

# The Great Disconnect: Occupy and Political Science

Sanford F. Schram

**Occupy the Future.** Edited by David B. Grusky, Doug McAdam, Rob Reich, and Debra Satz. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012. 455p. \$14.95.

**Occupying Political Science: The Occupy Wall Street Movement from New York to the World.** Edited by Emily Welty, Matthew Bolton, Meghana Nayak, and Christopher Malone. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 455p. \$95.00.

*The future's name is autonomy; its route is struggle; its engine youth; its brain is experience; and it has a heart with an indigenous history.*

— Subcomandante Marcos

*It's not that we don't care, We just know that the fight ain't fair  
So we keep on waiting, waiting on the world to change  
And we're still waiting, waiting on the world to change  
We keep on waiting, waiting on the world to change  
One day our generation is gonna rule the population  
So we keep on waiting, waiting on the world to change*

— John Mayer, "Waiting on the World to Change"

In the first few years after the Great Recession of 2007–8, many academics who study social movements were mulling over the mystery of why there was no upsurge in protest over the government's inaction to bring to justice those in the financial industry who had engaged in shady practices that had taken down the global economy and left so many Americans to endure ongoing economic hardship in the years that followed.

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That economic meltdown resulted from chicanery in mortgage and insurance markets that produced unemployment levels not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Its devastation has proven to be wide and deep, continuing to inflict economic pain on millions of American families, making it especially difficult for both those older workers who lost jobs and those younger ones entering the workforce to find stable, gainful employment that could sustain a decent standard of living.

It was particularly mysterious why there was no mass mobilization, not just by the unemployed but by all those who faced grim economic prospects and were most likely to resent the inequities created by an economy that was now changing to benefit the privileged upper classes but seemingly no one else. In fact, in the wake of the Great Recession, concern among researchers and scholars, but also activists, had arisen over how the top wealth holders had actually gained while everyone else has fallen behind, widening already high levels of economic inequality to unprecedented heights.<sup>1</sup> There was no real social movement decrying the inequity of the economy as it was rebounding from the Great Recession. Yes, there was the Tea Party, but more than anything else it represented resentment over the election of President Barack Obama and the idea that there was a "liberal takeover" of public policy. In fact, the Tea Party had ties to Wall Street and represented anxieties about taxes and spending that might come if the government were actually to do something to address the sources of the problem and try to remedy it. The Tea Party represented a sense of umbrage, but not about redressing inequities so much as maintaining them, whether it was the privileges of class, race, or gender. The Tea Party did present itself as representing Main Street over Wall Street, but it was not the populist upsurge desired by many who were

disappointed by the lack of mass protest over the failure of the government to hold Wall Street accountable for the economic meltdown.

There was talk of calling out those inequities, but no real action. “Too big to fail” was the epithet that characterized the government’s bailout of the financial industry, while those deep in housing, education, medical, and credit card debt were left to sink on their own. “Too big to fail” was followed by “too big to jail” that derisively called out the government’s reluctance to hold anyone accountable for the financial debacle. The pathos was palpable, but the political mobilization was missing. There was a message but no movement.

Then, on September 17, 2011, protestors took over Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan, and Occupy Wall Street sprang to life. They were diverse, young and old, students and the homeless, and the unemployed from Wall Street as well as Main Street. They mobilized and demonstrated in large numbers. As the protests persisted and in fact spread to other cities, and then explicitly linked up with protests already occurring around the globe, there emerged the mantra of “we are the 99%” that targeted the top “1%” who were benefiting at the expense of everyone else. The message was refined, but more importantly, there was now a movement. Finally, the people had risen up as an organized force, as Occupy Wall Street, and they made their discontent visible for all to see, demanding justice in the face of the injustice of it all. Along with many other interested observers, academic and otherwise, I was heartened, just like the editors of the two collections of essays under review.

Yet that might be where the similarities between the two volumes end and where my own critical distance from both begins. The essays collected in both volumes are by academics who want their scholarship to contribute to the efforts of Occupy Wall Street but who have very different ideas about what scholarship is and how it should relate to Occupy as a social movement. While the editors of each volume explicitly note their sympathies for what Occupy has represented, they diverge regarding what they see as their role in the movement, as well as their assessment of Occupy’s ability to fulfill its mission.

