

## Commentary article

# The role of self-directed humour in anarchist thought and practice

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### Abstract

*This commentary article explores the role of humour within anarchist thought and practice, emphasising its function as a tool for challenging authority and established norms. Drawing on historical and philosophical sources, it investigates how humour has been used to expose the absurdity of authority and foster a sense of invulnerability against oppression. The paper highlights the use of humour in Parisian cabarets post the 1871 Paris Commune and the case of the French anarchist Ravachol's smile. These examples, both discussed in the articles of Julian Brigstocke (2017, 2022), demonstrate two kinds of humour: directed at other and at one-self. Building on the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche (1968, 2008) and Albert Camus (2012), I propose a theoretical framework suggesting that anarchist humour should be self-directed in nature, contrary to the argument of Brigstocke. The paper concludes by arguing that this form of humour, by confronting the absurdity of life and the limitations of norms, fosters liberation and resistance, thereby undermining the power of oppressive forces.*

*Keywords: humour, anarchism, liberation, absurdity*

## 1. Introduction

Humour has long been recognised as a powerful tool for challenging authority and established norms. In the realm of anarchism, although not widely discussed by the practitioners of this school of thought, this potential has been harnessed to undermine the perceived expertise and discursive power of those in positions of power. This paper delves into the role of humour in anarchist thought and practice, exploring its capacity to expose the absurdity of authority and foster a sense of invulnerability in the face of oppression. The fundamental principle of anarchism is the opposition to all forms of authority and hierarchy that lead to the oppression of

people. Humour, as I suggest, has the potential to address and challenge these oppressive structures. Drawing on the works of Brigstocke (2017, 2022), I begin by examining the use of humour in Parisian cabarets following the 1871 Paris Commune, where artists parodied the inhumane conditions faced by prisoners sent to labour camps. I then turn my attention to the case of Ravachol, a prominent French anarchist. His defiant smile in the face of execution, as I will argue contrary to Brigstocke, serves as a powerful example of self-directed humour as a means of asserting one's invulnerability against external authority. Further, building on the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche (1968, 2008) and Albert Camus (2012), I establish a theoretical framework for my final argument which holds that truly anarchist humour should be self-directed or even self-deprecating, reflecting an attitude of invulnerability in the face of any external authority. This approach to humour allows individuals to confront the absurdity of life and the limitations of established norms, ultimately fostering a sense of liberation and resistance against oppressive forces. In conclusion, I argue that humour, when used in a self-directed and self-deprecating manner, is central to the anarchist perspective toward authority and the absurdity of everyday life. By embracing this form of humour, anarchists can demonstrate their invulnerability and resilience in the face of oppression, ultimately undermining the power of those who seek to control and dominate.

## 2. Anarchist humour in Paris cabarets following the 1871 Paris Commune

According to Brigstocke (2017), practitioners of anarchist school of thought have long recognised the potential of humour to oppose authority. They have viewed it as a valuable tool for challenging the established norms since the early history of the movement. The power of authority lies in the expertise it possesses, whether actual or perceived, such as “wisdom, reliability, capacity, skill, or strength” (Brigstocke, 2022, p. 4). Humour has the potential to challenge the hierarchy of expertise by revealing the limits of authoritative discourse. It helps to unground the authority by allowing the recipients of humour to see the absurdity of authority and the discursive power it possesses. According to Brigstocke, this is where the anarchist quality of the humour becomes evident. It allows individuals to see the fragility of the imposed norms, and to evaluate and challenge them. By doing so, humour opposes authority and hierarchy, which are the main targets of anarchism. To empirically demonstrate this, Brigstocke (2017, 2022) discusses the spectacles of Paris Cabarets, where artists parodied the living conditions of the prisoners sent to labour camps following the 1871 Paris Commune. This case study is an example of what can be described as humour directed at others. As Brigstocke (2017, 2022) illustrates, humour has the potential to challenge authority and thus was employed by anarchists as a tool to resist. However, it is not inherently anarchist humour, meaning that it does not specifically relate to anarchist traditions, unlike self-directed humour.

