

Introduction

The Comedy of Wealth?

OURS IS THE AGE OF BILLIONAIRES. From a mere dozen in the early 1980s to more than a thousand today, their numbers have surged along with their influence. The world's most prosperous individuals earn incomes that exceed those of entire nations.¹ For the rest of us, such riches are a dream. "That's the state to live and die in! . . . R-r-rich!" proclaims Mr. Boffin in Charles Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend*. The philosopher Seneca, however, thought otherwise, declaring two thousand years ago: "A great fortune is a great slavery." If he was right, who will free the billionaires?

"Leave No Billionaire Behind!" The placard caught my eye as I scanned the crowd assembled on Central Park's Great Lawn. That Sunday morning in the park, women carrying parasols and clad in elegant gowns, tiaras, and satin gloves, and men in tuxedos and top hats or *Great Gatsby*-like lawn-tennis whites, mingled against the backdrop of New York's skyline and a blue summer sky. Some played croquet and badminton, while others sipped champagne from fluted glasses (Figures I.1, I.2, I.3). Famous photographers snapped their pictures, journalists interviewed them, tourists and locals ogled them.² Were they celebrities? Consider their names: Ivan Aston Martin, Iona Bigga Yacht, Phil T. Rich, Alan Greenspend, Robin Eubland, Meg A. Bucks, Lucinda Regulations, Tex Shelter, and Noah Countability, among others. And their signs:

"Corporations Are People Too"

"Privatize the Park: Keep off the Grass"

"Widen the Income Gap"



FIGURE 1.1 Phil T. Rich (Andrew Boyd), cofounder of the Billionaires, is interviewed by the *Washington Post*'s Robert Kaiser during the fanciful Billionaire croquet and badminton demonstration in Central Park on the eve of the Republican National Convention. August 29, 2004. Photo by Lucian Perkins, courtesy of the *Washington Post* and Getty Images.



FIGURE 1.2 Billionaires for Bush play games as they sit in a circle on Central Park's Great Lawn while prize-winning journalists interview and photograph them during a day of protest on the eve of the Republican National Convention. August 29, 2004. Photo by author.

“Still Loyal to Big Oil”
 “Taxes Are Not for Everyone”

After their lawn games, the group staged a rally opposite the Plaza Hotel and then a Million Billionaire March down New York’s Fifth Avenue.

Lurking beneath the surface of this scene is a sense—only implicit—that something is not quite right. That disquiet touches historically deep debates about wealth, inequality, and democracy—concerns that stretch beyond any single election or political party.

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, writes moderate Republican Kevin Phillips: “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.”²³ Here is an implicit ideal of a democratic society that is at once humane and entrepreneurial, admiring of wealth yet alert to its perils.



FIGURE 1.3 Billionaires for Bush during their festive demonstration in Central Park on the eve of the Republican National Convention. August 29, 2004. Photo by Lucian Perkins, courtesy of the *Washington Post* and Getty Images.

By the start of the twenty-first century, the perils were stark. It was not just liberals but also moderates and avowedly apolitical social scientists such as Larry Bartels who were troubled that wealth inequality in the United States had outpaced that of more than thirty other countries the International Monetary Fund terms “advanced economies.”⁴ Two statistics that startled many: in 2007, the top one percent of income earners in the United States received 23.5 percent of total national (pretax) income and controlled 40 percent of the wealth—the highest levels of inequality in the United States in nearly a century.⁵ Yale economist Robert Shiller said in mid-2009 that rising economic inequality—not the financial crisis per se—is America’s biggest problem.⁶ In millennial America great wealth could purchase outsized political power, making possible even larger fortunes for a few. For many of the rest, livelihoods grew increasingly precarious.

Yet the widening gulf between the ultrarich and the rest was one of the most important issues seldom mentioned during the U.S. presidential campaigns of 2000, 2004, and 2008. It briefly appeared during the final weeks of the 2008 campaign, when the financial crisis dominated headlines. And for a short time during the 2000 presidential campaign, outspoken critics of plutocracy ranged across the political spectrum; they included millionaires and elite politicians such as John McCain (who later shifted to a much more conservative position), Bill Bradley, and Ralph Nader.⁷ Their blunt critiques sounded alarms that were soon muted. Only in 2011, fueled in part by Occupy movements, did debates about wealth inequality become more salient in campaign discourse.

This book’s protagonists—satirical activists who call themselves the Billionaires—were like canaries in a mineshaft, emitting warning signals ahead of dire trouble. Since the early 2000s, they and their successors have deployed ironic humor and street theater to nudge questions about wealth and democracy into public view.

. . .

