

The clandestine political humour. The most feared criticism of all regimes?

Review of the book:

VÁRNAGY, Tomás: "Proletarios de todos los países... 'Perdonadnos!'" El humor político clandestino en los regímenes de tipo soviético y el papel deslegitimador del chiste en Europa central y oriental (1917-1991). Buenos Aires: EUDEBA (Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires), 2016. 372 pages.



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This book is a scathing and corrosive critique of the "actually existing socialisms" in Europe. The author, leftist and follower of the thought of Karl Marx, explains in the Preface (pp. 7 to 11) its stance against predatory capitalism, imperialism and the foreign policy of the United States. Its central hypothesis, "exaggerating and in the way of a joke" (p. 359) is that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union were not caused by the policy of Pope Wojtyla, nor the Mujahideen of Afghanistan, nor the Star War of Ronald Reagan, neither Gorbachev or the inefficiency of the Soviet system, but were prompted by humor and clandestine jokes.

The Introduction (pp. 13-24.) quotes Bertolt Brecht: "Do not fight the dictators, you must ridicule them" and tells us that he began collecting jokes systematically after reading a book by Agnes Heller, Ferenc Feher and Gyorgy Markus (disciples of Gyorgy [Georg] Lukacs at the School of Budapest) in which the following is narrated:

One day Stalin called comrade Radek to his office, who was well known for his cynicism and given to saying things that others do not even dare to think. Stalin said: I have been informed, Comrade Radek, that you talk about me in an ironic way. Have you forgotten that I am the leader of the world proletariat? Excuse me, Comrade Stalin, replied Radek, particularly that joke I did not invent it.

There is debate about the paradoxical nature of humor, and the question that the author tries to answer is whether underground political jokes (clandestine and prohibited) in Soviet-type regimes were indeed a factor of legitimization, had an inoperative and void role or were subversive. His hypothesis is that the jokes actually weighed against the process of political legitimization of those regimes, deconstructing and putting "upside down" the established order.

The jokes made constant reference to the gap between propaganda and concrete reality, reflecting a double life that clearly differentiate public from domestic, showing the inconsistencies and distortions in a dichotomous world between official dominant ideology and the actual material circumstances, producing a liberating laughter of the constrictions because the contradictions between the two spheres were revealed.

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In the first chapter, "Theories of humor" (pp. 25-69), Varnagy analyzes the theories of humor, laughter and jokes, showing the different perspectives that result in almost a hundred documented theories about the subject. He discusses the history of Western thought, from the Old Testament and the Gospels, through the Homeric laughter, the comedies of Aristophanes and Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle. Analyzes the medieval seriousness, the thought of Thomas Aquinas, the interpretation of Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose* and Carnival of the Middle Ages, which produced a "world upside down" where the laughter of the peasants was a revolt against the establishment.

Thomas Hobbes developed the theory of superiority, begun by Plato, saying that laughter is of the powerful. With Immanuel Kant appeared the incongruity theory, because what causes laughter has to do with an expectation that comes to nothing. Herbert Spencer considered laughter as an outpouring of energy and Sigmund Freud took up this theory of shock, considering that humor and jokes are a relief that allows the expression of sexual and aggressive tensions in a socially acceptable manner.

In the second chapter, "Political Humor" (p.71 to 111), the author analyzes it from a general perspective and considers that jokes express social and political events, exemplifying with jokes in Antiquity and the Middle Ages and, with the invention of printing, shows the struggle between Catholics and Protestants, with the emergence of a whole stream of anticlerical jokes. Political humor could be dangerous: Daniel Defoe was pilloried for his parody of the Tories, and subversive, Jonathan Swift wrote a critical essay of the squalid conditions in Ireland due to English colonialism.

There were political jokes during the French Revolution, about Napoleon and many other hot topics; producing in the nineteenth century, due to surveillance and censorship, the emergence of the underground press in many countries. The *cabaret* becomes an efficient means of criticism, spreading throughout Europe and in Nazi Germany, by which humor was pushed underground. The gallows humor jokes (anti) Nazis was an important form of resistance.

