

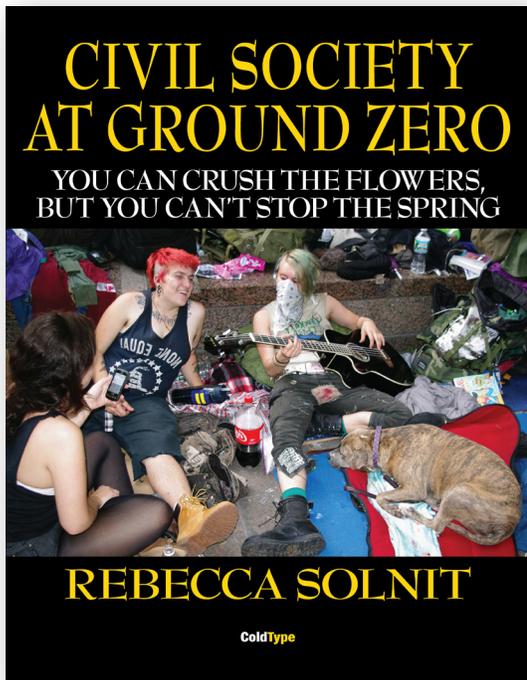
CIVIL SOCIETY AT GROUND ZERO

YOU CAN CRUSH THE FLOWERS,
BUT YOU CAN'T STOP THE SPRING



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Cover Photo: David Shankbone

These essays originally appeared at www.tomdispatch.com

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BY REBECCA SOLNIT

November 22, 2011

Last Tuesday, I awoke in lower Manhattan to the whirring of helicopters overhead, a war-zone sound that persisted all day and then started up again that Thursday morning, the two-month anniversary of Occupy Wall Street and a big day of demonstrations in New York City. It was one of the dozens of ways you could tell that the authorities take Occupy Wall Street seriously, even if they profoundly mistake what kind of danger it poses. If you ever doubted whether you were powerful or you mattered, just look at the reaction to people like you (or your children) camped out in parks from Oakland to Portland, Tucson to Manhattan.

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come together to bear witness to their hopes and fears, to begin to gather their power and discuss what is possible in our disturbingly unhinged world, to make clear how wrong our economic system is, how corrupt the powers that support it are, and to begin the search for a better way. Consider it an irony that the campsites are partly for sleeping, but symbols of the way we have awoken.

When civil society sleeps, we’re just a bunch of individuals absorbed in our private lives. When we awaken, on campgrounds or elsewhere, when we come together in public and find our power, the authorities are terrified. They often reveal their ugly side, their penchant for violence and for hypocrisy.

Consider the liberal mayor of Oakland, who speaks with outrage of people camping without a permit but has nothing to

say about the police she dispatched to tear-gas a woman in a wheelchair, shoot a young Iraq war veteran in the head, and assault people while they slept. Consider the billionaire mayor of New York who dispatched the NYPD on a similar middle-of-the-night raid on November 15th. Recall this item included in a bald list of events that night: “tear-gassing the kitchen tent.” Ask yourself when did kitchens really need to be attacked with chemical weapons?

Does an 84-year-old woman need to be tear-gassed in Seattle? Does a three-tours-of-duty veteran need to be beaten until his spleen ruptures in Oakland? Does our former poet laureate need to be bashed in the ribs after his poet wife is thrown to the ground at UC Berkeley? Admittedly, this is a system that regards people as disposable, but not usually so literally.

Two months ago, the latest protests against that system began. The response only confirms our vision of how it all works. They are fighting fire with gasoline. Perhaps being frightened makes them foolish. After all, once civil society rouses itself from slumber, it can be all but unstoppable. (If they were smart they’d try to soothe it back to sleep.) “Arrest one of us; two more appear. You can’t arrest an idea!” said the sign held by a man in a Guy Fawkes mask in reoccupied Zuccotti Park last Thursday.

Last Wednesday in San Francisco, 100 activists occupied the Bank of America, even erecting a symbolic tent inside it in which a dozen activists immediately took refuge. At the Berkeley campus of the University of California, setting up tents on any grounds was forbidden, so the brilliant young occupiers used clusters of helium balloons to float tents overhead, a smart image of defiance and sky-high ambition. And the valiant UC Davis students, after several of them were pepper-sprayed in the face while sitting peacefully on the ground, evicted the police, chanting, “You can go! You can go!” They went.

