Kai Ryssdal: Even though I said let's go. Hey everybody, I'm Kai Ryssdal, welcome back to Make Me Smart. None of us, we like to say around here, is as smart as all of us.

Molly Wood: That's right, especially on Tuesdays. I'm Molly Wood, it is our day to deep dive into a single topic with some help. Today we're talking about occupy wall street because 10 years ago this week, a group of activists pitched tents in New York Zuccotti Park, they said they were protesting against economic inequality. And then, of course, the big gap that we have now obsessively covered for probably at least half of those 10 years, the big gap between the people who hold the top 1% of wealth in this country and the rest of us.

Kai Ryssdal: In fact, if you remember, the big chant down there was we are the 99%. Right? Anyway, so those protests went a lot longer, a lot farther, frankly, than a lot of people thought it would. There were people in other cities around the world who launched their own analogous Occupy Wall Street camps and protests lasted about two months in Zuccotti Park, in New York City. And depending on who you talk to, it either faded from memory, or had some really profound impacts on capitalism and economic policy in this country. And so that's what we're going to talk about today.

Molly Wood: Certainly, we all say the 1% all the time. That's at least one thing to dig into more things. We have Ruth Milkman, she's a professor of sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center and School of Labor and Urban Studies and has studied the Occupy Wall Street movement. Professor, thanks for coming on.

Ruth: Thanks for having me.

Molly Wood: So what, how would you say, you know, could we quantify the ways that occupy wall street did change our understanding of wealth and the people that our economy is left behind?

Ruth: Well, I'm not sure it changed the understanding so much as made the understanding widespread in the population. You know, there were experts, people in the social sciences who had been studying inequality. And we're very well aware of its exploded, explosive growth in the period since the 1970s. But it wasn't really on the radar of the general population until occupy, I think that was one of the major impacts. We actually track the Google News, you know, mentions of the word inequality over time, and there's a big spike right after the fall of 2011. And it does decline a little bit after that, but it never goes back to the level it was. And, you know, I
think even without that data, you, we all know that, since 2011, the We Are The 99%, the fact that inequality is out of control, and you know, at a higher level than in a century, kind of anybody who's paying attention is aware of that now, and I don't think that was true in 2010. So that's one of the lasting impacts.

**Kai Ryssdal:** But if all we're doing is talking about it, right, and if as you say, inequality is the highest it's been in a century, did Occupy Wall Street do what it wanted to do, do you think?

**Ruth:** Well, no, in that sense, it did not. In other words, you're right, that the inequality has continued to grow since then. On the other hand, I think there's been a real transformation in the political landscape as a result of the much greater awareness of the problem and much more legitimacy for things like raising the minimum wage or Bernie Sanders's presidential campaigns, things like that, which probably would not have been as successful had it not been for this change in awareness. And that I think, tries, trucks back to occupy.

**Molly Wood:** But still mostly conversation, right, like we haven't seen necessarily significant actual policy as a result of Occupy, or in that 10 years anyway?

**Ruth:** I do think there's been significant policy, for example, raising the minimum wage, the fight for $15, which led to big hikes in the blue states and cities in the minimum wage, that's a very significant change. And, and there are some others, but on the whole, it's true that inequality remains out of control and is a huge problem. So it's not just the conversation, but I do think that when, when you're aiming at really fundamental systemic change like that, it's a pretty heavy lift, and so you know, occupy sort of got the ball rolling, but it hasn't happened.

**Kai Ryssdal:** It didn't come out of nowhere, right? I mean, this is on the heels of the financial crisis and the Tea Party, there were some precursors that I think are pretty important.

