

A Brief History of Occupy Wall Street and its Aftermath

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OUTLINE

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 - Economic Crisis * Social Media
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 - The biographically available “Graduate with No Future” led – with older mentors
 - A cross-class movement: radical youth, the excluded, organized labor
- **III. Why It Succeeded and Spread:** Networks vs. hierarchies; social media
- **IV. OWS Characteristics: horizontalism, “autonomism,” prefigurative politics and direct democracy**
 - The “chains of equivalence”
 - The end of ideology?
- **V. Achievements and Prospects: Changing the Subject**
 - Outrage: Putting inequality on the agenda
 - Hope: Convincing a new generation that change is possible

OWS had a pre-history and has a post-history too. It was planned by veteran activists.

It spread rapidly: in mid-October 2011 there were physical occupations of public space in 962 Cities in 85 Countries



I. The Unexpected Movement: Why It Took Off

“We were all expecting an occupation that would last maybe two days, and then the police would break it up. So we were not prepared for what was to come. We certainly didn’t expect to expand to other locations, either.” – OWS activist Matt Presto, age 25

- Economic crisis
- Social Media
- Real-time interaction at occupation itself
- Resonance: “The beauty of it was that there was total clarity on who the bad guys were. I think the fact that it was Occupy Wall Street, in Wall Street, versus Occupy the Post Office or Occupy the Senate or Occupy whatever, was critical. That’s what made it different. They captured what everybody knows on some kind of subconscious level about who’s really running the country and who’s in charge.”
- Stephen Lerner, 54 year old labor organizer

Global Inspiration

“It’s not like it just popped up out of nowhere. The Arab Spring, Tunisia, Egypt, and then moving to Wisconsin, was fundamental to this moment....A lot of these kids watched this happening. Wisconsin and Greece was all over the news, and the *indignados* in Spain, and even in London there were occupations. A lot of these kids were there at these things and folks from those countries were also part of OWS, folks from Spain and Greece have been part of the mix at times, so there’s a lot of cross-pollination”

II. Who Led, Who Followed: OWS' Generational/Demographic Profile

- A group of “biographically available” radical Millennials led OWS
 - highly educated, but underemployed
 - mostly white and middle class
 - slightly more male than female
- Older, experienced activists served as mentors – veterans of anti-globalization movement; DAN (cf Polletta), Bloombergville
- As it grew, it became more of a cross-class movement:
 - radical youth
 - the excluded/homeless
 - organized labor

“The Graduate with No Future”—

“It was the 26 to 29 or 30 crowd that was the strongest in terms of presence – people my age, who maybe had grad school or weren’t finding jobs, and had just blazed through college and a Master’s program and then were like, ‘What the hell is this?’”

-Sandy Nurse, 27

and biographically available:

“... young people bursting with energy, with plenty of time on their hands, every reason to be angry, and access to the entire history of radical thought”

- David Graeber, *The Democracy Project* (2013)

The age of the camps was dominated by 20s and early 30s, and then the retiree crowd . . . The demographic really felt like it was people who could drop everything and give themselves to this moment. . . . People who had been looking for something thought this was it. Kari Koch, 30

May 1, 2012 Survey Findings (N=725)

- 40% under age 30; another 20% age 31-39
- 76% had 4 years of college (39% had some post-college education)
- 62% White, 10% Latino, 8% African American, 5% Asian (the rest are mixed race or declined to state)
- 55% male
- 31% were union members (but only 13% of those < 30)
- 50% had household incomes \geq \$75K ; 35% \geq \$100K (by May 2012, the excluded were much less involved)



