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“Forum: Humour”

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FORUM

Humour

'He is an excellent man, as skilful, clever and versed in Holy Scripture as a cow in a walnut tree or a sow on a harp', quipped Martin Luther in his attack on the Catholic Duke Heinrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel published in 1541. Humour's role in German history is well documented: the biting satire and ribald humour of Hans Sachs' moralizing plays; Luther's often coarse and abusive polemic; the theatrical and musical comedies of nineteenth-century Berlin; the *Flüsterwitze* (whispered jokes) told under National Socialism, to name just a few examples. Yet as contemporary Anglophone scholars who encounter the New Year ritual of *Dinner for One* during research trips to Germany know, humour is a complex and elusive phenomenon. Its study has a long and distinguished pedigree, ranging from Freud on jokes and the unconscious, and Mikhail Bakhtin on the carnivalesque, to numerous more recent literary, anthropological and historical works. Some humour transcends time: Luther's insults now have a significant following on the internet. Other humour does not: the sixteenth-century habits of laughing at physical deformity and keeping dwarves at court, for example, or the popularity of minstrel shows in nineteenth-century America. In asking what made people laugh and why, we take a step closer to understanding the social and political norms of a period, both official and unofficial, and the role of groups and individuals in constructing and subverting those norms. Following a lively social gathering at which the merits or otherwise of *Dinner for One* divided scholarly opinion greatly, GH's co-editors, who take such matters very seriously indeed, decided to invite **Peter Burke** (Cambridge), **William Grange** (Nebraska-Lincoln), **Martina Kessel** (Bielefeld) and **Jonathan Waterlow** (Oxford) to take part in a forum to discuss the issues. We wish the journal's readers happy holidays!

1. Humour has long been recognized as a key object of study by aesthetic philosophers and literary scholars. To what extent can a historical reading of the literary texts of any disciplines across the ages enable historians to access more everyday cultures of laughter?

Waterlow: It's probably worth stating immediately that the scepticism historians who use humour in their work face from certain quarters regarding its significance as an object of study is entirely undermined by the fact that humour has fascinated and been discussed by numerous disciplines since the beginnings of written human history. Because of this, we can use philosophic and literary texts as evidence that certain concerns about the nature of the human experience—social, philosophical, personal—are far from new and might therefore provide us with channels by which we can better understand and identify with past cultures.

More concretely, what texts like these can do for us is, first, provide us with a sense of the official or public norms of the various forms of humour in a given period; second, give an idea of the issues of the day that most occupied the attention of thinkers, critics

and commentators, which they addressed either overtly through mocking humour or allegorically under the veil of humorous abstraction; and third – because humour is often predicated on transgressions – reveal certain contemporary taboos and social tensions via the act of humorously violating them.

I think it's a frustrating tendency in historical analyses to rely on the elite levels of discussions about humour from a given period under assessment. In the Soviet Union, Bolshevik thinkers argued themselves round in circles as to whether humour was an acceptable part of the new revolutionary society, given that it was 'clearly' a weapon which could be used in violence between classes: should it exist at all in the ideal socialist society? At the ground level, however, ordinary citizens used humour in a far more ambivalent manner, frequently laughing at their own misfortunes rather than attacking other social groups.

These upper levels—both political and social—are of course not hermetically sealed off from wider society; we can still find traces of everyday 'popular' culture within their pages, even if these will be fragmentary and divorced from much of their living context (then again, this is the sort of problem historians face with almost every other source, too). I think that humorous materials are particularly helpful in allowing us to recapture more of that context, though: having retold various Soviet jokes in conference papers, only to be met with a stony silence and blank stares, I've often been asked, 'Are these jokes actually funny?' Well, they were considered to be funny at the time, so if we're not cracking up over them now, then we have to try to recover the context—social, cultural, historical, political—that would have made them humorous to contemporaries. In short, if we can find another time's jokes funny, we take a significant step closer to understanding that period and the people within it.

Burke: As most of us know from experience, jokes that work in some situations fall flat in others, while cultural historians are aware that what is considered funny changes over time. All those references to horns in Elizabethan plays tend to bore us now, but I suppose they must have brought down the house at the time. We need to recover the sense of humour in one of the many foreign countries called 'the past', but how do we do it? In my own study of humour, mainly in early modern Italy, major sources of inspiration were, predictably for my generation I suppose, Mikhail Bakhtin on *Rabelais and his World* and Johan Huizinga on *Homo Ludens*. Both studies offer hypotheses that historians might try to test when investigating different cultures of laughter. And so, obviously, does Freud in *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, so does the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp with his concept of 'ritual laughter', and so do some anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, writing on 'joke perception'.

