

The Raid and its Aftermath
Two Days with Occupy Wall Street
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I. Tuesday Morning: Surveying the Wreckage
Red Hook, 4 A.M.

Like a lot of people who have trouble sleeping I'm constantly monitoring the internet for news about Occupy Wall Street. So when I woke early to find out that Bloomberg had made his vile and thuggish move on the OWS encampment at Zuccotti Park, I was able to get on the 5:50 train putting me there at around 7:45.

It is no exaggeration to describe the scene which greeted me as apocalyptic. Police in riot gear lined both sides of Broadway from Fulton Street where I got off the subway to the park several blocks south. Some cooled their heels, fondling their batons, clearly pleased with the work they had accomplished in the preceding, engaging other fellow cops with frat boy banter. Others paced idly displaying the swaggering insolence which most white people, typically the ultimate beneficiaries of it choose to ignore, but which is surely familiar and plenty menacing to those who are its usual victims,

The park when I got there was completely surrounded. On the Broadway side, two blue phalanxes extended the entire block with each officer standing in classical military formation at attention. A high ranking white shirt-a dead ringer for the infamous Lieutenant Bologna-inspected each officer in turn. He then warmly shook the hand of each one praising them for their outstanding work in negotiating this difficult but necessary operation. All smilingly accepted their superior's thanks.

I was one of the few to witness this appalling ceremony and it was absolutely clear to me (and it would have been to you) that some response was necessary. And so I followed in the Lieutenant's wake, suggesting to each officer that they would rot in hell but only after Goldman Sachs had looted their pensions funds, reducing them and their families to degradation and misery.

Most stood impassively, having been coached to maintain a stony disdain, though a few responded with the kinds of smirks supplied to them by the Hannitys and Limbaughs, who are likely a constant presence in their lives.

Of course, like any other attempt at unilateral activism this one was childish and accomplished nothing. Feeling rather ridiculous and more than a little unnerved, I crossed Broadway and strolled to the opposite corner. There, a woman, evidently from the neighborhood, had handed her three month old bull dog puppy to a cop who nuzzled it affectionately as his partner snapped a photograph.

That, no doubt, or something like it-will accompany the NY Post report of the event and will be posted in the precinct house. That the cops killed two puppies during their raid on Zuccotti Park will not be mentioned.

8:30 A.M. Foley Square

Having heard that the OWS encampment had attempted to reconstitute itself at Foley Square, I headed uptown.

Small groups of Zuccotti veterans came into view. Having just been rendered homeless, they had the familiar haunted and traumatized look of flood or tornado survivors. Since they were victims of state sponsored violence, not acts of God, no NGO, Red Cross, homeless services, FEMA was there to offer assistance. Nor were any medical services available to an occupier who been injured during the assault. Another survivor tended to him affixing a rudimentary splint onto what was possibly a broken or sprained wrist.

When I reached the temporary staging area at Foley, a women was serving breakfast to a few refugees out of a cardboard box from some of the salvaged supplies from Zuccotti. I had just taken a large wad of cash out of the bank with the expectation that I would dole it out to whoever seemed to be able to best use it and offered it to her. I asked her what the plans were for the day. She waited until the man with whom she had speaking had moved away and then gestured to me to come closer. She whispered in my ear "Canal Street and 6th Ave."

I had no idea whether she whispered simply to avoid being heard or as a ruse to mislead the cops, assuming that I was one.

Either was possible since by this point it had become reasonable to assume that every interaction connected with OWS was being monitored by police cameras, undercover officers and a network of informants. A police state in its starkest form had descended upon much of lower Manhattan that morning. The most conspicuous I haven't mentioned yet: three police helicopters, one hovering over directly over Foley, the other several blocks north, and the third at much lower altitude, executing sorties from one location to another whose main purpose seemed to be nothing other than to instill terror.

The higher-altitude helicopters, while likely providing some information useful to central command also functioned to induce paranoia. As I walked northward, I had the distinct impression that the helicopter a thousand feet above me was tracking my movements. Had they seen me receive the whispered message and assumed I was conveying it to an organizer uptown?

