

Occupy Veterans!
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I, Benjamin Schrader, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.¹

On July 14, 2001, I took this oath, and it is in this oath that a number of other military veterans—including myself—have found validation in their activism. The oath is meant to show loyalty to the nation, and many veterans still feel that it is their duty to uphold that oath long after their time in the military is over. Because the oath states that they are to defend the Constitution against “all enemies, foreign and domestic,” it is easy to see how one can translate this into many different forms of activism today.

One such movement, which is the focus of this paper, is the Occupy Wall Street movement. Therefore, this paper examines the reasons that some military veterans have chosen to become involved in a movement that has often been labeled as unpatriotic or even un-American, as it confronts the violence that has been perpetuated by the global financial system led by what David Harvey calls the “state-finance nexus.”² Furthermore, this paper will probe the ways in which these veterans view capitalism and how their actions promote a revolutionary way of thinking, making them what Antonio Gramsci would say are “Organic Intellectuals.”³ It is through this interaction that a thought-provoking dialogue takes place between

¹ “Oath of Enlistment,” *About.com US Military*, accessed December 5, 2012, <http://usmilitary.about.com/od/joiningthemilitary/a/oathofenlist.htm>.

² David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011). Pg 204.

³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (ElecBook, 2001). Pg 145.

service to ones country and protesting for the betterment of the nation. The discourse of military veterans offers an alternative view of how the Occupy movement can be looked at.

To do so, I will examine two concepts primarily through three different lenses. The concepts, as identified above, are state violence and the organic intellectual, and the lenses I will be using are: 1) Iraq Veterans Against the War's statement of support for the Occupy Movement, as this exposes the ties the state violence against veterans and the "99%"; 2) The attack on Occupy Oakland protestors and the subsequent injury of Scott Olsen, as this exemplifies the way in which the state works to protect capitalist interests by any means possible, and; 3) The YouTube sensation Sgt. Shamar Thomas who publicly denounced state violence and his efforts to raise consciousness through organizing. First, I construct a historical background of the Occupy Wall Street movement and a brief historical background of IVAW, since both Scott Olsen and Sgt. Shamar Thomas are both members of the organization.

Occupy Wall Street

While the Occupy Wall Street movement began on September 17, 2011, its roots can be traced back to earlier movements. As Elizabeth Cobbett and Randall Germain point out, "we can trace its origins to the food riots throughout 2007 and 2008 in Africa, the Indian Sub-continent and East Asia. In Europe, unrest has been simmering and boiling over since 2010, especially in Greece and Spain... And of

course the Arab Spring began as local reaction in Tunisia early in 2011.”⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri also point out a number of contributing parallel events such as “the extended protests at the Wisconsin statehouse, the occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens, and the Israeli tent encampments for economic justice.”⁵ The different movements all conveying civil unrest are primarily tied to the global financial system and the declining legitimacy that people feel towards the institutions that work within these systems.⁶ Though much of these global problems tied to the financial system were not being felt within the United States until around 2006 when foreclosures on low-income households began to rise rapidly due to sub-prime mortgages.⁷ This would quickly cascade into one of largest global financial crises since the great depression, peaking in 2008.

The crisis, compounded with actions—from what David Harvey calls the “state-finance nexus,”—such as the Supreme Court ruling of Citizens United that ruled corporations as people, raised the level of discontent within America.⁸ This is why on June 9, 2011 the popular magazine Adbusters got the wheels rolling on a campaign calling for the people of New York City to indefinitely occupy the epicenter of US and world financial systems to protest the ways in which corporations and banks were harming US democracy.⁹ They were calling for an

⁴ Cobbett, Elizabeth, and Randall Germain. “‘Occupy Wall Street’ and IPE: Insights and Implications 1.” *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies (JCGS)* 1. Pg. 110-111.

⁵ Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. “The Fight for ‘Real Democracy’ at the Heart of Occupy Wall Street.” *Foreign Affairs* 11 (2011).

⁶ Cobbett, Elizabeth, and Randall Germain. “‘Occupy Wall Street’ and IPE: Insights and Implications 1.” *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies (JCGS)* 1. Pg. 111.

⁷ Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*. Pg. 1-4.

⁸ Ibid. 204.

⁹ <http://www.whois.net/whois/occupywallstreet.org> (accessed 11/18/2012).

occupation of Wall Street until solutions were found addressing the troubling ties between capitalism and politics. As weeks went on, the movement grew to thousands upon thousands of protestors in numerous cities across the United States and a number of other countries across the globe. While there has been a decline of participation in the movement, there are still some that continue to Occupy spaces in the name of the movement.

