

Protests of summer 2012 will shape decade to come

Paul Saffo
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Occupy Wall Street is the latest - and most dramatic - instance of the unrest smoldering in the American zeitgeist since the 2008 financial crash. It is also something larger, a catalyst releasing social forces unseen since the 1960s. These forces will gain momentum over the next half year and converge in what is likely to be a long and dramatic summer of American protest and discontent.

Comparisons of this movement-in-the making and the '60s are as tempting as they are obvious. Now as then, it is well-educated, restless youth who are in the protest vanguard for the simple reason that the actual downtrodden are too busy trying to survive to devote time to a

cause. However, the '60s student activists marched against a backdrop of prosperity and low unemployment. The Establishment had jobs waiting for the anti-Establishment protesters whenever they decided to hang up their love beads. Today's new grads are faced with diminishing salaries and jobs in areas that do not employ the skills learned at university. Occupy's activists aren't just marching to save others - they are marching on behalf of their own futures.

The current economic climate contrasts sharply with that of the '60s, when an affluent and complacent middle class acted as social ballast against radical change. The middle class today is smaller and buffeted by underwater mortgages, unemployment and disappearing 401(k)s. This is an insecure population likely to agree with the sentiments of the demonstrators and, as the Tea Party has already shown, likely to protest as well.

The biggest difference between today and the '60s is in media power. Mass media all but controlled what '60s publics viewed. Poster board, postal mail, mimeograph machines and rotary-dial phones were the tools of revolution.

Thanks to the digital revolution, media power today lies firmly in the hands of the street, and no one is forced to get their news from a corporation. This will change, but for the moment, smart-phone-wielding demonstrators can topple dictators. Closer to home, organizations like 350.org count on social media to do everything from build a constituency to schedule the arrest times for White House protesters.

But digital media's impact goes far beyond mere reach; it has enabled the rise of leaderless movements from Anonymous to Occupy Wall Street. This adds tremendous unpredictability to the climate of unrest, as events unfold from the smart-mob consciousness of the participants. There are no leaders to arrest, much less negotiate with. Back in 1999, in the aftermath of the first leaderless demonstrations at the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in Seattle, the absence of



Demonstrators from groups including OccupySF blockcaded Wells Fargo headquarters on California Street in San Francisco.

Photo: Brant Ward / The Chronicle

summer. Both conventions are in Southern cities unlikely to hold large populations of indigenous anarchists, but I can't shake the suspicion that the local police will have their hands full with motivated visitors arriving from across the country.

The mere mention of police raises the specter that the summer of 2012 will turn violent. Memories of '60s-era chaos, from Isla Vista to the Watts riots and Kent State shootings, come to mind. We have militarized our police departments in the intervening decades, and a post-9/11 obsession with terror and security makes police overreaction all but inevitable. Protests will inevitably be met by counterprotests, and emotions will rise with the temperatures.

Will pro-oil protesters tangle with anti-tar sands demonstrators in Oklahoma? Might a frustrated cop pepper-spray helpless handcuffed students? Perhaps an anarchist will torch a bank, or a patrol car. The spark could come from - and land - anywhere. But when violence occurs, I am hopeful that it will be quelled by demonstrators self-organizing with social media to keep the peace. If volunteers can manage Burning Man, surely the same can happen with demonstrations to come.

The tumultuous summer of 2012 will also hold some welcome surprises. It will be a time when frustrated citizens find common ground in the streets, and demonstrators will be astonished by who is standing next to them. Commonality could well reverse the political fragmentation that has defined the last decade. Above all, the summer of 2012 will share one thing with what transpired in the 1960s: What unfolds in 2012 will unquestionably reshape our society in the decade to come.

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guilty to blame cost Seattle dearly. The police chief lost his job, and the city ended up settling with the protesters it arrested, at a cost of \$250,000 atop the millions already spent for police overtime and post-demonstration cleanup.

Other factors on the horizon:

The U.S. Supreme Court has taken up its most incendiary docket in years and will be handing down decisions on everything from health care mandates to illegal immigration in the months leading to summer 2012. No matter how the court rules, someone will be unhappy enough to protest.

Next year is an election year, with two major-party conventions scheduled in late