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Source: *Social Research*, Vol. 79, No. 1, Politics and Comedy (SPRING 2012), pp. 145-168

Published by: The New School

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23350302>

Accessed: 28-11-2016 18:59 UTC

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Angelique Haugerud

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WALL STREET BANKERS WHOSE CUTAWAY COATS, LARGE TOP HATS, and mustaches suggest they are nineteenth-century robber barons wave protest signs:

Keep things precisely as they are.
I've got mine.
Leave well enough alone.
Change, shmange!
I'm good, thanks.

"Fighting Back" reads the caption—not of an old photo, but the cartoon cover of the October 24, 2011, issue of the *New Yorker*. The improbable spectacle of a counterprotest by elite bankers neatly inverts Occupy Wall Street's "we are the 99 percent!" mantra.

The *New Yorker*'s caricature of robber barons bearing protest signs, however, is not mere fiction. Its doppelgänger is a network of actual protesters who call themselves the Billionaires. They don tuxedos and top hats, or ball gowns, satin gloves, and tiaras. Their props include champagne glasses, cigarette holders, and huge cigars—as well as bright banners and placards that are professionally printed rather than hand-lettered: "Corporations Are People Too!" "Leave No Billionaire Behind!"

Are they serious? Have the ultra-wealthy recruited supporters or hired actors to take to the streets on their behalf? Spectators sometimes believe so. The Billionaires, however, are actually satirists who

pose as the very power holders they critique. In contrast to Occupy Wall Street protesters, the Billionaires follow a strictly elegant dress code, and say precisely the opposite of what they mean: “Widen the Income Gap!” and “Heirs and Heiresses Unite: Death to the Death Tax!” They adopt names such as Tex Shelter, Lucinda Regulations (as in “loosen the regulations”), Ivan Aston-Martin, Alan Greenspend, Iona Bigga Yacht, Phil T. Rich, Owen Dwight Howse, and Noah Countability.

The Billionaires dubbed the US Labor Day holiday “Cheap Labor Day,” and displayed banners proclaiming “No Minimum Wage! No Minimum Age!” Examples of their street actions include the Million Billionaire March during Republican and Democratic National Conventions; a ballroom-dancing flash mob in New York’s Grand Central Station; thanking people outside post offices as they mail their tax returns on April 15; or auctioning off Social Security on President George W. Bush’s second inauguration day. A featured tag line: “We’re all in this together, sort of.”

Playfulness and theatricality are vital dimensions of citizenship. Far from being a “superficial froth on social relationships” or political practice, humor reflects a profound human quest to make sense of the world (phrase quoted in Powell and Patton 1988, xvii).

Since at least the time of Aristotle, democracy has nourished political humor. Scholars of humor note that “one of the mainsprings of humor is the discrepancy between reality and what we desire and expect” (Yarwood 2004, 14). The irony of a rupture between actual practices of governance and the democratic ideals of political accountability of rulers to citizens inspires the Billionaires’ satire as well as that of Comedy Central’s “fake news” show hosts Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. This essay explores satirical interpretations of that democratic rupture, focusing on two of the most delicate issues in American cultural politics: surging wealth inequality and the role of big money in politics.

WEALTH AND DEMOCRACY

Questions about the compatibility of wealth and democracy, though often mere shadows in contemporary public culture, have roots that

reach to the very founding of the United States as a rebellion against European aristocracy and officialdom. There was a crucial duality in this legacy, Kevin Phillips writes: “In contrast to stratified Europe, the more fluid society in America offered a double opportunity: both to make money and to criticize its abuse by the rich, pointing out how excess wealth and stratification undercut the democracy that had nurtured them” (2002b, 5). Here is an implicit ideal of a democratic society that is at once humane and entrepreneurial, admiring of wealth yet alert to its perils.

By the start of the twenty-first century, it was not just liberals but also some moderate Republicans, such as Phillips, who were troubled that wealth inequality in the United States had outpaced that of other wealthy industrialized nations and had reached its highest level in nearly a century. (In fact, income inequality in the United States in 2011 was more unequal than that of 30 other countries the International Monetary Fund terms “advanced economies” [Blow 2011, A23].) A statistic that startled many: by 2007, the top 1 percent of income earners in the United States received 23.5 percent of total national income and controlled 40 percent of the wealth (DeParle 2011, B1, 8). Yale economist Robert Shiller said in mid-2009 that rising economic inequality—not the financial crisis per se—is America’s biggest problem (*Charlie Rose Show* 2009). Between 1980 and 2006, the ratio of the average income of the wealthiest 1 percent to the median household income skyrocketed; “[i]n 1980 the average 1 percenter made 12.5 times the median income, but in 2006 . . . the average income of our richest 1 percent was a whopping 36 times greater than that of the median household” (Ayres and Edlin 2011, A29). At the opposite end of the scale, by 2005 the percentage of Americans living in “deep poverty” (living below half the official poverty line income) was at its highest level since the government began to track those statistics in 1975 (*New York Times* 2006, A22).

