

## Positive psychology, humour and the virtues of negative thinking

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In his essay on Karl Kraus, Walter Benjamin compared genuine satirists with the “scribblers who make a trade of mockery and in their invectives have little more in mind than giving the public something to laugh about”. Satirists like Kraus, wrote Benjamin, have “firmer ground under their feet” than those who merely seek to elicit laughter. Never was this truer, continued Benjamin, than in a world in which humanity “has run out of tears but not of laughter”.<sup>1</sup> The world today is very different from the Germany of 1931, when Benjamin’s essay was first published. We live in a pragmatic age. There are experts to advise us on the positive psychological benefits of laughter and tears. We should be grateful to those experts who seem to care about our possibilities for happiness. Yet, there is just as much need to find the firmer ground from which a critique of laughter – even a satire of laughter – can be proposed.

As Benjamin’s colleagues in the Frankfurt School argued, if we want to understand the ideological nature of common-sense, then we should try to stand outside the positive virtues of accepted sense by taking upon ourselves the requirement to think negatively. According to Herbert Marcuse, negative thinking should function “to break down the self-assurance and self-contentment of common-sense, to undermine the sinister power and language of facts.”<sup>2</sup> This applies to laughter and humour. In the false society of the culture industry, wrote Adorno and Horkheimer with more than a touch of cultural elitism, laughter “is a disease” and the laughing audience, obediently responding to those humorous products that have been mass-produced for their benefit, is merely “a parody of humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

The notion of thinking negatively is particularly pertinent in the present case, for the ideas to be examined go under the heading of ‘positive psychology’ and they express the virtues of positive thinking. Included under the rubric of positive thinking is the recommendation to laugh – or at least to laugh and to appreciate humour in a positive manner. In the abstract, how could anyone doubt the worth of laughter, rather than tears, or being positively happy, rather than negatively miserable? However, these views need to be understood in their wider context, rather than being treated as eternal verities.

The ideas of the positive psychologists, and particularly their ideas about humour are being promulgated at a particular time in a particular economic context. They belong to what William Davies has identified as the successful “happiness industry”, which is a major profit-making business, as well as being an important feature of today’s managerial practices.

Previously, happiness was seen to be the consequence of money: if people had money, then they were more likely to be happy. Today, according to Davies, means and ends have been reversed. The happiness of employees is now a means to profitability and, in consequence, companies invest in management consultants and happiness experts to increase the happiness of their employees.<sup>4</sup> More generally happiness is on the agenda of governments around the world.<sup>5</sup> For the past twenty years, positive psychology has been a successful and important part of this trend. Given the extent to which universities act like businesses in the contemporary world, the success of positive psychology can be described in economic terms.<sup>6</sup> It is said to have attracted hundreds of millions of dollars in research grants and has been described as the largest growth industry in psychology.<sup>7</sup>

Positive psychology should not be treated straightforwardly as a scientific theory as many of its advocates might wish. It can be considered as an ideology, which fits the neoliberal thinking of advanced capitalism. This is “ideological positivism” - not to be confused with “logical positivism”, a philosophy which dismissed all non-empirical statements as nonsense and to which no-one subscribes today. Ideological positivism, it will be argued, represents a conformist view. It suggests that there are no basic contradictions within the values and structures of contemporary society. Therefore, if individuals want to achieve their maximum potential for happiness, they need to learn how to change themselves, rather than to change the world. They must learn how to be positive whatever their circumstances; and having a suitable sense of humour is a crucial part of the recommended positivity.<sup>8</sup>

In calling this outlook an ‘ideology’, we are not suggesting that this is a political ideology that advocates support for a particular party. It is an ideology in the sense of being a form of common-sense that appears to be entirely ‘natural’ but that in crucial respects reflects the world as it is today. However, this reflection does not represent an undistorted reflection of the world, for, as will be argued, positive psychology involves a science that is limited in its powers of observation. Positive psychologists claim that their views on humour are firmly based upon empirical science and that they are merely being factual when they advocate their positivism. But in practice we will see that there is a gap between the claims of being scientific and the practice of positive science.

