Seriously Serious Political Spaces of Humor

Juha Ridanpää[1]

Department of Geography
University of Oulu
juha.ridanpaa@oulu.fi

It is common that the issues discussed in critical political geography, as well as the parlance used in such discussion, are inherently serious. Sensitive and volatile matters require either delicate or critical tone of voice. It is understandable that topics like sexism, racism or any neglect of human rights commonly discussed in critical political geography are far too serious and explosive matters to be laughed at. On the other hand, for 'normal people' humor, and popular culture in general (Sharp, 1996; Power and Crampton, 2005, Dittmer, 2005; Dodds, 2007), often function as a lens through which the world and its politically serious nature become conceived. Cartoons in newspapers and jokes on TV are commonplace practices through which the political world becomes dissected and criticized, without the requisite seriousness. At the same time humor has become an integral aspect of the recent 'entertainmentalization' of politics (Kolehmainen, 2006). All humor, even laughter, is somewhat socially and politically embedded (Macpherson, 2008). In addition to the simple act of giggling or mocking, as a practice humor also involves various socio-political nuances and purposes. Or put another way, it has been argued that social life is dependent on the practices of ridicule (Billig, 2005, 201-202).

Although it has been argued that humor is by nature a situated speech activity (Davies, 2003), in geographical research relatively few studies have employed humor as an explicit object or perspective of research. Conversely, humor has been widely studied as a socio-cultural phenomenon in psychology (e.g. Martin, 2007), psychotherapy (e.g. Witztum et al. 1999), neurology (e.g. Ramachandran, 1998),

and education (e.g. Flowers, 2001), for example. One bright spot still is that, in the few geographical studies that address humor, the emphasis has relatively often been on the social or political dimensions and importance of humor. For instance, how using humor as a tool in geography classrooms can help raise students' consciousness of social and political issues (e.g. Alderman and Popke, 2002), how humor has been utilized in the processes of political protest over urban citizenship (Epstein and Iveson, 2009), how literary humor can function as a means for contesting regional stereotypes (Ridanpää, 2007, 2010), and how humor has often functioned as an impetus for political debates and serious conflicts (Kuus, 2008; Ridanpää, 2009; Hammett, 2011; Purcell et al., 2010). Humor occupies several roles and functions within our political world and, although these issues may even sound trivial to many people, there are several reasons why humor should be taken seriously and studied more respectably. At the same time, studying humor helps us to understand how wide and deep the scope and influences of political institutions and practices extend.

One common feature of the few studies focusing on the relationships of space, politics and humor is that they all underline the serious nature of humor (additionally see Dodds and Kirby, 2013). Although humor can offer an alternative lens through which to perceive the political world, it can also function as a stimulus for political processes which may have far more serious consequences. One of the most drastic reminders of this is the Danish Muhammad cartoon controversy. Twelve ostensibly 'innocent' cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad were published in *Jyllands-Posten*, which turned into an international political crisis with several highly serious consequences such as mass demonstrations and torching of embassies (Bonde, 2007; Klausen, 2009; Ridanpää, 2009). On the other hand, in the Western media the angry reactions of the Islamic world, and Muslims' 'incapability' of handling humor, were made to appear not only drastically serious but also somehow amusing and ironic, regardless of the unquestionably serious nature of the controversy (Ridanpää, 2012).

In the field of political geography there are several research subfields in which humor studies can be applied. In postcolonial approaches there has long been a critical debate over how different manifestations of otherness become constituted and legitimized through ostensibly 'innocent' entertainment practices within various culture sectors. Humor is generally understood as being based on stereotypes and social and cultural processes in which self-identities are constructed and sustained through simplified categorical distinctions between the 'self' and the 'other' (Ridanpää, 2007, 2010). It has been pointed out how humor functions as a means to alleviate the fear of the unknown (Vucetit, 2004), but also, how it represents a socio-cultural practice for humiliating, 'othering', sexism and racism (e.g. Ehrlich, 1979; Dundes, 1987, Billig, 2001). Humor directed at ethnic minorities has generally been considered to operate as a socio-cultural tool through which hegemonic national narratives are maintained. The motive for making fun of

ethnic minorities or religious groups is ultimately a socio-political one and commonly understood as a socially subjugating practice (cf. Perks, 2010).

The first mistake is to conceive humor as being a sort of antidote to seriousness (cf. Palmer, 1994). In the case of mocking ethnic minorities, for example, the categorical difference between the frames of 'fun' and 'serious' becomes fuzzy. Auschwitz jokes, which Dundes (1987) has termed sick folklore, is a drastic example of how the difference between 'fun' and 'serious' may sometimes cease to exist. The it-was-just-a-joke remark is used to justify racism and turns into a political meta-discourse, entailing both a claim of doing something that is permissible as well as a denial of doing something criticizable—the antithesis of joking (Billig, 2001, 269-270). In the case of racist jokes, humor is not only serious but, as Billig (2001, 286-287) poignantly points out, may also turn into a conscious act of hatred:

> [T]he extreme racist can be brave without acting. They can be murderers in their imagination. There is no need for conscience: these are jokes and the targets deserve their fate. The contradiction between the two justifications does not matter. Thus, racists are invited to join the fun of the lynch mob without moving from their computer. They can have blood on their hands, but the blood will not drip messily onto the keyboards. Far from saying themselves that it is only a joke, they can assert that this is not just a joke. And if they do say this, then they will, at last, have said something that is accurate.

