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Economic and Educational Inequalities and Support for Occupy Movements: Some Recent North American Evidence

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Economic and Educational Inequalities and Support for Occupy Movements: Some Recent North American Evidence

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Abstract: The recent emergence of Occupy movements around the advanced capitalist world suggests widening perceptions of serious inequities and injustices and willingness to be involved in actions to change them. This paper will draw on evidence from a series of Canadian and U.S. opinion surveys of economic oppression, educational inequality and class consciousness, as well as support for Occupy movements, to assess the strength of these attitudes.

ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES AND SUPPORT FOR OCCUPY MOVEMENTS: SOME RECENT NORTH AMERICAN EVIDENCE

The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period
presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class.
Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. *The German Ideology.*

The purpose of this short paper is to explore whether recent expressions of criticism of the currently dominant economic system expressed most dramatically by Occupy protests in several countries might be indicative of the beginning of a rapid change of basic features of capitalism or transformation into a different economic system. A compelling case can be made for the view that the capitalist epoch of production is rapidly reaching limits to the continuing growth (of the overall size of the economy and the quantities of energy and material goods flowing through it) that has been its defining characteristic. Three primary factors block further economic growth: depletion of basic resources including fossil fuels, minerals, food and water; negative environmental impacts from extraction and use of these resources; and financial disruptions of monetary, banking and investment systems due to failure to adjust to resource scarcity,

soaring environmental costs and enormous government and private debt. Richard Heinberg (2011, p. 4) concludes from a recent review of the empirical evidence that: "we are seeing a perfect storm of converging crises that together represent a watershed moment in the history of our species. We are witnesses to, and participants in, the transition from decades of economic growth to decades of economic contraction." More specifically, the "Great Recession" starting in late 2007, characterized by home mortgage foreclosures contrasted with government bailouts to private corporations deemed "too big to fail" and lucrative executive benefits packages, was the immediate provocation for the Occupy protests driven by a sense of the need for a more just alternative way of organizing society.

The general theoretical perspective that informs this research posits an intimate connection between power and knowledge. Those dominant economic classes who own and control the major means of production, including large private financial, industrial and mass media corporations, have had very substantial opportunities to communicate their views as universal knowledge to subordinated classes. Those who lack control of the means of production have been subjected to forces of socialization serving to convince them that established hierarchical institutional forms in which they are subordinated are natural or inevitable. However, there is a growing contradiction in advanced capitalist societies between the concentrated privatized ownership of large corporations and the increasing socialization of the forces of knowledge production (e.g. widening access to advanced education, the internet). While powerful capitalists remain intent on protecting their property rights and asserting the sanctity of profits over workers' rights, widening access to strategic knowledge enables subordinate classes to develop more oppositional forms of class consciousness and critical attitudes beyond capitalist hegemonic ideologies. The awareness that people have about feasible or preferable ways of organizing economic life continues to be related to the extent of power they have to maintain or change such ways of life. But when alternative forms of life begin to be seen as needed, the previously inevitable can become intolerable. As de Tocqueville (1947, p. 186) observed: "The evil, which was suffered patiently as

inevitable, seems unendurable as soon as the idea of escaping from it is conceived". The post-World War II era was probably the most sustained period of economic growth in the history of capitalism, with significant gains by working class people in wages and benefits, educational attainments and general living conditions. Rising expectations were then followed by further gains in educational attainment coupled with stagnant wages and underemployment. As Morton Deutsch (2006, p. 26) observes: "a very effective way of enhancing the sense of injustice of the victimized is to increase their education and little else".

The recent Occupy protests predominantly in North America and Western Europe suggest a widening array of people may both perceive serious inequities and injustices and want to be involved in actions to change them. Broad popular sentiments of dissatisfaction with current conditions are a prerequisite for sustainable change movements. But such sentiments also have to be deeply grounded in the material conditions and consciousness of those most directly experiencing such inequities in order for the oppressed to be moved to act on their own behalf. So, the specific question we address is this: *Is there evidence of a major shift in popular attitudes toward economic and educational inequalities and interest in social justice movements to address them*?

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The evidence from surveys of public attitudes will be presented, using trend analysis and graphical displays, under four themes: perceptions of inequities of wealth and political power; perceptions of educational inequalities; expressions of class consciousness; and, finally, support for the Occupy movement.

