Anti, Anti Terror and the Joke of Homeland Security

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Anti-Anti Terror:

Color Coding and the Joke of “Homeland Security”

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Introduction
The United States, never a particularly circumspect or reflective nation, has been even less so over the last three and a half years. The attack on September 11, 2001 registered as a trauma that was followed by near silence in terms of debate about the meaning of the events or their implications. The attack allowed the Bush Administration to strengthen its political position, take the country into two wars, and further solidify its hold on the apparatus of government with the election of 2004. This is what one of my colleagues at the University of Massachusetts called “Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear and the Selling of the American Empire.”

In this context, a number of commentators have suggested that the best reporting on American foreign policy in the United States since 2001, particularly the invasion and occupation of Iraq, has been comedic. They often mention The Daily Show with Jon Stewart as host. After a brief hiatus following Sept. 11, that show has produced highly critical commentary, particularly on the invasion and occupation of Iraq, under the guise of “fake news”. But, other comedians, including even the mainstream late night comedy-talk shows in America of David Letterman and Jay Leno, have joked about the Bush policies on terror and Iraq. Of course, this has also been true throughout the world.

In this paper I will review the humor surrounding the Bush Administration’s anti-terror effort. I will focus particularly on the colored-coded alerts produced by the Department of Homeland Security because I am interested in the relationship between a sense of risk and evaluation of government policy.

I also believe that aspects of Bush policy like the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, where attempts at justification have been at least in part in terms of September 11 and the war on terror are different sorts of event. The humor surrounding these events, which seems more guarded and quantitatively less prominent is worth considering in its own right. It will, however, remain peripheral to the current inquiry.


4 The extraordinary map titled “NewYorkistan” (Appendix A) by Maira Kalman and Rick Meyerowitz that appeared on the cover of The New Yorker December 12, 2001 is a
The paper begins with the serious nature of humor. I will address the work of scholars who link humor to consciousness and ultimately to social structure. I then turn to jokes and politics where work by an interesting Estonian scholar Igor Grazin lays the foundation for the more pointed attention to humor about terror. Here I will look at some of the particular jokes and their political meaning. Ultimately I will address theories of resistance and the nature of culture with work like *Weapons of the Weak* by James Scott, which suggests that laughing at the Bush Administration War on Terror is a form of resistance.

Though I am new to the conventions of Catalunya, as well as pronunciation in its language, I think it would be all right to laugh during this presentation. That is, if something turned out to strike you as funny, it would be acceptable to laugh. Cross linguistic humor is challenging but I have been producing quite a bit of laughter in Barcelona over the last month with my attempts at Castellano and Catala’.

### The Nature of Humor

Humor, always present in society, was somewhat late to the realm of serious social scientific enterprise. Social science is itself a somewhat recent scholarly discipline and we can grant the need, at least initially, for its inquiries to be serious topics. But, there are now conferences and communities of scholars interested in what it means to laugh. They write about things that other people laugh at and they try to explain why the people laugh.

A very funny Marxist friend of mine, Bertell Ollman, created a game he called “Class Struggle” as a response to the very successful American game about the accumulation of property, “Monopoly”\(^5\). Then he tried to market it. He told the story of this enterprise in a very clever book called *Class Struggle is the Name of the Game*.\(^6\) In it, Ollman uses the game and his efforts to sell it to raise the issue of class struggle, the unspoken reality of modern life, which, he points out, is not usually spoken about in polite company. Ollman put together a conference in 1983 on left wing humor. The conference included jokes like:

Question: How many capitalists does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Answer: None, since we don't need capitalists to screw in light bulbs or any thing else that really needs doing in our society.

Ollman has said the conference experience was not completely satisfying but he still remains quite funny.

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remarkable exception to the generally strained humor surrounding the attacks of September 11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

\(^5\) Parker Brothers.

The social theorist Sigmund Freud, of course, wrote about humor. For Freud, humor was a key to the unconscious and it had very specific meanings. In part due to the penetration of his theories, it has come to be a conventional understanding that we reveal things when we laugh. I have often thought that the collective, public expression that is evident in humor and appreciated in the form of a collective laugh, even a little one (what Americans might call a chuckle), says something about what we know as a people, what we share as collective knowledge. In this sense, humor, like language and law depends on shared understandings.

