

## **Rolling in the Aisles: Organizational Laughter and the Ethics of the Margin**

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Since Turner's (1971) first attempt to encourage the field to take it seriously, a burgeoning swarm of studies have sought to expand on humour occurring in organizations (Collinson 1988, Linstead 1985, Westwood and Rhodes 2006) and "organizational" humour created and used as a tool by managers (Barsoux 1993). More recent work has considered humour in the contemporary cult of fun and play as a formal part of organizational culture. There has also been consideration of the organization of humour itself in the mainstream and fringes of the comedy industry, which has itself transformed since the decline of variety and rise of alternative comedy in the 1980s, stadium comedy in the 1990s, and the rise of a new "comedy establishment" so trenchantly and reflexively critiqued by Stewart Lee. Yet the predominant focus has remained functional, on the one hand attempting to identify the social role of humour in organizations, emphasising how play and "fun" can contribute to cultures of both increased performance and creativity; whilst on the other, even critical approaches have tended to import functional concerns into their attempts to analyse whether humour is a mode of resistance to organizational domination and exploitation, a coping device which facilitates accommodation to it, or a means of evasion of either. What have perhaps been neglected here are the understanding of both the basic mechanics underpinning organizational humour, and its more transcendent qualities, such as its capacity for non-meaning, which have the potential to move humour from the epistemological margins to an ontological centre stage (Critchley 2002; Cohen 1999). Humour has been regarded as transitive, that is having an object or purpose, but generally, and ironically, at such an abstracted level that it has often been treated as though it were intransitive, an expression of some relatively unspecifiable natural creativity which if suppressed can have dysfunctional consequences for organizations.

Whether humour has been regarded as a performance enhancer, a liberator of the spirit, a mode of resistance or a means of accommodating to unpleasant circumstance, most studies (although not all) have tended to stress its positive aspect, its light side. However it is used, somebody benefits, and except in the somewhat problematic case of resistance, nobody really suffers. The joke, for the most part, seems to be on no-one in particular, at least at an organizational level. The difficulties encountered by organizational humour studies in attempting adequately to distinguish between two kinds of humour lends potential support to Milan Kundera's (1996) contention that we lack an adequate language to distinguish between two kinds of laughter – light and dark.

Laughter itself, rather than humour or comedy, and with the conspicuous exception of Butler's attempt to develop theory rather than empirics (2015), has been relatively neglected in organizational humour studies, being regarded as an incidental epiphenomenon to the humorous situation. In this presentation I want outline a plan to redress this neglect, after first questioning Kundera's assertion that we really lack an adequate language to recognise the dark side of laughter. In establishing the conceptual ground for this exercise I explore the work of three philosophers who have dealt with laughter – Henri Bergson's (2005) essential study *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*; Georges Bataille's (2004; 2014) more wide-ranging and more radical approach in several works but particularly *Inner Experience* and *On Nietzsche*; and Jacques Derrida's (1978) treatment of Bataille's work (influenced by both Bergson and Bataille). There appears to be a divergence between Bergson's claim that laughter is a minor consideration, and Bataille's counter that laughter, in fact, should come first. What emerges from this discussion is a potentially radical shift in our understanding of humour and irony as not only linguistic or epistemological phenomena, but corporeal and phylogenetic ones – i.e. our bodies have a "sense" of humour, not just as a construction of our socially conscious minds. A

more thorough consideration of Bataille, and how his ideas might yet be reintegrated with those of Bergson, via Kundera and Derrida in particular, offers a way forward.

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