Five liberal tendencies that plagued Occupy

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The liberal tendencies of some Occupiers severely undermined the movement's strength; identifying them will make it easier to resist them next time.

In a country so devoid of genuinely left politics as the United States, it was little surprise that Occupy Wall Street (OWS), the most dynamic American social movement in decades, surged to the fore of national politics riding a robust wave of liberal euphoria. As I argue in *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street*, OWS never would have attained historic proportions without tapping into the pervasive despair that plagued left-liberal and progressive circles after Obama's failure to live up to the "savior of the left" hype that was so recklessly bestowed upon him in 2008.

But it was liberal support for a movement that a core organizing group of anarchists and anti-capitalist anti-authoritarians shifted in an autonomous, directly democratic, non-electoral, class struggle, direct-action-oriented direction that made OWS popular, radical, and radicalizing. Without the anarchists it would have been ineffectual; without the liberals it would have been irrelevant. By carving out space for liberals and progressives to engage with anarchist praxis, OWS made a profound contribution to the development of anti-authoritarianism in the USA and beyond.

However, some of the most debilitating obstacles that we encountered stemmed from a number of liberal tendencies infecting a predominantly radical anti-capitalist organizing network. No, I'm not talking about attempts to turn Occupy into a voter-registration drive for the Democratic Party, or run "Occupy candidates" in local elections, or morph the movement into a new, hip political party that "breaks all the rules." No, those tendencies were always peripheral and idiosyncratic within OWS, and they were cloaked in the stench of putrefying electoralism.

Instead, I'm referring to unacknowledged, internalized perspectives and orientations infected with liberalism through their constant exposure to the individualistic, capitalist climate we endure in this country. I hope that by examining a handful of them (space and time do not permit a complete list), we can better resist them next time.

1. Liberal Libertarianism

What do you get when an activist partially digests a skewed counter-cultural anti-authoritarianism without having rid themselves of their lingering liberalism? That's right, a Liberal Libertarian. The Liberal Libertarian is the person who has learned enough about the potentially heinous repercussions of coercion and exclusion to renounce authoritarian organizing structures, but takes this in such an individualistic direction that they also often dismiss even directly democratic structures and reject collective attempts to prevent boisterous individuals from completely disrupting assemblies, meetings, actions or any other collective endeavor.

If, at a large assembly of 200 people, one person is screaming out of turn about an unrelated topic and won't take several offers from nearby people to step aside and discuss the issue; and this happens often enough for it to get to the point where most people would rather leave the movement than endure such excruciating experiences; and it's known that there are myriad infiltrators and provocateurs, sent by both state and capital, among us, then most people would agree that a plan would have to be put in place to prevent one person from shutting down the work of hundreds. Not the Liberal Libertarian.

The Liberal Libertarian would rather see our collective efforts grind to a screeching halt than see one person "silenced" for any reason under any context. The Liberal Libertarian doesn't actually care about collective power; they simply seek individual self-realization. Take this quote from Charles Eisenstein, author of *Sacred Economics*, in a trailer for the film *Occupy Love*: "this movement isn't about the 99% defeating or toppling the 1%. You know the next chapter of that story: which is that the 99% create a new 1%. That's not what it's about." Instead of expropriating a ruling class whose obscene wealth is drenched in the blood of millions, the Liberal Libertarian just wants to multiply interpersonal emotional exchanges.

When that outlook begins to infect organizing spaces, the result can be disastrous unless we have procedures and decision-making methods that can withstand Liberal Libertarianism's corrosive effects.

2. Outcome Neutrality

Liberal Libertarianism is reactionary because it isn't really about transforming the underlying economic or political system. Instead, it aims to enact a more authentic rendition of popular liberal principles. So while the liberals of the Democratic Party don't really value freedom of speech, the Liberal Libertarians (in conjunction with left-liberals and progressives) often see nothing more important than creating free speech zones where traditional liberal values can be fully upheld.

This is often extended even to those who verbally derail the movement and in the case of Occupy Toronto even to the presence of Nazis. At an event in Toronto, a group of Occupy organizers explained how their encampment was split in half over whether to allow Nazis their "right to free speech" within Occupy.

But to make matters worse, this "free speech" liberal prefigurative politics infects outlooks on organizing and political struggle to the point where some activists consider it oppressive to promote a tactical direction or political agenda. Outcome Neutrality is the result. It dictates that any political direction that any group or community decides to take is essentially as worthwhile as any other. It incorporates a libertarian emphasis on autonomy and decentralization, but drains left libertarianism of its proscriptive content and reduces it to *laissez faire* (in the literal sense) left politics.

