
Political Affairs

The Occupy Movement: The Fight Against Class, Racism, and Inequality

August 15, 2023

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"We know big government does not have all the answers, no program for every problem. We know that we have work to do and give the American people a smaller, less bureaucratic government in Washington, and we have to give the American people one that lives within its means. The era of big government is over."

- President William J. Clinton

Introduction

The 2008 financial crisis was a rude awakening in American history. The "Reagan Revolution" of the past thirty years; ideals of cutting taxes, reducing federal spending, and restricting federal regulations, had finally come into focus. Globalization and financialization had not delivered on their promises to make everyone better off. Instead, these policies created an environment where racial disparities, wealth gaps, and social inequalities are at an all-time high - how did we get here?

During his 1996 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton promised to bring closure to 'big government', which aided in defining the neoliberal economic agenda that had governed American politics over the past decades and further solidified its place in American domestic policy for another decade to come. Many presidents before

Clinton promised to take action on what was seen as government intrusion in individuals' lives but never came to fruition. Instead, neoliberals at the time lived by what President Reagan called the "most serious threat to our great bastion of [economic] freedom," that threat - government. Regardless of Democratic or Republican leadership, the goal of the agenda was to achieve "a minimum amount of government authority and oversight." These goals were achieved by slashing the federal public service, rolling back banking and commerce regulations and reducing public spending.

President Clinton would later sign sweeping financial reforms into law. The most notable of which was the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act in 1999, a New Deal era banking regulation. The purpose of this regulation was to forbid the mixing of commercial and investment banking, which is considered to

be too risky and speculative, and widely considered to be the reason for the Great Depression. Therefore, banks were only allowed to operate under a mandate of either a traditional commercial bank or as an investment bank. This act's repeal stripped away consumer protections, and banks were now free to mix customers' private savings into Wall Street's highly speculative markets. Additionally, along with loosened financial regulations, the repeal allowed for the approval of high-risk loans, also called sub-prime mortgages. Not knowing what we know today, the President along with his predecessors, had just helped set the stage for what would be the most considerable, most profound financial shock since Glass Steagall was first implemented.

Three years after the 2008 financial meltdown, American households' net worth was 10% lower than what it would have been in 2007. The unemployment rate was higher, and the labour force participation rate was the lowest in almost 30 years. The Occupy movement would not appear until the newspaper *Ad busters* appealed for citizens to "flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades, and occupy Wall Street." On September 17th, 2011, the Occupy Movement did just that, and the "sit-in" began. Although the "occupation" itself would only last a couple of months, the Occupy movement successfully captured national and international headlines, sparking similar movements in other cities across the U.S. and indeed around the World. The Occupy movement, at its peak, was described as having the potential to enact long-lasting change; its appeal for economic and social justice still captivates

the middle class today. The Wall Street "sit-in" was front and centre in the movement against the neoliberal policies that dominated the American political and economic landscape for the last 30 years. Organizers of Occupy Wall Street went as far as to refer to their actions as the most important progressive movement since the civil rights marches. Within a few months, it would be evident that this was not true.

Given the gravity of the situation in the U.S. and opinion polls in favour of the movement, it may be surprising to know that the movement was unable to gain the support of minorities, specifically the African American community. A survey conducted in October 2011 found that African Americans, who were 12.6% of the U.S. population, made up only 1.6% of Occupy. The support from this key demographic is a significant component of any successful social movement. This paper will also include additional underlying research into the realities of African Americans, the influences of Occupy, and the relationship between the two.

This paper will also examine and discuss different contextual information needed to understand the dynamics of the social movement itself, including the economic and social conditions of the time. Therefore, this paper addresses two primary questions: Every significant social movement of the past century included African American voices and leaders; why not Occupy? Social movements generally attract varied socio-economic individuals; thus, collective attitudes and participation depend on the social cause; movements emerge when significant social and cultural breakdowns

occur. In this view, for movements to be successful, social movements require mass enthusiasm and collective excitement to galvanize the population to support the said movement. Occupy failed to achieve this. The movement was not able to mobilize the support and organization that the civil rights era experienced. The civil rights movement was able to gain political support - President Kennedy called the movement a "moral issue" and promised to sign the Civil Rights Act into law; additionally, civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. during the March on Washington and other events extended organizational efforts to include white group participation. Given these efforts, white participation in the movement varied by region, mostly due to the racial attitude disparities between northern and southern states. However, according to PEW research, overall white support in 1964 was 58% of voting age whites' whom supported the Civil Rights Act - representing how far the civil rights movement progressed societal perceptions of race in the United States. White participation and support was critical for the movement to succeed.

