

Cherian George and Sonny Liew, *Red Lines: Political Cartoons and the Struggle Against Censorship*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021. 448 pp. ISBN: 9780262543019.

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Over a decade ago I was fortunate enough to meet a veteran Singaporean editorial cartoonist. He told me he had stopped publishing cartoons in the early seventies, after postcolonial Singapore's leader, Lee Kuan Yew, scolded him, saying "politics not a laughing matter". For centuries conscientious and conscious satirical cartoonists have felt otherwise: punching upwards, mocking the (often dubiously) powerful has long been their meat and drink. Indeed, such 'offensive' free speech and holding of political and other authorities to account is deemed by many an indicator of a politically and socio-culturally thriving state. In soft authoritarian, overbearingly unamusing Singapore, explicit, hard-hitting cartoons do not surface — politicians remain untouchable, clearly beyond 'the red line'. However, as local cartoonist Miel attests, foreign issues, local ordinary folk should be ok. Politics being no laughing matter is not opinion but hard truth. The heroic fifty cartoonists given a voice in *Red Lines*, a book about political cartoonists across the globe struggling in a variety of ways with equally various methods of scary censorship from state and religious leaders and even their own often furious readerships, would deem such censorship to be detrimental to Singapore's socio-cultural life. Singaporeans, however, will not find *Red Lines* in their bookshops or libraries. Ostensibly this is due to the book's partial inclusion of the notorious Danish and French cartoons of the prophet in Chapters 13 ("Undrawable: The Aura of the Sacred") and 14 ("Je Suis Charlie: A Symbolic Battle"), potentially causing 'offence' (a key word as we shall see) to Muslim sensibilities. Readers of George and Liew's book might spot other reasons why Singapore's authorities might want to restrict local popular access.

Both authors of *Red Lines*, journalist and academic Cherian George and cartoonist Sonny Liew, hail from Singapore. Liew's is in fact one of fifty cartoonists's censorship-negotiating narratives rehearsed in this book. Singapore's National Arts Council gave and then retrospectively withdrew funding for Liew's widely popular but to the authorities all of a sudden "objectionable" comic book *The Art of Charlie Chan*, claiming the fictional comic "potentially undermine[d] the authority or legitimacy" of Singapore's government (130).

Published by MIT's information policy series, *Red Lines* posits the question: Why do the powerful feel so threatened by political cartoons? In exploring and attempting to answer this question through theory and the stories of cartoonists told by themselves through Liew's eye-catching comic strip format we are treated to "[a] visual

feast” (Madine Strossen). Using an accessible, democratized strategy of “[s]how not tell” (David Kaye), the authors demonstrate why successful cartoons are so effective and dangerous. Cartoons mocking and criticising the shortcomings of ‘our’ leaders “are easily understood by all” and are therefore deemed a threat by repressive and/ or insecure governments.

Red Lines highlights the fact that cartoonists are intuitively streetwise and witty in a way that most politicians and bureaucrats are not. We also learn how cartoonists’ deployments of an age-old tradition of exaggeration, metaphors, and stereotypes are not always appreciated by either target or less cartoon-literate readerships especially now that triggered ‘offence’ has been weaponised as an effective response to counter cartoons and cartoonists. George and Liew go on to demonstrate how cartoonists are a constructive form of resistance, helping readers to overcome fear of the authorities meant to serve us. Some of the best parts of the book are where the authors allow great and fearless cartoonists like Malaysia’s Zunar (intimidated by Najib, but ultimately bringing him and his fifty-years-in-power party down), Cuba’s Garrincha and Alfredo Pong, Ecuador’s Vilma Vargas, Nicaragua’s Pedro Molina, occupied Palestinian territories’ Mohammed Sabaaneh, Iran’s Nikahang Kowsar, and China’s Wang Limang and Kuang Biao to speak for themselves. Many cartoonists featured have been tortured, imprisoned, and/ or felt their lives in unequivocal danger, consequently obtaining asylum in ‘free’ Europe or the US. Whether such cartoonists are really now free or have become “poster boys” (as Sudanese cartoonist Khalid Albaih terms it) for a western liberalism that supports repressive regimes elsewhere is unclear.

