

Dave Dellinger's Political Legacy to Occupy Wall Street

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Recently historians have shown a growing interest in a small group of Christian radical pacifists, who became conscientious objectors during World War II, opposed the Cold War and participated in the civil rights movement as well as in the movement against the war in Vietnam (Tracy; Bennett; Mollin). These longtime nonviolent activists were a small but significant minority, because they kept political dissent alive in the forties and fifties when liberal consensus prevailed, bridging the gap between the Old Left and the New Left. Dave Dellinger was one of these activists and, as a leader of the antiwar movement, he played a crucial role in its evolution. He continued to be politically active throughout the eighties and nineties when dissent was virtually non-existent in American society, until his death in 2004 at the age of eighty-eight. His lifelong commitment eased the transition to Occupy Wall Street and provided ongoing continuity among radical movements.

This paper outlines and evaluates the influence that Dellinger exerted upon subsequent generations of protestors, from the New Left to Occupy Wall Street. In the latter case, it was an indirect influence because Dellinger died before the beginning of the movement in 2011 and many young activists did not know who he was, even though they pursued the same political goals and strategies. In fact Dellinger was an influential champion of twentieth-century radicalism and is still revered by older activists, who have created a website, as well as an Essay

Contest and an annual “David Dellinger Lecture on Nonviolence” to honor his memory and keep it alive (*Official Dave Dellinger Website*; “Announcing”). But, as his biographer Andrew E. Hunt has pointed out, he was a rather obscure public figure, except during a brief period of national celebrity thanks to his role in the 1969 Chicago Conspiracy Trial (279). After his “fifteen minutes of fame” he was forgotten by the general public and continued to labor in obscurity for the rest of his life (Dellinger 414).

However, while most activists of Occupy Wall Street did not know who Dellinger was, a few of them did know him, admired his long-standing activism and were aware of the striking similarity between his political standpoint and their own forms of protest. In 2012 some of these young militants started posting on the web favorable comments about him: for example, Michael Albert considered Dellinger as “someone whose work is worth revisiting today” and another activist wrote that “David Dellinger was one of my heroes” (Albert; “Nonviolence, Peace, and War”). They urged their friends to read up on his life and his writings.” As a result, Dellinger, along with Gandhi, Thoreau and Muste, became a source of inspiration for some of Occupy Wall Street protestors, but his influence upon the movement continued to be mostly indirect, because those who eventually came to admire him represented a very small minority. Therefore, although it cannot be claimed that Dellinger exerted a direct influence on Occupy Wall Street, neither can it be denied that he anticipated, inspired and, in some cases, personally influenced the young activists of the new wave of protest.

The trajectory of Dellinger’s life runs parallel to that of Occupy Wall Street. From its inception in September 2011 the movement succeeded in attracting the attention of the media by launching a series of anti-establishment demonstrations that consolidated the idea of ninety-nine percent versus one percent, but was subsequently unable to articulate a concrete program for reform (Stiglitz; Greenberg 46-48). The activists’ belief in participatory democracy, which was a central element of Dellinger’s political legacy to the movement, prevented them from building infrastructures for decision making and strategies for sustaining momentum (Tufekci). As a result, a year after the protestors were removed from Zuccotti Park, Occupy Wall Street reemerged as a series of advocacy groups— such as Occupy Sandy, Strike Debt, Occupy Our Homes and Occupy Farms— that are still trying to effect change in a pragmatic and incremental way. But the media no longer provide coverage of their activity and the young activists are continuing their work out of the public eye. Therefore, although Dellinger’s political legacy is not without contradictions, it also represents an outstanding and courageous example of a man who spent most of his life “speaking truth to power” in an attempt to expand “the boundaries of freedom” in the United States.

David (Dave) Dellinger was born in Wakefield, Massachusetts, in 1915, into an upper-class Republican family. When he was a teenager, he became aware that he was living a life of privilege and began to feel empathy for the poor and the oppressed. His family belonged to the Congregational Church, but he did not like

organized religion. However, he started reading the Bible on his own account and became a Christian, albeit an unconventional one, who never joined any church and was attracted by the way of life of the early disciples of Jesus, who shared their belongings and rejected any form of violence (Dellinger 446-50). He also greatly admired Saint Francis of Assisi, who had renounced his heritage as the son of a merchant and had chosen to live in self-imposed poverty. Dellinger was inspired to follow a similar path.

