THE POLITICS OF LAUGHTER:
THEORIZING LAUGHTER CRITICALLY IN THE SOCIAL ORDER

by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to determine how laughter shapes our shared political life. In recent years laughter has emerged as a key experience or event through which diverse political interests, beliefs, and identities form, interact, and struggle with one another. Laughter today is at once a medium through which subjects learn about and engage political issues (e.g., *The Daily Show*); a stake and weapon in contentious political struggles (e.g., the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks); and a circulating force that fuels complex political assemblages (e.g., laughter’s role in rhetoric of Donald Trump). Challenging the conventional liberal view that laughter operates politically by speaking truth to power, I turn to Nietzsche and the early Frankfurt School to develop a “critical theory of laughter” that elucidates how concrete experiences/events of laughter produce, disrupt, and transform what counts as truthful speech and who qualifies as a truthful speaker in a given social order. I practice this critical theory of laughter by offering close readings of the accounts of laughter advanced by Theodor Adorno, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, and Ralph Ellison. I find that laughter participates in politics by entrenching *and* subverting social power (Adorno); enacting *and* resisting sovereignty (Hobbes); stimulating *and* inhibiting human reason (Kant I); shaping *and* recomposing common sense (Kant II); and constructing *and* democratizing racial hierarchies (Ellison). Consistently split and splitting against itself, the politics of laughter are intensely dialectical. Laughter, I conclude, constitutes a privileged site wherein the contemporary social order constructs, preserves, and transforms itself politically. As the first full-length study to take laughter seriously as a political issue, this dissertation contributes to recent scholarship in laughter studies, critical theory, democratic theory, and the history of political thought.

First Reader: Samuel A. Chambers; Second Reader: William E. Connolly
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The Oxford English Dictionary defines “dissertation” as “an extended scholarly essay, usually based upon original research, submitted for a degree or other academic qualification.” The OED also provides a second, historically older and more concise definition: “discussion, debate.” If one is lucky, the experience of writing a dissertation is far more like the “discussion” suggested by the latter definition than the production of a qualification-satisfying essay described by the former. I, for one, have enjoyed just such luck. Although this project was an inevitably solitary and at times even lonely enterprise, I have had the honor of bringing it to fruition through conversations and exchanges with a remarkable group of scholars, colleagues, friends, and family. It is my hope that the (for now) finished product bears the traces of the “discussion, debate” that I consider this dissertation as, in its essence, being.

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INTRODUCTION
THE POLITICS OF LAUGHTER

“Man is by nature a political animal” (Aristotle 1996, 1253a3).

“Mankind […] is the only one of the animals that laughs” (Aristotle 2001, 673a7).

Humans, Aristotle famously argues, are political animals. The human animal’s unique status as political rests on its possession of logos, or the capacity for reasoned speech. Unlike the mere voice or noise (phōnē) that issues from non-human mouths, the human logos performs the specifically political work of establishing common prudential ends and normative aspirations:

Man is the only animal who has the gift of speech [logos]. And whereas mere voice [phōnē] is but an indication of pleasure and pain, and is therefore found in other animals […] the power of speech [logos] is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust. (Aristotle 1996, 1253a10–16)

Aristotle’s claim – that humans are political animals due to their possession of logos – constitutes perhaps the foundational argument of the Western political tradition (Bennington 2009; Chambers 2003; Ferguson 2014). The most generative thinkers since Aristotle – Aquinas (1947, 2007), Hobbes (2012), Marx (1996), and more recently Heidegger (2009), Arendt (1998), Strauss (1989), Derrida (2009), Foucault (1990), Habermas (2008), Rancière (1999), and Massumi (2014) – all orient their projects by engaging, contesting, and recasting this basic argument. They ask whether humans are the only political animals, what kind of logos (if any) is necessary for political life, and the extent to which the “human” and “logos” are themselves creations of politics. Doing political theory after Aristotle means grappling with the relationship between the human, logos, and public life.

Yet Aristotle also argues – somewhat less famously – that humans are the only animals that laugh. Logos and laughter are not natural allies. In laughter, reasoned speech “intended to set
forth the expedient and inexpedient […] the just and the unjust” devolves into what Descartes describes as “an inarticulate and explosive cry” (Descartes 1989, 84). Numerous commentators describe how humans appear to be at their least “human”- and most “animal”-like when they descend into a cacophony of chuckling, cackling, guffawing, or giggling (Beard 2014; Critchley 2002; Parvulescu 2010; Scott 2015). If laughter does not qualify as *logos*, Aristotle’s insistence that laughter is the exclusive property of the human animal and that the movements of the diaphragm in laughter “produce perception” and “act and move thought” (Aristotle 2001, 673a1–5) suggests that we should nevertheless not dismiss laughter as mere *phōnē*. Indeed, classicist Stephen Halliwell concludes that laughter for Aristotle involves a complex “body–mind interaction [that] can operate in either causal direction” (Halliwell 2008, 315), and philosopher David Appelbaum describes laughter as involving a “double movement”: a shattering of *logos* that nonetheless reverberates with meaning (Appelbaum 1990, 21). Laughter calls into question Aristotle’s foundational distinction between the *logos* that marks a properly human, political existence and the *phōnē* exterior to it. As a moment of *phōnē* that retains an essential connection to thought and discourse, laughter interrupts the smooth functioning of the human *logos*.

This dissertation explores how the human subject’s nature as a political animal hinges on its status as a laughing animal. If humans are political animals due to their possession of *logos*, then laughter – by destabilizing the distinction between *logos* and *phōnē* – plays a decisive role in determining, contesting, and transforming the scope and content of that political existence. Through an investigation of the accounts of laughter offered by Theodor Adorno, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, and Ralph Ellison, I investigate how experiences or events1 of laughter

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1 I explain my equivocation in describing laughter as an “experience” or an “event” in the sections that follow.
shape our shared political life. I argue that laughter constitutes a privileged site wherein the
contemporary social order constructs, preserves, and transforms itself politically. In laughter, a
particular distribution of *logos* – or conception of what counts as rational, truthful speech and
who qualifies as a rational, truthful speaker – emerges and entrenches itself (often in oppressive,
reactionary, and exclusionary ways that bolster and secure an existing social order’s structures of
power and hierarchy) and overcomes and transforms itself (often in more emancipatory,
subversive, and democratic directions that challenge and undermine those structures). The
political life of society takes shape, consolidates itself, and is resisted through laughter.

This study responds to laughter’s emergence in recent years as a key experience or event
through which diverse political interests, beliefs, and identities form, interact, and struggle with
one another. I will begin by describing four main ways in which laughter participates in politics
today.

**The Politics of Laughter Today**

I. A few weeks before the 2014 World Cup soccer tournament, comedian John Oliver
dedicated an episode of his HBO program *Last Week Tonight* to a blistering attack against FIFA,
the international association that governs the tournament. Using a series of absurd analogies and
humorous quips, Oliver introduced the World Cup’s corrupt practices to an American audience
largely unfamiliar with FIFA but increasingly interested in international soccer. For example,
after showing a clip where FIFA chairman Sepp Blatter defends the organization’s non-profit
status by claiming that its $1 billion holdings are merely a “reserve,” Oliver responds, “A
reserve? A reserve of a billion dollars? When your rainy day fund is so big that you have to check
it for swimming cartoon ducks, you might not be a non-profit anymore!” (Oliver 2014).
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There is nothing especially memorable about Oliver’s FIFA sketch, and this is precisely the point. In the United States in the early twenty-first century it is exceedingly normal for subjects to learn about and engage political issues by laughing at them. In the 2000s young Americans reported Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert’s *Colbert Report* as their primary news sources (Cosgrove-Mather 2004; Rasmussen Reports 2009). The success of Stewart and Colbert led to a proliferation of political satire programs in the 2010s (e.g., the shows hosted by Samantha Bee, John Oliver, and Larry Wilmore) as well as the overt politicization of previously staid network talk shows like *The Late Show* and *Late Night*. Similar developments are underway beyond the U.S. as well. Television networks in Armenia, Canada, Croatia, Egypt, Germany, Japan, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, and Portugal have all launched popular *Daily Show* spinoffs (Cardoso 2009; Hills 2017; Iqbal 2011; Marx 2012; Matijević 2016).

Not merely a simple reaction that subjects have to political events or controversies, laughter has become a key medium through which subjects learn about, engage, and respond to political issues and processes. Political scientists and media scholars have demonstrated the impact of this medium on public opinion about political figures and public engagement with current events (Baumgartner and Morris 2006, 2011; Cao 2008; 2010; Feldman and Young 2008; Hollander 2005; Morris 2009; Young 2004; Xenos and Becker 2009). For example, Tina Fey’s *Saturday Night Live* portrayals of Sarah Palin during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign were associated with steep declines in Palin’s approval ratings (Baumgartner, Morris, and Walth 2012), and exposure to *The Daily Show* has been shown to increase viewers’ knowledge of political and current events (Young and Hoffmann 2012). While many commentators interpret this ubiquity of laughter as a sign of a thriving public sphere unafraid of holding powerful
officials and institutions accountable (Euben 2003; Hariman 2007, 2008; Tønder 2014; Willett 2008), others see it as evidence of a cynical, nihilistic public culture (Hart and Hartelius 2007; Hart 2013) or as a distraction from more impactful forms of political participation (Frank 2014). Whatever one’s position in these debates, it is clear that subjects today are learning about and engaging political issues by and through laughter. Contemporary politics is a politics of laughter.

II. On January 7, 2015 two militants broke into the Paris offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and killed twelve people, including the magazine’s editors and five cartoonists (Bilefsky and de la Baume 2015). The attack originated in a dispute over laughter. For years *Charlie Hebdo* published irreverent caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad to mock what the magazine’s editor called the “totalitarian religious rhetoric” of “Islamic fascism” (Biard 2015). The editors of *Charlie Hebdo* understood laughter as a non-violent means of protecting the secular French public sphere from an allegedly intolerant and dangerous religious orthodoxy. Following the attacks, virtually the entire French political and cultural establishment and its foreign allies united around the slogan #JeSuisCharlie, and laughing at Islam was elevated to something of a liberal duty. Jonathan Chait announced that “the right to blaspheme religion is one of the most elemental exercises of political liberalism” (Chait 2015) and *The Guardian* demanded that “we must not stop laughing at these murderous clowns” (Rowson 2015). For *Charlie Hebdo* and its supporters, laughter stands at the front lines of the “war on terror.”

Many Muslims living in France and elsewhere interpreted the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons differently. From their perspective, French laughter at the Prophet Muhammad reflected a continuation of the West’s history of anti-Muslim imperialism, colonialism, and racism. As anthropologist Didier Fassin noted:
The caricatures were one more affront in a long list. Indeed, whereas satire has long been a way to mock and challenge the powerful, in the case of the French magazine, it only added insult to injury, targeting an already stigmatized and discriminated group, constantly exposed to Islamophobia as well as racism and xenophobia. (Fassin 2015, 7; see also Jackson 2015; Kay 2016)

The laughter generated by the cartoons antagonized (and thus reproduced) the “enemy” against which Charlie Hebdo claimed to be defending liberal French society. If, as the magazine’s supporters claim, laughter is a weapon in the “war on terror,” then laughter also helps create, sustain, and intensify the divisions at the very root of that “war.”

The Charlie Hebdo attack (along with the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy) suggests the existence of a politics of laughter in a second sense. In addition to serving as a medium through which subjects learn about and engage political processes, laughter also participates in the composition and unfolding of those processes themselves. Who or what counts as laughable, how it feels to laugh and be laughed at, and the histories of these meanings and practices of laughter constitute key axes around which political conflicts emerge and play out. Laughter is a multifaceted stake and weapon in political struggles: it incites, marginalizes, attacks, defends, empowers, and humiliates. By entering into, intensifying, and at times reconfiguring historical relations and structures of power, laughter today is, as Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai claim about comedy, “freshly dangerous” (Berlant and Ngai 2017, 235).

III. In October 2013 the BBC’s Jeremy Paxman interviewed actor and comedian Russell Brand about his recent assignment as a guest editor for the British political magazine New Statesman (Brand and Paxman 2013). The interview began with Paxman questioning Brand’s credentials for the assignment, and it quickly morphed into a debate over the form that political discourse should take amid mounting global economic, social, and environmental crises. The
Paxman-Brand interview went viral for several days, and the official BBC version has been viewed on Youtube over eleven million times.

Jeremy Paxman: Russell Brand, who are you to edit a political magazine?
Russell Brand: Well, I suppose like a person who’s been politely asked by an attractive woman. I don’t know what the typical criteria is. I don’t know many people that edit political magazines. Boris [Johnson], he used to do one, didn’t he? So I’m a kind of a person with crazy hair, quite a good sense of humor, don’t know much about politics – I’m ideal.
Paxman: But is it true you don’t even vote?
Brand: Yeah, no, I don’t vote.
Paxman: Well, how do you have any authority to talk about politics then?
Brand: Well, I don’t get my authority from this pre-existing paradigm which is quite narrow and only serves a few people. I look elsewhere for alternatives that might be of service to humanity. Alternate means, alternate political systems.
Paxman: They being?
Brand: Well, I’ve not invented it yet, Jeremy! I had to do a magazine last week. I’ve had a lot on me plate. But I say, but here’s the thing you shouldn’t do: shouldn’t destroy the planet, shouldn’t create massive economic disparity, shouldn’t ignore the needs of the people.

Paxman continues quizzing Brand on his reasons for not voting and concludes that Brand’s indifference towards voting means that he does not care about democracy. Rejecting this accusation, Brand insists on his commitment to a different vision of democratic politics.

Paxman: You're calling for revolution!
Paxman: There are many people who would agree with you.
Brand: Good!
Paxman: The current system is not engaging with all sorts of problems, yes. And they feel apathetic, really apathetic.
Brand: Yes.
Paxman: But if they were to take you seriously, and not to vote –
Brand: Yeah, they shouldn’t vote, they should – that’s one thing they should do, don’t bother voting. […] We know it’s not going to make any difference. We know that already.
Paxman: It does make a difference.
Brand: So like I have more impact at West Ham United cheering them on, and they lost to City, unnecessarily, sadly.
Paxman: Well now you’re being facetious.
Brand: Well, facetiousness has as much value as seriousness. I think you’re making the mistake of mistaking seriousness for the –

Paxman: You’re not going to solve world problems by facetiousness.

Brand: We’re not going to solve them with the current system! At least facetiousness is funny.

Paxman: Sometimes.

Brand suggests that being funny or laughable has a political efficacy that exceeds that of the “serious,” programmatic discourse that Paxman demands. That is why he believes he is the “ideal” person to edit New Statesman. When Brand responds, “At least facetiousness is funny,” I understand him as saying “at least facetiousness, because it makes people laugh, does something.” From Brand’s perspective, the laughter produced by his facetiousness loosens the stranglehold that the prevailing political-economic system has on the collective imaginary and makes it possible and desirable to conceive of alternative modes of social, political, and economic organization. Brand considers the serious discourse to which Paxman dedicates himself as failing precisely on this count: it assumes that existing institutional forms exhaust the space of political possibility. The Paxman-Brand interview suggests the existence of a politics of laughter in a third sense. By interrupting the ordinary ways in which subjects see, understand, and inhabit the world, laughter can transform the very terms of political discourse and action. For Brand, a democratic politics that is worth its salt today must be a politics of laughter in this way.

IV.

The White House Correspondents’ Dinner (WHCD) is the American media and political establishment’s annual celebration of itself. The WHCD provides Washington journalists and the politicians they cover the chance to pay homage to the First Amendment by enjoying a glamorous evening together – complete with a red carpet entranceway, A-list celebrity guests, and, perhaps most importantly, wall-to-wall cable news coverage. The highlight of the evening
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was – until very recently – a pair of stand-up comedy routines performed by the sitting president and a professional comedian.

At the 2011 iteration of the WHCD President Barack Obama and comedian Seth Meyers subjected perhaps the most famous celebrity in attendance – Donald Trump – to a merciless barrage of jokes about a rumored 2012 presidential campaign. It was clear that Obama in particular, after enduring months of Trump’s baseless questioning of the validity of his birth certificate, relished deploying his considerable comedic talents to embarrass Trump in front of the media and political elites whose respect Trump craved. Obama joked:

Now I know that he’s taken some flack lately, but no one is prouder to put this birth certificate matter to rest than “The Donald.” And that’s because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter, like: did we fake the moon landing? [Laughter] What really happened in Roswell? [Laughter] And – where are Biggie and Tupac?! [Laughter]

[...]

We all know about your credentials and breadth of experience. For example [laughter] – no, seriously – just recently, in an episode of Celebrity Apprentice [laughter] – at the steakhouse, the men’s cooking team did not impress the judges from Omaha Steaks. And there was a lot of blame to go around. But you, Mr. Trump, recognized that the real problem was a lack of leadership. And so ultimately, you didn’t blame Lil Jon or Meatloaf – you fired Gary Busey. [Laughter] And these are the kinds of decisions that would keep me up at night. [Laughter] Well handled, sir. Well handled.

Meyers continued the onslaught:

Donald Trump often appears on Fox, which is ironic because a fox often appears on Donald Trump’s head.

[...]

Donald Trump has been saying he will run for president as a Republican — which is surprising, since I just assumed he was running as a joke.
The laughter generated by the Obama-Meyers tag team humiliated Trump. He stared ahead stone-faced throughout their acts and left the dinner quickly after its conclusion.

Several Trump confidants claim that Trump decided to run for president that evening (Gopnik 2015; Haberman and Burns 2016; PBS 2016). The laughter Trump suffered at the hands of the Washington establishment (particularly from a black man whose status as American – let alone president – he resented) had to be avenged. However, when Trump actually launched a presidential campaign in 2016, the laughter only grew louder. Everything from his hair to his tacky hotels, penchant for racist and sexist remarks, and off-the-cuff policy proposals became fodder for unrelenting mockery by journalists, political opponents, and late-night comedians. But in what proved to be a decisive rhetorical maneuver, Trump linked the laughter that others enjoyed at his expense to the laughter he claimed that the United States as a whole had been suffering from for years. In his June 2015 announcement speech Trump proclaimed, “When do we beat Mexico at the border? They’re laughing at us, at our stupidity!” (Time 2015). In the following months a standard line in any speech or interview was “they [Mexico, China, Iran, ISIS, North Korea, etc.] are laughing at us. They think we’re so stupid!” The rhetoric of laughter was such a central part of Trump’s campaign that after only a few months The Washington Post was able to create a compilation video titled “100-plus times Donald Trump assured us that America is a laughingstock” (Chokshi 2016). Trump successfully depicted the widespread laughter that the political and media establishment directed at him as but a single manifestation of the more general laughter directed at the American people. “The same people who are laughing at me are laughing at you,” Trump seemed to be saying. In an era of persistent joblessness, crippling personal debt, permanent foreign wars, and above all, elite indifference to
these various crises, Trump’s rhetoric – suggestive of a joint foreign-domestic conspiracy against “everyday” Americans – proved remarkably effective. By making the real laughter directed at him resonate with the laughter he imagined America’s enemies were enjoying, Trump ensured that comedic attacks leveled against him would not – as his liberal opponents expected – undermine his support but would rather intensify his followers’ devotion to him.

Curiously enough, Trump himself does not laugh. Seriously: try recalling a single time when you saw or heard Donald Trump laugh. He (almost) never does it. For such a skilled public performer, Trump is also remarkably inept at telling jokes. His stand-up routine at the 2016 Al Smith Dinner (an event similar to the WHCD where presidential candidates roast themselves and one another) was painfully awkward for everyone in attendance (Flegenheimer and Parker 2016) and likely explains his absence from the WHCD as president. Trump has, however, mastered one mode of producing laughter. Recall the first Republican debate in August 2015 where Megyn Kelly questioned Trump about his history of mistreating women. Trump responded with a sexist quip about Rosie O’Donnell that launched the audience into a fury of laughter through which it rendered its verdict about Trump and his misogyny. With a single remark, Trump established himself – definitively, it turned out – as the premier talent of the Republican field. The cruel quip proved to be one of the most powerful weapons in Trump’s rhetorical arsenal. Jeb Bush? “Low energy” (laughter); Marco Rubio? “Lil’ Marco” (laughter); John McCain? “I like people who weren’t captured” (laughter); Elizabeth Warren? “Pocahontas” (laughter); Hillary Clinton? “You’d be in jail” (laughter).

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2 To my knowledge, Trump has been seen laughing on video only twice since he announced his presidential campaign. The first time was when a supporter made a joke comparing Hillary Clinton to a dog, and the second was when a supporter shouted “Slick Willie!” when Trump mentioned Bill Clinton.
The emergent American nationalist, proto-fascist assemblage (Connolly 2008; 2017; Deleuze and Guattari 2011) led for the moment by Donald Trump features a politics of laughter in a fourth sense. This is a political economy of laughter (cf. Ahmed 2004a) wherein Trump conducts a circulation of laughter that helps produce and sustain his position as sovereign. Trump “conducts” laughter in both senses of the word: he attracts the laughter of his liberal opponents and then directs this laughter onto his followers (“they’re laughing at us”). Trump completes the circuit by directing his followers’s cruel laughter onto his liberal opponents, who are in turn motivated (and encouraged) to laugh at him some more. In this economy, laughter flows toward Trump, through Trump, and away from Trump, but Trump himself does not laugh. Both inside and outside the sphere of circulation, Trump establishes himself as its sovereign. This is a key source of Trump’s political appeal. Only the exceptional figure who knows the joke, can play the joke, but is not in on the joke can guarantee that “we” (white, male, heterosexual Americans), not “them” (non-white, non-male, LGBTQ foreigners), will have the last laugh. A political economy of laughter produces and sustains the relationship between sovereign (Trump), his people, and an enemy that fuels the contemporary American nationalist and proto-fascist political assemblage.

* * * * *

Laughter participates in contemporary politics in multiple, overlapping, and oftentimes contradictory ways. Laughter is at once a medium through which subjects learn about, engage, and respond to political issues; a key stake and weapon in political controversies and struggles; a site of democratic disruption and transformation; and a circulating force that creates and sustains complex political assemblages. The questions of who people laugh at, why they laugh at these targets, and the effects that such practices of laughter exert reside at the center of our politics
today. My project seeks to illuminate this multifaceted politics of laughter. As the above vignettes indicate, the “politics of laughter” refers both to the political dimensions of laughter and to the role that laughter plays in contemporary political life. A study of the politics of laughter thus aims to tell us something about laughter and about “politics” more generally.

The Liberal Politics of Laughter

The predominant mode of theorizing the relationship between politics and laughter today is provided by what I call the liberal discourse of the politics of laughter. While “liberalism” is an irreducibly complex, capacious, and historically contested tradition (Bell 2014), John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty offers a helpful starting point for grasping the most important features of this discourse. According to Mill, freedom of individual thought and expression is required to discover the truths that make possible human progress against the stultifying forces of social conformism (Mill 2002, 14–16). Mill writes:

> Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion, is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for the purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right. (21)

Characteristically “liberal” accounts of the politics of laughter understand laughter as participating in an exercise of individual freedom that helps produce truths by which humanity improves itself. In what follows I review the main tenets of this discourse by examining a classic formulation provided by the Third Earl of Shaftesbury in his 1709 “Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour in a Letter to a Friend” as well as a more recent example.

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3 While Shaftesbury, an eighteenth century Whig, predates liberal political philosophy in the tradition of Mill, his commitment to human reason and the liberty of thought and expression makes his account of laughter an early – and perhaps for that reason, particularly sophisticated – example of the liberal discourse of the politics of laughter.
offered by Martha Nussbaum. I conclude by reflecting on what Henri Bergson’s account of the social function of laughter reveals about the limitations of the liberal discourse.

Shaftesbury’s “Sensus Communis” offers a defense of “raillery,” or the practice whereby “gentlemen and friends who know one another perfectly well” ridicule and taunt their various philosophical, moral, and political arguments (Shaftesbury 1999, 36). While raillery appears to be little more than lighthearted ribbing among friends, Shaftesbury contends that it plays an essential role in enlightened discourse. Raillery allows individuals to differentiate sound arguments grounded in reason from those based solely on opinions, prejudice, or “idolatry”:

> Truth, it is supposed, may bear all lights, and one of those principal lights, or natural mediums, by which things are to be viewed, in order to a thorough recognition, is ridicule itself, or that manner of proof by which we discern whatever is liable to just raillery in any subject. (29–30)

An argument’s susceptibility to laughter when under assault by raillery reveals its absence of rational foundation. Laughter is the test that all good arguments must survive:

> For nothing is ridiculous except what is deformed. […] How therefore can we possibly make a jest of honesty? — To laugh both ways is nonsensical. […] A man must be soundly ridiculous who, with all the wit imaginable, would go about to ridicule wisdom or laugh at honesty or good manners. (59–60; see also 35)

According to Shaftesbury, there exists a necessary connection between laughter and untruth, and laughter contributes to enlightenment by differentiating between sound and faulty arguments.

Although laughter shares a necessary connection with untruth, this connection does not arise naturally. Shaftesbury contends that laughter’s ability to expose faulty arguments flourishes only under conditions of liberty – that is, where individuals (like gentlemen of “the Club”) can freely reason by means of an unregulated give-and-take on any topic (36). Under a repressive
political or religious regime that restricts such discourse, laughter assumes pathological forms that are incapable of contributing to enlightenment:

The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned and controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint [...] whether it be in burlesque, mimicry or buffoonery [...]. Want of liberty may account for want of a true politeness and for the corruption or wrong use of pleasantry and humor. (34–35)

In the absence of freedom, laughter degenerates into the mere foolishness found in “the many barbarous and illiterate nations” (38). While enlightening laughter is a felicitous by-product of a liberal society, Shaftesbury in turn insists that a liberal society requires practices of laughter to sustain itself. Individuals will want to participate in the taxing “habit of reasoning” only if this activity is made more enjoyable by raillery. He writes: “Men can never be invited to the habit than when they find pleasure in it. A freedom of raillery [...] [is] the only terms which can render such speculative conversations any way agreeable” (33).

Weaving these various threads together, Shaftesbury conceives of laughter as an experience that either contributes to human enlightenment or plunges mankind deeper into ignorance. The former type of laughter is simultaneously (a) a product of conditions of liberty; (b) an exercise of liberty; and (c) an incentive to exercise liberty. The latter is the opposite of all these things. Laughter, liberty, and truth form a tight, mutually reinforcing conceptual network in Shaftesbury. Under conditions of liberty, laughter helps produce the truths by which individuals can further liberate themselves from false beliefs and repressive authority. Truth-producing laughter is the essential privilege, right, and duty of the liberal subject, while irrational laughter that serves no truth-producing function is neither worthy nor fitting of this subject. To translate Shaftesbury’s account into the Aristotelian idiom introduced earlier: conditions of liberty allow
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for, entail, and incentivize the conquering of the phōnē of laughter by its power of logos.

Individuals who laugh liberally ensure that laughter is not a senseless, wasteful activity of the body but rather a productive exercise of human reason that contributes to a life marked by conditions of liberty.

The conceptual network (laughter/liberty/truth) articulated by Shaftesbury survives intact in the work of today’s foremost liberal philosopher of the emotions, Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2001; 2004; 2013). While Nussbaum’s most detailed reflections on laughter focus on Stoics (Nussbaum 2009), she understands modern liberal political philosophy as informed by Stoicism in crucial ways (Nussbaum 1997; 2003). In particular, Nussbaum claims that Kantian cosmopolitanism finds its roots in the Stoic conception of a “world-citizen,” or one who inhabits a universal human community that transcends local loyalties, prejudices, and bonds (Nussbaum 1997, 6). The Stoics, like Kant and his liberal successors (e.g., Rawls and Habermas), conceive of such a cosmo-polis as grounded in “the worth of reason in each and every human being” (7). All humans are “fellow citizens” worthy of equal respect by virtue of the simple fact that they possess reason (7).

The conception of laughter that Nussbaum recovers in the Stoics reflects this cosmopolitan political vision. Nussbaum argues that unlike “frat boy” laughter that distracts from serious issues or “Aristophanic” laughter concerned with the body (Nussbaum 2009, 85–86, 91), Stoic laughter is highly rational. By mocking “the valuations characteristic of ordinary life,” Stoic laughter distances the subject from trivial concerns and makes possible an attention to things possessing “real” value (87). For example, in On Anger Seneca instructs a friend who is angry with an arrogant man blocking his way to “step back a long way and laugh” (87).
Nussbaum explains that “Stoic laughter turns on the discrepancy between pretension and real worth, the picture fools have of worldly goods and the reality of the worthlessness of these goods” (87). The “stepping back” achieved by Stoic laughter is simultaneously a “making progress” (88). The subject’s detachment from things lacking intrinsic, rational value (e.g., local loyalties and prejudices) prepares him or her for participation in the cosmopolitan world community imagined by Stoics and liberals alike. Moreover, because properly rational laughter delivers truth and freedom that makes possible even greater truth and freedom in the future, Nussbaum follows Shaftesbury in advancing a reflexive argument that laughter is a capability that a liberal society must guarantee its citizens (Nussbaum 2006, 77; see also 2013, 308–13). Nussbaum understands the political value of laughter to consist in how it can serve and advance the ends of logos – conceived of not simply as the exercise of reason in gentlemanly discourse, but as the realization of a progressive cosmopolis of human reasoners.

Contemporary accounts of the politics of laughter generally operate within the parameters set by this liberal discourse. For example, the laughter produced by political comedians like Jon Stewart, John Oliver, and Samantha Bee is typically understood as revealing truths about political actors, institutions, or events that were previously concealed by rhetoric, deception, or ideology. Freed from false beliefs or lack of knowledge, audiences can make more informed and rational political decisions. Meanwhile, defenders of Charlie Hebdo claim that the laughter generated by the magazine’s cartoons exposes and resists the irrational, dangerous dogma of Islamic fundamentalism and in doing so helps secure the liberty of the French public sphere. Finally, those who laugh at Donald Trump’s cruel jokes view them as refreshing, liberating moments of truth-telling amid oppressive regimes of “political correctness,” while those who
laugh at Trump himself experience similar feelings of liberation from what they consider to be his mendacity and authoritarianism. The liberal discourse of the politics of laughter enjoys near-hegemonic status today as subjects assess laughter in terms of its capacity to emancipate via the production of truth.

While Henri Bergson is in no sense a liberal philosopher in the mold of Shaftesbury or Nussbaum, his famous text *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* helps illuminate the limits of the liberal discourse. Bergson argues that laughter is a reaction to the appearance of automatism where one expects to find the vitality of human life. Individuals laugh when a human being momentarily takes on the quality of a lifeless machine: “the laughable element consists of a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being” (Bergson 1999, 15). Comic situations are those in which an individual lacks the “elasticity” necessary to adapt to a situation and instead repeats a single act over and over. Charlie Chaplin’s classic comedy *Modern Times* exemplifies Bergson’s claim that the source of laughter is “*something mechanical encrusted on the living*” (39). Chaplin plays a factory worker who repetitively tightens bolts on an assembly line. Upon leaving the line, he compulsively continues tightening anything that looks like a bolt – including a co-worker’s nose and the buttons on a poor woman’s dress. The scene ends with Chaplin offering a literal illustration of Bergson’s theory, as his character chases the line’s loose bolts until his body itself is lodged in – or “encrusted” by – the gears of the mechanic assembly.

Bergson contends that laughter performs a crucial social function. He explains that society has an interest in ensuring its members retain the adaptability and “elasticity” proper to their nature as living beings in the face of its own tendency to encourage the formation of
comfortable routines. What society fears “is that each one of us, content with paying attention to what affects the essentials of life, will, so far as the rest is concerned, give way to the easy automatism of acquired habits” (22). Laughter constitutes the means by which society encourages and enforces individual flexibility, mindfulness, and elasticity. Laughter is a sort of *social gesture*. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity, keeps constantly awake and in mutual contact certain activities of a secondary order which might retire into their shell and go to sleep, and in short, softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity. (23)

The gesture of laughter “corrects” and “represses” individual inflexibility, absentmindedness, and inelasticity, and those who exhibit hardening of habits amid the continuous flow of life suffer the light humiliation of the laughter of others (82, 176).

A significant tension marks Bergson’s account of the social function of laughter. How can a gesture whose purpose is to *correct* and *repress* simultaneously stimulate elasticity and novelty? It seems much more likely that the social humiliation delivered by laughter yields *greater* routinization and conformity (i.e., inelasticity) of behavior among its targets, not less. (This would be as if Mill were to solve the problem of social conformity not by guaranteeing freedom of individual expression, but by installing a social authority to punish conformity.) Moreover, if laughter is a repressive, corrective gesture, it risks devolving into the very mechanistic activity it seeks to combat. Bergson acknowledges this possibility at the end of his text when he worries that the laughing subject might come to embody the very same inelasticity exhibited by the target of his laughter: “The laugher immediately retires within himself, more self-assertive and conceited than ever […]. In this presumptuousness we speedily discern a degree of egoism and, behind this latter, something less spontaneous and more bitter” (178). If
this is the case, then perhaps we should consider the possibility that the so-called “inelasticity” or “absentmindedness” targeted by laughter can itself be an example of human vitality and creativity. Might society have a positive interest in the “eccentric” behavior it represses with laughter? The repressive, corrective function of laughter identified by Bergson threatens the very elasticity, mindfulness, and creativity that it aims to promote.

This tension in Bergson’s account points to a similar paradox in the liberal discourse. Just as functioning as a social corrective undermines laughter’s goal of encouraging individual flexibility, operating as the handmaiden of logos constricts the conditions of liberty that laughter requires and seeks to secure. For example, the laughter enjoyed by the “Club” of “well-bred” gentlemen in Shaftesbury enlightens and liberates only by consigning “the many barbarous and illiterate nations” to the irrational laughter of “buffoonery and burlesque” (Shaftesbury 1999, 36, 38). We find a similar dynamic at play in the above vignettes. In attempting to dispel the dogma of Islamic fundamentalism, the laughter produced by Charlie Hebdo entrenches and intensifies the marginalized social position of French Muslims. The liberty that such laughter exercises and secures for the French public sphere requires excluding its targets from this very same freedom. Meanwhile, the laughter generated by contemporary political comedians liberates and enlightens only by disqualifying its targets (e.g., Donald Trump and his supporters) as repressive (or repressed) and deceptive (or ignorant). In attempting to overcome repression and ignorance, laughter forecloses exercises of liberty and rationality among those it targets and, as the Charlie Hebdo attacks and the results of the Trumpist political economy of laughter illustrate, ultimately backfires and threatens the liberty and rationality of those who laugh. This is the core paradox –
or dialectic – of liberal laughter: laughter that is meant to liberate and enlighten through an alliance with *logos* morphs into laughter that represses and mystifies.

As the liberal discourse of the politics of laughter approaches near-hegemonic status today, this dialectic ensnares us ever more tightly. Contemporary politics is replete with laughter, yet we seem farther away than ever from the condition of enlightened liberty promised by laughter’s liberal defenders. Is there an alternative way to grasp how laughter shapes our shared political life? Is laughter politically valuable only insofar as it generates truth or, following the suggestion made by Russell Brand, does laughter participate in politics in ways that are not reducible to or articulable in terms of a *logos*-governed discourse?

**The Nietzschean Counter-discourse of Laughter**

*The Politics of Laughter* turns to a radically different philosophical discourse to determine if the political significance of laughter exceeds its capacity to produce truth. This *counter-discourse of laughter* inaugurated by Friedrich Nietzsche and continued by Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Mikhail Bakhtin provides the first set of conceptual tools needed to theorize the politics of laughter beyond the narrow liberal preoccupation with *logos*.

Nietzsche places the experience of laughter at the center of his philosophy, announcing that “I should actually risk an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter – all the way up to those capable of *golden* laughter” (Nietzsche 1989, 231–32). Unlike liberal laughter, “golden laughter” is not an instrument of human reason but rather the experience through which subjects question the value of what reason has become historically. He writes:
I bade them laugh at their great masters of virtue and saints and poets and world-redeemers. I bade them laugh at their gloomy sages and at whoever had at any time sat on the tree of life like a black scarecrow. I sat down by their great tomb road among cadavers and vultures, and I laughed at all their past and its rotting, decaying glory. (Nietzsche 1982, 308)

Nietzsche argues that learning to laugh at truth as a product of historically contingent political struggles makes possible the emergence of new, more life-affirming systems of truth that are themselves laughable in the very same way: “we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh” (322). Golden laughter resists and dispels the “spirit of gravity” typically associated with the pursuit of knowledge and instead cultivates “free spirits” armed with historical sense and courage in the face of “truth” (153; see also 1996). Whereas liberalism seeks to subordinate the φόνη of laughter to the ends of logos, Nietzsche attends to how this φόνη historicizes, de-essentializes, and opens logos up to becoming otherwise.

Georges Bataille further radicalizes Nietzsche’s philosophy of laughter. In an apparent attempt to secure a spot atop Nietzsche’s proposed ranking of philosophers, Bataille declares that “insofar as I am doing philosophical work, my philosophy is a philosophy of laughter. It is a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter” (Bataille 2001b, 138). Rather than yielding greater knowledge about the world (as liberals like Shaftesbury propose), Bataille understands laughter as carrying the subject to the very limits of knowledge itself:

_The unknown makes us laugh._ [...] It makes us laugh to pass very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which each thing is well qualified, in which each thing is given its stability, generally in a stable order, to a world in which our assurance is suddenly overthrown, in which we perceive that this assurance is deceptive, and where we believed that everything was strictly anticipated, an unforeseeable and upsetting element appeared unexpectedly from the unforeseeable. (135)
Bataille values limit experiences like laughter for how they allow what exceeds human reason to dramatically de-center and recompose what it means for the human subject to think and know (137–38). He continues:

From the moment I posed the possibility of descending as far as possible into the sphere of laughter, I felt, as the first effect, everything that the dogma brought me as carried away by a type of difluvial flood that decomposed it. […] The flood of laughter I underwent made a game of these beliefs […]. I was no longer able, from that moment on, to adhere to this game other than as to something that laughter had surpassed. (140)

Bataille understands laughter as a “reflective experience” wherein an abrupt suspension of the rule of *logos* by *phōnē* stimulates *logos* to transcend and transform itself (138). He concludes: “I didn’t imagine that laughter would dispose me toward thought, but that laughter, being in certain respects antecedent to my thought, would carry me further than thought” (Bataille 2001a, 153).

Jacques Derrida translates Bataille’s philosophy of laughter into the discourse of deconstruction. In his famous essay “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,” Derrida asks whether it is possible for a subject to think or act in such a way that resists capture by existing systems of meaning. He examines this question by considering modern philosophy’s paradigmatic meaning-producing device: the Hegelian dialectic, “a discourse, by means of which philosophy, in completing itself, could both include within itself and anticipate all the figures of its beyond” (Derrida 1978, 252). Derrida argues that only a “burst of laughter” constitutes a negativity that the dialectic cannot re-inscribe as a positive moment in the historical coming-to-consciousness of *logos*: “Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning” (256). It is absolutely impossible to cull meaning from a burst of laughter: “the burst of laughter is the almost-nothing into which meaning sinks, absolutely. ‘Philosophy,’ which ‘is
work,’ can do or say nothing about this laughter” (256). This dialectic-exceeding laughter is not laughter at the dialectic (such an intentional laughter could be subsumed as a meaningful moment of reason’s self-development); it instead emerges immanently from the dialectic’s exhaustion with itself. Derrida writes: “What is laughable is the submission to the self-evidence of meaning, to the force of this imperative: that there must be meaning” (256). The burst of laughter reveals that the “restricted economy” of the production of meaning operates within a “general economy” of non-meaningful play (270–76). Laughter deconstructs the Aristotelian distinction between logos and phônē by re-inscribing logos into the play of phônē.

Michel Foucault offers a final version of the Nietzschean counter-discourse of laughter. In the preface to The Order of Things, Foucault explains that his project originated in a disorienting burst of laughter at Borges’s account of a “certain Chinese encyclopaedia” that featured a seemingly bizarre classificatory scheme for animals with categories like “belonging to the Emperor,” “sucking pigs,” and “drawn with a very fine camelhair brush.” Foucault writes:

This book first arose out a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. (Foucault 1994, xv)

The theme here is familiar: laughter arises at the limits of logos – in this case, in an encounter with an unfamiliar episteme, or system of rules governing the production of knowledge (xxi–xxii). But rather than the exhilarating, emancipatory experience depicted by Nietzsche, Bataille, and Derrida, Foucault describes his laughter in ominous tones: “the uneasiness that makes us laugh when we read Borges is certainly related to the profound distress of those whose language
has been destroyed: loss of what is ‘common’ to place and name” (xviii–xix). By threatening what it means for the subject to think and know, the encounter with a foreign *episteme* forces the subject to grasp his or her own *episteme* as foreign. Through laughter, the subject confronts the fact that “there is nothing more tentative, nothing more empirical […] than the process of establishing an order among things” (xix). Foucault theorizes laughter as an experience through which *logos*, in an encounter with what it takes to be mere *phōnē*, discovers its own character as *phōnē*. The “profound distress” caused by this event suggests that despite the significant emancipatory power attributed to laughter by the other Nietzschean theorists, laughter’s disruptive, disorienting force can also give rise to darker, more reactionary outcomes. (This is an issue I will consider more fully in the sections that follow.)

While the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin was not a student of Nietzsche, his singularly rich account of laughter in *Rabelais and His World* shares much in common with and in turn greatly enhances the Nietzschean counter-discourse. Bakhtin argues that the Renaissance novels of François Rabelais demonstrate how laughter “is the second revelation of the world in play” (Bakhtin 1984, 84). The popular carnivals, feasts, and marketplaces depicted by Rabelais disclose a laughing “second world” alongside the official, serious world of the medieval Church (5–6). By parodically degrading religious rituals, images, and personages, the popular culture of folk humor undermines the sanctioned values of spirituality, piety, hierarchy, austerity, and tradition in favor of the opposed values of materiality, folly, equality, abundance, and becoming. But unlike the modern reduction of laughter to a force of “bare negation” (e.g., Shaftesbury’s raillery), medieval and Renaissance laughter renews and
regenerates that which it degrades and debases (11). Laughter for Bakhtin is an essentially am\textit{bivalent} force:

True am\textit{bivalent} and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this am\textit{bivalent} wholeness. (122–23)

The people as a whole overcomes its fear of earthly and divine authority by laughingly re-inserting the latter into the messy, material, contingent processes of historical becoming (90–95, 255–56). Although this popular culture of laughter wanes in modernity, Bakhtin believes that laughter constitutes an ultimately ineradicable mode by which humans inhabit and renew their common world (276). For Bakhtin, the \textit{phônê} of laughter is the tone through which the people degrades, historicizes, and thus reinvigorates \textit{logos}. While the Nietzschean theorists identify a similar power in laughter, Bakhtin’s account is distinctive for how it describes this power in explicitly political terms as belonging to the historically conscious, radically democratic, and utopian body of the people as a whole (9–12, 92, 255–56).

Nietzsche, Bataille, Derrida, Foucault, and Bakhtin all provide ways of theorizing the politics of laughter beyond the liberal focus on its capacity to produce truth. Rather than conceiving of laughter solely in terms of \textit{logos}, the Nietzschean counter-discourse understands laughter as involving a complex, dialectical relationship between \textit{logos} and \textit{phônê}. In laughter, \textit{logos} and \textit{phônê} unravel their constitutive difference by discovering themselves in one another. This dialectical play precipitates the historicization and transformation of what counts as \textit{logos} versus \textit{phônê}. From the perspective of the Nietzschean counter-discourse, laughter participates in
politics not by producing truth, but by shaping, disrupting, and transforming the terrain of rational, truthful speech. The Nietzschean theorists express philosophically what Russell Brand suggests colloquially, namely that laughter can interrupt and re-compose the very terms of political discourse and action. The significance of the laughter produced by political comedians, Charlie Hebdo, and even Donald Trump thus consists not in how it delivers the subject to truth, but in how it upends the terrain of truth and falsity itself. With this insight, the Nietzschean counter-discourse takes the first step in breaking the political impasse created and expressed by the dialectic of liberal laughter.

A Critical Theory of Laughter

Despite this advance, the Nietzschean theorists’ focus on laughter as an experience that originates from and exerts political effects on the level of the human subject (or in Bakhtin’s case, the collective subject of “the people”) leaves it unable to grasp how laughter functions to entrench and intensify existing forms of power in society. As the Charlie Hebdo and Trump vignettes illustrate, laughter is hardly always the liberating, transformative experience depicted by the Nietzschean counter-discourse, and the latter at times appears to re-inscribe the liberal faith in laughter’s “properly” emancipatory character. What is likewise needed is a perspective that (a) accounts for how laughter originates and functions within a larger social whole and (b) remains sensitive to laughter’s dialectical complexity and emancipatory potential as uncovered by the Nietzschean theorists.

Such a perspective is provided by the early Frankfurt School of critical theory, particularly the work of Theodor Adorno. The early Frankfurt School was a group of mid-twentieth century German philosophers and social scientists associated with the Institute for
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Social Research in Frankfurt. These scholars sought to reconceive Marxist social critique in response to the rise of Soviet-style communism, European nationalism and fascism, and mid-century state and consumer capitalism (Jay 1996; Jeffries 2016). I focus on the early Frankfurt School due to what Martin Jay describes as the “dialectical imagination” exhibited by its members like Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse – all of whom were active in the Institute’s early, formative years (from roughly 1930 until Adorno’s death in 1969) (Jay 1996). Beginning in the 1970s, scholars associated with the Frankfurt School gradually jettisoned this commitment to dialectical thinking in favor of the more neo-Kantian, proceduralist style of social critique championed by Jürgen Habermas (Geuss 1981, 63–66; Hoy and McCarthy 1994; Kompridis 2006, 16–30).

Early Frankfurt School theorists understand “critical theory” as an effort to comprehend society in a way that resists it. Society, or the social order, refers to the complex whole formed by the overlapping and interpenetrating economic, political, and cultural spheres of human life. For the early Frankfurt School these spheres are linked and organized (albeit in a loose, historically mediated way) by the circulation and accumulation of capital (Horkheimer 1999, 208; Adorno 2000, 30–33). Horkheimer, the Institute’s director from 1930 to 1953, describes critical theory as

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4 The concept of a “critical theory” of society originates in the early Frankfurt School, but by the late twentieth century a wide range of intellectual projects – from Derridean deconstruction to Habermasian rational reconstruction to race and gender studies – claim the mantle of “critical theory.” Today, one finds scholars in nearly every discipline and sub-discipline in the humanities and social sciences who consider themselves to be doing “critical theory.”

