Occupy Wall Street and Grassroots Movements in Latin America

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The Occupy Wall Street movement that by December 2011 had spread to 900 cities world-wide led me to question my earlier allegiance to the idea that government/the state is the most effective avenue to radical social change. The Occupy movement also led me to revisit a related argument that didn't begin with OWS and that's been going on in Latin America since the 1990s: whether government or grass roots is the best road to a good society. Is the state nearly always a source of domination no matter who is at the helm? Or can it be harnessed to combat domination of all kinds?

OWS rejects a top-down leadership structure (although some political analysts like John Heilemann insist that a cadre of "prime movers" guides the movement). Occupiers practice a horizontal, not a vertical form of decision-making, that is, decisions are made by discussion and consensus.

Moreover, they also move away from politics-as-usual by so far saying "no" to the call from many quarters — liberal and left — for a list of legislative demands. They advocate instead a broad commitment to economic equality and political inclusion, both of which the current capitalist system subverts. (OWS is by some accounts divided into social democrats who want a reformed capitalism and those who choose an anti-capitalist, communitarian path.) Up until now, OWS has resisted suggestions that they participate in the electoral process. In part, their position stems from a view that the deck is stacked in favor of the top 1% of the economic pyramid. There is a second factor as well: Instead of focusing on government and political parties, it aims to build a new society within the

"shell of the old." OWS refuses to wait for the revolution. That means instead of confronting capitalism's economic and political structures, many in Occupy, like their Zapatista counterparts in Mexico or the neighborhood assemblies in Argentina, seek to build self-governing communities. OWS shares with several social movements in Latin America a refusal to take power or strategize to take power They regard power as coercive and the enemy of autonomy, of self-organization. The Argentinian slogan of 2001 "Que vayan todos" (they all should go) summed up the distrust of all forms of "power over" — bureaucratic, electoral, labor — on the part of many mobilizations in Latin America. "Change the world without taking power" became their rallying cry.

In the process of direct action, social movements rejected the political parties and centralized structure of the Old Left. The Marxist Left was too far removed from the daily life of the marginalized, the "newly poor" created by neoliberalism, who lacked jobs, union representation and party affiliation. Their grassroots movements therefore focused not on the factory but on neighborhood or another form of geographic space as the locus of organizing. So both the ends and the means of social movements in the region differed from that of the historic Left.

In the past when I wrote about the competing claims of the state vs. the grass roots, I tried to be pretty even-handed. However, in conversations with Chuck Kaufman and Jamie Way of the Alliance for Global Justice, I leaned toward the state side of the ledger; in part because the grass roots seemed to lack the political muscle that I associated with collective strength; in part, because many of my generation found the decentralized, anarchist tendencies of the Seattle era activists somewhat alien. (It is said that the anarchist principles of the anthropologist and activist, David Graeber, form

the ideological core of the movement.) Now that I am fed up with electoral politics in the U.S., I find myself more attracted to grassroots autonomy than I was previously. So I decided to revisit the argument of government vs. grass roots with new eyes. The way I did that was to read a recent study of the relationship between social movements and left-leaning governments in Latin America. Benjamin Dangl, who has written about Bolivian mobilizations, in 2010 published *Dancing with Dynamite*, an analysis of the tension between movements and governments. He considers how grass roots movements can and do function outside of the state-centered models for social change.

Dangl's book, *Dancing with Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America*, analyzes the dynamic of radical social movements and left-leaning governments and political parties in the region: Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela, Brazil and the more rightist government in Paraguay. Social movements played a crucial role in electing these governments; subsequently there was an uneasy, even rocky, relationship between them. Dangl clearly sides with the movements. It is their militancy that he doesn't want compromised, though in fact this is what usually happens when the left comes into office.

He argues that the logic of the state is invariable: it always wants to centralize power. Therefore it weakens grassroots organizations especially when they make radical demands that the state and the governing party are not able or willing to meet. Leftist governments are constrained by right-wing forces, both national and international. They do, after all, still operate within a capitalist framework domestically and abroad. Look at Brazil under Lula. Because of the power of agro-industry and global capitalism, once in office Lula pursued neo-liberal policies; he ignored his promises for land

reform spearheaded by the most powerful social movement in Latin America, the Landless Workers Movement (MST).

