

Political Jokes in a Theoretical Context

—*Mr. President, what do you think of the Chinese position?*
—*Well, I like it, but my wife's knees bother her.*

Analysis of Humor

It's common to read that books about humor lack the seriousness required to qualify them as a subject to be examined. It is a pity if a reader judges a scholar¹ as spending his time on light or little-respected subjects. When this occurs, it has much to do with the social discourse on laughter. Morreall (1983:88) recounts that the dominant message throughout his educational experience was that "life was fundamentally serious business, and, certainly, serious business is what is important in life. If laughter and humor have any place, it certainly is not in the classroom but rather someplace outside of it." It's possible that because of this, analyses of jokes are rare. If we all laugh daily, surely the subject of our laughter should not deserve our attention and much less our analysis—who can think that a serious scholar should busy himself with the study of something that is not serious? Could he be like the biologist who studies those seemingly insignificant insects?

Many authors frequently refer to Freud's early-twentieth-century study (1973) suggesting that jokes bring to the surface that which is cryptic or hidden, allowing a glimpse at the subconscious. Bergson, also at the beginning of the twentieth century, did an analysis on what is "funny," examining the cause and effect of laughter:

Laughter needs to be placed in its natural setting, in society; and above all one must determine its useful function, which is that of a social function

[. . .] Laughter must respond to certain needs of everyday life. Laughter must have a social function. (1973:18)

Provine (2001), Critchley (2002), and Morreall (1983) claim that before them, no one had been able to create an accurate theory regarding humor and laughter. Provine criticizes all authors on the subject for basing their analyses on anecdotes and for writing without a scientific basis, but he concludes that “laughter is the quintessential human social signal. Laughter is about relationships” (p. 44). He affirms that his discovery is a victory for positivists, in that with strong scientific evidence he was able to prove what Bergson was able to prove one hundred years before with what for Morreall was not evidence. Morreall refutes Bergson regarding the social character of laughter to the degree that, a few pages after his refutation, he maintains that this is a social phenomenon. He bases his critique on the fact that nobody can formulate a theory that encompasses all forms of humor, even though one most certainly can’t get away from the Freudian motif. Another author who is profusely cited by many authors is Jankelevitch (1982), specifically in his analysis of irony.

Scholarly and specialized treatments are few, because it seems the subject of humor is of little interest to scholars; among those who *do* show an interest are Joubert in his early work (2002, original from 1579), and more recently the Americans Critchley (2002), Morreall (1983), Paulos (1982). Psychologists also show an interest—in fact, they are the ones who have paid the most attention to humor. Though the list of humoristic publications or publications about humor (Fultz, 1970) is quite long, it would include political caricature (Rius, 1984; Pruneda, 1958; A.D., 1960), funny or ironic treatments about politics (Covo, 1987), and even sarcastic newspaper columns such as those by the American Art Buchwald; the Israeli Efraim Kishon; and the Mexicans Marco Antonio Flota, Marco Almazán, Nikito Nipongo, and Catón.

Many authors are confused between humor and expressions causing laughter, perhaps because laughter is often a component of humor—even though, supposedly, laughter alone is not necessarily a sign of happiness. It is undoubtedly proof of a certain state of being, but in some cases it may show a mental problem and in other cases it might even show an illness. Some studies have shed light on different components of humor. Joubert analyzes “the physical and cosmological rationale, the spiritual, bodily in addition to the therapeutics” of laughter (Julian Mateo and Mauricio Jalon, “Prologue” to Joubert, 2002:15) and maintains:

What excites laughter in us is something ugly, deformed, dishonest, indecent, indecorous and inconvenient. For example: what provokes laughter in those present, is to see how as if by mere happenstance, embarrassing parts are discovered, which by nature or through public honesty we tend to hide because they are indecorous and not worthy of mercy.

Pitchford (1960) explores the social functions of humor, and, for his part, Eastman (1972) explores the different types of senses of humor. Ethnic humor is important for studying political culture and ideology, especially when it comes to discrimination (Telushkin, 1992). Morreall comes to suggest that laughter can theoretically be grouped into three types, even though his analysis suggests that they are really theories on humor: a theory of superiority, which focuses on emotions involved with laughter; a theory of incongruence, which regards objects or ideas that cause laughter; and the theory of relief, whose main point is that laughter frees up nervous energy. Morreall then produces his own single theory of laughter, which is just a combination of the three types he already identified.

Political humor has lately received some special attention. The works of Schutz (1977) offer a new and refreshing perspective on the classics; these works include his comic reading of the Greeks. His analysis regarding politicians’ use of humor is particularly interesting—and especially delightful is his chapter on Lincoln. Lukes and Galnoor (1985) collected jokes from all over the world. Banc and Dundes (1986) made a collection of Romanian jokes and re-edited them as a collection of Eastern European political jokes (1990). Both of these studies promise a deep analysis with theoretical advances, yet they leave the reader with a series of unanswered questions. Kishtainy (1985) concentrates on analyzing Egyptian political humor; Beezley (1985) and Schmidt (1990) examine Mexican political humor from folk and elite perspectives, respectively. A few scholarly journals have tackled the topic; among them we find the *International Journal of Humor Research* started in 1988; *The European Journal of Humor Research*, started in 2013; and *The Israeli Journal of Humor Research*, started in 2012.

Notwithstanding these efforts, political humor remains an area little explored. Levine (1968) accepts that there is little interest in scientifically researching humor. Provine (2001), whose work stems from the neurosciences, claims that most studies on humor since Plato are based on anecdotes, and that there has never been such a study with a scientific basis. Banc and Dundes (1990:11) comment that most of the studies available on humor are literally just collections of political jokes “completely devoid

of humor in its analysis.³ There are many questions pending, and with a future study new questions emerge, though most authors would agree with Provine regarding the ability for political jokes to expose, a theme that we will return to further on.

If humor and laughter emerge socially to such a degree that Provine suggests generates social cohesion, one might ask about the social and political circumstances in which political jokes are presented. Who are their audiences, and what are their motivations? In the same way in which many people don't wish to listen to off-color jokes, perhaps many don't want to hear political jokes. And in the same way in which some jokes may be considered inappropriate under certain circumstances—such as in a sexual context, for people of the opposite gender for whom there doesn't exist a level of comfort—perhaps those jokes simply should not be told in those circumstances, or to people of differing ideologies. What are the rules regarding who can tell a particular joke? Is it the highest person or the lowest in a particular hierarchy? Who gains approval to use a joke as a means for breaking the ice?

Provine (2001) says that speech in itself is more important than a joke's content. Paraphrasing him, we could ask if the act of telling a joke is more important than the joke itself. This could explain certain things about power relationships. On the other hand, what comes to our attention might be the point made by Morreall (1983:44) that, based on his experience, humor can be a conceptual conversation that is fun, yet also disconcerting and anxiety provoking. In reality, the same applies to politics. Politics progressed from being an instrument for happiness to a petty game of brotherhood, in which the conceptual conversation causes affliction. Here, the joke becomes a mechanism for the social compensation against politics because it helps society to get even with politicians.

There are many collections of jokes. The purpose of most of them is simply to entertain and be funny, nothing more. In these books, political jokes are few or are not included at all. Part of the problem with including these kinds of jokes in such collections consists in lack of knowledge of political events, lack of interest in politics, fear of repression, and belief that political jokes have no market; the inclusion of topics such as the police are not seen in a political context, as if the police have stopped being the repressive mechanism of the State (the monopoly of the legitimate violence of Weber's *dixit*). It is possible that in the collective imagination and due to corruption, the police have become an independent body to the point that people believe that they have distanced themselves from the government,⁴ or in fact that they are not part of it at all. One must accept the fact

that people seek out these books of collected jokes for pure entertainment purposes,⁵ as well they should.

We may offer many explanations regarding the lack of studies regarding political jokes:

1. Jokes are common, everyday phenomena. Even though they reflect social reactions to frustrating factors, they imply or create the establishment of relationships, and the conditions in which people confide in each other, functioning as an instrument for social cohesion. Nevertheless, they pass without notice by researchers, as do most of life's daily affairs, because they are subjective manifestations. People experiment with jokes habitually; they live with them, as they are found in the mass media, and they use them rather frequently. But by not being accustomed to focusing on routine, everyday occurrences, such as jokes, individuals—including scholars—ignore political jokes as objects for analysis; instead of analyzing them, they simply celebrate their existence.

2. Laughter, to a certain degree, has been considered malignant. This could possibly be derived from the fact that certain mental illnesses usually produce outbursts of laughter. Much attention has been drawn to a laughter epidemic in 1962 in the village of Kinshasa, some forty kilometers from Bukoba, near Lake Victoria in Tanzania (Provine, 2001:130).

The negative image of laughter may be due to its attack on the solemnity⁴ and seriousness with which people treat the events they consider important—politics being a major one of those events. Laughter is frequently condemned⁵ and is considered offensive because outbursts are usually presumed to be hostile acts. Consequently, laughter is often suppressed⁶ so as not to offend “political dignity.”

The Catholic Church attacked humor and laughter for being improper and not a characteristic of the appropriately moderate and good Catholics (Bossuet, cited by Morreall, 1983:87). The Church also denounced Molière's comedies because it conceived of laughter as an instrument of the devil. Baudelaire said that laughter is a punishable element because it is a product of satanic paternity and part of the dark side of human nature. If there was one thing that worried the Church during the Middle Ages, when it gathered its ideological discourse, it was fear of the devil and all that was associated with the devil—such as laughter (Delumeau, 2002). (Fear was commonly directed not only against the devil and laughter but also against women, Jews, and foreigners.)

Even in childhood, adults frequently attempt to stop a youth's laughter by saying, “People are going to laugh at you,” which equates laughter with ridicule.

What purpose does it serve, then, to examine something associated and equated with so many negative things? Hopefully, if humor is analyzed in a stroke of bad luck, scholars might discover their social or political dysfunction.

3. Political jokes and other forms of political humor are rarely transcribed,⁷ in part perhaps because politics are perceived as something serious and solemn, and thus the political joke is a transgressor, implying an attack against all that is political. Is it that solemnity offers a very thin layer of respectability? Or is it that those people most vulnerable to attack are cloaked within their solemnity, those whose power is fed by an image of them as solemn and dignified are upheld by a frail social base—such as is the case with dictators and political authoritarians? Schutz (1977:189) cites Corwin's "law of political politics": "Never make the people laugh. If you want to be successful in life you must be as solemn as a donkey."⁸ Kundera (1986:254) adds, "There is no movement which attempts to change the world confronting ridicule and scorn, because this is the corrosive agent that corrodes all pretentiousness." We cannot underestimate the negative potential of a politician being wounded in or by a joke; in authoritarian and totalitarian countries, this can bring about negative consequences (which we refer to later on) because rulers fear any criticism, whether it be in comic or serious form. In the end, by showing political hostility, jokes test certain degrees of governmental tolerance and confront governmental repression. This is also valid for writing *about* political jokes; writers of such material in many circumstances must be very careful not to offend the wrong people (not to mention being very diligent in working to get their studies published at all).

