

Notes from Occupy Theory Assembly, June 4th Washington Sq Park

Debt and Education: Building a Political Movement

(notes begin about ten minutes in, when it was agreed that the conversation would be a strategic conversation specifically about building a political movement around debt, including but not exclusively as it intersects with education).

-This is a conversation about the intersection of education and debt, what a political movement would look like. The take away would be another meeting to grow this.

-we've been talking about a debt strike, but this would have serious consequences for people; as the conversation moves forward, we should be talking a lot about solidarity, mutual support, and care.

-the occupy student debt campaign wants to start talking about a movement and not just a campaign. We were aware of earlier movement for free education, undertaken by unions that got some traction but it didn't take debt into account. In recent years the debt burden in the united states has become so crushing, we wanted to use anger around debt as a way to argue for free education, combining the two. When thinking of movements around these issues, it is not always best to compare the US situation with other places. There are overlaps, connections, and borrowings for sure; but in each context these movements develop organically. The US system is different than other countries. It is a huge private sector where the worst burdens are accumulated. There are student power conferences, like in Ohio, but they are not specifically mobilizing around debt; the question is whether Occupy structure can be scaled up on this issue.

-How can a movement actually form? Student groups tend to coalesce around issues like tuition hikes rather than perceiving its flip side in debt. One idea we've had is to create a flow between student groups and what happens after school when the realization sets in that you owe 50 K. One of the problems we've had is that the "debt forgiveness" petition people own the domain name we wanted to use. But how do we bring together different ideologies, work together at different times on different actions, even while there are deep disagreements. Like on the issue of debt refusal. The other folks working on student debt think a conventional political solution is possible, whereas we are trying to bring students into something more analogous to an economic justice movement with the notion of refusal rather than "forgiveness."

-when we talk about debt being a trillion dollars, it's abstract. I can't even imagine it; we should talk about how debt affects the daily material conditions of our lives. both economically, but also psychologically and affectively. there is a sense of shame; but imagine breaking silence and shame, like echo of gay rights movement. there could be so much power in that when you can stand up and say this is fucked up and I'm sick of it.

-in terms of building a movement, we are a long way from a million, but we need to start changing the culture. in the universities there are many of us. We've got three months till September and school starts. We can be sharing information, modeling alternatives, Free University. You cant scale Free U up to the US, were not there yet, but there is movement one step at a time. More meetings to plug people in, advancing rather than worrying about the freaking enormity of it. I feel intimidated by Quebec, but it took them three years to get there! It doesn't get there over night. We are making progress.

-I am a teacher, and I think about how to get my students involved. Think of the organizations that are already huge on campuses--Darfur campaign for instance--and maybe use some of that infrastructure to help draw attention to issues at home. Also, it is sometimes hard for student activists to meet up with each other, having a space where they can converge is important.

-Having been involved with OWS since the beginning, I think we are at a new phase. May Day was supposed to be the launch of the second phase, but it didn't happen. What can we do to garner the energy? There is something new about OWS that it breeds movements. Debt articulates something abstract in the concrete, more so even than Wall Street. Imagine "here is what debt means to me." A T-shirt that says "here is how much I'm NOT going to pay." There are existing organizational structures, but I am not personally interested in reaching out to those. Its about self-activation. I see global solidarity and students rising up. With May Day we thought it might be workers, but its students. They have a whole life of debt ahead of them. What does a movement look like. It is here. This is it. Because the analysis is here. It will get articulated over time, and will bring the focus that OWS doesn't have. You don't have to do much; its about the timing and the energy; the system is imploding on itself. How do we use the moment, combine direct action with vision, means with ends for something affirmative. A launch of something on September 17th.

-Yes students and debt; but debt is bigger than just students; its a connective issue that could bring together an exciting coalition together across many demographics. We didn't see the students at a large scale in September...to start with strategy you need knowledge; people need to know what the debt system looks like, and how their self-interest is involved in it. Then you start pumping it out; you can start small with what's already happening, make sure people working on it are checking in with each other. September 17th is an opportunity to articulate something; big demands? entire countries have had their debts forgiven--we can do it too.

-when we speak of a debt strike, consider that many people are already not paying their debts. de facto on strike, so how to make that more explicitly political. Debt is individualizing and invisibilizing; Its different than having a factory workplace shared by people. Debtors need to construct a place to find each other to build up that collective subject, collective identity of the debtor. internet and social networking are not in themselves adequate; In September you could make a call and thousands would come. Think back to Civil Rights movement, really building relations of trust and solidarity to make large-scale direct action possible. How to find each other and construct a social subject for this moment; our relation to debt and to time. The ways of

organizing from the Fall are not so useful now.

-Think of student walks outs, marches, occupations; New School, Baruch, NYU, Columbia...But not random fragmented things but a coordinated network of actions.

-I think talking about a specific date for debt strike is a good idea; the beginning of the fiscal year is July 1 for instance. Or what about the first day of school?

-identifying a date to start is a good idea; but lets talk more about support and solidarity. if I imagine not paying, what protection would there be? what is it like in term of time-frame? getting people to ask: what is it I'm paying for at 60 K a year? Then start questioning the underlying logic of the whole debt system

-OWS inspires the imagination in its identification of the enemy in the 1%. The onus of debt should be on them, not the 99%. I'm the only one in my family to go to college, and I went not on loans but on scholarships. I was able to go to school and live in the city in ways that would be impossible now. Where did the money go! The banks have ripped us off; there are many of us and few of them!

