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El Roto: A Political Cartoonist in Late Capitalist Spain

Under the pseudonym of El Roto, Andrés Rábago draws editorial cartoons for El País newspaper on an almost daily basis. Unlike other cartoonists his political satire rarely depicts real politicians or celebrities, but instead focuses on social types. This technique helps him to distance himself from current events as presented by the media and signal the more general causes of political conflicts. This article will explore cartoons from recent years in which El Roto represents and interprets manifestations of the economy in everyday life. I show that his editorial cartoons aim to unmask the ideological narratives that attempt to naturalize capitalism as the only possible economic system. His ideology critique can thus be described as a political intervention to interrupt the creation and shaping of systems of representation that legitimize this economic and cultural hegemony. This article offers a content analysis of some of El Roto's most relevant cartoons, identifying the most recurrent themes and techniques used in order to consider his position as a cartoonist in Spanish politics.

Keywords: *Andrés Rábago “El Roto,” political cartoons, ideology, capitalism, economic crisis.*

With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled (Walter Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” 44).

Andrés Rábago began his career as a cartoonist under the pseudonym OPS in the mid-1960s, drawing in periodicals such as *La Estafeta Literaria*, *La Codorniz* and *Triunfo*. His cartoons explored the human unconscious and the world of nightmares with an introspective style influenced by Surrealism and the illustrations of Roland Topor. The surreal and Kafkaesque situations represented in these cartoons alluded, without the need for supporting text, to the tense and repressive political climate of those years. Rábago continued to draw as OPS into the late 1980s, but in October 1972 he published his first cartoon as El Roto in the magazine *Hermano Lobo*. Under this new pseudonym, his cartoons became more overtly critical of the social situation in Spain, with the use of caustic humor and direct attacks on capitalism. This style has remained with certain variations, his almost daily editorial cartoons for the newspaper *El País* standing out for the simplicity of his drawings, with stark shadows and a short but striking text.

According to Isabelle Touton, this style permits him to “abstraerse del flujo de la información cotidiana, detener el tiempo y dar a ver con cierta distancia la realidad contemporánea” (Touton 211). His position within the medium is thus crucial to his interventions in the shaping of public opinion.

This article focuses on El Roto’s cartoons dealing with the economy. I thus analyze his understanding and articulation of contemporary economics and the financial crisis. I argue that, thanks to its detachment from particular events and specific characters, his political satire enables him to point out the more general causes of the crisis and, in particular, to depict capitalism as a voracious and ultimately destructive economic system. In this article I analyze editorial cartoons which have appeared in *El País* newspaper in the last five years and which have been subsequently collected in the books *Viñetas para una crisis* (2011), *Camarón que se duerme (se lo lleva la corriente de opinión)* (2011), *A cada uno lo suyo* (2013) and *El libro verde* (2014).

As interventions in public opinion, cartoons may confront or legitimize hegemonic power. According to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is the provisional domination or leadership of a social group over another. In parliamentary democracies, he adds, hegemony is normally exercised by the combination of force and consensus. Nonetheless, through the organs of public opinion, “the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority” (Gramsci 80). In the words of Stuart Hall, hegemony is achieved by “winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural” (quoted by Hebdige 16). Gramsci also adds that, although hegemony is ethical-political, the decisive nucleus is always economic (161). As part of the same organs of public opinion that make the economic consensus look both natural and legitimate—his position within *El País* should be understood through this negotiation—El Roto’s cartoons try to break through those hegemonic narratives and interrupt their processes of naturalization. I argue that his cartoons challenge what Isidro López has termed “consensonomics” (2012), particularly by breaking up the ideological narratives that support such a consensus. This article offers a content analysis of El Roto’s cartoons, focusing on some of his most important and recurrent themes, but it also considers his cartoons as interventions in political life and, therefore, as a social practice. I thus analyze his cartoons as a visual form of “ideology critique” and argue that, through it, El Roto identifies key features of the way that capitalism manifests itself in everyday life, such as the reification of social relations and the fatalism of its own development.

IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE

In an article about his period at *Hermano Lobo*, Pablo García argues that Andrés Rábago’s political satire, both as El Roto and OPS, aimed to “desvelar, rasgar o romper el artificio y la hipocresía de todo aquello que se construía o se pretendía hacer pasar por natural o inevitable, tanto a nivel político como social y económico.” Most of El Roto’s cartoons fiercely criticize the hegemonic discourse that naturalizes capitalism as

if it were inevitable. This aspect of his work, I claim, can be considered as ideology critique. This form of criticism is usually associated to thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Its purpose is to recognize how dominant ideologies, uncritically accepted, are embedded in everyday situations and practices. Ideology critique thus aims to penetrate the givens of everyday life and reveal the real interests that lurk beneath hegemonic discourses. Although this analysis allows El Roto to reveal how the hegemonic narrative is constructed, this is also the most problematic aspect of his criticism, because it suggests that, by unveiling ideology, one can find the true nature of things. Nonetheless, I will claim that his critique is most successful when he argues that capitalism is driven by fate and that fatalism is precisely its very nature.

In a very early ideology critique, Roland Barthes devoted his *Mythologies* to exploring “the sight of the ‘naturalness’ with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality” (Barthes 11). History and nature were thus constantly confused both in mass culture and everyday speech. He aimed, therefore, to show “how all the apparently spontaneous forms and rituals of contemporary bourgeois societies are subject to a systematic distortion, liable at any moment to be dehistoricized, ‘naturalized,’ converted into myth” (Hebdige 9). Similarly, El Roto’s cartoons try to expose that artifice under which reality conceals itself as if a product of nature. Under such a guise, the historical and political causes of real events are rendered inevitable and, therefore, the possibility of political change is deemed nil. For this reason, El Roto aims to denaturalize those discourses and point directly at the real roots of the problems.

The concept of ideology is very complicated because of the many different meanings that the term has carried throughout history. The word was first coined by the revolutionary aristocrat and rationalist philosopher Destutt de Tracy at the end of the eighteenth century to refer to the science of ideas. Ideology was thus born from the presupposition that scientific rationality could liberate men and women from their mystifications and irrationality. Soon, however, Napoleon started to use the term as a derogatory label for his opponents and referred to the principles of the Enlightenment as “ideology.” According to Terry Eagleton, his attack was based on the opinion “that there is something irrational about excessive rationalism” (6). Such ideas were consequently labelled as fanatical and impractical. As Raymond Williams suggests, this use is still frequent in conservative criticism of social policies which have been consciously based on social theory (126). One of the most important conceptions of ideology is the one that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels used in *The German Ideology*. For them, ideology was the failure to realize that ideas and consciousness are founded on material reality. They criticized Hegelian philosophers for considering that ideas preceded and were autonomous from social practice. This produced, according to Marx and Engels, an upside-down vision of reality which was abstracted from the real processes of history. This conception of ideology as “false consciousness” or “illusion” has been constantly used in Marxist thought. However, a more neutral definition that considers it as “the set of ideas which arise from a given set of material interests” (Williams 129) has been as widely used as the aforementioned understanding.

According to this definition, used for example by Lenin, there is a “socialist ideology” in the same way as there is a “bourgeois ideology.” In this line of thought, Stuart Hall has defined ideology as “the mental framework—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (29). Ideology, in this sense, can also be understood as the strategies used by a class or social group to legitimize its power—sometimes, turning back to the previous definition—by masking, denying or rendering as inevitable the material conflicts and internal contradictions of a given political and economic system.

El Roto’s understanding of ideology is close to this latter definition. He thus accuses the powerful of presenting a distorted image of reality that hides the real, material causes of conflicts. His “ideology critique” aims, therefore, to unveil hegemonic discourses in order to discover the real social relations that lurk behind the ideological surface with which reality has been dressed up. The ultimate goal is to defuse the political power of hegemonic discourses. In one of his most celebrated cartoons, El Roto depicts a burning car with a smiling woman inside. A businessman stands outside and exclaims: “¡Sonría, sonría! ¡No alarme a los mercados!” (*Viñetas* 57) [Figure 1]. Throughout the current crisis, politicians, media and businessmen have insisted on avoiding any policy or political gesture which would not please the markets. This narrative defends, in other words, that citizens should leave their sovereignty behind in favor of the market. In this cartoon, the absurd situation in which a woman smiles, even though she is in danger of being burned alive, renders equally absurd the whole issue of not alarming the markets even when this goes against one’s basic interests. The cartoon, therefore, overturns the ideological narrative that claims that what is good for the market is good for everyone.

