

Humour and resistance in security studies

An analysis of the Israeli TV show “Eretz Nehederet”

Chloé Bernadaux

Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES)

“There is nothing [that] disarms us like laughter.”

Henri Bergson

Abstract: Humor in the form of satirical popular TV shows has proliferated in the Anglo-Saxon culture as well as other parts of the world. Undertaking a discourse analysis approach, this piece engages with the political narratives put forward by the Israeli satirical TV show "Eretz Nehederet", consisting of parodies on contemporary international, regional and internal affairs. The political motivation of the show is central to the show's creators who define themselves openly as beleaguered left-wing activists denouncing the occupation and the dominance of the right-wing party, the Likud. As such, can the popular Israeli show Eretz Nehederet be identified as a form of resistance? This research investigates the subversive potential of humor in framing an understanding of security in terms of emotion, rather than "political change". By drawing on the concept of transformative resistance framed by James C. Scott, I argue that satire is a form of non-transformative resistance with the potential to contest or re-negotiate dominant conceptions of security and the Other. Finally, this study exposes the way in which "security" permeates society as a form of life and observes a range of affective dimensions embedded within discourses and practises in contemporary Israeli society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Humor in the form of satirical popular TV shows has proliferated in the Anglo-Saxon culture, with the emergence of TV shows such as the *Colbert's Report* in the US, the *Nightly show* in the UK, *Tonightly with Tom Ballard* in Australia; as well as in other parts of the world such as in Egypt with Bassem Youssef's show.

Analysing the role of Satire during the rise of Republicanism in France, Forbes underlines the capability of satirical humor to exercise public opinion, "drawing audiences into new practices of representative government" (Forbes 2010: 15), pointing at the potential democratizing force of satire. In an interview, prominent Canadian journalist Malcolm Gladwell identifies the power of satire as its capacity to "go to places where serious discourses cannot" (Gladwell 2016), a conception which unveils the participatory and inclusive force of satire within contemporary democracies. Satire can hence be summarized as the humorous and critical observation of society and its underlying values, mores and practices, which intends to awaken public's critical mind.

"Eretz Nehederet" is a satirical TV show, broadcast on the one of most prominent TV networks in Israel, "Channel 2" since

2003 and consisting of parodies on contemporary international, regional and internal affairs. The political motivation of the show is central to the creators who define themselves openly as beleaguered left-wing activists denouncing the occupation and increasing influence of the conservative nationalist party, the Likud. In this context, the title itself, meaning "A wonderful country", is ironical. As such, can the popular Israeli show Eretz Nehederet be identified as a form of resistance?

This research identifies humor as part of a register of non-transformative resistance and "ethico-political practise" (Brasset 2016: 170). In opposition to James C. Scott's original concept of "transformative resistance" (Scott 1990), this study exposes the way in which satire can trigger a "non-transformative resistance" to contemporary conceptions of security which permeate society as a form of life. Security discourses and practices in Israel can hence be synthesized under the concept of "public transcript" referring to certain conceptions of security and underlying values (Scott 1990). In opposition to transformative resistance bringing about major political changes, non-transformative resistance does not by essence seek a political resolution of the ethical dilemmas attached to this "public transcript". Satire however conducts a form of non-transformative resistance by exposing the range of affective dimensions embedded within discourses and practises of security in current Israeli society.

This research undertakes a performative approach in engaging with the satire's political narratives. The adoption of such an approach is in accordance with the view that there is no universal standard for appropriate resistance, as subversive performance always "run the risk of becoming deadening cliches through their repetition (...) within commodity culture where subversion carries market value" (Butler, 1990).

By analysing the narratives exposed by the Israeli TV show, this piece considers the way in which dimensions of everyday politics of security are exposed and to whom these representations are addressed. It also highlights the subversive potential of the understanding of security embodied in this satirical show in terms of emotion, rather than in terms of political change. Specifically, it points to the shows' depiction and understanding of the role of official Israeli public spheres or media in conveying a specific form of security. This analysis also emphasizes the way this form is problematized and reflects dilemmas of security. In this context, the use of a

performative approach aims to unveil the possibilities and limitations of this form of resistance, shedding a light on the ambiguities of resistance such as its contingency to power and the structure of agency. The assumption underlying this research is that popular comedy or satire should be viewed as contingent to established structures of power.

