

**“He Approves This Message”: Presidential Self-Deprecating Humor
as a Violation of a Social Contract**

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The 2012 presidential election season emphasized a prominent presence of comedy and humor within the spectacle of federal politics. One oft-cited example is a humorous anecdote repeatedly told by Barack Obama, running for re-election, of a four-year-old boy being shown a photo of Obama, and then being asked what Obama’s job was. “He approves this message,” the boy is said to have quipped. Repeatedly, Obama used the little boy’s response to make fun of himself slyly. “That’s what I do,” he would say, “I approve this message.”¹ The joke was not Obama’s first foray into campaign humor. During his 2008 run for the presidency, in response to the stark dearth of humor surrounding his persona (in contrast to the proliferation of attention-gaining jokes about Hilary Clinton and Sarah Palin), Obama took the important step of making fun of himself to lighten the mood. In response to the messiah complex with which his critics were attributing him, Obama informed attendees of a charity dinner in New York that he was not born in a manger. Instead, “I was actually born on the planet Krypton and sent here by my father Jor-El, to save the planet Earth.”² Obama routinely joins the voices of popular criticism in a lighthearted way.

This analysis will explore the theoretical nuances of humor’s position in the public domain within several strata. First, we will discuss humor as the political property of the masses, a status that gives the people room to critique and the government room to respond, in a spirit of participatory democracy. Moving on, we will examine the government’s acquisition of humorous critique, especially through self-deprecating humor, as an infiltration of the people’s cognitive space of action and a means of fizzling out a critical spirit, to the point of manufacturing consent. Finally, we will touch on the potential for the people to take back humorous critique as a means of fostering self-reflection and expressing discontent.

Although Obama provides an accessible microcosm of presidential campaign humor, joking – especially self-deprecating humor – has become par for the course during federal elections, in all facets of the political spectrum. During the 2012 campaign, Obama’s opponent Mitt Romney told humorous stories as well, including repeated observations about the founder of the Jimmy John’s sandwich chain who “graduated second in his class – second from the bottom.”³ *Saturday Night Live’s* sketch-comedy lampooning of the election season is a fixture of American politics, and increasing numbers of candidates are appearing on the show during their campaigns.⁴ “Fake news” programs like Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* have become important political forums as well – candidate John Edwards went so far as to announce his run for the presidency on the program.⁵ Postman⁶

notes that American politicians – especially the president – function like any other breed of celebrity, and as such they incorporate the pathos of the public figure.

The nature of political joking has changed in crucial ways since politicians have become active participants in the process rather than simple objects of humor. Remarkably, the rise in presidential figures' satirizing of themselves has coincided with a subtle but important quelling of some forms of humorous attack on politics, especially political cartooning. This phenomenon has occurred at a governmental, top-down level, most notably during the George W. Bush administration,⁷ as well as at amidst the consensus of civil society, where humorous critiques are occasionally opposed vehemently on the grounds that they are offensive. Within this framework, the status quo of humor in politics means that being funny, even in critique, is within the realm of the politician instead of the people. An element of public emotion that could function as a means through which the public might voice varying opinions about the government, criticize it, or oppose it, has become a venue through which the government can discuss itself. The people may laugh at politicians' jokes about themselves, but amid politician-dominated political humor, that may be the extent to which the people's voice is heard.

Humor as Political Property

To illuminate the nature of humor within the political public sphere, we can paint it as a species of political property that can be legitimately governed like any other property under a democracy with underpinnings in the social contract. Locke, in his foundational work on the nature of the social contract in *Two Treatises of Government*, lays clear parameters surrounding the give-and-take between the government and the people regarding property in its physical, material sense. He defines property as those items to which man has a right, either God-given or through the need for self-preservation from which society is borne. The basic form of property, for Locke, is the human body, giving each person the ultimate jurisdiction over themselves. Beyond that, he posits that property is acquired and kept through labor.

He that is nourished by the acorns he picked up under an oak, or the apples he gathered from the trees in the wood, has certainly appropriated them to himself. Nobody can deny but the nourishment is his. I ask then, when did they begin to be his? ...and it is plain if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could. That labor put a distinction between them and common.⁸

Humans as individuals, then, work for what they need, and they possess the products of that labor.

