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Joyless Laughter: Thaumazein at a World on Fire

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Abstract

Why theorize about political humor in a world that appears to have lost its mind? I argue that humorous laughter makes it possible to think beyond the ordinary by producing an experience of alienation from everyday habits and customs that would otherwise go unquestioned. However, this same possibility might lead to anxiety and awe that pushes us to quickly resolve and conceal the contingency of our habits shown when we laugh at them. This double-facedness of the potentiality of humor and laughter is related to the philosophical concept of thaumazein - wonder and awe produced when the obvious is suddenly seen as lacking any self-evident reason for being the way it is. I argue that in order to grasp the various functions that humor and laughter can perform, it is necessary to develop an ironic consciousness that is able to avoid falling into the trap of nihilistic relativization, but also to avoid the ideal of constructing knowledge that closes the door to all kinds of ambiguities and contradictions. In this way, the study of political humor, even in its extreme and reactionary forms, can help us to understand the ways in which common sense is contested and constructed collectively.

Keywords: philosophy of laughter, thaumazein, political humor, irony, Henri Bergson

Introduction

The 20th ISTP conference call for papers presented us with an imperative: “*as the world has been enflamed and seems to lose its mind, theorizing is more than ever an ethical demand*”. As we see the rise of rightwing extremism around the world, short-term economic interest overshadowing the urgency of tackling climate change, minorities rights suffering setbacks in countries where it was

thought they had already secured their due recognition, state-sanctioned violence against ethnic groups, increasing polarization among citizens that hinders any kind of cooperation among other challenges of the global contemporary political environment, a question loomed around me: Why theorize about humor, and political humor in particular in a world that appears to have lost its mind?

I want to briefly mention the experiences that led me to be interested in political humor. Even though I live in Chile the phenomenon around the first candidacy of Donald Trump completely fascinated me, it led me to numerous rabbit holes of political extremist message boards. It felt like looking behind the veil of well-mannered politics and staring at the most repulsive -but straightforward – takes on social and civic matters. The racism, sexism, and overall violent language of the memes, comics, and jokes I saw felt like a masochist experience from which I didn't want to escape. I kept consuming it completely disgusted and captivated by these mediums and characters that called into question the basic assumptions I had on politics. I also started paying attention to attempts to recreate this rhetoric in my local political context, and while several people dismissed these attempts as bizarre and eccentric discourses, the last few years have proven that they have gained substantial influence. All of this led me to a question: How was my laughter different from the laughter of those with whom I disagreed? Furthermore, was it different? Is humor important only insofar as it is used as propaganda? Where's the potency of humor? What are its potentialities and how can we use them?

In what follows I will try to give tentative answers to these concerns through a reading of Henri Bergson's book "Laughter" (1900/2008). Other authors have also inquired into the social functions of laughter and humor (Bakhtin, 1968/1984; Freud, 1905/1991, 1927/1992), however in this text I will focus almost exclusively in Bergson's theory. This is because, as I will argue, Bergson theory's inner tensions better reflect the double-faced nature of humorous laughter¹ and recognize the instability of the effects purported by its expression. His theoretical account stresses the inner contradictions of laughter's potentiality at disclosing that which is hidden behind the veil of customs and habits. Precisely the kind of considerations needed to theorize in an enflamed world.

Bergson beyond discipline

Usual descriptions of Bergson's theory of humorous laughter center around two different ideas that seem to be in direct opposition. On one hand, Bergson (1900/2008) insists on framing laughter as a way in which societies punish deviations from norms so the threat of being mocked serves to avoid extreme deviations from collective customs. At the same time, laughter is also described throughout the book as a relaxation of expectations, an explosion of possibilities -*a détente* that questions mechanical actions. Laughter occurs when "something mechanical is encrusted on the living" (p.24).

However, inasmuch norms are the result of habitual and repetitive actions, aren't they mechanical? How can laughter serve both functions at the same time? Some authors (Billig, 2005; Ford, 2018) have already pointed toward the fact that a reading of Bergson's theory that overemphasizes the disciplinary role of laughter misses its main contributions. In contrast, by analyzing laughter in the

¹ Throughout the text laughter will be discussed in its relationship with humor. Laughter often occurs in absence of any kind of humorous effect, however in the context of Bergson's theory, laughter should be understood as an effect of a humorous situation. As a matter of convenience whenever "laughter" is used this consideration should be taken into account.

broader context of Bergson's philosophical project a clearer comprehension of its relevance for everyday interactions emerges. Its functioning is better understood when considered as a mediator between the tendencies of rigidization of everyday life and the vital demands for constant adaptation and the creation of novel ways to act.

