'The Art of Controversy,' by Victor Navasky

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The Art of Controversy

Political Cartoons and Their Enduring Power

By Victor S. Navasky

(Knopf; 231 pages; $27.95)

In response to David Low's caricatures in London's Evening Standard, which depicted Adolf Hitler as a spoiled brat, the Führer dreamed of retaliation. He commissioned a beautifully bound volume that "refuted" the allegations embedded in the cartoons. But since, as Victor Navasky asserts, it's impossible to trump visual charges with verbal responses, "Hitler in the World's Cartoons: Facts Versus Ink" had a short shelf life.

In "The Art of Controversy," Navasky, the former editor and publisher of the Nation, introduces readers to great political cartoonists around the world and across the ages. To understand the power of political cartoons, he reminds us, one needs to take into account content, imagery, psychology and the context in which "readers" encounter them. And one needs to accept that cartoonists will use the discredited pseudoscience of physiognomy (which connected physical characteristics to character), distortions, stereotypes and group defamations.

Navasky is a self-styled free-speech absolutist. For this reason, perhaps, he does not weigh in on controversies about setting boundaries for political cartoons. "I am at something of a loss in defining the line between the stereotype and the hate cartoon," he writes. Claiming as well that "the line between racist and non-racist stereotypes is elusive," he advises victims "not to nurse their wounds" but to use the occasion "to kick off a round of discussion, debate, argument."

Readers will probably agree with Navasky that countries around the world should grant political cartoons the constitutional protection they have in the United States. More problematic, however, is his argument that, although editors and publishers have the right to revise and even kill columns and cartoons "for reasons of law, taste or other necessities," they should not establish "political litmus tests" for cartoons, in part because they are "not competent to make editorial decisions about art."
Emphasizing that he "abhors homophobia and gratuitously hurting people's feelings," he "votes" - in a sentence that reveals but does not address his own ambivalence - "to encourage nonsense as much as sense and to have a presumption (rebuttable though it may be) against killing any cartoon that is on its face funny, although again one has to ask, to whom?"

"The Art of Controversy" is redeemed by its subjects. Navasky rounds up the usual suspects - Thomas Nast, Bill Mauldin, Herbert Block, Al Hirschfeld, Doug Marlette and David Levine - in short sketches. He also brings to center stage cartoonists who are less well-known to American readers.

In the 1830s, in the weekly publication La Caricature, Navasky indicates, Charles Philipon depicted King Louis Philippe, with his jowled face, as a pear (French slang for "fathead"). The regime prosecuted Philipon six times, fined him thousands of francs and jail him for a year, but they could not prevent the image from circulating throughout the country.

Born Jonathan Shapiro in Cape Town in 1958, Zapiro, according to Navasky, is South Africa's most controversial cartoonist. Charged with rape and corruption, Jacob Zuma, president of South Africa, was his favorite target. Following revelations that Zuma had fathered a child out of wedlock, declared that women should not be left "in a state of desire" and advised showers as protection against AIDS, Zapiro replaced a tower in the president's office with a giant penis, depicted Zuma in a series of cartoons with a showerhead attached to his cranium, and showed him and his cronies pinning Lady Justice to the ground. That Zapiro is white and Zuma is black, Navasky notes, "complicated and intensified" responses to the cartoons.
At the end of his book, Navasky returns to the questions with which he began. If a cartoonist's critique of imperialism is wrapped in a sexist image, which set of values should prevail? If his "regular outlet" rejects a submission because the cartoon's politics are unacceptable, "does that deserve to be called censorship, or is it simply the exercise of editorial prerogative?" Given Navasky's vast experience at the Nation, the New York Times and Columbia Journalism Review, you can only wish he had provided better answers.

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