wie differenzierte Analyse der Kämpfe um Zugehörigkeit vorlegt hat, die nubische Einwohner:innen Kiberas gegen anhaltende Diskriminierung und Marginalisierung führen.

Beate Binder
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Danesi, Marcel: Comedic Nightmare: The Trump Effect on American Comedy. Brill Research Perspectives in Popular Culture.
114 pages. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022. EBook ISBN 978-90-04-53586-2

One might have thought that the apocalyptic images of the storming of the Capitol heralded the end of Donald Trump's political career, but that is not in sight. In addition, his impact on political rhetoric, often referred to as 'the Trump effect', persists in debates on migration, race, gender and intellectual elites. Marcel Danesi shows how this rhetoric is shaped by practices that have a long history in US-American comedy.

Although the author tends to overlook frictions in the society of the US prior to Trump's presidency and creates an essentialist concept of US-American humour, his book is insightful for scholars concerned with the slippages between comedy and politics today. Anthropologists such as Dominic Boyer, Tanja Petrović and Mirco Göpfert draw attention to the fact that more and more comedians have become politicians. Wolodymyr Selenskyj is just one of many other examples. Moreover, late-night talk shows and satirical journalism prove the increasing impact of humorous practices on politics and society.

At no point does Danesi leave his readers in any doubt that he views Trump's often blatantly clownish strategies as a serious threat to US democracy; his knowledgeable report on the Trump effect is devastating. Reading his book is, nevertheless, highly enjoyable, as the author elegantly weaves together complex theories on humour, such as those of Plato, Freud and Bakhtin, with studies on social media and garnishes it all with pearls of humour. The book comprises five chapters, entitled 'American Comedy', 'Buffoonery', 'Dark Comedy', 'The Circus Came and Went' and 'A Comedic Nightmare'.

An attempt to trace the structure of the book would fail, since Danesi meanders through it, but one wants to follow him even when he frequently digresses and writes a bit too much about Commedia dell'arte and too little about social bots. Admittedly, he often gets lost in details that are not very illuminating regarding the Trump effect, but it is amusing to learn that when a priest asked Voltaire on his deathbed whether he wanted to renounce the devil, the philosopher is said to have replied that now was a bad time to make new enemies (p. 68). Certainly, it would be more to the point to analyse how Trevor Noah, one of the most influential comedians in the US, countered

Trump's irresponsible COVID policies. He and other comedians became very serious back then and repeatedly explained hygiene measures to prevent the disastrous effect of the disinformation coming out of the White House, notably in black communities.

Danesi does not even mention Noah and almost completely ignores issues such as race, class and gender. He tends to look at the pre-Trump US as a monolithic, unified bloc and has a somewhat romanticized view of 'the core of the American comedic spirit', claiming that it was 'wry, witty, and innocent, free of political harangues and ideological antagonisms' (p. 2) before Trump came into power. This is all the more astonishing since he digs deep into the history of US-American comedy. Danesi should know that the racist minstrel shows can hardly be described as innocent and that Charlie Chaplin, whom he often mentions (albeit neither his films *Modern Times* nor *The Big Dictator*), was accused of Un-American Activities. The political 'harangues' of the avowed communist and 'ideological antagonisms' had incited the FBI's distrust.

Moreover, Danesi himself draws attention to antagonisms in the US, notably at the advent of the sitcom *All in the Family* in 1971. He analyses the confrontation between the character Archie Bunker, a defender of the Vietnam War and right-wing politics, and his son-in-law Michael Stivic, an opponent of the war and supporter of racial and gender equality. Danesi (p. 35) reminds his readers that during the 1972 presidential campaign, T-shirts and bumper stickers promoted 'Archie Bunker for President', and he analyses how Trump became a Bunker redux and copied his outrageous outbursts. Even his mispronunciations of common words bring back memories of the popular comedic character.

