

Book review

Feldman, Ofer (Ed.) (2024). *Political Humor Worldwide. The Cultural Context of Political Comedy, Satire, and Parody*. Springer.

While scholars agree on the fact that humour appears to be a phenomenon that is present among humans all over the world, increasing research in the field contests the illusion of universality with regard to its various types of manifestations. Humour is a multifaceted phenomenon embracing a tension between certain regular patterns at a transcultural level – such as incongruity as a basic mechanism – and local (contextual and cultural) specific features.

This book can be considered as a contribution towards a better understanding of those intrinsic tensions (invariable-variable and global/transcultural-local) in the domain of politics. Some generic traits of political humour are considered through the lens of diverse cultural specificities. When reading each contribution of this volume, one can identify which features, functions, types and devices of humour received the most attention in the studies conducted. Although including a revision of the three widely known groups of humour theories could seem unnecessary in the introductory chapter, its usefulness becomes more evident as one progresses through the chapters, since incongruity, release/relief and superiority often frame the phenomena analysed. Another group of categories that most contributions refer to are affiliative, disparagement, self-deprecating, and self-enhancing humour, giving a clear evidence of their operability in the field of political research. The chapters discuss how these four different types of humour can shape political discourse in societies and be used by political leaders, satirists, comedians and others as important rhetorical tools.

The contributions gathered in this book provide a wide panorama of humour as an important means of political communication in contemporary societies. The editor and authors' search for diversity is not only reflected in the cultures that are the foci of study, which mostly coincide with the scholars' origins (Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, Philippines, Poland, Spain, UK, USA), but also in the disciplines that frame each contribution (communication, rhetoric, discourse analysis, social and political psychology, political science, history, and philosophy). Diversity can also be found in the discursive genres and forms under analysis: jokes, satire, comedy, parody, press cartoons, memes, TV shows, movies, politicians' spontaneous or planned oral humorous remarks, artistic photographs and theatrical performances.

The risk of adopting a cultural approach to humour in politics in a book that seeks to cover different countries from a worldwide perspective is to generalise and present the results of the analysis for a given cultural context as if the traits identified were homogeneous and representative of that specific context. As the editor rightly states, not only are humorous expressions valued differently across cultures but also among individuals, and readers should bear this in mind throughout the whole volume. The challenge of representativeness is aligned with that of systematicity. In relation to this, the author of the final chapter underscores the importance of defining and explaining the criteria for selecting corpora and examples that support arguments and findings.

The introductory chapter, "Humour and politics: A conceptual introduction", by the Israeli-Japanese editor, Ofer Feldman, sets the tone of why context, and culture in a broader sense, play

such an important role in humour creation and appreciation. The author presents some theoretical considerations to frame the studies of this volume. That is the case of the aforementioned three groups of humour theories – superiority, incongruity, relief/release –, and the five functions of humour proposed by Avner Ziv (1984). The author also discusses the dual nature of political humour – its potential for both positive and negative purposes, including the role of stereotypes in ethno-national humour; and he analyses three main groups that employ political humour: the public, politicians, and the mass media, detailing their methods and goals.

After this Introduction, the book is structured in three parts. The first part, “Humour in legislative bodies”, presents five chapters. In Chapter 2, “Founding contradictions, Contemporary expressions: Political humour in American culture”, Michael Phillips-Anderson explores the interplay of comedy and political culture in the USA. Based on the claim that incongruity appears in American humorous expressions as a gap between the real and the ideal, the text examines examples including fictional politics; rhetorical humour produced by political figures, in particular Donald Trump; and cancel culture in comedy.

In Chapter 3, “Humorous genres and modes in Greek political discourse”, Marianthi Georgalidou studies humour as an indirect impoliteness strategy in Greek political discourse, by analysing examples from parliamentarians and political satirists on the media. Special attention is paid to conversational situations in which the face of different targets is threatened. The author analyses how impoliteness masked as humour provides “rhetorical weapons” in political discourse and claims that confrontational and combative encounters in the public domain are a characteristic feature of Greek politics, a main purpose being to undermine authority and contest hierarchy.

In Chapter 4, “British phlegm and individualism in humorous political advertising”, Kostoula Margariti, Leonidas Hatzithomas, and Christina Boutsouki propose that high individualism, low uncertainty avoidance and “British phlegm” are distinctive British cultural traits that also characterise its particular humour. Based on this claim, the text examines the use of humour, irony and sarcasm by prime ministers of the UK between 1997 and 2023 (Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Boris Johnson, Elizabeth Truss, and Rishi Sunak), focusing especially on how these discursive forms helped them tackle difficult and embarrassing situations.

In Chapter 5, “‘Kapwa’ and Filipinos’ fixation with presidential jokes”, Rogelio Alicor Panao and Ronald Pernia analyse when humour works – or does not – for a public political figure in the Philippines. The authors present the concept of *kapwa* as a core Filipino value and as an emotional framework for understanding politician-audience rapport. Depending on the political leaders’ connection with the collective and their perceived sincerity, humour can be a powerful rhetorical tool. This is illustrated with various examples from Philippine presidents’ rhetorical practices from 1987 to the present.