Why cloak such profound concerns in irony and satire? Great humorists suggest part of an answer. “The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow,” remarked Mark Twain.⁸ *Doonesbury* cartoonist Garry Trudeau has said that “bad news is good for satire.”⁹ And Jon Stewart, host of Comedy Central’s popular “fake” news program *The Daily Show*, said he and his writers focus on the morning news that most agitates them, “the sometimes somber stories he refers to as his ‘morning cup of sadness.’”¹⁰ In short, topics likely to invite ironic

humor are precisely those that frighten, embarrass, pain, or affront us. Yet by the end of the day, Jon Stewart and his staff feel better because they have transposed that “little cup of sadness” to humor. For them—and likely for millions of viewers—*The Daily Show* is a “kind of catharsis machine, a therapeutic filter for grappling with upsetting issues.”¹¹ And for some, ironic humor is much more—a political spark, an inspiration for action.

“It’s a Class War and We’re Winning!”

The women in elegant gowns and men in tuxedos who attracted media throngs to Central Park on a sparkling summer morning are political activists who for more than a decade have used satirical street theater to try to spotlight serious questions about democracy and economic fairness. With a knowing wink, they say exactly the opposite of what they mean. They share affinities with trickster humor’s word play or mischievous use of homonyms, ambiguity, and double entendres.¹² This is *play as subversion*, in the spirit of the court jester or wise fool who can speak safely what others dare not utter.

These activists practice an innovative genre of what scholars term “contentious politics” or “collective action” or “social movements”—if one takes these broad categories to refer, as Charles Tilly does, to “ordinary people who make collective claims on public authorities, other holders of power, competitors, enemies, and objects of popular disapproval.”¹³ The Billionaires’ style—described by a *New York Times* reporter as a delicate balance of “earnest intent and absurdity”¹⁴—both mocks and upholds the genre known as political protest (Figure I.4).

After a debut as “Billionaires for Forbes” in 1999, they morphed into “Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)” in 2000, “Billionaires for Bush” in 2004, “Billionaires for Bailouts and Lobbyists for McCain” in 2008, “Billionaires for Wealthcare” during the 2011 health care debates, “Billionaires for Plutocracy” in 2011, and “Multi-Millionaires for Mitt” in 2012. Adaptively named, they were comic sentinels for plutocracy.

Warning flags in eras of excess are *less* likely to come from the political center than from the margins, whether from humorists or serious voices that go unheeded. Cautionary words about grave instabilities in the financial system from economists such as Nouriel Roubini¹⁵ of New York University, for example, were ignored or downplayed by most economists, pundits, and policy makers before the 2008 economic crisis. After the crisis broke, Roubini—dubbed



FIGURE 1.4 Billionaires for Bush on tax day, April 15, 2004, New York City's central post office. Photo by author.

“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.

Just as Jon Stewart addresses weighty subjects such as the financial crisis and political corruption, other satirists for centuries have taken on the most serious issues of their times, at least as long ago as Aristophanes in ancient Greece.¹⁶ Satire’s “guiding premise,” classical studies scholar Ralph M. Rosen remarks, is “that something is not ‘as it should be,’ and it takes a satirist to set the world straight.”¹⁷ But didactic messages wrapped in ironic humor—whether today or in ancient Greece—need their own warning flags. Satire is “often far more elusive and unstable than it would ever let on.”¹⁸

Might that claim be more true of Jon Stewart, who declares himself a comedian rather than an activist,¹⁹ than it is of the satirical Billionaires, who aspire to be simultaneously humorists and activists? Asked by Fox News anchor Chris Wallace in June 2011 what his agenda is, Stewart replied that it is “about absurdity and it’s . . . anti-corruption, anti-lack of authenticity, anti-contrivance.”

The Billionaires' core aim, on the other hand, is to help keep alive in the public sphere questions about economic fairness.

Two "elephants in the room"—skyrocketing wealth inequality and the influence of big money in politics—commanded the Billionaires' attention years before the emergence of Occupy Wall Street.²⁰ Targeting Democrats as well as Republicans, the Billionaires' ironic humor made visible what many pundits preferred to ignore, namely that wealth inequality in the United States had accelerated to record levels and that large campaign donations and lobbying yielded lopsided benefits, such as favorable tax rates for corporations and the very wealthy, the capacity to win lucrative government contracts (crony capitalism), and deregulatory legislation that risked the environment, public health, safety, and—eventually—national economic stability itself.²¹

The U.S. Supreme Court's (5–4) *Citizens United* decision in 2010 unleashed extraordinary new torrents of political campaign donations from often-anonymous wealthy individuals and large corporations.²² Public opinion polls soon showed the *Citizens United* decision to be unpopular with a substantial majority of citizens across the political spectrum,²³ and many—such as constitutional law scholar and philosopher Ronald Dworkin—viewed it as a devastating blow to electoral democracy.²⁴ By mid-2012, a half dozen states had called for the U.S. Congress to draft a constitutional amendment against *Citizens United*. Among the signs Occupy Wall Street protesters waved in New York in 2011 and 2012 were "Democracy Not Corporatization" and "Revoke Corporate Personhood," counterpoints to the satirical Billionaires' slogan "Corporations Are People Too!" Yet in 2012 as this book went to press, U.S. congressional restraints or public disclosure mandates for corporate political contributions still appeared unlikely, leaving this momentous issue, like so many others, difficult to address through the formal institutions of representative democracy.

