

# Rah-Rah-Radical: The Radical Cheerleaders' Challenge to the Public Sphere

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The name “Radical Cheerleaders” refers to loosely organized groups of women and men who use creative cheers and costumes to engage in political protest. This article explores the ways in which the Radical Cheerleaders challenge gendered assumptions about women’s political activity. Through their aggressive presence on the streets, their rejection of norms of civility, and their use of humor, the Radical Cheerleaders (ab)use the traditionally gendered practice of cheering to stage transgressive political spectacles that cannot easily be subsumed into or appropriated by mainstream political discourse. The Radical Cheerleaders’ tactics, in other words, resist governmentality. In so doing, they trouble our ideas about political deliberation and citizenship and expand the boundaries of the contemporary public sphere.

*At all times, cheerleaders' behavior shall be exemplary. Behavior which is loud, boisterous, rude, unrestrained, rough, rowdy, offensively harsh or discordant, etc., shall subject a cheerleader to discipline.*

—*Syracuse University Cheerleading Handbook* (2005)

Despite myriad differences about the proper contours and content of what is called “the public sphere,” there is widespread agreement that access to *some* sort of public sphere is essential to any defini-

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tion of democratic citizenship (Dryzek 2000).<sup>1</sup> The public sphere is a space for political deliberation, where individual grievances can be transformed into collective problems, where potential remedies may be introduced and debated, and where public opinion—in the most substantial sense of that term—can be formed and transformed. In Jürgen Habermas's original use of the phrase, the public sphere is specifically *not* the state; it is an arena of civil, discursive interaction that is separate from formal political structures. Critical accounts of the public sphere emphasize that it has the potential both to undergird and to undermine political institutions (Habermas 1989).

For two centuries, women in the United States have struggled to gain access to the public sphere, and the proper tone, timbre, and content of women's political voice(s) have been the source of much controversy, both inside and outside of the feminist movement. Ultimately, these debates are about the gendered character of citizenship, and to what extent women and women's political activism can be incorporated into our already existing ideas about who can be a citizen in a democracy. "Women's political activism," after all, is (historically and/or theoretically) an oxymoron. Some scholars, such as Joan Landes, have concluded from this that the public sphere as theorized by Habermas assumes and relies on the exclusion of women for its existence; its very foundation "worked to rule out all interests that would not or could not lay claim to their own universality." Exclusion was central to the formation of the public sphere, "not a marginal or accidental feature" (Landes 1995, 97–98; see also Landes 1988).

Other theorists have noted that the qualities often deemed necessary for participation in the public sphere—such as reason, intellect, and objectivity—are qualities that are historically ascribed to men, and which have been presumed absent in women. For example, the skill of rational argumentation is a learned skill, something that can be dependent on one's class or educational background; that is to say, material and cultural inequalities often translate into deliberative inequalities (Hayward 2003, 506–8). These deliberative inequalities can mean the dif-

1. This agreement reflects what John Dryzek refers to as the "deliberative turn" taken by political theory in the 1990s. As Dryzek points out, however, not all of political science is as optimistic about deliberation; social choice and rational choice theorists' assumptions about fixed and immutable preferences put them at odds with the aims of deliberative democrats, who assume that preferences are shaped and changed through public deliberation. Political theorists, too, have argued that deliberation may be overrated in terms of what it might be able to accomplish politically (See Dean 2002 and Shapiro 2002).

ference between high and low political efficacy, between the people who feel confident enough to engage and challenge the system and those who simply withdraw from it. Quite simply, those who are good at making arguments are better equipped to persuade others to agree with their position; historically, it has been upper- and middle-class men who have been expected to excel and consequently have been trained in this kind of argumentation (Lynn Sanders in Dryzek 2000, 64–65).

Finally, some feminist theorists fear that privileging the qualities of rational, objective argumentation shuts out possibilities for alternative modes of political communication. An emphasis on rational argumentation, for example, may suppress and/or devalue comedic, emotional, theatrical, or other performative means of political expression. These alternative means of communication may be particularly effective for those on the margins of political discourse, or those who historically have been less effective in engaging in rational argumentation (Young 1997, chap. 3, and Love 2002). Political discourse is thus normalized and disciplined through what Michel Foucault called governmentality: the creation of norms and skills suitable for governable (that is to say, docile) subjects (Foucault 1991). For this reason, many theorists generally sympathetic to the aims of deliberative democracy—aims such as a robust public sphere and more depth and breadth to political participation—also have been likely to criticize the concept of the public sphere for its potential to reify gendered behaviors in intersubjective political communication (Dean 1995; Sanders 1997; Young 1996).

In this article, we explore the gendered parameters of the public sphere by looking at a particularly vibrant portion of it: subversive spectacle as political protest. We examine the three ways in which the Radical Cheerleaders (whose work we will describe) challenge gendered assumptions about women's political activity. Through their aggressive presence on the streets, their rejection of norms of gentility, and their use of humor, the Radical Cheerleaders (ab)use the traditionally gendered practice of cheering to stage transgressive political spectacles that cannot easily be subsumed into or appropriated by mainstream political discourse. The Radical Cheerleaders' tactics, in other words, resist governmentality. Ultimately, we argue, the Radical Cheerleaders trouble our ideas about political deliberation and citizenship, and expand the boundaries of the contemporary public sphere.

