

**Effects of Humour in Collective Action**  
**- and its potential for radicalisation -**

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### **Abstract**

Humour is used as a way to express opposition, in social media as well as in political comedy for example. But opposition like collective action is generally considered to be driven by anger and for people to act accordingly. Thus, humour and collective action have not been frequently put into context. In the current study, we investigate which effects humour has in collective action. And while we assumed that broadening would be one effect, we investigated specifically if one effect may also be facilitation of radicalisation. Based on the effects of humour in other social settings, we propose that humour in collective action has the potential of broadening the collective action, especially through in-group bonding as well as creating insight into a specific collective action. Because participants were diffused in their opinions on the radicalisation effect of the use of humour, we conclude that while humour can in fact broaden collective action, radicalisation may be more closely intertwined with in-group-bonding and creating insight than initially thought, moreover the coping function of humour would have to be explored more closely in this context. We conducted a qualitative analysis with a sample (N = 8) of personal connections from a researcher in Germany. This analysis was done based on semi-structured interviews.

*Keywords:* humour, collective action, radicalisation, creating insight, in-group bonding, coping

**Effects of humour in collective action – and its potential for radicalisation –**

In 2017 the *Zentrum für Politische Schönheit* (Centre for political beauty), a political action group based in Berlin, bought the only available lawn next to the house of former *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) politician Björn Höcke. The AfD has been known as one of the most right-winged parties in Germany (Ruhose, 2021), naturally so is Björn Höcke. The centre for political beauty bought the lawn and built an imposter monument next to his house, similar to one in Berlin reminding of the Holocaust. The intention was a sarcastic reminder of the normalisation of fascism in Germany (ZPS, 2017). This is a parade example of how humour may be used in collective action by simplifying the message to create insight into the cause of the collective action.

Opposingly, in the United Kingdom, the “Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army” also known as CIRCA or Clown Army, thrives on people dressing up as clowns, standing in front of policemen, protesting differently than the militants (BBC, 2005). This phenomenon is also to be seen in other countries, in the US, in Italy as well as in Germany, although not under the name of a specific movement. In this case, humour was used to create a nicer atmosphere within collective action, as well as to make activists seem more “human” and more approachable to non-activists.

The overall collective research question of this project is which effects humour has on collective action. And while we assumed that broadening collective action would be one effect, we investigated specifically if one of these effects can also be the facilitating of radicalisation processes. This will be explored by investigating the effects of humour around collective action in the views of activists who are or were part of collective action.

When looking at humour in collective action, there is an abundant variety of forms ranging from dress-ups, to jokes, to actions, from funny, to ironic, to sarcastic. In the

following, firstly humour will be defined, then humour will be described in terms of what it comprises and which functions it can have. The next step is to define collective actions and their prerequisites. Collective action will then be connected to humour. The specific focus of this thesis will be, if one of the effects of humour in collective action may be facilitation of radicalisation. For this, research on radicalisation and on the connection between radicalisation and humour is presented. As there is not much research on this specific question of the connection between humour, collective action and radicalisation, this thesis can only be an initial exploratory study that can be used to establish starting points for follow-up research.

## **Humour**

Humour is an effective tool in interpersonal communication with a wide range of variations, including sarcasm and irony, and different functions. Humour is complex and varies from culture, class and social setting (‘t Hart, 2007). According to Martin (2018) humour is the ability to understand jokes, an expression of cheerfulness, the ability to make humorous comments, the appreciation of diverse types of jokes, the seeking of sources that will make people laugh, remembering jokes and funny incidents, as well as using humour as a form of coping. These are all parts of humour, which can therefore be seen as a holistic characteristic.

However, because of its broad nature and the lack of a universal agreement on a definition, this present study conceptualises humour as a broad term, involving fun, making jokes, satire, memes on social media, as well as occurring on protesting signs for example. Its definition has expanded throughout the course of this project, in order to not exclude any experiences or expressions of humour of the participants, since its very nature is rather subjective than objective.

Graham et al., (1992) put together a list of 24 functions of humour, many of them relevant to the research question. These 24 functions can be grouped into three different categories relevant to this project. The first category is more interested in positive individually-centred functions. These include entertaining others, showing a sense of humour, adjusting to a new role and increasing the liking by others. The second category includes more positive group-related functions, such as to allow others insight into another's state of mind, to facilitate relationship patterns and to help others relax and feel comfortable. And the third category of functions is concerned with negative aspects like to disarm potentially aggressive others, to ease the tension brought by novel stimuli, such as new information and to disclose difficult information. Also, to control others, to put others in their place, minimising anxiety and to allow one to cope with a serious subject. Especially the latter two categories of functions might be interesting when looking closer at the facilitation of radicalisation processes, since they refer to the functions of humour that are being investigated in this project.

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that humour is an important moderation tool (Southam, 2004), that can simplify messages. Additionally, humour has been suggested to also strengthen the in-group bonds of a specific group. This has been shown to be effective through emotion management through humour (Francis, 1994).

Another example is Freud, who argued in his publication on humour in 1905 that in a polite society, aggressive thoughts may be shared more facile if they are presented as not serious, thus making the use of jokes and humour a facilitator in order to rebel against society, Freud's term for this was transgression (Billig, 2002). This is an effect of humour that could be an indicator of facilitation of radicalisation processes.

This research focuses on the functions, the effects and the importance of humour, as it adds to the contemporary knowledge base and understanding of humour as an experience and additionally, as a functional tool within group processes, namely collective action.

### **Collective action**

It is relevant to study humour in a defined context, as it differs severely between societies (Billig, 2002). And in order for humour to have any effect on collective action, according to 't Hart (2007), one condition must be met for the utilisation of humour. Namely, a pre-existing collective identity such as a political movement or a strict setting for any joke. Furthermore, collective action is used for groups or a virtual collective who address common causes, be it economic, social, political; addressing it together, virtually, verbally or in person. This implies a collective identity ('t Hart, 2007). Collective action is thus a defined setting in which humour can be investigated. In collective action a collective identity is established through distinguishing between in-group and out-group ("us" vs "them"), such as protest or from the community as well as the in-group bonding (Polletta et al., 2001).

Serving as a definition of collective action, is the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) proposed by Van Zomeren et al. (2008), consisting of three critical predictors. Namely, subjective injustice, identity and self-efficacy. Subjective injustice refers to the subjective perception of an individual, with sources being unjustly distributed, and chances lower for some than for others (Smith et al., 1994). Identities are individuals' subjective interpretations of who they are, based on their socio-demographic characteristics, roles, personal attributes, and group memberships (Caza, 2018). And lastly, self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to initiate and maintain the courses of action needed to produce an anticipated outcome (Bandura, 1997). The three core aspects of the model, subjective

injustice, identity and self-efficacy, are needed for a collective protest to work, thus being defining elements of collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2013).

In this research, protest was taken as a synonym for collective action, defined as any action that was undertaken to further one of the collective causes mentioned above. Street protests in this example count just as much as individual behaviour, such as raising awareness within your circle of friends, on social media, contributing to non-governmental organisations (NGO's) for example, with the purpose of social change, with the one condition, that it is set in some kind of collective frame, be it in a group or in a virtual circle. The assumption of what collective action entails, has also expanded throughout the course of the project to include all of the participants experiences.

