

The Year Mexico Stopped Laughing: The Crowd, Satire, and Censorship in Mexico City

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On 17 March 1949 the satirical magazine *El Presente* finally shut its doors. For nine months, the publication had provided what their writers called a “space for the angry voice of the people”.¹ They were not alone. During that brief period, other journalists, artists and amateur satirists had joined in, writing articles, plays, songs and jokes that mocked the political elite. Their denunciations rocked the country’s political establishment. Mexican officials confessed to the British ambassador that in summer 1948 “the flood gates of criticism were opened wide”. There was a “tenseness in the political atmosphere, which seemed to render anything possible”.² In the city’s cantinas, bar room bookies took bets on when the Alemán government was going to fall.³ If the magazine’s brief run was a high point for satire’s political potential, its closure proved a turning point for the Mexico City press. As Carlos Monsiváis argued, after *El Presente* folded, “what had been the critical space of Mexican journalism restricted itself in a compulsive manner”.⁴ Lessons were learned. Reporters were reluctant to stoke the political unrest of the capital’s crowds and political satire for a mass audience disappeared.

¹ Renato Leduc, “Jajaja”, *Presente*, 17 March 1949.

² Public Records Office, Foreign Office Files, Mexico, Report, 29 Aug. 1950.

³ Archivo General de la Nación, Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales Caja 112 Exp. 1, (henceforth AGN/DGIPS-112/Exp 1) Informe, 4 Aug. 1948.

⁴ Carlos Monsiváis, “La crónica y el reportaje como géneros periodísticos” in José de la Luz Lozano and Samuel Flores Longoria (eds.), *Periodismo: una visión desde Nuevo León* (Monterrey: Gobierno de Nuevo León, 1989), pp.33-45, p.34.

Between 1940 and 1970 gradual social changes transformed Mexicans' relationship to the written word. Broad cultural, economic, and political frameworks shaped what was written. But the history of the press is not only one of long-term structures, but also one of individual moments.⁵ They comprised brief, intense interactions among journalists, officials and readers; they linked to broader street protests; and they carried both short and long term consequences. 1948 was one such moment. For a few months, readers' connections to the press changed. In the second year of Miguel Alemán's presidency, the confluence of rising prices, monetary devaluation, and elite corruption generated serious disquiet. Critical publications found a real audience. *El Presente's* writers, together with other journalists, playwrights and street protestors came together to produce a savage denunciation of the post-revolutionary regime and posit the real chance of political upheaval. The crisis also changed the state's political strategies. Forced resignations and cheap food co-opted the Mexico City crowd. Attacks on the press and other satirical works were frequent.⁶ Violence, dirty tricks, and propaganda closed down critical spaces and brought mainstream newspapers onside. Functionaries adapted and learned; similar emergency measures would shape the management of future crises. Finally, the 1948 crisis also changed the nature of humour itself. Over the next few years, officials moved against popular satirists, co-opting the pliant and starving the more recalcitrant of space and funds. By the early 1950s, printed satire had lost its connection to popular protest; it had become the preserve of the political elite.

⁵ For a theory of the importance of moments or "temporalities" see William H. Sewell, *Logics of history: social theory and social transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁶ AGN, Presidentes Miguel Alemán Valdés (MAV), 542.1/700, Asociación Mexicana de Periodistas to President Alemán, 12 Oct. 1948.

The Satiric Moment

The Revolution unleashed a wave of political satire throughout the Mexican capital. Freed from the constraints of Porfirian censorship, writers now lampooned the political elite in two spaces, the theatre and text. For three decades musical hall political skits and satirical magazines were revolutionary cultural forms on a par with muralism or *corridos*.⁷ At first President Miguel Alemán favoured the production of political humour. Like his predecessors, he thought it an escape valve and even sponsored a series of satirical magazines. But during the first two years of his rule, political and socio-economic changes generated serious popular unrest, especially in Mexico City. Rumours of high-level sleaze, from juicy public contracts to contraband and drug trafficking, created the perception that Alemán was running a corrupt and inefficient administration. Anti-union policies, the sidelining of the military, rising prices, and the messy peso devaluation made these accusations stick. Individual jokes, they say, are all about timing; so is widespread satire. In 1948, political corruption and economic forces combined to generate what I term here a “satiric moment”, a Mexican Saturnalia. During this brief period, Mexicans of all stripes put aside class rivalries and came together to criticise and lampoon the ruling elite.⁸

