Occupy Wall Street: The Making of a New World

written by Sheila D. Collins | November 7, 2011

To the superficial eye Liberty Park (Zucotti Park) in lower Manhattan is a circus—a mass of people all packed together in one rather small city square, towered over by the gleaming multistory offices of the 1%, ringed by metal police barricades and overseen by a tall police tower at one end and a solid row of police vans along one side. Boxes, plastic bins and tarps covering all manner of equipment surround the perimeters, tents sprout like mushrooms down the middle. The park is a cacophony of sound. People of all ages, races, nationalities, sexual orientations and interests—some in wheel chairs, some who can breathe only through a tube, some in down jackets, others in the tatters of the homeless, some in military fatigues, others in clerical collars—mill around in seemingly random fashion or stand and sit around the perimeters on all four sides with hand lettered signs, many on scraps of cardboard boxes, expressing their sentiments:

End Wall Street greed. Tax the rich!

I am a union ironworker. I vote. I work. I pay taxes. I'm pissed. So I'm here! All the way from L.A.

We are the 99% and we are one!

Jobs for All!

Bring back Glass-Steagall!

Free higher education!

Second time I've fought for my country. First time I've known my enemy.

The church is occupying Wall Street. We're putting the protest back into Protestant.

Stop the Keystone XL Pipeline!

End hydrofracking!

Stop Monsanto from poisoning our food!

Restore funding for mental health.

But as you continue to watch this tableau you realize that this is a living organism, creating and recreating itself. Like all living cells it has a boundary and yet is permeable. It is constantly in motion, continually changing, yet remains the same. Sometimes, amoeba-like, the cell splits into two, or four or more, sending these new cells to other parts of the city—to surround City Hall, to march on Washington Square, to cross the Brooklyn Bridge, to protest outside Verizon's corporate headquarters on behalf of CWA employees, to march to the headquarters of Bank of America, Morgan Stanley, Wells Fargo, Citigroup, JP Morgan Chase, or to commit civil disobedience at a Brooklyn police station notorious for its use of racial profiling. At other times, the protest becomes a river, sending its rivulets rushing through the canyons of the city, between cars, through police netting and over police motorcycles until it settles in a pool in some other part of the city to make its statement: *We will not be afraid, we will not be silenced, we will not stand quietly while police*

brutalize peaceful occupiers. We fight for true democracy, and we fight to end the tyranny of the 1%. This is only the beginning.

When you finally spend some time inside the organism you realize that the seeming randomness of the movement has an underlying organization, a structure. What we are seeing at Liberty Park and in the hundreds of other Occupy movements that are spreading across the country and the world is an entire society in microcosm built, not through conquest or war as most of the societies on our planet were formed, but from the bottom up and inside out, organically. Inside the cell's membrane are several "departments," each focused on meeting a specific function needed by the body as a whole, just as each organ in the human body. There is a legal institution (where occupiers can get information on and help with legal issues from law students and members of the National Lawyer's Guild); a medical unit staffed by doctors and nurses that is now affiliated with an outside clinic; a food kitchen serving up delicious—and generally healthy—food brought by individuals, donated by organizations, or ordered from nearby restaurants by sympathetic supporters across the country and around the world (orders have even been phoned in from Egypt); an entertainment center where performers drum, dance and play other musical instruments; a meditation corner where people of every and no faith meditate around an altar made up of the sacred symbols from all of the worlds' religions; a press/communications department where on any given day, news about Occupy events around the world is sent digitally across the country and across continents via Skype, Facebook and Twitter; a "comfort" department where warm coats, pillows, blankets and other things necessary to occupying a square of concrete in cold and inhospitable weather are available; a clean-up/recycling department where brooms, mops, bleach and buckets indicate a concern to keep the area free of refuse and vermin; a library containing over 3,000 books all logged in an online card catalog according to subject, open and free to anyone—and with no fines for late returns; and a security department to make sure that Occupy's ground rules—peacefulness, nonviolence, respect for differences, are enforced through gentle persuasion. The entire park has become one big university where teach-ins are held on money and finance, healthy eating and food security, the mortgage crisis, police brutality, renewable energy, alternative electoral systems, and any number of other topics necessary to the creation of a new world; and the park has become a giant workshop where "guilds" of artists and other craftspersons teach others the tricks of their trade. The park operates as a people's government where whose who wish to participate learn about and debate the issues that confront our society and the world, practice participatory democratic decision making, and hear from experts who drop by from time to time to learn, bring information and encouragement. On Sunday afternoons one end of the park is dominated at its center by a papier maché golden calf (resembling the Wall St. bull) held aloft and labeled "false idol," "greed," and "money." The appearance of the golden calf signals that this end of the park has become a church/synagogue/Hindu temple/ethical culture meeting house/Friends meeting house/Baha'i temple; Buddhist gathering as an ecumenical "service" of song, prayer and exhortation is led by people representing differing pathways to the transcendent, but all united on the ethical values that should guide the good society.