INEQUITIES OF WEALTH AND POWER

Research in Canada and the U.S. has confirmed that wealth inequality is at historic highs and has increased rapidly in the past generation (Yalnizan, 2010). For example, the richest 10% of Canadians had over 58% of the net wealth in 2005 compared to

about 3% of the wealth for the bottom 50% of income groups; the richest 1% took a third of all growth of incomes over a recent decade and the top 20% saw their household incomes increase by nearly 40% between 1980 and 2009 while the bottom 20% had theirs drop by over 10%. Perceptions of wealth inequality reflect increasing awareness of these conditions. In 1990, about two-thirds of Canadians felt that the gap between rich and poor had widened, while by 2006 this belief in a widening gap was held by three-quarters of Canadians. In addition, about two-thirds thought that only the richest Canadians had benefitted from recent economic growth and those in the lowest income group were most likely to believe this (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006). In October, 2011, as Occupy Canada protests were occurring around the country, over 80% agreed that gap between the rich and poor has grown too large in Canada, and that corporations and the rich have too much influence over public policy and politics in Canada (Abacus Data, 2011). In December, 2011, two-thirds of Canadians expressed the view that the income gap between the wealthy and the rest was larger than ever. Over 80% thought that governments should take measures to reduce this gap, with those in the highest income group least likely to agree (Environics Institute, 2011).[i]

U.S. patterns of wealth and political power are even more inequitable than in Canada, with some estimates suggesting that the top 1% of Americans hold half of the wealth (Norton & Ariely, 2010). Opinion surveys in the 1940s found that 60% of Americans agreed that there was too much power in the hands of a few rich people and large corporations; in the late 1980s, 75% felt that the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer (Pew Research Center, 2011). In November, 2011, 80% said they believed that Wall Street and large corporations had too much influence in politics today while 74% thought those who were not wealthy had too little (Center for Public Opinion, 2011). Nevertheless, another late 2011 survey found that a small majority of Americans (55%) still thought that the economic system was fair, in contrast to majorities of low income (56%) and unemployed (70%) who felt it was unfair. A more in-depth study of Americans' views on wealth inequality has found that most people greatly underestimate its extent, that their preferred distributions of wealth are even more

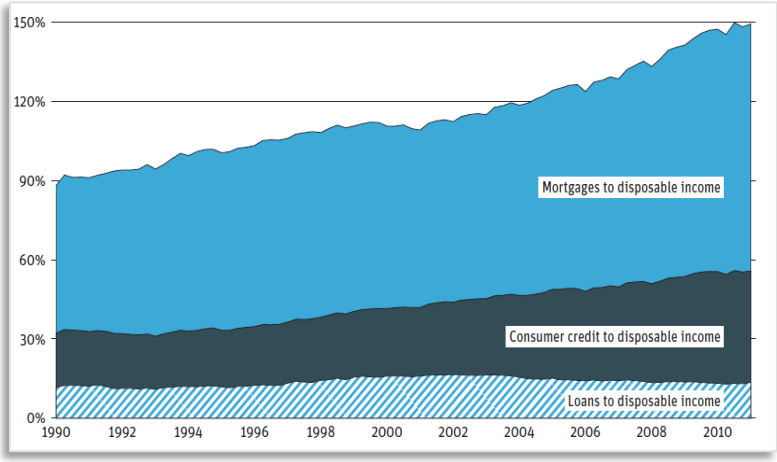
equitable than their low estimates of actual distributions, and that preferences for more equitable wealth distribution are shared across all social backgrounds (Norton & Ariely, 2010). This study suggests that Americans may have higher tolerance for wealth inequities than many other countries because of ignorance of the extent of the gap, mixed with high optimism about their opportunities for upward mobility. It should be noted that this study was done with 2005 data which may not reflect the more recent views of the lower income and unemployed cited above.

Overall, opinion survey data suggest that both Canadians and Americans have fairly widespread and long standing views of the existence of inequities of wealth and power in their countries but are becoming even more aware of increasing wealth inequities.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

Since at least the end of WW II, advanced formal education has been promoted as the major means for upward mobility in advanced capitalist societies. In North America, post-secondary institutions expanded very rapidly from the 1960s onward and by the turn of the century the majority of youth cohorts were completing either a university or community college program. As a consequence of increasing general accessibility, the gap in the chances of children from rich and poor families to complete post-secondary education narrowed through much of this period. For cohorts born before 1931 in Canada, those from professional families were over 9 times as likely to complete a university degree as those from industrial working class families; for cohorts born between 1951 and 1970, the difference had declined to about 4 times as likely (Livingstone, 2004). This continuing gap may represent a great waste of the talent of children from working class families, but as long as the gap was declining it suggested grounds for optimism. In recent decades, stagnant incomes and mounting debt loads coupled with substantial increases in tuition fees have made universities virtually inaccessible for children from lower class families (Figure 1).

