International Political Science Review (1990), Vol. 11, No. 4, 483–493

Political Humor and Authority: From Support to Subversion

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ABSTRACT. This paper attempts to categorize political humor using four criteria: target, focus, acceptability, and presentation. These are applied to examples of the humor of Bob Hope, the Gridiron dinner, Harry Shearer, and Lenny Bruce. Four types of political humor relating to authority emerge: supportive, benign, undermining, and subversive.

"I said. . .of mirth, 'What doeth it?'"—*Ecclesiastes* 2:2

Introduction

Offering abundant targets to laugh at and about, authority is a perpetual source of humor. Some of the subjects are perennial: rulers' foibles, self-importance, chicanery, corruption, scandals, and blunders. Then there are policies: these may be inept from the start, or be made so through incompetent execution. Consider just a few of the policies initiated by American authority holders: Irangate, the attack on Libya, the invasion of Grenada, Watergate, and the Vietnam War. Each offered the opportunity, gratefully accepted, for a raft of witticisms and jokes.

But authority figures also have to react to events they do not initiate and may even wish to avoid, such as the AIDS phenomenon, economic disasters (inflation, unemployment, a depression), and the widely publicized, assorted sins of America's television evangelists. All provoked mirth as one reaction. Indeed, nothing, no matter how sacred, is immune: assassination attempts, successful or unsuccessful, on presidents; the women's movement for equal rights; the personal, private sexual proclivities and preferences of presidents and presidential candidates; the last perhaps soon expanding to include incumbents of and candidates for other offices.

In this paper, I shall focus on political humor in the United States. I'll consider other types of political systems in future papers.

Democracies, by their nature, would seem to invite humor publicly directed at their rulers. After all, elected authority-holders are chosen from the people and can expect, eventually, to be returned to them either by electoral defeat or because of limits on the number of terms they may serve. (The fact that they often move on to lucrative

0192-5121/90/04 0483-11 $03.00

positions in law and business rather than returning to their home districts does not obviate the democratic aspect of their selection and departure.) Besides, in contrast to autocrats, whose vengeance can be swift and sure, rulers in democracies are usually unable summarily to punish the people who devise and direct humor at them. More important, in many democracies, is the tradition and practice of free speech, the most famous expression of which in the United States is in the Constitution. Because of all these factors, the making and purveying of political humor becomes a less risky undertaking for its originators. If commercially successful, it can be a source of affluence, even influence. (On the origin and development of humor, see McGhee, 1979.)

Significance

The obvious question (and just because it is obvious does not mean that it is unimportant) is whether this humor directed at authority-holders matters. The conventional view takes its inspiration from the work of Sigmund Freud (1960) in arguing that the expresssion of humor releases "the tensions of repressing the impulse to be aggressive" (Schutz, 1977: 31). This makes it particularly suitable for attacks on authority-holders who are (often) otherwise protected from direct disparagement.

Sublimating aggression, relieving tension, humor is thus therapeutic for both humorists and their audiences. Its effects on its target rulers, one surmises, would be to perpetuate their rule by dissipating oppositional intensity (Pitchford, 1960).

Even more beneficial to authority-wielders, it may be that viewing "something humorously is generally to cease to regard it as an enemy. . .To laugh at someone in political humor is to step toward community with him" (Schutz, 1977: 331).

There is an opposite view: humor is anarchic and subversive because it heaps scorn and abuse on respected figures, cherished institutions; and does so in a way that, were it not presented as humor, would be unacceptable. No wonder Plato would have permitted only the most innocuous comedy in politics, if that. Surely authority-holders who, feeling threatened by humor contrive to suppress it, are simply being sensitive to their power stakes, to the vulnerability of their authority. Does not humor sometimes enable people to confront authority, to diminish it, reduce its distance and majesty, thereby revealing authority-holders as imperfect mortals, error-prone humans, ordinary people unworthy of special respect, deference, or perpetuation in office?

Approach

These arguments are not mutually exclusive. Humor, it seems to me, may range along a spectrum in its relationships with authority. At one extreme it could be supportive; at the other, subversive. In between, it can be benign or undermining. The bulk of this paper is devoted to developing and exploring the ramifications of this idea. I shall first suggest some criteria for distinguishing and categorizing the different types of humor, then summarily apply these criteria to examples of the comedy of Bob Hope, Washington's famous (or infamous) Gridiron dinner, Harry Shearer, Lenny Bruce, and other comedy sources. I shall then briefly reflect on some of the questions raised by my material.

