

# **From Subverted Symbols to Subverted Power**

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April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009

## **Introduction**

The theory of symbolic interactionism gives us a framework in which to analyze and extract sociological insight from people's micro behavior. While it is usually used to study the quotidian and the habitual it can also be applied to more extreme situations that break from normative patterns of interaction such as certain types of political protest. This paper will examine three such examples of political protests – that of The Yes Men, the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, and Abbie Hoffman – through the lens of symbolic interactionism. This paper remains agnostic on the general validity of symbolic interactionism but finds that its emphasis on perceived meaning and meaning creation through interaction allows us to understand how these protests subvert power dynamics by acting on the level of symbolic meaning.

## **Three premises**

Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism is based on three premises:

The first premise “is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (Blumer, 1969a, p. 2). On its own this premise does little to differentiate symbolic interactionism from other strains of sociology. However, it is not the affirmation of meaning's significance, but the elevation of that fact to a central guiding tenet that defines symbolic interactionism. The import of this premise can best be understood by comparing it to two alternative models for human behavior. First there is the psychological model that focuses on internal mental factors. Second there is the social model that focuses on environmental and especially socio-structural factors. These models do not deny that meaning has a role but “it is regarded as a mere neutral link between the factors responsible for human behavior and this behavior as the product of [other] factors” (Blumer, 1969a, p. 2). In contrast, for Blumer meaning is itself an active, and in fact the key, factor in determining human behavior. Therefore, the best way to understand human behavior is to study those meanings, and not psychological factors or the social structure.

Blumer's second premise “is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows” (Blumer, 1969a, p. 2). Whereas, the first premise asserts the centrality of meaning, this second premise begins to explain where that meaning comes from. Like before, this premise is best understood in contrast to two alternative explanations for the origin of meaning, which run parallel to the two alternative models for human behavior outlined above. First, there is the psychological explanation that the meaning a human ascribes to an object should be understood by looking at various psychological elements, such as “sensation, feelings, ideas memories, motives, and attitudes” (Blumer, 1969a, p. 4) of that person. While these

elements may have been influenced by outside factors, the perceived meaning of objects is understood, according to this explanation, to ultimately emanate from the person's internal mental state. The second possible explanation, dubbed "realist" by Blumer, holds that external objects are imbued with intrinsic meaning. Meaning is not formed by the observer but directly grasped in the act of observing the object (Blumer, 1969a, p. 4). From the perspective of sociology both of these explanations fail to generate adequate pictures of meaning creation. The realist explanation fails to explain how meanings can change and how different actors can attribute different meanings to the same object, which would make it exceedingly difficult to explain much of the friction and conflict in society that sociology seeks to understand. While the psychological explanation allows for changing and subjective meaning, it does not account for the social in the creation of that meaning. So, while this explanation may be true in a strict sense it fails to connect the individual to the society in which we find him. Blumer's second premise not only gives an explanation for the origin of meaning but explains the dynamic and social nature of that meaning, which is what is needed for an adequate sociological picture, especially when we wish to understand disruptive political protest.

Blumer's third premise picks up where the previous premise leaves off and tells us how meaning is created in the interactions described by the second premise. It states "that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters" (Blumer, 1969a, p. 2). The idea is that, not only can meaning change over time, but it is actively created during each and every interaction, as opposed to a "mere automatic application of established meaning" (Blumer 1969a, p. 5). Thus, sociology should study the active construction of that meaning in the very interaction they wish to understand and explain. Furthermore, Blumer emphasizes the interpretive nature of this creation. Interpretation, as opposed to direct apprehension, is a messy and uncertain process that involves leaps of reasoning and guesses based on incomplete information. These are key features of how humans behave in social situations according to symbolic interactionism.

