

Can we rebrand a movement?

The perils of Twitterspeed branding

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IT'S INSPIRING TO WITNESS THE DIVERSITY of the Occupy participants and their collective desire for economic justice. It's exciting that so many are debating the merits of our economic system – even the concept of class. And it's heartening, in the face of media demands for hierarchy, to see general assemblies persist. I'm all for it.

But I wonder if "Occupy Vancouver" and Occupy Wherever might benefit from changing their name to, say, "99% Vancouver" or something that attempts to capture key goals in as few words as possible.

(What the heck, it could be "100% Vancouver." We could be ambitious and invite those pesky capitalists to disinvest, donate their wealth, and join the masses; maybe their lives would improve, too.)

I've always been a bit wary of imperative verbs. Not that they don't have their place; I just resist being told what to do or think.

So when I saw that "Occupy Canada" and "Occupy Vancouver" etc., were the names of the movement forming in solidarity and resonance with "Occupy Wall Street," I cringed.

I take words very literally. The name "Occupy Wall Street" communicates clearly that it has to do with a challenge to the investor class: Wall Street is where many of them do their business, and the initial gatherings were not called "Occupy New York." By contrast, "Occupy Vancouver" sounds like the goal is an invasion of the city, not changing our system.

Incoming action

A few media have already described what's happening in terms of cross-border transportation. On the site *rabble.ca* I read that "The #Occupy Wall Street movement comes to Canada on

October 15." An online CBC News item said before the first demos, "On Saturday, it arrives in several Canadian cities..."

Comes? Arrives? It sounds as if carloads of protestors were waiting at the Peace Arch crossing, other border points across the country, and airports. I visualized affinity groups poised to infiltrate the arctic by kayak under cover of night and frost.

Even though it was Vancouver's *Adbusters* magazine that originally proposed that people Occupy Wall Street with their "What is our one demand?" poster, the movement has been framed as an import, something redistributed, like a first run Hollywood movie.

I worry that in haste, some Canadian activists have unconsciously internalized our colonized status by adopting part of a US slogan, and the rest have been too busy to notice. Doing so could lead to some bizarre positions, like the contortions Canadian Communist Party members had to go through during the decades they followed policy set in Moscow, instead of reflecting Canada's reality.

The geography of a slogan

Based on a literal interpretation, then, "Occupy Canada" and "Occupy Vancouver" sound like a call for Occupiers to physically fill our urban and national spaces. As the Arrogant Worms sing, "Canada's really big!" It could look like a delusion or failure if for some reason it's just not possible to fill all of the Chilcotin, Nunavut or Ungava. That's a lot of terrain, and it's getting cold now, at least in the north Cariboo where I live!

Although one can certainly "occupy" an entire city or even a country with strategically placed forces, encampments and command centres, I doubt

this is a goal of any in the movement. And evoking military terminology runs counter to the principles of nonviolence most seem to share.

The problem is that if the words "Occupy [place name]" by themselves don't explain their purpose, they're not going to help anyone clarify goals or forge consensus. They stand as a verbal monument to fuzzy thinking, and probably fuzzy politics, too. They will confuse a lot of people instead of rallying or inspiring them. Or just waste a lot of time explaining that the slogan actually means something else, and that some organizers just cloned it without pausing to reflect.

Then there are the negative connotations of Occupied Territories in various parts of the world.

Occupied



Nations

A number of First Nations people have already questioned this language, reminding everyone else about the occupation of North America. In response, there are mealy mouthed disclaimers that amount to "sorry about the genocide – please join us!" It's nearly as bizarre as the conflated 2011 slogan "No Olympics on Stolen Native Ground," about which Steve Burgess pondered in a *Tyee* thread on Vancouver's anti-Olympic protestors, what about "No new Prince George post office on stolen native land"?