This view begs the additional question: Was Occupy part of a reactionary movement for the middle class, now awakening to a sudden realization of inequality? This information may not be surprising; still, Black median net worth is significantly lower than white households; African American families' typical experience is a net worth 6.7 times lower than white households. There cannot be a collective struggle or negative attitude towards a perceived unjust economic system if one segment of the

population has been fighting separate economic justices' that white households currently enjoy. The further one takes this thought experiment, the clearer it becomes that social movements remain entwined with race. It also grows harder to imagine how people could discuss inequality without taking race and others' experiences into account. This view demonstrates that the Occupy Movement is brought about by relative fraternal deprivation within the white middle-class and their perceived level of economic inequality.

The literature review will offer further economic, political, and social realities of African Americans that will help provide a better understanding of why African Americans were reluctant to join the movement. The answers to these questions inform us that social movement theory plays a pivotal role in addressing societal problems. While it is true that social movements are not complete until they successfully enact desired change - the purpose of this paper is not to assess whether the Occupy movement was successful in its aims or not. Rather, this paper tries to capture and understand the reasoning as to why and how the Occupy social movement failed to galvanize this vital segment of the population.

Methodology

In identifying sources for this paper, multiple databases were used. Initially, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR were utilized to take an initial sample of what types of articles were available. Regarding Web of Science, broad search terms were

initially used to establish a peer-reviewed research article list. In the beginning, I used a basic search of Why Occupy failed. From the article titles and research data derived from Web of Science and the other search databases using search statements, I utilized a more refined list of terms when utilizing other databases. These alternative searches' included Occupy and race, neoliberalism policies and race, and race attitudes within Occupy Movement. Through the University of Ottawa Library search database selector, I accessed these search databases. In addition to the database searching, several articles and other literature were located using the Snowball method. Each of the search terms used was selected due to their appropriateness and relevance in consideration of this paper's purpose.

Sources were analyzed according to several criteria:

1. The source had to be in line with the paper's purpose based on the research questions posed.
2. The source had to be from a credible and respected source. To ensure that a source was appropriate, certain prerequisites had to be met:
 1. The source had to hold a form of authority in terms of its origin to be deemed credible; mainly, the source had to be from a recognized educational institution, government body, or a respected figure in a place of power.

2. The source is factual and unbiased. A source had to provide evidence in its claims and be free from opinion based rhetoric that could bias the evidence presented.
3. I ensured that the material used had the most recent publication dates, going back no further than 2006, with the exception of primary sources.

Theoretical Framework

Social movement theory has been an ever-increasing, fluid subject for discussion - the concept and subsequent theorems can progress and adapt along with society. While people throughout history have protested, resisted, and pursued social change actions, the use of "social movement," as we currently understand, is a relatively new phenomenon. It wasn't until the 1960s, with the emergence of 'counter culture' in the United States and post-war hardships in Europe - that social movements began to be recognized as a legitimate empirical object of study, worthy of scientific research.

While this area of research was popularized in the 1960s, necessary groundwork on the understanding of collective action was popularized by Turner and Killian in 1957, with their book *Collective Behaviour*, which dealt with the 'micro' level of behaviour with regards to collective action - why an individual feels compelled to join in said collective action. This work was able to bring about what we now know as the first half of the collective behaviour school - which is considered one of the most critical strands

of societal thinking in what we would later know as Social Movement Studies.