### **The Situation and the Self**

A key concept in symbolic interactionism is the *definition of the situation*, which was first outlined by W.I. Thomas. At its most basic, the definition of the situation is what goes into the "examination and deliberation" that precedes and informs "any self-determined act of behavior" (Thomas, 1923, p. 42). On its own this is not a particularly informative concept. Thomas' insight was to realize that there is "always a rivalry between the spontaneous definition of the situation made by the member of an organized society and the definitions which his society has provided for him" (Thomas, 1923,

p. 42). That is, there is a tension between how the individual wishes to act and the moral codes and expectations imposed from without by society. Thomas developed this concept to explain the behavior of delinquent youth as the inability to square their inner personal definition of the situation with that of society. Shortly we will see how certain forms of protest operate by exploiting that tension. But in order to do so we must first understand how the definition of the situation operates within symbolic interactionism. Thomas gives a hint of this when he writes:

We live by inference. I am, let us say, your guest. You do not know, you cannot determine scientifically, that I will not steal your money or your spoons. But inferentially I will not, and inferentially you have me as a guest. (Thomas as cited in Goffman 1959, p. 3)

That is, the definition of the situation is arrived at through an inferential process which can be understood as the interpretative attribution of meaning and interaction described by Blumer. This idea can be seen more clearly in Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* – which in fact begins by quoting the above.

Goffman was not, strictly speaking, a symbolic interactionist, but his work and thinking were close to it in many ways. As noted above, Goffman drew explicitly on Thomas' work in *The Presentation of Self*; but he came up with a more dynamic conception of the definition of the self than Thomas'. Whereas Thomas simply contrasted society's relatively static definition of the situation with that of the individual, Goffman saw the definition of the situation as something that was recreated, and in a sense re-agreed upon, with each new interaction. The individual doesn't have to square their personal desires with the expectations of society so much as integrate their internal definition of the situation with those around him for each particular interaction anew.

In Goffman's model there is no definition of the situation before the interaction, but "together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation" (Goffman, 1959, p. 5). They do this, according to Goffman, through the impressions that they project, i.e. through the projection of meaning. Here we see the link to symbolic interactionism and Blumer's observation that, "the human individual confronts a world that he must interpret in order to act instead of an environment to which he responds because of his organization" (Blumer, 1969a, p. 15). Thus, Blumer's model as outlined in his three premises can explain how this "working consensus", as Goffman calls it (1959, p. 10), of a definition of the situation is initially arrived at and then continues to determine behavior. That is how "when an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation they come to have" (Goffman, 1959, p. 6).

Goffman's model allows for an actor to consciously manipulate the meanings others attribute to objects, and thus control the situation. As Goffman states:

This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan. (1959, p. 3)

And Blumer's symbolic interactionism explains the process through which this occurs.

### **Subverting Symbols**

Blumer notes that:

In the flow of group life there are innumerable points at which the participants are redefining each other's acts. Such redefinition is very common in adversary relations [...] (1969b, p. 67)

Political protest is often understood as operating through this process of redefinition. By manipulating symbols and meaning political protests can change the definition of the situation and control the interaction. The three examples of political protest I will examine, however, do not redefine the situation in a manner directly in line with the goals of the protesters but operate by engendering definitions of the situation that create paradoxes and tension, in order to break society's ability to perpetuate its preferred definition of the situation.

The first style of protest that we will examine is that of The Yes Men. As their website states, they operate by "impersonating big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them" (The Yes Men, n.d.). For example, in 2007 they posed as ExxonMobile representatives at GO-EXPO, Canada's largest oil conference. They successfully attracted some 300 people to their (fake) "key-note" speech at which they announced Exxon's "new product": vivoleum, a supposed new source of energy developed in response to global warming and dwindling oil supplies derived from the human flesh of those who have died as a result of global warming (The Yes Men, 2007; Smith, 2008). A direct denouncement of ExxonMobile would not have had the same effect as the elaborate hoax perpetrated by The Yes Men. By working on the level of the symbolic interaction – specifically by dressing, and acting as ExxonMobile representatives – they were able to determine the definition of the situation as a formal corporate presentation and through that control the interaction. The definition of the situation was manipulated by "act[ing] in a thoroughly calculating manner" (Goffman, 1959, p. 6) and presenting an entirely false self. They were able to do this because the audience attributed meaning to The Yes Men and their speech through their interaction with The

Yes Men, using an interpretive process of the various meanings The Yes Men projected. Having created that definition of the situation The Yes Men proceeded to give a speech that was equally false but in a completely opposite way, namely it looked wrong but had the spirit of truth. At no time did they directly attack ExxonMobile. Instead they relied on the tension between the fake realness of the definition of the situation they engendered and the realness of the fake speech they gave.

