Inside Occupy Ohio State University (OSU): Values, Media, and the Role of Public Universities in the Occupy Movement

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Abstract

During 2011, a group of activists established an Occupy group at The Ohio State University in solidarity with the global movement. Although Occupy Wall Street has been analyzed by many social scientists, its influence on campuses has not been as critically examined. The purpose of this study is to examine how the ideals and tactics of the Occupy movement have impacted student activism. Methods include semi-structured interviews with members of Occupy OSU and participant-observation, which involved attending Occupy OSU events. Interlocutors include students, one faculty member, and community activists from Columbus, Ohio. By examining the impact of the Occupy movement on The Ohio State University’s campus, this study provides an analysis of the effects of social movements on a university community. Observations during meetings, events, and in casual settings uncover a value system which governs Occupy OSU and illustrates how activists use resources and experiment in direct democracy. In this article, I argue that Occupy Wall Street empowered student activists by providing them with some of the tools, networking opportunities, and motivation for a new student movement.

Keywords: Social movement, Occupy, student movement

Introduction

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the rhetoric and tactics of Occupy Wall Street, the movement’s democratic significance cannot be denied. In order to understand youth and university approaches to the OWS movement, I have carried out a case study of Occupy OSU as a subculture with a distinct value system and institutions that reflect those values. I also discuss digital and linguistic communication, which forms an integral part of any social movement, and artistic symbolism particular to Occupy. After an examination of Occupy OSU, its culture, and its actions, I examine the movement’s impact on its members and its influence in creating a new student movement focused on democratizing university institutions and easing the increasing burden of student debt.

Situating Occupy Ohio State

While this study focuses mainly on the organization of Occupy Ohio State (otherwise referred to as Occupy the Oval or Occupy OSU), the global environment in which the movement is situated must be briefly examined to gain greater insight into local offshoots of the Occupy movement.

Occupy Wall Street arose as part of a long-term progressive movement to address systemic economic inequality, but it was a more direct reaction to the recession that began in 2008 and, in public opinion, showed few signs of abating. Specifically, many people were angry that bankers had engaged in high-risk behavior (compared to gambling by Comaroff and Comaroff 2011) without legal consequences. Meanwhile, over the course of the summer of 2011, Congress and the President battled over how to control the nation’s ever-increasing debt.

and Tea Party conservatives protested taxes and fiscal irresponsibility. Additionally, foreign popular uprisings sent shockwaves across the world. Citizens of various Arab nations, as well as Spain, Greece, and other nations poured into the streets to demand democracy and social justice (Cottle 2011; Agrama 2012).

In the United States, residents of individual states were waging their own battles over democratic principles (Collins 2012). In Ohio, an informal coalition of labor activists, public employees, Democrats, students, and moderate Republicans formed to challenge the policies of the new state government. This coalition provided common ground for new activists, some of whom became involved in Occupy groups. Finally, the specific environment of The Ohio State University adds an important dimension to this case study. As one of the largest universities in America, The Ohio State University is a complex organization. The university must be responsive to the needs of its students in order to survive and maintain order, but concern has grown over the increasing privatization of the university as it sells off assets (Bradley 2012) and partners in research with private companies. Although a majority of students are politically apathetic, various self-proclaimed “progressive” groups on campus lead campaigns for environmental, women’s, and workers’ rights.

In October 2011, as hundreds of cities initiated local Occupy groups, confidence in the nascent movement grew and Occupy came to Columbus, Ohio, where a diverse collection of individuals assembled in front of the statehouse to talk politics, share their stories, and raise awareness through signs and chants. Then, on October 24, a group of about two hundred fifty OSU students, faculty, and community members held an event in solidarity with the Occupy movement. University issues joined general demand for economic equality, as demonstrated by a huge sheet of paper on which students wrote messages to the OSU administration about rising tuition costs and the university’s plans to privatize parking and sign an exclusive merchandising contract with a reportedly unethical brand.

After five hours of events on campus at OSU, a few students led a march to the Columbus City Council. For many non-activists who had attended Occupy the Oval, the

2 We Are Ohio, an organization designed for this purpose, mobilized such groups to effectively repeal Senate Bill 5, which would have restricted collective bargaining rights for public employees. Since that success, We Are Ohio has been less publicly prominent, but it continues to oppose new voter registration restrictions and efforts to make Ohio a “right to work” state.


4 Of particular concern to student activists has been the looming prospect of Ohio’s public land, including Ohio public universities, being opened up to hydraulic fracturing.

5 OSU Free the Planet sent several student activists to Washington, D.C. to protest the Keystone XL pipeline, and OSU Students Against Fracking has lobbied both the university and the Ohio state government to ban hydraulic fracturing until it is more environmentally friendly.