FIGURE 1 TO BE REPRODUCED HERE

FIGURE 1. El Roto, *Viñetas para una crisis*, p. 57. Originally published in *El País* on 14 September 2011.

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Isabelle Touton has rightly suggested that El Roto is especially belligerent as regards the neoliberal discourse that places the economy outside politics and understands the free market as the natural economic system. According to this narrative, economics are only understood by economists and, therefore, people should not interfere in their professional sphere. This is a recurrent theme in El Roto’s work. He accuses the media of making current events and, especially, economics seem confusing to the ordinary public, even if presented as a coherent discourse. A cartoon from *Camarón que se*

duerme plays out this contradiction by showing a monkey reading a newspaper and exclaiming: “¡Qué claridad de confusion!” (107)

Isidro López has argued that the culture of contemporary Spain, born in the Transition period (famously coined CT), is founded on the ideological presupposition, driven by the theology of consensus, that every social or political conflict must be concealed. This narrative, claims López, was nourished in Spain by another ideological narrative at an international level, which claimed that the sphere of economics must be managed only by technocrats, who would apply their science infallibly, without any reference to or interference by politics (77). Isidro López argues that this narrative was introduced in Spain by the *Pactos de la Moncloa* in 1977, when the economic consensus across all the parties of the political spectrum introduced a technocracy which paved the way for neoliberalism. This economic ideology, as is well known, considers the State’s intervention in the economy to be detrimental to economic growth and progress and argues that the market should function without any interference from the State. According to López, neoliberalism’s strategy is to “situar el foco del malestar en algún colectivo que no sean las élites económicas, para desplazar los ejes del conflicto, y con ellos, la descarga de los costes en los sectores sociales con menos capacidad de respuesta política” (82). This concealment of the focus and source of conflict responds to the last definition of ideology that I point out above. El Roto synthesizes this ideological narrative in a cartoon in which he places a man on a platform who exclaims through a microphone: “¡Sed libres! ¡Emancipaos de las cadenas de las conquistas sociales!” (*Camarón* 68) Yet another point of conflict is hidden by this hegemonic narrative: this ideology in reality needs the State in order to redistribute public resources in favor of the elites. El Roto shows he is aware of this in a cartoon from *A cada uno lo suyo*: here a riot police officer, the example *par excellence* of the Repressive State Apparatuses (following Althusser’s terminology), has “Wall Street,” instead of “Police,” written on his shield (15). In another cartoon, from *Viñetas para una crisis*, a young boy says: “Reclamamos la separación empresa-Estado, pero nos dijeron no sé qué de un concordato” (53). Here, El Roto makes reference to the Concordat concluded by Spain with the Vatican in 1953, by which the Church was given a set of economic and political privileges, such as the exemption from government taxation and the right to establish universities—which added to its practical monopoly in the lower levels of the education system. This concordat is still in force after the modifications agreed in secret negotiations from 1976 and 1979 to fit the constitutional regime. Thus, if the non-separation between Church and State is usually justified by the legality of this Concordat, here El Roto suggests that neither is there any separation between the State and the market. López argues that neoliberal discourse was hegemonic in Spain until at least 2007, when the first signs of the financial, social and political crisis were perceived in Spain. Touton claims that, even if this hegemonic narrative was not overtly discussed in the media, political cartoonists such as El Roto denounced it publically—perhaps, she suggests, because they were seen as harmless buffoons (205). The aim of his political satire is, therefore, to contest this “consensonomics” in the same way that he criticized

the so-called consensus in the Transition in *Hermano Lobo* by highlighting that the process was actually led by the Francoist elites (García).

