

USA: Rape, Drug Overdoses, and Suicide in Occupy Movement — What Does Democracy Look Like?

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A series of crimes and tragedies in the Occupy movement — a rape in Philadelphia, drug overdoses in Portland and Vancouver, a suicide in Burlington — have led the media to scrutinize our movement more closely and have led the authorities in several cities to use such developments as an attempt to shut it down. We, the Occupiers, should ask ourselves: What do these experiences tell us about the Occupy movement and about our society? What is our moral responsibility in this situation, and what is the responsibility of the governmental authorities? Creating our own communities, we have to take responsibility to ensure that they are safe and welcoming. On the other hand we can insist that the authorities provide the resources to help us in dealing with some of the problems we face.

The reason we are seeing such social problems in Occupy is that we have become a mass movement. When you have Occupations in 1,000 cities and towns, involving tens of thousands of Americans who have participated in the movement's marches, rallies, encampments, and protests, you have the problems of any typical American community with an equivalent population. Were we to look at any, say, 100,000 Americans we would unfortunately find there had been drug use, rape, and suicide. The Occupy movement has brought media attention, through what is happening in our spaces, to some of the problems that unfortunately occur all the time in private spaces, many of which go unreported by the media.

The Occupy movement, made up of tens of thousands of working people, students, veterans, the unemployed, the poor, and the homeless naturally reflects our society with all of its virtues and vices. When we look at the U.S. military, major universities, large corporations, or any urban, suburban, or rural community, we find the same problems of sexual violence, drugs, and morbid depression. Too often in our communities, especially in our poor communities, governments deal with the issues just as they are dealing with in the Occupy camps. Too frequently police simply move in and respond to social, psychological, and medical problems with guns, clubs, and jails. The authorities use police power as a blunt instrument to deal with social issues, rather than bringing in the social service agencies, community members, friends and family members, and employment opportunities that might help solve the problem.

We don't really know, but the Occupy movement may have more than its share of people in distress. All progressive social movements tend to attract not only ordinary and relatively health working people and middle-class people, if you will, but also society's most oppressed and exploited: the lost, the dejected, the depressed, the outcasts, and pariahs. The hope embodied in radical social change which would create a more equal society attracts not only the idealists who come to it out of moral concern, but also those who have not been treated fairly, who have not experienced sympathy and compassion. Society's bent and broken recognize in our movement the idea, even if an idea we can only incompletely embody, that they too are welcome to become part of the community and to join in the struggle for justice. Yet many individuals come to our movement bringing with them the scars and distortions of their humanity, damaged by our classist, racist, sexist society. Or it may be simply that, sharing the same public space, we find ourselves living and organizing among the homeless,

many of whom have simply fallen on hard time, but some of whom have drug and alcohol problems or issues of mental illness. It is a great contradiction we see and feel everyday in the occupations.

What is admirable about our Occupy movement is that we want to deal with our society's social problems by creating a fairer society, one where the wealth of our nation is used to provide education, jobs, and housing for all. We are proposing a more democratic and egalitarian society, one that would produce less violence and fewer social problems, and provide more resources to dealing with those that remains.

Meanwhile, until we can do that, what can we ask of the authorities? Shouldn't the government be expected to treat a community of citizens engaged in protest as they would any other group of citizens? Would it be unreasonable to expect the authorities to provide shelter, toilets, health and social welfare workers to look after those in protest in the parks? We seldom need the police (only rarely when we face a violent person on our periphery or even in our midst with whom we cannot reason).

We feel sad to learn of violence that has taken place in the Occupations. We mourn the deaths, we work for social justice, and we stand for peace. We call upon more to join us and help build a healthy community, a healthy movement, and a better and altogether different society predicated upon democracy and equality. We are aware that, with our faults and our weaknesses, we are what democracy looks like. We are the 99 percent, and not all of us are strong or well. Yet we say, even more proudly: We Are What Democracy Looks Like! We Are the 99%! Occupy!

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P.S.

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<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/labotz141111.html>

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