

Book review

Willett, Cynthia & Willett, Julie. (2019). *Uproarious. How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

With *Uproarious. How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth*, Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett present a broad and in-depth discussion of contemporary forms of comedy, reframing our understanding of humour and giving theoretical space and meaning to voices that subvert discourses of exclusion.

The authors do not propose a new definition of humour, rather, they invite us to consider how humour can be a philosophy of life (p. 18), and how its impact is deeply rooted within our affective and social lives. They argue that we cannot understand humour by looking only at forms of intellectual humour that create a disconnect between the mind and the body and that are inattentive to humour's relationship with affects and with multiple layers of power (p. 18). They bring attention to how the intersections of race, gender and class impact the production and the reception of humorous discourses, and broaden the intersectional approach by "includ[ing] nonhuman animal species within [their] understanding of subversive agents of laughter and power" (p. 3).

By combining historical and philosophical perspectives (Julie Willett is an associate professor of history at Texas Tech University, and Cynthia Willett is Samuel Candler Dobbs professor of philosophy at Emory University), the authors invite us to "rethink the history of humour from below together with its philosophical uptake" (p. 18). Their approach contextualises the developments of theories of humour to explain why the voices they study have not traditionally been framed as comic ones, why and how the "erasure of the socially disempowered from the status of the comic, and thus the agent of true humour, is part of a persistent historical narrative and a master game plan that has come to define the construct of the rational man" (p. 4).

Uproarious counters this historical *and* theoretical erasure in two ways. First, by engaging critically with the four main theories of humour that are currently dominating the field of humour studies (Introduction). Second, by looking at practices of humour "from below," that is humour that can turn the tables and challenge marginalising discourses. The examples of comedy they discuss range from feminist humour (Chapter 1), humour against racism, and particularly against Islamophobia (Chapter 2), humour created by animals (Chapter 3), bodily humour and the cathartic relief it can provide as a counter discourse to shame (Chapter 4), and humour created within conditions of incarceration (Chapter 5).

In their introduction, "Revamping the four major theories on humour," the authors revisit the theories of superiority, relief, incongruity and play that are used across multiple disciplines to explain humour (p. 5). They do not dismiss the theories altogether, but point at their limitations, and at how the dominance of these theories can lead to the exclusion of multiple forms of humour.

Their discussion of superiority theory (pp. 7-11) shows how this approach often ignores the dynamics of power at play in the creation of humour. Based on their intersectional approach,

they reject monolithic binaries such as that of dominant/resistant to be attentive to the multiple categories of identity that affect relationships, and look at how comedians aim to locate their own position in order to “punch up” rather than down (p. 9). Ultimately, they propose to “rebrand superiority theory as levelling humour, reclaiming for ridicule egalitarian methods and aims against entrenched hierarchies and biases” (p. 10).

Uproarious’s critique of the relief theory is the most developed and illuminating (see pp. 11-13 and Chapter 4). The authors argue against the idea that humour only brings temporary relief while actually reinforcing oppressive structures, that is against the “persistent suspicion that comic laughter is politically irrelevant or ineffective” (p. 11). On the contrary, they show how humour from below can lead to lasting shifts that will alter social dynamics, and they “recast” the relief theory “as a cathartic, biosocial catalyst, and thus as a major player in an easily unsettled political terrain” (p. 12).

Contesting the prominent place given to intellectual forms of humour to the detriment of what can be called “gut humour” (building on Elizabeth Wilson’s gut feminism), the authors also reconsider the place of incongruity theory (pp. 13-15). By focusing solely on the cognitive aspects of humour, incongruity theories often rely on a strict separation between the mind and the body. Challenging this division, the authors look at how humour connects mind and body, and study how individual comic utterances are both affected by and in turn affect their social and political contexts (p. 15).

Finally, arguing “that laughter and humour originate in social play” (p. 15), the authors challenge the binary between the serious and the playful we find in theories of humour as play (pp. 15-18). They focus on the place of humour as part of social life and social change, thus contesting those who frame humour and play as escapist strategies. Building on studies of play in groups of humans and non-human animals, they show the importance of role reversal and self-handicapping in learning how to play and be social beings (p. 17). In humour, this means that we can learn to take turns at being the butt of the joke to create a social field that will challenge hierarchies. The root of their critique of play theories – and of superiority, relief and incongruity – is therefore the challenge of binary categories that limit our understanding of humour, trying to fixate it in a static structure while it is a changing and fluid phenomenon, a “play of exclusion and inclusion, a dialectic of hostility (laughing at) and joyful solidarity (laughing with), riding an emotional roller coaster of shame and pride” (p. 17).

