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Occupy Wall Street

The Stones Cry Out: The Power of the Occupation in the City Square

- Features -

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“And some of the Pharisees among the multitude said unto him, Master, rebuke thy disciples. And he answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.” Luke 19:39-40.

Where does the tremendous power of the occupation of city spaces, particularly the square, come from? The occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo brought down the Mubarak dictatorship, the indignados in assembly in the plazas shook the Spanish authorities, and Occupy Wall Street and its offspring across the United States have frightened city and state governments setting off a wave of police repression and state violence. The pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 led the Chinese Communist Party to send in the army, killing hundreds, perhaps thousands. What is the threat and what is the power inherent in the occupation of city spaces?

After all, these are not the seizures of government buildings and banks, bridges and railroad stations that we associate with the coups d'état, Putsches and revolutions in Italy, Germany, and Russia of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These are not the factory occupations of the 1930s that in France and the United States paralyzed production and threatened the manufacture of profit. True enough: the recent occupations in Egypt were often preceded and accompanied by large strikes and other social protests. Granted: the occupation of the heart of a city wreaks havoc with administration and commerce, and affects the daily life of millions. Conceded: the mass media's and the social media's publicity of these events has projected them across the nation and around the world, a political leveraging that magnifies their impact. Yet any or all of these explanations—the accompanying strikes, the disruption of the big cities, and the media impact—fail to provide a compelling explanation for the power of the occupation. There is something more here, something deeper.

We might find more convincing the idea that these occupations are symbolic acts that challenge the dominant economic ideology and delegitimize the state. By taking the city space, the challengers speak truth to power. The occupiers tug at the thread of economic and political authority, until at times it seems as if the whole cloth might simply unravel. The occupation appears as the suggestion of the great upheaval from below, as the token and the harbinger of social and political revolution. While only symbolic, the occupation suggests both a real struggle for power and an alternative society.

Yet, there is more than symbolism here. The occupation is a powerful myth and a social fact. The occupiers, the expectant public, and the threatened authorities all experience the occupation of city space as either an exhilarating manifestation of power, a gut-wrenching shaking of the routines of normal life, or as a menacing threat to the established order of wealth and political power. In the big cities, where the occupation takes on a mass character, students, professionals and workers occupy together; urban cosmopolitanism rubs elbows with plebeian radicalism. But through the day and especially at night, and more so at night in the smaller towns, the occupation has the character of a post-modern, urban millenarianism.

“We will not live this way anymore. We can live differently. We seek deliverance. We seek the better life.” People have gathered in the cities, their numbers relatively small compared to the size of the city as a whole, miniscule compared to the size of the nation—yet they shake the foundations of the state. Though their ostensible political aims are reformist, their belief that the system has failed and their desire for deliverance from it, give the movement a revolutionary character. The middle class and workers, the poor and the homeless join in the city space in an embrace of the movement's egalitarianism. And what is more revolutionary than the idea of equality? The people stand together saying: “We are equal. Each has voice. We have a common voice. We have found our voice. We are showing a new way to live.”

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We are witnessing something that goes beyond the symbolic, something that both threatens the deep foundations of our social structure and, equally important—no, more important—something that touches our deepest spiritual yearnings. The occupation is utopian in the best sense. Whatever its political program, its practice says: “We will no longer live in hatred and competition. We will live in love and community.” And, of course, that would mean turning everything upside down. That is why the occupation frightens and angers the bankers, the CEOs, the politicians and the generals. It says we no longer need your system. We need you no more. We might write of the occupation as Sorel wrote of the syndicalist myth of the general strike, “We thus obtain the intuition of Socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness—and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously.”

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The power of the occupation arises not only from the occupiers; it arises from the very bricks and stones of the city, from the iron and steel; it rises out of the pavement. Even if the occupation’s disciples held their peace, the stones would cry out. For the occupation gives expression not only to this moment’s yearning for the other, better world, it recalls and summons up the sweat and blood embedded in the bricks, it hears and echoes the past cry for justice sealed in the stone. The power of the occupation comes from the city itself, for the city is the crucible of culture and civilization.

The city is a palimpsest of our eight thousand-year history of labor and struggle. In the old cities of all continents the original ceremonial center, the ancient warrior citadel, the medieval market town, the bourgeois entrepôt, and the post modern cosmopolis are layered one over the other, each layer the result of one of those epoch-making shifts in human history, the collapse of an old civilization, the rise of a new one out of its ruins.