Of course, these were almost certainly conspiratorial fantasies-at least under normal circumstances. But circumstances had ceased to be normal that morning.

9:15 A.M. Canal and Sixth Ave.

The address supplied to me at Foley Square turned out to be a vacant lot owned by the Episcopal Archdiocese which had been considered as a new occupation cite. At that moment, a march of several hundred escorted by what seemed to be a nearly equal number of police was heading westward on Canal Street.

Upon arriving at Canal and Sixth, it turned out that the site would, in fact, need to be occupied. While it was hoped that the church trustees would allow the encampment, no formal invitation had yet been issued. Among OWSers, there was some skepticism as to whether the symbolism of an occupation at Canal Street, a relatively moderate income, predominantly Asian immigrant neighborhood, would dilute the essential message of the movement. Others stressed the need for a permanent base of operations, with one advocating for OWS to formalize itself as a 501c3 non-profit which would continue to be governed by the general assembly. Ultimately, the site would be rejected and OWS would return to Zuccotti Park later that afternoon.

As I had to leave to go to a rehearsal, I wasn't able to observe the process by which the de facto consensus was reached. Though just as I was leaving I did hear the news that a judge had granted an injunction allowing the OWS to return to the park enabling them to reconstruct the semi-permanent facilities which the police had destroyed. Bloomberg would ignore the judge's order which would be in effect for several hours before being overturned by a higher court. In the meantime, occupiers showing up with copies of the injunction were turned back by police acting, presumably, on the blatantly unlawful orders of the mayor's office. When the higher court overturned the injunction, it found legal justification for the raid. However, it specify that the park would be required to remain open to all normal uses thus opening the door for OWS's return later that afternoon.

II. Tuesday Evening: Pilgrimage 5:15 PM Zuccotti Park

The Zuccotti Park which greeted returning occupiers was most naturally described by appealing to Tacitus's phrase "a peaceful desolation." The chrysanthemums had been removed leaving bare plots which, being somewhat elevated, served as useful perches from which most of the park was visible. And, of course, the tent village which had housed the core OWS operation and activist nucleus had been disposed of, most likely never to return. Square yards of barren polished concrete and granite were thereby restored to view, their charmless, cold surfaces seeming to mirror the surrounding state-corporate culture against which our battle is being waged. The library had reinstalled itself at the corner with a few books though these would be later removed yet again by authorities seemingly hell bent on placing themselves within the lineage of the most infamous totalitarian regimes in their maniacal pursuit of censorship. The park was now ringed on all sides by metal barriers limiting access and egress except at a single location presided over by riot gear clad police.

Entering the park amounted to what was literally and figuratively a liberation both from the immediate and tangible threat of police violence as well as from the general totalitarian atmosphere which became by now a familiar aspect of downtown Manhattan. Some basic OWS operations had re-established themselves-including a rudimentary kitchen and medical service. Probably two thousand supporters crammed the park at once celebratory and defiant.

The general assembly which followed consisted primarily of basic information of immediate concern to the assembled community: the legal status of the group's occupancy of the park and potential suits against the city, the recovery of belongings (revealingly from a midtown sanitation department facility), the provision of housing for those who no longer had a place to sleep and food and medical care for those who were in need-- many were. For some reason, the periphery of the park seemed substantially quieter than it had been at any time I visited. The perpetual jackhammering from the WTC site a block away was not in evidence. Large vehicular traffic seemed to be temporarily stilled as were police sirens, which had seemed almost constant in my previous visits.

At one point, the facilitators asked that we briefly discuss with those around us how we found ourselves at the meeting. Sitting next to me was a stylish young woman who sang in a band who had heard the news of the raid on tour. She had "never been so angry in her life" and coming here immediately after getting off a cross country flight for her was an almost medical necessity, as she described it. For both of us (and many others there) our appearance there was a species of secular pilgrimage, with Zuccotti Park, a quarter acre negotiating chip within a vast lower Manhattan real estate deal, functioning as our unlikely Mecca. The facilitators then led us in a minute of silence for those who were injured, dispossessed, and/or made homeless by the raid which came as close to a sacrament as I and many others are likely to willingly engage in.