## PUBLIC WOMEN, OR TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

*“To whom do the streets ‘belong’?”*

—Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flâneur, the Sandwichman, and the Whore” (1986)

The Radical Cheerleaders began in 1996, when three sisters living in Florida (Cara, Aimee, and Colleen Jennings) decided to experiment with new ways of staging political protest. They published the first Radical Cheerbook as an independent 'zine in 1997, describing their project as “activism with pom-poms and middle fingers extended” (Vacarro 2004). Radical cheerleading spread quickly and with great enthusiasm. In 2001, the Cheerleaders were covered in numerous mainstream media publications, including the *New York Times*, *Spin*, *Bust*, *Newsweek*, and *Glamour UK*. By 2003, there were an estimated one hundred squads across the United States and Canada (with names such as the Rocky Mountain Rebels, Lickity Split, and Teen Radical Cheer). Soon the Cheerleaders had become an international movement as squads formed in Sweden, London, and Ireland (Associated Press 2003 and Osborne 2003).

The Cheerleaders refer to themselves as feminists, but they do not have a single message and are not united by a single issue, or even under the broad rubric of (what some call) “women’s issues.” Instead, they emphasize the interconnectedness of problems, and the squads describe themselves as diverse, open to new members and to new ideas. The New York chapter, for example, states on its Website that the group is

against sexism and street harassment, for positive body image and sex-positive education, against globalization, against racism and homophobia, for choice, against forced c-sections, against the patriot act, against the consolidation of corporate media, for grassroots community media resources, against the police state, the prison industrial complex, against the patriot act and the recruitment of low income youth and people of color in schools, against sweatshops, for workers rights, against the war in Iraq, the occupation of foreign nations, against the occupation of Palestine, for immigrants’ rights, for human rights, against illegal detentions, and against the criminalization of dissent amongst myriad other issues critical to our communities. (NYC Radical Cheerleaders 2005)

This polyvocal approach to activism means that Radical Cheerleading squads have supported a variety of political causes: workers’ wage struggles at fast food restaurants, anti-globalization protests, pro-choice rallies, antiwar protests, and even door-to-door cheering for the Democrats before the 2004 election.

From the beginning, the Radical Cheerleaders have understood that their presence at the center of political protest goes against gendered norms of political behavior, even — or perhaps especially — dissident behavior (see our discussion that follows). After witnessing the demonstrations at the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Aimee Jennings decided to start the Radical Cheerleaders when she observed that “the people who had the bullhorn got to state the message, and most of them were boys” (quoted in the Associated Press 2003). That is to say, even the voices from the unruly margins of the public sphere were male voices.

Choosing “cheerleading” as a way to include women’s voices represents multiple, and sometimes contradictory, subversions of gendered assumptions about “women’s place.” On the one hand, some of the women involved in the Radical Cheerleaders, like Aimee Jennings, are in fact former mainstream cheerleaders, and they see cheerleaders as “positive female role models” (Associated Press 2003). Jennings adds that “cheerleaders are athletes. They’re strong, they work really hard” (*ibid.*). As a result, the Radical Cheerleaders keep many of the trappings of traditional cheering. For example, the squad members usually don skirts and pom-poms (the latter often made out of shredded plastic bags); some go so far as to have fairly well-coordinated uniforms. They often wear the “ear-to-ear saccharin smiles” associated with cheerleading, and some of them bring the choreographed moves they learned from years in “real” cheering squads, including building pyramids (Usborne 2003, 13).

Yet the Radical Cheerleaders could never be mistaken for the all-American stereotype, and they take much delight in parodying it. For example, the women in the squads represent a wide range of body types, often in varying degrees of undress (one of their most popular cheers begins “Riot, don’t diet! Get up, get out and try it!”). The squads’ fashion (non)sense also parodies the sexual stereotypes surrounding cheerleading. Women in Radical Cheering squads often wear outrageously tight or skimpy clothing; male members of the troupes occasionally don very short cheering skirts.<sup>2</sup>

2. There is a racial dimension here that we want to acknowledge, even though we do not have space within this particular argument to investigate it. The New York squad, for example, states in their Website manifesto that they are against “racism,” against “the recruitment of low income youth and people of color in schools,” and for “immigrants’ rights”—which would seem to indicate that race is an important facet of their constellation of beliefs. However, from pictures on their Websites and various news sources, the actual makeup of the squads appears to be primarily white. The Los Angeles group called Teen Radical Cheer, by contrast, is made up principally of Latina/o teenagers (Usborne 2003). The different racial composition of each troupe might affect many aspects of their cheering, from the subject matter of the cheers to the crowd reaction to their performance. An

Thus, the Radical Cheerleaders exploit cheerleading's sex appeal while simultaneously being sharply critical of it. One member of the Chicago troupe Lickity Split, for example, argues that traditional cheering is "organized pornography" (Usborne 2003, 14). At the same time, the Radical Cheerleaders are aware that their outrageous clothing and provocative chants attract attention. This contradiction is evidenced in one of the cheers called "Bring It On: Philly Version," where the Cheerleaders yell: "I'm sexy! I'm cute!/ Political to boot!/ I'm bitchin'! I care!/ So go ahead and stare!" (NYC Radical Cheerleaders 2005).<sup>3</sup>

