

Wall Street, the Real Center of American Power

By now most of you have seen the coverage of "events thus far" near Wall Street. These notes are reflections on what turned out to be a somewhat aborted visit I took there today. I'd been at the office of the War Resisters League, doing an interview, so I didn't get to the Wall Street area until after six, and had gotten off one subway stop too far South, so had a long walk back up Broadway to find Zuccotti Park.

I'd taken with me my trusty little Canon S90, an expensive, tiny camera which I knew would take good pictures even as daylight vanished. However I had forgotten the camera tends to have a short battery life, and shortly after I took this photo of the Stock Exchange, when I reached Zuccotti Park and aimed the camera at the assembled youth and pressed the button, the camera flashed "recharge your battery", and promptly turned itself off. By then it was nearly 7, I admit to feeling tired and depressed by the camera's unexpected betrayal, so I headed back home.

By now I assume you have all seen good photos of the demonstrators - they have been widely carried, including a long and fairly good story in the October 1st New York Times, starting on the front page. So tonight, as I write these notes, be satisfied with a shot of the headquarters of the US government - not the White House, not Congress, but the Stock Exchange.

There are four observations I'd make, most of which have not been covered in the newspapers.

First, and a bonus because I had gotten off at the wrong stop and had to walk some distance through the financial district, was the awareness of the remarkable collection of barriers that block off virtually every street. Not only could no al Qaeda tank make its way down these narrow streets, but neither can an ambulance. There are large numbers of steel "chunks", rather handsome, looking as if they had escaped from a contemporary museum's collection of abstract sculpture, placed in the centers of the streets and on the sidewalks as well.

If we ever survive this period, we may look back in wonder at the strange and numerous objects protecting every building which might be the target of a terrorist attack.

Many years ago it was possible, if you were in Washington DC, to walk right up to the fence outside the White House. The last time I was down there I realized that all the little streets the might lead you there are blocked off. There, as in Wall Street, the system has put itself behind bars, a kind of pre-emptive arrest and confinement. The centers of power (most notably here in the financial district) are now almost guarded compounds, like the gated communities to which our elites flee when the day is over.

We have too easily accepted these gradual limits on our freedom. When I was young and jet aircraft were new, we could stand at the airport fence and watch them take off. Now we must leave our pocket knives at home, bundle our few liquids into small bottles. We can't even get to the ticket line at the airport to buy a ticket unless we have a current drivers' license or passport. (I'm due to fly to Los Angeles in a couple of weeks and have been in a mild panic waiting for a

renewed drivers' license - the last two times I flew, an expired license was almost enough to keep me off).

I could go on - but take note, if you go to support the youth, to walk a bit farther South, and photograph the barriers.

Second, this is a movement which isn't organized by a central committee of an American branch of al Qaeda. In some ways it isn't organized at all, yet it is well organized as you will see if you make a visit to Zuccotti Square. There is a place to go for medical help, for food, for communications. This strange demonstration has been organized by cell phones and the internet. These are the forms of communication which have played such havoc in the Middle East. Free communications is the threat that rigid societies, such as North Korea, or Saudi Arabia, most fear, and try to monitor and control.

The media has, correctly, noted that the youth do not seem to have an agreed set of demands, are not sure how long they will continue to remain in the Wall Street area. The media is disturbed by this because they do not understand it. Movements must have a clear set of demands - and the folks at Zuccotti Square don't. None of the clarity of Lenin's "Bread, Land, Peace" in 1917. So what?

I have no idea where this will all go. Will it fade like an autumn leaf when the temperature drops? What does it mean that the trade unions have joined in the demonstrations? I remember my mentor, A.J. Muste, saying that one never knew the hour or the day of a revolution. He didn't mean a violent revolution, but that moment when the "mode of music changes" and the walls of the city are shaken, as they were in December, 1955, so long ago now, when a black woman sat in the white section of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Or as, two decades later, during the struggle against the Vietnam War, the "Moratorium" took place on October 15, 1969, and the world could see that opposition to the war wasn't confined to a few radicals in New York or Chicago or San Francisco, but stretched to the smallest towns in America. It was then that we knew the Mandate of Heaven had fallen from the government, and the war's end was a matter of time (and sadly, considerable blood).

Third, while many of those who are going to Zuccotti Square don't realize it, one should never underestimate the role of reactionaries in making social change possible. A long long time ago I asked Bayard Rustin if he could explain to me the social value of reactionaries. I knew the value of conservatives - often the forces of social change rush too fast to dismantle useful parts of the social order. But reactionaries? Those who opposed all change? Bayard looked at me and said, "Ah, they are the most essential of all. For it is in a situation of social disaster where radicals are demanding the abolition of the old order, and liberals are demanding at least some regulations, and conservatives are conceding that at least one or two changes might be wise, that the reactionary says 'Let them eat cake' and it is then that the people move".

In the "Zuccotti case" it was the police officer who squirted mace into the faces of unresisting and unoffending young women, arousing the fury of almost everyone in New York City, that the media finally turned its full attention to events. That officer, who one hopes, in the fullness of

time, will be relieved of his duties and possibly spend some time in jail, did such a great favor to those of us who have watched the banks make a disaster area of working and middle class Americans, while those at the top not only remain in the President's inner circle, but walk away with increasing profits. Masses out of work, millions fearful of losing their homes, students burdened with impossible debts, but the small elite of great wealth have in their employ this police officer who has foolishly done them more harm than they yet realize. (In New York City there is concrete organizing now going on around the very issue of police brutality and human rights).

Fourth, what is behind this gentle assembly? It is because the usual process of social change no longer works. I do not hate Obama. I feel rather sorry for him. I had not voted for him, but like more than half the country I was glad he was elected. I knew, even then, that he was "of the Establishment" - no one is able to run for that office, with a chance of winning, who has not been vetted by the real center of power - Wall Street. But I had hoped Guantanamo would be closed. I had hoped the last troops would long since have been withdrawn from Iraq, and that we had not replaced them with "contract killers". I had known Obama would continue the war in Afghanistan, but had no idea he would not, much sooner, have realized we must withdraw. I could not imagine he would (as he just has) authorize the murder of two American citizens in Yemen without a trial or any due process.

And when the great economic disaster came, and it came surely not only because of Bush, but because of the folly of both major parties and the fact they are both bought and paid for by Wall Street, I could not imagine there would not be legal charges laid against those most responsible for the misery from which the nation suffers. Thus Obama's failures on these most crucial issues, left the youth with no hope in the political process. Where we go now, I do not know, but I do know, looking back at other moments of great tensions, the Civil Rights and the Vietnam Peace movement, that it is not until people take to the streets that there is hope for change.

To conclude on a happy note, as I walked to the subway in City Hall to get back to my apt., even as the rain began in earnest, I saw several hundred young people pouring out of the subway, headed, in the growing darkness, toward Zuccotti Square, chanting as they went, "The People, United, Will Never Be Defeated". I wondered, as I got to the entrance, why traffic was so jammed. There were the usual police cars with flashing lights, but that is a part of Manhattan's landscape. I didn't realize, until I got home, and found a message on my answering machine, that something like 700 people had been arrested trying to cross the Brooklyn Bridge toward Zuccotti Park. Included among them, I am happy to say, were several members of the Socialist Party, including Billy Wharton, the national co-chairperson of the Party.