

## Book review

**Ervine, Jonathan (2019). *Humour in Contemporary France: Controversy, Consensus, and Contradictions*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.**

Even though the fatal attack at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* has attracted international media attention and has initiated debates (whether academic or not) concerning humour, its boundaries, offensiveness, and freedom of expression, in recent years we do not often have the chance and the pleasure of reading in-depth analyses about French humour and its sociopolitical dimensions and repercussions. Jonathan Ervine's book comes to fill that void (at least partly) by concentrating on French humour relating to "the ethnic, racial, or religious diversity of French society", to "stereotypes that reinforce hegemonic power relations", and eventually dealing with "issues surrounding immigration, diversity, and the legacies of colonialism" in contemporary France (p. 1).

In his introductory chapter, Ervine frames his research endeavour by providing useful information concerning not only how humour is negotiated and circulated within the French context but, most importantly, concerning how concepts such as multiculturalism, identities, integration, and diversity are perceived and debated within the French Republican ideology. In this context, humour touching upon ethnic, racial, and religious diversity acquires a complex and controversial role, as "the concept of multiculturalism is seen as *un-French* due to being incompatible with Republican ideals of universality and the single and indivisible nation" (p. 2, my emphasis). There seems to be no space for such 'divisive' humour in a nation where egalitarianism and monoculturalism constitute dominant values, and where focus on a single (cultural or other) group would be perceived as deviating from "the universalist ethos of French Republicanism" (p. 4). More specifically, the author later on explains that

Republicanism's universalist ethos means that it does not generally identify the presence of different groups within society based on criteria such as ethnicity or social class. It instead focuses on people having a relationship with the state as individual citizens; furthermore, its egalitarian principles mean that it is not possible to officially quantify the number of people from different ethnic or racial groups (p. 96).

Given the above, Ervine dedicates the main four chapters of the monograph to four case studies of French humour produced since the beginning of the 2000s. These case studies "pose serious questions about what it means to be French, and about the values on which French society is based during a time of social, economic, and political turbulence" (p. 11). In such humour, cultural identities appear to be negotiated mostly through the emergence of stereotypes which are often exploited as sources of (racist) humour and even internalized by comedians who belong to the targeted cultural groups. Occasionally, attempts are made to challenge these stereotypes, but such attempts are not entirely successful, as we will see in what follows.

In Chapter 1, the author discusses in detail the famous case of *Charlie Hebdo* as it evolved from 2006 until 2015. Although *Charlie Hebdo* was a rather marginal satirical publication before 2006, it managed to attract public attention when in February 2006 it decided to

reproduce the so-called Muhammad cartoons earlier published by the Danish *Jyllands Posten* and causing international commotion (see among others Lewis 2008; Weaver 2010; Kuipers 2011). This decision came a week after a group of 19 European newspapers (including *France-Soir*, *Le Monde* and *Libération*) had decided to publish at least some of these cartoons as a way of defending the freedom of the press. Most importantly, this decision appears to be compatible with *Charlie Hebdo*'s defiant, provocative, and anarchic humour often being characterized as anti-establishment, anti-religious, and anti-clerical. Then, in 2007, the Grand Mosque of Paris and the Union of Islamic Organisations of France sued *Charlie Hebdo* for offending Muslim people for their religious beliefs via the publication of three specific cartoons (among all of those published). The trial attracted public attention and prominent politicians defended *Charlie Hebdo* in court, such as Nicolas Sarkozy and Jacques Chirac. The judge ruled that the publication of these cartoons was not insulting to Muslims and hence did not breach the antiracist law. Even if the cartoons were perceived as blasphemous, blasphemy is not punishable in the French Republic.

*Charlie Hebdo* attracted public attention once again when its offices were destroyed by a firebomb on 9 November 2011. On that day, the publication of a special issue was scheduled where Prophet Muhammad would 'act' as guest editor. The special issue was titled *Charia Hebdo* and was dedicated to the elections in Libya and Tunisia as well as to the influence of Sharia Law in Muslim countries of North Africa and the Middle East. Continuing its provocative humour,

[i]n the years between 2011 and 2015, *Charlie Hebdo* remained unafraid of depicting the Prophet Muhammad [...]. Following the violent events in Egypt, the front cover of the 10 July 2013 edition of *Charlie Hebdo* (number 1099) showed bullets being fired at a bearded Muslim in traditional dress who is seeking to hold up a Koran to protect himself. The headline on the cover that accompanied the cartoon was "Le Coran c'est de la merde, ça n'arrête pas les balles" ["The Koran is shit, it doesn't stop bullets"] (p. 44).

