"Excorporation" and "Carnival" in Humoristic Street Actions Staged for Nonviolent Struggle:

The 1996-7 Student Protests and the Resistance Movement (Otpor), Serbia [1]

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Abstract

In this paper, I seek to understand the way in which humoristic street actions operate in a nonviolent struggle by examining the extensive staging of humoristic actions during the students' nonviolent protest in 1996-7 in Serbia, and the nonviolent movement *Otpor*. The concepts of "excorporation" and "carnival" are in use to understand the operation of these actions. I argue that humoristic actions are defiant because they work to emasculate the opponent's rhetoric by appropriating and juxtaposing it with other discursive forces, for the rhetoric to be mirthful. Humoristic actions, when manifest in the form of carnival, can also be disarming and transformative. Carnival-like actions generate the positive energy which transcends the reality of pending clash between protesters and authorities. The first section discusses the relationship between nonviolence and humor presented in existing scholarship. Then, humoristic actions staged in the Serbian case are categorized and detailed. The final section, through the concepts of excorporation and carnival, analyses the operation of humoristic street action.

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Between nonviolence and humor: An overview

The relationship between nonviolence and humor is ambivalent, if not in tension. This explains why little attention has been drawn to the analysis of humor devised as a form of nonviolent resistance. Underlying assumptions within humor and nonviolence studies render humoristic actions problematic, from the ethical and tactical viewpoint. Ridiculing the inferior or the antagonist is considered an undesirable practice by humor and nonviolence scholars. And when it comes to the manifestation of humor as a vehicle for resistance, commentators from humor studies assert that defiant humor is merely a safety-valve. In a similar fashion, nonviolent researchers cast doubt over the tactical effectiveness of humoristic street actions.

The notion of humor covers a wide range of phenomena, from the physical act of laughing to the psychological causes and effects of the cogni-

TU Review.indb 13 5/8/12 2:17 AM

tive perception of something funny, from social and cultural manifestations to the intellectual dimension and from the religious aspect to the realm of ethics (see, for example, Bergson 1912 [1902]; Sigmund 1963, Sigmund 1928: 383-9; Ziv 1984; Apte 1988; Mulkay 1988; Bremmer and Roodenburg 1997; Berger 1998; Barron 1999; Critchley 2002). As a piece of social conduct, humor is recognized as laughing at oneself, with others and at others (De Sousa 1987). The last has raised ethical concerns among proponents of the "superiority theory" of humor. They point out that ridicule and mockery of inferiors or the misfortunate should be avoided as it is associated with humiliation and the assumption that one is superior to those being laughed at (Morreall 1983: 5-14).[2] This ethical concern is particularly emphasized in studies of ethnic jokes which assert that racist jokes do not only reflect inter-group tension but also reinforce antagonism and potentially create a precondition for racial discrimination and ethnic hatred (Davies 1990; Billig 2001; Diamond 2002: 251-72; Billig 2005: 200-35).

Existing studies in social functions of humor assert that defiant humor is only a "safety-valve", rather than an actual act of resistance. The powerful, be it the state, authorities, or the dominant population, allows joke-making of the powerless in order to release social tension and prevent the eruption of actual resistance (Donaldson 1970; Koller 1988: 17-30). Max Gluckman (1983), for instance, argues that medieval authorities licensed subversive carnivals and feasts, such as Festivals of the Fools and Saturnalia, to temporarily liberate the revolutionary desire of the subordinates, thereby thwarting the actual resistance. In a similar fashion, numerous works that examine the proliferation of jokes during the communist rule in Eastern Europe tend to conclude that defiant jokes targeting the communist regime and circulated among the people had little connection with the emergence of "actual" resistance movements in the 1980s. Jokes are often viewed as a mechanism to let off steam for people under hardship and help maintain their morale. The role of "whisper humor" is hence as if a safety-valve for people to continue bearing the livelihood under communism (Benton 1988; Davies 2007). In this sense, some scholars further assess that jokes can serve to maintain the regime (Speier 1998; Rose 2002).

Although nonviolence scholars do not make explicit their standpoint towards ridicule, advocates for nonviolence as a moral principle rule out the act of humiliation and provocation of the opponent. For instance, Arne Naess (1974), a prominent Gandhian scholar, concludes that the principle of Gandhian nonviolence embraces the act of non-humiliation and non-provocation as it "reduces the tendency to violence in the participations in the struggle." Humiliating the opponent, despite the aim for a "good" cause, is destructive and incompatible with a nonviolent goal (Naess 1974: 59). From the perspective of "positive non-

TU Review.indb 14

5/8/12 2:17 AM

violence", nonviolent methods with the focus on the mere absence of physical violence and the sanction of the opponent can lead to the neglect of symbolic violence, which potentially hinders sustainable conflict transformation (Bondurant 1964; Galtung 1965).

In many ways, while Mohandas Gandhi's sense of humor is acknowledged (Douglass and Douglass 1988: 5), Gandhian nonviolence is rather tragic due to the strong trust in the "self-suffering" of nonviolent practitioners as a catalyst for the opponent's change of view. It is believed that self-suffering can dramatize the course of a struggle because it cuts through "the rational defenses which the opponent may have built in opposing the initial efforts of rational persuasion" (Bondurant 1967: 226). The tragic aspect of the self-suffering of nonviolence practitioners works further to attract sympathy and support from the populace as violence waged against nonviolent resisters that is likely to undermine its legitimacy in the sight of the general public (Gregg 1935: 76). Perhaps, it is this paramount tragedy of the principled approach to nonviolence that overshadows the possibility of using "comic" tactics for nonviolent struggle.