See the following joke, which applies to diverse dictators:

A drunkard in Plaza de Mayo (Buenos Aires) is screaming, "The president is a son of a bitch; the president is a son of a bitch!!!"

Quickly, two policemen appear and start beating him for betraying the motherland, and they drag him away.

The poor drunkard starts to implore, "I was referring to the president of the United States!"

To which the policemen reply, "Don't try to confuse us; we know well who the son of a bitch is!"⁹

For politicians to appear as exceptional people is practically an existential requirement; this is why they strive to make myths about themselves to the extent of wanting to appear as demi-gods. The politician presents

himself before society as one of the best people in humanity, close to physical and moral perfection¹⁰ almost to the extent of not needing to reveal any emotion. To accomplish this, he needs to distance himself from society. The politician appears to not have the need to publicly accept that he is affected by human passions. Laughter equalizes people, and jokes create a social connection that does not necessarily benefit the politician. When a politician uses humor, it is to improve his image (Gardner, 1986) and to maintain himself above the common citizen. This is yet another sign of his superiority.

Political jokes attack this false myth and destroy the mystery within politics and the life of the politician. They allow us to see that politicians are creatures made of flesh and blood; they have families and lovers; they suffer, cry, age, make love, and even go to the bathroom. In brief, jokes strip away the mystical aura surrounding politicians; they reveal the sanctimony and show the horror they harbor regarding themselves—that they are human beings. We could perhaps play with Jerzy I. Lec's adage—"I hate my enemy because he looks so much like me"—or in the politician's words, "I hate the joke because it pictures me as I am."

Politicians search for a place in history with the best image possible, but the razor-sharp edge of jokes threatens to cut down that aspiration. When a joke appears in written form, it becomes part of recorded history and may even turn into a platform from which an attack may be later launched toward a once-solid political image. All of these are controversial ideas that scholars frequently evade.

4. There is general confusion about the concept that surrounds humor, and this complicates its analysis.¹¹ As I have said, humor is often confused with the comical, or with laughter, jest, caricature, comedy, parody, wit, irony, sarcasm, jokes, or satire, because even though these are all parts of humor, it is difficult to classify any or all of them as synonyms for it. It is necessary to explain that these concepts are different because their use implies a certain purposeful way to reflect certain states of being, and even cultural patterns.

Manifestations of humor and their subjects of attack are determined by historical, cultural, and social relations. Political jokes choose objectives with a political, cultural base, a political history and those political elements that irritate society. The science that looks to super-specialize often leaves out complex explanations, to an even further degree when the scientist cannot count on quantitative support to prove his hypotheses.¹² With this in mind, we will attempt to open a path to re-vindicate ourselves before the demanding mind that make positivism a nearly religious belief.¹³

of all cartoons or cartoon strips are caricatures;¹⁴ there is a position that approaches the matter of cartoons as if some of them are a minor art form, assuming that there are literary works that may be considered cartoons. This position openly contradicts the most conventional definition of *caricature* established by Acevedo (2000:8): “Political caricature is understood as the production of images that express a constant questioning of social relationships, by the use of satire, parody, and symbolic forms, such as allegory.” A taxonomy of humor in the arts and graphic humor demands further research—which is far from the purpose of this analysis—however, a point must have to be made to Barajas’s claim that the caricature triggered the Mexican Revolution, which refers more to his position as a caricaturist in the newspaper *La Jornada* than to a real proof that a very complex and sophisticated expression motivated an illiterate population to revolt (Barajas 2005, 2007).

In this book, I study involuntary and spontaneous behavior, in the sense that it is indirect, not binding, and not planned, though intentional. With difficulty, these characteristics can be attributed to cartoons or graphic caricature. In these forms of humor, a client relationship is established between author and reader that emerges through the joke. There are readers who follow an author because of a political ideological sympathy or a certain age or race identification, or other criteria, which drives them to agree with the author’s message.¹⁵ The reader’s agreement with the author doesn’t develop in jokes because they establish an ephemeral relationship. The anonymity in other forms of political humor generates a direct relationship precisely at the moment of communication. According to Freud (1973:137), there are three parts to a joke: the person who tells it, the person who listens to it, and the person who is the subject of it. An understanding is established between the one who tells the joke and the one who listens to it. As such, the speaker and listener bring about the subject of the joke, but the relationship between them ends as soon as the joke has been told. The one who tells the joke probably hasn’t invented it, and if he has, he surely would have in mind the subject of the joke and not the particular person he is telling it to. In that situation, no clientele relationship emerges.

In some cases, the political joke can be considered a caricature of a person or situation about which the ridicule is taking place, which in itself reveals another characteristic of jokes.

Our attention is focused on political jokes because it is the most common humoristic form, denoting a certain level of freedom. It does not create any lies and permits a certain amount of liberty, even though it may be ephemeral. Political jokes show the gaps in free social opinion, without

constraint indicating the themes used as part of social resistance and the limits of social transgression, representing a spontaneous form of political behavior. But, to better understand the jokes, let us first review the different types of political humor.

A Definition of Humor

Refraining from ostentation, we may put forward that basic questions about political humor, and especially about political jokes, are barely being formulated. These suggest certain theoretical and methodological directions at which the general discussion of humor is moving. However, it is the specific aspects of the political slope that should be looked at more closely.

Humor has a primary association with mood. This idea may reflect the physiological perspective and refer to bodily moods,¹⁶ which are believed to determine human health and predisposition (Goldenson 1984:415). Humor has a creative and curative power in that it is “amusing imagination, charming wit” and “romantic irony, equivalent to the triumph of the creative power of the soul of the artist over all form and content,” as Hegel affirms in Runces (1983:312); but it also identifies laughter with a pathological symptom (Moody, 1978). The energy released in laughter frees tensions and stress and helps cure personal illnesses and social frustration. Laughter is the result of a joke, satire, or comic reaction against aggression. In humor there is also found aggression and apprehension (*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1990: vol. 6, 144). Freud suggests, in the central aspects of analysis, that jokes are intentional and always have an objective.

The hidden intent of political humor is the correction of unwanted situations and the surpassing of social, moral, and political restrictions, especially those that are a result of political repression. The joke is a logical incongruence in which illogical syllogisms are built. See the following example:

Man: Hi there, new neighbor, it sure is a mighty nice day to be moving.

Neighbor 1: Yes, it is, and people around here seem extremely friendly.

Man: So what is it you do for a living?

Neighbor 1: I’m a professor at the university. I teach deductive reasoning.

Man: Deductive reasoning? What’s that?

Neighbor 1: Let me give you an example. I see you have a doghouse out back. By that, I deduce that you have a dog.

Man: That's right.

Neighbor 1: The fact that you have a dog leads me to deduce that you have a family.

Man: Right again.

Neighbor 1: Since you have a family, I deduce that you have a wife.

Man: Correct.

Neighbor 1: And since you have a wife, I can deduce that you're heterosexual.

Man: Yup.

Neighbor 1: That's deductive reasoning.

Man: Cool.

Later that same day, when our subject is talking with another neighbor:

Man: Hey, I was talking to the new guy who moved in next door.

Neighbor 2: Is he a nice guy?

Man: Yes, and he has an interesting job.

Neighbor 2: Oh? What does he do?

Man: He's a professor of deductive reasoning at the university.

Neighbor 2: Deductive reasoning? What's that?

Man: Let me give you an example. Do you have a doghouse?

Neighbor 2: No.

Man: Fag.

Be that as it may, political jokes not only play with syllogisms but also with the ideal images of politics to establish a new truth or reaffirm an old one. See the following joke, which suggests that corruption, when in the hands of a Mexican, has no geographical limit:

NASA opens a contest to launch a rocket to Venus, and since it is very risky, opens the possibility for the candidates to apply.

The Chinese guy arrives and he is told that the trip is high risk and what does he want in order to go:

"Chinese want a mirion dora."

"Why?"

"Because if Chinese no come back, with a mirion dora famiry opens creaner and rives well."

Then arrives the American, who is explained the conditions and asked, "What do you want?"

"American wants two million dollars."

"Why?"

"With one million family sets up a foundation with the other million, they live well."

Then arrives the Mexican; they go to explain, and he says:

"Buddy, I'm going, save your time; I'm going, it's done."

"But sir, we have to explain, that's the rule."

"Look buddy, it's done, I'm going."

They explain anyway, and they say:

"What do you want?"

"I want three million dollars."

"And what do you want three million for?"

"OK, look here, buddy, one million for you, one million for me, and we send the Chinese guy."

Humor expresses a moral lesson causing a moral correction produced by a positive emotion and the liberating energy of laughter.¹⁷ "In this case, the humorist is a moralist disguised as a scientist such as the anatomist who performs dissections to gross us out. Humor, in the strict sense of the word, is the transference of the moral for the scientific" (Bergson, 1973:107).

In difficult circumstances, humor serves as an instrument to perceive the funny aspect of a situation, or it lightens the spirit's load in an uncontrollable situation¹⁸—while at the same time, it redefines roles by putting the humorist, or the one who tells the joke, above his objective. One who tells jokes believes to have earned the legitimate right to critique the object of humor.

Political humor confronts situations that bother society, discovering or proposing a truth that may be illogical but in the end serves to bring light to the hidden political game. A joke need not tell the truth, but by attacking the official truth, it establishes reasonable doubt that questions politicians.

Jokes help reduce the distance that government has established in society between people and politicians. The State becomes autonomous from society, and those who govern develop a political project to represent themselves even when this pits them against society or even against the immediate interest of the ruling class (Schmidt, 1988). Against this autonomy, the elite try to limit politicians' power without destroying the system, preserving a façade of national unity behind which humor works as a confrontational instrument. With humor, the elite can participate without compromising themselves and without jeopardizing the stability of the political system. And humor is transmitted from the elite down to the people,¹⁹ providing a jubilant way of the people confronting the leadership, cutting social tensions and relieving political stressors without

putting the government in danger. The political joke is not pleasant for the government, but it turns out to be better than a revolt. Political humor is an instrument used to attack the political leadership that oppresses society, or because it violates political and moral values, norms, rituals, or symbols generated and imposed to defend those who govern. Both the transgression of the rulers and that of the joke must be public, and though they might not be communicated directly, the transgressing acts should produce awareness of themselves. Imagine a society that rejects its government, but never lets it know—and juxtapose this with a society that paints walls, organizes marches, and even sets off bombs to show its discontent. In the first case, the government may assume that harmony exists on its terrain, while in the second case, the government knows that it faces problems. Jokes are a social event; never remaining private, they therefore always transcend outwards. Even in systems in which an individual knows that he's being spied on, jokes are a transgressor because sooner or later the government will become aware of their ridicule.

