

# Satire and dignity

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This chapter examines satire from the target's point of view: how to respond to satire without losing dignity? The power of satire lies in its capacity to challenge dignity, which threatens social position, political legitimacy and individual well-being. Analysing concrete examples of satire, the essay reviews the merits, risks and limitations of possible responses: laugh, joke back, argue, retaliate, show anger, or withdraw. The capacity to respond with dignity is not distributed evenly: not everyone has the resources to do so. Moreover, there is not always consensus on what counts as a dignified response. In today's increasingly diverse and globalised societies, this makes satire increasingly contested and risky, but also an increasingly important domain for intercultural encounters and negotiations.

*"But he hasn't got anything on!" a little child said.*

*"Dear me, listen to that innocent voice," the child's father said, and people whispered to one another what the child had said. "But he's got nothing on – a little child says he's got nothing on."*

*"He's really got nothing on!" everybody finally shouted. The emperor cringed, because he realized that they were right. But this is what he thought: "I have to see this through." He walked ever more proudly, and the lords-in-waiting walked behind him, carrying the train that was not there at all.* (Andersen 2005: 110)

This is how we imagine satire: the sudden revelation of an awkward truth, exposing those in power as ridiculous – laughable. The satirist is simultaneously heroic and somehow pure, like the child in Andersen's tale: the only person not duped by the illusion, unimpressed by status. The story of the naked emperor ends on a painful note (as most of Andersen's tales do): not with the liberating discovery of the truth, but with a mocking description of the emperor's predicament.<sup>1</sup> Walking

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1. Andersen considered this a satirical tale. As the editor of the annotated version writes, Andersen changed the ending of the story just before it was printed, adding a final line which, he stated, "will give everything a more satirical appearance" (Andersen 2005: 110).

“ever more proudly” among his shouting subjects, his lords-in-waiting behind him, the emperor attempts to maintain his dignity.

The main danger inherent in being satirised is the loss of dignity. Public exposure and ridicule is shameful and painful. When satire targets people or institutions in power, the loss of dignity may lead to loss of authority – a very real threat to one’s position. In order not to lose face, the response to satire, therefore, must be dignified.

Studies of satire often look at the satire itself – the text, the image, the genre or form – placing it in a specific historical and cultural context to understand its meaning and function (Gray et al. 2009, *passim*; Meijer Drees & Nieuwenhuis 2010, *passim*). Alternatively, they look at the satirists: who are they, what do they do, what is their place in society, what perspective or party do they represent? In this article, I shift the focus towards the target of satire: the person or group mocked, ridiculed or exposed. If we want to understand the power of satire, we must investigate how it works in concrete situations: how does satire exert power? Of what does this power consist? I argue that this power is relational: it is played out in shifting social positions and social relations (Simpson 2003: Ch. 4 ff.; Goatly 2012: Ch. 5). Successful satire unites people in laughter and agreement, and attacks its targets by endangering or destroying their dignity. Dignity is not an individual mood or a motivation. Instead, like the related term “face” used by conversation analysts and interaction researchers (Zajdman 1995: 325–331; Haugh 2010, 2111–6), it is constructed collectively in situations, interactions and relations. Although produced by a person’s position and demeanour, dignity needs to be gained and granted by others. It requires legitimacy and recognition.

By starting from the perspective of the target, our analysis shifts to satire as embedded in relations and situations. Thus, we can analyse potentially hurtful and harmful elements of satire without making the largely untestable assumptions about underlying hostility, aggression or superiority that often feature in studies of satire and related humorous genres. Moreover, a focus on the target also opens up new questions for historical and comparative studies of satire. A survey of satire through the ages shows that satire, as well as responses to satire, vary greatly across contexts. What is considered a dignified response appears to differ considerably across time, place and “humour regime” (Kuipers 2011: 64–5). Thus, an exploration of responses to satire in different contexts allows us to see how satire acquires meaning and power, and which mechanisms are at play in making satire powerful – or not.