The two volumes under review, therefore, are not about the Occupy movement as such; more specifically, they are about articulating a relationship between Occupy and academic scholarship related to the issues raised by Occupy. *Occupy the Future*, edited by David Grusky, Doug McAdam, Rob Reich and Debra Satz, grew out of a *Boston Review* symposium on Occupy and provides research and analysis designed to demonstrate how academic scholarship can help Occupy improve its ability to attack the issue of inequality. *Occupying Political Science*, edited by Emily Welty, Matthew Bolton, Meghana Nayak, and Christopher Malone, opens by questioning what political science can learn from Occupy. In other words, *Occupy the Future* is

organized around the idea that Occupy could benefit from being more grounded in academic research on its key issue of inequality, and *Occupying Political Science* is premised on the idea that political science as an academic discipline can learn from Occupy and, in fact, needs to be *occupied* so that it can better fulfill its academic mission of speaking truth to power.

The two volumes correspondingly differ in their assessment of Occupy as a protest movement. *Occupy the Future* assumes that Occupy failed and did so because it was in fact not very well organized but, instead, could be better characterized as a disorganized eruption of passionate dissent that lacked grounding in academic research on its key issue of inequality, which also explains why the movement never developed an explicit public policy agenda and remains to this day at best an amorphous collection of protestors who could never make concerted demands for change upon the government. *Occupying Political Science*, however, explicitly defends Occupy as a success because as a protest movement, its role was to resist being co-opted into making public policy proposals that would only serve to undermine its main mission—to mobilize as many people as possible by raising consciousness about the injustice of protecting the 1% at the expense of ordinary people. The two volumes also disagree—mostly implicitly (but in places also explicitly)—about the role of reasoned analysis and passionate enthusiasm in making Occupy a success or failure, and then by implication about the importance of age and the maturity that comes with age.

*Occupy the Future* reads like what it is, an academic text chiding the protestors for allowing the heat of passionate commitment to burn out the light that comes with a more reasoned analysis. The editors are in fact explicit in suggesting that in hindsight, we can say that Occupy has fizzled as a protest movement because there was too much youthful exuberance at the expense of the kind of systematic thinking that is necessary for organizing for mass mobilization and sustaining an agenda that can impact the public policymaking process. The need for this type of dispassionate analysis persists (the editors are at pains to suggest) because now, finally, since 2013, the economy is coming back but in its own distinctive neoliberal way, with a government that seems incapable of taking charge of a financialized economy that makes more and more money for the investing class at the expense of ordinary people who find it increasingly difficult to hold decent paying jobs that can offer them a modicum of economy security. The growing economic inequality highlighted by the protests is quickly becoming institutionalized. Things look very different at this point, almost as if people have become inured to gaping inequalities and demoralized by their powerlessness.

If this diagnosis is correct, however, then *Occupying Political Science* is misdirected in at least two ways.

If Occupy has failed because of its excessive enthusiasm, then it should not be taken as a source of inspiration, learning, and advancement of the discipline of political science. At a minimum, the changed context underscores the risks of publishing in real time as events are still unfolding. Nonetheless, this volume consistently reflects the excitement and creativity of Occupy from the outset, even to the point of adroitly turning all that critical excitement on the very discipline of political science that is the professional grounding of these observers.

So there is a real debate between these two volumes even if each was written, it seems likely, without knowledge that the other was coming into existence. One way to stage this debate is to systematically go through what the two sets of chapters have to offer and then make an assessment of both. Once that debate has been staged, we can turn to some final commentary on Occupy, its relationship to academic scholarship and what the future holds for both together and apart.

*Occupy the Future* begins with the claim that Occupy's central concern was inequality. The rhetoric of the 1% versus everyone else was undoubtedly championed by Occupy, and the success of that rhetorical framing is itself noteworthy. Most notably, it helped to frame Mitt Romney's comments about the "47%," which he used as a shorthand to ham-handedly imply that Obama's supporters and those receiving forms of government assistance were all allegedly the same bunch of moochers who felt entitled to be dependent on the government because they saw themselves victimized by society. Romney's statistical calculation was not just empirically wrong; it was politically obtuse. But when this private comment went public late in the 2012 presidential campaign, the statistic of 47% could be easily interpreted by the frame "we are the 99%" that Occupy had so successfully circulated in political discourse in the months prior.

Therefore, Occupy was successful in helping frame the inequality issue. Yet whether this meant that economic inequality by itself was Occupy's central issue is less clear. Instead, a good case could be made that Occupy Wall Street was more about *injustice*, the injustice represented by "too big to fail" and "too big to jail," such that Wall Street was bailed out rather than prosecuted, no one was held accountable, and nothing was really being done to rectify the adverse situation everyone else confronted, even as they lost homes, dropped out of school, declared bankruptcy, and so on. Nonetheless, inequality is a persistent problem in our transformed economy, and Occupy has focused on that fact.

