

Putting the Mock in Democracy

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John Corner

University of Leeds UK

Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa (eds), *Studies in Political Humour*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011.

Jeffrey Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement* (2nd edn). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010.

Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris (eds), *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*. New York and Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2008.

Political humour has an ancient lineage and a vigorous and generically varied present. The idea that there is something inherently ridiculous about the political class as a group, along with many of its activities, has been articulated in widely different historical and geographical contexts, quite apart from comical perceptions of specific deficits at the level of persons, processes, policies and structures. In Britain, and maybe elsewhere, it can be seen at work in the old joke ‘don’t vote – it only encourages them’, a phrasing in which a symbolic hit back at elite management is only achieved by a degree of (ironic) withdrawal from a core form of democratic participation. Or there is Homer Simpson, taking comfort from the benefits of representational democracy in a manner which revealingly departs from enshrined principle – ‘That’s why we have elected officials, Honey – so we don’t have to think.’ Among other things, this illustrates the ambivalence or ambiguity surrounding many forms of political humour which, as Tsakona and Popa suggest in *Studies in Political Humour*, often complicate its relation to political opinion and political action. Where no democratic structures exist at all, as in some of their examples, humour mostly works vigorously and often darkly in the space of that overarching deficit. Where there is a system of formal democracy, but some doubt about its effective operation, the gap between ostensible and real provides rich territory for shared ironies and critique, variously inflected. It is not the idea itself that is being ‘mocked’ but the limited modes of its implementation.

Media systems work not only to circulate political humour. They are also, of course, a major site for its production, the mainstream routes now being joined by an increasingly wide range of online traffic. Political humour can still be generated at ground level clearly, but it has also become a staple strand of the entertainment industry in many societies, a matter of professional recipes and performances and a strategic sense of the

demographic variables of the media marketplace. (I take my title for this review from the catchphrase of *Capitol Steps*, the group of singer-satirists, formerly Washington staffers, who have been active and very successful since the 1980s, see www.capsteps.com). With the more general rise of comic performance as a key sphere of cultural production in many societies, the 'comic' becoming a standard, routinely available frame for the mediation of everything from the routine to the bizarre, this trend has been reinforced.

Political communication research has made connections with questions of humour and comedy for some time, although a dominant tendency, still noticeable, is for comic mediations of the political to be seen as possibly a 'helpful' way into political knowledge and perhaps political engagement for those groups, including the young, who might find a serious engagement with political news too demanding or boring. A cautious, perhaps slightly patronizing, welcoming of the comic often follows, a strand discernible recently in the wide range of writing on US late-night satire shows, notably *The Daily Show* (which is as much about satirizing current forms of mediation as current forms of politics, thereby complicating an assessment of its significance). However, this approach to political humour as some kind of ante-room to politics proper (or an external influence upon it) is now being joined by a much more intensive questioning of how humour works *within* politics proper, of how its cognitive and affective dynamics are quite centrally involved in the construction and maintenance of political culture and political subjectivity. Of course, the idea of 'politics', and its boundaries, needs care in all studies of 'political communication', a care it has not always received. An established tendency within Political Studies to be too narrow and exclusive, ignoring all that is not 'official' politics, has been countered in some parts of Cultural Studies by an expansiveness in which, since almost everything is seen as 'political', the effect is roughly the same as saying that nothing is. The levels, densities and markers of contemporary about humour 'politicality' across the span from institutionalized self-identified practices to the wide range of meanings and circumstances in which the political is an active element require alertness. So do the broader settings. Here, there is a literature of socio-cultural commentary about humour to draw upon, including studies by Palmer (1994), Billig (2005) and Lockyer and Pickering (2009).

