

# The ambivalent affordances of humour in capitalist organisations

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## Abstract

*Responding to concerns raised by Michael Billig (2018) regarding the functions of humour in capitalist organisations, this essay strives to convey how humour and satire can have liberating and empowering affordances for subjects in organisational contexts as they can potentially intervene in the negotiation and exercise of power through fostering negative dialectical thinking and estrangement. Revisiting the scepticism of Marcuse, Fromm, Horkheimer and Adorno toward humour, it strives to provide an initial theoretical framework to accommodate a more nuanced understanding of the functions of humour in power structures by locating it within the contingencies acknowledged by Frankfurt School critical theorists. Although humour can be co-opted to serve power and consolidate the status quo, it can also serve as a potential resistance strategy in capitalist societies and organisations.*

*Keywords: humour, capitalism, work and organisational leadership, positive psychology, Frankfurt School.*

## 1. Introduction

Agency is often considered to be a requirement of exerting power; therefore, subjectivity and empowerment usually go hand in hand. This is also true in organisational contexts and practices (Collinson 1994: 53). As power relations are often asymmetrical in hierarchical organisations, the full realisation of subjectivity on the part of followers usually requires empowering enhancements because, as Fleming & Sewell (2002: 863) observe, subjectivity is a contested terrain where struggles over dignity and equity cannot be fully separated. In this context, the subordinate resorts to various strategies including “intersubjective tactics, covert strategies and subtle identity politics” as a means of self-empowerment (Fleming & Sewell 2002: 870).

Using humour has been increasingly contested as a potential strategy for employee empowerment in organisations. Fleming & Sewell (2002: 863) note that “humour is an important feature of resistance.” They also refer to previous research that assume humour is on a par with oppositional resistance and intentional disobedience (Fleming & Sewell 2002: 864). Other studies, by contrast, underscore the coping functions of humour (see Collinson 2002: 270).

In other words, instead of resisting and striving to change the system, humour helps workers cope with pressure, stress, and similar aversions.

Humour, therefore, is thought to perform contradictory functions in organisational contexts. On the one hand, some studies argue it is often appropriated by managers in order to control employees. These studies emphasise the benefits of humour in fostering, “organisational commitment, creativity, diversity, collective learning and problem-solving” (Loacker & Peters 2015: 624). Though seemingly subversive on the surface, humour can eventually reinforce and solidify existing power structures (see Collinson 2002; Loacker & Peters 2015). Others deny that humour can be co-opted by managers. These studies maintain that humour is inherently subversive; thus, it inevitably challenges the existing power relations and structures. Humour has thus been seen both as a containing strategy manipulated by leaders and as a subversive strategy that empowers followers.

Collinson (2002) observes that managers and those in positions of power have tried to regulate and suppress humour. “Viewing jocularly as either ‘uncivilised’ or ‘dangerous’, they have sought its censorship through management control, exhortation and/or legal imposition” (Collinson 2002: 274). The range of potential suppressive strategies include “the management of production, the quashing of resistance, sustaining the authority, reverence and legitimacy of social institutions, ‘civilising’ both self and others, reinforcing class and status inequalities, differentiating self and protecting the organisation from litigation” (Collinson 2002: 277). Such attempts, however, have remained mostly futile in that even suppression has become an object of derision in some cases. In fact, attempts toward regulation sometimes backfire and create an impact contrary to the one initially intended by managers.

Instead of being caught in the binary of recalcitrance versus compliance, some scholars have tried to provide more nuanced takes on the organisational functions of humour. Fleming & Sewell (2002), for instance, note that the possibility of resistance partly depends on the way one conceptualises it. If we narrowly define resistance in terms of “Fordist clichés” (Fleming & Sewell 2002: 859), complacency will be dominant in contemporary organisations. Another intricacy originates in the assumption that obtrusive control inevitably gives rise to proportionate resistance (Edwards et al. 1995). As Fleming & Sewell (2002: 860) note, however, this is not necessarily true in the case of unobtrusive and hegemonic control. Nonetheless, they maintain that, “resistance is seen as something that automatically and openly unfolds in the capitalist workplace. [...] [W]e must take into account practices that may not involve open class struggle if we are to develop a more nuanced understanding of transgression” (Fleming & Sewell 2002: 862). In this framework, the meaning of resistance is also slightly modified. It can either refer to expressing discontent on the part of employees or to a space for asserting autonomy (Fleming & Sewell 2002: 862-863)

In his chapter “Positive Psychology, Humour and the Virtues of Negative Thinking,” Billig (2018) castigates the blindness of positive psychology to its status as an ideological construct. In doing so, he challenges the potentially enhancing impacts of humour in workplace as postulated by positive psychology. His critique is significant because it calls for an alternative perspective to the dominant approach that promotes the use of humour in organisational contexts. Building upon alternative assumptions, an innovative and potentially liberating approach can be developed in using humour as a means of empowerment and social change for the underprivileged subjects, particularly in workplace and organisational contexts.