## Satire as situation

Condren (2012:392; cf. Condren et al. 2008, *passim*) defined satire as “the critical impulse manifesting itself in some degree of denigration, almost invariably through attempted humour”. This definition locates satire primarily in motivation: the critical impulse. Crucially, however, the definition implies other parties. First, something or someone has to be denigrated: satire has a target. Second, attempted humour never is guaranteed to succeed, so for the satire to be deemed humorous it depends on the laughter or affirmative response of the audience.

Satire is more than a satirical text (image, sketch, etc.) and a skilful satirist with a good cause. It is a specific instance of a common everyday situation: an attempt to be funny at someone else’s expense. What sets satire apart from many such attempts is that satire is not a private joke, but a public intervention seeking wider audiences. The satirist looks for a public role or venue. Satire therefore is often mediated, rather than a face-to-face interaction. Moreover, satire aligns itself with political or social viewpoints: it is about the joke, but also about the cause. The humorous “packaging” of the message may serve various purposes (cf. Lockyer & Pickering 2006, *passim*). Satire can latch onto existing convictions, emphasising a collective point of view by sharing humour and laughter. The humour may serve to garner support, presenting a serious message in an appealing form. But most commonly, the humour in satire serves to attack: to collectively ridicule opponents, to mock their beliefs, and if possible to compromise their dignity.

During humorous interactions, people interact to co-construct a successful humorous exchange (Zajdman 1995; Hay 2001). However, humorous interactions can fail. Listeners may not get a joke, or may reject it as inappropriate. Cultural codes for humour tend to be rather strictly circumscribed, and transgressions may lead to acute humour failure: people can be shocked, or also more strategically, “take offense” (Kuipers 2011: 69 ff.). Satire intends to offend and exclude at least part of its audience, so the risk of failure is even larger. Audiences may not share the viewpoint expressed. They may side with the target instead. Even when they agree with the purport, people may dislike the humorous attempt because they don’t like the aggression and denigration. These are not necessarily explicit decisions. Responses to humour – and therefore satire – are often immediate and emotional: one laughs; one is offended; it leaves one cold. The co-construction of humour is strongly influenced by power relations and situational dynamics over which individuals may have little power.

As sociologists and sociolinguists have shown, failure and success of attempted humour always depends on situational dynamics (Hay 2001; Kuipers 2008: 377–380; Bell 2009). The attempted humour has to be “accepted” by others to become funny. Consequently, the target plays a role in the construction of the satirical situation.

The satirical utterance is not the end of the interaction – rather, it is what sparks the process of co-construction. The question then is: what can the target do, and to what ends, to influence the success or failure of satire?

### Satire from the target's point of view

How to respond when targeted by satire? It is a situation in which a limited number of responses are possible: one can respond or not, jokingly or seriously, angrily or with embarrassment. How one responds is not always a matter of choice or strategy: the response may be emotional and almost automatic. Satire is often intended to provoke, and provoked people lose their guard. Moreover, responses to satire can be culturally codified and ritualised. In such cases, some possible responses may be unthinkable, others may be so strongly preferred that no other options are left. Drawing on concrete examples of satire from past and present, and from different countries, I discuss possible responses to satire. I analyse the strengths and limitations of each response, as well as the conditions that enable or facilitate a specific reaction. As scholarly analyses of responses to satire tend to be scarce, examples are mainly contemporary, and often rely on media rather than academic sources.

#### Ignore

The first response is exemplified by Andersen's emperor: ignore. This is also the typical reaction to satire among present-day royalty. Neither the Dutch royal family nor the British monarchs have been known to acknowledge any one of the many instances when they were joked about, mocked or parodied. Both countries have a long tradition of satire attacking the royal family. For instance, the British royals were recurring characters on the long-running satirical puppet show *Spitting Image* (Brillenburg 2011: 115). Although many objected and *Spitting Image* caused a series of scandals, the royals themselves to the best of my knowledge never publicly discussed the show. In the Netherlands, satirists or comedians regularly target the royals. Every few years, an instance of satire going too far leads to public debates and public indignation, and until the 1970s occasionally to court cases (Kuipers 2006: 136–9). However, in these cases others are always speaking for the royals. They themselves abstain from any response.