In Chapter 6, “Holocaust humour in Israel as a political tool of the left-wing”, Liat Steir-Livny delves into a controversial and timely topic in these difficult times of war, by examining how Israeli Holocaust humour, satire and parody have become a tool for left-wing criticism of what they perceive as a siege mentality orchestrated by the right-wing since the 1990s. By primarily focusing on satirical TV shows and memes, the author explores how the right-wing use of Holocaust imagery to frame threats to Israel prompts left-wingers to create satirical content mocking these attitudes as manipulative. The analysis covers how this humour targets both general right-wing ideologies and specific politicians such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, while noting that the left occasionally uses similar tactics for their own agenda. The author warns that, paradoxically, while critiquing the manipulation of Holocaust memory, this approach may unintentionally reinforce the trauma’s dominance in society by further integrating it into popular culture.

The second part, “Ethno-national humour in religion, art, and popular culture”, consists of five chapters. In Chapter 7, entitled “Cultural wars in Polish political humour”, Dorota Brzozowska and Władysław Chłopicki show how some Polish traditional features related to religion, class system, literature, visual arts, cinema and popular culture, are the source of political humour. They focus on contemporary memes and cartoons that recontextualise cultural traits and whose target are mainly political figures. The chapter also addresses the current socio-political polarisation between conservative and liberal sides of the political divide.

Chapter 8, entitled “Jewish humour as a survival tool and a bridge to social justice”, by Linda Weiser Friedman and Hershey H. Friedman, delves into Jewish humour as a way to examine the political and cultural oppression of this group of people. The authors focus on social justice humour, which enables to bond together those oppressed by others and build self-esteem. Linked to its aim of equitability, social justice humour can also be a tool for re-educating bigots.

In Chapter 9, entitled “Humour and cynical political parody in Italian movies and newspaper cartoons”, Benedetta Baldi analyses political satire and parody during the post-war period in Italy, focusing primarily on cinema, where social satire found its main expression, and secondarily, in satirical press, cartoons and TV shows. These satirical manifestations criticised and denounced the government and politicians of the time, and adopted a crude and cynical approach to the changes undergone by the society during the forty-year government of the Christian Democracy (*Democrazia Cristiana*) party.

In Chapter 10, “The power of funny: Indigenous high art as quiescence and rebellion”, Liz Sills and Pamela Monaghan-Geernaert study Native American humour as a way of resilience and making fun of the oppressors. In line with social justice humour, although not framed within this concept, the authors centre on the Apsáalooke artist Wendy Red Star’s shocking and satirical art work which, through parody and irony, calls attention to the problems that plague Native Americans. Her pieces often include a sarcastic view towards stereotypes of Native people that are circulated in Western societies. Special attention is given to *The Last Thanks* – a satirical artistic photograph – and the potential subversive effects of contesting dominant symbols.

In Chapter 11, “The cultural background of political humour ‘sung’ by the Spanish people”, María del Mar Rivas-Carmona and María del Carmen García-Manga analyse the Carnival of Cádiz, presented as a “musical, poetic-theatrical, humorous, and also journalistic phenomenon”. The authors unravel the multimodal resources used by the different artistic groups performing during Carnival both in the theatre, where an official competition takes place, and in the streets of Cádiz. Through humour, parody and multiple socio-cultural references, the artists amuse, captivate the audience and address current events that affect society and politics, criticising far-right politics and politicians, fascism, racism, and xenophobia.

The third part, “Framing and analysing political humour”, presents the last two chapters of the volume. In Chapter 12, “Political humour in American culture: From affability to aggression”, Michael Alan Krasner proposes the concept *invited behaviour* as a lens to analyse the power dynamics of political leaders when using humour as a rhetorical mechanism. The author claims that changes in American political leaders’ humour reflect and reinforce changes in American political culture, from legitimacy to illegitimacy and the rise of a far-right wing movement among Republicans. In particular, he contrasts two strategic uses of humour. On one hand, political leaders’ humorous remarks – such as those from John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush, among others – are aimed at reinforcing the norm of deference to leaders and the legitimacy of the existing system. On the other hand, there is the use of crude, aggressive humour to debase opponents and destabilise the system, a phenomenon notably associated with Donald Trump’s rhetoric.

In Chapter 13, “Political humour: Theoretical questions, methodological suggestions”, Sam Lehman-Wilzig indirectly refers to the intertwined tensions invariable-variable and global/transcultural-local mentioned at the beginning of this review. The author discusses some difficulties when studying political humour across cultures and proposes future lines of research.

After this culturally diverse approach to *Political Humor Worldwide*, it can be expected that readers not only have been amused when reading the many humorous anecdotes in which political leaders were the protagonists but also have learned about idiosyncratic, artistic, historical, religious, and/or linguistic features from countries as distant as Greece, Israel, the Philippines and Spain, to name but a few. Also and especially, it can be expected that readers have learned about how humour can become an effective tool to gain audiences, “save the face” (Goffman, 1967) or dissipate a threat, educate, reinforce or subvert dominant structures.

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