Welcome to the Occupation

written by Scott McLemee | October 12, 2011

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“Bill O’Reilly has connected the dots to identify me as being behind the occupation,” said Frances Fox Piven. “I’m sorry to say that’s not true.”

We were talking, by phone, about the continuing protest on Wall Street — what it meant, how it was developing, and where things might go next. Piven, a professor of sociology and political science at the City University of New York Graduate Center, had gone downtown to join the protests a couple of times. Now in its fourth week and endorsed by several unions (most recently, the Communication Workers of America), Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has spun off hundreds of similar demonstrations around the country, including one outside the Federal Reserve building in Chicago.

We had a lot to discuss. But at some point, I was duty-bound to ask about the craziness. Or rather, it might be better to say, about the *latest* craziness. Over the past few years, Piven has emerged as Public Enemy Number One for the U.S. right wing, which believes that an article in *The Nation* 45 years ago that she wrote with her late husband Richard Cloward laid the groundwork for Obama’s plans to turn the U.S. into a somewhat larger version of North Korea, or something.

The whole thing makes about as much sense as one of those diagrams Glenn Beck used to put up on his chalkboard. Which is, as they say, no accident. It was the former Fox News celebrity who made Piven the focus of rage by attacking her repeatedly on his program.

“It was going on for almost a year before I knew about it,” she told me. “My students pointed it out to me on YouTube. I paid attention for a while but stopped. It’s boring.”

Well, apart from the death threats. She says they’ve started coming in again over the past week, since another Fox talking head played a clip of her remarks in support of Occupy Wall Street. It seems as if death threats would be anything but boring. But Piven sounded unfazed, if a bit weary of the subject. What really gets her going, by contrast, is talking about the dynamics and possibilities of the occupation movement. (More on that later.)

Other scholars I’ve contacted discuss the Occupy Wall Street movement as analysts, not advocates. They’ve been spared Piven’s drama. But insofar as they consider OWS to be a response to actual economic and social problems — rather than the work of dirty hippies and commie sympathizers — they may yet risk serving as fodder for somebody’s boosted Nielsen ratings.

David S. Meyer, a professor of sociology and political science at the University of California at Irvine, has offered a running commentary on the occupations through his blog Politics Outside, and discussed the movement’s relationship to the Tea Party in an op-ed for *The Washington Post.* He is an associate editor of the University of Minnesota Press series Social Movements, Protest, and Contention and has chaired the American Sociological Association’s Section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements. We discussed Occupy Wall Street (and its spin-offs) via e-mail.

“The people who’ve assembled in Zuccotti Park” near Wall Street, he said, “have a wide range of reasons for being there; some of them explicitly say that they are not political. But the growth of the campaign, the emulative efforts across the country, and the kinds of responses it’s generating, are all a function of this political moment, which is characterized by an economic (and political) crisis

where their interests are woefully underrepresented."

I asked Meyer to imagine that he'd received a proposal for a book on the movement for the Minnesota series. What would he want it to cover?

"One interesting project," he said, "would be to trace the origins and politics of the different Occupy efforts around the country, which will vary depending upon who gets involved in the efforts. I'm sure they're different, in terms of style and issues and militancy." The author would need to situate the movement in the context of "a decades-long increase in economic inequality, supporting — and being supported by — decreased regulation of business and dramatically increasing costs of political campaigns. It would note the 2008 collapse, the election of the first black president, the Tea Party mobilization, and the shift of balance in governance dramatically to the right. The Occupy movement is an attempt at redress, and it needs to be seen that way."

Comparisons between OWS and the Tea Party are inevitable, if hardly inarguable. My impression as a supporter of the occupations (albeit one averse to sleeping bags) is that the young protesters have been inspired by the Arab Spring in a way that the older conservatives in the Tea Party haven't been — and that the occupation movement has been more spontaneous, and considerably less well-funded, than the Tea Party.

"I make a lot less of the international dimension than you suggest," Meyer replied. "I completely believe that Tahrir Square was inspirational to some of the Occupiers, but there were plenty of other inspirational events around the world that didn't provoke a comparable response in the U.S. (think, for example, about the revolutions of 1989, plus Tiananmen Square). It was the current context that made that inspiration viable. And, I suspect, if it wasn't Egypt it would have been something else in these circumstances."