One of the main ways in which the occupiers tried to relate the subject of what they were doing was through their slogan of the 99% vs. the 1%. While around 300 families control around 40% of the world's wealth, which would be well under 1%, however the top 1% in America have on average over 19 million in net worth each.¹⁰ While this is a lot of money, the next 9% below them average a net worth of over 2 million dollars, so in reality it should be a slogan saying we are the 90%, and it is this 9% that "enforces the legal and political rules everyone must abide by."¹¹ Though the numbers may be skewed in the slogan, the effect was meant to focus on the small amount of decision makers within the state-finance nexus based on Wall Street.

Within this "occupation," camps were formed based on egalitarian ideals, where decisions were made through the consensus process, as there was no hierarchical structure or leaders. Information moved in a number of ways, it flowed through word of mouth, via the "human-microphone," it was passed in the

¹⁰ "About That 99 Percent ...," *Economix Blog*, accessed December 5, 2012, <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/10/about-that-99-percent/>.

¹¹ Roger Arnold, "Occupy Wall Street and the 1-9-90 Rule - TheStreet," accessed December 5, 2012, <http://www.thestreet.com/story/11280871/1/occupy-wall-street-and-the-1-9-90-rule.html>.

numerous workshops and classes, and it traveled via the Internet. The information included “how to” guides on everything from starting other encampments to camp procedures, information about why the crisis happened, academic books, and much more. It gained the attention of a number of academics such as Naomi Klein, Slavoj Žižek, Cornel West, and many more, all of whom came to speak to the “occupiers.” However the movement did not garner much mainstream media attention except when acts of violence occurred, which was primarily perpetuated by the state. It is two such instances that will be examined in forthcoming sections as I examine veterans Scott Olsen and Sgt. Shamar Thomas. The next section examines why many veterans have come to stand in solidarity with the Occupy movement.

Iraq Veterans Against the War and Occupy

Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) was formed in July of 2004 at the annual Veterans for Peace meeting in Boston, Massachusetts.¹² The name stemmed from a similar group from years past, Vietnam Veterans Against the War. In the same spirit, they organized actions and events in order to bring attention to and try to end the war in Iraq. They were comprised of any veteran or active duty military service member, from any branch, who served post-9/11.¹³ The three main goals of the organization were: “the immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces in Iraq; Reparations for the human and structural damages Iraq has suffered, and stopping the corporate pillaging of Iraq so that their people can control their own lives and

¹² “About | Iraq Veterans Against the War,” accessed December 5, 2012, <http://www.ivaw.org/about>.

¹³ Ibid.

future; and full benefits, adequate healthcare (including mental health), and other supports for returning servicemen and women.”¹⁴

In November 2011, the Iraq Veterans Against the War Board of Directors posted a letter of solidarity for Occupy movement. The letter is a good entry point for understanding the ways in which state violence is perpetuated against veterans as it creates an intimate link between the state-finance nexus and the military-industrial-complex.

State Violence

While one type of violence is direct and somatic, as related to the police and military’s use of violence, it is legitimated in order to protect the systems in place, like Wall Street. The other type is structural as the violence in poverty stems from the reliance on capitalist forces because the state must choose between capital and the good of the people and the state chooses the prior through a private centralization of the means of production, which in turn perpetuates poverty.¹⁵ In Johan Galtung’s seminal article “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” he examines this structural violence. Galtung states, “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.”¹⁶ In other words, due to the state-finance nexus’ choice of capital over the protection of the people, which leads to somatic and mental realizations below their potential realizations, violence is being inflicted. One

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd Revised & enlarged (W. W. Norton & Company, 1978). Pg. 438.

¹⁶ Galtung, Johan. "Violence, peace, and peace research." *Journal of peace research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-191. Pg. 168.

example of this can be found in the home financial crisis. As debt's rose but incomes remained stagnant, more people relied on credit and upon the refinancing of their homes. With the deregulation of the various credit and housing markets, there were fewer protections for consumers leading to high numbers of bankruptcy and home loan defaults.¹⁷ The removal of people from their homes is one site of state violence, which was one of the catalysts of the Occupy movement. At the numerous Occupy encampments, state violence became visible again as police used direct and somatic force in order to quell the numerous protestors. It is this form of state violence that this paper primarily examines.

Veterans are a part of the 99%

The first part of IVAW's statement of solidarity with the Occupy movement helps to understand the ways in which veterans are affected by this violence; it reads as follows:

Most of our military is made up of the 99%. We join the military for many reasons. Some join because of family tradition or a sense of patriotism. Others join for citizenship, education or to escape poverty or violence in our homes and neighborhoods. Many service members realize the wars we fight contribute to poverty and violence in Iraq and Afghanistan communities. We are coming home to a broken economy where veterans have higher unemployment, incarceration, suicide and homelessness than the national average.¹⁸

¹⁷ Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*. Pgs. 17-23.

