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Reassessing the Right to Laughter: Humour, Dissent and the Liberal Imagination

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Though it might seem utterly innocuous, almost not worth considering, at the heart of my concern is whether humour can be considered to be something *good*. This probably doesn't seem like a particularly controversial thesis, especially in New Zealand in the twenty-first century. For example, I would hazard an estimate that almost anyone reading this essay would like to be thought capable of humour in some form: whether this is understood as the ability to tell a joke, or make a comic observation, or, at the very least, to be seen to possess what is commonly referred to as a sense of humour. In our mediated culture, a sullen, unsmiling face is reserved for totalitarian authority figures, the po-faced, the earnest and the boring who feature as the recurring villains of television, film and advertising. In fact, I would even go so far as to suggest – in terms so broad and definitive that one would usually,

and rightly, shy away from them – that as a society, we value humour. To push this claim even further, when I refer to ‘we,’ I am not restricting this definition to New Zealand, but rather I am expanding this pronoun to encompass other nations within the rich, English-speaking, liberal democratic world such as Canada, Australia, the UK and the USA (and I would probably open this already large tent even wider if encouraged or pushed to do so). Within these nation states, united by a common media culture borne by a common language, humour is desired, respected and valued.

It is this social value ascribed to humour that makes it so important and that I seek to address here. This value is more than simply a love of jokes or an affinity for laughter; it is the ubiquitous and almost unflappable perception of humour as a benign, desirable characteristic. Moreover, this ascription of value is not the sole province of any one form or mode of humour, but rather is most often assigned to humour in a very general and abstract sense, including, but by no means limited to the overlapping realms of satire, jokes, comedy, slapstick, puns, wit and sarcasm. All of these various designations can be understood as specific forms or subsets of humour, and thus all of these are thought to be good in some way, shape form in terms of the worldview addressed herein. In particular, I am concerned with the ways that this valuation of humour takes on a political valence, whereby it becomes conceived of as a dynamic and enlightening, aesthetic and social force: a conception which I will argue is tied to manner in which humour plays a central role in the construction of our sense of what it means to be a critical, yet reasonable, subject in a liberal democratic society. However, rather than simply reaffirming this notion – rather than repeating what might be a familiar, if not often explicitly expressed, formula, that humour is democratic, progressive and critical – I want to trouble this comfortable equation, and suggest instead that humour is more complicated and more fraught than often thought. Instead, I want to suggest that

humour not only can, but does, function in culturally restrictive and even repressive ways that run contrary to a common conception of humour as a site of freedom and liberation.

Furthermore, I want to suggest that this dual nature of humour becomes most readily apparent at moments of crisis or controversy, and, in order to illustrate this point, I will consider in some depth the 2005 *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy as a means to illustrate my wider points about the cultural, political and social importance of humour at our current moment.

This importance of humour can be perceived on multiple fronts. Firstly, humour can be understood as a major concern of the media industries, which earn a significant portion of their profits from the production and distribution of situation comedies and comedic films, not to mention the role of humour in advertising, video games, popular publishing and internet content. To phrase it succinctly, the production and consumption of humour is a major economic concern. Secondly, humour also operates as an almost unassailable aesthetic category – by this I mean that humour is often taken up as a marker of unquestioned cultural value, such that for a text to be thought ‘funny’ is to entirely justify its existence and circulation. In this instance, ‘funny’ operates in a manner once reserved for categories such as ‘beauty’ or ‘truth.’¹ Thirdly and finally, humour has come to serve a central social need, wherein it operates as a site of subjective identity and affect that manifests, as noted by the sociologist Michael Billig, in the almost unquestionable desirability of a “sense of humour”² most evident in personal ads and obituaries. So strong is this belief in the social utility of humour that it increasingly comes to be seen as a physical and mental cure-all, one which can, in the words of humour scholar and entrepreneur John Morreall, “reduce stress, boost morale, defuse conflict, and make communication more effective.”³ Morreall even goes so far as to suggest that humour can aid physical recovery and healing⁴, an idea that recurs fairly

frequently in self-help and popular medical science reporting. It is, thus, on the basis of these reasons – economic, aesthetic and social – that I want to suggest that humour also performs an important political function.

Laughing All the Way to the Revolution: Humour as Radical Politics

I wish to make clear that at this stage that when I refer to the *political* function of humour, I do not mean ‘political’ strictly in the sense of parties and policies, though that is certainly an aspect of the way in which I will be discussing it. Instead, drawing on a wider cultural studies tradition evident in the work of theorists such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall,⁵ as well as the work of Michel Foucault,⁶ I here define politics very broadly as the distribution, contestation and negotiation of power within society. Above all, I am concerned with the way in which culture acts to challenge or shore up different interpretations of the world. According to this understanding, then, humour can be thought to be political insofar as it influences and inflects the ways in which we perceive and interact with the world, and the opportunities and obstacles that humour creates for addressing the world in a political manner. While there is some debate among theorists and philosophers as to the political role of humour, here I will focus upon the dominant understanding of its political role, wherein humour is taken up as a form of irreverent critique; as a means to subvert hierarchy, authority and dogma that Alenka Zupancic characterises as “the humanist-romantic presentation of comedy as intellectual resistance.”⁷ Simon Critchley’s highly influential book *On Humour* offers a paradigmatic example of this perspective, whereby humour is characterised as a subversive force that reveals the incongruities in the everyday structures of power, rendering the familiar unfamiliar and thereby producing opportunities for critique⁸. Similarly, in *Art and Laughter*, Shelia Klein makes the broad claim that “all humour is subversive, that is, aims to disrupt our assumptions, emotions, patterns of thinking,

ways of knowing and the world as we know it.”⁹ Such examples are only the tip of an iceberg of academic and popular work that imagines humour to be a revolution by another name and, in doing so, perpetuates an understanding of humour as an inherently progressive and productive political endeavour.