And the force of circumstances makes the occupation movement and the Tea Party resemble each other more than either would care to think. "That's not to suggest they're the same or symmetrical," Meyer said. "….To oversimplify, they were both angry about the Wall Street bailouts: Tea Partiers were angry that government was giving out money; Occupiers were angry that it was going to the extremely rich. They're also both marching through the trajectory of protest movements in America, generating responses from mainstream politics that end up defining them."

For all its journalistic convenience, the term "populism" is less a political label than an incitement to endless debate — not to mention the cause for some heavy theoretical lifting, of late. That the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street alike are called populist shows how fluid it can be as a category. In both cases, the movement identifies itself as an effort to mobilize "the people" against "the elite." Rhetorical similarities notwithstanding, they articulate their grievances in very different ways — in part because each has its own understanding of the composition (not to say complexion) of "the people."

In the 1990s, Michael Kazin, a professor of history at Georgetown University, offered an analysis of the common ideological denominator among variants of American populism. Each had inherited elements of a 19th-century conception of political and social conflict as a struggle between the many people who produced wealth (farmers, craftsmen, industrial workers, entrepreneurs) and the smaller group of exploiters who manipulated it (speculators, bankers, monopolists, bureaucrats). This "producerist" ethos could manifest itself in otherwise contrasting versions of populism, depending on how immigrants and racial minorities were regarded – whether as producers (in left populism) or exploiters (for the right variant).

The OWSers have identified themselves as defending 99 percent of the population against the

speculation and corruption of the top 1 percent. But Tea Party rhetoric has been much more overtly producerist, it seems to me, than the Occupy Wall Street movement has been. I wrote to Kazin to ask what he thought.

“You’re right,” he replied; “the TPers employ producerist rhetoric far more than have the OWSers, although if labor keeps promoting the latter, that could change…. From what I’ve seen and read, OWS discourse is populist in the majoritarian sense (99% vs. 1%) and in the focus on high finance, which has been a villain since Jefferson’s day. The old figure of the pot-bellied, top-hatted banker (sometimes straight from the Monopoly game) has staged a comeback, from protest signs to a recent *New Yorker* cover.”

Kazin’s latest book, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (Knopf), appeared shortly before the occupation began. Its subtitle might be taken by the movement as an encouraging word. But he is concerned that the protesters have used only half of producerist symbolism.The porcine plutocrat in spats makes for an easily recognizable image, but it’s not enough.

“The antithesis,” Kazin pointed out, “in the form of the moral worker/wage-earner/producer, isn’t much present, in part because most demonstrators have never seen themselves that way and in part because it’s become associated with the Palin-esque right.”

Here, I take Kazin to mean that her salt-of-the-earth, just-folks manner has enabled Palin to take on the role of spokesperson for the hard-working American. Be that as it may, “producerist” morality is just about the last set of values embodied in her career; she is as purely a creature of consumerism and celebrity culture as any figure in American politics. But the right’s positioning of itself as the voice of the silent majority has been effective enough to make populist language sound almost intrinsically conservative.

And this is a problem for Occupy Wall Street, “as it has been for the left since World War II,” said Kazin. “In a sense, the evocation of 99% is a sign of discursive weakness: it calls up a unified ‘people’ that everyone knows doesn’t and can never exist.”

It may be that more nuanced ideas about the economy and social structure will emerge — or already have. Keeping track of the movement even a week ago was much easier than it is now. Type the single word “occupy” into Google News and the results include reports from Boston, Atlanta, San Jose, Des Moines, and Austin. But speedy dissemination is one thing and sustained momentum, or real impact, something else altogether.

After reading his first post on OWS at Orgtheory — a group blog on the study of movements, networks, and organizations — I wrote Brayden King to get a better sense of how the movement looked to someone who studies group structures and processes. King is assistant professor of management and organization at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management.

For a movement to have be “potentially transformative,” he explained, it needed to meet three basic conditions. One is “movement capacity, such as resources and organization,” while another is “public attention, usually transmitted through the news media.” The third element is a vulnerable target. (It is not difficult to see how each might tend to reinforce the others.)

“The OWS faces prime conditions,” King explained, “because they have great capacity for action due to all of the people they’ve mobilized and their masterful ability to coordinate large-scale protest. The public is paying attention, allies and foes alike. And their targets are extremely vulnerable to attack given the poor reputation of politicians and financial institutions.”

