

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez' "Tax the Rich" Gown Is a "Designer Protest" Meant to Dull Class Struggle

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The Left is currently dividing very publicly over a viral clip on social media of AOC – Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – arriving on Monday night at an exclusive gala event in New York in a slinky, white satin, off-the shoulder, Marilyn Monroe-style gown with large red writing across the back demanding: "Tax the Rich."

Maybe "divided" isn't quite the right word. As with most left politics nowadays, the two sides seem to be talking across each other. It is as if they speak two entirely different languages.

Tickets to the Met Gala are at least \$30,000 a pop, though it seems AOC, a young New York City Congresswoman who identifies as a democratic socialist, did not pay for the ticket herself. She was invited and seized the moment to make her protest.

The medium is the message. pic.twitter.com/b4Ssr6HKYR

— Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@AOC) [September 14, 2021](#)

In an Instagram post, she wrote that she was helping "to kick open the doors at the Met. The time is now for childcare, healthcare, and climate action for all. Tax the Rich."

Predictably, the right instantly leapt on her "hypocrisy". Former President Donald Trump led the charge, calling her a "fraud".

But some on the left were unhappy too. They dismissed her attendance as a performative stunt – another clever move by AOC to build her brand on Instagram as a rebellious truth-teller safely ensconced in the big-business-friendly Democratic party.

Ever the politician, they noted, she was desperate to get herself noticed. Could this be

another salvo in her shot for an AOC presidential run in 2024 or 2028?

But with Trump on the attack, liberals lost no time rushing to her side, labelling critics on the left as curmudgeons. They argued she had brought an uncomfortable message for the rich right into their midst. She had taken the fight to the elite. And, given the media attention she invariably attracts, that message has now reached many millions. That could only be a good thing.

All the gotchas are like “but she’s at an event for rich people”

That’s the point.. <https://t.co/sDBOhtlI3h>

— Michael Walker (@michaeljswalker) [September 14, 2021](#)

But there is, I think, a deeper reason why this clip makes parts of the left – rather than the rich – uncomfortable.

Watch the video above with the sound off, and it is hard not to notice that AOC is enjoying herself – enjoying the glamour and that very expensive, very chic dress – just a little too much to qualify as any kind of class-struggle warrior.

The impression that this is faux-protest derives, however, from more than AOC’s pleasure at playing a mildly subversive Marilyn Monroe.

Far from “kicking open” the door of the Met, she appears to have been welcomed with a warm embrace. Certainly, she did not appear to be rustling too many feathers among her fellow, wealthy guests.

Turn the sound on, and the interviewers gushing over her and her dress simply confirm that this was a protest that posed no threat to anyone. It was a designer protest at a designer event. She fitted right in with the \$30,000-a-head crowd.

If you want to see what happens when a real protest takes place at an elite gala event, watch this clip from two years ago in the UK.

In it, Mark Field, an MP from the ruling Conservative party, assaults a peaceful and well-dressed woman, who like AOC has a ticket, at an expensive dinner in the City of London. To the apparent approval of other guests, Field grabs the woman by the throat – she is wearing a sash highlighting the City’s role in promoting the impending climate catastrophe – and frogmarches her out of the hall.

(I wrote a post at the time, arguing – as I could also here – that media debates around that assault missed the deeper political significance of what was going on and were chiefly intended to polarise opinion in more marginal, tribal terms centred on identity politics.)

My latest: The media have gleefully turned Mark Field's attack on a climate protester into a polarised public debate precisely to drown out far deeper, more urgent issues this episode should have dragged into plain sight
<https://t.co/XRBxWQGbyZ>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [June 22, 2019](#)

The more disturbing point about AOC's protest – at least for the serious left – is that, rather than taking the fight to the rich, she appears to have become their willing mascot. Her protest is very much part of the bread and circuses provided by the rich as a sop to the poor. And at some level, as her coquettish smile indicates, she understands that. She is openly conspiring in her role as an entertainer, as a distraction.

Watching AOC twirl for the camera, to show us her designer-messaged derriere, I was reminded of the media frenzy at the weekend over Britain's new tennis star, Emma Raducanu.

After winning the US Open on Saturday, she was encouraged to put on makeup and a similarly chic, if in her case black, dinner dress and lovingly kiss her trophy for the cameras. According to experts, she is about to become Britain's most bankable sportsperson in decades.

Raducanu kisses US Open trophy after changing into black dress to celebrate win <https://t.co/ktNxTaycKB>

— Sun Sport (@SunSport) [September 12, 2021](#)

But Raducanu's job is to entertain us. That is why she is in the headlines. She is being rewarded for her ability to amaze us, move us, distract us, even titillate us. Is that what AOC's job is too?