**Ruth:** Well, in some ways, yes. I think, um, well, our analysis is that it, it does stem from the Great Recession of 2008, kind of a delayed reaction to that, you know, the demographic group that dominated the occupy movement was young, most so-called millennial generation, activists, most of them college educated. And these were people who had gone to college, done everything they were supposed to do. And then they faced the Great Recession's in this, you know, labor market, where their opportunities, you know, were extremely limited. And I, you know, that was one of the big drivers. And then, in addition to that, a kind of political disillusion. So, on the one hand, you know, this kind of economic expectations that these young people had weren't being met. And at the same time, it was the same generation that had enthusiastically supported Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. And then they were kind of disappointed that that did not lead to the kinds of structural changes that, you know, were promised or the hope that was, you know, part of the campaign, in fact, the change was quite limited. So those two things together, I think, were the spurs. And then, you know, they responded to this call for action to, on September 17 to occupy wall street. And I think most people involved actually didn't expect it to be such a big deal as it turned out to be, all the folks we interviewed said they thought it would last a couple days, the police would kick them out,
that would be it. But instead, it gained incredible traction. And I think it just struck a chord in the wider population. That, you know, something was deeply problematic about the situation, you know, after 2008, Wall Street got bailed out, but ordinary people were really suffering. And so they really, you know, captured the imagination of the, of the public.

**Molly Wood:** Yeah, I mean, it's interesting. It's like it gave permission, right? It put words and structure to this thing that people had been feeling for so long. And when you put it that way, it's sort of it's not surprising that it might take 10 years or more to accomplish systemic change. But naming the system all by itself was a big deal.

**Ruth:** And that's the first step. You know, you can't change something if people aren't aware that it needs to be changed. So, you know, there's still a long way to go. But I think the other thing that happened as a result of the occupation of Zuccotti Park and all the replication of it around the country, and actually the world, is that it, it inaugurated a whole new wave of social movement protests. So before 2011, there really wasn't a lot of that in the United States, there was, by the way, in other parts of the world and occupy was linked to things like the Arab Spring, and the indignados of Spain and very self consciously, they were aware that they were replicating that form of protest. But, but in terms of the United States, this was the beginning of something that has continued ever since. We've seen Black Lives Matter, Me Too, all kinds of public protests in this past decade since September 2011. And I think occupy sort of opened the floodgates in that respect. And, again, not all those movements have achieved everything they aspire to. But they have put social movements back into the center of the political dynamic. And, you know, that's something we haven't had for a while in the United States.

**Kai Ryssdal:** Yeah, keep going a little bit, though. You alluded to, you didn't allude to, you actually, you talked about Bernie Sanders and, and his really strong showings in presidential campaigns, do you think we would have had the strength of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party here in 2020 and 2021, and honestly, you know, the habit gets wreaking on, on more moderate Democrats, do you think we would have had that progressive wing without occupy?

**Ruth:** Probably not, or if even if we had it, it would not be as influential or as large. Um, you know, Bernie Sanders has been around for a long time, as we all know, but he rose, his prominence just exploded after Occupy and, and, you know, the people we interviewed in our research on this, many of them commented that they had, in many cases, not all, many of them had been political activists prior to 2011. But nothing that they had done prior to that had gotten the traction that the occupy movement got. And so that gave them confidence and a belief that they could make social change in a meaningful way and attract other people to support that. So again, it just kind of created all this momentum for social movements that we've seen since then. And a lot of the people who participated in occupy went on to do other things. They participated in Black Lives Matter, they protested, you know, Dakota Access Pipeline, things like that. And of the people we interviewed, nobody has, you know, changed their mind about the importance of fighting for these changes, or, and most of them are still quite active politically.
Molly Wood: What do we see as we look back sort of 10 years on, what were the limitations of that movement, do you think?

Ruth: Well, one of the limitations was, it was also a strength, but it was a limitation at the same time. So the focus on class inequality was really important, especially in the United States context, where there's a lot of denial about the significance of class historically. But many people, in retrospect, have pointed out that occupy probably did not pay enough attention to other kinds of oppression, like racial and gender and sexual preference related oppressions. So there's some self-criticism, if you will, among those activists about that, but I think, you know, with the explosion of these other movements, since Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and so on, trans activism etc., you know, they're they've moved on to sort of incorporate a more intersectional approach to, to activism since. But at the time, there was a lot of internal to the, to the occupy movement, there was criticism along those lines.

Kai Ryssdal: So this, this is a little bit of an apocalyptic question, I suppose. But, but, but hear me out. So we had the financial crisis and the recession. We had occupy, that protested, among many other things, but primarily inequality in this economy. Here we are 10 years later, and your message is, which I grant you is that it's early days yet, right? Protest movements don't, you know, do fundamental change overnight, right, look at civil rights. Given though that inequality is increasing at a rate we haven't seen, and then it's at a level we haven't seen in a century, do we have the time it takes to let this protest movement run its course?