6 The most prominent of these include Women and Allies Rising in Resistance’s efforts to establish a universal, comprehensive sexual violence policy at OSU and the legislative lobbying of Vox (the campus branch of Planned Parenthood) to prevent budget cuts and policies that prohibit abortion and restrict women’s health services.

7 United Students Against Sweatshops have led campaigns against Sodexo, a food distribution company that signed a contract with workers after USAS’ efforts, and Silver Star, a franchise that uses low-wage labor in foreign countries to produce athletic apparel.
experience presented a tipping point for their involvement in non-conventional politics. Vignesh, a graduate student at OSU, had lived most of his life with an aversion to large crowds, afraid of repressive groupthink and pressure to conform. However, after his first demonstration, he felt liberated from his previous reservations about public protest. Nicole, an undergraduate, was also inspired by the action of marching with like-minded demonstrators. “There’s something about standing next to somebody” and participating together that forms a strong bond within the group, she says. After leaving the City Council meeting, the demonstrators marched a few more blocks to join Occupy Columbus. There, the first meeting of Occupy OSU was set for the next day, and the organization was born.

While the strength of any popular movement lies in collective action, the Occupy movement seems to be unique in its emphasis on the individual. Many earlier, well-known social movements, such as the Civil Rights movement, the women’s rights movement, and revolutions in the Middle East, publicly focused more on obtaining benefits for a group than for individuals. While the Occupy movement attempts to gain benefits for middle and lower classes, a focus on individual expression has both helped and hindered the movement. One criticism of the movement has been its lack of clear, formulated demands, but the absence of narrow and specific goals has allowed it to be radical, which may have led to the success of other movements (Piven and Cloward 1977), as well as providing a space where the aspirations of individuals can be identified and addressed. For example, David, a junior Sociology major, has long advocated for environmental issues. He views economic and environmental issues as interconnected and has brought environmental issues to the Occupy OSU agenda. Megan, an active proponent of feminism and women’s reproductive rights, sees women’s rights and economic rights as inexorably linked, since low-income women are often deprived of options available to higher-class women. Members of minorities also find their own struggle for equal rights reflected in Occupy’s message of “We are the 99%,” while other forces, such as churches with a focus on social justice and sociology classes, have instilled a strong sense of justice in individuals who have lived comfortable lives. The majority of Occupy OSU members are social science majors whose experiences in the classroom have made them more acutely aware of global problems. While students in other disciplines can succeed in their studies without an understanding of social and economic inequality, OSU degree programs such as sociology, international studies, and anthropology expose students to these issues in class.

**Methodology**

First, I read literature from anthropology, sociology, and political science to gain insight into social movements and socioeconomic inequality and their historical context. I discovered that some tactics of the Occupy movement, such as displays of civil disobedience and one-on-one organizing, are remnants of other social movements (Rojecki 2011; Graeber 2009.) However, reading about more conventional tactics highlights unique qualities of Occupy, such as the “People’s Mic,” a general assembly model of horizontal rather than vertical leadership, and establishing encampments in many cities. Within this theoretical framework, I studied Occupy OSU through participant-observation and semi-structured interviews. By attending Occupy OSU meetings and events, I studied what the group’s goals were, how they attempted to realize these goals, and how members interacted with each other and with others in the university community. General meetings were held weekly and lasted two to three hours. Four committees, including on-campus, off-campus, education, and communications committees, each met once per week. I attended several committee meetings and almost all general

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8 All names have been changed.
assemblies from October 2011 through March 2012. Events included four marches, several teach-ins about economic issues, and three major rallies with speakers.

I also asked thirteen Occupiers to share their experiences and personal insights into the movement. These casual interviews were focused on why and how the participant became involved in Occupy OSU, but they were also biographical in nature, since individuals’ decisions are strongly influenced by their personal backgrounds. These interlocutors were chosen primarily because of their active participation in Occupy OSU, but also because they had a comfortable enough rapport with me to disclose personal information. They were divided about equally between men and women and consisted mainly of undergraduates, although one graduate student and a professor were interviewed as well.