Today it’s no longer so easy for countries wanting to present themselves as modern, humane, liberal, or first world to simply imprison, torture, and murder cartoonists and other journalists. Instead, as Liew and George demonstrate, subtler methods are deployed: intimidation (starting with ‘friendly’ cups of tea, progressing to suing and beyond), friction (limiting internet content), and flooding (diluting internet with pro-authority propaganda). The internet it seems has made us all the more vulnerable victims of our own shortening and superficial attention spans and decreasing depth of political consciousness to see clearly beyond the veneer of internet hype.

Chapter 7, “Democratically Rejected: the X’ed Files,” provides a fascinating insight into why cartoons are rejected by editors. Do cartoonists believe the reasons for rejection given by their editors? Or are even friendly editors censors, ultimately in fear of or even wishing to please today’s regimes? Can unique relationships between publishers, editors, and cartoonists make a difference? The Charlie Hebdo massacre throws a tragic, poignant shadow across the book of cartoonists killed not by government but by religious extremists. But is the incident as black and white as it seems? There is a less well-known tradition of iconography of the prophet Muhammad in Islam. A recent Western, female cartoonist drew Muhammad sympathetically and faced no criticism let alone a

death threat. Thus, is there a possibility that some Western cartoonists in the name of defending free speech are unconstructively unsympathetic to Islam and the Middle East, in fact punching down rather than up?

As the book observes, for the first two decades of this century, religious extremism was the biggest challenge to cartoon freedom. However, since COVID-19's emergence in 2020 China has taken on this mantle. We read of Belgian cartoonist Lectr receiving death threats amidst more official superpower intimidation and demands to shut his cartoons of a biohazard Chinese flag down and apologise. All over a cartoon — but also underlining the need for cartoonists to research possible sensitivities such as national historical taboos (for example, Indonesia's anti-communist pogrom) and other symbols (including the hammer and sickle), and national flags (notably China). We read of an artist drawing a cartoon of a three-legged dog, not knowing that the politician he was referring to had only one leg. At the same time China has become an unofficial hub of memes — possibly a response to the current regime's censorship heavy-handedness? While the emergence of memes seems democratising and refreshing, and is celebrated even, *Red Lines* makes an illuminating distinction between traditional cartoons and memes. While even ambiguous cartoonists (like those of the stylised realist Sonny Liew) craft their work in a focused, fairly informed context, memes can be infinitely decontextualised, recontextualised, and randomly interpreted by anyone for any or no purpose — and certainly not everyone has the media literacy to fully appreciate the rich nuanced language of editorial cartoons.

Perhaps most fascinating is Chapter 8 (“From Liberation Technology to Platform Censorship”) which relates how in less than three decades the internet morphed from a champion of democratic liberty and freedom to liberty's antithesis. Also under scrutiny by cartoonists are the warped hypocritical values of the net; as French cartoonist Rudolphe Urbs observes, for social media platforms like Facebook, “racism seems less dangerous than a pair of boobs”. *Red Lines* introduces us to fascinating new scary terms such as “censorship creep,” “precariat,” “sabriat” — maybe a glossary would have been helpful? Chapter 9 explores how satirical cartoons can be paralysed by oppressive-defensive national flag-waving in the wake of events like 9/11 — and how some strong-willed cartoonists like Aaron McGruder successfully kicked against such 9/11 humour paralysis without being censored, via his wise-cracking little kid character, Huey Freeman.

The recent weaponizing of moral indignation is also explored, which can even be used to attack relatively innocuous ambiguous cartoons: “in the world's most open democracies, insult against identity has gradually replaced insolence against authority as the greatest taboo” (300). Such outrage is difficult for cartoonists to foresee or prepare for. As the authors observe, “it's practically impossible to predict who's going to take offense [sic] to what.” Now the powers that be can if they so wish orchestrate and activate intolerant populism reminiscent of Mark Anthony's cynical rabble-rousing in *Julius Caesar*. By the way, it is fascinating to see the most controversial