Ruth: Well, that's a great question. I mean, I think, you know, that, that's one crisis that this country is facing, there are others. Climate change, which also, you know, we don't have much time to deal with that. The political polarization in the country, these are all really serious problems. I think, you know, what we've seen though, is the growth of a big chunk of the population who have a critique of the status quo and a vision of what might be possible as an alternative. And it's true that we haven't gotten that far toward building that alternative. But it's beginning. I mean, I don't, I don't know that there's much more to say about that. It's, you're absolutely right that it hasn't happened yet. And it might not happen. There's no guarantees in this kind of business. But, but there are a lot of people who are trying to make those changes, and many more than there were prior to Occupy's emergence.

Kai Ryssdal: Yeah. And that's part of the point, right, part of what it was trying to do was, was raise consciousness, which it has done. Ruth Milkman is a professor of sociology at the City University of New York Graduate Center, also the School of Labor and Urban Studies. They're also a scholar of the Occupy Wall Street movement, 10 years ago this week. Professor, thanks for your time. We really appreciate you coming on.

Molly Wood: Yeah, thank you.

Ruth: Thank you. It was my pleasure.
Kai Ryssdal: Well, there you go. I think, I think the relevant point is that it's early at it's been a decade, but we just don't know, you know what I mean?

Molly Wood: And it doesn't, it, I know that it's frustrating, because a decade seems like a long time and yet totally isn't. It's interesting, there's actually a saying in the world of consumer electronics, my previous life, which is that it takes any new product a full decade to find its market fit, a full decade. So like, iPad comes out, for example, it's, it's possible that I'm inundated with all these live tweets of this Apple event, which just like side note, like, we wouldn't breathlessly report if Audi introduced like, white sticker on their seats, like, come on, stop caring, so much marketing, marketing water for this company, like how, anyway, it takes, you know, 10 years to figure out how you're going to deal with that and what is going to happen. But it's so interesting because when we started having the conversation about doing this episode, I was like, wait, occupy, like I forgot all about that. And while it is true that I may have sort of forgotten about the particulars of those protests, we're still using that language every single day. It's still influencing our politics at almost every level. And so that is major impact for protest movement that's like, about as good as you can hope for 10 years on.


Molly Wood: Yeah. All right, we're gonna take a quick break. We would love to know what you think the legacy of Occupy Wall Street is. Did it change the way you think about wealth and inequality? Did you, did it give voice to something that you had felt before deep down in your soul, which is like wow, this feels unfair. Let us know in an email, or a voice memo that you can send to us, makemesmart@marketplace.org, or you can call us, leave us a voice message. Our new number's 508-827-6278, also known as 508-UB-SMART.

Kai Ryssdal: And if you haven't for some reason subscribed to this podcast, please do that. It just helps in rankings and letting people know and algorithms and all that does, leave us a rating. Leave us a review. You know, all that good stuff. We'll be right back.

Molly Wood: I don't know what that weird yay was all about. Thanks, algorithm!

Kai Ryssdal: You're just happy. It's a happy Tuesday. Was that the happy Tuesday followed by the despairing sigh? I understand.

Molly Wood: Yeah, it was. Yeah, you may have undercut your own message.

Kai Ryssdal: Lianna's literally laughing at me from the control room. She looked at me, she's like, what are you even doing?

Molly Wood: Amazing. Anyway, what do you got in the news fix? Just the one link?

Kai Ryssdal: One link, two stories. But, but it's really amazing work by the Wall Street Journal. They have gotten their hands on internal Facebook documents. They're rolling it out in what I imagine is going to be a series this week called the Facebook Files, yesterday was about how
VIPs basically can do anything they want on Facebook and there will be no repercussions. Unlike us plebes who, you know, if you say a bad word, you'll get, you know, deleted or your post taken down. And today is talking about how they know Instagram, which Facebook owns, is bad for teenage girls. But they keep going anyway. And I just, it's, we talk a lot about, well, we used to talk more, not so much lately because there's been other stuff, but how Facebook knows what it's doing is damaging. And here is the Wall Street Journal with internal company documents showing that they knew too, and still no and aren't doing anything about it. And it's kind of wild, kind of wild. And while I'm here actually, a shout out, a quick shout out to the Wall Street Journal's podcast. I think it's called The Journal where they're talking to reporters who did this work. It's really kind of wild. Kinda wild.

