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If Occupy wants to play, it has to get in the game

By [Paul McMorrow](#) | DECEMBER 20, 2011

NOW THAT Occupy Wall Street and its local franchises have been swept out of their tent cities, it's impossible to predict what will become of the protests, because the movement itself has yet to figure out what it actually is. Is it a progressive reform movement, or is it a revolution? The answer will go a long way toward measuring Occupy's successes.

The three-month-old tent cities were both a blessing and a curse. The tents undeniably etched Occupy's economic critique into the public consciousness. Although massive income inequality and Wall Street excess existed long before the Occupy protests did, it has been decades since those issues resonated so deeply.

At the same time, the minutiae of prolonged occupation wound up distracting from the protests' core complaint. Every news story about Oakland protesters setting fire to piles of garbage, or Boston protesters scuffling with police over a sink, was a news story that didn't get written about the hollowing out of the middle class, or the financial recovery that left its workers behind.

The nationwide clearing of Occupy camps has brought another dynamic into view: Occupying space compensated for a glaring lack of organizational mission. Putting the public focus on physical occupation diverted attention from the fact that the movement lacks any kind of political platform.

And that gets to the heart of the uncertainty over Occupy's future. We all know what Occupy is against - corporate greed, the regressive distribution of income and political power, and crushing student debt, to name a few. The movement has had a much more difficult time articulating what it stands for. New York's Occupy Wall Street confounded onlookers when it publicly refused to issue a concrete set of demands. Camps in other cities followed New York's example.

When the tents were up, the protest tactic equaled the message, so protesters could skate by without articulating just what they stood for. Occupy doesn't have that luxury anymore. The protest movement

needs a clear political vision to stay relevant. Arriving at this political vision means reconciling antagonistic elements within the movement.

Occupiers speak broadly of direct democracy, and of creating a more just and egalitarian society, but their movement has been stubbornly silent about how to achieve these goals. Instead, the protests have defined themselves by their opposition. This was no accident. Putting together a platform is a political act. Occupy runs on consensus, and there's little political consensus to be found among the Occupy coalition. This wasn't such a big deal when the tents were up, and the protests ran on a shared community. It's more troublesome now that evicted protesters are meeting in parks and churches, trying to figure out where they go from here.

There are two ways to achieve a heated and fully plumbed version of the egalitarian society that flourished in the Occupy tent cities. One way is to dive deep into party politics: Raise money, run slates of like-minded candidates, and bend the political apparatus to the protest movement's will. This works, because it's exactly how the Tea Party has hijacked the Republican Party. Involvement in politics recognizes that Occupy protesters are really opposing public policy outcomes. It recognizes that the act of marching in the street does not rewrite public policy.

On the other hand, plenty of the people who were recently broomed out of tent cities in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Oakland, Los Angeles, and Portland have seen the reward for playing party politics: His name is Tim Geithner. The Occupy movements were fueled, in part, by Greens and anarchists and Ron Paul sympathizers and competing bands of socialists. These are people for whom politics is a dead end, and Occupy tent cities were a way of test-driving a social revolution.

These two blocs - the progressives, and the socialists and anarchists - want their activism to achieve vastly different outcomes. One reforms the existing political and capitalist structure, and one replaces it. That's an awfully large gap to close. But the movement's future relevance depends on finally figuring out what it wants to achieve, and how it wants to get there.

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