Although it is published within a series giving emphasis to 'discourse approaches', *Studies in Political Humour* engages with a much broader range of previous writing and a richer agenda of questions than this may suggest. In their introductory chapter, Tsakona and Popa attempt to provide a kind of 'state of the art' reading of where we are now in terms of scholarly appraisal of political humour's forms and functions. They start by noting two 'myths' which they see as disabling for productive study. First, there is the myth of political humour as essentially subversive and as leading to political change. Second, there is the myth of the narrow specificity of political humour in relation to certain socio-political communities, including ethnic groups. Against the first myth they wish to pose the ways in which humour can 'recycle and reinforce dominant values and views' (p. 2). Perhaps the 'myth' idea is a little too polemically strong for their purposes here, since their position is not so much that of exposing the complete folly of an established view, but opening up a more subtle and variable framework of analysis and judgement, one within which the critical functions of humour still have a place. This is even truer of the second 'myth', against which they want to place the idea that the tracing of similarities and connections across different groups is more important than focusing on specificity

and exclusivity, hence the comparative project of their book, drawing studies from many different national contexts. But this is, again, clearly a matter of adjusted emphasis not really myth-busting, since the return to specificities is regularly and necessarily made.

What the contributions to the Tsakona and Popa volume often draw productive attention to, as do the second edition of the Jones book and many of the chapters in the Baumgartner and Morris collection, is the sheer variety of the modes of 'political-ity' to which humorous framings can be applied and the variety, too, of the aesthetic and discursive models which are now available. Of these, 'satire' is often given a privileged position, its classical origins providing it with both formal and thematic gravitas, sometimes attributing to the satirist the rather grand role as a truth-telling joker whose penetrating wit (metaphors of skewers abound) is essential to the conduct of good politics. However, 'satire' now covers a range of media performances with very different degrees of what we might call analytic focus upon political events and therefore with very different kinds of yield for political understanding, ranging from the sharply revelatory to the repetitiously familiar. In this respect, the idea of 'mocking' (as used not only in my title but, for instance, in the popular British television programme *Mock the Week*) might indicate, although not intentionally by many of those who use it, a more relaxed, less cognitively ambitious approach to framing politics as comic. In many societies, the activity of 'mocking' appears to have become installed as a default mode for relating to a whole range of connections or disjunctions between popular and official life, although how much this can be taken as an indication of the 'real relations' being experienced it is hard to say, such is the play of irony often at work (for a discussion of some aspects of this, see Ridenpaa, 2012, on the debate around the Mohammed cartoons). Although all three books make contact with issues around audiences and ideas of influence, sometimes citing poll data, none of them shows the detailed investigation into the accounts of viewers, readers and site users which might start to shed some light on these factors (among studies which, at least in part, try to do this see Corner et al., forthcoming).

Chapters in the Tsakona and Popa collection offer case-study analysis from Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania and Estonia. Within a literature on politics and culture heavily skewed towards US examples, this is a refreshing and important focus, made even more so by the way in which several of the chapters concern humour in societies undergoing quite radical transition from authoritarian systems, in some cases negotiating the normative uncertainties of post-socialism. In a valuable historical study, Efharis Mascha looks at caricature and satire during the period which saw the rise of Fascism in Italy. She sees the work of political humour as initially effective in generating a popular political consciousness that countered Mussolini's own ideological project, but judges this to have largely stayed at the micro-level rather than transforming itself into levels of active public resistance. Mussolini's increasing control of the press and vigorous censorship reinforced this tendency. What comes out of this study, however, and applies much more generally, is the way in which 'contradictory consciousness' can be a factor in the culture of political humour, with people privately enjoying the ridiculing of powerful figures and party projects but also, to a degree and for a variety of reasons (personal safety and the fragmentation of subaltern groups included), being prepared to 'go along' with the dominant political order.

Liisi Laineste discusses the situation in Estonia, looking at the relationship between ethnic jokes and ideas of political correctness in public debate. She identifies the way in which the dynamics of nationalism often generate forms of offensive humour out of what she calls a 'discourse of danger', one which articulates perceived threats to national integrity through ethnic diversity. Her case study concerns the critical attention given (in 2007) by a Russian newspaper published in Estonia, to the way in which Estonian school-books recommended and even contained racist jokes, including those about Russians. She analyses the flow of commentary and counter-commentary on this issue, both official and unofficial, discussing the way in which ideas of 'bad taste' and different forms of reasoning both about humour ('It's only a joke', 'Where's your sense of humour?') and about racism appeared in mainstream media and online texts. Among other things, she notes the gaps that opened up between, on the one hand, official apologies and proposed measures of reform (including censorship) and, on the other, popular sentiment.