By merging sexual and political assertiveness, the Radical Cheerleaders try to stake a new place for women in the public sphere. The abstract rationality privileged by the public sphere's original (bourgeois, male) participants regarded embodied femininity as its other; claims to disinterested universality could not be so compelling when coupled with mundane particularities such as a sexed body. As Dorinda Outram argues, the *homo clausus* celebrated in the French Revolution "legitimated himself by his superiority to the somatic relations enjoyed by other classes—aristocracy, peasants, and workers—and by the other gender. In other words, what he possessed was a body that was also a non-body, which, rather than projecting itself, retained itself" (quoted in Landes 1995, 103). That is to say, the vitality of the public sphere depended on the erasure of particularity, on bodies whose excesses were contained and whose impulses were governable.

As a result, in the years that the public sphere was reaching its ascendancy in England, France, and Germany, "public woman" was something of an oxymoron. In fact, one historical meaning for the term "public woman" was a prostitute; "public women" "belonged to" the (masculine) public sphere without being legitimate members of it. The nineteenth century's obsession with prostitution, Elizabeth Wilson writes, was a result of more and more women stepping into public life; as more women migrated to cities to find work, fear arose that great numbers of women in the streets were now "out of place" and consequently out of control. Wilson argues that it "was not just that the numbers of prostitutes probably increased. Rather, was it not that all women who appeared unaccom-

overtly sexual, aggressive, and uncivil display might be interpreted very differently, depending on the skin color of both the cheerleader and the bystander. In subsequent papers, we plan to explore more thoroughly this dimension of the groups' performances.

3. We would argue that this contradiction is at the heart of "mainstream" cheerleading as well, as evidenced by Texas legislator Al Edwards's 2005 attempt to pass a law prohibiting "suggestive" performances by cheerleaders and drill teams.

panied on the streets might be prostitutes? Wasn't a woman in the street a woman of the street, a woman in public a public woman? And how could you distinguish [between them]?" (Wilson 1995, 150).

The idea of a public woman, especially a sexually assertive one, still makes us uneasy. As a result, "the street"—a space often regarded as the epicenter of civic activity—has not been a safe or welcoming place for women. Even today, the street continues to be a place where women are at risk of being verbally or physically harassed, their bodies "fair game" for stares, comments, suggestions ("Smile, honey!"), or aggressive touching. Even when these gestures are meant as compliments, women are well aware of the ambiguity and potential danger of even "harmless" interactions with strangers. Studies document that constantly being on the receiving end of these behaviors has detrimental psychological consequences for women; specifically, many women experience fear because of sexual harassment and, as a result, choose to limit their activities there (Koskela 1999; Lenton et al. 1999, 536; see also Gardner 1995). These behaviors have political implications. If women are made to feel uncomfortable and choose to limit their exposure "in the streets," then they have one less venue for being seen and heard and will be less likely to engage in civic activity (Caiazza 2005).<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to most women, the Radical Cheerleaders purposely take up space in the street, calling attention to themselves with their cheers. They encourage stares by their manner of dress and coordinated moves. While "ordinary" women on the streets fear that interactions with (male) strangers may lead to conflict and/or violence, the Radical Cheerleaders *initiate* confrontation with their aggressive and sometimes accusatory chants. The Radical Cheerleading squads, then, give the women and girls involved a way of being public and present in the street without assuming as much individual risk. Rather than being on the receiving end of men's actions in public, the Radical Cheerleaders *take* action; they become agents rather than (only) objects. While they still rely on some version of the male gaze in order to attract attention, the troupes' sexual and political assertiveness is a self-created spectacle, giving women authorship and control over how they are seen.

The Cheerleaders' performances, then, are an example of what Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman describe as a "masquerade that smudges the clarity of gender" (Berlant and Freeman 1992, 150); the

4. See also Sapiro 1993 for an account of how women are more likely to see themselves as potential victims of violence.

Cheerleaders appropriate an icon of mainstream, heterosexual culture and use it to assail traditional configurations of both sexuality and citizenship. By both mimicking and making outrageous the sexual titillation that is a part of mainstream cheerleading, the Radical Cheerleaders create a subversive spectacle of political action; they trouble the gendered assumptions that undergird both women's sexuality and their place in the public sphere.