The study of the show *Eretz Nehederet* allows to draw the thesis that satire is a form of non-transformative resistance, that has the potential, but does not necessarily, contest or renegotiate dominant conceptions of security and the Other. In the first place, this study provides a review of the concept of “resistance” within Critical Security Studies (I) and establish the relationship between resistance and humor in the philosophical and sociological literature (II). Finally, this piece intends at conducting a performative analysis of some episodes of *Eretz Nehederet*, focusing on the discourses of security and the related representations of the “Other” (III). Specifically, the ways in which the show challenges dominant perceptions of the Other are scrutinized, as the process of Othering lies at the centre of national identity construction and hence national security.

II. THE CONCEPT OF “RESISTANCE” IN CRITICAL SECURITY STUDIES

The concept of resistance finds its roots in the Latin “resistere”, meaning “to withstand something” or “to take stand against”. In opposition to traditional security studies focusing exclusively on military strategies and the state, critical security studies aim at distancing themselves from or “withstanding” the definition of security as an objective phenomenon falling within a clearly defined field of study. Central to all critical security studies is the role of power in shaping security discourses and practices. Based on the acceptance that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (Cox 1981: 128), critical security studies themselves constitute a form of resistance. Their inherent analytical value articulates power as creator of specific “modes of subjectivity and interpretative dispositions” (Doty 1993: 299), which promotes forms of knowledge that could potentially be subject of critical reflection on security.

Satire's intent to go beyond the positivism of traditional security studies offers opportunities for in-depth analysis of the concept of resistance. Post-colonial, feminist and postmodern critical literature, however, conceive resistance as submitted to agency in the renegotiation of power (Hoogensen and Stuvoy 2006; Richmond 2011, Rossdale 2016). These approaches intend to associate isolated acts of negation within a broader “transformation” framework. This “transformative” approach to resistance (James C. Scott 1990) conflates the role of intellectuals in challenging hegemonic conceptions of security and individual actors' agency, which is problematic in so far as resistance becomes analytically co-opted into the theory of political agency. This conception limits the concept of resistance as a motor of change, leading to the building of alternative systems. This view positing resistance as the

ethical input within the broader theory of agency generates limitations on our way to conceptualize resistance, as it excludes the possibility that no transformation might result from resistance. This dominant conceptualization suggests that if resistance was not conducive to change, it must have been co-opted.

I argue, hence, that resistance has not been sufficiently developed analytically by the broad literature on critical security studies. In opposition to its goal to unveil structures and sources of power, critical security studies' conception of resistance promotes a rather limited conception of power as something that is imposed upon instead as a creative process. In this framework, a cultural and ethnographic approach to security focusing on the production of practises and conceptions of security enables to frame a refined conceptualisation of resistance as productive of political subjectivities, suggesting a conception of subjectivity within a socially constructed system of power.

By looking at the ways in which subjects inhabit security (Brasset 2016: 172), a performative approach based on a conceptualization of resistance as a creative and affirmative process posits the centrality of the individual's subjectivity instead of an opposition against power that precedes the subject. Resistance is hence conceptualized as productive of power relations instead of purely opposite to power structures.

Departing from the latin root of resistance, “resistere” as “withstand”, Chandra advocates the replacement of the hegemonic view of subaltern resistance as opposition or “negation of power” with the term “negotiation” of power (Chandra 2015: 563), which “reworks” power relations in a more favourable or emancipatory direction. In this context, the concept of emancipation, from the latin *ex-mancipia* which illustrates the conscient movement of a slave to free itself from domination, itself does not refer to a transformative form of resistance in a societal context but rather in a subjective one. In this context, Chandra shows that the very action of “resistance” might fail to alter social and political structures of power, as subversiveness is essentially subjected to contingency. In a similar way as James C. Scott, Asef Bayat emphasises the emancipatory potential of everyday acts of resistance and “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (Bayat 1997: 57).

Therefore, this analysis intends to re-position the subject within power on the one hand and re-think the individual as tied to cultural values and norms on the other hand. As Foucault puts it: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault 1976: 95).

III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMEDY AND RESISTANCE IN THE LITERATURE

Ördén identified the relationship between humor and personal decision-making via the Kantian concept of “reflective

judgement” (Ördén, 2018: 23). The concept of reflective judgement or “judgement of taste”, relies on predication, but in opposition to determinant judgements, arises from the individual to generate a universal concept or general rule (Kant 1790: Section 75). As the political arises from contingency, where no pre-given norms can be applied, reflective judgement is easily transposed to the formation of political judgments. In other words, reflective judgement highlights the way in which personal political decision-making acts stems from a highly subjective and seemingly spontaneous sphere (Arendt 1982). In this context, humor is most adequately located within the framework of reflective judgement, as it constitutes a distance from the personal in a movement to reach the general or abstraction and reveals the shared structures of life.

