Special Issue Article

The politics and aesthetics of humour in an age of comic controversy

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Abstract
In this introductory article to a special issue on 'the politics and aesthetics of humour', we argue that today in the Global North, humour forms a heavily debated topic, which is deeply embedded in political struggles over who are included and excluded in post-9/11 nation states. Under influence of the recent shift from post-politics to hyper-politics in the European and Anglo-American public sphere, we observe a *repoliticisation of humour.* To understand how humour in this cultural conjuncture is related to processes of power distribution and contestation, a cultural studies approach is needed. We outline the following four main characteristics of such an approach: (1) it studies humour in the plural, as a set of cultural and aesthetic conventions embodied in practices that are not guided by one grand social or political function, (2) it seeks to understand how humour is embedded in relationships of power, and contributes to the negotiation, contestation and maintaining of social hierarchies, (3) it looks specifically at the form and style of humour, its aesthetics and how on this formal level, political meaning is created and (4) it contends that, while humour often purposefully creates confusion and ambiguity, through its rhetorical and aesthetic operations it also has the ability to foreground particular interpretations, thus making the meaning of comic utterances less undecided than is often claimed.

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'To me, humour is sacred. It is the only thing I really take seriously', says Dutch comedian Theo Maassen at the beginning of his comedy show *Vankwaadtoterger* (*Frombadtoworse*) (2017). The show premiered in 2016, one and a half years after the fatal attacks on the headquarters of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, and was the eighth solo performance of this popular comedian, who stands at the top of the Dutch comedy scene since the mid 1990s, and is commonly known for his provocative humour and blunt jokes (Zijp, 2017).

The central premise of this show is that Maassen wants to make at least one good joke about the prophet Muhammad. This premise gives Maassen the opportunity to make many jokes about Muslims (and, although more hesitantly, some jokes about the prophet), and to create a strong opposition between 'us' and 'them', secular western societies such as the Netherlands on one hand, and Muslims, in particular, immigrants with a Muslim background living in those societies, on the other hand. By adopting this rhetoric of a 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 1996), Maassen aligns himself with a conservative populism that has been on the rise in the Netherlands since the early 2000s (Oudenampsen, 2020; Zijp, 2017, 2019). Although Maassen has long been considered a left-wing comedian and his transgressive humour has been characterised as ironic and ambivalent (Donkers, 2012; Rovers, 2011), he has increasingly defended his privileges as a white male comedian who has the 'right' to joke about marginalised social groups such as Muslims, women and gay people.

This example is illustrative of three broader points regarding contemporary comedy. First, in spite of his many jokes, Maassen adopts quite a *serious* tone in his performance, which is representative of an increasing blurring of boundaries between debates *about* comedy and comedy as an art form. Maassen not only wants to make jokes and entertain the audience, he also wants to take a position in the discussion regarding the desirability of disparaging humour targeted at minorities. The same can be said of British and American comedians such as Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle who have devoted almost entire shows to defending their freedom to make jokes about marginalised groups, especially targeting trans people. As a result, comedy has become more defensive. It is in this light that we should understand Maassen's sanctification of humour ('To me, humour is sacred'), which is not merely an attempt to provoke Muslims and defend white male privilege, but also an expression of how high the stakes are for him when it comes to his 'right' to make disparaging jokes about marginalised social groups on stage.

Second, for Maassen, humour is bound up with *political* questions about freedom of speech and religious (in)tolerance. By reiterating the familiar trope of the humourless Muslim (Ervine, 2019; Kuipers, 2011), Maassen uses humour as a weapon to divide and draw boundaries between political and religious communities. He thereby reinforces a liberal 'humour regime' (Kuipers, 2011) according to which the ability to 'take a joke' is valued as an important characteristic of a secular public sphere. As Giselinde Kuipers has demonstrated, this regime has been mobilised by critics to stigmatise and 'other' Muslim minorities in the West who are supposedly not able to laugh at themselves, even when jokes at their expense mirror 'global inequalities' (Kuipers, 2011: 71). Moreover, opportunities to laugh along or 'strike back' without losing dignity are not evenly distributed and are harder for marginalised groups (Kuipers, 2011, 2015b).