REIFICATION

A businessman and a woman (probably his secretary, perhaps an executive, but significantly a woman) are in a meeting and the woman exclaims, as if making him listen to reason: “Detrás de los números hay personas.” The businessman angrily replies: “Pues que se aparten” (*El País* 2/3/2012) [Figure 2]. He is so interested in money that he is blind to the real, material source of capital. This cartoon thus represents the ideological concealment of the social behind the economic. For El Roto, under today’s capitalism, economics has been so much abstracted from its real, social roots, i.e. labor, that people are constantly neglected in favor of figures. This criticism can be understood through the Marxist concept of “commodity fetishism.” With this term, Marx suggested that the social relations involved in capitalist production are not perceived as relationships among people, but as economic relationships between the money and commodities exchanged in the market. These social relations between producers do not appear, therefore, as direct social relations, but rather as objectified relations between people. And, at the same time, relations between things—between commodities and money—appear as social relations. In this way, social relations between people are objectified, whereas commodities appear to have a life of their own. The labor transferred to the commodity appears as something objective, instead of something subjective—i.e. pertaining to the worker. The commodities, by contrast, take the worker’s dead labor as something objective and create exchange value in their relation to other commodities. For this reason, the movements of value of these commodities have, for the producers, the form of a movement made by things. And these things, far from being under the control of producers, says Marx, eventually control them. According to Marx, it is “the money form – which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly” (168, 169).

FIGURE 2 TO BE REPRODUCED HERE

FIGURE 2. El Roto, *El País*, 2 March 2012.

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El Roto depicts these objectified relations by which people take the form of objects in many cartoons. In them, people appear as commodities, sometimes with a price. For example, in one cartoon a woman looks at a shop window in which there are sale signs

of 50% and 60% discounts. A similar sign on the back of the woman states 70% discount, thereby signaling her own commodification—which, in addition, makes her value lower than the commodities in the sale (*Viñetas* 71). This objectification is also represented in other cartoons in which El Roto depicts businessmen and executives who are unable to recognize social reality behind economic figures. A chief executive exclaims to a microphone in one cartoon, for example: “Tranquilos, sólo es un problema de números y tenemos un cargamento de cifras para arreglarlo” (*Viñetas* 9).

The concept of “commodity fetishism” was taken further by Lukács, who coined the term “reification” to describe how social relations appear in a capitalist society in which the commodity structure has penetrated so deeply that it has remolded society in its own image. Lukács argued that, in this reified society, “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity,’ an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (83). Relations between people appear in this way as mere relations between things. This is a key point in El Roto’s understanding of the crisis. People are treated by businessmen as mere objects which can be exchanged and ultimately destroyed as if they are material objects. In another cartoon, one businessman says to another, both represented as social types in a black suit and with a cigar: “Si no se puede devaluar la moneda, habrá que devaluar a la gente” (*Viñetas* 14). Similarly, in a cartoon from *A cada uno lo suyo*, a businessman or politician with a skull as a head and pointing down at the people from a balcony says: “Tenéis que reducir también un diez por ciento la esperanza de vida.” The other person on the balcony, probably a politician, replies: “¡Lo que haga falta!” (25) These cartoons denounce the predatory nature of capitalism and its connivance with the political system. Instead of being the focus of politics and economics, people’s lives appear subordinated to the (capitalist) economy to the point at which their annihilation is demanded. This point is taken *ad absurdum* in a cartoon in which two men dressed in dress-coats, their eyes cut by the frame, exclaim: “La vida no es rentable. ¡Elimínela!” (*Vocabulario figurado* 226)

CAPITALISM AS RELIGION

In the prologue to *Vocabulario Figurado*, a collection of cartoons by El Roto published in 2006, Luis Goytisolo argues that there is something inherently Hispanic in the reality depicted by El Roto. His characters, says Goytisolo, whether they are ordinary people or top business executives, are rooted in a Spanish tradition: “el inexpresivo fatalismo con el que semejantes seres se expresan no es ni estadounidense ni británico ni alemán, sino de profundas raíces hispánicas, todo y todos sometidos a ese fatalismo tan inexorable como el de los pasos de Semana Santa” (9). I would argue that El Roto represents this fatalism as inherent to a capitalist society constructed in the image of the commodity form. Indeed, in Spain, such fatalism with which capitalism manifests itself uncannily resembles Catholicism’s dogma. Hence El Roto’s cartoons in which capitalism and religion appear closely interwoven.