In 1932 he enrolled at Yale University and was involved with Dwight Hall, the Yale Christian Association where students engaged in community service in the poor neighborhoods of New Haven. During this time Dellinger read Richard Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence*, which expounded Gandhi's teachings, and he became a pacifist. After he graduated *magna cum laude* in economics in 1936, he won a fellowship to continue his studies at Oxford University. But after a year he returned to the United States because he was not interested in a graduate degree that would open doors to a successful professional career. He wanted, instead, to improve his "understanding of life" and to this end he resumed his service at Dwight Hall until 1939, when he enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in New York City (Dellinger 23). He did not wish to become a professional minister and was not particularly interested in theology. His aim was "to explore, study and understand" the Christian faith, focusing on the Old Testament Prophets, the Christian Gospels and several historical movements and groups—some non-violent like the Quakers, others heretical—that were in line with his own views.

While studying at Union, Dellinger and four other students moved out of the Seminary and went to live in an apartment in Harlem, where they engaged in social work. In 1940 they transferred to a black neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, where they were joined by other students and volunteers. They were all pacifists and called their community the Newark Christian Colony, but it became known as the Newark Ashram (after Gandhi's Ashram) (Hunt 40-42). Later on Dellinger outlined his reasons for the creation of this experimental communal living: "I believed in a community of dedicated persons who wanted to gain insight and strength from one another" and had "associations with their poor, racially oppressed neighbors" (Dellinger 61). His search for a communal lifestyle was part of a larger search for a "beloved community" that, according to historian Staughton Lynd, has been a recurring element of the American radical tradition from the early nineteenth century on, influencing pacifist, anarchist, libertarian and socialist groups (Lynd). Dellinger himself would pursue this search for most of his life, taking part in several experiments in communal living.

At the Newark Ashram Dellinger and his friends rejected any form of hierarchy among themselves as well as in their relationship with their African American neighbors, who were encouraged to participate as equals in the decisions that affected their daily lives. In many ways the Newark Ashram foreshadowed the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) created in the black ghettos in 1963 by the university organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

Dellinger was aware that: “In many ways, ERAP was the Sixties version of the community organizing project that I had been part of in Newark in the late Thirties and early Forties” (200). A comparison can also be made with Occupy Sandy, the relief effort created in 2012 by members of Organize Wall Street to assist the victims of Hurricane Sandy. Working in partnership with local organizations, these activists focused on community service, mutual aid and long-term rebuilding of neighborhoods.

When World War II broke out in Europe, United States Congress introduced the draft in 1940 but Dellinger, being a pacifist, opposed not only the draft but the war itself. He could have been granted legal conscientious objection status because he was a divinity student, but he had to register for the draft (73). On principle Dellinger, along with seven other students of the Seminary, refused to do so and was sentenced to three years in jail. These eight divinity students were not the only pacifists who made such a radical decision. They were part of a small group of Christian war opponents, who belonged to organizations like the War Resisters League and preferred to go to prison rather than register for the draft; and during their detention several of them, including Dellinger, organized courageous protests against racial discrimination (Wittner, *Rebels* 72-83; Hunt 75-83). However, they represented a tiny minority among the conscientious objectors, most of whom enrolled in the armed forces albeit applying for non combatant military roles or for work in the Civilian Public Service camps (Hunt 73-74).

The forties were not the only time that Dellinger was imprisoned. During his life he was arrested on many other occasions, so that when he wrote his autobiography in 1993 he entitled it *From Yale to Jail*, stating that he had learned more valuable things in prison than at university (65). When he was taken into custody during World War II, his pacifism underwent a radicalization: his Christian and Gandhian beliefs were aligned with anarchism. Influenced by Thoreau, he became a nonviolent revolutionary and advocated civil disobedience as a means of opposing not only war, militarism and conscription, but also social and racial injustice within American society. He declared: “You cannot be truly nonviolent if you are not revolutionary” and, from then on, he did not like to be labeled a peace activist because “there can be no peace without justice and therefore I’m really a justice-and-peace activist” (458). Convinced as he was that the only viable answer to society’s evils was non-violent direct action, he wrote: “We must fight against institutions but not against people . . . The only way . . . is to combine an uncompromising war upon evil institutions with unending kindness and love for every individual—including the individuals who defend existing institutions” (140-42). Similarly, he stated elsewhere that he followed Christ’s injunction that we should love our enemies and pray for them (26). However his radicalism became increasingly secularized, and although he continued to be deeply spiritual, he very seldom referred to his Christian faith: “Ordinarily I don’t use words like ‘heaven’ (or ‘God,’ which in some cases can be even more confusing) because I’m

afraid that people will misunderstand me . . . I don't care about the words . . . What's behind them is what counts" (87).