In the 1830s, the United States had just a handful of millionaires. Then in the late 1800s, Gilded Age robber barons became billionaires and multi-millionaires from “railroads, manufacturing, and extractive industries such as oil and coal” (Krugman 2007, 18). That earlier era’s

ultra-rich included men such as Andrew Carnegie, Henry C. Frick, and John D. Rockefeller (who in 1907 became the first billionaire in the United States). For only a brief period between the New Deal and the 1960s did the number of billionaires in the United States drop substantially (2007, 18). By 2000, the nation's largest individual fortunes had leaped to \$50 billion or \$100 billion, and 270,000 individuals were decamillionaires (with assets of \$10 million or more) (Phillips 2002b, xviii).

Luxuries affordable by Wall Street tycoons during the 1980s—like the fictional Gordon Gekko in the 1987 film *Wall Street*—pale in insignificance when compared to the conspicuous consumption of the ultra-rich in the early 2000s. By 2006, the thousands of US households whose net worth was \$100 million to \$1 billion had primary residences worth on average \$16.2 million, and spent an annual average of \$311,000 on cars, \$182,000 on watches, \$379,000 on jewelry, and \$169,000 on spa services (R. H. Frank 2007, 8).

In American politics and media, the historic surge in economic inequality during the past two decades has been easy to miss—an inconvenient fact. Instead of focusing on that sharp historical shift, pundits who mention wealth inequality at all often simply refer to the existence of the rich as a natural feature of capitalism. But “once you realize just how much richer the rich have become, the argument that higher taxes on high incomes should be part of any long-run budget deal becomes a lot more compelling,” observes Paul Krugman (2011, A31). The widening gulf between the ultra-rich and the rest was one of the most important issues seldom mentioned during the US presidential campaigns of 2000, 2004, and 2008 (until it briefly appeared during the final weeks of the 2008 campaign, when the financial crisis dominated headlines).

Occupy Wall Street and the 2012 presidential campaign suddenly brought wealth disparities into the limelight. A mere two months after the Occupy movement began, news media mentions of income inequality had quintupled (Klein 2011). Though “we are the 99 percent!” branded a movement and shifted national political discourse, it remains unclear whether it will help to move legislation on campaign finance,

taxes, or the social safety net. Although polls show that large majorities of citizens favor raising taxes on the very rich in order to help fund public services such as education and police and fire protection,¹ accomplishing such tax increases appears daunting. Furthermore, dominant news media rarely mention that US income taxes on the wealthy today are historically low, or that tax cuts for the very rich have contributed substantially to economic inequality and budget deficits.

In an era of “truthiness”—comedian Stephen Colbert’s popularized term for ersatz truths—confusion about economic history and the effects of alternative policies multiplies. The 2008 financial meltdown began to shift public sentiments about wealth but barely loosened the grip of the conservative market fundamentalist policies known in most of the rest of the world as “economic neoliberalism” (sharp cuts to social safety nets, deregulation, privatization, free trade). Soon after the 2008 financial meltdown, some conservatives moved even further to the right and preemptively attacked the kind of New Deal policies implemented to recover from the Great Depression (T. Frank 2012, 37–40). Republican politicians and conservative pundits offer caricatures of President Barack Obama as a socialist who would have the government mandate economic equality and squash entrepreneurialism and the free-enterprise system. Obama’s actual policy preferences often resemble those of an earlier era’s moderate Republicans, such as Richard Nixon, or even sometimes Ronald Reagan—who raised taxes to help reduce a budget deficit. But many conservatives today portray even a modest increase in the taxes of the very wealthy as an attack on “job creators,” and dismiss any suggestion that the ultra-rich should contribute more to help rebuild crumbling infrastructure or support public services from which they too benefit.

Deregulation of the financial sector, along with cozy relationships between politicians and regulators, contributed to the 2008 financial crisis by enabling financial wizards—“masters of the universe”—to take devastating risks whose enormous costs US taxpayers then had to absorb. While the 2008 financial meltdown led some erstwhile advocates of neoliberal economic policies to recant (Richard Posner, Gary

Becker, and even Alan Greenspan), some wealthy ultra-conservatives advocated even more extreme versions of those policies and helped to organize political and public relations campaigns to oppose New Deal types of reform while arguing that individual freedoms were under attack (T. Frank 2012). As Charles Ferguson, director of the 2010 documentary *Inside Job*, remarks: “In the case of this [financial] crisis, *nobody* has gone to prison, despite fraud that caused trillions of dollars in losses. . . . It is . . . my hope that, whatever political opinions individual viewers may have, that after seeing this film we can all agree on the importance of restoring honesty and stability to our financial system, and of holding accountable those who destroyed it” (Ferguson 2012).

