



THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT: A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC FORCE?

Events: On 17 September 2011, about 5,000 people – carrying banners, shouting slogans and banging drums – gathered in New York and started to make their way to Zuccotti Park, located in the Wall Street financial district. There they erected tents, set up kitchens and established peaceful barricades. The Occupy movement was thus born with Occupy Wall Street (OWS), and quickly developed into a truly global wave of protest. On 15 October, tens of thousands of protestors took to the streets in some 82 countries around the world, affecting over 750 towns and cities, many demonstrators following the example of ‘the Zuccottis’ in setting up semi-permanent protest camps in parks or other prominent public spaces, usually close to financial centres. Although protests in different countries were often shaped by local issues and concerns, the common goals of the Occupy movement were to highlight social and economic inequality, and to condemn as unfair and unstable the dominance of the world economy by big corporations and the global financial system.

Significance: On one level, the Occupy movement is merely a further manifestation of anti-capitalist activism that dates back to the 1999 ‘Battle of Seattle’. However, the upsurge in Occupy protests was particularly significant in at least two respects. First, and most importantly, it was a response to the global financial crisis of 2007–09 and its aftermath, and thus constituted an attempt to challenge the values and redress the power imbalances that supposedly underpinned the crisis. This was evident in the movement’s recurrent focus on the vulnerabilities and injustices that flow from the dominant position that banks and financial institutions have acquired as a result of three decades of neoliberal globalization. Across much of southern Europe and elsewhere, Occupy activism expressed anger at the politics of austerity. In this respect, the Occupy movement expressed anxieties and frustrations that mainstream political parties and conventional interest groups clearly struggled to articulate. Second, Occupy drew inspiration from the outbreak of the Arab Spring, with OWS sometimes being portrayed as the ‘Tahir moment’ of the Occupy movement (harking back to the waves of demonstrations in Cairo’s Tahir Square that helped to bring about the fall of President Mubarak in



May 2011). As such, the Occupy protestors were seeking to take advantage of what was seen as a major shift in global politics in favour of ‘people power’.

How effective were the Occupy protests? This is a difficult question to answer as new social movements typically seek to raise political consciousness, and to shift values and attitudes, rather than affect specific public policies. In the case of Occupy, it looked to precipitate a ‘global spiritual insurrection’, a very difficult thing to quantify. The movement also attracted criticism, however. In the first place, it appeared to go little further than previous incarnations of the anti-capitalist movement in developing a systematic and coherent critique of neoliberal globalization, or in outlining a viable alternative. This, in part, reflects the political and ideological diversity within the movement itself. While some Occupy protestors were genuinely ‘anti-capitalist’, adopting a Marxist-style analysis of capitalism, many within the movement merely wished to remove the ‘worst excesses’ of capitalism. Second, although radical decentralization and participatory decision-making structures may have been part of Occupy’s appeal, especially as far as the young and marginalized are concerned, it is difficult to transform a collection of ‘anarchist swarms’ into a sustainable mass movement. Finally, Occupy’s tactic of establishing protest camps had clear drawbacks, not least because it was highly unlikely that such camps would be allowed to become permanent, meaning that the focus of the protest would be lost. Over time, the Occupy movement has thus become more tactically flexible, placing less emphasis on semi-permanent protest camps, and adopting wider and more innovative forms of protest.