The second half of this school of thought is by Smelser in his *Theory of Collective Behaviour*, published in 1962 - which was concerned with structural or societal-level factors. This view is also seen as the most relevant to the aims of this paper. In his view, Smelser was not worried about what led people to join movements but what kinds of changes in the political, economic, and social context lead individuals to mass movements. The basic premise of this school of thought, articulated by Chesters and Welsh, is that because societies tend to lean towards equilibrium, collective action by social movements can be understood as a natural mechanism reacting to structural strains or societal changes. Chantal Mouffe builds on this definition and suggests that the rise of social movements in the modern era emerged in response to new growing hostility resulting from the "contemporary development of capitalist societies". This development, as she states, manifests itself in the 'commodification of social life; the increasing presence and intervention of the State into daily life - what she terms 'bureaucratization' - as well as the destruction of collective identities through 'cultural mastication.' While the comparison between micro and macro perspectives is important. Micro-level considerations are not in line with understanding "the whole picture" of the Occupy movement and how society reacted to the movement. While they are critics of Mouffe's interpretation of collective behaviour - it may hold some weight on its own. It is true that there was a collective feeling of government intrusion in

individuals' daily lives, this view gives legitimacy and cause for the rise to neoliberal tendencies within society and gained support across the political spectrum. The reality in applying this view in terms of Occupy, not whether there was too much government intrusion but that there was not enough - which caused a change in society's equilibrium by the events of the 2008 financial disaster.

This change in equilibrium caused groups, mainly the middle-class, to question the changing realities around them, referred to as mass deprivation theory. First coined by Gurr in 1970, 'mass deprivation' is explained by Chesters and Welsh as the action of rebellion when there is a discrepancy between what one has and what one thinks one can get. This view is amplified when there are more considerable disparities between groups. In his book, *Social Theories and Social Structures* in 1957, Robert Merton argued that high social mobility rates raised hopes and expectations and encouraged favourable social comparisons. When conditions no longer become favourable within a given group and comparisons are drawn between another - fraternal relative deprivation arises. First introduced in the book *The American Soldier* by Samuel Stouffer in 1949, fraternal relative deprivation explained by the Oxford Reference arises from unfavourable comparisons between the circumstances of one's group and a reference group [the elite/1%], and it tends to lead to protest. It is important to note that the term 'group' is referring to social class and racial group. These terms are essential to understand the

motivations of those participating within the movement.

One of the earliest scholars to study social movement processes was Herbert Blumer, who identified four stages of social movements' lifecycle: (1) Emergence, (2) Coalescence, (3) - Bureaucratization, and (4) Decline. Blumer's framework of social movement processes places an emphasis on how to gauge the relative success of a movement and can further explain disparities between groups.

Literature Review

Neoliberalism and Race

Of course, President Reagan, Bush Sr., Clinton, and Bush Jr. are not the lone malefactors which led to the 2008 U.S. financial meltdown. Moreover, it is essential to note that the neoliberal economics practiced during this time, and in some cases still practiced today, was very popular and commanded a wide range of bipartisan support. Such neoliberal financial reforms affected every area of life from trade, commerce, public services, and taxes - specifically reducing marginal tax rates, emphasizing the reduction for wealthy individuals. The top marginal tax rate in the U.S. before the neoliberal agenda was 91% in 1963, and it began its descent to 50% by the start of Reagan's administration in 1982. The marginal rate fell further to 35% by 2007 during the Bush Jr. administration, where it has stayed consistent. Thus, these actions have created a fundamental shift in who carries the tax burden, taking it from top-earning Americans down towards working-

class Americans. Policymakers and economic elites presented a now deeply flawed argument of "trickle-down" economics, where society as a whole would benefit from reduced taxes on business and the wealthy as a means to create growth. As we now know, these policies of reduced government and taxes - once dubbed, 'voodoo economics' by Bush Sr, did not deliver on the promises of high growth; instead, according to the Roosevelt Institution - led to more inequality, more instability, and slower growth. The government began to champion free-market rhetoric that has been closely tied to the racialization of public program spending. With the reduced tax rates, less revenue is entering the national treasury. During this period, the government was seen as the enemy, and policymakers quickly rolled back spending on public programs and abstained from intervening in specific policy areas such as affordable housing and food assistance. These rollbacks affected society's most vulnerable, framing them as handouts and entitlements. Christopher Federico says this behaviour and whites' welfare attitudes "often rivals that of generalized motives and predispositions like self-interest, egalitarianism, and individualism." The free-market agenda thrived on the use of strategic racism. The racialization of government assistance increased by white peoples' assumptions of African Americans, being lazy and unmotivated to advance themselves as they are "tied down" by government assistance.