This is clear in Bergson's discussion of ceremonies. When discussing the ways in which mechanization enters human life, he takes social customs as an example of rigidity. "For any ceremony, then, to become comic, it is enough that our attention be fixed on the ceremonial element in it, and that we neglect its matter (...) and think only of its form." (Bergson, 1900/2008, p.27). However, it is precisely the rigidity of those ceremonies that makes it possible to coordinate our actions without having to constantly question our responses².

Ceremonies, as well as manners, serve as ready-made frames on which social actions turn into stereotyped movements. Since these habitual dispositions are necessary for everyday life, laughter is not necessarily directed toward dissolving them. As the quote above asserts, it is by focusing exclusively on their form that they become objects of laughter. By tearing ceremonies from their rooting on concrete matters we transform them into humorous material. The automatism that Bergson denounces throughout his book regards this problem. When situations, actions, ideas, and morals are treated as already established entities we fall into the trap of treating the living as if were solely something mechanical. If we take an abstracted perspective of ceremonies, they lose their solemnity, so that it becomes possible to laugh at them. They become mere formalities, devoid of any relation to the living. A purely formal approach to normativity is one of the many faces of comedy³.

Politics offer a rich environment in which to observe this. Politicians are constantly confronted with the expectancy of authenticity (Luebke, 2021) while at the same time having to appeal to a large enough group of people to get elected. A politician who exaggerates affability, or who tries to present herself as extremely polite may find her message interfered as it is these exaggerations that capture attention⁴. By resorting to ready-made frames of expectations and responses politicians can act in a way that is seen as "authentic" by a broad number of people, however, this also runs the risk of being perceived as premeditated when it fails to account for the particularities of the situation they are in. When the equilibrium between these two opposing goals is disrupted, the performative aspect of politics becomes our focus. On the other side of the spectrum, we find politics as exemplified in the past by Silvio Berlusconi and recently by Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Javier Milei who thrive by challenging the excessive ritualization of political communication. By resorting to insults, name-calling, sarcasm, joking, and mocking they enable

² This idea is also an important one in Bergson's (1988) "Matter and Memory" where these habitual dispositions constitute one of the two types of memory.

³ The term "comedy" is to be understood as a general designation encompassing a multitude of distinct modes of eliciting funniness effects, which can include irony, parody, wit, jokes, among others. On this article it is used interchangeably with humor, unless an explicit difference is made in the context of some author's theory.

⁴ A great example was Hillary Clinton celebrating her nomination, as the 2016 Democratic Party Convention. At the end of the ceremony hundreds of balloons were released, and her reaction went viral for how obviously forced her surprise was. She correctly realized she must look amused at the celebration but her cringeworthy reaction seem artificial, disconnecting it from the broader context. We end up focusing on the form of her reaction rather than the meaning of the ceremony she was in. A video of the event can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOLX9XHjyOU>

laughing at traditional politics, instead of being laughed at for partaking in the same practices they question.

Let's focus on one of the most mechanical aspects of everyday life. How we greet each other. We may laugh when someone responds "Good, and you?" before being questioned "How are you?" However, that person is doing exactly what s/he is supposed to do. Answering with a mechanical "Good, and you? But if we follow Bergson's logic we should laugh every time someone answers this way, given that it is an automatic response. Nevertheless, we only laugh when that automatism is revealed through a maladjustment. So why do we laugh in this case? What is the rigidity that laughter punishes in this example? Do we expect a different answer than "Good, and you?". We just want that person to follow common rules of courtesy. When someone fails to follow them, we are reminded of them.

It is insufficient to merely follow a rule; rather, it must be followed in a manner that is sensitive to the nuances of the situation. Rigidity is not found in the automatic answer "Good, and you?" but in the way it is enacted. We expect a mere automatic approach to greetings, while at the same time punishing the maladjustment that unveils precisely that same mechanistic expectation. We are aware we could answer a million different things to the question "How are you?" However, we feel at least a slight surprise when someone deviates from this. So, while habits and norms might be completely arbitrary, they feel and are defended as necessary. We feel estrangement from the way things are and therefore try to reestablish some known order. Here we might venture beyond Bergson and say that laughter serves as protection from recognizing the ways in which the mechanical is, in fact, encrusted in the living. Laughter conceals the degree to which we can be seen as puppets following a ready-made show.