This constellation of related approaches to humour can, perhaps, be best be understood as informed – whether directly or indirectly, tacitly or explicit – by the work of Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, specifically, his notion of the “carnival.” To summarise briefly, drawing on the historical carnivals of Europe, Bakhtin takes up the carnival, or the carnivalesque, as a symbol of the political force of anarchic, chaotic, grotesque, absurd culture: in the words of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, Bakhtin’s carnival is “a potent, populist, critical inversion of all official worlds and hierarchies.”¹⁰ Thus understand the carnival is liberation from the prevailing truth and established order and an entry into “truly human relations”¹¹ – under the conditions of the carnival, then, order breaks down, social status is repealed and reversed, fear gives way to reverie, and suppressed passions erupt. Widely taken up in cultural studies in the 1990s, most notably in the influential work of John Fiske,¹² the carnivalesque has been understood as a powerful theoretical tool for making sense of popular culture as a radical political force. It is in this vein that we should interpret Louis Kaplan’s enthusiastic appraisal of the political potential of Holocaust humour, when he declares that

“Unlike the official demand of Holocaust monumentality for a strictly delimited reading, ... transgressive modes of pop cultural expression (i.e., jokes, cartoons, and film comedies) are based on the refusal to be circumscribed within the confines of officialdom. They offer more decentralized, heterogeneous, polysemic, and anarchic transmissions of the Holocaust memory.”¹³

Kaplan here demonstrates how the notion of the carnival can inform an interpretation of humour as a profoundly political act. Extending this position further would seem to imply that to treat any ostensibly serious subject in a comic manner would constitute, to return to Kaplan's words, a "decentralised, heterogenous, polysemic and anarchic" moment. Here, then, the notion of the carnival is used to suggest that the destabilising influence of laughter can lead to the defeat of power and the levelling of hierarchy: a utopic vision of humour as revolution that crystallises many of the political assumptions made regarding modern satire and humour.

This perception of humour status as a form of politically critical speech is not unrelated to the resonance and importance of humour in our current moment. Rather, the sense of importance afforded humour can be understood within the dominant political culture of liberalism, a milieu in which the expression of subversive, critical or anti-authoritarian perspectives comes to be seen as an essential political duty. Following Wendy Brown, liberalism is here understood very broadly as a belief in the inherently positive and desirable nature of equality and individual freedom as guiding political tenets.¹⁴ Understood in this manner, we can think of liberalism as more than simply the concerns of a few political parties, but rather as a set of foundational values or ideals shared by all mainstream political interests in liberal democratic states. Under a liberal political order, dissent or the speaking of truth to power is seen as inherently desirable. Therefore, in this context, humour comes to be valued insofar as it is thought to promote freedom and challenge oppression, in other words, when it is believed to serve a liberal political function. Thus, what I want to suggest is that humour thrives in a liberal society when it is understood to be an expression of liberal values, such as is the case with the conception of humour-as-carnival.

In terms of such a model, a liberal relation to the world is both produced and promoted by humour and a pre-condition for its existence. Symptomatic of this viewpoint is Shelia Klein's suggestion that "The satire and irony in much of contemporary art has thrived in both US and UK societies because [they] have societies that are open to free expression and the critique of social and political structures. [The citizens of those countries] are able to laugh freely, and engage in public laughter, and the exhibition of these works may even spur changes in public and private consciousness, with citizens and public officials, which may lead to changes in social structures and policies."¹⁵ As enticing an image of humour as this might be, I am somewhat sceptical of Klein's account, in large part because she takes its liberal credentials for granted. Klein's declaration is noteworthy, however, because it speaks to the extent to which a liberal politics and humour are thought to be mutually reinforcing as well as demonstrating the manner in which such a sentiment might be expressed. Klein's position thereby illustrates how the centrality of humour to contemporary culture can be understood in part as a consequence of its purported affinity with liberal values.

It is during the liberal moment of politics, then, humour comes to be theorised as a form of carnivalesque dissent, and importantly this is the case even in the absence of any directly political content. In order for humour to be considered political is not, therefore, a matter of evoking subject material broadly classified as politics, but rather it is the form of humour itself which is here thought to do political work. Thus, humour, even ostensibly apolitical humour, comes to be regarded as a site of a necessary and inescapable politics: humour's irreverence becomes read as inherently antiauthoritarian in the context of a social order that proponents of a political reading of humour insist is serious about dominance, and dominant in its seriousness. For example, Joseph Boskin conceptualises comedians and humourists as modern-day shamans who confront social issues and taboos¹⁶. Stephen Kercher

argues that humour was one of the leading vectors for left-liberal politics during the McCarthy era and beyond, a space for the critical, marginal perspectives of minority groups: he recounts how the comedians themselves, figures such as Jules Feiffer, Harvey Kurtzman and the members of the Second City, considered themselves satiric forces of social change¹⁷. And perhaps most explicitly, Israel Knox declared in 1951 that “humour is a species of liberation, and it is the liberation that comes to us as we experience the singular delight beholding chaos that is playful and make-believe in a world that is serious and coercive.”¹⁸

Nor is this liberation restricted to a particular form of humour, such as satire, but rather is taken by writers such as Critchley, Klein and Boskin to encompass all possible forms: thus, punning is liberation from the rules of language, slapstick from the rules of bodily comportment, absurdity from the rules of sense. Hence, though most forms of humour are not understood to be politicised in any direct sense, the understanding of humour as a force of anarchy rather than order, nonetheless, reflects the more directly political theoretical consensus. Through this interpretive lens, all humour is an inherent force for freedom and resistance to authority, even if this political understanding of humour is not often clearly articulated in these terms.¹ The politics commonly attributed to humour can thus be understood as a liberal politics: and what I want to suggest, then, is that under the political and cultural conditions of dominant liberalism, humour becomes seen as an expression of dissent, in a moment when dissent is widely viewed as the speaking of truth to power, and therefore as something inherently desirable. Satirical humour becomes seen as an important form of democratic speech. Thus understood, humour becomes regarded as a social good in

¹ One major consequence of this interpretive framework is that forms of humour which are seen to not fit within this paradigm, such as racist jokes, are either ignored or deemed to not be humour, or at least not proper forms of humour. Critchley, for example, defines as “true humour,” that which laughs at itself, while bad or false humour is that, such as racist jokes, which is taken to laugh at others. In this manner, Critchley manners to preserve humour as an entirely positive and liberation force.

the context of liberal democracy: an interpretation evident in humour's previously considered status as an unquestionably desirable personality trait and aesthetic quality.

The perception of humour as an inherent good in the context of liberal political ideology is not, however, the ultimate conclusion that can be drawn from the current analysis. Instead, I would like to push this argument one more step and suggest that when humour is interpreted as a positive political force in liberal terms, this then creates the conditions whereby humour becomes tied to the expectations of liberal democratic society: a situation which goes some way to explaining why controversies regarding humour can become so heated and politically charged. The integration of humour into the expectations of liberalism arises as a consequence of humour's configuration as a form of liberal political speech, which then creates an impetus to partake and enjoy humour in order to demonstrate one's liberal credentials. The consequence of this is that to disapprove of humour, now understood as a form of free critical speech, is to side against the carnival, and thus to reveal oneself as aligned against not only fun, which is a problem in and of itself in our current society, but also against the politicised freedom of the carnival. The curmudgeon thus becomes tied to the figure of the carnival: to remain sour in the face of jocularity is to betray one's opposition to progress and free-thinking. The inadvisability of taking such a stance can be seen in the manner in which politicians endeavour to present themselves as at least capable of appreciating a joke, often at their own expense, if not capable of delivering one.