This essay, therefore, sets out to scrutinise the reservations concerning the use of humour in workplace and the reasons behind them, add nuance to the discussion by a close reading of Frankfurt School scepticism toward humour, and suggest liberating and empowering ways through which humour can be employed by underprivileged subjects in organisational contexts. Taking its cue from the state of the art, this paper acknowledges the ambivalent functions of humour in serving power or empowering the subordinate subject in the context of capitalist

organisations, and simultaneously warns against reducing the multiplicity of the functions of humour. A close reading of Frankfurt School and its scepticism toward humour in capitalist societies brings fresh insights and adds nuance to the ongoing discussions about the functions of humour in organisations. This essay intends to complement caveats against the organisational functions of humour and contends that besides its disciplinary and conservative functions aiming to preserve and reinforce the status quo, humour can also give voice to the subaltern and may be employed as a strategy for resistance or even subversion.

## **2. Humour in capitalist societies**

Martin & Ford (2018: 16) define humour as

*a broad, multifaceted term that represents anything that people say or do that others perceive as funny and tends to make them laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the emotional response of mirth involved in the enjoyment of it* (original italics).

Despite this rather neutral conceptualisation, the use of humour in organisations has been indented with scepticism. Claims to positive affordances of humour in organisations inevitably beg serious questions. Whose interests does humour serve in organisational contexts, and at whose cost?

Humour, for instance, can help employees cope with stress, which can subsequently enhance their efficacy, and consequently organisational profitability. This, however, does not necessarily raise the standard of living or improve well-fair for the employees who cope with increasing work-related stress. Such concerns raise scepticism about humour as a part of the corporate toolkit that ensures compliance, preserves the status quo, and reinforces existing hierarchies. Humour can be used to safely release revolutionary energies and replace them with light-hearted conformity. It can be used by leaders to manipulate their followers.

Arguing that humour is effective at affecting social change, Billig (2018) contends that humour is regressive, that it serves to reinforce the power structure. His essay opens a volume that includes chapters on the role and uses of humour in activist movements, marketing, corporate communication, public relations, workplace, and organisations. Serving as a foil to what several positive, occupational and organisational psychologists argue in this volume, Billig unleashes his sarcasm from the very first paragraph by writing: “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” (Billig 2018: 3). Underlying the ideological functions and economic services of the discipline, positive psychology and its recommendations to entertain optimism and to appreciate humour in a positive way constitute his main targets. He writes:

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 [...]. 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. 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.

(Billig 2018: 3-4)

Before exposing some ideological underpinnings of the discipline, Billig (2018) appeals to the Frankfurt School of thought as his point of departure to denounce the ideological functions of humour. He writes:

According to Herbert Marcuse [1978], 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.” This applies to laughter and humour. In the false society of the culture industry, wrote Adorno and Horkheimer [Horkheimer & Adorno 1979] 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.

(Billig 2018: 3)

I find it hard to refute the discursive functions and ideological positioning of disciplines and academic endeavours and deny the impact of the regimes of truth. However, I am not entirely persuaded by an outright dismissal of the potential functions of humour in capitalist societies. I believe conflating the status of positive psychology and the impact of humour is not justified. Further, considering the wide range of humour, including acerbic and indignant types, might present less obsequious affordances. Accordingly, I will revisit Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno to argue that humour can also have potentially liberating impacts. It can offer an empowering strategy for subjects in workplace.

## **2.1. Herbert Marcuse**

Marcuse is concerned about the tendency of established reality in general—rather than humour in particular—to contain and co-opt alternatives and digression. In fact, humour can function as a form of the countermeasure he proposes. In “A Note on Dialectic,” Marcuse (2014) complains that the established reality integrates criticism, resistance, and subversion, thus it effectively perpetuates itself. Through defining progress as a quantitative concept, it also defers the realisation of qualitative progress that includes freedom. He writes:

The established reality seems promising and productive enough to repel or absorb all alternatives. Thus acceptance—and even affirmation—of this reality appears to be the only reasonable methodological principle. Moreover, it precludes neither criticism nor change; on the contrary, insistence on the dynamic character of the status quo, on its constant “revolutions,” is one of the strongest props for this attitude. Yet this dynamic seems to operate endlessly within the same framework of life: streamlining rather than abolishing the domination of man, both by man and by the products of his labour. Progress becomes quantitative and tends to delay indefinitely the turn from quantity to quality—that is, the emergence of new modes of existence with new forms of reason and freedom.

(Marcuse 2018: 92-93)

To dismantle this, Marcuse proposes the notion of dialectical thought that “invalidates the *a priori* opposition of value and fact by understanding all facts as stages of a single process” (Marcuse 2018: 93). The driving power behind dialectical thought is negative thinking. Dialectical thought seems to lead the way toward freedom as it makes it possible for one to distance oneself from established reality and external conditions.

Humour shares and can facilitate the quintessence of dialectical thought in that it also distances and defamiliarises. It tends to distance its audience from its object (i.e. the butt of the joke or the target of criticism) in order to facilitate disinterested judgment on the part of the audience. Such estrangement also creates a sense of security arising from detachment. Most people feel more comfortable when they laugh at others than when they are being laughed at. To put it in other words, this temporal, social, spatial or physical, and/or hypothetical distance

(McGraw et al. 2014) is similar to what Bertolt Brecht (2014) called *Verfremdungseffekt*, i.e., distancing, alienation, or estrangement effect. Humorous distance can defamiliarise the established reality, hence facilitate dialectical negative thought.

