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| The USC4P&J Occasional Papers are a series of ad hoc publications on the themes of peace and justice, comprising informal  essays, declarations, papers in progress, and talks or contributions to meetings and assemblies. |

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| This talk was given by **Lucas Alden** on 11/7/2012 at a Rome chapter of ARCI, a national cultural association operating in Italy, as a contextual introduction to the US4P&J Cinema Forum presentation of *American Autumn, An Occudoc*. |

**Occupy and its Challenges to Society**

The film, “American Autumn, An Occudoc,” by writer/director Dennis Trainor Jr, who has made another documentary on US foreign policy called “Manifest Destiny Child” and also served as a writer/media consultant on Dennis Kucinich’s 2008 presidential campaign, strongly reflects the Occupy Movement in both its production style and content. It’s honest, direct, succinct and no bullshit – all reflective of the nature of the movement itself. All the most crucial issues of our time, as in the movement itself, are put into focus:  
\*Inherit problems of Corporate Capitalism  
 -Financialization of the economy  
 -Labor Union struggles  
 -getting money out of politics

\*Student Debt  
\*No healthcare  
\*Illegal Wars  
\*Enivronmental Destruction – sustainable energy/communities

You can see how the movement was brilliant in its leaderless structures. The issues of demands maybe better to save for a post discussion.  
   
  
 ***Intro to Occupy Film***

The central spawning factor of the Occupy Movement was its recognition of a near total corporate takeover of government in the USA. It’s a pushback against corporate oligarchy and its reflexive resulting inequality produced in society. Hence, the language of the 99%. By the way, it’s actually a fraction of the 1% who actually own this extraordinary amount of wealth and whose influence weighs enormously on Federal and state governments.

I hate to talk about Occupy in the past tense, as its effects I believe are being felt and will continue to be felt for years to come. There is still much good work being carried out behind the scenes. However, as we plainly see, there are no longer masses of people on the streets day in and day out. Why? I would point to two things – plainly the government crackdown, and, in a broader sense, the lack of education on the part of the public in *actively* supporting the movement(not that a majority of the public didn’t support them *in opinion*). The fault of the latter falls squarely on the shoulders of both the educational and cultural systems which don’t talk about these things and, also, people like you and I. The power of the Occupy movement is that it is fundamentally a mainstream movement. It does not do what so many movements on the left and in a larger sense the entire institutional and cultural left in the US have done particularly in the last 40 years – it does not retreat into fringe issues, it does not degenerate into saving the whales, debating abortion and other culture wars, or enter into long-winded arguments on not *if* but *how many* collective bargaining rights unions should have, or as Chris Hedges states, “busy itself with the toothless pursuits of inclusiveness, multiculturalism, identity politics and tolerance, a word MLK never used, and forgotten about justice.” It instead looks the awesome and preeminent issue of our time right in the eye, which is the state-corporate complex, its stranglehold on the US and world economy, largely the result of 40 years of neo-liberal policy. Formal democracy has never been applied to the economy, and popular movements to force this have long been crushed, going back over a century in the US.

We are certainly not in any kind of “post history”, there is no “clash of civilizations,” the movements that socialists, anarchists, labor unions etc have fought for over decades and decades have never been resolved – regrettably the prospects of economic justice have greatly been retracted over the last 40 years. Paradoxically, while the elites and government policy have been going one way, public opinion and public consciousness having been heading in another direction. Neo-liberal policies have concentrated wealth more and more, solidified power in the hands of a few while wresting any hope for economic and political power from the public. Meanwhile, public consciousness around these core issues has heightened dramatically since the 60s. Contrary to popular myth, not only has activism exploded but issues came to the forefront which simply hadn’t existed before the 60s.

