

# POPULAR COMICS AND AUTHORITARIAN INJUSTICE FRAMES IN MEXICO

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*Abstract: Analysts of social movements have done a great deal to extend our understanding of how resistance groups frame injustices. They often assume that some form of collective (discursive) action is necessary to frame common understandings, but in many authoritarian regimes collective action is not tolerated. Instead, opposition is expressed in messages embedded in comics, films, and other images generated by popular culture. In this article we connect the literature on social movements and framing to the psychological and cultural understandings of humor, and specifically how text and images in humorous comics form a response to official frames of social peace, modernization, and development. Even when no one dares to write a letter of protest, or take to the streets, or set up a website, the political content of comics establishes understandings about group identity and justice. In more open and democratic regimes, dissident leaders are permitted to manipulate images and understandings. In closed authoritarian regimes, comics are “ready meals” for dissidents. We examine humorous comics in Mexico from 1970 to 1976 to show how text and images spoke of injustices such as torture, poverty, and marginalization.*

Protesters, demonstrators, and revolutionaries took to the streets in 2011 in locations ranging from authoritarian Middle East regimes to rich countries' financial districts. As in earlier revolutions, grievances in 2011 were contagious, and though much has been made of the impact of new social media in the most recent outbreaks, protesters have always managed to communicate their grievances in ways that connect to others in very different places, often using cultural resources as tools to frame resistance (Johnston and Klandermans 1995, 14). In this essay we examine the Mexican comics *Hermelinda Linda*, *La Familia Burrón*, and *Los Agachados* as cultural resources during the term of Mexican president Luis Echeverría from 1970 to 1976. Of course, comics are simple stories designed to amuse and entertain, but here we concern ourselves with the social messages they contain. They dealt with some of the most sensitive and difficult issues of the day, often with absurd caricatures and exaggerations. What did this mean in an authoritarian regime? Were comics nothing more than funny stories?

Our interpretation is that they were among the various cultural products that

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framed ideas of injustice (even if unintentionally).<sup>1</sup> For the most part the comics were not overtly political; they dealt with everyday issues in the lives of Mexicans. One of these everyday issues was the treatment of people by those in power. In this way comics may be understood as responding to the official discourse of modernization, development, and social justice with an alternative framing of poverty, marginalization, and abuse of power. They helped establish the regime as an Other to which a response was possible. The political content in comics created understandings about group identity and justice. It tapped the social imaginary of readers—in other words, their social understanding of reality. When we laugh at a political figure being ridiculed in a comic, it is because we know there is a grain of truth there. The grain of truth is the social imaginary; the laughter is the reminder that we share it.

In this article we review the framing literature before suggesting ways to extend it to authoritarian regimes. We look at understandings of political humor and the context in which Mexico found itself in Echeverría's six-year term. We then analyze three humorous comics in Mexico during the 1970s and the mechanisms through which their humor connects to the social imaginary. We chose these comics based on their wide circulation and popularity and the time period because it was preceded by a crackdown against student protesters and featured continued repression against some dissidents (despite the official democratic opening or *apertura democrática*). Poverty and marginalization were widespread, despite important economic and development gains after the Second World War. There was plenty to criticize, and the content of the comics reflected that.

#### FRAMING IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

Our point of departure is frame analysis. Frames “provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency” (Goffman 1974, 22). They enable individuals to make sense of occurrences within their life space and the world at large. They are cognitive and interpretive devices stored in memory and used to understand and solve problems (Johnston 1995, 217–218; Benford and Snow 2000, 614). Social movement theorists emphasize the shared nature of framing, a process through which groups seek to establish shared understandings (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 2). Frames distill the real world, generate meaning, and under auspicious circumstances serve as a guide for action (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). They are not simply static perceptions but are interactive processes in which agents construct meanings that may challenge dominant meanings.

In framing, problems are defined and agreed on, such as injustice and victimization. Actors fight for “good” values such as justice and freedom, and to do this they must overcome a resolute opposition (Melucci 1996, 349). Because the logic of action in social movements is the desire to get something or to produce a just outcome, social action is deemed to be necessary—visible, noticeable, physical,

1. Framing, political opportunity structure, and resource mobilization contribute to the emergence and development of social movements. See Tilly and Tarrow (2007).

sometimes violent or forceful. The preoccupation with action and change predisposes scholars to examine countries where such activities are permitted or at least less costly. Thus much scholarly work on social movements is concerned empirically with Western democracies, where discourse and action take place openly (Guigni, McAdam, and Tilly 1999; Melucci 1996, 83–84). Where authoritarian regimes restrict social action there is less of it, and therefore less to study (Tilly 2004, 125). In fact, without the ability to mobilize and organize, some see framing as doomed: “Even in the unlikely event that system-critical framings were to emerge in the context of little or no organization, the absence of any real mobilizing structure would almost surely prevent their spread to the minimum number of people required to afford a basis for collective action. More to the point, however, is the suspicion that lacking organization these framings would never emerge in the first place” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 9).

But what if the framing is not collective or interactive? What if it is only communicative? What if there are no goals, simply grudges or desires or beliefs? We argue that framing as a process of inspiration, legitimation, definition, and naming can occur without action, and without an interactive, discursive process of collective mobilization. In authoritarian regimes, action may be risky, but that arguably makes framing even more important. Cultural expressions still construct ideas of us and them—of good social frames that point to injustices, versus bad official frames—even if they remain nothing more than latent. The more authoritarian the regime (and consequently the more closed the opportunity structure and the fewer the mobilizing resources), the more relevant is framing.

