

Global Dialogues

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***Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* by Michael Billig**

Mostafa Abedinifard

Billig, Michael. *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. London: Sage, 2005. 272 pp. Print.

To review a book seven years after its publication is unconventional yet may become necessary, particularly when a good book has received questionable reviews. This is the case with Michael Billig's *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. This review therefore involves critique of some earlier reviews of Billig's book, in addition to highlighting some underappreciated aspects of that polemic, which I regard as especially promising for the comparative study of humour across cultures.

Laughter and Ridicule stages an argument for the largely overlooked – yet central – role ridicule occupies in social life. This vital role, Billig argues, has been “textually repressed” in prevalent popular and academic psychological studies of humour, which manifest what Billig thoroughly critiques as “ideological positivism,” an ideologically motivated system of demarcating humour into desired positives and ignored negatives. Using a New Historicist methodology, Billig contextualizes and critically re-reads the three most famous humour theories of *superiority*, *incongruity* and *relief* alongside Bergson and Freud, highlighting these writers’ treatment of ridicule as a “form” or “aspect” of humour (22, 196, 200). Contrary to the claims of past reviewers,¹ Billig is meticulously careful not to conflate laughter, ridicule and humour. During his analytical and deconstructive explorations, Billig’s main concern – triggered by ideologically positivist studies’ disregard for ridicule – is the relation between humour and serious life, and “why humour is to be found universally in all cultures” (5). By emphasizing research that reveals the unnaturalness and rhetoricalness of laughter and humour, and especially building upon the humour and sociological theories of Bergson, Freud and Goffman, Billig proposes that humour, in the form of ridicule, plays a *necessary* role in maintaining social order. In this argument, the disciplinary function of humour is vital, since the prospect of embarrassment-causing ridicule acts as an internalized social control strategy that causes us to follow the course of social life (201-02). Given such a state of affairs, I remain shocked by Mike Lloyd’s claim that, “in short, no clear argument emerges from the book” (138). Likewise, considering the clarity and definitiveness of Billig’s arguments concerning the social significance of ridicule and the universality of humour, Thomas Scheff’s moderation of Billig’s arguments remains inexplicable: as paraphrased by Scheff, Billig’s book makes “the point that the humour involved in ridicule *might be* important in social systems. Although [Billig] doesn’t press the point, he *implies* that it may even be a universal component in all cultures and historical eras” (222-23; emphasis added).

As demonstrated throughout *Laughter and Ridicule*, the disciplinary function of humour, or its relation to embarrassment, is no new discovery in itself;² although, Billig’s thorough focus on this function and relation is unprecedented. This renders Nancy D. Bell’s comments misguided when she asserts that others have linked ridicule with social control (509). Still, despite Billig’s modesty (202), his argument for the necessary role of ridicule in maintaining social order is novel in humour theories and a substantial contribution to sociology and psychoanalysis. Billig’s theory furthers previous attempts to explain social agents’ motives for compliance with societal codes and removes doubts about the significance of humour as a serious sociological topic (Davis 327-30, Kuipers 361) by showing that “an understanding of humour is necessary for understanding serious social life” (Billig 4-5). Moreover, by emphasizing “the place of [parental] ridicule in the social development of children” (201), Billig supplements the sociological dimension of Freud’s repression theory. These significant aspects of Billig’s argument remain ignored in previous reviews.

In his seemingly overly ambitious claim to universality and hence necessity, Billig is well aware of his “leap of imagination” towards “an overall social theory of humour” (126), “a universal theory” (237) which necessitates his “taking the risk of theoretical exaggeration” (126). Contrary to Simon Weaver’s suggestions (576), Billig’s aim is not to provide typologies of particular humour. Likewise, contrary to the claims made by Jerry Palmer (87) and Lloyd (137-38), Billig analyzes enough examples for his arguments (he mainly re-reads other scholars’ examples). However, he also calls upon others to examine particularities of humour in contemporary culture (8). Reviewers have rarely appreciated this call for further research, which Lloyd (at the end of his review) implies is welcome (138). Christie Davies is blatantly antagonist toward Billig. Making use of his influence in the journal *Humour*, Davies writes an unusually long review, throughout which he derisively attacks Billig’s person, turning the review into a most discourteous and pompous pseudo-scholarly piece. Rather than presenting a coherent argument, Davies’ remarks simply ridicule a series of Billig’s alleged faults. Davies demonstrates little interest in seriously conversing with Billig: he mocks him, tries to be facetious or downgrades Billig’s statements, for example, by repeatedly asking, “So what?” (206, 209). One of Davies’ most graceless derisions puns on the German compound *billige Witze* (207), meaning *cheap jokes*. He thoughtlessly labels Billig “crassly ignorant” (205) and “perverse” (207) – comments which reveal blind fury. Davies’ ridiculing review is itself ample proof of the disciplinary function of ridicule. Ironically, the review works to refute Davies’ own superficial hermeneutic in which “jokes are first and foremost jokes” (Davies qtd by Billig, “Comic Racism” 30) – an illusion which Billig decisively shatters (*Laughter and Ridicule* 210, “Comic Racism” 29-31). That Billig’s critique of Davies’s maxim is never mentioned by the latter indicates a significant absence. Instead, Davies, much of whose oeuvre comprises joke analysis, attacks a straw man by outlandishly misrepresenting Billig as

opposing research on jokes (207). Davies probably misinterprets Billig's discussion about the eighteenth-century thinkers' disinterest – as opposed to modern researchers' interest – in discussing jokes (66-67). Davies must know about Billig's research on jokes.³

