

Occupy Movement (Fr. Lawrence R. Farley)

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Anyone who has not been comatose for the last several weeks has heard of the “Occupy Movement”, which began with the call to “occupy Wall Street” and then spread to other cities in the U.S. and Canada. I suspect that whether or not one’s city has had their main street or social venue “occupied” depends largely upon the relative size of the city. My own neighboring city of Vancouver has been occupied. The town of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, I think, has not.



In my area, the Occupy Movement has fizzled somewhat; the movement has moved on (as movements are wont to do). I suspect it had a bit to do with the cold weather that comes in a Canadian winter, and also with the (correctly) perceived lack of public support, which made the occupiers unwilling to defy court orders to disband. The occupiers occupied major venues in public spaces, (the Vancouver occupiers camped in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery), and this effectively meant

that those public spaces were no longer public. The public was very patient, (one might say “long-suffering”), but eventually they wanted their public spaces back, especially when they could not discern any real reason for their loss. I predict that when the history books documenting the significant events of the 21st century are written up, the Occupy Movement will be consigned to a small foot-note. Even now it is becoming something of a joke. I remember seeing a poster exhorting, “Occupy Mordor—because one ring should not be allowed to rule them all”. For now, before it vanishes into historical oblivion, I would like to ask the question, “What is the meaning of the Occupy Movement in North America, and what, if anything, is wrong with it?”

People of my vintage will recall that the first people to occupy anything in America were the university students, who occupied the offices of the university big-wigs, such as those of the university dean or president, inspired by the protests used by those striving for justice in the American Civil Rights Movement. The occupation was then called a “sit-in” because it consisted of the protesters sitting in the offices of those in authority and refusing to leave until their demands were met, provoking arrest and forcible media-covered removal. The media was indeed happy to cover the sit-ins, which meshed with the hippie movement of that time. (It was followed, culturally speaking, by “love-ins”—which one imagines involved postures other than sitting, and issued fewer demands.) The sit-ins were part of an evolving culture of student protest, fuelled by youthful objection to American involvement in the war in Viet Nam. In these protests, the protesters had an argument which, even if delivered through a bull-horn loudspeaker, had least possessed coherence. They articulated a position, made specific demands, and invited a response. The inconvenience occasioned by their sitting in was intended to provoke this attention and response. Since the situations they were protesting were widely regarded as unjust, the protesters often felt the warm glow of self-righteousness. They were, in their own view, standing up against a powerful and unjust regime at great personal cost. Sitting in and marching and burning draft cards and incinerating the American flag and dodging the draft were all a part of the same protest movement.

These sit-ins are, I believe, the cultural ancestors of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Those sitting in on Wall Street have a message—namely, that the greed of Wall Street (vaguely defined) has gotten the American economy into a tremendous mess, so that the greed of the rich 1% of the population, aided and abetted by the government (“The Man” in the words of their 1960’s ancestors) resulted in much misery for the other 99%. It remains a valid point. But this fairly basic message (“greed is bad”) seemed not to be followed by any concrete demands that anyone could easily discern. This being the case, the occupation

grew by reason of its very lack of concrete demands, as everyone with a grievance against anything joined in. In the Occupy Vancouver tents one found the perennially homeless, some students protesting high tuition fees, and people protesting the enforced pasteurization of milk. The local Canadian Union of Public Employees also joined in with their banners, though they had no discernible demands. It seemed as if everyone who was young or unemployed or angry or some mysterious combination of any of the above felt this was the place to be—at least during the day. Some of them went home to their warm houses at night. But they were back in the morning. Getting a warm night's sleep, however, did not produce a more coherent or unified message, nor any concrete demands, much less any suggestion as to how the demands might be met. It seemed as if their message was, "We're mad as hell and we're not going to take it anymore", but couldn't articulate what exactly they were mad as hell about. It looks as if they were simply angry at the fact that people as a whole were greedy, and some people—about 1% of the human race—were able to do something about it. This observation is correct, but occupying public space more or less indefinitely will not change it.

I am not here advocating defeatism or suggesting that the oppressed masses should love their chains. But I am advocating realism, and the recognition that we live in a fallen world. The misery caused to the 99% by the 1% in America feeds directly off the stupidity of the American banking system and the mess they made in the economy. This situation is new (especially for Americans), but the fact that the rich occupy (no pun intended) a privileged place in the world is hardly front-page news. In this fallen world, the rich have always oppressed the poor, and the strong have always oppressed the weak. More powerful races and tribes have often beaten up on weaker races and tribes, and nations with better armaments have usually always made life difficult for their weaker neighbours. (Ask the Scottish, the Welsh or the Irish.) This is not wonderful, and especially not wonderful for the poor, the weak and the less well armed, but it should not be unexpected, given the fallen state of the human heart. One can say to the rich and powerful, "Please do not oppress me", and if their fallen hearts have been touched by the grace of Christ, they may indeed decide not to oppress. As Christ said, with God all things are possible, and sometimes the camel does indeed go through the eye of the needle. But not often. That is why it is ultimately useless for the protesters to protest what is, after all, the universal human condition. If one says, "I will not leave my tent here on Wall Street until the rich decide not to oppress the poor", one will be there for a long time. The truth is that Man is greedy—and also angry, lustful, devious and lazy. A quick look at the world news will confirm this, as will a quick internal examination of conscience. This cannot be altered by hunkering down self-

righteously on Wall Street. It might be altered somewhat by hunkering down prayerfully in church.

This then is my first observation about the Occupy Movement—that what it is protesting is simply the fallenness of the human race. It is not wrong to protest this, though it is mostly futile. But there are, I suggest, two things that are wrong with the movement.

First of all, the Occupy Movement divides the human race into Them and Us, the 99% and the 1%, the Oppressors and the Oppressed. This leads to a tremendous sense of self-righteousness for the 99%. This defiant sense of self-righteousness is dangerous spiritually, because those protesting the fallenness of the human race are not less fallen than anyone else. Whether the sin is greed or lust or anger or deviousness or laziness, we are all a part of the 100% of those afflicted by sin. The division of the world into two very unequal parts promotes a fanciful view of humanity. It says, “You 1% are evil, and I, as part of the 99%, am pure”. It would be more accurate to say, “We are all 100% of us equally fallen, but you are fallen in such a way as to make life economically difficult for me”, but that does not produce a Pharisaical warm glow. Avoiding a dichotomy which places us among the unfallen and pure is the safer path. The world will one day indeed be divided into a true dichotomy of sheep and goats, but that time is not yet, and none of us have the wisdom to make that division. Meanwhile, dividing the world into Us and Them contributes to our blindness and the inability to see our own sins.



Secondly, the Occupy Movement, entrenched in self-righteousness and committed to protest, misses the true opportunities that exist to change the world. We cannot persuade all the rich and powerful of the world to share their wealth and instead store up for themselves treasure in heaven. But we can help some of the other 99% by sharing what we have. It is just here that the dichotomy of 1% / 99% especially

betrays us. It is true that 1% of the world owns most of the world's wealth. It is also true that you and I in North America , as part of the 99%, have more wealth than others—such as the others in Africa, and even in your occupied home town. I could sit in my tent and protest the hard hearts of the 1%, or I could leave my tent and walk the streets and help those others of the 99% who have less than I. The Lord's words were not directed merely to the super rich. They were also directed to me. On the day when He divides the world into two groups, placing one group on His right hand and the other one on His left, He will not ask me, "What did you protest?" He will ask me, "What did you do?" Now is the time to make sure that I can offer Him an acceptable answer. It is not about the sins of the 1%, nor about their missed opportunities. It is about my sins, and the opportunities now given to me.

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