

## Humor as one of the mechanisms unifying the people<sup>1</sup> at the times of real socialism in Poland

### Abstract

Humor is defined as a way of presenting, judging, or commenting on reality, emphasizing the comical or ridiculous side of things in different situations and having different purposes. For the Polish people, humor has always served as another tool to face reality at difficult moments of its history. In this study, we take the assumption that at the time of the so-called real socialism in Poland the Polish people used humor as one of the most important ways of resisting the system, as well as maintaining self-esteem and common sense before some truly absurd times. Taking into account that socialism is an ideology that advocates for equal rights, opportunities, and happiness and that real socialism, on its turn, completely denies them to citizens, we organize this study by using Maslow's Pyramid of Needs.

**Keywords:** Humor; Dictatorship; Real Socialism; Pyramid of Needs; Poland.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *people* generally refers to “all the inhabitants of a country, in connection with their rulers” (CLAVE, DRAE en línea). Given that in socialist Poland it was not the people that chose the leaders (CLAVE, DRAE en línea) and throughout that time the division between ‘us’ (the majority of dominated people) and ‘them’ (representatives of the regime) was very strong (DAVIES, 2014), along this study we use this term as a reference to the majority of dominated people.

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## El humorismo como uno de los mecanismos unificadores para el pueblo en la época del socialismo real en Polonia

### Resumen

Se define el humorismo como un modo de presentar, enjuiciar o comentar la realidad, resaltando el lado cómico o ridículo de las cosas en diferentes situaciones y con distintos objetivos. Al pueblo polaco, el humor siempre le ha servido como una herramienta más para enfrentar la realidad en momentos difíciles de su historia. En el presente estudio, trabajamos con la hipótesis de que en la época del llamado socialismo real en Polonia el pueblo polaco utilizaba el humorismo como una de las formas más importantes de resistencia al sistema, así como para mantener la autoestima y el sentido común ante unos tiempos verdaderamente absurdos. Partiendo de que el socialismo es una ideología que aboga por la igualdad de derechos, oportunidades y felicidad y de que el socialismo real, por su parte, los niega en su totalidad a los ciudadanos, organizamos este estudio sirviéndonos de la Pirámide de Necesidades de Maslow.

**Palabras clave:** Humor; Dictadura; Socialismo Real; Pirámide de Necesidades; Polonia.

### 1. Introduction

It is well known that in dictatorships and other oppressive systems, humor has been one of the manifestations that not only allow conveying censored information, but above all, serve to face reality from a detached perspective. In this study we intend to demonstrate how in People's Poland, humor represented for the people one of the main forms of resisting the system, also used to maintain self-esteem and common sense before a gray reality around them. The people faced with humor all the problems of daily life resulting from the absurd situations created by the system. This ranged from the

problems of basic needs, such as lack of basic products, to the most complex ones, such as attempts to manipulate culture and intellectual life in the country. As discussed below, aspects such as jokes told in public settings, such as in queues in shops, or in the privacy of households; the shows held in clubs and cabarets and many other forms of humor, helped the Polish people to unite in order to face the harsh reality during real socialism.

Before getting into the study, it is worth stressing that our objective is not analyzing real socialism from the viewpoint of the materialization of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Our sole purpose is demonstrating the role of humor in People's Poland. However, this objective cannot be achieved without providing a general outline of the socio-political and historical context of creating humor at that time.

For this reason, we begin by briefly outlining some issues related to the ideological materialization in the People's Poland that will be relevant for our study. Generally, the conditions that real socialism created for human beings were based on the economy, but affected all human needs (TALARCZYK-GUBAŁA, 2007; ROSZKOWSKI, 2009). Attempts to deploy the first of the ideological characteristics of socialism — bring private property to an end and replace it with State property or, at least, collective property, as well as the production means —, resulted in two modes of behavior. On the one hand, whether the State or cooperatives were managing the companies and private property was limited to personal property, the responsibility for the collective goods was also reduced or even disappeared, in many cases. On the other hand, people fought desperately to differentiate themselves (ZBOROWSKA, 2014). Hence, clearly that wish, intimately linked to self-esteem and personal identity, tenaciously opposed to the current prevailing ideology (ZABOROWSKI, 1988).

Another key task of socialism, eliminating social classes and establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat, ended up in an even more grotesque situation. National identity, national and social thought are based on the existence of some elites. Those who attempt to destroy a society or impose a doctrine on it always begin with the elimination of its intellectual elites. Well, there were several previous attempts to bring this Polish intellectual elite to an end. The most destructive in contemporary Polish history were, on the one hand, the so-called *Intelligenzaktion* undertaken by the Nazis just

after invading Poland in the fall of 1939, which aimed to destroy the intellectual elite (WARDZYNSKA, 2009, p. 50)<sup>2</sup> and, on the other hand, the slaughter of Katyń, mass murder of Polish military officers and intellectuals — professors, artists, researchers, and historians — carried out by the NKVD<sup>3</sup> between April and May 1940, after the Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17, 1939 (ŁOJEK, 1987)<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, the Soviet and German actions in occupied Poland had partly prepared the ground for introducing the domination of the proletariat. Partly, because the intellectual elites, although depleted, survived German actions.

At the time of real socialism<sup>5</sup> the regime exerted enormous ideological pressure on scientists and universities and it was visibly intensified in the 1970s. In spite of that, the scientific community and especially Polish universities managed to maintain autonomy. In fact, the seed of opposition grew in this community.