Frames are articulated and presented through a process of “amplification” or “punctuation” in which key elements are singled out and emphasized (Benford and Snow 2000, 623). The extent to which the articulations resonate depends on the fit between framing references and real life, the credibility of those making the claims, the way the claims relate to personal experiences, and their fit with cultural narratives. (We will see in the comics how these articulations can be identified.) If successful they result in boundary creation or reinforcement, where differences between challengers and challenged are established and awareness is raised (Benford and Snow 2000; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Boundaries are acknowledgements of difference. Consciousness and awareness lead to collective identity if individuals become knowledgeable about and sensitized to the consequences of boundaries (Hunt and Benford 2004, 445). Consciousness is activated by stories, or reactivated if readers have heard through the social imaginary—such as through rumors or reliable accounts—that “things have happened.”

Consciousness is also activated by media images, which are filtered through thought processes to produce beliefs (Gamson 1995; Johnston and Klandermans 1995, 17). Individuals link personal experience to public media discourse and create a frame through which they understand the social world. Those who share the frame also share perspectives on injustice and identify with one side of that injustice (Johnston 1995, 243). Thus frames organize thinking; they rally the understanding of diffuse atomized actors through symbols and codes, “selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions” (cited in Della Porta 1999, 68).

## MEXICO UNDER PRESSURE

When President Díaz Ordaz came to power in 1964, Mexico was in the midst of a long period of economic growth and stability. Mexico, it was thought, could serve as a model for other developing countries (Loaeza 2004, 301; Gracida Romo 2002).<sup>2</sup> Urbanization increased, and the ranks of businessmen, bureaucrats and skilled workers swelled (Tello 1993). But though the “Mexican miracle” (*milagro mexicano*) was creating a new middle class, this social change did not translate easily into social participation. The government created the rules of participation, decided policies, facilitated or blocked avenues of citizen influence in decision making, and manipulated access to power and resources (Aziz Nassif 2004, 372). Civil society groups were co-opted through umbrella organizations for workers, peasants, and the popular sector. Economic success (at least until the 1970s) helped the government establish and justify the corporatist system, though sporadic protests occurred throughout the postwar period from independent unions (such as the rail workers movement in 1958), unofficial parties, and others.

Co-opted civil society groups were part of the decision-making apparatus, while the government used a variety of tactics to contain or repress independent social movements. Funding was denied to groups that were critical of government policy. More overt forms of intimidation and repression were used, too. Independent trade unions, for example, were harshly treated when they sought to register or gain representation (Nolan García 2011). Yet elements of Mexican society had always been willing to risk a crackdown, and gradually the idea of democracy and the claims for greater inclusiveness gained currency. The Tlatelolco Massacre in 1968 was the culmination of this swelling opposition. During the summer of 1968, a series of student demonstrations convinced the president that there was a plot to destabilize the country. Their demands appeared to challenge the status quo, and the government’s brutal repression of them on October 2 in Tlatelolco Plaza confirmed that it would go to any length to preserve the system (Torres 2008, 31; Montemayor 2008).

President Echeverría inherited the tradition of PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) governments stressing social peace, stability, and modernization.<sup>3</sup> But he sought to show that he was open to change and that despite Tlatelolco, national renovation was possible (Cordera Campos 1993, 268). He made it clear that he wanted to reach out to young people and that he was open and tolerant of criticism. Technocrats replaced bureaucrats who were considered old-fashioned and politicized. Echeverría spoke openly about the need to address poverty, the uneven distribution of wealth, and the existence of political prisoners. He promised to fight the emissaries of the past (*emisarios del pasado*) (Scherer 1986, 45). He also saw the importance of the mass media (Aguilar Camín 1982, 175). He encouraged the press and the artistic community to discuss issues openly. He considered

2. The heart of PRI ideology was the Mexican Revolution and the Cold War, which the government used to promote authoritarianism, prejudice against other cultures and values, and state paternalism. See Condés Lara (1998, 23).

3. Echeverría had been the interior secretary under President Díaz Ordaz, and many blamed him for orchestrating the massacre in Tlatelolco.

intellectuals to be strategically important and sought to mobilize them to support the regime. Integrating them into his administration gave people confidence in his government. However, if the media were critical, they often came in for harsh treatment.<sup>4</sup> As with social movements, the struggles between the official representations of Mexico and newer media sources stressing the problems, the forgotten, the repressed, and the marginalized, were not new, but after 1968 new pressures were certainly created for independent voices of expression (Mraz 2009, 215; Hughes 2006).

Meanwhile, the much-vaunted economic achievements had begun to unravel. By September 1976, devaluation had resulted in increased prices, capital flight, and the collapse of the peso (Agustín 2007, 114–115; Gollás 2004, 238–239; Tello 1993, 156).<sup>5</sup> And despite Echeverría's pro-democracy rhetoric, repression continued. In 1971, protesting students criticized education reform plans and demanded the release of those political prisoners still in jail. They called for a demonstration on June 10 in Mexico City. The demonstration was not authorized by the government, and a large group of young men attacked the demonstrators. The mysterious attackers were later identified as the Halcones, a paramilitary group created to combat the guerrilla movement. Echeverría claimed that the government was not associated with the attack.

The violent repression was followed by growth in the underground resistance movement. In response, the government created new social programs and rural infrastructure development, such as telecommunications, energy, and credit. At the same time, the army was dispatched to counteract guerrilla activity (Castellanos 2007; Poniatowska 2006). A wave of kidnappings prompted Echeverría to order the security services to step up action. Many suspects were detained and interrogated. Ultimately Echeverría followed the policy of his predecessor by using the army and the federal security force against opposition groups. Forced disappearances began in 1969 in the state of Guerrero and spread during Echeverría's presidency. Nevertheless, official discourse remained focused on modernization, stability, and social peace and refused to accept the existence of guerrillas or its responsibility for repression. This dark chapter is known as the Dirty War (*Guerra Sucia*).

