

Nicholas Holm, **Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy**, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer, 2017, 223 pp., \$80.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

Veena Raman

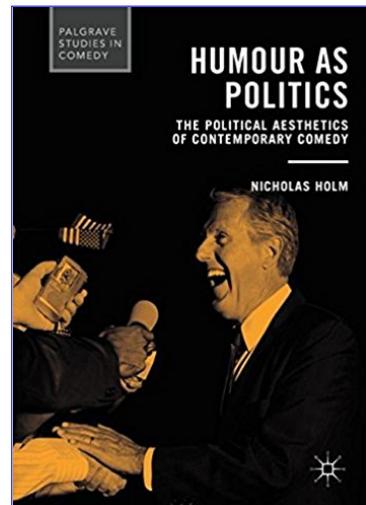
Pennsylvania State University, USA

In **Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy**, Nicholas Holm examines how the aesthetic aspects of contemporary comedies can influence the way we engage with and understand our wider sociopolitical context. Without making any causative assumptions about the political effects of popular western comedies, Holm provides an overview of theories of humor and analyzes how different comedic texts use humor to create ever-expanding doubt that makes us question all certainty.

The current climate for comedy and humor in the United States is fraught with contradictions. Individuals such as Desrire Fairooz (Code Pink activist prosecuted for laughing during the confirmation hearings of Attorney General Jeff Sessions) face misdemeanor charges for indulging in humor. Comedian Michelle Wolf has been criticized for her humor at the 2018 White House correspondents' dinner. At the same time, shows such as *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *The Daily Show* lampoon the White House, the president, and members of the administration and their ratings soar. In this context, Holm provides deeper insight into the political work of humor in general, observing how the logic of humor might affect our current thinking about liberalism, authority, and dissent.

There have been few book-length examinations of the aesthetics of humor, and this book fills that need within the field of humor research. It provides many conceptual insights and will be of interest to academics in humor studies. Through an investigation of the formal features and representational strategies of comedic texts, it examines how they shape our understanding of the world, its problems, and the possibilities of our politics. Thus, scholars of all forms of humor and students interested in cultural studies and criticism of how texts work will benefit from the numerous in-depth case studies Holm employs.

The first section of the book examines claims about the liberatory political function of humor (through analysis of events such as *The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear*) and challenges the many celebratory accounts in literature. Holm argues that we need models of humor that are more sophisticated and account for the diverse functions of comedic texts. The second section of the book involves an in-depth examination of three modes of humor (discomfort, provocation, and absurdity) through examples from contemporary shows. This is helpful since humor is an abstract aesthetic that effectively emerges only through specific forms such as jests, gags, non sequiturs, put-downs, etc. His analysis of the humor of discomfort, as it shows up in *The Office*, *Jackass*, *Borat*, *Chappelle's Show*, and *The Sarah Silverman Program*, demonstrates exactly how provocative humor and taboo breaking creates and breaches social boundaries and intervenes in socially charged conversations. The exploration of absurd humor through *The*



*Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park* reveals how these contexts invite audiences to accept contradiction and inconsistency as sources of pleasure rather than anxiety. In the final section of the book, Holm makes the case for a political aesthetic theory and suggests that we view the common thread underlying all these humorous texts as "epistemic acid," pervasive and persistent doubt that makes us question all certainty.

### **Critique**

Rather than celebrating humor as liberatory, the book takes a clear-eyed look at how humorous texts operate and how even the noncomic aspects are essential to the pleasures, motivations, and interpretations of the texts. Holm methodically describes the set of principles underlying and guiding how we interpret and create meaning when we encounter these texts, and how this impacts our understanding of the world as a political and cultural space. He draws on the traditions of Cultural Marxism and the aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière to argue that these texts have a function beyond their tendency for disruption and dissent. This aesthetic can work to repeat and reinforce existing social, cultural, and political logics, while also upending some aspects of the status quo.

In this book-length exploration, the author shifts frequently from the micro view of a case study to a macro conceptual perspective, effectively navigating between specificity and generality. There are a few limitations. The analysis is indeed grounded in the Western tradition and no interpretive analysis can completely account for the total meaning of its examples. The author acknowledges his own social position as a young, white, middle-class male while mapping how the dominant understands the world. In addition, this analysis is centered around a specific form, though the field of humor encompasses print, graphic, oral, film, and new media forms generated from a variety of different perspectives, genders, races and ethnicities, on topics as diverse as American culture itself. Furthermore, there are international and transnational opportunities and challenges of humor that have to be examined. This book is a good start at engaging with comic content from across a few countries in the Western world, through an interdisciplinary lens.

### **Comparisons**

There are other texts on humor theory, such as Foot's (2017) *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, which provides a behavioral approach to theorizing humor, and Gruner's (2017) *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*, which suggests that all instances of humor can be examined as games with competition and keeping score- with winners and losers. In contrast, this book offers a critical cultural perspective on humor as an aesthetic and its wide-reaching impact on our worldviews. While Foot offers a comprehensive cognitive theory of humor and its psychological and physiological benefits, this book examines the comedic texts, their interface with everyday life and media culture, and their wider impact on our political and cultural spaces.

Within the political humor domain, there are texts such as Lichter, Baumgartner, and Morris's (2014) *Politics Is a Joke!: How TV Comedians Are Remaking Political Life* that analyze political jokes on late-night TV shows and evaluate the relationship between political humor and viewers' perceptions without providing as much theoretical and conceptual depth as Holm. Books such as DiCioccio's (2012) *Humor Communication: Theory, Impact and Outcomes* use communication theory and principles to examine humor.

Holm's book fills a unique niche in that it examines how humor as an aesthetic can reproduce, challenge, or overturn our established norms of understanding.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, Holm makes an effective case that the aesthetic aspects of comedic texts are important because they arise from everyday conditions. Though these texts are bound by the conditions of their production, they can be understood as spaces of political possibility. They can be used to build consensus or dissent, freedom or justice, or any political ideology or some combination thereof, but not necessarily to foster radical political change, whatever that may be. Holm captures the tensions reflected in postmodern humor: its liberating promise of constant interrogation and dynamic change, and the inherent nihilism of critiquing without the promise of an end point or aspirations for a better life. In this landscape, we all live and laugh together in uncomfortable, absurd, and unsure terrain, negotiating between anxiety and glee, and no one has had the last laugh.

### References

- DiCioccio, R. L. (Ed.). (2012). *Humor communication: Theory, impact, and outcomes*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.
- Foot, H. (2017). *Humor and laughter: Theory, research and applications*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gruner, C. R. (2017). *The game of humor: A comprehensive theory of why we laugh*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lichter, S. R., Baumgartner, J., & Morris, J. S. (2014). *Politics is a joke! How TV comedians are remaking political life*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.