

# Occupy Wall Street's Battle against American-Style Authoritarianism

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Only a humanity to whom death has become as indifferent as its members, that has itself died, can inflict it administratively on innumerable people.

— Theodor Adorno

The Occupy Wall Street movement is raising new questions about an emerging form of authoritarianism in the United States, one that threatens the collective survival of vast numbers of people, not through overt physical injury or worse but through an aggressive assault on social provisions that millions of Americans depend on. For those pondering the meaning of the pedagogical and political challenges being addressed by the protesters, it might be wise to revisit a classic essay by Theodor Adorno titled “Education After Auschwitz,” in which he tries to grapple with the relationship between education and morality in light of the horrors of perpetrated in the name of authoritarianism and its industrialization of death (Adorno 1998).

## Adorno vs. Authoritarianism

Adorno's essay, first published in 1967, asserted that the demands and questions raised by Auschwitz had barely penetrated the consciousness of people's minds such that the conditions that made it possible continued, as he put it, “largely unchanged.” Mindful that the societal pressures that produced the Holocaust had far from receded in post-war Germany and that under such circumstances this act of barbarism could easily be repeated in the future, Adorno (1998) argued that “the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds” must be made visible (p. 192). For Adorno, the need for a general public to come to grips with the challenges arising from the reality of Auschwitz was both a political question and a crucial educational consideration. Realizing that education before and after Auschwitz in Germany was separated by an unbridgeable chasm, Adorno wanted to invoke the promise of education through the moral and political imperative of never allowing the genocide witnessed at Auschwitz to be repeated. For such a goal to become meaningful and realizable, Adorno contended that education had to be addressed as both an emancipatory promise and a democratic project. Adorno urged educators to teach students how to be critical so they could learn to resist those ideologies, needs, social relations, and discourses that lead back to a politics where authority is simply obeyed and the totally administered society reproduces itself through a mixture of state force and orchestrated consensus.

Adorno keenly understood that education is at the center of any viable notion of democratic politics and that such education takes place in a variety of spheres both within and outside of schools. Freedom means being able to think critically and act courageously, even when confronted with the limits of one's knowledge. Without such thinking, critical debate and dialogue degenerates into slogans, while politics, disassociated from the search for justice, becomes a power grab or simply hackneyed. What is partly evident in the Occupy Wall Street movement is not just a cry of collective indignation over economic and social injustice that pose threats to human kind, but a

critical expression of how young people and others can use new technologies, social formations and forms of civil disobedience to reactivate both the collective imagination and develop a new language for addressing the interrelated modes of domination that have been poisoning democratic politics since the 1970s. At the same time, the movement is using the dominant media to focus on injustices through a theoretical and political lens that counters the legitimation of casino capitalism in the major cultural apparatuses. The rationality, values and power relations that inform hyper-capitalism are now recognized as a new and dangerous mode of authoritarianism.

I am certainly not equating the genocidal acts that took place in Nazi Germany with the increasingly anti-democratic tendencies evident in U.S. foreign and domestic policies; but I do believe that Adorno's essay offers some important theoretical insights about how to imagine a broader understanding of politics as a form of public pedagogy. Its acute analysis of authoritarianism no doubt continues to resonate today, especially in light of the emergence of anti-democratic forces in American society that propagate massive human suffering, a disproportionate distribution of wealth and income, individual and collective despair, a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness, and multiple forms of economic, political, and racial exclusion. Adorno's essay raises fundamental questions about how acts of inhumanity are inextricably connected to the pedagogical practices that produce formative cultures that legitimate a culture of cruelty, a punishing state, the militarization of everyday life and an assault on the welfare state, while transforming government into an adjunct of corporate power.

Adorno insisted that crimes against humanity by authoritarian regimes should not be reduced to the behavior of a few individuals, but instead be understood as speaking in profound ways to the role of the state in propagating such abuses and the mechanisms employed in the realm of culture that attempt to silence the public in the face of horrible acts. Adorno pointed to the dire need to issue a public challenge that would name such acts as moral crimes against humankind and translate that moral indignation into effective pedagogical and political practices throughout society so that such events would never happen again. Adorno's plea for education as a moral and political force is just as relevant today, given the authoritarian practices used by the Bush and Obama administrations in conjunction with powerful corporations and financial institutions. The political and economic forces fueling such anti-democratic practices – whether they are unlawful wars, systemic torture, practiced indifference to chronic poverty, persistent racism, a war on youth and immigrants, massive economic inequality or the killing of innocent civilians by drone attacks – are always mediated by widespread educational forces and a host of anti-public intellectuals, institutions, and cultural minions. Just as Adorno asserted following the revelations about Auschwitz after World War II, effective resistance to such authoritarian acts cannot take place without a degree of knowledge and self-reflection about how to name these acts and their accomplices and transform moral outrage into concrete attempts to prevent such human violations from unfolding in the first place.

