

Democratización



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The connections between humor and politics are quite obvious. Political humor has a long history, since its beginnings in ancient times with Greek comedy until today. However, often times, humor that questions power is also, in turn, the object of questioning. For example, in Venezuela –which endures a political regime that denies democracy and freedoms–, some draw conclusions such as: “This is why we are in this situation: because we make a joke of everything”. This allows us to consider the two essential postulates that are usually formulated when studying the consequences of political humor, namely:

1. Political humor as an evasion mechanism, when fulfilling functions of collective catharsis. To the extent that people laugh at political problems, they release anger and frustrations that, without the presence of humor, would become factors of pressure and disagreement that would undermine the established power. In this sense, humor would contribute to maintaining certain structures of domination and would contribute in the preservation of the prevailing regime, by offering people the possibility of channeling the tensions generated by political, economic and social circumstances, and thus diverting reactions that could turn into violence. Political jokes, in this case, would be a kind of peaceful revenge for people who have lost their right to participate in political activity.

2. Political humor as a manifestation of disagreement, of desire for change and transformation of the prevailing order, as a way of expressing social discontent. From this point of view, humor has functions that transcend laughter, in fact, the more serious and momentous it is, the better. Thus, a humorous attitude would be correlated to analysis, criticism, dissent and, in many cases, the subversion of dictatorial, corrupt political systems that violate human rights.

In our opinion, humor produces various effects depending on the meaning, depth and ability to hit the bullseye of major political issues, which allow it to serve one or another of the purposes described. In the Soviet Union, for example, during the early days of the revolution, there was a lot of tolerance for political jokes, but as the paranoia of power increased, tolerance decreased, until a true persecution of humor began.

Something similar happened in Venezuela starting in 1999: theatrical shows such as “La reconstitutiva”, which parodied Chávez’s government in its beginnings, and which many of the regime’s ministers spectated, enjoyed complete tolerance. However, as democratic freedoms were dismantled, state theaters progressively closed their doors to dissident humor. Then, persecution and threats prevailed. In some cases, humorous presentations were hampered and attacked by violent pro-regime groups. Emblematic figures, such as the great graphic humorist Pedro León Zapata, became a target due to a political cartoon which then-President Hugo Chávez reacted to by publicly insulting and disqualifying the humorist.

Harassment of humor in dictatorial regimes is quite common. In the days of Juan Vicente Gómez, the two most important

comedians in the country, Leoncio Martínez (Leo) and Francisco Pimentel (Job Pim), paid for their witticism with jail time. In this regard, it is worth remembering an ingenious anecdote of Job Pim: several times he was admitted into the famous prison of La Rotunda, and on one occasion, when he was interrogated by the warden and asked about his profession, he replied: "political prisoner". Faced with the authority's demand that he speak seriously, he said: "Do you think you allow me to practice any other profession?"

In all dictatorships, whether rightist or leftist, humor is always perceived as a threat, because it becomes a space for dissent, a refuge for freedom, and a stronghold for critical thought. In the face of repression, humor always finds a way to sneak in and evade censorship. Preventing a good joke from being spread is almost impossible. The greater the inability to laugh, the stronger humor will be. In the times in which we live, control is much more difficult due to the multiplicity of social networks that facilitate communication and the intensity of their use.

New limitations for political humor are present today, in relation to what has come to be called "political correctness". Humor is frequently questioned in this sense, with the aggravating factor that the criteria for "being correct" vary or fluctuate according to ideological currents that maintain –not infrequently– double standards, an ambiguous moral that produces unequal treatment depending on the political standpoint from which criticisms are made.

Political humor is not limited exclusively to political jokes, although this is usually one of the most frequent manifestations. One of the virtues of political humor is its ability to capture briefly and amusingly what a political scientist or an economist would

require several pages or perhaps a whole book to express. In the days when the Soviet Union was crumbling, one of the devices frequently used by the then-President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, was to resort to jokes. This one, which he told once, forcefully summarized the failure of the Soviet regime:

An assistant approaches President Gorbachev and says:
"There is a woman outside the Kremlin who will not leave until you take her in".

