

## Book review

**Weaver, Simon (2022). *The Rhetoric of Brexit Humour: Comedy, Populism and the EU Referendum*. London and New York: Routledge.**

Simon Weaver, the leading scholar in the field of humour and rhetoric, has decided to tackle the very intriguing topic of Brexit and humour in his latest book, *The Rhetoric of Brexit Humour*. Not an easy task to take on, as both humour and populism appear to be fluid topics, as Weaver very well demonstrates. But, as we have seen in his previous publications, like *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour* (2011), Weaver's keen mind and sharp eye enable him to finish with a very comprehensible take on the tough challenge.

Generally speaking, *The Rhetoric of Brexit Humour* is almost like an introduction to populism and the rhetoric of humour, with a focus on the EU referendum in the United Kingdom. Weaver is great in finding common denominators between populism and humour, as his various sub-sections in the book prove. In the middle of the thriving theories of populism, in my opinion, this book is the most high-quality take on the humorous aspects of populism. Briefly put, this title is an important addition to humour studies, and I warmly recommend it to every scholar in the field. Furthermore, the text is very reader-friendly in the sense that every chapter begins with a short preview of what will be discussed and ends with a summary that states what has been achieved. Weaver's style is eloquent, and he does not fall into cheap opinionated conclusions. Evidently, Weaver understands rhetoric both in theory and practice.

His findings are convincing. Populism appears to be hostile to truly representative politics. Populists appeal to the 'people of the heartland' in opposition to 'the elite', 'the aliens', and 'the elite aliens'. Weaver argues that populism lives off extreme crises, or perceived crises at least, as well as fundamental dilemmas, which all give food for a humorous approach in various ways.

I will go through the book chapter by chapter and focus mainly on potential criticisms of the book. As stated above, in its totality the publication fills a research gap and is a welcome addition to humour studies. That said, to foster potential future discussions, I will offer a few problematisations of Weaver's thinking.

### *Introduction*

This is a very clear preview of the contents of the book and an interesting summary of populism as well as its connections to the phenomenon of humour. Also, the style gives a promise of what will happen in the later sections of the book: bright and dispassionate discussions with a sharply intellectual understanding of various aspects of populism. No complaints here!

### *Chapter 1: Leave or remain?*

As it is often the case with this type of books, which are targeted at audiences beyond the field of humour research, Weaver has to start with an introduction to humour theories. This he does in an unfortunately hasty manner, at least in terms of the scale of humour research. The three-fold distinction between superiority, incongruity and relief theories is quite adequately explained, but his historical comments are short-sighted. For instance, Weaver claims that Plato

wants to ban laughter from his ideal state, but this is not true; Plato argues that a certain class should avoid laughter, but in other sections of the state there are plenty of opportunities for high amusement of a moral nature. Furthermore, Weaver repeats the oft-used historical jump from antiquity to Thomas Hobbes, and states how superiority theory was the prevailing idea for two millennia. This is a commonly shared myth in humour research, but one should add that, for instance, Saint Augustine (2002 [401]) discusses amusement in a much more versatile manner. He argues that breaking the rules is exciting and amusing on its own, and not done in order to feel superior to anyone. Quite humane positions can be found in the works of Thomas More (1808 [1516]) and Erasmus of Rotterdam (1973 [1511]) to whom laughter and silliness are essential features of humanity. So, feeling superior through laughter is one picture of the past, but not really an honest one. In short, the discussions during those decades were much more wide-ranging and varied (see also Classen 2010) than Weaver would have us understand.

Despite this minor criticism, Weaver finds interesting points of commonality between humour and populism; the main ones being ambiguity and othering. This sets the tone for the rest of the book as he locates various kinds of incongruities within Brexit populism. Frankly, it is simply a delight to read about the inner ambiguities of such Brexit characters as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson; besides being targets of comedy, they both use humour as a rhetorical weapon to foster their quite ambiguous politics of Brexit.

#### *Chapter 2: Brexit, irony and populist politics*

Drawing on Giora & Attardo (2014), Weaver presents the idea of situational irony as one of the main mechanisms of Brexit humour. The definition is beautiful: “a rescuer heroically saving someone drowning only to find out that the rescued person was his or her worst enemy” (Giora & Attardo 2014: 397, according to Weaver p. 48). This is demonstrated in the fact that, for those who were voting for Leave, the promises were big to ‘save’ the UK, but in reality the outcome was something completely different. For instance, one of the repeated themes of the book is the famous Leave Bus that claimed that Brexit would save 350 million pounds a week, i.e., a cost of a new hospital. As it has turned out, the UK has not been able to build a new hospital every week since the Brexit, and this has been fuel for humour in various comedy shows etc., even during the campaign. The irony is that in their various political showoffs, populists are ranting against liberalism and free-market economics, but in their actual deeds they are often very much pro-liberalism; like Boris Johnson who defends free movement in the EU, even though most populists officially claim that free movement is the root cause of everything bad.

Weaver has so many interesting ideas that he cannot handle them all very deeply. An illustrative example is his discussion of humour and conspiracy. Conspiracy theories are the subject of very heated debate and their relationship to humour ought to be analysed in a more precise manner. Here Weaver handles the theme just for a couple of pages, and thus not very thoroughly. Weaver’s point is that humour is a rhetorical device for conspiracy theories, but this is hardly sufficient; in some cases, humour and amusement are actually the main reasons for developing and sharing this kind of theories. To demonstrate this, one might point to the theory according to which Finland does not exist but is just an imaginary country created by the Soviet Union and Japan to get access to plentiful fishing seas. But as is the case with any academic work, you cannot cover everything.

