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# Book review

## Bown, Alfie (2024). *Post-Comedy*. Polity Press.

Bown's *Post-Comedy* is a short but dense volume that offers a profoundly detailed analysis of how comedy once functioned as a shared form of social relief and communal bonding, but has since become fraught with tension, division, and anxiety. The book begins with an important and thought-provoking, yet honest, consideration. As Bown (p. 2) states:

> Joking together – and with and at each other – was once a key part of public life, which allowed a 'commons' to exist and universal solidarity to emerge, but now, – with the privatization and commodification of every space – no such public exists, and no such laughter takes place. This kind of comedy that dominates in its place is not universalist ribbing but self-congratulatory and smug satire and critic.

Drawing on Fox's (2023) definition of "post-comedy", Bown defines this new scenario as a "post-comedy world" (p. 2). Post-comedy, he argues, circulates through new channels such as social-media reels (e.g., TikTok) as well as private forms on personal devices, which replace the common spaces comedy once occupied. His view that comedy has become a product of the market is demonstrated by the fact that the positions of famous comics such as Acaster and Gervais are reinforced by high ticket sales for their live shows and high viewing rates on Netflix.

Building on Fox's ideas, Bown claims that the political stance of each comedian is supported by their viewing audience. The aim, however, is no longer simply to provoke laughter but to teach, which is why he describes this new form of humour as "didactic humour". In other words, the joke becomes an instrument of ideological polarisation: one way or another, the laughter it elicits reflects the ideology behind the joke itself (p. 16).

This argument is further expounded in the section titled "Didactic and retroactive laughter", which sheds light on the relativity of carnival meanings associated with comedy, humour, and laughter. This leads into Bown's discussion of "The form of jokes", which questions whether jokes can be inherently racist or anti-racist, a problem that has preoccupied thinkers such as Critchley (2002) and McGowan (2022), the latter drawing on Kant (2000). Bown dissects their discussion of famous jokes to demonstrate that, rather than trying to determine whether a joke is inherently racist, we can conclude that a racist joke becomes anti-racist the moment it exposes its own weak reasoning. It is our task, he suggests, to recognise this weakness to grasp the fundamental anti-racism within it (p. 30).

In the subsequent section, "Despicable jokes and the ideology of exception", Bown explains how jokes that appear profoundly racist against transgender people or "the Other" (for instance, those contrasting Chinese and Korean identities) still contain a sense of inclusion. They become something audiences can collectively laugh at, even while avoiding repeating them because targeting minorities or specific communities reinforces what he calls "the ideology of exception", that is, the belief that these groups are somehow separate from the majority and thus exceptions rather than integral parts of our shared community.

Furthermore, Bown discusses the connection between laughter and anxiety from both philosophical and psychological perspectives. Drawing on thinkers such as Freud (2001) and

Lacan (1997, 2017), he demonstrates that laughter functions as a means of exposing our subjective anxieties, while laughing at them socially allows us to share in their universality. Put differently, when we hear a joke that plays on our fears (for instance, the one about a patient who tells his therapist he has a crocodile under his bed, the therapist insists that such a thing is impossible, and the patient is later found to have been eaten by a crocodile), we can laugh at these fears, thereby exposing them and possibly coming to terms with the anxiety they provoke.

The subsequent section, "Sneezing corpses," is inspired by philosopher Alenka Zupančič's (2005) essay, in which she argues that humour (and the laughter that follows) arises from our awareness that what we see on stage is not real, and that we can always return to reality afterwards. In this sense, laughter is liberating as it cushions personal anxieties and allows individual members of an audience to come together as one. However, when we become polarised into subjects who believe they understand the world and others who do not, we embody the underlying message of didactic humour (p. 56). This dynamic is especially visible in political and divisive jokes. Bown rightly observes that "it might be that we tell jokes, in particular the divisive political jokes, in order to retroactively create an idea of a secure reality we can relate to" (p. 58). Using the example of Brexiters and Remainers in the UK, he shows that this form of divisive, didactic humour operates in both progressive and conservative communities, which rely on memes, jokes, and other media to reassure supporters that their worldview is more valid than the one of their opponents. The result, as Bown concludes, is that such humour "makes solidarity less possible" (p. 61).