The last segment of the GA involved breaking into groups to formulate ideas on the response to the crack down, with each appointing a representative to report the recommendation which emerged through consensus. This exercise in crowd-sourcing appeared to end in nearly total disorganization from what I could tell-by no means an unusual result deriving from the General Assembly process-at least, that is my impression.

III. Thursday Morning: Shutting Down the Street

7:30 A.M. Across from Zuccotti Park

However it was arrived at, the strategy which emerged from OWS was brilliant, at once exposing the vulnerabilities of the state apparatus and its almost comical ineptitude in dealing with the protesters, while demonstrating the increasingly broad and solid foundation on which the OWS movement was constructed. By that evening, flyers were being distributed announcing a full day of protest beginning with a shut down of Wall Street closed with a 5 PM mass mobilization organized with the full collaboration of the city's major unions.

Given the explicit intention to immobilize the operational nucleus of global capitalism, demonstrators hardly needed to be told that they would be greeted with massive police presence on Wall Street. As this was occurring in the wake of the widely criticized assault of Tuesday night, there would likely be limits on the brutality of the response, but there was little doubt that there would be many arrests, including of demonstrators not intending to participate in civil disobedience.

So it came as no surprise to find a group of only about a thousand amassed on the west side of Broadway from Zuccotti Park at 7:30. Few if any seemed to have any idea of how the shut down would be accomplished other than we would begin marching and would find our way as close to the the New York Stock Exchange as possible. Many were prepared to block intersections and walkways to prevent access and police had already erected checkpoints at every intersection within a two to three block radius of Wall and Broad so that these would not succeed in obstructing the operation of the stock exchange.

The checkpoints involved verifying identification from everyone passing through the line and as a consequence the police response had already accomplished at least part of the protest's objectives. Long lines of employees had already formed at the checkpoints even before the protesters arrived there, creating more than a little annoyance. In particular, mid level managerial functionaries, unaccustomed to being questioned were required to show their credentials. This resulted in at least one widely circulated youtube video showing that rarest of all occurrences: a bald topped, expensively attired white man giving the finger to a riot clad cop. This was duplicated many times in various forms over the next couple of hours, to the amusement to myself and other protesters.

Had the stereotypes of dread-locked, multiply pierced protesters been based on anything other than far right fantasies, the police would have little difficulty limiting access to those with legitimate business. The Stasi like security measures were necessitated by the reality that OWS is exactly what it claims to be, a movement of the 99% who looked, acted, shared many of the same concerns and fears as those trudging to work that day. Several business suit clad protesters who had donned what I later heard referred to as "business drag" did become evident in the hours to follow. One displaying an official looking sign from the Harvard Business School accosted the stream of working stiff at the bottleneck, announcing that everyone should ignore the protesters giving their attention to him, a credentialed expert from the highest ranks of the academy. He knew where they should invest their paltry life savings, what candidates they should support, why their tax dollars should be siphoned off to bail out billionaire investment bankers. This was an amazing performance of street theatre, though the humor may have eluded most, it was not lost on me.

I myself had benefitted from business drag, having avoided being one of the 18,000 swept up in the police dragnet during over the four days of the 2004 Republican convention. My ancient Brooks Brothers suit offered me substantial protection then and while I didn't press it into service on Wall Street, I was decently turned out in a shirt and

slacks. Nor was I accompanied by a sign or a camera or any other indication of my sympathies. This allowed some degree of anonymity and eventually on to Wall Street itself.

Having scouted the neighborhood in previous visits, it was apparent that a likely access point to Wall Street was provided by the Duane Reade which had entrances both on Pine and Wall. Sauntering down the food aisle (where I made the alarming discovery that Wall Street employees are a prime market for the organic produce which they used to snickeringly refer to as hippie food), past the down the escalator and I emerged on Wall Street.

