

What happened to Occupy? The divided left and the demise of a movement: The divided left and the demise of a movement

by [Doug Rossinow](#) in the [July 10, 2013](#) issue



Occupy Wall Street had me at hello—as it did most every other left-liberal college professor in the country. Suddenly, after decades of worsening inequality and adulation of wealth, after the financial crisis and the Bush-Obama strategy of saving the financial system by flooding the banks with money, after a faux-populist Tea Party movement—after all that, suddenly the power of the plutocracy was publicly confronted. Occupy’s success in getting out this message was astonishing.

But as soon as reports poured in about crowds communicating by wagging fingers and about the movement’s resistance to making concrete demands, I got a familiar feeling, and it was not a good one. This isn’t going anywhere, I thought.

I remembered my college days in the 1980s when I was involved in divestment activism aimed at apartheid South Africa. In the spring of 1986, the student group which I was part of set up a mock apartheid shantytown on Harvard Yard next to a tall wooden structure, painted white—the ivory tower. Our message was clear. The university could not pretend it was aloof from the political debates and struggles outside its walls.

We had a clear demand: divest from companies doing business in South Africa. And we succeeded in confronting the university's population with its complicity in the practices of apartheid.

But our movement was also plagued by some of the same liabilities that showed up in OWS. We tortured ourselves with long debates over whether to reach decisions by majority vote or consensus. We harshly criticized one another (not always without reason) for exercising unacknowledged power within the group. Worst of all, we failed to discuss seriously how our encampment would end. As the school year came to a close, people just drifted away. The university administration took down the ivory tower. Things ended quietly.

OWS clearly did not think through how things would end. Would Occupy be sustained indefinitely, through a ceaseless influx of new recruits? No. Would it declare victory and tell everyone to go home for the winter? No. Would it announce that Phase One—getting the issue of inequality on the table—was finished and proceed to formulate policy demands that politicians would either take up or incur the people's wrath? No.

When a small Occupy encampment materialized in Minneapolis, my wife and I quickly paid a visit. The scene interested us as historians and as citizens. We talked to students swimming in debt, but also to lots of the scruffy types you see at all left-wing political protests—anarchists in mood if not in word, who appear to eke out a bare existence on the economy's fringes.

At one point during the gathering's opening days, the Democratic mayor of Minneapolis, R. T. Rybak, a fairly liberal guy, spoke with the protesters. He seemed uncomfortable in the role of a city manager who must set boundaries, but that was his message: keep the protest sedate. Eventually, the local Occupiers went away. There was no violent confrontation of the sort that, with dismal inevitability, punctuated and then ended OWS in New York.

The ecology of place sometimes gets overlooked in political analysis. When I remember the divestment activism at Harvard, I also remember a train trip I once made to New Haven. Everyone in Cambridge followed news about divestment protests at Columbia, Yale and Berkeley, and I thought I would see what was up at Yale. I ended up sitting in on a meeting of the Yale student divestment group, and I was amazed at how different it was from Harvard's.

In New Haven, if a speaker at a meeting rambled on without apparent purpose, the meeting chair would interrupt that person and say get to the point or let others speak. Everyone seemed to accept this exercise of discipline. At Harvard, such a thing would have elicited widespread outrage. At Yale, as it happened, the chair of the meeting was an African-American woman and the speaker was white. The group was clearly more racially diverse than the meetings I was used to. This isn't the place to try to explain those differences. But local political environments can develop in rather specific ways.

More leftists per capita live in New York City than in perhaps any other large city in the United States. They tend to cluster into a couple of categories: habitual protesters and professional intellectuals, many of the latter being university professors. This combination caused Occupy to display a mix of navel gazing, theory mongering and thirsting for public confrontation.

These features of OWS prompted an expression of disgust from leftist writer Thomas Frank, who complained in the *Baffler* about OWS's "pseudointellectual gibberish" (his article was titled "To the Precinct Station: How Theory Met Practice and Drove It Absolutely Crazy"). This in turn prompted a rejoinder from Peter Frase in the journal *Jacobin* defending Occupy's carnivalesque resistance to programmatic thinking.

