

Why democracies need jesters

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Abstract: Comic narratives emerged with the earliest incarnation of democracy and play a critical role in democratic discourse. Analysis of political comedy offers a unique perspective on discourses of power and citizenship. Comedy helps citizens and political leaders navigate the inevitable tension of disillusionment. Tricksters, jesters and bullies inhabit this realm, and their chosen tactics and targets point us to a better understanding of comedy's important role in performing democratic conflict and expressing antagonism. This study attempts to define some broad categories of political humor through an exploration of both mass media and online user-generated content.

Democracy: A contract with disillusionment

All over the world, people are inspired by five words penned by the revolutionaries who founded what is now the United States: *all men are created equal*. Unfortunately, saying it was not enough to make it so. We have traveled to outer space, cured disease, built great cities; still the goal of equality seems the loftiest and most unattainable of all human aspirations. My own love affair with the idea of democracy began early, nurtured by my public school education, reinforced through a stint at "Girls' State," a summer citizenship camp I attended during my junior year in high school. Democracy. The best idea I'd ever heard. This was the peak of my illusionment.

The peak of my disillusionment would come two decades later, when the Supreme Court intervened in the presidential election of 2000, deciding that George W. Bush was the winner in Florida, and there was no need to count the votes and no need to consider their decision any kind of *precedent*. I was furious: at my political party, at my fellow citizens, and mostly at George W. Bush and his administration. When the Bush Administration launched the war in Iraq, I protested, I went to rallies, I taught myself Photoshop and bought URLs to express my dissent. I wrote songs, and made music videos. My parody song and music video of an Alice Cooper hit from the seventies, titled *Billion Dollar Cheney*¹ went "viral" to a modest degree – gathering almost 100,000 hits in the first two years it was on the web, half of those hits coming after being featured on the Huffington Post.

I became addicted to expressing myself on the web, and in my graduate studies I focused on examining the rhetoric of ordinary citizens who were, like me, expressing themselves in discussion forums and across the web, devoting hours to generating content and arguing with opponents. Even

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¹ 'Billion Dollar Cheney' can be viewed in modified form at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIMzINdcTJE>

a brief examination of political discussion on the Internet quickly reveals that comic messages are the coin of the cyber-realm. I was struck by the power of the well-timed, witty observation. My parody songs and Photoshop comics were not just satisfying because they gained a measure of approbation from my online cohort (although that was rewarding). The images, animations and songs were incredibly satisfying to create. It felt like participation, and it also felt like play. Adding my voice to other dissenters felt like a way of maintaining hope amidst disillusionment. And so my own participation gave birth to my interest in the central role that comedy plays in perpetuating democracy, and in creating the conditions under which a democratic system can be sustained.



Figure 1: One of my Photoshop images, created at the beginning of the Iraq war, with George Bush as Dr. Evil. Frame from Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery (Pixar Studios, 1997).

I begin my argument with the assertion that democracy is the best method yet devised for the distribution of political disillusionment. A political competition always results in winners and losers. In every electoral competition, there is a loser who feels disillusionment: with a candidate, with a campaign or party, with their fellow citizens, or in some cases, all of the above. At the end of each election, we have the opportunity to re-illusion ourselves, reset our sights, and revise our goals, knowing that the next battle is already planned, and this time, we might win. The democratic system accepts and contains conflict in order to harness the powerful solutions that can be produced when citizens engage in an open competition of ideas.²

If there is one thing we can agree on, we can agree, absolutely and for certain, that we want to argue about the best way to do things. Those who see democracy as a hopeless endeavor are pursuing the false goal of consensus. In fact, the goal of democracy is to provide an outlet for political discord—a way to govern in the *absence* of consensus. The battle (in ideal form) is transparent and fair and both winner and loser understand that they will live to fight again.

Acceptance of the tragically persistent nature of human conflict and error, according to Kenneth Burke, required the application of what he called the “comic corrective” to the tragic

² Mouffe, Chantal. (2000). *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.

narrative frame. Democracy, which guarantees that every election produces “losers” would appear to be the most tragic political system of all, and yet, it has always emerged with a healthy dose of comedy, from Aristophanes to Colbert. These democratic jesters are the lubricant that keeps the democratic machine from generating too much friction. They are the referees who call out the arrogant and the self-aggrandizing, and have evolved, particularly in the United States, as enforcers of the democratic notion of equality. In fact, our notions of comedy and equality have evolved together, and deserve to be recognized for both their form and their function in democratic discourse.