A hope in coupling humor with nonviolence, however, lies in the pragmatic approach to nonviolence.[3] In his monumental work, Gene Sharp outlines 198 methods of nonviolent action which, when carried out under the guidance of a well-calculated strategy and nonviolent discipline, operate to undercut the sources of power of the powerful opponent (mostly the state) (Sharp 1973, part one). By pointing out the coercion process of nonviolent methods, Sharp addresses the fact that street actions featuring with satire and mockery can be an effective tool for nonviolent struggle. These forms of street actions include skits and pranks, mock awards, satirical songs and guerrilla/absurdist theatre (Sharp 1973: 48, 51-2, 397). Given this recognition, Sharp's theory of power, which lays the foundations for a theory of nonviolent action, is influenced by Etienne de La Boétie's writing, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (1975).

Modern theorists in nonviolent resistance doubt to what extent humor can "seriously" contribute to overarching nonviolent campaigns. The view is reflected in Adam Roberts' study in the techniques of civil resistance in which he asserts that the concealed ridicule of the oppressed against the oppressor "is not necessarily in itself a part of a public movement or of a serious attempt to change the situation" (Roberts 1976: 28-9). Accordingly, he simply dismisses the fact that covert acts of resistance, or as coined by James C. Scott, "hidden transcript" – which include joke-making and carnival feasts of the subordinate – have historically given rise to overt and organized resistance (Scott 1990: 136-82).

The problem of the seriousness of humor in becoming a promising nonviolent tactic can be discerned by the scant research on the tactical use of humor

TU Review.indb 15 5/8/12 2:17 AM

in nonviolent struggle. Where the topic has drawn some interest, the limited existing research focuses on the "functions" or "utilities" of humor (Johansen 1991; Sørensen 2008). However, "utility" should not be confused with "operation" or the way things work. Utility can only tell "what" a thing can do but does little to inform us "how" that thing operates. Although, in this paper, I recognise that humor can serve a wide range of utilities in nonviolent campaigns as has been examined by prior research, I am more interested in understanding how humoristic street actions operate in the course of nonviolent struggle. The analysis derives from details of the humoristic protest methods of the 1996-7 student protests in Serbia, and nonviolent campaigns of the resistance movement, *Otpor*,[4] that played a vital role in the removal of Slobodan Milošević's dictatorial rule in 2000. Given the reliance on a single case study, I do not wish to generalize my analysis but rather I expound the way in which humoristic forms of protest operate within a particular context. The analysis of the Serbian case will also indicate the possible "companionship" between humor and nonviolence.

Humoristic street actions in the 1996-7 student protests and the resistance movement, Otpor, Serbia

Serbia in the 1990s experienced one of the most notoriously ruthless and yet populist leaders. Shortly after the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980, Slobodan Milošević, a former banker who had made his way to become the leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socialistička partija srbije – SPS*) and the President of Serbia, strengthened his power by manoeuvering nationalist rhetoric. During his rule, elections were often rigged and the police force and national media (*Radio televizija srbije – RTS*) was monopolized by his Socialist Party. The nationalist euphoria for a "greater Serbia" enabled Milošević regime to initiate three wars in a decade: the 1991 Croatian war, the 1992-5 Bosnian war and the 1999 Kosovo war, followed by the NATO aerial attack (Gordy 1999: 50-1). Corruption, cronyism and the gross expenditure on the prolonged wars aside, these wars enormously worsened the livelihoods of Serbians as they were indiscriminately affected by international sanctions. Under these circumstances, young Serbians saw no future. Many fled the country or joined underworld gangs (Collin 2001: 87).

The protests between November 1996 and March 1997, known as the "winter of discontent", were augmented by the setbacks in Milošević's policies and ignited by the stolen election in November 1996. Although Slobodan Milošević had defeated the opposition parties in the national election in the early 1990s, the opposition, uniting under the coalition *Zajedno*, began to rise by winning the municipality election in significant cities, including the capital city, Belgrade. The original election results, however, were falsified by the SPS-appointed Election

TU Review.indb 16 5/8/12 2:17 AM

Committee. An opposition coalition boycotted the run-off and organized protests by its supporters, dubbed "citizen protest".[5] Simultaneously, the students in Belgrade called for their own demonstrations and demanded the recognition of the original election results as well as the dismissal of the SPS-nominated rector of Belgrade University, Dragutin Veličković. Other university centre cities, such as Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Niš also saw student uprisings in solidarity with students in Belgrade, or else votes in those cities were rigged in a similar fashion (Thomas 1999: 285-6).[6] Even though conventional protest repertoires (e.g. rallies and speeches) were staged, overall the protests were colored by a festive mood due to the innovation of witty and carnival-like actions. The protests of the opposition coalition went on until its electoral victory was recognized on February 11, 1997 while those of the students continued until the resignation of the rector of Belgrade University on March 7.