Regarding humour, the science that the positive psychologists are creating is a science that avoids looking too closely at what people might be doing when they are being humorous. This avoidance is not chance – it characterises an ideological outlook. Herbert Marcuse wrote that positive thinking can only be explored from a firm ground of negative thinking. This means interpreting what is present in terms of what is absent, and to confront “the given facts with that which they exclude.”<sup>9</sup> What positive psychologists say about humour and the examples that they offer to bolster their theories must be understood in terms of what they do not say and the sorts of examples that are significantly absent in their writings.<sup>10</sup>

### The science of positive psychology

Positive psychologists like to emphasise how different they are from previous academic psychologists. Martin Seligman, widely recognized to be the pioneer of positive psychology, claims that psychologists used to concentrate on “deficits and disorders”, devoting themselves to finding solutions for problems such as depression, alcoholism and other

psychological afflictions.<sup>11</sup> By focussing on negative issues, previous psychologists - and Seligman includes his youthful self in this category - ignored the positive psychology of well-being. Now, positive psychologists explore how people can be optimistic, happy and at ease with the world. As a movement, positive psychology has not brought a new psychological method or paradigm in the way that Gestalt psychology in its battle with behaviourism offered very different theoretical assumptions, methodological techniques and conceptual language. Positive psychologists are innovators to the extent that they have applied the orthodox methods and constructs of psychology to a new set of problems.

When Seligman and others commend the power of being optimistically positive, they write in ways that recall the sort of self-help books inspired by Norman Victor Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* - a work that has influenced Donald Trump whose parents attended the church in which Peale preached. Peale advocated that everyone should apply the principles of positive thinking to their lives and that if they do, they will succeed personally and economically. The general message might resemble that of today's positive psychologists, but there is one big difference: the positive psychologists claim that their message is scientifically based. For example, Seligman writes: "The appeal of what I write comes from the fact that it is grounded in careful science: statistical tests, validated questionnaires, through researched exercises, and large, representative samples."<sup>12</sup> The word 'science' is seldom far from the writings of positive psychologists. When in an academic lecture Seligman cites the work that he and his colleagues have been doing, he refers to it as "the kind of science that is done in positive psychology."<sup>13</sup> He produces a scientific formula to describe his theory of happiness:  $H=S+C+V$ .<sup>14</sup> Critics have mocked the scientific pretensions of the formula, declaring it to be meaningless.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the scientific findings that Seligman and other positive psychologists cite in support of their ideas have come from scales which have been devised to assess phenomena such as optimism, happiness, positive thinking, resilience, psychological health, and so on. Positive psychologists seek to discover positive correlations between these measures of positive variables. Those who score highly on one measure are like to score highly on others. It is as if it is possible to win the jackpot with a row of winning scores. This is not some sort of imagined pure science that is derived entirely from mathematical formula and statistical analyses. Rhetoric has its part to play. If not all measures of happiness are correlated with the other positive measures, then the researchers will sometimes divide up the troublesome variable into several variables. They will label those variables that win the correlational jackpot with rhetorically positive terminology. Thus, Seligman claims that 'authentic happiness', as contrasted with inauthentic happiness, is correlated with other positive variables. The terminology is not haphazardly selected but it functions rhetorically to strengthen the impression that the positive goodies complement each other.<sup>16</sup>

The scientific display can be maintained by using metaphors as if they were literal descriptions. Barbara Fredrickson describes one of her studies in which volunteers improved their ability to concentrate if they "were injected with positivity."<sup>17</sup> Of course, they were not literally injected with positivity, or indeed with anything. They were given a small bag of chocolates. Talking of injecting with positivity closes the gap between what actually occurred

and the language of medical and scientific theory.<sup>18</sup> It treats the so-called injection as if it were an objective fact and shuts down other explanations why those, who have just been given a present, might be more attentive to their surroundings. Fredrickson's choice of language suggests that it was the injectable "positivity" that made the scientific difference.

Distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic experiences, such as between authentic happiness and the non-authentic varieties, is not peculiar to positive psychology. The negative thinkers of the Frankfurt School did much the same when they claimed that the laughter elicited by the culture industry was inauthentic.<sup>19</sup> Positive psychology makes a very different link between authentic emotion and economics. They suggest that a positive outlook can bring economic success to individuals. Seligman writes that the "most important resource building human trait" is probably "productivity at work".<sup>20</sup> He argues that those who are generally happy are likely to be happier at work and are, in consequence, likely to be more productive; and this in turn increases their earning power, leading to further authentic happiness. It is a benevolent circle resulting in financial and psychological jackpots, as well as consulting contracts for the experts in positive psychology. It is as if all the positive cherries can come up in a line on the fruit-machine of life.

In this way, positive psychology exemplifies an ideology as well as being a psychological theory. It advises individuals how to maximise their economic productivity. This is not by individuals seeking to change the world in which they have to work but by positively and happily fitting themselves to that world. The web-sites that promote positive psychology reinforce this impression. The University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Centre, whose Director is Seligman, advertises that "Positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive"<sup>21</sup> The Penn Resilience Program, which is part of the Centre, claims to have worked with individuals, teams, and leadership groups from a variety of organizations; these include "Military, Corporations, First responders including police officers, Government..."<sup>22</sup> The list is revealing for its absences, as much as its presences. The Centre does not mention work with teams from trade unions, radical parties or other organizations that want to change the world. The groups that the Centre is proud to mention are those that superintend, or profit from, the world as it is.

### Humour and ideological positivism

It still remains to be seen how the specific topic of humour fits in with the general approach of positive psychology. Theoretically it is one of the core elements. According to Seligman, there are twenty-four "signature strengths" that positive psychology aims to improve in people. In *Authentic Happiness*, he describes these strengths as "measurable and acquirable".<sup>23</sup> He includes a shortened version of his VIA Scale (or values-in-action scale) so that readers can identify their own signature strengths. The abbreviated questionnaire includes for each strength the two "most discriminating questions" from the complete scale. One of the key strengths measured by the scale, is "playfulness and humour." People with this strength are described as liking to laugh and to bring smiles to other people.

The two questions measuring this trait are: "I always mix work and play as much as possible"; and "I rarely say funny things". For each question there are five possible answers.

Seligman tells his readers how to score their selected two answers: “this is your humour score.” One might note that the first of the two questions not only assumes that responders will have work but that it is possible for them to find playfulness in their work. It does not presume work to be unremitting toil that is closely supervised. It assumes, in the manner of contemporary employment and productivity strategies, that fun is permissible at work.

There are several problems with determining “humour scores” in this way. Most crucially the measure relies on two self-report questions, neither of which asks about what sorts of things that the respondents might find funny. Certainly the assessment does not include a behavioural element with respondents being observed either telling jokes or listening to them. In short, the questionnaire does not say anything about the nature of the respondents’ sense of humour or ‘humour style’.

Self-report questions can be problematic, especially when there are issues of social desirability, because respondents have to be trusted to answer honestly. Given the general value for having a good sense of humour, the question “I rarely say funny things” is asking respondents to admit to a trait that is hardly socially desirable. Regarding humour, there is a specific problem of trust, which Freud in his great work *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* posed clearly. He distinguished between tendentious jokes, which break social taboos, and innocent jokes, which only use word play or what Freud called joke-work. Freud argued that we tend to laugh more at tendentious jokes than at innocent jokes such as puns. Because tendentious jokes share the same sort of word-play as innocent jokes, the greater laughter that they evoke must be related to the themes of the joke and the release of wishes that cannot normally be expressed in conversation. However, if you ask someone why they are laughing at a tendentious joke, they will always cite the joke work, not the topic. No-one is likely to justify their laughter at a lavatory joke by saying ‘I always find jokes about poo uproariously funny.’ This means, according to Freud, that we deceive ourselves by believing that we are only laughing at the cleverness of a joke, not at its capacity to allow the unsayable to be momentarily said.