The Billionaires spotlight plutocracy—the intertwined growth of political and economic inequality²⁵—which had ballooned faster than many cared to notice. It took deep root once again in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s and was flourishing by 2000. Billionaire investor Warren Buffett commented, "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making the war, and we're winning"²⁶—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!"

Hailed as the "rock stars of the protest scene,"²⁷ the Billionaires crafted an identity as genre-benders. They cultivated popular appeal through semiotic

contrasts reproduced in the media (and in official discourses and practices) and reiterated through performance: Billionaire charm versus liberal anger; that is, protesters who are elegant rather than scruffy, hip rather than traditional, polite rather than offensive, and harmless rather than dangerous. 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. Convinced that traditional forms of protest no longer worked, these artists, intellectuals, actors, corporate professionals, policy wonks, media producers, and seasoned and novice activists created a brand of theatrical political activism that evokes Information Age novelty, along with traces of earlier repertoires. In these ironic humorists we can detect echoes of late-medieval and Renaissance carnival, rituals of status reversal, charivaris, “festivals of resistance,” as well as more recent Dadaists, Brechtian tactics, Situationists, surrealists, Yippie guerrilla theater, Bread and Puppet Theater, Guerrilla Girls, Ladies Against Women, Code Pink, and Reclaim the Streets.

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. In contemporary parlance, they are “culture jammers” who aim to destabilize dominant corporate and editorial frames. By breaking common perceptual frames, political satire “*disrupt[s]* the transmission of the dominant political brand messages so competing conversations can occur.”²⁸ 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 [of cigarette advertising fame] turns into Joe Chemo, hooked up to an IV machine.”²⁹ The Billionaires—along with Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Tina Fey, and the Yes Men—toy with the soft boundaries between play and seriousness. The Billionaires believed, years before Occupy Wall Street evinced a zeitgeist shift, that their elegant attire, polished visuals, and satirical pose made their dissent more palatable than it would be if conveyed more directly and conventionally. Their intentions, however, turned out to be much less opaque than those of serious journalists writing about the ultrarich.

Dinosaur Topiary

Few Americans have ever met a billionaire and must rely instead on the pseudo-intimacies of media portrayals. Such stories are not hard to find. For instance,

ten months after Hurricane Katrina reminded the public of stark poverty in America, *New York Times* reporter Sharon Waxman offered this portrait of life near the top of the wealth pyramid: “At the push of a button, a 20-foot-wide screen descended from the ceiling and three huge speakers rose from beneath the wood parquet floor. At the other end of the room, a floor-to-ceiling bookcase sank—Batcave-like—revealing a projection room hidden behind it.”³⁰ This is what passes for “warm, cozy, informal” in Southern California’s Beverly Park, wrote the journalist. Here multistory palaces, some built in “classical 18th-century French style,” are set in landscapes adorned with dinosaur topiary and Provençal-style gardens. Less than ten minutes by car from Los Angeles’ famed Rodeo Drive, these estates sold for as much as \$30 million in mid-2006. They are so luxurious that “[w]hen Eunice Kennedy Shriver visited . . . during a reception for President Vicente Fox of Mexico, she said ‘I didn’t know they built houses like this anymore.’” This is “Paradise Bought,” the *New York Times* reporter writes, “a testament to the power of changed perspective, providing Los Angeles’s micro-club of superrich and superfamous a place to feel normal.”³¹

These images of opulence evoke consumer desire and fantasy, dreams that we too might one day enjoy such riches. Through such imaginative identification, America’s “celebrity culture” touches gently our ambivalence about wealth inequalities and allows us, as media and culture scholar Stephen Duncombe writes, “a peek at the other side of the growing class divide while assuring us—through our intimacy with this world—that it is not really another side at all.”³²

The *Times* reporter’s narrative is at once vivid and opaque. If readers, who are left guessing about intended moral messages, spot unexpected figurative meanings in Sharon Waxman’s words, it could be because we suppose she expressed *less* than what she thinks—a speech form that can be ironic.³³ Perhaps the reporter is dissociating herself from the literal or purely referential meaning of her prose, or intentionally avoiding explicit judgment in her narrative—a practice media scholars say typifies much U.S. journalism.³⁴

Some might see wry amusement or even light mockery in Waxman’s portrait of sumptuousness. Or her narrative could call to mind judgments about the justice or injustice of such extraordinary wealth, perhaps reducing a reader’s inclination to accept such riches as natural, or even prompting some to wonder if the wealth might have been acquired illegally or at the expense of employees’ livelihoods. Some readers might disagree entirely with such an interpretation, in spite of America’s unusual degree of wealth inequality in the early twenty-first century.³⁵ Indeed it may be *unlikely* that readers who are not already distressed

by the vast divide between the ultrarich and the rest would take Waxman's article as fodder for social justice arguments. Instead they could experience her narrative as classic comedy, journalistic understatement that captures an incongruous or surprising situation and prompts smiles. Comedy and wealth, after all, have long been friends in American popular culture.

