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"Where are they going?": Jokes as Indicators of Social and Political Change

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Jokes can be considered as one kind of narrative that can be used to express disobedience and subversion. However, the timing and context of when a joke is told can be more important for success than its subversive content or narrative form.¹ In spite of the efforts by the *International Society of Humor Studies* and its associated scholars to establish humour as a field of research,² jokes are still underestimated in the so-called serious research fields, although they can offer many insights into the state of a particular society. This study provides some general reflections and definitions about jokes and how to analyse them, before formulating some theses about political jokes, especially in the context of oppressed societies on the eve of major political change.

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The use of the word "joke" in English will be understood as the equivalent of *Witz* in German, *blague* in French, and *nukta* (and sometimes *zurfa*) in Arabic – reflecting the modern use of the term *nukta*. Earlier variations of texts with humorous content existed in classical Arabic literature. What is meant by the term joke? The Beirut-based scholar and professor of psychology Shahe Kazarian recently published an informative article on humour in the Arab Middle East, where he tries to outline ways to systematise jokes in Lebanon.³ According to a definition by the psychologist Rod Martin, humour – which can be translated as *fukaha* in Arabic – is "the positive emotion of mirth in a social context by the perception of playful incongruity and expressed through laughter-related behaviours".⁴ This complements the definition of joke by the linguist Victor Raskin, who states that "jokes are narratives or riddles whose main humorous force lies in the punch line, the line in the end of the joke, when there is a sudden and unexpected shift in meaning. The joke has appeared to be a straightforward if incongruous narrative or question with a single script, but then suddenly a second hidden and unexpected script of a very different kind is revealed."⁵

¹ Christie Davies: *Jokes and Targets*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2011, 5.

² Since 1998 ISHS has been publishing "Humor. International Journal of Humor Research" quarterly at De Gruyter's, as well as the series "Humor Research".

³ Shahe S. Kazarian: *Humor in the Collectivist Arab Middle East: The Case of Lebanon*, in: *Humor* 24-3 (2011), 329-348.

⁴ Rod Martin: *The Psychology of Humor. An Integrative Approach*, New York: Academic Press 2007. Quoted by Kazarian (see FN 3), 329.

⁵ Victor Raskin: *Semantic Mechanism of Humor*, Dordrecht: Reidel 1985, 99; Davies: *Jokes and Targets* (see FN

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Different perspectives, methods and disciplinary approaches can be used for analysing jokes, including psychological, linguistic and anthropological frameworks. In this article, I give preference to literary and sociological approaches. The literary approach studies the themes or motives of jokes, the personalities involved, and the structure of plots and stories. The sociological approach places factors such as performance and agency at the centre of analysis.

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In terms of performance, every joke is unique in the way it is performed. We have to distinguish between collections of plots told in jokes and the observation of joke performances. Normally, a joke is never performed the same way twice. This means that every discussion that takes place among joke tellers about the best way to tell a certain joke is meaningless for the researcher, who is interested in a particular plot and not in the performance.⁶ In terms of agency, the question of who is telling the joke is central. Is it the boss or the employee? The blue-collar worker or the academic? Is the performer male or female? Women often claim that they are not good joke tellers and that they prefer to leave it to their male companions.⁷ If we are to regard jokes as a form of resistance,⁸ does this mean that women are less subversive of the prevailing power structure than men? Many researchers have shown gender-based differences in approaches to communication, including humorous communication.⁹ Women do not joke less, but prefer to be less exposed than men. Giseline Kuipers has shown in her study – using material from the Netherlands and neighbouring countries (including Belgium and Germany) – that jokes are a matter of taste concerning the narrative form (she found, for instance, that women prefer short and absurd jokes, while men love long and detailed narratives), and also regarding the context and sociological setting where the joke is told. It is much more accepted among blue-collar workers to tell jokes than among white-collar workers or academics.¹⁰ My experience of collecting political jokes among academics in Beirut between 2005 and 2008 suggested that this might also be true for the Middle East.

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Apart from sociological settings, sociologists such as Christie Davies ask why a certain set of jokes

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⁶ Davies: *Jokes and Targets* (see FN 1), 6.

⁷ Giseline Kuipers: *Good Humor, Bad Taste. A Sociology of the Joke*, Berlin/New York: Mouton De Gruyter 2006, 61.

⁸ This is suggested in the Call for Papers for "Inverted Worlds" – Congress on Cultural Motion in the Arab Region, Beirut, 4-9 October 2012..

⁹ Short overview by Kuipers (see FN 7), 59-60.

¹⁰ Kuipers (see FN 7), 68ff.

appears in a society or in a particular historical context. He has examined ethnic jokes and jokes about people regarded as being stupid, such as the blonde who is the butt of jokes.¹¹ In 2005, one could hear Syrian jokes on every street corner of Beirut. This happened during the so-called Cedar Revolution that led to the withdrawal of the Syrian army, whose presence dated back to the civil war in Lebanon. A feeling of triumph and clear superiority was expressed through these jokes, as can be seen in this example:

Two Syrians are begging in Hamra Street. After a while they meet and compare their incomes. One of them has done well, the other one has made almost nothing. The man who hasn't done well asks: "What the hell do you tell them? I always say that I am a poor Syrian who has ten children to feed." Says the other man: "I tell them that I am a poor Syrian too, and that I have no money for my journey home."

