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The Vicious Cycles of Inequality

Time to Reinvent the Wheel

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Occupy Wall Street and its offshoots erupted seemingly out of nowhere in 2011, thanks to mounting anger over income and wealth inequality. Inequality has been on the rise since the 1970s. That this is unjustifiable and unjust, and that inequality's consequences are deleterious, is, by now, widely understood.

The Occupy movement was not exactly anti-capitalist, though it did take aim at key aspects of neoliberal capitalism, capitalism's latest phase. Government policies that impose austerity on all but the hyper-rich were targeted; so were some of the more egregious excesses – and (unpunished) crimes – of finance capitalists.

Because the movement gave expression to what many people were feeling, and because it was leaderless and non-ideological, it grew rapidly.

It became enough of a presence that corporate media had to take notice. Still, only thousands, or perhaps tens of thousands, actually took part in Occupy actions. Those who did were mostly young and white.

However, support for Occupy's goals and for what Occupiers were doing was more widespread. The slogan "we are the ninety-nine percent" rang true.

Local governments and the Obama administration understood that events could spin out of control were they to unleash the "forces of order." They therefore waited the demonstrators out — keeping overt repression to a minimum.

This was shrewd — winter came, and then the 2012 election season got underway. Occupy melted back into the ether.

The elections were lethal. Both parties promised more of precisely what the Occupy movements opposed. One would think that this would present an opportunity to carry the struggle forward. But not in our so-called democracy.

The choice was to vote the ninety-nine percent's way or not to vote at all; and, as per usual, there was no way to ignore the charade. Elections are like forces of nature that suck up all the political energy there is.

Predictably, therefore, the 2012 elections delivered the Occupy movement its coup de grace.

In its moment of glory, it revealed the depth and breadth of popular opposition to inequality and austerity politics. And its rise, decline and fall was consciousness raising, driving home the point that what "we, the people" want hardly matters.

People had demanded their dreams; they got Barack Obama.

The demonstrations set off by white policeman Darren Wilson's killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri are also expressions of mounting anger. This anger too could hardly be more justified.

But because the institutionalized racism endemic in American "law enforcement" doesn't directly victimize the white majority the way it does African Americans, Hispanics and other targeted minorities, divisions within the ninety-nine percent are more salient this time around than they were when the Occupy demonstrations erupted.

We beneficiaries of white skin privilege can understand what the Ferguson protests are about. We can side with the victims and express our solidarity. But, except in the Bill Clinton sense, we cannot really "feel..(their) pain."

Still, the Ferguson protests are more like Occupy Wall Street than may appear, and not only because in both cases a torrent of pent up anger was let loose. Both were pre-destined to follow more or less the same trajectory and to come to the same unfortunate end.

Therefore, expect the Ferguson demonstrators soon to find their anger pent up again, reinforced by a renewed sense of hopelessness.

It could hardly be otherwise when no one knows what to do next, and when, even if someone did, there is no effective way to do it.

This sad state of affairs has come about because without a real Left around to remind us, two venerable understandings, truisms really, have dropped out of public consciousness.

One is that relief from systemic oppression requires radical solutions; the other is that for popular outrage to lead to constructive change, acting out is not enough. The political sphere must ultimately be won over.

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Decades ago, it was widely believed that the problems communities of color have with police would go away if there were more black and brown police officers and politicians.

This was not a bad idea. Over the years, though, it has become plain that merely putting more black and brown people in positions of authority is not enough.

Even a black President changes very little — and not just because the one we have seems to feel duty-bound to blame the victims every chance he gets.

With its mostly white police force, Ferguson is more than usually stuck in the bad old days. But what happened to Michael Brown also happens to people like him in places where black and brown police officers and politicians abound. The police murder of Eric Garner in Staten Island is a case in point.

There are also technological fixes that can be helpful — Obama's palliative, requiring police officers to wear video cameras, is an example. And there are other carrots and sticks that can be deployed to make policing less dangerous for black and brown Americans. Academic researchers have devoted entire careers investigating the topic.

Nevertheless, the only real cure is genuine racial equality.

For that, it was evidently not enough just to end Jim Crow segregation in the South and more insidious forms of discrimination elsewhere. This is necessary of course, but not nearly sufficient.

There is still discrimination of course, but nothing like there used to be. During the second half of the twentieth century, the goal articulated two centuries ago by revolutionaries in France, that "careers" be "open to talents," was finally achieved here — not perfectly, but to a great extent.

Outcomes remain unequal, but not because laws and customs that reinforce white supremacy remain in place. Income and wealth inequality are the culprits now.

This why the affinities linking the Occupy Wall Street and Ferguson movements run deeper than may appear.

Formal racial equality, even with affirmative action, will not make people of color safe from police, so long as capitalism keeps on generating inequality.

Without addressing the issues Occupy protestors raised, there is no way to be rid of the grievances now drawing Ferguson protestors into the streets. There are palliative measures that can be effective in some circumstances, but they don't begin to amount to a cure.