The first city was a representation of the human being in the cosmos, an architectural image of man and mystery. The sacred space of the city remains. The temple to the gods, later almost entirely buried beneath the church, still remains. The Catholic Church triumphant stands with an equally arrogant disregard upon the Greek Temple and the Egyptian or Aztec pyramid. The Calvinist Reform church having stripped the walls and altars and burned the images in a furious storm of militant iconoclasm, now occupies the old Catholic building filling it with predestinarian pessimism and righteous fervor. The French Revolution’s Temple of Reason, the unfulfilled dream of a rationalist ziggurat to deism, lives on too even without bricks and mortar. Where the twentieth century revolutions passed—in Turkey, Mexico, Russia, China and Cuba—the temple was transformed into the House of the People, the library, the school. Yet everywhere, the spiritual sentiment—here in religious and there in humanistic form—lives on. The city preserves everything. The city is always sacred, as well as profane.

The sacred space and the market place, the citadel and the barracks, the agora and the forum stand at the center of the city, transformed by each new avatar of civilization. The ruling class designs the city in its image, and the laboring classes who built it have put their mark upon it. From the beginning the city—from Greece to Persia, from India to China, from the Aztecs, to the Maya to the Inca—brings empire abroad and class struggle within. In every city the police officer and the jail protect property, ensure exploitation and enforce the rulers’ will. And everywhere, driven by the pulse of economic growth and stagnation, by political corruption and despotism, and by their own organization and consciousness, the people rebel and rise up in bread riots and workers’ strikes, in armed rebellions and, at the right moment, in revolution. They erupt into the city spaces, their presence proclaiming: These are not your spaces. We built them and they are ours!

The old city remembers all of this. The memories live in the popular consciousness, in the community, in the university library. They live in the remains of the old slave market and in the spots on the shore where the stevedores shaped, lined up on the dock before the foremen, hoping to be chosen. They live in the broken stone tubs, buried beneath the streetcar line, later beneath the pavement, where the laundresses labored. The memories live in the monument to the Civil War, in the plaque in the park, in the bust in the museum. They live in the murals and the

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graffiti, in the bullet holes in the wall and the blood stains on the street. The memories live in the cemeteries, in the Communard Wall, in the mass grave of the victims of the Holocaust, in the cluster of graves of the Haymarket Martyrs. With the occupation of the city, Clio, ridiculed and ignored, distorted and perverted in ordinary times, suddenly finds her place, surrounded by respectful listeners and by assiduous readers: "We must know our history. We must know who fought before us. We must carry on the fight."

Cities represent the crux of our civilization and our humanity. Rural life provides for us, the mountains and the ocean shore renew us, the suburbs shelter many of us, but the city expresses us. The city enriches our experience, widens our horizons, magnifies our voices, and multiplies our power. We are the city dwellers. We are urban in our essence. The city history lives in us, consciously or unconsciously. This is not some Jungian idea of a racial unconscious. This is our experience. We live the city and the city lives in us. We have lived the growing up into our families and we have lived the handing down to our children throughout our generations in the city. We worked and lived in the city way. We made and ate our meals, used the toilet and bathed ourselves as city folk. We went to the city school and were raised in the temple of the faith—or turned from the faith—as the urban people do. We flirted, romanced, and made love in the city way. We ate in the restaurant and drank in the bar, danced in the club, passed the night in jail, and went to work to the morning in the way city folk do. We are urban in our glance, in our carriage, in our gesture. We are the city and the city is us. We are the occupation and the occupation is the city, not as the city is but as it might be. The occupation's power is the city itself.

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By the 1850s, "One could divine pretty nearly where the force lay, since the last ten years had given to the great mechanical energies—coal, iron, steam—a distinct superiority in power over the old industrial elements—agriculture, handwork, and learning....The world, after 1865, became a bankers' world..."
Henry Adams (The Education of Henry Adams [New York: Modern Library, 1931], pp. 238 and 247)

With its palaces, its quarters, and its slums, its avenues and its alleys, we embrace the city and we remember its history of work and protest. And what is that history that we remember? What is it that the city remembers of our own modern times?