Seligman dismisses Freud. He claims that Freud’s notion that childhood events determine adult lives is “worthless”. He even writes inaccurately, that, according to Freud, even our jokes are “strictly determined by forces from our past.”<sup>24</sup> That characterisation fails to acknowledge Freud’s distinction between tendentious and innocent jokes, as well as his careful analyses of joke-play. It also ignores that Freud’s ideas have been supported by the sort of experimental study that Seligman usually likes to describe as “scientific”.<sup>25</sup>

Freud, as is well known loved jokes, especially Jewish jokes.<sup>26</sup> Yet, it is possible to detect signs of self-deceit in his own understanding and appreciation of humour – a self-deceit that paradoxically adds confirmation to his theory. Freud saw the Jewish joke as an act of rebellion against the logic of the gentile world. More generally, he claimed that humour “is not resigned; it is rebellious.”<sup>27</sup> In writing like this, Freud was ignoring the conservative, disciplinary force of humour. Many sociologists have claimed that people observe the minor but restricting codes of everyday behaviour, because they fear the social embarrassment that would ensue from a breach. Behind the fear of being embarrassed lies the fear of being laughed at, for, in many social situations, people will laugh at those who fail to observe everyday codes.<sup>28</sup> An instance can be found in Freud’s own writing. He recounts when Little Hans, the young child of a close friend and psychoanalytic follower was staying at a hotel on

a family holiday.<sup>29</sup> The other guests were outwardly amused when, at mealtimes the boy tried to catch the attention of a little girl, the only other child of the same age in the hotel. The adults laughed and the boy became embarrassed. To the guests, and later to Freud, it seemed as if the boy was behaving just like an adult in love, and he was becoming embarrassed because his desires were being observed. Freud did not notice a lonely little boy, wanting to make a friend, but embarrassed by the adult mockery as he flouted the grown-up codes polite behaviour in a hotel dining-room. The more embarrassed the child became, the greater the adult fun. In not noticing this, Freud was failing to note the disciplinary, and certainly non-rebellious, functions of laughter. He did not notice that the adult laughter, carrying across the separate tables, was itself flouting the dining-room codes. The adults were enjoying themselves too much to notice.<sup>30</sup>

The episode in a middle-class, middle-European hotel in the early years of the twentieth century shows the difficulty of analysing humour. Things are frequently not quite as they appear, especially as they appear to those enjoying the laughter. At first sight what seems to be a moment of innocent amusement can, if one looks more closely, turn out to have disturbing undercurrents. As Freud suggested, we need to suspect what people say about their own laughter, not because they wish to deceive others but because they are deceiving themselves. There is social pressure to have a good sense of humour although what constitutes a good sense of humour is socially unclear. To this end all of us want to believe that our laughter is a sign of playfulness, good spirit and harmless fun, not cruelty or what Henri Bergson called “a momentary anaesthesia of the heart.”<sup>31</sup>

#### Attempting to distinguish between positive and negative humour

Despite positive psychologists claiming that humour is a signature strength of positivity, early results did not show strong correlations between humorousness and other positive variables. Rod Martin showed that the widely publicised links between humour and health were at best weak and mainly non-existent. He was also perplexed by other failures to show links between humour and other strengths of positivity.<sup>32</sup> However, Martin did not give up on the idea humour is an important aspect of positivity. He believed that the failure of previous measures was that they treated humour as a unitary phenomenon and, in so doing, they failed to distinguish between positive and negative types of humour. In his view, only the positive types of humour would be correlated with the other measures of positivity. Therefore, he set out to develop a questionnaire to distinguish between positive and negative types of humour. The result was the Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) another self-report measure.<sup>33</sup> The questionnaire, its wording and its construction bear close examination in order to see how ideological assumptions run through both the aims and the methodology of the scale.

In order to distinguish between different forms of humour, Martin concentrated on humour's functions rather than on its contents. He distinguished between the positive and negative functions of humour, as well as the intrapsychic and interpersonal functions of humour. Intrapsychic functions referred to the effects of humour on the self and interpersonal functions referred to the effect on people's relations with others. This gave rise to four distinguishable types of humour based on these two sets of functions.