¹⁸ "Board of Directors Statement on the Occupy Movement: We Are the 99% | Iraq Veterans Against the War," accessed December 5, 2012, <http://www.ivaw.org/blog/board-directors-statement-occupy-movement-we-are-99>.

This passage highlights a number of interesting factors. First and foremost is the idea that the military is primarily comprised of the 99%.¹⁹ This is the thread that holds the rest of the passage together as those seeking citizenship are usually coming to the US because of the imaginary that it is the land of opportunity; Those who join to get an education are doing so because they cannot afford it otherwise; escaping poverty is an obvious link to the 99%; and violence in one's home and neighborhood is almost solely tied to lower socioeconomic classes. Even joining because of family traditions can primarily be tied to class issues as Christian Appy points out that primarily class lines constructed the military drafts of wars past.²⁰

The other aspect of joining, patriotism, ties to the opening vignette of this paper. It is patriotism that makes one believe in the oath they take, before, during, and after their time in the service. It is that oath to defend the Constitution, against enemies, foreign and domestic, and it is within the Constitution that a violation by the 1% can be found. The preamble of the Constitution states:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.²¹

It is a violation of the establishment of justice, the lack of domestic tranquility and of general welfare, that these Veterans find the domestic enemy and stand in solidarity

¹⁹ Though I would say that it is solely made up of the 99%, there may be a multi-millionaire hiding amongst the ranks of soldiers, most likely some high-ranking officer.

²⁰ Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

²¹ "Transcript of the Constitution of the United States - Official Text," accessed December 5, 2012, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html.

with the Occupy movement. As they point out, “We are coming home to a broken economy where veterans have higher unemployment, incarceration, suicide and homelessness than the national average.” To look at the numbers on two of those issues, ‘the VA estimates that on any given night there are 200,000 veterans living on the streets and nearly 400,000 experience homelessness over the course of a year.’²² As far as veteran suicides go, the VA reports there is close to 18 veteran suicides a day.²³ So it is not just the people whom they are defending, but also they themselves that are being violated by this enemy. A good example of this violence and desire to defend the oath can be seen in the life of Sgt. Shamar Thomas.

Sgt. Shamar Thomas



Picture 1 & 2: Marine Sgt. Shamar Thomas confronts NYPD²⁴

²² Aaron Glantz, *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2010). Pg. 159.

²³ R. Gibbons, C. Brown, and K. Hur, “Is the Rate of Suicide Among Veterans Elevated?,” *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. S1 (2012): 0, doi:10.2105/AJPH.2011.300491.

²⁴ “US Marine Corps Sergeant Shamar Thomas Confronts NYPD (Video),” accessed December 6, 2012, <http://dailypicksandflicks.com/2011/10/17/us-marine-corps-sergeant-shamar-thomas-confronts-nypd-video/>; Michael Levitin, “Occupying War: A Marine Vet Finds His Mission,” *The Occupied Wall Street Journal*, accessed

Shamar Thomas was born into a life of violence in Roosevelt, New York.²⁵ At the age of two his father was killed in the streets, leaving him to be raised by his mother and stepfather.²⁶ With a long line of family ties to the military, he decided to leave the gang life that he grew up in to join the US Marine Corps at the age of 18.²⁷ While in the military he was deployed to Iraq and fought in the 2004 battle of Fallujah. Upon return from the military, he started college but the compensation from the military was not enough and he became homeless, living in a veteran's homeless shelter.²⁸ Shamar then left college and returned to the streets of Long Island to begin community organizing around gangs and youth. When the Occupy movement began he found a new way to frame many of the issues he saw as prevalent to the poverty that created the violence he grew up in, was now was working with, which were also tied to some of the reasons he was sent to Iraq.²⁹

On October 15, 2011, the New York Police Department had a crack down on the Occupy Wall Street Times Square protest, which became violent as the police tried to break up the demonstration. The most memorable aspect of the evening for many though came a block away from the violence as Sgt. Shamar Thomas faced off with about 30 police officers. The result of the confrontation was telling as the 6'4", 300 pound Thomas yelled at Police while wearing his Marine uniform after seeing protestors being attacked by the NYPD. As he yelled at the police, he asked a number

December 5, 2012, <http://occupiedmedia.us/2012/03/occupying-war-a-marine-vet-finds-his-mission/>.

²⁵ Levitin, "Occupying War: A Marine Vet Finds His Mission."

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

of questions, which none of the NYPD was willing to answer, questions such as, “why are you doing this,” “Why are you hurting US citizens,” and “aren’t you supposed to be protecting these people?”³⁰ The physical presence and the fact that Thomas was a war veteran seemed to intimidate the NYPD, as the confrontation dragged on for over 5 minutes. While Thomas would eventually peacefully leave the scene, the confrontation was recorded and put on-line, becoming a YouTube sensation, and currently has over 7.8 million views.