**LOST MY JOB,
FOUND AN
OCCUPATION.**

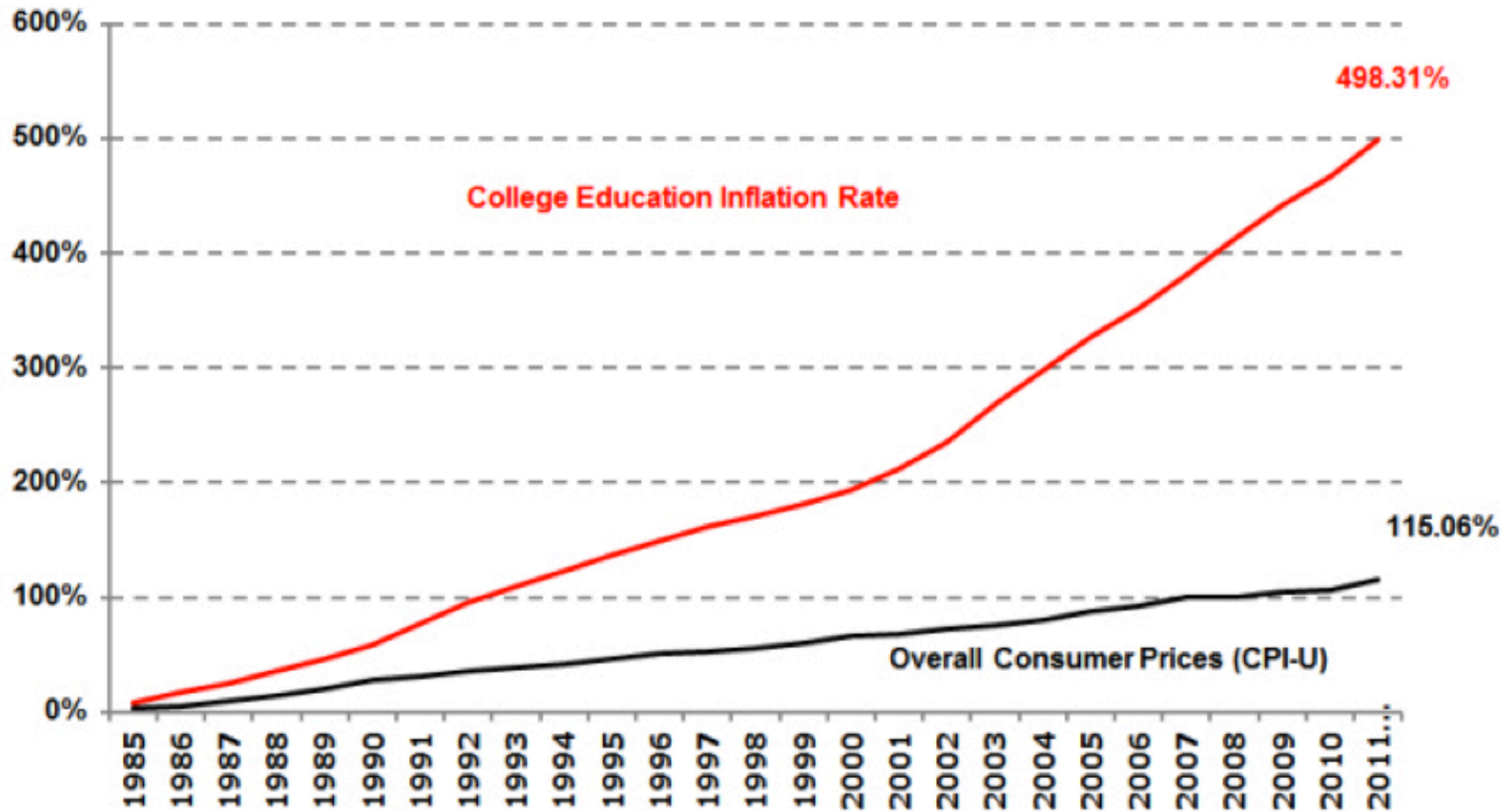
OCCUPYWALLST

UNDEREMPLOYMENT AMONG SURVEY RESPONDENTS

- Unemployment rate was close to that for NYC as a whole
- But 29% of all respondents, and 37% of those under 30, had been laid off or lost a job in the previous five years.
- Among respondents who were in the labor force (not including students), 24% worked less than 35 hours a week
- Among non-students under 30 years old, 33% worked less than 35 hours a week
- 4% of respondents were full-time students
- 6% were retirees



SOARING U.S. COLLEGE COSTS



GROWING STUDENT DEBT

- Two-thirds of all U.S. students who earned a bachelor's degree in 2011 had borrowed money to help pay for their education.
- Average debt in 2011 was \$26,600, up from \$18,650 in 2004.
- Student debt in the U.S. totals more than \$1 trillion, exceeding total U.S. credit card debt
- May 1, 2012 survey: 54% of respondents under 30 years old had student loans \geq \$1000



III. Why It Succeeded and Spread

Advantage (temporary?) of networks over hierarchies

Capacious organizational form – anyone could join

Maneuverability: NYPD

- Inexperience with social media
- Oscillation of response: non eviction, pepper spray and mass arrests, non eviction.