Despite the efforts, the socialist regime failed to eliminate social classes. On the contrary, its attempt to eliminate the intellectual and economic elites and reward workers led to the emergence of a new social class named as *intellectual workers* (*inteligencja pracujaca*). This included everyone who had a diploma from High School and/or Higher Education. Considering that, to equalize opportunities, by enrolling at any university, representatives of the working class and farmers' children obtained some special credits which the applicants to *inteligencja pracujaca* were not aware of, this new creation became, over time, a rare melting pot, where the true intellectuals formed a minority discriminated by the regime, while most people envied them and tried to imitate them. A joke at that time illustrates it this way:

<sup>2</sup> The action lasted, with interruptions, until 1943 and, as a result, 100,000 Polish intellectuals perished, some of them were shot in the so-called indirect actions (50,000) and others in concentration camps (WARDZYNSKA, 2009, p.50).

<sup>3</sup> People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the Soviet secret police led by Lavrenti Beria.

<sup>4</sup> Researchers estimate that the victims were at least 21,768 Polish citizens, both executed in the Katyń Wood and in prisons in two other cities and nearby places (see ŁOJEK, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> On the theme of real socialism in Poland the following references were read: ZBLEWSKI, (2005) DRYGALSKI & KWAŚNIEWSKI (1992); PRAZMOWSKA (2010); (DAVIES, 2014). You can also read: ALMEYRA, 1981; CRESPO [en línea].

A representative of the new class of intellectual workers ask an old professor:

- I am a business leader and executive member of the section of our party, I have power, money, university diploma, I have learned manners with a master, but I do not yet consider myself an intellectual. What do I have to do to get it?
- To start — the professor says —. You need three diplomas.
- This is no obstacle. I can get as many as I want.
- You did not understand me. This is your university diploma, your father's and your grandfather's ...<sup>6</sup>

In real socialism people put into practice, too, the idea of a single party — in the case of Poland, the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP; in Polish *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, abbreviated as PZPR)—, which dominated political and economic life, exercised monopoly on power and controlled the administration, companies, and the media. The result was, among other things, the appearance, in the entire socialist bloc, of a new type of social class, rather informal, but very powerful and dangerous: the class formed by socialist bureaucrats that got rich due to the system, named in Poland as the *red bourgeoisie*<sup>7</sup>, consisting of leaders and executive members of the party and their partners. In theory, the idea of a single party was advocating for the social interest, but in practice, the only interest advocated by the red bourgeoisie was its own. They were the new elite, economically, politically and socially omnipotent and supreme. And, finally, the working class. The primary objective of socialist ideology, the most rewarded, praised, and pampered group in official speeches, anniversaries, and State holidays...

<sup>6</sup> The jokes cited throughout the text come from the anthology of Polish political joke: *Dowcip surowo wzbroniony (The joke strictly forbidden)* by SYGUŁA-GREGOROWICZ & WALOCH, 1990. Our translation.

<sup>7</sup> Almost every country in the bloc created its own term to refer to this class of rich socialist bureaucrats: “In Poland in 1980, workers were mobilized in one of the most conscious movements since World War II calling their bosses ‘red bourgeoisie’. In 1988 in Yugoslavia workers demonstrated against the high living standards of the communist officials with posters that read ‘Down with the socialist bourgeoisie.’ The same year a group of Soviet workers in the Urals wrote to the leader of a strike repressed in Novochoerkassk in 1962: ‘We would like to have your advice on the methods of struggle against the enemies of the working class – the bourgeois bureaucracy, or, in Lenin’s, the soviet bourgeoisie’” (LRP-EEUU, en línea). See DUBISZ (2006), ZABOROWSKI (1988), or GŁOWINSKI (1993).

## 2. A little history<sup>8</sup>

It was the division of Europe agreed at Yalta by the allied countries that included Poland in the orbit of Soviet influence. Nevertheless, the true beginning of the People's Republic of Poland (PRP) dates from January 19, 1947, when after a fraudulent election, the Stalinist period began in this country.

This is the first and, at the same time, the hardest period of real socialism in Poland, having Bolesław Bierut as the leader and the marshal from the Soviet Union Konstantin Rokossowski as the defense minister of Poland. Bierut, President of the PRP until 1952, then Prime Minister (1952-54) and general secretary of the PUWP until his death, served the interests of the Soviet Union, led the process of Sovietization and he was responsible for the climate of terror and brutal repression against anti-communist dissidents. Bierut died in Moscow during the sessions of the XX Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, where the de-Stalinization begun (ZBLEWSKI, 2005).

In June 1956, in the city of Poznań, the first workers' rebellion erupted in the PRP with street demonstrations against the system, motivated by the economic hardship experienced by the population and forcefully repressed by the army. The revolt led to 57 deaths and 250 people arrested (including 196 workers) (JASTRZĄB, 2006 p. 202).

The second period of real socialism begins in October 1956, when the PUWP elected Władysław Gomułka — the former leader of the nationalist line of the party eliminated by Bierut — as its new first secretary. By placing, in his official speeches, the Polish people over doctrine, Gomułka raised many hopes. From the beginning he initiated a policy of thaw that brought major social changes: Marshal Rokossowski and other Soviet senior officers of the Polish Army marched to Moscow, annulled the collectivization of agriculture initiated by Bierut, triggered the rehabilitation of victims of political persecution. However, Gomułka did not reflect the hopes of the people, Moscow would never have allowed a reversal of roles, especially after the Hungarian uprising that also began in October 1956 and whose repression by the Red Army had a decisive impact

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<sup>8</sup> To report this part we have read HAUSNER & KLEMENTEWICZ (1992), PRAZMOWSKA (2010), ZBLEWSKI (2005), ZABOROWSKI (1988). DAVIES (2014).

throughout the communist world. The Polish regime got harder and it began to repress critics, especially the intellectuals named as ‘revisionists’ in official discourses. The crisis escalates in the summer of 1967 with repression undertaken by the Polish regime against Jews<sup>9</sup>. This leads to a student revolt that exploded in 1968 in many Polish universities and triggered a wave of persecution of intellectuals. The revolt of intellectuals found no echo among workers. However, two years later, in December 1970, the economic situation — the announcement of a rise in prices — causes a workers’ uprising in the shipyards of Gdańsk and Gdynia.

