

Book review

Charles Schmidt (Transl. Adam Schmidt).

Seriously Funny: Mexican Political Jokes as Social Resistance Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press 2014 \$39.95 (Paper) Electronic edition available

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A number of years ago I had the pleasure of giving a lecture on American humor to Japanese students at a university in Osaka. I was a bit anxious about the ability of Japanese students to understand American humor and asked for suggestions from the professor who invited me to give the lecture. She suggested I show *Peanuts* cartoons, which she said were very popular in Japan. So I prepared a PowerPoint presentation with lots of funny *Peanuts* cartoons. In my lecture, I spent some time talking about various theories of humor and then I flashed a *Peanuts* cartoon on the screen. Three hundred Japanese students stared at the cartoon, stony faced, and only one or two of them even cracked a smile. The professor who invited me, along with a friend of hers, a professor at a different university, then worked very hard trying to explain to the students why the cartoon was funny. I showed other cartoons and the two professors knocked themselves out trying to explain what was funny about the cartoons to the students who stared at the cartoons with a mixture of curiosity and bewilderment.

I had the same feeling the Japanese students at my lecture had when I read Samuel Schmidt's *Seriously Funny*, which deals with political humor in Mexico. Schmidt worked very hard, the way the two Japanese professors did, to explain Mexican humor and the jokes and other forms of humor he reprinted in his book. Not all of his humorous texts were jokes, which I define as a short narrative, meant to amuse, with a punch line. Schmidt wrote that many of his colleagues described himself as "the professor who collects jokes," as if this were something bizarre for an academic to do. His book is full of examples of Mexican political humor. There's hardly a page that doesn't have one or two examples on it, and though I could see the humor in many of his examples, much of the humor he used didn't register with

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me, though he generally tried to explain, with varying degrees of success, what was funny about each example.

As Schmidt explains in his introduction (2014:5) “The main purpose of this book is to understand why Mexicans laugh at politics and the impact this has on the political system, and to the extent possible, suggest a new focus to understand Mexican political culture.” He adds that most of the jokes he reprints are from Mexico City, which is the cultural and political center of the country. The first chapter of *Seriously Funny* offers definitions of humor and Schmidt’s taxonomy of the techniques found in humor such as wit, parody, irony, sarcasm and satire. He offers examples for each of these techniques, focusing on jokes, which he suggests are the most important form of political humor.

After dealing with theoretical concerns relating to humor and politics, Schmidt turns his attention to a discussion of Mexican identity and what is distinctive about the Mexican sense of humor. He mentions the work of various commentators on Mexican national character (2014:66):

Octavio Paz (1986) used more than forty adjectives in his analysis of the Mexican including “impassible,” “untrusting,” “underhanded,” “ironic,” “patient,” “nihilistic,” and “contemplative.” Torres (1984) concentrates on resigned and satirical. Among Linares sixty adjectives (1976) we find “aggressive,” “boaster,” “erotomaniac,” “sponger,” “offensive,” and “sex crazed.” For Lomas (1975) the Mexican is abusive, jealous, corrupt, and spiteful.

Schmidt discusses the work of several other commentators on Mexican character; all of the quotes are rather dated, but national character doesn’t change very rapidly. He adds another commentator, De Mora, who explains that lying is a common attribute of the people. De Mora explains that in Mexico lying is common for it is “a game of understood values: lies are told, everybody knows that they are lies, but everybody—especially the media—proceed as if they were the truth.” Schmidt offers an example.

“Which are the three lies of the Mexican? “I’ll pay you tomorrow,” “It’s not going to hurt,” and “We’ll get married soon.”

Schmidt offers a joke about elections in Mexico which reflects the corruption that was (and may still be) a basic element of Mexican politics.

A Mexican and an American show off to each other about their respective political systems. The American says “Our electoral system is so advanced that we know who
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won the presidential election within just 24 hours of voting's culmination." The Mexican responds, "And so what? Our system is much better. We know who's going to be president a year beforehand."

After discussing Mexican character and the Mexican sense of humor, Schmidt moves on, in chapter three, to a discussion of the role of political jokes in Mexico. He suggests that mistrust of the government is a central factor in Mexican political humor, and it is generally manifested in jokes about the Mexican political leaders. That explains why he devoted a chapter to political jokes about Mexican presidents. In his chapter on Mexican presidents, he offers an historical portrait of Mexican humor from colonial times to the present, and a separate chapter of jokes about presidents Ernesto Zedillo, Vincente Fox and Felipe Calderon. The chapter on Mexican presidents is full of jokes such as "They'll eventually find Luis Donaldo Colosio's brain, which was misplaced during the autopsy; the one they won't find is Zedillo's" and "Zedillo is *pedillo* [rhyming play on words meaning "Zedillo is a fart."] because he came out by accident. You can see that if you don't know Mexican history or don't know Mexican slang, the jokes about Colosio and Zedillo don't make much sense.

The rest of the chapter has jokes about Fox and Calderon, all of which insult their intelligence (and thus are similar to our Quayle jokes) and cast aspersions on their honesty. Many of these jokes are mildly humorous to the non-Mexican, since it is easy to recognize insults and attacks on individuals, but I don't think non-Mexicans fully appreciate the humor, wordplay and the allusions in many of these texts, even though Schmidt does his best in trying to explain why they are funny.

In his conclusion, he offers a joke that shows how language affects humor.

A Mexican runs into an Argentine and says to him "In Mexico, we are all machos." And the Argentine responds, "In Argentina, we are half machos and half female."

To understand this joke you must know that in Argentina "macho" means man or male. This is the last joke in the book.

Schmidt has written a book full of political jokes and other humorous texts reflecting Mexican attitudes towards government, power and thus offers us a kind of documentary on Mexican political culture that will be of use to scholars investigating Mexican political culture as reflected in Mexican humorous texts. It will be particularly interesting to political scientists and sociologists who deal with Mexican culture and society, but it is also of interest to humor scholars as an

example of the way that humor can offer insights into the mindset of people in a country and of how humor differs from one region in Mexico with another region and from one country to another. These humorous texts function, as Schmidt points out, as a form of political resistance—the way humorous texts do in all countries. Generally speaking we can say the more powerful the political repression, the more biting the humor. The jokes and other humorous texts in the book make that point, over and over again.