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Book review

Vuorelma, Johanna (2024). *Irony in International Politics.* Edinburgh University Press.

In September 2001, American essayist Roger Rosenblatt proclaimed that the age of irony had come to an end (Rosenblatt, 2001). This assertion stemmed from the belief that dark humour and an ironic questioning of everything obscured the truth and hindered preparations for real threats such as international terrorism. In general, Generation X (i.e. those born between 1965 and 1984) was characterised as the "ironic generation" suggesting that they used irony as a shield against the seriousness of the Cold-War and post-Cold war world. However, Rosenblatt's prediction did not materialise: Millennials and Generation Z have elevated the use of irony and satire to new heights within multimodal and multimedia online culture, rendering ironic communication an appealing mode of political discourse (e.g., Sundaravalli & Krishna, 2025).

Irony is typically defined as a form of communication in which explicit words can be interpreted to convey an opposing meaning, often creating a sense of humour. Since the intended meaning of irony is not explicitly stated but relies on the audience's ability to interpret nonverbal contextual cues, the humour it evokes can often be characterised as allusive, prickly, and even derogatory. While this dynamic is not new in domestic politics where rhetorical means are often employed to criticise opposing sides, in international politics the expectation leans toward polite, diplomatic communication that avoids escalating tensions and irritating other parties. Contrary to this expectation, Johanna Vuorelma, a University Researcher at the Centre for European Studies at the University of Helsinki, focuses on irony in international politics and convincingly shows that it has characterised (at least Western) international political discourse recently.

The aim of Vuorelma's book is to analyse how political leaders have employed irony, particularly to question the liberal international order. The author emphasises that irony should not merely be viewed as a figure of speech; rather, the focus is on irony as a discursive strategy that relies on both language and form. This approach connects the observation to recent discussions on affective discourses, which express and evoke emotions to construct specific meanings (e.g., Breeze, 2019; Mateus, 2018). In addition, the analysis draws from a performative view of politics. Temporally, the analysis broadly encompasses the post-Cold War era, focusing primarily on the past two decades. The book's conclusions call for further analysis to observe historical changes and continuities over a longer time scale.

While the literature review and discussion on irony in international politics are commendable, the book's primary contribution is its original identification of four distinct forms of irony: justice-seeking, hegemony-seeking, recognition-seeking, and disruption-seeking irony. Empirical case studies of political figures such as Germany's Joschka Fischer, Sweden's Carl Bildt, Greece's Yanis Varoufakis, the United States' Donald Trump, the UK's Boris Johnson, Hungary's Viktor Orban, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Russia's Vladimir Putin, illustrate these four forms of irony and demonstrate their ties to the social, political, and historical contexts in which the discourse occurs. As noted, the political leaders analysed primarily represent Western politicians. This may reflect a general Western or Global North

centrism in current rhetoric and international politics research but also makes the reader to think about international cultural differences in modes of political speech.

Although the author does not present a specific method for analysing irony, they refer to years of observation and collection of statements from political speeches, employing an inductive reading and organising the excerpts into a typology as patterns began to emerge. This eclecticist approach works well in a monographic format. In fact, the book demonstrates that monographs remain essential: the presented irony typology would not have been possible to develop and illustrate in a journal article, thus deserving the space afforded by a full-length work.

The presented typology identifies the related ideological positions and affective registers of each mode of irony: justice-seeking (liberal, shame), hegemony-seeking (conservative, fear), recognition-seeking (deserving underdog position, humiliation), and disruption-seeking (relativist, cynicism). Each form carries different implications or functions, ranging from radical to nostalgic and revisionist to nihilist. Vuorelma concludes that, at a general level, irony serves both as a coping mechanism to challenge power hierarchies and as an activating strategy to provoke political change. She also highlights the directional nature of irony, from self-oriented to other- and system-oriented. The main results are succinctly summarised in a figure at the beginning of the book (p. 16).

The book is well-structured, beginning with an introduction and contextualising chapter, followed by four chapters that delve deeper into the analysis of political discourse to illustrate the identified four forms of irony. The concluding chapter synthesises the main insights and discusses the limits of irony in international politics. The text is illustrative, allowing readers to grasp the main points easily. However, this clarity sometimes leads to repetition, as readers are reminded of premises discussed earlier. Consequently, the relatively short book (191 pages, including references and index) could have benefitted from some condensation.

Vuorelma is a political scientist, which is reflected in the emphasis of this discipline's literature in the bibliography. The discussion on affects and emotions primarily draws from a single and very relevant work by social psychologist Margaret Wetherell (2012). Incorporating recent literature from fields such as political sociology and political psychology might have enriched the exploration of the affective nature of political discourse. Nonetheless, Vuorelma's writing style is accessible to readers from various disciplinary backgrounds, and the classification of modes of irony and their functions will benefit many scholars. Although Vuorelma emphasises that irony should be studied as a distinct discursive strategy separate from satire, comedy, and humour, the book will undoubtedly interest humour researchers who are concerned with the serious implications of humour.

In conclusion, Irony in International Politics demonstrates that the use of double meanings, even at the highest levels of politics, has not disappeared; rather, it remains an integral part of political discourse. It appears that the ideals of liberal democracy, which emphasise clarity and finality in political vocabulary, have not been entirely successful, as hidden meanings and discursive ambiguities are increasingly employed. If Roger Rosenblatt were to examine the current landscape, he might harbour pessimistic thoughts about the global threats that this use of double meanings may conceal.

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