



Perspektiven auf globale Politik

OCCUPY WALL STREET – THE UNITED STATES’ FIRST POST-MODERN MOVEMENT

12. Oktober 2016 · von Gast · in *Blog Series: Movements and Institutions* · [Hinterlasse einen Kommentar](#)

Occupy Wall Street has disappeared from the public radar, yet it is worth a second look. Through its structure and identity, it has probably become the United States’ first post-modern movement. Outside of formal institutions, people created their own utopian spaces in the hope for political and social innovation.

by *Natalie Rauscher**

This is not Protest Wall Street; it is Occupy It. It does not march through; it stops and sits and waits (...). The very act is empowering, a form of theater as well as politics.

This quote by Andrew Sullivan from Newsweek refers to one of the most recent social movements: Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Inspired by protests from around the world, people built up their tents in Zucotti Park, New York, and took their protest to the streets. Today, the camps are gone and the first enthusiasm of a new movement has ceased. Yet, OWS is worth a second look. With its unique structure and identity, it has become the United States’ first post-modern movement. With its strong plurality, its leaderlessness, a lack of clear demands and the rejection of co-optation, one can see a clear departure from other popular movements. OWS appeared at a moment in time, when the American people seemed to suffer from a “moral shock” (Langman, Lauren. 2013: 520) triggered by the aftermath of the Great Recession in 2008 when so many middle-class



Folgt uns per E-Mail:

Schließe dich 1.165 Followern an

SUCHE

 LETZTE KOMMENTARE

- [Kommentar zu Ein „westafrikanisches Afghanistan“? Staatskrise in Mali und Herausforderungen an eine ECOWAS-Intervention von Ein “westafrikanisches Afghanistan”? Zur Staatskrise in Mali und der bevorstehenden](#)

families and young people had lost their hopes for a better future. The protests seem to have struck a chord in the very heart of American society.

Where did Occupy come from?

OWS is the first social movement of the new millennium that departs from the 20th century social movements and does so consciously. The American left had long been looking for other forms of protest that were different from the movement strategies of the 20th century, since it was (and still is) disillusioned with the existing political institutions, parties and electoral politics in general (Kress, Daniel, and Zeynep Tufekci 2013: 165). Many of the past social movements were shaped by identity politics. Although this is still a factor in today's movements, the degree of "personalization" has become a different one. With the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, personal freedom and growth through deregulation became the widespread ideology which is still highly influential, despite crises like the Great Recession (Bennett, W. Lance, 2012.: 21). Individualization and self-definition became central to mainstream politics. This has also influenced protest culture and OWS was no exception to that. Additionally, OWS was also shaped by traditional American anarchist ideology. American anarchist roots go well beyond the last century but also influenced protests like the anti-globalization campaign surrounding the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999, where new forms of protest were tested for the first time (Gopal, Shankar, 2001.).

Characteristics of Occupy as a post-modern movement

As one of the first social movements of the 21st century, OWS also shared certain aspects with 'new social movements.' Claus Offe characterized them as post-ideological and even post-historical in nature with a lack of a positive alternative and resistance to standard forms of co-optation (Offe Claus. In: Brucato, Ben. 2012:79). Protesters in the camps were uneasy or often right out hostile towards any form of co-optation. As a generally liberal movement, the Democratic Party would have been the natural addressee for the protesters. At its core, OWS raised issues that could have been supported by many progressives in the country and posed no serious threat to the established social, political or economic order (Kern, Thomas, and Sang-hui Nam. 2013: 207). However, OWS consciously wanted to avoid any contact or collaboration with established politics.

As a post-modern movement, OWS displayed plurality in its structure and was an attempt to address the grievances through an emotional approach rather than an appeal to rationality. The camps were no formalized protest assemblies but displayed a wide range of creative and innovative forms of protest. Postmodernism is marked by a loss of traditional ties to social actors like the church or unions whose interpretation of society and politics is no longer considered adequate.