African Americans are accustomed to historical wrongs dealt with by racialized policies. In 1938, half of the black men and

up to 90% of black women worked in the agricultural or domestic sectors - not surprisingly, because of racial attitudes of the time - these same sectors would become exempt from guaranteeing a minimum wage and other basic protections. Even though this policy would later be reversed, the legacy of such exploitation remains relevant today.

Subsequently, many African Americans joined unions for the protections that organized labour provided: higher wages and good benefits compared to non-union jobs. However, the power of unions to organize and bargain was being reduced. In 1981, President Reagan appointed ultra-conservatives to the National Labour Relations Board. The Board reversed several pro-labour decisions made by the Democratic majorities during the Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter administrations. The Reagan administration created a laundry list of sanctioned acts that the unions could be implicated in, which included the restriction of unions being entangled in politics. The attack on unions had direct con for African Americans. Black private-sector unionization rates have been consistently higher compared to their white counterparts. Over a third of African American males within the private-sector belonged to a labour union in the 1980s; African American female participation never reached these levels but it is still sizeable. De-unionization has eroded those seeking better opportunities. Between 1983 and 2015, the number of union-protected workers dropped by nearly 3 million, and unionization rates are approximately half of what they were 30 years ago. With unemployment

rates high, production moving overseas, and corporate attacks decimating unions, there was no chance for any labour legislative wins under both the Bush administrations and President Clinton administrations. The last labour refuges for African Americans were devastated by globalization and the corporate financialization of the U.S. economic system.

Disinterested Leadership

African American voices were at the forefront of social movements during the 20th century with one primary goal in mind: eliminating segregation. While there may have been differences in strategy and opinion on how to accomplish such an action, there was no denying the ultimate goal that was to be achieved. Black people in the U.S. have historically been connected to movements with an organizational structure in which goals, objectives, and demands were clear. These ideas stand in stark contrast to the grassroots, non-hierarchical, "leaderless" organizational structure that Occupy represents - the overall mission of the movement is lost. For Occupy, there is no unity in how to take down the current neoliberal order or how to transform the society in which we live fundamentally. On the surface, Occupy would seem like a movement that would resonate with Black Americans. However, the movements' ideals has not translated into action. Black leadership of the past has remained silent on the issue; organizations that had organized marches, boycotts, meetings, and sit-ins during the civil rights era are not endorsing such a movement like Occupy. Perhaps Black leadership did not

believe the movement was genuine from the outset. When civil rights icon Representative John Lewis tried to speak at Occupy [Atlanta], he was blocked by doing so because the movement was committed to "a democratic process in which no singular human being is more valuable than any other human being." This case of a "leaderless movement" was made in poor taste - when the mayor of Denver wanted to negotiate with Occupy [Denver] on policing within their camp, the general assembly responded by electing a dog to send back to the mayor to lead the discussion. Examples such as these raised questions within Black communities about the degree of seriousness for what the Occupy Movement is trying to achieve in its perceived fight against inequality.

A major issue plaguing the forward momentum of Occupy is its incapability to address race within their own movement. Because of this, "Occupy the Hood" was created; an offshoot of Occupy Boston that explicitly addresses concerns plaguing people of colour in Boston severed ties with Occupy. More offshoots were created nationwide. Jamarhl Crawford, more commonly known as "Uno the Prophet," a well-known MC and poet in Boston who helped organize Occupy the Hood [Boston], gave an interview to scholar and radio host Jared Ball which echos the feeling of African Americans towards Occupy:

"In the fight against racism...you find wickedness and racism. There were a lot of [white people] there who ultimately had a problem with acquiescing leadership and working with people of color on people of color's own terms."

