On the politics of Žižek’s jokes: A critical Lacanian discourse analysis

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Abstract Jokes are indispensable to Slavoj Žižek’s commentaries and theoretical reflexions on politics and culture. However, contrary, or in addition, to their putative radical meaning and their capacity to render clear certain ideological practices, some of these jokes seem to raise serious questions in relation to their politics. The current article will focus on three texts by Žižek, all of which contain a joke or pun, in order to examine the function of these jokes on a microsociological level, that is, in relation to speaker/audience dynamics, as well as exploring the broader politics they advocate and they invite us to embrace. A Lacanian discourse analysis is employed in order to open up these texts and jokes and discuss what is understood as their ideological character and disciplinary function.

Keywords Lacanian discourse analysis · Humour · Laughter · Žižek · Zapatistas · Subcomandante Marcos

Introduction

Jokes, humour, laughter and comedy have been studied and approached from a variety of perspectives, exploring distinctions in context, form, function and in their potential personal and social implications and consequences. In general terms, there are those authors who tend to see generic humour in a positive light, emphasising its therapeutic, relieving and redeeming properties, as well as its politically subversive qualities; its capacity to challenge order and power, and build communities of resistance (e.g. Critchley, 1999, 2002, 2008; Graeber, 2002; Hardt & Negri, 2009; Holloway, 2010). On the other hand, there are those authors and theorists who are more sceptical and critical towards generic humour, focusing instead on the ways it...
functions to strengthen the ruling ideology and perpetuate established hierarchies and subordination in a number of registers and fields, from large-scale politics to the workplace and personal relationships (e.g. Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Holmes, 2000; Billig, 2005; Zupančič, 2008).

Slavoj Žižek is perhaps the most prominent intellectual figure for whom use of jokes seems to be indispensable to the elaboration of his theoretical analyses and reflections on culture and politics, and there is now even an edited collection of these jokes (Mortensen, 2014). However, despite the important place jokes occupy in Žižek’s work, there seems to be still no critical examination of the function that these jokes serve within in his writings, seminars and public speeches, and the politics that they invite readers and audiences to embrace. Some positive assessments that see these jokes as communicating the “lightness of profundity” or as “a way into Žižek ontology”, seem to lack in both theoretical and analytical depth as well as critical spirit and rigour (e.g. Momus, 2014; Chow, 2014). On the other hand, critical, or even hostile, accounts of Žižek’s work, despite the fact that they do tend to, somehow, take jokes into account, do so only in order to identify a comical element in his political position, and ascribe to him names – “the deadly jester” (Kirsch, 2008), “the clown prince of the revolution” (Scruton, 2016) – thus avoiding focusing on the jokes as such and being indifferent to their ideological function and microsociological physics.

Žižek is notorious for making controversial comments, but in the last couple of years, following the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as Joe Biden’s election to the presidency of the United States, his comments, more than ever, make one seriously wonder about the political positions he expresses. Is he really the radical political thinker he was once assumed to be or he has turned into a theorist of the established order? How are we supposed to understand his endorsement of the role of “market completion” (Žižek, 2021) or his statement that he has been joking about being a communist and that he is just a modest social democrat like Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez (Hedges, 2021)? Could perhaps the rereading of some of his older jokes be of some use to us in order to elucidate and understand Žižek’s current political positions?

For the purpose of the current article I will critically explore some of Žižek’s jokes as they appear in three different texts. Rather than approaching these jokes as expressions of the “lightness of profundity”, what will be looked for is the reverse, the “profundity of lightness”, that is, those layers of meaning that are hidden, covered up by laughter or pushed away in the examined texts. Given the large number of jokes that have been recounted by Žižek in his books and speeches, and in order to avoid methodological confusion and the pitfall of making general claims about all of his jokes, only three texts will be examined here: “Resistance is Surrender”, an article published in 2007, and two videos; the first of a speech given at the Marxism 2009 festival in London, the second from a public discussion “On the Role of the European Left” that took place in 2013. The choice of texts has been based on the fact that all three include jokes that are explicitly or implicitly related
to the Zapatista movement and their spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, and tend to converge to the same “quilting point”; that is, it is the same master signifier that holds these texts together — even though as an implied signifier rather than explicitly present as such in the texts. This master signifier is produced, strengthened and maintained in place precisely through the jokes/puns employed, and as such necessitates a libidinal investment, through laughter, on the part of the readers, audience or viewers.

