

# **Occupation: Liberation—Building Sustainable Resistance Movements**

**By Matt Meyer**

Just as police were attacking Occupy spaces in Oakland, Portland, New York City, and elsewhere, and various mainstream (and even some left-leaning) pundits were declaring the demise of the Occupy movement, new initiatives and new life was being breathed fresh into grass-roots spaces. In less than one week following the dismantling of several prominent 24-hour occupations, and the arresting of some key activists, substantial achievements were being made. New York's "flagship site" convened a day-long series of mass, nonviolent direct actions, from a morning civil disobedience at the Stock Exchange, to afternoon "speak-outs" on the trains crossing several different subway lines and many miles throughout the City's boroughs. The evening concluded with a coming together of well over 30,000—including union delegations, peace activists, and occupiers. In Oakland, arrested meditator Pancho Ramos Stierle was released after several days of fasting and after a fast-paced campaign gathered thousands of signatures working to prevent the potential deportation of this Mexican internationalist. That campaign has also quickly been linked to other immigrant rights efforts ([www.change.org/petitions/join-the-free-pancho-movement](http://www.change.org/petitions/join-the-free-pancho-movement)).

And, in Oakland, New York, and Los Angeles, a newly-formed Council of Elders—some of the most respected icons of the civil rights era—gathered at Occupy sites on Sunday, November 20, 2011, for inter-faith services and inter-generational dialogues (<http://nationalcouncilofelders.com/index.html>). "We applaud the miraculous extent to which the Occupy initiative has been non-violent and democratic," these Elders asserted, "especially in light of the weight of violence under which the great majority of people are forced to live, including joblessness, foreclosures, unemployment, poverty, inadequate health care, etc. ..We are convinced," they said, "that Occupy Wall Street is a continuation, a deepening and expansion of the determination of the diverse peoples of our nation to transform our country into a more democratic, just and compassionate society—a more perfect union. We believe that the rapidly expanding and racialized impoverishment of our population, the rise of mass incarceration, the celebration of the culture of war and violence all create the bitter divisions among the peoples of our nation and throughout the world."

Sadly, these divisions have occasionally been exacerbated by progressives, trying to side-step or gloss over some of the fundamental lessons of previous movements. Emails boxes are stuffed with verbose discussions of which direction the Occupy movement should go in. Some

commentary correctly critiques “old left” dogma, such as Gary Hicks notes on “A Plea for John Brown,” (<http://www.politicalaffairs.net/gary-hicks-on-a-plea-for-captain-john-brown/>) which equally castigates “juvenile nihilists” (not the often caricatured, so-called violent anarchists) as well as finger-waving “establishment” pacifists who want all actions to be well-choreographed and negotiated with the police (rather than have the militant creative tensions present in the campaigns towards a beloved community waged by Dr. King and his colleagues). Other commentary, such as Peace and Justice Studies Association’s Randall Amster’s “Welcome Home” (<http://forusa.org/blog/7181>), calls for a movement willing to be truly inclusive, warts and all. Beyond north American borders, messages of support have poured in to #Occupy which presage the next rounds of revolutionary upheaval. “People of the world have come to refuse a culture of wars and also the ‘democracy’ of the rich,” wrote Yanar Mohammed of the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) (<http://warresisters.wordpress.com/2011/11/08/message-of-solidarity-to-occupy-wall-street-from-the-organization-of-womens-freedom-in-iraq/>). In a neat flip on what is usually considered solidarity, the OWFI suggests that the poorly-labeled Arab Spring (which, from the get-go, was never restricted to the region or season whose name it bears) has already gone well beyond expectations: “Connecting such a movement globally was beyond even the wildest dreams of most visionaries, but has proven to be within reach.” Finally, as should be expected in times like these, the youth take the lead. Portland student Tyger Ricard, writing about reasons to give a very political thanks for the gains of this season, cites no less than seven achievements already won by the Occupy movement (<http://ricksblog.biz/guest-viewpoint-give-thanks-for-occupy-gto/>). It is heartening to recognize—and insightful to reflect—that, even if Wall Street has not given in to a particular #OWS demand, there is much which has been gained by having folks speak openly to one another, talking about “tough stuff from the bottom up.”

