

**Slavoj Zizek, *Zizek's Jokes (Did you hear the one about Hegel and negation?)* Edited by Audun Mortensen. Afterward by Momus. 2014
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.**

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Zizek's Jokes is a collection of jokes found in various books published by Slavoj Zizek, an important philosopher and culture critic. It contains, we are told on the last page of the book, “every joke cited, paraphrased, or narrated in Zizek’s work in English (including some in unpublished manuscripts) including different versions of the same joke that make different points in different contexts. The larger point being that comedy is central to Zizek’s seriousness.” This is an important matter for we see that humor isn’t solemn but it can be serious.

We find that Zizek, one of the most important cultural theorists of the present time, has a wonderful sense of humor and that humor plays an important role in his thinking and writing. The photographs we see of Zizek in the book show a rather grim, ragged person, in a black tee shirt, who almost seems to be frowning. What we learn from reading his book is that beneath that rather gruff exterior is a person with a very strong comedic bent, which he uses to explicate the ideas of various philosophers and thinkers, such as Hegel, Lacan and Heidegger.

Some of the texts in this book are not really jokes, if we define jokes as short narratives meant to amuse, with punch lines. Thus, the first text in this book, “Three Whites and Two Blacks” deals with Lacan’s text on logical time which, Zizek explains, comes from an eighteenth-century French joke about three women prisoners who spend a considerable amount of time being penetrated from behind (Zizek is liberal with his use of the term “fucked”) who must determine the color of the man fucking them. If they can do that, they will be released. He concluded his discussion of this narrative writing “The message of the logical puzzle thus become

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more ambiguous: the three women are observing each other while having sex and what they have to establish is not simply “Who’s is fucking me, a black or a white guy?” but rather, “What am I for the Other’s gaze while I am being fucked?” as if here very identity is established this gaze.” This text isn’t really a joke, but an amusing story.

This text takes three pages. The rest of the jokes in the book generally take a page or less, though his text “A Comic Hegelian Interlude: Dumb and Dumber” takes five pages and is full of Bush and Quayle jokes. Žižek sees a Hegelian quality to Quayle’s comment “It isn’t pollution that’s harming the environment. It’s the impurities in our air and water that are doing it.” Žižek sees something interesting in Bush’s comment “I believe we are on an irreversible trend towards more freedom and democracy—but that could change.” Žižek has a lot of fun with Quayle and Bush tying them to Heidegger’s famous reversal, “the essence of truth is the truth of essence,” postmodern thought, and so on.

Many of the jokes in the book have a political dimension to them. Thus, he offers the following joke:

A German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by censors he tells his friends: “Let’s establish a code: if a letter you will get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it is true; if it is written in red ink, it is false.” After a month, his friends get the first letter, written in blue ink “Everything is wonderful here; stores are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, movie theaters show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair—the only thing unavailable is *red ink*.”

Some of his jokes are variations on well-known jokes, such as a joke he tells about Radio Erevan:

IN AN OLD SOVIET JOKE, a listener asks Radio Erevan: “Did Rabinovich win a new car in the state lottery?” Radio Erevan replies: “In principle, yes-- he did.

Only it was not a car but a bicycle, it was not new but old, and he did not win it, it was stolen from him.”?

This is a variation of the famous Radio Erevan joke:

A man calls Radio Erevan and asks “Is it true that Comrade Grukin won ten thousand rubles in the state lottery?” “Yes,” replied Radio Erevan, “But it was not Comrade Grukin but Comrade Schmetena, and it wasn’t ten thousand rubles but five thousand rubles, and he didn’t win it in the lottery but lost it gambling.

What is important to recognize about *Žižek's Jokes* is that it contains some wonderful jokes and that Žižek often ties his jokes to philosophical thought and the theories of some of our influential thinkers. Thus, jokes (and humor in general) often have profound philosophical implications of which we generally are unaware—unless we have someone like Žižek to call our attention to them.