
H-France Review Vol. 16 (September 2016), No. 203

Pierre Serna, ed., *La Politique du rire: satires, caricatures et blasphèmes XVIe-XXIe siècles*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2015. 262 pp. 25€ (pb) ISBN 979-10-267-0073-9.

Review by Sara Beam, University of Victoria.

La politique du rire is a collection of essays, a work of *histoire engagée* offered as a tribute to the illustrators at the satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo* and others in Paris killed by radicalized Muslims in January 2015. *Charlie Hebdo* publishes satirical illustrations that mock all authority, including the dignity of the prophet Mohammed, in order to defend a sacred principle: freedom of the press. The killers also acted in accordance with a sacred principle: that those who mock and deride God (and by extension Mohammed) should be punished, even killed. These largely incommensurable worldviews clashed tragically that day and continue to do so. This volume explains why satirical laughter is a core French republican value. Its publication in the months that followed the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre was an act of defiance affirming the need to speak out and not be intimidated into silence by terrorism.

In the days after the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, 3.7 million people across France demonstrated in the streets, some of them carrying billboards with the slogan “je suis Charlie,” to express solidarity with the victims and to celebrate the right to laugh and live free in a democracy. Other Europeans, however, questioned whether the depictions of Mohammed published by *Charlie Hebdo* and other satirical journals were in good taste or were unnecessarily provocative. This volume is a scholarly reply to such questions. Only a month after the killings, the ten scholars published here first gathered for a *journée d'études* where they tried to understand what had happened and why. Produced quickly and in paperback, addressed to a broad French public, this volume seeks to map out how printed satire, political cartoons, and blasphemy shaped the history of the West. Its exclusively republican and post-Christian perspective gives the volume coherence but weakens its ability to make a lasting contribution to debates about how laughter might help resolve the problems facing Europe today.

Faithful to the principle that open debate produces truth, this volume offers a modest diversity of opinions regarding the bounds of laughter in the French republic. All the authors regret the loss of life in January 2015 and all affirm the principle of free and open debate, but each scholar draws on their expertise to add historical insight to our understanding of political and blasphemous laughter. Many of the articles are clearly based on the original oral presentation at the *journée d'études*: addressed to a general audience, written in an accessible style, and set explicitly in the context of the killings at *Charlie Hebdo*. Others refuse to make explicit reference to modern events and assume a high level of knowledge about French history from their readers. This unevenness is frustrating and compromises the stated aim of the volume to reach a general public. The authors also vary in their willingness to acknowledge the motivations of the killers and defend the caricatures published by the illustrators. All deplore violence and none blame the victims, but they raise important questions: should we laugh at everything? When is laughter an abuse of power? Should we expect violence when we laugh at what others consider to be as sacred as our right to laugh? Whereas some of the authors, such as Pierre Serna, Isabelle Brian, and Alain Cabantous uncritically celebrate the historical development of satirical laughter in the West, others recognize that

laughing at everything has its costs. Only one author, Pierre Verschuere, addresses the crucial issue of whether the relative cultural and social power of satirists in relation to those they mock should be taken into consideration when assessing the cultural role of laughter. And only a few, including Isabelle Pantin and Jean-Marie Le Gall, acknowledge the seriousness with which blasphemy was once taken in the West as a means to try to advocate for a more humane approach to satirical laughter.

Pierre Serna is the organizer of the *journée d'études* and the editor of the volume. His preface and introduction are impassioned defenses of the European tradition of political laughter and its fundamental role in the French republic. Serna offers a broad sweeping narrative of the political uses of laughter in Europe beginning in the Renaissance through to the solidification of the republic in the late nineteenth century. The usual suspects are highlighted—Machiavelli, Rabelais, Molière, Hogarth, as well as many anonymous satirists—in a triumphant narrative of reason over religious bigotry and political repression. No non-Western traditions of satire are acknowledged here. Together, Serna's texts are a *cri de cœur*, an unambiguous celebration of the freedom to laugh at everything, the result of a civilizing process that he is convinced is currently being undermined. He is deeply disturbed by the return of religious extremism and those who apologize for it. Political correctness and formal state-sanctioned censorship are, for Serna, the enemies of liberty and democracy. The killers in January 2015 were “fanatiques religieux” (p. 17) who demonstrated their “ignorance des codes de l'humour” (p. 24) when they killed people who were merely exercising their right to laugh. Serna's firm stance provides a solid anchor to the volume; while other contributors are much less strident and self-congratulatory in their defense of laughter, none of them challenges Serna's basic position.

In a very straightforward contribution, Isabelle Brian observes with horror that some Muslim preachers celebrated the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre as righteous. Her study justifies laughter as a counter-balance to this abuse of power and demonstrates how mocking clerics has a long history in Europe. Since at least the sixteenth century, French and English satirists often joked not only about the foolishness, hypocrisy, and ignorance of preachers but also about the basic theological doctrines they preached in ways that eventually fundamentally undermined the authority of Christianity in the West. Brian argues that laughter is an essential political tool in an era in which preachers advocate violence against the infidel.