Ignoring satire often makes for a dignified response. To use an old-fashioned term that shows the relation with dignity: they deign no reply. However, to make such dignity possible, specific conditions have to be met. First, it works best when

the target has a firmly institutionalised position of power. If one is weak, ignoring satire emphasises the weakness. If one is strong, ignoring shows strength. Second, it is easier to ignore mediated satire, because the target is not directly put to the test. Mediated satire regards targets that are powerful and well known, whereas more “local” forms of satire are likely to be face-to-face. Finally, ignoring satire is easiest when others are willing to come to the target’s defence. People in power have others do the indignant responses for them, so they can afford to remain silent. This type of dignity, therefore, needs social support and resources. When not supported, the lack of a response might look like embarrassment and lack of clout.

In liberal democracies, there is a certain ritualised element to satirising non-responsive power figures. Throughout the modern Western world, we find genres, venues and occasions dedicated to ridiculing the powerful: comedy, cabaret, television satire, satirical magazines and weblogs. Often, this is supported by a specific humour regime dictating that “upward humour” is better than “downward humour”. In my studies of humour in the Netherlands and the US, I found that satirising or mocking people in a subordinate position is considered hurtful, whereas “upwards humour” is condoned precisely because it concerns people in power (Kuipers 2006: 148–228).

The mocking of the powerful is a quintessential democratic public ritual. Everybody can participate and enjoy the fun. Arguably, in egalitarian contexts the willingness of the powerful to let themselves be mocked without intervening increases their legitimacy. They *could* intervene, but don’t. Thus, they show themselves to be simultaneously “one of us” and “better than us” – they have the power, but they don’t use it for petty revenge. Instead, they respond with dignity.

## Laugh

Targets can respond by laughing at satire at their expense. In terms of dignity, this response has several things to recommend it. First, it does not break the humorous frame. Shifting frames is a disruptive action that easily leads to loss of face. Moreover, laughing at satire suggests the target is “above” the satire, which indicates self-confidence, and a certain light-heartedness in the face of offense.

In many relatively egalitarian countries in North America and northwest Europe, like the Netherlands and especially the US, having a sense of humour is often equated with “being able to laugh at oneself” (Kuipers 2006, esp. 195 ff.; 2011). The most dramatic ritualised test of this ability is the American “roast”, where friends or public figures are harshly ridiculed, and are expected to take this laughingly (Test 1980, *passim*). In the past decades, the UK and the US have seen the rise of television shows where politicians and celebrities are invited and

publicly mocked, like *The Daily Show*, the *Colbert Report* or the *Ali G Show* (Gray 2009). Laughing at satire shows even more mastery than ignoring it; and has the added value of taking the worst sting out of the satire.

Again, however, the success of this strategy depends on conditions and resources. First, laughing at being satirised is most feasible under the same circumstances when ignoring is a serious option: when the target has status, resources and social support. In other cases, laughing at oneself may be a more painful or ambivalent social act. Studies of “disparagement humour” have shown how members of subordinate groups, like women and people of colour, tend to enjoy jokes at their own group’s expense, whereas members of more established groups often reject such jokes (for an overview see Kuipers 2008: 375–7). In these cases, laughing at oneself appears to reflect exclusion, self-stereotyping or domination, rather than empowerment or self-assurance. Moreover, people who try to laugh at being mocked often do not completely succeed, which leads to rather half-hearted or insincere laughter. Such “pained laughter” looks inauthentic and may be more undignified than no laughter at all.

Gray (2009) has pointed out that TV satire featuring celebrities and politicians in person often works to their advantage, and may be orchestrated to that effect. Similarly, roasts are rarely organised by one’s true enemies. Oring (2003: 71–84) even suggests that roasts serve to cover up sentimentality – and thus are an expression of friendship. This sheds another light on the capacity to laugh when satirised. This may be most likely when the mockery and the criticism are relatively mild, when relations are not hostile or are even friendly. Especially in contexts where the capacity to laugh at oneself is a valued trait, satirising someone – not too harshly – may actually give people an opportunity to show off their excellent sense of humour.

