

**Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa (editors) *Studies in Political Humour*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2011, 290pp. EUR 95.00 | US\$ 143.00 ISBN 978 90 272 0637 4**

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### **Christie Davies\***

This interesting collection of essays by scholars from Romania, Poland, Estonia, Greece, Switzerland and England is a significant contribution to the study of the uses of humour within politics in several European countries, including Germany and Italy.

Many previous studies have stressed the subversive quality of humour within political systems but here equal weight is given to the ways in which humour is a conduit for legitimate criticism and can be a conservative force that upholds dominant values and institutions. Many of the empirical studies concentrate on the use of laughter-inducing incongruity and of debating humour in a context where the use of humour is expected to divide the political factions but within an agreed political frame, so that overall such humour reinforces a sense of inclusiveness.

The editors' note, on the basis of a number of studies of humour in former Communist states, "that parliamentary humour constitutes a reliable index of the (degree of) democratisation of parliamentary procedures". Humour had been rife in most private and public venues in Poland under communism but the tone of public political discourse was one of grim earnestness. It is also of significance that the editors are sceptical of the widespread view that mocking political jokes and interpersonal humour are an effective form of resistance to a totalitarian regime and cite a recent study of Danish jokes told under the German occupation of 1940-45; this supports earlier studies of jokes told during the German annexation of the Czech lands 1939-45 and, of course, in the Soviet empire.

Several of the substantive essays are important. Liisi Laineste's chapter, *Politics of taste in a post-Socialist State: A case study*, deals with the way in which ideas about jokes are continuously being reformulated by social change or political manipulation. Most East European countries have long been centres of ethnic conflict and today this can lead to a new, if usually misplaced, concern about ethnic jokes. In Estonia the problem ethnic minority are the Russian settlers left over from the time of Soviet imperial rule, who are now to be found at the bottom of the Estonian social order. Hence the children's joke:

Why do Russians wear straw hats?

Because you must always put hay on manure.

In and of itself, this is childishly amusing and unimportant but unfortunately a book containing it became reading material in the Estonian schools. There were complaints and the matter had to be considered carefully, given that there had been trouble between the two groups. Even the ever meddling European Union *politruks* (political commissars) poked in their unwelcome noses. Laineste has provided a very detailed and penetrating analysis of the different ways in which the ensuing tensions about humour were discussed, outlining clearly the various types of disagreement and their bases.

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A further insightful chapter about the post-socialist society is Diana Popa's *Political satire dies last*, about the Romanian cartoon sitcom *The Animated Planet Show* that provided viewers with information about political institutions and parties that other media were inclined to avoid. It entertained and enlightened the public but it enraged the satirized politicians, who later found indirect ways of shutting the programme down. There is a parallel here with Claire Watters' engaging chapter *Being Berlusconi* about the impersonation on television of Italy's great charismatic leader. Popa's account has the great merit of not being informed by theory but of being an empirical account that the reader can interpret as he or she chooses. Those who use theory as a scaffolding are apt to fall out of it, as happens with Effaris Mascha's Gramscian (with a wee touch of Freud) essay, *Mocking Fascism*, analysing 1920s satire on Mussolini, which is full of ideological jargon, such as 'hegemony', 'counter-hegemony', 'subaltern classes' etc. In consequence it provides a sketchy and misleading account of the nature and history of Italian fascism; this is a pity as the author provides not only good examples of caricatures of Mussolini but also interesting and revealing explanations of them. Theory impoverishes even the richest of accounts.

The chapters in the section *Humour by Politicians* make many good points. Ralph Mueller's *Fun in the German Parliament* is notable for its thoroughness; he has taken and measured the entire digital version of the proceedings of the Bundestag between 1994 and 2006, a great mass of spoken language in a written format, which has been annotated by the stenographers to indicate 'applause' (240,000 instances), 'laughter' (7,529) and 'amusement' (7,424). The figures speak for themselves. He has provided a systematic and insightful account of the settings and occasions that have provoked laughter and those that have produced amusement. Marta Dynel's article *Entertaining and Enraging* on so-called 'verbal violence' in broadcast political debates in Poland provides a sophisticated model of the way in which opponents in these debates are addressing a third party chairman, the audience in the studio and the viewers out there, as well as each other. They are, as we say in England, 'playing to the gallery', but this gallery includes the entire Polish people.

Some of the other contributors tend to rely on 'discourse analysis', which has proved to be a dead end in the same way as 'conversation analysis' has done. It is neither proper psychology nor proper linguistics but merely takes texts and pushes them through an arbitrary grid. The results are subjective and contestable, but discourse analysts disguise this fact with their high falutin' and obscure presentations.

*Studies in Political Humour*, is an excellent and wide-ranging volume that should enjoy a place on the bookshelves of both humour scholars and political scientists.