It is in this framework that my own local affinity group, Resistance in Brooklyn, issued the following statement as a discussion piece on moving beyond simple anti-racism in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. As always, RnB welcomes and encourages your input.

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*It is not our differences which separate [us], but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences.*

*-Audre Lorde, 1984 (“Age, Race, Class, and Sex” in Sister Outsider)*

*I felt like something important had just happened, that we had just pushed a movement a little bit closer to the movement I would like to see—one that takes into account historical and current inequalities, oppressions, racisms, relations of power, one that doesn't just recreate liberal white privilege but confronts it head on. And if I have to fight to make that happen I will... Later that night I biked home over the Brooklyn Bridge and I somehow felt like the world was, just maybe, at least in that moment, mine, as well as everyone dear to me and everyone who needed and wanted more from the world. I somehow felt like maybe the world could be all of ours.*

*-Manissa McCleave Maharawal, 2011 (So Real It Hurts: Notes on Occupy Wall Street)*

<http://www.leftturn.org/so-real-it-hurts-notes-occupy-wall-street>, describing the successful push by what she calls “our amazing, impromptu, radical South Asian contingent” to strike the words about “being one race, the human race, formerly divided by race, class...” from the Declaration of the Occupation, and the intense educational discussions that followed.

Resistance in Brooklyn (RnB), a twenty-year-old anti-racist, anti-imperialist collective rooted in the 1970s/80s movements in solidarity with struggles of communities and nations of color, is awed by the creativity, tenacity, and commitment of the burgeoning Occupy movement. However long it lasts, and in what form, is not the point. The main thing in our view is that the young people who have led the way have thrown down a gauntlet for 21st-century political action in the Global North that offers the possibility—if it takes on a broad enough solidarity agenda—to set the stage for overcoming the systems of oppression that shackle the majority of the earth's people, animals, and land. Thus it is critical for ever-widening groups of people to support, join, and pick up on OWS with an eye toward helping it forge solidarity-based alliances with struggles of communities of color here and throughout the Global South. No successful, progressive social change movement in the U.S. has ever been successful without a diverse base of support; we must not let racism divide “the 99%.”

Much ink has been spilled and many words have been written about the Occupy phenomenon. We are especially grateful to our comrades in #OWS Anti-Racism Allies, who have written articulately on tips for white allies of People of Color who are struggling both within and without OWS. These tips (<https://infrontandcenter.wordpress.com/tools-strategies/5-tips-for-white-allies-in-the-occupy-movement>) include the need to pay attention to who is talking; to listen from love; to share information and resources; to make it clear when there is a risk of arrest; and to support People of Color-created events. We are also indebted to the flyer that articulates the principle that talking about racism is NOT divisive; it is racism that has been used for centuries to divide us. What we are doing now is working hard to help #OWS become a genuinely anti-racist movement that can play a role in building an organized, mobilized, and unified force for radical change. We are most indebted to all the individuals and organizations in the Black, Latina, Native, and Asian movements which have taught and continue to teach us so much; the major

social change movements of our millennia have all grown out of mass organizing efforts from these peoples.

RnB therefore humbly adds the following ideas into the mix, in an effort to contribute our experiences in dealing with racism, alliance-building, collectivity, and long-term resistance.

1. Racism is just one tool of White Supremacy: We must first understand that racism is not just an individual thing, but a dynamic that takes hold of every institution in a society based upon the premise of white supremacy. Prejudice—pre-judging and assuming things about people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, class, physical ability, and other conditions—is a problem that many people from all walks of life can sadly succumb to. But RACISM = PREJUDICE + POWER. Institutional power in a country founded on white skin privilege still affects people despite the election of a president of African descent. And racism is just one tool of white supremacy—the bedrock organizing principle that white is the “baseline” reality that defines what it means to be “normal,” “American,” “the center of things,” “culture,” etc.

2. Anti-racism means solidarity with, and respect for, self-determination, autonomy, and freedom by people, communities, and nations of color: Solidarity must be a two-way street, not a condescending “gift” of material aid from well-intentioned white philanthropists. Self-determination must mean that organizations and movements from oppressed nationalities and communities get to call the shots about the work in their own neighborhoods and struggles. And in cross-community/cross-national movements for radical change like #OWS, those same forces should be supported in having a major voice, stepping forward to offer direction, and being public spokespeople. Some groupings may want to build independent of any assistance or intervention from people of European descent; respect for autonomy means being clear that this is not only OK, but supported.