This, however, does not mean that humour is bound to be liberating. In his reading of Hegel, Marcuse challenges the very notion of freedom, as well. For him, freedom itself is negative:

Freedom is the innermost dynamic of existence, and the very process of existence in an unfree world is “the continuous negation of that which threatens to deny (*aufheben*) freedom.” Thus freedom is essentially negative: existence is both alienation and the process by which the subject comes to itself in comprehending and mastering alienation. For the history of mankind, this means attainment of a “state of the world” in which the individual persists in inseparable harmony with the whole, and in which the conditions and relations of his world “possess no essential objectivity independent of the individual.” As to the prospect of attaining such a state, Hegel was pessimistic: the element of reconciliation with the established state of affairs, so strong in his work, seems to a great extent due to this pessimism—or, if one prefers, this realism. Freedom is relegated to the realm of pure thought, to the Absolute Idea. Idealism by default: Hegel shares this fate with the main philosophical tradition.

(Marcuse 2018: 94)

This is what Billig (2018) seems to ignore in that he maintains that humour simply guarantees conformity and lacks any liberating potentials. Although he builds his argument on Marcuse, he does not mention that his Hegelian approach inevitably relegates freedom to the world of thought and even that in negative terms. Freedom seems to exclusively belong to the realm of “Absolute Ideal.” In this sense, neither humour nor anything else can lead to genuine liberation in the socio-political sphere. Thus, the function of negative thinking is not only to destabilise common sense and undermine confidence in power and language but also to “demonstrate that unfreedom is so much at the core of things that the development of their internal contradictions leads necessarily to qualitative change: the explosion and catastrophe of the established state of affairs” (Marcuse 2018: 94). Even the seemingly liberating dialectical thought and negative thinking cannot break this unfreedom, let alone humour.

Marcuse, nonetheless, seeks to find a solution in avant-garde literature. For him, the avant-garde movement strives

to break the power of facts over the word, and to speak a language which is not the language of those who establish, enforce and benefit from the facts. As the power of the given facts tends to become totalitarian, to absorb all opposition and to define the entire universe of discourse, the effort to speak the language of contradiction appears increasingly irrational, obscure, artificial.

(Marcuse 2018: 94-95)

Marcuse does not turn to positive psychology or the individual psyche for the purpose of striving toward freedom. Rather, he turns to language, to an alternative discourse that evades conventional rationality, cherishes contradictions, obscurity, and artificiality. Although Marcuse never mentions humour here, these are the qualities that humour also shares with avant-garde literature. In fact, avant-garde literature frequently resorts to (dark) humour, satire, and irony, among others, in order to create the detachment that Marcuse also seeks.

Despite his reconciliatory attempt, Marcuse concludes on the same rather resigned note that he strikes when introducing dialectical thought and negative thinking. Dialectical logic remains critical and liberatory only in the domain of the ideal:

Dialectical logic is critical logic: it reveals modes and contents of thought which transcend the codified pattern of use and validation. Dialectical thought does not invent these contents; they have

accrued to the notions in the long tradition of thought and action. Dialectical analysis merely assembles and reactivates them; it recovers tabooed meanings and thus appears almost as a return, or rather a conscious liberation, of the repressed! Since the established universe of discourse is that of an unfree world, dialectical thought is necessarily destructive, and whatever liberation it may bring is a liberation in thought, in theory. However, the divorce of thought from action, of theory from practice, is itself part of the unfree world. No thought and no theory can undo it; but theory may help to prepare the ground for their possible reunion, and the ability of thought to develop a logic and language of contradiction is a prerequisite for this task.

(Marcuse 2018: 96)

The world, therefore, is unfree, and liberation is in thought rather than in action. We need a language of contradiction to translate this thought into action, and humour and satire use such a language of contradiction. If we decide to subscribe to Marcuse in his short essay, humour, like anything, can hardly liberate us from the established reality of capitalism except maybe in thought. At the same time, due to its contradictory nature and unconventional rationality, humour can come very close to breaking the established order and hegemonic reality.

## **2.2. Erich Fromm**

In the previous section, I tried to show that Marcuse does not argue that the use of humour is ineluctably compliant. Actually, his notion of negative thinking implies liberating paths for humour as they both rely on challenging presumed values. This, however, does not necessarily bridge the fissure between thought and action about which he is concerned. Erich Fromm raises similar concerns about the slip between theory and praxis but does not dwell on it. His critique is more compelling and detailed as it is sustained through a much longer work as compared to Marcuse's rather brief introductory note. Similar to Marcuse, Fromm (1956) complains that it is the external reality that determines all aspects of life for social subjects. This is primarily the result of subjects losing their sense of unique individuality. Everything we do, even our personal feelings, are prescribed and regulated by organisations. Tolerance is a laudable characteristic in open-minded people and liberal structures, yet organisations do not promote tolerance primarily due to its intrinsic value but rather because it facilitates efficiency through helping workers get along with each other, while reducing potential frictions. This will make it much easier for the system to be regulated and for the status quo to be upheld. Likewise, organisations tend to prefabricate and routinise other aspects of life, including entertainment. Fromm complains that

[i]n contemporary capitalistic society the meaning of equality has been transformed. By equality one refers to the equality of automatons; of men who have lost their individuality. *Equality today means "sameness" rather than "oneness."* It is the sameness of abstractions, of the men who work in the same jobs, who have the same amusements, who read the same newspapers, who have the same feelings and the same ideas.