5 When Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School refer to “society,” “the social whole,” or “the social totality,” they are referring to roughly the same object that Louis Althusser and his followers identify as the “social formation” (Althusser 2005; Chambers 2014). However, in order to respect the specificity of the Althusserian discourse and to avoid the non-dialectical Comtian or Durkheimian connotations of the term “society,” I employ “social order” in my discussion of Adorno and the Frankfurt School.
a human activity which has society itself for its object. […] Although it itself emerges from the social structure, its purpose is not […] the better functioning of any element in the structure. […] In genuinely critical thought explanation signifies not only a logical process but a concrete historical one as well. In the course of it both the social structure as a whole and the relation of the theoretician to society are altered, that is both the subject and the role of thought are changed. (Horkheimer 1999, 206–207, 211)

Critical theory responds to the experience of widespread suffering in capitalist society despite the latter’s pretensions to having achieved universal freedom and maximum efficiency. Adorno explains: “The experience of the contradictory character of societal reality is not an arbitrary starting point but rather the motive which first constitutes the possibility of sociology as such” (Adorno 1976, 120). Conventional empiricist social theory remains blind (or worse, indifferent) to this suffering by grounding knowledge about society in unmediated observation that lacks an account of how what is observed originates and operates within a larger historical whole: “Sociology’s abandonment of a critical theory of society is resignatory: one no longer dares to conceive of the whole since one must despair of changing it” (121). However, the experience of contradictions that gives rise to the need for a concept of social order makes the latter a necessarily problematic, if not impossible, object of knowledge. Because the theorist cannot provide a full account of that which mediates his or her own activity, Adorno rejects the traditional idealist claim that the subject can grasp society as a whole: “the cognitive ideal of the consistent, preferably simple, mathematically elegant explanation falls down where reality itself, society, is neither consistent, nor simple, nor neutrally left to the discretion of categorial formulation” (106). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, a critical theory of society is neither simply empiricist nor simply idealist, but instead operates in the dialectical space opened up between these two traditions (Horkheimer 1999, 208–209).
Critical theory (or what Adorno eventually dubs “negative dialectics”) negotiates the impasse between empiricism and idealism by investigating particular empirical objects whose social position and function shed light on the operation of the social order as a whole. Channeling Benjamin’s fascination with the “dialectical image,” Adorno proposes attending to the “eccentric phenomena” that embody and put the social order’s contradictions in sharp relief (Adorno 1976, 110; Buck-Morss 1977, 69–81). Critical theory, he writes, aims to “cause the totality to be illuminated in a partial feature” (Adorno 1991a, 16). By providing a window into the contradictions that characterize the social whole, such eccentric phenomena (what Adorno elsewhere calls the “non-identical”) constitute fecund sites for imagining new, alternative forms of social organization: “the means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility – the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one” (Adorno 1973, 52). Such imaginative thinking-against society proceeds immanently (i.e., by way of the resources made available by society) and not from a perspective that purports to be free from social mediation. As Adorno insists, “no theory today escapes the marketplace” (4). Critical theory, in short, entails identifying the seemingly minor discontinuities and contradictions that illuminate and, when properly cultivated, can transform the social order. “For the mind,” Adorno concludes,” is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality” (Adorno 1977, 133).

I propose that laughter is one of the “eccentric,” “apparently out-of-the-way, obscure phenomena” through which we can both grasp and think against the contemporary social order (Adorno 2000, 17). What does it mean to theorize laughter as a site of non-identity – i.e., as an
experience through which the social order becomes non-identical to itself? The Nietzschean counter-discourse is instructive here. Just as laughter participates in both *logos* and *phônē*, we can also understand laughter as at once *immanent to* and *outside* the social order. That is, while laughter always occurs within and thus constitutes a product of a determinate social order, it also exceeds that order, indicating its weaknesses, fragilities, or fractures (what Deleuze would call its “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 2011, 9)). Experiences of laughter allow subjects to imagine new modes of social organization, but – and this is crucial – as a product of the social order in which it arises, laughter can also function to defend and bolster that order against these very same vulnerabilities. Through laughter, the inside of the social order opens itself up to its outside and this outside re-inscribes the boundaries of its inside. (In this way, the inside and outside of a social order – just like *logos* and *phônē* – find themselves in and unravel their constitutive difference through one another (Derrida 1982a, 1982b).) There is likewise nothing *intrinsically* emancipatory about laughter; because laughter is at once inside and outside the social order, it can just as easily entrench and secure the latter’s structures of power and hierarchy as it can resist and overcome them. By revealing the social order’s openness to and dependence on what resides outside itself, laughter makes the social order non-identical to itself.

The conception of critical theory advanced by the early Frankfurt School allows us to grasp how laughter’s ability to shape, disrupt, and transform *logos* – that is, our capacity to establish a shared political life – does not operate in an abstract, subjective vacuum as suggested by the Nietzschean counter-discourse. It instead functions within the context of a determinate social order with its various structures of power and hierarchy. *The question of the politics of laughter is thus necessarily also a question of the politics of the social order.* When we consider
the *logos*/phōnē* dialectic alongside the inside/outside dialectic in this way, we find that laughter
is a key experience through which *logos* – understood as rational, truthful speech *as embodied
and secured by a social order’s structures of power and hierarchy* – constructs itself. Because
laughter is a site of social non-identity, whether experiences of laughter disrupt or reinforce this
*logos* always remains an open question. The dialectic of liberal laughter appears much less
mysterious and intractable when viewed from this perspective. Laughter that aims to liberate via
the production of truth paradoxically leads to greater repression and mystification precisely
because it constructs the *logos* that it claims merely to seek. Laughter always arises within the
context of a determinate social order, and its construction of *logos* likewise expresses and re-
inscribes that order’s structures and relations of power. In the case of *Charlie Hebdo*, this is the
history of Western colonialism and Islamophobia; in the case of laughter at Donald Trump’s
cruel jokes, this is the history of American racism and misogyny; and in the case of laughter at
Trump himself, this is the history of liberal indifference to the working class. In its attempt to
achieve enlightenment and liberation, liberal laughter uncritically accepts the conception of *logos*
embodied by the prevailing social order, and in doing so it entrenches and intensifies the latter.

The necessity of theorizing laughter with respect to the social order explains my initial
equivocation in describing laughter as an *experience* or an *event*. From the perspective of the
Nietzschean counter-discourse, laughter appears to be an *experience* (that is, something that
originates in and affects a *subject*), whereas from the perspective of an Adorno-inspired critical
theory, laughter appears to be an *event* (that is, something that originates in and exerts objective
effects on a *social order*). Laughter is simultaneously an experience and an event: the
momentous, shattering experience of laughter described by the Nietzschean theorists transforms
the subject’s situation in the social order (and thus qualifies as an event), while the event of laughter described from the perspective of critical theory always proceeds by way of subjects who laugh (and thus qualifies as an experience). Experiences of laughter occur in, proceed through, and exert objective effects on the level of the social order, while events of laughter occur in, proceed through, and exert effects on laughing subjects. Understanding how laughter operates politically requires attending to this dialectical relation between experience and event.6

To sum up: the politics of laughter are characterized by three overlapping and intersecting dialectics: logos and phōnē; inside and outside; and experience and event. When we consider these relations together, we find that laughter constitutes a privileged experience/event wherein the contemporary social order constructs, preserves, and transforms itself politically. This is the core argument of the dissertation. In laughter, consensus on what counts as rational, truthful speech and who qualifies as a rational, truthful speaker forms and entrenches itself (often in oppressive, reactionary, exclusionary ways that bolster and secure a given social order’s structures of power and hierarchy) and overcomes and transforms itself (often in more emancipatory, subversive, democratic directions that challenge and undermine those structures). The political life of society takes shape, consolidates itself, and is resisted through laughter.

This account of the politics of laughter – what I call a critical theory of laughter – departs decisively from and challenges the prevailing liberal discourse. The latter’s narrow focus on laughter’s capacity to produce liberating truth on the level of the human subject occludes an attention to how laughter (a) problematizes and transforms the terrain of truth and falsity (i.e., the

6 By now it should be clear that by “dialectical,” I mean the “consistent sense of non-identity” articulated by Adorno (Adorno 1973, 5) and not the progressive, teleological logic described by Hegel and many of his followers. Thinking dialectically means grasping the non-identical in a given situation as an occasion for thinking against and beyond that situation.
logos/phônē dialectic); (b) operates and exerts political effects on the level of the social order (i.e., the experience/event dialectic); and (c) can entrench existing forms of power in society (i.e., the inside/outside dialectic). The dialectic of liberal laughter consequently unravels under the gaze of a critical theory of laughter. By conceiving of logos as a historical product of experiences/events of laughter that are bound up with a social order’s structures and hierarchies of power, this project finds no difficulty in explaining how a “truth-producing” laughter can simultaneously function to mystify and repress. Rather than approaching laughter as an experience that liberates through the production of truth, The Politics of Laughter understands laughter as an experience/event that emancipates and oppresses through its construction of what counts as rational, truthful speech in a determinate social order.

The following chapters on Adorno, Hobbes, Kant, and Ellison develop and practice this critical theory of laughter. I approach these theorists’ philosophical accounts of laughter as fecund, dynamic sites for (a) theorizing the political emancipatory and reactionary possibilities of laughter; (b) cultivating the incipient and previously unrecognized democratic possibilities of their texts and/or projects; and (c) shedding light on the political origins, dynamics, and effects of recent experiences/events of laughter such as the 2010 Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,” the 2014 Chinese “ban on puns,” and the 2015 eviction of ten African American women from the Napa Valley Wine Train for “laughing too loudly.” This dialectical, mutually illuminating conversation between theory, text, and experience/event aims to reveal the political possibilities and dangers posed by laughter in the contemporary social order. More specifically, I find that laughter entrenches and subverts social power (Adorno); enacts and resists sovereignty (Hobbes); stimulates and inhibits human reason (Kant I); shapes
and recomposes common sense (Kant II); and constructs and democratizes racial hierarchies (Ellison). Consistently split and splitting against itself, the politics of laughter are never straightforward and predictable, but rather complex and intensely dialectical. This instability and polyvalence explains the political salience and efficacy of laughter today.

**Contributions of the Project**

Having established the timeliness, theoretical orientation, and core argument of *The Politics of Laughter*, I will now describe the contributions it makes to recent literature and scholarly debates. The project contributes to four broad research areas: laughter studies, critical theory, democratic theory, and the history of political thought. I will discuss each area in turn before concluding with a note on the project’s relation to contemporary affect theory.

**Laughter Studies**

Laughter is the object of study for a sprawling literature across the social sciences and humanities. To date, scholars have analyzed laughter as an historical object (Bakhtin 1984; Beard 2014; Borysławski et al. 2016; Classen 2010; Gatrell 2006; Halliwell 2008; Rea 2015; Sanders 1995; Screech 2015); an anthropological object (Beckett 2008; Douglas 1971; Goldstein 2013; Musharbash 2008; Overing 2000); a philosophical object (Morreall 1983, 1987; Critchley 2002; Zupančič 2008); a psychological object (Freud 2003; Piddington 1963; Provine 2000; Sidis 1919); a literary object (Bakhtin 1984; Davis 2000; Parvulescu 2010; Screech 2015); a sociological object (Elias 2017; Barker 2001); and a theological object (Bussie 2007; Gilhus 2004; Screech 2015). While all these approaches raise and at times consider important political questions, laughter has yet to be studied on a specifically political register. *The Politics of Laughter* fills this lacuna by examining the accounts of laughter offered by prominent theorists
of politics and by exploring laughter’s relation to the political themes of power, sovereignty, democracy, freedom, and race. As the first full-length study to take laughter seriously as a political issue, this dissertation makes a significant contribution to contemporary laughter studies.

Critical Theory

A self-described “critical theory of laughter,” The Politics of Laughter also intervenes in debates over the role and form of critical theory today. In recent years political theorists have explored how various techniques or genres that produce laughter like irony, humor, parody, and comedy can resist social structures and relations of power (Arnold 2009; Butler 1990; Connolly 2002a; Conway and Seery 1992; Euben 2003; Lombardini 2013; McWilliams 1995; Rorty 1989; Tønder 2014; Willett 2008; Zumbrunnen 2012; Zupančič 2008). These efforts largely follow the so-called “ethical turn” in political theory that focuses on cultivating practices through which subjects can challenge how they relate to their conditions of existence as a necessary first step in social and political transformation (Butler 2005; Connolly 1999a; Deleuze and Guattari 2011; Foucault 1990; 1997; White 2000; cf. Dean 2005; Vázquez-Arroyo 2016). Is the task of a critical theory of laughter consistent with this ethical turn, or does it operate with a different understanding of the relationship between theory and practice?

A great deal of recent critical and political theory has oriented itself in opposition to the vision of critique sketched by Adorno. For example, second and third generation Frankfurt School theorists – particularly Habermas (1984; 1990; 1996) and his students Seyla Benhabib (1986), Axel Honneth (1991; 2009), and Rainer Forst (2013) – have advanced an agenda of “rational reconstruction” designed to rescue the critical enterprise from what they view as the
normative paralysis generated by negative dialectics. Habermas laments how “negative dialectics is now to be understood only as an exercise, a drill. [...] In the shadow of a philosophy that has outlived itself, philosophical thinking intentionally regresses to gesticulation” (Habermas 1984, 385). This assessment of Adorno’s critical theory as hopelessly consumed by its own negative operation rather than engaged in the actual work of social transformation has also been invoked by non-Habermasians as a reason for supplementing – or even moving beyond – “negative” critique and theorizing more “affirmative” ethical practices (Bennett 2001; Latour 2004; Sedgwick 2003). “Critical theory,” Jane Bennett writes with respect to Horkheimer and Adorno, “has devoted too much effort to negative critique and not enough to elaborating an affirmative political response to the moral dangers and political injustices it exposes” (Bennett 2001, 161).

The “ethical turn” embraced by Habermasians and non-Habermasians alike holds that the project of negative critique exemplified by Adorno requires an ethical supplement designed to guide or instruct its readers on how to resist and transform social structures of power and hierarchy.

Adorno was familiar with early strains of this criticism, and he responded to it directly on numerous occasions (Adorno 1973, 143–44; 2005b; 2005f). Adorno contends that his work’s lack of positive prescriptions or guidance is a feature, not a bug. He steadfastly resists the notion that the purpose of “theory” is to inform a “practice” external to it (Adorno 2005b, 276). Theory is itself a form of practice: “Thinking is a doing, theory a form of praxis; already the ideology of the purity of thinking deceives about this” (Adorno 2005b, 261). Theorizing is always already intervening and acting in the world; no supplement – whether it be Habermas’s rational reconstruction, Sedgwick’s reparative reading, or Latour’s “respectful realist attitude” – is necessary for theory to exert practical effects. The important question is: what kind of practice is
theory? What distinguishes critical-theoretic practice from other modes of intervening in the world? Adorno argues that critical theory distinguishes itself by its power of negating the social order: “thinking is actually the force of resistance” (Adorno 2005f, 293). At first, this sounds simply wrong: certainly there exist numerous non-theoretical ways to resist the social order (and certainly they would be more “effective”!). But once we remember that the “social order” is not an empirical object that one can directly engage (unlike mechanisms or institutions of the social order) (Adorno 1969, 145; 2000, 34–36), Adorno’s argument makes more sense. Because “only a thoroughgoing theory of society can tell us what society really is” (Adorno 1969, 146) (that is, because only theory can grasp the complex, contradictory whole formed by society’s material relations and practices), only theory is capable of resisting the social order as such. Adorno takes Marx’s *Capital* as his model here (Adorno 2005b, 277). Marx resists the capitalist social order by theoretically illuminating the logic of capital in such a way that makes it possible (even imperative) to imagine alternative forms of social organization. He does so by attending to sites of non-identity (e.g., the commodity form) as illustrative of the contradictions and openings marking the whole. While *Capital* does not offer prescriptions or guidance for action, no one questions this text’s practical significance and efficacy (Adorno 2005b, 277; 2005f, 290). For Adorno, as for Marx, the highly specific, yet utterly necessary practice of resisting the social order proceeds by way of theory.  

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7 Notably, political theorist Sheldon Wolin adopts a virtually identical position to Adorno’s with his insistence on the transformative power – and thus necessity – of theory as such (Marasco 2017). According to Wolin, “epic theorists” like Plato, Hobbes, and Marx respond to social and political crises by systematically re-imagining the basic concepts, subject positions, and relationships of political order. By an “act of thought,” epic theory “attempts to change the world itself” (Wolin 2016, 26, 30). In the absence of this “critical and, in the literal sense, radical” theory, the political imagination required for subjects to collectively govern themselves withers away (27).
Adorno’s reflections on theory and practice suggest a distinctly political – rather than ethical – conception of critical theory. Instead of serving as the instrument of a resistance to be deployed separately, negative dialectics itself constitutes a practice of resistance to the social order. From this perspective, ethical projects that supplement negative critique with normative foundations or “positive” guidance cede too much political ground to the social order as it is currently constituted (Jameson 2009, 406; Rancière 2006a; Vázquez-Arroyo 2016). While others pursue non-ethical, political critical theories in this way – Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* and Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* come to mind – Adorno is unique for how vehemently he articulates and defends this approach. Following Adorno, I resist the imperative issued by ethical recastings or abandonments of critical theory to propose techniques, genres, or practices of laughter that can lead to social transformation. *The Politics of Laughter* instead intervenes in the contemporary social order by theoretically grasping the role that experiences/events of laughter play in shaping that order and opening it up to change. In doing so, the project reveals the value of a specifically political conception of critical theory today.

**Democratic Theory**

According to Adorno, “democracy is nothing less than defined by critique” (Adorno 2005a, 281). The critical theory of laughter offered by this dissertation thus also enhances our understanding of laughter’s relationship to democratic politics and of democracy more generally. It does so in three ways. First, while political theorists have studied the democratic possibilities of various techniques and genres that produce laughter, I follow Anca Parvulescu’s methodological suggestion to “start from laughter, […] dwell on laughter, and, at a few junctures, when laughter leads […] to it, […] touch on comedy” (Parvulescu 2017, 508; see also
2010, 3). I likewise seek to demonstrate how laughter itself is a privileged site of democratic politics in the contemporary social order. The chapter on Adorno reveals the conditions under which laughter resists and subverts forces of social control and conformity, while Hobbes illustrates how episodes of collective laughter constitute experiences of “fugitive democracy” wherein ordinary citizens claim the right to determine how to conduct their lives together in common (Wolin 1994). Kant shows that laughter enacts democratic dissensus by interrupting and transforming how subjects see and hear the world together in common. Finally, Ellison demonstrates that the laughter of African Americans can democratize the American racial order when it exceeds the bounds assigned to it by white supremacy.

By painting a picture of laughter as a rich and fruitful – and as yet under-theorized – site of democratic politics, these accounts draw on and in turn advance a distinctive vision of democracy. Departing decisively from contemporary liberal and deliberative democratic theories that privilege institutions and procedures geared toward the production of rational consensus (Rawls 1971, 1996; Habermas 1996; Cohen 2003), the following chapters show that laughter participates in democracy by calling into question and transforming the very concepts of “reason” and “consensus” that structure political life in the social order. By interrupting and recomposing the boundary between logos and phōnē, experiences/events of laughter render intelligible previously unintelligible modes of speech and forms of subjectivity. I demonstrate that democracy is not a form of government, a procedural or institutional arrangement, or a diffuse ethos, but rather, as Rancière argues, a ruptural moment wherein those lacking logos (i.e., the demos) “make understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (Rancière 1999, 30). The democratic politics of laughter uncovered in this project reveals that democracy occurs
whenever the political organization of society – i.e., a specific distribution of logos and phōnē – is disrupted and reconfigured.

Third, *The Politics of Laughter* enhances our understanding of and appreciation for Adorno, Hobbes, Kant, and Ellison as theorists of democracy. This is especially the case with respect to Hobbes and Kant, philosophers who are not typically associated with democratic theory. Attending to their accounts of laughter allows us to read their broader philosophies against the grain of both authorial intention and received interpretation to discern incipient and previously unrecognized democratic possibilities. We find that Hobbes – the paradigmatic champion of sovereign power – provides resources for theorizing counter-sovereign, “fugitive democracy” and that Kant – the classic exponent of cosmopolitan progressivism – offers the beginnings of a political theory of democratic dissensus. Meanwhile, Ellison’s essay on black laughter illuminates his distinctive conception of democracy as a mode of political life featuring processes of “antagonistic cooperation” between individuals, collectivities, and the social order. Although I do not trace connections between Adorno’s account of laughter and his nascent democratic theory (Mariotti 2016; Giamario 2017), the Adorno-inspired *political* conception of critical theory defended by the project as a whole shares crucial connections with the above Rancièrean vision of democracy. By uncovering previously unintelligible and unauthorized political possibilities of both laughter and the philosophies of Hobbes, Kant, and Ellison, this critical theory of laughter “makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (Rancière 1999, 30). The dissertation likewise demonstrates that despite its reputation as stultifying and elitist, Adornian critical theory is itself a democratic political practice.
**History of Political Thought**

Finally, *The Politics of Laughter* contributes to the history of political thought. While I examine the accounts of laughter offered by Adorno, Hobbes, Kant, and Ellison with an eye for how they speak to and critically illuminate the contemporary political condition, I do so by studying how these accounts fit and function within the texts they appear, their respective author’s oeuvre, and the broader historical contexts to which they respond. I am particularly interested in tracing the connections between these accounts of laughter and their authors’ broader political-philosophical projects. By providing the first detailed accounts of the philosophical and political significance of their accounts of laughter, the dissertation enhances our understanding of Adorno, Hobbes, Kant, and Ellison as historical theorists of politics.

**Affect Theory**

While *The Politics of Laughter* intervenes directly in laughter studies, critical theory, democratic theory, and the history of political thought, it makes only limited contact with a field with which it might at first appear to be more deeply in conversation: contemporary affect theory. Affect theorists focus on the role that pre-conscious somatic intensities play in the construction, maintenance, and transformation of conceptual systems, social movements, and political institutions (Ahmed 2004a, 2004b; Clough 2007; Connolly 2002b; Massumi 2002, 2015; Protevi 2009; Sedgwick 2003; Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Shouse 2005; Stewart 2007; Thrift 2004). Political theorists have been drawn to the study of affect as a resource for explaining and resisting reactionary political assemblages that operate in large part below the level of conscious human thought. As Brian Massumi notes:
Affect holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology. For although ideology is still very much with us […] it is no longer encompassing. […] It is now one mode of power in a larger field that is not defined, overall, by ideology. (Massumi 2002, 42; see also Connolly 2002b; 2008).

*The Politics of Laughter* joins affect theorists in attending to the political significance of the body and emotionality, the relation between the conceptual and the pre-conceptual, and seemingly minor or non-political experiences/events. For example, when Nietzsche and Bataille describe how the *phasis* of laughter pushes *logos* beyond itself, this *phasis* originates in and acquires its energy from an ensemble of affective intensities. Meanwhile, the political economy of laughter around Donald Trump confirms that the public circulation of laughter stems from and in turn generates potent and consequential affective dispositions within political collectivities.

While laughter has its roots in and exerts effects on an affective register, laughter itself is not an affect. As Connolly notes, laughter more closely resembles “a *manifestation* of surplus affect” (Connolly 2002b, 9; italics added). Experiences/events of laughter reside at the intersection of the affective and cognitive registers, and it is in the dialectical *relation* between affect and cognition (i.e., between *phasis* and *logos*) that I believe we can theorize the politics of laughter most fruitfully. However, this is not to disqualify a study of the politics of laughter along the lines pursued by affect theorists. Just as it is possible to examine laughter in terms of its intellectual, truth-producing function (as liberal philosophers do), one can do the same in terms of its affective, pre-conceptual dimension. (The fact that most affect theorists – with the notable exception of Brian Massumi – do not denigrate the status of thought with respect to affect suggests that this would be a much more productive exercise than those conducted within the liberal paradigm.) Because contemporary affect theory has its roots in the same dissatisfactions
with “negative” critique discussed above, the political stakes of such a project (perhaps titled *The Micro-politics of Laughter*) would be primarily ethical (Massumi 2002, 28). That is, after offering an analysis of how various affective, micropolitical forces shape practices of laughter and how these practices react back on the wider micropolitical field, it would suggest techniques by which subjects could cultivate more politically constructive modes of laughter (Connolly 2002b, 13). Although this dissertation departs from affect theory by focusing on the dialectical relation between intellect and affect and by resisting the turn to ethics, it invites productive exchanges with theorists interested in laughter’s affective origins and effects.

**Overview**

Chapter One, “Adorno’s Critical Theory of Laughter: The Political Possibilities and Dangers of Laughter in the Social Order,” turns to Adorno’s numerous accounts of laughter in the mid-twentieth century capitalist social order as a model for the critical theory of laughter pursued by the dissertation as a whole. Through an exploration of laughter’s role in Adorno’s aesthetic philosophy and essays on the culture industry, lighthearted art, Samuel Beckett, and Charlie Chaplin, I advance three main arguments. First, while most modern philosophers conceive of laughter in the terms offered by the liberal or Nietzschean discourses – that is, as an emancipatory experience that originates in the human subject – grasping how laughter functions politically requires attending to how it is produced by and exerts effects on the level of the social order as a whole. Second, because laughter always arises within a contradictory social whole, the politics of laughter are neither intrinsically subversive nor intrinsically oppressive, but rather complex and dialectical. Laughter subverts and emancipates only when it bears the traces of social violence within itself, and it oppresses precisely when subjects experience it as an escape
from power. Third, a critical theory of laughter like that practiced by Adorno engages laughter in its dialectical complexity as a moment of social non-identity. It seeks to determine how concrete experiences/events of laughter function to both entrench the social order’s various structures of power and hierarchy and reveal these structures’ previously unintelligible democratic and emancipatory possibilities. The chapter concludes by considering a haunting scene of laughter from David Simon’s *The Wire* that demonstrates how an Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter illuminates the politics of laughter today.

Chapter Two, “The Laughing Body Politic: The Counter/sovereign Politics of Hobbes’s Theory of Laughter,” reads Hobbes’s “superiority theory” of laughter through the critical lens articulated in the Introduction and Chapter One. Attending to the political themes in Hobbes’s account of laughter as well as the appearances that laughter makes in his political philosophy reveals that Hobbes can be read against the grain to shed light on the complex dialectic between sovereignty and counter-sovereignty at work in laughter and politics more generally. I make three arguments along these lines. First, I argue that Hobbes objects to laughter due to its status as a counter-sovereign political enactment. According to Hobbes, an individual laughs upon suddenly feeling a false sense of superiority with respect to another person. The disjunction that arises between the laughing individual’s conception of his or her own power and spectators’ more accurate assessments of the situation threatens the sovereign interest in social peace. Second, this counter-sovereign logic of laughter reappears in the Hobbesian social contract. The individuals who contract together to establish a commonwealth perform a sudden, vainglorious, and counter-sovereign political enactment that is highly analogous to that performed by the laughing individual. The Hobbesian body politic is a *laughing body politic* at the moment of its
foundation. This concept of a laughing body politic shows how the establishment of sovereignty always proceeds by way of a counter-sovereign enactment. Finally, the notion of a laughing body politic can be deployed to illuminate how episodes of collective laughter like the 2010 Stewart/Colbert rally constitute experiences of “fugitive democracy” (Wolin 1994). Collective laughter generates a fugitive demos by advancing a claim to sovereign power that is lost in its very own transgressive expression. Collective laughter at once claims and resists sovereign power, and its democratic efficacy consists in this exercise of what I call counter/sovereignty.

Chapter Three, “Making Reason Think More? Laughter in Kant’s Aesthetic Philosophy,” explores how Kant’s “incongruity theory” of laughter in the Critique of the Power of Judgment reveals the surprisingly decisive role that laughter plays in both his aesthetic philosophy and the rational life of the human subject. First, I contend that laughter is a highly specific form of aesthetic judgment in Kant. Laughter is the analogue of the sublime in the realm of taste: it involves a discordant relation between the cognitive faculties that is characteristic of the sublime, but this relation obtains between the understanding and the imagination, the two faculties at play in judgments of taste on the beautiful. Second, while most scholars dismiss Kant’s account of laughter as an inconsequential endnote to his aesthetic philosophy, I argue that the judgments of the beautiful and the sublime both presuppose laughter as their transcendental condition of possibility. Third, an account of aesthetic judgment that begins with laughter transforms how we understand the role of aesthetic judgment in Kant’s critical project. Rather than simply assuring the subject that nature harmonizes with freedom (as in the beautiful) or inspiring the subject to act freely (as in the sublime), laughter is an aesthetic judgment that enacts reason’s power of free self-transformation by way of a sensible stimulus at odds with the subject’s purposes. Laughter
“makes reason think more” (Kant 1987, 315): it stimulates reason to freely transform its principles for thought and action. Fourth and finally, placing this transcendental interpretation of laughter into conversation with Kant’s insistence that laughter is a mere affect reveals that laughter both stimulates and inhibits reason’s power to freely transform one’s principles for thought and action. The aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter, in other words, makes reason think more and less. I conclude that Kant offers an intensely dialectical account of the relationship between laughter and reason – one that heightens our sensitivity to the opportunities and dangers that laughter presents to human reason.

Chapter Four, “The Enthusiasm of Laughter: Kant, Dissensus Communis, and Democracy,” investigates how this reading of Kant’s account of laughter illuminates the role that laughter plays in the political life of the human subject. I begin by turning to Hannah Arendt’s and Jean–François Lyotard’s claims that Kant’s discussion of the enthusiasm of spectators of the French Revolution in The Contest of Faculties provides the key to unlocking the political significance of his aesthetic philosophy. Rather than interpreting revolutionary enthusiasm as a judgment of the beautiful (Arendt) or the sublime (Lyotard), I conceive of enthusiasm as the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter. Doing so demonstrates that laughter participates in politics by transforming sensus communis, or subjects’ shared sense about what is aesthetically communicable prior to concepts, into dissensus communis. The confrontation between the imagination’s aesthetic ideas and the understanding’s concepts in laughter interrupts and recomposes how subjects see and hear the world together in common. Using the examples of the Chinese government’s 2014 “ban on puns” and John Oliver’s 2015 “exposé” on the NCAA basketball tournament, I show that this dissensus is the source of great democratic opportunity.
and danger. I go on to argue that reading Kantian enthusiasm as laughter challenges how we understand the political implications of Kant’s aesthetics. More specifically, this approach historicizes, politicizes, and democratizes Kant’s key aesthetic categories to yield a democratic political vision of *dissensus communis*. An attention to Kant’s account of laughter reveals that Kant provides the resources for a much more subtle and critical theory of democracy than has been appreciated by even his most radical readers like Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia.

Chapter Five, “Over a Barrel: Ralph Ellison and the Democratic Politics of Black Laughter,” turns to Ellison’s 1985 essay “An Extravagance of Laughter” to explore the role laughter plays in American racial politics and, conversely, how race is an essential category for grasping the politics of laughter. The laughter of black Americans has long constituted a site of intense white anxiety and police action. Through a remarkable joke about “laughing barrels” – barrels into which Southern blacks were supposedly required to laugh during Jim Crow – Ellison describes how the distinctive sounds, styles, and tonalities of black laughter are shaped by white supremacy and how the latter constructs and maintains itself in part by regulating this laughter. Ellison demonstrates, however, that black laughter can – under certain circumstances – function to undermine the racial order and transform it in more democratic directions. I advance four arguments along these lines. First, Ellison shows how American white supremacy produces and is sustained by a historically specific *regime of laughter*, or set of rules and norms governing how subjects laugh. Second, Ellison illuminates the intensely dialectical politics of black laughter. The laughter of black Americans is neither simply the “irrational,” “primitive” force imagined by white supremacy nor an inherently emancipatory force opposed to racial hierarchy. The racist conception of black laughter as irrational and primitive contains within itself the
resources for its own democratic overcoming, and the democratizing power of black laughter depends crucially on its association with these attributes. Third, Ellison reveals that black laughter democratizes the racial order not when black subjects laugh at white supremacy but rather when their laughter exceeds the rules set by the white supremacist regime to generate a dissensus within that regime. Fourth, Ellison’s account of black laughter reveals his distinctive conception of democracy as a mode of political life characterized by jazz-like, Janus-faced processes of “antagonistic cooperation” among individuals, collectivities, and the social order as a whole. Democracy for Ellison involves black subjects and their allies working with and against the racialized social order such that the latter overcomes its white supremacist roots and realizes its stated democratic ideals.

The dissertation concludes with a brief, speculative coda on the relationship between laughter and a theme that arises at numerous points in the project, namely, deception. I propose that Adorno, Hobbes, Kant, and Ellison illustrate how the politics of laughter are a politics of deception. That is, they show how the phōnē of laughter constructs, maintains, and transforms the social order by deceptively presenting itself as logos. Conceiving of the politics of laughter in this way suggests the need to re-orient contemporary democratic and critical theory away from their traditional commitments to truth, truthfulness, and/or truth-telling and toward particular practices of deception.

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The Politics of Laughter argues that laughter constitutes a privileged site wherein the contemporary social order produces, preserves, and transforms itself politically. But a nagging question might still remain: why even bother studying laughter at such length today? Amid an
ongoing, yet still inchoate global political crisis featuring financial collapses, refugee flights, glacier meltdowns, racial violence, and renewed nationalisms, the focus on laughter might seem to be misguided or even trivializing. However, as I have already begun to show, experiences/events of laughter play key roles in the construction of and resistance to many of these emergent processes. Indeed, the politics of laughter has become more ubiquitous and consequential as this multifaceted crisis deepens and grows, and the dialectic of liberal laughter – the dangerous logic within which much of this recent proliferation is ensnared – serves only to intensify it. If, as I argue, laughter constitutes a privileged site of both political possibility and danger, then laughter’s outsized presence in the current moment speaks to and dramatizes the multiplicity of political possibilities and dangers that this moment affords. The critical theory of laughter advanced in the following pages aims to enhance our capacity to reflect on and thus constructively engage this deeply paradoxical political condition.
CHAPTER ONE

ADORNO’S CRITICAL THEORY OF LAUGHTER:
THE POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES AND DANGERS OF LAUGHTER IN THE SOCIAL ORDER

Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness. […] In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society’s worthless totality. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112)

Even laughter may yet have a future. (Nietzsche 1974, 74)

That Adorno objects to laughter is not at all surprising: perhaps no twentieth century philosopher is more closely associated with a melancholic ethos than Theodor Adorno (Rose 2014). But as is the case with almost any topic treated by Adorno, his views on laughter are not as simple and straightforward as they might initially appear. Adorno exhibits an unyielding commitment to dialectical thinking, and while he certainly criticizes laughter – particularly that manufactured by the capitalist “culture industry” – he also grants laughter a privileged role in his account of how aesthetic experience makes possible resistance and emancipation in modern society. In this chapter I explore how Adorno’s numerous accounts of laughter provide the model for a critical theory capable of identifying the political dangers and possibilities of laughter in the contemporary social order.

As described in the Introduction, most modern philosophers conceive of laughter as an irreducibly spontaneous and disruptive experience that originates and exerts effects on the level of the human subject. These subject-centric accounts call our attention to laughter’s capacity to emancipate via either the production of truth (the liberal discourse) or the transformation of what counts as truthful speech (the Nietzschean counter-discourse). The liberal and Nietzschean discourses leave us, however, with an incomplete and inadequate picture of the politics of laughter. In particular, they overlook how laughter is produced by and exerts political effects on
social structures and processes that exceed the human subject. For instance, when I find myself laughing along with a TV sitcom’s laugh-track (even when the jokes are not very funny), can I really describe my laughter as a spontaneous reaction originating entirely within myself? Or is this laughter better understood in part as the product of an entertainment and advertising apparatus with interests of its own? As another example, can we really explain the audience’s laughter at Donald Trump’s sexist joke at the first 2016 Republican presidential debate solely in terms of processes occurring within individual subjects? And does this laughter really resemble the subversive or emancipatory experience described by subject-centric discourses? Interpreting the audience’s laughter in terms of a broader social order that has historically afforded less value to women’s lives and bodies may lead to a different, more compelling account. Subject-centric approaches do not tell the whole story about how laughter shapes our shared political life today.

The main innovation Adorno introduces to the theoretical study of the politics of laughter is an attention to how laughter occurs within and is to a large extent produced by a broader social order. Originating in a Benjamin-inflected reading of Marx (Buck-Morss 1977), Adorno’s conception of social order aims to critically negate both empiricist and idealist modes of social theory by establishing a dialectical tension between them. Against empiricism (and on the side of idealism), Adorno insists on theorizing society as a whole. Knowledge of particular phenomena requires attending to how they are mediated by a larger social system that develops historically: “the usual empirical asceticism with regard to theory cannot be sustained. Without the anticipation of that structural moment of the whole, which in individual observations can hardly

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1 As explained in the Introduction, I use the term “social order” to refer to what Adorno typically identifies as “society” (Adorno 1969), the “social whole” (Adorno 1973, 37; 1997, 68; 2005c, 153; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xviii), or the “social totality” (Adorno 1973, 47; 1997, 55, 234; 2005c, 17).
ever be adequately realized, no individual observation would find its relative place” (Adorno 1976, 107). But against idealism (and on the side of empiricism), Adorno resists the epistemological presumption that the subject can grasp society as an entirely determinable system: “societal totality does not lead a life of its own over and above that which it unites and of which it, in its turn, is composed. It produces and reproduces itself through its individual moments. Many of these moments preserve a relative independence” (107). The social order thus constitutes a “fractured totality” (Jay 1984, 94) that can only be known by studying the concrete, material events that embody and express its contradictory character. Adorno writes: “for the mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality” (Adorno 1977, 133). Adorno’s accounts of the laughter produced by the culture industry, “lighthearted art,” Samuel Beckett, and Charlie Chaplin provide just such analyses of the modern social order. For Adorno, a study of the social order and a study of the politics of laughter proceed in and through one another.

I argue that Adorno yields three critical insights for the study of the politics of laughter today. First, he demonstrates that the politics of laughter are neither intrinsically subversive nor intrinsically oppressive, but rather complex and dialectical. This is not a straightforward claim that “context matters” when determining laughter’s political origins and effects. Laughter for Adorno is constitutively split against itself and politically “impure” because it always arises within a fractured, contradictory social order. Laughter serves oppressive, reactionary ends precisely when it is thought to provide an escape from social power, and it serves subversive, emancipatory ends only when it bears traces of social oppression within itself. Second, Adorno
illustrates the necessity and fruitfulness of theorizing laughter in terms of the question of social order. While the liberal and Nietzschean discourses emphasize the properly emancipatory effects of laughter, Adorno’s attention to laughter’s status as both an experience and an event yields an account of how laughter can function to entrench existing forms of power in society (i.e., the inside/outside dialectic). Third and finally, Adorno provides a model of a critical theory of laughter suitable for the contemporary condition. In contrast to the recent “ethical turn” in political theory that seeks to promote particular practices of laughter as first steps in challenging a subject’s social and political conditions of existence (Arnold 2009; Butler 1990; Connolly 2002a; Conway and Seery 1992; Euben 2003; Lombardini 2013; McWilliams 1995; Rorty 1989; Tønder 2014; Willett 2008; Zumbrunnen 2012), Adorno understands the task of critical theory to be to engage concrete experiences/events of laughter as dialectically complex sites of non-identity that both shape the social order and open it to change. I conclude that an Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter contributes to social reconciliation by challenging the subject to become otherwise such that he or she can laugh at existing social reality as something that has been overcome.

In keeping with the densely layered and oftentimes circuitous composition of Adorno’s texts, this chapter proceeds by way of several close engagements with his analyses of modern society, laughter, and aesthetics, and I present my arguments in full form only in the concluding

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2 Liberal and Nietzschean theorists of laughter might object to my claim that they neglect the question of social order. In particular, these theorists typically emphasize how laughter arises in concrete social situations and is often directed at conventional modes of speech and action. However, as Samuel Chambers notes, identifying a relation to broader social factors (that is, using “the word social mainly as a descriptor to indicate relationality, to mark contextuality, and to suggest a basic sense of plurality”) is not the same as analyzing something in light of an account of social order (Chambers 2014, 56; see also Adorno 1969, 148). Adorno, along with other Frankfurt School theorists and students of Marx like Louis Althusser, provides such accounts. Only when we attend to the question of social order in this way do we overcome subject-centric approaches and their faith in laughter’s properly emancipatory character. Mary Beard (2014) and Alenka Zupančič (2008) provide other studies of laughter that take the question of social order seriously.
Section I introduces the basic contours of Adorno’s critique of the modern capitalist social order. Section II describes his critique of laughter manufactured by the “culture industry” along with his less familiar objections to practices of “polemical” laughter directed against forms of social power. Section III turns to Aesthetic Theory and Adorno’s essays on lighthearted art, Samuel Beckett, and Charlie Chaplin in order to explain how laughter can constitute an emancipatory “aesthetic experience.” Section IV considers a scene of laughter from David Simon’s The Wire to elucidate the chapter’s main arguments.

I. The “Systematized Horror” of Modern Society

Understanding Adorno’s views on laughter requires a familiarity with his broader critique of the modern capitalist social order. Dialectic of Enlightenment (DoE), Adorno’s famous 1944 joint venture with Max Horkheimer, provides the clearest and most forceful statement of this argument. The text’s opening essay offers a polemical origin story for the “advance of thought” known as enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 1). The authors explain that enlightenment begins when archaic humans seek to disenchant the chaotic, mysterious forces of nature in order to control them for their own benefit (2). Enlightenment entails an idealist epistemology wherein the subject’s consciousness is held to be constitutive of and adequate for grasping the objective natural world. In enlightenment,

being is split between logos – which, with the advance of philosophy, contracts to a monad, a mere reference point – and the mass of things and creatures in the external world. The single distinction between man’s own existence and reality swallows up all others. Without regard for difference, the world is made subject to man. (5)

Elsewhere Adorno describes enlightenment epistemology as a philosophy of identity: the objective world is – or can be made – identical with the subject’s concepts and designs (Adorno
1973, 146–48). This belief in the equivalence of all natural objects from the perspective of the human subject finds expression in the methodological priority afforded to mathematics, quantification, and formal logic and in the historical emergence of the principles of self-preservation and utility-maximization (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 4). For Horkheimer and Adorno, enlightenment is a set of material exercises of power that gives birth to an idealist epistemology wherein a knowing human subject rules over a known, objective natural world.

The capitalist mode of production extends this enlightenment philosophy of identity across the entire social field. The commodity form reduces all qualitative differences between objects into mere differences in price. Everything in the world becomes exchangeable with everything else because everything is ultimately for-man: “bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion” (4). However, as Marx shows in the first volume of Capital, capitalism does not merely entail the reduction of non-human nature into objects of exchange. The commodification and profitable exchange of human labor-power extends the logic of identity even further (Adorno 1973, 146). The emergence of capitalism illustrates how enlightenment is not a relationship to the world that humans achieve once and for all, but rather a social-historical process with its own internal dynamism. “Enlightenment is totalitarian” because it constitutes an insatiable demand by the human subject that everything submit to his calculation and control: “For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion. Once the movement is able to develop unhampered by external oppression, there is no holding it back” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 3–4). Enlightenment begins with human
exercises of power over nature, and it culminates historically in the mass objectification of
human beings over themselves in capitalism.

Horkheimer and Adorno conclude that enlightenment betrays its own promise of securing
human freedom. By devoting itself single-mindedly to self-preservation and utility-
maximization, reason abjures its capacity for critical self-reflection and transformative thought
and binds humans to their prevailing conditions of existence ever more tightly: “what appears as
the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all existing things to logical formalism, is bought
with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand” (20). The apparatuses
of mass control developed in twentieth-century capitalist society exemplify these deeply
conservative, repressive tendencies of enlightenment. Whatever escapes, resists, or simply
appears to be outside the system of profit-based exchange must be incorporated, disciplined, or
eliminated: “Everything which is different, from the idea to criminality, is exposed to the force of
the collective” (21–22). Fascism and the Holocaust reflect the results of carrying this logic of
identity to its natural conclusion. Auschwitz marries enlightenment’s antipathy to the non-
identical with its most technologically advanced systems of control and destruction. “Genocide is
the absolute integration,” Adorno writes. “Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure
identity as death” (Adorno 1973, 362). Horkheimer and Adorno find that attempts to deliver
humanity from the violence of nature by installing the knowing human subject as sovereign
culminates in the unleashing of even greater violence by humans against themselves: “humanity,
instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (Horkheimer
and Adorno 2002, xiv). This is the dialectic of enlightenment.
It is crucial to note that Horkheimer and Adorno do not conceive of enlightenment as a “motor” of history à la Hegelian idealism; rather, they trace the modern social order’s historical development as a process of enlightenment. To explain this point, it helps to turn to Fredric Jameson, who argues that Adorno’s claims about the enlightenment epistemology of identity are grounded in a reading of Marx on the relationship between use-value and exchange-value. The category of identity only becomes thinkable when a social system based on exchange-value has leveled the differences between qualitatively distinct use-values: “Exchange value, then, the emergence of some third, abstract term between two incomparable objects […] constitutes the primordial form by which identity emerges in human history” (Jameson 1990, 23). For Adorno, categories of thought (e.g., identity) are products of the conditions governing social reality (i.e., exchange-value) (Adorno 1973, 317; Jameson 1990, 91). Horkheimer and Adorno thus do not understand capitalism as a product of the enlightenment logic of identity; rather, the enlightenment logic of identity is itself a product of capitalist historical development. The claim that modern society “obeys” a logic of enlightenment means that society obeys the logic that its own development has made possible. DoE likewise must not be read – as it so often is – as offering a free-standing philosophy of history. The speculative history sketched by Horkheimer and Adorno instead reflects a targeted strike against the capitalist social order’s own conception of its historical development and trajectory. As Susan Buck-Morss notes,

to read [DoE] as a positive if gloomy statement of the essence of history is to miss the point. The book was a critical negation of that rationalist, idealist, progressive view of history in which bourgeois society had itself become “second nature.” (Buck-Morss 1977, 61)
Horkheimer and Adorno, in short, understand their narrative about enlightenment as always already a narrative about modern capitalism.

