

Reflections on Occupy's May Day: All Play Doesn't Work

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Thousands participated in the 2012 May Day events spearheaded by people who identify themselves as part of Occupy Wall Street. There were marches, running battles with police, teach-ins, skill shares, music, and speeches. Unions, immigrant rights groups, queer rights groups, and many others joined in solidarity. The capstone of the May Day events in the United States was surely the march by tens of thousands of people in New York City, moving from Union Square down Broadway and ending more or less at Wall Street. There was much to enjoy. Large marches – especially this one, which I attended – are fun and can be thrilling. In New York City, the cast of characters in the street is pretty motley. Where I marched, the Rude Mechanical Orchestra (complete with *two* tubas!) got us all singing “We Shall Overcome.”

The Occupy media blitz – and the Occupy intellectuals I've heard speak and with whom I've spoken – marketed, without irony, the May Day events as a *general strike*. But everyone who knows the meaning of that term knows this is a lie. A general strike is a strike by all the workers (or most of the workers) in a community, regardless of where they work. The May Day actions didn't even amount to a *regular* strike. Rather, May Day 2012, at least in NYC, was more or less a roving lefty carnival. It was a series of performances – joyous street theater on a larger than normal scale. But, it was politically meaningless.

This exposes what is, in my opinion, a fundamental feature of the Occupy movement: Occupy is all play and no power. Substantive political action – and, in particular, the future of left resistance to inequality – remains in the hands of established movement organizations.

The last general strike in the United States was in Oakland, California, in December 1946. The city was shut down for two days. The streetcars were still, the busses still, and the stores were shuttered. Jukeboxes from taverns that strikers had closed were pushed onto sidewalks and the most popular music of the day filled the air. People danced in the street. Many called it their ‘work holiday,’ even while spending most of their time on picket lines. And those pickets: they were racially integrated and often led by women. The marchers stayed strong night and day, filled with good cheer. When you look at photos of the strike, everyone seems to be smiling and many are laughing, despite the winter weather. Some of the protesters picketed while roller-skating. During the strike, there was a meeting in a huge space attended by more than 10,000 people, with hundreds outside listening on speakers. A real general assembly! Unions were in complete control of the city. The cops, the politicians and the businessmen were powerless.ⁱ

May Day 2012 looked nothing like this. In New York City, the subways and buses ran without even a slowdown (even though the transit workers’ unions are typically unafraid to implement slowdowns when not actively striking). None of the municipal or state unions called for work stoppages or slowdowns. Nor were there a significant number of store closures.

Reasons can be given for this, and reasons were given. It was said that the union leaders would go to jail if they advocated for industrial action. Some pointed out that in this economy everyone

needs every dollar they can make. And so on. So be it. These are just the sorts of considerations one has to face when deciding whether to call a strike, much less a general strike. But, instead of facing up to these considerations against calling for a strike, much less a general strike, Occupy just redefined “general strike” to mean whatever would happen on May Day.

This appears to me to be a clear case of dishonesty. In democratic organizing, telling the truth matters. Being honest both with yourself and with those who follow you is essential for the organizing to be *democratic*. And, being honest with yourself and those who follow you is essential for the organizing to be *successful*.

So, this is not just about the term “general strike.” While there is a concern about Occupy’s Orwellian willingness to deploy powerful political terms in truth-disregarding but marketing-sensitive ways, thereby obscuring what might be required for actual political change, what really concerns me is that this approach betrays a failure to be open about the internal challenges to entering into genuine struggle. This, in turn, means that people will enter into that struggle only accidentally, in spite of Occupy’s obfuscation.ⁱⁱ It suggests that Occupy, short on political power and long on theatricality, is treating compelling, fun street performance as the same thing as building and using power in the political sphere.

A central goal of most forms of contemporary democratic organizing is the development of astute, disciplined political actors who understand what it takes to make changes in an unjust political order. What is destructive, then, is that people who are drawn into the Occupy movement are learning the *wrong* things about how to organize effectively for justice and change.

They are learning that what we saw on Tuesday May 1 was a manifestation of deep and profound political power – just march and protest, hold skill shares and yell at the cops, and the world will suddenly become more just.ⁱⁱⁱ What a terrible lesson.

Where can we look today for a proper lesson?

One place to look is the struggle in Wisconsin. When Governor Scott Walker tried, in early 2011, to force onto the state the most anti-union, anti-working class legislation in generations, the unions and the broader left community responded with fury. They occupied the state house. They rallied for days on end in the Wisconsin winter. The Democratic legislators fled the state, depriving the Senate of a quorum. These legislators suffered financial penalties for refusing to come back. Capitol police defied the orders of the governor, which was a legal risk. Workers took time off of work, consequently losing wages. The costs incurred were substantial and the risks taken were not for the meek. Despite this, the response was awesome: A massive fist rose from the earth and clocked the right-wing political establishment square across the face.^{iv} If anything in the United States during the past two years deserves to be called an insurrection, those early days of revolt in Madison do.^v

Against this backdrop and given the hype leading up to Occupy's May Day events, the timidity of those events stuns. For Occupy spent much of its energy representing May Day as a day of massive political action: The people are waking up! This is revolution! But, May Day wasn't any of those things and Occupy is not a political movement. What Occupy is, is an *aesthetic* – a softly democratic and faintly anarchistic one.^{vi} And, it's an aesthetic academics and many

activists on the left consume so that we can feel radical and politically active without actually having to be radical or politically active.

