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Satire, racist humour and the power of (un)laughter: On the restrained nature of Swedish online racist discourse targeting EU-migrants begging for money

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Abstract

Online racist discourse, in contrast to offline varieties, is often assumed to be emotionally unrestrained due to the anonymity of online settings. Taking an affective-discursive practice approach, the present study challenges that assumption by analysing online racist satire and other forms of racist humour targeting EU-migrants begging for money, as well as responses evoked by such humorous attempts, appearing in two discussion threads on the Swedish website *Flashback*. A discourse analysis is conducted, drawing on insights from theories of satirical discursive practice, critical approaches to humour, and the sociology of emotions. The results show that online racism may be articulated in subtle and restrained as well as more explicit ways through different humorous techniques. Furthermore, laughing and unlaughing responses to satire and other forms of humour reveal an online racist affective-discursive order in the making, which demands clarity in articulating racist messages. This points to online racism's restrained nature.

Keywords: racism, discourse, satire, humour, unlaughter, affect, emotion, online

Author biography

Karl Malmqvist received his PhD in Sociology from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, where he is also a researcher. Currently, he is a visiting post-doc at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, where he is working on a research project concerned with affective-discursive articulations of racism in new media contexts. His research interests also include normative transformations in the Swedish literary public sphere in the 20th and 21st centuries.

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Satire, racist humour, and the power of (un)laughter: On the restrained nature of Swedish online racist discourse targeting EU-migrants begging for money

Introduction

The present article analyses online racist affective-discursive practices, focusing specifically on racist satire appearing in online discussions about EU-migrants begging for money taking place on the Swedish discussion website *Flashback* (www.flashback.org). Racist satire is placed in the context of discursive interactions in this online arena and compared to other forms of racist humour articulated there. The analytical focus is on the relative subtlety of different forms of online racist humorous discourse, as well as on the order unfolding in online racist humorous interactions.

EU-migrants begging for money are a central concern in contemporary Swedish politics and public debate. Their precarious living conditions have received attention and action has been taken to cater for their rights and needs (see e.g. Pettersson 2014; Nebel 2014). But there have also been campaigns for criminalizing street begging, campaigns more or less explicitly targeting EU-migrants (e.g. Sverigedemokraterna 2014; Magnusson 2014). Furthermore, Roma EU-migrants have

been the target of Swedish online racist discourse on *Flashback* for several years, as will be seen in the analyses below. And recently, several tent camps of Roma EU-migrants have been burned down in racist attacks, which were both applauded and, it seems, partly planned in discussion threads on *Flashback* (e.g. Habul 2014; Ankersen 2014). This strongly motivates investigating Swedish online racist discourse targeting EU-migrants, particularly in the *Flashback* setting.

Furthermore, this article also has a theoretical concern, reflected in the focus on racist satire. In Swedish public discourse (e.g. Bjurwald 2013; Helin 2011), as well as in some research on online racism reviewed below, it is assumed that online articulations of racism result from the anonymity of online settings, where people presumably lose or give up their attempts to restrain themselves emotionally, not needing to take others' evaluations into account. This suggests that the subtlety and indirection of contemporary racism pointed out in discursive research, also reviewed in the next section, would not be present in online articulations of racism. However, this ignores the possibility that racism may be discursively expressed in different, more or less subtle and restrained ways, including indirect modes such as satire, online as well as offline. Furthermore, while online racist articulations may seem unrestrained from the point of view of mainstream discourse, this does not mean that online interactions articulating racism do not accomplish *some* order demanding a certain emotional restraint, although a very different one from that demanded by mainstream discourse.

Thus, the present article aims to problematize the assumption about online racist discourse as unrestrained by raising the following questions: (1) How might satire be used as a subtle affective articulation of racism in *Flashback* discourse about EU-migrants begging for money, and how does satire differ in this respect from other forms of racist humour in this online discursive arena? (2) How might interactions unfolding around satire and other forms of humour accomplish a racist order around humour in *Flashback* discourse?

Before critically reviewing research about restraint in online and offline racism, an important point has to be made. Referring to racist satire and other types of racist articulation as ‘humour’ is not intended to convey an aesthetic judgment from my side. It only refers to discursive practices the participants *themselves present* as humorous, and to the use of discursive *techniques* typically involved in humorous communication, in online articulations of racism.

Perspectives on online racist discourse

Research background: online racism, restrained or unrestrained?

Discursively oriented research has stressed the subtle and indirect nature of contemporary racist discourse. For example, denials and disclaimers often precede

articulations of racism, and rhetorical strategies are often used to communicate racism without explicitly derogatory words for migrants and minorities (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2014; Van Dijk 2000; 1992). This is due to norms against explicitly expressing racism (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2014; Feagin 2013; Billig 2001) and feelings of superiority (Wouters 2007; 1998) in contemporary Western societies, making subtle communication necessary in ‘frontstage’ settings (Picca and Feagin 2007).

However, this discursive requirement of ‘political correctness’ is commonly suggested not to hold online. For instance, comparing online forum discussions with a public meeting, Coffey and Woolworth (2004: 10) argue that ‘the anonymity the Internet affords gives prejudiced people license to publicly express racial attitudes’, while ‘communication in the physical presence of others does tend to bring about restraint’. Similar claims are made in other recent research on online racism (e.g. Steinfeldt, Foltz and Kaladow et al 2010: 368; Melican and Dixon 2008: 152). Such arguments echo the notion of ‘online disinhibition’ (e.g. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012; Suler 2004), a version of Zimbardo’s (1969) theory of ‘deindividuation’: under anonymous conditions, people lose, or give up, their sense of self and their adherence to norms and expectations of others, whereby their behaviour becomes intensely emotional, impulsive, irrational – i.e. unrestrained (Zimbardo 1969: 253).

Other research, however, suggests that online racist discursive practices are not always unrestrained. Daniels (2009a; 2009b) investigates ‘cloaked websites’,

which communicate racist positions in a subtle way that uninformed users might mistake for civil rights discourse. Such ‘coded’ practices in online racist discourse, resulting from increased monitoring of online user comments, lead Hughey and Daniels (2013: 338) to call for a new ‘Racial Internet Literacy’ sensitive to the subtle ‘slang and language of virtual racial invective and messaging’. The present article aims to contribute to such literacy by focusing on the use of humorous, particularly satirical, racist discursive practices in *Flashback* discussions about EU-migrants begging for money.