Third, and paradoxically, the blurring of boundaries between comedy and public debate in our example forecloses rather than enables a serious discussion about the politics of humour, that is, the way humour is bound up with social hierarchies and relationships of power. We are not supposed to question Maassen's point of view, because that would mean we 'de-sanctify' humour, that is, make it subordinate to other concerns, like human dignity. For Maassen, humour is thus something to be protected from dangerous outsiders, not something that should be subjected to further reflection and debate.

Although we do not share Maassen's nationalist populism, we do agree with his first two claims – that humour is serious, and that humour is political – while we strongly disagree with the third, that humour is beyond critical evaluation. In this introductory essay, we argue that the politics of humour need serious study. We do not believe that humour can be reduced to a single political value – such as the freedom of expression – but claim that humour is always political in the sense that it is embedded in relationships of power, and contributes to the formation of identities. As such, humour is an important topic area in cultural studies (Holm, 2017; Kuipers, 2015a; Lockyer and Pickering, 2005).

In what follows, we will first situate the project of this special issue within a wider context. We will demonstrate that Maassen's claims about humour are part of a broader trend in the Global North, which we describe as the *repoliticisation of humour*. We argue that humour and comedy increasingly take part in the power struggle over who is included and excluded in the post-9/11 nation state. Next, we will argue for a cultural studies approach to humour to analyse the politics of humour in the present cultural conjuncture. Finally, we will point to common threads and themes in the contributions to this special issue.

The repoliticisation of humour in the early-21st century

Although humour has always been political in the sense that it is predicated on the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion and bound up with social hierarchies, the extent to which the political nature of humour is acknowledged and debated depends on its historical and cultural context. In the past decennia, the political context of humour's production and reception in liberal democracies has changed considerably. The 'post-political' consensus of the 1990s and early 2000s (Mouffe, 2005) has been followed by an era of 'hyper-politics' (Jäger, 2021), which marks the re-entry of politics to the public sphere, but on different terms to those familiar to us from 20th-century mass politics. According to Anton Jäger, in the era of hyper-politics, political conflict increasingly plays out in the form of public controversies on social media.

What we call the *repoliticisation of humour* needs to be understood against the backdrop of this shift from post-politics to hyper-politics. As Giselinde Kuipers has demonstrated, in recent years, we have witnessed the rise of increasingly transnational 'humour scandals' (Kuipers, 2011), from the Muhammad cartoon crisis to the recent controversy around transphobic remarks made by Dave Chappelle in his Netflix comedy specials (Romano, 2021). This marks an important shift in social attitudes towards humour. While humour scandals are not a new phenomenon, in the post-political world of the 1990s and early 2000s, the idea that humour does not have serious political effects was more

widespread in both humour scholarship and public debate. This attitude characterises the 'positive humour movement' (see Billig, 2005b and Lewis, 2006 for excellent critiques of this trend). It can also be recognised in the work of the much-cited folklorist and humour scholar Christie Davies (2011), who famously argued that 'Jokes are a thermometer, not a thermostat; they provide an indication of what is happening in a society, but they do not feed back into and change or reinforce the social processes that generated them in any important way'. (p.248). In recent years, such blatant denial of the political and social effects of humour, for which humour scholars have provided strong empirical evidence (Boukes, 2019; Ford and Ferguson, 2004), has been replaced by the acknowledgement that humour can be used as a political weapon.

We witness this repoliticisation of humour throughout the Global North, in countries as varied as the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands (Dahl, 2021; Ervine, 2019; Goltz, 2017; Ödmark, 2021). A recurring trend in the ideological battles around humour is the supposed loss of freedom of the white heterosexual male comedian and the construction of two common enemies: Islam and social justice movements. The Muhammad Cartoon Crisis in the spring of 2006 was a landmark of the construction of Islam and Muslims as the enemy. Twelve cartoons on Islam and the prophet Muhammad in a conservative Danish newspaper led to global controversy and protests from Muslim communities worldwide (Kuipers, 2011). Among the media who reprinted these cartoons was the French satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo*, which was sued for doing so by two leading Muslim organisations in France. The journal won the case. Five years later, in 2011, the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo* were destroyed by firebombs when the journal announced an issue that was supposedly guest-edited by the prophet Muhammad. Events would turn even more dreadful when on 7 January 2015, 12 staff members, including editor in chief Stéphane Charbonnier, were shot to death by the Kouachi brothers, who said they acted in the name of Al Qaida (Ervine, 2019).