This is a tentative, preliminary foray into a serious subject. Although I draw on the extant scholarly literature, most of my analysis is original, even speculative. For, as is so often the case in social science, the quality and quantity of research are inversely

related to the intrinsic fascination of the subject (Galnoor and Lukes, 1985; and Weber, 1981 are two of the few exceptions). One reason is that the nature and possible effects of humor, in all its variety, directed at authority-holders, are difficult, if not impossible, to research. For the nonce, then, ideas and speculation deservedly take precedence.

Taxonomic Criteria

I propose that humor directed against authority can range from supporting to subverting depending upon its actual targets, focus, social acceptability, and presentation.

Targets

Authority is commonly possessed and enjoyed by parents (at least until their children reach puberty), employers, sports coaches (Paletz and LaFiura, 1977), professors, and their ilk. Our concern, however, is with political authority. Such authority exists on five levels: the individual seeking or occupying an authority position; the policies that person espouses, promotes, is identified with, takes responsibility for; the authority position itself, such as the congressional seat of the fourth district of North Carolina; the institution housing the position, such as the House of Representatives of the United States Congress; and the political system as a whole, including its dominating ideas and assumptions—which in countries such as the United States would include democracy and the notion that people possess the capacity for self-government.

The type of level is a useful guide to the kind of humor at work. The higher the level, the more fundamental the authority is likely to be, thus the humor has the potential to be at its most subversive. At that level, however, the targets are hard to assault with humor, even more difficult to do so with originality.

Consequently, although individual politicians may not like it, in democracies they are both the most obvious and least fundamental target. One reason is that they can be and are often replaced, while the system they represent survives, even flourishes. Moreover, humor aimed at particular office-seekers and -holders tends to be directed at their foibles and proclivities rather than at more damaging characteristics.

In contrast, humor that attacks the political system itself usually incorporates lower levels of authority in its ambit. And if system change eventuates, from monarchy to communism, for example, the results can be dramatic and drastic.

Focus

By focus, I mean the particular aspect or element of the authority level the humor emphasizes. In the case of individual authority-seekers or -holders, the foci tend to be their hollow rhetoric, crass pieties and, much rarer, their betrayal of principles.

Richard Nixon is a prime example. More than perhaps any other post-World War Two political figure, he attracted the shafts of humorists: cartoonists, columnists, television comedians, film-makers, stand-up comics, other politicians— the list is endless (Whitfield, 1985). Sometimes the humor focused on a physical characteristic, poking fun at his ski nose, jowls, or saturnine appearance. On occasion it highlighted his alleged lack of integrity and scruple, as in the comment that " 'Nixon is the kind of politician who would cut down a redwood tree, then mount the stump for a speech on

conservation' " (Adlai Stevenson in Dudden, 1987: 153). Or, during the Watergate saga, humorists pointed out his tendency to be less than truthful: television talk show host Johnny Carson observed " 'Whenever anyone in the White House tells a lie, Nixon gets a royalty' " (*ibid*).

My point is that some foci are more damaging, more devastating, than others. Even at the level of individual authority, a focus can be debilitating. Similarly, the focus of humor at a higher level of authority will often do no more than echo conventional complaints—for example, about the law's delay and the insolence of office. Humor directed at stereotypes soothes, comforts, is usually benign.

But a new or unexpected focus can alert and challenge the audience, bringing to its members truths about authority they might rather not know or actively avoid. Consider the illuminating insights that Finley Peter Dunne offered in his newspaper column through his fictional creation Mr. Dooley: on the vice-presidency—" 'It isn't a crime, exactly' "; and on the Supreme Court—" 'It follows the iliction returns' " (Dudden, 1987: 56).

The higher the level of authority, the more difficult it seems to be for humorists to provide an unconventional focus. Ambrose Bierce was a conspicuous exception. In his *Devil's Dictionary*, he defined the vote as: "The instrument and symbol of a freeman's power to make a fool of himself and a wreck of his country" (Schutz, 1977: 287). Having derided the voting aspect of democracy, Bierce went on to mock American politics as "A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage" (Dudden, 1987: 58).

