

Room for Debate: A Running Commentary on the News

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Is It Effective to Occupy Wall Street?

The protesters are getting more attention and expanding outside New York. What are they doing right, and what are they missing?

Beware of the Old Guard

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The main thing that Occupy Wall Street is doing right also happens to be the main thing these protesters are doing in the first place: sticking around. Merciless persistence is a large part of what made the Arab Spring work: those in the streets in Egypt and Tunisia managed to hold on longer than their rulers could.

Who remembers that as many as 20,000 people marched for a day on Wall Street this past May 12? But when just a few hundred stick around for more than two weeks, through rain and police crackdowns, it excites and empowers people everywhere, fostering hundreds of sister occupations across the country. They've reminded the country that it's partly tacit acceptance that has allowed corporations to wield so much influence in government and society, and that by organizing, and sacrificing, something can be done about it.

Spontaneity has been the occupation's lifeblood, but it's also a hindrance. Those in the civil rights movement got arrested for purposive acts of disobedience like lunch-counter sit-ins and "freedom rides," using actions to target very precisely the injustices they opposed. Yet these protesters at Wall Street have mainly been arrested for obstructing traffic during their improvisational marches. More careful planning of disobedience actions — breaking particular laws, at particular times and places, on their own terms — could send a clearer message of what they stand for, even in lieu of the elusive "one demand."

Maybe more than anything, though, the challenges this occupation-turned-movement faces now are growing pains. As big, established organizations like unions and political lobbies begin offering their support with promises of more marchers and resources, this genuinely grassroots upswell faces the challenge of building a broad coalition without getting co-opted by the old guard just when it really starts swelling.

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Topics: Economy, Wall Street, demonstrations and protests

This grassroots movement must avoid being co-opted by big, established organizations like unions and political lobbies.