Industry made the modern city with the banks and exchanges at its center. In London, the City. In New York, Wall Street. In Chicago, LaSalle St. The Stock Exchange, the Grain Exchange, the Merchandise Mart. Capital claimed the city's core, its heart, and arrayed around it the great museums, the opera houses and music halls, department stores, and the neighborhoods of the rich and well-to-do: the Upper East Side, the Gold Coast, Nob Hill. Capital created neighborhoods for the professionals, for the white collar workers, for the clerks, the secretaries. Further out the steel mills, the stockyards, the rail yards, the docks. The apartment buildings and row houses of the workers, the slums of the poor. The missions and charity houses for the destitute, the parks, the sidewalks, and bridges for the homeless. Capital arrayed the city: gleaming towers at its center and shacks and shanties on the fringe.

The city remembers how capital imposed itself in the workplace. The bank and the corporation, the board and the director, the manager, the supervisor and the foreman, on down the line passed the power of capital and pressed it upon the worker. The workers remember the indignity of the search for a job, hat in hand, résumé in hand, pleading: the shape, the pay-off to the foreman, the harassment, the demand for favors. They remember the speed-up, the stretch-out, the double-shift, the forced over-time. They remember the assembly line, the labor in the mine at the face, the trackmen laying the sleepers and the rails. They remember the long hours in the office cubicle, in the classroom, at the computer terminal. They remember pay-docking, the pay-cut, the layoff, the firing. They remember when the foreman struck them, when he insulted them, when he called them lazy dogs. They remember the pink slip in the envelope and how others turned away, afraid they might be next.

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The city remembers how capital imposed itself on government in the city, the state, the country. The banks and corporations bought the selectmen, the aldermen, the councilmen—most of them. The city remembers the deals: street cars, electric power, construction, and real estate, real estate, real estate. The city remembers the money passing from hand to hand, under the table, delivered in the paper bag, handed over with a wink and a smile.

They bought the state legislators, the Representatives, the Senators. The Senate became the rich man's club. They bought the president when necessary for a pretty price, but it was seldom necessary, for the president was usually a rich man. Or a Nixon, a lower middle class man proud to work in the service of the rich. The rich formed the cabinets, cabinets of bankers, oilmen, mine owners, stockbrokers, and corporate lawyers. Government at the federal level was larceny on a grand scale.

The city remembers how capital created the police, the army and the guard. How they built the armories in the city, fortresses against the working class. How they called out the guard to break the strikes. How, as the empire expanded, they drafted the workers' sons and sent them to war against Mexico, Spain, Colombia, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Haiti, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Vietnam. They fought for sugar companies, banana companies, mining companies, and oil companies. They fought for capital, against other working people like themselves. And the city remembers the star in the window, the black bunting on the door, the service in the church or temple, the youth's body in the cemetery. The city remembers, and the stones themselves cry.

The city remembers how capital imposed itself on the society. Remembers how they bought the priests, the ministers, the pastors, and the rabbis—many of them. How they bought the university professors—many of them. The city remembers that they bought up the newspapers, later the radio stations and the television channels. The city remembers how the money from Wall Street flowed to Madison Avenue, and the ad men; the copy writers created the images and words that flowed into the city, to the cottages and the apartments. The city remembers how they encouraged us to buy their stuff, to take out the loan, to go into debt, to mortgage the house, to turn in the insurance policy. The city remembers the corruption and the crooks, the Mafia and the street gangs.

The city remembers what capital has wrought. The city remembers the breadlines, the soup lines, the lines at the Salvation Army mission. The homeless men and women carrying their bags in the sun, the rain, and the snow. The sleeping in the doorways, the sleeping in the subways, the sleeping on the bus. The families sleeping in the cars, the kids held on a sleepless mother's lap. The city remembers the jobless man who abandoned his family in shame, crying, and those driven mad, the raving lunatic, the suicide.

The power of the occupation is the power of memory, the memory of exploitation and oppression, of insults and slurs. The city remembers that your grandfather was Irish, called a mick, and told that he need not apply. The city knows that your parents were called kikes or chinks, that they called you, and some still sometimes call you, nigger, beaner, and spick. The city remembers that you were called a bitch and a slut. The city remembers Stonewall, remembers that you were called a faggot or a dike. The city remembers those who died from hunger, from beatings and killings in the parks and the alleys, those who died anonymously, unrecorded, unremembered except by the city stones. The stones remember. The city remembers and the stones weep.

The Occupation, drawing upon the city's memory, our collective memory, our history, calls forth righteous indignation, summons up resistance, threatens rebellion. The power of the occupation is in memory and desire, in the memory of mistreatment and the desire for justice.

