

The Occupy Wall Street March

September 26, 2011

The following is a report from the Occupy Wall Street protest march from which I am now on the train returning home.

WHEN I ARRIVED AT ZUCCOTTI PARK at approximately 12:15, the march which was just getting under way initially appeared to be small, marginal, and unimportant. By describing it in this way, I do not mean to denigrate it. After all, I have spent a good part of my life attending small, marginal, and almost certainly unimportant events—namely concerts by obscure ensembles performing obscure "new" music, whatever that means these days. Of course, in these days of internet connectedness, events which attract only a few local participants can attract a national, or even world-wide audience of thousands. A concert in New York of the music of Lamonte Young or Milton Babbitt will almost certainly seem, and almost certainly is, marginal, by any reasonable definition of the term. But invariably, scattered around the world there are a few pockets of admirers who will amplify the event into something which is, at least in their minds, of great importance. The same goes for #occupywallstreet. Numerous "tweets," blog postings, comments to blogs, reports of solidarity marches, busses arriving from Madison, St. Louis, etc. gave the impression that this event had the potential to attract large or at least respectable numbers.

The fact is that it did not. The original group, and I made several efforts to check this, was almost certainly fewer than 1,000, which is to say that it filled about a half the length of a New York city block. Those who were at the Feb 15, 2003 demonstration will remember that the throng extended the entire length of 5th Avenue from 42nd St. to 96th, across to and back down again on Second, across to the United Nations and then back up again to 96th. That makes for something like 120 blocks or more crammed full with people—a crowd estimated at a million. This was almost certainly a factor of 500 smaller—an indication of where this movement needs to go to get the attention of Lloyd Blankfein, Jamie Dimon, and the other felons who are now our de facto rulers. More on that later.

When I describe the march as marginal, those familiar with protests of this general sort will know what I mean. Doug Henwood's report of his visit to Zuccotti Park (a.k.a. Liberty Plaza) nicely captured a static version of the basic outlines of the scene pretty well: a throng of college or post-college radicals, whatever that means these days (not much, in my experience), with a few moth-eaten contingents from the various Marxist sects still carrying the flag based on some more or less idiosyncratic passage in the *Grundrisse*, a few obvious psychotics best avoided, a few artsy lower east side types, though by now surely displaced to the outer boroughs. Of course, there were lots more: a few vaguely neurotic looking, aging academics like myself, a disarmingly pretty Asian girl with purple hair and her boyfriend, a few hip-hop enthusiasts, likely attracted by rapper Lupe Fiasco, who had endorsed the march. In any case, this is what we had to work with. And as Donald Rumsfeld famously remarked, you protest with the marchers you have, not those you wish you had. And so I joined in somewhat skeptically though I was to become less so for several reasons which I'll describe in the following, along with some interspersed commentary and reflections.

First, as the march got close to its ultimate destination of Union Square, it seemed to pick up steam, its numbers increasing, the chants, while still mostly pedestrian, becoming more coherent and less obvious recyclings of decades old slogans which have become by now almost irrelevant. Most significantly, as the march progressed it would be infused with a lot more passion and legitimate anger. On this latter point, it needs to be observed that a double digit unemployment rate means that being a college student or a recent grad is likely to be suffused with something in

between misery, dread, and stark terror of the future which likely awaits. And while this is becoming increasingly apparent to me among the students I teach, it was still more visible in the faces of more than a few of the protestors. This is not just the long-term future of carbon-induced planetary apocalypse which they will live to see—and which I, thankfully, will not. It is the immediate and midterm future of un- or at best under- employment at wages and working conditions reflecting the tight, employer-centric labor market. That means eking out a living through dead end internships; it means that temporary office work will become the norm for all but a few of the chosen (read Ivy League) grads in the appropriate majors having the right connections. And while for a long time the Nietzschean devil-take-the-hindmost ethos of college students was unforgiving; there was a common view that those unable to compete in the new economy had only themselves to blame. Now it is becoming apparent that the game is being played with a stacked deck. For the first time in a long time those in their teens and twenties have an immediate personal stake in that which they are protesting, and while the still dreadful legacy of sociology departments, "non hierarchical" discourse, diversity training, and "anti-racism" remains evident in the rhetoric, slowly the smothering layer of academic abstraction and language games seems to be lifting from protest culture and what is revealed is a deep, festering, and altogether righteous anger—what the Arabic speakers refer to by the word *hamas*.