For example, consider the concern surrounding Barack Obama's angry response to the satirical June 21 New York cover, "The Politics of Fear," which prompted commentators to question aloud whether the future president lacked a sense of humour. The charges of a lack of humour on Obama's part were subsequently redressed by Obama's repeated forays into

humour, such as his appearance on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno – the first appearance by a sitting president on a chat show – in order to demonstrate his ability to have a laugh. In a similar manner, Obama's predecessor cultivated the image of a relaxed, folksy sense of humour that often worked to offset criticism of his more militant policies. In a New Zealand context, the recently elected Prime Minister, John Key, has delivered several quips and jokes in his addresses to the press, some of which have backfired, but which nonetheless still work to entrench the perspective of Key as a politician with a sense of humour. Nor is it only politicians who need to be capable of humour, the demand also extends to private citizens who also must appreciate a laugh, especially those who might seek to actively define themselves as liberal. Laughter becomes regarded as a mark of the reasonable subject, who is able to temper his or her own politics and passions with a well-grounded perception of their own limitations.¹⁹ Thus, humour becomes an essential quality of the sophisticated and tolerant contemporary (liberal) subject: an important means to distinguish oneself from other subjects who are considered to lack the sense of humour necessary to engage on the global scale in a knowing, informed, and appropriately cynical manner. The net effect of this process is that humour becomes taken up as a gauge of social tolerance and self-critique, and the liberal subject becomes a humorous subject.

That's Not Funny: Debates over Controversial Humour

What happens, though, when such humour goes wrong? What happens when humour is thought to cross the cultural line from critical to offensive? Examples of such controversies abound, from Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat* and *Bruno* to numerous controversies arising out of *South Park* and *Family Guy*, the provocations of Chris Morris's *Brass Eye* in the late 90s,

the aforementioned New Yorker cover, South African cartoonist Jonathan Shapiro's (popularly known as Zapiro) provocative depiction of Muhammad in May 2010²⁰, *bro 'Town* creator David Fane's comments regarding AIDs patients and Jews in June 2010²¹, Joel Stein's *Time* magazine Article "My own Private India,"²² which was widely criticised in the Indian-American community in July 2010, in addition to numerous local infractions across the global. In all these instances, remarks made in the context of humour, are thought by some to go too far; to go beyond the bounds of acceptable comedy and to thereby contravene the conditions by which satire is considered a form of desirable political speech. In such circumstances, offence is taken, positions are staked, and humour is converted into a site at which politics is explicitly, actively and aggressively played out. In his analysis of such conflicts, Paul Lewis suggests that "[T]he edgy-jokes-lead-to-angry-criticism-and-counter-arguing-defensive-moves dance has become a ritual of public discourse".²³ Lewis characterises this rote response in terms of "anti-jokes," his term to describe the response to a controversial humour, whereby an offending incident is declared to be not funny, but rather a cruel and hurtful attack. The familiar form and frequency of these incidents whereby humour becomes a site of public conflict can be considered to speak to the social investment in humour as a site important enough to require frequent policing and debate.

How, though, are we make sense of these conflicts? As Lewis suggests, at a basic level, it seems that all the co-ordinates, indeed, all the rhetorical moves and feints, accusations and defences are already laid out for the aggrieved and defensive parties: the responses seem so automatic they may as well have been scripted. On the one hand, for those who seek to defend the validity of a given instance of possibly offensive humour, there is the notion of humour as dissent, as critique, as challenge, which argues that no limits should be placed. From this perspective, humour is always on the side of freedom and its opposition

always constitutes oppressive censorship. However, on the other hand, there is the notion of humour as mockery, as disrepute, as insult: a perspective which has not yet been implicated in the current discussion. This is because such an interpretation is all but impossible to countenance when working under the discursive limitations and assumptions of the carnivalesque, liberal model of humour. From this position, humour is at best a provocation, at worse a cruel and intolerant insult. In the case of controversial humour, then, the assumptions that are often made regarding humour and its political function are made visible, and thus must account for themselves. Therefore, though the largest majority of humour obviously does not result in international conflicts and debate – and thus is not politicised in any immediate or obvious manner – this does not mean that those unremarked upon examples are of a different kind than their more contentious kin. Rather, controversial humour can be thought to bring to the fore that which most often goes overlooked in other accounts of humour, as the liberal model is made apparent, and even brought into question. It is not then that contentious examples, such as the *Jylland-Posten* cartoons, are fundamentally different from the majority of humour, but rather that their interaction with other cultural, social, political, religious or ethical contingencies leads to intensified debate and concern with those instances. Thus, the liberal mode is still operative in those uncontentious examples, but under conditions and in relation to subjects and events, which do not result in the need for humour to openly account for itself and social function. In contrast, humour controversies arise when the understanding of humour as freedom is disrupted by claims that humour is working as illiberal insult and ridicule.

Both these positions can be seen at work in what is arguably the most important and controversial of the humour clashes in recent years – what is most often referred to as the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy, which arose following the publication of

12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad by the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten* on 30 September 2005. The 12 cartoons were the result of an “experiment” whereby the editors of the paper approached the Danish union of newspaper illustrators soliciting cartoons of Muhammad purportedly in order to demonstrate a stand against intimidation and self-censorship²⁴. The cartoons sparked fierce denunciations of the newspaper and the Danish state, death threats, boycotts of Danish goods by twelve countries, and international protests in which buildings were torched and over eight hundred people died, most in Nigeria. As Jytte Klausen, whose book, *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, I am drawing on in my account of the crisis, declares “It is hard not to marvel at how twelve little cartoons could cause so much trouble.”²⁵ Klausen argues that the cartoons functioned in such a manner because they become a flash-point for existing tensions regarding Muslim immigration into Europe, and an ongoing battle for global influence over diasporic populations between European and Muslim nations, Egypt in particular²⁶.