Nevertheless, after the protests, Milošević's power remained intact. By the end of July 1997, he was able to install himself as the Yugoslav president (Thomas 1999: 338-50). The opposition parties remained incapable of solving their disunity problem. Concurrently, the independent media and the academic circle of dissidents continued to be harassed by the regime (Ramet 2002: 341) . In August 1998, the deadly conflict in Kosovo reached its peak, marked by the breaking out of the armed struggle between the Serbian security forces and the armed Albanians in Kosovo. And this was followed by the NATO's aerial strike on major cities Serbia in March 1999 (Ramet 2002: 346; Human Rights Watch 2000). Against these odds, veterans of the 1996-7 demonstrations began to form a student movement, *Otpor* which developed into the people's movement in 2000. Their initial agenda was to oppose the draconian laws that severely restricted freedom of speech; however, they later realized that the only way to bring about real change was to remove Slobodan Milošević by means of mass mobilization and democratic election. Instead of relying on street demonstration, *Otpor* activists carried out series of marketing-based political campaigns in convergence with "DIY" (do-it-yourself) style of nonviolent action in which activists in around 200 local branches were encouraged to improvise streets actions based on humor and satire.

The following parts provide examples of humoristic tactics engineered and extensively staged in the 1996-7 student-led protests and *Otpor*'s nonviolent campaigns in 1998-2000. These tactics can be categorized into three patterns: satirical protest and absurdist street "happening', humorous and sarcastic slogans, and carnival-like rallies.

Satirical protest and absurdist street happening

Satirical protest staged by the 1996-7 protesters was often metaphorical with the

TU Review.indb 17 5/8/12 2:17 AM

symbolic denunciation of pro-regime organisations. One of the well-known actions included the cleaning of buildings. As dirtiness was symbolically equated with the regime, protesters offered their "service' to get rid of this dirtiness (Jansen 2001: 45-6). Among others, the SPS-backed rector of the Belgrade University was the target due to his strong opposition to the student protests, claiming that there were only "a handful of dirty and junky' students on the street. In response to this statement, students cleaned his office building so that the only remaining dirtiness was the rector. The Serbian Parliament, the Supreme Court and the Electoral Committee were additional targets of the mockery. When the Parliament claimed that they had to postpone their session regarding the falsified election results due to the need for rat extermination, demonstrators sprayed rat "pesticide' outside the building so they would not have any lame excuse to put off the meeting (Voyuvić 1999: 102). As a key mechanism that legalized the electoral fraud, the Electoral Committee buildings were attacked with protesters' hurling of tissue rolls in order to let them know that, "we have had enough shit" (Pravdić 1997: 41; Dragićević-Šešić 2001: 76).

Absurdist street theatre was staged to counter rhetoric of regime figures which attempted to demoralize protesters. For instance, Mira Marković, Slobodan Milošević's wife who concurrently held the leadership of the Yugoslav United Left party (*Yugoslovenska udružena levica – JUL*), had threatened to use violence against protesters. She announced that "a lot of blood had been shed for the introduction of communism into Yugoslavia and that [the party] would never go without blood." The butt of the jokes was palpable. After the announcement, a group of student protesters ingeniously set up a blood transfusion campaign to collect blood. Then, they went to the JUL headquarters with the collected blood, and mockingly asked if the party could please go now that they had their blood (Jansen 2001: 397; Dragićević-Šešić 2001: 79).

At times, street skits were improvised to satire the police attempt to block daily walk of students. In one incident, students, stuck in a blockade of police cordons, dressed up as prisoners, placing hands on their necks and walking in circle as if they were jailed. Together with the skit, they published an updated Universal Declaration of Human Rights, subtitled "The Latest Version for the Serbian-speaking and territorial area', guaranteeing Serbian citizens the equal right to "a jail sentence, clubbing, molestation, repression and all kinds of battery from the persons in charge of this." Also, they were assured "the right to death, captivity, social insecurity and lack of opinion or conscience, the right to be punished for no particular reason, to be innocent until forced to plead guilty, to be restricted in movement and residence within the boundaries of the country and to be uninformed or misinformed." Under the Declaration, citizens were also obliged to exercise the rights listed above at least once a year (Jansen 2001: 403).

TU Review.indb 18 5/8/12 2:17 AM

The hilarious happening that left the footprint for *Otpor*'s development of humoristic actions was titled "The Quest for the Rector". The action was executed by Mechanical Engineering Faculty students in response to the absence of the Belgrade University rector after students persistently requested for his resignation. A team of ten to fifteen students went to different places in Belgrade to "look for the rector'. They headed to the zoo, the bank of Danube river (trying to catch him with a fishing-rod), in the astronomical observatory (to see if he has found asylum in outer space), in street market places, and in restaurants and pubs. The final destination was the famous fortune-teller, *Branka*, who told them the rector would be dismissed in ten days. And he was (Dragićević-Šešić, 2001: 80). Ivan Marović, an architect of the action who later became a founding member of *Otpor,* notes that students intentionally carried out the skit with the presence of journalists in order to get the media coverage. In this way, pressure put on the rector did not come from student protesters, but the public.

