

Time to participate in democracy

My lunch money is safe. As I so boldly predicted last week, America has swiftly soured on the Occupy Wall Street movement. OWS is now even less loved than the positively ancient tea-party movement. David Weigel plumbs the trends from the last two surveys from Public Policy Polling:

"Do you support or oppose the goals of the Occupy Wall Street movement?"

Support: 33% (-2) - Oppose: 45% (+9)

Do you have a higher opinion of the Occupy Wall Street movement or the Tea Party movement?

Occupy: 37% (-3) - Tea Party: 43% (+3)"

Mr Weigel suggests that OWS's fall from favour is "a reflection of a steady thrum-thrum of viral Internet articles and local news reports about the dark side of Occupation..." Surely it's partly that. But Julian Sanchez lucidly articulates what I think many Americans find bothersome about OWS, even if they share its concerns:

"Almost everything about the execution of yesterday's eviction of protesters from Zuccotti Park was an outrage, from the interference with reporters seeking to cover the event, to the needless destruction of protesters' property, to Mayor Mike Bloomberg's stunningly lawless disregard for a court order restraining the city. But on the underlying question of whether the city must allow any group to set up a tent city in public space indefinitely, I think Doug Mataconis gets it right: There's no First Amendment right to camp out in a park, and no reason to think that there's anything constitutionally offensive about a content-neutral rule designed to ensure that public parks can continue to be used as, well, parks. People, of course, have every right to speak their mind in public (or, in this instance, quasi-public) space. But laying down dozens of tents and announcing that you and your friends intend to live there indefinitely always sounded suspiciously like an attempt to, in effect, privatize that public space.

I've always had a similar reaction to that hoary protest chant: "Whose Streets? Our Streets! Whose Park? Our Park!" Here we're supposed to understand that "our" means "the people" as a whole. But protesters—even when they call themselves "The 99%"—comprise a pretty minuscule fraction of a percent of the population of a city the size of New York. In practice, "our" means "this particular group of people," even if they aspire to represent a much larger group. We don't put expressive rights to a vote, fortunately, but it does seem like a whole bunch of democratically elected city officials are under the impression that their constituents want their parks to remain usable for traditionally park-ish purposes. Maybe they're wrong, of course, or maybe that's a pretext offered to squelch a threat to their corporate paymasters. But it always seems presumptuous when soi-disant populist movements, left and right, declare that "we the people" want this or that."

It's time for OWS to relinquish our cities' public spaces to the actual public and get on with the tiresome and frustrating grind of actual democratic politics. As Mr Sanchez puts it, "To imagine protest not as prologue to politics, but as a substitute for it, suggests a denial of the reality of pluralism, and an unwillingness to find out what democracy actually looks like."

But what if our system is so badly broken that honest democratic politics is no longer possible? This is, indeed, a main theme of the progressive master narrative: the 1% has grown so disproportionately powerful that it, for most practical purposes, owns "the system". In that case, telling tent-dwelling enthusiasts of participatory democracy to go home and actually participate in our democracy amounts to telling them to surrender to the oligarchs.

As Mr Sanchez observes, conservatives have their own stories about why their political preferences do not prevail.

"This has long been a major strain in conservative thinking: Everyone would see that our views are just simple common sense—obviously correct!—if not for a liberal media cabal systematically lying to people all day. Dark as this sounds, it's utopian in one sense: It implies we'd all agree but for the malign influence of this or that small but powerful group."

But we will never all agree. Refractory disagreement is a bedrock fact of liberal society. As is, I would add, the darkly utopian idea Mr Sanchez identifies: the notion that disagreement is a product of malign, illegitimate, external influence. We are much too confident in our political beliefs, and our over-confidence is sustained in part by just-so stories about why others fail to see things our way. The liberal media! Right-wing think tanks! The socialist indoctrination camps known as "colleges"! George Soros! The Koch brothers! The Bilderbergers! Corporations! The state! The military-industrial complex!

There is something profoundly satisfying about believing that one's own team alone has seen through the fog of disinformation and propaganda to the real truth about the treacherous interests that stand between our condition and the reign of justice. And there is something terrifically exciting about the sense, often engendered by visible protest movements, that one's own team is growing, that its narrative is catching on. Conversely, there is something profoundly dissatisfying, and a little bit demoralising, in acknowledging that most people will never accept many of ones' most ardently-held convictions, and that, therefore, none of us will ever get to live in a society that closely matches, or even roughly approximates, our beloved ideals. But it's true all the same. And it's true all the same that our actual democracy, for all its problems, does about as well as democracy can be realistically expected to do, given the size and diversity of this country. Frankly, we're pretty lucky our democracy works as well as it does. There's a great deal we can do to make it a little better, but there's very little we can do to make it a lot better, because we'll almost never agree enough about the really big stuff.

Banding together with a bunch of like-minded citizens to make a big noise is a great way to get noticed, to rally similarly-outraged others to a cause, and to shift the terms of the public debate. OWS has done all that. Now they've got to get some sympathetic folks elected to public office, because that's how this democracy thing works, when it does. Anyway, if our democracy really is irredeemably broken, the polls would seem to suggest that further camping is unlikely to turn things around.

Fonte: The Economist online, 18 Nov. 2011. Disponível em: <<http://www.economist.com>>. Acesso em: 21 Nov. 2011.