The basic co-ordinates of the debates that accompanied the cartoons can be understood in terms of two positions, which, it’s important to note, do not map tidily onto any West versus Muslim division. On one side, were those who saw the cartoons as exercise in free speech, a manifestation of the critical satiric impulse, which as discussed above, is so highly valued in liberal democracies, at least in principle. From such a position, any opposition to the cartoons constituted censorship or even authoritarian tendencies. Flemming Rose, the editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, compared the cartoons to the use of humour by dissidents in the Soviet Union as a means of resistance – he declared demands to censor the cartoons as anathema to secular democracy and free speech.²⁷ An aligned, and perhaps more troubling, refrain from those in support of the cartoons was that the offended parties had failed to ‘get the joke.’ Muslim opposition was thus framed as the consequence of a lack of a sense of

humour. This willingness to present Islam as a religion without a sense of humour, is strongly reminiscent of the colonial tendency, traced by Michael Ross, to imagine non-white subjects to be incapable of humour. Ross argues that, in colonial texts, the civilised settler subject is known by their sense of humour, which separates them from the colonised Other who is presented as lacking the requisite sophistication²⁸. A similar mechanism is arguably also at work in the current example, whereby the liberal humorous subject, who understands the cartoons as an exercise in critical free speech, is defined against the zealous seriousness of Muslim opposition. In such a manner, those in support of the cartoons framed opposition as a failure of interpretation – an inability to perceive a joke – rather than as the consequence of a different, but equally legitimate perspective.

It should be clear then that when someone is taking humour as offensive in this manner, they are no longer conceiving of it in terms of liberal critical speech. However, this does not mean that the aggrieved party has simply failed to correctly interpret the humour. Rather, what we see here is a response informed by an alternate view of humour as a demeaning, insulting operation that seeks to humiliate or disrespect its target: an interpretation which stands in stark contrast to the currently dominant interpretation of humour as a radical, critical force. As the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy took on a global resonance and the cartoons spread beyond around the world courtesy of new media outlets, these positions solidified further as newspapers' decisions to republish the cartoons were alternately conceived as either solidarity in free speech or evidence of widespread disrespect for Muslim opinion and values. At the heart of such a debate, then, there seems to arise a fundamental clash, not of cultures, but rather of different interpretations of humour: which raises the question of how should we best understand the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, as satire or mockery?

To ask such a question, however, is to approach this situation from the wrong perspective; one premised upon a false opposition. Rather than adhere to either of these circumscribed options, I instead want to argue here that humour is always both critique and insult. Attempts to distinguish between the two interpretations amount to attempts to separate out indivisible elements at the centre of the operation of humour: most examples of humour contain comingled and complimentary aspects both critique and ridicule. Moreover, I am not arguing these alternate conceptions of humour are simply the result of subjective disagreement; rather I want to suggest that they are inseparable political consequences of a single cultural process. Consequently, there need not be, and indeed cannot be, any final decision as to whether a given instance of humour is better understood as critical satire or abuse, and no final arbitration as to which side is correct. However, an adjudication of the correct meaning of humour is, by and large, the dominant perspective from which controversial instances of humour have been approached, in both the academic and popular press. As mentioned before, in instances of controversial humour, it has become common practice to assemble along well-worn paths of conflict: to defend humour as a special form of address, either politically critical or just joking, or to interpret it as straightforward attack on the butt of the joke.

Mapping the Controversy: Incongruity and Superiority in the Muhammad Cartoons

The polarisation of responses in instances of controversial humour, such as the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy, is particularly curious because of the manner in which this division reflects what might otherwise appear to a somewhat esoteric debate in the study of

humour, between adherents of what are customarily referred to as the incongruity and superiority models of humour. Indeed, I want to suggest that the debates surrounding the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons can be approached as the contemporary iteration of a long-standing question for theorists and philosophers of humour: that is, what makes humour humorous? As such, I will now turn to a consideration of the ways in which the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy can be mapped onto the competing theories of humour as more than simply an esoteric or academic concern, but rather as a means to better make sense of this conflict and the ways in which it speaks to the wider linkages of humour to critical thought and a liberal politics.

Historically, humour has been of concern to a great deal of prominent thinkers – Aristotle, Henri Bergson, Immanuel Kant, , Søren Kierkegaard, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Hobbes, Arnold Schopenhauer – though usually only in passing. As a consequence, we’re left with a broad range of theoretical models, often quickly sketched, frequently conflicting. A favoured contemporary method for making sense of this proliferation is to organise the multiple competing theories into a tripartite structure of Relief, Incongruity, and Superiority theories. I will not be addressing Relief theory here, because of its lack of both contemporary critical currency and immediate political relevance – for while its name may conjure up notions of a social-pressure release-valve, relief theories are, in practice, more concerned with the physiological and psychological mechanisms of laughter as a physical process,²⁹ and, as such, will not concern us here.

Briefly summarised, Superiority theory suggests that humour is generated when the subject has a sudden realisation of supremacy with respect to another person or situation. In the words of Thomas Hobbes, it is the belief that “the passion of laughter is nothing else but a

sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly.”³⁰ Superiority theory thus understands the experience of humour to arise from a sudden perception of supremacy in the audience with respect to another person, which causes the audience enjoyment. This feeling of superiority can arise for a number of reasons: for example, if the object of the humour, or the ‘butt’ were, in classic slapstick style, to trip and fall, or if a butt were revealed to be stupid or culturally ignorant. Through its recourse to such notions of normality and inferiority, Superiority theory thus runs counter to understandings of humour as inherently subversive, offering instead an interpretation of the comic as a site of ridicule, rather than rejoicing, that serves to reaffirm structures of power and ways of being. Superiority theory thus offers an interpretation of humour as a form of social corrective. In such accounts, laughter is not an escape from social rules, but our punishment for stepping out of line or a way to demonstrate the inferiority of certain social groups. The understanding of humour that arises out of Superiority Theory thereby challenges any attempt to attribute carnivalesque properties to humour or, more radically, inverts them such that the carnival becomes a site of control, its free play revealed as mockery and ridicule, its unsettling power focussed downward to repress rather than enlighten. The superiority theory of humour would seem to inform the perspectives of those who interpret the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons as a malicious exercise in disrespect. If one believes that the purpose of the humour here is to make the audience feel superior to the subject, or the butt, of the cartoon, then it is a short step to condemning the cartoons as an attempt to deride the Islamic faith. In terms of such a theory of humour, those opposed to the cartoon did not fail to get the joke – they got it all too well, as well as the declaration of supremacy or malice it embodied.

