

The Art of Protest

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"Scholars have come late to the party" in the study of transnational social movements and networks of activists. So say political scientists Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink. But anthropologists have arrived even later than most, and they also are underrepresented in the more established field of national social movements.

Today both trans-border and national activist networks are animated by new protest styles—some with roots in medieval "festivals of resistance" or carnival, and others apparent information-age novelties. Media-savvy activists now offer street theatre processions with colorful giant puppets, skits, music, ritual performances, newspaper wraps and inserts, leafleting, and parodies and subversions of advertisements (culture jamming). Issues range from environmental politics to human rights, corporate power and the World Trade Organization. Scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and David Graeber have found anthropology's neglect of this vibrant political domain to be scandalous.

COMMENTARY

Spoofing the Super-Rich

An ethnographic entry point into this lively field is a group who bend the protest genre with exuberant wit and a flair for media-friendly spectacle. They are ironists who call themselves Billionaires for Bush. Members dress in tuxedos, top hats, evening gowns and tiaras as they spotlight how President Bush's tax cuts and other policies have favored large corporations or the very wealthy at the expense of everyday Americans. Champagne glasses, cigarette holders and huge cigars—as well as bright banners and placards—are their props. They adopt fictitious names such as Phil T Rich, Iona Bigga Yacht, Meg A Bucks, Fonda Sterling, Noah Accountability and Alan Greenspend. Their placards declare "Leave No

Billionaire Behind," "Corporations Are People Too" and "Taxes Are Not for Everyone." Street actions include the Million Billionaire March during Republican and Democratic National Conventions, a ballroom-dancing flashmob in Grand Central Station, or thanking people outside a post office as they mail their tax returns on April 15th.

In everyday life, these Billionaires are actors, artists, corporate professionals, academics, unemployed recent college graduates and seasoned as well as novice activists. If we take a peek behind their playful satire of wealthy Republicans, we find an organization that was dead serious about influencing the 2004 presidential election, and by mid-year was organizing "Limo Tours" through battleground states.

By engaging one of the thorniest issues in American politics—namely class—the Billionaires for Bush might at first glance appear improbable candidates for media success. Yet in 2004 they became a media hit and a touchstone for other innovative protests as they grew in a few months from a handful of chapters to about 90 nationally. What endeared them to the corporate news media? Are they a model of activist adaptation to wider social fields—by responding to changes in state practices, repression, media structure or popular culture? What are the capabilities and limitations of this form of politics? What can analysis of Billionaires for Bush add to social scientific understanding of social movements and what challenges does such a group pose for anthropological research?

In 2004 nearly half of the world's 587 billionaires were US citizens, according to the business journal *Forbes*. Economic inequality in the US had reached a 100-year high and exceeded that of most industrialized nations—a matter of concern even to publications such as *Business Week*. Compared with wealthy European countries, the US ranked poorly on measures like infant mortality and life expectancy—though such facts seldom circulate in corporate American news media. Although many Americans have a strong faith in the Horatio Alger myth of upward economic



Alan Greenspend, Tex Shelter, Ivan Aston-Martin and Meg A Bucks (left to right) during a "Cheney Is Innocent!" vigil, New York, August 2004. Photo by David Gochfeld

mobility, such mobility has declined in recent decades.

The super-rich, as objects of both cultural fascination and resentment, are a potent force in the American cultural imaginary—perhaps more so in the early 21st century than at any time since the 1920s. The Billionaires for Bush prefer to pose as invented characters from the *Great Gatsby* era, rather than as familiar contemporary billionaires such as Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey or J K Rowling. Indeed they impersonate, as a member put it, "an imaginary subjectivity, something that is already the stuff of fiction and a complicated set of projective identifications... it's like a parody of a cartoon."

Charming the Media

"Billionaires for Bush, no matter what your politics, must be one of the most likable protest groups ever formed," wrote the *Washington Post's* Robert Kaiser in his 2004 online "Convention Diary." By September 2004, the Billionaires for Bush public relations team had tracked some 225 major print and electronic media mentions. Media coverage often focused on protest styles, contrasting the humorous and ostensibly new with the serious and traditional. An event in February 2004 resulted in a witty *New York Times* article and fanned other media interest: the Billion-

aires hired an actor who so successfully impersonated presidential adviser Karl Rove at a Republican fund-raiser that he fooled security agents, the public, other Billionaires and journalists on the scene. A video of the "Karl Rove action" is played at Billionaire planning and fund-raising meetings, and members love to tell this story about how, as one of them put it, they "scramble reality for a brief shining moment."

