Is the US “Occupation” Phenomenon a Civilizational Thing, and Will it Last?

A question put to me by our ISCSC President, Andrew Targowski

answer by Michael Andregg, UST in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

Last things first, Will the Occupations Last? Yes, for a year or more. As long as civilizations like, say China? Not the remotest chance. All populist winds are ephemeral.

That important practical note made: Yes, the US occupation of Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan on September 17, 2011 had deep roots and was much inspired by the Arab Spring of the preceding 9 months. That began with an overeducated street vender in Tunisia, Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire December 17 of 2010 to protest unfair treatment by police who had confiscated his scales supporting a deeply corrupt and entrenched government. The ruler for life of that government, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, surrendered his power of 23 years on January 14 (less than a month later) following public outrage after Bouazizi’s death.

Tunisia was followed by Egypt, and Hosni Mubarak followed Ben Ali into the dust bins of history briskly. There were shudders of protest in other places where traditional rulers hung on, like in Yemen, Bahrain and most recently Syria. In Libya, NATO supported change with heavy weapons and an Arab League mandate, and within months the old dictator Muammar Gaddafi was dead. Whether his son will be tried in Libya or an international court remains to be seen.

So the times, they are a changing. This boiling sea of unprecedented and largely unpredicted change inspired hundreds of lesser protests by citizens in locations all around the world including Russia, China, Greece, Israel, Japan and India where Anna Hazare staged hunger strikes that lead to recognition by the Parliament. The Norwegian Nobel Committee gave its annual Peace Prize to three women, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee of Liberia and Tawakkol Karman of Yemen, for their various non-violent struggles for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work.

Occupy Wall Street can only envy the results in Tunisia and North Africa. They have not seen a single titan of the big banks and investment houses fall despite guilt obvious to all and months of protest spreading to sympathy groups in hundreds of other cities including St. Paul, Minneapolis and others in Minnesota. But the OWS occupiers were scraped off of Zuccotti Park on the night of November 15th by New York’s finest by command of the Mayor (coincidentally founder of Bloomberg News, which covers and profits from mainly financial interests).

I spent the night of November 11 on a frozen Hennepin County Government center plaza with about 20 Veteran’s for Peace from chapters 27 and 127 in the Twin Cities and Red Wing MN trying to remember the original meaning of “Armistice Day” and express solidarity with the kids at risk of eviction any day. A few students also made the sleepover, along with about 60 of the regular occupiers who had been camping out here for almost two months. There were agreed rules, boundaries and porta-potties (paid for by the Occupiers, by the way). But the Sheriff and conservatives on the county board made it clear that the welcome was not open-ended, and incremental changes in the rules made it slightly harder each day to overnight safely and warmly.
No tents, no fires, no cooking, no electrical hookups, no leaving anything unattended and new ‘no’s periodically. The police swooped in one early December morning and took all the bedding, blankets, sleeping bags and such and wiped the occupiers out winter survival-wise.

So they have gone to supporting, by occupying ;-), recently foreclosed homes whose previous owners are willing to share digs with others while they wait out Sheriff’s evictions. We shall see what emerges next spring. There are events at the plaza each week, and some signage always survives the periodic purges and ‘cleanups.’ The only thing you can be quite certain of is that the occupy movement will emerge next spring in Minnesota. For now, it’s winter and time to pray for a Peaceful Christmas for everyone on an earth in the midst of unpredictable changes.

--- Michael Andregg --- Dec. 23, 2011