A political joke adapts to circumstances and interests that model the moral order by means of which society organizes values and symbols to ridicule norms and rituals established by politics; this is inherent in a joke's transgressing character. For example, consider the joke my brother, a doctor, told me, which attacks a supposed pompous event:

The first Jewish president of the United States was being inaugurated. His mother was seated next to one of the secretaries of the new cabinet. Very excitedly, she said: "Do you realize what's happening? The first Jewish president of the United States is my son!"

The secretary turns and patiently says: "Yes, ma'am, I am very aware of it."

After a few moments she turns to him again and says: "But understand my son is the first Jewish president of the United States and he is . . . the brother to the doctor!"

This joke attacks the seriousness of a presidential inauguration with reference to the stereotypical image that Jewish parents (especially in the United States) want their sons to turn into the epitome of success as a member of one of the most prestigious and most well-paid professions: that of the physician. The social value is transmitted through the political joke to reduce the value of the politician's position and the importance of the political event, emphasizing that the doctor's profession is actually the

more socially accepted. After all, the supposed most powerful president in the world ends up in second place after his brother the doctor.

Political jokes look to denigrate and ridicule politicians and their image. Other forms of humor have the same role when applied to politics, though each genre has special characteristics that affect its circulation. Before getting into that, however, let us look at the taxonomy of humor to clarify our analysis.

Toward a Taxonomy of Humor

Morreall's thesis (1983:47) can be accepted thus: the essence of humor consists in the enjoyment of incongruence, and the psychological change that laughter brings is an emotional change—although it can also be sensory, perceptual, or conceptual, and on the latter terrain we must consider culture, history, and geography. In this section, we identify three elements and eight types of humor commonly recognized in the literature on the subject. The three elements—comedy, laughter, and wit—are general elements found in humoristic situations. Tricks, caricatures, comedy, parody, irony, sarcasm, satire and jokes are all the eight types of humor. The form and frequency of these types depend on cultural determinants and historical context. Comments regarding each one are limited, considering that my purpose is to present a taxonomy that will allow the organization of humoristic expressions to facilitate the analysis of humor. I look to various authors, assuming that their definitions are sufficiently precise.

General Elements Contained in Humor

Comedy

According to Bergson (1973:50, 64), what is comical can be defined as "all incidents that call our attention to something physical in a person when what is moral is important" and "all combinations of comical acts and occurrences which produce in us the illusion that life and the sensation of a mechanical disposition," as both are invested in each other. As Goldenson (1984:159) says, *comical* is "a word which means funny or laughable but as a concept . . . is not easy to define." Goldenson also points out that "Kant emphasized the element of surprise. The sudden transformation of a forced expectation to nothing."

Comicalness is something unexpected that shouldn't happen but does, at which point it creates a ridiculous situation. Take the case of the person whose pants fall down while he is dancing, or a person whose supermarket shopping bag suddenly breaks, or someone walking down the street who steps on a banana peel and slips and falls.²⁰ When such events occur, it is comical and provokes laughter.

Laughter

Speaking mechanically, laughter may be defined as “convulsive and pleasant sounds which serve to free intrinsic tension when we listen to a funny story or see a fun event.” Eidelberg says that “laughter should also be used as a defense against crying and against shame” (*Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis*, 1968; Goldenson, 1984:415). Morreall (1983:20) adds that laughter is like the release of nervous energy, and says, “Laughter has a social function because it is a natural expression of entertainment. We can use laughter before others, to seem in front of others as if we weren't bothered but rather as having fun in the situation we find ourselves in” (1983:56). And with hysterical laughter, according to Morreall, by “reacting with laughter the hysterical person denies the reality of a traumatic situation” (1983:57).

Eastman says that people use any excuse to gratify themselves with laughter, since it serves to unify society (1972:4), while Bergman says, “It's not a pure pleasure, I mean a purely aesthetic pleasure, totally disinterested. It carries with it a second intention. Within that pleasure goes the unconfessed intention to humiliate by which to correct.” Bergson's perception (1973:88) can help explain why laughter was historically excluded from religious rites, temples, and most formal events.

For his part, Provine (2001:44) says that “laughter is the quintessential human social sign. Laughter is about relationships.” But, he adds, it is also “a sign of domination or submission” (p. 30).

Finally, in Kundera's words (1987:96), we find the following sarcastic perception regarding laughter:

Things that suddenly are deprived of the sense that is attributed to them, of the place that has been assigned in the pretended order of the world a Marxist raised in Moscow believes in horoscopes, provoke our laughter. Laughter then belongs, originally, to the devil. There is a bit of malice in it [things appear different than what they pretend to be], but also a bit of benevolent relief [things are lighter than they appear,

they allow us to live more freely, and stop oppressing us with their severe austerity].

Wit

Wit is “a certain predisposition to portray quick sketches²¹ or such quick and subtle comical scenes that we have barely started to perceive what happened and it is already finished” (Bergson, 1973:91–92). Goldenson (1984:798) believes that “it is a mental function which consists in the ability to make entertaining and incisive commentaries that enlighten a subject or a person. In psychoanalysis wit represents a biting verbal replica, or a play on words, that suddenly, and with a punch, frees a repressed or hidden feeling or attitude.”

Wit entertains but also embarrasses its victim. A typical example might be the short joke known as the *one-liner*, or a joke that is based on stereotypes. But anecdotes can also be witty. For example, here is an anecdote describing Eva Perón as a prostitute:

During her trip throughout Europe, groups were protesting in Milan the high price of exported food charged by “fascist” Argentina. While stones and tomatoes hit her limousine, Eva addressed the admiral general who escorted her and complained:

“Do you hear that? They call me a whore!”

To what her escort responds:

“I understand perfectly; I haven't been in the ocean for fifteen years but they still call me admiral.” (Wilkie and Menell-Kinberg, 1981:106)

The admiral's wit is an important component of the anecdote because it creates an unexpected and illogical turnabout by attacking Evita's reputation even when his military discipline *should* impede it.

Jest

With jest, “the apparent primary goal is the satisfaction in having carried out what critique forbids and also foremost is the tendency to like and be content, that its expression should not seem to be off the mark, or lacking in content” (Freud, 1973:121).

Jest is “a fun commentary or one that makes fun of” something (*Webster's Dictionary*, 1955:386), which can be found in childhood games or

humorous comments about attire, haircuts, or even something supposedly important—see the following example (Nikito Nipongo, 1985):²²

“What is the definition of idiocy?”

“A serious and ingenious idea coming from the finance ministry.”

Caricature

According to Freud (1973:195), caricature is based on the “exaggeration of certain features that normally go unnoticed and constitute degradation.” Put another way, it is

artistic expression about people, ideas or situations, which is brought about by sculpture, painting or drawing, sometimes with the purpose of ridiculing and other times with the purpose of emphasizing to a grotesque, ironic or funny degree, the physical features of a figure or peculiar scene. (Pruneda, 1958:11)

Goldenson (1984:126) describes caricature while including the theme of authority—without diverging from the above definition:

A drawing or description of an individual whose peculiarities or defects are exaggerated with the purpose of ridicule. Psychoanalysts compare caricatures with a play on words, where repressed impulses such as hostility elude the censor in order to be expressed. For this reason caricatures often deal with authority.

Caricatures or cartoons have been the most exclusive form of humor, because to be transmitted, they must be printed skillfully. And after being printed, their dissemination excludes certain social groups, such as the illiterate, though more than one author suggests that in fact the graphic nature of the cartoon served to spread its revolutionary effect in Mexican society at the beginning of the twentieth century (González Ramírez, 1974). This assertion must be questioned because it includes a certain condescension toward the illiterate, suggesting that their political consciences might be considered easy to manipulate.

From this point of view, it may be inferred that illiterates are able to better understand graphic statements, but the cartoonists are so sophisticated that their work cannot be easily understood by those with less education,

and on occasion even by those who consider themselves sophisticated. Take, for example, several cartoons of Porfirio Díaz at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which there appear razor blades that represent flattery: in Spanish, *hacer la barba* means “to kiss ass,” and this would likely be unintelligible to someone who lives in the countryside and doesn’t use a razor. Other cartoonists make allegories out of Greek myths, which must be virtually unknown to the illiterate population.

Cartoons served as a pedagogical instrument for some immigrants to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, but even so, we must consider that the cartoons were made under the sieve for the interests of the owners of the newspapers in which they appeared.²³ Thus, we should examine whether the immigrants in question were altogether illiterate, or on the other hand consider the thesis that they were only illiterate regarding English. Perhaps we could accept this thesis, for those in Mexico, and assume that the cartoons served to educate people—but from there, to affirm that they were a creative medium of political conscience might be an exaggeration. If we were to discuss this thesis about the political elite, we should handle it with care. Part of this elite were revolutionaries, while another part criticized the regime—and yet another perhaps might try to change its political opinion due to what a certain cartoon was communicating. One despicable fact is that the regime attacked political cartoonists with all that it had. Many were jailed, and some died from diseases they contracted in jail, which could have turned public opinion against a dictator as he gradually lost his good image. What is certain is that historians have not shown evidence for any of these arguments; instead, they have tried to assume that political cartoons feed a movement of the masses that unleashed a revolution.

Unlike with other forms of humor, the cartoon creates a relationship with clientele that can help mold ideas and opinions, such as with the present case of Rius, who has helped educate a generation of Mexicans, or of the cartoonists of *La Jornada* (Magú, El Físgón, Helguera, and Hernández), who have comprised an important part of the left-oriented discourse in the latter part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Comedy

“Comedy can only begin where we are not moved by the person of the other and begins with what we can call rigidity toward social life” (Bergson, 1973:113)

Following Aristotle, Runes (1983:75) says that theater comedy

is a work where main characters behave worse than people do in everyday life, contrasted with tragedy, where the characters behave more nobly. In Plato's *Symposium* Socrates argues that a writer of good comedy is capable of writing good tragedy.

Runes adds, in relation to its philosophical aspect: "Metaphysically Hegel's comedy consists of looking at reality as a unique and exhaustive category."

Parody

"We accomplish parody if we portray what is solemn in a familiar tone" (Bergson, 1973:104). Manipulation in religious prayer offers a good example of parody, such as in the following case that was circulated in anonymous copies of single sheets of paper that were picked up in downtown Mexico City:

OUR FATHER

Father José López Portillo, you who are always away on trips, your name has been greatly celebrated, bring us your government, do what you desire, be it in the school or in the textbook, make our bread more expensive each day, please let us have it today, and forgive our taxes the way we forgive your trinkets, do not let us fall within the free election of your police and inspectors. Amen.

The following is an American parody of "Our Father":

Our Father, who are in heaven, hello! What be thy name?
Give us this day our daily breath.
Our Father Who art in heaven, Hollywood be thy name.
Our Father Who art in heaven, Harold be thy name.
Give us this day our jelly bread.
Lead us not into creation
Deliver us from weevils.
Deliver us from eagles.
(Phillips, 1981:20)

Irony

In some ways irony is unexpected. For Jankelevitch (1982:31–69):

It is something that we would call a simulation more than a dissimulation, a behavior full of tricks and refections, an insidious and complicated intrigue [. . .] it is improvisation and paradox. [. . .] And once it

has happened there is more truth and light. [. . .] it could be called in the true sense of the word, allegory, because it thinks one thing and in its own way says another.

