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Jokes from the socialist countries in Finland in the 1960s

Introduction

As the pun “*Kekkoslovakia*” – referring to the family name of the late President of Finland Urho Kaleva *Kekkonen* (1900–1982) and the Republic of Czechoslovakia – insinuates, the Finnish political regime somehow resembled the (“soft” or “hard”) dictatorship of the socialist countries in the 1960s and the 1970s. Moreover, in the heyday of internal and external “finlandisation”, Finland officially maintained very “friendly” relations with the Soviet Union, so much so that no “unfriendly facts” about it or the socialist system and society could make the news there, and people who violated this rule were reprimanded by the state authorities (Halmesvirta 2017). President *Kekkonen* was in quite a hegemonic position in regulating the Soviet relations, befriending the Soviet leaders, particularly Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971). In some official speeches, he even presented Vladimir Lenin as the “god” or “founding father” of Finnish independence (Halmesvirta 2009). It may therefore come as a surprise that a book containing overtly political jokes and caricatures from socialist countries could be published in Finland (Halmesvirta 2017, *passim*; it should be noted that political jokes could not be published in the Eastern bloc countries; caricatures existed and were published, but had to address some limited social problems like alcoholism, not criticise political leadership). As I have shown elsewhere, censorship did not quite reach politically humorous columnists or caricaturists in Finland.

The editors of the collection entitled *Ole totinen, toveri. Kaskuja kansademokratiaista* [Be serious, comrade. Anecdotes from the People’s Democracies] by Harri Kaasalainen and Pekka Lounela, published in the year 1965, humorously commented that jokes were rather easy to smuggle across the Iron Curtain – nobody

could stop them, as they were in the air over the Iron Curtain, so to speak.¹ As Christie Davies puts it, they “sneaked round the prohibitions” (Davies 2009, 19). They were also transplanted to Finland by journalists and travellers visiting the Soviet bloc, and through the “Radio Yerevan” stories that circulated without any restrictions.² Knowing the sensitivity of the material, the editors wisely made the gesture of mild self-censorship by using the Finnish term *kasku* (anecdote, funny story) instead of *vitsi* (joke) in the title of the book, obviously because in Finnish *vitsi* carries not only funny and ridiculing but also somewhat denigrating connotations. Bored with the way the Soviet bloc was vilified in the West, they also wanted to give a say to the writers, journalists and ordinary people of the satellite countries, from whom they had heard the jokes, and let them tell how they themselves observed, envisaged and ridiculed the workings of the socialist system. They openly confessed to being envious of the high level of political humor in the Eastern bloc in comparison to its poor state in Finland, known as a democratic land of seriousness. The large number (265) of jokes in *Ole toinen toveri* tells us of the widespread and deep frustration of the people in the socialist system – a frustration which humour and laughter was supposed to relieve. In fact, they served the same purpose in Finland, particularly to those with far-right views, who detested Kekkonen’s “soft dictatorship”. To the author of this article, the jokes proved to be an eye-opener, offering insight into a largely unknown, underground world.

Davies (2009, 18–19) has concluded that jokes in socialism were highly political, referred to distinctive social structures, and were most likely to spring where control was the most stringent. My approach to interpret them is different. Inasmuch as the leaders of the socialist system shut themselves away from the “real” society, and their belief in the system and in its “paradisiacal” goals departed from social realities, the jokes about the system reflected this estrangement and became increasingly surrealistic and absurd. They reached a meta-level in which nothing was sacred. When silence became unbearable, what proved a real alternative was political comedy, at times bordering on gallows humour. In analyzing them, I will focus on three categories: religious imagery, travels and shortages depicted

1 Harri Kaasalainen (1930–1967) was a poet and playwright, member of the Board of the Union of Finnish Writers in 1960–1966, dramaturge of the Finnish Radio and TV (*Yle*). Pekka Lounela (1932–2002) was a critic, poet and columnist. He worked as a dramaturge of the Finnish Radio and TV (*Yle*) in 1957–1963 and finally as the head of its Theatre Department. The illustrations were drawn by Olavi Hurmerinta (1928–2015), who was the caricaturist of the leading conservative paper *Uusi Suomi* [New Finland].

2 Radio Yerevan is a fictional broadcaster featured in jokes popular in the Soviet Union and the former Eastern bloc countries in the 1950s and 1960s. These jokes often referred to topics which the communist authorities deemed sensitive.

in a corpus of ca. 20 jokes. Naturally, this analysis may only be marginally entertaining: as is the case with poems, an analysis of jokes tends to make them trivial or shallow.