Molly Wood: Yeah, this is gonna be very interesting. And you can see from Facebook's responses already on Twitter and elsewhere that the company is freaking out about this, they've gone full kind of, for lack of a better way to say it, Trump White House response, you know, in terms of being like the Wall Street Journal is just looking for an easy narrative and, and they put together this old information so that they can focus on the easy narrative. This is sort of paraphrasing an actual response, focus on the easy narrative instead of the fact that we've made significant changes to the cross check program, which of course is the one that led VIPs to have a totally different level of moderation and in many cases, none. And so it's this weird sort of like, attacking slash gaslighting, like don't focus on the fact that we definitely did have this program. Definitely did and still kind of do, just focus on the part where we're changing it like it's, it's, it tells you how bad this is. And is probably going to get in terms of this reporting, because we're talking about internal documents from 2019 and 2020. This is not like, olden times behavior.

Kai Ryssdal: Yeah, no, it's, yeah. I heard today their new, you know, user numbers, more than 3 billion people. Maybe that's been known for a while, it was news to me this morning. I was like, holy cow.

Molly Wood: I'm curious. And I assume that a lot of that growth is Instagram, which is making these teenage girls feel so terrible, but I'd be curious to know more.

Kai Ryssdal: And, you know, I, I saw, I'm out of Facebook for a long time ago, but I still do have Instagram. And I somehow convinced myself it's not really Facebook, but of course it is Facebook. And so now I have to get rid of Instagram, I think. I don't know.

Molly Wood: The features that, this is a quote from the Wall Street Journal, the features that Instagram identifies as most harmful to teens appear to be at the platform's core. Great, like, every time this company says, that's not true, or we don't know, or we're not the arbiters of truth or your self-esteem. Just stop listening, stop listening. Um, I have two stories today, I confess. One I just think is really interesting in the context of this labor shortage and inflation question. Amazon has increased its average starting wage in the United States to more than $18 an hour. Speaking of Occupy Wall Street and minimum wage conversations, um, yep, but it is, it is remarkable. And it's really interesting, the company is then giving signing bonuses of $3,000.
And, and what I think is interesting about this is that like, in theory, higher wages lead to inflation, right? Companies have to increase prices in order to pay higher wages and small businesses across America are feeling all of this pressure to pay a lot of money to be able to hire people. And for them, that likely means they'll have to raise prices. And in the case of Amazon, it shouldn't necessarily mean that they have to raise prices. And so you're in this weird, maybe I'm speculating here, but you're maybe in this weird, decoupling cycle of economics where Amazon can afford to undercut small business in both salary and price, potentially, which puts smaller companies and retailers in a tough spot, I would think. And I just wonder if that's true.

Kai Ryssdal: Yeah. Yeah, I'm mulling it over and I don't know the answer yet. But it's an observation, good observation.

Molly Wood: Thank you. Yeah. Thanks. Neil Irwin, get on that one. Yeah, that's right. That's right. That seems right up his alley. And then there was just this fascinating report from Pew Research Center. And it was global. A survey, well, mostly global, sort of global, a survey of 18,000 people in advanced economies, and asked people, are you willing to make changes in how you work and live to help reduce the effects of climate change? Are who, you know, what countries do you think are doing well and aren't. And what was fascinating is that more than 80% of respondents across the world said they would change their behavior to fight climate change. However, in the United States, globally, there was a difference between, you know, people who identify as liberal versus conservative, right, there were, there was a split in in most cases where liberals were more willing to change their lives and how they consume. And conservatives were less willing. In some countries, that difference was like really small. I think in Italy, it was like, I don't know, a 7% difference or something. In the United States, however, 94% of those on the left said they would change behavior, only 45% on the right said they would be willing to change anything about the way that they live in order to fight climate change. A gap of 49 percentage points, far larger than in any other country. Oh, and by the way, when residents of other countries were asked how they feel the United States is doing and its response to climate change, 61% of survey respondents said, bad. Which I think is bad grammar. Only 36% of survey respondents said good. 45% like you, you have to wonder about a party that's telling people that like extinction is not a problem, nor is the pandemic, you just have to ask how that is pro-life at all. Yeah, you have to ask.