Such demands for accountability fuel Occupy Wall Street protests against austerity programs that demand deep sacrifices from the middle class and poor while asking little or nothing from the mega-rich and financial institutions that destabilized the world economy and that grow ever larger, more profitable, and more powerful. Inspired partly by the “Arab Spring” protests against Middle Eastern dictators as well as European anti-austerity demonstrations, Occupy Wall Street protesters have staged peaceful demonstrations calling for Wall Street to be held accountable for its role in the financial crisis and for banks and huge corporations to pay their fair share of taxes and help to restabilize the housing market, end the foreclosure crisis, and invest in American jobs. Occupiers debate the very concept of demands, however, and some view demands for specific legislative reforms as a contradiction of the movement’s principles that would “turn them into supplicants . . . [and] impl[y] a surrender to the state” (Greenberg 2012, 47). Other Occupy participants favor reform of campaign finance law in order to realize their vision of a government whose elected officials are not beholden to large corporate and individual donors.

Campaign finance reform has been a particularly unwelcome topic among many elite politicians and dominant news organizations. It nonetheless has drawn growing attention from ordinary citizens, especially after the 2010 US Supreme Court’s (5–4) decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. That decision further loosened restric-

tions and enabled torrents of anonymous political campaign donations from wealthy individuals and large corporations. It also allowed such donations from labor unions, though their resources are much more meager. The Supreme Court rested this case on the claim that corporations—like people—have First Amendment rights, though corporations are created by the state and exist for the sole purpose of making profits (see Bakan 2004).

Public opinion polls show the *Citizens United* decision to be unpopular with large majorities of citizens across the political spectrum (Eggen 2010). Many observers—such as constitutional law scholar and philosopher Ronald Dworkin—view it as a devastating blow to electoral democracy (Dworkin 2010). By early 2012, a number of cities had passed measures to overturn *Citizens United*, and state legislators in California proposed a constitutional amendment to reverse the Supreme Court ruling. Among the signs Occupy protesters waved in September 2011 in New York were “Democracy Not Corporatization” and “Revoke Corporate Personhood”—counterpoints to the satirical Billionaires’ slogan “Corporations Are People Too!” Yet in early 2012, US congressional restraints or public disclosure mandates for corporate political contributions appeared unlikely—leaving this momentous issue, like so many others, difficult to address through the formal institutions of representative democracy.

These limitations opened political space not only for Occupy Wall Street’s direct democracy and direct action (Graeber 2011) but also for parodies of the election system’s financing rules. And so in 2011, Stephen Colbert, host of Comedy Central’s *Colbert Report*, took on super PACs (Political Action Committees). He obtained the approval of the Federal Election Commission to create his own fund-raising super PAC—“Citizens for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow.” Congressional super PACs in 2010 spent more than \$60 million, “managing to get their voices heard through what Mr. Colbert has described as a ‘megaphone of cash’” (Carr 2011, B1). Like any super PAC, the one Colbert created can “raise and spend unlimited amounts of soft money in support of candidates as long as it doesn’t ‘coordinate’ with them”

(McGrath 2012, 20–25, 36). His super PAC had collected contributions from some 30,000 people by late 2011 and began spending the money on subtly satirical political ads—thereby dramatizing the serious issue of campaign finance by becoming part of the very process legalized by the US Supreme Court’s 2010 *Citizens United* decision. After Mitt Romney told a heckler at an August 2011 Iowa campaign event that “corporations are people, my friend,” Colbert proposed that the Republican Party in South Carolina (where he grew up) add to its January presidential primary ballot “a nonbinding referendum question that asked the voters to decide whether ‘corporations are people’ or ‘only people are people’” (McGrath 2012, 23).

Colbert carried his super PAC escapade a step farther in the January 12, 2012, episode of the *Colbert Report*. Trevor Potter, former chair of the Federal Election Commission and now Colbert’s lawyer, appeared with him on the show and advised that while Colbert could not be a political candidate while running a super PAC, he could have it run by a friend or business partner—a widely criticized legal loophole. Colbert could even work with the PAC as a volunteer and he could talk about his plans on his show without violating the stipulation forbidding PACs from “coordinating” with candidates. With the legalities clarified, Colbert then dramatically transferred control of his amply funded PAC to his satirical news colleague and friend Jon Stewart—leaving Colbert able legally to run for president. Red and blue balloons dropped from above as he announced he would form an “exploratory committee for president of the United States of South Carolina” (Stelter 2012, A14).