To read the three texts, a Lacanian discourse analysis will be performed (Parker, 2005, 2010; Neil, 2013). More specifically, what will be examined is aspects of the unconscious of the texts, that is the “hidden” layers of meaning produced, and the master signifier that holds these three texts together and imposes itself on them. As Fink (1995) argues, a master signifier presents itself as a dead end, a stopping point that puts an end to association and brings discourse to a halt. The purpose of the current analysis, then, will be to “dialecticise” the master signifier, that is, to explore the ways it subjugates and sutures the meaning of the three texts examined, and thus brings this master signifier into relation with other signifiers.

In order to dialecticise the master signifier and broaden my critical perspective, I will adopt a constant to and fro between two positions; a hysterical questioning of Žižek’s jokes and commentaries — examining contradictions and political deadlocks — and a position of analysis informed by Lacanian concepts, in order to further open up certain aspects of the texts/jokes in question. These two positions of analysis can be seen as somehow homologous to the respective Lacanian social links of the discourse of the hysteric and the discourse of the analyst, but by no means identical to them (see Lacan, 1991/2007). Texts pose structural limitations to an analogous treatment of them in relation to the two aforementioned discourses. In other words, different as they are compared to speaking human beings, texts can be intensely questioned for their coherence, but cannot be put to work and produce answers in the strict sense of the term. Similarly, texts cannot be hystericised in the way human beings can be by an analyst, but, nevertheless, they can be opened up and explored by employing Lacanian concepts (Parker, personal communication, 2021).

It is important to make clear right from the start that no overarching, general claims are made about all jokes recounted by Žižek; the analysis deals exclusively with the jokes and texts discussed. Furthermore, no inferences will be made and no conclusions will be reached as far as Žižek’s own intentions are concerned; whether he believes, or not, what he says, or whether his words reveal something about his

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1 The Zapatistas burst onto the world scene on 1 January 1994 in south-eastern Mexico, when a group of armed indigenous rebels led by a masked *mestizo* man known as Subcomandante Marcos, came out of the jungle and occupied several townships of the state of Chiapas. The rebels spoke against the centuries long oppression and exploitation of the indigenous populations of the country and demanded freedom and democracy for all Mexicans as well as political autonomy for the indigenous populations.

2 In *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, book XVII of his seminar, Lacan identifies four discourses, the discourse of the master, the discourse of the hysteric, the discourse of the analyst and the discourse of the university, all four seen in broader terms as social links. Each discourse is comprised by four elements: $S_1$ (the master signifier), $S_2$ (knowledge), a (surplus enjoyment) and $S$ (the subject). Depending on the position these elements occupy, they correspond to the function of the agent, truth, production and the other. Later in this article the discourse of the master and the discourse of the university will be employed as frameworks for understanding interaction between Žižek and his audience.
own unconscious. In a similar fashion, the current analysis will not question or challenge Žižek’s political positions on state power, the Left, the Zapatistas and so on, from a transcendental vantage point outside of the text. The analytical approach of the article is strictly textual – the term text should not be understood here as being limited to written or spoken words, but more broadly defined so that it includes the entire social configurations and social interactions examined – and an immanent one; that is, Žižek’s arguments and the jokes/puns will be examined within their own conceptual framework (Held, 1990).

The purpose of the article, then, is to explore layers of meaning that can be found in Žižek’s jokes and puns, and the forms of subjectivity that can be discerned in Žižek’s humorous interaction with the audience (as well as readers and viewers) and are related to the affective investment (or not) of these jokes on the part of the latter. I look for contradictions, inconsistencies, ideological positions and political deadlocks, and in this sense, the article is situated within the critical tradition that stresses the conformist and disciplinary aspects of jokes and laughter.

The Right-wing Unconscious

In “Resistance is Surrender”, an article published in 2007 in the London Review of Books, Slavoj Žižek lunches a stinging critique against what he describes as the contemporary leftist position that global capitalism and state power could be undermined not by being directly attacked, but by refocusing the field of struggle on everyday practices, where one can build a new world, and he names as an exemplar of this approach the Zapatista movement. Žižek explains that such an approach that calls for resistance to the state, by withdrawal from it and the creation of new spaces outside its control, amounts to nothing less than accepting the triumph of capitalism. “What should we say to someone like Chávez?”, he wonders, “no, do not grab state power, just withdraw, leave the state and the current situation in place?”, and then he adds: “would not such a withdrawal just reduce him to a version of Subcomandante Marcos, whom many Mexican leftists now refer to as ‘Subcomediante Marcos’ [emphasis added]?” (Zizek, 2007, para. 16).

