

Political Pranks: Performing Anarchist Humor

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Political scientist David Miller begins his book *Anarchism* with an entry from a 1957 thesaurus: "Violent creature, brute, beast, wild beast; dragon, tiger, wolf, mad dog; demon, devil, hell-hound, fury, monster; savage, barbarian, vandal, iconoclast, destroyer; man of blood, butcher, murderer, homicidal maniac, madman; . . . ruffian, . . . tyrant; fire-eater, . . . fire-brand, agitator, revolutionary . . . nihilist, terrorist . . ."—anarchist (Miller, i). Undoubtedly many of these references persist to this day, the mention of "anarchists" and "anarchy" still conjuring images of insanity, brutality, and death. This paper seeks to trace a somewhat different thread of anarchism, one overlooked by the likes of Roget and his thesaurus, one that counters this stream of analogies that links anarchism solely to violence.

Instead of anarchism as tragedy, I want to examine it as comedy, "slapstick comedy"—the pie-in-the-face, of course. Here, the anarchist is prankster, trickster, fool, clown, invoking the type of laughter that Mikhail Bakhtin connects to the "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order . . . the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin 10). For Bakhtin, this carnival laughter "could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hands" (Bakhtin 94). It is this festive, disruptive, and transformative power of laughter that I want to relate to anarchism here.

In particular, I am interested in the prank—the political prank—as a performance of anarchism. Pranks function through ritualized inversion, subverting and sabotaging established power relations. As George Orwell once observed, "the bigger the fall, the bigger the joke. It would be better fun to throw a custard pie at a bishop than at a curate" (Orwell 284). In this anarchic manner, then, pranks seek to undo, to undermine, to ridicule authority, and they have been used to amusing political ends by the likes of the Yippies, Earth First!, the Billboard Liberation Front, and the Biotic Baking Brigade.

Granted none of these political pranksters may have escaped entirely the accusations of vandalism and violence; but their comedic acts can be somewhat difficult to so characterize. While the media and the state are quick to demonize, de-legitimize, and in the words of the situationists “spectacularize” dissent, this paper posits that the performance of political pranks can subvert the spectacle’s representations of radicalism and resistance. Focusing solely on one prank, the Eugene Anarchists for Torrey or EAT campaign, I argue that pranks can, if only for a moment, shatter one-dimensional representations of anarchism and counter the ways in which anarchists become “spectacle.”

Before I describe the Eugene Anarchists for Torrey prank, however, it is necessary to provide some background on the infamous “Eugene Anarchists,” undoubtedly a “spectacularized” resistance.

Background: The “Eugene Anarchists”

Eugene, Oregon is a liberal college town of approximately 130,000 residents in the Willamette River Valley, two hours south of Portland. A nexus of environmental and social justice activism, with remnants of the Sixties counterculture, Eugene is home to the Cascadia Forest Defenders, several ex-Merry Pranksters, and hundreds of displaced Deadheads. At the same time as it whirls in tie-dyes and “tolerance,” Eugene is a conservative town, with an economy still tied to timber interests while actively promoting new high-tech industries. Since the 1990s, politics in Eugene have taken a radical turn as a small group of “Eugene Anarchists” have come into conflict with authorities and into the media spotlight.

A history of the “Eugene Anarchists” might begin at Icky’s Teahouse, a local hangout, or it might begin at the Warner Creek Blockade, an Earth First! action in a nearby old-growth forest. Other significant moments included June 1, 1997 when, without public notice, city officials began removal of forty heritage trees to make way for the construction of another downtown parking garage. Members of the *Earth First! Journal* (the publication was housed in Eugene at that time), among others, arranged an impromptu Sunday morning demonstration and climbed

the trees hoping to protect them. Police and firefighters pulled them down, brutally pepper-spraying protesters' eyes and genitals as they clung precariously to the branches. The mayor, Jim Torrey, watched from his car.

And on June 18, 1999, local activists joined the call for an "international day of action," holding a "Reclaim the Streets" party that ended with some broken business and car windows downtown. Police in riot gear chased protesters into a nearby park, unleashing a barrage of pepper spray and tear gas. Fifteen people were arrested for rioting, including L.A. resident Robert Thaxton who was sentenced to eight years in prison for throwing a rock at a police officer.