Intervention - Genocide
Alert 3. September 2016

- Kommentar zu Über uns /
About von Roberta Ioana 4.
Mai 2016

TWITTER

- #Occupy Wall Street: The
US' first post-modern
movement | by Natalie
Rauscher | 8th post in
Movements & Institutions
bit.ly/2e8ukFc | 5 days ago
- Drüben beim @SipoBlog
startet eine spannende
Reihe zum Vergleich
nationaler Strategien und
Herausforderungen in
der...
twitter.com/i/web/status/
7... | 1 week ago

BLOGROLL

- A View From the Cave
- Aidnography
- ArmsControlWonk
- Chris Blattman
- Göttinger Institut für
Demokratieforschung
- Inner City Press
- International Law Observer
- IR Blog (Berlin)
- ISN Blog ETH Zürich
- Jihadica
- Junge UN Forschung
- Junge Wissenschaft im
öffentlichen Recht
- Justice in Conflict

This can also be seen in OWS. Traditional actors joined some of the protests but the Occupiers were generally rather skeptical of them. Protesters wanted an alternative and were quick to accept a movement like OWS where such extreme plurality of backgrounds and views were accepted and welcomed. In fact, this made it quite impossible for outsiders to address ‘the movement’ in any way. OWS began in New York but quickly spread to other cities or campuses around the US. All of the enclaves claimed to be part of the movement and were generally accepted as such by the other Occupy groups. Yet, there was little that clearly defined or linked them. OWS only issued very few ‘official’ documents. The documents remained quite general and expressed an overall acceptance towards almost any idea that was brought to the camps, except of course, discriminating views (for example: [Declaration of the Occupation of New York](#)).

Another very significant attribute of OWS was its composition. Again, it was defined by plurality. People could generally express different identities inside the movement. OWS drew people from many different social or racial backgrounds: A range of social groups were drawn to the streets, forming a unique combination of experienced activists, middle-class men and women and especially young, well-educated millennials who were politically independent. Additionally, there was an extremely large and active group of Internet users that supported OWS online. In general, OWS benefited enormously from the spread of mobile technology and social media, as mainstream media ignored the protests at first. Here, the individualization of protest comes significantly into play: Protesters could come in touch with OWS online and share their story; they could *individually* join the 99%. Thus, OWS also opened the possibility for the individual to realize that he or she was not the only one sharing similar grievances ([Mukherjee, Jacob. 2015.](#)). Many of these individuals felt that they themselves or their children had been betrayed of a better future. Thus OWS stood for a new kind of social movement that is not completely immaterial but also “not simply the classical interest-driven movement seeking better wages, workers’ rights, or the rights to vote (...)” ([Langman, Lauren. 2013.](#) 520).

OWS never stated any *clear* demands and was more or less a leaderless movement. Concerning their motivation, protesters “contrasted spiritual values (such as imagination, creativity, and spontaneity) with material greed. On the institutional level, they promoted democracy as the only antidote to corruption” ([Kern, Thomas, and Sang-hui Nam. 2013:](#) 199). Moreover, OWS stayed local, connected through its occupations of public spaces. This localization was also one basis for the extreme plurality of the movement.

The media often displayed this lack of demands as a shortcoming of the movement, but it was indeed one of the most important parts of OWS’s identity. For many, especially considering their anarchist influences, it seemed impossible to make demands because it would ultimately mean

- Kings of War
- menschenhandel heute
- Mobilizing Ideas
- Opinio Juris
- Political Violence @ a Glance
- Pundicity – Aymen Jawad Al-Tamimi
- Radikale Ansichten
- Sicherheitspolitik-Blog
- Stephen M. Walt
- Syria Comment
- The Disorder of Things
- The Duck of Minerva
- The Monkey Cage
- Theorieblog
- Theorieleben
- Theory Talks
- Thought Economics
- Völkerrechtsblog
- World Peace Foundation – Reinventing Peace
- zoon politikon

META

- Registrieren
- Anmelden
- Beitrags-Feed ([RSS](#))
- Kommentare als [RSS](#)
- WordPress.com

the acceptance of the authority of the institutions addressed. The American political system was seen as inherently flawed and untrustworthy, highlighting the influence of money and special interest. Therefore, they had to find ways towards change *outside* the existing political institutions. As mentioned above, traditional sources of social innovation and reform, such as trade unions, churches or other social groups seemed incapable of addressing the realities of the 21st century. For the Occupiers, it was thus natural that they would not issue any clear set of demands, as this would be a sign of recognition of the legitimacy of the existing political institutions (Graber, David, 2012 : 141-150). Moreover, OWS feared to become too 'established' and to be overshadowed by the 'brand' it seemed to have become. This extreme fear of outside support might seem absurd, yet for the protesters, it was a defining idea.

