

Some Initial Reflections on the Occupy Movement

By Arnold August, April 2012

The domestic prevalence of Wall Street over the economy regarding health care programs and bailouts for the banks and auto industry is well known. However, the cause of scarce funds available for social programs and developing the economy is hidden. The scarcity of funds is due to the enormous amount of money that is spent on what is called “defense” or “national security.” How is this agenda kept from public scrutiny and how does it affect the competitive two-party system? Chomsky writes, “because the major investors agree that a large defense budget is desirable, the two dominant parties compete only on whether the one or the other is stinting on military expenditures, with both promising to enlarge it.” The establishment media follows suit, “limiting debate to the terms defined by the two parties and excluding deliberations and expression of the position that large cuts are desirable.”¹ In this way, “consent is manufactured.” The participation of the people is eliminated in the political process on this life-and-death issue of war and peace, as well as on social spending versus military expenditures.

If we were to deal with our case study of Obama mainly on such issues as domestic, social and economic policies to the exclusion of foreign policy, it would amount to nickel-and-diming. For example, Parenti points out that, in 2009, Obama proposed a “stimulus package” to counteract the deep recession affecting the wealthy few. “Left unmentioned in the debate ... is that the US corporate economy has been living off annual stimulus packages ever since World War II. They are called ‘defense expenditures.’” The danger, Parenti points out, is that “the centrists and the liberals dare not challenge these military appropriations for fear of being seen as faltering in their devotion to ‘keep America strong.’” The enormous U.S. debt and heavy tax burden in paying interest on this debt “is largely the outgrowth of the gargantuan sums expended on wars and military budgets, the cumulative multi-*trillion-dollar* expense of maintaining a growing global empire for the past sixty years or more.”² (emphasis in the original) This is confirmed by the March 2012 estimates released by the U.S. Congressional Budget Office. The U.S. will spend more than \$5 trillion in interest payments over the next decade. The CNNMoney report writes that “over the decade, more than 14 percent of all revenue the government is projected to collect will be sucked up by interest payments.” It goes on to say that this represents a huge sum that cannot be used on “other priorities” of the U.S. For example,

“between 2013 and 2022, estimated interest costs will be higher than Medicaid spending; equal to half of Social Security spending; close to what is spent on all of defense.”³ However, defence spending, as the main culprit of this enormous debt and debt servicing, is evacuated from the debate. On the contrary, CNNMoney seems to indicate that defence spending is a priority that is suffering from debt servicing.

Thus, in analyzing the Occupy Wall Street Movement, it is necessary to place it in the full context of U.S. foreign policy. The 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement not only imposed the “1%” concept onto U.S. public opinion, but it also echoed throughout Europe, Canada and elsewhere. The “1%” has become a kind of corollary to the “military–industrial complex,” but concentrating mainly on the banking system. In order to appreciate both the “military–industrial complex” and the “1%,” it is necessary to uncover the merging of the banking system and the “military–industrial complex.” It has been fashionable since the 2008 economic crisis and again in 2012 (with the danger of another one on the horizon) for even the most establishment-minded economists and media to quote Karl Marx on the capitalist system as indicated in Chapter 2. However, what is *not* quoted is Lenin’s famous analysis summarized in his extensive study entitled “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism” as follows:

If it were necessary to give the briefest possible definition of imperialism, we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism. Such a definition would include what is most important, for, on the one hand, finance capital is the bank capital of a few very big monopolist banks, merged with the monopolist associations of industrialists.... [Imperialism means, among other concepts,] the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this, “finance capital” of a financial oligarchy.⁴

Lenin scrutinized the nature of this “imperialism,” which, as the term itself implies, means expansion and war. This finance capital seeks not only annexation, but violence and reaction extended to all parts of the world, including the non-industrial South and even the more industrialized North, and thus the competition for the re-division of the world by different powers.⁵

At the time Lenin wrote and worked, there were various powers in rivalry with each other to divide the world up among themselves. In the second decade of this century, there is one

outstanding economic–military power, and that is the U.S. This situation still exists despite the attempts of other countries and regional blocks to counter and challenge this unipolar domination.

