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Can Parody Change The World? - On the Philosophical and Political Aspects of Satirical Parody

RESUMÉ

Satire er i stigende grad med til at forme vores politiske bevidsthed. Men hvad sker der, når politiske emner bliver formuleret igennem satire? Formålet med denne artikel er at undersøge en af de mest udbredte udtryksformer inden for politisk satire, nemlig parodi, med henblik på at afdække parodiens bidrag til satire, samt at foretage en vurdering af parodiens kritiske potentiale. Jeg argumenterer for, at parodi kan forstås som en form for dekonstruktion, og at dens kritiske potentiale ligger i dens evne til at destabilisere politiske antagelser, der bliver taget for givet i vores samfund.

ABSTRACT

Satire is to an increasing extent a part of the formation of our political consciousness. But what happens when political matters are expressed through satire? The purpose of this article is to investigate a satirical mode of expression, namely parody, in order to determine the contribution that parody lends to satire as well as making an assessment of the critical potential of parody itself. I argue that parody can be understood as an instance of Derridean deconstruction and that its critical potential lies in its ability to destabilize political assumptions that are taken for granted in our society.

Introduction

Satire is becoming increasingly influential in shaping political debates today. To a growing number of people, satirical news presents a much-desired supplement to mainstream news and some people have even started to replace traditional media with satirical news as their primary source of information. This is not only an American or Western phenomenon but something that is happening all over the world (Baym and Jones 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to take satire seriously as a political force that is shaping our political discourses. Unfortunately, satire as a phenomenon is hard to pin down, as it makes use of numerous different modes of expression, such as irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, profanity, and many more. That is why I have chosen instead to focus my inquiry on one specific form of satire, namely satirical parody. Parody is a widely used medium for satirical critique and has been used since the dawn of satire. Furthermore, I believe that parody is exemplary in showing how satire can work as critique.

But how exactly does parody work? What are the philosophical assumptions about language and society that parody relies on? And does parody have the potential to express in-depth critique and create real political change? To answer these questions, I will explore an interpretation of parody as a form of Derridean deconstruction which plays on the fundamental structure of language. I will support this hypothesis by analyzing the use of parody in Jonathan Swift's satirical essay *A Modest Proposal* (1729). Finally, I will consider the political and critical power of parodic deconstruction with the help of the theories of Chantal Mouffe and Catherine Zuckert. But before taking on these questions, the very notion of parody will first have to be clearly defined.

Defining parody

Many of the most influential satirists of all time have made use of parody. This goes for classical satirists such as Jonathan Swift, Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde as well as modern satirists like Stephen Colbert and Sasha Baron Cohen. Parodies of political leaders, campaign ads and entire ideologies are some of

the most widespread and well-known instances of satire; from Aristophanes' parody of Socrates in *The Clouds* to Tina Fey's spot- on impression of the former Alaskan governor, Sarah Palin on the show *Saturday Night Live*. Parodies have even been used by several philosophers as a rhetorical and an argumentative instrument. Most noticeable is perhaps the figure of Zarathustra in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), who shares several noticeable characteristics with the figure of Jesus Christ and derives a lot of its critical force from this resemblance.

It is widely debated whether parody should be understood as a genre in its own right or as a technique that can be used in the service of for instance satire.[1] I believe that there are some obvious problems in regarding parody as an independent genre. First of all, parodies can be applied to various genres and are often used to caricature a certain genre as a way to mock and critique it. This is the case in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), which is a parody of the gothic novel as a literary genre. Another example of this is the song "Country Song (Pandering)" by contemporary comedian Bo Burnham from the stand-up show *Make Happy* (2016), where he plays with the musical genre called 'stadium country'. Both these parodies make fun of their 'host-genre', but at the same time they repeat and reproduce it. To say that *Northanger Abbey* is a gothic novel would be both right and wrong, since it is undeniably *more* than that, adding a level of self-reflection to the otherwise rather naïve genre, but at the same time it is the *most typical* of all gothic novels because it plays on the stereotypes that characterize the genre. If parody were a separate genre, it would be a genre that could contain and take the form of all other genres. This seems to me to be a confused usage of the notion of genre. Since parody can take on any genre, I find it more useful to think of it as a highly versatile artistic technique, device or instrument.

