

Humour as Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression

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Introduction & methodology

Humour as nonviolent resistance to oppression is an understudied area within peace studies, and little attention has been given to how and why humour can be a powerful strategy in challenging oppression.¹ This dissertation will both explore a new area of study and make the first attempts of building a theory of the functions of humour as nonviolent resistance to oppression. The method for this exploratory research is two fold:

1. It draws on sociological, philosophical and multidisciplinary literature about humour, nonviolence, and resistance. This literature contains both theory and empirical examples of diverse oppressive situations where humour has been used as part of resistance to oppression.² The findings from the literature is combined with
2. a case study of the Serbian *Otpor* movement that helped bring Slobodan Milošević from power in October 2000. The case study is built on journalistic and academic literature about the end of Milošević's rule as well as the authors qualitative interviews with 13 former Otpor members in Belgrade in June 2006. These interviewees represent a diverse group of former Otpor activists when it comes to age, gender and their role within Otpor. The interviews were conducted from a phenomenological and constructivist understanding of the importance of people's personal experiences and meanings that

¹ Most research on humour seems to be done by the medical professions with in interest in humour's ability to keep us healthy and overcome diseases. See e.g. the number of articles published in the academic journal "Humour" that is concerned with health compared to the number with a philosophical, societal or political focus.

² The examples used in this dissertation are all about state oppression – against a state's own citizens, against the citizens of an occupied country or against people kept in concentration camps or as prisoners of war (POW's). The people who are under oppression and use humour include both people who act as individuals and groups taking collective action. I sometimes refer to "the oppressor", as if it was a person, however, in cases of state oppression, this is short for "the oppressive system". Oppression in this scale is never be the responsibility of a single person, but build on the cooperation from a large number of people in the state administration, police and military. Although this study is limited to acts of state oppression, the area of humorous resistance to oppression could potentially also include oppression from smaller groups, e.g. neo-Nazis attacking immigrants or homosexuals, or in cases of domestic violence. This would be an interesting area of research for future studies.

construct their reality.³ See appendix A for more details about the selection of informants, the conduction of the interviews and method for analysis of the interviews.

In the selection of topic I am inspired by *critical theory*⁴ to choose a subject that deals with creating social change for a society with less repression, based on the normative assumption that repression like the methods used by the regime of Slobodan Milošević is something undesirable. The case study of the Otpor movement's use of humour is selected because it is special, and by looking more closely at the unusual, we can often get more information about the less unusual.⁵ Otpor's strategic use of humour and creativity is well known by people who are familiar with the organisation, and this uniqueness makes it possible to see the role of humour more clearly than in nonviolence against oppression where humour had a less central role and the humour therefore becomes invisible among other factors playing a role in resistance.⁶ Because Otpor is a special case it will not be possible to draw general conclusions, but in the future the ideas for a theory I suggest in chapter three can also be tested on other cases. To use a special case is vindicated because of the nature of exploratory research - since so little is known we need to look in a direction where there is something to be found.

In order not to build everything on a single case study, my ideas for a theory also draws on the literature findings. There are no contradictions between the examples from the literature and the findings in the

³ pp. 96-107

⁴ p.130-131; p. 11

⁵ Pp. 45-46, 55

⁶ For an author that refer to Otpor's creativity and ridicule of Milosevic, see e.g. pp. 319, 322. I first heard some examples of how Otpor had used humour during a visit in 2003, but not until the fieldwork in June 2006 did I realise how well thought through the strategy, including the use of humour, was. The only other organisations I have come across that used humour with the same kind of strategic thought is the Norwegian total resisters mentioned in chapter one and the clown army CIRCA mentioned in chapter 3. I do not exclude the possibility that other movements have used humour in their actions as well, but if they exist they have not written much about their experiences. However, there is no doubt that many movements have used humour to some degree – when I have discussed my theme with other people, they often have a memory of political humour used in Columbia, Belarus, Czechoslovakia or somewhere else. It would be interesting both if more examples were collected, and if their role in the struggle against oppression was analysed.

interviews, rather they support each other and combined they can generate new knowledge.

The methodology for the interviews in the case study is described in detail in Appendix A, but a few important considerations should be mentioned here:

Before the fieldwork, I had some assumptions about what I would be looking for, which were formulated like this: **Humour used by a social movement in an oppressive situation creates solidarity within the movement, attracts new members, overcomes apathy and challenges the fear of oppression.**

I found support for all this and much more, except that the aspect about “creating solidarity” early turned out to be problematic. What was problematic was the word “solidarity”, and not the meaning as I understand it: That humour can create the feeling that you belong together in the group, and support each other in difficult situations. As documented in chapter two, the informants spoke about this, but with other words, which is the reason why I in chapter three mention that the literature support this more than the case study. Because interesting areas that I had not thought of beforehand came up during the interviews, questions about some of the functions of humour have not been asked systematically to all informants. This is mentioned in the text in chapter two when I discuss the functions of humour.

Although the unique use of humour is well known among people who study Otpor, this use of humour is not considered anything special among the former Otpor activists, for many of them it was “just there”, and they did not consider it special until I asked for an interview about their use of humour. To avoid forcing my view on them, I made it very clear that although my main interest was their use of humour, I wanted to know if there were other factors they found more important or equally important to humour. The answers to this can be found in the section “the importance of humour as part of a strategy” in chapter two.

In this short dissertation I am mainly concerned with finding support for my ideas about the unique possibilities of humour. However, all good

research should also look for possible contradictions and disagreement with its findings. For lack of time and space, and since this is exploratory research, it has not been possible to do much of this. Nevertheless, in some footnotes I try to point towards possible areas of disagreement.

The following research questions are the basis for the dissertation:

1. What do theories about humour and theories about nonviolent resistance have to say about humour as nonviolent resistance? Which part of the theories can be combined in order to understand this area better?
2. What kind of humour has been used as part of nonviolent resistance against oppression?
3. What are the functions of this humour? How does it affect the participants in the movement and their relationships with people outside the movement?
4. How does the use of humour affect the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor?
5. What is the dynamic of humour as nonviolent resistance? How and why does it work?
6. What theoretical framework is needed in order to understand the functions of humour as resistance to oppression?

The dissertation is structured in three chapters: *Chapter one* introduces the reader to a wide range of literature about humour, laughter and absurdity mainly from the fields of philosophy and sociology, and gives examples of humour used against different kinds of oppression. This literature is combined with the interdisciplinary tradition of theory of nonviolent resistance. *Chapter two* is a case study of the Otpor movement from 1998-2000 with a particular focus on the movement's use of humour. The chapter explores how Otpor's use of humour can be analysed as functions of humour that served different purposes within the movement and in relation to people outside the movement. *Chapter three* brings the first two chapters

together in an analysis of the particular power of humour as nonviolent resistance. It investigates how humour can transcend rationality and how it can combine the serious with innocence and thereby bring a unique dynamic to the struggle against oppression. Through involving the repressive forces in the fun, it is possible to alter relationships. Here I also introduce the beginning of a theory of the functions of humour as nonviolent resistance to oppression. The first function of humour is to *facilitate outreach and mobilisation*, the second is focused on building inner strength for the individual or the movement by *facilitating a culture of resistance*. The third function of humour I consider unique and also has the most powerful potential. Humour has an ability to make three things happen at the same time: It escalates the conflict by mocking and ridiculing the oppression, at the same time as it reduces fear of repression and makes it difficult for the oppressive forces to respond adequately. I call this function of humour: *Turning oppression upside down*. The *conclusion* sums up the dissertation and introduces areas for further study.

Chapter One: Humour and Nonviolent Resistance

What is humour?

Humour is what makes a person laugh or smile, something they find amusing.⁷ It is both a constant and a relative concept - constant because all societies use humour and relative because what we find funny varies considerably⁸. Humour can take the form of a joke, story, play, skit, movie or book, a way of acting or a slogan in a demonstration. It can be based on irony, satire, parody and ridicule. The humour investigated in this dissertation is political and directed against oppression. Humour, e.g. used to ridicule ethnic minorities or women can indeed be oppressive and cruel, but the kind of humour I will explore encourages critical reflection about how society is and how we want it to be, and has a liberating function.⁹

Humour is always contextual and related to society - although we can sit by ourselves and laugh at a funny story, it is only funny when we know the background. What is funny is usually when things are turned upside down or when things are no longer as we usually perceive them. Almost all humour is based on contradictions and incongruity, and to understand it, we have to be able to think in more than one dimension.¹⁰

At the societal level, theories about the sociology of humour have been formed by different authors with different ideas about how humour and

⁷ This is the most basic definition of humour, e.g. used by Encyclopædia Britannica. . Almost every book and article about humour/the comic/absurdity/satire begins by saying how difficult and almost impossible it is to define the concept, and end up using one word to define part of another. Trying to define *satire*, Condren writes: “*Satire is neither a genre nor a closed form of writing, indeed, it is hardly constrained by the written word (...) it slides through definitional restrictions like soup through a colander. Rather than trying to dish it in duly defined proportion; it is better if more broadly we see satire as an idiom of criticism, correction and reform, most readily identifiable by its use of humour*” p. 80. For other attempts of defining different concepts, see for example: pp. 3-5; pp. 2-5. For the purpose of this dissertation it is not necessary to have definitions beyond everyday understandings of the concepts “joke”, “satire”, “irony” “ridicule”, “mockery” “parody” etc, but future and more detailed studies of the various kinds of humour one can use against oppression should be analysed more closely, also to see what the effect of certain kinds of humour is.

⁸ p. x; p. 7

⁹ p. 9-11

¹⁰ p. 25, 32, 60. Berger suggests that the incongruity comes from the uniquely human experience of both having and being a body. p. 29,209. In the end of the book, Berger’s point is that there are similarities between the experience of the comic and religious experiences, that both transcend the differences between different realities. (Our everyday reality vs. the reality of the comic/religious). Chapter 14.

society are linked. Michael Mulkay writes with special reference to humour in advanced industrial democratic societies,¹¹ but he offers a general theory on the sociology of humour. First of all, he introduces the **serious mode** and the **humorous mode**, and what characterises these two modes. In the **serious mode**, we all assume that we share the same world, and take for granted that other people perceive the world the same way as we do. When we are in the serious mode, there has to be a clear boundary between what is real and what is unreal. This is the world based on reason and logic, and contradictions are treated as problematic, where something can not “be” and “not be” at the same time. Contradictions are treated as failure to communicate properly, and assumed to be based on misunderstandings. In this mode, they **have** to be treated as problematic, otherwise they threatens to undermine the perception that we share the same world. In the **humorous mode**, on the contrary, there has to be contradictions, because that is the basic principal of the humorous mode. Contradictions are not problematic, but a necessary feature of the humorous mode. Here we play with the misunderstandings, incongruity and duality. In order for a joke to be funny, it has to turn things up-side-down and present something in more than one frame at the same time.¹² Stephen Brigham writes about the contrast between the world of reason and the world of the absurd, but it is basically the same contradiction they speak about. Brigham suggests that through absurdity, we can gain new insights that we cannot reach, or at least is more difficult to reach, with reason and logic. Showing things in an absurd frame means that rationality can be transcended. He writes mainly about personal transformation through psychotherapy, but potentially this can also true for changes at the societal level.¹³

For Mulkay, most humour is conservative and reinforces the status quo. Even political humour that at first hand seems to be radical and challenge things as they are, will in the long run serve to underline the already

¹¹ p. 2. Mulkay does not himself mention that he only analyse democratic societies, but all his examples are from Britain and the USA.