It is not realistic to view the contemporary U.S. without pointing the finger at this essential characteristic, namely that it is geared to expansion and military aggression. The current economic woes, as has been the case since World War II, are a direct consequence of the economy being based on war and expansion. This was exposed in the 2012 Report from the U.S. Congressional Budget Office. As noted above, CNN dealt with the Report, indicating that over the next decade more than 14 percent of government revenue will go toward interest payments, at the expense of other U.S. priorities. However, as predicted by both Chomsky and Parenti, CNN did not allow defence spending to enter the debate. This war policy does not favour only the bankers *or* only the military-related industrialists; the strategy privileges *both* these sections of the elite, merged into the financial oligarchy as the infinitesimally tiny ruling umbrella group.

The Occupy Movement has courageously succeeded in imposing the “1%” issue on the national political scene. There also seems to be an attempt to steer away from the trap of the “competitive two-party system” by supporting neither the Democratic camp nor the Republican one. This would be a great advance in overcoming Eurocentric prejudices in favour of the two-party system’s superiority with its “lesser of two evils” corollary. However, two weaknesses appeared in the initial stages of the Occupy Movement, both stemming from Eurocentric prejudices.

One weakness was the lack of focus on the U.S. as an imperialist country that drains a huge proportion of resources away from social spending. In addition, there is the moral factor of death and destruction that these policies bring to many areas of the world. Nevertheless, the situation has since been changing, seeing as we are witnessing democracy in motion at the grass-roots level. As scholar-activist Parenti pointed out in a talk on the Occupy Movement, in a La Peña activity in Berkeley, California, on January 6, 2012, “Obama is an imperialist.” He also hinted at the need for the Movement to “think outside of the political box,” reminiscing about the mass movement in the U.S. combined with the Vietnamese peoples’ struggle to turn the situation around and thus defeat the U.S.⁶ In a similar manner, Chomsky, in addressing the Occupy Boston encampment on October 22, 2011, raised an important point. In addition to domestic matters, he said, there are “two dangerous developments in the international arena [that] overshadow everything else.” The first example is the issue of

nuclear weapons, whereby “policies of the Obama administration and its allies are encouraging escalation.”⁷ For the facts on the issue of Iran’s uranium enrichment program and the global opposition to the U.S.–Israeli stand, see Chomsky’s “What Are Iran’s Intentions?”⁸

It is important to take into account the overall situation, in the words of Samir Amin, “The globalized ‘liberal’ economic order requires permanent war — military interventions endlessly succeeding one another — as the only means to submit the peoples of the periphery to its demands.”⁹

The Occupy Movement was focusing almost uniquely on the greed of capitalists and avoiding looking at the U.S. as an imperialist power seeking world domination by any means and draining the public treasury to achieve this aim. This can play into the hands of the U.S. penchant for individual morality as the problem. One has to keep in mind that the very basis of the U.S. socio-political system finds its source in the Protestant extremism of the Puritans and private property. Greed means self-indulgence and voracity. It is based on morality that thus can be fashioned to be less greedy and less self-indulgent. Therefore, opposition to greediness can be co-opted by the status quo. The ruling circles can easily settle for a minor redistribution of wealth while keeping the system intact, the most important feature of which is political power.

The moral use of “abuse” in U.S. political culture plays a major role. For example, all of the atrocities committed by the U.S. military abroad as listed in this chapter, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, are always attributed to “abuse,” “ill-use,” “collateral damage” or a “blunder” of an otherwise correct weapon, military action or system of interrogation. All of the tragedies are attributed as being *aberrations* of the system, committed by one or more individuals. This is done to hide the fact that the U.S. is an imperialist power and its armed forces as a collective carry out the increasingly fascistic tendencies of U.S. foreign policy. The greed of capitalists and military “abuse” and “blunders” are a *natural outcome* of imperialism; they are not oddities, but rather system conformities.

U.S. liberalism is based on extreme notions of individual private property to the extent that “good” and “bad” individuals dominate the manner of thinking. In the words of Amin, “Now this liberal virus, which pollutes contemporary social thought and eliminates the capacity to understand the world, let alone transform it, has penetrated the whole of the ‘historical left.’”¹⁰ This can lead to so-called alternatives such as “corrective measures” and the “reduction of poverty.”¹¹

In addition to emphasizing individual capitalist greed while, to a large extent, ignoring the U.S. as an imperialist state, the Occupy Movement cannot sustain itself and grow if it does not stick to principles. Thus I am reflecting on another issue to contribute toward the debate.

