

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2021

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Jennalee Donian, *Taking Comedy Seriously: Stand-Up's Dissident Potential in Mass Culture*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019, 162 pp., \$90 (hardcover).

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Stand-up comedy possesses unique potential to inspire the political imagination by impressing upon (largely unsuspecting) audiences alternative ways of seeing the world. For this reason, Jennalee Donian suggests that stand-up comedy, under the guise of evoking laughter, might effectively serve the ends of a radical, emancipatory politics. In *Taking Comedy Seriously*, Donian describes the comedian as an outsider who, with incisive observations, alerts his hearers to forms of thinking and being that break with the hegemonic order. Donian places stand-up comedy's increasing popularity in the context of neoliberal global hegemony and uses poststructural and psychoanalytic lenses to elaborate a theory of political comedy. Her work will certainly be of interest to political theorists with an expertise in emancipatory politics, particularly of the realist variety inspired by thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau.

Donian sets up her argument, first, by attempting to establish what stand-up comedy is. She provides a functional definition that depends in large part on the roles played by two historical archetypes: the mythological trickster and the European court jester. The mythological trickster, according to Donian, is, like Hermes in Greek mythology or Loki in Norse mythology, a figure who reconfigures a person's view of the social world by manipulating her perceptions. The European court jester, meanwhile, who is the more immediate forebear of today's stand-up comic, is the wise fool, familiar to us from Shakespeare's plays, who humorously conveys hard truths about reality.

More than any textual definition of stand-up comedy that Donian provides—and she provides several—these two figures most fully capture the role that Donian envisions the stand-up comedian playing in society. The jester, like the shaman and the trickster, Donian notes, is an outsider who is shunned by society, often because of a mental or physical abnormality. This “marginal position placed him outside of the social framework, which only sharpened his insight into human nature” (6). Thus, the stand-up comic is a “rhetorically marginalized individual,” who, through his performances, cuts through prevailing social orthodoxies, power hierarchies, and hegemonic ideologies, in order to provide insight into human nature (12–13).

Each of the contemporary comics whose work Donian analyzes in the final chapter—Ellen DeGeneres, Pieter-Dirk Uys, and Trevor Noah—are “hybrid” characters, operating in a liminal space, on the borderland of our conceptions of race and gender, by virtue of being gay, gender fluid, or biracial, which both marks them as outsiders and allegedly grants them keener powers of observation into human nature and social conventions. As the book progresses it becomes obvious that Donian is interested much less in the way the comedian grasps essential, illuminating truths about human nature than in the way in which the comedian challenges dogma, which Donian cynically presents as “absolute belief or faith in a non-existent absolute truth” (xiii).

The beneficial function that the comic performs is, according to Donian, neither insight into permanent features of human nature nor the evocation of laughter, but simply the “destabilizing function” the comic can serve by questioning “existing power relations.” It is for this reason that Donian uses as her contemporary examples only those comedians who “expose the constructed nature of essentializing social categories such as race and gender” (xvii). Again, the purpose and value of the comedian, from this perspective, is to reveal alternate ways of being and thinking in the world, ways not determined by police powers, a Foucaultian idea repeated throughout the book. The greatest value of this book, in fact, lies in its application of the poststructuralist political philosophy of Jacques Rancière and the radical democratic theory of Laclau to the contemporary comedic scene.

Taking Comedy Seriously is thus not primarily a study of political humor, or satire. Although Donian dedicates several pages to an examination of Freud’s relief theory of humor, other theories, including superiority theory, which is evident in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and incongruity theory, which is evident in the writings of Kant and Schopenhauer, receive only brief mention. The author limits her treatment to the Freudian account

because, she claims, it is most appropriate for assessing “the sociopolitical efficacy” of stand-up comedy in a neoliberal context.

Taking Comedy Seriously does present some worthwhile insights into the nature of stand-up comedy in the contemporary age and the degree to which it is capable of undercutting, rather than simply perpetuating, the prevailing value system of late capitalism. In an era of globalization and neoliberal capitalism, Donian argues, there is extreme economic and psychological suffering, perpetual debt, and frequent war on a global scale that demands an institutionalized antidote to anxiety. The social and economic conditions of capitalism produce obsessional neurosis, a kind of uncertainty, anxiety, and self-doubt to which comedy serves as a meliorating agent.

The capitalist regime thrives on what Donian calls, alternately, “the culture of choice,” “the tyranny of choice,” and “the ideology of rational choice.” Drawing on work by the Slovene philosophers Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek, Donian contends that the freedom of the individual to choose a career, where to live, where to work, one’s religion, what to buy—the sheer variety of choices at one’s disposal—is anxiety inducing. And Donian makes the convincing point that the idea of the self-made person and the primacy of individual choice produce a form of anxiety from which capitalism—and stand-up comedy, specifically—profits.

