

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IRSH 52 (2007), pp. 1–20 DOI: 10.1017/S0020859007003094
 © 2007 Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis

Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction*

MARJOLEIN 'T HART

SUMMARY: In the introduction to this volume, the author explains why social historians should study the relationship between humour and social protest in the past. The following questions are of interest. Under what conditions did laughter serve the cause of the protesters? How did humour strengthen social protest? And to what degree has humour been an effective tool for contentious social movements? Recent developments in the field of social movement theory regarding framing, collective identity, and emotions are combined with insights from humorology. A short account of the individual contributions follow: they range from the *Zapatistas* in Mexico to Vietnamese garment workers, from sixteenth-century Augsburg to Madrid and Stockholm in the 1990s. The findings point, above all, to the power of humour in the framing of political protest. Humour was used in quite different political opportunity structures, from open democratic societies to harsh repressive regimes. Often, humour furthered the development of the collective identity of a social movement, whereas in several cases humour acted as a powerful communication tool, serving as a true “weapon of the weak”.

The atmosphere of this meeting is totally different from the old ones. Many things have changed certainly. People laugh, laugh more and more, more and more freely! We could however take a poll to find out how the words of Mr Deputy Premier, who reiterates his sincerity and his truthfulness, were received. The answer was unanimous: “The more the Deputy Premier insists on his sincerity, the more sincere our laughter becomes in the hall”.

(Solidarity Strike Bulletin no. 6, 27 August 1980)¹

Humour and laughter can serve as a powerful tool in social protest. In ridiculing the representative of the government in the quotation above, a strong sense of unity was constructed among the strikers at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk, Poland, during the very beginnings of the Solidarity

* I am grateful to Aad Blok, Dennis Bos, Pepijn Brandon, Bert Klandermans, and Giseline Kuipers for their helpful comments and remarks. I thank Angèle Janse for her valuable help in editing this volume.

1. Quoted by Colin Barker, “Fear, Laughter, and Collective Power: The Making of Solidarity at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, Poland, August 1980”, in Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (eds), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago, IL [etc.], 2001) pp. 175–194, 191.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein 't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Movement of the 1980s. Great mirth was expressed in particular when Deputy Prime Minister Jagielski suggested that secret policemen needed more pay, because they often had to work overtime.

Yet protesters cannot always use humour. In strongly polarized settings, humour is one of the first victims. Seriousness and a strong emphasis on the righteousness of the claims inhibit laughter and joy. It is not without reason that revolutionaries (along with scientists) have been labelled humourless.² Indeed, much social protest is fuelled by anger and fear, which leave little room for more frivolous thoughts. Humour is also a highly complicated tool: the sense of humour varies strongly among classes, groups, and time.³ In Western societies, the trait of “having a sense of humour” has only become widely accepted as a desirable norm for someone’s character since the 1870s or so.⁴ As humour is strongly context-bound, the risk that a joke will not get through is high. In highly variegated audiences, humour does not necessarily unite, it can also divide and exclude.

In the case above, the risk that the sympathizers of the Solidarity movement would not appreciate the humorous content was reduced as the context of the joke was clear, the interests of the protesters were obvious and well-defined, and the humour was directly related to the complicated negotiations with the government at hand. Even then many of the protesters were filled with enormous fear and the settings were extremely polarized.⁵ How and why certain social movements can deal with humour, whereas others seem always more downcast and ponderous, is puzzling. This supplement aims to bring together a varied collection of examples of humour in social protest and tries to find out: (1) under what conditions laughter can serve the cause of the protesters; (2) how humour has strengthened social protest; and (3) to what degree humour has been an effective tool for contentious social movements. Of course, humour can also be deployed against social movements, yet this will only appear as a marginal theme. Rather, most contributions try to find out whether humour and social protest should be regarded as “comrades” or as “class enemies”.

Up to now, social historians have hardly studied the relation between humour and social protest at all. But I think this issue now falls on fertile ground. The subject is facilitated by the rise in the study of humour during the last two decades. Humorologists nowadays have an International Society for Humour Studies and their own periodical, called *Humor*. Even

2. Hans Speier, “Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 103 (1998), pp. 1352–1401, 1358.

3. Giseline Kuipers, *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke* (Berlin [etc.], 2006), p. 230.

4. Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Amsterdam [etc.], 2007), p. 24.

