



Laughtivism: The Secret Ingredient

Dilemma actions can also be humorous. But are they even more successful? Let's face it—for the most part, resistance to repression is serious business. But as we learned in Serbia, you can really advance your serious cause if you add some humor.

If it goes against common assumptions that nonviolence is more effective than violent protests, try making the argument that using humor is more effective in a political struggle than being angry. The idea of using humor to advance a cause often seems to contradict assumptions about the role of comedy in politics. The common assumption is that, if you are laughing, you might be venting frustration or mocking an abusive power, but you can't possibly be making a difference. At least that was the idea. But there is now proof that laughtivism is actually a positive component of successful

nonviolent activism. When you insert an element of play, you melt fear and you unmask authority's weaknesses.

But don't take our word for it. We have growing evidence of why laughtivism is so successful.¹⁸ Majken Jul Sørensen studied it, and in *Humour in Political Activism: Creative Nonviolent Resistance*, she describes five different types of humorous political stunts.¹⁹ What they all have in common is that they help the public laugh at abusive authority. Laughing inverts a power dynamic and reduces fear. Suddenly it is the ones laughing who have the power because they can see the flaws in the system. Once that happens, the movement will gain steam.

Sarah Freeman-Woolpert, a former CANVAS intern and student of mine from Harvard, explains this idea in detail in her article in "Waging Nonviolence." She writes, "Using humor and irony to undermine white supremacy dates back to the days of the Third Reich, from jokes and cartoons employed by Norwegians against the Nazi occupation to 'The Great Dictator' speech by Charlie Chaplin."²⁰ In recent years, we have seen a resurgence in Nazis—and likewise of laughtivism to counter them. Today, the resistance takes the unlikely form of clowns—troupes of brightly dressed activists who show up to neo-Nazi gatherings and make a public mockery of their hateful messages. This puts white supremacists in a dilemma: their own use of violence will seem unwarranted, yet their machismo image is tainted by the comedic performance.

Humor deescalates their rallies, turning what could become a violent confrontation into a big joke. Cases show that anti-Nazi clowning can also turn into a wider community event, bringing local people together in solidarity and fun.

For instance, take the recent, mocking response to far-right demonstrators in the German town of Wunsiedel. One of the cases we studied highlights an “involuntary walk-a-thon” organized in response to an annual neo-Nazi march. The organizers drew chalk markers on the pavement marking the starting point, halfway point, and finish line. Residents and local businesses pledged to donate ten euros for every meter the white supremacists marched to a group called EXIT Deutschland, which is dedicated to helping people leave right-wing extremist groups. People came out to cheer the marchers the day of the event, flanking the route with signs that read, “If only the Fuhrer knew!” and “Mein Mamph!” (or “My Munch”) by a table of bananas offered to the walkers. This turned the marchers into involuntary resisters of their own cause and brought the community together in unity to counter the messages of white supremacy.

Other European cities have employed clowns to counter the anti-immigrant groups that seem to be ballooning under the recent wave of populist politics. For example, the “Lolliers of Odin” formed in Finland to counter a citizen patrol called Soldiers of Odin.²¹ The clowns danced around the streets the same nights that the patrols went out in the community, bringing acrobat hoops and a hobby horse. They

also danced around the “soldiers” while playing in the snow. Their actions countered right-wing propaganda of making the streets “safer” from immigrants by bringing humor and silliness to their actions.

These cases show in astonishing ways how dilemma actions and laughtivism are equally effective against hate-mongers, racists, and xenophobic extremists as they are against authoritarians.

How Humor Works

The best acts of laughtivism confront their opponent with a dilemma. The government can *react* to those who ridicule it—detaining people, confiscating objects that were part of the action, or even processing and sentencing practitioners—thereby making themselves look even more ridiculous in the process. Or it can *ignore the acts* of laughtivism aimed against them, thereby opening the floodgates of dissent and enabling numerous replicas of the original action.

Indeed, when faced with an act of brazen mockery, oppressive regimes and strongmen have no good choices. Whatever they do, they will likely be perceived as losers. And that is because authoritarian power has no sense of humor. In the United States, you might make fun of the president, like for example when Chevy Chase impersonated Gerald Ford

on Saturday Night Live (SNL) or Jordan Peele impersonated Barack Obama. In those cases, if the president doesn't react strongly and even jokes about the impersonation, then it doesn't have a major negative effect on public perceptions of the person mocked. But, in contrast, if you have a strong, negative reaction, as Donald Trump did when Alec Baldwin impersonated him for SNL or in reaction to Sarah Cooper's TikTok impersonations, you open yourself up to even more mockery. As a result, whenever Trump tweets his displeasure at comedians, other high-profile comedians along with the general public respond by making fun of him.

But that's just an example from a Western democracy. It works elsewhere, too. Take as another example Putin's Russia, where instead of ignoring the prank—and being perceived as weak—the regime was forced to act and ended up looking bizarre and stupid. In early 2012—after local authorities barred public demonstrations that brought thousands in the streets in the aftermath of an election scandal—activists from the Siberian city of Barnaul staged a “toy protest.”²² Instead of carrying anti-Putin placards themselves, which would most probably get them immediately detained, Russian laughtivists propped up teddy bears, Lego characters, and South Park figurines to carry their messages for them. The toy protest backed Kremlin authorities into an awkward rationalization for banning something as seemingly inconsequential as a Lego toy holding a sign? After confiscating the unsanctioned toy “protesters,” Siberian authorities placed an official ban on

all future toy protests because the toys were not Russian citizens, but were, in fact, made in China. Thanks to the government's clumsy reaction, videos, images, and stories of their decision made national and international headlines.

