

Occupy the Future

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IN LATE SEPTEMBER OF 2011, THE OCCUPY WALL Street protest in Zuccotti Park began attracting national and international media attention. By late October, without any evident coordination, Occupy protests began appearing in scores of other cities and in many other countries. What looked at first like a burst of outrage at Wall Street and the irresponsibility of global financial institutions became a more general and sustained protest against historic levels of inequality and, in particular, the rising share of national income controlled by a tiny sliver, the so-called 1 percent.

“We are the 99 percent” became the slogan of the protesters, a capacious and inspired banner that permitted a large group to air diverse grievances. In the fall and earlier winter of 2011, the Occupy protests spread in ways that invited some to speculate that they might ultimately develop into a “social rights” movement with all the reach, power, and influence of the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. Given how quickly the movement withered in the wake of the forced closures of the encampments in early 2012, these early optimistic assessments now appear premature, if not downright naïve. But movements are subject to unpredictable ebbs and flows. We would do well to remember that even the civil rights movement did not advance linearly. After the high water mark of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, the movement struggled to find its footing and was largely moribund before the lunch counter sit-ins revitalized it in the spring of 1960.

What becomes of the Occupy movement will depend not just on external events of this sort but also

whether those who identify with the movement can fashion a compelling narrative that reenergizes protest around the issue of inequality. Given that the United States has historically been quite tolerant of inequality, it's not enough to proclaim that inequality has suddenly become too high. What, precisely, makes it *too* high? Don't we need to consider *how* so much inequality has been generated? Don't we need to examine the consequences of rising inequality for other outcomes that we cherish, such as opportunities for political expression? Don't we need to think carefully about the types and forms of inequality that are and aren't legitimate? The simple agenda behind this book is to take on these and related questions and thereby begin to develop a far-reaching and resonant narrative.

The backdrop to our effort is an Occupy-inspired teach-in at Stanford University on December 9, 2011. The faculty and students involved in this teach-in, including the editors of this book, were sympathetic to Occupy's complaints about inequality. Indeed many of them had devoted their scholarly lives to addressing is-

sues of inequality, only to find that the world suddenly cared about what had heretofore been a largely academic area of inquiry. The key question on our minds at the time was whether the Occupy protests warranted our full support and participation. We understood, in other words, what Occupy was against, but what was it for? This question motivated us to describe how and why gaping inequalities have emerged and to lay out what's troubling about those inequalities.

As preparation for the teach-in at Stanford, a distinguished group of Stanford professors agreed to write short opinion pieces about the Occupy protests. These articles, published in an online forum in *Boston Review*, reflected the varied backgrounds of the scholars by addressing such diverse issues as the institutional sources of rising inequality, the influence of money in politics, the declining access to education, and the role of art in social change. After the teach-in, we asked the contributors to expand their short pieces into short chapters, and this book is the result.

In expanding their essays, we asked the contributors not to examine Occupy as if it were an object of scholarly study, an already dead specimen awaiting a dispassionate and disciplined autopsy. This book is not an analysis of Occupy as a protest or movement; it's not an effort to understand its roots or organization; and it's not a reflection on its prospects. This book is intended, rather, to offer a broader framework for understanding why rising inequality is the core problem of our time.

In short, this is a book with an agenda, an Occupy-friendly agenda. Nonetheless, the authors of most of the chapters were asked to carefully ground their opinions in data of unimpeachable quality and provenance.

The resulting book is most surely not a manifesto. The contributors should not be understood to endorse the contents of every chapter. The closest we come to consensus is our commitment to a vision of the United States as a country deeply committed to the principles laid out in our founding documents and upheld by a succession of leaders of every politi-

cal party. We believe that everyone, not just the rich, should have the opportunity to get ahead or otherwise lead a good life. We believe that everyone, not just the rich, should have a right to be heard when our country makes decisions about its future. And we believe that everyone, not just the rich, should have an opportunity to participate fully and meaningfully in society.

We don't always live up to our most cherished ideals. Our country's history has been driven instead by a tension between our principles and our practices. Now and then, the disjuncture between our ideals and institutions has been exposed and led to dramatic reform. We've ended slavery. We've extended the franchise to women. And we've secured basic civil rights for all. Some of these projects remain works in progress. But the defining feature of our country is our commitment to making our most cherished principles real and meaningful rather than hollow.

The foregoing commitment plays out in five sections. The opening section offers an empirical ex-

amination of inequality in the United States and a normative examination of what kinds of inequality are morally objectionable.

The remaining sections take up different aspects of inequality: the sources of rising inequality; who bears the brunt of the effect; the relationship between inequality, politics, and democracy; and finally the costs of inequality for the environment, health, culture, and the arts.

Throughout these essays, we link criticism of inequality to the aspirations embedded in American founding principles and in the American Dream. Are we entering another moment in history in which the disjuncture between our principles and our institutions is being cast into especially sharp relief? Are new developments, such as the rise of extreme inequality, opening up new threats to realizing our most cherished principles? Can we build an open, democratic, *and* successful movement to realize our ideals?