Ideology and the “Occupy” Movement

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The ongoing economic crisis has been creating deep anxieties among the majority of citizens. We find ourselves inundated with news stories about soaring governmental debt, unfunded future obligations (re: Social Security, Medicare, private pension programs), widening disparities of wealth and income, taxpayer dollars being used to bail out large banks, etc.

The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement arose in response to those concerns. Pointing to "the 1%" at the top (members of the wealth/power elite, especially those who derive their largesse from the corporations and big finance) as culprits in the drama of economic calamity and injustice, OWS seeks to inspire solidarity among We the People — "the 99%" — toward embracing a majoritarian crusade for progressive social change.

There is an idea that the effectiveness of the movement will depend upon forging a maximally inclusive alliance of citizens. But this raises certain questions: Is it possible to delineate programmatic commonalities that can resonate with the various layers among "the 99%" (the disadvantaged, the middle classes, the working class, minorities, professionals, intellectuals, students, etc.)? Can demands be kept general enough? Can ideological divisions be avoided? Only time will tell. The sentiment is certainly understandable and the effort to employ an inclusive discourse is commendable. But there are indications that it may be naïve. The springing up of signage promoting the ideas of thinkers as disparate as Ron Paul, Cornel West, Ted Trainer, Paul Krugman, and Naomi Klein at the OWS encampments calls into question the long-term viability of the "99% solidarity" strategy.

Perhaps even more of a concern than ideological contention is the noticeable lack of ideological clarity within the movement. "I've come to favor Ron Paul's libertarianism because he's staunchly anti-militaristic." "I'll be voting socialist this year in order to send a message that we need a radical redistribution of wealth." But socialism is not primarily about redistribution and libertarianism is not necessarily anti-militaristic. In fact, something is askew when we see Occupy participants putting forward Ron Paul as the candidate of peace and freedom!

My own sense is that it won't be too long before the Occupy movement realizes that ideological questions must be addressed. Beyond sentiments for peace, freedom, justice, and democracy (which all the modern political ideologies claim to embrace) lie irreconcilable perspectives regarding fundamental issues such as property relations and the role of government in a modern industrial economy.

Socialism asserts that a pre-condition for overcoming plutocracy is collective ownership of the means of production within the context of a planned economy. How many Occupy activists who identify as socialists really advocate full-scale socialization of the economy? Anarchists, while offering no consistent formulation in regard to property relations, disparage the centralized structures associated with economic planning. Liberals believe that enterprises are best run privately . . . as long as the federal government provides a strong countervailing regulatory environment. Libertarians have no faith whatsoever in the federal government to do much in the way of regulating or planning or social engineering. And then there are the Greens . . . who question the very essence of an industrial economy/industrial state!
At a high level of generality there can sometimes be feelings of solidarity among the partisans of different ideological camps. But it might not take much more than a pending national election for specifics to start to fissure the Occupy movement, calling into question the "very broad tent" strategy. Some are likely to prioritize support for Obama over movement solidarity. Some will advocate for an independent candidate as the electoral expression of the Occupy worldview. Others will argue against getting involved in the election at all, seeing it as a distraction from the mass movement.

Meanwhile a sizeable percentage of the electorate will be backing the Republican candidate. It's evident that the left views "Occupy" as a left-wing phenomenon (based on its criticism of corporate domination and the prevalence of anti-capitalist rhetoric), but, of course, only a small minority of the citizenry identify as left-wing. So either the left is misinterpreting the situation or "the 35%" (of the population that votes right-wing) will ultimately voice their alienation and subtract themselves out of the equation!

In any event, initial OWS attempts to avoid ideology and partisan politics are likely to give way to the reality that social change movements eventually must arrive at some degree of solution-specificity and ideological clarity. Calling out "the 1%" has been good, effective P.R. — and makes sense on a certain level — but it doesn't much advance the movement programmatically. The next phase may very well have to get beyond that kind of imagery and generalized critique. Friends of the Occupy movement should be encouraging the development of distinctive prescriptions which lead in the direction of a coherent vision of a better society.