

## Book Review

**Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman.** 2020. *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*. University of California Press, 296 pp.

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In January 2018, I co-organized a two-day workshop facilitated by the Yes Lab for Creative Activism to explore the potential uses and impacts of humour and creativity in social justice struggle. The workshop materials foregrounded the importance of experimenting and engaging more deeply with tactics, tools, and strategies capable of advancing social change across a variety of sites of struggle. Two months after the workshop, participants were invited to reflect on their experiences, especially in terms of their sense of the importance of media strategies in their work, the significance of humour in activist and social change work, as well as the perceived merits of media hoaxing as a social justice activist tactic (Reilly 2019). Two of the main insights of this study would materialize in relation to the overlapping realms of collaboration and praxis: respondents expressed a strong desire to see increased opportunities for collaboration between activists and artists in and across social change work, and enthusiasm for the inclusion of humour and hoaxing in the elaboration of activist politics.

In having collaborated with the Yes Lab for the event, the focus on humour and activism could not have been more explicit. The Yes Lab, the brainchild of media activist group The Yes Men, was created in the interests of helping activist groups reach broader publics through media-friendly and attention-getting actions (see Hijinks). Together the event and companion research project highlighted a need to attend to the challenges and opportunities of harnessing humour in the service of social justice and social change. Nowhere in academic scholarship have these lines of inquiry been more pronounced and most well attended to than in Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman's ground-breaking work, *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*. The book is at once a primer on contemporary networked comedy in a twenty-first century media paradigm, an overview of comedy's place in social justice activist politics, and a rumination on comedy's potential role in advancing progressive social change. As Chattoo and Feldman argue, comedy and social justice activism constitute "twin arts and practices that share values and mannerisms of deviant thinking, encouraging new ways of seeing and new ways of being" (p. 198). It is precisely their coupling of these twin arts and practices – and their expansive treatment of the theory, scholarship,

and praxis associated with this subject – that makes this book such a welcome and important contribution.

Published inauspiciously in March 2020 (the beginnings of the Covid-19 lockdown), *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* may have flown under the radar for many (myself included). That said, the book's core themes and through-lines surrounding social justice anticipated much of the increased news and popular media attention devoted to the various injustices and inequities that would come to dominate during the pandemic: wealth inequality, housing and food insecurity, and employment precarity, to name but a few. Much to Chattoo and Feldman's credit, the book offers the reader a rare opportunity to learn about and think more deeply on the intersections between networked comedy, social justice, and social change. In order to ground their larger argument about the positive role comedy plays in social justice work, they present a compelling and comprehensive overview of five distinct genres of mediated comedy: satirical news, scripted episodic TV, stand-up, sketch, and documentary (Chapter 3). They do so as a strategy for introducing notable entry points into interdisciplinary research on comedy's broader societal impacts, and as a means of distilling four essential aspects of comedy's influence: "increasing message and issue attention, disarming audiences and lowering resistance to persuasion, breaking down social barriers, and stimulating sharing and discussion" (p. 13). The possibilities and limitations of comedy's cultural and political impact are taken up more concretely through deeper engagement with the ever-pressing issues of climate change and poverty (the subjects of Chapters 4 and 5, respectively). In terms of establishing a preliminary framework for contextualizing social change, they begin by stipulating that social change is best understood as operating on a continuum that includes anything from raising awareness and changing behaviours and attitudes to initiating institutional policy change (p. 23). In sum, their careful weaving together of networked comedy, social justice, and social change sets the stage for book's heftier work of supporting their claims that comedy can serve as an important vehicle for initiating and invigorating serious public discussion and engagement on urgent contemporary social justice issues.

The book is organized in such a way that both general and expert readerships will find the work accessible and comprehensive. Part I explores the question of comedy as a cultural form of considerable influence within the context of contemporary media and information regimes, situating comedy as both change agent and as exemplar of strategic communication capable of producing "unique strategic opportunities for interventions in social justice" (p. 79). Part II pivots towards understanding comedy's promising role in social justice struggles and challenges. To do so, Chattoo and Feldman explore two defining social justice issues of the early twenty-first century – climate change and poverty – as case studies through which to assess humour's efficacy as a companion tool or tactic to be leveraged in social justice

campaigns. Part III expands the discussion surrounding comedy's viability within social justice movements through a rich and varied illustration of comedians' own perspectives on their artistic and/or activist work, as well as a thorough account of how comedians and social justice advocates are collaborating to lay the groundwork for cultural change. Chapter 6, for example, centres the experiences of comedy professionals from traditionally marginalized racial, ethnic, and gender groups: W. Kamau Bell, Jenny Yang, Zahra Noorbakhsh, and Hasan Minhaj, among others. When coupled together, the efforts of comedians and social justice organizations can have the distinct impact of creating "ways for audiences to experience marginalized people and issues in ways that are funny, humanizing, and non-othering" (p. 176), all the while critiquing and amplifying the absurdities of the status quo.

Chattoo and Feldman are at their best in their case study chapters on climate change and poverty – a section of the book that illuminates the degree to which comedy is able to meaningfully reframe regressive ideas that retain a kind of untouchable common sense in the interests of replacing inadequate institutional solutions with promising alternatives. Of particular note in these two chapters is the emphasis on comedy's capacity to activate the civic or popular imagination, thereby encouraging audiences and publics of all kinds (from disaffected to politically active) to engage with serious issues of the day. Elsewhere, one of the most memorable and powerful insights in the book comes when the authors argue that traditionally marginalized figures in comedy stand to benefit greatly from networked platform arrangements because they are not only "able to assert real cultural power through comedy," they are also afforded the opportunity to bypass status quo culture altogether on the way to asserting "their full cultural identities" (p. 185). Finally, Chattoo and Feldman should be commended for their methodological rigour and flexibility: they expertly integrate theory, history, and scholarship, as well as qualitative and quantitative data. Indeed, more humour and comedy scholarship would benefit from such a multi-pronged approach to methods.

Given the book's undeniable value in establishing and contextualizing the ties between comedy and social justice, it remains to be seen what research and praxis are most needed at the current moment. One underdeveloped strand of research in the book has to do with the growing incorporation of humour and comedy in conservative and far-right Internet communities (e.g., Greene 2019). The book briefly touches upon certain negative elements and aspects of comedy and humour (e.g., emboldening prejudice, encouraging divisiveness), but the latter do not constitute a core research problem or line of inquiry. One prompt for future work is to participate in "interrogating comedy's power dynamics" (p. 191) – from alternative to mainstream to extreme right – and to situate the praxis (or doing) of comedy as part of a disparate set of activities taken up by a wide variety of actors operating in an ever-evolving media ecology. *A Comedian and an Activist* succeeds first and foremost in

solidifying comedy's standing as a potentially significant tool and tactic in the social justice movement toolkit. In reflecting on the book's overall importance, I would agree with the comedians who view themselves as practitioners of "a purposeful art form that can open people to new perspectives, which is an important prerequisite for change" (p. 145). And yet I would also agree with the authors that social change is hard-won, incremental, and part of a multidimensional and long-term spectrum. To return to my own experiences interfacing with artists and activists seeking to bring about progressive social change, an important question hangs in the balance: How can we create the conditions necessary to foster collaboration between comedians and social justice organizations at a time when resources, infrastructure, training opportunities, and time are in limited supply? Answering this question could help advance social justice struggles for the years and decades to come.

## References

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