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Article

LESSONS OF OCCUPY: TOWARDS A CONSEQUENTIAL SOCIALIST POLITICS FOR THE 99 PERCENT

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Abstract

This research uses the Occupy Movement as a springboard to discuss contemporary political struggles in Canada. Drawing on the recent experiences of Occupy activists, the author discusses the limitations of non-hierarchical, consensus and prefigurative strategies within social movements. In particular, I suggest that such practices, which are meant to challenge routine social inequalities, actually tend to reproduce them. I then ask how those who are exploited within capitalism can consciously and collectively push contemporary struggle in a socialist direction. Drawing on the works of Marx and Marxist theorists, the paper examines how an understanding of class, capital and hegemony are significant to the contemporary social justice agenda. Thus, insights from the empirical experiences of the Occupy movement are used to explore the broader question of how it is possible to bring about revolutionary transformation to a world capitalist system that is in crisis.

Keywords

Occupy, consensus, prefiguration politics, socialism, hegemony

"WE ARE THE 99 PERCENT" was the slogan that echoed throughout city streets in Halifax, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and many other Canadian cities in 2011 and 2012.[1] The

[1] Some of the other participating Canadian cities were Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary, Kingston, Victoria, Regina, Windsor, Winnipeg, Guelph, and Moncton. The movement was also present in several cities around the world.

Occupy Movement, its activists and its supporters were the voices behind the slogan and the bodies and minds that helped to build the broad-based social movement founded in consensus, anti-hierarchy and prefigurative politic. By identifying generally as the '99 percent,' the Occupy Movement tried to unite people through their stories of economic hardship to transform their societies from the ground up. Within a few months Occupy had spread to over 750 communities around the world (*Guardian UK* 2011) prompting general strikes, protests, demonstrations, soup kitchens, and the occupation of parks and foreclosed homes. By targeting Bay Street, Wall Street and the '1 percent' the movement was able to attain widespread support from those affected by the 2008 global economic crisis and the ensuing recession and austerity program.

While the Occupy Movement was successful at gaining widespread support as a populist movement, its adherence to consensus, anti-hierarchical and prefigurative politic led it to dissolve as the spontaneous energies of its activists and organizers burned out. This article examines some of the difficulties and limitations of Occupy's adherence to these forms of organization. It argues that the movement's commitment to the consensus process tended to reproduce existing social inequalities and the uncritical support of reformist politics. It also examines the limitations of prefigurative strategies that down play the coercive role of the state in response to social movements like Occupy that threaten or weaken capitalist hegemony. Lastly, it posits a return to a socialist politic in the struggle against inequality, exploitation and oppression in Canada today.

The Limitations of Consensus, Anti-Hierarchical and Prefigurative Politic

Beginning in New York's Zuccotti Park[2] the principles of consensus, anti-hierarchy and prefiguration acted as building blocks for the Occupy Movement. Anarchist and non-hierarchical activists subscribed to these strategies as a means to create an inclusive and democratic movement capable of resisting the vertical leadership of orthodox party structure (Graeber 2011). When asked what sort of leadership existed in the Occupy Movement, activists often replied, 'there are no leaders' or 'we are all leaders' to emphasize the horizontal movement they were attempting to create. Occupy activists emphasized the process of constructing "however slowly, however painfully…a genuinely democratic way of life" (Graeber 2009, 319). This is characteristic of prefigurative politics that attempts to, as Gandhi's adage goes, 'be the change you wish to see in the world.'

Wini Breines (1989, 6) uses 'prefigurative politics' to "designate an essentially anti-organizational politics" meant to challenge the hierarchical and central organization associated with Stalinism and abusive bureaucracy. In the 1960s, many New Left radicals were drawn to prefigurative politics, so defined, as a method of resistance as they drifted away from Marx's central analysis of the working class as a force for change (Burner 1996, 153). Similar to Occupy's contemporary use of prefigurative politics, New Left radicals believed that "if enough people

[2] Later renamed Liberty Plaza Park by Occupy activists.

exposed, mocked, and rejected the spectacle of an alienating system… that the system would lose legitimacy and any ability to command assent. Corporate and state bureaucracies would simply dissolve when faced with a 'great refusal'" (Bantjes 2007, 77). For Occupy activists, this great refusal was taking place in encampments all around the world as activists embraced 'new' and 'democratic' forms of organizing. For these activists Occupy represented a rejection of the exploitative and alienating relations within capitalism and the embrace of a more cooperative and egalitarian way of life.