*Affiliative* humour positively bolsters one's interpersonal relations by bringing people closer together in a benevolent way. According to Martin, "individuals who are high on this dimension tend to say funny things, to tell jokes, and to engage in spontaneous witty banter to amuse others, to facilitate relationships, and to reduce interpersonal tensions". In the HSQ, affiliative humour was to be gauged by questions such as "I laugh and joke a lot with my closest friends." *Aggressive* humour, by contrast, is used to demean others and as such it can be presumed to have a deleterious effect on relations with others. Aggressive humour was assessed by questions like "If someone makes a mistake, I will often tease them about it".<sup>34</sup>

As for the two intrapsychic forms of humour, the beneficial form was *Self-enhancing* humour. This refers to humour that enhances one's sense of well-being without harming others and helps the person to overcome obstacles in life. According to Martin, it represents "a tendency to be frequently amused by the incongruities of life, and to maintain a humorous perspective even in the face of stress or adversity". In the HSQ this dimension was assessed by questions such as "If I am feeling depressed, I can usually cheer myself up with humour." *Self-defeating* humour occurs when people use humour to mock or demean themselves in harmful ways, for example if they do so, in order to try to gain favour with others. It was assessed by questions such as "I will often get carried away in putting myself down if it makes my family or friends laugh".<sup>35</sup>

Martin does not use neutral scientific categories to describe these four types of humour. By and large, he employs everyday categories which are value-laden: categories such as "deleterious", "benevolent", "amuse", "harm", "witty banter", etc. Even the names selected for the four types of humour capture everyday values. It is better to affiliate with others than to be aggressive towards them; to be enhanced is preferable to being defeated. In the same way the contrasting terms "adaptive" and "maladaptive", which Martin and his colleague use to describe respectively the positive and negative functions of humour, assume the desirability of being adaptive and the undesirability of being maladaptive.

Martin argues that previous humour questionnaire failed to recognize the maladaptive forms of humour. He ends his article about the construction of the HSQ, with the hope that research with the new questionnaire "may provide better understanding of the ways in which humour may function as an adaptive resource for psychological health, as well as the ways in which it may interfere with healthy adjustment and impair relationships with others."<sup>36</sup> As is customary in this type of writing, the author does not explain what is meant by "adjustment" and "maladjustment", nor specify what exactly a person might be adjusting to or failing to adjust to. The category "healthy adjustment" is taken to be self-evidently desirable. Moreover, other positive psychologists have taken up this difference between adaptive and maladaptive humour. For example one positive psychologist, who links humour with resilience, writes: "In contrast to these two adaptive humour styles, the maladaptive humour styles tend to be detrimental to either the self (self-defeating humour) or others (aggressive humour)."<sup>37</sup> There is a further semantic move when researchers equate the positive forms of humour with a "good sense of humour", although nothing about the content of the humour has been mentioned.<sup>38</sup>

These general distinctions, which can also be found in pop psychology and everyday thinking, provide the basis for this development in the positive psychology of humour. Of

course, the development itself is highly technical. Martin's questionnaire emerges from some of the features that Seligman equates with science: statistical tests and large representative samples (although the representativeness of Martin's sample can be questioned, because a large proportion of his respondents were students). The technical development provides the evidence for the distinctions that originally motivated the search for the evidence. It is an example of what Herbert Marcuse, that champion of negative thinking, had in mind when he wrote that "empiricism proves itself as positive thinking."<sup>39</sup>

### Ignoring contradictions

Those believing in ideological positivism aim to show that everybody can make their personal world of positivity, in which the various virtues of positivity are attainable. All it requires is personal rather than social change. "Adaptive" is assumed to be a benefit. There is no hint that adapting to a world that is itself maladaptive might be maladaptive. This type of positivism represents more than a theory, for it expresses an outlook, which involves overlooking a series of existing contradictions. This is where the methodology of self-report questionnaires can be ideologically revealing.