A constant in Dellinger's life was that he always endeavored to put his ideas into action. On the one hand, he joined forces with other pacifists who had been war opponents like him, and together they founded a series of committees—such as the Committee for Nonviolent Revolution, the Peacemakers and the Committee for Nonviolent Action—that staged antinuclear demonstrations. These groups, each of which “generally grew out of an earlier one,” cooperated with the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), the major antinuclear organization of the fifties that opposed the arms race and atomic tests (Dellinger 152). But while SANE was liberal, Dellinger and his friends were radical, they protested against the Cold War, criticized both the United States and the Soviet Union, promoted unilateral disarmament and pondered a Third Camp political alternative (Wittner, *Struggle*).

At the same time, looking for an alternative lifestyle, Dellinger went to live in a commune. Along with his own family and three other families, he bought twenty acres of land and created a communal farm near the village of Glen Gardner, in New Jersey (Hunt 91-92). It was called “the intentional community of Glen Gardner” (later renamed “St. Francis Acres”) because it was part of a series of experiments in communal living, the “intentional communities,” which pacifists organized in those years as an alternative lifestyle to centralized and hierarchical institutions (Cornell). For twenty-one years, from 1947 to 1968, he lived and worked there with his large family: his wife, Elizabeth Peterson (whom he had married during World War II), his five children and a foster child. Subsequently he made this remark about their lifestyle: “We were premature hippies.” Besides farming their land, the members of the Glen Gardner community operated a printing press, publishing pacifist and radical books (Hunt 92). This activity became their main source of income, but their earnings were always minimal. As a result, Dellinger lived essentially on the breadline, and this situation was to continue all his life, even after he abandoned the commune, forcing him to ask repeatedly for financial assistance first from his father and then from friends and supporters.

Having a printing press at his disposal, Dellinger launched and edited, without being paid, a series of pacifist magazines that had a short life and a very limited circulation. But there was a turning point in 1956 when he participated in the creation of *Liberation*. This magazine—which he edited along with A. J. Muste, Bayard Rustin and other pacifists—lasted for more than twenty years and became an influential radical publication (Dellinger 149). The ideological line of *Liberation* reflected the ideas that Dellinger and the other editors had matured in the previous decade. Their radicalism was non sectarian: they criticized liberalism as well as Marxism, envisaging a new social order based upon decentralized, non-violent, cooperative societies. They also opposed electoral politics, favoring grassroots organizations, communitarian experiments and social movements without leaders, that did not erect hierarchical barriers between their members and resorted to a decision-making process based upon consensus.

Dellinger, in particular, believed that “horizontal” movements and communities were able to promote social change from the bottom up. His living experiences—first at Newark and then at Glen Gardner—were attempts to bring about the “here and now” his ideal of a decentralized and anarchist society, and represented examples of what Wini Breines has called “prefigurative politics” with reference to movements of the sixties like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Thus, Dellinger foreshadowed and put into practice a basic concept of the New Left: participatory democracy (Dellinger 6; Breines; Carson). A few decades later many of his long held beliefs would reemerge once again during the occupation of Zuccotti Park and be shared by the activists of the Occupy Wall Street Movement, who adopted the same non-violent strategy, decision-making processes based on consensus and the concept of leaderless movements (Cornell). Another analogy with these protest movements was Dellinger’s awareness of the importance of communication and his founding of many little magazines; even toward the end of his life he co-edited and contributed to yet another publication, *Toward Freedom*. During the Cold War the role of these little magazines was to provide activists with a forum for discussion of their ideas and comparison of their personal experiences. In the sixties the alternative press played a similar role, whereas the activists of Occupy Wall Street relied mainly on the Internet, although they also started a magazine when they occupied Zuccotti Park.

