

Occupy Wall Street: A Gift for the Economy

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The early characterization of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement as a group of rudderless kids with no real chance of success was fantastically misplaced. The 99 percent continues to occupy more cities, more headlines and more of our collective imagination.

The 99 percent includes people everywhere who want their basic needs met, environmentalists who want clean energy and conservation, communities that want justice for social exclusions and oppression, teachers who want more investment in education, working people wanting jobs with fair wages, students faced with dwindling job prospects who want their debt forgiven. And, of course, people want an end to the reckless corporate behavior and criminality, from - "robo-signed" foreclosures to investor fraud, from corporate personhood to out-of-control CEO compensation - that for sake of expedience is referred to as greed, though other "deadly sins" such as gluttony may do just as well.

The diversity of the movement and its purported lack of focus, has been a point of dismissal for its detractors and a source of vexation for some of its supporters, who worry that incoherency will lead to downfall.

However, we view the political heterogeneity differently. The issues are manifold, but taken together they present a quite cohesive "demand": a desire for a new society and a new economy that values people, caring and community. People want to live in commitment to and in common with each other.

In this sense, we agree with Naomi Klein's assertion at a recent talk at OWS that what is needed is a change to "the underlying values that govern our society." This project to re-evaluate our values means changing our ideas about how we make, exchange, distribute and consume stuff; it means precisely changing our economic values.

It is difficult to learn how to speak of new values, let alone embrace and practice them; it takes time. It is also hard for people stuck in the old values to hear what you are saying, and, yet, this is the task before the movement: perhaps this is why when OWS speaks, much of the media mainstream cannot hear them. And perhaps this is why some within the

movement are unwilling or unable to imagine doing more than demanding policy reforms (however important these might be).

To those who adhere to the old values, new values may appear quixotic, or even naive, propositions. And we may experience a gripping, emotional attachment to long-held beliefs that make them difficult to relinquish. In our economy, individual self-interest is understood to drive behavior, not social commitment. In this sense, self-interest is the value. In market capitalism, people are supposed to compete against each other for jobs and resources, supposed to produce and buy stuff for the cheapest price and supposed to make decisions that make them the most money.

These beliefs bleed into other areas of our lives. At home, in school, at work and even sometimes at church, people are encouraged to act in their own individual self-interest.

To be sure, this taken-for-granted central value has long been the subject of debate, even a sense of underlying unease. Adam Smith may have argued for its virtues in "Wealth of Nations," but he also argued against it in "Theory of Moral Sentiments." And so it goes. For some, self-interest is believed to be good. It motivates hard work and innovation, balances supply and demand. Acting on our self-interest allows the economy to be the proverbial tide that lifts all boats. In this view, we need to do as much as possible to allow people to follow their "natural" inclinations; we should deregulate the economy, create new free markets and lower taxes. For others, this self-interest can quickly morph into untrammelled greed. It leads to an imbalanced economy, social and environmental degradation and political corruption. In this view, the economy needs to be carefully monitored and regulated; taxes should be raised to redistribute wealth, and policies should be legislated that protect people and the environment. People and political parties disagree about economic policy, but across the whole political spectrum, the pursuit of individual, self-interest is presumed to be what motivates people in the economy itself.

But this is only one possibility among many. From the perspective of anthropologists, who specialize in exploring the incredible variation that people and societies display, our current set of economic relationships and values are NOT natural; the economy is not the expression of some innate human nature. For example, in his classic work, "The Gift," Marcel Mauss analyzed societies that exchange goods through reciprocal ties, rather than market exchanges. In gift economies, Mauss argues, economic actions are more than just profit-seeking behaviors. People are motivated to give, to receive and to give again, in order to deepen social ties, redistribute wealth

and affirm a wide range of cultural values. The economy is a vehicle for ethical behavior and social commitment, as much as self-interest.