(OWS strategy helped too: “We made a decision that we would not empower anyone to negotiate with the police. It really frustrated the police that they didn’t have a point person to talk to.”)

More agile than labor—solidarity efforts around city/country

IV. OWS Characteristics: Horizontalism, Prefigurative Politics, Direct Democracy

- Horizontalism, consensus-based decision making
- Prefigurative Politics: Self-organized housing, food, health care, education, a newspaper, a library
- No “demands”: chains of equivalence (Laclau/Mouffe), non-sectarian anti-capitalism

HORIZONTALISM

“Horizontalism is the one non-negotiable element of Occupy Wall Street. Many people are not used to decision-making that is so direct, and it takes a lot of time. Part of the beauty of consensus is that it’s actually a very natural form of decision-making. Informally, we do it all the time. But people see voting as the only legitimate form, and it’s hard to undo that conditioning.”

--Matt Presto, age 25

“This horizontal structure is really exciting for people who had never experienced it before. There was this great feeling of autonomy, that this was something that we could make our own.”

PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS: Pragmatic and Utopian

- “I consider occupation a form of direct action, and I consider direct action to be far more effective than more traditional marches in the streets and everything. I consider direct action to be any kind of action that does not recognize the legitimacy of existing political structures and simply taking matters into our own hands. So instead of, for example, applying for a permit to convene in a space, we just take it.”
 - -- Matt Presto, age 25
- “The movement has to be about joy. If it becomes an angry movement, then we’re just left in the same old place we were before. . . . To do an occupation immediately means that you need to recreate the means of daily reproduction. You need food, shelter, bedding, medical care. Then you need all the other things that go with it. You have education, the library, psychological counseling, arts and culture.....”
 - –Arun Gupta, age 47



THE **OCCUPIED** WALL STREET JOURNAL



**NEW YORK
UNITES!
WEDNESDAY
OCT. 5**
Student Walkouts
Union Marches
occupywallst.org
nystudentunion.org

THE REVOLUTION BEGINS AT HOME

Wall Street Protests Enter Third Week

Wall Street is becoming an unrecognizable place. The once hallowed financial district is now a place of protest and civil disobedience. The protests have entered their third week, and the momentum is building. The protesters are demanding that the government take action on climate change, healthcare, and the economy. They are also demanding that the government take action on the rights of workers and the rights of the poor. The protests are a testament to the power of the people and the power of the press.



No Demands: “Chains Of Equivalence”

“Anyone could come into the movement and see their grievance as equivalent to everyone else’s. If it’s like, ‘I don’t have a job,’ ‘I have student debt,’ ‘I have these medical problems,’ ‘I’m thrown out of my house,’ ‘The hydrofracking that’s going on,’ ‘The BP oil spill’... It doesn’t matter which. It’s all about Wall Street. It’s the 1%. They have all the economic power, so they have all the political power... Hundreds of thousands of people were able to enter various occupations and feel that they were unified, that’s what it really did for people. For the first time, the left was reaching people through the gut!” -Arun Gupta

The End of Ideology?



As for ideology, I think there was no dominant ideology beyond -- this system is messed up. . . . I'd say the anti-capitalists (spanning the gamut) were the most well organized [in our local Occupy] and took quick action to mold occupy in that spirit.
Kari Koch, Occupy Portland

V. OWS' ACHIEVEMENTS & PROSPECTS

Scattered Local Political Concessions

- Attorney Generals' mortgage renegotiation deal
- Local "Responsible Banking" ordinances
- Some union contracts positively affected
- NYC paid sick days ordinance (and elsewhere)
- Oregon passes "Pay it forward, pay it back" legislation to deal with student debt
- NY, CA passes the millionaire's tax