As Kuusisto-Arponen argues in this collection, the processes of silencing are always political. In a similar fashion humor often becomes political via the processes of breaking the silence, no matter how 'sick' or 'serious' the content of the humor may be. This connects to Sigmund Freud's (1905/2002) classic argument about how humor contains an internal psychological means for breaking taboos. Irony especially is a linguistic practice, which is continuously used in the media as a performative means for political criticism. Katharina Barbe (1995, 11, 111-129) has persuasively highlighted that, when compared to lies, it becomes clear how irony 'attempts' to be found out and transparent, not concealed, although she still emphasized that the political criticism inherent in humor is often inconspicuous and not meant as obvious to all participants. In political systems where overt criticism is not allowed, ironic humor is often used not to silence, but to 'hide' underlying political intentions (Barbe, 1995, 94). Moreover, when using humor, various degrees of being 'politically correct' exist (see Dodds and Kirby, 2013). As the still-ongoing Muhammad cartoon crisis has demonstrated, the political nature of correctness, tolerance and sensitivity may sometimes extend to drastic proportions. However, in the Western world the absolute value of breaking the silence, revealing the hidden, is a mundane part of people's lives, although its political nature usually goes unnoticed.

As seen from the Muhammad cartoon episode, humor can be a politically dangerous tool and, throughout history, making fun of people has been used as a sort of softened form of 'othering'. Humor is a matter of power-relations, a mutual but nonetheless 'distorted' relationship between a joking subject and a subjected subject, that is, 'a victim'. This touches on the topic discussed by Kallio: as important as it is to focus on the content of laughter, it is equally important to dissect the relationship of the subject *who* is laughing and the one at *whom* the laughter is directed. In addition laughter, as such, is an active performative subject in the context of the social and political processes in which power-relations become negotiated, and thus a political subject and a subject of politicization. In the case of irony, the key question is whether its net effect is affirmative or destructive, as a powerful tool against dominant authorities or as negator of dissenting voices—the latter an argument often held by those who have been on the receiving end of 'ironic attack'. Irony rooted in ethnic stereotypes, for instance, contains a critical message directed at dominant authorities, while from the perspective of the ethnic group in question the deconstructive effect is, for understandable reasons, hard to notice (Hutcheon, 1994, 27).

That said, as humor often entails the intention of breaking the silence—revealing the hidden—it thereby possesses great potential as a socially emancipatory practice. The taboo-breaking function of humor has its relieving aspect which includes a contestation of the 'taken-for-granted' assumptions about the world (Dodds and Kirby, 2013). Irony is commonly perceived as a rhetoric 'weapon' for insulting others, as a tool for 'othering' people, but ironic figures of speech are also used as devices through which dominant discourses, i.e. 'normal', hegemonic ways of framing events, can be contested (El Rafaie, 2005; Ridanpää, 2010). It is easily forgotten that for the 'othered' people, irony can actually be a means through which the oppressors and the oppressive system can be criticized, punishment avoided, solidarity with others achieved, emancipatory relief experienced and power relations discussed (Barbe, 1995, 96; cf. Kuus, 2008). It is important to emphasize how humor contains a productive power in terms of constituting, reflecting on, epitomizing and reinforcing ethnic, national, gendered and regional identities (Vucetit, 2004). Much debate has recently occurred on how humor functions as a psychological coping strategy in people's everyday lives (e.g. Macpherson, 2008). As in the case of Israeli Holocaust commemoration, humor can function as a tool with which traumatic pasts can be remembered and dealt with (Zandberg, 2006). This raises an alluring question about whether there exists also an inherent opportunity to utilize humor in political geography, not just as a research topic but as a rhetoric device, in order to invoke critical as well as constructive discussion over various social and political problems in a new, fresh fashion. Or as Gibbs (2002, 152) puts it, as a fine method to adjust to all complex circumstances:

> One important message is that irony is not an optional mode of thought
> that can easily be dispensed with in times of crisis and personal

conflict. Irony is among our best methods for immediately and unconsciously adjusting to complex circumstances. Embracing irony allows us to cope with the disparities we experience and express something about the inchoateness of the human condition. Perhaps ironically, irony may be the best verbal form for expressing what we most earnestly believe.

In summary, it is thereby worthwhile to ask what has made humor a non-essential issue for critical political geography, a social practice not to be taken 'seriously'? Humor is, among other things, a perspective from which to perceive the political world and everyday politics, a forum in which they can be discussed, a stimulus for political processes as well as a tool for social subordination and emancipation. Conceptual framings of 'critical', 'political' and 'serious' should not exclude practices of humor, but rather the opposite. Humor should thus be taken seriously as a relevant research topic for critical political geography.

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