

THE RISE OF THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT

Introduction

Focus

In September 2011, hundreds of people camped out in a New York City park as part of a protest called Occupy Wall Street. Within a month, the initial idea went international, with the Occupy movement eventually making its way to Canada. This *News in Review* story looks at the Occupy movement and the social and economic changes it hopes to bring to the world.

In July 2011, Vancouver-based *Adbusters* (an anti-consumerist magazine and website) raised the alarm. Citing a growing gap between the rich and the poor, *Adbusters* challenged its followers to protest the inherent injustice of having one per cent of the population control over 30 per cent of the world's wealth while the other 99 per cent of the world's population struggle to make ends meet. The protest—named Occupy Wall Street—asked people to strike at the financial heart of the United States by physically occupying Wall Street in New York City.

Within two months, protesters responded to the call and made their way to Wall Street. However, the New York City police department was ready for the protesters so the demonstration took a detour to nearby Zuccotti Park, where a makeshift camp was set up and a home for Occupy Wall Street was established.

Initially people wondered what the protest was all about. Eventually a variety of messages became linked to Occupy Wall Street, with most of them citing a growing sense of disenchantment felt by the majority toward the one per cent of the population that controls the financial lives of so many people in the U.S. Calling themselves “the 99 per cent,” Occupy Wall Street protesters

preached against corporate greed and bank bailouts and for finding solutions to the social plagues of unemployment and poverty.

Within a month a larger Occupy movement caught on around the world. At its peak, over 900 cities in 80-plus countries had Occupy protesters camping out downtown and speaking out against social injustice. In Canada, Occupy protests sprang up in 16 cities, from St. John's to Victoria.

Eventually most of the Occupy camps were dismantled. Sometimes the protesters voluntarily evacuated, but more often than not local authorities evicted the protesters. However, the message of “the 99 per cent” seemed to have caught on. Shortly after the protest began, the Occupy movement captured the attention of the international media as well as some influential politicians. Time will tell if the cries for social justice that rang out in a makeshift camp a block away from Wall Street will translate into legislation that bridges the gap between the rich and the poor. In the meantime, the Occupy movement has been steadfast in its resolve, telling those opposed to their movement that authorities can evict a few people from a park but they can't evict an idea whose time has come.

To Consider

1. Is there a need for an Occupy movement in Canada and other parts of the world? Why or why not?
2. Do you believe that a protest movement like this one is the best way to bring about change to the economic and political systems of wealthy nations? Explain your answer.
3. What is the point being made in the last sentence of the article?

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Video Review

Check It Out

Adbusters is an anti-consumerist protest magazine and website that promotes non-violent social change as well as democratic, economic, and environmental reform. Check out some of their rants, often in animated form, at www.adbusters.org.

Pre-viewing Questions

Join with a partner and discuss the following: According to the *Montreal Gazette*, 3.8 per cent of Canadian households control \$1.78-trillion or 67 per cent of Canada's financial wealth. Does this seem fair to you? What problems arise when so few people control so much wealth? Are the wealthy just being greedy or do they have a right to control so much?

Record some of your conclusions in the space provided.

Viewing Questions

Record your responses to the following questions in the spaces provided.

1. What is meant by references to "the 99 per cent"?

2. Why did Occupy Wall Street start? What were the protesters concerned about?

3. What did billionaire Warren Buffet ask Congress to do to "the one per cent"?

4. Briefly describe the base camps of the Occupy movement in Canada.

5. Why did some neighbourhoods want the occupiers to pack up and go home?

6. Why was it unlikely that Occupy protesters would be charged with something like trespassing after they set up their camps? What legal protection did they have?

7. How did the camp for Occupy Toronto change over the course of the protest?

8. Did Occupy Toronto protesters leave their camp willingly? How did they respond to the police the day they showed up to evict them from the camp?

Post-viewing Questions

Most of the Occupy movement camps were taken down by the end of 2011.

1. Do you think the end of the camps means the end of the movement? Explain your answer.

2. Do you think people will stop fighting to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor?

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The Rise of the Movement

Focus for Reading

The Occupy Wall Street protest emerged as a social justice movement founded on principles of equitability and accountability. Those involved in the movement were angered by the fact that close to 40 per cent of the wealth in the United States was held by just one per cent of the population while one in seven U.S. citizens lived in poverty (*Toronto Star*, September 20, 2011). While the Occupy movement did come to Canada, do you think these social issues are really cause for concern for Canadians?

The Birth of a Movement

The Occupy movement that started in the late summer of 2011 didn't just pop up unexpectedly. When the U.S. housing market crashed in 2006, many people south of the border lost their homes. Those who managed to keep them saw their property values drop by an average of 30 per cent. Then, in 2008, the financial crisis hit.

