

The Democracy of the Flesh: Laughter as an Educational and Public Event

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Laughter is a marginal topic within educational research in general, as well as within philosophy of education in particular. Whenever this subject gets attention at all, it is commonly treated either as a didactic tool, the benefits or dangers of which are discussed in relation to efficient teaching, or as a dimension of corporeality, the absence of which is symptomatic of an (educational) culture that is marked by a deep aversion toward human embodiment.

The former analysis tends to show that laughter might form an unexpectedly efficient instrument with which to improve motivation and concentration on the part of the students, or that it might be a very convenient aid for explaining abstract concepts. Laughter also improves creativity, social competencies, and so forth.¹ At the same time, this approach warns us to use this means with moderation, as laughter might always degenerate into plain cynicism or moral insensitivity, and because laughter has the power to disrupt every hierarchical ordering. Therefore, laughter could be dangerous within an educational system, which is supposed to be founded on an unambiguously instituted discrepancy between those who teach and those who are supposed to learn (this is why the school and the figure of the teacher are excellent candidates for objects of scorn and laughter).²

The latter approach concerning laughter in education situates this phenomenon and the aversion toward it in a broader perspective, namely the endemic hatred of and unmanageable fear for our incarnated condition as mortal human beings, which is a typical attitude in the West, dating to the time of Plato. We envy the immortal gods who are free from the decay that, being made out of flesh and bone, is our inescapable fate. So we eagerly define ourselves in terms of “the better part of man,” the mind, in order not to be confronted with the entropic bodies we inhabit. Therefore, especially in pedagogical contexts, teachers and students are encouraged to see themselves as immaterial subjectivities. As Erica McWilliam argues, there is no place for bodily desire in classrooms.³ We should keep silent about this feature of the human condition, although many will (tacitly) admit that the things we learned that were of the utmost significance for our lives frequently were provoked by teachers who were not just administrators, but were also passionate men and women of flesh and blood who had the talent to infect us in a corporeal way with the yearning to abandon ourselves to certain subjects. The point is that Western society is not keen on recognizing this fact. In the West, we would like education to be a purely cerebral matter, one that leaves no opportunity for seduction.

For the same reason, it is understandable why we are so repugnant toward laughter: laughing shatters the illusion we have about our rational identity.⁴ The main aim of this approach to laughter in education is to return the body to its legitimate place within education. Hence those who take this approach plea that we

should (dare to) show desire in classrooms and that we should (dare to) laugh — not in the name of efficiency (as the first approach claims), but in the name of a repressed dimension of humanity. On this view, laughter is an aspect of our lives that is disregarded only at a great cost: the loathing of our corporeal hardware prevents us from becoming fully developed human beings.

What we suggest in this essay is not to discuss laughter in education in one of these two ways. In our view, these approaches do not take laughter seriously enough. In the name of ideals such as didactic efficiency or complete humanity, laughter is treated just as an exquisite instrument with which to realize these goals. What we propose to do, on the other hand, is to start from the simple fact that there exists, from time to time, laughter in classrooms. Our task consists in describing this phenomenon as accurately as possible in order to show that the experience of laughter has an educational dimension. Laughter should not be defended on the ground that it might be a legitimate and useful instrument. On the contrary, the experience of shared laughter should be taken at face value, because — in itself — common laughter has a profound pedagogical significance.

TAKING LAUGHING SERIOUSLY

A description of this sort can be found in the phenomenological analysis of Helmuth Plessner, in his famous study on laughter and weeping.⁵ If one takes laughing seriously, then one should see in this phenomenon more than a complex of gestures and facial expressions that represent an internal, emotional state. Laughter is not the expression of joy, commotion, and so forth. If this really were the case, it would be most difficult to explain why laughter is so contagious. Above all, laughter has the character of a response to a disorientating situation, a situation that has made it impossible for the subject to find any clear or definite position. We laugh when we can no longer speak or act in an individualized way. There is no such thing as a controlled or intentional laughter. “In laughter man gives up a certain position. She answers directly and impersonally. She is delivered to an anonymous automatism. It’s not really she who laughs, but something laughs in her and she is, so to speak, only the theatre and the frame of this event.”⁶

In laughing, we capitulate, lose all capacity to control ourselves, and give up the possibility of relating to ourselves and the world in a meaningful way.⁷ In this abandonment we experience nothing more than the mechanical shaking of our bodies. So, it is no longer the subject (which coincides with its *Leib*, its “lived-through” body), but its anonymous flesh (*Körper*) that is doing the answering, namely through arbitrary, meaningless, and uncontrollable reactions. “Corporeal occurrences emancipate themselves. These shake us and bring us out of breath. Man has lost her relation to her physical existence, which in turn withdraws from her and which does with her as it pleases.”⁸ We experience, so to speak, the spasmodic, autonomous functioning of the flesh to which we have become reduced. So, when we laugh, our behavior is, according to Plessner, no longer the expression of our singular being, as when we smile to someone to show that we like him or her. Laughing is in fact on “the very borders of the human” (to quote the subtitle of Plessner’s study).

