

STREET THEATER

My Second Life as an Austerity Nut

Costas Panayotakis

In unusual times one has to do unusual things. Thus it is that my stolid existence as an Associate Professor of Sociology at one of the colleges in the City University of New York system has recently been enriched by the invasion into my life of Austerity Nut. Austerity Nut goes around the New York City subway system preaching the virtues of budget cuts and the need for all working people to lend a helping hand to our suffering brothers and sisters on Wall Street. In a Steve Colbert-like stunt, I have been posing as Austerity Nut to parody the absurd state of affairs whereby a deep economic crisis caused by the rich is used to attack working-class people in New York City and around the world.

But let me go back to the beginning of the story. The event that triggered the birth of Austerity Nut was a conversation I had with another activist after a union meeting we both attended.¹ This meeting focused on a situation that is also to be found outside New York (and even in other countries, most notably in Europe), namely the latest manifestation of the global capitalist crisis as a battery of fiscal crises of local, state, and national governments. In many of these cases, a popular scapegoat for these crises are public sector workers, whose salaries and pensions are characterized as unacceptably high. This scapegoating has certainly occurred in my native Greece, where public sector workers along with immigrants are blamed for the economic and social devastation that has resulted from a European Union- and IMF-backed austerity program. This scapegoating is also increasingly taking place in the European periphery as well as most states in this country, most notably Wisconsin.² It is also the situation facing me and my brothers and sisters working at CUNY. Under attack by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (one of the ten richest people in the U.S.) and newly elected N.Y. Governor Andrew Cuomo, both of whom are determined to cut the social services benefitting working-class New Yorkers and their salaries and pensions, public sector workers at CUNY and beyond have to fight back. The sense of our union meeting was that the magnitude of this fight would have to match the unprecedented magnitude of the assault that we are likely to experience.

In the conversation that I had after the end of the meeting with one of my union brothers, the question came up of whether the traditional way of doing things—lobbying local politicians, holding the occasional rally, and so on—would be enough to meet the challenge facing workers at CUNY and public sector workers in New York and other places. The sense that extraordinary situations may call for extraordinary methods was one of the reasons that I decided to reinvent myself as Austerity Nut. The other reason had to do with my growing sense that the absurdity of the response to the crisis adopted by the powers-that-be in North America, Europe, and elsewhere called for something more than sober economic and sociological analysis. Although such analysis is

¹ Being a CUNY professor, I belong to and I am active in PSC-CUNY, the union that represents about 20,000 faculty and professional staff at CUNY.

² For discussions of the situation in Greece, see Mike-Frank Epitropoulos, “Greece as a Demonstration Project: Will the Black Sheep Bite Back? Will the PIIGS? What about the U.S.?” *Dollars and Sense: Real World Economics*, Number 288, May/June 2010; and Costas Panayotakis, “Greece and the Global Capitalist Crisis,” *Z Magazine*, June 2010. For a good analysis and critique of the attempt to scapegoat public sector workers for the current crisis, see John Bellamy Foster, “Public sector workers are a ‘privileged new class’, says billionaire,” January 17, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/voices/public-sector-workers-are-a-privileged-new-class-says-billionaire/6442/>.

indispensable—and I have engaged in it in interviews I have given and various articles and a book that I have written since the eruption of this crisis—I was coming to the conclusion that to really highlight the injustice of responding to the crisis by penalizing those who had the least to do with it, one needed to supplement cogent analytical dissection of current “solutions” to the crisis with mockery pure and simple. Just as the support that such “solutions” have among the general public is not usually based on rational argumentation, so must resistance to such solutions evoke a visceral sense of the injustice inflicted on the majority. I believe that humor has an important role to play in achieving this objective.

Austerity Nut’s monologue does not just suggest the need to resist policies that use a crisis caused by the rich to victimize working people and the poor. It does so through an ostensible endorsement of all the ideological prejudices that have long dominated American society.³ These prejudices are deconstructed by being inserted into a set of assertions that are not just false but simply absurd. We are in a crisis, Austerity Nut proclaims, because of the greed of all of us working people, who have long denied the rich their rightful share of wealth and who have confined the rich to a misery so deep that it cannot be lifted by the lavish bailouts, tax breaks, and corporate welfare that they receive from the U.S. government and governments around the world. Even if things are getting hard for all of us, working people, we should not blame the rich for our own failings or think that we should rise up! An American revolution has never occurred in the past and will never occur in the future. Let us thank our politicians and the rich for making sure that every New Yorker has a well-paid job with good benefits and that no one is homeless or goes hungry. Let us, moreover, accept tuition hikes in public universities and fare hikes in the public transportation system. Finally, let all of us working people not ask what the billionaires in our country can do for us, but what we working people can do for the billionaires in our country!

