

# Humour and conflict in the Global South

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### Abstract

*This special issue focusses on humour studies scholarship from and about the Global South. It addresses a critical gap of underrepresentation, as identified in a previous conference of the International Society for Humour Studies and explored in subsequent panels. The issue brings together diverse contributions that examine urgent and emerging questions in Africa, Asia, and South America, highlighting how humour interacts with socio-political dynamics, cultural tensions, and historical contexts in these regions. By shedding light on these perspectives, this collection seeks to broaden the discourse in humour studies and encourage deeper engagement with global voices and experiences.*

*Keywords: Global South, conflict, periphery, eurocentrism.*

## 1. Introduction

In 2022, during the 32<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the *International Society for Humour Studies* held in the charming *Saint Silvester Room* — a 1740 church beautifully converted into an auditorium in the heart of Bertinoro, Italy — a group of international scholars gathered to discuss contemporary research on humour. Surrounded by delicate baroque details, it struck us that despite the variety of topics presented, they related predominantly to European or North American contexts. It was almost as if the setting, with its grandeur and predominantly white, Western attendees, had made evident a glaring absence: the voices and humour of the Global South were noticeably missing. Inspired by this realisation, we proposed a panel for the 33<sup>rd</sup> ISHS Conference in Boston, USA, to explore humour from these understudied regions. To our delight, the proposal was very well

received, with enough delegates to fill two plenary sessions. These sessions featured perspectives from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America. Some of these thought-provoking presentations have been transformed into the articles featured in this special issue.

Our belief that a wealth of research on humour in the Global South was being overlooked was confirmed. This led to a webinar hosted by the ISHS in June 2024, additional panels at the 2024 online conference, and this special issue, which we are thrilled to have curated with the generous support of the editors of the *European Journal of Humour Research*. The articles in this issue explore a wide range of urgent and compelling topics: satire in Zimbabwe, stories of resistance in Palestine, and the role of films and memes in Brazilian politics, to name a few. We are excited to bring these diverse and critical voices to our readers.

### **1.1. Humour and the Global South**

The absence that struck us in Bertinoro is also present in the existing academic literature on humour: there is a clear overrepresentation of work from and about the Global North within the field. This imbalance is not unique to humour studies but reflects a broader trend observed across various fields of knowledge production. Through our panels and this special issue, we hope to contribute to the growing body of research that focuses on and emerges from the Global South. Before delving into the theme and the papers presented here, it is important to clarify what we mean by the term *Global South*.

Traditionally, this term has been used as a more inclusive alternative to earlier descriptors like “Third World” or “Developing World,” which often carried linear and hierarchical connotations of socioeconomic development and were rooted in the Cold War-era Non-Aligned Movement. Today, however, Global South is employed more broadly to encompass spaces and peoples who are politically, culturally, or economically marginalised, regardless of their location. This allows us to move beyond mere geographical distinctions and consider the wider impacts of colonialism and contemporary global capitalism, recognising that there are economic “Souths” within the geographic “North” and vice versa (Mahler, 2017). Such a framework captures the intricate networks of power that continue to marginalise communities in post-colonial realities and fosters transnational solidarities among groups facing similar forms of oppression and exclusion.

This special issue represents our effort to create a space that encourages critical scholarship focused on underrepresented regions while resonating beyond traditional national boundaries. As researchers drawn to the study of humour, we have been mindful of the field’s limitations in addressing non-Western contexts; its scope, while broad, has often failed to fully engage with the complexities of Global South realities. To address these gaps, we were determined that our panels and this special issue should serve as a platform — rather than a pigeonhole — for scholars and practitioners from the Global South. For our initial focus, we chose the theme of humour and conflict in the Global South, aiming to explore the unique disruptions and instabilities in these regions and the specific forms of humour that have emerged as a response. Our task is a rather modest one, but it stands on the solid foundations laid by past and current scholars who have similarly sought to expand the horizon of humour studies.

### **1.2. Humour and conflict**

Despite emerging efforts being put into examining the relationships between humour and conflict in Global South contexts (Trindade, 2020; Mpofu, 2021; Perera & Pathak, 2022), it is crucial to note that much of the foundational discussion on how comedy navigates contemporary socio-political scenarios has been conducted from and about the Global North. Mirroring the field’s inequalities, we believe there exists a somewhat shared perception among researchers from the North that they are equipped to address theoretical and conceptual issues, while

researchers from the South often concentrate on specific case studies. This special issue aims to challenge this perception by presenting a tapestry of theoretically-sound and empirically diverse discussions from under-represented regions. We do not expect to analyse or lay any claims valid to the Global South as a whole —an endeavour that would be both impractical and reductionist. Instead, our goal is to highlight the unique contributions these contexts can offer to the broader field of humour studies and to provide a platform for voices and perspectives that are often marginalised or overlooked in mainstream academic discourse. In this section, we will clarify our understanding of the relationship between humour and conflict based on existing research.

Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai (2017) remind us that “what we find comedic (or just funny) is sensitive to changing contexts” (p. 234). It is sensitive because what seems funny in one context may appear embarrassing, offensive, or even unacceptable in another. It is also sensitive (in the sense of being *sensitised*) because it reflects and translates the dilemmas, impasses, and “affective economies” (Ahmed, 2004) of its time. As indicated by the very title of Berlant and Ngai’s text, today *comedy has issues* (emphasis ours). The first of these issues is the fact that, despite the established literature pointing to humour as a mechanism of enjoying incongruity (Morreall 1987, 2009; Tsakona & Popa 2011), the action of comedy today will likely produce anxiety: “by risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure” (Berlant & Ngai, 2017, p. 233). This particularity of contemporary comedy is noted in a substantial part of the contemporary literature (Page, 2008; Holm, 2017; Mears et al., 2020). According to Berlant and Ngai, this occurs because genres are not just an aesthetic topic but also “a scene of mediation and expectations” (2017, p. 239). This mediation occurs in response to each specific conjuncture, which makes it possible, through comedy, “to discuss context, history, and affect” (Webber, 2019, 10).

Contemporary socio-political conjunctures appear to create a favourable scenario for the convergence between humour and conflict. This is a global context of escalating polarisation and cultural wars, in which a substantial part of public debates has shifted to virtual arenas, where a type of communication highly saturated with irony prevails (Nagle, 2017, p. 16). A clear example is the type of content produced by self-proclaimed internet trolls, an army of conservative and anti-establishment activists, essentially composed of young, white, heterosexual men who meet and connect on digital platforms such as *4chan*, *8chan*, or subgroups on the *Reddit* portal (Salter & Blodgett, 2017). The trolls’ central agenda is the attack on political correctness in the name of freedom of speech, which, in their opinion, should be absolute and unrestricted. This makes no argument taboo for them, and the only rule is exaggeration, “as a way to attract attention and shock the well-thinking with abusive, misogynistic, racist, or anti-Semitic statements” (Da Empoli, 2019, p. 137). In parallel, trolls also engage in collective actions of offences and threats (including death threats) against those who oppose their views (Da Empoli, 2019, p. 166), often motivated by fake news and conspiracy theories, both important “keys to interpreting reality” (Da Empoli, 2019, p. 125-126) for these groups.

The fusion between humour (in its most offensive facet possible) and the mobilisation of fear (via fake news and conspiracy theories) is especially relevant in these digital environments, where the demand for engagement — measured by clicks and likes — is enhanced by the emotional involvement of the content. In this sense, Giuliano Da Empoli emphasises that “to keep its users connected, a social media company must, above all, do things in a way that makes them nervous, feel in danger, or be afraid” (2019, p. 109-110). The fusion between cruel humour and post-truth rhetoric responds well to these trends, simultaneously fostering ridicule, anger, and fear, thereby exacerbating and radicalising social and political conflicts. This type of communication highlights the pervasiveness of contemporary convergences between humour and conflict, within and beyond the Global South. In other words, the proximities between humour and the mobilisation of collective anxieties are not restricted to the realm of

representation but can also be identified in the public sphere, notably in the prominent role that humour, fake news, and conspiracy theories occupy in the contemporary socio-political arena.

In his study on the social impact of comedy, Arpad Szakolczai (2013) argues for a strong interplay between the public sphere and fictional representations. He contends that the public sphere should not be seen as an idealised space for rational discussion, but rather as an arena imbued with “fundamental theatrical qualities,” where dominance is often achieved through laughter, ridicule, and mockery (2013, p. 19). Szakolczai traces the evolution of the modern public sphere alongside the rise of theatrical performances, particularly comedies, which he refers to as the “commodification” of the public sphere. This commodification influences daily life, creating an expectation for comedic tones in various social interactions, extending beyond macropolitics into fields like journalism, education, and religion. Szakolczai’s work highlights the reciprocal relationship between sociopolitical contexts and cultural responses, suggesting a feedback loop in which fiction shapes the public sphere just as much as it is shaped by it. While this feedback is difficult to quantify, it illustrates the complexity of humour’s influence across diverse social and expressive domains.