While consensus and prefiguration created a movement open to all in principle, in practice the real politics of Occupy tended to replicate pre-existing hegemonic perspectives including, but not limited to, liberal reformism, sexism, racism and queerphobia. Such tendencies have long been remarked upon as a major problem in so-called consensus politics. For instance, Samir Amin (2009, n.p) argues that the adherence to consensus politics "abolishes the possibility of alternative choices and replaces [them] with a… respect only for a procedural, electoral democracy." This adherence to a procedural democracy treats all persons as equals thereby disguising deep structures of oppression (i.e. colonization, racism, sexism) that prevent traditionally marginalized groups from fully participating in the consensus processes to begin with. In the 19th century, Sojourner Truth called white women's attention to the ways that their discourses around 'women's oppression' excluded the realities of Black women like herself; at least since, there has been a rich literature around the ways that seemingly democratic processes actually re-centre socially dominant actors, typically the white male bourgeois experience. Within this vast literature, Breines (1989) has recognized the tendency for new social movements to likewise reproduce hierarchy and privilege within their prefigurative and consensus frameworks. In her study of the women's movement in the 1960s, for instance, Breines (1989) observed that those women with the most education and privilege became the de-facto leaders within these movements. The same can be said for Occupy, which reproduced social inequalities around class, race, gender, sexuality and so on.

For the Occupy Movement to reach a so-called 'consensus' it was often necessary to silence the voices of women, Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQI activists; so that the apparent 'consensus' was actually a deep refusal to engage with the issues of the majority that this represents. Arguably, this is inescapably the case where a broad and fluctuating membership with varying consciousness comes together to form 'consensus' within a larger hegemonic capitalist society. Canada's economic and political elite have worked hard to make capitalism the ruling ideology; of course, they have done so within a world-wide context of the growing power of transnational capital, including in the realm of the mass media, where the debates and values reflect the limits of acceptable discourse as defined by powerful capitalist actors who are at the same time the owners of the majority of the world's media.

Through such concrete material relations, including what Marx suggested was ownership and therefore control over the ideological apparatus (eg., the mass media), the dominant class is able to persuade subordinate groups "to accept, adopt and 'interiorize' the values and norms which… [they] themselves have adopted and believe to be right and proper" (Miliband 1990,

346). Since the 1980s, the neoliberal program in Canada has helped to bolster capitalism and fostered many divisions within subaltern groups, including, for instance, by suggesting that native-born working class Canadians are threatened by racialized, immigrant labour. Indeed, the survival of the capitalist system depends on making difference intelligible and translating such differences "into strategies of exclusion and abjection" that reinforce the values of capital (Hennesy 2000, 5). Despite Occupy's claim to be a prefigurative space that rejected these forms of oppression it was not immune to these same divisions and its adherence to consensus often exacerbated these problems. The movement's claim to be an equalitarian and prefigurative encampment neglects the lived experiences of many activists within the movement who encountered a discriminatory and exclusionary decision-making process and space.

While many activists identified capitalism as a contemporary problem they often did not understand its intricate connection to other forms of oppression; indeed, other forms of oppression were often explicitly denied and excluded from discussion, out of concerns for creating 'unnecessary' tensions within an emerging movement. Issues like colonialism and sexism were particularly contentious amongst activists who often deemed them too 'divisive' to engage in. For instance, when the Occupy Movement first emerged Indigenous groups justly criticized the movement for its colonialist implications (Walia 2011). The movement's aim to 'occupy' land already occupied by settler societies erased "the brutal history of occupation and genocide of Indigenous peoples" (Walia 2011, n.p). In short, Canada has a long history of concealing and distorting its colonialist past; too often, even usually, the Occupy Movement exercised a similar erasure of the colonial past and present. Even those encampments that formally acknowledged Canada's history of colonialism were often dismissive of the importance of pursuing an anti-colonialist politic. Such was the case in Occupy Vancouver where an initial decision by activists to recognize the unceded Coast Salish territories was met with blowback from those that argued that this acknowledgement placed 'too much' emphasis on First Nations issues (Walia 2011).

