

Lacan's Homeric Laughter

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Abstract: This essay tackles the question of laughter in Lacan by focusing on the function it plays when it appears as a link between Marxist surplus-value and post-Freudian surplus-enjoyment. Lacan had pointed out how and why Marx's capitalist would be shown laughing when discovering the principle of surplus-value. This sudden laugh equates surplus value and surplus jouissance, which forces us to revisit the issue of the economy of jokes. Against Freud who insisted on thrift, sparing and condensation, Lacan promotes a metonymic displacement in the logics of jokes, which entails a theory of the "little meaning" of words that can then be transformed into puns or jokes. Lacan would see excess and speed as the key conditions for laughter, and these features reappear in his later analyses of the discourse of capitalism. I compare Lacan's theory with Paolo Virno's political analysis of the joke as a moment of collective creation that interrupts a certain doxa so as to suggest in conclusion that Lacan's own laughter, that kept hesitating between tragedy and comedy, had a clear political function.

Keywords: Joke, *Witz*, economy, capitalism, metonymy, the politics of laughter.

Homer: Never existed—Famous for the way he laughed:
a Homeric laugher.
Flaubert, *Dictionary of Received Ideas*.

The cruel joke is just as original as harmless mirth; originally
the two are close to each other (...). The comic figure is a
raisonneur; in reflection he appears to himself as a marionette.
The finest exemplifications of the *Trauerspiel* are not those
which adhere strictly to the rules, but those in which there are
playful modulations of the *Lustspiel*.
Benjamin¹

Quite frequently Lacan would make me laugh at the time I went to hear his seminar at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, even though I did not dare emit the least titter or betray by inopportune signs any hilarity, given the atmosphere of rapt attention and philosophical concentration that reigned. Heavy billows of smoke coming from the participants' mouths allegorized the cloud of ideas released, a dense mist from which Lacan alone could extract meaning. All the while he would saunter on stage, an unlit cigar in hand, or spin stories in the microphone, his gaze piercing

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¹ Benjamin 1977, p.127.

all the fumes. However, he rarely made me laugh when he tried too hard to be funny; this happened once in a while; most of the time, I found his attempts at jocularity either contrived or rather opaque, as one can see in a sustained moment of written “fun” in *Ecrits*, the longish and involved satire of French analysts in “The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956.”² He was at his best in sudden attacks, vitriolic snarls aimed at institutions or people; we rarely recognized the butt of the sally, however, as was the case when he referred to Lucien Goldmann as “Mudger Muddle” in Seminar XVI. I would have never guessed the identity of the person thus nicknamed without the help of Jacques-Alain Miller’s note³).

Close to the beginning of the first seminar of the fall of 1968, Lacan offered a recapitulation of his Homeric struggles with classical psychoanalytic institutions that had led to his exclusion, or “excommunication” from the IPA, and quoted Beckett’s *Endgame* in which we say an old couple living in a garbage can. He went on: “Personally, after having lived in three psychoanalytic societies for some thirty years now, in three stints of 15, 10 and 5 years, I have a good notion of what it means to cohabit with household waste.”⁴ The punchline works better in French given the order of words. In “*cohabiter avec les ordures ménagères*,” we heard first “*ordures*,” a term which in colloquial French, when used for people, means “piece of shit.” Then the qualification by “*ménagères*” (household, but also literally, housewives) made it even funnier. This sally, well introduced by the diminishing numbers of years, was greeted by wild guffaws.

It was in the same seminar, as I was trying to decipher Lacan’s rather incomprehensible German, that he coined the term of *Mehrlust* (surplus enjoyment) as an echo of Marx’s *Mehrwert* (surplus-value), the latter word pronounced, as he noted later, as “*mère verte*,” or “green mother”.⁵ Both concepts served to tie up links between Marx and Freud, a connection that has been well explored recently.⁶ What was curious in this specific instance was that Lacan needed a theory of jokes to make the knot. He illustrated this with a little story that illuminates everything; it has to do with the function of laughter in Marx’s *Capital*.

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 2The overblown rhetorical satire of the French schools belonging to the IPA lists four categories of psychoanalysts, the Sufficiencies, the Little Shoes, the Truly Necessary and the Beatitudes. The text had been privately printed and circulated before it was published at the end of the essay in *Les Etudes Philosophiques*. See Lacan 2006a, p. 397-400.

3 See Miller’s note in Lacan 2006b, p. 415.

4 Ibid., p. 11. All translations are mine.

5 See Lacan 2006b, p.29

6 See for instance Bruno 2010, and Tomšič 2015.

The vignette offered to the public on December 11, 1968 is unabashedly autobiographical. Having elaborated his concept of *Mehrlust* that neatly spliced Marx and Freud in their joint analysis of the production of value and of enjoyment, Lacan told us how he had been reading Marx as a medical student. When he was twenty-five or so, he would go the hospital daily in the Paris metro, where he would read the *Capital* during his trips, and obviously his ear was already attuned to psychoanalytic listening. Reading the *Capital* in the Parisian metro in the mid-twenties must have passed for a mild provocation to the bourgeois. One day Lacan was struck by a scene that no-one else had apparently noticed, a scene in which Marx stages a specific type of laughter: the laughter of the capitalist who grasps both the simplicity and the huge consequences of the principle of surplus-value.

