Carnival against the Capital of Capital: Carnavalesque Protest in Occupy Wall Street

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ABSTRACT

The medieval carnival, according to Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, was a public festivity of excess in which people were free to violate social norms and subvert prevailing authority. Recent analysts have applied Bakhtin's concept of carnival to contemporary political protests that incorporate a playful, culture-defying element. But the term has been used in multiple and contradictory ways. For Bakhtin, carnival is an expressive pattern pervasive in a culture and has no instrumental purpose (what I call "communal carnival"), while carnivalesque protest consists of specific practices with an explicit political agenda ("intentional carnival"). The Occupy Wall Street movement can be analyzed as both communal and intentional carnival. Protest movements use humor to subvert received doctrines; humorous performances are addressed to participants, the public, and repressive forces. Some critics regard carnivalesque performances as frivolous and demeaning of serious political causes. I conclude by discussing the effect of carnival on the Occupy movement.

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Festive and playful activities have had an increasingly prominent part in street protest in recent years, especially since the Global Justice Movement of the 1990s and the first years of the twenty-first century. Such elements were also present in Occupy Wall Street (OWS), which spread from the eponymous center of the US financial system in New York City to hundreds of cities and towns across the United States in 2011. OWS protested growing economic inequality, the power of financial institutions, and the sway of big money in politics. Among other tactics, protesters used humor to raise these issues, hoping to encourage optimism and empowerment with acts of levity and celebration. Playfulness and defiance of official culture gave these acts a carnival atmosphere. Many activists and scholars have analyzed them applying the Soviet-era linguist and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of carnival.

This article examines Bakhtin's concept of carnival and its application to humorous elements in contemporary protest movements. For Bakhtin, "carnival" was a festivity that inverted social ranks, unmasked the mystifications of establishment hegemony, and revealed a different truth about power relations. People participated without distinction between performers and spectators, creating a community of celebration. Contemporary carnivalesque political protests likewise inject a celebratory element into criticism of established authority and institutions. However, in these activities performances are explicitly intended to express a political position and there is a relatively clear line between participants and spectators. I therefore distinguish between the communal carnival of Bakhtin's analysis and intentional carnival deployed for a political goal. Intentional carnival arises from communal carnival—it appeals to participants' sense of humor and playfulness—but it is designed to persuade the spectators of a political point (expressed in humorous, often self-deprecating terms). I discuss the Occupy Wall Street movement in relation to the communal and the intentional, and show that it partakes of both. Finally, I consider the functions of carnival-like behavior in political movements generally and its limitations.

The research reported in this paper consisted of participation and the study of graphics and videos on the internet. I was a peripheral participant in Occupy Wall Street, and my characterization of the occupation as communal carnival is based largely on that experience: I hung out periodically in Zuccotti Park, joined in several marches, and shared in the exuberant, carnival-like spirit. I did not witness directly the examples of intentional carnival that I discuss here (except for the hand-painted signs examined below). I found many examples of carnival performances on the internet and chose to analyze several that clearly portrayed the themes of OWS's protest.

Bakhtin's Communal Carnival

Bakhtin (1895–1975) came of age during the Russian Revolution and lived the heightened intellectual atmosphere of the postrevolutionary 1920s, when avant-garde art and literature and new philosophical thought flourished. Arrested in 1929, he spent many years in internal exile as a professor at a teachers' college in Kazakhstan. His major book, *Rabelais and His World*, written

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); cf. Michael Holquist, prologue to *Rabelais and His World*, by Mikhail Bakhtin, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), xiii-xxiii; Renate Lachman, "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-culture," *Cultural Critique*, 11 (1988-89): 115-52.

2. Roberto DaMatta, *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); *Trinidad Carnival: The Cultural Politics of a Transnational Festival*, ed. Garth L. Green and Philip W. Scher (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Claire Tancons, "Occupy Wall Street: Carnival against Capital? Carnavalesque as Protest Sensibility," *e-flux*, 30, December, 2011, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/occupy-wall-street-carnival-against-capital-carnavalesque-as-protest-sensibility/>.

3. Natalie Zemon Davis. "The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past & Present*, 50 (February, 1971): 41-75; Samuel Kinser, *Rabelais's Carnival: Text, Context, Metatext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Dominick LaCapra, "Bakhtin, Marxism, and the Carnavalesque," in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* by Dominick LaCapra (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

4. For example, Benjamin Shepard, L. M. Bogad, and Stephen Duncombe, "Performing vs. the Insurmountable: Theatrics, Activism, and Social Movements," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance*

in the 1930s as a thesis, was not published until 1965.¹ *Rabelais and His World* is a study of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a lengthy sixteenth-century novel composed of fantastic stories of a race of giants based on medieval legends. Throughout the novel, grotesqueness and debauchery stand as a critique of the stifling, hierarchical medieval society. Carnival plays a big role in Rabelais's novel and an even bigger one in Bakhtin's analysis. Carnival is the period immediately before Lent when people in the Middle Ages, in anticipation of the deprivation of forty days of fasting, indulged in excess: gluttony, licentiousness, and mockery of secular and religious authorities. Where carnival is still practiced today, in such places as Brazil, New Orleans (as Mardi Gras), and Trinidad, it has lost its critical edge against either state or church, and even much of its debauchery, now mostly exercised only symbolically, but it is still timed to coincide with the church calendar.²

The historical accuracy of Bakhtin's representation of the medieval carnival has been challenged,³ but *Rabelais and His World* gave critics of the Soviet system a resource with which to criticize their own society, in Aesopian language. His depiction of the subterranean and subversive nature of carnival is widely regarded as a covert attack on Stalinist repression and the suppression of the creative urges that had flourished in the revolution's immediate aftermath. Bakhtin achieved recognition and almost cult status in the 1960s and 1970s in the Soviet Union because he provided a metaphor for circumventing the lack of freedom to criticize and organize around alternative ideologies, however indirectly.

That same work has been applied to ludic protest in the very different political context of the capitalist West in recent years. In these societies, challenges do not have to be masked in Aesopian code; protest is public and open and has acquired standard routines. But they attack a pervasive conformity to the dominant ideology. New forms of protest emerge, the better to challenge a society in which a democratic shell encases an increasingly oligarchical, money-driven form of rule. The term "carnival," however, has been applied capaciously with selective incorporation of Bakhtin's concept. In certain respects present-day political protest that is tinged with humor and irony follows the pattern identified by Bakhtin, but in others it is quite different. Scholars tend to invoke the idea of carnival indiscriminately for any public political demonstration that incorporates humor or play.⁴

In Bakhtin's analysis, carnival gave common people an opportunity to depart from their prescribed roles and mock the powers that ruled them. It occurred on a regular basis, conforming to the liturgical calendar of feast days, but it subverted their sacred nature. Carnival was celebratory and iconoclastic at the same time: "As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions."⁵ The essential spirit of carnival was expressed in laughter. Public laughter is an expression of joy. It is also physical. It requires physical motion and is often involuntary, a surrender of one's conscious, rational self to the unexpected. Laughter is not an individual act but "the subjective consciousness of all the people."⁶

There were no spectators at carnival: "Carnival does not know footlights ... it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators." All were equal—except the rulers. Carnival reversed roles: the lords of state and church were ridiculed by the popular

Studies, 4 (2008): 1–30; Christopher Smith, "Whose Streets? Urban Social Movements and the Politicization of Space," n.d., http://www.yorku.ca/jmarches/visiblecity/Whose_Streets.pdf.

5. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 7.

6. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10, 92.

7. *Ibid.*, 7, 90, 339–40, 394.

8. *Ibid.*, 6, 315–22. Cf. Gavin Grindon, "Carnival against Capital: A Comparison of Bakhtin, Vaneigem, and Bey," *Anarchist Studies* 12 (2004): 149; Lachman, "Bakhtin and Carnival."

crowd. Carnival subverted the "official and authoritarian" culture that, combined with "violence, prohibitions, limitations, and ... an element of fear and intimidation," threatened the sinner with eternal damnation. In carnival people conquered "cosmic terror" and overcame "all the central ideas, images and symbols of official cultures" with (collective) laughter.⁷

The popular classes acted in concert to exercise dominion over the authorities, both in performance, by showing them in humiliating effigy, and in thought, by overturning the ruling ideas of hierarchy, decorum, rigidity, and modesty. In "liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order," carnival implicitly propounded a rival truth. The foibles of the rich and powerful, both secular and religious, were lampooned dramatically and graphically in bold, satirical strokes.

Carnival offered "grotesque realism": its images and enactments privileged the relation of the physical body, especially the lower body, to the real world. The spirit of carnival was portrayed as a fat, lascivious man who consumed great quantities of food and alcohol and was prodigiously sexual (most famously in the painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* [fig. 1]).

Figure 1. *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (detail). Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1558. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Bakhtin contrasted the classical exaltation of the individual to the carnivalesque presence of the crowd: in artistic representations, the classical sculpture shows the perfect individual body, while in late medieval paintings, the crowd indulges in sloth and licentiousness. All these inversions were played out in public performances in the street. The common folk who flocked to watch and take part created a community that cast off the shackles of authority. Carnival offered them an all-encompassing experience, "a second world and a second life outside officialdom." It embodied an entire folk culture, and preserved that culture's independence from the high culture.⁸

9. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 362–5.

10. Esther Peeren, "Carnival Politics and the Territory of the Street," *Thamyris/Intersecting*, 14 (2007): 78; Notes From Nowhere, *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism* (London: Verso, 2003), 180. Cf. Katharine Ainger, "Global Carnival against Capital," *Z Magazine*, September, 1999. Third World Traveler, http://www.third-worldtraveler.com/Global_Economy/GlobalCarnival.html; L. M. Bogad, "Tactical Carnival: Social Movements, Demonstrations, and Dialogical Performance," in *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theater and Cultural Politics*, ed. Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz (London: Routledge, 2006); 46–58; Bogad, "Carnivals against Capital: Radical Clowning and the Global Justice Movement," *Social Identities*, 16 (2010): 537–57; Graham St John, "Protestival: Global Days of Action and Carnivalized Politics in the Present," *Social Movement Studies*, 7 (2008): 167–90.

Bakhtin argued that carnival was an important source for a major historical transformation, the intellectual breakthrough from medieval obscurantism to Renaissance humanism. It provided people with the resources to challenge medieval dogma and assert the value of popular thought. In the end, though, the freedom of the Renaissance became individualized and sanitized, and as it was elevated to official culture, carnival lost its subversive edge.⁹

The Carnavalesque in Contemporary Protest

Many recent protest movements have engaged in carnivalesque performances. The first major protest to call itself a carnival in recent times was the Carnival against Capital in London on June 18, 1999. It was organized by the British group Reclaim the Streets in coordination with worldwide antiglobalization protests called by the international network People's Global Action during the G-8 summit meeting in Cologne, Germany. Another protest group, the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) in the UK, marched in clown costumes and staged elaborate open-air performances, usually without permit, as part of the Carnival for Full Enjoyment protesting the Edinburgh G-8 meeting in 2005 (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army. Photo courtesy of Tactical Media Files.
<http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/picture?pic=2426>

The combination of political protest and colorful party "exploits the ambivalent position of carnival as poised between aesthetics and politics," according to Esther Peeren; for Katharine Ainger and colleagues, "Carnival works all over the world, as political action, as festive celebration, as cathartic release, as wild abandonment of the status quo, as networking tool, as a way to create a new world."¹⁰

11. Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press, 2007), 22.

12. Wayne Gytting, "Gandhi Meets Monty Python: The Comedic Turn in Nonviolent Tactics," *Waging Nonviolence*, October 28, 2011, <http://waging-nonviolence.org/feature/gandhi-meets-monty-python-the-comedic-turn-in-nonviolent-tactics/>.

13. Bogad, "Carnivals against Capital," M. Lane Bruner, "Carnavalesque Protest and the Humorous State," *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 25 (2005): 136–55; Gytting, "Gandhi Meets Monty Python," Angelique Haugerud, *No Billionaire Left Behind: Satirical Activism in America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, "'Excorporation' and 'Carnival' in Humorous Street Actions Staged for Nonviolent Struggle: The 1996-7 Student Protests and the Resistance Movement (Otpor), Serbia," *Thamasat Review*, 14 (2010–11): 13–34.

14. For dozens more examples, see Andrew Boyd, *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution* (New York: OR Books, 2012); Steve Crawshaw and John Jackson, *Small Acts of Resistance: How Courage, Tenacity, and Ingenuity Can Change the World* (New York: Union Square Press, 2010).

Advocates believe that this ambivalence is a strength of carnival protest. If carnival activities offer a vehicle for unmasking the pretensions and obfuscations of authority, they are also directed against the self-imposed gravitas of traditional left activism. One reason for the growth of carnivalesque protest in this century is that many activists are increasingly disenchanted with the rigidity, dogma, and dullness of what Stephen Duncombe calls an "old model of protest [that] was simple and staid: march, chant, and listen (to the truth from the leaders)."¹¹ Thus intentional carnival grows out of communal carnival. Protesters deliberately inject the carnivalesque spirit into their own practice, and then deploy it to appeal to a larger public. (As we will see, however, this in turn can generate opposition to the frivolity of the carnivalesque from those who feel that it undercuts the political seriousness of protest.)