5. Barker, “Fear, Laughter, and Collective Power”, p. 186. On the dominance of “fear” in much of social protest, see also Jeff Goodwin and Steven Pfaff, “Emotion Work in High-Risk Social Movements: Managing Fear in the US and East German Civil Rights Movements”, in Goodwin, Jasper, and Polleta, *Passionate Politics*, pp. 282–302, 286.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

though philosophers, social psychologists, and linguists still dominate the subject, social historians can profit from this new expertise too. Furthermore, in the study of social movements a recent emphasis has been put on the role of “framing”, “collective identity”, and “emotions”, which allows us to put the research on humour and social protest in a wider and more suitable terminology. Also, in historical studies the *histoire des mentalités* has produced approaches that can be useful in this regard.

The time seems ripe, then, to construct a social historian’s combination of humorology with recent trends in social movement theory. First, I will evaluate the work of social historians in the field of humour and social protest. An account follows that stresses the findings by humorologists that matter in this respect. Then, several concepts of social movement theory are introduced, which will reappear again in the introductions of the individual contributions. At the end, I will return to the questions posed above.

STUDIES ON HUMOUR AND SOCIAL PROTEST IN THE PAST

The work of social historians on the minds and feelings of the past has become fashionable since the early 1980s, not least through the impact of historical studies inspired by cultural anthropology. “Mentalities” and “emotions” have found a place in the new historiography on popular culture.⁶ Before, such topics had constituted only a marginal object of studies: even within the famous French *Annales* school only a few historians had followed up on the publication of Lucien Febvre’s “La sensibilité et l’histoire” (1941).⁷ Among historical sociologists, the reprint and translation of Norbert Elias’s *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939) brought about renewed interest in how people strove to suppress their emotions over time.⁸ The study of historical sentiments was further stimulated by contributions in the *Journal of Social History*, among others.⁹

6. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, in *idem, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), pp. 3–30; Michel Vovelle, *Ideologies et mentalités* (Paris, 1982); Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978); Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds), *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (London 1982).

7. Lucien Febvre, “La sensibilité et l’histoire: comment reconstituer la vie affective d’autrefois?”, *Annales d’histoire sociale*, 3 (1941), pp. 5–20; trans. Peter Burke in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Lucien Febvre* (London, 1973), pp. 12–26.

8. Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen* (Basle, 1939); translated as *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford, 1994). For a combination of the *histoire de mentalités* with Elias’s theory, see Robert Muchembled, *L’invention de l’homme moderne. Sensibilités, moeurs et comportements collectifs sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1988).

9. Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History”, *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 821–845, 824–826; Peter N. Stearns, “Social History Update: Sociology of Emotions”, *Journal of Social History*, 22 (1989), pp. 592–599.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein 't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Regarding the specific relationship between humour and social protest, most mentality histories so far have dealt with past carnival festivities and comic spectacles. In this respect, Mikhail Bakhtin's work on *Rabelais and his World* remains the most widely quoted of all.¹⁰ Bakhtin pointed to the powerful impact of humour in popular culture in the late medieval and early modern period. During carnivals and similar festive periods former ranks and hierarchies disappeared. All participants to the carnival were considered equal and free and familiar contacts were allowed between different social classes and positions. These ritual settings stressed the all-human, all-joyous characteristics of life and opened the way for playful and undefined relationships. Furthermore, the festivals allowed the articulation of the idiomatic "world turned upside down", a funny and subversive way to play with established rules and hierarchies.¹¹

During such events, political protest was possible, as long as it was done by joking. As the masquerades of religious festivals often hid the identity of the participants, members of the urban lower classes exploited these events to express their hostility towards the ruling oligarchy. Owing to the fact that such festive periods were limited in time, these protests carried little direct threat to the existing order. However, sometimes such carnivals got out of hand and ended up in outright rebellious movements. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie showed, in his work on the sixteenth-century revolt in Romans, France, for example, how following carnival dinners, "to eat the rich who had fattened themselves at the expense of the community", people took to the streets shouting, "Rich men, give the town back your dishonest gains!"¹²