I once heard a guy at OWS with generally pretty decent politics say that he wanted to create an anti-capitalist, anarchist society, but if another society wanted to have capitalism that would be fine with him since he didn't want to "impose" his "opinion" on others. Politics dissolved into atomized opinions floating in a "free speech" pond. As long as everyone has the opportunity to express themselves then whatever follows is just "democracy."

Certainly some of this is derived from the important realization that activists and organizers shouldn't tell other communities or groups what to do and instead should work in solidarity with others toward collective liberation. But while an anti-authoritarian outlook eschews hierarchical organizing strategies that confine collective aspirations to plans and blueprints designed by others, solidarity is not a blank check. Truly revolutionary solidarity strikes a balance between advocating for our anti-capitalist, anti-hierarchical politics and recognizing that these values and ideas must be freely adopted rather than mandated. Our politics must maintain an anti-authoritarian normativity if they are to avoid falling into the liberal impotence of Outcome Neutrality.

3. The Opiate of the Virtual Collective Commonwealth

The historic movements of 2011 were often reduced to technology. According to the *New York Times* and many others, the Egyptian Revolution "began on Facebook" with the actions of a Google marketing executive living abroad. Then "what bubbled up online spilled into the streets" and, so the narrative goes, SMS and Twitter made mass mobilizations possible. While I'm not trying to minimize the importance that innovations in communications technology have had on popular politics, from the printing press to the newspaper, from the telegraph to social media, society's fetishization of novelty inflates the importance of the latest social media technology at the expense of less innovative or headline-worthy, but far more crucial, components of struggle.

In other words, to say that Egyptian resistance "spilled into the streets" is to miss the fact that it had been living on the streets and in workplaces, homes, neighborhoods, mosques, and churches long before any Facebook group. Sure, social media was a catalyst in the Middle East and North Africa, Southern Europe, the USA and elsewhere, but in focusing so much attention on a single catalyst we not only ignore other catalysts, we obscure the necessity of having social and economic conditions to catalyze in the first place.

And those conditions are not generated in cyberspace. The excessive focus on social media distracts us from the lived dynamics of actually-existing spheres of human sociability, and it subtly promotes a liberal prescription for political problems: that political change is primarily about disseminating isolated ideas for atomized individuals to consider, rather than organizing collectively from the ground-up and compelling our oppressors to adhere to our power. As I've argued elsewhere, this is a variation of what I call "the idea as motor of history," or the notion that change follows from enough people having come into contact with a transformative idea isolated from context.

In Zuccotti Park in the fall of 2011 there were a lot of people who thought that if we could just articulate the Occupy idea to enough people they would just have to come around to it because of its sheer righteousness. But although the Occupy idea was broadcast far and wide, it was not enough on its own in the absence of strong and sustained connections with concrete struggles. Many liberals argue that all we need to do is come up the right ideas to "fix the world," but felled-forests-worth of visionary thought has been published for some time. We don't need another idea; we need the power to make it happen.

Although social media and 24-hour cable news rapidly accelerated the dissemination of Occupy across the country and around the world, it catapulted OWS into the spotlight before it had accomplished the organizing that needs to happen initially in order to develop the capacity to be able to incorporate thousands of new people. We were constantly playing catch-up and before we knew it the meteoric rise of OWS was followed by a correspondingly precipitous plunge once social media and cable news moved onto the next big thing.

In that way, OWS was like the pop sensation "Gangnam Style" by Korean singer Psy. For a brief window of time "everyone" sang the song and did the dance (often with an ironic detachment) just as they flooded parks and squares so they could tell their grandkids that they too had "Occupied." But anyone who was caught blasting "Gangnam Style" (or organizing an Occupy event) a few months after it went out of style was considered hopelessly passé. Therefore, one of our most pressing questions is how to build a solid social movement that can withstand the inevitable social media hangover.

4. The Lens of the Live-Action Opinion Poll

Mainstream media coverage of political demonstrations essentially considers them live-action opinion polls that show what a large segment of the population thinks about an issue. Their liberal assumption is that the demonstration's only value is its ability to communicate a public message to legislators. If the government accedes to the demonstration's demand(s) it will be deemed a success, and if not (which is almost always) it is deemed a failure.