There are a number of interesting points an analysis could explore in relation to the arguments of this text. However, given that the focus of the current article is mainly on jokes, it is expedient to limit the breadth of the analysis and restrict it to a palpation of the pun “subcomediante”. To this direction, it can be said that what the signifier “subcomediante” adds to the overall argument is an element of foolishness associated with the particular political position discussed. In other words, to resist

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3 There is, for example, an inconsistent logic lying behind the comparison between Chávez and Marcos. For whereas the former sprung up from within the military-political complex of the Venezuelan state, the latter belongs to the clandestine guerrilla tradition of Latin America, so that even if Chávez was to withdraw from power, it would be difficult to imagine how he would be reduced to a version of Subcomandante Marcos. The positions these two figures occupy are structurally different and neither could occupy the position of the other on the basis of a single element, namely, that of his political position in relation to state power. Conversely, even if Marcos were to strive for state power, he would still not be a version of Chávez, precisely because he occupies a structurally different position.
and act outside state power is not simply “accepting the triumph of capitalism”, that is, surrendering, as the title of the article has it; it is also to act foolishly and make a fool of oneself; it means to act as a comic, ridiculous figure, (the prefix “sub” points to something less than a comedian) and as a cause of people’s laughter and derision. Thus, if “resistance as surrendering” is the text’s master signifier, then we should also note that the pun adds to it an extra dimension of “foolishness”. Or, even, it can be said that by means of the pun there is the constitution of a master signifier which, despite the fact that it is never formulated explicitly as such, it nevertheless plays a significant role in the text for it gives the arguments criticised a hue of “ridiculousness”. This master signifier is that of “resistance as foolishness”, and in the current analysis will be identified as the quilting point of all three texts examined.

More interestingly still, it should not escape the attention of the reader that what we have here is a pun, and if we are to take seriously Freud’s (1905/2003) argument that puns are not innocent as such, but, instead, bear a certain relation to the unconscious, we are confronted with the question of what the signifier “subcomediante” tells us about the unconscious of the text. Moving away from Freud and towards Lacan, that is, approaching the unconscious not as an internal depository, but as a function of language, as an exteriority, what should be looked for is not some hidden pieces of information suppressed deeply into Žižek’s unconscious, but those elements of the text that are unsaid and pushed outside of it, beyond even the speaker’s knowledge or intentions (see Parker, 2005; 2010; Pavón-Cuellar, 2010). At the very moment the signifier “subcomediante” is articulated and attributed to “many Mexican leftists”, the unconscious of the text is instantly constituted as those elements that are left out and could possibly disturb and subvert the meaning of the text.

At this point, we can retrieve the rather disturbing fact that the pun “subcomediante” was actually invented and circulated on various occasions immediately after the Zapatista insurrection by right-wing commentators in Mexico, who aimed to mock Marcos and ridicule the Zapatista struggle (e.g. Fuentes, 1996). We must be careful here and avoid rushing to hasty conclusions concerning Žižek’s own unconscious or malevolent intentions; he is most probably oblivious to the actual origin of the pun and it is equally possible that some Mexican leftists have actually adopted the pun. Furthermore, even if we identified in the reproduction of the pun a certain kind of jalouissance on the part of Žižek (Lacan, 1975/1998), this would tell us, actually, very little about the workings of the pun within the article.

It is important we stay at the level of text. If the signifier “subcomediante” tells us something about the unconscious of the text itself, it is precisely because it opens up the possibility of unintentional pieces of information flowing onto its surface; information that allows different kinds of readings and interpretations. It can be said, then, that what erupts onto Žižek’s text is a certain right-wing unconscious and this unconscious allows certain connection to be made between the left-wing and right-wing politics of humour in relation to Marcos and the Zapatistas; and it can possibly draw the reader, to the extent there is a libidinal investment of the signifier through laughter, into a weird alliance with conservative, racist, sexist and
reactionary sectors of Mexican society. At this point, further substantiation and expansion of the analysis requires the introduction of the second text.

