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Undercover Protester

by Heather Wilhelm | Feb 14, 2005 | [6 comments](#)

I have a confession to make. I am a capitalist pig, and so are most of my friends.

We don't spend our weekends shouting slogans in the streets. We don't rappel down billboards or flash police officers. And we don't make scenes in Wal-Mart or Starbucks unless we're really, really late for a meeting and the guy behind the counter is painfully slow and *where is my freaking latte already? This isn't rocket science, people!*

We are lackeys of The Man, and when we're not locked up in our cubicles, trading memos, we indulge in politically inconsequential activities like shopping or going to the movies. Which is so not-where-the-action-is.

The action is, of course, on The Street, with The People, fighting for The Cause. Protesting, in case you haven't noticed, has become the nation's new hobby. Despite attempts to more closely regulate the marching and the carrying on, protesting is flourishing as the numbers of protesters and causes grow amid war, globalization, and elections. Protesting seems to be the wave of the future. Call it democracy les plus ultra.

If this is true, however, there must be a sociology of protest. There has to be a logic behind it all--an explanation that could penetrate the brain of the most jaded yuppie.

To find out--that is, to get at what drives the modern protester--I searched for people in the know. People who hit the streets. People who talk about revolution. People who regularly discuss which brand of adult diaper is best to use when chaining oneself to a tree or a metal grate for an extended period of time.

For such big talkers, however, protesters tend to clam up when a stranger calls, especially a stranger who calls and wants to talk about revolution. It took me a few days of unreturned calls and fruitless e-mails to figure out how serious a problem this could be.

So, like the best of revolutionaries, I changed tactics. It was time to go underground. To find the true soul of the protest movement, I was going to have to crash some meetings. I would have to become a willing participant.

Vote, Damit

I arrive at my first protester meeting in disguise, in undercover mode. In my case, this consists of wearing some peacock feather earrings from the hotbed of revolution known as Urban Outfitters. Undercover mode also involves parking far enough away from places like the Soka Gakkai International Buddhist Center so that my "W 04" bumper sticker won't give me away.

I channel a serious, wounded expression, and I march inside the meeting hall. I am ready for a first encounter with my quarry: the planning meeting for the

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Brainwash

AFF's online magazine

New articles every week at www.affbrainwash.com. Here's a sampling:

Budding Bolsheviks by Kelly Jane Torrance

Over one third of high school students believe the First Amendment goes "too



And here I find them--my first protesters. First there are Janell and Fred, both gentle-looking, older souls. Then there is Rob, middle aged, slightly smelly, and sporting a torn, dirty t-shirt. There is a young, cute gay couple, one of whom wears a "Vote, Dammit" t-shirt that looks like it, too, came from Urban Outfitters. Orlando, an earnest young man who carries a copy of "Masters of War: Latin America and U.S. Aggression," sits next to them. Jeremy, a skinny teenager with streaky, disheveled hair, exhibits more than a hint of hostility. And Grant, who I soon learn is the group's big-wig, sports a long grey ponytail and John Lennon wire-rims.

And then there's me. I'm the one sticking out like a sore thumb.

I introduce myself to Fred and ask if I can sit in on his meeting. Fred looks pleased as punch, but Jeremy scowls. "It's not *his* meeting," he says to no one in particular. "It's *everybody's* organization." He plops into a chair. "I brought nuts," he mumbles, "if anybody wants them." Orlando thanks him, and Jeremy laughs. "Don't thank me--I didn't pay for them."

The meeting proceeds as follows:

6:38 pm: Fred asks the guy with the "Vote, Dammit" t-shirt to "chair" the meeting. Jeremy bristles at this mention of hierarchy. Appropriately enough, Jeremy decides to protest. A discussion of equitable leadership terminology ensues. Finally, the term "temporary chair" is approved. "It's fine, I guess," Jeremy says. "As long as he doesn't wear a crown."

6:55: Grant, in utter disgust, announces that another group of Chicago activists, rather than going to New York City to protest the Convention, are staging a "Unity" rally in the local Federal Plaza. The group proceeds to scoff, roll their eyes, and make fun of their rivals' pamphlet because it is printed in red, white and blue.

6:57: Jeremy expresses his desire to "cause a ruckus, either in Chicago or New York. . .I don't care!" Someone mentions that Jeremy should try to enlist some of his anarchist friends from Midwest Unrest. At this, someone else mentions the fact that the "walls have ears." Rob passes out posters, which contain an interesting mixture of naughty words, pictures of the American president eating the world, and derisive references to the "ruling class."