Women also found themselves fighting for basic recognition within the Occupy Movement. Several accounts of sexism and discrimination emerged from women activists including stories of exclusion, harassment and sexual assault (Holtby 2011). I am suggesting that this does not only reflect the difficulty of creating a 'new world' out of an existing, gender-unequal one. Rather, this reflects, too, the systemic exclusion of discussions around gender inequality with the Occupy movement and the failure of the movement to engage in reflexive, feminist politics to counter a male-dominated world. One of the most visible forms of discrimination against women was the gendered division of labour within Occupy encampments. Women were often underrepresented in general assemblies and overrepresented in the reproductive labour necessary for the functioning of the encampment. This is how one activist summarized her experience within Occupy Nova Scotia:

> In my own experience at the Occupy site in Halifax, I saw that women were quickly put into 'traditional female roles' – kitchen duty, cleaning up of site,

> nursing and health care. I saw again and again women begging for help in these fields. At general assemblies I saw men speaking the most and the longest and also attempting to silence women (George 2012).

This became a commonplace criticism of the Occupy Movement more broadly and prompted women to organize 'Occupy Patriarchy' as an attempt to create a "supportive, global space for feminist analysis, response and organizing… within the worldwide Occupy movement" (Occupy Patriarchy 2012). In an effort to educate male activists and push forward a feminist praxis, Occupy Patriarchy activists organized feminist general assemblies, demonstrations, and free-schools on gender inequality and LGBTQI issues. While the movement was popular with feminist activists within Occupy it was often met with anger and resentment from other participants, for a variety of reasons, including by some men who felt that they we being unfairly attacked.

In fact, although many male activists were supportive of women's initiatives within Occupy, others made the lives of feminist activists very difficult. For example, while many members supported a women's initiative to create a branch of Occupy Patriarchy within Nova Scotia, others mocked, threatened and accused women of dividing the movement. Similarly in Montreal, when women tried to organize a 'progressive stack'[3] as a moderate measure to address some of the inequalities they were witnessing in general assemblies, they were met with an aggressive backlash whereby one activist argued that it was time to "guide women back to the kitchen" (Occupy Patriarchy 2012). In the United States, along with the Occupy Patriarchy movement rose 'Occupy the Hood.' Occupy the Hood was initially organized by activist Malik Rhasaan who noticed a lack of a Black, Latino and Asian presence within NY's Occupy Wall Street (Gray 2011). Occupy the Hood quickly spread to over twenty other cities throughout the US including Detroit, Chicago, Austin and Philadelphia (Gray 2011). Both Occupy Patriarchy and Occupy the Hood demonstrate how activists' attempts within the original Occupy Movement served to replicate various forms of oppression including racism, sexism and colonialism; but they also suggest that these exclusions were not passively accepted, but rather challenged by minoritized participants. Put another way, rather than creating an all-inclusive movement, Occupy's denial of formal leadership and adherence to consensus managed to hide and obscure relations of power within the movement, making it necessary for traditionally marginalized groups to organize their own branches of the movement.

Prefigurative Politics and the Repressive Role of the State

Occupy's adherence to prefigurative and consensus strategies also served to obscure the coercive role played by the capitalist state in the repression of social movements. The

[3] A progressive stack gives speaking privilege to those in the general assembly who are members of traditionally marginalized groups.

prefigurative idea that capitalism can be overcome by exposing, mocking and 'refusing' to engage in capitalist social relations, ignores the coercive role of the capitalist state. Consistently, the state uses its police, military and intelligence to combat social movements that threaten capitalist hegemony. Across Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and provincial police worked together with the growing numbers of 'security' enterprises in the private sector to monitor the Occupy Movement from its inception (Mills 2012). Eventually, activists were met with more direct forms of state repression as Occupy encampments were torn down with varying degrees of force throughout Canada.

For those new to activism and unaffected by daily police violence, the forcefulness of Occupy evictions helped to expose the role of the state's armed wing as a force for stabilizing the political-economic system. Such was the case in Halifax after activists were evicted from Victoria Park on Remembrance Day after negotiations with veterans and Mayor Peter Kelly to relocate the Occupy site for the day's ceremonies (*CTV News* 2011). This event changed the attitude of many activists within Occupy Nova Scotia who had previously advocated that the police were a part of the '99 percent.' In an article written shortly after his release from prison, Occupy activist and journalist, Miles Howe described the violent treatment of activists by police during the eviction. After being taken into custody he describes continued violence as one woman's request for medical attention was met with "police boots laid into her chest" and an activists who went into seizure shortly after his arrest was denied medical attention by police officers (Howe 2011). These events prompted Occupy Nova Scotia to organize an emergency rally in support of activists who were arrested and mistreated by the police. The following day at the well-attended event personal accounts of police violence were widespread including one memorable testimonial from two high school aged women who had been hit and choked by a police officer; such testimonies created outrage in the gathered crowd. It might be argued that one purpose of such testimonies was precisely to create such outrage; but for many participants, such discussions importantly highlighted their first personal experiences with the coercive power of the state within capitalism and gave insight into the limits of Occupy within contemporary capitalist relations in Canada.