When individuals form societies, in Locke's vision, people's properties come into conflict by dint of each individual using common resources in order to make the things he needs. He observes that no man has the right to take more from the commons than what he requires, but calls for a way of apportioning the area from which he may draw those necessities. "As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property."⁹ The government's chief role in preserving society, then, is to administrate these amounts of land, as well as the commodities that arise from personal exchange of the fruits of that land. When conflict arises between men about intersecting properties, they cannot adjudicate themselves – "self-love will make men partial to themselves and their friends."¹⁰ The government, as custodian of the land from which property is derived, hears disputes and metes out punishments where punishments are necessary. Note that the government is not the custodian of the people here – it simply agrees with the people about its role as an arbitrator within their lives.

Locke's theory takes on a valuable new life in an age of intellectual property. In McLuhan's terms from his treatise on *Understanding Media*, the electric age has transitioned society from the primacy of the physical, mechanical process into a world dominated by "sheer information that, in actual practice, illuminates all it touches."¹¹ This information upon which society runs fills property inventories with processes instead of goods, and consumption becomes intake of information instead of commodities. The transition from physical to intellectual property is especially clear in the following passage from McLuhan, which ostensibly evolves out of Locke's acorn-gathering laborer cited above: "Men are suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, informed as never before, free from fragmentary specialism as never before – but also involved in the total social process as never before; since with electricity we extend our central nervous system globally, instantly interrelating every human experience."¹²

The process of acquiring intellectual property seems to follow Locke's formula, for all its content is ostensibly different. Where Locke's citizen gathered acorns to make into his means of physical sustenance, McLuhan's gathers nuggets of information that can be used in the processes through which he sustains his identity in an imploded electric society. His self-preservation involves a mental self as well as a physical one, and when his intellect clashes with that of another member of society, his government is there to mediate the conflict. Intellectual property is recognized by his legislature as something to be protected by a vast network of laws and the same rhetoric about rights that Locke uses to discuss physical property. In an age of attempted global governance (which McLuhan argues is ushered in by the same electric processes that make information an aspect of personal property), Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights decrees that "Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author."¹³

The parallels between intellectual property and Locke's conception of governmental custodianship of the land is clear in Holmer-Nadesan's discussion of "space" of action an important aspect of identity formation within a collective. She appropriates Daud's conception of space of action, a territory meant to "express the individual's 'striving for freedom, for autonomy and for personal interest.'"¹⁴ Like Locke's physical space of land in which an individual can raise his means of physical sustenance, the cognitive space of action is the area in which an individual can process the information they need to understand to participate in a process-based electric society. If a person becomes "dislocated" from their cognitive space of action, their identity and ability to make choices becomes destabilized. Inversely, the greater amount of cognitive autonomy, or choice, a person has, the greater their space of action. For Holmer-Nadesan, space of action can be discursively constrained such that individual identity is harmed, much in the manner that limiting the land a man can till harms his physical well-being.

In the electric age, then, intellectual property – humor, for example – is just as much a relevant domain of the social contract as the land. Whereas the government formerly only administrated physical space, it now also administrates cognitive space of action. If the contract is to continue to ring true, though, its nature must remain essentially the same. In Locke's original iteration, the government was the custodian of the land, not the people living on it. When the government started to control the people, especially when the executive started to abuse his prerogative, the people had the right to retaliate, or even go so far as to dissolve the government: "...whenever the legislator endeavor to take away the property of the people...they put themselves in to a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved from any farther obedience..."¹⁵ To continue our analogy, when a government begins to administrate the people instead of the cognitive space of action in which the people cultivate their intellectual property, the essence of the action is the same: it takes away the property of the people. If Locke considered infringement of land rights to be a governmental misstep, then, the same quality appears in infringements of cognitive space.