The Dusty Balls of Capitalism

Two years after the publication of the article in the *London Review of Books*, Žižek was invited to the Marxism 2009 festival in London, where he delivered his “What Does it Mean to Be a Revolutionary Today?” speech. During this speech, Žižek told the multitudinous audience attending the event a joke, which was received with great fervour, and ever since it has been widely circulated on the internet, both in print and in video, euphorically welcome and celebrated for its putative revolutionary message. The joke goes as follows:

In the fifteenth century Russia occupied by Mongols, a farmer and his wife walk along a dusty country road. A Mongol warrior on a horse stops at their side and tells the farmer that he will now rape his wife. He then adds, “but since there is a lot of dust on the ground you should hold my testicles while I am raping your wife so that they won’t get dusty, dirty”. After the Mongol finishes his job and rides away, the farmer starts to laugh and jump with joy. The surprised wife asks him: “How can you be jumping with joy when I was just brutally raped?” The farmer answers: “But I got him, his balls are full of dust.” [The audience bursts into laughter and prolonged applause.] (Zižek, 2009, speaking in Cousins, 2009, 22:10–22:49)

What makes this particular joke relevant to the current discussion, even though neither Marcos nor the Zapatistas are explicitly mentioned, is that it seems to converge to the same point with the “Resistance is Surrender” article. In other words, what holds these two texts together (as well the one that will be examined later), their quilting point in Lacanese, is the master signifier of “resistance as foolishness”, again communicated and strengthened through a joke. In fact, there appears to be an equivalence of signifiers that reveals a common structure: the Russian farmer/Zapatista peasants (and Marcos), facing brutal oppression and humiliation from the Mongol warrior/the Mexican state, engage in resistance, which is deemed to be somehow inadequate, insufficiently radical and, mainly, foolish, thus justifying a mocking and ridiculing stance towards them.

The fact that the audience invests psychically in the joke through laughter and applause entails that the master signifier is sustained as such and that possible resistance to it is actually buried in laughter. And we can imagine that had the joke failed to produce laughter, the text would have suffered serious fraying, which, at least in the case of the live talk in London, would have resulted in a rather awkward situation.

Up to this point, the interaction between the speaker and the audience can be seen as being structured by the discourse of the master (Lacan, 1991/2007). The master

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4 For more on humour, class and politics, see Fozooni (2020).
5 For more on the psychical investment of signifiers, see Hook and Vanheule (2016).
signifier of resistance as foolishness is addressed by the speaker ($S_1$), in the form of a joke, to the people of the audience ($S_2$), who are situated in the position of the complicit, and the product is laughter ($a$); a laughter which feeds back and further stabilises the master signifier so it can be able to perform its function within the text – and, it could be argued, procures the speaker with a certain necessary enjoyment to carry on with his speech. But, then, things become more complex.

When the first excitement of the audience subsides and laughter fades away, Žižek goes on formulating the political morale of the joke, explaining that the point for critical leftists today is not to “dust the testicles” of those in power, but to “cut them off”. Once again, the audience bursts into laughter and strong applause; the master signifier is again affectively invested and maintained in its place. Žižek adds that this does not have to happen necessarily in a radical way, it can be achieved with “smaller measures”, with “proper ideological struggle” (we will come back to this point later). Later, during the debate that follows his speech, Žižek offers the audience the following disclaimer:

I thought well in advance, should I use the joke or not? The first reason I did is because, at least, if you read the content, it’s not in any way making fun of the raped woman. It’s, on the contrary, the structure of the joke is that this so-called progressive intellectual, in order to score his small narcissistic point “oh I dusted the balls”, totally ignores the suffering there. This is the full point of the joke. [The audience responds with a strong applause.] (Žižek speaking in Cousins, 2009, 37:07–37:47)

Once again, the joke allows us to explore the unconscious of the text, and we can read this disclaimer as an example of what Lacan means when he argues that the return of the repressed and the repressed are one and the same (cited in Hook, 2018). To explain this idea Hook (2018) cites the example of the guilty husband whose gift of flowers makes his otherwise trusting wife start to suspect that something is amiss. It is precisely the signifier of the act of giving flowers that brings about the wife’s suspicion. In much the same way, Žižek’s disclaimer that the farmer joke does not actually make fun of the raped woman causes a retrospective questioning of its broader significance; it raises suspicion that there is perhaps something wrong going on here. After all, why should the audience, whose laughing investment indicates an apprehension that the joke is actually about the foolish resistance of the farmer, need such an additional clarification and endorsement of their response? At the very moment the disclaimer is pronounced, a certain uncertainty about the meaning of the joke explodes onto the text, a certain retrospective suspicion concerning its politics.