When reminiscing about his discovery of laughter in Marx’s text, Lacan took us to *Capital*, chapter one, book three, a chapter in which Marx analyzes the production of surplus-value. The passage describes the capitalist’s sudden understanding of the mechanism. The capitalist suddenly sees how value is transformed, and he laughs; such a laughter, being contagious, made Lacan laugh:

“Marx introduces this surplus-value—plus he almost did not introduce this surplus-value, neither plus nor value (Lacan is playing on “*un peu plus...*” in the temporal sense, echoing with *surplus*, and then on the phrase “*ni vu ni connu, j’tembrouille*,” meaning that there is a sleight of hand, a rhetorical trick, in Marx’s text), -- he introduces after some time, when, with a genial air, he lets the interested party speak, that is the capitalist. He lets him justify his position by developing the main theme, that is to say the services tendered to workers who only have rudimentary tools for their work, here a jointer, to which the capitalist adds a potter’s wheel and a mill, thanks to which the worker will do wonders, in a loyal exchange of reciprocal services. Marx lets all the time for this advocacy to be heard, and which sounds most honest, and then points out that the ghostly character with whom he is struggling, the capitalist, laughs. // This feature that may seem superfluous is nevertheless what had struck me at the time of these useful first readings. It seemed to me from then on that this laughter had to do with the unveiling by Marx of the essence of surplus-value.”⁷

Why should the analysis of surplus-value generate laughter for the capitalist? To understand this better, we need to take a look the passage in which Marx presents the theory of surplus-value precisely from the point of view of the capitalist:

“The capitalist paid to the labourer a value of 3 shillings, and the labourer gave him back an exact equivalent in the value of 3 shillings, added by him to the cotton: he gave him value for value. Our friend, up

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 7 Lacan 2006b, pp.64-65

to this time so purse-proud, suddenly assumes the modest demeanor of his own workman, and exclaims: "Have I myself not worked? Have I not performed the labor of superintendence and of overlooking the spinner? And does not this labor, too, create value?" His overlooker and his manager try to hide their smiles. Meanwhile, after a hearty laugh, he re-assumes his usual mien."⁸

Here is the point at which Lacan pauses. Marx seems to present a variation on the story of prisoners whose calculation of comparative hesitations and exchanges of glances allows them to realize that all three carry white discs on their backs.⁹ Thanks to Marx, we can add a new twist to Lacan's famous sophism: looking at each other for a while, the three prisoners burst out laughing at the same time, which allows them to leave the jail together. Here, similarly, we have three persons, the capitalist, the overlooker and the manager, all on the winning side. Two smile, while only one laughs—this is, of course, the capitalist. Here is what happens:

"Meanwhile, after a hearty laugh, he re-assumes his usual mien. Though he chanted to us the whole creed of the economists, in reality, he says, he would not give a brass farthing for it. He leaves this and all such like subterfuges and juggling tricks to the professors of Political Economy, who are paid for it. (...) The circumstance, that on the one hand the daily sustenance of labor-power costs only half a day's labor, while on the other hand the very same labor-power can work during a whole day, that consequently the value which its use during one day creates, is double what he pays for that use, this circumstance is, without doubt, a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injury to the seller.

Our capitalist foresaw this state of things, and that was the cause of his laughter. (...) The trick has at last succeeded; money has been converted into capital."¹⁰

The capitalist's laughter accompanies the disclosure of a fundamental principle: the value that labor-power possesses on its own and the value that it creates differ as much in nature as in quantity. This transformation called "metamorphosis," a recurrent signifier in Book I of *Capital*, entails that something has been created out of nothing, even if this contradicts Lucretius's motto of "*nihil posse creari de nihilo*." Marx adds as well that the creation of plus value is a transformation of energy.¹¹ These capitalistic metamorphoses can be measured: "The rate of surplus-value is therefore an exact expression for the degree of

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8 Marx 1906, p. 215. For the German text, see Marx und Engels 1970, p. 207.

9 See Lacan 2006, pp. 161-175.

10 Marx 1906, pp.215-217

11 Ibid., p.239, note

exploitation of labour by capital, or of the labourer by the capitalist."¹² When the capitalist laughed, it was because he was both exposing his trick and enacting it, but because he did this so obviously, in the end, nobody understood his game. Here is the root of capitalism, an unholy conversion of work into surplus-value, a conversion whose mechanism triggers laughter because it is both simple and complex. It's as if the capitalist was saying: "Piece of cake!" while immediately gobbling his cake—to evoke another famous Freudian *Witz*.

Such a shared laughter covers up the silent and monstrous work of metamorphosis that is defining for capitalism. There is something satanic in the process; in another section of *Capital*, Marx quotes Goethe's *Faust*. As Lacan understood it, this very moment showing the disclosure of the secret of surplus-value functions like a Freudian *Witz*. The truth is expressed in a joke exhibiting a secret. Marx agrees with Freud that the paradigm of all jokes is Heine's *Witz* about Hirsch-Hyacinth proudly stating that Baron Rothschild has treated him "famillionnairely" (JRU, p. 4).

This famous joke was the one chosen by Lacan to analyze Freud's theory of laughter in the earlier seminar V. In Seminar V on the "Formations of the Unconscious," Lacan spends a lot of time discussing Freud's joke book, and mentions Marx, twice. The first time, it is to praise his insight in having anticipated what he was going to develop as the "mirror stage." This was on November 27, 1957, when Lacan mentioned the first book of *Das Kapital* in glowing terms:

"I am not talking about the entire text—who's read *Capital*!—but the first book, which almost everyone has read. A prodigious first book, superabundant, revealing someone, this is rare, who sustains an articulated philosophical discourse. I urge you to go to the page where, at the level of the formulation of the so-called *theory of the particular form of the value of merchandise*, Marx shows himself, in a note, to be a precursor of the mirror-stage."¹³

Lacan alludes to a footnote we can find as note 19 to chapter one, part three. Marx's note comments a paragraph in which he insists that the equivalence between two commodities measures the value of the second, which he illustrates by quoting the French proverb, *Paris vaut bien une messe*. He adds this note:

"In a way, it is with man as with commodities. Since he comes into the world neither with a looking glass in his hand, nor as a Fichtian philosopher to whom "I am I" is sufficient, man first sees and recognizes himself in other men. Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind (*seinesgleichen*).

