

Cartoons and International Relations

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, JUL 15 2009

For my sins – of which there are many – cartoons have been much in my head in recent weeks. Let me explain: for too many years, I've been working on a book on a centenary of cartoons on South Africa's international relations. With the Centenary just five months away, I've been galvanised into doing something about it. So, running around my house for the past few months have been endless 'toons much to my wife's chagrin. I'd thought however that this was just to be one aging IR-hack's indulgence until I read Anca Pusca's interesting and thoughtful *Review Essay* on Walter Benjamin in the most recent edition of *International: Political Sociology* (Vol. 3. No. 2. June 2009). (What a great journal this has turned out to be: take a bow Didier Bigo and Rob Walker!)

Benjamin has always interested me but I've always thought that he was at some distance from IR. What Pusca has done, however, is to draw him closer to the discipline and weave his ideas into the "aesthetic turn" and the work of IR folk like Roland Bleiker, Cynthia Weber and Christine Sylvester. One of Anca Pusca's points is that the life of IR – even in the work of these talented colleagues – remains embedded in the 'classical IR sites' of war, conflict, terror etc. Benjamin offers us a bridge to a world less dictated by the boundaries of the discipline and more by the context of the research.

This brings me to cartoons which, in the mind of this sinner, seem terrific examples of a way to escape the disciplinary limits by focussing on the creative context of the moment when art and IT come together. The 'research' on 'the cartoon book' – as my loving wife calls it – has brought me into the everyday world of the cartoonist – folk who often make the most telling comments on IR's grim world. One fellow I interviewed told me he was presented a life-choice between becoming a sign-writer or a cartoonist. Fortunately, for us he made the best choice: his cartoon on the Mbeki government's scandalous policy towards Tibet was too hot for the local press to handle. (Happily, he's given me permission to publish it in my forthcoming book.)

Another cartoonist, now retired, who is white, drew the pictures for South Africa's 'black' newspapers for thirty-odd years. As he reflects on his portfolio, he sees the shifts and changes in his representations of events and, more importantly, personalities within the politics of the late-apartheid period. This is a new opening on the idea that history – as Benjamin argued was not a "succession of key moments" – but a liminal process of "becoming and disappearing" – to quote Benjamin from Anca Pusca's essay.

Many of us use cartoons in our teaching. My favourite is a 'broken telephone' comic strip which explains the new South Africa's disastrous and very embarrassing invasion of the neighbouring country of Lesotho in 1998.[i] But as I've worked on this book project, it has become clear to me that those of us in IR are missing a chunk of really important insight into the discipline's famous stuff by not looking more deeply in to the everyday life of cartoons.

Perhaps the energetic young folk running this interesting web-site might run more IR cartoons and, who knows, the ISA or BISA might invite cartoonists to talk on their takes on our world.

[i] Note from Editors: we're unable to publish the 'broken telephone' cartoon here due to copyright constraints. However, similar cartoons covering the incident are available via the Madam & Eve archive – see for example.

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