The theoretical perspective put forth by Thomas C. Veatch, of the Department of Linguistics, Stanford University, provides an opportunity to develop the meaning of humor with regard to collective knowledge. It also provides a foundation for the following discussion of the nature of humor. Veatch’s work is available online. His credentials seem legitimate, yet his perspective seemed provocative to me. He emphasizes the basis of humor in norms and calls attention to an aspect of presentation, simultaneity, which further develops the nature of consciousness about norms. In the theory, norms, transgression and simultaneity may produce a situation leading to the propensity to laugh.

For Veatch, humor depends on the existence of norms. He says, “[H]umor occurs when it seems that things are normal while at the same time something seems wrong.” I want to call attention, in this theory, to the relationship of normativity to humor. It is Veatch’s thesis that without some tension between a proposition and a condition that makes it seem strange there is no joke. “If the situation cannot be interpreted as normal, then it also cannot be funny.” For example, on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart the correspondents stand before pictures of places, like Baghdad, and profess to be reporting from there while it is clear that they are not in these places. This is funny and it sets up a context where what the correspondents present news items, sometimes in a manner we call, in English, “dead pan” or perhaps they present totally straight. The result is that, quotes from Donald Rumsfeld about “going to war with the army you have” become quite comical. "In fact, the host, Jon Stewart, will often disagree with the commentary,

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8 www.tomveatch.com/else/humor/paper/humor.html

9 "The necessary and (jointly) sufficient conditions for the perception of humor are:
   1. The perceiver has in mind a view of the situation as constituting a violation of some affective commitment of the perceiver to the way something in the situation ought to be.
   2. The perceiver has in mind a predominating view of the situation as being normal.
   3. The [1] and [2] understandings are present in the mind of the perceiver at the same instant in time.

In his discussion, Veatch refers to 1 as the Norm (N) and 2 as the Violation (V) and 3 as “Simultaneity".
saying that what they are reporting could not possibly be true. He is the straight man and his sense that the situation should be taken seriously and that the context of the fake backdrop is not an issue but that we must puzzle over the insane government policy adds to the joke.

For Veatch again, “…an unambiguous moral violation is not funny” and “…an affectively ambiguous situation also fails to be perceived as funny when the violation interpretation is so strong that the normality interpretation cannot predominate or fails entirely, when the perceiver decides that things are not okay after all.”

As mentioned above, Veatch draws on the issue of simultaneity. He points out that “if the two interpretations are not simultaneously present, then humor perception cannot occur.” This is the brilliance of the “fake news” dimension that places the reporter in front of a picture of the place he is supposed to be but with little effort to make it seem real. Thus, instead of what Veatch calls “one feeling followed by another” which “gives a sequence of feelings…but not humor,” you have in the show the spontaneous feeling of the absurdity of the claim that the reporter is in some place like Baghdad. Thus, in this thesis it becomes part of the nature of humor that “[w]ays of packing two views of a situation into one mind at the same time, such as surprise and ambiguity,” are important.

The fake backdrop is a television device. On television the claim that the bombs falling in the background are real is hard to maintain yet the medium has become overwhelmingly important. Now, along with movies, which exist in a strange epiphenomenal sense, TV is changing the face of the law. From what was once almost entirely verbal we now expect images. I am particularly interested in visual images, humor that has at least some visual component. This is, in part because I think that it travels and presents better. But I also prefer to investigate visual culture because the forms of authority traditionally associated with modern law have been more abstract and symbolic than visual and I think that is changing.

In exploring visual humor rather than the simply humor in language there are connections that may not be logical that become interesting. In this case, the similarity between the color codes and the gay pride flag in the United States is striking and becomes part of the cultural landscape (paisaje) that the codes operate on.

### Jokes and Policy

My interest in humor comes from a prior interest in collective knowledge and the cultural dimensions of public policy, as mentioned above. This sort of knowledge is

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10 “The latter may occur when the perceiver has too strong an emotional attachment to the violated principle; this kind of situation is discussed in a later section. In instances where N is lacking, the perceiver may be offended or threatened by a V interpretation rather than being amused.”

11 Ibid.

12 The blue and the green are reversed in the Gay Pride flag and The United States Department of Homeland Security has not included lavender as a color in its code.
always an aspect of politics and it includes law. The “authoritative allocation of values” is the definition that American Political Scientists used to offer for politics. To me, politics is the contest over that allocation and the definition works for policy and law. My work is usually about law and it has been my interest in law that leads me to many of the observations in this paper. Law is a common mechanism for the implementation of policy. In the United States, among students of policy, law is sometimes so much taken for granted that its qualities are not examined. Let me begin this consideration of “Jokes and Policy” with a discussion the peculiar claims that law makes.

