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Political Humor as a confrontational tool against the Syrian regime

A study case:

Syria, 15th March 2011 – 15th May
2012

Blanca Camps-Febrer

**INSTITUT
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PER LA PAU

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this working paper is to analyze the inclusion of political humor into the set of actions used by opponents to the Syrian regime during the first year of a state-wide uprising in 2011. The research argues that although political humor has traditionally been seen mainly as a concealed voice against dominant elites, it can nevertheless take a confrontational stance and challenge a regime. In this paper we assess the role of political humor in challenging the legitimacy of the Syrian State through the battle for the signification of events. We will work with a theoretical framework that draws its assumptions from social movements' studies and cultural studies. Through the assessment of the importance of discourse and the role of ideological domination to a regime we will see how the first year of the Syrian uprising included widespread acts of political humor as part of the strategy against the regime.

Key words: Humor, political opposition, Resistance – Syria, Revolutions – Syria, popular revolts

RESUM

L'objectiu d'aquest document de treball és analitzar la inclusió de les polítiques d'humor en el conjunt d'accions utilitzades pels opositors al règim sirià durant el primer any de revolta, el 2011. La investigació sosté que tot i que l'humor polític ha estat vist tradicionalment com una veu oculta contra les elits dominants, també pot prendre una postura de confrontació i desafiar un règim. En aquest treball s'avalua

el paper de l'humor polític per desafiar la legitimitat de l'estat sirí a través de la lluita pel significat dels esdeveniments. El marc teòric està basat en l'estudi dels moviments socials, així com en els estudis culturals i en l'anàlisi del discurs. Mitjançant l'avaluació de la importància del discurs i del paper de dominació ideològica del règim, veurem com el primer any de revolta a Síria va incloure actes generalitzats d'humor polític en el marc de l'estratègia d'oposició al govern sirí.

Paraules clau: Humorisme; Oposició política; Resistència al govern – Síria; Revolucions – Síria; revoltes populars

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este documento de trabajo es analizar la inclusión de las políticas de humor en el conjunto de acciones utilizadas por los opositores al régimen sirio durante el primer año de revuelta, en 2011. La investigación sostiene que aunque el humor político ha sido visto tradicionalmente como una voz oculta contra las élites dominantes, también puede tomar una postura de confrontación y desafiar a un régimen. En este trabajo se evalúa el papel del humor político para desafiar la legitimidad del estado sirio a través de la lucha por el significado de los acontecimientos. El marco teórico está basado en el estudio de los movimientos sociales, así como en los estudios culturales y en el análisis del discurso. Mediante la evaluación de la importancia del discurso y del papel de dominación ideológica del régimen, veremos como el primer año de revuelta en Siria incluyó actos generalizados de humor político en el marco de la estrategia de oposición al gobierno sirio.

Palabras clave: Humorismo; Oposición política; Resistencia al gobierno – Siria; Revoluciones – Siria; revueltas populares

Every Joke is a Tiny Revolution
George Orwell,
An Age Like This: 1920-1940

To the Syrian People in their quest for Freedom and Dignity.

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

On the 15th March 2011, several incidents with protesters in Syria finally galvanized a state-wide uprising directed against the regime. The demonstrations demanding the release of young children who had been arrested for painting anti-regime slogans on their school's walls turned into a popular uprising. The level of torture and violence that the children had suffered sparked the outrage over the country. On the 18th April 2011 in Homs, demonstrators tried to occupy the Clock Square, in an attempt to emulate the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt. They were met with heavy reprisal from the Syrian Army. After the failed attempt, a mock Clock Tower made out of cardboard could be seen in demonstrations across the country.

The Syrian uprising still goes on as we write these pages, and it has entered the stage of open civil war. More than 30.000 people have lost their lives and thousands others are illegally arrested, tortured or disappeared².

The popular demonstrations and nightly marches were the sign of the uprising until the heavy casualties of peaceful demonstrators and the subsequent defections in the Syrian Army lead to armed protection groups and ultimately to the establishment of a so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA)³, with more than two hundred autonomous or semi-autonomous brigades operating across Syria. The first self-appointed role of the FSA and the many brigades was to protect civilians and their peaceful protests but they quickly developed offensive operations as well with the goal to liberate territory from the state's control.

During the first year of the uprising⁴, however the violence and re-

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1. This paper's research was conducted as part of the Master's Degree on International Relations, Security and Development from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. The research was supervised by Dr. Rafael Grasa Hernández.
 2. According to UN estimates (September, 2012).
 3. Its creation was announced on a video posted on youtube the 29th July 2011 by a defected Colonel named Riad Al-Asad.
 4. The anti-regime movements in Syria refer to this ongoing period as the "*Syrian Revolution*". I use the terminology *uprising* instead of *revolution*, as I understand the term

pression⁵ rose, many Syrian opponents, activists, still kept a solid stance for a nonviolent strategy. Others combined nonviolent tactics with an ideological or active support for armed struggle as part of a common strategy. Activists still managed to mock and ridicule the regime through various original ways, strengthening the links of solidarity among the resistance and lifting the spirits against the hardships of repression. Art, and especially humor, accompanied the Syrian uprising.

But, how is it possible that such dramatic events with dozens of civilian deaths being reported daily be fertile for political humor? Is political humor a valid act on the rise among the tactics used by protesters and opponents? Or is it just a desperate act for citizens to help them cope with everyday life under oppression? What is its value as an oppositional act? Experiences like that of Egypt's ousting of former president Hosni Mubarak by the "25th January Revolution"⁶ and the much publicized use of satiric slogans or chants may have helped the idea that political humor could be a beneficial tool for political nonviolent resistance against a regime.

My purpose in this research is to explore how humor can become subversive and specifically the ways in which popular culture and political humor become part of the open resistance against the Syrian Baathist regime in a period of instability, of social and political turmoil such as the period from 15th March 2011 to 15th May 2012 in Syria.

I do not intend to decode the meanings of words and symbols as entrenched in a culture of communication⁷, but rather to determine

revolution to be more ideologically charged. I will use the term *revolution* when referring to the activists' expressions but my choice of *uprising* has to do with the fact that the period analyzed in this research is an insurrection or revolt that has shaken the structures of the country and might lead to deep political changes that have yet to be seen or to be specifically and ideologically outlined.

5. I define repression as a set of coercive measures or the threat of their use that are acquired by dominants to enforce a policy by the State. In Charles Tilly's words: "*the costs of collective action to a group resulting from interaction with other groups*" (1977:14).
6. Popular name given to the 18 days period where a popular movement throughout Egypt but especially in urban space succeeded in toppling President Hosni Mubarak and ending his 30 year rule over the country.
7. AlShaer, 2008.

the entrenchment of the acts of political humor within an open resistance strategy against the Syrian state.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SYRIAN CASE

In the study “*Humor as a serious strategy of nonviolent resistance to oppression*”, Majken Jul Sorensen focused on the Serbian Otpor oppositional movement as a successful but unusual case of the impact of humor in bringing down the oppressive regime of Slobodan Milosevic. The choice of the Otpor case was useful to the field in the sense that its impact was perceivable by a broad part of the society. It was a concrete example with concrete collectively-organized actions that could be tracked back in time. Even its activists and their intentions or perceptions could be reached through personal interviews. Sorensen argues that “*looking more closely at the unusual, we can often get more information about the less unusual*” (Sorensen, 2008: 169).

The case of Syria is probably the opposite example in two senses. Syria is interesting for the permanent and continuous role of humor and its indirect and parallel inscription in a wider strategy of confrontation. To note how secondary or parallel actions such as humoristic acts inscribe, increase, decrease or move from the dissimulation and euphemistic acts towards a more direct confrontation can be very useful in determining its impact in, unfortunately, usual cases when all non-violent opposition is overcome by violent opposition and the conflict escalates into an armed struggle. The study of political humor in a context of confrontational and open conflict shall determine the importance of ideology and legitimacy at two levels: in reassessing or challenging the dominant’s status within the structure of domination and in promoting engagement of oppressed within the oppositional movement.

On the other hand, we are not studying a coordinated or purposeful strategy of an organized group as the Otpor case referred to. Our aim is to overcome the dichotomy between organized and unorganized political action in order to acquire a broader perspective of the culture of resistance and opposition among the Syrian people. Based on previ-

ous studies of theory of resistance (see Scott, 1985 and 1990 or Tilly, 1977), we can guide ourselves through the complex network of resistance's actions in an open conflict and determine its links and purposes within an opposition, the Syrian one, that is especially marked by its complexity, division and local autonomy.

STRUCTURE OF THIS RESEARCH

I have structured this paper into three different parts. Firstly, I have tried to compile the literature about social movements and nonviolent resistance, from theoretical frameworks that could be of use to my analysis and to study the case of oppositional actions classed as political humor. This compilation has helped me in building up a framework for my own research, and this framework is also limited and detailed in Chapter 2 "*Analytical Framework*". Applying the analysis to the Units of study has been done and explained through Chapter 3 "*Political Humor in the Syrian uprising*". Some discussion on the results can be found in Chapter 4 "*Final Remarks*" where I will develop also some suggestions for further study and analysis.

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Finally, I cannot but be grateful to a number of people who have encouraged me and helped me along the work put on this research. I would like to especially acknowledge the support and guidance of my research supervisor Dr. Prof. Grasa Hernandez, especially on keeping up my motivation on this topic when violence and massacres were unfolding in Syria and dealing with political humor seemed to me harder and harder in the gloomy and tragic context.

On what concerns the specific contents and actions of activists I have been informed of some of the actions and supplied with productions by many Syrian friends and acquaintances. They have also been very helpful in exposing to me their different interpretations and their own personal perceptions on the actions and the tactics used by the opposition. In this regard, I am indebted to A.K., B. I. and W.Z. Thank you.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Our analysis of political humor in the Syrian Uprising draws its theoretical basis from social scientists dealing with the sociology of power and social movements. The Gramscian notion and theory of hegemony and ideological dominance (Gramsci, 1988) and the symbolic power identified by Bourdieu (1991) will serve us as when analyzing the context of power relations in Syria and the importance of cultural and ideological dominance in the Baathist State. The question of whether political humor is included within the strategy of activists in opposition cannot be understood without a look at the paramount importance that the battle for signification of events, the battle for legitimacy, plays in a popular uprising. This symbolic power can be challenged through different means, as we will see in the case of Syria, one of them being political humor. Moreover, we want to study the link between dissention and the actual acts that challenge directly the existing power relations (Scott, 1990) and determine if those that refer to political humor can be included in a broader confrontational strategy (Tilly, 1977).

