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## The radical right-wing roots of Occupy Wall Street

September 20, 2012 | Maureen Tkacik

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If there's one thing that united Occupy Wall Street with the Tea Party movement from the very beginning, it's a virulent aversion to being compared to each other.

The Tea Partiers started sharpening their knives before the Occupation even began. Two weeks before last year's launch Tea Partisan blogger Bob Ellis wrote a [post](#) <sup>[2]</sup> entitled "Socialists Plan to Rage Against Freedom on Constitution Day" – all but daring the lamestream punditry to compare the "infantile" plans of "spoiled children" to "throw tantrums" and "thumb their nose at the American way of life" to the beloved movement that "sprang up from nothing a little more than two years ago in the face of a Marxist president and Marxist congress."

In reality, of course, no political movement springs "from nothing." Indeed, both of them have roots in the same man. Fifty-five years earlier that fall, the Tea Party movement's [direct](#) <sup>[3]</sup> ancestors [met](#) <sup>[4]</sup> in Indianapolis to launch their first bid to [rally citizens](#) <sup>[5]</sup> against the "dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy" occupying the White House, Dwight Eisenhower. But when their beloved anti-communist Barry Goldwater was buried in the 1964 presidential election, the Republican Party moved swiftly to officially [renounce](#) <sup>[6]</sup> the "radical organizations" that had sullied its public image. Then the most radical of the right-wing radicals, Goldwater's beloved speechwriter Karl Hess, moved into a houseboat, renounced politics altogether and dedicated the rest of his life to peacefully protesting the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the new aristocracy he dubbed "the one percent."

You read that right: The first guy to call the 99 percent to arms was the author of a speech that claimed: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice." Goldwater had fondly referred to Hess as "my Shakespeare."

Hess had also worked as a professional union buster, an informant to Joe McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover; a regular contributor to the Wall Street-based red-baiting newspaper [Counterattack](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, and an amateur arms trafficker who sent contraband napalm to the plotters of a Bacardi-backed coup attempt against Cuba's then-dictator Fulgencio Batista. He'd also been a founding editor of the *National Review* and a full-time ghostwriter for the famous Texas oil oligarch and John Birch Society financier H.L. Hunt.

But then something changed. He could no longer reconcile the radical, rugged individualist rhetoric of the right with what he increasingly saw as its slavish reality, so he went with the rhetoric. He bought a motorcycle, then a houseboat. He stopped paying taxes; went to trade school so he could learn a skill he could barter for food and clothes and marijuana; wrote for underground newspapers and *Playboy* and the muckraking New Left magazine *Ramparts*; founded a semi-survivalist neighborhood agricultural co-op in Washington, D.C., and ultimately refined his lifelong distrust of big government into a more considered opposition to bigness generally. Big institutions were inherently hostile to democracy, he explained in his 1975 memoir-manifesto *Dear America*, because they'd been created by and for the tiny minority of elites who already owned a de facto controlling stake of the nation's political and economic power:

1.6 percent of the adult population owns 82 percent of all stock, and thus actually owns American business and industry. In a very real sense, that tiny 1 percent of the population faces the other 99 percent across a barrier of very real self-interest. That tiny 1 percent has been accumulating more as the years go on, not less. The key to that accumulation is assuring that the people who make up the other 99 percent are sharply restricted in what power and privilege they accumulate.

It's hard to know if *Dear America* made converts out of the 99 percent, though that was clearly his quiet intent. More than any of the journalism Hess had produced during his ideological conversion, *Dear America*, which is dedicated to "commonsense Americans", directly addresses his old audience of John Birchers and hardcore anti-communists angry about the invincible power of the Rockefellers and the Bilderberg Group and the Zionists and the Federal Reserve. By redefining the subversionary elements as the "tiny 1 percent who own it all effectively, and own more incessantly", he converted conspiracy theories into a simple mathematical phenomenon.

Certainly *Dear America's* prognosis was prescient. In those days the wealthiest 1 percent of the population took in a measly 8.5 percent of America's annual income – their share has [nearly tripled](#) <sup>[10]</sup> since then – and "the one percent" was three decades away from rhetorical tropehood. This is no doubt part of the reason that the hundreds of magazine and newspaper features lavished on Hess and his emergent brand of anarchism – by outlets ranging from the *New York Times Magazine* to the *Mother Earth News* – during those years made virtually no mention of the expanding concentration of wealth that had turned him off to mainstream electoral politics.

