

Jokes under Romanian Communism

Carmen Popescu

Petroleum and Gas University of Ploiești, 39 Bvd. București, Ploiești
E-mail: carmenpopescu@upcnet.ro

Abstract

Starting from sociological theories of humour, the present paper reviews current approaches to the relationship between humour and protest in Eastern Europe and discusses the issue of “collaboration” vs. resistance through humour in the Romanian totalitarian regime.

Keywords: *joke, theory, humour, regime*

Sociological approaches to humour

Sociological theories of humour are also known as hostility/disparagement theories (Attardo 1994: 49) in that they refer to aggression, superiority, triumph, derision and disparagement. Mulkay (1988) mentions Fry (1963) and Hertzler (1970) who attempted to develop a sociological overview of humour, but failed. Sociological approaches to humour often emphasize the aggressive/exclusive or cohesive/inclusive aspect of humour. The earliest theories mention the aggressive element of humour. Thomas Hobbes (in La Fave et al., 1976, quoted in Attardo 1994) formulated the idea that laughter arises from a sense of superiority of the laugher towards some object, known as the ‘butt of the joke’. This theory is also sustained by Bergson, for whom humour is used by society to correct deviant behaviour. His theory is an incongruity-based one used for sociologically-oriented analysis.

A book that offers an empirically documented sociological view of humour and its place in society is Michael Mulkay’s *On Humor* (1988). It fills a gap that resulted from the equation of ‘non-serious’ with ‘trivial’, i.e. considered unworthy of serious investigation. The author’s aim is to show that the symbolic separation of humour from the realm of the serious action enables social actors to use humour for serious purposes, and that makes humour an essential area for sociological inquiry (p.1).

One of the aspects highlighted by Mulkay concerns the distinctions that can be made between the ‘organising principles’ (p. 4) of the serious mode and of the humorous mode at the level of the discourse. There is often an interplay between the serious and the humorous modes, for which I used the term ‘frames’ (cf. Goffman 1986). I will summarise the main differences between the two modes as identified by Mulkay:

Table 1: Differences between serious and non-serious mode cf. Mulkay (1988: 22-26)

Serious mode	Humorous mode
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a <i>unitary</i> mode a) which takes for granted the existence of <i>one</i> real world b) in which ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretative diversity are potential problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a mode of interpretative <i>multiplicity</i> a) in which people interact and collectively create in the production of controlled nonsense b) in which everything has more than one meaning (interpretative duality) c) different plausability requirements (e.g. for jokes) operate than in the serious mode

The assumptions and expectations of humorous discourse are different from those of serious discourse and within this framework humorous incongruity is possible. Mulkay concludes his argument with the observation that the significance of humour lies in what it tells us about the serious mode and about the recurrent failure of that unitary form of discourse to cope with the multiple realities of social life (1988: 6).

Mulkay also refers to the way in which participants signal their adoption of the humorous mode. I will enumerate the categories of humour that Mulkay mentions:

- intended vs. unintended humour
- applied (when social actors make use of the humorous mode for serious purposes, i.e. in various types of difficult interaction) vs. pure
 - natural (happening independently of the human intention to amuse) vs. contrived
 - informal vs. standardized (transferable from one setting to another without considerable reformulation)

Mulkay emphasizes the broad functionality of humour in communication, i.e. that of a mediating device that helps carry out embarrassing or aggressive interactions and negotiate dangerous topics such as death or sexual availability without ‘personal risk’. The author sees it as different from teasing, which is used for criticizing a person without direct aggression (p.79). Mulkay’s main point is that the eventual serious content of humorous discourse can always be denied in the event of the speaker finding his/her assertions to be socially unacceptable, i.e. the retractability of humour. That is the reason why humour is often used to test others’ behaviour and deal with emotionally charged issues, something that also happened in the lessons recorded for my study.

Interestingly, humour occurs in relatively formalized structures being closely linked with contradictions built into those structures. Mulkay argues that humour is used in such settings in accordance with the requirements of those in power, i.e. who occupy positions of formal control, but that it can in fact be used to challenge, condemn and disrupt existing social patterns. In reality, it often works to maintain the social structures which gave birth to it.

Humour as social protest is an example in point. It is to be found in the political jokes told in the communist countries of Eastern Europe between the mid-1940s and 1989. The jokes were mocking political leaders as individuals but also the entire social and political system. The famous Romanian jokes in which the actors were representatives of the two opposing systems, communist and capitalist, were very often anti-Russian, resented even to this day as foreign rulers who imposed their social and political system on us.

In conditions of conflict, the status relations between the joker and the target are of paramount importance: in very repressive conditions, the humor of the powerless tends to be clandestine. Thus, in pre-1989 Romania all political humour was underground. The jokes were whispered jokes', and telling them involved personal risk. They were also a collective product, the fruit of many changes and improvements as they were retold by a very large proportion of the population. This type of humour at the same time highly enjoyed and thought to be tolerated by the political regime, to allow the negative feelings towards it in order to avoid open confrontation.

According to Kuipers (2008), in more open societies there are fewer restrictions on humour. Generally, there are institutions or publications devoted, at least partially, to political satire and humour. I would say that this is the case of today's Romania as well, where there are no boundaries established for humour whatsoever, maybe as a mechanism that compensates for the dark years of communism. The dynamics of humour and conflict is different today and publications such as "Academia Catavencu", "Plai cu boi", "Aspirina Saracului" are just a few examples of "free spaces" (Kuipers 2008) where the powerful can be mocked at. As in all former communist countries, Romanian political humour, the leading variety twenty years ago, has lost its importance since it can be open.

Whether political humour under oppression can be seen or not as resistance is a controversial issue (Obrdlik 1942, Stokker 1995, Benton 1988, Davies 2007). However, it is equally controversial whether or not it meant collaboration (André Clément 1945) by emphasizing the existing political regime. Davies (2007) argues that 'jokes are a social thermometer not a thermostat', i.e. they can indicate what is happening in society without being able to correct by feeding back into the social processes that generated them. Further research is needed in order to prove this point.

Bibliography

1. André Clément (1945) : *Les 100 meilleures histoires de l'occupation*, Paris, Le Sourd
2. Attardo, S. (1994): *Linguistic Theories of Humour*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.
3. Benton, G. (1988): *The Origins of the Political Joke*. In Powell and Paton (eds.), 35-33
4. Davies, C. (2007): *Humour and Protest*, Jokes under communism. *International Review of Social History*, 52:291-305
5. Fry, W. (1963): *Sweet Madness*, Palo Alto, Pacific Books.
6. Goffman, E. (1986): *Frame Analysis*, New York, Northeastern University Press.
7. Hertzler, J. (1970): *Laughter. A Socio-Scientific Analysis*, New York, Exposition.
8. Kuipers (2008): The sociology of Humor, in **The Primer of Humor Research** (Forthcoming), editor: Victor Raskin
9. Mulkay, M. (1988): *On Humour. Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society* London, Polity Press.
10. Obrdlik Antonin J 1942, "Gallows Humor" – A Sociological Phenomenon",
11. *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 45, No. 5, March, pp. 709-716, (1942),
12. Stokker, K. *Folklore fights the Nazis, Humor in occupied Norway, 1940- 1945*, Cranbury NJ, Associated UP, 1995)

Glume în timpul regimului comunist

Rezumat

Plecând de la teoriile sociologice despre umor, articolul prezintă relația dintre umor și protest în Europa de Est și realizează o paralelă între colaborare și rezistență prin prisma umorului în timpul regimului totalitar din România.