Joking aside: Theorizing laughter in organization studies

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Abstract

Humour is becoming an increasingly prevalent topic in organization studies. On the one hand, humour is said to enable workers to undermine management control; on the other hand, humour is said to provide managers with a resource for stimulating productivity. This paper seeks to challenge the duality between rebellious and disciplinary forms of humour by examining the meaning and significance of laughter. Following Bergson, it will be argued that laughter serves to rectify overly rigid behaviour that has temporarily disrupted the natural elasticity of life. Ultimately, I aim to highlight the moral ambiguity of laughter in order to destabilize the conventional distinction in the literature between ‘contestive’ and ‘repressive’ varieties of humour at work. This will serve to attune us to the way in which laughter – whether it is directed at a dominant group or a marginalized group – plays a socially normative role in organizations.

Biography

Nick Butler is a Lecturer in Organization Studies at the University of St Andrews, although he is currently on secondment to Lund University, Sweden for two years. His main projects are on the politics of 'excellence' and 'relevance' in the business school and the working lives of comedy performers in the UK.