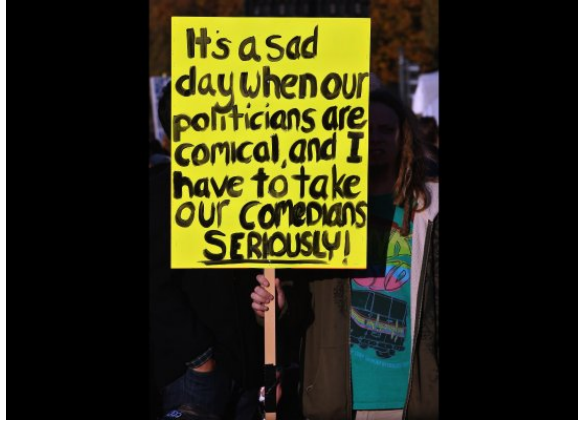


Figure 1: A protestor at the "Rally for Sanity" in 2010, not really that sad.

Comedy and Democracy

Comic narratives are distinguished by the assumption that “in” or “out” does not determine a character’s potential to play the fool. In fact, comic narratives depend upon the inversion of in and out. After all, if the powerful always win, it’s just another day at the office. But score one for the little guy and you’ve got a story we all want to hear. Moreover, the comic protagonist exercises agency, and unlike the hero in an epic, does not expect, nor receive divine intervention. As Burke reminds us, the comic narrative is one of forensics. The protagonist gets him/herself into and out of situations through his or her own actions, with perhaps a little luck at times. The comic protagonist may do the wrong thing for the right reason, or the right thing for the wrong reason, but above all she must survive by her wits.

Comedy emphasizes fallibility over malevolence, and stupidity over iniquity. Moreover, it ridicules the pretensions and postures of the self-important.

TAFT HAVE YOU HEARD OF THIS STANDARD OIL BUSINESS

yes, sir

THEY’RE A MONOPOLY

yes, sir

THAT ISN’T SPORTING AT ALL

no, sir

BRING ME STANDARD OIL

I’M GOING TO PUNCH IT MANFULLY IN THE FACE

sir, Standard Oil is a trust, not a person

you can't punch a trust in the face
 OH CAN'T I
 TAFT, WATCH ME BECOME THE FIRST MAN TO PUNCH A TRUST IN THE FACE
 THEN WRITE IT DOWN
 IN YOUR OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE NOTES
 "TODAY THE PRESIDENT PUNCHED A TRUST IN THE FACE"
 all right
 "QUITE SOUNDLY TOO"
 I will
 "WITH AN EXCELLENT RIGHT UPPER CROSS"
 yes, sir
 "CAN'T PUNCH A TRUST IN THE FACE"
 FORSOOTH
 I'M THE PRESIDENT
 I CAN PUNCH ANYTHING³

Roosevelt, in this case representing the American people, is talking to his vice president about taking on corporate monopolies. The sly pokes at the blustery and self-important Roosevelt establish the average citizen as the protagonist, the one "in the know" who sees the broader context and complexity but still understands that Standard Oil *must be punched in the face*. We the people congratulate ourselves for electing such a man. He is a blowhard aristocrat, but he's our blowhard aristocrat, and he's looking out for us.

Viewed in the context of history, comedy emerges as the most democratic form of narrative. Moreover, in an ongoing democratic competition, the power of comedy to temper disillusionment and even despair is essential to the perpetuation of a democratic system. The joke has the power to sting but also to soothe. It is the only narrative of "acceptance" that is sustainable over the long term.⁴ Sociologist Hans Speir highlighted the power of comedy to ease suffering, pointing to the role of comedy in the acceptance of conditions of inequality.

Humor accepts both nature and the world of affairs. Humor does not change the circumstances that it illuminates, although it is able to lessen the discontent and even the despair that these circumstances produce. It does not alter the life meanings of people or the forces that control them. It helps one only to bear somewhat better the unalterable; sometimes it reminds both the mighty and the weak that they are not to be taken seriously.⁵

³ "Dirtbag Teddy Roosevelt," accessed on March 3, 2015 at <http://the-toast.net/2014/09/16/dirtbag-teddy-roosevelt/>

⁴ Castillo, Jeanette (2008). Agonistic democracy and the narrative of distempered elites: An analysis of citizen discourse on political message forums. Dissertation (Ph.D.), Indiana University.

⁵ Speir, Hans. (1998). Wit and Politics: An essay on laughter and Power. *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 103, No. 5 (March, 1998). 1352-1401.



Figure 2. An Occupy protestor responds to Fox News coverage of the movement.



Figure 3: Not evil, just an idiot.