How extreme wealth intermingles with politics is one of the most provocative issues of our era. Plutocracy—the intertwined growth of political and economic inequality—took deep root once again in the United States during the 1990s and was florescent by 2000, a shift that troubles avowedly nonpartisan political scientist Larry Bartels (2008) as well as centrist and liberal pundits. Phillips writes that “the dynastic aspect of American wealth and politics has been growing much faster than public (and press) appreciation of its ballooning significance” (2002a, 11–14). The 2012 US presidential and congressional elections

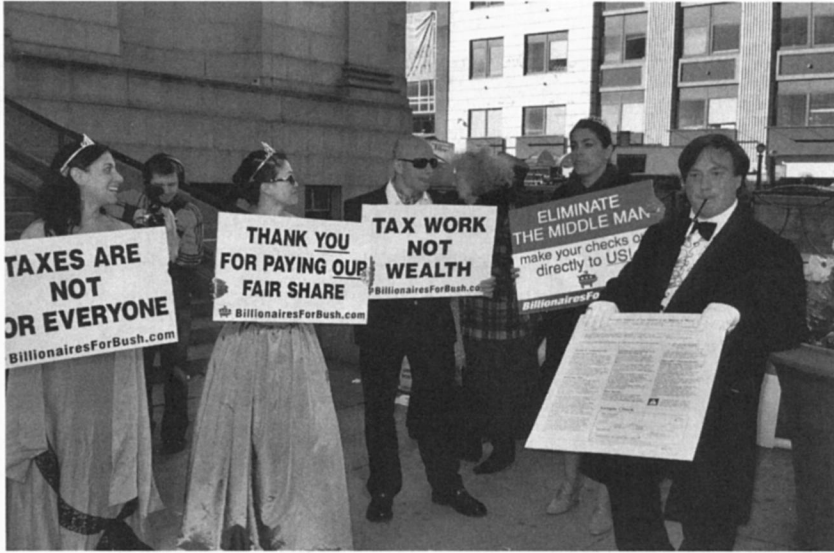
profoundly test public tolerance of unprecedented flows of private and corporate cash—often from anonymous sources—into political campaigns.

Like the first Gilded Age and the 1920s, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been an era of “avarice and speculation run amok,” writes Phillips (2002b). Billionaire investor Warren Buffett comments: “There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making the war, and we’re winning”—a rarely heard pronouncement in American public culture and precisely the sentiment captured as well in the satirical Billionaires’ slogan, “It’s a Class War and We’re Winning!”

These profound transformations, though slow to register in formal political domains, have galvanized a surge of protest. And for more than a decade they have engaged the satirical Billionaires—innovative activists for whom the threat posed to democracy by the role of big money in politics, skyrocketing economic inequality, the erosion of the middle class, and the expanding power of mega-corporations in politics and media have all been the focus of a war of wordplay in glamorous, media-friendly street theater.

BILLIONAIRES FOR BUSH (AND MORE)

Hailed as the “rock stars of the protest scene” (Jurgenson 2004), the Billionaires are genre benders whose style and tactics deliberately counter those of conventional protesters. These artists, intellectuals, actors, corporate professionals, policy wonks, and seasoned and novice activists created a brand of theatrical political activism that evokes information-age novelty, along with traces of earlier repertoires such as the trickster, late-medieval and Renaissance carnival, plus rituals of status reversal. They cultivate popular appeal through semiotic contrasts reproduced in the media (and in official discourses and practices) and reiterated through performance: Billionaire charm versus liberal anger—or protesters who are elegant rather than scruffy, hip rather than traditional, polite rather than offensive, and harmless rather than dangerous (Haugerud 2010, 112–127).



Billionaires for Bush on Tax Day, April 15, 2004. New York City's central post office. Photo by author.

Pretending to defend the ultra-rich, the Billionaires have promoted messages of economic justice and campaign finance reform that many Occupy Wall Street participants would cheer. Starting out as Billionaires for Forbes in 1999, they morphed into Billionaires for Bush (or Gore) in 2000, Billionaires for Bush in 2004, Lobbyists for McCain in 2008, Billionaires for Bailouts during the 2008 financial meltdown, Billionaires for Wealthcare during the 2009 health insurance debates, and Billionaires for Social Insecurity in 2010 when policymakers revived the possibility of privatizing Social Security. At Occupy protests in the fall of 2011, some Billionaires left their elegant attire behind while others donned tuxedos and ball gowns and appeared as Billionaires for Plutocracy and Billionaires for the One Percent. Their signs: “Buy Your Own Democracy!” “It’s a Class War and We’re Winning!” “Thanks for Paying Our Fair Share!”