Now, in this experience of radical self-loss, we communicate in a radical way. Being-seized, surrendering all self-possession and self-mastery, and the unwilling undergoing of eruptive (and sometimes aggressive) laughter opens us to one another. This is because it is no longer possible to give meaning to ourselves, and our relations to the world and to others, by starting from a fixed, individual position, as we normally do.

Following Georges Bataille⁹ and Alphonso Lingis¹⁰ here, in laughter, we find ourselves in a state of “radical transparency”¹¹: we communicate, but not because we share the same insight or the same language. People who do not share a cognitive, social and/or cultural background might nevertheless find themselves sharing in the same experience.¹² Furthermore, this radical transparency is not a cognitive category: transparency neither refers to (nor presupposes) a knowledge of the self: “The opposite of laughter is scrupulous self-criticism — that finger-wagging Socratic injunction: know thyself.”¹³ It is the giving up of one’s will to have a clear and guaranteed position that grants the possibility of community-in-laughter.

Furthermore, while laughing, we are confronted with a truth with which we cannot argue, which is shown to us as truth. What we experience while laughing is not something that invites us to search for a further legitimization of what we feel or to find out whether or not we are mistaken somehow. “Laughter affirms itself indubitably and believes in the world illuminated by its delight. That at which and with which someone laughs is true.”¹⁴ Laughter is a plain positive reality.

Finally, the experience of common laughter is also an experience of equality. In the unintentional surrender to the autonomous functioning of the body, hierarchical positions are no longer experienced as meaningful. The difference between teacher and student, between adult and child, between judge and criminal, and so forth are radically suspended. The experience of common laughter grants the possibility of a form of community, a possibility that nevertheless might vanish as quickly as it became existent. Referring to an example given by Bataille, when a student pulls away the chair of her professor when he is bending to sit on it: “there is the sudden revelation of an inability to maintain his poise, authority and seriousness. If we can refrain from laughing, we maintain a position of power... However, we lose our seriousness in laughing.”¹⁵ So, it all comes down to how we react to the possibility of community that is revealed in laughing together. In this example, the professor could restore as quickly as possible the hierarchical order that he represents as if nothing had happened. Giving ourselves over to laughter, on the other hand, implies a break in the course of history. The radical and unexpected has become a real possibility.

In the etymological sense of the word, this experience of common laughter constitutes an “e-ducational” event: something happens that has the force to move us out of position, to lead us out (*e-ducere*) of existing positions into a world in which we are exposed.¹⁶ This self-loss and exposure that one undergoes in the outburst of laughter are not only of major importance within educational contexts, but are educational in themselves, precisely because we give up mastery-over-our-own-lives

and instead experience a sense of togetherness and equality. When we are confronted with the automatic and anonymous functioning of the flesh, the kind of community that might be at stake in education is revealed.

THE DEMOCRACY OF THE FLESH

So, taking the experience of laughing in classrooms seriously, we would now like to ponder the public and educational dimensions of common laughter. We would also like to elaborate upon a more general approach, which both explores how corporeal experiences of self-loss might constitute a communizing and equalizing event and strongly departs from traditional interpretations of the public (within education).

The undergoing of community-in-laughter shows that the shared experience of loss-of-mastery by two or more people who happen to be together at the same time (even if they do not share any common background) constitutes a discovery of themselves as equals. Exposed to the impersonal and automatic functioning of the flesh that we are, we experience a bond with no one in particular (or, positively stated, with everyone with whom laughter brings us together contingently). Therefore, we do not think that it is improper to call this kind of experience “democratic,” not in its institutional meaning, of course, but in an experiential sense, where we feel a kind of bond against which we cannot argue — a bond of community, which is revealed as such in our undergoing of the same experience of desubjectivization. Because this kind of democratic experience occurs when we are exposed to the spasmodic and impersonal reaction of our own bodies, we would furthermore like to call this dimension “the democracy of the flesh.”