In a recent inquiry into the nature of law\textsuperscript{13} by a scholar from Estonia, Igor Grazin\textsuperscript{14} the author turns to humor to demonstrate the challenges to grasping the fundamental principle of modern jurisprudence, that “an object of obvious formality” (law) can make such a difference in the world.\textsuperscript{15} For example he proposes that “Legal expiration imposes an end on something that does not end in reality.”\textsuperscript{16} Grazin calls this a “counter position” for reasons that I do not quite understand. What is clear is that the aspiration of law to be outside human manipulation is somewhat peculiar, funny, in fact. Grazin says, “This counter-position forms one of the most characteristic feature of [the American film maker] Woody Allen’s texts.” Grazin summarizes these texts as “Nazism versus can-opener; the existence of God versus the availability of a plumber on weekends; reasonability of the Universe versus ‘some places in New Jersey’, etc.”\textsuperscript{17}

This sort of epistemologically based, teleologically tainted and ontologically screwy material is difficult to render in any language. It is difficult to communicate in English to a Catalan speaking, Castellano knowing audience but that is perhaps what makes it exciting and, perhaps even demonstrates its truth. “Nazism versus can-opener” may be how an ordinary statement without the inherent strangeness, such as “It is lovely in Barcelona today,” comes across to you given my way of speaking and, perhaps, your way of hearing. There are advantages to the written text.

Grazin’s point is that Woody Allen often makes humor by the mixing levels of meaning. The grand and important are juxtaposed against the ordinary. And, in the context of Grazin’s treatment of law, and ultimately my treatment of terror, absurdity comes from the intentional muddling of categories. Nazi’s put Jews in gas chambers and can openers open cans tomato sauce. The levels are off but one of the greatest tragedies of the Third Reich is the failure of ordinary people to stop the actions of the government. This failure, of course, has close analogies with the current state of dissent in the United States. Its, after all, both a land of terror and of the Academy Awards, of torture and of warm Apple pie, of collective arrogance and of very sincere, often individual, humility.

Sometimes the muddling in humor carries intentional similarity or cross connection. The issue of God’s existence seems like it is supposed to matter a whole lot today but it doesn’t, in practice, seem to matter much at all. The issue of whether a

\textsuperscript{13} Law, in this sense as part of politics, is based on the belief that human action, choice and the social world, can be constrained through human action, choice and the social world. Politics is more than this and I will get to some of how much more that it is, perhaps, in time.

\textsuperscript{14} “On Myth, Considered as a Method for Legal Thought,” \textit{Law and Critique} 15/2004: 159-181.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 163.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
plumber is available on weekends seems like a much lower order of concern yet it might matter much more than the existence of God, at least on a particular weekend given particular matters of plumbing exigency. This is the teleological crossing of wires.

While the issue for Grazin was law’s purported ability to make distinctions and confine behavior, here my subject grows a bit to include reaction to those distinctions and confining policies.

At least in America, the political contests between Republicans and Democrats seldom evoke serious and sustained comedy. While a sitting President, and his policies, such as the occupation of Iraq has been unusual for the level of criticism that has been publicly aired from Jon Stewart’s on going series “Mess O’potamia” to Michael Moore’s “Fahrenheit 911”. The war on terror falls somewhere in between these poles.

Of all its manifestations, the color-coded warnings known as the “Homeland Security Advisory System” produced by the “Department of Homeland Security” under Secretary Tom Ridge have been subject to extraordinary ridicule. An article in the Washington Post from August 13, 2003 reported that Congress believed the color alerts to be so vague as to run the risk of turning the public from the level of alertness they are supposed to engender. Presidential candidate John Kerry indicated in an interview in Rolling Stone magazine published October 20, 2004 that he would “scrap” the color-coded security warning because “people laugh at them”. He did not propose an alternative nor did he show that he really understood what was funny about the codes and so he lost his campaign.

With regard to the law on terror, the most famous law in the United States is the Patriot Act. Ultimately, the Patriot Act has been decidedly less a subject of humor than the color-codes. It may even stand as a measure of the limits of conventional “weapons of the weak” and even, it seems, the limits on cultural comment that is the terrain of humor. The Patriot Act is, after all, very difficult to understand. It is huge and complicated and commentary about it has not been funny.

Laughing About Terror

James C. Scott, who’s 1985 book Weapons of the Weak gave us this wonderful term for modest sorts of resistance, begins a subsequent, 1990 book with the Ethiopian Proverb “When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts”. Jon Stewart, with his audience of millions and the millions who laugh are not collectively weak but their laughter may be at least a modest form of resistance.

