

BOOK REVIEW

PERMITTED LAUGHTER

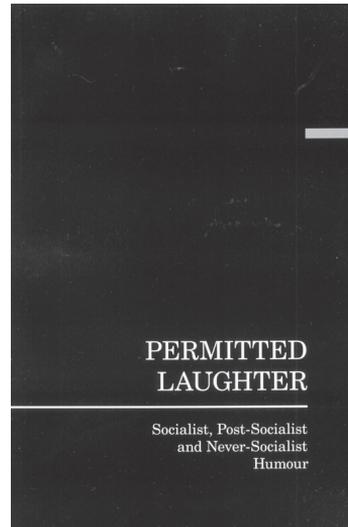
Permitted Laughter. Socialist, Post-Socialist and Never-Socialist Humour. Edited by Arvo Krikmann & Liisi Laineste. ELM Scholarly Press, Tartu 2009. 406 pp.

Humour is a phenomenon of great interest to scholars specializing in various fields: linguists, folklorists and psychologists, to name but a few. It can be discussed in many perspectives, being analyzed from a variety of angles¹. The book reviewed contains papers focusing on the contemporary Eastern European humour, mostly discussing the genre of joke in the post-socialist region.

As stated in the *Foreword*, “the book emerged from the papers originally given at the international symposium organized around the theme of post-socialist humour. The conference was held in January 2007, Tartu, Estonia and hosted by the Estonian Literary Museum” (p. 5). A number of Russian and Eastern European humour scholars, the majority of whom were folklorists, were invited to discuss the development of humour in their countries “accompanying the transition from socialism to post-socialism, the interplay of continuity and change in this process, and their vision for the future directions in researching humour in different societal contexts to complement the studies done mainly in Western scholarship” (p. 5)².

The book is composed of twelve papers: one of general character, not depicting a particular country, followed by eleven papers, the authors of which give insights into humour practices in given countries, i.e. Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Bulgaria, Russia. As editors point out, “the authors draw eclectically on diverse intellectual traditions, ranging from sociology to folkloristics, from close historical-cultural analysis to descriptions of specific category of jokes and their targets” (p. 5–6).

The aim of the first paper, *Post-Socialist, Socialist and Never-Socialist Jokes and Humour: Continuities and Contrasts* by Christie Davies, is to indicate problems connected with studying jokes’ humour of post-socialist societies, which involves comparing them with “the much larger and more distinctive body of jokes generated under socialism and with the humour of societies that have never been socialist” (p. 17). The nature of socialism is discussed briefly, so that the character of socialist jokes could be presented. The author draws attention to the fact that it is much more difficult to define a post-socialist society, as even the term *post-socialist* is problematic. Political jokes and humour, in never-socialist and in socialist countries, are discussed and exemplified. Another issue presented in the paper is the presence of socialism in post-socialist humour, which differs greatly from one post-socialist country to another.



Special attention is paid to the case of jokes and humour under post-socialist failure, such as the New Russians joke cycle of the early and mid-1990s. The German case is also analyzed and Ossi-and-Wessi jokes are discussed. The phenomenon of Russian real and humorous uniqueness is explained. Finally, the question regarding the crisis of post-socialist jokes is tackled. The author concludes by saying that “it remains to be seen how the joking of post-socialist societies develops in a world that is far more global and yet far less homogenous than that of socialism” (p. 34).

The first paper dealing with Estonian humour and jokes, *Political Jokes in Post-Socialist Estonia (2000–2007)*, written by Liisi Laineste, gives “an account of contemporary Estonian political jokes, most of all their general characteristics, possible sub-categories and popularity in recent years, focusing on Internet jokes” (p. 41). The author presents how local and global events are reflected by means of political jokes, “how well jokes mirror social reality, what forces are behind the joke targets in different societies, and how this is expressed in political / ethnic jokes [...]” (p. 50). The jokelore of post-socialist Estonia is used as research material, composed of 854 jokes from the category of political humour (2000–2006; the Delfi portal). A quantitative analysis was performed to count the frequency of jokes during the period chosen. Domestic and foreign politicians are common targets of post-socialist jokes. Unmodified Soviet jokes are also told by Internet users. The research shows that political jokes are found attractive by Internet users, political humour being a common way of discussing occurring changes.

The focal issue of Arvo Krikmann’s paper entitled *Finnic and Baltic Nationalities as Ethnic Targets in Contemporary Russian Jokes* is to discuss selected nationalities as ethnic targets in Russian jokes. According to the author, in the post-socialist period the number of ethnic butts has increased in Eastern Europe. Jokes have moved from oral tradition to the Internet and Internet jokes have developed a synonymy of ethnic butts. The following joke sources on the Internet can be distinguished: static context-free, static context-bound, dynamic context-free, dynamic context-bound. Taking into account similarity of plots and motifs connected with them, the four target characters of Russian jokes can be divided into two clusters: the Finnic (Estonians, Finns) and Baltic (Latvians, Lithuanians). The characteristic attributed to Finns and Estonians is slowness, as the author states, “not very salient among the universal features of the objects of ethnic mockery” (p. 86) – closely associated with ASEXUALITY, DUMBNESS and LANGUAGE DISTORTION. The constituents listed as well as others often appear in one and the same joke. The political relations between Russia and the Baltic states, are “only quite modestly represented” (p. 91) with a relatively small number of motifs and all issues discussed are exemplified with well-selected examples of jokes.

