

Book review

Sombatpoonsiri, Janjira. 2015. *Humour and Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. xvi + 264pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9780815634072.

This is the kind of title scholars working on Serbia (and, indeed, ex-Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe, more generally) would be prone to consider a rare treat. However, as I will try to show, there is little there that is of interest to anyone engaged in humour research beyond a thorough description of activities that were meant to elicit humorous reactions. Therefore, it may be useful to the ones among us who have often wondered how their work is different from the work of those who plan disruptive actions, such as *Otpor* members in Serbia in the late 1990s, which is the focus of this book.

The author is a political scientist specialising in International Relations and Peace Studies and the book is based on her doctoral dissertation. The book consists of two parts; the first one is entitled “A history of the Serbian sense of humour” and the latter “Otpor and its subversive humour”, each symmetrically featuring three chapters; there is a short chapter on “Conclusion[s]”, “Epilogue”, two Appendices (Appendix A on “Research methodology and data collection” and Appendix B on “Chronology of non-violent struggle in Serbia in the 1990s”), a chapter of notes, and a bibliography.

The chapters of Part One are meant to introduce the reader to “the Serbian sense of humour”. To this effect, Chapter 1 (“Laughing at the misery: Serbian comedic culture”) sets off to explain how the local humorous idiom capitalises on ridiculing misery. Chapter 2 (“Coming to the fore: Humorous protest actions in Serbia in the early 1990s”) shows how early protests in Serbia, following the lost war in Croatia and Bosnia, already reflected an awareness of the subversive potential of humour which was to culminate several years later. Chapter 3 (“Coming of age: Carnavalesque protests”) focuses on a specific form of protest championed by the internationally acclaimed organisation Otpor, which is the main focus of Sombatpoonsiri’s research. In this chapter, she attempts to show why Otpor’s humour is to be considered in juxtaposition to earlier forms of protest. Yet, the author essentially eulogises Otpor, making it difficult to follow intellectually –even for seasoned Otpor enthusiasts like this writer. Throughout these chapters, the author attempts to show how Otpor constitutes a notable turn, but theorising this becomes a very tricky path for it is based on the author’s political affiliation rather than on intellectual grounds. For instance, it will strike any social scientist as odd that in concluding the last chapter of Part One, Sombatpoonsiri makes a tripartite distinction (pp. 74-75) among types of protest actions that dominated Serbian political life in 1996-1997: *carnavalesque rallies*, *witty slogans*, and *satirical street theatre*. This may be fine as an extemporary division of labour, but hardly a good basis for theorising as it only manages to distinguish among rallies, slogans, and street theatre and says nothing about the most relevant distinction, in my opinion, which is the one instantiated by the use of *carnavalesque*, *witty*, and *satirical*. Unfortunately, the author’s theorising on humour essentially stops in selecting these labels. Indeed, this tripartite distinction is as puzzling as

Otpor's strategic plans, according to the author (p. 87ff), i.e., *nonviolence, campaigning and public relations, and marketing techniques*.

Part Two is essentially an endless catalogue of Otpor's "events" and "actions". The first chapter (Chapter 4, entitled "Fighting Milošević with Otpor's clenched fist: The campaigns") is essentially a eulogy of Otpor motivated by what the author believes contributed to an awakening of Serbian society. Chapter 5 ("Strategic humour: Satirical street theatre, parodic protest actions, and carnivalesque events") is a painstaking list of the performances/actions and events which took place at that time. Although it is theoretically void, this part can be of interest to those of us who are engaged in recent Serbian political history from a variety of perspectives. It can also be nicely connected to other, recent relevant research (e.g. Lampe 1996; Bugarski 1997; Todorova 1997; Bjelić & Savić 2002; Razsa & Lindstrom 2004; Žarkov 2007) and even not-so-recent philosophical works (cf. Konstantinović [1969] 2008) -- but this is completely left to the readers. Chapter 6 ("Localising strategic humour: How Milošević was mocked across Serbia") chronicles the significance of Otpor's protests for what was a notable change in Serbian political life: how Milošević progressively lost support even among the people who had supported him earlier -- which is in itself a significant and documented fact. And yet, true as this may be, talking about the disarming effect of nonviolence on Milošević's regime, since "[n]onviolence constituted a battleground unfamiliar to [his] regime" (p. 88), is not to say much about issues that are relevant to humour research. Rather, the constant frame of reference for the author is limited to activism (indeed, voluntarism) and its effectiveness. The author (pp. 94-98) maintains that there is a notable difference between the so-called "humorous street actions" of 1996-1997 and Otpor's later campaigns (beginning in 1998), since she considers the former spontaneous rather than goal oriented. This may well be so, and it may have been instrumental in "the nationwide lampooning of the regime" (p. 97). However, this tells us next to nothing about humour and humorous techniques; all it does is capitalise on the effectiveness of so-called marketing techniques.