The main goal that motivates the present research is to determine *if political humor is part of the set of actions that oppositional movements use against the regime. And if so, how are these actions useful or perceived as useful?* Oppositional movements have different strategies and goals. Even though the aftermath of the toppling of the regime and how to achieve this change remains problematic, the goal of changing the regime structure is shared by all members of the opposition⁸. As part of the oppositional acts, *how are satirical actions integrated and included, and what is their immediate goal? What is their impact?*

8. Opposition can be defined as an organized group of people with a common objective that confronts the perpetuation or existence of a government, regime or political structure in power. In the Syrian case, as in most cases, many argue that there is not an opposition but rather oppositions as the strategies, tactics and even objectives of opposing activist remain varied and sometimes irreconcilable.

We will approach the study of two different theorizations that affect the use of Political Humor. The concepts put forward in this research are mainly based on the works done by Prof. James Scott and Prof. Charles Tilly. The combining of both processes and analysis will be our main tool for analyzing a situation where a traditionally unimportant action can become part of a challenging movement to a specific power structure.

In the light of Hirschman's categorization of political behavior, protest can be shaped in daylight confrontation or rather in a concealed manner (1970). It can also question the legitimacy of the State or rather be adopted as part of the parallel strategies that subsist in a context of oppression or subordination (Bennani-Chraïbi, 2004). We also have to consider what we mean and understand by expression or political participation, since usually satire and humor are seen as located in the "*infrapolitics*" or "*microphysics of power*" of Michel Foucault's analysis and thus unchallenging the hegemony of the state (Foucault, 1991). Nevertheless, Scott's categorization of resistance acts will help us determine how political humor moves from hidden transcript to public transcript, to direct aggression (1990). What are the features that could characterize political humor as an act of open aggression towards the regime? In other words, why should the regime care about a satirical cartoon being carried by demonstrators? And why do these demonstrators prepare and draw cartoons as part of their performance and behavior in a demonstration? We also want to test Tilly's approach on the repertoire of actions to determine how political humor is included and its added value among other political actions in opposing the regime. If political humor was always considered as an action without relevance in the political sphere, is this consideration changed in an open confrontation where satire is present an openly defiant?

In the uprisings lived throughout the North of Africa and in the Middle East from the year 2011 on, political humor has been visible and extensively reported in the media. Our goal as social scientists here is to try to assess its real role and inclusion in the set of actions at the disposal of activists. It would be appropriate to ask, borrowing

Charles Tilly's words, "[...] *under what conditions, [...], collective action appears to form part of a social movement*" (Tilly, 1977: 30). In this sense, is political humor part of a social movement in Syria?

THE CONTEXT OF POWER RELATIONS

The context of our study is Syria in the first year of the 2011 uprising. To be sure, we deal with a non-democratic context that we will define as a *perceived* sentiment in which the subject —be it individually or collectively— *feels* that he/she has “*no institutionalized channels of political expression*” and participation (Bennani-Chraïbi et al., 2004:19). It is especially the direct experience of the subject what interests us. We are not attempting a description of the State structures of domination, but rather we focus here on the *links* and the *performance* of those structures on the subordinates. This definition based on the subject's perception allows me to overcome the ontological dichotomy between democratic and non-democratic societies, where an increase in the perception of non-democracy is not directly related to an increase of the totalitarianism but rather to what Alain Tourain calls the “*self-production of society*”, the changing collective perception of the meanings of the social interactions and of the power relations (Tourain, 1977).

In Charles Tilly's approach, a repertoire of actions follows the cycle of protest and it is determined by the power relations and its changes. If we account of the existence of symbolic power as part of the force of the state to dominate hegemonically and to preserve its authority, globalization and especially the globalization of social media, satellite television and other means of trans-border communication and information, can shift the balance and centers of power. The weight of propaganda war or of ideological production becomes thus much more central⁹.

9. Franz Fanon already talked about the importance of Radio during Algeria's war of independence. His analysis was especially focused on the impact of radio on contenders and the Algerian population. (Fanon, 1959)

IS POLITICAL HUMOR REALLY POLITICAL?

Political satire can legitimize political power or rather have a subversive effect in promoting social and political change (Kishtainy, 1985). Some studies suggest that political humor under dictatorships or authoritarian regimes is just a mere ‘safety-valve’ that does not really mobilize or promote any active resistance against it (Badarneh, 2011; Billig, 2005). Indeed, satire and mockery towards the elite is mostly regarded as part of the hidden transcript: jokes, tales, gestures, attitudes or behaviors that cannot be uttered or performed within the presence of the dominants. It is thus not seen as part of the direct acts of aggression. These analysis are based on a fix picture of a dictatorial regime where political humor is a concealed voice that does not oppose the regime frontally (Hirschmann in Bennani-Charïbi, 2004). Certain mechanisms that occasionally question the regime could paradoxically act in favor and strengthen the ruler, in line with what Anthony Giddens calls the “*naturalization of the mind*” (Giddens, 1984). The safety-valve perspective has so far come with the assumption that political humor simply contributes to reduce frustration or aggressiveness of the oppressed. There is no factual or historical backing of this assumption. If the hidden transcripts are produced by the feeling of injustice towards domination and there is no actual change in the current domination relations, how can these hidden transcripts prevent oppressed from taking an open path towards reshaping power relations? Moreover, the safety-valve theory does not take into account the power of cognitive production and of counter-symbolic and counter-discourse that can be generated through satire and its influence in the practices of resistance and of political mobilization.

Another dichotomy must be explained in what refers to our research: that is the distinction between hidden transcript and public transcript proposed by James Scott (1990). According to Scott hidden transcripts are those acts of dissent that occur within a space and among a group of people that share the same position in a given relation of dominance. These transcripts don’t usually reach the other side of the power relationship because of the reaction they would en-

tail. Hidden transcripts are usually opposed to the public display of language, rituals and behaviors that a group or individual performs in front of others. In our research, we focus our interest in the line between public and hidden transcripts. This is the line where Scott sees the battle for “testing the limits” (Scott, 1990: p.192), where subordinates, unsure of dominants’ effective powers might bring hidden transcripts to a public sphere. A free social site where these scripts are expressed free from dominants’ knowledge might mean a physical site far from the dominant’s presence, or else a coding of gestures or language apparently innocent to outsiders. But, bringing hidden transcripts into confrontation might mean bringing the joke physically closer to the dominants (from the safety of the family household to the street); making the message clearer for them to acknowledge it; or rendering it impossible to ignore. Our focus on the line or space between hidden and public transcript is very useful to understand evolutions and internal processes within a specific regime. When François L’Yvonnet’s analyzes the French society of the 21st Century, he finds that laughter has been tamed, trivialized, abducted and integrated within the accepted, rendering it inoffensive. Even when laughter is political, L’Yvonnet does not perceive it as resistance since “*resistance doit être animé par un projet*”¹⁰. Criticizing all politicians through the guignol (a popular puppet show of characterized politicians), ridiculing them, does not send a political message except that of the trivializing of politics, leveling all politicians or political activities to a grotesque masquerade. In his analysis, L’Yvonnet is focusing on the mainstream media and communication channels and his critique to them. He does not take into account other layers of humor present in the public space because they are only acknowledged by a minority that is not so close to the mainstream perception of democracy. Some of these messages that do have a political project are either permitted or fought on the basis of municipal laws (against graffiti, etc.), but mostly they get lost in the confusion of a loud and chaotic scene.

10. L’Yvonnet in Le Monde Supplement 15-16/04/2012

Trivialization of critique is not only the job of liberal democracies. Also other authoritarian regimes might restore to this tactic in what refers to media. The Algerians say, for example, that when a Syrian speaks he is killed, when a Tunisian speaks he is killed (during Ben Ali's regime), but Algerians speak and speak and speak until they die. The difference lies, as we will see later, on where the red lines are placed and on the reaction of the regime to the trespassing (from politically-motivated detentions, torture, public ostracism or even the cloning of civil society¹¹...).

To apply this analytical framework to satirical production, including the new resources and opportunities of new technologies, can help us improve theory on popular resistance practices. In fact, a non-rigid approach to humor and artistic production can shed some light on the multiple functionalities of these acts, as well as on the different relationships between the use of these productions and the control of the state towards them.

2.1. ASSUMPTIONS TO THE RESEARCH

The present research makes different assumptions that must be explained to proceed.

The first important assumption is the fact that 1) *the regime is not exclusively using violence as a means to maintain power*, that is as a means to make the people, the country, act the way the regime wants. If power was exclusively based on torture and repression, political humor would not be a useful confrontational tool since it is not directly challenging military power.

Secondly we see, 2) *Political Humor is repressed and censored under al-Asad's regime*. There is obvious evidence and official admission of this fact (see for instance Wedeen, 1999). It is also true, however, that there are no official written guidelines as to what can be subject to censorship or repression and what can be acceptable to the

11. The term «cloning» refers to the state policy or strategy of infiltrating civil organizations to create inner dissent or to divide and hinder their work from the inside.

regime. As professor Lisa Wedeen explains, however, people seem to be aware and understand what these guidelines are, that is, what can be said and what cannot.

2.2. UNITS OF ANALYSIS AND PERIOD OF TIME

Humor, as defined by Martin (2007), “*is the positive emotion of mirth invoked in a social context by the perception of playful incongruity and expressed through laughter-related behaviors*”. In politics the unveiling of incongruity is sometimes not funny; it is merely the courage to show the incongruity that makes an artistic expression part of the political humor. Political humor might make you smile or nervously giggle looking around to check who is watching you (Qassim, 2007).

Freud classifies jokes into two categories: innocent or with a purpose. Jokes with a purpose can be either aggressive or obscene (Freud, 1966). Political Humor falls into the category of aggressive jokes in the sense that its intent is to invert the order of things, reality and the power relations within society, even if just momentarily. The punch line unveils a situation that is absurd in the way life is absurd as it is based on doubt and mystery. Without doubt there is no humor (Kazarian, 2011). In politics thus, humor unmasks the inconsistency of speeches and policies through exaggeration —of policies, personal flaws...—, imagining a policy, politician or a plain citizen in an unusual situation to contrast the absurdity of their deeds, or even by plainly ridiculing the targeted actions (Badarneh, 2011).