#### HUMOR TO THE PEOPLE! COMICS, POLITICAL HUMOR, AND INJUSTICE FRAMES

Humorous comics are part of a broad tradition of visual representations of Mexican history that extends well back to the early years of the republic. Given the high illiteracy rate, visual media were always very important. Of course, humorous comics are not the only visual tools to express discontent, and Mexico is not the only Latin American country in which graphic illustrations arose as protest forms. There is a rich tradition of visual culture throughout Latin America, such as the one-page comic *Condorito* from Chile and the comic strip *Mafalda* from Argentina. Within Mexico, there are murals, paintings, prints, cartoons, newspaper

4. An example of this harassment was the so-called *Excélsior* affair. See Scherer (1986, 122–133).

5. On the 1976 crisis and its effects on the Mexican economy see Basañez (1999, 48–60).

comic strips, films, and various other forms that contain political humor. Other Mexican comics included *Paquito* (or *Paquito Presenta*, which began as a compendium of various cartoon strips) and *Pepín*. And there are apolitical comics such as *Kalimán*; *Chanoc*; *Lágrimas, Risas y Amor*; and *El Libro Vaquero*. Some visual media actively sought to portray the tension between official representations of Mexico and perspectives that stressed the forgotten, the repressed, and the marginalized (Mraz 2009; Lomnitz 2005).

We limit our empirical study to what we believe are the most important humorous Mexican comics of the 1970s. Having a relatively narrow range of sources (one country, a six-year period, one type of cultural resource) enables us to be more certain of our main point, that they in part respond to official government frames of social peace, development, and modernization. Although the comics themselves (and their authors) had different purposes and readerships, there was a commonality among them in terms of the social and political problems they addressed. This suggests that the problems were commonly perceived, not simply by the authors but also by the audiences. They were an alternative reading to the official frames.

In addition to the topics they spoke to, the three comics were important because of their circulation and readership.<sup>6</sup> Data on their circulation are imprecise, but from various sources we are able to glean some insights. According to information provided in the issues of *Hermelinda Linda*, its print run was 110,000 copies weekly. *La Familia Burrón* printed between 48,000 and 100,000 copies per week, according to its author, and *Los Agachados* printed around 150,000 per week at its peak (Hinds and Tatum 1992, 72–73, 160; Rubenstein 2004, 284). Estimates on pass-along readership indicate that each comic purchased by a customer was read by between four and twelve readers (Hinds and Tatum 1992, 5–6). Thus they reached a sizable audience.

*Los Agachados* differed from the other two comics in its more overt politicization and in the fact that its readership was more middle class (students and professionals).<sup>7</sup> Its author, Rius, was more politicized than Óscar González, the author of *Hermelinda Linda*, or Gabriel Vargas, the author of *La Familia Burrón*. In *Los Agachados* the stories take place in rural Chayotitlán. Usually the characters present the issue early in the story, such as the mayor asking his private secretary to check the electoral preferences in the town (del Río 2004, 76). The main characters are a lazy, ignorant, young man named Reuters Nopáizín, who cannot keep his mouth shut and whose favorite activity is to drink pulque; and Profe Gumaro, a leftist schoolteacher who patiently answers his neighbors' questions. Authority is embodied in the corrupt mayor Licenciado Trastupijes, a member of the "RIP," a reference to the national party, PRI.

The topics in *Los Agachados* include the lack of democracy, the massacre in

6. They are also easier to find. Some comics can be quite elusive. In fact we bought copies of *Hermelinda Linda* from private collectors in Mexico City, because they were not available as a complete collection in public holdings. We also were fortunate to have access to a private collection of *Los Agachados*.

7. However, workers' groups in the late 1970s were also using *Los Agachados* in their discussions of how to promote socialism (Hinds and Tatum 1992, 73; Rubenstein 2004, 289–290).

Tlatelolco, abuse by the authorities, corruption, poverty, social services, education reform, and others. However, Rius also used his pages to ponder the history of the Mexican Revolution, the history of comic books around the world, vegetarianism, healthy diets, and hippies. One of the characters would ask a question which the “wiser” citizens then answered. However, as the comic gained popularity, Rius changed the format. He used a collage technique that would become his hallmark, pasting images unrelated to the story and adding balloons with incongruous messages: “Frequently, the character belongs to a distant time and place, but his balloon is filled with slang and Mexicanisms” (Speck 1982, 118). The images were usually used during the explanation of a topic and would not have relevance later in the narration. Thus, the stories in *Los Agachados* became less narrative and more didactic. In some issues, the usual characters would not appear at all. The comic became “less recognizable as a standard *historieta*” (Agnew 2004, 16) and appeared more like ideological pamphlets or bulletins.

The readership of *La Familia Burrón* was probably lower-middle-class men and women, according to the fan mail received by the author (Hinds and Tatum 1992, 159; Bartra 2001, 67–90; Pitol 2010). It originally aimed to promote positive virtues (according to the author) such as religion, morality, and hygiene. In the mid-1970s the emphasis changed to include “the economic struggles and everyday concerns of the lower middle class . . . such as the lack of adequate housing, chronic unemployment, and rampant inflation” (Hinds and Tatum 1992, 161; see also Benítez Carrillo 2010, 18). Hinds and Tatum believe that Vargas was accusing the authorities directly for the poverty and marginalization that he chronicled in *La Familia Burrón*, even though he never called for radical change.

