

## Slippery Delight: Problems of Pleasure and Reproduction in Jokes

In “Is it OK to laugh” <https://cssh.lsa.umich.edu/2022/06/27/is-it-ok-to-laugh-pooyan-tamimi-arab-konstantinos-kalantzis-and-rihan-yeh-discuss-the-analytical-power-of-jokes/>

[Comparative Studies in Society and History blog- In Dialogue]

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What is humor doing for us, and what we are doing with it? These questions, central to this edition of *In Dialogue*, hint at the tension between giving in to jokes and the expectation that anthropologists should provide “serious” accounts of humor’s social role. The challenge is partly to the notion of anthropological analysis as a dispassionate exercise, the equivalent of Kant’s model of aesthetics, which by subordinating the senses to reason fails to do justice to people’s intense, corporeal ways of experiencing images (Buck-Morss 1992; Pinney 2006).

The problem of enjoying jokes is key to my 2015 “Fak Germani” piece, named after a bit of graffiti I recorded in an abandoned village bought by Germans in Crete. Part of my argument was that a particular idiom of joking was becoming prevalent among educated middle-class Greeks. Borrowing from “lowly” fields (shepherds, football hooligans, etc.), this style of joking produced ill-mannered responses to the demeaning sense of German/European surveillance that followed the 2010 EU-IMF bailout of Greece. As the jokes were at odds with a middle-class self-image, my interlocutors assumed a slippery stance—a maneuver that played out often in social media, where the jokes were simultaneously propagated and undermined as vulgar and ridiculous (2015).

In his contribution, Tamimi Arab frames humor as an ethnographic device for building rapport with his interlocutors, as an entry point to understanding the ostensible contradictions between drinking alcohol and being Muslim. *CSSH* readers might openly identify with his graceful protagonist, Ofran, a victim of brutal displacement, for whom drinking and joking conjure up an internationalist imaginary against the purist desires of neo-nationalism, Dutch, Iranian, or Afghan (2022: 279). But what happens when jokes evoke politically incorrect, deeply ambivalent material whose enjoyment might be improper or embarrassing?

Tamimi Arab’s friends laughed when he told them the “reputable international quarterly” (*CSSH*) published his piece on “Rumi Vodka.” Likewise, my own photo from a presentation showing me in my serious conference attire in front of a power-point slide displaying gangsta hip-hop figure Alitiz (adored and ridiculed by my middle-class interlocutors) giving a Greek version of the middle finger to Chancellor Angela Merkel, went viral among my non-academic friends. The image was funny to them because, like Rihan Yeh’s account of joking on the US-Mexico border, it combines two worlds that formally oppose one another: the English-speaking conference, the domain of sober intellectual value (in segmentary terms [Herzfeld 2022], representative of the Europe that Greeks deeply respect yet were reacting against in 2015); and the domain of aggressive vulgarity. Alitiz operates here like the narco-

corrido lyrics and trafficking jokes that Yeh's middle class tijuanaense interlocutors find attractive against their devotion to US-derived civility and obedience. Their realization of the violence of US bureaucracy resembles my interlocutors' recognition of the callousness of northern European commentators, following the bailout deal.

In "Fak Germani" I too was eager *to understand*. At a personal level, this translated into an effort to find solace in analysis. The piece was born out of frustration with what seemed like a new historical phase: "the Greek crisis" as an epoch. The epoch's ingredients put me in proximity to many of my interlocutors. I was pursuing a post-doc at what seemed to be the beginning of endless short-term contracts, a plight that has received critical attention in anthropology, though not always as an example of neoliberal austerity policies (e.g., Peacock 2016). My proximity to the crisis coincided with the omnipresence of Greece as a burning place in global media and the convergence of the personal, sexual, and national in stories of Greek-German couples breaking up over animosities between their respective nation-states. EU monitoring was viscerally felt. People joked that the German chancellor was watching them with punitive eyes whenever they held feasts or enjoyed themselves.

I was also increasingly disappointed by the standardized critique of Western discourse on Greece, which portrays that discourse simply as externalist, as Orientalist. Not only did this criticism elude the complex ambivalences of Orientalism – I explore these in the Greek-German constellation, (Kalantzis 2016; 2019:246-287 and forthcoming) – but it also could not do justice to the position from which I was observing (borrowing from Melanie Klein, let's call it "depressive"). The latter reveals the limitations, mutual conditioning and conflicts of all reactions by internal and external actors, surveillers and resisters, so to speak. Part of me wanted to exorcise this frustration and unleash the contagious magic of the jokes.

