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Occupy Philosophy!

by [Jennifer Uleman](#)

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Smack in the middle of the holidays, on a Wednesday night in very late December, about 150 people — philosophy professors and graduate students — gathered in a hotel conference room in Washington, DC, for a

panel called, “Thinking Occupation: Philosophers Respond to Occupy Wall Street.” The panel had been added, very late in the game, to the program of the 108th Eastern Division American Philosophical Association Meeting.¹

The size of the crowd surprised everyone, particularly since we’d organized things long after the printed conference program for had been sent out to APA members. We were up against stiff competition (the December APA is a zoo of sessions), including meetings of the International Association for Environmental Philosophy, the Hegel Society of America, the Radical Philosophy Association, and the Society for the History of Political Philosophy, among many others. It was at dinnertime (7:30-9:30pm). Given all this, a turnout of 150 people was amazing, and evidence of the hunger there is for engagement of the Occupy kind.

Our panel of six—Elizabeth Anderson (University of Michigan), Chad Kautzer (University of Colorado Denver), Charles Mills (Northwestern University), Darrell Moore (DePaul University), Annika Thiem (Villanova University), and me (Purchase College, SUNY)—included philosophers active in local occupations as well as philosophers who’d been watching and reading from a greater distance. Among us were full professors with named chairs and brand-new assistant professors. Some of us considered ourselves anarchist, some radical, some liberal; all of us had been energized by the Occupy movement.

We had, of course, a lot to say.

Elizabeth Anderson drew on Charles Tilly’s work to describe four features democratic social movements must project in order to win public support: worthiness (the participants live up to public standards of virtue), numbers (many people participate in the movement), commitment (the participants display a willingness to make personal sacrifices for their cause), and unity (they rally around a single, clear set of demands).² There was the rub; the Occupy movement clearly has the first three features, she argued, but the fourth is more complicated. The anti-plutocracy message is very clear, but Occupy has notoriously resisted articulating demands, with results that remain to be seen.

You can link to the full text of comments by [Chad Kautzer](#), [Charles Mills](#), [Darrell Moore](#), [Annika Thiem](#), and [me](#) by clicking on our names. (This report, with links, is also on [my website](#).) So more briefly: Kautzer emphasized the radically democratic internal structure of Occupy and how it is generating a new community of transgressive subjects (“outlaw subjects”); Mills argued that Occupy both can and should position itself as mainstream, given a clarified sense of liberalism’s central commitments; Moore talked about the importance of spontaneity and space in all the occupations; Thiem talked about what it would mean to occupy (academic) philosophy, calling on everyone to risk critique and political action at their own institutions; and, finally, via attention to a sign at Zuccotti Park (THE HEART WANTS WHAT THE HEART WANTS), I argued that the absence of demands, however untenable in the long-term, has underscored Occupy’s call for (and small-scale creation of) a public sphere in which inchoate desires can be explored, articulated, and honed.

After the presentations, hands in the audience shot up. Flummoxed, I asked Darrell Moore to take stack—the closest we came to embodying Occupy. A sampler of comments and questions: Given a common rejection of crony capitalism and corporate politicians, wherein do we locate the real differences between the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street? What did we think the future held and, in particular, what did we imagine about the looming (or already underway) battle for ownership of Occupy Wall Street? What else could be said about the role of affect in the Occupy movement (and how philosophers might pay better attention to it)? How was the concept of Occupation taking hold outside the United States, and could we reflect on resonances with uprisings in the Arab world and elsewhere? One audience member reported that when he walked around Zuccotti Park with a sign saying “Remember Rawls!” a lot of people approached him wanting to talk. Another said that many at Occupy Oakland were anarchists who had thought and read deeply in the anarchist intellectual tradition. The panelists were also, it bears noting, accused by one audience member of being

communists and tyrants, without any right, not having been elected, to ‘represent’ the views of the 99% or any other public — a set of charges, Anderson replied, that have routinely been made against US democratic social movements at least since the 1920s. After the session officially ended, twenty or so people milled in the room talking and exchanging names until it was finally time to go eat or sleep or catch the end of the conference reception.