The tactical characteristic of "the Quest for the Rector" action was transmitted to *Otpor*'s schematic staging of street skits between 1998 and 2000. Through (independent) newspapers' front page, novel and funny actions rendered the movement visible in order to oppose the regime's monopoly of the communication means. In early days of *Otpor,* absurdist street performance portrayed the movement as a "hip and cool' among young people, augmenting the number of new members. One of the most well-known street happenings of *Otpor* was titled "Dinar for Change/Resignation" (*Dinar za smenu*), initiated by activists in Belgrade and repeated in cities such as Niš and Kragujevac (Group of authors 2001: 375, 377). The context of the action was the Government's announcement of a new agricultural policy under the theme "A Dinar for Sowing." The policy encouraged people to donate one dinar for sowing and planting crops. In response, *Otpor* activists placed an unused barrel of petrol at the pedestrian street. In front of the barrel, there was the image of Slobodan Milošević surrounded by the target symbol, and next to it were a baseball bat and a sign suggesting people should batter Milošević's photo in front of the barrel.[7]

In Novi Sad, the second biggest city, and the capital of northern Serbia, a satirical theatrical happening was also witnessed. After the NATO air raids in 1999, Milošević initiated a grand reconstruction plan, with medals for loyal citizens and military heroes. The scene was broadcasted all over the country which remarkably contrasted with the near absence of reconstruction. In response to the regime's pseudo-reconstruction plan, *Otpor* activists in Novi Sad managed to build a "toy bridge' in a city centre park, and mockingly imitated the speech delivered by Milošević during the bridge opening ceremony. The message was that government's reconstruction plan was up in the air and unlikely to be real, symbolically equivalent to a child's toy.

TU Review.indb 19 5/8/12 2:17 AM

In Kragujevac, the gateway to central Serbia, *Otpor* activists executed the action "Awarding the Turkey". When Mira Marović received an award from the Russian government, activists announced that they would award Mira, too. But because Mira could not be present in their neighbourhood, they would give the award to a "turkey' instead.[8] Around thirty activists, then, came to the city centre area where they planned to award the turkey. They also scotch-taped the head of the turkey with a plastic flower, a well-known symbol for Mira's distasteful fashion. Soon later, the police arrived and "arrested' the turkey. Determined to finish off the happening, an activist mimicked the turkey postures and managed to receive the award briefly before the police took him away together with the real turkey. Activists then filed the lawsuit against the police, charging them of animal rights violation.

Absurdist street action was also carried out to poke fun at and thus undermine the regime's defamation of *Otpor*, especially after the movement's transformation into the people's resistance movement in early 2000. As the movement's popularity clearly posed a threat to the regime, it made the move to accuse *Otpor* activists, who were basically school and university students, of being terrorists, fascists and drugs addicts. Instead of rejecting such accusations, which could have led to the further charges from the regime and justification for harsh repression, in Niš, *Otpor* activists erected a stage downtown and confirmed to the public that they were terrorists who looked like nerds wearing glasses. This meant they had read a lot, which indicated that reading was dangerous for Serbia (York 2001).

Funny happenings of *Otpor* were lifted to the level of tactical pranks as the regime stepped up the scale of repression. In the period close to the election date on September 24, 2000, *Otpor*'s office in Belgrade centre was raided. Computers and materials confiscated. Naming this outrageous action "Unload 2000', activists struck back at the police by staging the "Load 2000' action. They expected that more raids would come if the police assumed that activists would "load' new devices and campaign gadgets in their office. Activists, accordingly, contacted national and international reporters, making sure there were sufficient witnesses for the impending circus. On the following day, they pretended to carry in a lot of heavy boxes. The secret police arrived and confiscated these boxes as anticipated; however, all they could find inside them were scraps of newspapers. The images and the news of sober police stunned by the empty boxes appeared in the international coverage. In Požarevac, Milošević's hometown, where brutal physical assaults were notoriously inflicted on activists, a similar action was carried out. Activists intentionally leaked out the information that materials sent from Belgrade would be left on the river bank close to downtown. When the police came, all they could find was a fisherman who had no idea for what a big crowd

TU Review.indb 20 5/8/12 2:17 AM

of police were frantically searching.

Humorous and sarcastic slogans on placards and banners

The 1996-7 protests were remembered for the genuine creativity of demonstrators discernable in their witty and sarcastic or even absurd slogans which appeared on banners, placards, stickers, and badges. Messages were created anew; or else, they were adapted from the popular slogans of commercial advertisements, quotations from literature and lyrics. In general, there were slogans directly attacking the regime figures. For instance, when Mira Marković visited India, students, via their placards, advised her, "you'll be safe in India, they don't kill cows there" (Collin 2001: 106). When the Yugoslav football team was beaten by the Spanish team in an international match prior to the protests, a demonstrator came up with a banner to satirise the Court, saying that; "Yugoslavia beats Spain 2-0. Signed. The Supreme Court of Serbia" (Lekić 1997: 47).

The despised RTS could not avoid being the target of mockery either. Being a propaganda machine of the regime, the RTS belittled the demonstrations by broadcasting the news of Milošević being a peace advocate who had not only signed the Dayton Peace Agreement to terminate the Bosnian war but had also led Serbians to prosperity and ever-lasting happiness. To many, this portrait was some sort of hallucination. It strikingly contrasted with the harsh day-to-day reality faced by the general populace. This contrast of two realities gave rise to such banners as "I want to live in the land of RTS" (Collin 2001: 110), "I think; therefore, I don't watch RTS" (Lekić 1997: 48), or "Turn off the TV and Turn on Your Brain" (Čolović 1997: 62).