Many other protests were carnivalesque without adopting the name. In the 1980s, when Polish police systematically painted over Solidarity's graffiti, they left big white blotches on the walls. To highlight the erasures, the Orange Alternative covered them with outlines of elves; later they marched in parades dressed as elves and chanting, "Elves are real."¹²

Many carnivalesque performances make an explicit, though distorted, reference to the object of a protest. Often they engage in exaggerated displays of obedience, exposing the pretensions of authorities to ridicule. Otpor, the Serbian nonviolent movement that protested (and ultimately defeated) the government of Slobodan Milosevic, was one of the pioneers of carnivalesque practices and an important inspiration of the carnival attitude for movements around the world. Among its many playful performances was a march in which Otpor paraded a herd of sheep wearing signs that read, "We support the Socialist Party" (Milosevic's party). To "express its love" for the Polish government, the Orange Alternative cleaned up the central square in Wroclaw by scrubbing it with toothbrushes while dressed up like the heroic workers portrayed in 1930s films. Billionaires for Bush appeared in elaborate evening dress and jewels at the 2004 Republican National Convention in a mock demonstration applauding George W. Bush's tax cuts.¹³

These are just a sampling of many recent instances of exuberantly creative political protest.¹⁴ Otpor's sheep and Billionaires for Bush's formal wear were symbols clearly referring to the objects of protest; the Orange Alternative and CIRCA were more nearly pure carnival, assembly for the joy of laughing together. Carnavalesque protest is especially effective in societies where political demonstrations are routinely repressed; protesters hope to circumvent the threat by pretending obedience or espousing a cause that seems harmless. Police inadvertently collaborate when they repress an ostensibly harmless protest, arousing indignation and heightening the sense of ridiculousness.

Many such activities have been compared to carnival, but with different meanings, some at variance with Bakhtin's original meaning. The two fundamental elements of Bakhtin's carnival, in my view, are festivity and subversion of authority. Contemporary political carnivals likewise involve these elements. But for Bakhtin, carnival was all-encompassing and created a community, a way of life lived in rejection of received routines and doctrines; it could not be reduced to particular humorous or festival performances. Protest performances, in contrast, have an explicitly political purpose—to convey a specific message of opposition to the prevailing order. They are consciously planned, organized, and carried out by a politically organized group. While those who plan and choreograph protest events may seek to capture the spontaneity

15. Geoph Kozeny, *Intentional Communities: Lifestyles Based on Ideals* (Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, MO: Foundation for Intentional Community, 1996).

16. Bogad, "Carnivals against Capital," 550–1.

17. For general accounts of Occupy Wall Street, see Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012); Michael A. Gould-Wartofsky, *The Occupiers: The Making of the 99 Percent Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2013); John L. Hammond, "The Arab (and European) Spring and Occupy Wall Street," in *The Birth of the Arab Citizen and the Changing of the Middle East*, ed. Stuart Schaar and Mohsin El Ahmadi (Northampton, MA: InterlinkPublishing Group, 2015), 283–98.

18. John L. Hammond, "The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street," *Science and Society*, 79 (2015): 288–313.

of carnival and attempt to erase the distinction between performers and audience, there are footlights, at least metaphorical ones, separating them.

I adopt the term "communal carnival" to represent the first pattern: a total way of life in which everyone is a participant and no one is a spectator, and in which the participants are there to engage in play. When performances have an explicit political purpose, promote a cause, and are performed by activists for a target audience, I use the term "intentional carnival" by analogy to intentional communities, which differ from spontaneously occurring communities in that they unite "people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values."¹⁵

Most invocations of Bakhtin in recent literature in fact refer to intentional manifestations rather than communal carnival. But intentional carnival performances generally arise from a spirit created by communal carnival. Overt performances will generally embody a pervasive rejection by participants of conventional culture, and any such rejection, if it occurs, will necessarily issue in specific acts that can be identified as carnival-like. Some contemporary activists offer their practice as more than an overt political intervention. They intend to offer a transformative experience for the participants: CIRCA (the clown army) held training sessions for aspiring clowns, encouraging them to develop "their own clown persona" by choosing an appropriate name, physicality, and costume; on a tour through the UK, CIRCA held a public performance in each town and then remained for two days, offering training in clowning for interested locals.¹⁶

The Carnival in Zuccotti Park

The movement that came to be known as Occupy Wall Street (OWS) manifested both communal and intentional carnival. On September 17, 2011, convoked by a call in the Canadian anticapitalist magazine *Adbusters*, a small group gathered to occupy Wall Street—the capital of capital—and attack the financial system at its heart, protesting escalating economic inequality, the growing power of money in politics (ratified by the Supreme Court in the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision of 2010), and the government's subservience to financial institutions by bailing out the major banks after the 2008 financial crisis. The slogan "We are the 99 Percent" drew attention to these issues; the idea of the 99 percent took hold in public consciousness and drew attention to the growing riches of the few in contrast to economic stagnation, or worse, for the many.

On the day of the announced occupation, Wall Street was heavily guarded, so the occupiers marched instead to nearby Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan and set up camp. Their numbers grew rapidly, and spinoffs occupied public spaces in hundreds of cities and towns in the United States and abroad.¹⁷ OWS attracted activists from the entire spectrum of progressive causes and organizations. But (as I have shown elsewhere), the dominant ethos was anarchist: it rejected conventional politics of both the mainstream and the Left, declaring itself opposed to capitalism and the state, and practiced prefigurative politics, attempting to create in Zuccotti Park a vibrant community in which people forged a collective life even as they protested institutions that oppressed them.¹⁸ This Do-It-Yourself (DIY), anti-institutional ethos had strong affinities both for the idea of the occupation as a communal carnival—a living community that created and controlled its own institutions—and for the practice of intentional carnival—a multivocal expression of political opposition to hegemonic capitalism.

19. Actually a privately owned public space; John L. Hammond, "The Significance of Space in Occupy Wall Street," *Interface* 5 (2013): 514.

20. Mark Bray, *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2013); Graeber, *The Democracy Project*; Hammond, "The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street."

21. Ginia Bellafante, "Gunning for Wall Street, With Faulty Aim." *New York Times*, September 25, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/nyregion/protesters-are-gunning-for-wall-street-with-faulty-aim.html>; Laura Bly, "Wall St. Rallies Are New Brand of Tourism; Arrests Drive Interest in Anti greed Protests," *USA Today*, October 4, 2011; *New York Post*, "'Occupy' Goes Big Tent" (editorial), November 8, 2011, <https://nypost.com/2011/11/08/occupy-goes-big-tent/>.