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The city remembers the occupations, big and small, loud and quiet, year after year occasionally erupting into the

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public spaces, seizing the squares, taking the boulevards and avenues. The men at the bench who took their tools and walked out of the shop. The women who walked out of the sweatshop, smiling and blinking into the light of day. Remembers the dockworkers whoâ€”surprising everyone, even themselvesâ€”stood black and white together and would not load the ship. The city remembers seamen who would not sail when the pay was low and the food was bad. Remembers the agitators who filled Bughouse Square standing on soap boxes preaching the Gospel that the “last shall be first.” Preaching democracy, equality and justice. Preaching socialism and communism.

The city remembers the unions that struck and marched with their banners in English, Yiddish, Italian, and Russian and filled Union Square. Remembers the Wobblies who fought for free speech and filled the jails of the cities of the West Coast. Remembers the crowds of people from the neighborhood who faced down the sheriff and his deputies, broke the locks, and returned the evicted family to its home.

The occupation calls to us, the city demands that we remember. And we remember.

The occupation summons us out of our homes, our apartments, out from under the bridge. The occupation of the present calls upon us to remember the occupations of the past. Drawing upon the memory of the city, we remember every occupation and every call for freedom. We remember how we occupied their squares, their factories, their lunch counters, and their streets. We remember the workers who occupied Haymarket Square in 1886, how the police crushed them and how six in that occupation paid with their lives for it. We remember the Pullman workers who stopped the trains and occupied the rail yards, until the troops broke their strike. We remember the rubber, auto, glass and electrical plants in the 1930s that finally, finally, finally after decades won the right to industrial unions, contracts, decent wages and fair treatment.

We remember the laborers, the share-croppers, the janitors and the maids with their tired feet, who with their children, their brave children, occupied the churches of the cities of the South and would not ride in the back of the busses, would not use the colored-only toilets, would not step off the sidewalk any more. We remember the preacher who recalled Amos and in his deep voice proclaimed, “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” And they occupied. We remember how they marched despite the fire hoses and the dogs, marched for themselves and for us, occupying the boulevards and the squares of the South. We remember the African American youth who occupied the lunch counters in the Woolworth’s in the center of the Southern cities and, like a tree standing by the water, would not be moved. We remember occupying today and take up the cry: We shall not be moved!

We remember the women who wearing white occupied the boulevards and avenues of America demanding the Equal Rights Amendmentâ€”and we remember how the states and Congress denied them. We remember the LGBTQ activists who, coming out of the closet and into the streets, acting up, and chanting “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it,” joined the historic on-going, centuries-long occupation of city spaces in the demand for equality. We remember the environmentalists who occupied the trees in the forest and climbed so high that we could see them and hear them in the city crying, “Save our planet!” We remember the immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America, and so many from Mexico, who by the millions occupied the squares of Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and dozens of other cities in 2006, waving their flags and the American flag, demanding equality. We remember all this and this too is the power of the occupation. The power of memory.

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Everywhere the flags fly over occupy: the American flag, the black flag, the red flag. Sometimes the peace flag, Go Green flags, flags with green and white bars and the Greek theta, equality flags with the equal sign. The American flags might give the impression of a nationalist movement, and there are nationalist moments, but with the slightest prompting the movement tilts toward internationalism. People cheer Egyptians who were at Tahrir Square. They

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cheer the Spanish indignados. They cheer Latino immigrant farm workers speaking to the assembly in Spanish. The movement glories in the World Occupy Day as protesters in hundreds of cities in all the inhabited continents and dozens of nations take to the plazas. Occupy speakers proclaim that we fight not merely for ourselves but for a better world for all. And everyone cheers.

We are reminded by the cheering of our history. Our memories are international. Memories of the great occupations. We remember the revolutions of 1848 and 1917 and 1918, occupying the squares of Europe. We remember the French students and workers occupying Paris in 1968, millions joining the general strike. And too, we remember the Arab and African immigrants who poured into the streets of Paris and other French cities in 2005 to demand equality. We remember the students and the workers who occupied Tlatelolco, in Mexico City in 1968 calling for democracy and against an attack on Cuba by the United States. We remember the hundreds of them shot and killed. We remember the Polish workers of Solidarno?? who in 1980 occupied the Gdansk shipyard and then by the millions all the squares of all the cities of Poland. General Jaruzelski crushed their movement, but the Polish occupation was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Communist party dictatorship and its rule in Eastern Europe.

