ORGANIZING CONCEPT:

OCCUPY WALL STREET &

The Political Identity Paradox

by Jonathan Matthew Smucker

Strong group identity is essential for social movements. There can be no serious social movement—the kind that challenges the powerful and privileged—without a correspondingly serious group identity that encourages a core of members to contribute an exceptional level of commitment, sacrifice and heroics over the course of prolonged struggle. This kind of group identity is clearly emerging right now among core participants in occupations across the country and around the world, and that's a good thing.

However, strong group identity is also something of a double-edged sword. The stronger the identity and cohesion of the group, the more likely people are to become alienated from other groups, and from the broader society.

The Political Identity Paradox states that while social change groups require a strong internal identity in order to foster the level of commitment needed for protracted struggle, this same cohesion tends over time to isolate the group; and isolated groups are hard-pressed to build the kind of broad-based power needed to achieve the big changes they imagine.

Strong bonding within a group tends to create distinctions between groups — that's true to an extent for all kinds of groups. However, it tends to have particular consequences for groups involved in political struggle. Consider a sports team that defines its group identity partly in distinction from rival teams. The team is likely to play all the harder against rivals as a result of the distinction. No problem there. A group engaged in challenging entrenched power, on the other hand—as the occupy movement is doing—has not only to foster a strong internal identity; it also has to win allies beyond the bounds of that identity, if it is to build the collective power it needs to accomplish its goals.

And, because of the nature of oppositional struggle, the tendency toward isolation can escalate very quickly in politicized groups. Oppositional struggle triggers an oppositional psychology, which can do a real number on a group. Movements that meet the kind of brutal resistance that the Civil Rights movement endured, for example, have a tough row to hoe. On the one hand, participants need to turn to each other more than ever for strength and support. They feel a compelling cohesiveness to their group identity in these moments of escalated conflict. On the other hand, they need to keep outwardly oriented, to stay connected to a broad and growing base. This is difficult to do even when leaders (we are all leaders) are fully oriented to the task, let alone when they are unprepared, which is so often the case.

Take, for example, Students for a Democratic Society (the original SDS that fell apart in dramatic fashion in 1969, not the contemporary SDS). At the center of the epic implosion of this massive student organization—underneath the rational arguments and accusations that leaders were slinging at each other—there was the political identity paradox. Key leaders had become encapsulated in their oppositional identity (or, rather, a few factionalizing identities) and they became more and more out of touch. They lost the ability and even the inclination to relate to their broader membership—a huge number of students at the moment of the implosion—let alone to broader society. Some of the most committed would-be leaders of that generation came to see more value in holing up with a few comrades to make bombs than in organizing masses of students to take coordinated action. This is the tendency toward isolation taken to the extreme. Dedicated radicals cut themselves off, like lone guerrilla fighters in enemy territory. It might have felt glorious, but it was a suicide mission.

The political identity paradox speaks to the need for political groups to develop both strong bonding and strong bridging. Without strong within-group bonding, group members will lack the level of commitment required for serious struggles. But without strong beyond-group bridging, the group will become too insular and isolated to be able to forge the broad alliances that are even more necessary for achieving big changes.

Good leaders have to perform an extraordinary balancing act between the conflicting imperatives of building a strong sense of identity within their groups and connecting with allies and potential allies beyond the group. This balancing act will be more and more critical as the occupy movement grows, as the core develops its own culture, and as our opponents attempt to drive wedges between the movement's most active participants and the broader society.