What, then, are the main characteristics of this technique? Or in other words: How does one turn something original into a parody? I have chosen to take the theory of Margaret A. Rose, presented in the book *Parody//Meta-Fiction* (1979), as the starting point of my inquiry. She defines parody as "the critical quotation

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[1] For "genre" see Hutcheon, L. *A. Theory of Parody*. New York & London: Methuen, 1985. For "technique" see M.A. Rose: 1979 or Householder Jr., F.W. "Parodia", in *Classical Philology* 39, no. 1. The University of Chicago Press, 1944.

of preformed literary language with comic effect" (59). In this definition, we find several characteristics: critique, quotation, literary language and comic effect. I agree with all of these features except the notion that parody is purely literary. Parody can occur in many different media and is found in all forms of expression from cartoons to philosophy (Householder 1944, 3-4). The 'targets' of political parody also take on various forms, ranging from political speeches, interviews and campaign ads to the discourse of certain political parties or the rhetorical style of specific news anchors. So parody is not necessarily literary and does not always revolve around texts or pieces of art. But it is critical, and it does work by repeating or 'quoting' the original, resulting in a humorous detachment from it. But *how* exactly does it work?

According to Rose, there are several ways in which a text can be parodied: "[P]arody works by way of juxtaposition, omission, addition condensation, and by discontinuance of the semantic and metaphoric logic of the original context which it quotes or alludes to in order to refunction it" (45). Under a common term, I will refer to all of these methods as forms of *distortion*. In the parody, the subject being imitated is distorted but never so much that the connection to the original source is broken. In the article *Parody as Criticism* (1964), William van O'Connor writes that parody presents the original as "exaggerated, [and] distorted – yet not in essence misrepresented" (242). Distortion is a necessary condition of parody, as is maintaining the connection with the original and staying true to its ideas.

However, as Rose remarks, although the ideas might have been clear in the original, the parody often adds a layer of ambiguity. It borrows the words and ideas of the original only to repeat them in such a fashion that they either ring hollow or suddenly seem suspicious (Rose, 47). This distortion and criticism of the original is also what creates the comic effect. Rose bases this claim on Kant's theory of humor: "So for Kant, for example, the essence of humor lay in raising the expectation for X and giving Y. This simple dictum has been accepted by most analysts of comedy and is particularly well suited to describing the mechanism at work in parody" (23). Incongruity or discrepancy is a central part of parody, since the original is always transformed, but the link between

original and parody is preserved. The comic effect of parody lies, then, in the "discrepancy between the parodied text and its new context" (Rose, 23).[2]

It is now possible to establish a list of characteristics of the parodic technique, some of which are necessary and some of which are contingent: 1) a parody bears a clear similarity and dependence on the original, 2) parody is repetition with comical and critical distance, 3) it is a distorted repetition, and 4) it is often ambiguous, which makes it difficult to extract a direct point or expression of opinion from it. In short, parody is an artistic device used to produce a comedic critique of its original by repeating or reproducing the central point(s) of the original but this time with an ironic detachment or a comedic distance. An example of a parodic figure which bears all of these characteristics can be found in Stephen Colbert's character from *the Colbert Report* who is, confusingly, also named Stephen Colbert. Colbert's character is inspired by conservative news anchor Bill O'Reilly but is a general parody of right-wing political pundits. The similarities between Colbert and O'Reilly are clear, both in the opinions that they hold as well as in their ways of expressing themselves. But it is not an exact match. Colbert exaggerates and distorts the kind of reasoning that O'Reilly uses to the point where it ceases to make sense and becomes ridiculous, thus providing the comical and critical distance. Still, Colbert does not directly refute O'Reilly's argument, nor does he present an alternative political position, which makes it difficult to derive a definite political opinion from it, leaving the performance somewhat ambiguous.

The contribution of parody to political satire: Parody as deconstruction

Having dealt with parody as an artistic device, I will go on to investigate the philosophical method that I believe to be at work in parody, namely the method of deconstruction as championed by Jacques Derrida.

