

Occupy, NATO, and the Confessions of an Interloper

A retired college professor and minister takes time to engage with and learn from youthful protesters. | ARVID ADELL

Let others complain that the age is wicked; my complaint is that it is wretched for it lacks passion.

SØREN KIERKGAARD

Sunday, May 20, began bright and beautiful, with an expected high of over 90 degrees. But it wasn't the temperature that induced me to throw my mountain bike into the cargo area of my Honda CRV and head into Chicago. The real attraction was the Occupy Chicago bandstand speeches all morning in Grant Park. Hundreds from all over the United States were expected to attend, followed by the afternoon march against NATO, which conservatively attracted three or four thousand people.

I had some acquaintance with such protest movements. Last year, from a tourist bus in New York City I had briefly witnessed the tent city Occupy Wall Street, and in 2005 while living in Scotland I had inadvertently stumbled into a passenger car on the British rail peopled with rowdy anarchists en route to Edinburgh to protest a G-8 conference.

But my intentions on this Sunday were entirely different. I wanted my encounters to be personal, close, and up front. I wanted to be involved. I wanted to feel the "passion" of these protesters. I wanted to be an occu-

pier! Kierkegaard wrote that "reading Hegel is like reading to a starving man from a cookbook." Enough virtual reality—I wanted to be there.

Of course, getting downtown was a huge challenge. The news radio continually urged people to stay away from the Loop. No parking, numerous roadblocks, hundreds of police who had come from as far away as Raleigh, North Carolina, to say nothing of thousands of pedestrians made for extremely difficult travel. But I avoided that possible trauma by parking my car six miles away and riding south along the lakeshore bike path.

When I arrived at the east end entrance to Grant Park, I hesitated. What was I doing here? Shouldn't I have detoured to North Park Covenant Church and worshiped with persons of like faith? Had I lost my senses? The media was reporting that on the previous day three protesters had been incarcerated on suspicion of being terrorists. Allegedly they had explosives and a plan to blow up several buildings, including President Obama's Chicago headquarters. A number of occupiers had been arrested for skirmishes with police. Plus, surveying the crowd, I didn't spot any other seventy-six-year-old gray-haired men in biking gear. I was apprehensive, to say the least. How would these protesters perceive me?

As an interloper? An informant? An anachronism?

I asked a couple of police officers if they thought it would be all right if I tried to interview some of the occupants. They smiled sardonically and replied, "We don't care, but it ain't gonna work!"

They were wrong. And, relative to my initial angst, so was I. My experience turned out to be revelatory and exciting.

I had an agenda for my interviews. The particular issue that had motivated each of these persons to make the trek into the city was not my primary concern. I left that to the media. My interest was whether occupiers thought God, religion, and the church had any relevance in their protests. At the beginning of each conversation, I identified myself—a retired pastor and an emeritus college professor of philosophy—and my objectives. What importance does your faith have in this demanding, enervating Occupy weekend?

It is worth noting that a considerable amount of privation accompanied the efforts of the protesters. A few local churches had offered limited places for lodging, as did some local residents, but the majority of them spent their nights outdoors, attempting to sleep on barricaded streets,



Arvid Adell and two protesters in Chicago's Grant Park

sidewalks, park benches, and grassy spots. They had to pay for their food. For most of them, bathing was an unavailable luxury.

At Grant Park most of the occupiers were young (twenty-something), male, white, fairly well educated, and apparently middle class. Observing them on this third day of their “vocation” as some referred to it, I sensed that they had become more than just protestors. They had established a kind of culture and community. Most of them seemed like friends.

Better err on the side of caution, I advised myself. Fortuitously the first activist I met was a pleasant, non-threatening-looking woman who agreed to talk to me after I offered her my credentials and my objectives. Her name (at least the one she gave me) was Occupied Kate from Cincinnati. She had a job—advertising journalist—a divorced husband, a son who was studying to become a photographic journalist, and a comfortable lifestyle.

Why was she here? She defined herself as a “single issue” protestor

who belonged to the 350.org global restorative economy movement. Her mission was to protest against TransCanada’s proposed Keystone XL Pipeline project, 1,100 miles of pipeline from Alberta to Nebraska. The project, she claimed, would increase the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by the equivalent of somewhere between 550,000 and 4,000,000 auto emissions. This excess would increase global warming to an unsustainable limit and usher in an apocalyptic event. Occupied Kate blasted her warning over the stage microphone: “Stop our government from continuing to subsidize oil explorations, especially the one in Canada!” Of all of the occupiers I interviewed, she was the only one who thought it worthwhile to appeal to our politicians.