Chapter 1, “Fumerism. Feminist anger and joy from Roseanne Barr to Margaret Cho and Wanda Sykes,” has a two-fold goal: showing that feminists have a sense of humour, and showing how their humour has the power to subvert norms and challenge patriarchal forms of humour. The chapter proposes to uncover a hidden history of feminist humour while analysing the workings of the subversive force of this humour. Identifying motherhood and sexuality as two key areas where feminist comedians use ridicule to dismantle oppressive structures, they dedicate the first two parts of the chapter to analysing examples of comedy discussing motherhood and female sexuality. They contextualise and analyse Roseanne Barr’s humour of the 1980s and 1990s, showing how it challenged traditional models of the family and of the role of the mother. Similarly, they discuss Wanda Sykes’s feminist take on the “reduction of women to property that has for far too long served to eroticize male domination” (p. 32), showing how her routine on “detachable pussies” sheds light on power dynamics that lead to rape culture and how her humour overturns male humour and reclaims woman’s rights on their bodies. Barr and Sykes offer examples of what the authors call “fumerist” humour, a term first proposed by stand-up comedian Kate Clinton (Barreca 1992: 178): humour that is both destructive and constructive, that burns traditional images through ridicule while eroticising new sources of power and joy (pp. 27-28). Indeed, building on Audre Lorde’s work on the power of the erotic,

the authors propose that feminist humour has a cathartic force that can turn anger into a joyful reclaiming of power.

In the third section of the chapter, they present a genealogy of feminist humour in the Foucauldian sense, which they frame as a way to read history through irony: “Genealogy is history and its tragedies replayed through the eye of the ironist (for us the fumerist), alert to inversions in the dynamics of power” (p. 34). Looking at the role of the techniques of inversion and levelling in humour and in feminism, they read figures such as the male chauvinist pig as a comic inversion used by the women’s movement to ridicule the female Playboy bunny created by a misogynistic culture (pp. 38-39). Giving the example of Margaret Cho’s “Slut Pride Parade,” they show how fumerism, a feminist humorous erotic, can “dismantle shame and generate erotic energy for us all” (p. 43).

In Chapter 2, “Fighting back against islamophobia and post-9/11 nationalism. Dean Obeidallah, Maysoun Zayid, Hari Kondabolu, and others,” Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett argue that humour has a role to play in countering collective negative affects such as fear and hostility. Being attentive to the circulation of affects, defined by affect theory as more visceral and transpersonal than emotions (p. 50), means breaking down the perception of the individual as an enclosed system. Network theories of affect show that individuals have porous boundaries, and are indeed “nodes of biosocial networks larger than themselves” (p. 50). Building on this porous and interconnected understanding of individuals, the authors argue that we should look at how humour circulates in networks and can become a contagious positive energy challenging toxic affects.

The chapter discusses a wide range of examples of comedy that help us see that racial identities are not essential features of individuals, but collective creations modified contextually and defined by social, political and economic factors (p. 48). From comedian Dean Obeidallah’s reflection on the shift of perception of his identity after 9/11 (“I go to bed September 10th white, wake up September 11th – I’m an Arab”; p. 47) to Ayma Ismail’s documentary *Muslims Can’t Take a Joke* and Hari Kondabolu’s 2018 Netflix special *Warn Your Relatives* (pp. 59-60), the authors look at humour’s role in addressing our collective responsibility for the rise of mass toxic affects such as islamophobia. More precisely, they show how these and other comedians’ edgy humour can provide a much-needed alternative to the sitcom’s sentimental humour, which has a limited impact in transforming normative and exclusive behaviours (p. 61). Even more importantly, they point at the limits of an unquestioned faith in logical thinking as a means to move towards a more progressive social context, explaining that the cathartic power of humour can help to change perceptions when logic and reason fail to do so (p. 57). By helping to recall “the malleability of race and ethnicity” (p. 65), they argue that humour helps to fluidify boundaries between individuals and thus “generates solidarity across identities that are now revealed to be fluid” (p. 52).