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In capitalism's current phase, it is often expedient for capitalists to export high paying manufacturing jobs overseas. This keeps wages down, even as profits rise, harming all workers, and putting the unions that still represent them in jeopardy.

It is a vicious cycle that is especially harmful to those who are least well off – not least because it forecloses their opportunities for advancement.

The children and grandchildren of past victims of legal and customary discrimination are disproportionately represented among the least well off. They are therefore hit disproportionately hard.

This is why many of America's black and brown citizens are nearly as poorly off as their parents were decades ago, notwithstanding the gains the civil rights movement helped bring about.

These gains opened up all sorts of opportunities. But with income and wealth inequality on the rise, only a fortunate few are able to benefit from them.

For the rest, it is as hard as it ever was to advance up the economic ladder. Minority youth, males especially, are the most affected.

The situation is worst of all for young men like Michael Brown. But it is bad for everyone living under what amounts to police occupation. It is even bad for the few who like the Jeffersons, George and Weezie, have been able to "move on up" to places where parents can more or less truthfully tell their children that "the policeman is your friend."

Even those who have risen like the Holders and Obamas to the heights of power are not home free. They still cannot tell their children what white parents can tell theirs because the friendly policeman only sees the color of a child's skin.

Bringing high paying jobs back home would help, but it wouldn't solve the problem –because under capitalism in its current stage, wealth, especially inherited wealth, is becoming an ever more important determinant of wellbeing than salaries or wages. In communities of color, wealth is in especially short supply.

Thanks to the work of Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and others, the causes and effects of this state of affairs — and its bearing on peoples' life prospects — is becoming increasingly appreciated in academic circles.

But professional economists are not the only ones cognizant of the return of *rentier* capitalism. The protestors in Ferguson and elsewhere appreciate the phenomenon too –because it is part of their lived experience.

They know that instead of bringing the bottom up, as capitalism did in the thirty or so years that followed World War II, neoliberal capitalism pushes the bottom down, making their own situation more hopeless.

And they understand that equal justice under law is bound to elude them as long as this process is unfolding, no matter how many technological fixes or cultural interventions anyone attempts.

For the people of Ferguson and communities like it to get out from under the policeman's boot, policies must be in place that cause income and wealth to become more, not less, equal.

Therefore, whether they know it or not, the Ferguson protestors' demands are a special case of the Occupy protestors' demands – made more than usually urgent by the events surrounding the police killing of Michael Brown.

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When the logic of capitalist development required that the state boost effective demand by assuring that workers had money to spend, egalitarian public policies came more easily.

Then, the underlying economic structure actually helped diminish the oppression racist laws and customs brought down upon persons of color. Now, the situation is reversed.

As in the thirty or so years that followed the end of World War II, this situation came about mainly because it was what capitalism, the capitalism of our time, required.

This is why an egalitarian program for our time and place that would genuinely address the grievances now being aired on the streets of Ferguson would require a more direct challenge to capitalism as such than was the case before the neoliberal turn.

That capitalism is the root of the problems that brought Ferguson – and Occupy – protesters into the streets would hardly have been news in the not too distant past. But this understanding got lost as the Left imploded in upon itself after Communism fell and Social Democracy went into the protracted eclipse from which it has yet to emerge.

Political disempowerment is what makes police repression of black and brown communities possible. Economic inequality didn't cause that; racism did. But for people of color now to empower themselves, it is not enough merely to attack the symptoms of their disempowerment; the solution must be more radical.

In short, the remedy for political disempowerment is the economic empowerment of the disempowered.

This cannot be achieved at the individual level; it requires restructuring the economic structure itself.

Since capitalism is now the main obstacle in the way of empowering persons of color – along with almost everyone else – the time is past due to make it Public Enemy Number One.

The Occupy movement was moving towards this understanding, but never quite got there.

Will the Ferguson demonstrators do better? The jury is still out, but the situation does not look promising – in part because, for them too, another venerable truism has also gone missing.

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Occupy Wall Street's strength, its spontaneity, was its fatal weakness.

Because it had no clear direction, it never got past the point from which it began: the people it mobilized expressed rage and celebrated the realization that “a different world is possible.” But they had no idea how to change the world; and, even if they had, they lacked the means to advance it.

For the Left, changing the world for the better was always the aim. It was understood, of course, that, for this to happen, it can sometimes be useful to vent anger at oppressive circumstances. But, in the end, political – though not necessarily electoral – struggle is indispensable. This no one doubted.

For some two hundred years, the debate was not over whether struggles to end oppression should move into the political arena, but how. Every conceivable way was envisioned and tried – violent and peaceful, legal and extra-legal, vanguardist and mass based.

Many lessons were learned. But, since the demise of Communism and the rise of the neoliberal tide, all the “teachable moments” of the past might as well never have happened. For all practical purposes, it is now lost knowledge.

Therefore now the thing most needed is that we recover what has been lost, that we reinvent the wheel.

If we don't, the Occupy and Ferguson scenarios will play out again countless times, as the conditions that brought them into being worsen with no satisfactory resolution anywhere in sight.