As to the relation between collective action and humour, two main functions of humour connect them: the furthering of the in-group bonds of collectivism and giving insight into the causes of the collective action (t' Hart, 2007). According to the researcher, humour appears to have power over the development of collective identity, by framing collective action, as it may serve as a means to portray a message. Humour may also alleviate stress and therefore prevent the mobilisation for collective action (t' Hart, 2007). However, recent research suggests that humour does play a role in mobilising collective action which is a prerequisite for broadening collective action (Baumgartner et al., 2018). Baumgartner and Lockerbie (2018) investigated political participation in watching late-night shows with political content. They concluded that political satire, thus a form of humour, mobilises viewers to collective action (Baumgartner et al., 2018). Mobilisation, in-group bonding and creating insight are functions of humour important to collective action. Consequently, humour may have an effect on the broadening of any collective action. If it has an effect on radicalisation is yet to be explored more thoroughly.

## **Radicalisation**

Radicalisation has been defined as “changes in beliefs, feelings, and behaviours in directions that increasingly justify [political] violence” (McCauley et al., 2008, p.416). Indicating that radicalisation refers not to a state of mind, but rather a process of developing extremist beliefs and emotions towards a certain cause as well as behaviours in some people (Trip et al., 2019). Furthermore, they define radicalisation as a deviation from core values of society. However, not all radicalised people act upon those extremist beliefs and emotions (Borum, 2012). Benevento (2021), supported the belief that radicalisation is not positive or negative in itself. Thus, beliefs that have been adopted over time, may have been justified by radicalised people, but most people do not actually engage in any terroristic action (Borum, 2012). It would be interesting to investigate the question, if radicalisation may also entail the sharpening of beliefs. The research on radicalisation is very broad and so is the range of definitions, but research points to radicalisation as a process in which individuals or groups challenge the core beliefs in a given time, eventually becoming normalised later on.

According to Wolfowicz et al. (2020), a potential factor for radicalisation is the ingroup connectedness, which may lead to an assumption that humour may play a role as a facilitator. In the present research on radicalisation, this, together with Freud's topic of transgression, is one of the rare hints of a connection between humour and radicalisation, as is the coping function of humour (Freud, 1960, Fritz, 2020 & Graham et al., 1992).

One look into social media, however, gives a fairly good first idea, of what radicalisation looks like online and that humour, friendly or on the dark side, is a rather effective and heavily used tool to further causes, find new followers and act radically behind the protection of a joke (Sikkens, 2016). Keeping to linguist Elisabeth Wehling (2018) stating that verbal violence follows the same distribution of pain inhibiting hormones as in



actual physical violence such as adrenaline and testosterone, what happens online on social media may also serve as a relevant reference to what possibly happens offline (Bargh et al., 1996). Social media therefore may be a good indicator that effects of humour could be facilitators for radicalisation.

Radicalisation often is researched in terms of right-winged parties, but not about left-wing activists. This paper focuses specifically on the collective action of left-wing activists in Berlin, Germany, protesting against neo-fascism, social injustices and discrimination such as racism, antisemitism, sexism and increasingly also focusing on the climate crisis. The left-wing activists' form of collective action are street protests, blockades as well as squatting events.

### **Present research**

Based on the previously mentioned studies, this project considers different effects of humour in collective action, starting with special functions of humour: a way of in-group bonding, out-group bonding, of creating insight into the cause of a collective action by simplifying of messages, coping and transgression. This project attempts to clarify the effects of humour around collective action of any kind, starting with the specific spectrum of left-wing activism in a defined setting in Berlin, Germany. The specific focus of this paper will lie on the possible effect of humour in facilitating radicalisation processes. Thus, the research question is, may one effect of humour in collective action be to facilitate radicalisation processes?

### **Methods**

Both the method and the results were written collectively by all students, to make this project fit into the timeline and course credits for the bachelor thesis. Hence, the method and

results sections describe my own core topics of the facilitation of radicalisation, as well as the other students' topics. This project received ethics clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen (research code: PSY-2122-S-0088).

### **Participants**

In total, eight participants were recruited via the personal network of one of the bachelor thesis students in this project. The sample was recruited in order to grasp a wide range of perspectives on humour in collective action. We asked different activists, from various left-wing movements, who were available to participate in our research. This resulted in a sample that is relatively small and heterogeneous in both age and movement categories. The sample consisted of four males, three females, and one non-binary person. Ages ranged from 18 to 77 years old ( $M=37$ ), with four people from generation Z (born 1997-2012), three people from generation X (born 1965-1980), and one person from generation Post War (born 1928-1945). Participants all originated from Germany, all have anti-fascist beliefs, and have a focus on collective action in Germany. Interviews were conducted with participants with different leftist political interests and ties to various movements, including the ANTIFA, *Rote Armee Fraktion*, anarchists, and climate movements such as Fridays for future and Extinction Rebellion. We feel it is inappropriate to categorise the participants as members of specific movements, because it would inadequately represent the activists as they are all fluid members of multiple movements. Therefore, in the result section we will use quotes of the participants themselves to elaborate on the movements they are or were active in and the political interests they have. During recruitment, participants were told that we were interested in humour in the context of past experiences with protest. No inducement to participate was given. Two persons who were invited to participate, did not participate after all, due to the COVID-19 situation.

**Semi-structured interviews**

Individual, semi-structured interviews were used to gather the information. This made it possible to gather information about the different topics of interest, and also leaving room for individual experiences and diverse points of view related to humour and collective action. Interviews were done with two or three interviewers at a time, as it was more feasible to keep track of the questions asked with another interviewer, as well as having the interview be more of a conversation. One interview was done with only one interviewer because of scheduling reasons. The main language for the interviews was English, however some parts were said in German as it seemed more easily for participants to express themselves more freely. Furthermore, one interview was done entirely in German due to the language barrier, with some explanations in Portuguese for the second interviewer. The other interviews have been conducted in English as the entire project was laid out in English and most interviewers do not speak German. All interviews, except for one, were conducted in real life, in a quiet and safe environment such as an empty apartment. One interview has taken place online via Google Meets, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The duration of the interviews ranged between 44-97 minutes. All interviews were double audio recorded with mobile phones and were transcribed manually. All the recordings were deleted after transcription, due to the privacy regulations. The topics that were covered in the interviews, were (1) involvement in collective action (e.g. ‘What kinds of activism have you taken part in?’), (2) functions of humour in collective action (see Appendix A for the interview questions), (3) appropriateness of humour (e.g. ‘Do you think there is anything that might make humour/fun around this cause inappropriate?’), and (4) violence around collective action (e.g. ‘Have you ever experienced a moment in which protest/collective action reached a tipping point, when the atmosphere became tense/grim/ when the atmosphere changed?’). The main focus of our

questions was which effects humour can have in collective action, as we tried to ask the participants as much about their experiences as possible.

The interviews were conducted as casual conversations, using open questions (see the above) as a guideline, in line with the semi-structured interview approach. At the end of the interview there was room for the participants to ask questions or add information or discuss topics they felt were relevant to the interview.

### **Analytic approach**

We chose to use thematic analysis as an analytic method due to it being compatible with open-ended inquiry and a deductive theoretical framework. An initial coding scheme was provided by our supervisor, based on the first four interviews that were transcribed. After that, each transcript was coded by one of the researchers, using the initial coding scheme. Additional codes were added if it was needed, based on new relevant information. We made an attempt to construct a coding scheme that was extensive and that fitted the research questions. See Appendix A for the questions that we asked the participants and Appendix B for the final coding scheme. A second researcher went over the transcripts again using the enhanced coding scheme. In that way we tried to make sure that all the relevant information in all eight transcripts were coded, allowing us to answer our research questions as thoroughly as possible.