Through these discussions, I learned how individual experiences shape each participant’s role in the group. A few questions were standard, such as how the subject became involved in Occupy OSU, why Occupy is important to him/her, and what he/she thinks will come of Occupy Wall Street. The rest of the interview was conversational, as this format encouraged interlocutors to reveal aspects of their personalities that provide insight into their actions. For example, Rachel was raised on a farm and first became involved in activism while campaigning for agricultural issues on the Ohio ballot. Vignesh was born in India but lived in multiple countries and cities throughout his life. This international perspective influences his stances on social issues, especially those concerning poverty. He disapproved of socialism until his friend suggested he read more about it, and now Vignesh considers himself a socialist. Jennifer attended a Catholic school that emphasized social justice, a philosophy which caused her to join USAS and Occupy OSU. These are only a few examples of how participants’ background influenced them to join Occupy OSU. Before using this information for an anthropological analysis of the group, it is necessary to understand how scholars have theorized social movements and the motivations behind them.

**Literature Review: Social Movements and Occupy Wall Street**

As a founding member of Occupy Wall Street, anthropologist David Graeber has written on the issues it presents, such as direct action and economic issues (Graeber 2009, 2011.) The meetings, motivations, and tactics of anti-globalization protesters that anthropologists like Graeber study are similar to those of Occupiers, with focus on direct democracy and free expression but also with established organizing strategies (Juris 2008; Smith 2008; Graeber 2009). Indeed, Graeber (2009: xvii) presents what may be perceived as an accurate prophecy, “There is a broad realization that the age of revolutions is by no means over, but that revolution will, in the twenty-first century, take on increasingly unfamiliar forms.”

This statement is certainly true of Occupy Wall Street. The movement does resemble earlier civil rights and workers’ movements in some tactics of civil disobedience, subversion of authority (Scott 1985) and the organization of marches and traditional protests, (Piven and Cloward 1977; Valocchi 2010) but its goals seem to be aimed more at promoting cultural and social change rather than legislation. Because of this lack of legislative demands, some have denounced the movement as aimless. However, other social movements have achieved some degree of social or cultural change among their constituents (Lauer 1976; Johnston and Klandermans 1995), which has been my observation within Occupy OSU. Additionally, the Occupy movement is more oriented toward individual agency and reclaiming democracy (Frank 2010,) rather than seeking to enfranchise one segment of the population. Finally, Occupy is unique from many past movements in its use of social networking to organize across cities and even countries (Cottle and Lester 2011; Juris 2011).

The motivations behind Occupy protests are many, but they are often responses to a sense of relative deprivation, economic inequality, and the behavior of many executives leading
up to the financial crisis in 2008. Relative deprivation and stagnant social mobility are problems in American society (Geschwender 1968; Gurney and Tierney 1982; Foroohar 2011) that provided motive for more people to become involved in nonconventional politics. Although Americans enjoy a high standard of living compared to people of other nations, a high per-capita GDP may not be the best indicator of a prosperous society (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Many middle and working-class Americans feel deprived compared to the top one percent of wealthiest Americans, who control about forty percent of the nation’s wealth (Domhoff 2010). Problems with corporate fraud and other extreme behavior associated with American-style capitalism (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Sayles and Smith 2006) have produced an extreme level of economic inequality. These factors, combined with high unemployment and increasing cost of education, sparked the inception of Occupy Wall Street. Subgroups of the Occupy Wall Street movement, such as Occupy OSU, then developed within particular kinds of environments.

The Occupy OSU Constituency

The Occupy OSU movement began as a handful of students and faculty from activist organizations such as United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) and the International Socialist Organization (ISO). Some OSU Occupiers had known each other since high school, while others were recent friends. Many, myself included, became aware of the budding organization through the event Occupy the Oval in October 2011. The organizers of this event, undergraduates Patrick and Paul, became de facto leaders of the group. They set the first meeting time, formed a Facebook group and events, and took the lead in planning direct action. The latter involved setting routes for marches, organizing speakers, and delegating roles to others. Weekly General Assemblies (known as G.A.s) began and continued throughout the academic year. Early G.A.s lasted about three hours because, in the spirit of democracy, every individual was given time to speak about personal feelings and stances on political and economic issues. Specifically, they discussed the extremity of economic inequality in the United States, blamed political and business leaders for the situation, and debated whether capitalism is inherently unjust. As time passed, G.A.s shortened as discussions became more goal-oriented and less philosophical.

A pattern of organization emerged around the education rallies on March 1, 2011 and May 16, 2011. The establishment of such a pattern suggests a move away from the nebulous beginnings of Occupy OSU into a more efficient and organized group. After setting a date (for both events, the date was set approximately one month beforehand), Occupy OSU debated the action’s overall themes during one or two G.A.s. Then demands were written, debated, and revised, and an agenda was organized with speakers for various topics. If a march was planned, the route was laid out, and whether or not the group should encourage illegal activity, such as walking in streets, was discussed.910

9 The latter point has proven to be quite contentious. The group is divided between those who think walking in the street will draw attention and show that the protestors mean business, while others worry that dramatic action will scare off potential members and allies. To resolve the issue, Occupy OSU decided to march in the streets and on the sidewalk, so participants will not be forced into illegal action. Diversifying tactics to allow maximum participation were also utilized in some anti-neoliberalization protests (Graeber, 2009).