The *charivari* was a related form of ritual manifestation. This mocking demonstration procedure was usually directed against neighbours to express public disagreement in familial, sexual, or marital matters. As such, it constituted part and parcel of popular culture. The authorities tolerated it: indeed, the *charivari* supported the process of social disciplining from below. However, *charivari* also ran the risk that political protest could gain an upper hand. For example, Charles Tilly showed how in 1833 the practice of *charivari* was turned into a direct political protest against the local authorities in Dijon.¹³

Despite the risks that such events could get out of hand, political protest was usually allowed in these ritualized settings – or rather, the cost of suppressing it could turn out to be too high, as repression itself might

10. M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington, IN, 1984); original version in Russian, 1965.

11. Burke, *Popular Culture*, p. 188.

12. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans* (New York, 1979); see also Burke, *Popular Culture*, p. 204; M. Lane Brunner, "Carnavalesque Protest and the Humorless State", *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 25 (2005) pp. 136–155, 139.

13. Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, MA [etc.], 1986), pp. 32–33.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

provoke an escalation of protest. Likewise, in royal courts, a jester could express critical thoughts about policies without fearing punishment by the ruler. His peculiar, ritualized position carried immunity.¹⁴ Even nowadays professional comedians can present harsh and undesirable political truths through laughter: their position as official joke-makers makes them different from other political critics. After all, “fools” should not be taken seriously and replying in a serious manner to a joke is generally “not done”.¹⁵ This is true for most of the more “democratic” societies, yet even in totalitarian regimes the authorities can act quite leniently towards social protest as long as the joking context is clear.¹⁶

Another ritualized setting that allowed for social protest was the published satire. Bakhtin devoted much of his study of Rabelais to this comic publication form – after all, the satire was the predominant medium of this sixteenth-century humanist author. Bakhtin pointed to its ability to express discontent at contemporary political events by invoking popular-festive, elementary imaginary.¹⁷ Early modern satirists escaped repression, as they were never explicitly clear about the object of their wit, even though the butt was often unmistakable to the public at large. In exposing and criticizing socio-political life, the satire of the early modern period is not so much unlike the caricatures and cartoons of our own days. In caricaturing power, it is the joking content that renders these communication methods so extremely successful.¹⁸

HUMOROLOGY AND THE POWER OF THE JOKE

In general, humorologists stress the role of jokes as a peculiar kind of communication strategy, peculiar due to the ambiguity of humour. For example, political jokes mocking the communist regime have been extremely prominent in eastern Europe. A classic Soviet joke runs as follows: one secret policeman asks another: “So, what do you think of the government?”. His colleague looks around before replying, “The same as you, comrade”, whereupon Policeman no.1 declares, “In that case, it is my duty to arrest you”.¹⁹ Is such a joke a protest against the regime? Not

14. Anton Zijderfeld, *Reality in a Looking Glass: Rationality through an Analysis of Traditional Folly* (London 1982), p. 207: allowing the jester to make fun of the ruler was a way to show the absolute power of the monarch.

15. Cf. the immunity position of the “joker” in various societies: Mary Douglas, “The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception”, *Man* (New Series), 3 (1968), pp. 361–376, 372.

16. Christie Davies, *Jokes and their Relation to Society* (Berlin [etc.], 1998), p. 176; Alexander Rose, “When Politics is a Laughing Matter”, *Policy Review*, 59 (2001/2002), pp. 59–71.

17. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 452–454.

18. Anton C. Zijderfeld, “Jokes and Their Relation to Social Reality”, *Social Research*, 35 (1968), pp. 186–311, 300–301, 306.