Despite this criticism, Billig's main argument inspires interesting questions for comparative research focused on the relation between humour and social structure.⁴ Social structures, such as gender, can be studied through Billig's theory, which raises the question: what is the relation between humour and gender order? Since "all societies have cultural accounts of gender" (Connell, *Masculinities* 67), accepting Billig's argument requires that some systematic cluster of humour revolve around societies' gender orders. Gender order is "the historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of masculinity and femininity" (Connell, *Gender and Power* 98-99). Studying examples of mainstream gender jokes in different cultures reveals the predominantly gender-policing role of such narratives in maintaining what Thomas Gerschick calls "hierarchies of bodies" (373). Other forms of gender humour also illustrate the disciplinary and normalizing power of ridicule. This condition is observed in diverse instances from Plato's deeming the prospect of women and old men taking exercise naked to be ridiculous and funny (161), to the traumatic ridicule of Ancient Judean Jewish athletes for their circumcised penises (Glick 31), to Ubeyd Zākāni's derisively cutting the penises of "ashamed" lovers who "can't get it up" on their first dates (320), to such contemporary Western sitcoms and commercials as *Two and a Half Men*,⁵ "Miller Lite" and "Old Spice." Aside from the disciplinary functions of ridicule in mainstream gender humour, "rebellious" humour such as feminist humour has also been shown to have unsolicited pro-gender hierarchical effects.⁶ This tendency confirms Billig's sub-argument about the disciplinary functions of rebellious humour. Despite Palmer's discontent with this sub-argument (88-89), demonstrating humour to be truly subversive is difficult. Unfortunately, as Billig observes, "in the world of late capitalism, the enjoyment of mass-marketed rebellious humour directly aids the economic structures that have produced such enjoyment" (212), structures which are already based on "gendered accumulation process[es]" (Connell, *Gender* 80-81).

Applying Billig's theory to gender humour also helps to explain why, despite their cultural specificities, different societies may enjoy not only similar humour themes, but also the same humour texts: because of overlaps in the gender orders of such societies. For example, the fact that we have sexist jokes in many cultures can be explained by the dominantly patriarchal gender orders of these societies. Such an understanding could extend Billig's argument about the simultaneous universality and particularity of humour, as it explains why we may have universal (gender) humour capable of arousing laughter across cultures.

I would like to conclude by discussing yet another misreading of Billig, whose use of irony has apparently caused some reviewers to interpret him as being (almost) anti-humour, or arguing against (the positives of) humour and/or laughter.⁷ This interpretation may be due to Billig's ironic references to being "anti-laughter" (1), "anti-humour" (9) and "humourless" (33). No cautious reader, however, will be deceived into thinking so; Billig warns readers against such a misreading (11, 242). He praises some uses of ridicule (11) and practices irony throughout the book. His acknowledgments page reveals his appreciation and practice of humour, and his first and last paragraphs display brilliant irony. Billig's opening of his book with self-deprecating humour is not accidental, considering his justified concerns about the ethico-political aspects and unsolicited effects of much humour. As is also suggested by a reference to his wife in the acknowledgments, Billig wants us to care for *the serious within the humorous*, which might otherwise remain unrecognized amidst the abundant, sometimes reckless, uses of humour by us all. Assuming the risk of being perceived as anti-laughter and anti-humour is necessary when critiquing the irksome pro-laughter and pro-humour presumptions prevalent in much humour research. Such presumptions, among other factors, might have prompted the substantial misreading of Billig's book. As inferred from Billig's polemic, I understand his critique of humour to be a vigorous invitation to change our *serious* world as a prerequisite for changes in our humour.

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Bio

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1. See Nancy D. Bell (508), Christie Davies (206), Mike Lloyd (137-38) and Simon Weaver (576).
 2. See Christopher P. Wilson's *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function*, chapter 12.
 3. See Billig's articles, "Comic Racism" and "Humour and Hatred."
 4. See Michael Mulkey's "Humour and Social Structure."
 5. See Elizabeth F. Hatfield's "What it Means to Be a Man: Examining Hegemonic Masculinity in *Two and a Half Men*."
 6. See Janet Bing's "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?"
 7. See Davies (207-08), Lloyd (136, 138), Palmer (88), Scheff (223) and Moira Smith (496).

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