



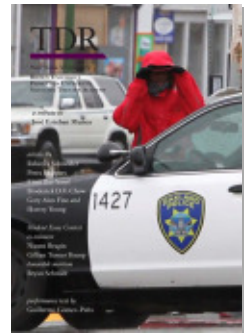
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TDR Comment

Occupy Solidarity

Richard Schechner

Sometimes clichés and platitudes are useful. So here're some: Ignorance is the plague. Xenophobia is the plague.

Hatred of others is the plague. Greed is the plague. Eradicate the plague. Performances are—or at least can be—model utopian societies. Workshops are ways to destroy ignorance; rehearsals are ways to creatively relate to others not by submerging or ignoring differences, but by exploring differences as the group devises a generous common way forward. Performances can hold up to public view the outcome of such active research. Performance studies—and other “studies” as well—can provide the critical lenses necessary to understand how societies work (or fail) as individuals and groups embody and enact their personal and collective identities.

At this moment, as I write, the Occupy Wall Street movement is extremely active in New York's Zuccotti Park (felicitously located at the corner of Broadway and Liberty). Other “Occupy” sites—encampments often—have sprung up around the US and beyond. There are Occupy sites in so many places that I can only name a few: Atlanta, Baltimore, Albuquerque, Denver, Boston; and overseas, Cape Town, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Tokyo, Brussels, Copenhagen, Moscow, Helsinki, Madrid... The Occupy London Stock Exchange is set up on the doorsteps of St. Paul's Cathedral. Up until now, with a few exceptions, the Occupy movement has been peaceful—the violence that has occurred has been the result of police intervention. In the Occupy movement, I and others hear loud and clear echoes of the great freedom and student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. There are also links—conceptual and strategic—to the Arab Spring uprisings, from Tunis to Cairo, largely peaceful, to the bloody encounters in Syria, Yemen, and Libya.

The driving slogan of the Occupy movement is “We are the 99%”—meaning that the people gathered belong to the vast majority who do not control the wealth of nations. In Zuccotti Park when I visited, the community comprised mostly younger (under 35) and well-educated people. There were seminars, speeches amplified by call-and-response instead of megaphones (to abide by New York's laws against unlicensed loudspeaker systems), drumming and dancing, art displays, petitions circulating, food being shared, and many other indications of creativity and goodwill. At the same time, the park was an isolate, surrounded by police and, I suppose, also infiltrated by undercover agents. The Occupiers were not so much marginalized as quarantined. Ordinary life went on outside of the park. And the long-term strategy of the authorities seemed to be, “Let them be for now; winter will take care of it. Like the leaves in the park's trees, they will finally be gone.” In Oakland, by contrast, the police used tear gas. This kind of response, of course, only enrages the Occupiers and all who sympathize with them. Outside of the US, in Greece and elsewhere, rioting and incipient armed revolution is increasing in opposition to the new economic order being enforced by the 1% and their minions. The struggle has barely begun, again.

Yes, I have a utopian option. It involves detaching labor from work, and pay from labor; lifelong education and support—the creative use of the automation and digitization that is dissolving the industrial model of human production, profit, and wages. Such a utopian option is not around the corner, but neither is it as far away as you might imagine.

For all this—from the Occupy movement and Arab Spring to visions of a society where the vast majority of people are paid because they exist, engage in lifelong education, art-making, and other creative activities—I am inhabited by two contending sets of feelings, intuitions, attitudes, observations, and thoughts. On the one hand, I regard with satisfaction my extremely local world of performance studies. I celebrate its indices of success—the growing number of

programs and departments globally, the quality and quantity of scholarship across a broad spectrum of subjects and methodologies, and the huge amount of artistic work it informs. On the other hand, when I am not dreaming of Occupy, I realize that in terms of economics, politics, the environment, human rights, and health, humankind is not reforming its practices deeply, broadly, or swiftly enough to avert the onrushing catastrophe. So what should drive my—and, by extension, your—future? The incipience of the Occupiers or the logic of the catastrophe? To what degree ought we think locally (for me, performance studies, academia, theatre work, etc.) and to what degree, globally? If we think both at the same time, how can we rectify two so very different temperature readings? What can performance studies do to help save the world?

I am embarrassed to ask such a question and humiliated if I do not ask it. Worse, I do not have a clear answer. I do know that movements such as Occupy Wall Street demand a shift from parochial concerns, from each tending her own garden, working within his own “identity community,” to concerns about “the whole,” the overall community, the future of the planet.

Here I will leave off.

Next week, I will be teaching my Monday night class on Ritual, Play, and Performance in Zuccotti Park.

Postscript

The Occupy Wall Street Zuccotti Park encampment was swept by police from the park in the wee hours of Tuesday 15 November. Occupiers have been assaulted and evicted from other sites nationwide. The Occupy movement is no longer mostly a street action.

Mainstream politicians are trying to co-opt Occupy. Do these politicians intend to redistribute the wealth or make any kind of fundamental structural change to society? Occupy is very popular on social networks. An 8 December 2011 Google search yielded 575 million entries. Hundreds of thousands of people use Occupy-related Facebook sites to stay connected to the movement. Are these web-radicals willing to put their physical bodies on the line in order to force a redistribution of wealth? Exactly what the future of Occupy will be is not certain.

What strikes me, and very positively so, is how much Occupy is a “solidarity” rather than “particularist” movement. Since the 1980s at least, there has been no one over-arching progressive movement issue. Actions have been on behalf of some specific group. All to the good. But Occupy’s “We are the 99%” signals an important shift. The aim is to include (just about) everybody. Those who are suspicious of Occupy warn that such a solidarity stance favors those already occupying places of privilege: educated whites, mostly urban, largely under 40. True up to a point, but the crowds I walked among in Zuccotti Park were not monochrome, and the causes espoused were broad-spectrum. The unifying theme was solidarity in favor of a redistribution of wealth and power. Occupy’s big umbrella is one all particularists can stand under; and its inclusive banner is one people of all persuasions can wave.

From this perspective, Occupy is a change of heart. As Patchen Markell remarked in a 28 October talk at Harvard:

Much discussion of the Occupy phenomenon has centered on the question of whether this movement can become more than momentary, and whether, to do so, it needs to organize itself around a specific set of concrete political demands. These are not irrelevant questions; but they are curiously inattentive to the specific character of this phenomenon as an *occupation* [...with the] power to sustain itself over time and to draw the attention of new participants and observers. [...] The question of demands or aims is important, but so too is the way in which the occupation has reorganized political attention, orienting its participants and observers toward the invitation represented by the park’s public status, presenting them with an opportunity to take this invitation at its word and to test its limits, intensifying a sense of involvement that will be critical to the

pursuit of *whatever* further decisions, goals, or demands come out of this improvised public space, and transforming—in its very existence and duration—its participants' and observers' sense of what is possible. Involvement is not control; what these events will *give* is not reducible to what they will *do*. (2011:17–18)

“What they will *do*.” “We are the 99%.” The question of wealth inequity will not go away. Once the park was cleared, Occupy's virus of the imagination spread exponentially with still unforeseen consequences. The struggle has barely begun, again.

Reference

Markell, Patchen. 2011. “The Moment Has Passed: Power After Arendt.” <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic849510.files/Patchen%20Markell%20-%20Power%20After%20Arendt%20-%20HP%20TC%202011.pdf>.