

John O'Kane

A PEOPLE'S MANIFESTO





This book is about what ordinary citizens, those with limited power and resources, think about the big Recession of 2008 and its aftermath. It investigates how non-experts and outsiders without access to the "facts" make sense of these times and pass along knowledge--not mere information--that catalyzes others to understand and act. They can express their opinions through a variety of venues, including op-ed writing, and reinterpret numerical "facts" within moral contexts.

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INTRODUCTION.

A PEOPLE'S MANIFESTO: UNPOPULAR POLICIES AND THE POPULAR MIND

The official rant these days is that the economy is in recovery from the Great Recession of 2008. The economy owned by those in the upper income brackets, the 1% or more broadly the 5% or even the 20%, has certainly recovered. The stock market is at record levels, profits for many major corporations are the highest in history, CEO and upper management salaries have spiked, and the housing market has nearly recovered its pre-recession value, according to a recent report by the St. Louis Federal Reserve.

The not-so-official rant, however, is that we're still mired in recession. The unemployment rate, a defective measure anyway that excludes those who stop looking for work and fails to reflect the epidemic of under-employment, remains relatively high. Wages are stagnant, small businesses are still being wiped out, foreclosures continue in the communities most impacted by the sub-prime loan policies the banks profited from, and housing values remain repressed for many in the lower and middle classes, with many homes still under water. These values, again according to the St. Louis Fed, will likely never return for this sector. This is especially worrisome since these values

were the source of retirement and start-up businesses for many citizens before the recession.

Since the new jobs being created are mostly low-wage and temporary ones, what will “recovery” mean to the struggling victims when we return to pre-recession employment levels? Taken together these deficits could retard the catch-up process for generations. The increasing spread between these different economies, an issue even before the recession, is increasing inequality to the point where we’ll need an overhaul of the system before we can return to the conditions that expanded the middle class during the fifties and sixties.

What’s striking is that seven years into this crisis we still don’t have a credible policy to deal with these issues. President Obama’s responses to emerging problems and issues are mostly ad hoc reactions. His approach lacks a consistency of purpose and action. Congress has been polarized for some time, and is mostly responsive to the funders that promise to get it elected in the next cycle of voting, and not to the people who clearly, as polls show, want real change. The people’s will is obviously being thwarted by a broken system.

Have the victims who occupy this “other economy” been abandoned, and their fates left blowing in the wind by an oligarchy so entrenched in power that it only wants to reproduce itself? Are they too alienated to at least hit the streets in sufficient numbers and make some noise? It seems years of abandonment have left them with little sense of empowerment or hope for real change. And now they’ve learned to ignore the process that ignores them. In this shared refusal the institutions that once served the lower and middle classes, and helped secure and protect their piece of the American Dream, have been reshaped or eliminated by the oligarchy.

Consider education, traditionally the vehicle for the excluded to improve their state in life. It was central to the broad policy of inclusion during the era of middle class expansion, roughly between 1945 and 1973. It was affordable. Higher education in California, for example, was tuition-free until the 70s, providing many citizens access to upward mobility. The arrival of perpetual budget-cutting, to a great extent a response to new tax reductions for the upper tier of citizens, helped reverse this trend. Budget-cutting was a national affectation, and it contributed to the erosion of the safety net as well. The US has one of the weakest welfare systems in the advanced industrial world. This forerunner of “austerity” politics severely weakened the New Deal/Great Society legacy premised on greater inclusion. TANF, the 1996 “revision” of the welfare law that removed the right to benefits, dealt this institution a

severe blow. The decline of unions has been responsible for the flattening of wages over the past forty years, leaving us with a low-wage economy where far too many citizens must work multiple jobs to survive, as Barbara Ehrenreich's masterful book, *Nickel and Dimed*, documents.

And housing, which traditionally helped many advance into and through stages of the middle class, lacks a policy design like what helped expand home ownership during healthier economic times. It has been dwarfed by bubble economics and policies that encourage speculation in land and property, all of which mostly benefit those at the top.

These deficits leave many unequipped to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, even if there were good options in the real economy to choose from.

Bipartisan Bloc

The problem is that a bipartisan bloc of establishment insiders, conservative republicans as well as democrats, owns the narrative for change, and this commonsense has little to do with practical policy solutions. This is very curious since, as Ian Masters noted recently on Pacifica's "Background Briefing," their policies were responsible for the 2008 collapse and our continuing economic woes. To compound the irony, many on the fringe work to block Obama's team from doing anything whatsoever, even sacrificing workers to budget-balancing schemes. They're now embracing moments in the past when we were supposedly freer, before the New Deal and certainly before any deals that included ordinary citizens. It seems that turning back can make you feel and appear liberated in the face of crises.

But how has it come to pass that no change, the undoing of change and a return to the past can be sold as change? Liberals want to go back as well, but to a different moment with greater opportunity and more equality. Perhaps Obama's "hope and change" was so empty and disappointing to many conservatives, and even some liberals, that they now distrust promises of moving ahead, and welcome a turn back to better times when change didn't seem necessary. And certainly before the left's heyday of the 60s when issues like civil rights and feminism, and the anti-poverty and anti-war movements, stamped society with the pedigree of future shock because of so much fast-paced change. The right does get hyper-motivated in the 70s to erase these advances from memory.

And they've been very successful since then at fighting to undo change under the guise of providing it. In the 70s they got very well organized and

built the base to elect Ronald Reagan, achieving the success that would help secure future gains. They were able to change the way we view society in relation to government.

The liberal establishment has always been a weak agent for change, mostly *talking* progress and legislating *individual* advantages without paying serious attention to structures and institutions. But the crisis of liberalism was married to this conservative success. This crisis is reflected already in the 1968 election when the democrats chose a candidate, Hubert Humphrey, whom many felt was not all that different from Richard Nixon. When Nixon won, the “radical” left moved to the fringe, and groups like SDS dropped out of politics. The democrats floundered for a few years, vesting its fortunes in the anti-war McGovern wing of the party for the 1972 elections. They lost again, by one of the largest margins in history, and their players moved toward the center, fearing their party might cease to be a serious threat.

Faced with the greater presence of this conservative bloc, which tended to pull democrats to the right, they became more and more like the republicans over the course of the decade in order to restore their competitive position.

This helps explain why there are now fewer liberal democrats in Congress, and even fewer progressives, to represent marginalized groups. And it also helps explain why the democrats’ proposals and policies are often lite versions of what the republicans offer. They’re for balanced budgets but not as urgently, and with a different mix of trade-offs between spending cuts and revenue increases; less austerity; more taxes on the rich but no progressive restructuring of the tax code; more regulation of corporations without any appreciable resistance to deregulation; free markets with a dash of planning, etc. With regard to defense both are players, as the reactions to Syria, the Ukraine “crisis” and ISIL showed.

As polls and focus groups reveal, people can easily identify and repeat the republican pitch but are fuzzy about what the democrats stand for. Perhaps we rush to embrace the story that sounds and feels better in the absence of clearly explained alternatives that make sense. Are we lured by images when options appear similar and we’re unable to clearly discern the differences?

The 2012 election results suggest that while the democrats picked up a few good seats in Congress, and Elizabeth Warren’s victory is especially notable, not much has changed in terms of the balance of power. Obama’s subsequent speeches were mostly a mild redux of his “hope and change” singsong. He renewed his support for the jobs bill the republicans blocked some months before the election, and to raise taxes on the super rich, claiming the voters gave the democrats a mandate to reverse course and improve the

lives of the middle class. But business as usual quickly replaced the rhetoric. He accepted the republican frames of the issues, especially the austerity agenda, and caved on reversing the Bush tax cuts. He even offered in advance to cut Social Security and Medicare, punting on second down again!

His economic talk has been recently dwarfed by the scandals over monitoring journalists and mining the meta-data of cyberspace customers, and especially the greater attention to foreign policy “crises.” But also attention to “cultural” issues, like gay marriage, gun control and immigration. Republicans claim this is evidence of his “liberalism,” though many of them support these issues as well, particularly immigration reform. And Obama’s support of the Dream Act was perhaps more about getting the Latino vote. Obama’s policies on the economy are centrist at best.

So these election results say more about the electorate’s rejection of an out-of-touch party that mostly represents the privileged, as well as its blundering misrepresentation of facts, than anything else. For Obama to be even mildly progressive on the economy he must make his rhetoric reality and break free from the conservative frame and avoid the perpetual right-wing austerity trap. He must get on the offensive with a *growth incline* policy that wipes out the need for austerity in the first place.

Not So New Normal

It’s remarkable how far we’ve turned to the right. We owe this to an extremely successful organizing effort by the “new right,” the more conservative thinkers and activists of the Republican Party who broke away from it after the Goldwater defeat in 1964. They targeted “liberal” legislation for repeal, created think tanks, PACs and media organizations, ran and supported candidates for office at all levels, and stepped up lobbying efforts to defeat those who they believed were “liberal” members of the establishment.