Acceptability

With rare exceptions, the more acceptable a piece of humor, the less subversive it is. Conversely, daring and outrageous humor tends to be spurned, rejected, or just ignored.

Political authority-holders themselves are particularly constrained. They can joke about their rivals, and certainly about themselves (self-deprecating comments display their common humanity with the electorate and are especially appealing coming from such patrician-type presidents as Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy), but most other subjects are excluded. It is not a matter of uttering subversive witticisms, which would be polluting the political trough from which they feed. Rather, they want to avoid antagonizing any sizable segment of the electorate. For many politicians this is no problem, as they lack a sense of humor anyway. Those endowed with one tend to resist temptation. Not always successfully. Consider Ronald Reagan. He recited an ethnic joke during the 1980 primary election season. To wit: "How do you tell the Italians at a cock-fight? They're the ones who bet on the duck. How do you know the Mafia's involved? The duck wins."

Reagan survived the gaffe, although not without causing concern among his advisors. Indeed, in part because of his ability to joke under intense physical pain and duress (at least as reported by his aides and doctors) he seems to have made the display of a ready wit an asset for presidential candidates in the 1980s—as long as it consists of non-controversial observations confined to acceptable subjects.

Professional humorists are obviously less restricted. After all, comedy is their business. But even they have to reckon with the acceptability of their targets and foci. As just one example, the comedian Will Durst said on the television show *Late Night with David Letterman*, "My idea of a joke is to give Hinckley a bigger gun." The remark referring to the 1981 attempt on the president's life by John W. Hinckley is believed to

have hurt Durst's career. It certainly seemed to terminate his appearances on the Letterman show.

Something more seems to be at work here than choice of target and foci. I would speculate that it may have to do with the prominent tension relief quality of humor. Humor that is supportive of or benign towards authority can relieve tension in one or more of several ways: by using a punch line, containing a reassuring conclusion and, most commonly, through laughter. Subversive humor, on the other hand, frequently lacks resolution, or, worse for the audience's psychological security, offers a conclusion that is widely believed to be both undesirable and painful—in the Durst example, the assassination of the incumbent American president. The concomitant result is that it often compounds the problem by failing to provoke the other mode of tension relief, laughter.

Presentation

The final criterion helping determine the placement of humor along the authority-supporting, authority-subverting spectrum is the mode of presentation. By this I mean the medium, the setting in which the humor is presented, the humorist's delivery and body language, the extent to which they communicate a sense of complicity with the audience, the amount of hostility they express and how openly, and the show's production values. These elements conduce to a presentation that I would call "slick" at one extreme, "raw" at the other. In general, "slick" is supportive of political authority, "raw" subverts it.

The Spectrum

With the inevitable procrustean effects, I now apply the four criteria to representative examples of humor directed at authority. These examples are suggestive rather than definitive and have been chosen from abundant possibilities. In the future I propose to discuss the late night television show *Saturday Night Live*, as well as the work of Gary Trudeau, Jules Feiffer, and David Levine.

Supportive

Bob Hope

The quintessential comedian of authority-supporting jokes is Bob Hope. Throughout his long career on the stage, on radio, in films, and now on television, Hope's targets have been relatively low level, often presidents; his focus, their foibles and idiosyncrasies. The following day the president and Hope will play golf together, attesting to the inoffensiveness and acceptibility of the humor.

Even when Hope's targets are governmental institutions, his choices are obvious, his focus on stereotypes. His opening monologue on his NBC *Comedy Special* of April 20, 1983 was typical. "How about that marvelous flight of the space shuttle Challenger! Everything went well but there was a slight delay before the blast off: the astronaunts forgot to pass through the metal detector." And, "Did you read where the astronauts' space suits cost two million dollars each? When did NASA hire Gucci?" The shuttle is celebrated, as are the astronauts themselves who are also humanized but not demeaned by the metal detector reference. The focus of the comedian's remarks are the hardy perennials: bureaucratic procedures and waste.

Even when Hope turns to a different governmental institution, his target and focus are predictable: "Well, like everybody else I've paid my income taxes and I'd like to congratulate our cameramen for their trick photography. You'd never know I'm not wearing a shirt; and the IRS took my pants too." What is being asserted here is that a law abiding and loyal citizen has paid his taxes, followed by the highly optimistic claim that everybody else has done likewise. As to his avowal of penury, his audience knows that Hope is one of America's wealthiest men. On the same comedy special he can also be seen serving as the spokesman for Texaco in that company's commercials.