One conclusion that may be reached from these and similar experiences, is that while prefigurative politics can be a strategic tool to help serve the community and promote social justice,[4] we cannot 'prefigure' our way into a new society. If one thing is clear from the experience of the Occupy Movement and Left historiography more generally it is that the state will not allow people to prefigure any type of politics that seriously challenges capitalist hegemony. Antonio Gramsci's understanding of hegemony as an interplay between consent and coercion is important here. In his prison writings Gramsci (2007, 213) elaborated the coercive and educational role of the state in protecting the interests of capital and shaping popular conscious. He argued that where consent proved futile the capitalist state would resort to the

[4] The Black Panther Party's (BPP) breakfast program was a successful demonstration of the power of prefigurative politics in action. Not only did the program feed thousands of children but it also garnered a lot of support for BPP.

police, military and, if needed, fascist forces to protect its interests.[5] Gramsci, like Marx and Engels, saw the "state with cold-eyed realism" observing that it was "not a politically neutral organ" but "exist[ed] among other things to defend the current social order against those who seek to transform it" (Eagleton 2011, 197). The Occupy Movement is just one name on a growing list of contemporary social movements which have been met with police repression, surveillance and violence; some others include, Idle No More (2012-2013), the Quebec Student Movement (2011-2012), Toronto G20 (2010), Quebec FTAA (2001), and the Anti-Globalization protests (1999). It is necessary to deal with this reality rather than operating, as prefigurative theory does, as if the capitalist power structure were already defeated.

Reforms and Assassinations: The Repression of Radical Struggles in Canada's 1960s and 70s

Indeed, prior to the Occupy movement, there are many examples of the Canadian state's use of coercion and consent to control social movements. The 1960s and 70s were a particularly rich time of protest and repression in Canada, and, indeed, world-wide. These two decades saw a rise in 'radicalism' unparalleled since the growth of neoliberalism and its intensified attack on workers and the welfare state. In solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, Parisian student uprisings, the American Indian Movement (AIM), the Black Power Movement and anti-colonialist struggles taking place around the world, activists in Canada mobilized to confront the oppression, exploitation and inequalities they witnessed in their own country. Movements like the Canadian Red Power and Black Power movements rejected capitalist-colonialist exploitation and saw themselves as connected with oppressed and exploited peoples around the world (Palmer 2012, 376). The type of solidarity being forged between different national and international struggles in the sixties and seventies was of great concern to the state and capital. Reports from the anti-terrorist wing of the RCMP grossly exaggerated the strength of Indigenous, Metis and Black organizations during the sixties and seventies to justify their heavy-handed repression (Austin 2013, Palmer 2012).

A number of strategies and tactics were embraced by the Canadian state to help repress activists in the sixties and seventies.[6] In Canada the RCMP and police worked in partnership with the United States in a counterinsurgency program known as COINTELPRO to destroy Red Power and Black Power movements and their leaders (Harris 2007). Working together, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the RCMP were able to infiltrate, undermine, and destroy the most radical elements of these movements (Harris 2007). In both Canada and the United States important leaders were killed and incarcerated (Palmer 2012, Harris 2007, Austin

[5] In *Socialism and Fascism: The New Order 1921-1922,* Gramsci wrote, "What is fascism if viewed through an international scale? It is an attempt to solve the problems of production and exchange with machine guns and rounds of gunfire" (Santucci 2010).

[6] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall's books *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* and *Cointelpro Papers* do a good job documenting the surveillance and repression of Black, Indigenous, Inuit and Metis activists during the sixties and seventies.

2013, Adams 1989). 1969 was a particularly bad year for racist and violent backlashes against Indigenous, Inuit and Metis peoples in Canada as leaders and activists were attacked and began 'mysteriously disappearing' (Palmer 2012, 399).

To divide activists and control dissent the Canadian state also used the media, reforms and the legal system as tools of repression. Throughout the mid and late sixties the media was awash with fearful accounts of Black Power and Red Power entering into Canada. Through such measures, the state sought to create in advance the public opinion required to destroy these movements.[7] Using the media, reforms and legal system as tools of suppression the state was able to embark on a violent and repressive campaign against Indigenous, Metis and Black activists while simultaneously dismissing, demonizing and scapegoating them as the *real* perpetrators of violence. This fed into the racist prejudices of white Canadians who, despite Canada's history of colonialist and capitalist repression, blamed Black, Metis, Inuit and Indigenous activists as the instigators of violence.

