

Gothenburg, July 4, 2017

Dear Moritz,

Many of your works are very humorous, and I must confess that I don't like humour very much. It's not that I don't laugh at jokes. But the issue is not whether humour makes us laugh or not. The issue is *how* it makes us laugh.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera describes two major kinds of laughter. The first kind is the devil's laughter, that makes visible the absurdity of the world. When an angel hears this laughter, he understands it as directed against God's creation. Perplexed as he is, he cannot come up with a response of his own. Instead, he starts to laugh himself, aiming to give laughter a different meaning. These two types of laughter sound the same, but have opposite meanings. The first is a rejection of the order of things, the second wants to maintain status quo.

Sadly, humour has lost much of its subversive force. The original laughter is a critically endangered kind. Instead, we have an abundance of the harmless kind. The dominance of the harmless laughter is reflected by Thomas Veatch' influential Benign Violation Theory, according to which humour occurs when something first seems to be wrong, but then turns out to be benign. This definition for certain does not fit the subversive kind of laughter.

How did we end up here? I think one reason is that capitalism discovered humour as a cheap and effective way to create emotional bonds with consumers. Another reason is that jokes have left the realm of the inappropriate, and are welcome everywhere. Today, humour makes us laugh, but hardly achieves anything else. This is perfectly illustrated by the Trump-jokes. They all portray him as a clown. But he already was ridiculous! I think these jokes do him a favour. They make him seem more tolerable than he is. After all, a clown is harmless, the U.S. president is not.

I'm happy to see that you use humour to destabilize perception. A couple of days ago, you told me the story about the schoolboy who inspired you to do your neon work. Right after having seen all the fossils at Naturkundemuseum, he exclaimed: "I don't believe in dinosaurs!". I started laughing, but stopped when I came to think about "post-truth", "alternative facts", and so on. Now, I've come to admire they boy's courage. It takes a lot of courage to doubt, and even more to express one's doubt in public. I don't think that the problem today is doubt, or that so many have lost their faith in authorities. Anti-authoritarianism is good! What scares me more are statements expressed with absolute certainty.

All the best,