I’m proud of “Thinking Occupation: Philosophers Respond to Occupy Wall Street,” and of the APA for embracing it. It will have been a real success if it encourages people to take up the DIY-ethos promoted by OWS. My charge: Run, philosophers, run (everyone else, too!) with whatever part of the anti-plutocracy message you find most urgent or salient; find whatever allies you can; make noise or pursue quiet changes as suits you and the means at hand. The more people push on different fronts, the more ways and places people work to reclaim democracy, the better it will be for everyone in the long run.

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1. The panel took place on Wed., Dec. 28, 2011. Huge thanks to Richard Bett, Secretary-Treasurer of the APA Eastern Division, and Linda Alcoff, its President-Elect, without whose help the panel would not have happened. [↩](#)
 2. Charles Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries, and Social Ties* (Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), chapter 15. [↩](#)

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6 Comments

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1. *David Velleman* says:
[January 26, 2012 at 5:59 pm](#) · [Reply](#)

It’s all very well to theorize the Occupy movement, but we are a part of the problem that they are protesting, and theorizing won’t make us part of the solution. One of the chief grievances of the Occupy movement—and a legitimate grievance—is the level of student debt, which is directly caused by the ever-rising costs of higher education. Until we join with our colleagues and administrators to control costs, claims to be in support of the Occupy movement are hypocritical. (And if we don’t do it ourselves, the Federal Government will soon force us to do it, by shutting off student loans for those attending the more expensive institutions.)



- o *Chad Kautzer* says:
[January 29, 2012 at 5:19 pm](#) · [Reply](#)

David, I would agree that higher education is not exempt from the concerns of the Occupy movement, but indeed one of our panelists, Annika, spoke only of Occupy and the academy (perhaps you overlooked the links to our papers?). Also, some of us are doing both theory and practice in Occupy. I find it a common assumption among academics to believe that whenever someone is theorizing a movement, they are not participating in it as well. In short, theory is not evidence of the lack of praxis.

2.



Nick says:

[January 27, 2012 at 12:25 am](#) · [Reply](#)

This is heartening. At my institution (SFSU) several of the graduate teaching associates and I held a similar panel in early November and we also enjoyed some success: not only did we have an unexpected number of attendees (around 80), a large portion of them were interested enough to stay for over an hour of Q&A. Keeping in mind that these attendees were mostly critical thinking and Phil 101 students, you can imagine how amazed we were. I think that there is a lot of interest out there for a way to interpret the movement and I'm glad to hear that it is still a hot topic among those best suited to provide it.

3.



RV says:

[January 27, 2012 at 12:58 am](#) · [Reply](#)

It is very exciting to see faculty members at philosophy departments become engaged with our current global problem of transnational capital vis-à-vis democracy. A medium should be established where we academics/students (perhaps not just of philosophy but humanities or even academia in general) can engage in dialogue and propose action.

4.



Gloria Bennett says:

[March 1, 2012 at 2:03 am](#) · [Reply](#)

Jennie,

I am so proud to be able to say that I have been educated by someone who is legitimately invested in the future of her students and community. As others have mentioned, I do believe that lack of accessibility to education and financial hardship are issues that need to be addressed by the Occupy movement, but I do not see a dialogue about these issues by members of the academic community to be part of the problem. The fact is that many professors have access to the perspectives of their students, which come from varying demographics and need to be represented in this discourse, especially when they do not have the means to represent themselves. I, for one, am glad that I have a former professor present to speak to my thoughts, ideas, and story (which you seem to have all done quite well, might I add.) The fact is that nothing can be accomplished without first having a conversation, and I think this panel shows us that we are well on our way to real, attainable progress. The important point, now, is for all of the educators and academics present in the discussion to bring this conversation to their students, colleagues, and fellow higher education professionals. The significance of Occupy really lies in the lack of demands, and the ability for everyone to participate in discourse. If we, as you said, continue to run with it and include anyone who is willing to listen and speak, then there is a real future for this period as a theoretical, political, and social movement.

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