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WHAT'S WRONG WITH SLACTIVISM? CONFRONTING THE NEOLIBERAL ASSAULT ON MILLENNIALS

By now most are familiar with the demonization of millennials as *slactivists*. The term, a portmanteau of slacker and activism, typically refers to “actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement.”¹ One of the interesting features of these attacks is that they are two-pronged: they come from both Bill O'Reilly-influenced Baby Boomers, who think of this generation as lazy, stupid, and dangerous; and they come from progressives who fail to appreciate the role of social media in contemporary activism, and who miss the ways that this generation wants to make politics pleasurable. This essay unpacks these two tendencies to denigrate the activism of this generation and argues that, taken together, these attacks on millennial activism demonstrate the pernicious role of neoliberalism in shaping political activity today.

Despite the constant attacks on the millennial generation it turns out that they demonstrate extraordinary political promise: they vote at a higher percentage of their demographic than any of the preceding generations, and they do more community service. What's more, as a cohort, they have absolutely no patience for the conservative, fundamentalist attacks on the rights of women, immigrants, people of color, and the LGBT community. Even more salient is that this is the generation that returned to the streets in protest in a revised version of traditional forms of activism, as evidenced by Occupy Wall Street (OWS).

OWS offers yet more proof of the attacks on millennials and the misunderstanding of the role of social media in fostering social change, since the movement was repeatedly considered a failure; and yet, the fact that almost every voting age citizen is familiar with the phrase “the 99%” certainly suggests a profound success in spreading their message. An interesting feature of these attacks on millennial activism is the need to constantly measure whether the activism made a difference. One might argue that that tendency is a sign of neoliberal values that require political action to be measured in quantifiable terms rather than in more holistic ways. In other words, the data-driven analysis of these movements seems to reinforce neoliberal ways of thinking.

Thus the second section of this essay describes key features of this new version of activism: its prevalence on social media, its combination of silliness and seriousness, and its almost ubiquitous satirical tone. Following the work of Stephen Duncombe, I argue that millennials are redefining citizenship and political action by refusing to allow politics to be dry and heavy. I refer to this activism as “satiractivism”—since it almost always combines political activism with satirical

commentary. What is noteworthy about this new form of activism, though, is that it offers wholly new avenues for political agency as millennials create memes, gifs, and tweets that can have significant political impact. I hope to show that much of the critique of millennial activism is itself a form of political repression. It is also a form of generational warfare—where the “elders” are the ones who really know what true political action looks like while the youth are considered clueless and naïve. If academics are to take seriously their possibilities as political agents, then they need to learn more from the existing activism of their students.

Millennial Bashing and Neoliberal Ideology

Let’s start with why millennials are the generation everyone loves to hate. Is there a more badmouthed group of people today than millennials? Everywhere millennials turn, they are told that they’re lazy, entitled, narcissistic, and clueless. They have even been called “the lamest generation.”² Pundits like Bill O’Reilly call them “stoned slackers”³ who watch *The Daily Show* because they don’t have the attention span for “real” news. But it isn’t just the Right that thinks that millennials are a wasted generation of entitled losers; millennials are slammed by those on the Left too. What’s interesting is that the critiques that come from progressives tend to focus on the ways that millennials don’t live up to their ideals and expectations of true political engagement. Think about it, the only folks that even care about testing the political authenticity of millennials are those who think they have a better grasp of what “real” political action means. It is worth asking why progressives need a litmus test for authentic political action. Why wouldn’t they focus on those that do absolutely nothing instead?

For instance, Micah White, a senior editor at Adbusters and an award-winning activist, went after a specific form of slactivism—clictivism—in a piece on the negative effects of MoveOn.org for *The Guardian*. White doesn’t specifically equate millennials with clictivists—but the connection is fairly common. In fact, even though Laura Bradley claims that “people don’t hate millennials: they hate 21st century technology”⁴ – we all know that there is a pretty clear public perception that millennials are the generation most influenced by new technology. In the end, though, most critics of slactivism merge disgust for the way millennials interact with the world with distaste for the technology that they use to do it.

