



# SATIRICAL ACTIVISM IN AMERICA

Extracts from Angelique Haugerud (2013) *Leave no  
Billionaire behind!*

- We are living in a time of Billionaires
- A dozen in the 1980s to more than a thousand today
- Numbers surged along with influence
- World's most prosperous individuals earn incomes that exceed entire nations

- Leave No Billionaire Behind!
- Anthropologist noticed the above slogan in a crowd assembled on Central Park's Great Lawn
- Women were carrying parasols
- Men in tuxedos



- Photographers took their pictures
- Names included: Ivan Aston Martin
  - Iona Bigga Yacht
  - Phil T. Rich



# SLOGANS

- Corporations are people too!
- Widen the Income gap!
- Still loyal to big oil!
- Taxes are not for everyone!



- Staged a rally at the Plaza Hotel
- Million Billionaire March down New York's Fifth Avenue
- Beneath surface is the feeling something is not right, touches historical debates about wealth, inequality, and democracy

- In 2007 the top 1% of income earners in the US received 23.5% of total national (pretax) income and controlled 40% of the wealth - the highest levels of inequality in the US in nearly a century
- Robert Shiller said in mid 2009 that the rising economic inequality not the financial crisis per se is America's biggest problem

- Widening gulf between ultra rich and the rest seldom mentioned in US elections of 2000, 2004, 2008
- Briefly appeared at the end of the 2008 campaign when financial crisis dominated the headlines
- In 2011 (fuelled in part by Occupy movements) debates about wealth inequality become more salient in campaign discourse

- Focuses on the satirical activists called the 'Billionaires'
- Argues that they were like canaries in a mineshaft
- Their presence emitting warning signals ahead of dire trouble
- Since 2000's they and their successors have deployed ironic humour and street theatre to nudge questions about wealth and democracy



- Why cloak these concerns in irony and satire?
- Secret source of humour is not joy but sorrow -  
Mar Twain
- Topics that invite ironic humour are those that frighten, embarrass, pain or affront us
- Ironic humour can be a political spark and an inspiration for action

- A play as subversion
- These activists practice an innovative genre of what scholars term 'contentious politics' 'collective action' 'social movements'
- 'Ordinary people'
  - make collective claims on public authorities, other holders of power, competitors, enemies, and objects of popular disapproval



**NEGATIVE  
ADS ARE THE  
BEST ADS!**



**Billionaires for Healey  
...Or Mihos**

**GO GOP:  
Because Money  
IS Everything!**



**Billionaires for Healey**  
(A wholly-owned subsidiary of BillionairesForBank.com)

- Earnest intent and absurdity
- Both mocks and upholds the genre known as political protest
- Debuted as 'Billionaires for Forbes'
- In 2000 morphed into 'Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)'
- 'Billionaires for Bush' 2004, 'Billionaires for Bailouts' and 'Lobbyists for McCain' in 2008

- 'Billionaires for Wealthcare' during the 2011 health care debate
- Warning signs in ears of excess are less likely to come from the political center than from the margins
- Warning signs from economists such as Nouriel Roubini of NY University were ignored or downplayed by most economists, pundits, policy makers



- Satire's guiding premise is that 'something is not 'as it should be' and it takes a satirist to set the world straight
- Satire is often far more elusive and unstable than it would ever let on
- Billionaire's core aim is to help keep alive the public sphere questions about economic fairness



- Sky rocketing wealth inequality and the influence of big money in politics commanded the billionaire's attention years before the emergence of Occupy Wall Street
- Targeting democrats as well as republicans
- Illustrated that the wealth inequality in the US had accelerated to record levels and that large campaign donations and lobbying yielded lopsided benefits

- Such as favourable tax rates for corporations and the very wealthy
- The capacity to win lucrative government contracts - crony capitalism
- Deregulatory legislation that risked the environment
- Public health safety and national economic stability itself.

- Citizens United 2010
- New torrents of political campaign money
- Anonymous donors
- Public opinion polls showed that it was unpopular with the majority of citizens across the political spectrum



- Occupy Wall Street slogans:
  - Democracy not Corporatization
  - Revoke Corporate Personhood
  - Counterpoints to the satirical Billionaires' slogan 'Corporations are people too!'

- Billionaire's spotlight plutocracy - the intertwined growth of political and economic inequality
- Billionaire's slogan "It's a class war and we're winning!"

- Hailed as the rockstars of the protest scene
- Cultivated popular appeal through contrasts reproduced in the media
- Reiterated through performance
- Billionaire charm versus liberal anger

- Protesters who are elegant rather than scruffy, hip rather than traditional, polite rather than offensive, and harmless rather than dangerous
- Props include champagne glasses, cigarette holders, and huge cigars, as well as bright banners professionally printed



- Convinced that traditional forms of protest no longer worked
- Created a brand of theatrical political activism that evokes Information Age novelty
- A witty command of policy issues
- Perform dissent in ways that surprises and charms

- '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...
- e.g. the retired Joe Camel - cigarette advertising turns into Joe Chemo - hooked up to an IV machine



- Attempting to reorder political debate
- Breaking common perceptual frames
- Political satire disrupts the transmission of the dominant political brand messages so competing conversations can occur