

Millennial Movements

Occupy Wall Street and the Dreamers

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The dominant narrative about the “Millennial” generation (roughly, those born between 1980 and 2000) portrays its members as selfish, lazy, narcissistic, entitled, and politically disengaged. Yet in 2008 Barack Obama captured their imaginations: 66 percent of voters under thirty cast their ballots for him, compared to half of those over that age—a larger disparity than in any presidential election since exit polling began in 1972. Millennials not only voted for Obama, but volunteered—by the hundreds of thousands—to work on his campaign. Moreover, a wealth of survey data suggests that they lean to the left: Millennials are the only generation in which self-identified liberals currently outnumber self-identified conservatives, and they are far more likely than their elders to support same-sex marriage, labor unions, immigrant rights, and even socialism. College-educated Millennials are even more progressive than the generation as a whole.

The 2008 Wall Street crash and the Great Recession disproportionately affected Millennials, many of whom entered the labor market just when the crisis hit. They have been struggling ever since with unemployment, underemployment, debt, and other forms of economic precarity. These developments also helped spark a wave of political activism. In 2011 Millennials—especially the college-educated among them—made up the core of Occupy Wall Street and its various offshoots.

Another Millennial social movement emerged a decade earlier: the “Dreamers,” or undocumented immigrant youth campaigning for a path to legal status. The Dreamers are

youthful by definition, and most have at least some college education. As undocumented immigrants, they can legally attend school, but until 2012 none were permitted to work either before or after they graduated. This movement is comprised mostly of those eligible for a legal path to citizenship under the proposed DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act, which would cover those brought to the United States as children who have completed at least two years of college or military service.

Occupiers and Dreamers alike are sharply critical of the political establishment, Obama included, and of the explosive growth in inequality since the 1970s. Both movements use the tactics of civil disobedience and direct action, including occupations of public spaces. Both support racial and gender equality and LGBT rights. Both movements also rely heavily on social media, as Millennials famously do in every aspect of their lives.

But despite their many similarities, Occupiers and Dreamers also differ in some key respects. One is demographic: white males were overrepresented among Occupy activists. Although many women and people of color were involved, they were less numerous and less visible. By contrast, the Dreamers are disproportionately led by Latina and Asian women, and nearly all participants are people of color.

The two movements also differ in their discursive strategies. The Dreamers made extensive use of storytelling as they built their movement. Occupiers occasionally told stories as well, but their main public narrative targeted class inequality and “the 1 percent.”

Finally, the two movements featured different organizational structures. The Dreamers used conventional political organi-

zations and methods of decision making and had identifiable leaders. But Occupy rejected traditional structures in favor of “participatory democracy” and making all decisions by consensus. While Occupy shunned immediate demands, the Dreamers focus on specific policies, like in-state tuition rates for undocumented students as well as the DREAM Act itself.

The activism of both groups reflects the demographic makeup of Millennials and their economic prospects. They are more racially and ethnically diverse than any previous generation: about 43 percent are non-white (Latinos are the largest and fastest growing group). And they are the most highly educated generation in U.S. history: a third of Millennials over age twenty-six have a four-year college degree or more. But they have paid a high price for this achievement: two-thirds of recent college graduates have outstanding student debt, averaging \$27,000.

Youth unemployment was substantial in September 2011 when Occupy surfaced (the official rate for twenty- to twenty-four-year-olds was 14.6 percent that month), but it was far lower among college-educated youth, who were more likely to be *under-* than *unem-*ployed. A survey of Occupy Wall Street in New York that I conducted with Stephanie Luce and Penny Lewis found that most active participants were under thirty and college-educated. As one activist we interviewed recalled, “It was the twenty-six to twenty-nine or thirty crowd that was the strongest in terms of presence—people my age, who maybe had grad school or weren’t finding jobs, and had just blazed through college and a Master’s program and then were like, ‘What the hell is this?’”

The Dreamers’ movement took shape over the first decade of the twenty-first century, mostly on college campuses. However, in the course of that decade, many of the activists graduated from college. They are the extreme case of what journalist Paul Mason calls “the graduate with no future.” As DREAM Act co-author Josh Bernstein has noted, “Historically, youth organizing has been very episodic. . . . The DREAM Act is different

because the Dreamers are stuck. It’s bad for them, but it’s actually good for organizing.”

