

JESTERS, JOKES, AND LAUGHTER: THE POLITICS OF HUMOR IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Conference at the Munk Centre for International Studies, Toronto, March 16–18, 2006. Jointly organized by the GHI and the Joint Initiative in German and European Studies (Toronto). Additional funding provided by the DAAD and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (Cologne). Conveners: Martina Kessel (University of Bielefeld/University of Toronto), Patrick Merziger (Free University of Berlin), Dirk Schumann (GHI).

Participants: Vincent Brook (California State University, Los Angeles), Christie Davies (University of Reading), Modris Eksteins (University of Toronto), Eileen Gillooly (Columbia University, New York), Peter Jelavich (Johns Hopkins University), Jakub Kazecki (University of British Columbia), Peter Michael Keller (University of Zurich), Giseline Kuipers (Erasmus University, Rotterdam), Kaspar Maase (University of Tübingen), Monika Pater (University of Hamburg), Jan Rüger (Birkbeck College, London), Nicholas Sammond (University of Toronto), Kathleen Stokker (Luther College, Decorah, Iowa), Mark Winokur (University of Colorado, Boulder).

Comedy and laughter have long been perceived as anthropological constants, especially in fields like the philosophy of humor or the anthropology of laughter. Recently, however, historiography has come to view these phenomena as culturally specific forms of communication that themselves shape their temporal and social contexts. The content, structure, practice, and meaning of comedy and laughter are now understood to be historically variable. What is seen as funny, what is laughed about, what one is permitted and expected to laugh about, and who laughs with whom about what, all reveals information about a society or a group, while also affecting the society or group. Through comedy and laughter, social relationships are negotiated and society is constructed and shaped. The topic “Comedy and Laughter” at the same time opens up a realm that seems difficult for historical writing to address, as attested by the diffuse concepts involved, including mass culture, popular culture, or folk culture.

Historical works have long concentrated on the time period before the twentieth century, while film and literary studies, ethnology, sociology, and media and communications studies have been more concerned with current forms of comedy and laughter. Among historical works, the dominant approach has been that of Michael Bakhtin, who saw laughter as the expression of a primal folk culture that was then submerged in the

process of civilization. Accordingly, "subversion" came to characterize the dominant narrative for the twentieth century, thus presupposing an intrinsically oppositional function of comedy. Alternatively, commentators endowed comedy and laughter with a more negative meaning, viewing them as a sphere free of politics that nevertheless functioned to ease tension and prepare the public once again for the demands of the rulers.

The conference "Jesters, Jokes, and Laughter: The Politics of Humor in the Twentieth Century" looked for the social meanings of comedy and laughter beyond these descriptive approaches. The conference sought to bring together the results of previous efforts while also pointing out new ways to incorporate indisputably popular texts and practices. One important result of these efforts was the revelation of the important roles played by comedy and laughter in processes of inclusion and exclusion. In the course of the presentations and discussions, it proved useful to distinguish between the semantics of the comical and the practice of laughter. Participants agreed that it was necessary to bind comedy to its specific medium in order to explore the conditions and unique aspects of comedy in the various media and sectors of the public sphere, and to counteract the tendency to make assumptions about the timelessness of comedy and laughter.

In the opening presentation, Peter Jelavich examined the political and social conditions that caused jokes told by Jews about themselves to cease being harmless. In the process, he identified a striking difference between the *Kaiserreich* and the Weimar Republic. Before 1914, the comic theater of the brothers Anton and Donat Herrnfeld was very successful in bringing the cliché of Jews as another German tribe alongside Bavarians, Saxons, and Berliners to the stage without arousing protest or causing offense. Not until the Weimar Republic did the same jokes about Jews become a problem: The Central-Verein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens, the major interest group representing Jewish Germans, attacked cabaret performers for disparaging Jews. Jelavich interpreted the different reactions as a sign of relative cultural pluralism in the *Kaiserreich*, while the increased sensitivity in the Weimar Republic indicated increasing anti-semitism. This antisemitism now was seen in comedy itself: Many cabarets were exclusively devoted to staging Jewish clichés, and joke collections perpetuated stereotypes about money-grubbing and sexual deviance, stereotypes that were never applied to other groups with the same degree of negativity and aggression. Jelavich therefore suggested interpreting comedy, a part of popular culture, as a yardstick for social change. The jokes and cabarets reveal the ebb and flow of a latent anti-semitism that would otherwise be very difficult to track. Last but not least, they also had an impact on society in turn, in that they provided a vehicle for spreading antisemitism.