22. Sarah Knuckey, Katherine Glenn, and Emi MacLean, *Suppressing Protest: Human Rights Violations in the US Response to Occupy Wall Street* (New York: NYU Law School and Fordham Law School, 2012); John McQuaid, "Why the Brutal Police Tactics at Occupy Protests?" *Forbes.com*, November 20, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/johnmcquaid/2011/11/20/why-the-brutal-police-tactics-at-occupy-protests/>; David Seifman, "City Settles 'Occupy' Lawsuit for \$350K," *New York Post*, April 9, 2013, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/city_settles_occupy_lawsuit_for_UwR3B19O3hSHdOL-o4DRpeO; Alain Sherter, "In Day

I will examine the movement in the light of my characterization of communal and intentional carnival. First, the whole occupation can be seen as a communal carnival. Within the space of Zuccotti Park, people were free to live together while rejecting the norms of bourgeois society. The occupation liberated a forbidden space—a public park,¹⁹ but one that was not meant for camping out and at a location where an invasion by a declaredly anticapitalist force seemed (at least to the authorities) to pose a threat to the financial district and the national financial system.

The anarchist spirit that prevailed in OWS entailed the tenets of horizontality, mutual aid, and prefiguration. The idea of horizontality embodied the pledge that everyone shared authority equally; no one had a privileged leadership status. Food, tents, and other services were freely offered to everyone, provided by donations and voluntary labor. Horizontality and mutuality were meant to prefigure the social relations that would prevail in a future emancipated society. The occupation thus challenged not only the capitalist system in its headquarters but the capitalist ethos of possessive individualism.²⁰ People came to the occupation, as full-time occupiers or as visitors, to join in the act of transgression against conventional restrictions on the use of public space.

Though far from fully realized in practice, these anarchistic ideals underlay the pleasure of participation and encouraged a lighthearted attitude embodying the carnival spirit. Interaction was festive. Constant conversations addressed public issues, personal troubles, and the link between them; visiting activists and academics gave talks, and debates occurred in endless General Assembly meetings. But there was also music and dance. Parents, seizing a teachable moment, brought their children and sometimes camped out overnight. The atmosphere was exhilarating. Several media accounts called it a carnival, although not always favorably.²¹

Carnival festivity was limited in at least two ways, however: first, the police surrounded and watched over the site permanently and went on rampages when occupiers marched on streets and sidewalks outside of the park, clubbing, pepper spraying, and arresting demonstrators. In Bakhtin's telling, carnival was ambivalently tolerated by authorities, who allowed it to occur even though it ostensibly threatened their power over the people, because they assumed that it would end in due course. The occupation of Zuccotti Park faced constant police harassment and, after two months, was violently evicted.²² The second limitation was internal: while nearly all occupiers luxuriated in the festive spirit, some were at least relatively more determined than others to maintain order and political seriousness. In this regard the occupation tested the limits of carnival as an intentional political action, reflecting the disjunction between humor and celebration, on the one hand, and the serious business of political protest, on the other.

While occupiers joined in a communal carnival as a festival of subversion and defiance of authority, they also put on many intentional carnival performances. Some were brief and spontaneous; others were elaborate and carefully prepared. Some did not occur in public, but were broadcast on the internet, the modern agora. They addressed several different audiences. Some were internal, meant for the movement itself. Some were performed for the public. Some were addressed to the police. (Some targeted more than one audience.) OWS brought forth a festive outburst of creative energy. Among many examples, I will discuss the use of hand-painted signs; an ostensible attempt to move into a bank; a gathering of superheroes;

of Protests, 'Occupy Wall Street'
Faces Police Violence," CBS
News, November 17, 2011, [https://
www.cbsnews.com/news/in-day-
of-protests-occupy-wall-street-
faces-police-violence/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/in-day-of-protests-occupy-wall-street-faces-police-violence/).

23. John L. Hammond, "Relations
of Media Production in Occupy
Wall Street," *International Journal
of Communication*, 13 (2019):
904–05.

24. These and other examples
can be found at [http://www.
damncoolpictures.com/2011/10/
best-signs-from-occupy-wall-
street.html](http://www.damncoolpictures.com/2011/10/best-signs-from-occupy-wall-street.html).

and a parody of *West Side Story*. They all used the themes of Occupy in mocking (but serious) condemnation of the dominant financial sector and those who were complicit with it; but they also mocked Occupy Wall Street itself. They exemplify the conviction that some issues are too serious to be dealt with only with ponderous denunciation.

Hand-painted signs. People marching in demonstrations carry signs proclaiming their cause. Often an organization calling a demonstration preprints signs with a uniform format and approved slogans. It hands them out to members to carry on the march, and may even exclude people carrying unapproved signs. The signs carried in OWS's marches were different. Many marchers made their own signs (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Marchers with hand-painted signs. Courtesy of "Best Signs from Occupy Wall Street Protests" website.
[http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-3iQ100gH5ys/TpS1m_CtzPI/AAAAAAAAACbf0/wP_lrztJTZ8/s1600/
occupy-wall-street-protest-signs-26.jpg](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-3iQ100gH5ys/TpS1m_CtzPI/AAAAAAAAACbf0/wP_lrztJTZ8/s1600/occupy-wall-street-protest-signs-26.jpg)

Some were made by individuals, but others (as well as banners and other art works displayed in marches) were collaborative projects, made in Zuccotti Park where professional artists, amateurs, and others who had never even dabbled in art worked together.²³

Many, but not all, were humorous; those that were carried diverse messages, sometimes self-mocking ("I'm so angry I made a sign"), sometimes gentle ("Ignore me/go shopping"), sometimes pointed ("I won't believe corporations are people until Texas executes one").²⁴ But they were all expressions of autonomy and creativity by people who wanted to contribute their imagination to the cause. In their diversity, they allowed each occupier to speak in a unique voice and were an implicit protest against the attempt by political organizations to stage-manage events, with signs that all too frequently carried ponderous, jargon-laden messages. Almost four years later, an art

25. Martha Schwendener, "Seeing the Power of the Political Poster," *New York Times*, July 31, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/31/arts/design/seeing-the-power-of-political-posters.html>.

26. Corelogic, "United States Residential Foreclosure Crisis: Ten Years Later," March, 2017, <https://www.corelogic.com/research/foreclosure-report/national-foreclosure-report-10-year.pdf>; *The Week*, "The Federal Reserve's 'Breathtaking' \$7.7 Trillion Bank Bailout," November 28, 2011, <http://theweek.com/articles/479867/federal-reserves-breathtaking-77-trillion-bank-bailout>

27. "Occupy Wall Street Sets up Living Room in Lobby of Bank of America," YouTube video, March 17, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0AP1RslWZs>.

critic for the *New York Times* called the signs carried in Occupy's marches "the signature of the Occupy movement."²⁵

Occupying a bank. The financial crisis of 2008–09 was the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. The immediate cause was an epidemic of mortgage foreclosures, due largely to the irresponsible and often fraudulent lending practices on the part of banks. Banks received a \$7.7 trillion bailout, while over 4 million homeowners lost their homes to foreclosure between 2008 and 2011; a mortgage assistance program for homeowners was weak and ineffective.²⁶ Though the banks were responsible for the crisis, they received much more favorable treatment than the homeowners.