(p. 15, original italics)

Similar to Marcuse, the solution that Fromm (1956) proposes requires *creative activity* as one way of attaining union where the creating individual unites herself with her creation. Unfortunately, though, this is not true for all productions. Creative activity can lead to union only when the individual plans, creates, and witnesses the results of her efforts. In a capitalist system, however, "[t]he worker becomes an appendix to the machine or to the bureaucratic organisation. He has ceased to be he—hence no union takes place beyond that of conformity" (p. 17). This alienation is not confined to organisational contexts; rather, it is the quintessence of capitalism. Concentration of capital, large corporations, and the division of (dispensable) labour require a new organisation where social subjects should lose their individuality:

Modern capitalism needs men who co-operate smoothly and in large numbers; who want to consume more and more; and whose tastes are standardised and can be easily influenced and anticipated. It needs men who feel free and independent, not subject to any authority or principle or conscience—yet willing to be commanded, to do what is expected of them, to fit into the social machine without friction; who can be guided without force, led without leaders, prompted without aim—except the one to make good, to be on the move, to function, to go ahead.

(p. 85)

In other words, human beings are alienated. An individual is alienated from herself, from her fellow human beings, and from nature. This is where a scepticism regarding the use of humour akin to that of Frankfurt School Marxists lurks in Fromm's (1956) work:

He [i.e. the individual] has been transformed into a commodity, experiences his life forces as an investment which must bring him the maximum profit obtainable under existing market conditions. Human relations are essentially those of alienated automatons, each basing his security on staying close to the herd, and not being different in thought, feeling or action. While everybody tries to be as close as possible to the rest, everybody remains utterly alone, pervaded by the deep sense of insecurity, anxiety and guilt which always results when human separateness cannot be overcome. Our civilisation offers many palliatives which help people to be consciously unaware of this aloneness: first of all the strict routine of bureaucratised, mechanical work, which helps people to remain unaware of their most fundamental human desires, of the longing for transcendence and unity. Inasmuch as the routine alone does not succeed in this, man overcomes his unconscious despair by the routine of amusement, the passive consumption of sounds and sights offered by the amusement industry; furthermore by the satisfaction of buying ever new things, and soon exchanging them for others.

(p. 86)

I am not going to try to refute this sceptical view of amusement and by implication humour. What I am trying to suggest is that though occasionally valid,<sup>1</sup> such scepticism should not prematurely deprive radical and progressive thought from using humour and satire as potential strategies.

Established reality imposes unfreedom and deprives social subjects of their individualities. It frequently excludes liberating dialectical thought and negative thinking. Humour can distance us from the established reality, shake us out of the numbness caused by total immersion in the system, raise awareness, demand judgement, and encourage change. In his *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique* [*Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*], Henri Bergson (1917) postulates that laughter is the result of an organic being behaving like an automaton—the situation that Marcuse and Fromm seem to be complaining about. Such laughter, I argue, can challenge and change our perception and endorsement of the established reality. Through briefly discussing a movie, a late-night show, and a poem later in this essay, I will try to convey how these creative works use humour, irony, and satire to depict and censure the alienating and dehumanising nature of capitalist organisations and call for change.

### **2.3. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno**

Horkheimer & Adorno's (2006) concerns are very close to those of Fromm. Taking late capitalism and mechanisation of labour as their points of departure, they contend that the grip of mechanisation is so strong on the lives of workers that it determines their leisure as well. In this situation, amusement should cost no effort nor require any mental capacity on the part of its recipient. Rather it functions along the lines of familiar, well-established, and worn-out associations. Entertainment simply prescribes reactions while excluding mental effort on the

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<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to fully agree with Fromm in the entirety of his critique, of course.



part of the receiver, which inevitably excluding logical connections. Consequently, the resulting fragmented products presume meaninglessness to be acceptable as the norm.

Such a mechanical reproduction of beauty precludes aesthetic experience. This is what Horkheimer & Adorno (2006: 54) call “the triumph over beauty”. Consequently, the “malicious pleasure” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2006: 54) of humour substitutes aesthetic pleasure. They believe that laughter starts at the moment when a threat ceases to exist (cf. Morreall 2009). For them, laughter “indicates a release, whether from physical danger or from the grip of logic. Reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from power; *wrong* laughter copes with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it. It echoes the inescapability of power” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2006: 54, my emphasis). In a situation when laughter is a medicine prescribed by the entertainment industry to blunt our senses, it becomes an antisocial practice of exclusion and an antithesis to happiness:

Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness [...]. In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society’s worthless totality. Laughter about something is always laughter at it, and the vital force which, according to Bergson, bursts through rigidity in laughter is, in truth, the irruption of barbarity, the self-assertion which, in convivial settings, dares to celebrate its liberation from scruple. The collective of those who laugh parodies humanity. They are monads, each abandoning himself to the pleasure – at the expense of all others and with the majority in support – of being ready to shrink from nothing. Their harmony presents a caricature of solidarity. What is infernal about wrong laughter is that it compellingly parodies what is best, reconciliation. (Horkheimer & Adorno 2006: 54)

Although they are not ambivalent in their elitist rebuttal of wrong laughter, Horkheimer & Adorno do not necessarily condemn mirth. Joy has a different meaning and origin for them; it is “austere: *res severa verum gaudium*” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2006: 54, original italics). Joy does not exclude pain; it “is present in ecstasy no less than in asceticism” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2006: 54). Yet, the cultural industry simply denies pain and replaces it with laughter:

