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Author(s): Antonin J. Obrdlik

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“GALLOWS HUMOR”—A SOCIOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

ANTONIN J. OBRDLIK

ABSTRACT

Humor is both a social product and an agency with social functions. It assumes different forms in various groups and within the same group according to the changes in situations. “Gallows humor” is a type of humor that arises in a type of precarious or dangerous situation. On the basis of experiences in Czechoslovakia following the advent of Hitler it may be stated that gallows humor is an index of strength or morale on the part of oppressed peoples. The positive effect of gallows humor is manifested in the strengthening of morale. Its negative effect is revealed in its influence upon the disintegration of those toward whom it is directed.

Humor, being both a social product and an agency with social functions which influences retroactively the group in which it originated, reveals certain characteristics which are common to all social phenomena. One unmistakable sign of its “socialness” is that it assumes different forms in various social groups and within the same group, according to different situations. A more careful analysis would disclose that there is possible a sociological classification of humor—that is, a typology of several groups or categories of humor traced back to their social origins. Such classification, however, is not of immediate concern in the present article. Suffice it to say that even the popular thinking distinguishes between, for instance, the jokes of priests, doctors, soldiers, farmers, forest guardians, etc.; that there are jokes typical of young people as distinguished from the older generation; that certain types of anecdotes are more prevalent among women, others among men; or that some groups are quite renowned for their inventiveness in the realm of jokes and anecdotes while others are comparatively barren in this respect. All of which confirms the statement that humor, if it is to be properly analyzed, must be studied in terms of its social origin as well as from the viewpoint of its social function.

One special type of humor is the so-called “gallows humor” which of late has become so typical in the nations which are oppressed by their invaders. The term itself reveals its origin and meaning. However, in this paper we use it in a more general sense as referring to humor which arises in connection with a precarious or dangerous situation. There is, however, one substantial difference between the gallows humor taken literally, when somebody expects a just punishment, and the gallows humor of those who, figuratively speaking, await their “gallows” as innocent vic-

tims of the aggression of the dictators; the first is an expression of cynicism, whereas the latter is the expression of hope and wishful thinking.

The present author had the "luck" of spending nine months in Czechoslovakia after that country was invaded by the Nazis. Thus, he had an opportunity to follow the development of the different phases of the general situation as well as to note the specific function performed in it by the element of humor.

Long before the actual invasion took place, and especially after the annexation of Austria, there was a whole crop of jokes and anecdotes—partly original and partly coming from the frontiers of Germany proper—the tenor of which was ridiculing the Nazi leaders and their regime. It was the humor-for-humor phase, a sort of lighthearted bravado and defiance, which can be explained by the fact that at that time Czechoslovakia still had pledges of assistance from France and Russia in case of an unprovoked aggression, and these gave a feeling of security to her citizens. But even then almost everybody felt the atmosphere of tension and uneasiness and realized that big events were in preparation. People tried not to see the bad omens, and many of them found in anecdotes an intellectual and emotional escape from the disturbing realities. It was symptomatic that the more ominous the news coming from invaded Austria, the more numerous and pointed were these anecdotes. They became a means of social control in that they bolstered the morale of the Czech people, and, although they were so often but the expression of wishful thinking, their importance as a compensation for fear could not be overestimated. It was a manifestation of morale evident especially at the moment of general mobilization—an action which was accepted by the overwhelming majority of the population, soldiers and civilians, with a feeling of relief after the long period of anxiety about the uncertain future. Up to this moment the jokes seemed to perform primarily the function of amusing the Czech public at the expense of Hitler and his associates. From then on, when the general mobilization made it quite clear that the danger was real, the type and content of anecdotes did not change; but it was apparent that the majority of them were invented, accepted, and spread with purposeful intention. The great importance of humor as a factor in social control was realized.¹

¹ Ridicule also has been used effectively as a social sanction among the primitives. The Eskimos, for instance, use ridicule against thievery. Instead of punishing the thief, they laugh whenever his name is mentioned, which, judging from the fact that stealing is almost unknown among the Eskimos, is probably a more effective means of social control than fining or imprisoning offenders.