*La Familia Burrón* revolves around Regino Burrón and his working-class family. His wife Borola is exaggerated in appearance and behavior. She constantly intimidates people with her musket, building a cannon to protect her adopted child, Foforito, from his abusive father and becoming a kind of masked superhero to protect her female neighbors from their partners’ abuse.<sup>8</sup> Friends and relatives are archetypes from the Mexican social imaginary: rural caciques, hippies, rich families, oppressed and submissive women, abusive men, scavengers, criminals, and others. Through their adventures, the comic discussed “contemporary issues like urban migration and changing gender roles that readers confronted in their daily lives” (Coerver, Pasztor, and Buffington 2004, 105). The story is usually linear and starts by presenting the characters that will be at the center of the adventure. Often it begins by discussing something unrelated to the plot, but soon the main topic emerges.

*Hermelinda Linda* reached the widest audience. During the 1970s it was one of the most popular comic books in Mexico and in fact sold better than the American comics that were gaining market share in Mexico (Rubenstein 2004, 30; Hinds and Tatum 1992, 19). It was exported to other countries in Latin America. However, copies are difficult to find. Even Óscar González, its author, is missing most issues in the years considered for this research. A few issues were consulted in his

8. *La Familia Burrón*, 17186, 17187.

private collection, thanks to his generosity, and others were obtained through collectors.

Its stories contain witchcraft, magic potions, evil spells, and other “illogical” means through which we learn about poverty, corruption, laziness, and dishonesty. The purpose of highlighting these issues was to raise awareness and to provide a moral message related to social well-being.<sup>9</sup> Hermelinda comes from a poor neighborhood in Mexico City. She is missing an eye, her face is pimped, and she has a big belly. Nothing is impossible for her and she has no moral qualms about her witchcraft as long as the client pays. She knows that her magic will punish those who are hurting others. The witchcraft always works, although often there is an unwelcome side effect harming the person who paid for it. Through these unexpected side effects, the user of the magical potion discovers a reality that they did not want to learn.

The authors of these three comics shared a purpose. They chronicled the (mis) adventures and struggles of ordinary people and those who held positions of power. Public records of a cultural nature matter in authoritarian regimes, because official records are often not available to the public. There is no freedom of information or avenues to secure official records. Newspapers may be controlled by the government or self-censored. Cultural resources such as comics can therefore represent a source of historical information. They can be analyzed systematically to uncover what it is they tell us about Mexican politics. Their communication strategy is symbolic (pictorial and linguistic) rather than factual, but the scenes portrayed in their pages act as contentious events in the same sense as contentious events in real life are captured for posterity by newspaper reports, video footage, or police records (cf. Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Their availability, low price, and the ease of reading and understanding them (with their combination of colorful images and enjoyable simple texts) made them perfect vehicles for communicating ideas.

Of course, comics were not created for historians or sociologists; they served a purpose for readers, too, with their stories of injustice, trickery, threats by authority figures, and poverty and lack of opportunity of ordinary people. By creating the idea of a claimant (a person who is needy or being abused), the authors also create boundaries between those of us who sympathize with the unfortunate, and the authorities, who abuse their positions of power. The outcome is not in the comic (because nothing ever gets resolved and everything returns to normal in the next issue); it is in a social understanding created in the reader.

#### POLITICAL HUMOR AND INJUSTICE FRAMES

We argue that humor helps frame dissent because it reinforces boundaries and identities by triggering in readers feelings of relief, superiority, and rebelliousness. Humor occurs in the milieu of social rules or codes. It belongs to a social

9. Personal interview by Leticia Neria with the author, Óscar González, July 15, 2010, Mexico City.



group in the sense that someone who does not belong to the group (and therefore is unfamiliar with the social rules and codes of the group) may not understand the comedy being generated (Benton 1988, 40; Eco 1979). "Laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary" (Bergson 1911, 6; see also Raskin 1984; Critchley 2002, 67). Humor emerges for different reasons. In authoritarian regimes, political jokes express social beliefs and underline the faults of those in power. They place us temporarily in a position of superiority (Pirandello 2002, 119). As Freud suggested, laughing at that which oppresses us brings relief. Political jokes are "a tribunal through which to pass judgements on society where other ways of doing so are closed to them" (Benton 1988, 33; see also Davies 1998, 95). Closed political opportunity structures thus helps explain the existence of jokes and parodies in authoritarian countries. "Laughter is often used for self-preservation and defensive action, or for some sort of temporary survival in horrible times" (Callahan 1992, 169). In some cases, humor will be one of the few channels to express disapproval.

Furthermore, humor can be seen as liberation. It brings a feeling of rebelliousness (Griffiths 1976, 20; Freud 2002, para. 6 of 14; Purdie 1993, 126; Critchley 2002, 12; Eco 1989; Freud 1916, 150). When we laugh at someone powerful being denigrated, we have a sense of victory. The joke makes us powerful, at least temporarily. It is aimed at our antithesis, and we use it as a means of aggression. It expresses "an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective" (Bergson 1911, 87). Humor does not promise to solve the flaw, but it gives society the opportunity to uncover it. We feel avenged by the rule breaking but also "free of sin" because we ourselves did not commit the action (Eco 1989, 11; Purdie 1993, 65; Zupancic 2006). We identify with comic heroes because they manipulate conventions to their advantage; they break the code.

Comedy results in a sense of relief or pleasure. Wit "is the most social of all those psychic functions whose aim is to gain pleasure" (Freud 1916, 286). Humans live with stressful demands under strict moral codes. Society represses some of our impulses, and laughing is a social and psychological defense mechanism or safety valve for our own fears and repressions.<sup>10</sup> Situations, topics, or facts that are taboo are aired through humor and are temporarily permitted. With jokes, we can discuss some of the most censored issues. They are accepted by the conscious mind (Freud 1916, 207). This is all the more acute in societies where moral values are very strong, or the expression of opposition is difficult. As Susan Purdie (1993, 126) points out, "since it breaches norms, all carnivalesque behaviour, like joking, involves a sensation of release and a mood of rebellion."