It is in this scene that an interesting intersection takes place. Sgt. Thomas, an ex-gang member, a war veteran, living in poverty, peacefully protesting, and witnessing violence at the hands of the state. Violence can be seen not only by the state towards the protestors but violence in his positionality as having fought in war and fighting on the streets in poverty, currently and in his past as a gang member. In describing this violence by the state, Eugene Holland states:

In one case, the violence is spectacularly noisy and direct—the modern state is indeed typically defined in terms of its absolute monopoly on legitimate or legitimated violence: on command, make war; disobey, and you answer to the police. In the other case, the violence is hidden, as it were, and indirect: Marx refers to the “silent compulsion of market relations” that makes the labor contract essentially involuntary; he also reveals that the “secret” of “so-called primitive accumulation” is that it more fundamentally means primitive destitution, that is, forcing people into abject dependence on capital for their very survival.³¹

This passage highlights the two types of violence that are being perpetuated by the state, which were described above through Galtung’s definition of structural

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Eugene W. Holland, *Nomad Citizenship: Free-Market Communism and the Slow-Motion General Strike* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2011). Pg. XX.

violence. However, here it is correlated with capitalism, as it is a function of the state to protect those who profit from it by any means necessary, even while violence is being produced by corporate entities onto those whom the police is sworn to protect. This is the focus of the next section as the idea protecting capital by any means is looked at, both the silent form in which the violence is hidden and then the “noisy and direct” form.

The 1% is Profiting From Our Sacrifices

As highlighted above, those who are partially responsible for violence upon the people and upon veterans are profiting from it. The second section of IVAW’s statement states:

Our nation’s leaders have betrayed us. We have been asked to risk our lives and mental health for the defense of our country and the well being of foreign allies. The causes for military conflict have proven false while corporations profit. The military industrial complex continues to grow in wealth while the rest of the world pays for it in dollars and blood. Instead of increasing programs to attempt to repair damages, many schools, hospitals, and social services are shutting down. Programs for veterans are inadequate and are leaving us physically, mentally, and emotionally bankrupt.³²

This section highlights a number of things, but first and foremost it returns to the idea of being violated by the state, in order for profits to be made. In a 2011 report by the Project on Government Oversight (POGO), they found that private contractors were making 1.83 times more than federal workers who did the same job.³³

³² “Board of Directors Statement on the Occupy Movement: We Are the 99% | Iraq Veterans Against the War.”

³³ Project on Government Oversight. September 13, 2011. *Bad Business: Billions of Taxpayer Dollars Wasted on Hiring Contractors*. <http://pogoarchives.org/m/co/igf/bad-business-report-only-2011.pdf>. (Accessed 28 November 2012). Pg. 1.

Similarly, it is thought that there is at least \$20 Billion (upwards of \$50 Billion³⁴) worth of waste by military contractors where that money is basically going into the pockets of the CEO's of these private contracting companies.³⁵ While this is nothing new, as the military-industrial-complex thrived during the cold war, especially in the Reagan years, it has boomed again with the current "War on terror" and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Therefore, it is clear that war is a profitable business, which is supported by the state and can be found just as culpable for the economic woes facing the nation.

The second important aspect highlighted in the passage above is the negligence by the US government in treating wounded soldiers, which can be seen as a silent function of the state in perpetuating violence. As profits are high for those in the private sector, veterans are coming home and having to fight for benefits. While it is becoming easier to cash in on programs like the *Post 9/11 GI Bill* with liaisons at nearly all college campuses, it is still a long arduous process for seeking treatment for physical and mental problems that occurred due to their military service. Because of the two recent wars, the VA system is extremely underfunded and overstretched. This begs the question that if those who are supposedly the "heroes" and "protectors of freedom," are treated this way by the state, then what

³⁴ "Cost Review of Military Contractors Would Be Revealing - MiningJournal.net | News, Sports, Jobs, Marquette Information | The Mining Journal," accessed December 5, 2012, <http://www.miningjournal.net/page/content.detail/id/579311/Cost-review-of-military-contractors-would-be-revealing.html?nav=5003>.

³⁵ "Contractor Distrust Costs DOD Billions, Study Says -- Washington Technology," accessed December 5, 2012, <http://washingtontechnology.com/Articles/2012/07/12/efficiency-dod-contractor-relationship.aspx?Page=1>.

does it matter in giving benefits and health services to the everyday citizen? It would seem that there is no importance for ensuring the everyday citizen is taken care of, which makes one question the processes of US democracy. Instead of the promotion of a “general welfare,” the insurance companies are winning and it is now a promotion of profits and the bottom line, and to protect those profits, the state will use any means to do so. The next section will highlight the “loud and direct” forms of violence that is perpetuated by the state as the Scott Olsen incident is examined.