### **Results**

The analysis contains three parts, divided into sub-parts. The analysis begins with an introduction of the participants. After that, we look at different functions of humour within collective action. Finally, we will look at situations in which humour use might be considered inappropriate.

### **Participants' demographic backgrounds**

First and foremost, for the interpretation and understanding of the quotes, it is of importance to be aware of the content of the sample. The sample consists of people from different generations, indicating different eras of left-wing activism. This may have an influence on their points of view about humour in activism, thus this needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting the quotes. The political identity of the participants is rather difficult to categorise into specific movements, as this is not set in stone and is always subject to change. An overall striking aspect one should keep in mind is that most participants did not feel like they were part of a solid group.

P3, P4, P5 and P7 are all part of the older generations of the sample (post-war and generation X). These participants have taken part in many forms of activism in the past. Currently, all four participants are implementing their experiences from earlier decades in journalism. In this way, they can still advocate for the things they consider important. P3 is currently furthering political action professionally as part of a political newspaper addressing and informing many activists of current events.

*P3:* I was mainly in antifascist protesting because in Germany after the reunification there was quite a wave of neo-Nazis and not only neo-Nazi movement but also militant neo-Nazis who attacked people with a migration background but really we had to sometimes to go to houses where they lived and just stay there to protect them because we knew Nazis are coming, (...). Well, it's [also] important for me to protest around Fridays For Future and against furthering this climate crisis. (...) What I established in my paper was a small group of people like a project who do only climate issues and they reach out to the movement and try to reach the movement to channel the information from the movement in Instagram as mainly, that's where we do it.

P3 became involved in anti-fascist activism after the Berlin Wall fell and there was a rise of neo-Nazi movements. The climate crisis is also a focus of hers.

A striking similarity between P3, P4 and P5 is the start of their activism, in which antifascism was especially prominent. P4 was first involved in street protest and then moved his interest to investigative political journalism.

*P4:* Well I started being active when I was sixteen/seventeen years old [in the '80s] when I was still going to school and for many years that was mainly in an antifascist movement so protesting against Neo-Nazis, green research, organising blockades on the streets when a Neo-Nazi march was scheduled, structural work. So antifascism is an entire set of different activities from street activities to organising behind the scenes. Later on, in my twenties, I also engaged in the Anti-gentrification movement so like community neighbourhood activism. The whole neighbourhood was in the process of gentrifying so like the rent went up, people were squeezed out and rich investors came in. So those kind of activities as well. And I basically also participated in what we in Germany would call the Autonomous movement, like anti-G, G8, G20 summits. Generally, it would be more like Anti-capitalism activities. So a broad variety of different things with these two focusses, Anti-fascism on one hand and Anti-gentrification work on the other hand.

Both P3 and P4 are now contributing to social movements with their career, they have chosen professional journalism as their form of activism.

*P5:* And we [me and my friends] put fascism on the daily to-do list. We had a hunch that it was in many ministries that there are Nazis in there (...) It was about the rigid solid everyday culture that included Nazis. That still lived and still does now. That we [students] suffered from, in school for example. And we slowly started to fight against that [oppression]. Because we couldn't dream of any kind of future in this country. (...) I started being part of the SPK [*Sozialistische Patienten Kollektiv*]. The SPK is the socialist patient collective. (...) I was only half a year in the RAF [*Rote Armee Fraktion*].

P5 has mentioned his participation in two different movements. He mentions in both participations of the SPK in 1971 and the RAF, his focus on any form of anti-fascism from a socialist and communist point of view. P5 has participated in various street demonstrations, squatting actions as well as the most militant forms of activism such as hostage-taking of an embassy.

P7 has never felt part of a specific movement, which is why eventually he founded his own collective. However, the focus of this collective was similar to the already established movements, the participant mentions leftist, radical, social movements.

*P7:* Before I also have been a lot in like social movements, I went to some kind of whatever ... leftist left radical and punk rock concerts and places, and you know, so I've been like running around there... (...). I have never really been part of a group, like I never like I never wanted to, be part of the group. (...) I would like look at it and I wouldn't feel good because there's this dogmatism or there is just like, I don't know what it is. I'm just not uhm... yeah, I'm not someone who is like entering a political group,.. that easily. Rather, after a while, I just created my own!

Despite the generation gap between the various participants, there is a great deal of overlap between the goals the activists are pushing for. Noteworthy is the shift of the main focus points. Among the older generation, antifascism was the greatest goal to fight for. Given the German history concerning World War II, the split of Germany, as well as the building of the wall in Berlin undoubtedly had an immense impact on the participants' lives. In addition to antifascism, recent activism has included its focus on for example the climate crisis, racism and feminism. Not only is the younger generation pushing for these, but so are the older ones, through for example journalism.

In our sample, the younger generation (generation Z) is represented by P1, P2, P6 and P8. These participants are all active in street protests, for various purposes and they have

corresponding political opinions among each other, but also differ in their points of focus. P1 and P8 both mention that they have ties to the ANTIFA.

*P8:* In Germany, in Berlin... it's a mix between political parties that I identify with and then social-political groups and movements outside that I identify with. Of course, generally, I would identify with ANTIFA, just because I think everybody should, and everybody should be antifascist. So that's something that I identify with. Obviously, I attended a lot of Fridays For Future demonstrations, so I would identify with that as well. Those are groups outside of the traditional political parties that I would identify myself with.

Alongside the ANTIFA, P8 makes a stand against climate change. Before he got the right to vote, because of his age, P8 put out his opinion by attending street protests, for the purpose of contributing to democracy. Climate change is for multiple participants a reason for activism.

*P2:* It [my focus on collective action] is different things. (...) There was like Fridays for Future, but just some general stuff that I was interested in. And then I also went to this really like left-wing, not left-wing but like leftish political school that really has their own fight against racism club in school. (...) I feel like I'm very interested in feminism just because I feel like that's a topic or an issue that is still very present in my generation [Generation Z] and in my friend groups and in all of my encounters, sort of. (...) It's like everyone, well not everyone, obviously, but like racism or climate change or even the living situation is easier to address and people are more perceivable to it.

Furthermore, P2 feels strongly about the squatting movement and has strong ties to them. She has also participated in different actions concerning the planning of a squatting operation.



A commonality among mainly female participants is the great struggle for feminism. This is not only an important issue for P1 and P2 from generation Z, but also overlaps with the ideologies from P3 from generation X.

*P1:* I consider myself to be left-radical, radical-left if you say that. I do have connections within the Berlin ANTIFA, but I'm not part of it. I always feel like I have like a half foot in it. (...) I think especially the topic around feminism, this is a huge topic for me and definitely attending a lot of women-organized demonstrations and intersectional feminism also. Since last year, since the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, there has definitely been a shift [of attention to BLM].

In addition, P1 mentions how she has connections to many people in the activism scene, especially a famous street squat in Berlin. She does not consider herself to be an active part of that movement even though she does participate in many events and demonstrations. P1 also mentions that she is anti-capitalistic and thereby critical of the system.

Being critical of the system is a similarity within the sample. All participants want to see change and are committed to it, however, most participants do not feel part of a solid group.

*P6:* How can I say, it's a lot of social issues I have a problem with and I want to fight against. A lot of issues with racism, fascism, and people being repressed. So what I want to fight for is freedom for everyone, let's call it that, unity.

P6 does not consider themselves to be part of a group. The only group P6 has a connection with is an anarchist group. They meet up with them and go to protests together. As noted down in the quote above, P6 is fighting for freedom for everybody and makes a stand against racism, fascism and people being repressed.