Incongruity theory, on the other hand, surmises that humour follows the substitution of an unexpected event or remark in the place of what is expected. Customarily traced back to the work of Kant,³¹ Incongruity theory proposes that humour arises when a particular interpretation or understanding of a statement or situation is suddenly disproved and another substituted in its place. Given that incongruity theory focuses attention on the formal mechanism of substitution, rather than the butt of the joke, this model allows for a much more euphemistic reading of the comic in contrast to the negative social implications of the superiority model. The contemporary ascendancy of this model can thus be thought to reflect the wider social tendency, discussed earlier, to imagine humour as a desirable and benign force, which, in line with dominant liberal ideology, is primarily conceived in terms of boundary-breaking, order-challenging, and carnivalesque freedom. Moreover, while there is nothing inherently political about the incongruous construction of humour – it simply relies upon the bringing together of two disparate elements, so that they uneasily coexist – subsequent commentators have reconfigured this interpretation in a number of politicised ways, many of which regard incongruity to be, or at least invoke, a profoundly subversive gesture, one which Karl Hill describes as “Groucho Marxism.” In this manner, humorists are thought to act as the comic doubles of critical philosophers, challenging the established norms of culture through “wit” rather than argumentation. Incongruity theory can thus be seen to underpin the position of those who understand humour to be a critical, liberal means of dissent. From this perspective there is no concern with cruelty or disrespect, but rather humour is a means to fulfill one’s liberal duty and speak truth power.

Neither of these models – incongruity or superiority – should be regarded correct in any final or total way. Both have been subjected to extensive debunking through the extensive provision of counter-examples. For example, Michael Billig goes to some length to

try and locate the hidden malice in apparently incongruous jokes,³² while the history of opposing superiority theory can be traced at least as far back as Francis Hutcheson's eighteenth century observation that a true believer does not find the inferiority of a heretic cause for amusement.³³ In light of the necessary gaps within any universalising theory, we should not therefore treat these models as final or full accounts of how humour operates, but rather as what they are: models. Both are simplified abstractions that allow one to conduct analysis and draw conclusions out of the chaotic complexity of actual occurrences.

This does not mean they are useless, far from it, because these models not only provide us with a means to begin to account for the complicated function of humour, but they also provide a way to make sense of the underlying and unspoken models of humour that inform the divergent positions as regard the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy, and indeed other humour conflicts. Furthermore, the frame of reference for understanding humour is more than just an academic matter; it informs the clash of perspectives over humour, the manner in which humour is created, mobilised, understood, and taken up in popular culture and everyday discourse. Perhaps the most important thing we should draw from this, then, is the inability of the dominant social narratives of humour, premised as they are within the broad contours, if not the theoretical niceties, of these models, to actually make sense of these conflicts. When humour is understood as an exercise in incongruity and satire it becomes a freedom of speech issue. When humour is understood as superiority and mockery it becomes a tolerance issue. These positions do not overlap. However, while neither position can fully account for the totality of the operation of humour in a case, such as the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy, nor can either position be considered a failure to understand how humour 'actually' works.

Moving Beyond the Liberal Model of Humour as Dissent

At a basic level, then, this is a simple point – humorous texts tend to be polysemic, that is have multiple meanings depending upon who is interpreting. What is more interesting here though, is the way in which those alternate meanings can become rapidly and rabidly politicised. Thus, in moments of controversial humour, these difference perspectives in relation to humour are taken up not simply as alternate interpretations, but as opposing positions in openly political and aggressive conflicts with very real material outcomes for many of those involved. Moreover, the way in which humour is interpreted in these moments is far from an autonomous decision but rather reflects the power structures in which that humour is situated, and the underlying understandings of humour that inform particular responses. The importance of humour within our contemporary media society as a means to communicate and critique can lead us to perceive it as an inherently positive aesthetic that speaks to the tolerance, critical distance and sophistication that we believe characterises our way of life. However, dominant accounts of humour as dissent and critique overlook the way in which it can serve a disciplinary and repressive function. Dividing this into an either/or debate, by characterising those who disagree as failing to ‘get it’, allows both parties to retain their denial, it allows the retention of pure models of humour, wherein the comic is thought to serve singular and relatively straightforward functions as a tool of resistance or oppression. This is not a helpful way to make sense of humour. From a liberal perspective, it blinds commentators and critics to the ways in which humour can hurt and marginalise. In emphasising this fact, I am not asserting that humour cannot be critical: if anything, I am arguing that it should be thought of as almost always critical on some level, but that this interpretation needs to be tempered through an acknowledgement that humour also operates simultaneously in other, less positive, registers. Humour is much more complicated than

simply the form of carnivalesque dissent or free speech that it has become in the liberal imagination, and this should bring us to reassess the unspoken right to laughter than operates in our political moment.

A significant part of this process involves working out how humour can be understood beyond liberalism and satire: away from a direct equation of humour with liberal political speech. This could involve increasing recognition of the parallels between the anger of opponents to the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons and the refusal of left to acknowledge the ‘humour’ of remarks by the likes of Rush Limbaugh or Anne Coulter in the USA. An equation of humour with critical thinking prevents us from considering how humour can be used in ways that clash with our own values and leads to a dismissal of any humour we disagree with as either a false or inferior form leading to an unproductive confusion of aesthetic and ethical registers. Faced with such a situation, too often we simply reject the possibility that the other is capable of humour at all. This means both a representation of aggrieved parties as unsophisticated, and unhumorous reactionaries and of those who mock the values we believe in as unfunny, manipulative demagogues. A consideration of the mockery of liberal values and practices is perhaps one way to begin the complication of an understanding of humour as an inherently positive carnival and to break the link between humour and an always liberal politics. Humour certainly functions as a form of liberal speech, but it is not simply freedom and it is not simply dissent. Given the importance of humour to the constitution of the reasonable and sophisticated subject of the contemporary Western metropolis, a better understanding of the cultural mechanics of humour is a vital part of any rigorous critical theory of the political potential of contemporary culture. To do so, we must jettison the sweeping generalisations that too often define the terrain on which debates about humour take place, and instead carefully attend to the actual texture of humour and

humorous texts. In the instance of a text such as the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, it becomes vital to consider the texts themselves – the way the joke-work of the text is constructed, the way it frames its butt and the attitude it takes towards them. This is a careful and particular job, and one for another time. What I have tried to do here is demonstrate the necessity of such a task, through arguing for the importance of humour for the political frameworks of our current cultural moment, and troubling the liberal frame through which we are accustomed to making sense of the political work of humour. As I stated at the beginning, I believe we are a society that values humour, and therefore I think that it is time we started thinking about it in ways that reflect its centrality, importance and possibilities.