Scott Olsen



Picture 2: Scott Olsen peacefully protesting with other veterans at Occupy Oakland.³⁶

Picture 3: Moments later after being hit by a gas canister.³⁷

Scott Olsen, a 24 year old 2 time Iraq war veteran moved from Onalaska, Wisconsin, to San Francisco to work for a software company. His first experience with activism came with protests against Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker’s attack on Unions,

³⁶ “This Video Shows Protester Scott Olsen Moments Before He Was Injured By The Oakland Police,” *Business Insider*, accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/this-video-shows-scott-olsen-moments-before-he-was-injured-by-opd-2011-10>.

³⁷ “Scott Olsen Injuries Prompt Review as Occupy Oakland Protests Continue,” *The Guardian*, October 26, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/26/scott-olsen-occupy-oakland-review>.

and then with becoming a member of Iraq Veterans Against the War.³⁸ When the Occupy movement began, he decided to become apart of the Oakland group and became a permanent resident at the Occupy Oakland encampment, working his job during the day and Occupying at night.³⁹ On October 25, 2011, in Oakland, California—just over a month into the Occupy movement—Olsen was peacefully protesting when police decided to break up the protest by means of force. In the melee that ensued Olsen was shot in the head with a gas canister. The canister fractured his skull causing him to be taken to the hospital as surgery became necessary to relieve the swelling in his brain. The irony of the event is that Olsen was sent to Iraq twice, returning both times physically unharmed, but comes home to exercise the first amendment right that he fought for and was critically injured by the state.

The Scott Olsen incident represents what Alain Badiou calls a “spark that ‘lights a prairie fire’.”⁴⁰ The fire can be seen in the resulting vandalism that took place after the attack. Badiou continues on to state, “Just as uniformly, the government and its police not only categorically refuse to accept the slightest responsibility for the whole affair, but use the riot as a pretext for reinforcing the arsenal of the police and criminal justice system.”⁴¹ Similarly, the police denied that

³⁸ “Scott Olsen: Casualty of the Occupation | Politics News | Rolling Stone,” *Rollingstone.com*, accessed December 5, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/scott-olsen-casualty-of-the-occupation-20120119>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott, 1st ed. (Verso, 2012). Pg. 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

they were responsible for Olsen's injuries and continued to use violent military tactics to combat the protestors.⁴²

On state violence, Badiou says:

To believe that the intolerable crime is to burn a few cars and rob some shops, whereas to kill a young man is trivial, is typically in keeping with what Marx regarded as the principle alienation of capitalism: the primacy of things over existence, of commodities over life and machines over workers, which he encapsulates in the formula: 'Le mort saisit le vif'.⁴³

While Olsen was not killed, a similar line can be drawn in a protection of capital with an utter disrespect for life. The police often claim that their tactics are not lethal and are meant to protect the people, but had Olsen not gone to a hospital he very well could have died from his brain swelling. The incident has subsequently left him with some brain damage.⁴⁴ Furthermore, who is it that the police are trying to protect, it is clearly not the protestors, as the violence seems to act as a form of repression, while Wall Street continues to profit on those who have been violated. Therefore it is a protection for the profiteers of violence, not of the people whom the police are sworn to protect, as the "non-lethal" weapons used against such protestors can often be lethal.⁴⁵

Interestingly enough, parallels between what the Occupy movement is fighting for are in some ways similar to what the Tea Party was fighting for. While

⁴² "US Military Veterans Heed Occupy Rallying Cry," Text.Article, *Associated Press*, November 3, 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2011/11/03/us-military-veterans-heed-occupy-rallying-cry/>.

⁴³ Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*. . Pg. 20.

⁴⁴ Scott Olsen: Casualty of the Occupation | Politics News | Rolling Stone

⁴⁵ Jorma Jussila and Pertti Normia, "International Law and Law Enforcement Firearms," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 20, no. 1 (January 2004): 55-69, doi:10.1080/13623690412331302294.

an in-depth analysis is not the focus of this paper, it should be noted as an interesting example that the Tea Party was demonstrating against the government, whereas the Occupy movement is protesting against corporate entities. While Tea Partiers were carrying weapons to protests, no violence was reported because it was against the state, which is fairly used to being protested against. Whereas the Occupiers carried no weapons besides a few rocks and bottles—but the majority were non-violent protestors and carried no weapons—and have been met with riot gear and violence because it is against these capitalist entities.⁴⁶ Therefore this state-finance nexus seems more concerned about protecting capitalist interests, as they seem more vulnerable to resistance.

