# Demonizing Islam by outdated satirical methods is a cultural tragedy

Associate professor of modern history at the University of New England, and coauthor of 'Comic empires: Imperialism in cartoons, caricature, and satirical art', published by Manchester University Press in 2019.

Richard Scully

■■ **How do written and graphic satires compare in regards to their political effectiveness?**
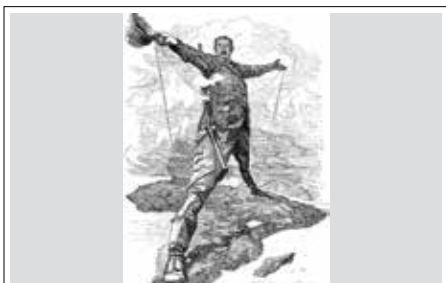
(Comic Empires, Figure 1.1)

Linley Sambourne, 'The Rhodes Colossus', Punch, 10 December 1892, p. 266.

This is one of the big - often unanswerable - questions in history, political and communications studies. Most graphic satire or written satire doesn't necessarily seek to change anything, whether that be people's minds, or policy. These are really just forms of free expression or comment as per Robert Phiddian's argument in Satire and the Public Emotions (Cambridge, 2019).

"Serious" efforts at effecting political change tends to come via party-political pamphlets, news items, speeches, and other mechanisms, of which satire is necessarily an adjunct. In cases such as the infamous ‹Boss› Tweed campaign by Thoams Nast (in the US in the 1870s), it is still unclear whether it was actually Nast›s cartoons that brought down Tweed. Even Tweed›s famous injunction ‹My constituents can›t read, but they can understand the pictures. Let›s stop them, damned pictures!' may not have actually been uttered by him. Napoleon III certainly feared cartoons more than printed satires, but again, whether these had particular power to change people's minds or mobile dissent, is unclear.

■■ **Why do we need to study satirical arts to better understand 'imperialism'?**

I think studying satirical art shows us a great deal about the past reception and attitude towards imperialism/imperialisms that isn't apparent from other sources. For instance, 19th-century cartoons produced in Britain are often characterised as pro- or anti-imperial, but this obscures a much more varied spectrum of opinion. The famous 'Rhodes Colossus' image of Cecil Rhodes astride the con-

tinent from Cape to Cairo is often held up as an image of imperial belief, but its original context (in Punch, in December 1892) indicates that it was supposed to be a lampooning of Rhodes himself, and his over-the-top attitudes. The accompanying rhyme is ambivalent - poking fun at the man, while admiring his convictions. People were not always serious about empire, even if they accepted it was a reality and a fact of the international system. Racist humour is very evident even in cartoons that were anti-imperialism, for instance (i.e. in John Gordon Thomson's depictions of the King of the Zulus, even though he was very Gladstonian an anti-imperial in his attitudes).

■■ **You observe that cartoons "reflect the ideas and prejudices of their creators and intended audiences." But how can we overcome methodological issues of interpreting satirical arts? After all, both the intention of the author and the message received by the audience at the time are open to interpretation.**

It's a good question, and one which I think doesn't have a straight answer. History is no longer the quest for a single, verifiable truth (it hasn't been since the ascendancy of postmodernism from the 1960s-80s). So multiple and often clashing interpretations are the stuff of good history writing. The important thing is to ground one's work in good theory (e.g. the stuff coming out of Humour Studies these day), as well as close empirical analysis (i.e. publication context, authorship, etc...).

■■ **You observe that graphic satire functions in both sustaining and challenging imperialism. I wonder which function has been more significant in terms of productivity of the authors.**

In the past, during the 'Age of Empire' (c.18th-early 20th century), I›d probably say that sustaining/legitimising empire was in the ascendant. Since 1945, the challenge has probably been more dominant. I would say though that, in contemporary terms, although cartoonists/caricaturists in general like to imagine themselves as anti-imperial and ‹on the side› of the weak, the very nature of cartooning (with its recourse to ethnic or other stereotyping), the hegemony of the Anglo-American and Western forms, the tendency to essentialise everything within a Western/Enlight-

enment paradigm means that even the most overt challenge to imperialism contains imperialist discourses and reinforces these. As you say - a very broad question.

■■ **Perhaps the most important, and the most enduring contribution of cartoons to imperialism has been defining or otherwise consolidating a concept of 'the Other', inferior to the imperial citizens. Can you tell us about the variety of these Others?**

Edward Said, Palestinian professor of literature at Columbia University, was a founder of the academic field of postcolonial studies and a prominent critique of Orientalism.

This is linked to my answer to the previous question. Effective caricature, cartooning, and satire often depends upon stereotyping in various ways (gendered, ethnic, etc.). This is inherent to the construction of 'Others', and the kinds of Orientalising processes examined by Edward Said and others. In a 19th-century British context, the 'Othering' of the Zulu or other African nations, Indigenous Australians, and countless other 'subaltern' groups was achieved through imagining them as inferior, different, and in varieties of gendered/infantilised ways. In Nazi Germany, the othering of the Jews, especially, but also other untermenchen (Slavs, Celts, etc.) was overt in cartoons; so too the othering of class enemies in the former USSR and other socialist/communist contexts.

■■ **Making a myth of that kind is usually easier than debunking it. One might argue that in order to debunk the 'Other' myth which cartoons have created, one needs to resort to other**