

Citizens, Government and Corporations: Assumptions Underlying the Occupy Movement

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What do people want when they claim membership in, or support, the Occupy Movement? The major criticism of this grass-roots phenomenon has been the absence of stated goals and objectives, despite the universal dissatisfaction expressed by participants with government policies that seem to favor the wealthiest over the rest of us.

Movement organizers have explained that it's too early to list goals, that they will gradually emerge with the consensus of members. But language is not only the result of clear thinking, it helps shape it. Without language to guide the movement, it remains amorphous; its members can only shrug when asked what are those principles for which they stand.

That said, Occupy participants who have been interviewed have informally expressed their assumptions about the value of the individual, the role of government, the relationship between government and the individual, and the place of corporations in civic life.

Our assumptions about these issues lead to our political positions and to the politicians who best reflect them. While I cannot presume to speak for the Occupy Movement, maybe I can distill some of the assumptions participants and supporters have expressed, if in different words.

One of the meanings of "occupy" is to "possess." I suggest that Occupy supporters want to repossess their government so that it remains, as Lincoln so eloquently said in the Gettysburg Address, "of the people, by the people, and for the people," not of, by, and for corporations.

Education: The individual and the family to which that person belongs form the nucleus of society. It is they who have inherent value, without regard to economic wealth. It is they who represent the real strength of the nation, and, as such, they should be strengthened through an educational system that is not delivered as a function of an individual or community's wealth. That education would help to develop an informed citizen, capable of thinking critically, a person who is educated and not merely trained, a person who recognizes the special blessings of life in the United States and who acknowledges the unique role of government in insuring those blessings that make the United States distinctive.

Health: As the foundation of society, the individual and family must also be healthy. Having millions of uninsured or poorly insured Americans, many of them unhealthy, is not worthy of the United States, the longest enduring democracy in the world. Every American should have access to affordable health care. Like education, the health of an individual should not be a function of wealth.

Work: As the fulcrum around which government is formed, the individual should have access to a job that pays a living wage, one that does not view the worker as just a "resource" to be exploited and tossed aside when the bottom line is threatened or investors don't reap their anticipated rewards. How is an

extremist capitalism that allows companies to go off-shore with their money, concealing their profits, while not paying U.S. taxes, less dangerous than the so-called “socialism” that critics of the Occupy Movement fear? If it’s all right for government to permit such crafty schemes, then it is certainly fitting that it also get behind bills that facilitate jobs for the unemployed, through public works initiatives, for example.

Environment: The health and strength of our people is also dependent upon a healthy environment. Air, water, and soil are part of our common wealth; they don’t belong to corporations who have no right to pollute. Government must have a role in guaranteeing the health and safety of its citizens. Air, water, and soil migrate. Cities and states are not equal to the entire task. Our nation must strengthen not weaken laws that protect and preserve our natural resources. Businesses that stand to profit from weakened environmental policies should have no role in setting policy.

Taxes: Citizens have a responsibility to share in the burden of supporting the government that enhances their quality of life and defends them. They should pay a fair tax. They visit parks, use the roads and highways, and enjoy the relative safety of America afforded by a well-trained military. Likewise, businesses and corporations enjoy an infrastructure without which they could not do business. If executives who profit from that infrastructure are truly patriotic, they will not shirk their responsibility in regard to taxes. Some gloat about paying no taxes. This is an obscenity. If you love living in the United States, if you claim that this is the best nation on earth, then stop your whining about paying taxes. It is the government’s job, however, to levy fair taxes by eliminating loopholes that favor the wealthiest citizens over the “Ninety-nine Percent.”

Citizens United, The Supreme Court case that turned corporations into “persons” has done incalculable damage to our democracy. Corporate money, when directed at politicians, buys government. Instead of government owning all business, as was the case in the Soviet Union, under our new system, business will own our government. In fact, of all the complaints expressed by Occupy demonstrators, this one is most frequently raised.

Use of Taxes: What government does with its resources also determines the strength of the individual and the family. While a nation must be able to defend itself and, at times, rescue the oppressed from the oppressor or stop genocide, war must be the last resort and must never be entered into to secure the natural resources of another country. The billions spent, the billions wasted in both Iraq and Afghanistan could have delivered a transfusion of economic marrow to a people stretched to breaking.

I may be off-base in attempting to distill the assumptions underlying the larger Occupy Movement as well as the one in my city of Pensacola, but let the dialog begin. (Lest anyone disparage the entire movement because of some bad eggs, remember how spontaneous and extensive the occupations have been throughout the nation, and how remarkably peaceful they have been.)