As White puts it:

A battle is raging for the soul of activism. It is a struggle between digital activists, who have adopted the logic of the marketplace, and those organisers who vehemently oppose the marketisation of social change. At stake is the possibility of an emancipatory revolution in our lifetimes.⁵

White begins his story by tracing the emergence of one of the most significant forms of online activism today—the launch of MoveOn.org. MoveOn.org was started by Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who sold a software company for \$13.8 million back in 1997. Frustrated with the Washington politics they witnessed during the meltdown of government during the Clinton impeachment mess, they launched an online petition to “Censure President Clinton and Move On to Pressing Issues Facing the Nation.” Within days they had reached hundreds of thousands of individuals. They created a new movement for social organizing that used marketing, computer programming, and a savvy understanding of social media. But for White, “The trouble is that this model of activism uncritically embraces the ideology of marketing. It accepts that the tactics of advertising and market research used to sell

toilet paper can also build social movements. [...] Gone is faith in the power of ideas, or the poetry of deeds, to enact social change.”⁶

There are two flaws to this line of thinking: first, it assumes that being savvy about marketing means you don’t have “faith in the power of ideas.” Now, those on the left cringe at the use of a word like marketing: it is the language of capital, after all. But it is important to pause here for a moment and recognize the current landscape in which politics takes place. Thus, the second problem is that those who imagine a political movement against capital imagine a space of protest outside of it. But those days are long gone. Neoliberal capitalism has eradicated the possibility of pristine spaces of resistance outside of the market. The question we have to ask is whether any real political change can happen without marshaling the force of the market? How many of us have sat around thinking about the right slogan to put on a sign to carry in a march? And how is that desire to reach someone—to market to them—so different from what is happening online today? The problem isn’t marketing; the problem is *what* is being marketed and *how* it is being marketed. From the moment that printing presses were first used to distribute political pamphlets, leftist politics have seized on technological innovation to distribute ideas.

Another flaw in the attack on slactivists/clictivists is the assumption that hitting “like” on Facebook is the endpoint of social engagement, but we have ample evidence that that is patently untrue.⁷ Not only has social media made social organizing for those that have been marginalized possible in ways never before imagined, but it also consistently leads to other more traditional forms of on-the-ground organizing and action.

From examples like the Arab Spring to the Berkeley student protests over Ferguson, social media offers protesters an opportunity to share information and communicate with their peers.⁸ Sure, some activists do nothing more than man their smartphones, tablets, and laptops, but in many cases they are helping to coordinate meeting spots, alert protesters to police blockades, and help keep the public eye on the events. Today the Internet is an essential part of political mobilization. Do we really think political action would be better today without the existence of MoveOn.org? Do we really think we can raise public awareness of major political issues without using Twitter? It may not be enough, and it may not be perfect, but there seems little doubt that it has had an impact and that without it the message and the struggle will go nowhere. As “slactivist” defender Kathleen Nebitt puts it:

Social media is reinventing social activism. The traditional relationship between popular will and political authority is being rethought, and it is now easier than ever for the powerless to collaborate and give voice to their issues. Simply put, slacktivism is a form of organizing that favors weak-ties over the strong-tie connections. Social media is a way for people to organize and connect loosely around shared interests.⁹

Nebitt reminds us that one of the reasons that the activism of millennials is so constantly denigrated is because older generations have trouble recognizing that change is not necessarily negative. Because social networking as it exists today was not possible in the 60s and 70s, some critics of millennials fail to recognize the various ways that these forms of activity lead to meaningful political action, but as a 2013 Pew Research Center study of “Civic Engagement in the Digital Age” shows, folks on social networking services are *more* politically engaged than