Moreover, Occupy Wall Street’s criticism of economic inequalities resembled in many ways Dellinger’s opposition to racial and economic injustices. Along with his pacifist friends at *Liberation*, he supported the civil rights movement from the very beginning and took part in several protests against segregation. At the same time he played a crucial role in the development of the movement against the war in Vietnam. In fact, according to Dellinger, “the anti-Vietnam War movement did not start in a vacuum. It was the offspring of previous movements for justice and peace” (Dellinger 189). However, when President Johnson began the escalation of the war in 1965, there was a split between the liberals and the radicals within the antiwar movement. Dellinger sided with the young radical students, who eventually prevailed; and in the second half of the sixties, although he had always been in favor of leaderless social movements, he became a national leader in the antiwar coalition and one of the organizers of the most important antiwar demonstrations. Thus he was “cast in the role of being an older brother” of the young antiwar protestors, bridging a gap between different generations of dissenters (189). His ideas underwent further radicalization: while continuing to profess non-violence, he called for more combative tactics and worked for the growth of a “militant, grassroots, antiwar and prodemocracy movement” that would compel Congress and the executive branch to end the war in Vietnam (190). At the same time, he expressed solidarity with armed liberation struggles abroad and revolutionary movements within the United States that resorted to violence in self-defense, including the Black Panther Party. But

his attempt to reconcile “Gandhi and guerrilla” gave rise to negative reactions in many of the pacifist activists with whom he had worked side by side in the previous decades.

A direct consequence of Dellinger’s antiwar activism was his indictment in the Chicago Conspiracy Trial, the most famous and controversial of the political trials of the period, that began in September 1969 and lasted for five months. After the protests and disorder that had taken place in Chicago during the 1968 National Convention of the Democratic Party, the government charged eight leaders of the protest movement with “conspiracy to incite a riot” and “crossing state lines to incite a riot.” Besides Dellinger, the other defendants were Black Panther Bobby Seale, yippies Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, student leaders Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis, academics Lee Weiner and John Froines. While the media followed the event closely, the defendants—especially Dellinger—decided to counter-attack the government’s indictment and to disrupt courtroom procedures with the aim of putting the government itself “on trial” (“Official Transcripts”). As a result, Dellinger became a celebrity.

The Chicago Trial was a turning point both for him and for the protest movement which increasingly rejected non-violence. Whilst sectarianism prevailed, the New Left entered a period of profound crisis and Dellinger himself went through a period of crisis. In 1968 he and his family sold Glen Gardner after receiving a bomb in the mail. They felt that it was no longer safe to live in such a remote spot and moved to an apartment in Brooklyn. But Dellinger’s new celebrity created tensions with his wife, who separated from him for a few years, until their reconciliation. In the meantime the magazine he edited, *Liberation*, ceased publication and his launching of a new radical publication, *Seven Days*, was a failure.

In search of a new direction Dellinger, along with his wife, moved to Vermont in 1980 and spent the last twenty-four years of his life there. Although he was sixty-five years old, he did not intend to retire or to give up his political activism. Along with other non-violent activists—some of whom were his longtime pacifist friends—he resumed the struggle for nuclear disarmament and during the Reagan administration he took part in demonstrations against the arms race. In the eighties and nineties he also helped organize protests against United States policies in Central America, military interventions in Eastern Europe and the first Gulf War (Epstein). But in contrast to the Vietnam antiwar demonstrations that had attracted hundreds of thousands of people, these protests involved only a few activists and were largely ignored by the American public. As time went by, Dellinger himself was forgotten by the general public and only a small circle of pacifist friends continued to be close to him until his death in 2004. However, he remained optimistic: he was happy to be no longer in the public eye and claimed that the latest protest actions were as important as the great mobilizations of the late sixties and seventies, because they kept alive the American tradition of “speaking truth to power,” just as had previously happened in the fifties when

only a minority of pacifists had opposed the arms race and nuclear tests. In 1993 he wrote that the fifties was “a time for sowing seeds,” while the sixties was “harvest time” adding that “of course, some new seeds were sowed in the sixties that haven’t come to full fruition yet” (152). Thus Dellinger continued “to sow seeds” in the last two decades of his life, when dissent was once again at a low point in the United States, in the expectation of a new “harvest time.” His activism contributed to keeping radical dissent alive in America and constituted his political legacy to Occupy Wall Street.

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