Eastman (1972:49–52) considers irony to be the humor of the little emphasized. For Bergson (1973:107), it is transposition in two diverse directions. Sometimes it enunciates what should be—making believe that it's precisely what it is—and it is in oratory form. Runes (1983:312) adds: "Socratic irony is the profession of ignorance over the part of a question, which in itself can in fact be very judgmental."

For his part, Cioran (2004:34) notes:

Irony is derived from an appetite of frustrated unsatisfied naiveté, which must by means of failure become bitter and poisoned. Inevitably it has a universal reach and if by preference it attacks religion and undermines it, it's because it secretly experiences the bitterness of not being able to believe.

A joke about the end of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship proves to be a good example of irony:

It is said that when Porfirio Díaz resigned, he suffered a very strong toothache and in those days it was difficult to find a dentist. It seems there were only two, and they were both foreigners.

One of the complaints against Díaz is that he permitted foreigners to expand their business interests, hurting local interests. The irony lies in that people's complaint about foreign economic intervention was one of the leading causes for the common opposition to his rulership. The joke illustrates the feeling amongst the people regarding a set of unjust governmental actions.

Sarcasm

Perhaps the most sarcastic comment I ever heard was when a newly appointed high-level official was congratulated in the following manner: "My condolences, Mr. Secretary." "Sarcasm is a caustic and derisive comment, it is a form of verbal aggression" (Goldenson, 1984:652).

Satire

Satire is "a written composition in prose or verse, whose objective is to bitterly censure or ridicule people or things. It is a hot, biting, sharp saying,

or discourse” (*Universal Hispanic Dictionary*, 1964). For an example, see the following poem from the Mexican colonial era:

“Virrey Marquina”
 For perpetual memory
 Viceroy Marquina left us
 A fountain in which people urinate
 And that is where his story ends.

Joke

The quintessential joke is the most widely used form of humor. It engages in provoking laughter and the comical. Its laughable content usually creates a syllogism that distorts reality, creating a “logical incongruence” (Morreall 1983:74) through which a joke can easily in fact transform reality to fit itself, because it establishes truths about what people think. Jokes don’t necessarily turn all politicians into fools in the public mind (much less actually *make* politicians fools in reality)—but they do manifest in people’s thoughts that politicians may not be the most intelligent people in the world. Here precisely resides political jokes’ destructive ability.

Different analysts bring different definitions of the joke. For Freud (1973:9), it depends on “the ability to find analogies between the uneven, this is hidden analogies.” For Goldenson (1984:415), “a joke allows us to, albeit temporarily, leave adult reality and return to the dominion of simple childish pleasure.” Meanwhile, Howe (1951:217) asserts that “a joke usually involves an attack against someone.”

In any case, a joke certainly allows the ignoring of rules, and it usually has a hidden intention focused on judging something or someone unusual or unexpected. The following example emerged at the end of the Mexican Revolution:

One day, during the administration of Plutarco Elías Calles, an Indian peasant walks by the National Palace in Mexico City. At that time they were adding another story to the palace and so he found himself surrounded by scaffolds. The Indian went up to ask what was happening and he was told that they were building a third floor. The Indian answered:

“I can calm down.”

“Why?”

“I thought they were taking it apart to take it to Sonora.” (Aguilar de la Parra, 1971:29-30)

This joke alludes to the extreme corruption that allows politicians, including the legendarily corrupt revolutionary leaders (Fuentes, 1962), to take anything they want—in this case, parts of a building—back to their homes—in this case, Sonora. Many stories in Mexico support the opinion expressed in this joke (see chapter 4). However, more than anything else, political jokes reflect that which most troubles society, a population frustrated by the changing nature of politics.

Politics stops being a means for providing happiness to society when it instead becomes a tool for satisfying politicians’ appetite for power and wealth. And since corruption seduces, it gains legitimacy in society’s expansion (Le Bon and Boyes, 2005:45), especially in the expansion of those in society whom corruption directly benefits. But through telling jokes, which can evade the rule of law, one can exorcise the negative impact corruption creates. In the end, with corruption, there are shared gains, someone can break the law and pay to evade the punishment; from there results popular wit, such as the case of José López’s campaign theme, which was changed from *The solution is all of us* to *Corruption is all of us*.

Each one of the concepts described and analyzed in this section possesses its own specificity, yet because they are all found in the same intellectual and discursive arena, and they all have the same purpose, it is easy to generate confusion and to use them indiscriminately.

To confuse matters further, we must recognize that societies cultivate different varieties of humor according to the unique characteristics of certain historical periods, meaning that specific forms of humor may have different degrees of importance depending on the historical period. Still, it cannot be doubted that even though expressions of humor change, all expressions have a highly defined place within a society’s social lingo.

Political Humor as Iconoclasm

Humor not only serves to free us of something that frustrates us—it is also a transgressing instrument through which we can overlook certain social norms and values, as well as put down certain symbols. As we saw above, through humor, we can parody religion, representing a rebellion against the dogmatic; we can satirize public figures and the pompousness of their acts; we can mock those situations that are vital to the life of politicians; we can create irony to express the incongruence of political decisions; we can make public discourse into a comedy, as we turn it into the object of

our sarcasm; and finally, we can develop funny critiques and tell jokes to diminish political ostentation.

Equipped with the tool of humor in all its forms, society can assail political values and symbols, taking the heroism out of political history—as it did in the case of the young girls who made fun of child heroes and other boys distorting the national anthem (see chapter 3)—because at the pace at which history moves, reconstruction of official discourse is very difficult. Whether it is a critique recovered from the past and validated for use in the present, or a newly generated critique projected toward the past to degrade the present, the attack against political icons through humor is a response to a general discontent, aimed at what contemporary politicians feed on. If, with humor, we establish that our politicians are more fools than heroes, the heroic base—which the establishment adopts—loses validity.

The importance lies not only in the fact that political humor may degrade the politician—even if he is president of a republic—but also in the fact that it may generate a devastating effect in attacking an iconic symbol and transforming it into a caricature. This is evident in the razor-blade cartoon work of Porfirio Díaz that we discussed earlier (González Ramírez, 1974: illustration 43).

Being a free and liberating medium, humor destroys symbols. It engulfs moral considerations and puts the validation of symbols under the axe, never halting in the destructive, clandestine objective of weakening the dominant iconography. Nevertheless, the possibility also exists that the government will react or that society will destroy this system. As an old Mexican saying goes, “Once the dog is dead, the rabies epidemic will end,” in which case certain values and symbols will recover their place, though renovated, and humor restarts again.

Political Humor and Participation

Different forms of political participation characterize different political systems, reflecting the relationship between society and the State. In a democratic system, people participate in a wide variety of institutions that together legitimize the system as a whole, and not just the government. That is why democratic governments can fall without creating major damage to the system. Citizens involved one way or another in the complex decision-making process can support or oppose different projects with relative effectiveness because the government has the power to impose its decisions on society. The more open and democratic the system is, the

more power society has to limit the degree of governmental imposition. The limits on social action come from a complex combination of factors to which the government, politicians, civil associations, and citizens all contribute. What is remarkable is that there is no formula that can synthesize all forms of action, limitation, and repression.

The limitation of social actions in a repressive system points to what the government considers—because it has so determined—to pose a threat to the system, even though these are social demands that may be taken care of without major complications in another system. In fact, the State feeds its great power with its ability to determine the origin and make-up of “evil”²⁴ that assails the sociopolitical and economic system as a whole, or any of its parts. One interesting example occurred under Roman law, in which the crimes of *laesa maiestas* were those that hurt the security of Rome, the emperor, or the Roman provincial governments (Cohn, 2004): The definition of these crimes was so extensive that it included jokes about the emperor.

Within authoritarian systems, participation tends to be controlled and manipulated by the State. Elections hold a ritual and symbolic role, since the results are predetermined. Society has little power to influence the deciding processes, and some groups opt to participate within the margins or outside of institutional political processes. Authoritarian regimes have a certain level of tolerance with respect to marginal participation, even though they support open systems of oppression that hold capricious and arbitrary repression of liberties as an essential characteristic.

In totalitarian systems, society practically and essentially lacks any influence in the decision-making process because there is no liberty. Elections, if they even exist, play no role in the making of decisions, since these are made at levels of power that are out of the reach of average citizens.²⁵ Marginal participation is forbidden, and is risky for any person who does assume it. Systems of repression openly repress any expression that the State considers inadequate. The Nazis, for example, created courts to judge those who made jokes about Hitler or who named their dogs or horses Adolf. Hermann Goering instructed the German Academy of Law to sanction these types of jokes as acts against the Führer, the State, or the entire Nazi system (*Weltanschauung*).

One of the challenges of political participation is *creating* room for dissent when there is no such room. In democratic systems, society finds ways to organize itself and tries to limit any insidious elements of domination. These elements complicate matters within authoritarian systems due to two factors. The first is that, according to Detlev Peukert (quoted by Le Bon and

Boyes, 2005), resistance implies that reservations of a regime originate from a personal code of beliefs and behaviors that are expressed through a lack of enthusiasm, or a person withdrawing from the collective life, restricting, as much as possible, social interaction—or becoming a dissident. The second factor has to do with governmental action meant to limit the spaces and time of free and independent political expression, and therefore resistance.

If all political systems have a certain level of tolerance for this resistance, some social and political groups differ from using unconventional or underground methods. Because of this, we can identify different types of resistance that depend on a society's level of political liberty and governmental tolerance, but also its level of political frustration.

Political resistance can be defined as the refusal to cooperate²⁶ with the structures of political power and authority. We can distinguish between passive and active political resistance. Active resistance can be both violent and not violent.²⁷ Violent forms include guerilla movements and invasions of lands. Nonviolent forms include rallies, marches, and strikes. Passive political resistance encompasses electoral abstention, civil disobedience, and political humor. Let us now go on to explore the manifestations of political humor.

Manifestations of Political Humor

Political humor is a complex phenomenon. It is a manner of public participation in politics as reflected in jokes, nicknames, caricatures, and parodies. In Mexico, there exist anagrams and satirical poems written specifically for one person or one occasion, or adapted to create a special political impact.²⁸ Each one of these manifestations varies in its intensity, content, and usage, according to the historical period in which it circulated, though some continue in their popularity. (There are jokes that have existed for nearly a century and have crossed borders, as we will later show.) In a study on humor, it is important to identify the type of humor that prevails in jokes, parodies, satire, and other forms. Even if we know that the joke is the most common type, it is worthwhile to analyze all of humor's themes and tones.²⁹

Some manifestations of political humor do not lend themselves to wide use. Nicknames, for example, are usually based on a certain characteristic of an individual, and thus they are used in only one situation—and they are not always able to be transferred from one culture to another, being perhaps of the most culturally restricted type of humor. This can be seen

with the nickname “Tricky Dick,” given to Richard Nixon after he manipulated the results of an electoral investigation, whose phonetics are very difficult to achieve in another language. Or consider “The Dog,” the name given to José López Portillo after declaring that he would defend the peso like a dog—just before the peso was devaluated (along with “The Dog”). Similarly, the ex-Bolivian president, Víctor Paz Estensoro³⁰ was nicknamed “IncaPaz” (with *incapaz* meaning “incapable” in Spanish); such a play on words is impossible to imitate in other tongues.