What were her views about God, religion, and the church? No equivocation here. She was an avowed atheist, having no empirical evidence of God’s existence. As for religion and the church, she said, they were

agents of global destruction, continually denying the validity of scientific research, which plainly shows our impending ecological suicide.

I thanked her and moved on. On the stage the man with the microphone was a dead ringer for Yasser Arafat—his huge black and white

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checked head scarf, khaki fatigues, and prominent nose were eerily similar to those of the former Palestinian leader. He was vilifying NATO, the United Nations, the United States, and Zionist Israel for its shameful wars against Palestine, Iran, Syria, and Libya, all in the name of imperial capitalism. My take was that very few protestors were listening. I exchanged

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greetings with him as he hurried away. He had no time for small talk.

My second conversation was with Wes from a western suburb of Chicago. He was a mild appearing individual, thirty-something, looking a bit bewildered at the hyper-activity all around him. He informed me that he had attended DeVry, then the Illinois Institute of Technology from which he earned a degree in engineering.

When I inquired why he was here he replied that his was a protest against the 1 percent. He had had a good job as a mechanical engineer in a local company, but a few weeks ago he had been let go as a cost-saving move. What irked him was that the company was ostensibly quite profitable and those at the top of the pay

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scale (the 1 percent) had kept their jobs and were unwilling to take a salary reduction so that he could keep his. He felt used, abused, and fearful about his financial future.

I asked him about God, religion, and the church. Wes turned out to be a complete agnostic. "I don't know if there is a God or not. As for religion, I am not sure if it does more harm than good. I don't go to church but I don't know why. That's about all I can say."

I decided it was time to take some risks, so I infiltrated a group of about half a dozen young men and one woman who were dressed in black clothes and wearing red bandannas, the colors of the anarchists. I was afraid I had entered a war zone and wondered whether these "revolutionaries" would engage in civil conversation with me. My fears were completely misplaced.

I introduced myself and then confessed that I had some hesitancy about approaching a group of anarchists, but that they didn't look particularly vicious nor revolutionary. They laughed.

Od Rachkem (surely an occupier name) was the spokesperson for the group. There are many kinds of anarchists, he instructed me. The word *anarchy* comes from the Greek word meaning "not having a leader/ruler." He explained, "We don't believe in hierarchies. We don't follow others. We are apolitical. No one is better than anyone else and every person has to develop his or her own philosophy of life."

Od was a handsome, tall, exceptionally articulate young man. I think he told me he had graduated from an Illinois university. So what was his philosophy of life? He was a "primitivist" and an "anti-civ" (as in "civilization") devotee. His mission at Occupy Chicago was to persuade

individuals to return to their roots as "gatherers and hunters," at least metaphorically, if not literally. By this

he meant we should adhere to a style of acquisition and distribution of goods similar to what they had before the days of capitalism and "surplus value." The primitivists acquired each day just enough to satisfy their needs and the needs of members of their community. No one kept the "leftovers" for themselves.

"Od," I offered, "that sounds like you are advocating socialism/communism!"

"Not at all," he replied. "Economic systems are artificial constructs and depend on hierarchical agencies to enforce their policies. We are anarchists. Our task is to inform society that each and every person has the right to basic survival needs (including health care) and then to voluntarily share whatever we have with those who don't. Our job is to convince everyone to follow this philosophy and then utopia would become a possibility."

Was he serious? It sounded like he was.

As I asked my three questions, I thought, *This is going to be an*

exercise in futility. I was pretty sure I knew what the anarchists would say.

Alex, who must have majored in anthropology or sociology in college and who shared Od's primitivist, anti-civilization conceptual scheme, said, "God, religion, and places of worship are residual hangovers from the tribal era. In order to gain leverage over other tribes, they invoked the powers of deities and made them into religions. We still do that today. Those of us who are against hierarchies absolutely reject all religions. There were no religions before civilizations appeared on the scene. Nature ruled!" Was I listening to Rousseau?

Tamika, the woman in the group, nodded her head in agreement with everything Od and Alex said.

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Just before I exited the anarchist group, we were joined by a young man named Lindsay who had the appearance of a choir boy from a local church. He said he had overheard the comments debunking religion and he had something he wanted to say. His understanding of economics and politics were based on what he knew about Jesus. He quoted Jesus's words at the final judgment scene found in Matthew 25: "Whatever you do to one of these the least of my brothers, you do unto me." That was his theory of economics.

Lindsay also suggested that Jesus was one of the original anarchists. He interpreted the Palm Sunday parade into Jerusalem as a protest march and Jesus's cleansing of the temple as the original occupy the city event. (The kid knew his New Testament.) That was his theory of politics. Jesus did not, he continued, intend to start a religion. Instead, he asked each person to seek the economic well-being of everyone else. "If you have two coats, give away one."

