

## OCCUPY THE SYSTEM: CONFRONTING GLOBAL CAPITALISM

by Frances A. Chiu

With the explosive emergence of popular movements all around the world in 2011, it was only natural that the Left Forum came to focus on the Occupy movement--"Occupy the System: Confronting Global Capitalism." Not surprisingly either, the conference would also boast its largest ever attendance in its 30-year history, with over 4000 participants, ten plenary speakers, and a dizzying array of panels that ranged from hip-hop and Islamophobia to Marx. As such, many of the themes touched upon the history of oppression exercised by the wealthiest 1%, regardless of time and locale; the challenges involved in defying a powerful 1%; and not least, strategies that have proven promising over the decades, if not centuries.

Certainly, most of the plenary speakers would elaborate upon these themes with varying emphasis in both national and international contexts. William Strickland (Director of DuBois Papers Collection, U. of MA, Amherst) and William Tabb (*The Restructuring of Capitalism in Our Time*) delved into the depredations of the 1% in America, while Nnimmo Bassey (Friends of the Earth International) concentrated on the reckless "sea grab" and "soil grab" enacted by transnational corporations in their quest for natural resources.

With abundant spirit and humor, Rose Ann De Moro (National Nurses United) reflected on her experiences with the California Nurses Association in their protests against then governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (when he sought to stretch nurse-patient ratios) and gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman in her run for governor. It was a theme that would be enlarged upon by Michael Moore in his inspiring plenary speech which encouraged the audience to take effective political action--whether it be protesting against local foreclosures, running for local office, or even just organizing a neighborhood "we are the 99%" campaign. In turn, Marina Sitrin (*Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina*) and Christopher Hedges (*Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*) separately addressed the recent history of popular movements in Argentina and the Czech Republic. It was fascinating to compare how the protests they witnessed, in spite of their pronounced differences, equally highlight the need to replace power hierarchies with new horizontal relationships (a weak translation of Sitrin's "horizontalidad") that underscore cooperation across work and education. Ultimately, in Hedges's words, it is up to us to choose whether we prize power and privilege--or truth and justice.

As for our Sunday morning Thomas Paine panel (March 18, 10 am), I was pleasantly surprised to find an audience of over 20: this was remarkable not only given the fact of its timing (as I have experienced far too often at other conferences) but also a choice of at least 50 other panels during the same session. There was a lively discussion on activism today, political dissent and the role of religion.

What follows below are summaries of two of three presentations at our Paine panel. (The third paper was given by J. Ward Regan, professor of history at New York University. His summary has not arrived yet; it will be printed in a later *Bulletin*.)

### Nobility and Noability (Frances A. Chiu)

America of 1792, according to Thomas Paine, was a nation where "the poor are not oppressed, the rich are not privileged. Industry is not mortified by the splendid extravagance of a court rioting at its expense. Their taxes are few, because their government is just: and as there is nothing to render them wretched, there is nothing to engender riots and tumults." What a difference it was from Old World England, bogged down by a greedy hereditary government busily "thrusting itself into every

corner and crevice of industry, and grasping the spoil of the multitude."

Is America still a nation where the poor are not oppressed and the rich are not privileged? Not really, even if the 1% live in 15,000 sq ft estates rather than castles and travel in Lear jets rather than coach and sixes.

A preliminary comparison of wealth distribution in 18th century England and our own reveals striking similarities. The aristocracy and gentry made up nearly 1% of the population but their incomes comprised nearly 25% of the national income: that is, nearly the same proportions as they were right before the Great Depression and Great Recession. Even the incomes correlate: the top tenth of the 1%--the dukes and earls--enjoyed annual sums of 10,000 -50,000 pounds, roughly \$20 million to a \$100 million today. Finally, nearly 50% were poor, with the bottom 20% receiving some sort of parish assistance: generally, the poor made no more than 20 pounds a year, equivalent to \$24,000 a year.

Not surprisingly, the growing wealth and power for the 1% in 18th-century England was accompanied by personal and material losses for everyone else. Those at the lower end of middling lost whatever independence they had and suffered declining wages. Laborers also lost benefits in the form of meals at their employers' tables--not unlike the way many today have lost employer provided health insurance and pensions.

Today, there is a similar rise in the incomes of the wealthy on top of a sharply reduced rate of taxation. The ratio of CEOs and upper management salaries to those of the average worker--343x, to be exact--is far more than in any developed nation. And just as in the 18th century, nearly one out of two people in 2011 is either low income or poor. Over 15.3% receive food stamps. Indeed, overall, the US enjoys less social mobility and more child poverty than Canada, France, and, yes, Britain.

Paine made four important points. First off, such men harbored a fundamentally flawed sense of "distributive justice." Secondly, a body of men "holding themselves accountable to nobody, ought not to be trusted by anybody." Thirdly, "What pillar of security does the landed interest require more money than other interest in the state, or what right has it to a distinct and separate representation from the general interest of a nation?" Fourthly, circumstances were such that the aristocracy didn't even need to pay taxes on goods like alcohol since they brewed their own beer. In fact, sometimes valuable resources on their land allowed them to profit at the expense of the people.

Let's look a little more closely at the present ramifications of these problems which Paine identified: a sense of privilege, lack of accountability, greed, and collusion--all of which overturn classical views of the aristocracy as a people fit to legislate. Many of these issues remain intact, even if the terms have changed. We

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