The Cooptation of the Women's Movement

Cooptation is another strategy employed by the state and economic elite to destroy progressive movements. Since the rise of the Occupy Movement there have been many attempts to co-opt its language and message by politicians and liberal forces. This was, perhaps, most evident during the US election season as public policy advocacy groups like the Centre for American Progress and MoveOn.org tried to appropriate the language and message of Occupy to bolster the Democratic Party and its candidates (Horn 2011). Another contemporary example of the cooptation of progressive movements is the liberal and conservative effort to co-opt the women's movement in the service of bourgeois ideology and practice. In Canada, hegemonic feminism prioritizes women's integration within the capitalist economy and upholds individualism, entrepreneurship and self-development as goals of the women's movement. This bourgeois appropriation applauds women who become capitalist exploiters and neglects the fact that for every successful woman CEO, entrepreneur or capitalist there exists many others who are faced with the continued exploitation and oppression necessary to create the luxuries that these 'successful' women can afford. Today, many working-class women have found "their lives in some ways worse, rather than better, than before" women's integration into the capitalist workplace (Brenner 2000, 6). Nevertheless, bourgeois elements of the women's movement continue to push for women's integration in capitalism helping to naturalize the division of women into classes that are pitted against one another in a competitive market.

[7] Gramsci (2007: 213) argues, "What is called 'public opinion' is tightly connected to political hegemony, in other words, it is the point of contact between 'civil society' and 'political society,' between consent and force. When the state wants to embark on an action that is not popular, it starts to create in advance the public opinion that is required, in other words, it organizes and centralizes certain elements of civil society."

The idea that women's equality and freedom depends on their further incorporation into the capitalist marketplace is the same logic that is used to help bolster support for neo-colonialist and imperialist pursuits worldwide. Politicians, corporations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) all appropriate women's issues to fund and garner support for neoliberal development, twisting movements for women's equality into a rhetorical fig leaf used to legitimate the expansion of capitalist social relations world-wide. NGOs exploit stories and images of poverty stricken young girls to help promote capitalist 'development' and 'democracy' in the Global South.[8] In the name of women's liberation, liberal and conservative politicians have also pushed for the contemporary war on terrorism (Eisenstein 2009, 169). In Canada, the US and Britain, "the war in Afghanistan was justified in part as an effort to save Afghani women from the Taliban" (Eisenstein 2009, 175). But reforms for Afghani women, like the reforms for women in Canada, were not meant to liberate poor and working-class women from poverty or patriarchy but to secure the interest of capital, control dissent and safeguard Western hegemony.

The notion that prefigurative and consensus politics alone can transform capitalist society is wishful and dangerous thinking, not least because it ignores the role of the state in safeguarding capitalism. When the political and economic elite are unable to coopt movements to their cause, as they have been able to do with much of the women's movement in Canada, they show no reserve in using more coercive forms of repression against activists. Even modest non-violent movements like the Occupy Movement are targeted as potential threats to capital to be repressed and made an example of. In the case of more radical movements like the Black Power and Red Power movements that emerged in the 1960s and 70s, the Canadian state — acting like other capitalist states —showed just how far it was willing to go to repress social movements as it incarcerated revolutionary leaders and marked others for death.

Beyond Reformism and Canadian Nationalism

Although there were activists within the Occupy Movement that subscribed to an anti-capitalist politics, there were many others that called for moderate reforms within the existing system. Operating within the consensus process meant that activists could only ever agree on the more moderate demands for a kinder capitalism.[9] For example, some of Occupy Vancouver's economic demands were to close tax loopholes, increase minimum wage and lower interest rates (Occupy Vancouver 2011). Similarly, Occupy Toronto (2011) demanded progressive taxation, restrictions on corporate personhood and a move away from private banking. While these are all

[8] For example, in 2011, the Harper Government announced a publically funded agreement between Canada's top 'NGOs' and mining corporations. The government partnered Plan Canada and IAMGOLD; World Vision Canada and Barrick Gold; and the World University Service of Canada and Rio Tinto Alcan to help forward Canadian mining interests around the world (Nieto and Schulman 2011). These NGOs exploit women's stories to forward imperialism and sell the idea of 'Western Democracy' in the Global South.