Concluding, participants were all associated with left-winged, social injustice protests. However, most participants specifically stated that they do not in fact identify with one specific group.

### **Functions of humour**

In this section we will cover 1) how humour can serve as a tool for interpersonal relationships 2) the role of humour in radicalisation, 3) the clashing of radical action and humour and 4) the role of humour in coping with activism.

#### ***Humour as a tool for strengthening existing interpersonal ties***

All participants mentioned the influence and contribution of humour on bonding with the ingroup. Various ways of using humour that can contribute to the bond between people within a group have been named. These included chanting, laughing together and dancing together among other things.

Interestingly, multiple participants mentioned bonding as an effect of making fun of an outgroup. For example, P7 said the following:

P7: If you're inviting people to laugh about someone more powerful, this is bonding.

P7 was not the only interviewee who mentioned bonding as an effect of making fun of an outgroup. P1 and P6 also talked about laughing at an outgroup but they specifically mentioned the police as the outgroup who they made fun of. P6 said the following:

P6: The people got together and they were singing songs, making fun of the police, holding together, listening to music, singing.

Another example of bonding by joking about an outgroup but then in a context of feminism is mentioned by P1: "also to bond, again, it's a bonding moment if we make fun of the stupid men that just don't get it." The participant points out that for women who have experienced for example body shaming or another hurtful event, joking about men who don't understand the pain that it causes, also is a bonding experience. Making jokes about or laughing at another group can thus help to form a bond within the group. It seems that the

explanation for this is that by making fun of the outgroup the activists in the ingroup distance themselves from the outgroup making the bond between the ingroup stronger.

However, making jokes about a less powerful outgroup or a minority can be problematic as mentioned by P7:

*P7: Sexist humour or racist humour or antisemitic humour is always trying to bond over a minority. Like, I mean, women are not a minority, but like, like a less powerful group.*

The interviewee is talking about how one of the main international bonding attacks among young men is talking about the hotness of women and making sexist jokes. Hereby the participant expresses their disapproval of this manner of uniting. Apparently, this way of using humour as a goal to form a bond with the ingroup can therefore also bring harm to a minority.

The previous quotes concerned ingroup bonding between activists but can humour also strengthen new ties with the non-activist outgroup?

### ***Humour as a tool to strengthen new ties***

There was a pattern of responses from participants that suggested that humour may in fact be a useful tool to strengthen new ties and for broadening a movement of any collective action. P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7 and P8 all indicated the above. P3 said the following: “bonding also with people not of your group but with people around you.”

This participant mentioned this in the context of cynical humour use. They mentioned that cynical humour makes everyone feel like they can still be part of the movement and make others feel more included, even people of the outgroup. P8 mentioned something similar by saying: “when there’s a lot of humour it helps to bond people together, bond groups” (P8). Both participants stressed that in a street protest humour can bond different groups and even the ingroup with the outgroup.

In addition to street protests, humour can increase activists’ reach through the media. For instance, through graphics on social media:

P1: With humour [in communist memes] you can just reach a lot more people. And I think it's way more fun to follow them.

Or through music:

P4: I think everybody who listens to that [satirical] song feels like part of a club. So I think yes but there must be more than just humour, you probably need to direct it and pinpoint specifically how you want to use it.

On one hand, most participants seem to agree that humour can be used to bond with the ingroup and to broaden the movement.

### ***Humour cannot broaden a movement***

On the other hand, P3 expressed doubts about whether humour broadens a movement. This is in contrast to the above-mentioned statements.

P3: When I said that I loved memes or just jokes in whatever channel, I don't think that those jokes really reach people who aren't into this already. (...) Yeah but I still think, so it would be great if all those jokes would reach other people, but I don't think that it's really... [laughs]

J.L.: So, you actually don't think it raises awareness among people who aren't already invested in the...

P3: No, I don't think so. I didn't think about that before but talking with you, I don't think so because I always, I try to imagine like clowns being at demonstrations and doing stuff, that's funny, but it doesn't ... and then people see it, okay, but I don't think it changes the mind of people who are not invested in the topic before.

The participant thinks out loud about their own experiences. Furthermore, she mentions a love for memes before this specific statement. The memes led to her thought that humour does in fact not broaden a movement but rather includes more people that are like-minded already. This participant was the only one saying anything about humour not broadening a movement, however corrected herself again in a later statement. It seemed an overall agreement that humour may broaden a movement.

Thus, most participants agree that humour can create new ties between activists and the outgroup, involve people and mobilise a broader audience for collective action. This can happen through different channels, such as music. In other words, humour seems capable of stimulating collective action. However, can it also stimulate involvement in radical action?

### *Humour stimulates radicalisation*

P1, P3, P4 and P6 talked about how humour can normalise a radical thought or action and therefore can contribute to radicalisation: “Even if you’re not communist, I mean I don’t consider myself communist either, but that moment if you read it [an anti-capitalist meme by Simin Jawa], you’re like... (...) it seems so obvious when you make a joke and it’s funny. It just seems obvious to you, like yes of course. (...) And I think that’s probably a process of radicalisation.” (P1) By presenting radical thoughts as normal, through humour, such an idea is more likely to be tolerated.

*P6:* In politics, there may be a lot of humour to like normalise your cause, let’s say it like that, make it more reachable for the people, kind of joking about it, so maybe you can present more radical themes, more radical ideologies or ideas a lot toned down because you’re being funny about it, or joking about it. So, I guess humour is a quite powerful weapon in politics, too.

According to P6, humour can cause radical thoughts or ideas to be expressed with less severity, which ensures that it can reach more people. P6 also mentioned that they think that the first step towards radicalisation is people believing that what they are doing is right or normal, and an ideology can be built on that basis. In addition, P6 deems humour an appropriate means of justifying extreme ideology: “Maybe some people would say humour is not okay to legitimize left-wing radicalism and I, of course, say it is okay.” (P6)

Normalising radical behaviour or thoughts as seen as the basis of radicalisation by P6 is also seen in street protests. An instant, where joking about police allowed street activists to engage in more violent behaviour towards police officers. In doing so, policemen were made smaller as individuals, so the activists approved more of their own behaviour. The same jokes

to disparage the police are also used to lower the strain. This use of humour to reduce tension gives the idea that humour use also has an opposite effect of preventing radicalisation.

*P3*: If you're banning all humour and you're getting more and more straight and getting into a fight mode, then that [banning of humour] makes radicalisation and not the humour. (...) in the Fridays For Future movement people are more laughing than in the Extinction Rebellion so the more you radicalise yourself, the less there is humour I would say. So quite the opposite. (...) So the other way around, perhaps humour can avoid a bad radicalisation.

Quite frankly suggesting that radicalisation is a humourless process and that humour therefore can halt the development of more radical convictions. Humour and radicalisation are negatively correlated according to *P3*, which is contradictory to the views of participants mentioned above. If humour and radical action do in fact not seem to work together, then the question arises whether radical activists overall also use less humour.