In one of his recent broadcasts from London, President Beneš of Czechoslovakia reassured the Czech people that things are going better because the rest of the world is beginning to ridicule nazism and its leaders, an action which should be taken as a good sign by the oppressed and as the beginning of the end by the Nazis.

Before the Munich "agreement"—that is, before the Czechoslovakian army was demobilized—jokes and anecdotes were in vogue, and, although many of them were lascivious to the point where they cannot be reproduced here, they all were surprisingly witty. There was actually an epidemic of jokes about Hitler's "plate circus" because, so the story goes, even the heaviest tanks were protected only by a thin plate instead of by thick steel and, therefore, could have been easily shot through.

After Munich, when the Czech nation was crushed and bleeding, there was no place for humor, not even for the gallows-humor type. It was a short period characterized by the attitude of "let's stick together; everybody's sacred duty is to do his best so that the nation can survive." Yet, surprisingly soon, humor was heard again, this time mixed with biting irony which revealed the intensity of disillusionment and grief caused by the indecency and treachery of those few Czechs who, seizing the opportunity to satisfy their personal ambitions, were only too eager to cooperate with and accept orders from their German master. The invectives wrapped in jokes and anecdotes were directed against the actual or supposed Czech traitors more than against the Nazis themselves. Mr. Chamberlain and his like, of course, got their portion also. Dr. Emil Hácha, president of the so-called "Second Czechoslovak Republic," was called significantly "The First President of the Second Republic of the Third Reich." His prime minister, a certain Mr. Beran, formerly known as the leader of the Czechoslovak Agrarian party and a would-be Fuehrer, was ridiculed in many different ways. One anecdote informed the Czechs that "from now on we must learn how to bleat because our leader is a Beran" (*beran* in Czech means "ram"). Gradually, an ever increasing number of the Czechs realized that an autonomous Czechoslovakia after Munich was an illusion, an impossibility both politically and economically. Above all, they were ashamed to see how, day after day and in an ever increasing measure, the old democratic traditions and the enlightened cultural policy of Masaryk's republic were ruthlessly broken and hurriedly replaced by the "New Order" of those who, accepting orders from Berlin, made it appear that the Czech people themselves were advocating this change of policy. The latter, in fact, were most bitterly opposed to these changes and were deeply ashamed of what was taking place. No wonder, then,

that when the Nazis took over all that remained of Czechoslovakia after Munich, this final annihilation was accepted by many Czechs with a sigh of relief: "At least it won't be we but the Germans who will be held responsible before the world for what is happening here."

This occurred in the middle of March, 1939. With it started what may be considered the most typical phase of the social function of gallows humor. Now, there were no more rumors and hearsays. Everybody could hear and see for himself the cold facts of reality. The country was plundered and robbed. There was hardly a single Czech family from which at least one member did not disappear into a concentration camp; and the new masters with truly superhuman cynicism began to build their New Order on foundations cemented with the suffering and blood of their helpless victims. It is, therefore, highly significant that precisely at this moment there was a pronounced revival of the gallows-humor campaign which today is going on not only in Czechoslovakia but also in all other countries subjugated by the Nazi military machine and its more devastating shadow, the Gestapo. People who live in absolute uncertainty as to their lives and property find a refuge in inventing, repeating, and spreading through the channels of whispering counterpropaganda, anecdotes and jokes about their oppressors. This is gallows humor at its best because it originates and functions among people who literally face death at any moment. Some of them even dare to collect the jokes as philatelists collect stamps. One young man whom I knew was very proud of having a collection of more than two hundred pieces which he kept safe in a jar interred in the corner of his father's garden. These people simply have to persuade themselves as well as others that their present suffering is only temporary, that it will soon be all over, that once again they will live as they used to live before they were crushed. In a word, they have to strengthen their hope because otherwise they could not bear the strains to which their nerves are exposed. Gallows humor, full of invectives and irony, is their psychological escape, and it is in this sense that I call gallows humor a psychological compensation. Its social influence is enormous. On many an occasion I have observed how one good anecdote changed completely the mood of persons who have heard it—pessimists changed into optimists. Relying on my observations, I may go so far as to say that gallows humor is an unmistakable index of good morale and of the spirit of resistance of the oppressed peoples. Its decline or disappearance reveals either indifference or a breakdown of the will to resist evil. I can remember that those who accepted the New Order as something final and unalterable refused to listen to anecdotes and usually attacked

those who repeated them in their presence with sarcastic remarks like this: “You’d better stop making fun of yourself. This is no time to live on jokes.” They did not lose their ardent nationalism, but their morale disintegrated—there was no will-power left to resist.