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[2] The notion that parody is inherently comic has been disputed by Linda Hutcheon. Hutcheon wants to use the term 'parody' to describe works that are not meant to ridicule or critique but rather to pay homage to other works by repeating certain phrases and styles. I believe these works to be better classified as imitations or instances of intertextuality and have therefore chosen to preserve the notion that a comedic effect is fundamental to parody.

When satirists Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have been asked to describe their specific brand of political satire, they have referred to it as a "deconstruction of news and politics" (McClennen and Maisel 2014, 98-99). A big part of this deconstructivist approach is seen in the way they imitate and parody the "real" news in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as well as how they sometimes parody the politicians themselves. This is perhaps best exemplified in the two times that Stephen Colbert (in character) ran for president of the United States (in 2008 and 2012). In the following, I will be exploring the kinship between parody and deconstruction with the hope of illuminating the philosophical method at work in parody and its critical and political potential.

One thing that sets parody apart from other instruments of political satire is the intimate connection that parody has to its object of critique. Parody presents a critique that is extracted directly from the target. It is almost as though the target criticizes itself when its logical fallacies and argumentative incongruities are revealed by means of imitation. This kind of "repetition with critical distance", I find, is reminiscent of the method of deconstruction (Hutcheon 1985, 18). In a noteworthy article, Robert Phiddian, author of a celebrated book about the parody of Jonathan Swift, goes so far as to argue that parody and deconstruction are secretly the same thing (1997, 681). Parody and deconstruction are both critiques from the "inside" of a text. It is a critique that "nests in the structure of the text and ideas it criticizes, as a cuckoo infiltrates and takes over the nests of other birds" (Phiddian, 681). In a similar fashion, deconstruction takes on the logic and the ideas of a text in order to drive them to their extremes, ultimately showing their instability and internal contradictions. This technique is described in a passage that Phiddian quotes from Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1997):

> The movements of deconstruction do not destroy [*sollicitent*] structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally,

> that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and
> atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way
> falls prey to its own work. (24)

Here, Derrida states the method of deconstruction with some clarity. Deconstruction is a mode of critique or subversion that works from *within* the text by inhabiting the structures or logic of the text. Derrida states that we are *always* living within the confines of a certain logic, especially in the cases where we take this logic for granted and it goes unquestioned. Deconstruction questions the text by developing the logic in the text further – especially in the cases where this logic is least explicit. The specific manner in which deconstruction inhabits the structure of a text is by assimilating into the text and, at the same time, staying estranged from it. Like deconstruction, parody is parasitic, living off the energy and internal logic of other texts.[3] Phiddian writes: "Parody is the parasite genre that can attach to any other (…), living off its mimetic, expressive or rhetoric energy, and reminding it and us that we are facing words rather than things, rhetoric rather than pure ideas, language rather than phenomena" (689). Here, we start to see a glimpse of the critical aspect of deconstruction and parody. Using only the text itself, it recreates the central points of the text but now adding a veil of doubt. Phiddian calls deconstruction a "hermeneutic of suspicion" (676), a very fitting expression. Parody and deconstruction both introduce a suspicion towards the original that undermines its authority – the claim that this exact text manages to truthfully represent the world *as it really is*. In plain terms, deconstruction (and parody) sets everything in quotation marks. It makes the reader skeptical of any text's claim to truth. This was for example the case with Jonathan Swift's famous book *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). As Phiddian writes: "After *Gulliver's Travels* we will never entirely trust a travel book again" (689). The parodic deconstruction of the travel book that Swift uses in *Gulliver's Travels* shines a different light on the entire genre. So did Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), which can be read as a parody of a detective story. The notion of a detective story "looks different after *The Name of the Rose*, and that difference looks very like a play of

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[3] I use the word "text" in the broadest possible sense of the word, including speeches, broadcasting, body language, etc.

différance" (Phiddian, 681). Phiddian, here, introduces a central term from the deconstructivist tradition, namely *différance*. But what does *différance* mean? And what does *différance* have to do with parody?