During the months of November and December 2011, two important movements took place simultaneously. In Egypt, Tahrir Square was once again the centre of the uprising to carry forward the next stage of the Egyptian revolt: to rid the country of Mubarak's vestige in the form of military rule. In the fall of 2011, once again hundreds of people were killed and thousands injured by the U.S.-armed Egyptian military, which also used U.S.-manufactured lethal tear gas canisters. During this same period, in the U.S., the Occupy Movement was spreading even further from its original Wall Street base to hundreds of cities and even small towns across the country. The U.S. media and the politicians could no longer ignore this courageous persistence in the face of violent police repression.

The Occupy Movement in its initial stages announced its inspiration from Tahrir Square. However, in November and December 2011, there were no massive actions against the Obama administration for its support of this military regime. This period was the occasion for massive solidarity with Tahrir and against U.S. aggressive policies in the world, a juncture providing opportunities to express *mutual support* against the U.S. for both its domestic and its international policies, which are intertwined.

This gives the Obama administration free reign to continue supporting the Mubarak regime without Mubarak. For example, on March 22, 2012, a senior State Department official told CNN that Obama's Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, "will issue a national security waiver allowing \$1.3 billion in foreign military financing to flow again to the Cairo government." All the funds go to U.S. firms holding contracts to supply U.S. military and defence equipment, weapons and training to Egypt. Furthermore, according to the State Department, "These decisions reflect our overarching goal: to maintain our strategic partnership with an Egypt made stronger and more stable by a successful transition to democracy."¹¹ By not targeting the Obama administration, the door is also left wide open for the U.S. "democracy promotion" program in Egypt and around the world. The Occupy Movement avoided, to a certain extent, mutual solidarity between the peoples in the U.S. and the Egyptian people from whom the Occupy Movement initially claimed its inspiration. In addition, the significant funds (\$1.3 billion) dedicated to the Egyptian military also show that a program based only on "capitalism" and "greed," abstracted from

U.S. imperialist wars and the striving for world domination, has its limits.

However, a few local Occupy Movements did take a principled stand, such as in Detroit, Chicago and Oakland. For an account of the reaction by the Obama administration toward both the Tahrir events and the repression of the Occupy Movement in the U.S., as well as his attempt to co-opt it, see the section “Egypt and the U.S. Occupy Movement: Tales of Democracy” in my article entitled “The Occupy Movement and Democracy in Motion.”¹²

The Occupy Movement is not homogeneous, nor is it stagnant. It brings democracy to the street, in the words of Parenti. This allows for discussion and innovation at the grass-roots level. This democracy in motion within different localities, by its very nature, allows and even encourages breakthroughs. The connection between them with the Internet creates the possibility of model actions that break out of the straitjacket of exclusively zeroing in on greed. One of the best examples is the Occupy AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) in Washington, D.C. in March 2012. The theme was the U.S. and Israeli actions regarding Iran. Occupy AIPAC took the issue of war and all its ramifications head-on, including defence spending, death and destruction, not only regarding the threat against Iran, but also in Iraq and Palestine. The Occupy AIPAC document on defence spending in general and the amount that is funnelled to militarize Israel is an excellent and courageous educational tool. At the same time, the Occupy AIPAC was infected to a certain extent by the virus of liberalism by creating illusions about Obama. However, this current democratization in the U.S. is a work in progress. For a detailed look at the AIPAC activities, on the one hand, and the Obama-Israeli interventions, on the other hand, see the section “Occupy AIPAC: A Major Breakthrough” in my article “The Occupy Movement and Democracy in Motion.”¹³

The Occupy Movement is an example of democracy in motion. It is changing as the examples of Detroit, Oakland, AIPAC and others illustrate. It is not a homogeneous movement; it has different pockets of resistance and political perspectives. For example, at least one — Occupy AIPAC — dotted the lines between the 1 percent and the overall system of wars and aggression. However, they spared Obama — a significant omission.

