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Structure and Practice at Occupy Wall Street

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was a two-month occupation of Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan in 2011. It spread throughout the country and recurred on subsequent dates. The financial district was the prime target, as a protest against the growing concentration of wealth at the top, but Zuccotti Park was the third choice of actual locations. Created in 1968 as a privately owned public space, it's a five-minute walk from the New York Stock Exchange. Author Marisa Holmes was one of the organizers. To those not involved, OWS appeared to be spontaneous, but in fact there was a long lead and lots of planning before hundreds of people arrived on September 17, 2011, to hunker down for the duration. As a media person, Holmes was able to draw on her copious notes and video recordings for this book. Her first-person account gives you the feeling of really being there.

Holmes situates OWS in a series of global protests, starting with the Battle of Seattle when the World Trade Organization met there in November 1999. Thousands participated in massive street protests over several days. Networks that formed during those disruptions flourished for a few years, and then receded. They were reinvigorated with the Arab Spring of 2011. She met one of the Egyptian protestors early in 2011, which persuaded her to go to Egypt in May to observe their actions firsthand and interview some of the participants. Back in NYC, she hooked up with a young man who had been in Spain during its May protests. Both drew on their experiences to shape the meetings that became OWS. Holmes emphasizes that the theme of all these occupations "was a rejection of representative democracy and an insistence on real or direct democracy in its place" (p. 17).

Holmes equates "real democracy" with horizontal decision-making through decentralized, autonomous groups. Holmes says this "structure
for communicating and sharing power” originated in southern Mexico in 1994 with the Zapatistas (p. 33). Horizontal democracy was used to set up various committees—often called working groups. Food and shelter were early needs. A library emerged as books arrived. The OWS Media Group started a week before the actual occupation, as did the Trainings Working Group, which taught civil disobedience and other protest techniques. Holmes was in the Media Working Group, which sought to spread the word to the larger public. She also was a facilitator.

OWS became known for its slogan: “We Are the 99%” (p. 39). Participants were well aware that wealth inequality had grown during their lifetimes as the benefits of economic growth accumulated to 1 percent at the top. One of their goals was to raise national consciousness about this concentration of wealth. That slogan may have been their most lasting legacy. The theme of wealth inequality attracted support from labor unions and progressive groups, which may be why “donations rolled in” until funds “ballooned to around a million dollars.” This in turn required a fiscal sponsor, a bank, and a way to make spending decisions democratically and accountably. Most people think more money makes things easier. Holmes says it was “our biggest problem” (pp. 163-164).

It wasn’t the only one. Race and sex were also problems, just as in the larger society. Holmes records that whites thought they were being inclusive but often practiced “a banal colorblind racism” (p. 111). This led to a People of Color Caucus, which was intentionally exclusive. Complaints of sexism didn’t lead to a women’s caucus, or a queer caucus, but did to a Safer Spaces Committee and a safer spaces tent for women only (including trans women). Those who engaged in sexual harassment were escorted from the park and told not to return. In effect, OWS had to create not only a form of law, but a form of law enforcement.

There were many other challenges as OWS tried to turn the park into “a city within a city that was largely autonomous from the surrounding Financial District” (pp. 145-6). Then, in the middle of the night of November 15, the New York Police Department moved in and threw them out. The National Lawyers Guild tried to use New York’s legal system to get them back in but did not succeed. Although Holmes only writes about New York City, by then there were occupations all over the country, and in other countries as well. Eventually all were evicted, but not at the same time. Two months after OWS’s removal I personally observed an eviction from a park in Washington, DC, which took place in the middle of the day with plenty of warning.

In NYC, OWS shifted to pop-up occupations at different places. Occupiers came back to Zuccotti on different anniversary dates for a few years. Holmes spends several chapters describing those occupations, even though they were very temporary. She is concerned that progressive groups like the Working Families Party (and others) tried to co-opt OWS toward their own ends. There was also power tripping and internecine warfare. Collective, horizontal decision-making had its limits: “Institutionalization, co-optation, repression, and counter-revolution were strong forces working against a true social revolution” (p. 316). In many of the countries where the Arab Spring blossomed, military dictatorships eventually took over. Utopia became dystopia.

Throughout the book one gets the sense that what occupiers most wanted from the experience was a sense of community. “Occupation gives us space to build relationships” (p. 151). They were reacting to the loss of in-person civic engagement that Robert Putnam wrote about in his 2000 book, Bowling Alone. The internet, which was just emerging when that book was written, has certainly contributed to the decrease of face-to-face interaction, replacing it with face-to-computer screens. Holmes’s chapters on the aftermath of 2011-12 provide many examples of how the internet has made life both harder and easier.
I visited OWS a few times during the primary occupation and subsequent commemorations, but I never spent the night. I took photos, observed, and listened. Despite that exposure, I found a lot of new words and new ideas in this book. The references for each chapter are at the end of each chapter. At the end of the book is an index and a glossary. Both needed to be longer. For example, when she first referred to “the squares” I had no idea what she meant and couldn’t find that term in either one. I finally figured it out, as I did with other terms and uses Holmes takes for granted. There are many new terms (e.g., “lulz”), and new uses of old terms that would have been quicker to look up rather than wait until their meaning sunk in (or didn’t in some cases). A list of abbreviations would have been helpful, as would a time line. You might not need any of these if you are part of the younger generation who grew up online, but they would certainly help us aging activists understand the younger ones.

Building a new society ain’t easy. Which is why OWS was just practice.

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