It is similar with anagrams made out of names, which consist of small changes in the order of letters in a name to achieve a comical and satirical effect. For example, an anagram for Álvaro Obregón is VENGO A ROBARLO (“I COME TO STEAL IT”).

Parodies of religious prayers are few and far apart and scarcely in circulation, probably because they are not very versatile and they tend to brush up against the sacrilegious, possibly offending certain listeners. On the technical side, it may be difficult to learn them when they are very long, and circulating them is not easy because they demand prolonged attention. The following is an example of this type of humor adapted to politics:

CREDO

I believe in the all-powerful PRI, creator of candidates on Earth. In de la Madrid, his only son. Our Father. He was born from the Bank of Mexico and appeared surrounded by his army of technocrats. He was made up, photographed, enlarged, and televised, and on the third day believing to be dead he came back to life among the dead. He went up to the presidential mansion (Los Pinos), he re-built it, he changed their street, and he is sitting with the International Monetary fund to the right of the PRI. We believe in his stone face, in the holy institution of taxes, in the fiscal deficit, in the public debt, and in the terrible life of the future world. Amen.

The same difficulties are found in political humor in the form of oral poetry, since it ends up being long and difficult to communicate and demands a greater effort, factors that cause the loss of humor.³¹ When the narrator utilizes the elements of oral poetry to transmit his humorous message, the attention of the listener may likely vanish,³² and the humor will be lost.

Beyond needing brevity, political humor needs a comic effect, sarcastic or ironic, to be transmitted and make an impact. For an example, let's look at the following fragment of a poem:

Gorillas

Soy un gorila, tengo mi fusil	I am a gorilla, I have my rifle,
por la consigna me he de morir	For it is my duty to die,
y si me dicen que habrá democracia	And if they tell me there will be democracy,
a fuerza de bombas lo he de impedir.	By means of bombs I will stop it.
Me sostiene el Chace Manhattan	Chase Manhattan supports me,
y también la Wall Street.	And Wall Street too.
Si ordena la Casa Blanca	If the White House orders it,
yo doblaré la cerviz.	I will bend over backward in submission.

(Gallo, 1987:256).

In the historical context of this poem, written during the 1968 student movement, the police were called gorillas. The allusion not only degraded the president, whose physical ugliness had won him the emblem of monkey, but also exploited the image of the gorilla as an ugly and aggressive animal. On the other hand, a typical political attack in Mexico was (and is) accusing someone of working for the United States,³³ and that year's conflict was no exception. Word spread around of a hoax that the student movement stemmed from CIA and KGB conspiracies.³⁴

The diversity and wealth of humor reflects, in part, social complexity, because we can assume that diverse groups have preferences for different types of humor. These groups' social, historical, and cultural characteristics determine the prevalence of any certain form of humor—though as we've expressed, jokes are the predominant humoristic manifestation because they are brief, easy to transmit, favor social relations, circulate better than other forms of humor, and, presumably, are more effective in having their message reach politicians and others in power.

Political Jokes

The joke is the most important manifestation of political humor because it is intentional, it is hostile, and it can be obscene due to a tendency to produce figurative nudity—at least, says Freud, “those jokes that have a tendency to run the risk of tripping up against people who find them undesirable to listen to” (1973:79). The political joke's obscenity consists in denuding politicians, bringing them down from their pretentious superiority. In the following paragraph taken from a book of Freud's (1973:87), I decided to replace the word “sexual” with the word “political” to demonstrate the value of denuding in humor:

Smut is like an exposure of the *political* differed to whom it is directed. By the utterance of the obscene words it compels the person who is assailed to imagine the part of *politics* or the procedure in question and shows her that her assailant is himself imagining it. It cannot be doubted that the desire to see what is *political* exposed in the original motive of smut.

It can only help to clarify things if, at this point, we go back to a hypothetical primary desire to touch the *political* parts. As, so often, looking has replaced touching.³⁵

As with politics, sexuality is repressed in everyday communications and must be expressed within accepted social norms. The knowledge of politics is hidden from social perception, forcing people to accept politicians' decisions. Politics, as a public matter, hides from society and becomes something private. This is a fundamental distortion that reinforces humor's effect: politicians have stripped society of public representation and have turned it into a private game that evolves exclusively among politicians. Politicians in fact turn to secret negotiations and yet demand legitimacy and the social acceptance of their dealings.

Sex and politics are hidden from the common person's eye, and this causes frustration to the people. One of the risks of democracy consists in substituting the people for politicians, which tends to happen when political maneuverings are handled in secret. Within these lies the process for the nomination of candidates, congressional negotiations, and even the negotiation of electoral results. The average citizen does not usually confront the resulting decision of such negotiations. Sometimes he is asked to ratify them with his vote, but that occurs when he has little or no capacity to influence the political process, which further frustrates him. The nomination of Dan Quayle as vice presidential candidate of the United States in 1988 is a classic example. It is very possible that the revelation of the impact of Quayle's economic position angered many Americans because it destroyed the image of democracy as an open game with equal opportunities. This, in part, explains—in addition to his proverbial ignorance—the great number of jokes that were made about this character. The same can be said about Vice President Dick Cheney (2000), who was the head of Halliburton, a business that has benefited with big contracts in Iraq and that is enveloped in a serious suspicion of bad management and economic abuse. As the saying goes, history repeats itself. In this case, the history of the power of money repeats itself, and the humoristic response is that the one who really governs was Cheney, and not George W. Bush.

Sex and politics must be attacked and unveiled to overcome frustrations. Jokes help in the following manner:

1. The joke is a spontaneous manifestation, an involuntary behavior, and even though its effect is immediate, it can be considered ephemeral. Its most valuable feature is that it produces pleasure; it is a hilarious expression that produces relaxation. In this manner, the joke has a great advantage over politics, since its serious nature cannot generate a socially gratifying effect.

2. The gratifying effect³⁶ of the joke is short lived, but within a social context this effect is magnified because it is transmitted and generalizes, making room for a prolonged social response, while the pleasure that politics produces is restricted only to those who can extract a benefit from it. If political pleasure becomes lewd, it is very different from that which humor allows, because it is selfish, while the pleasure of the joke, though ephemeral, is social.

3. The joke is a means of dealing with reality, especially in its most crude form. It is a cathartic expression and an act of self-defense against the abuse of power.

4. What is funny is in large part determined by cultural context (see Freud's discussion about the word *famillionar* and its connotation in a capitalist society). The joke is based on cultural values and symbols that are not often shared by other cultures. As a result, when we speak of "British humor," the frequent experience is that if a joke of that country is told in a different cultural or social context, rather than laughter it might be greeted with expressions of surprise. The political culture determines the funniness of political jokes.

5. The joke in general has its cycle: It goes from blooming into decadence and then into oblivion (Eastman, 1972:31). Most jokes follow this pattern, though some tend to have a longer lifespan than others and move both geographically and culturally. Following Bergson (1973:72-73), one could say that a joke has a dynamic effect: "an effect that propagates, growing in such a manner that the cause, insignificant in the beginning, reaches throughout a necessary progress, a result as unexpected as it is important." The political joke is often short lived when it is personalized against the head of state, but its life can be extended if the joke's essence is drawn out and transported to another era or culture to be expressed in a different context. The joke can allegorically emphasize the repetition of an event and make us incessantly remember its comical aspect; this is why, when dealing with a systemic circumstance, such as a people having a lack of freedom,

the situation that the joke critiques is preserved and is easily transmitted to other cultures with similar problems. Jokes about lacking freedom are easily understood because they deal with a universal value that is trampled on. The oppression being joked about is what awakens sympathy in us. Banc and Dundes (1986) followed the path of jokes in communist countries and found them to be repeated often and long lived, since those societies suffered from the same political vicissitudes, and if politics frustrates individuals, political jokes acquire universal value for them. The question is how to find common values and concerns among different cultures. When this happens, the same joke with minor corrections is applied in several countries. Such is the case about a Republican banker in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, about President Echeverría in the 1970s, and an Egyptian general during the Six Day War in 1967 (Lukes and Galnoor, 1985:167):

An Egyptian needed a brain transplant, so he went to the store to see what was available. The salesman showed him the brain of a mathematician who died at fifty-nine years old and said because of the mathematician's advanced age the Egyptian could have it for \$500. The Egyptian thought that the brain's age could be disadvantageous, so he asked for a different brain. They showed him that of a peasant who died at 25. The Egyptian shook his head; it was improper for his social class to have the brain of a peasant. At that moment, he saw a brain in a very well lit display and asked, "What's this?"

"Well, this is our best product," said the salesman. "It is the brain of an Egyptian general who died fighting against the Israelis. It costs \$100,000.

"Why so expensive?" asked our customer.

"Well, it's never been used!"

The essence of this joke survived more than seventy years since its original American version, even though the Mexican and Egyptian jokes are more recent (the Egyptian one being from 1967 and the Mexican one from 1971 to 1975). As it is told in the United States, the most expensive organ in the joke is the heart (which has never been used) of a Republican banker, while in Egypt it is the (never used) brain of a military leader and in Mexico it is the (never used) brain of a political leader. There is no cultural relationship among the three country's societies to explain the ways in which this joke was transferred. Perhaps the proximity of Mexico to the United States helps explain its transmission in that case, but not

its long-lived subject matter—unless we accept our frustrations with our leaders as a common denominator among societies. In the United States, the thing most desired in the joke comes from a stony-hearted banker; in Mexico and Egypt, it is the intelligence—or lack thereof—of a politician and a general. In all three cases, the person in society listening to the joke is meant to react strongly against the person in the joke who boasts power, as well as the failure that this character's behavior leads to. In one joke, the powerful character fails in the arena of financial interest and wellbeing, in another, the military man fails at leading a war, and in the third, the powerful politician fails at leading a nation.

6. The joke serves to subtly criticize the character in power, and it has a small chance of causing a strong reaction by virtue of the fact that it leaves no room for polemics or debate.³⁷ When a joke criticizes, it is a categorical, rotund, and determinant criticism, since opposition to political debate isn't open for discussion—nor does the joke pretend to convince.

Even when the joke intends to be synthetic, it is explicit enough to leave no doubt as to what it is attacking. For example, in the following joke about Luis Echeverría, there is no doubt that what is being criticized is his lack of intelligence:

Echeverría finds himself looking for a scuba-diving wetsuit in a sailor's berth. The sailor comes in and, surprised, he asks, "What are you doing here, Mr. President?"