Humorous laughter falls upon us, it is an automatic response without a reflexive decision to do so, and usually without us knowing its reason. Bergson tries to show that its cause lies in the multiple ways in which everyday life can fall prey to automatism. When something or someone becomes too entrenched in its tendencies. Automatism, habits, and norms may be extremely useful. They might work too well, and yet we laugh. As if for a moment we need to be reminded of our capacity to attend to the nuances of a situation. Stop us from keep on being mere puppets.

At this point, Bergson's theory differs from others that view the various comic mechanisms as means of dealing with taboo subjects or expressing a certain inner enjoyment, a perspective best represented by Freud's views of jokes and *witz* (1905/1991). Instead, for Bergson, laughter is the result of the entanglement between two opposing orders, the mechanical and the living. Laughter, in this sense, demonstrates that these two orders might be more deeply interwoven than initially apparent. It expresses the perplexity elicited when something deviates from an expected course. However, rather than solely correcting it by pointing towards the appropriate action it can also open a field of inquiries regarding the ways in which these two orders relate.

The order of things can always be different. Humorous laughter seems to be a way through which we are constantly reminded of the contingency of the manners in which we structure our lives and deal with their limitations⁵. In this sense, it seems as if estrangement is an appropriate way to

⁵ Incidentally, in a late text Freud also recognizes this possibility (1927/1992). Speaking of humor, which Freud distinguishes from jokes and *witz* accordingly to differences in their structural and dynamic mechanisms, he points out that in humor there is a cathexis on the superego instead of the ego. This gives rise to a position of grandiosity that manages to assert itself and overcome the demands and difficulties of the present. Thus, in humor the superego treats the afflictions that plague the ego as minor

understand humorous laughter potentiality and effects. In the next section, I will try to show the proximity between laughter as the result of humorous effects and the philosophical experience of *thaumazein*.

Thaumazein and laughter

Thaumazein has been claimed to be the origin of philosophical endeavor (Held, 2005). The defining question of *thaumazein* is: Why are things the way they are? In *thaumazein*, actions, beliefs, and attitudes are revealed as something more than habitual dispositions. What used to seem obvious is suddenly viewed as surprising and without any self-evident reason for being the way it is. There is a tremor in our ability to anticipate actions leaving us in a state of uncertainty. As such in *thaumazein* there is an attunement to a new way of experiencing everyday life (Llewelyn, 2001).

Although it has been commonly translated as wonder or astonishment, *thaumazein* is not synonymous with wonder, but it can act as a precursor to it. Wonder requires both the awareness of expanded possibilities for thought and active engagement in their exploration (Glăveanu, 2020). Glăveanu proposes a two-axis structural model of wonder, in which wonder is placed in equilibrium: first, between "wondering at" and "wondering about," and second, between immersion and detachment from its object. Hence wonder implies bounding together several faculties to transform our relationship with the world, ourselves and others in engaged manner. Conversely in *thaumazein* the individual is exposed to that which threatens to disable his own ability to respond to the world, leaving him vulnerable to manipulation and awe (Rubenstein, 2008). As such *thaumazein* might lead to wonder but it can also be dangerous and difficult to sustain.

When the obvious stops being obvious, we are led to the possibility of creating new ways of acting, thinking, and believing. However, that implies the dreadful experience of losing the customs that guide us. *Thaumazein* might be the moment of the opening of an inquiry, but it is not just that. As we ask ourselves why things are the way they are, we also recognize they could be a different way. And yet, this same possibility might lead to anxiety, to estrangement, and awe that pushes us to quickly resolve and conceal those same possibilities (Rubenstein, 2008). The opening to the experience of wonder and awe that *thaumazein* creates might lead us to conclude that what is arbitrary might be necessary after all. Or at least preferable to the confrontation with the unknown. This dread can be seen as one of the reasons that keeps the order of everyday life stable, making its management a valuable asset in politics (Barker, 2017).

Thaumazein arises when our understanding of the world is insufficient to act upon it, when our everyday concepts fall into contradictions (Rubenstein, 2008). The background against which day-to-day actions take place suddenly comes to the foreground so it is transformed into another object

inconveniences, thus relativizing its discomforts. Hence, Freud locates humor in a series of other phenomena where he also mentions delirium, drunkenness and ecstasy. However, by placing it in this series and focusing on the consoling function that the superego performs on the ego through humor, Freud does not delve into the possible constructive effects of humor. If for Freud humor allows us to overcome the present through the feeling of grandiosity that emerges from it, in the reading of Bergson's theory defended in this text, that is possible through the dissolution of the mechanical frameworks that guide our actions.

