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# How Occupy Will End



By Marty Kaplan

No one knows what difference Occupy Wall Street will turn out to make.

This could be the start of something big. Maybe the burgeoning sense that something is not right in America will reach a critical mass. It's already showing up in the polls. Maybe more and more ordinary Americans will wake up and smell the plutocracy. The consensus will grow that the only way that income distribution could have become so out-of-whack is that the power in Washington isn't in the hands of the people we elect; it belongs to the big corporations and Wall Street bankers and hedge fund managers who have the country by the short hairs. We're at the beginning of a tectonic shift in our politics, our culture, maybe even in our governance.

Or the movement fizzles. The demographics of the demonstrators don't keep expanding. Unemployment and foreclosure turn out not to be the contemporary equivalent of the draft's role in mobilizing broad opposition to the war in Vietnam. Winter, and shrewder policing with less blowback, take a toll on the encampments. Occupy becomes just another tale of the fall 2011 media scrum, alongside the Conrad Murray trial. In retrospect we realize that our political elites have grown so dependent on our predators that the whole corrupt system is immune to challenge. Occupy goes nowhere — there's no wave election, no campaign finance reform, no re-regulation or rule of law for the financial sector, no increase of progressivity in the tax code, no infrastructure rebuilt by no jobs program, no course correction for the American dream.

Since no one really knows what Occupy's impact will be tomorrow, there's a contest going on today, a battle for control over how the story is being told right now. And the way it's framed could actually determine the way it will play out in real life.

The right's strategy is: If we don't build it, they won't come. So its narrative is: These people are lazy, losers, hippies, stooges, drug-takers, a mob. They don't know what they want. They want to destroy capitalism. This is no Tea Party. Move along, there's nothing to see here.

It's a bit incoherent, but they're sticking to it, and their intention is to prevent any more of their pigeons — the 99 percenters — from figuring out how deeply they've been shafted by Koch-era robber barons and their political puppets.

The left, on the other hand, hears the strains of "Something's Coming" in the air. Its aspirational narrative sees the pendulum swinging the other way. A moral confidence is stirring. Yes, the political system is dysfunctional, but the urgency of protest will not be paralyzed by pragmatic cynicism. We really can do it. We can reclaim our country from the oligarchs. We can recapture what America used to be about. These Occupy encampments spreading from city to city? That's what it looks like when hope shucks off the victim script.

The arena where these warring narratives are slugging it out is in the media. Fox, which has been the publicist, cheerleader, speakers bureau and enabler of the Tea Party, is of course relentlessly dismissive of Occupy. Over on MSNBC, police bungling fuels support, and the messages on the demonstrators' hand-made signs provide a counter-narrative to the corporate triumphalism that has dominated public discourse for decades. CNN's account of Occupy is whiplashed between the false equivalence its brand requires — kabuki pundit combat, always ending the same way: "We'll have to leave it there" — and the need to hold eyeballs during commercials, which mandates you-won't-want-to-miss-this alarmism. The prestige press needs to play it both ways, in an only-time-will-tell frame, though it's always safe to go meta: "Every Movement Needs a Logo" was the title of a *New York Times* gallery of graphic identities proposed by designers, while *New York* magazine asked an ad exec and a PR pro to give letter grades to the occupiers' protest signs.

Social media, whose importance to the Arab Spring has become a benchmark of subsequent protests, is atwitter with people talking directly to themselves; it's an organizing tool, and a gauge of popular sentiment, that doesn't require the dots of the story to be connected in prefab patterns. But no matter how immersed we may be in virtual and mediated reality, Occupy is an essentially offline phenomenon. It has required real people in real places — not viral videos or Facebook pages — to give it credibility. It is as local, grassroots, bottom-up and non-hierarchical a movement as they come — the antithesis of billionaire-funded astroturfing by the likes of FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity. No one sleeping in those parks and plazas has a clue how this will all turn out. But their sheer physical presence gives them a narrative authority that the media and the chattering class lack.

Every day brings a fresh blizzard of data about the world. But which information gets our attention, and how it acquires meaning, depends on the story-in-progress at the time. A Congressional Budget Office study of income distribution can be the usual one-day story, like other CBO studies, or it can get massive coverage because Occupy put the topic on the nation's front burner. Record-breaking oil company profits can be framed as just another business story, or it can be reported in the context of the industry's climate change denial campaign, and the hold its lobbyist have over Congress, and our political system's imbecilic failure to address our direst global problem. Wall Street's escape from accountability, its capacity to thwart even the most modest attempts to rein in future recklessness, can be a story about the regulatory process, or it can be a warning that there are dangers to democracy that our Founders' checks and balances were unable to anticipate.

"We are the 99%" could turn out to be a popgun, or it could be the shot heard round the world. Just don't let anyone tell you that the answer is already a foregone conclusion.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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