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Simply the best:

Parody and political sincerity in Iceland

ABSTRACT

Pursuing a self-described anarcho-surrealist politics in the aftermath of Iceland's banking crisis, Jón Gnarr shocked the country's political establishment by winning the mayoral election in Reykjavík in May 2010. In this article, I explore the rise of Gnarr's Best Party, especially its refusal to accept a distinction between parody and sincerity in its mode of political performance. Against the backdrop of the increasing monopolization of (neo)liberal political discourse and action, I discuss how "Gnarrism" reflects at once something old and something new in northern liberal democracy. [*satire, performance, political culture, Iceland, anarchism*]

I'm the Predator of Icelandic politics. I'm an alien that no one really knows how to deal with. So the question is whether or not there's some Arnold Schwarzenegger out there. I don't think there is.

— J. Gnarr, *mayor of Reykjavík*

Something funny is happening to politics. In the past decade, "joke political parties," political performance art, and fake news organizations have proliferated at a dizzying rate. Although, to be sure, there is nothing new about political parody in itself (see Schwarcz, this issue), it seems as though satire is no longer content to stand adjacent to political culture as a ludic companion. From Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy to Stephen Colbert's Super PAC in the United States to Jón Gnarr's Best Party in Iceland, satire is now invading (or being drawn into) the sphere of "normal politics," muddying the supposedly clear distinction between "parodic" and "sincere" modes of political performance. The blurring of parody and sincerity is a phenomenon of enormous interest to contemporary political anthropology. Indeed, I argue here that it reveals a great deal about the dominant conditions of northern political culture today, particularly its monopolization of political discourse and action around principles we normally gloss as "neoliberal."¹ Northern liberal democracy still valorizes freedom of expression and the competition of interests as among its most cherished institutions. Yet, practically speaking, in the decades since the Washington Consensus, (mainstream) liberal freedom has more often than not meant the freedom to express only a certain set of ideas and to represent only a certain set of interests. An ironic distance has opened between northern liberalism's self-imagination and its practices, and this distance can make for good theater. Think, for example, of the U.S. national elections in which two fundamentally neoliberal parties strive to perform difference and spotlight "choice" in aspects of their platforms. Much as in the last years of European state socialism (see Boyer and Yurchak 2010), the overformalization and monopolization of liberal politics has, to a significant degree, rendered its authoritative discourses

and practices self-caricaturing. This situation has inspired new breeds of political parody and satire that seek not only to create ironic commentary on political performance but also to performatively inhabit the practice of politics. In this article, I delve into the fascinating case of Iceland's Best Party to give better ethnographic anchorage to what is at once a widespread yet still anthropologically underanalyzed phenomenon.

But, before proceeding, I offer a brief reminder that satire, parody, and irony have themselves long served as rich loci of anthropological attention and commentary, whether in the form of appreciation for the presence of what James Fernandez has termed "tropes of indirection" (Fernandez and Huber 2001:87) in expressive culture (e.g., Brenneis 1984; Herzfeld 2001; Lindstrom 1990; Ohale 2003) or in the exploration of parody's narratological presence in anthropological ethnography and theory (Boon 1982; Chambers 1989; Crapanzano 1991; Marcus 1988). More recently, anthropological attention has shifted toward satire and parody in politics, especially toward parody as a critical resource for engaging political authority (e.g., Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Graeber 2002; Haugerud 2010, 2012; Klumbyte 2011; Wedel 2009). This move builds on prior research in anthropology on the place of satire and irony in the constitution of social and political subjectivities (e.g., Goodman 1998; Shore 1995; Weidman 2010), and it indexes a long tradition in the human sciences, most notably, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (e.g., 1965) on parodic inversions and subversions of authoritative discourse.² More recently, the work of Achille Mbembe (1992:29, 2003) has proved a particularly stimulating resource for reflecting on how authoritarian power seduces its citizen targets into coelaborating aesthetics of obscenity and vulgarity through its excess of violence.

The Best Party makes for a particularly interesting case of the blurring of parody and sincerity in northern political culture today because of its enduring ambiguity, at least from the vantage point of mainstream Icelandic politics and international news media. Is it a sincere and serious political intervention or, rather, some kind of joke? What follows in the first half of this article is a discussion of Besti Flokkurinn (the Best Party), the self-described "anarcho-surrealist" political movement in Iceland that arose in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. My discussion of the Best Party is very much colored by the fact that I became aware of it through research on political performance in other contexts. I am not, in other words, an "anthropologist of Iceland," and this article cannot offer the kind of fine-grained diachronic contextualization that a true Icelandic political anthropology would provide. My hope is that what is lost at that end of the analysis is balanced by my ability to situate the Best Party within the transnational phenomenon in northern political culture described above.

