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Occupy's heiress

Leah Hunt-Hendrix, the granddaughter of an oil and gas billionaire, is determined to radicalize America's wealthy

BY J.A. MYERSON



Leah Hunt-Hendrix, right. Left: An OWS march with Hendrix at far right. (Credit: Photos courtesy of Leah Hunt-Hendrix)

“For Aristotle,” says Leah Hunt-Hendrix, “ethics is not a question about right and wrong, it’s a question about who you are. It doesn’t come down to a decision in an instant. It comes down to what kind of life you live, and what kind of life you live as a community.”

That question is an essential one to Hunt-Hendrix, 28, the granddaughter of the late billionaire Texas oil tycoon H.L. Hunt. She grew up surrounded by 1 percent privilege — but has spent the last several months neck deep in general assemblies, human microphones and consensus twinkles. She’s made the study of popular protest her life’s work — and Occupy Wall Street has allowed her to roll up her sleeves.

On this February afternoon, Leah’s just finished an Occupy Faith meeting about how to mobilize those communities to participate in an upcoming foreclosure defense action. The action would emulate successful (and soulful) previous attempts to shut down an auction where bank-seized homes are sold by breaking into song. The lyrics go: *Mrs. Auctioneer / All the people here / We’re asking you to hold all the sales right now / We’re going to survive / But we don’t know how.*

“So the idea,” she says, continuing on Aristotelian ethics, “is that part of what it means to think about ethics is to ask: How are we formed as people? How do we become who we are? Capitalism and advertising obviously form us in very concrete and specific ways and have formed us into a consumer public. Rosa” — she refers to the legendary organizer Rosa Luxemborg by first name — “writes about the mass strike. Participating in a strike is formative. It creates a consciousness of one’s agency and role in creating change.

“For Rosa, the revolution couldn’t happen without the re-formation of the whole society,” she says, setting up her point. She seems, even in casual conversation, to think surprisingly deeply, so when pressed on revolutionary philosophy, she goes all in. I use the word “re-formed” because that’s how she says it, not like “reformed.” It is a little startling to have someone from her background speak so directly about radical change.

“And the way to get re-formed,” she says, “is by participating in a collective movement, collective resistance. Through that process, the whole public is transformed, little by little. Their consciousness is reshaped, and they become agents of change.

I think that's also what is happening with Occupy Wall Street. Everyone who participates is becoming re-formed a little and their character is being reshaped. And their consciousness is definitely being reshaped. That's how change will have to happen in America."

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Leah went to evangelical summer camp in Missouri when she was a kid and loved it. "I knew I didn't agree with it politically, but I really valued the community." Getting involved in Occupy Faith "has been partly figuring out how to reclaim that upbringing, but in line now with my politics." After all, she notes, "America is such a religious country. We need to be able to reach people where they are, at that heart level."

Faith, however, is only one of two suppressed aspects of her identity that she is now reclaiming, thanks to Occupy Wall Street. The other is her class background. In addition to diving into organizing in New York's communities of faith, the Brooklynite is also attempting to radicalize the world of the wealthy.

Hunt-Hendrix's Upper East Side childhood brought with it the ultimate privilege: ignorance of her level of privilege. Schooling at Sacred Heart, dancing in "The Nutcracker" at Lincoln Center, gymnastics, shopping – it took moving temporarily to rural New Mexico to bring her family's wealth starkly to her attention. "Some of my friends didn't have indoor plumbing," she says of her new schoolmates, who mostly lived in the pueblo. "There was no way I was going to bring them to my house."

Moving back to New York for high school, Leah was struck to find even what was embarrassingly extravagant in rural New Mexico to be conspicuously modest among New York City wealth. "My parents are both inspiring role models who spend their lives fighting for justice. They were not at all materialistic, and had no intention of giving me money to buy new things at Barney's every week." Her relationship with her family is strong. Still, she concedes, "that didn't mean that we didn't have a yacht on the Hudson and things like that." But in "a city that makes wealth seem like the highest good," she says it was hard to find a way between the pressure to fit in with her classmates and the poverty and hardship she had witnessed. Amidst this confusion, Leah began to ask other, deeper questions: "What if you are part of the problem? What do you do when you realize that your history is the history of exploitation? That your lifestyle is depends on a system that you now see is unjust?"