¹² pp. 22-30. This distinction between the humorous and the serious mode also gives a suggestion to why it is so difficult to define humour as described in footnote 5. By forcing something that naturally operates in more than one dimension into only one is in itself a contradiction.

¹³ Unpublished Ph.d. manuscript.

established political divisions. Political humour will only appeal to the already convinced, and does not change political opinions.¹⁴ My findings contradict this, and I will return to the problems with calling all political humour conservative in chapter three.

Few have written explicitly about humour as resistance to oppression. On the contrary, in an article about political jokes in the Soviet Union under dictatorship, Gregor Benton writes that jokes are **not** a form of resistance, and do not mobilise anybody but only serve to air frustration and keep society sane without any long-term impact on resistance to oppression.¹⁵ He finishes his article with this strong statement:

“But the political joke will change nothing. It is the relentless enemy of greed, injustice, cruelty and oppression - but it could never do without them. It is not a form of active resistance. It reflects no political programme. It will mobilise no one. Like the Jewish joke in its time, it is important for keeping society sane and stable. It cushions the blows of cruel governments and creates sweet illusions of revenge. It has the virtue of momentarily freeing the lives of millions from the tensions and frustrations to which even the best organised political opposition can promise only long-term solutions, but its impact is a fleeting as the laughter it produces.”¹⁶

Benton does not offer any documentation for this claim, and this dissertation challenges his idea, although it is concerned with humour in a much broader sense than the jokes Benton writes about.

Humour under oppression and the social functions of humour.

Oppression can take many forms, and what is considered oppression changes across time and space. It is not necessary for the purpose of this text to set criteria for “oppression” as long as those concerned regard themselves as oppressed and use humour. The literature about humour gives some examples of how humour is used in different oppressive situations. Although they describe humour under certain circumstances, some more

¹⁴ pp. 209-212

¹⁵ pp. 41 and 54.

¹⁶ p. 54

general reflections about humour and oppression can be extracted from this writing. I will combine the examples with sociological categories of the social function of humour. Koller has identified thirteen such functions, and eight of his categories correspond well with how humour can function in resistance to oppression. They will be introduced when they illustrate a certain example.¹⁷ His category "Social Correction"¹⁸, which is concerned with social criticism aimed at changing status quo, covers all the humorous examples mentioned here. This also relates to the liberating function of humour I am exploring.

In her writings about the use of humour as resistance to Nazi occupation in Norway 1940-45, Kathleen Stokker notes that quisling humour (directed towards Vidkun Quisling, the leader of the Norwegian Nazi party) protected peoples self-respect and gave the population some sort of control in an uncontrollable situation.¹⁹ The jokes also served to break down isolation and create a solidarity and group identity within the population. Because so many people shared the jokes, their very existence contradicted the Nazi propaganda that people who did not join them would stand alone.²⁰ Stokker writes: *"The jokes also provided an image of nation-wide solidarity that vitally assisted the resistance effort."*²¹, something which contradicts Benton's idea that humour will never create any social change. A widely circulated joke in Norway, that at the same time illustrates how broadly resistance can be understood, is this:

"A Nazi officer brushed past a little gray-haired, aristocratic looking old lady. She raised her cane and knocked off his hat, berating him loudly for showing so little respect toward his elders. Embarrassed, he apologized, but she continued her tirade until he fled. The little old lady went on about her business chuckling to herself, "well,

¹⁷ pp. 17-26. The five categories I will not use in this dissertation because they are less relevant to the theme is: "Celebration of Life", "Balancing pain", "Defence against, Counter or Parry, Attacks or Threats", "Therapy or Catharsis", and "Survival".

¹⁸ p. 22

¹⁹ p. 339

²⁰ p. 349. In the postwar time, the jokes have served the purpose to create the myth that everybody participated in the resistance, and that nobody supported the occupation, which is contradicted by the fact that 60.000 Norwegians joined the Nazi party.

²¹ p. 339

*we'll all have to fight this war as best we can;
that's the fourth hat I've knocked into the mud
this morning"*²²

In Norway, this kind of humour helped create a resistance mentality.²³ In Koller's categories they become a way of forming "Social bonding" that shows who is "in" with the resistance movement, and who is "out" with the Nazi's. Some of this humour is an "Expression of Aggression and Hostility" and "Reinforcing stereotypes"²⁴, two of Koller's categories, e.g. when jokes are made about the Nazi's stupidity. (See appendix B for an example of this).

Stokker compares the Norwegian occupation humour with jokes from Eastern Europe during dictatorship, and finds that in Norwegian humour "everyone" fights back, and support for the resistance movement is found in the most unusual places, whereas in Eastern Europe, the jokes show that you should trust no one.²⁵ (See Appendix B for an example of this).

But humour can be much else than jokes: Two examples of humorous nonviolent action are also from Norway, this time in the social democratic 1983. A small group of total objectors organised in the group Kampanjen Mot Verneplikt²⁶ (KMV), who refuses both military and alternative service, wanted to create public debate and change the law that gave them 16 month in prison, but labelled it: "*serve their service in an institution under the administration of the prison authorities*"²⁷. To avoid having political prisoners there were officially no trial, no prisoner and no punishment. The cases of the total objectors went through the courts to establish who they were, but it was not a court case in the sense that there were anything to argue about - the result was always the same, 16 month in prison. Often the prosecutor never showed up because the result was clear anyway, so KMV

²² p. 351

²³ p. 154

²⁴ pp. 20 & 24. Koller is talking about "Reinforcing or undermining stereotypes", but in this context humour is not used to undermine stereotypes about the Nazis, although humour has this potential as well.

²⁵ pp. 102-103. This difference in the kind of humour used can be one explanation why Benton is so certain that jokes not will change anything, since he look at jokes from the Soviet Union, but it is no excuse for generalising from one country to the whole world, and it does not defend Benton against what we can learn from Stokker and Scott.

²⁶ Which means "Campaign against Conscription"

²⁷ p. 24

exploited this in one of their actions: One of the activists dressed up as the prosecutor and overplayed his role and demanded that the total objector got even longer time in prison because of his profession (he was a lawyer). As “the prosecutor” writes several years later:

“We wanted to show the country the illusion of justice in these cases. We planned to “wake” the people by laughter and make them think about what they saw. We hoped to get a balance of spectacular play and political arguments in order to, via headlines, put the whole question of conscription on the political agenda”²⁸

Nobody noticed anything wrong until one week later when KMV send their secret video recording of the case to the media and most of the country was laughing. In this action KMV satirise over the absurdity of having a court case when there is nothing to discuss, and succeeded in getting attention for their cause. A case against the activist playing the prosecutor was dismissed for lack of evidence although KMV gladly send them the video as evidence, but the authorities had probably had enough circus in their court. KMV aimed to wake the people and “provoke thought”, which is another of Kollers categories.²⁹

In another action a few months later, a number of activists climbed over the wall and into the prison where one of their members where serving his 16 months. The group demanded to be imprisoned together with their friend on the grounds that they shared his views and therefore should be imprisoned with him. This action caused confusion in the prison, where the guards were not used to getting extra inmates. In the end the activists held a press conference in the prison and was then carried out by the police. This time a case was not even raised against the activists. Not because the authorities did not know what happened, but because the action made the Norwegian population laugh again, and because there was no way of punishing them without looking ridiculous. What should the punishment be? Prison as the activists had demanded?³⁰

²⁸ p. 25

²⁹ p. 23

³⁰ For description of both actions see: pp. 25-26; and pp. 145-148

This is an example of what Koller calls “Upholding Honesty over Sham”, where humour is used to show the discrepancy between what politicians say and what the reality is. If the politicians call Norway a democracy, how come people are sent to prison for their beliefs, and how come that the imprisonment is not even called a prison sentence, but an administrative term for serving their alternative service?

This example has a particular twist to it because the activists broke into the prison, which clearly illustrates an important problem that an oppressive regime faces when its power is challenged with humour: How can it respond to this challenge without looking ridiculous and making people laugh even more? I will discuss this dynamic of humour further in chapter three.

Humour has been an important coping mechanism for individuals in stressful situations, from contemporary Somalia during the civil war³¹ to Nazi concentration camps and for prisoners of war. At first sight, humour in concentration camps seems impossible, but Neuman explains with many different examples what kind of humour flourished in the Nazi concentration camps all over Europe, and how they served different purposes. He thinks that this humour, often very black and morbid, both gave people a few seconds or minutes with something else than misery to think about, it preserved a sense of self-respect, it kept the wish to live alive, and it gave another perspective on the horror experienced every day than a tragic perspective does³². The humour often speak ironically of Nazi propaganda, for example in a song from Dachau that plays with the German slogan “Arbeit macht frei”³³ or with the ever present fear of death as in the joke “the glass eye”:

“An SS soldier comes into the barrack, block 8. His fierce look portend of death. But he has another tidings of death than typhus fever this time. He walks towards the camp prisoner Jerzy, a jew from Poland and says unemotional and grim: Tomorrow you will be shot, but

³¹ p. 145

³² pp. 25-26, 40-50, 53-54, 59

³³ pp. 141-143

I will give you one chance to live a little while longer - tell me which of my two blue eyes is a glass eye and if you guess correct you will survive this time. Jerzy, who is now trembling, looks into both of the eyes of the SS soldier for a long time. In the end he points at the soldier's left eye and says that is the glass eye. Correct says the soldier, how could you see that? You see, says Jerzy with relief, that eye has such a human look.”³⁴

The problems with slipping into apathy is also present in less severe situations than concentration camps. In both chapter two and three we will look at how humour can not only overcome individual, but also political apathy.

Writing about American prisoners of war in Vietnam, Henman describes how humour and jokes was a way of building relationships between the prisoners (which in my terminology becomes creating solidarity), but it was also “*a weapon for fighting back*”³⁵. It was not fighting back in the sense of taking over the prison, but fighting back in the sense of keeping control over ones own reactions in a situation where the prisoners had little control over anything else.³⁶ The same focus on control that Stokker referred to in the case of Norway under occupation. Several of Henman’s informants were willing to risk torture for telling a joke, if the joke would cheer up a fellow prisoner.³⁷ In Koller’s terminology, the kind of humour that Neuman and Henman mention is “Relief from Stress and Strain”, however short the relief is.

Hidden transcripts as moral ground for resistance

Resistance is interlinked with oppression, and the space for resistance can be more or less limited. In this text, I am only concerned with resistance to oppression and domination, the kind of resistance that aim to be liberating.³⁸ Resistance consists of many possible actions along a

³⁴ p. 20. Translated from Swedish by the author.

³⁵ p. 85

³⁶ p. 88

³⁷ p. 86

³⁸ Hoy calls this “critical resistance”, and this is the common use of “resistance”. However, it can also be called resistance when the oppressor resists the resistance. p. 2

continuum, and should not be understood only as either open rebellion or absolute submission.

A “hidden transcript” as opposed to the “public transcript” is the way a subordinate group act and talk about their oppressor behind his back. In the public transcript, the slave, the worker, the untouchable and the citizen under dictatorship says “Yes sir!”, show obedience and compliance, but when she can get away with it during the dark or together with a small group of trusted friends, the worker will work slower, the slave will steal his masters food and the oppressed citizen will mock and ridicule the dictator.³⁹ According to James Scott, who invented these terms, the hidden transcript has an important role in itself in giving people dignity in the eyes of themselves and their group, but it also serves as preparation for the day (which may never come) where the hidden transcript is declared in public and resistance is made open.⁴⁰ Scott’s nuanced understanding of resistance to domination, which is opposed to traditional understandings of resistance as open rebellion, provides us with concepts for looking at all the space between complete compliance and openly declared rebellion, the space where things are not as they seem on the surface.

