

From the Third Person Intruder to the Public Sphere

por Paolo Virno

I do not intend to discuss Freud's theses on jokes, nor, far less, to criticize them¹. It is enough for me to show that a radically different explanation of these same phenomena is *also* legitimate. And that this alternative explanation takes root precisely in certain Freudian observations.

Jokes, for Freud, are "made" (Freud, *Jokes*: 224), as opposed to the comical situation, which must simply be traced down and recognized. Whoever coins a joke does something new: "Have you taken a bath?" someone asks severely of a very dirty friend. "What, is there one missing?" the friend replies, unperturbed (ibid: 55). Moreover, while the comical dimension can be completely, or only in part, nonlinguistic, the joke is exclusively verbal. Those who say something witty do something new; let us note carefully, something they could *not* have done without words. The retort alters the situation into which it enters, thanks to certain semantic and rhetorical prerogatives in its possession, as outlined by Freud right at the beginning of Witz: "the coupling of dissimilar things, contrasting ideas, 'sense in nonsense', the succession of bewilderment and enlightenment, the bringing forward of what is hidden, and the peculiar brevity of it" (ibid: 11).

Doing something new with words: this general characteristic does not allow us, however, to grasp fully the nature of jokes. In and of itself, it does not clarify the situation sufficiently: even those who elaborate upon an ingenious metaphor create something new with words. On the other hand, the Freudian identikit of verbal creativity at work within the joke suggests, preliminarily, an affinity between "joke-work" and "dream-work": even the dreamer, in fact, proceeds by way of "the approach of dissimilar elements, the contrast of representation, the sense of the absurd." The distance that separates jokes from other forms of linguistic invention, but also and above all from the realms of dreams, is attested to even by Freud himself, when he emphasizes -on a number of occasions and in the most diverse contexts, as happens with every self-respecting *refrain*- the nullifying role played, *only* in the act of joke making, by the so-called "third person". What does that mean?

The first person, Freud says, is the author of the joke; the second is the object or the target of it; the third, ultimately, is its "audience," that is, the neutral spectator who evaluates the witty remark, understanding perfectly the meaning of the remark, and takes pleasure in it. The third person, superfluous or, worse yet, optional in the comical situation, is, instead a necessary component of the joke. Let us try to understand: the third person is not limited to amplifying the effects of the witticism; this "intruder" actually makes it possible. Without the spectator, jokes indeed would not exist. "No-one can be content with having made a joke for himself alone" (ibid: 175): in other words, a *private* or *interior* humorous remark is inconceivable. However, the presence of the interlocutor-victim is not any way sufficient for mitigating this dissatisfaction. Freud considers every

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joke that remains confined within the sticky relationship between sender and receiver to be a shot in the dark. The third person is a logical condition of the joke: the “I” and the “you” depend absolutely upon this third person. Without an audience, the actors would have no way of knowing exactly which script they have recited. Whoever produces the remark that abruptly modifies the trajectory of the dialogue does not succeed in laughing, or does so only upon reflection, thanks, that is, to the amusement of which the third person gives proof. This impediment to the direct enjoyment of one’s own witticism, according to Freud, is owed to two distinct, and therefore, convergent reasons. The first is this: the author of the joke cannot judge whether it has hit its target or if it is, instead, akin to simple nonsense. The choice between sense and non-sense does not fall within the competence of the witticist (nor of the deuteragonist who has been ridiculed). So then, the disinterested spectator “has the decision passed over to him on whether the joke-work has succeeded in its task -as though the self did not feel certain in its judgement on the point” (ibid: 176). And here is the second reason for the impediment to laughter: the “tendentious” remark, consisting of aggressive or obscene content, and equally, the “innocent” remark, that restores the childish habit of playing with words as though they were things, require of the person who coins the remark a conspicuous waste of psychic energy in order to overcome all sorts of inhibitions, “external or internal” (ibid: 181, fol.). For makers of jokes, the work entailed in making something new (and agreed upon) erodes and neutralizes their eventual “profit of pleasure”. The third person, on the other hand, who shares the same inhibitions as the joke teller, can enjoy the overcoming of these inhibitions without assuming any psychich waste: that is why the third person laughs heartily. This laughter, being exempt from counterbalancing, accomplishes the target of the remark.

Even while considering this “third person” to be so important, Freud assigns to this person the limited function of doing nothing more than signaling the characteristics for which the witticism is *absolutely* not reducible to dream-work. “A dream is completely asocial mental product; it has nothing to communicate to anyone else. [...] A joke, on the other hand, is the most social of all the mental functions whose goal is pleasure. It often calls for three person and its completion requires the participation of someone else in the mental process it starts” (ibid: 222). It seems to me, however, that one cannot overlook the contribution of the spectator to the success of the joke. This contribution, rather than being limited to disturbing or objecting to the joke = dream equation, actually offers the opportunity for formulating an equation which is totally different: *joke = praxis*. The figure of the third person as intruder, in addition to being outside the realm of dream-work, also demands, in the positive sense, the introduction of pertinent concepts that define appropriately the figure’s importance. This “intruder” is a point of departure, not a left-over entity.