This rebellion resulted in the fall of Gomułka and gave rise to the last period of real socialism in Poland. The new first secretary, Edward Gierek, tried to introduce the so-called *second industrial revolution* in Poland, but with his poor choices and huge debts contracted in countries located outside the socialist bloc led the country to ruin after a fictional economic boom (DAVIES, 2014)<sup>10</sup>. Although this peak did not occur in the State economy, it was felt in the daily life of citizens: censorship became a little less strict, people could buy more products, also luxury ones, or obtain a passport to go on vacation abroad<sup>11</sup>. The paradoxes of that time were reflected on the comedies made by Stanisław Bareja and on a TV series of the 1970s *Czterdziestolatek* (*The 40 Year-Old Man*) directed by Jerzy Gruza that reports the family life of a civil engineer, in Warsaw in the 1970s, years of propaganda on the success of Poland where the middle class of that time was satirized, ‘the working intelligentsia’ formed, on the one hand, by the red bourgeoisie and, on the other hand, by people without such ‘perspectives’ (DRYGALSKI & KWAŚNIEWSKI, 1992; TALARCZYK –GUBAŁA, 2007).

On June 25, 1976, a new rise in prices provoked new revolts among workers (in Ursus and Radom). This rise was immediately canceled, but in August 1980, the political situation and the growing economic crisis caused further price increases, and a huge ideological pressure on scientists and universities has visibly intensified. This situation

<sup>9</sup> As a result of the Arab-Israeli war (the Six-Day War) that the USSR and the Polish government condemned.

<sup>10</sup> See also DRYGALSKI & KWAŚNIEWSKI, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Soon after receiving the passport, the citizen had the right to buy 100 dollars in the bank. The guides *How to live in Europe for \$5 a day?* were quite popular. However, citizens were obliged to give back the passport after returning to Poland.

resulted in new calls for strikes by workers, students, and intellectuals who not only brought down Gierek, but also — for the first time in a country of *real socialism* — gave rise to two phenomena of extreme importance: the birth of ‘Solidarity,’ the trade union independent from the regime and recognition of the right to strike (ZBLEWSKI, 2005; PRAZMOWSKA, 2010; DAVIES, 2014; CLAUDÍN, 1981).

### 2.1 The declaration of martial law

The declaration of martial law on December 13, 1981, was anticipated by the strikes, occupation of public buildings, work stoppages, and dissemination of newsletters not subject to official censorship. In 1980, for the first time in a socialist country, a free trade union was created, the famous ‘Solidarity’ chaired by Lech Wałęsa, which carried along with it a massive national movement. As a result of all this, finally the negotiations between the government and Solidarity began. However, in addition to these negotiations that took place in Warsaw in an atmosphere of maximum tension, there were strikes and occupations of public buildings. All those acts were regarded as a felony and subject to imprisonment.

Although the first and more controversial issues discussed during negotiations between the government and Solidarity were claims strictly related to living conditions, as time passed the position of Solidarity got radicalized and trade union demands got increasingly political.

Both the Polish government and the USSR feared such a political content (DZIĘGIELEWSKI ET AL., 1994/1995 p.31). Accordingly, on December 13, 1981, the head of the military forces of Poland, General Wojciech Jaruzelski called the Military Council of National Salvation and the Council of State and enacted, since midnight the same day, martial law throughout the country’s territory<sup>12</sup>. The so-called Defense Committee, drastically reduced the civil liberties which were already severely restricted before, many dissidents, leaders of the anti-communist movement were imprisoned, while others hid.

<sup>12</sup> The speech delivered by General Jaruzelski on TV on December 13, 1981, can be heard with Spanish subtitles <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueNvZYIcNm4>



However, clandestine publications that reported the people of the true situation and government's intentions and tried to encourage them did not stop circulating.

Nonetheless, Solidarity defeated the socialist regime in Poland and promoted the fall of the socialist bloc in Europe.

### 3. From bread to dreams or the Maslow's Pyramid

In order to present and organize the role of humor in the context of everyday life in the era of socialism we resort to the Pyramid of Needs:



Image 1: Pyramid of Needs.

Source: <http://luisamontalvo.blogspot.com.es/2013/04/maslow-una-nueva-escala-de-necesidades.html>

He was a U.S. psychiatrist and psychologist, promoter of the humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow, who first introduced the concept of *Pyramid of Needs*. According to Maslow (1943), human beings have an innate wish for self-actualization. However, to reach the level of self-actualization, a human being must meet other needs, from the most basic, which the psychologist named as 'deficit needs' (physiological, safety, affiliation, recognition) to the most sublime belonging to the 'development of being needs' (desire to develop as a person, self-fulfillment). The difference between one and the other is that the 'deficit' needs are related to a lack, while 'development of being' refer to the task (what to do) of the individual. In other words, Maslow says there is a hierarchy of human needs. Meeting the deficit needs is important to avoid unpleasant consequences or feelings. The 'development of being' needs, on the other hand, are important for personal development, and they do not have anything to do with the shortage of something, but wishing to develop as a person.

Maslow's theory suffered a lot of criticism (WAHBA & BRIDWELL, 1986), finally recognized as largely correct (TAY & DIENER, 2011). These researchers also found that meeting the needs of the pyramid was related to a person's happiness, but, unlike Maslow's theory, the investigation by Tay & Diener discovered that the recognition and self-fulfillment needs were also important despite the most basic needs were not met.