19. Rose, “When Politics is a Laughing Matter”, p. 63.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

necessarily – much is in the eye of the beholder. Because of their ambiguity, jokes can often act as a relief from open or covert social pressures. Numerous studies of comparable jokes in the workplace have stressed the positive effect thereof for organizational harmony and for making tedious labour conditions bearable. Such jokes are often understood in the limited context of a factory or company only, and carry strong social, gendered, and/or ethnic boundaries.²⁰

In extreme repressive regimes gallows humour acts as a psychological escape from the unalterable.²¹ Often, such jokes are self-deprecating, and serve to bolster fellowship among oppressed or marginalized ethnic groupings.²² Yet a joke that is funny when told within those communities stops being amusing when ruling, dominant, or arrogant classes or groups use a similar joke to stress the minority position of the oppressed. Indeed, humorologists emphasize time and again: humour is extremely strongly bound in social and cultural terms. Henri Bergson's famous theory on the group-characteristics of humour stressed: "Our laughter is always the laughter of a group. You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others", and Konrad Lorenz stated: "Laughter forms a bond".²³ The latter also pointed out to the aggressive, isolating-the-other attributes of certain jokes.²⁴ An illustration is the recent worldwide controversy about the publication of Mohammed cartoons in a Danish newspaper.²⁵

It is not without reason that many ideologists of the political left regard humour and amusement as substitutes for the political action that should aim at change in societal settings. Indeed, numerous comedies on television strengthen existing stereotypes and show the inevitability of existing social

20. Kuipers, *Good Humor*, pp. 234–240; Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra, "Humour as a Discursive Boundary Marker in Social Interaction", in Anna Duszak (ed.), *Us and Others: Social Identities Across Languages, Discourses and Cultures* (Amsterdam [etc.], 2002), pp. 377–400; Arthur Asa Berger and Aaron Wildavsky, "Who Laughs at What?", *Culture and Society*, 31 (1994), pp. 82–86.

21. Antonin J. Obrdlik, "Gallows Humor: A Sociological Phenomenon", *American Journal of Sociology*, 47 (1942), pp. 709–716, 712.

22. Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington, IN, 1990); Anton C. Zijderfeld, "Trend Report: The Sociology of Humour and Laughter", *Current Sociology*, 31:3 (1983), pp. 1–103, 51.

23. Both views quoted by Joseph Boskin, "The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo", in John Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, NY, 1987), pp. 250–264, 254.

24. See also Oscar Verkaaik, "Fun and Violence: Ethnocide and the Effervescence of Collective Aggression", *Social Anthropology*, 11 (2003), pp. 3–22.

25. Giselinde Kuipers, "Het eerste transnationale humorschandaal. De Mohammed-cartoons en de mondialisering van de humor", *Sociologie*, 2 (2006), pp. 461–466. For an overview of the variety in reactions on the Muhammad-cartoons, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jyllands-Posten_controversy (accessed 8 January 2007).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

structures, thereby maintaining them.²⁶ Humour in itself never changes circumstances. In addition, humour may even lessen discontent among the oppressed, which might inhibit the mobilization into action. In this regard, jokes are often viewed as safety valves, just as the early modern authorities regarded carnival and *charivari*.²⁷ Yet humour can also serve social protest. Criticism and joy went extremely well together in the student movements of the 1960s in the Western world. Playful acts were used widely as a technique in numerous non-violent protests; students explored the power of humour to attract media attention and to disarm the authorities.²⁸

Similar strategies can be used on the shopfloor. In research on workplace jokes, the recent trend is to see subversive characteristics therein. Workplace jokes are not only simply safety valves; such jokes can also help the development of an attitude that stands in contrast to managerial values and priorities.²⁹ In a Brazilian telecommunications company, for example, satire was expressed in a union newspaper that featured cartoons with characters like “Powerful Little Chief” – an autocratic manager with a little black moustache and a Nazi-uniform – and “Vaselineman” – a junior manager who claims to sympathise with the employees but who is obsessed with power and easily defers to senior management.³⁰ In a British call centre, the following anecdote was told over and over again (and embellished, without doubt). One employee in the French section continued talking into the phone in French after the customer had hung up: “Thank you very much for calling. We will send someone round to kill your wife and family”. The manager who happened to stand within earshot was humiliated in front of the other employees as the employee reported to his manager on the enormous success of this specific call. In another call centre, management was ridiculed by posters and flyers with texts like:

**Are you lonely?
Having to make decisions?
Rather talk about it than do it?
Then why not
HOLD A MEETING
You can: Get to see other people**

26. Murray S. Davis, *What's So Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society* (Chicago, IL, 1993), p. 311; comedy's political implications are paradoxical – it makes radical and conservative statements at the same time.