Although these and numerous other confrontations between anarchists and police had local significance, the most important event for the "Eugene Anarchists"—certainly for the "spectacle" of the "Eugene Anarchists"—was undoubtedly the World Trade Organization protest in Seattle, Washington. On November 30, 1999 over 40,000 protesters, including union members, students, and environmental activists, barricaded streets in downtown Seattle, in effect denying access to the convention center and shutting down the meeting. Much of the mainstream media reporting on that day focused on the property destruction that accompanied the anti-WTO demonstrations, many laying the blame on anarchists from Eugene. As Seattle officials tried to convince the public that the police's use of tear gas, pepper spray, and concussion grenades was a necessary response, the *Seattle Times* and others pronounced that "Eugene anarchists were major players in the violence" (Postman A12).

[Image 1]

Since then, the media have become obsessed with the "Eugene Anarchists." Newspaper coverage has moved from local publications to *The L.A. Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*. Similarly, local and regional TV crews have sought them out, as have national, mainstream media. "Eugene Anarchists" have been featured on *60 Minutes II*, on the Australian version of *Dateline*, and on Art Bell's radio show; Courtney Love even mentioned them

when she guest-hosted MTV. They have appeared in *SPIN Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *Harper's*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. CNN wanted to interview them, and rumors circulated for some time that *Glamour Magazine* was planning an article about women in the "movement" (with speculation, of course, the magazine would airbrush out the body hair).

In some respects, all this media coverage is "a joke" itself, for the press has greatly exaggerated and spectacularized the "Eugene Anarchists." *Rolling Stone*, for example, featured a Hunter S. Thompson-esque exposé, a crazy weekend in the "Eugene Anarchist" underworld, spiced with drugs, shoplifting, vandalism, and of course, rock-n-roll. The tone of the article in *SPIN* is one of ridicule, featuring "Eugene Anarchists" chanting "We want free gorditas" as they trash a local Taco Bell, as well as a photograph of a black-masked individual smashing the Niketown sign—wearing Nikes, of course. But the content of the article itself may be irrelevant next to the advertisement on the front inside cover for Calvin Klein jeans.

[Image 2]

The hysteria and hoopla over "Eugene Anarchists" elicited a response from the state, as well as the press. Embarrassed to be at the helm of the "anarchist capital of the world," Eugene mayor Jim Torrey was quick to apologize for "exporting anarchists" (AP). Citing "anarchists" and "eco-terrorists" as the new threat to American security, FBI and police promised increased surveillance, infiltration, and repression (Wright 45).

Eugene activists (anarchist or not) returned home from the WTO protest in Seattle with mixed reactions to the event. Pleased with their success at shutting down the ministerial meeting and at gaining attention for the deleterious effects of global capitalism, the activist community was split over the issue of property destruction and troubled by media distortions of their town. These tensions were exacerbated as police, both locally and federally, vowed to crack down on "violent" protesters.

This was the climate in which two "Eugene Anarchist"-pranksters decided to "lighten things up" with a political prank and launched the EAT campaign.

The Prank

On December 17, 1999, the Eugene Anarchists for Torrey (EAT) campaign held a press conference and rally on the steps of City Hall, announcing their active support for the re-election of Eugene Mayor Jim Torrey. The small group of black-clad and (a few) black-masked individuals was completely outnumbered by several Eugene police officers, a handful of reporters, and a few curious onlookers.

Playing on the mayor's own pronouncements, flyers for the event exclaim, "Let's keep Eugene an exporter of Anarchists. Re-elect Jim Torrey! A vote for Torrey is a vote for inevitable anarchy!" The EAT press statement reads,

A faction of the Eugene Anarchist scene has decided to endorse Jim Torrey as our candidate for next year's mayor race. People will wonder how an anti-authoritarian group could endorse any candidate for a government position. Well, we believe that Jim Torrey has been very influential in turning Eugene into a 'hotbed' of Anarchy. We look at his vital role in the June 1st Treecutting/Torture and his ability to get gross polluters and discriminating corporations like Hyundai to move to our town, as prime examples of his Conservative/Corporate agenda, thus creating the inevitable and beautiful Anarchist backlash. Although none of us are foolish enough to buy into the scam of Democracy, and of course do not plan on voting, we encourage others, who still believe, to at least vote for the greater of two evils. If not for pure comedy, at least to make it clear to all what type of Fascist system we live under ("Eugene Anarchists for Torrey").

Asserting that "every good revolution needs a Torrey," the campaign puns the mayor's name, linking him to conservative, counter-revolutionary forces. This flyer also contains a photograph of the mayor at a pie-eating contest at the county fair, a reference not only to his appetite and greed, but to his symbolic pieing in December 1998 for his role in the June 1, 1997 pepper-spray incident.