those who aren't on those services.¹⁰ They report that, while the national average for citizens to attend a political meeting or work with fellow citizens to solve a problem in their community is 48%, those on social networking sites (SNS) do these activities at a rate of 63%. They further add that 53% of political SNS users have expressed their opinion about a political or social issue through offline, traditional channels—e.g., sending a letter to a government official, or signing a paper petition, but the national average for these activities is 39%.¹¹ As the Millennial Action Project reports, there are further studies that confirm these results, including one conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics that showed survey participants, especially millennials, who were actively engaged on social networking sites had higher levels of political engagement and stronger partisan identity.¹² They argue that, “Slacktivism—as a form of digital citizenship—is a stepping stone for deeper and stronger ties to political involvement and participation. These Harvard and Pew Research Center studies reveal a legitimate connection between political participation and social media.”¹³

Political engagement on social networking sites

60% of American adults use social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter; these are some of the civic behaviors they have taken part in on these sites:

	% of SNS users who have done this	% of all adults who have done this
“Like” or promote material related to political/social issues that others have posted	38%	23%
Encourage other people to vote	35	21
Post your own thoughts/comments on political or social issues	34	20
Repost content related to political/social issues	33	19
Encourage others to take action on political/social issues that are important to you	31	19
Post links to political stories or articles for others to read	28	17
Belong to a group that is involved in political/social issues, or working to advance a cause	21	12
Follow elected officials, candidates for office or other public figures	20	12
Total who said yes to any of the activities listed above	66%	39%

Table 1 Political engagement on social networking sites (Smith 2013)

Now, we can agree that not all clicktivism is of significant political value, and we can be sure that some slactivists have been suckers for hoaxes. They have maybe felt too morally pleased about their Facebook likes and hashtag use. Perhaps all they do is click and they don't do more. But any scholar of activism will tell you that the degree of real political involvement and impact has always varied. Not everyone who shows up at a rally is there for the greater good; but not everyone who doesn't show doesn't care. So the point is that, sure, some slactivism is stupid,

but the constant assault on this generation's primary form of political involvement is a far deeper problem—one that, I argue, has a far greater chance of creating disillusion and distance from politics than any social media stupidity ever could. It is time to take seriously the possibility that the constant denigration of millennial political action may blowback into apathy and disinterest.

One of the reasons this is so is because millennials are not the naïve, self-involved idiots most critics make them out to be. Again, I find it noteworthy that both the Left and the Right agree in the ways that they condemn the character of this generation. What this suggests is that this is more about generational bashing than political bashing.

Older generations have always demonized the young. Generational theorists William Strauss and Neil Howe remind us that “At the outset of World War II, army psychiatrists complained that their GI recruits had been ‘over-mothered’ in the years before the war.” According to generation scholar Russell Dalton, a main feature of millennial bashing is linked to the fact that millennials have a very different idea of citizenship from Baby Boomers and their elders. He keys into the idea that the younger generation is constantly blamed for all that is wrong in our nation:

A host of political analysts now bemoan what is wrong with America and its citizens. Too few of us are voting, we are disconnected from our fellow citizens and lacking in social capital, we are losing our national identity, we are losing faith in our government, and the nation is in social disarray. The lack of good citizenship is the phrase you hear most often to explain these disturbing trends. What you also hear is that the young are the primary source of this decline. Authors from Robert Putnam to former television news anchor Tom Brokaw extol the civic values and engagement of the older, “greatest generation” with great hyperbole. [...] Perhaps not since Aristotle held that “political science is not a proper study for the young” have youth been so roundly denounced by their elders.¹⁴

Dalton charges, though, that one of the key features of millennials and generation Xers is a redefined notion of citizenship: one that is not characterized by duty, hierarchy, and respect for authority as it was for generations like the boomers. He explains that the younger generations of Xers and Ys hold a model of “engaged citizenship”: “Engaged citizenship emphasizes a more assertive role for the citizen and a broader definition of the elements of citizenship to include social concerns and the welfare of others.”¹⁵ One of the key distinctions that Dalton points out is that understanding this new idea of citizenship requires recognition that civic involvement itself is changing: “Engaged citizenship has a broader view of social responsibility than the old norms of citizen duty.”¹⁶ So millennials may not vote, but they volunteer. They may care as much about global issues as those in their own city. When polled, we find that millennials score higher on “habits of the heart” like signing up to be an organ donor, giving blood, and donating to charity than their elder counterparts (see Dalton Figure 9.1). One key difference is that they may not obey laws that they think are unjust, foolish, or biased; and while they have inherited the basic skepticism of Generation Xers, millennials tend to distrust authority but have much higher hope for change and a much greater belief in their ability to have a positive social impact.¹⁷