As Speir notes, “the diverting political joke not only influences the course of dispute, but also the desire for conflict among the participants. The joke changes them, so to speak, as it deemphasizes the conflict.”⁶ With comedy, we are able to express our ambivalence and our hostility, point to incongruities and constantly invert, revealing and even celebrating the complexity that underlies human motivation. It is worth noting that Speir argues that the joke changes the people, and not the circumstances. However, one thing does have a way of leading to another. Comic narratives ultimately serve the purpose of converting ordinary citizens upwards into citizen-protagonists.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The comic citizen protagonist

Aristophanes wrote the first comic play in the Greek tradition, and introduced us to the very first citizen-protagonist in the form of Diceapolis. We meet him outside the assembly. He is a member of the demos, a regular guy. He delivers a monologue of complaints about the ongoing war and the ineffectiveness of the Athenian political body at resolving the conflict. He tells the audience he is going to go to the assembly and disrupt any speaker who does not speak for peace. At the assembly, he heckles the returning envoys from Persia whom he derides as “peacocks” for their fancy dress, and heckles everyone else as well, and still the Athenians will not speak of peace. Diceapolis then tricks the assembly into adjourning, and taking matters into his own hands, he negotiates a “private peace” with the Spartans and retires to his home in the countryside, believing he is free of both war and politics. He throws a party to celebrate the occasion. But his fellow citizens interrupt his party (in the form of the chorus). They don’t want peace; they want revenge. He has to talk them out of it.

In order to do this he changes his clothes so that he looks like a beggar, explaining that impersonating a citizen of lower status will only emphasize the cleverness of his argument. He makes his case with great rhetorical skill, inspiring his listeners with his wit and oratorical prowess, and is rewarded by being elected to power. Once he has secured this power, he proceeds to become what he previously derided, pursuing politics as if it were only a game, falling in love with the sound of his own voice, and losing touch with his constituents. In this way he completes the democratic cycle of illusionment-disillusionment. Such is the circle of political life.



Figure 4: "Political Memes Today," accessed March 3, 2015 at: <https://politicalmemestoday.wordpress.com/tag/lion-king/>

Aristophanes introduces the “clever citizen” to demonstrate the potential of democracy. Yet in true comic form, he tempers his heroic narrative with a warning against pride. Deification of elites is not permitted in comic narratives, and neither is deification of ordinary citizens. The privileging of “cleverness” above all is key to this dynamic.⁷ Cleverness is a quality that transcends, trumping status, gender, race, age, ability or disability. The truth spoken in a powerful way by the powerless is the path to nobility in a democratic system.

⁷ Zumbrunnen, (2004). Elite Domination and the Clever Citizen: Aristophanes’ Archarnians and Knights. *Political Theory*. Vol. 32, No. 5, pp. 656-677.



Figure 5: Advice to make you think.

In his choice of a citizen protagonist for the first comic play, Aristophanes establishes the first rule of democratic comedy: the inversion of power is a necessary element. The power of comedy is wielded awkwardly by the dictator, but is devastating in the hands of his oppressed subject.⁸ This principle is the foundation for the taxonomy of Jester, Trickster and Bully. I propose these categories as tools for the analysis of power dynamics inherent in comic political messages. Case studies representing mass media (Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert), User-Generated Content (YouTube video) and the Occupy Wall Street social movement will be used as examples for the categories. The taxonomy proposes that, consistent with Burke's identification of the tragic with the comic corrective as the proper "attitude toward history,"⁹ the comic narratives of jesters and tricksters are essential to democratic discourse, while bully humor requires a form of "othering" that celebrates and reinforces inequality. Tricksters...they are here to make us think, and to challenge our assumptions.

Jester, Trickster, Bully

There are many reasons why human beings laugh. Ambivalence, surprise, incongruity, ambiguity, superiority, even fear, aggression or frustration – all of these emotions can produce laughter. Laughter can be an act of aggression against those who are perceived as inferior, or a method for the less powerful to express aggression without threat.¹⁰ The critical principle that underlies the proposed taxonomy of political comedy is target. The concept of target defines the categories of jester, trickster and bully. There is always one who tells the joke, an audience, and a target. These categories can overlap, as in self-deprecating humor, where the teller and the target are the same, or in the case of peer-targeted jokes, where the target and the audience are the same, inviting us to laugh at ourselves as a cultural group, gender, or even species.

⁸ Scott, James C. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

⁹ Burke, (1937) *Attitudes toward history*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

¹⁰ Boskin, Joseph. (1997). *Rebellious Laughter: People's humor in American culture*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.



Figure 6: It may not be the top of the scale of political participation, but it's up there.

The upward or lateral target is the hallmark of the jester. Although this role has origins in the days of monarchy, the term remains appropriate. In a monarchy, the jester was the only one allowed to criticize the most powerful, with the understanding that ultimately the jester himself would “play the fool.” In this way the jester protected the status quo, while providing an outlet for the political frustration of the subjects. In a democracy, the status quo is the ongoing competition. In laughing at our political opponents, we keep our conflict grounded. We don’t laugh at evil. We laugh at stupidity. It is less threatening, and leaves hope that someday we will convince them to wise up and join our side.

