

14

A Place for Protest: The Billionaires for Bush Interrupt the Hegemonologue

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Prologue

Public protest is out of place in the United States. It has no place. It's on the run, running in place, running out of space.

Or at least this appears to be the goal of those who sanction protest only in Orwellian 'Free Speech Zones': out-of-the-way lots and streets ringed by fences, with police-controlled access and egress. Creative dissidents dissenters have resisted being 'put in their place' by defying permit bans or using art, direct action and diverse tactics to project their objections over the fences and out of the margins, hoping to disrupt the dramaturgy of state, corporate and political events.

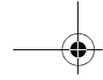
This struggle over protest-place was particularly intense in New York City – where real estate is always a hot item – during the Republican National Convention (RNC). The RNC, backed up by massive state power, demarcated, and occupied and fortified a heavily mediated space from which they could project to the nation a hegemonic monologue that would elevate their candidate to saviour status while overwriting any inconvenient details, facts and ongoing wars of choice. The anti-Bush Counter-Convention contradicted the RNC in both content and form; this was a multi-vocal, dialogical, placeless and many-faced mass entity, which flowed throughout the city, enacting the global justice movement's slogan 'We Are Everywhere'. The Counter-Convention infiltrated and engulfed RNC events and contested space in the streets and in the local media. Lacking the RNC's strategic power to lay claim to a secure – demarcate, occupy, and fortify – space, the Counter-Convention nevertheless attempted to disrupt Republican symbolism and dramaturgy with oppositional imagery while building and deepening intra-movement coalitions and connections for future action.

The Billionaires for Bush, a street theatre/media intervention group, made a unique (and no doubt tax-deductible) contribution to the Counter-Convention: using irony to focus on issues of class. Like public protest in general, the very concept of socio-economic class, or the identity of a ruling class, is denied a place in mainstream American discourse; indeed the term 'class warfare' has become a term with which pundits and politicians denounce not the elites, but anyone who critiques the elites or even acknowledges that they exist as a class. Commentators on all sides do flips in order not to say the phrase 'working class', resulting in such terms as 'the working poor' and 'working families'. The Billionaires for Bush use cartoonish irony to bring issues of class back to the forefront of discussion, and to mock the exploitive policies of the Administration wherever they perform; they also add an element of tactical ambiguity and playfulness to street confrontations where tensions can run high.

Place, protest and permission

Frisbees and grass. In the lead-in to the Republican National Convention in New York City this summer, the Republicans made it clear that both of these things were more important than the First Amendment to the Constitution. The United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ) coalition wanted to stage a massive rally on the Great Lawn in Central Park, a space big enough to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of demonstrators expected to gather to protest the Bush agenda. However, the Republican Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, backed up and pressured by the Bush Administration, insisted that so many people in the park would kill the grass. Bloomberg further claimed that such an enormous mass of protestors would violate the rights of people who wanted to play frisbee in the park.

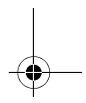
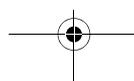
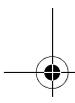
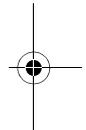
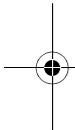
These were the excuses for the marginalization of a mass demonstration that threatened to disrupt the painstaking dramaturgy of the RNC. The RNC, like all such conventions, is a tightly co-ordinated ritual designed to overwrite the differences between the factions of the host megalopolis (that is, between fiscal and social conservatives), and to present compellingly emotional and strategically vague symbols and personas to the national public through the television. To make all of this cohere, the convention needed a powerful event-narrative, and perhaps this was why the RNC was scheduled later than any other RNC ever: so that it would be closer to 9/11. By occupying this hallowed time and space, the Republicans hoped to stage a pageant with a story-line in which a grateful New York would embrace their President-protector-avenger as he co-opted the memory of that tragedy for his re-election campaign.

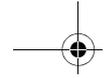


The battle for the right of peaceable assembly was key. A massive, peaceful, festive, creative public rejection of Bush at a historic, picturesque site in the city would certainly speak against the event-narrative. Beyond the Great Lawn, protestors wished intended to stage a Counter-Convention all over the city that would express a wide range of voices in dissent against the monolithic monologue that was the RNC. Thus the pressure on Bloomberg to marginalize the protestors as much as possible, claiming it was for their safety in the post-9/11 era, or for the grass' sake. Without a legal permit, many people, fearing arrest, would be intimidated and stay home. If the protestors were denied a viable permit, some frustrated protestors might engage in civil disorder, confirming the 'culture war' for the viewers at home and mobilizing the law-and-order Bush base.