"I'm looking for a wetsuit."

"Why?"

"Because the captain told me that, deep down, I'm not an asshole."

Here is another joke, which comes from the era during which Poland was under a communist regime; it criticizes the country's lack of freedom as a result of Soviet domination:

A genie appears to a Polish laborer and grants him three wishes. Three times, the laborer wishes for China to invade Poland. The genie asks why he chose the same wish three times.

The Pole responds, "Can you imagine how the Russians are going to end up after the Chinese go back and forth six times?"

7. The political joke works as a contradiction to achieve its humor. For example, in the case of a joke about a politician, it is assumed that the politician will be commonly shown as *intelligent, moral, and honest*³⁸—but

when a joke makes the politician assume the opposite attributes, the character becomes funny and causes laughter:

Bush asks how the Jews know it all: "If Saddam Hussein plans to invade Kuwait, they know it; if Assad plans to invade Lebanon, they know it; if the PLO plans to attack, they know it. How do they do it?"

"Well, Mr. President, they go to synagogue, they speak Yiddish to each other, and they ask what's new. And that is how they get a hold of the information."

Bush responds, "I want to learn Yiddish."

They teach him Yiddish, dress him like an Orthodox Jew, beard and all, and on Saturday they send him to synagogue. He sits down and asks in Yiddish to the man sitting next to him, "What's new?"

"*Shhh*, be quiet," says the man. "Bush is coming today."³⁹

8. The political joke has strength because it is logical. It builds syllogisms strong enough to destroy the image of a politician; its logical consistency makes it funny, though perhaps unrealistic. In the above joke, it's obvious that Bush's helpers weren't going to tutor Bush in accelerated Yiddish to be able to pass as a Jew in the synagogue. Normally, Orthodox Jews know each other, and they know if an outsider will be arriving. But, believing, after all, that he is Jewish they also reveal that they know that the president is going to be in the synagogue. The result is that the president of the United States, who controls the most powerful intelligence institutions in the world, actually has to rely on going to a synagogue to find out what is going to happen in the future. This is how the syllogism serves to turn the politician into the victim. See the following example:

Echeverría is digging at the base of a tree when his helpers ask him what he's doing.

He answers, "I'm looking for the square root."

According to the syllogism established in the joke, for Echeverría the tree has a root, there exists a square root; therefore, the square root must be under the tree. This syllogism classifies somebody as ignorant who should not be; as such, the incongruence and contradiction make it funny.

9. The political joke has a liberating energy because the individual citizen temporarily abandons his social responsibilities and recovers his freedom by abandoning his identity with the symbols and obligations imposed by the politicians who govern him.

The citizen doesn't attack the motherland, even though he may degrade its national symbols. With the joke, he confronts politicians to strip them of their power, a power that is used by experienced politicians in such a way that the common citizen cannot understand. For this, understanding would imply that access to power is open, and control would be lost over society, as well as the ever-present project of governing society.⁴⁰

The secrecy in politics helps the State to maintain its autonomy from society. The joke looks to diminish that autonomy, and though ephemerally, to limit the power of politicians.

10. Power is managed from an underworld hidden from the eyes of citizens, even though its effect is felt on a daily basis. The following joke illustrates this distortion:

A telegram arrives for a mayor in the Guerrero mountain range. It reads: TELLURIC TREPIDATION MOVEMENT RECOGNIZED IN YOUR AREA. SEND INFORMATION.

Two, three, and four weeks go by.

Finally, in the sixth week, a telegram comes in response: MOVEMENT SUFFOCATED. TELLURIC IS DEAD. TREPIDATION AND FIFTEEN OTHER BASTARDS TOOK FLIGHT, BUT WE FOLLOWED THEM CLOSELY. IN THE MEANTIME WE DIDN'T SEND INFORMATION BECAUSE WE HAD ONE HELL OF AN EARTHQUAKE.⁴¹

This joke shows the government's attitude towards dissidence and can reflect society's fear. I have found evidence of a telegram sent by the dictator Porfirio Díaz to the governor of Veracruz (nicknamed "The Panther"), where per a revolt by a lieutenant in a steamship, he ordered his men to "capture the vessel, shoot the officials and ten percent of the crew, all people involved in this campaign, and then inform." The governor ordered the detention of nine people; they were executed, and when faced with a national uproar, the governor said that he "was only following superior orders and had a quiet conscience." At the same time he was being protected by the dictator, who appointed him senator of the state of Hidalgo, the governor of Oaxaca, and made the judge presiding over his case declare himself incompetent. According to Barajas, "Popular voice interprets the sense of instructions well and summarizes them with a solid phrase: 'Kill them on the spot! ¡Mátalos en caliente!'" (2007:172–183). It is possible that the joke has evolved since this event in 1879, taking on a more recent topic.

There are key words that dominate communication between politicians and society. With these words they mask their intentions – it is what Scott

(1990:52–55) defines as "euphemizing or stigmatizing actions or people who seem to question official reality." In Mexico, a movement usually represents a political protest. This joke reveals politicians' obsession with fighting dissention, and that is why the mayor reacts with all his might to accomplish what is expected of him: disarm the movement, at all costs. The joke expresses the citizen's rejection of this persecutory mentality. The citizen knows that politicians are always loyal to power, on the side of the State, even if this implies stomping on individual, civil, or human rights. The local politician's reaction is supported by this principle of submission before the higher spheres of power, which establishes another logic – that power emanates from power, and not from the people.⁴² In Mexico, and perhaps in other countries, a politician's career depends on his capacity to pull strings in order to influence the political game; it doesn't stem from specific actions representing the people's interests.

With humoristic attacks, the citizen takes revenge by turning the image of the politician into that of a silly and aggressive macho. In this way he gets even because in the political arena the politician controls legitimate violence and the rules and methods of the game. The citizen plays at a disadvantage for he doesn't know those rules or real politik. With the joke he levels the playing field.

With the joke, the confrontation between civil society and the politician remains in the realm of the symbolic, without personalizing or going against the citizen. This is in some ways the history of democracy. Governments define themselves according to the level of representation in the population as well as the degree to which they impose themselves on society. They use methods that are more or less democratic, with relative social acceptance and representation. From there, the use of humor should be an important component in the democratic game. Within this scope and within democracy, for once, perhaps society wins. It unmaskes power and denudes politicians, stripping them of their larger-than-life image, criticizing what it wants to criticize, and destroying established symbols. Meanwhile, neither fools nor the invisible hand of legitimate violence can reach it. Nor can anybody be deprived of liberty, because it is society in the abstract that is transgressing, and because of that the common citizen enjoys the opportunity for freedom.

The following example criticizes the politician's false honesty and juxtaposes honesty with feminine virginity. One is a fundamental value of the democratic system, and the other is a fundamental principle of social morality in many religions. The objective of this riddle is to symbolically destroy the truth

What is the difference between a virgin and a politician?

Answer: When the virgin says “no,” it means “maybe”; when she says “maybe,” it means “yes”; and when she says “yes,” she is no virgin. On the other hand, when the politician says “yes,” he means “maybe”; when he says “maybe,” he means “no”; and when he says “no,” it means he is no politician.

11. One of the most important questions surrounding the political joke consists of determining the relationship between the type of political system portrayed and the political humor being used.

Conventional thinking suggests that there is a negative correlation between humor and democracy, assuming that with less freedom comes greater humoristic expression. There is no evidence to prove this affirmation—but we may modify it, suggesting that less freedom elevates the role of humor to that of liberator. Nevertheless, different problems emerge when analyzing this affirmation. For starters, democracy⁴³ doesn’t consist only of the realization of effective and honest electoral processes. Rather, it has to do with the existence of equality and freedoms; for the purposes of our study, I put in first place the freedom of expression.

We may suggest that democracy is a system in which liberties are extensive and guaranteed; in authoritarian regimes the government and the State have an arbitrary management of liberties, and in totalitarian systems liberty is completely absent. Nevertheless, we must be careful with two aspects. First, we must be conscious enough to not get into any discussion regarding the preference of ideologies that distract from rigorous critical analysis. Second, we must be careful not to fall into quantitative traps. We may suggest that to prove the relationship between jokes and democracy would require a rigorous and workable definition of the democratic concept, which in itself is problematic to obtain. Buscy (1985), Russell H. Fitzgibbon, and Kenneth F. Johnson in Tomasek (1966) and Gupta (1990)—to mention but a few—present the limitations of the definition that quantify the characteristics of democracy. Their work shows the need to generate an index that will establish a scale for political systems, but these types of indexes have great shortcomings due to a strong ideological component in their elaboration. This, no doubt, can be accomplished by means of models that measure phenomena. However, we can also move in another direction, such as in one that proposes measuring the quality of the democracy.⁴⁴ Such a task elevates the analysis to a different dimension because not only are elections quantified but also we must consider the citizen’s control over political systems and the degree to which the society is politicized. Still, many scholars criticize this approach as biased.

In any case, we find the need to formulate a taxonomy and typography of universal political humor and quantify them adequately to correlate both variables. To begin, we must accept that it’s not possible to quantify all jokes: a possible methodological obstacle. The lack of *exact numbers* in humor doesn’t nullify the analysis because numbers may be replaced with a qualitative, semantic, or semiological analysis of humor. This may help us understand the mood of a specific part of society, and here we must insist that no one may assume that political humor represents the opinion of *all* of society. The analysis of humor is a subjective expression of certain social segments. We should not lose sight of this aspect and continue with the objective of overcoming methodological obstacles that could become metaphorical straightjackets that would simply deny the development of a new focus of political analysis.

Even if we were to resolve this problem, we would still require the correlation of the type of political system with the qualitative aspect of political humor. Measuring jokes is a monumental task, especially because, as we’ve already mentioned, they are ephemeral and not always recorded. We must calibrate the *sharpness* or *crudeness* of a joke, and this can vary historically and geographically even within the same country—a clear indication of its complex character. We may conclude that analyzing jokes implies analyzing subjective expressions contained in the greatly inexact area of social values.

Political jokes indeed have to do with democracy. We find different types of political jokes in different types of political systems. Take, for example, the difference and impact of the role of television in the United States and Mexico. The Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., registered in just one year (1990) 3,025 televised political jokes, including those about the president. Up until the twenty-first century, it was ridiculous to think that we would one day see presidential jokes on Mexican television. There are several instructive anecdotes about the level of censorship that existed—and exists—in this medium.

Using a collection of jokes as indicators, we can compare political systems even when they are not similar. Let’s take the Romanian collection of jokes from Banc and Dundes (1986) as an example of those developed under a totalitarian regime, those from Schmidt (1996) as an indicator of jokes from an authoritarian regime, and those from the Center for Media and Public Affairs (1990) as an example of jokes from a democratic regime. This abbreviated comparison test demonstrates that there are more political jokes in a democratic system and that that number is drastically reduced in the totalitarian system. If we add in the factor of mass media, we find that while in democracy it is not unusual to find jokes on television, in the other

two systems they are rare or nonexistent. The number may turn out to be irrelevant because the impact of the jokes may be greater in a totalitarian regime, in which criticism is persecuted. Here, the joke can turn into the only form of political critique. Such was the case during the Nazi and Soviet regimes, for even though they successfully silenced criticism, they could not put an end to jokes.