### DELIBERATE DISSENT AND THE VIRTUE OF INCIVILITY

*Mission Statement: To provide a disciplined, spirited squad that builds school unity and pride. To show support at all times to the university and community. To encourage each other and have self discipline in cheerleading and life.*

—*Indiana University Southeast Cheerleading Handbook*  
(2005)

The Radical Cheerleaders' troubling of the acceptable boundaries of the contemporary public sphere becomes even more evident when the discussion shifts to explicitly dissident activity. Dissident activity, by definition, resists governmentality. However, certain types of dissident activity by women and for feminist causes are more easily disciplined and normalized by mainstream political discourse than others. Specifically, such constraints on women's dissident activity become clear when we examine a woman considered an icon of dissident behavior, the late Rosa Parks. Parks is an exemplar of what Holloway Sparks terms "dissident citizenship," which she defines as "the practices of marginalized citizens who publicly contest prevailing arrangements of power by means of oppositional democratic practices that augment or replace institutionalized channels of democratic opposition when those channels are inadequate or unavailable" (Sparks 1997, 75). Because these practices of dissent work outside of public spaces coded for legitimate political use—the voting booth, the courtroom, the halls of Congress—they must be atypical and creative to have political effect. Activities that fall under this purview include marches, protests, speeches, and picket lines, as well as the type of street theater practiced by the Radical Cheerleaders (*ibid.*, 75).

Sparks highlights Rosa Parks as an exemplar of dissident citizenship, but the use of Parks also calls attention to the gendered limitations of disciplined and thus "legitimate" dissent. Senator Barack Obama's (D-IL) remarks at Parks's funeral in 2005 illustrate these limitations:



The woman we honored today held no public office, she wasn't a wealthy woman, didn't appear in the society pages. And yet when the history of this country is written, it is this small, quiet woman whose name will be remembered long after the names of senators and presidents have been forgotten. (Associated Press, 2005a)

Contrast this with Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm's comments at that same funeral service. Instead of characterizing Parks as a "small, quiet woman," she instead called her "a heroic warrior for equality" and "a warrior for the everyman and the everywoman" (Associated Press 2005b). Which portrayal is accurate—the small, quiet woman or the heroic warrior for equality? According to Parks, by far the most common media portrayal of her most famous act was not Governor Granholm's but Senator Obama's—an unassuming, almost accidental act of dissent. The media, then and now, have not portrayed Parks as a purposeful activist with a history of rebellion. History, Parks said herself in 1992, maintains "that my feet were hurting and I didn't know why I refused to stand up when they told me. But the real reason of my not standing up was I felt that I had a right to be treated as any other passenger. We had endured that kind of treatment for too long" (Associated Press 2005a). Not only our collective memory of Parks but her very selection as a "dissident" (for extremely self-conscious political reasons) reinforces traditional constraints on women's public behavior, women's political voice.<sup>5</sup> "Is it possible we prefer our heroes to be humble," wonders Boston Globe columnist Ellen Goodman in a column on Parks, "or is it just our heroines?"<sup>6</sup>

If Rosa Parks is exemplary, and thus her "accidental" dissidence held up as a model, however implicit, of the type of dissident activity in which women should engage, what are we to make of women who assert their sexuality and yell out (in unison and with accompanying choreographed moves and various expletives) their political opinions on the streets? How should we think about women who interrupt the "legitimate" conversations of the public sphere, demanding our attention by creating a display, a scene, a spectacle that challenges norms concerning gender, sexuality, class, and political behavior?

5. For a more nuanced and contextualized view of the many acts of rebellion and the publics and counterpublics that mobilized both for and against the Civil Rights struggle, see Sparks 1997, especially pp. 89–92.

6. Ellen Goodman, "The Mythology of Rosa Parks," the *Boston Globe*, 28 October 2005, [http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2005/10/28/the\\_mythology\\_of\\_rosa\\_parks/?rss\\_id=Boston+Globe+-+Ellen+Goodman+columns](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2005/10/28/the_mythology_of_rosa_parks/?rss_id=Boston+Globe+-+Ellen+Goodman+columns).

“Civilitarians” offer one such interpretation of this type of behavior (Kennedy 1998, 84). Over the past 15 years, journalists and academics on both the Left and on the Right have decried what they have termed a “crisis of civility,” citing the increase of incidents of negative campaigning, attack ads, and name-calling on the floor of Congress, as well as road rage, rude cellphone users, and Jerry Springer (Sapiro 1999, 1; see also Banfield 1992, Hefner 1998; Himmelfarb 1995; Sparks 2000). The definition of “civility” varies according to each author, but civility is commonly linked with manners—consideration and respect for others, courtesy, politeness, and emotional and/or bodily self-control.

Adding “school spirit” to that list results in the attitudinal requirements for most cheerleading squads, whether they are Pee Wee cheerleaders for elementary school students, high school and college cheering squads, or the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders.<sup>7</sup> Normal cheerleaders are expected to have impeccable manners. While high school and college cheerleading have become much more athletic in the past 20 years and cheerleaders now compete in their own athletic competitions, civility requirements are still very heavily enforced. Not only do cheerleaders need to embody such civil traits themselves; one of their most important functions is to keep the crowd from becoming uncivil. The Washington (State) Interscholastic Activities Association states that this is a cheerleading duty of paramount importance: “Being the most recognizable representatives of a school, cheerleaders are in a position of great influence over a crowd. The cheerleaders can really set the tone for their crowd and should promote positive sportsmanship, ethics and integrity at all times” (2005).