Second, it became increasingly clear that more than a few of the participants were willing to push the envelope of the protest in the direction of outright confrontation, and, more importantly, this seemed both justifiable and appropriate under the circumstances. I use these words advisedly, doing so based on the recognition that demonstrations have become choreographed rituals which have long since lost the capacity to demonstrate anything meaningful. For when I say choreographed it needs to be understood that those doing the choreographing are the police, under orders from higher ups who are well schooled in crowd management techniques designed to marginalize and blunt the effectiveness of protest.

Under the Giuliani and Bloomberg regimes the cold precision of the choreography imposed by the NYPD on protests rivals that of the Ballet Russe under Balanchine: since the Feb 15th, 2003 and Republican National Convention protests, the authorities have made use of a highly effective combination of carrots and sticks. Quiet and non-violent protests—by which is meant non-disruptive under the terms set by the authorities—are tolerated. However, those stepping out of line, those who insist that protests do what they are supposed to do, i.e. disrupt business as usual and impose a cost on those primarily benefitting from its operation, are dealt with considerable harshness. THE RESPONSE OF DEMONSTRATORS over the past few years has been to capitulate to these imposed conditions and thereby, often under the rubric of "non-violence," allowing protests to become empty rituals. What is necessary now is that demonstrations reclaim their roots as demonstrations of power, specifically, their ability to disrupt. And while the disruptions effected today, in the larger scheme of things were quite minimal, what a critical mass of the participants seem to implicitly understand is that disruption—the ability to inflict real costs on entrenched capital through unpredictable and spontaneous (i.e. unchoreographed) direct action—is a necessary condition for our success. If these protests succeed in growing with this assumption at their core, they have real potential to become truly meaningful. It remains to be seen whether they will do so.

A couple of examples will give some idea of the potential I'm referring to, one of these extraordinary: after the march reached its eventual destination at Union Square Park, most seemed to expect that we would return more or less the way we came back to Zuccotti Park. While we were there, it became clear that the police had received orders to disperse the group. Their initial attempt to do so was when we were still in the park, and was achieved by vinyl mesh barriers which prevented the crowd from returning south back to its original destination in Wall Street. To do this required erecting these barriers at the edge of the group, turning back those who had just started on

their way south. Among these was a man maybe slightly younger than myself—though not much—who simply demanded to go where he wanted to, and he would be damned if he would let the cops get in his way. And so he stepped in front of the cops who were trying to hem us in, inviting a violent confrontation and likely arrest. But that's not extraordinary, as this was to be duplicated with greater or lesser degrees of violence at least forty times over the next hour. What was extraordinary was how the man impeded the cop: he did so by pushing a stroller which enclosed the man's three or four year old child in the cop's way. The cop pushed the stroller aside and attacked the man with real viciousness, in full view of the child. I didn't see what would later materialize—how or whether the man would be arrested. I did, however, see another small child in the park who was a spectator to the event breaking down in tears, as his father, a dreadlocked man, tried to console him.

As a parent of a small child whom I was considering bringing along to this, but thankfully did not, I wasn't sure how to respond to what seemed to be an act of almost insane recklessness. Initially, I was appalled, but in retrospect, in revisiting the mental image, I couldn't help but be moved by the commitment and courage displayed, and by the recognition that finally the stakes of our confrontation are becoming clear. As Marx famously observed "(we) are now compelled to face with sober senses, (our) real conditions of life, and (our) relations with (our) kind." While few of us will find ourselves capable of this man's courage, this is the kind of reaction which will be required of us when we face up to the realities we are encountering with sober senses.