The first chapters in *Occupy the Future* provide detailed analysis of the issue of inequality. There are actually only three chapters by political scientists, one by Rob Reich (coauthored with philosopher Debra Satz), which provides an empirical and normative assessment of growing inequality; one by Gary Segura, which offers a biting critique of U.S. politics in response to the Great Recession; and one by David Laitin, which offers proposals for changing our political

system to make it more responsive. The Reich and Satz chapter provides good background on the inequality issue and notes its deleterious effects on our politics. Segura stands alone in the volume in defending Occupy as effectively providing a "rare moment of clarity" about how the wealthy have hijacked the economy and prevented the political system from doing anything about it. Segura's short but trenchant analysis does not include the caveats about Occupy's failings that frame the collection. The Laitin chapter, however, provides a striking example of the theme of the book, that is, that the youthful emotionalism of Occupy could benefit from dispassionate academic analysis.

Laitin explicitly makes the pitch that if Occupy were to ground its understanding of inequality in political science research it could develop specific, concrete proposals for reducing its undemocratic effects. He goes so far as to use a median voter model, once popular in political science, to show how the median voter today would prefer drastically higher taxes on the rich, which are not likely to be enacted given our current political structure. His calculations lead him to propose the abolishment of the Electoral College and to favor allowing immigrants easier access to the ballot. Both these reforms, Laitin claims, would make the U.S. system more like those in Europe. The result would be a more democratically responsive public policymaking process. As he states: "My two concrete proposals, though elaborated in the mathematics of incentives and not in the psychology of rage, are in the spirit of Occupy and would play an important complementary role to Occupy's symbolic protests in challenging an unacceptable status quo" (p. 152). Here again is the theme of the volume put in stark terms: Occupy's passion needs the reason of political science so that it can have an explicit agenda with concrete proposals, or otherwise it will fizzle in the failure of overwrought emotionalism.

Laitin's median voter model is at best a straw man, however, and its assumptions about the self-interestedness of the median voter go uncriticized, even as the author uses the model to criticize Occupy for being insufficiently analytical.<sup>2</sup> It seems at best a fool's errand for Occupy to spend its time pushing for abolition of the Electoral College when its protests are focused on rectifying the economic injustices produced by financial chicanery on Wall Street. And immigration reform is a noble pursuit that has become a new third rail of U.S. politics. It is not clear how political science research as presented by Laitin's use of the moribund median voter model is improving the analytics of Occupy. Indeed, his account makes dispassionate scholarly research seem to be very much a distraction.

In fact, the whole premise of *Occupy the Future* seems to miss the mark. Occupy is about more than inequality; it is about protesting the economic injustice of a system rigged by and for the 1%. Occupy's poignant plea in protest of this situation has raised consciousness on the

issue and helped reframe public discourse. I am confident that the social and political sciences have much to contribute to Occupy's efforts, but that does not mean that if Occupy had consulted more studies on inequality and its effects on the political system it would have developed a more informed and concrete agenda for change and would not be the failure the authors of this volume suggest it is. Indeed, as I discuss later, from one important perspective within political science it is not even clear that Occupy needed a concrete agenda or that it has failed.

*Occupying Political Science*, in fact, assumes that Occupy was a success because it did *not* develop a concrete agenda, and that for this reason it has a lot to teach political science, rather than the other way around. The volume's first chapter, by Emily Welty, Matthew Bolton, and Nick Zukowski, refers to Occupy as a palimpsest so as to emphasize how it was made by multiple actors to operate on multiple levels and remain open to the pursuing of multiple possibilities. The subsequent chapters pursue these multiple dimensions.

The chapter by Christopher Malone and Violet Fredericks addresses the pivotal issue of whether Occupy's porousness in fact was detrimental. Instead, they effectively rely on Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's theory of protest movements to articulate the relationship between Occupy and the elections of 2012.<sup>3</sup> Using polling data and discourse analysis, they show how Occupy in fact played a conventional role for protest movements (as defined by Piven and Cloward). For Piven and Cloward, protest movements of subordinated groups (also known as "poor people's movements" as they called them in their seminal 1977 book by that title) are most effective when they organize themselves to succeed at protest, not at lobbying like interest groups or electioneering like political parties. Protest movements are about *protest*; their job is to mobilize people to demonstrate, to make issues more visible, to raise consciousness in the mass public beyond the protesters, to influence political discourse, and to restructure how public deliberation frames and considers problems that protesters are highlighting. While many have bemoaned Occupy's failure to organize protesters to move on so as to become a sustainable political force that can influence the policy-making process via lobbying and elections, Malone and Fredericks demonstrate, with empirical evidence from polls about opinion change in the mass public and from the content of speeches by candidates, that Occupy in fact fulfilled its role as an effective protest movement that influenced the electoral process and therefore, indirectly, future public policymaking on the issues of inequity in the changing economy.