Laughtivism even works against an oppressive military junta. The Burmese military faced hundreds of thousands of demonstrators with live rounds and tanks and did not hesitate to slaughter hundreds of them in cold blood during the Saffron Revolution in 2007. But just a year later, the regime was caught off guard and internationally humiliated by ladies' undergarments. The "Panties for Peace" campaign "played on the weaknesses of their opponents by exploiting the belief held by many in the military junta that female undergarments would drain power from the military regime by cursing their soldiers."²³ While the idea that they would be scared of panties may seem silly, to them it was a legitimate fear. So activists decided to play on this weakness and for more than ten months, women in Burma and from around the world mailed their panties to local Burmese embassies and to members of the military in a bid to strip the regime of its power and bring an end to its gross violations of human rights, especially those committed against Burma's women. With no clear answer to the creative provocation of these "laughtivists," the Burmese ruling generals *just abstained from reacting*. Normally wary Burmese women grew more confident, and other human rights groups gained motivation to escalate their campaign and replicate it both domestically and internationally.

You may doubt that the laughtivist approach leads to sustained political change. After all, if they are to succeed, activists must convey meanings and deliver messages, not just pull off a pratfall or a sight gag. But there is a reason humor is such a popular tool in the modern activist's arsenal: it works. For one thing, it breaks fear and builds confidence. For another, it also adds the necessary "cool factor," which helps movements attract new members. Additionally, much laughtivism can be done electronically using the tools available via digital media to call attention to abuses of power. Memes, for example, are easy to create and even easier to circulate, allowing users and sharers the relative safety of anonymity. Finally, humor does an excellent job of posing a dilemma for your opponent that tends to lead to clumsy reactions. The best acts of laughtivism clearly force autocrats and their security pillars into lose-lose scenarios, undermining the credibility of their regimes or institutions no matter how they manage to respond.

There may be another, more psychological reason why laughtivism works, especially against the mighty and powerful. Politicians, whether democratically elected or having seized power through other means, usually share an inflated sense of self-importance. After too long in power, and after seeing their own photoshopped face too many times in newspapers and on the covers of magazines, they inevitably start living in a kind of unreality. It's as if they start believing their own propaganda, and as a result, they start *taking themselves*

too seriously. This is why they very often react viscerally and in a self-defeating way when challenged with laughtivism.

And, as we have argued, one of the critical reasons why laughtivism is so effective is that it helps point out the situational irony of abusive power.²⁴ When a dictator claims that he is operating in the public's interest by repressing them, that situation is ironic, even if it isn't funny. The situation is ironic because it holds deep structural contradictions. It claims to be good for the public when in essence it is bad. It is like the shiny, happy photos of dictators that tend to line highways or show up in political advertisements. Their smiles make you cringe. Laughtivists are in a unique position to use critical irony to expose these flaws, unmask the farce, and show that the emperor, in fact, has no clothes. Once a resistance movement learns how to analyze the ironic contradictions of a repressive system, they can then find creative and entertaining ways to expose it.²⁵

For example, if a government is using excessive force but telling the public that force is needed to "keep the peace," then all protesters need to do is emphasize their peacefulness in order to show that the force is unnecessarily repressive. If, for example, the protesters hold out a flower like a gun in the face of police in riot gear, the flower will immediately allow the public to see the painful irony of their government's guns. And if the protesters hold flowers while dressed as clowns, it will show the public that the government has manufactured the threat that they supposedly need to repress. Suddenly

the laughtivists have shown that the real threat is a violent government and the protesters are not dangerous at all—and even better, such an action shows that they are so confident in their views that they can make jokes about those in power. That sort of attitude helps attract support for the cause and turn the tide.

Of course, just because laughter in nonviolent struggles has recently become so common, it is not easy or “spontaneous.” On the contrary, research shows laughtivism, as a special form of dilemma action, requires a similar set of strategic components to prepare, design, and perpetuate a constant stream of creativity to stay in the news, headlines, and tweets, as well as to maintain a movement’s momentum. As explained above, a key element of a successful dilemma action is a communications strategy. This is true for laughtivism, too. You can make power look like a joke, but you can’t assume that the media will cover the story without your calling attention to it. Once the media is aware, though, the chances are even higher that they will help draw even more attention.

The challenges to successful laughtivism are worth the gain. Humorous political stunts, like the ones in Sørensen’s study and in ours, attract new members, get media attention, and facilitate dialogue. Of course, there are risks to adding humor to resistance movements—especially the risk of not being taken seriously by the public or further dividing society. The risk of violent reprisals is real too. Even though

nonviolent actions tend to protect those who wage them, it is important to note that when laughtivism incites a violent response, this response may be even more aggressive than in actions that do not include laughtivism. This is so because when a figure and its allies feel mocked and dehumanized the results can be highly toxic. This was the case, for example, in the attacks on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.²⁶ Taking those risks into consideration, however, there are still many good reasons for activists to use laughtivism.

By and large, we find that when humor is a component of dilemma actions, it is an especially valuable weapon against repression. If you thought it was hard to arrest protesters being peaceful, it is way harder to arrest them when they are dressed as clowns or they are making out in a subway.