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NATIONAL How to Succeed in Reoccupation Without Really Trying

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Lately, I've been getting the feeling that Occupy Wall Street's past successes are starting to go to the heads of some of the people in the movement. We saw the glory days of Liberty Plaza, and also the recent spurt of momentum surrounding the brief March 17 reoccupation of Zuccotti Park in celebration of OWS's six-month anniversary. But as police departments across the country make it quite clear that occupations of any kind will not be tolerated, the mood has turned sour. The good old days, it seems, are not coming back. Instead, OWS has turned to a series of legal, temporary, roving "sleepful protests" — along Union Square, then outside bank branches and now at Wall Street itself.

More than a few organizers seem to be operating under the assumption that occupation — something comparable to last fall but somehow surely better — is a prerequisite for further political action. Consequently, some of the most talented organizers in New York (as well as, evidently, in Oakland and San Francisco) have been directing a considerable amount of energy into failed reoccupation attempts. When it's not reoccupying, the movement is celebrating the anniversaries of past successes instead of creating new ones. The more conversations I have with listless, frustrated organizers, though, the more I start to feel that right now this occupation-first logic is entirely backward.

This is a new time; the movement and its supporters are in a totally different place than they were last fall. Potential allies expect more from the movement — as they should. Many who were wholeheartedly behind it a few months ago seem to think it's over, or should be. The encampments lost much public support as the pressures of police harassment, a lack of resources to assist homeless Occupiers and other factors turned many into unsafe spaces. Videos of Occupiers behaving badly became fodder for a right-wing smear campaign that is now gearing up for any possible resurgence. This matters; in some sense, an occupation is only as good as its public support. That legitimacy is what makes it difficult for the state to mount an eviction without losing face.

Think of the early morning confrontation so many remember as the climax of Occupy Wall Street. On Oct. 14, thousands of people turned out before dawn to keep Mayor Bloomberg's cleaning crews out of the park. The moment those

crews were routed, when the announcement came through the people's mic and the assembled crowd of Occupiers, union workers and supporters burst into cheers — that was amazing. But it took a lot of committed allies to make that happen. Right now, that support simply doesn't seem to be there. Evictions continue without much outcry.

So how can the movement recapture that support? How can it, even more than before, light up people's imaginations and make them want Occupy to stick around? Here's a modest proposal to a movement that tends not to take or need advice:

Challenge the power that affects the most people's lives.

Right now, there are plenty of well-thought-out projects starting up in the movement that address the core issues that moved thousands of people to begin occupying Wall Street in the first place. There's Fight BAC, a project with the not-so-modest goal of taking down Bank of America. There are efforts to fight foreclosures and evictions through occupations, auction blockades or eviction defense. Disrupt Dirty Power is aimed at finally halting the corporate machine driving climate change. How about a massive student debt strike — anyone?

Projects with this level of focus tend to attract relatively small numbers of people compared to re-occupation attempts and rowdy marches. What if they became, for a while, the main business of the movement and the main outlet of its huge creativity? What if the first thing people thought of when they heard the word "Occupy" was, "Oh, those kids who saved my friend's home from foreclosure? I heard they're trying to take down the most dangerous bank in America!" Actions that directly challenge the economic violence of the system pose a dilemma for the entire society. You're asking everyone to choose sides — not about tents in a park, but about major features of everyday economic life. Do I want Bank of America to foreclose on my neighbor or not? Do I want my kids to spend their post-college lives enslaved by debt or not? These are serious political questions that have the potential to eclipse the nonsense the presidential candidates keep spouting. Suddenly the question of whether to allow the movement to occupy one space or another seems comparatively small.

As the movement shifts gears, it's hugely important to keep the spirit of occupation alive — though not necessarily in tents.

Occupiers are mapping the city's sites of injustice by sleeping out in the Financial District, but just as important is the sense of community at afternoon Town Square events and mutual aid on May Day. This sort of action is constructive rather than just disruptive, and it points the way toward a new, revolutionary society. Lots of people in the movement talk about wanting to see these occupations evolve into sustainable worker cooperatives and serious, large-scale mutual aid networks. But what if that happened in the context of making the most egregious, fundamental crises unmistakably clear — in the banks, in the schools, in politics, in how we treat our planet?

Compared to these massive tears in the fabric of society, I suspect that encampments in parks will seem like no big deal. Maybe the movement could even win back the right to occupy with much less effort. At the very least, there will be a whole lot more people standing up against the forces of repression and for the right to occupy. "Hey, we're changing the world with this movement," they'll say. "Why not let us have a park or a building and do some good with it?"

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