Its supreme law is that its consumers shall at no price be given what they desire: and in that very deprivation they must take their laughing satisfaction. In each performance of the culture industry the permanent denial imposed by civilisation is once more inflicted on and unmistakably demonstrated to its victims. To offer them something and to withhold it is one and the same. (Horkheimer & Adorno 2006: 54-55)

Horkheimer & Adorno, therefore, are deeply concerned about humour being co-opted. They associate it with deprivation, denial, and eventually the inescapability of power. Entertainment (and sexual pleasure) merely create an illusion of happiness by offering something that never takes place.<sup>2</sup> Besides, laughter for them is always malicious, tendentious, it is always at the expense of others. Horkheimer & Adorno are concerned about the role of laughter in hegemony and the way subjects identify with the power that suppresses them (Horkheimer & Adorno 2006: 62). But this is the “wrong laughter” they repudiate. There is also true joy which is austere, acknowledges pain, and does not function based on tantalizing. The true pleasure is serious and acknowledges suffering, like the experience of exclusion as epitomised in the life experience of the tramp protagonist in *Modern Times* (1936; see section 4). Horkheimer & Adorno (2006) are not imprudent in their remarks and arguments. They discern and warn against how the entertainment industry co-opts laughter to consolidate power and reinforce the status quo, yet they never rashly renounce true joy as inevitably acquiescent.

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<sup>2</sup> This is very similar to Lacan’s notion of Real.



### 3. The double-edged sword of humour

My readings of Marcuse, Fromm, Horkheimer and Adorno showed that despite their scepticism, they do not renounce the potentials of humour outright (see also Hietalahti 2017). Due to its distancing effect, potentials in challenging our presuppositions, shunning pleasurable denial, and flexibility in depicting pain, humour can foster dialectical thought and negative thinking and lead to true joy. Humour, therefore, is not inevitably compliant. Despite this, Billig (2018) does not seem to acknowledge this in his dismissal of positive psychology and the use of humour in organisations, although he also draws on the Frankfurt School.

Billig (2018: 3) underscores the economic and ideological implications of positive psychology and its insistence on positive laughter. He associates positive psychology with the “happiness industry” and accuses it of being complicit in managerial practices that primarily aim to serve organisational interests. Yet, he fails to distinguish between creative and critical humour and the dumbing-down effect of fun. This oversight leads to sweeping claims like the following:

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. More generally happiness is on the agenda of governments around the world.

(Billig 2018: 4)<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to attack positive psychology as a discipline and theory and universities as institutions. Billig (2018: 4) maintains that

[p]ositive 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” [...] [that] 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.

Again, I am not denying the complicit position of many, if not all, disciplines or the teaching machine of academia. Nor is it possible to ignore that most, if not all, disciplines and, more generally, systems of education have always had significant ideological functions and served power. Billig also rightly condemns the attitude that a positive outlook is the necessary and sufficient condition for bringing individuals economic success and prosperity. There is a myriad of privileges and disadvantages imposed on individuals that determines their economic performance and bars many from achieving economic prosperity. If we ignore all these external factors over which individuals have too little or no control, individuals will be bound to blame themselves rather than the unjust and dysfunctional system for their difficulties and failures. Propagating unchecked individual responsibility serves a clear ideological purpose in *laissez faire* systems: its internalisation implies that individuals are obliged to fit in the world instead of striving to change it.

Nonetheless, I have already argued that assuming humour to be inevitably complicit in the ideological process of interpellation—to use Louis Althusser’s terminology (1971)—and reducing its diversity and range to a conformist and conforming strategy at the hands of the powerful might miss the point about its potential recalcitrance. But why does Billig see humour

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<sup>3</sup> I for one can testify to the contrary as someone who lived three decades of his life in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

as an irredeemably conformist ideological apparatus and a part of the general toolkit of positive psychology in serving administrators and organisations? He seems to overgeneralise what Horkheimer & Adorno (2006) have termed wrong laughter and disregard the authentic joy they distinguish from it.

In his more extensive work on humour, Billig (2005) does not study the full range of humour and humour-related modes. In focusing on aggressive humour, he practically disregards three of its four types—namely affiliative, self-enhancing, and self-defeating humour—in his contention (see Martin et al. 2003). His main argument is that, “if ridicule is necessary for maintaining social order, then humour will not be intrinsically or essentially rebellious [...]. It may even help maintain the order that it appears to mock” (Billig 2005: 200). Ridicule, however, is not merely a mechanism for maintaining the social order; nor is humour inevitably bound with ridicule.

Billig presumes that codes of social behaviour are generally regulated by shame, so when one deviates from accepted behaviour, one is subject to embarrassment.<sup>4</sup> This embarrassment, he continues, usually seems comic to onlookers; as a result, social subjects are afraid of being laughed at. He concludes that “ridicule has a universal role in the maintenance of order” (Billig 2005: 201-202). In his book, he does not totally denounce the possibility of transgressive or radical humour but warns about equating humour with rebelliousness. This is of course true because the politics of humour are frequently ambivalent. Moreover, humour is not the exclusive property of progressives, radicals, and alternative thinkers (Billig 2005: 209-210).