The great problem of course, is how to deal with conflicting theories of humour—should we choose one and reject the others, should we try to combine them, or should we simply make use of whatever seems to fit with the material from the particular culture of laughter that we are trying to analyse? The work of literary scholars is also helpful when we turn to the sources, from early modern Italy for instance: jest-books, such as the collection of anecdotes about the Tuscan priest Arlotto Mainardi; stories, most famously Boccaccio's *Decamerone*; reflections on what makes people laugh, some of them to be found in Castiglione's *Cortegiano*; parodies; nonsense verse and so on. I don't think it too unfair to say that historians tend to read texts looking for 'the' meaning, while literary scholars, at least some of them,

are aware of multiple meanings. So historians may well have something to learn about the art of reading from their literary colleagues. I'm thinking of Bakhtin's idea of multiple voices within a text, of the idea of a 'subtext', underlying a given text, as well as more obvious double meanings. We might think that we know what a parody is, but if we turn to a literary study such as Paul Lehmann's *Die Parodie im Mittelalter*, we find, once again, a multiplicity of meanings. Think of the parodies of the *Vater Unser*—are they essentially making fun of a prayer, practising a kind of blasphemy? Or are they using the structure of a well-known prayer in order to make fun of something or, more probably, someone else. In similar fashion, when trying to gain access to past cultures of laughter, historians are well advised to study images, Brueghel's peasants for instance, and also the ways in which their colleagues in art history have interpreted these images. Since what made dead people laugh is elusive, we need every resource that we can find to approach it—iconographical, philological, anthropological, psychological, and so on.

Grange: I find myself unswayed and sceptical when the 'meaning' of humour comes up. Hypotheses among psychologists, linguists, anthropologists and proctologists about the 'meaning' of funny remain mostly unconvincing. The only real authorities on funniness are audiences. True, Günter Grass wrote funny lines—but I didn't hear anyone laughing except me. In the same way, Stephen Hawking repeats a cosmological joke about St Augustine: 'What was God doing during the millennia when *homo sapiens* was evolving and God had not yet appeared on the scene? He was constructing Hell for people who ask such questions!' Do astrophysicists think this is funny? What about theologians? And if they do, so what?

Many groups of human beings, along with many subspecies of related primates, have developed perceptual faculties for detecting threatening behaviour by learning to read vocal and visual cues. That ability among human beings has become an acute form of literacy, and some humans have evolved deep sensibilities in recognizing trustworthy tendencies among other members of their species. Some tribes and clans, however, use laughter as a means of obfuscation, and at times a strategy for survival. Sub-Saharan African tribes make laughter a significant component in the opening junctures of meeting strangers. Initial greetings are utterly superficial but they may form the basis of a future relationship, which is often fundamental to continued mortal existence in Africa. From the inaugural moments, greeters express primal joy and congeniality. They extend hands of greeting—but, not to offer a firm handshake. It is instead a metaphorical attempt to tear off the other person's hand, so vigorous is the gesture. Such vigour establishes a plane of understanding for the proper rituals that should follow, which often include prolonged cascades of loud laughter. Laughter is meant to convey a sense of mutual, if temporary trust.

Laughter in such instances may indicate some larger purpose, but it is neither literary nor aesthetic. Where then do historians or scholars turn to 'access everyday cultures of laughter?' There essentially is no place to turn. There are no 'places' in the study of laughter, no 'sites' where one may undertake an excavation of cultural 'epistemes' to inform ourselves of what people thought was funny. Few things are in any case less funny than a scholarly inquiry into what is, or was, funny. The best way to study funny is its opposite. A man was visiting church one Sunday morning, and the pastor was in

great form; his hearers laughed with gusto at his whimsy, which often introduced heavy theological topics. At the end of the sermon, a woman sitting next to the man asked him, ‘What’s the matter? Didn’t you think the pastor was funny?’ Oh yes, the man replied. ‘I thought he was hilarious—but, I am not a member of this parish’.

As this example indicates, laughter—or the lack of it—may not serve so great a social purpose as we think. Individuals often laugh for reasons best known to themselves; no social, aesthetic or literary theory can pretend even to approach individual motivations for laughter. Consider laughter instead as something predicated on nothing more than one person’s song of triumph. It expresses the laugher’s sudden discovery of momentary superiority over the person at or with whom he is laughing. It also explains his silence amidst tumultuous laughter in which he chooses not to take part.

Kessel: Studies about humour in European societies from antiquity onwards suggest—as Jonathan has already mentioned—that humour was always considered a phenomenon with the potential to test boundaries and taboos. Societies accordingly desired to control its appearance, its content, and the question of who should either decide about or be associated with laughter, satire or ridicule. To my mind, philosophical, aesthetic or literary texts did not just comment on or highlight such processes, but formed an inherent part of them. Take, for example, the definitions that Hegel used for satire and humour. He defined satire—which he associated with a critique of the political situation of the day—as an aesthetic format that would achieve neither ‘truth’ nor a poetic reconciliation of art and ‘the real’, while humour—which he interpreted to mean acceptance of the given—in his eyes aimed at healing frictions in society. By delegitimizing satire in both aesthetic and political terms, he drew on definitions put forward, for example, by Schiller and Fichte in the 1800s, who argued that humour meant the willingness to fight for German unity, instead of insisting on political reforms. Thus, Hegel’s system of thought turned specific political preferences into philosophical abstractions and made others disappear.

Regarding the thorny questions Peter raises—how to choose, if at all, among various theories of humour—I would agree that as historians we should use any possible resource. But beyond reading elite projections for silences and voids that might indicate their desire not to touch upon what they feared or thought irritating, we could also question theories for the unspoken assumptions they are based upon. Take for example the well-known and established understanding of humour as pointing out some sort of incongruence. It is a common feature of both premodern and modern ‘classics’ about humour to associate the right and the ability to joke with masculinity, whereas women’s opportunities for speaking up humorously were normatively tightly circumscribed. This tendency on the part of political and intellectual elites seems only to have grown in the age of revolutions with the insistence on the incongruence between femininity and politics. In turn, women who tried to participate in politics in the nineteenth and twentieth century were regularly made the butt of jokes that lived off that supposed incongruity between feminine bodies and the capacity for political thought. Beyond making us aware of the longevity of norms and hierarchies in societies supposed to have undergone radical change, this issue should not necessarily render us wary of the theory itself, but of the problem that jokes may have fortified social constructions of incongruence.