Government Lands – Appropriating the People's Intellectual Property

By making fun of itself instead of allowing the people to come up with their own jabs about the presidency, the government subtly but decisively re-appropriates the people's cognitive space of action for its own purposes. When Obama jokes that he was not born in a manger, for instance, he critiques himself, and feeds the people that quip with the sting already taken out of it. No individual in the society has the opportunity to participate in the open public discourse about the president that grassroots humor would offer them, because the president had already done the job himself. To a certain line of thinking, funny presidential rhetoric is a refreshing turn – a president who has the

humility to make fun of him- or herself. Thomas even cites a political satirist who recommended that presidential candidate Mitt Romney should openly deprecate himself in order to dim down criticism about his ostensible elitism, a focal point of public criticism of his election persona. (He suggested jokes like “The campaign is so busy right now my wife is driving both Cadillacs”).¹⁶ By this train of thought, the president who deprecates himself seems folksy, humble, and more likely to blend in with the people. The brand of compliance gained by self-deprecating presidents comes at the cost of the popular volition.

It is pivotal that we have characterized comedy and humor as intellectual property as we embark on this discussion. Funniness is often discussed in terms of power and control in groups – i.e., Mintz’s (1985) comedian-as-shaman and Collinson’s (1988) shop-floor workers whose joking polices in-groups and out-groups in the workplace. But examining funniness in the public sphere necessitates we examine its genesis as well as its symptoms if we are to understand its implications for a mass-mediated, mass-governed society that is composed of individuals trying to make sense of small-scale everyday life. Furthermore, if humor is not property and cannot be owned by one individual in the face of other individuals (and is, rather, a purely subjective matter of fleeting personal perception) then we have no grounds on which to address its relationship with governance. Couching it in this body of theory will allow us to make useful inroads in the usually personality-centered discussion of governmental comedy and humor.

Some conceptions of governance imply greater control over the property of the people that Locke’s social contract allows. These notions offer various justifications, including better custodianship, greater security, and even greater freedom. Take this passage from Weaver, for example:

Manifestly one is not “free” when one has to battle for one’s position at every moment of time. This interrelationship of freedom and organization is one of the permanent conditions of existence, so that it has been said even that perfect freedom is perfect compliance (“one commands nature by obeying her”).¹⁷

Following this line of thinking, among others, the executive who jokes about himself removes from the people the burden of having to do so, leaving them free to pursue other activities without wasting their individual information resources on considerations of the broader society.

This logic brings about the sort of democracy-by-spectacle condemned by Schmitt in his treatise on *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. For Schmitt, writing during the onset of the mass-mediated society that precipitated McLuhan’s electronic age, democracy has slipped away the serious public deliberation with which it is supposed to be defined. In its place, he finds a governmental system in which important decisions are made away from the public eye:

...the real business takes place, not in the open session of a plenum, but in committees and not even necessarily in parliamentary committees, and that important decisions are taken in secret meetings of faction leaders or even in extraparliamentary committees so that responsibility is transferred and even abolished, and in this way the whole parliamentary system finally becomes only a poor façade concealing the dominance of parties and economic interests.¹⁸

When the government does choose to relate directly to the people, Schmitt posits, it does so through propaganda, “the manipulation of public opinion” (p. 27), or through empty speechmaking. He asserts that part of the rationale is a conflict between the façade of liberal individualism and the reality of democratic homogeneity, which itself is problematic to maintain due to the mass scale at which the contemporary state functioned – a scale that is harder to manage in the wake of globalized mass communication, to be sure.

Thus, the government must create a homogenous collective that feels to its members like a many-faceted association of consenting individuals. Ellul describes this conundrum the government therefore confronts as “individuals enclosed in the mass and as participants in that mass, yet it also aims at a crowd, but only as a body composed of individuals.”¹⁹ In more explicit terms for our purposes, the government is addressing a group who functions as a mass, but who must feel as if each of them has consented as individuals. After all, in Schmitt’s words, “It belongs to the essence of democracy that every and all decisions which are taken are only valid for those who themselves decide.”²⁰ His analysis concludes that there is no practical way to reconcile the individuals within the collective and remain faithful to the ideals of democracy or liberalism – one has to trump the other in order for the system to be useful. He finds alternatives in the potential for a rationalist dictatorship that could reason on behalf of democratic homogeneity, or in “irrationalist theories of the direct use of force”²¹ that would allow forceful expression of individual perspectives. In a self-preserving system enmeshed within the democratic/liberal contradiction, however, neither dictatorship nor revolution seems to be a desirable form of resolution.