Religion

The first prominent group of jokes used biblical religious imagery, mainly when socialism could be somehow compared or juxtaposed with Christianity, indicating that the eradication of religious belief had not been entirely successful, or that socialist atheism and the Christian system of beliefs could make a curious yet useful mixture in the minds of ingenious comrades.³ Let us cite some examples.

“What is the difference between a revelation and a miracle?”. The answer was: “‘Revelation’ takes place when Jesus appears in front of the Politburo to solve economic problems, and a ‘miracle’ when Politburo does something to solve them” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 8). A miracle also happened when a baby was born from a “comradely” marriage without romantic love (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 77). Several jokes compared paradise and the realities of socialism, and occasionally socialist scientists were claimed to have invented both earthly and heavenly paradises, which reflected the lack of satisfaction of everyday needs in real socialism. However, the highest imaginable stage of socialism was not yet quite like a paradise, although in one joke it was reached when “people had got enough of everything”, so much that they cannot stomach it all (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 62).

Some jokes reveal deep skepticism concerning the impact socialist, anti-Christian and atheistic propaganda may have on peoples’ minds. For example: Eliza comes home after her first day at school and her mother asks: “What did you learn?”. Eliza is lost in thought and comes up with an intriguing question: “Does God know that we do not believe in him?” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 11). Ingenuity in concealing one’s real beliefs seemed to have gone quite far, too: one comrade was seen through a keyhole crossing himself in the toilet. In front of the party committee he explains: “At first I had to straighten my cockade, then check my party badge on the right pocket, then my party membership card in the left pocket and finally I buttoned my trousers” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 8). There were also jokes which combined two main themes: religion and space-race, i.e. “travel”. In a hesitant and secretive tone Khrushchev interviews Yuri Gagarin: “Tell me comrade, did you see any white-winged creatures up there”? Gagarin says: “I did see

3 There were some slightly anti-Semitic jokes about cunning Jews (see e.g., Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 80, 84, 93, 102).

them”. Khrushchev: “I feared this, promise me not to tell anybody else”. Then the Archbishop of Moscow puts the same question to Gagarin and he answers: “No, I did not”. The archbishop retorts: “This is what is suspected, you should not tell anybody else” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 7).

Heaven, hell and the devil were prominent motifs in the jokes: the hell resembling socialism (some sort of “torture”) and the devil in various iterations portrayed as a merciless dictator. In one joke, the devil seeks asylum in heaven because Stalin had been “admitted” to hell; in another, he foregoes a visit to heaven because he was told that the road there leads to socialism (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 13, 15). Yet another joke relates that after Stalin died, it was debated in the Politburo whether he should be buried in the Soviet Union. The Politburo had received an offer from Israel but someone soon protested: “I have heard that someone once resurrected there” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 28). Lenin appears in the *Toveri-*-collection only once, which indicates considerable respect: he was admitted to a test-period in heaven, and when God asked St. Peter to report about his “progress”, he answered: “He has done very well, my Comrade” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 33). In another joke St. Peter grants one wish to Kennedy, Khrushchev and Gomulka each.⁵ Kennedy: “May an atomic bomb destroy the USSR”; Khrushchev: “May an atomic bomb destroy the USA”; Gomulka: “Now I would like to have a cup of coffee” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 96).⁶ And the socialist hell was certainly more bearable than the capitalist one because of the permanent shortages (including the lack of tools) there (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 12).

Travel and defection

Many jokes referred to space travel and conquest. For instance, after Russians launch the Sputnik in 1957, two Hungarians discuss the topic. Imre wonders whether the Russians would soon travel to the moon, and János whispers, disbelief and hope in his voice: “All of them?” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 21–22).⁷

4 Khrushchev, whose reputation was not as bad as Josef Stalin’s, appeared in numerous jokes and satirical pictures. See e.g., a picture of him and Castro (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 59).

5 Władysław Gomułka (1905–1982) was a Polish communist politician; the leader of post-war Poland between the years 1947–1948 and 1956–1970. In the 1950s he was relatively popular for seeking “a Polish way to socialism” and giving rise to the period known as the “Polish thaw”. In the 1960s, however, Gomułka became more authoritarian, as he was afraid to destabilize the system.