The trickster has a long tradition,¹¹ and an integral relationship to narratives of power.¹² For the purposes of this taxonomy, the trickster is defined by the ambiguity of target. The trickster move is rare, and not always intentional. The trickster narrative complicates our understanding. It does not tell us what to think, but rather, just forces us *to* think. The laughter that the trickster evokes is often the laughter of ambivalence, discomfort, and confusion. The trickster narrative forces the audience to do work in order to make meaning of the narrative; it humbles through confusion and ultimately thwarts expectations. In fact, for the trickster, expectations themselves are often the target.

The choice of a target that is of equal or lower status than the joke-teller defines the distinction that is being drawn between the terms “humor” and “comedy.” As previously noted, the terms are often used interchangeably, but in the analysis of target the importance of the distinction becomes clear. Specifically, humor refers to jokes that establish identification and provoke laughter by “othering” a group and then invoking feelings of superiority. The target is the less fortunate soul, who is generally a victim of *circumstance*. Humor rejects through prejudice. It requires agreement with a set of assumptions about the target and the teller. Examples such as ethnic or sexist jokes require identification with an “in” group and agreement on who is the “out” group in order to share in the laughter.

¹¹ Hyde, Lewis. (1998). *Trickster Makes This World*. New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

¹² Ivie, Robert L. (2005). Democratic dissent and the trick of rhetorical critique. *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies* 5(3), 276-293.

For Burke, and for the purposes of this taxonomy, humor is characterized by a “malicious enjoyment”¹³ at the suffering of those who are perceived as weak or powerless, disabled or physically unattractive according to popular standards. This type of humor was prominent in the mid-eighteenth century, circulated widely among both the lower and the upper classes as “Jestbooks.” The humor found therein was “pitiless.”¹⁴ It mocked the blind, the deaf, the hunchback and the indigent (categories which often overlapped) who were subjected to cruel pranks played by aristocratic youths. In democratic cultures, the humor of humiliation, evoking the laughter of superiority, has come to define the bully. Although not always malicious, the laughter evoked at comic pratfalls or slapstick will also be considered humor in the analysis of political messages.

Stewart and Colbert as Jesters

The 2010 midterm elections in the U.S. featured numerous rallies in Washington DC, most notably two that were organized by cable television personalities. On August 28, Glenn Beck, then a popular Fox News television host held a “Restoring Honor” rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The rally was widely discussed across media outlets, and viewed by some, especially participants, as evidence of an insurgent populist movement among conservative citizens in the U.S. Tens of thousands of attendees traveled to the site from across the country, many of them Christian-right members of the Tea Party Movement.¹⁵ The event was designed to bring together conservatives who were clearly suffering the effects of democratic disillusionment after the election of Barack Obama as United States President.



Figure 7 Two different takes on the snake, one from a Tea Party rally (l) and one from the Stewart/Colbert rally (r).

¹³ Speir, (1998).

¹⁴ Dickie, Simon. (2003). Hilarity and Pitilessness in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: English Jestbook Humor. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Exploring Sentiment (Fall, 2003), pp. 1-22.

¹⁵ Freedomworks, an organization founded by Dick Armey, explicitly links the tea party and the Beck rally here: <http://teaparty.freedomworks.org/events/glenn-beck-82810-restoring> Accessed on 11/20/2010.



Figure 8: Although attendees were asked not to bring signs to the Glenn Beck rally, this demon felt her nutritional needs were more important.

Enter Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, hosts of Comedy Central’s late night comic news lineup. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* offer an hour of political satire and parody every weeknight. Their programs are popular—they are not only entertaining, but also informative.¹⁶ Jon Stewart is perhaps the most prominent jester in contemporary U.S. culture, regularly mocking both media and political elites. For his part, Colbert built a successful show out of his parody of Fox news personalities such as Bill O’Reilly and Mr. Beck. It is hard to imagine these two comedians ignoring an opportunity to shoot a few comic arrows at the apocalyptic narratives being spun by the Tea Party.

Shortly after the Beck rally, Stewart and Colbert announced their intention to hold a rally, but the conceit from the beginning was that they were *competing* rallies. Stewart proposed to “Restore Sanity” while Colbert, in his conservative persona, vowed to “Keep Fear Alive.” The rally was scheduled for October 30, 2010, only days before the midterm election, and featured many celebrity guests and the dueling narratives of Colbert and Stewart, pitting fear against “reasonableness” and tolerance. The large crowd was festive, and their numerous signs made the rally a celebration of the clever citizen, demonstrating their collective sanity and good humor. Examples included “Make Awkward Sexual Advances, Not War,” “We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take anymore than is reasonably tolerable,” and “It’s a sad day when our politicians are comical, and I have to take our comedians seriously!”¹⁷

¹⁶ Fox, Julia R., Koloen, Glory & Sahin, Volkan. (2007). ‘No Joke: A comparison of substance in The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign.’ *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. June 2007, Vol. 51, Issue 2: 213-227.