Flashy visuals, wit and irony attract corporate news media to protesters they might otherwise ignore. Especially since the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle and since the September 11 attacks, many journalists have misleadingly portrayed protesters as either irrelevant curiosities or as hooligans, miscreants and terrorists. Yet dissenting messages carried force in 2004 as they entered a public arena enlivened by the launch of Al Franken's Air America radio program, Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, advocacy groups such as MoveOn.org and critical best-selling books by former Bush administration insiders such as Paul O'Neill and Richard Clarke.

The glamour projected by the Billionaires for Bush as they self-consciously embrace tropes of status appears to signal complicity with—and indeed derives legitimacy from—the culture of celebrity and

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wealth they critique. Yet that pose becomes the means to pass a subversive message through corporate news filters. As a member put it, "these days, if you're going to 'speak truth to power,' you'd better make sure that 'truth' is infotainment."

Shaping Change?

Assessing the effects of advocacy networks or social movements is notoriously difficult. One can interview consumers of activist messages and track outcomes of legislative or electoral battles, but many effects are quite subtle. Individual subjectivities may change and political categories may be destabilized, debates reframed, new ideas and norms introduced, political participation expanded, and social networks mobilized in ways that shape later political movements, policies and institutions. As Sidney Tarrow observes, the effects of social movements can be fleeting but powerful.

More than a play of phantasms, invocation of an imaginary world or endlessly refracting signs, the Billionaires for Bush constitute social relationships and organizational modes that energize political activism. They are not only cyber-networked activists who recruit and mobilize members electronically, but they rely as well on crucial forms of social connectivity (meetings, social events, street actions). Their effectiveness depends not only on images used by the media but also on embodied performance. When they perform in public they unsettle ideas about political categories: Are Republicans really like that? What's wrong with being rich? Are those well-dressed people really protesters? Why would billionaires be protesting? When Billionaires for Bush attract public and media attention, they can step out of character to discuss political issues in depth, inform voters and reframe public discourse.

As activists refashion their strategies, anthropologists too need to shift their attention to these vital new struggles, imaginings and forms of social creativity. ■

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Uncensuring Boas

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"A most interesting history of the discipline of anthropology could be written dealing with the development of the profession and the painful process of the generation of a set of ethical standards," wrote Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, a member of the association's ethics committee, in her introduction to *Ethics and the Profession of Anthropology*.

It was, according to Fluehr-Lobban, Franz Boas' published letter to *The Nation* that resulted in the AAA addressing its first clear-cut issue of unprofessional behavior. In this letter, "Scientists as Spies," published December 20, 1919, Boas, a declared pacifist, was openly critical of President Wilson and denounced anthropologists who were allegedly using their scientific identity to cover up their spying activities.

Boas Censured

In his letter, Boas made a distinction between the soldier, diplomat, politician and business man who "may be excused if they set patriotic devotion above common everyday decency and perform services as spies," and the scientist. For the scientist: "The very essence of his life is the service of truth. A person, however, who uses science as a cover for political spying, who demeans himself to pose before a foreign government as an investigator and asks for assistance in his alleged researches in order to carry on, under this cloak, his political machinations, prostitutes science in an unpardonable way and forfeits the right to be classed as a scientist."

He proceeded to denounce four American anthropologists—without giving their names—who carried "on anthropological work, while employed as government agents, introduced themselves to foreign governments as representatives of scientific institutions in the United States, and as sent for the purpose of carrying on scientific research." Boas declared they not only shook "the belief in the truthfulness of science, but they [had also] done the greatest possible dis-

service to scientific inquiry. In consequence of their acts," he wrote, "every nation will look with distrust upon the visiting foreign investigator who wants to do honest work, suspecting sinister designs." Boas believed that a result of such actions would place "a new barrier against the development of international friendly cooperation."

The reaction to Boas' letter was swift and uncompromising. Boas had accrued much power as he challenged many of the hegemonic interests framing the anthropology of the time. Thus, some scholars were waiting for an opportune time to diminish his hold on the discipline. As he was well aware, Boas created many enemies as well as friends as he opposed the dominant evolutionary assumptions that legitimated the supposed cultural superiority of "civilized" society. He was intent on defending his idea of the centrality of culture. He alienated others by his role in shifting the professionalization of the

discipline to university graduate departments where he and his students followed a "natural history" approach to ethnology. Perhaps most importantly, he challenged the use of research findings in support of the racism contaminating the ideal of American equality.

For defending his idea of scientific integrity, Boas was harshly censured at the Council Meeting of December 30, 1919, held by the AAA at the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Neil M Judd moved the following resolution: "Resolved: That the expression of opinion by Professor Franz Boas contained in an open letter to the editor of *The Nation* under date of October 16, 1919, and published in the issue of that weekly for December 20, 1919, is unjustified and does not represent the opinion of the American Anthropological Association." Be it further resolved:

"That a copy of this resolution be forwarded to the executive board of the National Research Council and such other scientific associations as

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Portrait of Franz Boas c 1920. Photo courtesy of the American Philosophical Society