

Silvia Federici / Max Henninger

“We are witnessing the end of an era.” A conversation about pauperization and the Occupy movement in the USA

Max Henninger: According to figures published by the US Census Bureau in September 2011, 46.2 million US citizens were living below the poverty line in 2010 – the highest number in the 52 years for which poverty estimates have been published. How visible is the increase in poverty and how do those affected respond to their situation?

Silvia Federici: Undoubtedly the figures are correct, but it is not just poverty that is in question. What is happening is a dramatic policy shift whereby the rights and entitlements the US working class has fought for and come to expect are now declared to be, for the foreseeable future, unreachable and unjustified. To put it in media terms, it is “the end of the American dream,” signifying the historic severance of US capital from the US working class, in the sense that US capitalism is becoming completely de-territorialized and is now refusing *any* commitment to the reproduction of the US workforce.

The realization that we are witnessing the end of an era has been slowly sinking into the psyche of US workers. The subprime mortgage disaster was a turning point. Four million people without homes, many more in homes completely devalued, people living in tents – these are telling images of the degree to which many Americans have been pauperized, and they are not the only ones. Debt is now the new “common”: student loan debt, credit card debt, mortgage debt. Healthcare is also out of reach for an increasing sector of the population. In fact, payment of medical bills is among the

leading causes of mortgage default. But we have not yet seen the kind of response that would be expected in such a situation. Anger is rising. Anecdotal accounts of the predicaments Americans are facing fill the newspapers and TV news, and there are many local protests against the continuing cuts in healthcare, education and other social services. But we have not yet seen any broad mobilization against this massive impoverishment, and certainly not the type of mass protest that has taken place in the squares of Tunisia or Spain.

This may in part be attributable to the fact that in many families, women now have access to a wage; this is often what keeps the family from going bankrupt. But it is also the case that the US working class no longer has the level of organization it had before the dismantling of the industrial areas of the north, from Michigan to Massachusetts. Gentrification and economic restructuring (flexibilization, precarization, the exporting of most of the manufacturing base of the US, except for those industries and activities considered important for “security”) have broken up the solidarity bonds and networks that were the basis of working-class power, forcing people to leave their communities, to migrate to other parts of the country and now increasingly to become transients, moving from place to place according to where jobs open up.

The Occupy movement is both a reflection of this social defeat and a response to it. The popularity of the notion of the “99 percent” is emblematic. At its peak, when the encampments were expanding, you could see the movement’s social composition broadening day by day: former teachers or mid-level managers, even former Wall Street workers would mingle with students and unemployed youth, carrying slogans and posters that spoke directly to the sudden degradation of their social position and the general sense of hopelessness that Americans are experiencing today. In this sense, the Occupy movement is the first mass response to the end of the social contract that has shaped class relations in the US since the end of the Second World War. This social contract is now *de*

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facto defunct, except for a few remaining entitlements such as social security and Medicare, which are also under attack.

Max Henninger: Part of the context of rising poverty in the US is a dramatic polarization of incomes that has been evident for several decades, i.e. since before the outbreak of the present crisis. Between 1975 and 2005, incomes in the 90th percentile increased by 65 percent more than those in the 10th percentile. During the last decade or so, this social inequality seems largely to have been compensated for through the expansion of consumer credit – an arrangement that ended in disaster with the 2007/2008 subprime crisis. And in September 2011, we saw the emergence of a major protest movement – the Occupy movement – that is addressing the issue of inequality from below – witness the slogan “We are the 99 percent.” Can you share with us some of your impressions of what seems to have been the Occupy movement’s moment of genesis, the September 2011 occupation of Zuccotti Park?

Silvia Federici: Strictly speaking, Occupy Wall Street was an offshoot of Bloombergville, a camp students from the City University of New York set up in the summer of 2011 to protest Mayor Bloomberg’s cuts in the education budget. However, the decision to take to the streets and become a visible presence in the territory was definitely taken under the influence of the Arab Spring. Perhaps it was also inspired by the example, earlier in the year, of the occupation of the State House in Wisconsin by protesters opposing the governor’s decision to curtail union rights.

