

# From Global Justice to Occupy Everywhere

By Elizabeth Humphrys  
Online Occupy Issue

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## **‘She won’t be right mate’ – sign at Occupy Melbourne**

2011 was a year of unexpected protests, revolts and revolutions. Demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt toppled dictators, while thousands camped in Madrid’s Puerta del Sol and Barcelona’s *Plaça de Catalunya* as part of the *Indignados* movement. The Occupy Everywhere movement, which began with *Adbusters’* modest call for an occupation of New York’s financial district, cascaded into places as diverse as Oslo, Islamabad, Berlin and Sydney.

But suggesting that social movements are unexpected is not the same as saying they came from nowhere. To understand Occupy, we have to appreciate both what is new and what follows from previous struggles – in particular, the Global Justice Movement (GJM) of the early 2000s.

While Occupy is variously and simultaneously unfinished, retreating and still developing (depending on where you look), its mere existence signals a re-emergence of international anti-systemic social movements. Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova has traced Occupy’s origins in the *Indignados* movement and notes that ‘There is much to say about *los indignados*. It is a historical movement of great richness, which represents a new historical project, different from previous ones in many respects; at the same time it marks the development of the historical memory of the wisdom of the people, the experiences of the people, and the imagination and creativity they possess.’ As Casanova makes clear, the square protests in Spain and the Occupy Everywhere events are both new and not new. Occupy has a particular and specific form, yet shares many of the key concerns of the movement often given the derisive name of ‘anti-globalisation’.

## **‘Our resistance is as transnational as capital’ – j18 ‘Carnival Against Capitalism’ slogan**

To arrive at Wall Street, we need to first travel back to downtown Seattle, where on 30 November 1999 the GJM announced itself to the world. On that date, every major news outlet was reporting on the protesters who blockaded and shut down a meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as it negotiated a new round of international trade agreements.

The Seattle demonstration was called to highlight the WTO’s neoliberal agenda and its failure to tackle seriously global poverty and impending environmental catastrophe. Environmentalists came to protest deforestation and climate change, labour activists to underscore declining conditions and living standards in the United States. There were fair trade agitators, ‘forgive the debt’ Christian mobilisers, radical anti-corporate direct actioners and adbuster culture jammers. Police attacked the demonstrators with tear gas, and activists were pursued through Seattle’s streets until late in the night.

But it was successful: the talks were shut down.

Seattle itself represented the continuation of a movement that emerged in the Global South, with the resistance of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) to neoliberalism in Mexico. As Zapatista activist Subcomandante Marcos said in 1996:



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by dissatisfaction with neoliberalism, and a series of more localised and specific injustices.

Neoliberalism (often termed 'economic rationalism' in Australia) emerged in the 1980s. Overseas, it was implemented by conservative governments like Margaret Thatcher's in the UK and Ronald Reagan's in the US, but in Australia and New Zealand it was labour parties that radically remade the economy and the society. Economist and White House-insider John Williamson spoke of the Washington Consensus for the Global South: a term describing an economic and development reform model that the US elite sought to implement in Latin America. The ten-item reform model included trade liberalisation, fiscal discipline, privatisation and deregulation of state-run sectors; such a program was embraced by the WTO, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, under the control of the US and other wealthy nations, often with the active support of local governments and elites.

In a critique reminiscent of that levelled against Occupy Everywhere, some in the media claimed the GJM movement did not know what it wanted, that it merely criticised everything and did not propose anything, that it was incoherent and unfocused, and that no two activists could agree on its aims.

Yet, if the movement did not formulate a series of demands, this was because much of it was directed against the political and economic system *as a whole*. Ray Kiely, in his book *The Clash of Globalisations: Neo-Liberalism, the Third Way and Anti-Globalisation*, delineated the movement as one opposed to intensified exploitation, increased social and political inequality, cultural homogenisation and escalated environmental destruction. I think that his list also requires an opposition to the democratic deficit, as one key concern of the movement was that the international bodies being targeted (the WTO, G8, World Bank, etc.) were undemocratic, making decisions in the interests of the elites that constituted them rather than the majority of people.