Another weakness, in addition to abstracting capitalist greed from the imperialist system, is the all-too-evident lack of implication of African-Americans in the Occupy Movement. This is pointed out by African-American progressives. There are many reasons, one perhaps being the fact that Obama, as an African-American, is in power. The repercussion of this was explored

above in the section “The Red Herring in Two-Party Politics and the Danger of Fascism.” However, the question remains, why is racism not being raised as one of the main problems, along with the “1%” and capitalist greed? The federal state is the same racist one that has been developed since the epoch of the Founding Fathers. Thus, can the people attempt to build a mass movement for real change in the U.S. without raising racism as one of the major problems? It is almost akin to building an anti-status-quo movement in the former South Africa at the time of Apartheid — without demanding an end to Apartheid. Why is the African-American participation relatively very low (at the time of writing)? On this issue, important analysis from the African-American left is underestimated in the current volatile situation. Their views on the Occupy Movement and on the current situation of African-Americans, as well as the negative impact of “Obamism” on their community, are provided the space they deserve in the section “African-Americans and the Occupy Movement” in my article entitled “The Occupy Movement and Democracy in Motion.”¹⁴

The issue is political power of the people, whether in Egypt or the U.S. In Egypt, masses of people are fighting at the cost of their very lives against the imposition of U.S.-run elections. One can say that opposition to Eurocentric prejudices on U.S.-imposed elections runs through the very fabric of the new, emerging and revolutionary Egypt.

It is an advance to oppose the electoral farce, whether in Egypt or the U.S. However, Amin is correct when he writes, “to give up on the question of power is to throw out the baby with the bathwater.” Speaking about democratization in general around the world, he goes on to say, “only someone of extreme naiveté could ever believe that society can be transformed without destroying, albeit progressively, the established system of power.”¹⁵

Parenti raises a key point about the Occupy Movement. He writes that the U.S. needs

a new Constitution, one that establishes firm rules for an egalitarian democracy and is not a rigmarole designed to protect the moneyed class. The call for a constitutional convention (a perfectly legitimate procedure under the present U.S. Constitution) seems long overdue.¹⁶

¹ Chomsky, Noam, and Edward S. Herman. 2002. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. NY: Pantheon Books, p. xli.

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- ² Parenti, Michael. 2011a. *The Face of Imperialism*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, p. 14–15.
- ³ Sahadi, Jeanne. 2012. “America’s Debt Challenge: Washington’s \$5 Trillion Interest Bill.” CNNMoney (March 5). At <http://www.money.cnn.com/2012/03/05/news/economy/national-debt-interest/index.htm?hpt=hp_t3>.
- ⁴ Lenin, V.I. 1970. “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism.” August–October 1916. In *Lenin on the United States: Selections from His Writings*. NY: International Publishers, p. 246–47.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 248–57.
- ⁶ YouTube. 2012. “Parenti’s Talk in La Peña.” (January 6), Berkeley, California.
- ⁷ Chomsky, Noam. 2011. “Occupy the Future: The Occupy Movement Is an Unprecedented Opportunity to Overcome America’s Current Hopelessness.” In These Times (November 1). At <http://inthesetimes.com/article/12206/occupy_the_future/>.
- ⁸ ———. 2012. “What Are Iran’s Intentions?” In These Times (March 2). At <http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/12821/what_are_irans_intentions>.
- ⁹ Amin, Samir. 2004. “The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World.” NY: *Monthly Review Press*, p. 24.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 41–42.
- ¹¹ Dougherty, Jill, and Jamie Crawford. 2012. “Clinton to Certify Egypt Eligible for U.S. Aid.” CNN (March 22). At <<http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/03/22/clinton-to-certify-egypt-eligible-for-u-s-aid/>>.
- ¹² See “The Occupy Movement and Democracy in Motion” at www.democracyintheus.com, Chapter 2.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Amin. 2011. “The Democratic Fraud and the Universalist Alternative.” *Monthly Review* (October), 63:5.
- ¹⁶ Parenti. 2011b. “Occupy America.” (November). At <<http://michaelparenti.org/OccupyAmerica.html>>.