The condition of the third person clarifies the meaning of “doing something new with words” in the case of the joke. A “doing” whose reality depends entirely upon the presence of outsiders and, in the strongest and most complete sense, upon *public action*. It is nothing less, let us understand, than a political discourse held in a general assembly that urges towards insurrection against the constituted powers: if enunciated in the absence of witnesses, it is as though this discourse had never occurred. The intrinsic necessity of exposing oneself to the observation and judgment of one’s equals carves out with precision the sphere of praxis. Within this sphere there are no gestures or utterances in possession of any autonomous significance. It is a sphere, that is, which

can be separated from the worlds in which these gestures and utterances *appear* to the disinterested spectator (to the anonymous “s/he,” let us note, and not to the “you” to whom the gesture or utterance is addressed). In order to invent a metaphor, indiscreet eyes are not necessary: the first two persons are sufficient, the speaking “I”, and the “you” who is able to understand the innovative expression. On the other hand, those who utter a joke unexpectedly are in need of indiscreet eyes, because they are accomplishing an innovative action whose defective sense escapes, to a great degree, those who are directly implicated. The *praxis* can only occur by means of the “third person”, for the same reason which, according to Aristotle (See Aristotle, *Ethics*: 175-177) distinguish this third person from *epistémé* (pure knowledge) and from *poíesis* (production, doing). If the theoretical reflection eludes the observation of others and renders mute the world of appearances, *praxis*, instead, always presupposes and revives a public space. If production gives place to an independent object, or if it has an external goal, *praxis*, on the other hand, is an activity without a product, the result of which coincides entirely with its own performance. When action is consigned to exteriority and contingency (as opposed to *epistémé*) but deprived of an enduring product capable of certifying its reality (as opposed to *poíesis*), it can do nothing more than present itself again to the spectators. Its existence and its meaning are entrusted to the witness-judges.

In order to understand the strategic importance of the “third person” in the joke, there is no better strategy than to turn to the philosophy of Kant. The truly great event, for example, of the French Revolution of 1789, can only be understood by those who were “not themselves caught up in it”, but who limited themselves to following it with a “*sympathy* that borders almost on enthusiasm,” thus experiencing a form of “inactive delight” (Kant, “Contest”: 182 fol.) The advantage of the spectator consists in intertwining the actions as a whole, while the actors (first and second person) know only their own parts. In her lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, Hannah Arendt observed that, for Kant, the spectator represents the only effective antidote to the weakness and opaqueness that distinguish *praxis*. Whoever witnessed the Revolution without taking part in it saw “what counted most; he could discover a meaning in the course taken by events, a meaning that the actors ignored; and the existential ground for his insight was his disinterestedness, his nonparticipation, his noninvolvement” (Arendt: 54). Let us remember the two reasons for the impediment to laughter for those who invent the joke for the purpose of producing laughter: on one hand, the author is not capable of evaluating whether the joke has succeeded or failed; on the other hand, the author’s pleasure is curtailed by the work necessary for shaking the resistance of the status quo (or of the “inhibitions”). These same reasons hold also, on a completely different scale, for the protagonists of revolutions; even those revolutionaries who are deprived of a vision of the whole and overcome by the waste of energy, can enjoy their own feats only as a reflection, thanks to the assistance of the audience. “For the actor, the decisive question is thus how he appears to others [*dokei hois allois*]; the actor is dependent on the opinion of the spectator; he is not autonomous (in Kant’s language); he does not conduct himself according to an innate voice of reason but in accordance with what spectators would expect of him. The standard is the spectator” (ibid: 55). With regard to the joke, but also to the political *praxis* discussed by Kant and Arendt, a misunderstanding consists in extenuating, in certain cases, in completely abolishing the distinction between second and third person. By doing so, one will content with repeating some

obvious certainties: there is no such thing as private language -nor there is the possibility of private praxis; the human mind is fundamentally social, etc. But here the essential point is lost: the difference between amorous dialogue, or scientific conversation, for which the second person is sufficient, and a joke, or a revolution, which need, instead, an indifferent audience in order to exist. In certain jokes (let us think of word “games” not directed to a particular interlocutor), the second person may be missing, the “you”. In none of these jokes do we find the third person, the inactive and judging “s/he.” To reduce the third person to the second, or to amalgamate them, means to misunderstand the specific statute of *praxis*, and also, to preclude the understanding of the joke. Arendt writes: “We [...] are inclined to think that in order to judge a spectacle you must first have the spectacle -that the spectator is secondary to the actor; we tend to forget that no one in his right mind would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectator to watch it” (ibid: 61-62). This deplorable inclination affects today’s philosophy of the mind.

The “third person” authorizes the interchangeability of the joke and *public action*. Furthermore, we know that this has to do with a *linguistic action*. certainly there are analogies to be drawn between witty utterances and the performative utterances studied by Austin (“I baptize this baby Luca”, “I declare the session open”, etc.). In both cases: 1) an action is carried out with words, an action that could not have been carried out otherwise; 2) it is useless to attempt to reduce that which is *done* to the “thought content” of the phrases uttered; 3) these phrases, constituting an action in and of themselves, are not true or false -rather, they are successful or unsuccessful (fortunate or unfortunate, in Austin’s terminology). Nevertheless, if we were to choose to neglect their considerable formal heterogeneity, the fact remains that the performative utterance is clearly distinguished from the witty remark by virtue of its stereotypical and repetitive character. Since this has to do with a semijuristic and customary formula (order, pardon, promise, etc.), the same utterance is valid for analogous occasions. Vice versa, the joke provokes bewilderment and astonishment, and for this very reason it does not allow for reiterations: “the very nature of surprising someone or taking him unawares implies that it cannot succeed a second time” (Freud, *Jokes*: 188-189). Beyond the public and linguistic realms, the joke accomplishes an innovative action. In fact, as we shall see, it is this action that illustrates in a specialized manner the procedures and aptitudes that will be utilized, in general, by the most diverse *innovative actions*. The witty remark clearly recapitulates the techniques to which human praxis has recourse in a critical juncture, when the old compasses are knocked out of order by a magnetic storm; making improper connections between distant thoughts; having recourse to semantic ambivalence in order to make a turn onto a side street; shifting the psychic accent on a theme different from the initial theme, and so on.

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