Of course Lindsay then proceeded to make clear that you didn't need to be religious or believe in God to do

those things. Nor did you need clergy or the church. In the true spirit of the anarchist he asserted that everyone can do that on his or her own.

About this time a band began to play some kind of spirited music and the voice from the stage alerted us that the march against NATO would begin sharply at two o'clock. Almost everyone left Grant Park, and they were joined by thousands of others at the corner of Monroe Street and Michigan Avenue for the two-hour trek to McCormick Place. They were corralled by hundreds of helmeted police. The scene was impressive. Dozens of large colorful banners trumpeting causes as diverse as "Freedom for Puerto Rico" to "Same Sex Couples Have the Right to Marry" were on display.

The Yasser Arafat lookalike who had been too busy to speak to me earlier spotted me and insisted that I accompany him to the front of the parade so a picture could be taken of us on either end of a huge bright green and white Palestinian flag completed just in time for the march. "Help us make Palestine our own independent country," he implored. I told him I had spoken out against Israeli settlements in Palestine. For a brief time, I walked behind the flag he and another man carried with obvious pride and enthusiasm. This was their moment in the sun!

Unlike the speeches in Grant Park and the myriad banners presenting dozens of personal, economic, social, and political issues, the march against NATO had one focus: Stop the war in Afghanistan! Now! Over and over I heard the mantra that the sole purpose of the NATO organization was to gain control by war.

The beginning of the parade was singularly impressive and without incident. The police traveled step by step with the protestors, one of whom carried a sign depicting a giant heart with the inscription "We love Chicago police." I wondered if that sentiment was shared by everyone.

Transparency compels me to admit

that I walked only a short distance before making my egress.

Having completed my mission for the day, I walked my bike from the front of the parade back to Grant Park just in time to witness an ominous sight. A group of "Black Bloc" anarchists had gathered to join the protest march. I had been warned about them. As protesters, their tactic is to dress all in black, paint their faces or wear masks to conceal their identity, and march en masse.

They walked behind a large black and white banner defining (with an abundance of expletives) their persona in four principles. The first warned, "No one dares to mess with us!" The second was "We obey no orders." As I recall, the other two told of their endorsement of violence, and the language was no less offensive. Two of them gave me copies of their newspaper, *Revolution: the Voice of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, in which the editors prescribed the violent overthrow of capitalism in America.

One could see trouble in the making. The evening news reported that the police made thirty-five arrests during the march.

A strong wind off the lake was at my back as I cycled north to my car. I made record time, but I still had occasion to reflect on the events of the day. It had turned out to be a surprising, inspirational, yet iconoclastic experience. The Grant Park occupiers with whom I shared ideas were far different from what I had anticipated. They were intelligent, bright, articulate, polite, appropriately opinionated, and while being very passionate about their causes, they tolerated contrary opinions without fuss. They responded at length to my inquiries, but they also listened, without interruption, to me and to their fellow occupiers.

Yet a lingering vexatious feeling persisted. Did they make any sense, or were they merely wasting everyone's time? Is anyone who hears them going to empathize with their zeal and their philosophies of life? Aren't they first-

rank idealists and reductionists? (Is the only goal of NATO to make war? Are all the owners of property motivated entirely by greed? Doesn't civilization offer some positive benefits?)

When I asked them how they expected to implement their recipes for changing the world, given their extreme unwillingness to enlist the support of our established political and social institutions, their response amazed me. "Sure, we are idealists. We are called to enunciate these ideals, not to implement them." In one sense, they considered themselves "prophets" to America.

In his book *The Adventure of Ideas*, Alfred North Whitehead suggests that some ideas are eternal ideals and ultimately they shall prevail: ideals such as truth, beauty, freedom, peace, and adventure. Our role is not to create those ideals, but to announce them and to pursue them. Regardless, eventually they shall triumph.

I think the occupiers with whom I spoke would concur. This is precisely what they were saying and why they came to Chicago. Sharing on the basis of caring and needing; promoting peace instead of war everywhere and doing it now; eliminating oppressive hierarchies and hegemony by privilege; affirming the inherent sacred worth of every single individual; placing the sustainability of the earth above the desire for profit—these are eternal ideals which I think most of us would be willing to promulgate and which we have faith will finally succeed.

What did I learn from my interactions with these occupiers and marchers? Did they have anything to say to me and to the church?

I recall asking one young man in Grant Park why he and his friends had gone to all of the expense and effort to participate in a rather grueling event that very well might not change anything. His response was targeted at me and others like me: "I had something I wanted to say so I came here to say it! If you have something to say, then say it!" A well-spoken word for us all. ■