¹⁷ Examples of signs from the “Restoring Sanity” rally accessed online November 3, 2010 at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/30/the-funniest-signs-at-the_n_776490.html#s169297



Figure 9: Extreme reasonableness at the Stewart/Colbert rally.

The deliberate good nature of the crowd and the counter-narrative of Colbert's "keep fear alive" theme allowed Stewart to navigate a very treacherous position. He was teetering on the brink of sincerity and seriousness, a dangerous precipice indeed. When the jesters stop laughing we know we're in trouble. Although Stewart's closing remarks, focusing on the cooperative spirit and productivity of the average American were quite eloquent, he walked a fine line. Still, he brought, in textbook form, the comic corrective to the tragic narrative of polarization that dominated the conversation.

We hear every damn day about how fragile our country is -- on the brink of catastrophe -- torn by polarizing hate and how it's a shame that we can't work together to get things done, but the truth is we do. We work together to get things done every damn day!

The only place we don't is here or on cable TV. But Americans don't live here or on cable TV. Where we live our values and principles form the foundations that sustains us while we get things done, not the barriers that prevent us from getting things done. Most Americans don't live their lives solely as Democrats, Republicans, liberals or conservatives. Americans live their lives more as people that are just a little bit late for something they have to do -- often something that they do not want to do -- but they do it -- impossible things every day that are only made possible by the little reasonable compromises that we all make.¹⁸

The Stewart-Colbert rally led to discussion in the popular press about the role of comedy, and comedians, in the public discourse. Fellow comedian Bill Maher criticized Stewart for not being more specific with his target.¹⁹ He accused Stewart of "false equivalency" for his deliberately bipartisan critique. Other critics, like Bob Samuels, argued that Stewart and Colbert were making the serious business of politics decidedly "unserious."²⁰ At the Washington Post, in a piece titled "Who does Jon Stewart think he is?" Paul Farhi asked, "And so, a mass gathering with the stated

¹⁸ The transcript of Stewart's closing remarks was accessed online November 5, 2010 at:

<http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/Rally-to-Restore-Sanity/a/Jon-Stewart-Rally-Sanity-Transcript.htm>

¹⁹ "Bill Maher vs. Jon Stewart : Maher takes on Rally to Restore Sanity." Accessed online

November 5, 2010 at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/06/bill-maher-vs-jon-stewart_n_779944.html

²⁰ "Why Jon Stewart is bad for America (and why you will dislike this article)," October 25, 2010, Huffington Post. Accessed online October 27, 2010 at:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-samuels/why-jon-stewart-is-bad-fo_b_773483.html

aim of being nice. Is that a role a satirist can really play?”²¹

Perhaps it is not within the role of the satirist to mobilize people to rally for civility, but it is well within the role of the jester. Just as in the monarchy, where the jester’s ultimate loyalty was with the royals he served, in a democracy the jester’s loyalty is to the ideal set forth in the Bill of Rights: “all men are created equal.” It is the measuring stick he uses to calculate and report the gap between our stated goals and where we are in the moment. Ultimately, while the rally may not be remembered for the brilliance and bravery of the critique, it did inspire a large demonstration in support of democratic cleverness, a cleverness that was shared and celebrated by other citizens through television rebroadcasts and Internet posts.²²



Figure 10: A Comedy Central rally participant being informative.

Ever since he introduced his persona on Comedy Central, Stephen Colbert has rarely appeared in public out of character. He even testified before Congress during hearings on illegal immigration “in character.” This provoked controversy, and more grumblings about a lack of seriousness, but near the end of the hearing he dropped his persona for a moment and offered a glimpse into his own motivation:

I like talking about people who don't have any power. It seems like some of the least powerful people in the U.S. are those who come to the U.S. and do our work and don't have any rights when they're here. And then we ask them to leave. ... I don't want to take anyone's hardship away from them or diminish [the widespread effects of the recession] ... but migrant workers suffer and have no rights.²³

Colbert recognizes that from a comic perspective, the least-privileged citizens live in the most target-rich environment, and the comic narrative is the most effective way to bring humility to the

²¹ “Just who does Jon Stewart think he is?” *Washington Post*, October 25, 2010. Accessed October 29, 2010 at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/24/AR2010102402645.html?wprss=rss_print/style&sid=ST2010102102281

²² An example of Internet propagation of the clever citizen can be found here: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/the-100-best-signs-at-the-rally-to-restore-sanity>

²³ From an account in *The Atlantic*. Accessed online November 6, 2010 at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/09/stephen-colbert-testifies-in-congress-in-character/63507/>

powerful. The role of the jester is critical in a political system that is defined by the struggle for equality. In such a system, seeking the joke, the jester will naturally align himself, or herself, with the powerless. No matter how “unserious” the presentation, the comic narrative always has a very serious underlying message that is understood as a representation of *who* is laughing at *whom*. The jester mocks meanness, seriousness, pretention and paranoia, thus warding off fear and mitigating tragic frames. The jester reminds us that we must be all right, at least for the moment, if we are still able to laugh.

