Social Inequality and the Occupy Movement in Australia

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Though the Occupy is considered American, the issues that cause it and the goals it seeks to achieve are global. The purpose of this essay is to analyse the social, economic and political issues raised by the Occupy movement and its relevance to Australia's institutions. In doing so I will firstly, discuss the way that inequalities in modern power structures are the cause and focus of the Occupy movement, then secondly, seek to demonstrate that these power structures are present in Australia, while thirdly analysing the progress of the Occupy movement to date, particularly its reception in Australia. I will also be stating my own position on the movement and Australia's inequalities. Consideration will particularly be given to the inequalities of current democracy in both the United States and Australia; rationalisation and the power of communication and true freedom of speech; and the post-welfare state and the perception of equal life chances in Australia.

It has been over a year since what is generally recognized as the official start of the Occupy movement, September 17th, 2011, when a thousand New Yorkers gathered for a peaceful protest in Manhattan. In a mere three weeks, similar protests sprang up in seventy major cities and over six hundred communities around the United States. (Walters, 2011). The Egyptian and Libya revolution's smart use of Twitter and Facebook during Arab Spring in 2011 had already opened discussion as to social media's role in resource mobilization for cyberactivism (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). Occupy protesters realized globalization (Waters, 1995) meant they could share information without the restrictions of the print media, and added Tumblr, the 4chan imageboards, and individually hosted forums to this list of tools. The message of the 99% went "viral", disenfranchised people across the world joined the protest, and Occupy became an international movement, an occupation of one virtual, global "street" (Saskia Sassen, 2011).

But what was the movement, and what were they protesting? The Occupy Wall Street website asserts that "Occupying is a militant nonviolent tactic meant to assert control over physical space by reclaiming it for a new purpose while disrupting the ability of [an] opponent to use that space, thus forcing recognition of [a] cause." (from

http://occupywallst.org/) The Occupy movement asserts that political and economic power has been invested into a small minority in the population (the “1%”) and endeavors to reclaim some of that power (thus the slogan “We are the 99%”) through peaceful protesting and progressive democratic decisions. It is an attempt to reclaim democracy: though many of the Occupied countries ostensibly have democracy, it is one portrayed by the liberal ideology as an expression of popular will (Marx, 1848) but given the majority of social, political and economic decisions are in the hands of a minority of privileged people this is obviously untrue.

As highlighted in Alexis de Tocqueville’s sociological theories, standard democracy tends to exclude the opinions of the Othered minority (Orum, 2001). The Occupy movement, however, challenges this notion with the use of “privileged stacks” during the General Assemblies that decide the outcome of individual groups’ policies. While the meetings and debates are open to all, including “spokes” that may represent (but not act as an authority for) an external minority unable to attend in full, it gives preference and precedence to the voices of the underprivileged: a straight white male may have to wait longer for their turn. (Seltzer, 2011.) While each proposal is still voted upon by all present, this strategy enables a more diverse range of voices to be heard in shaping the Occupy’s goals. This equality of speech highlights the issues of inequalities present in our current democratic system, despite (or perhaps because of) America’s constitutional right to “freedom of speech”, an ideal that is also supported in Australia as part of the five fundamental freedoms (as defined by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship).

The right to free speech is threatened when there are gross disparities in access to the means by which speech is disseminated. Wealth and power is what buys people the right to be heard. Sometimes quite literally: for example, in many major cities, the use of voice amplification equipment is illegal without permit, ostensibly to avoid noise pollution in an already crowded space, and it was to circumvent this that the act of a group repeating a single speaker's words (mic-checking) enabled Occupy protesters to communicate when

in a large crowd. Gaining a political platform is similarly the domain of the privileged: those who can afford an education, are afforded better opportunities, and who are heard when they speak: studies show (Sesko & Biernat, 2010*)* that women and people of colour are more likely to be tuned out or forgotten by an audience regardless of topic. For this reason, the act of using the human microphone to disrupt and participate in social discourse, such as political speeches at universities, is disparaged by administrators and journalists as suppression of the speaker's "freedom of speech" while actually enforcing Weber's concept of “rationalisation”. By taking action against a mic check, the institution attempts to maintain its power structure and hegemonies, just as taking action against the Occupy protests under the guise of freedom of movement is fallacious. It is the conflation of "the maintenance of order and the protection of institutional reputation (zwecktrational action) with struggles motivated by the pursuit of an abstract ideal of freedom (wertrational action)". (Rey, 2012)

