

Symposium

Al Gini and Abraham Singer. *The Sanity of Satire: Surviving Politics One Joke at a Time*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.

Critics

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The *Sanity of Satire*, subtitled *Surviving Politics One Joke at a Time*, is a welcome addition to the burgeoning scholarship on humor. It is essayistic in form, expansive in range, and insightful in content. It is also a marvel of relative brevity, requiring re-reading to catch all of its subtleties and allowances. In it, co-authors Abraham A. Singer and Al Gini affirm the humanizing cognitive core of ‘satire’ (a term rather broadly encompassing humor and jokes that are socially relevant and opinionated, argumentative, or critical), reflect on the Trump era of politics, canvas the relevant experience of a range of stand-up comics, demonstrate the genius of women in comedy, somewhat discount the distinctiveness of Jews in comedy, debate the ethical limits of humor, and close with reflections on the existential limits of joking as a way of being. Though I am broadly sympathetic to their arguments (and generously cited as such in the book, Basu 1999), I will nonetheless raise some contrarian considerations or shifts in emphasis that a re-reading of the book prompts in me.

Considering humor (and satire specifically here), I think it is important to note two features about it: the role of pleasure and the incitement to novelty. In the first place, not all of the motivating pleasure of humor and satire is cognitive or epistemic. Approaches to humor that center on incongruity, ambivalence or absurdity work well for their arguments, but superiority, release and relief dynamics drawing upon relational and affective effects and implications much less so. Second, although much humor is conservative in ways well captured in Ted Cohen’s (2008) formulation of joking as a form of intimacy involving shared pre-existing knowledge and expectations, not all of it is. Rather, some of the most interesting didactic value of humor arises, arguably, from its artfully used capacity to elicit involuntary reactions, cause leaps in logic, and the formation of genuinely new mental associations. Put the plurality of pleasure together with the nudges towards novelty and one has a wider set of consequences not all of which will align well with the sanity of satire. In practice, this entails that the optimal theoretical impacts of humor

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identified by Singer and Gini are not necessarily those evident in the historical record of the actual consequences of public humor. That is, even as I want to affirm the benign socio-political promise of humor, the historical record is much more ambivalent and contingent on specific socio-psychological dynamics. In this regard, to some extent our authors invoke the work of professional comedians as empirical evidence for their arguments. However, standup comedy venues and satirical late-night TV shows are pre-framed and self-exonerating spaces, attended by those agreeable to being entertained, rather than genuinely public ones in which humor is contributing to serious discourse. That the use of humor by professional comics sometimes advanced public understanding does not capture the full scope of the historical consequences of humor in practice.

Given that I am actually researching the roles of humor in the contexts of Weimar and Nazi Germany the examples I will offer are not the dubious extension of Godwin's Law from the internet to academe. However, I will indulge in a bit of alliteration here and suggest four sorts of consequences of public humor that somewhat countermand the larger argument of Singer and Gini about the salutary sanity of satire: counterproductive criticism, corruption of value, cruelty and cynicism.

First, satire directed against well-deserving targets does not always achieve its intended outcome. It does not always elicit the sought after awakening of the target or sympathy among observers. It may instead prove counterproductive: underestimating yet also goading the enemy. There is, in this regard, mounting evidence that Donald Trump was personally motivated to undertake the retaliatory political actions and agenda that he did by the abundant disparaging humor that circulated at his expense, and advanced through the electoral cycles because his competitors did not take him seriously. Likewise, if not more so, Adolf Hitler, early dismissed before and after his failed antisemitic *putsch* of 1923 as a 'Berlin Clown', 'April Fool', and so on, explicitly sought to silence the laughter of his critics. Rudolf Hess (1938), second in command, noted in 1934 that it was a gift of grace that the Weimar Republic levelled mockery against Hitler and his movement rather than subduing it when they still could have. Moreover, and significantly, both Trump and Hitler rallied supporters with the frequent refrain that they too were being laughed at, that various elements in the world was laughing at them.

Second, politically motivated humor can contribute to the corruption of the very values held dear by the humorist. In satirizing a political target one can be tempted to compromise one's theory of values and virtues. Some of Plato's concern about lovers of laughter and ambivalence

towards Socrates' irony turned on the ways in which the superiority pleasure of laughter can lead astray. In this regard some of the progressive left humor directed against Trump turned on his *nouveau riche* tastes, gaudy sartorial choices, sham religiosity and substantial physical proportions though these same humorists would otherwise oppose classist arguments, consumerism, intolerance, and body-shaming. Likewise, some of the pro-democratic humor against Hitler emphasized his Austrian immigrant status and speech, petit-bourgeois self-taught loquacity and physical appearance. It also mocked the presence of homosexuality within the Nazi movement prominently embodied by Ernst Röhm.

Politics, including democratic politics, is about the distribution and circulation of power, as Singer and Gini of course well realize. It strikes me though that the effects of humor circulating in public discourse function differently depending on the extent to which a given society is politically oriented (in terms of status and values) around honor and shame. Notwithstanding its democratic institutions Plato's Athens was still working through its residual aristocratic honor-centric cultural values. Societies that are democratizing tend to dissipate, to varying degrees, the importance of essentialized notions of honor and shame and replace them with egalitarian notions of familiarity and difference. This makes it somewhat easier in democracies to engage socially in boundary crossing and transgressive humor. However, the processes of democratization and fuller inclusion in the *demos* unfolds over time. The logic of egalitarianism remains unfinished and subject to contestation and revision. Members secure privileges while those who are marginal, liminal, transitional remain vulnerable to civic and state violence. In this context of identity contestation political humor can manifest abject cruelty towards some categories of difference, trading as it often does on stereotypes and expectations. It can be used to undermine the prospects for popular acceptance and inclusion of the vulnerable. Singer and Gini note the example of Dave Chappelle who struggled with his own representations of African-Americans and reproduction of negative stereotypes. In the context of the Weimar Republic, some German-Jewish citizens in the early 1920s protested Jewish cabaret comedians who engaged in collective self-mockery of their all-too-human foibles in the presence of mixed audiences. They feared that such representations would further foment the very antisemitism on which the Nazi party was advancing. Indeed, the Nazi party had its own comedians who engaged in such cruel humor too.

Finally, one might worry about the extent to which the free play of humor and satire, to which all feel entitled, might foster generalized cynicism and epistemic doubt. If the optimal mode

here is a satirist effectively advancing social progress through inclusive tolerance, humor and satire can also be used for example to strategically forestall real criticism of the status quo. That is, those in power can engage in pre-emptive self-mockery to somewhat humanize themselves and crucially to neutralize the criticism of their injustices. George W. Bush is said by critics to have done this on occasion, and again in the Nazi period, ruthless Hermann Göring too. To the extent that humor can be used from all perspectives and pleasure drawn from savaging any and all targets as the butts of jokes, amid a generalized skepticism and mutual disregard, what remains may well be those wielding unbridled power.

In sum, if there are ethical responsibilities and limits tied to the unreasonable consequences of actionable hate speech, why not for humorous speech given that we know that not everyone will respond with sanity to satire?

References

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