But Hess was much more than "ahead of his time"; he was decisively of it as well. And perhaps no one more fully embodied "the 99 percent" than Hess, who'd paid the bills working as everything from a coroner's assistant to fishing magazine editor to *Newsweek* correspondent. He was indisputably personally indifferent to wealth – indeed, because the IRS began garnishing 100 percent of his "knowledge work" earnings in the late sixties, Hess wrote *Dear America* purely, he told the *Washington Post* at the time, "to mouth off". He performed so many

insidious deeds while in “service to the superrich” that his indictment of the system is uniquely damning, even as he spares most of the tawdry specifics and boldfaced names. (One exception was his description of life on the right as “an endless repetition” of a *National Review* party at which one of the magazine’s “fresh-faced young staffers caught staring a little too long and hard at Bill Buckley, said in awed tones, ‘Bill, you have the profile of a young Caesar.’”). He begins a chapter on Marx by apologizing for having written a previous book condemning Marx “on the basis of what FBI briefings told me Marx had said and not on the basis of my own knowledge and reading.”

Hess’s narrative is most affecting when he defends organized labor, a cause he has toiled to undermine in so many different capacities – professional union buster, professional red baiter, propagandist, snitch, etc. – that he derives inspiration from its mere survival:

Work and creativity, then, seem to be the things that actually build and those are attributes not of the reigning rich at all but of the population generally, of the working people rather than the owning people. You know this. Your senses tell you this, and yet propagandists for the rich can come along, as I did and others still do, and tell you time after time that without the rich you would starve, that without the rich the factories would close, that without the rich the farms would wither, that without the rich we would all be forced back to a primitive and animal existence. Is it possible ... to imagine America, with its incredibly skilled working people, its array of machines which they designed and built and operate, with its sturdy history of independence, is it possible, to imagine this land going backwards because the Rockefellers, the DuPonts, the Morgans, and the Mellons were dispossessed of their great wealth?

I’ve found it rare for men in Hess’s position to admit being “propagandists for the rich” to themselves, much less the wider world. But perhaps because he refrained from airing his fellow propagandists’ dirty laundry, Hess never faced the coordinated public relations backlash you’d expect against such an apostate today. Of all his wanderings off the reservation, Hess engendered the most suspicion in the sartorial realm, according to Jerome Tuccille, an old friend whose amusing memoir of the anarchocapitalists’ wartime coalition-building adventures, *It Usually Begins With Ayn Rand*, is packed with vivid descriptions of Hess in various “Field Marshal of the Revolution” ensembles:

There he was, the funkier looking revolutionary in fifty states, wardrobe fresh off the rack of Abercrombie & Fitch. Combat boots laced to the top with rawhide strips; olive-drab pants cinched in at the waist with the biggest, knobbiest, most outasight belt buckle you ever saw; khaki shirt opened to the third button so his chest hairs stuck out; sheepskin hunting jacket to ward off the October chill; and, piece de resistance, a green Fidel Castro fatigue cap with a black and red Wobbly button pinned over the peak. All in all, a week’s pay worth of proletarian garb.

“Karl was a hard guy not to like,” Tuccille recalls of his old friend. “There was a sincerity and sweetness about him; and he felt no bitterness or resentment toward the right, just sorrow.” He remained close to Barry Goldwater and right-wing stalwarts like [James Kilpatrick](#)<sup>[14]</sup>, and in one of the ugliest eras in political

history, appears to have avoided making serious enemies outside the IRS. “Libertarians who are highly ideological and Randian are usually repressing some fundamental part of their humanity, and he was no longer repressing that. So overall he was just a lot happier. I know our relationship improved a lot,” his son Karl Hess Jr. remembers. “Without question his ability to be human evolved considerably as he moved to the left.”

But rediscovering his humanity only enhanced Hess’s distrust for big government and the corruptionist politics that govern its control. “I have heard virtually every politician in the land admit that when all is said and done the only function of a political party in America is to gain power,” he wrote in *Dear America*. “Winning, they say, is the name of the game. And only winning.” He would no doubt be unsurprised to hear the son of his old *bête noir* George Romney, with whose “progressive” faction the Goldwaterites jostled so bitterly throughout the fifties and sixties, clumsily cast himself as a ruthless Randian *ubermensch* in the effort to leech more millions out of wealthy donors.

<sup>[15]</sup>Hess had lost all desire for that. An institutional locavore, he dedicated the rest of his life to experimenting with modes of [sustainable survivalism](#) <sup>[16]</sup>. He built a fully solar-powered house in West Virginia with his second wife, Therese, wrote a children’s book, and spoke at Libertarian Party conventions and local middle schools. Just before heart trouble began to seriously restrict his activities, he worked on Ron Paul’s 1988 presidential campaign on the Libertarian ticket.

