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Occupy's liberation from liberalism: the real meaning of May Day

Occupy's May Day rebirth, forging a new alliance of activists and union members, was a historic moment of anti-capitalist struggle



David Graeber

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A protest dog during the May Day demonstrations in Athens, Greece. Photograph: Nikolas Georgiou/Demotix/Corbis

The US press seems to have decided that the Occupy movement is no longer a story. Pretty much no matter what we do. In New York, on May Day, something between 50,000 and 100,000 people marched through the streets – we don't know the exact numbers because most papers didn't report the event at all, and therefore, didn't bother to make estimates. In California, there were blockades and walkouts. In Seattle, one band of protestors relived the famous Black Bloc actions of November 1999, smashing many of the same corporate windows – and even that didn't make national news!

But in a way it hardly matters. Occupy is shedding its liberal accretions and rapidly turning into something with much deeper roots, creating alliances that promise to transform the very notion of revolutionary politics in America.

During the first two months of the occupation, camps emerged in every city in America,

there was an explosion of press attention, and, at the same time, a vast influx of money (at one point, OWS in New York was sitting on over \$0.5m, almost all of it from donations of under \$100 each). Those months also saw a veritable invasion from liberal groups, ranging from Rebuild the Dream to MoveOn.org. Before long, occupiers realized the help was threatening to destroy them; meetings became bureaucratized as they turned into endless squabbles about money; paid organizers with agendas often very different than the original occupiers were infiltrating and trying to turn the movement towards much more conventional political or electoral campaigns.

Then came the evictions.

There is a traditional terms of alliance between liberals and radicals in American social movements: through civil disobedience and direct action, the radicals create a fire on the liberals' left that makes them seem relevant as a moderate alternative; the liberals keep us out of jail. In this case, the liberals spectacularly failed.

Over the winter, rather than making an issue of the extraordinary illegal violence of the evictions, they chose, instead, to create an almost histrionic moral crisis over a few broken windows in Oakland months before. But when OWS re-emerged in the spring, the abandonment of the liberals, the drying-up of the money, have become an almost miraculous blessing. Activists have honed and polished their street tactics and democratic process. New alliances have been created, with community groups, immigrant rights organizations, and, increasingly, labor unions.

One reason OWS agreed to forgo mass civil disobedience in New York on 1 May was to solidify those alliances. Instead, occupiers working within the coalition pushed – with the boisterous support of many rank and file, despite the initial hesitation of some union leadership – for a joint solidarity statement that called not just for the usual battle against austerity, but to the revolutionary transformation of society:

"For centuries, May Day has been a time when the stirrings of spring lead people of good will towards visions of revolutionary renewal. The powerful wish to take these dreams away from us. They never will. And so it is on this May Day, in the wake of a growing planetary uprising for justice, we dare to look forward to a world when the borders that divide us will be made meaningless, to the birth of genuinely democratic culture of communities managing their own resources for the common good, and where the value and dignity of no human being on this planet is considered inferior to any other."

For representatives of New York's Health and Transit Workers, not to mention its Central Labor Council, to sign on to such a statement is epochal. America is one of the few countries where May Day, the International Workers' Day, is not even a holiday –

ironically enough, considering the fact the date was chosen to commemorate events that occurred in Chicago, during the struggle for the 8-hour day in 1886. During the cold war, the idea of unions signing on to a statement like this would have been inconceivable: in the 1960s, unionized workers were known physically attack Wall Street protestors in the name of patriotic anti-communism. But the collapse of state socialism has made new alliances possible, and, in making common cause with occupiers, and the immigrant groups that first turned May Day into a national day of action in 2006, working-class organizations are also beginning to return to their roots—up to and including, the ideas and visions of the Haymarket martyrs themselves.

The words might be diplomatically chosen, but there's no mistaking what tradition is being invoked here. In endorsing a vision of universal equality, of the dissolution of national borders, and democratic self-governing communities, nurses, bus drivers, and construction workers at the heart of America's greatest capitalist metropolis are signing on to the vision, if not the tactics, of revolutionary anarchism.



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