2. In 1844, Theodor Mundt described popular humour as the ‘Robespierre of the Berliners’. To what extent has humour functioned as an agent of subversion in German history? In imagining humour as the political resource of the subaltern do we risk inadvertently reinscribing clichés about authority, bureaucracy and the absence of humour?

Grange: Theodor Mundt’s use of Robespierre as a kind of grotesque metaphor is historically questionable. Maximilien de Robespierre was both serial killer and utopian—a combination often deadly and seldom funny. Utopians strive to make the world a better place: in most instances they find little to laugh at, even as they proceed make the world more just, more equitable, more proportionate, more inclusive. Robespierre has had many emulators, none of whom got the last laugh. They include Stalin and Pol Pot; too bad they and other such utopians never saw comedy in mid-nineteenth-century Berlin. Had they done so, they might have witnessed the genuine humour of Berliners, when the unfortunate Theodor Mundt drew his analogy.

The 1840s were a decade when humour marched triumphant through Berlin, stopping mostly at the high altars of laughter at the time: Joseph Kroll’s Etablissement in Tiergarten and Friedrich Cerf’s Königstädtisches Theater am Alexanderplatz. In those venues the plays, skits, vaudevilles, couplets and routines of Roderich Benedix, Gustav Räder, actor Karl Helmerding, and the astonishing playwright David Kalisch subtly shaved off layers of Prussian pomposity. Few of their humorous efforts, however, functioned as subversion. While Robespierre used the ‘national razor’ of the guillotine, Kalisch *et al.*, particularly in the wake of the 1848 revolution, sharpened tiny razors of satire in the satirical weekly *Kladderadatsch* to barber the pretensions of Prussian military elites and reactionary Junkers. For their efforts, Kalisch and co-editor Rudolf Löwenstein spent time in Spandau prison. Upon their release, Kalisch and Löwenstein confronted Berlin’s new and ill-humoured police chief Karl Ludwig Friedrich Hinckeldey. Hinckeldey was so unhumorously inclined, in fact, that Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV raised him to the nobility in 1851. But Hinckeldey did not oppose humour on principle. He agreed that attending musicals, comedies and farces helped audiences ‘regain energies lost by hard work. Those who properly alternate recreation with work economize their brain power and are, therefore infinitely more practical than those who ignore or neglect recreation’.

Through the 1850s, the popular circulation of Kalisch’s *Kladderadatsch* nevertheless quadrupled, while attendance at his comedies staged in the Theater in der Blumenstrasse expanded so substantially that its owner Franz Wallner built a luxurious new comic theatre near Alexanderplatz and named the facility after himself. By the time the Wallner Theater opened, however, *Kladderadatsch* had lost its edge, slicing less and less from hide-bound aristocrats and landed gentry. *Kladderadatsch* at times even reattached dignity to some courtiers whom Kalisch and Löwenstein had earlier attempted to trim. Comedies at the Wallner Theater began to change the public image of Junkers, portraying them as patriotic, brave, thrifty and public-spirited. They appeared in mixed casts of many plays, depicting aristocrats and commoners freely intermingling and even marrying each other. *Kladderadatsch* by the 1860s embraced nationalism, and ultimately became a supporter of Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Thus, in contradiction to

Theodor Mundt's thesis, does humour become the unexpected maidservant of power, homologizing clichés about bureaucracy and enshrining the legitimacy of authority.

Burke: In the history of every place or region that I know anything about, not only Germany, humour has functioned as—among other things of course—a powerful agent of subversion. 'Subversion' is very much the appropriate word here, evoking vivid and dramatic images of the world being turned upside down, whether temporarily, as in the case of Carnival, or on what is supposed to be a permanent basis, as in the case of revolutions. Luther and those of his followers who made fun of the Pope in words and images knew what they were doing, as Bob Scribner and other historians have suggested. They did not need Bakhtin to tell them that this kind of comic 'uncrowning' had serious consequences, the destruction of the enemy by means of the explosive missiles of humour. In the case of secular politics, the army of caricaturists and cartoonists who have been at work in Europe from the Thirty Years War onwards once again knew and know what they are doing, dissipating the charisma that comes with authority, pointing, like William Thackeray in a drawing of Louis XIV, to the ordinary human to be found inside the royal robes. It might even be argued that the more authoritarian a given regime, the greater the opportunity it gives to subversive artists, dramatists (such as Václav Havel when he wrote *The Memorandum*)—or singers (Chico Buarque in Brazil under the military regime, Pussy Riot in Putin's Russia). I believe that for this reason the age of 'People's Poland' was a golden age in at least one respect, a golden age of jokes against the regime. Hasn't the quantity and quality of these jokes declined since 1989, or am I out of touch with what's going on these days? I haven't forgotten that authoritarian regimes employ censors, reducing the volume of what can be communicated officially or at any rate legally, but writers and artists living under these regimes learn to say what they want to say in an indirect manner—the 'method of Aesop'—and equally importantly, their audiences or spectators learn to look for subtexts and double meanings.