Although most Occupiers and Dreamers were Millennials, older activists played a key role in both movements. The summer planning meetings that preceded Occupy’s launch included seasoned veterans of previous social movements, especially those in the anti-globalization and anarchist movements, who

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conducted trainings and acted as informal mentors. “There were a few older people, and though there weren’t very many of them, they were listened to, welcomed, and respected,” one activist told us.

Similarly, the Dreamers were mentored by an older generation of immigrant rights activists, especially in Southern California where the movement first emerged. Fiscal sponsorship and guidance came from long-established immigrant rights groups, although later the Dreamers broke away from what many of the radicals among them came to see as “the social justice elite” or “the nonprofit industrial complex.”

Both the Occupiers and the Dreamers relied heavily on social media. This helped Occupy attract participants, get media attention, and, at critical moments, outwit the police. Images of repressive actions by the New York Police Department spread virally over social media and helped build support for the movement. Similarly, in 2010, when a group of Dreamers occupied the Washington offices of five U.S. Senators, they aired real-time video of the action over the Internet. Many Dreamers who have “come out” as undocumented post their stories on YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter.

For the Dreamers, the compression of space and time that social media make possible is especially important, because the mobility of undocumented immigrants is severely

restricted by their lack of access to drivers' licenses. Social media not only help link Dreamers and their organizations nationwide, but also allow them to connect and learn from other social movements. They feel a particular closeness to LGBT activists, as their borrowed use of the concept of "coming out" suggests.

Of course, face-to-face interactions were equally crucial. Many Occupiers told us how important Zuccotti Park and similar spaces in other cities were for building and sustaining their uprising. As one New York activist put it:

There's a lot of energy, which is very important for the movement, or people won't throw their body into it or leave their young family and work sixteen hours in addition to their job. The easy access to the park, the magic in the air that you step into, a near-religious experience that the moment you decide you're part of this, you are!

What happened after Occupiers were evicted by the police in New York and elsewhere offers further proof of how important such meeting places were to the movement. Although many Occupy working groups continued to meet, and some still do, the

movement itself disappeared.

The Dreamers, on the other hand, did not rely on claiming public spaces for themselves, although they too used direct action tactics, including brief occupations. They organized mostly through meetings and social events. Dreamers often testify to how empowered the movement—and the discovery that many others shared their dilemma as unauthorized immigrants—made them feel. Sociologist Walter Nicholls quotes one participant's account of a meeting where she "came out" as undocumented:

I was so scared but I did it—I don't know why I would ever do it. Just being in those spaces and meeting people . . . it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. I felt good. I saw that my [undocumented] status didn't need to limit me in the ways that I thought it would. And it didn't need to stop me. It didn't mean that everybody would hate me or would want to stop me from doing things. *It was the opposite. I was doing things because of my status. I was giving a speech in front of people and they were all happy for me, supporting me.* (emphasis in original)



Immigrant activists blockade a deportation bus in Chicago, November 2013. Photo: sarah-ji/Flickr.

Perhaps because they are such demographically different groups, Occupiers and Dreamers have different analyses of oppression and inequality. Occupy focused on class injustice, while race, gender, and sexuality at times became subjects of internal conflict. The original draft of the "Declaration of the Occupation of New York City" stated, "As one people, formerly divided by the color of our skin, gender, sexual orientation, religion . . ." This was successfully challenged by a group that went on to form Occupy's

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People of Color caucus, and sexual harassment and assault later became issues in some of the camps.

The "horizontalism" that Occupy cherished may have also contributed to the marginalization of people of color, women, and sexual minorities. As one participant recalled, "You still had leaders, and it was the same people who end up rising in the systems that we're trying to address. . . . The people who you would see on TV or as the quote-unquote leaders [of Occupy Wall Street] . . . were often white, male, and highly educated." Indeed, Jo Freeman's classic 1972 essay, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," circulated widely in Occupy circles.

Since nearly all the Dreamers were people of color, they did not have to worry about white males taking over; in fact their leaders were and are disproportionately female, queer, or both. Many Dreamers had explored issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality in college, as their 2010 manifesto—which begins with a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail"—makes clear. The term "intersectionality," which originated in the academy, has become a standard part of the Dreamers' lexicon.

The Dreamers make extensive use of story-

telling, which the older immigrant rights groups that incubated the movement had trained them to do. They developed a narrative that implied that they were not really "illegal" because they had been brought to the United States by their parents and had not chosen to cross the border (or overstay a visa). Arriving at a tender age, they were fully assimilated into American society and spoke perfect English. Only upon graduation from high school, when they needed a Social Security number to apply to college or for a job, did they learn of their lack of legal status.