The Pyramid of Needs, rethought through the contributions of the study by Tay & Diener, has had a major impact not only on psychology, but it has also been relevant in other disciplines. In the study of the situation of humor in socialist Poland, which we undertake below, will serve as a tool for organizing and partly attesting once again the invaluable role of humor in a human being's life.

There are two reasons for us to choose Maslow's proposal as a theoretical basis for the paper. First, and taking into account that one of the main objectives of the socialist ideology was respecting and meeting the needs of its society, using a tool that demonstrates the hierarchy between the various needs of human beings will be of great help in understanding the actual reality experienced in People's Poland. Therefore, the use of the Pyramid is very appropriate.

The second reason to use this proposal lies on the central hypothesis of this theory, which states that "in the cultures worldwide compliance with the needs proposed is related to the level of happiness" (Diener quoted by VERGANA, 2015 [en línea]), something which could also be expected of the socialist Polish society. Nevertheless, in the People's Poland it was very difficult to meet these needs, both the *deficit needs*, i.e. the most fundamental ones, as the most sublime ones related to the *development of being* (KOTT, KULA & LINDENBERGER, 2006; DAVIES, 2013). Thus, the question that immediately arises is: How did people face situations imposed by a system that addressed "the needs of citizens not predicted in government regulations and directives as unwanted and irrelevant?" (KOTT, KULA & LINDENBERGER, 2006:33). Undoubtedly, one of the weapons used by citizens was humor. And, as Mark Twain said rightly that the human race has a really effective weapon: laughter.

#### 4. Humor as one of the unifying tools for the people

*Humor* is one of these phenomena ranging from language, culture, and society. Usually it is associated with "an attitude in action, also directed towards an only direction,

the positive one, having funny pretensions” (VIGARA, 2013:10). *Humor*, on its turn, is defined as a way to present, judge, or comment on reality, highlighting the funny or ridiculous side of things. One of the most interesting definitions is provided by Acevedo who argues that humor is “the funny dignified by the defense of a suprasocial attitude” (ACEVEDO, 1966: 281). However, we cannot forget that Acevedo studies humor from a purely philosophical perspective. According to this author, the discourse of humor is understandable and tolerable because its goal is not punishing but exposing reproachable attitudes:

Humor is a rebel attitude but sympathetic with Humanity. It shows everything, but forgives everything. A resentful person cannot be a humorist because he is pessimistic; a humorist has, after all, a smile of indulgence, understanding, and pity (ACEVEDO, 1966: 107).

Reality does not always confirm philosophical considerations. This was the case of socialist ideas and this is the definition of humor. Reduced to a very specific dimension of place, conditions, system, and above all people, humor will not be sympathetic or tolerant, but on the contrary, rebellious and pitiless, because — here Acevedo is right — it is born from the melancholy of a highly spirited soul that even have fun with something that anguishes it.

There are different ways of expressing humor and parody, irony, satire, or joke. Polish people have always used it to express their disagreement with various aspects of reality. Clearly, the use of any genre of humor depends on the degree of preparation of the author and her/his receptor: education, intellect, experience, and knowledge that both share (WILK-RACIESKA, 2006). In socialist Poland all genres of humor were used, but the most popular was the joke, which fits and can be used by all kinds of audience. The structure of the joke is based, generally, on a verbal play, double meaning, allusion, or nonsense. Thus, the most typical resources are polysemy, a linguistic phenomenon in which a word has more than one meaning, and homonym, i.e. formal or phonic identity between words of different meaning and different origin. There are, however, other resources that the joke advantage. These include, above all, the situational and empirical

context, i.e. experience and knowledge shared by the person who tells the joke as her/his interlocutor (WILK-RACIESKA, 2014).

The Polish humor at the time of real socialism was primarily related to the empirical context, but it was observed, in its various forms, in all aspects of life linked, as we will see below, to the many steps that constitute the Maslow's Pyramid. In this way, it played motivating and defending functions and served as one of the unifying tools for Polish people.

It was one of the most popular jokes at the time of real socialism in Poland that brought to mind the Pyramid of Needs:

Six miracles of socialism:

1. There is no strike, but no one works.
2. Nobody works, but everyone receives wages.
3. Everyone receives wages, but people cannot buy anything.
4. People cannot buy anything, but everyone has everything.
5. Everyone has everything, but nobody is satisfied.
6. Nobody is satisfied, but everyone votes in the system during the elections.

This feature of life in socialist Poland is contradictory not only from a standpoint of formal logic, it is also absurd, just as life was absurd at the time. Take, for instance, the review of one of the most interesting books about that time, *Absurdy PRL-u (The absurdities of PRP)* by Marcin RYCHLEWSKI (2007): "The paradoxes of all kinds were the characteristic feature of those times. However, the biggest advantage [of this book] is the ability to know both the funnier side of the PRP (and the most uncomfortable and terrifying, at the same time) and the other, the ordinary face (although, speaking of that time, it would be better to say absurd) of everyday life" (LATOCHA, 2010 en línea).

The anthology by Rychlewski does not collect the jokes that were told at the time, but fragments of regulations and official decisions, speeches by leaders of various levels of the regional and local government, correspondence between citizens and the authorities, and many well-documented anecdotes testifying the absurdities of real socialism. Thus, it is no wonder that the Polish people - considering they had almost no other way of expressing their political beliefs and their disagreement with the system -

resorted to ridicule, mockery, joke against the regime and its institutions<sup>13</sup>. Humor is a powerful weapon to fight the problems of life. Through humor, the Polish people tried to relieve stress and anxiety by detaching from reality and resuming strength to keep fighting. Not surprisingly, the so-called Soviet *dissidents* said then: *all of us live in the socialist field, but the Polish hut is the most cheerful* (KOSINOVA, 2012, p.7)<sup>14</sup>, something that Polish people repeated bitterly (SKRYPTOR, 2011; RADZIWINOWICZ, 2013).

