

The New York Times

Academia Occupied by Occupy



A protestor at an Occupy rally in New York last month. Don Emmert/Agence France-Press — Getty Images

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER -- April 30, 2012

If surveys of Occupy Wall Street supporters conducted last fall still hold true, the crowds of protesters expected to turn out Tuesday for May Day events across the country will most likely skew male, young, white, college educated, underpaid, and thoroughly disgusted with the American political system.

But the crowds may also be notably heavy on another demographic cohort: notebook-wielding social scientists hoping to get a more precise understanding of the nebulously organized individuals marching under the banner “We are the 99 percent.”

Academics across the country have embraced the movement since it emerged in September, organizing classes, publishing reams of commentary and issuing calls to “occupy” not just Wall Street but also sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy or the entire “academic vampire squid” itself, as a poster for a session at the recent annual meeting of the International Studies Association put it.

A smaller number have also been turning to a more difficult task: turning a sprawling movement into hard — and publishable — data.

“This thing just erupted so quickly,” said Alex S. Vitale, a sociologist at Brooklyn College who studies the policing of demonstrations. “It’s almost overwhelming to deal with all the information that’s out there.”

Mr. Vitale is finishing a 10-city study of interactions between protesters and the police since last fall, which he said showed a lack of overall “militarization” in police response in major cities. (New York is an exception, said Mr. Vitale, who organized a demonstration against police tactics in Zuccotti Park last fall but said he did not consider himself part of the Occupy movement.) Other researchers are doing ethnographic studies, crunching survey data, recording oral histories and analyzing material by and about the movement, all at lightning speed compared with the usual pace of scholarship.

“Academics are used to taking forever, but we don’t have to,” said Theda Skocpol, a sociologist at Harvard and author, with Vanessa Williamson, of “The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism,” a study of Occupy’s right-wing counterpart published in January.

That book, which combines in-depth interviews with quantitative analysis of the Tea Party movement, is a model for the kind of ambitious work that could emerge in studies of the Occupy movement, some social scientists say. But getting a handle on Occupy, with its amorphous structure and aims, could be more challenging, Ms. Skocpol said.

“The Tea Party from the beginning saw themselves as leveraging and changing the Republican Party, while the Occupy people are much more ambivalent,” she said. “That makes them harder to pin down.”

Some researchers also say that the sympathy many academics feel for the movement risks undermining objective research.

Edward Maguire, a criminologist at American University who is leading a study of attitudes toward the police and the law among Occupy protesters in six cities, cited an incident in which one research assistant at a demonstration in Washington in March “handed in her ID, turned in her clipboard and within minutes got arrested.”

“Part of where our research is heading is making recommendations to police departments,” he said. “When they look at our research, I want them to trust it. Having people involved in the movement wouldn’t work for us.”

Yet scholars in disciplines with a long tradition of participant-observer research say that direct involvement can offer a better understanding of a movement’s internal dynamics.

“Everybody I know doing this is an activist of some sort,” said Jeffrey Juris, an associate professor of anthropology at Northeastern University who is organizing strategy workshops for Occupy Boston while also studying it. “But Occupy is so open and broad based, it doesn’t take much to consider yourself an activist.”

Dr. Juris and other activist scholars started an online clearinghouse called Occupy Research last fall to share research methods, tools and data sets. So far the network has hosted two “hackathons” using data gathered on the site as well as facilitated collaborative research like an accounting of Occupy encampments worldwide and analyses of Occupy-related Twitter posts.

But that kind of research, however valuable, is “low-hanging fruit,” said Todd Gitlin, a professor of sociology and communications at Columbia and the author of “Occupy Nation,” a sympathetic account of

the movement published this week as an e-book. The most pressing unanswered question, he said, doesn't concern Occupy's activist core but the nature of what he called "the outer movement," those people who may have showed up for big marches but don't attend general assemblies or other meetings.

"They are the political means by which the movement grows," Mr. Gitlin said. "And there are a lot more of them."

Last fall the Occupy organizers in New York asked Héctor Cordero-Guzmán, a sociologist at Baruch College, to devise an online survey, which was then posted at occupywallst.org. The first wave of results, published in October, is widely credited with cementing the picture of the movement as representing what Mr. Cordero-Guzmán, in an interview, called "a decent cross-section of the population."

"This wasn't just young single people with nothing to do at age 22," he said. "These were people who had done all the right things and things weren't working out for them so well."

Many scholars, however, question the value of Internet surveys, which can skew toward respondents who are more committed and more comfortable with technology. "I think it's terrific that he did it, and did it so quickly," said Ruth Milkman, a sociologist at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York who is planning a randomized survey of Occupy participants. "But it's not representative. No one quite knows who is excluded."

Some researchers studying local Occupy groups see a movement struggling with the question of just who is and is not part of it. Jesse Klein, a graduate student in sociology at Florida State University who has been studying Occupy Tallahassee since October, said divisions have emerged between activists who have time for long, consensus-based meetings and those who don't but feared being criticized as lacking commitment. "There's a strain," she said.

In the meantime the group has disbanded its camp near the capitol in favor of sit-ins, legislative actions and other conventional political activity. "Just being physically present didn't get them the results they wanted," she said.

In an article in the May issue of the journal *American Ethnologist*, Dr. Juris argues that Occupy's social-media-driven "logic of aggregation" may make it less durable than the anti-globalization movement of a decade ago, which mobilized existing activist groups according to a "logic of networks."

"Occupy has been about aggregating large numbers of individuals who have never been active before," he said. But people who are easily aggregated, he said, can also be easily disaggregated.

At a panel discussion at American Ethnological Society's annual meeting in New York last month Dr. Juris warned against what he called a troubling "fetishization of occupation itself."

"It's critical to broaden tactics," he said. "But how do you do that when the movement is called Occupy?"