

Occupy Wall Street: New politics and new milestones

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The occupy movement has achieved an incredible and much-needed shake-up of a long-standing political stasis in the US and elsewhere, but it is crucial now to highlight the connection between failed foreign policy, bloated military spending and illegal wars, and the economic crisis at home.

This is an extraordinary time. The astonishing Occupy Wall Street movement emerged as the heart of our 99%, claimed the little scrap of earth in Zuccotti Park on behalf of all of us, and created a live-in soapbox from which to challenge inequality — how the 1% controls our economy, buys off our government, imposes their wars, and avoids paying their taxes. It both reflects and marks an end to the popular desperation that had taken over so much of our political life — instead, it applied the lessons of the Arab Spring, unexpectedly shaping a connection reaching far beyond the activist core, quickly moving from Wall Street to Main Street to the small parks, the steps of government buildings, the public squares from Oakland, California to Ames, Iowa, from Chicago to DC, to cities and towns across the country.

The challenges facing this new and different movement are legion, but joining its pop-up iterations is an incredible gift to those of us fighting that same outraged despair that first brought this vast disparity of folks to occupy what is now the people's squares. In New York City, I huddled with GritTV's Laura Flanders and Peace Action's Judith LeBlanc, in the driving rain at the smaller-than-usual general assembly at Occupation Wall Street's Zuccotti Park the other night. It was hard to see over the sea of umbrellas, and the meeting was pretty short. But the people's mic functioned fine in the rain, as folks discussed a variety of ways to act in solidarity with our Oakland contingent, who had faced a particularly brutal police assault, critically injuring a young Iraq War veteran from Iraq Veterans Against the War and Veterans for Peace [1].

A couple of weeks ago while speaking at several places in Iowa, I visited the activists of Occupy Des Moines, who had regrouped in front of the state capitol after bailing out 37 of their number who had been arrested by state troopers at the order of the governor. While they stood with their signs, the progressive mayor of the city pulled up, offering a nearby city park as an alternative site, one that would be outside the right-wing governor's jurisdiction. After a consensus decision, they moved their encampment, demonstrating again how this movement is creating new divides among the powerful.

Occupying DC

In Washington, we have two Occupy encampments. Both have been amazing in bringing new permanence and new breadth to the political resistance long present/absent/present in this city. With other IPSers and a variety of close friends and comrades, we've marched with the Occupy folks to protest at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and elsewhere. We've done teach-ins on the Iraq troop withdrawal and the renewed threats against Iran. We've had amazing discussions with folks occupying the squares.

Spending a day with the Institute's Letelier-Moffitt human rights awardees, representatives of Wisconsin's progressive movement, I hung out for a while at Freedom Plaza, one of the Occupy sites, talking with a brilliant homeless woman. She taught me more about homeless policy in DC than I had ever known. She described life in the shelters, saying that "yeah there're bedbugs, and there's no security and they're way too crowded, but that's not the real problem. The real failure is that the city government's mandate is to advocate for our rights, and it's the rights of homeless people that are being ignored. Their mandate isn't just for charity, they're supposed to be advocates for our rights." She knew the details of the city mandate and what obligations were being ignored — I hadn't had a clue. This is what this new movement looks like.

Occupying the Future

There are huge uncertainties, of course. Will the encampments figure out how to survive the encroaching winter? Can the iconic center, at Occupy Wall Street's Zucotti Park, remain the symbolic heart of the national, indeed global movement, as its working groups and caucuses extend out into other parts of the city? Will the Occupy movement figure out how to balance the focus on new ways of living with each other, creating new democratic norms that are, in the new dictum, horizontal instead of vertical, while simultaneously figuring out how to escalate the challenge to power that the creation of the Occupy sites began?

We won't know for a while. But we do know now, already, that Occupy Wall Street — and Occupy DC, Occupy Des Moines, Occupy Los Angeles and Chicago and Atlanta and Taos, New Mexico — have already shaken up our political stasis in a critically important new way. I've been thinking a lot about the first Palestinian intifada, the nonviolent, society-wide mobilization that transformed Palestine's nationalist struggle beginning in the late 1980s. Palestinian activists chose "uprising" as the logical English equivalent, but intifada doesn't really mean that — it means something closer to "shake-up" or "shaking out" — exactly what Occupy Wall Street has done to our body politic. It's our intifada, and it's shaking up that money-glutted, war-mongering, tax-avoiding 1 % like nothing in a couple of generations.