The first four miracles of the joke above relate to two basic levels of the Pyramid of Needs: physiological and safety. The physiological level includes the vital needs for survival, such as food or rest, while the second is aimed at personal security, stability, and protection. Here there are, among others: physical security, health, family, employment, income, and resources. As socialism is a political and social ideology seeking that all goods and jobs, as well as the duties and rights in a society, are equally distributed among its members, the Polish socialist State guaranteed, in theory, to cover all these needs of its citizens. In fact, and taking into account above all the contradiction of the socialist ideology as understood by the authorities with real motivations of human nature<sup>15</sup>, it was impossible that all members of society had the same standard of living and that any competition was annulled<sup>16</sup>: human beings are competitive by nature, they want to stand out from others, they want to be recognized, they want to be appreciated. In addition, the ineffective economic and social policy, which generated a lack of resources, affected

<sup>13</sup> This despite the fact that the ordinary Polish citizen knew, especially during the 1950s, that jokes were dangerous and could put her/him in trouble. Let us look at a joke at that time: The Ministry of Public Security of the PRP announces the contest to choose the best political joke of the year. The prizes: I – five years in a labor camp; II – four years, III – three years.

<sup>14</sup> Kosinová's work gathers interviews with the most famous dissidents of the Soviet Union, e.g. Iósif Aleksándrovich Brodsky or Anna Ajmátova, experts and translators of Polish literature and poetry (and European that Brodsky translated from Polish), Bulat Okudzhava, to name a few (KOSINOVA, 2012 pp. 103-165). "How the Polish language and humor then came into our lives" – says Era Korobova (Kosinova, 2012:133).

It is interesting that what the Russians said about the Polish, Hungarians — as written by e.g. GEBHARDT & KÜTTNER, 1997, p.44— basically they said about themselves. And, taking into account their level of life after 1968 (the so-called *Gúlyas Comunism*, see BURANBAEVA & MLADINEO, 2011, p. 37-38 or DALOS, p. 171), they were also right.

<sup>15</sup> OLTRA CLIMENT (1993) provides us with an interesting study on the real motivations of human nature and the economy.

<sup>16</sup> The socialist idea of equality took place during the real socialism by trying to equate the standard of living of all citizens, both economically and socially, something which had the effect of leveling downward the rules on the standard of living in all its aspects (ROSZKOWSKI, 2009 pp. 211-218).

the economy of individuals without providing the country with means and it caused — as one of the main reasons — a domino effect in the upper levels of the Pyramid.

On the other hand, the guarantee, the socialist ideology, a job (any), and a (minimum) wage to all its citizens caused the lack of competition. It is natural that this system might generate extreme feelings and behaviors, too, such as disappointment and, very often, lack of respect for working. This latter feeling may be illustrated through this rhyme: “czy się stoi czy się leży sto złotych się należy” which, in a free translation, means “no matter your dedication to work, because they must always pay you the least.” The Polish economy — especially in the last decade of socialism — was bankrupt and wages could not be translated into consumption. Throughout the period of real socialism, commodities were lacking. There were three periods of restrictive regulation of sugar, meat, and other products. In each of them, regulated products could only be purchased through vouchers in very limited amounts, though diversified according, for instance, to age or work type (physical workers, such as miners and workers, were entitled to buy greater amounts than those doing the intellectual work). In the last stage of real socialism in Poland there was a lack of everything and everything was sold through vouchers: meat, sugar, butter, cheese, marmalade, candy, alcohol. Besides the distribution of all products to the regions and, within the latter, to the stores was irregular and did not cover the needs. For this reason, the queues that formed in front of stores, especially buying meat were huge and lasted for hours. The so-called *queue humor* was one of the most developed:

— What would have had in Poland if socialism had not existed?

— Everything.

As meat was the basis of Polish cuisine, its lack became the symbol of the overall deficit. Just after an administrative reform the following joke emerged:

— Why have they divided Poland into 49 voivodeships (administrative provinces)?

— In order to have as many provinces as there are numbers in the lottery, so every week they raffled which of the provinces receive its meat ration.

Some products, especially those regarded as luxuries, like chocolate, were accessible only on the black market. However, the government did not deprive its citizens of pastry products. The best-known items that could be purchased in the official stores were then “chocolate-like products” that obviously had nothing to do with chocolate, but their name became, very quickly, a symbol of the absurdities in the system. Items to prepare cakes were not the only ones missing in the People’s Poland. Very often, fake chocolate (and other products) came under a marked envelope with the stamp: alternative label (*etykieta zastępcza*). This derived — due to lack of material to produce adequate wrappers — from the fact that people used wrappers prepared for products that at the moment... were also missing. The “alternative label” along with the “chocolate-like article” were symbols of everyday life within the period, but also *culturemes*, i.e. expressions loaded with emotional, cultural, historical, social, and/or political meaning, created by a sociocultural community under specific conditions. Given its very complex semantic load, culturemes are often difficult to explain in other languages. “Etykieta Zastępcza” (Alternative label) was the title of the first album of a band of Polish musicians, Wały Jagiellońskie, coming from the best tradition of the Polish student cabaret. The very funny and ironic texts of its songs were mostly pastiches of reality and bitter reflections of life and the world not only socialist.

Polish people at the time loved the so-called “abstract” jokes. They were *pure nonsense* jokes describing absurd and impossible situations at the time. Their structure was based on lack of agreement between the narrated and the actual situation. This kind of jokes appeared at all levels of the Pyramid and they were very significant. For instance, jokes at the level of basic needs seemed to focus on shortcomings, but they actually addressed a much more serious problem, namely the impossibility of living a normal life even at such a basic level:

A customer walks into a butcher shop and says: please give me 500 grams of pork tenderloin.