They've also inherited a mess of a nation and a complex, conflict-driven globe. They're constantly under attack, especially millennials of color, who are even more susceptible to the extreme policing tactics in our schools and are way more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers.

If they make it to college, as tuition rises, they are buried under a mountain of student debt.¹⁸ They are also working their way through school in record numbers with four out of five¹⁹ college students holding jobs while in classes. And when they do get meaningful jobs, they toil away at unpaid internships²⁰ that will never become full-time job offers.

But all of this won't keep even the most progressive-minded professor from denigrating the millennial generation in the ubiquitous end-of-semester Facebook rant about lazy, entitled students. Rare is it for a professor to remember that the student might be scrambling to get work done because they also worked a job all term or spent hours at the financial aid office trying to figure out how to pay their tuition bills. And let's not even talk about the generational moralizing that suggests that it is only this young generation that drinks too much, parties too hard, and stays up indulging in hedonistic practices too late.

As if millennials were not bashed enough while they were in college, when they graduate they are not likely to get a job. Despite recent news that the job market is improving, millennials are still suffering disproportionately in this economy. In fact, new studies find that 40% of unemployed workers are millennials. But that doesn't stop the ongoing urge to millennial bash. Again and again, anecdotes of entitled, spoiled, moody, "me, me, me generation" millennials dominate the media. But it's worse than that, since most of the anecdotes really only refer to a highly select segment of millennials. For instance, anecdotes about helicopter parents do not apply to the vast majority of the millennial demographic, which also includes first generation college students, students of single parent homes, students of color, and students from lower income families. It is a characterization of childhood coddling that completely ignores contemporary challenges young people face due to social pressures related to race, socioeconomics, and existing parental support.

So how is it that all of the anti-millennial hype ignores the reality of this demographic? The millennial generation is 43% non-white and has to deal with all of the social pressures associated with racial tension. Approximately 25% of millennials were raised by single parents (today it is about 33%). Additionally, about 66% of single moms work outside the home.²¹ Single working mothers do not have time to do their children's homework for them, much less harangue their teachers for better grades. Based on these facts it's odd to claim with any credibility that this is a generation of spoiled, entitled kids.

Despite all this, we still have an onslaught of negative press about this generation. The hype doesn't match the numbers.²² The attacks are not based on reality. Even though there is a range of conflicting research on the degree of social involvement and civic engagement of this generation, there still is significant research to show that this is a generation that is indeed involved in politics and that has, without a doubt, extraordinary political potential.

And yet, as Henry Giroux points out, the hope of this generation is all too often squashed by the difficult realities in which they live. Writing in relation to violent student protest, he explains: "Suffering under huge debts, a jobs crisis, state violence, a growing surveillance state, and the prospect that they would inherit a standard of living far below that enjoyed by their parents, many young people have exhibited a rage that seems to deepen their resignation, despair, and withdrawal from the political arena."²³ As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, "the plight of being outcast may stretch to embrace a whole generation."²⁴ There now seems conclusive evidence that the millennial generation will suffer the hardships of neoliberalism at a rate that far exceeds that of older generations.