6:59: I learn that Janell is a Unitarian and that she has a daughter named Liberty.

7:00: I am still stunned at this discovery, because it is not stereotypical at all. At *all*.

7:05: Rob is studying my notes with a suspicious eye. I attempt to write in code.

7:16: It's time to plan a press conference. For what, no one seems sure, but the idea of a press conference sounds good. Scheduling chaos ensues. Wednesday, I am told, is the apparently very important Revolution Screening, so that day is out. Friday is Critical Mass, which, I soon learn, is a bunch of bike riders going through red lights and blocking city traffic to claim their right to "public space." The End the Death Penalty Fundraiser blocks out another day. We eventually settle on Tuesday.

7:30: Suddenly, I notice that a woman across the table is staring at me. "You

far" in the rights it secures. But why should they care about freedom, when nobody else does?

Problems with the property tax
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by Bradley J. Vasoli

Tom Wolfe's latest may be reactionary and hyperbolic--but it's still a great read.

know, I think that you three," she points at the gay couple, and--*oh, no*--me, "You three should stand up at the press conference! You could really get us the right image. It's sort of the 'hip factor' thing, you know? The media loves it!" I silently curse my peacock earrings. Somehow, miraculously, the subject is dropped.

8:00 pm: I ask Grant and Janell for their press release. I also ask for their e-mail addresses, which they reluctantly write on my reporter's notebook.

Janell gives me a penetrating look. "Thanks for coming."

Neither she nor Grant will e-mail me back in the weeks to come.

We All Struggle

"You know what I want to learn about protesters?" It's Saturday, my dad is on the phone, and he's getting fired up about the lefties again. "These people who are supposedly the 'voice of America'--don't they have jobs? What are they doing to make money? What are they contributing to society?"

It's a pretty good question, so I start posing it to full-time protesters.

"How," I ask, "do you manage to pay the bills?"

"How do I make money? I'd rather not say," says the guy who works the register for free at the local Revolution Bookstore.

"I don't see why that's important," says the man wearing a George Bush mask and juggling six globes on the corner of State Street.

"I'd rather not get into that," says Aron Kay, the famous "Mad Yippie Pie Thrower." Kay, who speaks to me via cell phone from a New York City Kinko's, has been perfecting a signature protest move since the sixties: tossing pies in the faces of notables like William F. Buckley. "Everybody knows somebody," he says, deliberately, "who needs a pie. I work at *that*." He pauses. "Have you ever been to a Rainbow Family Gathering?"

"We all struggle," says Wendy Tremayne, an artist/activist who is best-known, perhaps, for organizing 30 naked women to spell out "No Bush" in Central Park on a very, very cold day. "People who make a full time commitment, including myself, really struggle day to day to get by any number of odd ways. I teach yoga, and I occasionally do public relations work. . .It's really like juggling."

Tremayne, charming and cheerful, tells me about her latest project, "The Vomitorium." A protest against American empire and consumerism, the Vomitorium involved a staged Roman-style glutton-fest--complete with live vomiting--on the steps of St. Mark's in New York City. "The people for my projects," Tremayne says, "aren't the usual suspects: the artists, the full-time activists. I always recruit from the general public, because I think the general public really wants to be an artist, and, secondly, they really need self-expression."

Self-expression is exploding all over, and it has never been more sophisticated. A prime example is Bill Talen. Known as The Reverend Billy, Talen runs the Church of Stop Shopping in New York City, complete with a slick website, a press office, and a makeshift choir that follows him through Wal-Marts and Starbucks across the nation, "exorcising" cash registers from the demons of consumerism. Billionaires for Bush, another protest group, travels across the

country in limos, holding courtly dances. The Ruckus Society, based in Oakland, California, trains leftist protest groups to rappel down billboards, chain themselves to trees, and disrupt organized events.

Protesting, for many, has become a full-time job. In an odd way, it has become its own industry.

"It's all very entertaining," Tremayne says to me over the phone. "Oh, and by the way," she continues, "I'm currently offering a film screening in my home, open to all. It's a twelve-hour lecture by Bob Avakian."

Who, I ask, is Bob Avakian?

"He's the Revolutionary Communist party leader," she says. I pause. "Oh, it's not a pitch on communism at all," Tremayne insists. "It's just--he opens up so much to talk about."

"However," she laughs, "If you have something to lose, it's harder to accept The Revolution."