Occupy Oakland has been busted up three times and still it thrives. To say noth-



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ing of the other 1,600 occupations in the growing movement.

Alexander Dubcek, the government official turned hero of the Prague Spring uprising of 1968, once said, “You can crush the flowers, but you can’t stop the spring.”

The busting of Zuccotti Park and the effervescent, ingenious demonstrations elsewhere are a reminder that, despite the literal “occupations” on which this protean movement has been built, it can soar as high as those Berkeley balloons and take many unexpected forms. Another OWS sign, “The beginning is near,” caught the mood of the moment. Flowers seem like the right image for this uprising led by the young, those who have been most crushed by the new economic order, and who bloom by rebelling and rebel by blooming.

The best and the worst

Now world-famous Zuccotti Park is just a small concrete and brown marble-paved scrap of land surrounded by tall buildings. Despite the “Occupy Wall Street” label, it’s actually two blocks north of that iconic place. It’s rarely noted that the park is within sight of, and kitty-corner to, Ground Zero, where the World Trade Center towers crumbled.

What was born and what died that day a decade ago has everything to do with what’s going on in and around the park, the country, and the world now. For this, al-Qaeda is remarkably irrelevant, except as the outfit that long ago triggered an incident that instantly released both the best and the worst in our society.

The best was civil society. As I wandered in the Zuccotti Park area last week, I was struck again by how much what really happened on the morning of September 11th has been willfully misremembered. It can be found nowhere in the plaques and monuments. Firemen more than deserve their commemorations, but mostly they acted in vain, on bad orders from above, and with fatally flawed communications equipment.

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The fact is: the people in the towers and the neighborhood – think of them as civil society coming together in crisis – largely rescued themselves, and some of them told the firefighters to head down, not up.

We need memorials to the coworkers who carried their paraplegic accountant colleague down 69 flights of stairs while in peril themselves; to Ada Rosario-Dolch, the principal who got all of the High School for Leadership, a block away, safely evacuated, while knowing her sister had probably been killed in one of those towers; to the female executives who walked the blind newspaper seller to safety in Greenwich Village; to the unarmed passengers of United Flight 93, who were the only ones to combat terrorism effectively that day; and to countless, nameless others. We need monuments to ourselves, to civil society.

Ordinary people shone that morning. They were not terrorized; they were galvanized into action, and they were heroic. And it didn't stop with that morning either. That day, that week they began to talk about what the events of 9/11 actually meant for them, and they acted to put their world back together, practically and philosophically. All of which terrified the Bush administration, which soon launched not only its "global war on terror" and its invasion of Afghanistan, but a campaign against civil society. It was aimed at convincing each of us that we should stay home, go shopping, fear everything except the government, and spy on each other.

The only monument civil society ever gets is itself, and the satisfaction of continuing to do the work that matters, the work that has no bosses and no paychecks, the work of connecting, caring, understanding, exploring, and transforming. So much about Occupy Wall Street resonates with what came in that brief moment a decade before and then was shut down for years.

That little park that became "occupied" territory brought to mind the way New York's Union Square became a great public forum in the weeks after 9/11, where every-



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one could gather to mourn, connect, discuss, debate, bear witness, share food, donate or raise money, write on banners, and simply live in public. (Until the city shut that beautiful forum down in the name of sanitation – that sacred cow which by now must be mating with the Wall Street Bull somewhere in the vicinity of Zuccotti Park.)

It was remarkable how many New Yorkers lived in public in those weeks after 9/11. Numerous people have since told me nostalgically of how the normal boundaries came down, how everyone made eye contact, how almost anyone could talk to almost anyone else. Zuccotti Park and the other Occupies I've visited – Oakland, San Francisco, Tucson, New Orleans – have been like that, too. You can talk to strangers. In fact, it's almost impossible not to, so much do people want to talk, to tell their stories, to hear yours, to discuss our mutual plight and what solutions to it might look like.

It's as though the great New York-centric moment of openness after 9/11, when we were ready to reexamine our basic assumptions and look each other in the eye, has returned, and this time it's not confined to New York City, and we're not ready to let anyone shut it down with rubbish about patriotism and peril, safety and sanitation.