## **Anti-Authoritarianism in #OccupyWallStreet**

Critics of authoritarianism like Adorno in many ways offer insight into the concerns and collective opposition being raised by young people and others through the Occupy Wall Street protests taking place all over the United States and in many other parts of the globe. What we see happening in this surge of collective resistance is an attempt to make visible the ideologies, values, social relations and relations of power that fuel a toxic form of casino capitalism, one that assumes it owes no accountability to the American public and legitimates itself through an appeal to the self-evident and the discourse of common sense. Injustices of various stripes are much more powerful when they are normalized or hide behind the shadow of official power. The collective uproar we see among young people and others is in part an attempt to make dominant power visible and accountable, while doing so through new forms of solidarity that have been often marginalized, fractured, pathologized or punished. In fact, within a very short time, the Occupy Wall Street protesters have changed the national conversation from the Republican right-wing discourse about deficit reduction and taxing the poor to important issues that range from poverty and joblessness to corporate corruption. They have all but usurped dominant media and cultural apparatuses that have been enormously successful in normalizing the ideology, values, and social practices of market fundamentalism for a number of decades. But most importantly, as Jonathan Schell (2011) has argued, they have unleashed “a new spirit of action,” an expression of outrage fueled less by policy demands than by a cry of collective moral and political indignation whose message is “Enough!” to a corrupt political, economic and media establishment that is hijacking the world's wealth for itself, immiserating ordinary people, sabotaging the rule of law, waging interminable savage

and futile wars, plundering the world's finite resources, lying about all this to the public and threatening Earth's life forms into the bargain."

The spirit of action that informs the current protest movement is not about providing recipes or tossing around facile slogans – it is about using new pedagogical tools, practices and social relations to educate the rest of the American public about the dangers of casino capitalism as a new form of authoritarianism. The Occupy Wall Street protests offer a new language of critique and hope, while inventing a mode of politics in which the claims to justice, morality and social responsibility prevail. In this first and important stage of the movement, young people and others are making visible how organized violence works through a criminal culture and set of dominating power relations; they are expressing a sense of not just individual but collective outrage that is as moral as it is concretely utopian. "Imagine the unimaginable" is more than an empty slogan; it is a call for reactivating the potential of a radical imagination, one that rejects the tawdry dream worlds of a privatized, deregulated and commodified society. The protesters are making a claim for a sense of collective agency in which their voices must be heard as part of a concerted effort to shape the future that they will inherit. This effort is part of what the philosopher Bernard E. Harcourt (2011) has called a social movement in search of a new form of politics, one that not only rejects the inadequacy of existing laws and institutions but also offers resistance "to the very way in which we are governed: it resists the structure of partisan politics, the demand for policy reforms, the call for party identification, and the very ideologies that dominated the post-war period." What young people and other protesters are making visible is that the frontal assault being waged by casino capitalism against social protections, economic justice, immigrants, unions, worker rights, public servants, democratic public spheres, the notion of the common good and human dignity itself represents not only an attack on existing and future generations of young people but also an alarming act of barbarism and attack on democratic modes of governance and sovereignty.

Democracy is always an unfinished project. Yet, in its current state in America, it appears to be in terminal decay. If a democratic struggle is to be successfully mobilized against the bankers, hedge fund managers, religious extremists and other members of the ruling and corporate elite, then a critical and democratic formative culture must be given life through the production of new ways of thinking and speaking, new social organizations and a new set of institutions that collectively stake a claim to democracy, if not hope itself. What is promising about the Occupy Wall Street protests is that young people and older Americans are delineating the contours, values, sensibilities and hidden politics of the mode of authoritarianism that now shapes the commanding institutions of power and everyday relations of the 99 percent, who are increasingly viewed as excess, disposable and unworthy of living a life of dignity, shared responsibility and hope. This task of delineation is not easy: the conditions of domination are layered, complex and deeply flexible. Yet while the forms of oppression are diverse, there is a promising tendency within the Occupy Wall Street movement to refocus these diverse struggles as part of a larger movement for social transformation. And there is more. Such protests also embody the desire for new forms of collective struggle and modes of solidarity built around social and shared, rather than individualized and competitive, values.

History is not without ample examples of how new modes of resistance can develop, ranging from traditional acts of civil disobedience such as sit-down strikes and teach-in campaigns to voter registration drives and the development of alternative modes of communication. But the Occupy Wall Street protesters, while capable of using traditional and historically informed acts of resistance, are in large part rejecting old ideological and political models. They are not calling for reform but for a massive rethinking and restructuring of the very meaning of politics – one that will be not only against a casino capitalism, which through the chimera of free markets rewards the financial and political elites at great social and environmental costs but also for a restructuring of the notion of governance, rule of law, power relations and the meaning of democratic participation. The current protests make clear that this is not – indeed, cannot be – only a short-term project for reform, but a political and moral movement that needs to intensify, accompanied by the reclaiming of public spaces, the use of digital technologies, the development of public spheres, new modes of education and the safeguarding of places where democratic expression, new identities and collective hope can be nurtured and mobilized. At the same time, there are some crucial short-term demands that are worth pursuing, such as ending student debt, funding programs to eradicate the scourge of 22 percent of American children who live in poverty, developing much needed infrastructure, offering mortgage relief for the 50 million living with the "nightmare of foreclosures," increasing taxes on the wealthy and corporations, and putting into place a public works program for the 25 million unable to find jobs (Scheer 2011). These calls for change represent only a handful of the policy reforms that will surely continue to be articulated as part of a larger strategy of long-term structural change and political transformation.

