

Documents from the front line

This section is intended to include material of a non-academic, practical and immediate nature, representing ongoing psycho-political process – including manifestos, course hand outs, leaflets, petitions, round-robins and ephemera of all kinds. All contributions will be gratefully received.

Occupy Auckland

CREA LAND, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

ABSTRACT *These notes provide an account of another example of the worldwide “Occupy” movement, that of Occupy Auckland in Aotearoa New Zealand. The article describes the General Assembly and the decision-making process involved in these meetings. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: occupy Auckland; race; General Assembly; decision-making process

What is happening cannot be defined. It is happening. It is a happening . . . It is a spontaneous uprising that has been building for years in our collective unconscious. It is a gorgeous, mischievous moment that has arrived and is spreading. It is a speaking out, coming out, dancing out. It is an experiment and a disruption. (Enslar, 2011)

As you walk into the main city centre of downtown Tamaki Makaurau, Aotearoa | Auckland, New Zealand, you enter a clash of cultures. First, at the Queen Street entrance to Aotea Square, there is a huge arch called “Waharoa” (Gateway), formed in wood and copper by Selwyn Muru, a Māori sculptor. You might think that you are approaching a space that is a clear recognition of the indigenous people of this land. However, just after this artwork, you walk right onto a giant slab of concrete, a newly renovated and neatly tiled square, a space with little greenery. It is pretty stark, with a few benches for sitting. For the past 45 days, the starkness of the concrete has been enlivened by a multi-coloured palette of 100 tents of all shapes and sizes, by informative and evocative signs, by statements of discontent with the status quo and, most particularly, by a growing alternative society in the making. This is Occupy Auckland (see <http://occupyauckland.org/>; <http://www.facebook.com/OccupyAuck>).

Occupy Auckland has been in Aotea Square since 15 October 2011. The reasons for the occupation have been stated thus:

- We are saddened that the world is filled with so much unnecessary suffering, environmental destruction and systematic injustice.
- We are frustrated that the current economic system is so clearly the cause of so much of this suffering and its unequal distribution.

- We are disappointed that our political institutions and representatives have failed to find meaningful alternatives, have rescued this failed system and in doing so have called the democratic process into question.
- We are angry that so many of today's dominant ideas support inequality and injustice and silence those who would speak up about it.
- We know that none of this is inevitable, and delight in the fact that not only has the world changed many times in the past, it can change again. In the very fact that we are speaking together, another world is not only possible, but is within our reach. (Occupy Auckland, 2011)

It is a beautiful sunny evening as I walk into the encampment of the occupation. It is a few minutes before the General Assembly begins. Someone calls out "Mike check!" Those who are within earshot echo in chorus, "Mike check!" Again the solo voice calls "Mike check!" and again those within earshot chorus "Mike check!" I recall the first time I was watching the live streaming video coverage of Occupy Wall Street (see <http://www.livestream.com/globalrevolution>) and how moved I felt when the call "Mike check" went out, and then the people there repeated these words in a chorus of affirmation. One week later, and there was another echoing chorus of 50 within earshot, and another 50 who could hear them, and another 50 who could hear them, further and further out from the first calling. The reason for this echo-style communication is because, in the States, there was a restriction on the use of megaphones at Occupy Wall Street. The result of this way of communicating is a wonderful sense of inclusiveness.

Back to Auckland. On approaching the occupation, the first words you see, written large on a big white sheet, hanging in front of the Welcome tent, are: "Welcome. You are the 99%." This slogan is the rallying cry of the occupy protests taking place all over the world and refers to the fact that 99% of us are not satisfied with the fact that the majority of the wealth in the world is held by 1% of the population. As I gazed around further I saw more signs: "Stop the War on the Poor"; "When the people lead, democracy follows"; "Love more"; "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results"; "Kei hea te aroha?" (Where is the love, the honour, the respect for each other?); "We are united for one reason—we stand against a global system of inequality." Stepping onto the occupied area, there is a whare kai (food tent) where three meals are offered daily; a whare inu (a tent for water, tea and coffee); a first aid tent; a tent for workshops and discussions; and a media/outreach tent. There are various teams/groups that take care of daily needs; for example, there is a security team, a conflict resolution team, a media team, and a council liaison team.

