

Occupy Canada: Media Pundits vs Reality

Robert A. Hackett

The Occupy Wall Street/Occupy Canada protests seem to be occupying – and perhaps unhinging – the minds of media pundits – at least, those who are mired in the dogma of “free market” fundamentalism.

One recent example from CBC Television came in the form of a personal attack on author Chris Hedges. A well-known American journalist and writer, Hedges had agreed to appear as a guest on the Lang O’Leary Exchange to discuss the Occupy movement. He was in the process of calmly and lucidly explaining that movement’s rationale when interviewer Kevin O’Leary interrupted to dismiss Hedges as “a leftwing nutbar.”

A second example, also from CBC TV, came from the October 13 edition of The National’s “At Issue” panel. Along with two journalists, the At Issue panel consists of a senior advisor with a Canadian partner of the global public relations giant Burson-Marsteller, and the economically conservative commentator Andrew Coyne.

Asked whether the rallies currently sweeping the globe could bring about real change in Canada, Coyne could barely contain himself:

“Even in the US where people have far more problems to actually worry about, it’s not clear that these people represent anybody other than themselves,” he frothed. “There’s always a constituency that doesn’t like capitalism (or) rich people... They just decided to get together and shout about it some more.”

Evidently Mr. Coyne can’t bring himself to read opinion polls showing many middle-class

Americans share the demonstrators’ worries about growing economic inequality and unemployment. Concern about corporate greed and corruption is certainly not confined to those currently in the streets.

So Coyne’s glib dismissal is itself easily dismissed. But the pundits (and some journalists) also make a more plausible point. The protesters, they say, are a motley bunch. They don’t have a single message, or specific solutions.

It is true that the movement hasn’t answered the question posed by *AdBusters*, the Vancouver-based magazine that originally inspired the rallies: “What is our one demand?” But that’s not surprising. And it’s certainly no reason to dismiss the movement.

Social movements have often started out with a shared grievance, not a particular solution. Think of the flagship of today’s global movements, environmentalism. It ranges from conservationists who want to preserve wilderness, to more politically-oriented groups advocating policies to counter global warming, to radicals who see civilization itself as the problem. A smorgasbord of approaches. But united by a concern that the ecosystems on which humans depend are threatened, and need our conscientious protection.

So too with Occupy Canada. The people involved share one belief: that the currently dominant “neoliberal” or “free market” version of capitalism is not working for the vast majority of people. While it creates wealth for some,



it is also the destructive global engine behind massive and growing inequality, the current fiscal and economic crisis, and climate change and environmental collapse.

An economic system that is rumbling along out of democratic control creates so many types of perceived injustices, affecting so many different constituencies, that it is hardly surprising that there is no “one size fits all” solution.

It’s also hard to nurture citizen-based political campaigns in a society that teaches people that rebellion is a matter of buying edgy fashion accessories. That so many people have come out into the streets demanding change – political change – is an impressive achievement in and of itself.

That doesn’t stop some journalists from complaining that they don’t know what Occupy Wall Street is about. Perhaps they don’t know how to deal with a movement that doesn’t provide blue-suited leaders, glossy handouts, and a narrow message box test-marketed in focus groups. Today’s generation of activists values participatory and consensus-based processes, more than programmatic statements.

To observers like me, schooled in the movements of the 1960s and 70s, that can be frustrating. I’m told that the first ninety minutes of the Occupy Vancouver rally on October 15 were taken up deciding how to make decisions. But in

a networked, “social mediatized” society, maybe that’s the way to build the trust and buy-in needed to launch a new and sustainable movement.

Eventually, protest must be turned into policy, if there is to be change in how the world allocates resources. And there is no shortage of ideas about policy alternatives. *AdBusters* itself has touted a tax on financial transactions (originally proposed by conservative economist James Tobin) to reduce the volatility of global money markets, and to raise funds for international development. Amongst the folks I met at Occupy Vancouver, there would likely be common ground in policies like a more progressive tax system, and public investment to reduce youth unemployment and develop sustainable energy and technology.

Last May (have the pundits forgotten?), 30% of voters elected the NDP as Canada’s official opposition – a party with progressive policies on a range of issues. Maybe the Occupy movement should add another demand: that media pundits on our public airwaves reflect the realities and diversity of our society, rather than rehash hackneyed “free market” dogma.

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