



# Occupy Toronto:

## A Photo-Essay

Zaheer Baber University of Toronto

Barely a few weeks before the Occupy Wall Street movement caught most by surprise, many commentators to an article on the BBC website had concluded that collective protests against grinding social inequality that had recently erupted in Britain, Spain and Greece were unlikely to occur in the United States.<sup>1</sup> While not ruling out the possibility of some collective response, most social scientists quoted in the article agreed that despite the financial meltdown, millions losing their homes due to the sub-prime mortgage crisis, the ongoing military engagements costing trillions and the mounting debt, rather than connect, as C. Wright Mills put it, personal troubles to public issues of social structure, most Americans were more likely to blame themselves than engage in any collective action.<sup>2</sup>

As Peter Dreier, professor of politics and director of the urban and environmental policy program at Occidental College in Los Angeles put it, ‘People are angry, and right now they’re taking their anger out on themselves – the quiet riots of suicide and depression.’ Veteran political activist and Columbia University sociologist broadly agreed with the diagnosis but to his credit, he also held out the real possibility of some collective outrage. As he put it:

It’s amazing to me that Americans are so slow to rise collectively ... not only against unemployment but against the quite identifiable forces that are responsible for it ... I’m not predicting that such a thing will happen, but it would not in the slightest surprise me if there were some burst of street expression, some street rage.

The Occupy Wall Street Movement did indeed take many by surprise, even though media activists such as *The Yes Men* in their remarkable ‘mockumentary’ *The Yes Men Fix the World* – available on youtube – had hoped for precisely such a response.<sup>3</sup> Mainstream American media anchors and writers were forced to cut back on their coverage of the antics of celebrities and they promptly moved on to ridiculing those who took to the streets and occupied parks nationally and globally. The protestors were of course predictably labeled as ‘disorganized’, ‘confused’, and ‘romantics’. While comedian Jon Stewart did not disappoint and relentlessly exposed the hypocrisy of the big networks, the big surprise, as Todd Gitlin has pointed out, was comedian Bill Maher, who in the past has shown considerable critical acumen but who this time around ended up parroting the likes of Newt Gingrich and advised the protestors to ‘get a job.’<sup>4</sup>

While a detailed analysis and understanding of the Occupy Movement will have to await the publication of Todd Gitlin’s forthcoming book *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* as well as other articles in the tradition of ‘public sociology’, the remarkable fact about the movement is that it got off the ground at all.<sup>5</sup> The narrative of the dramatic increase in social inequality since the 1970’s, the collapse as well as outsourcing of manufacturing as well as service jobs, the resources – human and economic – sucked up by the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial meltdown, the speculations that contributed to the housing crisis, the highest rates of incarceration in the world etc. are all

too familiar to warrant repetition.<sup>6</sup> There is no shortage of sympathetic observers and even participants who will eventually retreat into cynicism and even outright hostility towards the movement. Some of this cynicism will no doubt be driven by disappointment fueled by unrealistic expectations of instant, benchmarked and quantifiable outcomes. Such cynicism, precipitated mostly by euphorically unrealistic expectations and the consolidation of the neo-liberal global economy, was indeed a dominant feature of the student movement of the 1960's. However, in times such as these when any expression of dissent is instantly repressed, subverted or co-opted by politicians who in Max Weber's words, 'live off' rather than 'for politics', it is worth reminding ourselves of the fact that some people actually chose to exercise certain muscles and thought processes that had almost atrophied. There is no doubt that there were many others who sympathised with the movement but could not actively participate due in part to the brute facts of what Karl Marx called 'the dull compulsion of economic relations'.<sup>7</sup> More significantly, as the images from Occupy Toronto amply document, the sheer diversity of the activists – in age, gender, class and ethnicity – as well its global spread is nothing short of remarkable.

Many incorrectly assume that unlike the United States, social inequality in Canada is not too pronounced and relatively benign. To be sure, while the situation may not be quite as dire as in the United States, when it comes to the egalitarian redistribution of resources – material and symbolic – the situation is by no means even close to the Scandinavian countries and most working people feel the pressure. The situation of the aboriginal population that once in a while makes it to the mainstream media is indeed dire.<sup>8</sup> Although the regulation of the banking system played a major role in buffering the economy from some of the ongoing shocks delivered to many other economies, the conservative government, reinvigorated by a slim majority during the last elections, seems determined to whittle away social programs under the cover of "fiscal responsibility". The thousand or so activists who occupied St. James Park and demonstrated regularly on Bay Street – the Toronto equivalent of Wall Street – were a determined diverse group. Despite a

strand of narrow professionalism that sometimes succeeds in re-engineering initially socially engaged students into what Max Weber called 'specialists without spirit', the campers did include a few sociology students.<sup>9</sup> A community kitchen provided simple meals and massive pots of coffee, a library came up within a few weeks and talented musicians performed under the massive historical gazebo. The vicissitudes of climate change that some of the protestors were fighting against, ironically ensured a milder than the usual winter Canada is notorious for. However, after talking to a very wide cross-section of the occupiers, there is no doubt that had they not been eventually evicted from St. James Park, they would have easily coped with even the harshest of Toronto winters.

In a nod to the great American photographer Lewis Hine who quipped 'if I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug around a camera', the images from Occupy Toronto are not captioned.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14978876>

<sup>2</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The Yes Men Fix the World

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OazUh0Ym8rc>

<sup>4</sup> <http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/author/tgitlin>

<sup>5</sup> Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street*, forthcoming, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Hacker, "We are more unequal than you think", *New York Review of Books* February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012; Chris Hedges, *The World as It Is: Dispatches on the Myth of Human Progress*, New York: Nation Books, 2011; Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality makes Societies Stronger*, London: Bloomsbury, 2011; Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, New York: Penguin, 2011; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. I (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007) p. 809

<sup>8</sup> John Ralston Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*, Toronto: Penguin, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 123.

Zaheer Baber is Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto where he also holds cross-appointments at the Munk Centre for Global Affairs; Institute for Culture, Communication and Information Technology; Knowledge, Media and Design Institute. He is a generalist, interested in macro comparative historical sociology. He has published articles in journals such as the British Journal of Sociology, Theory and Society, Current Sociology, International Sociology, Sociological Inquiry etc. and is the author of *The Science of Empire* (1996), *Communalism, Secularism and the Intellectuals* (2005), *CyberAsia* (editor, 2006) and *Society, History and the Global Human Condition* (co-edited with Joseph M. Bryant, 2011). He is also a frequent contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement* and *Nature*.











