The stark and unyielding force of DoE corresponds to what the authors consider to be the dreadful reality of life in the mid-twentieth century capitalist social order. “The world is systematized horror,” Adorno laments (Adorno 2005c, 113). “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly” because literally every thought or action predicated on the dichotomy between knowing human subject and known objective world re-inscribes the violent logic of identity governing the whole (39). Adorno’s 1951 text Minima Moralia illustrates just how thoroughly enlightenment principles have penetrated spheres of life conventionally thought to resist or escape their influence. One such sphere, as we will see below, is the social order’s various practices of laughter.

II. Adorno’s Critique of Laughter

Adorno deepens his critique of modern society by launching a two-pronged attack against laughter. First, laughter manufactured by the capitalist “culture industry” entrenches social power by distracting subjects from the oppressive conditions of the whole. Second, polemical laughter, or laughter directed against social power, inadvertently bolsters the latter by re-inscribing the idealist principle of constitutive subjectivity. Adorno’s critique calls into question

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3 For example, although bourgeois marriage is idolized as a non-instrumental human relationship, Adorno argues that it functions to distract partners from the violence they participate in outside the home: “Marriage […] usually serves today as a trick of self-preservation: the two conspirators deflect outward responsibility for their respective ill-doing to the other while in reality existing together in a murky swamp” (Adorno 2005c, 30–31).

4 The following sections make frequent reference to “power” and “social power.” Consistent with the above account of enlightenment, Adorno believes that subjects exercise “power” when they make nature or other humans into objects for their use or control. In modern capitalism, such exercises of power congeal into various relations of domination (e.g., capital over labor; monopoly over consumer; humans over nature) whereby the social order as a whole reproduces itself. I call these relations of domination “social power.”
subject-centric approaches to the politics of laughter, especially the liberal discourse’s assumption of a stable, self-sufficient subject capable of escaping social irrationality via laughter.

Laughter in the Culture Industry

The culture industry essay from *DoE* features Adorno’s most frequently discussed (though by no means most extensive) comments on laughter. Here he and Horkheimer consider the Durkheimian thesis that the shattering of traditional social ties in modernity yields a condition of cultural chaos. They argue that this thesis “is refuted by daily experience. Culture today is infecting everything with sameness” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94). Modern culture is homogenous and homogenizing because it has become an *industry*. What counts as “culture” in the mid-twentieth century capitalist social order are Hollywood films, television shows, radio broadcasts, and print periodicals. Culture has ceded the autonomy it once enjoyed with respect to the economic process and has subordinated itself to the capitalist imperatives of profit, efficiency, mass production, and total administration (128). As an industry, culture entrenches the “total power of capital” (94).

The culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno contend, performs a continuous bait-and-switch on its consumers that disciplines them to accede to their own domination by capital (94). Radio programs, television shows, and blockbuster films (today we could add Youtube, Netflix, and twenty-four hour sports networks) promise subjects a pleasurable escape from the toils and miseries of the daily work process even as they impose the terms of existing social life on them ever more forcefully:

Film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination […] thus it trains those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality. […] The products themselves, especially the most characteristic, the sound film, cripple those
faculties through their objective make up. They are so constructed that their adequate comprehension requires a quick, observant, knowledgable cast of mind but positively debars the spectator from thinking. (100)

Cultural products secure the power of capital by repeatedly diffusing the subject’s dissatisfactions in a way that leaves the social order responsible for them unchanged: “the culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises” (111). The pleasures provided by the culture industry are ephemeral and hollow (and, of course, always for profit), and they systematically distract the subject from any thought of challenging the whole. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, subjects enforce their own social domination through the consumption of cultural products.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of laughter begins about halfway through “The Culture Industry.” Consistent with the critique described above, they target the laughter generated by newspaper comics, Hollywood cartoons, and stunt films as a distracting pseudo-pleasure that only increases its subjects’ subservience to social power (110–14). Miriam Hansen notes that this focus on laughter constitutes a direct response to Walter Benjamin’s arguments in the second version of his famous “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” essay (Hansen 2012, 163–82). Here Benjamin contends that the collective laughter generated by Disney films like Mickey Mouse can have salutary – even revolutionary – political effects by diffusing the audience’s violent and fascistic energies:

If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large – tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic

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5 Perhaps today we could add “laughter yoga clubs” to this list of sources that produce laughter as a pseudo-pleasure. Laughter clubs first emerged in India in the 1990s, and they are now popular all over the world. Laughter yoga aims to harness the physiological and psychological benefits associated with laughter (Cousins 1976; Mora-Ripoll 2010) by generating laughter among subjects in a controlled setting (Alvarez 2010). From an Adornian perspective, laughter clubs function as ideological supports for the social order by distracting and consoling subjects from the suffering inflicted by the social order without calling the latter into question.
character – one also has to recognize that this same technologization has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychoses. [...] American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies. (Benjamin 2002, 118)

For Benjamin, the collective laughter generated by Disney films can help forestall outbreaks of mass violence. Hansen explains that “by activating individually based mass-psychotic tendencies in the space of collective sensory experience and, above all, in the mode of play, the cinema might prevent them from being acted out in reality” (Hansen 2012, 165). According to Benjamin, the laughter manufactured by the culture industry is keyed toward anti-fascistic political ends.

Horkheimer and Adorno take issue with this assessment of laughter. In a 1936 letter to Benjamin, Adorno expresses doubts about the therapeutic and subversive power he attributes to laughter manufactured by the culture industry. Adorno writes that “the laughter of a cinema audience […] is anything but salutary and revolutionary; it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism instead” (Adorno 1999, 130). He and Horkheimer make this disagreement with Benjamin a major theme in the culture industry essay. They argue that the collective laughter generated by a Disney film intensifies (rather than diffuses) the public’s violent, fascistic tendencies under capitalism. When an audience laughs at the comic mishaps of a Mickey Mouse or a Donald Duck, they engage in an act of cruelty that embodies and re-inscribes the social order’s hostility to non-conformity and non-instrumental activity:

Cartoon and stunt films were once exponents of fantasy against rationalism. They allowed justice to be done to the animals and things electrified by their technology, by granting the mutilated beings a second life. Today they merely confirm the victory of technological reason over truth. […] The quantity of organized amusement is converted into the quality of organized cruelty. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 110)
Adorno repeats this argument in *Minima Moralia* when he describes “the collective of laughers” at newspaper comic strips as those “who have cruel things on their side” (Adorno 2005c, 141).

The audience that laughs at cartoon characters disciplines itself by publicly reaffirming that non-instrumental, “silly” behavior will be met in true Bergsonian fashion – that is, with a cruel and overwhelming collective response:

> To the extent that cartoons do more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 110)

Horkheimer and Adorno reject Benjamin’s rosy assessment of the laughter manufactured by the culture industry and instead emphasize how it mechanically re-inscribes and intensifies the cruelty of the social order. They conclude that “in wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society’s worthless totality” (112).

This, however, is not the end of the story when it comes to laughter in the culture industry essay. Horkheimer and Adorno go on to introduce a decisive distinction between “wrong” and “reconciled” laughter. Wrong laughter, like that manufactured by the culture industry, embodies and entrenches social power. It succeeds at doing so because it *convincingly parodies* social reconciliation. Horkheimer and Adorno write: “the collective of those who laugh parodies humanity. […] Their harmony presents a caricature of solidarity. What is infernal about wrong laughter is that it compellingly parodies what is best, reconciliation” (112). While a full account of Adorno’s idiosyncratic understanding of “reconciliation” is beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief excursus will suffice. Adorno rejects the Hegelian conception of reconciliation as a social
state or condition wherein the split between subject and object has been overcome. This, he
believes, is the fantasy of idealist philosophies of identity, and it functions to suppress the
object’s innumerable and inexhaustible differences with the subject: “It is precisely the insatiable
identity principle that perpetuates antagonism by suppressing contradiction. What tolerates
nothing that is not like itself thwarts the reconcilement for which it mistakes itself” (Adorno
1973, 142–43). Adorno advances an alternative vision of reconcilement as a fleeting moment
wherein an object becomes radically non-identical to the subject. He writes that “reconcilement
would release the non-identical, would rid it of coercion […]. Reconcilement would be the
thought of the many as no longer inimical, a thought that is anathema to subjective
reason” (Adorno 1973, 6; see also 2005e, 247). While a relationship of non-identity might seem
to constitute the very opposite of “reconciliation,” Adorno believes that the term is appropriate
because it is only in such a relationship that both subject and object are freed from the
intrinsically violent logic of identity. Reconcilement, in other words, abolishes the hierarchy
between subject and object and allows them to confront one another as equals (181).
Reconcilement as non-identity takes the form of a fleeting moment because any permanent or
sustained experience of the non-identical risks becoming identical to itself: “the idea of
reconcilement forbids the positive positing of reconcilement as a concept” (145).

Horkheimer and Adorno contend that “wrong laughter” succeeds at entrenching social
power because it compellingly parodies such an achievement of reconcilement (i.e., the
suspension of the logic of identity). Consumers are drawn to Disney films because they believe
they are escaping social power when they laugh at the cartoons. Crucially, Horkheimer and
Adorno argue that when wrong laughter parodies reconcilement in this way, it parodies an
achievement that *laughter itself actually makes possible*. They identify “reconciled laughter” as an experience that provides a fleeting moment of reconciliation: “Reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from power; wrong laughter copes with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 112). In other words, wrong laughter would not succeed in entrenching social power if subjects did not have a passing familiarity with laughter’s capacity to actually achieve reconciliation. The ability of the “wrong laughter” manufactured by the culture industry to entrench the power of capital makes reference to and depends on the possibility of a “reconciled laughter” that resists such power.

The concept of “reconciled laughter” transforms how we understand Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of laughter in “The Culture Industry.” Contrary to what a cursory reading might suggest, Horkheimer and Adorno do not simply reject Benjamin’s argument that collective laughter serves emancipatory or revolutionary political ends. Their critique of the “wrong” laughter manufactured by the culture industry in fact requires the possibility of a reconciling laughter that resists forms of social power. Earlier in *DoE* Horkheimer and Adorno describe these contradictory political potentialities of laughter:

If laughter [throughout class history] has been a sign of violence, an outbreak of blind, obdurate nature, it nevertheless contains its opposite element, in that through laughter blind nature becomes aware of itself as such and thus abjures its destructive violence. […] Laughter is in league with the guilt of subjectivity, but in the suspension of law which it announces it also points beyond that complicity. It promises a passage to the homeland. (60)

Adorno thus agrees with Benjamin about the emancipatory potential of laughter, but he believes that Benjamin takes a too one-sided (i.e., non-dialectical) view of the politics of laughter under
mid-twentieth century social conditions. Grasping how laughter functions in the modern social order instead requires distinguishing carefully between its opposed political tendencies.

I examine Adorno’s conception of reconciled laughter more closely in the next section, but before continuing we should take stock of just how far we have departed from both the liberal and Nietzschean discourses of the politics of laughter. As noted in the Introduction, these discourses understand laughter as an experience that originates in the human subject and whose political significance consists in how it spontaneously undermines either falsehoods (the liberal discourse) or prevailing conceptions of truth themselves (the Nietzschean counter-discourse).

Horkheimer and Adorno complicate both approaches by demonstrating that laughter is often anything but spontaneous, disruptive, or centered in the subject. A great deal of laughter is instead manufactured by society’s apparatuses of control. Treating laughter at a Disney film (for example) as beginning and ending in an individual subject yields a woefully inadequate account of how this laughter functions politically as a mechanism of social control and domination. While laughter passes through individual subjects, subjects are not the primary loci of laughter. Adorno shows that the political origins and effects of laughter can only be understood in light of the conditions governing society as a whole. In other words, we must grasp laughter not only as a subjective experience, but also as an objective event. For Adorno, conventional philosophical conceptions of laughter as spontaneous, disruptive, and centered in the subject are myths born of an inattention to the question of social order.

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6 Adorno in fact overstates the extent to which Benjamin ignores the political dangers associated with laughter manufactured by the culture industry. In a footnote to the “Work of Art” essay quoted above, Benjamin writes that “a comprehensive analysis of these films should not overlook their double meaning. It should start from the ambiguity of situations which have both a comic and a horrifying effect. […] What is revealed in recent Disney films was latent in some of the earlier ones: the cozy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence” (Benjamin 2002, 130n30).
Polemical (or Liberal) Laughter

Given Adorno’s antipathy to the culture industry, one might expect that he looks favorably upon so-called “polemical” practices of laughter that target apparatuses of social control and that aim for the liberating political effects he and Horkheimer attribute to reconciled laughter. Certainly Adorno supports laughing at capitalism, the culture industry, and fascism, right? In this section I demonstrate that (a) Adorno rejects polemical laughter as reinforcing the enlightenment philosophy of identity and (b) while his account of laughter manufactured by the culture industry challenges both the liberal and Nietzschean discourses, Adorno’s critique of polemical laughter targets the assumptions of the liberal discourse much more directly.

Adorno first raises the issue of polemical laughter in a *Minima Moralia* aphorism titled “Juvenal’s error.” Citing Juvenal’s remark that “it is difficult not to write satire,” Adorno asks what role irony (particularly satire) can play in modern society (Adorno 2005c, 209). Satire, he explains, works by exposing the distance between ideology and reality:

> Irony convicts its object by presenting it as what it purports to be; and without passing judgment, as if leaving a blank for the observing subject, measures it against its being-in-itself. […] In this it presupposes the idea of the self-evident, originally of social resonance. He who has laughter on his side has no need of proof. (210)

While Shaftesbury would certainly agree with this view of laughter’s relation to truth, Adorno argues that laughter can no longer serve this social function today. The saturation of life by the imperatives of self-preservation and utility-maximization has transformed reality into its own justification such that the gap between reality and ideology on which satire depends has closed:

> The impossibility of satire today should not be blamed, as sentimentality is apt to do, on the relativism of values, the absence of binding norms. Rather, agreement itself, the formal a priori of irony, has given way to universal agreement of content. As such it presents the only fitting target for irony and at the same time pulls the ground from under
its feet. Irony’s medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared. […] There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail. (211)

For Adorno, the modern social order has made polemical laughter – that is, laughter directed at forms of social power – both necessary and impossible.

Adorno revisits the issue of polemical laughter in a 1958 essay on Samuel Beckett’s play *Endgame*. I examine this essay more closely in the following section, but for now I want to note simply how Adorno enlists Beckett to question the value of polemical laughter. He writes that the laughter [Beckett’s play] arouses ought to suffocate the ones who laugh. This is what has become of humor now that it has become obsolete as an aesthetic medium and repulsive, without a canon for what should be laughed about, without a place of reconciliation from which one could laugh, and without anything harmless on the face of the earth that would allow itself to be laughed at. (Adorno 1991b, 257)

Building upon *Minima Moralia*’s claim about the impossibility of satire, Adorno contends that humor is “obsolete” because the all-encompassing nature of the capitalist social order makes it impossible for the subject to occupy a position from which to laugh at it in a critical manner. The standpoint that Shaftesbury or the Stoics occupied with respect to social irrationality is not available to the modern subject who is helplessly entangled with his object of laughter. Laughter that presumes to originate from a privileged, external position is “repulsive” because it embodies and reinforces the idealist conception of the self-sufficient subject. When Adorno argues that satire has become impossible and that humor is obsolete, he does not mean that these genres cease to exist in modernity. Rather, they no longer perform their emancipatory function and instead operate as ideological supports for the social order. Laughter that aims to resist social power ultimately reinforces this power by entrenching the liberal, enlightenment principle of the constitutive subject.
Adorno crystallizes his objections to polemical laughter in a 1967 essay, “Is Art Lighthearted?” In this piece Adorno assesses the political value of comedies or parodies that target the very worst product of the modern social order: fascism. He writes: “Several years ago there was a debate about whether fascism could be presented in comic or parodistic form without that constituting an outrage against its victims” (Adorno 1992, 251). (Adorno here is almost certainly referring to Brecht’s The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui and Chaplin’s The Great Dictator (Adorno 1974, 81).) Adorno rejects the notion that laughter at fascism can serve positive political ends:

By now the polemical form of humor has become questionable as well. […] One cannot laugh at [fascism]. […] Comedies about fascism would become accomplices of the silly mode of thinking that considered fascism beaten in advance because the strongest battalions in world history were against it. (Adorno 1992, 251–52)

Comedies about fascism disrespect its victims not because they violate some code of moral decency, but because the laughter they generate presumes to originate from a position external to the social order. The subjects who laugh falsely believe they are laughing at something in which they are not implicated. Such laughter re-inscribes the idealist myth of the self-sufficient subject that is at the root of fascist politics, and it absolves the viewer of responsibility for resisting the fascist tendencies that continue to circulate in society. Adorno explains that

the historical forces that produced the horror [of fascism] derive from the inherent nature of the social structure. They are not superficial forces, and they are much too powerful for anyone to have the prerogative of treating them as though he had world history behind him and the Führers actually were the clowns whose nonsense their murderous talk came to resemble only afterwards. (252; see also 1974, 81)

Adorno believes that polemical laughter reinforces the intrinsically violent philosophy of identity that governs the operation of the social order as a whole.
In its attempt to resist social irrationality by revealing the truth behind ideology, the polemical laughter identified by Adorno is a type of liberal laughter, and his critique restates the dialectic of liberal laughter described in the Introduction. Just as liberal laughter’s ascription of rationality and freedom to the subject who laughs renders it unable to deliver the freedom and enlightenment it promises, polemical laughter’s bolstering of the subject at the expense of an attention to the question of social order makes it incapable of achieving the emancipation it seeks. Indeed, the manifest political failures of liberal laughter in the Trump era illustrate Adorno’s claims about how laughter that is convinced of its own capacity to combat fascism risks actually strengthening reactionary political assemblages. Adorno’s critique of polemical laughter illuminates the dangers posed by the liberal discourse’s assumption of a stable, self-sufficient, rational subject who seeks to escape the irrationality and oppression of the broader social order by laughing at it.\footnote{While Adorno also resists the subject-centric and celebratory tones of the Nietzschean counter-discourse of laughter, the liberal discourse’s assumption of a stable, self-identical individual subject makes it a much more urgent target than the minority Nietzschean view that at least allows for transformation and becoming. Below we will find that Adorno’s critical theory of laughter actually converges with the Nietzschean vision of laughter on key points.}

In light of Adorno’s two-pronged attack against laughter, his and Horkheimer’s distinction between wrong and reconciled laughter now appears quite slippery. While the culture industry essay suggests that laughter’s efficacy as a force of social oppression depends crucially on its ability to achieve a fleeting moment of reconciliation, Adorno’s critique of polemical laughter demonstrates that a subject’s efforts to harness this reconciliatory capacity only bolsters social power. Both laughter manufactured by the culture industry and polemical laughter re-inscribe the idealist conception of the self-sufficient subject who can escape from or subvert social power. Making sense of reconciled laughter – the concept upon which Adorno’s entire
account of the politics of laughter hinges – consequently requires conceiving of laughter beyond the terms of the constitutive, self-sufficient subject. For this, I turn to his aesthetic philosophy.

III. Aesthetic Experience and Reconciled Laughter

Adorno argues that art provides the sole hope for reconciliation in the modern social order. If laughter can indeed serve the ends of reconciliation (understood in the non-Hegelian, “fleeting moment” sense described earlier), then examining Adorno’s aesthetic philosophy is essential for determining how it does so. After reviewing the main concepts and arguments advanced in Aesthetic Theory, I turn to Adorno’s essays on lighthearted art, Beckett, and Chaplin to contend that laughter constitutes a key aesthetic experience that resists social power. For Adorno, laughter serves the ends of reconciliation when it harnesses the violence of the social order to undermine the subject who laughs.

Art’s Double Character

Adorno’s central argument in Aesthetic Theory is that art alone can achieve autonomy in modern society. In a world where “wrong life cannot be lived rightly,” art possesses the unique ability to break free from the conditions governing existing social reality: “artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous reality. Thus, however tragic they appear, artworks tend a priori toward affirmation” (Adorno 1997, 1). An artwork tends toward affirmation (i.e., reconciliation) because its existence is indifferent to the subject and his interests. Through this non-identity with the terms governing social life (i.e., its “uselessness”), art exerts a “counter-pressure to the force exerted by the body social” and keeps alive the possibility of reconciliation (33).
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The autonomy that art achieves with respect to society is not the individual freedom or escape imagined by liberal, enlightenment philosophies. As was the case with “reconciliation,” Adorno submits the dominant conception of “autonomy” to a radical reinterpretation. Art, he explains, has a “double character”: although it achieves autonomy from society, it always remains a “social fact” (1, 5). That is, art is produced by subjects in a determinate historical situation (43), employs the socially available materials and techniques of production (34), takes existing social content for its thematic material (225), and generally offers itself for sale in the marketplace (236). According to Adorno, “art is related to its other [i.e., society] as is a magnet to a field of iron fillings. Not only art’s elements, but their constellation as well, that which is specifically aesthetic and to which its spirit is usually chalked up, refer back to its other” (7).

Consequently, the autonomy that art achieves with respect to the social order is thoroughly mediated by that order: “art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art” (225; see also Zuidervaart 1991, 88).

Adorno argues that the constitutively impure quality of art’s autonomy is the source of its political efficacy (Adorno 1974, 89). Were art to achieve absolute (i.e., liberal) autonomy from social reality, it would no longer critically engage that reality. Like the polemical forms of laughter discussed above, art that imagines itself as having completely escaped the terms of social life ultimately leaves the latter unchanged and perhaps even strengthened. Conversely, were art to shed its claim to autonomy, it would devolve into the mere entertainment and pleasure-peddling of the culture industry. Adorno explains:

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8 It is also not the self-overcoming and becoming-otherwise imagined by Nietzschean philosophies. However, as described in the previous footnote, these approaches are not Adorno’s primary target, and his conception of autonomy actually aligns with the Nietzschean view in key ways.
if art had absolutely nothing to do with logicality and causality, it would forfeit any relation to its other and would be an a priori empty activity; if art took them literally, it would succumb to the spell; only by its double character, which provokes permanent conflict, does art succeed at escaping the spell by even the slightest degree. (Adorno 1997, 138)

From Adorno’s perspective, because it critically engages social reality, the “impure” autonomy proper to art is more autonomous than that allowed by liberal, enlightenment philosophies.

How does art achieve this form of autonomy? That is, how does an artwork transcend the social order without sacrificing its connection to it? Adorno contends that an artwork achieves autonomy when its own construction embodies the tensions and contradictions circulating within society: “because the spell of external reality over its subjects and their reactions has become absolute, the artwork can only oppose this spell by assimilating itself to it” (31). An autonomous artwork pushes these social features to their limits such that they become non-identical to themselves. Adorno’s favorite example of this is Schoenberg’s compositions which press the existing musical form of tonality to its extreme such that it gives rise to the new musical form of atonality (Adorno 2002c, 399). Adorno claims that “by reenacting the spell of reality, by sublimating it as an image, art at the same time liberates itself from it; sublimation and freedom mutually accord” (Adorno 1997, 130; see also 1974). For Adorno, art achieves autonomy from the social order by immanently overcoming its own social features. In art, a piece of objective social reality becomes otherwise to itself.

The subject’s experience of an artwork (what Adorno calls “aesthetic experience”) is consequently an experience of the non-identical. By undermining the enlightenment principle that the objective world is or can be made identical to the subject’s concepts and interests, art challenges the subject. Adorno writes: “aesthetic experience […] is a countermovement to the
subject. It demands something on the order of the self-denial of the observer, his capacity to address or recognize what aesthetic objects themselves enunciate and what they conceal” (Adorno 1997, 346). As an encounter with objective non-identity, aesthetic experience makes the subject non-identical to his own self-conception as an autonomous, world-constituting entity. Art undoes the constitutive subject by making him aware of the objectivity within himself: “The experience of art […] is the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness” (244–45). Art reveals the subject to be a product (rather than the origin) of a larger social and historical process. “Aesthetic experience,” Adorno explains, “breaks through the spell of obstinate self-preservation; it is the model of a stage of consciousness in which the I no longer has its happiness in its interests, or, ultimately, in its reproduction” (346). By opening the subject up to a non-coercive, non-identitarian relation with the objective world, aesthetic experience provides a fleeting moment of social reconciliation.

Adorno describes such aesthetic experience as a “shock” to the subject: “the shock aroused by important works […] is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work; it is the moment of being shaken. The recipients lose their footing” (244). Aesthetic experience occurs in sudden, momentary shocks (or “shudder[s]” (245–46)) because an anticipated or sustained experience of the non-identical is impossible (lest the non-identical become identical to itself). Adorno insists that aesthetic experience is not a feeling or affect because it calls into question the very subject in or on whom feelings and affects occur:

Aesthetic feeling is not the feeling that is aroused: It is astonishment vis-à-vis what is beheld rather than vis-à-vis what it is about; it is a being overwhelmed by what is aconceptual and yet determinate, not the subjective affect released, that in the case of aesthetic experience may be called feeling. (164)
If spirit is “that through which artworks, by becoming appearance, are more than they are” (86), then aesthetic experience is best understood as a spiritual event whereby the subject becomes otherwise to him or herself. In this way, Adorno’s conception of autonomy converges with that advanced by the Nietzschean discourse – with the crucial caveat that this autonomy is always impure due to how it emerges out of and bears the traces of a contradictory social order. As we will see below, Adorno – like the Nietzschean theorists – understands a certain type of laughter as constituting just this kind of momentary, subject-undoing, spiritual aesthetic experience.

Laughter and Aesthetic Experience

Adorno’s critique of laughter introduced the notion of “reconciled laughter,” or laughter that resists social power by refusing the enlightenment logic of constitutive subjectivity. In this section I turn to his essays on lighthearted art, Beckett, and Chaplin to elucidate this conception of reconciled laughter and describe how it constitutes a key form of aesthetic experience.

In “Is Art Lighthearted?” Adorno considers Friedrich Schiller’s thesis that art provides a “lighthearted” escape from “serious” life (Adorno 1992, 247). Adorno rejects this argument as prefiguring the culture industry’s notion of art as entertainment and consolation: “For all the noblesse of his gesture, Schiller secretly anticipates the situation under the culture industry in which art is prescribed to tired businesspeople as a shot in the arm” (248). Adorno nevertheless acknowledges a grain of truth to Schiller’s thesis. While individual artworks are not lighthearted (lest they devolve into mere entertainment), art as such features a lighthearted quality: “The thesis of art’s lightheartedness is to be taken in a very precise way. It holds for art as a whole, not for individual works. […] A priori, prior to its works, art is a critique of the brute seriousness that reality imposes upon human beings” (248). Art is lighthearted – even playful (Adorno 1997, 39)
– because it refuses to take existing social forms too seriously: “That is what is lighthearted in it; as a change in the existing mode of consciousness, that is also, to be sure, its seriousness” (Adorno 1992, 248). Previewing his argument about the double character of art, Adorno explains that an artwork’s political potency consists in how it embodies a dialectical tension between serious life and lighthearted escape. Art is serious because it emerges from, bears the traces of, and critically engages the social order, but it is lighthearted in its resistance to the terms governing that order. Adorno concludes that “as something that has escaped from reality and is nevertheless permeated with it, art vibrates between this seriousness and lightheartedness. It is this tension that constitutes art” (249).

Adorno leverages this conception of art to restate the critique of laughter he and Horkheimer had leveled in the culture industry essay. He argues that laughter that functions solely as a lighthearted diversion from the oppressive conditions of the social order inevitably becomes an ally of that order: “laughter, once the image of humanness, becomes a regression to inhumanity” (251). The distinction between wrong and reconciled laughter reappears here as a distinction between laughter that contributes to human regression and laughter that enacts an “image of humanness.” However, Adorno says more about the latter type of laughter than he did in “The Culture Industry.” Laughter that is an “image of humanness” maintains a dialectical tension between its lighthearted and serious qualities. Such laughter is lighthearted in that it pokes fun at existing social reality, but it is serious in how it acknowledges its embeddedness in that reality and calls its own conditions of existence into question: “the moment of lightheartedness or humor is not simply expelled from [artworks] in the course of history. It survives in their self-critique, as humor about humor” (252). Reconciled laughter laughs at
prevailing practices of laughter (e.g., the culture industry and polemical laughter) in which the subject participates. Adorno reiterates this point by invoking Beckett: “humor is salvaged in Beckett’s plays because they infect the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair” (253). Unlike practices of laughter that re-inscribe the subject’s distance from his object of laughter, the “seriousness” of reconciled laughter implicates and in turn undermines the subject who laughs. Reconciled laughter embodies the serious/lighthearted dialectic Adorno identifies as essential to art.

Adorno’s work on Beckett further demonstrates the centrality of laughter to his account of aesthetic experience. Adorno held Beckett in very high esteem (he intended to dedicate *Aesthetic Theory* to Beckett (Adorno and Tiedemann 1997, 366)), and he particularly admired Beckett’s 1957 play *Endgame* (Zuidervaart 1991, 150–77). *Endgame* features a series of dark, absurd dialogues and interactions between a wheelchair-ridden blind man, his restless servant, and the former’s elderly parents who live in garbage cans. The play is set in a barren, depopulated world where the characters are all waiting to die (Beckett 1978). Adorno interprets *Endgame* as depicting the “general disaster” in which the enlightenment logic of identity culminates historically (Adorno 1991b, 266). Having completely used up and destroyed the natural world, humans have descended into a state of complete meaninglessness and alienation:

> The Beckettian situations of which his drama is composed are the photographic negative of a reality referred to meaning. They have as their model the situations of empirical existence, situations which, once isolated and deprived of their instrumental and psychological context through the loss of personal unity, spontaneously assume a specific and compelling expression – that of horror. (253)

Adorno argues that Beckett’s absurdism reveals the social order’s non-identity with its own claims to rationality. By depicting “the absurdity into which mere existence is transformed when
it is absorbed into naked self-identity,” *Endgame* “renders reality unreal with a vengeance” (246; 1997, 31). This artistic sublimation of social reality makes it possible – even imperative – to imagine alternative forms of social organization. Adorno concludes that “the immanent contradiction of the absurd, the nonsense in which reason terminates, opens up the emphatic possibility of something true that cannot even be conceived of anymore. It undermines the absolute claim of the status quo” (Adorno 1991b, 273). Beckett turns existing social reality against itself in *Endgame*, and Adorno interprets the play as a prime example of autonomous art.

Laughter is the aesthetic experience that Adorno associates with *Endgame*. Beckett’s “schizoid situations are comical,” Adorno writes, “but the laughter it arouses ought to suffocate the ones who laugh” (257). The claim that *Endgame* generates laughter that suffocates the subject recalls Adorno’s account of aesthetic experience as a “shock” that makes the subject non-identical to himself. The subject literally cannot survive the laughter generated by Beckett’s play because it calls into question his own social identification as a self-sufficient, world-constituting entity. The subject who laughs at the play undoes himself through his laughter. Such laughter sustains the critical tension between seriousness and lightheartedness that allows a more reconciled mode of social life to become imaginable: “The category of the tragic surrenders to laughter, just as his plays cut off all humor that accepts the status quo. They bear witness to a state of consciousness that no longer admits the alternative of seriousness and lightheartedness” (Adorno 1992, 252). Beckett’s work gives rise to a dark, self-reflexive laughter that undermines the subject and thus makes possible a fleeting moment of social reconciliation.

Adorno’s reflections on clowns and clowning provide perhaps the strongest indication of the importance he attributes to laughter as an aesthetic experience. Adorno explains that clown
performances recall an archaic rationality premised on close, affective, mimetic relations that is distinct from the distant, detached, instrumental rationality that predominates in modern society. By playfully imitating or parodying elements of the social order, clowns trouble the self-evidence of modern reason. Clowns embody an “anarchistic and archaic immediacy [that] cannot be adapted to the reified bourgeois life, and becomes ridiculous before it – fragmentary, but at the same time allowing it to appear ridiculous” (Adorno 2002a, 489). Clown performances exemplify the double character of art: by eschewing enlightenment rationality in favor of mimesis and parody, clowns strive for autonomy with respect to society, but by appearing in and interacting with elements of modern social life, they remain a social fact. In fact, Adorno believes that all art features a clownish quality. He identifies “that element of the ridiculous and clownish that even the most significant works bear and that, unconcealed, is inextricable from their significance” (Adorno 1997, 119). Adorno even suggests that philosophy itself obeys a logic of clowning. That is, philosophy imaginatively reconfigures, modifies, and at times subverts elements of existing social reality in order to envision a more reconciled mode of human life:

Philosophy contains a playful element which the traditional view of it as a science would like to exorcise. [...] The un-naïve thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied him. Philosophy is the most serious of things, but then again it is not all that serious. (Adorno 1973, 14)

Adorno understands the logic of clowning – obeyed by art and philosophy in general – as key to resisting the enlightenment rationality governing the modern social order.

It is likewise not surprising that Adorno admires his era’s most famous clown-like actor, Charlie Chaplin. In a short but masterful 1964 essay, “In Malibu,” Adorno recalls meeting
Chaplin at a California dinner party during his exile in the United States (Adorno 1996; Habermas 1983, 99). Adorno writes that Chaplin struck him as embodying two opposed tendencies. On the one hand, Chaplin views the world as mere material for parody, and his insatiable will to performance evokes the violence of modern reason. Chaplin’s powerful, explosive, and quick-witted agility recalls a predator ready to pounce. [...] There is something about the empirical Chaplin that suggests not that he is the victim but rather, menacingly, that he would seek victims, pounce on them, tear them apart. (Adorno 1996, 59–60)

On the other hand, Chaplin’s clown performances playfully subvert this violence by embodying a mimetic rationality whereby the subject becomes otherwise to himself. Adorno notes that “it is as though he, using mimetic behavior, caused purposeful, grown-up life to recede, and indeed the principle of reason itself, thereby placating it” (60). Adorno argues that Chaplin’s aesthetic genius consists in how he accommodates these two opposed impulses without resolving their antinomy. Chaplin is “a vegetarian Bengal tiger” who “projects upon the environment his own violence and dominating instinct, and through this projection of his own culpability produces that innocence which endows him with more power than all power possesses” (59–60). Rather than offering hollow entertainment or a detached polemical indictment of the social order, Chaplin’s performances turn the social order’s violent tendencies against themselves.

Adorno concludes by recalling how Chaplin parodied Adorno himself at the dinner party. At one point during the evening, Adorno absent-mindedly extended his hand to say goodbye to an actor who had lost his hand during the war. Upon grasping the actor’s iron prosthetic, Adorno was startled and “sensed immediately that I could not reveal my shock to the injured man at any

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9 Chaplin’s film *The Great Dictator* (which concludes with Chaplin pleading with the audience to resist authoritarianism) is the obvious exception here, and Adorno takes issue with this turn in Chaplin’s style (Adorno 1974, 81).
price. In a split second I transformed my frightened expression into an obliging grimace that must have been far ghastlier” (59). Chaplin, of course, witnessed the entire encounter, and before long he was mimicking Adorno’s reaction in front of the entire crowd, generating great laughter. The sight of one of Hollywood’s biggest stars parodying one of the world’s most melancholic philosophers – who just happened to be the film industry’s most virulent intellectual critic – was surely not to be missed!

By parodying Adorno, Chaplin reveals the philosopher – exactly the kind of figure who supposedly exemplifies life at its most serious, sober, and high-brow – to be just as ridiculous a character as anyone else. Adorno’s description of the laughter generated by Chaplin’s performance is crucial for understanding his conception of reconciled laughter. Adorno writes: “all the laughter he brings about is so near to cruelty; solely in such proximity to cruelty does it find its legitimation and its element of the salvational” (60–61). Chaplin gives rise to a “salvational” experience of laughter – an experience that undoes the subject and thus makes possible a fleeting moment of reconciliation – yet this salvational, reconciling power of laughter depends crucially on its “proximity” to its opposed tendency: cruelty. The subjects who laugh at Chaplin’s parody of Adorno are cruel towards Adorno and towards themselves, for they inhabit the same social order that Chaplin’s performance reveals to be ridiculous. Laughter resists the oppressive social order and offers a glimpse of reconciliation only when it embodies, sublimes, and displaces the cruelty of that order. Without this violent, “suffocating” element, laughter lacks the seriousness necessary to avoid lapsing into mere entertainment or consolation. As Adorno notes in *Aesthetic Theory*, “only by the strength of its deadliness do artworks participate in
reconciliation” (Adorno 1997, 134). For Adorno, laughter contributes to social reconciliation only when it bears the traces of the oppressive social order within itself.

To summarize: Adorno’s aesthetic philosophy reveals the possibility of theorizing laughter beyond the terms of the self-sufficient, enlightenment subject. The concept of reconciled laughter introduced in “The Culture Industry” is best understood as the aesthetic experience of laughter Adorno describes in his essays on lighthearted art, Beckett, and Chaplin. The dialectical tension between lightheartedness and seriousness in reconciled laughter undermines the myth of the constitutive subject at the root of prevailing practices of laughter and modern social power more generally. Reconciled laughter is not a feeling or affect because it calls into question the very subject in whom feelings and affects arise; it instead reflects a quasi-spiritual movement wherein the subject is made non-identical with himself. Reconciled laughter harbors no pretensions of achieving an absolute escape from social power, and its emancipatory capacity depends crucially on the extent to which it bears traces of the social order’s violence within itself.

VI. Adorno’s Critical Theory of Laughter

I conclude by bringing these various threads together and stating the chapter’s arguments in their full form. However, in keeping with the socially engaged nature of Adorno’s work, I will present my arguments through an examination of an episode of laughter from American popular culture, namely a scene from David Simon’s The Wire. This scene illustrates the multiple ways in which an Adorno-inspired approach is necessary for grasping the politics of laughter today.

In Season Five, Episode Six of the The Wire, Scott Templeton, a newspaper reporter with The Baltimore Sun, interviews a homeless veteran named Terry for a story about a suspected
serial killer targeting homeless men. Terry mentions that he developed PTSD while serving in Iraq, and Templeton asks him to describe what happened. After hesitating for a moment, Terry recounts the incident that “fucked me up good”:

We had a month left on the tour. We were working a mission outside Fallujah […]. We finished our sweep, headed back in, right? It was all good. Then bam. Our lead vehicle was hit with an elevated IED. The blast tore the M-50 gunner in half, flipped the Humvee like a matchbox car. Driver lost both his hands, blood shooting out all over. He’s fucking laughing, saying over and over, “Look ma, no hands.” [Pause] It’s the laughing I can’t shake. Weird, because he’s okay. He’s better than me. (*The Wire* 2008)

Terry’s chilling account brings us about as far as possible from typical discussions of the politics of laughter that focus on satiric television programs, political cartoons, or stand-up comedy acts. Yet this deeply disturbing, haunting laughter is perhaps one of the most politically significant events of laughter imaginable, as it originates in and constitutes an immediate response to an exercise of state violence. While the extent to which Terry’s story is inspired by real events remains unclear, numerous medical and journalistic accounts suggest that this story is at minimum quite plausible. For instance, the recent American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been associated with an unprecedented increase in cases of pseudobulbar affect syndrome, a condition wherein subjects suffering from traumatic brain injuries experience unexpected and inexplicable bouts of laughter and crying (Fonda et al. 2015). And in something of an inversion of Terry’s story, American soldiers have on multiple occasions acknowledged or been accused of laughing wildly during attacks on Iraqi and Afghani militants and civilians (McGreer 2010; Nadem and Haroon 2012; Quade 2010). Whether or not the story recounted in *The Wire* is itself based on true events, a theoretical study of the politics of laughter must be capable of elucidating the troubling relationship between laughter and contemporary state violence to which it alludes.
Adorno’s accounts of laughter help make sense of the laughter haunting Terry. Adorno

demonstrates that the politics of laughter are neither intrinsically oppressive nor intrinsically

emancipatory, but rather *complex* and *dialectical*. This is the chapter’s first argument. According
to Adorno, laughter that embodies and entrenches forms of social power (“wrong laughter”)
necessarily contains within itself possibilities for emancipation and reconciliation. If wrong

laughter did not make reference to this reconciling capacity, it would sacrifice its oppressive
efficacy as subjects would no longer believe that it provides an escape from power. Conversely,

laughter that actually resists social power and tends toward reconciliation (“reconciled laughter”)
always emerges out of and bears traces of social violence. If reconciled laughter were not

contaminated by serious life in this way, it would sacrifice its critical energy and risk becoming

an ideological support for the social order. Adorno shows that any given experience/event of

laughter is dialectically complex and contains its opposed political tendency within itself.

Terry “can’t shake” his fellow soldier’s laughter because this laughter is divided against

itself in the way Adorno describes. “What is infernal about wrong laughter,” Horkheimer and

Adorno write, “is that it compellingly parodies what is best, reconciliation” (Horkheimer and

Adorno 2002, 112). Terry experiences this “infernal” character of wrong laughter to perhaps the

greatest degree imaginable. Because the soldier’s laughter originates in a traumatic injury, it

parodies (perhaps even mocks) the pleasure, subversion, and freedom that the modern social

order typically associates with laughter. But whereas subjects of the culture industry generally do

not perceive the violence in which their laughter participates, in Terry’s story the contradictory

character of wrong laughter is laid bare to horrifying effect. Terry cannot stomach the

juxtaposition of the soldier’s gruesome injury with a reaction that appears to deny that reality.
Only an account of the politics of laughter as intensely dialectical – that is, as split and splitting against itself – can explain how laughter assumes such an uncanny, double-sided quality.

To be clear, however, Adorno is not advancing an ontology or philosophy of the politics of laughter as complex and dialectical. Laughter is not intrinsically split against itself; it only assumes this character within a contradictory social whole. Grasping how laughter functions politically likewise requires attending to the question of social order. This is the chapter’s second argument. The inadequacies of conventional subject-centric approaches to the politics of laughter become blindingly clear when brought to bear on Terry’s story. The liberal discourse cannot account for an experience/event of laughter that is seemingly devoid of truth content (logos) yet remains irreducible to a mere senseless frenzy (phōnē). Meanwhile, the Nietzschean counter-discourse’s conception of laughter as an exhilarating self-overcoming is, at least on its own, also unconvincing as the soldier appears utterly defeated in his laughter. Making sense of this laughter requires shifting our focus away from the soldier himself and toward his relationship to the social order as a whole. The soldier’s laughter reflects the tension between the values of individual strength, freedom, and happiness celebrated by the early twenty-first century neoliberal social order and the objective violence and bloodshed required to secure those values. The contradictory quality of this laughter embodies and expresses the political contradictions coursing through the broader social order. Determining how the soldier’s laughter entrenches or resists existing forms of power requires attending to its function within this order. Such an approach dispels the myth of laughter’s properly emancipatory or subversive character and allows us to grasp the complex, contradictory ways laughter functions politically today.
The chapter’s third and final argument concerns what we can *do* with Adorno’s numerous accounts of laughter. One possibility is to interpret Adorno as laying the groundwork for an ethical practice of “reconciled laughter” that can contribute to social reconciliation. This approach is consistent with the recent “ethical turn” in political studies of laughter described in the Introduction. Shea Coulson pursues this strategy and argues that Adorno’s work on the culture industry, aesthetics, Beckett, and Chaplin yields a “theory of critical laughter” (Coulson 2007, 142–43). Seeking to rescue Adorno from charges that he simply dislikes laughter, Coulson claims that Adorno only disapproves of uncritical practices of laughter (like those manufactured by the culture industry) and finds significant aesthetic and political value in the more critical, subject-undoing forms of laughter generated by Beckett and Chaplin: “Adorno’s apparent mirthlessness is actually disdain for an uncritical use of laughter that simply concretizes social repression. Laughter, for Adorno, should act violently against reified structures and unhinge the subject from reification” (143). According to Coulson, Adorno distinguishes between uncritical and critical laughter and endorses the latter as an “art of laughter” that subjects can employ to help achieve social reconciliation (Coulson 2007).

Closer attention to Adorno’s methodological commitments suggests an alternative interpretation of the upshot of his approach to laughter. Adorno is first and foremost a dialectician, and he consistently refuses – to his critics’ great consternation – to advance straightforward ontological or programmatic arguments (Benhabib 1986; Buck-Morss 1977; Habermas 1990; Honneth 2009). Indeed, *Minima Moralia, Negative Dialectics,* and *Aesthetic Theory* read less like treatises that advance “theories of” anything than they do densely layered critical engagements with concrete elements of modern social life. But if Adorno lacks an
argument about the kinds of laughter subjects should practice, then what is the point of his theoretical reflections on laughter? As discussed in the Introduction, Adorno insists that theory’s value consists in its autonomy from practical concerns (Adorno 2005b, 2005e; Marasco 2015, 109–113). Theory is autonomous in the same mediated sense that art is autonomous: it transcends social reality not by offering recommendations for practice but by assimilating itself to that reality to such an extreme degree that it displaces and transforms the very terms of practice (Adorno 2005b, 276). Adorno writes that “thinking becomes aware of what within the matter extends beyond what was previously thought and thereby breaks open the fixed purview of the subject matter” (Adorno 2005d, 131). By avoiding the trap of either uncritically accepting or pretending to escape the terms of social life, negative dialectics bears witness to the non-identical and contributes to reconciliation more effectively than texts that take utopia as their explicit subject matter or objective (Adorno 2005b, 277–78; 2005f, 292–93). For Adorno, only ostensibly “disengaged” theory achieves the autonomy necessary to actually challenge social and political practice.

I likewise do not interpret Adorno as advancing a “theory of critical laughter” along the lines suggested by Coulson. Rather, I argue that Adorno’s texts on the culture industry, aesthetics,
Beckett, and Chaplin model a critical theory of laughter. A critical theory of laughter engages laughter as a constitutively complex, double-sided experience/event that emerges within and exerts political effects on the level of the social order as a whole. Following Adorno’s dictum that “we are not to philosophize above concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, out of these things” (Adorno 1973, 33), such a critical theory does not promote a particular type of laughter (e.g., “critical laughter”) for its salutary political effects but rather delves into concrete experiences/events of laughter, bearing witness to the non-identical within each of them by searching for their previously unrecognized oppressive tendencies and emancipatory potentialities. On the one hand, a critical theory of laughter identifies and warns against the violent tendencies of seemingly emancipatory (“reconciled”) experiences/events of laughter. For example, it demonstrates how laughter generated by satiric television programs like The Daily Show or Saturday Night Live, while often resisting and undermining social power in productive ways, always risks becoming a detached, polemical laughter that re-inscribes social violence (i.e., it always risks succumbing to the dialectic of liberal laughter). On the other hand, a critical theory of laughter identifies and seeks to cultivate the possibilities for social reconciliation incipient in seemingly oppressive (“wrong”) experiences/events of laughter. For example, it shows how the audience that laughs at Donald Trump’s sexist remarks imagines itself as transgressing the rules of “political correctness” and likewise embodies a revolutionary political energy that has been redirected toward reactionary ends. An Adorno-inspired critical theory attends to laughter’s dialectical complexity in order to discern its political risks and possibilities.