The Danish cartoon controversy and the successive attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* established the idea that humour is 'under siege'. Comedians like Theo Maassen felt called upon to act as self-proclaimed protectors of the freedom of speech. In doing so, they reinforced the popular conservative frame of 'the crisis of multiculturalism' (Chin, 2017), the idea that Muslim migrants are a problem to secular societies like Denmark, France and the Netherlands, because of the supposed incompatibility of the norms and values of these migrants and those of the 'native' inhabitants of these countries.

More recently, the supposed besieging of humour has also been connected to the rise of social justice movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. British comedy icon John Cleese, for example, has claimed repeatedly that 'woke cancel culture is killing comedy' (Zindulka, 2020) and currently works on a television series around this subject (*The Guardian*, 2021).[1] In his view and that of others, holding comedians accountable for the racist or sexist implications of their jokes, which has become more common since the advent of the aforementioned movements (e.g. Nieuwenhuis, 2020), is a slippery slope. It would make comedians more wary of uttering certain jokes and would punish those who refuse to hold back by 'cancelling' them. However, the myths of self-censorship and 'cancel culture' are in contradiction with a comedy industry that thrives on transgressive jokes which fuel rather than destroy careers (Aroesti, 2021).

Hence, these are straw man arguments, used to silence critique or debate on humour that reinforces negative stereotypes.

While we do not agree that a critical engagement with the politics of comedy leads to censorship, it is important to stress that our aim here is not to take part in what Paul Lewis has dubbed the 'edgy-jokes-lead-to-angry-criticism-and-countering-defensive-moves dance' (Lewis, 2006: 6) or in 'declaring allegiances in some sort of winner-takes-all conflict or pretending to be some form of all- knowing adjudicator sent from the academy' (Holm, 2016: 111). Rather, the controversies we are witnessing today have a longer history and require a deeper theoretical and historical understanding of the many faces of humour and the uses to which it has been put. Hence, our aim is to contextualise and historicise the social and political role of humour across case studies set in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Nazi-Germany and the United States, thereby specifically focusing on the aesthetic dimensions of comedy.

Humour and comedy research

Two strands of research have informed this project, in particular: humour studies, most notably the sociology of humour, and critical comedy studies.

Traditionally, humour research has been the domain of philosophers, psychologists and (socio-)linguists, and – although to a lesser extent – of sociologists and anthropologists (Raskin, 2008). While dispersed thoughts and speculations on humour can be found in the western philosophical canon from Aristotle to Bergson (and beyond), the multidisciplinary study of humour in a more rigorous and empirical vein only started in the 1970s, and was formalised in 1989 with the organisation of annual humour conferences under the umbrella of the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS; Carrell, 2008).

For the purposes of this special issue, the sociology of humour is most helpful, because it emphasises that humour is always embedded in social relationships, and plays a role in the negotiation of those social relations and hierarchies (Kuipers, 2008, 2015a, 2015b; Mulkay, 1988). In this, it differs from psychological studies of humour, which focus on humour as a personality trait or measure the psychological effects of humour (Ruch, 2008), as well as from linguistic humour research, which limits itself to verbal or text-based humour, and takes the joke as the primary unit of analysis (Attardo, 1994; Raskin, 1985). As Nicholas Holm argues in his contribution to this issue, building on sociological work by Giselinde Kuipers, reducing humour to jokes, as traditional humour research is wont to do, is to ignore the complicated aesthetics of humour, of which the joke is only one – and arguably an outdated – manifestation. Holm explains that, with the rise of mass media technologies and a thriving comedy industry, humour is 'increasingly characterised by a high degree of formal diversity and complexity'.

By demonstrating that humour fulfils many different social roles, and cannot be pinned down to a single meaning or function, sociological research has also challenged philosophical studies of humour, which have long tried to find humour's 'essence'. Classical examples are the oft-cited 'superiority' theory of humour, according to which all humour is the expression of a feeling of superiority over another human being (Morreal, 1987), or Bergson's account of humour as a social corrective (Bergson, 2011 [1899]).

While sociological, anthropological and folkloristic humour research has mostly focused on the use of humour in everyday social interactions and has conceptualised comedy as itself a form of social interaction (Brodie, 2014; Scarpetta and Spagnolli, 2009), in recent years, humour has also been taken up as an object of serious study within media and cultural studies. Here, an emphasis is placed not on spontaneous humour in everyday social interaction, but on mediated humour or comedy, for example, cartoons, film and stand-up comedy (Lockyer, 2016). The surge of interest in comedy among media and cultural scholars was marked by the establishment of *Comedy Studies* in 2010, an academic journal dedicated to the study of comedy.

