



Book Review

Rashi Bhargava and Richa Chilana, eds. (2023). *Punching up in stand-up comedy: speaking truth to power.* London and New York: Routledge, 276 pp. ISBN: 9781032267258. Price: £27,99 (paperback or e-book), £96,00 (hardback).

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When I first read the title of this edited collection, I was somewhat afraid that this was another one of those books which uncritically celebrate the subversive powers of humor and stand-up comedy. Luckily, *Punching Up in Stand-Up Comedy* presents a far more nuanced argument than its title may suggest. While the editors and contributing authors are indeed interested in the work of comedians who use humor to “punch up” and “speak truth to power,” the book does not resort to clichés about the liberating powers of humor. Rather, it presents rich and reflexive analyses of the politics of stand-up comedy in different geographical, cultural and political contexts.

The volume is broad in scope, but without losing focus. This is, first of all, because the contributors draw (partly) from a shared corpus of texts. The most recurring reference is Rebecca Krefting’s book on “charged humor” in America, or humor which opposes “social inequalities and cultural exclusion” (Krefting 2014: p. 2). Krefting is also one of the authors of the first essay, further discussed below. Other works that are cited throughout are Sophie Quirk’s books on the impact of British stand-up comedy (Quirk 2015, 2018) and Cynthia and Julie Willett’s *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comic Speak Truth* (2019).

But more than a shared set of texts, the collected essays fit together because they are undergirded by two shared observations about the politics of humor. First, quoting Stephan Wagg in their introduction, the editors state that “comedy invariably has a political thrust and, potentially, political consequences; it isn’t only political when it is practiced by a Marxist or when it involves a joke at the expense of the Prime Minister” (p. 6). The editors thereby give expression to a growing consensus in the field of humor and comedy studies that the politics of humor cannot be reduced to government and state politics, or to the genre of “satire.” The collected essays pay special attention to the politics of identity in the work of comedians from minoritized and marginalized groups.

Secondly, in a world where persons, information, and cultural forms travel fast, the boundaries between the global and the local are increasingly hard to maintain, which gives rise to new social and political cleavages. This is showcased by the global spread of stand-up comedy, and the resulting tensions between local cultures and stand-up comedy as a “foreign” genre. One of the merits of *Punching Up* is that it pays

attention to these tensions. In doing so, it acts as an important corrective to the dominant focus on British and American stand-up comedy in current comedy scholarship. *Punching Up* features essays on stand-up comedy in several countries in Europe and the Global South, including Finland, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy and Morocco.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first section, “Punching In and Punching Up: Limits and Possibilities,” details the history and evolution of stand-up comedy outside of the Anglophone world. The first two essays focus on the charged humor of Moroccan comedians (Mohamed Bassou and Rebecca Krefting) and subversive uses of humor in Indonesian stand-up comedy (Nina Setyaningsih and Anisa Larassati). While these essays present fascinating details about the history of stand-up comedy and its relationship to local culture, the authors remain silent about British and American influences. Hence, these essays suggest that stand-up comedy in these countries organically developed out of older comedy traditions, without undergoing any foreign influences. If that is indeed true, it would have been something to explicitly address, since that would present a serious challenge to the dominant historical narrative that stand-up comedy was invented in the US and/or the UK. For instance, it is confusing to read that stand-up comedy in Indonesia was introduced in the 1950s, and thus relatively early, but that the first comedy club was only created in the 1990s.

The other essays in this section discuss the tensions between the local and the global in more detail. For instance, Jonathan Ervine demonstrates how in France, stand-up comedy’s emphasis on the identity of the performer was initially perceived as incompatible with the dominant national culture. Stand-up would be part of “urban” culture, comparable to hip hop. The humor of minoritized comedians, such as the members of the Jamel Comedy Club, was believed to appeal to community-specific values, thereby colliding with the Universalist ethos of the French Republic. Interestingly, in other European countries, such as Finland, stand-up comedy was also initially perceived as an American import product which would be incompatible with certain aspects of the local culture. As we learn from Marianna Keisalo’s essay, in Finland stand-up comedy was at first perceived as un-Finnish, because “silence [in Finland] is an accepted part of social interaction” and “boastfulness or calling attention to yourself is considered to be in bad taste” (p. 200).