“Is it a joke? I can’t figure out if it’s a joke,” said a woman encountering the Billionaires for the first time at their 2004 tax day event outside New York City’s central post office. A male passer-by at the same event at first wondered: “But are they for or against Bush?”

"They lost their mind!" a man in his thirties muttered as he walked down Manhattan's Eighth Avenue, past the Billionaires' July 2004 "celebration" of George Bush's birthday. As passers-by linger and watch, they usually realize that the "campy, spoofy" (as one observer put it) Billionaire impersonations are meant to be ironic. Satirical cues can misfire, however, and not everyone gets the joke or appreciates it even if they do understand it. Sometimes observers respond as much to the Billionaires' performance of conspicuous leisure as to the content of their play—perhaps especially when they attempt to cross class or race categories. Unfriendly responses, though uncommon, point to the paradoxical risk of "pulling off the parody a bit too well" or becoming what one spoofs—in this case "clubby elites who are screened off from the rest of the world" (Haugerud 2004). Thus, the Billionaires' challenge as street performers is to denounce inequality through empathic humor that reaches across the country's growing economic divide even as they enact a caricatured aloofness, self-admiration, and foppery.

What is striking about the satirical Billionaires at their best is their magnetism—the power of their live performances. Their political effectiveness and media appeal of course hinge on live performance. Crucial here are split-second reactions that bypass conscious awareness—as hinted in Lois Canfield's description of her first street performance as a Billionaire in Seattle: "You've got about three seconds . . . it's so quick! . . . The real impression that you make is the visual and whether or not they even listen to anything you say is based on your visual." The "visual" here encompasses not just costumes and signs but poise, gaze, affect, grace, and charisma. Voice quality and locution are pivotal. At play in Billionaire encounters with the public are subtleties of affect—"intensities that pass body to body . . . resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds . . . affect and cognition are never fully separable" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1–2).² Thus an ideal Billionaire performance would entice someone to pay attention and to feel a psychic connection, followed by an "aha!" moment when political cognition is triggered—not necessarily

just recognition by those who already agree, but also enlightenment or even transformation.³

When they take political satire to the streets, performers try to sustain spectators' psychological collaboration throughout the performance, a process that includes, as Beeman puts it, a crucial but fragile and constantly shifting phatic connection that "keeps all parties engaged with each other" (1993, 386). Since the dynamics are anything but predictable, displays of quick-witted connection with spectators (including journalists) are an advantage.

In street performance, contexts are emergent, open-ended, and variable across participants. Both performers and observers "position themselves . . . and are simultaneously positioned by others according to factors such as class, ethnicity, and gender," as well as less observable individual consciousnesses.⁴ Thus individuals hear Billionaire performances in quite different registers. Whether a Billionaire street performance resonates powerfully with a *Washington Post* reporter as well as a Verizon technician or concert stagehand, then, depends on artistry, context, and luck.

During the 2000 presidential campaign, the Billionaires for Bush (or Gore) multiplied into a media-friendly grassroots network of 55 chapters nationally. Four years later, bearing a name redesigned to suit a new presidential campaign—Billionaires for Bush—their visibility escalated dramatically as they grew within a few months from a half-dozen or so members meeting in a Manhattan apartment to 100 chapters across the country and a handful abroad. Over 10,000 people joined their online community (Duncombe and Boyd 2007b, 44) thanks to a polished website, media coverage, eye-catching street events, fund-raising parties that attracted celebrities such as Electronica artist Moby (Richard Melville Hall), and other networking. With a red, white, and blue piggy bank as their logo, the Billionaires for Bush cultivated high production values—protest with polish. They produced music CDs,⁵ a tongue-in-cheek book (Billionaires for Bush 2004), T-shirts, bumper stickers, and an infomercial (among other products). Their modest funding came from sales of such products

and from individual donations: “Billionaire production values on a shoestring budget.”⁶

The Billionaires for Bush won a spot among 15 finalists selected from more than 1,500 contestants in a “Bush in 30 Seconds” ad competition sponsored in November 2003 by MoveOn.org. Their ad entry—“Leave No Billionaire Behind”—featured piggy banks, plutocrats, and children, and offers a “message of appreciation to the millions of children paying for tax breaks for the rich” (according to their press release). Photographed in 2004 by Richard Avedon for the *New Yorker*, the Billionaires for Bush also starred in an Art Spiegelman cartoon sequence in that same magazine and appeared on CNN, ABC, MSNBC, and other television networks as well as in articles in *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, *Der Spiegel*, and other newspapers and magazines in the United States and abroad (see Haugerud et al. forthcoming 2012). *Washington Post* associate editor Robert Kaiser (2004) writes that “Billionaires for Bush, no matter what your politics, must be one of the most likable protest groups ever formed.”

