

Book review*

Chao, Shun-Liang and Vivienne Westbrook (Eds.) (2026). *Humour in Times of Confrontation, 1901 to the Present*. Routledge.

This book is the first to be published in an ambitious series, entitled *Humor in Literature and Culture*, which aims to “harness expertise from international academia to examine the role of humour in the evolution of human society” (p. ii), and to do so chronologically. Given that stated focus, it is strange that this first collection is devoted not to the role of humour in one or more ancient societies but to very recent history; and that the (problematic) concept of societal evolution is nowhere mentioned, let alone embodied in this book. Furthermore, its focus is limited to humour “in times of confrontation”—though this interesting restriction might well be justified by the unprecedented scale of the carnage and destruction which humanity has managed to unleash during the last 125 years. The contributors range appropriately from early career researchers to associate and full professors; the majority are drawn from the UK and USA, though there is an important chapter from a Hungarian scholar, and of the two editors Chao is based in Taiwan and Westbrook, who is also the general editor of the whole series, held posts in Taiwan and Kazakhstan and now has honorary positions at two Australian universities.

The Introduction first surveys humour during the major conflicts of the long twentieth century, and then promises an approach based on Morreall’s (2009) theory of the roles of humour in dark times: “to criticise what is wrong and inspire resistance to it, to unite those who suffer, and to help them cope with pain without going insane” (p. 5). The editors then devote the rest of their Introduction to an overview of the subsequent chapters. These synopses could profitably have been supplemented with an exploration of the wider questions and issues which the editors’ very promising first four pages open up but do not develop.

The book is not very long; only 204 pages (and without an Index). My reservations are concerned primarily with the selection of topics. Three out of nine chapters are devoted to humorous and/or satirical responses to events in the USA. Although between 1901 and 2025 that nation fought in more than five major overseas wars (World Wars I and II, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan), only one of these wars is treated in the book—and not from an American perspective (Chapter 3, discussed below). Despite the fact that all five of these wars (especially perhaps Vietnam) generated considerable, significant humour and satire, this volume is silent on the four others.

Instead, Chapter 1, “Caricaturing the City: Humour and Racial Difference in New York City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (Meaghan F. Walsh) studies the tensions caused in New York by immigration at the turn of the twentieth century” framing the discussion around the humour in three paintings by George Benjamin Luks, Chapter 2 by Richard Aldersley examines “Red in the Face: the Great Depression, Nathaniel West, and cynical Humour”, and Chapter 8 by Gabe Beckhurst discusses “Survivalist Humour: Improvising at the Turn of the

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Millennium”. None of the confrontations inside the USA which are discussed in these three chapters is substantive in comparison to the great conflicts between peoples and ideologies, causing death and suffering on the largest imaginable scale, which are the principal landmarks of 1901-2025, meaning that it is difficult to justify the inclusion of these three topics.

By contrast, Chapters 3 and 4 are excellent studies of significant manifestations of humour in perilous situations; both are European. Camilla Smith (Birmingham, UK), the author of an important 2023 book on Jeanne Mammem, returns here to German art with “Juro Kubicěk’s *Mein Krampf* (‘My Spasm’): Derision, Dissent, and Denazification in Post-War Berlin” –a rebound copy of Hitler’s infamous monograph which Kubicěk interleaved with satirical drawings and photomontages by himself and other artists. This work was probably begun secretly before the collapse of the Third Reich, but Smith rightly places it in the context of “uneasy questions regarding artists’ post-hoc self-positioning to Nazi resistance” (p. 57) in the very difficult living and creative conditions of a devastated Berlin in the first years of the Allied occupation.

Even more valuable is an authoritative case-study of humorous response and resistance to the Soviet puppet dictators who ruled most Eastern European countries after 1948. Hungarian scholar Lili Zách studies in “The Power and Limitations of Humour in State-Socialist Hungary in the Aftermath of the 1956 Revolution” the fraught period in her native land after the Revolution of 1956 against the Stalinist rule of Mátyás Rákosi, the Russian invasion which crushed it, and the installation of János Kádár in November of that year. The jokes and other forms of humour which helped to ease the pain of living under communist dictatorship were complex. Zách both supplies a full historical context and analyses the forms of humour which were used by the politically repressed Hungarians, and she bases her findings on her own archival research as well as on previously published material. She is also well aware that challenges can be made to Christie Davies’s view (2010, p.10) of the benefits of humour under totalitarian regimes as “tiny realms of freedom” inside which humour has a critical function (p. 84).