The U.S. economy stagnated badly, and most experts blamed deregulation of financial services for the crisis. Put very simply: measures preventing risky investment behaviour, once illegal under U.S. law, had been legislated away. This opened the door for banks to make highly speculative investments without having enough money to cover potential losses. When the losses hit, the banks collapsed and the U.S. government was left with the painful decision to either bail out the banks or watch the economy plunge into a full depression. They chose the former, which meant that U.S. taxpayers were forced to cover bank losses to keep the banks afloat (*Montreal Gazette*, November 5, 2011).

Disenchantment

The combination of the housing and financial crises led to a growing sense of disenchantment among regular U.S. citizens. After all, if they failed to pay their mortgage, there was no question that the banks would kick them out of

their houses and get as much money out of them as they could. And these were the same banks they had to bail out with their own tax dollars. Others pointed out that if a regular person doesn't do their job properly, they get fired. But if a banker in the U.S. doesn't do their job properly (and bankrupts the bank), they get bailed out by the taxpayers!

The Call to Occupy Wall Street

Drawing on this sense of disenchantment, the anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* sent out an e-mail in July 2011 stating that large corporations have too much power over the economy and government decision makers. They went on to say that big business might pay attention if activists physically took control of Wall Street in New York City. The e-mail was accompanied by a poster of a ballerina perched on top of the famous Wall Street Charging Bull statue as protesters emerge through a fog of tear gas in the background.

The e-mail and poster couldn't have come at a better time. Activist groups threw their weight behind the call, and Occupy Wall Street was born. They collectively picked September 17 for the date of the occupation. About 1 000 people took part the first day of the protest and, when the police turned them aside in the heart of New York's financial district, moved to nearby Zuccotti Park and made it the home of Occupy Wall Street.

Tactics

Occupy Wall Street protesters staged mass demonstrations—including a Millionaires March and a Zombie Walk—and began disrupting traffic in the financial district. They even blocked traffic on the busy Brooklyn Bridge. Some demonstrations drew as many as 15 000 protesters. They also held large, daily public forums called the General Assembly in Zuccotti Park.

New York City prohibits the use of megaphones without a permit, so protesters worked together to create a “human megaphone,” where the person speaking would make their point and those gathered near them would collectively shout what they said toward those gathered farther back. This technique worked surprisingly well and was eventually adopted by other groups participating in the movement. It also served to highlight the fact that Occupy Wall Street was a leaderless movement with a common message.

Eventually other U.S. cities began organizing Occupy protests of their own. Embracing the theme “We are the 99

per cent,” camps were set up in Boston, Chicago, Denver, and Oakland. The movement claimed that they appreciated the “organic” growth of the protest and made the point that the goal of the occupation was to open a dialogue about the kind of socially inclusive and economically just world that the overwhelming majority of people wanted to live in.

However, criticism surfaced from outside the protest that the movement needed leadership and a more centralized message. According to critics, what seemed to be emerging was a hodge-podge of complaints that sounded more like bitter griping than social activism.

Even though Occupy Wall Street evolved into a movement that inspired over 900 similar protests in more than 80 countries, many wondered if the protest had done enough to capture the world’s attention. As winter approached and the camps came down one by one, it was unclear if the conversations, innovations, and systemic changes that Occupy Wall Street had hoped to inspire would come to fruition.

Analysis

1. According to Statistics Canada, 3.2 million Canadians (9.6 per cent of the population) are considered low-income earners, and over 600 000 children live in low-income families. Revisit the question set out at the start of this section. Is this statistic cause for concern for Canadians?
2. The Occupy movement received respectable public support in the fall of 2011. Montreal’s *La Press* magazine found that 58 per cent of Canadians supported the movement, while a *Time* magazine poll showed 54 per cent support in the United States. Based on your reading, do you support or oppose the Occupy movement? Why?
3. By the end of November 2011, the Occupy protest was fighting more for their right to exist than for an end to economic injustice. Do you think this shift in focus hurt or helped the protest?

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The Movement Comes to Canada

Occupy Canada Sites

- St. John's
- Halifax
- Fredericton
- Quebec
- Montreal
- Ottawa
- Toronto
- London
- Windsor
- Winnipeg
- Regina
- Saskatoon
- Calgary
- Edmonton
- Kamloops
- Vancouver
- Victoria

Before Reading

A Robin Hood tax is a way of taxing large corporations and financial institutions to benefit the public. For example, a very small tax on stock and bond transactions could net the Canadian government billions of dollars in tax revenue. Should the Canadian government pursue these options? What kind of opposition do you think the government would face if they went ahead with this tax strategy?

Occupy Canada

Occupy Wall Street seemed to carry a universal appeal for social justice activists around the world. Eventually the rallying cry was heard and Occupy protests began springing up in other cities.