A description of the remainder of the march requires the trite but, in this context, altogether accurate phrase, "violently dispersed by the police," though this is, of course, usually applied to various third world dictatorships. One block south the police began to erect a second set of barriers with the purpose of dividing the march into smaller groups, separated by a block or so, arresting those who refused to get out of the street, and who resisted. The arrests were undertaken with considerable brutality which I was a direct witness to, and almost a victim of. The worst which happened to me was to have received the full brunt of a body which had been slammed with remarkable force by a particularly violent and thuggish cop. Another encounter which I witnessed was worse and somewhat disturbing. A protester who had, I would imagine, prevented the erection of the crowd control barrier, was tackled and set upon by at least seven or eight cops administering a series of blows to all parts of the man's head and abdomen. I had never seen a display of violence of such intensity and it was quite unnerving. The fact that the target of this display of brutality was black will probably not come as a surprise.

These are some of the events which seem worth reporting here. There were others which a more journalistically inclined (and trained) observer would no doubt relate. Rather than itemizing these I'll close by mentioning a third reason why I am somewhat optimistic. This is personal and even a bit sentimental so those who don't know me might do well to skip the remainder of this paragraph. At the intersection of West 4th my friend Judd Greenstein, whom I had called earlier, darted in the crowd next to me. Judd, in addition to being probably the most gifted, passionate and communicative of the younger composers I know, is also one of the finest people—in the simplest and most meaningful sense of the term. Pretty much unique in my circle of acquaintances, he is a reliable presence at these sorts of protests, having joined me a year ago or so at a Wall Street protest following the bank bailouts. More significantly for me, this seemingly random encounter brought back for me one of my most treasured memories. At the Iraq war protest in Feb 2003, I was within a sea of bodies walking southward on the corner of 79th and Amsterdam, when I spotted within the crowd heading west my father Morris, who was then eighty, and my mother Rosamond, who was now walking slowly having begun to be affected by the Parkinson's disease, which would take her life this year. I probably shouldn't have been surprised. While they are not political activists (certainly less so than my father's long time friend and colleague Chomsky) their investment in

politics is real, though almost exclusively moral-dictated by a simple code which required them to actively protest when their government is enacting atrocities in their name, as it did in Vietnam during my childhood, and as it was about to do in Iraq. Protest is what every decent person did back then—it was not limited to an activist clique. There were lots like my parents back then.

Judd attended this demonstration for exactly the same reasons that my parents did nearly half a century ago, demonstrations that were defining events of my childhood. Protest is what decent people do when they are confronted with evil. Having both witnessed the thuggish crackdown south of Union Square, I was grateful to be able to be able take stock of the situation with him. His presence today was for me a validation of the possibility that there maybe some ultimate hope to be squeezed out of what now appears to be a fairly desperate trajectory into something approximating a police state—at least for those who do what is necessary to make protest meaningful.

Finally, a post-script: I'm writing this as the police prepare for what may be a final—and likely, if today's events were any guide—intensely brutal assault on the encampment in Zuccotti Park. As I have been posting on Facebook, this appears to me to be a Martin Niemöller moment for us—one where they are coming for a marginal clique, one which is the butt of jokes (including my own above) and regarded as absurd and insignificant by all but a few. Today's NYT's coverage of the protestors, predictably contemptuous and dismissive, sets the stage perfectly for this crackdown—and provides grounds for all the right thinking people who are the *Times*'s primary demographic to avert their eyes. The few decent people who find out about this may get on the subway and head to Wall Street to bear witness, and maybe even act. But I can't say I'm in the least optimistic that anything like this is in the cards—certainly nothing approximating the display of force which we must marshal to make a difference. All this is only further confirmation of Niemöller's dictum: when they come for us there may very well be very few left to speak up.

John Halle, a founding member of the Common Sense Composers' collective, currently teaches courses in music theory and linguistics at Bard College Conservatory of Music. He was formerly a Green Party Alderman from New Haven's Ninth Ward.