⁷ Edward Wright Rios, *Searching for Madre Matiana: Prophecy and popular culture in modern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 2014), pp.153-190; John Mraz, *Looking for Mexico: Modern visual culture and national identity* (Durham: Duke University press, 2009), pp.153-200; José Luis Martínez S. *La Vieja Guardia, Protagonistas del periodismo mexicano* (Mexico City: Plaza Janes, 2005), p.234; Armando de María y Campos, *El Teatro de Género Chico en La Revolución Mexicana* (Mexico City: INRM, 1956); Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2001); Gerardo Luzuriaga, “Teatro y Revolución: Apuntes sobre la Revista Política en México, Mester”, Vol. xxi, No. 1 (Spring 1992); Alejandro Ortiz Bullé Goyri, “Orígenes y desarrollo del teatro de revista en México (1869-1953)” in David Olguín, *Un siglo de Teatro en México*, (Mexico City: FCE, 2011), pp.40-53.

⁸ Saturnalia was the Roman feast, which Bakhtin thought the high point of satire. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (Champaign-Urbana, Indiana Press, 1984), pp.8-9, 198-9.

At first Miguel Alemán encouraged Mexican satirists to ply their trade. He was known as the smiling president - Mr Colgate - whose broad, toothy grin was meant to indicate a sense of humour. During his campaign, he allowed playwrights to mock his riotous student days and his lack of military experience.⁹ And when he came to power, he announced a new era of cultural openness by allowing the first performance of Rodolfo Usigli's righteous attack on revolutionary hypocrisy, *El Gesticulador*, written a decade earlier.¹⁰ Initially, his relations with print satirists were equally close. In 1944, he sponsored the creation of *Don Timorato*, a cartoon-heavy humour magazine. It was edited by one of Mexico's leading columnists (and future *Presente* head), Jorge Piño Sandoval. And it was lavishly illustrated. The artistic director was *Hoy*'s star, Antonio Arias Bernal.¹¹

But such close connections did not last long. The first two years of the administration alienated writers, workers, and the Mexico City crowd. Many saw the central problem as corruption. Alemán had come to power flanked by a group of young lawyers, officials, and hangers on. They were known as his "amigos" or friends.¹² Some held official positions. Fernando Casas Alemán was an old Veracruz ally, whom Alemán appointed as chief of Mexico City. Ramón Beteta and Antonio Ruiz Galindo were former UNAM law

⁹ De María y Campos, *El Teatro*, pp.442.

¹⁰ *El Gesticulador*'s run did foreshadow what was to come. It was shut down after a two week run. Cabinet members thought it indirectly criticized the current regime. Peter Beardsell, *A Theatre for Cannibals, Rodolfo Usigli and the Mexican Stage*, (Rutherford: Associated University Presses, 1992), pp.56-65.

¹¹ *Don Timorato*, 30 Jun. 1944.

¹² In Veracruz, they had been known as the Polacos. See Jorge Gil Mendieta, Samuel Schmidt and Alejandro Armulfo Ruiz León, *Estudios sobre la red política de México* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2005); Ryan M. Alexander, "Fortunate Sons of the Mexican Revolution: Miguel Alemán and his Generation, 1920-1952", Unpubl. Ph.D diss. University of Arizona, 2011, pp.93, 105, 107.

school classmates.¹³ Alemán made them heads of the Mexican treasury and the ministry of the economy respectively. Others simply orbited their friend's newfound power. Enrique Parra Hernández was another law school buddy. Described as “the minister without a budget”, he was in charge of Alemán's finances and, so rumour had it, his amorous affairs.¹⁴ And Jorge Pasquel was an old Veracruz friend who became an import-export merchant, baseball impresario, and media owner.¹⁵ Others still held combined roles. Carlos Serrano was an old military contact from Veracruz, who not only headed the Mexican senate, but also acted as informal chief of the secret service, and the president's collector of campaign contributions.¹⁶

Whatever their official role, all the amigos used their proximity to the president to line their own pockets. Some exploited their connections to gain access to public contracts. Enrique Parra specialised in deals with state companies. In 1947, he took a 30 per cent commission for flogging 19 million pesos worth of tracks to the railway company. And over the next year, he used his brother's position in the Bank of Exterior Commerce to buy agricultural products on the cheap and sell them overseas.¹⁷ So did Jorge Pasquel. In 1947 he received a contract to import all the state's construction materials through his customs houses; in 1948 he got a government concession for selling petrol in Mexico City. The deal gave Pasquel the profits from three quarters of the capital's petrol

¹³ Roderic Ai Camp, “Education and Political Recruitment in Mexico: The Alemán Generation”, *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 18.3 (Aug 1976), pp 295-321.

¹⁴ Adolfo León Ossorio, *El Pantano (Apuntes para la historia), Un Libro Acusador* (Mexico City: np, 1954), p.38.

