



Norwegian student Ragnhild Freng Dale got caught up in the democratic winds sweeping through London last year. It is easy to see how she got sucked into Occupy's lively direct participation assemblies with the "People's mic", where the crowd repeats what is said so that everyone can hear the speaker. In the interview below, activist and co-editor of the Occupied Times gives us her take on Occupy and participation.

Why did Occupy come into being?

People in the UK, and across the world, had constantly been told that the banks were 'too big to fail', and that cutting welfare and public services was the only alternative. The first occupations were a response to a system that valued profit over people, and the people who came down to occupy were tired of being ignored, structurally silenced and put down. They wanted to be seen, heard and taken seriously.

Occupy's greatest asset was its ability to engage people all across the political spectrum. Whether or not one liked the movement, the camps were hard to ignore, and the radical openness of public space meant that anyone coming down to the occupation inevitably became a part of what was going on.

Who are Occupy today?

Occupy is not one group of people, nor has it ever been. I would say that Occupy London, as a concept, is dead, despite a few people clinging on to what at best can be called a 'PR campaign'. The real work of individuals who were involved in Occupy can be seen elsewhere, where they have started new initiatives without the "umbrella" name; some support local communities to defend libraries from shutting down, others occupy empty buildings to run community centres, engage in environmental activism against fracking, or run indie media initiatives, to mention a few.

In the US, Occupy groups have morphed into disaster relief under the name of Occupy Sandy, providing the biggest coordination effort after Hurricane Sandy struck New York City. The state and the voluntary organizations were both slow in their responses, whereas the Occupy networks could mobilize a large number of volunteers in practically no time. One month after the hurricane, it is Occupy activists that are gutting houses, cooking meals, and providing families with support.

Another US initiative after Occupy Wall Street is StrikeDebt, who have just started a 'Rolling Jubilee'. They are raising money to buy off people's personal debt; not in order to profit on it (as is normal), but to write it off and delete it completely. This is still in its early stages, but they have already raised 450,000 dollars, which can abolish 9,000,000 dollars of debt for ordinary Americans who have been forced into debt for medical bills, housing, education, and other basics in life. A UK initiative is about to be born from some of the more radical networks mentioned above.

Do you feel you're being heard?

The government and the media were never interested in listening. If you look at the violence with which government and police have reacted against peaceful protestors in nearly every country with an occupation, you clearly see that this is not something the political elite welcomed, quite the contrary.

The media is a whole chapter in itself: at the start, everyone was covering Occupy, but mainly portraying it as a 'confused' movement that had no leaders and didn't know what it wanted. It is hard to explain in two sentences how a non-hierarchical movement works, and messages were often distorted. We talk about freedom of press, but the mainstream media are largely financed by people and corporations that have interests widely opposed to those of the Occupy movement. That is not to say that individual journalists and publications are not sympathetic or supportive, but overall, the tendency is different.

I would say we are being heard by those who are willing to listen. My main involvement since January has been as part of the editorial team of the Occupied Times of London, a radical newspaper that publishes writings on the topics like economics, environment, society and activism. To take us as an example, we have a solid, steady readership, and we are encouraged by people coming to us to show their support or to write for us.

Especially after the camps disappeared, it is becoming less about being listened to and more about building to become the change we want to see.

How is Occupy a reaction to our right to participate?

Chomsky said in an interview on Democracy Now! that Occupy had brought solidarity to the US, in a way that had not been seen before. I would add that it also showed the impossibility of representation: no one individual could represent the views of the collective or other individuals that took part.

Whereas much of the current 'audit culture' talks about stakeholders and public meetings ahead of building plans, we largely find that people are 'listened to', but then ignored when it comes to the actual decisions. In the Occupy camps, a block was an actual block; a decision could not be carried forward until a full consensus was reached. Whilst hard to replicate on a large scale, it nevertheless points to a crucial factor we seem largely to have forgotten in contemporary politics: we never gave consensus for our public services to be taken away. We never gave consensus for exploitative industries to operate – we are just told that this is how the system works, that this is what common sense is.

Why is Occupy important?

What is most important about Occupy, for me, is that it shows that the logic of capitalism simply does not work. People can show solidarity, openness, and cooperation with strangers, and they can do amazing things if they agree to build the right structures together. The camp was like a break from the outside world, a space where real, political debate could take place and where alternatives could be tested.

"The system" is only too big to fail because we are robbed of the possibility of imagining an alternative. Occupy in the camps, as well as the phoenixes rising from their ashes, show that people are able to organize in different ways, where there is direct participation and democratic organization without an over-arching authority. It gives me hope that we can genuinely work for something better.