

## **The Fight for ‘Real Democracy’ at the Heart of Occupy Wall Street**

The Encampment in Lower Manhattan Speaks to a Failure of Representation

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

October 11, 2011

Demonstrations under the banner of Occupy Wall Street resonate with so many people not only because they give voice to a widespread sense of economic injustice but also, and perhaps more important, because they express political grievances and aspirations. As protests have spread from Lower Manhattan to cities and towns across the country, they have made clear that indignation against corporate greed and economic inequality is real and deep. But at least equally important is the protest against the lack — or failure — of political representation. It is not so much a question of whether this or that politician, or this or that party, is ineffective or corrupt (although that, too, is true) but whether the representational political system more generally is inadequate. This protest movement could, and perhaps must, transform into a genuine, democratic constituent process.

The political face of the Occupy Wall Street protests comes into view when we situate it alongside the other “encampments” of the past year. Together, they form an emerging cycle of struggles. In many cases, the lines of influence are explicit. Occupy Wall Street takes inspiration from the encampments of central squares in Spain, which began on May 15 and followed the occupation of Cairo’s Tahrir Square earlier last spring. To this succession of demonstrations, one should add a series of parallel events, such as the extended protests at the Wisconsin statehouse, the occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens, and the Israeli tent encampments for economic justice. The context of these various protests are very different, of course, and they are not simply iterations of what happened elsewhere. Rather each of these movements has managed to translate a few common elements into their own situation. In Tahrir Square, the political nature of the encampment and the fact that the protesters could not be represented in any sense by the current regime was obvious. The demand that “Mubarak must go” proved powerful enough to encompass all other issues. In the subsequent encampments of Madrid’s Puerta del Sol and Barcelona’s Plaça Catalunya, the critique of political representation was more complex. The Spanish protests brought together a wide array of social and economic

complaints — regarding debt, housing, and education, among others — but their “indignation,” which the Spanish press early on identified as their defining affect, was clearly directed at a political system incapable of addressing these issues. Against the pretense of democracy offered by the current representational system, the protesters posed as one of their central slogans, “Democracia real ya,” or “Real democracy now.”

Occupy Wall Street should be understood, then, as a further development or permutation of these political demands. One obvious and clear message of the protests, of course, is that the bankers and finance industries in no way represent us: What is good for Wall Street is certainly not good for the country (or the world). A more significant failure of representation, though, must be attributed to the politicians and political parties charged with representing the people’s interests but in fact more clearly represent the banks and the creditors. Such a recognition leads to a seemingly naive, basic question: Is democracy not supposed to be the rule of the people over the polis — that is, the entirety of social and economic life? Instead, it seems that politics has become subservient to economic and financial interests.

By insisting on the political nature of the Occupy Wall Street protests we do not mean to cast them merely in terms of the quarrels between Republicans and Democrats, or the fortunes of the Obama administration. If the movement does continue and grow, of course, it may force the White House or Congress to take new action, and it may even become a significant point of contention during the next presidential election cycle. But the Obama and the George W. Bush administrations are both authors of the bank bailouts; the lack of representation highlighted by the protests applies to both parties. In this context, the Spanish call for “real democracy now” sounds both urgent and challenging.

If together these different protest encampments — from Cairo and Tel Aviv to Athens, Madison, Madrid, and now New York — express a dissatisfaction with the existing structures of political representation, then what do they offer as an alternative? What is the “real democracy” they propose?

The clearest clues lie in the internal organization of the movements themselves — specifically, the way the encampments experiment with new democratic practices. These movements have all developed according to what we call a “multitude form” and are characterized by frequent assemblies and participatory decision-making structures. (And

it is worth recognizing in this regard that Occupy Wall Street and many of these other demonstrations also have deep roots in the globalization protest movements that stretched at least from Seattle in 1999 to Genoa in 2001.)

Much has been made of the way social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been employed in these encampments. Such network instruments do not create the movements, of course, but they are convenient tools, because they correspond in some sense to the horizontal network structure and democratic experiments of the movements themselves. Twitter, in other words, is useful not only for announcing an event but for polling the views of a large assembly on a specific decision in real time.

Do not wait for the encampments, then, to develop leaders or political representatives. No Martin Luther King, Jr. will emerge from the occupations of Wall Street and beyond. For better or worse — and we are certainly among those who find this a promising development — this emerging cycle of movements will express itself through horizontal participatory structures, without representatives. Such small-scale experiments in democratic organizing would have to be developed much further, of course, before they could articulate effective models for a social alternative, but they are already powerfully expressing the aspiration for a “real democracy.”

Confronting the crisis and seeing clearly the way it is being managed by the current political system, young people populating the various encampments are, with an unexpected maturity, beginning to pose a challenging question: If democracy — that is, the democracy we have been given — is staggering under the blows of the economic crisis and is powerless to assert the will and interests of the multitude, then is now perhaps the moment to consider that form of democracy obsolete?

If the forces of wealth and finance have come to dominate supposedly democratic constitutions, including the U.S. Constitution, is it not possible and even necessary today to propose and construct new constitutional figures that can open avenues to again take up the project of the pursuit of collective happiness? With such reasoning and such demands, which were already very alive in the Mediterranean and European encampments, the protests spreading from Wall Street across the United States pose the need for a new democratic constituent process.