Therein lies the rub – for everyone who learned from the May Day events that this is what democracy looks like, for everyone who learned from the May Day events that this is what mass political action looks like: you were sold a bill of goods. Big marches and ‘general assemblies’ that most people cannot attend aren’t the primary vehicles for democratic change. Street theater may be political, but it doesn’t amount to an exercise of significant political *power*.^{vii} Occupy marketed May Day as something that it isn’t. Occupy might be playing the same cynical consumerist game it rails against.

I do not deny that Occupy is fun. I love participating. As performance, Occupy is valuable. While marching together, my friend turned to me and said, “Occupy is like the fountain of youth for unions and other organizations.” He’s right. Occupy’s energy made NYC’s giant May Day march happen – there is no way it would have happened in the absence of Occupy. The energy and open-faced joy of Occupy probably has reinvigorated many of those experienced organizers and left institutions that were, in some cases, struggling for energy as a result of both the recession and intense challenges from the Right.^{viii}

All this fun does not take away from the fact that Occupy is, in the end, little more than theater. Theater is important. It can start a conversation. It can inspire those who have power to use it in certain ways. But theater can be distracting, and young activists could learn the wrong lessons from Occupy. People will come to believe that the theater that is Occupy is a substantive form

of direct political power when in fact it is not. What happens when they become disillusioned when they discover that effective organizing means a lot of drudgery (like many other jobs)?

For the kind of power needed to bring the world more in line with our ideals, we must look, at least on the left, to more traditional organizations like labor unions and communities of solidarity, like women's rights groups, immigrants' rights groups, queer rights groups and the like. To learn how to create political change, to learn how to fight back when they say cut back, look to the 1946 Oakland General Strike or look to the 2011 Wisconsin insurrection.^{ix} While Occupy should continue to reach out to these groups and inspire them with their energy, Occupy should be open in acknowledging that such cheerleading is all it is able, or willing, to do.

Like I said – Occupy is a good thing and it has been very fun. But in the end, Occupy is just play.^x

ⁱ The strike ended partly because the unions representing utilities workers, which were affiliated with the more radical Congress of Industrial Organizations, planned to join the strike by shutting off electricity to all of Alameda County. While many rank and file members of the AFL unions leading the strike might have supported this incredible action, the leadership was worried that they would be red-baited. The politicians and businessmen, on the other hand, were worried that they might have a small-scale revolution on their hands. Finally, a crooked but powerful leader of the Teamsters ordered his union to start crossing the picket lines. As a result of this confluence of events, all sides came together to make a deal, and on its third day the general strike ended.

ⁱⁱ What are the elements of this struggle? Most basically, it is about numbers and training, which often involves a lot of really boring stuff like collecting names on sign-in sheets, calling those people back, organizing one-on-one meetings with them, training them to take over leadership, and so on. Occupy folks should ask themselves how it was that so many people ended up in that March on May Day: unions and other organizations that do all that boring grunt work turned out their people.

ⁱⁱⁱ Occupy is more obsessed with its relationship with the police than any post-Black Panthers US-based movement of which I am aware. This strikes me as partially due to the essentially performative aspect of Occupy (see my “Living Politically” published on this blog), but also as a case of sheer political laziness. It is easy to battle with cops, but it also gets you nowhere. But it does make great theater. If it bleeds, it leads – even in the minds of the activists. On the other hand, we should definitely worry *very much* about the encroaching police state. But the way you fight a police state is by taking control of the *state*, not by focusing only on the *police*. Of course, it’s impossible not to fight the police, but you have to be careful in picking when to engage in police-irritating mayhem. Not only should it be part of something bigger, cops themselves are working people who are also being screwed by the Right.

^{iv} Please forgive the purple prose – but in this case, it may be warranted.

^v The Wisconsin actions failed to defeat the anti-union legislation, although the struggle continues in the electoral realm. As most people know, the unions have forced the governor into a recall election. He will probably win that election, but even then there is a victory to be salvaged from that. First, the Wisconsin struggle directly energized the struggles against anti-union legislation in Ohio and Indiana (and in the case of Ohio, the legislation was defeated). Second, the unions have shown that it is extremely costly to challenge them. Just putting up a

real fight, even if you are not declared the winner, reaps the benefit of teaching the Right that it cannot just take what it wants. In general, struggles for justice never end with a clear-cut victory.

You fight for one thing, you win something else, and you keep moving.

^{vi} [Claire Jarvis](#) deserves the credit this observation. I am merely repeating her insight.

^{vii} General strikes, like the 1946 Oakland general strike, are *both* theatrical and politically powerful.

^{viii} Occupy obviously requires organization. But almost all intentional practices do. So, I am happy to concede that Occupy organizers organized the march. But, organizing a march is not the same thing as building political power.

^{ix} Also look to the long struggle for justice that ran from the 1930s through the 1960s. Both the Black activists and white activists who helped to form the SCLC, build the NAACP and do the grassroots work of the civil rights movement were often communists or trained by the communists who were central to the great expansion of labor power in the 1930s. For more on the connections between the Old Left and the civil rights movement, see Matthew Nichter, “Rethinking the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Radicals, Repression, and the Black Freedom Struggle, 1930 – 1965” (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2012).

^x I thank Claire Jarvis for extremely helpful comments and thoughtful conversation. I also thank Michelle Zeiler for helpful comments (and for being a tireless AFT organizer).