The Occupy movement officially came to Canada on October 15, 2011. Activists in municipalities across the country responded to the call and set up camps in public spaces in their cities. Many of the camps mimicked what was happening in New York City: marches and traffic disruption were common, general assemblies were held to discuss issues, and camps were run on consensus with no discernable leaders. More than anything, the Occupy movement in Canada sought to embrace and proclaim the “We are the 99 per cent” message of their Occupy Wall Street comrades in New York City.

A Lack of Clarity

However, the lack of clarity that mired the movement south of the border soon emerged in Canada. Some journalists wondered why the general assemblies held in some Canadian cities spent an inordinate amount of time complaining about bank bailouts—something that never happened in Canada. This left some commentators frustrated because there were uniquely Canadian problems that the Occupy movement could focus on namely: globalization (a process that

has seen companies shift labour out of Canada in favour of cheaper labour in other countries), the Alberta oil sands project (an environmental disaster according to many), and the economic decision to keep the dollar high (despite job losses in the manufacturing and trade sectors).

The Occupy camps were also controversial. One man suffered a non-fatal drug overdose and a woman died on the site of Occupy Vancouver. Meanwhile, merchants with shops close to the Occupy camp in just about every municipality complained that the protests were scaring away business—in essence, hurting the ability of some of the “99 per cent” to make a living.

Did Canada Get the Message?

However, if the goal was to get people to talk about the Occupy movement’s overall message, some might say they accomplished their mission. Articles, columns, editorials, and news reports heralded the plight of the 99 per cent. A *Toronto Star* editorial challenged Finance Minister Jim Flaherty’s fight against Robin Hood taxes. While thousands of protesters prepared to march in a mass demonstration in New York City on October 5, Flaherty told a crowd of Manhattan business people that Canada would fight any efforts to put miniscule taxes on stock, bond, and derivative transactions. The *Star* asked the question, “...why did he [Flaherty] push so hard

and give billions in federal money for provinces to introduce the HST paid by individual consumers—the so-called 99 per cent—but is fighting so hard against a 0.1 per cent financial transaction tax on the financial industry?” (*Toronto Star*, October 13, 2011).

Furthermore, the *Montreal Gazette* ran an extensive story that demonstrated how, as of 2009, 3.8 per cent of Canadian households controlled \$1.78-trillion, or 67 per cent of Canada’s financial wealth. All this while the bottom 20 per cent of income earners saw their wages drop by as much as 20 per cent since 1980. Indeed, the rich appeared to be getting richer while the poor were getting poorer (*Montreal Gazette*, November 5, 2011).

The movement also caught the attention of some pretty influential people. Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of Canada, called the protests

an “entirely constructive” demonstration of collective frustration about the state of the economy and income inequality. NDP leadership candidate Brian Topp told a *Globe and Mail* reporter, “The demonstrations are making this point, not just in Canada but all around the world: The trend in the last 20 years was massive, multibillion-dollar expenditures on tax cuts to people who least need the help” (*The Globe and Mail*, October 17, 2011).

While this kind of subtle endorsement could not be ignored, the future of the Occupy movement and the revolution of the 99 per cent do not seem to have had much impact on the one per cent. Whether the populist movement will drive social change in the months and years to come is still subject to speculation.

Analysis

1. Why did critics feel that the Occupy movement in Canada lacked clarity?
2. How did articles in the *Toronto Star* and *Montreal Gazette* lend support to the plight of the 99 per cent?
3. What do you think the next step of the Occupy movement in Canada needs to be? How can they keep their message alive?

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Thorstein Veblen and the Modern World

Did you know . . .

The wealthiest person in the world is Mexico's Carlos Slim Helu, who has a net worth of \$72-billion. His personal net worth exceeds the gross domestic product of over half the countries in the world.

Before Reading

Think about the role that technology plays in your life. How willing are you to pay good money for the latest smart phone, tablet, or computer? Who profits from your purchasing decisions? Where do you get the money to pay for your electronic gadgets?

Maybe groundbreaking economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen could teach the Occupy movement a thing or two about how things got to the point where the one per cent managed to run roughshod over the 99 per cent. In 1899, he posited in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* that a society's evolution follows a Darwinian pattern that is shaped by what he called technological determinism. A society that accepts the right inventions moves forward on the evolutionary continuum, while a society that either opts for the wrong technologies or is absent from the process falls behind. In this way, technology determines the future of a society (which is what technological determinism entails).

A society that makes the right decisions creates a class of people that gets very rich—so rich that they have plenty of time and money for leisure activity. The leisure class is marked by serious consumerism, accumulating excess goods to show off to others. Veblen pointed out that the emergence of the leisure class leads to an economy that shifts away from innovation for the benefit of all of society to the accumulation of capital for the benefit of the very rich. In the end, this is reflected in a wealthy ruling class that basically

disregards the plight of those who are not wealthy. This seems to be precisely what the Occupy movement was complaining about in 2011.