Jokes, satire and ridicule are only one part of the hidden transcript, and Scott does not give humour particular attention. But humour, as part of the hidden transcript becomes one way of developing the culture for further and openly declared resistance. This is a strong contrast to Benton, who claims that political jokes will never be a form of resistance, but links well with Stokker’s understanding of how jokes can contribute to a resistance mentality and the writings of Neuman and Henman about the humour in concentration camps and for prisoners of war, which help preserve self-respect, dignity and a wish to live.

Nonviolent resistance to oppression

There are many definitions of nonviolence, and the concept is often misunderstood. I follow Vinthagen in understanding nonviolence to include

³⁹ pp. xii, 4-6, 17-19

⁴⁰ p. 202

two aspects at the same time: resistance to violence (against violence) without using violence yourself (without violence).⁴¹ Nonviolence has nothing to do with passivity. It is common to separate between principled and strategic use of nonviolence, although many overlaps between the two traditions exist.⁴² Although someone like Gandhi would prefer to treat the opponent with respect and convince her that he was right rather than coerce her to submit, most practitioners of nonviolence today are much more pragmatic, and would not have any problem using e.g. aggressive and hostile humour if it would help them achieve their objectives. The theme of aggression also appears in Berger's writing about satire as a weapon, and satire certainly can have an aggressive element. Satire that doesn't bite is no longer satire.⁴³ However, in relating humour to resistance and therefore to power, I find it important to make a distinction between different types of aggression. There is the kind of satire that kicks upwards towards the oppressor, and the kind of satire that kicks down at a minority. Sometimes the role of the oppressor and oppressed is overlapping, but some cases are relatively clear. A clear example of satire used to kick the oppressor is Otpor's attacks on Milošević which we will return to later, an example of satire directed towards an oppressed minority is the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed.⁴⁴ Satire that is not directed towards the oppressor loses its liberating function and can itself become oppression.

The technical use of nonviolence, as described by Gene Sharp and other authors, is built on identifying the weakest points in the dictatorship, determination and good strategic planning by the people waging the struggle.⁴⁵

⁴¹ p. 26.

⁴² Gandhi is most often associated with the principled use of nonviolence, while Gene Sharp was the first to develop the technical approach theoretically. pp. 76-77. However, Gandhi himself was also a great strategist, and Sharp was influenced by Gandhi's strategic thinking, see e.g. . Some members of social movements that use nonviolent means because they expect them to be more effective than violence can have nonviolence as their personal way of life although the rest of the movement does not.

⁴³ pp. 157-158.

⁴⁴ In September 2005 the Danish newspaper "Jyllandsposten" in the name of free speech printed a number of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, which was considered very offensive by the marginalised Danish Muslim population. During the next couple of months and culminating in the beginning of 2006, these cartoons led to an international crisis and boycott of Danish products.

⁴⁵ ;

Nonviolence means that the group taking up resistance is using nonviolent means, but it does not mean that violence is absent. On the contrary, by escalating a previously hidden conflict, nonviolent resistance is likely to produce violent repression from police and military if the opponent is a state or has the support of the state.⁴⁶

“Political jiu-jitsu” is an important term for nonviolent resistance, and it refers to how the opponents own force, as in the martial art, is used against him. When nonviolent resistance is met with violence, a special dynamic arises: It becomes difficult to justify the use of violence against a nonviolent resister. Sharp writes: *“Cruelties and brutalities committed against the clearly nonviolent are likely to disturb many people and fill some with outrage. Even milder violent repression appears less justified against nonviolent people than when employed against violent resisters”*⁴⁷. Such unjustified repression forces third parties and previously undecided people to take sides.

An interesting parallel to the way satire works can be found here, as satire is also a form of martial art where words are turned around and the person or case satirised around find his own force used against him, as Berger says about satire: *“Like the martial arts, it always uses the adversary’s strengths against himself and thus turns them into weaknesses”*

⁴⁸

In his 198 methods of nonviolent resistance, Sharp also includes one which is called “Humorous skits and pranks,”⁴⁹ where he uses examples from Eastern Europe. Although Sharp is concerned with strategic nonviolent resistance, he does not have any comments on the particularities of humour as a form of nonviolent resistance.

⁴⁶ Chapter thirty. Contrary to the common understanding of the words “escalating conflict” as something negative, in nonviolent resistance the escalation of conflict is necessary for the nonviolent struggle. Understanding this is important for understanding the third function of humour in chapter 3.

⁴⁷ p. 657. The concept of political jiu-jitsu has been further developed by Brian Martin in his forthcoming book about backfire.

⁴⁸ p. 160. This parallel is also made by Koller: p. 25 in his category “Defense against, Counter, or Parry attacks or Threats”

⁴⁹ p. 148

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Humour has been used to counter oppression under many different circumstances and in many different ways. It is a form of nonviolent resistance, and can be seen as part of a hidden transcript that may or may not be declared in the open, but helps form a resistance mentality and preserve self respect. Humour transcends rationality, something that can be useful in a situation where the reality has become absurd. Neither studies of resistance nor studies of nonviolence explain the dynamic of humour as resistance, although both indicate its potential. I will therefore now introduce the case study of the Otpor movement which used a high degree of humour in its struggle against Milošević. In chapter three I will demonstrate how the combination of the literature presented here and the case study findings can deepen our understanding of how and why humour works as nonviolent resistance.

Chapter Two: Case Study of the Otpor Movement

Serbia under Milošević

Slobodan Milošević came to power in 1987 and has been president of both Serbia and what remained of Yugoslavia after the Balkan wars in the 1990's. His rule was based on popular support and he tried to keep a democratic façade and held elections, although their results were often disputed.⁵⁰ What characterised Serbia during these years was growing nationalism, international isolation and a decrease in living standard for ordinary people.⁵¹ Some space for opposition and independent media existed throughout this period, all though they were often harassed and repressed.⁵²

Most of the time opposition to his regime were split, but he was challenged, especially in the winter 1996-97 when the opposition won the local elections in all the big cities and Milošević for months refused to recognise their victory.

The protests where organised in separate blocs, one by the students and one by the political opposition parties.⁵³ Especially the students showed a lot of creativity and humour and made the several month long protests into a party. Serbia has a tradition of satire and black humour, and the student demonstrations showed many examples of this, as these slogans suggest: Empty toilet rolls with the message "*We have had enough shit*".⁵⁴ After Yugoslavia lost 0-2 to Spain in a football match, someone wrote: "*Yugoslavia beats Spain 2-0. Signed, the Supreme Court of Serbia*".⁵⁵ One

⁵⁰ The discourse about Milosevic has changed in the west over the years. In 1995 he was a man to negotiate with during the Dayton agreement over Bosnia. In 1999 he was a pariah, and when he died in Haag in 2006 he was standing trial for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

⁵¹ p. 315

⁵² For information about the diversity of the independent media and the repression of them see e.g. ;;; and . Collin's book focuses on Radio B92, or B2-92 as it was called for a period when it was cut off from its usual frequency was the centre for rock music and for young people who wanted to live a "normal" European life. In Collin's book we get the story of Serbia from 1989 to 2000 through the history of the radio station that wanted to promote a "normal" Serbia.

⁵³ p. 1

⁵⁴ p. 106

⁵⁵ p. 106

saying in Serbia is supposed to be: “*Our past is awful, our present terrible: It’s lucky that we don’t have a future.*”⁵⁶

During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in spring 1999, most political opposition became impossible, and for a while Milošević enjoyed an increase in support for his nationalistic agenda. However, soon after the end of the war Otpor, opposition political parties and civil society in general started to organise. On September 24th 2000 there was a presidential election that Milošević had called early, expecting that he would win and gain new legitimacy. Instead the opposition candidate Kostunica from the DOS coalition won, although the Milošević side tried to rig the elections. The official result showed 48% for Kostunica and 38% for Milošević, which meant a new election round. Based on an alternative counting the opposition refused this, and declared Kostunica the winner with more than 50%. They called for protests and strikes, and on October 5th half a million people gathered in Belgrade’s streets and took over the federal parliament and the state television. On October 6th Milošević stepped down.⁵⁷

The Otpor movement⁵⁸

The Otpor movement played an important role in bringing Milošević from power, and provided much of the preceding mobilisation that made October 5th possible.⁵⁹ Otpor started in October 1998 as a network of mainly students and other young people, but grew out of the protests from 1996-

⁵⁶ p. 196

⁵⁷ For information about October 5th, including the importance of the provinces and a mine strike in the Kolubara coal mine see & An American published version of this book which is available outside Belgrade but with the same content is

⁵⁸ Where nothing else is mentioned, the source of information in the rest of this chapter is my qualitative interviews with former Otpor activists. Their quotes are all in *italics*. Words in brackets [] indicates that I have inserted words, either because they refer to something said earlier or because words are missing or to correct mistakes in English that could be confusing. Only a few mistakes have been corrected, because this is how these informants speak. (...) indicates that words or sentences have been cut out because they are not relevant for the context where the quote is placed. Three dot’s without a parenthesis ... indicates that the speaker is making a pause, and words in **bold** that the speaker is emphasising something. Everyday speech is very different from academic writing. We usually don’t speak in whole sentences, we stumble over words when we get eager and enthusiastic about a theme, we take a lot of things for granted because they have been mentioned previously in the conversation, which all means that a sentence can stand rather lonely when it is taken out of its context to illustrate a certain point. But I hope these quotes will show the reader that my ideas are grounded in what people actually said, and hopefully they can convey a little bit of the energy that existed in the interviews. See also appendix A for a detailed description of the methodology used.

⁵⁹ There does not seem to be any disagreement about this, see e.g. ; ; p. 13

97.⁶⁰ There is a strong link between these protests and the Otpor movement. Almost all my informants had participated in the previous protests, as young as fourteen to fifteen years old, and a group of students kept in touch during the next two years, hanging around in the same places but not as an organisation, and they became the “founders” of Otpor. The remaining part of this chapter is based on information provided by the thirteen former Otpor activists I interviewed. It is difficult to transform the energy and “human face” they gave this research into writing. It is impossible to do justice to the enthusiasm, laughter and pride of their past they still show now 6 years later, but when reading the quotes, the reader must try to imagine a diverse group of young people, all with the belief that they did what they could to fight an inhuman, repressive regime that had destroyed their country, and that up till 5th of October, Otpor did almost everything right.



Illustration 1 Otpor's symbol, the clenched fist

My informants and their friends would join Otpor for various reasons. Many of the people I interviewed grew up in homes where resistance to Milošević was part of the agenda, although a few had at least one parent that supported Milošević. My informants stated as reasons and motivations for joining that they wanted a normal life without wars and bombs. Some joined together with friends or had friends that were already involved. When they were fist inside, they enjoyed the feeling of having a new “family”, of being taken seriously, and the adrenalin kick of participating in something dangerous.⁶¹

Organising actions

Otpor had a conscious nonviolent strategy, knowing that using violence would be to meet Milošević where he was strongest. On the principled vs. strategic continuum of nonviolence, most people in Otpor seem to have seen nonviolence as a tool to achieve their goals and rejected violence for pragmatic reasons, not because they considered violence in itself to be

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⁶¹ These different reasons are also supported by newspaper interviews, e.g. ;

wrong. One person suggested to me, that humour was one way of showing intelligence and giving a positive message.

Otpor was built as a non-hierarchical organisation, with no individual leaders and where small independent groups organised their own actions.⁶² A saying in Otpor was that if you cut off one head from Otpor, 15 new will grow out.⁶³ However, it still had an informal leadership and a core group that laid out the strategy. Otpor's clenched fist logo started to appear everywhere, and using modern branding techniques, Otpor made it cool to be against Milošević, among a big part of the young generations.⁶⁴ Humour did not do the job alone, but the humour and creativity was also part of the strategy, to always meet people with a positive message.