Diana Popa contributes a chapter looking at the Romanian satirical television series, *Animated Planet Show*, an animation-based format based on the successful British series *Spitting Image*. Once again, the terms of a 'delimited success' are noted. The show is judged to have been successful in 'debunking' politicians and providing viewers with 'mental maps of the political and social world' running counter to those provided in official publicity. Yet 'it was unable to work as a corrective for poor social and political behaviour. It was unable to inspire reform' (pp. 157–8). Perhaps this points to a more general question relevant to all three books under review. Just what expectations are held about 'critical' humour as an agency of political change? Many of the contributors are articulate about the caution needed here but there is a sense in which they keep being surprised and disappointed in their own studies about the disparity between comedy's apparent capacity to change aspects of popular consciousness and its limitations when it comes to bringing about any kind of change to political structures and processes. This continues through to the little Postscript with which Tsakona and Popa close the book. They summarize that 'the common thread linking all the cases of political humour investigated here is *criticism*: politicians and politics are not as (each humorist thinks) they (ideally) should be and this is highlighted and framed via the humorous mode' (p. 272). Nevertheless, two pages later they quote Michael Billig at some length, including the following lines:

At the flick of a switch (and after the proper payment by credit card), we can enjoy regular programmes of fun and mockery. Dutiful consumption encourages us to mock apparent authority, enabling us to enjoy the feeling of constant rebelliousness in economic conditions that demand continual dissatisfaction with yesterday's products. (p. 276)

This is less a recognition of the political limitations of humour as an agency of political change than an identification of its efficiency as a tool of ideological control. It might have been useful had the editors spent a little more time working across some of these variations in the perceived workings of the humorous, which clearly relate in part to the different economic and political contexts of those making the assessment. In particular, the 'influences critical perceptions but not actions' position needs

differentiating from Billig's suggestion that even the notion that critical perceptions are produced is a mistaken one.

A tension about just how political humour works has also been evident in recent writing from the United States. The second edition of Jeffrey Jones' *Entertaining Politics* sees him making a number of revisions to his 2004 text. Some of these take account of shifts in the format and the personnel of the satiric television shows that are his subject. Jones places the rise of satire shows against what he judges to be the failure of mainstream political programming to engage properly with its duties to provide information and debate. His detailed analysis, with ample citation, of how the mix of entertainment and politics works across the dimensions of parody, spoof, interview, celebrity and insider–outsider relations is an essential read for anyone interested in how the political can be taken up within television's shifting performative options. He is constantly alert both to political and journalistic contexts, identifying the wider factors which have played into satiric television's successes and then led to changes in its character and its national positioning within political culture. At the end of the book he remains strongly upbeat about the achievements. These include not only a highlighting 'of political issues not raised within mainstream television, while offering options for an alternative politics' (p. 252) but an expansion of media literacy 'by casting a spotlight on the news media and its techniques for constructing truth and reality' (p. 252). As he rightly says, the shows have placed their focus not just on politics and the media independently but on the relationship between the two. While raising questions about how the partisan political positioning of the shows is variously perceived (the 'liberal' massively outweighing the 'conservative'), he argues that rather than placing what is happening too quickly in a partisan frame, attention should be given to the major underlying factor upon which the shows' success is built – the relative absence of serious critical assessment, rather than assertive position-taking, elsewhere in the media. This leads to asking what the shows effectively question and what they don't (for instance, until recently, issues of race and gender were secondary at best).