The Bank of America was a main nemesis of Occupy, accused of responsibility, even more than other big banks, for the foreclosure crisis. Early in 2012 a small group of occupiers carried furniture into a Bank of America branch, claiming that they were moving in because they had lost their home to foreclosure (fig. 4).²⁷

Figure 4. Moving into the Bank of America. Screenshot from "Occupy Wall Street Sets up Living Room in Lobby of Bank of America," YouTube video, March 17, 2012. Courtesy of OccupyTVNY. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0AP1RslWZs>

This "occupation" laid bare the absurdity of the government's support for the guilty parties while the innocent were punished (validating Thucydides' maxim, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must"). Occupiers made vivid the loss of homes by many impoverished citizens. They subverted the logic of capitalism (if you don't keep up payments on your mortgage, you lose your home) with a different logic: we don't live in banks, but we rely on banks to help us acquire a place to live. When the bank takes our home, we must turn to it to provide shelter directly. This message bore an implicit Polanyian anticommodity logic. In the normal case, a bank helps a family find shelter by lending the family money that it can then pay to buy a home. The occupiers symbolically short-circuited that process by eliminating the cash transaction. Instead of using the bank's money to acquire shelter, they demanded that the bank actually provide shelter outside of the housing market.

Superheroes. Carnavalesque protest often appropriates well-known cultural items. Superheroes—Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman—are the folk heroes of our age, always ready to combat the forces of evil, and always wearing a costume and a cape. On Halloween, 2011, demonstrators staged a Superhero March on Wall Street. People dressed as superheroes representing various effects of the financial crisis: Unemployed Man, fighting for the rights of the unemployed, the underemployed, and the creatively self-employed; Wonder Mother, who is like Wonder Woman, except that she has to fight villains with a baby strapped to her chest; Master of Degrees, whose power is that he is super-overeducated for any jobs available—shackled by debt, he carries around a giant ball and chain; Fantasma, the first undocumented immigrant superhero—her power is that she is invisible to those who hire her; and several others (fig. 5).

Figure 5. Superheroes' March on Wall Street. Screenshot from video accompanying the article "Occupy Halloween: The Occupy Super Heroes Fight Evil on Wall Street," by Deanna Gillen, October 31, 2011, Mic.com. <https://www.mic.com/articles/2227/occupy-halloween-the-occupy-super-heroes-fight-evil-on-wall-street>

28. Voice of Art, "Tax Dodgers, Pt. 1," YouTube video, July 27, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEyV-IRDuVU>; Nicole Martinelli, "Unemployed Man Is the Unofficial Superhero of Occupy Wall Street," Wired.com, October 31, 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/10/unemployed-man-occupy/>.

29. The superhero Batman was also alluded to by the projection of a "Bat Signal" bearing Occupy slogans on a New York high-rise building during a march; Hammond, "Relations of Media Production," 909.

After a rally in Zuccotti Park, they marched to the New York Stock Exchange for a showdown of Superheroes against Wall Street. Wall Street was heavily guarded, as it was throughout the occupation, but since they looked not like demonstrators but like people in Halloween costume, they were let through the barricades and spoke out in front of the stock exchange building.²⁸

The superhero theme has a contradictory resonance. Looking for magic resolution of our problems is appealing, but we know it is a fantasy. These superheroes, whose roles are derived from conditions of poverty and exploitation, represent in caricature what a movement hopes to accomplish in fact: to turn oppression into a source of strength by mobilizing the victims against it. So while the idea of the superhero is recognized as a joking fantasy, it bears a deeper truth.²⁹

Occupy West Side Story. Adapting another element of common culture, a small group of occupiers dubbed parody lyrics of two songs into clips from the film *West Side Story*. Even though the film is fifty years old, it is well known; its story of young people who are considered juvenile delinquents and subject to police harassment is readily adaptable to OW's themes of inversion and transgression.

30. "Occupy West Side Story - Officer Winski," YouTube video, April 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wGZR-JG4ZJE>; "Occupy West Side Story - Debt Song," YouTube video, April 19, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WZ2Hla2cPs>.

31. Lauri Apple, "Hey, Occupy Wall Street: Dressing Up Like Zombies Is Dumb," Gawker.com, October 3, 2011, <http://gawker.com/5846013/hey-occupy-wall-street-dressing-up-like-zombies-is-dumb>; Harry Lee, "Occupy Wall Street International Day of Action: Students from across the City Rally at Union Square, NYULocal," November, 18, 2011, <https://nyulocal.com/occupy-wall-street-international-day-of-action-students-from-across-the-city-rally-at-union-square-426096f0023b>; Revolutionary Games, "Bed-in, Asks Who are You in Bed With." OWS - Revolutionary Games Newsletter, January 19, 2012, YouTube video, February 12, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TW6x2dvALo>.

32. Michael Reay, "Humor," in *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), Blackwell Reference Online, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosh064>; Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception," *Man*, New Series, 3 (1968): 373; Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 126–8. Cf. Tad Friend, "What's So Funny?" *The New Yorker*, November 11, 2002; John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N.

Officer Krupke became Officer Winski, a real-life NYPD officer and nemesis of the occupiers:

Gee, Officer Winski, the laws are unjust.
You can't arrest us all, soon there'll be no one to bust.
The charges are trumped up, they'll all be dismissed.
That's why the people are so pissed.

The Jet Song became the Debt Song: "When you're in debt you're in debt all the way / from your first student loan to the mortgage you pay." The two song parodies transform Stephen Sondheim's original lyrics to refer to two of the main targets of Occupy's protest.³⁰

These are only a few examples of the many carnivalesque performances staged by groups in the name of Occupy Wall Street, for the festive spirit in the service of subversion was pervasive throughout Occupy. On "Corporate Zombie Day" (October 3, 2011), demonstrators marched on Wall Street in whiteface and ghoulishly altered business suits to mock the "corporate zombies" (appropriating an already existing anticorporate trope) in the high-rise office buildings. On November 17, 2011, students at New York University "castrated" a paper-mâché bull named Wally, symbolizing Wall Street; they invoked "a glamorous phrase for what [the one percent] do: creative destruction. We can do that better than they can." Revolutionary Play, or RevGames, a subgroup of Occupy, promoted glitter-bombing of political candidates and staged "bed-ins," carrying mattresses to public places and lying down to provoke discussion of the question, "Who Are You in Bed With?" The Tax Dodgers, a fully uniformed baseball team whose members represented the corporations that had avoided paying any taxes in recent years, played against teams representing the 99 Percent and always won because, according to one of them, "We suck at baseball, but it doesn't matter because we pay the ump."³¹

These performances, produced in the name of the Occupy movement, were actually put on by small groups who took it upon themselves to stage a show to present a message, make an impression on some public, and provide fun for the participants. In a sense all of Occupy operated this way, adhering to the DIY principle. Individuals or small groups were free to Do It Themselves in the name of Occupy Wall Street, affirming again their autonomy from any imposed leadership.