The HSQ assumes that friendly teasing can be separated from aggressive teasing. Martin writes that "although friendly teasing and playfully poking fun at others may be a way of enhancing cohesiveness in more benign forms of affiliative humour" this did not count as aggressive humour which intends "to belittle others, albeit often under the guise of playful fun".<sup>40</sup> Thus, the playful and the aggressive types of humour can be distinguished. However, things are not so simple in real life. There is evidence that in close relationships those who tease their partner wrongly believe that their partner enjoys the good fun of being teased.<sup>41</sup> Such teasing can be an exercise of power and the victims risk being branded as lacking a sense of humour if they protest. There is nothing new in this. Over three hundred years ago, Jonathan Swift wrote that the victim of mockery in conversation "is obliged not to be angry, to avoid the imputation of not being able to take a jest."<sup>42</sup>

Of course, the methodology of self-report questionnaires cannot uncover the complex operation of power in such situations. The researcher has to take the respondents at their word, including the victims who hide their hurt, and the perpetrators who deceive themselves that their bullying is enjoyed by the victims. Although researchers such as Martin might acknowledge the difficulty of identifying precise spot where friendly teasing shades into aggressive teasing, their methodology is designed to treat the two forms as if they were entirely distinct, rather than being inherently contestable. Yet the methodology does not fully succeed in satisfying the aims. The dimensions of affiliative and aggressive humour are not entirely separate. Martin's own study reveals that for male participants there was a .28 correlation between the two dimensions, while with female participants there was a .22 correlation (with both correlations being statistically significant). Subsequent researchers have tended to dismiss such correlations, even without describing what they might be. For example, Kuiper claims that "evidence is...strong that the four scales of the HSQ are distinct from one another, with intercorrelations being in the low to modest range."<sup>43</sup> It is as if



researchers wish to avoid recognizing that affiliative humour might be aggressive, as groups draw together by laughing at outsiders, foreigners or even scapegoats within their midst.

There is one omission that particularly underlines the inherent conservatism of ideological positivism. The functions of mockery that Martin seeks to identify are those that might harm the self's own psychological health or harm the person's interpersonal relations. The social world shrinks to the individual and the individual's personal relations. Humour relating to the wider social world does not feature in the HSQ. The socially rebellious function of humour that Freud stressed is theoretically and methodologically absent. There is no attempt to identify the firmer grounding that Walter Benjamin attributed to Kraus and to Swift and that gives their satire deeper meaning. Neither in VIA nor in HSQ are there questions about using humour for social critique: nothing in the style of 'I find it funny when the powerful and the corrupt are satirised' - nothing about the way that mockery might help to establish justice in an unjust world. Instead the positivity of the wider world is taken as an unspoken assumption. It is individual adjustment that matters.

### Humourless writing

There is a further absence in the writings of positive psychologists on humour. They stress the positive value of humour – at least, the right type of humour – but when they write on humour, they tend to be humourless, despite the value that they place on humour. Martin's article about the development of the HSQ contains no illustrative jokes nor humorous passing remarks. All is seriously earnest. This is quite different from Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. The author's love of jokes is clearly apparent. Freud knew that there was no inherent opposition between wit and serious investigation. Being funny can be a way of being serious.<sup>44</sup> It is possible for analysts of humour to be seriously funny, especially when mocking the work of others from a firm alternative grounding.

There is much to find funny in positive psychology as Barbara Ehrenreich demonstrates in the witty sarcasm she uses in *Smile or Die*, especially when she discusses her meetings with Martin Seligman.<sup>45</sup> I must admit that some of Seligman's self-enhancing comments have made me smile, even laugh. Towards the end of one chapter in *Authentic Happiness* he asserts that the chapter ideally represents a win-win situation: "If I have done my job well, I grew intellectually by writing it, and so did you by reading it."<sup>46</sup> In each of Seligman's three works that are cited in the present piece, he mentions that he was once elected president of the American Psychological Association. His pride is clear, especially when in *Authentic Happiness* he describes at length how he nervously waited for the results to be declared. And there is no false modesty as he claims in *Flourish*: "I was elected by the largest majority in history."<sup>47</sup> To adapt Oscar Wilde's comment on the death of Little Nell: one must have a heart of stone – or a mind of mush - not to laugh at this self-enhancing tale of triumph.