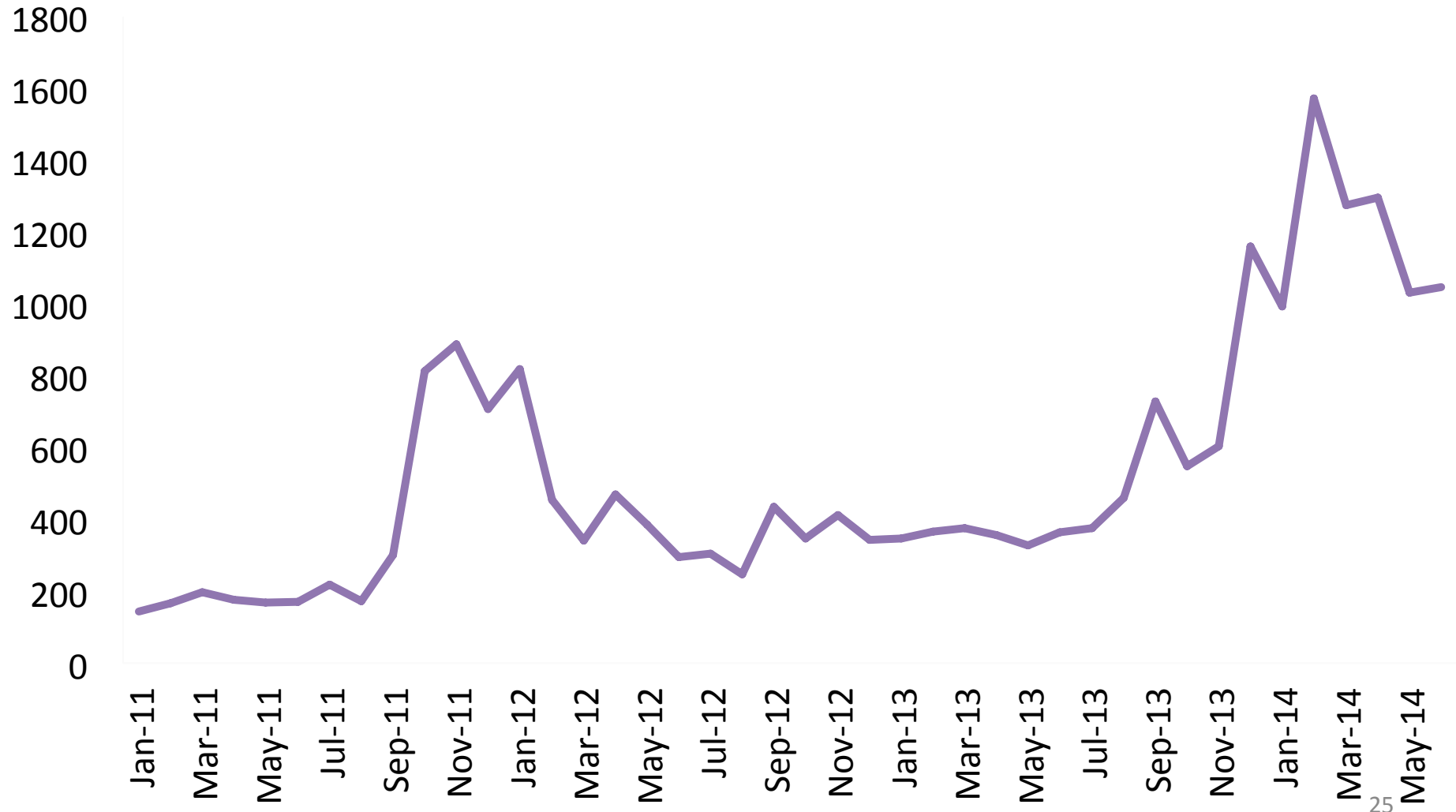
CHANGING THE SUBJECT

“Its success is in changing the national narrative, naming the huge elephant in the room, and that’s economic inequality, a political system that’s rigged to serve the few at the cost of the many... It’s not that the conservative narrative went away, but it lost a lot of credibility and stopped being the driving force.” - Cathy O’Neil, age 40

News Mentions of “Income Inequality”

(January 2011-June 2014)