10 This qualifies as direct action according to David Wieck, Rob Sparrow, and David Graeber (2009) because it disregards the authority of the state. The protestors walked in the street to assert their own right to the space rather than to explicitly lobby the authority of the city of Columbus.
Like the discussion and ideas, the makeup of G.A.s is moderately diverse. The group is approximately half male and half female and mostly white, with some African and Asian-Americans and several students who had immigrated to the U.S. years ago.11 Most active members study social sciences, including sociology, political science, economics, anthropology, and international studies, although engineering, physics, and biochemistry majors are also included. Throughout the 2011-2012 academic year, undergraduates constituted the majority of the group, but roughly one-third of active members graduated in 2012. Approximately half a dozen graduate students were active in the group, with studies in economics, comparative studies, and engineering. Although numerous faculty members have expressed written support for Occupy OSU, only one professor was regularly involved. He stated that he sometimes restricts his participation to allow students to lead, since he wants students to develop their own organizing skills. Rounding out the group were an organizer who works with campus workers and a liaison from Occupy Columbus who invites OSU Occupiers to support Occupy Columbus’ activities.

Efforts have been made to maintain and increase the diversity of the group, with varying degrees of success. A student of Egyptian descent tried to bring in Arab-American students by linking Occupy OSU to the revolution in Egypt but confessed that Arab students were not very interested in American nonconventional politics. One point of dissension with the G.A. process is its domination by the males of the group. A recommended solution to the problem was to choose a female facilitator to run the meetings every other week. This proposal met with strong opposition, as many felt that gender is an indistinct criterion. The issue was never completely resolved, but it was improved by emphasizing “step up, stand back,” a philosophy that encouraged quiet people to assert themselves and more forceful members to rein in their egos.

Democratic Values and Occupy OSU: Freedom of Expression, Individual Empowerment, Collectivity, Solidarity, and Community

Before turning to the values I have observed in the OSU movement it is important to examine the symbolic importance of the word “Occupy.” It is a military term that evokes a formidable sense of opposition and territorialism. While this tactic may seem strange for a nonviolent movement, it addresses a cognitive militancy in the group. By occupying a space like Wall Street, the protestors asserted their right to be heard and the idea of public spaces as belonging to the people. After all, protestors assert, if their tax dollars pay for the streets and public buildings of their cities, they have a right to occupy those spaces. This relationship to public space is reflected through the chants and slogans of demonstrators, such as Occupy OSU marchers. In mid-November 2011, Ohio State students marched directly in High Street, one of Columbus’ busiest roads, and chanted, “Whose streets? Our streets!” This central idea of occupation pervades the collective consciousness of the movement’s members and shapes the way they view space and territory. (Graeber 2009)

Although they come from different backgrounds and may focus on different specific issues, members of the Occupy movement in general and Occupy OSU in particular share an overall value system. One component of that system is respect for individuals and individual expression. Most Occupiers are socially libertarian and claim to hold individual liberties in high regard. As such, the Occupy movement functions as a “constituent moment” (Frank 2010) that reinforces democratic values. However, individual liberties are limited by collective values, which shall be discussed below.

11 Many white members of Occupy OSU frequently address “white privilege,” just as issues of “male privilege” and “class privilege” to mitigate the elitist effects of having an educated, mostly white membership.
The first value I highlight is freedom of expression. For example, perhaps nowhere is Occupy’s effort to appreciate freedom of expression more evident than in the G.A. It is modeled after Occupy Wall Street and operates as an expression of direct democracy. The G.A. is not conducted by an elected leader but by a rotating corps of volunteers who facilitate, record the proceedings, and maintain a speakers’ list to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. Thus, the structure of the G.A. promotes horizontal leadership and equal opportunity to be heard. Similarly, any member can bring forth a proposal to be voted on by the greater body. Freedom to express dissent with the group’s decisions is another fundamental principle of the G.A. By crossing their arms to “block” a proposal, Occupiers tell their fellows that they absolutely cannot proceed with the action. Even one block in the group has the power to halt procedure because the individual’s concerns must be heard and understood by the group. Because of its revolutionary ideas and grassroots structure, the G.A. has been described as a “transformative experience” by Paul, a senior political science major at OSU. Forms such as the G.A. can empower and inspire individuals to achieve some degree of direct democracy in their regular life. (Graeber 2009; Juris 2008)

In an effort to foster equality in expression, dissent is protected by the format of the G.A. and has never been prohibited by the rules of the group. However, in practice peer pressure to agree with a proposal or to express a certain point of view does influence members. They sometimes refrain from dissension with an accepted plan out of a sense of futility. Furthermore, liberal values strongly dominate the group. Supporters of President Obama’s foreign policy, hydraulic fracturing, free-market enterprise, and curtailment of unions’ powers are socially, if not legally, discouraged from expressing such views during meetings. Consequently, tolerance is promoted within limits, and even though Occupy Wall Street claims to represent “the 99%,” some views are favored over others.

