

Book review

Webber, Julie A. (ed.) (2019). *The Joke Is on Us: Political Comedy in (Late) Neoliberal Times*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Facing crisis upon crisis across Europe and the United States, the impact of neoliberalism on economic growth and the development of private sector has been put under question. In this climate, *Joke Is on Us* has come to shed light on the role of political comedy during this era of multiple crises. As Julie Webber explains, “the aim of the volume is to test whether or not political comedy since the 2008 financial meltdown has challenged audiences to think critically about neoliberalism or not” (p. 4). The most appropriate scholars to investigate the above hypothesis have contributed to this volume via impressive studies that emphasise issues of self-identity, ideology, populism and by examining different genres that extended from stand-up comedy to social media discourses. *Joke Is On Us* synthesises political theory and humour studies and puts the study of comedy in the terrain of political and cultural analysis. To do this, the volume follows an articulated structure that builds carefully from section to section and chapter to chapter, constructing a chain of examples from wide-ranging research and allowing readers who are less familiar with humour studies to discover the importance of the discipline. The book is divided into three parts and contains eleven chapters (not counting Introduction and Conclusion). The volume begins with an Introduction, in which Julie Webber introduces the main aims of the book. By providing the main concepts that are under examination (political and social power of humour), she underlines the interdisciplinary character of the volume that presents political, social and psychological perspectives of humour through a range of examples that lay the ground for discussion.

In the first section “The terrain has changed”, the authors underline recent controversies in comedy that are related to the changes in the landscape of neoliberalism and our understanding of racism and right-left politics. The section begins with the chapter “All they need Is lulz: Racist trolls, unlaughter, and Leslie Jones” by Viveca Greene, in which the author presents a comprehensive overview of Leslie Jones’ story and how she was targeted by online trolls due to her comedy. In particular, the author focuses on two events. First, Jones’ portrayal of herself as a slave that outraged African-American women and, secondly, her performance in the *Ghostbusters* movie that led to her Twitter account attacks by right wingers. Drawing on the concept of *unlaughter* as a critical frame, the author succeeds in examining racist humour and reveals how neoliberal ideology goes hand in hand with white supremacy.

In the next chapter “Brexit irony on *The Last Leg* and *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver: Critiquing neoliberalism through caricature”, Simon Weaver provides a fascinating analysis of Brexit irony by examining Brexit discourses. The chapter employs rhetorical discourse analysis as a method of analysis and illustrates that the synthesis between discourse analysis and argumentative tactics that is introduced here could lead to an in depth analysis of political rhetoric and its recontextualisation through comedy. Another important point here is that Weaver’s analysis reveals that the comedians who focused on Brexit misrepresented the leaving points, emphasised caricature that led to simplifications and populism, and left untouched political decisions and discourses on the issue that should have been criticised.

Hence, Weaver's chapter explicates how neoliberalism is established via a form of comedy that reproduces stereotypes through individualisation and irony, while leaving out of the field of its criticism the real political.

Chapter 3 "What's wrong with slactivism? Confronting the neoliberal assault on millennials" by Sophia A. McClennen examines millennials' political participation. On the basis of the neologism *slactivism* (slacker and activism), the author argues that millennials are better prepared than previous generations to meet the challenges of the digital era providing new ways of activism. Moreover, by presenting the rise of *satiractivism*, McClennen recognises the central role satire plays in activism today and the power of social media, and questions the mass media and all those who criticise millennials because their political participation and critical thinking are not kept up with the values of previous generations as neoliberal forms.

Following the discussion on activism, Secil Dagtas' chapter "Political humour in the face of neoliberal authoritarianism in Turkey" presents 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, Turkey, by emphasising the political usage of humour and the links between humour and power in activist actions against neoliberal authoritarianism. The author examines specific aspects of Gezi Park satire as acts of resistance and symbolical violence and argues that in that case humour became politics itself that expressed solidarity and unified people, while mitigating social and political differences.

