

R E V I E W

SERIOUS LAUGHTER.
REVIEW OF *AUTHORITARIAN LAUGHTER. POLITICAL
HUMOR AND SOVIET DYSTOPIA IN LITHUANIA*,
BY NERINGA KLUMBYTĖ, ITHACA:
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The work of the Lithuanian researcher Neringa Klumbytė, who lives in the United States, may arouse jealousy. Several times I have tried to write something about laughter, jokes and situations that become comical, even unintentionally. And each time I put these plans aside for later. This was not only because of my embarrassing procrastination but more out of a certain helplessness at the need to write seriously about laughter. Indeed, about one of the most serious human activities and reactions to the world, the emotional expression characteristic of the human species.

Klumbytė took the subject very seriously. She saw it as an excellent opportunity to examine how culture emerged under the conditions when its content was shaped from the top down by the Soviet authorities. In her reflections, she concentrates on the problem of humour, directed laughter as a tool for managing society and forming worldviews. In considering laughter, she focused mainly on the didactic and propagandistic levels of its influence.

The author analyses satirical magazines published in the territory of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic and the entire Soviet Union (such as “Broom” and “Crocodile”). She conducted a meticulous research in the Lithuanian archives, including, among others, the Lithuanian Central State Archives, the Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art (LALA) and the Lithuanian Special Archives (LSA), the latter of which provided access to the internal party documents and the resources of the Republican Department of the Committee for State Security (CSS).

Klumbytė did not limit herself to analysing the content of the magazines, documents and other materials she found. The results of her fieldwork are also very interesting: in particular, she based her conclusions on interviews and informal conversations conducted with Lithuanian editors of the satirical magazine “Broom”, as well as commissioned authors, satirists and graphic artists. Crucially, these interviews were carried out with people who had worked with “Broom” before the final period of the Soviet Union and the so-called *glasnost*, that is in the Brezhnev era, when the Soviet model of an authoritarian regime seemed stable and unchangeable.

In this way Klumbytė, has taken the rarely trodden path of exploring the cultural and social history of the Soviet Union. As a result, apart from the obvious content analyses and recommendations as to who in the Soviet ideological universe deserved the birch of sarcasm and contempt, we also get an appealing sketch of the portrait of the creative intelligentsia caught up in Soviet propaganda. The sketch, however, is not black and white. Alongside the crude propaganda, satirical magazines also published foreign language translations and apolitical social humour, including certain ideas that slipped in between the lines and went unnoticed or ignored by the censors.

Although Klumbytė inevitably touches upon the problem of the equal participation of intellectuals and artists in the maintenance of the Soviet system, she chooses not to pass judgement. In some sections of the book we find descriptions that allow us to better understand not only the content itself, but also the people who produced it. They were not ideologically indoctrinated or “true believers” in Marxism-Leninism. Nothing of the sort. Nor should they be called cynics for hire. They could perhaps be described as conformists, striving to find their own place in the “system”, to pay the necessary tribute of loyalty. And to retain as much autonomy and freedom of choice as possible. But let us return to the basic problem that the author discusses — laughter conditioned by the authoritarian system.

One of the most interesting issues raised in the book is the conceptuality of humour. The laughter the author examines is historical and cultural. It is linked to individual conditions and the perspective through which those who laugh look at the world. Laughter can, therefore, be characterised by gender, race, class and religion. It can manifest a political stance — deliberate or spontaneous, premeditated or ad hoc.

What made people who grew up in the Soviet Union laugh, became incomprehensible to younger generations. Jokes that were funny in the Soviet era ceased to be entertaining on the level of emotions and obvious associations after the fall of the Soviet Union. This was not because the generation of people born and raised after 1991 automatically rejected everything created by the old regime, including satire. It was because humour not only requires knowledge of cultural codes but it also feeds on experience. Humour is possible within the shared associations, within a sense of comic inadequacy. Bursts of spontaneous laughter cannot be fully explained. One

needs to feel it to be completely immersed in shared laughter. It could be said that people born after the fall of the Soviet Union no longer feel the world which they only know second-hand.

The intergenerational culture of laughter turned out to be a cultural community based on shared worldviews, comparable experiences and the perception of nuance. It can be argued that a cultural community in this sense is a community of feeling the world and responding to it almost on the physiological level. It is a community of emotional outbursts caused by similar stimuli. In this case — bursts of laughter.

By writing about laughter and humour, Klumbytė tells a story about disappearing worlds. In some sections of the book, she deliberately does this in the form of ethnographic documentation. She conducts a peculiar inventory of material objects, especially when she “enters” the homes of her interlocutors. She takes her readers to the summer house of Juozas Bulota, the former editor-in-chief of “Broom”, who has brought there furniture and knick-knacks he acquired in Soviet times. This description is reminiscent of a trip to a “retro museum” overflowing with exhibits.

While reading, we nearly stumble over a low coffee table, a sofa from the second half of the 20th century, a wall unit. And of course, indispensable in the home of the intelligentsia, bookcases full of chaotically arranged books, catalogues, albums, old papers, sentimental photographs, decorative elements whose value and meaning can only be understood by their owner. We can see the collection of dolls dressed in traditional costumes typical of certain Soviet republics and “friendly states” of the Eastern Bloc. Under our feet we have old, slightly worn carpets, miraculously obtained from department stores plagued by shortages. The view from the window is obstructed by a thicket of houseplants that barely fit on a windowsill.

Personally, the chapter I found most interesting is the one in which the author writes about multi-layered and “multidirectional laughter” (p. 135-168). She addresses one of the most fascinating problems of humour: the fact that it cannot be fully controlled. Humour as a tool of the authoritarian seriousness of propaganda can, in certain situations, be highly dangerous to it. A small dissonance or an unintended context can be enough to turn the seriousness, or even the sacredness of the disgruntled regime into pastiche. Laughter can be used to stigmatise enemies or as a safety valve. Agreeing to controlled jokes about the authorities, carnival mockery and transgressions are part of a repertoire of methods as old as societies themselves for maintaining social order. But it is difficult to predict when a safety valve becomes a detonator. Another deeply inspiring and engaging theme is the dystopia of the Soviet project that emerges in between the lines of top-down controlled satire, as well as the problem of creating and maintaining a sense of justice in satirical content to which the author devotes a separate chapter.

The book is, therefore, much more than an analysis of the content of magazines and the censored jokes used by propaganda. It is a true archaeology of the culture of Soviet Lithuania. Klumbytė's work is an outstanding contribution to the study of the Soviet authoritarian regime. From the descriptions and analyses of satire caught up in the Soviet system we learn a great deal about the relationship between the state and citizens, propaganda and the strategies of individual creators to break free from its dogmas.

Finally, it should be noted that the author also devoted space to an exhaustive characterisation of the cultural, social and political life of the Soviet Union. This is probably due to the need to include a “compulsory programme” to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the subject to various committees and reviewers. On the other hand, this section of the book may be particularly instructive for readers who do not deal with the social and cultural aspects of the Soviet Union on a daily basis. Laughter — even when it was directed from above — could not be completely tamed. Shared laughter worked against vertical social organisation. And thanks to laughter, as the author suggests, the society resisted its total atomisation. This multi-layered book is certainly worth a close reading.

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