Participants in many contemporary grassroots social movement organizations believe that team based, non-hierarchical, "leaderless" organizational structures allow for diverse and extensive participation. However, as much the Occupy movement thought they were welcoming to all of the "99%", although in reality, the movement restricted how minorities could participate and have their voices heard equally. African American leadership did not appear interested to grasp onto this "leaderless" structure and bring in a new narrative of their own. The occupy movement was mainly organized through social media and not traditional outlets that African Americans may have been accustomed to. African American peoples are the originators of fighting against the current economic and social order, what Occupy is now starting to decry is what Black people have been fighting back against and experiencing throughout U.S. history. During the civil rights era, James Forman, as part of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, a civil rights organization, called on Black Americans to not perpetuate capitalism or contribute to Blacks' exploitation in the United States. Another example would be that of Huey P. Newton, the co-founder of the Black Panther Party, who called for the destruction of the capitalist system that exploits American workers. The difference between civil rights era leaders and the contemporary Occupy era is that prominent Black institutions such as the United Negro College Fund, and the Congressional Black Caucus appear to be taking large amounts of corporate donations. Since the 1980s, these groups

received substantial financial backing from tobacco, alcohol, and telecommunication firms. These firms meticulously cultivated relationships with leaders of Black communities in the form of campaign contributions. Suppose this portrayal is accurate and systematic throughout Black organizations. In that case, it will make sense that these very leaders and institutions would not advocate against a system from which they stand to benefit.

African American Socioeconomic Realities

Socio-economic status encompasses income, educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and (social) class. The median wealth of white households in 2009, is twenty times that of Black households in the United States; during the aftermath of the financial disaster of 2008, the net worth of Black households fell from \$12,124 in 2005 to \$5,677 in 2009, a decline of 53%, compared to a 16% decrease for white households. Black communities were devastated by the economic changes; access to income support services such as unemployment insurance and supplemental food benefits were restrictive. In 1996, President Clinton signed sweeping welfare reforms that "ended welfare as we know it." The reform bill cut deep into nutritional assistance programs and added punitive measures for those who most needed to access these programs that primarily did not exist before, including work requirements. Ever since the 1960's welfare has been racialized and closely associated with African Americans, portraying them as lazy, refusing to work, and living off government

largess. Welfare overtime became a code word of sorts for race and came to symbolize the perceived problems within poor Black communities: single parenthood, family breakup, and unemployment. Nadasen Premilla states that, welfare was seen as an enabler to these problems rather than a social safety net for the most vulnerable to help. The image of the "welfare queen" targeted black women, in particular, fuelling the political discourse about race, class, and gender in the United States.

Although the reforms of the 1990s began to show promising results in the early years, the promises of the reforms fell short during what is now being dubbed "The Great Recession of 2008" which, substantially increased deep poverty and left families who could not find work without a safety net. Census Bureau data show that those who are Black are most likely to be in deep poverty, with poverty rates of 10.8%. Those who are white are least likely to live in deep poverty, with poverty rates of 4.1%; according to the Census Bureau, in 2016, 18.5 million people lived in deep poverty. What welfare reformers don't understand is that having a job is no guarantee against poverty. In this case, deep poverty stems from centuries of abuse, exploitation, and dark dissent against people of colour; poverty is transferred through generations, and policies such as these exacerbate the problem, preventing the upward mobility of those trying to escape it.

As a result of shrinking access to cash assistance and the increasingly poor economic climate, Black college graduates were also experiencing troubles. In addition

to socio-economic realities that may deprive students of valuable resources, high-achieving African American students may be exposed to less rigorous curricula, attend schools with fewer resources, and have teachers who expect less of them academically than they expect of similarly situated white students. As a result African American college graduates between the ages of 22 and 27 had an unemployment rate of 12.4% in 2013, which is more than double that of the same age. As Nathalie Thandiwe, radio host and producer in New York, puts it, "Occupy was started by whites and is about their concern with their plight. Now that capitalism isn't working for everybody, some are protesting." Thandiwe's commentary is consistent with economic and financial realities for Black people, and highlights how white people have now decided to rail against capitalism as it currently functions, only when it has proven adverse to their financial security. Black people did not feel they had a space within the Occupy movement, African Americans are just trying to survive and move away from centuries of economic and social abuse. The issues that Occupy want to confront are not by any stretch the same issues that African Americans are fighting.