How would a critical theory of laughter along the lines modeled by Adorno interpret the soldier’s laughter in The Wire? Attending to the contradictions embodied in and expressed by this
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laughter generates a richer understanding of and sensitivity to its political dangers and potentialities. On the one hand, the stunning disregard the soldier apparently displays toward his own injury can function to entrench the violence of the social order. A spectator might view his laughter in terms consistent with contemporary conceptions of warfare as a mere video game wherein all injuries are temporary, reparable, and in service of entertainment. On the other hand, this laughter’s radically contradictory quality can also spark changes in how its audience thinks and acts politically. The utter absurdity of a world in which a young man laughs when his hands are blown off can trigger changes in attitudes and comportments toward war and the social order’s other practices of violence. These two options are not mutually exclusive. As Adorno notes, the distinction between violence and reconciliation is porous and unstable (Adorno 1996, 60–61; Adorno 1997, 134), and one gets the distinct sense that the soldier’s laughter generates contradictory political impulses even within Terry himself. A critical theory of laughter intervenes in and transforms the social order not by promoting particular practices of laughter but by making the political dangers and possibilities posed by laughter thinkable and urgent.

Adorno’s claim that an aesthetic experience of laughter is intrinsic to philosophical activity itself (Adorno 1973, 14; Adorno 2005a, 262) suggests that a critical theory of laughter does more than simply take laughter as its object of study. It is also a critical theory of laughter in a second sense: it generates its own laughter. By dwelling in laughter’s dialectical complexity, a critical theory of laughter challenges the subject to become otherwise such that he or she can laugh at these practices of laughter as things that have been overcome. The laughter generated by such a critical theory is not a detached, polemical, liberal laughter but rather the self-suffocating, spiritual movement of aesthetic experience. It is thus closely akin to Nietzschean laughter.

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wherein *logos* overcomes and transforms itself, but it assumes a decidedly less celebratory and more dialectical tone as it emerges within and responds to the “systematized horror” of the modern social order. The enormity and significance of this task is evinced by experiences/events of laughter like the one recounted by Terry in *The Wire*. What kind of social and political transformations must occur for subjects to become capable of laughing at the soldier’s laughter as something that has been overcome? By aiming to produce an experience/event of laughter that intervenes in, displaces, and transforms social reality, an Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter makes possible, however obliquely and fleetingly, a more reconciled mode of social life.
CHAPTER TWO

THE LAUGHING BODY POLITIC:
The Counter/sovereign Politics of Hobbes’s Theory of Laughter

In despite [sic] of that philosopher who, being a real Englishman, tried to bring laughter into ill-repute among all thinking men […] I should actually risk an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter – all the way to those capable of golden laughter. (Nietzsche 1989, 231–32)

In sum, no society, no union in life, could be either pleasant or lasting without me. A people does not for long tolerate its prince […] except as they mutually or by turns are mistaken, on occasion flatter, on occasion wisely wink, and otherwise soothe themselves with the sweetness of folly. (Erasmus 2015, 28)

Let us laugh together, on principle. (Connolly 2002a, 120)

On a mild October afternoon in 2010, 215,000 people gathered on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (Montopoli 2010). Unlike previous mass gatherings on the Mall, those assembled were not celebrating a presidential inauguration, protesting the federal government, or demanding civil rights; they were instead enjoying a comedy show. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” entertained the crowd by satirizing the Great Recession and Tea Party-era American political culture of polarization and fear-mongering.

While Stewart sought to downplay the rally’s political significance by insisting that he aimed simply to put on a good show (Adams and Batty 2010), the signs constructed by the attendees betrayed the event’s unmistakable political character. For example, an older veteran held a sign that read, “I fought Nazis, and they don’t look like Obama,” while a young Muslim woman’s sign pled, “Please don’t call me terrorist,” and a man in a cowboy hat held a sign announcing, “I hate taxes, but I like: Roads, firemen, some cops, traffic lights, National Parks” (Funny or Die 2010). Why did a comedy concert become the site of such intense political energy and mobilization? What is it about laughing together that is so politically salient and efficacious?

The present chapter turns to Thomas Hobbes, a canonical philosopher of both politics and laughter, to explore these questions. Following the approach outlined in the Introduction and
Chapter One, I interpret Hobbes’s theory of laughter as a site of non-identity – in particular, a site of non-identity within his political philosophy. The contradictions, ambiguities, and transformations marking Hobbes’s various accounts of laughter critically illuminate and are in turn critically illuminated by similar tensions and possibilities for becoming-otherwise in his political thought. Reading Hobbes’s theory of laughter alongside his political philosophy in this way demonstrates how Hobbes – the philosophical champion of sovereign power – provides the resources for theorizing the origins and possibilities of counter-sovereignty, or the disruptive and potentially democratic upheaval of entrenched economies of power. More specifically, it reveals the complex dialectic between sovereignty and counter-sovereignty that is at work in both laughter and political activity more generally. Hobbes’s theory of laughter, as I will show, likewise constitutes one of the most politically fraught and generative dimensions of his oeuvre.

Hobbes has traditionally been interpreted as offering a “superiority theory” of laughter (Morreall 1983; Critchley 2002). According to this theory, laughter originates in a feeling of “sudden glory” over someone or something else (Hobbes 1994c, 46; 2012, 88). However, several scholars note Hobbes’s insistence that the expression of individual superiority involved in laughter is actually vainglory, or a sign of individual weakness (Heyd 1982; Skinner 1996, 2002c). Taking this insight as my starting point, I advance three arguments about Hobbes and the politics of laughter. First, I argue that Hobbes objects to laughter as a counter-sovereign political enactment. As an expression of superiority that immediately undermines itself, laughter disrupts and confuses the economies of power responsible for maintaining social peace. Second, I contend that this counter-sovereign logic of laughter reappears where we least expect it to in Hobbes: in the social contract establishing a body politic. The Hobbesian body politic is a
laughing body politic in its sudden, vainglorious authorization of sovereign power. This concept of a laughing body politic shows how the establishment of sovereignty always proceeds by way of a counter-sovereign political enactment. Finally, I argue that the notion of a laughing body politic can in turn be deployed to shed light on how episodes of collective laughter like the 2010 Stewart/Colbert rally constitute experiences of “fugitive democracy” (Wolin 1994). Collective laughter generates a fugitive demos by advancing a claim to sovereign power that is lost in its own transgressive expression. Collective laughter at once claims and resists sovereign power, and its democratic efficacy consists in this exercise of what I call counter/sovereignty.

The chapter proceeds in four sections. Section I offers an exegesis of the various iterations of Hobbes’s theory of laughter, paying close attention to how the politics of this theory changes over time. Section II features a critical analysis of Hobbes’s objections to laughter as vainglorious. By focusing on his neglected treatment of laughter in De Cive and the kind of authority Hobbes claims for himself in his texts, I contend that Hobbes levels a primarily political (rather than moral) critique of laughter. Section III stages an encounter between Hobbes’s theory of laughter and his political philosophy in order to reconsider the privilege typically afforded to sovereignty in the latter. I conclude in Section IV with an examination of several recent episodes of collective laughter that demonstrate how the notion of a “laughing body politic” elucidates the democratic politics of collective laughter today.

By arguing for the presence of a counter-sovereign politics at the heart of Hobbes’s political philosophy, I depart from commentators who emphasize the proto-liberal (MacPherson 1964; Wolin 2004), anti-democratic and anti-republican (Hoekstra 2006; Skinner 2008), positivist (Strauss 1984), or rational choice (Gauthier 1969; Kavka 1986) dimensions of his thought. I instead align myself with scholars who attend to how Hobbes provides resources for theorizing resistance to sovereignty (Craig 2015; Martel 2007; Sreedhar 2010).
I. The Politics of Hobbes’s Theory of Laughter

I will begin by examining Hobbes’s accounts of laughter in *The Elements of Law* (1640), *Leviathan* (1651), and *De Homine* (1658). I do this not simply to introduce what Hobbes has to say about laughter, but rather to highlight how the ambiguities, contradictions, and transformations marking Hobbes’s theory are essential for grasping his critique of laughter (Section II) as well as my own arguments about the politics of this theory and of laughter more generally (Sections III–IV).

Hobbes’s first discussion of laughter comes in Chapter IX of *The Elements of Law*, and it showcases many of the tensions that characterize later iterations of his theory. Hobbes describes laughter as the bodily sign of a nameless passion: “There is a passion that hath no name; but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance we call laughter” (Hobbes 1994c, 45). This distinction between laughter and the passions does not last long, however, as Hobbes identifies “the passion of laughter” three times on the very next page (46). Here Hobbes provides the first formulation of his so-called “superiority theory”: “the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (46).

The concept of “glory” constitutes the linchpin of Hobbes’s early theory of the passions. Glory is the first passion that Hobbes identifies in *The Elements of Law*, and all the other passions (including laughter) derive from glory in one way or another. Hobbes defines glory as “the passion which proceedeth from the imagination or conception of our own power above the power of him that contendeth with us” (40). An individual “glories” when she imagines that she
possesses more power than someone else. *Power*, Hobbes explains, is the capacity to produce something in the future, and it is measured in relational terms (37). He writes:

*Power* simply is no more, but the *excess* of the power of one above that of another. […] The *signs* by which we know our own *power*, are those *actions* which proceed from the same; and the *signs* by which *other men* know it, are such *actions*, *gesture*, *countenance* and *speech*, as usually such powers produce. (38)

My power is only the power I have in excess of your power, but this same power might be no power at all when compared to that of a third person. Power is identified by its signs, which include certain patterns of acting, gesturing, and speaking. In *The Elements of Law* Hobbes understands the passions in terms of a complex economy of power relations that individuals decipher by way of conventional signs.

As the passion of sudden glory (or as Hobbes’s initial formulation suggests, the sign of a nameless passion), laughter participates in this economy of power relations. An individual who laughs feels a sudden excess of power with respect to someone else (or herself formerly). One never laughs in a vacuum: laughter is immediately bound up with political relations that envelop and exceed the individual. As one of the “countenances” that signifies an excess of power, laughter also constitutes a move within these relations. When an individual laughs, the economy of power undergoes a change as spectators learn that the laughing individual feels more powerful than she did previously. Because laughter occurs within, makes reference to, and modifies a larger economy of power relations, laughter is a political passion (or sign of a passion). Hobbes, in brief, advances a *political* theory of laughter in *The Elements of Law*.

Hobbes returns to laughter in Chapter VI of *Leviathan* where he describes it as a bodily motion accompanying the passion of sudden glory:
Sudden Glory, is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. (Hobbes 2012, 88)

One year earlier Hobbes had advanced a similar formulation in a fragment titled “Of Passions”: “sudden imagination of a mans owne abilitie, is the passion that moves laughter” (Skinner 2002c, 148). Hobbes in this period clearly prefers the thesis that laughter only signifies the passion of sudden glory, and he makes no mention of the “passion of laughter” in Leviathan. However, Hobbes refuses to completely disentangle laughter from his analysis of the passions. Laughter appears as an entry in Chapter VI’s long inventory of the passions, and Hobbes employs capitalized typeface for laughter just like he does for the other passions (Hobbes 2012, 88). The question of laughter’s status as a passion or sign of a passion remains unresolved in Leviathan.

Leviathan also features important changes in the two central concepts of Hobbes’s theory of laughter: glory and power. Whereas in The Elements of Law all the passions derive from glory, in Leviathan glory is a species of the passion of joy (88). Hobbes no longer understands the passions as radically dependent on how an individual locates himself in a broader economy of power relations. His conception of power reflects this change. In The Elements Hobbes describes power as analytically prior to glory and the passions, while in Leviathan power follows his analysis of the passions and is conceived of in narrower, more instrumental terms: “The POWER of a Man, (to take it Universally), is his present means, to obtain some future apparent Good” (132). The emphasis on glory as joyful and power as instrumental removes laughter from the economy of power relations that was its natural environment in The Elements of Law. Rather than expressing superiority in relation to others, laughter in Leviathan expresses more a private
feeling of being able to act upon other people and things. The version of Hobbes’s theory of laughter found in *Leviathan* thus functions to deflate laughter’s political significance.

Hobbes analyzes laughter once more in Chapter XII of *De Homine*. This iteration of his theory features major and decisive changes. Here Hobbes understands laughter exclusively in terms of an individual’s self-image: “when the animal spirits are suddenly transported by the joy arising from any word, deed, or thought of one’s own that is seemly, or of a stranger that is unseemly, this passion is laughter” (Hobbes 1991, 59). In a departure from earlier texts, Hobbes is unequivocal that laughter is a passion. He also doubles down on the argument introduced in *Leviathan* that laughter derives originally from joy rather than glory (58–59). This decoupling of laughter and glory necessarily dissociates laughter from discussions of power. Power plays only a minor role in the preceding chapter on the appetites and aversions, and the treatment of the passions in *De Homine* makes no mention of power (49). The universe in which laughter arises and exerts effects shrinks dramatically in *De Homine*. No longer a sign or instance of glory within an economy of power relations, laughter instead constitutes a simple joy associated with an individual’s self-image. Hobbes concludes: “Universally the passion of laughter is sudden self-commendation resulting from a stranger’s unseemliness” (59).

The modifications that Hobbes makes to his theory of laughter between *The Elements of Law* and *De Homine* function to dissociate laughter from politics. We see this most clearly in Hobbes’s detachment of laughter from the political themes of power and glory. Laughter in *De Homine* concerns only an individual’s self-image rather than changes within a broader economy of power. But perhaps even more important is how laughter achieves unquestioned status as a passion in *De Homine*. Passions, according to Hobbes, belong to natural philosophy, or the study
of the motions of natural bodies. Signs or manifestations of passions, meanwhile, reflect events that usually, but not always, follow these natural motions (Hobbes 2012, 44; 1994c, 17–18). For example, while “Sudden Glory, is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called Laughter” (Hobbes 2012, 88), laughter need not accompany all sudden glory. Laughter necessarily implies sudden glory, but sudden glory does not necessarily imply laughter (Ewin 2001, 38–39). This distinction between passions and their signs mirrors the natural/artificial dualism at the heart of Hobbes’s philosophical project as a whole (Hobbes 2012, 16; 1994a, 11–12; 1991, 35). Hobbes argues that man becomes a political animal when he creates or submits to an artificial body capable of compelling the actions of his natural body. “Politics” enters the picture only in the fraught interplay between man’s natural and artificial bodies – i.e., at the intersection of what is necessary and possible in man. The uncertain status of laughter as a passion in The Elements of Law and Leviathan likewise invests it with political significance. Neither a simply natural nor simply arbitrary reaction to sudden glory, laughter requires an individual to negotiate the conflicting demands of a dual natural/artificial – that is, political – existence. De Homine’s description of laughter as a passion dissolves this political question into a straightforward theory of man’s natural motions. For this reason (along with the dissociation of laughter from power and glory), De Homine contains no political theory of laughter.

As is well known, Hobbes divides his philosophical system into three parts: the philosophy of natural bodies, the philosophy of man, and civil philosophy (Hobbes 1991, 102–103; 1994a, 11–12; Sorrell 1996; Tuck 1996). Hobbes’s philosophical trilogy (De Corpore, De Homine, De Cive) reflects this organizational schema. Although the passions clearly belong to the philosophy of man, Hobbes describes them as man’s natural motions. In De Corpore and the “Epistle Dedicatory” to De Homine Hobbes proposes studying man as a natural body in terms of physics (Hobbes 1994a, 72–73; 1991, 35), and in Leviathan he classifies the passions as part of natural philosophy (Hobbes 2012, 130–31; Strong 1993, 140). While Hobbes’s philosophy of man occupies a somewhat ambiguous position between his more cleanly delineated natural and civil philosophies, the narrow issue of man’s passions (versus the broader subject of his morality) belongs to natural philosophy.
While the basic thrust of Hobbes’s “superiority theory” of laughter remains more or less the same from *The Elements of Law* to *De Homine*, the politics of this theory shifts markedly. Depending on how Hobbes treats and arranges the concepts of the passions, glory, and power, laughter either intervenes in and modifies a complex economy of power relations (as in *The Elements of Law*) or is liquidated as a political issue altogether (as in *De Homine*). The ambiguities, contradictions, and transformations that mark the various iterations of Hobbes’s theory reveal not only a shifting conception of laughter’s relationship to politics, but perhaps also a shifting view of the role that laughter ought to play in political life. The next section examines this second issue more closely.

**II. Hobbes’s Political Critique of Laughter**

As others have suggested (Heyd 1982; Skinner 1996, 2002c), the conventional wisdom that Hobbes advances a “superiority theory” of laughter suffers from a fatal flaw: Hobbes repeatedly insists that individuals should avoid laughter because it betrays vainglory, or a lack of power. In this section I examine why Hobbes objects to laughter as vainglorious. I then explore Hobbes’s neglected discussions of laughter in *De Cive* in light of scholarship investigating his account of the laws of nature and the kind of authority that Hobbes claims for himself in his texts. I argue that Hobbes urges individuals to avoid laughter because expressions of sudden vainglory disrupt and undermine the sovereign interest in social peace.

Hobbes concludes his entry on laughter in *The Elements of Law* by condemning laughter as vainglorious. While glory is the triumph of the mind proceeding from a conception of power, vainglory proceeds from a false or merely imagined conception of power: “Further, the fiction, which is also imagination, of actions done by ourselves, which never were done, is gloriyng; but
because it begetteth no appetite nor endeavour to any further attempt, it is merely vain and unprofitable’ (Hobbes 1994c, 41). Laughter is vainglorious because it makes reference only to another’s inferiority rather than to one’s own power, and it likewise gives rise to no deed beyond itself. Laughter, Hobbes contends, is “an affection of glory from other men’s infirmities, and not from any ability of their own” (52). “It is vain glory, and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmity of another, sufficient matter for his triumph,” he writes (47). Hobbes repeats this criticism of laughter in *Leviathan* (Hobbes 2012, 88), *De Homine* (Hobbes 1991, 59), and two other minor accounts of laughter, a 1638 letter to Charles Cavendish (Hobbes 1983, 52) and “The Answer to Sir William Davenant’s Preface before Gondibert” (Hobbes 1994d). In the latter piece he emphasizes the absence of laughter in the lives of truly powerful individuals:

> Great persons, that have their minds employed on great designs, have not leisure enough to laugh, and are pleased with the contemplation of their own power and virtues, so as they need not the infirmities and vices of other men to recommend themselves to their own favour by comparison, as all men do when they laugh. (454–55)

> Why does laughter’s vainglorious quality pose such a problem from Hobbes’s perspective? Several commentators point to occasions where Hobbes condemns laughter as not befitting a virtuous individual (e.g., his argument in *De Homine* that “those who laugh the most are those who collect the fewest arguments for their virtue from their own praiseworthy deeds” (Hobbes 1991, 59)) to claim that Hobbes objects to laughter on moral grounds. For example, R.E. Ewin contends that Hobbes views laughter as morally suspect because an individual could instead sympathize with or pity a perceived inferior:

> That nameless passion is but one possible reaction to the perceived calamity of another. Even when the other has been attempting to dishonour one, it is possible (and, on Hobbes’s account, desirable) to ignore it; a great mind will pay no attention to, not glory in its superiority, and compare itself only with other great minds. (Ewin 2001, 40)
Meanwhile, Quentin Skinner argues that Hobbes believes laughter detracts from the development of a stronger moral personality. He writes that “Hobbes is clearly in earnest in counseling us to avoid derisive laughter whenever possible” because “gifted people have in addition a positive moral duty to help others to cultivate similar feelings of magnanimity and respect” (Skinner 2002c, 175–76). In what follows I turn to Hobbes’s neglected discussions of laughter in De Cive to argue that his objection to laughter on apparently moral grounds is actually rooted in a more fundamental political interest in maintaining social peace.

To my knowledge, there exist seven texts in which Hobbes examines laughter at any length. The first six are the sources discussed or cited thus far: (1) The Elements of Law, (2) Leviathan, (3) De Homine, (4) the “Answer to Devanant,” (5) the fragment “Of Passions,” and (6) the 1638 letter to Charles Cavendish. Given such a small archive, it is difficult to explain how virtually every commentator on Hobbes’s theory of laughter has overlooked his rich analyses of laughter in De Cive, the treatise on political philosophy second only in importance to Leviathan. If Hobbes had discussed laughter exclusively in his philosophy of man, then the argument that he offers a primarily moral critique of laughter might be more compelling. But De Cive carries what was already a politically charged theory squarely onto the terrain of political philosophy.

Hobbes opens De Cive by considering the Aristotelian thesis that man is “born fit for society” (Hobbes 1991, 110). Against Aristotle, Hobbes argues that man seeks only the benefits from life in society, which take the form of profits from business and honor from interactions

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with others (111). After noting that the profit motive alone cannot sustain society, Hobbes turns to the issue of honor. He explains that individuals congregate in order to inflate their reputations by feigning glory to one another. Laughter plays an important role in these interactions:

> if [men meet] for pleasure and recreation of mind, every man is wont to please himself most with those things which stir up laughter, whence he may, according to the nature of that which is ridiculous, by comparison of another man’s defects and infirmities, pass the more current in his own opinion. And although this be sometimes innocent and without offense, yet it is manifest they are not so much delighted with the society, as their own vain glory. (111)

Laughter constitutes a public display of vainglory that generates the “greatest discords” among individuals (114). When John laughs at Susan, Susan must find a reason to laugh at Peter in order to protect her honor in the eyes of John. Peter must then do the same to a fourth person, and so on: “men must declare sometimes some mutual scorn and contempt, either by laughter, or by words, or by gesture, or some sign or other” (115). These interactions produce a dangerous atmosphere of fear and antagonism, leading Hobbes to conclude that “no society can be great or lasting, which begins from vain glory” (113).

The story that follows is familiar to readers of Hobbes. Awash in public displays of vainglory and lacking a natural fitness for society, individuals muddle along in a miserable and dangerous condition of fear (118). The “fundamental law of nature” discoverable by reason instructs man to exit this state of nature and seek peace to the extent possible (123). This Law serves as the foundation for a host of subsidiary laws that instruct individuals to covenant with one another and avoid antagonistic conduct. While Hobbes’s accounts of the laws of nature in *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan* proscribe vainglory and countenances that provoke antagonism (Hobbes 1994b, 101; 2012, 234), he specifically identifies laughter in *De Cive’s*
seventh law of nature: “no man, either by deeds or words, countenance or laughter, do declare himself to hate or scorn another” (Hobbes 1991, 142–43). According to Hobbes, laughter violates the Law of Nature because it undermines the conditions of social peace.

On what grounds, exactly, does Hobbes understand the laws of nature as obligating individuals? This is an old and complex debate in Hobbes scholarship. On the one hand, Hobbes describes the laws of nature as simple maxims of prudential reason designed to help an individual preserve his life: “A LAW OF NATURE, (Lex Naturalis,) is a Precept, or generall Rule, found out by Reason, by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same” (Hobbes 2012, 198; see also 1991, 123). The fundamental Law of Nature instructs man to seek peace because reason dictates that peace is necessary for self-preservation. De Cive’s seventh law of nature likewise forbids laughter because laughter increases the risk of life-threatening social discord.

But Hobbes also describes the laws of nature as functioning in an additional way, namely, as moral obligations. “The laws of nature,” Hobbes writes, “are the sum of moral philosophy” (Hobbes 1991, 152; see also 2012, 242). It is thus not only prudent to seek peace (and avoid laughter); it is morally right to do so. As Michael Oakeshott notes, a subtle “change of idiom” marks the trajectory of Hobbes’s arguments around the laws of nature: “The conditions of peace, first offered to us as rational theorems concerning the nature of shameful-death-avoiding conduct (that is, as a piece of prudential wisdom), now appear as moral obligation” (Oakeshott 1991, 309). Importantly, however, the laws of nature only morally obligate endeavors in the state of nature. Blindly conforming one’s actions to these laws in the absence of an enforcement mechanism that compels universal obedience might inadvertently increase the danger posed to
one’s life. Hobbes explains: “The Lawes of Nature oblige in foro interno; that is to say, they bind
to a desire they should take place: but in foro externo; that is, to the putting them in act, not
alwayes” (Hobbes 2012, 240; see also 1991, 149). Hobbes concludes that it is just for an
individual to endeavor to obey the laws of nature: “He that endeavoureth their performance,
fulfilleth them; and he that fulfilleth the Law, is Just” (Hobbes 2012, 240; see also 1991, 150).

Why do reason’s prudential maxims take the form of moral obligations? That is, why is
something that reason dictates one should do necessarily also something that one ought to do?
The answer to this question resides in the essential distinction between “appetites and aversions”
and “reason” that Hobbes draws in response to the challenge posed by moral skepticism.
According to Hobbes, the values “good” and “evil” typically signify nothing more than
idiosyncratic appetites and aversions – i.e., what individuals are attracted toward or repelled by
establishment of a rigorous moral philosophy is impossible when we confine ourselves to the
level of appetites and aversions. Because no one shares the same sense perceptions, “scarce two
men” can agree “what is to be called good, and what evil” (Hobbes 1994c, 26; see also 2012,
196; 1991, 47). Hobbes elaborates:

Every man, for his own part, calleth that which pleaseth, and is delightful to himself,
good; and that evil which displeaseth him: insomuch that while every man differeth from
another in constitution, they differ also from one another concerning the common
distinction of good and evil. (Hobbes 1994c, 32; see also Tuck 1989; 1996; Skinner
2002b; Flathman 2002)

Hobbes resolves the skeptical challenge by turning to the faculty of reason. Whereas appetites
and aversions refer to hopelessly idiosyncratic immediate evaluations, reason involves a
“reckoning” of future consequences that admits no such disagreement (Hobbes 2012, 64). A
crucial passage in *De Cive* explains why the value of social peace advanced by the Law of Nature is a moral good due to its origin in a rational reckoning about the future. I have italicized the key lines of this argument:

> They are, therefore, so long in the state of war, as by reason of the diversity of the present appetites, they mete good and evil by diverse measures. All men easily acknowledge this state, as long as they are in it, to be evil, and by consequence that peace is good. *They therefore who could not agree concerning a present, do agree concerning a future good; which indeed is a work of reason; for things present are obvious to the sense, things to come to our reason only.* Reason, declaring peace to be good, it follows by the same reason, that all the necessary means to peace be good also; and therefore that modesty, equity, trust, humanity, mercy (which we have demonstrated to be necessary to peace), are good manners or habits, that is, virtues. The law therefore, in the means to peace, commands also good manners, or the practice of virtue; and therefore it is called *moral.* (Hobbes 1991, 150–51; see also 2012, 242)

Because future-oriented reason (and not mere appetite or aversion) dictates that peace is good, the Hobbesian laws of nature escape the moral skepticism plaguing other values. Peace becomes the index of true moral virtue, and an individual in the state of nature consequently has a moral obligation to endeavor to seek peace and, as a means to this end, avoid laughter.

Hobbes’s argument that the laws of nature constitute moral obligations due to their foundation in reason raises a whole new set of questions, however. I will focus on two issues in particular. First, there is no guarantee that the organic rational consensus concerning the value of peace that Hobbes envisions could ever actually come to pass. In fact, Hobbes’s own reflections on the “right” use of reason suggest that disagreement about this value is more likely:

> As in Arithmetique, unpractised men must, and Professors themselves may often erre, and cast up false; so also in any other subject of Reasoning, the ablest, most attentive, and most practised men, may deceive themselves, and inferre false Conclusions; Not but that Reason it selfe is always Right Reason, as well as Arithmetique is a certain and infallible Art. (Hobbes 2012, 66)
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The mere possession of reason, in other words, does not ensure its “right” use. But even if individuals were to agree that reason dictates that peace is “good,” a second problem remains: there is no consensus on the meaning of peace. Skinner explains that every individual possesses their own understanding of what “peace” requires in practice: “the contention that a given action will in fact conduce to peace remains a judgement. Who, then, shall be judge?” (Skinner 2002b, 138; see also Tuck 1996, 189). Because an idiosyncratic determination about the meaning of peace cannot generate a moral obligation, individuals remain without a standard for knowing when their endeavors violate the Law of Nature.

Hobbes turns to politics for a solution to both of these problems. The capacity of the laws of nature to morally obligate individuals rests on the presence of a sovereign authority. First, a sovereign determines what constitutes the “right” use of reason. Hobbes writes: “Therfore, as when there is a controversy in an account, the parties must by their own accord, set up for right Reason, the Reason of some Arbitrator, or Judge, to whose sentence they will both stand” (Hobbes 2012, 66). If all individuals agree that social peace is good, it is because a sovereign authority has decided that this is what reason dictates. Second, a sovereign determines what “peace” means and requires in practice:

It is annexed to the Soveraignty, to be Judge of what Opinions and Doctrines are averse, and what conducing to Peace […]. It belongeth therefore to him that hath the Soveraign Power, to be Judge […] as a thing necessary to Peace; thereby to prevent Discord and Civill Warre. (272)

Hobbes makes this point even more clearly in a later passage in *Leviathan*. He argues that the laws of nature require the decisions of a sovereign in order to be effective as moral obligations:

For it is the Soveraign Power that obliges men to obey [the laws of nature]. For in the difference of private men, to declare, what is Equity, what is Justice, and what is morall
Vertue, and to make [the laws of nature] binding, there is need of the Ordinances of Soveraign Power.\(^4\) (418)

By determining (a) that reason dictates that social peace is “good” and (b) that “peace” means and requires what the laws of nature stipulate, a sovereign secures the status of these laws as morally obligatory.\(^5\) But if all of this is true and the laws of nature constitute \textit{in foro interno} moral obligations only in the presence of a sovereign power, then they presuppose precisely what has not yet occurred: an exit from the state of nature via the establishment of a sovereign power. The obvious question at this point is: \textit{who} is the sovereign that makes Hobbes’s laws of nature morally obligatory?

Several scholars have explored the complex issue of the kind of authority that Hobbes claims for himself in his texts (Kahn 1985; Martel 2007; Strong 1993). James Martel poses the question in the following terms: if, as Hobbes insists, all authority originates in a sovereign, by what authority does Hobbes write about sovereignty? “Hobbes seems to be appropriating the sovereign ‘last word’ even while appearing to defer to that sovereign authority. He seems to be surrendering to something that he is in the process of creating or authoring” (Martel 2007, 45). Following Martel on this point, I argue that Hobbes \textit{performs} the office of sovereign in his accounts of the laws of nature. That is, beyond merely \textit{describing} the origin of sovereignty, Hobbes himself exercises the sovereign responsibility of defining the requirements of social peace. The laws of nature are moral obligations because Hobbes, as sovereign, says so. Hobbes

\(^4\) While Hobbes in this quotation is almost certainly describing how the laws of nature require a sovereign in order to obligate \textit{in foro externo} (i.e., in action), the same logic also applies to \textit{in foro interno} obligations (i.e., to endeavors). The laws of nature cannot impose meaningful moral obligations on individuals in the absence of a sovereign power who fixes the meaning and requirements of social peace.

\(^5\) The Hobbesian sovereign is quite simply \textit{he who defines}. Because disagreements over meaning are at the root of social conflict, from Hobbes’s perspective, \textit{defining} the rational basis for and meaning of peace is the same thing as actually \textit{achieving} peace.
conceals this sovereign operation with his questionable assertions that the right reason of all declares social peace to be good and that “peace” requires the precise list of do’s and don’t’s that he offers (Hobbes 1991, 150–51; 2012, 242). But as we have already seen, peace constitutes an undisputed moral value only from the perspective of sovereignty (i.e., from the perspective of an authority whose raison d’être is the cessation of moral disagreement), and the practical requirements of peace always involve a sovereign decision. In his accounts of the laws of nature Hobbes performs the image of sovereignty he seeks to bestow to the political and philosophical tradition.

Whether or not Hobbes’s textual performance of sovereignty is intentional (perhaps he seeks to illustrate the task facing prospective political sovereigns), it is clear that we cannot interpret the laws of nature (including his proscription against laughter) as a simple inventory of natural reason’s dictates. These moral laws are grounded in a more fundamental political interest in social peace and political decision about what peace requires; they are grounded, in other words, in a performance of sovereignty. Hobbesian moral philosophy is, in other words, a function of Hobbesian politics.  

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6 This position distinguishes my approach from several prominent interpretations of Hobbes’s laws of nature. A first group understands the laws of nature as forming a self-sufficient theory of moral obligation (Boonin-Vail 1994; Taylor 1938; Warrender 1961). These accounts neglect how the laws of nature serve a primarily political function in Hobbes. They “onely concern the doctrine of Civill Society” and avoid more general ethical issues (Hobbes 2012, 238). In my view, Hobbes is a moral theorist only insofar as he is a political theorist. A second group acknowledges the links between Hobbes’s moral and political philosophy but interprets Hobbes’s moral views as enjoying analytic priority (in one way or another) over the arguments made in his political philosophy (Connolly 1993; Martinich 2005; Sorrell 2007; Strauss 1984). My approach reverses this order of priority and emphasizes how Hobbes’s political investments determine the contours of his moral philosophy. Oakeshott’s argument that the laws of nature constitute moral obligations only by virtue of a sovereign command comes closest to my approach. He writes: “the sole cause of moral obligation is the will of this Sovereign authority; the only sort of action to which the term moral obligation is applicable is obedience to the commands of an authority authorized by the voluntary act of him who is bound. […] Natural law is morally binding, but it consists of those theorems of reasoning that have been commanded by the Sovereign; until the Sovereign has willed them, they are not laws and therefore create no moral obligation” (Oakeshott 1965, lx–lxi). While Oakeshott correctly identifies the priority of the political over the moral, he neglects how the laws of nature owe their moral bindingness to Hobbes’s textual performance of sovereignty.
De Cive’s discussions of laughter reveal that Hobbes objects to laughter on primarily political rather than moral grounds. If laughter is unbecoming of the virtuous, moral individual, it is because the laughing individual threatens the sovereign interest in social peace. How, exactly, does laughter do this? Recall our earlier examination of laughter as a display of sudden vainglory within a broader economy of power relations. Laughter makes a claim of individual superiority that is undermined through its very own performance. While spectators understand that laughter is a sign of individual weakness, the laughing individual actually feels superior to his or her object of laughter. An incongruity thus arises between the laughing individual’s conception of his or her own power and spectators’ more accurate assessments of the situation. This incongruity throws a wrench into the everyday processes by which individuals decipher relations of power between one another, and it likewise increases the risk of dangerous misrecognitions and miscalculations by everyone involved. Laughter in Hobbes constitutes a counter-sovereign political enactment because it intervenes in an economy of power by disrupting and confusing the relations that compose it. As a vainglorious, “unprofitable” enactment (Hobbes 1994c, 41), laughter does nothing more than disrupt and confuse the economy of power relations within which it arises. Hobbes objects to laughter because it proliferates political confusion, uncertainty, and risk. The gradual decline in the political significance of laughter from The Elements of Law to De Homine likely reflects an attempt by Hobbes to remove this dangerous, destabilizing experience/event from the domain of politics.

III. The Laughing Body Politic

If Hobbes’s theory of laughter constitutes a site of counter-sovereign energy within his political philosophy, what happens when we place this theory into conversation with his account
of the origin of sovereign power? In this section I argue that reading Hobbes’s theory of laughter alongside the central passages of his political philosophy yields a more complex understanding of Hobbesian sovereignty and provides the conceptual tools needed to illuminate how collective laughter participates in democratic politics today.

As is well known, Hobbes conceives of “politics” in terms of bodies. Unlike man’s natural body, the political body or “body politic” is an artificial body that individuals create (or find themselves subject to via conquest) by covenanting with one another (Hobbes 2012, 130; 1991, 35; 1994b, 122). Individuals institute a body politic by agreeing to “conferre all their power and strength upon” a sovereign person or assembly (Hobbes 2012, 260). Individuals authorize a sovereign to “beare their Person” – that is, the person of the body politic (Skinner 2002a) – in order to ensure its benefit and protection (Hobbes 2012, 260). Hobbes spares no superlatives when describing the degree of power that individuals grant a sovereign. “There is no power on earth that can be compared to him,” reads the verse above the sovereign’s head on the frontispiece of *Leviathan* (Hobbes 1985, 71). Sovereignty, Hobbes writes, is “so unlimited a Power” and “as great, as possibly men can be imagined to make it” (Hobbes 2012, 320); it is “absolute,” “the greatest dominion that can be granted” (Hobbes 1991, 181–82). According to Hobbes, individuals inhabit a political body when they grant a sovereign absolute power to compel the obedience of their natural bodies.

Despite Hobbes’s grandiose descriptions of sovereign power, several commentators have questioned how much power we can actually attribute to the Hobbesian sovereign. Sheldon Wolin points out that sovereignty in Hobbes consists of nothing more than an agreement among subjects to not resist the sovereign’s will (Wolin 2004, 254–55). The person or assembly
appointed sovereign does not receive any new power from the body politic; the sovereign simply retains the natural right to all people and things that everyone else relinquishes. Sovereign power consisteth in the power and the strength, that every of the members have transferred to him from themselves by covenant. And because it is impossible for any man really to transfer his own strength to another, or for that other to receive it; it is to be understood, that to transfer a man’s power and strength, is no more but to lay by, or relinquish his own right of resisting him to whom he so transferreth it. (Hobbes 1994b, 123).

The power of the sovereign is thus equal only to that of a natural individual, and its efficacy depends on the willingness of subjects to honor their promises not to interfere. As Wolin notes, the Hobbesian conception of political power was a grossly oversimplified, even hollow one. The power to act required only the elimination of hindrances rather than the active enlistment of the private power and support of the citizens. The citizens had simply to stand aside and not interfere. (Wolin 2004, 255)

William Connolly, meanwhile, contends that sovereignty requires that subjects believe in the binding force of natural reason and its commandment of obedience. If subjects begin to doubt or contest this faith (as I did in the previous section by emphasizing the determination of “right reason” by an arbitrary sovereign decision), the system’s “principle of sovereignty would be shattered. Order would be based upon command, but sovereign commands would lack the intrinsic, obligatory status Hobbes invested in them” (Connolly 1993, 39). Finally, James Martel emphasizes how the efficacy of sovereign power requires that subjects believe in the person of the sovereign himself: “the sovereign is an ‘object of our Faith’; it really does matter how we think about it; without a sense of trust and ‘taking their word,’ sovereign authority disappears” (Martel 2007, 56). Wolin, Connolly, and Martel demonstrate how the power of Hobbesian sovereignty depends crucially on the good behavior and faith of those subject to it.
When we bring this account of Hobbes’s political philosophy into conversation with the interpretation of his theory of laughter developed above, several important similarities between the laughing natural body and the Hobbesian political body come into view. In particular, the political enactment performed by individuals who establish a body politic is highly analogous to that performed by the laughing individual. The Hobbesian body politic is, I argue, a *laughing body politic* in its authorization of sovereign power. This is the case for three main reasons.

First, laughter and the establishment of a body politic share the same distinctive temporality. The time of laughter in Hobbes is irreducibly sudden, instantaneous, and singular. Laughter is the passion (or sign of the passion) of *sudden* glory, and it occurs in quick “*Grimaces*” (Hobbes 2012, 88) or “*distortion*[s] of the countenance” (Hobbes 1994b, 45). An individual laughs at a given object only once: “Almost nothing is laughed at again and again by the same people” (Hobbes 1991, 59; see also 1994c, 45–46). The covenant founding a body politic shares this temporality. The social contract suddenly, decisively, and irrevocably modifies the prevailing economy of power relations. At one moment there exist only isolated, warring individuals; in the next there is a “reall Unitie of them all” (Hobbes 2012, 260). The covenant establishes a body politic the instant it is agreed to, and the covenant occurs exactly once. (Hobbes argues that the individuals who institute a body politic are bound to it forever or until sovereign protection ends (264, 344).) Individual laughter and the establishment of a body politic are both sudden, instantaneous, and singular political enactments.

Second, these two political enactments both reflect instances of “glorying.” As described earlier, laughter expresses a sense of individual strength and superiority that makes reference to and transforms a broader economy of power relations. The individuals who establish a body
politic also experience glory. The quality of life in a commonwealth greatly exceeds that of life in the state of nature (Hobbes notes that an individual enters into the covenant only because it provides “some Good to himselfe” (202)). One can almost hear Hobbes laughing derisively at critics who insist that man is better off in the state of nature:

But a man may here object, that the Condition of Subjects is very miserable […] not considering that the estate of Man can never be without some incommodity or other; and that the greatest, that in any forme of Government can possibly happen to the people in generall, is scarce sensible, in respect of the miseries, and horrible calamities, that accompany a Civill Warre; or that dissolute condition of masterlesse men. (282)

Just like laughter, the “glorious” political enactment of instituting a body politic modifies the prevailing economy of power relations. The individuals who covenant with one another render themselves powerless with respect to the sovereign they authorize (160), and they enter into an asymmetrical relation of war with those outside the newly formed commonwealth (268). By establishing a body politic, individuals perform a political enactment akin to the “glorying” involved in laughter.

Recall, however, that laughter expresses a sense of superiority incommensurate with an individual’s actual power. This vainglorious quality is the third and most significant parallel between individual laughter and the establishment of a body politic. The arguments of Wolin, Connolly, and Martel concerning the precarity of sovereign power in Hobbes suggest that the individuals who establish a body politic perform a vainglorious political enactment. The body politic claims a degree of power that the sovereign it authorizes can never hope to exercise. There are simply too many sites of sovereign vulnerability to take Hobbes’s claims about the sovereign’s incomparable, “unlimited,” “absolute” power as an accurate representation of its position. Hobbes’s repeated declarations about sovereign omnipotence betray the vanity involved
in the social contract. Like the laughing individual, those who establish a body politic intervene in an economy of power relations not by making a claim of superiority that can actually be redeemed, but rather by disrupting and confusing that economy. An incongruity arises between individuals’ collective assessment of the power they confer to the sovereign and what they, as individual subjects, know the sovereign can really do. This incongruity increases the risks of miscalculations and misjudgments of power relations among individual subjects and between individual subjects and the sovereign. The institution of sovereignty does not, as Hobbes promises, bring an end to the war of all against all; it instead simply renews that war by giving it a different shape and cast of characters.

To summarize: the establishment of a body politic involves a sudden expression of vainglory analogous to that involved in individual laughter, and the Hobbesian body politic is a laughing body politic at the moment of its foundation. Reading the central scene of Hobbes’s political philosophy alongside his theory of laughter has yielded an unexpected and paradoxical result. If the Hobbesian body politic is a laughing body politic and laughter is a counter-sovereign political enactment, then the establishment of sovereign power in Hobbes constitutes an enactment of counter-sovereignty. The individuals who form a body politic aim to authorize an omnipotent sovereign to secure permanent social peace, but their covenant is a performance akin to laughter that undermines this very intention. The institution of sovereignty instead merely disrupts and confuses the prevailing economy of power relations in a new way. Attending to the politics of Hobbes’s theory of laughter reveals the counter-sovereign underbelly of his political philosophy as well as the latter’s inability to dispel the threat of disruption constantly haunting it; it discloses, in other words, the counter-sovereign presuppositions and possibilities of Hobbes’s
political thought. In the terms employed by the dissertation as a whole, Hobbes’s politics of sovereignty becomes non-identical to itself when brought into sustained contact with his theory of laughter. The next section explores the converse transformation sparked by this encounter, namely the becoming-non-identical of the politics of Hobbes’s theory of laughter. In particular, I show that the concept of a laughing body politic elucidates the sovereign operation performed by collective laughter.

IV. Laughing Bodies Politic, Fugitive Democracy, and Counter/sovereignty

In his famous 1994 essay “Fugitive Democracy,” Sheldon Wolin argues that democracy cannot assume a permanent, institutional form (Wolin 1994). Because the principle of equality runs counter to the logic of hierarchy that necessarily characterizes modern social and political institutions, democracy is instead best conceived as a “fugitive,” rebellious moment in which ordinary citizens claim and exercise the right to determine how to conduct their lives in common. “Democracy,” Wolin writes, “is not about where the political is located but how it is experienced” (18). In this section I contend that the concept of “laughing body politic” developed above illuminates one way in which democracy and the political are experienced today. To make this argument, I examine three recent episodes which, in addition to the “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” described earlier, illustrate how democratic bodies politic form through experiences/events of collective laughter. The efficacy of these bodies as democratic consists in how their laughter at once claims and resists sovereign power.

The first example of a laughing body politic is provided by audiences of late-night political satire programs like The Daily Show and Saturday Night Live. Viewers of these programs share laughter together at elite political, economic, and media figures and institutions.
They do so either in real time or as video clips are shared and reposted online. Hobbes’s theory suggests that these communities of laughter experience and express vainglory, or an illusory and ultimately idle sense of power over their objects of laughter. Along these lines, critics lament that such laughter intensifies viewers’ cynicism toward and detachment from political life and thus fails as a democratic strategy. For example, in a recent piece titled “Jon Stewart is Not Enough,” author Thomas Frank asks, “What does it do to our larger political vision when we confine our political thinking to the crafting of hilarious put-downs of Tea Partiers and right-wing reality-doubters?” (Frank 2014; see also Hart and Hartelius 2007). This line of criticism is largely consistent with Adorno’s view of “wrong” laughter as a distracting pseudo-pleasure through which subjects are deceived about their resistance to social power. However, following Adorno’s commitment to dialectical thinking, might the preceding analysis suggest that laughter’s democratic efficacy consists precisely in its idle, vainglorious quality? When audiences laugh at elite figures and institutions, they publicly express an illusory sense of power that disrupts and confuses the reigning economy of power relations. Powerful figures and institutions feel threatened because they can no longer safely count on those who laugh at them to maintain their ordinary levels of deference and submission. If Wolin is correct that democracy is a rebellious moment in which ordinary citizens assert a previously unauthorized degree of political power, then the laughing bodies politic generated by late-night satire programs perform democratic political enactments. While Hobbes and critics like Frank or even Adorno might identify laughter’s expression of sudden vainglory as inimical to political life, I consider this quality to be a source of laughter’s democratic promise.
CHAPTER TWO

A recent event in Turkey provides another example of a laughing body politic that exerts democratic effects. In a July 2014 speech decrying “moral corruption,” Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç declared that “a woman should be chaste. […] She should not laugh in public” (Letsch 2014). He continued: “[A woman] should not laugh loudly in front of all the world and should preserve her decency at all times” (AFP 2014). Thousands of Turkish women responded to Arınç’s comments by posting photos and videos of themselves laughing in public on social media sites like Twitter and Instagram (Letsch 2014). These women spontaneously formed a laughing body politic that defied Arınç’s proscription against women’s laughter while simultaneously making Arınç the target of their laughter. As with the laughter generated by late-night satire programs, this laughing body politic dissipated as quickly as it formed and did not accomplish anything “concrete” (e.g., it did not attempt to convince legislators to pass new anti-domestic violence laws). However, through collective laughter, the Turkish women formed a demos that made itself seen and heard, to quote Arınç, “in front of all the world.” By claiming a previously unauthorized political voice, they rendered the cultural conservative narrative about women’s role in Turkish society newly vulnerable.  