*"Everything we did must have a dosage of humour. Because: I'm joking, you're becoming angry. You are always showing only one face, and I'm always again, with another joke, with another action, with another positive message to the wider audience..."*⁶⁵

During the next two years Otpor grew stronger, more streamlined and established branches in all parts of Serbia.⁶⁶

Otpor had activists, not members, and apart from leaflets and posters, actions were the main communication tool. Actions would be a performance, a theatre, a sketch, exhibitions etc - and always with a message directed against the regime. Hundreds of different actions were carried out by different groups all over Serbia. The idea to do actions was also inspired by 1996-97 where a group of students from the faculty of mechanical engineering had "discovered" humour's ability to provoke and attract attention. This experience was carried forward to Otpor by some of the students that had participated and used systematically. (See the example of "search for the Dean" in Appendix B.)

⁶² p. 175, ;

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⁶⁴ p. 177, 208

⁶⁵ Srdja Popovic in

⁶⁶ It is difficult to know how many members, or activists as they were called, Otpor had. Numbers I have been told varies between a few thousand core activists to 100.000 supporters. Before October 5th Otpor did not keep track of its activists, and after October 5th a lot of people were eager to pretend that they had been part of Otpor.

Examples of humorous actions

Two actions in particular have been mentioned to me as the best examples of humorous actions:

To support agriculture, Milošević was placing boxes in shops and public places asking people to donate one dinar (Serbian currency) for sowing and planting crops. As a response, Otpor arranged its own collection called "Dinar za Smenu". *Smenu* in Serbian is a word with many meanings, it can mean both change, resignation, dismissal, pension and purge. This action was repeated several times in different places in Serbia, and consisted of a big barrel with a photo of Milošević. People could give one dinar, and would then get a stick they could use to hit the barrel. On one occasion, a sign suggested that if people did not have any money because of Milošević's politics, they should bang the barrel twice. When the police removed the barrel, Otpor would say in a press release that the police had arrested the barrel. They would also say that the action was a huge success, because they had collected enough money for Milošević's retirement, and that the police would give the money to Milošević.

In the beginning of September 2000, a few weeks before the election, the police raided Otpor's central office in Belgrade. They took away everything - posters, stickers, office equipment like photocopiers and computers, and left only tables and chairs. Otpor called this police action "Unload 2000" and said that since the police had done the action this time, they were going to do the reaction "Load 2000". Otpor planned for a time where the new equipment would arrive, and pretended that this was a secret action. However, because they knew who was informing on them to the secret police, they made sure that the secret police would know when all the new materials would arrive. A number of Otpor activists showed up outside the Otpor office in the main pedestrian street in Belgrade, apparently carrying heavy boxes that needed a lot of effort. The police arrived, and ordered the activists to put down all the boxes, which they reluctantly did. Some policemen were ordered to carry the boxes away. The policemen lifted the boxes with all their strength, since the boxes had

looked heavy, but was in for a big surprise when the boxes flew into the air. The Otpor activists had managed to fool the police, and all the boxes were empty or full of old newspapers.

Bystanders and Otpor activists were laughing, while the police was swearing at each other and the secret police's inability to provide reliable information.

These two actions seem to be favourites, but there were many more. A few examples that illustrates different types of humour:

Other actions would use a more subtle irony, playing with words and symbols that have to be explained to make sense in English, e.g. these two: One of the very first actions Otpor did was called "It is rotten, it's going to fall". Two pumpkins were placed in a tree and faces cut out. One of them had a flower behind its ear, an easy way to recognise Mira Markovic, the wife of Milošević. When Otpor activists shook the tree, the pumpkins fell down. The subtleness and humour would have been lost if the "rotten" connection between the pumpkins and the regime had been spelt out.

During the election campaign in the presidential election of 2000 that eventually brought Milošević from power, Otpor's main slogan "gotov je!" (he's finished) was negative, but it had a satirical element when the stickers was placed over all the socialist party's posters with the face of Milošević.



Illustration 3 Otpor stickers with the text "He's finished" over election posters of Milošević.

Milošević's first name is Slobodan, and "sloboda" means "freedom" in Serbian. Milošević's wife's first name is Mira, and "mir" in Serbian means "peace". So a saying goes: "Freedom is spelt without an N, and Peace is spelt without an A". This is humour that is not meant to make people laugh out loud, but to smile a little and provoke thought.

A last example shows how an oppressors own words can be used against her: Mira Marcović said that the communists came to power with blood, so



Illustration 2 "Load 2000", police take away Otpor's empty boxes

they would not leave power without blood. The Otpor activists then went to the hospital to donate blood and said "Here is our blood, now you can go".

Inspiration for humour

Where did the inspiration for using humour come from? As already mentioned, the strategic use of humour grew out of experiences from the 1996-97 demonstrations. The sometimes daily actions were often a reaction to statements for politicians or inspired by certain days, like Milošević's birthday, Easter holiday and May 1st. One informant told me, that asking about inspiration is like asking an artist where he gets his inspiration from - it is impossible to explain. He continues: "*When you are 18 years old, you are in some kind of permanent brainstorm!*" A few informants would mention that they grew up with Monty Python and that kind of humour, and that black humour is a big part of Serbian culture. Some actions that went well in one place was copied in other cities, but several informants stressed that they tried to be as original as possible and would rather invent new actions than copy what had been used elsewhere.

The importance of humour as part of a strategy

It is very important to bear in mind, that the humour should not be understood separately. It was not fun just for the sake of having fun. It went hand in hand with the serious message, which should be obvious from above, as a way of mocking, ridiculing and making the regime look absurd.

Otpor also did actions without the slightest hint of humour, most importantly on the eve of the Orthodox New Year, 13 of January 2000. At this event, which is often referred to as a turning point, 30-50.000 people where gathered at the Republic Square in Belgrade to celebrate New Year with Otpor. At midnight, Otpor showed a film about the wars in the previous years with names and photos of everyone who died because of Milošević's politics, and then they said:

"There is no reason for the celebration, go home and think what to do, so that next orthodox New Year we

have a reason to celebrate (...) This year, life finally must win in Serbia”⁶⁷

One of Otpor’s early slogans was called “bite the system, live resistance”, and humour was an integrated component of “living the resistance”, meaning that Otpor activists had to participate in actions and show a personal example of how resistance is possible. Some of my informants would emphasize that they did never think about the humour as something on its own, and they had not reflected about it as something special or questioned the use of it. It was just there, ever present. Humour has been described to me as “the glue”, “the key” and “the spice” of Otpor, or as someone said: *“I don’t think Otpor would be Otpor without humour”*. Everyone would say that humour was very important for Otpor, sometimes stressing that other things were important as well.

“Humour was very important in Otpor (...) We were much more accepted in the population because of the use of humour and nonviolent actions.”

A few informants belonging to the founders and leadership had a clear strategic thinking about what humour could achieve in terms of provoking and mocking the regime and reducing peoples fear. Comparing to the 1996-97 student protests, where the humour happened spontaneously and did not have such a clear message, one informant put it like this:

“It was initially about fear in [the] Serbian people. When you laugh you are not afraid, you know, and we used that from the very first step (...)In Otpor we [figured out] every action and planned every action, we [thought] about the plan and we also did totally stupid actions [as in student protest], but with [a] goal. You know we [in Otpor] focused on what will be after the election, in [student] protest it was just humour [without a goal].”

Although everyone I talked to would consider humour important for Otpor, other aspects of Otpor’s work are considered equally or even more important for Otpor’s success. Nonviolent discipline and training has been mentioned to me, as well as the use of strong symbols. Humour was only

⁶⁷ Srdja Popovic in

interesting because it had an integrated serious message and because it was contrasted with more “black” actions like the orthodox new year. To the Otpor activists it seemed to have been equally important to combine it with street activities and direct communication with the general public.

The functions of Otpor’s humour

In this section I will show how Otpor activists viewed the different functions of humour. They are separated into three categories - the first about the relationship with people outside Otpor, the second about relations inside Otpor, and the third about the relationship with Milosevic’s regime.

The informants stressed different aspects of the functions of humour depending on their role in Otpor. Generally the founders/leaders talk about reducing and confronting fear, provoke and also that it attracted more members. The people who joined later stress that humour made it more attractive to become a member of Otpor, also for themselves, because the humour made Otpor stand out from other organisations and political parties, which were considered dry, boring and dull.

1. Humour as a way of attracting new members, standing out and getting attention

The informants confirm that humour is a good way to attract new members and catch the attention of students and young people, the main target group for Otpor in the first period of organising:

“If you do something on a volunteer base, you need to motivate people. If you do something funny, people usually smile. If people smile they feel very well, and that was another way how to raise motivation of the people.”

Asked by interviewer: “Do you think humour helped you to achieve things you could not have done without humour?”

“yes definitely - especially in the beginning to break [the] pattern of thinking among young people, especially (...) to attract a critical mass, and a critical mass does not mean thousands (...) but a strong base. The humour was very important to attract young people, to attract those who made every campaign

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possible, to attract volunteers (...)opposing the regime, but not getting into classical political debate, I would say that was where humour [came] into the picture. Humour was the most important tool for Otpor to grow.”

However, getting new members was not the main reason for using humour, it was more like a side-effect. It worked especially to attract young people, but it was not intentional. One informant who was part of the leadership said that the biggest rise in members came in the beginning of 2000 after the celebration of the Orthodox New Year when Otpor became more serious. This does not contradict that humour help getting more members, but it suggest that the combination of humour-seriousness matter or that other factors are more important as well. Many other things than humour made it attractive to get involved in Otpor - the way Otpor was different from all opposition parties in its way of organising where everybody was important and no one was standing out or fighting for their own position. One of my informants preferred the night jobs with hanging up posters because of the adrenalin kick much more than the humorous public appearances.

Humour as a way of getting attention was mentioned spontaneously by several informants, but was not part of the questions asked to all informants. Getting attention is linked to getting new activists, but goes broader - to get the attention of the media and the general public, as a way of being remembered and make an impression. Humour has a way of catching people's attention. Otpor was depending on the alternative media to spread their message. According to my informants, the independent media would always report positively about them no matter if there was humour involved in the actions or not, while the state media would usually ignore them or occasionally report negatively.

To explore the theme of attention better, one should also make an investigation into how the general public reacted to Otpor's use of humour, and see what "ordinary people" think got their attention. But the Otpor members thought it helped them stand out and get attention:

"[humour] made a difference between our politics and the politics of parliament and official dry politics. We also wanted to show ourselves as the children, and using humour made things more memorable for people"

However, humour was not the only way to achieve this. One informant said that sometimes humour would not reach people, but the "black actions" like the orthodox New Year would.

Otpor had an ambivalent relationship with the opposition parties. On the one hand, Otpor saw its own role as creating pressure on them to unite before the presidential election, but it was also important to show how they themselves were different from traditional party politics. As one informant said, speaking about the differences between Otpor's use of humour and the political parties: *"it was totally new, totally fresh idea"*

Also in this case, humour is just one way for Otpor to stand out - what was probably even more outstanding was the way activists would feel that they made a difference.