But it gets worse. Millennials don't just suffer from the economic realities of neoliberalism; they also suffer from its inherent pedagogy. As Giroux explains, neoliberalism brings with it a whole way of life, one that abandons a notion of the public good and replaces commitment to life with a commitment to the market.²⁵ One demographic highly vulnerable to these attacks is the young. But Giroux warns that we have to be wary of the inherent need of neoliberal ideology to demonize all youth as either criminals or idiots. In *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability* Giroux explains that, as the market demands the erosion of the social state, youth become subject to a whole host of punitive measures "governing them through a logic of punishment, surveillance, and control."²⁶ Giroux explains that this process is so effective because it is bolstered by a culture that is not just complicit with this narrative but actually supportive of it. He explains that educators are among the most important sources of potential pushback, and that they too rarely recognize that they have a crucial role to play in the social demonization of youth. As he puts it: "there are too few commentaries about how the media, schools, and other educational sites in the culture provide the ideas, values, and ideologies that legitimate the conditions that enable young people to become either commodified, criminalized, or made disposable."²⁷

Giroux points out that the social inequities that disproportionately impact the lives of young people have always been a part of US society; what is new now, though, he claims, is the fact that these inequities do not spark even the slightest degree of compassion or concern. Youth are not seen as at risk, as in need of protection, support, nourishment, guidance, and encouragement: "they are the risk."²⁸ What if the attack on slactivists has to be read in light of the neoliberal attack on youth? What if the need to denigrate millennial activism is a product of a neoliberal mindset that can't imagine the young as anything more than slackers or threats? Giroux explains the fact that the young are either coded as dangerous or stupid is revealing of a need to describe them in ways that make controlling them essential. It also creates a world where society owes them nothing. Their problems are not a public crisis; they are the consequence of being lazy, coddled, thugs.

But here is where the real twist happens; Giroux explains that the neoliberal depoliticization of political problems has made it virtually impossible to imagine a way to address social struggles via the public sphere. But, of course, reclaiming the public sphere is exactly what is required if we are to organize in ways that have the ability to advance any sort of real political change. The problem, though, is how to define the public sphere in the social network era when the sort of meaningful connections assumed necessary for politics look radically different than previous eras.

Thus at the heart of the slactivist attack on millennials is the definition of the public sphere and of how that space for politics connects with the private, with markets, and with the lack of face-to-face contact. We can understand how the Right mindset is all-too-quick to privatize the problems of millennials. They, after all, are fully in favor of the private replacing the public. But the Left has failed to grasp the political crisis of millennials because they have failed to notice that for most millennials the public and the private no longer operate as discrete spaces of existence. Giroux argues that "[...] for many young people and adults today, the private sphere has become the only space in which to imagine any sense of hope, pleasure, or possibility."²⁹ But what if the most significant place for political mobilization is now both private and public? It is that one angry tweet sent out late at night that leads to thousands in the streets the next day.

What if Twitter has replaced the coffee shop? What if Twitter is even better than the public rec center because it allows the “community” of those who care to not be bound by geography?

Taken together, we are now able to see how a range of issues has combined to create the context for demonizing millennial political action. Technological change and generational bias are just the surface. The deeper issue is the degree to which those who criticize millennials have themselves internalized the idea that the young are not able to be meaningful political actors. Such prejudice has limited our ability to consider the ways that the social media market is both of and against capital, usually simultaneously. It has held us to our own naïve contrasts between the public and the private. Even more disturbing, it has convinced us that the market truly is everywhere, so much so that when our own students are marshaling it for change we can’t celebrate their successes and join in. Instead, we look for what’s wrong with their strategies and what’s missing in their hearts.

Millennial Politics and the Rise of Satiractivism

Combatting such a highly negative position is at the center of media scholar and activist Stephen Duncombe’s work in *Dream: Reimagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. What Duncombe explains is that political engagement is activated through “people’s fantasies and desires through a language of images and associations.”³⁰ He insists that “truth and power belong to those that tell the better stories.”³¹ The problem, though, is that the Left has been lousy at inspiring vision since it has been so dominated by negative critique, reluctant to offer utopic vision, and overtaken by over-theorized worries about “the real.” Meanwhile another set of fantasies has been on offer by the Right. But Duncombe finds in youth activism a wholly different tactic—one that offers great hope for effective political action.