### Joke back

A third possible response to satire is to joke back. As in the previous response, joking back maintains the “humorous frame”. The target shows off the emotional mastery required to not take (too much) offense, manages to adopt a similar non-serious stance – and has the quick wit to repay in kind. Satire becomes a battle of wits and jokes.

In modern media culture, the ability to respond to satire with laughter and humour is highly valued. Probably the most prominent example is the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner, where the president of the United States for once has the chance to hit back at the press. At the 2013 dinner, Obama stated, for instance: “I know CNN has taken some knocks lately, but the fact is I admire

their commitment to cover all sides of a story, just in case one of them happens to be accurate.” [...]“The fact is I really do respect the press. I recognise that the press and I have different jobs to do. My job is to be President; your job is to keep me humble. Frankly, I think I’m doing my job better.”<sup>2</sup> This is a carefully prepared and scripted event. The president always takes care to joke at his own expense: “These days”, Obama said in 2013, “I look in the mirror, and I have to admit, I’m not the strapping young Muslim socialist that I used to be.” This careful self-mockery before mocking others reflects the risks of joking back: one does not want to look aggressive. There are many ways in which the participants, in particular the President, could lose face.

The Danish cartoon controversy of 2005–6, when cartoons (allegedly) showing images of the Prophet Muhammad led to protests in Denmark and beyond, provoked several instances of “joking back”. For instance, the European-Arab League responded with jokes about Anne Frank and Hitler. An Iranian newspaper organised a cartoon contest and awarded the first prize to a joke that referred to Auschwitz (for extensive analysis, see Kuipers 2011). This form of joking back differs from Obama’s tactful jocularly. Rather than using joking to position oneself “above” the satire with mild mockery, harsh satire is countered with harsh satire in an escalating fight.

This still requires considerable resources, not to mention access to the public sphere. The relation with dignity appears to be less straightforward. Both the aggression in the rebuttal and the content of the jokes put some observers off. These jokes were wilfully offensive, like the original cartoons, but they attacked different sensibilities and thus different people. But more fundamentally, there appeared to be little consensus, even with relatively homogeneous European societies such as Denmark, Belgium (where the Anne Frank cartoon was published) or the Netherlands, about whether hitting back is a good response: should one take up the gauntlet, or let go?

### Argue back: Rebut or concede

The fourth and fifth responses to satire are logically possible, but rare in practice: serious acceptance, and serious rebuttal. Both responses imply a shift from the humorous to a serious frame, without any further emotional colouring. The satire is treated as simply another intervention in a serious debate. I have not found

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2. See: <http://www.whca.net/dinner.htm> and [http://www.washingtonpost.com/posttv/politics/obamas-full-speech-at-the-2013-white-house-correspondents-dinner/2013/04/27/16ac0b70-af79-11e2-a986-eec837b1888b\\_video.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/posttv/politics/obamas-full-speech-at-the-2013-white-house-correspondents-dinner/2013/04/27/16ac0b70-af79-11e2-a986-eec837b1888b_video.html) [consulted October 15, 2013].

well-publicised examples of serious acceptance of a satirists' point. In TV talk shows where comedians and "serious" guests mingle, such interchanges happen (although satire may be too big a word for this). The impression it gives is somewhat dull or schoolmasterly, but not painfully undignified. The satirical critique must be rather mild to lead the target to concede, rather than object or argue back.

Serious rebuttal is more common: it takes up satire as an attack that needs to be countered, but without anger or embarrassment. An interesting example of prolonged serious rebuttal, after initial ignoring, can be seen in the 1981 French presidential elections. Comedian Coluche announced his candidacy, dressed in oversized tails and sash, representing the "idlers, the dirtbags, the drugged, the drunks, the paedos, the women, the parasites, the young, the old, the jailbirds, the dykes..."<sup>3</sup> When his candidacy picked up steam, his competitors, Mitterrand and Giscard d'Estaing, were forced to take him seriously – especially Mitterrand, who was most threatened by Coluche's leftist program (Vaguelsey 2006).

