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## Joel Whitney: NYPD Blues: Why Thuggishness Helps Occupy Wall Street

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Twelve days ago, the #OccupyWallStreet protestors stepped into the media fray. They called themselves “an entire generation” of “[over-educated](#) and under-employed” young people. While people from all age groups have lost homes, jobs, pensions, 401k retirement money, you might not, at first, know any of that from the few “leaderless” kid leaders who ended up spotlighted in the media repeatedly for that entire (single) generation. A “horizontal” “global revolution” will inevitably embody contradictions nearly as dire as those typified by right wingers who want to run a government they inherently distrust. This is one of the American dilemmas: how co-opted the outsider becomes once he or she has made it in. It’s essentially that conundrum of American

leadership that Obama himself stepped into, with his quasi-outsider status complemented by technocratic skill and rhetorical power.

Of these three assets that initially made Obama viable for office and utterly hailed as savior, it was his outsider status that seemed to disappear so completely with his election. (It wasn't just that an outsider president of the United States is an oxymoron. But he seemed to lose all affinity with his base of supporters who elected him, as demonstrated in the small donor problem [described in the Times](#) last weekend.) Lacking in technocratic skill and rhetorical power, by contrast, the OccupyWallStreet movement's outsider status was all it had (along with a new malaise and a Congress that ought to have done most of any protest movement's heavy lifting). If you believed the limited, and mostly cynical early coverage of the movement, this was unlikely to be enough to win us over.

Enter the NYPD, with its campaign of brutal arrests and undisguised repression. At last this movement spoke clearly, if in the negative, with a rhetorical power that rose above the cliches of protest slogans, through a blow that came directly from Mayor Bloomberg's office; it was honed (we know) during the 2004 Republican National Convention where hundreds of protestors were likewise manhandled and kept from trouble through bureaucratic delays (and the police-force latitude of the Age of Terror). "Truth comes in blows," says the eponymous narrator of Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*.

What had been dismissed by so many in the media as mere antics before the weekend was now viral marketed as a long archetypal tableau of American decline, corruption and violence against the weak, the young, the idealistic. Thank the endless YouTube videos of early September's media darlings, the heroes of September 11, now just two weeks later wrapping orange mesh pen-fencing around rowdy but totally unmenacing protestors. After detaining them (the visual is of one side playing Red Rover, cheering at a pep rally, the other using tactics developed for urban warfare), police dragged protestors across downtown streets, [pepper-sprayed them](#), smashed and tossed cameras, threatened, and cursed at frail post-pubescent misfits, kneed them in the backs and backs of their necks, contorting their spines, binding wrists so tightly with flex cuffs their hands turned blue; in some cases protestors were arrested for merely speaking to a cop. In one of the most stirring of the [videos](#) (minute 2:58), you can hear what sounds like a very sweet young woman amidst the chaos of cameras being smashed and heads butting together telling another, "I'm sorry, they pushed me." In another, a [kneeling law student](#) shouts, "That is the bank that took my parents' home... they played by the rules... That's the bank right there!" Before he is arrested, Christlike, he says "Take me, I submit."

We are only powerful to do good. The rest is compulsion, corruption, like cops whose orders or stupidity forced them to mace and pepper-spray well meaning protestors.

Not that all the protestors were models of Gandhian self-discipline or MLK-style self-control. Most chided police with stock phrases like "shame, shame, shame" or "the whole world is watching" as arrests ensued; others baited police with references to Amadou Diallo, which may have been a brutal episode but the whole of NYPD certainly didn't commit it. Collective punishment can happen verbally too. But it was the police who escalated. Whatever protestor-on-police verbal abuse came largely came *after*—videos make this relatively clear—police had

already pushed, and pulled and bashed and sprayed. And anyone would have been at first mystified, then angry. Were there orders from on high to dispense with this nuisance to the city? Clue: Mayor Bloomberg was already on record saying that economic conditions were in place for widespread urban riots. What had previously been innocuous protest chants (“Who are you protecting, who are you protecting?”) scored an eerie power beside such brutal tactics.