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Hunt-Hendrix has only watched one episode of "Downton Abbey." "I'm told I'm like the middle sister, right?" She asks me.

Actually, it's the youngest sister, Lady Sybil, everyone's favorite character on seemingly everyone's favorite show. She's the sister whom World War I rids of her interest in the British aristocratic life she is expected to lead. In the fourth episode of Season 1, before war breaks out, the Irish socialist chauffeur Branson overhears Lady Sybil indicate her support for women's rights and subsequently provides her with pamphlets, or what we on the left self-assumptively call "literature." From then on, it is only a matter of time before Sybil is politically radicalized and disenchanted with the trappings of nobility (and in love with the help).

"Everybody keeps saying I should watch that show," she says.

Watching it myself recently, I was struck by Lady Sybil's similarities to Nancy Cunard, the historical love of my life.

Cunard's childhood was straight-up Grantham. Born in 1896, so every bit Sybil's contemporary, she grew up in a castle in the U.K., the daughter of an American socialite mother and a British baronet father. She had her debut season in London

society, attended celebrated girls' schools – the whole thing. Then came World War I, and Cunard split for Paris, hanging out with literary luminaries and political radicals.

In France, Cunard founded a publishing house, which put out works by Samuel Beckett, Ezra Pound and Louis Aragon. (These were just three of her many boyfriends whose work they attributed to inspiration she provided; Pablo Neruda, T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, Man Ray, James Joyce, Constantin Brancusi and William Carlos Williams all fell for Nancy and made artwork in her honor.) She devoted herself feverishly to combating oppression, over which she agonized very powerfully, allocating her most fervent opposition toward Spanish fascism and American white supremacy. For this offense, Cunard was trashed in the press and disinherited, which suited her, since she'd grown to hate the ruling class from whence she'd come.

Cunard poured all of her remaining resources into helping refugees who'd fled Franco and wound up in concentration camps, setting up a shelter to feed them, reporting their devastation in the international press, struggling to enlist comrades. Years of desperation and horror later, Nancy couldn't handle it any more. She fell headfirst into drunken depression, hitting the sauce harder than she ever had before, which is saying something. She died insane, penniless and paper-thin in 1965, having spent much of her curtain call shouting incomprehensibly about bigots and fascists.

Not all heiresses-turned-revolutionaries have stories as tragic as Cunard's. And there are several of them. Jessica "Decca" Mitford was 1 year old when World War I ended and therefore had a very different type of childhood from Cunard. Nevertheless, she flew the noble coop, reporting on the Spanish Civil War and landing in the American communist milieu (superior, one thinks, to her sisters Unity and Diana, who were big supporters of Nazism and fascism). In the 1950s, Decca, like many communists, got heavily involved in trailblazing civil rights activism and displayed great hostility toward the House Un-American Activities Committee. She broke with the Communist Party as Stalin's atrocities came to light and led a successful life as a left-wing journalist, living out the credo attributed to her: "You may not be able to change the world, but at least you can embarrass the guilty."

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There is something tremendously appealing about the heiress who decides to ignore the conventions of the life opulent and commit to the ideas and struggles of the underclass. And to its men. Sybil has her Irish chauffeur, Rose had her Jack, and Jasmine has her Aladdin. The more Hollywood you get, the less the class element receives meaningful exploration, and the more the story becomes a perverse negation of the knight-and-damsel rescue story.

The archetype here is Maid Marian, the folk legend who occasionally appears in Robin Hood tales. There is no orthodoxy in the Robin Hood canon, but in many of the versions with which modern audiences are most familiar, Marian is liberal gentry, a minor noble, a Lady Sybil, who falls for Robin Hood and joins his cause (sometimes quite valiantly). In Mel Brooks' parody "Robin Hood: Men in Tights," Marian's prophylactic armor constricts her libido to the provinciality of the rest of the aristocracy. In the Disney animal version, she's a high-born vixen whose kisses are auctioned as prizes for an archery contest. In each of these, her beau leads a socialist commune in the woods, whose members terrorize the corrupt political leadership and stop it from getting rich off the peasantry.