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12 Ibid., p.241

13 Lacan 2017, pp.72-73 (modified)

And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his skin and hair with his purely Pauline corporality (*Leiblichkeit*), will appear to Peter to be the type of the genus homo.”¹⁴

Lacan was right to point out that Marx was presenting a general logic of equivalence that corresponds to the main lesson of the mirror stage: there is no identity without a dual formation of identity in which a projection is key; this entails the way two individuals abstract from each other the image a universal essence of humanity. Such a process of sublimation has to leave behind or erase the specific corporality of each of them.

Lacan discovers that Marx had analyzed the mechanism of identification before him, seeing that this was the place to recapitulate his critique of the idealist philosophy of Fichte, Hegel’s predecessor, who believed that identity could be summed up by the tautology “I equals I.” Marx would also connect this main principle with the engine of economy he is discovering and explaining, for this is the link with a general equivalent, an equivalent that is always found at the root of value. Marx’s passage had been preceded by a discussion of the various words used for value, like *valere*, *valer* and *valoir* in French; and in that context he quotes the French saying supposedly uttered by Henry of Navarre ready to become Henry IV if it just implied that he had to convert to Catholicism if he wanted to be made king of France: *Paris vaut bien une messe*.

This famous saying had been translated into English by Joyce as “... was Parish worth thetette mess,”¹⁵ which echoes with Lacan’s astute remark that a joke has only relevance—hence only triggers laughter—when it is meant for people who belong to the same parish¹⁶ (Lacan, 2017, p. 107-108). In that amazing discussion, Lacan underlines the etymology of French *paroisse* and presents it as a derivation of the Greek *parodia*, people who are not from the house, but also, evidently, parody. The audience could laugh at the joke only because they all had been students, all had had to take oral exams in history for the baccalaureate, and so on. Lacan concludes that session of 11 December 1957 by making another pun, an echolalic pun to be sure, when he links the Freudian “censor” with “sense.” Here is the place of the Other, his linguistically oriented version of the Freudian Unconscious, in case we hadn’t seen it:

“The Other is constituted as a filter that puts order into, and places an obstacle before, what can be accepted or simply even heard. There are things that cannot be heard, or which habitually are never heard any more, and which a joke strives to make heard somewhere, as an echo. To get them to be echoed back, it uses precisely the thing that forms an obstacle

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14 Marx 1887, p. 55, modified,

15 Joyce 1939, p. 199.

16 Lacan 2017, pp.107-108

to it, like some sort of reflecting concavity. (...)The little other, to call him by his name, contributes to the possibility of a joke, but it’s within the subject’s resistance—which for once, and this is highly instructive for us, I am rather seeking to provoke—that something that makes itself heard will resonate much further, and this means that the joke will resonate directly in the unconscious.”¹⁷

We understand why Lacan can say that a psychoanalyst has everything to learn from the joke-work described by Freud. Why then is Lacan not so happy with the treatment of jokes given by Freud? As I have attempted to show, Freud insists on the fact that *Witze* condense meaning, whereas Lacan enhances the relative parsimony of sense jokes are predicated upon.¹⁸ This leads Lacan to restate the principle of metonymic displacement typical of the object a:

“It’s not simply a question of equating so many yards of cloth, it’s the equivalence between cloth and clothes which has to be structured, that is, that clothes can come to represent the value of cloth. In other words, the equivalence necessary from the start of the analysis, and on which what is called value is based, presupposes, on the part of both terms in play, abandoning a very important part of their meaning. //The meaning of the metonymic line is located along this dimension.”¹⁹

Lacan teases out the consequences of this principle as he bring into play the dimension of the Other in which he sees the pivot of wit and jokes.

What the following session stresses is that the metonymic chain produces an erasure of differences, and once more, Marx is alluded to:

“I borrowed a Marxist reference in this connection—bringing two objects of need into operation in such a way that one becomes the measure of the value of the other, effaces what is specifically related to need from the object and thereby introduces it into the order of value.”²⁰

However, such an erasure of specificity does not for all that eliminate meaning, for it produces what Lacan calls “de-sense” (*dé-sens*). Lacan immediately points to possible ambiguity in his coining, which could be heard as *décence*, which means “decency” and is not what he means here. Thus, to avoid any confusion, Lacan proposes to call this *le peu-de-sens*, literally “little-sense” or “not-much-of- sense.”²¹

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17 Lacan 2017, p.108

18 Rabaté 2016, p. 82-103. The second section of this essay formulates differently my analysis of Freud’s remarks on the economy of jokes.

19 Lacan 2017, p.73

20 Ibid., p.87

21 I choose not to follow Russell Grigg’s translation as “bit-of-sense” (Lacan, 2017, p. 87). The phrase foregrounds the positive and not the negative. Perhaps “Just-a- little-bit-of-sense” would work better in this case.

As Lacan explains, jokes or witticisms (*mots d'esprit*) rely on a scarcity of meaning, but this diminished sense should not be understood as being tantamount to a negation of sense. Lacan refuses to fall into the theoretical trap consisting in asserting that meaning is totally lacking, which would be the thesis of the “absurd” deployed then by French existentialism. Instead, Lacan engages in a vicious attack on Albert Camus, who is not named but is recognizable because he had just been awarded the Nobel prize at the time (Lacan says that he has been “ennobled”). Quite brutally, Lacan rejects Camus’s disquisition on non-sense as a “discourse of the beautiful soul” (he has aligned himself with Sartre’s ongoing critique of his former friend at the time). Camus would have attempted to deduce from the lack of meaning in life a general theory of the absurd, in which he saw an ethical rebellion of the individual against a world devoid of justification. Lacan seems to hate this: “His discourse on non-sense remains the most pointless (*le plus vain*) that one has ever heard. It’s absolutely not the case that there is a play on nonsense every time equivocation is introduced”²² (Lacan, 2017, p. 87, modified). To prove this, Lacan alludes to Heine’s joke on the golden calf quoted by Freud. Because *veau* is homophonic with the third person of the verb *valoir*, as in *il vaut*, this reiterates the relative thinness of meaning. This meagre meaning comes in handy whenever we use words to play on them, mistake them or distort them:

“Everything you can find in plays on words, and very specifically those called conceptual plays on words, consists in playing upon how bad words are at maintaining a full sense. It’s this little-sense that, as such, is taken up, and it’s here that something occurs that reduces the message to its scope, insofar as the message is both a success and a failure, but always a form necessary for any formulation of a demand.”²³

This brings Lacan to reiterate that the “little-sense” has as its counterpart the huge but invisible power detained by the Other. If the dimension of the Other is primordial, it comes from the fact that meaning is shared between several people, at least as far as jokes are concerned:

“Freud dwells on the fact, as if it were something completely primordial that pertains to the very nature of jokes, that no joke exists in isolation. Even if we have forged it or invented it (if we can one say that any joke is our own invention and it’s not the joke that invented us), we feel the need to attribute it to the Other. A joke is indissociable from the Other, who is charged with authenticating it.”²⁴

Thus no *Witz* can ever testify to the pathos of the absurdity of a human condition, as Camus would have it; on the contrary, the *Witz* puts

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22 Ibid., modified

23 Ibid., modified

24 Ibid., p.88

in motion an awareness of the “little” measure of meaning, this “not much of sense” that our own words contain, especially when contrasted with the endless riches concealed in the Other. It is this Other that sends us back to the interrupted trajectory of the metonymy, asking of us that we answer to the question: “What does this mean?”²⁵ Lacan explains this in those terms:

“A *Witz* (*trait d'esprit*) is only complete once it gets beyond this point—that is, after the Other has taken it on board, responded to it and authenticated it as such. In order for *Witz* to happen, what is needed is that the Other has perceived what is there, in the transmission of the question about the little-sense, as a demand for sense, that is to say as an evocation of a sense beyond – beyond what remains unfinished.”²⁶

Lacan has in mind his graph of desire, which is why the segment that he sees as unfinished has to be chalked to the agency desire. Human desire is nothing without an Other that alone authenticates the *Witz*, which is why jokes cannot be understood as exercises in unchained or unrestrained non-sense, but as creative practices linking several subjects. These subjects can find a common ground precisely because the words they use are interchangeable, shallow, devoid of the depth and weight of interiority, in fact ready to be used as grist to the mill of our bad puns and silly jokes. Jokes exploit the scarcity of meaning that obtains in any given chain of signifiers. Lacan thus prefers to the logic of “non-sense” an economics of “not-much-sense” that soon becomes a “no-sense” (*pas-de-sens*). Lacan immediately seizes the opportunity to play on the amphibology of *pas*, and invokes typical phrases that include it: *pas-de-vis* (screw thread), *pas-de-quatre* (four step dance) or *Pas-de-Calais* (the strait of Dover).²⁷ This series of signifiers hinging around *pas* then generates another pun: this time, the “not-sense” turns into a “step-of-sense,” for “*pas de sens*” can mean the step (*pas*) made by sense to progress. Hence one will not be surprised to see the return of the metaphor as a *pas-de-sens*, for as we know the verticality of poetic images can move beyond the series of equivalence that flow with the drift of a metonymic chain.

Lacan provides examples of jokes or witticisms. One is a joke he heard from his friend the poet and novelist Raymond Queneau. The joke takes place during a history examination when a student is asked about some battles; each time, he answers that he sees corpses, wounded

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., modified

27 Ibid., p.89

soldiers, hears the noise of guns. The examiner asks for more precise details; the student reflects, adds that all he can see is a horse rearing and neighing. The line is repeated a few times for different battles until he is asked about the battle of Trafalgar. When the student plays the same linguistic *spiel*, the examiner points out that this was a naval battle. Then the student says: “Whoa! Whoa! Back up, Neddy!”²⁸ Space lacks to discuss Lacan’s complex analysis of the joke fully. He takes it as an opportunity to denigrate Freud’s joke book, especially the section on the comic. However, after his point in his seminar, Lacan never returns to the parallel he had established between Marx and Freud; one has to wait ten years to see the same thought return, which says a lot about the circular or spiraling way his theories would progress.

II

A detour through Freud’s economic metaphors will contextualize Lacan’s divergent view. We know that Freud asserts that two principles are at work simultaneously in the joke-work: first a joke economizes on psychical expenditure, and then it overcomes or bypasses the critical sense deriving from repression. The first mechanism describes condensation, often purely verbal, whereas the other achieves something like a displacement, especially when the joke is sexual in nature and aims at seducing someone. “We need only repeat that this pleasure comes from an economizing (*Ersparung an psychischem Aufwand*) in psychical expenditure and a relief (*Erleichterung vom Zwange der Kritik*) from the compulsion of criticism.”²⁹

Freud discusses the function of play manifested by children. This analysis remains within the economic domain, but points to “freedom” and “fun” (*Spiel* and *Scherz*), both presented as a release (*Auslösung*) or a “removing” process (*Aufhebung*) shown to be working together. By lifting up or cancelling internal inhibition, the joke-work releases new sources of pleasure. Such a freely-flowing activity functions as a whole; it is thus almost impossible to distinguish what is due to form and what is due to the content of the joke (JRU, p. 126). The process of freeing releases (*entbinden*) pleasurable affects that were hitherto bound and constrained. This releasing power finds a theoretical corroboration in Fechner’s definition of a pleasure that is multiplied. It is therefore neither divided, condensed, economized, or “saved.”