The absurdity of the joke lies not only on the fact that going into a butcher shop and finding there more than a bored salesgirl was an unreal situation at that time, but the joke metaphorically illustrated numerous seemingly natural but unreal situations in real... socialism.

In the second link in the Pyramid of Needs there is the need for *security*, which includes protection from physical and emotional harm. Despite the ideological roles of benefactor and protector that the socialist government stressed at every moment, the State also covered the citizens' need for security. Jokes demystified the lack of both individual and national security:

- What is the role of trade unions in capitalism?
- Advocating for workers against the regime.
- And in socialism?
- Contrary to what happens in capitalism.

One of the themes often addressed in jokes was the police, named as “Civic Militia”<sup>17</sup> (*Milicja Obywatelska*). It is commonly known that the term *militia* comes from the concept of an armed force consisting of ordinary citizens. Nonetheless, at the time of real socialism, unlike the implicit meaning, the militia represented a State force, used to exert political repression on the citizens.

The Polish people had two reasons to make fun of the militia. The first was the awkwardness of a large part of militiamen. A very significant number of them were not educated people, because the schools preparing them were not demanding. As a saying of the time stated: “not through High School, but through your living intent you will ascend to lieutenant” („Nie matura lecz chęć szczerą zrobią z ciebie oficera”). Consequently, the character of the militiaman became the symbol of stupidity, foolishness, and ignorance:

- In a park bench a militiaman is crying like a cupcake.
- Why are you crying so much?
  - I am missing the patrol dog.
  - Do not worry so much. Certainly, it will find the way home.
  - It will, but how will I get back?

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<sup>17</sup> The Civic Militia was created in 1944 by the PKWN to replace police before the war. In 1990 it turned into *Policja*.



And another example:

- Why do militiamen always patrol in pairs?
- Because one of them can read and write and the other is the scholar's bodyguard.

PUWP members were also mocked:

At a meeting of the executive board of the PUWP, the first secretary praised the successes of the Polish economy:

- Even the Pope dedicated some words to our economy in the UN forum.
- And what did he say?
- ;Holy Virgin Mary!

However, ridiculing PUWP members and militiamen due to their lack of education was only one side of the coin. The civic militia was the predominant means of surveillance in Poland until 1990 and the government used it to infuse fear among the people. The people, in turn, ridiculed it to reduce this fear. Ridiculing what we fear is a well-known tactic. For obvious reasons, jokes on the subject were not always very funny:

A militiaman comes home and starts beating his wife.

- You moron! —shouts the woman—. How many times do I need to repeat you not to bring work home?!

After stabbing a student who had distributed some leaflets, militiamen became aware that the sheets were blank.

- Why were you distributing blank sheets? — asked the student.
- Because everyone knows what should be written on them.

The lack of security was closely linked to another level of the Pyramid, that of the need for *affiliation* covering social needs such as the sense of belonging, acceptance, and friendship. The People's Poland, just as the entire socialist bloc, lived in shade and under

constant pressure and threat of the Soviet Union that was observed in the public resources, schools, and other institutions. The regime stated and underlined, at every step, the friendship between Poland and the Big Brother and Friend, who — according to the regime — protected all members of the bloc and fought against injustice and the threat of imperialism. However, the people knew about its stuff and, as always, expressed this through jokes:

The teacher asks a student:

- How is Poland today?
- Popular.
- And what else?
- Democratic.
- Something else?
- Socialist.
- And before the war, what was it?
- Independent.

The first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Brézniev, arrives in Warsaw on an official visit. At the airport people greeted him with a salvo of honor.

- Why are they shooting? — asks an old woman.
- Brézniev came — people answer.
- What? Do not they manage to kill him with one shot?

And one last example showing the lack of security and hatred that the Polish people felt towards the Soviet Union<sup>18</sup>:

Permanent bathing prohibition in the Bug (border river between Poland and the Soviet Union) was announced, as if someone started to leap up and wave the arms, the Soviets could be forced to come and provide their aid.

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<sup>18</sup> It is very important to differentiate between the Soviet Union as an embodiment of the system and its citizens, who were also victims of the regime (see e.g. KOSINOWA, 2012; RADZIWINOWICZ, 2013).

The distorting mirror of the joke strongly reflected the faithful and ostentatious friendship that the Polish regime manifested towards the Soviet Union:

A hot sunny day the first secretary of the party is walking dressed in a raincoat and under a huge umbrella.

— Why are you wearing this? — his wife asks.

— Because it is raining in Moscow.

Then, PUWP leaders were primary targets, since both the people and the government itself depended on decisions made by the first secretary of the party. However, both members of the executive board of the PUWP and the government were mostly regarded as servile and pusillanimous with the Soviet Union. In addition, they were credited as silly, because, given the ideology of socialism that — by definition — rewarded the working class, uneducated people managed to occupy very high positions. One of the jokes that made it clear circulated throughout the time and it was repeated with the ‘enthronement’ of each new first secretary:

The first secretary is visiting a museum. The guide explains:

— This vessel is of Chinese porcelain.

— And why not of the Soviet Union?<sup>19</sup> — the dignitary asks indignantly.

As mentioned before, Maslow divides the five needs into orders, lower — where physiological and security needs belong to — and higher, with social, esteem, and self-fulfillment needs. According to the psychologist, the lower order needs are predominantly satisfied in an external way, while the higher-order needs are satisfied within the person. Moreover, as each of these needs are met in substance, the next level of needs becomes dominant. From what was discussed so far we see, however, that at the time of real socialism, during economic scarcity, workers could not meet considerably their lower needs either through payment, or contracts, or holding a position, or consumption. This did not prevent them, nevertheless, from seeking to meet the higher needs.