Other theorists in the wake of Schmitt’s theorizing have observed that governments found a workable way to span the gap between the individual and a unified societal spirit – Noam Chomsky refers to the idea concisely as “spectator democracy.”²² The observers of this line of thinking conceptualize the citizens of a democracy as a “bewildered herd” after the fashion of Walter Lippmann²³ that must be seduced, persuaded, and tamed in order to keep democracy ticking along in a sustainable way. Chomsky refers to the process as “the manufacture of consent,”²⁴ the goal of which is unity, harmony, and lack of a critical spirit within the public. Public debate is not silenced. A manufactured consent system, cognizant of thinkers like Schmitt and all the inspirations for his conception of democracy, maintain controversial popular discourse in order that the voice of the

people may still be heard, and the general will to which the people consent under the veneer of a social contract may seem to have arisen organically from reasoned dialogue. Chomsky notes:

Debate cannot be stilled, and indeed, in a properly functioning system of propaganda, it should not be, because it has a system-reinforcing character if constrained within proper bounds. What is essential is to set the bounds firmly. Controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that defined the consensus of elites, and it should furthermore be encouraged within these bounds, thus helping to establish these doctrines as the very condition of thinkable thought while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns.²⁵

Somehow, the people must participate in a critical spirit on an individual level, or at least think that they do (liberalism) and also come together to reach a consensus that guides the government through the general will, or at least think that they do (democracy).

The question of humor within this framework makes more sense in light of the ability of humor to act as a critical force that can check the government. Comic criticism is often targeted at public figures – particularly powerful politicians – to act as a corrective. Joking provides an attractive package for criticism that provides a happy affective payoff for the audience, but also demands accountability, truth, and reason.²⁶ When comic criticism takes place in a group setting, it creates a spirit of democratic community within an audience that invites them to take a collective step back and look at their comfortable status quo in a new light, catalyzing commonality while creating the potential for new paradigms.²⁷ Humor finds incongruities in its targets, especially because human laughter is often precipitated by juxtaposition of things that position relationships in a new light. If the incongruities take place under the surface of apparent unity, the humor creates space for conception of alternatives to that unity,²⁸ meaning that the people can critically examine a situation before they consent to it.

All of the potential for humor to act as criticism takes place first within the private property of each citizen's personal cognitive space of action. In fact, humorous criticism that is injected from another source rather than achieved by an individual within a community takes on an entirely different tone. It becomes comedy instead of humor, and unifies instead of dividing. Meyer²⁹ observes this divergence in terms of the effects of particular styles of funny discourse. He says that laughter has four basic rhetorical functions, the first two of which unify the audience with the object of laughter (comedy), and the latter two of which divide the audience from it (humor). Identification and clarification, the first two, bring the target of laughter on the audience's level and clarify the desirable social norms for which it stands. The audience automatically finds itself liking the target and, so to say, consenting to its nature. The divisive – and therefore critical – functions of humor are

enforcement, which cautions the audience to adhere to social norms that the object of laughter violates, and differentiation, which puts the object of laughter in a clearly undesirable out-group that differs it from the audience. The two divisive functions are still funny for all they are critical, and allow the audience to bid a cheerful farewell to the thing they are laughing at. If the audience can dismiss its behavior theoretically in the realm of the funny discourse, they can more easily dismiss it in an approach to everyday life that seems reframed in the wake of the laughter. If the audience can dismiss its behavior, furthermore, they must also gain a critical distance that will make acceptance of it a conscious choice rather than a taken-for-granted (even manufactured) assumption.