¹⁵ Teóculo Manuel Agundis, *El verdadero Jorge Pasquel, Ensayo Biográfico sobre un caracter* (Mexico City: np, 1956)

¹⁶ For Carlos Serrano's actual role, see NARA, Record Group 170 (RG 170), To Commissioner of Customs, Bureau of Customs, DC, 19 August 1947.

¹⁷ León Ossorio, *El Pantano*, pp.39-40.

stations.¹⁸ He also rented planes, launches and his private yacht directly to Miguel Alemán, charging the president 123,000 pesos per year.¹⁹

They also used their newfound status and consequent impunity to operate illegal enterprises. Pasquel specialised in contraband cars. This was big business, as import taxes were steep. In the US a four-door Cadillac cost \$2485 dollars. Over the border, with import taxes added on, the same car cost around fifty per cent more. Officials estimated that smugglers brought in around 4500 illegal vehicles per year.²⁰ Pasquel's customs offices in Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo and Veracruz offered a perfect cover for the trade. He would front the smugglers the money to buy the cars in the United States, collect them at the border, issue them with fake import duty certificates, and then flog them in Mexico at an inflated price. His ranches in San Luis Potosí doubled as upscale car lots, their transient populations of Cadillacs and Studebakers secured by armed guards.²¹

Others employed their status to traffic drugs. This was even bigger business, worth an annual 20 million dollars according to the US Treasury and 60 million dollars according to Alemán's personal secretary.²² At first Carlos Serrano attempted to monopolise the trade. As the campaign fund manager he came into contact with a range of smugglers, who agreed to make lavish contributions in return for protection. He also used these new associates to move more directly into smuggling. In June 1946, immediately after

¹⁸ Agundis, *El verdadero*, pp.105-11

¹⁹ AGN, MAV, 568.1/5, Mariano Narro to Secretario Particular, 24 Nov. 1949

²⁰ *La Nación*, 15 May 1948.

²¹ *Presente*, 14 Sept. 1948, *Heraldo de San Luis*, 12 Jan. 1955.

²² NARA, Record Group 59 (RG 59), Report of Maurice Holden, 16 Jul. 1947.

Alemán's election, US customs officials in Laredo discovered 63 tins of opium stashed in a secret compartment of a Cadillac. The car was Serrano's, the driver a nephew of one of his close associates, Juan Ramón Gurrola. Despite US pressure, Serrano refused to prosecute Gurrola and even rewarded him with a leading job at the DFS. In a final flourish, the colonel spent the next two years submitting "very strong and rather bare-faced" requests to US officials to return the high-powered Cadillac.²³ After 1947 his effective control over the DFS strengthened these links.²⁴ The two heads, Gurrola and Marcelino Inurreta, already had connections to the narcotics trade. After overhearing their plans for expanding the business, the US military attaché concluded that they were "using the organization as a front for illegal operations to amass personal fortunes", and that Serrano was "fully cognizant of these sideline operations".²⁵ The chiefs were not alone; lesser DFS agents also had shady pasts. In 1947 the FBN speculated that "anyone with a past record as a crooked narcotics enforcement officer needs no other qualification to be accepted as an agent".²⁶

In post-revolutionary Mexico, official graft was nothing new. Maximino Avila Camacho's propensity for bribes was legendary; for good reason, he was nicknamed "Mr

²³ NARA RG 170, Box, Carlos Serrano file.

²⁴ For Serrano's control over the DFS, see Sergio Aguayo, *La charola: una historia de los servicios de inteligencia en México* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2001).

²⁵ NARA, RG 59, Report by Maurice Holden, 16 July 1947

²⁶ There is no doubt that the FBN may have overemphasised the DFS's links to the drugs trade. Anslinger in particular thrived off creating new, often phantom threats. But the DFS was a strange target, given its anti-communist stance and the fact that it was created with FBI assistance. Other evidence also backs up Serrano's connections to the drug trade. See the revelations in G. A. Genz, "Entrepreneurship and caciquismo: A study of community power in a Mexican Gulf Coast village", Unpub. Ph.D diss. Michigan State University, 1975, p.181, Aaron W. Navarro, *Political Intelligence and the Creation of Modern Mexico, 1938-1954* (Penn State, 2010), p.184.