I am pleased to report that Austerity Nut’s message is well received. At the end of my stunt, I distribute photocopies of the message, and most people take it and read it again. Sometimes I get asked questions like: “This is a joke, right?” or “Are you a Democrat or a Republican?” or “What is it that you want?” Other times people just laugh and give me the thumbs up. One of the people in my audience emailed me at the address I provide at the bottom of the page I distribute (upliftingmessage@gmail.com) and confessed that, at first, he thought that what I was saying was absurd. But after pondering it more and understanding its hidden message, he said he would try to get my text published in his school newspaper. Once a middle-aged teacher told me, “You are right, but nobody really cares about what’s going on.”

That teacher’s cynicism notwithstanding, people do respond more than one might expect. My girlfriend, who was with me the first time I performed this piece, told me that she was relieved to see that performing my monologue was not as risky as she had feared. I’ve also noticed an interesting racial pattern in people’s response. Although this pattern is certainly not absolute, it does seem like black folks are more likely than white folks to accept the text that I make available at the recession-proof price of zero dollars and zero cents at the end of my performance. Although the text is primarily focused on class inequality, the subway riders’ response bears witness to the long-standing mediation of class inequality in the United States (and increasingly in other parts of the world as well) by race.

³ For an early version of Austerity Nut’s monologue, see Dave Belden, “Invitation to join in some political theater on the subway,” <http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2011/02/07/invitation-to-join-in-some-political-theater-on-the-subway/>.

I have also performed my piece in my union's Delegate Assembly, the union's policy-setting body. People's reaction was enthusiastic. One of the people in my audience said this had been the best Delegate Assembly meeting she had attended. Another emailed me expressing his enthusiasm about the piece and letting me know that he had performed the piece twice on his way back from the meeting and that in both cases people liked the message a lot. A third person, who teaches film, offered to film me doing my stunt in the subway. I have also received an invitation to talk about my stunt at a local TV show and plan to continue spreading my message of "sacrifice" to anyone willing to hear.

From a personal point of view, the birth of Austerity Nut has changed my experience of taking the train and moving around my city. Before Austerity Nut, I sat in the subway reading this or that radical social theorist or this or that radical analysis of the current crisis, while being largely oblivious to the people and goings-on around me. Now I feel that I am putting all this reading to use, sharing it with those around me and doing so in a way that is entertaining and thus more likely to be appreciated. Part of my motivation in writing a humorous response to the criminal nature of the "solutions" to the crisis that are on offer by the powers-that-be was to reach out to people around me who knew that all was not right but felt too demoralized and defeated to do anything about it. I believe I am pursuing this objective with some success. In any case, Austerity Nut has been good for my own spirits. And besides, Austerity is such a great first name for someone with a heavy Greek accent like myself!

Confessions of an Austerity Nut

Good morning my friends and don't worry, I'm not gonna ask for money. I am fortunate enough to have a job, at least for the time being. In any case, my name is Austerity Nut, and I preach the virtues of budget cuts. You see, the reason for the terrible economic crisis facing us is that you, I, and all other working people in this great city and state of ours are too rich and too greedy. The rich, on the other hand, are falling further and further behind, while being denied their fair share of the wealth produced in this country. If this trend continues, not even the tax breaks and generous corporate welfare they receive from our government will be enough to save our rich from utter destitution and misery!

This is why all of us, working people, should welcome the opportunity to lend a helping hand to our rich as well as to our suffering brothers and sisters on Wall Street. As our governor and mayor rightly point out, we need to cut wasteful spending on education, on health care, and other social services. These cuts are inevitable because we surely don't want to tax the bonuses of our suffering brethren on Wall Street. Our mayor and governor are right not to tax their hard earned billions. Our brothers and sisters on Wall Street are the reason our economy is in such a great shape. I ask you, where would we be without them?

Now it's true that sometimes things get hard for you and me. But it's surely not fair to blame the rich for our own failings or to get angry at our capitalist system. Now, more than ever my friends, we must trust our politicians and the rich. They are good people—and, I promise you, they stay up at night making sure that every New Yorker has a well-paid job that comes with good benefits; that no child goes to bed hungry at night; that no New Yorker is homeless; and that every New Yorker can afford to go to college. So let us all accept tuition hikes at our public universities and fare hikes in our public transportation system. Let us accept that we don't need to spend so much money on schools and hospitals and that we don't need unions, pay raises, or decent pensions.

And now, firm believer in free enterprise that I am, I will make this message available to you at the recession-proof price of zero dollars and zero cents. Please spread this uplifting message to everyone you know. Show it to your friends, family, and neighbors, even your boss. Photocopy it, perform it, and distribute it as you please. And above all remember: ask not what the billionaires in your country can do for you, ask what you can do for the billionaires in your country!

Austerity Nut would love to hear from you. Send him your comments and reactions to his email address: upliftingmessage@gmail.com.