That effort is the work of the second half of the article. Beginning with the premise that the relationship between cynicism and sincerity in politics is an old one, I discuss two philosophers, Michel Foucault and Peter Sloterdijk, who have commented on this relationship at length. I then contrast their analyses of classical cynicism with the results of my ongoing research with Alexei Yurchak on the emergence of "stioob" in Soviet socialism—stioob being a late socialist mode of parody so true to its object of imitation that it was very difficult to determine whether its performances were cynical or sincere. I argue that all three analytics help us to understand the emergence of the Best Party and its sibling forms of political performance as responses to neoliberal monopolization of northern political culture. Yet I also argue that the meaning of these "emergent politics" (Duncombe 2007:141; Haugerud 2013) can be difficult to determine. Although in some performances, a critical dialogue with neoliberal monopolization is relatively clear, the example of the Best Party shows the indeterminate performativity of others. Members of the Best Party have consistently denied that a categorical distinction can be made between satire and sincerity; they view both as essential to their practice. For the outside observer, it is thus hard to tell whether the Best Party's anarcho-surreal experiments point toward anything like a "political ideology" in the traditional sense or whether political performativity is meant to be an end in itself. The lesson we can derive here is that political anthropology should be on the lookout for emergent forms of political action and belonging that are not always recognizable to the categories of northern liberalism—neoanarchisms, neosocialisms, and, indeed, neofascisms, for example—as well as for forms more indefinable still, forms that are capitalizing on the increasingly predictable and recursive formalism of contemporary liberalism (as well as the companion economic and energetic crises of northern capitalism) to enact alternative political imaginations.

Too small to fail

For a country of 320,000 people, Iceland has been a surprisingly routine presence in international news cycles over the past five years. First, in the early weeks of the global financial crisis of 2008, Iceland suffered, relative to the size of its economy, the largest banking collapse in world history. Deregulation of the Icelandic banking industry in the early 2000s had created enormous incentives, as elsewhere in the world, for banks to reinvent themselves as speculative, entrepreneurial enterprises. Overheated international investment and other perilous financial schemes followed, inflating the banking sector and domestic lending, fueling, in turn, a consumer revolution that made Iceland, for a few years, one of the wealthiest countries per capita in the world. But Iceland's three major private banks also ended

up accumulating over \$85 billion of international debt by 2008, several times the size of Iceland's gross domestic product. When international credit markets dried up after the collapse of Lehman Brothers that September, the banks' debt could no longer be serviced, and all three failed and were nationalized, bringing Iceland's Central Bank very nearly to the brink of bankruptcy. Foreign bank account holders, particularly in the United Kingdom, pressured their governments to force the return of their deposits. In less than two weeks, Icelandic sovereign debt was downgraded to junk status, and the Icelandic krona lost two-thirds of its value; inflation and unemployment, meanwhile, soared. With the Icelandic economy in collapse, the IMF stepped in in November with a \$4 billion stabilization package, ending the most intense phase of the crisis.

But the aftermath spilled over into 2009, as popular protests against those who had presided over the collapse increased. As anthropologist Hulda Proppé recalls,

In January 2009, the demonstrations reached a level of intense seriousness and a violent undertone could be felt. On January 21, [they] took a new twist. On that night the drumming of the pots, pans and drums could be heard loudly to my home, a 10 minute walk from the city center, and the light from the fire that had been made by setting the Christmas tree in the city center on fire, lit the sky blood red. For the first time in 60 years the Reykjavík police used tear gas to move demonstrators from the parliament building in order to try to gain control of the situation that had emerged. [n.d.:2]

Prime Minister Geir Haarde, who had governed during the run up to the financial crash, was driven from office less than a week later by what amounted to a popular revolution that anticipated and inspired both the Arab Spring and the global Occupy movement.³ Yet protests in Reykjavík continued throughout the year, as the succeeding government also sought to hold Icelandic citizens liable for part of the debt amassed by the failed banks. In the end, foreign creditors were forced to accept losses on most of the banking debt, a most unusual solution for coping with the aftermath of 2008 (as we continue to see in today's Eurozone crisis).

But this extraordinary commitment to prioritizing citizen interests over financiers' interests is precisely what pushed Iceland into the international news again. Haarde was arrested, tried, and convicted for his role in allowing the crisis conditions to build,⁴ and Iceland's economic turnaround in 2011 and 2012 has convinced a number of economic policy analysts that the decision to allow its over-inflated banking sector to collapse (as opposed, e.g., to the "too big to fail" policies of the United States and United Kingdom) and to protect citizens from the odious debt generated by its banking sector were among the key decisions that allowed the country to minimize the long-term negative impact of the crash (e.g., Darvas 2011).⁵ Indeed, eco-

nomics pundits like Paul Krugman (2011) now routinely cite Iceland in debates over what to do with other failing European countries like Greece and Spain, where creditor-friendly austerity policies are driving economies into recessionary ruin. Once an internationally recognized exemplar of the dangers of deregulated banking and excessive borrowing, Iceland has in just a few years become an international symbol of resistance to the dominant wisdom of neoliberal necessity. When I toured the occupation of Barcelona's Plaça de Catalunya with a Brazilian journalist in May 2011, he pointed out to me that the camp had three sections named for its inspirations: Tunis, Tahrir, and Iceland.

But, the part of this story that is most closely related to the issue of political parody began to unfold a few years earlier, in 2009. In the heart of the unrest concerning public debt liability, an unusual group of actors entered the Icelandic political sphere and found their mode of political performance to be even more resonant with the public than they had hoped.

Jón Gnarr and Besti Flokkurinn

In the fall of 2009, Iceland had four major political parties, the Social-Democratic Alliance, the Left-Green Party, the Independence Party, and the Progressive Party. What made the country's political discontent so severe at the time was that the latter two parties represented the government that had deregulated the banking industry and allowed it to generate the massive debts in the first place and that the other two parties composed the new government that was trying to convince the public to accept debt liability to avoid international sanctions. Icelanders expressed a distinct feeling of betrayal that the new government was slipping into the habits of its predecessor and a sense that they had no meaningful political choice, at least when it came to the debt issue.