Also, in efforts to capture the emerging anti-taxation fervor they managed to get referenda on ballots across the land to decrease taxes. Property tax revolts were especially in vogue, mostly in populous states that experienced a sharp rise in land values, like California where Prop 13 was passed in 1978. Their fixation was against “excessive” government spending and the taxes to pay for it, in particular the relatively higher income taxes of the post-WWII era used for programs to expand the middle class and lift the perennially excluded out of poverty. LBJ’s Great Society, and specifically the “war on poverty,” was part of a center-left alliance committed to greater inclusion. Individual income tax rates remained high until the first moments of the

Reagan administration when those for the top tier dropped to roughly 35% from 70% (they were 91% under Ike until JFK's administration reduced them to around 70%).

These activists were passionately committed to overturning every facet of what they claimed was a society that had become too artificially leveled by "left-liberal" engineers. Jerry Kloby and others argue that by the end of the 70s they had produced a virtual revolution. The 1978 mid-term election gave the republicans control of Congress, and from this moment the support grew to pass what will become Reagan's program.

Its philosophical core was a shift to neo-liberal economics, drawn from Adam Smith and his successors who stressed changes in the money supply to spur growth. This meant the rejection of Keynesian economics that focused deficit spending and government stimulus, forces that guided the expansion of the middle class during the postwar era. The market became the arbiter of what is important in society. Private interests and corporations were the engines of activity. The belief was that the fruits of their activities would trickle down to the rest. This evolved into such a powerful idea that it became synonymous with freedom itself. Private interests with the means to engage in wealth-creation were freer to create more of the same.

But free-market economics was a misnomer. The effect of these activities working together hardly made life free for all. They became a justification for those with more influence on the market to restrict the playing fields. A host of buzzwords and processes that conjure freedom, like deregulation and privatization, took over the imagination and these fields.

Takeovers, free-market enterprise in action, were an inevitable consequence. These private interests merged with and acquired others since it bumped up the stock prices and allowed them to get bigger and manipulate the playing fields. Though overlooked by the media, this ironically led to the opposite of a free and competitive marketplace. Unfortunately the mergers and acquisitions game that became a virtual epidemic in the late 70s has continued mostly unchecked. Monopolies and oligopolies breed as the anti-trust police have taken an extended holiday. They destroy small businesses in the communities where they operate, exact excessive prices that penalize consumers, and often sack many workers as well.

Walmart is the classic offender. Recent data show that six of its major stockholders own as much wealth as at least the bottom 30% of the country. Its plans to build new stores in communities are being fiercely resisted as people learn that the employees of Walmart often have difficulty affording its products and need public support to survive!

This reflects the cultural priority of business over labor in the market mythology. The power of private interests has known few bounds. Corporations, we're told, must have the flexibility to hire and fire at will to maximize their bottom lines in the face of the market's ups and downs. This leads to the practice where companies hire part-timers because it gives them this flexibility. It's also cheaper, since these jobs come without benefits.

The globalization of the mid-70s was a catalyst. Companies that couldn't compete in that era's extended recession began to leave for foreign sweatshops, blaming labor for their weak balance sheets, and breaking union contracts in the bargain. This of course led to the weakening of the manufacturing sector. High wages weren't the cause of this changed competitive climate but labor became the scapegoat. This began a long and persistent process of weakening labor that has left the union movement in such dire straits today.

With domestic production suffering, financial activity becomes an important source of profits as well. The demise of the Gold Standard in the early 70s freed up funds for speculation in real estate, which led to economic bubbles and gentrification excesses in subsequent decades. It also encouraged the trading in currencies, which often proved more profitable than loans for the purpose of making things. These activities were boosted by the increased spending power from the tax reductions for the upper tier of earners.

The neo-liberal formula was firmly rooted during the next twelve years of republican rule, and extended during Clinton's presidency. Though elected as a Washington outsider, he embraced some progressive causes, particularly universal health care. But the republican takeover of Congress in 1994 chilled what aspirations he had, and he becomes a market-pandering "new democrat." From then he goes along, pushing free trade agreements (though NAFTA was actually enacted before the mid-term, 1994 elections, on January 1st of that year) against the wishes of the unions; "welfare reform" in the guise of TANF in 1996, which ended the New Deal/Great Society program of AFDC premised on the idea that unemployment and the lack of jobs were systemic, giving applicants access to continuous benefits; austerity (Clinton balanced the budget--something the Republicans rarely do--though to a great extent on the backs of the excluded and underprivileged); and the late-decade repeal of Glass-Steagall, the law passed in the Depression 30s that separated investment banking from regular banking. The scrambling of these two is generally believed to have produced the speculation bubble that brought it on. This repeal pushed the financial-speculation envelope even further. It's astounding. Some estimate that today the financial economy comprises 40% of the whole!

What better symptom of the rightward turn: a democratic president who helped seed an increasingly sectarian republican agenda. This spelled the near demise of the type of democrats who fought for workers and much of the middle class, and the beginning of a system where both parties deal for their privileged benefactors, aware that they can survive just fine by ignoring the rest. Successful election runs became more and more beholden to the same wealthy funders.

These “new democrats” have learned to give in so easily, often resisting in word but usually folding under pressure. They go on and on about unfairness, of how the republicans are out of touch with ordinary Americans, but they often help pass tax cut after tax cut for the privileged that neither need them nor use the wealth transfer to create jobs and foster growth, the persistent republican refrain. Bush could never have pushed through the tax cuts of 2003 and 2006 without the cultural trail of attraction to the right’s mythology blazed long ago.

Obama continues the script. He’s the master at negotiating from the center, and giving away too much too quick, like he’s already accepted much of the republicans’ positions. Health care is the classic example. Obama accepted the premise from the start that “reform” should occur within the private insurance industry. Single payer would likely be better, he claimed, but since we already have a private system we need to make use of it. And though his team pushed the voting for the final bill through the appropriations process, where it needed only a simple majority, it didn’t push a vote on the Public Option, a pale substitute for single payer but at least an offering that would have given a real alternative to those who need health care, and possibly satisfied the members of Obama’s progressive base. “Obamacare” is only the plan Romney pushed through in Massachusetts anyway, a massive giveaway to the private insurance industry.

Where Obama and most democrats are timidly accepting, the republicans are aggressively demanding and full of passion. It’s the take-charge mindset that makes their day and convinces victims theirs will be better too if they keep believing the palatable morsels of information fed to them. While the democrats make rhetorical passes at figuring a flawed system, the republicans, especially those on the extreme fringe like the Tea Party, guiltlessly practice what Obama recently labeled Social Darwinism in their constant threats to destroy government.

Enter Occupy

Will the system have to collapse before we're free of the new normal? If it had collapsed in 2008 perhaps the democrats would have taken stock of their recent history and acted differently. But the crisis was efficiently managed by the elite interests that own both parties, and it was back to business as usual. There are differences between the parties, but the most notable difference is between these interests and the rest, what Occupy Wall Street designates the 99%. Becoming substantially different from the republicans will mean representing the victims of the downturn, those whom the democrats used to represent, and forming a new relationship with the people. The disconnect between the elite and the people trumps inter-party rivalries.

There are a significant number of citizens occupying various niches of society who are mad as hell about what's happened over the course of the past five or six years, but are still taking it. They're anxious about their future prospects, and quite upset about how the elite manages the direction of the country they would like back. They may not even know exactly what a progressive position or direction is, but they know what they like and don't like and feel strongly that our institutions, especially the parties, are simply not responsive, as mentioned earlier. Even unions, so thoroughly weakened in recent years that they've become susceptible to further attacks from republicans who aptly point to their inconsistencies, are seen as privileged entities that mostly represent those who live longer.

There's a great deal of distrust of professionals and experts. The best and the brightest from the elite schools and networks that created our economic mess are unfortunately responsible for cleaning it up and allocating the spoils. But they're blocking change so why should their victims be that willing to defer to them now? There has to be another way.

Occupy promised to be. Surfacing in the aftermath of the 2010 Tea Party victories, its activists were the "left populist" answer to this blockage. They tried to capture the reigning discontent by focusing economic fairness, especially the divide between the 1% and 99%. Its national and international presence in the Fall of 2011 forced a sorely needed discussion of inequality that resonated with ordinary Americans, especially wage earners and small business owners. Though its epicenter was Wall Street, this explosion of innovative protest was really about Main Street, or rather its residents whose fates were linked to the financial industry as victims. This perspective was only barely part of the early Tea Party diatribe, which is still mostly about the

alleged evils of big government and “excessive” taxes. So Occupy understandably spread, though not exactly like prairie fire, to the spaces all over the globe where these concerned citizens and victims reside.

Thanks to the crackdown by authorities, and cold weather, Occupy’s huge and noisy presence is no longer. But the corporate media has been unable to ignore the issues it has raised. Occupy’s proliferation of sites has kept its activism alive, and core members have been able to refine its messages and attract a greater diversity of sympathizers.

May Day 2012 was meant, perhaps idealistically, to renew Occupy’s original motivations and spectacle. Plans for a general strike didn’t pan out, and the crowds were not nearly as large as the organizers had hoped. But it was a dynamic mix of activists and protesting styles. This day has long symbolized the struggle for workers’ rights through the participation of unions and traditional left organizations, but Occupy brought a diverse cross-section of non-traditional activists who embraced a broad spectrum of issues, not merely those bearing directly on the economic plight of workers.