The attack at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 left 12 people dead and 11 people injured, and resulted in more attacks during the following days. It also caused intense debates in the media, the academia, the political sphere, etc. around controversial topics such as the freedom of expression, terrorism, social tensions, and migrant integration. The provocative humour which was typical of *Charlie Hebdo* was suddenly out of focus, thus bringing to the surface a number of "paradoxes" (p. 48), as Ervine calls them. For example, political leaders viciously mocked by *Charlie Hebdo* participated in the national demonstration after the attack, celebrating the freedom of the press, even though some of them came from countries where such freedom is rather suppressed; and people from diverse social groups were eager to celebrate or reassert fundamental values of the French state serving the interests of the political elite (pp. 48-49).

The second less known but no less interesting case study pertains to the work of the French stand-up comedian of African descent Dieudonné, who seems to be one of the most controversial comedians in the country. Dieudonné started his career as an artist who used his comic performances to challenge social discrimination and promote antiracism. While fighting against social discrimination, his humour and public interventions at some point started targeting Jewish people, hence his discourse became ambivalent and he has overtly been accused of anti-Semitism. More specifically, Dieudonné usually targets (French) Jews for monopolizing the role of the victims (i.e. during the Holocaust), for promoting the 'uniqueness' of their own suffering, for financing the Apartheid, and for exerting excessive power on the French media and politics, among other things. Such views have resulted in the media concentrating more on Dieudonné's public statements and interviews than on his comedy shows; in him becoming a *persona non*

*grata* in TV shows, etc.; in lawsuits with accusations of anti-Semitism (of which he was cleared, however); in him facing difficulties in finding venues for his own shows; and even in governmental attempts to ban his shows.

Dieudonné's humorous performances have clearly been interpreted in opposing ways. Some people question the very funniness of his texts, while others perceive them as conforming to the French Republican value of universalism, here enacted as the potential to laugh about everything (*rire de tout*; p. 74). Some concentrate on the divisive meanings which perpetuate social hierarchies and exclusion, while others perceive them as attempts to attract media attention, to promote himself, and to increase his following. As time goes by, Dieudonné's humorous performances and his public statements seem to gradually converge in tone and content, especially when it comes to questioning 'equality' (*égalité*) within the French Republic.

The case study of Dieudonné is indeed ideal for investigating opposing interpretations of, and reactions to, humour as well as for exploring what *controversial* humour seems to be like. In his effort to demonstrate that "France is struggling to apply its Republican principles in everyday life and is not effectively managing an increasingly diverse society", Dieudonné "no longer appears to celebrate diversity in the manner that he did when he was a left-wing anti-racist activist [and] he increasingly seeks to play the concerns of one minority group off against another in order to cultivate a following" (p. 93).

The third chapter of the book is dedicated to *Jamel Comedy Club*, its history, and the way it has contributed to promoting not only stand-up comedy in France, but also the careers of the young stand-up comedians who appeared on this show. *Jamel Comedy Club* was created by the comedian Jamel Debbouze, who was brought up by Moroccan parents in France. Its aim was to give voice to young comedians coming from minority groups and living in the suburbs of Paris or other big cities in France, as well as to enhance the visibility of minority groups in the French media, always within the context of the 'egalitarian' and, in fact, *colour-blind* 'universalism' of the French Republic. *Jamel Comedy Club* provided the opportunity to stand-up comedians to "present themselves and their experiences, using humour to intervene in debates about the opposition (or interaction) between Frenchness and foreignness and represent their daily life" (p. 101).