In Bown's view, progressive communities, and the comedians who claim to represent them, are failing to achieve their aims, as they often seem unable to laugh at themselves. By taking things too seriously and continuously calling their audiences to action, progressive comics leave themselves open to mockery by conservatives, who turn apparent weaknesses into sources of success (e.g., Trump's questionable dancing or Cameron's "Piggate"), as discussed in the section "Satire and satiation: From Brexit to Trump '24." The author then delves deeper into contemporary humour, particularly memes, as a means of both challenging and reinforcing political views. He argues that conservative politicians often fare better than liberal ones at transforming mocking memes into tools for humanising themselves in the eyes of supporters. This effect is amplified by the logic of digital humour, which operates through algorithms that confine users to groups constantly exposed to their preferred content (e.g. reels, memes, videos, GIFs) thereby further narrowing their perspectives. Bown refers to this phenomenon as a form of "group psychology".

To elucidate this further, Bown also discusses the "Keks and LOLs" phenomenon (the former being the Korean equivalent of the latter). A telling example is the use of text messages or memes associated with Andrew Tate and the male-centred, misogynistic, far-right movements he represents. Bown reports that, in 2023, several schools in the UK sent messages to parents warning that any student found supporting Tate's views would be placed in isolation. Unfortunately, as Bown rightly explains, a woke approach risks undermining its own attempts to raise awareness about the needs of often-targeted groups (e.g., Black, Latino, and LGBTQ+ communities). In his words, "[a] culture of fear that polices [transgressive play] too quickly because of its content risks allowing it only to belong to the toxic communities that this policing attempts to prevent (…) more regulation only leads to more radicalization and to more desire to provoke" (pp. 81-82). Attempting to educate people, particularly children and teenagers, about the disruptive nature of transgressive play or humour in the form of memes risks elevating such memes to a preferred option: a radical act of opposition to the status quo.

A curious but not implausible connection between milk and the phenomenon of trolling on the internet is proposed in the following section. As Bown contends, both milk and trolling share an underlying element of attraction and repulsion, with trolling often used online as a means of

ridicule. However, he argues that rather than responding to trolling with indignation, we would be better off laughing at it, and at those who perpetuate it (p. 97). Our inability to laugh and to recognise both the Other and ourselves as objects of fantasy, becomes a central shortcoming of political activism, as Bown elaborates in the section "Activist or fetishist". The final section, "Dancing laughter and clowns: From St Vitus to TikTok," seeks to show how historical episodes of pathological or contagious mass laughter and dancing (such as St Vitus's dance) parallel the modern, algorithmic contagion of short-form videos on platforms like TikTok. The book concludes by arguing that comedy has the power to reveal how "masters", figures of authority, can lose their dominance (become castrated, in Bown's psychoanalytic phrasing) through their own actions and desire for power and self-recognition. Comedy, he maintains, can ridicule capitalist society by exposing its contradictions and our collective weaknesses, regardless of political orientation. Rather than using humour for didactic purposes that reinforce division and moral superiority, we can employ comedy to reveal societal contradictions and, ultimately, to foster a sense of shared humanity and universal solidarity.

In summary, *Post-Comedy* is a provocative, thoughtful and well-argued book that compels readers to reconsider many assumptions about humour, offence, culture wars, and what we expect from laughter in an era shaped by online life. While it may not provide all the answers, it convincingly asks the right questions. The book will particularly appeal to readers well-versed and interested in comedy, cultural theory, media studies, and the ways in which contemporary debates (such as cancel culture, identity politics, and digital culture) shape everyday experience. On a final, minor note, referencing could be improved, as it is not always as consistent as one might desire.

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