The Paris Commune was a revolutionary government that seized power in Paris for a few months in 1871 following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Anarchist values, including anti-authoritarianism, self-management, and decentralisation, were central to the Commune's governance. In May 1871, however, the left coalition was defeated by the regular army, leading to repressions. These repressions became a subject of satire in Paris Cabarets, which were the meeting point for the anarchists of Paris, as discussed by Brigstocke. *Taverne du Bagne* was the most notable anarchist cabaret in Paris. The interior walls were decorated with paintings that depicted the inhumane conditions of the labour camps. Visitors were greeted by insults and, for an additional fee, could experience being put in irons. Those who wished to leave were required to provide mocking certificates of liberation (Brigstocke, 2022, p. 9). Brigstocke draws a comparison between cabaret humour and anarchist tradition, linking it to the Foucauldian conception of *parrhesia*, which emphasises the necessity of speaking the truth even

while risking one's life for the common good. By satirising authority in cabarets through mimicking the conditions of labour camps, anarchists manifested their protest and demonstrated their awareness of the limitation of the expertise of the power-holding elites. They were not afraid to showcase this knowledge and make it visible to the wider audience. As Arendt (1972) stated, the best way to undermine the power of authority is to laugh at it, as contempt is the biggest enemy of those who are in power, and humour is a way to express it. Anarchists in the cabarets risked their lives, as Brigstocke argues, by telling the truth through humour, as the authorities were well aware of the fact that cabaret humour was directed at them, with the goal of delimiting and challenging their power. This is what Brigstocke considers as an additional anarchist flavour to humour. In conclusion, Brigstocke argues that the actions undertaken in the cabarets to challenge the authorities constitute the essence of anarchist humour.

While it is true that humour can undermine authority and reveal its limitations, as Brigstocke illustrates with the example of the Parisian cabarets, this quality is not distinctively related to anarchist humour. On the contrary, the authorities – who are the enemies of anarchists – can use humour to oppress, as seen in the case of totalitarian regimes. Brigstocke (2022, p. 4) acknowledges that authorities might use humour to promote racism or misogyny to reinforce their power. Additionally, humour is often used to create “us versus them” dichotomy, promoting exclusion, hatred, and domination of one group over another (e.g. anti-Semitic humour or the ridicule of Tutsis by the dominant Hutus in Rwanda). Thus, humour can be used both to challenge established norms and to reinforce them, serving as a tool for both resisting and perpetuating oppression. Humour, in this sense, is merely a tool that anarchists can use, but it is not inherently associated with anarchist sentiments – just as the knife used by anarchist Luigi Lucheni to assassinate Empress Elisabeth of Austria had nothing inherently anarchist in its nature.

Additionally, Brigstocke draws a connection between anarchism and humour due to the risky nature of mocking authorities, as he believes was the case in the Parisian cabarets after the Third Republic reclaimed power. Conversely, I argue that cabaret humour existed not because it was risky, but because the situation in the labour camps was relatively benign for the anarchist artists based in Paris. The presence of humour already indicates that engaging in such activity was not sufficiently risky, as demonstrated by the benign violation theory of humour. McGraw and Warren (2010) argue that for humour's incongruity to take effect and for laughter to emerge, the violations must be simultaneously benign. There are three possible conditions: “(a) the presence of an alternative norm suggesting that the situation is acceptable, (b) weak commitment to the violated norm, and (c) psychological distance from the violation” (McGraw and Warren 2010, p. 1141). In the first case, the prisoners of the camps were at least alive and had escaped the guillotine. In the second and third cases, although the visitors of the cabarets and anarchists, in general, might have been committed and psychologically affected by the events following the Paris Commune, they were not sent to the New Caledonian labour camps. Instead, they were in Paris, in a relatively safe position, able to enjoy artistic life, including the drinks and comedy shows in cabarets. By comparison, it is highly unlikely that Broadway shows in New York featured Jewish performers wearing robes similar to those worn by their compatriots in the Nazi concentration camps. These norms were not considered benign, and thus the humour did not arise in a similar fashion on Broadway as it did in cabarets. Therefore, the type of humour that flourished in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, which Brigstocke associates with the anarchist tradition, existed not due to a unique anarchist sentiment such as a risky endeavour against the oppressor, but because it was relatively benign and used simply as a tool to fight authority.

As I will argue, an inherently anarchist kind of humour is self-directed rather than aimed at others. This should have been observed in the labour camps of New Caledonia, where those who were directly imprisoned and oppressed demonstrated a sense of invulnerability in the face of their sufferings through the use of self-directed humour. Although I lack access to relevant

sources to demonstrate this tendency among New Caledonian prisoners, the usefulness of self-directed humour is well documented in the case of the Nazi concentration camps where it flourished among the prisoners (Ostrower, 2015). Similarly, as I argued elsewhere, such humour has been demonstrated by the residents of Sarajevo during the city's siege following the break-up of Yugoslavia (Orlov, 2021). This commentary article advocates for this type of self-directed or even self-deprecating humour, which lies at the core of the anarchist attitude towards any external authority.