We can approach it as follows: despite the fact that audience’s affective investment (that is, laughing and applause) take place on a kind of political ground – that of the futility and foolishness of the farmer’s resistance – this ground is by no means stable; it has been corroded by the suffering of the raped woman and the humiliation of the peasant himself – experiences which are not simply things of the far history, but the real actual conditions of many peasant communities around the world (including the Zapatista communities). The return of the repressed of the joke reveals retrospectively the possibility of a different reading of the joke in relation to
the raped woman. For the joke might, in fact, not make fun of the raped woman, but nonetheless, its very structure as a joke necessitates her suffering and humiliation, which has to be ignored, pushed away, if it is to be effective as such and produce laughter. Again, it is important to stay at the level of the text and make no hasty inferences about Žižek’s (or even the audience’s) own intentions or unconscious. After all, as Hook explain: “In Lacan’s understanding of ‘the return of the repressed’ there needs be no ‘dirty secret’” (2018, pp. 60–61).

However, once suspicion has been instigated, a mere disclaimer of the type “it does not make fun of the raped woman” can hardly have been sufficient in eradicating alternative readings. And, further, the statement that the joke is actually about the “so-called progressive intellectual” who ignores suffering – the fact that aims to suture the meaning of the joke – nonetheless contains the logic for its own undermining; it can easily be reverted and turned against the speaker. We can read it like this: the so-called progressive intellectual/philosopher, in order to score his small narcissistic point “oh, I said a radical joke” (or, “oh, I used a funny pun about Marcos”) and entertain his audience, totally ignores the politics of the joke – that is, the suffering taking place in it (as well as real suffering in Chiapas). This is definitely a point that can be made about the audience, readers and viewers too; for the libidinal investment of the joke pushes away real suffering and unites the audience in a laughing community of self-acclaimed radicals.

Billig’s (2005) distinction between the psychological function of jokes and their sociological consequences can help us explore this point further. For those who laugh often might imagine that they are daringly challenging the status quo, and in their meta-discourse of laughter they might claim to occupy a position of rebelliousness, but this psychological function might differ significantly from the broader social implications, which might be conformist, conservative and disciplinary. In this sense, Žižek’s joke and the commentary that follows it, allows the audience to position themselves on the side of radical politics – disapproving as ineffective and ridiculous the microresistance of the farmer – without, at the same time, having to worry about its broader reactionary aspects concerning the rape of the woman.

The Therapeutics of Laughter

As mentioned above, once the repressed of the text has returned, a mere axiomatic disclaimer that the joke is not about the rape of the woman but about something else can hardly suture meaning and inhibit suspicion. What is needed, then, is a kind of knowledge that will anchor the joke on a firmer ground and will allow the rationalisation and justification of its problematic points. The discourse of the master needs the support of the discourse of the university. Žižek continues:

Now, to go even a step further, now you will say, and I know, you have the right to say this, “but nonetheless the topic is rape, obviously horrible suffering was going on there, and nonetheless, we laughed”. My experience, from real struggles, friends in Sarajevo, is that, yes, this is what you should do!
My god, I have friends in Sarajevo who were shot, raped, and how they survived? Do you know that when Sarajevo was under siege, that was the golden era of incredible brutal cruel jokes? I spoke with women who were raped and they told me [that] the only way to survive is not to say “oh, I am now victim”, but to turn their predicament into a dirty joke and so on and so on. I mean, that’s real life. I am not bluffing here. This is not intellectual stuff.

[The audience responds with strong applause.] (Žižek speaking in Cousins, 2009, 37:53–38:50)

If Chow’s (2014, p. 232) argument that Žižek “is rarely interested in whether or not anyone is laughing” at his jokes is correct, then here we are in front of one of these “rare” moments in which Žižek’s words can be read as an active interest in the audience’s laughter as a way of maintaining the ethico-political integrity of the joke and the situation as a whole. The argument presented in this quote is altogether different from the one offered in the previous disclaimer that the joke actually makes fun of the “so-called progressive intellectual”, which is an argument that concerns the joke itself. The attention is now shifted to the reaction of the audience. This is the return of the repressed in relation to the audience’s reaction; a suspicion that perhaps there is something wrong with laughing and applauding at this particular joke.

We can read it as follows: the audience’s laughter and the speaker’s ethico-political position are lifted off their corroded ground and rescued by being embedded into the firmer ground of a kind of therapeutics of laughter (the relieving properties of jokes). This is a move that performs two interrelated functions. First, it alleviates possible anxiety on the part of the audience concerning the politics of the joke, and, second, it prevents, or even blocks, possible resistance to and challenging of its problematic dimension, its dark side, the rape of the woman.