A third example illustrates the counter-sovereign and democratic possibilities of collective laughter in a slightly more unusual way. In the mid-2000s a group of U.K. and European activists opposed to global trade policies, the Iraq War, and the “war on terror” formed the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) (Klepto 2004; Routledge 2012). CIRCA’s most notable protest activity occurred at the 2005 G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland.

7 In this way, the Turkish women practiced a form of what J. Jack Halberstam calls “gaga feminism,” or a queer, anarchic, media-savvy feminism that “hints at a future rather than prescribing one; […] opens out onto possibilities rather than naming them; […] gestures toward new forms of revolt rather than patenting them” (Halberstam 2012, xiii).
CIRCA aimed to undermine dominant military and security discourses by depicting the latter in the most absurd forms imaginable. “Clownbattants” donned traditional military fatigues decorated with colorful wigs, face paint, and rubber noses, and they armed themselves with feather dusters and water pistols. According to Paul Routledge, a scholar of social movements and CIRCA participant, the clown army generated complex, vibrant scenes of laughter at otherwise tense and confrontational protest sites (Routledge 2012). The clowns laughed at one another’s costumes and routines, and they interrupted police management of the protests in comedic ways. Routledge describes how

the tactic of “staying in clown” frustrates police management protocols, since they are dependent upon negotiating with protestors (i.e., talking sense to them), rather than dealing with a rebel clown who while sensitive, acts nonsensically. An example of this occurs when a police officer approaches a group of rebel clowns and asks them who is in charge. Rebel clown logic necessitates each clown to point in a different direction (including up and down), to no-one in particular [...]. It subverts the protocols of policing. (Routledge 2012, 446)

Police officers, along with more “serious” protesters and the onlooking public, found themselves laughing at (or perhaps with) the clown army (443–47). CIRCA prompted the formation of a laughing body politic with the otherwise disparate groups of conventional protesters, police officers, on-site spectators, and the broader media public (443). This shared laughter “generate[d] bonds of solidarity” that invited alternative forms of political association and resisted the antagonistic modes of relation encouraged by prevailing military and security discourses (441).

The crowds that gather on the National Mall for the “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,” the audiences of late-night political satire programs, the Turkish women who refuse to stifle their laughter, and those who participate in and witness an army of protesting clowns all constitute laughing bodies politic. In each case, collective laughter generates a demos in the
sense described by Wolin: it advances a claim to power that is lost in its own transgressive expression. If the notion of a laughing body politic highlights the counter-sovereign presuppositions and possibilities of Hobbes’s sovereign politics, then it also reveals the sovereign dimensions of the counter-sovereign political enactment performed by collective laughter. By laughing together, a demos resists existing forms of sovereignty by laying claim to a previously unauthorized degree of sovereign power. The democratic efficacy of collective laughter consists in how its exercises of counter-sovereignty proceed only by way of claims to sovereign power, and conversely, how these claims to sovereign power only emerge in the form of challenges to existing modes of sovereignty. Neither simply sovereign nor simply counter-sovereign, the democratic politics of collective laughter are instead counter/sovereign.

V. The Counter/sovereign Politics of Laughter

This chapter has moved back and forth between Hobbes’s theory of laughter and his political philosophy in order to critically illuminate how collective laughter participates in democratic politics today. An attention to the politics of Hobbes’s theory of laughter uncovers a complex dialectic between sovereignty and counter-sovereignty that is at work both in laughter and in politics more generally. More specifically, we discover an exercise of sovereignty where we at first find only counter-sovereignty (i.e., in Hobbes’s theory of laughter) and an exercise of counter-sovereignty where we at first find only sovereignty (i.e., in his political philosophy). The answer to the question posed at the outset – namely, how to explain the political significance of events of collective laughter like the 2010 “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” – is now clear. Collective laughter generates a counter/sovereign demos – that is, a demos whose establishment of and resistance to sovereign power proceed one through the other. Rather than reflecting a
necessarily idle, cynical, or counter-productive response to political life, events of collective laughter can precipitate the democratic transformation of entrenched economies of power. A key task of democratic politics today may be to ensure that political bodies – especially the “Hobbesian” ones – keep laughing.
CHAPTER THREE

MAKING REASON THINK MORE?
LAUGHTER IN KANT’S AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY

There is no better start for thinking than laughter. (Benjamin 2007, 236)

Immanuel Kant is modernity’s preeminent theorist of rationality. His critical philosophy explores with unsurpassed rigor and subtlety what it would mean to order one’s speculative and practical pursuits by the dictates of reason alone. A study of laughter’s relationship to the human logos would likewise do well to attend closely to the unexpected discussion of laughter that Kant offers in §54 of The Critique of the Power of Judgment (CPJ). “Laughter,” Kant explains, “is an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing” (Kant 2000, 332). Kant’s lengthy “Remark” on laughter follows his more famous analyses of how the aesthetic judgments of the beautiful and the sublime bridge the “incalculable gulf” between nature and freedom (175). While Kant’s characterization of laughter as an “affect” seemingly disqualifies it as an object of critical-transcendental reflection, the present chapter examines the reasons and resources that CPJ §54 provides for understanding laughter as a third form of aesthetic judgment that plays a distinctive, decisive, and highly fraught role in his critical philosophy, and by extension, the rational life of the human subject.

Most commentators interpret CPJ §54 as a self-contained “theory” of laughter that is to be studied and evaluated alongside other such theories (e.g., Hobbes’s so-called “superiority

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all parentheses, italics, and boldface in this and the next chapter belong to Kant or the translator, and all Kant citations (except those to The Contest of Faculties) refer to the standardized page numbers of the Akademie Ausgabe. For the Kritik der Urteilskraft I generally use the now-standard Guyer translation (Kant 2000), but for select quotations I employ the Pluhar translation (Kant 1987).

2 Kant’s account of laughter is connected to so many elements of his sprawling philosophical apparatus that unpacking its significance for the study of the politics of laughter requires two chapters. The current chapter examines the relationship between laughter and reason in Kant, while Chapter Four investigates the more explicitly political implications of CPJ §54.
theory” or Freud’s “relief theory”) (Morreall 1983; Lippitt 1994; Provine 2001; Smith 2017; Smuts 2006). While such an approach may offer some valuable insights about Kant’s views on laughter, an inattention to why Kant focuses on laughter and the broader critical apparatus that Kant develops around laughter leaves the richness and complexity of CPJ §54 largely unexplored. The current chapter consequently attends to the numerous imbrications of Kant’s account of laughter with his analyses of the beautiful and the sublime. Tracing these connections does not simply yield a more contextualized and rigorous reading of CPJ §54, however. As was the case in the previous chapter on Hobbes, studying Kant’s account of laughter within the context of his wider philosophical project causes the terms governing the latter to begin to shift underneath our feet. In particular, we find that the Kantian concepts of beauty, sublimity, judgment, critique, and reason take on meanings and functions that are at odds with Kant’s own intentions and conventional interpretations of his project. In this way, CPJ §54 constitutes a site wherein Kant’s aesthetic and broader critical philosophies become non-identical to themselves. An account of how Kant illuminates laughter’s role in the rational life of the human subject thus proceeds through a re-interpretation of his aesthetic and critical philosophies – a re-interpretation that his discussion of laughter itself provokes.

I advance four arguments along these lines. First, although Kant describes laughter as an “affect” carrying only empirical significance (Kant 2000, 330–34), a close reading of CPJ §54 reveals that laughter is also a highly specific form of aesthetic judgment. Kant explains that a subject laughs when the understanding suddenly relaxes after an unexpected clash with the imagination. Laughter involves a discordant relation between the mind’s cognitive faculties that is characteristic of the sublime, but this relation obtains between the understanding and the
imagination, the two faculties at play in judgments of taste. *Laughter in Kant is the analog of the sublime in the realm of taste.* Second, instead of reflecting an afterthought of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy, the judgments of the beautiful and the sublime both presuppose laughter as their transcendental condition of possibility. *Laughter constitutes the most basic aesthetic judgment in Kant.* Third, an account of aesthetic judgment that begins with laughter transforms how we understand the role of aesthetic judgment in Kant’s critical philosophy. Rather than simply assuring the subject that nature can harmonize with freedom (as in the beautiful) or inspiring the subject to act freely (as in the sublime), laughter is an aesthetic judgment that *enacts* reason’s power of free transformation by way of a sensible stimulus at odds with the subject’s purposes.

In surprisingly Nietzschean fashion, *laughter stimulates reason to freely transform its principles for thought and action: it “makes reason think more”* (Kant 1987, 315; cf. Hay 2017). Fourth and finally, putting this transcendental reading of laughter into conversation with Kant’s claim that laughter is a mere affect reveals that laughter both stimulates and inhibits reason’s power to freely transform its theoretical and practical ideas. *Laughter, in other words, makes reason think more and think less.* Crucially, these two activities proceed in and through one another: thought-transforming laughter (such as that produced by subversive jokes) involves an affective dimension that always risks re-entrenching reason’s ideas, while thought-inhibiting laughter (such as that produced by sexist or racist jokes) originates in and reacts back upon a free cognitive activity that can always prompt a new transformation of reason’s ideas. Despite his well-earned reputation as an apodictic thinker, *Kant offers an intensely dialectical account of the relationship between laughter and reason* – one that heightens our sensitivity to the opportunities and dangers that any given experience/event of laughter presents to human reason.
The chapter proceeds in six sections. Section I offers an overview of the Kantian critical system, with a focus on the concepts of nature and freedom as Kant presents them in the first two Critiques. Section II introduces the judgments of the beautiful and the sublime and explains how they contribute to the CPJ’s goal of uniting the domains of nature and freedom. These sections provide the foundation for the reading of laughter as a key form of aesthetic judgment offered in Sections III–V. Section VI concludes by considering this transcendental interpretation of laughter in light of Kant’s insistence that laughter is a mere affect.

I. Nature and Freedom in Kant

The possibility of human freedom in a determinist natural world constitutes perhaps the core philosophical question explored by Kant in the first two Critiques. Below I briefly describe Kant’s conception of the relation between nature and freedom in order to frame the philosophical stakes of the account of laughter he advances in the CPJ.

In the Critique of Pure Reason (CPR) Kant seeks to determine how objective knowledge about the natural world is possible without an appeal to speculative concepts lacking a basis in human experience. How can the human subject produce reliable empirical knowledge in the absence of metaphysical concepts that guarantee nature forms an orderly, law-governed system? Kant resolves this dilemma by introducing a radically subject-centered epistemology that locates the conditions for empirical knowledge entirely within the human subject. He argues that the subject’s faculty of the understanding contains the concepts of quantity, quality, relation, and modality that introduce order to the manifold of sensible intuition synthesized by the imagination (Kant 2009b, A80/B106). These a priori concepts – and these a priori concepts alone – make possible knowledge of the natural world as a law-governed system. Kant writes: “As exaggerated
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and contradictory as it may sound to say that the understanding is itself the source of the laws of nature, and thus of the formal unity of nature, such an assertion is nevertheless correct” (A127). Because the conditions of knowledge lie entirely within the subject, the latter only knows nature as it *appears* to him. The subject can never know natural objects as they are “in themselves” (i.e., beyond their relation to the subject):

> Pure concepts of the understanding are therefore possible, indeed necessary *a priori* in relation to experience, only because our cognition has to do with nothing but appearances, whose possibility lies in ourselves, whose connection and unity (in the representation of an object) is encountered merely in us, and thus must precede all experience and first make it possible as far as its form is concerned. (A130)

Thanks to the *a priori* categories of the understanding, the subject can attain objectively valid knowledge of the empirical world as it appears to him.

While this doctrine secures the validity of empirical knowledge without invoking speculative concepts, Kant explains that human reason remains unsatisfied with knowledge of mere appearances. How can reason satisfy its interest in metaphysical questions like the beginning of the world, the possibility of freedom, and the existence of God without overstepping its bounds and claiming knowledge of things-in-themselves? (Avii, A466–67/B494–95; cf. Kant 2001). Kant examines this “natural and unavoidable” dilemma of reason by means of four “antinomies,” or pairs of mutually incompatible yet equally necessary metaphysical assertions advanced by reason (Kant 2009b, A420–25/B448–53). The third antinomy concerning the concept of freedom, or the metaphysical idea of an uncaused cause, interests us most here. In this antinomy reason simultaneously asserts that freedom must exist (in order to explain the very first cause in the chain of natural causes and effects) and that freedom cannot exist (because the concept of an uncaused cause violates the laws of nature) (A444–451/
B472–479). Kant resolves the antimony by invoking his distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves. While all natural objects, viewed as appearances, obey the laws of nature, these same objects can be considered effects of freedom when thought of as things-in-themselves. That is, a natural object’s behavior in accordance with the laws of nature can be thought of as an effect of free (or “intelligible”) causes. Kant writes:

Thus the intelligible cause, with its causality, is outside the series; its effects, on the contrary, are encountered in the series of empirical conditions. The effect can therefore be regarded as free in regard to its intelligible cause, and yet simultaneously, in regard to appearances, as their result according to the necessity of nature. (A537/B565)

Importantly, we can only think of a natural object as an effect of freedom; because the conditions of knowledge are limited to appearances, the subject can never understand how an object is an effect of freedom (A540/B568). With this solution Kant preserves the metaphysical concept of freedom without imperiling the foundations of empirical knowledge (A541/B569).

The full implications of Kant’s transcendental account of freedom become clear when we consider the special case of the human subject. According to Kant, man is a natural object whose movements are subject to the laws of nature just like all other bodies, but reason also equips him with the special power of free causality. The human subject can begin an action independent of the chain of natural causes and effects. While human actions always obey natural laws, they can also be thought of as originating in a power of free causality: “the human being […] is in one part phenomenon, but in another part, namely in regard to certain faculties, he is a merely intelligible object, because the actions of this object cannot at all be ascribed to the receptivity of sensibility” (A546–47/B574–75). The Critique of Practical Reason examines this power of free causality more closely and seeks to determine the conditions under which human freedom is
possible. Kant argues that the human subject acts freely insofar as he determines his will *morally* (i.e., in such a way that the maxim of his action can become a universal law) (Kant 2008a, 3–4). Moral action is determined exclusively by a law reason gives to itself; its grounds remain entirely independent of the chain of natural causes and effects in which the subject is embedded as part of the world of appearances. Kant writes:

> As no determining ground of the will except the universal legislative form can serve as a law for it, such a will must be conceived as wholly independent of the natural law of appearances in their mutual relations, i.e., the law of causality. Such independence is called *freedom* in the strictest, i.e., transcendental sense. Therefore, a will to which only the law-giving form of the maxim can serve as a law is a free will. (28–29)

For Kant, the human subject is transcendentally free insofar as he acts morally.

While Kant carefully differentiates nature (the empirical domain of appearances) and freedom (the transcendental domain of things-in-themselves), he also aims to determine the precise ways in which these domains intersect and interact. The Third *Critique* addresses this issue directly. Kant claims that the *CPJ* – especially the first half on aesthetics – aims to bridge the “incalculable gulf” that the first two *Critiques* open up between nature and freedom (Kant 2000, 175). The next section explores Kant’s arguments for how aesthetic judgment unites the concepts of nature and freedom, and it prepares us for the reading of Kant’s account of laughter offered in Sections III–VI.

### II. The Beautiful and the Sublime

Kant presents the core of his aesthetic philosophy in the Analytic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment (*CPJ* §§1–54). The Analytic focuses on two types of judgments: judgments of taste (i.e., judgments about whether an object is beautiful) and judgments of the sublime. The beautiful and the sublime are *aesthetic* judgments because they concern how the representation
of an object pleases or displeases the subject (Kant 2000, 188–89, 203). No objective logical, cognitive, or moral criteria are involved in the beautiful and the sublime; these judgments proceed through the subject’s mere feeling of pleasure or displeasure in reflecting on an object. Understanding laughter’s role in Kant’s aesthetic and critical philosophies requires a familiarity with the beautiful and the sublime. While there are many theoretical angles one can pursue with respect to these judgments, I focus on five items in particular: (1) their conditions of emergence; (2) the cognitive faculties involved; (3) the form of the relation between the cognitive faculties; (4) the quality of the pleasure felt by the subject; and (5) how they unite the concepts of nature and freedom.

The Beautiful

The *CPJ* opens with an analysis of judgments of taste, or judgments about whether an object is beautiful (§§1–22). A beautiful object, such as a flower, is one whose form arouses a completely disinterested feeling of pleasure in the subject (Kant 2000, 211, 229). According to Kant, the pleasure taken in a beautiful object consists in its “mere form of purposiveness” with respect to the subject’s reflective power of judgment (221). The form of an object is “purposive” when it launches the understanding and imagination into a harmonious relation with one another (189–90, 217, 222). Whereas in an ordinary determinative judgment the understanding provides a concept or rule for the imagination to obey in its synthesis of the manifold of intuition, in a reflective judgment of taste an object’s form sends the imagination into a “free play” with the understanding (179, 217). Here the representation of the imagination harmonizes not with a

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3 By arguing that aesthetic judgment (e.g., the claim that “X is beautiful”) proceeds *through* or *in* a feeling of pleasure (rather than being attached to a feeling that either precedes or follows the judgment itself), I subscribe to the so-called “internalist” reading of Kantian aesthetic judgment adopted by theorists like Aquila (1979), Lyotard (1994), Tinguely (2013), and Zerilli (2016).
specific concept of the understanding, but only with the latter’s lawfulness in general (217–19, 241). This stimulation of the two faculties by one another yields a feeling of pleasure (217). Kant describes

the facilitated play of both powers of the mind (imagination and understanding) enlivened through mutual agreement. A representation which, though singular and without comparison to others, nevertheless is in agreement with the conditions of universality, an agreement that constitutes the business of the understanding in general, brings the faculties of cognition into the well-proportioned supposition that we require for all cognition. (219)

Because the pleasure produced in a judgment of taste is grounded in nothing other than the free and harmonious relation between the faculties of the understanding and the imagination that are common to all subjects, the subject can demand that all others agree with her judgment that a particular object is beautiful (211–19).

Judgments of taste play a crucial role in Kant’s critical system. Although the moral law commands the subject to act freely (i.e., without regard to sensible interests) (Kant 2008a, 29–30), Kant wonders whether the subject has grounds for believing in the possibility of achieving the ends of freedom in nature: “nature must consequently also be able to be conceived in such a way that the lawfulness of its form is at least in agreement with the possibility of the ends that are to be realized in it in accordance with the laws of freedom” (Kant 2000, 176; Guyer 1993, 19). To what extent is nature disposed toward a human will determined morally? Is it really possible for the subject to achieve the highest good as prescribed by the moral law? A judgment of taste encourages the subject to believe in the possibility of bridging the gulf between nature and freedom because the beautiful reflects a subjective experience of freedom within the natural world (Guyer 1993, 18, 41). The beautiful object’s formal purposiveness with respect to the
subject’s power of judgment suggests that the purposes of nature can readily harmonize with those of the subject. Kant explains that aesthetic judgment

provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical, from lawfulness in accordance with the former to the final end in accordance with the latter, in the concept of a **purposiveness** of nature. (Kant 2000, 196)

Judgments of taste hold the two ends of the Kantian system together by assuring the subject that the purposes of nature can harmonize with those of freedom, and Kant likewise concludes that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good (353).

**The Sublime**

The sublime is the second aesthetic judgment Kant analyzes in the *CPJ*. Whereas in the beautiful a feeling of pleasure results from nature’s purposiveness with respect to the subject’s cognitive faculties, in the sublime a highly paradoxical feeling of pleasure results from nature’s **contrapurposiveness** with respect to these faculties (245). Nature is “contrapurposive” when its representation clashes with the subject’s ability to judge it. Rather than feeling like nature is “pre-determined” for the subject (as in the beautiful), the sublime leaves the subject feeling as if nature is at odds with her power of judgment (189). Kant writes: “that which [...] excites in us the feeling of the sublime, may to be sure appear in its form to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination” (245). Sublime objects appear to widen rather than bridge the gulf between nature and freedom.

To explain how this judgment contributes to the Third *Critique*’s goal of uniting nature and freedom, Kant differentiates between two “dispositions” of the sublime (247). The
mathematical sublime arises when a subject attempts to aesthetically “comprehend” an empirical object like the Egyptian pyramids or St. Peter’s Basilica that appears “absolutely great” or “great beyond all comparison” (248, 252). Judging these objects on an aesthetic register presents a severe problem for the subject’s cognitive faculties. Reason, “which requires totality for all given magnitudes,” asks the imagination to do something of which it is not capable: representing the “un-representable” (i.e., something that appears “great,” or large beyond all measure) (251–52, 254). Reason and the imagination likewise arrive at a violent impasse that agitates the mind (258). Kant explains that a pleasure unexpectedly issues from this displeasurable discordance:

The feeling of the sublime is thus a feeling of displeasure from the inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude for the estimation by reason, and a pleasure that is thereby aroused at the same time from the correspondence of this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest sensible faculty in comparison with ideas of reason, insofar as striving for them is nevertheless a law for us. (257)

The imagination’s failure to comprehend the natural object does not, as we might expect, demonstrate the mind’s impotence with respect to the natural world. It instead testifies to the strength of the subject’s power of reason because only a being endowed with reason would ever demand the representation of the un-representable in cognition. Kant writes: “the subject’s own incapacity reveals the consciousness of an unlimited capacity of the very same subject, and the mind can aesthetically judge the latter only through the former” (259). The paradoxical pleasure of the mathematical sublime inspires reason in its theoretical vocation.

Meanwhile, the dynamical sublime is a paradoxical pleasure that inspires reason in its practical vocation. The dynamical sublime arises when the imagination represents a natural object, such as a threatening rock formation or large thundercloud, as arousing great fear (260–

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4 As Pluhar notes, “comprehend” (Zusammenfassung) here means simply “to collect and hold together” in the mind, not “to understand” (Kant 1987, 251n14).
61). Provided that the subject is at a safe distance (such that she can reflect on the object without interest), this representation unexpectedly yields a feeling of pleasure (262). The subject takes pleasure in how the representation of a fearsome natural object reminds her that she possesses the even more powerful capacity to determine her will free of empirical influence (i.e., morally). Sublime objects “elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature” (261). The subject feels the paradoxical pleasure of the dynamical sublime when the imagination’s representation of a fearsome natural object reveals her even greater power of practical reason. In both its mathematical and dynamical forms, the sublime bridges the gulf between nature and freedom by inspiring the subject to think and act freely in the sensible world.

Before moving on to Kant’s account of laughter, let me briefly review the judgments of the beautiful and the sublime along the lines proposed at the outset. First, the subject judges an object to be beautiful when its form is purposive with respect to her cognitive faculties, and she judges an object to be sublime when its form is contrapurposive with respect to these faculties. Second, the beautiful involves a relation between the understanding and the imagination, whereas the sublime involves a relation between the imagination and reason. Third, the understanding and the imagination enter into a simple, harmonious play in the beautiful, whereas the imagination and reason enter into a complex, violent discordance in the sublime. Fourth, the beautiful pleases the subject immediately, while the sublime pleases the subject only by means of a corresponding displeasure. Fifth and finally, the beautiful assures the subject that nature harmonizes with the moral duty to act freely, whereas the sublime inspires the subject to think.
and act freely even when nature is not predisposed to these purposes (267). By bridging the gulf between nature and freedom in different ways, the judgments of the beautiful and the sublime work together to secure the overall unity of the Kantian critical system.

**III. Kant and Laughter**

Kant’s account of laughter in *CPJ* §54 comes at the end of a lengthy discussion of the relationship between between art, taste, and genius (*CPJ* §§43–54). In these sections Kant identifies a type of art that pleases the subject by stimulating his cognitive faculties (“beautiful art”) rather than by providing sensuous gratification (“agreeable art”) (305). Beautiful art launches the understanding and the imagination into the harmonious, disinterested, pleasurable play described in the above discussion of the beautiful (306). After assessing the value of various artistic practices as beautiful art (e.g., poetry “claims the highest rank of all” while music “occupies the lowest place” (326, 329)), Kant offers an extended, yet rather unexpected analysis of laughter. He focuses specifically on the “play of thoughts” or witty joking that subjects enjoy at dinner parties (331–32). He describes how clever witticisms generate laughter among guests by playfully reversing their expectations. Kant offers the following example:

> If someone tells this story: An Indian, at the table of an Englishman in Surat, seeing a bottle of ale being opened and all the beer, transformed into foam, spill out, displayed his great amazement with many exclamations, and in reply to the Englishman’s question “What is so amazing here?” answered, “I’m not amazed that it’s coming out, but by how you got it all in,” we laugh, and it gives us a hearty pleasure. (333)

According to Kant, a quick reversal in the subject’s expectations (here, in the response the diners expect from the Indian guest) provokes laughter. Kant – unfortunately⁵ – provides several additional examples of this kind of joking and the laughter it produces (333–34). Kant’s

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⁵ One commentator suggests that the fact Kant found the above joke funny is itself the laughable incongruity of his “incongruity theory” (Smith 2017).
examinations of laughter in the *CPJ* and elsewhere in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* almost exclusively concern joking that occurs at dinner parties (Kant 2000, 305–306; 2006, 264–65, 278–81). After recounting the news of the day and engaging in a robust philosophical discussion, “men of taste (aesthetically united)” allow themselves a degree of sensuous pleasure by laughing together at witty jokes (Kant 2006, 278–81).

Joking poses a problem for Kant’s distinction between beautiful and agreeable art. On the one hand, the dinnertime exchange of witticisms is a “play of thoughts” or “play of the power of judgment” that involves quick changes in the representations considered by the mind (Kant, 2000, 331, 335). Considered in this way, joking appears to constitute a beautiful art and laughter its corresponding “pleasure […] of reflection” (306). But on the other hand, Kant describes laughter as an enjoyable vibration of the body’s organs that aids digestion, thus suggesting that joking more closely approximates a merely agreeable art (332–34; Kant 2006, 281). The following quote illustrates how joking resides right on the boundary between beautiful and agreeable art in Kant:

> Music and material for laughter are two kinds of play with aesthetic ideas or even representations of the understanding, by which in the end nothing is thought, and which can gratify merely through their change, and nevertheless do so in a lively fashion; by which they make it fairly evident that the animation in both cases is merely corporeal, although it is aroused by ideas of the mind, and that the feeling of health resulting from a movement of the viscera corresponding to that play constitutes the whole gratification in a lively party, which is extolled as so fine and spirited. (Kant 2000, 332)

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6 Kant briefly examines laughter generated by two other practices, namely, naiveté and whimsicality (Kant 2000, 335–36). His analysis of these sources of laughter is much shorter and, in my opinion, less philosophically rich than his treatment of joking, and I focus only on the latter in this chapter. For more on laughter produced by naiveté and whimsicality in Kant see Hounsokou 2012, 325–28.

7 While Kant often considers joking and music in the same breath (he goes as far as to describe music as concerned with “charm and movement of the mind” – the same two predicates he attaches to joking (Kant 2000, 328)), he does not hold the two arts in equal esteem (331–32). At different points in the *CPJ* Kant includes and excludes music from the category of beautiful art (329–30, 332), but he always describes joking as an agreeable art (305, 332). The proximity of joking to an ambiguous art like music further evinces its liminal status in Kant’s aesthetics.
While Kant acknowledges that laughter originates in a play within the reflective power of judgment, he concludes that because the gratification it provides is bodily, “the joke […] deserves to be counted as agreeable rather than as beautiful art” (332; see also 305).

As a bodily sensation, laughter cannot claim the *a priori* validity that belongs to the pleasure taken in beautiful art and which critical aesthetic philosophy in general aims to ground and legitimate (168). But despite Kant’s assertions that joking is an agreeable art and laughter is an affect, *CPJ* §54 provides many reasons and resources for interpreting laughter as part of his critical-transcendental philosophy. More specifically, joking and laughter are deeply entangled in and bear the traces of the conceptual apparatus that Kant develops around the beautiful and the sublime. Tracking these connections between laughter, the beautiful, and the sublime reveals that rather than reflecting an inconsequential endnote to Kant’s Analytic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment, laughter constitutes an aesthetic judgment that brings the logics of both the beautiful and the sublime into a highly specific and significant relationship with one another. I will begin by identifying the connections between laughter and the sublime.

**Laughter and the Sublime**

The judgments of laughter and the sublime both arise when the sensible world departs from its normal mode of operating in harmony with the subject’s power of judgment. According to Kant, a joke produces laughter by representing an idea that clashes with the subject’s expectations: “In everything that is to provoke a lively, uproarious laughter, there must be something nonsensical (in which, therefore, the understanding in itself can take no satisfaction).

**Laughter is an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation**
into nothing” (332). Later Kant claims that a joke presents an illusion “that can deceive for a moment” (334). The dinner party guests laugh at Kant’s joke about the overflowing bottle of beer because the Indian’s response “tricks” their power of judgment. The sublime also originates in a contrapurposive representation (245). The subject feels the sublime when the immense size or power of an object stymies the imagination’s attempt to represent it to the satisfaction of reason. In the sublime, the subject’s cognitive faculties are not immediately adequate to an empirical representation. Laughter and the sublime both originate in a representation that is contrapurposive with respect to the subject’s power of judgment.

Laughter and the sublime are also complex judgments involving paradoxical feelings of pleasure. Kant describes both laughter and the sublime as “mental agitations”\(^8\) that please the subject only by way of a displeasurable discordance between the faculties (Kant 1987, 247, 334). The pleasure of laughter consists paradoxically in how a joke frustrates and fatigues the mind:

The joke must always contain something that can deceive for a moment: hence when the illusion disappears into nothing, the mind looks back again in order to try it once more, and thus is hurried this way and that by rapidly succeeding increases and decreases of tension and set into oscillation: which, because that which as it were struck the string bounces back suddenly (not through a gradual slackening), is bound to cause a movement of the mind [agitation] and an internal bodily movement in harmony with it, which continues involuntarily, and produces weariness, but at the same time also cheerfulness. (Kant 2000, 334)

The sublime also originates in an unpleasant mental vibration: “The mind feels itself moved [agitated] in the representation of the sublime in nature […]. This movement [agitation] (especially in its inception) may be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object” (258). The pleasure of the sublime

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\(^8\) Here and below I prefer Pluhar’s translation of Bewegung des Gemüths as “mental agitation” over Guyer’s choice of “movement of the mind.” “Agitation” better captures the forceful, disorienting effects that laughter and the sublime have on the subject.
arises through this unpleasant mental agitation: “the object is taken up as sublime with a pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure” (260). To sum up, both laughter and the sublime (1) originate in a representation that is contrapurposive with respect to the subject’s power of judgment; (2) involve a discordance between the cognitive faculties; and (3) please the subject only by way of displeasure.

These close connections between laughter and the sublime have not gone unnoticed by scholars of Kantian aesthetics (Adorno 1997, 198–99; Banki 2014; Borch-Jacobsen 1987; Godfrey 1937; Hounsokou 2012; Marmysz 2001; Nancy 1993). In particular, Stephen Nichols argues that laughter constitutes the “anti-sublime” (Nichols 2005). According to Nichols, laughter is a sudden gesture of the body that generates a critical, though sometimes frightening breach within the subject. In somewhat Adornian fashion, laughter makes previously inexpressible or unimagined possibilities for selfhood more plausible (381). (Here we might note Kant’s claim that in laughter, “the rogue within ourselves is exposed” (Kant 1987, 335).) As in the terrifyingly pleasurable breach that the sublime introduces within the subject (specifically, between his faculties of imagination and reason), the subject experiences “a kind of dread and awe” at the disjunction that laughter introduces between him and himself (Nichols 2005, 381).

Unlike the sublime, however, the paradoxical pleasure of laughter does not serve to reassure the subject about his rational vocation. Laughter instead produces the opposite result: a sense of the body as grotesque and abject, linked to the self in a mocking caricature of identity, with the mind actively questioning what this means, while yet incapable of formulating answers, let alone of imposing order – in essence, a kind of negative or anti-sublime. (384)
For Nichols, laughter obeys the logic of the Kantian sublime but reverses its sign (cf. Banki 2014, 59–60; Borch-Jacobsen 1987, 749–50). Instead of a triumphant integration of the subject around his faculty of reason, the aesthetic judgment of laughter proliferates incongruity and difference across the thinking subject.

Nichols presents a compelling case for understanding laughter as the anti-sublime. As a paradoxical pleasure stemming from a discord between the faculties, laughter in Kant is indeed *formally analogous* to the sublime, even if the two judgments work in diametrically opposed directions. However, grasping the full significance of laughter as the analog of the sublime requires attending to laughter’s connection to the other aesthetic judgment in Kant: the beautiful.

**Laughter and the Beautiful**

The Third *Critique* and *Anthropology* offer many resources for interpreting Kant’s account of laughter through the lens of the beautiful. First, *CPJ* §54 seeks to determine whether the category of beautiful art can accommodate the practice of joking responsible for laughter. We see Kant’s preoccupation with the beautiful in his reference to “the harmonies in [musical] tones or sallies of wit […] with their beauty” and in his description of joking as a “beautiful play” (Kant 2000, 332). Second, Kant characterizes the capacity to produce laughter as an ability akin to *genius*, or the talent for producing beautiful art (307, 334). Third, Kant describes dinner party joking as an activity enjoyed by “men of taste (aesthetically united)” – that is, by subjects who share a heightened sensitivity for the beautiful (Kant 2006, 278). Fourth, Kant claims that laughter, just like the beautiful, originates in a disinterested play of the faculties: “the *play of thoughts* […] arises merely from the change in the representations, in the faculty of judgment, by means of which, to be sure, no thought that involves any sort of interest is generated, but the
mind is nevertheless animated” (Kant 2000, 331). Kant’s portrayal of laughter as a play of thought is itself significant because the faculties enter into a “play” in the beautiful, whereas “seriousness” characterizes the mind’s attitude in the sublime (245).

The most important link between laughter and the beautiful, however, concerns the cognitive faculties that both judgments call into play. Like the beautiful, laughter in Kant involves a relation between the understanding and the imagination. Two key passages in CPJ §54 establish this. The first specifies the role of the understanding in laughter:

[…] the understanding, in this presentation in which it does not find what was expected, suddenly relaxes, [and] one feels the effect of this relaxation in the body through the oscillation of the organs, which promotes the restoration of their balance and has a beneficial influence on health. (332)

Kant points to this activity of the understanding twice more on the same page. According to Kant, the subject laughs when the understanding cannot make sense of the world with the empirical concepts and rules it normally employs. As the sensible world diverges from its expectations, the understanding experiences a certain frustration before suddenly relaxing. This relaxation-via-frustration is the paradoxical pleasure of laughter.

The second key passage in CPJ §54 introduces the imagination into the equation. Kant writes: “music and material for laughter are two kinds of play with aesthetic ideas or even representations of the understanding, by which in the end nothing is thought, and which can gratify merely through their change, and nevertheless do so in a lively fashion” (332). The important point is Kant’s claim that laughter originates in a “play with aesthetic ideas.” While Kant here describes aesthetic ideas as “representations of the understanding,” his more detailed treatments of aesthetic ideas strongly suggest a different reading. In CPJ §49 Kant explains that
an aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination that the understanding cannot account for with its concepts and rules:

by an aesthetic idea […] I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible. (314)

“An aesthetic idea,” Kant continues in CPJ §57, “is an intuition (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be found adequate” (342). Aesthetic ideas express the imagination’s creative power free from interference or regulation by the understanding (342). In an aesthetic idea “the imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is […] very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it,” allowing the mind to “transform” experience (314). Poetry manifests the power of aesthetic ideas most dramatically (314). Kant’s description of laughter as “a play with aesthetic ideas” is decisive because it reveals that laughter is not a judgment that originates simply in an activity of the understanding but rather in a particular relation between the understanding and the imagination.

In CPJ §21 Kant notes that the “attunement” between the understanding and the imagination “varies in its proportion, depending on what difference there is among the objects that are given” (Kant 1987, 238). How can we describe the attunement between these faculties when the object of reflection is a witty joke? The first passage above indicates that the understanding carries a set of expectations that it regularly employs to order and make sense of the world. A joke confronts the understanding with aesthetic ideas that it cannot comprehend with these concepts and rules. After trying and failing to subsume the imagination’s aesthetic

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9 Here I once again prefer the Pluhar translation. Pluhar’s rendering of Stimmung as “attunement” better grasps the importance of the relation between the understanding and the imagination than Guyer’s more literal translation of Stimmung as “disposition.”
ideas, the understanding suddenly relaxes, and the subject laughs. Kant insists that the
understanding simply surrenders in this encounter with the imagination: its expectations are
transformed into “nothing,” rather than into new concepts or rules. In “material for laughter […]
nothing is thought, and [it] can gratify merely through [the representations’] change” (Kant 2000,
332–33). A mere change in the posture of the understanding – not the production of new
knowledge – yields the paradoxical pleasure of laughter. 10

Pulling these various strands together, we can say that laughter constitutes an aesthetic
judgment that brings the logics of the beautiful and the sublime into a highly specific relation
with one another. Like the beautiful, laughter is an aesthetic judgment originating in a relation
between the understanding and the imagination that is both disinterested and not based on
concepts. But while in a judgment of taste the understanding and the imagination enter into
reciprocal harmony with one another, in laughter these faculties work at cross purposes and
arrive at an impasse. The imagination overburdens the understanding with ideas it cannot
comprehend, and the understanding clings to a set of expectations that it would rather abandon
completely than accommodate to these ideas. From both sides, the harmony of the beautiful is
foreclosed. The paradoxical pleasure generated by the discord between the imagination and the
understanding in laughter mirrors the paradoxical pleasure generated by the discord between the
imagination and reason in the sublime. Laughter is thus the analog of the sublime in the realm of

10 If, as Kant argues, the capacity to produce laughter is an ability akin to genius (Kant 2000, 334), then it is a highly
unusual form of genius. According to Kant, genius is the talent for presenting aesthetic ideas in a form that
harmonizes with the understanding and yields the pleasure of the beautiful: “The mental powers, then, whose union
(in a certain relation) constitutes genius, are imagination and understanding […] . Genius really consists in the happy
relation […] of finding ideas for a given concept on the one hand and on the other hitting upon the expression for
these, through which the subjective disposition of the mind that is thereby produced as an accompaniment of a
concept, can be communicated to others” (317; see also 344). Because laughter results when aesthetic ideas fail to
harmonize with the understanding, the “genius” responsible for producing laughter reflects a certain failure of
genius. Kant’s concept of genius, in other words, becomes non-identical to itself in the pleasure of laughter.
taste. The aesthetic judgment of laughter applies the sublime’s logic of discord and impasse to the cognitive faculties of the imagination and the understanding at play in judgments of taste.

IV. Laughter and Aesthetic Judgment

Kant is undoubtedly aware on at least some level of these connections between laughter, the beautiful, the sublime. If he were not, it would be difficult to explain why he devotes over six pages (330–336) to joking and laughter in the middle of a treatise of critical philosophy. No other art – certainly no other agreeable art – receives this amount of focused attention in the CPJ. An explanation for the presence of Kant’s “Remark” in the Third Critique might begin by noting that a key task of critical philosophy is “to institute a court of justice” that establishes boundaries between proper and improper objects of transcendental analysis (Kant 2009b, Axi–xii). Kant’s efforts to disqualify joking from the domain of beautiful art suggest that he believes laughter resides just beyond the borders of critical-transcendental legitimacy.\footnote{Perhaps this is why Kant affords laughter such an important role at dinner parties. Because it straddles the boundary between sensuous and cognitive pleasure, laughter is uniquely positioned to satisfy the dinner party’s dual mandate of promoting “good living” and moral virtue (Kant 2006, 277–78).} Kant likely dwells on laughter because he worries that its source in a “play of the power of judgment” (Kant 2000, 335) might distract readers into considering matters that ultimately carry only empirical significance. Laughter is more than a simple affect Kant can easily write off as an empirical or anthropological issue, but its status as a bodily sensation precludes its inclusion in critical philosophy proper. CPJ §54 functions, in other words, to protect Kant’s larger critique of judgment from contamination by the ambiguous pleasure of laughter (cf. Hay 2017).

My above argument that laughter is a form of aesthetic judgment joins the work of several other scholars who claim that CPJ §54 plays a more important role in the Kantian project
than Kant himself acknowledges. For instance, Annie Hounsokou contends that laughter is an “aesthetic phenomenon” that performs the same unifying function between nature and freedom as a judgment of taste, except in reverse. Whereas in the beautiful a natural form pleases the subject on a cognitive level, in laughter a cognitive activity pleases the subject on the bodily level:

While the beautiful strikes the powers of cognition through its bodily form, the witty [joke] does exactly the reverse: in wit, the intellect affects the body. Though the operation is reversed, the significance is the same: the body – which we experience as phenomenon – and the mind – noumenon – are connected; they communicate, they affect each other.

(Hounsokou 2012, 323)

Hounsokou also claims that certain kinds of laughter remind the subject of her moral vocation in a manner akin to the sublime (326–27). Despite Kant’s dismissal of laughter’s role in his critical philosophy, Hounsokou concludes that laughter contributes to the CPJ’s project of unifying nature and freedom: “laughter, because it is more than what Kant would call mere sense, and yet partakes of it insofar as it affects the whole body, could help elevate the body into Kant’s project of integration of sense and freedom” (330).

While Hounsokou’s reading marks an advance over Kant’s own appraisal of the importance of CPJ §54 to his project, her argument actually prevents us from grasping the full significance of Kant’s account of laughter. For Hounsokou, laughter, the beautiful, and the sublime are linked by the similar effects they exert on the subject. Like the beautiful, laughter involves a feeling of freedom within the sensible domain, and like the sublime, laughter can inspire the subject to act morally (323, 326–27, 330). This narrow focus on subjective effects leads Hounsokou to conflate laughter, the beautiful, and the sublime such that laughter’s distinctive role in the rational life of the human subject remains unspecified. She writes that
“laughter is arguably aesthetic, beautiful, and even sublime” and that we should consider laughter “as a species of beauty and the sublime, and consequently, as a point of reconciliation between nature and freedom, sensible and supersensible, in its own right” (318). The problem with these claims is that insofar as we remain within a Kantian framework, we cannot treat laughter as beautiful and sublime or as a “species” of the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful and the sublime are highly specific forms of aesthetic judgment that differ in fundamental ways (e.g., they involve different faculties that enter into different forms of relation with one another). They do not constitute a single genus of which laughter could form a species. As Lyotard insists, “the difference between the sublime and the beautiful is not one of emphasis. It is a transcendental difference. The ‘transition’ from one to the other signifies to the imagination that its ‘facultary’ partner will change” (Lyotard 1994, 60). Hounsokou sidesteps these issues by describing laughter in generic terms as an aesthetic “phenomenon” or “experience” (Hounsokou 2012, 317, 328). But these characterizations undermine her core argument that laughter unifies nature and freedom, as Kant insists that only aesthetic judgment can do this (Kant 2000, 177).

Grasping the full significance of CPJ §54 requires an elaboration of the precise way in which laughter constitutes an aesthetic judgment.

A second commentator adopts an approach that is more sensitive to these issues. In an apparently forgotten 1937 essay, “The Aesthetics of Laughter,” F. Godfrey offers a reading of Kant’s account of laughter within the context of his aesthetic philosophy. Godfrey contends that laughter “fulfills a distinctive function in the rational life” and likewise plays an important role in the Kantian project (Godfrey 1937, 126). He describes laughter as a “species of taste” involving a breakdown between the cognitive faculties “analogous” to that which occurs in the sublime
(126, 130). A joke frustrates the understanding, and laughter reflects an effort by reason to preserve the mind’s overall sanity in the face of an unexpected disruption: “in laughter, as in taste generally, we may see the mind’s power of asserting its own unity, of keeping itself whole and sane, and of expressing this unity and sanity in appropriate and specific ways” (129). In addition to performing this “defensive” function, reason actively benefits from its indulgence of the imagination in laughter:

The mind when confronted with an absurdity is not reduced to nothing, but plays with it in fancy, and so sanity is preserved. The imagination now is not merely reproductive […] but productive, for reason refuses to be confined to the actual, but widens our outlook to the infinite realm of the possible, contingent, and impossible. (132)

Unlike Hounsokou, Godfrey is attentive to the specific relations that obtain between the cognitive faculties in laughter, and he concludes that laughter constitutes a third form of aesthetic judgment in Kant: laughter “is an aesthetic judgment, akin to, though distinct from, the judgments of the beautiful and the sublime” (126).

My approach follows Hounsokou and Godfrey in attending to the role laughter plays in Kant’s aesthetic philosophy, but I seek to more precisely specify the relationship between laughter, the beautiful, and the sublime. As described above, laughter cannot constitute a “species” of the beautiful and the sublime because the latter are not a single genus of which laughter could be a member. Godfrey’s account, while more careful on these points, nevertheless fails to develop its key insight that laughter is a species of taste analogous to the sublime. I contend that when we identify the aesthetic judgment of laughter as the analog of the sublime within the realm of taste (Section III), we find that rather than reflecting a species of the beautiful and the sublime (Hounsokou) or a third type of aesthetic judgment (Godfrey), the judgments of
the beautiful and the sublime intersect and share a common root in the judgment of laughter. Laughter is the cloth from which both the beautiful and the sublime are cut. The beautiful transforms laughter’s discordant relation between the understanding and the imagination into a harmonious relation, while the sublime transforms laughter’s discordant relation between the imagination and the understanding into a discordant relation between the imagination and reason. Hounsokou’s argument (provided that we identify laughter as an aesthetic judgment) is thus correct, but only in reverse: the beautiful and the sublime are species of laughter. Insofar as the beautiful and the sublime are related to one another in Kant’s philosophical system, both judgments presuppose the aesthetic judgment of laughter. A transcendental laugh – a laugh that does not actually occur, but always must have occurred – is the condition of possibility for both the beautiful and the sublime. Laughter, considered from a transcendental point of view, constitutes the most basic aesthetic judgment in Kant. This conclusion requires us to reassess the role of aesthetic judgment in the Kantian critical system as a whole.