The Occupy cause was able to use its mass to stand up for the rights of others, such as picketing on behalf of workers at a Manhattan Pizzeria called "Hot and Crusty" so that the workers would not lose their jobs, and the support of Chicago teachers during their strike (Solnit, 2012). Though Occupy came too late to involve itself in the 2011 QANTAS industrial disputes, it allied itself with the unions and, most recently, has made plans to picket on behalf of Sydney Telstra workers, as can be seen on the Occupy Sydney website. (http://www.occupysydney.org.au/) Occupy also raised awareness of police racism by resisting "stop and frisk" policies that target people of colour, particularly black and latino youths in the United States, ala the shooting of Trayvon Martin (State vs Zimmerman). Institutionalized racism fits with Bourdieu’s (2001) description of internalized power structures, and is equally applicable to the prejudice suffered by minority races in Australia, particularly those of Middle Eastern origin (Poynting, 2007) and Aboriginal Australians. The Occupy movement also focuses on erasing debt, shifting money from big banks to smaller credit unions, and protesting house foreclosures through squatting. In this way, it concentrates on the economic inequality following the instability of the global financial

crisis.

The Occupy movement is as important in Australian society as it is in the rest of the world. In fact, given the movement's origins in America and the close social and economic ties Australia holds towards the US, primarily due to its media dominance and political alliance, it is arguable that the specific goals of US Occupy movements such as OWS are increasingly relevant to Australia, even though social perception is that we are "the lucky country" due to our comparative egalitarianism. (ABS, 2007) However, individual autonomy and globalization's influence means wealth distribution and consumer value is decided at the whim of the capitalist market: this is the neoliberalism which has overtaken Australia today. This means that the state holds key power, and it is people of privilege who are most likely to have access to those positions of power, and thus use them to perpetuate the inequality in order to retain their own status and preserve the social order. It is still possible to make out groups of "winners" and "losers" within Australia, and some groups fall disproportionately into a category. The rich are still getting richer faster than anybody else, and while this wealth has trickled down, there is still a problematic discrepancy in the distribution of wealth amongst those underprivileged by class, gender and/or race. (Habibis & Walter, 2009).

Perhaps because Australia was not hit as hard by the GFC, and perhaps because we have a history of suppressing our minority voices, there has been heavy disparagement of the OWS movement in Australia, evident both in news media as further perpetuation of the social order by the state itself, and spaces of public opinion. One Daily Telegraph article on Occupy Sydney dismissed the movement as "silliness" (Campion & White, 2011) and there is little awareness about the complex and conflicting goals of the movement, making it seem disorganised to outsiders despite the democratic structure. The attitude Australians are expressing towards the Occupy movement seems to be "Go and Occupy a job" (Waters, 2011), disregarding the fact that Occupy protesters come from all walks of life and using concepts of mutual obligation (Saunders, 2000) to disparage and belittle the

act of protest itself rather than addressing the issues being raised.

For my own part, I took part in two Occupy protests in late 2011 in Martin Place, disenfranchised with the white male privilege and power that dominates Australian discourse and the difficulties with Othering I had seen and experienced for myself. It seemed to me even then that the movement was not limited solely to modern East-Coast Northern America, but was addressing key problematic elements in the machine of capitalist society and the institutions that greased the wheels. I suppose in some way it captured my sociological imagination, the concept of ephemeral communications on social networks bringing people together and enabling a collective consciousness to take back mandation of their own society. However the micro issues were more difficult than the beauty of the macro protest. It was obvious that individuals of the movement often had conflicting mores and values: some people wanted anarchy for anarchy's sake, while others were hoping to harness the attention drawn to the Occupy movement to forward their own political agendas. Minority groups quibbled over the rules governing a safe space while pressing issues such as sanitation during the occupation went unaddressed. However I felt simply bringing the public discourse to bear on global financial problems and the inequality in power in Australia and the reshaping of the strategies we use to oppose these inequalities was worthy of my time.

In conclusion, the Occupy movement is a global response to the inequalities of today. Though the Occupy movement seems disorganized due to covering a broad spectrum of issues and inequalities in modern power structures, it has achieved some of its goals simply by bringing issues into the public discourse through both cyberactivism and the print media, though the latter's role in reinforcing the state's role in perpetuating inequality means it often maligns the movement. Issues such as racism and sexism, disenfranchisement, economic instability, the power of wealth and the uneven distribution of wealth in Western societies have all been raised and, more importantly, discussion of effective strategies to *change* these inequalities has taken place and in some cases (such

as the movement from banks to credit unions, the work with student debt and foreclosures, and union support) these changes have been successful. However the movement has not taken hold as strongly in Australia. Though the inequalities of race, class and gender in the political, social and economic spheres are generalizable to modern Australian society, the differences in specifics have meant protesters are seen mostly as goalless and the movement is perceived as protesting problems occurring elsewhere in the world. However, as the Occupy movement changes its shape so as to accommodate different ways of peaceful protest beyond occupation, so too do its intentions change, and perhaps with it the Australian perception.

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