Hypothetically, we suggest that jokes have a relationship with economic development and the consequent urbanization. Political power is concentrated in capital cities, and in cities in general, where economic power is centralized. This phenomenon is exacerbated, since most countries are predominantly urban. Consequently, the concentration of human populations that are found near the sources of power experience political fallout in a more significant manner because they are more exposed to formal and informal information. Certainly, in these populations, given the effect of mass media, jokes are more easily spread because people are familiar with the governmental elite and they are more sensitive to “bedroom secrets,” which are also a source of rumors and jokes.

The amount and the sharpness of jokes vary according to the *juncture* as well as the quality of democracy even though there are certain topics that remain from the past. Examining the Mexican case turns out to be very useful in shedding some light on this point. Mexico is a country that has some basic democratic components, such as systematic elections, political parties, and organizations. Nevertheless, in the literature, Mexico is considered to be an authoritarian system (Stallings and Kaufman, 1989; O'Donnell, 1986). Political jokes circulate widely around such themes as corruption, and their sharpness varies; however, even when the political system is very open, humor doesn't reach the masses. A good example of this can be seen in the case of Héctor Suárez, a popular comedian who told a joke about President Carlos Salinas and was fired by the station on which it was aired.⁴⁵

12. The discussion about the usefulness of relating a number of jokes with a political system, to identify characteristic and thematic differences in political jokes, according to a specific system, has been insufficient. The superficial analysis of political humor, which is based on collecting jokes from a specific period, has led to mistaken conclusions, such as the negative correlation between humor and freedom. This allows us to suggest that to understand this type of humor it must be examined in relation to socio-political elements, such as with research into how society perceives itself.

If we accept Almond and Verba's (1963) definition of political culture as the way in which the individual sees himself before power and the government, we can conclude that different forms of political participation

exist in a given political system. In all systems, there are jokes, and these jokes derive from the political culture; a symbiotic relationship is created in which jokes and political culture feed off each other. Let there be no doubt—no matter the attitude of politicians—that political humor has a great importance in the political system. I thus put forth the idea that political humor represents a social opinion regarding politics and is an important component of political culture.

Political culture also determines the forms of participation within a political system. Voting is one of the most important, because it nourishes the creation of a consensus, and it is verifiable. This facilitates the approval of society as a whole and generates legitimacy for the system. That is how legal legitimacy is attained: The fact that a candidate is elected by a majority in an honest election gives the system legitimacy.

Nevertheless, beyond voting, the level of influence a given society has over politics can vary. Society in general has a limited influence on certain political events, as with, for example, the selection of candidates, because even when the process is an open one, society is faced with a limited number of options to choose from. A typical case is the selection of the candidate for vice president of the United States, since he is selected by the presidential candidate through a secret process. Therefore, to counteract society's lack of say in certain decisions, other forms of political participation—from electoral abstention⁴⁶ to political humor—develop. Through these means, society demonstrates the channel through which it prefers to send differing messages to communicate its opinion.

On another level, we have citizens who are able to participate in labor unions, civil associations, nongovernmental organizations, professional groups, and interest or pressure groups. By means of the same activity, they can reinforce the system, but abstention only weakens it. It is paradoxical that those in power, who require for their legitimacy an increase in political participation, might try to manipulate the very political process but thus end up supporting electoral abstention.⁴⁷

In Mexico, neither presidential re-election nor consecutive congressional re-election exists, except regarding labor, peasant leaders, and other positions such as university presidents. In this manner, the system supports its leaders in different organizations that—even though they are often corrupt—exercise iron-like social and political control. While citizens continue to participate in social organizations, the political system is legitimized in general, since society lives its daily life according to the established order. This allows a political stability that is complemented by the efficiency of the administration and the electoral system.

When people are frustrated with the political imposition on their lives, different social and political reactions occur, among which are electoral abstention and attacks on politics by means of jokes.

13. In nondemocratic regimes, jokes facilitate an underground political participation comparable to the power's exercise of police methods. To confront and attack power, one should situate one's self on the same grounds that those of power stand on. Obviously, the confrontation is still unequal because while politicians count on efficient instruments to act when they feel that there are threats against their system, the citizens have weaker weapons, many of them informal, such as political jokes. Those who tell jokes are not expecting to overthrow power, but rather to ridicule the powerful and what they represent.⁴⁸ Jokes are one of the means that society uses to defend itself from the excesses of power. Society makes up damaging anonymous revenge through humor without provoking a backlash; they are a form of resistance that avoids the "open confrontation with the structures of authority which it resists,"⁴⁹ and in democratic systems they are a balancing mechanism in the hands of society.

Political humor destroys the seriousness, solemnity, pomposity, and ritual that surround politics. Losing respect or fear regarding politics reduces one's obedience to power and promotes society's mobilization. On the other hand, a individual who only has humor left as a form of expression possesses very limited—almost *no*—formal participation. Politics stops being of interest to him because the access routes to power are closed off. That is why a demagogue's lies and secrecy gain him favor in a society that has to keep quiet in front of their government's lack of transparency.

Jokes don't lie, they don't fool, nor do they use subterfuges; they are beyond party logic and beyond the calculations of a system's need to reproduce itself. Political humor allows an individual to confront politics and politicians, without violence and all while relatively safe from retaliation. Political humor is a form of free political expression⁵⁰ and doesn't follow a set course. It has no predetermined constructive or destructive intention. Contrary to the dynamic of political discussions, political humor lacks specific themes and regularly takes unexpected turns.

Finally, the humoristic recourse is more effective than the political. The joke only requires people to listen, and they are aplenty. It could even happen that they are in the audience, even if they don't realize they are the object of the joke. Formal political process requires legitimacy, consensus, and other resources that can be difficult to obtain. Naturally, politicians react in different ways to humor. It is said that several heads of State have collected the jokes about them. A student told me about having seen a

collection of jokes in the private library of Luis Echeverría, even though during his administration there was a rumor that whoever told jokes about him would be jailed.⁵¹

14. The political joke focuses itself against what characterizes the political system and what most irritates society. Until recently, in ex-communist⁵² countries, the irritation emerged as a result of the lack of freedom under the Soviet regime. Consider the following examples:

Two dogs run into each other in the old Warsaw plaza; one is very well fed, the other is very weak. The well-nourished one says that he has just arrived from Prague, where there is an abundance of good food and beautiful girl dogs.

The other dog says, "So what are you doing here?"

And the first one answers, "I just came to bark."⁵³



Once, Khrushchev and Ulbright were walking around Moscow, and they found a child.

They asked him, "Who is your father?"

"Khrushchev."

"Who is your mother?"

"The Soviet Union."

"What would you like to be?"

"A cosmonaut."

Some time later, Khrushchev was visiting East Berlin, and as he was walking with Ulbright, they saw a child and asked him, "Who is your father?"

"Ulbright."

"Who is your mother?"

"The Democratic Republic of Germany."

"What would you like to be?"

"An orphan."⁵⁴

The economic situation in socialist countries is spoken of in much the same way. In a joke about Fidel Castro, the economic situation is very well outlined:

Vladimir Putin visits Cuba, and when he notices that all of the Cubans have broken shoes, he asks Fidel how it can be possible that after fifty years of *improvements* the Cubans have been walking around with broken shoes.

Fidel answers: "And in Russia they're better?"

Putin answers him yes, and that if he wanted to he could go to Russia and he had his permission to kill all of those he sees with broken shoes. They get on Putin's airplane, they get to Russia, the first person he sees has broken shoes, and so according to their pact he pulls out his pistol and kills him.

The next day the Russian newspapers had the following headline: CRAZY BEARDED MAN KILLS CUBAN AMBASSADOR IN THE AIRPORT!!!

Before its disappearance, in the USSR there was also concern about the country's economy. The following joke alludes to the subject, and in a very sought-after comparative game, it synthesizes what would happen in three countries:

President Francois Mitterrand has one hundred lovers, and one of them has AIDS, but he doesn't know which one.

President George Bush has one hundred bodyguards and one is a terrorist but he doesn't know which one.

Mikhail Gorbachev has one hundred economists but only one has a brain, but he also doesn't know which one.

The main targets of political jokes are usually power symbols and those political elements that most bother society. Thus, in the Soviet countries, jokes' subject matter was often freedom; in Mexico, given the great impact of the federal government and the chief executive in power, the subject is often the president. When jokes refer to local issues, they tend to attack governors and even municipal presidents, but always as representatives of the pyramidal and authoritarian political system.

In the United States, even though there is a wide choice of subject matter for jokes, the jokes tend strongly to concentrate on the president, his politics, and his decisions. During 1990, the ten subjects most covered in jokes recorded by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (1990:4) were the Persian Gulf War, the USSR, the environment, crime, business, the savings-and-loan scandal, the economy, and the presidential figure. In the case of jokes about George W. Bush, they have often ridiculed his apparent ignorance of speaking the English language properly.

Political jokes attack principles related to power that the citizen is supposed to respect. It destroys the general consensus while stripping powerful people of their aura. Within the underground world of power and humor,

the joke has greater power because it can refuse to recognize political rules while establishing them, and when their effects rise to the surface, it's undermining job is such that it is uncontainable. It denudes the politician, and it shows him the way society wants to see him, not the way he wants to be seen. It is a distorted version of the story about the emperor's clothes; for the political character nothing is worse than the joke because it allows for no disguises. Political jokes clothe the politician against his will. With this new wardrobe, society can view him in its own way, leaving him with no other option but to hide his shame (see the following examples):

They call that politician "Mr. Synchronized," because every time he opens his mouth, he sticks his foot in it.



They call that politician "The Fish," because he opens his mouth and says nothing. (Salgado, 1986:45).

The essence of the joke is not to elucidate, but to ridicule. Nevertheless, once it exists there is more light and truth. The people win for the first time, expressing preferences without associating themselves with certain influences or political ties and ideologies. By means of the political joke, the people struggle against defeat and political immorality, though its path may have violated conventional political norms and rituals. When politicians fall in the path of the joke's ambush, they lose respect and legitimacy.

Certainly the confrontation between humor and politician is unequal. Humor has the advantage of attacking with weapons that are little understood by the political system, since politicians trust that the people will continue to be satisfied with the imposition of the system's rules and abuses. For politicians to be able to make their own jokes, there would have to be a change in rules and rituals, because in principle they would have to question their own formality and solemnity.

When politicians use the joke, their objective is different than that of societies. John F. Kennedy used to make jokes to enrich his image. Gardner (1986) attributes this use of humor to the value attributed to candidates after Kennedy, who took advantage of jokes to improve their images, to make themselves seen like the common man—or, on the other hand, to insult other politicians—but by no means did they use jokes to attack social values. Ronald Reagan's use of jokes is a classic contemporary example. Politicians in general don't tell jokes that denigrate the nation or the political

system; political jokes can be guerilla weapons—but not in the hands of politicians.