Following these definitions, we focus our work on the actions inscribed within the tactics of political humor which comply with the following characteristics:

1. Individual or collective actions part of a folklore or popular culture produced during the period from 15th March 2011 to 15th May 2012.
2. They are public actions with free access according to the availability and nature of the action
3. They are not intended at realistically portraying or describing a

situation but they nevertheless refer to the political situation of Syria

4. They have an implicit or explicit purpose of opposing the current regime or authority

5. They are perceived as funny, satirical or mocking

As to the place of development of these actions we include those taking place in:

a) New atypical spaces: facebook groups, music videos, mock videos and pictures, drama, puppets, cartoons and animation, etc.

b) Topical space: puppets and drawings, posters, graffiti, street performances and chants and slogans.

2.3. SOURCES FOR DATA

The vast bulk of data for this study is taken from the internet, specifically referred to me through facebook, twitter, youtube and other websites and blogs; reported to me mainly through these first three platforms. Data and contents have been contrasted through detailed scrutiny and personal interviews with members of the resistance inside and outside of Syria. I have conducted 5 semi-constructed interviews with activists in exile (Turkey and Spain) and two with activists inside Syria via Skype (Damascus and Kobani). These interviews are not meant to present any quantitative results, but they certainly helped me in gaining a deeper grasp of the current context of my case study and the daily development of events.

There are natural limits to this research. Firstly, the inclusion of direct actions on the ground, mainly during street demonstrations has been done only through verification and study of the material available, this is video-actions and videos reporting actions on the ground. We will not take into account actions of political humor outside Syria, where the context of confrontation and the reach of the Syrian authorities are not present and therefore the costs of these actions differ enormously¹². We are however aware of the possibility that some of

12. Notwithstanding the pressure and political complexity that the conflict is bringing to neighboring countries, such as Lebanon, Turkey or Iraq.

the internet actions used for this research might have been produced outside of Syria. That is why we have tried to center our study not on specific productions but on general topics of satire and burlesque redundant within different actions and formats. The actions studied are taken into consideration only when they are known and used by the Syrian opposition inside, either by reproducing one same topic or symbol online and offline or by being verifiably produced inside.

3. ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL HUMOR IN THE SYRIAN UPRISING

In the previous chapter, we have tried to describe the main theories that deal with political humor in the perspective of a political action. We are dealing now with the role of political humor in the context of an open conflict like the first year of the Syrian uprising. The main difficulty of this analysis lies in the constant reshaping of forces and power relations that takes place during such turbulent times. The changing power-balance forces all intervening agents to constantly reassess their available resources and the impact of their actions.

THE EXPERIENCE OF OPPRESSION UNDER THE BAATHIST REGIME

Syria has been under the control of the Baath Party since 1963. After an unsuccessful and short-lived union with Nasser's Egypt, a group of military officials led by Baathist members took over control of the State. In 1971, the Minister of Defense and strongman of the Government Hafiz al-Asad was confirmed President of the Syrian Arab Republic after a bloodless coup that came to be known officially as "The corrective Movement". Hafiz al-Asad remained President until his death in 2000. His son Bashar al-Asad was elected President that same year in a referendum where he ran unopposed and has ever since been reconfirmed once.

Although there is a parliament (People's Council) and legislative and presidential elections in Syria, the Baath party controls the country effectively, as the Constitution states in article 8 "the Arab Socialist Baath Party leads the state and the society" and the majority of seats in the People's Council are reserved to the Baath-led coalition of National Progressive Front. This disposition was taken out on the 2012 Constitutional reform. However, the control of the Baath party is not only limited to the political organs but also of the Syrian economy and social organization. The regime developed a wide network of information and secret services that made very dangerous any form of criticism towards state policies.

American scholar Lisa Wedeen¹³ identified three rough areas of power of control by a regime: a) *the material resources*, b) *the institutions of force and punishment*, and c) *the production of the historical narrative*. This third area was of high importance to Hafez al-Asad's rule of Syria, especially since the 70s (Wedeen, 1999), when efforts and resources on ideological domination especially raised. Its importance continued during Bashar al-Asad's presidency. The power for the signification of events represents the capacity by the state to control and impose a certain narrative, a certain explanation of the world, of the reality. The control of the symbolic world is therefore an important battlefield where contestants fight for meanings and historical interpretations of events.

Although Syrians could have felt the three areas of domination as oppressive, the conditions did not substantially change from 2010 to 2011 to explain for a widespread revolt. There was a pauperization of the masses and a thinning of middle classes since Bashar al-Asad's ascension to power and the implementation of neo-liberal policies. In the short term, however, something changed in the spirit of Syrians that

13. Lisa Wedeen's book "*Ambiguities of Domination*" on the use of the symbolic language under Hafez al-Asad's regime was an essential guide to my understanding of the historical meaning of rhetoric, imagery, spectacle and language in Syrian politics. Her detailed description of the rhetoric used by the Baath party and Hafez al-Asad's regime in specific events such as the Hama uprising and massacre in 1982 was very useful to me to understand the origins and the implications for the emergence of new platforms and networks of symbolic and narrative production in the twenty-first century.

facilitated an open and wide uprising throughout the country¹⁴. An undeniable factor can be seen in the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions. That is, their success. Although the political and social context of these countries are very different to Syria's, the reversal of a situation that might have been perceived as inevitable, the realization of the power of the oppressed, provided the theoretical counter-ideology that allowed Syrians to imagine a change in power relations. *"It is as if we had been blind. I had never even thought of the possibility of change in my country"*, a Syrian medical student told me three months into the uprising¹⁵. The toppling of the Tunisian and Egyptian Presidents led to a weakening of the Syrian regime's persuasive power that was making people comply with the authority's norms. The inevitability of the Syrian regime was cracking. Its legitimacy was, however, still intact. The coercive methods were also still there, especially after the brutal tortures of the children of Dara'a. The possibility of change, however, was breaking in through the satellite images of a crowded Tahrir Square in Cairo chanting *"The people want to topple the regime"* (al-sh'b yuryd īsqāṭ al-niḏām - الشعب يريد اسقط النظام), and through the stories of Mohamed Bouazizi heroic martyrdom in Tunisia. What had changed, thus, was the experience of this oppression and the capacity of people to imagine alternative realities (Tourain, 1977).

HUMOR AND SATIRE IN POLITICAL LIFE

There is much literature on the use of discourse, of symbols, of images and spectacles in authoritarian regimes, especially in those that tend to assimilate the state to the president. We can find various examples

14. It must be noted, however, that much concern/value was given to the fact that the two biggest and more important cities of the country, namely Damascus and Aleppo, did not see important acts of support to the uprising until months later. This was explained with concern by the opposition by the fact that the regime's grip was tighter in cities closer to the power and, alternatively, valued by supporters of Asad's regime as the evidence that the uprising was led by Islamists in Sunni regions or even infiltrators crossing the borders from neighboring countries (to Dara'a from Jordan, Homs and Hama from Lebanon or even Idlib from Turkey).

15. Interview conducted in Barcelona by the author of this research.

in the Middle East, with Gamal Abdelnasser, Saddam Hussein or Hafez al-Asad as experts in the enforcement of the leader's cult. There is not however much research on the role of art and humor in resistance, as oppositional acts to totalitarian or repressive regimes in the Middle East. The importance of cult and compliance to the Syrian regime provides also an example of how the symbolic power, the power to impose meaning aligned with the State's version of reality, is paramount in the uprising. Shehata reports of existing rumors that Egyptian presidents Nasser or Sadat were interested in monitoring political jokes on the street (1992). Although these were only rumors it shows the perceived potential threat of jokes or, at least, the uncensored or less censored barometer that they could provide to monitor the regime's popular support. In Egypt, increasing humor and satire can be found in the toughest situations, such as the 1967 defeat of the Six Day War and the 25th January Revolution. The Lebanese political scientist Asad AbuKhalil notes "*[t]hen-President Gamal Abdel Nasser was so concerned by the public mockery of his troops that he gave a speech warning of the damage that can be done to the community by jokes.*"¹⁶ Hegemony of a narrative is a realm that cannot be fought solely with weaponry and coercive violence.

Although most studies agree with the fact that political humor cannot significantly alter regimes, its *use* as part of the transgression against the power of the state are obvious in the study of the 2011 revolutions in the MENA region. Political humor is used in conveying a message and express demands openly. It is interesting to compare the treatment of the Hama events to the 2011 Uprising since we can find a coherent and parallel narrative in both accounts by the state and its official media. The difference, however, lies in the fact that monopolizing the narration of events has become more difficult due to globalized media, the opened space of narration and the continuous flow of information production through new technologies and social media. Thus, "*preserving the regime's monopoly on historical interpre-*

16. From his personal blog: <http://angryarab.blogspot.com.es/2011/02/what-is-funny-and-what-is-not.html>

tation” (Wedeen, 1999:42) has become much more difficult. In 1982 a rebellion of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama was met with extremely violent retaliation, with aviation bombarding and destroying most of Hama’s old city, with the death of between 10-40.000 inhabitants and massive extrajudicial executions, detentions and imprisonment. The official rhetoric of the events was, according to Wedeen, that the Muslim Brotherhood’s members were ““reactionaries”, “rightists” and “vermin” threatening to “contaminate” the body of politics” (Wedeen, 1999:44). Compare this to the “[c]onspiracies are like germs, after all, multiplying every moment everywhere” (Bashar’s Speech, at Damascus University on the 21st June 2011). And again in a speech by Hafez al-Asad on the 8th March 1982, “beware of those “who wear the clothes of Islam” but are not Muslims” (p.48), as opposed to “It is not the fault of Islam when there are terrorists who take cover under the mantle of Islam” (Bashar’s Speech, at Damascus University on the Jan 12, 2012).

In 1982 and the following years, of course, the official rhetoric, which provided the formula, the language and symbolism to be used to orient the historical events, went practically unchallenged if but for clandestine milieus, concealed expressions and external opposition. The twenty-first century, however, the narrative has become more porous and alternative, external, clandestine discourses are openly challenging and competing for the conquest of the public space.

THE SYRIAN UPRISING

Through our research we found mainly 3 main different formats of satire used: cartoons and signs, on theatre or mocking performances and on oral messages such as jokes, chants or slogans. Cartoons appeal directly to the shared sentiment, have to have a message to the point and “*the artistic aspect means that the cartoonist is freer to express his personal views than for instance the journalist*”¹⁷ that has the ontological obligation to contrast facts. Cartoons do not have to be

17. Andreas Qassim, 2007.

funny either. They might just gruesomely express a shared feeling. The best-known case in the Middle East is probably that of Palestinian cartoonist Naje al-Ali, where he powerfully depicts dramatic situations that appeal to a shared narrative of all Palestinians (see Pic. 1).