### ***Radical action and humour clash***

An interesting finding regarding the question mentioned above was the absence of humour within the radical left. It was explicitly stated by *P1*, 4, 5 and 6 that radical leftists tend to be very serious and make no use of humour: "Especially since a lot of social protests take themselves extremely seriously like the burden of saving the world is on your shoulder, there is no time to laugh" (*P4*). "They [activists] take it [their actions] quite seriously, I have not really experienced that much humour, it's always like, try to do quite tough and how serious is what we're doing and there was not a lot of space for humour, I felt." (*P6*)

*P4* and *P6* describe how the gravity of the activism beliefs leaves little room for humour. The radical left ideology is not something to be joked about, as it is severe and to be taken seriously. However, this lack of humour is considered to be a flaw by other participants: "I still have some [left-wing activist] contacts here in Berlin and also the young sometimes, are all, absolutely humourless. I consider this a serious limit" (*P5*). Additionally, *P1* substantiated the statement by saying:

*P1*: The radical left (...) are very humourless. They are really not funny. [laughter] It's just serious shit all the time and everything is taken so seriously. And I think that's what's sometimes really annoying because I'm like *Oh my God, don't take it so seriously, like, do you ever have fun?* (...) However, the radical left is, again, way too serious on topics and way too emotional on topics. And like, weakens themselves, with no effect.

High levels of strictness and solemnity might result in internal conflict and division.

P5 provides an example of how the radical left is fragmented into separate leftist groups:

“There has been a shift that we [radical left activists] are more and more pointing out or focusing on, or putting political movement into the singular, into the individual, (...) And that's also, I think from there it also comes that people are fighting against each other all the time. Like *Oh my God, this other left person just silenced me or like misgendered me*, and I think that's definitely a big topic, and I'm not... but this shouldn't be the main focus” (P5). This damages the activist solidarity that is vital to successful collective action, because the activists are no longer fighting together towards a collective cause, but each fighting for their own specific beliefs - even against other leftists.

The absence of humour is thus considered harmful to a movement. Even though multiple participants mention that joking around might lighten the tension and further the relationship between activists, participants report that the radical left is not known for its banter among activists. Humour might not fit into that image, but it may serve as a tool in alleviating some of the psychological pressure that many activists experience as a consequence of their continual fighting for change.

### ***Humour as a coping mechanism in activism***

Humour as a coping mechanism has been used for a long time to cope with the feeling of being responsible for saving the world. P4 explains this by saying:

*P4*: Well, there is this famous Emma Goldman saying ‘If I can't dance I don't want to be in your revolution’ and I like that very much. She said this in the early 1900 and it was meant as a part of the socialist and communist revolutions. Emma Goldman was an anarchist and what

she wanted to express is that political activism can't always be super serious, super severe, super tough, and super straight, there must be room for some fun like dancing and it must be possible to dance and not always to say: *Today we have to save the world*. I think it expresses something which is really important, that beyond these severe and serious business there must be some space for fun, humour, and enjoying emotions. So she at a very early stage way before the internet and the memes, she in a way nailed it in that one sentence.

The importance of humour in activism is emphasized here. Humour can be utilized to cope with different aspects of activism. We will analyse four ways in which humour can function as a coping mechanism, based on the different aspects of activism. This will be done in different sub-sections.

### **Humour as a coping mechanism to better interact or deal with other groups.**

Activism can get burdensome due to interactions with the police or other groups of activists. In some situations, these confrontations can even result in violence. According to P1,3,4,5,6 and 8 humour can help to cope with these interactions and the emotions that arise from them.

*I.B:* Do you think it [humour] also helps to release some stress from activists?

*P4:* Definitely, especially when you have these confrontations like when we drew a blockade in front of the nuclear power plant or when you have confrontations at the G8-summits with the police, there is an enormous level of stress on a physical and psychological level so laughing always eases these moments.

*P3:* So I remember a lot of more cynical jokes amongst us when we were dealing with all this Nazi movement. Because you had to get out your feelings somehow (...) but also kind of coping with the hatred you see or the threats you see and all that to also sometimes to make the situation better for those who are threatened really.

P3 and P4 describe different emotions that can arise from confrontation with the police or other groups. Humour can help deal with these feelings of stress, hate, tension and fear. P3 also mentions a specific kind of humour, cynical humour, when dealing with feelings of hate towards the other group. The use of cynical humour in this context might be used to



downgrade the other group, related to the above-mentioned joking about outgroups, which might lead to less negative feelings during and after a confrontation with that group. P8 mentions ironic humour when dealing with feelings of helplessness that can arise in situations where you feel powerless:

*P8:* The humour that I do like in protest is just being kind of ironic, when for example, when, I've witnessed being at a protest during corona like when the coronavirus was happening and then the police told the organizers to everyone have one like three feet apart, but then the police were so close that the people couldn't be apart. And just taking that with a bit of irony that's something that I find okay, that I do as well, because (...) the organizers make an announcement; alright guys try to be three feet apart, also with the cops or something ... then I mean, it's fine, it's funny. There's nothing you can do about the situation, so you just take it lightly, I guess. So I guess humour just helps take things lightly

Thus, it seems that different emotions can lead to different styles of humour being used, in the context of confrontation with others. Another differentiation that becomes apparent within dealing with other groups, is the moment in which humour is used. This can be during or after the confrontation:

*P6:* Like, everybody sat in a circle, singing *Wir haben Spaß*, [laughter] as the police were like surrounding the people, and that was the moment when I was really laughing about it because we're having fun here, we're sitting, listening to music, taking drinks, everybody was talking to each other, the police were standing there around us. In that situation, if everybody would have been like surrounded by the police, it could have been something so evil, like *Oh my God, we're here now, the police is around us*, but the people got together and they were singing songs, making fun of the police, holding together, listening to music, singing.

*P4:* When you're in such a tough confrontation and everything is so serious including your physical integrity then afterwards the news that you watch on tv about it is all super heavyweight, I think it's incredibly important to somehow let it go and share it with others.

It's usually much easier to laugh together than to do something else, but it is also important that you see how others feel.

This indicates that humour can sometimes help during confrontations to avoid a clash, and therefore avoid negative emotions that would otherwise arise during those clashes. By using humour, the tension decreases which creates more room to take a breath. In other words, humour can help de-escalate the situation. At other moments, emotions can get so high that there is no room for humour during the confrontation. In those situations when de-escalation is not possible, humour can function as a coping mechanism after the confrontation to then create the possibility to deal with those emotions and then let go of them.

**Humour as a coping mechanism to deal with emotions as a group.** Most activism takes place in groups, which means that people can also deal with emotions together. Examples of these emotions are hatred, anger, anxiety, sadness and helplessness. Humour can be used to cope with these emotions. According to P1,3,4,5 and 8, it is important to laugh together because it is a good way to get your feelings out and talk about what happened. In this way, humour can also help to de-stress and take away tension. Lastly, humour can also help to deal with feelings of repression.

P4: So similar to the clowns you have the possibility to be straightforward and attack someone or to take a different route which is maybe not from A to B directly but surrounding. By using humour, you make fun of someone and you allow people to express emotions and to laugh about the guy even though you feel like you want to cry because he's so super tough and so unfriendly, but you can laugh about it and that's also an opportunity to let emotions flow

P8: yeah, after a protest, you get like, you could go to a supermarket, buy something to drink and then just sit down on a bench and just kind of talk about the protest, kind of joke about it. And that does help unwind in my opinion. Sort of build down like, regress those feelings of anger you might have had.

*P7:* There was an Indian move- or like in an Indian village, whenever there would be a new repressive law, they would gather and read it out loud and laugh collectively about it. So, this would be like a gathering to kind of ridicule or to like free themselves from this repressive feeling, which is like standing in front of them.

At different moments, humour can be used in different ways to deal with emotions as a group. For example, during preparation for a protest or demonstration, humour can be used to ease the moment and release tension. In contrast, after a protest or confrontation, humour can make it easier to talk about the cause they stand for in a less heavy way. In addition, humour used after a protest or confrontation can also help to cope with things that happened during activism.