Would things be different today if Occupy had been different? Or is it possible that Occupy is not the failure that many have made it out to be? Critics of Occupy often invoke an invidious comparison with the U.S. Civil Rights movement.<sup>4</sup> Yet the Civil Rights movement was

a long-term project that itself had its ups and downs. The road from the Montgomery bus boycott to Selma was punctuated by the March on Washington, with periods of inaction in between. Protests fizzled after the Montgomery boycott only to be reignited following the dramatic events at Selma. The lesson from the Civil Rights movement is not just that you need a sustained, committed, organized group with an explicit agenda. It is also that you have to be patient, wait for opportunities to protest, and be organized as protesters to take advantage of them when they come. All the same, the core of such a movement is protest and mobilization and not lobbying or electoral campaigning.

The Civil Rights movement was led by a number of related groups, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in particular. Yet the movement also relied heavily on the energy of youth, as embodied in the activism of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). These groups coalesced *not* around an explicit policy agenda so much as around the mobilization of protesters to help raise consciousness about the injustice of racial apartheid in the United States. SCLC and SNCC did not always agree on what to do when, and over time tensions developed between such leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture). Yet the movement was sustained as protests increased the visibility of the issue, dramatized the injustice of segregation and racial discrimination, and eventually helped frame political discourse to the point that policy elites felt obligated to enact a series of "Civil Rights" laws.

The lesson of the Civil Rights movement is not necessarily that Occupy has failed but that we are again living in an era of protest (as Piven has noted) and that protest movements ought to do what they do best: mobilize people to raise consciousness, frame political discourse, and pressure policy elites to respond. Piven is worth quoting at length:

A movement forceful enough to change the course of history must accomplish two great tasks. [Beyond being disruptive, they are] communicative. The movement must use its distinctive repertoire of drama and disturbance, of crowds and marches and banners and chants, to raise the issues that are being papered over by normal politics, for the obvious reason that normal politics is inevitably dominated by money and propaganda.

On this, Occupy has already made substantial headway. The slogans that assert we are the 99 percent, they are the 1 percent, named the historic increase in inequality in the United States during the past few decades as the main issue, and the movement dramaturgy of encampments and masks and general assemblies and twinkling fingers helped to give the message heft and appeal, even to the media that had at first simply disparaged the movement. To be sure, there were lots of complaints that Occupy had failed to issue its own policy proposals—which I think it was wise not to, since to do so would have ensnared the activists in endless disputes about particulars. But that is quibbling. It is far more important that we can see the influence of the movement's main issue—extreme inequality—on the speeches at the Democratic convention, for example.<sup>5</sup>

Protest movements have their role to play. Their efforts can be articulated to work with those organized interests lobbying within the policy process and to help political parties influence and win elections, say, between Occupy and MoveOn or other progressive, left-leaning groups active in electoral and public policy organizing. Yet protest movements are not lobbies and they are not parties. Their role is different, and political scientists, commentators, and activists all need to appreciate that and not indict a protest movement like Occupy for failing to do everything. Such movements can perhaps do better in articulating relationships with organized pressure groups and parties; and Occupy is far from perfect on that score. Yet as Occupy lives on beyond the protests, it continues to develop those relationships while continuing to organize to perform its role.

In comparing Occupy to the Civil Rights movement, it is important to be sensitive to historical context.<sup>6</sup> That was then and this is now. The two movements have not only different issues but different demographics and different locales, and perhaps, most importantly, take place at different times with different political climates. For all these reasons, Occupy can never replicate the Civil Rights movement. And indeed, as social scientists, we should not expect it to do this. Instead, Occupy ought to be understood, and appreciated, for what it is: a distinctive form of protest politics that articulates the preoccupations and political styles of today's young people, but also the broader economic concerns of all—young and old, single or with children, black and white, formerly middle class or persistently poor—who are rendered vulnerable by the economic transformations in the wake of the Great Recession.