V. Laughter in Kant’s Critical Philosophy

In the Second Introduction to the CPJ, Kant argues that the sections on aesthetics take precedence over those on teleology. He writes: “In a critique of the power of judgment the part

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12 In a recent article on Kant’s aesthetic philosophy Joseph Tinguely gestures – albeit obliquely – to laughter’s status as the transcendental condition of possibility for the beautiful and the sublime. Tinguely writes that humor “gives a plausible description of just how a subjective affective state could be constitutive of our perceptual and cognitive capacities rather than a mere by-product of an independent mental operation, and […] thereby demystifies what it would mean to say that an affective or subjective state is internal to the way we discriminate objects and perceptual scenes” (Tinguely 2013, 233). In order to understand Kantian aesthetic judgment in general, Tinguely suggests, we must understand laughter in particular. Humor and the laughter it generates provide an illustration of Kant’s claim that subjects can judge objects in or through a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. With this argument Tinguely points to the central role that laughter plays in Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment.

13 To be clear, my argument that laughter constitutes the most basic aesthetic judgment in Kant is not a historical claim. There is no evidence that Kant himself conceives of laughter as more important than the beautiful or the sublime. My contention is instead a philosophical argument about the relation between these three judgments in Kant’s aesthetics. Insofar as the beautiful and the sublime are related to one another as modes of unifying nature and freedom, they both necessarily presuppose the judgment of laughter as their transcendental condition of possibility.
that contains the aesthetic power of judgment is essential, since this alone contains a principle that the power of judgment lays at the basis of its reflection on nature entirely a priori” (Kant 2000, 193). If the Third Critique aims to connect the concepts of nature and freedom, and aesthetic judgment belongs to this Critique “essentially,” then my argument that laughter (rather than the beautiful or the sublime) constitutes the most basic aesthetic judgment entails a radical re-evaluation of aesthetic judgment’s role in Kant’s philosophical system. In this section I trace how laughter achieves the CPJ’s task of bridging the gulf between nature and freedom and how the aesthetic judgment of laughter stands at the heart of the Kantian critical project.

Doing this requires returning to Kant’s characterization of laughter as a “play with aesthetic ideas” (332). As described above, aesthetic ideas are representations of the imagination that the understanding cannot account for with its concepts and rules (314, 342–43). Kant also notes, however, that an aesthetic idea “is the counterpart (pendant) of an idea of reason” (314). Whereas an aesthetic idea is an intuition that no concept can adequately grasp, a rational idea is a concept that no representation of the imagination can adequately exhibit (314). Kant claims that reason generates its own concepts that do not derive from intuition or the understanding and that strive for the absolute or unconditioned in the realms of theoretical knowledge and practical action (Kant 2009b, A299/B355, A326–29/B382–85). These ideas regulate the subject’s metaphysical speculations (e.g., the existence of God) and practical reasoning (e.g., the permissibility of ethical maxims). Kant writes:

Reason does not give in to those grounds which are empirically given, and it does not follow the order of things as they are presented in intuition, but with complete spontaneity it makes its own order according to ideas, to which it fits the empirical conditions and according to which it even declares actions to be necessary that have not occurred and perhaps will not occur. (A548/B576)
An aesthetic idea is the “counterpart” of a rational idea because the former attempts to make the latter more real and palpable to the subject. Aesthetic ideas “strive toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience, and thus seek to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason (of intellectual ideas), which gives them the appearance of an objective reality” (Kant 2000, 314). For example, a poet’s aesthetic ideas can give sensible expression to the rational idea of God (314).

Kant goes on to suggest that aesthetic ideas do more than merely exhibit the ideas of reason. In *CPJ* §49 he explains that aesthetic ideas can stimulate reason to “think more,” or to transform its ideas:

Now if a concept is provided with a presentation of the imagination such that, even though this presentation belongs to the exhibition of the concept, yet it prompts, even by itself, so much thought as can never be comprehended within a determinate concept and thereby the presentation aesthetically expands the concept itself in an unlimited way, then the imagination is creative in [all of] this and sets the power of intellectual ideas (i.e., reason) in motion: *it makes reason think more*, when prompted by a [certain] presentation, than what can be apprehended and made distinct in the presentation. (Kant 1987, 314–15; italics added)  

According to Kant, the imagination can stimulate reason to think beyond what is presently entailed by its ideas. This is an absolutely crucial point because it means that the mind’s “play with aesthetic ideas” in laughter is in the end not an activity limited to the understanding and the imagination. The confrontation between the understanding and the imagination in laughter jostles the mind as a whole and *puts reason to work*. The force that laughter exerts on reason exceeds that exerted by an aesthetic idea acting in isolation because in laughter an aesthetic idea is brought into direct conflict with the understanding’s empirical concepts. This discordance

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14 Pluhar’s rendering (“it makes reason think more”) captures the stimulative and generative force that the imagination exerts on reason more effectively than Guyer’s translation (“it gives [reason] more to think about”).
dramatizes precisely what is at stake in reason: the subject’s capacity to think and act beyond the empirical. The aesthetic judgment of laughter makes reason “think more” by prompting it to revise or generate new ideas about the world and how the subject ought to act in it. Through laughter the mind arrives at new principles for thought and action. In true Nietzschean fashion, the human logos overcomes and transforms itself in the aesthetic judgment of laughter (cf. Hay 2017). Because reason is always the source of its own ideas (Kant 2009b, A548/B576), this transformation constitutes an enactment of reason in its freedom. Laughter actualizes what John Zammito identifies as reason’s “immanent dynamism, the capacity to set its own goals and to pursue them” (Zammito 1992, 171) and what Nikolas Kompridis describes as reason’s power to disclose new possibilities for thought and action (Kompridis 2006, 235). The aesthetic judgment of laughter, in short, stimulates a free transformation of the ideas of reason.

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this section, how does interpreting laughter as the most basic aesthetic judgment in Kant impact our understanding of the role of aesthetic judgment in his philosophical system? The aesthetic judgment of laughter unites nature and freedom in a very particular way. If the paradoxical pleasure of the sublime consists in how the contrapurposiveness of nature reveals the strength of the subject’s faculty of reason, then the paradoxical pleasure of laughter consists in how the contrapurposiveness of a joke stimulates reason in its free activity. The joke is purposive from the perspective of reason because the laughter it generates prompts reason to freely transform its principles for thinking about and

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15 This is precisely what Godfrey had in mind when he suggested that in laughter “reason encourages us to look beyond the given to the merely possible, contingent, and impossible, and to contemplate them in imagination” (Godfrey 1937, 131).

16 In addition to revealing an incipient Nietzscheanism in Kant’s aesthetic philosophy, the argument that laughter prompts reason to freely transform its ideas can be read as drawing Kant closer to a certain type of Hegelianism. Indeed, many commentators have identified Hegelian elements in the arguments of the mature Kant (Hance 1998; Zammito 1992; Pillow 2000; Michaelson 1979; Riley 1983; Yovel 1980).
acting in the sensible world. Aesthetic judgment thus mediates between nature and freedom not simply by assuring the subject that the purposes of nature can harmonize with those of freedom (as in the beautiful) or inspiring the subject to act freely in an inhospitable natural world (as in the sublime), but by actually enacting reason’s power of free self-transformation by means of a sensible stimulus ostensibly at odds with the subject. Precisely because laughter is the experience of reason’s freedom in an inhospitable sensible world, an account of aesthetic judgment that begins with laughter showcases how an empirical world not predisposed to the subject can nevertheless advance his or her rational vocation to think and act freely.

We find the aesthetic judgment of laughter at play in what Kant considers to be the paradigmatic exercise of reason in its freedom: the practice of critique. In the Preface to the CPR, Kant declares the task of critical philosophy to be one of judgment (Kant 2009b, Axi–xii, Axxi). Reason determines its proper capacities and limits by instituting “a court of justice” between its mutually incompatible yet equally necessary metaphysical theses (i.e., antinomies) (Axi, A420–25/B448–53). Reason settles these disputes by freeing itself from the transcendental illusion that occasions them (namely reason’s propensity to confuse subjective principles of empirical knowledge for knowledge of objects as they are in themselves) (A296–309/B351–66; cf. Grier 2001). In “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” Kant explains that in the absence of empirical predisposition, the aesthetic judgment of laughter generates an a priori principle that nature, by means of its contrapurposiveness with respect to the subject’s power of judgment, is purposive with respect to reason. This principle of reflective judgment unifies nature and freedom by demonstrating how sensible presentations that resist cognition can nevertheless promote the subject’s interest in thinking and acting freely. To be clear, this a priori principle does not replace those principles provided by the beautiful and the sublime, but it expresses a crucial way in which reflective judgment proceeds once we admit the importance of laughter as a form of aesthetic judgment in the CPJ.
CHAPTER THREE

of objective criteria, reason judges the metaphysical assertions it is justified in making by means of a feeling:

One can easily guess that it will be a concern of pure reason to guide its use when it wants to leave familiar objects (of experience) behind, extending itself beyond all the bounds of experience […] for then it is no longer in a position to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to objective grounds of cognition, but solely to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to a subjective ground of differentiation in the determination of its own faculty of judgment. This subjective means still remaining is nothing other than reason’s feeling of its own need. (Kant 2001, 8:136; italics added)

Reason “orients” itself solely by way of a subjective feeling. From the very beginning there exists an irreducibly aesthetic dimension to Kantian critique.

The Second Introduction to the CPJ makes this connection between critique and aesthetic judgment explicit. Here Kant emphasizes the centrality of aesthetic judgment to the critical enterprise as a whole:

the aesthetic power of judgment contributes nothing to the cognition of its objects and thus must be counted only as part of the critique of the judging subject and its cognitive faculties, insofar as these are capable of a priori principles […] which is the propaedeutic of all philosophy. (Kant 2000, 194)

The subject determines what her reason allows her to know and do by means of an aesthetic judgment. As Lyotard notes, “aesthetic judgment conceals […] a secret more important than that of doctrine, the secret of the ‘manner’ (rather than the method) in which critical thought proceeds in general. […] The mode of critical thought should by definition be purely reflective […]. Aesthetic judgment reveals reflection in its most ‘autonomous’ state, naked, so to speak” (Lyotard 1994, 6). The CPJ’s Analytic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment thus serves as a meditation on the possibility of critique in general.
If there exists an irreducibly aesthetic dimension to Kantian critique, and if laughter is the most basic form of aesthetic judgment in Kant, then we would expect to find important parallels between the aesthetic judgment of laughter and Kant’s critical method. These parallels appear quite readily. In laughter an illusion generated by a joke occasions a discord between the cognitive faculties, and this discord stimulates a free self-transformation within the subject’s power of reason (Sections III–V). Similarly, in the practice of critique more generally, an illusion (the mind’s propensity to confuse subjective principles of thought for objective knowledge about the world) occasions a conflict within reason that prompts a new self-understanding of its capacities and bounds (Kant 2009b, A497–507/B525–35). Driven to laughter by the “joke” played on it by its own transcendental illusion (Kant 2001, 8:135), reason freely attains enlightened self-knowledge. In both laughter and critique, a discord between the cognitive faculties occasioned by an illusion prompts a free self-transformation within the power of reason. To be certain, the illusions that spark the judgments of laughter and critique are very different: the former is a contingent, sensible, and inconsequential joke shared among dinner party guests, while the latter is a necessary, transcendental, and intractable illusion generated by reason itself. However, the manner in which judgment proceeds in laughter and critique is identical. Laughter constitutes the modality of aesthetic judgment at the heart of Kantian critical philosophy.

VI. Bringing the Body Back In: Thinking More and Less in Laughter

Reading Kant’s account of laughter within the context of his critical-transcendental philosophy has proven to be quite fruitful. By interpreting laughter as a form of aesthetic judgment involving a pleasure of reflection rather than a pleasure of sense, we have – among other things – unearthed its capacity to prompt a free transformation of the subject’s ideas of
reason. However, an investigation that seeks to determine how Kant illuminates the relationship between laughter and reason cannot stop here. Despite the many resources Kant offers for conceiving of laughter in transcendental terms (i.e., as an aesthetic judgment), he repeatedly and consistently argues that laughter is a mere affect. Laughter, Kant writes, is “an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing”; it serves “the promotion of the business of life in the body […] in a word the feeling of health” (Kant 2000, 332; see also 2006, 255, 261). Although a “Kantian” account of laughter need not constrain itself to what Kant actually says about laughter, it cannot simply ignore or contradict these claims. I likewise conclude by considering what Kant’s arguments about laughter as an affect, when placed into conversation with the critical-transcendental interpretation of laughter offered above, reveal about laughter’s role in the rational life of the human subject.

According to Kant, an affect is a feeling of pleasure or displeasure that inhibits the subject’s capacity for rational self-reflection. Affect is “that movement of the mind that makes it incapable of engaging in free consideration of principles, in order to determine itself in accordance with them” (Kant 2000, 272). Unlike the pleasure of reflection taken in an aesthetic judgment, an affect is a pleasure of sense that “shut[s] out the sovereignty of reason” (Kant 2006, 251). If laughter is indeed an affect, then its relationship with reason is the exact opposite of what we discovered earlier. Rather than prompting reason to “think more” (i.e., to freely transform its principles for thought and action), laughter arrests and inhibits reason’s free activity: it makes reason think less. Kant is definitely on to something here, as we have already found that laughter often functions to entrench subjects’ existing theoretical and practical ideas. For instance, laughter at a TV sitcom can distract subjects from critical thought and action, while racist and
sexist jokes can produce laughter that bolsters an audience’s prejudices. (Kant’s own joke about the Indian and the bottle of beer exemplifies this tendency. This deeply colonialist and racist quip almost certainly reinforced its listeners’ conceptions about the colonized subject’s supposed triviality and inferior intelligence.) As an affect, laughter arrests reason’s capacity for free self-reflection and prompts reason to recommit itself to its ideas.

What are we to make of the fact that *CPJ* §54 allows for two diametrically opposed interpretations of laughter’s relationship to reason? Is laughter an aesthetic judgment or an affect? Is it a pleasure of reflection or a pleasure of sense? Does it prompt or inhibit the free activity of reason? In short: does laughter make reason think more or think less? I argue that the genius of Kant’s account consists in how – by allowing these two competing views of laughter’s relationship to reason to coexist on the same conceptual and philosophical terrain – it demonstrates the extent to which laughter’s cognitive and affective dimensions are articulated in and through one another. That is, laughter’s capacity to make reason “think more” proceeds through an affective stimulation that undermines this free activity of reason, while its power to make reason “think less” originates in and then reacts back upon a free, transformative activity between the subject’s cognitive faculties. Kant captures the mutual entanglement of the cognitive and the affective in laughter (i.e., laughter’s status as aesthetic judgment and affect) in what are ultimately the most suggestive and consequential lines of *CPJ* §54:

This very transformation [of a heightened expectation into nothing in laughter], which is certainly nothing enjoyable for the understanding, is nevertheless indirectly enjoyable and, for a moment, very lively. The cause must thus consist in the influence of the representation on the body and its reciprocal effect on the mind. (Kant 2000, 332–33)
For Kant, laughter involves a mutually reciprocal relation between cognition and affect, the transcendental and the anthropological, “thinking more” and “thinking less.” There is not “good,” “reason-stimulating” laughter on the one hand, and “bad,” “reason-inhibiting” laughter on the other. There is only a single, irreducibly duplicitous experience/event (or aesthetic judgment/affect) of laughter that makes reason “think more” through “thinking less” and “think less” by “thinking more.” Kant, in brief, advances an intensely dialectical account of the relationship between laughter and human reason.

This account reveals how we cannot understand the opportunities and dangers that laughter presents to reason in isolation from one another. On the one hand, the necessarily affective dimension of the free transformation of reason’s ideas prompted by laughter leaves reason at constant risk of sliding into a thoughtless repetition of these ideas. As evinced by the dialectic of liberal laughter, even the most ostensibly subversive jokes can give rise to new forms of dogmatism. The Islamophobia of Charlie Hebdo and the increasingly formulaic quality of Trump-era liberal political satire illustrate this danger. On the other hand, the necessarily cognitive dimension of the entrenchment of reason’s ideas that occurs in laughter ensures that it can always prompt new transformations of a subject’s principles for thought and action. Laughter at even the most racist or sexist joke can achieve ironic distance from the joke’s intended or received meanings and stimulate unexpected ideas and effects. For example, Chris Rock’s

To be clear, I am not arguing, like Hounsokou, that laughter’s status as both a pleasure of sense and a pleasure of reflection (i.e., as both an affect and an aesthetic judgment) accounts for its capacity to unify the domains of nature and freedom. As described earlier (Section IV), Kant insists that only aesthetic judgment – that is, a pleasure of reflection – can do this. My earlier transcendental reading of laughter as an aesthetic judgment (Section V) explains how this unification occurs. The present section examines what laughter’s dual status as a pleasure of reflection and a pleasure of sense reveals more generally about its role in the rational life of the human subject.

In the Aristotelian idiom introduced earlier, Kant shows that the human logos overcomes and entrenches itself through the phōnē of laughter.
famous “Niggas vs. Black People” sketch may at first generate laughter among white audiences that functions to reinforce their racial stereotypes, but as Lester Spence has argued, this laughter may in turn prompt greater reflection and discussion over how a racialized social order draws and maintains boundaries of political care (Spence 2012). When read within the context of his broader critical-transcendental philosophy, Kant’s account of laughter accentuates how laughter’s thought-transforming and thought-arresting capacities continuously entangle, exceed, and undermine one another. By illuminating how laughter makes reason think more and think less, Kant heightens our sensitivity to the opportunities and dangers that laughter presents to the human subject.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE ENTHUSIASM OF LAUGHTER: KANT, DISSENSUS COMMUNIS, AND DEMOCRACY

[In laughter,] the rogue within ourselves is exposed. (Kant 1987, 335)

Laughter [...] indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly adopts the changing forms of the disturbance. It, also, is a froth with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter. (Bergson 1999, 179)

The examination of Kant’s account of laughter offered in Chapter Three focused on laughter’s role in the rational life of the human subject. Kant demonstrates how laughter simultaneously makes reason think more and less – that is, how laughter prompts and inhibits the free transformation of reason’s principles for thought and action. While this reading of CPJ §54 undoubtedly carries important implications for politics (e.g., it suggests that experiences/events of laughter can both transform and entrench the norms grounding a political order1), it does not theorize Kant’s account of laughter on an explicitly political register. As is well known, political theorists in recent decades have turned to the Third Critique as a resource for grasping the aesthetic dimensions of political life, the political dimensions of aesthetic life, and the political implications of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy (Adorno 1997; Arendt 1968; 1992; 2007; de Duve 2015; Derrida 1981; Ferguson 1999; Lyotard 1988b; 1994; 2009; Panagia 2009; Rancière 2004a; 2006b; 2009a; Zerilli 2005b; 2016; Žižek 1989). The present chapter places the reading of Kantian laughter advanced in Chapter Three into conversation with this rich, yet often contentious literature on the politics of Kantian aesthetics in order to determine how CPJ §54 illuminates laughter’s role in the political life of the human subject.

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1 Chapter Three can likewise inform a practice of critical theory like that advanced by Nikolas Kompridis which focuses on reason’s ability to disclose new possibilities for thinking and acting in a social order (Kompridis 2006, 235–38).
The concept of *enthusiasm*, which Kant discusses in the *CPJ*, the *Anthropology*, and his 1798 text *The Contest of Faculties* (*CF*), has been central to attempts to theorize the political significance of his aesthetic philosophy. In *CF* Kant argues that the enthusiasm felt by spectators of the French Revolution indicates the existence of a moral disposition within the human race (Kant 2009e, 182). Following Kant’s suggestions in the *CPJ* and *CF* that enthusiasm is a form of aesthetic judgment (2000, 272–75; 2009e, 182), political theorists have explored how enthusiasm constitutes the crucial hinge concept between his aesthetic and political philosophies. A first group comprised of Hannah Arendt and her followers understands enthusiasm as a judgment of taste (Arendt 1968; 1992; 2007; Beiner and Nedelsky 2001; Degryse 2011; Markell 2014; Villa 1992; Zerilli 2005b). For these commentators, Kant’s discussion of revolutionary enthusiasm signals how the beautiful models a practice of political judgment oriented toward intersubjective persuasion and the creation of a vibrant public realm. As Arendt writes, “the activity of taste decides how this world, independent of utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it” (Arendt 1968, 222). Meanwhile, a second, more fragmented group conceives of revolutionary enthusiasm as a judgment of the sublime (Clewis 2009; Lyotard 1988b; 1994; 2009; Žižek 1989). Jean-François Lyotard, for example, emphasizes how feelings of the sublime like enthusiasm interrupt sensible experience and serve as a “call” to engage in a critical, postmodern politics: “the sublime feeling […] is the subjective state critical thought must feel in its being carried to its limits […]. The absolute is never there, never given in a presentation, but it is always ‘present’ as a call to think beyond the ‘there’” (Lyotard 1994, 150).
The current chapter interprets the revolutionary enthusiasm described by Kant not as the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful or the sublime, but rather as the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter. As I explain in greater detail below, the Kantian text supports – even encourages – this reading by identifying enthusiasm as both an aesthetic judgment and an affect. I place this conception of enthusiasm as laughter into conversation with the accounts of the politics of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy offered by Arendt, Lyotard, Jacques Rancière, and others in order to (a) determine the role laughter plays in the political life of the human subject and (b) reconsider the political possibilities of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy.

I advance two arguments along these lines. First, laughter as conceived by Kant participates in politics by transforming sensus communis, or the shared sense of what is aesthetically communicable among subjects prior to concepts, into dissensus communis. The confrontation between the imagination’s aesthetic ideas and the understanding’s concepts in laughter interrupts and recomposes how subjects see and hear the world together in common. This dissensus communis is the source of great democratic opportunity and danger. While laughter mobilizes the democratic logic of equality, or the absence of a natural foundation for rule, to make possible the emergence of previously unintelligible subject positions, this logic can also function to re-inscribe and intensify existing structures and hierarchies of rule. Second, reading Kantian enthusiasm as laughter challenges how we understand the political stakes of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy. Interpreting enthusiasm as laughter historicizes, politicizes, and democratizes Kant’s key aesthetic categories so as to yield a democratic political vision of dissensus communis. An attention to the politics of Kant’s account of laughter (rather than the
beautiful or the sublime) reveals that Kant provides the resources for a much more subtle and
critical theory of democracy than has been appreciated by even his most radical readers.

The chapter proceeds in five sections. Section I introduces Kant’s concept of
revolutionary enthusiasm and its status as both an aesthetic judgment and an affect. Section II
describes how Arendt and Lyotard make this concept central to their studies of the political
stakes of Kant’s aesthetics. Section III re-conceives enthusiasm as the aesthetic judgment/affect
of laughter and argues that the political significance of laughter consists in how it transforms
sensus communis into dissensus communis. Section IV illustrates how laughter operates
politically in this way through two examples: the Chinese government’s 2014 “ban on puns” and
comedian John Oliver’s 2015 “exposé” on NCAA college basketball. Section V concludes by
turning to the interpretations of the CPJ offered by Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia to
reflect on laughter’s relationship to democratic politics and Kant’s status as a democratic theorist.

I. Enthusiasm

Kant’s essay in The Contest of Faculties, “A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question:
‘Is the Human Race Continually Improving?’,” has attracted considerable attention from
theorists interested in the political stakes of his aesthetic philosophy (Arendt 1992; Beiner 1992;
Carroll 1984; Clewis 2009; Foucault 1986; Habermas 1994; Lyotard 1988b; 1994; 2009; Zerilli
2005b). Kant argues that an affirmative response to the question posed in the essay’s title
requires identifying a historical event that signals the existence of a moral disposition in
humanity (Kant 2009e, 181). If humanity is disposed toward morality, then we can hope for its
continual progress toward the rational ideal of a republican political order (184). Kant points to
the enthusiasm of spectators of the French Revolution as just such an event:
We are concerned here only with the attitude of the onlookers as it reveals itself in public while the drama of great political changes is taking place: for they express universal yet disinterested sympathy for one set of protagonists against their adversaries [...]. Their reaction (because of its universality) proves that mankind as a whole shares a certain character in common, and it also proves (because of its disinterestedness) that man has a moral character, or at least the makings of one. [...] This revolution has aroused in the hearts and desires of all spectators who are not themselves caught up in it a sympathy which borders almost on enthusiasm, although the very utterance of this sympathy was fraught with danger. It cannot therefore have been caused by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race.² (182)

According to Kant, widespread enthusiasm for the French Revolution signals that humanity is the cause and author of its moral improvement, and it allows us to predict that humanity will progress indefinitely (181). Considered in isolation, this argument is perplexing. Given that the moral law strictly prohibits revolution (Kant 2009a; 2009c, 81; 2009d, 126–127), why would enthusiasm on behalf of a revolution signify the existence of a moral disposition in humanity? Kant’s analysis of enthusiasm in the Third Critique helps answer this question.

The CPJ’s discussion of enthusiasm places the historical-political question considered in CF firmly on aesthetic terrain. Kant analyzes enthusiasm in the “General Remark” that immediately follows the Analytic of the Sublime. He explains that enthusiasm is an affect felt on behalf of moral ideas: “If the idea of the good is accompanied by affect [as its effect], this affect is called enthusiasm” (Kant 1987, 272). The spectators of the French Revolution are not enthusiastic for revolutionary acts as such (which are morally prohibited), but rather for the moral idea of a republican political order that the revolution strives to achieve. Kant writes: “true enthusiasm is always directed exclusively towards the ideal, particularly towards that which is purely moral (such as the concept of right)” (Kant 2009e, 183). Although enthusiasm is felt on

² Although Kant describes the spectators’ attitude as a sympathy that “borders almost on enthusiasm,” (Kant 2009, 182; italics mine), he unequivocally identifies this sympathy as “enthusiasm” three times on the next page (183).
behalf of moral ideas, because it is an affect it cannot garner the approval of the moral law. As we saw in Chapter Three, an affect “is that movement of the mind that makes it incapable of engaging in free consideration of principles, in order to determine itself in accordance with them. Thus it cannot in any way merit a satisfaction of reason” (Kant 2000, 272; see also 2006, 251–52). Kant, in brief, conceives of enthusiasm as a morally problematic affect felt on behalf of morally laudable ideas.

Kant argues that in addition to being an affect, enthusiasm is also a modality of the aesthetic judgment of the sublime. He writes: “The idea of the good with affect is called enthusiasm. This state of mind seems to be sublime” (Kant 2000, 272). Enthusiasm is a modality of the sublime because reason stimulates the imagination to represent an ultimately unrepresentable idea (that of a republican political order) to intuition. The impasse reached between the imagination and reason functions to inspire the subject in her moral vocation: “Enthusiasm is aesthetically sublime, because it is a stretching of the powers through ideas, which give the mind a momentum that acts far more powerfully and persistently than the impetus given by sensory representations” (272). As sublime, enthusiasm presupposes the presence of moral ideas and emboldens the subject to fulfill her moral duty. Kant writes:

[T]he imagination, although it certainly finds nothing beyond the sensible to which it can attach itself, nevertheless feels itself to be unbounded precisely because of this elimination of the limits of sensibility; and that separation is thus a presentation of the infinite, which for that very reason can never be anything other than a merely negative presentation, which nevertheless expands the soul. (274)

To return to Kant’s discussion of the French Revolution, although the spectators do not condone the actions of the revolutionaries, their enthusiasm is a judgment of the sublime that inspires

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3 As Robert Clewis notes, Kant understands enthusiasm as itself a judgment of the sublime rather than merely an affect that elicits the judgment of the sublime (Clewis 2009, 89–90).
them to achieve the idea of a republican political order. This enthusiasm, Kant concludes, signals
the existence of a moral disposition that ensures humanity will progress indefinitely.

Enthusiasm, like so many of the concepts we have encountered in our study of Kant, occupies an ambiguous status in his aesthetic and moral philosophy. As Clewis notes,
aesthetic enthusiasm is deeply ambivalent. Although it is grounded on, and a response to, the idea of morally good, as an affect it involves a momentary inhibition of the rule of reason. Like the sublime, aesthetic enthusiasm reveals freedom. However, like any feeling [...] qua feeling it does not have any moral worth. (Clewis 2009, 183)

On the one hand, Kant identifies enthusiasm as an affect, or a pleasure of sense that inhibits rational reflection. Indeed, Kant goes to great lengths to differentiate the affect of enthusiasm (Enthusiasmus) from the passion of fanaticism (Schwärmerei) (Kant 2000, 275). While an affect’s temporary interruption of practical reason can function to promote a subject’s capacity to act morally, a passion corrupts the power of desire so thoroughly as to render free moral action impossible (272). On the other hand, Kant describes enthusiasm as “aesthetically sublime” – that is, as a modality of the judgment of the sublime (272). Enthusiasm is sublime because it launches the faculties of reason and the imagination into a discordant relationship that motivates the subject to fulfill her moral duty.

Kant’s characterization of enthusiasm as both an affect and an aesthetic judgment is deeply perplexing, as the entire Third Critique is premised on the existence of a fundamental difference between affect (a pleasure of sense) and aesthetic judgment (a pleasure of reflection). Kant opens CPJ §54 (the section containing his account of laughter) by reiterating this distinction: “between that which pleases merely in the judgment and that which gratifies

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4 John Zammito explains that Kant’s efforts to differentiate the affect of enthusiasm from the passion of fanaticism stemmed from his deep aversion to what he considered to be the fanaticism of his period’s religious figures and Romanticist philosophers, especially Herder (Zammito 1992, 33–44).
(pleases in sensation) there is, as we have often shown, an essential difference” (330). As I demonstrated in Chapter Three, however, the account of laughter that follows utterly demolishes – albeit covertly – this “essential” distinction between affect and aesthetic judgment. Nevertheless, Kant’s reflections on enthusiasm constitute his most explicit attempt to theorize this relationship between affect and aesthetic judgment – that is, to think through the paradox of an aesthetic judgment that exerts sensuous affects and an affect that operates on the level of free cognitive reflection. Consequently, the concept of enthusiasm will be of great help in determining how laughter participates in politics, just as the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter will be of great aid in determining the political stakes of his reflections on enthusiasm.

II. The Politics of Enthusiasm

Hannah Arendt and Jean-François Lyotard have offered perhaps the most insightful and influential interpretations of the political significance of Kant’s claims about revolutionary enthusiasm. Their readings provide the necessary foundation for grasping (a) how Kant illuminates the relationship between laughter and politics and (b) how his account of laughter reveals the political possibilities of his aesthetic philosophy. I begin with Arendt.

Arendt

Arendt’s Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy establishes a series of important links between revolutionary enthusiasm, the beautiful, and political judgment in Kant (Arendt 1992). Focusing on Kant’s assertion that the sympathy of the spectators of the French Revolution is “universal yet disinterested” (Kant 2009e, 182), Arendt argues that these spectators make a kind of judgment of taste on the events they witness. She writes that judgment
arises from “a merely contemplative pleasure or inactive delight.” This “feeling of contemplative pleasure is called taste,” and the *Critique of Judgment* was originally called *Critique of Taste*. […] We shall see that [Kant’s] final position on the French Revolution, an event that played a central role in his old age […] was decided by this attitude of the mere spectator, of those “who are not engaged in the game themselves” but only follow it with “wishful, passionate participation,” which certainly did not mean, least of all for Kant, that they now wanted to make a revolution; their sympathy arose from mere “contemplative pleasure and delight.” (Arendt 1992, 15)

Arendt contends that subjects judge political events in the same way they judge beautiful objects: reflectively (i.e., without a cognitive, prudential, or moral rule) and disinterestedly (i.e., such that they can expect all others to agree with their judgment) (71–73).

According to Arendt, the validity of a political judgment consists in its appeal to what Kant calls “*sensus communis*” (75; 1968, 222). *Sensus communis* is a notoriously complex and controversial concept in the history of philosophy, and Kant’s treatment of it is even more so. The notion of a *sensus communis* – which has in different historical periods referred to a shared body of knowledge; a “sixth sense” that coordinates the impressions of the other five senses; a type of practical wisdom; and a universally shared feeling for others – finds its origins in Aristotle but becomes the object of sustained philosophical attention only in the eighteenth century with essays by Vico and Shaftesbury (Boyson 2012, 25–31). Considering *sensus communis* within the context of his aesthetic philosophy, Kant offers a characteristically transcendental interpretation. He claims that because a judgment of taste is grounded in nothing more than a harmonious accord between the faculties, the subject can demand that all others feel the same pleasure in reflecting on an object: “One solicits assent from everyone else because one

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5 Debate about the meaning and significance of “*sensus communis*” in Kant is long-standing and has attracted commentary from scholars in multiple disciplines. Some important voices are Arendt 1992; Beiner 1992; Degryse 2011; Ferrara 2008; Guyer 1997, 248–73; Lyotard 1988a; 1994; Makkreel 1990, 154–71; Norris 1996; Zerilli 2005b; 2016.
has a ground for it that is common to all” (Kant 2000, 237). Judgments of taste presuppose the
existence of a sense about matters of taste that is shared by all subjects:

Only under the presupposition that there is a common sense (by which, however, we do
not mean any external sense but rather the effect of the free play of our cognitive
powers), only under the presupposition of such a common sense, I say, can the judgment
of taste be made. (238)

Sensus communis is a subjective sense about what is aesthetically communicable, and it furnishes
no objective rules for judgment. We say that a subject “has taste” when she judges in accordance
with sensus communis (i.e., in such a way that her judgment can be communicated universally).
Kant writes: “taste can be called sensus communis […]. One could even define taste as the
faculty for judging that which makes our feeling in a given representation universally
communicable without the mediation of a concept” (295). For Kant, sensus communis describes
the subjective capacity to judge what is aesthetically communicable prior to concepts.

Arendt argues that Kant’s conception of sensus communis reveals the political stakes of
his Analytic of the Beautiful. A political judgment – like the one made by the spectators of the
French Revolution – resembles a judgment of taste in that it claims universal validity without
appealing to determinate concepts. When we judge politically and aesthetically, we demand that
all others agree with us despite the absence of a concept or rule that can prove that our judgment
is correct. Arendt explains that we can make these sorts of judgments thanks to sensus communis:

“sensus communis is what judgment appeals to in everyone, and it is this possible appeal that
gives judgments their special validity” (Arendt 1992, 72). The subject who judges politically
reflects on whether her pleasure or displeasure can be communicated universally. Would all
others feel the same way when presented with this object or event? Because appealing to sensus
communis never “proves” anything, Arendt insists that persuasion is the mode of discourse proper to political and aesthetic judgment (72). Practices of persuasion grounded in sensus communis (or the subjective sense that everyone should – but cannot be forced to – agree) generate a common world between subjects. Arendt writes: “Judging is one, if not the most, important activity in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass” (Arendt 1968, 221). For Arendt, the enthusiastic spectators of the Revolution exemplify a practice of political judgment that generates and sustains a vibrant public realm. She concludes that “when one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one’s bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a Weltbetrachter, a world spectator” (Arendt 1992, 75–76).

Linda Zerilli has dedicated over a decade over scholarship to elucidating Arendt’s conception of political judgment and its relationship to Kant’s aesthetics, and the preceding account is indebted to her careful and illuminating readings (Zerilli 2005a; 2005b; 2016). Before moving on to Lyotard, I would like to note a friendly amendment that Zerilli offers to Arendt’s approach. Zerilli emphasizes how the imagination’s freedom as a presentational power in Kant (i.e., its creative production of aesthetic ideas (Chapter Three, Sections III–IV)) means that aesthetic/political judgment employs sensus communis not so much as a “guide” for judgment (Arendt 1992, 75), but rather as a capacity for persuading others to see their common world in new ways. Zerilli writes: “Far from guaranteeing agreement in advance, sensus communis allows differences of perspective to emerge and become visible. Sensus communis is not a static concept grounded in eternal truths but a creative force that generates our sense of reality” (Zerilli 2005b, 173). There exists an intrinsic dynamism and openness to sensus communis, and the shared sense
of what counts as aesthetically communicable itself changes by means of persuasive practices of judgment: “If the world is the space in which things become public, then judging is a practice that alters what we will count as such” (179). Zerilli explains that the enthusiastic spectators of the French Revolution judge events “in their freedom” (that is, imaginatively and not by means of concepts) such that sensus communis changes.

Kant’s judgment of the French Revolution expands our sense of the real, for it refuses to judge on the basis of victory and defeat, of any interest or end whatsoever. The judgment that at once expands our sense of reality and affirms freedom is possible only once the faculties are “in free play,” as Kant puts it. Only where the imagination is not restrained by a concept (given by the understanding) or the moral law (given by reason) can such a judgment come to pass. (178)

For Zerilli, the revolutionary enthusiasm identified by Kant exemplifies a practice of political judgment oriented toward imaginatively expanding what counts as aesthetically communicable.

Lyotard

Jean-François Lyotard also believes that the concept of enthusiasm is essential for grasping the political significance of Kant’s aesthetics. But whereas Arendt interprets revolutionary enthusiasm in terms of the beautiful, Lyotard interprets it under the rubric of the sublime (Lyotard 1988b, 161–71; 1994, 153–56; 2009, 29–41). Focusing on Kant’s description of enthusiasm as “aesthetically sublime” (Kant 2000, 272), Lyotard argues that the enthusiasm of the spectators of the French Revolution is an example of the aesthetic judgment of the sublime. In order to understand how Lyotard conceives of the relationship between enthusiasm and politics, we must first review his account of the politics of the sublime.

Lyotard contends that the Kantian sublime is the philosophical precursor of his own concept of differend. A differend is a dispute where one party lacks the linguistic means to
express the wrong done to it by another party. “In the differend,” Lyotard explains, “something ‘asks’ to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away” (Lyotard 1988b, 13). For example, there is a differend between a corporation and a wage-laborer in a capitalist legal system. While the laborer can make a legally actionable claim about payment of wages or unsafe working conditions, there exists no mechanism for her to redress the underlying injustice: the buying and selling of her labor power to generate surplus value (9–10). Politics, Lyotard argues, involves “bearing witness” to the feeling of not being able to express a wrong by inventing forms of discourse that are capable of doing so: “What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them” (13). According to Lyotard, the Kantian sublime is the paradigmatic case of differend. In the sublime, the mind’s power of representation (the imagination) and its power of ideas (reason) enter into a conflict that cannot be resolved for lack of a common idiom. Reason issues an ultimately unanswerable “call” for the imagination to represent the former’s essentially un-representable ideas to intuition (Lyotard 1994, 150). Lyotard writes:

The object that is presented to reason in the phenomenon is never “big” enough with respect to the object of its Idea, and for the imagination the latter is always too “big” to be presentable. The differend cannot be resolved. But it can be felt as such, as differend. This is the sublime feeling. (233–34).

For Lyotard, the sublime is the feeling associated with all differends: something must be articulated in language that can not be with the means available. He writes:

What is discovered [in the sublime] is not only the infinite import of Ideas […] but also the destination of the subject, “our” destination, which is to supply a presentation for the unpresentable, and therefore, in regard to Ideas, to exceed everything that can be presented. (Lyotard 1988b, 166)
The sublime, Lyotard concludes, provides the model for a political project that seeks to invent idioms capable of articulating and redressing previously inexpressible wrongs.

Lyotard believes that Kant’s focus on the enthusiasm of the spectators of the French Revolution reflects an attempt to theorize this politics of the sublime within the context of a concrete historical event (Lyotard 1998b, 165–71; 1994, 153–56; 2009). By virtue of enthusiasm’s connections to the sublime, Lyotard explains that CF contains “perhaps all of Kant’s thinking on the historico-political” (Lyotard 2009, 28). The spectators’ enthusiasm is the sublime feeling of a “call” to make their moral idea of a republican political order an empirical reality:

The enthusiasm that publicly betrays itself on occasion of the French Revolution […] because it is an extreme sublime feeling […] is able to display that humanity is constantly progressing toward the better. […] It constitutes an “as-if” presentation of the Idea of civil society and even of cosmopolitan society, and thus the Idea of morality, right where that Idea nevertheless cannot be presented, within experience. (39)

Lyotard goes on to contend that in postmodernity, subjects feel a “new kind of sublime” that intensifies the logic of Kantian enthusiasm (63). Postmodern politics involves critically engaging a multiplicity of differends – that is, heeding the sublime feeling in multiple domains by inventing idioms that can articulate previously inarticulable wrongs. Lyotard writes: “Perhaps reflective responsibility today also consists in discerning, respecting, and making respected the differends, in establishing the incommensurability of the transcendental exigencies proper to heterogenous phrase families, and to find other languages for what cannot be expressed within existing languages” (67). Whereas Arendt believes that the revolutionary enthusiasm identified
by Kant models a politics of persuasive judgment and world-building, Lyotard understands it as informing a disruptive, postmodern politics of “bearing witness” to differends.6

III. The Enthusiasm of Laughter

Arendt and Lyotard have shaped how an entire generation of political theorists understand Kant’s political philosophy. Challenging the conventional wisdom that Kant’s political thought is merely an extension of his moral philosophy (“for all politics must bend the knee before right” (Kant 2009d, 125)),7 Arendt and Lyotard demonstrate how his aesthetic philosophy entails its own distinct vision of politics.8 Despite these accomplishments, however, both Arendt’s and Lyotard’s approaches suffer from a key exegetical weakness. As noted earlier, Kant understands enthusiasm as both an aesthetic judgment and an affect – that is, as a pleasure of reflection and a pleasure of sense. Consequently, conceiving of enthusiasm in terms of the aesthetic judgments of the beautiful or the sublime yields a limited account of this concept’s political significance. I argue that laughter – an aesthetic judgment that is also an affect – provides a stronger framework for grasping the vision of politics that emerges in Kant’s

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6 Zerilli’s reflections on Arendt suggest that these two political projects might not be as different as they at first appear. If Arendtian practices of judgment “expand our sense of what we can communicate,” then they “bear witness to the differend,” or to what remains inexpressible in language (Zerilli 2005b, 180; Lyotard 1988b, xiii). Where Arendt and Lyotard part ways is on the possibility of building a “common” world. For Lyotard, the incommensurability of language games in postmodernity renders such a vision illusory (Zerilli 2005b, 181).

7 Such a view emerges in Kant’s so-called “political writings,” namely Perpetual Peace (2009d), The Metaphysics of Morals (2008b), and “On the Common Saying: ‘This may be true in theory, but it does not apply in practice’” (2009c).

8 The term “vision of politics” comes from Sheldon Wolin (Wolin 2004, 17–20). Wolin argues that all political theories entail an imaginative vision of the basic presuppositions and ideal organization of political life. Imagination serves as “the theorist’s means for understanding a world he can never ‘know’ in an intimate way,” and it is “the medium for expressing the fundamental values of the theorist” (19). Rather than seeking to elucidate Kant’s own vision of politics (which, as described above, emerges in his so-called “political writings”), this chapter follows Arendt and Lyotard in seeking to uncover an alternative, unstated vision of politics that is incipient in his aesthetic philosophy. I likewise do not understand a theorist’s stated preferences and ethos as exhaustive of the political vision made possible by his or her work, and I pursue the alternative visions that the latter makes possible.
reflects on revolutionary enthusiasm. The present section explores what an interpretation of enthusiasm as laughter (rather than the beautiful or the sublime) reveals about (a) laughter’s role in the political life of the human subject and (b) the political possibilities of Kant’s aesthetics.

What would it mean to conceive of revolutionary enthusiasm as the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter? If the spectators of the French Revolution are laughing rather than engaging in a judgment of taste or judgment of the sublime, then what is the political significance of their enthusiasm? While Arendt demonstrates that revolutionary enthusiasm suggests a practice of political judgment oriented toward persuasive appeals to sensus communis and Lyotard shows that it suggests a disruptive politics of bearing witness to the differend, the enthusiasm of laughter yields an alternative vision of politics. As we saw in Chapter Three, laughter applies the sublime’s logic of discord to the cognitive faculties of the imagination and the understanding at play in judgments of taste. Grasping the political stakes of the enthusiasm of laughter thus requires attending to the two key concepts featured in Arendt’s and Lyotard’s respective appropriations of the beautiful and the sublime: sensus communis and disruption.

The status of sensus communis in the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter is highly uncertain. On the one hand, Kant explains that the dinner party guests who laugh at one another’s jokes are “men of taste (aesthetically united)” (Kant 2006, 278). They possess and employ sensus communis, or a shared capacity for judging what is laughable (and beautiful, etc.). They all enjoy laughter at the same jokes because they all see and hear the world in basically the same way. (In this sense they are highly akin to Shaftesbury’s “gentlemen and friends who know one another

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9 Henri Bergson’s decidedly Kantian claim that laughter arises only from the perspective of the “disinterested spectator” (Bergson 1999, 10) lends further support to reading enthusiasm as laughter. As noted above, Kant describes enthusiasm as a form of “universal, yet disinterested sympathy” enjoyed by “spectators” of the French Revolution (Kant 2009e, 182). In Bergson’s account, the laughing subject is a disinterested spectator who occupies the universal position of “society” against the “absent-minded” or “eccentric” individual (Bergson 1999, 22–23).
perfectly well” (Shaftesbury 1999, 36). On the other hand, Kant suggests that the dinner party guests do not employ sensus communis when they laugh. As described in Chapter Three, rather than being in the disinterested, “free play” which can be attributed to all others (Kant 2000, 217), the cognitive faculties enter into a violent discordance in laughter. Despite the empirical evidence of agreement provided by their shared laughter, the dinner party guests have no transcendental basis for presupposing the same reaction in one another. From a transcendental perspective, the fact that their laughter is shared is a mere empirical coincidence. Kant suggests that subjects simultaneously employ and abandon sensus communis when they laugh.