Furthermore, against ‘online disinhibition’, proponents of the social identity model of deindividuation effects (e.g. Reicher, Spears and Postmes 1995) show that anonymous individuals do not act aggressively towards out-groups due to *loss* of restraint; rather, individuals are *more* susceptible to restraint, i.e. conformity to in-group norms of hostility towards out-groups, under anonymous online circumstances where their social identities are salient (e.g. Reicher, Spears and Postmes 1995; see also Douglas and McGarty 2001; 2002; Spears and Lea 1994). This suggests that online racist articulations are shaped by in-group norms, and not only by general norms of ‘political correctness’, as suggested by the research on racist discourse reviewed above.

However, as suggested by Wetherell and Potter (1992), social identity theory typically ignores how such in-group norms, or normative orders, are *accomplished* in discursive interactions. This may be said about the ‘online

disinhibition' perspective as well. In contrast, the present article aims to analyse not only the subtle ways in which satirical humorous discourse articulates racist positions, whereby 'political correctness' is circumnavigated, but also how a racist, in-group normative order is accomplished in humorous discursive practices unfolding in discussions about EU-migrants on *Flashback*.

(Un)restrained emotion, affective-discursive practice, and research on online racist humour

Furthermore, social identity theory tends to ignore affect and emotion (Billig 2002). The same could be said about the discursive research on racism reviewed so far (cf. below).¹ Emotions are part of the original 'disinhibition' paradigm, albeit in a problematic way. First, in contrast to this paradigm, hatred and violence against out-groups involve the active repression or restraint of some emotions (notably shame, but also empathy; e.g. Scheff 1990; 2003; 2004; Turner 2007; Vetlesen 2011) while others are actively cultivated. The latter include anger, but also happiness, satisfaction, and pride about inflicting harm upon enemies (Turner 2007; Vetlesen 2011). This suggests the importance of humour in racist discursive interaction (see below).

Second, the 'disinhibition' perspective assumes that emotions are inner, pre-discursive entities restrained by 'rational' judgment in non-anonymous settings, but

released in anonymous settings (e.g. Zimbardo 1969: 259). Thus, emotions involved in aggressive behaviour are seen as ‘things’ with certain intrinsic properties that make them inherently irrational to express, regardless of discursive context. This assumption takes a particular normative order of emotional restraint for granted, ignoring that classifying some emotional expressions as ‘irrational’ (or ‘aggressive’ or ‘violent’) is a *judgment*, rather than an objective description (a similar argument is made by Burkitt 2014: 4). Such an assumption is less useful when the problem to be investigated is whether and how online racist humorous articulations might be restrained by and involved in accomplishing order.

In contrast, the present article approaches online racist discourse as an *affective-discursive practice* (e.g. Wetherell 2014; 2013; 2012). Such a perspective treats emotions as inseparable from the ongoing discursive interactions in which they are made meaningful (Wetherell 2014: 86). Furthermore, it treats the articulation of emotions as inextricably entangled in the accomplishment of ordered patterns of social relationships (Wetherell 2012: 24), while at the same time recognizing that such ordered patterns and the affective meaning-making involved in them are contingent (or ‘could be otherwise’, p. 4). Thus, in the present article, articulations of emotions in online racist discourse are studied as part of interactional processes of accomplishing affective-discursive order, rather than measured against a taken-for-granted order of emotional restraint. In particular, it focuses on the use of the subtle humorous practice of satire to

articulate emotions in online racist discussions under scrutiny and on the order of racist humour emerging in responses to satire.

This brings me to the affective-discursive practice of online racist humour. Billig (2001) argues that the meta-discourse of online racist joke sites disrupts mainstream boundaries of reason, allowing expression of violent racist fantasies otherwise discursively repressed. In a different way, Weaver (2011) analyses how the rhetorical structure of online racist jokes strengthens racist claims to ‘truth’, thus reducing modern ambivalences around the Other and contributing to racist order building. Unlike Weaver, and following the affective-discursive practice perspective just outlined, I focus on the *interactional practice* of racist humorous order building as well as its rhetorical structures. Unlike Billig, I focus on the boundaries *accomplished*, and not only those disrupted, in online racist affective-discursive interactions around satire and other humour forms. Finally, neither Billig nor Weaver specifically addresses the use of *satire* in online racist discourse (although Weaver discusses it in relation to the Danish Muhammad Cartoons). The next section outlines the components of satirical humour relevant for the analysis of online racist discourse about EU-migrants begging for money in Sweden.

Racist satirical discourse

The structure of satirical discourse. With Frye's often-quoted formulation, satire may be defined as 'militant irony' (Frye 1990/1957: 223), i.e. irony used for the purpose of attack. Irony is an indirect mode of communication (e.g. Berger 1997: 27). But in what sense is satirical humorous discourse ironic?

According to Simpson (2003), any satirical discursive act (utterance, text, image) involves two types of irony, played out against each other. First, satire involves *echoic* irony, i.e. it *imitates* some other act in an abstract or generalized way that aligns the echoed act with the position of the satirist and creates ironic distance to its original source. Simpson labels this the *prime* of satirical discourse (p. 95–96). However, secondly, a discursive act is not satirical unless a *dialectic* form of irony is introduced. This creates a tension within the satirical piece by bringing in some sort of opposition, creating an *incongruity*, which runs counter to the expectations following from the discursive act echoed in the satirical piece (p. 96), for instance by combining presumably incompatible concepts. It is this incongruity that creates the humorous effect of satire, in accordance with a common notion of incongruity as a 'divergence from expectation' (Attardo 2014: 383).

However, not all incongruities are equally humorous. According to Billig (2005), incongruity theory², stating that comic effect arises from unexpected combinations of incompatible ideas, downplays humour's relational and emotional aspects. But to explain why only some incongruities are seen as funny, Billig suggests,

humorous incongruities should not be separated from hierarchical social relationships and associated feelings of superiority and inferiority, legitimacy and illegitimacy (Billig 2005: 72–73; see also Weaver 2011 and Critchley 2002).