Though less spontaneous and much smaller, this gathering resembled the 1999 WTO demonstrations in terms of the agenda and those represented. The latter highlighted the status of unorganized labor and the role of global sweatshops, pointing to the growing gap between haves and have-nots. The addition of Occupy to May Day focused inequality as a larger social issue than merely workers fighting for their own wages. With these elements in place, the May gathering had the potential to be noisier and larger, like the WTO protests. But the WTO event was a surprise, one-time occurrence. At subsequent global meetings early in the decade, police and military authorities were ready to meet protestors with firm, well-planned controls, and the gatherings themselves were mostly held in isolated locations, aiding their efforts.

Authorities have refined their techniques considerably since then, giving them the advantage at public protests. Recently federal legislation was passed that imposes huge fines and jail time for protesting too close to certain sites and persons. The effect of these changes and measures, as many suggest, is to discourage protest in advance.

But if the numbers are small and the protests are much quieter than what many feel is needed to provoke an effective response, the form of Occupy has the potential to build a base of active outsiders, citizens who’ve been excluded from the political process and want to belong and be heard, witness democracy at work. In a sense then the police crackdown that led to the dispersal of the occupiers from the various sites, on Wall Street but also those

in other major cities, to locations out in the heartlands of everyday life, was a blessing. Many folks don't exactly have the time or funds to vacation in the metropolises, a constraint that would limit participation.

The profusion of small-scale actions at various sites encourages it. In Long Beach, for example, similar to many other cities and neighborhoods of protest activity here and around the globe, once the occupation of a downtown park was dispersed by the police, Occupy grew and dispersed throughout the city. No longer clustered in one place for the mere airing of dissent, the members began to occupy the specific sites that could make a difference. They recently gathered at a major bank that was foreclosing on a victim, as well as the home itself and the court responsible for the whole ordeal, all over a brief time span.

Once they have done all they can at one site, they're off to a different action, putting pressure on another perpetrator of wrongdoing. They want to make their presence felt and expose specific wrongs, not merely rant a laundry-list of general ones at a one-time event; or follow the Tea Party playbook of repeating abstractions ad nauseam.

They experiment with democracy in their own group and mostly shun the system. They have little interest in sponsoring candidates for office, or in answering to traditional leaders who tend to craft an agenda and pass it down for ratification. They invite input from below and listen to the voices wanting to contribute in their special ways through the regular general assemblies, and wait for the moment when democracy has had a chance to work and people are more aware of what's happening around them.

They also avoid pinning themselves down to an agenda, the subject of much criticism in the mainstream press which has mocked the movement for lacking a sense of purpose and direction. But they believe in remaining open to possibilities, in keeping the process going and refusing a particular script. This helps them avoid being coopted into the system as mere claimants after their own interests.

The occupiers are certainly trying to avoid the path taken by the Tea Party. It was able to get many of its followers elected in 2010, but they're now members of the establishment, funded by the usual plutocrats. They've gone from "radical populist" outsiders to ultra-conservative insiders. If leaders with an agenda begin to surface from Occupy and take the electoral route, will they become only well-funded democrats? Can Occupy have an impact without moving inside; without mounting a full effort to reform the system? Arguably it already has in putting inequality on the agenda.

They're reformers, but the paradox they face is that as a force from outside it has limited ability to change the system's power relations. How far can raising awareness go if the insiders refuse to alter them? As the Civil Rights movement showed, the pressure from outside can succeed in changing the system from within. But that also took a decade. And if the outsiders take a seat inside, will the energy and hope they bring tend to disappear?

Occupy's answer is to remain provocative, keep up the pressure, and see what happens. Its tentative, exploratory nature makes sense since it's greatly concerned with seeding long-term change. But the danger is that Occupy, though more diverse and populist according to Todd Gitlin, will go the way of SDS in the late 60s and flip off the system ("To the Point," KCRW, Santa Monica, CA, 12/26/13). One of the crucial failings of SDS, according to Gitlin and others, was its withdrawal from the 1968 election in the belief that Hubert Humphrey, the democratic nominee, and Richard Nixon, the republican one, were mostly the same and that it wouldn't essentially matter who won. This attitude was driven by the disappointment that followed the assassination of RFK, whom SDS passionately supported and believed would win the election and represent their progressive agenda in the White House.

Just as their withdrawal gave the election to Nixon, Occupy's thumbing down of the establishment, and reluctance to try and create links to players inside who could begin to produce change, may retard progress toward developing a credible alternative. But many Occupy activists are burned out and frustrated, especially with the recent crackdowns and falloff in members, at the intransigence of the power structure, its paid-for politicians and legislation in the wake of *Citizens vs. United*, and the continued arrogance of the 1% in blaming victims. It's easy to see why many feel working in the system is hopeless. More and more are turning to community sharing in the belief the system is not going to appreciably change. Institutions are simply refusing to act. And unfortunately, widespread apathy and dropping out can have the unintended consequence of propping up these institutions.

Occupy can catalyze a peaceful people's revolution. Its form is democracy-in-motion and it offers an answer to a system that's controlling the direction of change from top-down. But it must eventually get more bodies on the line. It isn't enough to expose how the new normal has helped to pervert democracy over time. Yet one of Occupy's major contributions is exposing the illusion that elite interests with superior know-how can speak and act for us.

Whose Populism?

The language of the Declaration of Independence gives us the power, in theory at least, to replace leaders and start over. And though we've never come close to doing this since the country's founding, the idea that we can start anew is a potent mythical charge for many citizens. We're no strangers to large-scale protests and even riots, however, as Catherine McNichol-Stock shows in *Rural Radicals*, her survey of popular uprisings from Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 to the ferment that produced the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. These have increased during moments of near economic collapse.

There was much discontent in the early days of the nation as it transitioned from an aristocracy to a republic meant to represent ordinary citizens. But it was after the Civil War when the tensions were greatest between them and the powerful elite that amassed fortunes in the new corporate urban order from slavery and cheap labor. The economy was still mostly agricultural, and it was the rural areas that bore the brunt of an unregulated capitalism. The success of the cities contrasted with the lingering poverty in the country. The refusal of the elite to offer political solutions to these problems fueled the protests.

This energy was far from pure and consistent. The same people, groups and communities could sympathize with left and/or right. The frequent and severe economic crises during these years created sympathy for the left which was critical of corporations and trusts and the government's role in propping up their power, and driven by demands for economic equality and fairness. But there was also support for the right which was critical of government for denying personal freedoms and unfairly benefiting minorities, which it scapegoated while often slighting corporate influence in support of cultural issues.

There was naturally a strong desire for the restoration of some degree of economic equality and fairness among the discontented victims. But the daily visual evidence in the widening gaps between their lives and those of the more privileged didn't always turn them to the left. Economic deprivation doesn't necessarily push people toward the positions and parties that deal with their circumstances in the best and most rational ways. In living the effects of scarcity and survival they may lose perspective and vote against their interests; even find new enemies among their neighbors. Plus in rural areas the influence of family and moral values was strong. They trumped social issues, and even interfered with the ability to fully grasp their economic situations and take charge of their lives.

These effects bred mentalities that foster division and even violence. There was racism in the backlash of Reconstruction against the freed slaves; sexism in the patriarchal reaction against women breaking into the workforce; and class repression in the actions of the propertied.

Religion was also a factor. It could potentially dissolve these mentalities and help the devoted cope with ever-recurring crises beyond their control. But the strong presence of fundamentalism and evangelical Christianity stressed personal responsibility, rarely social justice, and the need to transcend worldly circumstances. And those drugged on opiates can often speak in tongues and through scripts. They can defer to others and shun the more fundamental left-populist ideals of Thomas Jefferson's direct, participatory democracy.

These caretakers can dilute and divert the people's energy; tame the messages and take charge of business. For example, the left-populist People's Party, formed in 1892, merged with the democrats in 1896 to nominate William Jennings Bryan for president. They did this reluctantly since they had made huge gains outside the establishment party structure. And as fate would have it, Bryan lost to McKinley. So much for representative democracy! Deference to elites inevitably leads to a striking contrast between what the people want to see change and what the owners of the change narrative want to change, a familiar paradox in current-day America. And it can lead to action, even revolt, like when Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker was recalled for attempting to strip public unions of their bargaining rights.

But these ideals are threatening. They conjure a mass of individuals taking charge together, something foreign to many and against the grain of self-reliance and traditional hierarchy for many liberals and conservatives. However enticing Jeffersonian democracy is, most feel more secure with caretakers who can get the job done, make the tough choices that require the time and knowhow too few have. All that energy for change can't remain as it is. The desire for equality and fairness needs direction, so the baton must pass to players.

What Now?

This helps explain why Occupy failed to capture the protest field when the economy nearly tanked in 2008. It seems all the signs were there for the left to succeed, with plenty of victims appealing for help. Not since the Great Depression had the system been so exposed, offering a strikingly transparent view of how it really works. Admittedly not many have been prosecuted for crimes pertaining to the financial meltdown, the numerous scandals, the sub-

prime loan debacle, insider-trading scams, all of which pointed to serious flaws in the financial system. But it couldn't capitalize. Watching the corporate elite amass ever more piles of wealth during a crisis that won't go away, while the plight of the victims barely changes, is worth a prestigious education in economic history. But the main attraction was to the message on the right that government is the principal problem!

