

The Transformation of

PROTEST

Advocates and detractors agree: Occupy Wall Street changed the rules forever.

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TEN YEARS AGO THIS MONTH, OCCUPY WALL STREET UNEXPECTEDLY inaugurated a new wave of protest. The domestic manifestation of a worldwide explosion of digitally networked social movements, it scaled up rapidly, attracting enormous public and media attention. But the protesters were evicted from New York City's Zuccotti Park and other occupied spaces after only a few months, and Occupy dissipated soon afterward. Some commentators have dismissed it as a meteoric flash in the pan, while others have criticized its "horizontalist" structure and lack of concrete demands.

After speaking recently with more than 20 activists who were centrally involved in the movement, we beg to differ with such negative assessments. "Occupy wasn't a blip, it was a spark!" declared one, veteran organizer Nastaran Mohit. "It was a turning point, a spark that led to many fires." Musician and educator Sonny Singh agreed: "It was the beginning of a movement trajectory that we're still in. Occupy being the catalyst, socialism is cool now." Mohit and Singh were among the 25

New York Occupy veterans that we interviewed earlier for a study funded by the Russell Sage Foundation and published in 2013, most of whom agreed to speak with us again this year. In that study, titled "Changing the Subject," we argued that Occupy had shifted the national political conversation to focus on rising inequality and had transformed the political trajectory of the participants themselves—changing the subject in both respects.

As the 10th anniversary of the Zuccotti Park occupation approached, we reconnected with our interviewees to explore their political activities since 2011 and to hear their reflections on Occupy's legacy. Our earlier research had targeted people who were key architects of the effort as well as others engaged in a broad range of related activities. Some of the interviewees were sea-

soned organizers with extensive experience in progressive movements; others were younger activists with formidable social media skills, including a few who had been radicalized in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

They all remain politically engaged. Some helped launch Occupy Sandy, Strike Debt, and other immediate offshoots of the movement. Many met one another again at Dakota Access Pipeline or Black Lives Matter protests. Some are full-time organizers; others are writers or professors. The follow-up interviews show that we have not seen the last of them.

A decade later, none regret their involvement in the 2011 effort. They all agree that Occupy did what was possible at the time, and did it spectacularly well. Not one had expected the Zuccotti Park encampment to last more than a few days, and all were amazed when it garnered so much traction and attention. Interviewees also reflected on the movement's limitations, including flaws in its analysis of race and gender, the



Sending a message: Images of Occpy Wall Street demonstrators circulated rapidly, extending the movement far beyond Zuccotti Park.

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Outdoing FEMA: Occupy Sandy organizers spearheaded clothing and food drives following Hurricane Sandy's destruction.

BUT OCCUPY HAD LIMITS AS WELL, AND THOSE TOO HAVE PREOCCUPIED OUR interviewees over the years since. The iconic call for the unity of “the 99 percent” enabled a euphoric feeling of solidarity and helped attract increasingly diverse crowds to participate in the occupation at Zuccotti Park. While appreciating the movement’s powerful centering of class, many participants also criticized it for underemphasizing racial and gender oppression and other divisions within the 99 percent. Some had tried to promote an intersectional approach from the earliest days of the occupation and struggled to create space for people of color and women to play leading roles. Most observed that subsequent waves of movement activity—from Black Lives Matter and #MeToo to trans advocacy, immigrant rights, and Indigenous struggles—have generated a far more complex understanding of capitalism and power, as well as a far more diversified leadership. Those movements built on Occupy’s success but also moved the left in a more intersectional direction.

The easy reproducibility of occupations, and the “mini-society” of Zuccotti Park and other occupied spaces, with their spirited prefigurative social relations, helped catalyze Occupy’s explosive growth, creativity, and connectedness. No one we spoke with expressed regrets about the defining feature of the movement: the taking of the space at Zuccotti Park and at the thousand other encampments that radiated out from there. But some participants had critiqued the term “occupation” from the outset, with its evocation of Palestine; others noted that as a tactic, occupation had serious limits. Holding physical space required enormous work, and while the park provided participants with a place to sleep as well as food, medical care, and culture, it soon became overwhelmed by problems endemic to the larger society,

tactic of occupation itself, and Occupy’s lack of organizational coherence and accountability structures. They drew a variety of lessons from the experience, and many explained to us how their own political perspectives, as well as the shape of the left more broadly, have evolved in the years since.

The signature contribution that gave Occupy lasting influence was its laser-sharp focus on skyrocketing inequality and entrenched corporate power, transforming the popular “common sense” about capitalism and class. In addition, the occupation was the midwife for a new generation of progressive political activists. After 2011, some Occupiers became active in the Bernie Sanders campaign and the Democratic Socialists of America; others moved into Black Lives Matter, climate activism, and the labor movement. Even for experienced organizers, Occupy was a transformative moment, which reshaped their political analysis and ongoing work. The movement’s success in gaining traction with the public, moreover, encouraged further activism. It was a critical defining moment, a launching pad for the past decade’s left-wing resurgence.

such as the needs of New York’s vast unhoused population as the number of homeless within Zuccotti began to rise. Safety became an increasingly important concern, and there were reports of women being sexually assaulted while encamped there. The difficulties involved in providing security in a mini-society of tents in a downtown park became increasingly apparent. Occupy simply lacked the organizational capacity to address these formidable challenges. Most of our interviewees came to see encampment as a temporary and transitory tactic, at best. As one interviewee who wished to remain anonymous reflected: “Before it gets too weird, let it die.”

