General

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The strength of Occupy is having a designated adversary, but that is not enough to ensure concerted political action.

The recent "citizen awakening" that we witnessed with a variety of Occupy movements and akin initiatives is very encouraging because it breaks with the prevalent post-political consensus of recent decades. A taboo has been broken and the "there is no alternative" neo-liberal mantra has been profoundly shaken. Many voices contesting the obscene inequalities existing in our societies are currently being heard as they call for the end of the unbridled power of financial capital. The task now is to ascertain whether all of the energy that has emerged can produce lasting political effects. This is the challenge facing the various movements as they enter a new phase. How can they maintain their energy as they attempt to increase their audience?

There is no denying the profound impact that the Occupiers have had on public discourse, and their putting the issue of equality on the agenda has been no small achievement, especially in the United States. But it is time to move on to the next step, which entails the consolidation of the allegiance of their followers by clarifying their joint objectives. I am not referring here to the need to make specific demands but to the importance of formulating common aims so as to create a political link between their very diverse constituencies. No doubt, this will come at some cost because it will become clear that there are serious divergences within the 99%. Some of them might indeed be serious enough to reveal the existence of severe fault lines behind the consensual unity that the slogan "we are the 99%" suggests. This kind of a slogan has been praised for its ability to arouse emotions and for its inclusive potential. Nevertheless, we should raise some reservations concerning a possible lack of awareness of the wide range of antagonisms existing in society and a rather naive belief in the possibility of a consensual society, once the "bad 1%" has been eliminated. This kind of reasoning could easily remain at the level of a moral condemnation of the rich, instead of a political analysis of the complex configuration of the powers that need to be challenged to create a more just and democratic society. More importantly, in my view, is that this slogan seems to take for granted the presumed unity of the "we" and obviates the necessary process of construction of this "we" through the articulation of a "chain of equivalences" among the manifold protests that propel the various movements. To be sure, the strength of Occupy is having a designated adversary, but that is not enough to ensure concerted political action. To believe that everyone involved in the Occupy movement has the same objectives and that the diversity of their struggles necessarily converge by the mere fact of their shared opposition to financial capital is simply too hasty of a conclusion. The shared aims cannot be defined until we specify what is at stake in the confrontation with the adversary. It is only through a political process involving the construction of unity across differences that a truly political movement can be established and it is unlikely that a 99% majority can ever be reached in a pluralist society.

Fortunately, some activists are aware of the need to secure lasting links among the multifarious Occupy constituencies and several steps are currently being taken towards a

political articulation of the diverse protests. Questioning the mechanisms of the debt, for instance, is an issue particularly apt for potentially uniting very different groups who are affected by the crisis caused by the subprime mortgages or are suffering from the crippling consequences of student loans. Another important step consists of joint actions involving feminist and immigrant organisations, as well as with various trade unions, in an effort to democratise state institutions. The "horizontalist" nature of the Occupy movement is often celebrated as a departure from existing forms of democracy but horizontalist practices on their own cannot bring about a profound transformation of power relations in our society. These efforts need to be combined with vertical interventions that engage existing institutions to make them more democratically accountable. What is at stake here is the establishment of a synergy between extra-parliamentary and parliamentary struggles that could lead to the creation of a leftist-oriented populist movement that would provide the "collective will" necessary to effectively challenge neo-liberal hegemony.

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Tags

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