Why "Occupy Wall Street" Fizzled

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The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street came into existence at roughly the same time, in the wake of the financial markets' collapse, and each was an angry challenge to the country's financial and political status quo. But there the similarity ended.

The ultra-conservative Tea Party movement focused on tax cuts and smaller government, and it has never veered far from that message. It achieved consensus on these goals early on, and has succeeded in unifying adherents in its congressional caucus and elsewhere. It remains a potent force in American politics today.

The liberal Occupy Wall Street, by contrast, focused on . . . well, what exactly? Its message, beyond disdain for the rich, was never entirely clear to many Americans, and indeed its various protests fizzled without much to show—no new leaders, no legislative victories or political change of any kind. If anything, the national mood favored liberal ideas, yet the Occupy protestors never showed any kind of solidarity. The movement is now dead, and will be no more than a footnote to history.

Why the stark difference in the fates of these two movements? A group of New York University psychological scientists believe the answer may lie in a fundamental psychological difference between liberals and conservatives—specifically in how individuals on the left and right perceive their uniqueness. Everyone believes their beliefs are more widely shared than they actually are, but Chadly Stern and his colleagues think that liberals are also highly motivated to feel unique and nonconformist, and that they therefore underestimate their similarity to other liberals. Moderates and conservatives overestimate their similarity to other like-minded people, and this basic psychological difference could be undermining liberal solidarity and mobilizing conservative movements.

Here's how they explored this idea in the lab. They recruited a large sample of men and women, ranging in age from 18 to 77, who identified themselves as ideologically liberal, moderate or conservative. All the volunteers read a series of statements, with which they could agree or disagree. Some of the statements were political (American should strive to strengthen its military) and some were general (I like poetry). They were then asked to estimate the percentage of politically like-minded people who would agree with each statement. Everyone completed a psychological inventory that measured personal need for uniqueness.

The idea was to see if liberals see themselves as less conformist than moderates and conservatives. And they do. As reported in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, self-defined liberals underestimated the similarity of their views to those of other liberals, whereas moderates and conservatives overestimated the similarity. What's more, liberals' nonconformist views were clearly shaped by a dispositional desire to be different, not part of the crowd. The authors believe this is a deeply rooted egocentric bias in the way liberals see themselves in the world.

This finding has important implications, especially for those who want to mobilize political movements. Perceived consensus—even if it's just a perception—can motivate a movement's rank and file to embrace social change and stay focused. By contrast, the desire for uniqueness can undermine individuals' ability to capitalize on whatever consensus actually exists. The NYU scientists believe that this psychological dynamic is reflected most notably in the media today, where conservative pundits speak with a unified voice of a movement, while liberal commentators splinter the left with critical and diverging views.

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