2. Humour as a way of overcoming apathy and creating solidarity

In the apathetic Serbian society in the end of the 1990's, everybody who was organised in any way was resisting apathy. One person talked about the apathy created by the professional politicians, and how Otpor used modern branding techniques⁶⁸ to create the "live the resistance" atmosphere. Humour can be one way to overcome apathy for a social movement faced with an apathetic society, but as with all other points mentioned so far, humour is not enough. Here I will let the informants speak for themselves, the first is an answer to a direct question about apathy:

"[there was] an atmosphere of absolute fear, and everything was destroyed [in NATO bombing](...)overall feeling that we could not do anything(...)and this is really where humour come into the picture: you

⁶⁸ "Modern branding techniques" refer to the way many transnational companies "brand" their products. Companies like Nike and Coca Cola do not just sell a shoe or a drink, they sell a lifestyle of being "cool". Likewise with Otpor – you don't just participate in resistance now and then at a demonstration, you have to "live the resistance". An Otpor informant made this comparison to me. Although there are some parallels, my opinion is that branding a product is rather different from branding participation in nonviolent resistance.

*couldn't persuade anyone, in this kind of atmosphere in the country, you couldn't persuade anybody that something **could** be changed, that something **should** be changed (...) with using different symbols, different narratives [Otpor succeeded] . And then there was the energy it was somewhere there, you could feel it, it was just to trigger it... people were really very, very eager to change things, (...) you just needed something to wake them up and make them active again."*

"We wanted to show that however silly it can be, you can do something, although it may look silly, at least you do something, and that was the idea of Otpor. You don't support Otpor, you have to join Otpor, to live Otpor. And you have to take part in this kind of action, to do your own actions. Bite the system, live resistance [an early Otpor slogan]."

"Humour was just a tool. Actually it was not so funny at all (...) [we were] trying to make some kind of parallel reality and to convince other people that there is a parallel reality, and with that parallel reality there is another choice and that means you can choose. The fun was tool and humour was tool, because everything else was not so funny of all."

As mentioned in the introduction, the word "solidarity" did not work in the interviews. Therefore my support for the rest of this function of humour is not as strong as for the other functions. The informants did not reject the idea of humour as a way of creating solidarity, and they did speak about how the use of humour made them feel like a family, and how it made them stick together, which is what I mean by solidarity:

"[because of the humour] we were functioning much better in the organisation, we had better relations inside Otpor, we felt like a family"

"The humour was good to make us stick together and to confront the fear and anxiety, because it was possible to change a dramatic situation like beating up [by police] into something funny."

"(...) and that is also how to use the humour, to actually attract more activists coming, and maybe not in the beginning [on] purpose, but actually that was the result. I would say that humour was like the glue"

and connected all the things that actually consisted of Otpor”

Almost all informants describe spontaneously their time in Otpor as a very important part of their life, for some it is a time of personal transformation. Many informants still have their best friends among people they got to know during their time in Otpor, and talk about life before, during and after Otpor. In this, I also see some support for my claim that humour helps create this feeling of solidarity, although this feeling was probably not caused by the humour alone, but by the experience of participating in a social movement in their “forming years” as teenagers and mid- twenties.

3. Humour as a way of provoking the regime and reducing fear of repression

There is no doubt that humour was an important factor for reducing peoples fear of the regime and of the police. Some of my informants would stress this element spontaneously, and everybody else would support it when asked directly. It is a very simple logic: It is more difficult to be afraid of someone when you laugh at him.

“The thing is, that [humour] was something like the main thing that brought him [Milošević] down, because people was afraid, there was fear everywhere around and if we are going to change something, the main idea was to make fun of the things that make them afraid(...)to make people less afraid by using humour.”

Asked directly if humour would reduce fear of Milošević: *“yeah, because you would have that psychological effect that if you laugh a something you just don’t take it that much seriously, yeah definitely...no “but”s.*

“It was initially about fear in [the] Serbian people. When you laugh you are not afraid, you know” Later in the same interview, talking about why Otpor used stupid and silly actions: *“These [stupid and silly] actions were used in the beginning, in 1999, we wanted to lower fear and increase the enthusiasm of the people, you know.”*

In addition to reducing fear, humour can provoke both the regime and the police and wake up the general public by provoking thoughts. It is a way to mock the regime and expose its absurdity. Several informants would mention humour's ability to provoke spontaneously, but questions about humour and provocation have not been asked systematically to all informants.

"Our humour was used with a lot of cynicism and irony towards the government (...) everything we did was involving humour and irony, and it made Milošević very angry because (...) it was something to provoke him, to provoke Milošević, (...) maybe provoke is not the right word, but to provoke other people to think... through irony...the real picture." Later in the same interview: "We could never provoke that way of thinking, definitely we could never provoke that much if we didn't have humour."

"[Humour] is something you are using to provoke people... (words missing) You are doing something to provoke them, you are trying to point a finger, to [make them] think about and see how really stupid things were"

Relationship with the police

The Milošević regime tried to react to Otpor in different ways - from arrests and beatings to terrorist and fascist accusations.⁶⁹ Between May 2nd and September 2000, around 2000 Otpor activists were detained in an illegal campaign directed towards political opponents. Many of them, also minors, were beaten, had their fingerprints and photographs taken and a criminal file opened, although they had not been involved in any criminal activities, just been wearing the Otpor t-shirt or hanging up posters and stickers.

⁶⁹ The regime also tried to produce some posters that can be interpreted as humorous: The most famous makes a connection to Hitlerjugend and to Madelain Albright, US Secretary of State during Nato's bombing of Yugoslavia, and very unpopular in Serbia. The poster shows a member of the "Hitler Jugend" doing the "Heil Hitler" greeting, and instead of the swastika on his arm, he has Otpor's fist symbol. The background also shows a big Otpor fist. The Otpor activists I spoke with did naturally not find this poster funny, but it might be that the people who made it intended it to be funny, although it can also be interpreted as an "ordinary" attempt of propaganda. Another poster to show the Otpor fist full of US dollars with the text: "I sell because I love to betray". To understand the effect of posters like this, one should talk to the general public and not former Otpor activists. Most Otpor activist I spoke with did not see any humour in this, although one person thought that this was a clever move by the regime, and if the regime had done more like this, it could have been a potential problem for Otpor.

According to the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade that has documented the repression of Otpor, the harassment was so systematic and similar all over Serbia that it must have been ordered from up in the hierarchy and was not the idea of single policemen.⁷⁰

During interrogations, the police would often ask the Otpor activists “who is your leader?” and “where do you get the money from?” Otpor activists would reply that they are all leaders or that they have no leaders, and that the money come from the “Dinar za Smenu” actions. This is also an example of irony, since the amount collected would not even pay for 10 t-shirts, according to one informant. When a group of Otpor activists met the police on the street, they would bark like dogs, suggesting that the police was Milošević’s dogs and not thinking for themselves, another clear provocation.

The view of the police varies considerably from one informant to the next. Some consider all policemen to be part of the repression, while others describe differences between different parts of Serbia and between individual police officers. One informant was sure that some police officers quit their job when they were ordered to commit brutalities against Otpor activists.⁷¹

The strategy of humorous street activities that involved the police created a new relationship with the police. The police was losing control and got involved in Otpor’s activities in ways they had not anticipated, that made them look foolish, and where their own reactions made them look even more ridiculous. In one action where Otpor was staging a mock football match, the police arrested all players + the audience and the referee, and then the police became ridiculous through their own actions.⁷² The “Load 2000” action with the empty boxes is another very good example of this. One informant also suggested that this way of engaging the police became a way of demoralising the police officers - they had not joined the police to

⁷⁰ p. 7

⁷¹ For the purpose of this dissertation this difference is not necessary to explore further, but it would be interesting to see a study of Otpor that also included how the police and the Milošević government looked upon and reacted to Otpor’s use of humour.

⁷² The match was mentioned by several informants, and is also described in this article:

be ridiculed and become involved in street theatre, suddenly playing the main characters in plays they did not know about.

Looking back

When I asked people if they would change anything if they could go back, almost all informants said a clear no. A few said they would maybe have used more humour, and one said that some of the humour against the police in one to one interaction maybe had been too cruel, and I understand it in the meaning “too personal”. One mentioned that the number of actions was almost too overwhelming, and that instead of doing five actions in one day, they should have done one that was planned better.

But most would not change anything and are very satisfied and proud of what Otpor did from 1998- October 5th 2000:

“Before the fall of regime I wouldn’t change a single thing”

Asked if he would change anything: *“Before 5th of October, for sure no. It was really almost perfect”*

Chapter Three:

The Dynamics of Humour as Resistance to Oppression

Humour as a form of nonviolent resistance

The people who use humour as part of their resistance seldom seem to be very conscious about how they use it and why it works. Many of my informants from Otpor had never considered the use of humour something special until I asked about it, although there are exceptions within Otpor from this generalisation.

One group which is using humour consciously and are very articulated about the unique nature of humour is CIRCA - Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army - a UK based network of clowns that operate through nonviolent action against capitalism and militarism, e.g at military recruitment offices and G8 meetings.⁷³ (See appendix B for an example of CIRCA's way of working in the clowns' own words). CIRCA is highly aware of humour's possibility to disrupt, confuse and turn things upside down through mocking and ridicule. CIRCA is operating far from dictatorships, occupation and concentration camps, but nevertheless their analysis articulate some of the findings from the many different examples mentioned in chapter one and two:

*"...make clowning dangerous again (...)give it back the social function it once had: its ability to disrupt, critique and heal society(...)creating coherence through confusion - adding disorder to the world in order to expose its lies and speak the truth."*⁷⁴

*"We are **clowns** because what else can one be in such a stupid world. Because inside everyone is a lawless clown trying to escape. Because nothing undermines authority like holding it up to ridicule (...) We are **circa** because we are approximate and ambivalent, neither here nor there, but in the most powerful of all places, the place in-between order and chaos."*⁷⁵

⁷³ CIRCA is part of the anti-globalisation/globalisation critical/globalisation from below movement which also has a strong "carnival" component. p. 173-183

⁷⁴ from the section "Rebel Clowning"

⁷⁵ from the section "About the Army". Emphasis in original

The rest of this chapter will combine the literature introduced in chapter one with the ideas from the case study in chapter two. The intention is to further develop the understanding of the dynamics of humour when it is used as a form of nonviolent resistance to oppression. First I want to consider the ambivalence created by using the humorous mode on a very serious issue such as oppression, and in the second part of the chapter I will demonstrate how the literature and case study combined can lead to an understanding of how and why humour works as part of a strategy for nonviolent resistance. I will suggest the beginning of a theory of three functions of humour, where number three concerns the unique nature of humour's dynamic.

The contrast between innocence and a serious issue

If we return to the theories from chapter one, Mulkey suggested that



Illustration 4 : The contrast between innocence and a serious issue. British police with CIRCA clowns.

almost all kinds of humour build on duality, incongruity and ambivalence. Things have to be put in contrasting frames for humour to be produced. There have to exist a contrast between the humorous and serious mode, where the outside position of the “clown” is used to expose what is considered the serious “inside”. The contrast is especially useful in humour used against oppression, because oppression is something very serious. Oppression should be fought, it should not be laughed at, and it is by definition not funny! I think, that just the idea and attempt of using humour in such a situation changes what is going on, no matter if the humour succeeds in making

people laugh or not. The reformulation in a humorous mode shows in itself that something has changed, and creates the expectation of further changes. Humour, also the aggressive forms such as satire (which Berger calls it), signalises innocence, even when there is a serious intention behind it. Humour changes the situation because however serious the message is, it has a hint of “Don’t take me seriously”, and “I’m not dangerous”. CIRCA is using this innocence of the clown to contrast with the things they object to, such as the war in Iraq. The Norwegian total resisters do the same when they jump into the prison. Otpor managed to use the dualism between innocence and seriousness in several different ways. They did this e.g. through combining the humorous actions with “black” actions, but also by contrasting their young age with the harsh response from the regime. When the famous cartoonist Corax made the cartoon with the Otpor boy below for the magazine Danas, he visualised this contrast, and Otpor borrowed the cartoon and used it on its leaflets.