Thus, the social reach of humor, based on the entertainment of an audience, can be referred to as corresponding to the intersubjective practise of reflective judgement. In this context, at the centre of application of the concept of “reflective movement” on the formation of political judgements lies the concept of “enlarged mentality” (Kant 1790), implying that political judgements form themselves an intersubjective practice. As Mihai puts it:

It must be emphasized that the capacity for political judgment can only be developed in the company of others, within efforts of making sense of the world together. Formal education does play a role – strengthening the capacity to enlarge one’s mentality implies some theoretical knowledge – but it is the everyday engagement with different standpoints that enables the cultivation of judgement. (Mihai 2014: 25).

What are the limitations of humor in its capacity to instill critical judgements? In his book “*L’ère du vide*” or “*the era of void*”, the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky depicts the post-modern society as driven by a new form of disenchanted hedonism, itself representative of the cult of indifference and frivolity (Lipovetsky 1989). In this framework, humor would be, rather than an interruption of our daily life concerns, a way to create a light and disengaged atmosphere at the service of a new hedonism. Hence, the socio-political reach of humor disappears in what he calls the “humoristic society”. In this regard, the French philosopher François L’Yvonnet points to the “indiscernibility” of comedians in postmodern societies and shows how their discourses, while denunciatory, reify the system and hence have the potential to become easily neutralised and incorporated within the system (L’Yvonnet 2012). According to these views, the intensity of political conflict would be reclaimed and annihilated by a “reconciliatory laughter”, unveiling the affinities between comedians’ elite and domination. In this context, the contemporary humorist would not take the risk to oppose power structures and would opt for a “regulated critique” (Cotte 2012: 14).

However, some authors pointed to the way in which humor reveals specific characteristics or features allowing for the

pluralization of the political life in its own right (Cotte 2012: 14). They demonstrate humor’s unique capability to expose the conflict between the mobility and rigidity of life, unveiling our own personal inelasticity and fostering self-awareness (Bergson 1990). By shifting the focus from the position of the individual to the universal or general, comedy provides opportunities to spark both mental elasticity and reflective judgement (Ördén 2018: 24). In this context, some authors have evoked the way in which comedy confronts the rationality of political discourses producing critical self-reflection (Odysseus 2002) and some sense of contingency.

However, are reflective judgement and humor related in some ways to a transformative view of resistance? In his analysis of the relationship between reflective judgement and political change, Bourdieu stresses the prominence of the reproduction of social activism as a habitus in providing opportunities for transformation (Bourdieu 1988: 190). In this context, he argues that art is more adequate than scientific knowledge in disrupting the dynamics shaping the structures of power within free societies (Mihai 2014: 38). This argument can be related to Arendt’s view that laughter is more effective than truth; implying that comedy and satire can act as efficient catalysts for social activism or political change, depending on contingency. On an empirical level, a study led by Jody Baumgardner, Jonathan Morris and Natasha Walth draws a relationship between Tina Fey’s humoristic show on her impressions of Sarah Palin and the 2008 Elections, suggesting that the satirical show had a “45.4 percent probability of saying that Palin’s nomination made them vote for McCain” (Baumgardner, Morris and Walth 2012: 100); all other factors being equal. This implies hence the possibility of a measurable effect of humor in triggering transformative resistance to some extent.

However, this transformative resistance ought to be nuanced as humor does not aim at the presentation of an objective and clear purpose; but rather intends to accommodate perspectives. As humor is nothing when not understood and is a deeply intersubjective practice, the impact of humor is hardly predictable nor measurable (Ördén 2018: 24).

Hence, it is worth focusing on the possibilities and opportunities satirical shows provide in informing public discussion of politics and creating a critical engagement with security; in opposition to a quantitative impact-based analysis based on a transformative view of resistance.