Of course, these two alternatives are not necessarily in opposition, nor is there any reason to think that they cannot operate at the same time. But exploring this possibility is beyond the scope of this article.

of our attention (Held, 2005). Therefore, the experience of *thaumazein* reveals the openness of the quotidian to its modification, showing that its familiarity is nothing more than the result of the practices that sustain it. Consequently, this uncanniness is not the emergence of anything unusual, rather what is unusual is “the unexpected encounter with something familiar” (Griffero, 2021, p. 111).

The relationship between several forms of comedy and the perplexity associated with *thaumazein* has been previously addressed directly and indirectly by other authors. Theodor Lipps (1898/2015) in his book “*Komic und Humor*” argues that humor turns our attention towards our otherwise implicit assumptions through the perplexity that it impose upon us, explicitly relating it with *thaumazein*. However, Lipps is addressing the relationship between humor and the sublime in art so his understanding fails to account for the contingency of that which is disclosed. Closer to our idea is the way in which Alenka Zupancic (2008) explains the relationship of comedy with notions of identity: “Comedy is the moment in which substance, necessity, and essence all lose their immediate - and thus abstract - self-identity or coincidence with themselves.” (p.34). Through comedy, the world is not presented as existing independently of any subject or external influence, but rather the product of acting subjects. However, Zupancic’s argument is that this does not imply disregarding everything as mere appearance or fiction but rather stressing the concreteness of the core guides of everyday life.

Political humor can be seen as a rhetorical device through which expectations around the political arena are disarmed or challenged. While there is undoubtedly a kind of humor that relies on superficial commentary of the mundane aspects of politics that leaves untouched the assumptions we have of it (Zupančič, 2008) there is also another kind that exploits the ambiguity of the expectations that determine what we see as viable practices in politics (Giamario, 2020). As the emergence of eccentric politicians in the last decade has shown us, this disruption does not have to be expressed by comedians or laypeople.

The similarity between laughter elicited through humorous effects and *thaumazein* does not lie in their establishment of distance towards everyday habits and customs. Neither is it solely in their revelation of these as contingent. Rather it lies in that by transforming our experience of these habits the possibility of thinking beyond them is enabled. The moment when habits and customs could be a different way allowing for their disentanglement from affects or norms. However, as mentioned above, laughter also serves to dispel this realization. “It is just a joke”, “I’m just doing this for the laughs” we are told. Laughter can work as both the recognition of a problem and as an attempt to solve it. The opening and closing of an inquiry. Here we see the duality of laughter. It can paradoxically end up reinforcing the necessity of absentmindedness, just as *thaumazein* may lead to an effacement of the questions it generates.

When we see the bizarre humor of politicians such as Donald Trump or Javier Milei, we may be tempted to quickly disregard them as pathological cases. However, when they insult and make fun of their adversaries, they are taking advantage and exploiting the inefficacy of traditional institutions to channel popular discontent toward politicians in any meaningful way. Their laughter points towards a gap in the traditional manner of doing politics.

Both Trump and Milei are examples of the failings of their respective nation’s political systems to address problems that have been present but veiled for a long time. But it is tempting to look at them as mere clowns and ignore the political problems from which their laughter springs. Their laughter serves as a moment of recognition akin to *thaumazein*, pointing towards the problems of

political institutions and contemporary democratic ordering. However, when these characters laugh, they do so in a way that recognizes those gaps and contradictions while immediately covering them through a rhetoric that precludes any further inquiry.

In this sense, we should not fetishize laughter, irony nor any kind of humorous effects or mechanisms as a supposedly transformative force in themselves. For example, to hold on to the idea of an innate opposition between an ironic attitude towards a certain order and one of serious affirmation neglects the way in which an ideal subject of late capitalism has an ironic distance towards any order (Petrović, 2018). We will come back to the topic of irony later.

Both Milei and Trump (and many others) laugh in a way that does not invite any dialogue, taking their own answers as final solutions. This same strategy has been observed in the analysis of hate humor in which the challenges of contemporary society are quickly resolved by resorting to an imagined idealized past (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). As their counterpart we can think through Bergson of a kind of laughter that can keep those gaps open, enabling the possibility of entering dialogic relationships with them.

To absurdity and beyond

Absurd comic effects are a clear example of ways in which humorous laughter deals with intersections between the actual situation and virtual possibilities. It is based on the abandonment of everyday regimes of sense and meaning (Holm, 2017). The absurd gives way to contradiction and uncertainty as defining traits of the situation. Opposing views may coexist showing us the cracks that normativity conceals, and the possibility of living differently. The actual order, the one we are led to expect, is obliterated in absurdity. We are left with a series of gaps that deny the possibility of a new consistent order through which we might understand our actions.