Even in a globalized-digital era, the oral expression remains the most common tool of the oppressed against the dominant elite. The oral expression is traditionally filled with elements of disguised resistance. The importance of oral expression is sometimes overlooked due to the lack of access to it and due to its impermanence and volatility. But it is precisely this impermanence that makes of oral expression a key resource for the oppressed. The impermanence of the oral actions makes them easier to communicate and perform in chosen contexts and with chosen audiences. It also might pass from communicator to communicator rendering the author of the act difficult or nearly impossible to trace back.

The oral tradition, however, continues to be a very popular form of transmission throughout the Arab world with jokes being told in the intimacy of friends or family or with theatre, comedy, songs and slogans. Jokes have no author, they are impersonal and part of the folklore and, as such, they are more difficult to stop, to repress and their authors more difficult to punish than any other kind of political criticism.

3.1. THE MESSAGE: THE TOPICS OF MOCKERY AND SATIRE

A political joke is offensive when it is “*not universally considered to be in good taste by all members of society*” (Badarneh, 2011). This makes of jokes a way for people to “*temporarily overcome their oppressors, to momentarily triumph by ridiculing and criticizing*”. In a way, political jokes build an alternative world, they are a fiction that accuses directly the regime of a certain injustice, “*calling into question the legitimacy of the political system*” (Badarneh, 2011).

As we will describe in this section, we found through our research that Syrian activists using political humor against the regime during

the 2011 Uprising have developed specific actions that dealt with current events. They focused on the key elements of domination and the groups holding the power, undermining the bases of this power, targeting directly the authority of the regime.

We could distinguish three main topics around which the plots of comedy revolved:

a) *The villains, their policies and discourses.* These actions deal and refer to the regime, its leaders, its gangs, para-military, army and the representation of the enemy as identified by the opposition(s).

c) *The international community.* It refers rather to the international “communities”, be it the Muslims of the world, the citizens who support democracy around the world or even the international powers, stakeholders that might swing its support (even through material/financial support) towards one side or the other of the actors in the conflict.

b) *The revolutionaries and their mission,* or rather a self-representation of the opposition(s) of a spotless or ideal image of the population and the activists supporting and leading the Uprising.

These three focus of political humor can be displayed in very different formats and intentions as we will see in the following sections.

A. THE VILLAINS, THEIR POLICIES AND DISCOURSE

In resistance and nonviolent uprisings, traditional theory talks about the importance of differentiating between the oppression and the oppressor (Sorensen, 2008). The purpose of this difference is strategic as well as moral. Differentiating between the structure, the system, and the people that sustain and perpetuate oppression makes it easier to devise regime-change tactics because regime-members and regime-supporters do not feel so much directly threatened. This difference is not being made in the case of Syria and it would be very difficult to do it given the characteristics of the State. Oppression is personified in the face of Bashar al-Asad, as personified is a regime which especially made an effort to develop a personal cult. The cult identifies the leader as the source of all good, of all power, and ultimately, of all legitimacy

(Wedeen, 1999). For Syrian citizens to break free of the state's grip, the leader has to be exorcized, it has to be decrowned through ridicule, by exaggerating his flaws and putting him in degrading situations (Bakhtini, 1981). Bashar's official picture thus can now be found in toilets (See Pic. 6) or trashcans, associating him with the lowest and the eschatological and therefore bringing his high and untouchable image and "position" to the lowest and dirtiest level. We can find here the process of so-called "subversiting", regaining the symbols of propaganda (the leader's pictures) to reverse and subvert their messages.

One of the characteristics of political humor, especially in what regards caricature, is the building of personified "villains". The villains can be identifiable members of the political or military elite, or rather nameless, stereotyped figures that represent the whole collective elite. This difference is important in the context of an authoritarian regime since sometimes the line of censorship is drawn in between. That is, a caricature of a chubby anonymous Arab politician hypocritically crying while seated on a pile of dead bodies (Pic.2) is acceptable because it represents the passivity of the political class as a whole and of Arab States regarding the Palestinians' situation. Alternatively, a cartoon of Bashar al-Asad waiting to hitch a ride on Gaddafi's car is not (see Picture 3). Direct and personified criticism is one of the red lines that cannot be crossed. Ali Ferzat, Syria's best known cartoonist, knew where the red line stood¹⁸. He had already been censored under Hafez al-Asad and his satirical publication Al-Domari closed down under Bashar's presidency after the disappointing Damascus Spring¹⁹. Although Ali Ferzat had a long experience with censorship, he kept on publishing on the Kuwaiti newspaper when his caricatures were finally seen as having crossed the line. In August 2011, after the publication

18. *"I did not choose to become a cartoonist. It is not an institution or a course that you can enroll into. I was born an artist, a critic - and even as a child I used to write cynical stories. It just so happens that my medium is art. The real motivation - the real message is my cynicism."* AlJazeera Interview with Ali Ferzat on The Listening Post (Last Modified: 16th April 2012).

19. The Damascus Spring was a movement that took place after the ascension to power of Bashar al-Asad in 2000 demanding overture and political rights, but was soon repressed and many of its leaders were incarcerated.

of these pictures (Pic.3) Ali Ferzat was illegally kidnapped, allegedly by “Asad’s thugs”, beaten, and both his hands broken²⁰. When his work started to get personal, but also when his caricatures were being carried and used at demonstrations as anti-regime signs Ferzat’s cartoons became part of the confrontational actions to be repressed²¹. The same caricature took then different and deeper meanings because of the context where it was being brought up. On an interview for the BBC, Ferzat says: “*Before, I made sure not to draw any official that could be recognized, even though my cartoons were based on real people. Even if someone in power felt they were being targeted, they wouldn’t say anything because that would be like confirming it really was them.*”²²

An example of the recurrent element of the villains as a topic can be found in the series of a puppet show posted on youtube. “*Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator*” imagines what Bashar al-Asad is feeling throughout the events unfolding, showing him as a cruel dictator and mostly as a dumb and clueless fearsome tyrant (See Pic.21). The puppet show started broadcasting through the internet in November 2011 and finished its first 13 episodes on February 2012. The puppets speak in Syrian dialect and have a second entry with English subtitles, although the Arabic version remains more popular with always thousands more viewers²³. The creators of this puppet show, called Masasit Mati, are ridiculing the regime through four main villain-characters, the Syrian President, the Shabih or State’s thug, the TV-anchor and, occasionally the dead ghost of Hafez al-Asad who appears in Bashar’s dreams to tell him off or advise him on the best methods to repress the population. The show also makes Bashar say what protesters think he truly believes admitting the massacres, the influence of his family, tra-

20. See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/20/entertainment-us-syria-cartoonist-idUSBRE82JoLA20120320>

21. See <http://www.theworld.org/2011/12/slideshow-syrian-cartoonist-not-silenced-by-attack/> for a slideshow and explanation of a selection of Ali Ferzat’s cartoons.

22. Sebastian Usher. “*Ali Ferzat: Revolution redefines art in Syria*”. BBCNews. 25 March 2012. Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17491184>

23. For the first episode, the viewers in Arabic were 25.748 whereas the Viewers with English subtitles were 18.725. The second episode follows the same pattern (14.521 in Arabic and 8.704 in English) as do the rest of the videos. Checked on the 2nd May 2012.

dition, etc. Protesters and activists are also represented and even the creators of the show appear in flesh and bone, especially in the last episode of the first season, concealed with scarves and flags of the resistance as a final act of bravery and defiance to the regime.

The production of this puppet show can be seen not only as an open accusation to the regime and its leaders (as well as on state television and its propaganda), but also as a rewriting of the narrative. The show is sneaking into Bashar al-Asad's life and presenting an imagined behavior, a specific way of thinking that although fictional attributes certain characteristics to Bashar al-Asad and suggests a wicked position and attitude of the ruler towards the ruled. In a way, the show fills the gaps that controlled state media don't fill, imagining and inventing what lies beyond the scarce and carefully prepared public appearances of the dictator.

Masasit Mati or Ali Ferzat's sober approaches to criticizing the dictatorship and its violence contrast with the use of ridicule and animalization of Bashar al-Asad by many activists. Mocking the intellectual capabilities and Asad's flaws or inventing new ones was a common topic for chants, posters, videos or even transformation of official signs (Pic. 5 and 12). Bashar al-Asad, an ophthalmologist, has been the target of jokes referring to his bad vision (Pic. 4), sometimes in connection to him ignoring what really is happening on the ground (especially in early stages of the uprising) or just as plain insults to his person.

The animalization of the dominants can also be found in the mockery against the regime. The wordplay on Bashar al-Asad's family name, which means lion in Arabic, is well known and used among activists. The President's long neck however has made him the target of caricatures depicting him as a giraffe, a donkey or lately, as a duck. Not that ducks are especially evil to Syrians. In March 2012, a long series of private emails were leaked to the British paper *The Guardian*. They were emails showing correspondence between Bashar al-Asad and different supporters of his trusting, or between him and his wife Asma al-Asad. The emails gave a glimpse at Asma's luxurious shopping tastes amid the worst months of the uprising and showed her as a cold-blooded woman. Mostly what enraged the Syrian activists and

population supporting the resistance was the crumbling of a somewhat spread idea that the leader was being held captive by his entourage, and the proof that he was not dumb or blind to what was happening, but rather cynical and oblivious about it.

The same element of mockery can be found in trans-border productions of political humor elaborated over the same “punch-line” in different formats. The discovery through the leaked emails that Bashar was being affectionately called “Bata” (duck in Arabic) by his wife, has added to the jokes concerning his animalization. Many photoshopped pictures or videos have overflowed the net, videos and songs, some of them produced probably also outside Syria. On the streets in Syria, however, the use of this joke has also been evident. Pictures and videos of at least three demonstrations could be found where references to the duck were made, usually by carrying a plastic duck (in the village of Sirmin, Idlib) (See Picture 8) or even a real one (18th March 2012 in Berza, Damascus, see Pic. 9). AlArabiya news site also reported of protesters chanting “*You duck, may God damn your soul*”. All motives and actions that deal with the animalization of the leader contribute to the breaking of fear against the regime, as a sort of exercise for bravery.

But not only the main leader is targeted by satire. Other jokes also refer to the main leaders and tycoons of the regimes—a photo of an obese Asian child with the capture indicating him to be the Syrian Ambassador to the United States Walid al-Mouallem—, references to businessman and the president’s cousin Rami Makhlouf in songs chanted during demonstrations²⁴ or other jokes against Bashar al-Asad’s wife Asma. The vast bulk of the jokes, however, have been permanently referring to Bashar al-Asad.