In early 2008, the Billionaires produced a widely viewed video spoof—“No, You Can’t”—that was covered in the *New York Times* (Dwyer 2008) and featured a Dick Cheney lookalike and other Republican figures undercutting Barack Obama’s “Yes We Can” slogan. The “No, You Can’t” video was a direct parody of a popular video featuring celebrities and Obama’s oratory that had been produced by the musician will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas.⁷ At the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul, dressed in pinstriped suits and black fedoras, the Billionaires posed as “Lobbyists for McCain” and carried placards declaring “No, you can’t!” and “Loyal to Big Oil” and “Don’t Change Horsemen Mid-Apocalypse.”⁸

During Wall Street’s 2008 meltdown, the Billionaires for Bailouts donned tuxedos and gowns or black suits and fedoras as they joined Wall Street protests, with slogans such as “Thanks for the \$700bn Check!” and “I’m Starving, Bail Me Out!” and “Billionaires for Bailouts Love Tax-Payers!” (Segal 2008, C01) They pivoted during the 2009 health

care reform debates to pose as “Billionaires for Wealthcare” and staged a stealth prank that attracted national media attention: a musical satirical protest—“Public Option Annie,” sung to the tune of “Tomorrow” from the Broadway musical “Annie”—which caught health insurance industry executives at a Washington, D.C. conference by complete surprise. That choral stunt was featured at the top of MSNBC’s *Rachel Maddow Show*, in a segment captioned “Guerrillas in Their Midst.” Maddow termed the Billionaires’ prank a “sign of the continued spunk and energy on the left to push for a robust version of [health care] reform.”⁹

In 2010, as proposals to cut Social Security benefits resurfaced—even though the Social Security trust fund is not in crisis and is not the cause of the federal budget deficit (see Krugman 2007)—the Billionaires for Social Insecurity declared “It’s a Crisis! Because We Said So” and announced they were “Feeling Entitled to Cut Your Entitlements (Since 1936).” In mid-2010, following the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision, a spin-off group dressed as the country’s Founding Fathers won media coverage of their protests in Washington, D.C. against massive political campaign fund-raising by corporate lobbyists (Leonnig 2010). Also in 2010, Agit-Pop Communications (describing themselves as “an award-winning netroots subvertising agency”) and co-led by the Billionaires’ cofounder Andrew Boyd) and teamed up with MoveOn to create “RepublicCorp” (“Buying Democracy One Race At a Time”)—a “merger between giant corporations and the GOP” (Agit-Pop.com 2011). They quickly sprouted offices and street actions in several cities, produced a video that MoveOn transmitted to nearly a million people, serenaded the head of the Republican front-group American Action Network, recorded a “corporate anthem,” and joined Stephen Colbert’s 2010 “Keep Fear Alive” rally in Washington, D.C., among other activities (see RepublicCorps.us).

To mark the second anniversary of the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision, the Supreme Court’s white exterior was briefly lit one night—until police arrived—with giant dollar signs and a light projection of the words “rights are for people.” That caper was organized by

“The Other 98%,” a netroots organization cofounded by Andrew Boyd and described on its website as “a political home for the silent majority of Americans who are tired of corporate control of Washington” (other98.com).

A “toolbox” for such forms of creative protest is offered in the 2012 book *Beautiful Trouble*—collectively authored by Boyd, the Yes Men, and participants in Code Pink, the Ruckus Society, the Other 98%, and other creative activist organizations. *Beautiful Trouble*, according to its website, compiles “best practices and ideas” in creative protest—“principles, tactics, theories, case studies” (beautifultrouble.org).

In April 2011, when corporate media outlets reported that many large US corporations paid no federal taxes and that some even received tax credits, Andrew Boyd teamed up with the Yes Men and US Uncut¹⁰ to concoct a widely reported media hoax asserting that the General Electric Corporation would “donate [its] entire \$3.2 billion tax refund to help offset cuts and save American jobs” (Sturr 2011). During the half-hour or so when the public believed the hoax, GE’s stock plunged and then recovered quickly once the hoax was revealed—illustrating, a US Uncut spokesman said, that GE would not voluntarily “do the right thing” and pay their tax—in spite of loopholes in the law—since that would cause their stock to fall. “GE’s tax avoidance is unpatriotic, it’s undemocratic, it’s unfair,” said Andrew Boyd (TheYesMen.org).