If those were the issues, the theoretical links between the Zapatistas, Seattle and the protests that followed around the globe were threefold: critiques of the Washington Consensus and neoliberalism; of globalisation (as from above rather than from below); and of commodification (as usefully exemplified by Naomi Klein's bestselling book *No Logo*).

The chief mobilising tactic was blockades of the meetings at which the global elite gathered. The GJM saw its enemy – quite rightly – in the WTO, IMF, World Bank, G8, G20 and, as in Melbourne, the World Economic Forum. It was a preoccupation echoed in the title of Jonathan Neale's book *You Are G8, We Are 6 Billion*, in some ways an early version of the Occupy slogan 'we are the 99 per cent'.

## **'Global justice is coming: prepare now' – s11 blockade poster**

Soon after Seattle, the GJM announced itself in Australia with a blockade known as 's11', at which 20,000 activists surrounded Melbourne's Crown Casino.

During the first of three days, on 11 September 2000, the protestors stopped over 200 delegates from attending, with a public lecture to students by Bill Gates cancelled and a key conference dinner unable to proceed. After the failure of the conference's first day, police dealt violently with those blockading the casino on day two, attacking activists at dawn and dusk. Before the blockade had even commenced, I experienced an unprovoked attack by police officers (who had removed their badges), leaving me with broken ribs, while a close friend suffered a serious eye injury. As with the eviction of Occupy Melbourne, the act of protest was seen as reason enough by the police to inflict bodily harm.

After s11, actions spread like wildfire, with demonstrations against the World Bank and IMF in Prague on 26 September 2000; against the EU Summit in Nice on 7 December 2000; at the summit negotiating the Fair Trade Agreement of the Americas in Québec City in April 2001; with the Global May Day protests of 2001 in London, Berlin and elsewhere; and a mobilisation against the World Bank in Barcelona in June 2001.

Almost immediately, though, activists began debating how they could move beyond 'summit hopping'; how they might put down roots in local communities to build a different society. At the World Social Forum, first held in January 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the main slogan was 'Another world is possible'.

The military-style policing of global justice demonstrations reached a dangerous impasse in July 2001, when the Italian *carabinieri* shot and killed a young protester on the streets of Genoa during a 300,000 strong 'manifestation'

against the G8. Then, as GJM was peaking, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington took place. Activists in the US and Australia, in particular, were unable to cope with this shift in geopolitics. Attempts to curtail the protests accelerated and activists were routinely demonised. The space for real debate in the media around the question of global economics was squeezed out by ever-increasing hyperbole from political elites as they invaded Afghanistan and Iraq – as George Bush said, 'you are either with us or with the terrorists'. The legislative environment in many countries, including Australia, was changed to limit freedom of expression and inhibit political protest, and the international bodies soon learnt to meet in far-flung corners of the globe rather than in the middle of major cities. As a result of all of this, and the inability of activists themselves to cope with the changing environment, the movement was seriously demobilised in some countries – most particularly, in Australia and the US.

### **'Dear capitalism, it's not you it's us. Just kidding, it's you' – handmade sign, Occupy Wall Street**

In the decade since the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, the fundamental concerns of the GJM have not been resolved by the elites. Moreover, the economic situation in many countries – and particularly in the US and Eurozone – has gotten sharply worse. It is not automatic that a financial crisis leads to political struggle, but the sharp shift towards crisis has provided fertile ground for Occupy and the Spanish square protests to take root and grow.

In addition, if the GJM was demobilised over the last decade, its activists were replaying events, thinking, theorising and maintaining their rage – albeit in a more fragmented form. Researcher Cristina Flesher Fominaya, who worked with the autonomous elements of the GJM in Madrid, argues that 'movement success or failure is often treated ... as an all or nothing proposition: either movements meet their objectives or they fail'. She argues that the relationship between failure and success is more complex and that we need to shift our focus from movement outcome to movement development.

Thinking in terms of longer-term movement development allows for the reflexive process of activism to be acknowledged by underlining how movements can learn even in periods of retreat.