Apart from the involuntary and spasmodic reactions of the body while laughing, phenomena such as perspiring, the urge to fart or to pick one’s nose, the impulse to masturbate, and so forth, all confront us with the same experience, namely that we are, in the end, not the master of our own existence and that all the hierarchical distinctions that society installs are ultimately in vain. We all (might) have to sweat, to “let one off,” to dispose of nasal mucus, and so forth. Hence the democratic character of those forms of corporeal experience that expose us to the impersonal functioning of the body.

Empirical research shows that phenomena such as burping, urinating in public, talking about one’s period, and exhibiting sexual lust are much more negatively appreciated by members of higher income levels than by members of lower socioeconomic strata.¹⁷ If one must surrender to these “lower” modes of behavior, so it is more fervently believed by the members of the wealthier classes, one should do so only in private. Otherwise, one feels (or should feel) very much ashamed. In bourgeois and higher milieus, these things are often taboo, and they are sometimes severely punished within education. Now, one might wonder why the white-collar class is so adverse to these specific bodily phenomena (given that this class is not abhorrent toward the body in general). Perhaps this has to do with the fact that defecating, scratching one’s bottom, eating with one’s bare hands, giving oneself over to sexual desire, and so forth show the undeniable democracy of the flesh. All

the examples we have just given confront us both with the autonomous functioning of our bodies and with the fact that we ultimately lack self-control. In these cases, we all have the same experience of the loss of self-mastery. This experience contradicts all of the social and cultural distinctions that humanity invents. These aspects of embodied life constitute a time bomb, which constantly threatens the existing hierarchical order, and thus it becomes understandable why the higher classes try to immunize themselves against all these “unpleasant” phenomena: they force us to face the fact of the autonomous and anonymous functioning of the flesh that is radically indifferent to social structuring.

The point here is not that we should, in the name of this discovery, abolish all social distinctions, start living like the animals, or reshape society and our educational system in an egalitarian way. We also are not defending the view that we are, in an anthropological or ontological sense, the same or that we share the same characteristics or capacities — if this was our view, we would subsequently be moved to undertake major educational and societal reforms. The point is, rather, that in having the same expropriating and equalizing experiences (as we have, for example, in laughter), we, as beings who are confronted with the autonomous and anonymous functioning of the flesh, experience, at the same time, community. This community is not an originally given, positive entity that becomes thereupon the object of experience; it should instead be considered as something that only exists in and as a (corporeal) experience. This “public” experience is, furthermore, an educational event, as through it we witness, in a very passive way, the impossibility of upholding any fixed position. To put it even more accurately: in this kind of experience, we sense an equality, which implies the end of the narcissistic dream of full mastery over our own lives, and which therefore undermines any hierarchical distinction. We have no alternative then but to undergo a factual democracy that abolishes all cultural, social, pedagogical, or political distinctions that man constructs. We are literally moved out of position and become “e-ducated.”

THE PUBLIC AND EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION OF LAUGHING TOGETHER

In order to elucidate further the educational and public sense of this community-in-laughter (or, more broadly, any community experienced while exposed to the anonymity of our flesh), we will in the following try to show how this communizing and equalizing experience is quite different from the way in which the notion of the public is traditionally treated within philosophy of education.

Generally speaking, when the public dimension of education is discussed, it is interpreted either in terms of visibility or in terms of commonality. Whenever one strives toward more “egalitarian” ways of educational interaction and organization of schooling — egalitarian meaning the equal possibility of all participants to defend their points of view and to participate in major decisions — it is tempting to defend the view that the educational system should provide a structural context which allows a gathering of and discussion between all participants, both so that everyone has a voice to be heard and so that everyone has the chance to utter his or her standpoint as something that really matters (for example, in school parliaments). This line of thought is an exponent of the Arendtian concept of the public discussion

taking place on the agora.¹⁸ This definition of the public is critical of the view that democracy consists in the addition of particular interests, resulting in the rule of decreeing whatever the majority prefers. Hannah Arendt's concern is that such a "democracy" is merely another form of tyranny: it suffocates the concerns of any minority (this is why, from the point of view of the minority, as in the case of Plato, who found himself poorly understood by the majority of Athenians, absolutism is preferable over the kind of democracy in which the majority is always in the right).