Things changed in November 2009, when a new party, Besti Flokkurinn (the Best Party), appeared, although it was immediately and widely derided as an amusing but otherwise inconsequential "joke party" by the Icelandic political elite. After all, critics smirked, its supposed ten-point platform was composed of 13 points and included statements like "Stop corruption: We promise to stop corruption. We'll accomplish this by participating in it openly" and "Free access to swimming pools for everyone and free towels: This is something that everyone should fall for, and it's the election promise we're most proud of." But, notably, the platform also included "Cancel all debts: We listen to the nation and do as it wishes because the nation knows what's best for itself" (see Besti Flokkurinn—Pólítískt Partí 2011). None of the Best Party candidates had any previous political experience, although some were familiar figures in the Icelandic music and arts scene, including the party's founder



Figure 1. Jón Gnarr, founder of the Best Party and mayor of Reykjavík. Photo by Hörður Sveinsson.

and chief agent provocateur, Jón Gnarr, a well-known actor, writer, and stand-up comedian; Óttarr Proppé, a founding member of the influential rock band HAM; and Einar Örn from the musical group the Sugarcubes. Proppé confirmed to me in an interview in Reykjavík in December 2011 that the original impetus to form the Best Party had come from Gnarr, who had been calling old friends and associates to express his dismay with the state of politics in the country. “I had absolutely no interest in politics myself,” Proppé told me, “But I knew Jón and I knew that he was the kind of guy who would see this through.”

Soon Gnarr was running for mayor of Reykjavík, with elections scheduled for May 2010 (see Figure 1). The Best Party’s platform proved to be remarkably resonant despite, or perhaps because of, the Icelandic political and media establishments’ refusal to take the party seriously. It did not hurt that Gnarr also proved to be a magnetic and often hilarious public speaker. In campaign debates, one could see opponents spontaneously laughing along with him as he oscillated between the absurdist talking points of the Best Party platform and reassurance that he was absolutely sincere and serious in his efforts to change Iceland for the better.

Heiða Helgadóttir, Gnarr’s campaign manager and the Best Party’s only salaried employee, told me that she thought Gnarr’s background was essential to his campaign success: “Jón has a terrific sense of timing that he developed from his work in comedy. And politics, you know, is also about timing.”

As the Best Party rose in the polls in the early months of 2010, Gnarr attracted more and more news media attention. The Best Party’s promise to refuse a coalition with any party that had not watched all five seasons of HBO’s *The Wire* drew significant commentary (see, e.g., Birrell 2011; McGrane 2010). News reports pored over the details of Gnarr’s life: He had never completed secondary school and was a juvenile delinquent, punker, anarchist, and the son of a communist policeman; his wife was pop singer Björk’s best friend. These nuggets were not often the result of investigative journalism, however, as Gnarr himself was usually the one feeding the news media information that seemingly delegitimated him. In one interview, he said, “I have always been a rather shocking character, ever since I was a kid. It has always been part of my personality, to shock. As a four year old, I used to go up to people on the bus and ask if they had been fucking. ‘Are you always fucking?’ I’d ask, and my mother would have to rush me out.” Pundits clearly were not quite sure what to make of Gnarr’s political campaign. Was it just another shocking prank? If he was sincere, why did he seem unable to remain serious? Most of the news reporting both inside and outside Iceland concluded that popular support for the Best Party was little more than a protest action against a political system that had failed its population in a spectacular fashion. In other words, there was no positive content to the Best Party; it was simply a caricature of a political system that had already made itself a laughingstock.⁶ Gnarr certainly did not deny his frustration with mainstream Icelandic politics. In an interview he gave to an English-language Icelandic news service in May 2010, he described the Best Party as an effort to provoke a “cultural revolution” in Iceland. Gnarr explained,

Political discourse is all dead and vapid. I’ve never been interested in governance or politics . . . I’ve listened to all the empty political discourse, but it’s never touched me at all or moved me, until the economic collapse. Then I just felt I’d had enough of those people. . . . I started reading the local news websites and watching the news and political talk shows—and it filled me with so much frustration. . . . So I wanted to do something, to fuck the system. To change it around and impact it in some way. [Magnússon 2010]

But the argument that the Best Party was simply a prank or even a protest action misses the fact that what characterized the party’s political performativity was its refusal to choose between being either parodic or sincere. In the view of party participants, they were always both. Gnarr

never modified the position that he was not joking, that his political positions, however absurd, were utterly genuine. He explained that his political convictions always moved between anarchism and surrealism, trying to combine “the best bits” of both. He saw himself on the left except that he could not tolerate left-wing moralization and hegemony: “What’s it to me if someone wants to spend their time in strip clubs or smoking crack or surfing the web for pornography?” In the same interview quoted above, he said that what he disliked most was any effort to categorize the Best Party:

Yes, categorization. I am against that. We are such a clever species of animal, we love defining everything. I like depriving people of that sense of well-being they derive from that—any sense of well-being really—and make them feel uncomfortable. Not that I want to hurt anyone. I just hate being categorized, placed in a shelf. That’s one of the things I am enjoying about Besti Flokkurinn.