Duncombe works on the idea of an “ethical spectacle” and urges a return to the sort of passionate engagement that fires up citizens to fight for causes in which they believe. According to Duncombe, the ethical spectacle can challenge the contemporary era of spectacle-heavy politics. Delving directly into the world of social media and the sensational nature of news, Duncombe’s strategy makes political information both informative as well as fun, and takes away from the circus of distracting politics that is full of lies and misinformation. He explains, “For spectacle to be ethical it must not only reveal itself as what it is but also have as its foundation something real.”³²

Also, the spectacle must be pleasurable. Liesbet van Zoonen explains in *Entertaining the Citizen* that entertainment is a central part of politics today, but it is not equally useful for encouraging productive democratic participation. She points out that those activists who shun pleasurable politics are nostalgic for an era of politics long gone.³³ She proves that the presence and relevance of entertainment in politics has only intensified over time—and that the consequence is greater engagement in politics by the population. We know, for instance, that 85% of millennials report that keeping up with the news is important to them, that 86% consume diverse viewpoints on news, and that 45% follow five or more “hard news” topics. But, unlike older generations, they do this while on social media and not while reading a print newspaper: “This generation tends not to consume news in discrete sessions or by going directly to news providers. Instead, news and information are woven into an often continuous but mindful way that Millennials connect to the world generally, which mixes news with social connection, problem solving, social action, and entertainment.”³⁴ The key, then, is mobilizing entertainment, pleasure, and excitement for political projects that are progressive and not reactionary.

Crucial to this, as I argue with my co-author Remy Maisel in *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?*, is the role of political satire like that of *The Colbert Report* and Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*.³⁵ "One of the key ways that satire is exercising influence over the public sphere is in its direct participation in the reconstruction of what it means to be politically active. Satire, whether in the form of Colbert's satire TV or the Yes Men's satire activism, is increasingly attracting citizens to find ways to develop and act on political ideas while enjoying themselves."³⁶ Central to understanding this political development is breaking down the distinction between fans and political participants. Van Zoonen argues that "fan groups are structurally equivalent to political constituencies," in which fandom is linked to political citizenship through "affective identification."³⁷ In one great example, Colbert encouraged fans to use the hashtag #NotIntendedToBeAFactualStatement to go after claims by Arizona Senator Jon Kyl that lies he had spoken about Planned Parenthood were "not intended to be factual statements." The first night that Colbert announced the plan, there were more than 1 million tweets per hour using the hashtag. Most of them were savvy examples of political irony. Colbert called out the Senator for lying, but then he asked fans to use Twitter to shame him with irony. His fans jumped on board, and they were so good at it that Colbert read some of their tweets on his show the next day. To some, that sort of activity might seem like nothing more than slactivism, but I argue that engaged use of social media to ironically mock a gasbag with political power is, indeed, a significant political act.

There are, of course, many examples of times when satirists have asked their audience to go beyond their digital worlds and get involved in more traditional ways. Think, for instance, of the way that Colbert encouraged his fans to open their own Colbert-inspired super PACs. Surveying a range of interviews with college students that opened ironic super PACs, Maisel and I noted that all of them found that the experience had educated them on campaign finance: they had not only enjoyed themselves while doing it; they had also built meaningful alliances that allowed them to use political action and irony to raise public awareness of a significant political issue.³⁸ By the time of the 2012 election, Colbert-inspired super PACs were 2.5% of all those registered. That seems like more than just a stupid slactivist joke.

But, as we argue in the introduction to our book, political satire today is not just dominated by satirical interventions instigated by professionals. In fact, citizen-satire is a crucial form of political participation today. For example, during the 2013 government shutdown, average citizens took to social media to express their frustration, disgust, and outrage. The shutdown led to a series of viral memes, hashtags, and other forms of social-activist media that allowed US citizens to express their frustration over the shutdown while using satire, sarcasm, and irony. Hashtags like #Govtshutdownpickuplines and #NoBudgetNoPants blended the satirical with the cynical. Twitter was not the only venue for citizen-satire activism; users engaged with Tumblr, BuzzFeed, Upworthy and a host of other Internet venues to share their outrage and create a community of dissent. Of course, much of this satirical social media was created by older citizens—but it would be fair to say that millennials played a major role.