Jacques Rancière’s conception of the relationship between aesthetics and politics helps elucidate the political stakes of this antinomy of sensus communis in laughter. According to Rancière, “aesthetics” concerns the a priori rules that regulate what subjects can see and hear in the sensible world: “aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense [...] as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière 2004a, 13). This system of aesthetic a priori forms what he calls a “distribution of the sensible,” or a determination of which bodies appear as visible and which utterances are understood as intelligent speech (i.e., logos) in public. Rancière writes: “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (12). As a designation of what counts as aesthetically communicable among subjects prior to concepts, Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible” is the philosophical successor to Kant’s “sensus communis” (Wolfe 2006; cf. de Duve 2015, 161). Where Rancière diverges from Kant, however, is his insistence that sense is distributed. For Rancière, the rules for what counts as
visible and intelligible are never *purely* transcendental or *a priori*; concrete historical-political struggles construct (or “distribute”) sense experience to the exclusion of other possible patterns of seeing and hearing in common.

Rancière argues that “politics” is the re-distribution of the sensible, or the recomposition of what counts as aesthetically communicable among subjects prior to concepts (Rancière 1999, 58). “Politics is aesthetic in principle,” Rancière writes, because it “makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise” (30). Politics proceeds through *dissensus*, or the polemical juxtaposition of mutually incompatible modes of seeing and hearing within a single social order. Politics occurs when bodies and utterances rendered invisible or unintelligible by a particular distribution of the sensible nevertheless make themselves seen and heard: “the essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one” (Rancière 2001, Thesis 8; see also 1999, 27; 2009, 11). As an example, Rancière recounts Herodotus’s tale of the Scythian slave revolt (Rancière 1999, 12–13). The Scythian slaves waged an effective rebellion when they took up arms and behaved like their warrior masters. By presenting bodies of warriors where their masters expected to find slaves, the rebels recomposed the prevailing distribution of the sensible and the power relations dependent on it. Politics, according to Rancière, proceeds through such processes of *subjectivation*, or the creation of new subject positions via a redistribution of the sensible (39–40; Chambers 2013, 98–104). Once the Scythian masters responded with whips that reminded the rebels of their formal status as slaves, however, the latter “took to their heels without a fight” (Rancière 1999, 12). For Rancière, Herodotus’s tale demonstrates how the subject positions and power relations that compose a social order hinge
decisively on fragile and contestable aesthetic relations (e.g., how the rebels see themselves and are seen by their opponents).

Rancière’s reflections on the relationship between aesthetics and politics illuminate the political stakes of the antinomy of sensus communis in laughter. When a joke presents subjects with an idea that clashes with their ordinary modes of seeing and hearing the world in common, they employ sensus communis by laughing together. Their laughter expresses a shared sense that the joke presents something unexpected and out of the ordinary. However, this affirmation of sensus communis comes only by way of a loss of its transcendental foundation. The aesthetic ideas advanced by the imagination in the joke offer a glimpse into a new way of seeing and hearing the world that remains, for the moment at least, only partially intelligible and not universally communicable. In laughter, subjects employ sensus communis at the very same time they abandon it. By manifesting “the presence of two worlds in one” in this way (Rancière 2001, Thesis 8), laughter transforms sensus communis into dissensus communis. Common sense becomes common dis-sense, or a chaotic un-grounding and scrambling of how subjects see and hear the world together in common. Laughter discloses what is aesthetically communicable among subjects by rendering this communicability uncertain, contestable, and open to change.

Grasping the political effects of the dissensus communis generated by laughter requires returning once more to Kant’s core claim that laughter “is an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing” (Kant 2000, 332). Laughter arises when the imagination furnishes a presentation that does not accord with the understanding’s expectations (i.e., with the concepts and rules that the subject normally employs to make sense of the world). Crucially, when the subject hears a joke a second or third time, the understanding’s
expectations fail to “heighten,” and the laughter generated becomes less intense (if it arises at all). What at first strikes the subject as hilarious inevitably becomes less funny over time. The clash between the imagination’s aesthetic ideas and the understanding’s expectations in laughter likewise functions to transform these expectations. Experiences/events of laughter alter the “attunement” (Kant 1987, 238) between the understanding and the imagination such that sensus communis (what counts as aesthetically communicable prior to concepts) changes. The subject’s abandonment of sensus communis in laughter is thus also sensus communis’s abandonment of itself. Kant’s account of laughter reveals that sensus communis is not simply the transcendental condition of possibility for aesthetic judgment (Kant 2000, 239–40), but also the product of concrete, historical events of dissensus communis like laughter. Laughter, in short, historicizes and politicizes Kant’s concept of sensus communis.10

When we conceive of the enthusiasm enjoyed by the spectators of the French Revolution as the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter, we arrive at a vision of politics as dissensus communis. The political significance of the spectators’ enthusiasm consists not in how it models a practice of persuasive world-building or bearing witness to the differend but rather in how it disrupts and recomposes the space of public appearance. The events of the Revolution play, as it were, a joke on the spectators’ existing mode of aesthetic perception. Where they once saw the aristocracy and clergy as the proper subjects of politics, they now – quite suddenly and unexpectedly – find the free and equal individuals announced by the Declaration of the Rights of

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10 For the sake of argument, I have followed Kant in assuming the existence of a single, hegemonic sensus communis that structures aesthetic experience in a given spatio-temporal setting. However, laughter can also be understood as performing the same disruptive, transformative political enactment in a world featuring multiple, overlapping aesthetic common senses. Here, laughter would disrupt senses of what is aesthetically communicable shared among more local communities. Because communities overlap in diverse and oftentimes unexpected ways, these experiences/events of laughter would exert unpredictable political effects beyond their original contexts.
Man and Citizen. In the laughter generated by this “joke,” a new political subject (the free and equal individual) becomes visible and intelligible as such. Revolutionary enthusiasm is not, as Kant suggests by linking it to the sublime, felt on behalf of a transcendental moral idea (a republican constitution), but rather a concrete historical-political event (the appearance of the free and equal individual subject). This historical logic of revolutionary enthusiasm means that subjects never know ahead of time the object of their enthusiasm. The enthusiasm of laughter “allows us to hope for human improvement” (Kant 2009e, 182) not because it reveals the existence of a universal moral disposition, but because it demonstrates that sensus communis can change. New modes of seeing and hearing in common – that is, new subject positions – can always emerge and disrupt the distribution of the sensible. This modality of enthusiasm allows us to hope for human “progress” (understood not in the developmental, teleological sense endorsed by Kant, but in the much weaker sense that some distributions of the sensible are “better” than others (Rancière 1999, 30–31; Chambers 2013, 72)) by exhibiting the historical contingency and contestability of who counts as a political subject.

Returning to the two questions posed at the beginning of this section, how does interpreting revolutionary enthusiasm as laughter illuminate (a) the role laughter plays in the political life of the human subject and (b) the vision of politics that emerges in Kant’s aesthetics? With respect to the first question, reading enthusiasm as the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter demonstrates that laughter participates in politics by transforming sensus communis into dissensus communis. Laughter changes how subjects see and hear the world together in common, and it makes possible the appearance of new subject positions. With respect to the second

11 Along these lines, Stephen Holmes notes that “in retrospect, nothing could appear more laughable than the French Revolutionary attempt to restart the calendar at Year 1” (Holmes 1988, 223n89).
question, conceiving of enthusiasm as laughter reveals and cultivates the politics of *dissensus communis* incipient in Kant’s Third *Critique*. Kant’s account of laughter historicizes (and thus further politicizes) what commentators have long recognized to be the key political concept in his aesthetic arsenal: *sensus communis*. It demonstrates that *sensus communis* is both the condition of possibility for and product of concrete historical events of *dissensus communis*.

Before considering a few contemporary examples that illustrate how laughter operates politically in this way, I would like to differentiate my approach from an alternative interpretation of the politics of laughter in Kant. To my knowledge, Jeremy Arnold (2009) is the only other political theorist to take Kant’s account of laughter seriously as an occasion for critically examining the relationship between politics, aesthetics, and judgment. Arnold argues that Kant’s conception of laughter as a pleasurable affective response to contingency means that laughter “can infuse reflective judgment and thereby politics with an affirmative ethos” (Arnold 2009, 16). Arnold acknowledges that laughter is not always affirmative, and he turns to Arendt to explain that subjects can avoid resentful, “Hobbesian” laughter by employing *sensus communis* to reflectively regulate the pleasure they take in unexpected events: “One may find that the fact one is laughing, upon reflection – that is, seen from the various standpoints our imagination can visit – is reprehensible” (16). Arnold claims that laughter, when judged reflectively in this way, can serve as a productive ethical resource in late modernity by orienting practices of political

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12 Crucially, historicizing the concept of *sensus communis* is not the same as empiricizing it. Lyotard rightly worries about readings of *sensus communis* – most notably, he claims, Arendt’s – that take it to be an empirical agreement on aesthetic matters that can be enunciated and quantitatively measured: “the *sensus* isn’t a sense, and the feeling which is supposed to affect it (as a sense can be affected) isn’t common, but only in principle communicable. There is no assignable community of feeling, no affective consensus in fact” (Lyotard 1988a, 22; 1994, 18). The account offered in this chapter understands *sensus communis* as the transcendental condition of possibility for aesthetic judgment that varies historically via political events of *dissensus communis*. *Sensus communis* cannot be described or measured empirically because it is the very condition of possibility for the activities of describing or measuring (i.e., it determines which objects count as observable and which postures and movements qualify as measuring).
judgment toward an affirmation of the contingency and messiness of democratic life. He concludes: “Laughter is a pleasurable affective response to the contingency of experience, an affect which can infuse political judgment and open the possibility of a more affirmative democratic politics” (7).

While Arnold sheds light on the political stakes and implications of Kant’s account of laughter, a questionable argumentative move limits the scope of his analysis. Arnold describes laughter as an affect that enriches practices of political judgment external to it:

Laughter […] may be an experience from which judgment can proceed such that the affective and the cognitive, pleasure and reason, the body and the soul work together to form political judgments infused with both interested and disinterested pleasure, gratification and the affirmation (or reprimanding) of pleasure. (14)

For Arnold, laughter is not judgment; laughter is instead an “experience from which judgment can proceed.” Like so much of the political-theoretic commentary around laughter (as described in Introduction), Arnold treats laughter as an ethical supplement to political practices that ultimately reside elsewhere (e.g., in judgment). In this way, Arnold overlooks laughter’s own political origins, dynamics, and effects. More specifically, he fails to grasp to how laughter in Kant does not simply “infuse” judgment, but is instead itself an aesthetic judgment/affect that is politically consequential in its own right (namely, it disrupts and transforms sensus communis).

Grasping the political stakes and possibilities of laughter in Kant requires eschewing the ethical approach pursued by Arnold and treating laughter as itself a site of politics.

IV. The Politics of Kantian Laughter: Two Examples

This section examines two recent “events” of laughter – the Chinese government’s 2014 “ban on puns” and comedian John Oliver’s 2015 “exposé” on the National Collegiate Athletic
Association (NCAA) basketball tournament – to explore how the above account of laughter in Kant elucidates how laughter operates politically in the contemporary social order.

The Chinese “Ban on Puns”

In November 2014 the Chinese State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television announced a prohibition on “non-standard” uses of the Mandarin language (Silbert 2014). Mandarin is rich in homophones that provide speakers with many opportunities to construct unexpected, clever usages for similar sounding words. The government claimed that widespread internet and advertising “misuses” of common words and idioms threatened to undermine traditional Chinese culture and “mislead minors” (Mair 2014a). It warned that violations of the policy – derided in the Western press as a “ban on puns” (Branigan 2014; Mair 2014a; 2014b; Silbert 2014; Sonnad 2014) – would be punished severely (Mair 2014a). One report speculated that the immediate impetus for the prohibition was a popular internet pun that took advantage of how a term of affection for the Chinese president Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan is also a homophone for “marijuana” (leading people to utter phrases like “we live in the Marijuana Era” (Sonnad 2014)). Another pun capitalized on the homophones “serve” and “smog” to mock the government’s environmental policies (Mao’s slogan “Serve the People” became “Smog the People” (Sonnad 2014)). Meanwhile, the popular “river crab” and “grass-mud-horse” puns (homophones for the government’s policy of a “harmonious society” and the phrase “fuck your mother”) have become common symbols of grassroots resistance to the Chinese government (Wang, Juffermans, and Du 2016; China Digital Times 2015).

One can interpret the political objectives and effects of the Chinese government’s “ban on puns” in several ways. First, the policy might reflect an attempt to establish a standardized set of
meanings in order to prevent cognitive confusion and maximize social efficiency. From this perspective, the proliferation of puns trading on multiple meanings endangers the smooth functioning of a large and complex market society. Second, the “ban on puns” might be an effort to enforce a common moral code. On this reading, laughter at disrespectful and oftentimes crude internet punning is a form of bad behavior that threatens civic virtue and social solidarity. Finally, and perhaps most plausibly, the prohibition might reflect an attempt by the government to protect the interests of the Chinese ruling class. The puns often target government policy and leadership figures, and eliminating the laughter produced by subversive wordplay would remove a key source of political dissent and elite embarrassment.

These cognitive, moral, and prudential explanations of the Chinese “ban on puns” are all credible, but Kant’s treatment of laughter on an aesthetic level points us in a different direction. The above reading of the politics of Kant’s account of laughter suggests that the Chinese “ban on puns” reflects an attempt to secure an aesthetic common sense. Internet punsters imaginatively modify meanings of utterances in ways that the understanding does not anticipate and cannot immediately cognize. Chinese subjects laugh as they hear certain sounds and see certain bodies in new, unexpected ways. Where subjects once saw the powerful figure of Xi Jinping, they now see marijuana; where they once saw government service, they now see smog; and where they once saw social harmony, they now see river crabs. Sensus communis becomes dissensus communis in the laughter generated by these puns, and the government’s prohibition reacts to this rupture in aesthetic common sense. In an attempt to secure an immediately transparent and stable sense of what can be seen and heard in common, the authorities seek to legally bind the imagination to the prevailing concepts and rules of the understanding. In doing so, they concede
the political fragility of *sensus communis* and draw attention to how new bodies and utterances can always become visible and intelligible. While internet punning may at first appear to be trivial, harmless wordplay, Kant shows how these laughable modifications in meanings constitute moments of heightened political opportunity and danger.

**John Oliver and the NCAA**

A second example of how laughter operates politically in this way is provided by a recent “exposé” of American collegiate basketball offered by comedian John Oliver. In March 2015 Oliver devoted an episode of his HBO program *Last Week Tonight* to the NCAA “March Madness” men’s college basketball tournament (what Oliver called “one of America’s most sacred annual traditions”). Challenging the popular portrayal of college basketball players as nurtured “student athletes” on the road to successful professional careers, Oliver depicted players as disenchanted, minimally educated laborers working for free on behalf of a billion dollar industry. Employing clever quips and absurd analogies, Oliver surveyed copious research and journalism in support of his argument. He concluded the program by presenting a fake television advertisement for the NCAA’s latest basketball video game (another NCAA property for which players are not compensated). Oliver’s “ad” recreated the association’s marketing strategy of promoting the game’s “authenticity,” but it highlighted an alternative “authentic” experience to the one peddled by the NCAA. His version, titled “March Sadness: Rated E for Exploitative,” touted how one can choose to play the game as an athlete who suffers a devastating injury and loses his college scholarship, a millionaire coach who verbally and physically abuses his players, or a university administrator who must decide how to spend the piles of cash the athletes generate each year.
What are the political effects of the laughter generated by Oliver’s “exposé”? At first glance, Oliver’s jokes and the video game bit appear to be vehicles designed to help advance his substantive critique of the NCAA. On this interpretation, laughter functions politically by making an otherwise uninteresting (or even depressing) topic engaging to a wider audience. Along these lines, political scientists and media scholars have argued that entertainment or “soft news” programs like Last Week Tonight serve as a “gateway” for more informed political decision-making (Baum 2002; 2003; Baum and Jamison 2006; Feldman and Young 2008; Young and Hoffman 2012). For example, Polk, Young, and Holbert claim that “humor has long been used as a tool for persuasion, to make stories more captivating, sources more likeable, or arguments more effective” (Polk, Young, and Holbert 2009, 203). While the laughter of Oliver’s audience undoubtedly helps advance his substantive critique of the NCAA, I once again contend that our focus should not be on how laughter supports political process external to it (e.g., the critique pursued by Oliver), but rather on how laughter itself operates politically.

The Kantian approach articulated above suggests that the political significance of the laughter produced by Oliver consists in how it generates a dissensus communis that transforms the audience’s perception of the subjects and institutions of American collegiate athletics. Instead of seeing happy, strong, nurtured student athletes that benefit from participation in sports, the audience now sees vulnerable, exhausted, exploited laborers in desperate need of radical changes in the political-economic structure of the NCAA. Through the laughter produced by Oliver, new subject positions become visible to the audience: the college athlete as exploited worker; the university as exploitative employer; the NCAA as corrupt cartel; and the fan as complicit consumer. Seeing collegiate sports anew in this way (i.e., as a highly inegalitarian system of
indentured servitude rather than as an innocent pastime) invites – even demands – radical changes in athlete compensation, unionization rules, and workplace protections. Kant’s treatment of laughter on an aesthetic (rather than cognitive, moral, or prudential) level calls our attention to how the laughter produced by Oliver operates politically by disrupting and recomposing how viewers perceive the subjects and institutions of collegiate athletics.

V. The Democratic Politics of Kantian Laughter

This chapter has put *CPJ §54* into conversation with the accounts of the political significance of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy offered by Arendt and Lyotard in order to illuminate laughter’s role in the political life of the human subject. When we interpret revolutionary enthusiasm – the concept identified by these theorists as the hinge between Kantian aesthetics and Kantian politics – not as an judgment of the beautiful (Arendt) or the sublime (Lyotard) but rather as the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter, we find that (a) laughter participates in politics by transforming *sensus communis* into *dissensus communis* and (b) Kant’s aesthetics supports a vision of politics as *dissensus communis*. I will conclude by returning to Rancière and then to Davide Panagia to consider the specifically *democratic* stakes of both laughter and Kant’s aesthetic philosophy.

My earlier rendering of Rancière’s account of the relationship between aesthetics and politics (Section III) left out a key dimension of his argument. According to Rancière, the dissensus of “politics” is always *democratic*. By interrupting and recomposing the aesthetic rules that identify some bodies and modes of speech as visible and intelligible (and by extension, some as fit to rule and others as fit to be ruled), politics introduces the logic of equality into the necessarily inegalitarian logic of a given distribution of the sensible. Politics, Rancière explains,
enacts the democratic principle of “pure chance or the complete absence of qualifications for
governing” (Rancière 2001, Thesis 3). The moment of politics reveals the fundamental absence
of a natural foundation for rule, or “the ultimate anarchy on which any hierarchy rests” (Rancière
1999, 16). The aesthetic dissensus enacted by the Scythian slaves affirmed their equality with the
warrior masters by revealing the absence of any natural or necessary foundation for a
hierarchical relationship between them: the “slaves” could dress like warriors and take up arms
just as easily as their “masters”. For Rancière, all politics (that is, all aesthetic dissensus) is
democratic (101). (Conversely, democracy is not an institutional form or ethos, but rather the
“institution of politics itself” – an event of dissensus whose logic of equality gives rise to new
subject positions (101).)

Rancière contends that Kantian judgments of taste are the philosophical archetype for the
aesthetic dissensus involved in democracy (Rancière 2006b; 2009a). Kant’s argument that a
judgment of taste is disinterested and claims universal validity means that the subject judges
without regard to her status within a prevailing social hierarchy (Rancière 2009a, 7). The
judgment of taste neutralizes sensus communis (i.e., the distribution of the sensible) even as it
lays claim to it. For example, a laborer who reflects on the beauty of a garden she constructs for
a wealthy client reflects on the garden as if it were her own – that is, without regard to her
inferior social status. Rancière writes: “the singularity of the aesthetic experience is the
singularity of an as if. […] This as if is no illusion. It is a redistribution of the sensible, a
redistribution of the parts supposedly played by the higher and lower faculties, the higher and
lower classes” (8). The political scandal associated with a judgment of taste is that anyone can
make one; any subject can demand that all others acknowledge her imaginative reflection as
sensus communis. Rancière concludes that “this is what disinterestedness or indifference entails: the dismantling of a certain body of experience that was deemed appropriate to a specific ethos” (7–8). For Rancière, Kant’s Analytic of the Beautiful provides the model for a democratic politics of the imaginative “as if” whose egalitarian logic disrupts and recomposes sensus communis.  

Building on Rancière’s approach, Davide Panagia argues that Kant’s analysis of the beautiful forms the core of “the radical democratic project” that emerges in the Third Critique (Panagia 2009, 31). According to Panagia, “sensations,” or “the heterology of impulses that register on our bodies without determining a body’s nature or residing in any one organ of perception” are the very stuff of democratic politics (2). Not bound to any social structure of meaning or value, sensations interrupt and invite recompositions in conventional modes of seeing and hearing the world in common (2–3). Panagia claims that the Kantian beautiful is one such aesthetic experience of sensation. Because there are no qualifications to make a judgment of taste, the beautiful makes possible new modes of public perception: “the disinterested interest one experiences in a judgment of the beautiful is the result of an interruption of the networks of distribution that grant us a common ground” (43–44). Panagia goes on to contend that sound can enact democratic dissensus in a similar way. In particular, the cacophonous noise of crowds possesses a political efficacy that exceeds that of rational or deliberative communication (67).

13 Rancière’s embrace of the beautiful is somewhat surprising given how political theories oriented toward disruption and dissensus are more commonly associated with the sublime. However, Rancière insists that the sublime (especially as interpreted by Lyotard) amounts to a far too transcendental feeling of “the mind’s infinite indebtedness to a law of the Other” (Rancière 2009a, 7; see also 2004b). The sublime’s call to think, act, and speak differently remains anonymous and generalized, while the beautiful’s imaginative “as if” affords a concrete role to the demos, or the not-yet-visible and/or -intelligible “subject” who nevertheless judges as if she were (Rancière 2001, Thesis 4).

14 Although Panagia acknowledges the rational dimension of the beautiful (Panagia 2009, 25–26), Kant would almost certainly object to his interpretation of the beautiful in terms of sensation, as the Third Critique strictly differentiates the beautiful (a pleasure of reflection) from the agreeable (a pleasure of sense) (Kant 2000, 205–10).
Such noise (phasis) calls into question who qualifies as a reasonable speaker and what qualifies as reasonable speech (logos). Panagia writes:

Democratic politics [...] is first and foremost a politics of noise. Though a political utterance may be retroactively tuned to sound like a reasonable expression of interests, its first pitch is an interruptive noise. In this respect, I want to know what such dissensus sounds like. (48; italics mine)

I argue that Kant shows us that democratic dissensus sounds like bursts of laughter. Laughter’s transformation of sensus communis into dissensus communis enacts the logic of equality identified by Rancière in his account of dissensus. Laughter originates in the presentation of an unexpected, absurd idea of the imagination right where one expects to find common sense. A joke’s capacity to produce laughter hinges on the aesthetic idea’s lack of qualification from the perspective of the understanding. Through the dissensus communis it generates, laughter transforms what counts as aesthetically communicable among subjects. The political scandal associated with laughter is perhaps even greater than that associated with the beautiful. Whereas in the beautiful anyone can make a judgment that claims universal validity, in laughter any idea can actually become common sense. There are no qualifications on the ideas that the dissensus communis of laughter can transform into sensus communis. By revealing and capitalizing on the absence of a natural foundation for sensus communis, experiences/events of laughter perform a democratic political enactment.

However, as we have already seen, the sounds of laughter are not always those of democratic dissensus. Rather than making a previously invisible or unintelligible subject position (what Rancière calls the demos (Rancière 2001, Thesis 4)) visible or intelligible as such, laughter often functions to re-inscribe a social order’s existing conditions of invisibility and
unintelligibility. For example, a racist joke that compares African Americans to monkeys may produce laughter that bolsters a white supremacist *sensus communis* wherein African Americans are perceived to be unqualified for full participation in public life. Such a joke confronts subjects with an idea (e.g., the black subject as monkey) that clashes with and momentarily renders foreign their normal mode of seeing and hearing the world in common. But rather than prompting the formation of a new *sensus communis* that recognizes African Americans as equals (as a more subversive joke might), this laughter re-affirms the terms of the prevailing racist distribution of the sensible. The political efficacy of laughter at racist and sexist jokes consists in how it bolsters an existing *sensus communis* at its point of maximum vulnerability (that is, where it has already been revealed to lack a natural foundation). Such laughter transforms *sensus communis* into *dissensus communis* only to entrench the terms of the former even more strongly. The *dissensus communis* generated by this laughter is thus decidedly not a Rancièrean dissensus, as it mobilizes the democratic logic of equality to re-inscribe the existing distribution of the sensible and prevent the emergence of new subject positions. This laughter, as Sheldon Wolin might say, enacts democracy without the *demos* (Wolin 1994, 13; see also Rancière 2009a, 12).

Kant’s account of laughter consequently provides the resources for understanding the democratic opportunities and dangers presented by concrete experiences/events of laughter. Laughter enacts democracy by transforming *sensus communis* into *dissensus communis* such that previously invisible or unintelligible subject positions can make themselves seen and heard in public. However, this *dissensus communis* can also betray its own democratic promise and function to bolster a social order’s existing terms of visibility and intelligibility. *CPJ §54* ultimately yields a vision of democratic politics distinct from that offered by Rancière and
Panagia. While Rancière and Panagia propose a politics of dissensus that trains our attention on the susceptibility of any given distribution of the sensible to democratic disruption, Kant’s account of laughter yields a politics of *dissensus communis* that directs our attention to the democratic promise *and* precarity of experiences/events of aesthetic disruption as such. Though always “democratic” in principle (i.e., proceeding by the logic of equality), *dissensus communis* can nevertheless yield anti-democratic results (i.e., a re-inscription of the existing distribution of the sensible). The democratic project that emerges in Kant’s Third *Critique* is thus not simply “radical,” as Panagia argues; it is also *critical*. It discloses and thus encourages us to attend to the dangers lurking within the democratic possibilities of *dissensus communis*. This discovery of a Kantian vision of politics that is at once democratic, radical, and critical may in the end be the most unexpected – and consequential – result of reading his account of laughter politically.
That must be the reason, thought Sandy, why poverty-stricken old Negroes like Uncle Dan Givens lived so long because to them, no matter how hard life might be, it was not without laughter. (Hughes 1995, 249)

This race has the greatest of the gifts of God, laughter. It dances and sings; it is humble; it longs to learn; it loves men; it loves women. It is frankly, baldly, deliciously human in an artificial and hypocritical land. […] The white world has its gibes and cruel caricatures; it has its loud guffaws; but to the black world alone belongs the delicious chuckle. (Du Bois 1968, 148)

Somebody on the set was white laughed in such a way—I know the difference of people laughing with me and people laughing at me—and it was the first time I had ever gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with. Not just uncomfortable, but like, should I fire this person? (Chappelle 2006)

On August 22, 2015 police removed ten African American women from the Napa Valley Wine Train (Rocha 2015). The Wine Train company, which offers luxury dining along historic rail routes in California wine country, accused the women – members of a book club – of disturbing their fellow passengers by “laughing too loudly.” This incident generated national media attention and inspired the Twitter hashtag #laughingwhileblack that highlighted other incidents of white hostility toward African American laughter (Rocha 2015). Such a preoccupation with the styles, patterns, and volumes of black laughter is hardly new, as the laughter of black Americans has long constituted a site of intense white anxiety and attempts at regulation (Chasar 2008; Parvulescu 2010, 59–77). Indeed, as scholar of American popular culture Mike Chasar notes, “we must recognize the extent to which race relations in the United States have been conducted via African American laughter” (Chasar 2008, 60). In light of this history, the present chapter asks: in what ways is race an essential concept for grasping how laughter shapes our shared political life? And conversely, what role does laughter play in American racial politics?
I turn to Ralph Ellison’s masterful 1985 essay, “An Extravagance of Laughter” to explore these questions. In this piece Ellison – the African American novelist and essayist most famous for his Cold War classic, *Invisible Man* – carefully weaves together American racial history, African American folklore, and personal anecdotes to elucidate the political origins, effects, and possibilities of black laughter. Through a remarkable joke about “laughing barrels” – barrels into which Southern blacks were supposedly required to laugh during Jim Crow – Ellison demonstrates that the distinctive sounds, styles, and strategies of black laughter are shaped by white supremacy and that the latter maintains itself in part by regulating this laughter. Despite the central role black laughter plays in the construction of a racialized social order, Ellison insists that it can also function to radically undermine and democratize that order. Building on the themes of laughter’s dialectical complexity and democratic possibility addressed in the previous chapters, I employ Ellison’s essay to examine the status of black laughter as a privileged site in which white supremacy is both reproduced and resisted. I then show how Ellison’s reflections on black laughter illuminate his distinctive conception of democracy amid white supremacy.

Like Adorno, Ellison theorizes laughter as an experience that emerges from and exerts political effects on the level of the social order as a whole. But whereas Adorno attends to the politics of laughter within the mid-twentieth century Western capitalist social order, Ellison examines laughter within the nineteenth and twentieth century American racialized social order. The latter is characterized by *white supremacy*, or what Ellison describes as the “myth” that white Americans “by the mere fact of race, color, and tradition alone were superior to the black

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1 To be sure, race plays an important role in Adorno’s work (see, for example, the essay on anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 137–72)), just as capitalism is a key theme for Ellison (see, for example, his extensive involvement in and subsequent critique of Communist Party politics (Ellison 1995; Foley 2010; Jackson 2002; Rampersad 2007)). However, capitalism constitutes the center of gravity of Adorno’s project, while race occupies a similar position in Ellison’s oeuvre.
masses below them” (Ellison 1986, 176–77). Not simply an ideology of racial difference, white supremacy entails a political program of systematic racial subjugation: “Whiteness was a form of manifest destiny which designated Negroes as its territory and challenge. Whiteness struck at signs, at coloration, hair texture, and speech idiom […] It thrived on violence and sought endlessly for victims” (172). In concrete terms, white supremacy operates by way of a denial of political rights to blacks (e.g., slavery and segregation), rituals of physical violence against blacks (e.g., lynchings and beatings), and various anti-black stereotypes (e.g., the lazy or hypersexualized black male) (174–78). While the “geopolitical center of white supremacy” was the antebellum and Jim Crow South, the inextricability of white supremacy from the social, political, and economic development of the United States as a whole means that it continues to haunt subjects and institutions far removed from those times and places (173, 175–76; see also Mills 1997; Olson 2004). Ellison argues that the structuring “myth” of white supremacy cuts against the democratic principles of freedom and equality enshrined in the country’s foundational political documents and espoused by leaders of all eras and ideologies: “democratic ideals […] were rendered absurd by the prevailing mystique of race and color” (Ellison 1995, xiii; see also 1986, 172–76). This contradiction between white supremacy and democracy motivates Ellison’s broader literary project (Ellison 1995; 2003c; 2003g; 2003l) and forms the backdrop for the examination of black laughter he offers in “An Extravagance of Laughter.”

The present chapter proceeds in four sections. Section I reconstructs Ellison’s claim that the distinctive sounds, styles, and strategies of black laughter are shaped by a history of racial oppression and that white supremacy sustains itself by treating these differences in laughter as evidence of essential racial difference. Ellison shows how the American racialized social order
produces and is in turn reproduced by what I call the white supremacist regime of laughter. Section II turns to Ellison’s rendition of the laughing barrel joke to contend that the politics of black laughter are intensely dialectical. Black laughter is neither simply the “irrational,” “primitive” force imagined by white supremacy nor an inherently democratic force opposed to racial hierarchy. Black laughter democratizes the American racial order only when its “irrationality” and “primitiveness” exceed the terms set by white supremacy to reveal the very same characteristics in the laughter of whites. The racist conception of black laughter as irrational and primitive thus contains within itself the resources for its own democratic overcoming, and the democratizing power of black laughter depends paradoxically on its association with these attributes. Section III contends that the democratizing effects of black laughter materialize not when black subjects disobey or laugh at the white supremacist regime of laughter but rather when their laughter turns this regime against itself. Section IV concludes by considering what Ellison’s account of black laughter reveals about Ellison as a theorist of democracy. Challenging recent scholarship that focuses on Ellison’s exploration of the paradoxes of democratic government (Allen 2004a, 2004b) or attributes of democratic individuality (Turner 2008; Morel 2004), I contend that Ellison advances a unique account of democracy as a mode of political life characterized by complex, contradictory, and even Janus-faced processes of “antagonistic cooperation” (Ellison 2003b, 850; 2003c, 602; 2003k, 496; 2003m, 188) among individuals, collectivities, and the social order as a whole.

I. The White Supremacist Regime of Laughter

Shortly after arriving in New York City in 1936, Ellison found himself the guest of the famous African American poet Langston Hughes at the Broadway adaptation of Erskine
Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*, a comedy about a poor Southern white family that paradoxically embodies all the Depression era’s worst anti-black stereotypes (Ellison 1986, 181, 186). Ellison recounts falling victim to a fit of laughter during a scene where sixteen year old Ellie May Lester sexually seduces her older sister’s husband at the encouragement of their father who wants to steal the poor man’s bag of turnips: “I was reduced to such helpless laughter that I distracted the entire balcony and embarrassed both myself and my host” (186). Ellison describes his laughter as “an extravagance of laughter, […] a virtual uncontrollable cloud-and-dam-burst of laughter, a self-immolation of laughter over which I had no control” (186). While Ellison emphasizes how his extravagance of laughter demonstrates the importance of comedy for navigating the complexities and paradoxes of life in the American racial order (146, 197), I would like to put this frequently commented upon question of genre (Allen 2004a; O’Meally 2003; Rovit 1960) aside and reflect more closely on how Ellison describes his fit of laughter itself. What are the political origins, meanings, and effects of Ellison’s laughter at *Tobacco Road*?

Ellison connects his extravagance of laughter to a joke from African American folklore. As his seemingly unquenchable laughter angered other theater-goers and even distracted the actors on stage, a mortified Ellison worried about the impression he was making on his famous host. Ellison writes that he imagined Hughes thinking, “Damn, if I’d known this would be his reaction, I would have picked a theater with laughing-barrels!” (Ellison 1986, 186–87). “Laughing barrels,” Ellison explains, are the subject of an “old in-group joke” shared among black Southerners (187). According to the joke (I will explain why it is a joke in the next section), Southern towns placed barrels marked “FOR COLORED” in their central squares into which black subjects were required to stick their heads if they “felt a laugh coming on” (187).
The barrels were designed to “protect” the town from the disruptive sounds of black laughter. With this reference to laughing barrels, Ellison embarks on an extended examination of laughter’s role in the American racial order.

According to Ellison, the United States’s history of white supremacy finds expression not only in the differences in social status, wealth, and political representation between blacks and whites, but also in the ways in which black and white subjects laugh. The sounds, styles, and strategies of black and white laughter express and in turn reproduce distinct historical-political experiences. Ellison recalls a personal incident that illustrates these dynamics. When attempting to participate in the “white” cultural scene of a New York City bookstore, Ellison accidentally employed a cliché common to Southern blacks. A white college student responded to Ellison’s faux pas with laughter and a racial slur. Ellison writes:

I didn’t like it, but there it was – I had been hit in mid-flight; and so, brought down to earth, I joined in his laughter. But while he laughed in bright major chords I responded darkly in minor-sevenths and flatted-fifths, and I doubted that he was attuned to the deeper source of our inharmonic harmony. (161)

Ellison and the white student do not make the same sounds when they laugh, and their respective laughs “do” different things. The “bright major chords” of the white student’s laughter express and in turn reinforce his privileged status in the racial hierarchy, while Ellison’s “dark,” “minor” laughter reflects an uneasy acknowledgment of and attempt to safely navigate his vulnerable position in that hierarchy. Moreover, by responding to the racial slur with laughter, Ellison participates in a long tradition of black subjects employing laughter to dissemble in (and thus
survive) encounters with whites (Chasar 2008, 71). A history marked by inequality and oppression manifests and reproduces itself in how black and white subjects laugh. Ellison argues that a white supremacist social order interprets the distinctive sounds, styles, and strategies of black laughter not as products of a history of oppression but rather as further evidence of the black subject’s intrinsic inferiority. While white laughter is considered to be “rational” and always directed at what Ellison calls a “discernible target” (e.g., a black man like Ellison in the bookstore), black laughter is understood to be fundamentally irrational and without object (i.e., it is mere phōnē) (188, 193). Black laughter is not fully human laughter, and its “primitive,” uncontrollable sound is understood as threatening civilized society. As Chasar remarks,

scholars and laughter “theorists” took great pains to show either that black laughter was different from white laughter by virtue of its childishness and innocence or that laughter itself had behavioral or physiological roots in Africa and was thus a primitive, immature, or uncivilized element in the Western world. (Chasar 2008, 63; see also Parvulescu 2010, 61–66)

Ellison writes that there exists an “unnatural and corrupting blackness of Negro laughter” that constitutes a “confounding, persistent, and embarrassing mystery” to white society (Ellison 1986, 190–91). The distinctive sounds of black laughter mark one as black – that is, as an inferior being who poses a danger to American society. The construction of a racialized social order thus proceeds not only through practices of seeing black skin, but also through practices of hearing

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2 Ellison’s laughter thus recalls the advice offered by the Invisible Man’s grandfather: “I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” (Ellison 1995, 16).

3 This connection between the sounds, styles, and strategies of black laughter and a history of oppression recalls Du Bois’s description of slave sorrow songs as “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (Du Bois 2003, 255). Ellison’s laughing barrel joke (examined in the next section) shows how black laughter, like the sorrow songs, resists reduction to its origins in oppression by also “longing toward a truer world.”
the sounds made by black bodies. For Ellison, laughter constitutes a privileged site wherein “race” as a naturalized relation of social and political inequality establishes and entrenches itself.

“Laughing barrels” are the mechanism by which the Jim Crow South defends itself from this mysterious, dangerous force of black laughter. Ellison traces the perverse logic by which the very conditions of slavery, segregation, and discrimination that give rise to the distinctive sounds of black laughter are offered as justifications for regulating that laughter:

The barrels were considered a civic necessity and had been improvised as a means of protecting the sensibilities of whites from a peculiar form of insanity suffered exclusively by Negroes, who in light of their social status and past condition of servitude were regarded as having absolutely nothing in their daily experience which could possibly inspire rational laughter. (188)

Crucially, laughing barrels do not eliminate the sounds of black laughter from public space. Passers-by (white and black) know exactly why the black person’s head is buried in the barrel, and they can likely hear muffled laughter through the barrel. Laughing barrels instead segregate black laughter; they localize and contain it such that it poses no significant threat to public space. Laughing barrels provide an occasion for spectators of all colors to learn and re-learn that the sounds of black laughter belong to bodies not fit for full and equal participation in public life. Black subjects in particular learn the cruel truth that while failure to segregate their laughter will result in violence, obeying the laughing barrel policy affirms their inferior social and political status just as effectively. Laughing barrels, in short, attempt to ensure that the supposedly disruptive sounds of black laughter function to secure white supremacy.

The “laughing barrel” is a common trope in African American folklore (Dundes 1973, xv–xvi; Bercaw and Amon 2016), and it serves as a metaphor for the various mechanisms employed by a white supremacist social order to segregate black laughter. Sterling Brown’s 1932
poem “Slim in Atlanta” provides an example of another “laughing barrel”: “Down in Atlanta, / De whitefolks got laws / For to keep all de niggers / From laughin’ outdoors. / Hope to Gawd I may die / If I ain’t speakin’ truth / Make de niggers do deir laughin / In a telefoam booth” (Brown 2000, 81). A twenty-first century “laughing barrel” might be Tyler Perry films, TV shows, and plays. Perry’s comedies about middle class black life provide black Americans with a space to laugh in virtual isolation from whites. Although this laughing barrel lacks the compulsory quality of the Jim Crow barrels or Brown’s “telefoam booth,” it nevertheless advances the goal of segregating black laughter such that it does not disrupt white society. Moreover, Perry’s trafficking in elements of minstrelsy (Kopano and Ball 2014) bolsters white conceptions of black laughter as childlike and unsuitable for public space. Ellison demonstrates that laughing barrels operate wherever and whenever black subjects segregate their laughter in such a way that preserves a conception of citizenship premised on white supremacy.

The laughing barrels described by Ellison constitute mechanisms of the broader white supremacist regime of laughter. This concept of a “regime of laughter” is a modification of Foucault’s influential notion of “regime of truth” that describes how the rules and procedures governing the production of knowledge rely on and sustain historically contingent subject positions and relations of power (Foucault 1984, 73–74). A regime of laughter is thus the set of rules and mechanisms governing laughter that emerges from and in turn reproduces a

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4 As the introduction to a recent scholarly anthology on Tyler Perry notes, “[Perry] has unapologetically made it clear that he is principally speaking to, for, and about African Americans” (Bell and Jackson II 2014, 6). Thanks to Sam Chambers for directing me to consider Tyler Perry.

5 Despite the enduring role of the laughing barrel tale in African American thought and folklore (Dundes 1973, xv–xvi), the historical record remains unclear about the existence of actual laughing barrels in the antebellum and Jim Crow South. Because such barrels would likely be used for multiple purposes (Ellison suggests that most were “old whitewashed whiskey barrels” (Ellison 1986, 192)), historians have been unable to identify specific barrels that were employed to segregate the sounds of black laughter (Bercaw and Amon 2016).
constellation of historically specific subject positions and power relations.\(^6\) The regime of laughter operative in Ellison’s essay (and, as the Wine Train incident suggests, remains operative today) presumes an essential difference in the origins, meanings, and effects of the laughter of black and white subjects and seeks to regulate black laughter in order to secure white supremacy. Through mechanisms like laughing barrels, the white supremacist regime reproduces the “black” and “white” subject positions (i.e., the very categories of essential racial difference). Theorizing laughter in terms of *regimes* highlights how there exists no such thing as laughter “pure and simple” that can form the object of a study of the politics of laughter. As this dissertation has insisted, laughter is always produced, understood, and regulated within the context of a determinate social order with its own historically specific political processes and structures (in this case, race), and an account of the politics of laughter requires an account of these processes and structures.

**II. The Dialectics of Black Laughter**

Ellison explains that while the laughing barrels are designed to help produce and defend white supremacy against the disruptive force of black laughter, they do not always achieve their objective. The barrels can fail – and this is the source of the “joke” – because they risk generating an even greater social and political disruption. Ellison claims that the laughing barrels fail when white spectators find themselves laughing along with the black subjects whose heads are buried in the barrels. He describes how

> the uproar from laughing-barrels could become so loud and raucous that it not only disturbed the serenity of the entire square, but shook up the whites’ fierce faith in the stability of their most cherished traditions. For on such occasions the uproar from the

\(^6\) While Mary Beard makes passing reference to a “regime of laughter” in her study of ancient Roman laughter (Beard 2014, 142), she does not define this concept or articulate its significance for the broader study of laughter.
laughing-barrels could become so contagious and irresistible that any whites who were so unfortunate as to be caught near the explosions of laughter would find themselves compelled to join in […] It was an appalling state of affairs, for despite their sterner resistance, even such distinguished whites literally cracked up and roared! (191)

The scene of laughter that originates with black subjects laughing in the barrels generates a scandal within the Southern town. Black laughter – maligned as an irrational force that threatens civilized society – has gained control over the public behavior of the white citizenry. And it has done so precisely by way of the mechanism designed to regulate it! Ellison continues:

The whites assumed that in some mysterious fashion the Negro involved was not only laughing at himself laughing, but was also laughing at them laughing at his laughing against their own most determined wills. And if such was the truth, it suggested that somehow a Negro (and this meant any Negro) could become with a single hoot-and-cackle both the source and master of an outrageous and untenable situation. (191)

Obeying the laughing barrel policy unexpectedly allows even the lowliest black Southerner to take charge of public (i.e., white) space. Rather than securing white supremacy against black laughter, the laughing barrels threaten to undermine the racial hierarchy.7

Why, exactly, does this scene of laughter precipitate such a grave political crisis? As the minstrel tradition illustrates (and Ellison’s bookstore encounter confirms), black bodies are common objects of white laughter (Chasar 2008, 62; Fauset 1994), and the white laughter at the body in the barrel likely begins as a chuckle of superiority. However, it remains unclear why this white laughter proliferates so wildly and persists for such an extended period. Ellison writes:

For since it was an undisputed fact that whites and blacks were of different species, it followed that they could by no means be expected to laugh at the same things. Therefore, when whites found themselves joining in with the coarse merriment issuing from the

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7 Such a hijacking of public (i.e., white) space is unlikely to materialize in the case of the Tyler Perry laughing barrel described above. In contrast to the highly visible and audible segregation of black laughter enforced in the Southern town, Tyler Perry comedies move black laughter almost entirely out of the view and earshot of whites. Despite Perry recently being the highest paid male entertainer in the United States (Bell and Jackson II 2014, 1), many whites have never seen (or even heard of) his shows. The segregation of the Tyler Perry laughing barrel itself means that the black laughter emanating from it cannot disrupt white space in the same way black laughter does in Ellison’s story.
laughing-barrels, they suffered the double embarrassment of laughing against their own God-given nature while being unsure of exactly why, or at what, specifically, they were laughing. Which meant that somehow the Negro in the barrel had them over a barrel. (Ellison 1986, 192)

Recall that whereas the laughter of black subjects is considered to be irrational, uncontrollable, and without purpose, white laughter is thought to always have a rational motivation and discernible target (193). By putting the white spectators “over a barrel” – that is, by prompting them to laugh uncontrollably for no apparent reason – the laughing barrel scene dissolves the distinction between black and white laughter. All laughter is now black: wild, mysterious, and disruptive. The laughing barrels undermine the white supremacist regime’s presumption of an essential difference between the laughter of black and white subjects. Ellison concludes:

A Negro laughing in a laughing-barrel simply turned the world upside down and inside out. And in doing so, he in-verted (and thus sub-verted) tradition and thus the preordained and cherished scheme of Southern racial relationships was blasted asunder. Therefore, it was feared that if such unhappy instances of interracial laughter occurred with any frequency, it would create a crisis in which social order would be fatally undermined by something as un-political as a bunch of Negroes with their laughing heads stuck into the interiors of a batch of old whitewashed whiskey barrels. (192)

Rather than functioning as a site wherein white supremacy reproduces and entrenches itself, laughter becomes an experience/event wherein black and white subjects share public space together on an equal footing. Through their laughter, black subjects make themselves count as
members of the *polis*; their laughter precipitates a *democratization* of the Southern town. This is the source of the crisis generated by the laughing barrels.8

The genius of the laughing barrel joke consists in how it provisionally accepts the white supremacist conception of black laughter as “irrational,” “primitive,” and “wild” in order to reveal the very same qualities in the laughter of whites. This revelation occurs at the precise moment when white supremacy aims to put the supposedly essential difference between black and white laughter on full display (i.e., when the black subject has his head buried in the barrel). The laughing barrel scene deconstructs the distinction between black and white laughter at the foundation of the white supremacist regime of laughter, and in doing so it reveals Ellison’s intensely dialectical conception of the politics of black laughter. The sounds of black laughter are neither simply the echoes of an oppressive history nor democratizing forces opposed to white supremacy. Both political valences depend on – even as they exceed and undermine – one another. Black laughter’s status as a product of racial oppression and sign of racial inferiority invokes attributes like “irrationality,” “primitiveness,” and “wildness” that, when taken to their extremes, make possible a democratic transformation of the white supremacist social order.