In contrast, *incivility* “connotes discourtesy, conduct that betrays little regard for the feelings of others, indifference to widely accepted norms of behavior” (Kennedy 1998, 85). Incivility, according to its critics, demonstrates both a lack of respect for others and a lack of control over oneself. Incivility first exemplifies a lack of respect for others, in that others in the public space might be disgusted, annoyed, inconvenienced, or frightened by one’s behavior. Secondly, incivility displays a lack of control over one’s own bodily functions (spitting, farting, blowing one’s nose, table manners) and/or a lack of control over one’s emotions in public (yelling, cursing, up to and including verbal

7. Country Music Television’s new reality series on the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders confirms that even cheerleaders at the professional level must go through “attitude” training, which focuses on “professionalism and etiquette,” including days developing correct table manners (CMT 2005).

and physical violence).<sup>8</sup> Incivility thus highlights all types of “ungoverned” public behaviors, behaviors that are not disciplined, and therefore not coded as “civil.”

Incivility also has overt class, race, and gender markers. Specifically, more conservative “civilitarians” also consider uncivil any behavior that differs from largely religiously derived, bourgeois norms governing women’s conduct, especially women’s sexual conduct (Kennedy 1998, 84). These unbecoming public activities include those that contribute to the decline of “family values,” such as same-sex marriage, divorce, and the availability of day care: “Family is the fundamental building block of all human civilizations,” says James Dobson of Focus on the Family (2005). Accordingly, the “frighteningly high number of children born to unmarried women,” and the “flaunting” of homosexuality in public are also defined as uncivil (Carter 1998, 77; Shils 1992, 92).<sup>9</sup> Rosa Parks may have been a dissident according to racial norms of that time, but she was also the epitome of what it means to be civil for a woman in the public sphere: she was married, feminine, demure, attended church regularly, and was solidly middle class in manners and appearance. She challenged a significant source of inequality, but she challenged it in a way that did not obviously endanger traditional gender, sexuality, or class norms. She was practicing “civil” disobedience in every respect, which, according to Sparks, made it much more difficult for elite whites to label Parks as a troublemaker or agitator (Sparks 1997, 99–100). Claudette Colvin, by contrast, was arrested a few months before Parks for a comparable offense, but community leaders declined to pursue the matter legally or publicize it to start a bus boycott when they found out that Colvin was unmarried and pregnant (*ibid.*, 99).

Given the particular context of a white supremacist South in which (extremely uncivil) violence against racial unorthodoxy was the norm, Parks’s obvious civility worked in the Civil Rights movement’s favor. She was a well-governed citizen: respectful of the feelings of others and in control of herself; thus, middle-class white America could and did identify with her as a fellow human being at a personal level, a designation denied to African Americans in the Jim Crow South. She was like them in every way except for the color of her skin. In this specific situation, creating a connection with the white middle class watching the bus boy-

8. For a pre-Foucauldian genealogy of the rise of civility and its relationship with the modern state, see Elias 2000.

9. See also Carlson 2004, which states that the bond between marriage and procreation is the foundation of the “unwritten sexual constitution of our civilization.”

cott unfold in newspapers and on television was very effective. However, her civility also exposed weaknesses in this approach. Parks's brave and defiant act was easily appropriated into the mainstream discourse that held that a well-governed woman could not possibly have been the author of her actions: After all, she was just a small, quiet woman whose feet hurt too much to give up her seat.

Very few will dispute the historical successes of *civil* disobedience as a tactic of protest. Are there situations, however, where *incivility* could be both effective and less easily appropriated into mainstream political discourse, where ungovernability is necessary and what we might call "losing control" of one's body and emotions—at least refusing to accept traditional notions of public decorum—might be warranted, indeed, where "losing control" of one's body and emotions is actually the point? After all, what exactly does it mean to be "well governed" in a society that systematically denies full personhood to many of its members? Perhaps incivility is also a rational response to injustice. Speaking in favor of incivility, Benjamin DeMott has argued that "the incivility railed at by the elite should be seen as a protest by Americans outside the ranks of the publicly articulate against the conduct of their presumed betters" (1996, 12). Randall Kennedy told those present at a 1996 symposium on civility at the Yale Law School that "if you're in an argument with a thug, there are things much more important than civility" (in DeMott, 12). Kennedy later noted that "virtuecrats" have fits over bad language, but "homeless families and involuntary unemployment only get a shrug. They focus more indignation on the raunchy lyrics of gangsta rap than the horrific indifference that makes possible the miserable conditions that those lyrics vividly portray" (Kennedy 1998, 86). If civil discourse systematically displaces discussions of social problems like poverty and discrimination, then incivility might be an effective tactic to force those issues back on the agenda.