The protestors were told they could exercise their constitutional right to peaceable assembly . . . in the borough of Queens, several miles and a river from Madison Square Garden where the RNC was to be held. When they refused, they were told they could gather on an inhospitable strip of the West Side Highway, also far from Madison Square Garden, where many would pass out from standing on the shadeless blacktop, superheated by the NYC summer sun. The UFPJ gave in to the city's hardball negotiating tactics and accepted this place for protest. However, UFPJ's outraged grassroots members threatened to drop out of the coalition and march *en masse* on Central Park, permit or no, rather than stand on the Highway. Finally, the city and UFPJ agreed to a march, without a rally, that would mass west of Union Square, pass Madison Square Garden, and double back to disperse at Union Square. This was hardly ideal, but UFPJ decided to make it work, all the while resenting the fact that the people were not allowed to meet in their own park.

The movement staged many responses to the government's restrictions on peaceable assembly, and to the privatization and overregulation of dissent in public space in general. Massive anti-Bush banners were illegally hung from hotel roofs; some groups rented billboard space, while others creatively altered commercial postings, to make them anti-RNC. ACT-UP got naked outside of Madison Square Garden; their stencilled skin screamed, 'STOP AIDS DROP THE DEBT'. Times Up!, the bicycle-riders' group, staged the largest Critical Mass bike ride in the history of New York, which clogged the avenues of Manhattan for hours. For 40 weeks, Reverend Billy staged a recurring action in the recently reopened World Trade Centre subway/PATH station. Every Tuesday evening rush hour, anonymous performers would join the swarms of commuters, scuttling around and talking in their cell phones; however, as they did so, instead of chatting to their spouses or





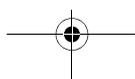
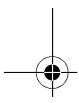
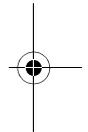
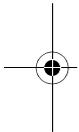
giving orders to subordinates back at the office, they recited over and over the First Amendment to the United States Constitution:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

This mass recitation would gradually escalate from invisible theatre to a crescendo of screaming glorious First Amendment worshippers, and police found it hard to arrest them as they chanted those sacred words.

The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) ran pell-mell through the streets without a permit, alternating between clownarchic swarming, strict military formation marching ('Left-Spit! Right-Sneer!'), cowardly fleeing, 'sneaking' in plain sight, and hiding behind very small objects. CIRCA was determined to remind spectators of Bush's now-infamous jetfighter landing on an aircraft carrier, costumed in a flight suit, putting his thumbs up, and announcing the end of major combat operations in Iraq under a 'MISSION ACCOMPLISHED' banner. This intrepid appearance was stunning in its crafted, mediated placelessness; in fact the carrier group was just outside of San Diego. Normal conveyance for such an executive visit would have been a quick shuttle on a helicopter. However, the jetfighter was much more daring and exciting looking. The supersonic warplane and the aircraft carrier were commandeered as the set and backdrop for the heroic figure of Bush. The entire carrier battle group did circles as it stayed out of port for Bush's dramatic visit; the cameras were arranged to aim out to sea so the nearby shore and city would not be in the frame. The crew, who by the rules of military discipline had to cheer their Commander-in-Chief, served as adoring extras in this high-seas adventure. CIRCA Harpo-Marxed on this Bush moment by wearing flight suits that said 'MISSION ACCOMPLICATED' while searching for weapons of mass destruction in restaurants, mailboxes and the body cavities of passersby, and using giant straws to snort the white lines in the streets and crosswalks, thus evoking both Bush's delightfully contrived moment on the aircraft carrier and his narcotic leisure aids of times past.