This pairing of capitalism and religion in El Roto is, in fact, connected to his argument about people's objectification under capitalism. Thus, Lukács, in his argument about the reification of our society, argues that human beings "erect around themselves in the reality they have created and 'made,' a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature" (128). With the term "second nature," Lukács refers to the world created by man, the world of human convention, but here he also conceives second nature as having been completely interpenetrated by the commodity form. Walter Benjamin described "second nature" in similar terms: "Humans of course invented, but no longer by any means master this second nature which they now confront" ("Work of Art" 18, 19). Finally, for Adorno, "second nature" is always illusory, because we think that we understand it, but it is only a semblance which has been historically produced (120). This "illusory semblance" is a recurrent theme for El Roto, who accuses the media and the marketing industry of creating an ideological semblance of reality. In *Camarón que se duerme (se lo lleva la corriente de opinion)*, a book that collects his cartoons on the media, these examples abound. In one, two firemen are extinguishing a fire and one exclaims: "¡Olvidate del fuego, lo importante es que no se vea el humo!" (9) This cartoon is a clear example of ideology critique in which El Roto accuses the powerful of hiding the real sources of conflict and focusing only on the surface. In another cartoon, a man mistrusts the reality he sees and wonders whether it is a product of marketing: "¿Estará amaneciendo de verdad o será solo marketing?" (92) In these cartoons, ideology has practically replaced reality. This opinion is problematic, however, because it suggests that the reality—or second nature—that we have created is something false, but that if we unveil that false semblance, we can reach the real essence of reality. Reality, however, is created and shaped by the economic and political system; it is not replaced by it. As Dick Hebdige argues, ideology "does not occur as the direct result of some kind of masking operation consciously carried out by individuals, social groups or institutions," it rather thrives at the level of normal "common sense," where the ideological frames of reference are most effective and their ideological nature most efficiently concealed (11). An effective ideology critique should not be about unmasking ideology in order to perceive reality, but about analyzing how ideology interpenetrates common sense and conditions the understanding of reality. Unfortunately, some of El Roto's cartoons—especially those dealing with media—fall under the former category.

El Roto's most interesting articulation of second nature is nonetheless when he claims that people can no longer control the activity imposed by capitalism, since—paraphrasing Lukács—it evolves with the same inexorable necessity as the irrational forces of nature. In his depictions, capitalism is driven by fate and is compared with a betting house or a casino. El Roto draws a cartoon of a man in a bookmakers who exclaims: "La economía la lleva una casa de apuestas, sí, ¿qué pasa?" (*Viñetas* 30) In another cartoon, a businessman tells an employee: "¡Déjate de análisis económicos! ¿Qué dice el horóscopo?" (31) [Figure 3] El Roto denies the ideological assumption that economics is a science and argues by contrast that, in fact, capitalism is driven by fate.

As a consequence, we are all subject to the irrational forces of the market, which are not very different from those of nature and which in a primeval society were taken to be gods. Hence the similarities with religion and the fatalism of the *pasos de Semana Santa* that Luis Goytisolo mentioned.

FIGURE 3 TO BE REPRODUCED HERE

FIGURE 3. El Roto, *Viñetas para una crisis*, p. 31.

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This similarity between capitalism and religion had already been identified by Marx, who argued that the movement taken by commodities in their intercourse with other commodities, as bearers of value, can only find an analogy in the “misty realm of religion” (167). It is no accident that El Roto understands capitalism precisely as a religion: “La libertad religiosa os permite tener cualquier creencia, pero la fe en el dinero es obligatoria,” says a character in a cartoon (*Camarón* 67). Similarly, in another cartoon a businessman appears on a big screen in front of a board of shareholders and exclaims: “Aceptaremos todas las creencias religiosas pero dentro de una única fe económica, naturalmente” (*Vocabulario* 92). An analysis of Walter Benjamin’s 1921 text “Capitalism as Religion” may help us to understand the cultic nature of capitalism. In that short piece Benjamin claimed that capitalism is a purely cultic religion, because it has no specific body of dogma or theology, but its utilitarianism acquires religious overtones. In this way, capitalism is the celebration of a cult in which every day is a feast day and, therefore, every day requires worship. Unlike other cults, capitalism only creates guilt, not atonement (“Capitalism” 288). El Roto takes this capitalism—religion analogy to its extremes by suggesting that, ultimately, capitalism demands human sacrifices: “La diosa ‘productividad’ exige más sacrificios,” says a shaman or a pagan god (*Vocabulario* 195). This is what Benjamin means when he argues that capitalism is the first religion that offers no reform of existence, but only its total destruction (289).