Parody as a play on différance

In a lecture that was later published as an essay titled "Différance" (1986), Jacques Derrida presents and discusses the theory of *différance* at length. Derrida puts a great deal of effort into explaining that *différance* is neither a concept nor even a word and how, therefore, it is basically impossible to define the term (3). He goes on to state that *différance* cannot be said to "be" as such - it does not "exist" nor is it really "absent". It does not exist because it has no presence like other existent things. And it is not absent because absence points negatively to a possible presence. Generally, Derrida is more concerned with telling the audience what *différance* is not than what this mysterious term actually means. In order for me to be able to philosophically investigate the meaning of *différance*, I will have to set aside Derrida's statement that *différance* is not a concept and attempt to define it anyway.

The aim of the term is to bring together two meanings of the Latin verb "differer" which have been lost in the French "différ*e*nce", namely the meaning "to defer" and "to differ" (Derrida 1986, 7-8). These two meanings point to two distinct kinds of difference: 1) The first refers to a deferral or delay of meaning. The idea here is that all signs are "late". They are stand-ins for something which was once present. Take for instance a note saying "remember to buy coffee". This note is a sign (to yourself or someone else) that signals an intention or thought that was at one time present but which is now being communicated with a delay. To Derrida all signs and all language work like this:

> The sign, in this sense, is a deferred presence. Whether we are
> concerned with the verbal or the written sign, with the monetary
> sign, or with electoral delegation and political representation, the
> circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter
> the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it,

intuit its presence. (1986, 9)

Here, *différance* hints at the delayed meaning of words that never accomplishes to truly designate the thing "as it is" when it is present to the beholder. Derrida uses this semiotic thought to put the existence of an "original" presence into question. Seeing that such a presence is, and always would be, unfathomable through language it is uncertain why it should carry the weight in philosophical discourse that it traditionally has done. Immediacy and presence in an ontological sense have traditionally taken primacy over mediated and communicated ideas of being. This is the essential theory behind Derrida's critique of the primacy of speech over writing in *Of Grammatology*.

2) Now to the second meaning of the Latin "differer" which is to "differ". This meaning is to some extent still there in the word difference. This side of "differer" refers to the role that difference plays in providing meaning to words. Derrida states that words only become meaningful through their relation to and difference from other words: "[I]n language there are only differences. (…) [E]very concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences" (1986, 10-11). The easiest example to consider here is that of a dictionary. In a dictionary, no word has a meaning on its own. Each word is defined by other words that are defined by still more words which, although they define one another, are fundamentally different from each other. It is the fact that they differ which, according to Derrida, is the foundation of their meaning: the word "cat" has a meaning in that it is not the same as "dog". These are the two meanings of "differer" that Derrida seeks to resuscitate with the word *différance*.

So, Derrida wants to remind his readers that there are more ways in which things can be different from each other and that this differentiation is what language consists of. But *what* is *différance*? It is not a concept, not at word, not a method, so what is it? Derrida is suspicious of the very way this question is posed. The "what" indicates a search for an essence, a substance, a presence which he insists that *différance* does not possess (1986, 14-15). In "Différance", the closest Derrida comes to determining the "what" of the term is by referring to *différance* as a "force" or a "movement" (18). In a later interview, he states

that: "*Différance* is the "productive" movement of differences" (1988, 85). It is that which produces difference but also the general force of differentiation. It is the reason or, better, the fact that words change their meaning over time and in different contexts. It is the instability inherent in meaning and language. One might ask: What is, then, the connection between *différance* and deconstruction? It is difficult to find any texts that explain the exact connection between these two "concepts", but I would venture the interpretation that *différance* should be seen as simply a kind of fact about language and the world. It is not a method or an approach to language. It is simply how language works, according to Derrida. Deconstruction, on the other hand, is the method of tracing or enhancing the play of *différance* in language to make it apparent and push forward the movement of *différance*. Deconstruction might be seen as the "active" part of *différance* which in itself is neither active nor passive (Derrida 1986, 9).