27. Zijdeveld, “Trend Report”, p. 57. I thank Christie Davies for sharing his thoughts on this subject.

28. Davies, *Jokes and their Relation to Society*, p. 311.

29. See also Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra, “Over the Edge? Subversive Humour between Colleagues and Friends”, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 15 (2002), pp. 65–87.

30. Suzana B. Rodrigues and David L. Collinson, “Having Fun? Humour as Resistance in Brazil”, *Organization Studies*, 16 (1995), pp. 739–768, 751–752.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein 't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Sleep in peace
 Offload decisions
 Learn to write volumes of meaningless notes
 Feel important
 Impress (or bore) your colleagues
And all in work time!
 [Followed by a photograph of the managing board in a meeting]
"MEETINGS"
The Practical Alternative to Work³¹

In these cases, the use of humour ended up in supporting the local trade-union activists. Such can hardly be called "safety valves" any more: indeed, the double effects are difficult to separate.

As a communication strategy, humour belongs to the rich treasury of the instruments of politics and can be used in political protest. In early modern England, radicals regarded "ridicule and derision, mocking and playing the fool" as great polemical instruments.³² Jokes often weaken the defences of an audience and render the listeners more amenable to persuasion.³³ These tactics can be used by those in power too. But for those engaged in social protest from below, it is important to realize that "Joking often cuts through great obstacles better and more forcefully than being serious would".³⁴ Criticism expressed in a joking manner is more difficult to refute by "rational" arguments. Authority and power can melt, as the invitation to laugh *with* one another appeals to all-human feelings and breaks down "official" barriers. As such, humour certainly constitutes one of the "weapons of the weak".³⁵

FRAMES, COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES, AND EMOTIONS

In this respect the notion of "framing" is of interest, a concept used widely by social movement theorists nowadays. It refers to how a situation is interpreted by those engaged in social protest.³⁶ Ideology counts, but

31. Phil Taylor and Peter Bain, "Subterranean Worksick Blues': Humour as Subversion in Two Call Centres", *Organization Studies*, 24 (2003), pp. 1487–1509, 1499.

32. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 282.

33. John C. Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication", *Communication Theory*, 10 (2000), pp. 310–331, 324.

34. Horace, quoted by Francis Hutcheson, "Traditional Theories of Laughter and Humor", in Morreall, *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp. 26–40, 35.

35. Humour seems very much in line with the other "weapons of the weak" of gossip and minor sabotage; see James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT, 1985).

36. The term refers to Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York, 1974). On the concept of frame, see Hank Johnston, "Verification and Proof in Frame and Discourse Analysis", in Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenborg (eds),

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

framing is different from ideology: agents of the social movement have to define and articulate the position of the actors involved. They have to translate ideological beliefs into an existing, practical framework, giving events and experiences meaning so that they are connected with each other. A prescription of how to solve the problem also constitutes part of the framing process. Through framing, particular events and elements are also rated as more important than others. For example, William Gamson pointed to the importance of bringing “injustice” to the forefront in the framing of collective action.³⁷

Framing is a way to link interests to social action. A fine example of humorous framing is the name giving to MADD, “Mothers Against Drunk Driving”. The abbreviation itself is funny and catches the attention, whereas the initials provide a further framing of the protest. The term “Mothers” calls into being the protection of the powerless (children), “Against” with a capital A signifies anger and moral outrage, whereas “Drunk Drivers” stand for those acting socially irresponsibly and out of control.³⁸ Successful framing is of enormous importance for social movements, as it furthers the processes of resource mobilization.³⁹

Alongside framing, the last decade has witnessed increased attention to the concept of “collective identity” in social movements.⁴⁰ Charles Tilly showed how, during the nineteenth century, British protesters identified themselves increasingly as “supporters of [...], opponents of [...], members of [...], each defining a position with respect to actions by constituted authorities”. With the rise of such collective identities, other ties weaken, such as with neighbourhood or family.⁴¹ Collective identities also include