The second strand of research that has shaped our project is a particular branch of comedy studies that has been described as 'critical humour studies' (Weaver, 2011: 8) or 'critical comedy studies'. Both in traditional humour studies and in comedy studies, a strong emphasis has been placed on the beneficial psychological and social effects of humour: humour has been celebrated for reducing stress, fostering mental and physical health, releasing social tensions, expressing our shared humanness, challenging the status quo and speaking truth to power (Critchley, 2004; Eagleton, 2019; Gray et al., 2009; Jones, 2010; Raskin, 2008; Warner, 2007). Here, scholarly accounts of humour echo many commonsensical ideas about humour as a positive social and political force, and have been slow to develop more critical approaches.

Critical comedy studies disagrees and seeks to redress this balance. The term 'critical comedy studies' was first used by Sharon Lockyer, founding director of the Centre for Comedy Studies Research (CCSR) at Brunel University London, but it is a helpful term to refer to a broader strand of comedy research that has emerged in the past 15 years, and reflects a growing interest in the 'dark side of humour' (Holm, 2018; Kuipers, 2008: 382). In particular, scholars have paid attention to the way comedy is bound up with social hierarchies and the formation of cultural identities, for example, in studies of (anti-)racist humour (Billig, 2005a; Pérez, 2013; Weaver, 2011), comedy and disability (Lockyer, 2019), gender and (anti-)feminist humour (Han and Kuipers, 2021; Kypker, 2021; Proulx, 2018) and humour and class (Friedman, 2015; Kuipers, 2015a; Weaver, 2022). Also, the popular idea of political satire as necessarily anti-establishment has been questioned (Higgie, 2017; Nieuwenhuis, 2018). While the research in this strand comes close to what we discuss here as a cultural studies approach to humour, thus far no attempt has been made to outline what such an approach might look like.

A cultural studies approach to humour

To understand the politics of humour and comedy in the present cultural moment, a cultural studies approach is needed. We will highlight four important characteristics of such an approach.

First, a cultural studies approach does not reduce humour to one cultural style or genre, but studies humour in the plural, as a set of cultural and aesthetic conventions, styles and genres which vary with cultural and historical context. Adopting such an approach means moving away from sweeping statements about the politics of humour. In humour research, there has been a tendency to make general claims about the politics of humour without taking into account the specific cultural and historical context in which humour is performed.

In particular, many scholars have made crude distinctions between 'progressive' and 'conservative' humour, often normatively framed in terms of 'true' (progressive) versus 'false' (conservative) humour (e.g. Critchley, 2004; Zupančič, 2008).

That this line of thinking is widely embraced across humour studies is demonstrated by two much-cited studies, which adopt otherwise different perspectives and come to opposite conclusions, but share a tendency to abstract from humour's concrete cultural and historical manifestations. In his *On humour* (2004 [2002]), philosopher Simon Critchley argues that 'true' humour offers 'a form of liberation or elevation', but that 'most of the best jokes are fairly reactionary or, at best, simply serve to reinforce social consensus' (Critchley, 2004: 9, 11). In an awkward move, Critchley both acknowledges and denies the existence of reactionary humour by claiming that most humour is reactionary, but that this is not 'true' humour. Doing so, he performs what Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, in their critical reading of Critchley, have called an 'illogical conflation of taste with ontology' (Berlant and Ngai, 2017: 241–242). This conflation of taste with ontology is made most explicit when Critchley, at the end of his book, opposes reactionary humour to what he calls 'my sense of humour', which is a form of humour that throws doubt upon 'the dominant common sense' (Critchley, 2004: 90).

Michael Billig's (2005b) *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour* seeks to criticise this type of humour research, which reproduces the personal aesthetic and ideological preferences of the researcher. Although Billig's argument is based on empirical evidence from socio-psychological research, his counter-thesis that humour is cruel by nature, and mostly functions as a social corrective, similarly abstracts from culturally and historically specific manifestations of humour. Like Critchley, Billig (2005b: 202, 207) draws a crude distinction between what he calls 'disciplinary' and 'rebellious' humour. In a next step, he complicates the distinction by arguing that while humour might feel liberating, it often reproduces the social order, thereby implying that 'true' humour is conservative. Thus, both authors promote a one-sided understanding of humour and abstract it from the concrete social and cultural contexts in which humour is performed.