The 1996-7 protests also saw placards and radio jingles that mocked Milošević's populism, and countered the regime's denouncement of protesters. For example, when supporters of Milošević, who had been bused in from the countryside to counter the Belgrade protesters, chanted "Slobo, we love you," Milošević bluntly replied, "I love you, too." The rebellious radio station, B-92, poked fun at this lame response of Milošević, reproducing and using it as their jingle. On the following day, student protesters carried shields with the lettering, "I love you, too". They also greeted each other saying, "I love you" and replying "I love you, too" (Voyuvić 1999: 202). When Dragan Tomić, the president of the Serbian Parliament, claimed that the students were manipulated, the following day saw one banner mocking this invalid allegation by confirming that students "have an under-aged, retarded, impressionable, reduced, manipulated, pro-fascist temperament" (Collin 2001: 106).

TU Review.indb 21 5/8/12 2:17 AM

Other slogans contained relatively grotesque and obscene language, with double meanings. An example could be seen on toilet rolls inscribed with, "we've had enough shit". Others included "When the ruler is 'impotent', only the people 'arise' " and "Fifty years of sex is enough. We are in climax now" (referring to the fifty years of despair that people had been living under the communist and dictatorial rule). Another placard, with reference to Tito's patronising students by calling them his "children' (in the event of student uprising in 1968), reads "Children, we love you. Signed. Belgrade paedophiles" (Čolović 1997: 66) Placards with absurd and nearly politically meaningless slogans were also shown to make the protests colourful. Examples were "Smile Serbia, you're on candid camera!"(Lekić 1997: 14), "Ivana, I love you" and "I'll have a better slogan tomorrow, I promise" (Čolović 1997: 66).[9]

Carnivalesque rallies

The spirit of carnival was ubiquitous in the 1996-7 protests. It mutated the protests from political activity into cheerful parades. The beginning period of the protest witnessed a Dionysian carnival combined with a Brazilian samba parade, in which participants marched around the city while drumming, whistling and battering anything they could lay their hands on. International flags were vibrantly waved, ranging from those of Yugoslavia and Serbia, France, Japan, Germany and the USA, including those with commercial logos. The inherent message of the waving of the flags was that "Belgrade is the world" (Collin 2001: 99-100, 106).[10] Rock 'n' roll and punk, famous for being the music of rebels, was also loudly played in convergence with the "traditional folk rhythms of Serbian rumba to create a kind of communal trance magic [in exorcising] evil spirits" (Collin 2001: 108).

Parade marchers moreover wore ridiculous-fancy costumes, in an attempt to become anything and to mock anyone they wished, ranging from a pseudo-crown prince, wanna-be Roman gladiators, ridiculously-dressed police officers, to those with comic sunglasses, face masks and nurses' uniforms. At one point, sheep were brought to the demonstrations. Poking fun at socialist voters, sheep owners hung placards on the sheeps' necks, bearing such slogans as "we support the Socialist Party of Serbia" and "the whole world is against us" (referring to the self-victimatization among Serbs during the period of wars and international sanction) (Dragićević-Šešić 2001: 79). The parade would have lacked a real spirit of anti-regime demonstration without the mocking of Slobodan Milošević. Protesters managed to create a life-size sponge effigy of him, dressed in a stripped prison uniform; his small head was done in modelling clay and stuck on an umbrella and his Pinocchio-like nose was made of an inflated condom.

TU Review.indb 22 5/8/12 2:17 AM

When the police set up a cordon to block entry into the protest site in Belgrade centre, protest organizers initiated "the Cordon of the Cordon' action, in which students, as well as professors and artists, pursued a stand-off against the police cordon. While the police were armed with batons, tear gas launchers and guns, the citizen cordons were armed with flowers, mirrors and smile. Flowers were handed to the police by flirting female protesters. The mirrors were held up to the police, allowing them to see their own "human' faces (Jansen 2001: 398; Dragićević-Šešić 2001: 79). Whereas the authorities stood with strict discipline and soberness, the protesters displayed a world of fun, play, and laughter. They wore comical dress and improvised all kinds of games, such as water polo in the heavy rain, "photographing themselves and drawing their portraits, playing chess, donning boxing gloves and sparring with officers and fishing fish tins from the surrounding garbage cans". Jokes and burlesque dance were the "weaponry' of the cordon of people, firing into the police, hoping to get at least one laugh from them in return (Voyuvić 1999: 203).

The stand-off continued. As neither the police nor the protesters were willing to leave the scene in spite of the ruthless icy cold, the fear of a crackdown was on the rise. Students decided to set up a party, entitled the "Discotheque Blue Cordon' (*Deskoteka plavi kordon*). A provincial sound system was brought in to get the festivities started. For 178 hours, police encountered the biggest live Belgrade party with around 30,000 party goers who ceaselessly danced along to British punk mixed with traditional Balkan songs (Voyuvić 1999: 203; Dragićević-Šešić 2001: 79). The highlight of the discotheque was the "Miss University Contest' organized by students in collaboration with a pro-opposition newspaper, *Demokratija,* to elect the favourite female protester. The event was followed by the "Mister Police Contest,' in which the most popular police officer was selected by the protesters (Blagojević 1999: 121; Jansen, 2001: 398). The stand-off lasted for seven days. Eventually, the protesters were permitted to walk through Belgrade centre as they had done initially (Voyuvić 1999: 204).

Carnival features of resistance were absent in *Otpor*'s nonviolent campaigns during 1998-2000. The reason had to do with *Otpor*'s strategy which opted to avoid the staging of mass demonstration in a long period of time. Veterans of student protests who became founding activists of *Otpor* learned from the 1996-7 protests that taking to the street was not the most effective way in getting supporters of the Milošević's regime on board with them, thereby gaining political momentum. Street demonstration relied on accumulation of numbers of participants on the street, which could increase the possibility of mutating a nonviolent protest into a riot, giving the ground for state repression. Moreover, when the number of protesters declines, the movement's publicity can be in jeopardy.

