

## On Laughter

11 & 12 July 2019

Keynote speakers: Morten Kringelbach (Psychiatry); Yasmine Musharbash (Social Anthropology); Devorah Baum (Literary Studies)

To say the least, academics struggle with laughter. We can analyse jokes, dissect irony, theorize ‘the comic,’ and laugh ourselves, but when it comes to talking about laughter – often uncontrollable, sometimes inappropriate – we stop short. Perhaps it is too intimate, too revealing, too awkward.

‘On Laughter,’ a two-day conference hosted at the Institute of Advanced Studies at University College London, will address laughter itself. The humanities and the natural and social sciences all have something valuable to contribute. We invite scholars working across these areas to consider the following dimensions of laughter:

- Politics and laughter;
  - How do politics and laughter intersect? Who is allowed to laugh, and at what? Laughter can diminish, it can be resistant – and it can be many other things at the same time. What effect does laughter have on our political beliefs? When is laughter translatable to politics? How might laughter be gendered?
- Forms and performances of laughter;
  - How is laughter made? What are the strategies for producing laughter – narrative, performative, social? What are the cultural specificities? How have these forms/performances changed over time? What are its modes and genres – for example, irony, comedy, satire – and how do they work?
- Affects of laughter;
  - Laughter can both be a response to, and incite, certain feelings. It can be hostile, joyful, nervous, fearful, awkward, derisive, dismissive, patronizing, or even a sign of ‘madness.’ Which kinds of feelings make us laugh? What are the affectual consequences of laughing?
- The laughing body;
  - How is laughter embodied? What is the neurology of laughter – and can this help us to understand it socially? How do non-human animals laugh? How can laughter be induced physically (as with tickling)? How could laughter help us to understand concepts of self and personhood?
- The evolution, history, and ontogenesis of laughter;
  - Where does laughter come from evolutionarily, historically, and developmentally? What can we learn from looking at laughter across species? What role did/does laughter play in the development of trust, cooperation, and the origin of language? What role does laughter play in the lives of infants and children? How is laughter used to socialize? What are the histories of laughter?
- Authority and laughter;
  - What is the relationship between laughter and authority? How can laughter diminish authority? How can it re-institute power? How has the relationship between authority and laughter worked historically? In what forms? Who becomes the target?
- Morality and laughter.

- What can't we laugh at? What are we required to laugh at? To whom do the rules apply? What work does laughing, or not laughing, do socially? How do ways of laughing become markers of group identity? How can laughter be used to make an individual or group more or less human?

We invite proposals for individual papers of approximately 15 minutes that address the above themes. Please send proposals to Alice Rudge and Andrew Dean, at [onlaughter@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:onlaughter@ucl.ac.uk), by 14 March (midnight). Please note which themes you are planning to address. Responses will be provided by late-March.