

Laughter – A Trailblazer in Political Struggle or an Unreliable Force?

Sundén, Jenny and Susanna Paasonen. 2020. *Who's laughing now? Feminist tactics in social media*. Cambridge: MIT Press. (191 pages)

IN ROBERT ALTMAN'S satirical costume drama *Gosford Park* from 2001, a male character accuses a female character of lacking a sense of humor. Her dry response is that he has misunderstood the whole thing – she definitely has a sense of humor, but only laughs when she thinks something is funny – thereby, in an eloquent way, implying that the man who has addressed her is not. Since I saw the film, I have thought a lot about this witty exchange of words. When women (and many others for that matter) protest against verbal abuse, we are not seldom put in place through accusations of lacking a sense of humor, of not getting the joke, that is, of being too stupid to understand what everybody else included in the prevailing linguistic community recognizes. This suppression technique often works surprisingly well. Most of us, being accused of lacking a sense of humor, are not as quick to respond as the female character in *Gosford Park*. Rather, to speak with Judith Butler's words, we are put on the spot and feel embarrassed and exposed. We lose our nerve, and thus need some time to regroup and pull ourselves together in order to talk back, claiming our right to exist on our own terms. And

as we all know, when it comes to humor, time and timing is everything. I find this remarkably interesting since it demonstrates the fine-tuned nature of the power structures imbedded in the game of language, how swiftly it shifts and turns. How inclusion and exclusion, control and subordination, violence and the struggle to get away from it are there, in our words and gestures, all the time. Expressions of humor and laughter are perhaps the place where this becomes most evident.

A relevant question is thus: are humor and laughter useful as tactics in feminist struggle and politics? This is what Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen discuss in their book *Who's laughing now? Feminist tactics in social media* (2020). In their discussion of humor as feminist tactics, the authors take their empirical starting point in the #metoo-movement, a social media event of gargantuan proportions that in an unprecedented way put sexual harassment on the agenda. Through what the authors describe as a methodological approach guided by viral logic, they examine networked forms of feminism that, based on humor and laughter, deal with sexual harassment. The authors ask if it is appropriate to joke about and laugh at the grim representation of women's and non-binaries' experiences of harassment and violence. The answer is a conditional yes, since the meaning of humor, like all linguistic operations, depends on context.

The empirical starting point in the aftermath of #metoo gives the book topicality. At the same time, the epistemological questions brought to the table seem timeless: How does the rapid speed of everyday political struggle, in the shape of actions and words played out here and now (in this case on a digital arena), connect to the often frustratingly slow pace of overarching social transformation? Is it possible for a woman – women being the sex which according to Luce Irigaray is not One – to become a subject within the current linguistic order? And, given that laughter and humor are parts of this current linguistic order, could they nevertheless be a vehicle for change in feminist attempts to reach a status for women and other non-males as unoppressed subjects?

These seemingly eternal queer and feminist questions are given a sharpened edge when the authors pair humor and laughter with feelings

of shame, arguing that shame, rather than anger or pain, is the affective backbone of #metoo. Shame, they write, like laughter, is a phenomenon of a “sticky, lingering quality” (22), firmly connected to the body and its materiality. Could it be then, that shameless feminist laughter is the antidote to sexual shame, a shame that not only explains the culture of silence surrounding sexual harassment, but that has also served to keep women in place, century after century?

To put shame at the center of the discussion of laughter as a feminist tactic proves fruitful. In a string of chapters, from a range of perspectives, and through careful, critical cultural analysis of empirical examples drawn from contemporary digital popular culture, the authors examine a number of different digital expressions where laughter and shame intersect. Laughter and humor, however, turn out to be unreliable friends in political struggle, since the meaning of laughter is, perhaps more than that of any other semiotic sign, dependent on context: on when, why, how, and most of all who is doing the laughing. The authors account attentively for this unreliability of laughter, its complexity and nuances, and the book is a joyful read. One example of analysis that is especially worth mentioning is how the book describes the risks and benefits of humor as a glue holding groups together in what the authors label as “affective homophily” (chapter 3). Another highlight is the critical analysis of how the gender binary between men and women provides a source of laughter (chapter 6).

Having read the book, I am as uncertain as ever of the efficiency of laughter and humor as a feminist strategy. The unruliness and unpredictability of laughter as such makes it difficult to appreciate as a tool or tactic, governed by political willpower. As straightforward backfire against sexual shaming, it seems to be working quite well. However, when up against the experience of physical pain and the mental agony of rape and sexual violence – those real-life experiences that gave rise to #metoo – I am not so sure laughter is as effective. Perhaps it comes down to proximity: as long as the #assholes operate online, the sexual violence they exercise may be effectively combatted through digital feminist humor. And that is after all what this book is about: online hate speech

and how to curb it. In the end, and given the generative force ascribed to laughter's unpredictability by the authors, feminist laughter might have its strongest positive impact when allowed to exist for its own sake, rather than as a foot soldier in feminist politics governed by will and reason: laughter as comfort, joy, and resilience along the way, a feminist room of one's own for those of us who need a break from the harsh sexual power structures, if only for the limited time that our laughter lasts.

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