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So, What Are the And Where Do They Go From Here?

BY JUDITH BUTLER

Ever since the Occupy Movement emerged onto the political landscape, critics and skeptics have both asked, “so, what are the demands?” And in more recent months, skeptics have asked whether the movement has lost momentum since many of public sites occupied have been cleared by state-ordered police power. Let us consider first the question of demands, and then turn to the question of where the occupy movement moves now.

If we think about this first question, we can see how firmly entrenched the notion is that political movements, if they are to qualify as “political”, must (a) be organized around a concrete and discrete list of demands, and (b) endeavor to have those demands satisfied. For the moment, let us consider what kind of politics is characterized by such assumptions, and what kind is not. In other words, although we take for granted that politics must furnish a list of demands that can be satisfied, it does not follow that we are right to take that version of politics for granted as some of us clearly do. Let us think, then, about the component parts of this skeptical claim, and see which version of politics is assumed and promoted by this question. Further, let us consider whether the kind of politics that Occupy pursues not only fails – or refuses – to comply with this idea of politics, but is actively trying to establish another one. So let us start with two of the basic

building blocks of the skeptical position: (1) demands that appear in the form of a list, (2) demands that can be satisfied,

1. *Demands should take the form of a list.* Let us imagine that the Occupy Movement were to say that we have three demands: (a) the end of home foreclosures, (b) forgiving student debt, and (c) a decrease in unemployment. In some ways, each of these demands surely resonates with what Occupy is about, and people who are concerned with all these issues have clearly joined occupy, joined demonstrations with signs that oppose home foreclosures, unmanageable student debt, and unemployment rates. So the list of demands is clearly related to the Occupy Movement, and yet, it would be a mistake to say that the political meaning or effect of the Occupy Movement can be understood perfectly well by understanding these demands or, indeed, a much longer list of demands. The first reason is that a “list” is a series of demands. But a list does not explain how these demands are related to one another.

If one of the main political points of the movement is to draw attention to, and resist, growing inequalities of wealth, then that is a social and economic reality that crosses all the specific demands that such a list might include. But it would not really count as one demand among many. In other

words, through what language and action does one call attention to a growing inequality of wealth in which the rich monopolize increasingly greater amounts of wealth and the poor now includes increasing numbers of the population? This point is made evident by each of the particular issues on the list, a list that could include the decimation of social services, including public healthcare, of pensions, the increase in “flexible” labour that makes workers into a disposable population, the destruction of public and affordable higher education, the overcrowding of primary and secondary public



The number of participants surged.

Illustrations from *The Beginning of the American Fall* by Stephanie McMillan

The Occupy concept caught like wildfire. By October 9, more than 600 “Occupy” protests had been held or were ongoing across the U.S.



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schools, tax breaks for the rich, depression of wages, and increasing government support for the prison industry. We can make such a list, add to such a list, even become more specific about such a list, but no one item on the list can help us explain what gathers all those items together on the list. If we argue, though, that increasing wealth differentials and inequality that emerge directly from contemporary forms of capitalism are exemplified by each of these issues, and that together they provide evidence for the claim that capitalism relies upon, and reproduces, social and economic inequalities of this kind, then we are making a claim about how a system works and, more particularly, how the capitalist system works now: inequalities are becoming greater, assuming new and devastating forms, and this accelerated process of inequality remains unchecked by existing state and global authorities who have a vested interest in making capitalism work.

The skeptic might still respond with the following: “but don’t we have to work on each of these issues separately in order to make any real difference in people’s lives? If we would

all take on some one issue, we could make our way down the list, finding practical solutions for each item there.” To take this point of view, however, is to insist that the items can be separated from one another. But if we need to know what links the items together in order to provide a solution to this problem, then our politics depends upon our asking about the systemic and historical character of the economic system itself.

Indeed, if we understand how the increasing differentials in wealth (and the accumulation of more wealth by fewer and fewer people, and the extension of poverty and disposability to increasingly larger numbers of people) follows from a particular economic organization of society, one that is geared to produce ever more acute versions of this inequality, then in order to address any of the items on the list, we have to understand the broader structure of inequality to which each item points, and we have to think about ways of objecting to that economic regime, rather than seek to make smaller adjustments to its operation. Indeed, if we “fix” any problem on

the list without addressing the reproduction of inequality, and if that inequality is being reproduced in ever more acute ways, then the list just gets larger, even as we seek to remove a particular item from it.