Antoine de Baecque takes a very different approach and jumps forward in time to show how Henri Bergson's early twentieth-century study of laughter made analyzing humor a serious intellectual pursuit. Unlike Sigmund Freud, who understood jokes primarily in terms of individual psychology, Bergson stressed the social function of laughter, both the mechanical collective laughter produced by the physical gags depicted in early twentieth-century comic cinema and its ability to define insiders and outsiders. For Bergson, laughter was a civilizing tool, a means to train citizens and assimilate them to the political and cultural norms of the French republic. The ability to “get” a joke (rather than to be its butt) is a sign of cultural integration. De Baecque agrees with Serna that the French code of laughter is deeply embedded in a specifically republican tradition, but he is less sanguine about the “certain dose d'amertume” that is often hidden beneath its gaiety (p. 152).

Leslie Vuillaume's impassioned defense of freedom of speech in Egypt during the Arab Spring is the only piece that focuses on a non-European context. Based on research conducted for a documentary film about Egyptian graffiti artists between 2011 and 2013, Vuillaume shows how street art informed the public of contemporary political developments when a corrupt and silenced media sector was unable to do so. She points out how the artists played on a number of visual traditions, imitating Western satirical imagery and adapting classical Egyptian visual tropes in order to challenge the authoritarian regimes of both Hosni Mubarak and later Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi. Given the harassment, imprisonment, and deaths of many Egyptian activists, she concludes that graffiti is an essential means of fighting oppression. Vuillaume's analysis would have been greatly strengthened by an engagement with the question of blasphemy. None of the Egyptian images questioned the authority of God or of Mohammed. Implicitly, contemporary Egyptian graffiti reveals that targeted satire—against censorship and political

repression—can often be more effective than generalized insults that undermine values that most Egyptians hold dear.

Isabelle Pantin's thoughtful and well-balanced piece confronts the shock value of the sixteenth-century publications of François Rabelais, whose satirical works were condemned by the Sorbonne. She notes that some modern students are uncomfortable with the earthy grotesque humor of his novels: "pour eux, tout simplement, l'obscénité du texte était 'trop'" (p. 51). Pantin seems to share the distaste of her students and so instead analyzes a more ambiguous section of the *Quart livre* that mocks the papacy with gentle irony and even empathy. Making direct reference to the events of January 2015, Pantin acknowledges that shocking images can turn an audience off, and result in a wholesale rejection of valuable criticism. She advocates for laughter that provokes reflection, acknowledges the complexity of human motivations and actions, and judges without necessarily abandoning a fundamental generosity of spirit. Pantin's contribution reveals how a thoughtful engagement with the past can help us to think differently about our actions today.

Hervé Drévilion's contribution examines how military laughter in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France served multiple functions, including dehumanizing the enemy, releasing social tensions created by hierarchy and social difference, and even mocking royal policy. Military humor could be brutal and was often necessary in order for soldiers to survive the psychological and physical hardships of military life. Nevertheless, some proponents of military jokes expressed the need to rein in some kinds of humor, including the outright mockery of specific individuals in the interests of saving one's skin. Drévilion highlights the inherent ambivalence of laughter: that it can both defuse violence and provoke it, hence the need to deploy it responsibly. He hesitates, however, to draw explicit parallels between the eighteenth century and today when the French find themselves at war with a very different kind of enemy.

Laurent Bihl's study of *belle époque* satirical illustrations of women being ritualistically abused investigates the bounds of humor and the costs of laughter. He argues that in the West a culture of one-upmanship exists in which illustrators and satirical writers continually push the boundaries of good taste in order to increase revenues, to critique hypocrisy, to thumb their nose at censors, and/or to vilify enemies during times of war. Without addressing the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre directly, Bihl suggests that reducing the cultural function of caricature to a defense of freedom of speech simplifies the ways in which shocking images both critique and promote the behaviors they depict. Unlike Serna, who sees a clear distinction between the right to depict violence in illustrations and the illegitimate murder of illustrators, Bihl asks whether our manifest interest in transgressive and often violent images is itself self-destructive.

Pierre Verschuere explores how the long tradition of student practical jokes played out at the École Normale Supérieure between 1945 and 1971. While most student laughter was directed at other students or professors, at times Normalien jokes turned political, most notably during the constitutional crisis engendered by the 1950s war in Algeria. Verschuere carefully distinguishes between the intellectual freedom to explore ideas at the ENS and the social function of student laughter. Following Pierre Bourdieu, Verschuere sees laughter as a means of social distinction: the Normaliens embraced the aristocratic tradition of sprezzatura, a mocking rejection of a culture of seriousness, to cement their social and intellectual superiority. Verschuere concludes that the laughter of the Normaliens was often cruel and akin to "le ricanement du proverbial renard libre dans le poulailler libre" (p. 214). Verschuere does not address contemporary events directly, but his analysis encourages us to reflect on the power relations embedded in laughter. The inclusion of articles willing to acknowledge the relative position of cultural privilege of the *Charlie Hebdo* illustrators and the structural discrimination and disadvantages faced by much of the French Muslim population would have been very welcome.