But the three conditions do not, in themselves, generate either structure or strategy.

“If I were researching the OWS,” King wrote, “I’d want to be a fly on the wall and observe their strategic decision-making and see how they arrive at decisions about which targets to go after, what specific goals they’re going to pursue, etc.” Calling the occupations “well-positioned to be tactically successful,” King said that “once they’ve collectively decided to do something, they will be carry it out because of the enormous resource capacity and organization they’ve created.” That leaves open an enormous question, though: “How do you arrive at strategic decisions when there is no hierarchy and when you’re trying to keep together a broad coalition of diverse groups?”

The problem he poses is an old one, and difficult to solve through strictly procedural means.

It also leaves open the question of what the intended *effect* of the movement ought to be.

One possibility is that OWS might, like the Tea Party, emerge as a factor in electoral politics. The protesters “could become the barb in the side of the Democratic Party and force them to move further left in their policy agenda,” said King. “They could reawaken an interest in labor issues. They could put pressure on Democrats to become tougher on financial regulation and loosen the grip that the elite financial network has on Democratic economic policy making….” That would mean settling on particular campaigns or pieces of legislation to support or oppose, “as the Tea Partiers did when they aggressively attacked Obama’s health care program and galvanized Republicans to resist those reforms.”

Legislation and campaigning have not been the focus of OWS thus far. Another possibility is that it might have an impact over the much longer term. The protesters “may instead decide to never pursue a specific policy agenda,” King said. “Instead, they may be content to serve as a base for the mobilization of the left and as a platform for solidarity-building. The long-term benefits of this kind of mobilization could be great, especially if it eventually fosters a coherent philosophical vision of the future, but the short-term benefits might be muted. Without a clear set of targets and goals, the OWS might not be able to generate the same political influence that the Tea Party did.”

The movement’s sudden growth and present course probably reflect the fact that the pull of electoralism is at its weakest just now. And simply at the level of logical consistency, being anti-Wall Street and pro-Obama is not really feasible. As a candidate in 2008, he received more money from the financial sector than John McCain did. The list of people in the administration with strong ties to Goldman Sachs is not short. But lesser-evilism will be on the rise soon enough.

Decisions about the next step for the movement will need to be made. And it’s a matter of time before OWS’s short-term maneuvers are influenced less by ideological debate than by meteorological necessity. But with a whole generation of people facing the prospect of long-term joblessness, it’s not hard to picture things on Wall Street becoming very rowdy indeed in, say, March.

“This isn’t going to be over very quickly,” according to Frances Fox Piven. “Picking Wall Street was brilliant, and it was absolutely right to conceive the action as an occupation, not the usual protest. It’s reinventing the demonstration. With a protest, the target just has to sit it out, knowing that you won’t be there tomorrow. The young people who are involved in this are going at it with some tenacity.”

The most interesting part of the conversation came when Piven began to discuss what she called the “very acute moral sensibility” of the movement. This choice of terms bothered me a little. Too much sentimentality pervades our political discourse, whether of the left or right. Acute moral sensibility counts for less, in social conflict, than a feel for strategy and tactics.

But Piven went on to cut right through these reservations. “The central moral issue of American political economy now is inequality,” she said. It had been growing before the economic downturn, and the past few years have driven awareness of it home.The people involved in the occupations “are trying to find different ways to expose what extreme inequality is doing to us,” she continued. “They’ve reached out to all sorts of allies. They’ve been reaching out to labor unions and the unions have responded with support. When was the last time *that* happened?”

With the occupations movement, something has changed. “As you know,” Piven said, “a lot of politics on the left for many years has been about identity as ‘us and them.’ Realizing and recognizing our differences was necessary, but it also caused a lot of damage. With Occupy Wall Street, there’s no identity politics in it at all. It’s all kinds of people — old, young, very diverse, very open. Nothing the demonstrators have said is offensive to potentially allies. And I don’t think that’s just a tactic. It’s a new mood or feeling, it’s deeply solidaristic.”

By contrast, the hostility directed at Piven — the hostile messages, the cyberstalking, people following her around with cameras – sounds much less important to her. It’s a sideshow. She’ll keep participating in the occupations, and speaking in support of them.

As for her detractors, she imagines they, too, will carry on. “They attend my lectures and write everything down,” she said. “Then they publish distorted quotations on their blogs. It’s what they do.”