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Creative Dissent

Protesters at the Democratic National Convention are proving that the spirit of creative dissent remains alive and well.

by Margaret Weigel

(July-28-2004)



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It is no secret that Boston is not known for its eccentric creativity. As one Manhattan wit once wrote in Monk magazine, "In New York, trash barrels are used for impromptu drumming and skateboard ramps; in Boston, they are used to put trash into." However, with the Democratic National Convention attracting [protesters](#) from across the nation and beyond, perhaps the buttoned-down city of Boston may finally get

down, and get funky with performance art, street actions and other manifestations of creative political dissent.

The buzzword at this year's Democratic National Convention so far is "unity." To the Democrats' delight and Republicans' chagrin, the DNC is presenting a united, left-leaning face to the country, if not so much behind nominee and hometown boy John F. Kerry, then against George W. Bush's administration. In such a context, the stuff of dissension, never mind creative

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protest, can be hard to find. But it still exists -- most of the time, that is.

It appears that protesters keep anti-bankers hours. On the second day of the DNC, I started my search for protesters by stopping first at the State House where, at 11:30 am, the black-clad [Weeping Women](#) were scheduled to march for an hour and a half to "bear witness to the devastation of the war-making of our nation." But when I showed up, three or so motorcycle policemen were stationed on the steps, with no weeping black-clad women anywhere to be seen.

I then took off to check out the goings-on in the officially-designated "[Protest Pen](#)" by the Fleet Center, where the DNC is taking place. By the time I arrived there, in the mid-afternoon, it was as deserted as Boston's streets on the first day of the convention. Pro-life and anti-protest slogans scrawled in chalk covered the walls and asphalt like fossilized evidence of a former civilization. As the curious strolled through the empty pen, the sole protester was an older man exhorting us to read the Bible.

One possible reason for the disappointing turnout is that the heightened security presence is putting a damper on creative dissent at the first national convention of the post-9/11 era. Clusters of jackbooted police are stationed throughout downtown Boston, including an intimidating phalanx of about thirty motorcycle cops at the intersection of State and Washington Streets, and noisy overhead hovering helicopters.



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As I left the [Protest Pen](#), I ran into a woman from Canton, MA who was dressed as Betsy Ross. [She was arguing with a pair of policemen](#) instructing her to disassemble her flagpole flying an American flag. It seems, ironically, that this flagpole qualified as a dangerous weapon, and she relented, putting away the flagpole but wrapping the flag around herself like a shawl.

The "Really, Really Democratic Bazaar" organized by the Bl(A)ck Tea Society, was as much of a hotbed of creative protesting as it could be, confined to the northwestern edge of the Boston Common. According to their website, the society is "an ad-hoc coalition of anti-authoritarians organizing in the Boston area and beyond to resist the Democratic National Convention." Their bazaar featured [paper-mâché masks](#), puppet-makers, [living statues](#), political bumper stickers, pins and speakers railing against the DNC. Ralph Nader and Noam Chomsky were favorite sons here, frequently evoked in response to the corporate-owned Democratic Party.

Another organization, Boxers Against Bush, had marked off a square with ropes and invited passersby to test out their boxing skills against [an inflatable George W. Bush effigy](#). Another group



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had constructed a large, [snake-like puppet](#), half the size of a football field, which they managed to parade around the Common. Each snake segment was marked with an agenda on the Progressive wish list: health care, no war, equal rights, better schools, etc. Another static, if moving, display were the 902 pairs of combat boots laid out at Copley Square, one pair for each casualty of the current Iraq War.

But it wasn't until later in the evening that I encountered the old-time spirit of political hay-making and creative dissent with the [Billionaires for Bush](#). The Billionaires are the brainchild of "Phil T. Rich" (aka Andrew Boyd, formerly of Boston's United for a Fair Economy), and in the age of Bush, the concept is sixty nationwide chapters strong. At 6:30 pm, over 120 "billionaires," decked out in top coats, furs, and ball gowns, convened in front of Rowe's Wharf. After security personnel had twice relocated the crowd outside the swanky hotel, several Billionaires chanted, "Privatize the sidewalk!" in response.



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"Monie Oliver D'Place," 30, of New York, declared, "Billionaires for Bush is a grassroots organization of corporate cronies, degenerate heiresses, and billionaire CEOs. We are the top half percent, and we have all the wealth and power in Washington." When asked what he would say to the other 99.5 percent of the population, he immediately responded, "I would say thank you, thank you for ignoring the fine print on the last two tax cuts, thank you for bearing the tax burden so we don't have to.

It's a good day to be a Billionaire."

And indeed it was a good day as the rain held off and the Billionaires, [holding signs](#) such as "Corporations are People, Too" and "Wealth Care, not Health Care!," marched from Rowes Wharf to the state GOP headquarters in Beacon Hill. By the time the march began, it was close to 7 pm and I'd been looking for creative dissent all day long. I was beginning to suspect that although security issues may have put a damper on some of the street protests, it seemed as though it was more a matter of timing. I have since heard that the [Protest Pen](#) comes to life when the convention starts every evening.

And so not only do protests follow politicians like a shadow, they keep the same hours, as well. While Boston's displays of creative protest may not rival the heady heyday of Abbie Hoffman and the Fluxus performers of the 1960s, the spirit is alive and well. Just remember to start looking after 4 pm.

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[Margaret Weigel](#) writes for [WBUR Online Arts](#), the online arts

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