It is this violence that is created by the state-finance nexus that is of concern to veterans and to all those involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement. In order to overcome this violence new types of thinking are in order, and it is in the creation of a resistance to the state-finance nexus that I will now turn as an examination of veterans who act as Organic Intellectual's that create such resistance and new modes of thinking.

The Organic Intellectual

Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectual," traces back to his thoughts on the spread of revolutionary thought in order to bring about the Communist revolution. The basis comes from Marx as he saw the role of Communists as "the most advanced and

⁴⁶ I have often heard in jest that if members of the Occupy movement had come to the different actions like the Tea Party members did, with weapons, they would more than likely get shot by the police, which seems like a very sad and disturbing hypocrisy, that shows the differences between the reactions of the state in relation to protests against capitalism.

resolute section of the working-class parties of every country,” and it was their role to “point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat.”⁴⁷ Therefore, it was initially the communists who were seen as the intellectuals and it was their duty to raise class-consciousness to help progress a communist revolution.

By the time that Lenin had come around the communist revolution had still not come and he looked to reconceptualize how the revolution would come about. For Lenin, class political consciousness could only be attained from an outside force, which he would call the vanguard party.⁴⁸ This party would consist of committees that had not only intellectuals but also primarily what he refers to as “agitators,” which would spread propaganda and rile up the working class.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it was within these committees that theory would be formed, which would then be spread to the working class. Therefore, there were two functions of this vanguard party, one of the social organizing and the other of theorizing, which is where the term praxis became popular.

About thirty years later, Antonio Gramsci revisited this idea of revolutionary thought. While he agreed with Lenin that social organizing and theorizing were crucial to the revolution, he believed that it was from within the classes that organic intellectuals would rise to create revolutionary change.⁵⁰ Therefore, these organic intellectuals would both organize and theorize, but it would be with an insight that

⁴⁷ Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader. The Communist Manifesto*. Pg. 484.

⁴⁸ V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, ed. S. V. Utechin (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975). Pg. 98.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 102.

⁵⁰ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Pg. 132.

is unavailable to bourgeois intellectuals because it comes from a level of experience, which I will return to shortly.

Nearly eighty years after Gramsci wrote about the organic intellectual the discussion continues on, and has been amplified in the wake of the largest financial crisis since the Great Depression. David Harvey picks up the torch in his book *The Enigma of Capital* in a chapter reflective of Lenin titled “What is to be Done? And Who is Going to Do It?” While he gives some lip service to Gramsci, as he states there is a lot to learn from the plight of the working class, the chapter is much more aligned with Lenin’s vanguard party.⁵¹ Harvey divides those affected by the financial crisis into sides; the discontented and alienated make up one half, in which they are those who supposedly understand the system and have become jaded, i.e. academics, leftists, activists, etc.;⁵² the deprived and dispossessed make up the other half, which are “those whose conditions of laboring and living are most immediately affected by their insertion into the circulation and accumulation of capital only to be deprived and dispossessed of their command not only over their labour but over the material, cultural and natural relations of their own existence.”⁵³ In other words, these groups of people are those who are exploited, not only by the corporations they work for but also by the system in and of itself. The exploitation has come at the hands of businesses, the legal system, the security apparatus, the military, etc. It

⁵¹ Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*. Pg. 257.

⁵² Ibid. 240.

⁵³ Ibid. 241.

is those of the working-class who are most affected by capitalism as they are the targets of exploitation and are often left behind.⁵⁴

Harvey states, “It is not the place of the alienated and discontented to instruct the deprived and dispossessed as to what they should or should not do. But what we... can and must do is to identify the underlying roots of the problems that confronts us all.”⁵⁵ While Harvey seems to be pushing against the vanguard idea, he also advocates that it is “the intellectual wing of the alienated and discontent,” that must basically teach and expose the problems of the world to everyone else, as if those who are comprised of the deprived and dispossessed are not able of conceptualizing what the problem is and what should be done. Harvey also seems to suggest that the alienated and discontented must join the deprived and dispossessed and surrender their privileges to become deprived and dispossessed themselves, which will create a better alliance.⁵⁶ Though this seems to come from a place of privilege as it belittles the complexities of issues like racism, sexism, and the other identity politics that have connections with class issues. Which is why a turn back to Gramsci is needed, as it is not the bourgeois intellectual that will be the savior of the working class, but rather the organic intellectual since they are the ones who experience the most violence at the hands of the state finance nexus.