So while the NYPD has proven to the world where mayoral and police sympathies lie on a systemic level, this by no means solves the protest’s rhetoric problem, since persuasion is built on ideas. Police violence has resuscitated the viability of our sympathy with the protests. But ideas are still the brain of any movement. On Twitter the mere fact of coverage, in true post-modern fashion, initially usurped any coherence of ideas. Typical tweets over the weekend ran something like: “#OccupyWallStreet finally noticed by [media brand].” Many of the articles cited even by those sympathetic with the protests were utterly derisive. Ginia Bellafante in the *Times* reports how the protestors’ “demands” include nothing less than an end to corporate personhood in international law, or—in one passive aggressive inclusion—the end of the combustion engine. But coverage has gotten more balanced since the arrests. As Nathan Schneider told Democracy Now, the right to have a political conversation about the future is itself a valid basis for protests. I agree.

There are two types of stories about the protests: narrow coverage which offers no context, and coverage that understands what’s happening around the protestors. We find ourselves in a world where police brutality is the price of the right to assemble. Why? In this light, what choice do we have but to support even the most naive of protestors? What will we have become if we look onto this police brutality and can think only to say to ourselves, “Glad I didn’t walk into that.”?

In the images of these young people in New York and Washington being brutalized and arrested en masse, we find a stark contrast with the president’s unprecedented mobilization of young people in 2008. Is he scared?

In their bruises, arrests, and panic attacks last weekend the protestors scored points the way scholars Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth [insist](#) nonviolent resistance always works. Namely, protestors contrasted their own nonviolence with the brash violence of the state to draw public sympathy. Although the Egyptian and Tunisian street revolutions happened after the period Chenoweth and Stephan look at in their study (1900 to 2006), they were largely nonviolent. According to the data those nonviolent “campaigns” were able to draw domestic and international support because the nonviolent nature of the protests contrasted so sharply with the thuggishness and lack of mandate of the leaders. At key moments internal desertions took place, as when police and military forces made clear signs they supported the protestors, and when outside governments and institutions previously supportive of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes withdrew support.

Like any protest movement, Socrates, in the trial that condemned him, sought to reharness power by redefining it. Putting him to death, he argued after the verdict, was not power since it was the wrong thing to do. The committee whose majority put him to death by a slim margin held no real power over him, since no good man can be harmed by a lesser man. His argument (see Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*) is tricky, built on the fact that, since we don’t actually know if death is

good or bad, the only thing that can actually harm us is to become an agent of harm, someone who actively works against the good. This, Socrates makes clear, we can only do to ourselves by allying ourselves with the wrong course of action, as the majority of the committee was doing when it sentenced him to die. In day-to-day policy debates where interests are weighed against others, this argument has limited application, and it requires our belief for it to work at all. But broadly speaking, it can be a good benchmark for where we stand. We are only powerful to do good. The rest is compulsion, corruption, like cops whose orders or stupidity forced them to mace and pepper-spray well meaning protestors.

A contemporary formulation of this, by Thomas Schelling, was cited at the end of Chenoweth and Stephan's study: "[The] tyrant and his subjects are in somewhat symmetrical positions. They can deny him most of what he wants—they can, that is, if they have the disciplined organization to refuse collaboration. And he can deny them just about everything they want—he can deny it by using the force at his command... They can deny him the satisfaction of ruling a disciplined country, he can deny them the satisfaction of ruling themselves... It is a bargaining situation in which either side, if adequately disciplined and organized, can deny most of what the other wants, and it remains to see who wins."

Mayor Bloomberg shares the blame for last weekend's violence. But until he engages the protestors as equals, it's blame alone, not power that he holds. The protestors, even the ones who want to do away with combustion engines, do have power. Even if the protests effectively died with the weekend's arrests (which they clearly [didn't](#)), the mayor lacked the power to stop them without falling into Socrates's trap; that is, without repressing democratic dissent, without allying himself with tyrants. Same for President Obama and the tar sands protests in Washington last month. In the images of these young people in New York and Washington being brutalized and arrested en mass, we find a stark contrast with the president's unprecedented mobilization of young people in 2008. Is he scared? That's a rhetorical question. This is too: as the protests around the country and around the world extend themselves closer and closer to the date of the next fateful presidential election, who really has the power?