

## Book review

**Klumbytė, Neringa (2022). *Authoritarian Laughter: Political Humour and Soviet Dystopia in Lithuania*. Cornell University Press.**

A topical book by Neringa Klumbytė, Professor at the University of Miami (Ohio, USA), *Authoritarian Laughter: Political Humour and Soviet Dystopia in Lithuania*, not only expands the field of humour studies in Lithuania, but also adds to the current research on the Soviet era around the world. The scholar has carried out a meticulous research revealing the multi-layered nature of Soviet-era humour in Lithuania, and demonstrating that humour for Lithuanians was both a form of adaptation and a form of resistance against political and social oppression. Moreover, laughter helped to understand and endure the repression of the Soviet regime.

This important work, published by Cornell University Press in 2022, has enriched the rapidly growing field of humour studies and the research on totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe. The book has already received well-deserved recognition, becoming the winner of the 2024 BASEES (British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies) Women's Forum. In 2024, the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania Science and Encyclopaedia Publishing Centre published a translation of the book into Lithuanian (translated by Daiva Litvinskaitė).

Klumbytė's work is a fitting addition to the shelves of books on political humour that explore the Soviet era and the periods of totalitarian oppression. The scholar builds on the analysis of the origins of political humour in various cultures, especially the comic nature of totalitarian regimes, including the Soviet Union, presented in *Jokes and Their Relation to Society* by Christie Davies (1998). Her work also complements Ben Lewis' *Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told through Communist Jokes* (2008), which explores the role of humour as a mode of resistance, self-expression and response to totalitarianism and the absurdities of life under communism, as well as Jonathan Waterlow's *It's Only a Joke, Comrade!: Humour, Trust and Everyday Life under Stalin* (2018), which examines the humour that circulated in the Soviet Union under Stalinism, when laughing was a survival strategy and a secret form of resistance. Klumbytė complements the research carried out by the above-mentioned authors by thoroughly analysing the situation of humour in Soviet Lithuania, using the popular humour and satire magazine of the time, *Šluota* ("Broom"). I would also like to mention David L. Hoffmann's *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941*, published in 2003. Although the book does not directly analyse humour and comic nature, in my opinion Klumbytė's research adds to Hofmann's ideas on how the Soviet government shaped the everyday life of the country's citizens, ideological and cultural norms.

All of the books analyse humour in complex political and social conditions and help the readers to broaden their knowledge of the Soviet era. However, Klumbytė's *Authoritarian Laughter* stands out for its field of research—it specifically describes the situation in Lithuania during the Soviet era, which has been little analysed from the perspective of humour studies. Moreover, the book focuses on the satire and humour periodical *Šluota*, which has received little attention so far. It can be argued that Klumbytė's book is a history of *Šluota*.

*Authoritarian Laughter* is an interesting read. Especially engaging are the various personal experiences of the author about her adventures in collecting material for this book. The saying that “Any joke is a story that people tell each other about themselves” (p. ix), found at the very beginning of the book, is very befitting.

In the Acknowledgements, readers are briefly introduced to the relevant dates in Lithuanian history (p. xiii). For those who are unfamiliar with Lithuanian history, the dates help to understand for how long the country was under occupation, how the Lithuanians persistently resisted this oppression, why it is so important to explore the topic. The book focuses not only on the linguistic, but also on the visual expression of satire, i.e., cartoons. Klumbytė’s book has many cartoons from *Šluota*, and the images that are not included in the book are posted on the author’s website [Neringaklumbyte.com](http://Neringaklumbyte.com). The creation of a website is an excellent means of dissemination, appealing to readers of all ages, and accessible to a wide range of academic disciplines (e.g., historians, communication specialists, art and media scholars researching the Soviet period).