An important element in thinking the absurd in line with Bergson's approach is found in the way he conceptualizes dreams. In his conference on dreams, Bergson (1920/1975) tries to show how the mechanisms that produce dreams are constantly present in our lives but tempered by the utilitarian order that requires us to anticipate and plan our actions. By detaching perception and memory from the requirements of pragmatic action, dreams enable the linking of different images to compose scenes that are alien to the margins of daytime intelligibility. Dreams demonstrate that the principle of intelligibility cannot capture the full scope of the possibilities of our imagination. Both dreams and laughter are described as relaxation of expectations. Sense and nonsense are constitutive of psychic life, yet their relationship is not one of exclusivity.

According to Bergson (1900/2008), absurd comedy is the result of the clash between this dream-like logic and the utilitarian order that helps us anticipate and plan our actions. The latter is directly related to our common life with others and the regulations imposed upon us by customs and norms. Both types of ordering carry risks. As we have already argued, excessively rigid adherence to criteria of utility and normativity can lead to mechanized behavior that is not capable of adjusting its actions to the subtleties of the specific context in which they are carried out, therefore having the opposite effect to the expected. For example, when the same formality with which a boss is treated is transferred to the treatment of colleagues. Meanwhile, the dream-like order adjusts things to its way of thinking instead of accommodating thoughts to things: “but the dreamer, instead of appealing to the whole of his recollections for the interpretation of what his senses perceive, makes use of what he perceives to give substance to the particular recollection he favours” (Bergson,

1900/2008, p.88). Ironically, despite offering an escape from the demands of social life, reverie might end up imposing a rigid attitude toward the world, as Don Quixote's stubbornness shows.

In the purest form of both orders there is an absent-mindedness of action which is answered with laughter. Absurdity as a result of the immersion of one kind of order into the other - for example through an unexpected and out-of-place Freudian slip of a politician during a solemn speech - shows the impossibility of a complete determination of our actions by habits and norms (Freud,1905/1991). While absurdity can offer temporary relief from those expectations, this relaxation runs the risk of dwelling on skepticism regarding social life. As Holm (2017) argues:

The chief consequence of this distinction is that absurd humour may be considered a less challenging, and more conservative, but also more popularly palatable manifestation of social, political and formal absurdity that constantly maps and remaps, draws and erases, the dividing lines between sense and nonsense, nonsense and absurdity, that shape the popular epistemologies of humour in the contemporary moment. (p.173)

While absurdity can foster an attitude of openness and skepticism of the obviousness of social discourses it can also end up justifying a disposition of naïve relativism in which there is no need to account for the communality of social life. In the absurd, we recognize the coexistence of the existing and that which, without being fully compatible with what already exists, is imaginable. Of course, the latter need not be mere fantasy since its virtual existence may well be a mean through which to think beyond the limitations of the immediately existing. Both the already existing and the virtual possibilities are seen as equally conceivable, and thus the question arises as to how to position oneself towards either of these. Bergson's thesis is that we laugh at the absurd to reintroduce ourselves into the collective and thus resolve that problem.

Going beyond absurdity, through absurdity, implies recognizing the entanglement of two contradictory orders in the way we structure our lives. This "impossible joint articulation" (Zupančič, 2008) of habits and imagination is necessary for the proper functioning of our social world. Laughter reminds us that actions ought to be socially guided while at the same time maintaining enough freedom and imagination to go beyond what is immediately present. Insofar the articulation between what already exists and virtual possibilities --precisely the junction in which absurdity emerges- requires a community to avoid falling either to the mechanization of habits or the absentmindedness of reverie we can ask ourselves: what happens when the collective itself becomes absurd? When the milieu in which this articulation takes place ends up being captured by the very rigid tendencies it seeks to avoid?

Take for example Javier Milei's eccentric personality. It runs contrary to what has been commonly understood as the expected temper of a politician. All his bizarre antics have enabled him to exploit the contradictions of his country's political system, challenging what would have seemed obvious or reasonable. However, this same recognition of new possibilities has led to a repetition of old-school policies of austerity as well as looking for ways to circumvent parliament's opposition to his plans. What all his mocking of traditional politicians leads to is the forsaking of democracy and dialogue as a system through which to search for new possibilities of government.

Politics that seemed absurd a few years ago, that were just laughingstocks, are now part of the mainstream. They are no longer funny. Perhaps we did not realize this in time because we were too busy laughing at them...rather than asking ourselves why their mocking and humor were so

persuasive for so many people. Laughing as a defense against the cracks of everyday ordering they signaled.