It's as if the best of the spirit of the Obama presidential campaign of 2008 was back – without the foolish belief that one man could do it all for civil society. In other words, this is a revolt, among other things, against the confinement of decision-making to a thoroughly corrupted and corporate-money-laced electoral sphere and against the pitfalls of leaders. And it represents the return in a new form of the best of the post-9/11 moment.

As for the worst after 9/11 – you already know the worst. You've lived it. The worst was two treasury-draining wars that helped cave in the American dream, a loss of civil liberties, privacy, and government-

tal accountability. The worst was the rise of a national security state to almost unimaginable proportions, a rogue state that is our own government, and that doesn't hesitate to violate with impunity the Geneva Convention, the Bill of Rights, and anything else it cares to trash in the name of American "safety" and "security." The worst was blind fealty to an administration that finished off making this into a country that serves the 1% at the expense, or even the survival, of significant parts of the 99%. More recently, it has returned as another kind of worst: police brutality (speaking of blind fealty to the 1%).

Civil society gets a divorce

You can think of civil society and the state as a marriage of convenience. You already know who the wife is, the one who is supposed to love, cherish, and obey: that's us. Think of the state as the domineering husband who expects to have a monopoly on power, on violence, on planning and policymaking.

Of course, he long ago abandoned his actual wedding vows, which means he is no longer accountable, no longer a partner, no longer bound by the usual laws, treaties, conventions. He left home a long time ago to have a sordid affair with the Fortune 500, but with the firm conviction that we should continue to remain faithful – or else. The post-9/11 era was when we began to feel the consequences of all this and the 2008 economic meltdown brought it home to roost.

Think of Occupy as the signal that the wife, Ms. Civil Society, has finally acknowledged that those vows no longer bind her either. Perhaps this is one reason why the Occupy movement seems remarkably uninterested in electoral politics while being political in every possible way. It is no longer appealing to that violent, errant husband. It has turned its back on him – thus the much-decried lack of "demands" early on, except for the obvious demand the



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pundits pretended not to see: the demand for economic justice.

Still, Ms. Civil Society is not asking for any favors: she is setting out on her own, to make policy on a small scale through the model of the general assembly and on a larger scale by withdrawing deference from the institutions of power. (In one symbolic act of divorce, at least three quarters of a million Americans have moved their money from big banks to credit unions since Occupy began.) The philandering husband doesn't think the once-cowed wife has the right to do any of this – and he's ready to strike back. Literally.

The Occupy movement has decided, on the other hand, that it doesn't matter what he thinks. It – they – she – we soon might realize as well that he's actually the dependent one, the one who rules at civil society's will, the one who lives off her labor, her taxes, her productivity. Mr. Unaccountable isn't anywhere near as independent as he imagines. The corporations give him his little treats and big campaign donations, but they, too, depend on consumers, workers, and ultimately citizens who may yet succeed in reining them in.

In the meantime, a domestic-violence-prone government is squandering a fortune on a little-mentioned extravagance in financially strapped American cities: police brutality, wrongful arrest, and lawsuits over civil-rights violations. New York City – recall those pepper-sprayed captive young women, that legal observer with a police scooter parked on top of him, and all the rest – you're going to have a giant bill due in court, just as you did after the 2004 Republican convention fiasco: New York has spent almost a billion dollars paying for the collateral damage already done by its police force over the past dozen years.

The desperately impoverished city of Oakland paid out more than \$2 million in recompense for the behavior of the Oakland Police at a nonviolent blockade at the Oakland Docks after the invasion of Iraq broke out in 2003, but seems to have

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learned nothing from it. Surely payouts in similar or larger quantities are due to be handed out again, money that could have gone to schools, community clinics, parks, libraries, to civilization instead of brutalization.

Out of the ruins

Maybe the teardown of Zuccotti Park last Wednesday should be seen as a faint echo of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Structures, admittedly far more flimsy, were destroyed, violently, by surprise attack, and yet resolve was only strengthened – and what was lost?

The encampment had become crowded and a little chaotic. There was the admirable bustle of a village – bicycle-powered generators on which someone was often peddling; information, media, and medic sites whose staff worked devotedly; a kitchen dispensing meals to whoever came; and of course, the wonderful library dumpstered by the agents of the law. There were also a lot of people who had been drawn in by the free food and community, including homeless people and some disruptive characters, all increasingly surrounded by vendors of t-shirts, buttons, and other knickknacks trying to make a quick buck.