In this context, Ervine discusses in detail the ways such performances represented immigrant identities and, more specifically, how these comedians handled widespread stereotypes about their own ethnic groups or other ones, either by reproducing these stereotypes, so that their performances appeal to the wider audience, or by attempting to renegotiate them in order to challenge them and distance themselves from them. Ervine is right to suggest that drawing a boundary between these two representational strategies and goals is never a straightforward matter, especially when it comes to the public negotiation of hybrid identities. In other words, in their attempt to reuse and reappropriate certain stereotypes in a humorous or ironical manner, comedians often end up endorsing social hierarchies and discrimination against their own cultural groups or other minority groups. Furthermore, comedians' subversive and challenging intentions may not be interpreted as such by members of the audience "who view diversity and multiculturalism much less favourably and prefer to simply laugh at the evocation of a recognisable stereotype" (p. 118).

In sum, the third chapter elaborates on the ways *Jamel Comedy Club* has promoted stand-up comedy and comedians in France and has simultaneously made diversity visible, thus undermining French universalism, which ignores and masks racial and ethnic diversity in France. This, however, has not resulted in the elimination or at least mitigation of racial stereotypes but in their public recycling under the guise of comedy.

The recycling of anti-minority stereotypes is further explored in the fourth case study of the book, which focuses on humorous diversity within ethnic diversity. Ervine discusses the

different approaches to humour and comedy performances taken by comedians who consistently refer to the Muslim culture(s) and religion. Once again, the discussion evolves around comedians' efforts to reuse and reappropriate demeaning stereotypes, this time including the stereotype that Muslims are humourless people and that humour is incompatible with Islam. In this sense, humour is expected to target not only the above-mentioned stereotypes, but also those non-Muslims who embrace them as well as those Muslims who attempt to portray themselves as deceptively good Muslims and/or take behaviours ascribed to Muslims to extremes.

This is not an easy endeavour at all as comedians simultaneously try to avoid producing a kind of humour that would oppose the French Republican values of universalism, equality, and freedom of expression. As a result, they resort to humorously targeting other minorities and suggesting that "social cohesion is about [...] being able to laugh about one's neighbour as much as about one's self" (p. 135) and that "we all need to make fun of each other" (p. 151). However, as Ervine succinctly puts it, "it is somewhat simplistic to argue that members of minority groups mocking each other is necessarily unproblematic" (p. 151). To illustrate his point, he discusses different comedians and brands of humour ranging from mild to provocative, while at the same time he provides information on how the comedians themselves articulate their intentions behind joking, and on how their humour is interpreted within the French context. The author concludes that "*wanting* to get beyond clichéd representations of Muslims and *succeeding* in doing so are two different things" (p. 162, emphasis in the original), especially since France has actively and persistently attempted to regulate and restrict cultural diversity and eventually to render Islam invisible in the French public sphere. In such a context, this humorous recycling of negative stereotypes against Muslims easily and most conveniently become arguments in favour of such restrictions and invisibility.

The final chapter of the book includes the author's conclusions and, more importantly, his own positionings towards the main topics discussed in the previous chapters. He begins by asserting the significant impact the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 had on bringing to the fore minority identities and cultures and their relationship with humour. The much debated question of whether one can laugh about everything (*peut-on rire de tout?*) is no longer treated as a moral/ethical question but instead has become a pragmatic one. And the answer is that we cannot (or would rather not) laugh about everything without taking into consideration the consequences of our laughter and humour. Humour emerges as a controversial tool at speakers' disposal, who may use it as a weapon against Others or may attempt to regulate its use to maintain their own political (or other) power. More specifically, Ervine argues that

one needs [to] consider the values on which jokes are based and what they suggest about power relations within a society. If 'rire de tout' involves exercising freedom of speech to perpetuate a majority population's stereotypical perspective on minority groups, it can hardly be said to be a progressive use of a supposed entitlement, or one that helps to uphold key French Republican principles such as *égalité* [equality] and *fraternité* [fraternity] (p. 169, emphasis in the original).

On the other hand, comedians of minority descent seem to have acquired an increased visibility and potential to express their sociopolitical criticism in humorous terms, yet this does not mean that their views necessarily influence sociopolitical affairs (cf. Davies 2011). Their attempts to renegotiate negative stereotypes against their own or other ethnic groups can eventually backfire in front of audiences whose members cannot distance themselves from "French Republicanism's tendency to obscure difference via its focus on the concept of a single and indivisible state in which citizens are not defined by criteria such as race or ethnicity" (p. 177).