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The third chapter, "'Communist' Political Humor" (pp. 113-173) deals specifically with "communist" humor, and the author notes that clandestine political jokes were vital in these countries as it was a means of expressing complaints and criticisms. He mentions that persecution for telling jokes was already in antiquity and it is already registered in classical Greece; in the Soviet Union it was considered a "counterrevolutionary activity".

Anekdot is the Russian word for "underground political joke" and was a means of denying the official policy. Its tremendous popularity, according to Várnagy, is that it undermined and delegitimized the Soviet regime. There is a reference to the influence of Jewish, Armenian and Georgian humor; the differences between the public sphere and domestic, jokes about stupidity and a periodization of "communist" political humor is performed: since the 1920s, Stalinism, the Thaw, 1960s, the centenary of the birth of Lenin, the brezhnevian stagnation and changes brought about by Gorbachev with concrete examples of a collection of jokes both in the Soviet Union and all countries of the actually existing socialisms in Europe.

Chapter Four, "Jokes in the Soviet Union" (pp. 175-273), is a collection of underground jokes from 1917 to 1991, Varnagy quotes Karl Marx: "The last phase of a world-historical form is its comedy" (Introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1844). A synthesis of life in the USSR:

How is life in the Soviet Union? Lenin was like being in a tunnel: surrounded by darkness but with a light guiding us forward. Stalin was like riding a bus: one drives, some are sitting ["sit" in Russian is synonymous with "being in prison"], the rest shaking. With Khrushchev it was like being in a circus: a man speaks and everyone else laughs. With Brezhnev was like being at the movies with a bad movie: all are waiting for the show is over and, finally, Gorbachev is the one who draws back the curtains to get people out.

The fifth chapter, "Jokes in Central and Eastern Europe" (pp. 275-335), lists the forbidden humor in, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia. Migration of humor was a characteristic of all these countries, the same joke could be told about Ulbricht, Rakosi or Ceaucescu:

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In Bucharest there is a long row of more than two kilometers to buy bread. One of the possible customers, furious, shouting: "I'm going to kill Ceausescu!" And runs away. Returns an hour later and was asked: "Did you kill him?" "No, the tail there was longer ...".

Another joke, more specifically national, based on the strong religiosity of the Poles and clearly subversive, is as follows:

A French politician visit Poland. On Sunday he expressed his desire to go to Mass and assigned a senior official to accompany him. "Are you Catholic?" Asks the Frenchman. "Believer, but not practicing." "Of course, since you are a communist." "Practitioner, but not believing."

The last chapter, "Humor and delegitimization" (pp. 337-359) discusses the issue of legitimacy in the USSR and the Eastern bloc countries in Europe where the author considers that the jokes reflected the crisis of socialist values. They are attacking its legitimacy as the basis and foundations of ideology, subverting the system and producing an inversion of the world. He introduces the book of Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, where he discussed the Medieval Carnival and popular consciousness, the divorce between the official language and concrete reality. Várnagy considers that the incongruity between them was both during the Middle Ages and, also, in the Soviet Union, and the rebellious nature of carnival and laughter were a liberating and revolutionary force where the carnivalesque mood produced the breakdown of official culture and delegitimization of the existing order.

In short, the author considers that the central tendencies of the jokes aimed at the very foundations of the system, covering an exceptionally wide range from aspects of everyday life to the most important political events. The jokes were a comprehensive response to all the doctrinal body, discrediting the scientific nature of the theory and practice and revealing the betrayal of the thoughts of the founders, producing a loss of legitimacy that subverted the whole scheme of the Soviet bloc.

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This book is highly original, an extensive work analyzing the issue, with collection of materials nonexistent in Spanish (nor English) language and, at times, so funny that it is impossible not to drop a hearty laugh. It also contains an important bibliography (pp. 361-372) in several languages and more than 80 little-known illustrations (photos, posters and cartoons). I consider, wholeheartedly, that it would be worth to translate it to English language for the benefit of antitotalitarian thought, be it from the left or the right.

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