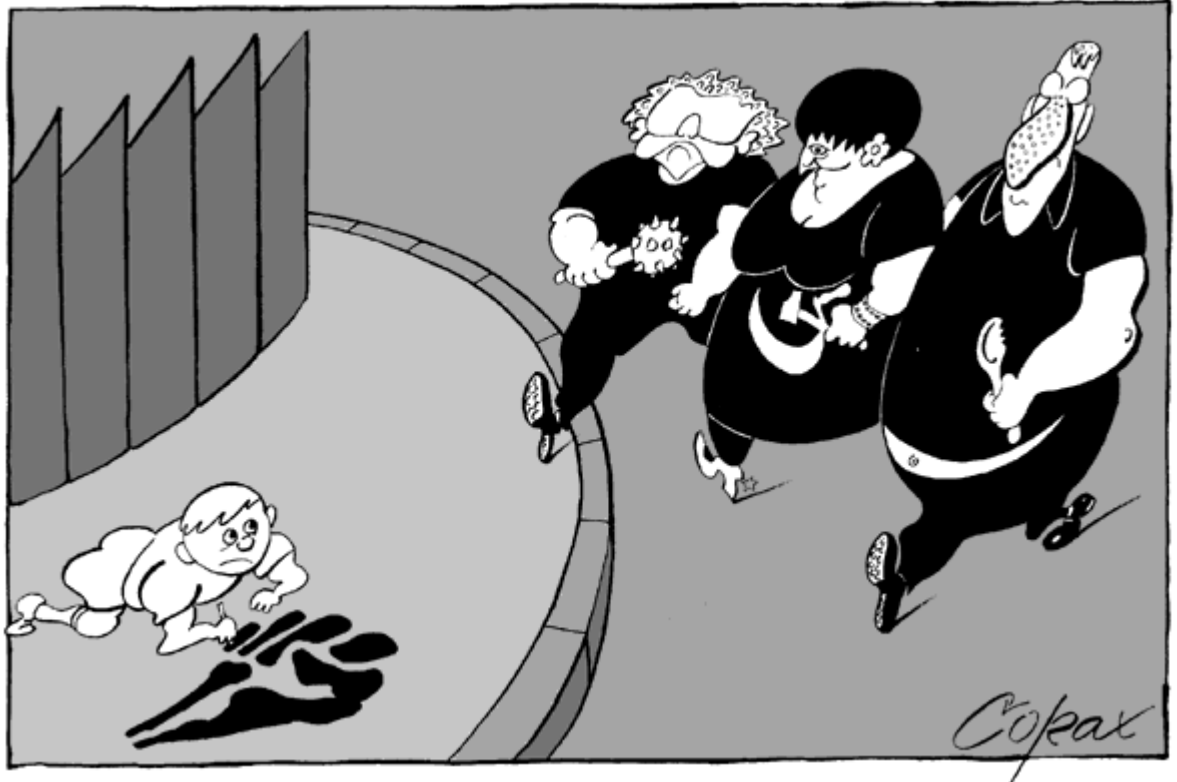


Illustration 5 Boy drawing Otpor fist. From left, Slobodan Milošević, Mira Marković (his wife) and Vojislav Šešelj (leader of the nationalist radical party) is coming to get him. Corax cartoon from "Danas" May 5th 2000.⁷⁶

This is a play with the contrast, because Otpor activists were not **that** young, and through their actions they did in fact pose a threat to the regime. On the leaflet, the drawing of the young boy is contrasted with statements about Otpor from political parties in power. They refer to Otpor in extreme terminology - calling them drug addicts, terrorists, and fascists. I think that this use of extreme words backfires on the regime, because people can go out and meet Otpor activists and see for themselves that they are ordinary young people and not drug addicts or terrorists.

Political humour needs some incongruity and absurdity in order to thrive - if things are as the politicians say they are, there is little to joke about and almost nothing to build satire, parody and irony on. In Serbia there were plenty of this incongruity and absurdity between what politicians say and how ordinary people, including Otpor activists, experience their life, so they have plenty of material to use. This incongruity includes statements about how everything is fine while the real experience is that

⁷⁶ p. 158

Serbia is falling apart, or being called a terrorist because you paint graffiti. Humour becomes a logical way of dealing with this absurdity in everyday life. For the Norwegian total resisters, the incongruity exist when Norway is called a democracy and don't have any political prisoners, while they are being send to prison for 16 months because of their political believes.⁷⁷ This way absurdity transcends rationality. What groups like Otpor, Circa and the total resisters wish to achieve is to make people understand that what is going on in their country does not make sense. At the individual level Brigham suggest that sometimes absurdity can be more effective than rational explanations in making people understand their own reactions,⁷⁸ and I think that the cases explained here shows that this can also be true at the societal level.

The functions of humour as nonviolent resistance

Combining insights about how humour works from chapter one and two, my suggestion is that theoretically humour can be understood as consisting of three different functions when it is used in resistance to oppression: "*Humour facilitates outreach and mobilisation*" is the function that concerns the relationship with other people outside the movement. The second function is that "*Humour facilitates building a resistance mentality*", which is concerned with the internal dynamics within the resistance movement - how to build solidarity and strengthen the individuals capacity for participating in resistance. The third function of humour I have identified I call "*Turning oppression upside down*". Humour used in this way has the most powerful potential, because it changes the relationship with the oppressor or oppressive forces. Three things happen at the same time, and together they turn the world of oppressor and oppressed upside down: Humour escalates the conflict, it reduces fear of the oppressor, and it limits the oppressor's possibilities for responding adequately.

⁷⁷ Dualism can also be illustrated from a slightly different angle: In Bogad shows how western democracies and their limitations are ridiculed by movements who participate in the electoral process from outside positions with little intention of participating as equals. In two of Bogad's case studies, the electoral guerrillas are drag queens, which is in itself a play with duality and exposing the straight society, which may make them better equipped than others to expose the electoral systems failures through irony, satire and absurdity. See e.g. p. 41

⁷⁸

1. *Facilitating outreach and mobilisation*

The first function of humour concerns issues about outreach and mobilisation, in other words contact with people who are not part of the resistance movement. Humour can attract more members, it becomes more fun to be involved, it brings energy, and you feel you become part of a family and that you belong there. In the case of Otpor, humour became part of the style and the branding which made it cool to be a part of Otpor. In relation to others, humour can make you stand out, and it may become easier to get attention from the media, as also the Norwegian total resisters experienced. The literature has little to say about this function of humour, but I consider it to be straight forward and unproblematic. I think it is well documented in the case study in the section "Humour as a way of attracting new members, standing out and getting attention". These are all important aspects of organising for a nonviolent social movement, but it can all be achieved without any use of humour, although humour might be of great help. Many social movements manage to bond their members, to attract new activists and to get attention, and most of them do not consider to use humour to accomplish this.⁷⁹

2. *Facilitating a culture of resistance*

The second function of humour concerns what is going on inside the resistance movement. What happens outside and inside are interlinked - e.g the number of new activists influence what is happening inside, but there is a fundamental difference in how humour works in relation to the outside and the inside. Differences exist both in the form and the content of the humour you use to reach out and the humour you share with your friends in the movement.⁸⁰ Humour facilitates the building of a culture of resistance both at the organisational and individual level. Again this is nothing that can be achieved only through the use of humour, and many resistance movements have created a resistance mentality without using humour. But

⁷⁹ For many different examples of nonviolent social movements see for example or

⁸⁰ This is a area that can be explored much more when more examples of humour as resistance is collected

it does occur, as Stokker has documented in the case of the Norwegian resistance to Nazi occupation.

Building a resistance mentality or a culture of resistance is part of what Scott calls the hidden transcript. This is the “small world” where jokes are shared, as in the Nazi concentration camps or occupied countries and a fellow prisoner is cheered up. For facilitating the building of a culture of resistance, the humour does not have to be declared in the open, it is enough if it serves to keep you alive in the concentration camps, as Neuman described, or if it helps you gain control of your own reactions as for the POWs that Henman writes about. It is through examples of humour that serve this function that Stokker counters Benton’s claim that jokes will not change anything. Benton is not aware of the need for a hidden transcript that bind the potentially open resisters together, and what role jokes can have in forming the hidden transcript, that will maybe be declared in the open one day.

There is a huge difference between the level of repression in concentration camps and Milošević’s Serbia, but nevertheless the situations share a need for overcoming apathy. In the case study of Otpor, it is this kind of humour I have documented the least, although support can be found in the section: “Humour as a way of overcoming apathy and creating solidarity”. However, what makes me certain of this function of humour is the fact that in the literature, it is humour that serves this purpose I have found most references to.⁸¹

A resistance mentality build on some degree of an us/them divide. Although such kinds of divides are often considered problematic, in an oppressive situation there has to be a difference between those who are oppressing and those who are resisting. You need to name what it is you consider oppressive in order to be able to fight it. Many nonviolent resisters make an effort to separate between the oppressor as a person and the oppression he is committing, thus the humour will attack the oppressive system, but not the oppressor as a person⁸². However if the resisters do not

⁸¹ ;and

⁸² E.g. this distinction was very important for Gandhi. p.74

make this distinction, and because there is a us/them divide, it can be that stereotypes will be reinforced or that the humour will be aggressive as Koller suggested.

In this sense of the us/them divide, Mulkay is right when he says that political humour underlines established political divisions, but it is not correct, at least not in oppressive situations, that it is conservative and reinforces status quo. In the case of Otpor it helped create the feeling that something can and must be done about the status quo, and in order for this to happen, the difference between oppression and resistance has to be clear.

Theoretically, Critchley has shown how humour is based on an us/them divide, where humour can only be shared with those who share the same codes for what is funny, based e.g. on culture, language, gender etc.⁸³ Or as Berger put it: *"Those who laugh together, belong together"*⁸⁴

3. Turning oppression upside down

Turning oppression upside down is the third function of humour as resistance, and here the humour deals directly with the relationship between the oppression and the resistance. This kind of humour has a new dimension and operates on a different level than the two previous functions. When it works, three things happen more or less simultaneously: 1. The humour used is confrontational, e.g. by provoking, mocking or ridiculing, which escalates the conflict and put pressure on the oppressor. 2. Although an increased pressure raises the chances of repression, paradoxically the use of humour reduces fear within the resistance movement, and 3. Humour reduces the oppressor's possibilities for reacting in an adequate way.

It is difficult to mock or ridicule those in power without some humouristic elements, although the humour can be more or less "gentle" or more or less close to what is actually true. The closer you stick to the truth about the oppressor, the better the humour works. The humour Otpor used was not very aggressive, although actions like banging the barrel with Milošević's photo has an aggressive element. Other satiric and provocative

⁸³ pp. 67-68

⁸⁴ p. 57

actions, like the donating of blood, is not aggressive. The power of humour is not in the level of aggression, at least not in a dictatorship, but in the courage it takes and in the ambivalence between the innocence and the clear serious message. The provocation can be camouflaged behind the innocence that is part of the innocence-serious contrast explained earlier. However, playing with provocations can be dangerous business, and the result can be a violent response. Gandhi, for example recommended not to provoke or humiliate the oppressor since it would increase the chances of a violent response.⁸⁵

I have not investigated how the general public looked at Otpor's use of humour, but in order for the ridiculing of Milošević to work, there has to be a perceived element of truth in it. I find it likely that Otpor's humour worked because they stayed within certain limits, and played with what was true - e.g. that Yugoslavia had fallen apart, or statements they could read in the newspaper every day. If Otpor had tried to call the regime drug addicts or child abusers, people would have known that it was too far out. Instead they took what Milošević did and twisted it and turned it against him, like in the "Load 2000" action or the leaflet with the cartoon and the statements about Otpor activists. The same kind of humour was used by the Norwegian total resisters in both the actions described in chapter one, which were provocative without being aggressive.