We remember the South African workers who throughout the 1980s poured into the streets of the townships and the cities, from Soweto to Johannesburg, to demand an end to apartheid. We remember the South Korean workers and the Brazilian workers who also in the 1980s organized, and struck and occupied factories to overthrow the military dictators who ruled their countries. We remember the Indonesian students and citizens who in the face of gunfire and killings continued their occupations of the universities and the public squares and drove Suharto from power in 1998. We remember Oaxaca in 2006 where the teachers took the square, followed by the townspeople, in spite of the death squads that killed a score. All of this the occupation remembers. And the memory is our strength. We remember and we occupy.

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We have occupied and won. And we have occupied and lost. And why have we won? And why have we lost?

Occupation is our response to the crisis of capitalism. To the crisis of the economy, to the crisis of war, to the crisis of the environment. Capitalism is crisis and occupation is the response. Since the beginning of capitalism in the 1500s there have been panics, depressions and crises, mostly local then. Every decade since the industrial revolution of 1750 we have had a depression, bank failures, business collapse, unemployment, and misery. Since the nineteenth century every crisis has been a global disaster, misery for millions. The countryside starving, cities in pain. The response to the crisis has been the bread riot, the protest march, the demonstration, the strike, the occupation, the barricades, the uprising—and sometimes the revolution.

The crisis often divides the rulers as they argue over how to resolve it, how to carry out the war, and today what to do about the looming environmental crisis that threatens the planet. Their divisions open space for us. Where they divide, we rush in, pushing them apart. The occupation of the park, of the square, of the street becomes a wedge in that opening, driving the ruling factions apart. They are not, however, so easily divided. They overcome their own division and stand together against us, united in their fear of us.

The smallest infringement on their power creates a political crisis for them. The occupation of the park raises for them the question: Who runs the city? Them or us? Who makes the rules? Them or us? Who has the power? Them or us? The occupation of a park, a square, a street—a thing as small as that—seems to them (before it seems so to us) to be a question (strange as it seems) of dual power. They fear that allowing us to stay in the park and speak out against the system could be the seed of a new society and a new state. There is one power they say, and that power, they say is them. But how to exert that power, how to reestablish their power over the park and the people in it?

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The ruling party is a two-handed engine: one hand, the cold fist of iron, the other, the sweaty palm of cooptation. The former is more fierce, the latter more insidious. They are equally dangerous. The iron fist sweeps us from the square, the sweaty palm invites us to the party. Their party. At the party, they say, there will be music. We remember the adage: Who pays the piper calls the tune.

Republicans and Democrats, and the right and left of each of those ruling parties, divide among themselves the work of ending the occupation. Some move to drive us from the square with mounted police, clubs and pepper spray. Others, the Democrats mostly, welcome us to the square, only hoping we will back their candidate when the cold, rain, snow and the passage of time have driven us from the square. Taking off their cashmere coats and donning nylon jackets, their pocket stuffed with money from the corporations, foundations, and lobbyists, they come down to say, "We share your frustrations. We share your goals."

We remember now, now that we are awake, now that we are occupying, the long history of betrayal. We remember the other times that they offered us their hand, invited us to the party. We remember how the Populist farmers' revolt at the turn of the last century, enticed by William Jennings Bryan, entered the Democratic Party and the farmers movement died. We remember that the unionists of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations entered the Democratic Party and the labor movement—and slept there. We remember that the African American civil rights movement, and the feminist movement entered the Democratic Party and withered there. Where have all the movements gone, long time passing? We remember now, now that we are awake, that they all went into the Democratic Party, and there they passed away.

We have won. We, in the long, historic, never-ending and ascending occupation, from time to time we have won. When have we won? We have won when we overcame our divisions, stuck together and fought. We have won when we retained our independence. We have won when we built movements large enough and powerful enough to become a political force themselves.

In America, in the United States, we have won, partial victories, but we have won. When have we won? We won when, united and independent, the industrialist unionists built the industrial unions in the mid-1930s. We won when, united and independent, the African American civil rights movement and its white allies overturned the Jim Crow system in the South. We won when, united and independent, we ended the war in Vietnam. We won many other victories, partial, sometimes short-lived, all important: for women's rights, for gay and lesbian, transgender and bisexual rights. We have yet many days to go in the occupation, many miles to walk, many challenges and victories to be won.

Gathering in the city, taking strength from its history, remembering its past and our past, we stand firm. Today, we are Occupy, united and independent. Ask me what democracy looks like? I will tell you: We are what democracy looks like. We are the 99%. You are the 99%. We are the 99%. Occupy!

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