Gallows humor works two ways: it bolsters the resistance of the victims and, at the same time, it undermines the morale of the oppressors. As long as the Nazis know that their victims ridicule them, they cannot be sure of the final victory and must, in their turn, expect the changes in the situation that might occur in the future. Again I recall with what haste and anger the Germans in Czechoslovakia washed inscriptions insulting or making fun of their Fuehrer and his regime from the walls of houses and wooden fences where they appeared overnight. A master who was sure of himself would have ignored such things as childish and would not have taken them as serious proof of disloyalty which would eventually have to be avenged by capital punishment. Thus humor proved to be a socially significant element, constructive for the oppressed and destructive for the oppressors. The Czechs knew about it and therefore did not keep gallows humor only for themselves but on every possible occasion served it also to their uninvited “protectors.” Here are a few examples:

Soon after the outbreak of war, the Germans in Czechoslovakia distributed a list of events which would take place on definite dates. According to this information, England was expected to be on her knees no later than August 15, 1940. Soon after that date the Czechs replied by distributing their leaflets, which read: “Do you know why Hitler has not invaded England yet? Because the German officers could not manage to learn in time all English irregular verbs.” Another version gave the following answer to the same question: “You see, Hitler had to postpone the invasion because he has not yet definite proof that the British intend to invade their own Isles as was the case when they planned to invade Norway and Denmark and later the Netherlands and Belgium.” Needless to say, this made the Nazis furious, and invariably each such sign of Czech resistance was followed by new waves of mass arrests. Evidently this kind of humor was not very humorous to the Nazis. Still another explanation of the postponement of the invasion of England: “Do you know why the daylight-saving time has been exceptionally prolonged this year? Because Hitler promised that before the summer is over, he and his army will be in England.”

Since the famous Bat’a shoe factory started the production of shoes with wooden soles, Czech gallows humor is convinced that the Nazi blockade of Great Britain is one hundred per cent successful: “Not one rubber

sole nor a single leather sole reaches us from Britain, and, as a consequence, British commerce is suffering tremendous losses!" To find a Czech who is truly loyal to the Germans is no easy task. According to Czech gallows humor, the Gestapo found one such specimen at long last. He was an old man walking up and down the street and speaking seriously to himself aloud: "Adolf Hitler is the greatest leader. The Germans are a noble nation. I would rather work for ten Germans than for one Czech." When the Gestapo agent asked what was his occupation, this Czech admirer of naziism reluctantly confessed that he was a gravedigger.

Various events, which usually took the form of orders either strictly forbidding something or asking for something to be unconditionally fulfilled, were always followed by jokes especially fabricated for those occasions. Naturally, listening to foreign broadcasts, especially those from London, was considered a case of high treason. One anecdote tells of a man who was dragged out of his bed by a policeman while listening to the broadcasting from London. He already sees the horrors of the concentration camp but is soon relieved when the policeman, a Czech, says: "I don't mind your listening in to London, you idiot. I do it, too. But you might at least have the sense to turn off the loudspeaker in the garden!" I suspect that this and other similar scenes really happened, especially in rural districts where people were comparatively safe and therefore were less cautious. The following anecdote contains a story which, too, might have actually happened, and on more than one occasion. A Czech guest leaving the restaurant one evening says to his friend: "Good night. Now I am going to listen to the London and Paris wireless." He is overheard by a Gestapo agent and followed to his home. However, no wireless receiver can be found. "Do you never listen to foreign broadcasts?" asks the Gestapo man suspiciously. And the reply: "Oh, yes, I just can't help it." Then the Czech kneels down and says: "That's London there." After that he puts his ear to the wall of the neighboring apartment and whispers: "That's Paris there." Whereupon the Gestapo agent hurries around to the neighboring flats, only to find in one of them a high official of the German S. S. administration, and in the other one a German officer in uniform.