One might expect America's great divide between affluence and poverty—wider than it has been in a century—to yield narratives of tragedy rather than humor. And of course it has. Why then has the wealth gap as comedy often shadowed American public culture? Would the Billionaires be amused by dinosaur topiary in Beverly Park? Undoubtedly. The *Times* reporter's comic overtones and the Billionaires' pointed irony, however, suggest utterly different interpretations of contemporary inequality. Indeed political satire first draws potency from comedy, and then foils it.

The Comedy of Wealth?

Comedy reassures. Restoration of harmony and reconciliation of conflict are hallmarks of comedy as plot type, as outlined in Hayden White's classic study.³⁶ If narrated as archetypal comedy, California's Beverly Park in the *New York Times* article becomes a tale of the ultrawealthy as mere curiosities, and vast differences between rich and poor seem harmonizable, natural, and inevitable. The interests of elites and ordinary citizens are not at odds³⁷ in comedic narratives about wealth, which rest easily on an imagined "state of economic nature" that supposedly precedes government and politics, where individuals' time and energies are freely exchanged, and where "rewards . . . [are] proportionate to effort" and markets are "naturally occurring democracies . . . [that] express the popular will."³⁸ Market forces, in this vision, are natural, benevolent, and unstoppable.

Satire (the fictional form of irony), on the other hand, upends such tales and assumes that the pleasing resolutions of comedic narratives are inadequate.³⁹ Satire amuses but at the same time criticizes or attacks through techniques such as ridicule, parody, or caricature. Satire's purpose nonetheless is "positive change," writes humor theorist Charles E. Schutz.⁴⁰ Plotted as satire, an economic meltdown is not a force of nature or freak accident but rather the entirely preventable outcome of politics and policy.

To choose (consciously or not) comedy, satire, romance, or tragedy as plot structure is to make a profoundly important choice about a story's meaning.⁴¹

Anthropologists' own archetypal narratives, as Donald Donham demonstrates, may emphasize hope, optimism, resignation, despair, or cynicism—which are in turn rooted in sharply varied assumptions about the capacities of individuals, the malleability of institutions, the contingencies of history, and the justice or injustice of a social order.⁴²

The implicit paradigms of historical explanation underlying satire and irony “frustrat[e] normal expectations about the kinds of resolutions provided by stories” cast in the other three modes.⁴³ What scholars such as Hayden White term the metahistorical implications of satire and irony differs sharply from comedy, tragedy, and romance.⁴⁴ Satire, White says, “represents a different kind of qualification of the hopes, possibilities, and truths of human existence. . . . It views these hopes, possibilities, and truths Ironically, in the atmosphere generated by the apprehension of the ultimate inadequacy of consciousness to live in the world happily or to comprehend it fully.”⁴⁵ Why activists who embrace irony remain passionately committed to change—even as they implicitly acknowledge the limitations of human consciousness and of language itself in representing the world—is part of this book’s story. More central, however, is the question, why do individuals who are passionately committed to the common good turn to irony at this historical moment?

The Billionaires’ ironic humor is at odds with the archetypal narratives embodied in dominant neoclassical economic theory, which Donham suggests are *comedy*: “Comedy, not as joke of course but as plot, appears to be a persistent feature of neoclassical analyses, so-called Pareto optimality typically providing the healthy resolution to apparent contradiction.”⁴⁶ Neoclassical economic theory is grounded in models of markets as self-regulating systems and as efficient organizers of the production and consumption of goods and services. Pareto optimality, as economist George DeMartino puts it, posits that “an outcome (economic or otherwise) is ‘efficient’ if no one can be made better off without making at least one other person worse off . . . [but] to say that an outcome is efficient is to say nothing at all about equity or fairness.”⁴⁷

An apparent conflict between the interests of the wealthiest one percent of the population and escalating numbers of unemployed citizens—if plotted as comedy—turns out not to be a conflict after all, but rather the outcome of putatively natural market processes, or simply phases in what some economists and others interpret as the market’s Darwinian processes of self-correction. Free-market cheerleaders would argue that inequality can become temporary and put to good use by arbitrageurs and that economic justice is to be found

in the market.⁴⁸ Such views—repudiated by many—enable dismissal of policy moves to counteract economic precariousness, high unemployment, poverty, and extreme wealth disparities.

Further to the right than the comedic trope of Pareto optimality was the late 2000s American Tea Party ethos: “You’re on your own” or “Why should anybody else have what I do not have?” or “Why should I help pay for someone else’s health care or unemployment benefits?” Such questions lend themselves not to satire—which aims at inspiring hope and laughter as well as anger—but to a language of insult. Yet conservative media personalities who embrace this stance, such as Rush Limbaugh, aim to elicit laughter from their audiences, and they and liberal pundits and satirists carry out dialogues in absentia—or sometimes in person (as when Jon Stewart and Bill O’Reilly are guests on one another’s shows). All contribute to contemporary political imaginings.

