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Sustaining a Movement

Posted By [Timothy Zick](#) On October 3, 2011 @ 12:56 pm In [Civil Rights](#) | [23 Comments](#)

Thanks to Danielle and the regulars for inviting me to extend my guest stint a bit longer.

Like others, I've been watching with great interest the "Occupy Wall Street" protest, and have noticed that this nascent movement has begun to receive more extensive media coverage (see [here](#) ^[1] and [here](#) ^[2], for example). I'm encouraged that such a diverse and passionate group has devoted time and energy to public dissent, and has used traditional public places like parks and streets to do so. And they've been savvy about it so far — using technology in innovative ways, creating public space, etc. But I've also expressed some kepticism that a movement with no official leadership or hierarchy, uncertain intellectual and public relations foundations, a diverse menu of grievances, a relatively apathetic public, a media generally focused on conflict rather than message, and a police force that is apparently dedicated to escalating its use of force can actually develop into an effective long-term protest movement. (In [this post](#) ^[3], Frank Pasquale has collected links to more optimistic commentary, and offers some encouraging comments of his own.)

In the short term, the last characteristic mentioned above may actually help to sustain the protest for some period of time. Like other movements, including most prominently the civil rights movement, the Wall Street occupation appears to be benefitting somewhat from the conflict dynamic with NYC authorities. Pepper-spraying, netting, harassing, and arresting protesters will engender at least some measure of sympathy from the public. As distasteful, unpleasant, and dangerous as these encounters may be, some movements need them in order to garner public attention and sympathy and to energize current and would-be participants.

Not all movements need this sort of conflict. Although it relied in part on public demonstrations, the Tea Party movement, which faced many of the same limitations now affecting the Wall Street demonstrators, seems thus far to have succeeded without any significant conflict with authorities (although there were certainly some tense moments at some public rallies). Of course, there may be demographic and, more importantly, organic reasons for this distinction. For all their grouching about the political process, Tea Partiers want access to it — ostensibly in order to effect fundamental change. Sharp conflicts with police and other authorities serves no real purpose for such a movement, which wants to retain legitimacy after the tents are folded and the placards stored away. For the occupiers, though, the agenda (insofar as one is becoming clear) seems to be opposition to private greed — banking excesses, corporate welfare, etc. It may take time for that message to develop and be disseminated. In the meantime, conflict will help keep the occupation in the news and in the public eye. Here as elsewhere, resort to escalated force is a counter-productive policing method.

Of course, the protesters will need more basic forms of sustenance as well. So kudos to the local pizzeria offering a special on "[occu-pies](#)" ^[4]. Clearly, the movement does not object to all aspects of free enterprise.

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URLs in this post:

[1] here : http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/02/opinion/sunday/kristof-the-bankers-and-the-revolutionaries.html?_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y

[2] here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/02/nyregion/for-police-another-protest-brings-another-overreaction.html?emc=tnt&tntemail0=y>

[3] this post: <http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2011/10/recommended-reading-on-occupywallstreet.html>

[4] occu-pies: <http://dissenter.firedoglake.com/2011/09/19/live-blog-for-occupywallstreet-day-three-evening-edition/>

[5] : <http://rortybomb.wordpress.com/2011/10/03/actions-become-beliefs-participation-and-class-bias-in-occupywallstreet-debates/>

[6] : <http://www.interfluidity.com/v2/2255.html>

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