The Great Depression energized the left and gave it an edge, but then the conditions were more severe; the system came closer to collapsing. Perhaps when there's a near collapse but it's a less than complete one, the elite becomes threatened, realizes what could happen if it doesn't defend itself, and takes steps to manage it, or at least attempts to remove the chaotic consequences from public view and scrutiny.

This is what it has done when conditions were not even as critical as they are now. The S&L crisis of the 80s, for example, the forerunner of our financial meltdown, was successfully managed so that the burden was passed to taxpayers with sleights of legislation and little fanfare. Unemployment levels were high, but they didn't remain so for long. The wage shrinkage was compensated by the burgeoning credit card industry, the beginning of easy--if usurious--money to fuel speculation bubbles. And the media cooperated by ignoring the signs.

It seems people wanted to ignore signs too in the wake of the 2008 crash. Accustomed to good times, the severity of the crash fueled a fear of the unknown, which made it easier for the elite to manage it with its wealth of resources and organizational knowhow. The massive Treasury bailouts--TARP--are what especially irked those who would become the Tea Party. Surging in popularity after the 2008 election, it presented itself as "populist," claiming to be against those who stick it to the little guy. They were a throwback to early America when the battle lines were clearly drawn between aristocratic victimizers and lowly victims, not unlike now. These sentiments were nominally at odds with establishment conservatism whose rhetoric and policies over the years have hardly been sympathetic with the lowly.

Hence the friction between the recent Tea Party class in the House, for example, and the mainstream Republican Party over exactly these issues. The deficit is one. As we've seen, these activists have become budget-balancing purists, fighting for deficit reductions as a way to penalize the federal government for sending checks to banks and corporations. But they back off from either going after the recipients, or fully exposing the cronyism. We might call these symbolic take-backs since the austerity cuts have done more to penalize the victims than the perps. We expected them, as populists, to

shake things up, though not with such an extreme agenda that targets “big government” almost exclusively.

This is curious since the Obama administration, according to a recent *Forbes* magazine report, has been to date the most penurious spender since Ike. Unfazed by such matters, they support a shock-doctrine purge of the system to radically cut spending even further, but mostly for social programs. This is a special problem since they’re not interested in finding new sources of revenue, only in keeping and increasing their tax cuts.

Again, their positions mostly benefit the elite which supports the center-right agenda: limited government, free markets, deregulation, privatization, individual initiative, etc. And their rhetoric aside, these members have become players, funded by big corporate donors, able to wield considerable power over the larger House body and pull many from the mainstream to the right. Like when they held the government hostage over the debt-ceiling increase, willing to let it default. Ted Cruz and Eric Cantor dictated to John Boehner.

These Tea Party activists are brokers to the elite who claim to represent the people, offering relatively uncomplicated answers to unasked questions wrapped in enticing myths and abstractions that connect with most Americans. They’ve steroided America’s turn to the right; firmed-up the center-right consensus.

To what extent then did these powers prevent Occupy from being able to capture the protest field when the economy tanked in 2008?

Myths and Abstractions

It was no surprise that the democrats lost seats in 2010. There hadn’t been a substantial improvement in the economy since Obama took office. In fact inequality increased, especially between whites and non-whites, and the middle class continued to shrink. The victory of the Tea Party should have been a wakeup call for liberals and progressives, as well as party players, to work together and provide a real alternative. But the election fallout brought blaming and in-fighting. And Obama seemed more interested in kowtowing to the victorious conservatives than working with the liberals and progressives who helped him get re-elected, those he reached out to in the 2008 election.

This ironically created opportunities for outsiders to have a go at change, and was reason enough to spawn Occupy which offered to make everyone players. It also provided a framework to understand the increasing gap between the 1% and 99%. In their eagerness to engage a swelling mass of

folks eager for change, it seemed to be their moment. Had they burst on the scene in warmer weather their numbers would have been larger and as a group they could have become a formidable foe for the alliance of elite interests and the Tea Party.

As it stands, Occupy's challenge is daunting. It must fight the powers but also the minds seduced by myths and abstractions. One of the most appealing myths is that the system self-corrects. This is perhaps the most abstract and simple answer to an unasked question that Occupy faces, since it is the corollary to one of the Tea Party's core wishes: that the government should be pared back and removed from the policy picture as much as possible. Citizens soak this up in the canon of classic economics textbooks, or through peers and pop culture. It's a potent influence since it permits problems to be "solved" privately, behind the scenes, and justifies public inaction. This can be a tough sell, however, when the "facts" either suggest that no solutions to a problem can be produced, or when they contradict the myth. It helps that the elite owns much of the mainstream media.

If the media can convince most that the system self-corrects, then the filter-down principle, the notion that the effects of wealth-creating activity or tax breaks at the top find their way into the coffers below, will firm up this myth. Like an organism the system simply functions, so why pay attention? It's another automatic process that need not concern us, more justification for denying public responses and making victims wait. This phrase and concept resonate so well that few likely feel the need to examine if it really washes.

Elites of course welcome the bailouts, tax reductions and subsidies from their friends, inorganic input that guarantees some correction will occur for some. However angry many are when they see these "gifts" flowing, such concern is likely fleeting if the system self-corrects and benefits filter down. What goes around comes down and around. They see the larger-than-life success at the top visually rubbed in their faces. And they perhaps give these wealth-creators a pass because they feel they might be one of them someday.

Unfortunately these elites are immune if their actions fail to deliver, just like the too-big-to-fail banks and corporations with their insurance policies of infinite spoils from the public treasury. If stark inequities surface, or embarrassing gaffs are committed, superstar wealth-creators like Jamie Dimon can photo-op apologies with such flare that most will miss the smoke-and-mirrors. And the victims themselves of these blameless policies can possibly get into the act, stream their own mea culpas and accept fault. The myth itself after all suggests in effect that people are missing what's really

happening behind the scenes, and this means the elites have considerable leeway to maneuver unseen.

Some see through these illusions, but not everyone. The experts pontificate ad nauseam in the blogosphere, assuming their offerings will filter down to those most affected by the crises. But many not in the choir are beyond analysis. They lack interest in getting up to snuff about issues that seem so removed from their immediate lives; or they're unequipped for the task, feeling like they're listening to lectures they never took to very well back in school anyway. The experts need to offer the information that people can use to clarify their situations.

The right presents itself as the caring expert who knows what those beyond analysis really understand: myths and abstractions that appeal directly to them as worthy patriotic consumers who can freely choose what's right for themselves, and need not worry about issues that are always confusing anyway. The effect of its pitch is to suggest that society doesn't exist; only a maze of separate wills that act responsibly in the worlds of their own making. From repeated pitches they learn to see only private and personal problems, not social and public issues. This attitude is the perfect companion to a belief in the self-correction myth.

So it's individual home buyers who burst the housing bubble through purchases of property they couldn't afford. Unions are unnecessary and counter-productive since they prevent individuals who want to work and succeed from making the choices that will let them. Unemployment is an unfortunate fact of life, but individuals can always find work if they put their minds to the task, no matter how deep the recession. Presto, a new authority emerges to cut unemployment benefits, and the same system continues.

Does this perpetual pitch teach self-interested consumers to be resentful toward others as well? It was allegedly once natural to regard the fate of others within a community of interests, find ways to temper markets and check the immorality of unbridled competition, and refuse to accept the authority of the dog-eat-dog jungle as a victim-producer. According to E. J. Dionne, a balance between the interests of self and those of community once defined the identity of America. But self-interest now trumps activities infused with redeeming social or community value.

Unfortunately the right knows that once individuals start to blame others, they can capitalize on this division and exploit it. Divide and conquer policies are common on the right. For example, if you target select public sector union workers for getting an inflated wage or pension, and shove the message in the faces of those making only minimum wage and lacking a decent pension, you

get victims battling it out against each other instead of joining forces against the “bad guys.” These victims are too fatigued to challenge the powers taking advantage of a weakened labor movement, or join efforts to support the idea that the country is productive enough for all workers to get a fair wage and decent pension.

In fact the victims often assertively support those responsible for their plight, their enemies and masters. Wall Street perhaps caused the financial crash, but look at what it has done for us over the long term! It’s mind-boggling anyway that so many either don’t understand Wall Street’s role in the crisis, or reject this as a possibility. Many of its victims, and especially those occupying the lower rungs of the 99%, support excessive CEO salaries, even see the elite movers and shakers as victims themselves.

Most striking are those who blame themselves for the problems. Perhaps they identify so strongly with the all-powerful and successful that they’ll bend over backwards to foot the bill for the mortgage mess. Again, since images of success address them 24/7, they’re constantly forced to compare their performances with others, and this makes it hard to let go of the notion that America is where the best things happen.

If someone’s world is immersed in private issues and personal problems, it’s not likely they’ll be up to snuff about the larger public one. This means they might be resentful toward others, and even blame them, and themselves, for problems they don’t fully grasp. Excessive self-interest prevents perspectives on how the parts and special issues come together in the whole, a precondition for informed citizenship.

Who’s More Equal?