Soccer Moms Unite

"We're definitely seeing a new wave of mass protest movements," says Ronald Hayduk, a political science professor at the City University of New York and sometime deacon for "stop shopping" activist/cash register exorcist Reverend Billy Talen. "People can see that capitalism is a global system, and it pits everyone against each other. I once heard someone say that if the assets of the richest 5 percent were redistributed, people could work 20 hours a week. Who wouldn't want that kind of program and kind of life?"

He laughs. "Well, I guess the richest 5 percent wouldn't."

After a week of interviews, Communists seem to be crawling out of the walls. Socialists, I find, are a dime a dozen. Everywhere I go, I'm handed a copy of *The Worker*--and no one, it seems, can get enough of Mao.

"The idea behind the protests," a young Communist named Kirov tells me, "is to get a million people into the streets. It's to eventually replace the system, not any particular candidate. It's so much more important than voting."

Kfir Alfia, after living through the 2003 San Francisco protests, decided to quit his job and take on the commies full-time. Kfir is one of two founders of Protest Warrior, a conservative counter-protest organization with a website, a nationwide network, almost 8,000 members, and slogans like "Communism only killed 100 million people--let's give it another chance!"

"The Iraq war," Kfir says, "really brought out the differences between right and left in this country. A lot of the groups that organize these protests--including International A.N.S.W.E.R., which is a front group for the World Workers party--have completely socialist agendas."

"Some protesters just want to have a good time and say they were at a protest," he says, "and others are outright socialists. But the majority of protesters, I think, don't give much thought to the actual things that they're saying. They end up being stooges for the organizers that many times have other agendas."

"You know, it's weird," he says. "You go out there and there are these soccer moms protesting. And they seem totally normal--except for the fact that they

have these radical political views."

The next afternoon, I head to a Chicago peace rally in search of normal, non-communist, protesting soccer moms. It's actually much harder than it sounds.

"The media is completely whitening us out," Margaret Kemp says to me. "I mean, they'll probably say there were only about 200 people here today!"

I look around, noting aloud that there are only about 200 people here today.

She stares at me. "See!?!"

Felix, tall and lanky, tells me that the CIA is everywhere. *Everywhere*. "You know that the government was involved in blowing up the World Trade Center, don't you? Jet fuel burns at 3,000 degrees. Steel burns at 4,000 degrees." He looks around. "Do the math, sister."

After walking ten feet into the protest, my pamphlet collection includes six copies of *The Worker*; "Bring Back the Eight Hour Day"; "No Gods, No Masters"; and, finally, a three-page handout entitled "REFUSE TO PAY TAXES--DEATH TO ISRAEL." This last little gem was handed to me by a skinny old man who looks like he's about to fall over. A woman wearing a Howard Dean button scowls when she sees him. "Don't give us any of your anti-Semitic *crap*, Jeffrey." He nods, grins, and totters away.

Eventually, I hit the soccer mom jackpot: Matt and Becky Kirsch, a couple from suburban Chicago, who have three cute kids and a rainbow flag. Becky tells me about health care and presidential lies. Matt tells me how "wrong" the president is. Matt, I notice, is holding a "Death to Israel" handout.

"Does it make you uncomfortable," I ask, "to be working with people who are clearly anti-Semitic?"

Matt looks a bit taken aback, but recovers. "No, I don't feel uncomfortable about it, because the most important thing is to get this man out of office," he says. "He's offended everybody. For everybody to unite to get him out of office is great. After he's out, we can sort out who's going to get what and how we're going to go forward."

He grins, embarrassed. "By the way, I didn't pick flier up--it was given to me."

I half expect him to crumple it up or put it in his pocket, but he doesn't.

A few days later, I attend my final protest. It's a rainy Saturday in Grant Park, and I've dragged my husband Phillip along. We're here, en masse, to see the Chicago protesters off to New York City. It's Republican Convention time.

I approach the first group of protesters I see. They're teenagers, two with dyed bright orange hair, and three with nose rings. When I ask what they hope to accomplish in New York City, one giggles. The other slinks away. The third just stares.

"Maybe," Phillip says, "this is like playing golf for them."

It's an impressive turnout, and we weave through a strange mix of 200 Manhattan-bound protesters: punks, conspiracy theorists, aging hippies, and nice young couples in Chicago Cubs hats who tell me that George W. Bush is an absolutist crusader with a bizarre black and white worldview.