That comedy special, with its roster of comedic notables (all of whom are either as supportive of authority as Hope or are apolitical), with its expensive production costs, and use of state of the art technology, is eminently slick. It is presented in a spirit of good, inoffensive fun.

Bob Hope is dedicated to an America whose economic and political systems have served him well. His loyalty and commitment to his country are reflected in his numerous and celebrated trips to entertain American servicemen and -women abroad. He would not knowingly damage political authority in America. As he said during an interview on the CBS Morning Show (January 15, 1987), "I never go deep, I just prick 'em a little; I never draw blood."

Benign

The Gridiron Dinner

One of Washington D.C.'s strangest events is the annual Gridiron dinner. Washington reporters and their bosses, editors, and publishers dine with and entertain, by dressing up in silly costumes and performing in satirical skits, the people in government and politics they write about the rest of the year.

At first impression, the Gridiron is a kind of love feast, or at least a mutual admiration society. The press jibes at political authority-holders and, in so doing, pokes fun at itself. Then, before the night is over, the public officials have their opportunity to respond. Their responses are sometimes quite droll. At the 1987 dinner, then House Speaker Jim Wright (D. Texas), confessed that his party had been inconsistent: "For six years, we went around saying Ronald Reagan didn't know what was going on. And now, when he says the same thing about himself, we say he's lying." But the star of the event was the president himself. According to one journalist, he "took on each of his supposed weaknesses—his age, his memory, his distaste for hard work, his domination by his wife, his inattention to detail—and laughed them away with a joke on himself."

Even when the president involved is Ronald Reagan, a man who can give and apparently take a joke, unlike most of his somewhat humorless recent predecessors, the Gridiron dinner is not entirely supportive of political authority. We might more accurately characterize it as benign. The targets are individuals and policies, rarely anything at a higher level. But the foci are diverse, ranging from the familiar to the arcane, the trivial to the vital. The ritualization of the event renders the humor acceptable, but it is not always appreciated let alone welcomed by its subjects in attendance. The presentation is an odd combination of slick and raw. The press performers are amateurish (these are not show biz professionals, after all), the setting relatively makeshift. On the other hand, the white tie event is prestigious, graced by the presence of the president, as well as Supreme Court justices, congressional leaders, governors, and diplomats.

So the Gridiron dinner is benign rather than supportive. What this means in terms of its relationship to political authority is best summed up in the words of the Gridiron president welcoming President Reagan: "We think you. . .know, as we do, that it is a precious thing that we can kid each other and have good fun together" (Broder, 1987: 5A, from whom this description of the 1987 Gridiron dinner is taken; the interpretation and analysis, with which I doubt Broder would agree, are mine).

Undermine

Harry Shearer

Writer, actor, director Harry Shearer is perhaps best known for his performance in the fake rockumentary film *Spinal Tap*. But it is his radio show "Hellcats of the White House" by which he may best be remembered (aside from any future accomplishments). The program purports, as the sonorously voiced announcer intones, to the accompaniment of triumphal music, to present tapes from "the Holmes Tuttle Collection, the West's Leading Active Archive of Historic Storylines." These tapes, we are told, contain "tales of action, adventure, and romance in our nation's executive mansion" (all quotes are from tapes provided by Mr. Shearer. copyrighted by Century of Progress Productions).

What listeners hear are the apparent voices of President Reagan, his trusted aides, his wife, and an occasional show business hack, as they go about their affairs at the White House, on Air Force One, at the president's ranch, and abroad. An aide tells the president of his forthcoming speaking assignments. The president reads the list: "SDI Forum," "Citizens for a Drug-Free Nicaragua," "Americans United for Mining in National Parks." When he finishes, the aide comments: "It's much better for you to be out of town when McFarlane has his next suicide attempt."

In another episode, the president speaks to the nation following his return from the Geneva summit. Addressing the issue of disarmament negotiations with the Soviet Union, he comments: "We'll be doing our utmost to convince them to trust us when we say that we would never use our strategic defense initiative to launch a first strike against them. But we'll also be underlining our concern for sound verification procedures for any agreement we do reach. Because, unfortunately, we can't trust the Russians even if they would trust us. If there's one game show the Russians could never be on, it's 'To Tell the Truth'."