One of the things that strikes me about Occupy Auckland is the recognition that it is part of a global movement, which started first in New York more than two months ago (on 17 September); currently, there are occupations taking place in over 2400 cities in more than 82 countries worldwide, and there are a number of websites that provide reports and commentaries on the movement which, amongst other matters, reflect the developing sophistication of the issues under discussion in the occupation. For instance, one blogger, writing in response to an article by Farrow (2011) on Occupy Wall Street's race problem, wrote:

I think the Occupy Movement is now emerging from its infancy. If it doesn't address race now and seriously, it will be doomed to irrelevancy. If it does address race seriously, then they ain't seen nothin' yet when it comes to how much punishment the State can dish out. (Bobbosphere, 2011)

In Occupy Auckland I believe the race issue is being addressed by the fact that there are Māori (tangata whenua, meaning “people of the land”) who are supporting the occupation with their presence, their experience, and their knowledge of working in relation to dominant culture. There are ongoing group discussions about culture, with questions being asked, such as “What is culture?”, “What is important to you about culture?”, and “How do we hold unity within diversity?”

In Aotearoa the concept and politics of biculturalism describe a relationship, a partnership, between tangata whenua and non-Māori, originally based on Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) (see Waitangi Tribunal, 2011), in which Māori are acknowledged as tangata whenua, the original indigenous people of this land. There is an ongoing bicultural conversation that continues in this country, in multiple settings and amongst various peoples, mostly with the purpose of finding avenues to partnership. In this post-colonial context, with all its painful ramifications, the massive generosity of Māori towards Pākehā (non-Māori who are born here) and Tau iwi (non-Māori who are born elsewhere) astounds me and fills me with appreciation on a daily basis. For the past three years I have been studying and learning, albeit rather slowly, the Māori language and tikanga (customs and ways of being). The fullness of each word, and the multiple layers of meanings and metaphor in the everyday language, and in the waiata (songs), deepen my understanding of the richness of indigeneity, and the profound sense of connection and interconnection with nature and with spirit.

So why have I been drawn to this Occupy Auckland movement? I believe that the very existence of this movement is crucial to bringing about a change in the way that we are living on this planet. We humans have increasingly become a destructive presence on Earth for far too long. This movement, presenting itself at this time on this planet, is calling for a new way of being together. Also, as a therapist and group facilitator, I have become interested in the group process of the Occupy movement and, specifically, in the decision-making process adopted by the movement and the individual encampments, and I and at least one other therapist have been involved in Occupy Auckland in the facilitation process.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

I have just now returned from the General Assembly (GA), a whole-group meeting which takes place three times each week. All decisions in the occupation are made by the GA. These meetings or assemblies are set up in a very egalitarian manner, so that every single person present who wishes to speak is given the space and time to do so. Prior to the GA, all present (those living in the occupation, as well as visitors) are invited to offer any proposals, in writing. These proposals are then gathered beforehand by a small facilitation team, and then, one by one, brought to and discussed by the entire group. As each proposal is brought forward, discussion is organised by a stacking system. Those who wish to speak raise their hands and two people, designated as stackers, go to these people one by one, get a brief of their issue, and then “stack” the speakers accordingly.

Decisions are made using a very particular method of voting, for the most part using a system of hand signals. Once a proposal is stated, the facilitator asks the group whether there is consensus (which is defined as at least 90% of the meeting). Those who agree with the proposal raise their hands and twinkle wave their fingers upwards. Those who disagree lower their hands and wave their fingers downwards; this indicates disagreement with the proposal,

but does not stop or block the proposal. Those who wish to oppose the proposal adamantly put their hands into fists and cross their arms (in front of their chests) at their wrists in a movement which is called “blocking”. Ideally, “blocking” is used if a person thinks that the vote taken is against the foundational principles of the occupation; sometimes, however, it is used because a person is strongly against the proposal. Even if only one person blocks, the facilitator may seek a compromise, which may be suggested and may address the person’s unease immediately. If this does not happen, however, the facilitator invites three people to come forward to speak in favour of the proposal, and three people to speak against. This is followed by another vote. If someone still blocks, then the proposal is sent to a working group to be discussed further, and an amended or new proposal is brought back to the next GA. Other hand signals used in the GA include:

- Using your thumbs and forefingers to make a triangle in the air—this represents a point of process; for example, if someone thinks the speaker has diverted the discussion from the issue at hand.
- Raising one finger in the air—this indicates a point of information or clarification.
- Raising a hand to one’s ear—this means that the person can’t hear.
- Circling your hands round each other (known as a wagon wheel)—this indicates that the person thinks that the speaker is going on and on and repeating themselves, and that it’s time to wind up.

What stood out for me today, and each time I have attended a GA at Occupy Auckland, is that the enormous diversity of people—young, old and in between, Māori and non-Māori, and others of varying economic and political situations—are all respecting each other, by word and by deed. There is an open-heartedness and a willingness to find a meeting place where all feel honoured. This, for me, is a great beginning foundation for creating a new and true society.

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