The author underlines the fact that the magazine and the comedians under scrutiny have a "long tradition" (p. 19; or "long history", p. 26) of irreverent, discriminatory, and offensive

humour, which could account for behaviours that resulted in attacks, lawsuits, bans, etc. against them. The question arising from such a positioning concerns our own positionings as humour analysts: Shall we just take such ‘traditions’ into consideration as part of the wider context in which the related events are to be framed and examined? Shall we treat them as excuses for overlooking or underestimating the sociopolitical repercussions of humour? Or shall we adopt a critical stance bringing to the surface the multiple interpretations of, and reactions to, such humorous ‘traditions’ and highlight their contribution to perpetuating social inequality, bias, and verbal abuse?

Without ignoring the importance of humour ‘traditions’ and the emerging tendencies among young French stand-up comedians, Ervine places particular emphasis on the critical analysis of the discriminatory dimension of ethnic and religious humour. His monograph is an excellent study on what Weaver (2016) calls *liquid racism*, which pertains to the ambiguity of humour referring to social discrimination and inequality. Humour circulating mostly in the media may be framed as attempting to be subversive and attacking racist or other discriminatory standpoints, but, in fact, it may end up normalizing them (on liquid racism and humour, see also Tsakona 2019; Archakis & Tsakona 2021). Furthermore, members of minority groups who come into contact with such humour and wish to make their own comic voices heard do not often manage to refrain from internalizing racist values and views and, then, reproducing them (on the internalization of racism by members of minority groups, see Pyke 2010; Nguyen 2016; Archakis & Tsakona 2022, and references therein).

In all the chapters of the monograph, Ervine provides plenty of historical, social, and political information concerning the case studies under scrutiny, which is not only interesting and revealing but also helpful for readers outside France, who may not be familiar with the details of the topics at hand. In addition, he extensively refers to how the humour examined is perceived among the diverse groups of the audience, which is something that not many authors attempt to (as they more often than not limit themselves to reconstructing the humourists’ intentions). He also underlines the significance of such contextual information so as to be able to deeply understand and interpret the related events. Especially when it comes to the Muhammad cartoons and their publication in *Charlie Hebdo* (among other venues), which attracted international academic attention, Ervine makes clear that familiarity with the *local* context of the events is of paramount importance for analysing and interpreting what may have happened therein. Obviously, this holds for all the cases of controversial humour which may (have) become known via the media, but their details may not be accessible to all the commenting parties.

Ervine’s writing or narrative style is compelling and vivid. However, this turns out to be at the expense of the analysis. In my view, what seems to be missing from this book are, on the one hand, data (i.e. authentic texts or cartoons related to the case studies at hand) and, on the other, detailed theoretically-informed analyses. Unfortunately, only in a few cases does Ervine describe or provide extracts from comedy shows. Still, it would be preferable to reproduce the humorous discourse referred to. At the same time, the exploitation of relevant humour theories and/or contemporary approaches to humour is scarce and usually takes the form of brief quotations supporting his own claims or conclusions.

I would not like to be misunderstood in this book review: Ervine’s monograph is one of the most fascinating and through-provoking monographs I have recently read. The author adopts a critical perspective on humorous discourse by highlighting its offensive, discriminatory, and racist quality in nation-states where the boundaries between majority and minority populations are hardly questioned and the inequality between them is so normalized that it becomes invisible for many of their citizens. This is, in my view, how monographs should be: making us think and reconsider our own assumptions as humour analysts and problematizing concepts and arguments

we take for granted concerning, among many other things, the ‘innocuous’, ‘inconsequential’, ‘playful’, or ‘subversive’ character of humour and its ‘primarily’ entertaining function in the public sphere. Hence, I strongly recommend Jonathan Ervine’s study, especially to those who work on contextualized sociopolitical, historical, and critical approaches to humour. It is a book that one enjoys reading and benefits from its clarity and argumentation in many ways.

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