In fact, the entire show is Shearer's invention and creation. He writes the script to represent and reflect the president's activities of the past week. An extraordinary mimic, he does all the voices, capturing timbre, breathing, intonation, pauses, and speed.

I would classify this humor as undermining political authority. Certainly President Reagan is an unexceptional target. Moreover, the focus appears to be conventional: the president's unselfconscious capacity for (public) self-delusion. The mimicry implies a certain grudging respect, almost affection, for the president. But Shearer goes beyond the obvious, alleged sins of the incumbent to far more disturbing aspects of the presidency: the vagaries of the presidential decision-making process, the internecine power struggles among his aides, the endemic media manipulation, and the contradiction (some might call it a chasm, after listening to Shearer's programs) between the behind-the-scenes reality of the behavior of the denizens of the White Houses and the sanitized (drycleaned) version provided to the public.

Our final two criteria also contribute to the authority-undermining quality of

Shearer's work. The presentation and use of technology are sophisticated, but essentially Shearer is a one-man operation, relying on his ingenuity and extensive radio experience to compensate for a meager budget. Since it is broadcast on radio, the show has some acceptability, but it airs on Sunday mornings from a relatively small radio station in Southern California. Moreover, rather than appealing to the mass audience by reducing tension, it increases tension through its open-ended format, by having the protagonists ask questions which are never answered, and by ending the show with a series of soap-operatic suspenseful questions from the announcer. Like messy life, nothing is resolved, and the saga continues week after week.

Understanding "Hellcats," moreover, requires a certain familiarity with Ronald Reagan's past (for examples, Holmes Tuttle is the name of a Ford dealer in Los Angeles who helped bankroll Mr. Reagan's political career; *Hellcats of the Navy* was a film in which the future president appeared with his future wife, Nancy). Appreciation of the program's humor is also enhanced by knowledge of recent national events. Unsurprisingly, therefore, although the show's following grew, it remained cultish in comparison with the audience for the Bob Hope special.

Subversion

Lenny Bruce

Lenny Bruce died in 1965. During the last years of his life he was beset by the US law enforcement, legal, and judicial systems. He was arrested on three occasions for obscenity. The verdicts were, respectively: innocent; guilty but reversed on appeal; and guilty, affirmed on appeal. (For the details of Bruce's life and a meditation on the meaning of his career, see Goldman, 1974.)

In August 1965, a few days before his death, Bruce appeared in a nightclub in San Francisco, one of the few cities in which he could legally peform without being subjected to arrest, and where his performance would not incur the wrath of local public officials, including prosecuting attorneys and the police. His work that night was filmed in 16 mm and, under the title *Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, offers a rare glimpse of the untrammeled, albeit somewhat weary, Bruce doing his act.

His act is unlikely to be duplicated in the past or future. With the transcript of his most recent obscenity trial close at hand, sometimes in his hand, he contrasts and compares his actual nightclub performance with the version of it reported by the police for which he was indicted by the grand jury and found guilty by the judge. Bruce's litany of complaints about the "peace officer's" inadequate and thoroughly misleading version of his act are both dismaying and convincing. Bruce points out that he had to go to court not to vindicate his act as it really was, but to defend the policeman's misbegotten version of his act.

He then chronicles, with increasing ferocity and despair, his frustrating clashes with the legal system. A typical example is his encounter with Federal Appeals Court Judge Thurgood Marshall, a black man whom President Lyndon Johnson would later elevate to the Supreme Court. "So Thurgood Marshall says to me, 'What are you doing here? You didn't exhaust your remedies in state court.' So he's a Negro. I figure I'll grab him and he will understand my problems in the state court. I said, 'What's it like is I'm a Negro in Alabama and I'm looking to use the toilet and by the time I get the relief it's going to be too late.' He says, 'You're no Nigger.' I say, 'It's an analogy.' Appeal denied."

For Bruce, Marshall represents an American judicial system that, through its structure, processes, and personnel is uncaring, incompetent, and unjust. Through his worn physical presence, by recounting what actually happened to him, and through the content of his act, Bruce destroys illusions about American justice. He dissects it by showing how it dissected him.