Klumbytė’s book consists of Acknowledgements, Relevant Dates, Note of Transliteration, Introduction, and eight chapters on the banality of Soviet power, political intimacy, the Soviet predicament, censorial indistinction, political aesthetics, multidirectional laughter, satirical justice, and the Soviet dystopia. The book also contains the chapters “Post Scriptum: Revolution and Post-authoritarian Laughter” and “Conclusion,” which deal with the issues of lost laughter and authoritarian stigma. The book ends with Notes, References and Index.

In the Introduction, Klumbytė introduces readers to the subject of her book, namely the magazine *Šluota* and its editors, revealing her close relationship with the subject, her search for it and the preparation of the book. I would like to highlight a quote at the beginning of the Introduction, which is a fitting description of the mood that prevailed in occupied Lithuania during the Soviet period:

Communist party ideologists could see the *Broom* artists and writers fighting against unresponsive, inept bureaucrats or the shoddiness of industrial production, while readers could generalise *Broom* criticism to the socialist system itself. Authorities read depictions of criminals, robbers, homeless people, or sexualized images of women in the West as a critique of “rotten capitalism.” Yet these same images aroused some readers ‘fascination with the West and desire to visit it’ (p. 3).

(Klumbytė, 2022, p. 3)

This quote brings to light the dualism of humour in Soviet Lithuania: by ordering to ridicule the West, the institutions made the idea of the West even more attractive to their citizens. Here, it is appropriate to mention the concept of “forbidden fruit,” which claims that bans and taboos only increase curiosity—contrary to what the censors expect.

Klumbytė uses several methods in her research, which allows her to investigate more precisely the research problem: In what ways did the Soviet government in Lithuania use political humour and satire as an ideological tool? How did it become *multidirectional*, i.e., it both served and opposed the regime? The core of the problem lies in understanding humour not only as a propaganda tool but also as a sophisticated form of communication that could also lead to oppositional attitudes. The author uses the method of historical ethnography in order to answer as precisely as possible the question of how people lived, thought and interacted under specific historical conditions (i.e., in Soviet-occupied Lithuania). Klumbytė analyses the facts of the past, delving into people’s experiences, emotions and the elements of everyday life that shaped their relationship with the historical period and the political system.

In the first chapter of the book “Banality of Soviet Power”, the author complemented people’s personal experiences with institutional archival material, collecting documents on the

control of state satire, the politics of censorship and the editorial decisions of *Šluota*. The in-depth interviews conducted by Klumbytė with the creators of *Šluota* and their relatives are especially interesting. This way, the reader has the opportunity to become acquainted with the recollections and learn about the experiences of the editors, cartoonists and journalists of the magazine in the then Lithuania. The stories of Juozas Bulota's, the editor-in-chief of *Šluota*, and personal archive viewings in Vilnius, in the apartment on Milda Street and in the Bulota's family farmhouse, reveal the author's special involvement in the research.

Klumbytė also pays attention to the visual aspect of *Šluota*, thoroughly researching and interpreting the cartoons in order to understand magazine's ideological messages and subtexts. Moreover, the focus is not only on this magazine, but also on the largest-circulation Russian-language magazine in the USSR, *Krokodil*, and *Dadzi*, published in Latvia.

Klumbytė employs the concepts of *multidirectional laughter*, *political intimacy*, and *antagonistic complicity* to analyse the interaction between humour, resistance, and state power. The author relies on an analytical approach revealing the influence of the state and politics in the creation of satire in Lithuania. Here, I would like to highlight the notion of *banality of power* (cf. Mbembe, 2001), which explains the everyday participation in authoritarian processes, and is discussed in the first chapter of Klumbytė's book. In my opinion, this concept is very fitting. The creators and readers of *Šluota* participated in power projects not because of their *belief in* the system but simply through ordinary everyday activities. Thus, the term *banality of power* explains how an authoritarian regime was able to incorporate the people into its structures, while at the same time providing space for subtle resistance. The study of Hannah Arendt (1963), mentioned in Klumbytė's book, should also be acknowledged: "Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil' uncovers that participation in murderous projects can sometimes have no deep ideological roots or motives" (p. 30).