[9] Not all Occupy encampments in Canada released demands. Some anarchist and prefigurative activists argued that the Occupy Movement should abandon demands altogether because they legitimized the current system.

desirable and progressive reforms, there is no acknowledgement of a larger project to say, eliminate wage labour and transform the social relations of production. In the preamble to their list of demands, Occupy Toronto (2011) points specifically to 'corporate greed' as the contemporary problem faced by Canadians, a formulation that makes it sound as if the problem is a tiny immoral minority and not class relations per se. It was not uncommon for Occupy activists to interpret the slogan the "99 percent versus the 1 percent" to mean that today's economic problems stem from a 'greedy rich' rather than a rich class structurally supported to grow wealthier through the exploitation of the rest of society. While capitalists remain in a position of dominance at the point of production they are still subject to the laws of capital that force them to constantly turn a profit at an expanded rate. Marx (2009, 40) argued,

> The consideration of his own private profit is the sole motive which determines the owner of any capital to employ it either in agriculture, manufactures, or in some particular branch of wholesale or retail trade… The plans and projects of the employers of capitals regulate and direct all the most important operations of labour, and *profit* is the end proposed by all those plans and projects.

The absolute primary consideration of capital is profit; moral constitution is a humanistic concept that does not apply to the social relations of production from the perspective of capital. Indeed, capitalist enterprises that put humanitarian aims above profit go out of business and cease to exist; so there are structural constrains on the ability of capitalists to do anything other than put profit above all other considerations. This is why the problem is not morality, but the social relations of capitalist economic systems. It is essential to confront the limitations of a theory and practice found on the idea that capitalism can be reformed, corrected or controlled in a way that prioritizes poor and working people. While the struggle for reforms within capitalism is an important one,[10] they must be understood within a larger struggle for socialism. As we continue on the path towards further economic, social, and environmental destruction it is important to recognize and confront the "suicidal contradictions" of a system based in "endless capital-expansion, irrespective of the consequences" (Mészáros 2010, 35). In his book *Capitalism: A Structural Genocide,* Gary Leech (2012, 149) conservatively estimates that "10 million people die annually as a result of capitalism's structural genocide" and "hundreds of millions more suffer non-fatal forms of structural violence such as trying to survive on a non-living wage or no wage at all, a lack of basic housing, hunger, sickness and many other social inequalities." The call to revolutionize the world beyond capitalism is premised upon such recognition of the murderous nature of capitalist social relationships.

Oil sands production in Canada is a good example of capital's endless pursuit of profit at the expense of the people and the environment. The Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN)

[10] They are important for a number of reasons like helping to train and organize activists as well as aiding to alleviate some of the immediate social and economic burdens of the poor and working class.

has called the project a 'slow genocide' as "the cultural heritage, land, ecosystems and human health of First Nation communities"[11] are "sacrificed for oil money" (IEN 2013). Fort Chipewyan is a community in crisis, like so many others, since the beginning of oil sands production. Community members of all ages have been affected by high rates of illnesses and cancers that did not exist prior to oil development (Radford and Thompson 2012). Despite evidence that the oil sands are responsible for poisoning First Nation communities, the state, in partnership with the private sector, continues to promote production as a sustainable, ethical and profitable project. But even the communities that are said to be benefitting from production and development are facing crisis. In Fort McMurray, homicides, assault, theft, break-ins, and homelessness have all increased since production began (*National Post* 2007). Women are also finding it increasingly difficult to cope with life in oil sands communities as prostitution, homelessness and spousal abuse have all risen (Ghanie 2008). Another serious problem has been the high rates of depression and suicide amongst oil workers in Canada (*CBC* 2005). Nevertheless, for Canada's political and economic elite, oil sands production is too lucrative a business for the state to turn oppose, even when lives are at stake; adding yet another chapter to Canada's capitalist-colonialist history.

The Occupy Movement's focus on national reforms often ignored the plight of dominated and subaltern populations in other nations being exploited and oppressed by capitalism and Canadian imperialism. While Occupy activists meant the movement to be global in scope, the rhetoric at demonstrations often focused on creating better jobs and conditions at home. The demands put out by Occupy Toronto and Occupy Vancouver did not mention solidarity with international struggles beyond the broad demand to put an end to Canadian military occupation. While this is a noble goal, it is also necessary to confront the capitalist system that exploits labour worldwide. Monopoly and transnational capital force activists and workers to organize at a global level as capitalist use the global economy to divide labour. In a capitalist society, labour and nature are united only in production with the goal of moneymaking and are recognized only for their ability to make profit (Burkett 2003, 108). Reformism is shortsighted and incapable of transforming social relations and it is often employed by capitalists as weapon to divide, conquer and corrupt the dominated classes (Lenin 1970, 75). Vladimir Lenin's (1970, 75) contention that reformism is always the "bourgeois deception of the workers [and subaltern classes], who, despite individual improvements, will always remain wage-slaves, as long as there is the domination of capital" continues to ring true today.