This points towards the so-called superiority theory of humour, as stated by Kemper (2011: 61): ‘We laugh [...] when we have triumphed, either via overpowering an opponent or attaining a sign of our eminence, that is, receiving some sense of status enhancement’. This follows from Kemper’s status-power theory, according to which emotions are responses to outcomes of status and power relations; thus, while joy (and laughter) follows from an increase in one’s own status, another’s claim to status that is deemed to be illegitimate evokes contempt (p. 33). However, following Billig, joy in superiority and contempt are not necessarily separate and discrete entities, but may be articulated simultaneously; status differentials deemed legitimate may be supported rhetorically by presenting ideas to the contrary as incongruous, whereby both joy and contempt are articulated through ridicule (see Billig 2005: 70–73).

Satire as practice: uptake, (un)laughter, and the humour community. So far, I have been concerned with the structural features of satirical discursive acts and their social and affective-practical implications. To be ‘successful’, however, satire needs to be recognized and approved by its addressee. This ‘uptake’ of satire is far from

straightforward (Simpson 2003: 153), which brings me to the nature of satirical discursive practice.

According to Simpson, satirical practice involves a triangle of relationships between the satirist (producing the satire), the satiree (the receiver), and the target. The satirist usually disapproves of the target, and strives to make the satiree an ally in this disapprobation. For this to be successful, the satiree has to accept the satirical ‘footing’ offered by the satirist. If this fails, the bond between the satirist and the satiree may instead become weakened (Simpson 2003: 85–88).

Importantly, rejection of the satirical footing is not necessarily a result of the satiree’s cognitive failure to ‘get the joke’. Simpson argues that satire works to suspend the validity claim of sincerity. But even if the satiree recognizes that the satirist is insincere, other validity claims may shape his/her response. While recognized insincerity also subverts any truth claim, it does not necessarily rule out a judgment of the satirical attempt based on claims to appropriateness. Thus, even if the satiree ‘gets the joke’, he/she may still reject the satirical attempt as inappropriate (Simpson 2003: 165–166).

Here I assume that rejection of a satirical attempt may be communicated rhetorically through *unlaughter* (Billig 2005). Laughter and other expressions of amusement are rhetorical; social actors use them to communicate meanings and position themselves in conversations (p. 189–192). But this also goes for unlaughter, i.e. ‘a

display of *not* laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded' (p. 192, emphasis added). Due to its nature as a rhetorical practice, Billig points out that laughter may communicate and maintain social order. Laughter unifies those who laugh against the target of ridicule (p. 194). Thereby, it may be a means of bringing transgressors of order back into line (p. 234–235). Unlaughter should have a similar ordering and boundary-maintaining potential (p. 199; see also Smith 2009: 159).

Finally, for 'successful' uptake, satire must be in tune with the audience, understood as a 'humour community' characterized by 'likemindedness' and 'political affiliation' (Simpson 2003: 59). Thus, following Weaver (2011), an incongruity presented in humour must not "'threaten" the existence of the habitus' (p. 26) of a humour community, i.e., 'successful' humour confirms the audience's assumptions about social relationships. Otherwise, the utterance remains ambivalent, and anxiety and uncertainty follow (p. 34). This could partly explain rejections of satire as inappropriate even when the satirist's insincerity is recognized (see above).

Data and method

The present article focuses on discussions about EU-migrants begging for money in two discussion threads in the forum 'Integration och invandring' ('Integration and immigration') on the Swedish discussion website *Flashback* (www.flashback.org). In

particular, it focuses on one of these threads, titled ‘Bör tiggeri ses om [sic.] arbete och därmed EU-migranterna som arbetskrafts-invandrare’ (‘Should begging be seen as a job and therefore the EU-migrants as labour migrants?’; *Flashback* 2014). This thread unfolds around a piece of satirical discourse on EU-migrants and contained 66 posts when downloaded on June 2, 2014. The second thread, ‘Invandrare som tigger’ (‘Immigrants who beg’, *Flashback* 2011/2012)³, which contained 3.131 posts when downloaded on April 11, 2014, is mainly used here as a contextualization of the satirical discursive practice emerging in the first thread, and the analysis focuses on stories articulating superiority humour and responses to them. The analyses focus on the *responses* to satire and other forms of humour as well as on these more or less subtle modes of humorous discourse in themselves, since it is assumed that whether emotional expression is spontaneous or restrained can only be determined by looking at unfolding affective-discursive practices (see (Un)restrained emotion, affective-discursive practice, and research on online racist humour).

Some reasons for investigating satirical and other humorous affective-discursive practices in the specific context of discussions on *Flashback* about EU-migrants begging for money were mentioned in the introduction. There are, however, other reasons for looking at racist discourse on *Flashback*. First, according to *Flashback*, the site has 919.713 members and contains 48.282.118 posts (17 November 2014). Thus, the site arguably has a considerable reach, and it does not only attract

racists, but hosts forums and discussion threads concerned with all sorts of topics, from food and computer technology to drugs and, which is most relevant here, political and cultural issues, including those debated in the ‘integration and immigration’ forum dealt with in the present article.⁴ Secondly, while some user-moderation and rules of conduct exist on *Flashback*, there is no requirement of identifiability; indeed, *Flashback* presents itself as ‘Freedom of speech for real’. The ‘disinhibition’ assumption discussed above would lead one to expect that because of this anonymity, racism would be expressed in an unrestrained way on *Flashback*. Thus, *Flashback* serves as a critical case (Flyvbjerg 2006), since, if *Flashback* racist discourse displays subtle and restrained characteristics, this seems orthogonal to the ‘disinhibition’ assumption, lending support to research emphasizing the subtle and restrained nature of online racist discourse, reviewed above. This also motivates the specific interest in satire here, since satirical discourse is an indirect means of communication.