Contemporary anthropologist David Graeber stresses a more salient insight in Mauss's work: even in a society presumed to be dominated by market capitalism, people are compelled to act ethically toward each other. If we pause for a moment, we can see this fundamental truism all around us: in the self-sacrifices of undervalued and underpaid teachers to their students; in the efforts of community organizers to raise up the voices and interests of the disenfranchised; in community potlucks that strengthen social ties by sharing resources; in the countless hours of unvalued childcare provided by mothers and other caregivers; and in pervasive, everyday-acts of kindness that help us to manage our lives. We might even consider the philanthropy of the very wealthy, if we choose to, as gestures of commitment to each other. We might conclude from the above that self-interest doesn't rule our lives. People are motivated by and value both self-interest and social commitment.

But here is the rub. Ethical values and actions beyond self-interest are understood in our present society to be extra-economic; they are supposed to take place outside the formal economy. It is precisely for this reason that they are frequently dismissed as mere sentimentality. How then do we move ethical values and social commitment to the very core of our economic values? Is this even possible?

Fortunately, this is a question that already has an answer. And we don't have to go back in time or across the globe to find it. Massachusetts, where we live, abounds with efforts, enterprises and initiatives that merge the ethical with the "economic."

For example, the Alliance to Develop Power (ADP) in Springfield is a grassroots community organizing group that fights for social justice and the interests of their members. But in contrast to organizations that concentrate on policy changes, ADP brings an interesting twist to their politics. They engage in campaigns and initiatives that lead to the creation of institutions that they own and control. ADP currently operates four affordable housing complexes as well as a maintenance, landscaping and weatherization company. These enterprises are owned by, employ and governed by ADP members; decisions are made by them, profits come to them and they decide how to reinvest the profits. Coming up: an urban agriculture project, community-controlled radio and more cooperatively owned businesses. By building institutions that allow the community to control profits, ADP members are able to make decisions that balance the needs of the individual, the community and the environment.

The Worcester Energy Barn Raisers formed three years ago to help people and community organizations weatherize their homes. The group builds capacity by sharing know-how on the techniques that allow buildings to become more energy efficient. The work is all volunteer. The core volunteer members bring their labor to each project where volunteers from the neighborhood and community join them. While there are material costs associated, this is an instance of a mutual aid economy that works to deepen social relationships and build community. After a day of working side by side and exchanging skills and resources, barn raisings conclude with a shared meal; reflective conversation; and often new relationships, allies and possibilities.

The Valley Alliance of Worker Cooperatives (VAWC) is an affiliation of eight worker-cooperatives throughout Western Massachusetts's Pioneer Valley. Worker-owned enterprises behave differently than "regular" firms: employees are the bosses; they collectively control and make their own decisions about what to do with the profits of the business. They do not outsource themselves; they live and work in the communities they serve. Their personal success, the success of their business and the success of their communities are bound together. And VAWC cooperatives contribute to a fund that helps spread the worker ownership model as well as strengthen ties among worker-owned cooperatives and the large networks of consumer cooperatives in the east coast.

The ADP, The Worcester Energy Barn Raisers and VAWC are merely three examples of a growing, new economy - in Massachusetts, the United States and the world - that enables people to bring social commitment and ethical values into their economic endeavors. We can also look to the proliferation of consumer cooperatives that allow members to democratically decide which services and products should be available for consumption, alternative financial institutions like credit unions that are structured to benefit members and the community, fair-trade networks that subject consumers and producers to ethical markets and alternative currencies that work to promote sustainable and strong communities.

These real-world examples of economic enterprises that encourage community rather than individualism and privilege equality over exploitation, show us the better parts of ourselves. These are economic spaces where it is difficult to tell where our self-interest begins and our duty to others begins; these are economic spaces that enable us to act ethically toward each other. These structures and enterprises already exist. In some cases we simply need the desire to expand and replicate them. And

when power doesn't concede, we must organize in order to take it; there is a movement afoot that can help us do just that. Let's accept the gift offered by OWS, let's accept the invitation to join the 99 percent and then reciprocate by helping to create, organize around and demand a new economy and a new world.

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