

## Book review

**Young, Dannagal Goldthwaite (2020). *Irony and Outrage: The Polarised Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.**

Based on the juxtaposition between the literal and nonliteral or intended meaning, verbal irony is an effective vehicle for communicating disappointment, disapproval, and criticism in a humorous way. The contrast between what the ironist says and what they actually mean typically highlights how far things are from their desired state. This contrast also gives irony its playful character, as gleaning the ironist's true intention is generally considered amusing and rewarding. Thus, ironic jokes are widely appreciated (Dynel 2017; Gibbs 2000). However, in a broader cultural context, this playful ambiguity has at times been seen as inappropriate or threatening. For example, Jebediah Purdy (1999: 9) claims that "the point of irony is a quiet refusal to believe in the depth of relationships, the sincerity of motivation, or the truth of speech – especially earnest speech". In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, several cultural commentators called for replacing ironic attitudes and expressions with sincere engagement (Guhin 2013).

Similar messages continue to appear in the public discourse today with varying intensity. However, irony continues to function in its playful capacity, and one area in particular where it has enjoyed increasing popularity in recent years has been politics (see, among others, Greene 2019). Dannagal Goldthwaite Young tackles this topic in her book, *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States*.

The book is an examination of how irony functions within the context of liberal political satire as a television genre, setting it against conservative *outrage programming* shows (i.e. political commentary shows centred around the personal brand of the presenter and "guided by the spirit of anger and indignation," typically directed against perceived ideological/political opponents; p. 48). The author systematically compares their forms and functions, as well as the psychological characteristics of their respective consumers. Her central claims are: that "televised political satire and conservative political opinion programming, while not the same, serve similar needs for their audiences [...], have parallel effects on their audiences," and "look different from each other due in large part to the different psychological frameworks of liberalism and conservatism, which account for distinct psychological traits and aesthetic preferences among their creators and audiences" (p. 5).

These interesting and timely claims are then developed over the span of ten chapters (not counting the prologue and the epilogue chapters), in which the author draws from an impressive range of sources, including history, sociology, political science, psychology, and neuroscience. She also presents her own extensive body of empirical work on the topic, as well as personal correspondence with other scholars in the field. Thus, the initial chapters trace the development of conservative talk radio and liberal political satire performances, which, influenced by the changing media landscape, eventually coalesced into their contemporary forms of outrage programming and late-night political satire shows, respectively. The author then argues that the emergence of these two distinct forms can be mapped onto the specific psychological

characteristics of conservatives and liberals. These are the need for cognition (enjoyment of thinking and comprehending), the need for cognitive closure (preference for clear answers), and openness to experience. These lead liberals to enjoy ironic political satire, and conservatives to prefer unambiguous and direct outrage programming. However, in the final third of the book, the author presents extensive evidence showing that although these two forms of political commentary differ with respect to aesthetics and intended audiences, they serve the same psychological needs, namely, the provision of information and entertainment:

Once [the viewers] are watching, the shows signal to them what issues and what political events are important for them to think about. The shows frame these issues and events in a way that affects how their audiences interpret them, assign responsibility and blame for them, and look for solutions to them (pp. 190-191).

The greatest strength and value of the book lies precisely in the author's skilful presentation and juxtaposition of these two sides of the political media landscape. The author acknowledges her own ideological positions, is quick to present thoughtful counterarguments and limitations to the results she discusses, and ends the book with a strong conciliatory message. In particular, although she makes references to the genetic underpinnings of the psychological/cognitive traits determining conservative and liberal attitudes to irony and satire, she emphasises that they are neither deterministic nor necessarily negative in and of themselves. Rather, the corresponding social issues – a certain lack of effectiveness by liberal satirists in translating their messages into action, stoking fear-based polarisation by the conservative outrage pundits – are identified as resulting from the shortcomings of the media corporations which prioritise profits over honesty and accountability.

The author's knowledge and experience, expert combining of numerous perspectives and sources, as well as sensitivity and impartiality result in the book being an informative, engaging, and compelling investigation. It is well written and easy to follow, with plentiful reminders, summaries, and examples helping the reader follow the argument as it progresses from historical accounts to psychological studies, to social commentary at times. However, the book's unique scope as well as its accessible tone and style have two main consequences for its content. First, the book is relatively casual in defining irony and locating it within satire. Although this does not diminish the weight of the author's arguments, it does stand in contrast with the careful terminological and definitional concerns typical of works on irony (see, among others, Garmendia (2018) for an academic book; and Kreuz (2020) for an example intended for popular audiences). Second, the author sometimes summarises empirical studies very briefly, chiefly focusing on their results at the expense of detailing their methodology. Moreover, in place of in-text citations, the book uses bibliographical endnotes. At times, this results in the author making overgeneral statements based on single statements sources (e.g., Chapter 4, References 17-19). However, this is not a flaw of the book, but rather a conscious decision, as the author visibly intended this book for broader audiences than just researchers in the psychology of humour and politics.

Other major limitations of the book are openly acknowledged by the author, namely (a) the specific context of electoral politics in the United States in recent decades and (b) the focus strictly on television programming. Again, they do not detract from the book's value, as the author bases her research and conclusions on generalisable psychological mechanisms, and makes explicit calls for extending her findings and claims to other contexts. Thus, *Irony and Outrage: The Polarised Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States* is a worthwhile offering in the field of humour studies, serving as an excellent and thought-

provoking introduction to a promising and worthwhile area of research. It may also be of interest to social studies' researchers, as well as interested readers from the general public.

**Piotr Kałowski**

University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw, Poland

[p.kalowski@vizja.pl](mailto:p.kalowski@vizja.pl)

## References

- Dynel, M. (2017). 'Academics vs. American scriptwriters vs. academics: a battle over the etic and emic "sarcasm" and "irony" labels'. *Language & Communication* 55, pp. 69-87.
- Garmendia, J. (2018). *Irony*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gibbs, R. W. (2000). 'Irony in talk among friends'. *Metaphor and Symbol* 15 (1-2), pp. 5-27.
- Greene, V. S. (2019). "'Deplorable" satire: Alt-right memes, white genocide tweets, and redpilling normies'. *Studies in American Humor* 5 (1), pp. 31-69.
- Guhin, J. (2013). 'Is irony good for America? The threat of nihilism, the importance of romance, and the power of cultural forms'. *Cultural Sociology* 7 (1), pp. 23-38.
- Kreuz, R. (2020). *Irony and Sarcasm*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Purdy, J. (1999). *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.