TU Review.indb 23 5/8/12 2:17 AM

Accordingly, *Otpor* shifted to marketing strategy used to conduct political campaigns, with an aim to mobilize mass support for the opposition coalition, and subsequently defeat Slobodan Milošević on the election date. A host of catchy slogans, although not as witty as those of the 1996-7 protests were reproduced and disseminated through graffiti, T-shirts, badges, posters, stickers, and flags, in order to spread the message of resistance and encourage young people to vote. In other words, *Otpor* employed means of popular culture for itself to become a youth cult of resistance (CANVAS 2008).

Humour remained a signature of *Otpor* within the strategy of popularizing the movement. *Otpor* did not obtain adequate funding to produce sophisticated televised advertisements for their campaigns. Nevertheless, a private advertisement company picked up the popularity of *Otpor*, creating the hilarious washing machine commercial based on *Otpor*'s campaign, "He's Finish" (Gotov je) launched in July, 2000. The advertisement, broadcasted nationwide, showed a female celebrity demonstrating how to use the washing machine "properly'. She put a T-shirt with the image of Milošević in the washing machine while explaining that the most effective function of the machine to "wipe off' the stain, a metaphorical reference to Milošević, was the one painted with the black and white fist symbol of *Otpor* (York 2001). The switch was pressed, not only in the commercial advertisement, but also in reality. The campaign, "He's Finished" was the final resistance campaign prior to the "bulldozer revolution' that toppled Slobodan Milošević on October 5, 2000.

"Excorporation' and "carnival' in humoristic street actions staged for nonviolent struggle

During the nonviolent struggle in Serbia between 1996 and 2000, humor was manifested as a vehicle for popular defiance and as energy that transformed the potentially fatal street demonstration into a nonviolent one. Most of street skits and slogans derived from backdrops of symbols that gave rise to the rhetoric of Milošević's regime. Humoristic street actions were staged to make fun of the rhetoric, thereby not only belittling its seriousness, but appropriating the discourse. At times, protesters and activists juxtaposed different discursive elements with an attempt to jokingly exaggerate the rhetoric that denounced them. As a consequence, discourses of denunciation were made light. These processes can be contemplated through the concept of "excorporation' developed in pop culture studies. The use of this concept, in turn, helps to refine a theory of power central to the analysis of nonviolent struggle.

The concept of "excorporation' emerges as a synthesis of the polarized de-

TU Review.indb 24 5/8/12 2:17 AM

bate within pop culture studies. On the one hand, pop culture is understood as a genuine aesthetic expression of the mass. On the other, it is criticized as a form of cultural domination in the age of global industrialisation (Storey 1993: 10-5; see also, Barthes 1979; Adorno 2001). A breakaway from this dichotomy lies in the approach that considers pop culture as a site of struggle wherein the romantic authenticity and "thick hegemony' is irrelevant to everyday life practice. Whereas ideological hegemony lingers on through the appropriation of pop culture, when things are used, meanings of commodities provided by the dominant system are constantly negotiated and reshaped. In the process of using, users are producers in a way that they extract features of system, discourses, and the contents of rhetoric that seem to sustain domination. They combine the remnants of such discourse or rhetoric with other discursive forces to recreate their own rhetoric. At times, the renewed, and often distorted rhetoric becomes a tactic utilized to strike back against the dominant or the system it represents (de Certeau 1984; Fiske 1989: 1-23; see also, Docker 1994).[11]

The concept of excorporation provides a crucial theoretical implication to a theory of power central to studies in nonviolent struggle. The analysis of "people's power' lies in the assumption that power of the ruler is sustained by obedience and consent rendered by the ruled. Accordingly, the ruler can be brought down when consent of the ruled is withdrawn. The fundamental posit of this theory is that power is essentially polarized between the ruler and the ruled, and that consent exists in its full form (Sharp 1973: 28; see also, Bond 1994). The theory has been criticized from the perspective which contends that domination of the ruler can be manifested in the subtle from of ideology. A person does not necessarily represent the oppression. Rather, oppression can be entrenched in belief systems – if not discourses that govern practice (see, for example, Martin 1989; Mcguinness 1993). This implies that the escape from domination is nearly impossible. However, Roland Bleiker (2000: 185-207) argues that the two ends of the analysis of power do not reflect the struggle of ordinary people in which the power of ruling discourses is not completely undermined. Nor is it invincible. Rather, discourses that empower the dominant can be emasculated by the constant practice of linguistic transgression and laughter (see also, Callahan 1998). As for the latter, prevailing discourses are not only twisted, but turned into the subject of laughing. When something can be laughed at, its authority is undermined, if not denied (Arendt 1970: 67).

By means of poking fun, humoristic street actions question the seriousness which bases power of the opponent's rhetoric and codes of practice. This is also where its authority and legitimacy is derived. Similar to Mary Douglas' consideration of jokes as anti-rite – jokes emerge from official rites in order to destroy

TU Review.indb 25 5/8/12 2:17 AM

the very meaning of being of the official (Douglas 1984) – humoristic tactics embrace parts of the rhetoric and symbols underlying practices of the opponent. These rhetoric and symbols are juxtaposed with other discursive forces available in the market of ideas. Indeed, the product of this "excorporation' process is an idiosyncratic recreation with an aim to deride parts that form its being.