8:20 A.M. Wall Street

The street resembled an Edward Hopper painting-mostly deserted with the exception of a few office workers who had managed to get through the checkpoint threading through the police lines. Not long after, after the calm would be broken by a demonstrator being hauled into a paddy wagon. I yelled across the street to ask what the charges against him were. He responded that he was being taken in for "speaking in too loud a voice." We then engaged in a stentorian dialogue where I questioned him on the details of his arrest: did he think that his arrest was indicative of a broader move towards a totalitarian police state presided over by our billionaire mayor? Yes, indeed he did, he responded. The mayor is showing himself to be a true fascist. Did he think that the police arresting him were aware of the role of Wall Street investment banks in looting public sector pension funds. Perhaps not, he said, but shouldn't they be arresting Goldman Sachs employees rather than demonstrators. I registered my strong, high volume agreement.

This went on until he was en route to central booking and was one of the rare occasions where police seemed to become aware of me. I'm not sure if this was because they were actually listening to the content of our conversation or were considering arresting me. If so, there was a problem: this was, after all, about as transparent an exercise in constitutionally protected free speech as could be imagined. Trampling on the constitution was evidently best done under the cover of darkness, as it had been on the previous Tuesday and wouldn't look so good in broad daylight, particular as numerous cameras, including those of major networks had begun to appear on the scene.

In any case, I walked away quickly, disappearing into a crowd which had formed further down Wall Street near the subway station. Police had erected a checkpoint there as well impeding those trying to exit the station. A crush of bodies extended all the way down to the subway platform creating a potential for a stampede. After some very tense and possibly dangerous minutes the police finally took down there checkpoint, attempting to re-erect it a half a block down at either end of the street. This created a bizarre situation in which pedestrian traffic in one direction was prohibited on one side of the street while being permitted on the other. The nonsensical orders emanating from the police-often directly contradicted by others just a few feet away amused protesters and enraged the throng of middle level managers, IT consultants, administrators and secretaries who were

attempting to negotiate the situation. Some of the suits made no secret of their displeasure, aggressively pushing their way through the crowd muttering obscenities, ostensibly directed to the protesters.

The ultimate result of the police was that anyone, protesters or workers, wanting to get anywhere on Wall Street could do so sooner or later, though the Broad St. leading to the NYSE was heavily barricaded. I found myself on the closest corner where a couple of the OWS drummers had set up and were beating an infectious rhythm. A woman who was a familiar presence from previous marches had succeeded in installing a banner on a ledge on the corner building and was improvising chants.

Wall Street is closed today.
It is occupied
By occupy Wall Street
All of you bankers go home.

I joined in adding a few lines of my own:

Private equity firms
Will not be stealing
Old ladies savings today.
Because Wall Street
Is closed!

Goldman Sachs will not be looting
Police departments' pension funds
Today
Because Wall Street
Is closed.

While we were on the corner, an announcement was made that the opening bell was delayed due to the protest. The claim would be repeated on various left news outlets, I was later informed that this was incorrect. At the time it elicited a big roar from demonstrators who by that point had filled both sides of Wall Street. Wall Street was indeed shut down, though of course we knew perfectly well that "business" in all its nefarious forms was being transacted, this was only a first attempt of a movement still in its infancy. The General Strike in Oakland of a week before managed to disrupt the operation of the nation's fifth largest port. And while the shipping companies will attempt to obscure the extent of the damage, credible figures of millions of dollars in losses have been circulated. The West Coast Port Shut Down scheduled for December 12th promises to inflict substantially larger damages.

At the point, the movement is speaking to capital in the only language it understands: in dollars. Whether we were communicating with Wall Street in their language is probably

not a question which anyone can answer right now, though it seems certain that, whatever is the case, we will be doing so soon.