The paper titled *Hybrid Entertainment Television: Viewership of the Lithuanian “Dviracio Sou”* by Jūratė Kavaliauskaitė discusses hybrid entertainment television and patterns of its viewership, basing on a Lithuanian television programme “Dviracio Sou” which combines sketch comedy, political satire and spoof news. The author also states that “the discursive ambiguity of hybrid entertainment television makes it relatively open to a variety of readings and modes of pleasurable experiences” (p. 99). An empirical qualitative audience research was conducted, so that a scope of motives to watch the programme could be revealed. The perceptions of humorous, intertextual

and non-fictional elements were also described. The typology of the viewership of the programme at issue was proposed.

The aim of the paper *Polish Jokelore in the Period of Transition* by Dorota Brzozowska is “to show the main tendencies of script changes in jokes that were popular in Poland at the beginning of the 21st century” (p. 127). The corpus of over two thousand jokes from various sources (books, press texts, brochures, Internet websites, oral circulation) is analyzed. The author discusses changes connected with the situation in Poland after 1989 and the fall of communism. The three most numerous groups of jokes are examined in terms of their contents and development, i.e. political, ethnic and sexual jokes. The first group, the one of political character, is composed of the prototypical Polish jokes. The ethnic jokes analyzed have the Russians, Germans, Jews, and Americans as their targets. Jokes about manners are also discussed using the example of jokes about women, with the author paying attention to jokes in the contemporary journalistic context as well.

The paper, *The “Szkło kontaktowe” Show – A Return to the Old Irrationality?* by Władysław Chłopicki, discusses a Polish satirical television daily show with a view to accounting for “a new phenomenon in Polish humour” (p. 171), using multiple media-presenting since 2005. The author attempts to relate it to the notion of post-socialist humour. Favourite humour-evoking strategies of the hosts and guests are discussed. The selected examples from the show, analyzed in the paper, illustrate how some form of post-socialist humour is present. The author concludes that “Polish political humour may be argued to be partly post-socialist, although its appreciation is limited to middle-aged and older Poles, [...], and even within this group the “non-socialist” type of humour, deprived of such open references tends to prevail” (p. 181).

Stanoy Stanoev’s paper entitled *Totalitarian Political Jokes in Bulgaria* presents “an overview of the most popular themes and plots of the Bulgarian political jokes under socialism” (p. 185). The themes discussed are: the risk of telling jokes in non-democratic regimes, totalitarian social differentiation, presidential figures and everyday life absurdities. The author concludes that jokes offer adaptive strategies, helping people to cope with difficult reality. The existence of political jokes “contains valuable information about the processes characterizing the particular reality in which the jokes were told and re-told” (p. 204).

The Origin of the Anecdote: “Mukha Tsokotukha [The Buzzing Fly] Submitted for Consideration to Soviet Rules” by Sergey Neklyudov discusses one anecdote about Stalin, probably based on actual events that took place in the 1920s, published by A. Krikmann³, “The State Leaders criticize the poem *Mukha-mukha, tsokotukha*”, which appears in several variations. The first version of the anecdote at issue was recorded in 1983, with its thematic source being the story of persecution of Chukovsky’s tales in the 1920s. The interrelation between historical reality and the narrative mechanics of anecdote is demonstrated by the story as well as by the version in which Chukovsky is replaced by Mikhalkov. The replacement of the former with the latter, a plagiarist and a cynical writer of the Soviet hymn he kept changing according to political demands, changes the message conveyed by the anecdote at issue.

Elena Shmeleva and Alexey Shmelev’s paper titled *Contemporary Russian Jokes: New Cast of Characters*, describes the recent trends observed in Russian jokes. The

author focuses on new joke targets, such as: New Russians, Estonians as well as other groups, including drug addicts, computer programmers and public figures, for instance several politicians. Understanding topical jokes, i.e. jokes which comment on the events widely discussed in the mass media, relies heavily on background knowledge, and new jokes' cycles are also discussed. According to the authors, "there are characters in newer joke cycles who were completely unfamiliar with the Soviet jokelore" (p. 228), such as New Russians, Yeltsin and Putin. The second category is composed of characters present in old jokes, but not very popular, for instance, Estonians, programmers and drug-addicts.

