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'Occupy' protests keep conversation alive

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

A pair of obscure video artists in a distant ex-urb outside Los Angeles may point to a larger meaning for the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Jeff Foye and Gordon Winiemko have created an art installation in Riverside, Calif. -- a community that hugs the desert and has been hard hit by the mortgage crisis.

According to a local public radio station, the two have been taping themselves outside of dozens of foreclosed homes, performing the everyday suburban activities that once went on there: washing the car, mowing the lawn, etc.

Winiemko said the videos display the now-quaint "desire of the 99 percent to be the 1 percent."

Now, I can't imagine two artists from a down-and-out desert town can alter the American conversation -- but their work points to one accomplishment of the Occupy protests that has been overlooked: In a nation that runs far away from any scent of class conflict, everyone now knows about the divide between the top economic 1 percent and the rest of the country.

This is no small achievement: For decades, at least, the right has painted any attempt to deal with economic divides as "class warfare," and a danger to the aspirations of millions of Americans. One example: The debate in the Clinton years over raising the inheritance tax was turned on its head. Republican and business groups dubbed it the "death tax," and convinced middle-class Americans that their dreams were on the line. Most people, the GOP line went, hoped someday to be successful enough that they, too, would have a large inheritance to leave to their children -- and so they opposed the death tax as a hurdle to their grand ambitions.

But the last decade has seen a sharp decrease in social mobility -- which really hasn't been that wonderful since the late 1970s anyway. Maybe, then, people are no longer buying into the dream of someday soon wearing tuxedos, sipping champagne and reviewing various hedge fund performances through their monocles.

And now comes the Occupy movement to drive home the point.

Some wish the protestors had an agenda, a set of goals and a timetable -- anything but the seemingly open-ended tent city occupation now enmeshed in several urban centers. I get that -- it's frustrating to see all this attention going to waste. But is it? Like any good politician, the protestors keep repeating their central idea: the 1 percent versus the 99. That idea then gets sustained attention, including a statistical analysis in the New York Times and a semi-unflattering portrayal by Steve Lopez, the most popular columnist working at the Los Angeles Times.

Sure, a lot of hemp harvesting and vegan dining are going on in the tents, which, OK, have little to do with economic justice. But every protest movement -- by its very nature -- attracts more than its share of fringe elements. Remember the Tea Party people who flooded town halls in the summer of Obama's health reform? Remember "death panels" and "keep your dirty government hands off my Medicare?" Remember just about any Tea Party candidate who has ever run for just about anything? They weren't really "for" anything; their agenda, such as it was, was a lot of "NO!" to a whole lot of things they didn't like.

But they had a peculiar genius: They never let up, they kept pounding away until they reshaped Congress and the GOP.

Give the Occupy people that much credit, as well. From two artists in Riverside to the pages of national newspapers, they are also altering the conversation.

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That may be enough.

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