Nevertheless, humor reminds us of the existence of the rule. We cannot deny its existence, although we may not accept it as legitimate. Any relief we feel about the breaking of the rule is only temporary. Humor is a "cold carnival" (Eco 1989, 20). It is paradoxically liberating and oppressing. Ultimately, we know that the world works in the way that is being parodied. "Political jokes are the citizens' response to the state's efforts to standardize their thinking and to frighten them

10. We use the terms *laughter*, *wit*, and other references to comedy in an interchangeable way, though we recognize that the terms can and have been differentiated and problematized.

into withholding criticism and dissent" (Benton 1988, 33). The act of humor is a means of insurrection (Davies 1998).

But why do those in power allow society to make fun of them? One answer could be that through humor society is entertained and therefore distracted from changing the status quo. Political humor maintains morale and is a harmless safety valve, a "cold carnival": we find relief, we feel avenged, but nothing changes and we simply confirm the existence of "the rule" (Eco 1989, 17). We release socially what we repress because doing so "frees us from the chain of our perceptual, conventional, logical, linguistic and moral systems" (Raskin 1984, 38). Jokes keep people happy, even if they mobilize no one. Political jokes may be "tiny revolutions," (as George Orwell pointed out in his 1945 essay "Funny but Not Vulgar"), but they are "revolutions only metaphorically" (Benton 198, 41; see also Purdie 1993, 60; Davies 1998, 176; Callahan 1992, 159). Satirists can always claim that, in the end, they were "just joking." Moreover, humor may diffuse the feeling of injustice by sugarcoating certain practices, making it easier to accept the status quo. Comics produce less hot emotion.

In the Mexican case, perhaps because most comics contained little political content and it was disguised within a story that dealt with everyday dramas, the government felt unthreatened. There were limits; criticism of the army or the president was mostly avoided, while the authorities were more relaxed about criticism of local police and politicians. Also, the government may have felt that its democratic opening obliged it to accept some barbs.

#### THE MANY DEADLY SINS: INJUSTICE FRAMES IN MEXICAN COMICS

In this section we draw on the comics to understand how their images and text connect to the social imaginary and act as an alternative injustice frame. We use two approaches. The first is to measure the frequency of certain political topics, and the second is to analyze the content. We were constrained by the availability of the materials but were able to draw on forty-five issues of *Hermelinda Linda*, seventy-eight of *La Familia Burrón*, and thirty-seven of *Los Agachados* for analysis. For analytical purposes we considered comics as "text," understanding them as "a network of different messages depending on different codes and working at different levels of signification" (quote from Eco 1979, 5; Saraceni 2003, 51). The viewer compares "the world such as is presented by the text with his own 'real' world, that is, the world of his (presumed) concrete experience" (Eco 1979, 37). Our method of analysis uses semiotics and narrative tools to segment, describe, and analyze sources, drawing out information about their use of humor and expression of social dissent (see especially Gubern 1981; see also Muro 2004). We reduce segments of the text to smaller units, which allows us to choose a topic to follow (such as corruption). We looked for *iconic signs*, images that represent a reality; and *indexical signs*, which provide information about a place or a person without stating it directly (Casetti and di Chio 2007, 112–113).

Elements with most relevance to the story were identified by highlighting the place they occupy in the frame and their regularity and size, among other characteristics, according to focalization criteria (Casetti and di Chio 2007, 158). These

elements were then examined using the theory of humor in order to pinpoint the historical references. Focalization criteria, such as the policemen's gestures and activities in *La Familia Burrón*, and indexical signs, such as the references to President Echeverría embodied in Mayor Trastupijes's sunglasses, hat, and coat in *Los Agachados*, were both important.<sup>11</sup>

The role of the reader is important because comics "cannot truly show the world of the story, but can only suggest it by employing the device of the synecdoche, using a part of something to represent the whole of the thing" (Duncan and Smith 2009, 158). The reader gives meaning to the story inside the comic by using previous knowledge of similar situations from his own reality. The plausibility of comics comes not from the images, characters, or actions but from the cooperation of the reader in accepting certain "truths" during the process of reading (Eco 2007).

We follow Román Gubern's model of analysis, using three elements that belong specifically to comics (Gubern 1981; also Duncan and Smith 2009, 155–158). One is the way the balloon permits characters to express themselves. The balloon can be studied according to its shape: a regular one to express normal conversation, a chain saw to show agitation, a cloud when referring to a thought.<sup>12</sup> Its content can also be studied, whether dialogue or images. "Lettering . . . treated 'graphically' and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery. In this context it provides the mood, a narrative bridge and the implication of sound" (Eisner 2008, 2, 4). The use of bold fonts denotes excitement, a small font means that someone is whispering. Sometimes images appear inside the balloons, such as symbols when a character is swearing or a light bulb when someone has an idea (Gubern 1981, 145–150; Muro 2004, 95). Words representing sounds, such as *boom!*, *bang!*, *aarrgh!*, or *phew!*, also carry meaning. They can be defined as exclamations that correspond to a stereotypical situation that is already a convention, agreed and known by the readers and the creators. A neophyte in the language of comics will be able to relate the sound-word to its reference (helped by the image).

Hence, when we see that a character is upset, yelling, whispering, or that something was about to collapse, we are following these conventions (Gasca and Gubern 2001). Frequent examples appear in *La Familia Burrón*. When Borola fights with someone, we read words such as *cuas*, *chin*, *pon*, *crash*, and we understand that she is fighting even if the frame does not show the confrontation itself. Nevertheless the style, particularities, and recurrences differ in each comic. Rius, for example, uses bold fonts when someone is yelling but also when he wants us to pay careful attention to a fact, and a whisper appears in brackets (as in the work of other artists).