The Occupy movements performed a patriotic service in putting equality on the agenda. Americans tend to take this issue more or less for granted. We cite that snippet from the Declaration of Independence at will, that we’re all created equal, feeling elevated to high moral ground through God’s blessing. Of course we’re not really created or treated equal, and it takes moments like the present, when inequality is increasing, to question what equality means.

In practice it seems to mean we want the opportunity to be more equal than our neighbors, believing that if we can freely pass them we will fulfill the divine mandate. We don’t want an equality of result where government forces everyone to be nearly the same since this would violate our competitive, individualistic culture. We feel we can fend for ourselves just fine as long as institutions freely function. In striving to be our best in the workaday struggle

to succeed, however, we can become blind to how institutions and spheres of influence make freely-acting individuals unequal.

It's unfortunate that the discussion about how to reduce inequality rarely gets to the source of the problem. We can supposedly do it through education, training select citizens to upgrade their skills so they can compete in the increasingly competitive global market; increasing the minimum wage, or providing a living wage, etc. But if the same reward scheme and occupational ladder remain, individuals will merely replace each other. One's gain will be another's loss. And their actions will have a limited impact on the larger game without help from other bodies, like what a union or collective ownership can provide.

This push to educate everyone exposes the limits of our democracy since the glut of well-educated will become unemployed, or seriously under-employed. To ward off social chaos there must be barriers to universal education.

As long as employers have the power to pay low wages and keep a disproportionately large share of the value from work, inequality won't be reduced. But this issue is not even on the agenda. We don't think in these terms. The gap between haves and have-nots has been widening for so long that we accept it as normal. It's part of our culture. Policies in place over the past thirty-five years or so have mostly reversed the post-WWII policies for expanding the middle class and eliminating poverty through deficit spending and progressive taxation. Where the top 1% owned only around 17% of the wealth in the mid-70s, reflecting the impact of the leveling policies from the previous 30 years, today they own nearly 80%.

It will take the election of many new representatives or a significant increase in citizen power to build a new foundation where different institutions can reverse these trends.

Victims feel helpless in the face of these changes. Stewing in the same pot for so long with many like themselves, they're driven to escape at all costs and improve their situations, make up for past losses no matter how sympathetic they are with the idea of equality.

Those opposing policies to reduce inequality have an edge in this cultural climate. They point to the high taxes the European "welfare states" pay, for example, particularly in Scandinavia, to make their case, and get mileage from their claims because few here can imagine what the results of those taxes might be. The relative tax burden has been shifted onto their shoulders since the Reagan revamp of the tax code in the early 80s. But this has gone along

with a decline of wages during the same time, making it more difficult to pay the taxes.

Since serious efforts to understand the problem of inequality are not on the agenda, the issue is easily distorted. As soon as politicians or the media mention unfairness, especially the need to raise wages and increase the assets and resources of those who've dropped out of the middle class or below the poverty level, they're charged with fomenting "class warfare." And this usually prefaces a rant about socialism. Absent is a discussion of the "class warfare" that created the conditions requiring these raises and increases in the first place.

The problem is that rants about socialism substitute for this absent discussion. Its mere mention conjures evil and allows the user to capitalize on people's fears and irrationalities. Claims that we already have it--the proof is in the mere mention of Obama's "big government"--allow politicians to conflate improving the plight of workers and the middle class with the arrival of big brother. And this muddles the differences between social democracy and socialism.

There's no question that many are down on socialism, or most any "foreign" ism. But few can have a grasp of what it is. They must be driven by a media-stoked fear of the unknown since the current alignment of power in this country is far from socialistic. Socialism involves the partnering of business, government and labor in a relationship that's shaped by the belief that all citizens should share in the productive fruits of the whole. With our increasing inequality and exclusion of labor from the bargaining table, those who claim we're in the throes of socialism or on the way toward it must be living in a fantasy state, like that gentleman a while back at a Tea Party rally who urged the government to stay out of his Medicare!

The socialism controlled by baggy suits and bloated bureaucracies barely exists now. North Korea, though more aptly labeled a fascist dictatorship, is perhaps the only holdout. Effective mid-January 2013 Cuban citizens were allowed to leave their country for long stretches. The country has already begun to experiment with market principles and appears headed in the same direction as China and other Southeast Asian countries that long ago married capitalism to something resembling socialism. All those "evil" regimes that the right feels are bad models ready to export their disease here to willing importers, might actually collapse from within.

The anti-socialism pundits, vague about the targets of their discontent anyway, seem to be obsessed with a nonexistent threat. This is a fair definition of paranoia, but they know more about socialism than they're

letting on. Though socialism has no foundation here, playing the socialism card, claiming it is everywhere, is an effective way to silence critics, and it helps screen attention from a very real threat to them: the creeping rise in wages back to the levels of the 70s when there was a solid middle class.

CEOs know that once wages begin to increase they might spiral upward and people will like it; even come to expect it. They must demonize socialism, and even social democracy, because if people better understand these alternatives they might better grasp how capitalism works and sympathize with a more humane alternative. These ideas persist because they propose to correct some of capitalism's flaws with respect to inequality, and can help explain the smoke-and-mirrors that allocate wages and money. Above all they might offer a way forward that manages the relationship between public and private more equally. Perhaps the CEO's real fear is that they will no longer be able to amass fortunes at the expense of others.

The right's reactions to Obama's victory are telling. Bill O'Reilly said that the real victors were those who want more stuff from the government, who believe they're "entitled." Which means in effect they're guaranteed something they don't deserve, that's not theirs, and that's filtered down from the welfare dispensary, i.e. the government, which stole it from the job and wealth creators, the losers in the election. The former must be in Romney's 47%. Those who voted for Obama, the socialist who believes in filter-down big government, simply don't want to work. Legitimate work, which leads to authentic wealth-creation, comes with no help from government or outsiders. It's performed by large corporations that supposedly do it themselves. If they get a little help from their friends, however, mum's the word. They may not need more stuff, but they certainly seem to be grabbing an awful lot of it!

Their creation of wealth suffers, however, when they can't take advantage of cheap labor. They might have to work more and become dependent on outside sources. Shrinking wealth may suggest that someone stopped working as hard as they apparently were.

But there's entitlement embedded in the lives of those at the top as well. They work and network to get a system that returns infinite payouts. They lobby for tax laws that dispense permanent and unquestioned largesse. Oil companies and agribusinesses who buy candidates expect subsidies and transfers. And the work that justifies this sort of entitlement has a higher value than the low-wage work that needs government support due to the very unlevel playing fields formed over a long period of time. Through a mostly invisible shell game, this work uses the work of others and resources from the treasury to get more value, allowing its owners to collect more stuff. To stake

out a difference from the republicans and get control of the agenda in going forward, Obama and the democrats will need to expose how this shell game works, explain it to the people and sway the opposition. What is the power that assigns value to work? How are wages set so low for some?

Who defines what welfare is?

Value gets buried in the power of market forces which give the impression of being an arbitrary referee between employers and potential employees. Those with something to offer meet up with those who need something, and in the give and take some win and some lose. It suggests efficiency and fairness. But while anyone in theory can have a shot at participating in a market as producer or consumer, there's no such thing as a market that is free in its structure and effects. Those who own more have more control over outcomes. Large employers have had more control for a long time, and not because of some "free" movement of market forces.

Corporate-funded government has helped keep the minimum wage low, refused to enforce antitrust laws that could keep the playing fields more level, prevented a union movement from spreading to ever more sectors of the labor force, enhanced free trade agreements that give inordinate advantages to business over labor, made the tax code ever more advantageous for those in the top tiers, etc. The result is an entrenched cronyism that allows those with the biggest stick and bankroll the opportunity to be more effective players.

These players are winning the game, and have the ability to define the losers as lazy, dependent and mostly into getting "welfare." They ignore the fact that the big corporations either won't hire people, despite their stockpile of cash, or keep reducing wages, taking away value, so that government support is the only way for these victims to survive in this transition to a healthier economy. But they are getting away with it, thanks to the power of pundits like Bill O'Reilly and Rush Limbaugh who pass on the toxic mental bondage that helps to keep the victims of our monstrous downturn in physical bondage.

Can Obama and the democrats set a process in motion that breaks this mental bondage and capture the narrative for change? If they are to successfully battle this power and appreciably reverse inequality, they will first have to admit the problem exists. Then they will have to shift the debates and bust through the austerity and "entitlement" illusions to focus on the reconstruction of the economy and jobs through growth. The expansion of the economy will stream more tax revenue into treasuries and eventually reduce the deficits. Above all they need to reverse the mythology that lower wages are somehow crucial for a healthy economy!

Reform Possible?

If change from top-down is not forthcoming, what should liberals and progressives inside and outside the system do? Tom Hayden, in what seems like an about face from his SDS perspective of the past, feels they must stay the course and help build a progressive coalition that eventually challenges the status quo. He believes that Obama is building a gradual revolution over the long term, and we need this coalition in order to develop the institutions for securing future progressive outcomes and preventing backlashes (“Saving Obama, Saving Ourselves,” Peace and Justice Resource Center, 9/4/13).

Similarly, Bill Fletcher Jr. and Carl Davidson suggest that instead of blaming Obama for not being progressive enough, and especially for not being socialist, the left should explain what’s needed to move in the direction of social democracy, the most credible option for change. It needs to run interference for him, come to his aid and help confront the obstacles he faces. The left should learn to expect slow gains and realize that its expectations when Obama was elected were too high. Even FDR had to be content with piecemeal gains at first (“The 2012 Elections Have Little To Do With Obama’s Record,” *Alternet*, 8/9/13).

