

Book review

Sørensen, Majken (2016). *Humour in Political Activism: Creative Nonviolent Resistance*. Palgrave Macmillan.

In light of the increasing presence of humorous formats in young oppositional groups' political activism, Majken Jul Sørensen set out to define the role of humour in non-aggressive activism, its ability to facilitate resistance to dominant discourses and the powerful, and to oppose suppression and marginalisation. She does so in her remarkable book *Humour in Political Activism: Creative Nonviolent Resistance*. Its very opening example draws the reader into the book and at the same time possibly demonstrates the most important application of humour: deflating the opposition.

With her book, Sørensen defies a long line of researchers who have doubted the political impact of humour (Tsakona & Popa 2011). Her concrete examples demonstrate a range of qualities that allow humour to have an impact, break into set discourses and destabilise authority. She demonstrates that humour, especially in light of its ambiguity, is a fitting means to question old assumptions and try out new ideas. In the book's **first**, introductory **chapter**, the author asserts that humour used as a strategy of discursive guerilla war cannot be ignored. Discursive guerilla war does not oppose a given authority, but aims to undermine dominant, even infiltrating, ideas – Bourdieu's (1990) *habitus*; it must ask why people obey. Mere knowledge, truth and reason cannot fracture such blind, internalised obedience. Non-violent resistance, however, can enter the spirit and the heart with a creativity that elicits emotions by means of surprise. Hence, Sørensen demonstrates that even where real change is not immediately apparent, humorous political stunts can break up dominant discourses with poignant attacks.

The **second chapter**, therefore, asks not whether humour can create social change but rather which role it can play under which conditions. Sørensen maintains that the complexity and multidimensional nature of power structures must be met by multifaceted resistance: power and resistance shape and elicit each other in confrontation. Humour provokes mental flexibility, necessary for both its reception and production. Humour thinks in different directions at the same time, and can therefore simultaneously maintain old and new insights.

The author uses theatre metaphors to describe what she calls *humorous political stunts* (which are fundamentally different from traditional mediums of humour as a political weapon) in order to provide a better understanding of unscripted encounters between performers and the public or political agents. These confrontations mark the primary moment that initiates change. Creative activist stunts literally turn political issues into a "play of politics" (p. 13), where, like in theatre, the course and outcome are materially affected by the questions of "who plays, on what terms, by whose rules and on whose playing field" (p. 14); humorous activism can be analysed by theatre's classic parameters of stage, actors, audiences and timing.

In the **third chapter**, Sørensen establishes five different types of humorous stunts. She describes these through ten international examples of activist challenges to political and social issues. The distinction between these types is not always apparent; the focus is placed on

differences in method. The examples provided might inspire activists and can even be used as a manual and individually adapted.

A summarising table (p. 62-63) establishes the types of the humorous political stunts examined: supportive, corrective, naive, absurd or provocative. Their classification is based on the positioning of the performers in relation to dominant discourses, the theatre metaphor, the statement to the powerful, the statement to the audience, and, finally, the relation to non-humorous protests.

The choice of a given kind of humorous stunt is guided by the actual power play and its potential dangers as well as the aim of the critique and therefore the decision whether protest is to be open, hidden, questioning, aggressive or ridiculing. The incongruities that amuse the audience must be directly related to the power relations and open a dialogue with the authorities. The potential success of a humorous stunt is inscribed at the very moment the public notices or decides that the comic stunt is a political protest. The uncertainty of this moment entails openness for new information and perspectives. Emotions such as doubt, uncertainty, disruption, consternation or even fear are evoked, creating the decisive difference to conventional protests, which often merely reinforce existing opinions. Humorous creativity provides a cognitive detour that interrupts a psychological circuit. Unpredictable, hidden, humorous activism is a promising alternative in political circumstances that do not permit open criticism.

The **fourth chapter** takes a closer look at the Swedish anti-military network Ofog at hand of activist interviews, analysing how humour can facilitate outreach and mobilisation and also create and sustain a culture of resistance. She concludes that comic stunts are not only quick to gain the attention of mainstream media, but can also make direct connection with the audience, the general public. Making people laugh establishes openness that surpasses the closed mindset of anger. The comic activists are perceived as distanced from themselves, which helps in conveying their message. Humour can playfully loosen inter-human boundaries and thereby simplify communication; it can gain attention and be a wake-up call. Revealing absurdities highlights the random nature of habitual patterns and thereby instigates their disruption. Humour's memorable nature means that comedy can elicit a permanent critical approach.

Irony, as a particular subset of humour, possesses an additional quality. The task of solving a puzzle that is not immediately apparent gives the audience a moment of understanding that boosts their self-confidence: they feel clever. However, Sørensen is certain to point out the danger of misunderstanding when using irony, and the fact that irony presupposes basic agreement. The Ofog performers report of a steep learning curve: less successful stunts are retrospectively analysed in order to learn how to use irony in a way that the general public understands it.

The author notes that while the playful element of humour generally mobilises the young in particular, some were in fact repelled by the lack of earnestness. Humour has an apparent potential in maintaining a culture of resistance: it lightens the mood, brings people together and strengthens the sense of community. By creating a distance from negative feelings, it acts as a collective shield against fear, uncertainty and apathy.

