

BOOK REVIEW – *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust*, edited by David

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Is there any space for comedy in tragedy? For years, comedians and audience members alike have grappled with the balance of pushing the envelope while remaining respectful – a line as fluid and ever-changing within popular culture as the jokes themselves. More and more, comics such as Chris Rock claim that growing “PC” or political correctness culture has made showrunners and entertainers “scared to...make a move” or take risks with fear of retaliation. This debate was made even more relevant with the recent altercation where Will Smith hit Chris Rock at the Oscars over a joke that seemingly went “too far” (Velasquez, 2021). While already a hotly contested subject, the relationship between comedy and tragedy only becomes more convoluted when the tragedy extends beyond the individual and into an entire community. With instances such as slavery, 9/11, and genocide, jokes on these topics can come off as crass, disrespectful, and a betrayal to the legacy of the victims, creating a hesitancy when approaching these events with anything other than melancholy. For these reasons, the book *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust* caught my eye. As the event that gave genocide the moniker the “crime of all crimes,” the Holocaust is a universally recognized stain on global history – a designation that seems to demand a solely somber and bleak attitude in relation towards it. Editors David Slucki, Gabriel Finder, and Avinoam Patt, however, beg to differ. In *Laughter After*, comedy related to the Holocaust is reframed from a means of degradation and disrespect to not only a form of resistance, but also an act of healing that grants space for both victims and perpetrators to reconcile and seek out hope.

With contributions from a variety of scholars, *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust* examines the relationship between comedy and catastrophe as it traces the history of humor within the context of the Holocaust and redraws the boundaries of ethical and respectful representations of the

tragedy. The essays compiled for *Laughter After* are split into two categories: “Aftermath,” which traces the historical use of satirical anti-fascist songs and storytelling during WWII, and “Breaking Taboos,” which focuses on the contemporary usage of humor in relation to the Holocaust. The juxtaposition of the time periods explored throughout both sections works in tandem to push forward the central argument of the book: Humor and the Holocaust do not exist on disparate spectrums but have historically and can presently coexist. This argument is multi-pronged and shifts among chapters with authors such as Marc Caplan (2020) seeing Holocaust satire as a form of “revenge humor” that enabled the Jewish living amidst and after WWII to seek vengeance without violence, while Jarrod Tanny (2020) describes Holocaust humor as a gateway to larger debates about how to commemorate atrocity and how such commemoration impacts survivors and their families.

While offering a generally positive outlook on the relationship between comedy and the Holocaust, *Laughter After* does not ignore valid concerns about the weaponization of Holocaust-related humor, especially amidst a more politically fractured modern-day society. With the rise of online “meme culture” and trolling, the book acknowledges the possibility for Holocaust humor to act as modern-day propaganda to increase the ranks of the alt-right while reframing manifestations of fascism as jokes (Slucki et al., 2020, p. 7). While a small addition, the inclusion of this counterpoint demonstrates the nuance present throughout the entirety of the book as the contributors do not negate the magnitude of the Holocaust, but instead use historical evidence to demonstrate how the memory of the Holocaust can be preserved through different mediums.

As opposed to solely relying on theoretical frameworks, *Laughter After* delves deep into existing scholarship and primary sources such as songs and television to examine the relationship that humor and the Holocaust have shared over decades. Across the various time periods and examples highlighted throughout the book, one of the lasting themes is the role of class distinction in formulating Holocaust humor, exemplified by use of the Yiddish language. In one of the most compelling chapters, David Schmeer (2020) details the life of Dutch-Jewish dancer and mime artist Lin Jaldati, a survivor of Auschwitz who utilized satiric Yiddish songs in her performances both pre- and post-WWII. Prior to WWII, the Yiddish language was a tool to satirize patriarchal Judaism and traditional conservatism, as Yiddish was considered a more plain-spoken language in comparison to Hebrew. However, the use of Yiddish satire post-Holocaust took on a more symbolic meaning, as this language of Eastern European Judaism represented the “remnants of a destroyed culture and [the] cultural reflections of a downtrodden people” (Schmeer, 2020, p. 60).

Not only was this information unknown to me, but it expanded the discussion of the Holocaust outside of merely “Germans versus Jews” thinking into a more nuanced discussion of class relationships and power dynamics. With controversial topics like the Holocaust, the quality of the joke depends not only on the content itself, but also the comedian because power dynamics are central to whether humor is seen as derogatory or as a communal recognition of past trauma. The discussion of Yiddish as a linguistic medium in this essay shows a recognition of the role power can have in comedy as use of the Yiddish language strips away the superiority and thus disrespect that Holocaust jokes told in English or German might have. Schneer’s (2020) description of Lin Jadatai’s performances also noted the multicultural nature of her music, since she used Yiddish songs but also German folk songs, allowing German audience members to join in the singing and gain a feeling of absolution for wartime guilt. This perspective of healing stretching beyond the immediate Jewish community and into the larger global perspective was a powerful point as it drove home the message of humor as a form of reconciliation.

In Jordana Silverstein’s (2020) chapter on third-generational Holocaust humor, she considers the work that humor can do as a method of encountering the tragedy while simultaneously easing the trauma of memories. But are those outside the affected community deserving of such comfort? The book hedged on this point frequently as the focus largely remained on the internal Jewish community, but as contemporary media becomes more accessible and the world becomes more interconnected, this discussion of humor and the Holocaust must extend further into the general populace. It is important that the prioritization of Jewish voices persists, since the healing that can occur on a global level is moot if the affected population is pushed to the background of their own narrative.

Overall, *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust* broached a difficult topic with earnestness and understanding, noting that comedy can be a tool for community building and resistance. In terms of larger take-aways on political correctness and where “the line” exists within comedy, this book demonstrates that difficult or tragic subjects can be made humorous but require good intentions. Critics of so-called “cancel culture” oftentimes exist outside (or even have social or economic dominance over) the demographic which the joke focuses on, a dynamic that prevents humor from being seen as a communal experience versus an authoritarian mockery. As comedians continue to push the envelope, *Laughter After* reminds us of the human victims that still exist today and the importance of respecting their legacy, even through laughter.

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