Whose Humor? On the Darker Side of the Carnivalesque

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In their paper, Fiona Westbrook and E. Jayne White challenge the concept of post-truth' and its alleged obviousness. Following Bakhtin, they elegantly show that there are or could be many "not fully merging" truths, and that when examining dialogues, the attachment of 'post' to 'truth' may lose its power.[1] Instead, what Westbrook and White help us acknowledge is the emancipatory potential of online political discourse and the ways in which dialogism can bring new voices and new political accents to light.

Utilizing the important differences between the two meanings of truth in Russian—received *istina* and lived *pravda*—The authors claim that a monologic view of truth, and, in fact, any neat differentiation between information, misinformation, and disinformation is bound to be flawed. They call instead to understand truth as necessarily situated in specific time, place and modes of communication. What is most intriguing about this approach is that loopholes in argumentation, and more in general—the incompleteness of truth, is seen as an advantage from a political perspective and not as something to overcome with more rigorous inquiry or greater fidelity to facts. It is this immanent incompleteness that allows for dominant voices to be negated and for new ones to take center stage.

My brief two comments, while not resorting back to rigid concepts of truth and post-truth, may still complicate the democratic potential of dialogues in social networks. Looking at the relationship between various and competing voices, I believe it would be harder to maintain optimism.

First, istina and Pravda are not simply different but are also connected and influenced by each other, reflecting each other, and to a large extent are determined by their counterpart. To take one of Westbrook and White's examples, early childhood education teachers in Australia during the COVID pandemic expressed on Facebook their lived-truth-Pravda through a carnivalesque jesting of the prime minister's words. They also expressed an alternative

received-truth-istina to fight what they saw as damaging, maybe even degrading and dangerous, governmental policies. But is truth really contested here? Although the istina expressed by the government is being criticized and ridiculed, it also shows that lived-truth-pravda is dependent on it, or in other words—part of the teacher's lived experience is having to deal with the official istina. Penetrating and stable, this istina is part of the teacher's ecological system. "Teachers are just babysitters" is an opinion, truth, policy guideline, that no personal lived pravda can ignore. The teachers' pravda is not independent from the official istina, and often is a mirror-image of the latter. Looking at dialogism this way, we do not see much playfulness or a wide variety of truths. Instead, there is a political binary choice between istina and not-istina, and a familiar choice between *us* and *them*. If the teachers' Pravda would have applied also to a critique of their own received istina, then perhaps the strict boundary between friend and enemy would have been complicated, thereby allowing for not only more new voices to be heard and listened to, but also contribute to the very formation of new voices and political stands.

The possibility of self-critique brings me to the point of my second comment which is humor. Westbrook and White speak of ironic stances, carnivalesque jesting, parodies, mockeries and laughter as ways to subvert the domination of istina and, more in general, to undermine prevailing power structures. Indeed, humor and laughter can have a significant role in the exposure of power and in imagining of political alternatives. In online discussions, humor is present and is perhaps the preferred mode of communication. Not in order to argue against the authors' argument and their depiction of the carnivalesque, I wish to view humor, especially its political aspects, more cautiously.

In general, jokes entertain and give pleasure to both the speaker and listener. They also have the potential for additional functions—exposing truth that is otherwise hidden, unmasking pretentions, creating a sense of belonging, and ultimately offering, even if just briefly," an alternative view of our world."[2] As such, humor engages with the political. Moreover, it can be a relatively safe way to express discontent about a political situation or about specific political ideologies, institutions, and figures. Because jokes are anonymous (we rarely

know who wrote the whispered joke) the person who repeated it is more-or-less protected; the joke just told enjoys an impersonal advantage.[3] It points to a truth that cannot be attributed to an individual and is therefore more "objective." The teachers in Westbrook and White's article used irony and humor to "feel heard and affirmed by peers" and to question the government policies they saw as wrong and damaging, not to mention foolish and born out of ignorance.[4] They expressed the three traits of humor according to Freud. Their humor was an instrument with which sensitive topics can be safely dealt with, they expressed hostility (toward their superiors), and they strengthened friendship with peers and social coherence. Being able to joke online allows for both more anonymity if chosen or more publicity if preferred. Most importantly, humor enabled teachers to take up the difficult critique of the common-sense of those in power.

But is all humor the same? And are all the non-heard voices of equal political and moral value? I believe that to ignore the differences in the "affiliation" of humor would be an analytical as well as a political mistake. The powerful laugh too, and their humor operates differently and has different goals. Take "punching down," for example. The term refers to the practice of making fun of those who are already at a worse situation than that of the speaker. Cracking jokes about minorities, people with disabilities or members of the LGBTQ+ community are common expressions of "punching down." While this humor is not official in the sense of directly representing the powerful and their institutions, it is still a clear expression of the dominant ideology. This kind of jokes also creates a community around them by excluding those who are the butt of the jokes. In the past, jokes about Jews, allowed non-Jews to "turn themselves from imagined victims into victors within their new social order," and act as perpetrators without taking responsibility for it.[5] After all, it's just a joke. Traditionally, and maybe nowadays even more, the carnival provides the perfect opportunity to laugh about the weak. To take an example from American colleges, there is hardly ever a Halloween in which there isn't some sort of scandal involving white students dress up with black-faces or joking around drunk using the N-word. If carnivalesque jesting means suspending social norms, it certainly makes sense that this sort of humor is welcomed. We might come close to a

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troubling conclusion, according to which the voices of racist white students are those that are unheard or suppressed and the carnivalesque—be it with the assistance of alcohol consumption or of the anonymity in online message boards, memes etc.—that allows these voices to be heard. But acknowledging racist or any other exclusionary humor as an expression of authenticity is not where we want to be. How can this be avoided, and not through an ideological choice of "punching up is good, punching down is bad?"

A differentiation between humor with emancipatory potential and humor that only strengthens the oppressive characteristics of the social order can be made, and it is fairly simple one—the political criterion is whether the joke is funny or not. I do not mean how well a joke was executed, how fitting were the comedian' intonation and timing, or was it concise enough. I refer instead to one of humor's most common features, and suggest that it is also a political one—the element of surprise. Bergson wrote that laughter has to do with a sudden change, a dissolution of continuity, a surprise, a contrast with something that breaks down the familiar (this is the reason, of course, for a joke being funny only when it is told the first time).[6] Breaking down the familiar is not merely a rhetorical device used by comedians and surprising the listener can be much more than a trick. It could also aim for breaking down the listener's ideological and political common sense. A joke can tap into what we perceive as self-evident, obvious or beyond critique and then, in a crucial moment, surprise us with a new fact, a new angle, a new interpretation of the situation. In short, the surprise that enables laughter can be political. And if a racist joke was not funny (and they usually aren't) this is because it is expected; we already know what the punchline is going to be. To conclude, I want to stress that the last thing we as educators want to do is to become the humor-police. But I believe there is still value in appreciating discourse not only for its truthfulness or evasion of truth but also for the ways in which it can be dull or surprising, offensive or funny, strengthening the status quo or undermining it.

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