9:30 AM Wall Street

The rest of the morning consisted of protesters blocking various thoroughfares, sitting down in intersections and in general making every effort to impede the smooth functioning of what Mario Savio called "the machine". More protesters found their way downtown as the day went on, as very large crowds filled several intersections in the vicinity of the NYSE.. The police charged with maintaining the flow of pedestrian and vehicular traffic were also amassed in huge numbers at numerous intersections.

The sheer number of cops, and their marching in military formation as if in a parade, created rubber necking delays as did a pair of nearly topless protesters who displayed themselves at the intersection of Broadway and Nassau. White shirted Lieutenants barked a continuous stream of orders to traffic and passers-by, to move on. Protesters like myself pretended to listen attentively to their orders to get off the street, then responding always with a question, "where exactly would you like me to walk officer?" "I don't care. " "Is this spot over here OK? No? How about this one?" "Just move-get the fuck out of the way." "What is that you said?" "Could you speak a bit more slowly?" "What are you fucking deaf?" "In fact, yes. I am having some trouble with my hearing. Perhaps you could raise your voice somewhat." As he was already communicating at peak amplitude, this request would be met with considerable annoyance. Forcing him to engage with me in an extended conversation prevented him from issuing orders to others and also allowed me and others to occupy the pavement for a few minutes.

I should say that there never appeared to be any indication that the officers in question were considering subjecting me to arrest. This was almost certainly because the arrest would not have been justified as I had not (or at least claimed not to) understand the orders. In fact, with a few exceptions, virtually every arrest which I saw that day, and I saw many, was legally justified: a clear order had been issued informing demonstrators that they were engaging in illegal activity which they directly indicated they were ignoring. There were, no doubt, some who got caught up in a dragnet without intending to engage in CD. But these numbers have been, in my opinion, exaggerated by the movement, and doing so is a mistake for two reasons. First, on a practical level, had many potential supporters not been deterred from descending on Wall Street the hoped for shut down might have come closer to actually materializing. Secondly, and more fundamentally, focusing on illegal exercise of state authority by the police tacitly accepts the assumption of its legitimacy. At the heart of OWS is the recognition that the all aspects of the system are, at their very foundation, illegitimate. And this is the case even when, maybe even especially when, it operates within the law. This is the radical core of the OWS movement, one which the inherently reformist focus on police abuse obscures, to our detriment.

As I was coming late, I decided to walk uptown from Foley Square with the expectation that I would meet the student protest march from Union Square en route. While the presence of helicopters indicated roughly its location, I somehow managed to walk past it, ending up at Union Square a half hour or so after the march had departed. This constituted a reminder that the numbers involved in most OWS actions are not that large—certainly not yet comparable to those which were routinely brought out by the anti-war movement at its peak in 2003 and 2004. Rather than being dispiriting, it is a testament to the message of OWS that even with relatively small forces it is perceived by elites as a serious threat. This is why the march was met by formidable police presence particularly around NYU and the New School where a building had been taken over that afternoon. Several blocks of Fifth Ave. were effectively on lockdown, closed to both pedestrian and vehicular traffic

What followed in Foley Square was, as noted above, designed to complement the civil disobedience actions on Wall Street with a demonstration of the breadth of OWS's support. And in that respect it surely succeeded with the rally and subsequent march attracting at its beginning, according to police department estimates, 34,000 a figure which clearly swelled in the hours ahead, likely to 50,000 or maybe even above. But these numbers and the legitimacy which they conferred came with a price, namely the involvement in, some might say the usurping of, the event by the city's labor unions and with it the authoritarian, top down ambience familiar to anyone with a few years experience of the left-one which is directly contradictory to the anti-hierarchical, leaderless organizational structure of OWS.

The rally unfolded predictably as a procession of union functionaries and clergy dispersed a string of focus group tested platitudes over two acres of assembled bodies, usually preceded with a folksy, "how ya'll doin' out there?" or "Are you fired up?" They then proceeded to issue a more or less specific "demands"—also violative of the spirit of OWS—before handing the mic back to the emcee.

