

Punching up in Stand-up Comedy: Speaking Truth to Power (2023) Rashi Bhargava and Richa Chilana (Eds.) Routledge: Oxon, New York. ISBN 978-1-03226725-8

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Rashi Bhargava and Richa Chilana's edited collection *Punching Up in Stand-Up Comedy: Speaking Truth to Power* (2023) is a timely intervention on the role of humour in destabilising power, as witnessed in the current socio-political context. As I write this review, the recent uproar against stand-up comedians Kunal Kamra and Ranveer Allahbadia in India has barely subsided, making us ponder about the limits to free speech in a democracy. This book consisting of 12 chapters elaborates the growth and potential of stand-up comedy in different countries and cultures - Morocco, Indonesia, India, Finland, France to name a few. A long, exhaustive introduction not only allows us a glimpse of the many forms of humour and the various issues related to it namely, humour as creating belongingness and a sense of community, role of comedy in highlighting the gaps between lived realities and the promise of citizenship, the long digital life of political jokes and the blurring of the private and the public etc.

Among the many interesting ideas in the book is the idea of comedy as political communication and commentary on the state of society. Bassou and Krefting's piece explores the history and growth of stand-up comedy and charged humour in Morocco in addressing social inequalities, forms of religious dogmatism and other social ills like corruption and

systemic failures, though censorship and public backlash have often tried to control it. Comedy raises several meaningful debates as long as people are willing to engage with it though in contexts like Morocco, comedians have to be careful that they do not offend or shock. They have to be both provocative and sensitive in the way they engage their audience. However, the rising popularity of this platform in shaping the worldview, identities and behaviour of people raises hope, in ushering in social and economic justice. Similarly in societies like Indonesia, by Setyaningsih and Larassati traditional forms of comedy were used to criticise the privileged and powerful groups. Subsequently, comedy emerged as an important alternative medium for speaking up about politics, ethnicity and sometimes religion. The advancement of technology has further enabled the emergence of comedy as a booming industry through online platforms. Stand-up comedy serves several purposes such as releasing tensions arising in conflicts, or as a way of standing up for one's own ideals or even a form of disguised resistance.

While discussing the meaning and potential of humour, Keisalo says humour is difficult to analyse as it can be interpreted in different ways- much more than it being seen as either trivial or as a serious, potent form. In fact, claiming a single function for

humour is reductive. Humour provides a lens to understand the human condition in both its general and its particular aspects. However, social and cultural contexts shape how it is perceived. Since comedy as a form of 'semiotic action' allows for new inventions and challenges conventions, it can be seen as a tool for creating continuity and change.

Another interesting idea explored in the book is the interactional dynamics between the comedians and their audiences through 'affective arrangements' as expressed by Antti Lindfors. Stand-up comedy is looked at 'as a goal driven phatic labour' in an artificial setting, aimed at forging affective connections between the comedian and a group of strangers using a certain dynamics of the body. A certain potential awkwardness is central to such interaction. The non-normative body located at the intersection of gender, class, ability, race attempts to mediate and thus transforms stand-up comedy as an aesthetic, ultimately shaped by society and politics.

Comedy allows space for several submerged identities and attitudes to be foregrounded and yet it eclipses some other forms. Margherita Dore in an interesting piece portrays De Salvatore, a comedian who deploys humour in an innovative manner to talk about issues of disability and stigma associated with particular illnesses which runs in her family. This is not to elicit sympathy or pity, but with the intention of increasing awareness and enlisting people to participate in blood donation. Through her example, the author attempts to show how stand-up comedy can be used to persuade people to stand-up for a cause. Skillfully articulated, the use of humour in this case could be cathartic for the performer as well as a way of 'raising awareness among the public about genetic illnesses, 'challenging stereotypes about sick people' and 'fostering active social and political engagement.' (pg 230, 231)

Though comedy can be a form of release, its liberating potential is interrogated by Aju James in his piece 'Stand-up Comedy as Escape'. He argues that though stand-up comedy is seen as an art form associated with progressive politics, it remains silent, for example, on the issue of caste in India. Stand-up comedy has emerged as an aspirational goal among the youth in Mumbai, generally belonging to the upper caste, middle class background who perceive it as a space for escape, to articulate their difference and individualism in a mass society which is increasingly under the control of global capital and technology. Ironically enough this arena is sustained by the existing, dominant media infrastructures in the city and the privileged access to such global media

flows of urban youth in Mumbai, manages to invisibilise caste structures and world views. On a larger level, this erasure is indicative of an attempt to construct a new global identity.

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Rachel Blackburn's insightful and yet poignant piece on performative strategies dwells on the distinctive methods used by three stand-up comedians located at multiple intersections of identity (black, indigenous, persons of colour). This location allows them a different lens to view the social world as they navigate different national and cultural boundaries. Blackburn makes an interesting use of the idea of the 'contact zone' as a space where the conquered (i.e the racialised, gendered and such marginal subjects) speak in the voice of the conqueror (the dominant white people) by taking to strategies like code switching, using linguistic whiteface, tracing history forwards and backwards in time etc. to highlight the inequalities embedded in the societies in which they perform. While they enable the audience to recognise that whiteness is laced with racism, in doing so, these comics of colour seem to find their 'authentic' voice. What we don't get to see in the different contributions, is the perspective of the audience. Do these ideas leave a mark in the mind of the audience?

At the heart of the book is the idea that all comedy is political and collaborative, subversive and yet powerful. The potential of different forms of humour and its articulations reveals the disguised manner of resistance that it offers to dominant ideas and structures, both statist and socio-cultural. The figure of the comedian is that of a rebel, their actions attack, call out, hold a mirror and gradually erode our sedimented mindsets and world views, nudging the society towards change. This is what causes fear among those in power and invites reprisals. This book will be a valuable addition to the existing literature in sociology, politics, performance studies and media studies to name a few.