All the supporters of OWS shared a general feeling of moral indignation with the current system but often remained unspecific about their grievances. The vagueness of the movement was thus also an opportunity to mobilize people from various backgrounds. Inside the camps, protesters then tested what they desired: Direct democracy. There was no charismatic leader defining the protests; everything was decided with participatory means and based on consensus. Usually, protesters met in a 'general assembly' or working groups, were able to express themselves and discuss issues and then decide things consensually. Thus, the camps themselves became forms of political expression; a utopian space where many occupiers' dream of a better society seemed possible. In this way, OWS powerfully challenged the idea "put forth by ruling parties or elites, that there is 'no alternative', that genuine opposition has disappeared in formal political life" (Gould, Deborah B., Mohammed A. Bamyeh, Ruth Milkman, William Julius Wilson, and Dana Williams. 2012: 12-21). Occupy has thus already been labeled a model of the "newest social movements" that produces a living organism of revolutionary protest outside of established politics or state power (Day, Richard. In: Brucato, Ben. 2012: 79). As I suggest above, OWS can also be labeled a postmodern "newest social movement" as it displays many characteristics that depart from other movements before. It tried to build a creative outside hub of political reform without ties to traditional actors or established politics. The plurality of its structure is displayed in the different camps all over the US where people from all backgrounds could gather. Additionally, OWS did not issue any clear demands and was basically leaderless.

What happened to Occupy?

It is hard to discern what remains of OWS. Its impact cannot be measured in political reforms or bills. For some participants, OWS in itself was the new utopia they were looking for, for others it was the quick excitement of the drum circle and some people only supported the protests online. Yet, after the movement lost its central camp close to Wall Street, the whole movement soon dissolved. This dilemma is also based on the very

structure of a post-modern movement. Based on plurality, with no leaders, no clear demands or a way forward, it is difficult to keep a protest movement alive. The localization and individualization of political protest proves to be a challenge to a social movement today. As there are no steady social actors continuing the ideas, the individual protestor has no place to turn to. Moreover, OWS often drove a wedge between protesters and liberals sympathetic to many of OWS's ideas. OWS has always rejected the idea of co-optation, especially by a political party. It thus consciously moved away from the idea of putting their own people up for election or office. In contrast, the protests tried to build a hub of political culture outside of established institutions in the hope of creating a source for social reform and innovation. On the local level, some activists continue to do so.

Despite its physical disappearance, OWS certainly changed people's perspective on the possibilities of social protest in the US today. The protests have rebutted the idea of a politically disconnected millennial generation and it has challenged the idea of what is acceptable and desirable in American society and politics. Despite its challenge of established institutions, the OWS has opened up a discursive space among politicians, leading to a revival of issues such as social inequality. Especially for liberal politicians inside the Democratic Party, OWS created a "radical flank effect," staking out a radical position that provided ideological cover for Party elites" to address issues raised by OWS (Kress, Daniel, and Zeynep Tufekci 2013). The powerful ascension of politicians like Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders displays this vividly. OWS is not an occupation anymore, yet it has left a mark on recent American history and contemporary politics.

* **Natalie Rauscher** is currently working at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies as a teaching and research assistant. She is pursuing her PhD on social inequality in the US under the influence of the sharing economy. Her Master thesis dealt with the Occupy Movement and its impact on political discourse.

*This is the eighth post in the **blog series** „**Movements and Institutions**“. Check out the **introductory post** for more information on the series and click [here](#) for all contributions.*



Photo by Tom Thai (CC BY 2.0)



Bewerten:

1 Vote

Teilen mit:

Twitter Facebook 26 E-Mail Google

Gefällt mir

Einem Blogger gefällt dies.

Ähnlich

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| IB Online (1/10):
Eine kleine
Netzschau
In "Links" | IB Online (1/1): Eine
kleine Netzschau
In "Links" | IB Online (3/2): Eine
kleine Netzschau
In "Links" |
|--|---|---|

Schreibe einen Kommentar

Gib hier Deinen Kommentar ein ...

← [Institutions in a critical agenda for
social movement studies](#)