
MONEY & MOVEMENTS

Consider the Lilies

BY NATHAN SCHNEIDER

The day Occupy Wall Street created the Finance working group – now happily renamed Accounting – was frantic. It had to be; this was the first week of the occupation, with donations pouring in from all over the country. Nobody knew who would get to spend it, or how, and the community's needs were mounting every minute. A proposal was cobbled together for that afternoon's General Assembly (GA), and an ally who happened to be at the plaza that day pitched in to set up a fiscal sponsorship. Nobody had much of a chance to think about how to be the change they want to see in the world, at least in this respect.

Things have calmed down somewhat for the winter, and now there's time to think more carefully. There has been tremendous time and energy sapped up in the General Assembly and Spokes Council about often-minute hows and whys of distributing money within the movement. The philanthropy starting to come in from outside risks empowering only those privileged with existing connections to the pursestrings of the wealthy. Of course, full-time activists don't grow on trees, and they need to be supported, as do their works. Yet a paycheck can become a sense of entitlement—good for building a stable institution, but threatening to the militancy of a resistance movement.

Dealing with money is hard, and all the more so for a community committed to making its every procedure reflective of its aspirations. Compared to most other kinds of undertakings, however, true popular movements are actually pretty cheap, and they can come by what they need quite naturally if they're doing their job right.

In the heyday of the civil rights movement, radical groups had to buckle down for years of intensive on-the-ground organizing. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee entrusted budgetary details to Executive Secretary James Foreman, which enabled SNCC to react quickly to the various emergencies that came up all the time. Still, its

members would hold days-long meetings to decide on overall priorities collectively—meetings which make a few hours at the General Assembly seem mercifully short.

“Fundraising went on all the time,” explains SNCC veteran Mary King. “But it was segmented.” While SNCC organizers lived and worked in black communities in the South, The Freedom Singers toured the country, raising money and awareness by singing songs and telling stories about the movement. These weren't entertainers. “They were real people with real stories,” says King, “authentic heroes and heroines working in the movement, until Jim Forman asked them to go on the road.” “Friends of SNCC” chapters formed in Northern cities to organize these performances and support the movement from afar. Not that the intake was very big, in the end; a SNCC field secretary, the person in charge of local operations, earned the equivalent of less than \$70 a week in today's dollars.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference had a more integrated approach to fundraising. Staffers were expected to contribute at least 10 percent of whatever they spent. “There was plenty of fancy fundraising involving celebrities like Harry Belafonte,” explains Mary King. “Yet the wonderful thing about staff members being expected to help carry their own weight is that it made them remember to be frugal.” They raised money from bake sales, car washes, and family members, often close to the communities in which the staffers were working. King herself advocated for more of this decentralized approach in SNCC. “Grassroots fundraising is extremely important,” she says. “You can draw psychological nourishment from it, and share knowledge. It is not just money.”

Improvisation was also a big part of the civil rights movement's daily bread. During the Montgomery bus boycott, Bayard Rustin turned to nearby Birmingham, where black steel workers made good salaries and often had two cars per family. He persuaded many of them to send their second cars to Montgomery for carpooling boycotters. This made donors part of the effort in a more direct, substantive way than just giving money.

Such in-kind giving has been the basis of the ongoing May 15 movement in Spain, which helped to inspire Occupy Wall Street. According to Spanish activist and journalist Ter Garcia, “Little money, but many hours of voluntary work, made possible the country's most important social movement in recent memory.” Those at the month-long Madrid encampment, for instance, decided not to accept monetary donations at all. As the camp



grew, more and more of its needs—food, printing, and sound equipment, for instance—were provided by people joining the movement. Even now, after having transitioned from encampment to neighborhood assemblies, Madrid's Indignados don't take or manage money.

Where money is necessary, such as for web server space, the Spaniards raise it through small-scale benefit parties or selling swag like buttons and T-shirts. Their widespread anti-foreclosure efforts have deftly avoided legal fees by using trained volunteer activists as advisors to government-provided public defenders. Organizers see keeping money to a minimum as a way of maintaining independence while fostering interdependence.

Down in Washington, DC, those occupying Freedom Plaza intend to create a "co-operative sub-economy" that can support participants and the movement. With the help of political economist Gal Alperovitz, author of *America Beyond Capitalism*, they're now drawing up business plans. One is for an "Occupy food truck," an offshoot of Freedom Plaza's extraordinary kitchen. Another idea is to produce and sell propaganda swag through a worker-owned shop, offering their services to other Occupy groups. This kind of project, if successful, would meet shorter-term goals as well as longer-term ones; besides raising some money, it models a more sustainable alternative to the usual corporate structures. But these occupiers certainly aren't expecting to get rich in the process.

For those in the Serbian resistance movement Otpor!—which helped bring down Slobodan Milošević—nobody got too comfortable, even when hundreds of thousands of dollars were pouring in from Western interests eager to do away with the regime. This money paid for printing supplies, T-shirts, banners, and rallies. "We were volunteers, so our parents were financing us for almost two years," recalls Ivan Marović, one of Otpor's founding organizers, who visited Liberty Plaza in the first week of the occupation. "Old ladies were bringing food and tea to protests, taxis gave us free rides, local cafes would give us free coffee."

If a radical movement is doing what it should be doing, it will run mostly on things other than money. What money it does need will be used better when coming from those whom the movement serves. If you're holding fancy thousand-dollar-a-plate dinners, you've probably become a status-quo NGO, and you'd better start giving up hope of revolution.

"Consider the lilies, how they grow," Jesus is recorded as having told his friends. "Don't keep striving for what you'll eat and what you'll drink, and don't keep worrying. It's the nations of the world that strive after these kinds of things." Instead, he said, work toward the blessed community, as the lilies grow toward the sun—"and these things will be given to you as well."

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