Source: LexisNexis- all news (English), United States



CHANGING THE CLIMATE

Longer term efforts and effects

- Occupy Sandy; Rolling Jubilee; Strike Debt; Occupy Homes
- Election Successes (NYC, Boston, Seattle)
- Bolder local actions at city level – e.g., Richmond CA using eminent domain to purchase mortgages from underwater homeowners, reduce the principal and protect from foreclosure; LA suing Bank of America; cities refusing to implement Secure Communities.
- Upsurge in protest activity – e.g., Moral Mondays in North Carolina and now spreading throughout south
- Upsurge in protest against corporate education, testing
- Labor efforts: See Luce

CHANGING THE SUBJECT: NEW ACTIVISTS & LEADERS

“After a period of low social activity for forty years, we’re lacking a lot of infrastructure, capacity, leadership, skills, and it’s going to take waves to build that up. But thanks to Occupy, a lot of people are learning the right skills and are becoming really good leaders and good organizers.”

-- Jonathan Smucker, age 34, organizer and writer

“[Those with no previous activist history] would have never considered getting arrested like six weeks ago, for anything. I think they’ll take the idea that you can do that, that political tactics can involve breaking the law, they’ll take that into whatever else they do.”

--Suresh Naidu, age 34, economics professor

QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Realizing the 99%?

Here you had this group of ambitious, bold activists, that took a park, and none of us thought this was possible in New York City, and this exploded into a national movement that is internationally recognized. But I've said since Day One that unless this movement connects with working people or the working poor or the unemployed, really connects with devastated communities across the city, it's not going to pick up the traction that it needs."

-- Nastaran Mohit, 30, immigrant rights and labor organizer

One perspective that I took away from Occupy . . . made stark through that experience, is about the role of the houseless, those in poverty, and the working poor in leading the movement of social justice. We can't just talk about "the working class" [as in organized labor] and think that should define the front lines of our struggle. At Occupy, the houseless played a huge role . . . The Occupy encampment was one of the only places where I've experienced living and working side by side with houseless folks. So, it's clear that the working class is not a monolith, but in the world social justice, active leadership is generally taken by "workers" in the traditional sense. . . . or leadership from poor folks is not taken as seriously as from an indebted college student, for example. . . . Occupy brought the stratifications and striations of the lower classes into perspective and the camps, in some ways, bridged those strata.

-- Kari Koch, 30, Occupy Portland

CASE: Homeless Organizing

What the Occupy Wall Streeters are beginning to discover, and homeless people have known all along, is that most ordinary, biologically necessary activities are illegal when performed in American streets—not just peeing, but sitting, lying down, and sleeping.

-- Barbara Ehrenreich, Mother Jones, October 2011

The movement's relationship to poor, houseless or those in poverty is a service model. We feed people and publicly fund shelters, rather than supporting autonomous zones for houseless people to build communities.

--Occupy Portland activist

Occupy Madison

Ending Homelessness one house at a time Doing what the government won't do!



“It’s not just a shelter, it’s a commitment to a lifestyle. It’s a co-op mixed with Habitat for Humanity mixed with eco-village as the long-term goal.”

Brenda Konkell, tenants rights organizer, Madison WI

Scale, organization?

“We have to build institutions and structure that allow people to struggle over the long term, to actually use the power of Occupy Wall Street, which is this big dreamy thing, to feed those particular things.”

--Yotam Marom, age 25, teacher

“We have to come to terms with gravity, which is hard for a movement that aspired so high and somehow by magic succeeded. We live on earth! We have a movement, there’s no question about it. But it’s questionable whether it can become a mass movement.”

-- Shen Tong, age 40+, owner of a high-tech company

“We need to get ready for real changes. The social movements are ill equipped, as we currently exist, to claim power or institute participatory systems. Occupy was amazing, but in so many ways it was rough and demonstrated that vague concepts of social change and generic agreements on far fetched ideas are not enough to lead the change. And if we are not prepared to offer alternatives and participatory leadership, then we will not be able to sustain.”

-- Kari Koch, 30, Occupy Portland

“Now the genie’s out of the bottle. There’s this energy! I don’t know if they’ll be able to put it back in. Whether it’s under the Occupy brand or not, people are still going to be organizing. Nobody’s going away. There’s a lot of work to be done, and we’re going to continue tackling it, now that we’re all connected, on all these different fronts, in the student movement, in the labor movement, housing, community organizations.”

--Mary Clinton, age 25