*-Call her in, -says Gorbachev, and he asks the woman-
What's happening?*

The woman says:

-I have a question.

-Go ahead, tell me, -says Gorbachev.

-Was communism invented by a politician or a scientist?

-It was invented by a politician, -he says.

-That explains it -says the woman-. The scientist would have tried it on mice first.

In times of revolution, such as the one that Venezuela faces, the reaction with which power reacts most frequently in the face of humor is that of intolerance. However, wit allows evading controls and censorship. On the other hand, attacks on comedians always raise suspicions of an intransigent power. When other forms of communication have been silenced or confiscated, humor lingers, for it is a heritage of culture as old as man himself, the resource that he always had at hand to cheer himself up in the face of adversity and to not lose hope. In times of revolution, humor is the refuge of freedom.

Conclusion

We dedicate our twelfth issue to reflecting on five areas of culture in Venezuela: humor, education, art, anthropology and social media. As we expressed before, it has been an approximation with which we do not pretend to reach a conclusive analysis. It is the photograph of a moment that we hope will transcend, because it describes the impetus and perseverance of those who, from different spaces, contribute to the liberation of our country.

In the five articles included in this issue, we find complex diagnoses, deep reflections and responsible hope, one that is based on two pillars: first, in the full awareness of those who understand that the goal of their efforts is worthwhile in itself and, second, sustained work that does not allow itself to be defeated by the ups and downs of the conjunctures and advances firmly overcoming the immediate culture —what José Ignacio Cabrujas called the *culture of operations* and today we could update it as a *culture of missions*— which at times has conspired against Venezuelan noblest ventures.

After editing this issue, some questions arise and open up new horizons for study and reflection. When reading the authors, we wonder how this authoritarian, complex and painful episode will affect —in Ortegian terms— the *psyche* of our country; how it will influence our "original impetus"; how our humor, our affections, our traditions will be marked; how will our goodness or eternal disposition to enjoy ourselves be transformed, or not.

Exploring the depth of our wounds and the way in which they have affected our Venezuelan soul is not a mere intellectual fact.

It is an exercise that can help to understand the difficulties of the present moment and to warn of future challenges. From now on, understanding “now” as a constant present, we can acknowledge that this reality that we are living –or surviving– will condition our culture and our political dynamics.

Recently, we have noticed signs that worry us, but we will not refer to all of them. We will only stop at one in particular. We have seen that uncertainty, fatigue and terror have led us to go from an “every man for himself” situation to a “dog-eat-dog” situation. A wave of intolerance among those of us who pursue the same goals of freedom is flooding the limited deliberative space that remains and seriously limiting encounters between people who have the right to think differently. As is characteristic of the 21st century, this trend is mainly manifested in social media, especially on Twitter, where we see forceful and irrevocable judgments of 280 characters and responses loaded with contempt for the opinion of others. Paradoxically, we also frequently see that those who subscribe to this dynamic then demand that political actors and society be willing to dialogue and conciliate. It is a contradiction that we are called to overcome.

We think –and propose– that a possible antidote to cure this tendency is personal encounter. Discovering the other, banishing stereotypes, transcending digital means, boasting good intentions, saying things by looking at each other, preparing arguments to better explain oneself, working to convince... it is an arduous and exhausting task. We believe that at this time it is necessary to rebuild the human bridges that have been blown up by the dictatorship's violence. And to do so, mere will is not enough, and can actually be reduced to dangerous voluntarism if divorced from the reality of things. It is a difficult task that requires political pedagogy and personal virtue. Perhaps going

back to what our democracy was can help us find our own paths. We are not orphans, and recognizing where we come from can shed some light on the future ahead of us.

The reality we are experiencing confirms the need to delve into the wounds that these decades of revolution have left in our soul as a people and to study how they have affected our culture and our political dynamics. This edition is a first approximation. It is up to us to find space and time to advance in that purpose.

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Editor