There’s no question that Obama has been prevented from realizing his “vision” by the republican blockade in Congress. He’s faced considerable obstacles in getting things done, but mostly since the 2010 mid-term elections. As Paul Krugman argues, the republicans have consistently blocked Obama’s efforts to do something to improve the economy since taking over the house and increasing their numbers in the senate in 2010. So their refrain that Obama hasn’t done anything to improve the economy is laughable. It’s their economy (“Obstruct and Exploit,” *New York Times*, 9/10/2013).

The case for reform is an attractive one, especially since the left has become so weak. But is Obama an emergent progressive or merely an occasionally liberal republican who spouts a progressive rap? Does he have the skills to overcome these obstacles? Does he even want to overcome them? Has his performance over the past several years proven that playing politics in the system mostly changes its replaceable parts and players? Can we get real change without a revamp of institutions?

Leaders produce change. They build coalitions of the unlike-minded and diverse; get those with widely different leanings and perspectives to agree, or at least agree to disagree long enough to win. This is how the new right became so successful in the 70s. It was plagued by in-fighting for sure, but its players were able to make winning the priority. It’s hard to imagine new

democrats and the dwindling numbers of liberals in Congress mixing it up with socialists and progressives, and being even near the same book or chapter, let alone on the same page. We'll see how successful Progressive Democrats of America (PDA) is in the coming months.

The government shutdown debacle excluded, the differences on the left seem greater than those on the right. How can there be common ground on social democracy when so many establishment democrats are hostile toward it? How can socialists accept the value of social democracy, so different in terms of its assumptions and motivations from socialism? It seems it's much easier for the ultra-conservative republicans to hash it out with their moderate colleagues. The former hold more extreme views, but all pretty much agree on what it takes to gain power and hold it. Just keep badgering the public with the need to reduce government and taxes!

Can Obama stimulate a new conversation and bring these players together? Does his post-election rhetoric signal a new confidence and leadership strategy? Will we have to wait for him to evolve along with the revolution Hayden claims is coming?

Obama's campaign rhetoric in the run-up to the 2008 election at least dovetailed with progressive positions and causes. Perhaps his boldest assertion was that the economic collapse was due to flawed neo-liberal policies which have been shaping society since the Reagan revolution, and that we had to root them out and reverse course to get back to what America is all about, equal opportunity and pursuit of the American Dream. He condemned privatization, and the deregulation of industry, especially the banking sector. And though he didn't take the next step and designate a policy framework for restructuring the economy, many of his other claims and positions seemed potentially progressive.

So what happened during the first two years of his term, when the democrats owned the votes? His appointments sent signals that he was aligning himself more with the status quo. He has let the neo-liberal policy players take care of the housing crisis. He didn't push single payer when it came to the voting. His prescriptions for consumer protection and corporate accountability and regulation have been weak, hardly consistent with the pre-election "vision." He advocated and advocated but failed to push with conviction. He could have, had he not been so preoccupied with reaching across the aisle, placating the republicans, playing bipartisanship.

Occupy could become his accidental ally. His post-election rhetoric about saving the middle class and making the rich pay their way will be meaningless unless the democrats regain their lost identity as preservers of the people's

interests. Its energy and vision could catalyze the left, and even make change contagious. But much hinges on whether the non-Occupy left, in crisis since the collapse of the movements in the late 60s and early 70s, accepts Hayden's challenge to assist Obama's gradual revolution. Can it stomach the mandate to work in the system?

In the meantime there's hope in what can happen down below. Our goal, consistent with Occupy's lesson in democracy, must be the creation of new parties and institutions for people to engage with. Instead of waiting for Congress to break up the too-big-to-fail banks, expand the capital of community banks and credit unions that are more serviceable to those who need them. Instead of waiting for a single-payer health care system to become the law of the land, follow Vermont's example and pass the equivalent at the state level. Instead of waiting for Congress to revamp CEO salaries and the corporate wage structure, increase shareholder activism to pressure these changes. Instead of waiting for living wage laws to be passed, target the industries responsible for keeping wages low with impromptu labor actions, like those a while ago on Black Friday at selected Walmarts.

And instead of waiting for austerity to be further entrenched as a policy, stage actions at the localities where its effects are most immediately evident to emphasize what the path toward Greece will look like, and who will be impacted most. A failure to expose austerity as a form of class warfare that attacks legitimate wage earners as "entitled," pushes the consequences of failed policies onto the victims. This will only make inequality worse. On the fifth anniversary of the Lehman collapse it was revealed that the 1% captured 95% of all the income gains accrued since the 2008 recession. Budget-cutting, versus budget-expansion in a time of retraction, is one of the drivers of the income and wealth gaps...

CHAPTER 5. DISARM THE POWER

What would the protest field be like if the Diedres, who passionately believe in making society better, joined with the mass of citizens who are morally-outraged by where the country is going and want real change but feel alienated from the political scene? Tragically, movements have difficulty recruiting them. Many don't feel welcome in these groups, seeing them as out-of-touch elite organizations. Would this change if organizers encouraged them to contribute so that they feel as though they have a voice that matters?

The movement that captures hearts and minds must put the democratic ideals into practice that society lacks. *Its* society must model the larger society, offer solutions and filter them up to the rest of us. This means being as representative of the people as possible, and bringing those into the process who don't normally participate. And it especially means abolishing hierarchy and privilege so that a process can form from the bottom-up.

It seems likely that if the numbers in these groups which experiment with democracy increase to a sizable critical mass, they will be better equipped to bring the necessary pressure for change. Perhaps Occupy is the perfect Petri

dish for producing the changes that other movements haven't thus far been able to...

There's no shortage of folks at Occupy rallies who are informed about the issues Diedre raises. The gatherings are a melting pot of aware activists who've digested degrees of movement history. But not many want to engage in speculative jawing sessions. They're activists first, geared to getting things done. Few seem patient with academics or traditional intellectuals who brandish theory as a weapon. There's an absence of star figures who claim to make all the important connections and have the relevant master stories on the tips of their tongues. In fact, it's difficult to identify leaders.

During one of the gatherings I bumped into a few of the people Diedre had been talking to and listened to their conversations for a while. The purpose of this gathering was apparently to plan a strategy about how to respond to the banks' foreclosure actions, specifically the results of their "robo-signings" where homeowners were quickly evicted without a chance to mount a defense or get a modification to their mortgages. Frustrated with the legal process, and the federal programs that were virtually useless for those who lacked equity in their homes or had been laid off from their jobs--those who qualified didn't need help!--they decided to occupy the homes, one in particular they believed was targeted for action very soon.

"We have to do something...if the banks can get away with taking people's property so easily, what will they do next?" an animated male in his mid-twenties blurted. His words seemed to give those in his immediate circle some assurance, like he was a respected authority. Christian had apparently logged a few years with the anti-war movement before getting involved with Occupy, though neither he nor the others I talked to would divulge much about their histories. He graciously deferred to others around him when they wanted to offer their opinions, or disagree. I noticed however that few seriously disagreed. It was like most accepted the basic assumptions of what they were all about, and were mostly fixated on the matters at hand.

"They'll probably own most everything soon and home ownership will no longer be an option for many...we'll all be renters," chimed Annie, who appeared to be in her early 20s.

"If we can put all of our energy into stopping this one, make a big stand, then we'll have a better shot at getting them to reverse their policies," added Peter, whose appearance and demeanor suggested someone much older than his actual age of twenty three.

"Wouldn't that be mostly a symbolic gesture," I offered, "since the banks have no legal obligation to do anything about their loans?"

"We'll take any momentum we can get for now," he responded. "You have to start somewhere. If we get enough support behind us, and some media on our side for a change, there's no tellin what can happen!"

"Is it a matter of swaying public opinion, getting more bodies out there to spread the enthusiasm?...will the banks eventually have to take notice?"

"That's a big part of it...can't do much without the people behind ya!"

"If your numbers were bigger now would the banks be as aggressive in the first place? The unsympathetic media is always taking digs at your attendance, suggesting I guess that you aren't that important."

"They never talk about the real issues...just find ways to discredit us," Annie adds.

"Bigger gatherings threaten them since they're not that well informed?"

"They're definitely threatened by change and new ideas...their owners are all about profits."

"And if they told it like it is, the gatherings would pick up and..."

"...that's exactly what we need...the people would be flocking to our meetings if they knew what we're about."

"It's too bad you couldn't have gotten it together earlier, back in the Bush administration when all of our problems were starting...or before the Tea Party came on the scene after Obama was elected."

"We've been out there for a while, just not that visible or vocal. Many of us were in the anti-Iraq movement here in LA. I started High School around the time when the Seattle WTO protests happened and could never get that out of my mind...wish I coulda been there. Since then I've been paying lots of attention to what's happening and waiting and connecting," Christian weighs in.

"Is that pretty much the story for most of you guys?"

"For many...we've just come of age in the world of activism. We represent all ages but my generation feels it's responsible for putting together a successful movement."