Analytically, the present study focuses on subtle affective articulations in online racist discursive practice, as exemplified by satire and responses to it, and such articulations are contrasted with non-satirical narratives presented as humorous and with the responses to these narratives. In analysing satire, the procedure was to locate the central satirical elements following Simpson: the echoic *prime* and the *dialectic* incongruity intended to be humorous (Simpson 2003; see also above). Like the analysis of all humorous discourse (Weaver 2011: 32), this procedure required both

contextualization in the case of the prime (what is the echoed discursive target of satire and how is it echoed?), and analysis of paradigmatic oppositions upon which central incongruities are built in the case of the dialectic. Contextualization also meant looking back on earlier discussions about migrant beggars on *Flashback* in order to locate paradigmatic oppositions circulating in this particular arena that make the satire appear incongruous without this being explicitly articulated.

Furthermore, contextual comparisons were made with non-satirical humorous narratives about encounters with EU-migrants in *Flashback* discourse. Following Kleres (2010), who builds on Frye (1990/1957), these narratives were analysed as ‘comic’ narratives structured around a movement towards the protagonist’s active achievement of ‘triumph over [...] obstructions’ created by other characters in the story, thereby articulating a ‘cheerful, joyous emotional universe [...]’ (Kleres 2011: 192). However, in analysing this universe, attention was also paid to lexical and paraverbal markers presenting the narratives as humorous (e.g. Kleres 2011: 194–195).

Regarding responses to both satirical and non-satirical humour, the analysis focused on articulations of amusement and non-amusement, both paraverbal and verbal. Instances of the former might include visual markers such as emoticons and avatars as well as onomatopoeic utterances like ‘haha’, while instances of the latter might include everything from utterances of the type ‘Dead on target’ to more sophisticated examples of *mode adoption*, where the satirical or other humorous

practice is continued in a manner similar to the original satirical piece (Simpson 2003: 182), indicating amusement. Furthermore, the analysis included meta-discursive markers in relation to satirical discourse, presenting particular utterances as intended to be read as funny or serious (see Billig 2001).

In this connection, how was unlaughter analysed? Billig's definition of 'unlaughter' (quoted above; see also Billig 2005: 192) implies that the context in which laughter is absent is enough to determine whether unlaughter is practiced (i.e. is amusement expected in this context?). Apart from this, however, he suggests (p. 193) that unlaughter should also explicitly indicate recognition of non-serious intent.⁵ Given this, the analysis looked for unlaughter in a strict sense, i.e. signs of non-amusement plus explicit reference to a recognized non-serious intent (e.g. 'That's really not funny'), as well as for other instances where amusement seems expected but is absent, the latter possibly indicating disapproval by rejecting the humorous discursive mode (see Simpson 2003: 182), rather than a failure to recognize insincerity, although insincerity is not explicitly referred to.

All *Flashback* posts quoted in the following analyses are translated from Swedish, and all translations are my own. To enhance understanding and readability, and because of difficulties in translating errors from one language into another, I have translated most Swedish passages containing serious linguistic errors into correct English. Apart from this, I have strived to make the translations as literal as possible

and to retain the style of the original posts. A few words that were difficult to translate literally are provided with explanatory notes.

Analysis

Prime and dialectic in Flashback satire

The first part of the analysis of racist satire on *Flashback* seeks to answer four questions: What is satirical about the opening post of the discussion thread ‘Should begging be seen as a job and therefore the EU-migrants as labour migrants?’, quoted below (1)? What is intended to be humorous about it? Who/what is the target of satirical humour? In what sense does it involve racist affective-discursive articulations? This post is unusually subtly formulated compared to other posts on *Flashback*:

- (1) Lately, many have migrated from the newer EU-countries to Sweden. These EU-migrants mostly seem to support themselves through begging in streets and squares. This has led many here in Sweden to express concern. Some complain that it is disturbing with beggars in the streets. Others are really upset because of the beggars’ poor housing. Some utter accusations towards the EU-migrants’ home countries. All in all [...] the situation is not satisfactory. Something simply has to be done. My proposal is that begging should be seen as just like any other job. If we decide on that, [...] the EU-migrants will be seen as labour. This is because begging is now seen

as an occupation. And begging in Sweden has for a long time been poorly developed. There is simply a great shortage of labour power in begging. The need for a well-developed begging industry, is thus satisfied by the EU-migrants. [...] (*Flashback* 2014, April 2, post #1)

While most readers will probably notice that there is something odd about (1) – for one thing, the proposal itself seems incongruous, which I will return to later – its satirical elements may be located following Simpson’s (2003) account of the two ironic modes in satire. Starting with the *prime*, what sort of discourse is echoed, and how is it echoed?

To begin with, the post’s form resembles a ‘serious’ mainstream opinion article in a newspaper. There is a seemingly balanced presentation of divergent opinions about a problem, then, a solution is proposed (‘begging should be seen as just like any other job’), and finally, an argument is presented for this solution. This suggests that mainstream media discourse on the topic of EU-migrants is echoed. However, there are markers of ironic distance indicating that the post is a ‘spoof’ (Simpson 2003: 93); for example, the divergent opinions are listed in a trivializing way, suggesting that disagreements only concern whether street begging is ‘disturbing’ or whether the EU-migrants’ ‘poor housing’ is found ‘upsetting’, which is hardly an exhausting description of mainstream media debate about the issue.

The spoof quality is strengthened in the satirist’s subsequent posts in the thread. In one, the satirist writes that his/her proposal might seem like a ‘joke [...] but in

Sweden it is not at all a joke’, adding that he/she is ‘greatly surprised that the Green- and Left party [politicians] have not already suggested what I am suggesting here’ (*Flashback* 2014, April 2, post #7). In another, the satirist writes that his/her proposal would contribute to Sweden’s status as a ‘humanitarian superpower’, a word the Swedish centre/right-wing Moderate party uses to describe its asylum policy ambitions (Moderaterna 2014), and adds that this is something that ‘Sweden’, not the satirist him/herself, ‘claims to be aspiring to’ (*Flashback* 2014, April 2, post #5). Finally, in a post where arguments for the proposal are presented, the satirist writes: (2) ‘Immigration [...] is what pushes Sweden as a country forward. At least I have read in the newspapers, heard on the radio, and seen on tv, that it is what makes Sweden continue to exist’ (*Flashback* 2014, April 3, post # 23).