THE FALSE REFORMS AND OTHER LIES

The production and consumption of political humor draws its sources from key political events. In this sense political humor is strongly in-

24. See a translation in English of a protest song: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3GNNPYubOE

fluenced by the political context, the atmosphere of liberties or oppression, the thickness of resistance within society, the existence of criticism within the political structures, etc. It drinks from the sources of reality, of current events of political actors, of everyday issues of matter to the ruled, to twist them for the purpose of evading reality, to point its flaws or to blatantly oppose it.

As it uses ridiculing and mocking as the main tool, it thus follows mainly the actions or words of the “enemy”, the villains. In a sense, political humor tries to hijack the regime’s narrative and reverse its meaning by exposing the absurdity or the inconsistency of the discourse with the deeds and the reality. There is an element of dialogism, “*using others’ words that are ‘ideologically saturated’ to represent our own meanings*” (Badarneh, 2011).

The first three speeches of Bashar al-Asad following the beginning of the Uprising (including an interview to the American News Channel ABC) were fertile land for mockery. The expectation of what these speeches could bring (supported by the drawn-parallel that Mubarak had given three speeches before resigning) left only rage and disappointment. Asad’s words were later deconstructed, analyzed and reclaimed. The first speech after the events of Daraa was on the 30th March 2011 and it was delivered at the People’s Assembly among vivid cheers and exalted poetry of the regime supporters. Bashar al-Asad, cheerful and self-confident, dismissed the protests as a mere conspiracy undertaken by infiltrators. Hours later a Facebook group with thousands of members was in use. It was called the “Infiltrators”. On the third speech, on the 21st June, Asad stated that “[c]onspiracies are like germs, after all, multiplying every moment everywhere.” The facebook group, still currently active, Germs of Freedom (جرثيم الحرية - *jrāthym al-hurriyat*) was set up. This group had 4,320 members on the 9th of May 2012. Chants of “*the Syrian germs salute the Libyan rats*” —in allusion to what Gaddafi called the Libyan opposition— could be heard in demonstrations during the first months.

The Facebook group called *The Chinese Revolution against the Chinese Tyrant* (الصينية ضد طاغية الصين - *al-thwrat al-ṣynyat dd ṭāghyat al-ṣyn* - الثورة) represents a critique to the censorship of the regime in a burlesque

attempt to trespass the red lines by targeting the Syrian regime with codenames from China. Demonstrations and actions are also described with changed names in line with what activists inside Syria (and all over the world in place of dictatorships) do with weather terminology: “*It is raining in Homs*”, meaning there are violent clashes, etc²⁵.

On the 7th of May 2012, parliamentary elections were organized across the country. The oppositions’ boycott was almost total. The boycott was denouncing elections as yet another rough intent at presenting a political will that the regime’s Army was contradicting on the ground by continuing to repress peaceful demonstrations. For instance at least four videos were uploaded on the day of the Parliamentary elections. Two of them showed activists posing as regime’s supporters, one of them selling votes that were later cast on a garbage bin. As a parody, these actions act out the behavior of the “enemy” in the pretense of introducing counter-meanings to their actions and discourses. This kind of actions shows “*the gap between the regime’s words and its actions*”²⁶. And it is not only the formal structure of the regime which is spreading its lies, but also pro-regime media as the joke testifies:

“If I tell lies, will I go to Al Akhrar [the afterlife],” a young boy asks his father. “No,” the father says, “if you lie, you go to Al Dounia [life on earth *but also one of the Syrian pro-regime TVs*]”²⁷.

A grimmer action took place in Damascus where photos of martyrs of the Uprising were posted on walls as candidates to the elections. This can nevertheless be considered political humor, though macabre, because it takes up the institutional signification of “posters of parliamentary candidates” to subvert it with the memory of the dead ones at the hands of the regime’s armed forces.

Aiming subversion and direct confrontational action against the regime and its supporters, a very controversial activist is Hossein Jabri and his phone-calls. He calls people within the regime (security forces,

25. Related to me from personal conversations with inside activists.

26. Muhammad A. Badarneh, 2011:319.

27. Phil Sands. “*As bloodshed in uprising grows, Syrians turn for protection to humour*”. The National. Jun 23, 2011 <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/as-bloodshed-in-uprising-grows-syrians-turn-for-protection-to-humour>

known thugs, police...) adopting different personalities and pretending to be on their side to either get information or just ridicule them, often insulting and swearing strongly. The conversations that he obtains via phone-calls are uploaded onto youtube, some of them getting more than 60.000 views. This was applauded by some and negatively perceived by other activists, as they distanced themselves from the foul language and the violent threats that Jabri sometimes uses.²⁸

B. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY: STAKEHOLDERS AND AUDIENCE

In this category we have included different topics that have been subject of satire and that deal with actors and attitudes of foreign powers such as the United States of America, Qatar, Russia or Iran. The USA and Qatar were usually regarded as potential allies of the opposition whereas Russia and Iran were seen as supporting the regime and thus depicted. Other international actors were given a role in satirical messages: international organizations such as the United Nations Organization or the League of Arab States, and specifically the International Observers deployed as part of the Arab League Plan or the Joint Arab League and UN Plan lead by Kofi Annan. Throughout the events unfolding every position or action undertaken by these actors found a response on the streets or the internet.

Many actions dealt with the issue of foreign intervention (the establishment of a buffer zone or a no-fly zone or even direct NATO-led military intervention) and international support through resolutions or sanctions against key regime personalities. Some of the actions that we had access to were pursuing to pressure the international community by showing its slow-reaction or their lack of commitment. These actions have probably clearer goals than the former topics described: mocking the dictator might seem useless, but touching on the bad-conscience of an international audience seems more direct to the point. The comedy builds up the guilt by selling the alternative narra-

28. See: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/26/197119.html>

tive to the international community, depicted in form of complaint, victimization or seeking solidarity through appealing to shared common values (democracy, human rights, the Islamic humanist values within the Muslim community, etc.).

At the end of 2011, the League of Arab States sent a mission for the first time in the history of the organization to monitor and report on the violations of human rights that were taking place in Syria. They were deployed on the 27th of December 2011 and suspended their operations one month after. During and after this time, the mocking of their failure took place along different formats, The messages of incompetence and uselessness kept pressuring the Arab League to be more convincing and to take a stronger stand against the regime. From cartoons to street performances, different actions took place. However, the evidences I gathered had to do more with productions made for dissemination on youtube than for own consumption during demonstrations or street protests. Mocking videos were made with a small group of people in the middle of agricultural fields in Syria and specifically aimed at being recorded (theatre-like performance)²⁹. There is therefore a clear understanding of the outer dimension of the conflict since protesters and opponents inside are acting minding the international community and its positions, trying to bend international public opinion in their favor.

In April 2012, the UN deployed some 15 UN military Observers³⁰ as part of the so-called Annan Plan to monitor a truce that started on the 15th of the same month. The Annan Plan consisted of 6 points, amongst them, the return of all military brigades to the barracks. This point was not done and videos showed evidence of tanks still patrolling or being stationed on the streets, especially in Idlib, Homs or Hama. The death of civilians and the continuation of military reprisals were also evident. Some of these military operations even took place hours after the visits of UN Observers leading to the frustration of the opposition

29. See for example this video in a mock-report from UgaritNews showing military and humanitarian aid being transported into Syria by turtles: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rki3dfISIM>

30. As part of the planned 300 that were to be deployed gradually on the ground.

and raising serious doubts as to the effectiveness of these UN agents. In Bennish, a town in the Province of Idlib that has been producing a lot of different actions of nonviolent resistance, a group of activists dressed up as deaf and blind UN Observers —with cotton in their ears and wearing dark shades— participated in a demonstration against the regime mocking the UN mission as useless (see Pic.15).

C. THE SELF-REPRESENTATION OF THE OPPOSITION

Another of the important topics of satire is that of representing the opposition. Its importance lies in the fact that it is an action of self-representation that builds an image of the *ideal* Revolution and the legitimacy of its mission. This image seeks to counteract the regime’s accusations of protesters being “infiltrators”, “armed gangs” and “salafi-jihadists”. We can find a parallel on Naje alAli’s Palestinian Handala, the symbolic Palestinian child, a refugee that represents the moral conscience of the Palestinian cause. The child created by alAli, Handala, can be seen in keyrings, flags and all sorts of Palestinian imagery. In the Syrian Uprising we do not find such a unified symbolic character, but we find in Kafr Nabel’s comic signs the figure of a young unarmed but brave protester that wears the colors of the revolution (See Pic. 19). The image of the protester is this young fearless man, but also children like the 13-year-old Hamza AlKhateeb, one of the first child martyrs from Daraa and whose name has become that of a Brigade of the Free Syrian Army in Idlib. A Facebook page was created in his honor (*We are all Hamza Alkhateeb*, with more than 23.000 likes³¹). The need for heroes, with local martyrs and local activists been inscribed in the memory of the uprising has thus to do with the moral stand of the movement, with the message that this uprising is seeking to convey.

Self-representation of the opposition is also conveyed through burlesque, usually directed at taking the regime’s words and denying through exaggeration the allegations of being supported with arms

31. Following the example of “*We are all Khaled Saïd*” one of the most popular facebook pages of activists of the Egyptian Revolution, in honor of the youngster beaten to death by the police agents in Alexandria on the 6th June 2010.

and money from outside powers. The first known and widely popularized video, to put but one example, was that of the activists from Homs providing a mocking news broadcast showing the alleged existence of terrorists armed with eggplants and zucchinis instead of real weapons³². Later on, in February 2012, in one video allegedly from the north of Syria, province of Idlib, people greet the arrival of the Free Syrian Army, which is filmed riding on ... donkeys and carrying hoes and shovels for weapons³³. All these actions are being displayed in an intent to revert the arguments of Bashar al-Asad and his regime, to unveil the lies of his speeches by exposing the superlative innocence of the opposition. These superlative exaggerations thus work in both senses: they expose the regime's wickedness and they emphasize the revolutionaries' innocence and goodness. But the goal is also to promote the revolutionary side among undecided citizens:

"A friend of mine in Aleppo [which didn't see major demonstrations until after months] was sent a package of nappies from another friend in a suburb of Damascus which has been protesting," explained one resident of the capital. *"He put a note with it saying, 'join us if you're a man, if not, these are for you'."*³⁴

There has been some satire that breaks the spotless image of the opposition and points some self-criticism, especially from the people inside Syria towards the exiled opposition. As a way of communication with other parts of the opposition, for instance, addressed to the Syrian National Council in its Istanbul meetings and its internal fights a poster in Amouda was reading *"The Revolution is in Syria, not in Turkey"*³⁵. Other chants or jokes that have circulated also refer to the internal division. One of the first slogans of the Uprising was *"One, one, one, the people of Syria are one"*. This slogan has been ironically transformed to *"One, one, one, the people of Syria are twenty-three*

32. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkDjmO-eWE4>

33. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pv-dYnuJLDg>

34. Phil Sands. "As bloodshed in uprising grows, Syrians turn for protection to humour". The National. Jun 23, 2011 <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/as-bloodshed-in-uprising-grows-syrians-turn-for-protection-to-humour>

35. Note that Amouda, with a majority of Kurdish population, is especially sensitive and skeptical of Turkey's support of the uprising.

million and one”, alluding to the divisions and the leadership fight within the opposition.