While the Republicans had the Federal, city and state governments and their massive strategic power to occupy and hold space, the opposing social movement had a tactical advantage in working on familiar home territory amongst a mostly supportive population and enjoying a wide diversity of skill sets, identities and modes of performance and protest. The Counter-Convention staged meetings, councils,



conferences, cultural events and many kinds of street actions all over Manhattan and Brooklyn; the Republicans found that they had a more limited range of motion outside of the cordon of police protection at scheduled events. Some RNC delegates may even have experienced a sense of out-of-placeness that the invisibly white, unmarkedly privileged and entitled had perhaps never felt before. Republican delegates were taunted as they went to their Broadway shows and finely dined at Tavern on the Green. Delegates attending an auction of Johnny Cash memorabilia were confronted by over a hundred Johnny Cash look-alikes, who denounced this co-optation of that people's musician by strumming and singing Cash songs that advocated for the poor and the imprisoned. The pseudo-right-wing Missile Dick Chicks infiltrated a Republican private party as the 'entertainment'; it took a while for the partiers to realize they were being laceratingly lampooned by their hired 'showgirls', and it took them longer to throw the Chicks out.

Bush had scheduled a ceremonial visit to the site of the World Trade Centre. This offended many New Yorkers who felt that Bush had never delivered the promised economic or security aid that he had promised to the city after 9/11. The movement planned a mass bell-ringing all over the neighborhood to non-verbally signal a protest to Bush's presence even if police kept protestors far away. P. Diddy, whose office looks down on the site, had put up anti-war posters on all of his many windows, a visual that would have disrupted the event's solemn obeisance/obedience to Bush. The RNC chose to cancel the event, keeping their dramaturgy within the more manageable, nigh-hermetically sealed Madison Square Garden. This was no small victory for the Counter-Convention movement; disrupting a planned ritual at the site of those horrific terror attacks made the Republican co-optation of 9/11 less explicit and thus less powerful.

However, there is one voice that the author has shamelessly neglected in this tract: that of the elites. Their response to all of these provocations was crucial to an understanding of the civic dialogue that was happening in the streets of New York. Accordingly, and in the interests of objectivity, I will report the following: on Sunday, 29 August, the day of the big march, about a dozen people showed up on the Great Lawn, in lovely opera gowns and tuxedos, and festooned with blinding jewellery. These were the Billionaires for Bush, and they archly informed the massed media that, in fact, the real reason one million 'hoi polloi' were denied the Great Lawn on that day was because they, the upper 0.00001 per cent, had already reserved the space to play lawn sports. They went on to point out that this was part of their agenda to 'Privatize Everything', from the Park to the City Library, to the electoral process itself – 'one dollar, one vote!'

The dazzling gaggle of haute-reactionaries then spread out all over the massive lawn, playing croquet and badminton. The sight of a few well-to-do cartoon characters scattered about, having their elitist way with that massive green space, sharply evoked the absence of the million protestors. This was a typical Billionaire action: riffing on reality; using satire to surprise, amuse, and engage; and satirically straight-arming the 'red-state/blue-state' culture-war binary by trying to get Americans to once again think about *class*. Through ironic adoration they attempt to disrupt Bush's constructed persona as a straight-talking, dirt-under-his-nails Everyman, reconstructing him as the upper-class wastrel-turned-warmonger that the Billionaires love so much. Of course class is a key component of the base-line irony of the project: the sight of 'plutocrats' marching in the streets with signs underscores the reality that of course, this sort of 'grass-roots' performance in public space is something elites need never resort to. The Billionaires manifest as a funhouse-mirror image of the very elites whose disembodied, globalized 'liquidity' is one of the very foundations of their power. Since the real oligarchs won't come out and play in the street, the Billionaires provide the punch lines, playing both sides of the debate with joyously heavy-handed mockery.



Figure 14.1 Billionaires for Bush demand more privileges

Billionaires flash-mobbed the city in actions planned and spread by internet and cell phone, such as waltzing *en masse* in Grand Central Station. In an intra-social-movement bit of theatre, they played a smack-down game of basketball with the organizers of the Poor People's Coalition.

Billionaires spread their ironic message on radio, TV and the web (www.billionairesforbush.com); this multimedia approach added layers to the campaign, while the Billionaires' performative irony allowed them to play both sides of the debate. As my Billionaire character, 'Ollie Gark', I found that doing a radio interview on a left-wing gay radio station show enabled me to draw connections between class and gender oppression with a smarmy, condescending smile. The affable, self-satisfied demeanours and a repertoire of one-line jokes led to a great deal of media and press attention for the Billionaires.