At some point, Freud quotes Gustav Theodor Fechner’s *Preschool of Aesthetics*, a treatise which states that “... there emerges a greater, often much greater, pleasure than the pleasure-value of the individual determinants by themselves, greater than could be explained as the sum

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28 Ibid., p.98

29 I refer to the excellent translation by Joyce Crick, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, London, Penguin, 2002, here p. 122 and hereafter abbreviated as JRU and page number.

of single effects” (JRU, p. 129). The three terms deployed by Fechner, *Lustbedingungen* (determinants of pleasure), *Lustresultat* (result of pleasure), *Lustwerte* (pleasure values) and *Lustergebnis* (outcome of pleasure), all imply a quantification of the libidinal energy steadily moving toward a plus or as surplus. Freud quotes a passage in bold page 51 of this revolutionary treatise in experimental psychology, and then immediately generalizes the hypothesis when he comments that this principle would be true of artistic production in general (JRU, p. 129-130). All this betrays Freud’s uneasiness facing his initial thesis stating that a single principle of “economy,” “thrift” or “sparing” would allow us to understand the general mechanism of jokes, wit and even art in general.

Freud seems to discover an opposed principle that would consist in forcefully lifting the ban of inhibition, repression and criticism; this violent subversion of repression then tend to trigger a multiplying factor. Here Freud returns to another logics, a mechanism that he had apprehended when launching the idea of an over-determination of dream-images: over-determination means not just a principle of “thrift” but also a multiplication of the meanings determining a single images. Just as the signifier “rat” condenses all the chains of reasoning of the Rat-Man, the condensation of a good joke generates quitter a few avenues for thought and laughter. Examples appended to this new principle turn around absurd jokes. Here is one, since it echoes with many others: “As he is being served fish at dinner, a man reaches with both hands into the mayonnaise and rubs it into his hair. His neighbor looks at him in astonishment, so he seems to notice his mistake and apologizes: “Excuse me, I thought it was spinach”” (JRU, p. 134, note). Such a teaser confirms an idea of extravagant spending and exuberance in the realization of wishes: whenever the free enjoyment of nonsense is permitted, one cannot distinguish between mayonnaise and spinach any longer.

Does the rationale of the joke reside in the principle of “economy”? Yes, if by “economy” is meant the analysis of the transformation of value in social exchange; not only or necessarily, if by “economy” we have in mind a principle of parsimony, of saving on time, energy or verbal expenditure. And indeed, no sooner had Freud posited the principle that a *Witz* was defined by brevity, condensation and sparing, than he began to voice doubts. His doubts appear when he explains that the unconscious economizes just in the way a housewife is ready to pay more for her travel to a distant market where vegetables are cheaper (JRU, p. 34). Later on, more doubts are proffered in those terms: “Is not the economy (*Ersparnis*) in words expressed more than cancelled (*aufgehoben*) by the expense of intellectual effort? And who is being so thrifty? Who benefits from it?” (JRU, p. 34) It is at this point that Freud examines examples running the gamut from simple word puns to the archaic pleasure found in nonsense, whose signal exemplification is the Irish bull.

Jakob von Falke had taught Freud about the absurdist logic of the Irish bull, which is exemplified by this famous story. Visitors are told about the battle of Waterloo, and one asks: "Is that the place where the Duke of Wellington spoke those words?" The immortal reply is: "Yes, this is the place, but he never spoke the words" (JRU, p. 80, note). The logical shift creates several mental spaces that coexist despite incompatibilities: Wellington was indeed at the battle, but he did not speak; he must have spoken the words elsewhere or the words were invented afterwards; perhaps the entire battle was invented as well... Hesitating between Napoléon and Wellington, we fall into skepticism, and our doubt derives from such an overturning of conventional logic.

The logic of nonsense offers numerous parallels with dreams, and Freud continues his analysis of jokes by comparing them with dreams. It is much later that he returns to the economic principle that he left aside for a while. This time he wants to face his own doubts and tackle the conceptual tension between thrift and expenditure. Freud reiterates that the "savings made by using the same words" count for nothing "against the enormous expenditure involved in the act of thinking" (JRU, p. 150). He develops a complex economic parable:

"We may do well to allow ourselves to compare the economy (*Ökonomie*) of the psyche with a business concern. As long as the business turnover is very small, the main thing of course is that on the whole not much is spent and that the running costs are kept extremely low. The frugality (*Sparsamkeit*) applies to the absolute height of expenditure. Later, when the business has expanded, the importance of running costs lessens; it no longer matters how high the amount of expenditure becomes as long as the turnover and returns can be sufficiently increased. Restraint in expenditure for running the business would be petty, indeed positively unprofitable. However, it would be wrong to assume that given the absolute amount of expenditure there would be no more room for the tendency towards economy (*Spartendenz*). The boss's thrifty-mindedness will now turn to parsimony (*Sparsamkeit*) in single items, and feel satisfied if the same activity can now be managed at a lower cost when its previous costs were higher, however small the economy (*Ersparnis*) may appear in comparison with the total expenditure. In a quite analogous way, economy (*Ersparung*) in details remains a source of pleasure in the complicated business of our psyche, too, as everyday occurrences can show us" (JRU, p. 150).