The metamorphosis of Russian political humour from the 18th century literature to the present-day folklore is examined by Alexandra Arkhipova. Her paper, *On the Formation of the Russian Political Anecdote: From Peter the Great to Putin*, contains the analysis of a joke which was told as early as in the 18th century as a 'true story' about Russian Emperor Peter the Great. The evolution of the story is shown: it evolved into a joke about Stalin, later, into a joke about Leonid Brezhnev, to be told as ones about Putin, Bush and Chirac. It should be emphasized that the plot of the joke has not changed over centuries; yet, as the author states "one and the same plot may incorporate different outlooks depending on the historical era" (p. 244).

The other paper written by Arkhipova, *Traditions and Innovations in Putin Jokes*, contains a presentation of a corpus composed of 195 jokes, encompassing 136 joke-types, collected in the period from 2000 to 2008 from various sources, such as: the Internet websites, the newspapers (central as well as provincial) and oral communication. The Putin jokes are analyzed in terms of being new or old and the analysis shows that about 75% belong to new-joke types, with the rest being composed of 20% jokes of the Soviet era and 5% jokes of the post-Soviet era. The grouping of old and new joke-types is presented in thematic categories. Linguistic analysis of Putin jokes covers the following aspects: interplay of the formal and colloquial speech registers in Putin's idiolect, the usage and decomposition of idioms in Putin's spontaneous speech, demetaphorization in Putin jokes, clichés and idioms in jokes about Putin, his speech in jokes with a special focus on the violation of Grice's Maxim Quantity.

Mikhail Lurie's paper, titled *Soviet Children's Humorous Folklore: the Techniques of the Comic*, is composed of three short essays, devoted to one children's humour folklore genre each. The genres chosen, borrowed from the adult folklore and incorporated into the children's folklore, are: children's jokes, parody poems, sadistic rhymes. The first of the genres to be discussed is the joke in which several motifs are presented and exemplified. Parodies and remakes "come into being as a result of the remaking of some existing literary and literary-musical texts" (p. 341). Some poems, which are realizations of the genre at issue, imitate the individual style of a given author in a comic way with some comic imitations focusing on "the style and intonation of the Russian lyric poetry of the second part of the 19th century – the beginning of the 20th century" (p. 342). There are also texts which reproduce particular works of literature in a pejorative way, so-called remakes. Children's songs are also parodied. The genre of 'sadistic verses', also called 'sadistic couplets', came into being at the end of the 1970s, early 1980s. The texts tell a story about a child or a group of children who become either victims, or perpetrators of crimes of killing or maiming.

The papers are followed by *Conclusion*, written by Liisi Laineste. To sum up, she lists four general aims intended to be met in the volume reviewed, the first of which is “to bring together two worlds of research that have existed separately for quite a long time: that is the entire versatile realm of humour research in Eastern Europe, and the ideas concerning the sociology and folkloristics of jokes in Western Europe” (p. 372). The second aim is to define the kind of humour prevailing in Europe after the 1990s. The third one consists in capturing the change occurring in a decisive moment. The fourth objective is to determine common points of interest among humour researchers in Eastern Europe as well as to outline future research targets. The next subchapter contains definitions of the following terms: post-socialism, Soviet and post-Soviet in the research material, globalization. Then three important issues of post-socialist humour, i.e. processes, features and functions, are presented. The last subchapter contains further research directions: to create an international Internet portal of contemporary jokelore, with as many post-socialist countries involved as possible and with an online platform for a dialogue; to analyze the compiled database; to “point at interconnections and dependencies between tradition and its cultural, political, demographical, and economic contexts” (p. 399), to present an overview of jokes expressing hate, intolerance or racism.

As Liisi Laineste states, “in the globalizing world, there is an increasing necessity to “know thy neighbour”, and alongside other things, to know their tastes in humour. In this respect, not much is known of Eastern Europe, the former socialist bloc”. It should be stressed that the volume reviewed fills the gap, giving the insight into humour in some post-socialist countries. The book contains papers written from different research perspectives, shedding light on various aspects of humour in the period discussed. They all contribute greatly to the development of humour research and address important issues. This collection of papers is a valuable source of information for humour scholars specializing in folkloristics, linguistics and many other disciplines.

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Notes

¹ Some publications on humour issued within the last decade: *Świat humour*. S. Gajda & D. Brzozowska (eds.), Opole 2000; *Stylistyka X: Style and Humour* 2001; *New Approaches to the Linguistics of Humour*. D. Popa & S. Attardo (eds.), Galati 2007; *Humour and Laughter: Theory and Applications*. D. Popa (ed.), Galati 2008; D. Brzozowska: *Polski dowcip etniczny. Stereotyp a tożsamość*, Opole 2008; *Shades of Humour. Humour: theories, applications, practices*, Vols. 1/2, A. Kwiatkowska & S. Dzereń-Głowacka (eds.), Piotrków Trybunalski 2008.

² The programme and theses of the symposium are available at: <http://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/konve/joke07/teesid.pdf>.

³ See A. Krikmann 2004. *Netinalju Stalinist / Интернет-анекдоты о Сталине / Internet Humour about Stalin*. Tartu: EKM.