

PAUL MCMORROW

# The still-leaderless revolution

Paul McMorrow | NOVEMBER 15, 2011



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

**Tents and signs are part of the Occupy Boston scene at Dewey Square near South Station.**

IT'S ONE thing to speak along with a crowd. It's quite another to actually speak for that crowd. The difference is between parroting and leading, between really mattering, and not. And right now, the Occupy Wall Street movement is on the wrong side of all those differences.

The two-month old protest movement has generated scads of public attention since its inception, in part because it's rare that large groups of people willingly take up residence in public parks, and in part because it's a wonderful time to be protesting the economy's

shortcomings.

It's been decades since capitalism was this easy to ridicule. The unemployment rate has been stuck at 9 percent for two years, and millions more workers have settled for part-time work or have stopped looking for work altogether. A generation of students is graduating into a labor market that has no room for them or their high-priced degrees. Corporate profits have rebounded from their recession lows, but wages haven't risen along with profits; in fact, over the past decade, the typical worker's paycheck couldn't even keep pace with inflation. While the vast majority of Americans are falling behind economically, a small number of elites are claiming ownership over an outsize portion of the country's wealth.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

The Occupy movement sprang up in opposition to the hollowing out of the American Dream, and to the United States's emerging banana republic economy. Its calling-card slogans, about standing up for the 99 percent of the country's residents who are running in place financially, were designed to cut as broad a path as possible. If you don't own multiple yachts, you're supposed to be with the occupiers.

### Related

- **Court order allows Occupy Wall Street protestors to return**
- **33 arrested in raid on Occupy Oakland**

That's why, if you're currently living in a tent city, a recent poll from the Wall Street Journal and NBC News feels like a kick in the teeth. The polling data shows that an overwhelming majority of Americans agree with Occupy Wall Street's critique of the nation's economy. And most of those same people see little but futility in what's happening at Zuccotti Park in Manhattan and Dewey Square in Boston and Frank Ogawa Plaza in Oakland.

Seventy-six percent of respondents to the poll said they agreed with the Occupy movement's basic tenets - that the country's current economic structure favors a very small portion of wealthy residents, and that major banks and corporations hold too much power. At the same time, only 32 percent said they view the Occupy movement positively. Only 25 percent

“

*The modern left has never excelled at mounting a cohesive protest movement.*

said the protests have been good for the country; twice as many said the movement hasn't made any difference either way. The protest movement is being damned with indifference from the broad 99 percent it claims to represent.

The Occupy protests have had no shortage of distressing economic data to seize on. Earlier this year, the Census Bureau released data showing that the median family's real income dropped 7 percent over the past decade. The Congressional Budget Office just issued an inflammatory report on wealth concentration, showing that 80 percent of US residents have seen their share of wealth decline over the past three decades, while the top 1 percent has doubled its share of the country's wealth. A recent paper by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston showed that Americans are losing the ability to climb the economic ladder. This is the kind of stuff that should have people marching in the streets.

The Occupy movement's problem is what's happening once the marching starts. The modern left has never excelled at mounting a cohesive protest movement. That's why anti-Iraq War protests often devolved into competing bands of socialists waving signs about Palestine and Mumia, and it's also why anti-Iraq War protests never got anywhere. Occupy Wall Street's economic critique resonates, but the Occupy movement is foundering as a political force because it brings out the worst in the left.

The Occupy movement prides itself on its leaderless, consensus-driven approach. In practice, though, being leaderless and broadly democratic means that the movement lacks cohesion and organizational focus. Occupiers set up camp, and then began debating just what they wanted to accomplish, or whether to issue a set of policy demands at all. This inability to articulate an end game means that the movement's means of protest have subsumed its message, making Occupy Wall Street a loosely related band of urban campsites, not broad-based national reform movement. The act of squatting in a park takes precedence over political action, and addressing societal inequality gets lost in the noise.

*Paul McMorrow is an associate editor at CommonWealth magazine. His column appears regularly in the Globe.*