Now, what does all of this have to do with parody? When Phiddian argues that parody is like *différance,* he makes some considerable adjustments to the term. He does not buy into Derrida's idea that *différance* is a common trait to all language. He argues that "we have to read past the Derridean proposition that *différance* is a transcendental principle implicit in all language (…) to read it in a tactical sense as a description of a certain kind of language" (685). For Phiddian, it is something specifically characteristic of parody. Deconstruction, too, is something which, he argues, happens most explicitly in parody. He does this because he wants to be able to separate parody from what can be called "straight language". "Straight language" is the kind of language that attempts to represent a reality *as it is* and unambiguously convey the author's opinion; it is plain language without irony, sarcasm or parodic distance (Phiddian, 680). Phiddian's aim is to argue for the special capabilities of the parodic form, which is why this form has to be separable from normal or "straight language". The problem is, of course, that this is a misreading of Derrida's philosophy which attempts to contrive a theory of all forms of language and not just of parody. Like Phiddian, I am attempting to argue that parody possesses a quality that "straight language" does not and that this quality makes it a suitable instrument for political and moral critique. And, likewise, I believe this quality to be best understood in Derrida's terms of deconstruction and *différance*. However, I do not think that it is necessary to misread Derrida to make this

argument. So how does one go about solving the problem that Derrida clearly aims at providing a universal theory of language, but that this theory seems to be best applicable when it comes to just one instance of language, namely parody?

One way of dealing with this problem would be to regard all language as a kind of parody. And this would indeed be possible. One would then have to claim that all sentences are, in some sense, quotations of prior sentences in a new context, although the result is not always humorous nor critical. But this approach undermines the argument that parody, as opposed to "straight language", has a special ability to criticize or question ideas because it would mean that no language could be considered as being "straight". Another possible response is, like Phiddian, to claim that the theories of deconstruction and *différance* are not universal but only explain what is at work in this specific form of expression: in parody. However, as mentioned above, this ignores Derrida's original point. Moreover, it results in a rather naïve notion of "straight language" because if only parody is seen as a form of *différance*, this means that all non-parodic language should work without any deferral and difference. It should be straight and stable in a way that not only Derrida, but every dialectical thinker since Hegel would perceive as impossible. This is why I prefer a third option which is to assert that all language is, in fact, a play of *différance* but that parodies reveal this fact in a way that "straight language" does not. "Straight language" can even be seen as the attempt to hide the play of *différance* and insist on a consistency and stability that is not actually there. I find this third solution most gratifying because it preserves the notion that language is always in motion and that meaning is contextual. It also makes it possible to establish a distinction between what, in everyday life, is experienced and understood as "straight language" and what is clearly acknowledged as being something else, namely parody. In addition, this solution accomplishes the aim of identifying what is particular to parody and why parody is a suitable medium for critique. Revealing, by way of imitation and exaggeration, the mechanism of deconstruction of concepts and ideas already at work in every statement makes the process conscious and gives the audience a chance to be skeptical in a way that is not encouraged in regular, "straight" speech and text. So, parody, seen as an instrument, can be understood as the method of exaggerating and revealing the *différance* that was already there in the original

but in a way that makes the recipient aware of it and makes her question her immediate impression. In this sense, parody is not just a criticism of this or that specific discourse or logic. Parody proclaims the impossibility of any text, however straight it attempts to be. It shows that language is deeply unstable and that concepts (such as right, wrong, progress or wealth) are always debatable.

An (im)modest proposal

A great example of satirical parody which deconstructs a logic from within and, ultimately, questions the very meaning of morality can be found in Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. The text was written as an imitation of a political pamphlet, in which Swift parodies the empirical, calculating and avaricious attitude of contemporary politicians. The proposal that he presents is that, as a solution to the growing problem of poverty and the increase in especially child beggars, the wealthy elite should begin to eat the children of the lower classes. To argue his point, he proceeds with calculations concerning the number of child beggars, their approximate weight and nutritional value, the cost of breeding and nurturing them until they reach the appropriate size and even provides one or two recipes for cooking the children (149-50). As the text progresses, it seems there is nothing that this proposal will not fix. Swift even argues that this practice of selling babies for consumption will cause a decrease in domestic violence, as the men will be more careful with their wives during pregnancy, since they are now carrying something of actual value. He writes:

> Men would become as fond of their *Wives*, during the Time of their
> Pregnancy, as they are now of their *Mares* in Foal, their *Cows* in Calf,
> or *Sows* when they are ready to Farrow; nor offer to Beat or Kick them
> (as is too frequent a practice) for fear of a Miscarriage. (155)

Swift uses the calculating logic of contemporary politicians and exaggerates it to a point where the complete lack of moral concern becomes unbearable. The parody, in this case, takes on a form very similar to an argument *ad absurdum*.