The recent collapse of a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh that resulted in over 1000 dead workers (Alam 2013), mostly women and young girls, is just the latest dramatic example of why the struggle for emancipation must go beyond reforms and national self-interest. These workers laboured long hours in sweatshop conditions to produce cheap clothing for Western

[11] These communities include the Mikisew Cree First Nation, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Fort McMurray First Nation, Fort McKay Cree Nation, Beaver Lake Cree First Nation Chipewyan Prairie First Nation, and the Metis (IEN 2013).

retailers like Loblaw's Joe Fresh, Cato Fashions and The Children's Place (Goodman and Shaikh 2013). When workers feared the building would collapse because of a five-storey crack in the structure, it took threats of termination from their employer and hired criminals to make workers enter the factory (Green and Quadir 2013). The resulting collapse and coverage in many Canadian and American media outlets prompted some to boycott the clothing lines. While a boycott is certainly warranted, the problem remains that working conditions such as those in Rana Plaza are a systemic issue and people cannot make systemic change by 'voting' with their dollars. As Western retailers try to distance themselves from the wreckage and lives destroyed in Rana, these conditions remain the industrial standard throughout many parts of the world and are rarely exposed by the media. The abundance of cheap, disposable labour and the lack of environmental and worker protections is what drives corporations to produce in these areas in the first place. While Wal-Mart and other retailers tried to distance themselves from the catastrophe in Rana, just five months earlier 112 garment workers in Bangladesh's Tazreen factory were killed in a fire making clothing for Wal-Mart, the GAP and Disney (Goodman and Shaikh 2013). From Canada to Bangladesh and all over the world, the capitalist project threatens to bring all into its orbit.

Socialism for the 99 Percent

While the Occupy Movement shied away from formal organization and leadership, the contemporary Left should commit to forging strong parties and alliances capable of mobilizing in times of political and economic instability. After the repression of radical movements in the 1960s and 70s, the breakup of the USSR, and the so-called defeat of a socialist alternative, many on the Left have been quick to dismiss class and party organization as viable forms of resistance today. The 1980s saw a widespread abandonment of Marxist theory as Marx became "typecast as the inspirer of terror and gulag" (Hobsbawm 2011, 398). Those who remained sympathetic to Marxism and the socialist cause often sought to revise Marx's theories and make them more palatable in a 'post-socialist' society. Over time this led to a major shift towards movementism, social democracy, and forms of organizing that tried to replace the revolutionary role of the working class and party in favour of 'the people,' affinity groups and cultural forms of dissent.

The Importance of Class for Contemporary Struggle

As long as capitalism remains the primary mode of social production class remains the fundamental relationship that reproduces and changes it. To emphasize class organization is not to say that other forms of oppression (i.e. gender, race, sexuality, ableism) are not important. Indeed, I have sought to show here that one of the problems of the Occupy movement was precisely to ignore feminist claims, Indigenous decolonizing struggles and racism within the everyday practices to the movement. Rather, I simply observe that the class relationship is created

by the division of capital and labour. Class is not defined "in terms of style, status, income, accent, [or] occupation… [it] is not a matter of how you are feeling but of what you are doing. It is a question of whether you stand in a particular mode of production" (Eagleton 2011, 161). Everyday socially creative human beings must operate in a society where an exploitive relationship dominates the very point of production. The reproduction of the working class has "significance far beyond its own sphere," it is "the wrong which keeps so many other kinds of wrongs in business (imperial wars, colonial expansion, famine, genocide, the plundering of nature [and] to some extent racism and patriarchy)" (Eagleton 2011, 166). Because class is a fundamental material reality of society it can help tie together social antagonisms which otherwise have "no point of anchorage in anything outside of themselves" (Greaves 2009, 215).

Issues like racism, sexism and other forms of oppression, "are central ideological and institutional props" for capital (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Werlhof 1988, 2). In a society dependent on the suppression of the working class for profit, the political and economic elite are "deeply threatened by the prospect of people organizing across lines of difference" (Hennesy 2000, 5). Marx was one of the first to theorize about the intersection of race, class and ethnicity in some of his post-1853 writings (Anderson 2010). In his works on British colonization in Ireland, Marx observed how the perceived differences between the Irish and British working class served to keep the working class as a whole divided to the benefit of the capitalist class. He argued,

> Every industrial and commercial center in England possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life…This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it (Marx 1975, 221).