Chapter 3, “Can the animal subaltern laugh? Mocking alpha males with Georgia and Koko,” also argues that humour can generate more solidarity between individuals, and even across species. Criticising one of the traditional criteria of humour, that it is a specifically *human* aptitude or practice, the authors challenge the space we have ascribed to animals in humour: as the butts of the joke and the targets of ridicule. Instead, the chapter looks at how animals’ use of humour is a sign of their agency, while showing how a study of animals as humour producers can shed light on the origins and the roles of laughter in our human communities.

Compared to the four other chapters, Chapter 3 presents a much longer historical and conceptual discussion to contextualise the authors’ arguments on laughter and humour and to analyse some examples of comedy produced by animals. The authors situate their approach as one that takes into account the histories of oppression and exploitation of animals while trying not to cast animals in the roles of victims, choosing to focus instead on animal agency (p. 80).

Building on animal studies and play theories, they show how looking at animal humour can help us understand the social uses of laughter, notably as a means of ridiculing members of a community in positions of authority (such as alpha males), and as a tool to demand fair play among members of the community. Among strategies for creating an “egalitarian ethos” (p. 88), they explore the role of name calling, giving the example of gorilla Koko’s playful criticism of her caregiver (p. 88), and of animal tricksters or practical jokers such as chimpanzee Georgia (p. 90). Finally, stressing the continuity between groups of oppressed animals and other oppressed social groups (and the similar structures of the exploitation of human and animal workers), they argue that a renewed look at the connection between animals and humour, and the disruption of “old-school assumptions that animals can only be funny when they perform human tricks” can help us “collectively tackle other oppressive norms” (p. 97).

Chapter 4, “A catharsis of shame. The belly laugh and SlutWalk,” compellingly continues and deepens the discussion of feminist humour initiated in Chapter 1. The chapter reframes comic relief by going back to the meanings and effects of catharsis and proposing a form of “collective catharsis” that has the power to alter oppressive structures. The authors first discuss the limits of studies of humour that consider only its cerebral aspect, be they cognitive (e.g. the incongruity theory) or philosophical (humour as a way to rise above difficulties without effecting any changes). Both approaches neglect the larger social dynamic at play in humour, as well as the emotions and affects of humour and their impact on the body. Building on the work of Deborah Gould (see Kinsman) and Arlie Russell Hochschild, they emphasise the key role of “emotion work” in dismantling oppressive structures, and in particular “humour’s cathartic power to challenge the stifling patriarchal politics of shame” (p. 100). Deploring the dismissal of relief theories such as Freud’s early writings on jokes, the authors propose to go back to the notion of relief, while drawing distinctions between different types of relief.

Working with Belfiore’s (1992) notions of *homeopathic* and *allopathic catharsis*, which would help shield someone against oppression without modifying the structures of oppression, they propose a third type, *collective catharsis*. More than a temporary venting of energy, collective catharsis is a model of relief as *flow* (p. 111), a collective circulation of energy that can bring lasting modifications, notably in the “distribution of shame in society” (p. 109). Their argument is strengthened by their discussion of McCumber’s (1988) article on the early meanings of the Greek term *catharsis* as a term for menstruation, and the inference that catharsis was perceived as a social purging of “dirty” aspects of the community, often associated with the female. Reframing both catharsis and menstruation as productive processes rather than moments of purification from uncleanness, they expose the connection between the repression of laughter and of female sexuality.

The authors illustrate the concept of collective catharsis with the examples of comedians who have used humour to create a shift from shame to pride. Analysing Amber Rose’s “Walk of No Shame” (Gillespie 2015) and her involvement in the SlutWalk movement, they show how Rose fosters this shift by ascribing a positive value to the word *slut* that has been used to stigmatise women. Similarly, they read Amy Schumer’s sketch “Football Town Nights” (Schumer et al. 2015) as a reappropriation of rape jokes commenting on the pervasive presence of rape culture: “In making rape culture – not its victim – as the butt of the joke, belly laughs can rock the foundations of a misogynistic civilization while liberating women from slut shame” (p. 119).

The fifth and final chapter, “Solidaric empathy and a prison roast with Jeff Ross,” explores the possible roles of humour in fostering connections between people of radically different status. Contrary to other chapters, Chapter 5 deals with the work of a single comedian, Jeff Ross, presenting his roasts of prisoners of the Brazos County Jail and of the Boston police as examples

of empathetic humour that can engage us emotionally to modify our perceptions and our social interactions.