Resurgent since the 1970s has been a notion of natural market processes or an imaginary “free” market that conceals the laws and institutions which actually define the rules of competition in *any* market. These rules shape outcomes such as financial crises, recessions, and wealth bubbles. Many argue that different regulations over Wall Street firms’ allowable debt loads and investment practices, for example, might have prevented the 2008 financial meltdown. The Glass-Steagall Act—banking reform legislation enacted during the 1930s Great Depression—separated high-risk investment banking from commercial banking that relied on citizens’ deposits. But with the support of Democrats as well as Republicans, much of Glass-Steagall was repealed in 1999, paving the way for the rapid expansion of ever larger and riskier financial institutions that were free to use depositors’ money for their speculative investments.

“Occupy the SEC”—an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street that includes former Wall Street professionals who favor restoration of Glass-Steagall provisions—in February 2012 drafted a 325-page comment letter to the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and the Federal Reserve Board. Their target was financial industry lobbyists’ attempts to water down reforms proposed in the new Volcker Rule legislation, whose original purpose was to curtail certain highly risky, speculative investments by large banks that benefit from the Federal Reserve discount window and other implicit government backing. Thanks to lobbyists, Occupy SEC leaders said, by mid-2012 the Volcker Rule was turning into “Volcker-lite or Volcker-full-of-holes”; “Occupy the SEC” aimed to restore the legislation to its intended purposes.⁴⁹ As this example illustrates, markets are not part of a “natural” order;

they can be full of asymmetrical incentives created by humans through political processes.

Those most likely to tell stories about the American economy—and its great wealth gap—that fit the archetype of *comedy* are precisely those whom the satirical Billionaires “unmask” through irony, caricature, and paradox (satire’s typical weapons).⁵⁰ Hence their slogans are “Corporations Are People Too!” and “Widen the Income Gap!” and “Taxes Are Not for Everyone!” I have seen spectators interpret these slogans literally—testament to a dominant ideology that for several decades has celebrated great wealth, enabled many large corporations to avoid paying federal taxes, and supported far lighter tax rates for the ultrarich than for the rest. In contrast, observers who detect a joke and catch the Billionaires’ ironic intent sense the implied critique of such policies. For some, such irony becomes a tool for “unmasking . . . the present.”⁵¹

Thus *hope*, not despair, is irony’s gift.⁵² As Jedediah Purdy writes, irony is a way to keep alive, in the spirit of Plato’s Socrates, “the highest and noblest human hopes . . . if we stopped wishing for them, we would be lesser creatures—more resigned, poorer in possibility, inclined to despair.”⁵³

A moral vision of a more just future, not a romanticized vision of the past, inspires progressive ironic activism. And so the satirical Billionaires’ cofounder Andrew Boyd writes that for a wide range of organizations participating in the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, “Irony was no longer an expression of our lack of confidence. . . . We were neither nostalgic nor snide. We had achieved a new attitude—sly and mischievous, yet full of hope for the future.”⁵⁴ The Billionaires and their satirical compatriots such as the Yes Men are not naïve about the future or about their own capacities as agents of change, yet they wholeheartedly embrace the moral vision of a fairer economy, a more just social order, and a vibrant democracy—values in sync with those of many ordinary citizens but somehow marginalized in official discourse and political practice and in mainstream news media.

Why does it matter how America’s great wealth gap is portrayed by satirical activists and by a reporter writing a lighthearted piece in the *New York Times*? Citizens constitute themselves and imagine their nation partly through media consumption.⁵⁵ Furthermore, popular culture, in Stuart Hall’s view, “is one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged . . . the arena of consent and resistance . . . where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.”⁵⁶ In struggles over hegemony—contradictory processes aimed at ideological domination—small perturbations can foreshadow mo-

mentous changes.⁵⁷ Because corporate news journalists in the United States often adopt story frames that embody conventional wisdom rather than question dominant understandings,⁵⁸ it is left to others—including satirists—to try to stretch the boundaries of the thinkable and speakable, to destabilize common assumptions. That is precisely the intention of the satirical Billionaires.

Taunting the Powerful

Against their powerful targets do the faux Billionaires who star in this book wield mere slingshots? Like the trickster, theirs is vulnerability humor, used especially, writes Yarwood, by those who “operate from a position of weakness relative to their target.”⁵⁹ The satirical Billionaires in everyday life are ordinary citizens, and as protesters they occupy a marginal social category in the United States.