The most interesting part is that he makes a great and convincing argument if one ignores the obvious moral oversight. The logic is flawless which is, of course, the point. Swift pushes the instrumental rationality to a point where no one in their right mind would perceive it as rational anymore. This is what satirical parody can do by revealing the problematic contradictions inherent in terms like "the greater good", "growth" and "value". When Swift talks of the value of these children, he refers to their monetary value as a product to be sold and bought. This notion stands in direct contrast to the idea that most people might have of an inherent value of human life. Showing how these two understandings of value are always at play simultaneously when we use the word is a way of revealing the force of *différance* in language through deconstruction. Now I will go on to consider in more detail the political and critical potential of this satirical technique.

The political and critical potential of deconstruction

At the heart of deconstruction lies a certain prioritization of two classical, philosophical dichotomies, namely the primacy of *contingency* over necessity and *possibility* over actuality. Deconstruction is always aimed at undermining the perceived necessity of our supposed truths, revealing how they are, in fact, contingent and a product of historical and cultural circumstances. This insight allows the deconstructivist to suggest the possibility of a different interpretation of the world – to focus on what might be possible instead of simply what is. This is one of the reasons why the deconstruction presented in parodic satire is politically interesting. But the question of the political impact of deconstruction is not so easily answered. Derrida's deconstruction is both political and anti-political, depending on what one expects from a political theory. It is political because it is radically anti-totalitarian and emancipatory. It is anti-political in that it makes the construction of any new value system, ideology or anthropology virtually impossible or, at least, inherently suspicious. I will now look at the political potential of deconstruction, after which I will go on to consider the objections raised against reading Derrida as a political philosopher.

Derrida himself is of the opinion that deconstructivism does have a political significance. In a lecture on the relationship between deconstruction and pragmatism, Derrida touches on the subject of the political and what he thinks deconstruction can contribute in terms of politics and political change. Here, he introduces the notion of the political as a way to stabilize the violent chaos of the world by forcing rules and conventions onto it. He says:

> [O]nce it is granted that violence is *in fact* irreducible, it becomes necessary – and this is the moment of politics – to have rules, conventions and stabilizations of power. All that a deconstructive point of view tries to show is that since convention, institution and consensus are stabilizations (sometimes stabilizations of great duration, sometimes micro-stabilizations), this means that they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic. (1996, 83)

Derrida understands "the political" as the fight against a fundamental instability; as an attempt to create stability in the midst of chaos and conflict. Deconstruction, then, is a reminder that the structures and power stabilizations are man-made and, therefore, contingent. This realization paves the way for new possible ways of organizing society. Even though the chaos is terrifying, it carries within it a potential for emancipation from restrictive power structures. Derrida goes on to say: "Now, this chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize" (1996, 84). Although "the political" is an artificial stabilization, it is also a political act to destabilize it, to emancipate oneself from it and bring about change. Derrida states that there is "no ethico-political decision or gesture without (…) a 'Yes' to emancipation" (1996, 82). So it seems that both stabilization and destabilization are forms of the political in a Derridean sense, but deconstruction only offers a way to *de*stabilize political structures, not a way to build them back up. Deconstruction is not about forming a unity or a political consensus but about undermining unity and making any hegemonic homogeneity appear suspicious. This focus on conflict and pluralism instead of consensus is the reason why the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe states

that deconstruction is "primarily a *political* logic" (1996, 2). She writes: "By showing the structural undecidability of numerous areas of the social, deconstruction reveals the contingency of the social, widening in that way the field of political institution" (1996, 2). Mouffe's theories of radical democracy and agonistic pluralism, like the theories of Derrida, emphasize the importance and inevitability of disruption and conflict. The idea is that politics are roused and fuelled by conflict and that there will *always* be conflicts in a society. Every advantage will prove a disadvantage to the "other"; every decision will be a "detriment of another nation (…), another family (…) of other friends" (Derrida 1996, 86). That is why politics and political philosophy should not, according to Mouffe, strive to avoid or ignore conflict by searching for universal principles that will eventually turn out to be culturally and historically conditioned. Instead, they should be concerned with the ideological fight over the power to control the discourse, knowing that this discourse can never be universally true or just.

