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Seriously Funny: Mexican Political Jokes as Social Resistance by Samuel Schmidt

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Schmidt, Samuel. *Seriously Funny: Mexican Political Jokes as Social Resistance*. Translated by Adam Schmidt. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014. xiii + 279 pages. Paperback, \$39.95.

Seriously Funny is the first English edition of Mexican political scientist Samuel Schmidt's survey of a neglected form of political participation, the joke. Readers should be aware that the emphasis here is on the "serious" rather than the "funny" (perhaps better reflected in the Spanish title, *Humor en serio*), and that, though the great many jokes included are often quite funny, Schmidt's is a scholarly work drawing on psychological research on humor—defined, citing another scholar, as "the transference of the moral for the scientific" (p.25)—and historical and political science analyses of Mexican politics. His primary purpose is to reveal the social context of political humor and explain its role in the Mexican political system. And, as any comedian knows, if you have to explain it, it isn't funny.

His explanation, though, is fascinating. Schmidt argues that, although jokes are often dismissed as a frivolous waste of time, they represent an important and revealing dimension of the relations between state and society. His thesis is that jokes are a form of resistance (he calls it "subterranean confrontation" [p. 8]) available to a citizenry that demands to be heard, to express its frustrations with politicians, and to call for change. When people pass along jokes they are not only having a good time but they are in fact launching a minor rebellion, getting even with their targets using a readily available weapon that nonetheless does not threaten the stability of the political system. Political jokes are subversive; they strip away the nearly royal aura of dignity in which politicians like to shroud themselves and expose them as flawed humans. As such, joke-telling has always held special importance in Mexico, which has been subjected to a variety of flagrantly corrupt and authoritarian regimes.

The book offers a broad theoretical treatment of political jokes, examining why jokes predominate as the typical form of political humor (as opposed to caricature, sarcasm and irony, etc.), then more narrowly examines Mexican humor and the role of political jokes in Mexico. Final chapters document the evolution of jokes across Mexican history, focusing on twentieth-century presidents. These years provide fertile ground for humor given the roller coaster ride Mexico has lived in the past century, including a revolution and an authoritarian political party, an economy in freefall, and an ongoing transition to democracy, and through it all political elites that tend to leave office much wealthier than when they entered.

Mexican jokes take on a surprisingly trenchant, almost vicious character. There is no shortage of political humor in the U.S., of course. We find many jokes about the personal foibles of presidents: Clinton ate too many Big Macs, George Bush (H.W. and W.) mangled the English language, Barack Obama is aloof, almost robotic. Politicians are fair game everywhere in the world, and Schmidt recounts a number of jokes that have traveled across borders by simply swapping out names. What is remarkable about the quintessentially Mexican political jokes is that nothing appears to be off limits. Jokes ridicule sacred symbols, national heroes are savagely mocked as fools and scoundrels, and military catastrophes become comic opera. The nation itself is apparently punctured and deflated. It is hard to imagine similar treatment given to George Washington or Pearl Harbor. But as Schmidt reminds us, jokes communicate the frustrations and judgments of society. If this is so, the message is loud and clear: it is not Mexico itself that is

targeted, but the assortment of bandits and incompetents who have driven an innocent nation into the ground.

Here again emerges Schmidt's thesis on the critical role jokes play in politics. Politicians outrage common decency when they pillage the public coffers without shame, finish out their terms, enjoy the applause of polite society, and finally think they have gotten away with it. But through its razor-sharp ridicule society refuses to play along, forgive, or forget, and in fact imposes perhaps the worst punishment of all: to be laughed at.

Beyond the few specializing in political humor, this volume would provide valuable insight for those who research culture, public opinion, or state-society relations in any country, and is absolutely essential reading for anyone interested in Mexican politics, if only to be able to repeat the jokes.

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