The authors look into the connection between humour and empathy by first asking what kind of empathy is needed for bridge-building forms of humour. Presenting a historical overview from the 18th-century notion of *sympathy* to contemporary discussions of *empathy*, they distinguish between several ways of understanding empathy and show the limits of each conception. Empathy conceived according to a matching theory, for example, proposes that we can feel someone else's pain, while "superlative" empathy proposes that feeling is not passive but co-constructed. In both cases, the authors argue that empathy runs the risk of appropriating the other's pain from a privileged standpoint. In contrast to those approaches, they propose to look at "radical empathy as a capacity to bond where one would not expect to find it" (p. 133).

Humour would be a particularly good way of creating radical empathy through its capacity to weaken "defences that sustain social tensions and hierarchies" (p. 133). The authors point out how the inclusive and celebratory nature of the roast in particular can de-escalate tensions, show the humanity of the other and foster solidarity. By roasting prisoners, Jeff Ross would "elevate their stature to someone you laugh with, not simply at" (p. 122), generate empathy towards them, and therefore make the viewers see the reality of the tragedy of mass incarceration in the United States ("a system that contains more unfree black Americans than the institution of slavery did in 1850"; p. 122).

Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett conclude with a discussion of the connection between humour and the tragic. In their conclusion, "Humour can't wait. In the tragic with Tig Notaro and Hannah Gadsby," the authors propose not to abide by the old formula that "tragedy plus time equals comedy." Following the lead of Tig Notaro creating humour in the middle of a distressing period of grief and pain (after a breakup, her mother's passing and her cancer diagnosis), they foreground the role of humour within tragic moments. Yet, they caution against a detached standpoint that would use humour to not deal with the tragic: "Confronted by the tragic, the comedic soul chooses to share and engage, to work through, not detach, as we live in the moment to change the moment. This is why we embrace Notaro's philosophy that humour can't wait" (p. 150). Similarly, they highlight how Hannah Gadsby's move away from self-deprecating humour and towards more subversive comedy enables her to address the misogyny of a comic culture that has tolerated humour from the margins only when it further reinforced marginalisation (pp. 151-152). Notaro and Gadsby exemplify the philosophy of "humour of connection" (p. 149) the authors have developed, of humour using anger, collective catharsis and solidaric empathy to transform shame into pride and build connections.

Uproarious is a must-read for every humour scholar. Its critical engagement with dominant theories of humour highlights how the consideration of an overlooked and under-theorised corpus of comedy will modify our very understanding of humour and its powers, and show the limitations of our current theoretical frameworks. Their critique of incongruity theory replaces the knowledge we can gain from this approach within a wider conceptual framework that can take into account the impact of humour not only on our brains but also on our bodies, our interconnections and our politics. As they explain, "[g]ut-wrenching ironies risk losing their charge when they are theorised as mere cognitive incongruities. Too much is at stake" (p. 67). Similarly, their reframing of relief theory opens up questions about the consequence of neglecting the power of humour produced from a subaltern and subversive standpoint.

Disregarding the other's laughter as mere relief reassures dominant social groups that they still hold the reins of power. The refusal to register the social power of subaltern laughter marks a central bias in standard philosophical conceptions of what humour is (p. 5).

Uproarious covers a lot of ground, be it in terms of topics discussed, of theoretical approaches adopted or of new conceptual propositions. The space dedicated to the analyses of the work of the comedians studied is therefore sometimes quite limited. This is particularly the case in Chapters 1 and 2, which present a wide variety of examples and where more space is dedicated to explaining and defending the authors' theoretical approach. The claims on the potentialities of humour are wide-reaching but well-defended and nuanced. The authors are specific about the practices of humour they associate with the positive potentialities discussed, making sure not to make vague claims that could pertain to any type of humour (e.g. "We do not by any means suggest that all comedy is the same. Even attempts to be progressive often turn out simply to be salutes to normality"; p. 60). Finally, in a publishing landscape dominated by single-authored or edited volumes, it is heartening to see scholarship truly blending two disciplinary perspectives and two voices in a seamless and thought-provoking style. *Uproarious*'s quick pace and the density of the discussion make for a fascinating read.

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