Showman Phineus Taylor Barnum also became a model for Trump. Danesi shows how the president copied his 'hyperbolic, bombastic verbiage' (p. 74) Barnum used when he advertised hoaxes which his audience was only too happy to believe, for example, when he presented Joice Heth, allegedly a 161-year-old slave, as George Washington's nanny. Trump is often compared to the famous impostor who eventually became a politician, and he even adorns himself with the comparison. Trump learned from Barnum how to decry moral decay and, at the same time, celebrate excesses, as well as how to stage pseudo-events that do not deceive audiences when they are revealed as hoaxes, as long as they are entertaining.

Danesi is a professor emeritus of semiotics and linguistic anthropology; his strength is in dissecting figures of speech and rhetorical skills. He accurately and convincingly demonstrates what Trump learned from Bunker and Barnum in this regard. His brilliant presentation of the significance of jokes delivered in a single line, the so-called one-liners – according to Danesi, the staple of US-American comedy – deserves special mention here. He has tracked down some hilarious examples, also showing how W. C. Fields and Will Rogers made one-liners popular in vaudeville and how the Three Stooges used them. He quotes famous one-liners by Rodney Dangerfield and Lenny Bruce, retracing how they have been adapted for use in social media. Danesi argues that one-liners became Trump's most important weapon during his campaigns and presidency, whether in direct confrontation with an audience or via twitter. The US

president used them to make fun of face masks, wind turbines and political correctness, to chide political opponents and unpopular comedians, and to downplay the importance of climate change or social inequality.

Danesi asserts that the US went through a 'Comedic Nightmare' when a clown became president. However, his supporters enjoyed his performances – others, by contrast, perceived him as an 'evil clown'. The clown, usually an emblem of cheerful open-mindedness, is also perceived as a 'harbinger of bad things' (p. 73) in the US: Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952) introduced the character of a clown who used his funny mask to hide from police in American popular culture, while Stephen King emblemized an evil clown character in his novel *It* (1986).

The underlying assumption of Danesi's investigation is open to criticism because it is based on an essentialist concept of culture: he departs from the idea of a formerly innocent and unpolitical comedy, the 'cultural bloodstream of America' (p. 9), to which audiences would have reacted as a unified group. Numerous studies on the reception of popular culture falsify such assumptions, not least Stuart Hall's groundbreaking insights in *Encoding/Decoding* (1980). There is little doubt that audiences and US-American society have become more fragmented and polarised since Trump entered the political stage, but what is to be learnt from the Trump effect is obfuscated through embellished simplifications of American history. It is misleading to claim that the US was a unified country welded together even more tightly by laughing at the same jokes before Trump came into power. To be sure, statements that went viral, such as 'liberals can't take a joke' (p. 92), are certainly a reaction to the demands of political correctness that Trump repeatedly attacked as an evil promoted by liberal intellectual elites. The claim that 'right-wing comedy found its way into the mainstream' (p. 92) after he became president sounds convincing, though it poses a question of definition: misogynous and racist jokes have a long history in the US. It is certainly more illuminating to consider how Trump made use of already existing divisions and reinforced the construction of dichotomies concerning race, class and gender.

In the light of countless studies on the impact of humorous practices on in- and out-group dynamics, Danesi's often repeated dogma that the goal of US-American comedy was once to make all people laugh is questionable. It is astonishing to find such a well-read author basing his analysis on such ahistorical simplifications, but it seems he is in a state of shock, overwhelmed by developments that he, like many scholars, did not believe were possible. Nevertheless, the book is a treasure trove for anyone interested in the connection between comedy and politics. Danesi quotes Will Rogers, a comedian who triumphed early last century: 'I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts' (p. 8). About a hundred years later, a comedian seems to have modified this for TikTok: Sarah Cooper just lip-synced Trump's statements – for example, his absurd advice regarding COVID – and thus drew the attention of countless young voters.

Cassis Kilian
Institut für Ethnologie, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main