The website, designed to present both the satirical group-persona and an earnest political critique, also served as a modular tool to help spread the concept: people looking to start a chapter in their home town could download many excellent graphics, slogans, performance ideas and even original songs in karaoke version so they could sing them with the back-up of a blinged-out boombox. This helped the consistency of costume, graphics and 'branding' of the group across the country, while allowing for flexibility, creativity and idea-sharing amongst and between the local groups. Thanks to the website, media coverage and relentless proselytizing, there are now 100 Billionaires for Bush chapters in the United States and abroad. The website provided a virtual place to co-ordinate performances in far-flung actual spaces.

The Billionaires had already bird-dogged Bush on the swing-state campaign trail, setting up their red-white-and-blue piggybank banner and cheering him on with 'Two Million Jobs Lost: A Good Start!' as he drove by. The Billionaires also swung through the swing states during their Get On the Limo tours, spreading the gospel of greed and seeding new chapters as they went. Their Block the Vote tour in Florida, snarkily celebrating (and publicizing) the tradition of Bush-family Republican disenfranchisement of African-Americans, was enhanced by the soundtrack of rapper 50 Billion:

The Billionaires are in the house
The Billionaires are in the WHITE House . . .
Buying access
Seeing progress
And making a mess
Of the political process
Oh yes!

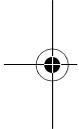
Irony can always be misinterpreted, especially when a group uses the same shtick on multiple simultaneous audiences. We found that police tended to treat us more politely, perhaps because of our generally genteel, entitled demeanour, or perhaps we were activating some ingrained instinct to protect the propertied? There were incidents when the police would put us in with pro-Bush demonstrators... and at least one time when those Bushites took us seriously, joining in on our chants such as 'Four More Wars!' in earnest, a chilling example of the complexities of irony as a tactic. Still, Billionaires such as founding plutocrat Andrew Boyd (aka 'Phil T. Rich') have found that irony has been an effective tool for engaging people who would otherwise tune out the message, creating momentary confusion and a pleasing 'Ah-ha moment' for passersby.

Now that the election is over, sadly, the group will not be changing its name anytime soon. Thanks to targeted voter suppression/intimidation, an insufficiency of voting machines in minority districts, and a well co-ordinated character assassination of Kerry, the day ended in victory for Our Benefactor. When confronted with the devastating consequences of this 'victory', the cadres may have faltered, and the joke may have worn thin. The class warriors of the radical Right will drive to further Privatize Everything, from our genes to our prisons to our national forests, while striving to overwhelm discussion of class with culture war at home and wars of choice abroad. They will strive to further dominate all branches of the government, all sectors of civil society, and farther flung corners of the world. Nevertheless, the Billionaire website immediately hailed the results and noted that the group had, after all, 'paid for eight years', and celebrated 'the disappearance of over 1 million votes'. It remains to be seen how, or if, this extended multimedia subvertisement will regain momentum after the election, or/and how it will fit into a greater long-term strategy. Clearly, this kind of performance is only one tool in the repertoire of the movement of movements, only one approach of many, and not to be relied upon exclusively or inflexibly. Groups like the Billionaires will continue to experiment with techniques that are not purely reactive but that help to create a culture of shared meanings that can in turn sustain an oppositional movement even in the darkest of times. The satirical struggle continues.

Creating a place for protest necessitates building a joyous, dialogical space that can attract and include the voices of many diverse counter-publics. The movement of movements contains differences not only in beliefs but about how to act on those beliefs. Some feel that an oppositional movement should not even ask for a permit from the state, or that only direct action is effective and not mass demonstrations. Places



for protest should look and feel different from those created and occupied by States or Parties, who, in the words of one Republican advisor, 'create their own reality' in fortified, hegemonological, placeless spaces where the waters off San Diego stand in dramatically for the Persian Gulf, where Madison Square Garden is the HQ Central of the culture war, where war is peace and ignorance is strength. The movements do not have the power to create such places. All the better. They are rooted in localities while reaching out to each other, co-ordinating virtually and gathering on the street and in (surveilled and scrutinized) meeting places. This is not only about pandering to the 'swing states' in the parlance of the day. Movements perform not only against what they oppose but to embody and enact visions of the world we want to see, to invest our place with our own cultures. These places, created and sustained through performance, are not merely reactive encampments outside the castle but the beginnings of a new place to live. Oppositional places need to be constructed not only in response to events such as the RNC, but, as with the Counter-Convention, they must deepen intramovement connections and coalitions across boundaries of geography, identity and privilege, through co-operation, performance and praxis under pressure.



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