Conversely, the capacity of black laughter to undermine the racial order depends not on any revolutionary quality intrinsic to such laughter (Chasar 2008; Fauset 1994), but rather on how

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8 The logic of democratization at work in Ellison’s laughing barrel joke resonates strongly with the account of democratic politics articulated by Jacques Rancière over a decade later (Rancière 1999, 2001). That is, Ellison describes how a police order (white supremacy) entails a particular partition of the perceptible (the white supremacist regime of laughter) that the *demos*, or “part without a part,” (the black citizenry) interrupts to reveal “the equality of anyone at all with anyone else” (i.e., the equality of black and white subjects) (Rancière 1999, 15). But whereas for Rancière the *demos* reveals its equality by demonstrating its possession of *logos*, or the capacity for reasoned speech, for Ellison the revelation of equality works in the opposite direction: those who possess *logos* (the white Southerners) are reduced to the mere *phônê* belonging to the *demos* (i.e., to black laughter). Ellison thus goes further than Rancière by revealing not only the “sheer contingency” of the differential allocation of *logos* and *phônê* in a police order, but also the radical contingency and fragility of the *logos* itself (Rancière 1999, 15). For Ellison, then, an inegalitarian social order is a temporary product of an ongoing *process* that can go awry at any moment.
white supremacy defines the laughter of blacks in racist terms as “irrational,” “primitive,” etc.

Ellison shows that the politics of black laughter are constitutively complex and double-sided, and it is this unstable, dialectical quality that accounts for the enduring saliency of black laughter in political struggles over white supremacy today.

Recall that it is Ellison’s uncontrollable laughter at *Tobacco Road* that reminds him of the laughing barrel joke in the first place, and we find a similar dynamic at work in the Broadway theater. Although there is no formal segregation of laughter in the theater (i.e., there are no laughing barrels), the space remains governed by the white supremacist regime of laughter. Ellison describes how the theater (a) encourages polite laughter that emanates from the audience as a whole and lasts for a determinate period and (b) prohibits unruly laughter that originates from a single audience member and persists for an indeterminate period. These rules and norms are racially coded in the terms provided by white supremacy. Ellison explains:

Things were getting so out of control that Northern white folk in balcony and loge were now catching fire and beginning to howl and cheer the disgraceful loss of self-control being exhibited by a young Negro […] a young man who was so gross as to demonstrate his social unacceptability by violating a whole *encyclopedia* of codes that regulated proper conduct no less in the theater than in society at large. […] [P]erhaps, in shock and dismay, they too were thinking of laughing-barrels. (Ellison 1986, 187–88)

Ellison’s laughter marks him as a black man in the predominantly white space of the Broadway theater. Ellison suggests that he has developed a capacity to regulate his laughter in order to avoid trouble in such environments:

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9 Once again, by “dialectical” I do not mean the progressive, teleological dialectics of Hegel, but rather the negative dialectics of Adorno that focuses on how the unruly and excessive non-identical (e.g., the black laughter emanating from the laughing barrel) illuminates and can transform the whole (e.g., the white supremacist social order).

10 Here I disagree with Anca Parvulescu’s otherwise brilliant reading of “An Extravagance of Laughter” (Parvulescu 2010, 59–77). Parvulescu notes that “there are rules as to when one laughs and how one laughs in the theater […]. All theaters have their laughing barrels” (74). While the Broadway theater certainly regulates laughter according to the terms of the white supremacist regime, it does not segregate black laughter. The theater thus does not have laughing barrels.
It was as though I had plunged into a nightmare in which my personality was split in twain, with the lucid side looking on in wonder while the manic side convulsed my body as though a drunken accordionist were using it [...]. And while I wheezed and choked with laughter, my disgusted lucid self dramatized its cool detachment. (187)

The absence of laughing barrels corresponds to the emergence of an internal regulation by black subjects of their laughter. The extravagance of laughter that Ellison suffers in the theater is unique because it eludes control by his “lucid” half that normally enforces obedience to the rules of the white supremacist regime.

Just as the laughter of the black subject in the barrel democratizes the Southern town, Ellison’s extravagance of laughter democratizes the Broadway theater. Ellison recounts how his fit of laughter divides the overwhelmingly white audience. Some angrily insist on upholding the theater’s rules of laughter, while others allow themselves to laugh along with Ellison:

But now as I continued to roar at the weird play-without-a-play in which part of me was involved, my sober self marked the fact that the entire audience was being torn in twain. Most of the audience was white, but now many who occupied seats down in the orchestra were beginning to protest the unscheduled disruption taking place above them. Leaping to their feet, they were shaking their fists at those in the balcony, and they in turn were shouting their disdain for those so lacking in an appreciation for the impromptu broadening of the expected comedy. (189)

When the group of white audience members joins Ellison in laughing, the previously strict distinction between permissible (i.e., white) and impermissible (i.e., black) laughter crumbles. No longer an occasion for re-inscribing racial hierarchy, laughter instead becomes an experience/event that reveals and affirms the equality of black and white audience members. Through the scene generated by his laughter, Ellison affirms his equality in the space of the theater:

Caldwell told me something important about who I was. And by easing the conflict that I was having with my Southern experience (yes, and with my South-Southwestern identity), he helped initiate me into becoming, if not a ‘New Yorker,’ at least a more tolerant American. (197)
As was the case in the Southern town, the democratizing power of Ellison’s laughter depends paradoxically on its status as a product of racial oppression and signifier of racial inferiority. It is only by means of the racist terms through which the white supremacist social order interprets black laughter that the latter succeeds in revealing and affirming the equality of black and white subjects. Grateful to Caldwell for creating an occasion where his laughter could yield “an interracial situation without the threat of physical violence,” Ellison concludes by praising the novelist as a “mighty destroyer of laughing-barrels” (197).

III. The Democratic Politics of Black Laughter

Ellison’s celebration of Caldwell as a “mighty destroyer of laughing-barrels” makes clear his commitment to abolishing the white supremacist regime of laughter. However, a crucial passage in “An Extravagance of Laughter” complicates our understanding of Ellison’s attitude toward the regulation of black laughter. Speculating on the best course of action for a black subject who is about to laugh, Ellison writes: “Negroes who were wise – or at least fast on their feet – took off posthaste for a laughing-barrel. (Just as I, in my present predicament, would gladly have done.)” (188–89). This view of laughing barrels as a resource that the black subject actively seeks out accords with other historical accounts of laughing barrels. For example, folklorist Alan Dundes writes that

in slavery times and afterward […] if a Negro wished to laugh out loud at his master, he might do so only at considerable risk. So he suppressed the desire to laugh and went instead to the “laughing barrel,” where he could laugh to his heart’s content without fear of being heard.11 (Dundes 1973, xv)

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1) The various analogues of “laughing barrels” in African American folklore also confirm this view. For example, black worshippers supposedly used wash kettles, “prayer bells,” and “shouting barrels” as safe outlets to pray and sing in the antebellum and Jim Crow South (Dundes 1973, xv–xvi; Bercaw and Amon 2016).
On this interpretation, laughing barrels are not so much a mechanism deployed to impose an inferior social and political status on blacks as they are a technology employed by blacks to safely enjoy their laughter. While “laughing barrels” exist only in a white supremacist society, Ellison suggests that we look beyond their status as instruments of racial oppression and attend to their capacity to protect and even empower black subjects.

If the relationship between black subjects and the mechanisms of white supremacy is not simply or strictly antagonistic, then under what conditions does black laughter democratize the social order? Two episodes from earlier in Ellison’s essay suggest an answer to this question. The first concerns Ellison’s experience as a newcomer to the New York City public bus system in the 1930s. Ellison writes that after assuring himself that – unlike in the South – he could sit wherever he likes on the bus, he finds himself considering an unexpected question:

I asked myself whether a seat at the back of the bus wasn’t actually more desirable than one at the front. For not only did it provide more leg room, it offered a more inclusive perspective on both the interior and exterior scenes. I found the answer obvious and quite amusing […]. Now that I was no longer forced by law and compelled by custom to ride at the back […] what was more desirable – the possibility of exercising what was routinely accepted in the North as an abstract, highly symbolic (even trivial) form of democratic freedom, or the creature comfort which was to be had by occupying a spot from which more of the passing scene could be observed? (Ellison 1986, 153)

For Ellison, Northern buses raise a “troublesome question” and a “certain unease” about the meaning of freedom in a country with a deep and enduring history of racial oppression (156). Does freedom for black Americans consist in the enjoyment of previously denied rights? Or does freedom instead consist in the pursuit of one’s individual preferences, even when these preferences align – at least on the surface – with historical practices of oppression?
Digging deeper into this question, Ellison wonders whether he and others had ignored possibilities for free action in the segregated South. He describes how his experiences on the Northern buses were raising the even more troublesome question of to what extent had I failed to grasp a certain degree of freedom that had always existed in my group’s state of unfreedom? Of what had I neglected to avail myself through fear or lack of interest while sitting silently behind Jim-Crow signs? […] to what extent had I overlooked similar opportunities for self-discovery while accepting a definition of possibility laid down by those who would deny me freedom? (156)

While in no way criticizing the civil rights movement (Warren 1965; Ellison 2003d, 433), Ellison worries that an exclusive focus on securing and enjoying the rights refused to black Americans confirms the total power of white supremacy against the black subject and denies to the latter any capacity for acting freely on his or her own terms. Freedom for Ellison involves a “play upon life’s possibilities” (Ellison 1986, 180) – that is, a critical engagement with (rather than mere removal of) mechanisms of racial oppression. Ellison, in other words, refuses to allow white supremacy to dictate the meaning of black freedom. As Lucas Morel notes, Ellison held that “there was no need to get all of his instruction in liberty from a racist society” (Morel 2004, 58).

Ellison believes that actions like voluntarily sitting at the back of the Northern bus affirm that his capacity to determine how to be free is equal to that exercised by whites.12

The second episode that explains Ellison’s apparent ambivalence towards the laughing barrels concerns his memories of Alabama police harassing Tuskegee students traveling on the

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12 This focus on the possibilities for freedom amid unfreedom is a recurring theme in Ellison. For example, in “Blues People” he writes that slavery “was a most vicious system, and those who endured and survived it a tough people, but it was not (and this is important for Negroes to remember for the sake of their own sense of who and what their grandparents were) a state of absolute repression” (Ellison 2003a, 284).
highway to the university. Ellison describes how students coped with this abuse by laughing together upon their return:

Back on campus we were compelled to buffer the pain and negate the humiliation by making grotesque comedy out of the extremes to which whites would go to keep us in what they considered to be our “place.” Once safe at Tuskegee, we’d become fairly hysterical as we recounted our adventures and laughed as much at ourselves as at the cops. We mocked their modes of speech and styles of intimidation, and teased one another as we parodied our various modes of feigning fear when telling them who we were and where we were headed. It was a wild, he-man schoolboy silliness but the only way we knew for dealing with the inescapable conjunction of laughter and pain. (Ellison 1986, 171–72)

Although Ellison appreciates the therapeutic effects of this laughter, he believes that it falls short as a response to the police violence. He continues:

Thus was violence transcended with cruel but homeopathic laughter, and racial cruelty transformed by a traditional form of folk art. It did nothing to change the Phenix City police, and probably wouldn’t have even if they heard the recitation. […] My problem was that I couldn’t completely dismiss such experiences with laughter. (171–72)

Unlike the white supremacy-subverting extravagances of laughter emanating from the laughing barrels or the Broadway theater, the Tuskegee students’ “cruel” laughter merely reduces their pain by assuring them of their moral superiority to the racist police. (In this way, it is akin to the liberal laughter described in the Introduction.) While black laughter that targets mechanisms of white supremacy is valuable as a survival strategy, Ellison suggests that it fails to challenge the terms of the racial hierarchy and ultimately fails as a democratic strategy.

These two episodes shed light on the conditions under which Ellison believes black laughter democratizes the white supremacist social order. Just as Ellison eschews a preoccupation with the rights denied to black subjects and rejects a strategy of laughing at racist whites, he does not believe that black laughter undermines the white supremacist regime of
laughter when it merely violates or targets that regime. In fact, the black Southerner in the

laughing barrel joke actually obeys the laughing barrel policy (even as his laughter functions to

undermine that policy). Meanwhile, Ellison’s “lucid side” in the Broadway theater does not

encourage or restrain his laughing “manic side”; it simply observes the scandalous laughter in

“cool detachment” (187). In both cases, the subject neither engages in a straightforward violation

of the prevailing rules of laughter nor laughs at these rules or the mechanisms enforcing them.

An extravagance of laughter likewise does not constitute a deliberate strategy on the part

of the black subject. Such laughter is instead an experience that the subject suffers from. Ellison

writes that he “was reduced to […] helpless laughter” by the play (186) and that the black

Southerner was “taken over by a form of schizophrenia” (190; italics mine). Unlike the laughter

of the Tuskegee students that takes deliberate aim at the racist police from a distance, the

extravagance of laughter emerges unexpectedly from deep within the white supremacist social

order – that is, from within a context where black laughter is highly regulated. This

democratizing laughter thus does not belong exclusively to the black subject from whose mouth

it originates; it is instead a collective experience shared between black and white subjects that

functions to undermine the racial conceptions of both. Indeed, unlike the morally superior laugh

he enjoyed with his fellow Tuskegee students, Ellison’s laughter in the Broadway theater reveals

to him that white subjects are not – in their essence at least – the monsters that white supremacy

has made them into:

On one side of my mind I had thought of my life as being of a whole, segregated but in

many ways superior to that of the Lesters. On the other side, I thought of the Lester type

as being, in the Negro folk phrase, “a heap of whiteness gone to waste” and therefore a

gross caricature of anything that was viable in the idea of white superiority. But now
Caldwell had highlighted the warp and woof of my own ragtag American pattern. [...] I laughed and I trembled, and gained thereby a certain wisdom. (197)

The scene precipitated by Ellison’s laughter affirms equality not just to the white audience, but to Ellison as well. Black laughter exerts democratizing effects when its subversion of the white supremacist regime of laughter puts the entire racialized social order – that is, white and black subjects (or more precisely, the very concept of “race” itself) – “over a barrel.”

IV. Ellison, Black Laughter, and Democracy

What do Ellison’s reflections on the democratic politics of black laughter reveal about his broader understanding of democracy within a racialized social order? Democracy is a recurring theme in Ellison (Ellison 1995, vii-xxiii; 2003c; 2003g; 2003k) and political theorists in recent years have found Ellison’s most famous text, *Invisible Man*, to be a valuable resource for grasping the relationship between democratic politics and white supremacy. For example, Danielle Allen contends that Ellison dramatizes the constitutive tensions of democracy as a *form of political life*. According to Allen, Ellison explores how democratic self-government paradoxically requires that citizens make painful (and in the case of white supremacy, non-reciprocal) sacrifices for one another. “The politics in [*Invisible Man*],” she writes, “lies in the novel’s account of what it is like, psychologically speaking, to be an individual in a democratic world of strangers, where large scale events are supposed to arise somehow out of one’s own consent and yet never really do” (Allen 2004a, 38; see also 2004b, 25–49). Meanwhile, Jack Turner and Lucas Morel argue that Ellison sketches a model of *ethical individuality* proper to democratic life. Situating Ellison within the Emersonian tradition that articulates a liberal democratic sensibility capable of challenging social and political reality, Turner claims that
Ellison brings to this tradition a much-needed attention to white supremacy: “In *Invisible Man*, Ellison gives us a picture of democratic individuality in black, and in his essays, displays a democratic individualist sensibility that confronts rather than evades race” (Turner 2008, 657).

Finally, Morel describes the Ellisonian democratic individual as one who resists white supremacy by pursuing opportunities for creative self-expression within the racialized social order. “For [Ellison],” Morel writes, “the politics of the American regime, despite the segregation he experienced, left sufficient room for aspiring Negro individuals to make their mark. […] Ellison wrote as an individual striving to contribute to a community of diverse individuals” (Morel 2004, 60–62).\(^{13}\)

Ellison’s reflections on black laughter in “An Extravagance of Laughter” suggest an alternative interpretation of his democratic theory. I argue that Ellison conceives of democracy as a distinct *mode of political life*. By “mode of political life,” I am referring to the pattern or structure of everyday political interactions among subjects and between subjects and the social order. A “mode” of political life differs from what I identified above in Allen as a “form” of political life in that the latter focuses on how structure (e.g., a formally democratic system of government) conditions everyday political interactions, while the former calls our attention to how structure *emerges from* those everyday political interactions themselves. Ellison’s account of black laughter reveals that in a democracy, the everyday political interactions among subjects and between subjects and the social order assume a pattern he elsewhere calls “antagonistic cooperation” (Ellison 2003b, 850; 2003c, 602; 2003k, 496; 2003m, 188). Unpacking what Ellison means by antagonistic cooperation requires turning to his essays on jazz.

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\(^{13}\) Timothy Parrish (1995) and Meili Steele (1996) also offer incisive analyses of Ellison’s contributions to democratic theory.
Antagonistic Cooperation in Jazz

Before finding success as a writer, Ellison studied classical music and sought to become a symphony composer (Ellison 2003e; 2003h; Jackson 2002; Rampersad 2007). Ellison’s interest in classical music was heavily influenced by his familiarity with the early twentieth-century American jazz scene, and he wrote extensively about the relationship between the two genres (Ellison 2002). Ellison understands jazz as a product of “antagonistic cooperation” in at least two ways. First, black jazz musicians work with and against the classical music tradition from which they have historically been excluded. Ellison describes how jazz musicians bring their distinctive historical experiences to bear on classical instruments, techniques, and styles:

There is a conflict between what the Negro American musician feels in the community around him and the given (or classical) techniques of his instrument. He feels a tension between his desire to master the classical style of playing and his compulsion to express those sounds which form a musical definition of Negro American experience. […] This desire to master the classical technique was linked with the struggle for recognition in the larger society […]. It was the tension between these two bodies of technique which led to many of the technical discoveries of jazz. (Ellison 2003i, 271; see also 2003h, 68–71)

Black jazz musicians affirm their status as artistic equals without sacrificing what is uniquely “black” about their productions. Ellison argues: “I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition, and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision” (Ellison 2003e, 229).

For Ellison, the political significance of jazz does not consist in any overt political message, but rather in how the processes of antagonistic cooperation that black musicians enter into with
classical music reveal and affirm their capacity to contribute to the musical tradition on their own terms as equals.\textsuperscript{14}

The internal dynamics of a jazz performance also feature a second form of “antagonistic cooperation.” Ellison describes a jazz jam session as a “contest” (Ellison 2003i, 267) or “ordeal” (Ellison 2003j, 247) wherein each musician seeks to prove his or her “power to express an individuality in tone” (246). The quality of the group performance depends on how successfully each individual musician articulates his or her own distinctive talents, feelings, or voice against those of the other members of the group. Ellison writes:

True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment [...] springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents [...] a definition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. (Ellison 2003i, 267; see also 2003c, 602–3)

The individual jazz musician proves him or herself a worthy member of the group by developing and mastering a unique musical identity, yet the latter emerges only fleetingly in response to the play of others and is thus never truly one’s “own.” Ellison admires jazz for how it establishes and sustains a dialectical tension between individual and group that simultaneously advances and undermines the interests of both: “The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization” (Ellison 2003e, 229). Ellison conceives of jazz as a dynamic artistic process

\textsuperscript{14} In “Going to the Territory,” Ellison describes the “vernacular” style characteristic of American artistic production in similar terms. He writes: “I see the vernacular as a dynamic process in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves. [...] In it the styles and the techniques of the past are adjusted to the needs of the present, and in its integrative action the high styles of the past are democratized.” (Ellison 2003c, 612). While Ellison’s concept of the “vernacular” is functionally equivalent to “antagonistic cooperation,” I focus on the latter because its very name dramatizes the dynamic, dialectical tensions that such a process calls into play.
wherein black musicians enter into relations of antagonistic cooperation with the classical music tradition by simultaneously entering into relations of antagonistic cooperation with one another. Jazz, in short, involves the establishment of an intensely dialectical relationship between individual, group, and tradition.¹⁵

Grasping the richness of Ellison’s concept of antagonistic cooperation requires analyzing the relationship between jazz and classical music more closely. (We could perform a similar analysis on the internal dynamics of the jazz jam session, but for the sake of space I limit my focus here.) This relationship is one of “antagonistic cooperation” in at least eight distinct senses. First, jazz cooperates with the classical tradition (by employing its instruments, techniques, and styles) in such a way that antagonizes it (i.e., in such a way that resists its musical hegemony). Second, jazz cooperates with the classical tradition (by employing its instruments, techniques, and styles) in order to reveal the classical tradition’s antagonism with itself (i.e., to reveal that classical music does not, as it claims, exhaust itself in its own instruments, techniques, and styles). Third, jazz antagonizes the classical tradition (i.e., it resists its musical hegemony) by cooperating with it (i.e., by employing classical instruments, techniques, and styles). Fourth, jazz reveals the classical tradition’s antagonism with itself (i.e., it shows that classical music does not exhaust itself in its own instruments, techniques and styles) by cooperating with that tradition (by employing classical instruments, techniques, and styles). Fifth, jazz cooperates with the

¹⁵ While Ellison and Adorno share a striking number of similarities in biography and intellectual orientation (e.g., early training and ambitions in classical music; roots in a Marxist tradition, yet resistance to orthodox Marxism; the possession of an intensely dialectical imagination; an aesthetic orientation toward politics, yet strong allergy to so-called “political” or “protest” art; and a reputation for aesthetic elitism) they appear to split decisively on the artistic (and thus political) merits of jazz. Adorno famously objects to jazz as a commodity through which the masses take pleasure in their own alienation (Adorno 2002a; 2002b), whereas Ellison admires jazz as a means through which black artists publicly reveal and affirm their equality with whites. However, as James Harding points out, a closer look at their respective jazz writings reveals “a surprising correlation” between the two thinkers (Harding 1995, 130). In particular, Ellison’s distinction between “jazz as experience” and “jazz as entertainment” (Ellison 2003i, 269; 2003f, 277) suggests that he shares Adorno’s concerns about the commercialization of music.
classical tradition (i.e., it reveals new musical possibilities allowed by classical instruments, techniques, and styles) by antagonizing it (i.e., by resisting that tradition’s musical hegemony).

Sixth, jazz cooperates with the classical tradition (i.e., it reveals new musical possibilities allowed by classical instruments, techniques, and styles) by revealing that tradition’s antagonism with itself (i.e., by showing that classical music does not exhaust itself in its own instruments, techniques and styles). Seventh, by antagonizing the classical tradition (i.e., by resisting its hegemony), jazz cooperates with it (i.e., jazz reveals new musical possibilities allowed by classical instruments, techniques, and styles). Eighth and finally, jazz reveals the classical tradition’s antagonism with itself (i.e., it shows that classical music does not exhaust itself in its own instruments, techniques and styles) by cooperating with that tradition (by revealing new musical possibilities allowed by its instruments, techniques, and styles).

Despite the dizzyingly contradictory directions in which these permutations run, they are all implied by Ellison’s account. This is not a flaw in Ellison’s reasoning, but rather its decisive feature. Antagonism and cooperation are dialectically intertwined to such an extreme degree that it is impossible to tell for certain where one begins and the other ends. Antagonism is never simply antagonistic, and cooperation is never simply cooperative; there is an ineradicable duplicity to each. The opposite of “antagonistic cooperation” is not some third term but rather “antagonism” and “cooperation” taken separately. An antagonism not keyed toward cooperation forsakes critical engagement with the whole it resists and risks slipping into idle protest, while cooperation lacking an antagonistic element forsakes critical energy and risks tacitly accepting existing social conditions. According to Ellison, the political significance of jazz consists in how
it establishes a dynamic, dialectically complex, Janus-faced relationship of antagonistic cooperation between black musicians and the classical music tradition.\textsuperscript{16}

**Black Laughter, Antagonistic Cooperation, and Democracy**

Ellison’s jazz essays provide the key for grasping the distinctive conception of democracy that emerges in “An Extravagance of Laughter.” When Ellison suggests that the democratizing power of black laughter consists in how it subverts the mechanisms of the white supremacist regime of laughter, he describes the very same process of antagonistic cooperation at work in jazz. Consider once again the case of the laughing barrels in the fictional Southern town. First, black laughter *cooperates* with the white supremacist social order (i.e., it obeys the laughing barrel policy) in such a way that *antagonizes* that order (i.e., in a way that resists the inferior social and political status afforded to black subjects). Second, black laughter *cooperates* with the white supremacist social order (i.e., it obeys the laughing barrel policy) in such a way that reveals that order’s *antagonism* with itself (i.e., it reveals the social order’s failure to live up to its stated democratic ideals). Third, black laughter *cooperates* with the white supremacist social order (i.e., it helps the latter achieve its stated democratic ideals) by *antagonizing* it (i.e., by resisting the inferior social and political status afforded to black subjects). Fourth, black laughter *cooperates* with the white supremacist social order (i.e., it helps the latter achieve its stated democratic ideals) by revealing that order’s *antagonism* with itself (i.e., its failure to live up to its stated democratic ideals).

\textsuperscript{16} It may be possible to interpret Ellison’s concept of “antagonistic cooperation” as an unintentional gloss on Chapter 13 of Marx’s *Capital* (Volume 1). Here Marx argues that the cooperation among laborers that makes possible the emergence and accumulation of capital is simultaneously also the product and source of labor’s necessary antagonism with capital. He writes: “The co-operation of wage-labourers is entirely brought about by the capital that employs them. […] Hence the interconnection between their various labours confronts them […] as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose” (Marx 1990, 449–50). Marx continues: “As the number of the co-operating workers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital, and, necessarily, the pressure put on by capital to overcome this resistance” (449). For Marx, as for Ellison, cooperation and antagonism are intricately and inexorably bound up with one another, and the promise of an emancipatory politics resides in their dialectical relationship.
these ideals. Each of these modes of cooperation can be inverted into practices of antagonism along the lines described in the jazz example. For example, black laughter antagonizes the white supremacist social order (i.e., it resists the inferior social and political status afforded to black subjects) by cooperating with that order (i.e., by obeying the laughing barrel policy).

As if this relationship between the laughing black subject and the white supremacist social order were not complex enough, it is actually only one part of the story. The presence of multiple laughing barrels in the Southern town means that the individual black subject does not laugh alone (Ellison 1986, 190–91). The sound of his laughter competes to be heard with – even as it resonates with and intensifies – the laughter emanating from other barrels. In addition to entering into a relationship of antagonistic cooperation with the racialized social order, the individual subject’s laughter enters into antagonistic cooperation with the laughter of the other black subjects, and this collective laughter in turn enters into antagonistic cooperation with the racialized social order as a whole. Ellison shows that the democratizing power of black laughter consists in how it antagonistically cooperates with – or cooperatively antagonizes – the laughter of other black subjects and white supremacy more generally.

There is, however, one important way in which the conception of antagonistic cooperation that emerges from Ellison’s account of black laughter departs from that articulated in his jazz essays. Whereas the jazz musician must possess special artistic training or talent in order to enter relationships of antagonistic cooperation with other musicians and the classical tradition, there exist no such qualifications when it comes to laughter (beside the black subject’s inevitable social training in the rules and regulations governing his or her laughter). According to Ellison, the laughing barrel joke “suggested that somehow a Negro (and this meant any Negro) could
become with a single hoot-and-cackle both the source and master of an outrageous and untenable situation” (191). The democratizing laughter emanating from a laughing barrel can originate from any black subject. When black laughter democratizes the white supremacist social order, it reveals the equality of even the lowliest black subject with his or her white counterparts.

Ellison’s account of black laughter illuminates his conception of democracy as a mode of political life wherein subjects enter relationships of antagonistic cooperation with one another and the social order as a whole. In the context of American white supremacy (the social order from which Ellison writes and which we continue to inhabit today), democracy involves antagonistic cooperation by black subjects and their allies with the various subjects, mechanisms, and institutions of white supremacy. Antagonistic cooperation is neither quiet acquiescence to nor blind protest of racial oppression. It is instead critical – and in a certain sense, duplicitous – work against and on behalf of a social whole that oppresses black subjects. For Ellison, this whole is worth saving because there is literally nothing outside of it. Resisting the arguments of black nationalists who (like racist whites, he believes) conceive of American democracy as irreparably tied to racial oppression (Ellison 2003n, 583), Ellison insists that the futures of black Americans, white Americans, and American democracy in general are bound up with one another. “American life is of a whole,” Ellison writes (Ellison 1986, 185), and “the nation could not survive being deprived of [African Americans’] presence because, by the irony implicit in the dynamics of American democracy, they symbolize its most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom” (Ellison 2003n, 588). Through antagonistic cooperation black subjects affirm their capacity to contribute to public life on their own terms as equals, and only through such actions does the social order overcome its white supremacist roots and realize its
democratic ideals. Ellison understands democracy, particularly in the context of persistent racial hierarchy, as an *intensely dialectical* – that is, self-contradictory and Janus-faced – mode of political life that pursues cooperation through antagonism and antagonism through cooperation.

This account builds on but ultimately departs from the interpretations of Ellison’s democratic theory offered by Allen, Turner, and Morel. (In this way it models the process of antagonistic cooperation described by Ellison.) For her part, Allen rightly highlights the importance of contradiction and paradox to Ellison’s conception of democracy. But whereas Allen understands the form of democracy as the *source* of the contradictions that subjects must negotiate in a democracy, Ellison’s account of black laughter shows that he conceives of democracy as *itself* a contradictory mode of life by which subjects work with and against one another and the larger social order. Meanwhile, Turner’s identification of a liberal individualist sensibility in Ellison helpfully demonstrates how democracy involves critical confrontations with white supremacy. But liberalism’s core belief that the self-identical individual constitutes the fundamental unit of social and political life remains at odds with Ellison’s understanding of the “individual” as an ever-evolving product of democratic processes of antagonistic cooperation with other subjects and the social order as a whole. Ellisonian democracy, in other words, is not a form of liberalism (cf. Foley 2010; Rampersad 2007). Finally, while Morel correctly emphasizes Ellison’s refusal to allow white supremacy to dictate the terms of individual black freedom, he fails to account for what is ultimately central for Ellison: the dialectical interplay between individuals, collectivities, and the social order. This point is crucial because, as we will see below, Ellison has often been accused of fetishizing individual self-expression at the expense of racial solidarity or a realistic account of white supremacy. “An Extravagance of Laughter” shows
that Ellison does not theorize democracy simply as a form of government or type of ethical individuality but rather as a distinct mode of political life involving relations of antagonistic cooperation among individuals, collectivities, and the broader social order.

Responding to Ellison’s Critics

I will conclude by bringing my account of Ellisonian democracy into conversation with a series of less charitable interpretations of Ellison’s political project. Most notably, Jerry Gafio Watts argues that Ellison advances a politics of “heroic individualism” that understands white supremacy not as an oppressive barrier to black equality but rather as “an inspiring landscape for transcendence” (Watts 1994, 22). Watts claims that Ellison’s interest in the possibilities for black freedom amid segregation betrays both a naïve denial of the physical and psychological devastation wrought by white supremacy and an uncritical celebration of the black individual’s capacity to heroically “rise above” such conditions. Ellison’s work gave rise to a notion of freedom void of historical contexts. This notion of freedom assumed that regardless of social conditions and circumstances, the individual would still have to make choices governing his or her life. In making these choices, the individual either successfully or unsuccessfully realized his or her freedom. (55–56)

According to Watts, Ellison overstates the power of black individuals and neglects the necessity of collective political action for transforming the racialized social order.

Watts’s objections originate in a peculiar interpretation of Ellison’s concept of “antagonistic cooperation.” Watts understands antagonistic cooperation as the process by which a social antagonism (i.e., some racial barrier or oppression) “cooperates” with the black subject by creating an opportunity for that subject to heroically assert his or her individual freedom (56–57). While Watts rightly recoils at this conception of antagonistic cooperation as symptomatic of an
ahistorical, “bourgeois” conception of liberty (57), he is simply wrong to associate it with Ellison.\(^\text{17}\) Ellison’s laughing barrel joke and jazz writings show that rather than society cooperating with the black subject by posing an antagonism that invites a heroic overcoming, the subject cooperates with the white supremacist social order in order to generate an antagonism within and against that order. Although Turner (2008) and Morel (2004) demonstrate that Ellison is an “individualist” in a certain sense, Ellison does not glorify the individual black subject as capable of heroically “overcoming” his or her social conditions. Through antagonistic cooperation, the black subject transforms – but does not transcend – the racialized social order.

Watts’s critique (and its underlying misreading) of Ellison reflects a more widely held set of objections to Ellison’s political project. For decades critics have accused Ellison of uncritically celebrating the power of the black individual and of retaining an untenable allergy to collective political action. For example, in interviews in the 1960s novelists Richard Stern and Robert Penn Warren challenged Ellison on whether his focus on black freedom amid slavery and segregation amounted to a romanticization of racial oppression (Ellison 2003h, 76–80; Warren 1965, 346). More recently, Barbara Foley’s monumental study of Ellison’s pre-\text{Invisible Man}\ stories and essays traces his apparent abandonment of radical leftist politics in favor of an allegedly more conventional democratic pluralism (Foley 2010; see also Rampersad 2007). While Ellison certainly emphasizes the possibilities for individual freedom amid white supremacy and harbors suspicions about collective political action, his writings – particularly “An Extravagance of Laughter” – demonstrate that this does not amount to a glorification of the

\(^{17}\) Revealingly, Watts turns to Albert Murray, a twentieth century jazz critic and Ellison interlocutor, for this definition of “antagonistic cooperation” (Watts 1994, 56–57). Murray’s rendering of antagonistic cooperation is indeed problematic in the ways Watts describes, but this is an indictment of Murray, not Ellison.
black individual (Watts), romanticization of oppression (Stern, Warren), or disavowal of radical politics (Foley; Rampersad). Rather, it reflects an effort to articulate a genuinely dialectical – and thus genuinely radical – account of democratic politics: one wherein individuals and collectivities work with and against one another and the larger social order in order to overcome white supremacy. Refusing to fetishize the power of individuals, collectivities, or the social order, Ellison favors an approach that brings these elements into complex and contradictory relationships of antagonistic cooperation with one another. This is the vision of democratic politics that emerges in Ellison’s account of black laughter, and it stands as his most important contribution to contemporary democratic theory.

V. Putting White Supremacy “Over a Barrel”

Black laughter constitutes a privileged site wherein the American white supremacist social order is produced, reproduced, and resisted. In “An Extravagance of Laughter” Ellison shows that the distinctive sounds, styles, and strategies of black laughter are shaped by a history of racial oppression and discrimination. Despite policies that regulate (and in some cases, segregate) the supposedly “primitive” and “irrational” sounds of black laughter, the laughter of African Americans can exceed the terms of white supremacy and democratize the American racial order by revealing the very same qualities in the laughter of whites. Through their laughter, black subjects can subvert the white supremacist social order and make themselves count as members of the polis. Ellison demonstrates that democracy amid white supremacy does not consist merely in protesting mechanisms of racial oppression or seeking equal rights with whites, and it certainly does not entail rejecting the social order as irreparably racist. Democracy instead involves black subjects entering into dynamic, dialectically complex, Janus-faced relations of
antagonistic cooperation with one another and the white supremacist social order in order to affirm their capacity to participate in public life as equals. By working with and against other subjects and the racialized social order as a whole, everyday black Americans – like the women on the Napa Valley Wine Train – who are forced to stifle or segregate their laughter can nevertheless succeed in putting white supremacy “over a barrel.” That is, at least, Ellison’s (and our) democratic hope.
LAUGHTER AND DECEPTION

The unconditional will to truth—what is it? Is it the will not to allow oneself to be deceived? Or is it the will not to deceive? [...] But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived? (Nietzsche 1974, 281)

Experience shows that in our times the rulers who have done great things are those who have set little score by keeping their word, being skillful rather in cunningly deceiving men; they have got the better of those who have relied on being trustworthy. (Machiavelli 2012, 61)

But it is a sad thing, they say, to be deceived.
No; the saddest thing is not to be deceived. (Erasmus 2015, 63)

Laughter constitutes a privileged site wherein the contemporary social order constructs, preserves, and transforms itself politically. While the dominant liberal discourse emphasizes laughter’s capacity to emancipate through the production of truth, I argue that laughter participates in politics by shaping, disrupting, and re-composing what counts as rational, truthful speech and who qualifies as a rational, truthful speaker. Through close readings of laughter’s relationship to social power (Adorno); counter/sovereignty (Hobbes); reason and common sense (Kant); and racial hierarchy (Ellison), I have demonstrated that experiences/events of laughter are dialectically complex sites of profound political risk and democratic opportunity. In laughter a particular distribution of logos emerges and entrenches itself (often in oppressive, reactionary, and exclusionary ways) and overcomes and transforms itself (often in more emancipatory, subversive, and democratic directions). By way of conclusion, I review the preceding chapters by examining how their arguments are linked by a theme to which I have repeatedly gestured but have not yet explicitly addressed, namely, deception. I find that (a) the politics of laughter are a politics of deception and (b) this discovery suggests the need to re-orient democratic and critical theory away from their traditional commitments to truth, truthfulness, and truth-telling and toward practices of deception. I once again begin with Adorno.
Rejecting conventional subject-centric approaches to the politics of laughter, Adorno argues that laughter in late modernity always arises and exerts political effects within a contradictory social order. The politics of laughter are likewise neither intrinsically oppressive nor intrinsically emancipatory, but rather complex and dialectical. On the one hand, “wrong” laughter generated by the culture industry and polemical practices like satire and comedy bolsters existing forms of social power by deceiving the subject into believing that she has escaped such power. On the other hand, “reconciled” laughter produced by artists like Samuel Beckett or Charlie Chaplin resists social power by harnessing the violence of the social order to undermine the subject who laughs. Because the subject experiences such laughter as a painful shattering of her identity as autonomous and self-sufficient, she is necessarily deceived about its emancipatory effects. According to Adorno, laughter entrenches social power only when it appears to be emancipatory, and it resists social power only when it appears to be oppressive. An Adorno-inspired critical theory of laughter dwells in this duplicity of laughter in order to discern its political risks and cultivate its democratic possibilities.

Deception also plays a decisive role in the politics of Hobbes’s theory of laughter. Hobbes contends that laughter is sudden vainglory, or a false or merely imagined conception of one’s own power. An individual who laughs deceives himself that he is more powerful than the object of his laughter. Hobbes understands this self-deception as carrying important implications within the context of a political community. The discrepancy between how the laughing individual and others assess his power threatens the sovereign interest in social peace, and Hobbes consequently objects to laughter as a counter-sovereign political enactment. However, when we read Hobbes’s theory of laughter alongside his political philosophy, we find that this counter-sovereign logic of
laughter reappears in the social contract establishing a sovereign: the Hobbesian body politic is a *laughing body politic* in its sudden, vainglorious authorization of sovereign power. The concept of a laughing body politic reveals how the democratic possibilities of collective laughter consist in how it simultaneously embodies *and* resists sovereignty. The laughing bodies politic generated by the Jon Stewart/Stephen Colbert rally, late-night political satire programs, the laughing Turkish women, and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army all claim an unauthorized, self-deceptive degree of sovereign power that is lost in its very own transgressive expression. Hobbes illuminates how the counter/sovereign politics of laughter are rooted in a necessarily self-deceptive claim to power.

Kant conceives of laughter’s relationship to deception somewhat differently than Adorno and Hobbes. According to Kant, laughter arises when a joke presents the understanding with aesthetic ideas that it cannot comprehend with its concepts and rules. As Kant notes, “the joke must always contain something that can deceive for a moment” (Kant 2000, 334). The Kantian subject is not deceived by laughter; rather, she laughs because she has been deceived. This deception proves to be quite fruitful, however, as the aesthetic judgment of laughter stimulates reason to “think more,” or to transform its principles for thought and action. But because Kant insists that laughter is also an affect, the joke simultaneously prompts reason to “think less,” or to re-commit itself to its ideas. The opportunities and dangers that the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter pose to human reason can thus only be grasped in conjunction with one another; itself the product of deception, the aesthetic judgment/affect of laughter presents itself to us only deceptively – that is, as always in the form of its opposite. Turning to the political implications of Kant’s account of laughter, Kant demonstrates that in laughter, *sensus communis*, or what counts
as aesthetically communicable among subjects prior to concepts, becomes *dissensus communis*,
or an anarchic scrambling of how subjects see and hear the world together in common. A new
*sensus communis* emerges through this democratic enactment performed by the enthusiasm of
laughter. Kant’s account of laughter yields a critical and radical vision of democracy as *dissensus
communis* – a vision that understands new forms of aesthetic common sense as originating in
imaginative practices of deception.

Finally, Ellison illustrates how the democratic politics of laughter hinge on laughter’s
capacity to deceive. Ellison argues that the distinctive sounds, styles, and strategies of African
American laughter are shaped by white supremacy and that the latter sustains itself in part by
regulating this laughter. The laughing barrel joke illuminates how black laughter can exceed the
role assigned to it by white supremacy by cooperating with the mechanisms of that regime (e.g.,
the laughing barrels) in such a way that undermines its assumptions about the differences
between black and white laughter. Under the guise of obeying the laughing barrel policy, the
laughter of black subjects democratizes the Southern town. “An Extravagance of Laughter”
reveals Ellison’s distinctive conception of democracy as a mode of political life featuring such
jazz-like, Janus-faced processes of “antagonistic cooperation.” On this view, democracy is
neither reducible to nor impossible in a racialized social order; democracy instead involves
cooperating with the racial order’s policies in such a way that affirms that order’s stated
democratic ideals against its own inegalitarian, racist practices. For Ellison, democracy entails
deceptive practices of antagonistic cooperation among individuals, groups, and the social order
as a whole.

* * *
Throughout this project I have argued that the political significance of laughter consists in how it launches logos and phōnē into a complex, dialectical relationship such that what counts as logos versus phōnē becomes uncertain, contestable, and open to change. The above reflections on laughter’s relation to deception shed more light on precisely how these transformations occur. In laughter, phōnē deceives logos. That is, by deceitfully presenting itself as the expression or carrier of logos – whether it be the logos of social freedom or oppression (Adorno); the logos of an individual’s power (Hobbes); the logos of reality and common sense (Kant); or the logos of racial hierarchy (Ellison) – the phōnē of laughter undermines and transforms what counts as logos in a given social order. Laughter participates in politics by deceptively presenting itself as that which it is not (and, coincidentally, as that which the liberal discourse imagines it as providing), namely, the truth. The political possibilities and dangers of laughter consist in how it originates in and/or practices deception. The politics of laughter are a politics of deception.

Conceiving of the politics of laughter in this way challenges the basic assumptions of two of the main research areas to which this project has contributed. First, it calls into question contemporary democratic theory’s commitment to truth, truthfulness, and/or truth-telling as core principles of democracy. Democratic theorists from the otherwise disparate deliberative, liberal, post-structuralist, and pragmatic traditions agree that democracy requires truth-oriented civic values like transparency, openness, honesty, sincerity, trust, and candor (Cohen 2003; Dewey 1954; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Habermas 1996; Luxon 2013; Markovits 2008; Mill 1958; Warren 2001; West 2001). The democratic politics of laughter uncovered in this project suggest that democracy instead entails practices of deception. Previously unintelligible or disqualified subjects affirm their status as equals by deceptively taking on the appearance of logos such that
what counts as rational, truthful speech and who qualifies as a rational, truthful speaker in a given social order change. For instance, the Scythian slaves described by Rancière affirm their equality by deceiving their masters that they are warriors; the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army interrupts prevailing police logics by disguising themselves as clown soldiers; and the Chinese punsters reassemble aesthetic common sense by momentarily tricking their listeners about the meanings of common utterances. Ellison’s concept of “antagonistic cooperation” captures how these Janus-faced practices of working with and against a social order can lead to the democratization of that order. Laughter’s participation in democratic politics suggests that democracy might not be a form of government or way of life committed to truth, truthfulness, or truth-telling, but rather an experience/event wherein that which counts as phōnē deceptively recomposes the prevailing distribution of logos.

Second, conceiving of the politics of laughter as a politics of deception transforms how we understand the task of critical theory today. In its traditional Frankfurt School and (at times) post-structuralist forms, critical theory operates according to a logic of demystification (Bennett 2010, xiv–xv; Chambers 2013, 123–56; Latour 2003; Rancière 2009). According to this logic, the theorist reveals how various power structures deceive the “masses” about their “real” or “true” interests (Geuss 1981). Critical theory, in other words, seeks to deliver its addressees from a state of deception to a state of enlightenment. The critical theory of laughter offered by this project, while indeed demystifying the fascistic dangers of apparently emancipatory liberal laughter, has consistently eschewed re-orienting politics toward “truer” or more “enlightened,” “liberating” practices of laughter. It has instead demonstrated that the democratic, emancipatory possibilities of laughter are just as deceptive (and even self-deceptive) as its liberal, fascistic possibilities. In
fact, laughter’s democratic promise consists precisely in its origin in and practice of a
(self-)deceptive transformation of what counts as *logos*. Critical theory’s response to a condition
of “mass deception” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94) thus need not be truth or enlightenment,
but rather more creative, more radical, and more democratic practices of (self-)deception. If, as
Nietzsche contends, we must “*learn* to laugh” (Nietzsche 1982, 408), perhaps as critical theorists
we must also (re-)learn how to deceive. This project has shown that these tasks may ultimately
be the very same thing.
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CURRICULUM VITAE

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