We can detect here a shift from the discourse of the master to the discourse of the university. What lies underneath S2 is again the signifier of “resistance as foolishness”, but this time it can be seen as transposed to the possibility of the audience foolishly resisting the suggested meaning of the joke. There is uncertainty and anxiety here concerning the meaning of the joke and the audience’s reaction to it, and Žižek’s heteroreflexivity, that is, the enactment in speech of another’s possible reflexive reaction (“now you will say … but nonetheless the topic is rape … nonetheless we laughed”) enacts precisely this anxiety. The positions of S2, then, is occupied by a certain knowledge on the workings of humour and jokes, and despite the fact that this knowledge is grounded and concretised in the example of the women of Sarajevo, we can hear a certain knowledge on the positive qualities of laughter resonating from this particular example; a knowledge that ranges from relief theories of humour to positive psychology (see Billig, 2005; Zupančič, 2008; Mentinis, 2013). This knowledge, then, interrogates the surplus production of laughter (a), and the product would be a divided subject ($) torn between enjoyment and guilt. But such an outcome would be a disaster for the overall argument and the continuation of the speech.

In fact, this link is never completed, that is, we never arrive to the point of the divided subject, for the discourse of the university is short-circuited by the
instantaneous eruption of a remnant of the discourse of the master in the form of the
supereogoic command “Yes! This is what you should do” (that is, to laugh), which
serves to prevent the hystericasation of the audience by endowing it with a sense of
wholeness – and rescue its ethico-political integrity. In keeping with Lacan’s view,
the discourse of the university here serves to legitimise and rationalise the discourse
of the master (Fink, 1995).

This second disclaimer performs a synthetic personalisation on two levels. First,
it further reinforces the community of laughter that has been produced through the
joke, and, second, brings this community together with the raped women of
Sarajevo. Despite the fact that the first disclaimer defined the object of the joke as
the “so-called progressive intellectual”, immediately afterwards, the audience is
prompted to laugh not at this particular object, (or at themselves, to the extent they
self-reflexively identify with the “dusting the balls” politics of the progressive
intellectual), but as a kind of “victims of suffering”, through an identification with
the raped women of Sarajevo: if the raped women turned their predicament into a
dirty joke, so can the audience.

But this is a move that blurs the significant differences between the two
categories of people. For turning suffering into a dirty joke may be an effective way
for the raped women of Sarajevo to cope with suffering, but it is not clear at all why
an audience that is outside the condition of suffering of those women and
comfortably attends a public speech needs a “dirty” joke. For what suffering does
this particular audience need therapeutic laughter? Why, according to Žižek’s
prompting, should they laugh? All of a sudden, “we” all, the audience, the readers,
the viewers of the YouTube video, become subjects of suffering and we are free of
guilt to enjoy a “dirty” joke through the fantasy of the therapeutics of laughter. To
understand further the political deadlock of this commentary, we may ask whether
the same joke could have been said to an audience composed of raped women (or to
a group of peasants). Only by asking this question can the difference between the
London audience and the raped women of Sarajevo be re-established.

We need to think, as Billig (2005) argues, that the same joke told by different
people can have different consequences. When members of the same group tell a
joke about their predicament, they know that certain limits of meaning are in place.
This does not mean that they would enjoy it if somebody else told the same joke.
The outsider is somehow in a different position in relation to the joke; his/her
laughter is seen as intrusive, obtrusive and hostile. So, it can be argued that the
audience is offered is an ill-founded therapeutics of laughter containing loose
connections and misrecognitions.

**Ideological Fantasy**

At this point we can come back to Žižek’s supereogoic imperative and explore
further its ideological function within the text – as an indispensable aspect of a
Lacanian discourse analysis (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014). If we examine a little bit closer
the heteroreflexive enactment of the possible, rather anxious, reaction of the
audience (that is, “now you will say, and I know, you have the right to say this, ‘but
nonetheless the topic is rape, obviously horrible suffering was going on there, and nonetheless, we laughed’’), can we not detect in this sentence the structure of what Žižek (1989) himself has elsewhere described as “ideological fantasy”? Here is a quote from The Sublime Object of Ideology:

What they overlook, what they misrecognise, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring reality, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion may be called ideological fantasy. (Žižek, 1989, pp. 32–33)

We can read this quote in relation to Žižek’s joke as follows: what the audience are led to overlook, to misrecognise, is the illusion of the putative radical political stance and the therapeutics of laughter that structure their effective relation to the reality of the joke (and laughter). What the therapeutics of laughter does is to momentarily open up the reality of the joke (that “horrible suffering was going on there”), in order to immediately close it up again and reinforce ideological fantasy with the superegoic imperative “Yes! This is what you should do” [laugh]. We can read a certain disciplining of the audience here. What the superegoic imperative “Yes! This is what you have to do” does is to bring together the law and enjoyment in the ability to enjoy one’s obedience to the arguments offered, thinking of it as a good thing (see McGowan, 2004; Marshall, 2007).