"There are several who look like they're in their forties, fifties and even sixties. Are you a big happy family? Do you feel like an enlightened kin group?"

"We coexist," Annie adds. "We all want more or less the same thing, to make a more equal and sane society. Some of us are maybe too green...others are maybe too grizzled and burnt out. Some of the older activists are hung up on outmoded ideas of revolution. But maybe my generation can't yet understand what that means. So we all work together and try to prepare for the unknown."

"While you try to stop evictions and take other actions that improve lives...no need for different theories to get in the way of that?"

"That's what it's all about...there's the theorists and then there's those who get the job done!"

"Have some of the older ones adapted pretty well?...pulled back on the 'force the revolution' stuff?"

"The younger ones too...some wanna bring it on but most of us just face up to what it is...we're in this situation due to lots of bad thinking back there and...we need to break free and forget about the mistakes, the fantasies," Peter suggests.

"It does seem like the left fell asleep for a while back there...makes sense, it suffered serious setbacks. So the natural response was to do some serious social soul-searching about what's next?"

"I don't know if it was sleeping...there was lots of activity behind the scenes, with the environment, women's rights, race, gay rights...but there had to be some new thinking. Seems the system usually wins and..."

"...from defeat comes fresh new ways to look at things? But are there many options or ways left that haven't been thought of and tried? Is the left exhausted? Is that why the Tea Party has been so successful, they just simplify and act?"

"Every generation has to meet new challenges and understand the new conditions it faces. Our approach may not be unique but none over the course of history has been. It's not so much about the left, the official and professional intellectuals, as it is the people challenging the establishment...that left is one of the problems!" Christian adds.

"But what can be done without that left?"

"We can avoid their errors...and maybe convert those who are still around and potentially helpful to us."

"Isn't the issue always about taking power...the power to make happen what you believe is the right thing?"

"For sure, but you have to get it and keep it."

"The Tea Party just made lots of noise, stuck to their talking points, and stepped into power...with a little help from the ecstatic voters and corporate donors."

"They got into power because too many people out there got sucked in by their propaganda. They don't represent real and lasting change. They're the symptom of a messed-up system in transition...a caricature of the establishment."

“But they’re there and making their version of the truth happen...austerity, lower taxes for the 1%...the agenda the privileged die for!”

“But they won’t last because real change needs to be rooted and have the people’s backing,” Annie responds. “The Tea Party represents power from the top dictating to the people, even though it claims to be grassroots...that won’t last.”

“Unless they stay in power long enough to sponsor those who can root a different agenda. Isn’t that the problem the left and progressives have now?...the Reagan revolution stuck over the long term and left us with a more privileged society?”

“And that’s why we have to plant our version in the people’s lives...that’s what Occupy is all about.”

“But why then did they beat you to the punch after Obama was elected? Did they have a better organization? Did you spend too much time reflecting and learning and miss the moment? Are the American people really that gullible?”

“Yeah they are. But those guys have been lying in wait for a long time. It’s easy to get a jump when you lack moral scruples and own most of the bloody world, especially the media,” Peter answers.

“Did Obama look like at least a potential messiah back then?...did you feel the momentum from his victory would mute critics...even provide immunity from significant challenges by republicans and conservatives?”

“Not really...most of us were pretty suspicious of him all along. It’s just that he seemed so different than Bush that...”

“...so when the recession happened did you feel he would deal with it a lot differently than he did?”

“We thought he would do something. It didn’t take us very long to figure that whatever it was...well, it wouldn’t amount to much. He hasn’t upset our expectations yet.”

“So were you taken off guard when the Tea Party captured the limelight?”

“Not really...because it’s not like they have answers to anything,” Annie adds. “To see a group get so popular so fast, that’s a distortion of what America was once all about...that’s depressing. We wondered how that could have happened.”

“Too many seduced by half-truths and myths?”

“Yeah, but their whole focus is different. They want to take power and control the system as it is...they have no vision of changing it other than getting a bigger piece of it. In a sense their rise to power will only bring the system closer to collapse because the real problems are being ignored.”

"Won't those in power be able to get a firm enough grip on the system so that change will no longer be possible?...they will be able to manage the chaos and keep things the same?"

"Only for so long...force of any kind, repressive or subtle, has its limits."

"In developing-military societies aren't there many collapsed sectors that coexist with the good ones?"

"Latin America?...many progressive regimes are succeeding the dictatorships!"

"But how many bodies paved the roads to the Bolivian and Venezuelan revolutions?"

"But those countries don't have the literacy level or the traditions...people don't know what it means to get involved and vote...they're just starting to...though in some of them there's more grass roots activity than here!" blurts Christian.

"Here it seems we need to block the ultra-right from getting power in the first place since there's so much apathy. Reagan's revolution from thirty years ago has thoroughly transformed society. Many are still trying to root that out. And if the republicans take Congress in 2014, well...that might secure that revolution even more and turn us into something like an authoritarian regime."

"That's why we need to do more than make noise and grab power and replace the state...we need to make the changes that lead to permanent structural change and allow the people to govern themselves. Otherwise the party elites will merely take turns controlling the system, ignoring the people's wishes."

"But how do you do that without power?"

"It's not about grabbing power through a party machine, but building a broad-ranging strategy to make long-term change. This takes time. The election cycle doesn't allow much progress. The existing system isn't currently reformable."

"So it's a matter of putting pressure on the players...being hyper-activists?"

"More than that," Peter suggests. "We'll have to get the bodies out there to create at least the suggestion that we will act, that we're watching them, monitoring their behavior...and try to influence sympathizers in the system as much as we can. We must demonstrate whenever necessary to..."

"...prove the power of numbers? That's your main weapon, right? Since outsiders lack access to the inner sanctums of power, they must resort to symbols?"

"We want to force the system to change without being part of it...that will only destroy our momentum. The system is too powerful and seductive. That's why we don't sponsor candidates. We must create alternative institutions while making guerilla raids on the system."

"Your goal then is to be inside and outside at the same time?"

"Or at different times...we try to keep a cool perspective on what they're up to and learn when to appear, or expose some injustice or...intervene, take a firm stand on..."

"...that's a challenge...a delicate balancing act that requires patience and..."

"...that's the point! It is a challenge, but there's no other way to fight the power. What good does it do to flip off the system and chant radical slogans all day while there's business as usual? And no matter how much effort we might put into running for office, we'd be denied...could never afford the entry fee!"

"Isn't there the danger that without much of a foothold in the practical political scene the players will ignore you?"

"That's where the power of numbers comes in. Martin Luther King perfected this strategy with the Civil Rights movement. There were very few sympathizers in Congress. King kept bringing more and more supporters to the demonstrations and the players had to take notice, even though it was totally non-violent. Enough of them eventually folded and..."

"...non-violent direct action then is your essential strategy?"

"Well, there's no agreement about...it's probably the choice by default...too many of us are against any kind of violence," adds Christian.

"It worked for King but haven't the times changed too much? Without the crowds of supporters it's hard to imagine direct action having any kind of chance to work. And people don't have time now to get out there...can't imagine that many getting religion in these conservative times."

"That was said about the 50s too when King began his campaign. It's always an uphill battle...we need to keep at it and be patient."

"And public opinion will eventually be on your side?"

"Definitely! There are too many good and aware people out there who are silent now but...they only need a boost of confidence."

"Your issues of inequality and poverty...those seem to be the main ones...will they eventually be the priority like race was back then?"

"No question...that's what's on everybody's mind...we're waiting for them to join us."

"Look how far we've come," Annie adds. "A few years ago no one was putting inequality at the top of the agenda."

"Lots of folks rap against the big corporations and the 1% but will they embrace that cause like so many did with race? You need more than the educated elite."

"If the recession continues displacing people."

"But class has always been a taboo issue here...Americans are conflicted about what equality means and...I can't imagine a movement on the scale of Civil Rights that deals with inequality overtaking the land. Even though many are upset about their situations and see the effects of poverty and inequality all around them, they seem to see moves toward more equality as potentially taking away something from them."

"We're definitely heading into unknown territory...but again, you could say the same about race back in the mid-50s. King was actually beginning to link equality with race when he died...more and more impoverished whites saw him as a leader for them."

"Perhaps his assassination verifies how strong that taboo is!"

"Had he lived, who knows?" suggests Peter. "His broad coalition strategy was alive and well in the 80s though with Jackson's Rainbow Coalition. He nearly got nominated."

"Those times were more supportive of equality. There were democrats that represented the lower classes and people of color. But if the time has come for people to support equality, what's gonna bring it on? There are no leaders like King to..."

"...it's not about one person now...there are many who can do his work."

"But don't you need someone with charisma and the ability to get lots of folks together who need guidance?"

"We can all chip in...become a committee for..."

"...but don't Americans have a messiah complex? They have to believe in a superhero who will deliver them from their demons and warped perspectives?"

"They do...no question, and that's part of our struggle, to get them thinking together and participating so that they can make things happen themselves."

"That's a tall order. It seems most people feel that if there isn't someone doing their bidding then it all must not be worth it."

"For sure...after years of seeing no leaders like King step up, and with no training and involvement in the system, they wonder if our society has lost its soul."

"There's a lack of independent visionary leaders throughout society...seems those who could be candidates become professional insiders that spout interests."