Irony and Dialogue

Some time ago, while talking to a taxi driver he asked me about my occupation. When I told him I was interested in studying politics and humor he told me he worked as a consultant during the 1988 Chilean presidential referendum in which Augusto Pinochet was overthrown. He told me how important for the campaign against the dictator a joyful and humorous campaign was. When I told him I was interested in offensive and disparagement humor he argued against the idea that those could be considered proper types of humor. As if recognizing them as such would mean showing agreement with their message so it was necessary to dispel any kind of interest in their content. By equating those kinds of humor with pure hatefulness and malice he shut any further inquiry into what those practices can teach us about how politics is experienced by a great number of people.

Maybe there is another way to laugh at the absurd, a way that is not just a defense against the awe provoked by seeing our ways of life being dissolved. A way of laughing akin to understanding that every habit, custom, action, and belief can be subjected to its dissolution and use that knowledge to explore it, to wonder about it, to transform it.

A laughter closely related to what Jankélévitch calls an “ironic consciousness” (1936/2020). Jankélévitch was interested in developing a notion of irony that avoids the subjectivist excesses of romanticism, which he perceived as incapable of creating any kind of knowledge and as an absolute negation of any kind of reality. Instead, he tried to show how irony could create new perspectives from where to build a more flexible, strong, and wide understanding of our world.

Jankélévitch (1936/2020) conceptualizes irony as a healthy mistrust towards actions, thoughts, and language itself. He contrasts it with seriousness, in which actions are direct reactions to immediate experience; irony, on the other hand, offers a perspective that makes it possible to establish connections between ideas, objects, and things that seem impossible. Playful, yet consequential, irony prevents tragedy by stopping us from creating illusions of consistent and teleological realities. It promotes a plurality perspective, in which one successively adopts an infinite number of points of view so that they correct each other (p.41). Irony implies a melancholic disposition due to the recognition of this plurality, one that defeats any intention of self-determination or that assumes the existence of a final definite word to define its object of interest.

The type of irony described by Jankélévitch (1936/2020) is not merely a destructive stance towards any kind of truth; rather, it frames truth as a process of becoming rather than a fixed entity. It is an impetus of creation, not constant repetition. But creation that accepts rather than tries to dispel the entanglement of the two contradictory orders that, as Bergson’s argues, constitute our daily lives. An entanglement that can only be sorted out by constant dialogue and interaction with others. In a passage that seems extremely close to Bergson’s ideas in “Laughter” Jankélévitch declares that irony protects us from routines and the inertia of ready-made phrases, it keeps us vigilant while also forcing us to adapt even if it is painful. It consists of the modification of routinary associations and all too predictable constellations (p.103).

Of course, irony can easily fall into cynicism, mistrust can lead to anomie, and pluralism to naïve relativism. As several authors have argued (Čeika, 2020; Fisher, 2009; Holm, 2017; Petrović,

2018; Zupančič, 2008) irony, parody and satire are not by themselves means of dissolution of any normative order. They could very well reinforce what they criticize. Being ironic does not necessarily entail stopping doing that which is being questioned, and in fact might end up facilitating the reproduction of the contradictions and absurdities it shows (Fischer, 2009). When reactionaries argue that the only alternative to today's problems is a return to a mythical idyllic past (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Wilson, 2017) there is an attempt to vindicate, more often than not by using irony and satire, the existence of an already defined, unquestionable reality that is the only possible answer to these problems. However, this is the result of an irony or satire that while attacking certain beliefs renounces the affirmation of the possibility of imagining other alternatives, so the repetition of what already exists is the only option. By showing there are no alternatives, that is how irony defeats itself. Falling prey to the emptiness of meaning and truth it points out, ironizing about everything but its own negativity.

Plesa (2024) has shown how, in our times, meaninglessness can be commodified and sanitized in what they call "fashionable nihilism". In this way, the quest for meaning and change that can emerge from the discomfort that irony produces is bypassed, and we are just left with satire and self-serving monologues as a way of coping. In opposition to this type of nihilism that only serves as a satirical mean for coping they conceptualize "neonihilism", whereby the impossibility of imagining an alternative to systemic problems and meaninglessness is confronted through irony that "connects us with an understanding that we all, or at least many of us, suffer together, albeit in diverse and intersectional ways from the conditions of our shared neoliberal social matrix" (Plesa, 2024, p. 618). Therefore, irony serves a mean of community building upon which the search for alternatives is no longer left to individuals but rather their collective efforts. However, this clear distinction between irony (derived from neonihilism) and satire (as an affective disposition associated with fashionable nihilism) risks reifying every instance of irony as confrontational. Despite this potential problem, Plesa recognizes how easily ironic confrontation can be transformed into satirical coping. Because of this malleability, the question regarding the potentiality of irony (and humor) should not be whether it serves to disrupt and confront, but rather: under what conditions are they capable of enabling the search for other realities and ways of life?