No, I don't think that making these points assumes that the authorities and their bureaucracies are always humourless—some politicians at least like to collect jokes about themselves. Of course, as usual in history, there is another side to the coin. Like Carnival—once again!—political jokes may act as a safety valve, may help to reconcile people to a regime that they dislike. Have a laugh and carry on. I sometimes wondered whether in some office in some ministry in Warsaw there was not a department of political jokes, staffed with bureaucrats working hard to produce jokes against themselves in order to keep the people happy.

Waterlow: I think the principal risk is not the reinscription of clichés about bureaucracies, but continuing to leave unquestioned the subversive power of ordinary people's humour. Over the years spent studying everyday humour under a repressive regime, I've come to be very sceptical of the suggestion that it has any real political power, at least in terms of altering the regime it mocks.

The danger here for historians is of confusing affect with effect: satirical humour exchanged between citizens can and does serve to change how those citizens feel about the regime, themselves, and the relation between the two, but while this is vitally

important to recognize and to analyse, it should be understood from the perspective of adaptation and critical engagement, rather than of direct action which alters the external world. As such, this is both more than the ‘safety valve’ effect Peter mentions, but also less than the kind of hefty subversion that turns the world upside down in any measurable, publicly visible way. Rather, this is something closer to Stoicism than to a revolutionary credo; instead of striving to change the external world, one alters how one responds to and understands it.

Often, claims made in memoirs or interviews that one told anti-regime jokes—whether or not these claims are true—are just another element of latter-day self-exculpation, of varnishing one’s (perfectly understandable) apathy, ambivalence, or self-interest with the sheen of ‘passive resistance’. Hence we find implausibly large numbers of people claiming publicly, or just to their families, that they were in the French Resistance, or were never in a Nazi organization. Joking here functions as a handy salve for uneasy consciences and helps draw a personal line of continuity between two very different socio-political paradigms.

Governments and bureaucracies certainly do not enjoy being laughed at (but then, as William noted, neither do utopians or, we might add, anyone other than professional comedians), and their displeasure is often more visible to us in the historical record than is any sense of how the joke-tellers themselves understand and experience their actions. Consequently, I think it’s easy to overstate the case for the power of popular mockery: being afraid of something does not mean that it’s objectively dangerous, and I’ve yet to hear a convincing example of a regime toppled by the humour of its citizens. To be sure, various people have claimed that, for example, the Soviet bloc was weakened—even fatally—by the rich culture of political joke-telling which flourished in its various states, but I would argue that these jokes were symptoms rather than causes of a coming political upheaval and eventual collapse. To put it crudely, the Berlin Wall came down because people demolished it, not because they joked about it.

Kessel: To interpret humour as subversion has a tradition just as long as the opposite definition, namely to see humour as a means to stabilize social and political norms. Both are valid although I do agree with both Peter’s and Jonathan’s scepticism regarding wit’s power to change political regimes. Often, however, humour can be both at the same time, and sometimes it is neither, but something altogether different.

In the media explosion before and during the German revolution of 1848, satire indeed played an important role as a form of critique and subversion, as has often been argued. The journalist Adolf Glaßbrenner, for example, used the figure of ‘Nante’, the ‘man on the street’, to comment on politics and stretch the realm of the permissible, promptly being driven from Berlin for his insistence on free speech. However, precisely because satire now played a role as political commentary, as it had done in England since the eighteenth century, conservatives did not want to leave the arena of the supposedly non-earnest to their opponents. In the political thawing of the 1860s, for example, Prussian conservatives established their own satirical magazine, aptly entitled *Der kleine Reactionär* (*The Little Reactionary*), although it did not survive for long. I don’t know about Communist Warsaw, Peter, but in Nazi

Berlin, publishers were indeed producing the kind of Goering jokes favoured by the population at the time. We should therefore be careful not to associate humour and satire automatically or only with liberal or democratic positions or the underdogs in society. Furthermore, as Martin Baumeister has pointed out, the projection of the 'man on the corner' as the watchful commentator of oppressive politics, as the working classes' incarnation of agency, and as the victim of unacceptable social conditions, was not a 'natural' feature of any given class but the product of an increasingly differentiated culture industry. A heterogeneous mass public, confronted with rapid social change and political options, catered to a popular culture that also served to present role models.

Furthermore, I would argue that humorous comments in certain contexts can be interpreted from a governmental perspective as a practice that was neither meant nor understood as subversive but as a legitimate way of taking part in politics. To this day, German cultural memory cherishes the idea that oral jokes in National Socialism symbolized the everyday resistance of non-Jewish Germans. I would suggest understanding that notion as an extremely successful form of memory construction. Most of the jokes that were indeed told openly by non-Jews during Nazism could not be mentioned publicly after 1945 because they would have undercut the postwar, non-Jewish self-definition of not having known anything about exclusion, persecution and the Holocaust. So it may be helpful to study the realm of laughter as one possible indicator for various forms of governmental agreement between rulers and ruled who negotiated through joking their desired form of participation in an authoritarian society and reminded their government of the promises it held out to those who still counted as citizens.

3. The capacity of laughter to include and exclude, to stabilize and destabilize authority, to mobilize or dissipate anger, is commonplace knowledge. Does its historical study merely permit the illustration by other means of narratives that are already familiar, or does it offer the possibility of writing particular histories differently? What else, in other words, does it help us to understand that we might not otherwise grasp?