*P4:* Sometimes there were like twenty people in preparation for an event and everybody was so extremely tight and tense and if someone made a good joke all the tension flowed down like a river that flows down to the valley.

*P2:* I mean I feel like listening to the music made us feel like we're talking about this. And it just makes it more of a fun activity. I don't think we would have done it if we were just like if we never had a beer and if we never went out after it, we would have just been at the library just painted our posters and then we went. It made it more relaxed, more something enjoyable together.

*P2:* And this friend of mine, who also gave a speech she was like and next is the neighbourhood legend. And it was really fun, and everyone was really just laughing and just, I don't know, it makes it less formal and makes it more of a get-together.

**Humour as a coping mechanism to deal with emotions individually.** In addition to coping with emotions as a group, activists individually cope with emotions as well. Activists can deal with these feelings before, after and during collective actions. These negative emotions for instance are anger, anxiety or feelings of responsibility. These emotions can for example arise during protests when situations get heated.

*P6:* If you're in a situation, and you're walking along there and suddenly the flames are burning up, you hear the hammering of glass all around you, there's stones flying, cars burning, police officers beating people to shit if you see stuff like that... My heart was pounding, I really was in a state of survival there, I went down to primal instincts like, I don't know, live or die kind of. You see how people get beat to shit, get arrested, people officers are running behind you, and you know if you are not fast enough, they are going to catch you and beat you to shit on the ground.

Besides the functions of humour when coping with emotions in a group, participants talk about two additional functions of humour in the context of coping with emotions on an individual level. The first function is to cope with things they have seen. The second one is to tell themselves that what they did was the right thing to do. It is a way to justify what has happened and lower feelings of doubt and anxiety.

*P1:* Yeah. I feel like humour is sometimes a good thing to lower your own burden.

Aside from humour being a tool to lower the burden it is also a way to justify things you have done during a protest. Afterwards, activists realize what happened during a protest or demonstration. At moments like those, humour is a way to tell yourself that what you did was the right thing. It makes it easier to cope with feelings of doubt and anxiety.

*P6:* You need the humour to also kind of tell yourself you're right. Because maybe in situations like that you doubt your activism, you doubt what you are doing, because things sometimes get quite ugly. So, I guess humour is important to me sometimes too, to cope with the things I saw.

Concluding, humour can serve two additional purposes: to cope with what they saw and to justify their actions.

**Humour as a coping mechanism to continue the work of being an activist.** As stated above, humour can be used to deal with confrontations and emotions on an individual and group level. This can ease some of the burdens that activists experience, making it easier to continue the work of being an activist. Nevertheless, there are various reasons why being

an activist can also be burdensome. For example, activism does not always result in the change you wish to see, it costs a lot of effort, and there are various negative emotions to deal with. Also, activists often tend to put a lot of pressure on themselves, because they feel highly responsible for the cause they are fighting for.

*P6:* It really brings you down if you see how much effort is put in by people, how many people get hurt, and how little change, how much power the state still has. Seeing how many people get hurt and how many bruises there have been, how many head injuries from police batons, and still so little change. So yeah, it puts a lot of pressure on you.

*P2:* I feel like especially in left wing activism, there's always this really high standard that people put on themselves, speaking correctly and behaving correctly and just always having to be on the good side, I guess, and never allowing for anything populist. And I think sometimes it gets very tiring of always having to be the ones that phrase what they think well and that they really are thorough in how they express themselves and not never discriminating (...) That [humour] really helps relieve some of that responsibility that you feel like you have if you have a certain political opinion... if you identify with a certain group.

Humour as a coping mechanism to deal with feelings of pressure and responsibility is especially used after events or protests. Humour can then help to cope with these feelings. Also, laughing about things that have happened and being sarcastic can help to keep the morale up. This is especially useful when feelings of helplessness arise. There are always causes to keep fighting for, which can make it feel like there is no end to activism. Using humour might help with this.

*P3:* Demonstrations can get nasty as well, so there's always a kind of tension or even fear (...). You can't be active in this, in some ways, border ways to militants, without coping with it, without lowering the tension.

*P6:* It is always so emotional if you see things like that [policemen beating activists], again maybe to process it, but in situations like that you maybe only give humour to process the situation, to keep the comadre up, to not focus on the bad things that are happening. But kind

of making a joke out of it, like 'We gotta do this, what happened was shit'. Laughing about it, being sarcastic about it, and next time is going to be better. Maybe that can help to keep the morale up and the fighting spirit, but it doesn't necessarily relieve the pressure. It's still there, because you always experience it again and the humour doesn't stop it, because it's not my choice, it's the state and the problems in the world.

Another way in which humour can help activists to continue their work, is by bringing back some of the joy into activism. By making fun of situations, you can take away some of the seriousness.

*P6:* Humour is probably quite a powerful weapon because you can make fun of things and probably take the piss out of some situations, tone things down. (...) humour brings interest or brings away from the seriousness and more to the joy and the fun and kind of like, it brings people more into it I think.

*P4:* Political activism can't always be super serious, super severe, super tough, and super straight, there must be room for some fun like dancing and it must be possible to dance and not always to say: 'Today we have to save the world.' I think it expresses something which is really important that beyond these severe and serious business there must be some space for fun, humour, and enjoying emotions.

In conclusion, there are numerous reasons why activism can get burdensome. Humour can function as a coping mechanism in different ways to avoid the burden of being an activist getting too heavy, making it possible to continue the work of being an activist.

### **Inappropriateness of using humour in collective action**

Humour is widely used by activists; however, humour is not always appropriate. There are different situations in which humour might not be appropriate. First of all when others have been treated badly, and therefore emotions are high.

*P4:* If you see that others have been treated, let's say much worse than you and are crying, then it's inappropriate. So it very much depends on the situation. I think humour general a great weapon but you need to be very aware of how you can use it and direct it.

*P8:* Because if someone gets arrested and they also get like punched in the face and they're bleeding while being carried to the police truck, it's, I don't think it's appropriate to laugh about that, because somebody actually suffered and paid a heavy price. So it depends on the outcome if... if it was difficult, but everyone got home safely, then of course humour is a great way. If it didn't go well and people went to jail, then it's, I'm not sure if I would use humour. (...) But if someone you know suffers then that's not an appropriate moment for humour in my opinion.

*P6:* I'd say humour is not okay if you are talking about any of the serious issues, like humour at George Floyd. Taking humour for that, that'd be like totally out of place. Humour at serious issues where people got hurt, people even died, or people could die, or people's lives could be, how can I say, diminishing the actual worth of a human through humour. So as soon as humour attacks like, as soon as humour gets inhumane, like calls for violence maybe, in a sarcastic way, against minorities or people that don't really have to do, that can't do anything for their ethnic identity, for their skin colour, their age, whatever. I think as soon as humour attacks something people can't change, as soon as humour kind of calls for violence, it's not okay.

As described by these participants, these are conditions where there is no room for laughter. These conditions are all centred around the people from the ingroup, with a focus on the personal consequences of a clash with other groups or the police.

The second situation in which the use of humour might be inappropriate is when it takes away the focus from the cause that activists fight for.

*P1:* But... I feel like the radical left is, they're not really funny. They're really serious. And I think that, I don't know, sometimes it's really important because I mean especially on those days, you have, it's really important to remind yourself what this day actually is about and that this is a serious topic, and sometimes humour can also make the topic seem less important.