Consequently, much of what the Radical Cheerleaders want to discuss in a public forum is, according to present standards, quite uncivil. In fact, practically everything about the Radical Cheerleaders is rude, both in terms of a lack of respect for the feelings of others and also what is perceived as a lack of control of one's emotions and body in the public space. As a journalist for the London newspaper, *The Independent* noted, "Being polite . . . is not a priority for this merry band" (Usborne 2003, 13). In addition to often flouting "respectable" standards of dress, the content of many of their cheers would be considered shocking and disrespectful to passersby according to current standards. Many cheers deal

overtly with forms of “improper” sexual behaviors, such as masturbation (“2-4-6-8! Barbie likes to masturbate! She’s been doing it since age 8! And her skill is really great!); homosexuality (“Trannies, fags, dykes, and queers! There’s more to us than selling beers! You won’t find us acting straight! Shopping for the perfect mate!”); and abortion (“We got it goin’ on! We say womyn are really strong! We’re not going to go away! Cause pro-choice is here to stay!”) (Radical Cheerleaders 2005a, 2005b). Other cheers deal with beauty standards—combining objectionable public language with an overt refusal to accept standards that classify the vast majority of women as unacceptable—like the cheer “Fuck yer fascist beauty standards!” which ends with “U-G-L-Y! We don’t believe your fucking lies! FUCK u misogynists! AND your fascist beauty myth!” (2005b).<sup>10</sup>

In addition to “uncivil” cheer content, their preferred means of communicating that content also violates many norms of civility. “Normal” cheerleaders are also loud, but the times and spaces considered appropriate for this type of noise are heavily circumscribed. Cheering is only appropriate during athletic contests and specifically labeled in-school events like pep rallies, as well as orderly public spaces like parades. And even within officially designated athletic events, cheering is greatly restricted and policed; for example, cheerleaders are only allowed on the playing floor or field during breaks in the “real” athletic event, such as time-outs and halftime. In fact, the “real” athletic team can be disciplined with penalties, such as technical fouls with free throws (basketball), penalty kicks (soccer), loss of down or yards (football), even game stoppage, expulsion, and forfeit if the team’s cheerleaders attempt to transgress beyond their expressly designated time periods and physical spaces. Cheerleaders who are ungovernable are a nuisance to their team.

Radical Cheerleaders, by contrast, are purposively creating a nuisance. They cheer in undesignated, often disorderly public spaces, such as political protests. Disregarding the norms of polite society, they interrupt other conversations in the public square through sheer volume. Radical Cheer squads may coordinate to march and cheer along with other dissident groups for larger political demonstrations to protest globalization or the Iraq war, for example. Or they may not. The multiplicity of issues important to different squads, as well as the informal, nonhierarchical internal

10. Civility, of course, is also the hallmark of standard academic discourse. For this reason, we struggled with how to describe the content of the Cheerleaders’ performances while remaining within the bounds of appropriate, academic language. We decided that it would be counterproductive (not to mention quite ironic) to censor the Cheerleaders in this article, while affirming their subversive use of profanity and vulgar humor.

organization of most squads, limit strict generalizations about exactly how and in what capacity Radical Cheerleaders participate in different events. The one generalization that can be made, however, is that the squads themselves decide how, when, and where they will participate.

Both the content and the performance of their cheers show that although Radical Cheerleaders may not respect societal conventions about proper public behavior for women and are not concerned about embarrassing or annoying others with their cheers, they are completely *in control* of their bodies and emotions. Like any performance (and also like “normal” cheerleaders), the Radical Cheerleaders practice in private to varying degrees before their public displays; the cheers are meant for public consumption. Everything about the cheers, from the language to the subject matter to the method of presentation, indicates complete authorship and ownership of the event. The Radical Cheerleaders may create a spectacle, but it cannot be labeled “accidental,” as Rosa Parks’s dissidence was subsequently labeled. Their ungovernable spectacle is one entirely of their own creation.

### THE UNLAUGHING LAUGH BACK

*“You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her.  
And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.”*

—Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1980)

Like deliberate incivility, humorous performance does not conform to the normalized and disciplined discourse of the public sphere where rational argument, good logic, and factual evidence are privileged. Neither does it mirror the typical emotions often present in political communication. When emotions do appear in public discourse, especially in the discourse of dissent, they are typically those of anger, disgust, and righteous indignation. Protests, by definition, are spurred by objections, remonstrations, and complaints about the status quo and thus are undergirded by negative emotions. By contrast, the performances of the Radical Cheerleaders are fun for those cheering, as well as often being humorous and inspiring to fellow protesters and passersby: “I think radical cheerleading is a really effective way of protesting,” stated Andrea, a Radical Cheerleader from Florida, in an interview with the webzine *girlphoria.com*. “I have found that people listen to what we say because [i]t’s in this funny rhyme, so politically, We can say a lot more than if we were making a speech” (Oceania 2005).

In this section, we examine the role that humor and laughter can play in political dissent. We argue that humor, especially dissident political humor, has the potential to upset or disrupt unexamined assumptions about gender and the public sphere. Specifically, the Radical Cheerleaders use laughter as a political tactic to problematize both the actual substantive issues that are the subject of their cheers and to trouble two specific, gendered stereotypes about women and humor: that women are usually the butt of the joke and that feminists have no sense of humor.

