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## Occupy Wall Street: How We Surprised Ourselves

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At the top of the list of what the Occupy movement accomplished is, “We surprised ourselves.”

By “we,” I mean anyone residing on the left. To be on the left is to be intimate with defeat. Sometimes defeat is heroic, as with the Spanish Civil War. Sometimes it’s betrayal, as with the fate of the Russian Revolution. Defeat can be bewildering, as in, “What happened to that moment of Feb. 15, 2003?” Often it’s just depressing, like the delirious 60s that gave way to the tortuous 80s.

Occupy, in contrast, was a rocket ship of giddiness for nearly two months. Liberals squirmed, reluctant to criticize or embrace it. Conservatives yelled from rocking chairs that the dirty hippies needed a job. Every police attack gave Occupy strength. A bewildered media tried to grasp how a leaderless movement could shake the halls of power.

It helped that there were no expectations for success. There were no pollsters tut-tutting that the 99% versus 1% was divisive. No professional organizers corralling the herd into a single message. No revolutionaries hectoring that only the scientific terms proletariat and bourgeoisie would do. No Democrats demanding that lofty aspirations be pulverized into middle-of-the-road mush.

Occupy rejected all the rules and injected its own style of class politics into the body politic. Much of the center clambered aboard the 99% train. They got the idea because they had been getting the shaft.

Soon it was Occupy everything – the banks, the homes, the hood, the workplace, universities, cinema, food, healthcare, gender, music, philosophy. Nothing, even abstractions, seemed out of our reach to recreate after checking centuries of capitalist baggage at the door. Iconic images and deeds piled up: Shamar Thomas facing down a phalanx of cops, armed with nothing but fatigues and lungs; a pepper-sprayed but defiant Dorli Rainey; the silhouette of occupiers triumphant at the shut-down Port of Oakland.

The small things made the biggest difference. Occupy changed how we felt. We were the motor of history, not just its victims. The mic check gave us a participatory society, not just one of spectacle. We could have communities where food, shelter and care were available to all comers. We had a platform to share individual grievances and hopes and find unity. The homeless had names and stories. Lost souls found a purpose. The dispossessed were abundant in human kindness and connections.

Now, we know how the story developed. As much as the police repression smashed occupations and the mainstream media returned to snarky indifference, the Occupy movement fell into bad habits. Occupy made us want to be better selves, but pettiness, paranoia and selfishness stewed beneath. Donated money and equipment was stolen. Fights broke out over control of Facebook and Twitter accounts. Shady outsiders set up a national convention unaccountable to the movement. One power-hungry individual tried to grab all the money flooding into the Occupied Wall Street Journal by seizing control of the Kickstarter campaign. One labor organizer in Los Angeles attempted but failed to hijack the entire movement there by setting up a rival occupation. Liberals succeeded in co-opting Occupy through their branded “99% movement.”

At this point, many wistfully recall the heady days of Occupy’s youth, while wrestling with the cynicism of a premature old age. We comfort ourselves with taxonomic analyses, naming every social movement that has evolved from Occupy: a changed national debate; a move-your-money campaign from banks to credit unions; a slew of new and old media projects; a robust home-foreclosure defense movement; a grassroots uprising against coal, natural gas and oil extraction; labor solidarity from coast to coast; a debt strike. Or we describe the anatomy of the movement: the slogan of “We are the 99%” that gave us a voice; the target of Wall Street that gave us a reason to be; the tactic of mic check that gave us a body; the strategy of occupation that gave us the people.

But none of this captures the heart and soul of Occupy. The sensation of surprising ourselves. That we could overcome juvenile bickering. That we could master history. That we could speak to, and not just of, the people. That we could let secret fantasies tumble from minds to mouths to a circle of people that breathed life into them and gave us a glimpse of a future we thought we would never see.

It would be easy to let acid disappointments etch away memories of dreams made real. But they were real if fleeting. And holding fast to the importance of that experience can propel us to new heights still.

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