In El Roto, one also finds this movement in reverse. Religion, or rather the Catholic Church, appears as a mere capitalistic organization—devoid of its theological side. In a cartoon from *Vocabulario figurado*, two bishops are seated reading the Scriptures and one comments: “¿Cómo es posible que los que escribieron los evangelios se olvidaran de las subvenciones a la Iglesia?!” “Será que faltan hojas,” replies the other (205). This is another of the Spanish traits that Goytisolo points to in El Roto’s cartoons, regarding the way that the Catholic Church not only interferes in political life—many of his cartoons deal with the interference of the Church in the education system or attacking women’s rights—but also takes part in the accumulation of capital. This cartoon also points to the above-mentioned concordat between Spain and the Vatican, by which the

Catholic Church was exempt from taxation and, furthermore, was subsidized to buy new buildings.

In all these examples, we have a double nature with a mythic pole (capitalism as religion) and a material one (the Church as a profit-making organization). Thus, on the one hand, in the mythical static pole, capitalism shows itself to be subject to natural forces, uncontrollable by humans, as if it were god-like. On the other hand, religion (embodied in the Church) shows itself to be something transient, earth-bound, which operates for earthly purposes, particularly for making profit, rather than for theological concerns. This same polarity was posited in Benjamin's concept of "natural history." For him, presenting history as a natural state served the *status quo* and justified the sorrow and suffering in history as something essential to it. For that reason, he used the other side of the coin—that is, the nature that shows itself to be transient—as a corrective for the history which is presented as what has always been there. He showed this polarity in the image of ruins. El Roto repeatedly represents the system in ruins, but he also points to the ideological surface that hides the wreckage. Thus, a cartoon shows an intact façade and a pile of debris behind that supports it. A balloon coming from the façade reads: "No hay peligro de derrumbe, los escombros sostienen la fachada" (*A cada uno lo suyo* 69) [Figure 4]. The conception of allegory that Benjamin developed in his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* attempted to make these two poles visible: allegory petrifies history to show that it is part of nature, whereas nature, at the same time, reveals that it is transient. With this double nature, Benjamin corrected the mythic pole of history and, in doing so, demystified it. The technique that El Roto uses is very similar to allegory: it attempts to reach the truth by revealing the inner contradictions of the object to which it has been applied. Indeed, Benjamin conceived irony as a variant of allegory that reappeared in later periods of crisis (*Origin* 188).

FIGURE 4 TO BE REPRODUCED HERE

FIGURE 4. El Roto, *A cada uno lo suyo*, p. 69.

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Through the image of the ruin, Benjamin showed that history was not a continuum of historical development which would lead inevitably to progress, but was a course leading to destruction and catastrophe, unless the proletariat activates the emergency break of history. In the preface to a book by El Roto edited in France, Reyes Mate also refers to Benjamin in relation to the way El Roto alerts to his readers that capitalism is leading to catastrophe. More specifically, he mentions the section "Fire Alarm" in *One-Way Street*, in which Benjamin cautions that the course of cultural and technological development led by the bourgeoisie will become deadly and urges the "true politician" representing the proletariat to intervene. He uses the metaphor of a bomb which is about

to explode: “if the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed by an almost calculable moment in economic and technical development (a moment signalled by inflation and poison-gas warfare), all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut” (469). Mate compares El Roto with the one who presses the fire alarm before it is too late. If a blind trust in progress was anathema to Benjamin, El Roto is equally suspicious about a progress which is driven by the predatory principles of the bourgeoisie. This view is exemplified in a cartoon in which a businessman/politician tells a young girl: “¡Hay que empujar a la locomotora!” And she replies: “Deje, deje, nos vamos andando” (*A cada uno lo suyo* 57). El Roto thus understands that capitalist progress is a way to destruction and that it is necessary to take an alternative path. This image can be compared with Benjamin’s argument in the paralympoma to the theses “On the Concept of History” in which he claims that revolutions are not the locomotives of history, as Marx under the influence of the ideology of progress suggested, but rather “an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake” (402).