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Tracking Footprints?: A Response to Nicholas Holm

Mike Lloyd

It is encouraging to read Nicholas Holm's work on humour and politics and to see someone taking the topic seriously. Although my own work on humour is quite different, I share the view that humour is far too pervasive to be neglected within academia just because it appears less directly "serious." To date, the international literature on humour and the main scholarly organisation devoted to it – the International Society for Humor Studies – has been dominated by linguistics and psychology. So, it is good for some diversification to occur, and particularly for this to have some association with New Zealand (there is precious little research here on humour). However, slightly altering Holm's title, I am going to exercise the right to be critical, hopefully in a constructive manner. The critical points made here share in common a desire for more attention to specifics. Of course, this is where Holm finishes his argument, and I do hope that he takes up his own suggestion to study particulars "at another time," however, in getting to that partly evasive conclusion he has raised some points that deserve critical discussion.

Shortly after defining politics as "the distribution, contestation and negotiation of power within society," and then framing the concern with humour "as a form of irreverent critique, as a means to subvert hierarchy, authority and dogma," the discussion moves to Bakhtin. This is because his work on the carnival is consistent with the notion that humour is critique. Nicholas notes that many scholars have favoured Bakhtin's concepts as they are "a powerful theoretical tool for making sense of the popular culture as a radical political force." However, as some scholars who have ethnographically studied carnivals suggest, we may need some caution before jumping on the Bakhtin bandwagon. Crowley³⁴ and Abrahams³⁵ both make this point with the former being more direct. As Crowley says, "the most astonishing characteristic of Carnival is its conservatism of form in a situation designed to maximise innovation and creativity."³⁶ He goes on to make the obvious if neglected point that Bakhtin's source material was primarily textual:

for Bakhtin, "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people" ... Carnival becomes

“life itself,” ... [But there is] One small problem: no such Carnival has ever existed, and indeed Bakhtin had no field experience with Carnivals or markets except through Rabelais. ... Indeed, the idea that all people participate in Carnival is dead wrong. ... So, if you look at it a little closer, you wonder if this isn't something Bakhtin cooked up in some cold Russian room. Like the lady said about Bach, “I don't like Bakhtin, but I approve of him!”³⁷

I am sure many people would say they have good reasons for approving of Bakhtin's model of carnival, but we could extend the last point that Crowley makes. That is, most people are in favour of critique, particularly if directed at those who unjustly benefit from power and perpetuate inequality. Consequently, it is very easy to *want* humour to be positively involved in progressive politics, or at least some kind of counter-movement against power. But we need to remind ourselves of one of the complicated “meta” features of humour. As Basso nicely puts it,

Acts of joking convey messages that are not conveyed when the acts they are patterned after are performed unjokingly, and for this reason jokes are not intended to be taken literally, “seriously,” or at face value. ... In the event that they are, they instantly cease being jokes and, having thus gone awry, stand open to interpretation as instances of the unjoking acts they are modelled upon.³⁸

This takes some thinking through. One thing it emphasises is that successful humour is very finely crafted and based around structures of economy. But the key thing to take from it is that very rarely is humour directly political; given its own dynamic, it tends to operate some steps removed from such a level, or as Raskin has nicely put it, “Politics is a serious business; humor has a serious footprint: its “message.”³⁹

Christie Davies, one of the few sociologists who has worked extensively on humour, has some useful things to say here. Let us take one of his specific analyses; the discussion of “Jokes on the Death of Princess Diana.”⁴⁰ To cut a long story short, after the media announced to the world that Diana had died in hospital after a car crash in Paris, there arose, it seems within hours, an internationally distributed joke cycle. Despite these jokes being unflattering to Diana and the Royal Family, Davies does not analyse them as some kind of

serious critique of the monarchy, outdated political systems, and so on. Instead, he focuses on incongruity, particularly regarding the role of contemporary media in portraying disasters or accidents. The incongruity has two key elements. First, media reports urge us to feel strong emotions, but this is incongruent both with our physical absence from the scene of the tragedy, and with the sanitised portrayal of disasters, accidents, or tragedies. Second, televised reporting of such events is a “rubbish sandwich”: solemn announcements and calls to grieve are sandwiched by the typical fare of trivial quiz shows, soap operas, sport and overblown endorsements of advertised products. Hence, the gist of Davies argument:

The level of incongruity provided by the media and particularly television was perhaps especially high following the death of Diana because of the extraordinarily strong media coverage of her death and funeral. Hence the enormous volume of jokes that followed.⁴¹

In what he calls a “dialectical” explanation, he sums up his explanation of the Diana jokes:

Humour is the only area of social life where dialectical relationships prevail, so that the strong assertion of a thesis calls into play a humorous antithesis. The more insistent and emotional the thesis, the more numerous the antithetical jokes. The Diana jokes are a series of reversals of the hegemonic sentimentality, for they are the only way in which independence and opposition can be asserted.⁴²

Now, Davies’ use of the terms dialectical and antithesis does suggest some connection with resistance to power, but carefully note the central role of emotionality and sentimentality in his argument. The humour anti-thesis is towards the incongruous suggestion that it is natural for everyone to be grieving at Diana’s death. Also note the orientation to unpacking the socio-logical conditions of possibility for humour’s emergence (“socio-logical” is a way of emphasising that the logic has social bases). So, for Davies and many other humour scholars, humour has a massive formal consistency and the particular content focused on is relatively insignificant. Again, Raskin has succinctly expressed this: “A rare good joke will be appreciated for its quality as would a joke about anything – and that anything will be quickly forgotten.”⁴³

If this is accepted, it might mean that when humour is actually mobilised around obvious matters of inequality, the formal humour mechanism itself can diminish any directly political return, that is, content matters are “quickly forgotten” because people focus on appreciation of the new manipulation of old humour mechanisms. This is the import of Basso’s point noted above: because of the nature of humour, it is one-step removed from serious political discourse; it has to be to be humour. In “getting” a political joke people may well reflect upon serious matters, but first they must be operated upon by the antithetical mechanism of humour, and there is a case to be made that whatever humour produces – laughter, critical reflection, etc – in some part it is based upon appreciation of the socio-logical mechanisms themselves.