The informants from Otpor use the word "provocation" in two different meanings - to provoke the regime, and to provoke people to think. This illustrates that there is not necessarily a clear separation between the different functions of humour, and that one humorous act can belong both in "Turning oppression upside down" and "facilitate outreach and mobilisation".

That humour can reduce fear is also documented by the quotes in the case study. It is difficult to be afraid when you laugh, although the provocation may give you reason to be even more afraid. Two of the informants belonging to the leadership of Otpor told me how they had first used humour to reduce fear, and then decided to become more serious in

⁸⁵ p. 70

January 2000, which continued until May 2000. In May, the major police crackdown came, and they returned to the “silly” actions again in order to lower fear.

Henman calls humour a coping mechanism for POW's, and although she does not explicitly mention coping with fear, the creation of fear is an element of oppression the resistance has to overcome.

In the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that humour used against oppression has a special twist to it because the humorous mode is connected to a perception of innocence, and contrast so sharply with the serious issue of oppression. I think this contrast can take us even further, because it leads to another special side of using humour: How do you repress it?⁸⁶ It is almost impossible for the oppressor to respond to, because no matter what he does, it can be used against him. How can you arrest a clown without making people smile or at least notice the contrast? Or as in the case of the Norwegian total resisters: How do you punish someone who demands to be imprisoned? Or in the Load 2000 action: How do you respond when your secret police has just been exposed as ridiculous? Ridicule undermines authority and the authorities don't know how to respond, because it is not part of the means they are used to respond to. They know how to respond to violence, and how to react to “ordinary” protest such as demonstrations. But if the oppressor uses force against someone who is “just making fun”, he makes himself look ridiculous, and gives the movement new material for further development of the fun. This does not mean that the oppressor doesn't respond with violence, but it is much harder for him to justify it.

Sharps concept of political jiu-jitsu is a good way of describing how relationships change if the oppressor uses violence against someone who is using nonviolence. It is difficult to justify such an overreaction, and the changes are that previously undecided people or even the oppressors own people, will take the side of the nonviolent movement, or at least withdraw their support for the oppressor. As one Otpor activist put it:

“In the year 2000 lot's of people were actually witnessing young people doing nothing bad and being

⁸⁶ Adolf Hitler made political humour illegal in 1939, which is itself a joke. XX

beaten by the police [for wearing an Otpor t-shirt] (...) and people started actually to think, "what if I would get beaten for wearing my shirt, whatever my political believes". You are just wearing a shirt, and you are beating a kid... what kind of monster are [they] (...)The regime didn't have the adequate response to humour(...)the regime just wasn't creative enough to think about anything else than beating up and I guess that beating up was also the key to success, let's say it so, because(...)you are laughing at them, and they are hitting at you, so what kind of people they are?"⁸⁷

Two of the Otpor leaders I talked to called Otpor's actions "dilemma actions" - and the idea is to leave no way out - no matter how the Milošević regime reacted, they had to regret it. The "Dinar za smenu" is an example of a dilemma action - if the police do not take away the barrel, they lose face, and when they do something, Otpor continues the joke by calling it arrest of a barrel and say the police will give Milošević the money for his retirement. No matter what they do, they have lost.⁸⁸

"Turning oppression upside down" is different from the other two functions of humour because it directly challenges the relationship with the oppressor. To achieve all three elements of "Turning oppression upside down" at the same time is a relatively unique dynamic, although I do not exclude the possibility that it can be created through other means as well.⁸⁹

There will be cases where humour can be of great help in facilitating outreach, mobilisation and a culture of resistance, but will not be taken to this level. Neither there is no guarantee that this strategy will work even in the cases where it is tried, because what happens also depends on the reaction from the oppressor. Potentially the humour can become too

⁸⁷ That Otpor grew and "benefited" from police brutalities was confirmed by several informants, and it is not uncommon. Although repression sometimes leads to fear and a decrease in resistance, it is not uncommon that more repression leads to a feeling of "enough is enough" and increase the resistance as Gene Sharp has documented with his political jiu-jitsu effect. These are complex effects with many factors and the relationship between resistance and repression is not necessarily linear. An author who has investigated the non-linear connections between repression and resistance is Karl-Dieter Opp who writes about the growth of resistance in the GDR before the fall of the Berlin wall. .

⁸⁸ One author associated with writing about dilemma actions is George Lakey. See e.g

⁸⁹ However, I have not been able to think of any other way to do this simultaneously. It is not difficult to achieve these elements separately. E.g. escalating the conflict can be done nonviolently without use of humour, e.g. by nonviolent direct action that occupy public spaces. There are many ways of reducing fear, e.g. the military do this with strict organising and orders, and nonviolent groups achieve the same by good planning and affinity groups. The possibility for a violent response that is considered adequate by the general public is often reduced by using nonviolence (political jiu-jitsu and backfire theories).

aggressive and focus on the oppressor instead of the oppression. If it is no longer based on wit and intelligence but too much on provocation, it ceases being funny, and the general public will lose sympathy. It is also possible to imagine scenarios where a repressive response is so severe that it increases fear although the repression is ridiculous, or that the oppressor manage to find an adequate response, maybe by using humour himself.

Conclusion

In the conclusion I will return to the research questions from the introduction and summarise my answers to them as they have appeared in text. In the end I will give my suggestions to how the theme of humour as nonviolent resistance can be studied further.

- 1. What does theories about humour and theories about nonviolent resistance has to say about humour as nonviolent resistance? Which part of the theories can be combined in order to understand this area better?*

As I demonstrated in chapter one, theories about nonviolence and resistance have little to say about humour, and literature about humour has little to say about how it can work to counter oppression. However, when these two traditions are combined and related to an empirical study, they can enrich each other and new knowledge arises.

- 2. What kind of humour has been used as part of nonviolent resistance against oppression?*

As I said in the introduction, the case of Otpor is selected because it is special, and humour was known to have been used to a large extent. Most nonviolent movements working against oppression do not use much or any humour, and it would be easy to find examples of cases where the research questions used here would be irrelevant. However, through the case study of Otpor and examples from the literature, I have documented that humour has been used successfully to resist oppression. The Otpor movement used a variety of humorous actions: From the empty boxes in the pedestrian area

of Belgrade that fooled the secret police, to the satiric donation of blood to the hospital to avoid blood in the streets. In Nazi concentration camps and in Norway under occupation jokes have been shared between people to create solidarity and overcome apathy. Also in Norway, the total resisters showed that the courts and prisons with all their institutionalised rules and rituals can become the arena for dramatisations of the oppression.

3. *What are the functions of this humour?*

- *How does it affect the relationship with people outside the movement?*
- *How does it affect the participants in the movement?*
- *How does it affect the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor?*

Humour can serve a wide range of functions depending on what the oppressive situation is like, what form the humour take and what kind of humour is used. Most importantly humour influences different relationships differently. The kind of humour that affects the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed the most is not necessarily the same humour that influence the internal dynamics of the movement or get the attention of the outside world.

In Otpor, the activists experienced that regarding their relationship with the outside world, humour could help them get more members, they got more attention and found it easier to communicate how they were different from the political opposition parties.

The functions humour can serve within a group go in a very different direction: American POWs and Jews in Nazi concentration camps found that humour sometimes could help them preserve self-respect, dignity, a wish to live and some control in a situation where they had little control. For Otpor, humour facilitated the sense of belonging to the group described as “feeling like a family” and it was an important tool for overcoming political apathy.

The relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is probably the most central in a situation of oppression, and here humour can play a

central role. Both Otpor and groups from Western Europe like the Norwegian total resisters and CIRCA have shown how spectacular humorous actions can be a provocation for the oppressor - actions like the breaking into the prison and the empty boxes catches the attention of the media, but they also becomes a provocation that the authorities can not ignore. In addition to affecting the relationship in this way, Otpor activists have also confirmed that in situations of fear, humour can help reduce fear because it is difficult to be afraid of the oppressor when you laugh at him.

4. *What is the dynamic of humour as nonviolent resistance? What theoretical framework is needed in order to understand the functions of humour as resistance to oppression?*

The importance of humour as a way of resisting oppression should not be exaggerated, but humour does have a powerful potential. In chapter three I have introduce my ideas for a theoretical framework that can help us understand the dynamics of humour as resistance to oppression.

Because humour works in more than one dimension at the same time it can combine innocence with seriousness in a way that can alter relationships and transcend rationality. Through humour, a nonviolent movement can achieve a number of different things: Humour can *facilitate outreach and mobilisation*, which means serving functions that concern what is happening outside the movement - attracting new members, getting attention and standing out. On the other hand, humour can also work within the movement by *facilitating a culture of resistance* through creating solidarity and overcoming political apathy. However, by using the word facilitator I mean to indicate that although humour can be helpful, it is perfectly possible to do this without any use of humour. Humour can be an important factor, but is not sufficient. The third possible way of using humour gives it a new dimension and works at a different level where I consider it to be unique and not just a facilitator: *Turning oppression upside down* uses mocking and ridicule to escalate the conflict when the nonviolent movement takes the initiative and becomes confrontational.

Simultaneously two other things can happen: When the oppression is held up to ridicule, and people laugh at their oppressor, it potentially reduces their fear of the consequences of the escalated conflict. Strategic and creative use of mocking and ridicule also make it difficult for the oppressive forces to respond in an adequate way that they can easily justify, since almost everything they do can be further used against them and make them look ridiculous. These functions of humour are not mutually exclusive, there might be examples of humour that overlap the different functions, and there is no guarantee that it will always happen because a movement is using humour, since many other factors are at play here.

As with all kinds of investigations, looking into the world of humour and nonviolent resistance has generated more questions than answers. Topics for further investigations and analysis include:

- Many different kinds of humour exist - e.g. satire, irony and parody, and it can take different forms, such as jokes, actions or plays. What types of humour will best serve the different functions of humour suggested here? Are jokes for example more likely to *facilitate a culture of resistance* while spectacular actions *turn oppression upside down*?
- What happens when a movement in addition to mocking the oppressor uses self-irony and exposes its own mistakes and shortcomings?
- Can humour backfire on the nonviolent movement so that it is not taken seriously or the sympathy goes to the mocked oppressor?
- How is the use of humour perceived by the general public, does it change their thoughts or behaviour in any way?
- What do the oppressors think about the humour directed towards them? There is a possibility that the oppressor will try to use counter humour, what will this humour look like, and how can the nonviolent movement respond to the counter humour?

- What arguments and cases can be found that contradict seeing *turning oppression upside down* as a unique dynamic?

Appendix A: Case study methodology

This particular case study is selected because it is special, and by looking more closely at the unusual, we can often get more information about the less unusual.⁹⁰ In this case the unique use of humour makes it possible to see the role of humour more clearly than in nonviolence against oppression where humour played a less central role and the humour therefore becomes invisible among other factors. Because Otpor is a special case it will not be possible to draw general conclusions.