The presentation by Kaspar Maase used the case of World War I to test possible methodological approaches for researching comedy and laughter. He concluded from the increased production of joke magazines that the war had been a time of laughter. He cited the series *Tornister-Humor*, which was also oriented toward the civilian population, the humorous periodical *Der Brummer*, the title of which evoked the shells of the big Krupp cannons, and the extremely successful play *Immer fest druff* as examples of militarized forms of the comedic. Still, Maase advocated looking not only at these semantics, these military connotations, but also at laughter as a social practice existing independently from the interpretation of texts. Who can, may, and must laugh with whom can produce social formations that exist independently from the subject of the joke. Maase pointed out that the German populace's clear need for comedy and laughter could tell another story about the processing of the war experience that differs from the usual images of aggression and arrogance.

The next four contributions provided preliminary answers to questions about the meanings of comedy and laughter. The first presentation sought a more precise understanding of the subversive components of humor in war. Using Norway as an example, Kathleen Stokker presented a different interpretation of the so-called *Flüsterwitze*, or underground jokes, that have been repeatedly cited in order to construct myths of a popular resistance. By emphasizing the social practice of the telling of the joke, however, Stokker was able to interpret this kind of source in a new and productive way. She used underground periodicals to show that the relatively small group of active resistance members intentionally used jokes to advance their goals. Contemporary diaries demonstrate the prevalence of these jokes and their meanings for the populace. An eleven-year-old girl, for example, kept a diary of jokes, fully aware of the danger of doing so. These jokes were thoroughly conservative in content. Much more meaningful however was first the fact that information was passed on regarding the presence of the resistance, and second, that relating and listening to jokes were signs of a diffuse mentality of being different, indispensable for the work of the few active resistance members.

Peter Michael Keller examined a second popular myth, that of the cabaret as an institution where only the resistance-minded came together. The Zurich cabaret *Cornichon* is considered to have been a Swiss anti-fascist establishment during the Nazi era. Using stage photos, programs, manuscripts, and tape recordings for the period after 1945, Keller attempted to place the texts back into their contexts, a difficult undertaking because the situation of the performance seems to have been irretrievably lost. Nevertheless, he was able to uncover the multiple retrospective constructions and overlays of subversion. Thus the *Song of the Compromise*

of 1935 was an ironic depiction of Swiss particularism. From 1940 on, the ensemble sang it as an anthem to Switzerland. After 1945 the cabaret claimed that the song had been a battle song against National Socialism, and performed it accordingly. The cabaret thus adapted to the dominant Swiss self-representation of the times, not least of all because this sold well. Keller concluded by asserting that the political cabaret of the 1930s was an invention of the postwar era.

From these deconstructions of resistance legends, the presentations turned to the question of the forms and meanings of laughter and the comical in the era of the world wars. Jan Rüger emphasized the ambivalent interplay of popular comedic forms and political and military authority figures. Carl Braun was very successful at imitating the mannerisms, clothing, and voices of well-known personalities in Berlin cabarets and vaudeville shows. After Braun was censored by the authorities, he stopped imitating voices and was then able to recommence his parodies. On the one hand, these performances threatened to undermine authority by making politicians the butt of jokes. On the other hand, they could be understood as expressing and advancing the popularity of these politicians. Not only the meaning was ambivalent, however. Interested in popular entertainment, even if only as a censor, the government vacillated between seeking to satisfy the entertainment needs of the lower classes and seeking to control them. The laughter and comedy of this milieu thus became linked to the war effort, while also gaining acceptance and significance outside of the milieu.

Patrick Merziger, too, was concerned with the interaction between audience, producers, and the state. He advanced the thesis that the comedy of National Socialism is to be found in satires and caricatures if it is to be found at all. After 1933, National Socialist satire encountered resistance in the populace. The general public complained bitterly about satires at its own expense. At the same time, writers experienced satire as a paradoxical form that not only annihilated the opponent, but immediately brought him back into the dialogue. For this reason, too, satire and caricatures were unpopular. According to Merziger, the political meaning of comedy is not found primarily in the political satire of the time, but rather in its gradual disappearance. This disappearance prevented the social dissonances from being addressed while simultaneously rendering invisible the exclusions upon which National Socialism was built. Merziger interpreted the disappearance of satire as a sign of the desire of large parts of the populace to be able to live in a unified National Socialist community and to be able to forget about those persecuted under National Socialism.

The next presentations focused on laughter as a social practice, but were based on narrative sources. Jakub Kazecki found that memoirs of

the First World War went beyond polarized evaluations of the war to describe laughter as a social behavior in remarkably similar ways, whether in the works of Ernst Jünger, Erich Maria Remarque, or Walther Bloom. In these memoirs, laughter did not serve to ease the hardships of the front as official positions would have it, but was instead part of everyday life in wartime. "Laughing about" negotiated hierarchies that did not necessarily correspond to official hierarchies, "laughing together" created camaraderie, and "laughter at" produced exclusion. Laughter not only structured the social group of soldiers, however, but in this view also helped process the experiences and adapt to the new realities of warfare: According to Kazecki, a joke was often the response to atrocities and suffering of the populace.