These, however, are followed by a sharp turn in his argument when he writes: “In the world of late capitalism, the enjoyment of mass-marketed rebellious humour directly aids the economic structures that have produced such enjoyment” (Billig 2005: 212). This is of course true in many occasions, but humour can also function as resistance to help (re-)negotiate and modify power relations in organisations. In addition to being a coping mechanism that might facilitate the endorsement of the status quo, the potentially subversive power of humour can be employed to give voice to the subordinate. The parrhesiastic power of humour, for instance, can facilitate telling the truth to power for the underprivileged (Higgie 2013, 2014, 2017). Through its carnivalesque quality, humour can destabilise and topple power hierarchies (Bakhtin 1984; Bayless 2014; Dentith 1996). Fleming & Sewell (2002: 869), for instance, propose the concept of *švejkism* as “a significant reconstitution of subjectivity in organisations, acting as an alternative to the supine or credulous acceptance of the rhetoric and practice of contemporary management.” In developing this concept, they identify the many ways—namely, scrimshanking, flannelling, equivocal affirmation, practice as performance, an ironical disposition, scepticism and cynicism—through which humour can be employed by employees for the purpose of resistance.

Likewise, Critchley (2006) notes that formalised humour imposed on employees to benefit organisations is itself prone to be informally ridiculed by them. In other words, employees resort to humour in order to cancel the docile functions of official humour. This is because humour can expose the contingencies of power and divest the consolidated power of its aura as a result. Critchley believes that humour can foster what Marcuse (2014) calls negative thinking in that it challenges the accepted reality through estrangement or putting a distance between its audience and their lives. It provides a defamiliarised perspective to our practices and opens new vistas for seeing the world in a different light. It “can help liberate us from the taken-for-granted structures and practices of power that can so easily dominate the seriousness of life” (Critchley 2006: 31). Estrangement is similarly cited as a liberating feature of humour in other studies (Fleming & Sewell 2002; Loacker & Peters 2015). Critchley (2006: 18) concludes that

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<sup>4</sup> In his focus on shame cultures, Billig also ignores guilt and fear cultures.

humour invites us to become philosophical spectators on our own lives; it is a practically enacted theory that might be said to be one of the conditions for taking up a critical position with respect to what passes for everyday life, producing a change in our situation which can be both liberating and elevating.

This has strong implications for bridging the gap between theory and practice that both Marcuse and Fromm complain about.

In the next section, I succinctly investigate three creative works as suggested in the works of Marcuse and Fromm in order to further illustrate the potentials and intricacies of humour in resistance and subversion.

#### **4. Three creative works**

Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) is a comedy that takes alienated individuals and their lives as its main theme. The movie opens with the montage of a large herd of sheep pushed into a sheep pen suddenly cutting into a shot of a large group of workers filing out of a subway station and entering a factory at 6:00 AM. Creating this vertical relationship between the sheep and workers based on their acquiescence establishes a sarcastic metaphor and comments on dehumanising institutional conditions. The protagonist is an unnamed tramp who suffers from physical and psychological damage under inhumane work conditions. He is a part of the larger machine whose operation is overseen by a director who is bored, solving a jigsaw puzzle and reading a newspaper, while watching his employees on CCTV (even in the restroom) and repeatedly asking the section supervisor to speed up the production line even when the workers cannot scratch their armpits, shoo a fly, or sneeze without falling behind its unrelenting speed. This is while the protagonist has to take an hourly leave to visit the restroom. Being a part of the larger machine, the protagonist is no longer capable of organic behaviour and only acts mechanically as an automaton. This is what causes laughter according to Bergson (1917); at the same time, it critically reflects back to the audience the situation in which they are working and living their lives.

Lunch break is the only momentary relief from the repetitive labour, but the efficiency mania does not tolerate even a short break. A salesman pitches an automated feeding machine to the CEO so that the labourers can continue working uninterrupted. The tramp is chosen to test the malfunctioning machine and endure its humiliating abuse. Eventually, he suffers a nervous breakdown due to mounting workplace stress and is taken to a mental institution. Humour, in other words, does not cause wrong laughter; rather, it fully acknowledges pain and suffering. We see the tramp as an individual with an emotional side only when he leaves the plant. On leaving the hospital to start a new life, he is advised to take it easy and avoid excitement, but this is not possible in the hectic, crowded, and loud world outside. Accidentally, he lands in the frontline of a demonstration by a crowd of unemployed labourers who demand liberation and unification and is arrested and incarcerated as he is mistaken to be the communist leader of the strike and protest. Meanwhile, papers report on the demonstrations as "Strike and Riot: Breadlines Broken by Unruly Mob." When he receives the news that he is released due to good demeanour, he pleads to stay in prison longer. Alone, hungry, and unable to find a job, he encounters a girl who has stolen a loaf of bread. To escape the misery of unemployment, he takes blame to go to prison again. This is while we see him repeatedly being treated as an outlaw throughout the movie.