The Veteran as the Organic Intellectual

The third section of IVAW’s statement of solidarity with the Occupy movement is subtitled “Veterans have a history of effective grassroots organizing,” and reads:

⁵⁴ Ibid. 241.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 241-242.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

IVAW has been a voice for veterans and their grievances since our founding in 2004. We understand that change comes about when people speak up, organize, and demand justice. Veterans and active-duty service members have a history of organizing, from the Bonus March to the Vietnam War. Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have an important contribution to make to this movement.⁵⁷

This passage exemplifies the ways in which veterans have been and continue to play important roles in activism for social justice. It is evident that IVAW is working towards issues beyond veterans as their mission statement seeks reparations for the Iraqi people. Similarly the havoc reaped upon the American people by the state-finance nexus is a similar violation that the veterans have experienced in their encounter with war. This violation—as shown in the section on state violence, seen above—is tightly linked to the state-finance nexus.

IVAW's letter of solidarity closes by stating:

As service members we are told that we fight for human rights and democratic freedoms. However, these rights seem to be continually denied at protests across the nation, often times by police using excessive force and violent tactics. We support our members, fellow veterans and members of this movement who have been subjected to this gross contradiction, and who have refused to remain silent.⁵⁸

It is in the wake of what happened to Scott Olsen that this statement was forged, as the violence that was perpetuated upon him exemplifies this denial of “democratic freedoms,” which he and other veterans fought for. Furthermore, it is this denial of

⁵⁷ “Board of Directors Statement on the Occupy Movement: We Are the 99% | Iraq Veterans Against the War.”

⁵⁸ Ibid.

rights, which pushes the veterans of IVAW to organize and resist the state-corporate nexus that continues to profit at the cost of the people. It is this kind of information and organizing that is at the heart of what Gramsci terms as the organic intellectual, as it seeks to counter the violence and create new forms of positive change. Similarly, Sgt. Shamar Thomas can be seen as an organic intellectual that has grown from the violence inherent in the state-finance nexus. It is because of this violence that Sgt. Thomas stands up and fights, as he states:

This is a chance to voice our issues—police brutality, economic injustice, foreclosed homes... I'm a warrior, I don't have any fear in the streets. So how do I sit on a couch and watch people fight for our freedom and not do anything about it? That's cowardice. This is about my freedom and the freedom of my people.⁵⁹

It is not just events like Occupy Wall Street that Sgt. Thomas has worked with to expose these problems, but rather his other organizing that needs to be examined.

After the confrontation with police, Sgt. Thomas helped to start two organizations; the first was called "Occupy Gangbangers."⁶⁰ The second was "Global Veterans of the 99%," which was coordinated with Iraq Veterans Against the War. The latter group would eventually become a sub-committee within the New York IVAW chapter, but would also organize with groups such as: Veterans for Peace, OccupyMARINES, Occupy Navy, Occupy Airforce, Occupy Coast Guard, Occupy Military Families.⁶¹ The goal of the two organizations was:

...to engage gangsters and former soldiers in Occupy, transforming the destructive violence bred within warrior communities into a

⁵⁹ Levitin, "Occupying War: A Marine Vet Finds His Mission."

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

positive, unified power that challenges the corporate state actors who have victimized those communities—by sending them to fight in illegal manufactured wars, disenfranchising the inner-city poor, and failing to offer economic futures to either.⁶²

The organizing done by Sgt. Thomas can be seen in a number of ways. The first is that it can be seen as a uniting of the “deprived and the dispossessed.”⁶³ However, unlike Harvey’s notion of the alienated and discontent coming to help unite, Sgt. Thomas comes from these groups—veterans and gang members—thus making him more of an organic intellectual. Therefore, what Sgt. Thomas is doing is organizing with gang members who have grown up in violence perpetuated by these systems, and organizing with veterans who have been exploited by the state-financial nexus, and teaching both groups who their enemy should be.

Sgt. Thomas’ focus is in his message, as he often asks the gang members, “How are you a gangster when you’re killing your own people in your neighborhood, your own army, somebody who’s poor just like you?”⁶⁴ In this message he aims to point their rage towards the state and the corporate interests that are exploiting their communities.⁶⁵ The message of Sgt. Thomas in combination of the Occupy message in which the unification of poor blacks, particularly gang members who are often seen as a problem within society—that drains the resources of communities due to the cost of policing them—then becomes a positive force, which seeks revolutionary change.

As for his message to veterans he states:

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*. Pg. 239-241.

⁶⁴ Levitin, “Occupying War: A Marine Vet Finds His Mission.”

⁶⁵ Ibid.

