Chapter 2

The Occupy Wall Street Movement

*Attack in a “Lawless” World?*

**Introduction**

[A] big reason for the movement’s rapid and continued takeoff went widely unnoticed in the hue-and-cry about how Occupy did or didn’t resemble past movements on the American left in at least three-quarters of a century, this movement began with a majority base of support.

Gitlin 2012: 32–33

The US was witness to many protest movements with global consequences, especially the Civil Rights Movement, but also to some extent, the protests against the Vietnam War and others. Ugo Mattei and Laura Nader remark:

Dissenters founded the United States. In the nineteenth century, abolitionists were the ones who were willing to criticize the powers of the time for the end of slavery. The suffragettes were dissenters and today women have political rights. In the 1960s the dissenters forced re-thinking of the Vietnam war at the same time as the civil rights movement wanted to finish the job begun in the nineteenth century for equal rights irrespective of color (*sic*), gender, or class; while the consumer movement fought fraud and hazards and the environmental movement sought to address the slippery slope threatening the future of the planet.

Mattei and Nader 2008: 193

Dissent has been at the very heart of American civil life and in most cases, it was a beacon of what democracy should be like, but, although on the fact of it, the US was the ground and the starting place for the enthusiastic acceptance of dissent, which clearly placed moral principles above procedures and even existing legal regimes. The main figures of the past, such as Martin Luther King, may not have been the first to stand for human rights, as at least the principles of that movement had been in existence for some time, and had even been entrenched in law in the UK since the Le Louis case (*Le Louis*, 2 Dobson Rep. 238), at a time when slavery and the transportation of slaves from Africa to the United States were routine, but the
British authorities found the practice to be both repulsive and morally wrong.

In the 1960s and 1970s protest was common in the US, particularly in schools and universities. Those activities appear slightly less common today, when students are scrambling to pay soaring tuition costs, while they look forward to an uncertain future, as youth unemployment is at its highest point in several decades, both in the US and in Europe.

Part of the reason for the reduced activism also depends on the collateral effects of the so-called “war on terror” after 2001. Muzzling of journalists and—in general—of the media, is common after 9/11, as anything that is not simply a repetition of the official government’s interpretation of events, is cause for reprimand or even for the firing of journalists or newscasters: “The need for legitimate dissent was dismissed in favour of ‘balanced’ reporting. Dissident positions are dubbed ‘offensive, irresponsible, unpatriotic’ by government officials” (Mattei and Nader 2008: 192).

Academia, once the bastion of free speech, is now equally controlled, especially for those attempting to express any critique of the relations between US and Israel, for instance, including the illegality of Israel’s treatment of Palestine. While a critique of government’s policies in general brings forth the charge of anti-patriotism, critiques of Israel’s policies bring out predictably the accusations of anti-Semitism in almost all campuses.

The 2001 Patriot Act, with its extreme, and most often misplaced concerns about “national security,” is now primarily used as the foundation of ongoing intimidation of citizens’ protests, while covering illegal government policies and activities with the mantle of legitimacy:

But patriotism may turn violent and ugly and have lasting consequences long after the crises have passed. It might even be the most powerful ally of plunder, when the rule of law loses credibility thus failing to perform as a legitimizing influence.

Mattei and Nader 2008: 193

The arrogance and insularity of the US in regard to other countries’ ethnicities and religions, is almost unparalleled in the world today. An example of both intimidation and arrogance is the document issued in October 2001 by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA). It is “a piece about 40 pages long in which more than a hundred allegedly unpatriotic campus incidents were described. In the process they accused more than 40 professors of encouraging what the ACTA called un-American activities” (Mattei and Nader 2008: 194; see also Gonzales 2004: 262; Sands 2006).