The End of Cynicism

The photo on the cover of this issue of the Democratic Communique comes from Zuccotti Park on October 13, 2011. It features Occupy Wall Street’s citizen media committee in New York City: Self-produced, DIY media by and for the movement through audio and video podcasts, web presence, and collaborative media projects. Its media content was mostly distributed via tens of thousands of social media links, but also word-of-mouth sharing, independent media outlets, and even print media through the encampment’s newspaper, The Occupied Wall Street Journal.

But in New York that day, it was immediately clear that Occupy was a serious movement, even if it was making up its rules and agenda as it went along. The mobilized participants in the park that October were cooperating with an idealism unmatched by any in recent history, and in an era where competition and monetization and markets are the name of the game, it was an undeniably exciting moment. And one that would be short lived, too. The encampment would be cleared by the NYPD in a matter of weeks.

As I’m sitting here today in mid-November, one year to the day since the clearing of Zuccotti Park, I’m not so sure that the end of the encampment was such the bad thing that I thought it was back then. By any measure, the occupation of space by hundreds of thousands of participants in more than 700 cities was a real success story of a mobilized global and local citizenry. And one that brought with it conversations on the trajectory of our democracy, our media, our communities and states, and our social contracts.

But toward November or so, it seemed as though the press coverage had started to be more about the banality of their presence rather than the importance of their messages. I began to wonder if the encampment moment was better as a shorter one, and to move beyond the occupation of space as a political strategy. Better to burn out than it is to rust, you know?

In the weeks that followed, I remember bouncing between a cautious optimism for Occupy’s potential to leverage its very real accomplishments into political action. But I was also nagged with a fear that the moment would simply fade into the history books, written off as yet one more failure of the idealism of aging hippies and disaffected Millennials.

The time since, though, has shown that the innovation inherent in the network-centric Occupy approach can translate itself to other, perhaps even more pragmatic political movements. Just last week, the Rolling Jubilee debt abolishment movement began, alongside the Strike Debt movement. Occupy Sandy is at the forefront of the relief effort in New York City and New Jersey following Hurricane Sandy’s devastation. Occupy Our Homes is working to organize resistance against bank foreclosures. There are dozens of others – Occupy the Courts, The Occupy Labor Alliance, Occupy the SEC, and the start of the Occupy Co-Op Credit Union is hopefully just on the horizon.
Here’s the lesson, though: What we learned from Occupy in 2011 is that for all the cynicism, the material injustices, the systemic corruption, and indeed, the heartache that we’ve seen in the recent iterations of our democracy, when people organize and decide to cooperate, real change is possible. It is a lesson as old as the Republic, but one that we’d largely forgotten in the face of the systematic marginalization of organized community action that had been the status quo for decades.

But if nothing else, Occupy serves as a reminder that cynicism and apathy always leads to a dangerous malaise, and that it is those two old concepts – cooperation and idealism – that build a society more in line with principles of justice. We must be cautious, of course. But the future, at least for now, appears to be brightening.

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