A YouTube Bully

Steven Crowder is a “comedian, columnist and political commentator”²⁴ residing in Los Angeles, California, who produces short videos of his political commentary. This commentary is regularly linked from popular conservative political websites such as HotAir.com and garners view totals in the tens of thousands. He also appears on Fox News as a commentator/humorist, most notably on the Sean Hannity program. Having ended the discussion of the jester with the topic of immigration and immigrants, it seems appropriate to present the same topic from the perspective of a comedian who does not align himself with the powerless. Steven Crowder’s video “Illegal Aliens! (Featuring the Jimenez Brothers)” offers an example of the downward targeting of a bully, presenting humor rather than comedy.²⁵

Mr. Crowder’s video takes the form of a monologue, with narrative inserts that consist of characters played by him (and sometimes others) in various costumes. He opens by asserting that conservatives are afraid to talk about illegal immigration for fear of being called “racist.” Conservatives have no problem with immigration, he says, “But we do have a problem with illegal immigration. Notice the difference. If you want to come on over, folks, ring the bell and come on in through the front door, like everybody else.” Spliced into his monologue at this point are scenes of Mr. Crowder as a stereotypical “redneck” character, listing off all the groups conservatives allegedly hate in an exaggerated American “hillbilly” accent, “Lithuanians, Albanians,” etc. He then presents himself in a migrant laborer costume, with poncho, straw hat and dirt-smudged face, enacting the part of a service worker at a fast food restaurant who only speaks Spanish. To be more specific, the character only speaks one word of Spanish: “si.”

Mr. Crowder (as himself) shouts, “Assimilate! There is no room for hyphenated Americans! Multiculturalism has not worked and cannot work.” He goes on to describe the experience of his own mother, who he tells us was “French-Canadian,” and made an effort to learn English upon immigrating to the U.S. After making his point, Crowder moves on to discuss solutions for illegal immigration, including a border fence on the US-Mexico border. He continues, “I think America should build its own wailing wall. It’ll show America’s appreciation for its Jewish people and confuse the crap out of the Mexicans.”

We then see Crowder, in an interpretation of Hasidic dress, kneeling in front of a fence. An audio track of prayer is heard, but the music transitions into the Mexican hat dance as we see Crowder and a cohort, now in poncho and sombrero, crouched on the other side of the fence. As the “Mexicans” scale the fence and take a peek, they are indeed confused, but even though the first

²⁴ From Mr. Crowder’s official website, accessed November 4, 2010 at <http://www.stevencrowder.ning.com>

²⁵ “Illegal Aliens! (Featuring the Jimenez Brothers)” Accessed online November 4, 2010 at:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/stevencrowder?blend=1&ob=4#p/c/D4D67C0C404DCFCC/28/F4WZC8K71a4> Quotes transcribed by the author.

“Mexican” reports to the second that “they’re all Jews” and they aren’t sure it is America, they decide to climb the fence anyway. Mr. Crowder (as himself) comes back to wrap up, “Bottom line is that there are a lot of Americans who want to preserve and protect our country and we shouldn’t be seen as unsympathetic or demonized because of that.”

The numerous stereotypes portrayed in this narrative classify it as bully humor. Rather than equalizing through comedy, they reinforce Crowder’s position of superiority, which he states explicitly with the example of his mother, who immigrated the “right” way. In Crowder’s narrative, the “rednecks” share the same dirt-smudged face as the Mexican immigrant. The “appreciation” shown to Orthodox Jews ultimately makes them a target, through the offensive caricature of their beliefs and traditions (build a wall and they will wail). In fact, all of Crowder’s alter egos are portrayed as inferior to his wholesome, all-American “real-life” persona—the one who delivers the argument.



Figure 11: Frames captured from Mr. Crowder's YouTube video. From (l) to (r): Mr. Crowder as himself; the illegal waiting on him at the fast food restaurant; the wall-scaling immigrant in full Mariachi costume; the Jew, wailing because, well, there is a wall; and the average American-born conservative just trying to figure it out.

Bully humor can be seductive, as it features a teller who conspires with an audience to mock the strangeness of an “other.” It is anti-democratic for the same reason. In the example of “Illegal Aliens!” this is seen through blatant stereotyping, but also in the confusion of Mr. Crowder’s argument. He initially states that he is not against immigrants, just illegal immigrants, but then this distinction is lost in the command to “assimilate!” which would seem to apply to both legal and illegal immigrants, and is clearly targeted at cultural differences rather than legal status. Most of all, the video seeks to generate laughter not from incongruity or even ambivalence, but from a clear statement of superiority.