What the tramp undergoes comments on the cruel burden of external reality on his personal life. Likewise, workers are depicted to have lost their sense of individuality and almost all aspects of their lives are determined by the external reality. The alienated worker is an appendix to the machine. Not only does the protagonist behave like an automaton in the opening of the

movie, we also see a “mechanical salesman” trying to sell a machine that feeds labourers while they are working their routine jobs in order to “eliminate the lunch hour.” The film manages to create a critical distance that can challenge the established reality and function as a call for change. This distance defamiliarises the status quo and encourages what Marcuse (2014) calls dialectical thought. Above all, *Modern Times* is a great example of austere humour that does not deny pain in order to blunt our senses; it largely eschews reconciled laughter that results from excluding mental effort on the part of the audience. Chaplin’s use of ambivalence is particularly effective in stimulating this cognitive demand, not the least because, “as a Hollywood commercial film, *Modern Times* epitomises the complementary relationship between production and consumption both as a critique of technological culture and a commodity produced by it” (Howe 2013: 48). Appealing to Horkheimer & Adorno (1997), Howe (2013) further contends that

Chaplin’s film challenges [...] sweeping generalisation that the culture industry “perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises [...]; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997, 139). To the contrary, the reflexivity of production and consumption that *Modern Times* employs asks the audience to recognise its critical engagement with mechanised society, rather than simply offering “[a] commendation of the depressing everyday world it sought to escape” (139).

(Howe 2013: 60)

W. H. Auden (2006) pays an ironic tribute to a similarly dehumanised social subject in his poem “The Unknown Citizen.” The State erects a marble monument to commemorate “*JS/07 M 378*.” Loss of individuality runs so deep that the subject is even denied a proper name: a code defines *its* function in the fabric of society. The very fact that a monument is erected to mark an obscure entity clearly hints that the State actually cherishes such obscurity. *JS/07 M 378* is celebrated because the Bureau of Statistics has not filed any complaints against him, because he served the “Greater Community,” because “He worked in a factory and never got fired, / But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc. / Yet he wasn’t a scab or odd in his views [...]” The press is satisfied with him since he bought a paper every day and “his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.” This attempt at defamiliarising the saturated workings of capitalism is a comment on Fromm’s (1956) complaint about the standardisation of consumer tastes.

State researchers are also convinced “That he held the proper opinions for the time of year; / When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.” In other words, the State is commemorating an entity that lacked even the slightest trace of individuality and autonomy; one who fully conformed to policies, norms, and ideological requirements. In this context, questions such as “Was he free? Was he happy?” are only “absurd.” Auden, therefore, uses irony and humour to defamiliarise and criticise the degrading relationship between individuals and institutions and encourages his readers to reconsider their economic and social functions.

An instance of avant-garde literature, this poem uses the language of contradiction to challenge the notion of freedom and calls for dialectical negative thought à la Marcuse. It uncannily resembles the passage I have earlier quoted from Fromm (1956) in exposing and holding to contempt how capitalism replicates socialised subject-labourers in large numbers to perpetuate consumerism. The system does all it takes to make sure that subjects play by the rule and fit into the social machine without causing any friction. The ultimate objective is to have workers who function, while being led without force and under no authority. The standardisation of taste and expectations ensures that they are easily commanded, while their illusion of autonomy keeps them happy. In other words, citizens are alienated from themselves and their fellow human beings. Auden’s use of irony and sarcasm are austere as demanded by Horkheimer

& Adorno (2006), so instead of blunting our senses, they create a distance between the audience and the dehumanised character and encourage them to revisit their assumptions and even lives.

In both examples, humour, satire, and irony are used as creative ways to foster negative thinking and call for the restoration of autonomous subjectivity. This is of course different from the routine prescriptive ways of using humour in organisations. Creative use does not reduce humour to a strategy for regulating the leader-follower relationship or for buffering stress in employees. It is not conceptualised as a mere communication strategy to maximise profit. Rather, humour is a counteractive strategy for the labourer to see and assess the situation from a distance, to give voice to her demands, and to call for change.

*Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (HBO) goes one step further by using humour and satire to actively promote organised labour and unions in “Union Busting” (2021) after an attempt by Amazon workers in Alabama to unionise failed despite their abysmal working conditions. The episode emphasises that an appeal to personal decisions are not enough to explain why this and similar attempts have been voted down. Oliver clarifies that “you might assume that a union vote is a completely free and fair election. That is an illusion fed by executives like Jeff Bezos,” before moving on to discuss the union busting industry and its strategies. We learn through a leaked video that Amazon has instructed its managers to take immediate action against any sign of unionising, which includes “use of words associated with unions or union-led movements like ‘living wage’.” The episode further exposes legal loopholes and many union busting strategies including what Amazon did to harass its workers and stoke fear against voting for unionising. In doing so, the show actively advocates organising labour and changing laws to rebalance the playing field. In other words, humour is not a tool exclusive to leaders and executives. It can also be used by the underdog to expose the power dynamics, speak truth to power, communicate the necessity of resistance, and call for change.

This, however, is a fascinatingly complicated case that requires a more nuanced approach as it can reflect the uncertainties about the liberating or acquiescent consequences of humour in workplace. The content of this episode focuses on labour and unions, but simply because the content supports proletarian causes does not necessarily make it subversive. The primary audience of John Oliver’s show tend to be well-educated. It is sophisticated comedy aimed at upper-middle class American liberals who tend to hold university degrees. Also operative is that Oliver is British-American, and there remains a sense of inferiority among Americans to the more cultured British. Oliver, therefore, speaks not only as an outsider to the American system but also speaks down to it.