*P4:* If you're always funny there could be the danger of losing focus on the whole message. In a way it's naturally the case that the topics that you raise are in a way serious topics like

injustice, BLM-movement, neo-Nazis, racism, protests against summit G-8 and so on. In a way it's all serious business so if there's an overdose of humour it carries the risk that you lose the focus of your whole message. If you only make fun about things then people maybe don't take you serious enough so it's a question of dosing.

So, in order to keep focused on the goal, according to P1 and P4, you should abstain from using humour.

The last situation, which is mentioned by the participants, in which humour is not appropriate, is when it is used to make fun of someone on a personal level.

*P6:* So as soon as humour attacks like, as soon as humour gets inhumane, like calls for violence maybe, in a sarcastic way, against minorities or people that don't really have to do, that can't do anything for their ethnic identity, for their skin colour, their age, whatever. I think as soon as humour attacks something people can't change (...) it's not okay.

*J.L.:* And would you say there are moments where humour could be appropriate or not appropriate?

*P2:* Um, it's like always when it goes on, like personal level, but I feel like that's more generally my opinion than, like specifically on activism. And I feel like discriminating is never no, I don't ever like that in anyways and don't think that is supportive, ever. I think there are some lines that you should not, you should not cross them. (...) In fact, for me, it's mostly certain words that I use. I don't like when people say disabled, like in Germany, you know, it's a very common word to say. Yeah It's discriminating, and oftentimes I'm like please don't use that word. Why are you doing that? Because I feel like language is really impactful. And the only thing and that's the whole thing also with gendering. That's because our language is like the whole way we think, you know, and so impactful. So I think we should watch it.

When humour attacks specific people or groups, especially minorities it is thus not okay to use humour.

Concluding, when considering the use of humour in activism, it is important to keep in mind the situations in which humour might not be appropriate.



## Discussion

This thesis examines the effects of humour in collective action. Humour is a sympathetic way to express opposition (Billig, 2002), thus we assumed that humour could have the effect to broaden a collective action. But humour is at the same time a way to test social boundaries (Billig, 2002), in this manner, we asked if humour may also have the potential to facilitate a radicalisation process. This question was sustained as two functions of humour, in-group bonding (Wolfowicz et al., 2020), coping (Graham et al, 1992) may be factors in radicalisation processes, also worth consideration is transgression by Freud (1960).

As Benevento (2021) and Borum (2012) stated, radicalisation has positive as well as negative potential. In our interviews we asked neutrally about radicalisation, without bias to either positive or negative potential. As there is not much research to the connection between humour, collective action and radicalisation, our specific research question was: Could one of the effects of humour in collective action be to facilitate radicalisation processes?

This research focuses on the effects and the importance of humour, as it adds to the contemporary knowledge base and understanding of humour as an experience and additionally, as a functional tool within group processes, namely collective action. We were able to support the assumption that humour has indeed the potential effect to broaden collective action. Additionally, having investigated the facilitation potential of humour for radicalisation, we have found neither overly supporting evidence nor overly opposing evidence concerning the hypothesis that humour can be a facilitator in radicalisation processes.

### Theoretical implications

The results within our research are in line with Southam's findings (2004), showing that humour does indeed serve as a simplification tool, in this case in collective action and creating insight. Furthermore, we were able to support the claim that humour strengthens in-

group bonding, as Francis (1994) showed. We were also able to support the assumption that humour does have a function of in-group bonding stated by Graham et al. (1992). All participants agreed on the fact that those functions can broaden the movement, supporting the initial assumption. This was an exploratory study, with which we were able to point to specific functions of humour that could have a special potential to broaden collective action. This could be helpful when exploring this topic more in-depth.

Only a few participants have agreed that humour can radicalise, and especially the coping function of humour was relevant. However, it seems to be an overall understanding that broadening a movement often goes hand in hand with the radicalisation of parts of the movement. This connects to the findings of Wolfowicz et al. (2020), that a potential factor for radicalisation is the in-group connectedness which comes with the broadening of a collective action. The same applies to Sikkens (2016) that finding new followers on social media - at least comparable to broadening collective action - works when acting radically behind the protection of a joke.

From our study we firstly concluded, it may be possible that with the broadening of collective action - by creating insight and in group-bonding - there may be some more radical individuals that makeup parts of the mobilisation. Secondly, being involved could already be a form of radicalisation. But those are secondary effects. We concluded that while humour can broaden collective action, radicalisation and broadening collective action may be more closely intertwined than initially thought. However, since radicalisation and humour both do not have universal definitions, it may be of interest to investigate this further.

### **Practical implications**

It has been established within our small sample that humour can broaden collective action and with this have positive effects on social movements. This means that we advise to use humour in order to create a more harmonious environment and atmosphere for people of

any movement. Former activists have said that they would have wished for more humour use during their time as activists, they have said that humour is missing in many movements and that anytime they have witnessed the use of humour. The participants deeply admired the courage of the people using humour. Inferring, it seemed an overall agreement that humour should be used more frequently in collective action.

### **Limitations**

Limitations to this study include first and foremost the sample size. A sample of  $N = 8$  people is simply too small to be able to generalise anything on a larger scale. This may quite easily be resolved with a different sample technique. This leads to another limitation of the study. The sample was solely based on personal connections from one researcher only. Leading to the small sample size mentioned above. Another approach to this could have been to recruit students from a political university, make use of more snowballing sampling, as well as reach out to potential participants through online questionnaires. This may resolve the limitations of both the generalizability and the small sample size, which go hand in hand.

Oppositely, the personal approach was enormously productive. We were able to establish an open atmosphere and motivated the participants to go deeper in their own understanding, to open up and to look with interest on their own experiences. This was a very fitting setting for an exploratory study. Also, the personal connection to the participants, being a limitation to the study as well as, in this case, an advantage, helping the participants to open up. It is not easy to find left-wing activists willing to open up and answer truthfully, leading to a special sample of answers. It may be a small sample, but in contrast to an online questionnaire it is reliable focusing on quality rather than quantity.

Another limitation that comes to mind is the language used. All participants were of German origin, thus making the language used in the interview only a secondary language. This may create barriers and problems for participants to express themselves as freely as they

would in their mother tongue. This may be more easily countered by creating this research in one language only.

### **Future research**

Suggestions for future research include more connections between topics. This may be necessary as, in the process of the research, it has become more and more apparent that subthemes may be intertwined more than expected. Our questions were too open and too broad and they would have to target more specific elements of radicalisation, that is why this approach would need another exploratory study with a different set of questions. Including social indicators as well as behavioural indicators in the study might be helpful for future research, as it became clear in the interviews that radicalisation is multifaceted and the functions of humour can only be part of the whole picture.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this research has come to many conclusions, new insights as well as only partially supporting the assumptions, as no direct causal link was established between humour and radicalisation. However, we conducted an exploratory study aimed at delivering more concrete questions and hypotheses for future research, which was successful. Humour has various effects in the context of collective action, such as broadening of collective action, in-group bonding and creating insight into collective action. However, all of these effects need further research to establish many more ways in which humour may moderate.