Traditionally, humorous material about sex and gender has been used to keep women in their (subservient) place. Aristotle is often given credit for the original theoretical discussion of what later became known as the disparagement or superiority theory of humor—the idea that laughter is an expression of one’s feelings of superiority over another.<sup>11</sup> Laughter, in this theoretical formulation, is inherently connected to ridicule. Speaking specifically of women in the *Poetics*, Aristotle asserts that the “ridiculous was a species of ugliness or badness,” and thus, obviously inferior beings (such as slaves or women) were acceptable characters for comedy. They would not be acceptable characters for a tragedy, which, instead, needs characters with integrity (such as male citizens) to be effective (1952, 37). Different genres of jokes reducing women to various, inferior types fall into this category: mother-in-law jokes, blond jokes, jokes about women as infantile, jokes about rape or sexual promiscuity, all species of jokes reducing women to sexual body parts/objects, or, conversely, jokes about women who are too “fat” or “ugly” to garner male approval.

The typical female response to these types of jokes—for example, that jokes about breast size, female intellectual inferiority, or rape are not especially funny—has resulted in the claim that women, especially those women who consider themselves feminists, have no sense of humor.<sup>12</sup> However, it was not always this way. Frances Gray argues that it was only when a sense of humor came to be considered a positive character trait in the modern period that women were labeled as lacking in this regard. She cites Reginald Blythe’s 1959 treatise on the use of humor in English literature as a particularly noteworthy example: “Women have not only no humour in themselves,” Blythe asserts, “but are the cause of the ex-

11. The other two major theoretical schematics are relief theories, which are based on Freud’s (1964) discussion of jokes and posit that laughter is a release of the energy that we usually use to suppress taboo thoughts and feelings in order to comply with the rules of society, and incongruity theories (discussed later in this section).

12. By contrast, the lack of laughter at castration, impotence, and vaginas with teeth does *not* lead to charges of humorlessness in men (Gray 1994, 4).

tion of it in others. This is almost too cruel to be true . . . they are the unlaughing at which men laugh” (Gray 1994, 7).

While the powerful often laugh at the powerless to reinstate and reinvigorate already existing social boundaries by forcing them back into facile stereotypes (the premise behind many ethnic jokes), humor can also be used in creative and subversive ways by the powerless. This subversive potential is tied directly to the most widespread of the theories of humor, incongruity theories, which argue that laughter is often triggered by some type of incongruous event (Critchley 2002; Morreall 1987). Manifestations as different as the Three Stooges, Monty Python, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *Far Side* cartoons all create or highlight incongruous situations, which often, depending on our individual and social context, make us laugh.

Incongruity, however, is also troubling. In *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas maintains that all cultures need a relatively stable system. Disorder, or what she calls “matter out of place,” is potentially disruptive to that system and thus is often regarded as dangerous, like some type of pollution that then needs to be expunged or purified and thus returned to order, bringing back the normal state of affairs. Depending on the context, Douglas argues, matter out of place can evoke reactions ranging from smiling and laughter to irritation and revulsion (Douglas 1966, 35).

As the discussion and examples in previous sections indicate, the Radical Cheerleaders reframe and re-present various stereotypically “feminine” traits in an incongruous manner, a manner different from the “normal” frame of reference for making sense of cheerleaders. Although certainly some bystanders find this type of incongruous reframing irritating, even revolting, the merging of the nonthreatening stereotype of the attractive, well-behaved female cheerleader who is cheering to support the (male) team with the often blatantly provocative, profane, sometimes male cheerleader who is cheering to support a radical political platform creates a form of cognitive dissonance that is, instead, often funny. For example, the New York squad’s cheer “No Justice” illustrates this dissonance: “No Justice! Here’s a piece of my mind/ No Justice! A piece of my behind/ No Justice! Piece it together you’ll find—RADICAL CHEERLEADERS ON THE FRONT LINES!” (Radical Cheerleaders 2005a). The dissonance occurs at multiple levels. Cheerleaders are not ordinarily in the streets. They do not normally cheer about President George W. Bush, masturbation, poverty, the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas or, for that matter, their behinds.



They certainly do not swear or interrupt and, as noted earlier, they as well as their “teams” are disciplined if they are impolite or cheer at inappropriate moments or in inappropriate spaces. They are rarely the center of attention, but instead are an accessory whose main function is to support the team. The Radical Cheerleaders disturb all of these stereotypes and this, in turn, makes people laugh: “Protests so often [are] a rally with people talking at you or a boring march,” says Christina Stephenson, a Radical Cheerleader from Washington, DC, in an interview with the journal *Iris*, “but then the radical cheerleaders swoop by and put a smile on everyone’s faces. The energy multiplies and people stop being bored for a second” (in Long 2005, 22). It is interesting to note that the often humorous nature of cheering can also be unsettling to the serious nature of protest itself. Even within the dissident community, Radical Cheerleaders present potentially disruptive incongruities.

What makes these incongruities especially noteworthy is that the cheerleaders themselves are the authors, not the objects, of this humorous performance. If the crowd laughs and joins in, it is in response to cheers that they created, outfits that they made, moves that they choreographed. In this case, their refusal to comply with a myriad of societal norms is an overt, strategic act, designed to both create sisterhood within the group and raise consciousness in the larger public about specific political issues.

Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that laughter can instigate thought, and that this type of laughter is quite different from both the ridiculing humor often used to keep women in their place and the transparent, rational, seemingly objective discourse so highly prized in the public sphere: “Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into the zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below.” Laughter, Bakhtin argues, “demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it (Bakhtin 1981, 23). Thus, this type of interrogative laughter can help clear away affective barriers to a reexamination of deeply held beliefs.

