Creston Davis is the founder and director of The Global Center for Advanced Studies (GCAS).

Abstract

In this article, I identify the need for intellectuals to organize around the core building blocks of life, air, water, and food. The article examines the lack of such organization on the left and the need to overcome the differences that fragment us. The article then goes on to propose a way of organizing in dialectical terms between protests, revolts on the one hand, and a “base” organized around a school committed to difference, discourse and conversation, and above all democracy.

“Responding to the challenges of capitalism in the world today must take the form of Organization & Ideology” – Alain Badiou

Nearly weekly new reports emerge telling us about the growing disparities in our world. In nearly every instant these reports are as unbelievable as they are ominously true. Here is just one example: Oxfam recently reported that 85 of the richest people on the planet are as wealthy as the poorest half of the world.1

And happily there was a response to this glaring social and economic inequality, which began on September 17, 2011 and spread throughout the globe. This became known as the “Occupy Movement.” For a time, this movement looked very promising and has surely raised a level of consciousness about the central issue of justice. However, the long-term strategic effects of Occupy have faded away almost as quickly as it started. Although the Occupy movement has faded, the central issue of the injustice of extreme inequality not only remains with us but is growing with several detrimental effects. So the question I want to pose here is precisely how and under what means can we organize so that a sustained and long-term organization can be formulated without - and this is crucial - stifling the need to respond in the form of protest actions.

The seminal challenge before us thus can be posed in both positive and negative terms. It is positive, in that the very act of organizing is itself a response to this dangerous trend of the growing storm of injustice. For the alternative is unacceptable namely to idly stand-by poorest half of the world,” The Guardian, January 20, 2014, accessed September 18, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/jan/20/oxfam-85-richest-people-half-of-the-world.

1 Graeme Wearden, “Oxfam: 85 richest people as wealthy as
doing nothing as more and more resources (the means of production) are being used to undermine the basic requirements for sustaining life: water, food, and shelter. Indeed, many scholars go so far to say that we have reached a moment in history where it is necessary to take a stance against this injustice otherwise we will continue to face increasingly more difficult times as even now laws have been enacted to undermine democratic action. In other words, everyone still has a choice to take a stance, and to fail to do so could mean that our world ineluctably will not be able to sustain life in just a generation or two.

The challenge is negative in that the means and resources for organizing (its premises, values, and practices) are gravely missing from our current common existential equation. A political philosopher and ethicist like Alasdair MacIntyre has conceded that there can’t be any universal agreement about what constitutes “reasonable arguments,” “[...] because,” as Ted Clayton succinctly states, “we cannot agree on the premises of morality or what morality should aim at, we cannot agree about what counts as a reasoned argument, and since reasoned argument is impossible, all that remains for any individual is to attempt to manipulate other people’s emotions and attitudes to get them to comply with one’s own wishes.” And because a universal agreement in terms of rationality cannot be achieved, it requires MacIntyre, in a Wittensteinian gesture, to retreat from a dialogical common discourse into a “language game” symbolically organized within the conservative framework of intra-linguistically defined “tradition.”

Risking the inevitable critique of extremely privileged intellectuals (even and especially the ones who claim to be liberal progressives and there are a lot more than you think), I would like to propose that we can all agree that for life to continue each person, village, city, region and our very planet needs clean (i.e., non-toxic) air and water. Air and water, it’s really very simple. To breathe air is essential, but not just air, clean air is essential for health. Clean water too is essential for life, and it is needed every day. Air every moment, and water every day are the essential building blocks of life and health, of all things, social, economic, political, cultural. So, as reductive and basic as it may seem, we must first start with the foundations of life and build from here a way of framing existence, such that a healthy life is not only possible but also sustainable over time and for all people.

But to understand our world in the simplest of terms remains the issue that very few academics are able to focus on. The reasoning for this may touch on how incestuous and neoliberal the academy has become on the level of individual scholarship. New languages and complex symbolic structures are constructed precisely to become increasingly exclusive with each new book or

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2 The Patriot Act for example.
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organization. Communication in that the facts needs to be delivered clearly and accurately. But that still isn’t enough—action is required. Organization needs to take place on both the local and global level. Organization that has to do with the basic questions of life: water, air, shelter.

The trends of today’s capitalist world, the so-called “free market” world does not take into account a standard of health for all people, that is to say, for the planet. The universal for capitalism is profit at the cost of all else, including human beings, the planet and all manner of life. In this sense, capitalism is soullessly pathological because it sacrifices life for material gain for an increasingly smaller demographic. The outcome of capitalist gain is then re-invested for further gain and this logic of accumulation madness is obsessive as it is compulsive. Objectively we can observe this mad logic by the numbers in the surveys in which wealth is increasingly concentrated into the control of fewer and fewer people. Thus, a aristocracy is emerging on the bases of which a new foundation that Philip Goodchild calls a “Theology of Money” has already been erected. And here we must revive what MacIntyre says that we are in a new “dark ages.” We are not so much in a new dark age as we are in feudalism in which the church has been supplanted by Wall Street and the capitalist has become the aristocracy of our time. This axis, something that has been forming from the early 70s, is nothing less than a threat to life as such and we must organize to stop it. But, again, to do this will require great sacrifices and turns on the question: Are the middle and working classes willing (as they are certainly able) to give up the capitalist fantasy otherwise known as the “American Dream” in order to save the future generation from extinction. This should be our task and our mission must begin with the basics of life, water, food, and added to this, shelter.

Organization, Action & Protest

In light of this new elitism that is now controlling the capitalist world, we have witnessed reactions and protests in recent years. The two main protests have been the “Arab Spring” and the “Occupy Movement.” And much good has resulted from these movements, and in the case of the former, much danger has emerged. But, in regards to the latter, no serious social change has come to realization. What then can be done?