IV. HUMOR AS NON-TRANSFORMATIVE RESISTANCE: ANALYSIS OF “ERETZ NEHEDERET”

To unveil the challenges posed by the show to dominant Israeli perceptions of security, this analysis considers episodes dealing explicitly with the representation of the Other, both Palestinians and Arab leaders, and explores whether critical acts of resistance are conducted in the show. These sketches can be characterized as both “news parodies” shows and “fantasy-anchored” satires (Shifman 2012: 101), based on reflection and distortion of the news.

A. Newschool program for Kindergarten students

The show imagines a new special Kindergarten program in Tel Aviv managed by *Im Tirtzu*, a nationalist right-wing group in Israeli in coordination with the Ministry of Education. The joint education program is supposed “to prepare children for their complicated life in Israel” (Eretz Nehederet, 2010).

The teacher starts by asking her students: “Who can tell me why we need to have peace?”. A first student spontaneously responds: “What peace? Who will we make peace with?”. Another says: “I used to be a lefty but I got disillusioned”. Another one answers: “It’s proven, removing settlements doesn’t bring peace.” Later, the teacher asks: “Here is our tiny Israeli in the Middle East. Who knows how we call the rest of the world?”. “Antisemitics!” respond all the students in unison. She then initiates a new game called “Don’t preach us morals!”.

- The teacher: “The Italians?”
- One student: “Helped the nazis”
- T: “The French?”
- S: “Vichy Regime”
- T: “The Turks?”
- S: “Massacred the Armenians and the Kurds”
- T: “Norway?”
- S: “Killed the salmon.”
- T: “So what do we tell the world?”
- All children: “Don’t preach us morals! There won’t be another Auschwitz!”
- S: “Give them Judea and Samaria and they’ll want Haifa! That’s how the Arabs are.”
- T: “We don’t say “Arabs” here, cutie.”
- S: “Sorry, I meant demographic threat.”

Here are exposed and mocked the rationale vehiculated by the right-wing parties emphasizing the disutility of negotiation, their rejection of world opinion and willingness to continue the building of settlements. One of the creators of the show describes the show’s intention as following:

“We try to put it in this situation where children in kindergarten are learning it and you see how bleak it is, how sad it is to raise a generation with no hope and that is exactly the idea of Netanyahu: Things are only gonna get worse, all the world is against us, we have to build a fortress around us and prey for god to save us, there is nothing we can do. That’s what we are aiming at in a lot of our sketches. It appears to be funny and then you think about it once more. Then, maybe something will touch you, and you might feel the pain that has driven us to write that. The fundamental truth when you think about it is kind of sad” (Gladwell 2016).

Gladwell testifies in an episode of his podcast *Revisionist History* on the personal emotional impact of the Israeli satire.

“I said I laughed out loud for the first time I saw this sketch. But the second time I saw it, I didn’t laugh at all (...). The intentions are pretty plain, they aren’t hard to decode. We have here children mouthing the absurd dead-end arguments

of adults. And if laughter is normally the great distractor, the laughter dissipates quickly here. Satire works best when the satirist has the courage not just to go for the joke” (Gladwell 2016).

These testimonies highlight how and the extent to which Eretz Nehederet participates to the emergence of critical thinking by suggesting the way in which security is bound up through emotion. The broad “Other” is either depicted as a “demographic threat” referring to the Palestinians or “against us” pointing to the rest of the world community; unveiling the role of “anger” as a crucial component of “security” within Israeli society. The “Other” is depicted as a “hating being” towards Israelis, and the subject remains entwined within these deeply entrenched feelings and rationalities from a young age.

This rather realistic and tragic reflection lies in opposition to the transformative conception of resistance as it shows great pessimism on the possibilities or ways forward for change. The emotional depth in which the concept of security is embedded is suggested by the children, who act as emotional subjects developing a perception of the “Other”. In this framework, the show promotes an alternative political narrative of security as culturally-constituted, as it explicitly points to the ways in which Israeli conceptions of security are related to social, cultural values and well-entrenched resentments and emotions revived and reaffirmed by Israeli right-wing movements. As a matter of fact, traditional conceptions of security as objective matters are explicitly negated, which raises the viewer’s awareness on its own perception of the Other. Nevertheless, the conceptualisation of the subject as emotional suggests a rather limited reflection on subjectivity. However, I argue that the emphasis on the role of emotions contributes to the rephrasing of security as a vital category to the individual and points to the extent to which security relates to identity construction.

To summarize on this part, one can argue that this satire, through self-derision, aims at provoking a sense of “anger at the self” (Brasset 2016: 186), with the potential of offering an avenue towards critical reflexivity or *reflective judgement* for Israeli viewers.