Milestones: Iraq Withdrawal, Qaddafi is Killed, Prisoners Go Free

In the meantime, the news is full of milestones. President Obama's announcement that almost all of the U.S. troops still occupying Iraq will come home by the end of the year certainly counts as a huge milestone-to-come. It's not complete, but it's a huge victory for our U.S. and global antiwar mobilizations, and especially for the people of Iraq so desperate to see an end to eight years of occupation. It means almost all the U.S. troops, and all the Pentagon-paid contractors will leave by the end of this year — so even with the biggest U.S. embassy ever built, with 5,000 staff, and thousands of security contractors (paid by the State Department this time, abiding by the letter though clearly not the spirit of the get-them-all-out-by-the-end-of-2011 agreement) this is a huge tribute to our years of work. I talked about the troop withdrawal on the Diane Rehm Show on NPR, including some of the history of what the years of war and occupation, plus the 12 years of Washington's crippling economic sanctions, have meant for the people of Iraq. Also on RT, I examined the consequences of the war for Iraqis [2].

And of course the killing of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, after he was captured alive, marked another grisly milestone in the Libyan civil war. In my article on salon.com, I wrote about how vulnerable Libya remains: still oil-rich but more divided than ever, after Qaddafi's death [3]. Far from "liberation," Libya continues to face a host of serious dangers.

We also had a nice victory for popular mobilization. CTV, the Canadian network that had given in to pressure and removed my interview on Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian UN statehood bid, put it

back on the website when they got enough letters of protest to decide they had to reverse their decision. And they just invited me back, this time to talk about the consequences of Qaddafi's death. You can watch that CTV interview here [4].

Occupy Wall Street, Not Palestine!

That's the slogan coined by the BNC, the Palestinian leadership of the now-global movement for boycott, divestment and sanctions — BDS — that challenges Israeli violations of international law and human rights. And we have yet another milestone, this one on the Palestine-Israel front, the prisoner swap that saw the first 400 or so out of a total of 1027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the one Israeli soldier held by Hamas. It was certainly a "win-win" at the human level, but of course there are political causes and consequences too. Here's the link to the "Inside Story" show I did on al-Jazeera English [5], discussing the prisoner exchange with my old friend and Palestinian civil society leader Mustafa Barghouti as well as an Israeli colonel. Al-Jazeera also published my commentary on the prisoner swap [6].

Just as this newsletter was getting ready to go to press, we also got word from Paris that UNESCO voted overwhelmingly to recognize Palestine as a full Member State. According to U.S. policy, that will trigger an immediate cut-off of U.S. dues to the UN's cultural, education and science organization, as well as ending U.S. dues payments to (and perhaps thus voting rights in) several other important UN agencies — possibly including the International Atomic Energy Agency, which monitors nuclear production around the world. Stay tuned for more analysis next time...

Amazing Times

The Occupy movement is bringing new energy, new activists, new ideas, new strategies into our movements for peace, justice and equality. One of the chants I heard last week, from folks at Brooklyn for Peace where I was speaking [7], seemed to capture the moment particularly well:

"How do we end the deficit? End the wars and tax the rich!" [8]

It's good advice. We've got a lot of work to do to get there.

Phyllis Bennis

P.S.

* From TNI:

<http://www.tni.org/article/occupy-wall-street-new-politics-and-new-milestones>

* Director of the New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies, Phyllis Bennis is a fellow of both TNI and the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington DC where she directs IPS's New Internationalism Project. Phyllis specialises in U.S. foreign policy issues, particularly involving the Middle East and United Nations. She worked as a journalist at the UN for ten years and currently serves as a special adviser to several top-level UN officials on Middle East and UN democratization issues. A frequent contributor to U.S. and global media, Phyllis is also the author of numerous articles and books, particularly on Palestine, Iraq, the UN, and U.S. foreign policy.

Footnotes

- [1] <http://ivaw.org/blog/press-release-marine-veteran-critically-injured-occupy-oakland-march>
- [2] http://www.ips-dc.org/media/video_the_us_did_far_more_damage_than_good_in_iraq
- [3] See on ESSF (article 23349), "[After Gadhafi, the West eyes the Libyan prize](#)".
- [4] <http://watch.ctv.ca/news/latest/end-game/#clip553512>
- [5] <http://watch.ctv.ca/news/latest/end-game/#clip553512>
- [6] <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/10/2011101710357404529.html>
- [7] http://121contact.typepad.com/my_weblog/2011/10/oct-25-2011-phyllis-bennis-speaks-brooklyn-for-peace-listens.html
- [8] http://brooklynforpeace.smugmug.com/PeaceAndEconomicJusticeCommitt/Phyllis-Bennis-On-The-Arab/19758063_3jDjj9#1551974444_F5qVxgN