## Defending the Public Good

It is important to recognize that what young people and many others are now doing is making a claim for a democratically informed politics that embraces the public good, economic justice and social responsibility. Central to this struggle is the need to affirm the social in governing, while defining freedom not simply through the pursuit of individual needs and the affirmation of self-interests but also as part of a social contract that couples individual and political rights with social rights. Political and individual freedoms are meaningless unless people are free from hunger, poverty, needless suffering and other material deprivations that undercut any viable possibility of dignity, agency and justice. The capacity for individual and political freedom has to take a detour through the social, which provides the economic foundation, public infrastructures and social supports for making private joys possible and individual dreams realizable. The public good is the basis for any real understanding of freedom, at least one that believes in shared responsibilities, liberty, equality and justice. As Zygmunt Bauman (2011) points out, political rights lose their viability without social rights. He writes:

Little or no prospect of rescue from individual indolence or impotence can be expected to arrive from a political state that is not, and refuses to be, a social state. Without social rights for all, a large and in all probability growing number of people will find their political rights of little use and unworthy of their attention. If political rights are necessary to set social rights in place, social rights are indispensable to make political rights 'real' and keep them in operation. The two rights need each other for their survival; that survival can only be their joint achievement. (p. 14)

The Occupy Wall Street protests are rejecting a notion of society that embraces a definition of agency in which people are viewed only as commodities, bound together in a Darwinian nightmare by the logic of greed, unchecked individualism and a disdain for democratic values (Lakoff 2011). The old idea of democracy in which the few govern the many through the power of capital and ritualized elections is being replaced with a new understanding of democracy and politics in which power and resources are shared and economic justice and democratic values work in the interest of the common well-being and social responsibility.

The Occupy Wall Street protesters reject the propaganda they have been relentlessly fed by a market-driven culture: the notion that markets should take priority over governments, that market values are the best means for ordering society and satisfying human needs, that material interests are more important than social needs, and that self-interest is the driving force of freedom and the organizing principle of society. Professor Fred Jameson once said, and I am paraphrasing here, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. That no longer seems true. The cracks in the capitalist edifice of greed and unchecked power have finally split open, and while there is no guarantee that new modes of social transformation will take place, there is a vibrant collective energy on the horizon that at least makes such a possibility imaginable once again.

In the spirit of Adorno's call after Auschwitz for a politics that embraces education as both an emancipatory promise and a democratic project, the Occupy Wall Street protesters are making clear that the values and practices of disposability and social death promoted by casino capitalism have replaced important elements of a democratic polity with a culture of violence in which democracy has become a pathology and informed appeals to morality and justice a cruel joke. They are arguing forcefully and rightly with their bodies and through the new social media that neoliberal economics and its cruel forms of politics and public pedagogy, amply circulated in various platforms of the dominant media and in higher education, have become a register of how difficult it is for American society to make any claim on the promise of a democracy to come. As the realm of democratic politics shrinks and is turned over to market forces, social bonds crumble and any representation of communal cohesion is treated with disdain. As the realm of the social disappears, public values and any consideration of the common good are erased from politics, while the social state and responsible modes of governing are replaced by a corporate-controlled punishing state and a winner-take-all notion of social relations. Within this form of casino capitalism, social problems are placed entirely on the shoulders of individuals just as the forces of privatization, deregulation, and commodification weaken public institutions and undermine the web of human bonds and modes of solidarity that provide the foundations for a democratic politics and a political and economic democracy. Younger and older Americans are now saying "we have had enough," and their spirit of resistance is as educational as it is political.

At this same moment, young people all over the world are developing a new language of ethics, community and democracy in order to imagine a type of society and global world other than the one that is currently on display. It is imperative for intellectuals, educators, social workers, organized laborers, artists and other cultural workers to

join with them in order to put the question of radical democracy, solidarity and economic and racial justice on the political agenda. This suggests we need to forego the fractured single-issue politics of the past by refusing to argue for isolated agendas. It suggests developing a social movement that rejects small enclaves in favor of a broader social movement that can address how the current configuration of neoliberal capitalism and other anti-democratic modes of authoritarianism work as part of a larger totality. Such a globalized movement must offer to all people the tools of a politics that embraces both a radical imagination and a radical democracy. This means making evident not only how casino capitalism intensifies the pathologies of racism, student debt, war, inequality, sexism, xenophobia, poverty, unemployment and violence, but also how we might take up the challenge of developing a politics and pedagogy that can serve and actualize a democratic notion of the social – that is, how we might understand and collectively organize for a politics whose hope lies with defending the shared values, spaces and public spheres that enable an emergent radical democracy.

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