

Book review

Schmidt, S. (2014). *Seriously Funny: Mexican Political Jokes as Social Resistance*. Translated by Schmidt, A. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press. 296 pp.

Seriously Funny is an interesting account of Mexican humour and Mexican political culture. Samuel Schmidt systematically explains how humour is grounded in Mexican culture, underpinning the points of mockery and highlighting the moments of political critique. The author's contribution to the studies of politics in Mexico is evident and significant. He notes that psychoanalysis and politics and other disciplines deal with the analysis of implicit and explicit meanings within social communication, however none of them have dealt sufficiently with the recognition of the role of humour as a means of social resistance. The book is insightful and provides us with numerous political jokes from the colonial era to the years of independence, right up until the elections of 2012, mainly targeting the Mexican Presidents who, as the ultimate symbols of political power, are the most popular subject of mockery in Mexico. The book is divided into five chapters. The first three chapters focus on an account of the theoretical-social-historical context of Mexican political culture and the last two focus on the presentation and analysis of political jokes targeting Mexico's Presidents. In what follows, I shall provide an account of each chapter.

In the first chapter Schmidt discusses the theoretical context of political humour. Initially he provides us with a brief overview of the theory of humour, then he goes on to an account regarding the lack of literature in relation to the subject of political humour focusing on four key points of explanation such as that "laughter, to a certain degree, has been considered malignant" (p. 19) or that jokes are so common that they have gone unnoticed by researchers. Also, he mentions that "politics are perceived as something serious and solemn, and thus the political joke is a transgressor, implying an attack against all that is political" (p. 20). Finally, he asserts that the difficulty in analysing humour, thus making it rare in scientific analysis, lies to the necessary historical, social and political contextualisation of any manifestation of political humour. Following that, Schmidt goes on to a definition of humour based on numerous theorists such as Freud and Bergson, among others, and his emphasis is placed on the transgressive character of jokes and their intent to correct political order. He then provides us with a taxonomy of humour between the three elements (i.e. comedy, laughter and wit) and the eight types of humour (i.e. jest, caricatures, comedy, parody, irony, sarcasm, satire and jokes). Schmidt's theoretical context of humour entails a distinction between a democratic and an authoritarian regime, where understandably in a democracy humour finds more space for critique, whereas in an authoritarian regime participation is controlled and there are certain levels of tolerance towards mockery. Then he analyses the manifestations of political jokes and their importance to society. He believes, and he is right, that "analysing jokes implies analysing subjective expressions contained in the greatly inexact area of social values" (p. 49). More specifically, if we do not consider the political cultures within which a joke lies, we will not be able to understand its meaning and scope. Political

humour is an important factor of political culture. Therefore, political humour with its symbols and manifestations –paradoxically doing it in a conservative way– aims at correcting and not in a fundamental overturning of political power. Having stated the basic theoretical grounds, Schmidt goes on to explore the target of Mexican political humour in particular.

In the second chapter his emphasis is on Mexican culture. He develops his ideas by addressing what he deems to be the characteristics of the Mexican people. He then adopts a historical and behavioural perspective, whereby he discusses the role of power and addresses humour as a remedy. The chapter elucidates the most important aspects of Mexican culture and its most significant contribution is the following: we understand the butt of the joke by recognising the different features of the culture in which the jokes are embedded. The author throws light on the historical and the behavioural perspective of the Mexicans, their colonial period, their political values and symbols such as blame, trust, patriotism, uncertainty, responsibility, credibility, power and solidarity. These political values have remained intact within the rural area but have been combined with modernity's needs in Mexico City. The issue of power is also significant, since it lies at the heart of Mexican political culture. The one who has power and influence is also the target of political jokes. Finally, humour as a remedy means that, following a Freudian tradition, we laugh at politicians in order to free ourselves from their political oppression – in a sense, humour is a relief mechanism.

The third chapter is devoted to the social role of political jokes in Mexico. Here the emphasis is placed on the degrading role of political humour and its aim to destroy, or threaten to destroy, political values. He considers political humour a detector of public opinion concerning nationalism and political participation, which are core values of Mexican society. However, as mentioned before, the target of the joke is generally Mexican Presidents. That's why the following two chapters of the book are devoted to the jokes against Mexican Presidents, since they are the most powerful political symbols and are considered omnipotent. Here the analysis of the jokes is prolific, and Schmidt's archive of political jokes is capacious, extremely interesting and historically based, covering a very lengthy time period.

Mexican political jokes target the President and the political elites, and their circulation was facilitated via the internet. More and more jokes were circulated and public opinion was freer and freer to degrade and mock political power. Whereas official history tends to create a specific image of the politicians according to their will, jokes tend to tarnish this image and bring everything into question. Corruption, fraud, political influences are some of the most popular issues which political jokes bring to the fore. Political humour aims to destabilise political values and is a promise of a passive revolution. If political power aims at consensus and legitimacy, political jokes aim at correcting and destabilising the government.

This book allows the reader to study political humour while also becoming acquainted with Mexican political culture. Its historical perspective is a great asset and extremely useful to the understanding of jokes for a non-Mexican reader. However, I would suggest that this grounding would have been helped if it were supplemented by a political theoretical perspective such as a Gramscian account of "passive revolution" or the role of "traditional versus organic intellectuals" (Gramsci 1971). This way the role of political humour as a means of degrading power would be placed in the arena not only of political but also of popular culture, where different manifestations of reaction/social resistance to the established political order take place, aiming at correcting or degrading the strength of the official political discourse. In any case, this is a book worth studying for academics in the field of political humour and anyone who would like to know more about Mexican political culture.

Efharis Mascha
Hellenic Open University, Greece

Reference

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Hoare, Q. & Smith, N. G. New York: International Publishers.