With the emergence of Occupy Everywhere, the frame of political protest has become more national in many places – particularly in the US and Europe. While the Occupy events are still largely about corporate power, they have not commenced exclusively with the international (with the IMF, WTO, etc.), but rather located the economic concerns at home with national governments and capitalists. The target and cause of the problem is in some ways clearer: the 1 per cent super-rich and the politicians who back them. It is not located transitorily at elite summits but in the everyday – in parliaments, on Wall Street and in the bureaucracies implementing austerity cuts in places like Greece and Spain.

The debate in many countries has also seen a useful return of the question of the nation state: whether it is a body that acts in the general interest of society or in the interests of a rich and powerful minority. While there will always be the desire to shut down the meetings of the global elite, the idea of travelling to another country to do so, to summit hop, seems increasingly superfluous. There is no need to visit Prague, Quebec or Genoa to make your point when governments and corporations are ensuring we – the 99 per cent – bail out the 1 per cent everywhere.

In an article for the ABC opinion site *The Drum*, Jeff Sparrow made two useful points about the specific historical circumstances of Occupy Everywhere. Firstly, that after ten years of war, the new movement must be different to the early 1990s. Secondly, that the economic situation is vastly different, with the economic crisis deep and prolonged in most regions of the globe.

Sparrow argues that the movement is, justifiably, still a refusal rather than an affirmation, and that this question of turning events like Occupy and the square protests more fully into a movement on the offence, one making positive demands, is one that remains. That said, a movement based on affirmation and bringing a new world into being seems far more likely now because of Occupy than only a year or two ago.

### **'Every morning I wake up on the wrong side of capitalism' – mobilising graffiti, World Social Forum, Bombay**

After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, a political space opened up, a framework

no longer structured by the Cold War dichotomy of Washington vs. Moscow but by the way that capitalism worked globally for the benefit of the few. Events after 9/11 closed that space – but only for a time, displacing the contradictions but not dissolving them. A decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq could only temporarily suppress the tensions within the capitalist system: in particular, the growing gap between the haves and have-nots.

The last few years have seen natural disasters and droughts cause the deaths of millions in the developing world, even though famine and starvation are not *natural* in the modern era but are ensured by the functioning (or non-functioning) of capitalism. Even within wealthy countries, the growing wealth and income gap means distress and constant worry for many people. Medical bills are one of the largest reasons bankruptcy is sought in the United States, and, as – with its personal accounts of dire economic circumstance – suggests, working diligently is insufficient to ensure you can find a job or keep your house.

Some political commentators argue that Australia is different, not only because we have escaped the worst of the global economic crisis but because of ongoing wage and wealth growth – despite the increasing gap between the top and bottom 10 per cent of the population, based on income or wealth ownership. Yet ordinary people do not feel they have it 'better than ever', and many point to diminished economic and political choices as a key source of their grievances. Private debt is extremely high, rental and mortgage costs are causing significant stress, and costs of formerly publicly funded goods like health and education have increasingly shifted to individuals. As Godfrey Moase argues on 'Godfrey's Blog of Claims', equality matters, and 'Australia has become more unequal over the last 30 years [which] causes anxiety, anger and a political backlash'.

While Occupy has lost its vibrancy in many Australian cities, the issues that motivated it remain unresolved. Further, movements like the GJM or Occupy are not isolated formations or periods. While each is unique and different, they are part of an endlessly moving confrontation over the nature of society and in particular contemporary capitalism. The social conditions behind Occupy – economic, political and ideological – remain in place and will find further expression. Be that a reinvigorated Occupy, or something else, only time will tell.

Emerging movements do need to think carefully about how to progress discussion of an alternative world and alternative ideas. And this needs to be in a specific and not abstract way. The issue of movement organisation and democracy was not resolved within the GJM, and, perhaps, too little attention was paid to such issues. Even if Occupy can settle tactical or organisational questions, are the mechanisms that have evolved suitable for this larger task? If not, how and where can such a discussion be expected to happen?

The next step must be real dialogue in each city and country about what is next and how we can assist a new world to come in to being.

Although there are new strengths in Occupy (relative to the GJM), there are also real weaknesses. As Žižek has argued, it is too often easier for many to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. For this reason, Occupy could do with a little of that late 1990s vibe – and truly believe that 'Another world is possible', one with the interests of the 99 per cent front and centre.

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