

#OWS: Radicals Overcoming the Story of the Righteous Few

by Jonathan Matthew Smucker

The Occupy Wall Street movement claims to be a movement of “the 99%”, challenging the extreme consolidation of wealth and political power by the top one percent. Our opponents, however, claim that the 99% movement is just a bunch of fringe radicals who are out of touch with mainstream America.

They’re not 100% wrong about us being radicals. Young radicals played pivotal roles in initiating Occupy Wall Street. And radicals continue to pour an enormous amount of time, energy, creativity, and strategic thinking into this burgeoning movement.

What our opponents are wrong about is the equation of *radical* with *fringe*. The word *radical* literally means going to the *root* of something. Establishment forces use the label *radical* interchangeably with the disparaging label *extremist*. But clearly the radicals did something right here. They’ve flipped the script by framing the top one percent as the real extremists — as the people who are truly out of touch. By striking at the root of the problem and naming the primary culprit in our economic and democratic crises — by creating a defiant symbol on Wall Street’s doorstep — a new generation of young radicals has struck a chord with mainstream America. A movement that started as an audacious act by a committed band of radicals is growing broader and more diverse by the day.

Radicals will continue to play a crucial role in this movement. Throughout history the “radicals” have tended to be among those who give the most of their time and energy to movements for change. They tend to make up a large part of the movement’s core. As such, their contributions are absolutely indispensable.

However, successful movements need a lot more than a radical core. For every core participant who gives nearly everything of herself or himself, you need at least a hundred people in the next tier of participation — folks who are contributing *something*, while balancing other commitments in their lives. If we are to effectively challenge the most powerful institutions in the world, we will need the active involvement of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people — folks who are willing to give *something*. If the core fails to involve a big enough “next tier” of

participants, it will certainly fail to effectively engage the broader society. These “next tier” participants are not even the base, but rather the *start of the base* needed to accomplish our aims.

If the kinds of changes we imagine are ever to be realized, it will be through the active participation of large numbers of teachers, nurses, factory workers, barbers, artists, service workers, students, military service members and veterans, religious communities, civic organizations, unions, and even allies within the existing power establishment. These participants come as they are, and the core must welcome them as such. The movement cannot afford to have a high bar for entry. The smallest of contributions must be encouraged and affirmed. If we are to keep building a popular movement, we must accommodate a continuum of levels of involvement, as well as levels of political analysis.

We’ve gotten an impressive start in a very short amount of time.

And our opponents have taken notice. They will do what they can to foment division between the radicalized core and the broader movement — because they know well that the dynamic (and challenging) relationship between core and broader base is one of the biggest strengths *and* biggest vulnerabilities of our movement. The successful interplay between these tiers of movement participants is of critical importance. Unfortunately, our opponents tend to know this better than we do.

Too often, radicals play into our opponents divide-and-conquer strategies, by relishing in our radical identity more than we value connecting with a broader base. Too often we get stuck in a *story of the righteous few*.

Radicals tend to *become radicals* because we become disillusioned with aspects of the dominant culture. When you feel like you’re up against the culture, it’s easy then to develop an inclination to separate yourself from that culture. When we begin to become aware of the destructive impacts of racism, sexism, capitalism and whatever other social systems we encounter that we see perpetuating oppression, we don’t want to be part of it. We feel a moral repugnance and a desire to not cooperate with injustice.



THE STORY OF THE RIGHTEOUS FEW

However, this desire to separate ourselves from injustice can develop into a general mentality of separation from society more generally. In other words, when we see the dominant culture as a perpetrator of injustice, and we see society as the storehouse of the dominant culture, then our desire to separate ourselves from injustice can easily develop into a mentality of separating ourselves from the mainstream of society. With the mainstream seen as bad, we begin to look for ways to distinguish ourselves and our groups from anything mainstream. We begin to notice, highlight, exaggerate and develop distinctions between ourselves and the mainstream, because these distinctions reinforce our radical identity. The distinguishing features often go far beyond nonparticipation in those aspects of the dominant culture that we find offensive.

Radicals may start to adorn themselves with distinguishing features to express separation from society, and also to flag other radicals. In his book *All the Power*, author and community organizer Mark Anderson describes in tribal terms how this phenomenon plays out in punk subcultures:

The punk subculture has many of the hallmarks of a tribe ... piercings, tattoos, more. These markers, also including hairstyle, dress, music form, even slang, help to demarcate the boundaries of the group, to set it off from the larger populace. In this way, appearance can even be a form of dissent, a strikingly visual way to say, “I am not a part of your corrupt world.”