We cannot fix the one form of inequality without understanding the broader trends of inequality we are seeking to overcome. By thinking that all the items must be disaggregated, we miss our mark and narrow our vision at the expense of both social and economic justice. Of course, one can work on any of these items at the same time that one struggles for the end to the structural reproduction of inequality. But that means that some group, some political articulation, has to keep attention on the problem of structural inequality. If we think that there are adequate resources within the current economic regime to fix these problems, then, we make an odd assumption. We assume that the very system that has produced the inequality that characterizes all the items on the list can serve as the recipient of our demands. This brings me then to the second presumption made by the skeptic’s question.



2. Demands should be capable of being satisfied.

This surely seems like a reasonable point. But anyone who argues that demands must be capable of being satisfied assumes that there is someone or some existing institutional power to whom one could appeal to have one's demands satisfied. Union negotiations backed by the threat of strikes usually do have a list of demands which, if satisfied, will avert the strike, and if not, will commence or prolong a strike. But when a company, corporation, or state is not considered a legitimate partner for negotiation, then it makes no sense to appeal to that authority for a negotiated settlement. In fact, to appeal to that authority to satisfy the demand would be one way of attributing legitimacy to that authority. So articulating demands that can be satisfied depends fundamentally on the attribution of legitimacy to those who have the power to satisfy the demands. And when one ceases to direct demands to those authorities, as happens in the general strike, then it is the illegitimacy of those authorities that is exposed. This is one important implication of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's contribution to Occupy Theory.

But if those existing institutions are complicit with the economic regime that depends upon, and furthers, the reproduction of inequality, then one cannot appeal to those institutions to bring about an end to the conditions of inequality. Such an appeal would defeat itself in the course of its articulation. Simply put, the appeal or demand that sought to be satisfied by the existing state, global monetary institutions, or corporations, national or transnational, would be giving more power to the very sources of inequality, and in

that way aiding and abetting the reproduction of inequality itself. As a result, another set of strategies are required, and what we are now seeing in the Occupy Movement is precisely the development of a set of strategies that call attention to, and oppose, the reproduction of inequality.

Perhaps to the skeptic the idea of making "impossible demands" is equivalent to vacating the field of the political itself. But that response should call our attention to the way that the field of the political has been constituted such that satisfiable demands become the hallmark of its intelligibility. In other words, why is it that we have come to accept that the only politics that makes sense is one in which a set of demands are made to existing authorities, and that the demands isolate instances of inequality and injustice from one another without seeing or drawing any links among them? One can see that the restriction of politics to a list of demands that can be satisfied thus keeps the field of politics restricted to contemporary electoral systems that operate on the assumption that any radical change in the economic regime is non-negotiable. So, whatever is negotiated, whatever demand is satisfied, will not touch upon what is non-ne-

gotiable, namely, the reproduction of an economic regime that is spawning inequalities at an alarming rate. We might say the particular politics that defines practical and intelligible politics as the production and satisfaction of a list of discrete demands is committed in advance to the legitimacy of existing economic and political structures, and to a refusal of the systematic character of inequality.

As we can see, one of the key ways that existing regimes of power maintain their legitimacy is by debunking and dismissing all forms of popular political resistance that call their own legitimacy into question. They have strong self-interested reasons to dismiss the Occupy movement as "apolitical." At that moment, they are trying to maintain a monopoly on the discourse of the political, trying, in other words, to define and control the power of discourse that will establish who makes sense, whose actions are truly political, and who is "beyond the pale," "misguided," and "impractical."

The uprising that calls into question those strategies of self-legitimation reminds us that a form of government or power that is democratic depends upon the popular will of the demos, the people. What recourse do people have when the institutions that are supposed



to equally represent them politically, provide conditions for sustainable work, secure basic health care and education, and honor basic rights to equality, end up distributing all of those basic resources and rights differentially and illegitimately? At such a moment, there are other ways of enacting equality, showing up together on the street or on the internet, producing alliances that demonstrate the resonance, the overlap, and the broader links among all those items on the list of contemporary injustice.