Satirical protest and absurdist street actions staged by student protesters and *Otpor* activists were hilarious because they distorted and destroyed the seriousness of the rhetoric and codes of practice that empowered Slobodan Milošević and his entourage. The core content of rhetoric was taken out. Remnants were juxtaposed with other discourses, rendering the rhetoric and practices of the regime mirthful. In the skit of cleaning the rector's office, instead of defending themselves as genuine, students subtly showed their "cleanness' by associating the unpopular rector with (moral) dirtiness. That is why they cleaned his office building, so the only dirtiness which could not be removed by detergent is the rector. Also, in highlighting the repressive face of the regime, students took a chance of being rounded up by police cordons to demonstrate that living in Serbia was as if being imprisoned. The text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was replaced with the reality of human rights violation in Serbia under Milošević's rule. The "absence' of the rector, an reaction to students' demand for his resignation, became a terrific source of a week-long hilarious searching for him. Some places visited by students, such as the zoo and the astronomical observatory, implied students' contempt for the regime-sponsored rector. By visiting the famous palm reader, students moreover made use of his absence as a confirmation that he would definitely be dismissed.

Witty messages in slogans also demonstrated how "excorporation' works. They were based on practices of regime figures (e.g. Mira Marković's visit in India, the Serbian Supreme Court's falsification of the election results, Milošević's lame greeting of his supporters). The contents of these practices were then twisted and incorporated into seemingly out-of-context messages or events (the non-consumption of beef among the Hindu population in India, the Serbian defeat in the international football match and protesters' greeting one another with the sentence "I love you").

To counter the regime's propaganda and defamation, student protesters and *Otpor* activists based their absurdist street actions on statements or practices of the regime, twisting and/or exaggerating them. The action "Blood Transfusion' was comical because students simply realised a wishful thinking of Mira Marković by collecting blood to ensure that her party would step down. The state policy propaganda was an abundant source for *Otpor*'s street pranks and skits, as apparent in the action "A Dinar for Change/Resignation' – a response to the absurdity

of "A Dinar for Sowing' policy, and the action "Reconstruction of the Bridge' – a satirical reaction to the non-existence of the government reconstruction plan after the NATO bombing in 1999. The tactical sophistication of absurdist happenings was most evident in the "Load and Unload 2000' action in which activists managed to involve authorities as a clown in their show. The earlier police raid on *Otpor* office in Belgrade provided the base for this action. While the core idea of the raid remained the same, the difference lies in materials that attracted the raid in the first place. Boxes confiscated by the police were empty. By making the police look ridiculous in the public – not to mention on the newspapers' front page, their ridiculed authority was witnessed.

The event of the 1996-7 student protest in Belgrade brought to light a kind of transformative and disarming humor, embodying in carnival rallies. Particularly during the seven day stand-off between protesters and cordons of police, the carnivalised demonstration transformed the atmosphere of antagonism, which potentially pushed the protest to the edge of violent confrontation, into a cheerful gathering. Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelias and His World* (1984), offers a crucial insight into this transformative characteristic of carnival.

Bakhtin (1984: 59-95) proposes that the world of carnivalesque arises from the inversion of the established order and the imagination beyond the seeming reality. Carnivalesque is a cosmology, as initially present in the work of, wherein official seriousness is transgressed through the act of playfulness, excessive devouring and drinking, the use of scatological language, talk about the body's lower stratum (e.g. belly, excrement, and sexual organs) and the inversion of social roles. The ancient carnivals and feasts, some of which continue to be practised in the modern day, saw women wearing men's clothes and acting like men, landlords and masters becoming slaves, priests practising forbidden activities and sinners being redeemed. These are the popular practices of carnival and folk humor which transgressed the "fixed' reality by allowing participants in the practices to take a journey to the world of utopia, the world where justice and egalitarianism can be imagined. Hence, the energy generated from carnival is not the kind of humor that rebels against authorities, as often assessed by scholars (see, for example, Fiske 1989: 69-102; Scott 1990: 172-82; Docker 1994: 169-85). Rather, it is a power to create a parallel world where political imagination is made possible. Expressed differently, the world of carnival contains diverse realities and there are always alternatives lying in an apparent fixed situation.

Carnival features apparent in the rallies of 1996-7 protests generated the energy of the "other' world, the world beyond the seeming reality. Amidst the disastrous consequences of the Yugoslav wars, the economic crisis and the authoritarian regime, marchers managed to create a festive atmosphere and colour

TU Review.indb 27 5/8/12 2:17 AM

the tedious protests with a touch of carnival-style humor. They wore fancy costumes, mocking everything and becoming anyone they wished to, and danced along to the loud eclectic sound of music. Instead of allowing the stand-off with the police to accumulate tension and the possibility of violent crackdown, protest organisers initiated "Cordon of the Cordon' and the "Discotheque Blue Cordon' actions, from where the festive mood was generated. Two worlds collided in these actions: the world of seriousness of the police cordon and the world of playfulness of the citizens. The victory of the latter was obtained with the laughter and smiles of the police who were expected to be sober in the world of seriousness. In this sense, the carnival-like actions, staged by the 1996-7 protesters, helped to prevent violent clashes between the authorities and dissents mainly because the actions transcended the "mood' of the tedious stand-off. The atmosphere was reconstructed in a way that the seriousness of antagonism between conflict parties was replaced with the playfulness, the spirit of carnival humor.