The constitutive ambiguity between parody and sincerity is exemplified by what was perhaps the most effective tactic of the Best Party campaign, the production of a campaign video that appeared to both imitate and satirize the traditional aesthetics and tropes of political campaign videos. Set to Tina Turner’s version of “The Best,” the video cuts between shots of candidate Gnarr touring the city making campaign stops, listening earnestly to concerned citizens, even kissing a baby, and studio shots of members of the Best Party putting their philosophy to song, (e.g., “We are the Best, the Bestest of Parties” . . . “Tell the squatters in charge that it’s time to leave, the blathering loons should be given a home in the city zoo”). The video culminates in a campaign speech by Gnarr, standing alone on the top of a building overlooking Reykjavík,⁷ gesturing wildly, speaking apparently at once to no one and to everyone below him:

Fellow citizens, the time has come for everyone in Reykjavík to look inside their hearts, to discuss with their family and friends. Do I want a bright future with the Best Party? Or do I want Reykjavík destroyed? Free towels in all the swimming pools! A polar bear for the Reykjavík zoo! . . . Disneyland in the Vatnsmyri area! A drug-free parliament by 2020! . . . Do away with all debt! Economize, we only need one Santa! And, and, we will not accept the mediocre! We want the Best!

The video, released on YouTube, was an instant hit and eventually received hundreds of thousands of views in Iceland and beyond.⁸ On the face of it, it is fun, smart satire. But, over time, in a variety of speaking engagements, it became evident that some of the more curious elements of the Best Party’s platform indexed significant social, political, and environmental issues facing Iceland and the world.

The polar bear for the zoo addressed, for example, climate change and the current Icelandic policy of shooting polar bears that swim to shore fleeing melting ice farther north. The free towels at swimming pools were aimed at attracting greater European tourism, obliquely invoking an obscure EU regulation that, for a pool to be classified as a “spa,” it had to provide free towels to its users. The drug-free parliament referenced an extended rhetorical analogy Gnarr later offered about the relationship of Icelandic political culture to the nation—that of a substance-abusing father to his injured yet enabling family (see Nikolov 2010). But these evidently sincere political messages were cloaked, almost unrecognizably, in the parodic displacements of the video and campaign platform. Once again, it was not quite the case that a sincere politics was hidden inside a satirical shell. The mode of political performance simply denied a categorical distinction between satire and sincerity.

Besti Flokkurinn won the municipal elections in Reykjavík on May 30, 2010, with 34.7 percent of the popular vote, gaining 6 of 15 seats on the city council, only two short of an absolute majority in Iceland’s capital. With 83 percent of Reykjavík’s registered voters (nearly a third of Iceland’s total voting population) going to the polls, this was an event of national political significance. Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir described the Best Party’s victory as a shock and perhaps the “beginning of the end” of Iceland’s four-party system. Gnarr’s first several months as mayor then offered more shocks, further confounding observers at home and abroad about his political sincerity. His frequent invocation of the wisdom of a classic Finnish comic book series about the Moomin elves caused opposition politicians to roll their eyes or to stare at him uncomprehendingly. His mayoral welcome address to the Iceland Airwaves music festival in August 2010 was a brilliantly surreal piece of governmental discourse,⁹ beginning with the scientific improbability of anyone being in Reykjavík, followed by a discussion of Schrödinger’s cat and the reality of existence and then a report on his ongoing conversations with elves and trolls and their advice that Iceland would do well to join the European Union. Also in August 2010, Gnarr led Reykjavík’s gay pride parade in full drag, complaining that the real Jón Gnarr had not shown up as promised, accusing him of probably talking to elves, and concluding, “This is what we get for voting for a clown in elections.” (See Figure 2.)

Gnarr avows that there is a method, of sorts, to all this. He says he frequently plays on his apparent unsuitability for political office in serious times as a method of attracting media attention to the party and its positive work: “I like appearing as a simpleton, like when I gave a speech at the University of Reykjavík and shouted that I had risen from the ashes like the bird Felix. I was just waiting for some blogger type to correct me on that. That gets the party press and exposure, and as soon as they do, I can stand aside, laugh and let the facts or essence of what I was saying do the talking”



Figure 2. Jón Gnarr, mayor of Reykjavík, dressed in drag for Reykjavík's gay pride parade, August 2010. Photo by Stefán Sveinsson (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/stebbisveins/>).

(Magnússon 2010). And he has shown time and again that it remains possible for him, even as mayor, to infuse political performance with affects other than earnestness. Indeed, if what has come to be known in Iceland as “Gnarrism” contains an ideology, it is not a set of policies or positions but, rather, a kind of affective disposition, one that distinguishes itself in its humility and playfulness from the self-satisfied professional austerity of normal politics. Proppé, now a city councilor, told me that the hardest thing about the transition from campaign to government was how to maintain a “sense of *naïveté*”: “Before meetings, we give each other hugs and kisses. That’s something we do to maintain our spirit. . . . I think it’s very important that we maintain our humility, that we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Because that is opposed to how politics is normally practiced.”

Gnarr confirmed this attitude in his first presentation of a city budget in December 2010. Faced with the very difficult situation of having to cut municipal services, he took a humble, apologetic, strangely honest position:

What kind of party is The Best Party? I don’t really know. We are not a proper political party. We are maybe more of a self-help organization, like Alcoholics Anonymous. We try to take one day at a time, to not overreach our boundaries and to maintain joy, humility and positive thinking. . . . Our motto is: humanity, culture and peace. We do not foster any other ideals or political visions. We do not share a predetermined, mutual ideology. We are neither left nor right. We are both. We don’t even think it matters. . . . We often say that we aren’t doing what we want to do, but what needs to be done.