The Dreamers' storytelling typically included an explicit embrace of American symbols: the flag, the Statue of Liberty, and values like "hard work" and "fairness." The chosen storytellers themselves were the "best and the brightest"—the valedictorians, the straight-A students, and other youth poised for upward mobility, if only they could win legal status.

Such narratives attracted coverage from both ethnic media and mainstream English-language outlets. The immigrant rights movement highlighted these stories in hopes of winning public support not only for the Dreamers but also for comprehensive immigration reform. However, after a series of failed efforts to win that sweeping change in the law, the Dreamers began to break away from the immigrant rights groups that had mentored them. Many of the older activists who were documented could afford to wait for change, but the delay would immediately jeopardize the Dreamers' future.

As a result, many became increasingly militant. A turning point came in 2010, when Dreamers began launching direct actions. That May one group occupied the Arizona office of Senator John McCain; in July another group launched a hunger strike in front of Senator Dianne Feinstein's Los Angeles offices. Other activists later deliberately courted arrest at immigrant detention centers along the border.

The Dreamers did not abandon storytelling, but their narrative changed. One new theme was captured in the slogan "Undocumented, Queer, and Unafraid." They embraced the LGBT movement, refusing to apologize either for their lack of legal status or their sexuality. Dreamers also dropped the

idea that they were in the country “through no choice of their own,” rejecting the implication that while *they* were innocent, their parents were not. Instead, their revised narrative celebrated their parents’ courage in risking so much to bring them to the United States so they could have a better life.

The Occupy narrative that gained traction with the public was the opposition of the 99 percent to the power and privilege of the 1 percent. That catapulted the issue of growing inequality into the center of the national political conversation, where it remains. But Occupy had another narrative too, one that had little impact on public discourse but was treasured by many of the activists themselves. They rejected mainstream politics as hopelessly corrupt due to the financial influence of the 1 percent and instead embraced participatory democracy and prefigurative politics. Unlike the Dreamers, they did not embrace the American flag or other patriotic tropes (although some did quote the U.S. Constitution).

Occupy famously refused to define its “demands,” a stance for which it was often criticized. Many of the activists we interviewed defended that approach, arguing that it was a key ingredient in the movement’s appeal. As one suggested,

Anyone could come into the movement and see their grievances as equivalent to everyone else’s. If it’s like, I don’t have a job, I have student debt, I have huge medical bills, I’m thrown out of my house, the hydrofracking that’s going on, the BP oil spill, it doesn’t matter. Everyone felt it’s Wall Street, it’s the 1 percent that’s to blame. Because they have all the economic power, they have all the political power.

By contrast, the Dreamers’ more conventional organizations make more specific demands—above all, legal status for the undocumented, as well as in-state tuition and financial aid for undocumented college students, access to drivers’ licenses, and fewer deportations. Their local, state, and national organizations make decisions more traditionally and draw on support from established immigrant rights organizations as well as churches, colleges, and community organiza-

tions. The Dreamers engage in direct action, but they also continue to participate in traditional politics, regularly lobbying elected officials to support their demands.

And they have won some major victories. Most significant are in-state tuition laws in twenty states, and the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which allows young undocumented immigrants to obtain work permits and protects them against deportation (although without a path to full legal status or citizenship). About 600,000 undocumented youth have already applied for DACA. The Dreamers’ direct action efforts were key to this victory, as were Democratic Party efforts to mobilize the Latino vote in 2012.

Ironically, although the Dreamers invested a great deal in carefully crafted personal stories—far more than Occupy Wall Street—they have had less impact on the national political conversation than Occupy’s attacks on the “1 percent.” While Occupy itself has dissipated, its success in riveting public attention to the issue of inequality has endured.

The basic social conditions that sparked both of these movements remain intact: a weak labor market and ongoing devolution in mainstream politics. A variety of other Millennial-based movements are emerging too—from campaigns against sexual assault on college campuses, to union organizing efforts among adjunct faculty, to anti-racist groups like the “Dream Defenders.” Some Millennials are even reviving Marxism, through magazines like *Jacobin*, *n+1*, and in the pages of venerable publications like *Dissent*. Even if the anemic economic recovery takes off, this generation will remain heavily burdened by unprecedented debt, underemployment, and economic precarity, all of which should reinforce its left-leaning political views. We can expect “the graduate with no future” to rise again.

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