Today, against the background of the ongoing civil war in Syria, these jokes would not work or would carry different messages. This holds true also for the following joke, which represents a typical wandering plot – one that is found in different countries with the Syrian man replaced by a more relevant national:

An American, a Frenchman and a Syrian arrive in hell. The devil welcomes them, shows them a telephone and gives them the opportunity to talk to their families. First, the American talks for a while to his relatives. After he has finished the devil demands \$1000 for the call. The American complains – but to no avail. He has to pay. The Frenchman thinks that he will be wiser and talks to his family for only a minute. But the devil demands from him €1000. The Frenchman is furious – but he has to pay. In the end it's the turn of the Syrian. He talks for a long time because he has to greet every single member of his large family. After his talk the devil only charges him one Syrian pound. The American and the Frenchman are outraged by this and ask the devil: "Why?" He answers: "It was a local call."

One characteristic of the joke is that it is a collective product of a society.¹² It is not possible to go back to the first joke teller or to the direct source of a certain joke. Therefore, while telling jokes can be very dangerous for the performer under repressive circumstances, jokes do not die with the teller. They represent a shared narrative property of a society.

<6>

Many of the plots of the traditional Homsî jokes, in which the Homsî represents the fool in the joke tradition of Bilad al-Sham,¹³ were transformed into more general Syrian jokes at the end of the Syrian

¹¹ Christie Davies: *Ethnic Humor around the World: A Comparative Analysis*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990; Christie Davies: *Jokes and Targets* (see FN 1).

¹² Davies: *Jokes and Targets* (see FN 1), 213

¹³ Collections of Homsî-jokes go back to medieval Arab scripture. The geographer Yaqut is also familiar with stories about the stupidity of the people of Homs, Yaqut: *Mu'jam al-buldan*, Bairut: Dar as-Sadir 1977, vol. 2, 304.

presence in Lebanon. After a while the Homsis took back his place within this set of jokes. Davies has offered an explanation why the inhabitants of certain regions of a country – such as Homs in Syria – were chosen as the butt of jokes. He suggests different possible reasons. For example, people on the periphery, especially in a rural environment, are likely to be represented in jokes as being stupid, as is the case with the East Frisians in Germany. Or, the subject of the jokes is from a town that struggles in competition with other, more important, urban centres in a country.¹⁴ This could apply to the city of Homs, situated on the road between Damascus and Aleppo while being itself an ancient city of trade and commerce. People of these different cities are very similar in their habits and behaviours. Joking helps to create a sense of superiority over other successful city dwellers.¹⁵ With this very old competition in mind, it might be no coincidence that Homs was the scene of the first major confrontations between the regime and the opposition during the revolt in Syria, much earlier than the clashes in Damascus and Aleppo. This remark is a digression in my argument, to show how the analysis of jokes can contribute to understanding the structure of a society and even explain violent events.

<7>

I share the opinion of Christie Davies when he says that jokes have no consequences for society as a whole.¹⁶ The persecution of joke tellers under totalitarian regimes – at times verging on the insane – tells us about the fears and insecurities of the powerful, but nothing about the capacity of humour to affect a society. Large numbers of political jokes were told in the Soviet Union, a system that existed for about seventy years until its collapse. However, while jokes do not change the circumstances, they may predict changes, or, to formulate it more modestly: jokes can express the desire of a society for change. Here is a Russian joke from 1985:

Russian Social Survey question: "Where were you born?"

Soviet Citizen: "St Petersburg."

Question: "Where did you go to school?"

Answer: "Petrograd."

Question: "Where do you live?"

Answer: "Leningrad."

Question: "Where would you like to live?"

Answer: "St Petersburg."¹⁷

It is also one of the characteristics of jokes that they fail if the teller has to explain them. A successful joke is one that provokes immediate laughter. The fact that the reader of this article might not be able

¹⁴ Christie Davies: *Jokes and their Relation to Society*, Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter 1998, 11ff.

¹⁵ Davies: *Jokes and their Relation to Society* (see FN 14), 169f.

¹⁶ Davies: *Jokes and Targets* (see FN 1), 266.

¹⁷ Davies: *Jokes and Targets* (see FN 1), 251.

to laugh about the Russian joke from 1985 proves the importance of the right context for a joke. The famous and beautiful city of St Petersburg in Northern Russia was renamed a number of times under the Soviet regime. The St – a religious reference – was not in accordance with Communist ideology, so the city was named Petrograd. Later, it was renamed after the great Communist leader, Lenin. But in the end, after *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet system, the original name of St Petersburg was restored to the city.