Eileen Gillooly applied an otherwise little-noted distinction to the discussion about the social practice of laughter. Most presentations unquestioningly described comedy and laughter as a masculine practice. Gillooly pointed out that this is a traditional ascription traceable to the novels of the nineteenth century. All aggressive forms of comedy and laughter connote masculinity in western culture, while femininity is associated at most with empathetic humor and the mild smile. Authors like Jane Austen and George Eliot had internalized this cultural assignation, and their protagonists reproduced it. While Gillooly saw this distinction lose significance in the twentieth century because gallows humor or the grotesque were less marked by gender, she observed a renaissance around the end of the century, especially in the works of Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner, and Penelope Fitzgerald. This renaissance could be interpreted as an indication of the long life of these ascriptions. Because the protagonists' feminine humor is intentional and apparently appears as a deliberate quotation, it is also possible that it is recognized as an anachronism, thus again making it a comedic object.

Christie Davies and Giseline Kuipers addressed the actual telling of jokes. Davies viewed the ownership of jokes as an element to be used to reveal their meaning. The owner of a joke could be determined by searching for those who originated and publicized the joke. Jokes about Jews in Eastern Europe around the turn of the century were incomprehensible in their original form to non-Jews because the jokes played on special customs. Culturally transmissible versions were prepared by Jewish authors and publishing houses, leading Christie to attribute Jewish ownership to these jokes. By contrast, Davies described the Polish jokes that were popular in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States as jokes against Poles because these jokes did not address any uniquely Polish qualities, and the jokes were never adopted by Polish media.

Giseline Kuipers examined the changing meaning of ethnic jokes. She distinguished between a public based on media communication and

a public based on direct interaction. Her 1995 survey of Dutch students revealed that there was a unique, non-interchangeable joke script available for every ethnic group. The groups with the lowest social status were the targets of the most primitive jokes. At the same time, joke-tellers tended to combine ethnicities perceived as foreign into one group. In 2005 by contrast, the popular joke targets "Moroccans" were no longer broadly associated with Africa, and jokes played on cultural attributes rather than simply on associations with dirt. In 2005 a paradoxical situation intensified in that ethnic jokes were part of everyday practice, but there was no counterpart in the mass communications media. According to Kuipers, attitudes toward immigrants changed in public discussion in the Netherlands in the sense that coarseness actually became cultured. Still, jokes about immigrants could not be told because the subject was viewed as too sensitive.

The final presentations focused on the mass media. Mark Winokur used early-twentieth-century animation to show that in the field of comedy, too, technology could develop its own meaning independent from narrative. Rotoscoping, developed in 1914 by Fleischer Studios, involved projecting a motion picture on a screen and then sketching it frame by frame, producing an animated film. Thus original picture and overlay united to form a single image with an effect both grotesque and comical. To describe the resulting disturbing mixture, Winokur suggested the term "creolism." Two examples embodied this concept. The first was the cartoon hero Coco the clown, based on the white, Jewish David Fleischer but given African-American features during the animation process. The second, Betty Boop, is of indeterminate ethnicity. Thus this technique depicted ethnicities on the screen at a time when American society was marked by racism while tending to banish ethnic differences from the movies. These comic characters kept the suppressed present.

Monika Pater addressed programs containing comedic offerings and the political meaning and utility of these program structures. National Socialist radio broadcasters quickly realized that propaganda did not satisfy the needs of listeners and thus lent itself very poorly to direct political influence. Radio appeared more useful as a means to influence and organize moods. Pater described how the program was directed to the daily needs of listeners, for example with energetic music in the morning, which according to listener testimony promoted the punctual beginning of the workday. Production of laughter was held to be one means of shaping the week. Thus the program *Bunte Stunden*, 40 percent of which consisted of skits, was intended to put one in the mood for the weekend and to produce a sense of time well spent, irrespective of content. Pater claimed that it was precisely the constant repetition of subject and form that demonstrates that here the point was less the communi-

cation of new content than the recognition of the familiar. This was intended to create the feeling of security.

Vincent Brook closed the conference with a presentation regarding American sitcoms. In so doing, he took up the subject of the opening lecture, the Jewish joke, though in a completely altered social and media environment. Brook noted a trend beginning in the early 1990s toward Jewish characters in television comedies such as *Seinfeld*, *Will and Grace*, *The O.C.*, or *Friends*. *The Larry Sanders Show*, a satire on talk shows, also addressed the subject of "the Jew," but only in a few of its eighty-nine episodes. Still, according to Brook, the show demonstrates that the self-reflexivity successfully achieved by the medium of television now finds expression in comedy, too. Thus a main character converts to Judaism because of his love for a female rabbi, and the show takes up the cliché that Jews control the American media by having all employees successively reveal themselves to be Jewish. Brook saw in this self-reflexivity the possibility that at the end of the twentieth century, "the Jews" are again the owners of antisemitic jokes. This, together with the casual nature of the jokes, expresses the disappearance of much of the pressure of the problem and the increased acceptance of the Jewish in the United States.