On this first interpretation, real democracy is constituted in the action of free people coming together in order to discuss the good life (of the polis), and this gathering presupposes the will of each participant to consider the point of view of every other citizen, even if she defends a minority opinion. The agora is thus a structuring principle that educates people, in the sense that it facilitates anyone to become visible and to have a voice, so that everyone becomes sensitive to the fact that fellow citizens might, in all sincerity, be attached to a radical, divergent point of view. This does not imply, of course, that one should leave one's convictions behind. The point at stake is that a collective decision only deserves the name democratic if it is the result of a conversation in which every standpoint had a fair chance to see the daylight.

Therefore, the "public," within this Arendtian line of reasoning, should protect us from private harm or vulnerability through a regime of visibility. The public realm is to be seen as something that is constructed by private beings as a weapon of defense. In the terminology of Jean-Luc Nancy, it should be considered an *oeuvre*, a product of work.¹⁹ "The public" is conceived as a derived, secondary phenomenon which draws its meaning from "the private." In a sense, the same is true when we consider another traditional definition of publicity.

This second, frequently defended, interpretation of the public concerns the sharing of something that a group of people has in common. Now, this commonality might be interpreted, first, in a very minimalist way, as in the traditional theories of the constitutional state. Here, the public is defined as an association of people who share the insight that it is more rational to enter into a social contract than to go on living as private individuals, all envisaging their own benefit, because this will result in a state of permanent war. Community, on this view, results from the rationally informed choice of an aggregation of individuals, all of whom comprehend that the institution of social life is to their own private benefit, and that this fact (in the end) strengthens their position.

On the other hand, the maximalist, or communitarian, version of the public argues that a genuine community is possible if and only if each participant is willing to identify his- or herself with, for instance, a set of values, a language, a tradition, or an origin that is shared. Here, the continuation of the community is seen as more important than the subject-centered preferences of the individuals who belong to it.

At first, this communitarian version seems to be the opposite of the minimalist definition of the public, because the communitarian upsets the priority of subject over community. Nevertheless, in both cases, the public — again — is considered

as a product of work (*oeuvre*). In the first case, community is the creation of individuals who are willing to renounce a part of their liberty in order to safeguard private security. The same is true in the second scenario. Although many communitarians will defend the view that community is something that predates the individuals who are born into it, the claim that we should share a common tradition is only intelligible in an era when the organic community for which the communitarians strive is already gone and lost forever. So, according to this view, community is seen as something on which we should constantly be working, by raising the new generation to become worthy representatives of the particular language, practices, and values that are “theirs” and that form the sacral cement of society. The *oeuvre* in question is a constant struggle to safeguard the community and to banish any element that threatens the community’s self-coincidence.

To conclude, in both cases, the public is seen as a defense against a private position, which is seen as a nuisance to be overcome. Clearly, education plays an important role in the constitution of this community-to-be-produced: it is as if we are born as privatized beings who, thanks to initiation and socialization, come to see a more important stake and so become the members of a community (be it a constitutional state, an association we enter into because it does not rationally make sense not to participate in it, or a particularistic brotherhood of people willing to share and defend the same values in order to form a strong, authentic, and harmonious community).

Now, it should be clear that the kind of community that is revealed, for instance, in the experience of common laughter is in no way to be considered a product of work, an instrument which must protect us against some potentially private difficulty. The community-in-laughter is not a secondary phenomenon that is made meaningful because of some benefit it brings to the individual (this benefit being, in both versions of the public just described, the strengthening of the individual’s position upon entering or founding a community). The public that is at stake in the community of those who find themselves together in laughter is, instead, a plain positive reality. It is given as such in experience and, consequentially, we should take it seriously. This public is not defined as the “non-private.” When confronted with the involuntary, automatic, and anonymous functioning of the flesh, we in fact experience a communication that in no way refers to something we as privatized beings (should) long for or from which we need protection, something that cannot be expressed in terms of interests, goals, or legitimized insights (of individuals).