3.2. THE PLACE AND THE AUDIENCE

Jokes and satire have no reason to be produced unless there is a second step of communication. Without communication, the production of satire is in vain since the producer of the action is not laughing alone but needs the complicity of an audience. The audience has to be complicit because if the receiver is against the feelings that the joke arise then the objective of its communication is opposed to the expected (Freud, 1966: 133). In political satire these opposed feelings do not refer so much to feelings but rather to the political idea that the joke (in a broad sense) conveys. Thus, Bashar al-Asad was sharing a mock video of ‘how to hide a tank’ that goes unseen by the Arab League Observers³⁶, but the shared meaning of the joke was opposed to the similar jokes or allusions that were made to the observers blindness. The fact that Observers were not spotting (or reporting) tanks in the streets of Homs was a target of mockery by the opposition as well as by the Baathist supporters whereby the goal and target of the joke is 1) *the same* in the sense that the Observers are clueless to what is going on and 2) *different* in that opposition targets the regime and its brutality and the regime targets Burhan Ghalioun as head of the Syrian National Council and their failed efforts to engage the international community in the conflict.

In Egypt, Cairo’s Tahrir Square was the geographical focus point of the so-called “25th January Revolution” of 2011. In the square, jokes about Mubarak circulated, comic performances took place and new slogans and chants were made up to cheer the masses. These formats of political humor were mostly not made for the internet and news channels to capture and disseminate throughout the world. They were made mostly to be shared within the inhabited geographical spaces of the revolution while some of them were also broadcasted.

36. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/video/2012/mar/14/syrian-tank-video-assad-emails>

Although some journalists raced to baptize the events in Egypt as the “Facebook Revolution”, the social network was just one element in the web of factors and actions that took place and led to the downfall of Hosni Mubarak. In our focus on Syria, we found that most of the production of political humor was shaped by the space where it was produced and by the audience receiving and laughing at it, not passively, but sharing a message that, in their turn, made them supporters of the message behind the joke. For art or humor cannot only be produced, they have to be communicated as well, and the intentionality of any act has to be shared by the agent as well as by the reader, viewer or receiver (Foucault, 1988). The spaces and formats in which political humor is produced and disseminated are thus essential to the message, to intentionality and to the impact they have.

In the case of Syria, the difficult appropriation of spaces has made humor more fluid and more difficult to grasp. Part of it is being made with a clear intention to be broadcasted, as a message to the world outside Syria. The difficult and dramatic conquest of public space has made humorous and artistic actions more volatile and more difficult to share with others. Whether they are produced in Arabic dialect, or Kurdish, or English the expected audience differs. The spaces are not only neutral contextualizations and supports for the action, but rather they shape the action and the organizational structure itself. Spaces are therefore co-actors of the action, since they determine its language and its scope.

Also the group called “*The Calendar of Freedom*” has dyed Damascus fountain waters red in memory of the martyrs dead during the uprising. Other activists’ dark humor related to the martyrs has been that of renaming the streets of Syria with the names of the martyrs of the uprising, tearing down the symbolic presence of the regime. This action has taken place directly on the streets by replacing street signs and finds its parallel online through a google application called Map Maker³⁷. And in parallel also Syrian artists from Damascus film themselves cutting out the graffiti stencils and spray-painting the walls of

37. Reported by Sahar Khamis, Paul B. Gold and Katherine Vaughn, 2012. More details on <http://ogleearth.com/2012/01/google-conspiring-for-regime-change-in-syria-through-maps-hardly/>

the city with their signs. The main purpose of their action is to stamp the city with the face of the uprising. The morrow will return the rhetoric of the uprising to the heart of the regime and its supporters will be forced to erase or disfigure the signs and symbols. The internet, however, will immortalize the actions in a *spaceless* place.

The actions locally and on the street, as well as the actions aimed at raising international support for the uprising, have developed a lot of humorous and satirical material, often macabre. These instruments of confrontation against the power and the State are issued and received locally and internationally and produce different effects depending on: the available resources; the perception of potential repression or suppression; and the chronological time of the revolt in which these actions are used. The revolt in the streets is nurtured by feedback and mobilization through the Internet and to an international audience. The internet has also a role of political awareness and transmission of information for the opponents, but also helps raise awareness within the international community about events in Syria. In other words, it spreads a narrative of events that confronts the State's narrative.

The difficulty for researchers of this entrenchment between space and spaceless places is to know exactly how much of these actions are being produced for internal consumption. "*Internal audiences are more crucial than external supporters*" Ackerman says (2006). The videos of the graffiti's week, showing activists in the middle of the night spraying symbols of the revolution (a fist with a broken chain with the slogan of "Break with Humiliation" āksr qyd al-dhl - قيد الذل - الأسر) immortalize the work of disobedience of reclaiming the streets through the walls. The painting of graffiti, as well as the hanging of the flag of the uprising (green, white and black horizontal stripes with three red stars in the middle) are much more dangerous acts of resistance since they take place in spaces that are not conquered by the uprising. They become conquests, even if they might not last. They become brief and fugacious spaces of resistance when the mark of the graffiti, the mark of the flag is there.

On the other hand, and according to local accounts, the hope for an international intervention motivated in the first year of the Uprising

the production of actions for external consumption, since there was a clear perception that the world was watching and would soon come to the rescue of the Syrian people as it had done in the Libyan case. However, as the conflict procrastinates and the hope of a quick international intervention dwindles, actions could arguably be more directed to local consumption or turn to other targeted audiences.

3.3 THE MESSENGER: NEW ACTIVISTS OR OLD OPPONENTS?

The question of the authors of this political humor is perhaps the most complex. It is apparent that the organization of satirical actions is mainly locally organized and sometimes coordinated through internet with other local groups. Nevertheless, our purpose in this paper is not to determine the structure of these actions but its inclusion in the set of actions available to activists. The nature of activism, thus, its background and its entrenchment in the daily practices will not be addressed profoundly in this paper. I will however briefly outline the main issues in reference to authorship since they might offer a perspective at the nature and source of this particular type of activism that further research could develop in the future.

As we have seen, the places of these actions are usually public spaces -spaces usually tightly controlled by the regime- or the internet. In the case of public spaces there may be ways to preserve anonymity such as big demonstration where each one's demands are included in the masses' demands and therefore the threat for each person might seem less. Other activists also choose nights and unsurveilled spots to perform their acts. They preserve the action and get the message through while concealing the activist (the messenger). Other activists have chosen to show their faces and expose themselves to targeted persecution or killing. The same pattern can be found in armed oppositions, where some may hide their faces and others, who know their acts are already a declaration of war to the regime, who show their identity cards and faces on videos posted on youtube.

Precisely in political humor, most practices are entrenched in oral

tradition where the origin is hard to know and the message passes mouth-to-ear at the messenger's will, while the messenger is not the author and the responsibility is thus diluted. After the murder of Ibrahim Qashoush, for instance, some speakers that played his song in his honor were placed by activists at Arnoos square in Damascus. When the speakers were taken down by the authorities "a Facebook page appeared calling for "Freedom for the speakers of Arnoos Square."³⁸

As we saw previously, a revolt is in need of martyrs and heroes that lead the way and sanctify the actions of those involved in the dissent. While everyone had heard Ali Ferzat's name before the revolution, who had heard of Ibrahim Qashoush before March 15th 2011? Who had heard of "spray man" Nour Hatem Zahra (one of the graffiti artists) before he was killed? Syrians may have also heard of director Adnan Zaray that in 2001 directed the popular tv-series 2001 *Buqa` t daw`* (Spotlight) and popularized the story of "rajoul al bakhakh" or sprayman. In 2011 he supported the uprising and was arrested in Damascus in March 2012. However, names like Nour Hathem Zahra or Abdelbasset Saroot (local goalkeeper), Bassel Shahade (amateur filmmaker) were not known before the uprising and they had remained mostly unknown activists until the repression of the regime fell upon them and made them martyrs.

3.4. POLITICAL HUMOR WITHIN THE STRUGGLE FOR SIGNIFICATION

So far, we decorticated the topics and formats used by activists when resorting to political humor. As we saw, these elements are consistent with political demands in demonstrations, in exiled oppositions and unfold along with the events on the ground and on the diplomatic scene. The permanent update of satire in relation to events follows the general strategy of the uprising when targeting the regime's moral authority. Professor Ackerman sees in nonviolent movements the pur-

38. C. Ella Wind. "Dark Humor Facebook pages of the Syrian Opposition" Jadaliya. 22nd August 2012. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6950/dark-humor-facebook-pages-of-the-syrian-opposition>

pose of “*discrediting the lies that an oppressive ruler uses to assert legitimacy, weakening the support that he needs to govern, and interrupting his capacity to monopolize information and control events*”³⁹ (2002). These elements put forward by Ackerman are very useful to our analysis of political humor which plays a role in confronting the regime.

The different uses and purposes of political humor are evident in a non-democratic context. It is important to note that what is subversive and what is not, does not depend only on the intentionality. Ali Ferzat’s caricatures might always have been a critique to the power, but when did they become a loud “voice” —in Hirschmann’s terminology— instead of a concealed one? Who moved the line that was crossed? Was it Ferzat when his caricature depicted Bashar al-Asad? Or was it the state when it perceived that the caricature was strengthening the opposition’s legitimacy? It is only in open confrontation where an important impact of political humor can emerge.