Conclusion

The case of Serbia's student-led 1996-7 protests and the subsequent resistance movement, *Otpor*, brings to light how humoristic street actions work in nonviolent politics. As I demonstrated in the first section, although the relationship between nonviolence and humor can be in tension due to assumptions underlying the two practices being seen as incompatible, there is the recognition that humor can be used as a method for nonviolent struggle. However, little effort has been made to understand its operation. Collated details of humoristic street actions suggest that these actions work on the basis of "excorporation'. That is, they come into being by appropriating the rhetoric of the opponent which is initially aimed at generating propaganda or tainting the image of activists. In so doing, humoristic tactics derived themselves from the rhetoric or codes of practice that empower the opponent. While the core content is dislodged, remaining elements are juxtaposed with other discursive forces to enable the strike back at the opponent. Moreover, the carnival rallies in the 1996-7 protests illuminated that the festive mood could transcend the conceivable reality wherein the tension between the protesters and the authorities caused by the stand-off could spiral into the violent clash. And perhaps, this is the crucial link between nonviolence and humor that has been little observed?

TU Review.indb 28 5/8/12 2:17 AM

Notes

[1] The paper constitutes a part of my PhD dissertation (in progress) which was presented at the biannual conference organized by the International Peace Research Association (IPRA), July 6-10, 2010, Sydney, and at the International Conference on Humour in ASEAN, August 4-5, 2010, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. The conference held at Bangkok was part of The Humanities Research Forum Project and supported by Thailand Research Fund.

[2] Morreall (1983) categorizes prevailing discussions about humor into three theories, namely: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. Proponents of superiority theory associate humor with the ridicule of those facing physical deformity and misfortune. Accordingly, the assessment of humor is negative viewed from the ethical standpoint. Advocates for relief theory contend that humor is rather a psychological release of tension. Based on this theory, humor is considered as a defensive mechanism to get through difficult times of life. The incongruity theory emphasizes the cognitive process of humor wherein humor, referred to as the sense of amusement, is caused by the convergence of two or more incompatible ideas.

[3] It should be noted that the boundary between principled and pragmatic nonviolence is problematic. The separation of principled from pragmatic nonviolence is drawn in this paper only for the benefit of the discussion.

[4] Otpor is the Serbian term for "resistance'. Therefore, in Serbia, the movement is referred to as "Resistance Movement' (Otpora pokret). To follow this tradition, hereafter, I use the term Otpor with reference to the "Resistance Movement'.

[5] Similar demonstrations had been orchestrated by the opposition party, namely the Serbian Renewal Movement Party (Srpski pokret obnove – SPO) led by Vuk Drašković, after the national election in 1991 which ended with bloodshed. The same pattern was repeated in 1993 in which Drašković was severely beaten and detained for six months. However, the protest in 1996-7 was different as students also spearheaded. It was the second uprising of students after the one staged in 1968.

[6] Main universities of Serbia are located in Belgrade, Novi Sad (the capital of the Northern autonomy province, Vojvodina), Kragujevac (central Serbia), and Niš (southern Serbia). During the protest in 1996-7, although "citizen protests' scattered in cities and towns throughout Serbia, "student protest' were organised mainly in these university centre cities. Votes in Novi Sad were not rigged, but students staged the demonstration in solidarity with those in Belgrade and other cities. A veteran student leader in Novi Sad added that the protest was also implicitly aimed to "overthrow' Milošević regime.

[7] While there was no report of the arrest following the action, in Kragujevac, twelve activists were arrested which led to the tactical gathering in front of the police

TU Review.indb 29 5/8/12 2:17 AM

station in demand for the release of the detainees. In this case, the action which provoked the arrest and led to the gathering attracted more media attention than the mere staging of the action.

[8] In Serbia, a turkey symbolises an indecent woman. A leading Otpor activist in Kragujevac explained that the selection of turkey for this action was rather due to the practicality. But the fact that turkey contains the offensive symbolic reference perhaps rendered this action insultingly humorous.

[9] It should also be noted that some slogans reflected the nationalist opinion which dismissed Serbian responsibility in war crimes experienced during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. An example can be discerned in a slogan which described the war as the national catastrophe which had ended in the loss of territory. Another slogan that also reflected a similar sentiment towards the conflict in Kosovo, and which was intentionally the police deployed from the provinces, reads, "Instead of kicking us, you should go to Kosovo to kick those Albanians" (Čolović, 1997).

[10] Stef Jansen (2001: 35-55) argues that this action indicated the way protesters re-identified Belgrade as a cosmopolitan urban space. It symbolically opposed the widespread ultra-nationalist discourse and self-isolation from the international community.

[11] Fiske (1989) developed the concept of "making do" proposed by Michel de Certeau to comprehend the tactical resistance in everyday-life activities such as reading and cooking. In a similar fashion, Fiske coined the term, "excorporation' to understand the way in which the usage of popular commodities is subject to a constant change. Meanings of commodities are reshaped by users. His prime example is the jeans which was initially produced in the context of military usage, but later became so popular among teenagers who want to look "cool', with a subversive personality.

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TU Review.indb 32

5/8/12 2:17 AM

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TU Review.indb 34 5/8/12 2:17 AM