There is a sustained—and driving—tension throughout the book, which Donian acknowledges when she asks whether comedy can truly be subversive in a neoliberal regime. Comedy is commodified under capitalism. And it is in effect sanctioned by the very neoliberal order it endeavors to critique. In the medieval carnival tradition, misrule and disorder were sanctioned for a limited time by the governing regime as a legitimate outlet for pent-up social angst. According to Donian, comedy under neoliberal empire functions in a carnivalesque manner wherein mockery—i.e., stand-up comedy—is permitted as a safe outlet for the very tensions produced by capitalism and the “tyranny of choice” it imposes. Nevertheless, Donian contends that postmodernist art can be both conservative—i.e., complicitous in the continuation of the hegemonic regime—and critical in thrust, preparing audiences for the possibilities of utopian change.

Whereas comedy that operates on carnivalesque logic perpetuates existing power structures established by the ascendant ideology, the kind of sociopolitically efficacious comedy in which Donian is interested paves avenues for progressive agency and revolutionary political action by bringing to

the audience's mind alternative "blueprint[s] for social ordering" (69). Political theorists attuned to recent developments in contemporary realism will find many commonalities between Donian's thesis and the radical realism proposed by Enzo Rossi, Mathias Thaler, and Paul Raekstad, who argue that realism, far from endorsing the status quo, possesses utopian potential, insofar as it can shape the political imagination by demonstrating unorthodox ways of being together, whether through fictional literary works or autonomous zones, like that which existed for a time in Seattle, Washington, in the summer of 2020.¹

Donian, in line with the realist arguments of Chantal Mouffe and Raymond Geuss, expresses dissatisfaction with a Habermasian conception of politics, according to which consensus is the aim of political negotiation, and argues that contestation and conflict are the essential—and inalterable—features of politics. Whereas the policing of consensus tends to solidify the prevailing hegemonic ideology with its social hierarchies and class divisions, comedy, when it lives up to its disruptive potential, can create what Jacques Rancière called scenes of "dissensus," which constitutes a break from current ways of living, being, and seeing and presents "a contrasting structuration of the common world" (76).

Donian's analysis does have its limitations. For example, she provides plenty of examples of comedians jabbing at heteronormative social norms. But it is far from clear that such barbs qualify as alternative blueprints of social order. Nor does she show how such alternative blueprints, were they to exist, are supposed to be funny. Donian subordinates laughter to social activism. For this reason, the few jokes Donian actually does mention are at best only mildly amusing. Additionally, Donian does not explain what happens when an "emancipatory" ideology itself becomes hegemonic. Donian measures comedy by its sociopolitical efficacy, not its relation to truth. If a newly ascendant ideology were to interpret gender as a social construct, should comedy that essentializes gender then become the new gold standard? Donian, who values comedy only for its potential to undercut regnant ideologies, gives us no reason to think otherwise.

In the book's final chapter, Donian utilizes her limited "theoretical arsenal"—mostly Rancièrian political philosophy—to analyze the careers

¹ Enzo Rossi, "Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible," *Constellations* 26, no. 4 (2019): 638–52; Mathias Thaler, "Hope Abjuring Hope: On the Place of Utopia in Realist Political Theory," *Political Theory* 46, no. 5 (2018): 671–97; Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

and styles of comics who assume enough of a marginal identity to resist heteronormative consensus and create Rancièrian “dissensus” through their performances. Their comedic performances serve as a Trojan horse, a means by which problematic perspectives can meet minimal public opposition and achieve “safe passage past the censors at the gates of propriety” (98). But Donian does not adequately consider the possibility that this violation of taboos—this transgression of social norms—enacted out of a desire for authenticity and self-creation is itself an outflow of the neoliberal order she thinks it desirable to undermine.

Donian clearly has difficulty claiming that figures such as DeGeneres and Uys are marginal figures, radical revolutionaries who face immense suffering on account of their emancipatory political visions. DeGeneres, for example, is a household name, a wildly popular writer, performer, and talk-show host, who earns millions of dollars per year and has more Twitter followers than there are people in the United Kingdom. DeGeneres is clearly speaking to—and profiting from—a wide swath of the population, whose common view of the world already incorporated, or at the very least could make room for, DeGeneres’s allegedly transgressive persona. Although Donian notes how DeGeneres pokes fun at the limitless number of choices presented to individuals in a neoliberal society, DeGeneres herself is presenting her audiences with alternative lifestyle choices that are commodified, sold, and spread far and wide as alternative avenues for self-creation and self-expression. DeGeneres does not subvert, but nourishes, the neoliberal drive for originality, autonomy, and choice.

Donian does admit that comedy, in spite of its dissident potential, might be destined to serve the dominant ideology. She nevertheless faithfully carries out her declared purpose of locating the emancipatory, dissident potential of stand-up comedy in the contemporary world. Readers may regret that Donian tends to overtheorize gender and undertheorize race. Readers may also regret that Donian treats humor—and laughter—as a side note throughout her study. Indeed, by the end of the book, there seems to be one eternal, unshakeable truth that Donian uncovers, perhaps unintentionally, and that cannot be disputed, which is this: when we take comedy seriously, we make it far less funny.