Burke: I think that this question of illustration versus understanding might be approached along two paths, one that comes from studies of laughter in general and the other from particular historical problems. Looking at studies of laughter in general, based for the most part, though not entirely, on evidence from western countries in the present or the recent past, a historical approach leads to a more acute awareness of variety in the aims and methods of inclusion, exclusion, stabilization, destabilization and so on. To take an example from the discussion of humour in one of the most famous texts from the Italian Renaissance, Castiglione's *Cortegiano* (1528), written by one of the most civilized individuals of the period and addressed to other civilized individuals. In this dialogue, one of the speakers argues—without being contradicted—that it is natural to laugh at human deformity. In other words, an attitude that shocks us today was taken for granted in the sixteenth century. It wasn't an eccentric attitude, as the important place of midgets at court reminds us. So we need history, especially the history of relatively remote periods, to remind us of the variety of moral standards in general and of standards in joking in particular.

The second approach focuses on ‘particular histories’, asking whether or how they are illuminated by introducing laughter into the story. Since the relation between laughter and authority is a recurrent problem, let me take the case of Louis XIV, especially the image of the king (it would of course be equally possible to take an example from German history, but I prefer to stick to what I know more about). Our image of the king is largely derived from the official image-making of the time, a time when unusual efforts were made to present the king in what it would be an understatement to call a ‘favourable light’, since he was described as omniscient, omnipotent, always victorious, just, and so on, indeed as ‘Louis the Great’. Of course historians want to know how successful this campaign of what it is convenient if anachronistic to call ‘propaganda’ may have been at the time. An indirect answer to this question is provided by a few surviving unofficial and unfavourable images, always satiric and sometimes parodic. These contemporary invitations to laugh at Louis act as a powerful reminder of resistance to his regime. Most of the surviving texts and images of this kind were produced abroad (by the Dutch, the Germans and the English), but there is a little evidence of French reactions. For example, a statue of the king in Paris, glorifying him, was soon surrounded with railings to prevent obscene graffiti appearing on the pedestal. In short, the evidence of laughter helps to take us behind the scenes and so view the theatre of royal power from a different angle.

Kessel: It may be that these insights are common knowledge. However, I think that shedding light on processes of inclusion and exclusion by asking questions about laughter is no mean feat. To exclude through laughter and derision is quite a different historical phenomenon from organizing social positioning through, say, specific legal or linguistic requirements for nationality, by asking for particular professional expertise for certain positions, or by demanding income for social status. Thus, as Peter just suggested, listening to laughter in history makes us more aware of the specific ways in which historical actors actually did include or marginalize others and how they did attribute or withhold cultural and social capital.

In that sense, laughter can have a powerful political meaning beyond any specific content. Taking humour seriously acknowledges the role emotions play in modern history, and thus also raises questions about our basic understanding of the modern. For example, using irony or sarcasm can shift a discussion from the level of argument to the arena of emotions, making it hard to answer or impossible to gear social interaction back to argumentative procedures agreed upon precisely to control emotional dimensions in politics. Furthermore, it might almost be a truism nowadays that laughter can be the spark for violence. The various historical meanings of this connection, however, still need to be analysed, especially as the recognition of laughter as a historical phenomenon might help us understand how, in democratic societies too, groups negotiate identity and belonging through categories of honour and shame. In a more general sense yet, using humour as a category of historical analysis allows us to see not only how it entertained, but also how it worked as a cultural practice that shaped social order through shared assumptions about society and politics. In other words, the ways in which people deal with laughter point us to the ‘sacred cows’ of a given society, dispositions held so dearly that historical actors would not allow anybody to make fun of them, or, if they did, it was at the cost of remaining an outsider or under threat—a phenomenon clearly visible today also.

Finally, I understand anecdotes or jokes as elements of what I call an ‘everyday historiography’, as the ‘smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact’ (Joel Fineman). Of course, they may not convey anything beyond the entertaining moment. Then again, they may offer an unobtrusive yet expressive opportunity for taking part in the permanent act of making society. They translate imaginations of the real, convey people’s projection of their past, and tell us about hopes and fears of things to come. By narrating or enacting jokes, historical actors indicate how they want their status to be secured, how others should speak to them, and how they judge or grant power and honour.

Waterlow: I’ll try to answer this through the example I know best—Stalin’s Soviet Union—which I think bears some relevance to German history, too.

Two principal trends in the historiography that sought to understand how ordinary citizens lived through and understood the Stalin years can be simplified as either ‘citizens were terrified into submission’, or ‘citizens came to believe in Communism as a substitute religion’. Even with the ‘archival revolution’ of the 1990s, as the doors of those institutions were for the first time thrown almost completely open to researchers, social and cultural historians of the Stalin years continued to circle the middle ground between those two poles of total state coercion versus total state conversion without ever really defining it or its operation, settling for vague terms such as ‘grey zone’ or states of ‘half-belief’.

Humour can add a great deal more to our understanding of how ordinary (that is, politically uninfluential) citizens perceived, grappled with, and ultimately came, by necessity, to normalize much of the world around them during these years. Humour demonstrates that this was not (or not always) a case of papering over the cracks between official rhetoric and lived realities, but rather an explicit confrontation with these disjunctures—not only viewing the theatre of royal power from a different angle, as Peter puts it, but also reflecting critically on what that theatre meant when contrasted to both the claims made from the Royal Box (so to speak), and to the lived experience of the majority.