As Aju James shows in another interesting essay, comedians from Mumbai (India) have used the global appeal of stand-up comedy more in their favor to construct a “global Indian-ness” (p. 92). Stand-up comedy enables these comedians to escape local, conservative middle class ideologies and lifestyles, including the ideal of a well-paid, corporate job and the formation of a nuclear family. However, as James points out, these comedians are typically able to become successful because of their upper taste, upper-caste backgrounds, which grants them access to the right

social networks and cultural and media industries. They thus remain tied to the same middle class backgrounds from which they try to escape, a paradox that is hardly explored in their work. James' precise and well-written analysis and his reflections upon the limits of critical comedy mark his essay as one of the best of this volume.

The second section, "Gendered Experiences and Stand-Up Comedy," deals with female comedians who use the stage to subvert gender hierarchies in a patriarchal society. While Christian Berger's (very) short essay on Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* remains somewhat descriptive and does not have much to add to the meta-perspective on humor offered by the Australian comedian herself, the other essays are more compelling.

Madhavi Shivaprasad's essay in particular makes a valuable contribution to debates on the contested politics of female comedy. Shivaprasad demonstrates that identity matters in terms of *whose* comedy counts as legitimately "political." Female comedians in India are not only criticized for lacking a sense of humor (a global phenomenon, as confirmed by some of the other essays), but also condemned for being apolitical. Ironically, the observational comedy of male comedians is not evaluated in the same terms. Moreover, when female comedians from India oppose the authorities, they run a higher risk of being censored or receiving death threats. That some female comedians in India are nevertheless successful in using humor for counterhegemonic purposes is demonstrated by the case of Agrima Joshua, who decided to unlist rather than remove a popular YouTube video after a complaint was filed against it, thereby circumventing censorship and further boosting the popularity of the video.

The third and final section, "Comics and the Audience: Connections, Ethics and Efficacy?," deals with the interaction between comedians and their audiences and the chapters in this section present valuable reflections on method, comedy, and audience interpretation. Marianna Keisalo argues that comedy scholars should pay attention to both the form and content of comedy. She observes that scholars who focus on content tend to believe that comedy has a crystal-clear political message, while scholars who emphasize the form and aesthetics of comedy typically suggest that comedy is elusive and ambiguous up to the point that its meaning can never be decided upon. In a careful close reading of the work of Finnish comedians, Keisalo demonstrates that comedians indeed guide their audiences towards particular interpretations. The most important methodological implication of her analysis is that "through emphasizing its [comedy's] ambiguity and creativity, the comedic figure becomes a kind of detached free-floating promise of meaning, which is – paradoxically – not very meaningful" (p. 206).

Another Finnish comedy scholar, Antti Lindfors, makes the case for affect theory as a helpful heuristic. Affect theory has something to offer here because it takes

affect seriously as a social and embodied experience which results from an interaction between comedian and audience. Hence, it can work as an “important corrective against the well-entrenched, pejorative association of comedy with ‘low’ bodily affairs” (p. 184). Lindfors demonstrates the value of affect theory by pointing to “awkwardness” as a vital aspect of stand-up comedy. Conceptualizing “awkwardness” as a form of “phatic rupture” (p. 189), and stand-up comedy as a phatic form of communication in which building up rapport with the audience is key, Lindfors argues that comedians need to deal with awkwardness. While comedians often try to counteract it, it can also be consciously evoked and played with during comedy sets.

The authors who make the strongest case for the subversive powers of stand-up comedy in this collection address the role of humor in authoritarian regimes. In the context of unconcealed political oppression, it is easier to identify the resistant possibility of humor than in liberal democratic societies, such as the USA. In the final essay, Chris A. Kramer reflects upon the political work of comedy and comic derision in liberal societies. He raises the question of how comedians should respond to conspiracy theorists, arguing that mocking them and their followers can easily backfire, and that comedians should not target people but their ideas. His essay is part of a recent stream of publications which make the case for a post-critical comedy, a mode of comedy which is more emphatic and reflexive than critical comedy (Holm 2018; Nicolai 2023; Zijp 2023). However, because Kramer’s essay is speculative and does not discuss any concrete cases, it remains hard to imagine what such a post-critical comedy might look like, and how it might lead to “epistemic repair” (p. 245).

Punching Up is a fascinating and rich volume, which grapples with urgent questions relating to the politics of comedy: what does it mean for humor to be “political” in the present cultural moment? How, in the changed political landscape of the twenty-first century, can comedians exert influence and make an impact? How do they use humor as a counterhegemonic tool, and how do they negotiate the tensions between humor’s progressive and conservative sides? Although the quality of the individual contributions varies, the geographical scope of the volume, the coherence between the different essays, and the nuanced way in which the authors deal with the critical potential of comedy, make *Punching Up* into a welcome contribution to the burgeoning field of comedy studies.

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