In one example, millennial Matt Binder created the Tumblr page "Public Shaming" where he retweeted hypocritical tweets from users that showed their position on the shutdown as idiotic. As he explains, "I discovered that as I would retweet these, my followers would start @replying these people and let them know they were idiots. They would then delete their offending tweet. Well, I couldn't let that happen. So, I screenshot away."³⁹ Binder went on to repost tweets calling for Obama's assassination, indicating "p.s. The Secret Service is not

furloughed” and that the tweeters should all be expecting a knock on their door soon. Binder, who says he does “comedy, politics, tech+ web stuff” has 11,000 followers on Twitter, and his Tumblr page on the assassination tweets was liked by over 1,000 users. Binder shows us how social critique of politics by citizens is able to reach more of us than ever before; his mix of comedy, techie skills, and social critique is a sign of a new generation that blends citizen engagement with entertaining comedy; and yet, some would just dismiss him as a useless slactivist.

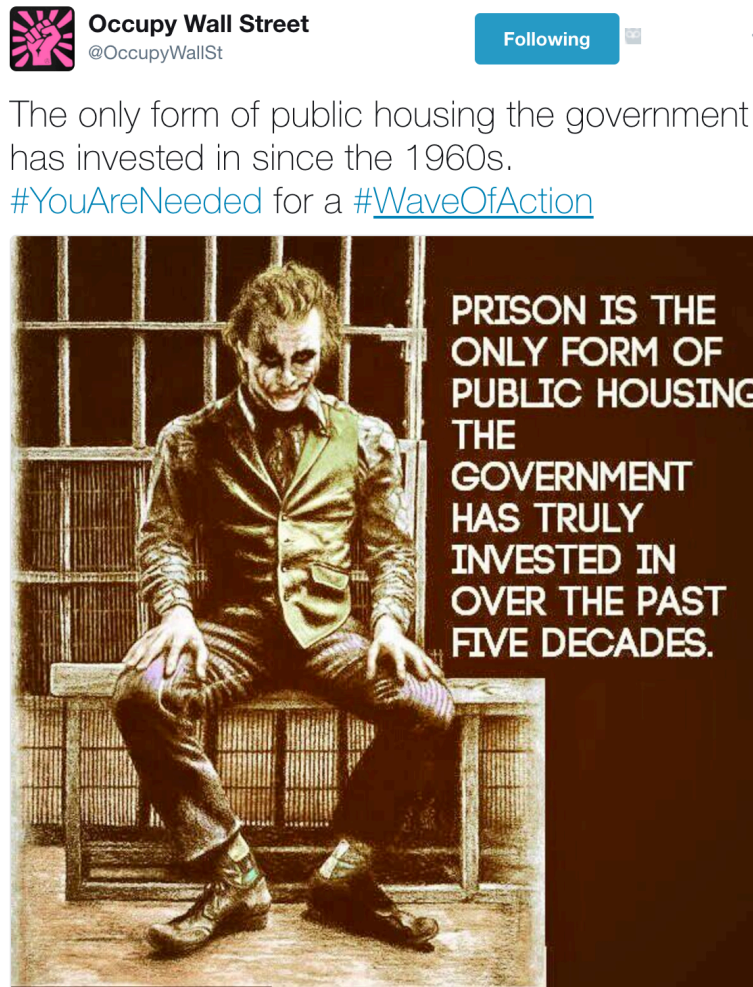


Figure 1. Occupy Wall Street Twitter and irony to spread its message (41)

It is time to imagine what would happen if we offered a positive spin on this new activism. One that recognizes both the power of social media as a key feature of contemporary activism as well as the central role that satire now plays in activism today. As Angelique Haugerud explains in her study of the public satirical activism of the group Billionaires for Bush, this new version of activism is just as politically motivated as ever: “A moral vision of a more just future, not a romanticized vision of the past, inspires progressive ironic activism.”⁴⁰ Today’s activism is increasingly tied to satire as a fundamental part of the way that it reaches a broad audience and inspires progressive political action: my co-author and I call it *satiractivism*.