In contrast with the second version of the public, this community-in-laughter is a bond of no one and everyone. It is “a community of those who have nothing in common.”²⁰ We simply happen to find ourselves together in laughter, without the necessity of any shared identity. In this event, a contingently gathered “we” shares an experience of loss-of-mastery and equality. As opposed to the first version of the public, “the democracy of the flesh” is not about making us visible. It is, rather, about us experiencing being exposed and thus abandoning our attachments to the individual positions that the agora should protect. Thus, without presupposing that there is a common interest, which should grant the possibility of a “public” experience,

the experience of common laughter shows that, in the corporeal experience of self-loss (negatively formulated), an “*intercorporeal*” community of everyone who is contingently delivered to the impersonal flesh is experienced (positively formulated).²¹

Now, what happens here could be termed an “e-educational” event: through this public exposure to the autonomous functioning of the body, we come to partake in a bond in which it has become utterly impossible to uphold neither any definitive nor hierarchical identity. Experiencing the community-in-laughter, we are unconditionally out-of-position. This communizing and equalizing kind of event might just be what the public vocation of education is all about. Again, this does not imply a defense of the position that we should apply more laughter in classrooms: in that case, we would be using laughter as an instrument and a weapon — as a tool that is necessary for the community-to-be-worked-on. What we might do, instead, is cease to immunize ourselves against events that happen anyway, such as laughter, and accept the equalizing and communizing effect of these events. This presupposes, however, the will to take laughter seriously.

1. See, for instance, Johannes Gruntz-Stoll and Birgit Rissland, eds., *Lachen macht Schule. Humor in Erziehung und Unterricht* [Laughter Promotes Schooling: Humor in Education and Teaching] (Bad Heilbrunn, Germany: Verlag Julius Klinkhardt, 2002).

2. Fritz Osterwalder, “Nun lern’ ich bei Lust und Lachen — All die allerschönsten Sachen. Humorlosigkeit in der Schule — ein pädagogisches Erbe?” [“Only Through Joy and Laughter Will I Learn the Finest Things: The Absence of Humor in Schools: A Pedagogical Heritage?”] in *Lachen macht Schule*, eds. Gruntz-Stoll and Rissland, 40.

3. Erica McWilliam, “Admitting Impediments: Or Things to Do with Bodies in the Classroom,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 26, no. 3 (1996): 367–379.

4. Rita Bischof, “Lachen und Sein. Einige Lachtheorien im Lichte von Georges Bataille” [“Laughter and Being: Theories of Laughter Reviewed from the Standpoint of Georges Bataille”], in *Lachen — Gelächter — Lächeln. Reflexionen in drei Spiegeln* [Laughter: Reflections in Three Mirrors], eds. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (Frankfurt am Main: Synsikat, 1986), 55.

5. Helmuth Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen. Eine Untersuchung nach den Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens* [Laughing and Weeping: An Examination of the Borders of Human Behavior] (Bern, Germany: Francke, 1961). The account given here of Plessner’s analysis is deliberately partial. We concentrate foremost on his description of self-loss, where Plessner, at the end, also states that laughter, as the impossibility of answering, still is an answer, and that in this sense personality is saved (Ibid., 89).

6. Ibid., 155 (our translation).

7. Ibid., 86 (our translation).

8. Ibid., 87 (our translation).

9. Georges Bataille, *L’expérience intérieure* [The Inner Experience] (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

10. Alphonso Lingis, *Body Transformations: Evolutions and Atavisms in Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005).

11. “Whoever laughs with us is of our kind. It is not yet the pleasure of recognizing that our minds understand one another. Communication without words when we do have a language in common is not the deep complicity with one another that we feel in laughter.... If we begin to speak to someone, it is because first we see him or her as someone with whom we could laugh and grieve” (Ibid., 94).

12. See, for instance, the role laughter plays in so called “first contacts,” that is, the first contacts between anthropologists and “foreign” tribes, who have as good as nothing in common, in Henk Driessen, “Humor, Lachen und die Feldforschung: Betrachtungen aus dem Blickwinkel der Ethnologie”

[“Humor, Laughter, and the Field: Reflections from Anthropology”], in *Kulturgeschichte des Humors. Von der Antike bis Heute* [A Cultural History of Humor: From Antiquity to the Present Day], eds. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Darmstadt, Germany: Primus Verlag, 1999). Another example would be the laughter of babies, which engenders a kind of communication (with adults), although they are missing the use of language (Lingis, *Body Transformations*, 93).

13. Lingis, *Body Transformations*, 90.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 97.

16. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstone, England: Palgrave, 2005), 134.

17. Lieven Vandekerckhove, *Gemaakt van as. Lichaam en norm in de westerse cultuur* [Made from Flesh and Bone: Body and Normativity in Western Culture] (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo, 1982).

18. See, for example, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

19. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 31.

20. Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

21. This is a translation of the famous terminology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*intercorporéité*). What we suggest is not to take this concept as an ontological category explaining why community is possible or desirable, but rather to treat it as a descriptive category of something that we can, in fact, experience.

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