In sum, the satirist’s proposal and his/her subsequent statements are presented as *not really* the satirist’s *own* opinions, but ascribed to a range of different actors, including political parties along the entire spectrum of established politics as well as mainstream media. Thus, a vague and generalized *establishment* of mainstream political and media actors is constructed at the same time as the satirist marks distance towards this establishment’s putative statements. This sort of distancing and generalizing echoing is typical of satire (Simpson 2003: 95–96), and a distancing from the ‘politically correct’ establishment is to be expected in racist discourse (e.g. Hughey and Daniels 2013).

But not just any type of establishment discourse is echoed in (1). In particular, the proposal to define street begging as a regular job echoes a stance taken by the centre/right-wing block in Swedish politics in mainstream discourse on the issue of labour migration, although, as seen above, it is attributed to a more general mainstream establishment. This discursive stance claims that immigration is positive in so far as it contributes to economic growth by strengthening the country in the face of international competition and by supplying it with needed professional skills (e.g. Moderaterna 2014). That this view of labour migration is targeted in the satire is clear in a later post, where the satirist writes: (3) ‘if we recognize [...] begging as an occupation, it can constitute a desirable temptation, for a lot more people [...] to come to Sweden, and with their professional knowledge contribute to the continued desirable development of Sweden’ (*Flashback* 2014, April 3, post #23). This brings me to the second element of satire, the *dialectic incongruity*, which introduces an opposition running counter to the expectations implied in the echoed discourse, whereby a comic effect is created (Simpson 2003: 96).

Specifically, the centre/right-wing discourse on labour migration is echoed in the argument that street begging should be seen as ‘just like any other job’ because this would satisfy the ‘need’ for a ‘well-developed begging industry’ supposedly suffering from a ‘great shortage in labour power’ (see (1) above). In the context of Swedish labour migration discourse, this would be incongruous with expectations:

While this discourse defines immigration as positive to the extent that it provides Swedish industries with competitive advantages and professional skills, it would not define street begging as an ‘industry’ experiencing a ‘shortage of labour power’ with the necessary ‘professional skills’ in this sense. But in presenting street begging in this way, the satire juxtaposes the categories of *begging* and *jobs* in a way running counter to the expectations implied in the position taken by the centre/right-wing camp in mainstream discourse on labour migration. Thus, the more general establishment discourse echoed throughout the satirist’s posts is mocked as leading to the supposedly absurd, and therefore comic, conclusion that street begging has to be defined as ‘just like any other job’. This ascription of a putatively humorous incongruity to establishment discourse, constructed as positive towards migration, is a subtle attempt at communicating a racist position, dismissing all established views that see *anything* positive in migration.

Racist satire in the context of the Flashback humour community

However, this piece of satire is not presented to a mainstream audience, but to *Flashback* participants. Thus, it is not participants in mainstream discourse that are assumed to find the satire humorous; rather, a *Flashback* humour community is presupposed. This raises the question: what is really meant to be *comic* about the juxtaposition of the supposedly incongruous categories of *begging* and *jobs*?

To answer this question, it is necessary to contextualize the piece of satire by looking at other *Flashback* discussions about EU-migrants. In the thread ‘Immigrants who beg’ (*Flashback* 2011/2012), a frequently occurring feature is narratives presenting EU-migrants as dishonest and as criminals, narratives that often also involve stereotyping and dehumanization of Roma people. (4) is a typical example of the dishonesty narrative, drawing on recurrent stereotypes about Roma people, here referred to as ‘Gypsies’, being immoral (e.g. Goodman and Rowe 2014: 34) and dehumanizing the EU-migrants by calling them ‘pigs’:

- (4) Really conscience-lacking pigs some of them are. (Gypsies I assume) [sic.], enter trains and buses and walk around there begging while at the same time showing pictures of deformed children [...] that they have stolen from the internet but pretend are their own. (*Flashback* 2012, February 20, post #95)⁶

The narrative presenting EU-migrants as criminals is exemplified in (5), which clearly draws on recurrent stereotypes of Roma people (once again referred to as ‘Gypsies’) as thieves (e.g. Goodman and Rowe 2014: 33):

- (5) One must ask the question whether the begging and the street music making is the only thing they do. ‘Romanians’ have been linked to both skimming and other credit card frauds, copper thefts, robbery of old people and burglary. These Romanian gypsies are probably active within

several different criminal niches during their stays in the country. (*Flashback* 2012, May 11, post #150)

Street begging, particularly done by Roma EU-migrants, defined as a dishonest and criminal activity in this way on *Flashback*, suggests that it is assumed to be the opposite of a regular job, which is presumably an honest, law-abiding activity. This is also indicated in one of the (bemused) responses to the satire analysed here: ‘Why not recognize what other one-percenters⁷ do for a living as an honest job too? If one recognizes begging as an honest job, then burglary, robbery, fraud should be as well?’ (*Flashback* 2014, April 3, post #43)

I will return to the responses evoked by the satire below. Here, the point is that what makes defining begging ‘as just like any other job’ an incongruous proposal, and therefore presumably humorous, in the *Flashback* humour community is that street begging is already constructed as the opposite of an honest job, especially when Roma people are suspected to be involved. This rests on a shared assumption of a sharp *status difference* between Roma EU-migrants begging for money and honest (presumably Swedish) workers, where the former are assumed to be inferior to the latter. What the mock proposal suggests by combining these supposedly incongruous elements, implying that begging and having a regular job are *equally* acceptable and legitimate means of support, is a *levelling* of this status difference. Such a levelling would be unacceptable and unexpected in the *Flashback* community, whose members obviously

identify with the category of Swedish workers. Therefore, the proposal is expected to be humorous to this particular audience. So when establishment discourse on labour migration is mocked here, this is done by presenting it as *really* implying such a levelling of status differences between Roma EU-migrants and Swedish workers. Thus, following Billig (2005: 72–73), incongruity is only held to be humorous when perceived to go against an assumed order of hierarchical social relationships, itself assumed not to be funny at all.