The Occupy movement is also a continuation of the student movement that has grown throughout North America and internationally over the last decades, in response to the commercialization of education. The very concept of occupation connects it with the tactics that students have adopted in the last two years, from New York to Berkeley and beyond, and especially in Europe. For all their differences, these struggles expressed the same need: not only to oppose the authorities but also to produce moments of collective

experience and collective reproduction on different terms than the competitive logic of neoliberal capitalism. As I mentioned, it is significant that some of the young people who started Occupy Wall Street were City University of New York students who in June of this year were involved in the creation of Bloombergville.

From a broader perspective, the Occupy movement expresses the deep currents of discontent now spreading throughout the country, especially among the youth. I cannot help thinking that the experience of the “tent cities” set up by homeless, evicted people across the US over the last few years has also been a factor in the formation of the encampments. These “tent cities” also evoke the historic memory of the Hoovervilles, in which thousands of out-of-work families camped out during the Depression, both to demand government action and to support their own survival. There is a long tradition in the USA of social movements occupying public space to make their demands heard. Aside from the Bonus Army of the 1930s, the Poor People Campaign of the 1960s and the assemblies the Wobblies would set up in areas where itinerant workers congregated to look for work, in more recent times there have also been the “tent city” projects set up by students on many US campuses, beginning in the 1990s, to protest the immiseration and exclusion people across the planet are exposed to. The Occupy movement dramatizes past and present social crises while simultaneously calling for a new type of political work, built on the immediate transformation of day-to-day life and reproduction.

While the response to the “crisis” on the right has been the formation of the Tea Party and the attempt to form a new moral majority – coalescing around the slogan “We Want Our America Back” and projecting a return to a white America, “unburdened” from immigrants and civil rights –, on the left we begin to observe a breaking away from electoral politics. For all the considerable limits of the Occupy movement, politics is taking the form of a truly creative process, with a plethora of micro-experiments in new forms of reproduction and cooperation.

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Max Henninger: Can you say anything about the movement’s social composition? It seems to be mostly a movement of young people, but what is their social background? How diverse is the movement in terms of its social background?

Silvia Federici: The Occupy movement has spread across the country, and generalizations about such a vast territory are always dangerous. The general perception, however, is that the Occupy movement is mostly made up of white middle-class youth. But this must be qualified in various ways. Over and over, it has become evident that a much broader public has been interested and eager to participate. It is significant, for instance, that unions were quick to rally around the movement. In New York, the bus drivers’ union even protested against the police using their buses to take arrested protesters to the precincts. And on weekends, a broad variety of people, young and old, joined not just out of curiosity, but to voice their own protest. However, the encampment form of organization does place some limits on this kind of participation. Many people cannot participate on a regular basis, due to commitments ranging from work to family obligations. This has been a thorny issue within the movement. Many complain that the occupation method creates a divide between those, usually young and jobless, who can be present and participate in all the decision-making and the older folks who perform as fellow travelers, visiting on weekends, sporadically participating in the assemblies, donating money and other forms of support, but inevitably remaining on the margins.

There has also been a racial divide, and there still is. Generally speaking, this movement has attracted a broad spectrum of people because of its non-sectarian quality and capacity for inventiveness, but above all because it is the first public expression of the realization that many people have that their future is blocked. So in its first phase, the movement was quite diverse, with a substantial presence of women and people of color both in the working groups and in the decision-making processes. However, the existence of unequal gender- and race-based power relations has been a prob-

lem. When the encampments came under attack from the police, and when Occupy began spreading to the neighborhoods, it became more difficult to find the mixed crowd we saw during the first weeks. Another key issue that Occupy has had to confront has been its relationship to the homeless people who were either present at the sites before the occupation or were then attracted to the encampments. Many homeless people realized there was a benefit to joining the Occupy sites, as these had more resources and provided some protection, as well as a more interesting social environment. Keep in mind that in New York City, for example, Occupy organized an alternative system of reproduction for almost two months, with free tents and free distribution of food, reaching a peak of three thousand meals a day. Similar, though less spectacular accomplishments could be seen in many of the more than one hundred sites across the country.

