

Book Review

Patrick Giamario (2022). *Laughter as politics: critical theory in an age of hilarity.* Edinburgh University Press, 212 pp.

Reviewed by **Robert Phiddian**, Flinders University, Adelaide, SA, Australia,
E-mail: robert.phiddian@flinders.edu.au. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8413-991X>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2022-0097>

Laughter generally feels good, so we tend to have a lot invested in believing that it is also just and “appropriate.” A thoughtless politics of laughter assumes that something we laugh at somehow deserves it. Laughter is the vigilante arm of the forces of poetic justice. Intuitively this feels about right, but it is a dream that fades rapidly before any serious critical analysis. Seldom has the analysis of laughter in politics been as searching as that essayed in Patrick Giamario’s excellent treatise under review. He recognizes that laughter can be on the side of the angels (laughing with or punching up, as my students are fond of saying), but it can also exert harsh, even bullying discipline. To talk about gelopolitics is to open a very interesting can of worms. Laughter is often political, but can it be said to have a coherent politics?

Giamario presents an explicitly democratic and carefully argued progressive view of gelopolitics. He does not hide his convictions: “Those seeking to resist neofascist deployments of laughter should consequently abandon the illusory and self-defeating goal of policing laughter more effectively and instead engage today’s enormous quantity and variety of laughter as a unique, albeit danger-ridden opportunity to imagine and build more democratic institutions and ideologies.” (33) Perhaps he is too quick on the trigger to call bad laughter neofascist – I will return to that at the end of the review – but the historical range and depth of his political thought about this most unbridled form of critique is impressive.

He starts with Hobbes, but goes well beyond the usual clichéd evocation of sudden glory as the epitome of superiority humor. It is too easy to see Hobbes as an advocate of Civil War era ridicule as harsh discipline, but Giamario reads far beyond the usual passage into *De Cive* and other works to render inescapable the conclusion that the oft-quoted “Suddaine Glorie” is really for Hobbes a vainglory that should be properly understood as an abuse rather than simply an agonistic application of power: “a gelopolitical reading of Hobbes’s theory of laughter, in short, illuminates laughter as an unauthorised, fragile feeling of power through which sovereignty is made, undone and made again.” (41) Deep down in Hobbes’s political philosophy, laughter is a destabilizing threat to sovereign power, and thus immoral and impolitic. Hobbes does not approve of it as a sort of coercive political action but rather disapproves because it can perform such action in a counter-sovereign manner.

Giamario then turns the admittedly authoritarian Hobbes on his head to argue that a “gelopolitical reading of Hobbes’s theory of laughter shows that sovereignty is continually produced, disrupted and reinscribed in laughter.” (57) His illustration of “laughter as a site of politics” is the Polish Shipyard Workers who brought down the Communist regime with their humorous resistance: Hobbes would not be amused, either by Walesa or Giamario.

Laughter as Politics then turns to the well-known Frankfurt-based stand-up comedian, Theodor Adorno to address the central ambivalence between the entertainment industry laughter of the happy consumer and the laughter of political critique: “To the question of ‘to laugh or not to laugh?’ Adorno seems to have a clear answer: laughter that channels and entrenches the violence of capitalist society (wrong laughter) is a political vice, while laughter that resists this violence (reconciled laughter) is a political virtue.” (85) This is the normative core of Giamario’s argument, and it arrives precisely at the junction between the intelligent, self-reflexive, exploratory laughter, which I and readers of this journal will tend to value, and the idea that humour should be “purely for entertainment,” as my more irritating students insist. Dialectical critique is here offered as a solution to consumer laughter, it seems, but laughter as critique presents a parallel problem to the question of satire’s seeming inability to effect change. If laughter or satire are so politically potent, why does not the world recognize the fact and change accordingly?

Enthusiastic support for critical, insurgent laughter takes center stage for the subsequent chapters of *Laughter as Politics*, which address race and gender. In a subtle account of Ralph Ellison and the revolting US tradition of the “laughing barrel,” Giamario addresses the regime of power that has non-whites smiling at all times but being disciplined should they laugh “excessively.” Ellison is an exemplar of a democratic black laughter that unsettles racial order: “Rather than functioning as a site wherein white supremacy reproduces and entrenches itself, laughter becomes an experience/event wherein Black and white subjects share public space together on an equal footing. Through their laughter, Black subjects dismantle the racial hierarchy and make themselves count as members of the polis.” (105) Laughter can do this. Laughter should do this. Laughter helped build the stereotypes, and it can help to dismantle them, or it can reinscribe them in subtle ways that sponsors resilience and political change. However, the political work still needs to be done by human agents who want to resist the bad old ways.