The role of OWS in all this was to play the role of the child briefly appearing at the adult table to receive a few pats on the head before being dispatched to “go play with your toys.” With a tone of unmistakable condescension, the emcee announced that the next item on the agenda would be a “mic check”. Someone made an attempt, their words dutifully repeated in waves by the assembled group, but after no more than thirty seconds, the speaker was squashed by 1000 watts of amplification as the emcee moved the proceedings along to the next act. A few musical interludes came next, including what I thought was a pretty effective hip hop anthem which would have provided an excellent segue to the focal point of the rally, the march over the Brooklyn Bridge.

But there was to be no march at all for the next hour. We stood in the cold, kettled behind steel barriers to no apparent purpose preventing the crowd from spreading out onto neighboring streets with no word from the organizers as to what we were waiting for. It turned out that the delay was induced by the arrests of various union officials, including SEIU head Mary Kay Henry. These were, of course, purely symbolic, staged arrests

pre-negotiated with the police department to insure minimal disruption and, unlike for OWS protestors who were often held for thirty six hours or more, an immediate release from custody. No real obstructions to bridge traffic occurred that evening but not because the crowd was unwilling to engage in civil disobedience--no doubt many were. Rather, those who were so inclined were prevented from doing so-- not by the police- but by union appointed marshals smilingly performing their function as cops forming a first line of defense ahead of the police lines. The most hardened cynic could find no better symbol for what was the relationship of the unions to mass movements has become.

It turned out that that very morning, the SEIU had endorsed the re-election of a candidate who will receive a billion dollars in campaign contributions, much of this from Wall Street. A day after, SEIU would unveil its "Occupy Congress" initiative" exposed as a transparent attempt at co-optation by Glenn Greenwald, albeit one which has taken in many insufficiently skeptical leftists assuming that it is associated with OWS. This week's Occupy the Capital events in Washington D.C. is the latest and most aggressive attempt to by what is left of the labor movement to restore its sagging credibility by rebranding itself in the colors of OWS.

All of these initiatives were being unveiled at the same time as a nationwide crackdown of OWS encampments across the country--often quite violent. The defense of these occupation would now be left to OWS and its core supporters, for unlike labor's shining moment when it organized its membership to prevent the first police crackdown on Zuccotti Park in early October, no mobilization of union forces would be called in prevent the destruction of occupations across the country from Los Angeles, to Philadelphia, to Portland, to Poughkeepsie.

And yet what is most heartening is that all of these attempts at co-optation have in no way succeeded in diminishing OWS. Every day it seems after having achieved a victory or suffered a setback (it is often difficult to discern which is which!) the question is asked with some degree of concern or alarm "What will OWS do next?" But somehow, almost as if by magic, the organization--whoever this is--comes up with a new action which reaches out to a new constituency and deepens its support. I am writing this on Occupy Your Homes day where OWS is descending on foreclosed residential properties in numerous cities. (I am watching the live stream of the East New York action almost with tears in my eyes.) Last week, occupy Santa Cruz had taken over a vacant commercial property belonging to Wells Fargo and, in a strategically wise move, is now returning it after having well made its point. Next week, Occupy Oakland along with several other West Coast cities and the de facto support of the ILWU rank and file remarkable will attempt to extend its port shutdown to the entire West Coast.

As it broadens in scope and scale, OWS is quickly transcending the limits of any political movement in living memory to the extent that is no longer advancing social, economic or racial justice, protesting war or environmental pillage, or defending a demonized minority against the predations of state power. It is doing all of those things all at once and much more. That is to say that it is no longer a movement--it is dealing in the currency of revolution.

Uttering the word is frightening, to us but more so to elites who have predictably, responded both with a mixture of violent repression, a dramatic shift in their rhetoric and, it would now seem certain substantive concessions. The implementation of the three decades long neo-liberal project, remains on track and with it the imposition of domestic austerity measures, foreign military adventurism and planetary destruction. But there are now real, as opposed to merely delusional grounds for hope that it will be overcome.