

Questions for an interview with Heather Hurwitz, author of
Are We the 99%? The Occupy Movement, Feminism, and Intersectionality

On the face of it, Occupy Wall Street's slogan—"we are the 99%"—spoke of unified activism in service to equality. To what degree did the movement deliver on that mission?

Such unity of purpose notwithstanding, once diverse groups of activists descended on encampments in the fall of 2011, the differences in their experiences and worldviews were laid bare. If economic equality was what they sought, what ended up separating them?

One of the novel aspects of your book is the focus on women and queer persons' experiences. Why do you believe highlighting those perspectives is so important?

Back in 1989, scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the notion of intersectionality when she argued that the disadvantages Black women endure are distinct from the racism experienced by Black men *and* from the sexism experienced by white women. What did she mean?

You argue that whether contemporary social movements fizzle or endure depends on how their activists engage in intersectionality. Why is that lens so crucial?

Traditionally, gender, class and racial inequalities have been considered in isolation. How does intersectional analysis change how we see such challenges, particularly those of multiply marginalized groups?

Despite its wide popularity and its accent on participatory democracy, Occupy was nevertheless marred by reports of discrimination and harassment against women and racial minorities. How were those incidents addressed? How did intersectional responses, like Safe Spaces, illuminate that approach as a potential remedy?

Occupy was the first widespread social movement in the US to use Facebook extensively for organizing and recruiting. What role did it and other social media play at Occupy, both in connecting people as well as in airing activists' intersectional critiques and driving a wedge between them?

Conflict within social movements is normal and expected, but at what point does it cross a line and become destructive to the movement itself?

The very choice of the word "occupy" to represent the movement was a point of debate. In what way were popular alternate frames, such as Unoccupy and Decolonize, a critique of the movement?

The creation of subgroups within Occupy addressed particular concerns of their members. To what degree did those subgroups become a corrective, and to what degree did they create separation from the larger 99% movement?

You argue that the very nature of the movement—being democratic and horizontal—discouraged the decisive action that might have stopped the splintering of the movement's energies. What responses do you believe would not only have helped Occupy cohere, but strengthened it?

Drawing members from diverse groups and embracing one of the most fundamental of American values, freedom of speech, Occupy was the site of intense debate about the representation and deeper purpose of the movement. How did its media and cultural products, like "Hot Chicks of Occupy Wall Street," illuminate those tensions?

You argue that slogans such as “Get money out of politics” and “They got bailed out, we got sold out” are *exclusive* frames. Who are they representing? And who do they marginalize?

When some Occupiers wanted to confront authorities in marches and protests, they effectively ignored the raced and gendered consequences that men of color and all women face when they express their anger in white, male-dominated contexts. Please say more.

The Occupy movement prided itself on non-hierarchical, flat, or team-based voluntary leadership structures. Given how foreign that is to many of us, please say more about this approach to governance, and how it solved some problems while creating others.

Movements are often experimental labs where strategies meant to help transform society are field tested. Might “step-up and step-back” and “progressive stacking,” intentional efforts to redistribute power employed at Occupy, be used outside of such contexts to help overcome our culture’s conditioning that suggests white men are the only qualified leaders?

Women and genderqueer activists of many races and ethnicities acted swiftly—much more quickly, you note, than in previous generations—to critique sexism and white male dominance in many of the movement’s spaces. How? Was that swift action a function of greater awareness? More access to strategies and responses? The support of feminism’s icons and long-standing organizations?

While contemporary feminism shaped Occupy from its very beginning and figures prominently in the arc of intersectionality’s evolution, it has nevertheless been characterized by some today as “nowhere-everywhere.” What did they mean?

Did the Occupy movement die or change in 2012?

Though the encampments were long ago torn down, Occupy—and its lessons—continue to reverberate. How was it expressed through the Sanders’ presidential bids? What effect did it have on the BLM movement? And MeToo?

The examples of the abolition, women’s suffrage, and civil rights movements notwithstanding, you contend that the current period is a unique moment in the life of social movements. How so?

Future progressive movements, you write, depend on learning lessons about the achievements and mistakes of Occupy. What do you believe are its most important take-aways?

While intended to be a corrective, was it inevitable that Occupy—as a movement that grew out of a society troubled by inequities around class, race and gender—would also display those troubling fissures? Moving forward, how do progressives build solidarity across gender, race, class, and sexual identities within mass movements?

Occupy rose in response to our last significant economic downturn, the Great Recession back in 2008. Do you believe the economic impacts wrought by the pandemic today will encourage a similar critique and level of activism?

We are approaching the 10th anniversary of Occupy. How would you characterize the last 10 years of activism, and what should we expect for the next 10?