Obviously, the concerns of political scientists may well be different from those of humour theorists or specialists on the Balkans (or both). However, the most fundamental problem with this book is its absolute abstinence from any discussion of how the author understands humour and exactly what is the (academic) target audience for this work. By avoiding any theoretical discussion of how she conceptualises humour, she leaves us with the task of evaluating the very relevance of her data. This is copiously documented and painstakingly explained, to be sure. Nevertheless, a description of skits and other actions hardly suffices as the basis for a good read, when the theoretical background is essentially limited to activist voluntarism.

There is no question that anyone reading Janjira Sombatpoonsiri's book will eventually know more about how the Serbs handled the multi-layered crisis that began with the death of Tito and, in an important sense, is still going on today. However, one will be hard pressed to ground this book in any field that has traditionally occupied itself with humour theory or, for that matter, with social science. To be fair, Peace Studies sounds sufficiently new-fangled a field to potentially warrant such a monograph. On the other hand, the author hardly tries to show the relevance of her work to others who might be, in principle, interested in her material. Rather than being interdisciplinary, I find that this work avoids drawing connections with any field beyond political science (and in one reading it simply adheres to the limited agenda of Peace Studies).

One has to have the patience to get to the conclusions of this book in order to realise exactly why it has steadily felt like so perplexing an exposé. The author uncannily gives the answer herself: "[this book] attempts to empower organised movements with ammunition in the form of ideas for creative nonviolent actions aimed at social change" (p. 162). Much as

one may be activistically inclined, to have to read a book on it may be quite trying. The title, *Humour and Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia*, does not necessarily prepare an audience interested in humour for what is to follow. Notably, this is the only book on humour I have ever come across that does not go into the trouble of defining what humour is supposed to mean in the context it is used. If you expect to find references to linguistic (or any other kind of) humour here (cf. Bergson 1956 [1899]; Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994, 2008), you will be disappointed. On the other hand, if you happen to take an interest in political movements in the Balkans, and opposition movements in particular, you will be rewarded with a catalogue of “humorous actions” undertaken by the Otpor movement in the late 1990s, arguably the most turbulent period in contemporary Serbian history.

It is for these reasons that I found the author’s arguments hard to relate to. The only positive attribute I can think of, without qualification, is that this is a good source of information on a brand of Serbian activism capitalising on parody. This, in itself, does allow for connections to be drawn between this work and that of others (e.g. Jansen 2001; Athanasiou 2010; Johnson 2012; Canakis & Kersten-Pejanić 2016), if the readers are willing to take the trouble to do so. However, the author’s interests are still hardly compatible with those of any brand of humour research I am familiar with.

On a different note, it so happened I wrote this text while on a fieldwork trip to Belgrade. While doing so, I kept wondering how this book has enlightened me vis-à-vis the many witty slogans of protest around the city. The fact that it has not –I must be quick to remark-- may be entirely my problem: merely as a function of my particular concerns. Yet, the strategic use of humour as championed by the author is –to linguists, at least-- as old as Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle and Austin’s (1962) and Searle’s (1969, 1979) Speech Act Theory. Trying to be fair to the author, yet again, I chose to focus on what her work has taught me about the *uses* of humour –a legitimate socio- and pragmalinguistic concern. I failed there too, for it all boiled down to proving the supremacy of nonviolence as a strategy –and, since I have never doubted that, I have become none the wiser.

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