For example, critical jokes are usually structured around a judgement in which the target is measured in some way (against its own claims, a familiar standard of some kind, or an absurdly exaggerated version of either) and is found wanting. Delving into what the standards of judgements are that allow such jokes to function offers a very rich seam for historians to mine: to what alternative and/or traditional standards of judgement did citizens continue to refer, and to what extent did they criticize the regime against its own proclaimed values, indicating thereby a degree of acceptance of those values?

What is most interesting about humour is the way it entangles these different discourses and values, leaving us with a sense of the lived experience of contemporaries, rather than the kinds of sources (pamphlets, newspapers, plays, and so on) that so often in the pursuit of propagating or defending a particular position leave artificially segregated the numerous moments where different values and ideas crosshatch with each other, rather than meeting head-on in conflict.

Martina raises the interesting point that humour can also move interpersonal interactions, even when explicitly political in content, into the realm of emotions. Although I’ve yet to find much of interest in the ‘emotional turn’, I would agree that humour offers an important source for engaging with the desire of individuals in the past to

create and nurture ‘trust groups’ outside mainstream, ‘official’ society. Under a repressive regime, sharing a political joke with someone signalled an important judgement of trust that they would not denounce you to the authorities. As such, humour of this kind can be a vital clue to the nature of unofficial trust groups and channels of communication.

Grange: Humour has an inconsistent record of destabilizing authority, especially if the authority in question is well entrenched. Why? Individuals generally conform to social norms they see around them, norms which in most cases they inherited from previous generations. Subsequent generations usually fortify inherited rules, often endowing them with supernatural meaning and intrinsic values. They do so with good reason: reinventing the wheel is usually a waste of time, because it involves teaching each succeeding generation a new set of rules. Institutions thus become constructions that limit individual freedom, whose rituals often sanctify inclusion or exclusion. They also tend to stabilize, since most humour offers an opportunity for escape.

Such rituals include theatre performance, especially the performance of spoken comic drama. One major wrinkle of comic effectiveness became apparent in fifth-century Athens, namely *parrhesia*, the Athenian right ‘to speak freely and boldly’. No other Greek city state insisted on such freedom; yet without it, comedy could not have functioned as it did. Following the fifth century, the plays of Aristophanes, Menander and their literary descendants became more than an institution. In the modern world, humour has become an industry.

One of the best examples of the German humour industry at work occurred with the abrogation of censorship in the Weimar Republic. Comedies, comic reviews, cabarets and nightclubs began to feature all manner of humorous performance, some of which were topical and aimed at ‘changing the narrative’ in German political life. But those performances failed to destabilize much of anything. In fact, they may have helped solidify and restore some institutions of censorship and control, which until about 1926 been in retreat. The antics of topical comedians such as Karl Valentin, Liesl Karlstadt, Max Adalbert, Trude Hesterberg and Blandine Ebinger provided laughs aplenty, but they also stirred resentment. So did the music of Friedrich Hollaender and the plays of Bruno Frank.

When those resentments became public policy in the Third Reich, an unprecedented upsurge in comedy production took place. Comedies began to outnumber all other forms of German dramatic performance. The production of humour may unfortunately have killed several comic performers; one example is Robert Dorsay, a well-known cabaret star whose career prospects improved after the Nazis came to power. But he once complained in the Deutsches Theater canteen about whipped pastry topping there, calling it ‘Adolf Hitler Memorial Cream’. Secret police operatives shortly thereafter arrested and executed him for ‘anti-Reich activities’. The tragic fate of comedian Kurt Gerron is more well known. A member of the original Brecht-Weill *Threepenny Opera* cast, Gerron was ultimately interned at the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where he performed songs from that show for SS guards and later completed a propaganda film, featuring many of the camp’s children’s laughing and playing in the ‘model internment facility’. Five days after the filming was complete, the SS shipped both Gerron and the children to Auschwitz, where they perished upon arrival.

The study of humour *ex post facto*, on the other hand, offers abundant range for historians to destabilize earlier concepts, especially from a theoretical standpoint. A good example of comedy from the American theatre of the 1830s to the 1880s is minstrelsy. Performers in blackface appeared throughout the country; there were at one time over twenty minstrel companies operating out of New York. Today, performing in blackface is taboo—so politically incorrect that no one dares take it humorously.

4. Writing about the premodern carnivalesque from the perspective of 1930s Russia, Mikhail Bakhtin emphasized that the sphere within which the freedom of laughter can be exercised is sometimes broad and sometimes narrow. What expands and contracts that sphere, and what drives broader changes in the culture of humour? What transforms its rules and norms?

Waterlow: A counterculture by definition requires a culture to counter—as such, it will always to some extent be conditioned by that which it negates, just as visions of utopia carry with them what Eric Naiman has called the ‘indented characteristics’ of the (in their authors’ view) imperfect societies and politics in which they originate. Hence the Carnival is not simply a world unto itself, but the familiar world turned upside down.