They're robbing veterans first-hand... How do you consciously give an 18-year-old \$1,500 a month to fight a war where he's on the front lines, so he can't even save up enough money to get his own place when he gets out? We talk about supporting our troops and 'honoring our veterans,' but how are veterans going to send their kids to college or even buy a car on the pensions they're paid? We all know in our hearts that there is one thing, or many things, wrong... Would you fight for freedom?⁶⁶

The violence that veterans are asked to perpetuate in the name of freedom comes at great cost to the veteran, mentally, emotionally, and physically as shown in previous sections. All the while there is little compensation for the trauma that comes with the wars they are asking to fight in. This not only damages the veteran at the point of injury, but also perpetuates into future generations, which often leaves the veteran and their families destitute. It is this destitution that often leads youth to join gangs creating a cyclical process that Sgt. Thomas aims to break. He goes on to state:

We have a powerful weapon: our voice, We're getting veterans and gangsters around the country together into the movement—understanding why we're here, why we're oppressed. We make them question who they are, and help them to look at Wall Street—these are the people we need to fight against. Once we take money out of politics, we can take back our communities.⁶⁷

It is within this message, that the ties between the state-finance nexus culminates with all the previous aspects that this paper examines, as it exemplifies the different levels of violence—at home and abroad—that can be seen perpetuated by those on

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Wall Street, those who send the troops to war, and the state apparatus that protects capitalism.

It is the functions of capitalism that are in part, the reasons he was in a gang, joined the military, was sent to war, and became homeless upon return. As Gramsci states in his discussion of the intellectual, “he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is to bring into being new modes of thought.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Sgt. Thomas seems to be engaging on a different level—as opposed to the regular Occupy participant—as he attempts to draw the parallels between the war on the streets and the wars abroad. It is the immorality towards our citizens that he fights against as the state-corporate nexus perpetuates violence upon the people and upon the veterans it sends off to war. Sgt. Thomas seeks to change this by exposing the injustices and organizing others to stand up, speak out, and fight. This can be seen in the above quote as he states the power of one’s voice and the ways in which it can be a powerful weapon.

The organizing/social function is one of the most crucial points for Gramsci’s organic intellectual. While Gramsci states, “all men are intellectuals,” the defining characteristic for him is the “immediate social function... in the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighted, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous effort.”⁶⁹ It is this social function that Sgt. Thomas is engaged in, as he attempts to teach others of the perils embedded within

⁶⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (International Publishers Co, 1971). Pg. 141.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 140.

capitalism, specifically by organizing veterans and gangsters. Gramsci goes on to state:

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence... but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator... from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains “specialized” and does not become “directive.”⁷⁰

This quote highlights a number of things, from the social to the need to be involved within the functions that one is theorizing. It is the first hand experience that gives the organic intellectual their credibility and ability to reconceptualize ideas. Similarly, it is Sgt. Thomas’ firsthand experience in gangs, in the military, and on the streets that give him the ability to be an effective organic intellectual. This does a number of things but most importantly, as Gramsci points out, it ‘deepens and broadens the “intellectuality” of each individual,’ that the organic intellectual engages with.⁷¹ It also works to transform what Gramsci terms as ‘the two major superstructural levels; civil society and the state.’⁷²

The “structure,” for Gramsci, is the base in which the functions of capitalism reside, whereas the superstructures are where politics and ideology reside.⁷³ The structure and the superstructure have a reciprocal relationship that transforms one another, which is what makes capitalism so elusive. Therefore, it is the duty of the organic intellectual to expose these transformations so that those who wish to

⁷⁰ Ibid. 141-142.

⁷¹ Ibid. 142.

⁷² Ibid. 145.

⁷³ Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs (NYU Press, 2000). Pg. 190-193.

disrupt the functions of capitalism can be more effective. Sgt. Thomas does this as he shows the relationships between war and poverty, which works to disrupt the state-financial nexus.

Conclusion

The participation of military veterans within the Occupy Wall Street movement creates an alternative narrative in the ways in which the movement can be examined. With groups like IVAW, and individuals like Scott Olsen and Shamar Thomas, working within the Occupy movement, a broader understanding of the breadth of the state-financial nexus can be seen and the extent of violence that stems from the system in which the state works to perpetuate. The oath of a soldier disrupts this violence as they have sworn to protect the very people that the state is violating. Paradoxically, it is then the state itself that can be seen as the very enemy that the veterans must fight, as it is in violation of the Constitution by not establishing justice, not insuring domestic tranquility, neglecting the common defense, not promoting the general welfare, not securing liberty to ourselves or posterity, and by egregiously violating the First Amendment—the right to free speech and the right to assemble peacefully.

Furthermore, veterans can often act as organic intellectuals as they seek to raise a new kind of class-consciousness that creates a condition of possibility in which a radically egalitarian, anti-capitalist, co-revolutionary space can be formed. The organic intellectual is a critical position in making change, and groups like IVAW, along with veterans like Sgt. Shamar Thomas can participate in these roles, as they are able to reach across multiple levels of subjugation. Once on the front lines

of battle in Iraq and Afghanistan, they now come home to fight on the front lines of the battle for America.

"Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."

*-John F. Kennedy
13 March 1962*

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