Surely there are similar dynamics in play among radicals at Liberty Square and at other occupations across the country. The big danger is that radical subcultures caught in this pattern of emphasizing how different they are may over time start to even prize their own marginalization. If society is unjust, then our justice-oriented identity may be reaffirmed when we are rejected by society (or more accu-

rately, by portions of society). If society is bad, then marginalization in society may be seen as good. We may tell each other stories of how we were ostracized in this or that group, how we’re the outcast in our family, how we were the only revolutionary in a group of liberal reformists, etc. We may start to swim in our own marginalization. This is the *story of the righteous few*.

In the story of the righteous few, success itself becomes suspect. If a group or individual is embraced by a significant enough portion of society, it must be because they are not truly revolutionary or because their message has been “watered down”. It seriously messes with radicals’ heads when some of our ideas start to become popular! We are so used to being the most radical kid on the block, and suddenly people we’ve never met are coming out of the woodwork spouting some of the lines we’ve been saying for years. It’s a bit of an identity crisis!

Here we see the importance of checking our narratives for faulty components. If we allow the story of the righteous few to hold a place in our narrative about social change, then our efforts are likely to be seriously hindered by a general mentality to separate and distinguish ourselves from society and to retreat from success. To organize effectively, this mentality has to turn 180 degrees to a mentality to connect with others, to notice commonalities, to “weave ourselves into the fabric of society” (quoting #OWS participant Beka Economopolous), and to embrace being embraced by society. For many radicals, this can be a big shift in our conceptualizations of ourselves and of our society.

The good news is, we are presently deep into the process of making that profound paradigmatic shift. The framing of *the 99%* itself asserts an alignment of our vision with the interests of a super-super majority of Americans. It encourages us to think of most everyone as an ally or potential ally. We even welcome “one percent defectors” who agree with our goals and stand with us.

The importance of this paradigm shift cannot be

overstated. Over the past four decades radical social justice movements tended to feel like we were up against the whole culture. We began clustering into increasingly insular circles, looking to each other for support and connection, as if to hold onto our sanity in a world gone mad. In the face of “free trade” agreements, austerity, raging wars of aggression, attacks on the cultural gains made by earlier social justice movements, and many other set-backs, we often felt entirely impotent.

That’s part of what makes this moment so significant. The 99% movement has the potential to pull us out of a *counter-cultural* mentality and set us up to claim and contest the culture—*our* culture—rather than denounce, abandon, and distinguish ourselves from it. *We are the 99%. We are the true moral majority.*

But we have a long road ahead. The meme of *the 99%* can help to shift our thinking, but no meme is good enough to do all the work for us, without any conscious effort. While we continue to challenge the dominant storyline, we must also self-reflectively challenge some components of the narratives we tell ourselves about our relationship as “radicals” to society. If we want to win, we have to scrap the chapter of the righteous few, and replace it with a story about everyday Americans—about huge swaths of society—stepping into movement together.

The underlying economic conditions are politicizing more and more Americans by the day, creating greater potential for the emergence of a broader-based movement than we’ve seen in decades. And this moment needs the full participation and influence of radicals. Without radicals, this wave would lose its fire and settle too soon for too little.

It must be pointed out that some establishment forces in the emerging precarious alliances (all alliances are precarious!) will try to throw radicals under the bus first chance they get. But really it’s on radicals to make sure no one gets that chance. The way to do that is for radicals to get really good at making friends with a lot of people —

to be the life of the party. It must be abundantly clear to tentative allies and opponents alike that it would be difficult to isolate us; that there would be a *broader* backlash if they attacked radicals. One thing *not* to do is shrink away from engagement with broader constituencies and unwieldy alliances — even including those who might betray us if they perceive they can get away with it. Such a retreat would make our fears self-fulfilling; would enable those who would screw us; would seal our fate as righteous martyrs whom the world was not ready for. Radicals have to ask themselves if their radical identity confines them to being eternally rejected, ostracized, and crucified — that’s the story of the righteous few. The powerful are always ready to tell that story, and we must determine to not be a predictable character in their script. Serious radicals must decouple radicalism from such a martyr mentality. Serious radicals must aim to succeed. Fighting an advantaged opponent without a real intention and strategy for success is not so much fighting as it is coping. The tendency of the outgunned resister to run headlong kamikaze-style into enemy lines is the tendency of someone who wants to be righteous — not of someone who seeks to affect real change.

We must ask ourselves if our intention is to bring about meaningful change, or if it is to act out righteous narratives (either as individuals or in small enlightened groups). At long last, we have an opening to build a serious broad-based movement to challenge egregious injustices and deeply entrenched power and privilege.

Ten or twenty years from now, will we look back on Occupy Wall Street and see it as a blip, as a righteous stand that was predictably short-lived? Or will we see this as the moment when America rediscovered collective action — when a broad-based movement for social and economic justice was (re)born? Will we see it as little more than an interesting twist—a peculiar spike—in the otherwise predictable story of the righteous few? Or will we see it as a catalyst of a new moral majority that went on to change the course of history?