Furthermore, presenting a levelling of the assumed status difference between Roma EU-migrants and Swedish workers as a humorous incongruity to an audience identifying with the latter is a celebration of this status difference, articulating the triumphant joy in superiority described by Kemper (2011: 61) as the source of laughter. At the same time, this is contemptuous joy, since it ridicules a status ascription to Roma EU-migrants assumed to be undeserved, undeserved status being the source of contempt (Kemper 2011: 33). Thus, racist contempt and joy in superiority are affective-discursively accomplished in this satire, which, thus, targets Roma EU-migrants as much as establishment discourse on migration.

Bemused responses, unlaughter, and the making of a racist affective-discursive order

It may be recalled that to be ‘successful’, satire requires that the satirees, i.e. the audience, both recognize the satirist’s insincere or ironic intent and judge the satirical act to be appropriate (Simpson 2003: 165–166). In the interactions taking place around the satire under scrutiny here, these requirements seem to shape the responses of the other participants. Indeed, as the following will show, the satirical proposal analysed above does not receive many responses from the satirees that indicate amusement. This lack of amusement, however, is not due to a disagreement with the racist premises that the satire has to presuppose in order to have a humorous effect. Rather, as I will try to show, it is due to the ‘inappropriateness’ of the satirical proposal in the context of *Flashback* racist discourse.

There are some exceptions that do display humorous amusement in response to the satire. In (6), this is seen in the attempt to adopt the satirical mode, indicating conferral of insincerity to a piece of satire (Simpson 2003: 182), which is nevertheless done in a much more direct and outspokenly anti-Roma racist manner in line with the stereotypical narratives presenting EU-migrants as dishonest (see (4–5) above; Rowe and Goodman 2014; Goodman and Rowe 2014):

- (6) **But that’s an excellent proposal, in line with today’s development.** Another good thing is that the Romas finally can start to pay taxes. Everybody knows that all the Romas want is to contribute to Swedish welfare, just like all other immigrants, but as non-registered beggar it has

been really hard. As a taxable labour migrant this dream can now finally come true for many Roma people. (*Flashback* 2014, May 2, post #57, bold in original)

However, a more typical response is to display *disapproval* of the mock proposal *without* any signs of amusement. Several of these responses purport to refute the proposal as if it was serious, as seen in quotes (7–9), denying that begging might be defined as a regular job or that it might contribute to the growth and development of the economy, which the satirist’s ironic appropriation of centre/right-wing discourse on labour migration had suggested in (1):

- (7) No. Begging contributes nothing productively to society, neither principally nor factually, abstractly or concretely. Thus it is not a job. (*Flashback* 2014, April 2, post #9)
- (8) Begging should not be seen as a job because it doesn’t create any value or goods; socioeconomically it is purely negative keeping in mind all social misery, extra costs and added work for authorities and the social sector that it brings. (*Flashback* 2014, April 8, post #54)
- (9) It is NOT a way out to make begging into a legitimate occupation, then we are just solidifying a society where the streets crawl with beggars (*Flashback* 2014, April 3, post #22)

While posts (7–9) emphasize the assumption about the categories *begging* and *jobs* as incongruous, they do not present this incongruity as humorous, as the satirist did, but

rather as a serious proposal to be rejected, or even, as suggested by the expansive language (Retzinger 1995) in (9), as a provocation. Two responses to the satirist's claim in quote (2) above capture this sense of provocation: (10) 'No one with a minimum of critical thinking would claim that the immigrants have built the country' (*Flashback* 2014, April 3, post #24) and (11) 'Hell, you must be a rocket scientist. Wake up damn it' (*Flashback* 2014, April 3, post #25).

The bemused responses (7–11) might suggest that the satirist's mock proposal simply has not been understood as insincere, which would explain the lack of signs of amusement in the satirees' responses. It should be noted, however, that the satirist ends all of his/her posts with the signature 'Karl Kapplin, authorized buffoon and clown' ('Karl Kapplin' being a 'swedification' of Charles Chaplin), and his/her avatar is an image of Charles Chaplin posing as the Dictator (although the blue and yellow colours of the Swedish flag have been added to the Dictator's party emblem). This communicates insincerity and signals that amusement is expected. Thus, although the bemused responses quoted above may not be instances of unlaughter in the strict sense (see Data and method above), they may constitute a significant absence of amusement where it is otherwise expected. Possibly, they are instances of enacting 'seriousness' to communicate disapproval, i.e. *mode rejection* (Simpson 2003: 182), rather than of a failure to 'get' the point, even though 'getting' the point is not signalled by explicit reference to the satire's non-serious intent.

However, several responses clearly indicate disapproval, while at the same time explicitly signalling that the ironic position of the satirist has been recognized, thus arguably articulating unlaughter in the strict sense (non-amusement plus explicit reference to non-serious intent; see Data and method above). In an earlier post, the satirist had claimed to be ‘serious’; however, distancing him/herself from this position, he/she also wrote that the proposal would be ‘dismissed as purely ridiculous’ in a ‘normal country’, and claimed to be ‘adaptable’ to Sweden’s ‘multicultural agenda’ (*Flashback* 2014, April 2, post #6). Quote (12) is a response to that post:

(12) Hard to determine which ones are troll-threads... You wrote something about Sweden not being normal and that is worth commenting, because the goal ought not to be to throw in the towel and adapt oneself to a weird situation like you're suggesting but the opposite: to aim at changing it for the better again. Or what? (*Flashback* 2014, April 5, post #32)

The reference to ‘troll-threads’ suggests that the proposal has not been taken seriously; it refers to posts that disturb the discussion through posting unserious comments. In fact, the word ‘troll-thread’, the lack of signs of amusement, and the uncertainty about the satirist’s position articulated in the post (‘Or what?’) together present the satirist’s use of indirect means to communicate his/her message as disturbingly *inappropriate in its lack of clarity*. This is also suggested when the same participant, in a later post, urges

the satirist to get serious: (13) ‘Get into the game now 😊’ (*Flashback* 2014, April 5, post #39).