That's certainly how it looks.

Those who invited her to the gala event and those who spent the evening rubbing shoulders with her do not seem to have been overly troubled by her message of "Tax the rich." And that is not because they actually want to pay more taxes. It is because they understand that nothing she is doing – including her gown protest – will lead to them paying more tax. In fact, she may even assist them in forestalling efforts to tax them fairly.

By having AOC at their event, New York's liberal elite look open-minded and socially progressive. They want to present an image of social concern, of being reform-minded, even as they hoard their wealth and fritter it away on a seat at an exclusive gala dinner whose price could support a poor family for an entire year.

If AOC's protest was a threat, the attendees would not be giggling with her. She played her role perfectly, asking a question – but most certainly not answering it – about "what it means to be a working class woman of color at the Met".

Well, what does it mean – apart from as entertainment value? How exactly does her attendance advance social justice issues, apart from in flaccid, strait-jacketed, identity-obsessed terms that now pass for meaningful political action?

"We really started having a conversation about what it means to be a working

class woman of color at the Met ... we can't just play along, but we need to break the fourth wall." pic.twitter.com/UZj22DjMI3

— The Recount (@therecount) [September 14, 2021](#)

Having AOC at the Met Gala is the New York elite's equivalent of billionaire Bill Gates flaunting his philanthropy, even as that same philanthropy actually helps Gates to grow his fortune even further. AOC is the New York elite's version of a tax write-off.

But it's worse than that.

AOC's protest isn't just toothless. It's fully aligned with her evolution as yet another Democratic machine politician, even if one whose distinctive marketing campaign is premised on her being some kind of rebel.

AOC's invitation to the Met Gala, and her acceptance, is just another stage in her cooptation by the elite. The brashly outspoken rookie politician of a few years ago has been gradually tamed into the more "responsible" politician looking to claw her way up the Democratic party career ladder.

She is becoming a parody of her old self. The rhetoric of political protest on the campaign trail in the 14th congressional district has – once put to the test – morphed into the empty spectacle of protest by a Congresswoman increasingly comfortable hobnobbing with the rich and famous.

She is becoming part of the very elite she supposedly disdains. She is a celebrity politician, just as Raducanu is a now celebrity tennis player. She plays to the camera because there is nothing more to her actions than performance and pageantry. And in these, at least, she can excel.

The point here isn't primarily to apportion blame. AOC is playing the role she needs to fill to survive politically, a game Jeremy Corbyn failed to play when he was unexpectedly – and accidentally – thrust onto centre stage on the other side of the Atlantic. British elites, liberal and conservative alike, hurriedly joined together to destroy Corbyn through the manipulation of popular political discourse, presenting him as a national security threat and an antisemite.

If they have to, US elites can and will do the same to AOC. But they are increasingly confident that they won't need to.

Rather, focusing on AOC helps to clarify how our corporate-controlled political systems work; how protest in the mainstream must take the form of hollow spectacles and gestures; and how even the most principled politicians have to make grave compromises, accepting their role as entertainers rather than agents of meaningful change.

The gradual process of cooptation of AOC – her "maturing" as a politician – is already evident.

She has learnt that the political cost of pursuing a vitally important cause like Medicare for all she once espoused so passionately is too high. When she and the small group of democratic socialists in Congress had a once-in-a-lifetime chance to force a vote on

Medicare in January, a move that would have put the donor-dependent leadership of the Democratic party in an impossibly difficult bind, they lost their nerve and crumpled. Their passionate campaign commitments turned into so much hot air.

Why would any of us imagine that, having fallen at that early hurdle, she will be ready to jump even bigger obstacles as she pursues a high-flying political career within the Democratic party.

For some on the left, none of that seems to matter. They think AOC deserves support precisely because she is so expert at spectacle, at sounding committed even as she sells out her principles. If they cannot get action, they will settle for performance.

As she justified her attendance at the Met Gala on Monday, AOC argued that “the message is the medium”. But really it was the spectacle that was her message. She was having fun, joshing with the rich as though she was now firmly one of them. And they loved it.

Which was the real point. She will need them to bankroll her political aspirations, and the billionaire media to play softball with her, when she leaves behind her New York congressional district.

A few years hence, the woman whose gown said “Tax the rich” will be all the more credible, and useful to the elite, when she subtly changes tune and demands it is time to “Stop the attacks on the rich”.

She may be more flamboyant and more publicity-savvy than her political rivals, but AOC is no less susceptible to the pressures of a political system systemically corrupt and designed to maintain the privileges of a wealth elite.

With that Met Gala gown, she read the room well. She is on her way up.

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Featured image is from AOC’s Instagram account

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