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## Appendix A

### Interview questions

1. Introduction about our interests in the functions of humour around collective action. (*limit this to a couple of minutes*)
  - a. Oral informed consent as specified in the document for the ethics request.
1. Involvement in collective action (*limit this to a couple of minutes*)
  - a. What kinds of activism / fighting for social change have you taken part in?  
Think of any kind of action you've undertaken to further the collective cause, for instance on the streets or on social media.
  - b. For which cause(s)?
    - a. How would you describe your involvement in fighting for this cause / these causes?  
How involved have you been, in which roles (participating, organizing), and for how long?
3. Functions of humour
  - a. So, are these actions always serious, or are you also having fun?
  - b. Can you think of a time when you had fun or made fun in any way around your fight for social change? I'm interested in fun broadly connected to action, so not only during a specific action, but also during the lead-up to or aftermath of an action.
  - c. Can you walk me through what exactly was fun about this instance?
  - d. Can you explain why you were having or making fun? Did you try to achieve something by having / making fun? What?
    - i. *If they don't understand what you're asking for, you can probe for specific functions / give examples:* For instance, sometimes people have fun to lighten their mood or to

strengthen their bonds with others. Or people may make fun of something because it feels awkward. Or they present something as “just a joke” to avoid others’ disapproval.

- e. Can you provide other examples of when you have had or made fun in any way around your fight for social change? That is, during, in the lead-up to, or after an action.
  - a. *If no occasions* ☐ Why not?
2. Appropriateness of humour
  - a. Why do you think fun is so frequent/rare around the cause you are fighting for?
  - b. Do you think there is anything that might make fun around this cause inappropriate?
3. Violence around collective action
  - a. Protests can reach a certain tipping point, when the atmosphere becomes tense or grim.
    - b. Can you think of a time when you felt that this tipping point happened?
    - c. Can you walk me through what you experienced during this instance?
    - d. Why do you think the tipping point was reached here?
    - e. In situations like this, when the atmosphere changes, some people move to the front and others step back. Have you noticed people in your environment who enjoy these situations, who are having fun?
    - f. Can you explain why they/you were having or making fun? Did they/you try to achieve something by having / making fun? What?
    - i. *If they don't understand what you're asking for, you can probe for specific functions / give examples:* For instance, sometimes people have fun to lighten their mood or to strengthen their bonds with others. Or people may make fun of something because it feels awkward. Or they present something as “just a joke” to avoid others’ disapproval.

- g. We have now talked about fun during such an event. Sometimes people also have fun when looking back at grim or tense situations. Can you think of a time when this happened?
- h. Can you walk me through what you experienced during this instance?
- i. Can you explain why you were having or making fun? Did you try to achieve something by having / making fun? What?
- i. *If they don't understand what you're asking for, you can probe for specific functions / give examples:* For instance, sometimes people have fun to lighten their mood or to strengthen their bonds with others. Or people may make fun of something because it feels awkward. Or they present something as “just a joke” to avoid others’ disapproval.
- j. Can you provide other examples of when you or others had fun around a grim or tense protest? That is, during, in the lead-up to, or after a grim or tense protest.
- k. Can you walk me through what you experienced during this instance?
- l. Can you explain why they/you were having or making fun? Did they/you try to achieve something by having / making fun? What?
- 4. Is there anything else you would like to mention about fun around collective action?
- 5. Checklist: Probe about specific functions of humour, based on literature / our interests
  - a. Is there any way in which fun might play a role in shifting the boundaries of the acceptable / radicalisation / acceptance of violence?
  - b. Is there any way in which fun might play a role in increasing awareness / mobilization of the wider public?
    - i. Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, if people use funny memers or signs during a demonstration to attract the general public’s attention.
  - c. Is there any way in which fun might play a role in coping with psychological pressure from activism / stigmatized identity / activist burnout?

- i. Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, using a joke to cheer someone (or yourself) up or to make the cause you stand for less heavy on your shoulders.
- d. Is there any way in which fun might play a role in strengthening ties among activists / strengthening social identity?
  - i. Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, joking among each other and laughing together.
- e. Is there any way in which fun might play a role in self-presentation of activists to the outside world / non-activists?
  - i. Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, making a joke about your involvement in activism to make an interaction with someone less awkward.
- f. Can you think of situations in which fun around the fight for this cause would be inappropriate?
  - i. Probe / examples if necessary: For instance, joking about a certain topic as taboo because the topic is a serious real-life problem.
- 6. Demographic details: Age (in broader categories to prevent identification), gender, country of residence
- 7. Thanks, finish interview, ask whether they know someone else with whom we might want to talk about these topics of fun and protest too.

## Appendix B

### Final coding scheme

Theme	Sub-theme	Code
Sample description	CA background: Movements and topics	Anti-facism
		Feminism
		Racism / BLM
		Anti-capitalism
		Anarchist / anti-system
		RAF
		Climate activism
		Communism
		Not fitting in with existing groups
		Social injustice
	Ways of activism	Protest on the streets
		Journalism

Squitting

Identity politics

Solidarity

Social context

Mention of (radical-)left  
sub-groups / fractioning

Competition / negativity between sub-groups

Criticism of “performative action”

Division between mainstream “woke” people  
and “real” left

Emotions around CA

Anxiety / scared

Anger

Enjoyment / enthusiasm / having fun

Empowerment / feeling strong

Humour can take away the seriousness

General typology of  
humour

Subject of humour

Making fun of police

Making fun of non-activists

Making fun of right-wing

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 Making fun of politicians
 

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Different media of humour around CA      Memes / social media

Other (non-meme) graphic / visual / art

Music / chants

Performance (also including clowns during demo)

Verbal / conversational (telling jokes)

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Functions of humour      Humour and radical action / radicalisation / escalation      Radical action and humour clash / radicals tough activists have no humour / feelings of anger or taking a topic seriously clash with humour

Humour can stimulate radicalisation / escalation

Humour can prevent radicalisation / escalation

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Humour and political identification / mobilization      Humour can be used for ingroup building / bonding

Humour can energize CA

Humour can cause a nice atmosphere  
/ entertainment / having fun together

Humour can broaden the movement, create  
insight / recognition / awareness among a  
broader audience

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Humour and making people smaller / more human      Humour can make activists seem more  
“human” / approachable to non-activists

Humour can make police seem more “human” /  
less power = easier and less scary target /  
opponent (escalating)

Humour can make police seem more “human” /  
less power = reducing necessity for violence  
against them (de-escalating)

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Humour and coping

Humour can help cope with responsibility of being an activist / can make activists feel good about what they do

Humour can help cope with danger / threat / anxiety, can help people admit they are scared or overwhelmed

Humour can distract from pressure / fear

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Humour and creating distance

Humour can create distance from a situation = facilitate de-escalation

Humour can create distance from police = facilitate escalation (“they are not like us”)

Humour can create distance between activists and the general public = no increase in awareness / mobilization

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Inappropriateness of humour

Group & topic: for left-wing activists politically incorrect humour is inappropriate

OR Arguments against humour use

Use: humour is not appreciated if it is the only form of CA (e.g. only joking / memes, instead of part of the repertoire)

Topic & group: humour about other people's (not own) suffering is inappropriate

Humour to facilitate violence is wrong

Humour as ineffective (this is another argument against humour use, other than whether it is appropriate)

Humour as not fitting with one's personality (this is another argument against humour use, other than whether it is appropriate)

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Violence / radical  
CA

Attitudes towards violence

Avoidance of violence

Violence undermines the message

Violence can be fun

Violence is (sometimes) necessary to achieve change

Violence is provoked by police mere presence

Violence is provoked by police behavior

Image of ANTIFA as violent

Being targeted by police violence provides status

Violence as male / testosterone thing

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Other (inductive) themes we note in the interviews

Inter-generation comparisons / relations among activists

Different generations coming / working together

Different generations having different approaches

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*Note.* CA stands for Collective Action.