

Raging streets: Waking up to reality Global street protest or a sign of democracy crisis?

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In memoriam: Václav Havel (5 October 1936 – 18 December 2011)

For the last two months the global protest movement [Occupy Together](#) has been filling up headlines of all world media. The first manifestation, organized on 17 September 2011 in the Zuccotti Park on New York's Wall Street, quickly inspired unsatisfied citizens all over the world and the protest actions have since been organized across all continents in over 17,000 cities.



The fundamental uniting motto of the protestors is "We are the 99%". In the view of the protesting crowds, the choice of the banner points toward one of the thorniest issues of our time – the legitimacy crisis of representative democracy. According to the protestors, the elected political representatives currently defend the interests of 1% of the world population only – and that is of those who have amassed and control the vast majority of global economic resources and whose greed is perceived as bringing the global economy on the verge of a fatal collapse. The protestors try to use political activism as a means to protect their civil rights and interests and manifest their frustration with the current global situation.

Reaction of authorities

Several days prior to the two months anniversary of the *Occupy* movement protest, police in Portland and New York City, and other locations in the US started to take measures against the protesters. It took the US authorities almost two months to come up with a strategy on how to deal with the protests, especially after it has become clear that they will not simply go away as soon as the weather gets colder. However, given the spread and intensity of the protest, it is unlikely that any measures taken by the authorities including the use of physical force will succeed. The justification of the authorities to use violence against the protestors ranges from health hazard, sanitary cleaning, intervention against disruption of public order, crime as well as complaints by local businesses and residents. The public bodies in several US cities have used a very dubious approach when dealing with the protestors. Eviction notices are delivered at midnight, the media is presented with ambiguous public statements by NYC Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg that

“protests don’t work”, but that the protesters are “welcome back after the clearing” (albeit without tents and sleeping bags), and areas adjacent to the protest sites have been closed to both citizens and to the media. The overall situation points only to the overall helplessness of authorities.

The recent development – the active use of force by authorities – is interesting for two reasons: firstly, it is not clear what the goal of authorities is (the protest is spreading to more cities across the globe and newly also to campuses across the US) and secondly, the repeated controversies over the use of violence against the protesters point to a deeper issue of a legitimate use of violence. In any democratic society the elected government has the monopoly over the use of force. However, it is exactly the legitimacy of the government which the *Occupy Together* protests put in question. In the eyes of the protestors the government which does not represent the majority of citizens is not legitimate and hence has no right to use force. And with this mindset, many protesters asked police officers to “disobey their orders”. In some cases veterans and non-active duty military personnel sharing the movement’s views have joined the protests and others have even shown their disillusionment with the current situation by resigning from their public posts (Oakland’s Deputy Mayor Sharon Cornu). Seeing the system as illegitimate and as such misusing the monopoly of force against its own citizens draws further parallels with the Arab Spring, in particular with the development of the situation in Egypt.

Without leaders but with principles

The popular movement *Occupy Together* is non-hierarchical in character and has no leader at the helm despite the fact that the initial impetus for the first Wall Street demonstration came from the Canadian magazine [Adbusters](#). Each of the protests has been announced and rounded up through the Internet, which has allowed it to attain a horizontally structured organization. Yet the movement is far from being anarchic. In fact, the protests are internally organized by a number of nameless volunteers and are also guided by some leading principles. Apart from the violence that occurred during demonstrations in Rome on 15 October 2011, all protests are non-violent and rail against not only capitalism and economic liberalism, but all ideologies and especially chauvinism, sexism, neo-Nazism, any type of religious fanaticism, and nationalism. Therefore, it would be a blunt misconception to set the movement side by side with the summer riots in Britain.

Throughout the course of the various protests, the movement has also acquired a number of well-known supporters. As one of the October demonstrations in London showed, the most outspoken proponent of the movement is the Australian activist and co-founder of Wikileaks Julian Assange. During his brief appearance Assange stated that the occupiers were on the streets to construct, not to destroy, law. Another intellectual celebrity that participated in the October New York protests was Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek, who also stepped out with a speech:

“They tell you we are dreamers. The true dreamers are those who think things can go on indefinitely the way they are. We are not dreamers. We are awakening from a dream which is turning into a nightmare. We are not destroying anything. We are only witnessing how the system is destroying itself.”

The encouragement of Zizek and Assange brings to the forefront one of the key elements of the movement – its anti-systemic character. Its aim is not to bring down the current political leadership or alter existing policies; the goal is to point toward the self-destructive nature of the contemporary world system and allow those who have been silent until now to speak up.

As in the case of protesters in Egypt and other parts of North Africa, a crucial role in mobilizing people have been played by social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Social networks, though, are not the only common feature of *Occupy Together* and the so-called “Arab Spring”. For disillusioned people all across the world, the Arab Spring stands as an epitome of the power of the masses, i.e. that it is possible to rise against tyranny and strive for a new social order. It has demonstrated that political mobilization, active protesting on the streets, and the use of other non-conform forms of political participation such as strikes, occupations, and in extreme cases also violence, are in situations when the authorities are breaching rights of their citizens’ legitimate means of political struggle.

In this respect, there are many parallels between the current global movement inspired and encouraged by many contemporary intellectuals and the famous essay written by Václav Havel in 1978 “The Power of the Powerless”. To Havel the “powerless” are the “individuals who are doing what they feel they must and, consequently, who find themselves in open conflict with the regime”; it is those who had been shaken by an ideology and united in a common solidarity based on discontent and moral values. In this light, *Occupy Together* is a tangible proof of the “solidarity of the shaken” and the actual power of the powerless.

