

Are we really 99 percent?

BY ROBIN HAHNEL
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

In a posting on ZNet on Nov. 21 Michael Albert argued that “we” are not really 99 percent. “When occupiers and critics alike say, we love the creative innovation embodied in the 99 percent slogan, I worry. Does saying we are the 99 percent obscure more than it reveals?” Albert went on to argue that if we don’t give “serious attention” to differences among the 99 percent – differences between roughly 19 percent who monopolize empowering tasks, supervise others, and enjoy relatively generous compensation, and the remaining 79 percent who work for much less pay

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carrying out orders issued by these “coordinators” – the Occupy movement runs the risk of being hijacked by a minority within its ranks.

On the other hand, in his column in the New York Times on Nov. 24 Paul Krugman argued that a careful look at the data reveals that “we” are actually 99.9 percent because it is actually the top 0.1 percent who have appropriated the lion’s share of the productivity gains of all of us over the past thirty years. “We are the 99 percent is a great slogan.... If anything, however, the 99 percent slogan aims too low. A large fraction of the top 1 percent’s gains have actually gone to an even smaller group, the top 0.1 percent.”

So what is one to think? Are “we” 99 percent as the slogan says? Are “we” only 79 percent as Albert argues? Or are “we” actually 99.9 percent as Krugman says data suggests?

Facts are facts, and “in fact,” both Albert and Krugman are correct. Krugman is correct that the thirty-year larceny by the super wealthy has actually been more “grand” than the 99 percent slogan implies. But Albert is also correct that in addition to the 1 percent there are another 19 percent who are the beneficiaries of economic arrangements that cannot be justified and work to the detriment of the 79 percent below them.

But the question is not really what percentage “we” are. The question we need to answer is how the Occupy movement should try to develop. Should the Occupy movement focus on hammering out an agenda for those of us who already consider ourselves progressive to rally around and fight for? Or, should it try to reach out to those who are increasingly upset with what is happening to them but have not identified with progressive causes and movements in the past?

I want to insert one other “fact” into this



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important discussion about where the occupy movement should try to go.

Neither leftists nor progressives have been able to “connect” with an important part of the 99 percent for many decades.

Assume with Albert that there are 19 percent who are “coordinators” with important class interests which put them at odds with the rest of the 99 percent. Unfortunately, many in that majority do not have progressive values. Worse still, many in that same majority have long been actively hostile to progressive ideas and movements. I would venture that 30 percent is a generous estimate of the percentage of the US population that is progressive. In which case, at most, 30 percent of the 79 percent is solidly “with us.” That leaves as much as 49 percent of the population who have long lent “us” a deaf ear – but not because of any objective class interests that should make them unreceptive to a progressive economic agenda.

This 49 percent is the magnitude of the historic failure of left and progressive economic movements in the U.S. over the past thirty years. And unless “we” figure out some way to connect with a significant part of this 49 percent we will continue to be unable to build a majoritarian movement for social change. Left and progressive movements in the 1930s and 1940s did

connect with many in this 49 percent who participated in the famous FDR New Deal coalition. But that was a long time ago.

When the financial crisis broke out in 2008, soon to be followed by the greatest recession and foreclosure crisis in over 80 years, I thought leftists and progressives might be able to reach out and connect with at least some in that 49 percent who had long been beyond hearing our voices. After all, I reasoned, the Rush Limbaugh narrative they had been tuned into had been “proven” false by the economic crisis the right wing narrative predicted was impossible. Surely the 49 percent would start to look for answers elsewhere. Unfortunately much too little of this happened in 2008 and 2009. Instead, the right wing quickly came up with a list of false scapegoats and spurious theories to explain what had happened to their listenership. As most who “voted for change” in 2008 waited in vain for Obama and the Democrats to respond effectively to the crisis, public anger at elite misrule broke out first on the right in the form of the tea party movement which peaked in time for the 2010 midterm elections.

But the tea party is so 2010, and 2011 is all about Occupy! 2011 began with a winter uprising in Wisconsin that was led by traditional progressive organizations, with a very traditional progressive agenda.

However, what followed was anything but traditional. By late summer, Occupy Wall Street and solidarity occupations in hundreds of cities across America had fingered the financial sector and its political cronies in both political parties as the cause of our distress. The Occupy movement also provided a radical diagnosis for the root cause of our economic illness – obscene economic inequality – as well as a radical cure – replace elite mis-rule with participatory democracy. Moreover, it was obvious that the Occupy movement was not organized and led by “the usual suspects,” as progressive activists and organizations scrambled to support the movement after the fact.

Below are three questions I think those debating where the occupy movement should go would do well to consider.

(1) While there are many in the 49 percent who remain tied to tea party politics and its fantasy world created by right wing think tanks for broadcast on right wing radio and Fox TV, there are some in the 49 percent who are somewhat detached from this right wing narrative. How many are “some,” and what is the extent of their detachment are important questions.

(2) Does the Occupy movement provide “us” with a second chance to break out of “our” historic isolation? Can the Occupy movement reach people in the 49 percent who progressives failed to connect with three years ago, now that it is clear that neither mainstream political party is going to do anything to make the economic crisis go away in the foreseeable future?

(3) What can the Occupy movement do – or be careful not to do – to maximize reaching new people?

The 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s saw the rise of important “new social movements” in the US fighting against imperialism, environmental destruction, and oppression based on race, sex, and sexual orientation. In a prolonged period without a severe domestic economic crisis it was difficult for leftists and progressives to engage the body politic in discussions of class issues. Is not the worst economic crisis in over eighty years which shows no sign of abating something of a “game changer?” Suddenly the super economic elite and their apologists in the media and academia seem unable to suppress discussion about how badly economic inequality has poisoned our society. Is this the time to change the subject to discuss conflicting interests among the 99 percent? Or should we instead thank the 0.1 percent for over-playing their hand to such an extent that they have goaded tens, if not hundreds of millions of average Americans to openly question an economic system that has spawned unacceptable economic inequality and destroyed any semblance of political democracy? The Occupy movement surely doesn’t want to hand the super-elite another bailout by changing the subject to divisions among the 99 percent, however real and important they may be.

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