In the 21st century, however, the rules of censorship seem to have been diffused or rather to be easier to overcome, not because the line is not there anymore, but mainly due to two factors:

a) The increasing importance of other unauthorized publishing spaces, particularly via the internet, as well as the overwhelming production of professional and amateur material. The “*hidden transcripts*” in James Scott words (Scott, 1977), the humor and acts of resistance that go concealed with everyday practices, can become open resistance when the spaces of production and of communication multiply⁴⁰.

b) The increasing distance between Oppressor and Oppressed (Oberschall in Bennani-Charībi, 2004). The greater the separation be-

39. Peter Ackerman, and Jack DuVall. The right to rise up: people power and the Virtues of Civic Disruption. Vol. 30:2 Summer 2006

40. Although my research does not focus primarily on the agents using these tactics it must be said that there is a generational rift. It is not too much the use of the political humor but rather the spaces where it can be expressed, one stronghold being the online platforms and new technologies. These atopic spaces represent an obstacle for older activists but also for the participants and receivers of these actions. The number of internet users in Syria (Population with access to worldwide network) was of around 20% (Total population: 20.447.000) in 2010. Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people) were less than 60, according to <http://www.internetworldstats.com>.

tween the elite and the community is, the greater the social mobilization and radicalization can be. This radicalization of social movements can also be found in the increasing daring of political humor. A Bahraini artist, reflecting on his country's 2011 uprising and his own attitude, says: "*There are no more limits in my drawings, my pencil is finally liberated*"⁴¹.

The costs of political humor increase as the regime tries to prevent further spill-over of opposition-supporters. Public display of support is strongly encouraged and hesitations become signs of possible support to the opposition. Thus the regime increases the repression, unwillingly also increasing the value of the actions undertaken by activists. The cyberwar undertaken by the regime, infiltrating facebook pages, impersonating users, developing Trojans and tracking the activists IPs to arrest and torture the authors shows the importance of these tools.

The best known case of the cost of satire is that of Ibrahim Qashoush, supposed to be either a fireman or mason. He became a poet (satirist) of the revolution ('the nightingale of the revolution') and was found dead on the shore of river Orontes at the beginning of July 2011 with the vocal cords stripped out. He was the alleged author of songs that are still being chanted in every demonstration around the country. His assassination was a desperate act intended to "quench" the origins of a challenging chant. However, the roots of the chant were buried in the oral expression of folk culture of the oppressed as states the fact that the title of "the nightingale of the revolution" has been attributed to, at least, three different authors. Interesting to note also, that the melody of his chanting (with different words) has also being used in pro-regime demonstrations, in an intend to counter-act its message.

The slogan "*Stop the killing, we want to build a homeland for all Syrians*" that a girl used in April for the first time recorded in the central of Damascus⁴² is a perfect use of euphemism as a strategy used by

41. Oun, 2012. [Author's own translation from French.]

42. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SkfR4OjqJk>

the oppressed to oppose the dominant. In this sense, the slogan was apparently non-partisan and was not explicitly supporting the uprising but merely expressing a naïve desire to end the confrontation. In as much as the Syrian government is saying to be fighting against terrorists who are the prime origin of massacres, the action undertaken by the girl puts the regime in a difficult position. Repressing her would mean recognition of the state's responsibility in the killings. Alternatively, not repressing the action would allow a previously unauthorized political action to take place and, in a sense, a social site for expression to be carved out in the heart of the capital.

The intentionality of satire, thus, seems to be part of the tactics used in social movements as expressed by Ackerman (2006). The direct goals of political humor are mocking, ridiculing, delegitimizing, exposing the lies of the regime, highlighting abuses, supporting martyrs and other protesters or even spreading rumors. Political Humor as part of the strategy contributes to the uprising in transmitting ideas, concepts and even ideologies sometimes faster and stronger than other "serious" actions (an article on a newspaper, a political speech, a press release or a human rights report). Political humor is trying to persuade and bring to the side of the revolution the supporters of the regime that might weaken their trust in it; passive supporters of the regime that could feel more confident to join the revolution within a nonviolent movement; and the international community that will decide to strongly engage in confronting the Syrian regime.

However, it must not be forgotten that comic actions also provide reassurance and psychological relief to activists, recreating a fictive space where reality is mastered, where tanks are just ordinary vehicles to be washed and lubricated, where dictators are just ducks and silly men to be scorned and where victory is already celebrated. This is in fact one of the most analyzed aspects of political humor in a non-democratic context. Under a dictatorship, jokes are told in the intimacy of a home, among friends or people that know and trust each other. They are an act of opposition that builds shared narrative and meanings mainly among the people unhappy with the regime. It hardly ever leaves the circle of those already convinced or part of the

opposition. This intimate circle where jokes or meanings are shared grows where the open confrontation grows, and thus has been the case of the Syrian uprising, where satire has left the safety of a family household, of two good old friends whispering at each other and has joined the ranks of daylight confrontation. Political humor can open up the space for critics bringing down the first layer of fear. As in Egypt's Tahrir Square during the days that preceded the ousting of the President Hosni Mubarak, the goal of this humor was to "*build community, strengthen solidarity, and provide a safe, thug-free outlet for Egyptians to defy the regime*"⁴³ in a way, laughter was a spell against fear.

Be it for personal or collective consumption among revolutionaries or with the purpose of undermining the regime's support, the cycle of the tactics is the same. The state narrative was the only possible public narrative imposed to all inside Syria before the beginning of the Uprising and political humor develops itself through three steps that deal with the public narrative: deconstruct the long-time official narrative; rebuild and reclaim a new narrative; and spread the new symbolic power longtime immobilized in the clenched fist of the State.

A. DECONSTRUCTING THE REGIME'S NARRATIVE

As we have seen, satire can contribute to destabilize the power relations, snatching public support that was fuelled and controlled through the cult and the symbolic power enforced by the regime and complied by the population. Through subverting the meanings of official narrative and the once-unchallenged obedience to the symbols and rites it breaks down the totalitarianism of the official narrative. The meanings and words of the dominants are primarily voided of their sense when they become part of the joke and thus political humor is stealing the symbolic production that provided the legitimacy and justification of the existence of the regime.

43. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/02/laugh-o-revolution-humor-in-the-egyptianuprising/71530/#slide1>

The Syrian regime is now at odds to make the population believe that they are the only ones able to save the country from chaos, that the only alternative will be sectarian war and fundamentalist rule. One of the pro-regime graffiti repeated throughout the country states it: “*Asad or we burn the country*” (ā’sd āw nḥrq bldnā - بلدنا (اسد أو نحرق)). It is a coercive threat, but it implies also a belief, the discourse that the opposition questions and challenges. The regime’s narrative is still there and still trying to impose its absolutism over other narratives, but these other alternative narratives have emerged from the “concealed voices” and are now openly questioning the official voices.

B. REBUILDING AND RECLAIMING THE SYMBOLIC PRODUCTION

A new alternative narrative that breaks through the quasi totalitarian control of the regime helps promoting a culture of resistance. The goal is to contribute not only to break the narrative of the regime and free all possible alternatives but also to create a specific and alternative symbolic production, giving new meaning to the events, to the actors, to the actions, and sharing these new significances with a growing part of the population and of course of the stakeholders.

In what Badarneh calls dialogism, comedy is used as “*a ‘centrifugal’ power that moves the individual away from what the regime says*” (2011). A teacher from Damascus, who calls herself Joumana Maarouf, writes in a letter published by LeMonde, that the meaning of words is changing and is part of the political struggle that is going on in Syria. The word “*freedom*” itself, even if it has always been part of the official slogan of the Baath Party⁴⁴ is now a term that has been conquest by the opposition⁴⁵. Wanting freedom, as generic as it may sound, means currently to many Syrians, to be with the opposition. Alternatively the *monhabikins* are now those who support the regime,

44. “Unity, Freedom and Socialism”

45. <http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2012/04/23/lettres-de-syrie-2/>

called by that name in satirical reference to the wide-spread official posters of Assad under the slogan of “*Monhabik*” (We love you).

C. SPREADING THE NEW NARRATIVE

In Egypt, a blogger by the name of Amrani says that “[t]here was a lot of spontaneous humor — it is the Egyptian character — but there also was a desire to show that the demonstrators weren’t just angry young men, that they weren’t just seen as Islamists”⁴⁶. In this sense Amrani also sees humor as part of a show, part of a performance to campaign for the audience the good intentions, the good character of the revolutionaries. It is thus also part of the propaganda. The artist, the performer, the protester bearing the sign or the hundreds singing a satirical song, conveys an idea, a message and a narrative. Through a comic, fantastic or exaggerated form, there is always a chore truth — or recognized among the authors as a chore truth— to be transmitted that can more easily reach the outsiders and lure them to join the community of shared values and symbols.

4. FINAL REMARKS

Power is not merely sustained by violence and coercion. The ability of a regime to make people believe in it or to force them to act *as if* they believed in it lies not only in coercive power but also in authority, and the capacity to monopolize what some scholars call symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991; Wedeen, 1999). The efforts deployed by the Syrian State to “persuade” the people of its legitimacy and therefore of its authority to exert power show us the importance of other means other than violence. Ever since the rise of strong pan-Arab, non-aligned leaders in the region, and in the Syrian case with Gamal Abdelnasser (president of the short-lived United Arab Republic), but especially with Hafez al-Asad, Syria’s regime has deployed resources and efforts

46. <http://www.arabist.net/blog/2011/4/6/humor-and-the-egyptian-revolution.html>

to monopolize and write the sole possible narrative of events in the country and about it. The battleground for opposition to the regime is, therefore, not only that of gaining the means to control organized violence, since *power* is not exclusively based on it. There is another battleground other than violence, that of the *authority*, which entails a respect, an individual and collective acceptance of the existence of the institution, leader or entity.

As Hannah Arendt states, “*the worst enemy of authority is, therefore, disdain and the safest means to undermine respect is laughter*” (Arendt, 2012:62). In this sense, we have tried to analyze in this study if and how political humor can be included in the set of actions that the population is using and perceiving as a tool to confront the regime. In line with Hannah Arendt’s reasoning, most of the satirical productions we found during the first year of the Uprising was directly targeting the Syrian leader’s authority and contributing to the loss of respect of the population towards him. Other actions inscribed in political humor were focusing on other international stakeholders or on a self-representation of the revolutionary. Activists were fighting directly in the symbolic battlefield at high costs and as a decisive part of the struggle for regime-change.