Jean-Marie Le Gall's article about the role of laughter during the Renaissance and the Wars of Religion in France pushes the reader to reflect on one's civic responsibility to liberty but also to fraternity. Le Gall analyzes how sixteenth-century French Protestants and Catholics laughed at one another in ways that

often turned violent, resulting in assault, mass murder, and civil war. He acknowledges the potential for violence at the heart of all belief systems and takes seriously the claims of the killers at *Charlie Hebdo* that they were doing so to defend God. But he also celebrates the fact that the Renaissance revived the texts of Cicero, Quintilian, and Aristotle who argues for moderation in laughter; Renaissance authors Erasmus and Montaigne value laughter that points out vices but does not condemn whole nations outright. Celebrating freedom of the press as a cornerstone of the French republic, Le Gall nevertheless questions whether “cela signifie un soutien au droit de tout caricaturer” (p. 94). Le Gall refuses, however, to develop this idea more fully.

Alain Cabantous ends the volume with a contribution that explores the tensions between laughter and religion and their frequent incommensurability. Cabantous emphasizes that the illustrators at *Charlie Hebdo* were not only laughing at authority but also, from the perspective of a devout Muslim, rendering “ridicule et vulnérable ce qui pour lui est intouchable” (p. 253). Cabantous reminds us that, within the Western tradition, blasphemy was punished with death until the late seventeenth century. Only after over a century of religious violence between Protestants and Catholics did Europeans come to accept that public ridicule of personal faith could be tolerated. Cabantous concludes that in the West religious faith has been replaced by a faith in laughter: “notre sens du rire est vital, donc sacré” (p. 258). Cabantous, like Serna, celebrates that the West has progressed beyond religious fanaticism and he clearly judges the terrorists as misguided killers who failed to recognize that laughter is necessary to discover truth.

Taken together, these articles do an excellent job of articulating the important and ambivalent role that laughter plays in French society today. When the French demonstrate together after the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre or more recent attacks to express their determination to fight for their way of life, one of the key principles they embrace is the right to laugh. Laughter is an essential democratic tool that promotes a relatively free exchange of ideas, exposes abuses of power, and protects the rights of citizens. This volume clarifies why the illustrators at *Charlie Hebdo* were willing to risk their lives in order to public inflammatory images of the Prophet Mohammed.

But there is a pressing need for more, for a frank discussion about the role of laughter in a globalizing world where national borders are increasingly porous. Hundreds of thousands of refugees are arriving in Europe, many of them people of faith who do not embrace the culture of laughter so clearly articulated in this volume. Several of the authors here question whether derisive laughter is socially useful, but they hesitate to offer concrete suggestions about how to redefine the bounds of laughter in a re-confessionalized world. Can we temper our laughter without sacrificing too much?

In all societies, even democracies where freedom of speech is protected, there are silences and things we cannot bear to hear or see. As Socrates’s trial and execution in classical Athens long since taught us, there are always limits to freedom of speech. In France, Holocaust denial is illegal and the religious freedom of Muslim women to wear a niqab in public spaces is denied; in my homeland of Canada, one cannot legally possess child pornography and many Westerners would agree that depicting the physical abuse of the disadvantaged is not funny. Acknowledging these limits to laughter and to freedom of speech in the West is as important as defending the right to laugh at authority. This useful and provocative volume of essays initiates a discussion that urgently needs to be expanded to include the many French citizens who do not find satirical depictions of the prophet to be acceptable. A more robust debate that acknowledges the current diversity of French attitudes to laughter would be a true act of defiance that might actually weaken the appeal of radical Islam.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Pierre Serna, « Avant-propos »

Pierre Serna, « Introduction »

Isabelle Pantin, « Rabelais et ses papimanes: outrance comique et signification politique »

Jean-Marie Le Gall, « Rires et violences religieuses à la Renaissance »

Hervé Drévilion, « Le rire du sergent: rire, violence et sociabilité dans le monde militaire sous le règne de Louis XIV »

Isabelle Brian, « Le rire du prédicateur: de Tallemant des Réaux aux *Predicatoriana* de Gabriel Peignot »

Antoine de Baecque, « Rires contemporains, révoltés et libres! de Bergson à la place Tahrir »

Laurent Bihl, « Pince ou pique-sans-rire. Le vieux loufoque est-il comique? »

Pierre Verschuere, « Le rire de la vieille dame: humours, sciences et politiques rue d'Ulm de 1945 à 1971 »

Leslie Vuillaume, « *Street art* et révolution en Égypte: le rire au bout de la Révolution »

Alain Cabantous, « Le rire et le blasphème: remarques sur un couple improbable »

Sara Beam
University of Victoria
sbeam@uvic.ca

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172