If this all seems a bit abstract, we can make an interesting analogy to the case of the Muhammad cartoon controversy. In 2008 the journal *Humor* featured a special forum on the controversy, including the following insightful comment from Elliott Oring: “People can be mightily offended by a host of things – cartoons among them. As in the case of those published by *Jyllands-Posten* on September 30, 2005, cartoons can even offend people who *have not actually seen them.*”⁴⁴ This is an interesting adjunct to the case of humour where “anything is quickly forgotten.” When we are dealing with strong socio-logical machineries of form, whether the antithetical impulse of humour, or a type of religious fundamentalism, matters of content will often be relatively unimportant. This is not to say that humour cannot be brought into analyses of power, but it certainly suggests that to do so is very difficult. To continue Raskin’s metaphor, it may be akin to having plenty of footprints to follow, and being able accurately to guess the type of beast one is following, but never being able to track it down.

Personally, in regard to humour, I am more in favour of a kind of Wittgensteinian position. That is, one that avoids saying that complex, heterogenous social practices are all really derived from a single overarching structural force. A particularly egregious example is provided by Michael Billig who, in a book length treatment, basically argues that all humour is a form of ridicule (see Lloyd for a critical review).⁴⁵ Of course, here I have endorsed the work of Christie Davies, which is actually an exemplar of generalising comparative sociology, but a quick look at his work will show that it begins with a great deal of collection of humorous data. There is detail in it, even if at times it does get glossed over in his

comparative project. So, the positive project here might be to collect material on political humour whilst simultaneously working out how to theorise or analyse it in a way that avoids the tendency to over-generalise. It is not an easy thing to do and I wish Nicholas good luck with this project, if this is in fact what he is trying to do.

To finish, a slice of humour. There is a wonderful Peter Cook and Dudley Moore sketch called “The End of the World” where four men are gathered on a mountain because Brother Enim (Peter Cook) has precisely prophesied the date and time of the end of the world. They count down from ten seconds to the allotted time:

Peter: Five – four – three – two – one – Zero!

Omnes: (Chanting) Now is the end – Perish the World!

A pause

Peter: It was GMT, wasn't it?

Jon: Yes.

Peter: Well, it's not quite the conflagration I'd been banking on. Never mind, lads, same time tomorrow ... we must get a winner one day.⁴⁶

Undoubtedly, it is stretching the example too far, but this seems a good thing with which to think about humour and critique. Religious ‘false’ prophets, and maybe even ‘Religion’ as a whole, are the obvious butts of the joke, however, in the returning back tomorrow, same time, same place, we have a sobering reminder of the power of what Alfred Schutz liked to call “paramount reality”.⁴⁷ That is, the mundane, everyday world that, sooner or later, after our diversions, fantasies, periods of excitement, and so on, we always return to. Interestingly, it could be argued that if critique is to have any purchase it too must have implications for “paramount reality.” But, it seems to me that humour is not actually designed to alter the everyday world in any serious sense of the word “critical”. What it can do is add a certain wry and pleasurable sensibility to our realisation that there is no escape from reality. Thus, it is not because every joke may have a hidden “critical” edge that humour is so pervasive, but simply because it makes life bearable.

Laughter from a Historical Perspective: A Response to Nick Holm's 'Reassessing the Right to Laughter: Humour, Dissent, and the Liberal Imagination'

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In a historical context in which humour has caused riots and deaths while also serving, in the case of Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, as a vehicle for news and public commentary, Nick Holm's reassessment is timely. The publication of cartoons about the prophetic founder of Islam in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, offers a useful case study in which to explore the question of whether humour should be understood as an indicator of liberal values. To pursue this question, Holm has chosen to interrogate two competing explanations of what constitutes a humorous topic: the claim that humour stems from an appeal to a sense of superiority vis à vis its object as opposed to the alternative explanation that it derives from a sense of incongruity. To provide a gloss on these competing paradigms, the question might be posed as to whether humour primarily involves mocking, insults, and putdowns or whether it reflects a sense of irony, playfulness, and what Mikhail Bakhtin has discussed as the carnivalesque. There is much in Holm's paper which requires interrogation and analysis since it raises provocative questions about such complicated areas as the history of emotions, the reasons for the existence of the constitutional protection of free speech, issues of tolerance and human rights, and the power relations in which humour takes place.

As a historian whose discipline relies upon the deductive work of assembling interpretations based upon a multiplicity of specific instances, it would be the examples cited ever so tantalizingly and briefly by Holm that would be the ultimate test of the validity of these models. Lawrence Levine's examination of 'black laughter' in *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* treated humour as a survival mechanism, a weapon of the weak to mock the pretensions of their oppressors, the cultural ability to transcend suffering through humour which he also ascribed to Jews confronting pogroms, prejudice and poverty. Patrick Merziger identified two models in the historiography on humour: humour understood as a form of resistance and as an instrument of power in which a ruling regime used satire to ridicule or even obliterate its opponents. Merziger's own work on humour in Nazi Germany added a third form, a 'benign humour', which emphasised German unity rather than covertly or overtly expressing aggression, agitation or protest. Taken out of its German context, this third form might also be found among African Americans as described by Levine who identified the 'cathartic, integrative ritual of laughter'. The contributions to a special issue of the *International Review of Social History*, later republished as *Humour and Social Protest*, stressed this third form in a series of case studies of humour's contribution to solidarity ranging from leftist cartoonists in the early twentieth century United States to garment workers in contemporary Hanoi.⁴⁸ These case studies thus amplify the dual model of humour as aggression or liberation to identify a third – unity.

My own just completed work, *Seeing Reds: U.S. Conservatism and Red Scares, 1871-1964*, challenges the limitations of the two models of humor presented and the subsequent claim that humour is either a freedom of speech issue or a question of tolerance.⁴⁹ Perhaps it is my own experience as a historian seeking to understand the complicated functions humour performs but it seldom happens that such neat separations exist in historical

situations. He then went on to say that 'what is more interesting here' is the 'way in which those alternative meanings become rapidly and rabidly politicized in the current moment'. My own reading of the historical evidence suggests that three forms of humour are always political in that they reinforce, resist or construct new forms of power. As a case, in point, the cartoons analysed in *Seeing Reds* condensed ideology into memorable images which offer insights into beliefs and values both for what they highlight and what they omit. Their fusion of emotion and ideology enhanced their ability to convince because of their familiarity and their ability to trigger fear, hostility, and contempt in receptive viewers within the disarming camouflage of humour.