An even clearer articulation of unlaughter, presenting the satire as ‘nonsense’, is the following, written by a participant nicknamed Meiji: (14) ‘You have written several posts (in other threads), which are worth considering... but this is pure nonsense... and you probably know that’ (*Flashback* 2014, May 6, post #60). Responding to this, the satirist again takes an ironic stance, both dismissing that his/her proposal is nonsense (*Flashback* 2014, May 6, post #61) and at the same time marking distance by claiming that ‘[i]n a country run by buffoons [...] one has to act as a buffoon’ (*Flashback* 2014, May 6, post #63). Finally, Meiji posts a response clearly indicating both disapproval and understanding of the satirical intent, that is, unlaughter:

(15) It is very hard to write satire in Sweden, since Sweden is surrealistic. Swift's⁸ audience generally believed, that it was out of the question to eat children. Your proposal – that begging is classified as work in Sweden – will not be generally dismissed (*Flashback* 2014, May 7, post #66).

Post (15) presents the use of satire – and the satirist’s positioning as both serious and unserious – when discussing EU-migrants begging for money on *Flashback* as risky in its ambiguous indirectness. Meiji does not disagree with the underlying racist assumption of the satire, i.e. that equalizing begging with work is a ridiculous and ultimately contemptible levelling of status differences between EU-migrants and

Swedish workers. Rather, he/she articulates fear that readers might be lured into taking the satirical proposal seriously. Again, a demand for *clarity of position* is articulated: in racist *Flashback* discourse, humour is off limits if it is not clear about its racist message.

Thus, while racist humour may have the serious effect of contributing to racist order-building by reducing ambivalences surrounding the construction of the Other (Weaver 2011), these final posts suggest that constructing a racist order also places constraints on ‘appropriate’ racist humour, which must unambiguously confirm the racist assumptions of the humour community. Perhaps, this explains the bemused responses to the satire (7–11) as well as the more immediate instances of unlaughter (12–15). To elaborate on this, I now turn to examples of more typical racist humour and responses to it in the material.

Superiority humour and laughter within the bounds of a racist order

As Billig (2001) argues, bigots do not lack a sense of humour, although racist humour is not innocent or inconsequential. My point in the previous section was to demonstrate that, at least in *Flashback* discourse, this racist humour is nevertheless constrained by certain boundaries of ‘appropriateness’, which demand that the communication of racist messages through humour is unambiguous. This is further suggested by typical examples of racist humour on *Flashback*, which might seem unrestrained but in fact

might be said to conform to these boundaries. Examples of this sort of humour, and of the responses evoked by it, will be analysed below.

Sometimes, begging EU-migrants carry notes with them, accounting for their need for money. Several posts in the *Flashback* thread ‘Immigrants who beg’ include more or less elaborate ridiculing stories about these notes, which are typically presented as examples confirming the stereotypical narratives presenting EU-migrants as dishonest, discussed above. Quote (17) exemplifies such stories:

(16) Yeah, I’ve encountered those notes many times. Lately I have begun to snatch the note they lay beside me. The last time was yesterday (note no 3). I also take the note and put it in the inside pocket so that the beggar sees me do it.

When he was on his way back he looked at me ‘i saw you take the note, can i have it back?’, he said in shaky English. The guy was like 25-28 and a short buster.

‘Nah, I’ll keep it for now, hurry up so you dont miss your next train’, I answered.

‘What do you need the note for? Give it back!’

‘I want it for my collection, deal with it.’

After that he backed off a few steps, started to punch the seats and swore wildly in gypsyian⁹ (romanian?), pointed his finger at me and banged on the window when walked by on the outside.

When he did so I pointed my finger back at him at the same time as I opened my jacket to show the note sticking up 😏 (*Flashback* 2012, May 10, post #134)

Quote (16) follows the structure of comic narratives of triumph (Kleres 2011: 192). The narrator presents an episode, in which he/she steals a note from an EU-migrant begging for money, who attempts to reclaim it. This is the obstruction in the narrative. Then, the narrator presents him/herself as resisting this attempt and as unaffected by concern for the EU-migrant, as seen in the utterances he/she attributes to him/herself. After another attempt at getting the note back, the EU-migrant is presented as giving up, displaying his frustration by hitting train seats, swearing, and pointing his finger. Then, the narrator presents him/herself as triumphantly pointing his/her finger back and showing off the note he/she has stolen. The post ends with a so-called ‘evil grin’ smiley. Thus, the narrator presents him/herself as successfully overpowering and humiliating an EU-migrant, signalling that this is a pleasurable event. This is an unambiguous example of the joy in superiority described by Kemper (2011: 61).

This story evokes immediate responses such as the following: (17) ‘Ha ha. Dead on target. As for myself I am too yellow to snitch notes but damn it’s time to try’ (*Flashback* 2012, May 10, post #135). Or: (18) ‘Haha, I have done similar things. Have a pretty good collection of beggar notes at home now’ (*Flashback* 2012, May 17, post #168). After a while, in response to the story, another participant presents the following supposedly ‘funny’ idea about how to humiliate EU-migrants begging for money, once again presented as ‘organized criminals’:

(19) Is there anyone who has snitched a note who can scan the picture of it? I came up with a funny joke one can do with the beggars. You make a note that looks the same as theirs with the same picture and the same format, but you replace the text. So when a beggar gets the note back, he receives a 'flashback' produced note instead of the one with the sob story that these organized criminals try to circulate (*Flashback* 2012, May 18, post #172)

Immediate responses follow: (20) 'That would be damn fun to do. I can volunteer some weekend' (*Flashback* 2012, May 20, post #173). And: (21) 'HAHAHA that's super smart!!!! And with a MEAN picture too!!!!' (*Flashback* 2012, May 22, post #176)

Quotes (17–21) are unmistakable displays of amusement at the story presenting humiliation of EU-migrants as pleasurable (16). The quotes may seem to confirm the unrestrained nature of racism in anonymous online settings. Indeed, admitting to, and displaying amusement at, illegal and racist acts would seem to be a clear instance of 'disinhibition' from the point of view of mainstream discourse, since neither admitting to such acts nor displaying amusement at them would be acceptable in a mainstream context.

