



Call for papers for an *ephemera* special issue on:

The comic organization

Issue Editors: Nick Butler, Casper Hoedemaekers and Dimitrinka Stoyanova

The study of humour has become a prevalent theme in organization studies over the last few decades (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). This is perhaps unsurprising as joking practices are a part of all workplaces, not to mention everyday life. Studies have documented the prevalence of clowning, horseplay, pranks, satire, ridicule and lampooning in a variety of settings and at every level in the organizational hierarchy (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). But while joking practices are certainly pervasive, the meaning and significance of humour at work is by no means uncontested: humour is said to serve variously as a coping mechanism, a subversive strategy and a management tool in contemporary organizations. Starting from this basis, the Special Issue seeks to explore the 'inescapable ambiguity of humour' (Kenny and Euchler, 2012: 307) in relation to the world of work.

The role of humour and laughter in organizations has undergone a considerable shift in recent years. For much of the twentieth century, joking practices were strictly forbidden within the industrial workplace due to the negative impact on labour discipline. This is illustrated most vividly by the story of the assembly-line worker who was fired because he was smiling and laughing with his colleagues, thus disrupting the flow of production (Collinson, 2002). Increasingly, however, humour is coming to play a prominent role in ensuring compliance to corporate objectives. This is most evident in contemporary 'cultures of fun', which encourage employees to

engage in light-hearted and enjoyable activities in order to secure commitment, improve motivation and ultimately boost productivity (Butler, et al., 2011; Warren and Fineman, 2007). In response to such initiatives, employees might respond with mockery and ridicule as much as lively engagement or wholehearted participation – after all, there is probably nothing less likely to raise a smile than being compelled to have fun (Fleming 2005). This points to humour as a complex and sometimes contradictory ideological element in contemporary organizations (Westwood and Johnson, 2012).

Historically, the work of humour has played an important role in inverting the norms and values of society, from ritual clowning in tribal societies to the preachings of ‘holy fools’ in Eastern Orthodoxy (Palmer, 1994). For example, the seriousness of official culture during the Middle Ages was continuously undermined, albeit temporarily, by the riotous laughter of the carnival (Bakhtin, 1984). Today, the labour of laughter has increasingly become a part of mass entertainment: ‘fun is a medicinal bath’ that soothes and pacifies us, masking the grotesque inequalities of industrial capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 140). But while comedy is certainly big business, we might wonder whether there is the possibility for a more radical kind of humour to mobilize against the imperatives of commercialization – perhaps one that ‘respects no categorical distinctions and follows no norms’ but ‘sweeps in without warning’ to shatter social conventions and disrupt the economic order with a sudden burst of laughter (Davis, 2000: 29).

This Special Issue takes seriously Walter Benjamin’s suggestion that ‘there is no better starting point for thought than laughter’ (cited in Parvescu, 2010: 12). Certainly, the phenomenon of laughter provides a basis on which our capacities and limitations as human subjects can be understood and interrogated. On the one hand, laughter calls to mind the fallibility of our condition – we laugh at a pratfall, for example, because such behaviour doesn’t measure up to our image of how a person should ideally conduct themselves (Bergson, 2010). On the other hand, laughter underlines the fact that we possess the ability to speculate on other possible realities or ‘counter-worlds’ (Berger, 1997) – after all, what is a joke if not a reflection on how things could be otherwise? Humour therefore plays an inherently unstable role in society, drawing attention to the deficiencies in ourselves and others whilst simultaneously opening up potentially new ways of thinking and acting in the world (Critchley, 2002). We therefore invite submissions that engage in a critical analysis of the ‘comic organization’ in the broadest sense, especially those that move beyond the conventional understanding of humour and laughter as intrinsically positive and desirable (Billig, 2005)

Possible topics include but are not limited to the following:

- The ethics and politics of humour
- Parody and satire in organizations
- Humour, transgression and the carnivalesque
- Taste, taboo and offensiveness
- The philosophy of humour and laughter
- Jokes and their relation to the unconscious at work
- Humour and advertising
- Jokes, class and social order
- Humour, hierarchy and subversion
- Humour and cynicism at work
- Theology, redemption and divine laughter
- The labour of joking: writing and performing comedy
- Positive psychology and the ideology of positivity

Deadline for submissions: 31st December 2013

All contributions should be submitted to one of the Special Issue editors: Nick Butler (nick.butler@fek.lu.se), Casper Hoedemaekers (choedem@essex.ac.uk) or Dimitrinka Stoyanova (dimitrinka.stoyanova@wbs.ac.uk). Please note that three categories of contributions are invited for the special issue: articles, notes, and reviews. All submissions should follow *ephemera's* submissions guidelines (www.ephemerajournal.org/how-submit). Articles will undergo a double blind review process.

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