Marx also began to link the British and Irish experience of class, ethnicity and nationalism to race relations in the United States where poor whites in the American South would unite with plantation owners against Black workers (Anderson 2010). While the economic and political circumstances that Marx was commenting on are certainly different from the experiences of today, they help to expose the important relationship between capital and other forms of oppression.

In the 1970s, the Canadian state was deeply frightened of a coalition between Blacks, Indigenous peoples, the White Left, and French-Québec nationalists (Austin 2013, 154). This type of coalition was made possible by the shared experiences of exploitation and oppression within capitalism. In a society where the Left must bring together the unique and varied peoples to face the same direction against the system that exploits them all, the class relation continues to be an important unifying concept that can help demystify reified social relations.

Forging Socialist Leadership

The ability to imagine new modes of production is hindered by "our daily and repeated involvement with capitalist social relations" (Paulson 2010, 34). It is therefore necessary that the Left forge strong leadership in the struggle for communism. Leadership is crucial as capitalism "fragments the working class internally and divides it from other exploited and oppressed groups externally" (Blackledge 2010, n.p). Leadership or party must be organized from the conscious members of subaltern classes to help the masses understand their historic position within society. For Marxists,

> [The] distinction between party and class is not a distinction between a fixed elite and the foot soldiers, but a simple recognition of the fact that there exist a variety of levels of class consciousness within the working class—from scabs to revolutionaries and all the variations in between (Blackledge 2010, n.p).

In order to engage in the process of transforming exploitative and oppressive relations it is necessary to first understand one's position in a "determined hegemonic force" (Gramsci 2011, 67). Unlike many countries in the Global South that have a recent history of socialist struggle, the majority of Canadians have not yet begun to cognitively negate the present reality, let alone begin to imagine new modes of production and ways of being: "Mass movements in major capitalist centres, and where capitalism developed 'organically,' have tended towards social democracy" (Paulson, 2010, 35). For many Canadians "reform of the system often seems like a real possibility" whereas "revolutionary transformation typically appears impossible" (Paulson 2010, 35). While it is certainly true that party organization can become repressive, movementism cannot create or prefigure the type of social change necessary from within contemporary capitalism and, at its worst, it becomes a distraction from organizing along more revolutionary party lines.

A revolutionary party with clear demands and strong leadership is therefore needed to help identify class exploitation and other forms of repression and mobilize against them. This was the function of the Black Power, Red Power, Québec Nationalist and class organizations that emerged in Canada in the 1960s and 70s. While these movements, like all progressive movements, were met with significant repression, they were capable of mobilizing a significant challenge to capitalist hegemony.[12] What made these movements so powerful was their rejection of capitalist-colonialist exploitation and oppression along with their understanding of struggle as an international project. Rooted in solidarity with anti-colonialist and socialist parties and organizations worldwide, these movements put forth truly revolutionary politics capable of

[12] These movements were not without their limitations. One major weakness was some of their attitudes towards revolutionary women.

overthrowing bourgeois social relations of production. Of course, the fact that they were violently repressed by the colonial state, also suggests the enormous challenge that revolutionary leadership faces; any contemporary revolutionary movement must anticipate violent state repression.

Conclusion

This article examined some of the difficulties and limitations of Occupy's adherence to consensus, anti-hierarchical and prefigurative politic. I have argued that the movement's commitment to this politic tended to reproduce existing social inequalities while underestimating the power of state repression and capitalist reforms. While the Occupy Movement did not embrace the revolutionary socialist perspective necessary to transform society, however, it did reinvigorate discussion and awareness around growing inequality, austerity and corporate control. In the struggle for social and economic justice one must consider how activists are learning and being transformed by their lived experiences. As the material conditions of life lead one to choose to struggle against them, the practical experience of struggle advances the consciousness of those who had the experience as well as the material conditions. In this respect, Occupy represents a contemporary struggle by subordinate classes wanting to educate themselves in alternative ways of being. One of the lessons from Occupy to the Left is that the class conscious must be better prepared for confrontation when the moment arises (or if one is provoked). Without clear class consciousness at the leadership levels the most fundamental aspect that binds the '99 percent' together as a unified working class against the exploiting class is ignored.

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