The cartoons which I analysed by Thomas Nast, the premier cartoonist of his era, which appeared in *Harper's Weekly* from the 1860s to the mid-1880s, reveals the same complicated questions about the meaning of humour as do the cartoons which *Jyllands-Posten* published in 2005. Nast, usually celebrated by liberal historians for his progressive attitudes in support of African American emancipation and enfranchisement or in defense of the Chinese victims of mob violence, was capable of vicious attacks on Catholicism and Irish Catholics. Portraying bishops as crocodiles or reptilian figures crawling over the Capitol dome or the Irish as simian-faced thugs, Nast helped to stir up mob violence in the streets of New York where he also served in the militia to suppress the riots his attitudes helped to create. He combined the liberatory and the repressive aspects of humour, sometimes in the same cartoon even as he built Protestant and nativist solidarity against Catholics and other immigrants whom he defined as un-American. Like the *Jyllands-Posten*, *Harper's Weekly* spoke in the name of liberty while also tacitly encouraging intolerance and bigotry.

Such situations do not make for neat divisions between questions of free speech

and tolerance. Indeed, as both Nast and the Danish incident also demonstrate, the situation also involves the competing freedom to practice one's faith. Writing as the defender of 'secular society', Flemming Rose, culture editor of the *Jyllands-Posten*, accused Moslems of demanding 'a special position, insisting on special consideration of their own religious feelings' which he described as 'incompatible with contemporary democracy and freedom of speech, where one must be ready to put up with insults, mockery and ridicule'.⁵⁰ Clearly conflating the libratory with the sense of superiority in his rationale for publishing the cartoons, Rose argued that airing opinions, however cruel, racist or derogatory is preferable to repression and allows the free exchange of ideas necessary to democratic politics. Coming from such a position, he demanded the toleration of satire which is intolerant, cruel and insulting to groups, religions, or gods which other people hold sacred. There is, therefore, no clean separation between freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and tolerance. In Rose's view unacceptable ideas must be able to be endured. He did not add the caveat that those who objected have the same right to express their objections nor offer them space in his newspaper. The conundrum that free speech requires the tolerance of intolerance has no easy solution except to ensure equal access to the means of communication. This, of course, in an unequal national or global society calls into question the notion of 'free' speech when the ability to communicate carries a hefty price. Neither the *Jyllands-Posten* nor other publishers of the cartoons addressed this issue or provided remedies.

It is necessary therefore to examine the questions of ethics, purposes, intentions, and likely consequences which the *Jyllands-Posten* and its defenders evaded. Rose enjoyed the privileged position of a occupying powerful and well-fortified positions in his own society, as did Nast and *Harper's Weekly* in New York, which protected him from the consequences meted out to those who paid with their lives in Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, Lebanon,

Turkey, Iraq and Nigeria from the violent reaction this display. Stepping back to ask who has the power in the conflict over the cartoons would point out that satires do not need to be politicized. They are already political acts and the question is rather what kind of politics do they endorse? The makers needed to confront these question for themselves rather than being censored or threatened, but they should have admitted their own power as Westerners involved in quasi-imperial relationship with the groups that have been the objects of Western colonialism. What is free and what is humour in an unfree context?

To speak as a historian, I would dispute, therefore, that people trained in my discipline could accepted the proposition that liberals necessarily see humour as carnivalesque, 'decentralized, heterogeneous, polysemic and anarchic', subversive, critical, or anti-authoritarian. Certainly, the cartoons drawn by Nast and his disciples exemplified the urge to demonstrate one's superiority over those whom they mocked, whether Catholics, immigrants, or radicals. They mocked or ridiculed the relatively powerless and endorsed the claims of superiority of the already powerful. These types of humour invite contempt, hostility, or derision towards their targets. In that, they fit the definition of ridicule in Webster's dictionary, which defines it as 'language calculated to make a person or thing the object of contemptuous humorous disparagement; also, looks or acts expressing amused contempt; derision; mockery; or an object of mocking merriment'.⁵¹ The definition itself thus contains the element of cruelty or hostility as latent if not fully developed in the kind of humor that we call satire. Certainly, it was quite obviously present in the cartoons in *Harper's Weekly* and the *Jyllands-Posten*.

Interspersed among the thousands of instances of such cartoons which reinforced the existing power relations in American society, there also existed some from considerably less powerful media outlets which mocked the powerful. By their very departure from the dominant view, these might be considered expressions of incongruity, but they also exemplified what Michael Cohen has called 'angry if playful outrage' infused with 'a sense of collective idealism', a combination of solidarity and protest in 'a class politics of laughter' to 'illustrate the common values that held them together as a movement'. Like the African American humour described by Levine, these cartoons sought to pull the powerful down to the common level and expose their lack of superiority. In that they were expressing the carnivalesque mode described by Natalie Zemon Davis as the upending of the normal rules of a society.⁵² There was a humour from the bottom up instead of the lofty heights of superiority from which *Nast* and the cartoonists of the *Jyllands-Posten* invited their readers to peer down on objects of their ridicule.

Derived from this analysis, I would put forward a tripartite interpretation of what historians of humour have discovered that identifies three positions which humour might take, rather than two: reinforcing the existing power relations; challenging those power relations, and developing a solidarity based on good will and good humour towards the other members of the community. As the historical examples have demonstrated, these could interpenetrate creating the 'German humour' of the Third Reich or the 'black laughter' described by Levine as the 'cathartic, integrative ritual of laughter'.⁵³ Placing humour within this schema requires an analysis of the emotions contained within the humorous camouflage. I doubt, for example, that anyone actually laughed at the cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* or in *Harper's Weekly* because their humour intended to elicit scorn or belittle the objects. These cartoons expressed aggression and contempt rather than joy.

Behind this interchange, which Nicholas Holm has drawn to our attention, lie the issues of globalization and the media in a world system in which the rules about freedom and expression are impossible to disaggregate from the power relations which treat knowledge as a form of property even as its purveyors speak of free speech or freedom of the press. Access to such freedoms is unequally distributed, and depends on unequal ownership, unequal access to resources, and lives within a long history of dominance and subordination, which any satire that aspires to promoting freedom needs to recognize and take into account. Like George W. Bush, Nast and the Danish cartoonists exhibited the hubris of seeing themselves only as defenders of freedom while failing to see that they were also its enemies by inflaming already volatile political situations. In both the historical and the contemporary context, the test would be to ask about the power relations humour upholds or undermines or creates. It is essential to consider the situatedness of satire, the satirist's standpoint, the elicited response of the intended consumers, and the position of the target. In the case of *Jyllands-Posten* whose freedom to express its views was never in doubt, the question would be asked: what freedom was advanced by their actions – and whose freedoms were eroded? Nick Holm has raised important questions which should perplex and confound the liberal imagination.

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