The EAT campaign became an extended prank of sorts, lasting beyond a single, momentary joke, as the members of EAT stayed "in character" to show their "support" at numerous engagements. In January of 2000, EAT met with the mayor; the room was filled with many police and journalists as anarchists. Although the event was supposed to mark the beginning of a dialogue between the city and anarchists, Torrey refused to speak. Indefatigable, EAT asked the mayor to blink once for "Yes" and twice for "No." Counting his

eyelid flutters, anarchists thus secured Torrey's approval for the next meeting of the WTO to be held in Eugene, as well as for equal funding for police and anarchists—in their words, “to level the playing field in the class war.” Before security officers escorted the mayor from the room, EAT serenaded him with their rendition of the Sex Pistols's “Anarchy in the UK”:

*Torrey is the Antichrist,
And I am an anarchist.
I'm not gonna vote,
But I want him to win.
It's Eugene Anarchists for
Jim Torrey!
'Cause I wanna eat
Jim Torrey!*

True to the decentralized nature of anarchism, others took up the EAT mantle. The word “EAT” and a “circle-A” anarchy symbol were spraypainted on the side of a neighborhood police station. EAT campaign signs appeared in people's yards. Farther afield, anarchists in Olympia, Washington formed OAT (Olympia Anarchists for Torrey), and Portland, Oregon anarchists created PAT (Portland Anarchists for Torrey). “It appears there'll be a power struggle to see who gets him,” quipped one EAT member. “In fact, we're nominating him for the dictator of the Pacific Northwest” (“Radical Political Theatre and Culture Jammin”).

On election night, a dozen EAT supporters “crashed” the public party at the county fairgrounds, helping themselves to hors d'oeuvres, dancing the conga, and cheering with encouragement as the results came in. . . . A landslide victory! In a post-election flyer, EAT proclaim that “Torrey received over 71 percent of the vote in the Eugene primary. Jim only expected 60 percent, so the extra 11 percent has been attributed to the hard work of the EAT campaign” (“Eugene Anarchists for Torrey”). “We put a lot of work into this campaign,” one anarchist gushed to the local newspaper on election night. “We're really happy” (Bolt).

Getting the Joke

EAT members have built many political, historical, and symbolic references into their prank, and there are several levels at which one can “get” this joke. Like all practical jokes and pranks, the EAT campaign requires an audience, for jokes are performed for one's self and for

others. In this way, the prank has both esoteric and exoteric functions and interpretations. In other words, pranks perform for “outside” forces, demonstrating an anarchist critique, subverting and undermining the status quo, and challenging non-anarchists, perhaps, to examine the mayor’s politics—or electoral politics in general. Pranks also serve a purpose for those “inside” the movement, sustaining and reinvigorating an activist community under attack by the media and the government. According to one “Eugene Anarchist,” “Most people think the EAT campaign is merely a *joke* disguised as a *campaign*. It’s actually a *campaign* disguised as a *joke* (“EAT”).

Obviously, the EAT campaign is a stab at the mayor with a not-so-subtle reference to Torrey’s corpulence. Furthermore, it is the *body* of authority—literally and symbolically—that is targeted by their prank. As the EAT flyers and communiqués reiterate, Jim Torrey has played a central role in cultivating the social, political, and economic atmosphere that has made Eugene a “hotbed of anarchy.”

Although the mayor eventually faced several opponents in his re-election bid, he was running unopposed when EAT was first formed. With over \$20,000 in campaign contributions, Torrey’s re-election was never really in doubt. However, by supporting the mayor’s campaign, “Eugene Anarchists” twist the implications of Torrey’s “inevitable” re-election. EAT’s promise of a victory “by any means necessary” not only echoes Malcolm X, but Richard Nixon. Likewise, EAT’s chant for “Four more years!” repeats a slogan from President Reagan’s 1984 reelection campaign.

While the EAT campaign satirizes the conservative politics of Jim Torrey, it also makes fun of liberals and the electoral process in general. Reiterating the anarchist condemnation of liberal politics that seek to reform rather than abolish the State, the EAT materials point out that “electing a more liberal candidate may have been a disastrous [sic] development, as it would have allowed local liberals to once again believe all the lies about how you can change the system by begging the powers-that-be for reforms” (Anonymous). Here, EAT’s prank connects to

a larger anarchist critique of “democracy.” One flyer asks, “if it’s humiliating to be ruled, how much more degrading is it to choose our masters?” (“Eugene Anarchists for Torrey”) The EAT campaign also mocks the logic of choosing the “lesser of two evils,” a decision voters frequently bemoan. Thus EAT embraces voter disillusionment and apathy, characterizing it as political action rather than inaction. As one communiqué notes,

While we dream of a day when we have no masters, tyrants, bosses (or mayors) or their merciless defenders of wealth, . . . a day when we wake up on election morning and realize that absolutely nobody voted and our government is universally recognized as illegitimate, until then if we are still to be ruled by someone (or something), let him be the greater of the evils! (“Eugene Anarchists for Torrey”)

By explicitly stating the dilemma of the “two evils” in their campaign literature and by throwing their weight behind the greater of the two, EAT mocks the government’s claims to “law and order,” suggesting a police state will in fact lead to social upheaval and “inevitable anarchy.”