Discussion

The emergence of Occupy (2011) as a social movement is a not new phenomenon. Social movements have dramatically changed the societies in which they occur; throughout American history, there have been many notable movements, including the suffragette movement and of course most notably the civil rights movement. These

movements have varied widely in their aims and tactics; some have been revolutionary while others simply advocate for reforms in an existing system. Defining a social movement can become difficult; a movement is not a political party or interest group, nor is it a mass fad or trend, unorganized, fleeting, and without goals. While it is true the objectives of Occupy are distorted, the movement was not disorganized in its purpose. However, it was unorganized in terms of execution and participation. Some characteristics of social movements are that they are "involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; sharing a distinct collective identity." Although social movements can be thought of as organized, they can also be informal social entities oriented towards a goal. These goals can either be a specific and narrow policy or be more broadly aimed at more comprehensive societal and cultural change. This definition along with the theoretical framework built allows for the examination of Occupy and why it failed to galvanize African American participation.

The first stage in any social movement is very preliminary; Occupy is no different. There is little to no organization. Those who participate are experiencing a shared discontent with neoliberal policies and the social conditions for which they created. Occupy was born from the very protest of these policies and perceived changing conditions that was once enjoyed. An example of a social movement organization during the civil rights era would be the Student Non-violent Coordination Committee. During the civil rights era, there

was, of course, rising discontent among the African American community. Protests, boycotts, and rallies were organized to bring awareness to the injustice brought upon African Americans during the civil rights era, most prominently: segregation.

Often before the next stage, movements will fail because citizens will often recognize unrest or injustice within society, but neglect to come together. This can be observed within the Occupy movement. African Americans have long recognized social and economic injustice. During the Occupy movement, they did not feel obligated to join Occupy because African Americans have various distinct social movement organizations operating on their behalf, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). In the second and third stages, the social movement has become more clearly defined in terms of its aims - unrest is no longer isolated within the group and uncoordinated. It would appear in considering what issues were important, Occupy and its participants focused on matters that were important to them - white middle class issues. More importantly, the movement is not random; it is strategic in its outlook.

However, the "leaderless" movement of Occupy hinders its efforts in clearly defining its goals and where to draw the line of success. Occupy Wall Street's goals may differ from Occupy Atlanta - there is no singular unifying force behind the movement and its participants. Even though Occupy has garnered attention from the media, Occupy can no longer rely on mass rallies to

continue its cause. In this later stage, social movements are supposed to carry more political power, with potential access to political elites. However, Occupy quickly fizzled out because it became difficult for members to sustain the emotional enthusiasm necessary and because continued mobilization became too demanding for participants. The complete lack of African American participation suggests that mobilization efforts only included members of that particular class of citizens. Those who join the movement are from middle-class backgrounds, even though, yes, there is a perceived social imbalance. By the time Occupy can create organizational structure, the economy has started to recover, and participants no longer see the "inequality" they used to. This shows that the movement was entirely a reactionary strife by the white middle classes perceived deprivation.

Conclusion

Social movements continue to be a significant force in the world. Social movement theory and the perceived fraternal deprivation that Occupy participants exhibit - provides us a fundamental analysis that helps us better understand both past and present. During the peak of the Occupy Movement, it must have been impossible to avoid the excitement of it all. The era of Occupy is looking for a movement to call their own. However, it is not as "inclusive" as advertised; as new movements like Occupy develop, they can learn from the investigation of prior movements. Thus far, what has been learned is that the Occupy

Movement has hindered its forward momentum by not recognizing the racial disparities that their movement is grounded upon. Occupy has undoubtedly inspired off shoots, possibly invigorating others to question the very society they live in. Unfortunately, African Americans feel they do not have a space in the movement the way it is currently oriented. Despite Occupy's "leaderless" structure, the voices that are being heard and seen are those of white middle-class status and not those in marginalized communities. As white citizens, these individuals can more easily navigate institutions of power and have directly benefited off of decades of neoliberal policies; white successes have been built off the exploitation of people of colour. As it currently stands, Occupy failed as an agent of fundamental economic

transformation due to the lack of ideological cohesion within the movement. Occupy failed to recognize issues that have affected other social classes rather than just the middle class which they represent. Future research may further develop the idea of discriminatory resistance to encompass different and overlapping status hierarchies that influence leadership. Recent events in our world are providing further evidence of the treatment and disenfranchisement of African Americans, the civil rights era may be over. However, the fight for civility is not over. Future movements will take centre stage in the glaring eyes of the media and public, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is still taking shape, and it is up to everyone in a place of privilege to recognize their place within society - no matter how small.

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