The recent psychological theory of humour developed by Peter McGraw and the Humour Research Lab (HuRL) argues, in my view convincingly, that humour operates in essence via ‘benign violations’. To be funny, something must violate some kind of norm, rule or expectation, yet must still in an important sense be ‘benign’ rather than frightening or overly serious. Whether or not McGraw’s theory really does encompass *all* humour (it would be difficult to say definitively that one couldn’t eventually find an example which didn’t fit his framework), it does highlight a key point: humour is fundamentally calibrated by prevailing norms of behaviour, taste and other social values. Therefore, as these change in a given society, so humour changes, too.

For Bakhtin, grotesque humour always contains within it simultaneous images of decay and rebirth and hence this folk laughter is ultimately part of long-term cultural cycles of death and renewal; while laughter debases and even destroys, he suggests, it is simultaneously creative and helps establish new perspectives. In this way, the sphere of laughter expands and contracts in a constant and unending cycle. But what drives these changes? I think it would be foolhardy to suggest we can talk of quantitative changes in a culture’s humour, but in terms of the quality and nature of that humour, I would argue that the more serious, constricting and pious the official culture (whether enforced by social norms or actual laws), the sharper, more bitter and indeed more creative the population’s humour (the jokes really did get worse after 1989, Peter!). All the same, folk humour is a deeply ambivalent mode which ‘crowns and uncrowns at the same moment’: it oversteps official limits but, as it does so, it affirms that those boundaries exist—it is funny because it is transgressive in some sense; if it were not transgressive (merely ‘benign’, in McGraw’s terms), it would not be funny.

To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that political humour is solely defined by the regime it engages with; although it is a response to that regime, joke-tellers simultaneously draw on other sources and discourses—ranging from their own pre-regime

experience to knowledge of other countries and value systems—to take on and criticize the regime. In short, when criticizing a person or institution, one does so by reference not only to their self-representation or purported values, but also to one's own values and worldview, which will have been shaped by sources outside and/or qualitatively distinct from those of the regime. In short, you do not only 'speak Bolshevik' when mocking the Soviet regime, nor would all Germans speak (only) in the language of the *Völksgemeinschaft* when criticizing Nazi social policies. Rather, it is in the confluence of these two streams that humour is brewed.

Burke: The reference to Russia in the 1930s prompts one kind of answer to this question, about censorship and the official limits to laughter, the prohibitions, which clearly constrain humourists even if, as my answer to your second question about subversion suggested, they can also stimulate them to find ways to evade them. That is a rather obvious kind of answer, though it would be interesting to develop it with case-studies of laughter in successive regimes—in Russia under the last tsars, for instance, in the early Bolshevik years, in the Stalinist years, after 1989 and so on.

But in my view at least, it is more illuminating to explore changes in unofficial taboos, the Freudian 'censor' inside us rather than the official censors of the Austro-Hungarian empire that inspired Freud to coin his term. As a beginning, it might be useful to switch from one cultural theorist to another, from Mikhail Bakhtin to Norbert Elias. Elias never published an analysis of laughter (although an essay of his on the subject written in the 1950s was found quite recently), but it is not difficult to imagine how he would locate the history of humour within his famous account of the 'civilizing process', with its emphasis on increasing restraint. It is equally easy to find historical examples of the 'civilizing' of laughter. One that I have already mentioned is the shift from laughing at physical deformities in the sixteenth century to the later disapproval of such laughter. The study of cartoons and caricatures in a particular place over the long term might be one of the best ways to identify the civilizing process in action, and an obvious English example is the contrast between the freedom displayed by James Gillray and the self-control shown by John Tenniel, whose caricatures of Gladstone focused not on his face but on his 'Gladstone collar'.

Of course your question demanded explanation. Elias offered a complex, mainly political explanation of the whole civilizing process in the second volume of his book. Do we buy it? If not, what do we put in its place? I have a feeling that as usual, Elias didn't do justice to the power of religion, and in the case of Western Europe I'd want to say more about the Protestant ethic (worldly asceticism limiting the scope of humour) and about the similar Counter-Reformation or 'Catholic puritan' ethic as well. But we (like Elias in his later years) still face the problem of explaining opposite trends, 'decivilizing processes' as he called them, including an expansion of the sphere of humour. Think of England in the 1960s, at least as I remember it. A flourishing of satire (*Private Eye*, for instance, was founded in 1961) at a time of increasing permissiveness, especially in the sphere of sex, as acted out or represented (the *Lady Chatterley* trial and all that). Simple reaction against an age of repression? Delayed reaction to the Second World War? I'm just speculating. To go beyond speculation, we need a comparative study of cultures of humour, including Britain and the Germans, 1945–1989.

Kessel: Structures of agency, fear or a society's mental disposition to *laissez-faire*, power, violence or the rule of law—I would argue that developments in any historically important dimension could initiate changes regarding the freedom of laughter. Thus, I think the process can go many ways: satire may lose its cutting edge because its favourite subject goes out of (political) fashion, jokes may turn sour because the social fabric in that particular context is wearing thin, mentalities may no longer allow certain types of jokes, or a shift in the range and type of media available may allow for entirely different ramifications of satire, to name just a few. The reverse, however, may equally be the case—the very practice of laughter, as a deeply political phenomenon, can trigger or help to shape changes in society. Thus, the German middle classes in the late eighteenth century formed a culture that was intended to help them gain dominance over the aristocracy by carefully grooming laughter into a distinctive feature of successful social behaviour, projecting their bodily and emotional control as a sign of cultural superiority and as a coping mechanism regarding actual shortcomings in influence and prestige. With gruesome effect, the agreement among non-Jewish Germans during National Socialism to turn exclusion and destruction into a reality not only through violence but also through a systematic allowance for derision and spite towards the persecuted, helped to turn those who were considered to 'belong' into an affective community that brutally censored jokes by the persecuted, but made great speaking room for itself.