The second element is images that give information about someone's feelings or way of thinking or provide details about the mood of a place. These are visual metaphors that are included in the frame and can be inside or outside balloons.

11. The identification of topics such as abuse of authority was accomplished using Eco's approach, where facts which are related in meaning are put together to reveal a correlation that allow us to 'label' these facts. Eco (2000, 131–144).

12. A full review of balloon styles is found in Gasca and Gubern (2001, 422–479).

Their function is to express the state of mind or the feelings of the characters. They can also be understood as symbols that represent the invisible (McCloud 1993, 129). Some classic visual metaphors include smoke coming out of the ears when a character eats something hot or spicy, or a broken heart when they suffer in love. An example can be found in the issue in which Ruperto Tacuche is tortured and we know he was electrocuted because of the broken lines around his body. Another function of these metaphors is to create an environment or to set a mood. When a character receives a thump and the image includes birds flying around his head, we know that this represents dizziness or confusion.

The third element is *kinetic signs*, which indicate movement. Kinetic signs show the space that something or someone has moved along, and it is generally expressed as lines marking the direction the body has followed. When someone is running, the lines will be straight; a swing will be a curved line; a repetition of a movement, such as waving a hand, can be represented with the repetition of one element several times, one over the other, which would look as though the character had many hands. They are also known as *motion lines* (McCloud 1993, 109–114). Although there are conventions, they differ according to the artist and publishing company.

Table 1 presents the results of our analysis of topics in the comics. When a topic appeared consistently in numerous issues, we considered it to be a social concern and looked for it across the three titles. This enabled us to create an index of relevant topics. The frequency in which topics were discussed is a gauge of their relative importance, often indicating that they were not isolated or rare concerns but rather were part of the social imaginary.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to note several things: first, the most frequently criticized topics in *Los Agachados* are politicians and the security forces, while for *La Familia Burrón* and *Hermelinda Linda* poverty and the security forces occur most often. Second, in *La Familia Burrón* and *Hermelinda Linda*, commentary on social issues of machismo, wealthy people, and poverty is very high, in some cases higher than criticism of political issues. Third, *Los Agachados* was clearly more focused on criticizing political issues than the other two comics. In *Los Agachados* the drawings are less detailed and refined and the characters are not as exaggerated as in *La Familia Burrón*, and not as realistic as in *Hermelinda Linda*. But its focus is more overtly political and serious.

In the remainder of this section we consider some examples in which *diputados* (members of Congress) and the police were subject to criticism, and where the comics seek to frame boundaries between victim and oppressor, just and unjust. *Diputados* and the police are among the most frequently criticized in these three comic books. *La Familia Burrón* is the only comic with a regular character who is a *diputado*, but they appear in conversations and other references in *Los Agachados* and *Hermelinda Linda*, too. The references are consistently negative; *diputados* are

13. In this essay we collapse all the humorous references into one single category, but readers wishing to learn more about which mechanisms of humor were used to illustrate which injustice should consult Neria (2012). The mechanisms are incongruity, exaggeration, superiority, relief, and breaking the rule.

Table 1 Incidence of humorous portrayals of the authorities in the three comics

	<i>Hermelinda Linda</i>	<i>Los Agachados</i>	<i>La Familia Burrón</i>
Abuse of authority	12	53	—
Army	—	7	2
Civil servants	7	17	—
Democracy	—	54	3
Official corruption	13	54	19
Police/paramilitary	32	90	89
Politicians	12	156	30
Poverty	29	42	178
Torture/violence	9	65	47
Other*	102	139	267

Sources: *Hermelinda Linda* by Óscar González, forty-five issues, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1973. *Los Agachados* by Rius, thirty-seven issues, 1970–1974, 1976. *La Familia Burrón* by Gabriel Vargas, seventy-eight issues, 1973, 1974.

\*In *Hermelinda Linda* the category *other* includes foreigners, guerrilla groups, machismo, rich people, social corruption, and youth. In *Los Agachados* it includes communism, foreigners, guerrilla movements, indigenous people, machismo, political parties, the media, rich people, schoolteachers, social corruption, unions, and youth. In *La Familia Burrón* it includes communism, countryside, guerrilla movements, machismo, rich people, schoolteachers, social corruption, and youth.

lazy, incompetent, and abusive of their position of power, which they did not obtain democratically. In an episode of *La Familia Burrón*, Borola visits her friend, the diputado Gorraez. When she tries to borrow some money, the diputado tells her that he cannot help because he is in a hurry to get to the Congress. Borola replies: “Don’t give me excuses. There are too many like you who just sit around all day.”<sup>14</sup> The diputado’s name (Gorraez) is a play on words: “*vivir de gorra*” means to get things without paying for them.

In *Los Agachados*, some characters are discussing the failure of the Mexican Revolution, since it did not bring the social welfare that was expected. A man is reading aloud from a newspaper: “Mexico has almost 10 million unemployed [*desocupados*].” A caption next to the image adds “(not counting the *diputados*).”<sup>15</sup> This play on words links diputados with idleness, which is another meaning of the word *desocupado*. In another issue of *Los Agachados*, Professor Hans, the German scientist who lives in Chayotitlán, is explaining what calories are, and he says that we expend calories with the physical activities we undertake every day. The comment is illustrated with a clipping of a man in black and white on a vintage bicycle saying: “Even a diputado burns it off, though you wouldn’t believe it.”<sup>16</sup>

In *Los Agachados*, Nopálzin expresses the widely held view that the main political party PRI stole the elections. Nopálzin and his neighbors are playing football and they need a referee. Mayor Trastupijes volunteers, and Nopálzin comments: “You a referee? Maybe not—better someone who’s not from the ‘RIP.’ You’re all

14. *La Familia Burrón*, 17280, p. 20.

