

RECENSIONI

Angelique HAUGERUD | *No Billionaire Left Behind. Satirical Activism in America*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 278.

In the growing realm of ethnographic literature on social movements and activism, Haugerud's engaging monograph of the innovative satirical network of "Billionaires" deserves special attention. The "Billionaires" are a group of innovative street actors and lay performers who addresses the issue of rocketing inequality in North-America, a «new gilded age», in the words of Haugerud. Based on nearly a decade-long participant observation, interviews and archival research, the volume traces the emergence and the internal dynamics of activists who came to public attention mostly during US-election under various names, including "Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)", after the banking crisis started in 2008, "Billionaires for Bailouts and Lobbyists for McCain" or, during the US healthcare debates, "Billionaires for Wealthcare". The title of the book itself, *No Billionaire Left Behind* takes up one of the satirical slogans employed by activists, a slogan that plays with the important "No Child Left Behind" – act of the US government that intended to promote an inclusive educational policy. The Billionaires are a network of overwhelmingly middle-class citizen, including graphic designers, architects, teachers, academics who appear in public under subtle pseudonyms such as Merchand F. Arms, Noah Countability, Iona Bigga Yacht or Alan Greenspend. Incorporating classical stereotypes of billionaires, woman and men of the network dress up in elegant gowns and black suits in order to unite in public spaces, lifting, for instance, glasses of apple juice that represents champagne. In some occasions, for example in front of Wall Street or at electoral events, members of the group wave banners stating slogans such as «Taxes are Not for Everyone», «It's a Class War and We are Winning» or «Still Loyal to Big Oil».

Dressing up as billionaires is not an end in itself. Dressing up, staging and having fun during improvised street performances is not part of the departure from "serious" politics that characterizes many forms of contemporary activism. On the contrary. The bold satirical messages of this activist network echoes with first and foremost the often overlooked tendency of a re-establishment of a plutocracy based on a minority of ultra-rich who influence mainstream politics. As Haugeruds reports in her well-documented introduction, in 2007, the top one percent of income earners controlled 40% of the total wealth, the highest level of inequality that the US have historically experienced.



And the gulf between these ultra-rich elite who closely influences mainstream politics, and the rest, is widening. These numbers indicate a mostly silent process who replaces democratic and meritocratic practices by a re-emerging plutocracy and «gilded age». The nation-wide public performances of the “Billionaires” expose the contradiction of tremendous wealth inequality and basic civic values: they expose that the king is naked, or, in more precise terms, that democracy has already been replaced by plutocracy. «This is play as subversion, in the spirit of the court jester or wise fool who can speak safely what others dare not utter» Haugerud explains eloquently (Haugerud 2013: 5).

The first chapter outlines the path of the emergence of the network since 1999, dating back to similar forms of protest as spectacle. The second chapter explains the context in which the billionaires operate, providing an extraordinary clear account about the contemporary neoliberal myth about wealth inequality as a natural phenomenon, objectified through several ideological features. The subsequent chapter sheds light on the emergence of the network, drawing largely oral history interviews. This part compellingly provides accounts of the sense of experimental sense of their early founders. The final chapter offers a spirited reflection on the value of humor as a tool of political engagement and contrasts the “Billionaires” with the Occupy movements, by which it was eventually overtaken.

The book has several unique merits. Importantly, Haugerud shows that the “Billionaires” are not ordinary political activists. They are performers; they are innovators. The billionaires campaigns of hilarious street theater break with established forms of political mobilization. The conventional mobilization composed of rally, speech and demonstration is based on the image of the “angry liberal” activist. The billionaires do not shout nor occupy; they convey their subversive message through gently talk, irony and gestures. Haugerud shows why the billionaires deserve analytical attention of social movement scholars. Their gentle performances reinvent conventional protest, subverting existing stereotypes. Through these innovative forms of protest the network has been able to focus on an often overlooked key tendency of contemporary US society.

In Haugerud’s ethnography, the emergence of the network is followed in a classical ethnographic style “from the inside”, that is through the voices of its founders and protagonists themselves. In many ethnographic accounts of activism, the sympathetic engagement with the subjects of the study itself as well as the limits to a “community” – style approach, often implies analytical limits that overlook broader dynamics of the context. Often more interesting are accounts that follow connections or contextualize the values and objectives of the movement studies, analyzing broader cultural shifts, as proponents of the “New Social Movements” paradigm have done. Not so the volume of Haugerud. Her hilarious account tells a story of how innovative forms of mobilization can effectively subvert language and produce unexpected outcomes and thus do not need to follow connections. Her interest seems to be to provide an analysis of the cultural politics of parody and image marketing, of the efficacy of satire and “gentle” subversion.

This strength implies also a downside. The choice to portray the network “from the inside” resonates with classical “community studies”, entailing the same limits that this approach has had in other realms of ethnography. The ethnographic episodes give the impression that references to the broader context remain overlooked or minimal. For example, we learn little about the “ordinary” life of the activists, of their relation to the outside world. From her angle of interpretation, the author did not follow many connections around the network, such as those towards former or “disillusioned” activists. In her study, the “Billionaires” network remains is systematically to the Occupy movement, but we learn little about their relations to similar forms of mobilization, such as the so-called “clown’s army” during anti G8-demonstrations. In addition, the relation between activism and inequality seems to be taken for granted, as an almost “natural” expression of concern. In the realm of social movement studies, this assumption has been often overcome by different paradigm, such as the “Resource Mobilization Paradigm” whose scholars have shifted attention to the ability of activists to mobilize economic, political and cultural resources. Could it be possible that the ability of the key protagonists to mobilize new resources, combining art and politics in a new fashion, has contributed more to the emergence of the network than raising inequality did? Or, in the realm of “new movement” studies who have shifted attention to the broader cultural dynamics of activism, including the function of activism as a mean to recast subjectivity and collective identities. What are the broader socio-political implications of this new form of mobilization?

Also with these open questions, it must be underlined that Haugerud’s account addresses the most pressing contemporary concerns: the question of compatibility of extreme inequality with democracy and social justice. This book unearths innovative and experimental forms of mobilization that address these questions and which remain often overlooked by less ethnographic approaches to social movements caught in pre-set interpretative categories of activism. Finally, through its sympathetic and sensitive eye, Haugerud offers a convincing example of how ethnography can illuminate struggles for social justice.

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