The second value that is important to highlight is the focus on empowerment of individuals, and the G.A. was designed to foster this empowerment. The next example demonstrated that while the value seemed positive to the group and actualized in organizational structures, sometimes even good intentions can lead to controversy. When Occupy OSU was still forming, a small group of three individuals met privately and made decisions about what the organization’s goals should be. After their fellow members expressed frustration with those students, small group meetings became more public, so more members could meet outside of G.A.s. Members with a broader background in sociology and organizing became de facto leaders because of their experience. Therefore, the idea of speaking up and becoming a leader is intimidating to new and less experienced members, although a few freshmen have earned respect and responsibility through frequent engagement and participation in activities. This respect is realized through more invitations to lead discussions and events. Speaking up is encouraged, and members nearly always refrain from personal attacks during debate.

Individual empowerment is also facilitated by the “People’s Mic.” It was first developed in New York City because any electronically amplified sound, even a battery-powered megaphone, was illegal without a permit. To ensure speakers could be heard by large audiences, the people nearest the speaker would repeat every few words, acting as a human amplification system. However, the People’s Mic has much greater repercussions than simply those of sound. As Jennifer, a senior international studies and philosophy major, said, “you have to listen to what

12 The “block” appears to have originated in other direct action groups, and has been documented in meetings of the New York Direct Action Network (Graeber, 2009.) It is likely that this gesture of Occupy Wall Street was introduced by more seasoned New York activists and modeled after their own meetings.

other people are saying” in order to repeat their words correctly. As a self-described “big fan of conversation,” Jennifer also points out that the People’s Mic facilitates horizontal leadership and understanding. Through the People’s Mic, anyone in the group can make themselves heard. In this respect, Occupy OSU has succeeded in its goal of promoting dialogue – at Occupy OSU events, the audience repeated speakers’ words faithfully, even if they did not completely agree with the statements.14

A third value is collectivity. As with the previous two values, the individual is valued and many organizational structures are designed to empower individuals. However, the group is considered vital as well. Many Occupiers do not simply protest the widening gap between rich and poor but also lament the perceived decline of community values in favor of rugged individualism. Therefore, the very same mechanisms that promote freedom of individual expression can also be used as a source of collective power.

For instance, the General Assembly empowers the group to make decisions that are, on the whole, acceptable to its individual members. Disagreements are resolved through discussion, but ultimately, the success of any G.A. depends upon the level of trust within its membership. In this regard, Occupy OSU maintains a significant advantage over more disparate groups like Occupy Columbus. The latter group fell apart after a few months because members came from varied backgrounds and could not agree on goals or aspirations. Some respectful dissent from within Occupy OSU is tolerated well and even encouraged, as multiple points of view are appreciated.

One example of how dissent is tolerated while still maintaining a value of collectivity comes from Justin, an undergraduate who began attending G.A.s in March. He acts as a devil’s advocate when it comes to issues of dealing with the board of trustees, influencing the university’s policies and budget, and national politics. In my observations, I have never seen his objections treated rudely. Instead, other group members calmly explain their position. Moderate dissent is either resolved through discussion or merely put aside to focus on immediate goals. Moreover, the group is self-selected to have liberal tendencies, so members share similar, if not identical, political and social leanings. This prevents major dissent that could have destroyed the organization early on.

The People’s Mic, when employed in an organized manner, can also act as a unifying collective force. The best examples of this are the staged “Mic Checks” that have proliferated since the advent of the Occupy movement. Although these Mic Checks use the same format as the People’s Mic, both the intent and the outcome of the action are different. The People’s Mic is meant to amplify one individual’s voice to express that individual’s story or opinion, while the Mic Check acts as a show of unity around one central idea. During a Mic Check, one individual presents, line by line, a statement that is endorsed by the other participants in the Mic Check.

