

The Sixties Redivivus: The “Occupy Wall Street” Protests

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This article is one of SCSS President Stephen M. Krason’s “Neither Left nor Right but Catholic” online columns. It looks at the “Occupy Wall Street” protests, and aims primarily at drawing a comparison between them and the protests of the 1960s. It also assesses them in light of Catholic social teaching.

Those of us old enough to remember the 1960s cannot help but be struck by the similarities between the upheavals of that era—especially the anti-war movement—and the current “Occupy Wall Street” protests. Both have featured mass protests in the streets. Both have had a distinctly leftist socio-politico-economic orientation. Both have viewed “capitalism” as an enemy and eagerly embraced class-war rhetoric. Both have occurred at a time when probably the most leftist presidential administrations and policy agendas up to their time were in place. While the 1960s protests targeted government more because of the Vietnam War and the draft, both have criticized military policies but at the same time called for an expansion of federal social welfare programs. Most protesters are younger people—probably below thirty in the 1960s (Remember the “Don’t trust anyone over 30” slogan?) and below thirty-five now. The participants in both cases have educational attainment far above the average of the population, with 92 percent of the OWS crowd having at least some college (notice that I did not say they were more *educated*, as their ignorance of social ethics, economics, and American Founding principles abounds). Both movements have been propelled by sympathetic media coverage. Both have betrayed a kind of “unwillingness to sacrifice” or an entitlement mentality. As I point out in my forthcoming book *The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic*, for all the problems of the country’s Vietnam War policy, it was consistent with the Founding culture’s belief in the need for present sacrifice in the hope of future good. This was typical of America’s entire Cold War effort, as seen in JFK’s insistence that Americans would “pay any price” in the struggle for freedom. The 1960s anti-war protests made clear that Americans would no longer do that, and so the 1970s witnessed the U.S. standing by while countries were swarmed over by Communist forces and the accession of the USSR to the height of its power. The current OWS

people want banks and the wealthy to give them the money to pay off their student loans that they voluntarily contracted for. They don't believe they should have to carry out their responsibilities since others have so much money and in their view should "bail them out." This is entitlement run amok. Also, like the 1960s the origins of the movement have hardly been spontaneous; leftist activists and organizations were involved from the beginning. People like the Communist Bettina Aptheker and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist Mario Savio led the UC-Berkeley "free speech movement," which inaugurated the sixties' student rebellion. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which grew out of the American socialist movement, egged on student activism and played a significant role in campus clashes. The Canadian-based leftist, environmentalist group Adbusters engineered the OWS movement. OWS has welcomed a range of arch-leftist organizations (socialists, Communists, and anarchists), one of its main organizers has been Obama "green jobs czar" and former Communist Van Jones, and the leftist public advocacy group MoveOn.org has been strongly promoting it. Both movements also have seen left-leaning clergy providing cover for what is a rankly secularist movement. Unlike the sixties, though, it's not just Christian and Jewish clergy, but also Moslems, Hindus, and others.

We also see a 1960s-type utopian vision of democracy at work. The hundreds or thousands of OWS participants all gather in a "general assembly" to decide what their agenda for each day will be. It is not surprising that they can't come to decisions. Their labyrinth of committees can't agree on how their money will be spent. Such Rousseauism was also seen in the SDS's 1962 Port Huron Statement. The ugliness of such ultra-democracy (ochlocracy) has become readily apparent in both cases. Historian Allen J. Matusow writes that in the Weather Underground—an SDS faction—the male leaders dominated the female faithful, sexually imposing themselves on them or telling them who their bed partners for the night would be. The unreasonable trust prompted by OWS's version of democracy has led to stolen laptops, iPods, and cellphones, and also sexual assaults in their camp cities.

There are some differences, to be sure. The unions now are involved, whereas in the 1960s they were spearheaded by the likes of the anti-Communist George Meany who supported American Vietnam policy. Also, the universities are not targeted now. One commentator pointed to the oddity here: Wall Street is being blamed for student loan indebtedness, even though it is the universities, bolstered since the sixties by federal student loan and grant programs, which have sent tuition and other expenses skyrocketing beyond the inflation rate. Some of this increase has been due

to campus amenities that the students themselves clamor for. Again, they avoid responsibility.

While, then, the comparisons with 1960s radicalism create an unimpressive picture of OWS, can we say anything better about its views from the perspective of Catholic social teaching? Not much, in my opinion. Their blanket condemnation of capitalism—by which it is presumed they mean the market or business economy—is not in line with that teaching, which upholds private property, economic freedom, and the right to make a reasonable profit, while it rejects an uninhibited market where ethical restraints are pushed aside. One recalls John Paul II’s distinction between the two notions of “capitalism” in *Centesimus Annus* (no. 42). Class conflict has consistently been rejected by the Church, as has socialism (which at least some of the OWS crowd seems ready to embrace). Recall that Pius XI stated firmly, “no one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist” (*Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 120). Its angry rhetoric and confrontational tactics hardly mesh with the cooperative spirit that the Church has long called for in economic and social relations. OWS seems impervious to the certainty that its demand for universal health care would translate into a massive new government entitlement program. John Paul’s trenchant criticism of the welfare state (*CA*, no. 48) would likely fall on deaf ears with them. The right to medical care in *Pacem in Terris* (no. 11) hardly spells out a structure that would violate subsidiarity or sanction such an unreasonable economic burden on government and taxpayers that rationing of care would result. Indeed, in their zeal to stick it to the rich—even though they, like the Obama administration, seem vague about who all that includes—they are oblivious to the fact that, as Leo XIII taught, excessively high levels of taxation can violate the right to private property and thus be immoral (*Rerum Novarum*, no. 47). There is no indication that they believe their conception of democracy must be directed by the truths of the natural law, without which John Paul said democracy becomes a “thinly disguised totalitarianism” (*CA*, no. 46).

OWS has some concerns that the Church shares: the problems of a stagnant economy, expanding unemployment, the economic dislocations caused by globalization, the growing burden of individual debt, and the lack of a sufficient concern for economic ethics by some in the corporate community (which, by the way, seems to be as much left-wing as right-wing nowadays). The absence of a sound ethical grounding for OWS’s views, its instinctive attachment to leftism (“progressivism”), and its inadequate understanding about how economics works show that—like the sixties protesters—it is full of supposedly good intentions. We know that the road to hell is paved with them—and when overlaid with ideology it is also a recipe for social disaster.