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Staying behind the Iron Curtain, jokes in the then German Democratic Republic (GDR) also mirrored the weariness of the people with their system. Shortages of basic daily needs were mentioned:

Question: Why is there only rough toilet paper left on the market?

Answer: So that even the last asses get red.

Getting red of course refers to becoming a Communist or, in the case of the GDR, a follower of the ruling Socialist Unity Party. The message of this joke, told during the 1980s, would be that at that time there was nobody of intelligence and dignity remaining to become red. This joke also demonstrates the ability to talk on forbidden topics within jokes, referring to politics or sexuality or the toilet. The following joke about Emile Lahoud is another example. Lahoud was the Lebanese president from 1998 to 2007, covering a long period of Syrian presence in Lebanon that demanded good relations between the Lebanese president and Damascus:

Question: Why does Lahoud only use two-ply toilet paper?

Answer: Because he has to send a copy of every paper to Damascus.¹⁸

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Back to the GDR context, where one famous joke even seemed to predict the way out of the situation chosen later on by the people of East Germany:

Erich Honecker, the last President of the GDR, whose nickname was Honni, comes back from a trip abroad. He finds nobody around. In the end he arrives at the Berlin Wall. There he finds a big hole and a note: "Honni, you are the last – switch off the light."

Apart from predicting the fall of the Berlin Wall – the people of the GDR made a big hole in the wall in the autumn of 1989 – this joke also tells us something about the attitude of Germans, or East Germans in particular, concerning the necessity of saving electricity. There is a certain relationship between this joke and a joke from Egypt about the aged Mubarak:

¹⁸ I recorded this joke in a place of great dignity, an office concerned with religious affairs of the Christians in the Middle East, and it was told by a highly educated female staff member.

In a deathbed scene Azrael, the archangel of death, comes down to Mubarak and says to him: "You have to say good-bye to the Egyptian people." Mubarak asks: "Why, where are they going?"¹⁹

I assume that this joke is mirrored by jokes told in other countries about their gerontocratic elites (if one thinks of the "Great Leader" of Cuba) and could represent a wandering plot. There are leaders who act in a manner calculated to make you understand that they will rule forever and it seems that they believe in their own immortality. However, people seek their way out, and the departure of the Egyptian people to a better future or at least a future without Mubarak since the beginning of 2011 was predicted in this joke.

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Jokes can tell the truth about what is possible and what is not. Looking at the trial of Mubarak and his sons, and the sentences passed by the judges in June 2012 (a life sentence for Mubarak and no sentence for his sons), the following joke foresees this verdict:

Mubarak on his deathbed is lamenting: "What will the Egyptian people do without me?" His advisor tries to comfort him: "Mr President, don't worry about the Egyptians. They are a resilient people who could survive by eating stones." Mubarak pauses to consider this and says to his advisor: "Grant my son Alaa a monopoly for the trade in stones!"²⁰

The point is that even on his deathbed or during his trial Mubarak thinks about pampering his sons and finding a way out for them. These are actions that fit the Egyptian reality.

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At this point I should underline again that I do not see any evidence for a convincing relationship between joke telling and rebellious or even "revolutionary" behaviour. I consider the persecution of joke tellers an overestimation of the effects of joking on society. On the contrary, in my view every political leader should be proud to be the butt of jokes, because this is a powerful indication of his/her importance in the eyes of the people. I am speaking about people's perception of power, rather than about real power. Of course there is a difference between the image of a wise caliph like Harun al-Rashid and the bloodthirsty (as-Saffah) Jammal Pasha, Turkish proconsul of Syria during the First World War, as represented in anecdotes.²¹ But whether cruel or fair, if people are talking or joking at

¹⁹ Issandr El Amrani: [Three Decades of a Joke that Just Won't Die](#) (9 February 2011)

²⁰ El Amrani (see FN 19).

²¹ The "good caliph" Harun al-Rashid is very present in traditional collections of Arab anecdotes. F. Omar in his El-article on him states that this always positive image "has obscured the true historic personality" of this caliph. Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Ed. , Leiden: Brill 1971, vol. 3, 232. Youssef Mouawad: Jamal Pacha, en une version libanaise. L'usage positif d'une légende noire, in: Olaf Farschid et al (Eds.): The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, Beirut: Orient-Institut 2006, 423-446.

the expense of political leaders then they matter, at least in the perception of the society. During the days of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora in Lebanon (2005–2009) I did not record a single joke about him. This does not mean that there were no jokes about him at all, but if I asked people for jokes about politicians, Siniora was clearly not the first to come to mind. I did manage to collect some cartoons showing him as a marionette of the Hariri family.

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To summarise, jokes are a play with the incongruous. We have to differentiate between the unique individual performance of a joke and its plot, which is a collective product. But both aspects are connected to each other as long as different groups of people have different tastes concerning jokes. Apart from this, we can consider jokes as good indicators of what is going on within a society, what topics (and taboos) are under discussion and what real changes are to be expected. Because of their informal nature, jokes are able to carry all kind of messages long before they appear in the headlines of "serious" media, or instead of appearing there because of suppression.

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