### **3. Ravachol's smile as an expression of self-directed humour**

Brigstocke presents a compelling illustration of the potency of humour as a response to authoritarianism through the case of Ravachol. Ravachol was a prominent French anarchist from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who was guillotined in 1892. His notoriety stemmed from his direct confrontations with the authorities, a concept famously referred to as "propaganda by deed." Even in death, Ravachol became an enduring symbol of defiance within anarchist circles. At the moment of his execution, his final, defiant smile, reflecting the inherent absurdity of the world, remained etched upon his countenance:

A severed head gazes down from the foot of the guillotine at the howling crowd below. The head, frozen in rigor mortis and clotted with gore, has a terrifying laugh locked on its face. It is a cold, bitter laugh, with insults and derision on its lips.

(Barrucand 1892, cited in Brigstocke, 2022, p. 11)

Unlike Brigstocke, who interprets the smile from the perspective of Ravachol's historical record as a proponent of the tactic of propaganda by deed, I suggest that the smile was directed at Ravachol's position at that moment. Brigstocke claims that there is no humour in Ravachol's smile, in contrast to the humour present in the Parisian cabarets. He acknowledges, however, that a form of truth-telling and parrhesia can also be observed in Ravachol's smile. Although propaganda by deed was losing its popularity as a tool to address authority among the French anarchists of this period, Ravachol remained dedicated to this strategy. He consistently engaged in direct violence against the bourgeois and state authorities to shift societal imagination and further increase awareness and the necessity of revolution among the public. According to the author, Ravachol's decapitated smiling face became a symbol of truth and an expression of contempt. Brigstocke interprets Ravachol's choice to smile in the face of death, in the light of his actions against the authorities, as his last attempt at propaganda by deed rather than as a humorous act. In contrast, I suggest that the smile could be interpreted as an example of self-directed humour. If this interpretation is valid, there is more humour in Ravachol's smile than in the cabaret spectacles, and it is a type of humour that is inherently anarchist in nature. I suggest that Ravachol's smile is neither an example of propaganda by deed nor an act of laughing at anyone else. Instead, the smile was directed at himself and the condition he was facing – death. As an anarchist who respected no authority over himself, a principle Ravachol explicitly manifested throughout his lifetime, I propose that he similarly rejected the authority of his inescapable conditions when his head was placed on the guillotine bench. The smile demonstrates Ravachol's awareness of his liberation from all possible external authorities and obstacles, despite being physically restrained, indicating his internal invulnerability.

Freud's similar example from his essay "Humour" (1928) further illustrates the liberating power of humour. He presents a joke about a prisoner being led to the gallows: before his Monday morning execution, the prisoner looks up into the sky and says "Well, the week's beginning nicely" (Freud, 1928, p. 1). Through this joke, the prisoner adopts a humorous attitude towards life, creating a pleasurable subjective reality in contrast to the objective world where he

is about to be executed. In Freud's words, it means: "Look here! This is all that this seemingly dangerous world amounts to! Child's play – the very thing to jest about!" (Freud, 1928, p. 5). The criminal mocks himself and thus liberates himself from the unavoidable reality. Similarly, anarchist humour is rooted in a self-directed nature and in the ability to laugh at oneself. Such humour possesses dignity, compared to laughing at others, which assumes superiority over the object of laughter and thus contradicts the principles of anarchism. Simon Critchley (2011, p. 98) compares this view of humour to Freud's idea about melancholy: "When the melancholic talks about himself it is as though he were talking about some loathsome thing. This is why melancholics talk so obsessively about themselves; in a sense, they are talking about somebody else." It means that the "subject becomes an abject object" (Critchley, 2011, p. 97). Similarly, when we mock ourselves, it is as if we laugh at someone else. This attitude is liberating, humour, in this respect acts as an anti-depressant: "This is a positive super-ego that liberates and elevates by allowing the ego to find itself ridiculous" (Critchley, 2011, p. 103). The anarchist inviolability in form of absence of any external authority upon oneself can thus be constituted in humour. It prevents any authority from being imposed upon oneself, allowing people who can laugh at themselves to be triumphant in the face of oppression, as Freud puts it:

[...] what is fine about it is the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure.