At this point we can further (hysterically) question the texts and examine contradictions in relation to the political moral of the joke, that is the futility and foolishness of the farmer’s (and the so-called progressive intellectual’s) resistance. For if we take at face value the therapeutics of humour/laughter that Žižek advocates as a way to deal with harsh situations, then why not see the farmer’s proclamation “I got him, his balls are full of dust” as a turning his and his wife’s suffering into a joke? That is, a kind of humoristic subversion of his predicament similar to the one Žižek attributes to the raped women of Sarajevo and calls his audience enjoy too? In other words, the attempt to justify the joke with reference to the therapeutics of humour cancels the putative radical political meaning of the joke. Conversely, if we take Žižek’s assertion that the farmer’s politics are ineffective for granted, are we not justified to think of the therapeutics of humour he proposes as politically ineffective too?

Of course, we can understand the farmer’s reaction on several grounds. Throughout history peasants have devised various forms of microresistance in the face of oppression and exploitation (see Scott, 1990), and to impose simplistically external standards of resistance on them would mean to ignore their experience and life conditions. After all, had the farmer in the joke reacted violently against the Mongol warrior, he would have probably been killed on the spot. Is it a heroic “suicide” what is demanded from the farmer so that we do not laugh at him? Notwithstanding the contradictions emerging here, Žižek is reassuring: this does not have to happen in a radical way. It can be achieved through “small measures”, through “proper ideological struggle”. 

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It is here we can come back to the point mentioned earlier in relation to the Zapatistas. In Chiapas – as in many other places in the world – the rape of indigenous peasant women in front of their family members by paramilitaries and soldiers in order to punish and bend political involvement with the Zapatistas is not a thing of past history or a joke but an everyday reality. There are, however, no therapeutics of humours here, no dirty jokes alleviating suffering, no ideological distinction between victimhood and laughter. Instead, the indigenous predicament is turned into determination for struggle, armed defence, political organisation, commitment to the Zapatista cause. Their “small measures” in order to “cut the balls of capitalism” have been to be a part of the struggle in the mountains of Chiapas and to fight for different social and political relations. Even if one does not consider the Zapatistas a genuinely revolutionary or a radical movement, one should definitely accept that they do much more than jumping up and down with joy in the face of power’s attack. One would expect Žižek, then, to see the Zapatistas at least as a small measure ideological struggle, and see in the ski mask of Subcomandante Marcos someone who did something more than simply “scoring his small narcissistic point”. However, this does not seem to be the case. To carry on with the analysis more text is required.

The Return of the Pun

On May 2013, four years after the talk in London, Žižek participated in a panel on “The Role of the European Left”, together with Alexis Tsipras, the leader of the Greek leftist party Syriza. During his speech, Žižek reaffirmed his support for the taking-power politics and returned to the topic of the Zapatistas and Marcos:

As much I support, as long as it goes, this dream of non-representative immediate democracy and so on and so on, I don’t believe that different forms of local self-organisation and so on, whatever, communal cooperation and so on, have the potential to universalise themselves. And here, shamelessly I am saying: back from Marx to Hegel: we need to reinvent the state; we need more than ever a strong regulative state. (Zizek speaking in SkriptaTV, 2013, 1:24:39–1:25:00)

Then, he pejoratively calls the Zapatistas “a tourist attraction” (ignoring the actual living conditions in Chiapas, in much the same way the rape of the woman is ignored in the farmer joke) and continues:

They have their leader, in Mexico, Subcomandante Marcos; now, in a fully justified way he is now called subcomediante Marcos because he ...
[unfinished sentence]. (Zizek speaking in SkriptaTV, 2013, 1:25:00–1:25:40)

We are in a very similar context to that of London, and one would expect that once again the pun could have produced laughter. Had the pun be successful in producing

