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**Conflating Studies of Political Humour Discourse  
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## **Conflating Studies of Political Humour Discourse and Popular Entertainment Culture**

Villy Tsakona, Diana Elena Popa (eds.). 2011. *Studies in Political Humour*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

The premise laid out in the introduction of *Studies in Political Humour* describes humour as a set of antagonistic forces: one force seeks to destabilise the political status quo by pointing to alternatives; the other force counters with a reinforcement of dominant views and puts value on social stability. Overarching questions are about what happens when these two forces clash; for example, whether they point researchers toward a need to discuss the basic nature of political systems rather than contemporary particularities, and if political humour is an effective means to achieve and rate sociocultural change in society. As a result, political humour remains a problematic instrument of critique in political discourse.

According to Tsakona and Popa, the inherent ambiguity of political humour also explains why researchers in the field tend to focus on either the subversive or reinforcing side rather than putting both in dialogue with each other. The editors attempt to bridge this gap. Their examples are case studies from specific national contexts across Europe, which rely on tools from discourse analysis and performance studies and input from media such as television and theatre. The conclusion is that in political humour seriousness usually wins out over absurdity, leading ultimately to an equilibrium or “stabilisation of conflict”.

The book is divided into three parts. Each part contributes to a shared understanding of political humour. Chapters two, three, four, and five focus on the ways in which politicians use humour to engage their opponents outside the rules of “serious” discourse. Ralph Müller describes in chapter two how German parliamentarians laugh at and not with each other to draw boundaries between factions. Argiris Archakis and Villy Tsakona, and Marianthi Georgalidou respectively, discuss the role of humour in Greek politics as a strategy of conflict management in chapters three and four. In chapter five, Marta Dynel presents a study on superiority humour. She analyses verbal attacks in political debates airing on Polish broadcast television.

In part two, chapters six, seven, and eight deal with political humour produced by the media and individual artists for public entertainment. Engaging society in politics via political satire is the main point. Diana Elena Popa, for instance, elaborates in chapter six on the benefit of an animated television series for the budding democracy of post-Communist Romania. In chapter seven, Clare Watters investigates Silvio Berlusconi’s satirical impersonation by comedian Sabina Guzzanti. Efharis Mascha traces the tradition of European anti-fascist

humour in chapter eight. All three find that political humour can serve to undo constraints on public amusement, which were put in place by the political establishment.

Part three includes chapters nine, ten, and eleven. Here, discussions seek to gauge the usefulness of political humour in measuring change in society and the political climate. In chapter nine, Liisi Laineste argues that Estonian ethnic jokes and their adoption into the country's political rhetoric point to a shift in the national demographic. Vicky Manteli follows with an insightful analysis of the containment of radical voices via humorous theatre in chapter ten. Chapter eleven serves the editors as a final note in lieu of a separate conclusion. Tsakona and Popa end the book by stressing the varieties of political humour, which researchers have yet to explore.

On the whole, *Studies in Political Humour* is well rounded. The book guides both expert and general readers through a range of discussions about political humour. The applications, functions, and limitations of political humour and the difficulty of using it to communicate values and positions between parts of society become especially apparent in the concluding remarks of Tsakona and Popa. Extending the editors' reflections would come in handy here as a starting point for further study in national environments. Those interested in the political dimension of humour and European politics will find the book a very helpful resource.

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Research interests: cultural studies, European migration, interdisciplinary approaches to humour.

Benjamin Nickl: Review on *Studies in Political Humour*. 2011.  
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