In a Bakhtinian inversion, these performances expose the discrepancy between the claims of authority to benevolent legitimacy and the truth of oligarchical domination. This inversion provokes laughter. According to the incongruity theory of humor, "Events are potentially amusing if they upset taken-for-granted interpretations of a situation or utterance and highlight other valid but contradictory interpretations." For Mary Douglas, "[a] joke consists in challenging a dominant structure and belittling it.... [The joker's] jokes expose the inadequacy of realist structurings of experience and so release the pent-up power of the imagination." Murray Edelman, drawing on Bakhtin, argues that art and humor can serve as an antidote to official political discourse; art can liberate by elevating popular conceptions over official mystifications.³²

In each of OWS's performances, what Bakhtin calls the "prevailing truth"—people must pay their debts to the bank, the laws are just, police officers are your friends, and they enforce the laws fairly—is unmasked.³³ All these interventions enact the essence of Bakhtin's carnival: the "truth" propounded by authority figures is exposed and the authority thereby overturned, if only

Zalta, Spring 2013 edition, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/humor/>.

33. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10. The superheroes and the signs carried in demonstrations unmask multiple truths. Their explication is left as an exercise for the reader.

34. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

35. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 94.

36. James M. Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* 13, no. 3 (September, 1998): 413, 418.

37. Bogad, "Carnivals against Capital," 542–3; Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 84; Cristina Flesher Fominaya, "The Role of Humour in the Process of Collective Identity Formation in Autonomous Social Movement Groups in Contemporary Madrid," *International Review of Social History*, 52 (2007): 245–6; Shepard, Bogad, and Duncombe, "Performing vs. the Insurmountable," 2; Smith, "Whose Streets?" 164.

38. Eduardo Romanos, "The Strategic Use of Humor in the Spanish Indignados/15M Movement," in *Crisis and Social Mobilization in Contemporary Spain: The 15M Movement*, ed. Benjamín Tejerina and Ignacia Perugorria (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

39. Bruner, "Carnavalesque Protest," 139; cf. Bogad, "Carnivals against Capital," 542.

momentarily. These enactments are a weapon of the weak, asserting their claim against the strong who dominate them. In James Scott's analysis, they can at least on occasion move the weak to challenge their superiors more overtly.³⁴

If these intentional interventions represent an inversion, what about the communal carnival, the occupation itself? Its festivity, its laughter, also derived from giving the lie to several prevailing truths: the sanctity of property, invaded by occupiers; the omnipotence of the financial system, shaken by a handful of challengers and requiring the full strength of militarized forces to protect it; capitalist rationality, exploded by communal sharing of goods and labor. The fact of the occupation was a testament to the power of the imagination and the capacity of people to act together against hegemonic restraints.

The Audiences of Carnival

Carnavalesque activities may be directed at several audiences: sometimes at movement participants, sometimes at spectators (including the media), and sometimes at authorities, notably the police. In their variety, they may have both communal and intentional aspects.

For participants. For Bakhtin, the main function of carnival is release from inhibitions: in laughing, people free themselves from psychological and social constraints, and overcome fear: "Laughter liberates not only from the external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor."³⁵ To laugh at an oppressor is an optimistic assertion that one can defy the oppressor's power. To challenge the status quo, a movement must break the hold of the rules so that people will embrace the alternative order that offers them a better life.

Outrageous, flamboyant actions can erase the lines separating politics, art, and everyday life. The visual, auditory, and dramatic elements of carnival appeal to people seeking to integrate their political activity with their personal lives and creative processes. These processes have an emotional as well as a rational element. They can strengthen a social movement's mobilizing capacity. People may participate out of an emotional reaction to injustice, and participation can itself engender emotional involvement with the cause of a protest.³⁶ Having fun together can be an incentive for people to participate. It can create a social cement and contribute to the building of community.³⁷ It can also be a welcome change from the solemnity of conventional political protest and draw more people in.

Overarching all of these functions, collective laughter provides tension release. Eduardo Romanos shows that humor can relieve the internal tensions that arise in a movement in the heat of political arguments.³⁸ It can also soften the tension of living in a world in which contradictions are laid bare but not resolved: playful interaction offers some relief to people who feel that the only possible response is to laugh at rulers' destructive or negligent behavior.

For spectators. Humor unmask the claim of the powerful to power, and of authorities to knowledge. It exposes them to ridicule and rebuts their pretensions of superiority. It challenges hegemonic discourse and produces "creative disrespect."³⁹ As Bakhtin argues, laughter makes everyone equal, but paradoxically elevates the lowly above their superiors. A message conveyed humorously, moreover, can appeal to people who are turned off by preaching and denunciation

40. Bleuenn Lechaux, "Non-Preaching Activism in New York: The Theatrical Militancy of Billionaires for Bush and Reverend Billy," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 23, no. 2 (2010): 176.

41. Voice of Art, "Tax Dodgers, Pt. 1."

42. Marjolein 't Hart, "Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction," *International Review of Social History*, 52 (2007): 17; cf. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 291; Dieter Rucht, "The Quadruple 'A': Media Strategies of Protest Movements since the 1960's," in *Cyberprotest*, ed. Wim Van De Donk, Brian D. Loader, Paul G. Nixon, and Dieter Rucht (New York: Routledge, 2004).

43. Bruner, "Carnavalesque Protest," 144; Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 127; Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, 255.

44. Knuckey et al., *Suppressing Protest*; Moynihan, "Officials Cast Wide Net"; *New York Times*, "Government Surveillance of the Occupy Protests," May 23, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/05/23/us/23occupy-docs.html>.

45. Richard Feloni, "The Mainstreaming of Occupy Wall Street: How Rethinking American Capitalism Became the Most Important Debate of the 2010s," *Business Insider*, December 4, 2019, <https://markets.businessinsider.com/>

but respond to what Bleuenn Lechaux calls "non-preaching activism," playful and ironic messages instead of guilt-tripping and fear.⁴⁰

A comedic message may evoke a response based on recognizable elements of the culture. According to Gan Golan, guiding spirit of the Superhero march and the Tax Dodgers, "That stuff really works because it was fun, entertaining. Rather than depress people with these realities, we realized that trying to elevate their spirits through humor actually allowed them to engage the issue [and] have the conversation that we wanted to have about what was causing all these problems."⁴¹ Some performances appeal to members of the public to become participants.

Both the content and the style of a performance may differ depending on the primary target. Though the line between participants and spectators is not always clear, I suggest that when the target is already-mobilized participants, a performance can be more extreme both in dissent from officially prevailing views and in the exercise of a flamboyant, disruptive style. Most activists will be happy to challenge the "prevailing truth of the established order" in both style and content. A performance directed at uninitiated bystanders may have to be more restrained to be effective.