One can imagine the candidates' conundrum: an angry or mocking response would have made them seem needlessly aggressive, especially given Coluche's clownish appearance. A jocular response would have made them look as clownish as Coluche. Yet, at one point Coluche had 16% of the electorate on his side, as well as a number of famous intellectuals, like Pierre Bourdieu and Gilles Deleuze. In this case, seriousness was probably the best response – but dignity was certainly endangered.

Coluche's story illustrates the power and weakness of satire. In the end, he withdrew before the elections. Had he won, he would have had to negotiate an impossible compromise between his satirical self and the serious world of politics. But before his withdrawal, he managed to destabilise politics, attracting a large following with this combination of comedy, rebellion and critique. His unexpectedly successful candidacy made both the office and the persons aiming for it look rather silly.

I am inclined to interpret this as a loss of face for Mitterrand and Giscard – but looking at contemporary sources this may be unjustified. Likely, "taking yourself too seriously" was less of a threat to one's image in 1980s France than it is in today's media saturated times, where "seriousness", certainly among public persons, is always slightly embarrassing. Possibly, there is also a cross-cultural element to this: even today, French politicians probably wouldn't have to go to the same length as, for instance, Obama to prove their ability to take a joke.

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3. Author's translation. The original announcement can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSdvpK2uec8> [consulted 29 October 2013].

## Strike back

All possible responses discussed so far are dignified in the sense that the target does not show any sign of hurt or offense. Dignity becomes more imperilled when the satirised lets on that a nerve has been hit. This implies a shift from the humorous to the serious mode – and potentially a more emotional frame that shows anger, indignation, or embarrassment.

Targets of satire may also strike back. When the target has formal power, the satire can be suppressed, the satirist punished or silenced. The history of satire abounds with crackdowns against satire. However, in most Western democracies today, banning or suppressing satire is rare and legally difficult to achieve (though not impossible). A well-known exception to this is Italy. The crusade of former Italian Prime Minister and media mogul Silvio Berlusconi against humourists targeting him or his party has attracted international attention.<sup>4</sup> However, Italy has a much longer tradition of repression of satire. Comedian Beppe Grillo, who eventually became a politician himself, was banned from TV in the 1980s for critiquing the socialists.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a show called *Raiot* that satirised Berlusconi was removed from television and even from the archives of Italian public television producer RAI. The comedian Sabrina Guzzanti, who impersonated Berlusconi, was sued (Waters 2011). In Italy, repression of satire is contested but not universally rejected: it does not appear to have harmed Berlusconi's dignity in the eyes of his followers. This may reflect Italy's fragmented public sphere, which has no common humour regime and a noticeable lack of independent media (cf. Ginsborg 2005).

Those who are not in power can also strike back at satirists by formal means. They can ask for withdrawal, compensation, apologies or suppression through a civil case, a letter to the editor, or another public intervention. This is often touted as a good solution – for instance, it was often mentioned as the proper route for offended Muslims in the Danish cartoon controversy. However, I am not aware of many successful attempts at this response to satire. Certainly, letters to editors and court cases have not had much effect in the case of the cartoon controversy (Kuipers 2011). Most judges and other formal institutions in Western societies today prioritise freedom of speech. In addition, as in the case of serious rebuttal, it shows a dubitable lack of humour.

Hitting back can also take a more violent shape. For instance, in 2011 the office of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* was bombed after it published

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4. See for instance Beissende satire, *Journal 21* 10 November 2011. <http://www.journal21.ch/berlusconi-beissende-satire> [consulted 29 October 2013]; Kington, T. Italian film-maker mothballs satire on Silvio Berlusconi's antics. *The Guardian* 16 January 2011

5. See J. Israeli, "Seriously funny". *Time Magazine* 2 October 2005.

a special issue called Charia [Sharia or Islamic law] Hebdo, with the Prophet Muhammad as “guest editor.”<sup>6</sup> Although the attack was never officially claimed, the general consensus is that this was carried out by Muslims who felt offended by the magazine’s repeated mocking of Islam. Staff were massacred in the magazine’s offices in January 2015.<sup>7</sup>