Second, a cultural studies approach seeks to understand how humour is embedded in relationships of power, and contributes to the negotiation, contestation and maintaining of social hierarchies. Such an approach is in line with British cultural studies, which has challenged the elitist project of humanities scholarship and its definition of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said' (Hall, 1980: 59). The Birmingham school has redefined culture as a site of political struggle and contestation and broadened the scope of cultural scholarship to include popular culture and everyday social practices (Williams, 1961). Given the popularity of comedians and the recent repoliticisation of humour, we consider comedy to be an important example of such a cultural practice where power relations are negotiated, contested and reaffirmed.

By taking humour seriously as a set of cultural practices embedded in social hierarchies and power relationships, we depart from the tendency, both in humour scholarship and public debate, to think of humour as a necessarily subversive cultural practice, which speaks truth to power (Gray et al., 2009; Jones, 2010). While humour can certainly function that way, it does not necessarily do so. The popular image of the comedian as a truth-teller who opposes the powers that be is based on a traditional notion of power as

concentrated with the state. In cultural studies, alternative conceptions of power have been put forward, drawing from Marxist, feminist and poststructuralist theories, among others (e.g. Butler, 1988; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; McRobbie, 2009). The Gramscian notion of hegemony has been especially influential, as it highlights the importance of culture as a site where relationships of power are negotiated and maintained through a 'central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values, which are not merely abstract but which are organized and lived' (cf. Gramsci, 2011; Williams, 1973: 9). A cultural studies approach to humour helps to analyse how hegemonic cultural practices and social hierarchies are maintained or contested through comedy. This is especially urgent since, as Sophie Quirk has argued, the idea that comedians necessarily oppose power, but do not exercise power themselves, is still widespread in both the comedy industry and society at large (Quirk, 2018).[2]

Third, to understand how power is negotiated, contested and reinforced through humour, it helps to pay attention not only to the content or targets of that humour, but also to its form and aesthetics. In often-explosive public debates on humour, little attention has been paid to form and style. As Dustin Bradley Goltz (2017) argues,

> In the current cultural climate where comedy is so often at the center of controversy, too often we engage comedic work as if it were parallel to political speech. Rather, from an aesthetic communication and performance approach, the political workings of comedy involve much more complicated processes than merely 'what was said'. (p.6)

In political communication research as well, humour has often been reduced to its explicit messages or targets (Baym and Jones, 2012; Boukes, 2019).

In cultural studies, style has long been an object of interest (see, for instance, Dick Hebdige's classic work on subculture: Hebdige, 1979). In the past decades, humour has been a growing concern for media and cultural studies, and in line with this, scholars have increasingly paid attention to questions of comic form and style (Davis, 2003; Kuipers, 2015a [2006]; Lewis, 2006; Shifman, 2013). This special issue builds on recent work, in which authors have more explicitly tried to theorise comic form and style in relation to wider social and cultural relations, analysing what they have called the 'rhetoric' (Weaver, 2011, 2022), 'political aesthetics' (Holm, 2017) or 'dramaturgies' (Bala and Zangl, 2015) of humour. This often interdisciplinary research combines close reading methods from traditional humanities with a cultural studies approach in which comic form and style are analysed in historically and locally specific cases and related to broader political concerns. As Nicholas Holm (2017) puts it: 'Such a political aesthetic approach involves wedding a wider sociological perspective to an aesthetic reading that attends to the formal qualities of texts and the political opportunities afforded in their production and interpretation' (pp.14–15). In his contribution to this issue, Holm further elaborates upon this approach.

While this issue leaves room for different approaches to humour – including an anthropological approach as taken by Quirk – most contributors present close readings of comic styles, and analyse how these styles acquire meaning within the broader historical and cultural contexts in which they have been developed and performed. Doing so, this special issue complements existing work in comedy studies, which places a stronger emphasis on production and reception (Lockyer, 2016).