<sup>19</sup> Actually, the joke is an untranslatable phonetic play, but the version I present insists on the same idea of demonstrating the ignorance of the first secretaries.

Since the last link of the Pyramid includes two types of factors - the internal of esteem, such as self-respect, autonomy, and achievement; and the external such as status, recognition, and attention-, it is clear that meeting the latter was very difficult. However, in those times of economic scarcity, restrictions on freedom, access to culture, and knowledge unfolded outside the socialist bloc, the Polish cultural and intellectual life flourished dynamically. A breeding ground for this development were, on the one hand, precisely the restrictions and censorship and, on the other, the contempt that the people felt towards the regime and its humiliating attitude. As for humor, censorship contributed to the development of mockery, texts, poems, and satirical and ironic songs more or less camouflaged.

#### 4.1 Cabarets and Comedy

Paradoxically, the hardships of daily life were the strong point of the cabarets at the time. It has already been mentioned in the beginning of this text that in real socialism there was not a free media. For this reason, cabarets and comedy were the only way to tell the truth and express true feelings (KIEC, 2014). Cabarets encouraged the clandestine dialogue of understanding between artists and their audience. It is said that the regime regarded the cabaret as an exhaust valve and, sometimes, the performances were the result of an agreement between artists and censors, but censors were not able to grasp everything. The message addressed the audience intellectually educated and capable of deciphering the subliminal language.

The cast of the major cabarets at the time consisted of the best and most renowned Polish artists. In Poland during the socialist era various cabarets were active in the larger cities. Many of them deserve to be mentioned<sup>20</sup>, but we will only offer an outline of the most relevant ones. The first ones were 'Kabaret Hybrydy' then 'Pod Egidą,' which were formed in Warsaw just in the second period of socialism, but before presenting them we mention two later cabarets that started operating in the 1970s:

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<sup>20</sup> For more information see KIEC, 2014; WYSOCKA, 2009; NYCZEK, 2008; PRZYBORA, 2010.

‘Właśnie leci kabarecik,’ a series of TV performances in the form of cabaret and the cabaret ‘Tey,’ in Poznań.

‘Właśnie leci kabarecik,’ a surreal creation devised and directed in the 1970s by Olga Lipinska, theater director and screenwriter, played a major role in finding that the Polish people could detach from their reality, although they never directly commented on the situation in Poland in the work. The scenario of the shows was a little decadent theater that symbolized the PRP. And chaos ruled over theater: elements in the set fell, performances were improvised live with no script, artists collided against each other, forgetting their texts. The surreal chaos along with dialogues and texts sometimes deeply camouflaged, through the rhetorical-linguistic strategies, and intended for an intellectually educated audience, formed an impressive whole.

Zenon Laskowik and Bohdan Smoleń, cabaret artists, comedians and actors took in Poznań, since 1971 until the introduction of the martial law (1981), the cabaret ‘Tey.’ The artists took a rather direct humorous way. Their shows were deeply rooted in the context of the time. Most of the *sketches* could be understood only in relation to a context of everyday life in real socialism in its broadest sense. The authors took advantage of satire, irony, and all kinds of rhetorical and linguistic resources. Among the latter the most frequently used was polysemy. For this reason, the translation of these texts is very difficult. Here is an example that ridicules the obsession of the regime to impose State secrecy on issues of the public sphere. The key to reinterpret the text is the polysemy of the Polish word that means *Christmas ball* and the diminutive of the word *bomb*:

- Good morning, we came from the TV for an interview. Could you tell us in which company we are?
- No, this I cannot tell, it is a State secret. But I can tell you that they pay me 5 zlotys per *little bomb* (= Christmas ball? / A small bomb?).

However, the cabaret ‘Pod Egidą’ played the most relevant role in the life of the Polish people. First things first.

Contrary to what may seem at first sight and despite all the restrictions imposed by the regime on intellectuals, throughout the period of real socialism, in Polish

universities there were student clubs. In turn, in the 1950s the ‘Klub Hybrydy’ (*Hybrid Club*) started operating in Warsaw, one of the most relevant centers of the students’ cultural life. The cultural offer in the club slightly exceeded what was allowed by the regime. For instance, it was there that the first jazz concert was organized in postwar Poland.<sup>21</sup> It was also there that many of the best Polish artists in the era began their careers: musicians, poets, actors, and writers. In 1962, the club organized its first cabaret performance entitled ‘The bath in the River Rubicon’ and a dramatic staging ‘The process by the shadow of a donkey’ by Dürrenmatt. Artists from the ‘Klub Hybrydy’ were inspired by texts written by the best authors of all time, which allow ambiguous interpretations. They were primarily two artists, Wojciech Młynarski and Jan Pietrzak, who in their songs began to show provocative-subversive nuances that get stronger. In 1967, the regime closed the cabaret Hybrydy because it was “inciting students to depravity” (SZCZERBA, 2015, en línea).

