

Can Capitalism be Reformed? Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS) in a Bind: Doesn't Want to Mention the S-Word

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Although many on the established Left are claiming OWS as their own, latching on to the anti-capitalist theme that figures prominently, at least in some locations, it's clear that the focus of the OWS 'movement' varies greatly from place to place. Thus where it all started, in downtown Manhattan, the focus is very much on capitalist criminals rather than criminal capitalism. But little or no mention of the dreaded word- socialism, ironically for fear of alienating even those who occupy, never mind what the rabid corporate/state media does with that which shall remain nameless.

In fact, you'll be hard put to find any reference to the S-word except from the tiny Left contribution itself. The vast majority of those participating in OWS are not socialists or even favour socialism, they just want a job, a decent place to live and affordable health care. Not unreasonable expectations in the richest country on the planet you'd think.

The question is, can capitalism be reformed to give the millions currently without a future a shot at some kind of decent life? To quote:

The Western Left has come full circle: After abandoning the so-called ♦class struggle essentialism♦ for the plurality of anti-racist, feminist, gay rights etc., struggles, ♦capitalism♦ is now re-emerging as the name of THE problem. So the first lesson to be learned is: Do not blame people and their attitudes. The problem is not corruption or greed, the problem is the system that pushes you to be corrupt. The solution is not found in the slogan ♦Main Street, not Wall Street,♦ but to change the system in which Main Street cannot function without Wall Street. ♦ ['The Violent Silence of a New Beginning'](#) By Slavoj Zizek, In These Times, 27 October 2011

Herein lies the dilemma for the direction of the OWS or as I prefer to call it, OTW. Will it end up as yet another attempt at 'reforming' capitalism from within or will it mature into a direct challenge to the rule of Capital? Most importantly, can this be done without resorting to the S-word given that in the eyes of many in the 'developed' world it holds no attraction having been attached to the Soviet Union and 'Reds under the bed' Cold War propaganda for decades?

There are historical parallels with today's crisis most notably with Roosevelt's 'New Deal' program, itself the response to a crisis precipitated by the same gangster capitalists of the time; bankers and financiers. But the 'New Deal' didn't solve the crisis of US capitalism, WWII did that. By 1939 unemployment had been reduced by only the tiniest amount even

with all the government-financed work programs. It was only when the US economy resorted to what it does best, building weapons of war, that the US economy recovered.

It's true to say that at that time—during the 1930s—Socialism did figure as an alternative to a bankrupt capitalism. It's also true to say that WWII was waged in part in order to destroy socialism as it then existed.

So, as we've been here before and as with 1939, is it going to be large-scale war as the 'solution' to the current crisis of capital? But is Iran for example a replacement for Hitler and the Third Reich?

Iran doesn't cut it as a reason for all-out war even with all the phony assassination plots and the ongoing 'black ops' and propaganda wars being conducted against the country. In any case, is general, or world war the only 'solution' to the crisis of capital? How about lots and lots of 'small' wars as a replacement for one big one?

There are several problems with this approach. Firstly, conducting lots of 'local' wars just ain't the same as one big one for what is needed is a dire (non-existential) threat to the Homeland (now why can't Iran play ball and declare war on the USA?) followed of course by a Declaration of Emergency and then Conscription. Once the state is put on a war footing, it's game over for any kind of opposition, let alone one advocating the dreaded S-word short of a general insurrection aka the Bolsheviks (I might add that the 'War on Terror', the post-Soviet replacement for the 'War on Communism', although very useful for repression at home and 'small' wars abroad, is itself an 'existential' threat with only a limited shelf-life without a real enemy).

And that's the problem with an 'existential' threat like Iran as it hasn't invaded anyone let alone threaten to invade. Indeed without the active participation by the corporate/state media in selling the Big Lie, I feel sure that things today would be altogether different.

Second, conducting lots of small wars is logistically much more difficult to undertake and importantly, difficult to justify without a massive and continuing propaganda war, and just how many wars can the Empire justify to its populace when they are having to pay for the crimes of capitalism with their jobs and homes?

Hence the reemergence of that old Cold War tactic of 'proxy wars' of which Libya is the latest incarnation, with NATO 'helping' the insurgents overthrow dictator Gaddafi.

A good parallel with Libya from the Cold War days is Angola where the US used Apartheid South Africa as its proxy against the 'Marxists' as well as funding and arming the opposition UNITA via another of its proxies, Mobutu of the then Zaire (now the DR Congo). An intervention brought to a shuddering halt when Cuban and Angolan forces destroyed the SADF in the Battle of Cuito Carnevale (the last time the Left won anything excepting Chavez' Venezuela).

The degree to which the dreaded S-word is feared, even on the alleged Left is aptly described by the writer I quoted from above,

The only sense in which the protesters are communists is that they care for the commons—the commons of nature, of knowledge—that are threatened by the system. ♦ ibid

So, if they are 'only communists' insofar as they believe in the Commons, what to make of the writer's following passage?

They voice their protest on behalf of the inalienable truths that we should abide by in our society: the right to housing, employment, culture, health, education, political participation, free personal development, and consumer rights for a healthy and happy life. Rejecting violence, they call for an ethical revolution. Instead of placing money above human beings, we shall put it back to our service. We are people, not products. I am not a product of what I buy, why I buy and who I buy from.

But the 'rights' Zizek talks of have never existed under capitalism. There is no 'right' to a job or a home. Whatever gains we have made in the way of social progress have been made because we fought for them. Hence the answer to the cry, 'What do they want' is patently obvious even if the means whereby we reach our goal are still far from defined, let alone agreed upon. For many taking part in OTW this is perhaps their first taste of exercising 'people power' after slumbering for so long. Is it any wonder therefore that OTW is feeling its way forward given that the Left has 'misled' us for so long.

What Zizek's essay tells us is that even on the Left, the fight for an alternative to capitalism has to be handled as if walking on soft-boiled eggs. What a way to begin a revolution. Fortunately, there are still writers on the Left who have a solid handle on things:

Many decent people are locked into the embrace of a system that is rotten to the core. If they are to earn even a reasonable living they have no other job option except to give the devil his due: they are only following orders, as Eichmann famously claimed, doing what the system demands as others now put it, in acceding to the barbarous and immoral principles and practices of the Party of Wall Street. The coercive laws of competition force us all, to some degree or other, to obey the rules of this ruthless and uncaring system. The problem is systemic not individual. — '[David Harvey on the Occupy Wall Street movement](#)'

Given that 'democracy' whatever its form, parliamentary, presidential or whatever, has run its course and refuses to accede to the demands of the 99%, then Harvey's call is all the more important to the future of OTW:

The movement triggered by Occupy Wall Street is crucial to our collective future. It shows us that the collective power of bodies in public space is still the most effective instrument of opposition when all other means of access are blocked. — (ibid)

How this plays out is yet to be decided and there is no guarantee of success-this time-but surely it's obvious that capitalism can no longer masquerade as a democracy, a 'democracy' by the way that it never gave us; once more we have fought for it over the past two centuries. But even if we did regain some political democracy, it's clear that we have never had economic democracy, the one that really counts. From this all else flows.

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