Humorists are free to attack anything, but politicians, are limited by morals and values,⁵⁵ especially consensual ones.⁵⁶ In contrast to what Pitchford (1960:46) thinks, political humor is not an instrument to produce a consensus, even though it originates within the society and destroys its adversary as well as any consensus. The political joke always has a subjugating intention.

For a joke's narrator and creator, there exists a certain dual type of values. In his life, he surely defends traditional values, symbols, and verbal expressions, while with humor he destroys these with impunity. Similarly, in the area of political discourse, he must show an immense amount of earnestness and seriousness to convince, whereas humoristic discourse circulates easily in the opposite way—with powerful jokes and jests.

15. The political joke has the ability to synthesize opinions, which gives it an enormous advantage over other forms of communication, which usually require long dissertations. As we have already seen, brevity is one of the joke's main characteristics.

Here are some examples of jokes showing an ability to synthesize many opinions into a single public opinion:

What colors destroyed Mexico during the presidency of López Portillo?

They were green, black and bright pink; green because of the great leak in dollars and the elevated national debt. Black because of 'black' Durazo's childhood friend and ex-chief of police of the Federal District, who was famous for the levels of corruption he reached; and bright pink for the rumored romance he had with Rosa (pink) Luz Alegría.⁵⁷

The next joke is isomorphic:

What are the colors of the past three presidents of Mexico?

Echeverría, bright red for his purported communism; López Portillo, rat grey, for his reputed corruption; de la Madrid, medium ochre (mediocre) for his ineptitude.

16. The political joke can represent an act of optimism through its intention to generate change—because, as we have already seen, if an individual doesn't have the capacity to influence the political system by means of formal channels, then he may try to better it by means of humor.

Who Makes Up the Jokes?

The etiology of political jokes seems to be a mystery. But knowing who invents them, or at least in which social circle they originate, can help us understand which segment is the most unhappy with the political situation because that is the segment most motivated to use jokes to send political messages.

Some jokes originate outside the political sphere and are later adapted to fit some political figure, and some jokes may come from other countries.⁵⁸ Often, anecdotes are invented or told and then converted into jokes because they display a certain degree of incongruence. Even some political jokes originate as anecdotes, despite most of them being anonymous. Given the difficulty of determining the exact origin of jokes, let us for now be satisfied with the analysis of their propagation.

Among those who tell jokes are comedians; others are simply natural joke tellers when they participate in social events but are not necessarily interested in political jokes.⁵⁹

In Mexico, political jokes are disseminated among different sectors of the elite: politicians, academics, comedians, leaders of opinion, and citizens concerned about politics. Businessmen generally tell off-color jokes, as well as some political jokes. The same happens with academics. But political and off-color jokes can even circulate among politicians. Those who are not part of the elite most often share sexual and non-political jokes. The collections of jokes contain a reduced amount of jokes—of the ones that are of concern here (Salgado, 1986, 1986a, 1986b; Rojas and Esparza, 1985; Phillips, 1981; Canar, 1974)—and generally, they refer to the police as if that wasn't a political subject, and they avoid real political issues. Political jokes can even be considered part of the elite;⁶⁰ they circulate in places that the elite frequent, such as cafés, restaurants, and bars. They often come up in the conversations of politicians, businessmen, managers, and scholars. Among scholars, the type of conversation consisting of political jokes is usually recorded in universities. In contrast, among the non-elite groups, not a single political joke seems to have been produced. Thus, we can say that evidence supports the following affirmations:

1. Most of the flow of information is recorded among the elite, where there is knowledge and incentive to make up jokes about subjects that very often don't reach the public arena. The elite may develop a joke as a quick response to a political or governmental administrative action. The joke sends a message of correction to the government, and of transgression for the rest of the society.

The following joke refers to the economic measures applied by President Clinton:

“What does it take to ruin the U.S. economy?”
“One Bill.”

This joke was made up at the beginning of Clinton’s administration, and it shows the discontent among some segments of the American elite regarding the economic measures his government had adopted.

2. The elite know the bedroom secrets of functionaries, which is one of the main reasons political humor is so powerful. The people want to air the dirty laundry of political personalities.⁶¹ Because of that, intimacy acquires a great weight, such as was the case for Fouche in France, whose spying system caused the downfall of Napoleon (Zweig, 1958).

3. The nonpolitical elite want to know—in the strictest of confidence—the secrets of power, as well as how politicians are able to exercise it. Those who exercise power ignore society, and—even though all of society resents it—the elite make up the social segment that can best use this information to promote their interests. The elite are sensitive to the immediate impact of political decisions and know how to send messages to the government and politicians. Politics and political jokes are part of a hidden political game, but jokes are the political weapon used by the elite in the face of their conflictive relationship with power.

4. Here, we should add a comment about the exercise of power in general. We know that there is scarce inside information about power from those who have exercised it, and there are few politicians who write about it; nevertheless, there exists a category of participants in power who are educated and talented social climbers. When these people leave their positions, they are free from political or moral pressure to keep secret their knowledge of how power functions. Thus, they constitute a valuable source of information with respect to politicians’ secrets.

5. The economic elite enjoy the privilege of travel and communication with people of other elite groups in the world, enabling one nation to adapt the ironies, parodies, and jokes of other nations. This explains why there are long-lived jokes that are told in many different countries and cultures. Possibly what is important is not affinity between cultures, but rather that between different elite groups belonging to those cultures.

6. The long lives of some jokes lead us to assume the existence of a historical memory that belongs to the elite. In fact, the elite do have access

to formal information through educational institutions and publications through which international contacts are established. Informal information is also readily available and circulates in the various networks of the elite.

As we have suggested, some jokes have similar structures, though parts have been adjusted to fit different regional and time situations or various important personalities. These jokes may appear in different cultures at different times. Consider the following example:

President Chun of Korea, President Reagan of the United States, Pope John Paul II, a young boy, and a captain are all in a submarine. The submarine starts to sink, and there are only four oxygen tanks. The Pope mentions the importance of his responsibilities in the church, takes a tank, and disappears. Reagan says that he needs to lead the free world; he takes another tank and leaves. Chun says that forty million South Koreans depend on his leadership and decides to take the third one; he also leaves.

The captain then turns to the boy and tells him to take the fourth tank because the captain is going to go down with his ship.

But the boy says, “It isn’t necessary, Captain. President Chun took a fire extinguisher.”

There is an isomorphic joke about the president of France, Giscard d’Estaing; instead of in a submarine, it takes place in an airplane, and instead of taking the parachute, he takes a hippie’s backpack.

Another interesting joke is shared by Yugoslavia and Mexico. In the first, Tito is nominated for the Nobel Prize in chemistry because he made crap out of the dinar. In the Mexican version, López Portillo is nominated for three Nobel Prizes: the one for physics because he made the peso float and then he sank it; the one for chemistry because he was able to make crap out of the peso, and the one in biology because he converted man into dog. Obviously, the idea of the prize is repeated, and the part of the joke about chemistry is the same, even though the Mexican version was expanded to include other subjects—especially the unfortunate underlying declaration that López Portillo would defend the peso like a dog. This joke was also adapted to Carlos Salinas.

Jokes about de Gaulle, Khomeini, Zia, Brezhnev, and other world leaders also share similar themes, in their case a visit that the leaders pay to God. Here is a version including Brezhnev, Nixon, and Ceausescu:

God receives Brezhnev, who is crying, and he asks him why he is crying. Brezhnev responds: "The Americans have a better standard of living than us."

God says: "Don't worry, you are ahead in the space race."

Then he receives Nixon, who is crying, and he asks why he is crying. Nixon answers: "The Russians are ahead in the space race."

God says to him: "Don't worry, you have a better standard of living," and Nixon is consoled.

Then God receives Ceausescu, who is crying, and he sits down to cry with him.

Similar jokes appeared in Mexico during the foreign debt crisis in the eighties.

In some cases, the colonial or post-colonial condition explains the transference of jokes, which has prolonged their life. However, in other cases, without cultural similarities or direct economic connections among countries, the transmission of jokes can be explained by the movement of the elite, as we discussed above, as well as their access to mass media.

7. The elite are generally better educated and have experience managing large amounts of information, which allows them to create jokes and understand the messages they involve.⁶² As has been mentioned, this turns out to be important because a joke that has to be explained loses its comic effect. Nevertheless, the elite have sufficient information to make funny, comprehensible jokes even in a transcultural environment.

8. The elite can benefit from the use of jokes;⁶³ in sending messages to politicians, they can even use them to threaten the government (Schmidt, 1991b). They can then use political humor to seek a new and more convenient agreement with power.

9. The non-elite sector is influenced by the elite and internalizes its values and opinions. We don't know exactly how the transference between the elite and the common folk occurs, but we can appreciate that there is a mutual influence. The dominant language prevails, and the dominated assume it as their own. Furthermore, jokes can be transferred more surely and quickly than a political critique, and through jokes, whoever does not want to be identified as a critic of a regime may do so without declaring a political preference. Jokes are not usually created to motivate the dissention of other social groups, yet for the dominated, laughter can sometimes be the only instrument to incite dissent.

10. Politicians can be considered part of the elite; all the same, they develop their own system of linguistic codes and behavior that might be

known as political lore: a system of symbols, written and unwritten rules, and a concept of the world and life that regulates public and private conduct. In this way, political lore can help the elite communicate with other social sectors.

Conclusion

Humor has different forms and manifestations that are determined by historical and cultural conditions. Some cultures may prefer a certain form during a particular period. Nevertheless, jokes seem to be the most profuse humoristic manifestation. They are easy to transmit, don't require explanation, and don't create annoying conversations. They are hedonistic and help to free energy; consequently, they are an important instrument for the freedom of expression.

There is sufficient evidence to associate certain types of political humor with certain types of political regimes. In fact, democracies tend to be more tolerant of political humor. The paradox is that political humor, as a critique of power and its symbols, is a conservative instrument for participation whose final objective is to simply correct and not fundamentally change the political system.

Jokes don't truly correct problems in themselves, but they do send messages about problems that must be corrected. In authoritarian systems and even in totalitarian ones, they can even, in a way, substitute elections as a means of allowing political expression. Political humor can synthesize public opinion and manifest political critique even when formal participation is nonexistent.

It's difficult to determine who makes up jokes, but we can more easily discover who tells them. Political humor originates and circulates within the elite, trickling from that circle of society downward to the rest of society, as well as moving across borders to the elite of other countries to be adapted for fitting into certain local contexts. The elite is the social segment that most benefits from political humor's use.

Mexicans are famous for using humor widely and for laughing at everything, seemingly even death. This is some of what we will explore in the next chapter, together with inquiry into what makes the Mexican laugh and what role political jokes play in Mexico.