This brings us to the conclusion that *the producers of political humor during the Uprising see themselves as part of the resistance and opposition*. This is an important *reflectivist* assumption on the nature of intent by the activists. Even though the activists might not be collectively organized or broadly coordinated and that they might decide the use of certain actions individually, they are “*aware of their common interests and distinct identity, and that they [are] self-consciously seeking a set of changes [...]*” (Tilly, 1977:3), and important elements that determines their inclusion in the movement against the regime.

We have described in this research these series of actions undertaken by opposition activists from a humoristic approach that challenge the Syrian regime. Through the events of the first year of the Syrian Uprising, political humor has proved a feasible and used tactics along

with other confrontational tactics. Political humor is used during demonstrations (in street theatre, carrying of puppets, objects or burlesque slogans) or isolated as an action against the regime *per se* in its trespassing of the red lines. In this sense, actions can be coordinated —Graffiti Week, The Calendar for Freedom— or they can also be uncoordinated acts that are locally using a ‘liberated’ meaning or comical significations —i.e., the duck— to be inscribed in broader coordinated actions such as demonstrations.

Throughout the rising of the confrontation, more actions of political humor could be found. Our conclusion here is that, contrary to what might appear, the actions of political humor become part of the repertoire of actions available to protesters in a context of open and widespread political struggle. They do not stay only in the hidden transcripts but are also used in the battle for legitimation. The actions of political humor have a purpose aligned with that of the uprising and they become 1) *more daring* and 2) *more common*, when confrontation between regime and oppositional groups rises. The costs of using political humor are similar to those before the uprising or can even be more —since repression can become more susceptible and brutal— but the benefits are higher because humor adds up to the other actions being undertaken and the self-censorship crumbles, rendering humor more direct and openly confrontational.

More evidence of open and confrontational political humor on the streets as well as on the social media has been found throughout the uprising than previous to it. Self-censorship has been lowered due to the increase of political support to resistance among the population, for instance in the case of Ali Ferzat. This increased support raised the benefits of using unveiled political humor while the costs (repression, censorship) remained the same or even rose. When a political minority turns into a perceived majority, political humor can become challenging and be adopted as a channel or tool for critique and protest. Political humor in Syria has shown its intent at challenging the official’s discourse, unveiling other significances of the regime’s policies and actions as well as putting pressure on the international community. These actions as inscribed in a broader strategy gain more impact

and become part of a set of actions used by activists as the open confrontation spreads in other levels and through other tactics of nonviolent resistance.

Humor has traditionally been given little importance when studying social movements and popular protests. As an oppositional movement, humor is seen as part of the “*hidden transcripts*” or the *infra-politics*, that is the actions that are *invisible* or almost *unintelligible* to the dominants and that hardly count as political acts (Scott, 1985)⁴⁷. The dichotomy, as any attempt to systematize social reality, is always a simplification of a continuum reality where categories are much blur than in abstract academics. Drawing on Bourdieu’s argument that actions of protest learn from daily practices of the ordinary, we might understand political humor as a parallel strategy of concealed opposition at a given time that can however become an open act of confrontation against the regime and be included in the repertoire of actions available to the opposition (Tilly, 1977). It does not mean, however, that concealed actions of political humor will be performed in an open confrontation by the same actors or even in the same form. Confrontation with the regime can be graded, from parliamentary or accepted opposition, political opposition in exile, to public displays of collective opposition (demonstrations, strikes...), general uprising, and armed opposition, being civil war the highest point of confrontation (highest in terms of costs) between rulers and ruled. Since all of these situations can co-exist, what is important is the weight of certain tactics and strategies at a given time, namely a) the *public support* of the population towards them and b) the possible *impact* to sever the power’s authority and subvert the power relations between rulers and ruled.

In this sense, the claim made by many scholars and analysts that political humor is part of a veiled fruitless critique to a regime (Hirschmann, 1970), or even counterproductive as a regime-change or regime-transformation tool (Giddens, 1984; Badarneh, 2011), can be challenged by this research. The inclusion in one or another catego-

47. James Scott, 1985.

ry is not only based on the topic, intentionality or format of the act but rather on the context of confrontation where the act is produced and communicated. The increase of the benefit that satirical acts bring to the resistance makes of comic acts a feasible and useful act to be included and used in the repertoires of actions of the protesters.

No clear-cut can be made as whether political humor is challenging or unchallenging, but we can confirm that it can purposely become challenging and unveiled as it has done in the Syrian case. Furthermore, we can see how similar actions can move from a hidden confrontation to an open one when the socio-political context changes and thus become part of the set of actions available to activists to challenge a regime.

FROM POPULAR UPRISING TO CIVIL WAR: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL HUMOR IN AN EVER-CHANGING CONFLICT

Our research did not address the issue of the impact that an increased stage of violence and civil war might have on the use of nonviolent strategies such as political humor. The amount of comedy has actually increased progressively during the first year of the uprising, along with mass demonstrations and other initiatives of popular resistance. This has been so even after the first violent clashes between the Syrian Army and armed rebel groups. It is not clear however how in a state of civil war or generalized armed clashes humor can be kept as a popular tool among activists, especially those inside the country and suffering directly from violence. When armed confrontation becomes progressively the most determinant scenario, political humor might become less important, like other peaceful demonstrations and other actions of mass nonviolence. Nonviolent actions that might still be useful could be more linked to undermining the material power of the regime (sabotage, army defections and other forms of disobedience), since the symbolic power, the authority of the state, has already been lost by the regime or is perceived as not so central anymore. The regime loses, not its power, but its authority that had been gained by legitimacy (of

the past) or by justification (of present and future). When authority is lost, coercive measures become exponentially paramount in maintaining control over the state power.

When the death toll is estimated at 30.000, not many are left to laugh. Laughter is however still present in the revolution in September 2012. Its role and its position in the set of actions has however varied in reference to that of the first year of the Uprising. Still many jokes are being told and posters with cartoons are seen in demonstrations. However rich and crude jokes are told against the shelling of bombardment, these jokes are mostly found in the concealed life of the private sphere or among larger groups of dissidents. It is obvious that the taboo has been broken. However, political humor seems to have lost its place in the set of actions available to activists in their struggle against the regime. Political Humor as other forms or nonviolent activism are still being performed, but their importance *vis à vis* the military and armed struggle has dramatically dwindled.

ANNEX 1: SIGNS AND SYMBOLIC CATALOGUE

Picture 1. Naje al-Ali's cartoon depicting the criminalization of the Palestinian people.



Picture 2. Cartoon by Ali Ferzat, previous to the Uprising, depicting an Arab leader full of jewelry and crying on top of a pile of dead bodies.



Picture 3. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad hitching a ride from Libyan former Dictator Muammar Ghaddafi. By Ali Ferzat. Behind al-Asad we see Walid Mouallem.



Picture 4. ‘This is how Asad looks’ says the sign being held by a protester. The poster plays with the medical training of the President (as an ophthalmologist) and with the fiction of his discourse in relation to what is really happening in the country.



Picture 7. Different ways for a duck to die: following the disclosure of Asad’s private correspondence, the duck became the symbol of the President’s personae. The pictures express the wish of the activist to end with Bashar al-Asad’s life.



Picture 8. Protesters in Sirmin carrying a plastic duck during a demonstration, also a symbolic Bashar al-Asad.



Picture 9. Protesters in Damascus carrying a live duck during a demonstration



Picture 10. “Go away JinTao”, written in Arabic, supposedly in Syria. This was posted in the Facebook page of the “Chinese Revolution” and plays on the replaced discourse of the Syrian Revolution by the Chinese Revolution (Jin Tao is the current president of the Republic of China and thus holds the same rank as Bashar al-Asad)



Picture 11. “Homs’ Wash and Lubricated international for Tanks” (mghsl w mshhm ḥmṣ al-dwly l-ldbābāt), categorized as a local business with 67.144 likes on the 9th of May 2012.



Picture 12. On the road to Homs, as the picture reads, a sign (probably photoshopped) limiting the speed of tanks.



Picture 13. Street performance of the armed opposition: Before the public presentation of the Free Syrian Army on the 24th of July 2011 by Riad al-Asad, the opposition was denying any violent or armed action from the activists' part, sticking to the slogan that the Uprising was totally peaceful.



Picture 14. Mock campaign posters in Zabadani show faces of those killed by the regime forces in the neighborhood. The fakeness of the parliamentary elections is unveiled by the memory of the ongoing struggle and repression.



Picture 15. Mock-UN Observer in the town of Bennish (April 2012). This activist reports for Al-Jazeera and other media posing as a blind and deaf UN Observer, a week after the deployment of the first staff of the Annan Plan.



Picture 16. Mohammed Dib (head of the League of Arab States mission) offering a rose to “prostitute-like” Bashar al-Asad Both smile and remain carefree of the dead bloody bodies next to them. Occupied Kafr Nabel (18th January 2012)



Picture 17. The banner on the left reads “Not only is it an Arabian Spring it is a tsunami that will uproot all the dictatorships all over the world”. Occupied Kafr Nabel 10/02/2012”



Picture 18. Mohammed Dib, head of the Arab League’s mission, with a tank on his head says “I didn’t see any tanks at all!”. Another mockery of the inefficacy of the Arab League’s mission.



Picture 19. Occupied Kafr Nabl 1st February 2012. A caricature by a local unknown artist showing Iranian Ayatollah Khamenei and Russian Primer Minister Putin blowing air into Bashar, characterized as a balloon. On the left of the drawing a young male activist dressed with the colors of the revolutionary flag stings the balloon. The clear message is the fact that activists are trying to topple the regime (personified in Bashar al-Asad’s Picture) while Iran and Russia’s governments are supporting and helping it.



Picture 20. Bashar comfortably sitting on his throne on a pile of dead bodies while Putin stops a rock which reads “Security Council” in reference to the repeated vetos of Russia to UNSC resolutions regarding Syria. Occupied Kafer Nabel 3rd February 2012



Picture 21. Frame of Episode 8: Beeshu's Birthday. In this frame we see the character of Bashar al-Asad and another character representing a member of the Shabiha (shabyḥa) or paramilitary groups.



ANNEX 2: INTERNET RESOURCES FOR ANALYSIS (SELECTION)

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Footnotes

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- The Harvard author-date system. In this system, sources are briefly cited in the text, usually in parentheses, by author's last name and date of publication. The short citations are amplified in a list of references in alphabetical list, where full bibliographic information is provided. Bibliographic references must follow *The Chicago Manual of Style* (15th edition). See a *Chicago-Style citation quick guide* at:
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