Ostensibly harmless, the Billionaires display a witty command of policy issues and perform dissent in a way that surprises and charms. But their intentions are serious—nothing less than a reframing of current political debates.¹¹ In contemporary parlance, they are “culture jammers” who aim to destabilize dominant corporate and editorial frames. Culture jammers penetrate “the subconscious of [an ad] campaign, uncovering not an opposite meaning but the deeper truth hiding behind the layers of advertising euphemisms. . . . So . . . the now-retired Joe Camel turns into Joe Chemo, hooked up to an IV machine. That’s what’s in his future, isn’t it?” (Klein 2002, 281–282).¹²

The Billionaires can be seen as part of a large array of movements and networks that target what Naomi Klein (2002) terms the “corporate

hijacking of political power”—and consequent harm to the environment, human rights, democracy, and workers’ physical and financial vitality. However inchoate, decentered, or full of internal contradictions these movements may be, they nonetheless have “shift[ed] the terrain of political organizing away from traditional political parties and labor organizing,” David Harvey suggests, and they draw strength from their “relevance and embeddedness in the politics of daily life” (2003, 168). Elsewhere I discuss the Billionaires’ origins, history, subjective experiences, what motivated individuals to participate, how they assess the organization’s effectiveness, and how spectators respond (Haugerud forthcoming).

The Billionaires were particularly careful to protect their brand image, monitor the semiotics, and maintain high production values—glossy placards and banners, elegant costumes, polished and witty performance. It’s about “the power of the surface” the Billionaire known as Merchant F. Arms (Jeremy Varon) said to me in late 2008. He commented that while the Yuppies “knew how to manipulate the media,” the Billionaires

brought it to a new postmodern level of reflexive awareness of the power of the surface. . . . It was all about showmanship and performativity and style and costume and posturing and that’s where we live as Americans. We may deny it [but] . . . that’s how we play our politics out (Haugerud 2008).

Furthermore, if the Billionaires appear to have a “countercultural” or “neo-Yippie vibe,” Merchant F. Arms said, “the trappings are more radical than the actual message or goal.” The Billionaires are “really in the service of completely above-board establishment, democracy-by-the-books electoral strategy”—liberal reformism rather than radicalism. Theirs was “a politics of make America fairer, redistribute the wealth, make the American middle class viable, and vote George Bush out of office.” The Yuppies, by contrast, “thought the entire political establishment was corrupt . . . they didn’t even believe in McCarthy in 1968; it



Billionaires for Bush, after participating with other organizations in a march against privatization of Social Security, June 2005, Washington, D.C. Photo by author.

was a politics of smash the system” (pers. comm. 2004). While members of the satirical Billionaires coalesced around particular presidential candidates and shared the larger goal of campaign finance reform for all political parties, they were individually committed to quite varied political ideologies and practices ranging from liberal reform to direct action (cf. Graeber 2009).

The Billionaires use ironic wordplay and satirical street theatre to “animate the abstraction of money ruling our democracy—making visible an invisible reality” (Duncombe 2007, 156). In so doing, they make such abstractions seem contingent rather than inevitable—shining a spotlight on power’s fault lines. What the Billionaires and other ironic activists such as the Yes Men do can be seen as a mode of performing citizenship in the public sphere. How lasting or ephemeral the effects are of such performance is the subject of debate. Yet there can be little doubt that ironic humor and parody can reshape political imaginations in ways dictators and other leaders have long found threatening and ordinary citizens have found inspiring.

On issue after issue, since 1999 the Billionaires have taken stands that have proved prescient. Political satire and irony flourish especially when other forms of political critique are curtailed, or when conventional political categories, modes of expression, and organization seem inadequate—an apt description, many would argue, of early twenty-first century America.

CONCLUSION

As the *New Yorker* cover cartoon that opened this essay reminds us, robber barons are back, and they tap deep public ambivalences about wealth, power, and democracy. Red flags in eras of excess, however, are less likely to come from the political center than from the margins—whether from humorists or serious voices that go unheeded. Warnings of grave instabilities in the financial system from economists such as Nouriel Roubini (2010) of New York University, for example, were ignored or downplayed by most economists, pundits, and policymakers before the 2008 economic crisis. After the crisis broke, Roubini—dubbed “Dr. Doom” by pundits—attracted more attention, though his positions were by no means embraced or widely publicized by corporate news media. Indeed, in July 2010, the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* included a spoof showing economist Roubini gagged in a dark closet, as pundits in news clips glibly misrepresented the logic of policy approaches to the financial crisis. The satirical Billionaires too were like canaries in a mine shaft, sending out warnings of crisis.