Frank is right about how leftists fawned over Occupy, sometimes with obscure and pedantic rhetoric. Frase is right that Frank is longing for the kind of economic populism that just isn't on offer today. There is little point in imagining (as Frank does) that it is 1892 or 1937 again. Of course, it's not 1968 again either, as Frase might need reminding.

Frank's thinking has been consistent over the years. He has always been an enemy of identity politics, left or right, believing that it blinds people to economic realities. (In *What's the Matter with Kansas?* he skewered the identity politics of the right by which voters elect plutocrats in the false belief that these "conservatives" will outlaw abortion.) Frank has a couple of controlling ideas: *Follow the money. The market is a false god.*

In likening, at least in superficial terms, the libertarianism of the right to the state-bashing attitude of Occupy and much of the left, Frank makes an incisive point. He argues that progressives should learn to love the state (and use it) if they want to save America's middle class.

For the New York left, however, the state truly appears as the repressive machine that Marxism, in its original form, said it was. Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg turned New York City into America's Singapore. They cleaned it up and made it safe—to the relief of its white population. Black and brown New Yorkers, particularly young people, have felt the business end of the New Improved NYC. “Stop and frisk” doesn't begin to capture the extent of the surveillance, suspicion and repression that young men of color in New York live under. Added to this reality was the growing national trend of penning political protesters into “free speech zones.”

If OWS had first taken root in Minneapolis—or Chicago or Denver or Charlotte or Houston or Los Angeles—it would have developed differently. But that couldn't have happened, since Wall Street isn't in any of those other cities and because—with the possible exception of Los Angeles—none has the requisite concentration of protesters. You go to war with the left you've got.

American politics has developed asymmetrically since the 1960s. On the right, a major political party, the Republicans, formed a tight relationship with conservative movement cadres. Members of these cadres graduate from youthful involvement in right-wing activism into the lower ranks of the GOP apparatus. Republican politicians and officeholders embrace the activism of their grassroots base.

On the other side, the Democrats, America's moderate party, have long been estranged from progressive activism, deriding anything that smacks of the left. The disdain is mutual. The result has been one party boasting programmatic coherence and ideological ballast, and the other piecing together its evolving agenda on the fly; one is replenished with a steady stream of young ideologues, the other is stuck with student-government careerists.

Certainly there is a downside to the GOP's more intensely ideological character. It may lead to extremism and a consequent loss of mass support. Yet Republicans have succeeded remarkably well from 1980 to the present in showing political pragmatism and adaptability while remaining programmatically robust. Perhaps this run of success is now coming to an end. Time will tell. But Democrats have followed a very different path of development, one marked by ideological and programmatic drift.

Progressive America—defined very broadly as the entire left half of the political spectrum, including moderate reformers as well as declared radicals—is composed of four different constituencies: the politicians, the organizers, the protesters and the professors. Beyond that are the progressive masses, who sometimes protest but more often simply vote. This group is composed disproportionately of single women, people of color and the working class.

I focus on the politicians, the organizers, the protesters and the professors because they are the ones who, more than others, can find the time to devote to political activism. They are progressive America's cadres.

Issues—whether reproductive rights, the incarceration state, student debt, foreign war or anything else—don't divide liberals or progressives into functional groups. The issues aren't what divide progressives; a lot of progressives agree about a lot of the issues, even if they differ about which issues to work on. The four categories I've named cut across positions on the issues.

The politicians are those who run for office and who work on campaigns and for officeholders. They are the Democratic Party's apparatchiks.

The organizers work on all the issues, usually for modest pay. Some work for labor unions. Some used to work for ACORN. Some work in church-based organizations. Some are attached to the Working Families Party. Many of them descend, one way or another, from the disciples of community organizer Saul Alinsky. Generally they represent the interests of America's working class and its poor, although some of them represent interests, like those of women or LGBT Americans, that are not class-bound. They do the scut work of the left, such as it is. They generally show little patience for academic theory or for notions of protest as a joyous end in itself. They have too much to do.