6 Poland has never been in possession of any nuclear weapons.

7 Also appeared in Poland. Nowadays the same joke formula is applied to the Americans who want to reach Mars.

One joke neatly combined the motifs of space conquest and travel: the Estonian communist party leader optimistically declares: “In 1967 we will send a man to the moon, and in 1974 to Mars!”. One comrade humbly asks: “And when can we visit Helsinki?” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 18). It has been established that ca. 211,000 Hungarians defected in 1956 (Romsics 1999, 320). They are followed by one lucky dog of whom his Austrian fellow later inquires: “Why did you defect? Was your house in bad condition, weren’t there enough bones to eat?”. The Hungarian dog answers: “My house was winter-proof and there were plenty of bones to eat but I wanted to bark, too” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 25). Back at home, Imre’s defection is discussed in a party committee meeting, where his actions are severely criticised by one comrade. However, his own self-criticism follows: “Why didn’t I follow him?” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 24). Another comrade of Imre’s is taken to a mental hospital: the reason being that he tried to defect to the Soviet Union (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 25). The most adventurous would-be defector comes from Montenegro; he climbs to a mountain-top and is ready to jump down. His comrade wonders: “What are you going to do?”. The fellow explains: “I’ve just learned that the world is spinning around. I’ll jump when the USA is down there” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 37).

Shortages

In spite of the so called “fridge-socialism” (at least in Hungary in the 1960s), shortages and complaints about them became a part of everyday life in the socialist bloc. This was abundantly reflected in jokes. I cite a few of them below, starting with the ones which bore on the so-called imperialist international relations.

In one joke a socialist economist comes to the conclusion that, basically, the difference between socialism and capitalism is truly economic: in capitalism people exploit Others, in socialism it is the other way around (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 89). In the shadow of the economic competition between the West and the East, Kennedy informs Khrushchev that the “Yankees” had decided to build socialism in their country. Khrushchev is not particularly delighted: “Oh crap, where can we buy wheat then?” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 63). He wonders how on earth the USA and Canada can produce so much grain, and he soon realizes why: it is typical capitalist overproduction (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 76). In another joke, a Foreign Minister from a developing country begs the Soviet ambassador: “Could you please send us something that helps us deal with our famine, instead of tons of political literature and socialist advertisements?”. A new shipment is duly sent, consisting solely of cookbooks (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 65).

People found ingenious ways to go around the shortages or transform them into something different without eliminating them. For example, one comrade complains that although it was announced on the radio that large amounts of meat, milk and butter had been produced, his fridge remains empty. His friend holds a solution at hand: “Connect the fridge to the radio” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 34). Other inventions could help, too: if only a cow and a giraffe could be interbred, benefits would accrue: the giraffe part of the new animal could eat from the neighbour’s side of the field and the cow part would produce milk on one’s own field (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 68–69). And, reminding us when and where the circulation and reuse of products actually began: in socialism drunkards could buy liquor with the money they earned from selling empty bottles (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 35) (!), which has nowadays become an everyday sight in the streets in Finland. It is remarkable that the jokes concerning shortages do not seem to express much explicit admiration for capitalist abundance or luxury – that would have been a complaint rather than a joke – they only implicitly remind people of the existence of another, albeit not much better system.

Three prisoners sit in the same cell (Fig. 1). They glance at each other furtively. Finally, one of them says: “I cried out: ‘Down with Gomulka!’” and I was sentenced to five years”. The second gives a start: “I cried out: ‘Long live Gomulka!’ And I was also sentenced to five years”. Both of them look at the third prisoner and wait for his reaction. Finally, he confesses: “I got ten years. I am Gomulka” (Kaasalainen, Lounela 1965, 51).



Fig. 1. In a Polish prison (Kaasalainen, Lounela, 1965, 51).

Concluding remarks

What did socialist jokes mean to the humour-reading Finns? By way of conclusion, four points can be made. First, they showed them that everything was not as good, and that people living in the satellite states were not as happy as it was depicted by the leftist propaganda and romanticist images found in socialist magazines (e.g. *Maaailma ja me* [The world and us]) and movies in Finland. Jokes presented the “unfriendly facts” in a roundabout way, as well as a mental reality that differed from the official one. Secondly, Finns realised that socialist jokes were often clever and ingenious, and enriched the rather meagre array of jokes in Finland, which were mostly about the miserly Laihians (“using the same piece of bark to wipe their arses after shitting”), or the homosexual or overly libidinous Swedes (“how do you separate two Swedes from each other? Cannot be done!”). Thirdly, they gave some rearguard ammunition to the opposition of Kekkonen’s official Finland, where self-censorship in dealings with the matters of the Eastern bloc should have been exercised. Despite being loud, however, the political opposition on the far right was quite insignificant in Finnish politics in the 1960s. Nevertheless, the sheer fact that such a collection of jokes was published demonstrates that freedom of expression was still available, and that yet another genre of entertainment could be cherished there. Finally, the jokes made it manifest to the Finnish readership that even if the socialist system was totalitarian in various degrees within the Eastern bloc, it was unable to *totally* conquer the minds and thoughts of the so-called ordinary citizen. In a “liberal”, democratic Finland where “soft” self-censorship was the order of the day, one could wonder what sort of culture of humour would make the day when finlandisation comes to an end (late 1980s). Where is the humour of de-finlandisation?

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