Like Benjamin, El Roto understands civilization to be an enormous pile of ruins and debris. He plays out this polarity in a cartoon in which a man tells another “¡Qué gran civilización, la nuestra!” and the other replies “¡Y eso que está en escombros!” (*Vocabulario* 40). For El Roto, the field in which the association of progress and destruction is most evident is in the environment. The collection *El libro verde* deals precisely with this topic. In a cartoon that alludes to an environmental disaster like the Prestige oil spill in 2002 on Galicia’s coastline, El Roto writes over the image of a black sea covered by oil that reaches a beach: “Cuando la marea negra alcanzó la costa, progreso y ruina se mezclaron en la arena...” (91)

SOCIAL TYPES AND THE BRECHTIAN GESTUS

In the prologue to *El libro verde*, entitled “Un pequeño teatro ambulante,” Basilio Baltasar argues that the position of the person who looks at his cartoons is closer to the theatre spectator than to a reader. For him, these cartoons are a *mise-en-scène* in which El Roto puts social types on stage who interpret their position in society by miming or pronouncing words with aplomb and sobriety (*El libro verde* 3, 4). This way of talking can be compared to Bertolt Brecht’s “crude thinking,” a way of referring theory to reality by means of the proverbs and idioms of everyday language, instead of highly theoretical vocabulary. Two other similarities with Brecht’s theatrical practice are: the use of social types, instead of psychologized individuals, and the employment of *Gestus*. Brecht coined this neologism from the German word for gesture (*Geste*). The first time that he used the term was in a 1920 theatre review in which *Gestus* was employed to signify bodily gesture as opposed to spoken word, but it was not until 1929 that he began to use the concept as a key pillar for his theory of the epic theatre. Brecht’s assistant director Carl Weber defined it “as the total process, the ‘ensemble’ of all physical behavior the actor displays when showing as a ‘character’ on stage by way

of his/her social interactions” (43). Benjamin analyzed the concept of *Gestus* in his texts on Brecht’s epic theatre and defined it as dialectics at a standstill. For him, this technique frames and encloses an attitude and, hence, interrupts the flow of real life in a way that causes astonishment in the audience. Through this astonishment, the spectators are able to spot the contradictions of such a situation (4). In “The Author as Producer” Benjamin defines the aim of epic theatre as portraying situations rather than plots. The plays obtain the situations, says Benjamin, by interrupting the action (778). In “What Is Epic Theatre?,” Benjamin argues that the truly important aspect of epic theatre is that the audience discover the situation for the first time or that it becomes de-familiarized and a common situation is looked at from a new, more critical perspective. This de-familiarization (*Verfremdung*) is achieved by interrupting the action. Benjamin claims that the principle of interruption in epic theatre takes up the procedure that had become familiar in recent years in media such as film and radio, that is, montage. This montage is also present in the cartoons of El Roto. Both his humor and the reflective elements he uses to trigger thinking unfold through a gap in the cartoons between form and content.

This gap often appears through a clash between what readers see and what the characters in the cartoons say. The cartoons thus attempt to reveal the inner contradictions of ideological discourses. In one cartoon, for example, a marquise riding a horse is depicted in the drawing and a caption reads: “Los sindicatos son un anacronismo, repetía machaconamente la marquesa a su caballo...” (56). In this way, the typical narrative of the Spanish Right that accuses trade unions of being obsolete is annulled by revealing the contradiction between such a discourse and its source, in this case the marquise—who proves to be the real anachronistic element. Similarly, in another cartoon El Roto attempts to defuse the neoliberal narrative that calls for more cuts in social welfare as a necessary measure for economic recovery by putting the focus of the discomfort back onto the ruling class. In this case, the tension between image and text unravels the ideology behind this hegemonic discourse: in the image there is a yacht on the sea from which exclamation marks emerge. The text at the top of the cartoon reads: “Desde los yates se elevaban voces airadas reclamando más recortes sociales...” (*Viñetas* 74). The cartoon suggests, therefore, that cuts are not necessary to boost the country’s economy, but to augment *their* economy.