One example of this is when a group of Ohio students Mic Checked a presentation by a natural gas industry spokesperson at the Ohio State University. The presentation, designed to promote hydraulic fracturing, or fracking in Ohio, was interrupted about ten minutes in by cries of “Mic check!” Reading a prepared message about the alleged dangers of fracking that had been distributed to participants of the Mic Check, one student shouted each line and was echoed from every corner of the room. After delivering their message to the presenters, the students left the chamber, chanting “We won’t stop until you do!”

The fourth value it is imperative to discuss is solidarity, which is deeply enshrined in Occupy’s organization and ideologies and is similar to historical social movements (Lauer 1976; 14 It is worth noting that in my observations, no vehement opponent of Occupy OSU has attempted to use the People’s Mic to spread dissent within the group, so the extent of Occupy OSU’s commitment to this ideal is still inconclusive.
Juris 2011). Other than the message of “We are the 99%” and the “Occupy” brand itself, “solidarity” is the buzzword of the movement. Members sign their emails with “solidarity,” events are called “in solidarity with” other demonstrators, and Occupiers sing “Solidarity Forever” during their marches. John, an undergraduate, asserts that his solidarity fist tattoo is not simply an emblem of radical politics but “a symbol of unity in the face of adversity.” Another student, Patrick, likens a social movement to a “good gang” in which members of the group support each other and face down hardships with unity. Solidarity with union workers and other organizers is most prevalent, but solidarity with the LGBT community, the poor, Planned Parenthood, foreign protestors, and racial minorities is also important, both in rhetoric and in practice.

One of the most dynamic properties of solidarity is its universality. It can unite seemingly disparate groups, because even though individuals may hold different political views (libertarian, liberal, and socialist in this case), a common cause brings them together. Paul’s personal mantra is “people over money,” which reflects a widespread concern amongst Occupiers that human needs and happiness are not adequately valued in the current global socio-political-economic system. Such concern is likely a reflection of Marxist thoughts on the impersonal and exploitative nature of capitalism (Marx 1848) which has been studied directly by at least seven members of the group. Many Occupiers would also agree with Vignesh’s statement that he would like to see people treated as human beings rather than commodities to be bought and sold. This sense of common humanity and alienation allows OSU Occupiers to act and react in strong solidarity with other Occupy groups across the nation and across the world. For example, Ahmed, an OSU student of Egyptian descent, organized a solidarity event on January 25, 2012 to mark the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the Egyptian revolution. Chants such as “From Columbus to Tahrir, we do not have any fear!” and a call-and-response “Hollaback!” “We got your back!” are significant for the power of solidarity that they expressed.

Another major show of solidarity occurred in response to vandalism on the OSU campus. In March 2012, “Long Live Zimmerman,” presumably in response to the shooting of an African-American teenager in Florida, was spray-painted on the Hale Black Cultural Center. Hundreds of outraged students staged a sit-in in the Union to demand a crime alert system for so-called hate crimes, as well as increased commitment to diversity and tolerance at OSU. A group of graduate students (mostly African-American but some white and Latino students) founded OSU Stand Your Ground, a group that reappropriated the phrase from Florida’s controversial gun law. There is substantial overlap in membership between Occupy OSU and OSU Stand Your Ground, and Occupy OSU has adopted some of SYG’s demands into its own agenda. In addition to SYG, Buckeyes Against Fracking, United Students Against Sweatshops, OSU Free the Planet, and other groups have recruited membership and support from Occupy OSU.

A fifth value and focus is on community. Occupiers often regret the observed decline of community in favor of isolationist individualism. Andre, a member of Occupy Columbus, views the movement as a “renaissance of human consciousness.” He noted how average people do not make eye contact with strangers on the street or reach out to others beyond their own social circles. Megan said of Occupy OSU, “half the reason I go back is because I love these people.” This camaraderie both contributes to and is an effect of open discussion within Occupy.

The power and pervasiveness of solidarity within the Occupy movement lends itself readily to a strong sense of community amongst its members. Through the shared experiences of marches, general assemblies, and other activities, Occupy has created a space in which like-minded individuals can discuss ideas and nurture friendships. Vignesh, who had never been involved in activism before, was “amazed that people think the same way as me.” Several Occupiers hold minority opinions or are constituents of minority groups and are relieved to discuss their ideas freely without fear of reprisal. Zach, another new activist, recognizes the
significance of community within the movement, commenting, “These are people who will care about me.” I met Sarah at Occupy the Oval, and at the time she was not involved in any activism. She later became passionately involved in USAS and developed strong friendships with other Occupiers.