Occasionally a joke slips through. Then we can see why so few do. Barbara Fredrickson provides an instance in *Positivity*, when she is discussing amusement as one of ten forms of positivity. She provides some hypothetical examples of amusement. One occurs when a neighbour "shares her latest favourite joke ('What do you call an agnostic, dyslexic insomniac?')". Amusements are not serious, Fredrickson writes, and "heartfelt amusement"

brings the “irrepressible urge” to share your joviality with others. When you laugh at your neighbour’s joke, you signal that “you find the current situation to be safe and light-hearted and that you’d like to build connections with others.”<sup>48</sup> Another win-win situation in which genuinely positive emotions broaden and build.<sup>49</sup>

Fredrickson gives the answer to her joke/riddle in a footnote, which is physically separated from the question by almost two hundred pages: “Answer: Someone who lies awake at night wondering if dog exists.”<sup>50</sup> What Freud would have called the ‘joke-work’ depends on swapping the word ‘dog’ for ‘god’. The joke assumes that hearer and listener are able to distinguish between the two words but they imagine that dyslexics cannot or might not; in reality, rather than in the stereotype that the joke plays upon, this is not an error that dyslexics are likely to make. The joke is an instance of what some analysts call ‘superiority humour’: the joke-teller and their audience assume the inferiority of dyslexics, who make mistakes that teller and hearer do not. And that makes the joke funny.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, the joviality, the heartfelt amusement, the safety and the building of social connections depend on mocking imagined inferiors. All the positive win-wins in the hypothetical situation demand an anaesthetic of the heart.

No wonder positive analysts of humour do not encourage researchers to conduct in-depth studies of actual examples. They would then find that the categories, which are separated in the self-report questionnaires, are intermixed in real life. Positive psychologists might champion the values of amusement and a good sense of humour but we have to take the nature of these phenomena on trust from the scientists, just as they take on trust what their respondents tell them. In this way, the research is conducted at a distance from everyday practice. A more sceptical position, which no doubt the positively-minded would disparage as hopelessly negative, allows us to see the ideological character of this outlook. There is no doubting that positive psychology today is successful both academically and economically. It presents itself as a serious science with seriously profitable applications, but, all the same, it’s a funny business.

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- <sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Karl Kraus” in *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) pp. 239-272.
- <sup>2</sup> Herbert Marcuse “A Note on Dialectic,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978).
- <sup>3</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1979).
- <sup>4</sup> William Davies, *The Happiness Industry* (London: Verso, 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> Laura Hyman, *Happiness: Understandings, Narratives and Discourses* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2014).
- <sup>6</sup> Brendan Cantwell and Ilkka Kauppinen, (eds), *Academic Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).
- <sup>7</sup> Kristján Kristjánsson, *Virtues and Vices of Positive Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* (London: Sage, 2005).
- <sup>9</sup> Marcuse, op cit., p. 447.
- <sup>10</sup> See Michael Billig and Cristina Marinho, *The Politics and Rhetoric of Commemoration* (London: Bloomsbury Books, in press) for a discussion of the value of examining discursive and social phenomena in terms of significant absences.
- <sup>11</sup> Martin E.P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2003), p. 21.
- <sup>12</sup> Martin E.P. Seligman, *Flourish: a new understanding of happiness and well-being* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2011), p. 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Martin E.P. Seligman, *Flourish: Positive Psychology and Positive Interventions*. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values (Chicago: University of Michigan, 2011), p. 234.
- <sup>14</sup> Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, p. 45.
- <sup>15</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die* (London: Granta, 2009); Andrew Anthony, “The British amateur who debunked the mathematics of happiness. *Observer*, January 19 (2014)”. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/jan/19/mathematics-of-happiness-debunked-nick-brown>
- <sup>16</sup> Kristjánsson, op cit., chapter two.
- <sup>17</sup> Barbara Fredrickson, *Positivity* (London: Oneworld, 2009), p. 48.
- <sup>18</sup> See Michael Billig, *Learn to Write Badly: how to succeed in the social sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) for a more general critique of this type of rhetoric in psychological and social scientific writing.
- <sup>19</sup> See Adorno and Horkheimer, op cit.; Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London: Sphere, 1968). Positive psychologists who value the positive benefits of optimism would be unsurprised that the negatively thinking Frankfurt School members were generally pessimistic about the possibilities for transforming the society that they criticised: John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss* (London: Verso, 2016).
- <sup>20</sup> Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, p. 40.
- <sup>21</sup> Accessed at <http://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/>
- <sup>22</sup> Seligman also advises educational establishments. In January 2017 the University of Buckingham, one of the few private universities in Britain, welcomed Seligman as its new official advisor. Henceforward, all tutors would be trained in positive psychology and all students at the university would be required to take a module in positive psychology. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/happiness-expert-advises-uks-first-positive->