Occupy sites have been magnets for many people who were not necessarily interested in the political significance of the operation, and who in some cases were unable to adjust to its rules. This unexpected confrontation with a population that most participants in Occupy have been shielded from has proven to be one of the most important challenges faced by the movement. How this challenge will be met remains an open question, although the process provides a unique opportunity for many young people to learn about the life experiences of a growing part of the US population, one they would not normally encounter. Broadly speaking, going beyond its rather narrow social composition is the main challenge the movement faces today, and its ability to do so will decide its future.

Max Henninger: To what extent is the Occupy movement the product of a more long-standing political activism that simply hasn't been perceived as strongly, but which is now bearing fruits, and to what extent does it break with earlier forms of political activism or originate somewhere other than in activist circles?

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Silvia Federici: This movement appears spontaneous but its spontaneity is quite organized, as can be seen from the languages and practices it has adopted and the maturity it has shown in response to the brutal attacks by the authorities and the police. It reflects a new way of doing politics that has grown out of the crisis of the anti-globalization and antiwar movements of the last decade. This new way of doing politics emerges from the confluence of the feminist movement and the movement for the commons. By “movement for the commons,” I mean the struggles to create and defend anti-capitalist spaces and communities of solidarity and autonomy. For years now, people have expressed the need for a politics that is not just antagonistic and does not separate the personal from the political, but instead places the creation of more cooperative and egalitarian forms of reproducing social and economic relationships at the center of political work.

In New York, for instance, a broad discussion has been taking place for some years now about the need to create “communities of care” and collective forms of reproduction so as to address issues that “flow from our everyday life.” We have begun to recognize that for our movements to work and thrive, we need to be able to socialize our experiences of grief, illness, pain and death, experiences that are often relegated to the margins or the outside of our political work today. We have seen that movements that do not place on their agendas the reproduction of both their members and the broader community are movements that cannot survive; they are not “self-reproducing,” especially in these times, when so many people are confronting crises in their lives every day.

A great source of inspiration for the Occupy movement has been the response of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, when support networks were formed to provide alternative forms of research into the nature and treatment of the disease, visitors to the sick ones and negotiators with the pharmaceutical companies. Also, the anarchist tradition of “mutual aid” and, above all, the experience of the feminist move-

ment – which realized that “the revolution begins at home,” with the restructuring of our reproductive activities – have been important models, even if not formally recognized. In recent years, this merging of feminism and political “commoning” has generated a great number of local initiatives: community gardens, solidarity economies, time banks and attempts to create “accountability structures” at the grassroots level, in order to be able to deal with abuses within the movement without resorting to the police. Often these initiatives have seemed to remain confined to the local level. They seemed to lack the power to link up and confront the status quo. The Occupy movement shows us that this need not be the case. The question now of course is how to bring these different experiences together and initiate forms of intervention that can begin to make a difference at the macro-political level. I think the Occupy movement’s neighborhood-based interventions against foreclosures and the creation of a movement against student loan debt are steps in that direction.

Max Henninger: The movement has experienced a remarkable degree of international diffusion. Do you think the transformation of Occupy Wall Street into a global Occupy movement makes sense? Is there a risk of overstretch, or of people outside the US simply latching onto what is to them no more than a convenient label?

Silvia Federici: I do not think that this should be a concern for us. The Occupy movement that has been sweeping through the USA and Canada is not the beginning of a global movement; it is itself a product of the widespread mobilizations that began in Tunisia, then expanded to Egypt and then reached Spain. Like the occupation of the State House in Wisconsin in the winter of 2011, Occupy Wall Street was inspired by the so-called “Arab Spring,” particularly by the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt. Taking a broader perspective, we can see that, as a form of struggle, “Occupy” has been crucial for thousands across the world for many years, even before the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions. Think of the tactics

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of the MST in Brazil and of the many land-squatting movements in Africa and Latin America, movements that aim to reclaim expropriated land and prevent the privatization of forests and waters. Occupying is one of the most essential forms of struggle for a world proletariat for whom the fight against enclosures is now a question of life and death. I wonder when we will see the first maritime Occupy movement, by fishermen and women protesting factory trawlers. The Occupy movement in the USA is a learner, and an expression of the fact that the type of exploitation and immiseration felt by people in the former colonial world is now extending to the urban middle class in Europe and North America. The question, of course, is how the Occupy movement will be able to transform itself into a network capable of global action and the formulation of joint political programs.