Informants

The majority of the information about Otpor's use of humour is based on qualitative interviews with 13 former Otpor activists in Belgrade in June 2006 conducted by the author. The informants were contacted through several different "channels": An inquiry on Balkan Academic News (BAN) yahoo group lead to some contacts, some informants provided phone numbers to other informants, and "Center for Nonviolent Resistance" which members have a background in Otpor was very helpful. Friends also knew people in Belgrade who contacted former Otpor activists for me. Some of the informants are "self-recruited" in the sense that they responded to the BAN query and said they could help me, others were asked to give an interview because others had recommended me to talk to them.

Although all possible care has been taken to include as wide a range of activists as possible, the reader should keep in mind that the interviewees could not be randomly selected because no database to select from existed. It was never intentioned to use this small sample for any kind of statistical purposes, and the views expressed here by my informants may differ from what other former Otpor activists experienced and remember. The informants were representative when it comes to gender - six females and seven males, and when it comes to age, they were between 17 and 26 when

⁹⁰ Pp. 45-46, 55

they were active in Otpor, which cover most of the average age span among Otpor activists in 1998-2000. When it comes to roles and functions within Otpor, the informants also cover a great variety, ranging from street activists who were handing out leaflets and hanging up posters, over media spokespersons and trainers to the founders and informal leadership within Otpor. I chose to focus on the Belgrade area, since the use of humour does not seem to be different between the capital and the provinces. A minor problem with the selection of informants is, that all the informants had very positive memories of their time in Otpor from 1998-2000. Several of them mentioned that they knew other people looked more negatively at their time in Otpor, but it was unfortunately not possible to get an interview with anyone who expressed such views. I see two reasons for this: One is that people are not interested in being interviewed and does not come forward themselves if they have painful memories of this time. The other possibility is that most former activists have positive memories of the time before October 5th 2000, and that the number of negative views get exaggerated because the frustration and disappointment with the time after the fall of Milošević get mixed up with the time period before.

Having mentioned these limitations with regard to the selection of informants, it is however my firm belief that they represent a fairly diverse group of people with different experiences and roles within Otpor, so that the information they provided, taken together, gives a both reliable and valid perspective of the use of humour within Otpor.

Interviews

The interviews took place at the informants work place, the botanical garden or at cafés. They lasted between one and two hours, depending on how much time the informants had available, how many informants were interviewed at the same time, whatever an interpreter was necessary or not and how much they had to say and remembered. Generally I had the feeling that the subject about humour within Otpor got covered appropriately and that I had enough time to do the interviews.

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Three of the interviews were done with two or three informants at the same time. These group interviews was a deliberate choice, based on the idea that it would save time, stimulated the informants memories and make them feel more comfortable. General this worked well, but it also had a few disadvantages - when the informants disagreed or when one would talk more than the other(s).

On two occasions I used an interpreter all the time, on a few occasions he was present to help when needed, and the rest of the interviews were done in English, but neither the interviewer nor the interviewees or interpreter are native English speakers.

All interviews are taped, but in a few places parts of it is missing for various reasons. The tapes were supplemented with handwritten notes during and after the interview. The informants are promised confidentiality. However, almost all informants said it was ok if I used their names. I have not seen any reason to do this, but it shows their open attitude to their time in Otpor, and their pride of what they had participated in. These are all "strong" informants with an unproblematic relationship to this part of their past. Many have been interviewed by journalists several times. I had prepared a long list of structured open ended questions, but I did not use it very much. The informants would cover many themes spontaneously and most of the time we would continue in a conversation-like style, and I would make sure that all themes got covered. It would not have been possible to follow the standardisation without me interrupting constantly and thereby creating a very different atmosphere, which I considered more important than answers that can be directly compared. A few times it was not possible to keep pushing on a theme because the interviewee did not see the nuances in the questions and/or I did not manage to explain them properly.

Everyone was informed that humour was the theme I was most interested in, but given the opportunity to comment on whether they found this important or not, or what else they would find important in Otpor's way of working. The questions that gave a lot of the answers used here, and which is asked to all informants was "what would you say was the reason

that Otpor used humour?” and “What did humour help you to achieve that you could not have done without humour?”

A note about time and memory

The interviews are done 6 years after the things in question happened, which is a long time. The informants' memories are likely to have changed during these six years. However, the events in question are not everyday life, but things that played an important role in the interviewees' life, which is likely to help memory. The passing of time has also made it easier to approach controversial issues such as fear, and given the informants the possibility to reflect about their experiences. It is noteworthy that six years later and more experienced, almost all informants would not change anything if they had the chance to go back.

Analysing the interviews

The tapes have not been transcribed for lack of time. Instead I have listened to all tapes and taken notes of all themes mentioned and the informant's attitude to the theme. This is the first and most crucial element in the analysis. Afterwards all themes from the notes are coded systematically according to seven social functions of humour. Answers concerning “getting new members”, “get attention”, and “show difference” are presented together in chapter two because they belong together and there are overlaps between them. “apathy” and “solidarity” also have some natural links, and since they concern the inner condition in Otpor, they are presented together. “Provocation” and “fear” are the last two functions, and they go together for reasons that are explained in the text itself. Everything is also coded according to their relation to: “examples of actions”, “looking back”, “regime counter humour”, “inspiration”, “relationship with police, media and others”, “reasons for joining”, “importance of humour” and “organisational issues within Otpor”.

All in all, I feel confident that the interviews have been done thoroughly. Another sample of activists are likely to have provided more or less the same results, and another researcher asking the same questions

would have reached the same conclusions, although the personality of both the interviewer and the interviewees influence this kind of qualitative interviewing and information gathering.

Appendix B examples of political humour

Nazi stupidity:

*"A Norwegian, a Swede and a Dane were talking about which of them could do the best job in patching people back together. The Dane said, "I once cut the arms off a guy back in Denmark, and attached new ones; now he is the world's best boxer!" The Swede said, "Well, I cut the legs off a fellow and after I attached new ones he became the world's best soccer player!" "That's nothing" said the Norwegian. "Back in Norway I cut the head off a guy and replaced it with a cabbage and now he is Norway's Minister President."*⁹¹

Eastern Europe humour - trust no one!

"Two Rumanians are on a bus. One is sitting down; the other is standing. The man sitting asks:

-Are you a member of the Communist party?

-No, I am not.

-Are you in the military?

-No, I am not.

-You mean you are not a government or party official of any kind?

-No, I am not

*-Then get the hell off my foot!"*⁹²

"The glass eye" Joke from Nazi concentration camps.

Circa in the recruitment office

Example of CIRCA action, written by Kolonel Klepto from the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army:

"Clunk... The heavy metal shutters of the armed forces recruitment centre roll down. Its 3 o'clock on a Friday afternoon in Leeds city centre, no more soldiers, sailors, or airmen will be joining up today. Inside the deserted office the glossy exhibition panels exclaim "Be the best" in brash bold letters. But dreams of adventure and liberating foreign lands will have to

⁹¹ p. 345

⁹² p. 103. Stokker refers here to Banc and Dundes.

be postponed, the office is shut for the day and a decidedly un-glossy spray painted banner with "Closed" written in wobbly green letters, is stuck to the shutters. On the pavement outside a makeshift recruitment stall is set up, and dozens of leaflets are being handed out to passing shoppers "Be Rubbish" they entreat "Join the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army."

A few minutes previously 15 clownbatants from the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), dressed head to toe in combat gear delicately trimmed with pink and green fuzzy-fur and sporting sparkling steel colanders helmets, had marched into the centre and asked the recruiting officers if they could join up. In high pitched clown voices we told them about our previous experience in the clown army, displaying skills such as silly salutes, showing subversive slapstick drills, exhibiting the art of telling jokes that disarm and explaining that where their bombs fail we might be able to succeed with laughter.

Figure 1. Sorry. The army isn't recruiting today. Its closed.

But they hadn't taken our desire to join their army seriously, and a very large and extremely un-amused commando from the Royal Marines tried to throw us out of the centre with the help of a growing number of police officers. But it's hard to move a rebel clown, they don't resist in a conventional sense, but tend to slip out of the clutches of authority like wobbly jelly and distract them from their duties with loud gaffaws and stinging mockery. The more our pleas to join the army fell on deaf ears - "Please teach us how to liberate people!" "Where are the application forms?" "Why can't we have really really big guns like yours?" - the more chaotic the scene in the recruitment office became. Very long sausage balloons started screaming across the space sounding like ammunition about to explode, sherbert filled toy aeroplanes did manic loop the loops over the RAF desks, one clown crawled around the floor polishing soldiers boots with his feather duster while another read out loud the latest communique from CIRCA (see figure 1), which detailed the absurdity of the so called "hand-over " of power in Iraq and announced the occupation of Leeds by CIRCA and the establishment of the Clown Provisional Authority.

Figure 2. CIRCA Communique No 3.

Earlier in the day we had occupied the local BBC HQ, to search for dangerous propaganda (weapons of mass distraction), and the Labour party offices, where cabinet minister Hilary Benn resides when he has time to be in his constituency, in his absence he was offered the position of minister for International Clowning Development.

Figure 3. Clowns occupy MP Hilary Benn's office. But the clown himself wasn't there.

Two days later CIRCA was spotted marching around the Menwith Hill spy base, helping over 200 police officers - on foot, bicycle, horseback and quad bike - shepherd, film and document about 80 peace protesters around the base. Nothing undermines authority like holding it up to ridicule and

one of the most efficient techniques of ridicule is mocking by imitation. Every time the police made a line to block the protesters way, the clowns would create their own line in front of them. Every time a policeman shouted to the crowd to "stay behind the line" (road markings) a clown would repeat the demand in a silly voice over and over again, ad infinitum - incessant repetition is key to ingredient of slapstick comedy - this would be followed by endless improvisations around the concept of the LINE, until eventually all 18 clowns speaking in chorus asked each policeman in turn "Officer ...what's so important about the LINE". The police are comfortable with confrontational resistance but faced with the art of ridicule, they don't know quite how to respond. In this instance they soon change their language and seemed to be too embarrassed to use the word "line" anymore, asking people to simply "get over there."

Figure 4. Spot the clown.

At one point a very long tape measure appeared and the clowns set up a competition to find the tallest policeman and the smallest protester, an exercise that ended with the clowns getting completely tangled in the tape and falling over. Whenever the very slick mountain bike cops passed by, clowns would idolize their "cool" lycra shorts, sunglasses and shiny new bikes, causing the police on foot to smile and thus teasing out some of the internal tensions of the force - "divide and fool" being one of CIRCA's key strategies to rebel against the forces of coercive power!"

Example of the dean from Serbian student demonstrations 1996-97, told by three different informants:

One of the demands from the student protest was that the Dean should resign. The main student protest was stuck on the issue, they had been demonstrating every day for months. Some students from the faculty of mechanical engineering decided to do actions that would escalate the pressure on the Dean, and because they were only a few hundred and wanted to attract attention, they decided to do something provocative. There was a "rumour" that the reason why the Dean did not resign was that he was in the south of Serbia skiing, so the students organised a "Search for the Dean" that lasted for a week. Every day they went to a different place to search for him and all the time with a humorous provocation. Carrying signs saying "Dean we know you are here" they went to the city zoo and asked all the animals if they had seen the Dean. The next day they went to the river with cod fishing equipment to see if they could catch the Dean. (Among Serbian fishermen the cod is considered really stupid because it is

easy to catch by making a sound. This would hint at the Dean's stupidity, but is something you don't make explicit when using humour.) Another day they went to search for the Dean-osaur together with the palaeontologists and found a bone that proved that the Dean-osaur was there. And so on for a whole week. The last day they went to the local fortune teller to ask if the Dean was going to resign. She looked in her tarot cards and then declared that he would resign in ten days. And within 10 days, he did in fact resign - not because of her prediction, but because of the pressure put on him.

Bibliography