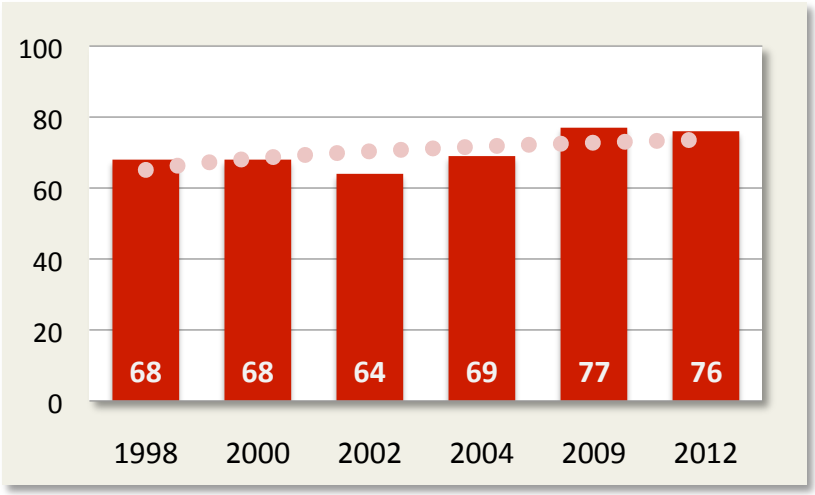
Figure 1: Canadians are Drowning in Debt



Source: Macdonald & Shaker (2011).

There is now a widespread sense of the educational inequality facing these children and their families (Figure 2). A series of Ontario attitude surveys has found that in 1998 two-thirds of the general public thought that those from lower income families faced worse chances of getting a post-secondary education than students from upper-income families; by 2009, this view was shared by over three-quarters of the public and by clear majorities in all income groups.

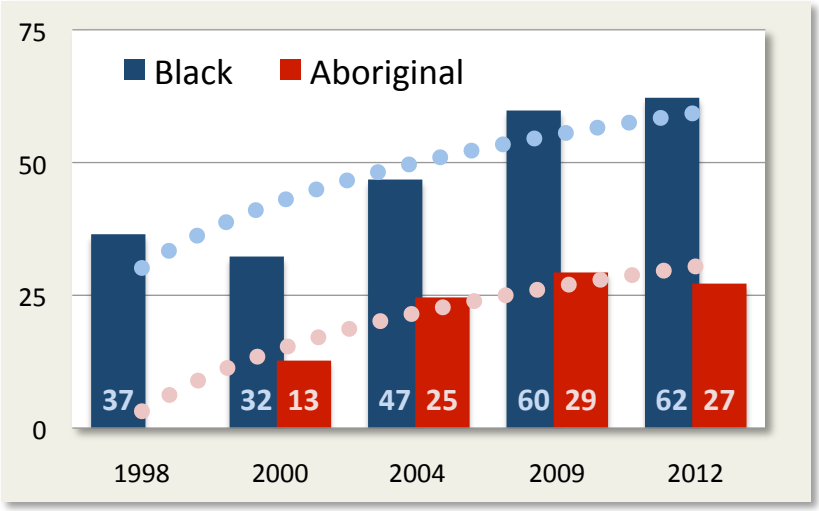
Figure 2: Perceived Lack of Access to Post-secondary Education for Students from Low-income Families, Ontario



Sources: OISE Survey, 1998-2012.

Over this same period, recognition that aboriginal (Figure 3) students have a worse chance than white students of getting a post-secondary education increased from about a third to 60% of the general public (Livingstone & Hart, 2010).

Figure 3: Lack of Access to Post-secondary Education for Black and Aboriginal Students, Ontario



Source: OISE Survey, 1998-2012.

During the past decade, there has also been increasing recognition that black students have a smaller chance than white of getting a post-secondary education (Figure 3). This is consistent with findings from the Canadian surveys on Work and Lifelong Learning, which demonstrate that racialized social groups, particularly racialized females in Canada most often experience discrimination (Livingstone & Raykov, 2009).