To support this community building, Occupiers do not only engage with each other at formal Occupy events, but also at parties and other social outings, which provide bonding experiences in more casual settings. This social aspect of the movement has had a profound personal impact on members. A few students who are new to the university or who have been more reserved in the past forged a majority of their friendships at OSU with fellow Occupiers. As Paul points out, all of this negates the traditional “binary in capitalism between work and leisure” – the idea that classes and extracurricular activities are work and should not overlap with leisure activities. During marches, drums and music makers take the place of the giant puppets and street theater of modern activist groups, but a joyous, carnival mentality that rejects the austerity of state authority is constant. (Graber 2008; Juris 2011) Political and economic issues blur with more mundane details of everyday life to form a dialogue that is both enlightening and entertaining. At parties, some people discuss politics while others dance and talk about lighter subjects. In this respect, Occupy has grown into the kind of flexible and interactive community it desires to create in American society.

Social Media, Visuality, and the Actualization of Occupy OSU Values

The modes of communication employed by the Occupy movement incorporate the values outlined above into everyday practice. Social media, for instance, has proven extremely effective in mobilizing demonstrations (Cottle and Lester 2011; Juris 2012). Since its inception, Occupy Wall Street has used Facebook to its full advantage. There are hundreds of various Occupy pages on Facebook which range from “Occupy Wall St.” and “Occupy Together” to more targeted groups, such as “Occupy the Hood” and “Occupy Colleges.” These pages constantly post new information, videos, images, and memes on Facebook where fans of their pages can view and share the links. Additionally, Occupy OSU creates Facebook events for every G.A. and Occupy-hosted event. This allows members to invite their friends to join with just a click. Because of social media, much of Occupy OSU’s organizing occurs online rather than mostly in person, as previous movements had done. However, reliance on social media risks excluding people without ready access to online resources as well as potentially exposing plans to authority figures. The latter concern led Occupy OSU to prohibit intraorganization communication through OSU email to prevent alerting campus police to plans for action.

Outreach of the Occupy movement is not limited to words, but involves a wide range of visual aids to raise awareness and disseminate the movement’s message. From banners bearing “People Over Profit” and the image of Brutus the Buckeye with Guy Fawkes’ face to signs demanding the reversal of Citizens United vs. FEC and a halt to fracking, visual supplements allow for quick statements. For example, Chris from Occupy OSU drew the design of a one-hundred dollar bill with Benjamin Franklin saying, “I’m just a face on a piece of paper; I shouldn’t matter more than actual people.” Many Occupiers are artistically inclined, including Nicole of Occupy OSU, who says, “what gets me going is the art side of it.” At the January 25 solidarity rally, Nicole carried a colored sign that read “Cairo to Ohio” and bore the image of an upside-down pyramid with “99%” emblazoned on it. Signs can certainly draw attention to larger issues.

While these media are important, Occupy art also takes less conventional forms. For example, one occupier constructed a gingerbread house that bore the phrase “This House Has Been Occupied” in white frosting. Accompanying the house were two smiling gingerbread “Occupiers,” a frowning gingerbread “banker,” and a cardboard sign that said “People Over
Money.” The final form of Occupy art I shall address is digital graphic art that has been widely distributed through social media. From simple images with the date and time of an action to more complex infographics and even videos, online Occupy art combines education with creative expression. It is impossible to summarize all Occupy art here, but its prevalence in the Occupy movement reflects the ideals of Occupiers, such as free expression and diversity.

Public Universities and the Occupy Movement

Values and modes of communication have laid the groundwork for a student social movement. Universities have been prominent breeding grounds for activism throughout many struggles. Students at The Ohio State University may not be as politically polarized as at more liberal institutions, but there are many student activists who have come together through Occupy OSU. As university students and faculty, the constituency of Occupy OSU can unite around university issues such as tuition increases, privatization of assets, and lack of student voice in the board’s decision-making. Additionally, many members of Occupy OSU have been long-term friends or have worked together in other activist student groups. These factors combine to create an environment in which individuals are usually comfortable subjugating their own agendas to the decisions of the group.

Graeber (2009: ix) argues that the 1980’s and 1990’s were “probably the most depressing time to be a revolutionary.” He contends that previously, the radical Left was more concerned with utopian ideals and therefore had greater vision, and that protests against global neoliberalism have returned the radical Left to a sense of militancy. Student movements at The Ohio State University seem to mirror this timeline. OSU students held massive protests against the Vietnam War in the early 1970’s, but student activism seemed to decline thereafter. However, a bad economy and increasing awareness of neoliberalism may be encouraging more student activism since 2011. In an interview, undergraduate Jennifer compared the Occupy movement to WTO protests of the 1990’s, because many Occupiers desire not only to improve the economic situation for Americans, but to overthrow a system which, in their view, oppresses billions of people around the world. The International Socialist Organization draws on opinions from around the world, and some active members of United Students Against Sweatshops have visited sweatshops in central America to conference with the workers for whom they fight.