No political or economic regime can claim to be legitimately democratic when it fails to represent the people equally. And when that inequality becomes pervasive, and is treated as an irreversible fact of economic life, then the people who suffer that inequality act in alliance, enacting and calling for the kind of equality. Some might object that radical equality is impossible. Even if that were the case – and there is no good reason to accept that claim at face-value – it would not be possible to think democracy without an ideal of radical equality. So radical equality is a demand, but it is not directed to those institutions that reproduce inequality. It is directed to the people themselves whose historical task is the making of new institutions. The appeal is to ourselves, and it is this new “we” that is formed, episodically and globally, in every action and demonstration. Such actions are in no sense “apolitical.” They take aim at a politics that offers practical solutions at the expense of addressing structural inequality. And they remind us that every form of politics gains or loses its legitimacy depending on whether it accords equality to the people it is said to represent. Otherwise, it fails to represent, and so destroys its own legitimacy in the eyes of the people. In demonstrating, in acting, the people come to represent themselves, embodying and reanimating the principles of equality that have been decimated. Abandoned by existing institutions, they assemble themselves in the name of a social and political equality, giving voice, body, movement, and visibility to an idea of “the people” regularly divided and effaced by existing power.

So where does the Occupy movement go now? To answer this question, we have to ask first, who poses this question? And we have to ask, in what form does this question appear? One point is clear from the start: it is not the

tasks of intellectuals to pose and answer the question. One reason is that intellectuals do not have prescient powers and theory cannot have the job of prescribing to those who are engaged primarily as activists. Indeed, let us take this whole distinction apart, since activists are very often theorists, and theorists are sometimes also engaged in forms of activism that are not primarily concerned with theory. The best any of us can do is to track what is actually happening, how it moves people, and what effects it has. And what we see right now, I believe, is that the Occupy movement has several centers, that its public actions are episodic, and that new forms of effectiveness are increasingly evident. By “effectiveness” I do not mean that demands are being formulated and satisfied, but that mobilizations are increasing in size and appearing in new geopolitical locations. As the US elections dominate the news media, it remains clear that a large part of the population understand that their concerns are not addressed by electoral politics. So Occupy continues to delineate the way the popular will wants a political movement that exceeds that of electoral politics. In this way, the “representative” claim of electoral politics is itself brought into greater crisis. Few achievements could be more important than showing that electoral politics as it is currently organized does not represent the popular will – and that its very legitimacy is put into crisis by this divergence of democratic will from electoral institutions.

Perhaps most importantly, though, is that Occupy questions structural inequality, capitalism, and the specific sites and practices that exemplify the relation between capitalism and structural inequality. If Occupy has drawn attention to forms of structural inequality that affect any number of corporations and state institutions, that adversely affect the general population as they try to meet the basic needs of life (shelter, food, health care, employment), then it has surely brought attention to the general economic system that relies upon, and produces, inequality with increasing intensity. We can argue whether capitalism is a system, an historical formation, whether its neo-liberal versions are substantially different than the capitalism criticized by Marx in the 19th century. These are important debates, and academics

should consider to focus their attention there, to be sure. But there remains the question of the historical present of capitalism, and Marx himself tells us that we must take as our point of departure the historical present. What are the specific public institutions and services that plunge ever more people into conditions of precarity, the corporations whose exploitative practices have decimated working lives, the health care conglomerates that profit on illness and refuse to offer adequate health services, the public institutions that are either being decimated or subordinated to corporate logics and the profit calculus? Paradoxically but urgently, Occupy must act episodically to target and expose these sites of inequality, finding their public face and instance, and seizing or interrupting those processes by which inequality and increased precarity are being reproduced.

So, I do not think we have only to mourn the loss of Zucotti Park or other public spaces where Occupy was dwelling. Perhaps the task is to undertake squatting as a form of public protest, even if it is only episodic and targeted. Paradoxically, one can only draw attention to radical inequality by exposing the sites where inequality is reproduced. This must happen in relation to centers of corporate and state power, but also precisely at the site of “service delivery” – health care corporations that fail to provide service, banks that exploit those who keep their money there, universities that become the tools of corporate profit. These are just a few. But if Occupy is episodic, then its target is not known in advance. And if it targets unemployment in one place, unaffordable housing in another, and the loss of public services in yet a third, then it strings together over time a sense of how capitalism is located in concrete institutions and sites. As much as we find against structural inequality and a “system” that profits by its reproduction, we have to focus on the concrete instances where that inequality takes place. So if we do not stay in the same place, it is not to be lamented. If we are on the move, then we are, in collective forms, tracking the sites of injustice and inequality, and our trail becomes the new map of radical change.