We simply try to work as well as our conscience permits. And it is work, often very hard work. These are

troubled times. Our society collapsed, and we are still dealing with the consequences. We need to make cut-backs for the third [successive] year . . . We are forced to reduce services, and increase the burdens of some. This is not a fun position to be in. Sometimes we have to choose the lesser of two evils. Is it better to deprive children than the elderly?

This budget contains many propositions that I would be happy to be rid of. But this is our situation. My hope is that we can achieve solidarity about these propositions, not just us elected officials but also all of us that inhabit this city—its employees and inhabitants. We can do this if we do this together.

We have so much. We have this wonderful country and all the opportunity it offers. And we have one another, to rejoice with and to comfort. We need not be sad. We can laugh, have fun and tell jokes. We can dress up and stage events to pass the time. Smiling is free. We are still OK. Christmas is on the horizon, and then the sun will return. The future is bright and filled with possibility. [Gnarr 2010]

Rather than playing to anger or fear, the affective ideology of Gnarrism emphasizes hope, laughter, and play. At the more obviously earnest pole of Best Party politics some very interesting experiments in direct participatory democracy have emerged, including an official partnership with a nonprofit organization, the Citizens Foundation, whose website, Better Reykjavík (<http://betrireykjavik.is/>), allows citizens to recommend and vote on municipal budget priorities. Following the model of Porto Alegre in Brazil, the Best Party has set aside funds for participatory budgeting on neighborhood priorities (Andersen 2012). At the other pole, as Gnarr says, “We are the only species that laughs, so why should our politics not reflect this?” Gnarr and Besti Flokkurinn utilize the social networking medium Facebook extensively as a method of remaining in contact with citizens concerning political issues. Gnarr often also posts links he finds interesting and home videos there too, including a Christmas address in which he appears in a Darth Vader helmet topped by a red Santa hat (see Figure 3). Another repost suggests an ideological kinship for Besti Flokkurinn in Gnarr’s link to Thefuntheory.com, a website dedicated “to the thought that something as simple as fun is the easiest way to change people’s behaviour for the better” (Volkswagen 2009). And, yet, Helgadóttir tells me that being mayor has been less than fun for Gnarr himself. The hard work exhausts him and has brought him to tears in public. She confided in me that she sometimes has to give Gnarr pep talks to cajole him into remaining mayor. “It’s just so boring!” he keeps telling her.

In the second half of the article, I move to a deeper analysis of what the case of Gnarr and the Best Party might teach us about the relationship between satire and political



Figure 3. Jón Gnarr, mayor of Reykjavík, dressed as Darth Vader for his Christmas address, December 2010. Photo from Besti Flokkurinn Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/bestiflokkurinn>).

sincerity in northern liberal democracy. In our current research project on the rising popularity of overidentifying parody, or “stiob,” Yurchak and I (see Boyer and Yurchak 2010) have been struck by the extent to which the supposed “antipolitics” of satire has come to occupy increasingly central locations in political culture over the past few years. What is perhaps most surprising is the growing suspicion that at least some satirists are more sincerely committed to truth telling than the political actors that our liberal democratic institutions authorize to act and speak on our behalf.

Parrhesia, cynicism, stiob

There are at least two ways of understanding the recent surge of satire in Western political culture. The first is that it is a contemporary repetition of something very old, as old perhaps as European democracy itself. The second is that this surge is something distinctively contemporary or at least modern. Both arguments have their merits; let me begin with the one for ancient roots.

In the early 1980s, two of the more influential philosophical minds of our time, Michel Foucault and Peter Sloterdijk, apparently quite independently of one another, called attention to the importance of classical cynicism,¹⁰ a political tradition of public performance that thrived on often vulgar inversions of the norms of polite society. Foucault’s last several lectures at the Collège de France in 1984 focused on cynicism and its relationship to parrhesia, a modality of truth telling in ancient Greece. Parrhesia was “first of all and fundamentally a political notion” (Foucault 2011:8), a pivotal linkage between the subject and truth in the context of classic democracy. The *parrhesiastes* was someone committed to “telling it all,” without inhibition and without fear of reprisal. He was neither a professional nor a prophet nor even the maker of rational arguments but one “to tell individuals the truth of themselves hidden from their own eyes, to reveal to them their present situation, their character, failings, the value of their conduct,

and the possible consequences of their decisions” (Foucault 2011:19). Foucault (2011:254) then advanced the argument that classical cynicism, with its principles of nonconcealment and reversal, with its frequent performances of vulgarity, should be interpreted as parrhesia par excellence. It was a modality of truth telling so intensely grotesque that it reminded “all men that they are leading a life other than the one they should be leading” (Foucault 2011:315), that is, a life “faithful to the truth” (2011:314).

Foucault’s lectures broke off because of illness and before it was clear whether he intended to draw some contemporary moral from his analysis of ancient cynicism. Sloterdijk’s *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (*Critique of Cynical Reason*, 1988), however, very obviously meant to contrast the vitality of ancient political cynicism with the “universal, diffuse” condition of contemporary political life. The book is too manifold to summarize quickly, and I do not attempt to do so here. But what it is principally remembered for is its argument that the “pernicious realism” of the Enlightenment’s centuries-long project of unmasking the contingencies of human understanding has left no onion layers to peel, no secure grounding from which to any longer adjudicate truth and falsity. In other words, the project of truth making and truth telling has become so varied and contentious that it has very nearly destroyed its own nominal purpose. We have lost faith in universal truths and fallen down a deep well of self-satisfied alienation. As Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., 1991) might have put it, the articulation of truth has become little more than a game of positions, a field of competing forms of capital. Thus, our “crisis of representation.” Worse yet, according to Sloterdijk, critical enlighteners of today have forgotten their roots in ancient *kynicism*, “in the powerful traditions of laughter in satirical knowledge” (1988:16) that he argues originally nourished Western critical enlightenment. Thus, the companion of the Western elite’s rapidly receding faith in epistemic universality is the rise of mirthless, respectable, and, above all, calculating epistemology whose philosophical expressions are so often “the mere administration of thoughts.”