But tricksters are sly. They taunt the powerful. Indeed political satire shines a spotlight on power’s fault lines and contingencies.⁶⁰ And ironic activists attract serious allies, including actual billionaires and multimillionaires and sometimes even politicians—as when comedian Jon Stewart in December 2010 helped to inspire, or shame, Congress into finally passing legislation to provide health benefits for the firefighters and others who first responded to the September 11 attacks and who subsequently developed problems such as cancer and respiratory disease.⁶¹ Stewart criticized Republicans who had blocked the bill and broadcast networks that had neglected the issue; he added, “Though, to be fair, it’s not every day that the Beatles songs come to iTunes” (a story covered by the major news networks at that time). Although such an explicit link between legislative outcome and the work of a satirist may be rare, there is no reason to assume the absence of consequential if less easily traceable influences of political humor on public figures and public opinion.⁶²

Plutocracy’s resurgence 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. By 2011, as Europe saw huge demonstrations against austerity programs and as protests swept across North Africa and the Middle East, the United States itself suddenly spawned Occupy Wall Street, a movement that quickly became national and global. Months earlier that same year, states such as Wisconsin saw large public protests against state austerity programs that accompanied large new tax cuts for the wealthy and big corporations, and attempts to abolish workers’ collective bargaining

rights.⁶³ Public opinion polls showed that large majorities of U.S. citizens opposed such policies and favored progressive taxation to support vital services such as education, health care, transportation, police, and fire protection, which were being slashed in the name of fiscal responsibility.⁶⁴ Yet these widely shared preferences were routinely ignored or misleadingly dismissed as out of the mainstream or too “liberal” by public figures and dominant news organizations. That disconnect, already evident at the turn of the new millennium, created a discursive opening for the billionaires—both real and pretend—who are this book’s protagonists.

To capture the spirit of those moved to speak out publicly on issues such as extreme wealth inequality or the need for campaign finance reform, it is helpful to keep in mind not just their rhetorical positions on wealth, lobbyists, taxes, and corporate accountability but also matters more ineffable: a spirit of hope, a moral sensibility. There is space in the study of social movements or political activism for those who are attracted to definitive strategies and results, verifiable connections between intentions and outcomes, as well as those interested in the poetics of politics and those who approach agency as other than “a simple projection toward the future.” The latter phrase is Kathleen Stewart’s; her writing on affect in everyday life invites us beyond conceptions of agency as willpower so that we watch for the ways “all agency is frustrated and unstable and attracted to the potential in things.”⁶⁵ Hence the personal experiences and words of the satirical Billionaires themselves, along with those of spectators, are as important to this story as larger-scale narratives about the arc of American democracy and wealth.

Million Billionaire March

When the elegant satirists played croquet and badminton on Central Park’s Great Lawn, surrounded by hordes of national and international reporters and photographers (and joined by this anthropologist), they had a number of striking personal experiences: exhilaration over all the media attention; exchanges with passersby (“Who are you? The Queen of England?” shouted a man on the sidewalk to Billionaire member Contessa Frieda Markett, who wore a blue satin ball gown and tiara); enduring high humidity and heat during their energetic rally at the Plaza Hotel and then their Million Billionaire March down Fifth Avenue; hopes of being among the handful selected for Richard Avedon’s studio photo shoot that afternoon⁶⁶; keeping an eye on the

police van cruising alongside their march; being careful not to occupy too much sidewalk space so that pedestrians could pass; checking their temporary tattoos bearing phone numbers for legal aid in the event of arrest; and laughing as their Billionaire marshal, Contessa Frieda Markett, directed them repeatedly to keep to the right half of the sidewalk as they marched: “to the right, Billionaires, to the right—like the country!” With astonishment, cheers, and tears of joy, the several hundred Billionaire marchers from across the country turned a Manhattan street corner and caught sight of a vastly larger multitude—hundreds of thousands of human figures bearing colorful banners and placards, singing and chanting as they walked together—affirming an expansive sense of political possibility.

That day of political electricity, on the eve of the Republican National Convention, for the Billionaires and other protesters with whom I spoke, brought on a sense of affective solidarity or social connectedness of the kind anthropologist Victor Turner would characterize as “*communitas*”: the moral values or sentiments of humankind-ness and solidarity that cross-cut status ranks.⁶⁷ For the Billionaires for Bush, that Sunday in August 2004 became iconic, a powerfully resonant high point in the emotional arc of their organization. How pleased they were with the huge turnout of Billionaires, media, and celebrities such as Richard Avedon and cartoonist Art Spiegelman. Spiegelman took as his Billionaire name Milty National, marched with them that day, and wittily captured the experience in a half-page color cartoon sequence in the *New Yorker*.⁶⁸ New York City officials had banned a half million protesters from Central Park that day, but the Billionaires had devised a way to express dissent in that public space nonetheless. A *New York Times* reporter wrote of their “Billionaire Croquet Party” in Central Park: “Then the invasion began—dozens of Billionaires for Bush, badminton rackets held aloft, champagne flutes overflowing, waving signs that said ‘Corporations Are People Too.’”⁶⁹