The second example we will look at is the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA). CIRCA is not a single organization but a tactic that has been adopted (and adapted) by various groups throughout the world. The basic model is to participate in contentious protests, such as the various anti-globalization demonstrations, dressed as clowns. CIRCA isn't just about clowning around, they seek to bring "together the ancient practice of clowning and the more recent practice of Non-violent direct action" ("Reclaim the Clown", n.d.). As with The Yes Men, CIRCA members dress and act in a particular way (as clowns) in order to present a certain self and project meaning and ultimately define the situation. However, unlike The Yes Men, CIRCA members do not seek to present a false self but a self that is "perfectly paradoxical" and "grotesquely beautiful" (CIRCA, n.d.). On the one hand they "come to give everybody a laugh and a smile" but at the same time they "always create major panic and general alarms" (Salt and Pepper clown as cited in Milan, 2005). These internal contradictions destabilize society's definition of the situation and do not allow a "working consensus". It is this disruption of the working consensus that ultimately, as a participant in a CIRCA action directed at the CIA explains, "is effective because [it] completely make[s] the situation a joke. It takes the seriousness and legitimacy away from the CIA" (Whitney Walberg as cited in Wagstaf, 2007). Stated more broadly, the goal of CIRCA is not merely to negotiate for a definition of the situation more favorable to their world view but to call into question and undermine society's ability to impose any definition of the situation at all.

The last style of protest we will explore is that of Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies!, the loosely organized group of which Hoffman was a leader in the late 60s. While the two previous forms of protest exploited unexpected or contradictory definitions of the situation, Hoffman's actions relied on the messy and individual nature of the attribution of meaning itself as a way of fomenting mass participation and subverting society's normative definition of the situation. One of his well known actions was the throwing of money at the New York Stock Exchange. He and a group of fellow activists entered the stock exchange as part of a tour and then proceeded to throw money – in the form of single dollar bills – over the railing to the exchange floor below. Stock brokers stopped what they were doing and began to grab for the money. What is interesting about this event is that

“it was a perfectly mythical event, since every reporter, not being able to witness the scene<sup>1</sup>, had to make up their own fantasy” (Hoffman, 1968, p. 33). Hoffman also insisted that the Yippies! themselves were nothing but a myth. This was true in two ways. On the one hand Hoffman would often refuse to give definitive answers about who the Yippies! were or what they were doing. He would communicate through what he called “blank space” which is “the transmission of information whereby the viewer has the opportunity to become involved as a participant” (Hoffman, 1968, p. 81-2). The idea is that “Blank space, the interrupted statement, the unsolved puzzle, they are all involving” (Hoffman, 1968, p. 80) because they force the listener to complete the story themselves. On the other hand Hoffman would present multiple contradictory selves. For example when asked about the difference between a hippie and a Yippie! “A hundred different answers would fly out, forcing the reporter to make up his own; to distort” (Hoffman, 1968, p. 102). He did this because a myth allows for mass participation as everyone pitches in to modify and add to it, what Marshall McLuhan called “participation mystique” (as cited in Hoffman, 1968, p. 103). This is beneficial to a protest movement in two ways: First, because it means more people will be involved. Second, and more importantly, because it allows for greater freedom and more challenges to society’s definition of the situation. Hoffman explicitly stated that all of this was achieved by “communicating ideas through the mass media by manipulating famous symbols” (as cited in Jordan, 2007). It is the fact that interactions are based on symbols which are only understood with interpretation that allowed Abbie Hoffman to create the confusions and myths that he did which, in turn, destabilized the prevailing definition of the situation.

### **Subverting Power**

This paper has used symbolic interactionism to understand how three different styles of political protest attempt to turn the tables on those in power through the manipulation and projection of meaning. Specifically, the protesters create a definition of the situation by exploiting the symbolic nature of interaction. Furthermore, it has argued that they do not create a definition of the situation that is directly advantageous to them – as is often the goal of traditional political debate – but promote definitions of the situation that lead to contradictions, tension and open ended turmoil. These styles of protest do this to go beyond achieving limited goals and to undermine the normative relations of power in society. What the three styles of protest discussed have in common is that, while they are interested in pushing their particular view, they are more interested in upturning society’s usual pattern of behavior and order and thus create space for new and non-normative behavior and ultimately for a new type of society by accentuating the interpretive basis of interaction.

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<sup>1</sup> Security guards did not allow the press inside.

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