Sloterdijk seeks to retrieve the *Frechheit*, the cheekiness, he regards as lost within the schizoid diffusion and earnest professionalization of modern subjectivity. Cheekiness is perhaps not a total antidote to cynicism, but it is, for Sloterdijk, a recurrent necessity. Sloterdijk creates a positive alignment between satire and sincerity, as though the satirical mode of laughter represented a deeper, less alienated relationship to life and to truth than serious, sophisticated critique. Put in other terms, it seems that laughter becomes a refuge of sincerity in this era of “enlightened false consciousness” (Sloterdijk 1988:5) and (post)modern cynical apathy.

Even if the critique of Enlightenment itself seems a rather monolithic target,¹¹ Foucault’s and Sloterdijk’s analyses helpfully frame Gnarr as parrhesiastes and the Best Party as a vehicle of *kynical* disruption of the earnest

professional cynicism that seems to typify late liberal democratic practice today. But Yurchak and I believe there is also a more specific historicity to the rise of Gnarrism as part of an ensemble of stio-like interventions in contemporary Western political culture. *Stiob* (stee-YOP) is a Russian slang term that refers to a particular socialist-era technique of parodic overidentification, whose method was to inhabit the forms and norms of authoritative discourse so perfectly that it was impossible to tell whether the imitative performance was ironic or sincere (Boyer and Yurchak 2010:181).

Stiob was particularly germane to late (Soviet-style) socialism because of communist party-states' obsessive emphasis on the formal orthodoxy of their discourse. The pressure in late socialism was always to adhere to the precise norms and forms of already existing authoritative discourse and to minimize subjective interpretation or voice. Yurchak terms the result of this pressure "hypernormalization" (2006:50), an unplanned snowball effect of the layering of the normalized structures of authoritative discourse on themselves. Late socialist political discourse was no longer about making literal statements about the world; it was about repetitively recombining a limited series of discursive elements. Politics, such as it was, became largely performative. Under such conditions, the aesthetics of *stiob* made sense. Given that late socialist states had already disinvested themselves from literal meaning, it seemed increasingly senseless to engage their political discourse, whether critically or affirmatively, at the literal level as though it contained indicative content. Instead, *stiob* highlighted the fact of performative repetition itself. The hypernormalization of authoritative discourse in the late socialist party-state thus created the possibility of a mode of parody that operated by inhabiting widely circulating but increasingly meaningless discursive forms. *Stiob* both recognized and refused to communicate in the terms of hypernormalized authoritative discourse. It was, rather, a kind of squatting within the language of power.

When compared with Gnarr and Besti Flokkurinn (but also with Grillo, Colbert, and other contemporaries), this mode of "parody" no longer sounds so exotic. The rising frequency, variety, and popularity of these stio-like interventions have led us to explore overformalization and hypernormalization in contemporary liberal-democratic political discourse as well. I do not have the space here to reconstruct our entire analysis in detail (see, instead, Boyer and Yurchak 2010), but the core of our argument is that the changing institutional and ideological organization of political culture in the North (and particularly in the United States) has consolidated discursive conditions analogous in certain respects to late socialist hypernormalization. For example, we discuss how the corporate monopolization of broadcast media production and circulation and the adaptation of news journalism to digital media have made the authoritative representations of political and economic issues significantly more homogeneous and experientially repetitive.

We look at the cementing of neoliberal consensus in political news analysis and the rise of imitative textual practices in news coverage more generally; we also examine the professionalization of political life and the central importance of 24–7 news cycles for political communication and show how political performances in the United States are increasingly calculated and formalized, concerned more with efficient and precise political messaging than with riskier but more substantive forms of political debate and communicational improvisation. Finally, we discuss how the collapse of Cold War geopolitics unsettled late liberal political imagination by removing the constitutive alterity of communist threat. Although various imaginations of Muslim and Chinese antiliberalism have partially filled this void, we interpret these positionings as unstable, a condition that has forced northern liberalism into defining itself in increasingly abstract and untethered ways. The increasing emphasis on positive image over substance demonstrates the slippage of contemporary northern liberalism into the self-referential discursive habits of late socialism.

However, we do not ignore important differences between late socialist and late liberal *stiob*, perhaps most obviously in terms of governmental organization; we thus do not argue that all modes of *stiob* are the same but, rather, only that they bear a family resemblance to one another. If late socialist *stiob* thrived on the hypernormalization of post-Stalinist communism, then late liberal *stiob* can most clearly be heard to address the gradual homogenization of northern political discourse around the anchor points of neoliberal ideology, for example, that the market is the central institution of society and that individual rights and autonomies are the most positive features of sociality. It is telling that Gnarrism arose in the context of a debate over public debt liability that was scarcely a debate since all the mainstream political parties had already converged in the belief that the fiscal morality of the creditor–debtor contract outweighed the moral responsibility of the Icelandic government to its citizens.¹² As one also sees today in Spain, Ireland, Portugal, and Greece (the so-called PIGS countries), austerity is presented by bankers, politicians, and technocrats alike as the sole moral solution to what is portrayed as national indulgence and profligacy. But the accumulation of wealth in neoliberal policy regimes always favors elites over the vast majority of citizens (Duménil and Lévy 2011). In the good times, small numbers of actors reap most of the rewards. And yet, when these regimes go sour, entire populations are held hostage to creditors.