Since the youth protests of the 1960s there has been concern among powerful groups that the rising expectations of highly educated young people who could not get the sorts of rewarding jobs they anticipated and who faced the prospect of continuing underemployment could become a serious threat to the existing social order (e.g. O'Toole, 1975). Numerous aspects of underemployment have continued to increase since that time. Underemployment is even becoming notable among managerial and professional employees but it is still more likely that those in industrial and service

working class jobs now have educational qualifications they are not recognized for (see Livingstone, 2009). For the most part, it appears that underemployed young people became caught up in an educational arms race competing against themselves for diminishing job rewards, with relatively little interest in social protests beyond those for continuing access the higher education. In light of a growing sense of educational inequalities and mounting underemployment, how long can this preoccupation continue without leading to growing support for revolutionary ideas?

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

As Marx suggested, the existence of revolutionary ideas presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class. For orthodox Marxists, revolutionary hopes have been pinned on the working class, especially the industrial proletariat. What recent signs are there of the development of revolutionary class consciousness? Class consciousness can be conceived of in terms of at least three levels: class identity, oppositional consciousness and hegemonic consciousness (cf. Mann, 1973). Very briefly, a revolutionary working class consciousness involves identifying oneself as playing a distinctive role with other workers, perceiving capitalists as enduring opponents and having a vision of an alternative society to be achieved through struggle with these opponents. Conversely, capitalist class consciousness involves identifying as a member of a ruling or upper class, perceiving ownership rights as superior to workers rights and commitment to a society that defends the priority of these property rights. We will look at findings of a series of Canadian national surveys that have explored this issue in 1983, 2004 and 2010 (Livingstone & Scholtz, forthcoming).

Over the past three decades, the main shift in the Canadian class structure has been the decline of working class jobs and an increasing proportion of intermediate managerial and professional employee jobs. Correspondingly, there has been a decline in the numbers who identify as working class and increase in those who identify themselves as middle class. However, throughout this period a majority of the entire labour force has expressed support for the rights of organized workers to be protected

during strikes versus management rights to hire replacement workers, and a majority has also supported the view that corporations benefit owners at the expense of workers and consumers. While working class identity has declined and mixed views on workers' rights and owners' fights are quite common, consistent working class supporters have outnumbered consistent capitalist supporters by about 3 to 1 throughout this period. Contradictory mixtures of class identities and views on owners' and workers' rights are commonly expressed by those in most class positions. But two patterns in relations between class consciousness and class position have been clear. Large and small employers have exhibited strong capitalist class consciousness, while the declining numbers in the industrial working class continue to be most likely to hold oppositional working class consciousness. Furthermore, hegemonic capitalist consciousness remains strong among employers and those in the highest income groups—in the sense that strong majorities deny the possibility of a society running without the profit motive—whereas only among the industrial working class has there been a majority who agree with this possibility. So, only the ruling capitalist class expresses a coherent hegemonic class consciousness, but many in the remaining working class retain an oppositional working class consciousness and many others express support for workers' rights. The preconditions exist for the wider emergence of revolutionary ideas in the current class structure.

A U.S. survey in the wake of the emergence of the Occupy movement, taken in December, 2011, offers suggestive evidence in this regard. Two-thirds of Americans now say there are strong conflicts between the rich and the poor, compared to less than half two years earlier. Class conflicts now tend to be seen as more common that conflicts between immigrants and native born or between blacks and whites. The perception of strong class conflict has risen to a majority in all income groups, all age groups, all levels of education, all political party orientations and ideologies. As the pollsters observe: "These changes in attitude over a relatively short period of time may reflect the income and wealth inequality message conveyed by Occupy Wall Street

protesters…[but] may also reflect a growing public awareness of underlying shifts in the distribution of wealth in American society" (Morin 2012 p. 2).

SUPPORT FOR THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT

When the Occupy movement emerged in late summer 2011 in the wake of the fallout from the "Great Recession" that began in late 2007, it was largely organized via the social media that have rapidly become the main vehicle for mobilizing protest movements around the globe. There has been a coincident decline in the legitimacy of mass news media. Pew Research Center surveys (2011) have found that since the late 1980s scepticism about mass media reports has increased greatly, so that two-thirds of Americans now think stories are often inaccurate and 80% feel that reports are often influenced by powerful people and organizations. So what have most people made of this movement that they have so far still learned about mainly through mass media? An early days October 2011 Gallup poll found, not surprisingly, that over half of Americans did not yet know enough about it to offer an opinion; the highest support came from unionized workers; most of the quarter of the population that already supported Occupy felt that the U.S. economic system was unfair, whereas most of those who then opposed Occupy or did not know enough about it thought the economic system was fair (USA Today/Gallup Poll, 2011). A bit later October 2011 Canadian survey found that about 40% were favourable to Occupy, 20% unfavourable and the rest did not know enough (Abacus, 2011).