Benjamin not only sees *Gestus* in Brecht, but also in Kafka’s literature. In his 1934 essay “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” Benjamin claims that “Kafka’s entire work constitutes a code of gestures” (801). Benjamin compares the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, from the novel *Amerika*, to Chinese theatre (studied by Brecht to develop his epic theatre), a theatre which dissolves the events into gestural components. In the novel, the applicants to become performers were only expected to play themselves. This theatre, then, tested the conditions of a typical man in society, in the same way as happens in Brecht’s epic theatre. For that reason, Benjamin says that Kafka’s world is a world theatre and that man is always on stage. Following Basilio Baltasar’s point, El Roto’s characters are also on stage. His social types—the businessman, the banker, the politician, the worker, the protester, even the objects

which have a voice in his cartoons—are playing themselves and making the social relations in which they are inserted readable. The gestures to which their social condition is dissolved are not only corporeal, but also textual.

These gestures, which make social situations readable beyond ideological, hegemonic narratives, are conveyed by El Roto through turns of phrases and placing special emphasis on the possessive pronouns that reveal the position of the different social types in society. In a cartoon from *Viñetas para una crisis*, he depicts a capitalist who says: “No os preocupéis, el sistema capitalista renacerá de vuestras cenizas” (75, underlining in the original). The cartoon thus suggests that capitalism is asking ordinary people to make sacrifices so that the ruling class can keep its privileges. In another cartoon from the same book, two rich people exclaim: “¡Se os acabó nuestra fiesta, amiguitos!” (44) [Figure 5] This cartoon responds to the discourse that became hegemonic a few years ago and explained the crisis by blaming people for living beyond their means. Germán Labrador argues that this proverb of “hemos vivido por encima de nuestras posibilidades” shaped the “common sense” that people interiorized in order to come to term with the crisis. According to this logic, says Labrador, “individuos e instituciones, quien más y quien menos, habrían consumido aquello que no tenían, hecho lo que no debían, y esperado lo que sabían no merecer, ¡y ya era hora de que fuesen castigados por ello!” (88) In this cartoon, El Roto suggests that, while ordinary people are accused of living too well and cuts in social spending are deemed necessary, the ruling class keeps living with all its privileges.

FIGURE 5 AND 6 TO BE REPRODUCED HERE

FIGURE 5. El Roto, *Viñetas para una crisis*, p. 44.

FIGURE 6. El Roto, *Viñetas para una crisis*, p. 85.

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CONCLUSION

In the previous issue of *Romance Quarterly*, dedicated to Spanish humor, Rhiannon McGlade argues, through an analysis of the political controversy around the infamous “*fets de Cu-Cut!*”, that, “far from being ‘politically inconsequential,’ cartoon humor has the power to both reflect and affect its environment” (200). As an intervention in political life and, more directly, in the media that shape public opinion, political cartoons have the ability to challenge, contest or affirm hegemonic narratives. In the case of El Roto, many of his cartoons became placards in the *movimiento 15-M*, since some of the *indignados* considered that these cartoons were able to interpret the social and political reality better than any other slogan. El Roto was also sympathetic towards them and on 26 May 2011, ten days after protesters started to camp out in the Spanish

squares, he published a cartoon that depicts the *indignados* in Puerta del Sol with a collective balloon that reads: “¡A la puta calle! nos dijeron. Y eso hicimos” (85) [Figure 6]. El Roto also reflects on the impact that this movement had on what is now termed the old and new politics. With the same typification of the protesters but with no specific location and with a large white flag, another balloon says “Los jóvenes salieron a la calle y súbitamente todos los partidos envejecieron...” (84) This latter cartoon was in fact hung in the Cercanías train station of Sol during the *indignados*’ camp. El Roto’s cartoons became for them a symbol of both identification and denunciation. The social group that was formed around 15-M was thus assimilating and winning for their own struggle a traditional intellectual (in Gramsci’s terms) such as Andrés Bello—a key figure to understand the development of Spain from Francoism to today.

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