
Traitors to their class

Posted by Marjorie Pritchard

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By Peter Dreier and Chuck Collins

After five weeks, Harvard students just evacuated the tents they had pitched on campus as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Their protest helped persuade the university to raise wages and benefits for the college custodians. The students intend to continue their activism by other means, focusing on issues such as the university's investment in HEI, a hotel company with questionable labor practices. Some pundits viewed the Harvard protest as laughingly ironic, paradoxical, and even hypocritical. After all, whether or not they come from wealthy backgrounds, being at Harvard marks them as part of the elite -- the so-called one percent -- with a clear stake in the existing system of privilege and power.

Few of the protesters probably know about Corliss Lamont (1902-1995), a 1924 Harvard graduate, who was born to Wall Street wealth as the scion of the chairman of J. P. Morgan & Company, but who cast his lot as a backer of radical causes. In 1929, while teaching philosophy at Columbia University, Lamont came to the aid of the 19 "scrubwomen" who cleaned Harvard's Widener Library. They had been fired after they complained to the state's Minimum Wage Commission that the university had failed to pay them Massachusetts' 37 cent-and-hour minimum wage. Lamont led a publicity campaign to embarrass his alma mater and then raised the money, much of it from other alums, required to pay the maids what Harvard owed them.

It turns out that today's Harvard students, protesting on behalf of the 99 percent, are hardly an anomaly, but are part of a proud tradition of affluent Americans -- those who inherited or worked for their fortunes -- finding common cause with the poor, the working class, and progressive movements for social justice.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, many wealthy Americans were motivated by religious views about slavery, women's rights, and labor. Some were inspired by the writings of radicals and reformers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Edward Bellamy and Upton Sinclair, who challenged their conventional views, aroused their consciences, and helped stir them to action.

A clandestine group of wealthy abolitionists who called themselves the "Secret Six" funded much of the movement to end slavery. Publicly they helped elect abolitionist Charles Sumner to Congress, funded William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper the Liberator, and supported the work of Frederick Douglass. Secretly, they financed John Brown's anti-slavery organizing, including his attempted insurrection at Harpers Ferry in 1859.

During the Progressive Era, many wealthy Americans -- mostly college-educated women -- contributed their time, talent, and money to the battle against slums and sweatshops. Jane Addams, Alice Hamilton, Florence Kelley, Lillian Wald, and many others founded the settlement house movement - the nation's first generation of community organizers -- and embraced crusades for workers' rights, public health, housing reform, women's suffrage, civil rights, and

peace.

Maud Younger (1870-1936) was an independently wealthy socialite, raised in San Francisco, whose experience working in a New York settlement house radicalized her into a lifelong crusader for social justice. To learn more about working class life, she worked briefly as a waitress, then organized San Francisco's first waitress union in 1908 and was instrumental in mobilizing support for the state's eight-hour-day law. She founded the Wage Earners' Equal Suffrage League for Working Women and in 1911, with the support of the labor movement, helped pass an amendment to the California constitution granting women the right to vote. She invested her fortune and talent in the National Woman's Party to extend the vote to women nationwide.

During the great "Uprising of the 20,000" in 1909 and 1910 (the largest strike by American women workers to that time), upper class women affiliated with the Womens Trade Union League raised money for the workers' strike fund, lawyers, and bail money, and even joined the union members on picket lines. (Union organizer Rose Schneiderman referred to them as the "mink brigade.") It was through her work with the WTUL that a young Eleanor Roosevelt was first exposed to the suffering of the poor, an experience that transformed her into a life-long progressive.

Her husband, President Franklin Roosevelt, the scion of a patrician family -- indeed, a Harvard graduate -- believed that his New Deal policies would humanize and thus save capitalism. But most of America's upper class feared that FDR was leading the country down the path to socialism. They called him a "traitor to his class. "

Julius Rosenwald (1862 -1932), a founder of Sears Roebuck, also donated millions of dollars to create more than 5,000 schools for African American children in the rural South. In the 1930s, the Rosenwald Fund supported the Highlander Folk School, a training center in Tennessee for radical activists that became a key player in the Southern labor and civil rights movements. Marshall Field III (1893 -1956), heir to a Chicago department store fortune, was a founding board member of Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation, started in 1940 as a center for community organizers that has trained or influenced generations of grassroots activists, including Cesar Chavez. Alinsky's IAF was given another financial boost in the 1960s by Gordon Sherman (1927-1987) of the Midas Muffler company. Sherman was also an early funder of Ralph Nader's network of consumer groups (including his first advocacy group, the Center for Auto Safety) and a backer of Chicago's Businessmen for the Public Interest, which conducted research and legal action to help the poor, challenge racial discrimination in housing, and improve the environment.

In the 1950s and 1960s, wealthy Americans participated in the civil rights movements, as activists and as funders. Children of America's elite went South to register voters, join the Freedom Riders, and organize marches for integration. They continued their activism and philanthropy in the anti-war, women's rights, and environmental movements. Starting in the 1970s, groups of wealthy radicals, seeking to challenge the paternalistic "noblesse oblige" approach to giving, created progressive foundations dedicated to funding grassroots groups fighting for decent housing, workers rights, immigrant rights, voting rights, living wages, and other social justice causes. Today, more than a dozen such foundations -- such as Liberty Hill in Los Angeles, Vanguard in San Francisco, Bread & Roses in Philadelphia, Haymarket People's Fund in Boston and North Star Fund in New York -- operate on the principle of "change, not charity."

During last year's battle for health care reform, the grassroots organizing was led by Health Care for America Now, a coalition of unions, community and consumer groups, and faith-based organizations. HCAN's work, particularly its direct action protests and media work targeting the insurance companies, gave Democrats the pressure they need to rescue reform from defeat. HCAN's major funder was Atlantic Philanthropies, a foundation created by Chuck Feeney, whose fortune came from Duty Free shops.

Of course, most wealthy progressives are reformers, not radicals. They recognize that a huge divide between the rich and the rest of America is not healthy for democracy. They want to make capitalism more humane and fair. Billionaire George Soros -- a favorite target of Fox News and the extreme right -- has contributed significant funds to human rights groups and to liberal Democrats. Warren Buffett, the CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, the nation's second wealthiest individual, and hardly a revolutionary, recently suggested that rich Americans should pay somewhat higher taxes. Following Buffett's example, and inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement, last week three dozen wealthy businesspeople, calling themselves "Patriotic Millionaires for Fiscal Strength" called on Congress to substantially increase their taxes.

The Harvard students who occupied their campus to draw attention to the nation's economic injustices are part of a long tradition. Some brand them "traitors to their class," but they are really just citizens with a conscience.

Peter Dreier teaches politics and chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy department at Occidental College. Chuck Collins directs the Program on Inequality at the Institute for Policy Studies.