3. There is no Great White Hope: Too often, in a society so influenced by racism, even progressive and deeply anti-racist people and organizations put themselves forward in some solidarity activities in a way that suggests that they are the “true” anti-racists, while other activists are not advanced enough to play a leading role. In fact, all white folks must continue to grapple with our deeply rooted racist upbringings all of our lives, while also not operating out of guilt or defensive reaction. As we struggle against racism and white skin privilege, we must also struggle against the special privileges granted to some “special” white folks who monopolize interactions and conduct closed relationships with leaders from communities of color. We must struggle for collective liberation of all people. Conversely, we should not foster the notion that solidarity with oppressed communities and nations is a “specialty” area of activism that only certain “well-versed,” “well-connected,” or “particularly interested” white people need to or can engage in. In our efforts to overcome both our own racism and the limitations of our social change movements, one great challenge is to struggle with other white folks, without becoming elitist or sectarian.

4. “Color-blindness” is a myth: While it is true that the very concept of “race” is a biological myth from a DNA standpoint, and we understand that all people have some shades of “color,” we also recognize that race has a particular history in the U.S. That history cannot be wished away by either individuals or entire movements that want to “see beyond” race. As long as institutional racism and denial of self-determination for oppressed peoples *continue* to characterize U.S. society (not just back in those “bad old days before civil rights” or “before Obama”), white activists will have the responsibility not only to “see” these issues, but also to educate other whites to grasp them and to support struggles to overturn those unjust systems.

5. We must fight not only racism, but also colonialism and imperialism: In constructing a truly liberated society based on justice for all, we must not only move beyond whiteness as a social category, with all the injustices it creates, but also beyond colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism. For example, our work against capitalism and racism must include an understanding that Wall Street has been occupying indigenous land since 1645, and must be de-colonized. It must include a call for the freedom and independence of the last major U.S. colony—we must call for the Un-Occupation/Decolonization of Puerto Rico. It must include freedom for the scores of U.S. political prisoners—activists held because of their beliefs and actions toward freedom and justice—and an end to the prison-industrial complex that incarcerates based upon racial injustice. Our fight for economic justice, while understanding that so many of us have been exploited by “the 1%”, must also understand that Blacks in the south (New Afrikans), Mexicans and Latina immigrants, Native Americans, Asians and other Third World peoples have been super-exploited through theft of land, labor, culture, and history. We must therefore join in the call—raised by Native Nations, New Afrikans, radical environmentalists, and others—to “Free the Land!”

6. Struggles against institutionalized oppression are interconnected: As we work together for liberation and revolution, not only do we struggle against white skin privilege, but also we seek to end all the divisions of people justified by false assumptions and prejudice. That means it is crucial that we actively learn about and support the struggles in society, and within Occupy Wall Street, against patriarchy, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, trans-phobia, able-ism, ageism, anti-Semitism, militarism, and all forms of oppression. Many of the same principles outlined here about solidarity, autonomy, and self-determination apply similarly to relationships between activists from the group accorded relative privilege by society (for example, men) and the group that is oppressed (in this case, women).

7. Anti-racist trainings can only take us so far: Trainings that help white activists understand the historical and current injustices facing people of color, and the harmful dynamics often practiced by even well-intentioned white people, are valuable tools for strengthening our movement. But the only way to fully actualize the principles taught in those trainings is to engage in the active work of alliance-building solidarity, educating other white people about the key issues of white supremacy, and organizing against the empire. Furthermore, doing this hard work collectively

(not just in one-on-one or small-group relationships) is the only effective way to develop as an anti-racist white person. No amount of training—or, for that matter, of activist experience—can prevent us from making mistakes. Our honest, self-critical, loving reflections upon those mistakes are the only way we can grow—as individuals and as a community.

As always, we encourage comments, ideas, additions, modifications, disagreements, debates, edits, suggestions, and the sharing of your own passions and experiences. We look forward to building dialogue and community with anyone who has read this far.

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