One of the complicating factors in the Occupy movement is that so many of the thrown-away people of our society – the homeless, the marginal, the mentally ill, the addicted – have come to Occupy encampments for safe sleeping space, food, and medical care. And these economic refugees were generously taken in by the new civil society, having been thrown out by the old uncivil one.

Complicating everything further was the fact that the politicians and the mainstream media were more than happy to blame the occupiers for taking in what society as a whole created, and for the complications that then ensued. (No mayor, no paper now complains about the unsanitariness of throwing the homeless and others



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back onto the streets of our cities as winter approaches.)

Civil society contains all kinds of people, and all kinds have shown up at the Occupy encampments. The inclusiveness of such places is one of the great achievements of this movement. (Occupy Memphis, for instance, has even reached out to Tea Party members.) Veterans, students, their grandparents, hitherto apolitical people, the employed and unemployed, the housed and the homeless, and people of all ages and colors have been drawn in along with the unions. And yes, there are also a lot of young white activists, who can be thanked for taking on the hard work and heat. We can only hope that this broad coalition will hang together a while longer.

It Gets Better

And of course just as civil society is all of us, so some of us have crossed over to become that force known as the state, and even there, the response has been more varied than might be imagined. New York City Councilman Ydanis Rodriguez got scraped up and arrested by the NYPD when he tried to walk past a barricade two blocks from Wall Street while the camp was being cleared. And retired New York Supreme Court judge Karen Smith got shoved around a little and threatened with arrest while acting as a legal observer.

A councilwoman in Tucson, Regina Romero, has become a dedicated advocate for the Occupy encampment there, and when the San Francisco police massed on the night of November 3rd, five supervisors, the public defender, and a state senator all came to stand with us.

I got home at 2 a.m. that night and wrote, “Their vows to us felt like true representative democracy for the first time ever, brought to us by the power of direct democracy: the Occupy Movement. I thought of the Oath of the Horatii, David’s great painting in the spirit of the French Revolution. The spirit in the plaza was gallant, joyous, and ready

for anything. A little exalted and full of tenderness for each other. Helicopters hovered overhead, and people sent back reports of buses and massed police in other parts of town. But they never arrived.”

Former Philadelphia Police Captain Ray Lewis actually came to Wall Street to get arrested last week. “They complained about the park being dirty,” he said. “Here they are worrying about dirty parks when people are starving to death, where people are freezing, where people are sleeping in subways, and they’re concerned about a dirty park. That’s obnoxious, it’s arrogant, it’s ignorant, it’s disgusting.”

And the Army, or some of its most honorable veterans, are with the occupiers, too. In the Bay Area, members of Iraq Veterans Against the War have been regular participants, and Occupy Wall Street has had its larger-than-life ex-marine, Shamar Thomas, clad in worn fatigues and medals. He famously told off the NYPD early on: “This is not a war zone. These are unarmed people. It doesn’t make you tough to hurt these people. It doesn’t. Stop hurting these people!”

To my delight, at Occupy Wall Street I ran into him, almost literally, still wearing his fatigues and medals and carrying a sign that said, “There’s no honor in police brutality” on one side and “NO WAR” on the



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other. Which war – the ones in the Greater Middle East or on the streets of the U.S.A. – hardly seemed to matter: they’re one war now, the war of the 1% against the rest of us. I told him that his tirade was the first time I ever felt like the U.S. military had actually defended me.

Right now everyone is trying to figure out what happens next and quite a few self-appointed outside advisors are telling the Occupy movement exactly what to do (without all the bother of attending general assemblies and engaging in the process of working out ideas together). So far, the Occupy instigators and Occupy insiders have been doing a brilliant job of improvising a way that civil society can move forward into the unimaginable.

As for me, the grounds of my hope have always been that history is wilder than our imagination of it and that the unexpected shows up far more regularly than we ever dream. A year ago, no one imagined an Arab Spring, and no one imagined this American Fall – even the people who began planning for it this summer. We don’t know what’s coming next, and that’s the good news. My advice is just of the most general sort: Dream big. Occupy your hopes. Talk to strangers. Live in public. Don’t stop now.

I’m sure of one thing: there are a lot more flowers coming.

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