So the Best Party can indeed be understood as operating in a tradition of parrhesia and kynical performance, as can other recent performers of neoliberal power like the Yes Men (Day 2011) and the Billionaires for Bush (Haugerud 2013). But Gnarr and his collaborators also exemplify a response to a discursive ecology in which liberalism's promised plurality of competing viewpoints and platforms within "normal politics" seems more form than

substance. Within contemporary liberal democracy across the North, one finds that progressive liberalism has been drawn into such tight orbit with neoliberalism that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between them. And the more that progressive liberalism struggles to differentiate itself from neoliberalism's market imaginaries, the tighter the bonds seem to become, perhaps a reflection of the fact that guaranteeing the freedom, security, and property of the globalized elite to which liberalism now belongs necessarily means sacrificing the security, freedom, and labor of many others (see, e.g., Harvey 2007). With progressive liberalism struggling to present a clear alternative to neoliberalism, the range of authoritative discourse in liberalism increasingly narrows even as its dogma hardens. Witness the sincere anger of the Tea Party movement as it desperately advocates the idea that further radicalizing liberalism will somehow reverse the conditions of decline generated by liberal reforms of the past. And beyond liberal political discourse, difference and authority seem even more difficult to locate. In its various New Left iterations, social democracy has long capitulated to liberal political ontology and seems rudderless. Neosocialism, meanwhile, scarcely exists outside the exclusionary welfarist fantasies of the radical Right. Anarchism has, until recently, only been able to eke out an existence in abandoned places.

This all sounds rather hopeless, but of course things looked darkly inevitable in the final years of Soviet socialism as well. Yurchak and I interpret the rise of late liberalism as, true to its performativity, a phenomenon that ultimately refuses to disclose the certainty of its significance. According to Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber, satire and parody belong among those "militant forms of irony that, like sarcasm, are positioned confidently as to what is right and wrong in the world" (2001:21). If this generally is true, it is then striking that political parody today does not always announce its confidences clearly. Take the Best Party. Personally, I find its values of "humanity, culture, and peace" enormously compelling compared to mainstream political values, and yet I do not think we should assume that the meaning of Gnarrism is restricted to a literal critique of neoliberalism. It is possible to view the work of the Best Party as a creative kynical response to the overformalization and homogenization of political discourse and nothing more. It is possible to view it as part of the birth of a new literal politics whose contents are not yet fully defined. It is even possible to understand it as a deeper stioab of the affective turn in late liberal politics, the forefronting of emotions and affects over rational arguments and critical reflection as the core of politics.¹³ Or Gnarrism could mean something else entirely. I am not trying to hedge opinions but, rather, to stay true to my object of analysis. As Gnarr says, categorizing Besti Flokkurinn is convenient but misses the point entirely. The strength of stioab is that one is never really certain what its "message" is supposed to be.

Conclusion

In lieu of a tidy analysis of the meaning of Gnarrism, I simply suggest instead that its performative suspension of literal meaning may be precisely the locus of hope (and play) for the possibility of radical political transformation. In 2002, David Graeber addressed this issue both presciently and pithily in his discussion of the practice of direct democracy by neoanarchist movements across the world:

A constant complaint about the globalization movement in the progressive press is that, while tactically brilliant, it lacks any central theme or coherent ideology. (This seems to be the left equivalent of the corporate media's claims that we are a bunch of dumb kids touting a bundle of completely unrelated causes—free Mumia, dump the debt, save the old-growth forests.) Another line of attack is that the movement is plagued by a generic opposition to all forms of structure or organization. It's distressing that, two years after Seattle, I should have to write this, but someone obviously should: in North America especially, this is a movement about reinventing democracy. It is not opposed to organization. It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization are its ideology. It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy. [2002:70]

From our present vantage point, in the wake of the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, neo-Bolivarianism, and, at a different scale, the Best Party, the quest for new forms of democracy, whether anarchic, liberal, or social, no longer seems so improbable. The Washington Consensus's three decades of transforming the world have led us to a situation in which an increasingly repetitive and self-referential political ideology is trying to sustain its monopoly on truth in an increasingly unruly environment. Much as neoliberalism seems to be running on fumes since 2008, it seems very naive to assume that its end is near. Much life remains invested in that ideology. And yet, as Yurchak writes of the final years of Soviet socialism, one could not conceptualize its end while living in the middle of its hypernormalized sense of reality. But when a collapse eventually came, it seemed perfectly obvious to its citizens that its end had long been inevitable (Yurchak 2006:1). Whether or not we are living in similar circumstances, the mission of political anthropology today should be to attune itself not only to the enduring power of neoliberal hegemony but also to an expanding field of neoanarchist, neosocialist, neofascist, and indeed (neo-)neoliberal experiments in practice and ideology that are taking advantage of mainstream neoliberalism's hypernormalized retreat from democratic discourse and from reference to events in the world.¹⁴ But



Figure 4. Logos for the Best Party and Bright Future political parties. From the parties' websites (<http://www.bestiflokkurinn.is/> and <http://www.bjortframtid.is/>).