In Soviet Lithuania, people lived in constant tension, subconsciously fearing the regime's punishment. Klumbytė's use of the above-mentioned research assumptions answers many questions that arise in contemporary society about the complex life of people in the Soviet era and the need to adapt. However, one of Klumbytė's more absolutist statements about the Lithuanian poet Justinas Marcinkevičius (i.e. that he "published pro-Soviet poems and poems with nationalistic undertones"; p. 35) is questionable, as he published only a few such poems in order to escape the political regime's repression. I think that this is a case of making use of the wrong literature on the period, especially since the author herself notes that the period she is researching was very ambiguous. The author's research reveals that humour was a space in which there was a constant negotiation between the state and the citizens, and that laughter simultaneously served ideological purposes and created opportunities for resistance. Furthermore, in the analysis of *Šluota*, Klumbytė points to the contradictory nature of authoritarian regimes, where power was both strong and fragile.

The second chapter of the book, "Political intimacy," continues the analysis of the *relationship* between society and the repressive authorities, as it deals with the subtle, often paradoxical ways in which Lithuanians living under the oppression of the USSR went about their daily lives, combining cooperation with resistance, or rather, marking the line that could not be crossed. This chapter also talks about the joint outings (to hunt) and celebrations of *Šluota*'s editorial board, which in the minutes of the meetings of the Communist Party of Lithuania were treated even as violations of discipline. The inclusion of such stories in the book perfectly reflects the way in which the authorities were simultaneously ridiculed and served.

When the readers turn to the third chapter of the book, "The Soviet predicament," they find a photograph taken by Klumbytė (p. 66) of the former *Šluota* journalist Albertas Lukša with his dog Mika. Such illustrations make the content of the book more interesting and allow the reader to get to know the characters better. In this chapter, I would like to highlight one important

quote: “To say that it was meaningful and significant to work at the Communist Party ideological front is not to argue that *Broom* CP members believed in communism” (p. 68). The quote perfectly illustrates the case of Lithuania during Soviet oppression, or rather the attempts of the Soviet government to maintain its rule in Lithuania, which was very protective of (and managed to preserve) its identity. Lithuania’s history of independence, partisan resistance, national and cultural history posed serious obstacles to the Soviet authorities. Lithuanians managed not only to adapt, but also not to succumb to foreign rule and preserve their identity.

When we talk about ideological oppression, we must also discuss the practice of censorship. In the chapter “Censorial Indistinction” (Chapter 4), Klumbytė argues that censorship not only limited artistic and creative freedom, but also shaped certain norms of everyday life and ideological goals, creating a kind of ‘non-discrimination’ practice. The author describes how censors often failed to draw clear lines between what was genuinely ideologically unacceptable and what was ‘allowed’ but had certain subjective interpretations. On p. 104, there is an interesting table prepared by the author. It contains excerpts from the *Glavlit censored content of the Broom* reports. The table shows the year of publication of *Šluota*, the censors’ comments and explanations. The table further familiarises the reader with the content of *Šluota* and shows that Soviet censorship in Lithuania was a complex and dynamic system: although it had clear ideological boundaries, it was often unable to distinguish between minor and serious violations. This feature of the censors allowed magazine’s creators to pursue their artistic goals with some freedom and to get around sanctions by using the Aesopian language.

In Chapter 5 “Political Aesthetics,” Klumbytė seamlessly moves from censorship to an analysis of political aesthetics. Here, she summarises the general content rules of *Šluota* that defined the political aesthetics of the magazine:

The *Broom* editors followed several general content editing imperatives that shaped the political aesthetics of the magazine. A satirist could not generalise about negative aspects of everyday life (they had to be singular or temporary) and had to write in a positive, reaffirming language. Cartoons and satires had to have a positive corrective stance. The critique was to be directed at overcoming temporary shortcomings, survivals of the past.