Occupy famously aimed to create inclusive horizontal structures that maximized participation and democracy, yet it soon was plagued by “the tyranny of structurelessness,” in Jo Freeman’s unforgettable phrase from the 1960s. As the movement mushroomed, meetings of the General Assembly were increasingly dominated by white and male voices and got bogged down in speechifying, rendering decision-making nearly impossible. The participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds and political orientations, which led to clashes. Meetings were also vulnerable to disruption and infiltration: As protest consultant Lisa Fithian told us, “You can’t keep the police out of an open movement space.”

After experiencing these problems, some Occupy activists adopted new approaches in their subsequent movement work, preemptively anticipating the conflicts and needs that arise in open participatory forms. They developed accountability mechanisms designed to rein in individuals who behave badly, for example. As writer and sociologist Marina Sitrin put it, “Rules are fine. Rulers, no—but rules are a good thing. Without having rules and agreements, it’s much more difficult.”



CRAIG RUTTLE / AP PHOTO

Similarly, many interviewees in retrospect considered Occupy's signature "leaderlessness" and refusal to focus on specific demands as necessary elements in its success, yet ultimately insufficient. Many concurred with journalist and media studies professor Nathan Schneider's observation that "the strategy of building institutional power, electoral power, state power, has become much more widely embraced by people who during Occupy times might have been more anarchistically inclined." Occupy's unexpected traction with the public helped embed this shift in perspective.

The very lack of left infrastructure in the United States in 2011—after decades of decline for organized labor, left parties, and movement organizations—both enabled the explosive creativity of the Occupy moment and presented an obstacle for those who, in its aftermath, did not "want to just be a bunch of people in a park," as organizer Yotam Marom explained. "We want a piece of this thing! We want to win."

Some of our interviewees put their post-Occupy energies into the labor movement, pushing it in new directions. Others began building new organizations or helping existing ones grow stronger. But the biggest shift involved electoral work. Some Occupiers had been engaged in electoral politics before 2011, but the large majority were skeptical of its efficacy. For some, this reflected disillusion and disappointment after having supported Obama in 2008; for a certain number, aligned with an anarchist perspective, it was a matter of long-standing principle. Today, however, many of our interviewees are either directly engaged in electoral work or see it as a key terrain of political struggle. There are also those who are more ecumenical than they were in 2011. Only a few remain thoroughly averse to electoral efforts.

In 2014, socialist City Council candidate Kshama Sawant's victory in Seattle, along with the passage of multiple citywide minimum wage ordinances around the country, were early post-Occupy examples of what was possible with focused local efforts. But the carrot and the stick of the electoral turn were more fundamentally embodied by Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. The Sanders campaign largely embraced Occupy's ideological perspective and, as writer and organizer Jonathan Smucker told us, vividly illustrated how "a campaign can step in and provide scaled infrastructure to absorb thousands and thousands of volunteers." Conversely, Trump's victory crystallized the stakes involved in electoral work. And although our interviewees' own contribution to the explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America has been marginal, many of them commented on its importance as a new arena of activity for other former Occupy participants and supporters.



CRITICS WERE QUICK TO LABEL OCCUPY A FAILURE ONCE THE POLICE CLEARED out Zuccotti Park and the other encampments that sprouted across the country. But Occupy involved far more than the physical occupations: It inaugurated a new wave of social movement efforts and inspired a new generation of activists. The tactic of occupying public space succeeded beyond all expectations in riveting worldwide attention on the crisis of inequality. That tactic was not capable of reversing the massive increase in inequality that had occurred—on the contrary, inequality has continued to widen. But the Occupy moment gave beleaguered longtime organizers the confidence to build organizations and movements to bring about lasting change, and it inspired a new generation of activists to join them. As the minister and Occupy activist the Rev. Michael Ellick told us, it "was a way of giving people who have no power power right away." After that, they were ready and eager to move on to bigger projects.

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—Yotam Marom

The past decade has witnessed some of the largest protests in US history, as well as the unprecedented impact of Sanders's presidential campaigns and the growth in the number of young people (and some growth among older ones as well) who openly support socialism. Would all of this have happened without Occupy Wall Street? It is impossible to know for sure, but for us, Yotam Marom sums it up best: "Occupy was a really significant psychological shift, from righteous losers—which was my experience beforehand—to contenders. Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, the Bernie campaign are within the context of a world in which the left can contend. Occupy cracked something open!" ★

Passing the torch: Movements like Black Lives Matter were inspired by Occupy, but tend to focus on specific policy demands.

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