

Who Shall Occupy Make Demands Of?

The Modern Case of the One-Eyed Monster

One of the biggest critiques being made of the Occupy movement is that it has no demands. If, however, we take the standpoint that Occupy functions in an interventionist mode—if we see it as an Occupy *moment* rather than an Occupy movement—we see that its refusal to issue demands is part of the beauty of it. In fact, the making of any demands at this point in the intervention would be too thin of a kind of social change for this political moment.



Second Order Change

To make a demand would suggest that the current problem is merely a content problem. Of course, there are lots of content problems that Occupy points to—the expanding wealth of the top 1% vs the 99%, the bank bailouts, the environment, foreclosures, etc. While these surface aspects are most certainly the *stuff* of the problem, there exists what we at the Design Studio would call the second order problem. There are first order problems (things you can get at directly) and second order problems (things you CAN'T get at directly). For example, altering conditions within a given established relationship can be a first order change, while changing the very nature of the relationship would be a second order change. That is the level we see Occupy working at.

The second order problem here is one of distance, form, and what Erin Manning and Brian Massumi refer to as the relational field between the state and market sectors. Currently, little to no distance exists between what we might call government (or the state sector) and the market (or private sector.) Examples of this include privately owned charter schools for public school students, corporations being granted the right of (expensive) free speech, the burgeoning number of private military companies employed by the U.S. armed forces, and perhaps most tellingly, the enormous public bailout of private banks.

Without any distance between these two sectors and their functions, there can be no checks and balances. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson is helpful here, with his concept of “double description.” When two parties are in relationship, he says, it is

important not to fall into the trap of ascribing to either of the parties in the relationship any individual characteristic that is actually half of the larger, active relational pattern. (For example, we can't accurately describe the Democrats or Republicans except in their relationship to each other.) He made the analogy between double description--holding onto both parties' descriptions of the situation simultaneously--as doing something akin to what happens in binocular vision, with the distance between the two eyes producing the slight but significant difference in input that allows the brain to then construct a sense of depth.



Thinking about this in relation to the current state of non-distance between the state and private sectors, we see that the collapse produces a Cyclops of sorts. Take the example of the bank buyout. Was the almost \$1 trillion bailout critical for the ultimate well-being and solvency of the U.S. government? An answer of yes certainly points to a one-eyed (or at least one-headed) beast. An answer of no, however, just means that the public and private sectors are so closely

wedded as to make the public sector *believe* that its livelihood was based on the success of the private sector. In either case, we do not have much evidence of two distinct powers with the ability to have checks and balances.

Two Sectors, One Vision

With its monocular vision, the much-privatized public sector has a crisis of identity. Now that it's bought into the private sector's vision of the good life—primarily based on accumulation of private wealth and property—there isn't much reason for it to exist. Each traditional role it gives up (public schooling, public safety, public health, even public property), makes it less relevant. Its former strengths—protecting people's rights, protecting the environment, providing health care to the poor, etc.--are now seen as market inefficiencies, things the Cyclops can do without. So what we have is a complete triumph of the private sector over the idea and description of the good life, and even the purpose of the state sector itself. This is readily visible in the many calls for shrinking the government and getting it out of the way of business, which is currently expected to be the best purveyor of all things good.

As we speak, the public sector has abandoned any desire or responsibility to privilege or protect the common or the vulnerable. It is in hearty compliance with the idea that what is good for the private sector is in the best interest of all. Conveniently, both political parties are in compliance with the collapse of the state and market sectors into one. Their differences are around priorities within and between the collapsed sectors as best. At this point we will get resistance from both parties and the private sector for a public sector with a logic and function that privileges humanity and life over neoliberalism.

Slaying the Beast: Occupy as a Civil Society Strategy

So, why no demand? There's no one within this sectoral collapse to legitimately make a demand of. Let's not make demands to a collapsed privatized public sector. But we can start to pose the larger question. For those of us in the work of promoting social justice, we have to make this relational problem visible to the "99%" who are on the downside of it. To hold open a space of occupation without demands is to force us to recognize that underlying and feeding all the first order content problems is a more significant second order problem, to do with form and distance. To address the relationship between these sectors will be difficult, but we are now at a time when it is critical. (On the bright side, if we successfully slay the Cyclops, many of the first order solutions will readily follow!)



Past shining a harsh light on the collapsed relationship between the private and public sectors (and the dominance of the private sector), Occupy can help us imagine a new public sector that has a distinct vision of the good life—one that values the 99%, protects public speech and protest, and supports public property that is actually usable by the public. Imagining a public sector that has its own sturdy view seems difficult, never mind insisting on one. But this is where the interesting change can happen!



For more on the importance of independent sectors, see social threefolding on Wikipedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_threefolding
Or go deeper with Nicanor Perlas on the issue here: <http://www.nicanor-perlas.com/Articles-and-Editorials/societal-threefolding-i.html>