In my view, therefore, we should be careful not automatically to associate certain types of societies with greater freedom or repression of laughter—certainly not in the modern world—but rather to ask specifically who drew the boundaries for whom and with what effect. Next to long-term changes that reflect the qualitative differences between pre-modern and modern societies, I am fascinated by studying the non/liberty of laughter because it points us to paradoxical processes in modern societies. Thus, the authoritarian state of Wilhelmine Germany protected the realm of speech of Jewish-German comedians as long as they did not satirize crown and altar. As a result, these professionals of laughter often commented (self-)ironically on the tangled forms of German-Jewish identity making, and, as Peter Jelavich has argued, inscribed themselves as German citizens into the new nation precisely by doing so. In the political democracy of Weimar Germany, however, their discursive options dwindled as the reduced role of the state as the arbiter of freedom of speech combined with the conservative and anti-Jewish disposition of many of the state's and society's representatives to prove Jewish-Germans' fear correct that their self-irony would only provide antisemites with fodder. Given such examples, I would suggest studying the frayed realm of laughter as a possible indicator for the ways in which societies deal with the inherent ambiguity of identity.

Grange: Martina makes a good point about the 'non-liberty of laughter', which had a curious history in the Third Reich. Laughter was then an instrument of what Detlev Peukert called the German 'double life', allowing most citizens to put on a pleasant public face while concomitantly inhabiting a private sphere, 'pursuing non-political spare-time pleasures with minimal possible interference'. Laughter at home or shared with cronies at work is obviously distinct from laughter enjoyed at a comedy performance in a theatre. Laughter in the former, to paraphrase Suzanne Langer, is a direct response to what she called 'separate stimuli'. The comic play, on the other hand, betokens what she calls a 'lift in the vital feeling in each laughing audience member', a result of interconnected and

conjoined provocations. Comedy in a theatre expresses a kind of communal mood—but then, most people attending a comedy do so with expectations of laughing. But even if one enters the theatre in a bad mood, a play's humour can often find fertile ground in which to take root and blossom. Humour in the theatre feeds off the responses of others in the audience. What prepares the ground for laughter is the dramatic illusion and the willingness, even the eagerness of the individual audience member to accept the illusion. The situation onstage is often preposterous (and often preposterously inane in most comedies during the Third Reich), yet a punch-line could result in an explosion of laughter if the stage totality allowed it to seem natural and unforced.

To taste the freedom once experienced at the Feast of Fools in medieval Europe, one had to travel (one still can, in fact) to the Bluffton Street Fair in northern Indiana, where Swiss-German farmers with names such as Aeschlimann, Klopfenstein, Emschweiler and Neuhauser brought their families to what was essentially a *Jahrmarkt*. Mechanical rides, apple pie booths and live pig races were among the amusements on offer. Police officers and fair marshals kept order as school bands marched through the streets, vendors offered new-fangled gizmos in a tent 200 metres long, and real estate brokers hawked land and houses. It was almost like the Carnival scene from *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari*, the highly praised silent film of 1920 with Conrad Veidt as the spooky guy in the cabinet. But something almost as spooky was also about to happen in Indiana.

The Street Fair boasted something few other fairs in Indiana could offer: a live show called 'The G-String Follies', which offered audiences comprised mostly of farmers and tractor salesmen the sight of scantily clad women dancing alluringly inside a large tent, where raucous music beat an insistent rhythm that accompanied their movements. Though a large greasy man with tattooed arms guarded the tent's entrance, determined boys could sometimes sneak in and witness the spectacle. On one occasion, the proceedings involved an event that was nothing short of carnivalesque. A woman with dyed pink hair ecstasically danced for about ten minutes on a small, raised stage under glaring, exotic lights. At the conclusion of her dance she stripped down to her G-string (as the show's title promised), but on this occasion she briefly pulled down her G-string as well, breaking the local law but exposing pubic hair she had also dyed pink. The resulting uproar included laughter that exploded in a spontaneous concatenation of frenzy and erotic adulation, like a July 4th fireworks rocket streaking high into the heavens over Indiana, fuelled by the brief glimpse of a woman's pudendum. Most of the grown men on that occasion, along with all the young boys, experienced a carnivalesque excursion to distant, forbidden territory. They had enjoyed an unprecedented, albeit circumscribed freedom along the journey, after which they returned to safety. The farmers and tractor salesmen continued to talk about it afterwards, as they gathered outside the tent, eating sweet corn and candied apples.

What had just happened? A great change had taken place, one which Herbert Marcuse had earlier described as 'a transformation of the libido from sexuality constrained under genital supremacy to eroticization of the entire personality'. The result at the 'G-String Follies' was a kind of consciousness raising, a method that allowed eros to trump civilization (from the title of Marcuse's 1955 book on the subject). What made this instance unique was how laughter combined with eros and rendered both acceptable and non-threatening to authority. No one was arrested, the police and fair marshals continued on their rounds, and everyone proceeded to other, more traditional attractions.