Similarly, just as the dissident under socialism, *Occupy Together* lives two parallel lives – on the streets of world metropolises and in the virtual world of online discussion forums and social networks. The global e-sphere enables anyone in any corner of the world to share experience on issues such as how to act during protests, what to beware of, how to run a protest camp (including sanitary and health measures and the provision of supplies), and what to avoid. The protests were able to spread with an epidemic speed due to the mobilization efficiency of the social networks and all the communication features it includes such as videos from previous demonstrations and life stories of participants, which can inspire followers elsewhere.

Not only the Left

Watching the footage from the protests, one can notice that the movement’s supporters are mainly representatives of those social classes that have been most seriously hit by the repercussions of the world economic crisis. Some have been affected directly – by the loss of their jobs or homes (as in the case of many Americans whose dream about their own houses vanished overnight in the domino effect of the mortgage crisis), but many have also suffered indirectly – such as students and war veterans, whose social benefits have been seriously curbed. Initially, the protestors were made up of mostly young leftist radicals with socialist and anarchist tendencies; however, as early as during the first week, the movement had diversified by age, gender, religion, and political views.

According to some, mainly American commentators, *Occupy Together* is a leftist response to the [Tea Party Patriots](#), the radical and adverse movement within the US Republican Party. The global and dynamic growth of the movement, though, does not support the link between the two movements. The Tea Party is a radical and regional American camp with high political ambitions of a regional, national, and even federal character that praises values and emphasizes issues that are relevant for the American reality only. The potential of the movement to spread outside of the US borders is thus very limited. In contrast, *Occupy Together* refuses to spell out any concrete demands and does not offer any clear solutions. It merges global and locally relevant topics. Most importantly, it criticizes the approach of the world leaders to solve the world crisis by bailing out world banks that to the protestors represent the main villain in the crisis. The protests reject saving banks at the costs

of citizens who have carried the main burden of the crisis. The goals of the movement must thus be understood at a more abstract level that upholds the strengthening of direct democracy, higher transparency of political decision-making, and increased responsibility of global corporations.

The local character of the movement can be demonstrated by the participation of many opponents of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the US and Britain, adversaries of nuclear energy in Japan and Germany, ecologic activists, representatives of the LGBTQ community, and animal rights fighters in a number of other countries.

Last but not least, the movement has a significant individualistic dimension – strong inner motivation of the individual participant is as diverse as the groups they recruit from. Lech Walesa, former Polish president and leader of the anti-communist movement, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet president, have both made a parallels between Occupy Together, the Polish Solidarity, and the Soviet Perestroika.

Zero confidence

The movement also has many opponents among representatives of rightist and conservative groups that refer to the protestors as anarchists coming from unruly social classes. The longer the protests last, the higher the number of participants, and the higher the emphasis that is placed on concrete local issues, the clearer it is that the practice of representative democracy as we know it is in a major state of crisis. Public trust in democratic institutions is currently low as never before. The reason for that is that the existing policies are no longer in the interests of the public and they no longer represent their beliefs.

Political measures tend to have a short-term impact at the cost of future generations. This way the social gap is progressively widening whereby the number of those that find themselves among the unprivileged and socially disadvantaged ones is rapidly growing. In this context, the public has come to the only logical realisation: the current situation is unsustainable and trying to keep the system unchanged would lead to its fatal and abrupt collapse.

In addition to drawing attention to the looming collapse, Occupy Together points to a generational rift in attitudes. The older generations have for years been tacitly and gratefully reaping the benefits of the welfare system without questioning its fairness and sustainability. They have not pondered over the origin of their luxury and whether it does not exist at the cost of others – others who work unethical amounts of hours in inhuman conditions in faraway lands in order to provide them with cheap goods for their consumerist way of life.

The young generation is now reconsidering the welfare of their childhood and starts posing the questions their parents have been avoiding for so long, ready to face the bitter blow. The global decline in economic growth in the demographic context of the developed economies reveals the fact that the future of young generations will be miles away from the relatively secure comfort of their parents' and grandparents' retirement years. The young will have to face an endless stream of bills stemming from the past luxury that won't be paid off neither by them nor their children. They will have to pay the price for ecological damage, environmental problems, unsustainable economic growth, armed conflicts with dubious legitimacy, and outdated governmental policies.

Beyond state borders

The value system has been changing in the past few decades in the direction of so-called post-materialistic values that, while accepting consumerism as such, dismiss the vast amounts of material personal assets. What has changed is the consumerist behaviour that tends to be much more responsible and considerate (this is exemplified by the recent popularity of ecological products, fair trade goods, and support for small local business). The new value system goes hand in hand with the criticism of the existing global economic and political system, whereby citizens require more say in important political decision-making processes and protection of the freedom of speech.

In the context of this legitimacy of governance crisis, politicians should be more responsive to the demands of the masses. After all, every citizen has a voice in elections and if the 99% unite their voices, the influence on the electoral results can be quite substantial. It can hardly be expected that these voters would support increased public spending on armament and industrial growth at the cost of education and sustainable growth.

Occupy Together has brought to the forefront the growth of global solidarity. Existing problems will be more difficult to solve within the borders of nation-states; an intensive cross-national cooperation will be needed. In brief, the character of the movement gives an important impetus for the initiation of a global discussion rooted in local issues. This could be the first step to the much-needed solutions to our current global crisis with long-lasting effects.