B. The representation of Arab leaders

The following analysis intends to examine the complex representation of the “Other” and sheds a light on ideological meanings conveyed by this representation as well as their impact on cultural perceptions of the “Other”. The show features the satirical imitation of numerous Arab leaders throughout Season 8 released in 2011, ranging from Muammar Gaddafi in Episode 9, or Bashar Al-Assad in Episode 9 and Hassan Nasrallah in Episodes 4 and 6. The shows’ intent lies in contradicting widespread Israeli perception of Arab leaders as threats by transforming them into comic figures.

The show operates an act of refusal to reinforce stereotypes of Arab leaders as existential threats against Israel, accounting to some extent for a non-transformative resistance to hegemonic dominant discourses about the perception of the “Other” within Israeli society. It stands in contrast to the portrayal of the Arabs falling into the stereotypical paradigm of the good vs. bad Arab, which reinforces the perception of the “Other” as security threat for the Jewish Nation (Shifman 2012: 95).

Interesting is to observe Arab leaders’ “Israelification”, as comic representations of Arabs in Eretz Nehederet transformed them into objects of identification for Israelis (Shifman 2012: 100). For instance, they all speak Hebrew fluently with an Arab accent, in contrary to American leaders who only speak English in the show. The show only features trivial topics between the Arab and Israeli representants. Instead, their fascination about Israeli cinema or music and interest in food are exposed, which aims at putting aside disputes and depoliticizing relations between Israeli and Arab leaders. The explicit intent of the show lies in stressing similarities between Israeli and Arabs as human beings. I argue however that at the heart of their commonality lied only their role as consumers of Israeli goods and culture, rather than their human condition. A new Middle East where Israeli culture and aspirations occupies a prominent part is framed by the show, reifying the hegemony of capitalism. This aspect leads us back to the limitations of humor put forth by Gilles Lipovetsky and François L’Yvonne, according to whom the post-modern humoristic society annihilates the political potential of humor as catalyst for “emancipation” as all representations can easily be co-opted within the system.

The influence of the show's fantasy-anchored portrayals of Arab leaders remains limited as they remain rarely linked to the news. The commercial limitations of the show based on neoliberal assumptions also prevented a more complex and nuanced representation of Arab leaders. In opposition to the Kindergarten episode, representations of Arab leaders seem to fall within the depoliticized “safe realm of consensus” (Shifman 2012: 103). In other words, the satire brings about a “deferral” instead of an incitement of politics (Brasset 2016: 185), which would be at the heart of transformative resistance.

V. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In Eretz Nehederet, the subversiveness of satire is tied to the exploration of subjectivities on security; and operates a critical distance towards Israeli state-level politics of security and traditional media narratives. This accounts for the rise of reflective political. While the show did not target any form of “aggressive accommodation”, which would have aimed at the simultaneous confrontation of the dominant security culture and transformation of society; it successfully reaches “assertive accommodation” (Opdycke 2013: 16), intending to establish a “cooperative balance” between prevailing and “co-cultural” groups asserting alternative conceptions of the Other and security (Orbe 1998: 17).

However, limitations of humor and satire as vehicle of reflective judgements exist, as the show unveils a fantasized depoliticization of the relationship with the Other and cooptation of its representation within hegemonic Israeli culture. The failure to deal with political representations of the other as political leaders in the de-fantasized context of war seriously annihilates any potential for critical distance towards political representations of security.

One can however argue that a more complex political representation of Arab leaders would not have been well-received by today’s Israeli audience, suggesting that the critical input of humor is not a given and remains highly context dependent.

Other studies have shown how humor, as an effective rhetorical tool at the service of dominant security actors such as state leaders (Sover and Kayam 2014: 9) or private security companies, contributes to reinforce dominant threat constructions and conceptions of security. This suggests that humor can potentially become embedded within a top-down political process that instead of challenging, rather entrench existing power structures and relationships (Gruner 2017).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Chloé Bernadaux, from Paris (France), received Master's degree in "International Security" from Sciences Po Paris in 2020, with specializations in Middle East Politics and Global Economic Policy. She previously conducted research at the Lebanese-American University in Beirut. She is a contributor to the Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES), the International Campaign to Ban Uranium Weapons, and Encyclopedia Geopolitica. Her interests include political economy, Middle East politics, disarmament affairs and social movements.