While only the most staunchly electoral activists fail to focus on the demonstration's primary role as a catalyst for organizing society around a given issue, The Lens of the Live-Action Opinion Poll extends itself beyond its prominence in the media into how activists assess turnouts for their events. Because so many of our organizing efforts fail to generate mass support, the enormous turnouts that Occupy events generated lulled some into assessing crowds solely in terms of numbers without analyzing who the people were, what brought them out, and who they came with.

Successful movements don't organize disaggregated, de-contextualized individuals; they organize tenants, migrants, workers, prisoners, community members, etc. based on issues directly affecting them on a daily basis. That's part of the reason why the floods of people that surged into Occupy encampments flowed back out just as fast as they came in: the movement wasn't sufficiently anchored in their everyday struggles.

For some new-age liberal types this question didn't matter because through their post-identity politics they only saw a uniform sea of humanity. But this liberal discomfort with group identity manifested itself in a variety of ways such as opposition to the formation of People of Color Caucuses and organizing spaces, for example, and the promotion of a "melting pot" identity-less politics that saw everyone as "Occupiers."

While the liberal outlook would have people lose the particularities of their oppression in an artificial unity oriented around grievances of the movement's most well-off, a revolutionary outlook would have people find themselves through collective struggle and form links of solidarity across different planes of resistance.

5. The Myth of the Misinformed Officers of the 99%

John Steinbeck once wrote that "Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires." To that, I'd add, "Opposition to the police never took root in America because people see the police not as armed guardians of capital but as temporarily confused workers." Of course, just as Steinbeck overstated the failure of socialism in America, I overstate the lack of opposition to the police, especially in working class communities of color. Nevertheless, as compared to many other countries around the world, the United States has had a deficiency of socialism and anti-police sentiment.

If you attend a relatively mainstream left demonstration in Latin America or southern Europe, for example, it's quite common to hear anti-police epithets shouted and chanted without any audible dissent in the crowd. At an Occupy event, a cop could be brutalizing someone, yet shouting "fuck you" at the cop would inevitably attract the ire of several invariably white protesters.

A major reason for this is the misguided notion that the police are also part of the 99%. Space does not permit a full discussion of the limitations and problems with the 99% language, but

suffice it to say that "the 99%," just like "the working class," when used politically is a normative rather than a purely descriptive phrase. So although the police work and are paid less than the 1% their entire *raison d'être* is to oppose the political advancement of the working class. Modern police forces emerged from Southern slave patrols and the need to repress labor disputes.

We need to eradicate the liberal notion that if we articulate our grievances precisely enough the police won't bash our heads in. While in a few isolated cases some police officers might realize the reactionary nature of their profession and quit, they'd only be replaced by other working class people looking for some job security and authority, and their resignation wouldn't address the structural nature of law enforcement as the bodyguard of the ruling class. You can't reason with class rule.

Occupy didn't come anywhere near threatening the ruling class and engaged in non-violent tactics but was, nevertheless, faced with systematic brutality. Imagine what the police would do if we managed to generate a powerful anti-systemic movement. The Black Panthers certainly found out.

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When left to fester, these liberal tendencies leave us with activists who eschew collective political aspirations in favor of detached personal opinions, spend an inordinate amount of time trying to disseminate those opinions online while ignoring interpersonal social relations, block attempts to forge a united struggle and resist disrupters and infiltrators, ignore the particularities of oppression, and defend the police even when they're assaulting peaceful demonstrators. Those exposed to these influences oppose building power in the name of a postmodern opposition to hegemony while simultaneously drain struggles of their ability and willingness to withstand repression.

Instead, we need to construct groups, movements, and projects that nourish person-to-person bonds in neighborhoods, apartment buildings, workplaces, and communities without getting lost in how many followers a group's Twitter account has. We need to be vigilant against the attempts of isolated people to impose their priorities on everyone else in the name of their individuality (after all, the beauty of *free association* implies the option of *free disassociation*) and use organizing structures that are durable and designed to withstand interference.

And while recognizing the importance of humility and introspection every step of the way, we mustn't be afraid to make our case for the reconstruction of society. To see calls for a world devoid of hunger and hatred as mere "opinions" on par with capitalist appeals to augment inequality and incarceration is to fall into the liberal trap of ceding contestations of power to our enemies. Successful struggle requires an anti-authoritarian normativity that rejects the bizarre liberal notion that the perspectives of oppressors are as worthwhile as those of the oppressed.

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