A few months later, in the same year 1967, Pietrzak opened a new cabaret that was ironically named as ‘Pod Egidą’ (*Down with the Aegis*). The cabaret was formed to continue the artistic tradition of the ‘Kabaret Hybrydy,’ but it soon developed a humor style of its own. The texts that appeared on the scene parodied reality using all rhetorical, stylistic, linguistic, and contextual resources that allowed avoiding the prohibition to take action. At the entrance of the cabaret a banner warned: “The company is not responsible for lost illusions.” Comedians said at the scene: “Marxian people threaten the land” or “grow socialism in the Sahara, a week later the sand is lacking” (SZCZERBA, 2015 [en línea]). Due to time and crisis the texts began to become more bitter, more direct, and less funny. They strongly alluded to the history of Poland, to the patriotic literature, to past events gathered by the people in the important moments of its history. The texts were dense, full of meanings that only Polish individuals were able to capture. In that environment the song “Let Poland be Poland,” written by Jan Pietrzak with music by Włodzimierz Korcz became the unofficial anthem of the Solidarity and after the introduction of the martial law, of all Polish individuals. Pietrzak had already written the song in 1976, but the council of the cabaret thought it was too serious to be set out in this

<sup>21</sup> Jazz was regarded as imperialist music and it was forbidden in the socialist bloc.

kind of scenario. The lyrics addresses the history of the Polish people, its desires and numerous struggles so that Poland could be free and independent.

All cabarets suspended their official activities within the martial law period, but clandestine publications reporting the people of the true situation and intent of the government and trying to encourage the individuals did not stop circulating. The joke, though even more bitter, also existed:

- Why does the government shoot against the workers?
- Because the main aim of the socialist government has always been the worker.
- Why does Jaruzelski dress uniform in Poland and a suit in Moscow?
- Because he works in Poland and he is at home in Moscow.

Within the martial law period not only soldiers and senior administrative officers wore uniforms. Wearing uniform was obligatory also on the TV, so some TV presenters who did not suspend work on radio and TV to protest against the implementation of the martial law put it.

- Mom, why did not they put *The Adventures of Maya Bee* today<sup>22</sup>?
- I think, my child, that is because they have not found such a small uniform.

Speaking of the role of humor in the Poland of real socialism cannot ignore the role of comedy and more accurately the comedies created by one of the most controversial Polish film directors, Stanisław Bareja (TALARCZYK –GUBAŁA, 2007).

The paradoxes of Gierek's third period of real socialism reflected not only on the cabarets and the joke on the street, but also on the comedies by Stanisław Bareja. Although his early movies, filmed in the 1960s and early 1970s, consisted of trivial and somewhat frivolous comedies, addressing marriage or love affairs, eventually their themes began to revolve around the paradoxes of life in real socialism. Finally, between the years 1975 and 1986, he focused on an acidic satire against the system. The most classic comedies by Bareja are 'Miś,' 'Alternatywy 4,' and 'Zmiennicy.' As Pawlicki said in an interview for the magazine *Film* (1988, n° 15): "[the movies by Bareja] talk a lot about not only the history of Polish cinema, but the history of our culture in general and its

<sup>22</sup> *The Adventures of Maya Bee*, an animated Japanese TV series, admired those days by all children in Poland.

relations with the current situation (...) Suddenly, Bareja's innocent comedies began to have serious problems, intromission [of censorship] with scripts and movies already finished increased" (Pawlicki, 1988, citado por Olczak-Moraczewska, 2000, [en línea]).

What was the reason for this situation? It was most likely to be a sense of humor soaked in surrealism. Each scene presented in his comedies reflect the reality in an unreal way, exaggerated beyond reality, but... behind that surreal disguise the socialist reality is perfectly recognized. The director did not invent surrealism, but carefully examined the world around him and "told us that our world was turned upside down while we all pretended not to see or really did not see it" (Pawlicki, citado por Olczak-Moraczewska, 2000, [en línea]).

Olczak-Moraczewska (2000, [en línea]) notices that, for this reason, the comedies by Bareja have received an almost documentary dimension and to this day people recognize in them the portrait of real socialism.

## 5. Conclusión

We have mentioned in our study only some interesting phenomena of how the Polish people — in the conditions of real socialism — resisted the system and preserved their self-esteem and common sense using humor. The examples and analyses shown demonstrate, however, that humor is a very sensitive tool, such as strings on a musical instrument resonating repeated voices and going through the pyramid of needs, from the basic to the most sublime ones. During real socialism, as well as at other hard times, the Polish individuals maintained the national identity by developing their culture, their traditions, and preserving their great sense of humor.

As we have seen, at least in Poland, this humor type is closely related to politics. In the post-communist era, at a time of resurgent democracy, some of the cabarets of the 1970-80s tried to operate again but they lacked breeding ground and failed or changed course. The jokes were also silenced.

In real socialism humor, although clandestine and forbidden, penetrated and permeated all spheres of everyday life. Consequently, halfway between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries the PRP became fashionable among the young generation. As ROESKE (2014)



observes, the objects of the time gained for this generation the status of ‘classic’ and those times are perceived as an inexhaustible source of absurd humor<sup>23</sup>.

One of the reasons that turned the so-called *pop communism* into a trend<sup>24</sup> lies on the finesse of Bareja’s comedies, on the literary cabarets, and the jokes.

In 2015, democracy in Poland turned 26 years old. In autumn that year a new government immediately began to endanger democracy with its activities. The government was still in power, protest marches and demonstrations began. Humor also returned. Today, humor no longer camouflages, it has acquired new forms and it has all the means needed to be expressed, but its function remains the same: to unite and protect those who are in favor of democracy.

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth stressing that it is not socialism in the ideological sense that is fashionable, but this captivating phenomenon operates independently from political or ideological issues. The young express only a fascination with objects and everyday life of those times. A trend that has emerged spontaneously, with no participation of marketing (ROESKE, 2014:140).

<sup>24</sup> The term was coined by BOGUSŁAWSKA & GRĘBECKA (2010) in their book *Popkomunizm. Doświadczenie komunizmu a kultura popularna (Pop communism. The experience of communism and popular culture)*. People name as *pop communism (popkomunizm)* the “cultural phenomenon created at the intersection of modern popular culture with the reminiscences of what could be called *civilization of communism*” (BOGUSŁAWSKA & GRĘBECKA, 2010 p. 361).

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