There is no irony without a relation with an Other, it requires the acknowledgment of his/her capability of respond to us. In contrast, cynicism and lying try to silence everyone, to force the other into pure passivity. Jankélévitch (1936/2020) thoroughly emphasizes the rhetorical economy of irony, it works by alluding rather than by explaining in depth. Irony alludes to the gaps in our understanding without trying to immediately provide an answer to them because it thrives in the recognition of the impossibility of capturing the full complexity of the world. That is why the ironic utterance requires a listener capable of reading between the lines, because only then can irony keep alive our active understanding of reality, one, we might add, that is always full of contradictions and ambiguities. Irony can enable the search for other realities and ways of living when one renounces the search for a final answer to the questions it generates and rather searches for a dialogue upon which to build new ways of thinking. Through the recognition of the "crack in all there is" (Zupancic, 2008, p.118), the abandonment of the ideal of escaping or solving them, and the acceptance of contradictions and ambiguities as inherent features of our social world we can strive to the development of a relationship with the others that foster new ways of thinking.

Both Bergson and Jankélévitch work around the coexistence of contradictory ideas and dispositions without resorting to their annulment or falling into the traps and risk of either side. In Bergson's case, the challenge is to balance the adaptive function of habits, which can lead to

rigidity, and the creative openness of reverie, which can impede effective action. Meanwhile, in Jankélévitch's case it is on one side between relativism devoid of any content that nonetheless can demolish false illusions; and on the other side seriousness towards the world that can end up fixing ideas into ready-made realities incapable of changing, but that is necessary to avoid being left with nothingness.

Thaumazein at a world on fire

This article has tried to show how Bergson gives an account of laughter that strikes some similarities to the experience of *thaumazein*. As he tells us, laughter requires “a momentary anesthesia of the heart” (Bergson, 1900/2008, p.11) one where our automatic dispositions are momentarily paused to force us to correct ourselves. Humorous laughter can generate a *pathos* like *thaumazein*, unsettling what is taken for granted and inviting the possibility of questioning it and fostering our understanding in order to transform it. By enabling the juxtaposition of elements and ideas that would seem incongruent in everyday life the stability of the familiar is disrupted, and creative inquiry and engagement is enabled. However, as has been argued, the way in which this is resolved can end up concealing precisely the questions that arise. Recognizing the contingent nature of our customs and habits may leave us completely disoriented in how to act and what to expect of our world. The awe provoked by seeing our ways of living being dissolved can serve as a deterrent to stop any further inquiry or cynically reinforcing their contingency as desired and necessary.

Humorous laughter is double-faced, it veils and unveils established norms while signaling an ambiguous positioning towards them. Should we keep them, should we transform them? This double facedness should not be regarded as a problem to be solved, instead it should serve a guide to the way we inquire into the ways political humor is used. By trying to elicit laughter, political humor targets established norms of what to expect from politics and politicians. This does not necessarily mean transforming them, it can very much function as a way of cynically reinforcing them.

Laughter potency lies precisely in this ambiguous nature, it cannot be completely defined as a mechanism to challenge rigid norms, nor as an affirmation of them. It is precisely the fact that neither of those possibilities is defined *a priori* that which transforms laughter into a rich phenomenon around where to study the ways in which people create meaning and modify their understanding of the world.

Whenever we hear someone saying ‘It's just a joke’ we should consider it as a clear invitation to take it seriously. Studying political humor beyond the question of its persuasive power requires the disposition to accept that behind the masquerade of contempt, bitterness, *ressentiment* (Capelos et al., 2024) and overall hate there is a questioning of the order through which politics is done. The study of humor in a world that has lost its mind is a fundamental entry point for understanding the dispute of what the “common sense” is, of what it means to do politics, and of the ways in which new frameworks of intelligibility are constructed and contested when the old ones have become rigid and stale.

The risk of falling into absolute relativism, or of renouncing any form of building a common understanding of our common social world leading us to an extreme individualism is always present. Both for those who are consumers of these forms of political humor and for those who research it. We have tried to develop, based on Jankélévitch, a notion of irony that allows us to

understand and balance two different tendencies: that of an extreme seriousness that is incapable of enabling thinking something different from what is already given and immediately present, and on the other hand, the relativization mentioned above.