cartoon in the history of South Africa, Zapiro's cartoon of 2008, depicting the justice system about to be raped by Zuma as she is held down by key supporters — where even critics might see the social justice behind the image outweighs possible offence at the image (301). But George and Liew's book also demonstrates that cartoonists themselves are human and can be fallible, make mistakes. In another cartoon, Zapiro ill-advisedly used a racist trope to make a social justice point. *Red Lines* highlights the danger of this — cartoons have effectively made a difference not only for good, but also bad, for example, using racist stereotypes in swaying the masses to complicity in Nazi Germany and 1990s Rwanda. Equally worrying, Chapter 10 highlights how women cartoonists have been imprisoned and tortured for their audacity to encroach on male-dominated spaces in India and elsewhere: nevertheless, Swathi Vadlamudi is shown refusing to be intimidated, valorously taking on Narendra Modi's brutally misogynistic goons.

One of the most striking cartoons featured is "Just Thief League" (40), satirising the aristocratic expensive high life (at whose cost?) of leaders and their first ladies. Malaysia's Rosmah is portrayed as a squashed and stout Wonder Woman, complete with pink Birkin bag. Elsewhere, Turkey's Erdogan is a cat caught in a ball of wool (113). After complaining about this, the leader found himself represented as a variety of other animals and vegetables. Martin Rowson's 2013 cartoon of an Afghan woman standing her ground against a drone is truly powerful both because of the cartoonist's imagination and art, and the urgent truth resonating behind the image.

The book begins with a warning: "Many readers will find a few of the cartoons distasteful or offensive." Some images are indeed close to the bone. For me, the only senselessly nauseating cartoon is an anonymous British racist 'cartoon' deploying the gang rape image encountered in Zapiro's cartoon referred to above, but not in the cause of social justice. Rather it sloppily and unfocusedly punches down to stir up hatred of the Muslim minority while also representing political opposition as child abusers, and the police and social services as blind supporters of such abuse. It's neither funny nor clever — but has effectively incited racial and religious hatred, championing Brexit values, by dehumanising others in an echo of earlier German anti-semitic cartoons, or those fuelling the Rwandan genocide. We could contrast this with the more nuanced deployment of the same trope in Mysh (Michael Rozanov)'s cartoon, which is perhaps shocking but makes its point in the name of social justice (immigrant virtue vs misbehaviour of 'true' citizenry). For most of us, hate speech should not be part of *civilised* free speech. A distinction needs to be made between offensive speech and incitement to hate speech. In cartoons and reading cartoons as in everything else there is a need for nuance. A Burmese cartoon shabbily appropriating Richard Newton's glorious 1792 cartoon "A Bugaboo!!!!!!" satirising William Pitt's sloganeering confection of reactionary national hysteria over the French Revolution to mock today's international concern at genocide and ramp up mob hatred against the Rohingyas makes me want to kick something.

What makes *Red Lines* a nuanced and learned exploration of cartoons and censorship, so accessible and readable is its format: a hybrid of research journalism and zine cartoon. One chapter mimics web browser pages (Chapter 8 which explores deployments of memes and censorship), elsewhere a popular magazine layout is used — complementing the often heavy and incisive academic nature of the more theoretical parts of the writing. Some may deem this hybrid book of 438 pages too unwieldy. For me, however, the form enhances the content — the book is beautifully rich and varied, itself a work of art. The authors “hope you will be able to engage with the ideas in this book” and certainly don’t want us to be merely passive reader-consumers. On page 198 readers are even shown how to attempt to make their own memes. George himself experiments before our eyes, showing shots of his handphone screen as he attempts to send seditious ‘toad’ images referencing a comparatively beloved former premier to a China registered mobile number.

With its attractive format, rigorous but clear theory tempered with page-turning real-life story examples, this book could be the basis for a fascinating undergraduate course on cartoons. The text generates fascinating questions: Why are cartoons so scary for some leaders? Which leaders and at what moments? Is it ever right for an editor to thwart a cartoonist? What threatens cartoonists’ freedoms most? Repressive regimes or free market forces? Did the internet or aggressive capitalism kill the golden age (c. 1960-1995) of editorial cartoonist freedom? How can we ever find a balance between free speech and protecting people, genuine sensibilities when it comes to cartoons?

Red Lines should be essential reading for those interested in the art of the cartoon and issues of free speech at a time when such speech seems unprecedentedly under threat.