With this approach, Mouffe sets herself apart from many other political philosophers who adhere to a more Hegelian and rationalistic conception of politics as an ongoing progression towards a political utopia of unity without difference. Mouffe opposes this line of thought, stating: "What is specific of democratic politics is not the overcoming of the we/them opposition but the different ways in which it is drawn" (1996, 8). To her, agonism or the embracement of conflict is the essence of the political as opposed to consensus. The dream of consensus, Mouffe says, is a fantasy and a dangerous one at that because failing to see conflict does not mean that conflict does not exist, it only means that it is being suppressed or that some people's suffering is being accepted as a necessity for stability. According to her, deconstruction "reveals the impossibility of establishing a consensus without exclusion" (9). And because of this recognition of the inescapability of conflict, Mouffe considers the deconstructivist approach superior over all other theoretical approaches that aim at consensus (11).

The belief that any form of consensus is artificial and only created by absorbing and suppressing difference is what, to Catherine Zuckert, makes Derrida fundamentally anti-activist, anti-revolutionary and, subsequently, politically impotent (1991, 354-55). In the text "The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction" (1991), Zuckert is searching for a foundation or a mere possibility of creating a

positive political ideal within the scope of Derrida's thinking. But Derrida shies away from any such system-building, arguing that any system will eventually turn into a totalitarian ideology or simply collapse. This, according to Zuckert, makes Derrida politically passive and inapplicable. This passivity is what she perceives to be the real Heideggerian heritage in his writings: "The trace [of Heidegger] is (…) to be found in the essential passivity of an historical-poetic attempt to oppose the totalitarian effects of the ideological, technocratic politics of the will to power with receptive openness" (355). Just as the late Heidegger urged his readers to open themselves up to a possible ontological event (*Ereignis*), Derrida encourages his readers to listen and react to the autonomous movements of *différance* – without knowing where they will go or how to influence them. This becomes the only way to avoid constructing new totalitarian systems. The problem is that this aimlessness is politically paralyzing and the refusal to construct positive ideals is dangerous, as it becomes impossible to judge whether a political development is good or bad. Without positive values and ideas, one cannot rationally argue that democracy should be better than dictatorship or that equality is better than inequality. This leads to an inconsistency in Derrida's thinking. For if no position can be deemed better than another, then why should "openness" or emancipation, which Derrida clearly values, be any different? Zuckert ends up concluding that Derrida's "radical uncertainty has a debilitating effect on political action" (356). According to her, Derrida's inability to provide a *positive* political theory or the foundation for a stable world view makes him politically irrelevant or even reactionary.

So which interpretation is more convincing? I believe that, to some extent, both Mouffe and Zuckert are right. They present two different notions of politics: a negative and a positive. The negative (Mouffe) primarily focuses on the disruption of established norms and social structures, whereas the positive (Zuckert) insists on the need for new ideals in order to create new structures and institutions that might bring about a more just society. Ultimately, both elements are necessary in order to bring about political change. First, the existent system must be challenged and destabilized, undermining the matter-of-factness of the given world order. Only then can we go on to rebuild with the insights that deconstructive analysis has offered. Consequently, the answer to the question "can parody change the word?" is no, but it can be the instigator

of such a change. Deconstructive parody is only political in a negative way which means that is does perform an important critique of that which is being parodied; however, this criticism alone is not enough to actually solve the problem and transform society.

In conclusion, parody as a form of political satire is a suitable device for negative critique due to its method of deconstruction and its ability to reveal the play of *différance* in moral and political rhetoric. Parody works by repeating and mirroring real-life political ideas and discourses but with a critical distance. This distance provides the recipient with a suspicious look at propositions that are presented in a "straight language". The political potential of parody, like that of deconstruction, lies in its ability to question this supposedly "straight language" and the moral and political "stabilizations" that it entails. When a satirist parodies a political text or a specific politician, this works as a critical deconstruction of the original context and all the deep-rooted assumptions that belong to this context. By exaggerating and distorting the original, the parody puts that which is taken for granted into question and allows the recipient to break with the given structure. In itself, parody may not be transformative, but it does possess a disruptive, subversive force that is clearly critical and, I would argue, has the potential to be emancipating.

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