So here we have Occcupy on the scene in September 2011. Young folks, particularly, were more than well aware that government no longer represents the public – that the corporate media’s encouragement of a “Republican-Democratic” ideological battle is a near total farce. The most egregious assaults on the American working classes are fresh on their minds, since they occurred in just the last 15 years, mostly under a “democratic” president, Bill Clinton – NAFTA, the attack on and unraveling of welfare, skyrocketing healthcare and higher education costs (with no possibility of bankruptcy for the latter, a unique event in US history) and what led directly to the current and nearly unprecedented financial crisis (one which hasn’t been seen since the 1930s), the final extirpation of the 1933 Glass Steagall Act with the 1999 Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act which conclusively tore down the firewalls between investment and commercial banks, allowing not only risky but criminal behavior in the financial industry, particularly on Wall Street.

As if we actually needed another reminder that the Democratic Party has, in the final analysis, long had extremely little of the public interest at heart, the Obama Administration (who I had voted for in 2008) had these fine points on its resume and starkly in the minds of Occupying protestors and substantial portions of the nation at large (so, leaving international crimes aside):

* Immediate appointments of the same financial industry figures from previous administrations as his economic team, instrumental in implementing legislation under Clinton and Bush which largely caused the crisis (Summers, Rubin, Geithner, Paulson etc)
* Affordable Care Act, already helplessly watered down, ends up being thousands of pages written by insurance industry lobbyists mandating the purchase of hopelessly insufficient for-profit healthcare plans
* Failure to reinstate Habeas Corpus (Patriot Act) and dismantle the FISA Act (illegal wiretapping)- and most significantly for the Occupy Movement – they failed to seize the opportunity and failed to address the economic system itself and chose instead to further merge banks, financial institutions and the state with $16 trillion of bailouts
* Austerity measures proposed by both the White House and Congress (DRC), the most foolish and immoral road to go down in times of recession
* No attempt at halting environmental catastrophe, and in fact furthering it, with increased oil drilling (Keystone Pipeline) and the jettisoning of the Copenhagen conference in 2009

And, instead of a rational response to Occupy, such as a Federal works program, a moratorium on student debt and mortgages, and a healthcare plan that the public had wanted for decades, the administration responded with not only the evisceration of the encampments, but passed, on New Year’s Eve 2011, the NDAA Act in which sections 1021 and 1022 overturn 200 years of domestic law by allowing for indefinite militarized detention of American citizens who are simply suspected of involvement in terrorism *and* stripping them of due process until the “end of hostilities,” effectively making dissent against the state a federal crime with its greatly broadened and super draconian definition of terrorism. The good news is this is the government on its heels and frightened by the mass appeal of the Occupy Movement with its immediate force in altering national and international discourse. Not a coincidence it was put into effect at that point, I believe, neither did commentators like Chris Hedges, who spearheaded the lawsuit against the Obama Administration, and actually had it overturned about 2 months ago, with the administration subsequently acting to begin an appeals process which momentarily puts it back into effect.

Power will never, especially power in the form of a neo-liberal corporate state, concede anything without sustained demands, a wise man once noted. Occupy was and is a shining light onto how we can become a more just, peaceful and stronger society if we so choose. Not only has the movement succeeded in altering the national and international discourse, but it has also presented a model of solidarity into how not only future movements can and must look like, but how society itself can look like (purely democratic decision making councils, hospitals, pharmacies, libraries etc). In that sense of changing discourse, the movement was an immediate and stunning success. Movements, as many commentators have pointed out, morph in and out of existence into different forms, have ups and downs and are generally highly unpredictable. How Occupy will take its next form or even if it will be called Occupy, is anybody’s guess. But what is clear is this – if there is to be any real hope of not only the survival of formal democracy but the burgeoning of a real functioning democracy, it will lie in movements like Occupy whose power is rooted in the fact it is, as I stated, fundamentally mainstream. These movements and their principal actors have an awesome responsibility to connect to the masses everywhere, especially in the US, and demonstrate that they stand for fundamental interests of the vast majority of the population, the 99%. If a movement such as Occupy recedes into its own cocoons in petty, fringe issues, violence, elitism, or allows itself to be hijacked and assimilated into the Democratic Party, it is doomed, will never connect fully to the American public – and p0pulations everywhere - and never affect fundamental change. It all comes down to education, and that’s especially up to activists the world over.

Lucas E. Alden

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