If we think of the major millennial-related political actions from student debt protests to OWS to #BlackLivesMatter, we can note a series of common features.

Many of the most well-known millennial-related political actions have used social media to advance the visibility of their cause. They have made participation in political action pleasurable and they have also often used irony, satire, and snark. Duncombe points out that one of the reasons why satire, spectacle, and political action are so closely tied for millennials is because satire combines passion with politics. Rather than shy away from the irrational, this new Left politics remembers that any fight for the future must include a heavy dose of dreaming and desire. Satirists like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert brought their audiences together by creating a shared community that “got” the joke and cared about the reality behind the joke. As Duncombe explains, this new vision for Left politics does not contrast the real with spectacle; it understands that spectacle can play a central role in amplifying the real.⁴² In this way, satirists and other Left public intellectuals can work together to create what he calls “ethical spectacles” that contrast the unethical charades that characterize so much of the information circulating in the public sphere.⁴³

But some naysayers, when they aren’t misunderstanding the political potential of social media, will then say that snark and satire simply lead to cynicism and apathy. Those criticisms miss the point. Both digital activism and citizen-satire offer users a wholly redefined sense of political agency. They require connection and engagement and critical thinking. One could easily argue that anyone that claims that millennials are depoliticized, selfish dolts simply hasn’t been paying attention. Sure, some users will just click “like” and then look at a picture of a cute cat, but research proves that most do much more than that.

The political sphere today is dominated by sensationalized media, by incessant marketing, and by a severe breakdown in the distinction between the public and the private. The public narratives of political crises are intense battlegrounds framed all-too-often by the reactionary spin of Fox News rhetoric. Out of this mess we have before us a generation that has not been given the chance to be naïve about politics, the economy, or race relations. Millennials are one of the most skeptical generations in history.⁴⁴ They question government, media, and that spam email about bleach in Red Bull their aunt sent them. Because they consume so much information, they have a much higher bullshit meter than earlier generations as well. But, as I explained above, this generation is also quite optimistic. They are hesitant to trust, but have high hopes for their future.⁴⁵

This all means that millennials are poised to be the best generation of political actors we have ever seen. I firmly believe that any chance those of us from older generations have to advance progressive politics will come from building meaningful alliances with millennial activists—ones that allow them to be our peers rather than our protégés. In order to fully explore the potential for such connections, the co-authored book mentioned above was written with a Penn State undergraduate majoring in media studies. When I pitched the project to her, I did so with the idea that we would each bring valuable insights, skills, and experiences. When I met her she was launching her own Colbert-inspired Super PAC and we teamed up to write a few blogs together. I knew once we started to work together that she had a sharp mind, a fiery political sensibility, a penchant for sarcasm, and a deep understanding of the political possibilities among her generation. As we worked on our project, she taught me as much as I taught her.

The book made Penn State history as the first-ever academic monograph written by a faculty member and an undergraduate. It's worth pausing to wonder how and why that could be true. It's even more urgent that we think about why such collaboration is rare if not non-existent. Is it possible that, despite our outspoken commitment to political change, we are actually more conservative than we want to believe? Is it possible that despite our progressive defense of student rights, we don't actually want to recognize their right to be meaningful political actors? Sure, writing an academic book on politics and satire may not be the sort of political act that you would define as meaningful. But, as I've argued in this piece, old-school rallies and sit-ins are not enough to effect political change today. There are clearly a range of ways we can team up with our millennial students—as peers—to engage in political projects. The task before us now is to reconsider our knee-jerk participation in millennial bashing while working to imagine ways for us to build politically meaningful alliances. A first step might be to address our Facebook snark towards the power elite rather than those we have the pleasure to teach.

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