Although EAT performs its joke for and on others—the media, the mayor, and mainstream Eugene for example—some elements are, of course, for “insiders.” Humor has a particular internal resonance as it corresponds to the “Eugene Anarchists” espousal of “play” and rejection of “work.” By no means rejecting more militant direct action, EAT suggests that pranks can be a useful anarchist tactic. Labeling their particular brand of activism “anarcho-cynicism,” members of the EAT campaign satirize the “serious” work of anarcho-syndicalism—“it’s like nihilism but a lot more fun.” “People don’t believe anarchists have a sense of humor,” laments one anarchist. “EAT shows they’re wrong.” “Things are pretty hopeless,” says another. “At least we make people laugh.”

Contrary to their reaction to the other coverage they have received, several “Eugene Anarchists” express their pleasure with how the EAT campaign unfolded in the media. They note with a certain satisfaction that EAT confused the press. Unable to “spin” the story, journalists reported EAT pranks blow-by-blow, even word-for-word. For once, “Eugene Anarchists” had a chance to spout their rhetoric uninhibited—even though the delivery was as a punchline rather than a political oratory. While most interactions with the mainstream media get twisted to suit

the dominant, corporate viewpoint, it appears in this case the press just did not, just could not “get it.”

This seems to be the most powerful and important moment of the prank—the difficulty for the media to rationalize, recuperate, or doctor it. At the beginning of this paper, I attempted to chronicle a series of local events and media exposés that led to increased tensions and hostilities between police and anarchists. The EAT campaign threw a monkeywrench (pun definitely intended) into this “spectacularization” of “Eugene Anarchists.” While the media was furiously promoting the image of violent anarchists—protesters who smash windows, spray-paint graffiti, and hurl rocks at police—the “Eugene Anarchists” responded with a practical joke, retorting “where’s your sense of humor?” EAT takes the popular image of anarchy [see image 2], the spectacular image of anarchy [see image 1], and *détournes* or inverts it, presenting it in a manner that runs counter to the conventional portrait of insurrection and is therefore difficult to commodify or distort.

[Image 3]

The prank interrupted the dominant narrative that portrays anarchists as angry, violent terrorists, responding instead with an image of a clown. The prank defused the escalating tensions, challenging the equation of anarchy solely with chaos and destruction. Furthermore, it steered the headlines away from anarchist “mayhem,” utilizing the media to broadcast anarchist “mirth.” As one anarchist’s account of EAT’s activities on election night states, “Security presence was surprisingly minimal, and no violent incidents were reported, proving that despite [sic] our hooliganish media reputation, it’s funner to ridicule the mayor than to punch him” (Anonymous).

This paper suggests that laughter can defy the dominant narrative that “spectacularizes” and stereotypes oppositional forces. As theater studies scholar Graham White argues, “in order to resist the spectacularizing of political acts which are representable as irrational, oppositional groups must be continually striving to subvert the spectacle’s own narratives, challenging

dominant representations" (White 339). Performing pranks allows anarchists to do so, utilizing symbolic inversions to deflate egos and subvert hierarchy.

Ideally, of course, I could conclude with a pronouncement that the "Eugene Anarchists" have given a whole new meaning to "riotous," that their cacophonous laughter has shattered the bonds of oppression. But much that has occurred since the EAT prank has been decidedly *not* funny. There has been widespread disagreement over both theory and practice. In fact, at one point, two EAT members jokingly formed a splinter group EAT ME, calling for more confrontational tactics. In June 2000, these two individuals set fire to three SUVs at a local car dealership (an act, I should probably clarify, that had nothing to do with EAT). One, Craig Marshall, is now serving five years, and the other, Jeffrey Luers, is serving twenty-three years in prison. With state repression and internal divisions, alongside a continued espousal by some of "revolutionary violence," the "Eugene Anarchists" have since failed to utilize comedy to the same effect.

Nevertheless, the laughter invoked by EAT, like that of many political pranksters, was a powerful performance of anarchism—an act of mocking and derision that defied authority and defied expectation while also containing an element of hope and renewal. It is laughter's possibility for liberation and for transformation that make political pranks a promising and amusing anarchist tactic.

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