On humor in the Syrian civil war: theoretical and methodological considerations. Reply to “No Laughing Matter? The Potential of Political Humor as a Means of Nonviolent Resistance. A Case Study of Syria” by Sonja Noderer

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Evelyn Haman, a very famous German humorist once said with incomparable sobriety: “humor is a serious matter”. Despite several attempts to address humor in the context of civil wars in Syria (Camps-Febrer 2012; Damir-Geilsdorf 2020), the Arab spring or the Gezi-Park Protests (Damir-Geilsdorf and Milich 2020; Hatab 2016; Purcell et al. 2017; Al-Rawi 2016; Görkem 2015), humor hasn’t been taken serious in the broader field of IR and International Peace and Conflict Studies (IR/IP&CS), although the “emotional turn” is well established in the respective disciplines (Koschut et al. 2017). In her article “No Laughing Matter? The Potential of Political Humor as a Means of Nonviolent Resistance” Sonja Noderer turns to humor as a very important discursive practice and cultural resource of protest communication in the context of the Syrian civil war. Building on concepts of non-violent resistance by Vinthagen (Vinthagen 2015) and the Carnivalesque humor theory by Mikhail Bakhtin Sonja tracks down how the Syrian opposition relies on humor as a discursive practice across a wide range of different forms and modes of protest communication. Analyzing the everyday practices of humor, Sonja reconstructs humorous narratives of protest and dissent in songs, series, cartoons, lyrics, or protest banners. In sum, the paper provides valuable insights on an often underestimated and—given the severe situation in Syria—rather unexpected phenomenon.

In my reply to her article, I would like to problematize some general issues on how humor is addressed in the article. My intention is not to criticize Sonja’s work as she refers to several of the problems as well, but to offer some thoughts of reflection on humor in IR/IP&CS, as it is indeed a “serious matter”.

Firstly, I think it is important to account for the various modes of communication through which humorous messages are ventilated. Sonja’s intention is to bring the

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role of humor for Syria's protest movements to our attention in the first place and therefore showing the variety of humorous articulations across the board (from cartoons and posters to series) seems necessary and helpful. However, as we can already see in the empirical examples, humor is not only based on language in a narrow sense but relies on multimodal resources of communication. Some of them, for example visual forms of humor such as the Assad-caricatures might be even more comprehensible to a wider international audience than spoken or written jokes. As the medium is (at least part of) the message it makes a difference how and where humorous interventions take place and whether the communicative act is, for example, made to address a broader public (e.g. street art, protest banners etc.) or whether it is an everyday practice taking place during interpersonal conversations (e.g. people joking about the regime). I think, that in order to better understand humor as political articulation and discursive practice of resistance the different ways, means, and specific communicative conditions of how the messages are conveyed to various audiences should be reflected more thoroughly.

Secondly, and closely connected to my first point is that relationality seems very important when humor is conceptualized. Sonja's analysis is, at least in my reading, very much focused on the "messages" itself and less in how they resonate with the audiences. But speaking of humor without taking into account the audience's reception is problematical as the purpose of joking is (according to the working-definition of the paper) to "cause amusement" among "others". So, the "others" are supposed to be the ones who must have the same sense of "humor" in order to decipher and understand the message. Otherwise the communicative act wouldn't work or is in danger of going sideways and will raise misunderstandings, which is indeed very often the case, especially in highly politicized contexts. So, I was wondering who the audiences of humorous interventions in the case of Syria are. Especially under the conditions of a dictatorship it is rather unlikely that, for example, jokes about the regime are told among people who don't know or don't trust each other. So, in terms of group identity formation it seems to me that jokes play a very important role in order to establish the "self" (Vucetic 2004). But how is it possible that humor then could become so powerful that it challenges the narratives of the regime (considered as the "other" or even the "enemy")?

My third point is, that I see a contradiction in the way how humor is conceptualized. In her conclusion Sonja states that:

As a "weapon of the weak", the symbolic power of political humor can serve social movements in their resistance against oppression. According to NVR and humor theories, it not only provides relief from suffering but also mobilises the opposition and fosters outreach across divides, breaks the power of the oppressor and disseminates shared norms and a utopian vision of a better future. All of these functions of political humor can be observed in the Syrian context.

On the one hand, the article argues that humor is a "weapon of the weak" on the other it is conceptualized as "non-violent resistance". I would object that humor can't be both. Either humor is considered a "weapon" (and as Sonja rightly points out not only of the "weak") then we have to acknowledge that humorous practices are illocutionary in the sense that they might be used to "attack" oth-

ers. If we conceptualize humor as an act of non-violence, we might underestimate the perlocutionary effects of humorous communicative acts—that people might feel discriminated, hurt, and disrespected. So, I see a tension in how both concepts are used here, and I would make a strong argument against the conceptualization of humor as non-violent resistance as Sørensen argues (Sørensen 2008). To be sure, humor is not an act of physical violence like torching cars or throwing stones etc. but I think, we should not underestimate the violent potential of language and other forms of communication. Humor doesn’t leave scars on skins but might leave scars on souls. As Lene Hansen (to take an example from IR) has already shown in her seminal Mohammed Cartoon article, what some people think is funny and ironic is considered blasphemy by others (Hansen 2011).

Sonja’s conclusion also suggests, that humor has been some kind of “game changer” in the Syrian civil war. But regardless of the sympathy I have for the article, these concluding remarks seem to be a bridge too far. In my view, the research design is not able to demonstrate whether and how humorous interventions have mobilized anybody and the article doesn’t provide evidence for such effects. As Sonja acknowledges in the conclusion herself, the audience reception and reactions by the regime are beyond her scope—which is ok, but suggesting that humor has had mobilizing effects is difficult, though. Here, we should be careful not to exaggerate the discursive function or capacities of humor in civil war settings.

My last point problematizes an ontological issue: the essentialism in the conceptualization of humor. The major definition of humor the article draws on comes from Sørensen (2008) and says that humor is

Everything that causes amusement, from a joke, story, play, skit, movie or book to a way of acting or a slogan in a demonstration. It can be based on irony, satire, parody or ridicule (Sørensen 2008, p. 170).

This definition is not only very broad it also fosters an essentialist understanding of humor. Like it or not but many people might consider catcalling and jokes about blond women, religious minorities, or people of color as funny (which reminds us that humor is by no means just a weapon of the weak). Others consider such utterances as sexual harassment, religious, or ethnical discrimination—which is all but funny. According to the definition “it causes amusement” at least among those who crack the jokes, so these practices can count as “humor”. So, what about discursive conditions, rules, and regulations under which humor becomes possible—or not? Is every form of political humor considered legitimate as long as it is directed against the ruling regime? For Sonja, relying on humor is a legitimate act of resistance against Assad’s regime—and who would disagree. But what about the further implications of humor as discursive practice of resistance beyond that single case, where the answer seems quite easy? Humor is a discursive practice and therefore never stable and always up for the negotiation of its meaning. The discursive boundaries of what counts as humor (or not) are permanently in flux and it doesn’t depend on whether it “causes amusement”. Here, I think, we are only at the starting point of a debate which goes way beyond IR/IP&CS.

In addressing humor in the context of the Syrian civil war Sonja has made an important point and necessary contribution to the field of IR/IP&CS. However, as

soon as we widen our scope and leave disciplinary boundaries behind (as Sonja did in remarkable way) we come across a lively debate on humor as part of protest communication and as a political practice to express dissent. So, I consider Sonja's article as an encouraging starting point to engage with this literature, but there is still a lot of work to do.

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