#### *Chapter 3: Brexit populism, trickster irony and comic responses*

In this chapter, Weaver describes in an insightful manner what actually happens in humorous political speeches by populists. That said, this is the chapter to which I direct most of my philosophical criticisms. According to Weaver, populists use trickster tactics. The idea of trickster tactics, for a philosopher of humour, is an oxymoron. Weaver has taken the idea of the

trickster and located it at to the core of populism, but here I must challenge his position. Tricksters, in their purest forms, do not have tactics. They act and react; they are the eternal outsiders who are constantly floating on the margins of society (Hietalahti 2019). In my interpretation, they are a kind of epitome of humour, that give actual flesh to the bones of the dynamic concept of humour. When applied to political contexts, they yearn neither for popularity nor power, but rather they show how ridiculous every political system is.

Weaver does recognise the above-mentioned aspects of tricksters when he refers to Lewis Hyde and his concept of tricksters as “the lords of in-between” (Hyde 2008: 6, according to Weaver p. 65), who are constantly moving and changing their appearance, but Weaver nonetheless argues that the Brexit trickster simply gives up the trickster’s essence and takes control into their own hands. Of course, it is a good thing that he defines his position and explains how he uses the term, but as it is in such a clear contradiction to how the trickster has been understood, perhaps it would have been more sensible to use a different term. Of course, it is possible to say, for example, that populist politicians are serious and that here by serious we mean humorous, but that would be rather silly choice.

That said, the chapter in itself is of high quality, the main problem being how the key concept of the trickster is applied.

#### *Chapter 4: Brexit, anti-populism, caricature and critique.*

After quite a harsh criticism of the previous chapter, I must admit that the concept of caricature is well applied in this chapter. Weaver is insightful in dealing with populist and their counter forces (that he calls *anti-populism*) and how both sides are eager to make simplifications of the other. Even if populists are against ‘experts’ and ‘institutions’, and perhaps sciences in general, the logic in anti-populism does not fare much better. They too make over-simplifications of their targets through ridicule. But this is just what happens with caricatures. The artist takes one or two notable features of their models, and exaggerates those, and quite often in a very sharp way.

Naturally, it would be beneficial for the reader to know UK politicians, as for an outsider reader like myself, not all the mentioned political figures are familiar, even though they are big names and central actors in the Brexit process. But this flaw is, of course, the fault of the reader alone; I should be better informed. Nevertheless, Weaver knows his field and paints a lively picture of how wide the humour-coloured discussions have been around the Brexit.

#### *Chapter 5: Brexit, social class and comedy*

As a general rule, the book gets better towards the end. The chapter on social class is perhaps the most important of the whole work. It would be easy to think that populism appeals to lower social classes, but Weaver shows that the reality is much more complicated. Actually, the discourse describing ‘the people’ (lower classes) versus ‘the elite’ is constantly repeated by both Leave and Remain supporters, and it became, as Weaver puts it, “a stock binary for joke structure” (p. 99). In this way, humour in general supports the simplified picture, and makes it the general narrative. This is, in short, a meta-level victory for populism.

Weaver manages to show how ambiguous the relationship between Brexit populism and social class is, and he brings forth the concept of *pan-class populism* by which he refers to the idea that populism appeals to and is used by various classes. This is clearly a more accurate representation of what was and is going on in the UK than simplified positions on how just certain groups of people are lured to vote according to populists ideas. It is a fact that it was not the lower classes alone who voted for Leave, nor was the elite only for Remain. Still, humorous performances repeat the myth of the lower classes as the dumb and ignorant ‘people’.

*Chapter 6: 'Brexit means breakfast'*

This chapter continues the highly important theme from the previous chapter. In humour, language is the king, as we mould reality through it. A very Wittgensteinian position, indeed. In Brexit humour, neologisms and naming are thriving. As the old idiom goes, it does not matter how things actually are, but how they seem to be.

One of the recurring themes of the book is how Brexit feeds on fear; on both the Remain and Leave sides. All kinds of disasters are predicted to happen if people vote for the wrong thing. As Weaver notes, the apocalypse waits on the horizon, often in humorous forms, as terminological witticisms suggest. For instance, how do you like such mirthful neologisms as *Borisgeddon*, *Brexitgeddon*, *europocalypse* and *Torypocalypse*? Humour is one of the central weapons in fight for depicting reality (for your own ends).

*Chapter 7: Incongruity, transition and the shifting landscape of Brexit Britain*

Brexit lives on, as Weaver convincingly shows. It has become an established part of contemporary comedy in the UK. Both victory and loss are still satirised, so Brexit appears to be a shared experience for a generation, although people may still be quite baffled by what Brexit actually is. And as humour so often deals with incongruities, ambiguities and uncertainties, it is evident why Brexit is a constant source for humorous material for comedians.

This chapter clearly starts to wrap up things and is a certain kind of conclusion before the concluding chapter.

*Conclusion*

A solid ending that binds the strings together and repeats the key elements of the work. Not too much to complain about here either.

All in all, Weaver has put together an impressive study, and despite its few flaws discussed above, this title earns a warm recommendation. Besides being an accurate take on Brexit humour, it is a showcase piece on how to construct painstaking and dispassionate academic research. Perhaps at times the book reminds one slightly of encyclopaedias, as Weaver has so many insightful ideas and being the conscientious scholar he is, he just cannot put the bar too low for himself. This leads to the outcome that almost every chapter begins with a new introduction to a new concept. Still, the reading experience is compelling, due in no small part to Weaver's unquestionable expertise.

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