Kai Ryssdal: So many questions. All right. So the news fix over to all y'all.

Molly Wood: We're not gonna beat this into the ground, I promise. But we do have an important follow up on one of our most important issues right now because guess who called back?

Patty: Hi, this is Patty in Southlake, Texas. I'm listening to the Thursday’s show and did I just hear the first make me barf from Kai? Talk to you later, bye. Thanks for making me smart.

Kai Ryssdal: I'm sticking to my guns, dead rats are dead rats.
Molly Wood: And yes, Patty, yes, you did.

Kai Ryssdal: Yeah, I got some internal grief for that. Let's just say. Alright, moving right along. Moving right along. So here we go. This is another voice memo. Let's hit it.

Andrew: Hi, Kai and Molly. This is Andrew in St. Louis. I plan to donate to your fundraising drive no matter what. And it would really sweeten the pot if Kai did the karaoke rendition of the gambler that was talked about many moons ago on the show. Molly, to sing karaoke is clearly not uncomfortable for you. Maybe other listeners will come up with something more appropriate for you to do. Anyway, thanks for being the central part of my survival kit and before that, my Trump survival kit. I give you two clear examples just from yesterday's show. Kai, don't listen to anyone else, you're not twisted. I have mouse problems so the mass rat drowning also made me smile. Molly, you had me at oh, biscuits. You had me at oh, biscuits.

Kai Ryssdal: I do like oh, biscuits. and it's got to be oh, biscuits. You can't just say biscuits.

Molly Wood: You can't just say although sometimes I do because if you, you know when you're , when you have long since given up but all these were habits that were ingrained when I was trying not to swear so much around my child because people who know me in real life know that I'm like a trucker.

Kai Ryssdal: You're not worried about that anymore, though. You're over that?

Molly Wood: I'm sorry other parents that no, I have long since given up on that. Although clearly I'm still saying like, I'm still out here in my day to day life saying biscuits and flapjacks and all these other things.

Kai Ryssdal: Alright, we're gonna go out with the make me smart question the answer to it, of course, the question is what is something you thought you knew and later found out you were wrong about? Here you go.

Megan: Hey, y'all. It's Megan from Flower Mound, Texas. Something I thought I knew but later found out I was wrong about his I have asserted in many arguments in my marriage that cars only depreciate in value, and so we shouldn't be throwing too much money at cars. However, with the global supply chain shortage caused by the pandemic, we were able to buy a Jeep about a year and a half ago and turn around and sell it yesterday for far more money than we purchased it for. So there we go.

Kai Ryssdal: Economics, baby. Economics works. How about that. Come on

Molly Wood: I really should not have sold my car for so little. I'm filled with regret. That's a good, that's a good one. Well played, Megan, well played. If you have put off emailing us or sending us a voice memo because it was too complicated to figure out how to record it and send especially on Android, with your answer to the make me smart question, I'm just saying, like have a built in app for crying out loud. Consider calling us and leaving us a voice message
at our new number 508-82-SMART, 508-UB-SMART. The question once again is what is something you thought you knew and you later found out you were wrong about? You can find support for laughing at rats.

Kai Ryssdal: Laughing at rats, come on. Dead rats, not live rats.

Molly Wood: Make Me Smart is produced and directed by Marissa Cabrera. Marque Greene is in training this week. Tony Wagner writes our newsletter. Our intern is Grace Rubin.

Kai Ryssdal: Lianna Squillace is in charge on the other side of the soundproof glass. Drew Jostad is going to mix it down later. Ben Tolliday and Daniel Ramirez, wherever they may be, composed our theme music. Our senior producer is Bridget Bodnar. The executive director of on demand is Sitara Nieves, who somehow always gets credit on the show even though--

Molly Wood: You might want to stop right there. Yep.

Kai Ryssdal: I’m just saying.