"Titanic," "Aladdin," "Robin Hood," "Downton Abbey" – those stories are all just stories, and all of those stories were written by men, so of course a charismatic bachelor with nothing to lose is the one who rescues the lady from the banality of wealth (and often himself from the discomfort of poverty). But Leah Hunt-Hendrix seems not to need saving. Though I don't ask, as the present topics – politics, religion and class – are sensitive enough.

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In the United States, we are not very good at talking about privilege. Christopher Hitchens attributed the rise of the Tea

Party to anxieties about a loss of privilege, writing that followers “are worried about two things that are, in their minds, emotionally related. The first of these is the prospect that white people will no longer be the majority in this country, and the second is that the United States will be just one among many world powers.” Tulane professor and MSNBC host Melissa Harris-Perry has said that a noteworthy component augmenting the country’s emotional reaction to September 11 was the shattering of Americans’ privilege of security from terrorism (a privilege which many in the world do without).

There is also a healthy, honest and moral way of dealing with ones privilege, but it is no easier to talk about. Leah, who can quote Hegel and Voltaire, who can recite pieces of Arabic poetry she encountered when learning the language in Syria, who contributes ideas and questions in an unending suite of meetings, admits that she has trouble explaining her relationship to wealth.

“I get the ironies. I understand that there are contradictions between coming from an oil and gas family and doing this kind of activism for social equality. There are parts of our identity that we might have to be willing to give up to live in the kind of world that we want to live in,” the type of world where “everyone has enough.” It is clear that, however, that unlike Cunard, Hunt-Hendrix is not motivated by a mere desire to rebel, but by a vision of a better world. “To get there, however, we can’t hide from who we are. We have to work with what we have, from where we are and what we’re given.” She says that she has come to this conclusion partly through the influence of an organization called Resource Generation, which aims to help young people leverage their resources and privilege for social change.

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Leah is very specific about the form she envisions that leveraging taking. “Before Occupy, I thought a lot about how attempts to create positive change have negative consequences and the ways in which philanthropy and motivations like ‘benevolence’ and ‘compassion’ often reiterate power dynamics and hierarchies. The goal is to figure out how to participate in creating change in ways that don’t recreate those power dynamics.”

Her interest in this question took her all the way to the Middle East, right in the middle of the Bush era “clash of civilizations.” She spent six months in rural Egypt, interned at the Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement at the American University in Cairo, improved her Arabic in Damascus, Syria, and headed to the West Bank where she continued her examination of the impact of international aid through different civil society programs. Hunt-Hendrix was hoping to determine “what it was that really transformed power relationships” and found that none of the prominent NGOs did. Economic development programs and Palestinian-Israeli dialogue programs posed no threat to the power dynamics that generated oppression.

Instead, it was in nonviolent direct action on the part of Palestinians, the protests against the wall that take place weekly across the West Bank, where Leah saw potential. Here was a way that an “outsider” could support the movement, stand in solidarity, in a way that didn’t reiterate those power dynamics – “to join in their chorus,” as she puts it, “but not to come in with one’s own projects.”

Her interest in the Middle East ties into the same reasons she has invested in Occupy Wall Street. Not because they’re both controversial, but because they both highlight the interconnections of politics and economics. “What is happening in Israel and Palestine isn’t just an identity conflict,” she tells me. “It’s also related to a global economic system that benefits a few and impoverishes many. The occupation of Palestine is profitable. While the identity issues are real, they can obscure the economic and material underpinnings of the conflict.” Which is why it may make sense to occupy Wall Street instead.

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The opulence of “Downton Abbey’s” world was not particular to Her Majesty’s aristocracy at the time. Americans ascended

to aristocratic levels of luxury not through hereditary nobility but raw capitalism. The matriarch in the Grantham castle (like her real-life counterpart, Nancy Cunard's mother Maud) is of American birth and American wealth. Sir Richard, a rich media mogul in *Downton Abbey*, draws out the nobility's intolerance of the gauche sensibilities of the nouveau riche. But the Granthams' American equivalents cannot be said to have lacked aesthetic taste.