This is subversive stuff. It is compounded by his other targets and the distinctive approach he took to them. He was, for example, the only humorist of the time to take on the Kennedy assassination; but he did so by debunking the myth propagated by *Time* magazine that the president's wife had bravely tried to stay in the car when the shots hit. His purpose, he said, was to free his own daughter from having either to live up to such a fantasy standard or from having to feel guilty when she failed to do so.

Bruce was also uninhibited in his use of langauge. His humor employed every notorious four-letter word and their longer and shorter brethren. This enabled him to reveal the prurient malevolence within authority, to portray the wielders of authority as con men. It also significantly reduced the acceptability of his humor by eventually confining him to a few nightclubs and concert appearances.

His presentation was raw: he was wont to introduce his act with the phrase: "Dirty Lenny is going on soon." His personal acceptability, as well as that of his act, were limited to a small audience (although a much larger one was to emerge after his death). Combine these facts with the relatively high authority level of his targets, his disturbing foci, and the way his humorous bits usually exacerbated tension in the audience by their lack of satisfactory resolution. Lenny Bruce becomes, then, the quintessential authority-subverting comedian.

Reflections

I shall briefly reflect on a few of the questions this paper raises. One obvious issue is the relationship of the four criteria with which I have tried to assess political humor. For example, it is theoretically possible in a particular comedian's performance for one criterion to be supportive, another to undermine authority. As my case studies indicate, however, the four criteria do seem to be interconnected in a consistent way. At least I have found no flagrant disjunctions. Were contradictions to occur, we would have to determine the overall pattern: most likely, three of the criteria would be consistent, with only the remaining one deviant.

This, of course, raises the question of the relative weight of each criterion. My initial intention was to weigh them equally. In the process of writing the paper, however, it has become clear that target and focus are usually more important than acceptability and presentation. These latter two criteria primarily have confirmed judgements based on the first two.

One reason for the lesser significance of presentation may be because of my relative neglect of the performance forum. Different forums are variously hospitable, or hostile, to subversive humor, with nightclubs at one extreme and, at least in the United States, television at the other. Commercial concerns, allied to formal, informal constraints, and self-censorship limit the availability of corrosive political humor in the mass media. As the CBS television network censor pronounced: "It's OK to satirize the President, as long as you do so with respect" (Hill and Weingrad, 1987: 22).

Change

Forums are also intimately related to changes in comedians' targets and foci. Although many humorists remain consistent in their treatment of politics over the years (Bob Hope may be more supportive now than when he started out in show business, but he has always been supportive), others do change. Lenny Bruce ended up far more radical than when he began. Usually, like most people, comedians' radicalism declines as they grow older. Richard Pryor is one example. His early monologues (diatribes is a more accurate word) were bitter excoriations of American life, politics, and race relations. Later on, as he graduated from seedy nightclubs to video specials to feature films, he mellowed (deteriorated, perhaps) into tolerance and understanding.

Political humor is also influenced by changes in the attitudes of authority-holders and the public (and vice versa). So-called dirty words are an example. They still may not be read frequently in most daily newspapers, or be bandied about on radio and network television, but they are staples in many humorists' lexicons, including those who eschew politics in their acts. Most authority-holders are no longer enraged enough to threaten or undertake punitive action against the users of "dirty words." "Words that Lenny Bruce got arrested for in 1962 you can see being said by women on the big screen" (Paul Krassner, quoted in McCabe, 1986: 18). (On the issue of such words as threats to authority, see Paletz and Harris, 1975.) Visual obscenity and pornography are a different matter (Paletz, 1988).

Times change, too. Some periods may be conducive to particular types of political humor. Placid periods, such as the mid-1950s in the United States, might encourage trenchant critiques of authority, particularly if the humor is directed at sins perpetrated during previous years. Such humor could be riskier in more turbulent periods and be regarded as too incisive for the times. Authority-holders, too, might be less tolerant during such periods.

Moral Judgments

Like many Americans, I have ambiguous views of and relationships with political authority in its many levels and varieties. At times I believe it requires more support and I deplore, although I would not try to stop, attacks on it by humorists. At other times, I applaud the practitioners of subversive humor and would join them had I the wit and talent. So I have tried in this speculative paper to eschew moral judgments, to avoid preferring one type of humor, or one humorist over another. I may not have been successful. Perhaps my heart is with Beaumarchais: "I make people laugh and thus change the world."

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Acknowledgment

I thank Mike Adlin and Gabriel Michael Paletz for their assistance in the preparation of this article.