Savvy occupiers

By David Heim
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Social ethicist Gary Dorrien talked to Century *executive editor David Heim after writing his cover story on "the case against Wall Street." Read the article (subscribtion required).*

Have you been a part of any of the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations?

I've taken part in several demonstrations and talked to people at Zuccotti Park/Liberty Square. My chief impression is the one that I highlight in the article: I'm struck by the ideological, economic, racial and ethnic diversity of the protesters. The group that sleeps at the park has a higher quotient of anarchists than the crowd that gathers each day, and there are felt distinctions between the occupiers and the larger crowds that show up to demonstrate and hang out. But the sheer diversity of the gatherings makes the point that a great many people from nearly all walks of life are fed up with the system and with typical liberal attempts to reform it.

The Occupy Wall Street movement is sometimes compared to the social movements of the 1960s in its youthfulness and its focus on egalitarian process--it's a movement without leaders. Is that comparison helpful?

I went to college and graduate school in the 1970s. The 1960s generation, I thought, made important breakthroughs on racial justice and building an antimilitarist movement, and I thought the work of our generation was to fulfill the social revolutions of the 1960s. That didn't happen. Some Occupy protesters remind me of New Left anarcho-pacifists of the '60s generation that I knew, and others are less ideologically defined, in the manner of '60s counterculture movements. In fact, some of the Occupy

protesters *were* counterculture radicals in the 1960s.

But the Occupy movement will not have to live down what is usually said about the social movements of the '60s--that they set off a backlash that drove American politics to the right. Today virtually all Republican officials and presidential candidates want to privatize Medicare and reduce Medicaid to block grants. They want to give another tax cut to corporations and the rich and to abolish taxes on interest, dividends, capital gains and inheritance. They want a balanced budget amendment to the constitution that caps federal spending at 18 percent of the total economy, a figure last reached in 1966. They have wholly adopted the mentality of antigovernment activist Grover Norquist, vowing to never raise new tax revenue in any way. And they have no answer to how the financial industry should be prevented from frothing up another crash.

So it's hard to imagine that the Occupy movement could set off anything more reactionary than the situation we already have, (Though Republicans are debating whether to slash Social Security, too, and whether to abolish all the remaining progressivity in the tax code.)

Meanwhile, at least half of the Occupying protesters are deeply alienated from the Democratic Party. This opposition cuts deeper than the opposition of the New Left to the Democratic Party in the 1960s. To be sure, Democrats created a catastrophe with the war in Vietnam.
But Eugene McCarthy and Bobby Kennedy stirred huge reactions by offering themselves as saviors in 1968, and by 1972 the Democratic Party had an antiwar presidential nominee, George McGovern. Today, the disillusionment with Obama and the entire establishment is intense in the Occupy movement, because Obama and the Democrats are functionaries of a prevailing order that does not work for most people.

What do you most admire about the movement? And what worries you? What's a best-case scenario for it, in your mind?

The greatest strength of the Occupy movement is its rebellious spirit. It is angry, and it is planning to stay. You have to be awfully stubborn and rebellious to persist in opposing Wall Street's dominance of the economy. And it is inspiring many people, especially young people, to believe that democracy is stronger than the economic oligarchy, at least potentially.

As for what worries me: every protest movement has to negotiate the twin dangers of co-optation and marginalization. Besides that, what worries me most is that it would not take much of a spark to set off a violent crackdown by the police. We know this because numerous crackdowns have occurred already, despite the fact that this is a disciplined and peaceable occupying group--one that prohibits alcohol and drugs in the square and one in which all manner of spiritual practices are practiced daily.

My article addresses the "best-case" question. I greatly admire the Occupy organizers for setting off something that the various social justice organizations to which I belong never came close to launching. The Occupy founders had a better idea. This movement is closer, ideologically and strategically, to the antiglobalization movement of the 1990s than to the social justice organizations that initially snubbed the Occupy protest. The Occupy organizers, however, realized that demonstrating against the World Trade Organization every now and then did not accomplish anything. Claiming a site, and holding onto it indefinitely, plays out very differently.

Your article focuses on regulating Wall Street banking and investment, which is clearly one of the movement's top concerns. What other policy goals would you list as priorities in achieving greater equality in our economic and political systems?

A substantial part of my work has made the case for developing decentralized forms of economic democracy--public banks, community finance corporations, community land trusts, worker and community owned enterprises, cooperative networks and, most importantly, mutual-funded holding company models that are more entrepreneurial than cooperatives and are better able to scale up. I don't believe that the factors of production trump everything else. But I do believe that those who control the terms,

amounts, and direction of credit have a huge say in determining the kind of society that the rest of us live in. Anything that democratizes the process of investment is a gain for the common good.

Martin Luther King Jr. was devoted to three interlocking social justice causes: racial justice, economic justice--especially antipoverty activism--and antimilitarism. That is still a compelling list of priorities to me, except that all of these commitments have to be conceived as inseparably related to struggles for gender and sexual justice, and ecological flourishing.

As a social ethicist whose field was invented by the Social Gospel movement, I treasure the Social Gospel's emphasis on just distribution and the common good, along with Reinhold Niebuhr's realist emphasis on power politics and the faults of liberal idealism. But liberationist criticism adjudicates what I take from the Social Gospel and Niebuhrian traditions. Social justice must not be reduced to concerns about the fair distribution of things. It is also about giving voice to oppressed communities and being liberated from structures of oppression and dependency. Because some groups are privileged, social justice involves paying attention to the differences between groups in order to fight against racial injustice, sexism, violence, exclusion, discrimination against GLBTQ individuals and communities, and other forms of domination.