When a funny criticism of the president comes from the people, it falls within the divisive realm of humor. It involves a clear “us” vs. “them” spirit that allows the people to find their own identity that might oppose the government, or at least its behavior. Critical voices like political cartoons, viral YouTube videos (for example, the “Mitt Romney Style” parody of Gangnam style that circulated during the 2012 presidential election), and interpersonal witticisms allow the audience to begin their involvement with the government within their own space of action and thus keep their ideas about it within the realm of their own individual property. Because the people can think critically among themselves, they are participating in a truly liberal way, and one that catalyzes an element of democratic participation. A president or other political figure criticizing themselves, though, creates a different dynamic. At no point in the process of creating, the funny discourse is the audience actively involved. Instead, the people are asked to sit back, relax, and let the thinking happen exactly where Schmitt says it happens in a government that fails to span democracy and liberalism: behind closed doors, in a PR committee meeting. Although the process appears to observe the same spirit of participation – the people are still laughing at the politician, the effect is a unifying, comedic one. If the president or any politician seems down-to-earth enough to make fun of themselves, then they seem more like one of the people. In that manner, the president seems to subvert the gap between the elite government and the common person, giving the people the impression that they are closely involved with a humane government that has their interests closely at hand. However, in this scenario, no child alerts the public that the emperor has no clothes. The emperor is instead proudly displaying his nudity for public consumption, and in doing so making sure that the people accept his body on his terms. Either way, the audience beholds a naked government. But, to take the analogy a bit further, an emperor who exposes his own body can tone up a bit first, or cleverly hide anything he wants to.

In a subtle way, self-deprecating humor allows politicians to meld the general will with their own and manufacture consent. As far as the public is concerned, it has still received the satisfactory happy affective payoff of laughing. Grievances have been aired, power structures have been exposed, and the tension-reducing property of laughter has vented frustration. However, the public is laughing with the politician rather than at him, placing the two on an equal plane. Normally, this

would all seem to be in the spirit of democratic participation, but the plane in question is one that has been prescreened and approved by the politician already in power. The space of action lies, in this case, within the king's lands instead of the town commons. George W. Bush, for instance, often joked about his own "Bushisms," saying, for example, that he had a tendency to place his emphasis on the wrong "syl-LAB-le" when speaking.³⁰ While certainly critical, the jokes obscured more pertinent issues about Bush's ability to run a country that might have otherwise taken the people's critical spotlight while he was running for the presidency. Bush's approval of this particular message is important, because it distracts from other messages that might criticize him in more scathing ways.

Even humor that directly addresses areas of critical public interest can work in a politician's favor if he ensures that humor relieves the tension behind the critical angst. In 2011, for instance, President Obama humorously addressed popular speculation that he was not born in the United States, and was thus unqualified to hold his office. At the annual White House Correspondents dinner, often a forum for Washington humor, Obama proclaimed that he had just released his long-form birth certificate to prove that he was indeed born on U.S. soil, and he was going to show the audience video footage of his birth to give his claim further evidence. Under this pretense, Obama showed the assembled guests – and everyone watching at home or online – part of the opening sequence of Disney's animated feature *The Lion King*, in which baby Simba the lion is ceremoniously presented to a group of African animals in a very African setting.³¹ With such influential public figures in attendance – laughing – Obama's deflating of the criticism was clear. He had seen the problem building, and he neutralized it. The president's choice of audience was crucial: as Chomsky observes:

The primary targets of the manufacture of consent are those who regard themselves as "the more thoughtful members of the community," the "intellectuals," the "opinion leaders." An official of the Truman administration remarked that "It doesn't make too much difference to the general public what the details of a program are. What counts is how the plan is viewed by the leaders of the community."³²

Obama had journalists, fashion leaders, rock stars, and Hollywood fixtures in his immediate audience; he indeed chose the leaders of the community as his willing compatriots. His joke prevented others from criticizing him within their own space of action and it fizzled out the importance of the entire issue under the happy tones of laughter. Consent to end discussion was spurred directly by the president himself, instead of growing organically from the public. Of course, Obama here was rejecting a massive system of racialized discourse that he is uniquely faced with as the first President of the United States who identifies as black, but for better or for worse, the

criticism of his birthplace was a popular one. The question of whether the voice of the people occasionally needs to be subverted by authority figures is certainly a spinoff of our current set of concerns - one that lays the framework for worthy future analysis.

