

Transcript: The Philosophical and Political Significance of Laughter

Darian: Hi this is Darian Meacham from UWE Philosophy and I am here with Dr Francesco Tava from the University of Milan. Hello Francesco.

Francesco: Hello Darian

Darian: How are you?

Francesco: Pretty good thanks

Darian: Francesco you recently gave a paper where you argued for the political significance of laughter. Can you explain something about why laughter might be a significant category or political tool even?

Francesco: Yes that was actually the end of my talk. I think that we can consider the political outcome of laughter if we consider the basic aspects of this phenomenon. So for example what Bergson said about it, there's three very basic aspects: the humanity of laughter, the fact that only a human being can laugh; the fact that laughing at something is actually detached from self, from reality so it takes a step back from reality; and the third aspect which is also the most important that laughter is a social activity, there is a big difference between laughing alone and laughing with others. So as a consequence we can also see certain contradictions. The position of the subject is somehow inclusive and also exclusive with this laughter he is in the world has a part in it which is a social activity, laughter but laughing he also takes a step back from reality and for this reason he can become a useful political character rightly because of this very complex situation in which he is within, his reality with all the concerns for the political situation but he also has the sort of outer view that enables him to have a more deep and also more complicated perspective on it.

Darian: So we usually think of the political actor as someone who is completely involved in the immediate social circumstances. But what you are describing is sort of a double movement where the person or the laughing actor is at the same time involved and distanced. How does that doubleness work?

Francesco: Well I think that we can see the difference here from a passive political actor and an active political actor in the sense that if you are totally involved you cannot recognise if in politics there is something wrong so you will not see if actually there is some problematic situation in which you have also to say no to build a sort of opposing position against the mainstream and this is what I mean by politics so not the typical idea of politics but the politics that involves this double situation as you said.

Darian: In your work you create a connection with the idea of laughter and the idea of political dissidence which seems somewhat different from political action or it seems a special category of political action. Can you explain a little bit about how laughter might relate to dissidence in particular?

Francesco: Yes that's actually one of my main points. We can imagine dissident action as something very different from a normal opposing action in politics. You can imagine the typical

opposing action like a sort of power which is absolutely the same as the mainstream power but just opposed to him so a sort of plus against another plus. In this case we are imagining a sort of minus, a sort of strength, a sort of power which is subtly different, qualitatively different from the mainstream power which actually creates a totally heterogeneous force that for this heterogeneity threatens more the power. I think that laughter has this possibility, because of its shattering characteristic.

Darian: So if I understand you correctly is what you're saying that the power of laughter stems from the fact that political power as normally understood in fact can't comprehend laughter and hence can't respond to it and so the laughing political actor has a sort of negating power, has a sort of power in powerlessness over the dominant political power. Francesco: Yeah that's what I think basically and that if you see the history, the tradition of satire for example you can see it very clearly so the satire has this negative power which is actually seen from the mainstream power as something incredibly dangerous, more than a normal, typical characteristic political position because of this capacity to always take a step over from the normal situation in which power takes place.

Darian: Is laughter in that sense dangerous or does it present a risk to all forms of political organisation, all forms of political power or is it certain particular forms for example authoritarian political power that are particularly vulnerable to laughter? Because, I am thinking now of the Five Star Movement in Italy which in a sense seems to be in a large part based on laughter but is opposed to in fact the democratic functioning of the system.

Francesco: Yeah well this question is quite complex but I'll try to say something. I think that it's quite difficult to make a tight difference between some sorts of authoritarianism and what we intend by democracy today so I think that even in democracy there are some parts which present authoritarian aspects as well and in this sense I think that laughter can be seen as a useful tool in every kind of political situation. Of course the more the authoritarian part is visible the more the laughter can actually show its authentic strength and yes the situation in Italy is particularly tragic not funny in this sense and I think also in the Five Star Movement there is no more space for laughter, they just shout at the moment.

Darian: Alright thank you very much Francesco

Francesco: You're welcome