However, by assuming that there is only *one* order of appropriate and inappropriate emotional expression, this would be to ignore the contingency and variability of orders of emotional restraint (see (Un)restrained emotion, affective-discursive practice, and research on online racist humour). Furthermore, it would ignore the rhetorical nature of humour and its capacity to communicate and maintain order

(Billig 2005). In the preceding section, I suggested that the disapproving and unlaughing responses to racist satire indicated an affective-discursive order in the racist *Flashback* humour community, prescribing that racist messages should be communicated unambiguously. Unambiguous superiority humour (16) and the responses to it (17–21) simply show the other side of this humour order. For the many responses indicating that humiliating EU-migrants is indeed found to be humorous, communicate *approval* of, and even *celebrate*, stories of such humiliation. Thus, in this case, the humour community's expectations of clarity are met, but in the case of satire, they are not. Laughter and unlaughter, then, are two sides of the same coin in the practice of constructing an online racist affective-discursive order around humour.

Concluding remarks

The findings presented above support research that stresses online racism's increasingly subtle and restrained nature (see Research background). While online racist affective-discursive articulations may often be explicit, as displayed in the triumphant narrative analysed in the previous section, they may also indirectly communicate contemptuous joy in superiority through the ironic modes of satirical discourse, as seen in the first analytical section. This suggests that online racist discourse does not always differ from offline, mainstream varieties. At least, satire as a mode of articulating racist superiority

feelings in relation to EU-migrants by ascribing putatively humorous incongruities to an ironically echoed version of pro-migration mainstream discourse speaks against the notion of online racism as disinhibition.

However, although the satire examined above is based on stereotypical assumptions about Roma EU-migrants and constructions of a generalized 'establishment' shared by the *Flashback* humour community, it is typically not received by the satirees as humorous, but rather as a provoking proposal to be dismissed and a risky move that may be interpreted in the 'wrong' way, in other words, with unlaughter (Billig 2005). Whether or not the satirees recognize the ironic intention of the satirist, this suggests that while satire may be used to articulate racism, the subtlety and indirectness of satirical discourse runs counter to the *Flashback* community's expectations of clarity about the racist message communicated. I argue that in displaying disapproval of this breach of expectations through unlaughter, attempting to bring the satirist back into line, the satirees build and maintain a racist affective-discursive order around humour.

This, in turn, suggests that the affective-discursive practice of online racist humour is not only about releasing otherwise repressed pleasures of hatred by disrupting the boundaries of mainstream reason (cf. Billig 2001), but also about raising alternative restraints demanding explicitness about those racist messages that are kept implicit in mainstream discourse. This runs counter to the notion of online racism as

disinhibition, while it is more in line with social identity theory's emphasis on the power of in-group norms in shaping hostility, including hostile superiority humour, towards out-groups in online settings, although the present article also demonstrates how such in-group norms are accomplished in discursive practice.

This, I argue, is also shown in the approving responses to stories where EU-migrants are humiliated. For these stories, unambiguously articulating joy in superiority in relation to EU-migrants, confirm the *Flashback* humour community's expectations of clarity. Also, the responses, encouraging such stories and the actions portrayed in them, confirm that these expectations of clarity have been met, and celebrate this confirmation. Thus, while laughter at the humiliation of EU-migrants might seem unrestrained, it is but the other side of unlaughter evoked by ambiguous satirical articulations of racism; it is well within the bounds of the racist order accomplished through unlaughter and involved in accomplishing it. Racist order is not only built by the rhetorical structure of racist jokes (cf. Weaver 2011), but also by the receivers' conferral of 'humorousness' to those utterances that are accepted as meeting the *Flashback* expectations of non-ambiguity.

In light of this, one might ask why a participant in racist *Flashback* discourse chooses satire as a mode of communication. One reason might be that he/she attempts to communicate his/her racist message to a different, perhaps more mainstream audience, who might not be active participants, but who nevertheless, due to the

accessibility of online forums, *might read* racist discussion threads on *Flashback*. Communicating racist messages to such an audience requires more subtlety than expected by active *Flashback* participants. Given this, knowledge about racist satire hopefully contributes to the critical online literacy that Hughey and Daniels (2013) call for.

Finally, if online racist humour, satirical or not, is ordered rather than disinhibited, this supports theories highlighting the active cultivation of ‘positive’ emotions involved in hostility and violence against out-groups. Thus, the superiority humour targeting begging EU-migrants is perhaps not unrelated to, but involved in the processes leading to, the violent attacks against EU-migrants’ tent camps in Sweden mentioned in the introduction. This, however, requires further investigation.

Notes

¹ There are exceptions to the lack of attention to emotional processes in research on racist discourse, e.g. Ahmed (2004).

² It is common to divide humour theories into three traditions: superiority theories, incongruity theories, and relief theories (Weaver 2011; Billig 2005; Critchley 2002). While I discuss both incongruity theories and superiority theories, it is beyond the scope of the present article to compare all three traditions.

³ This thread is still active, but I refer to it as *Flashback* (2011/2012), since I will only use examples from 2011 and 2012 in this paper. However, when discussing specific posts, I refer to *Flashback* (2011) when the post is from 2011 and *Flashback* (2012) when the post is from 2012. Dates and numbers of the posts are included.

⁴ This, of course, means that while more or less racist posts dominate discussion threads in the latter forum, these threads are not secure from anti-racist *Flashback* users’ attempts to interfere. No real such attempts were found in the satirical thread analysed here (*Flashback* 2014), although such attempts appear in the thread ‘Immigrants who beg’ (*Flashback* 2011/2012), which is also analysed in the present article.

⁵ Other research on unlaughter is also unclear as to whether the latter requirement is explicitly included (e.g. Smith 2009; Dobbs and Kirby 2013).

⁶ Such narratives may of course present the narrator as *really* generous precisely because the begging EU-migrant is presented as faking their distress, as suggested by Ahmed in her analysis of the presentation of asylum seekers as 'bogus' (Ahmed 2004: 46).

⁷ A translation of the Swedish word 'enprocentare', referring to persons involved in criminal activity.

⁸ This refers to Jonathan Swift's classic satire *A Modest Proposal*.

⁹ 'Gypsy' is my translation of the word 'ziggiska', a highly derogatory word for the Roma language derived from the Swedish word 'zigenare', again a derogatory word for Roma people.

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