Most people's relationships with politics cannot be subsumed to a deliberative process, rather, it is formed in everyday talk and interactions. More than ever people are informed through "nontraditional" means in which humor plays a central role and the boundaries between what is serious and what is not is blurred (Aalberg et al., 2012; Doona, 2020; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2022). One could simply regard it as propaganda, and argue humor and laughter are mere rhetorical devices to deliver a message. And while on a certain level that is true, it remains an insufficient understanding of their potency. To address the questions that arise when humorous laughter is taken seriously, even the laughter of those with whom we disagree, it is essential to recognize the type of order that is being challenged and the underlying reasons for this challenge. As other authors have argued the hybridization of political communication nowadays challenges traditional notions of what it means to do politics and even what is considered as a valid political message (Askanius, 2021; Bulatovic, 2019; Doona, 2018; Holm, 2017).

Just labelling as propaganda the use of polemic types of political humor precludes the true understanding of humor and laughter and relegates them to mere rhetorical elements that would be secondary to a main objective or goal. The psychological research on the effects of political humor is full of mixed results and is mainly focused on its persuasive and learning effects (Burgers & Brugman, 2022; Walter et al., 2018), this shortcomings should be understood as signs of the necessity of researching how people actively engage with it and how different factors can influence its effects. By questioning what kind of reactions are elicited by these rhetorical devices we can gain a better understanding of the transformations of these norms and expectations.

This article has attempted to demonstrate that these rhetorical forms enable the questioning of the obvious, of what is so automatic that we do not even stop to think about it. It is common that research on extreme forms of political humor tries to quickly dismiss hostile worldviews as expressions of underlining prejudices and attitudinal dispositions, however as has been argued it can also serve to highlight certain aspects of a phenomenon while concealing others. In this sense, the use of humor in politics also serves to build an image of the world in which certain elements are worth considering while others are not. While this article is theoretical, we can venture a hypothesis and ask ourselves whether the hybridization of politics and humor can change the ways political attitudes are developed by enhancing the relevance of certain aspects of everyday life over others.

Conclusions

As the extreme right makes electoral gains all around the world the seriousness of its consequences for the environment, civil rights, democracy is conflated with a rhetoric that thrives in absurdity, contradictions and disparagement.

The White House's social media accounts have shared AI-generated-Studio-Ghibli-style images depicting the deportation of crying families. Meanwhile, people are being sent to a torture center disguised as a prison in El Salvador without due process because of their allegedly gang-affiliated tattoos (Phillips & Rangel, 2025). How is it imaginable to laugh at a landscape like this? We must imagine *à-la-Bergson* a cold-hearted laugh, that chuckles at the recognition of how nonsense floods politics, that smirks while allowing for the awe provoked by the dissolution of long-standing

consensus to inspire to look beyond the immediate. Laughter might not always entail joy but at least might allow for a distance to think our reality without falling into clichés or ready-made frameworks of understanding. To let thaumazein turn into wonder.

Let's go back to one of the initial questions at the start: How was my laughter different from the laughter of those with whom I disagreed? Those laughs at the racist and far-right forums that nevertheless captured my attention. My tentative answer is that while discovering those forums and laughing at them helped me question my basic assumptions on what politics is and can be, it also opened an inquiry that was not quickly dismissed through resorting to all-encompassing worldviews as a response to the problems they pointed to. Meanwhile, the laughter that accompanied the racist and sexist jokes I saw were mixed with grievances about unresolved political, social and economic issues, but instead of fostering an interest in developing a broader understanding of those problems they quickly resorted to villainizing minorities, women and foreigners to answer those complaints.

There is a type of laughter that is to be learned that enables looking into the most abhorrent aspects of politics without defensibly dismissing them. A laughter that produces an ironic disposition that serves to establish new and creative relationships between aspects that otherwise would remain hidden by their obviousness. It's a laughter born not out of joy, but of the possibility of recognizing the paradoxes that define our contemporary world. A melancholic, yet playful ironic laughter that unlike fascist laughter can recognize the failings and contradictions of traditional well-mannered-harmony-seeking-politics but doesn't try to quickly dismiss them by imposing an all-encompassing worldview. A resilience that allows us to confront the absurdities of politics and societal norms without succumbing to despair. Humorous laughter, at least the kind I've tried to show through Bergson, is a laughter that helps us enter dialogic relationships with ourselves and others.

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