From the other direction, it is just a matter of time before some right wing wag suggests that protestors Occupy a Job. After all, occupations are also things we do for a living. And that will simply reinforce the stereotypes of protestors as flakey and lazy.

people that are now – thankfully – starting to appear, I see few visual clues about what it's for or what we might be proud of. After all, the difficult work of forging consensus might just be easier if we keep some positive unifying values in mind.

diversity by their different heights and poses, reflecting them as repeated clusters cancels out individuality.

Fresh icons, please

Can someone please come up with some alternatives to clenched fist graphics? Maybe the Occupy Vancouver website is supposed to depict collective rage, and of course there's no shortage of injustices to be angry (or shout) about, but it looks like someone's about to get punched in the nose!

Fists are starting to appear on Facebook, too, as profile pictures change to express support for the movement. Please, Friends, just upload a photo of your pet, a clever cardboard placard, or what you had for breakfast. Let's collectively unclench and stop fistism before it spreads further.



The visual reflects the verbal

The Occupy Vancouver website glows with the worst visual clichés of the left. It frames a new movement with old iconography.

Personally, I'm very fond of the anarchist CNT and FAI posters from the Spanish Civil War, but the sheer volume of red and black on the Occupy Vancouver home page just hurts my eyes. It appears **VANCOUVER** has magically become a **Red City** (which will come as a surprise to COPE, Vision, and the NPA). Maybe it's on fire, though I hope not.

Rendering "OCCUPY VANCOUVER" in bold, sans serif upper case certainly occupies the space in this layout. In fact, "OCCUPY" takes up as much horizontal space as "VANCOUVER", as if it's a fait accompli by font.

If you typeset it, will they come? I'm not so sure. I always thought netiquette discouraged the use of upper case text as typographic SHOUTING.

Then there are the silhouetted figures. It's pretty clear this group is against something, and the layout unites them around the slogan "Occupy Vancouver." But apart from some nice photos of



OV's designer has symmetrically reflected the array of figures on the left to create the ones on the right. If you zoom back in your browser, you'll see repeated clusters of the same graphic.

I'm familiar with the keyboard shortcut to do this in Adobe® Illustrator®; it's fast and easy. And I can't blame the web designer, who has probably done this work very quickly for free. However, I don't understand the visual or political intent here, if there was one.

Each affinity group, if that's what the clusters represent, looks the same in this graphical realm. Like corporate franchises that look identical, regardless of their location. Perhaps half the protestors are from a mirror image planet. Maybe Left equals Right. Monolithic.

From a distance, it makes me think of sea anemones or lamprey's mouths waiting for their prey, but maybe I need a new prescription for my progressive lenses. If the original array of figures was meant to imply some kind of

If we have to borrow, how about a variation on the Catalan Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT) icon of clasped hands held aloft? A much stronger statement about unity and mutual aid.





On the other hand, importing icons and traditions from other places can confuse people, too. The movement *could* use something local that appropriates and radicalizes one of BC's existing symbols, like the dogwood flower or the Steller's Jay, our provincial bird.



Jays are clever birds, occasionally raucous, and often mischievous, with the added bonus that it's difficult to distinguish the males from the females. That both genders are sapphire blue and black might simplify graphic design and messaging.

Maybe we could consider a new symbol, like a pinecone or a volcano. (Definitely not a mountain pine beetle!) There are so many possible sources for generating a 100 Mile or 1000 Mile political culture in this vast, gorgeous, inspiring land we live in.

Work for change – change the name

In 1946, George Orwell wrote in *Politics and the English Language* that by eliminating bad writing habits "... one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration ..." I believe the same is true with graphics and imagery.

Now that the movement has some momentum, it might seem hard to step back and "preoccupy" ourselves with its brand. But if the goal is changing the system, not just reforming it, hopefully we have the flexibility to change our slogans into more creative, original, and transformative ones, even if it requires changing some email addresses and domain names (*at least from dot com to dot org, as seems to be happening in Toronto*).

I invite readers to use this forum to propose their own ideas for a new brand that might encapsulate this movement.

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Southwest corner of BC's Bowron Lakes circuit from Mount Tinsdale, Palmer Range.