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similarly childish disconnect from real world fears so as to represent the absurd at a level not captured by other more traditional and complex images. Jokes about the way the codes were handled, and related proclamations from Secretary Ridge (like the suggestion of duct taping windows) critically attack the judgment of officials, including the perception of threat and the suggestion as to the appropriate response by the DHS. This is at one level obvious but on another quite extraordinary since the United States is highly authoritarian with reference to state power.

The color codes don’t require particular behaviors in the way the Patriot Act does. As such, though they are government policy and bear on “the authoritative allocation of values,” but they are not law in the traditional sense. Resistance to them is a low level political form and indeed their status is in part what elevates them in terms of humor. Some of the humor, in fact, has been in the form of suggestions for action based on the codes.

Thus, in the matter of the color-codes one aspect of the humor is the sort of muddling suggested by Veatch, Grazin and Scott. Basic colors schemes are something attended to more by children in the very first years. Children’s books are in basic colors. Having a box of coloring crayons is one of the first proprietary relations. The norm, with regard to color is simple and the associations of basic colors are innocence.

Terror on the other hand is complex. The emotions in the United States following September 11 are characterized by confusion. Safe places become dangerous. The reality of mortality is everywhere present. The images and the possibilities they suggest are things we wish to place out of the life of children. We think instead of the purity of the everyday, the innocence and emerging life that we associate with them.

Humor about terror does not go uncommented upon and as with attempts to make fun of just about anything, there are those who will object. In the United States, objections run to the serious fears that are allegedly a subject of the warnings and the memory of those who were killed on September 11 in the United States. This is thought sometimes to be joking about the Bush Administration’s anti-terror effort.

Many of the terror alert satires are reproductions of the visual image. The following goes more deeply into what it means for the codes to be colors. It was posted as “Pudding Time” at www.puddingbowl.org a very political web log.

May 21, 2003

Terror Alert Confusion

Given the necessity of having our nation’s current Terror Alert Level uppermost in mind at all times, it concerns me that the color codes for the five levels may not be equally intuitive for everyone. For example, if blue is a calming color for you, as it no doubt is for many people, you may subconsciously assume that a Blue Alert means a Low terror threat.

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22 Such as dancing at the second inaugural balls, bodies coming back to the US from Iraq (these are not allowed to be shown at all), or even the ailing Chief Justice of the United States swearing the George W. Bush in for a second term.

23 A group calling itself “World In Conflict” proposed that citizens should wear color-coded buttons to match the alert level thereby starting conversations about appropriate behavior for each level. See http://www.nwcitizen.us/wic/Quickly/Publicbaffledbyterroraler.html.
I have disturbing news for you. A GREEN Alert indicates a Low threat of terrorism--a BLUE Alert requires that you assume a guarded posture. Your mistaken assumption could lead to your choosing short pants instead of trousers, sandals instead of sneakers--sneakers that could have saved your life.

Indeed, even an inversion of the familiar Roy G. Biv appellation for the order of the color spectrum--the "rainbow," if you prefer--fails us, due again to the government's contention that green is less scary than blue. I don't think I have to explain the many ways such dangerous subjectivity could lead to lapses in each citizen's vigilance--and open wide the door for our enemies.

On these matters, the blogger draws attention to the basic aspects of humor, our sense of what is normal and what is out of place. He undercuts the authority of those responsible for the codes. His humor heightens our sense that the codes do not make us safer AND the joke emphasizes that there is considerable doubt that the government is doing something important with these codes. The humor must even suggest that, perhaps, with regard to the fight against terror in general little that is being done makes us feel safer. Our blogger continues.

....More importantly, what good is ANY of this to our color-blind citizens? In spite of their crippling disability, we surely cannot afford to cast them to the sidelines in freedom's most desperate hour.

For this reason, I have developed the following five Animal Codes to more logically correlate to the Terror Alert Levels. They are as follows:

- Level of Terrorist Alert -- Animal Code
  - Low -- Possum
  - Guarded -- Owl
  - Elevated -- Snake
  - High -- Tiger
  - SEVERE -- SHARK

I urge you to make automatic your reaction to each adjustment in Terror Alert Level by practicing, perhaps with family or friends, your own interpretive behavior as it corresponds to each Animal Code. (Costumes shouldn't be necessary, and would be cumbersome in the event of an attack.) Constantly monitor the Dept. of Homeland Security website or FoxNews.com….