(Freud, 1928, p. 2)

In my opinion, Ravachol's last laugh before the execution exemplifies Freud's idea of the ego's invulnerability achieved through humour. Thus, even though the humour is directed at oneself rather than at the oppressor, an anarchist can undermine the power that authority can exert upon him or her through internal invulnerability. Even in the face of death, and in the absence of any belief in the afterlife, as some founders of the anarchist tradition have metaphorically "killed God." The absurdity of life and nihilism discussed by Nietzsche and Camus will be further elaborated. This will demonstrate how anarchists can implement self-directed humour as an attitude towards life.

#### **4. Humorous attitude towards the absurdity of life**

In Western philosophical thought, nihilism emerged following the death of God. This concept led to the search for new meanings and norms, as religion ceased to be a moral compass for humanity. Both Camus and Nietzsche sought solutions to nihilism. In *The Rebel* (2012), Camus searches for the cure for nihilism and the meaning of life in the surrounding absurdity, finding an answer in the rebellion. Nietzsche's (2008) response to nihilism involves the creation and constant re-evaluation of the values by the overman. However, it is only one aspect of his response, which will be further demonstrated.

Camus believed that even when there is nothing to believe in, a rebellious individual must believe in something. For him, the rebellious hero was Sisyphus. Mordechai Gordon offers a useful interpretation in this context:

Camus's point is that Sisyphus is most conscious of the cruel and absurd nature of his punishment during his descent of the mountain to retrieve the rock. When he is rolling the boulder up the mountain, Sisyphus is so immersed in the tremendous amount of effort and discipline that it takes to move the rock that he thinks very little about his misfortune. However, during his descent,

Sisyphus is free to contemplate and even react to his tragic fate. Moreover, he is not only conscious but also rebellious and scornful.

(Gordon, 2015, p. 371)

Camus' anarchist rebellion is thus an attitude one can adopt towards the surrounding nihilism and the punishment imposed by authority. Although Sisyphus is unable to escape the vicious cycle, he can at least demonstrate his rebellious attitude while descending the hill. In my opinion, while demonstrating such an attitude is highly commendable and few might be capable of it, this is precisely where the limit of Camus' anarchism lies. An anarchist is expected to be able to demonstrate this attitude both while descending the hill and while pushing the rock upward. That is why the Nietzschean approach is more uncompromising in terms of challenging the established norms and authority, and this advantage is granted to him by humour.

Gordon (2015, p. 375) refers to Freud's idea of humour's potential to liberate and make oneself invulnerable to external conditions to demonstrate that Nietzsche's second response to the bankruptcy of morality, apart from creation and re-evaluation of norms, is humour and laughter. Within the field of humour studies, Nietzsche's (1968, p. 56) claim in this respect is widely known: "[p]erhaps I know best why man alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply that he *had* to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, fittingly, the most cheerful." The ability to laugh at oneself is a significant tool for liberating ourselves from the sufferings we have to endure during our absurd lifetimes. Humour allows the real world to immerse into a non-serious subjective reality where we can view ourselves from a detached position (Critchley, 2011). When we push the rock up the hill and see no escape, we can choose to take the situation non-seriously by implementing humour and laughing at ourselves. This, indeed, is a true violation of authority. The punishment imposed upon Sisyphus becomes meaningless as it ceases to impose the suffering that is central to the idea of punishment itself. Similarly, when Ravachol smiled at himself in the face of death, his executioners had absolutely no authority over him even though they could physically imprison and decapitate him. The crowd could appreciate Ravachol's inviolable attitude and realise the limits of the state's power, much like in the case of Foucauldian parrhesia, and more significantly than through the satire of the Parisian cabarets. Such an attitude is inherently anarchist, in contrast to merely ridiculing authority. The life surrounding us, with established norms, is absurd; this absurdity is, in fact, habitual and an integral part of our existence. The best way to address this, as Nietzsche (1968) advises, is to take it light-heartedly.

The traditions we fight against today may vary, as different dominant discourses hold authority over humanity in various parts of the world. An anarchist response to these conditions is to take them light-heartedly by laughing at ourselves. Nietzsche (2008) claimed that few can become overman, and, similarly, Freud (1928) stated that liberating humour is a gift granted to a limited number of special individuals. I agree with both, however, that anarchists are particularly capable of employing humour as an attitude toward the absurdity of life and the artificial norms imposed upon us. For anarchists, this should take the form of what Voltairine de Cleyre (2004, p. 8) calls a *dominant idea* – such as when King Lodbrog's Vikings face death and torture with a smile because it reflects their attitude. De Claire states that their mindset may be explained by their primitive beliefs but also indicates the strength of their dominant idea. The anarchist attitude towards any authority, including absurdity and even death, should be a humorous expression of the dominant idea of individual invulnerability.

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