And it seems my Greek interlocutors weren't the only ones enjoying what novelist JM Coetzee describes as "the release of the genie" (2003: 56). A non-Greek colleague, critical of German austerity policies in the EU, whom I accidentally met at an academic event, shouted "Fak Germani!" upon seeing me. Was he referencing my article, thus uttering the content of the graffiti found on a Cretan tarmac (whose ungrammatical, ephemeral, sexualizing nature I discussed, in my essay, as political limitations)? Or was this simply an opportunity to say that phrase? The ambiguities contained in these acts of reproduction are, I would argue, the key issue.

But why I am speaking of contagion? Central to my piece is the idea that in reproducing what one is formally criticizing, a degree of ambivalent pleasure may be derived from the object of critique. I approach this reproduction as something uncontrollable, not as an intellectual strategy. This is why one Greek performer of a joking genre that over-identifies with its object of critique, without identifying itself as parody – a genre called *Stiob* in the Soviet context (Boyer and Yurchak, 2010) – vocally objected to my analysis in the conference mentioned above. In conceiving of that slippery delight, I draw on an old visual-studies idea according to which visual reproduction can never be entirely negative as it ultimately allows for the appearing object's revival (Bucher 1981). Later writings politicize this approach further by arguing, for instance, that photographing neonazi/fascist groups, despite critical intent, may reproduce the subjects' self-image of order and power (Godby 2000). A persuasive version of this notion is offered, about textual writing, by Coetzee,

whose heroine Elizabeth Costello delivers a lecture on the importance of not releasing “the genie,” the evil that dwells in detailed accounts of torture perpetrated by Nazis in Third-Reich Germany (2003).

If the 1940s seems inapplicable to post-bailout Greece, consider that the German-imposed austerity reactivated a mnemonic lineage: Germans of the 2010s were perceived as executors of austerity who descended from the executioners of the 1940s Occupation. On the slippery nature of reproduction, consider the awkward scenes of Germans visiting an unofficial, quasi-domestic “war museum” in highland Crete. They perform a certain anti-war humanism, with humbleness, restrained smiles, and guest-book comments stating “never again.” But upon entering the museum, they let out gasps of shock at the displayed swastika flag, a key museum artifact found in the area following battles between Allied soldiers and Nazi troops in 1941. The discrepancy between the visitors’ and the owner’s take on the rawness of the past is further exaggerated by Sfakian men’s open embrace of warrior aesthetics. The owner of the museum suspiciously tells me that some of his German visitors are cryptonazis, while his pre-adolescent son walks around in military garb (common among young male shepherds) and uses WWII binoculars from the museum collection to monitor his neighbors, which feeds into Sfakian ideas of gazing as gathering info about enemy patriline.

Is it OK to laugh? Behind an affirmative response to this question lies a moral understanding integral to anthropology’s approach to politics, which privileges the opposition of power and resistance (even though this opposition has been critically revised over the decades). If Germany and the EU are agents of power, then tricks and ill-mannered jokes at their expense become acceptable forms of local response. This effort to restore agency characterizes the present moment in anthropology, which foregrounds what Robbins (2013) calls, disapprovingly, “the suffering subject” (see also the [Book Symposium](#) on Han 2012). It has a deeper history, however; for instance, in arguments about how the aggressive objectification of female Western tourists by Arab (or Greek) men is compensation for their subordinate political status (e.g., Bowman 1989; Buck-Morss 1987), an argument more difficult to hear or make in the post-*metoo* moment.

In retrospect, my piece tried to unleash and restrain the genie, laughing and analyzing the evasive politics joking produced, while refusing to translate joking into consistent political engagement, let alone resistance (Bakalaki 2016). I wanted to heed the laughter that subverted the seriousness of actions. All three essays explore these issues and are aware of the limitations of joking (which manifest, in Yeh’s account and my own, in the simultaneous disavowal and admiration of European or US power, while Tamimi Arab’s interlocutor speaks of the actual impossibility of joking about alcohol and Islam in Afghanistan). At a utopic level, jokes point to the limit of semiotics. Jokes *do* rather than mean, even when laughter comes from a break with acceptable meanings. It’s something we all struggle with in our essays.

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#### Acknowledgments

Kalantzis' research on Crete was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 695283, PhotoDemos project). Previous work on Crete has been financially supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the University of London Central Research Fund, the UCL Research Project Fund, and a Mary Seeger O'Boyle Fellowship at the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies at Princeton University.

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