There is a cycle with humor about particular policies. The jokes build and at some point it is clear that the object of humor is laughable so that it becomes too easy to make the joke. When, during the campaign, John Kerry mentioned the color codes it was with assurance that they were laughable. When the term of Secretary of Homeland Security Ridge was up the laughable codes were part of his legacy.

Where colors are part of the humor, it is not enough to simply restate the colors. Once that restatement is done, or after it is done twice, more is required. That is evident above but also in the very clever blog at http://subintsoc.net/terror_colors.php which uses colors like beige, pink and olive to bring the range of life in color to the code system.
In some ways the ability to laugh at the War in Iraq is for Americans a lower level of discourse than laughter about terror but this is because of the relationship between politics and humor just discussed. In most respects… degree of suffering, economic impact, threat to humanity, the war in Iraq poses a much greater threat. But this is the “Mess O’potamia” to which the comedians return nightly in the United States.

**Resistance in Public**

The thing that makes James Scott’s notion of resistance so compelling and that of Silbey and Ewick of potential interest is the relationship between what might seem like, and indeed may simply be, idiosyncratic expressions of feelings and the potential for something more social or public, like resistance in the political, movement, sense. In this discussion of humor, the special dimension is that more than one person senses or feels the condition.

A joke that only gets one laugh in a room of two hundred or a cartoon that only one in a couple of hundred appreciate is not very funny. Humor, by definition speaks to something more general. The peasant’s fart as the nobleman passes needs to be heard or commented upon to matter in the social sense that lies behind Scott’s insight.

It is in this sense that references to an American “Homeland” are so peculiar. References to a “Homeland” are a new development in the United States. This use of the word is new and the concept, as applied to the United States rather than the Third Reich, is new. What they designate might traditionally have been thought more appropriate to the German and its notion of a place associated with both the domestic and the nation.

Since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the initiation of the war without end, the war on terror, by the Bush Administration, the public sphere, the sphere of discourse and culture has been threatened. In this final section of the paper, I wish to focus on the threat to the public sphere in the interest of homeland security and the extent to which laughing in public, perhaps in the minimal sense that there are some vital signs for a dissenting polity, plays a role in moderating and ultimately possibly limiting the disastrous consequences of American anti-terror politics.

The existence of a public sphere and the relationship between this more technical space and the aspects of language and culture at the foundation of humor (and law24) are part of a substantial body of scholarly material. There is a public sphere constituted by discussion of the existence of a public sphere.25

This research is self conscious about the extent to which there is “a” public sphere. Some of the most interesting work, at least a few years ago, posited, of course, that there was not one but many public spheres. They have been critical of the “ingrained monolingualism” in the liberal concepts deriving from the French, of course, but even the American Revolution.

Contests over the public sphere are a larger and perhaps more complex way to consider the implications of humor. While solidifying the stature of the humorist, who may be a figure of considerable influence and power, they may undercut other forces of domination.26

My text here is the effort to replace Secretary Ridge. On January 11, 2005, the American President George W. Bush made his second attempt to nominate a replacement for the first Secretary of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge.27 He put forth the candidacy of Michael Chertoff. One of the qualities of this nominee, as Bush made clear from the beginning, was that Chertoff had been through the Senate confirmation process three times successfully. He was confirmed a month later, February 15, 2005 by a vote of 98-0.28

My sense is that we won’t be hearing much more about the color alerts but we are left with a great deal to collectively comment upon. We will have even more earnest efforts to address the threat of terror with little or no attention to its causes. In America the apparatus of Homeland Security will likely continue to grow as if in competition with the similarly misnamed apparatus of Defense. And the American Secretary of State, who embodies the promise of opportunity and stellar achievement, seems very likely to continue to wage policies with stunning arrogance and disastrous consequences.

Lloyd, Eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); See also, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, The Public Sphere and Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).


27 The first nomination, that of former New York Police Commissioner and protégé of former New York Mayor Rudolf Giuliani, Bernard Kerik, ended in a withdrawal of the candidates name due to the discovery of numerous legal and social improprieties in his background.

28 Issues raised by Senate Democrats about Chertoff’s role in formulating interrogation policy did not materialize after he said during hearings that he thought torture was wrong.
Appendix A
Appendix B
Alternative Color Codes

Southknoxbubba.net credits Mike Hollihan for the code on the left from February 14, 2003. The code on the right is referred to above and noted in the text at “World in Conflict”.

QuickTime™ and a TIFF (LZW) decompressor are needed to see this picture.