Today, humour can be identified in previously unimaginable forms, such as *serious* public figures indulging in social media dance trends or using popular punchlines. Although the use of humour as a direct means of action in the political field has been studied for several decades (Mulkay, 1988; Gardner, 1994; Tsakona & Popa, 2011), according to Fechine and Demuru (2022), there has been a recent transformation in this use, which was previously mostly restricted to moments of intentional relaxation (O’Connell & Kowal, 2004; Ross, 2018) or occasional attempts to demoralise the opposing field (Ilie, 2004; Meisel, 2009). This change is particularly notable among figures who are at the extremes of the political spectrum, among whom they identify a tendency towards the use of what they call “buffoon populism” (Fechine & Demuru, 2022, p. 21). The term refers to the jester’s privilege of mocking everyone without being punished, something that is possible precisely because their speech is taken as non-serious and therefore harmless. However, this privilege is established based on a clear separation between the serious discourse of those in positions of power and the non-serious discourse of jesters and clowns. For the authors, however, these dimensions are currently entangled, which is evident, just to cite some of the most famous examples, in the jocular nicknames used by Donald Trump to refer to his political enemies (Tyrkko & Frisk, 2020), in the recurring jokes made by Boris Johnson in his speeches and public statements (Barber, 2013), or in the stand-up comedy strategy used by Jair Bolsonaro in his public speeches — the specific focus of Fechine and Demurus’ analysis.

In his examination of recent cultural production in the United Kingdom, Weaver argues that, due to the constitutive irony of conservative discourse, some uses of satire “are uniquely able to criticise populist incongruity in ways that are not open to ‘serious’ political commentators” (2019, p. 164). In other words, the recurring use of humour by far-right leaders ends up contributing directly and/or indirectly to widening the dissemination of humour, as their use of humour calls for cultural responses that are also comic – a counterattack. This happens because humour allows for a rebuttal of non-serious discourse while navigating the unstable terrain of deep symbolic conflicts in the contemporary political arena. Weaver’s argument somewhat reiterates Szakolczai’s hypothesis of the interconnection between the public sphere and the sphere of representation (2013), and updates it to the present moment, marked by heightened polarisation and cultural wars.

Humour has become an increasingly unstable terrain, a sensitive domain in both its performance and consumption, constantly exposed to scrutiny and criticism. This instability highlights its potential to generate conflict, particularly in socio-political contexts where boundaries between satire and offense are blurred. Yet, it is precisely this capacity for disruption that makes humour a powerful tool for both challenging and reinforcing power structures. By

navigating the fine line between laughter and provocation, humour reveals underlying tensions, amplifies societal divides, and offers a unique lens through which we can examine contemporary political and cultural conflicts.

### **1.3. Overview of the Special Issue**

Humour and conflict are central themes woven throughout the various articles in this special issue. Unlike the dominant narratives of humour production and scholarship from the Global North, these articles serve as a reference bibliography that not only *addresses* but also largely *emerges* from the Global South. The cultural texts examined here are filled with sharp humour, reflecting issues like polarisation, cultural wars, and other pervasive tensions in contemporary society. This is achieved not only by aligning with one side of the political spectrum but also through a simultaneously comic and contentious engagement with sensitive topics such as wars, sexuality, structural racism, colonial legacies, and the specific political dynamics of the Global South.

In her paper, Florence Madenga examines Magamba TV, a satirical YouTube channel with over 40 million subscribers that uses the aesthetics and language of state television news to mock Zimbabwe's local politics and policies through shows such as *Zambezi News* and *The Week*. Madenga highlights the visual cues present from the opening titles of each episode, which clearly indicate that this is a parodic newscast. Her article discusses techniques such as breaking the fourth wall, and using stereotypes, tropes, and puns to create humour. Another programme on the same channel, *Tsaona*, features comedians impersonating the president, a portrayal hinted at by the use of distinctive scarves. Madenga also reminds us of Zimbabwe's current authoritarian regime and of how some comedians face physical violence as a form of repression, while much of Magamba TV's content manages to evade censorship due to the lack of specific legal regulations against satire.