This difference creates a challenge for protest movements that aim to attract the attention of the media. It is not easy to win their coverage. Media rarely pay attention to the conventional forms of protest. They are more likely to report events that shock or surprise. But appealing to the media with novelty presents the danger that newsgatherers will seek out the bizarre and curious and emphasize the deviant aspects of movement activity. Indeed, spectacular, disruptive performances are often the easiest way to offer "good copy" and get media attention, but the coverage may well ignore the issues that the protesters want to call attention to. It may even produce hostility rather than sympathy.⁴²

The forces of repression. Carnavalesque protest can also deflect repression. It is less easily repressed than more ordinary forms of protest in part because it is cloaked in innocence, in part because it parodies obedience (like Otpor's sheep), and even more to the point, because police departments simply do not know how to respond to situations for which they do not have a standard operating procedure in place. M. Lane Bruner observes that authorities may prove "nearly helpless in the face of ... carnivalesque absurdities," which can deflect their attention, at least temporarily, while they decide whether to come down hard. In his "third rule" for radicals, Saul Alinsky counseled, "Wherever possible, go outside the experience of the enemy." According to David Graeber, "the most effective method of dealing with police is always to do something they have not been trained to respond to."⁴³

If carnivalesque protest is especially effective under the conditions of totalitarianism, what about Western liberal democracies? While the level of repression of political activity in general is not comparable, police repression of public protest has escalated significantly at least since September 11, 2001 (in contrast to the more tolerant style of protest policing of previous years). Wall Street occupiers pushed back hard against police surveillance and repression, and the police responded not only with brutal tactics but with a program coordinated nationwide to demolish the occupations and eviscerate the protest.⁴⁴

[news/stocks/how-2010s-established-a-path-to-better-capitalism-in-us-2019-12-1028738839](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/10/us/economy/occupy-wall-street-2010s.html);

Steve Kornacki, "The One Indisputable Triumph of Occupy Wall Street," *Salon*, November 12, 2011, https://www.salon.com/2011/11/11/the_one_indisputable_triumph_of_occupy_wall_street/; Linette Lopez, "How Occupy Wall Street Won In One Chart," *Business Insider*, January 16, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/how-occupy-wall-street-won-in-one-chart-2014-1>; Jesse Myerson, "Occupy Didn't Just 'Change the Conversation.' It Laid the Foundation for a New Era of Radical Protest: Measuring Occupy Wall Street's Impact, 5 Years Later," *In These Times*, September 17, 2016, <http://inthesetimes.com/features/occupy-legacy-five-year-anniversary-mayday.html>; Emily Stewart, "We Are (Still) the 99 Percent: Occupy Wall Street Was Seen as a Failure when It Ended in 2011. But It's Helped Transform the American Left," *Vox.com*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-high-light/2019/4/23/18284303/occupy-wall-street-bernie-sanders-dsa-socialism>.

46. Rachel Abrams, "States' Minimum Wages Rise, Helping Millions of Workers," *New York Times*, December 31, 2014. Lydia DePillis, "The Volcker Rule Cites the Occupy Movement 284 Times," *Washingtonpost.com*, December 11, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/12/11/the-volcker-rule-cites-the-occupy-movement-284-times/>; Jonathan Smucker, "Occupy the White House: The Bernie Sanders campaign is the next phase of a movement that started eight

Did the carnival performances and the carnival atmosphere in Occupy achieve any political gains? Occupy may appear to have failed because banks were not nationalized and taxes were not raised on the super-rich. But that is an impossibly high standard. The movement did provoke discussion of inequality in the United States after 2011. It focused attention on the unjust distribution of income and the power of the banks, which had long been facts of life but all too easily ignored. Discourse shifted from the period before to after the occupation, as revealed by a Lexis Nexis search of the *New York Times*: the term "inequality" appeared in 30 articles in July, 2011, and rose to 108 in January, 2012, giving the issue probably more attention than it had received during three decades of skyrocketing inequality. Journalists unhesitatingly credit this growing attention to economic inequality in the United States to the Occupy movement, at least one calling it the movement's "one indisputable triumph." News articles, some as recent as 2019, have continued to credit Occupy for the change in political discourse.⁴⁵

Real political gains have followed: the election of progressive candidates Elizabeth Warren as senator from Massachusetts in 2012 and the new members of Congress in 2018 on platforms denouncing inequality; intervention by Occupy the SEC, an offshoot of OWS, in the regulatory process set in place by the Dodd-Frank Act; and strikes by minimum wage workers in fast food and retail sales, which won raises in individual companies and legislation increasing the minimum wage in many states and cities. Bernie Sanders's presidential campaigns, fueled by many veterans of Occupy as volunteers, highlighted economic inequality and his denunciation of the "one percent." By 2020, nearly all the candidates in the Democratic presidential primary followed.⁴⁶ While it is difficult to establish a direct effect, it seems reasonable to conclude that Occupy at least played a part.

Objections to Carnival

The political use of carnival has been challenged. Some critics argue that far from channeling discontent into political change, it co-opts protesters' energy by allowing a discontented population to let off steam so that their protest loses its force. Others see it as frivolous and say that it demeans the seriousness of a cause.

The first criticism holds that carnival raises no serious opposition to the dominant forces in society. On the contrary, it functions as a safety valve with no lasting effect. Anthropologists have investigated inversion rituals, notably in Africa, and concluded that they fall far short of being revolutionary, even though they involve the denigration of established authorities. For Max Gluckman, rites of reversal "are intended to preserve and strengthen the established order." Similarly, according to Terry Eagleton, "Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off." Secular and religious authorities only tolerated the medieval carnival, in this view, because they believed it presented no serious threat. Revelers' mocking of authority figures merely reaffirmed their authority and thereby reinforced the status quo.⁴⁷

But it is incorrect to say that contemporary carnivalesque protests are tolerated; they have been repressed. As already noted, Occupy Wall Street and its offshoots in other cities were infiltrated, systematically harassed, and violently evicted. Authorities apparently took them quite seriously.

years ago in Zuccotti Park," *The Nation*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/occupy-sanders/>; Astra Taylor, "Occupy Wall Street's Legacy Runs Deeper Than You Think," *Teen Vogue*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/occupy-wall-street-legacy>.

47. Max Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 109; Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), 148; Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 13. Cf. Andrew Robinson, "Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power," *Ceasefire Magazine*, September 9, 2011; Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995).

48. Ashley Frawley, "Questioning the Carnavalesque: Is Feudal Ritual Really a Convincing Model for Contemporary Revolution?" *Culture Wars*, January 7, 2010, http://www.culturewars.org/uk/index.php/site/article/questioning_the_carnavalesque/ (site discontinued).