The Boston Billionaire known as Arby Trajj (Chris Hartman) arrived in New York City about 10:00 that morning, after driving by rental car from Connecticut.⁷⁰ In his late twenties at the time, he worked as a researcher and graphic design consultant for a Boston nonprofit organization. He brought with him a badminton set and two costumes for the day: what he imagined as a 1920s version of an all-white lawn-tennis outfit (white slacks and white hat) for the Central Park event, and his Arby Trajj Billionaire tuxedo, top hat, and monocle. After playing croquet and badminton on the Great Lawn, he dashed to his parked car, changed into his tuxedo, and then hailed a taxi on Fifth Avenue: “I

enjoyed telling the cab driver: ‘to the Plaza Hotel, please,’ in my Billionaire voice and he didn’t miss a beat; he didn’t ask me about my costume or anything.”

Hartman joined the Million Billionaire March down Fifth Avenue and commented on the camaraderie: “It felt like a pretty cohesive group. . . . Probably helping the effect was that we all had distinctive costumes and we were all to varying degrees in character, so it was fun.” He felt energized by the smiles and exchanges with surprised pedestrians: “I imagine if we had just been carrying signs in a normal protest march we might not have gotten the smiles we got. For me personally, I got a lot of energy from making people laugh.” While he appreciated the Billionaire approach because “it was by design meant to capture the attention and imagination of the average person with humor,” he felt “burnt out with the old protest-march mode of political action” and found that participating in the satirical Billionaires’ actions “was a way of lightening it up for me.”

When the Billionaires reached Union Square Park, he said, many “flopped down on the ground and began talking to each other.” Hartman, however, said he had been “getting such a kick out of getting reactions from passersby . . . [that I] continued hailing people as they walked by and I got a lot of people taking my photograph, laughing. Some people would come up and talk to me and I would talk to them in [his Billionaire] character.” To stay hydrated, he had dropped into convenience stores along the march route to buy bottles of “very fine apple juice,” and then as he stood in Union Square at the end of the march, he kept refilling a champagne glass with “apple juice, which looks exactly like champagne.”

The route for that day’s huge march organized by United for Peace and Justice and many other political networks had been a matter of contention and was approved only a few days previously. In response to the city’s denial of a permit to protest in Central Park, the Billionaires posted a tongue-in-cheek announcement on their listserv: “Billionaire Croquet Party: 500,000 anti-Bush protesters will be barred from Central Park so we can play croquet. Part of our ‘Keep off the Grass’ campaign to privatize Central Park. Bring your croquet sets, badminton sets, and other upper-crust lawn games. Billionaires should not gather in groups larger than 20, as it would be awfully out of character to get arrested!”⁷¹

Casting the satirical Billionaires as anything but protesters, yet playfully referring to the protest permit denial and free-speech issue, Billionaire cofounder Phil T. Rich (Andrew Boyd) declaimed to a reporter interviewing him in Central Park that morning: “Not a single protester to be seen . . . [We are] unencumbered by people eager to exercise their supposedly inalienable rights—just look at how alienable they are!”

Boyd's statement to that reporter echoes our era's profound contradiction: *In a political system rooted in democratic ideals but accustomed to serving the interests of large corporations and the very rich, putting ordinary citizens first had become extraordinary.* As public policy scholar and former Clinton administration labor secretary Robert Reich wrote, "Washington and the financial sector have become so tightly intertwined that public accountability has all but vanished. . . . The extraordinary wealth of America's financial class also elicits boundless cooperation from politicians who depend on it for campaign contributions and from a fawning business press . . . as well as think tanks eager to reward their generosity."⁷² And so the satirical Billionaires chant, "This Is What Plutocracy Looks Like!"—itself an echo of the 1999 anti-WTO protesters' refrain as they marched in the thousands through the streets of Seattle declaring: "This Is What Democracy Looks Like!"

Humor and Specters of Calamity

This chapter's two opening vignettes—the satirical Billionaires in Central Park, and palatial homes and dinosaur topiary in California's Beverly Park—can be spun into contrasting tales of comedy or satire. Comedy soothes, while satire and irony trouble comedy's happy plot resolutions. Political satire shines a powerful spotlight on the unthinkable or invisible. If comedy and satire hold a mirror up to society,⁷³ what do these playful opening scenes reveal? For some, the surface images affirm the dominant political logic of an era: a wealth gap is natural, greed is good, and markets should run "free." For others, both vignettes hint at alternative attitudes and values and raise questions: What kind of economy is fair or moral? Must the quest for profit and personal responsibility trump health, safety, and security? Should society help its less fortunate members? Has the gap between the ultrarich and the rest grown too wide? Does superconsumption by a fortunate few harm the rest? Have dreams of a better life become unattainable for too many?

