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## Review

# Comedy and critical thought: Laughter as resistance

Krista Bonello, Rutter Giappone, Fred Francis, and Iain MacKenzie (Eds.)  
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Is humor critique? Many have long assumed it to be – including heads of state and government censors. A group of people sniggering together often seems threatening, signifying a kind of antisocial collectivity, a point of view not commonly available, a subverting of the normative stitching of politics. This suggestive conflation also underlies the power of the medieval jester, the coyote trickster, the Greek cynic, the literary satirist, and – in our own time – the late-night television comedian, all of whom possess a tremendous power: the ability to say the unsayable, to confront hypocrisy, to kick the pricks.

But any clear-eyed rendition of humor must also take into account its profoundly reactive qualities. Those sniggers also serve to keep others in their place. The subjects of jokes are more often minorities than governments. The cutting edge of wit can exile and humiliate. Teenagers mobilize humor against the misfit, the nerd, the overweight, the already-outcast. This would seem an odd fit for critique: cruelty against the weak does not comport with the uncovering of the truth from the exigencies and productions of capitalist cultural consumerism.

Comedy also operates under a second set of procedures which mis-fit critical thinking. Critique requires distance from its subject, whereas humor operates through immersion. Humor operates contextually and immanently. Explaining a joke kills the joke. And a third problematic: critique depends on a profound positivism, or at least a presumption of discoverable verities. Discovery (the procedures of seeing how things operate) and actuality (the structural truth of oppression in any given situation) underpin critical thought. What is behind the curtain is real; the curtain itself must be abolished. Comedic tropes, in contrast, revel in the play between reality, intentionality, and meaning: irony, sarcasm, exaggeration, slapstick. Critique operates structurally and narratively, while humor surprises and undercuts.

This volume of thirteen essays, originating in a conference ranging across lines of political science, rhetoric, history, philosophy, and media, addresses this vital



question along multiple lines. Some of the authors examine a specific form, idiom, or practice of comedy at a certain historical and geographic juncture. Others attempt the question directly, examining various theories of humor in conjunction with Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse. And the final few scholars use specific humorous forms to try something different – creating projects based in humor, art, and intellectual discovery.

At its best, the book's associations and diversity evoke the pleasures of both academic writing and comedy clubs. They have the potential to change the way one views things, enabling new connections and intellectual bridges between periods and lineages. They may even enable some readers to better understand why they consider certain things or events funny as opposed to tragic, or provocative rather than palliative. Juxtaposing two political movements based in humor (say, Italy's Five Star movement and the establishment-supporting satire of eighteenth-century Dutch weeklies) demands an expanded and richer notion of how comedy operates in relation to governmentality. But at its worst, *Comedy and Critical Thought* seems more hodgepodge than dynamic discussion, a variety show overstuffed with noble failures, stolid acting, and irrelevant sideshows. Each author clearly commits to certain normativities, but these sometimes do not engage, whether with one another or the reader. Abbreviated appearances of subjects such as medieval liturgy, WWI cartoons, or Salman Rushdie are intriguing in their own rights, but do not fundamentally refract upon one another.

Not to blame these individual authors – perhaps the variety show, by definition, lacks coherence and a central argument. Rather than a tredecupled summary of the book's chapters, then, this review will instead identify some recurrent themes in the various essays, and engage their overall importance and persuasiveness, for the questions raised by the central animating arguments of the book are engaged by the individual empirical case studies.

First amongst these are the curiosities of the relationship between the political idea of resistance and the practices of comedy. The term 'resistance,' much in vogue in the past generation of political writing, appears not only in the collection's subtitle but also in a few of the essays. Yet its political import is never really questioned – as a keyword, it often stands in for 'opposing the power of the government or society, usually in a way I approve.' Critique, as a few of the essays note, is not necessarily resistance. It may provide the intellectual groundwork for future political action, for example, without changing the present at all. Nicolas Holm presents this in his brief but convincing contribution, when he notes how television shows (e.g., *The Office* or *The Simpsons*) may be operating with a mere veneer of transgression while also replicating a managerial capitalist normalcy. Humor, he notes, 'is both critical *and* functions in the service of current relations of power, because those two functions are not necessarily exclusive' (p. 37). Other essays in the volume make the same significant point, using such diverse examples as Lenny Bruce, Samuel Beckett, and the character Harlequin.



A second recurring motif arises from the debate over Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin, famously, held that certain moments in mediaeval peasant life reverse the norms intrinsic to the authoritarian Catholic order. Carnival presents a moment of disorder, where laughter and satire bring bawdiness and bodily functions, the riot of the people, inversion of hierarchies, and a temporary abandonment of moral rules, to temporarily hold sway. Carnavalesque humor liberates society: participatory, public, corporeal, unruly. Many contemporary conceptions of comedy have inherited this celebration of the rebellious and antisocial on the side of rationality – here, Kate Fox shows Rabelais, Shakespeare, and Cervantes connecting to everyday comedy against the 'violently repressive ideology' of Church and state (p. 87). But this Bakhtinian model of humor must ignore certain implications to work, as Francis Stewart explains. It must insist on the utter humorlessness of theological institutions and social organizations; it must connect laughter intrinsically to social progress, and it must present disorder as salutary – this last not an interpretation shared by those subject to racialized slaughter (Jews, Roma) or sexual violence.

A third reverberating theme is the relationship between those who create the comedic and those who laugh – the particularities of humor's aesthetic of reception. That a particularly powerful combination of taboo violation and politicized humor motivated 1970s punk is incontrovertible, but (as Russ Bestley notes) the audience, whether the individual listener or the mass media, often missed the jokes. Levi Haynes describes his own process of high artistic creation in relation to physicalized humor, developing the complex histories of their relationships and effects alongside its challenges and misrecognitions. Most audaciously, the book concludes with an attempt to 'do' funny political theorizing. Adrian Hickey, Giuliana Monteverde, and Robert Porter analyze the relationship of intellectual public posturing to self-help texts, narrating a fictional set of external and internal dialogues in the workplace, oriented around Deleuze, Bergson, and Ballard. Is it funny? Sort of. Insightful? Definitely.

Like many compilations, this book neither builds a narrative, nor arrives at a punchline. With a few exceptions, it instead properly undermines the current consensus that humor itself liberates, that a joke is unproblematically reducible to positive change, that watching a late-night comedian changes the world. This presents a necessary corrective, and a critical (in both senses of the word) engagement.

But ... comedy still does *something*. The sense remains that humor has a more complex worldview on offer – a better way of being than the all-too-present stolidity of much of life and language. Famously, Donald Trump never laughs. There must be (we still feel) a connection between the humorlessness of officialdom, tyranny, and authoritarianism. Disciplinarians' hatred of comedy and efforts to eliminate jokes puts one more, small weight on the scale in favor of its critical power. Milan Kundera (whom the contributors here never mention) saw in



*The Joke* the ability to confound power and to insist on the irreducibility of humanity. Isn't that the same goal as critique, albeit a profoundly different method?

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