Public imagination today is haunted by specters of financial calamity, environmental catastrophe, and predatory corporations. In the years immediately preceding the 2008 financial meltdown and big bank bailouts, signs of distress in the United States included some 56 million citizens without health insurance, 36 million living in poverty (Smith 2005, 10), hundreds of thousands of people losing homes mortgaged at subprime rates (often through deceptive lending agreements), pension funds collapsing, schools failing, physical infrastructure crumbling, an overstretched military, corporate accounting failures and fraud, “fictitious capital,”¹³ government spying on citi-

zens, growing concentration of corporate media ownership, politicians acting as courtiers of powerful corporations that fund their campaigns, and heightened political polarization and incivility in public discourse (Harvey 2003, 13, 16–17, 211; see also Hacker 2006; Krugman 2007; Roubini 2010). For most Americans, incomes, jobs, retirement funds, and access to affordable health care all became increasingly precarious—thanks to a “great risk shift” (Hacker 2006) that corporations and Wall Street encouraged and legislators dependent on private campaign contributions permitted. Few would deny a sense of disquiet, if not alarm. Plutocracy’s re-emergence, however, has opened an ever more lively terrain of ideological struggle and popular cultural vibrancy, where citizens’ attitudes suddenly seemed to be in great flux during the early 2000s.

In democracy’s long history of struggles to tame the market economy or to protect the nonwealthy from an ultrarich minority, satirists have been sly players.¹⁴ From Aristophanes of ancient Greece to Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and George Orwell—or in millennial America, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Tina Fey, and the Billionaires—humorists have held a mirror up to society. Reflected in it are rulers’ foibles, along with injustices large and small. Ironic humor—whether diversion or subversion—helps us to interpret the times in which we live.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With the permission of Stanford University Press, portions of this article are drawn from my forthcoming book, *The Billionaires: Satirical Activism in America* (2013).

NOTES

1. The April 2011 *Washington Post* and Maris/McClatchy polls showed 70 to 80 percent of Americans supporting higher taxes on the rich and corporations. See Pew Research Center, “The Deficit Debate: Where the Public Stands” <<http://pewresearch.org>>.
2. In this context, bodies are “defined not by an outer-skin enve-

lope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2).

3. Thanks go to Melanie McDermott Hughes for suggesting this theme.
4. The phrase quoted is from Farnell and Graham (2000, 419), writing in a different context.
5. Clifford J. Tasner (a Hollywood producer whose Billionaire name is Felonius Ax and who led their Los Angeles chapter) produced satirical Billionaire music CDs such as “Never Mind the Rabble: Here Come the Billionaires” (2000) and “The Billionaires Are in the House” (2004). Both feature songs with ironic lyrics set to familiar tunes.
6. The Billionaires’ motto. See <<http://www.billionairesforbush.com/overview.php>> (accessed March 19, 2012).
7. Both videos are available on YouTube and on the Billionaires’ website <<http://www.billionairesforbush.com>>.
8. The *Wall Street Journal*, among other media outlets, mentioned that appearance (Gamerman 2008).
9. Video of the *Rachel Maddow Show* segment in October 2009 was posted on the Billionaires for Wealthcare website: <<http://www.billionairesforwealthcare.com>> (accessed August 9, 2010).
10. On its website, US Uncut describes itself as “a grassroots movement taking direct action against corporate tax cheats and unnecessary and unfair public service cuts across the US” <<http://www.USuncut.org>> (accessed June 4, 2011). A sister organization, UK Uncut, which started in October 2010, opposes “brutal cuts to service,” arguing that in the United Kingdom “a cabinet of millionaires have decided that libraries, healthcare, education funding, voluntary services, sports, the environment, the disabled, the poor, and the elderly must pay for the recklessness of the rich. Austerity economics is the policy of the powerful. It cannot be stopped by asking nicely” <<http://www.ukuncut.org.uk/about/ukuncut>> (accessed June 11, 2011).
11. As Huizinga notes in his classic study of play, “the contrast between play and seriousness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed” (1950, 5).

12. For examples, see the Canadian journal *Adbusters* (adbusters.org), the Culture Jammers Encyclopedia (sniggle.net), and Subvertise (subvertise.org).
13. As Harvey writes, “much of what passed for finance capital was in fact unredeemable fictitious capital supported by scandalous accounting practices and totally empty assets” (2003, 190).
14. On democracy, see Dunn (1992), Shapiro (2003), and Tilly (2007).

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