This episode is thereby an instance of comedy whose content is supportive of proletarian causes, but might also be part of the culture machine designed to amuse and inform the petit bourgeois. This is probably why John Oliver explicitly addresses this demographic audience in saying “and if by some chance, you’re a corporate executive who is made it this far into the show, first I’m almost impressed that you are still here.” In other words, this episode illustrates my argument on the double-edged nature of humour and its stakes of being co-opted in capitalist societies. While carrying a seemingly subversive intent, there is simultaneously an element of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* that plays right into Billig’s (2018) argument. One might question if it is really subversive: Is it liberal in trying to nibble around the edges, improving the structure but not attacking the structure? Is the purpose of John Oliver to make those who benefit most from the structure to feel better? The audience might be supporting subversive causes by laughing along with seemingly subversive comedy, but in doing so they might also declare their allegiance to change without having to actually work for change and thereby safeguarding their privileged position.

Discussing the legal subtleties in understandable language, exposing union busting strategies and anti-union consultants that benefit from capitalising on them, and proposing solutions, one might argue, seem to be genuine reformative attempts. The episode advocates

H.R.842 - Protecting the Right to Organise Act of 2021 that was introduced to the House on 02/04/2021 to protect the rights of workers. Though the act was “Received in the Senate and Read twice and referred to the Committee on Health, Education, Labour, and Pensions” on 03/11/2021, it is not yet passed into law after one year. So, one might conclude that these reformative attempts are not geared toward subverting the system; rather, they strive to strike a new balance in labour relations that secure the perpetuity of capitalism and Amazon as its epitome. At the same time, one should be wary that resistance is not only limited to Fordist clichés. There does not seem to be enough evidence as of yet to decide whether John Oliver’s comedy genuinely makes a difference or simply reinforces the status quo. While it seems to provide liberation in thought (rather than in action), it is at the same time eerily close to reconciled laughter in that “[i]t echoes the inescapability of power” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2006: 54).

## **5. Concluding remarks**

In discussing Billig’s (2018) concerns about the use of humour, I explicated one reason why some critics are extremely suspicious of humour as reinforcing the status quo and consolidating power. Billig (2018: 7) is sceptical about the “conservative, disciplinary force of humour” which, he believes, results from its shaming power. Although shaming is indeed among the functions of humour, it does not fully represent what humour is capable of. Humour is ambivalent and contradictory, not only in its nature but also in the myriad of its functions. While it can reinforce the status quo and is susceptible to co-option by power, it can also be employed for vocalising dissent and resistance. It can other and exclude social subjects, and, at the same time, it can be inclusive and create a sense of identity and community. As humour can be used by the underdog to fight back power, it seems premature to deprive subaltern subjects from one of their potential strategies by arguing that all humour can do is to serve capitalist ideology and power. In other words, concentrating on the drawbacks of positive psychology and conflating them with humour risks the mystification of the potentially regenerating impacts of humour as even its shaming power can be channelled against authority. Humour is not inevitably doomed to serve the powerful and maintain the social order; it can be a strategy for negotiating and exercising power. It is not the exclusive property of certain social, economic, or political communities; nor is it always controlled from the top. This is what Bakhtin has noticed as the liberating and regenerative potentials of (grotesque) laughter in his *Rabelais and His World* (1984) when writing in a suppressive historical milieu. Many people who live under repressive regimes share this experience. Humour can give voice to the subaltern and peripheral; it can even be a strategy for resistance and subversion (Holms 2017; Eagleton 2019; Gibson 2019; Karmer 2020).

Collinson (1994) warns against the tendency to exclusively polarise the functions of humour in writing that “[r]esistance frequently contains elements of consent and consent often incorporates aspects of resistance” (Collinson 1994: 29). Besides, different forms of power require different strategies for resistance (Fleming & Sewell 2002: 870). Some critics, however, neglect

this complexity and the defensiveness, fragility and precariousness that frequently characterises collective practices. In searching for ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ forms of resistance, they have also tended to deny or understate the possible organisational significance and effects of individual forms of resistance

(Collinson 1994: 55)



While some forms of (official) humour can generate stability and compliance, other forms of workplace humour can have destabilising, disruptive, and recalcitrant effects. It is rather easy for managers and humour consultants to inadvertently slip into subversive humour due to its evasive and malleable nature. Besides, even officially sanctified humour can be subject to clandestine ridicule. In other words, even in the case of effective stabilising humour, the possibility of further subversive ridicule cannot be ruled out. Therefore, managerial attempts in employing humour to regulate and suppress digression and defiance can prove to be counterproductive in the end. Thus, humour can indeed be a liberating and empowering strategy for social subjects. The plethora of the functions it can perform in this process and the contexts and conditions for their efficacy remain to be further explored (see Holmes 2000; Marra 2007; Bos & t'Hart 2008; Westwood 2004; Westwood & Johnston 2012).

I find myself sympathetic to Billig when he writes that

[t]hose 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 that involves overlooking a series of existing contradictions. This is where the methodology of self-report questionnaires can be ideologically revealing.

(Billig 2018: 9)

Nonetheless, I also believe we should not prematurely deprive ourselves of the potentials of any empowering and reactionary strategy including humour. Humour and satire can facilitate social change. They can intervene in the exercise of power by providing the voiceless with a means of articulation in capitalist regimes of power. They can encourage subjects to adopt more critical attitudes through estrangement. They can be a form of scepticism, which implies a greater cognitive capacity to identify and deal with the contradictions of reality. They can be employed to respond to and thwart the managerial use of humour by employees. The subordinate and underprivileged, therefore, can resort to humour to exercise power and negotiate their share of it. As humour and satire are among the few empowering and liberating strategies available to the subaltern, it is not wise to ignore their potentials outright.

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