The protesters are those who descend like flies on almost any progressive mobilization and especially on those that promise a confrontation with the forces of repression. Following on the idea that place matters, the New York variety of protesters are a lot more prone to confrontation than the Minneapolis flock.

And the professors? The less said about them, perhaps, the better.

The basic problem with OWS was that the protesters, ever-ready for an encampment and itching for a fight, moved in and took over. "We are the 99 percent" was and

remains a brilliant rallying cry. But those five words were the essential contribution of Occupy, and they came at the start. After that, it became about celebrating activism.

After it became clear that OWS had no plan to shut itself down—that the Occupiers did not intend to leave Zuccotti Park in New York on their own terms—a showdown with the police was inevitable. This despite reports that individual New York cops, at least in the early going, had expressed sympathy with Occupy's message.

The historian Richard Hofstadter once wrote that, in American politics, "when a third party's demands become popular enough, they are appropriated by one or both of the major parties and the third party disappears. Third parties are like bees: once they have stung, they die." Hofstadter also said that protest parties offered "firm and identifiable programs and principles." But unlike third parties of old, OWS never offered a clear program.

If Occupy's message had been translated into policy demands, constituencies other than the protesters would have had to do it. But who? Occasionally a professor would offer a useful idea. The organizers could generally be counted on to show up. The politicians were unreliable.

Which brings us to the Democratic Party in the age of Obama. Of the four groups that make up progressive America, the protesters are the only group of which Barack Obama has never been a member. He was a part-time law professor and before that a full-time organizer. Forget about the disillusionment of those who saw in Obama something he never was or claimed to be (socialist, pacifist, populist, postracial). Think instead of the promise he offered to heal the breaches in progressive America. I don't mean the divide between black and white. I mean the functional disconnects separating the politicians, the organizers and the protesters.

Obama has actually continued a process of absorption by the Democrats of activist energies that began during the George W. Bush years. In the Vietnam era, antiwar activists became protesters because the war was the Democrats' war; most who opposed it saw few options within the political system. They couldn't use the Republican Party, which stood to the Democrats' right, as an antiwar vehicle. Antiwar candidates among the Democrats, like Eugene McCarthy in 1968, seemed plausible as agents of change only to some.

But between 2001 and 2008 wars were waged by a Republican president, and a lot of antiwar sentiment got channeled into the system. Democratic candidates succeeded in presenting themselves—despite the complicity of prominent Democrats in Bush’s foreign policy—as vehicles for young people who wanted to end the wars and pursue nation-building at home. Obama, the former organizer, brought into his campaigns for office a lot of young talent that, in another time, would have stayed outside conventional politics.

Can Obama’s brand of incrementalism answer the questions that Occupy raised? From a protester’s point of view, no. Obama’s closeness to the same gang of policymakers who urged financial deregulation in the 1990s is no illusion. The Democratic politicians have failed to respond directly to the sins of finance and to the distress of those suffering from foreclosure and unemployment. In this sense, the politicians failed to seize the day that dawned with Occupy.

However, from the view of a young organizer—or a middle-aged professor—things look somewhat more hopeful. Obama’s fiscal policy and the Federal Reserve’s monetary policy have been more expansionary than many progressives will allow, and they contrast starkly with the austerity regime pursued since 2008 across Europe.

Unfortunately, Obama is proposing to move further toward austerity in the government’s discretionary budget. His compromises will be more than many can stomach. I cannot recall an elected official who seemed to believe more firmly than Obama does that, in Max Weber’s words, “politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards.”

But if Obama’s party, clearly hobbled by its dependence on campaign contributions from financiers, is not to be the sole instrument of progressive change, then the organizers, the professors and renegade politicians will face the challenge of creating new ones. Progressive America needs to face the fact that the protesters in its ranks can spark a movement toward change—but cannot do more than that. This is because the paths toward solipsism and confrontation are now deeply etched in the landscape of American protest. These traces have been dug for decades. Once the initial excitement around OWS ebbed, this is where the protests slid. No serious student of America’s protest culture should be surprised.

Occupy’s contribution was dramatic, and we should not slight it. We should salute it. But Occupy’s limits were also clear, and they were no accident. It did what it could.