-I'm a grad student at NYU and I teach undergrads. The amount of debt I took on in 2003 has doubled for these students in 2012. How did it double. The securitization of student loans, for instance. How to combine strategic discussion of debt with tuition: cut debt off before it becomes debt by pushing for halt and rollback of tuition-increases. delegitimize the debt. Also, people have been talking about support networks. Just today in this meeting I've heard from two people who've defaulted on their loans. I didn't know that. Just the knowledge that others are defaulting helps me with my own decision. Its like the gay rights movement: overcoming shame, fear, coming out. Identify and have answers regarding the fears: credit rating? jail? legal support?

-there are three chronological points in students lives; 1) decision to go to higher ed 2) are you going to stay in when tuition increases? 3) what to do when you get out and loans are due? Constant decisions in these periods of your life. I don't know how sympathetically a default would be perceived. This doesn't seem to me the only way of manifesting on these issues. Also, there are lots of issues of race and class here too that need to be acknowledged. Consider example of Brooklyn Coalition for peace that does anti-recruitment work, passing out information about alternatives to military as a way to pay for education? Something along these lines relative to higher education and debt? Ways to get an education without taking on huge loans?

-fighting the shame of the debtor; corporations enforce individuality. relation to labor? spread out education to make it more horizontal.

-shame, support, ending isolation and silence. linking student debt to other kinds of debt, great way to collaborate with housing debtors, health care debtors, credit card debtors. also draw

attention to the way wall street is bundling student debt just as it did with mortgages. A lot of commonality between student debt and housing crisis. Could be similarities between actions taken as well--occupy a foreclosed home; what would be the equivalent for debtors taking over a space?

--I like the idea of Fall Semester being a big start; it could be combined with Free University, connect it to teach ins and part of a larger strike.

- how to take the spaces we do have back--campuses; rethinking the identity of the student, student unionism that crosses over into questions of labor as well. internships for instance.

-networking and outreach is crucial before actions; a group we could work with is SLAP; they had a cool project of a debtors wall, with numbers and totals of what people owe. Performative action evoking Pink Floyd's the Wall!

-what are moderate ways to show support, ways that are more socially acceptable?

-we had a convo at Bryant about student debt being part of a larger ecosystem for debt, one that isolates even while it is systematic. how to take the shame and redirect it to the institutions, not the individuals victimized by it. Flip the terms and talk about pride, community, solidarity, community of debtors.

-I'm a parent as well as a teacher; my daughter had a bank account before she was even born; that established her existence from the standpoint of our system. we are born debtors and stay debtors forever. OWS says no: we are not essentially people qualified for a loan; we are not that. we are people with rights!

-there are a lot of people turned off by the more radical language. How to keep it accessible. Student chapters, but also ways for parents and families to be part of it. Parents chapters? we need spaces where everyone effected can converge.

-just speaking in public about debt--and articulating the condition of feeling silenced and ashamed, individualized--is already an empowering breakthrough. This could inform some social media "coming out" videos along the lines of gay rights--you are not alone. also want to put in plug for OWSDS as a place to come and experiment with direct actions surrounding debt, and escalating toward Sept 17th. good platform for people working on different projects to come and work together, articulate analysis with targeted creative action teams that could then feed into ongoing media and propaganda projects. folks have been talking about spaces in which to construct this new subject of the debtor--assemblies most importantly. But also allusions to campus as a space of possible occupation, what are other sites of debt injustice that could be held? Also what about debtors camp? Maybe not of the Zuccotti variety, but still some kind of semi-permanent, or maybe roving architectural installation ala Hoovervilles in the 30s in Central Park. debtors sit-ins and pickets too...

-POI, there will be a debt-related action team on Saturday at disobedience school.

-There will be a debtors assembly on Sunday, reaching out to many kinds of debtors to have them come out for it. A note on the state, and why this is not just a petition to legislators. People often talk about the state withdrawing from education. Not at all; the essence of neoliberalism is government transferring fiscal responsibility to corporations. That's not the state getting out; its a new way of managing education. When we speak of privatization, people often think of corporate sponsorship, research and development, etc. But it is most radical in the funding of education via debt. This is the role of the state; so what were doing is different than the lost cause of petitioning the state; its a critique of the states function in neoliberalism. So were not just appealing to people's self interest, but at a meta-level, a critique of bigger systems and the state.

-the folks working on community gardens and the commons have an important take on this---education should be a commons and a right.

-how differently education is funded here; how can teachers like me to facilitate discussion with students. enable them to free the imagination.

-linking housing and debt: alot of people who have student debt will contemplate getting a house--and going into yet another debt system.

-reiterate point about coming out, not shame but rather pride, community, breaking silence. think of the example of ACT UP and its propaganda; Silence =Debt. Not being afraid to say debt is horrible, ruins peoples lives at so many levels.

-credit card debt should be a focus.

-How do we move this forward; this is a new kind of assembly that is trying to do something rather than just a speak-out. If we get it right, it will proliferate. Its not about dragging people in; its about the time and the pulse and tone; that's what OWS was able to do initially; get it right together; there is so much power and energy. Just the fact that were going to be here next week together, activated together. Just that notion is key.

Do we meet again? That will always be the question; if we do, it will synergize. So lets come to the next meeting prepared to synthesize.

There are alot of folks here already working on things. we should map out the connections, the resources, build a network. Report backs next time.

This will go out as notes and we can synthesize the next steps at the assembly with the folks who show up:

Pick out facilitation team at the beginning,

5-10 convo about agenda

Come prepared with notes

Report backs from people already working on it who know what's going on

-the large convergence will be important, I'm reluctant to see it fragment into tiny subgroups, most of whom don't know each other.

Strike Debt/Debt Strike!

Black Monday is Coming!!!