49. Apple, "Hey, Occupy Wall Street;" Sarahana, "Slavoj Žižek speaks at Occupy Wall Street: Transcript," *The Parallax* (blog), Impose, n.d., 2011, <https://imposemagazine.com/bytes/slavoj-zizek-at-occupy-wall-street-transcript>; Barney Frank, *A Life in Politics from the Great Society to Same-sex Marriage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 156.

50. Bogad, "Carnivals against Capital;" Duncombe, *Dream*;

Another criticism of carnivalesque protest finds it ineffective for a different reason: that it undercuts the serious purpose of political protest. These performances are usually put on by groups loosely associated with larger political movements that pursue the same goals without the taint of frivolity. To those in the broader movements, carnival antics may seem like a sideshow, demeaning and counterproductive. For example, Ashley Frawley expresses disdain for what she calls "ritualised displays" that claim to be revolutionary:

Many of the valuable elements revealed in contemporary protest movements—the creativity of direct action tactics, the sheer mass of people who care enough to leave their houses, the value and necessity inherent in opposition itself—are ultimately diffused and dispersed through aimless activity that can name no common enemy and thus claim no common goals except to share in collective discontent.⁴⁸

Some pointed to this danger of diffusion and dispersion in Occupy Wall Street. After Corporate Zombie Day, a commentator on Gawker.com mocked the protesters in an article headlined, "Hey Occupy Wall Street: Dressing up Like Zombies Is Dumb." In a talk at Zuccotti Park, while clearly identifying with the occupation, Slavoj Žižek nevertheless warned the occupiers, "Don't fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap." Former congressman Barney Frank offered a similar condemnation of the intrusion of a spirit of fun into politics (though not addressing OWS): "If you care deeply about an issue, and are engaged in group activity on its behalf that is fun and inspiring and heightens your sense of solidarity with others, you are almost certainly not doing your cause any good."⁴⁹

But for advocates, fun, inspiration, and solidarity are precisely the point. When the immediate target of carnivalesque protest is not only oppressive authority but its own progenitor, conventional political protest, it subverts not only the fear and oppression imposed by authorities but the dreariness of a humor-challenged Left. It draws strength from its rejection of the somber and humdrum political repertoire of marches and demonstrations. Robert Stam argues that the attitude of much of the Left stems from a "refusal of pleasure" by a "puritanical Marxism;" for Benjamin Shepard and his colleagues, it reflects an overemphasis on human rationality, ignoring the nonrational motives that often guide behavior—"the joy of protest is often why people get involved."⁵⁰ The tension between believers in carnival and those who find it unduly frivolous arose in Occupy Wall Street. It was not dominant, however. A lighthearted spirit prevailed in general, and while some wanted to concentrate on serious politics, most participants also joined in the fun.

A Utopian Coda

In Occupy Wall Street, communal carnival was practiced in the occupation and also gave rise to specific performances that simultaneously expressed the solidarity of the group and addressed outside publics with a message intended to be persuasive. The carnival that was the occupation was a zone of fun, inspiration, and solidarity (inverting, once again, Barney Frank's triad). During two months, it allowed the participants to conceive of being part of a different world—"a freedom from corporate fundamentalism [enabled] a freedom to experiment with alternatives."⁵¹ The carnival was punctuated by intentional acts of protest, but the performances cannot be separated from the life experience. They occurred within a total community, a second life; the performances in turn informed the life.

Flesher Fominaya, "The Role of Humour," Haugerud, *No Billionaire Left Behind*; Robert Stam, "Mikhail Bakhtin and Left Cultural Critique," in *Postmodernism and its Discontents*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1988), 142; Shepard et al., "Performing vs. the Insurmountable," 5.

51. St John, "Protestival," 182.

52. Benjamin Franks, "The Direct Action Ethic: From 59 Upwards," *Anarchist Studies* 11, no. 1 (2003): 13–41; Benjamin Franks, "Postanarchism and Meta-ethics," *Anarchist Studies* 16, no. 2 (2008): 135–53; David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009), 210; Hammond, "The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street."

53. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 315.

54. Ibid.

55. Craig Brandist, "Gramsci, Bakhtin and the Semiotics of Hegemony," *New Left Review*, 216 (1996): 94–109; Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

56. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 154–67.

57. Michael Gardiner, "Bakhtin's Carnival: Utopia as Critique," *Utopian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1992): 40.

58. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 89. Cf. Gardiner, "Bakhtin's Carnival," 39–40; Robinson, "Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital," Stam, "Mikhail Bakhtin and Left Cultural Critique," 134.

59. Gardiner, "Bakhtin's Carnival: Utopia as Critique," 40.

This mutuality was consistent with the prevailing DIY ethos of Occupy. Its anarchism included the principle that the means used to achieve any end must be consistent with that end; means and ends are inseparable.⁵² Carnival as a calculated political act and carnival as a way of life shared by all in the occupation were integrally related. For Bakhtin, carnival did not pursue any end. He saw it as self-contained: people escaped from the confines of everyday life, found unalienated participation, and envisioned the possibility of an alternative life. Yet it was an affirmative, democratic experience. Its integrity was also due to the truth it proclaimed, contradicting the prevailing truth that is shown on exposure to be false and a mystification.

Bakhtin's analysis of carnival is closely related to his theory of language. Carnavalesque protest is multivocal (or in Bakhtin's term, heteroglossic⁵³): it speaks in multiple voices, not necessarily in agreement with each other. This analysis reveals Bakhtin's democratic spirit. In his theory, language was like carnival itself: he rejected the prevailing structuralist analysis derived from Ferdinand de Saussure that studied language's formal structure, the monoglossic, authoritative language. Instead he analyzed actual utterances, the spontaneous outpourings of the popular classes that refused to be bound by formal rules. In those heteroglossic outpourings, everyone speaks at once, cacophonously. Each voice represents the speaker's particular point of view, and all of them are equally legitimate and entitled to a hearing.⁵⁴ In their utterances as in their carnival revelry they reject hegemonic culture.⁵⁵ Bakhtin found in Rabelais's language the popular language of the marketplace; in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* Rabelais introduced its vocabulary into the literature of high culture, thus validating the voice of the people.⁵⁶ Democratic, popular speech and democratic, popular participation are both opposed to the hegemony of rulers, and monoglossic dogma yields to cognitive liberation. Carnival frees the revelers from restraints both in society and in thought, a process necessary to achieve "a truly egalitarian, radical democratic community."⁵⁷

Bakhtin saw the life of carnival as utopian: "Life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom."⁵⁸ In this utopianism carnival reveals a truth normally obscured by official or hegemonic doctrines, and affirms and points to the possibility of a life emancipated from oppressive, stultifying conformity. Bakhtin maintained the utopian dimension—the faith in the liberating potential of popular cultural forms, even during darkest Stalinist repression.⁵⁹ Carnival allows us to laugh, and, as Bakhtin teaches us, laughter liberates.

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