Let’s begin by assessing the weaknesses of the Occupy movement. There are internal and external weaknesses. The internal one has to do with the liberal politics that infiltrated the movement and turned its radical edge into a conservative stance that finally pandered to the status quo. Instead of occupying public spaces as an act of defiance to the point of breaking the law, the movement decided to cater to the demands of the state. At the end of the day, only a few and not the common risked standing together against the state. In other words, at the end of the day, the liberal stance of “We’ll protest so long as the law maintains its authority” only concedes the law, having precedence over the injustice of the state’s axis to the death politics of the wealthy. The point being: the unjust politics of Wall Street continues to function as the state of exception whereas the multitude must be tamed by the law—the very logic that allows the wealthy to continue operating unjustly without accountability by the people.

This is also why liberal politics (that which undergirds and supports the university profit-making system) are impotent. Universities, within the neo-liberal

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5 During the Fall, 2014 we have seen more protests and uprisings surrounding the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, which certainly are gaining more and more strength globally.
regime, can only ever reproduce the stalemate of the capitalist culture because although they have a few so-called “radical thinkers” they are often but not entirely rendered powerless by the golden handcuffs of tenure. The psychological fears the college professor experiences are so palpable it too frequently shocks them into a researcher that can only ever complain about identity politics while sipping on gins-and-tonics. This fear must be broken with the courage to speak the truth about our life on this planet, and it cannot be done by just talking about how bad everything is from the forests evaporating to the massive ice melts. These are but symptoms of a much greater and ominous systematic attack by the capitalist regime against our planet. Courage must be conjured, and a call to action must be sounded. This is war, but a war that must be waged on principles of justice and a politics of life and love. But it is also a war whose veneer-fantasy called the “middle-class” cannot see behind their closed doors, fancy cars, in what is already a pathological repression otherwise known as zombie politics.

The external problem with the Occupy movement has to do with sustainability. More strictly, the problem is organizational sustainability. The protest nature of Occupy was unable to sustain itself over a long period of time. If, however, there was an institution established that can sustain itself through long-term organizing and community program development, while at the same time being able to respond to injustice through needed protest then the overall demand for justice by the people can be sustained. The pressure for change, for justice must be unrelenting through a dual strategy of short and long-term action plans. Additionally, this dual strategy will work to help keep the long-term institution from falling asleep and sinking back into apathy and the status quo through protest action, and conversely, the protest action will be grounded in a sustainable vision so that it doesn’t just become a flash-in-the-pan and quickly evaporate leaving no long-term outcome.

Organizational Form

This raises the question: What “institutional” form should this organization take? There are many options: community organization, a global political party, an organization shaped around a specific issue (women’s rights, etc.) and so forth. There are many great strengths to organizing locally, but the biggest weakness is that it isn’t connected to the plight of the oppressed around the globe and so whatever changes they bring to the local domains, as good as they are, must also be linked to the global fight for justice. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. who once said “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” And given the advanced technologies we have today at our disposal, we must take advantage of them in order to form a global/local institution so that our struggle for justice and democracy can have both the local and the global connected together into a network of communication and action for the voice of the common. Thus the question becomes: What institutional form would serve these purposes best: (a) sustainability; (b) protest action; (c) local; and (d) global? My proposal is the formation of a school grounded in the pursuit of justice by the perpetual desire to raise consciousness and organize solidarity around justice as well as be able to deploy action to confront injustice in a way that is both sustainable and yet ever unfolding through itself. This action, moreover, must be motivated at all times towards a politics of life and inclusion.

I, along with many comrades, including Katerina Kolozova, have started a school with this strategy in mind. The school is called The Global Center for Advanced
Studies (GCAS). Alain Badiou is the president of this school and it contains leading theorists and activists on the faculty. The great strength of this school, as our President states, is that “It is neither reducible to a party, nor is it strictly an intellectual endeavour.” A school like GCAS can thus unite the oppressed on a global front while deploying local action in the name of democracy and emancipation. Seminar courses can be taught in a way that raises the level of consciousness globally, while also organizing action locally. What is more, because it is a school it must not take up dogmatic positions, but must rather, as Max Horkheimer pointed out in his important book *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937), become a self-conscious social critique with the mission for emancipation through enlightenment, which does not cling dogmatically to its own foundational assumptions.\(^6\) Closely related to this is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s idea of the “multitude” in which they say,

“...there must be a moment when reappropriation and self-organization reach a threshold and configure a real event. This is when the political is really affirmed—when the genesis is complete and self-valorization, the cooperative convergence of subjects, and the proletarian management of production become a constituent power.”\(^7\)

With Horkheimer’s call to not dogmatically cling to doctrinal assumptions, but yet continue the process of enlightenment, together with Badiou’s idea of the Event and with Hardt and Negri’s notion of the coming multitude that hasn’t yet actualized itself, we have a model for a school that can function as a global/local organization, which allows for an infinite diversity, whilst at the same time, a specific sustainable strategy both strategic and tactical (short and long term, global and local).

With this very anemic strategic model in place (which is in great need of being fleshed out), we can start with the school itself as we begin the formation of global and local organizations, and through this school, we can then build a communication network that contains within it the ability to ignite actions and knowledge about the spreading injustices around the world issuing from global capitalism and neoliberalism waging war against the essential elements of life. GCAS and other schools must then be committed to life above all, to health and be a movement not only of resistance and protest, but also of producing a positive unfolding of life. And finally, such a school is just one proposal among many that already exist and have for some time now. But uniting these different organizations committed to life can form a global community that could, if organized carefully, begin to assist us as we fight and struggle for life, for breath, air, water and shelter for all.

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