Occupy Wall Street: 99% Trickster

While political actors may exploit ambiguity, they seldom want to be seen as creators of ambiguity. To create ambiguity is to leave it to the audience to do the work of making meaning, thus relinquishing control of the narrative. In politics, this is rarely appealing, and in fact can be dangerous, as it may thwart the persuasive aims of the messenger and waste both opportunity and a great deal of money. The trickster is unconcerned with such details, untroubled by the messy processes of renovation and the upheavals of change. Rather, the trickster is focused on the single-minded pursuit of a goal.

The Occupy Wall Street movement that began in September 2011 in New York City represents a unique moment of synthesis between online and offline citizen activism. Although the activists themselves were always clear about their target, they did not put forward a spokesperson, and the response from the media was confusion to a degree that seemed almost deliberate. At the time of the protests I was an assistant professor at Florida State University in Tallahassee, and was called upon by a local television station for an interview at the state capitol, where the protesters

were gathering. As I stood on the capitol steps talking to the reporter, a young woman approached and handed us flyers with information about the “demands” of the Occupy movement. When she moved on, the reporter turned to me and said, “Why did she give me this?” He seemed genuinely confused. He then proceeded to ask me a number of questions that were answered on the young woman’s flyer.

Ignoring the obtuseness of media coverage, whether deliberate or inadvertent, the occupiers took a do-it-yourself approach to getting their message out that was in line with their other efforts. The movement did not put forth a leader, or seem concerned about elevating anyone to the position of “official” spokesperson, calling themselves the 99%. Nor would they identify themselves with a political party. They did not immediately present a list of demands, but also made no secret of their overall theme of inequality. They built a community in a public space, making themselves visible to the bankers on Wall Street and eventually the larger public. They marched. They set up community food distribution points, and set out to demonstrate their idea of what a more just society might look like. They held meetings and talked and made puppets and danced around drum circles.



Figure 12: Kumbayah this sign.



Figure 13: No caption necessary.

The occupiers built networks and broadcast their protests live on the Internet from laptops. They used social media to organize demonstrations, spread information about law enforcement activities, and garner support among the rest of the population. As police in several cities used tear gas, pepper spray and other methods to control the protests, the movement generated images that became Internet memes. Moreover, they engaged in tactics of “creative disruption,” such as halting home foreclosure auctions by singing, and camping on the lawns of homes targeted for foreclosure.²⁶



Figure 14: The love affair is over, and all I got was this classic breakup line.

A comprehensive history of the movement is not necessary to identify the Occupiers as tricksters. The movement continues, albeit with a much lower profile, at the time of this writing, making such a history a work in progress.²⁷ Collective actions the movement refers to as “rolling jubilees” are collecting money and purchasing debt in order to forgive it, beginning with medical debt and moving on to student debt. And there is no doubt that the Occupy movement successfully shifted the political narrative in the United States during the fall of 2011. The term 99% entered the national vocabulary. Suddenly politicians and media personalities were turning their attention to issues of income inequality and economic fairness. The collective ingenuity and creativity demonstrated by the occupiers succeeded in throwing dirt on assumptions about how political movements are organized, and suggested that new media culture in the United States may have reached a point where online and offline activism were able to achieve a moment of convergence.

²⁶ An account and video of the foreclosure auction can be accessed here:

http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2012/01/singing_protest.php Other acts of creative disruption are documented here: <http://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/5-acts-of-creative-disruption> Accessed on March 3, 2015.

²⁷ The account set forth here is drawn from a comprehensive Lexis-Nexis search of popular media coverage as of May 2012, as well as study of social media and websites created on behalf of the Occupy Movement.

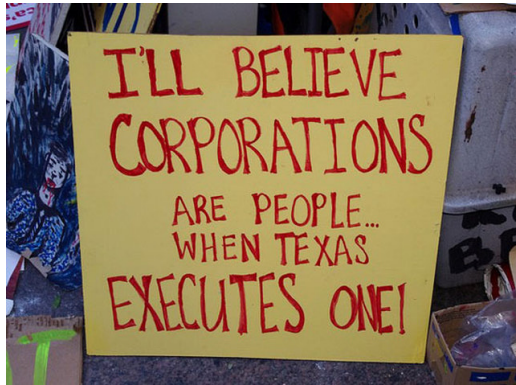


Figure 15: The joke is set up and paid off, and clearly on target.