Striking back at satire is a strategy that, again, depends on power and resources: it works if one gets away with it. In terms of dignity, it probably works best when executed quickly, decisively, and conclusively. Extended legal cases, lengthy procedures or long debates are risky: the juxtaposition of satire with serious objection flatters the satirist. Therefore, striking back is probably less effective in more egalitarian contexts – where quick execution of power is difficult. It is also more risky in today’s media cultures, because a successful intervention requires control of media flows. Finally, striking back may look more dignified in societies where honour is a meaningful cultural category (cf. McAleer 1997). Honour cultures, from 19th century duelling to, arguably, present-day Italy, value striking back, even with the risk of failure or downfall: an assault on one’s good name cannot go ignored, or be laughed away.

### Show anger

Targets of satire can also respond by showing anger. Often, this is the response that satire aspires to. When targets become emotional and angry they “lose it”, which is taken to mean that they are “showing their true colours”. An angry reaction to satire may also spark a humour scandal: a public debate about the appropriateness of a (public) attempt at humour.

A public show of anger and indignation is socially risky and generally not seen as the most dignified option. This is especially true when the anger seems unrestrained. In humour scandals, media often highlight the scandal by showing images of unrestrained anger. Coverage of the Danish cartoon controversy often included images of shouting mobs of bearded men, usually in untranslated Arabic. This underscored the narrative of uncivilised humourless Muslims. The same trope regularly occurs in media coverage of less dramatic humour scandals,

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6. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15550350> [consulted 29 October 2013].

7. In January 2015, the offices of Charlie Hebdo were attacked, and 12 staff members were murdered by two fundamentalist Muslims. Although the assailants were killed by the police shortly after the attacks, it is generally assumed that the massacre was intended as a retribution for the desecration of the prophet. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237> [consulted 28 April 2015].

with generally shameful results for the satirised. Although there are cross-cultural differences, the open showing of anger tends to be taboo in most places – or alternatively limited to those with most power (bosses, kings, generals, etc.).

However, in modern media culture we regularly see public figures respond to satire and ridicule with stylised outrage – a moderate form of anger and indignation in presentable or even mediagenic shape. Again, whether this is successful depends on resources, and most specifically social support. Stylised anger functions rather like joking: it can be used to gather support for one's point of view. Like joking, this only works with sympathetic audiences. Lone anger looks bad, while shared supported anger – if carefully measured – may show strength and dignity. When enough people take offense, the balance shifts: the humour fails, and the satirist's dignity suffers.

### Shame, embarrassment and withdrawal

Finally, the emotional and non-humorous response that is not dignified at all – and therefore is rather rarely seen in public: shame and embarrassment. This only really happens when all other options are exhausted or impossible. Since the emotion of shame leads to withdrawal, this response usually remains “backstage” and unseen (Billig 2005:200–36). Most satire is mediated, so this response does not have to become exposed.

Public embarrassment by satire is rare in contemporary societies. The purest examples of satire as public shaming occur under extreme and dramatic conditions, like the Chinese Cultural Revolution, where fallen leaders were publicly mocked, and students ridiculed their former teachers.<sup>8</sup> In contemporary politics, we sometimes see politicians unable to respond quickly and effectively to mockery by colleagues, with painful results. However, spectators tend to find shamed responses to satire unpleasant, and satirists (rather than, for instance, politicians using harsh humour) generally avoid causing direct shame. The satirical films and TV shows by comedian Sacha Baron-Cohen, who approached hapless victims using his alter egos Bruno, Barat and Ali G., often rather viciously expose bigotry, snobbishness and stupidity of a range of groups. However, as Gray (2009) shows, the moments of revelation in such spoofs or mock interviews are generally not shown. Moreover, victims have rarely sought media retribution. This lack of response is generally not interpreted as the dignified silence of the mocked official, but the withdrawal of persons who have nothing to gain from more public

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8. Buckley, C, Children of Mao's Wrath Vie for Power in China. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/22/us-china-politics-bo-idUSBRE85L04E20120622> [consulted 29 October 2013].

exposure. In such instances, both the sharpness of the humour, and the lack of resources of the satirised leave no other option open.