we should attune ourselves with caution. I think political anthropology should seriously question whether this field of isms (e.g., anarchism, fascism, liberalism, populism, socialism) is truly adequate to an anthropological discussion of emergent politics today. For one thing, these new experiments may not seek to develop political ideologies and movements in the traditional sense. For another, as Graeber and Gnarr agree, it seems precisely the point that whatever comes next need not be recognizable in terms of categories drawn from the major political movements of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The general tone of international news media coverage of the Best Party has been, as one might expect, dismissive of its significance beyond Iceland. We are reminded time and again that Iceland is “a small country.” And thus, by implication, we are advised not to take anything emerging from Iceland very seriously. In my short time in Reykjavík,¹⁵ I did indeed encounter that small-country effect as I asked as many people as I could what they thought of the Best Party and Gnarr. That there was a range of opinions from “I think this is great, exactly the kind of shake-up that Icelandic politics needs” to “I think he [Gnarr] is very underqualified for a serious job” was less surprising to me than the fact that everyone I spoke with seemed to have met their mayor in person. Eventually, I began to ask people how (rather than whether) they knew Gnarr. My next taxi driver replied, “Well, I don’t know Jón Gnarr... I only know his brother.” So, granted, Iceland is a small place. But it is a truism that any large change has its origins in some small place. So, why not Iceland? The year 2011, when I visited Reykjavík, was a breathtaking year of political tremors across the world. I asked Helgadóttir what she thought of all of this, whether she saw the Best Party as a global spark. At first she demurred, and then a certain pride crept in: “Listen, one always hears that Iceland is a small country, that you can’t take us as evidence of anywhere else. But large things have small beginnings. I sometimes think, isn’t it interesting that Occupy never really took root here. Why? Because [gesturing around her] in Reykjavík we occupied city hall. [laughing] And maybe soon the parliament.”

Indeed, in anticipation of the Icelandic parliamentary elections of 2013, in early 2012 the Best Party contributed significantly in terms of ideas, persons, and initials to the formation of a new national party, Björt Framtíð (Bright Future), which aims to take its experimental political inter-

ventions to a national stage (see Figure 4). To get things started, the new party’s name was crowd sourced. Whether Gnarrism’s time of opportunity has arrived or has already passed is impossible to know. But it seems clear that Icelandic politics, at any rate, will never be the same again.

Notes

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1. I use the term *liberal* throughout this article in its political-philosophical sense, referring to the ensemble of political ideologies, originally of European origin, that emphasize individual rights and freedoms. By *neoliberal*, I mean a more specific and radical variant of liberalism that has, since the 1970s, modeled individuals as consumers and that posits markets and commerce as the basis for legitimate social action. The neoliberal worldview has informed a variety of antiwelfarist institutional projects of privatization and deregulation across the world. Finally, by *progressive liberalism*, I refer to modes of liberalism that link the advancement of liberal principles to the strengthening and improvement of broader social institutions such as social welfare, organized labor, and equal rights.

2. Even though Bakhtin himself insisted that “the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times” (1965:11).

3. January 21, 2009, is now known in Iceland as the culminating event of the “Pot and Pan Revolution,” so named because of the use of kitchenware to make noise during the protests of 2008–09.

4. In all, over 200 warrants were issued for banking and political leaders, including the chief executive officers of the three failed banks. Many of these figures have fled Iceland.

5. Other decisions included capital controls to stabilize the krona and forcing banks to write down mortgage debt amounting to over 110 percent of a home’s value.

6. This logic is particularly clear in the postelection analyses of the Best Party’s victory. See, for example, Brenner 2011, Helgason 2010, *Telegraph* 2010, and Ward 2010.

7. As one of this article's reviewers commented, this building had specific significance for residents of Reykjavík:

The house that [Gnarr] is standing on the balcony of is Perlan, a house built upon former tanks for hot water for the city of Reykjavík. It was changed into a house, with a fancy restaurant at the top, which turns in a circle allowing the guests to get a view of the city. It was built at the time of a former mayor of Reykjavík, Davíð Oddson, and also former Prime Minister of Iceland and former bank manager of the Icelandic national bank (during the economic crash) and now editor of Morgunblaðið (media of the conservative party, privately owned). Davíð Oddson is considered by many still the political "father figure" of Iceland. There was great criticism when Perlan was built, that DO was building it as a monument for himself and it was very expensive. . . . This then is a highly political spot to stand on and "take over" Reykjavík.

8. I highly recommend watching the video (see YouTube 2010).

9. For a video clip of Gnarr's introduction, see Iceland Chronicles 2010.

10. The early 1980s was also the moment in which neoliberal ideology began to secure its dominant position in Western governmentality. Although I can draw no direct connections between this fact and Foucault's and Sloterdijk's interest in cynicism, the coincidence is striking.

11. Although it is a sensible target in the tradition of critical theory inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Nietzsche 1994).

12. For discussion of the moralization of debt globally and historically, see Graeber 2011.

13. I see this turn as related to the rejection of Keynesianism (an earnest, literalist form of liberalism if there ever was one) that dates back to the 1970s. In the United States, the Reagan revolution comes to mind as well as Obama's affect-full yet strangely contentless "Hope" campaign in 2008. A parallel example from late socialist stioab is the band Laibach's long-term exploration of the affective dispositions of fascism (see Lillemose 2007).

14. Further examples of research along these lines include Juris 2008, 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012; and Schiller 2011.

15. I spent one week in Reykjavík in December 2011 in preparation for writing this article.

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