The occupiers created excitement, mystery, ambiguity and anonymity. In refusing to follow the scripts of previous social movements, they crafted a collective identity for themselves that served to make their point about inequality. At the same time, they generated an atmosphere reminiscent of the carnival that has often characterized public reaction to “unfunny times.”²⁸ They performed the “trick” of dissent,²⁹ but took dissent beyond the level of individual policies to call into question the very organization and motivations of the American economic system.

Moreover, the occupiers modified spaces, occupying public parks, marching through public streets, and performing acts of street theater, such as projecting a “bat signal” like image on the Verizon building in New York City during a march.



Figure 16: The Occupy ‘bat signal.’

After a particularly brutal response by campus police to protestors at UC Davis, the students confounded expectations by staging a highly effective “silent” protest of the chancellor at a moment when all expected to hear angry, shouting voices. Video of the chancellor’s “walk of shame” quickly went viral on the Internet.³⁰ Even more viral was an image of a campus police officer casually pepper-spraying peaceful students. This image was quickly turned into an Internet meme.

²⁸ Achter, (2005).

²⁹ Ivie, (2005).

³⁰ One video of the protest can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8775ZmNGFY8>



Figure 17: The meme came to be known as "casually pepper spray everything." More can be found at: http://www.occupythegame.com/lieutenant_john_pike/

Ultimately, the occupiers were successful in creating and disseminating a collective narrative about the underlying causes of income inequality, and what they saw as the compromised and corrupted condition of our country's democratic process. The narrative created by the movement made space for a new iteration of the citizen-protagonist, demonstrating a way of "doing" dissent, marking what has played out as a slow but clear cultural shift away from the "greed is good" narratives of Wall Street philosophers. It is arguably the failure to recognize this shift that sabotaged the 2012 presidential campaign of Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan.



Figure 18: They know where the money went.

The trickster narrative complicates, but in doing so it also opens up space for a broader conversation about human conditions and motivations. The trickster specializes in questions and not answers. Tricksters do not refer us to the cosmic, or ask us to have faith, nor do they necessarily demand that we remain grounded in reality. While the jester is essential to democratic discourse, the trickster also fills a role of critical importance. If the jester's comic narrative keeps our focus on "man in society," the trickster narrative calls upon us to reconsider our assumptions about *what society is*, where the boundaries are, and how they are shaping our point of view.

Conclusion

This taxonomy is meant as a tool for the exploration of comic narratives in political discourse. It is intended as a way of conceptualizing the power relationships that are found in these narratives. Although I have attempted to establish the symbiotic relationship between comedy and democracy, I would also argue that the categories of jester, trickster and bully transcend political systems. In non-democratic systems, comedy still serves an important function. If speech is restricted, the clever citizen does not go away, but rather tells her jokes in a whisper.³¹ Under such conditions we might also expect that the jesters who are allowed to speak in the public sphere will be those who uphold the established power dynamic.

³¹ Scott, (1985).

Another important consideration in the analysis of comic narratives is the influence of cultural differences. Determining the directionality of a target requires a familiarity with the prevailing view of the status of various groups within the culture, not to mention an understanding of the history, art and idioms of the teller and the audience. Differences in cultures and political systems invite comparison, and cross-cultural comparison of comic narratives about the powerful, informed by depth of knowledge about the culture, could add to our understanding of how democratic cultures emerge and thrive.

Burke called comedy a “corrective.” In my own work I have explored it in conjunction with Chantal Mouffe’s notion of agonistic pluralism,³² exploring how it can reduce the friction of the perpetual conflict of democracy.³³ It precludes closure in a polarized system, with our laughter the signal that we are not utterly and completely disillusioned. We have not yet labeled the other as *evil* but still believe they are *terribly mistaken* and should be discredited. This is the critical component of an agonistic system: to recognize that the other side is not beyond redemption. If we decided that they were, we would have no choice but to resort to violence and utter destruction. Comedy takes the place of violence in an agonistic system, functioning as the “weapon of the weak.”³⁴ In fact, in a pluralistic society, the rules governing the choice of target are informed by notions of equality as enshrined at the outset of the experiment.

The role of comedy in empowering clever citizens and tempering democratic disillusionment is an under-examined area of American culture. Future study of comic political narratives could shed light on the ways in which citizens in a democracy use comedy as an equalizing force, and how comic narratives are used to navigate the space between political idealism and cynicism. The categories of jester, trickster and bully offer a tool for differentiating between democratic and anti-democratic comedy. Although what makes us laugh is often complex, situational and culturally specific, there are some basic rules of the democratic comic frame that can be identified, and the fostering of a rich comic culture in democratic systems can enhance both the project and the process of self-governance.

³² Mouffe, Chantal. (2000). *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.

³³ Castillo (2008).

³⁴ Scott, James C. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

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2. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/fjelstud/the-best-signs-from-occupy-wall-street#.mbozGyP9L>
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