The order to collect metals for the use of armament production stimulated still another group of jokes. One anecdote informed the Czech public that because the collection of metals was not successful, Baron von Neurath, the Nazi lord over subjected Czechoslovakia, ordered the confiscation of many metal statues which were to be melted and sent to Germany. There was, however, one exception in the procedure. When the Nazis confiscated the statue of Moses, Hitler sent an urgent wire that this

statue be transported to Berlin without being previously melted, for Moses was the only individual who could advise the Fuehrer how to get across the English Channel with dry feet!

In Slovakia, where people very soon lost the illusion of having an independent country under the Nazi "protection," the situation is exactly the same. Stories are about that almost everybody there is infected by the contagious disease called "Churchillism," and that the explanation of the fact that of all the leaders of the Slovak Quisling party only Sano Mach, the minister of propaganda, refuses to allow some public square in the capital city or elsewhere to bear his name is that "Sano Mach Square" would read in German "*Sano Mach Platz*," which, literally translated, means "Sano, make room"—that is, disappear!

A number of these anecdotes, like the one just quoted, illustrate the type of gallows humor based primarily on ironical playing with words. They are popular and influential. Others are the manifestation of a very determined and well-planned passive resistance. In a village the Gestapo men found a hanged hen with the following inscription fastened to her neck: "I'd rather commit suicide than lay eggs for Hitler." The story of this incident spread quickly all over the country. In my own birthplace these words written in capital letters on the wall of the cemetery appeared overnight: "Hey, you Czechs, get out of here! Don't you know that this is the German Lebensraum?"

Although our primary interest here is not in telling anecdotes, we have had to mention a few of them and to describe the circumstances in which they originated in order to illustrate the social nature and the social function of gallows humor. There are many other anecdotes in Czechoslovakia, and almost every one of them was spread in several versions, usually gradually polished and pointed. He who has had no opportunity, as a participant observer, to feel on his own skin, as it were, the beneficent influence of the gallows humor upon the mentality and emotions of people in invaded countries can hardly have an adequate idea of the importance of the social function exercised by this type of humor. In addition, I am inclined to believe that what is true about individuals is true also about whole nations—namely, that the purest type of ironical humor is born out of sad experiences accompanied by grief and sorrow. It is spontaneous and deeply felt—the very necessity of life which it helps to preserve.

In the light of data presented in this article as well as out of numerous other observations and experiences which the sociologist finds in the present world's vast laboratory, there appear these conclusions. Humor in general, and gallows humor more specifically, is a social phenomenon the

importance of which, under certain circumstances, may be tremendous. It originates in the process of social interaction and bears marks of the particular group by which it was created and accepted. Its social character is revealed by the fact that it changes its content—and sometimes also the form in which it is presented—in accordance with the character of the group and the social events to which it reacts. The specificity of the gallows-humor type lies in that it is always intentional in the very real sense of this word. Not humor-for-humor, but humor with a definite purpose—that is, to ridicule with irony, invectives, and sarcasm in order to become a means of an effective social control. This teleological character of gallows humor determines its social function, which is twofold—positive and negative. Its positive effect is manifested above all in the strengthening of the morale and the spirit of resistance of people who struggle for their individual and national survival; its negative effect (which, of course, is again something very positive from the viewpoint of the oppressed) reveals itself by its disintegrating influence among those against whom it is directed. In both instances it proves to be an extremely powerful weapon. Finally, gallows humor is a reliable index of the morale of the oppressed, whereas the reaction to it on the part of the oppressors tells a long story about the actual strength of the dictators: if they can afford to ignore it, they are strong; if they react wildly, with anger, striking their victims with severe reprisals and punishment, they are not sure of themselves, no matter how much they display their might on the surface.

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