

The Yippies and the Occupiers

As a co-founder of the Yippies (Youth International Party)—known for demonstrating against the Vietnam War at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago—I find myself comparing and contrasting the Yippies and the Occupy Wall Street protesters.

We had to perform stunts to get media coverage of our cause, so a group of us went to the New York Stock Exchange, upstairs to the balcony, and threw \$200 worth of singles onto the floor below, watching the gang of manic brokers suddenly morph from yelling "Pork Bellies" into playing "Diving for Dollars." Then we held a press conference outside, explaining the connection between the capitalist system and the war.

Now, a particular placard, "Wall Street Is War Street," gives me a sense of continuity. Other anonymous Occupier spokespersons carried posters proclaiming: "God Forbid We Have Sex & Smoke Pot. They Want Us to Grab Guns & Go to War!" "I am an immigrant. I came here to take your job. But you don't have one." "\$96,000 for a BA in Hispanic transgender gay & lesbian studies and I can't find work!" And a woman in a wheelchair: "Stand Up For Your Rights!"

By the sheer power of numbers without the necessity of stunts, the Occupiers have broadened public awareness about the economic injustice perpetuated by corporations without compassion conspiring with government corruption that has resulted in immeasurable suffering. The Yippies were a myth that became a reality.

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NPR waited until eleven days of Occupy Wall Street had passed before reporting its existence. The executive news editor explained that the Occupiers “did not involve large numbers of people” (actually, there were already several hundred), no “prominent people” showed up (thus ignoring Michael Moore and Susan Sarandon), the lack of “a great disruption” (the police pepper-spraying protesters trapped in a cage of orange netting finally met that need), “or an especially clear objective” (oh, right, like all those flip-floppy pandering politicians whose clear objective is to get elected).

The Occupiers appear to be a leaderless community—most likely, you can’t name a single one; not yet, anyway—whereas Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and I served as spokespeople for the Yippies. We had media contacts and knew how to speak in sound bytes. If we gave good quote, they gave free publicity for upcoming demonstrations. It was mutual manipulation.

Sample: A reporter asked me about the 1968 counter-contention we were planning, “Will you be staying in tents?” I replied, “Some of us will be intense. Others will be frivolous.”

During an interview with Abbie and me for the CBS Evening News, taped at his apartment, Abbie paraphrased Che Guevara and said, “I’m prepared to win or die.”

However, that never got on the air. When the reporter asked me, "What do the Yippies actually plan to do in Chicago?" I smiled at her and said, "You think I'm gonna tell you?" That portion of my answer was used to end Walter Cronkite's segment on the Yippies, but my follow-up sentence—"The first thing we're gonna do is put truth serum in the reporters' drinks"—was omitted. They had beaten me at my own game.

The Yippies were inspired by the Buddhist monk in Vietnam who set himself on fire in order to call attention to the war. The photo of that incident traveled around the globe, and I wore a lapel button which featured that flaming image. Similarly, in 2010, a street vendor in Tunisia refused to pay a police bribe, then immolated himself, which inspired a revolution there, and next in Egypt, spreading into Arab Spring, which ultimately inspired American Autumn in 2011.

Inspired by the Yippies attempt to levitate the Pentagon, Aron Kay wanted to get fellow Occupiers to levitate Wall Street, to no avail. Likewise, inspired by the Yippies nomination of an actual pig named Pigasus for president, Michael Dare tried unsuccessfully to persuade fellow protesters at Occupy Seattle to carry out his notion that, "If corporations are people, let's run one for president." I offered myself as Secretary of Greed.

The evolution of technology has changed the way protests are organized and carried out. The Yippies had to use messy mimeograph machines to print out flyers that had to be stuffed into envelopes, addressed, stamped and mailed. The Internet generally—and social media such as Facebook and Twitter—have enabled Occupiers to inexpensively reach countless people immediately.

When the Yippies were being tear-gassed, and beaten sadistically and indiscriminately, we chanted, "The whole world is watching!" But now, when a bloodbath was expected to happen if the New York police forced the Occupiers out of the park—and then that didn't happen—Michael Moore asked a cop, "Why don't you think the eviction happened?" The reply: "Because the mayor's afraid of YouTube."

(One month later, Mayor Bloomberg apparently lost that fear; by his order, the eviction happened at 1 a.m. The next afternoon, a protester, before being allowed back in, was overheard remarking, "The cops have occupied Zuccotti Park. We're just trying to figure out what their demands are.")

Not only what occurred in Chicago in 1968 was officially labeled "a police riot" by a government-sponsored investigation, but also an undercover police provocateur—who was disguised as a local biker and acted as Jerry Rubin's bodyguard—would ultimately state that he participated in pulling down the American flag in Grant Park, destroying it, then running up the black flag of the Viet Cong in its place.

"I joined in the chants and taunts against the police," he said, "and provoked them to hitting me with their clubs. They didn't know who I was, but they did know that I had called them names and struck them with one or more weapons."

Now, as the Occupy model has spread around the country, police brutality has increased, and it's not surprising that there have been accusations of provocateurs sabotaging the nonviolent principle, not to mention an assistant editor at a conservative magazine who infiltrated a group of protesters in Washington, D.C., later

claiming that his purpose was “to mock and undermine them in the pages of the *American Spectator*,” and that he helped incite a riot at the National Air and Space Museum, getting pepper-sprayed in the process.

The Yippies were essentially countercultural, an amalgam of radicalized stoned hippies and straight political activists. And, although the Occupiers are essentially mainstream, their demonization by right-wing media pundits has been providing a replay performance of the Dinosaur Follies.

Bill O’Reilly called the Occupiers “drug-trafficking crackheads” and “violent America-hating anarchists.” Sean Hannity said they “sound like skinhead Nazi psychos.” Ann Coulter referred to them as mobs of “teenage runaways” and “tattooed, body-pierced, sunken-chested 19-year-olds getting in fights with the police for fun.” Glenn Beck warned that they “will come for you and drag you into the streets and kill you.” Andrew Breitbart declared that Occupy Wall Street is “a group of public masturbating violent freaks.”

Rush Limbaugh labeled them “dumbed down” and “propagandized” and asked a rhetorical question reeking with layers of irony: “Whatever happened to the ‘60s-- *Question Authority?*” At this point, Limbaugh is like a castrated canine that is still busy humping the living-room sofa by force of habit.

I’ll conclude here with a little gift for the infamous 1% in the form of what could eventually become a riddle for reactionaries. “What do corporations and fetuses have in common?” And the answer is: “They’re both persons.”