The next three chapters are not quite at the level set by these two, but they are still impressive. In “‘A Demonstration is also FUN’: Folk Humour and Play as Tactics to Demolish the Rational State during the 1968 Protest” Laura Bowie successfully demonstrates that humour:

played a fundamental role in the ’68 movement before it fractured and became more violent as the state response became more forceful. Humour served as...a way to *display* [Bowie’s italics], in clear and certain terms, the perceived inherent absurdity of the state apparatus (p. 120).

Unfortunately, Bakhtin’s gross misreading of the Roman Saturnalia [quoted from Bruner 2005, p.138] appears on p. 105–but, regrettably, almost everyone who invokes ‘the carnivalesque’ perpetuates his error, which is refuted by Beard [2015] (2024, p. 61ff.).

Sarah Crook’s chapter “Confronting Patriarchy: Humour and the British Women’s Liberation Movement, 1968-1992” also studies events in and after 1968. It is wide-ranging and presents a large number of specific examples. And Sarah Chant’s “Riotous Laughter: LBGQT+ Humour in the Age of Stonewall” provides a third successive chapter on post-’68 events–now in the USA, and focusing on the riot generated by the infamous raid in 1969 on a well-known gay bar, New York’s Stonewall Inn, and the uses of humour in the LGBTQ+ political movements which developed after it. They then move on to study the uses of humour to cope with the devastation caused by HIV/AIDS in the ‘80s and ‘90s. Crook provides a comprehensive account of the role of humour in American sexual politics during a tumultuous time.

The final chapter, written by volume co-editor Shun-Liang Chao, is a dispatch from the frontline of a confrontation which increasingly threatens to become a very dangerous armed conflict. He writes from National Chengchi University in Taipei, and his chosen subject is the

“Little Pinks”, “a legion of young, patriotic netizens in China and beyond that first took shape in 2016 in an online campaign against pro-Taiwan independence individuals and institutions” (p. 186). Chao’s title is “Confronting China’s ‘Little Pinks’: Political Humour in Namewee’s Love Song ‘Fragile’,” and he both describes and analyses the satire of the Little Pinks by Taiwanese pop singer Namewee. His chapter brings to the book a fascinating focus on an Asian topic which is both a real, serious confrontation and a battle waged in the contemporary media of online posts and YouTube videos.

Despite two excellent chapters and four good ones, this book falls well short of dealing adequately with its topic. The focus on “Humour in Times of Confrontation” would be welcome if more of the period’s major conflicts were treated. The Second World War receives only a chapter on artistic activity in Berlin in its immediate aftermath; the First World War, the Vietnam War and the Second Iraq War were pivotal events which profoundly reshaped the world order, and they gave rise to much satirical material, some of it of high artistic quality; but they are completely absent from this volume. Chapters 1, 2 and 8 deal with relatively unimportant conflicts, and even the much more satisfactory chapters 5, 6 and 7 arguably devote too much space to the events of 1968 and their aftermath.

This new series inevitably invites comparison with Bloomsbury Academic’s *A Cultural History of Comedy* (2020) (I should disclose that I was the editor of *CHC* volume 1, *Antiquity*; but I had no input into the format of the series as a whole). This comparison does not favour the new Routledge project, for four main reasons: (1) All six Bloomsbury volumes had the same eight chapter titles, so parallels between periods were directly facilitated; by contrast only the words “Humour in...” are likely to unite the Routledge books. (2) The six *CHC* volumes were prepared concurrently and then published simultaneously, so the series editors could ensure that their overall concept was maintained throughout. (3) Volume editors were required to provide a comprehensive Introduction and expressly forbidden to fill space with synopses of the subsequent chapters. (4) Finally, although the series title referenced Comedy rather than Humour, only my own volume confined itself to staged comedy (due to the richness of the source material for ancient Greek and Roman theatre); all of the other five books discussed to a greater or lesser extent non-theatrical manifestations of humour, including in vol. 2 its presence in mediaeval daily life, religion and learned society, in vols. 4 and 5 satire in novels of the Enlightenment and the Age of Empire, and in the Modern Age (1910-2020) standup comedy, film, television and new electronic media. Concededly, Asia was excluded altogether, and a predominantly Anglophone focus also meant that continental Europe after the Middle Ages was only rarely discussed; but within those limitations a fairly comprehensive overview was achieved. Future volumes of *Humour in Literature and Culture* will have to address key topics much more extensively than the collection reviewed here, if they are to offer a serious successor to the *Cultural History of Comedy*, rather than just some individual chapters which provide an occasionally useful supplement.

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