Methods of Social Movement Research (Minneapolis, MN [etc.], 2002) pp. 62–91; David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford Jr, Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation”, *American Sociological Review*, 51 (1986), pp. 461–481; Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (2000), pp. 611–639, 614. See, for a historical application of the concept: Michiel Baud and Rosanne Rutten, “Introduction”, in *idem* (eds), “Popular Intellectuals and Social Movements: Framing Protest in Asia, Africa, and Latin America”, Supplement 12, *International Review of Social History* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 1–18.

37. William Gamson, “Constructing Social Protest”, in Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (eds), *Social Movements and Culture* (Minneapolis, MN, 1995) pp. 85–106, 90ff.

38. James M. Jasper, “The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements”, *Sociological Forum*, 13 (1998), pp. 397–424, 412, referring to the study of Gusfield (1987).

39. On the concept “mobilization of resources”, see Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA, 1978).

40. This has undoubtedly been furthered by the “discursive turn” in the social sciences; see Roger V. Gould, “Historical Sociology and Collective Action”, in Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff (eds), *Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology* (Durham [etc.], 2005), pp. 286–299, 296 ff.

41. Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA [etc.], 1995), pp. 378–379.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-72214-8 - International Review of Social History: Supplement 15: Humour and Social Protest

Edited by Marjolein't Hart and Dennis Bos

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and refer to the style of protest, repertoires of action, forms of organization, degree of moderation or radicalism, strategies and claims, and the use of certain terms. All in all, they distinguish “us” from “them”, from opponents and/or from the community at large. Throughout, the construction of collective identities is facilitated by the existence of positive feelings towards other activists in the group.⁴²

An example of a strong collective identity bolstered by humour is the separatist movement of the Canadian west against the federal government in Ottawa in the early 1980s. As a strategy to mark the boundaries of the in-group and the out-group, cheap marketable commodities were developed, such as bumper stickers with “The West Needs Ontario, Quebec and Trudeau Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle” or baseball-caps and T-shirts with “Republic of Western Canada”. These items served as a source of camaraderie among those involved in the conflict. The humorous aspect lies in the fact that no-one could be certain whether such items conveyed a serious message or whether the wearer was just making fun of the idea. Meanwhile, the point was made nevertheless.⁴³ In a more radical fashion, the Muhajir Quami Movement (MQM) of the 1980s in Pakistan turned to aggressive humour in its aim to mobilize supporters. Through satire and grotesque exaggeration its public gatherings exploited existing ethnic and religious stereotypes, and succeeded in attracting numerous uprooted and marginalized youngsters in this way.⁴⁴

Yet humour that furthers a collective identity is often limited to the already established “in-group” only.⁴⁵ Louis Armstrong, the famous black jazz musician, related in his performances to the tradition of the African trickster and filled his record, “Laughin' Louie”, with numerous nonsense words – but much was only understandable to the black music community. Some of his jokes carried to a wider audience, in particular when referring to his colour, such as this joke: “Can God be black like me? My God!”⁴⁶

The African-American comedian Dick Gregory exploited the power of humour that is understood by variegated communities. Some passages in *From the Back of the Bus* (1967) are telling: “Personally, I like Negroes. I like them so much, I even had them for parents”, or “The NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] is a wonderful organization. Belong to it myself. But do you realize if

42. Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, “Collective Identity and Social Movements”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27 (2001), pp. 283–305, 285, 292.

43. Harry Hiller, “Humor and Hostility: A Neglected Aspect of Social Movement Analysis”, *Qualitative Sociology*, 6 (1983), pp. 255–265, 262.

44. Verkaaik, “Fun and Violence”, p. 14.

45. On the integrating power of humour, see Zijdeveld, “Trend Report”, p. 47.

46. Frank A. Salamone, “‘Laughin’ Louie: an Analysis of Louis Armstrong’s Records and its Relationship to African-American Musical Humor”, *Humor*, 15 (2002), pp. 47–63, 55.