Across the lawn, I see a familiar long gray ponytail and John Lennon wire rims. "Hi!" I say brightly. "Do you remember me?" Grant, the big-wig from my first protester meeting, nods and lights a cigarette. Then he walks away.

Across the sidewalk, I talk to Justin Fleming, conservative activist, who has come with the Chicago chapter of Protest Warrior. "Unfortunately," Justin says, "the person with all the answers here is a guy named Grant." He points across the lawn and I see Grant, still smoking.

When I mention that Grant doesn't want to talk to me, Justin nods. "I'm not surprised. He's a member of the Revolutionary Workers Party." He rolls his eyes. "It's a Maoist group, believe it or not. In the past week, I've received harassing phone calls from several members of the social justice organizations. They don't want us out here."

It strikes me, in an odd way, as a political version of team sports.

Carrying On

Joseph Scheidler stands on the side of Chicago's busiest street, holding a massive picture of an aborted fetus. A woman pulls over, sticking her blonde head out the window. "You're sick!" She screams. "Sick! Sick! Sick!"

Scheidler smiles and waves. "I'd rather get a reaction than have people just drive by," he says. "And I agree--the sign is sick. That's why I'm out here. People need to see it."

Scheidler, founder of the Pro-Life Action League, has been protesting for 30 years for one single issue. This makes him an anomaly in today's protest world, where multiple-issue protests are the order of the day.

Today's protest organization doesn't die. It simply adapts and grows.

"There's no doubt the protest movement will continue beyond the current issues," says Dan Rosen, 26. Rosen has marched against the Iraq war in San Francisco and New York, against the IMF and World Bank in Washington, D.C., and even marched in this year's March for Women's Lives.

"Of course the protest movement will continue," Tremayne agrees. "It's about a whole capitalist system that needs to be revised."

"When all is said and done," Kfir Alfia of Protest Warrior tells me, "We really want our organization to carry on."

The Mad Yippie Pie Thrower offers a more blunt analysis. "Look, the movement ain't going to stop," he says. "If it's not Iraq, it will be something else."

Protesting in the new millennium--an age of self-obsession, of a media that covers the media, and reality TV--is, appropriately, all about protesting. In a remarkably succinct measure of the zeitgeist, the means have become the ends.

But protesting is also about ideology.

"You have to have a philosophy that is human-centered and focused on making people's lives better," Dan Rosen tells me.

"Leftist protesters, I think, have a subjective view of morality. That's their ideology," Kfir says. "In the end, they are terrified of making any kind of absolute moral judgment."

"My ideology?" Wendy Tremayne asks. "Well. . .you know, I sort of look to art. Especially Hieronymous Bosch. I love his depiction of the Garden of Earthly Delights. You know, he's inviting us to see that the world in perfect form might not look angelic. It's dark and it's light, and it's without duality in a way. So, in the end, that's how I perceive things."

I'm about to tell her that I interpret the painting differently--that Bosch was depicting the utter depravity of the world--when she pauses and laughs. "So, yeah, I'm sorry. . . I don't know if I've answered your question. Did I say anything about ideology just then?" I pause. Then I tell her that she answered my question perfectly.

Heather Wilhelm is a writer in Chicago.

Comments

Loved it..Thank you..Am thinking who to forward it to..What do you think?

Posted by: [Ruth Bosch](#) at February 16, 2005 08:13 PM

Thanks, made me feel like I was there. I laughed a lot, and learned a little. I am sending this out to alot of other "moms who think" (and my husband and my dad).

Jenette.

Posted by: [Jenette](#) at February 17, 2005 02:46 PM

Hi,

I'm from Chicago's Protest Warriors. I was also at the protest "Farwell to Anarchy" a few days before the RNC. I accidentally stumbled upon your article and found it to be excellent.

Thanks,
-Marcin

Posted by: [Marcin](#) at February 22, 2005 05:27 PM

Thanks for the article. Very thorough and draws the line clearly between left and right tactics and ideologies. Thanks for the efforts!

Jenn
PWChicago Chapter Leader

Posted by: [Jenn](#) at February 22, 2005 05:49 PM

Your article reminds me of trying to explain to others what to expect from the protesters. Very well done, and very honest.

It does become kind of a sport to protest the protesters! Very well done!

Wes
PW Chicago Chapter

Posted by: [Wes](#) at February 22, 2005 07:49 PM

You're welcome any time with Chicago PW :)

-Neverborn

Posted by: **Nev** at February 23, 2005 01:18 AM

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