15. *Los Agachados*, 282, p. 21.

16. *Los Agachados*, 51, p. 12.

much too tricky."<sup>17</sup> In another example from *Los Agachados*, Mayor Trastupijes informs another politician, Municipal President Epitacio, that he will not be the candidate for the next elections since "he does not know how to steal." The two politicians then decide that the next PRI candidate should be someone honest. Epitacio wonders where they would find such a person. Trastupijes says: "Well, you know what they say. No one joins the Party to stay poor."<sup>18</sup>

The police are portrayed as violent, dishonest, and lazy. In an episode of *La Familia Burrón*, two friends go out partying and get into trouble in a cabaret. When the police arrive, one of the policemen asks his chief: "Should we go in swinging?"<sup>19</sup> The two friends are jailed and the last caption of the comic reads: "Although Mrs. Burrón got news right away that her husband was in the lock-up, no one could say how he had lost his wallet in the 'investigation.'"<sup>20</sup> The police are referred to as "the devil's helpers," even to their faces. Yet they never seem troubled by this. Bella Bellota is looking for her boyfriend, Ruperto, because many days have passed since he was arrested and there has been no information on his whereabouts. When she finally finds him, she asks him in front of the guards: "Are you OK? The devil's helpers haven't mistreated you?"<sup>21</sup> In another story in *La Familia Burrón*, Ruperto is waiting for his girlfriend outside her house when the police stop and detain him without reason. The policeman threatens him: "If you don't want your legs broken, shut up and get in the car." Ruperto replies: "You can't arrest an innocent man for no reason." The policeman responds: "Oh no?" and shoves him into the car.<sup>22</sup>

The *Policía Judicial* are called *perjudicial* (prejudicial) in a play on words. We find such language in an issue of *La Familia Burrón*, and also in one from *Los Agachados*, suggesting that this was a common way to refer to these forces. From the comment of one of the characters in *Los Agachados*, the *Policía Judicial* is more feared than the regular police: in an episode in which two policemen are trapped in a jail, they hear a voice outside, and wondering who it could be, one answers: "They're *perjudicial*. Be afraid."<sup>23</sup>

In the episode of *La Familia Burrón* in which Ruperto is accused of robbing a jewelry shop, he is interrogated by police investigators who are referred to as "Ruperto's tormenters."<sup>24</sup> There is good reason to refer to them that way, as we see from the severe punishment that he suffers. He is questioned for hours under powerful lights, and a group of policemen give him a beating. They are portrayed with evil eyes and animal fangs. One of the investigators threatens him: "We'll give you one more chance, then we'll use other means to make you talk."<sup>25</sup>

17. RIP is a play on the acronym PRI.

18. *Los Agachados*, 26, p. 6.

19. *La Familia Burrón*, 17171, p. 32.

20. *La Familia Burrón*, 17171, p. 34.

21. *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 16.

22. *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 5.

23. *Los Agachados*, 97, p. 26. The torture and abuse they inflicted were well known.

24. *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 11.

25. *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 13.

This threat becomes real in the next frame, where Ruperto receives severe electric shocks, along with crude language from one of the policemen represented by strange symbols. The caption says, "A million-volt shock lit Ruperto up like a lightbulb of 5000 watts."<sup>26</sup>

In *Hermelinda Linda* a woman visits her son-in-law in jail, trying to deliver a basket of food. He cannot be visited because he is in the infirmary, so she must leave the basket with the guard. She asks the policeman not to eat the food, and he replies: "I won't even taste it . . . as long as you give me a cut."<sup>27</sup> She gives him some money, again asking him to resist temptation, and he replies: "For 50 pesos I could go without eating for a week."<sup>28</sup> The policeman is depicted as clownish, with gawking eyes and protruding tongue. In *Los Agachados*, Mayor Trastupijes orders Bedoyo to arrest a man who is painting antigovernment graffiti. Trastupijes insists on arresting the man without using violence. Bedoyo thinks to himself, "Hmm, how do you arrest someone without hitting him?"<sup>29</sup> In another issue, the local police are looking for someone who robbed a visiting member of Congress. Working separately, two policemen each arrest an innocent civilian, framing them with the crime. When they are brought before the authorities, both badly injured, one of the accused says: "I'm innocent! He grabbed me and threatened to kill me if I didn't confess!" The other prisoner adds: "The cop took me from my house and forced me to confess with his nightstick!"<sup>30</sup> The police are dishevelled and unshaven.

Another example can be found in *La Familia Burrón*, when an alleged thief is captured by the police. He is accused of robbing a jewelry store. One of the policemen says to him: "We're not going to waste time with you. Spill the beans or we'll stick your feet in melted lead."<sup>31</sup> In a story in *La Familia Burrón* in which the wealthy Tinoco family is robbed, Mr. Titino Tinoco calls the police as soon as he notices the crime. When the chief of police answers the phone, he is eating a burger and drinking a soft drink at his desk, paying little attention to his work. This is a common portrayal of the police. We might imagine that Mr. Tinoco phoned at a bad time, during lunch, but everything in the panel has a reason for being there. In this case, the elements in the image are pointing to the police chief's lack of professionalism. This is reinforced after Mr. Tinoco informs the police he knows of no suspects. The policeman replies: "What? I thought you were going to mention a few suspects. This sounds like a lot of work."<sup>32</sup>

A similar image appears in the episode previously described when Bella Bellota is looking for Ruperto in various prisons. She speaks with the head of the jail, a policeman who is playing tic-tac-toe by himself.<sup>33</sup> An adult policeman playing a

26. *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 13.