For Locke, any attempt to act as the steward of the man instead of the common property is a breach of the social contract. For Schmitt, any government that fails to uphold the individual cannot be called a liberal democracy. For Chomsky, manufactured consent is an insult to the public that is implied to be “just too stupid to be able to understand things.”³³ Because self-deprecating humor infiltrates the public’s individual cognitive space of action – each person’s private property – it breaches the role of government-as-custodian and prevents the people from participating in a democratic public sphere on their own terms. In order to keep up participation in governance, then, the people must understand and enact the role of critical humorist in their discourse about the government, and resist accepting the government’s unifying comedic frames about itself and social issues.

Taking Back Humor

Maintaining the liberal spirit within a democracy might take a different form than Schmitt or Chomsky envisioned. Although the proposition piques uncertainly, the electric age of mass mediation might have brought about a state in which it is the participatory obligation of the people to, occasionally but consciously, make fun of their president to prevent him from overstepping his bounds by infringing on their intellectual property and doing it for them. Dewey offers an alternative to the status quo when he calls for a spirit of this sort of active intellectualism as a form of social action. He observes that “the historical march of mind, embodied in institutions, was believed to account for social changes – all in its own good time....The crisis in liberalism is connected with failure to develop and lay hold of an adequate conception of intelligence integrated with social movements and a factor in giving them direction.”³⁴ That is, the people in a liberal government must take charge of their intellect and move it ahead on their own terms, rather than waiting for institutions like the government to do it for them. He observes in passing the argument presupposed by manufactured consent, namely, that the general public is “not endowed with the degree of intelligence that the use of it as a method demands,”³⁵ but offers the reassurance that once the use of intelligent criticism becomes an ingrained part of society, that criticism will become useful to everyone. Since, as established above, humorous criticism is an exercise of individual intelligence, we can easily envision popular jokes about the government as a valuable form of social action. The Supreme Court has even recognized the value of lampooning public figures, protecting the public’s ability to do so by its decision in *Hustler Magazine, Inc. v. Falwell*.³⁶ The public should, therefore, value this ability, as should the government. In fact, if the government finds utility in staying within

the bounds of Locke's social contract, it should be careful not to infringe on the people's territory in this regard. A president who makes fun of himself is entertaining and likeable, and thus a sparkling addition to the American celebrity mythos, but is also a poor custodian of the people's ability to use their intellectual property in a simultaneously liberal and democratic way.

Endnotes

¹ Thomas 2012, 1.

² Alston 2008, 68.

³ Thomas 2012, 2.

⁴ Jones 2009.

⁵ See Feldman 2007.

⁶ See Postman 1985.

⁷ See Lamb 2007.

⁸ Locke 1689/2007, 30-31.

⁹ Locke 1689/2007, 33.

¹⁰ Locke 1689/2007, 17.

¹¹ McLuhan 1964/1999, 351.

¹² McLuhan 1964/1999, 358.

¹³ United Nations 1948, 7.

¹⁴ Holmer-Nadesan 1996, 59.

¹⁵ Locke 1689/2007, 173.

¹⁶ Thomas 2012, 2.

¹⁷ Weaver 1953, 173.

¹⁸ Schmitt 1988, 20.

¹⁹ Ellul 1965, 6.

²⁰ Schmitt 1988, 25.

²¹ Schmitt 1988, 79.

²² Chomsky 2002, 14.

²³ Chomsky 2002, 16.

²⁴ Chomsky 2002, 18.

²⁵ Chomsky 1989, 48.

²⁶ See Baym 2005.

²⁷ See Mintz 1985.

²⁸ See Gring-Pemble and Watson 2003.

²⁹ See Meyer 2000.

³⁰ Miller 2001, 39.

³¹ See CNN Wire Staff 2011.

³² Chomsky 1989, 47.

³³ Chomsky 2002, 17.

³⁴ Dewey 1935/2000, 50-51.

³⁵ Dewey 1935/2000, 57.

³⁶ See Gilbert 2004.

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