The second section "Post-network neoliberal politics" highlights late night comedy shows landscape. It starts with Marc-Olivier Castagner and David Grondin's chapter 5, "From irritated hostages to silly citizens: Infotainment satire as ludic surveillance", which focuses on John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* show. Based on Bourdieu's (1979) *symbolic power* and *symbolic capital*, the authors unveil the strategies that are adopted by John Oliver to compete *culture wars* and develop a new kind of citizenship -a silly citizenship- that removes the audience from political ideas. Likewise, through a range of examples, the chapter offers a detailed overview of Oliver's strategies in parallel with very well explicated theoretical bases that show us the rules of infotainment in the era of neoliberalism.

Chapter 6 "The political economy of late-night comedy" by Don Waisanen explores the relation between truth and power and the role of comedy in it. By examining the political economy of late night comedy from a neoliberal viewpoint, Waisanen contributes to the discussion of political satire insofar as the author questions the possibility of critique on neoliberalism via comedy.

Authored by James Brassett, chapter 7 "British comedy and the politics of resistance: The liminality of right-wing comedy" aims at explicating that comedy matters for politics. Focusing on the political life of British comedy, the author identifies a long tradition of irony over political correctness that has formed right wing politicians' discourses. In this sense, *liberal hegemony*, as it is adopted by right wing comedians, has led to a new form of politics that has to be examined on the basis of a new political consent.

Finally, chapter 8 "I want to party with you, cowboy: Stephen Colbert and the aesthetic logic of 'Truthiness' after Campaign 2016" by Aaron McKain and Thomas Lawson also contributes to the theoretical discussion on irony and the reshaping of political ethos. The authors go back to Colbert's satire to examine the transformations on comedic principles and stylistics and how Colbert's comedy was synchronised with the political aesthetics of neoliberalism. By presenting different examples of works that have analysed American and British political comedy, and based on an impressive range of theoretical backgrounds that are extended from Bourdieu and Foucault to the Aristotelian rhetoric, the authors of this chapter contribute to the great strength and theoretical value of the book by placing humour studies in the fields of social and political sciences.

The third section “Neoliberalism and subjectivity” also empowers the theoretical terrain of the concept of humour by examining the intersection between identity and neoliberalism. Jessyka Finley’s chapter “From awkward to dope: Black women comics in the alternative comedy scene” (Chapter 9) starts with an overview of the history of ‘alternative comedy’ and black comedians’ struggles to break into the mainstream and proceeds to discuss the podcast *2 Dope Queens* in order to examine femininity and race on the basis of neoliberal rhetoric. Through the fascinating analysis of the chapter, the reader has the opportunity to discover how black women’s humour is reaching new audiences and deals with recognition and neoliberal subjectivity.

Following on the issue of subjectivity and the neoliberal use of diversity, Rebecca Krefting’s chapter “Savage new media: Discursive campaigns for/against political correctness” (Chapter 10) presents an in depth analysis of social change that combines ethnography and critical feminist discourse analysis and intends to contribute to the discussion of political correctness and inequalities by considering the impact of neoliberalism in it.

Finally, referring to a review of the ‘Bachelorette’ reality television show finale episode in the title, Diana Rubenstein’s chapter ““An actual nightmare, but... pretty good TV’: Horror-comedy in the Trump era” (Chapter 11) begins with the live traumatic break-up of the show to examine the rise of ‘horror-comedy’ in relation to neoliberal feminism during the Trump era.

The book concludes with the editor’s investigation of Trump’s presidency impact on the media through the lens of neoliberal politics. Julie Webber also puts into question the morality of comedy and entertainment and the audience’s reaction to it in the era of Big Data. This interesting and timely volume provides a systematic guide to the study of humour via informative and pioneering investigations that illustrate how humour and neoliberalism are interconnected in the era of post-normativism. It is very well structured with a plethora of empirical works helping the reader follow the main argument that at times is enriched by different methodological frameworks and insights on the topic. It represents a fascinating reading not only for scholars work in the field of humour, but also psychologists, sociologists, linguists, media and political studies researchers, who could find useful notions on humour and comedy.

Joke Is On Us offers high content quality with international examples and perspectives that could provide a baseline for future scholarship in the field, while bringing two of today’s key concerns: political comedy and neoliberalism. Some very minor limitations of the book are not relevant to its contents and quality, however, but related to the publication - the great number of typos, especially in the Introduction chapter illustrates the limited attention that is paid even by the highly recognised publishing groups to scholarly books/e-books in recent times of crisis.

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References

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