Is Canada starting to reflect Veblen's theory? Are Canadians more pre-occupied with conspicuous consumption than with building an innovative and sustainable economy that will keep Canada progressing for decades to come? In Canada, the wealthiest one per cent has captured 32 per cent of all income growth in the nation, while the poor have seen their income either stagnate or decrease over the past 30 years (*Montreal Gazette*, November 5, 2011)

Globally, things don't look much better. Currently, two billion of the planet's seven billion people live on less than \$2 a day. The disparity between rich and poor can also be expressed this way: 42 per cent of global income goes to the richest 10 per cent, while one per cent of global income is divided among the poorest 10 per cent.

While innovation is still part of the economy, there seem to be a lot of people with more money than they know what to do with. At the same time—and the Occupy movement has done an effective job of pointing this out—a lot of people are struggling to make ends meet.

Analysis

1. How accurate were Thorstein Veblen's predictions in 1899?
2. Is a society free from the dominance of the leisure class realistic? Can the majority of people manage to not be consumed with consumption?

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Adbusters

Did you know . . .

Adbusters has an international magazine circulation of close to 100 000 readers.

Before Reading

What role do social activism and political protest play in challenging authority? What forms of activism and protest do you think are most effective? What forms of activism or protest do you feel are unacceptable?

Adbusters Activism

The Occupy movement started innocently enough. A simple e-mail blitz by *Adbusters* asked people to take to the streets of New York and shut down the city's financial district. Calling the campaign Occupy Wall Street, the protest gained international coverage and spanned protests in over 900 cities in 80 countries.

Adbusters was pleasantly surprised to see people respond to its appeal. Since its inception in 1989, the *Adbusters* brain trust has been doing their best to provoke outrage within society over issues like rampant consumerism, economic injustice, and corporate greed. Two techniques that *Adbusters* uses to drive its point home are anti-advertising and culture jamming.

Anti-advertising

Adbusters magazine completely excludes commercial advertising from its pages. However, the magazine does have quite a few anti-ads. Anti-advertising seeks to modify existing ads to parody consumer culture. Over the years, anti-ads have been the signature of *Adbusters*. In one

anti-ad in the July-August 2011 issue, an ad for an iPad is parodied. The anti-ad looks just like a regular iPad ad but instead of the original image that demonstrated how light and thin the tablet is, the anti-ad shows the iPad held gingerly between a person's two fingers being handed to a starving black child under the caption, "Thinner than ever." The ad is shocking and takes a direct shot at consumerist culture.

Culture Jamming

Adbusters also creates and sponsors culture jamming events like Occupy Wall Street. Culture jamming—sometimes called subvertising—tries to disrupt mainstream consumer culture in an effort to cause people to pause and reflect on their role in the advancement of consumerism. The goal is to create a new level of consciousness that can free people from the grip of consumer culture. For the most part, culture jams are very artistic in nature and appeal to a wide variety of people. Some *Adbusters* campaigns that have gone global include Buy Nothing Day and Digital Detox Week.

Activity

1. Go to www.adbusters.com and find three anti-ads. What makes these anti-ads so effective?
2. In Digital Detox Week people have to power off all technology in their lives for one week. Try initiating your own Digital Detox Day. Spend 24 hours without a cell phone, computer, or television. Write a reflection on how the "detox" affected the way you spent your day.

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Activity: Up for Debate

For this activity you will take part in a four-corners debate. For each of the statements below you will need to decide whether you:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Your teacher will direct you to consider one statement at a time. They will also decide which corners of the classroom will reflect each position (i.e., strongly agree, agree, etc.). Consider the statement carefully and then move to the corner of the classroom that most accurately reflects your perspective. Discuss your reasons for either supporting or not supporting the statement with people in your corner. After about five minutes the teacher will open a class debate on the statement. After the debate, either stay where you are or move to a new corner if the debate caused you to change your mind. Be prepared to give reasons for your decisions.

The teacher will repeat the process for the remaining three statements.

Statement #1

Capitalism is an idea whose time has come and gone. The sad legacy of this form of economic governance is commercialism—and this is essentially the blight of humankind at this point in our history.

Statement #2

The 99 per cent needs to stop their complaining. If it wasn't for the economic risk-taking by Canada's entrepreneurs—particularly the one per cent—innovation would die and the economy would grind to a halt.

Statement #3

The gap between the rich and the poor is evidence of the social injustice that has come to characterize our society. The government needs to put a cap on the maximum salary CEOs can receive nationwide and raise the standard of living for the poor to well above the poverty line.

Statement #4

What people want more than anything is "capitalism with a conscience." Business practices need to reflect a concern for the common good that demonstrates empathy for other people and a concern for the environment. Capitalism is not the enemy. It just needs to be adjusted to reflect more humane and socially just values.

Follow-up

Write a reflective paragraph about what you learned about yourself and your opinion on these issues.