Interrogative laughter is at the center of the Radical Cheerleaders’ performances. In the NYC Radical Cheerleaders’ “Call to Action” to protest the Republican National Convention in September of 2004, they state: “We believe that radical cheerleaders are unique in our ability to convey a message, because we do not accept that just voting will make a

difference in this world. It is our duty to let the Bush Administration know that we are fed up and we won't stop until our demands are met" (2004). To do this, however, cheerleaders are supposed to come armed with noisemakers, uniforms, and pom-poms. Combining the gravitas of their political message with the levity of their performance creates a disjunction in expectation that not only makes us laugh but, hopefully, also opens up a space to reflect and perhaps imagine something different. Radical Cheerleaders recognize this potential: "Those cheers let us protest in a way that's approachable, not scary. And this gets people laughing—and thinking" (Radical Cheerleaders 2006). Privileging "serious" and "civil" rational argumentation risks dismissing comedic performances such as these, rather than regarding them as legitimate and effective modes of political expression. Rather than diminishing the quality of political debate, the Radical Cheerleaders help create interrogative laughter, which, in turn, encourages us to think (2006). If one can laugh at things as profoundly ingrained in our culture as attitudes toward gender roles, one can begin to question their naturalness, their moral rectitude, and their permanence.

### RADICAL CHEERLEADING AS SYMBOLIC DISOBEDIENCE

We have argued that through their aggressive presence in the streets, their deliberate incivility, and their use of humor, the Radical Cheerleaders expand the boundaries of the public sphere. Specifically, they challenge two aspects of the public sphere: the gendered norms that constrain women's participation and behavior in political protest, and the premium placed on rational, objective discourse in public deliberation. Rather than appealing to abstract principles or well-reasoned arguments, the Radical Cheerleaders create a humorous, embodied performance of political opposition.

This strategy, of course, is not without its critics. Some theorists worry that such antics are too easily appropriated and incorporated by what Guy Debord first referred to as the "society of the spectacle," and critics beginning with the Frankfurt School have worried about the commodification of dissent. Indeed, the Radical Cheerleaders have had some experience with this; when their antics were picked up by mainstream media publications, the Cheerleaders' message was construed to be less angry, less offensive, less outrageous, and more feminine. When *Glamour UK* printed its 2004 interview with Cheerleader Mary Xmas, for example,

the accompanying photographs featured Cheerleaders with airbrushed armpits, lest underarm hair appear too “radical” for *Glamour* advertisers (Vacarro 2004).

A second, related criticism comes from some advocates of deliberative democracy. The kinds of spectacles engaged in by the Radical Cheerleaders are, in deliberative democrats’ minds, the antithesis of rational argumentation or meaningful public discussion. In its simplest form, critics charge that spectacle compromises critical thinking and can lead to depoliticization (Shugart and Waggoner 2005, 66). At its extreme, some theorists argue that spectacles—even spectacles of resistance—inhibit and impair political judgment. Thus, spectacle contributes to the aestheticization of politics, a symptom of modernity that Walter Benjamin identified as culminating in fascism and war (Benjamin 1968, 241).

As Linda Zerilli points out, however, these critiques rest on the assumption that “spectacle” can be easily discerned from “substance,” that what is imaginative or creative in politics is dangerous to what is “real” (Zerilli 2005, 716–17).<sup>13</sup> Zerilli argues that this is a false opposition, that politics not only tolerates but rather *requires* creative engagement. One important purpose of the public sphere, then, is to expand the boundaries of our political imagination; this often means calling into question the normal or accepted ways of “doing politics” and providing a space for rhetorical and tactical experimentation. Especially for groups at the margins of political discourse, finding new and interesting ways to present their message is crucial if they want to be heard. The street theater performed by the Radical Cheerleaders should be seen as a kind of aesthetic and performative experiment in which incivility (indeed vulgarity) and humor are used to push the boundaries of acceptable political discourse.

The political contributions of the Radical Cheerleaders, however, go beyond advocacy for a more inclusive public sphere. The norms fostered by deliberative publics also promote normalizing self-control. The public sphere is a site not only for learning democratic engagement but also for nurturing governmentality; individuals learn behaviors that allow them not only to govern but also to be *governable* (Barry Hindress in Dryzek 2000, 63). By bringing their incivility and often vulgar humor to the streets, the Cheerleaders productively interrupt these lessons in docility; they are the class clowns in the school of participatory democracy.

13. Geoffrey Baum (2005) makes a similar claim with regard to the news parody *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. “Real” news, he argues, is so intertwined with spectacle that *The Daily Show* should not be seen as “fake” news, but as an experiment in political journalism.

The sorts of spectacles performed by the Radical Cheerleaders are what Orville Lee calls acts of symbolic disobedience, or “the disruption of established patterns of symbolic interaction [which] enables ordinary citizens to raise a critical perspective on the legitimacy of the symbolic order (Lee 1998, 499).” The Radical Cheerleaders create a transgressive spectacle that challenges traditional conceptions of both gender and politics—and in so doing, changes the shape and content of the public sphere.

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