"So you can see why there's distrust among the people...they wonder who represents them...who speaks to their interests?"

"Are they gripped by the illusion there have to be top dogs with access to the right stuff?...they don't see that we create slots for deliverers, and CEOs, that are filled from large pools of qualified...that we manufacture experts who claim to represent the interests of all the novices but they don't! It's revealing that our revered leaders these days are drowning in scandals. King seemed to be above all that, but he was never tested."

"That notion of the larger-than-life leader is no longer valid," Christian adds. "And the sooner we destroy that illusion the better. It's a great opportunity for people to learn a new idea of what leadership means. They're beginning to get the sense that grand visions and big ideas are losing their credibility, that there's no one solution to problems...that we simply need credible souls to mobilize and get things done."

"But as some become able doers won't they step up, rise above the rest and get more energized and project an aura of special qualities that they will inevitably parlay into privilege? The overachievers that socialist societies always have trouble with, and have to repress in some way? Can there be a religion without priests?"

"There can be if the religion is passionately believed by many and they're taught to be priests themselves," adds Annie. "Leaders don't have to be rock stars. That's one of the problems with the 60s movements...their leaders became an elite class endorsed by the media."

"So block charisma from..."

"...no, expand it...bring it out of more people...just don't stroke egos."

"Your group experience will do this?"

"Yes, we're in a great moment now...we can unlearn the fascination with traditional charismatic superstars...they're counter-productive to our causes anyway...we can learn to become our own leaders."

"Wasn't King experimenting with this idea? Though the force behind the scenes, he encouraged his people at demos to dress the same as him so that they could spread the danger and responsibility, creating a sort of egalitarian protest body where no one ego stood out."

"Like the Zapatistas down in Chiapas. They all wore masks so that the leaders couldn't be distinguished from the rest and given special attention."

And the less educated members were given tasks and roles to get them experience in managing their own affairs.”

“You force change by first practicing authentic democracy among yourselves?”

“You set a positive example...the better your working group is the more power it will have to influence the system.”

“How effective can this influence be without a base inside the system?”

“But insider political games are a dead end...they can’t produce real change anyway...this way you avoid that trap and pressure the system to change without being part of it,” adds Peter.

“That’s gonna require some clever jujitsu! Won’t you have to supplement that pressure with an agenda that gets noticed by the movers and shakers who can act on it, or at least give it serious attention?”

“Not an agenda!...that will limit us. They can pin us down with it and use it to control our voices. We have to keep our positions fluid...put nothing in stone. It’s the process that matters most. We have to keep it open and let the program evolve with the practical action.”

“But don’t you have to have some principles in common to be taken seriously by the inside players? Otherwise won’t they ignore you?”

“We have our principles, just not an agenda. They know we stand for social justice for everyone...a fairer distribution of wealth and resources, peace and prosperity for...”

“...those are lofty goals that many will have a hard time disagreeing with but...what then? How does the rhetoric translate into specific laws?”

“By keeping up the pressure and getting the bodies out on the front lines...making as many connections as possible with those who can help advance our goals,” Christian suggests.

“That will be enough to sway the 1% that controls those who make the most important connections, the owners of the great wealth and resources of...”

“...eventually they won’t have a choice if we stay focused. The important thing is that we stay patient and reject the temptation to use violence to reach our goals...once that line is crossed there’s no...”

“...you firmly reject the radical cause?”

“We have issues with what is meant by ‘radical’,” Annie adds. “We don’t want to repeat past sins...history has shown that the fascination with the lifestyles of revolutionaries and the practicing of irresponsible aggression can lead to irreversible setbacks.”

"Isn't there a danger though in assuming there's a fresh new way or approach to change? Can any one group or movement have it completely wrong? Do things really change that much? Won't you be condemned to repeat past sins, as the cliché goes?"

"We don't believe that...we want to reconnect with what America is all about, go back to the days when this country represented average folks...when we lived the spirit of the American Revolution!"

"Haven't those moments been very brief? It seems we're always looking back to times when..."

"...there've never actually been 'golden moments' when it's all worked out smoothly according to some ideal plan...only ones that were better than most and offered a glimpse of optimism for..."

"...like the 60s?...many look to then, before Nixon, like they..."

"...or before Reagan when there was at least some hope that the left could turn it around."

"Not the 30s, or even the post-WWII 50s when wages and wealth were rising for the lower and middle classes overall?"

"Those were all promising moments, and too brief as you say...every once in a while conditions allow average Americans to get a bigger piece of the action and...those times are when we nearly live up to our ideals, the hype about the American way that so many recklessly embrace."

"Were radical groups on the left more receptive to these Americans in those moments...or was there merely an eruption of forces that favored them?"

"Some historical fortune for sure but...the political climate opened up options and they caught the waves of progress," says Peter. "The favorable tax structure, federal programs, educational subsidies and..."

"...and that made it seem normal that they were getting a fair shake?"

"Yes, and those moments made many feel like they belonged...that they knew what it meant to be a good patriotic American."

"Since those moments were few and far between perhaps not many had time to get used to them, and the memories are lacking and...so it makes sense that today equality and fairer treatment for the average person seems so foreign to Americans...way out of the mainstream."

"Yeah, you just mention the need to help victims of bad policies and you're demonized. All it took is for us to mention the problem of inequality when we first started organizing and we were quickly branded socialists and communists!"

"That raises an interesting question. How can you convince these Americans themselves, many of whom are victims of recent policies that have created more inequality, as well as half-truths in the media, that this vision is mainstream and not radical?"

"Very carefully!" suggests Christian.

"It seems that while many victims are not all that happy about the way things are going, they have a script in their heads that's against any return to those moments which would benefit them."

"It's a challenge to undo the damage...we have to go slow and avoid pushing some final solution that will alienate people. It's a long-term process that will cancel out if we get too..."

"...radical? But none of this seems very radical!"

"We have to make sure it stays that way...present our program for the average American as what it is and...use normal tactics. Revolution requires lots of patient work. It's a practical mind game."

"That sounds so right...the fulfillment of King's dreams in a sense. But don't you still need a script, a narrative...and some allies working inside to translate your ethical principles into firm action. Otherwise isn't Occupy in danger of becoming mostly community organizers?...not to discredit that profession."

"We do, we're not denying that...but we feel we have a narrative for change. It's just that if you focus too narrow, the hopes for real change will be dashed. We need flexibility, especially now with..."

"...haven't the stakes changed in recent years with the rise of the extreme right? Haven't they shown that getting a piece of the action inside the system is the most important goal?...from that base they can sway public opinion and prop it up. In developing outside first won't your links to those in the system always be somewhat behind the curve?"

"Their take on change, which is more about stripping it away and getting more privileges, is compatible with the inside...they're at home there. They're natural insiders. It would be a disaster for us to use that approach. We're not insider people. And we lack money."

"It seems the lesson from how the right works is that significant influence in the system is gotten the old-fashioned way, with noise and the threat of force. Like how the House republicans threaten to bring down the system and extract gains from Obama every time!"

"That just shows their desperation to grab what they can. Power taken in that way will never lead to lasting positive changes. It's based on force and

not the changing of attitudes. Backlash, or maybe 'blowback' is a better term, is guaranteed."

"Holding political hostages and resorting to terrorist tactics will merely unleash more of the same?"

"Polarization and one logjam after another where nothing ever changes...endless instability," Annie says.

"How will your approach to power deal with these issues?"

"We just keep up the pressure and remain astute watchdogs...wait for their destructive actions to open up chances for intervention. We realize we have far less power than the elite insiders, especially the bloc of right-wingers and Tea Partiers holding the system hostage these days. But the more power they concentrate the weaker they get in a sense...what can they do with it? Since they can't solve our problems with it, and have no vision for real change, that power only deepens their narcissistic fantasies and pocketbooks. They need the rest of us to succeed and it's only a matter of time before that truth forces real change. Meanwhile we pile up progress in the cracks."

"But is this enough? They aren't solving the problems but can they keep amassing wealth and power to the point where resistance is so weak that they can lord over the rest of us for a very long time? In the short term do they really need anyone else?"

"In the long term we're all dead, as the saying goes! I think we're seeing already that some of the silent citizens are beginning to speak out. They rejected Obama's war on Syria...they came out against the Tea Party's shutdown of the government. If the elite refuse to see the writing on the wall, it will have to arrest more and more of us, and that's potentially disruptive."

"If it's true as many say that the most basic prerequisite for real change is to overhaul the funding for elections...get money out of politics...then do you feel that your approach can help realize this goal?"

"There's a lot of momentum building to overturn *Citizens vs. United*, even among elites. They see how our democracy is threatened by lobbying and the buying of votes. The damage to the one person, one vote idea is already severe. We'll need the court to eventually reverse this travesty, so we have to keep up the pressure."

"Obama will have to make some enlightened appointments soon!"



This book is about what ordinary citizens, those with limited power and resources, think about the big Recession of 2008 and its aftermath. It investigates how non-experts and outsiders without access to the "facts" make sense of these times and pass along knowledge--not mere information--that catalyzes others to understand and act. They can express their opinions through a variety of venues, including op-ed writing, and reinterpret numerical "facts" within moral contexts.

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