Compared with the accounts in Tsakona and Popa, whose framing does not really include the United States of course, Jones, while not uncritically celebrating television satire, finishes this book firmly believing in the 'expanded and contested boundaries' (p. 235) which it has brought about. He rejects the arguments of those who see a 'trivialization' of politics being ushered in by the new mediations and is doubtful about the arguments of critics who point to the dangers of an increased cynicism. Picking up on the work of Peter Sloterdijk and Jonathan Gray, he situates the 'cynical' within a more complex view of political subjectivity, one in which notions of truth are still held on to and the laughter and ridicule are, in part, a kind of defence mechanism, a therapy. Certainly, the constituents of contemporary political consciousness within whose terms the new forms of mediated humour are enjoyed deserve further exploration, both at the level of theorization and, as I have indicated earlier, at the level of empirical study rather than speculation. A too easily negative notion of the 'cynical' as a 'bad' ingredient of civic culture, a diagnostic judgement that has gained momentum, needs to have arguments and evidence placed against it.

Jones, unlike many of those who have written about the topic from the framings of political communication studies, is perceptive about aesthetics and discursive design,

and about the complex cognitive profile of humour which partly results from these factors. He has good things to say, for example, about the instabilities and uncertainties about precisely 'who is saying what' that are created by forms of parody, citing the vigorous imitation of a right-wing talk-show host that appears in *The Colbert Report*. Just how far something is exaggerated from 'the original' and then how far that exaggeration informs a reframing of 'the original' by the audience is often crucial and less straightforward to determine than might initially appear.

It's useful to bring the Baumgartner and Morris into this review, if only briefly, since their collection, published some four years after the first edition of *Entertaining Politics*, brings together a range of different approaches to the conceptualization and analysis of political humour and contains much in its 19 chapters that will retain its usefulness for some time. There is sharp overview writing here as well as detailed case studies, perhaps some of them rather too absorbed in tasks of 'measurement' where the effort is not entirely repaid by the reward. In their preface, the editors reflect among other things on the idea of 'truthiness', coined by Steven Colbert in 2005 to pin down the way in which truth-values, while still strenuously affirmed, had increasingly become strategically mutable in official political discourse. They remind us of the brilliant economy and precision of some of the best satirical writing, as in Colbert's remarks about President Bush in 2006, 'I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands on things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares' (cited on p. 21).

Working through the contributions across the five sections, a British reader gets confirmation of the sense, established in the Jones book, of the magnitude of *The Daily Show* and then *The Colbert Report* both for American political comedy and also for perceptions within the research community. These programmes are such a focus for the writing that one begins at times to wish for something that pushes out a bit further, albeit into areas of comedy-politics relations less highlighted in national life. That said, there are also good pieces on the web, on political cartoons and on the satiric magazine, *The Onion*. Indicating that fault-line that I commented on earlier, the relative emphasis on the effectiveness or the limitations of humour within the political system varies, an issue shrewdly reflected on by Doris Graber in her short conclusion.

As the study of political communication makes more extensive connection with questions of the political imaginary and of political 'affect' (on both, see Barnhurst, 2011), the contribution of different kinds of humour to the civic mix is likely to receive more attention within different research frameworks. The relationship of comedy to the agenda established by news output will be one continuing point of reference since so much humour serves to 'work through' (Ellis, 2000) by various means, including distortion and subversion, the hopes, fears and tensions articulated largely via political journalism. Another recent collection of essays (Gournelos and Greene, 2011) attempts to do this in specific relation to the transformations of post-9/11 America, and it is likely that this kind of focus, which includes the 'political' but tracks comic forms and approaches much more broadly in relation to a specific theme or event, will be very productive. Other points for closer engagement will include the generic range of comic forms in circulation, the 'targets' they choose (and those they ignore), the orientation of the politics at work inside the humour and the demographic spread of specific audiences, readerships

and site users (as elsewhere, a pattern of social class and ethnic, as well as age and gender divides is likely to be at work both in political affiliations and in media use). Alongside these factors, the response of the political class and its advisers to conventions of comic disrespect at work in the culture and their employment of it in the service of their own self-projections will also be worth looking at more closely (see, for instance, Coleman et al., 2009).

Feeding centrally into those 'structures of feeling' which work to locate politics within everyday life, thereby acting as a resource for modes of cynicism, acceptance, hope, fear, anger and (even) action, the focus and character of political humour will continue to be an important marker of political culture. This is particularly so in a period like the present, where in many countries the basic framing relationship between the economic and the political system appears to be increasingly vulnerable and open to question.

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