

Occupy Wall Street breeds new generation of activism



OCCUPY WALL Street, the growing protest against corporate greed and the influence of corporate money and lobbyists on government, has restored my faith in the millennial generation.

Until the recent protests in New York City, the current generation of college students seemed mostly unconcerned about the social, economic and political injustices of the larger society. As far as they were concerned, those problems didn't affect them.

The so-called "millennial generation" grew up in a world of instant gratification, dominated by computer games, email and cell phones. Generally speaking, they expected to be granted privileges without having to work for them. A college degree was considered the cultural capital to successful employment and their ticket to the American Dream.

They considered their grandparents, who came of age during the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, "radicals" who "overreacted" to the government's prosecution of the Vietnam War and blacks' struggle for civil rights. Nor did they see any similarity between those injustices and the "war on terrorism" and the growing resentment of Hispanic Americans today.

COMMENTARY

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The millennials didn't see the relevance of those issues to their lives. But reality hit home when they realized that the economic recession and President Obama's bailout of corporate America had affected their abilities to pay off their college loans.

Between 2005 and 2009 a full 41 percent of college students surveyed by the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Higher Education Policy were either delinquent or in default on their college loans. More alarming was the prospect of long-term debt. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the jobless rate for Americans with at least a bachelor's degree rose from 4.7 percent to 5.1 percent last month, the highest since 1970 when records were first kept.

What the statistics indicate is that recent college graduates are being denied job opportunities and they face the very real possibility of being in debt for the rest of their lives, unable to declare bankruptcy.

Their American Dream has been compromised by 1 percent of the population that dominates corporate America and exercises considerable influence in Washington. They

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are the proverbial "rich who are growing richer" while students from middle- and working-class backgrounds are being forced to join the ranks of the poor.

On Sept. 17 the millennials finally said "enough," and took to the streets in New York City to register their disapproval. Since then, students have joined similar "Occupy" protests in more than 150 cities in the United States and Europe.

Like the student generation of the 1960s, today's millennials see the relevance of this protest to their own lives. It has become personal, and that is a refreshing change among a generation that had been known for its docility.

Ultimately, the millennials are accountable for the future of this country. Let's hope it doesn't take another Great Depression for them to meet the challenge.

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