27. *Hermelinda Linda*, 363, p. 20.

28. *Hermelinda Linda*, 363, p. 21.

29. *Los Agachados*, 71, p. 6.

30. *Los Agachados*, 39, p. 24.

31. *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 34.

32. *La Familia Burrón*, 17191, p. 22.

33. *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 15.

children's game by himself while working is incongruous. However, beyond the absurdity is the intention to insult all policemen through universalization, and to point out that the police were unprofessional. Likewise, in *La Familia Burrón*, Borola visits a childhood friend, who tells her that she is married to a highway patrolman and that they are wealthy because "from bribes alone you can pocket a million a month. . . . when I met him he was a traffic cop at a busy intersection, and already rich. Later, he realized that surprising lovers in their cars was a gold mine, and he became a patrolman."<sup>34</sup>

The torture in *La Familia Burrón* is very detailed (see Castellanos 2007, 224227, 248–254), from beatings to more sophisticated methods, which are referred to as "scientific advances in investigation."<sup>35</sup> However, they are caricatured and mixed with the use of colloquial language and comic expression. For example, in order to extract a confession, the police chief says to Mr. Tinoco (in the episode about the robbery) that they can do "a simple 'arm twist,' then pull out fingernails one at a time and even hang them by their tongue,"<sup>36</sup> and he adds that the reason for using violence is because "it's hard to get a confession with kind words. With these types you need to use force and violence."<sup>37</sup> His methods, which are described by the police chief himself, also include skinning the suspect, putting boiling oil in his ears and torches in his eyes. For all their violence, the police appear to be very slovenly and unfit.

The army is strongly criticized in *Los Agachados*, despite the efforts of the authorities to prevent this portrayal. A caption reads: "They carry on with arbitrary detentions, beatings, torture, and threats to the opposition."<sup>38</sup> The frame is illustrated with a soldier resembling Adolf Hitler, with the same moustache and hair. By recognizing Hitler, we understand that the author considers Mexican soldiers to have behaved like Hitler in their violations of human rights. The caption makes this plain. The violence of the soldiers is confirmed in another issue when Professor Hans explains that the government has not found a way of conducting a dialogue with the students, only violence, and the frame shows a soldier wearing a gas mask beating a student.<sup>39</sup> In another issue, we see a peasant standing in front of a grave while making a comment about those who demanded land reform: "They got what they wanted: soil . . ."<sup>40</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: FRAMING, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND IDENTITY

Obviously it is impossible to show that the minds of all readers of comics were affected by the framing inherent in their stories. But given the levels of dissent among many intellectuals, media outlets, and others, and the reactions to abuses

34. *La Familia Burrón*, 17280, p. 16

35. *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p.13.

36. *La Familia Burrón*, 17191, p. 22.

37. *La Familia Burrón*, 17191, p. 29.

38. *Los Agachados*, 115, p. 12.

39. *Los Agachados*, 77, p. 20.

40. *Los Agachados*, 98, p. 10.



from some of those outside Mexico, it was clear that abuses were part of the social imaginary during the Echeverría period (at least among the middle class). And the messages of the comics were consistent in terms of their portrayal of abuse and injustice. This is important given the large differences between them in other respects—their appeal, art, stories, and so forth. What comics did was to widen the net of those who were exposed to the anti-official framing. They popularized injustice frames. This is significant given the high sales and pass-along readership. Through comics, the social imaginary was extended and alternative (non-official) frames were introduced or strengthened.

We have seen common threads in the comics in terms of the way they address social injustices. Through the characters' misfortunes we recognize the daily suffering of the population. There is a consistency that suggests a common anti-authority frame. The language of humor helps readers digest the injustices perpetrated and tolerated by the authorities. It enabled serious topics to be addressed in an unserious way. Not all the stories in the comics address political issues, but when they do, their framing is consistent. They reinforce the boundaries between the weak and the powerful and between citizens and authorities, and by doing so they frame injustices clearly. The purpose of humor is not that we accept the value system it portrays but that we recognize its existence. Denigrating the authorities allows us to achieve a brief victory on behalf of the vulnerable.

Humor connected official malfeasance to the social imaginary by exaggerating faults and humiliating those in power. In an episode reviewed above, the prison guard's lack of dignity in asking for money to safeguard some food, and later mentioning that for a small amount of money he wouldn't eat for a week, elevates the reader to a position of superiority. We would neither participate in such an open act of corruption nor promise to stop eating for seven days just for money. The policeman's actions degrade him. We feel sympathy for the woman who offers money (Purdie 1993, 65). Fictional scenes like these enable us to criticize and humiliate by making "a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed" (Bergson 1911, 197).

The language and symbols of comics create alternative meanings, challenging official constructs and official frames. The naming that occurs through official discourse is overturned. New names take hold. Cultural codes are inverted (Melucci 1996). It is a communicative process because it involves sharing understandings intersubjectively through symbols and language. The idea of injustice is defined and sharpened through cultural expression. When comics portray the government as corrupt and enjoying a lifestyle well beyond the means of the poor, they illuminate boundaries between the governing and the governed. They connect individuals by attributing specific characteristics and relationships to them. Such processes deepen the cognitive understanding of us versus them. They establish relations within and across boundaries and create shared understandings of these boundaries (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Moreover, comics are part of the public record. Without ever joining together in a physical space or communicating with one another, readers form a common consciousness as they enjoy a simple tale. The inversion of the powerful and the powerless is a form of temporary entertainment, but it leaves behind a residue of constructed meaning.

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