Here, Freud seems to give us a curious lesson in economy; he takes the idea of business management by explaining how one should shift from a small business for which thrift is crucial to a bigger company in which a rapid turnover is a sign of success. The first example he gives then can strike one as curious: he assumes that there is a pleasure in switching an electric button if one has been used to lighting a gas lamp. Is that true? Whether this is true or not, the gain observed in the joke's saving remains

a small, minimal linguistic saving or smaller even psychic gain. We remain within a minimal "economy" that seems dwarfed by the huge psychic energy deployed and channeled by the Unconscious. As the *Interpretation of Dreams* stated, the Unconscious is a capitalist; however, even a big capitalist likes to make small savings. Freud compares the motive of the wish underpinning a dream with capital:

"The position may be explained by an analogy. A day-time thought may well play the part of *entrepreneur* for a dream; but the *entrepreneur*, who, as people say, has the idea and the initiative to carry it out, can do nothing without capital; he needs a *capitalist* who can afford the outlay, and the capitalist who provides the psychical outlay for the dream is invariably and indisputably, whatever may be the thoughts of the previous day, a *wish from the unconscious*."³⁰

I'll illustrate this idea with a joke that somehow presupposes the Freudian unconscious, and yet sends it up while asserting its relevance. I paraphrase and condense a passage from *The Jewish Joke*.³¹

Samuel sits inconsolably next to the bed on which his wife is lying, obviously dying, with a dry rattle in her throat. Anxious to alleviate the pain of her inevitable demise, he asks: "What can I do to bring some joy in your last moments?" She replies that she would like to have sex a last time. Samuel obliges. Then a miracle happens: all of a sudden the wife is revived, color comes back to her cheeks; she jumps out of bed, opens the window and starts singing. Samuel, meanwhile, bursts into tears. She asks: "Samuel, Why cry? It's time to rejoice. You just saved me from death -- isn't that wonderful!" Tearfully, Samuel replies: "It's not that. I was thinking: *I could have saved mother!*"

In a manner that is similar to the joke narrated by Queneau to Lacan, we see in this example that the key moment is the punchline, which is independent of the brevity of the story, and has very little to do with the density of a verbal pun or a *Witz*. Similar jokes can be expanded at will, minor incidents can be added, and these delays will not kill the laughter that comes from the surprise of the last line. If there is an economy at work here, it can only be understood in a general sense that takes into account the whole of society, including its very economic exchanges. Here is why we need to combine Marx and Freud.

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30 Freud 1965, pp. 599-600.

31 Baum 2017, pp. 88-89.

III

These principles were sketched by Lacan in Seminar V and developed ten years later in seminar XVI. What impelled Lacan forward in 1957 was his idea that any *Witz* would have to be authenticated by the Other. Without the agency of the Other, one cannot grasp what links two subjects who are bantering and joking together. Lacan was led to his main principle that laughter is the best example of a human manifestation that clinches the equivalence between surplus-value and surplus-jouissance. Here is why the 1968 seminar pays homage to the discoveries of the 1957-58 seminar. Linking his previous analysis of the *Witz* with the emergence of the object a, Lacan draws again his graph of desire and points that the double arrow that produces a sort of hook asking the subject to say “what it means,” even when the signifier is as overloaded as “famillionnaire.”

As Lacan revisits his former close readings in December 1968, he notes the difference between having Heine’s character Hirsch Hyacinth refer to Salomon Rotschild as displaying a generous familiarity and possessing millions, and using the condensed *Witz* that calls Rotschild’s attitude “famillionnaire.” As Lacan says, we only laugh in the second case, and we laugh because a subject is “interested” in the exchange.³²

The subject convoked here will be demultiplied into several avatars, first the moment when Hirsch Hyacinth coins the funny portmanteau-word for a friend, then the moment when the friends tells the witticism to another friend: “This triplicity is maintained when the third one repeats the message in his turn.”³³ It is here that Lacan returns to his analysis of the capitalist:

“Where then is the sensitive spot of this famillionnarity? It will elude those who transmit it. What is at stake precisely is the novelty I have introduced into our discourse, and that I will not hesitate to transpose into the field, namely the capitalist subject. //What is the function of those who manage to pass between the links of the iron network of what is insufficiently summarized by the notion of the exploitation of some men by other men, I mean those who are not caught up in the extremities of the chain of exploitation, and who are they? They are employees. If this *Witz* causes laughter, it is because each of the interlocutors who meet as they exchange the gentle fun of this *famillionnairely* feels, even without knowing it, interested as an employee, or if you want, implicated as working in the tertiary sector.”³⁴

Here the pattern repeats Marx’s vignette in which we saw three men laughing; however, an important displacement has taken place: in Lacan’s reading, these men can only laugh because they are not millionnaires

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32 Lacan 2006b, p.52

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

themselves, but employees, people who envy the familiarity observed between Rothschild and Hirsh Hyacinth but from a distance. It is at this point that Lacan feels the need to add to his scheme the question of the Other: *Che vuoi?* What does the Other want?³⁵ Lacan, we may remember, keeps quoting Cazotte’s 1772 novella, *The Devil in Love*, in which the hero summons the devil, who appears to him under the features of a terrifying camel head with huge ears, asking the fatidic *Che vuoi?* After a series of metamorphoses, the devil turns into Biondetta, a most seductive young woman who can offer everything to the bemused Alvare. His growing sexual desire for her is thwarted by the knowledge that she is the devil—but a happy ending will be found.

We can thus conclude this analysis by saying that the capitalist laughs when he understands what the Other wants from him, just at the moment when he understands the essential joke upon which surplus-value is predicated. This is a link that Lacan developed in 1972, when he gave his talk on “Psychoanalytic Discourse” in Italy.³⁶ In this talk, Lacan returns to the capitalist discourse and even writes it on the blackboard. He then states this: “The capitalist discourse is not “ugly” (*moche*)—on the contrary, this is something that is amazingly clever (*astucieux*). Crazyly clever but bound for a puncture, a break down, a collapse (*crevaïson*).”³⁷ Lacan predicts that because the capitalist discourse is efficient, all too efficient, it presupposes its speedy progression, and therefore will have go too fast, and a headlong drive that will exceed itself: “... it works too fast, it consumes itself and eats up itself (*ça se consomme, ça se consomme si bien que ça se consume*).”³⁸ An endlessly exacerbated consumption will consumes itself and produce a burning out of the system.

