

A Message to Occupy from the 99%

I recently returned from anthropological fieldwork in Africa to find Harvard Occupied and a tent city erected in the Yard.

I would like to think I am a member of the 99% the **Occupy movement** is about. Both of my parents were laid off in this economic downturn. My father spent the year before his unemployment training the people who would offshore his job. My 58-year-old mother had no health insurance for two years; the care she received was cobbled together from doctors willing to accept payments of \$10 a month. This is not the America they taught me to believe in.

But effecting real change requires that **Occupy** Wall Street (OWS) do more than demand debt relief, diversity, fair contracts, and justice. It requires hard, clear-headed thinking. It requires views nuanced enough to make policy recommendations. It requires **Occupy** Harvard being informed enough to tell Harvard President Drew Faust and the Harvard Management Corporation how to write socially just, yet fiscally responsible, policy.

The first concrete complaint in **Occupy** Harvard's statement of principles is the 180:1 pay difference between the head of investments of Harvard Management Corporation and the lowest-paid custodial staff. This difference strikes me as grossly large but not necessarily unjust. After all, one of them manages a \$30 billion endowment and the other cleans classrooms. Should job duties and skill be tied to pay? Do you decrease the executive's wage or increase the salary of the lowest-paid employees? What ratio would make it "just," and how do you determine this?

It is not enough to say Harvard should pay custodians fair wages without discussing contract details. In an open message, **Occupy** Harvard writes, "The administration has claimed that its workers are treated fairly, but we all know our custodial workers are reasonable people – they wouldn't be complaining if they were treated properly." This is not an argument. It does not inform. There are no figures for current wages and benefits, comparisons to regional and national averages, or the cost of living in Boston. And yet the public is supposed to concede that their prior contract was unjust.

The **Occupy movement** is also about global justice. I have lived on two continents with people surviving on less than a dollar a day. I have seen what no access to health care looks like; I know what happens to the body when food is gone. The children cry until they are too empty to cry anymore. It makes you sick.

But feeling sick is not a platform. Talking about how sick you feel is not a policy prescription.

Occupy Harvard writes there is "injustice in African land grabs that displace local farmers" but provides few details about how Harvard can improve its foreign investment practices. How do you distinguish between farms that create jobs in a region where unemployment hovers above 90 percent and those that displace local peasants stuck in little better than a feudal system? At one market in southern Ethiopia, I met a woman who walked 10 kilometers to sell four shriveled oranges. I imagine she would gladly pick someone else's produce for pay. Would you tell her that Harvard won't invest in businesses that invest in her country?

And yet there are other places in Africa where large multinational agribusinesses are building farms on traditional lands and those who do not move are simply arrested. Six months after the first trucks come there is no village, only miles of crops and a nomadic people turned beggars.

Occupy Harvard's petition states, "we have a duty to examine our own role in contributing to these disparities and should seek out ways to create a more just world." I agree. But this is not a platform; it is a set of values. How to enact those values is a platform, and this is what we are waiting to hear.

In the meantime, **Occupy** Harvard effectively holds Harvard Yard hostage. Is it reasonable to indefinitely maintain a tent city at the center of the Yard until someone else figures out how to enact these values in Harvard's policies?

It is easy to live in tents with like-minded people talking about injustice. It is more difficult to do something constructive with your outrage. This is your challenge, **Occupy**. Are you willing to work hard enough to educate yourselves on how to build a better world, not just demand that others do it?

Americans, and many of we Harvard students, know our institutions are replete with injustice, in part because of the dialogue **Occupy** has created. But how do we, how does Harvard, create a more just world? How do you manage \$30 billion in a responsible way? How do you maintain Harvard's academic excellence while building an institution whose cornerstone is not only truth but justice?

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Or is it simply enough to set up tents and issue vague lists of demands with little direction on how they should be met? Someone else will figure out the details. This is why, to many observers, however sympathetic with the cause, the **Occupy movement** smarts of self-righteousness and entitlement: We're not going to move until we get what we want. And we're not going to tell you what exactly we want.

Simply pointing out the injustices isn't enough.

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