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6 A couple of years later, as a Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras would fully comply with all the IMF and EU Troika’s demands and would implement extreme austerity measures.
laughter, that is, had the signifier “subcomediante” been libidinally invested, the “foolishness” of the Zapatista politics, just like the farmer’s resistance, would have overflowed the hall. But unlike in the event in London, this time the joke fails, misfires, the discourse of the master is dismantled, nobody in the audience laughs, and no time is given for an amendment of this failure because, all of a sudden, someone from the audience interrupts the talk, disturbing its symbolic structure. We cannot hear the voice in the video. There is a short silence. We assume it is a voice from the interruption it causes to the talk and Žižek’s response afterwards. Given that the event follows the usual structure – that is, the speakers in the panel talk first and then, at the end, people in the audience take the microphone (available in the event as we see in the video) and have their turn to ask questions – the (unheard) unexpected, bare (that is, with no microphone) voice that interrupts the convention functions as the real of the event. The eruption of the real (a) hystericises Žižek’ ($) who starts questioning the voice:

No, I seriously mean it, what do you believe in, that there will be some kind of direct sense that local communes ... [unfinished sentence]. (Zizek speaking in SkriptaTV, 2013, 1:26:10–1:26:30)

The real insists. Another bare voice (perhaps from the same person) interrupts again and asks Žižek in a serious tone if he actually said “subcomediante Marcos”. The pun has clearly failed and the quilting point suffers a serious fraying. There is strain. Žižek gets agitated, annoyed, he adopts a more assertive tone and he responds as follows:

Yes! and I know what I am talking about, I was there [emphasis added]. The moment he started to play moral authority, he was totally integrated, they loved him, the most corrupted politicians loved him and so on and so on. For me this is intellectual purism. He lost... the moment, the path he had chosen [emphasis added]. I want the Left to be able to change things in the most everyday, common life level ... (Zizek speaking in SkriptaTV, 2013, 1:26:40–1:27:30)

At this point, we can (hysterically) ask: If the point for “the Left is to be able to change things in the most everyday common life level”, why not see the Zapatistas in these terms and recognise the deep changes the movement has brought about in the everyday life of the indigenous people of Chiapas for nearly thirty years? And, what about rhetorical resources such as “I know what I am talking about, I was there” (clear examples of what Lacan (1966/1977, p. 40) calls “empty speech”? Does it mean that because one happened to visit Mexico and have friends there (similar to “I have friends in Sarajevo who told me ...”) one knows something more about the everyday reality of the indigenous communities? And if the issue for the Left is to take state power, that is to be integrated into parliamentary politics as they are, what does it really matter if Marcos has been integrated in his own terms as an acceptable difference within the system? And, most importantly, what does possibly mean that Marcos “lost the path he had chosen”? That he and the Zapatistas should have gone on with the armed struggle and face brutal extermination by the Mexican Army? Is it either a total integration into party politics or a heroic suicide that is
demanded from the Zapatistas (and the farmer in the joke) in order not to be seen as foolish?

Back in the “Resistance is Surrender” article and the critique of the position that politics has to be located at a distance from the state, Žižek (2007, para. 14) attacks Simon Critchley’s politics of resistance arguing that “Critchley’s anarchic ethico-political agent acts like a superego, comfortably bombarding the state with demands; and the more the state tries to satisfy these demands, the more guilty is seen to be”. Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with Critchley’s or Žižek’s position, can we not see the same logic operating in the texts examined here? In other words, can we not identify in them a superegoic function, which imposes extreme demands of radicalness on Marcos and the Zapatistas, and the more they fail to reach them, the guiltier and the sillier they are seen to be?

Conclusion

The current analysis focuses on three texts by Slavoj Žižek, all of which are structured around a joke or pun, which, in turn, is contributing to cementing the master signifier of the three texts, that is, “resistance as foolishness”. Starting from Freud’s thesis on the relation of jokes and puns to the unconscious, it has been attempted to palpate the unconscious of the texts in question, bringing into the analysis and interpretation elements that are not there in a clear, concrete, spoken way, but, rather, exist in a virtual form. These elements – which in the current article are not always linked in a unified account, but are rather left hanging as possibilities of interpretative connections – are revealing of a reactionary and conservative function of these texts that allows them to be aligned with the conscious efforts of right-wing sectors of society, and seem to enjoy a certain sadistic relation to suffering and resistance.

The structural and semantic similarity of the jokes and puns appearing in the three texts, and their repetition over a period of seven years (from the 2007 article to the 2013 talk), allow us to identify an unresolved (unconscious) textual tension concerning radical politics, which could be understood as being rather symptomatic. And at this point we could perhaps make a step further, and read in Žižek’s recent endorsement of market completion and his statement that he has been joking about being a communist (Žižek, 2021; Hedges, 2021) a kind of resolution of this symptom.

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