Finally, we believe that a cultural studies approach which is concerned with the politics of style helps to move away from too strong an emphasis on the polysemy and ambiguity of humorous texts. In media and cultural studies, there is a tendency to treat humour as slippery, elusive and open-ended. In line with this, many recent studies have taken an audience and reception approach, relying on the idea that the meanings of humour depend on audience interpretation (e.g. Tomsett, 2018; cf. Sehmby, 2013). From a cultural studies perspective, culture is indeed understood as negotiated and contested. In the context of humour, which often purposefully creates confusion and ambiguity, it seems especially wise not to make bold claims about the definite meaning of humour. However, this does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid, or that humour is merely subjective. Humour is not, by definition, polysemic (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, 2014: 981). Rather, analysing the rhetorical and aesthetic operations of humour can help to demonstrate how particular interpretations are foregrounded, even in situations when humour plays on ambiguity. In her contribution, Veronika Zangl demonstrates how German and Dutch authorities during the Second World War exploited the ambivalences of humour to win the population for the National Socialist cause.

Three common threads

The five articles in this special issue all respond to the question of how humour as an aesthetic form and practice, bound up with specific sociocultural contexts and ideological frameworks, does political work. This results in a variety of interpretations of what humour's politics entail. Despite the different emphases in the contributions in this issue, some common threads can be observed.

All five papers share a powerful counternarrative against an overly simplified idea of comedy's inherently liberating or progressive powers. While none of the authors denies that humour can, in some contexts, have subversive or emancipatory qualities, each in their own way seeks to correct the overly optimistic image of comedy as the ultimate watchdog of liberal democracy and antidote to authoritarianism. Nicholas Holm's contribution shows how an anarchic and nihilistic style of American comedy that used to have a liberating and emancipatory potential at its conception in 2001, in later years developed into a dominant cultural mode and lost its radical potential. Ivo Nieuwenhuis' contribution to this issue on the style and rhetoric of the popular Dutch satirical TV-show *Zondag met Lubach* makes clear that the ideological messages conveyed by this show are usually much less radical and progressive and much more centrist and consensus-seeking, compared to the reputation the show has garnered among critics and the general audience. Dick Zijp's paper questions the political validity of the 'anti-mass' rhetoric of two prominent Dutch comedians from different generations. In Sophie Quirk's contribution on British comedy clubs that, as she calls it, 'platform marginalised identities', the common-sense idea that the only thing that truly matters for comedians is whether or not they have the 'natural' quality to make the audience laugh, is held up to scrutiny. Veronika Zangl's article probably forms the most powerful contestation of the narrative of humour's inherent 'positiveness'. She shows how comedy was used to implement totalitarian and antisemitic Nazi ideology in the Netherlands under German occupation between 1940 and 1945, thus countering the popular claim that humour and totalitarianism are mutually exclusive.

A second thread in this issue is formed by the idea that humour can build political communities. Quirk discusses this idea from an institutional perspective, looking at the way in which comedy clubs that platform marginalised identities can contribute to such a process, and as such function as a productive site of 'prefigurative politics'. Zijp and Zangl, however, look at political community-building on the aesthetic level. The Dutch comedians studied by Zijp evoke a negative image of the political community in their work, by picturing all forms of community-building as pro-totalitarian. The case discussed by Zangl gives an example of an imagined political community that actually is totalitarian, thus showing that community-building is not intrinsically progressive either.

Third, the relationship between comedy and the liberal consensus of the post-Cold War West forms a recurring concern throughout the issue. It plays a pivotal role in Nieuwenhuis' analysis of the aesthetics of *Zondag met Lubach*, which shows these aesthetics to be characterised by a strong depoliticising tendency, whereby politics is reduced to a matter of technocratic problem-solving. The anti-mass attitude of Zijp's comedians also reveals a liberal conception of politics, in which the individual forms the locus of critical thought, and hence of political change. Within the British context studied by Quirk, liberalism reappears in the meritocratic ideas about the art of stand-up comedy favoured by many working in the industry. In all three cases, humour is shown to be not necessarily left-wing or at least not as radically left-wing as is sometimes believed (cf. Quirk, 2018).

All in all, the papers collected in this special issue present in-depth and contextualised readings of the politics and aesthetics of humour and comedy. In an age of comic controversy, where humour has become at the centre of cultural and political debate, and the slow and attentive reading of comic texts is the exception rather than the norm, we believe this to be an important task for cultural studies.

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Notes

1. The criticism of 'woke cancel culture' is the most recent manifestation of the much older debate on humour and 'political correctness', which dates back to the 1980s (Lewis, 2006).

2.   Quirk argues for a Foucaultian notion of power, according to which power is not concentrated with the state or emanates from a symbolic centre, but is disseminated throughout society as a network of relationships (Quirk, 2018).

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