“I suspect if Karl were around today he’d have much respect for Occupy,” says Tuccille, who works in finance and seemed to doubt his old friend would feel similar affinity toward the Tea Party, pointing out that Ron Paul had, in stark contrast to most other members of his party, made “some soothing comments lately about Occupy” in a recent interview with Brian Williams:

I advocate the market. But I complain that one percent is wealthy because they get the benefits through the inflationary system, through the contract system, through the military expenditure system, through the bailout system. So I identify with them ... That’s why I didn’t like the idea when I think [Herman] Cain said that these people ought to just go out and get a job. Why blame the victims?

Just because a man’s political consciousness begins with Ayn Rand, in other words, doesn’t mean it has to stay there.

Karl Hess died in 1994, before the first Republican Revolution catapulted the libertarian think tank circuit into the big leagues of the Beltway perma-elite. His son Karl Jr., then a fellow at the Cato Institute, ultimately compiled an autobiography, *Mostly on the Edge*, from some early outlines, drafts and notes in his father’s files, augmenting that material with his own interviews and recollections. Its two forwards were written by Institute for Policy Studies founder Marcus Raskin and Charles Murray, author of *The Bell Curve*, both of whom focused on Hess’s faith in his own historical irrelevance. Recalling an IPS

panelist who had offended Hess by claiming to speak for the “forces of history,” Raskin commended his late friend for always remembering that “those who tried to make history with grand schemes did so on the backs of others.” Similarly, Murray wrote:

Many people who write about public policy have had their minds changed by Karl Hess. But Karl himself would be the first to say that it really doesn't make any difference whether he influenced other thinkers and writers. History will turn out the way it turns out for reasons that have nothing to do with grand historical figures or with the greatest political philosophers, let alone with today's ink-stained wretches writing op-eds and position papers.

Today *Dear America* is long out of print. A dog-eared paperback copy of the latter will set you back \$40 at a minimum, while the hundred-some names thanked at the start of *Mostly on the Edge* for their kind assistance paying Hess's medical bills would give any moderately savvy reader the idea that Hess was just another well-connected right-wing Cold War conspirator. Barry Goldwater is among them, as is Charles Koch; Ed Crane and Tom Palmer of the Cato Institute; former CIA Director Bill Casey; Paladin Enterprises of *The Hit Man*, a step-by-step assassin's guide that has been implicated in numerous deaths; and Victor Niederhoffer, a hedge fund manager and veteran Objectivist so diehard he named his daughter “Galt.” Many names on the list belong to major donors to the Tea Party or its related think tanks; and remember, Karl Hess Jr. was a Cato scholar during the nineties.

You would never know – nor would Hess Sr. ever expect you to know – how Hess Sr. had tried and failed to warn America about its intensifying concentration of wealth, the pernicious influence of propagandists for the 1 percent on its political discourse, and the ultimate unsustainability of its excesses in the face of every logical, intuitive or historical norm. But he trusted humanity enough to understand that some seem to figure such things out independently. As for the rest, as Raskin wrote:

More often than not I suspect that he had his fingers crossed in hope because he had seen perversity and distortion which the broken dreams and exploitative ideologies of the twentieth century had visited on humanity.

Fingers crossed, then, for the 99 percent.

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[1] Image: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/files/2012/09/Screen-Shot-2012-09-20-at-3.21.11-PM.png>

[2] post: <http://www.dakotavoice.com/2011/09/socialists-plan-to-rage-against-freedom-on-constitution-day/>

[3] direct: <https://sites.google.com/site/ernie1241/Home/JBS-16-1.JPG>

[4] met: <https://sites.google.com/site/ernie1241/Home>

[5] rally citizens: <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/goldwater-the-john-birch-society-and-me/>

[6] renounce:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2199&dat=19651201&id=pE4yAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=UOYFAAAAIBAJ&pg=3819,354965>

[7] Image: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/files/2012/09/RTR383BZ.jpg>

[8] Counterattack: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/IFStonesWeekly-1964jul27-00004?View=PDF>

[9] Image: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/files/2012/09/RTR34A3E.jpg>

[10] nearly tripled: <http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-UStopincomes-2010.pdf>

[11] Image: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/files/2012/09/RTR38370.jpg>

[12] Image: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/files/2012/09/donttread.jpg>

[13] Image: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/files/2012/09/foley.jpg>

[14] James Kilpatrick:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=A2dQAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=MVgDAAAIBAJ&pg=3447,788940&dq=karl-hess&hl=en>

[15] Image: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/files/2012/09/teapots.jpg>

[16] sustainable survivalism: <http://miscprojects.com/about/current-work/>

[17] Image: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/files/2012/09/RTR22T7U.jpg>