Perhaps more so in the early twenty-first century than at any time since the 1920s, the ultrawealthy in the United States are potent objects of both cultural fascination and resentment. Although Occupy Wall Street in 2011 and 2012 nudged questions about economic opportunity and inequality into the limelight, as a conversational topic, wealth (or more pointedly, class) in America has long been ticklish. That is one of the reasons the Billionaires chose ironic humor as their weapon.

Public imagination in the early twenty-first century is haunted by specters of financial calamity, environmental catastrophe, predatory corporations, and Wall Street robber barons. In an imaginary world of democracy in which all points of view are thoughtfully considered, where social connection and individualism are not at war, and where the richness of human variety is embraced, political satirists might be rare. But in hard times political satire and irony flourish. Should we then count comedic satirists—though often consigned to peripheries—among the makers of history?

The effects of ironic political humor—with exceptions such as Jon Stewart's public support for the 9/11 First Responders legislation—are usually difficult to trace, and scholars of humor debate its radical or reformist potential. Yet there can be little doubt that satire can reshape political imaginations in ways dictators and other leaders have long found threatening,⁷⁴ and ordinary citizens have found inspiring.

Political humor—so vital to political imagination and everyday meaning-making—clearly merits anthropological attention. Yet humor has been a rare focus in contemporary ethnography. Exceptions include Donna Goldstein's superb study of a shantytown in Rio de Janeiro, and Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak's innovative analysis of a particular form of parodic overidentification known by the Russian slang term *stiob*, which blurs the boundaries between sincerity and ridicule.⁷⁵ Otherwise it has been scholars in communication and media studies, more often than social scientists, who have analyzed contemporary American political satire.⁷⁶ I know of no other ethnographic study of the Billionaires, and this book is one of the first social science studies of satirical political activists.⁷⁷

This study is less about practical politics than it is about the political imagination, spirit of the times, limits of public discourse, poetics of politics, and the cultural delicacy of dramatic differences in wealth. It analyzes cultural politics during a time of profound ambivalence toward politics itself. Why might the satirical Billionaires be considered a cultural touchstone, a sensitive gauge of the fragile condition of American democracy? What are the possibilities and limitations of popular activism that relies on informal networks more than formal institutions, performance parody more than community organizing or traditional canvassing, and decentralization and consensus more than hierarchy and central control?

Chapter 1 provides a snapshot of the satirical Billionaires' trajectory from 1999 to 2012, and explores theories of ironic humor as political instrument, ironies of ethnographic fieldwork, and recent innovations in protest as spectacle by the Yes Men, Reverend Billy, Reclaim the Streets, and Stephen Colbert, among others. (The Appendix outlines my research methods.) Soaring wealth inequality and the collapse of the American middle class is one of our era's biggest stories; Chapter 2 explores the new Gilded Age as the cultural and historical period that frames the satirical Billionaire enterprise. It includes my interview with William Gates Sr. and discusses the counterintuitive melding of political concerns of satirical Billionaires and celebrity billionaires, along with popular cultural conceptions about wealth and taxes in America, and debates about whether a global economy driven by vast quantities of finance capital deployed in obscure transactions, such as derivatives, offers any recognizable object for social movement dissent.

Chapter 3 offers a rare glimpse of the embryonic stages of social movement organization, as it explores through oral history interviews how the satirical Billionaires' political network emerged after a decade of experimentation among creative activists in Massachusetts. Framed as an analysis of political ritual and antiritual, it also considers the transformative potential of resistance in political ritual. Chapters 4 and 5, building on the perspectives of participants, spectators, and media, trace the Billionaire trajectory of the 2000s: increasingly savvy strategists polishing their own "brand," growing pains as their organizational culture shifted in stages, a sharp boost in their production values during the 2004 presidential campaign, delight in their growing numbers and media coverage, an internally divisive period and demoralization after the 2004 presidential election, strategy meetings to reassess it all in mid-2005, experimentation with new modes of action and organizational names in sync with the 2008 presidential campaign and financial crisis, 2009 health care debates, the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court decision, and 2011 austerity programs and increasingly hard economic times as a new presidential election approached. These two chapters consider as well how Billionaires can be seduced by their own theatrics, and I include close-ups of how people on the street perceive the Billionaires—with attention to those who share their political sympathies but do not necessarily appreciate their street theater, and highlighting voices that are emblematic of today's economic fracture lines.

Chapter 6 takes up a Billionaire's claim: "we cracked the code of American media culture. . . . For a brief, shining moment we outsmarted the system." So

said Merchant F. Arms—social movement historian and experienced activist Jeremy Varon. How successful were the Billionaires in defying traditional images of protest in order to reach imagined publics? What did it mean to be players *in* as well as *of* the media, neither wholly compliant nor resistant? Chapter 7 offers final thoughts on humor in social movements and the contemporary political significance of satire and sincerity. I contrast the Billionaires with Occupy Wall Street and suggest not only that the satirists of the 2000s and earlier years were harbingers who helped in small ways to set the stage for the serious protests that followed, but that more sustained subversions of the status quo require humor as well as earnestness.