

**BOOK REVIEW**

**A CULTURAL HISTORY OF LAUGHTER\***

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**Abstract**

This review focuses on Abilio Almeida's first book, "A Cultural History of Laughter." In this book, Almeida examines the history of laughter from the 4th century BC to the 21st century. By examining intellectual debates and emotional regimes in different periods of history, the author emphasizes that laughter has taken on different meanings and societies gave different meanings to the action of laughter. The book makes a significant contribution to the field of sociology of culture and cultural history by drawing on intellectual history and the history of emotions.

**Keywords:** Culture, Sociology, History, Laughter

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## **Kitap İncelemesi**

### **Gülmenin Kültürel Tarihi**

#### **Öz**

Bu inceleme Abilio Almeida'nın ilk kitabı olan "A Cultural History of Laughter" (Gülmenin Kültürel Tarihi) başlıklı kitabını konu almaktadır. Almeida bu kitabında milattan önce 4. yüzyıldan 21. yüzyıla kadar yayılan geniş bir zaman aralığında gülmenin tarihini incelemektedir. Yazar kitabında tarihin farklı dönemlerindeki entelektüel tartışmaları ve toplumsal duygu rejimlerini inceleyerek gülmenin farklı anlamlar kazandığını ve toplumların bu eyleme farklı değer yargıları verdiğini vurgulamaktadır. Entelektüel tarih ve duygular tarihininden yararlanan bu eser kültürel sosyoloji ve tarih alanına bir katkı niteliğindedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sosyoloji, Kültür, Tarih, Gülmek

We all laugh as humans. But why do we laugh at certain jokes and situations? What were the meanings of the laughter and how did they change? When did laughter become taboo in public, and how did it regain its place? To answer these questions and to pose more, there should be a history of laughter. Early works such as Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* examined the folk culture and humour (Bakhtin, 1984) and became a base for the further studies on the history of humour and laughter. Recent literature has focused specifically on the history of laughter and its use in history. There are even works that focus on the less explored areas of the sociology field, such as China's comic book culture (Rea, 2015). A couple of years ago, thanks to the rise of global history, there have also been edited works that include many case studies about humor and laughter all around the world (Derrin & Burrows, 2021). As an addition to the growing literature, Abilio Almeida's first book, *A Cultural History of Laughter*, traces the story of laughter from the time of Plato (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He achieves his aims by highlighting the intellectual discourses that characterizes specific eras, accompanied by a sociological explication. Consequently, the book becomes a good contribution to the cultural sociology field and stands out from its peers by its strong intellectual framework.

*A Cultural History of Laughter* explores the presence of laughter in intellectual debates throughout history, examining it as a culturally structured phenomenon that is heavily influenced by emotional regimes during specific periods. The book is composed of two main parts. The first part investigates the story of transformation of laughter from a sin to a symbol of happiness. The author argues that the Platonic view, based on the cave allegory, is that emotions (*pathos*) are deceptive and that those who are deceived by their emotions laugh at the one person who comes out of the cave and sees the real world. According to the author (2024, pp. 12-14), for Plato, the laughter was a symbol of ignorance of the one's dependent on their senses. The author argues that this Platonic view of laughter as a symbol of ignorance, passion to be controlled and the need for a logical role model continued into the Christian world and led to the image of a Jesus who never laughed in his life, as well as the other religious figures (Almeida, 2024, p. 20). However, this situation changed in the Middle Ages. Despite the serious faces in the portraits and mosaics, and the emotional regime of melancholy, people laughed, especially at carnivals. Almeida associates the laughter with the lower classes and the common people as a tool against the settled order (Almeida, 2024, p. 28). After the Enlightenment, the author emphasizes that the man's ability to understand himself gave a new definition to the laughter: the madman as a wise man who could show the ridiculous side of a person by laughing (Almeida, 2024, p. 39). As the author articulates, further

debates and studies by intellectuals and scientists such as Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin on emotions confirmed that laughter was a “natural” emotion that can serve different purposes (Almeida, 2024, pp. 41-43). Modern laughter was now considered a tool for new insights and a release of energy because of our limited ability to think about certain things (Almeida, 2024, p. 47).

The second part of the book examines emotional climates during specific periods. The concept of emotional regimes, as developed by the history of emotions, forms the theoretical foundation for this section of the work. Emotional climates refer to the prevalence of specific emotions within a society during a particular historical period. The author puts forward that (2024, p. 63) the laughter found new meanings on the medieval period’s fear, the anger caused by the alienation of the workers thanks to the rise of capitalism (2024, p. 69) and the modern era consumption-based happiness (2024, p. 74). Parallel to these new meanings under different emotional climates, Almeida claims that the growth of the press, coupled with technological advancements in media, cinema, radio, television and the internet resulted in the emergence of new mediums for the laughter’s depiction and has led to a “democratization” of it (Almeida, 2024, p. 93).

The work of Almeida is a well-written piece of research but also has certain limitations. Despite the author offers an intellectual exploration of laughter, the sociological dimension of the narrative remains underdeveloped. The author attempts to address both intellectual debates and sociological changes in history. However, the narrative remains unbalanced in favour of a top-down approach. In this respect, the title of the book becomes more ambitious than the book’s actual content. Additionally, the author raises many intriguing questions, as mentioned at the beginning of this review, which encourage readers to further explore cultural sociology and history of laughter. However, it can be argued that drawing upon other disciplines such as history or historical sociology might have been more beneficial for Almeida to present his claims. For example, the author could have paid more attention to the evolution of capitalism in shaping the concept of laughter as a new norm in modern societies and provide a background information on the process. Eurocentric paradigm of the book can also be interpreted as a deficit, as this approach narrow downs the scope of Abilio Almeida and omits the similarities and differences between societies, and for the modern era, the impact of capitalism. However, the author is kind enough to acknowledge some of these issues in the appendix and invites readers to critique his work.

To conclude, the book attempts to fill the gap in the cultural studies by giving a history of laughter. Despite its relatively top-down approach and Eurocentric focus, Almeida's work is an encouraging introduction book of a cultural sociology for individuals keen into social sciences and even for the general audience.

**Çıkar Çatışması Bildirimi:** Yazar, çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

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