"Radical clowning" (p: 97) is a particularly effective form of activism that has been adopted by a range of groups (e.g. the e.g. Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army). "Tactical carnival" (p: 97) and joyful protest go hand in hand with a refusal to accept a militarist point of view. The clown poses as an outsider without allegiance and therefore able to fit anywhere, sporting an attitude that appears particularly suited to creating and maintaining a peaceful culture of resistance. The tactic of clowning carries many uses for non-violent interaction and conciliatory interaction with police and the military. Some activists find it liberating to embody the clown; it helps master the difficulties of maintaining resistance. In

all, “rebel clowning” (p. 98) undeniably contributes to the activists’ internal loyalty, frees energies and sustainably cultivates a joint and active attitude of resistance.

Sørensen describes humour that serves to maintain resistance among the group as “internal” (p. 102), as opposed to external humour directed at the public. Humour that failed to be understood by the public it was addressed to has often eventually served the activists themselves. The fun enjoyed by the activist performers while planning a comic action must be considered a significant factor for sustaining an internal culture of resistance.

In the **fifth chapter**, Sørensen asks how humorous political stunts function in direct relation to the state, and whether they can influence political decision-makers at all. She describes events surrounding the Norwegian group KMV, who instigated political change in the treatment of total conscientious objectors throughout Scandinavia in the 1980s. In this long and controversial process, which bore many defeats for the pacifist anarchists, the use of humour did reveal the absurdity of the laws and systems. This seems to have incited further activists. It appears that legal change was eventually initiated by a combination of humorous and earnest strategies.

Humorous political activism is exposed to a series of dilemmas and risks, which Sørensen explores in the **sixth chapter**. Firstly, activists may undermine the seriousness of their own protest with their endeavours to provoke laughter; humour might ridicule the issue itself. Secondly, humour can always produce misunderstandings. Further problems might arise from mixing humorous and non-humorous aspects of activism. Ethically, ridicule can be perceived as offensive and violent. Finally, there is the risk that cynicism and satire can cause disillusionment rather than encouragement.

Sørensen's **seventh chapter** addresses humorous political stunts within the theory of non-violent action. She sets out from Vinthagen’s (2015) concept of a combination of resistance and construction expressed through four aspects: dialogue facilitation, power breaking, utopian enactment and normative regulation.

Humorous political stunts appeal to the imagination and the human need for spectacle and drama, thereby facilitating communication in particularly complex situations. This benefits the weaker side, because the powerful have less interest in communication that rests on unpredictable ambiguity and implies an uncertain outcome. The greatest potential appears to lie in the temporary and symbolic disruption of the dominant discourse. The revelation of paths to a different future disrupts the legitimacy of convention and shows alternatives to the present discourse. Within greater campaigns and movements, a position that differs from conventional protest in how it formulates resistance can make voices heard faster and more easily. Vinthagen (2015) also appeals to Ghandi’s notion of questioning the normality of violence: this is where humorous political stunts make a contribution. However, this contribution will initiate only a temporary disruption, failing to guarantee the long-term disempowerment of violence.

All in all, Jul Maiken Sørensen has made an important contribution to the debate about the political uses of humour. The complexity of humour calls for a differentiated debate concerning its forms in activism. With its wide and well-structured spectrum of analyses, this book provides a thorough insight into humorous resistance in a range of contexts, power relationships and forms of rule and provides sufficient information to establish the opportunities and risks of concrete humorous stunts in political activism.

Although the second chapter falls short of entirely convincing of the necessity or usefulness of constructing different categories for the division of humorous stunts, and the analyses, especially in this chapter, are at times somewhat too peripatetic, it is worthwhile to persevere with reading this book. Sørensen’s attention to detail goes hand in hand with a clarity that mostly provides explicit demonstrations of why and when humour can be of use in

concrete situations. This makes the book a fitting tool for political activists on the look-out for other forms of resistance.

Sørensen's manifesto-like text is shaped by her philosophical approach and illuminates how humorous activism challenges politics. The protests normally do not interrupt *Realpolitik* as usual: they sustainably question dominant violence and established discourses. The author's awareness of this fact means that she delivers not only an important contribution to the debate about the ethical and moral quality of political humour and its appropriate, good and just use, but also demonstrates the context of these issues with regard to the topic at the heart of each activist intervention.

The author takes a thorough look at the advantages and disadvantages of humorous protest and does not neglect to point out that the decision to use humour as a medium of communication must also be based on a consideration of the activists' potential for aggression. Activists with a peaceful, friendly nature or diplomatic skill may be more successful using traditional forms of protest and communication. Moreover, Sørensen makes it particularly clear that a humorous attack is aimed not only at the opponent, but also involves the public and their opinion, which therefore need to be considered. The author therefore calls upon activists to conduct appropriate research in order to establish which content will remain apparent and understandable in humour: a necessary piece of advice that should be taken to heart.

Although Sørensen concludes that it is difficult to establish whether and where humorous activism has achieved its goals, she clearly demonstrates the exceptional quality of humour as a means of communication. In particular, humorous stunts are well suited to attaining media attention and thereby gaining moral support, inciting a change of opinion or even mobilising a hitherto uncritical population.

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