Occupy ought to be seen as an expression of and a protest against the pervasiveness of what Judith Butler and others have termed “precarity.”<sup>7</sup> One key dimension of ongoing precaritization is the increasing prevalence of so-called casual labor (or, not much better, temporary labor), whereby more and more people are unable to secure stable employment with decent wages or salary, or benefits such as pensions, sick leave, vacation time, and health insurance. A second and equally insidious feature of the increasing precaritization occurring in the economy today is that the few remaining jobs that do offer stable employment and secure benefits require advanced education, which itself is becoming less accessible and affordable, except via excessive amounts of student debt, now the largest form of debt in the United States, exceeding mortgages, credit card balances, and medical bills.

In fact, the economy increasingly runs on debt, on which growing numbers of people must rely in the hope of overcoming or at least holding at bay their precarity. Occupy, at its heart, has always been about protesting the injustice of this transformed economy, especially for the younger generation. Therefore, it is no surprise that

students were so prevalent in Occupy's demonstrations. Occupy's future clearly lies in mobilizing the young to resist the debtor's bind posed by precaritization. Occupy has shown signs of moving in this direction with efforts on debt forgiveness, especially for students.<sup>8</sup> And President Obama has made gestures (even if limited by the persistent political gridlock in Washington today) that the restructuring of student debt (along with mortgages) is an issue that must be addressed. At the same time, offshoots of Occupy are organizing around a broad range of issues that includes banking reform, tax equity, homelessness, disaster relief, global warming, and so on, as they relate to the transformed economy.<sup>9</sup> These Occupy initiatives may not have the visibility of the first wave of public protests and occupations, but they still hold promise. And if political science teaches anything, it is that the forms of dissent, resistance, and collaboration that percolate beneath the surface of politics can sometimes coalesce over time in ways that generate macropolitical contestation and change.<sup>10</sup>

Not only does the ongoing work of Occupy, including its less visible but continuing networking efforts, furnish political science with explanatory challenges and opportunities; it also poses questions about the very character of political science inquiry. While there is surely much that Occupiers can learn from researchers, I lean toward the contributors of *Occupying Political Science*, at least in believing that political science has more to learn from Occupy. Ours is a diverse discipline, but it remains dominated by quantitative researchers who accept the fact/value dichotomy and are reluctant to frame their inquiries in order to serve an advocacy agenda.<sup>11</sup> Too much of political science research remains informed by the belief that the goal of that research is to help develop theoretical explanations of political phenomena irrespective of whether that research helps people address the political challenges they currently confront. The editors of *Occupying Political Science* call for an occupation of the discipline, which, in my mind, involves promoting a critical perspective that challenges the positivistic research hegemony, and instead promotes methodological pluralism, recognizing the importance of “problem-driven” as opposed to “theory-driven” research, and putting an end to the fact/value dichotomy as the touchstone for deciding whose research is “real” political science. In the process, political science can learn to become more open to more unconventional ways of practicing politics (including the use of art, performance, and street theater that were prominently on display in the Occupy demonstrations that spread across the country in 2011). Learning from activists what politics is, what it means to them, what their political concerns are, and how those concerns can be best expressed at any one point in time is actually an important form of political science research historically, and it would be a mistake to forget that now in the rush to criticize the youthful

exuberance of Occupy, because or in spite of the fact that it has yet to realize all that its supporters had hoped.

So, perhaps, then, there is a generational issue. Perhaps old political scientists need to be open to learning from the young activists who are their students and from younger colleagues who are drawn to the activists and sometimes are themselves activists. The Child is indeed at times Father to the man. And Occupy is very much teaching us how the younger generation is looking at the transformed economy with its own distinctive ways of expressing its concern and approbation. In fact, there is wisdom in the youthful refusal to settle now in the short run for limited policy concessions because Occupy is about something much larger—the political future itself. Perhaps then it is like the song says: Occupy must lie in wait, “waiting, waiting on the world to change,” and in the process helping to make that change happen.

## Notes

- 1 See Winters and Page 2009.
- 2 For a critique of the median voter model, especially as related to policy issues like taxation, see Holcombe 2005, pp. 253–55.
- 3 Piven and Cloward 1977.
- 4 There have been a number of positive and negative comparisons suggesting that Occupy is and is not like the Civil Rights movement from a variety of political perspectives. For two that are critical from the left, see Browne-Marshall 2011 and Greenberg 2012.
- 5 Piven 2012.
- 6 See Coates 2012 and UndisciplinedPhD 2012.
- 7 See Schram 2013.
- 8 See New 2012 and also Web pages for debt-reduction initiatives that were spun off from Occupy Wall Street: <http://rollingjubilee.org/>; <http://strikedebt.org/>; <http://occupystudentdebt.com/>.
- 9 For instance, see Quart 2013.
- 10 Coles 2006.
- 11 Flyvbjerg, Landman, and Schram 2012.

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