The commentaries by Dirk Schumann, Modris Eksteins, and Nicholas Sammond, the closing commentary by Martina Kessel, and the lively discussion centered around general issues in the history of comedy and laughter in the twentieth century. The humorous in the broadest sense, it was revealed, is seldom a neutral phenomenon; it is far more meaningful than the absence of seriousness. Conference participants viewed as far more significant the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and the ordering and formation of community, that are produced or changed through the comical and in the act of laughter. Even and especially in modern societies, these cultural forms of communication serve as a "management of differences" (Sammond), whereby comedy and laughter have both a changing and a preserving effect, qualities simultaneously subversive and affirmative.

As a result, it should not be assumed generally that the social custom of laughter either created a homogeneous "community of laughter" or reflected the existence of "common people" whose laughter automatically set them apart from their rulers. During the conference, it became clear that the view of comedy and laughter per se as acts of "small subversion" required revision. Especially the presentations regarding National Socialism revealed that a large proportion of the populace actually led Nazi elites to portray the world in a harmonious, non-serious manner. At the same time, however, some presentations pointed to a specific laughter of the "common people" that was distinguished by its volatility

and spontaneity. At least in Germany, this kind of thigh-slapping laughter would have been impossible in the bourgeois theater, for example. The conference once again made it clear how difficult it is to situate the practice of laughter in historical perspective. The study of the places of laughter can help identify the different forms and meanings of laughter. Thus the Berlin cellar cabarets appeared on the scene as gathering places for social outsiders who experienced laughter as opposition regardless of the contents of the performances, while the Swiss cabaret of the 1930s with its lighter theater was only assigned this tension in retrospect. Despite their prescriptive or ascriptive nature, memoirs and novels also represent important source material. Further insights are offered by censorship attempts, books of etiquette, guides to public behavior, or even contemporary academic essays on laughter, which frequently pass along cultural value judgments. The final commentary noted an additional gap in research. Particularly in democracies, laughter plays an important social and political function. In parliamentary debates, for example, the level of communication often changes from seriousness to levity in order to conceal conflicts and to avoid the compulsion to argue.

Since Freud, the *Überwarter* of the comical, comedy has generally been granted the function of keeping the taboo present, of pointing out problematic areas, and delineating the non-normal. If one interprets comedy as an indicator for the non-normal, it is possible to use comedy to demonstrate social change: Sexuality in Western societies no longer possesses the same comedic potential as it did at the beginning of the twentieth century. Maintaining a critical stance on Freud, the discussion encouraged researchers to conceive of the comical in a more complex manner, and not simply as a simple reference to something suppressed. A practically unbroken continuity of misogynistic jokes is conspicuous: This could indicate the enduring nature of gender-specific hierarchical thinking. Furthermore, that which is no longer the subject of comedy could indicate a new stage of repression, although it was debatable if the disappearance meant an increase in exclusion or increased sensitivity. At any rate, it was striking that nearly all of the presentations touched on ethnicity as a problem area negotiated through comedy. Regarding current problems facing the world, the question arose regarding to what extent ethnicity overlaps with or is aggravated by religion. Certainly the highly charged nature of ethnic comedy and its overlaps with other semantic areas are important; for example, the connection of ethnicity with homosexuality or femininity. Put another way, numerous examples showed that ethnic comedy subliminally addresses other problems. Hence the numerous jokes about Jews after 1945 really address the Holocaust, while the Polish jokes really thematize class conflict.

The changing forms of the comical, perhaps even more than its content, represent another fruitful area of research. For example, it might be possible to reconstruct what Peter Jelavich termed “comedic landscapes,” trends in comedic form for particular epochs. This trend formation should by no means be viewed as a conflict-free process, however. Behind distinctions between serious and ostensibly non-serious social scripts, as well as behind debates about the appropriate comedic forms for a society, there are usually conflicts regarding interpretive authorities. Future research should address the entertainment industry as an actor with a preference for certain forms of comedy because of demands that comedic forms cater to the market, producing a high degree of homogeneity. The reconstruction of “comedic landscapes” revealed surprising transatlantic correlations, even though the conference was not originally intended to be comparative. Thus satire turned out to be equally unpopular in 1930s Germany and the United States of the 1950s, while National Socialism promoted the disappearance of public references to ethnic differences in the United States.

Martina Kessel and Patrick Merziger
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