An international survey in November 2011 found that over half of Canadians sympathized with Occupy compared to 45% of Americans (Stechyson, 2011). So, in spite of the fact that traditional mass media frequently trivialized the protests of the Occupy movement, ridiculed its highly participatory structure and diverted attention to secondary issues like street cleaning, the movement appeared to increasingly resonate with a growing portion of the population in North America.

At the time of writing, the Occupy movement continues to undertake more concerted and consolidating activities across several regions (Figure 4) in terms of street actions, ongoing local initiatives and demands of government focused on several main objectives.

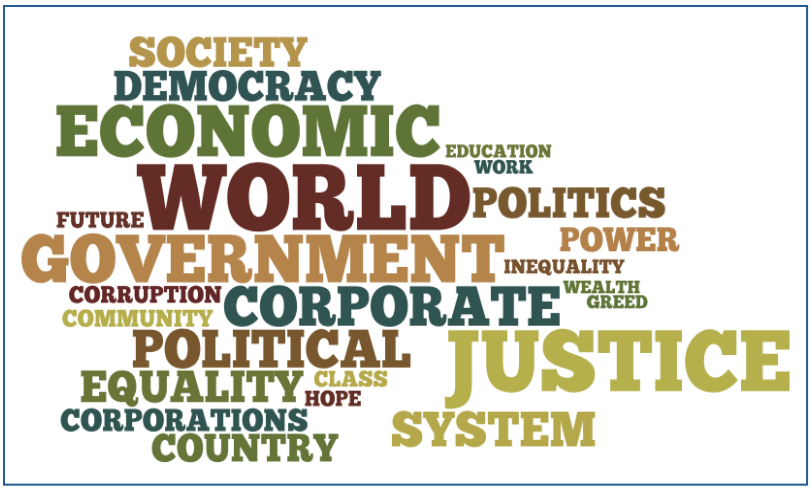
Figure 4: Map of Occupy Movement

Source: http://www.occupyresearch.net/page/2/

Our analysis of an open-ended question from an early survey of Occupy movement participants shows that the main objectives of the movement were related to economic inequities, social justice, globalization, corporate greed and struggle against government policies (Figure 5). Specific actions focused on re-empowerment of people and communities, reigning in corporatist privileges, debt forgiveness and banking reform, wealth and income redistribution, universal health and education access and food security, decent jobs and a sustainable economy, peace and social justice (Haque, 2011). These may have been halting steps but the objectives are in tune with the growing popular perceptions of inequities of wealth and power, and of educational inequalities; they also resonate with the continuing oppositional working class consciousness of a working class core and a plurality of other wage and salary earners.

Labour unions have been among the valuable supporters of Occupy protests in many areas.

Figure 5: In just a few words, what are you trying to achieve with your participation in Occupy Movement?



Source: Occupy Research, 2012

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the first six months after the launch of Occupy Wall Street, the Occupy movement clearly had a rapid impact on public opinion, tapping strong sentiments of frustration at growing inequities. The widening of public discussion of such inequities and needed economic reforms has been a major achievement. The tactics of occupying specific locations for substantial periods were initially very effective, although such tactics may have to be revised to sustain larger scale mobilizations. But at least the prospect of progressive social movements resisting mounting neo-liberal austerity measures and fighting for the social justice objectives they share with the Occupy movement became a more open question than it was before the Movement began. The empirical findings here offer some resources of hope for constructive popular education practice in relation to current progressive social movements.

Addendum: In the period since this paper was completed, despite widespread mobilization of mass media and massive use of police forces to suppress the Occupy

movement, it has continued to express itself in diverse creative ways. Other popular movements, such as “Idle No More” driven by aboriginal people, have also arisen based on similar widespread sentiments about economic inequities and social justice.

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[i] In spite of a widely assumed high level of relative economic development in Canada, analysis of the most recent Canadian Community Health Survey (Statistics Canada, 2010) finds that about 40% of the lowest income group experiences some form of food insecurity.