Occupy Wall St. is a unique adaption to an age in which the old hierarchies of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and religious dogma are breaking down amongst a younger generation, but are stubbornly clung to by those who still hold power. At a time when more and more of the world is beginning to suffer a future of joblessness and homelessness, the poisoning of our food, air and water and the imminent threat of climate catastrophe, the Occupiers model for us a way of surviving and adapting to reduced circumstances and of working together to build a new world in the midst of the old order that is crumbling. Incredibly creative, they are transforming long discarded modes of operating into new possibilities. Denied a sound system or even a bullhorn by the city's mayor, they have created the "people's mic," a unique restoration of the oral history tradition where each speaker's words are repeated by others so that the message gets transmitted

throughout the crowd. When the police took away their generators, threatening the cut-off of lights, heat and communication with the outside world, they found a way to generate electricity with bicycles. At a time when the book industry is threatened with extinction by the electronics industry they have created a library of real books donated by bookstores, publishers, libraries and individuals. At a time when 535 people in the U.S. Congress cannot make one intelligent decision, they have found a way to gain the consensus of as many as 3,000 people at a time. Without housing or public toilets they have found a way of surviving outdoors, on hard cement in the midst of a freak October snowstorm that left hundreds of thousands of homes without power across the northeastern U.S. Starting with no money and no formal organizational backing, they have attracted as much as half a million dollars to their cause, all the food they need to eat, medical, legal, and psychological assistance, and tents (donated by Riverside Church) as colder and inclement weather approached. Using the power of nonviolence, risking comfort, security, their health, and some even their lives for the sake of a greater good, they are demonstrating that creativity and selflessness, generosity and the longing for community still lie embedded in the human spirit despite a system that has sought to stifle creativity through an education system focused on standardized testing, computerized learning and budget cuts that eliminate the arts from school curriculums; despite a system that rewards ruthless competitiveness; and despite a system that insists we are all individuals and don't need the help of others to survive and thrive.

And the 1% still don't get it! Neither do their handmaidens, the politicians or the media pundits. The billionaire mayor of New York still says, "I hear your complaints. Some of them are totally unfounded." Rather than complaining, he says, the protesters "should be out there trying to change the world and make it better." (Michael Bloomberg, quoted in Kate Taylor, "Two Mayors Deeply Split Over Blame on Fiscal Ills," *New York Times*, November 2, 1011, p. A25.) I have news for you, Mr. Bloomberg, they have already made the world a better place. You seem not to have noticed that because of the Occupiers, the public discourse has now turned from one that is focused on deficits and austerity, to one focused on justice and fairness; from one that is focused on division and partisanship to one focused on what the majority have in common; from one that calls any kind of protest from below "class warfare" to one that more accurately describes the class warfare that is really being waged on the great majority of the world's people by those at the top of the economic pyramid. The Occupiers have already exposed the folly of police crackdowns, caused at least two mayors to back down from further repression, and have spawned the first general strike (in Oakland, CA) of the new era.

Changing the public discourse is, of course, only the first step in the creation of a better world. But the world as we know it was not created overnight. The forces of the Old Order are still formidable and are already trying to subvert it—to co-opt the movement to the ambitions of the Democratic party in the next election or; like MTV, to reap corporate revenues by turning it into a reality show; or, like the neo-Nazi Right to exploit the movement's populism to sow seeds of anti-Semitism and racism in order to win converts for its perverted agenda. But I like to think that these remnants of the Old Order are like a concrete bunker built on sand. The tide has turned, and it is coming in. As the protesters say, "This is only the beginning."

Sheila D. Collins is Professor of Political Science Emerita at William Paterson University and a co-founder of the National Jobs for All Coalition, on whose Executive Board she serves.