

Book Review: Occupy The Future

by Blog Admin

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*The Occupy Wall Street movement ignited new questions about the relationship between democracy and equality in the United States. Can we build an open, democratic, and successful movement to realize new ideals? **Occupy the Future** aims to offer informed and opinionated essays that address questions on democracy, freedom, and capitalism. Much of this book serves as a useful primer for those interested in the rise of inequality in the US, writes **Stephanie Spoto**.*



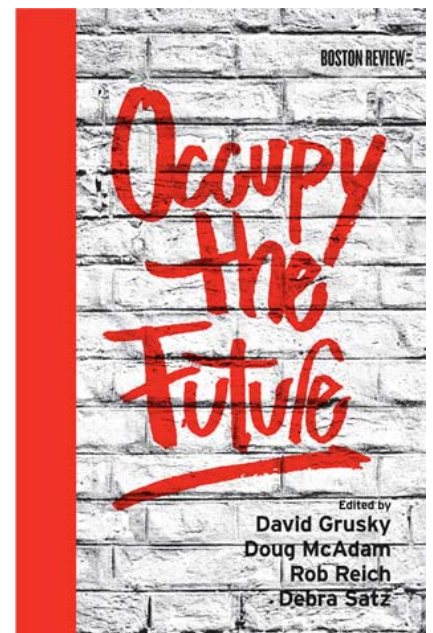
Occupy The Future. David B. Grusky, Doug McAdam, Rob Reich, & Debra Satz (eds.)
MIT Press. February 2013.

Find this book:

In December 2011, a group of students and Stanford faculty prepared for an “Occupy-inspired” teach-in at the university, which led to the creation of this edited collection. The contributors form an impressive list of academic superstars, the students of superstars, and even a winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics. Many of the contributors have dedicated their careers to the study of economic inequality and social justice, making them the perfect set of academic minds for this project.

Many of the adjectives that have been used to describe the Occupy movement can also be used to describe some chapters in this collection; just like the protests themselves, these chapters are well-meaning, passionate, but – in the end – vague. However, perhaps one of the most notable confusions is with the subject of the book itself. While the title of the book and the aesthetic of the cover (with a graffiti wording on a rough brick wall) would suggest that the book is, in fact, about the Occupy protests themselves, most of the essays that make up this collection only occasionally address Occupy.

Instead, the book addresses wider economic inequality, with class-based issues dominating much of the word count, just as it dominated much of the discourse of the Occupy sites themselves. The chapters by [Prudence L. Carter](#) and [Shelley J. Correll](#) make for great analysis of gender and racial inequality, but seemed marginalized by the discussions of economic inequality, without much acknowledgement of the intersectionality of oppression from the other chapters. The first few chapters on economic inequality make no concerted effort to include critiques of race or gender hierarchies within these economic models, with nostalgic looks at decades gone by failing to talk about how, for many, many people in the United States, the situation has greatly improved. This is perhaps exemplified by a figure taken from an article from the *American Sociological Review*, showing the increase of inequality, but including only men’s wages in the data set.



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The chapter, “Why is There So Much Poverty?” by [David B. Grusky](#) and [Kim A. Weeden](#) argues that so many people are in low-wage jobs because of barriers to higher education. If more people had access to college degrees then they could apply for jobs with higher salaries, siphoning off numbers from the pool of jobseekers without college degrees, thereby making it possible for ‘unskilled’ workers to apply for jobs with less competition. They even seem to suggest that Stanford should be “meeting the rising interest in its degrees by selling some profit-maximizing number of them” (p.79). They mention “European-style market regulations”, which they admit might reduce poverty, but have a negative effect on the Gross National Product. American free-market models, on the other hand, create “a highly competitive and regulation-free economy, with the happy result that there are more goods and services for everyone” (p.73). For everyone? What about the millions denied access to these goods and services because of poverty? While they admit that the price of a market economy is a high poverty rate, in theory this unfortunate result could be curbed by the creation of a safety net.

Increasing the safety net to help those in poverty is certainly a great necessity, and the authors go on to say that they wouldn’t “rule out” addressing the institutions of the market which would inundate the safety net with so much poverty to begin with. With the *Huffington Post* (31 Mar 2013) reporting that over a quarter of a million university graduates hold minimum wage jobs (to say nothing of the many, many more in low-wage jobs) the authors’ claim that a greater number of university graduates will raise the wages of “unskilled” workers is hard to swallow, since now both university graduates and those who never attended college are now competing for the same jobs.

[H. Samy Alim](#)’s chapter, “What if We Occupied Language?”, offers an introductory look at how the use of language shapes our perception of the world. Starting with the shift in the word “occupy” and its new connotations since the Zuccotti Park takeover in September 2011, Alim then goes on to discuss taking language back from oppressors who use it as a mode of social control. Citing the use of “illegal” as a method of dehumanizing undocumented migrants, Alim calls for resistance against the colonizing practices of language, which oppress with nomenclature and rhetoric wrapped in negative stereotypes and connotations. Language mirrors reality, and reality mirrors language. So by taking models of positive and inclusive language from a movement like Occupy (that had people within it who were actively engaged in the elimination of oppressive language practices) and expanding that model of language into the larger world, the users of inclusive language can have a positive effect on perceptions and actions in wider society. Though this was a thought provoking introspective look at language and prejudice, it didn’t seem to fit in with the other chapters.

The book seemed rushed in places; much of the information in the first part of the book is repeated several times in various chapters, and could have been improved by more diligent editing. There was very little critique of capitalism as an economic model, with most of the chapters which did offer advice for improvements opting for slightly more regulated capitalism; a solution which is not in line with the more revolutionary spirit of the Occupy protests. One author even states “inequality is not always wrong”, and then goes on to conflate the terms “equality” with “sameness”, while another author labels radical calls against the *status quo* “Anti-American”. Considering that Occupy was an international movement against political corruption and corporate capitalism, this book could have done a lot better.

However, if you take out references to Occupy, much of this book serves as a useful primer for those interested in the rise of inequality in the US. In many places, the style is more journalistic than academic, making it a very accessible introduction to the subject.

Stephanie Spoto is an activist and antiquarian bookseller in Monterey, California. She received her PhD in English Literature from the University of Edinburgh. [Read more reviews by Stephanie.](#)