Public universities, which are partially funded by the state and therefore subject to more public accountability than private universities, have a unique place in the movement. Students have used this momentum to create a forum to protest increasing tuition and privatization of public universities. In 2012, Occupy OSU began to center more around students’ issues and the role of the public university, with a platform that broadly demands recognition of undergraduate education as a right, not a privilege, but also opens up debate on a variety of university issues, such as transparency, student representation on the board of trustees, and student loan debt. Actions included a rally on March 1 to protest tuition hikes, student loan debt, and the university’s parking and merchandising contracts and an event called “Reimagine OSU” on May 16 and 17. At “Reimagine,” half a dozen professors held class outside and students spoke out

15 Currently, there are two student positions on The Ohio State University Board of Trustees, one undergraduate and one graduate. However, these students are appointed by Ohio’s governor, not the student body, and they do not have voting power on board decisions.

16 Many students, particularly in the International Development Studies program at OSU, have discussed problems with global neoliberal policy in their classes.

17 http://reimagineosu.org/
against the Board of Trustees' monopoly on financial decisions.18 A suggestion was made to change the group’s name from “Occupy OSU” to “Reimagine OSU” in the future. Future plans also involve using protests and complaints to pressure the administration into allowing students and faculty more power in deciding the budget.

Furthermore, OSU Occupiers have networked with other students to form the Ohio Student Association, which represents diverse environmental, social, and economic activists. This has increased networking between Ohio institutions of higher learning and allowed organizers to plan multiple simultaneous actions. For example, actions against student debt took place on March 1, 2012, at the Ohio State University, Ohio University, Shawnee State, and Kent State University. This cooperation is likely to continue into the future, with an increasingly connected network of student activists.

Following the lead of Occupy Wall Street, a new student movement, albeit a small one presently, has come about to address the economic and personal toll of university decisions that affect the communities within and around college campuses. Tools to promote direct democracy, such as the G.A., the human microphone, and an emphasis on the reclamation of public space are still integrated into the student movement and will likely undergo continued use in the future. Universities have played a role in the past to promote peace and racial equality, but now economic issues are the central focus of the burgeoning student movement, and as tuition increases and employment opportunities decrease, the new generation of student activists will soldier on.

Conclusion

Some conclusions about the Occupy movement and its relation to students can be drawn from the above observations. First, the Occupy movement has increased national dialogue about economic inequality. During summer 2011, American media focused on the debate over the national debt, but by mid-October, Occupy’s message of “We Are the 99%” garnered substantial coverage and integrated itself into academic, activist, and even popular culture. Occupy has been referenced in numerous classes and has reached a wide audience due to the above-named communication networks. The Occupy movement has caused a shift in debate, if not yet in legislative policy.

The second impact of the Occupy movement is the personal and cultural change it has achieved among its own supporters. Education about issues of inequality has increased among individual members, and so have leadership skills. During his interview, Zach told me that he learned more from Occupy than from his classes, while David and Chris felt more educated about economic issues. Most members of Occupy OSU have also referenced the personal empowerment and confidence they have gained through their experience in the organization. All the members I spoke to expressed some degree of optimism in the movement, and Jennifer, David, Molly, John, Meredith, Paul, and Vignesh all directly referenced the empowerment they experienced.

Finally, the Occupy movement has provided historical and theoretical context and democratic tactics to a new generation of student activists. Occupy OSU began as a rather disparate group of individuals, but common values and new friendships molded it into a more cohesive unit. Now Occupy OSU is working with other students across Ohio to improve students’ options in a stagnant economy. Even if Occupy Wall Street has faded from the national dialogue, it has left in its shell a new student movement, one which has yet to stand the test of time.

Predicting the outcome of social movements can be extremely difficult since their patterns fluctuate with contemporary crises and cultural innovations, but although many onlookers have declared the movement to be defunct, at this time many local Occupy branches are still relevant and effecting changes in their communities. Meanwhile, Occupy OSU looks forward to 2012 to start a student movement whose goals range from increased financial transparency in public universities to free access to undergraduate education. As some students have suggested, the movement may not retain “Occupy” as its public face, but Occupy Wall Street and its subsequent local sister movements have changed the lives of many people. By forming a subculture with a value system and various modes of communication, Occupy OSU has opened a new space for activism and united many individuals under a common cause. Its greatest impact has not come in the form of specific gains, but in the personal development of its members such as Vignesh, who stated, “Occupy is an extension of who we are.” Finally, even though Occupy has died down nationally, activism at OSU continues and, as Paul said, “this is only the beginning.”

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