I want to stress the adjective “*astucieux*,” which can be rendered as “clever,” but also “natty,” “wily,” “slick” or “crafty.” It derives from “*astuce*,” whose root is the Latin *astus*, meaning “cunning”; this colloquial word suggesting tricks, jokes, and witty repartees. Thus capitalism was not only founded on a trick, as we have seen with Marx, but also on the acceleration of this trickster economy. This is how modern economy combines the production of surplus-value and of surplus-jouissance.

Since I had to follow Lacan in Italy, I will quote an Italian philosopher whose work is attentive to the logics of jokes and to their political function. The question of the *Che vuoi?* of the capitalist system has been posed by Paolo Virno in his excellent book *Multitude: Between*

.....
35 Ibid., p.53

36 See Lacan 1972, pp. 32–55.

37 Ibid., p. 36.

38 Ibid.

Innovation and Negation.³⁹ Virno re-thinks Freud's theory of the joke so as to transform it into a revolutionary tool. *Multitude* develops a political theory of the joke that has a lot in common with Lacan's theory as stated in Seminar XVI. The point of departure for Virno is that any joke will produce a new word, a new term, as in a coining: we assist to the creation of a word that did not exist in the dictionary, as was the case with "famillionnairely." This performative moment is read as a way of doing new things with words, with a nod to Austin's theory of the performative.

Virno also notes that at least three persons are needed for a joke to be produced. In the simplest case, as with what Freud calls "tendentious jokes" or even "smut," we have the author of the joke, the target, and the neutral spectator.⁴⁰ (The laughter produced is with the third person, the witness who, by laughing, authenticates that there has been a joke indeed. Virno concludes by equating "joke" with "praxis" since the process has had the result of "doing something new with words."⁴¹ The third person is enough to turn the joke into a public and innovative action. Here is how Virno sums up his post-Aristotelian theory:

"The joke is an innovative action carried out in the public sphere in the presence of neutral spectators. Joke-making inscribes itself entirely within the framework of *praxis*. It entails the use of *phronesis*, that is to say, of practical know-how that allows us to assess what it is appropriate to carry out within a possible situation. *Praxis* and *phronesis*, however, pushed to the extreme, since the joke is an action that undermines and contradicts the prevalent belief-system of a community (*éndoza*), thus revealing the transformability of the contemporary form of life."⁴²

Virno adds that if a joke exhibits the discrepancy between rules and their applications, it also mimics the pattern of a moment of decision-making: each time, it is necessary to move beyond commonly accepted rules and take into account a broader picture of humanity, as when Antigone, according to Hegel's reading, subverts the laws of the city, taunting Creon, and subverting imposed edict in the name of her superior and non-written laws—this for Hegel, was the introduction of female irony into the closed circuit of the polis, which would lead to its dissolution.

Virno is one of the rare contemporary philosopher to stress one important feature of the joke: it corresponds to a sudden moment of decision, an instant of verbal triumph, a "sudden glory," as Hobbes would say, because it interrupts a certain weak consensus about things. Here,

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39 Virno 2008. I want to thank Joel McKim for having first pointed out to me the importance of the work of Paolo Virno.

40 Ibid., p.80

41 Ibid., p.82

42 Ibid., p.129

a joke "truncates",⁴³ just as Lacan would "cut" an analysand's sentence half-way to achieve the effect of a scansion; he would thus mark the end of a psychoanalytic session by severing the thread of discourse and letting one signifier appear in all its newly gained significance. Virno thus concludes: "The joke is an innovative action that decrees the state of exception. On a par with all other innovative actions, the joke also rises up from the rule to "the common behavior of humankind."⁴⁴ This theory has one main advantage: it critiques all the theses about jokes as embodying a momentary subversion, a "Mardis Gras hiatus when it is finally legitimate to transgress and mock the order that is in place during the normal work week."⁴⁵ (Virno, 2008, p. 165).

Lacan's interruptions were meant to have lasting effects, and not be considered as spontaneous outbursts that subside. One example suffices to show how Lacan's critical laughter managed to cut through certain discourses, even when he was in partial agreement with them. When Lacan laughs at Gide, when for once he lets down his guard and wails like a woman after his wife has burned their precious correspondence, he shows that laughter can be more than a weapon: a way of not being the accomplice in a personal drama, and of taking a critical position that puts things in perspective.

It is important to remember that the analysis of Gide's case was made in the same Seminar V in which Lacan examined Freud's theory of jokes. When Lacan discusses the famous scene in which we see Gide heartbroken, comparing the burning of his love letters by his wife whom he had abandoned to go to England with a young male lover with the killing of an infant, Lacan is not moved; on the contrary, he is amused and even laughs. He compares Gide's cry with that Harpagon, Molière's famous miser, who would cry out for a treasure that he thinks has been stolen, and repeatedly screams "My casket!," whereas he should be more concerned for his daughter's fate that is at stake then.⁴⁶ This derives from Gide's specific issue, his lack of sexual desire for a wife he wanted to marry—she had decided to destroy what was most precious after her husband had given proof of his attraction to a young man. "This woman that he does not desire can effectively be the object of a supreme love for him, and when this object with which her has filled the hole of love without desire disappears, he utters that miserable cry who similarity to the comical cry par excellence, that of the miser, 'My money box! My

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43 Ibid., p.121

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p.165

46 *Les Formations de l'Inconscient*, p. 261.

precious money box!...”⁴⁷ Unwittingly, Gide has turned into a character of comedy, even if this comedy comes close to tragedy.