Blessing Mkwambeni and Trust Matsilele also explore the role of satirical journalism in contemporary Zimbabwe. They argue that comedy fills the gap left by traditional forms of journalism in contexts where dictatorships or the erosion of democratic values prevail — similarly to how art and music have been viewed by other scholars. The comedic content produced by the *Comic Pastor's Monthly Comic Awards*, which comprises the 12 episodes analysed in their article, challenges the top-down control typical of a government-regulated media landscape, where state television is accompanied only by non-confrontational private press. These comic videos serve as a last resort for critical perspectives or, as the authors describe it, an “alternative public sphere,” even though they often blur the boundaries between journalism and entertainment.

Natasha Vashisht focuses on a comic monologue by Ahmed Masoud titled *The Shroud Maker* (2018), set in a neighbourhood in the Gaza Strip against the backdrop violence in the region braved by Palestinians. Inspired by a local entrepreneur who decided to keep her shop open during the 2014 war stating she had “nothing left to fear” and that the terror campaign was “good for business,” Masoud created the character of Hajja Souad, an old, cynical seamstress. Souad's life is intertwined with traumatic events, such as the Six-Day War, which resulted in numerous tragic deaths in her family. However, the inherent tragedy of burying loved ones is tempered with generous doses of black humour: “I make money when people die,” the character quips, alluding to her shroud sales spiking with high mortality rates. Vashisht combines a reflection on how black humour operates in the Global South with a thorough analysis of the play and its diverse themes, ranging from the legacy of British colonialism to the apartheid-like conditions purportedly fostered by Israel. This is further enriched by insightful interviews with the playwright.

Unusual connections between humour and violence are also explored in the article by Diego Hoefel and Mariana Baltar, which is based on questions raised by the film *Bacurau* (2018). Directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles and awarded the Cannes Jury Prize in 2019, the film is a blend of science fiction, horror, and sharp political satire. It follows the residents of a small town in Northeastern Brazil as they band together against a group of sadistic foreigners from the Global North, who are intent on killing them for the thrill of a live-action video game. Hoefel and Baltar examine the reactions of Brazilian audiences — applause, laughter, and other signs of support — during scenes where the film’s villains are brutally punished and killed. They argue that these responses can be understood in light of both a historical awareness of enduring forms of colonial exploitation and the ongoing cultural battles between left- and right-wing supporters. The authors delve into these conflicts within the context of contemporary Brazilian cinema, which increasingly intertwines elements of humour, horror, and science fiction.

Viktor Chagas explores right-wing memes that cross national boundaries, focusing on how they adapt—or even disregard—their initial meaning when presented to a new audience. In other words, he examines the interplay between the universal and the local. The corpus chosen by Chagas, consisting of memes shared by supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro, addresses a gap in the analysis of how extreme right-wing supporters produce engaging humorous content in a Latin American context. Most existing scholarship on this topic has focused on European memes related to Nazism or North American content connected to Trumpism. Chagas categorises his findings into three types: memes that translate and adapt material from other contexts to fit the Brazilian setting, memes that offer different interpretations of the original material, and memes that aim for a theoretical universality in their meaning.

Finally, João Paulo Capelotti analyses a lawsuit brought against a Brazilian stand-up comedian known for making offensive jokes about minorities. His article scrutinises the controversial content of the comedian’s show and explains step by step the arguments presented by both the prosecution and the defence throughout the case. Was the comedian a victim of judicially sanctioned censorship, or was he simply facing the legal consequences of promoting hate speech? By comparing the Brazilian courts’ rulings with case law from the United States and the European Court of Human Rights on similar matters, the article highlights the paradoxes that arise from the production of disparaging humour in the age of social media, where the attention garnered from court trials can increase a comedian’s popularity and contribute to their portrayal as a martyr for free speech.

While the contributions in this issue are diverse in scope and subject matter, they collectively highlight the significant scholarship of the Global South. Through this collection of papers, we hope to draw attention to how humour practitioners and scholars navigate the issues of identity, politics, and uncertainty, through their art and analysis. We argue for the creation of new epistemes for the analysis of humour which centre on the cultural and socio-political realities of its creators and consumers. However, this special issue should not be seen as an exhaustive or conclusive response to the disparities and underrepresentation identified at the outset of this editorial. Instead, it calls for a broader debate on the complexities and challenges associated with humour studies in underrepresented regions. We aim for this issue to encourage further exploration and critical engagement with the diverse perspectives and experiences of the Global South, recognising that much work remains to be done to address existing gaps in the field.

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