The rarity of public embarrassment in response to satire may be related to a general increase in social sensitivity to the pain of others (Elias 2012). However, the avoidance of public shaming through satire also reveals something about the logic of satire. Like all forms of humour, it has to retain a sense of playfulness. When the satire becomes too painful to watch, the humour falls flat. Thus, harsh satire is most enjoyable when the victim is not publicly humiliated – and therefore not present. While it is amusing to see dignity attacked, it is less enjoyable to see dignity destroyed – at least from up close.

### **Conclusion: Satire, power and the public**

This essay examined satire from the target's point of view: how to respond to satire? The main danger for the target of satire, I argue, is the loss of dignity. Losing dignity or "face", as conversation analysts call it, implies embarrassment as well as decline in status and power. All can be real threats to social position, political legitimacy and individual well-being. I have shown that there are several ways to deflect and neutralise the impact of satire. However, the capacity to respond with dignity to satire is not distributed evenly: not everyone has the resources to do so. Moreover, there is not always consensus on what counts as a dignified response.

The power to respond with dignity to satire depends on factors that are not always under the control of the "satirised". A successful dignified response relies on individual self-assuredness, quick-wittedness and self-restraint. However, these capacities often reflect social position. They depend on social status as well as social support: the willingness of others to come to the satirised's defence, laugh at their jokes and cheer their interventions. Moreover, the satirised need access to the public arena, and the social legitimacy to make themselves heard. Thus, individual, social and political resources can help or impede the chances of successful response to satire. The case of the 2006 Danish cartoon controversy highlights both the initial effect of limited resources to respond to satire – and the rather astounding change of affairs when such resources can be mustered. On a less dramatic scale, many responses to satire by relatively powerless groups and individuals show the difficulty in getting responses acknowledged as dignified. In many present-day Western contexts, the reproach of not having a sense of humour can be quite damning: a devastating blow to one's dignity.

There is not always agreement on what constitutes a dignified response. Again, the case of the Danish cartoons is a rather dramatic example: its spread across the globe, framed in increasingly different ways, enabled radically different interpretations of the same event – with different judgments on moral positions and levels

of dignity. However, many smaller examples show that even within single, homogeneous cultural contexts, interpretations of the same event vary greatly, humour regimes are always contested, and power positions are not fixed but fluid. An angry response may seem legitimate and quite dignified to some, but look weak and emotional to others. What looks like cowering to some, others may deem a dignified silence.

This analysis of satire from the target's point of view, therefore, opens up many new research questions: how and when does something get acknowledged as dignified? Are there universal or more general standards for "successful" responses to satire? Can we identify general mechanisms and tendencies amidst historical and cultural specificities? For instance, is responding with humour always the most dignified response, or is this a more local "belief" in a society where humour is seen as an essential part of the self? Is losing one's dignity equally terrible under all circumstances or for all people, and if not: how does it vary and why?

These are fascinating research questions for academics of various backgrounds. However, questions about satire and dignity also have great social relevance in an era of increasing cultural interaction and exchange. Even "at home" people have access to media from around the world. The public sphere is more diverse, more transnational, and less regulated than ever before. Humour and satire reach ever larger and more diverse audiences. As a consequence, the chances of satire backfiring are growing. The issues this raises are academic, but also moral and political, as well as practical and legal.

In a diverse and globalised world, the social import of satire is likely to increase. Social differences and cultural cleavages inevitably need to be debated and negotiated – but a trigger is needed to show where the cleavages are. Humour and satire have proven fruitful arenas for identifying divides, highlighting differences and oppositions, but also for uniting people in joint laughter. Satire is also an invitation: a challenge to the satirised, an appeal to the public to choose sides. The power of satire is not rooted exclusively in social opposition, aggression and conflict. It also requires social understanding, communication, and collaboration. In the end, satire is powerful – or not – because of its public: because it manages to make people agree – and laugh.

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