<sup>23</sup> Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, chapter nine.

<sup>24</sup> Seligman, op. cit., pp. 66-7.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Dolf Zillmann, “Disparagement humour”, in *Handbook of Humour Research*, vol 1, ed. P.E. McGee and J.H. Goldstein, (New York: Springer, 1983).

<sup>26</sup> Theodor Reik, *Jewish Wit* (New York: Gamut, 1962); Ruth R. Wisse, *No Joke: making Jewish humour* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Humour” in S. Freud, *Art and Literature*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14 (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985).

<sup>28</sup> Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*.

<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Analysis of a phobia in a five year old boy (‘Little Hans’)”, S. Freud, *Case Histories, I*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 8 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1909/1990).

<sup>30</sup> Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, chapter seven.

<sup>31</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (London: Macmillan, 1911).

<sup>32</sup> Rod A. Martin, “Humour, laughter and physical health: methodological issues and research findings”, *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(4) (2001): 504-519.

<sup>33</sup> Rod A. Martin, P. Puhlik-Doris, G. Larsen, J. Gray and K. Weir, “Individual differences in uses of humour and their relation to psychological well-being: development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire”, *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37(1) (2003): 48–75.

<sup>34</sup> Martin et al, p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Martin et al, *ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> Martin et al, op.cit., p. 73.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas A. Kuiper, “Humour and Resiliency: Towards a Process Model of Coping and Growth” *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 8(3) (2012): 475–491.

<sup>38</sup> For example Kuiper, op. cit.; Arnie Cann and Chantal Collette, “Sense of humour, stable affect, and psychological well-being”, *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 10(3) (2014): 464-479.

<sup>39</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, p. 139.

<sup>40</sup> Martin et al. op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> Dacher Keltner, R. C. Young, E. A. Heerey, C. Oemig and N. D. Monarch, “Teasing in hierarchical and intimate relations”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(5) (1998): 1231-1247. See also Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, pp. 160ff.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Swift, “Hints towards an essay on conversation”, in J. Swift *Tales of the Tub and other satires* (London: J.M. Dent, 1909).

<sup>43</sup> Kuiper op. cit, p. 482.

<sup>44</sup> Patricia Cormack, James F. Cosgrave and David Feltmate, “A funny thing happened on the way to sociology: Goffman, Mills, and Berger”, *Sociological Review*, in press; Aída D. Bild, “The Finkler Question: Very Funny is Very Serious”, *Atlantis*, 35(1) (2013): 85-101.

<sup>45</sup> Ehrenreich, op, cit.

<sup>46</sup> Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Seligman, *Flourish: a new understanding*, p. 61.

<sup>48</sup> Fredrickson, *Positivity*, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> For Fredrickson’s broaden and build theory of positive emotions, see *inter alia* Barbara Fredrickson, “What good are positive emotions?” *Review of General Psychology*, 2(3) (1998): 300-319; Barbara Fredrickson and Thomas Joiner, “Positive emotions trigger upward spirals toward emotional well-being”, *Psychological Science*, 13(2) (2002): 172-5.

<sup>50</sup> Fredrickson, *Positivity*, p. 238.

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<sup>51</sup> John Moreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983). For an analysis of jokes about dyslexics, see Andrew Goatly, *Meaning and Humour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 29ff.