A debut season off Central Park is awfully similar to one off Regent's Park; one could summer in Newport just as lavishly as in Yorkshire; Phillips Exeter Academy turned out young Americans as impressive as Eton College's young Britons. The most famous American counterparts to Nancy and Decca are men: Freddie Vanderbilt Field and Corliss Lamont were both anti-capitalist leftists born, respectively, to railroad and banking wealth. But there is another aristocracy in the United States of America, down South. And no capitalists got much richer in the South than the ones who struck oil in East Texas.

Every Thanksgiving and Easter and summer (those weeks not spent at evangelical camp) Leah spent with the Hunt family in Dallas. On White Rock Lake, in a big house called Mount Vernon (recalling not just Washington's home but also "Tara," say, or "Belle Reve"), Granny Ruth would host parties. Surviving her husband, H.L., Ruth was very involved in the church – First Baptist Dallas – "and so we'd have to go twice a week, Sunday and Wednesday, but she would always buy us ruffled church dresses. It was a different world from New York, but there was something beautiful about it. A lot to resist, but also so much love."

Leah depicts her grandmother as constantly giving, as everyone's granny, as a woman with a huge heart. But, she remembers, "there was something almost 19th century about it. That part of life was like another era." It's hardly the way one expects to hear a Luxemburg-enthusiast talk about the power elites in her life. "My theme in life," she tells me, "is open hands. Everything is welcome, but everything is also free to leave. You can't clasp onto anything."

Her nascent dissertation at Princeton will explore what she provisionally calls "the genealogy of solidarity." Solidarity must be right next to open hands as a theme. "There are two aspects to solidarity," she observes. "One is standing with others and the other is an awareness of one's own complicity in systems of oppression."

Her interest in solidarity, however, is tied to her analysis of movement-building. "Oppression is experienced in different ways," she tells me. "But if you can trace it back to its roots, then a diverse array of groups can link up in solidarity and combine their efforts toward changing the system rather than palliating the symptoms. I think that Occupy is doing just that. There is no other social movement that I've been exposed to that as clearly is shedding light on the root causes of oppression, not only in America, but also globally."

Those root causes are twofold. The first is "an economic system that necessarily creates the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few." Nothing like hypocrisy here: "It's not just good people versus bad people. The causes of this are structural. We need new economic models, and many people involved in Occupy are thinking about and working on exactly that question. Particularly, I think that the focus we're seeing is on models for local autonomy, self-sufficiency and sustainability."

The other root cause is "is the link between the economic system and state power. For people who care about democracy, currently, the political system is so tied down by lobbyists, and the people who get into office are already strapped down by the people who funded them."

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Back stateside after her work in the Middle East, Hunt-Hendrix was forced to confront "this whole industry of philanthropy and the nonprofit-industrial complex" with new eyes. Rather than abandon it, Leah decided to mobilize her experience with funders and engage in conversations about how to support grassroots activists and social movements.

To that end, she has spent the last year working on how to get more money into social movements and grassroots organizing. “But this takes serious thought. It doesn’t mean pouring money out indiscriminately and turning grassroots groups into mainstream NGOs. The question is, how can donors fund in ways that help build movements rather than tie them down? One simple example is to help provide spaces, places in which activists can meet, strategize, share their analysis and come up with plans. Just to enable that process.”

Leah’s perspective on this was shaped by her personal experience at the 2011 World Social Forum in Senegal, an experience she calls life changing. There, she saw activists and theorists tackle the question of how to get from building local power to dismantling or democratizing international institutions. Tens of thousands of activists from around the world convened to discuss how to build a trans-national movement that was locally connected but guided by an international political analysis and policy expertise. Unfortunately, she laments, this sector is severely underfunded.

Resources, media exposure, a mobilized public – all the elusive elements seem to have come together around Occupy Wall Street. OWS took the stage as the opportunity to build that movement at a global scale. But the funding issue remains an important one. “Funding can help or harm,” Leah explains. “And funding Occupy is particularly tricky. But the broader movement for social and economic justice needs support. Activists and communities on the front lines need support. We need to use this time to emphasize the effectiveness of community organizing and local empowerment. There are so many grassroots groups out there that are doing incredible work to build local power, and we need to get more money into that sector, which has typically been neglected in favor of more mainstream institutions.”

“I think,” she admits, “it’ll take time.”

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