Just as Harpagon bemoans the disappearance of a money box whereas he should investigate his daughter’s loss, Gide could only understand what had happened later, when he had turned into a “man of letters,” someone who could universalize a “truth” valid for all readers. When Lacan returns to that scene in his essay on Gide’s youth taken up in *Ecrits*, he points out that comedy might usher in a process without any end: “It all ends with comedy, but who will put a stop to the laughter?”⁴⁸ In Seminar V, Lacan had already articulated comedy and tragedy, for he knew that the two genres had to be linked in the Greek theater. As he sees it, “...comedy was produced for the community, that is, insofar as, above itself, it constitutes the existence of Man as such,”⁴⁹ which chimes in with Virno’s idea, already mentioned, that the comedy created by the joke rises up from the rule to reach the level of as “common behavior of humankind.”⁵⁰ In his 1958 seminar, Lacan illustrates his theory with a discussion of Jean Genet’s play *The Balcony*, a play that he frames within the concept of Christian communion. Genet’s ferocious satire of the powers that be ends on a rather parodic note, with “Our Father who art in heaven,” and Lacan asks: “The comedy ends there. Is it blasphemous? Is it comical? We can place the accent wherever we like.”⁵¹

In this context, the equivalent of Virno’s Schmittian “state of exception” for Lacan might have been the role he ascribed to the “saint” in the last decade of his life. It was in *Television* that Lacan offered a last detailed consideration about the links between laughter and capitalism—the key is the function of the saint, someone who both enjoys but embodies “the refuse of jouissance” (*rebut*), which suggests more dejection than rejection. The saint is characterized as someone who can act as the trash (*déchet*) of the symbolic system. Are we back to the quip on “*ordures ménagères*” mentioned at the beginning? Not really—for the saint bypasses any kind of distributive justice, any economy of rewards.

“The saint doesn’t really see himself as righteous, which doesn’t mean that he has no ethics. The only problem for others is that you can’t see where it leads him. // I beat my brains against the hope that some like these will reappear. No doubt because I, myself, didn’t manage to make it. // The

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47 Lacan 2017, p.245

48 Lacan 2006a, p.641

49 Lacan 2017, p.245

50 Virno 2008, p.121

51 Lacan 2017, p.252

more saints, the more laughter; that’s my principle, to wit, the way out of capitalist discourse—which will not constitute progress, if it happens only for some.”⁵²

Here, Lacan puns on the common French saying *Plus on est de fous, plus on rit* (the more, the merrier, but literally: the more mad people, the more laughter there is), changing *fous* to *saints*. Lacan seems to regret not having attained to sainthood himself—a few years later, his model would be James Joyce, a writer who identified as the saintly man of literature, the *saint home* of universal culture or the *sinthome* as such. This did not prevent the rather mad laughter of which Nora Joyce, his wife, would complained when she described her husband laughing alone at night when writing *Finnegans Wake*—not laughing alone but in mystical communion with his absent psychotic daughter who at the time was institutionalized in a psychiatric ward...

Here, for once, Lacan shows that we need to share a common ideal with all others—he points out that no individual solution will obtain facing capitalism; we have to be all saints, laughing saints at that, if we want to exit from capitalist discourse. Lacan’s interventions, his scansions or interruptions, he knew it, could only be effective on certain modes of discourse. He was not going to erect barricades or throw Molotov cocktails, but he believed that a revolution could take place in mentalities. Actually, his influence after 1968 was sufficient to turn a whole generation away from “direct action,” the sterile terrorism of the kind one saw in Italy --Virno himself was made to pay for this moment, although he did not approve the military armed struggle of certain groups--, or in Germany and Japan.

To his patients, Lacan would have to explain that, when he had stated that his ethics could be summarized as “never yield on your desire,” as he says at the end of his seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, this did not mean unleashing all libidinal desires against the powers of repression; to read him well, one had to be conscious that this ethics was above all a tragic ethics founded on the finitude of the subject. He would with Walter Benjamin who would point out that in the plays of the German baroque drama, jokers would always appear as a marionettes. They were inveterate *raisonneurs*, which transformed them into the stock characters of comedy, and thus made all these tragedies appear as tragicomedies. The *Lustspiel* was the other side of the *Trauerspiel*, in the same way as *Mehrlust* can be shown to be the reverse of *Mehrwert*.

The performative power that this critical laughter unleashes appeared at the conclusion of an interview given for the Belgian television in 1972. The journalist Françoise Wolff wanted to produce a

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52 Lacan 1990, p.16

program on Lacan that would explain his theories in simple and positive terms. Only at the end, did she dare voice an objection, which made her ask: “Then, under the cover of psychoanalysis, wouldn’t there be a repression of freedom?”⁵³ Startled, Lacan laughed and almost stuttered: “(Laughs) Yes... Those terms..., the word makes me laugh, yes... I never talk about freedom.” Obviously taken aback by such a naive question, but still trying to remain polite, Lacan hesitates, laughs, and finally states that the word “freedom” does not belong to his vocabulary. This is not totally exact, however, but indeed he would never use it in such a broad and vague way. If it is the case that the more saints there are, the more we laugh, we understand how Lacan rethinks in his idiomatic manner what Georges Bataille had been developing with the notion of an “accursed share.” But we can continue singing:

O when the saints go laughing in...
 Yes, I want to be in that number,
 When the Saints go laughing in...

Wishing to be a saint, although not really being a saintly man himself, attempting to straddle the theories of Freud and Marx at a time when they were begin to pull away from each other, Lacan was caught up in a living paradox. The paradox can be approximated by applying to his “personality” (a term that, as he said in his dissertation on paranoia, would allude to the comic or tragic masks worn by actors) what Flaubert writes about Homer: he never existed (if he had existed, why would Lacan keep referring to “Lacan,” talking about himself in the third person?), but all the same he was famous for his Homeric laughter...

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 53 Françoise Wolff’s “Interview pour la television belge,” in her documentary “*Jacques Lacan Parle*” (1972) online in Purple Diary.

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