(Klumbytė, 2022, p. 127)

The relationship between aesthetics and ideology was undeniably a complex one. Even though the official Soviet aesthetics was supposed to censor everything, the artists ingeniously incorporated elements that allowed various works to emerge, even under authoritarian regime. The most important thing was to keep editorial strategies intact and to follow the tradition of censorship (on p. 127, Klumbytė provides a table of editorial censorship of the magazines *Šluota* and *Krokodil*).

The phrase by the *Šluota* artist Kęstutis Šiaulytis, “The opposition was not to the regime, but to its foolishness”, opens book’s Chapter 6 “Multidirectional Laughter”. It once again supports the idea that satire in the Soviet era was not only an entertainment, but also an opportunity to indirectly express one’s opinion, to find a way round sanctions, and to make a fool of the government, that is to say, to oppose it without the system realising it, by taking advantage of the system’s weaknesses. This chapter is richly illustrated with *Šluota* cartoons and provides a convincing interpretation of them.

Chapter 7, with the catchy-sounding title “Satirical justice,” has an interesting story to tell: a woman working in the *Kova* (English: “fight”) tobacco factory is injured and the factory management tells her to end her shift. Later, it turns out that the woman has broken her spine, and as she follows the government’s orders and continues working that day, she becomes disabled. Someone suggests that the unfortunate woman write a letter and seek the truth through *Šluota*. That someone is not wrong—the journalists start looking for the truth. The story in

Klumbytė's book shows that *Šluota* also functioned as an institution of satirical justice. In many cases, *Šluota* was the last chance to find justice.

The last eighth chapter of the book answers the question of what the Soviet dystopia is:

People walk on wooden planks in flooded, muddy yards to safely reach apartment building entrances. In other yards, there are unfinished sidewalks and construction debris. Children play in playgrounds with broken wire fences and sandboxes without sand, and drive their bicycles over mud-washed roads in apartment housing districts.

(Klumbytė, 2022, p. 198)

Such a dystopian world of Soviet Lithuania is depicted in the letters of *Šluota* readers. In Chapter 8 "Soviet Dystopia", Klumbytė analyses and presents various evidence (archival photographs, stories of poverty, and letters to *Šluota*) that the Soviet government sought to create a welfare society, but in reality life was burdened by everyday deprivations: poor infrastructure, shortages of food and manufactured goods, bureaucratic difficulties and social inequalities. Thus, it not only reveals the failures of the Soviet utopia, but also introduces readers, who have never experienced this reality, to the everyday difficulties of the people who lived then.

Although Klumbytė uses complex political and theoretical concepts that may be more difficult to appreciate for readers unfamiliar with the theories used in the book, it is a valuable academic work not only for scholars studying the Soviet period. Through the prism of political satire and humour, the book demonstrates how Lithuanians preserved their identity despite oppression, strict censorship and fear of punishment. It could be argued that the book focuses mainly on *Šluota* as the main example of Soviet humour, and that it cannot be an illustration of the whole situation of humour in Soviet Lithuania. I would argue that the insights provided by Klumbytė echo the results of other authors' research on Soviet-era jokes (see Anglickienė, 2006; Bandoriūtė-Leikienė, 2020).

The author's refusal to divide humour into *official* and *underground* humour is also interesting and exceptional. It seems that in the context of this difficult period in Lithuania, this rejection of strict boundaries is correct and convincing, because there are so many variables in research of the Soviet era that no longer allow us to draw unambiguous conclusions on certain issues (in this case, humour). I would like to highlight another strength of this book—the notion of political intimacy, which allows us to see how, even in authoritarian environments, artists found ways to overcome ideological constraints and, at the same time, to maintain a certain level of loyalty to the regime.

I strongly suggest to read Klumbytė's book *Authoritarian Laughter* to those who are interested in the study of humour, the Soviet era and repressive systems, and to those who are eager to learn more about culture and art of that time, who want to get to know Lithuania better and to learn more about the Lithuanian people's unwavering strength to maintain their identity.

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