A second factor operating to demobilize the social movements is their cooperation with the state. For example, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina neutralized large segments of grassroots groups by handing out government posts and creating social programs to reduce poverty. As Dangle points out, programs to help the poor don't change social structures. Working with the state and party apparatus on elections especially undermines the strength and autonomy of the movements. This is evident even in the country where the government is most responsive to the grassroots — Bolivia. Dangl agrees with the stance of the influential Uruguayan analyst, Raúl Zibechi, that expanding the power of the movements is essential. This expansion decidedly does not involve becoming part of the electoral process, which benefits parties more than movements. It does not mean watering down demands to meet the institutional political needs of parties. One can see clearly what an oppositional position is by looking at the MST in Brazil. It showed electoral support for Lula in 2006 as the lesser of two evils. But the MST didn't let that support detract from its radical organizing for land reform or from direct action in the form of land takeovers.

A novel aspect of the grassroots movements is a different view of revolution than that of left-leaning governments. The traditional left has always defined revolution as confronting the state, taking it over and dismantling it. Social movements today, by contrast, prefer to see revolution woven into the fabric of everyday life. They make a point of not waiting for government and political parties to build the society they want. Opting for a non-verticalist structure, rejecting elections, they follow John Holloway's now well-known dictum, "change the world without taking power." In his

book of that title, Holloway focused on the Zapatistas in Mexico, who organized their communities in Chiapas autonomously, practicing "politics from below." (Dangl doesn't include the Zapatistas in his study.)

As an example of revolution now, Dangl cites the Argentinian social movements before they were co-opted by Kirchner — the piqueteros (road picketers), worker-run factories, and neighborhood assemblies. They organized schools, food production and construction with the intention of creating a world where the dispossessed could thrive without directly challenging or confronting capitalist relationships and the capitalist state. The strongest social movement in the region, the MST in Brazil, is also the most autonomous. Unlike grassroots movements in Bolivia and Venezuela that are entwined with the party in power, the MST stands for separation. It started schools for liberating education in the areas it occupied; also health centers and other institutions, not waiting for Lula's government to bestow the state's largesse. (From the historical record, the wait would have been interminable.)

Dangl concludes his study of social movements by looking at fledgling efforts in the North and their links to grassroots efforts in Latin America. In the U. S., as in other countries with an established tradition of representative democracy, the electoral system defines the democratic process for most people. It's as if no other forms of democratic government existed. (I have noticed recently that the mainstream media no longer speak of direct democracy. It prefers more pejorative words to describe the government of, for example, Hugo Chavez — terms like "populist" or "authoritarian.") However, North or South, many radicals argue that building a movement to undermine the power structure is a more valuable contribution to democracy than elections. The Civil Rights movement in the

U. S. for the most part operated outside the electoral arena. Rosa Parks never presented a demand to a legislature. Dangle describes recent instances of direct and autonomous action. Workers at Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago occupied the factory in 2008. They drew directly, self-consciously on the tactics of Argentine worker cooperatives. The Take Back the Land movement of the homeless in Miami, Florida, similarly operated outside of legal and government channels. Homeless people and local citizens occupied vacant land in Miami in 2006 and 2007, borrowing from the strategies and esprit of the landless workers movement in Brazil. Through communal meetings, the Miami group learned how to exercise heretofore elusive control over their lives.

Dangl hopes to see more of this kind of organizing in the North. Undoubtedly, he welcomes the emergence of OWS in the U. S. and around the world.

Heretofore, I sympathized with the statist argument that the main role of the grassroots movements was to bring Left governments to power. Though critics of "power from below" typically don't marginalize popular struggles — at least not explicitly — they nonetheless privilege the state. For example, William Robinson in a 2008 article on Latin America, gives a nod to civil society. He then explains further, saying that no emancipatory project is possible "without addressing the matter of the power of dominant groups, the organization of that power in the state (including coercive power) and the concomitant need to disempower dominant groups by seizing the state from them, dismantling it, and constructing alternative institutions . . . Without some political hammer the popular classes cannot synchronize the

forces necessary for a radical transformative process." This is a legitimate concern for those of us on the Left. I just wanted to shift the balance in my own mind from the primacy of government and political parties. The statist position gives the social movements a decidedly secondary role as handmaidens of the state. Questions remain. Is government, as Dangl and others believe, necessarily hierarchical and authoritarian? Can we say with confidence that grassroots groups don't have, can't have, the coordinated power to change social relations?