Similarly, the Medusa’s laugh of gender insubordination, from Helene Cixous to Hannah Gadsby, is a weapon against patriarchy and centuries of mother-in-law jokes. It can be a dialectical solvent to the male gaze of comedy that puts women and gender non-conformists forever in their place. If we have ears to listen we can hear resilient and resistant laughter at settled patterns of order and subordination. @metoo as a movement is not, and should not be, humorless, but those who deride it

try to get away with pretending otherwise. And here is the deep nostalgia in Giamario's argument, one I share and think we all should share. Giamario wants laughter to do political work *in a polis*. I do too. However, a polis needs an agora, and that is what is most fragmented in late, technologically mediated capitalism. One never needs to meet ideological opponents on common (let alone equal) terms. One can laugh either at the unregenerate or with the like-minded, and gelopolitics loses a capacity to do democratic work the more this is the norm.

Laughter as Politics ends in a present where the liberal consensus that laughter works for freedom, equality, and poetic justice is under pressure. Consequently, "scholarship on laughter, comedy and humour has also grown markedly more agelastic in the last several years." (165) The most fundamental move of gelopolitics is not to laugh at something risible, it seems. It is to declare that something is not funny. It is not OK, according to most theorists of humor these days, to laugh in a reactionary way. Yet, while Giamario would be glad to see the end of Trump and his cognate coercive populisms, he rejects the earnest desire to suppress the harm of bad laughter: "The core problem with the new agelasty is not only that the depoliticisation of laughter it pursues is impossible to achieve (because politics has always been gelopolitics); it is that even trying to do so undermines its stated goal of resisting neofascism. Attempts to insulate the polis from laughter would have the effect of blocking the politicisations of both laughter and the polis that are necessary to combat neofascist politics." (170).

Perhaps this is a little quick to pronounce the anathema of neofascism against all the works of some strangely coherent late capitalist hegemony that acts as a boogiemani in much progressive thought these days. If the book has a weakness, it is a tendency to ascribe agency to ideas and attitudes like neofascism when these seem to me better understood as the intellectual plumbing for programs pursued by the individuals and groups to a range of ends, including malign ones. In Giamario's critique, power can seem to take on a protean, even demonic, force to lull our senses, making us laugh anti-democratically. It's possible, but a simpler explanation might be that the political work of laughter is to distract the political passions at least as often as it sharpens their analytic power. If we accept Ockham's Razor here, then we can admit that laughter does many things politically, and advocate for the 'good' works of reconciled laughter without claiming an intellectual inevitability for their superiority by force of the correctness of the critique.

This would leave Giamario's fundamental point standing strong – that we cannot insulate politics from laughter so we need a productive gelopolitics. It is not laughter that does politics, it is what people do with laughter that does politics. The medium is not (at least not necessarily) the message. Laughter can expose power, or mystify it, it can sensitize audiences to injustice, or anesthetize them, it can answer a bully, or simply bully the defenseless. The slippery element of Giamario's account is whether

it should be a normative or simply descriptive theory of the sorts of political work done by laughter. This slipperiness, far from being a problem, is essential to any serious attack on the topic. It involves the scholar's ethical self, and admits this impossibility of a purely detached or objective account. Any competent investigator in these matters lives somewhere in the slipperiness between 'should' and 'is.' We all come to these issues from somewhere that inflects who we laugh with and who we laugh at.

So, this book pursues a subtle and self-consciously normative argument to frame politically productive laughter as supporting comic resilience for those who punch up at injustice and apt contempt for those who punch down at the less powerful. Laughter feels good and can thus anesthetize us from too much thought, but Giamario reminds us that it can cut as well as tickle. Agelasts assume that the solution to this problem is to create a theoretical safe place where only politically sound laughter abides. Giamario shows that, politically we are in laughter, and must take account of its protean qualities to work towards a better, more truly democratic world.