15 per cent”.²⁷ Nor were illegal businesses. On the border, former president Abelardo Rodríguez had a hand in gambling dens, brothels, and the drug trade.²⁸ Mexicans often brushed off such corruption with a shrug of the shoulders or a shake of the head. They were politicians. What could one expect? Some even accepted it. Wouldn’t they do the same in Maximino’s place? But, the *amigos*’ venality was different. It caused much more widespread protest than previous efforts. In fact, it became the key trope of both written and oral satire during the 1948 crisis. The question remains why? Why did the *amigos*’ corruption generate such cross-class dissent?

First, the *amigos* rarely tried to hide their wealth. In fact, they flaunted it. Conspicuous consumption was the rule and Pasquel was playboy in chief. He stepped out with famous beauties like María Félix. He spent months hunting wild game in Africa. He amassed huge collections of planes, boats, guns, cars and watches. His Tlalpan residence was decorated with Diego Rivera paintings, Sèvres china, Louis XV furniture and Florentine marble sculptures.²⁹ His San Luis Potosí hacienda was even grander. It had its own private airfield and was covered in murals depicting the miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe. A visiting tourist described the bedroom as “an ornate voluptuarium somewhere between Cecil de Mille’s Hollywood and the late King Farouk’s Alexandria”.³⁰ Tales of his wealth, his expensive leisure pursuits and his love life regularly appeared in the social pages of *Novedades* and other Mexico City papers. This

²⁷ Alejandro Quintana, *Maximino Avila Camacho and the One-Party State: The Taming of Caudillismo and Caciquismo in Post-revolutionary Mexico* (Lexington: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), p.112.

²⁸ José Alfredo Gómez Estrada, *Gobierno y casinos: El origen de la riqueza de Abelardo L. Rodríguez* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 2007).

²⁹ Agundis, *El verdadero*, pp.65-9.

³⁰ Selden Rodman, *Mexican Journal, The Conquerors Conquered*, (London: Feffer and Simons Inc, 1958), p.48.

lifestyle made him the most hated of Alemán's amigos. But he was not alone. Gossip and spreads on the social pages revealed the rapid enrichment of other functionaries close to the president. The British ambassador observed that while Ramón Beteta had once been poor, "now he is rich but has not sufficient sagacity to camouflage his sudden accretion of wealth. The mansion he is building for himself and his bejewelled American wife has not escaped the notice of either his chief or the public".³¹ Enrique Parra went from a damp house in down-at-heel Colonia Santa María la Ribera to a vast Polanco mansion and purchased his wife a necklace so chintzy that it "looked like a planetary system".³²

Second, stories of high profile corruption started to leak out in the mainstream press. For the first eighteen months of Alemán's rule, government relations with the big nationals were shaky. The government's spin machine was still in its infancy and financial incentives were irregular and weak. Many also suspected (correctly) that Alemán was behind Pasquel's 1946 takeover of *Novedades*.³³ In early 1948, Alemán worsened relations still more by putting through stringent new copyright legislation. The law was designed to protect the rights of authors, but also included rigid articles that seemed to infringe on the freedom of the press. One backed up the old press law, giving federal authorities "the right to restrict or prohibit the publication, production, circulation, representation or exhibition of works which are considered contrary to the respect which is due to private life, morals and public peace". Others prohibited the publication of

³¹ Stephen R. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s, Modernity, Politics and Corruption* (Wilmington: Scholarly resources, 1999), p.258.

³² León Ossorio, *El Pantano*, p.38.

³³ Confidential US State Department Central Files, Mexico, Internal Affairs, 1940, 1945-49 Roll 32, Report on *Novedades*, 31 July 1946.

official documents and unauthorised photographs, effectively curtailing the press's ability to corroborate an exposé.³⁴

Such tensions opened up space for criticism. In 1947, *Excelsior* reprinted Daniel Cosío Villegas' venomous condemnation of the revolutionary regime, "La crisis de México". The original piece was published at the end of Avila Camacho's presidency in an academic journal.³⁵ *Excelsior's* publication brought Cosío Villegas's denunciations to a broader audience. And his condemnation of "general, ostentatious, and offensive administrative corruption disguised beneath a cloak of impunity" now read like a prescient attack on Alemán's *amigos*.³⁶ They also encouraged papers to pursue high profile scandals. In the first six months of 1948, the nationals explored a high profile daylight hit on a senator, touched on the connections between political elites and the country's drug industry, and attacked the administration for allowing US soldiers connected to the foot-and-mouth commission to carry arms and intimidate journalists.³⁷

Third, President Alemán quickly managed to alienate three key groups – the military, the unions, and the Mexico City crowds. Until 1946 successive Mexican governments had sought to appease the military. Officers in particular were treated generously. They were given political power in the shape of governorships, government offices and the

³⁴, *Novedades*, 20 Mar. 1948.

³⁵ The original article was published according to two emergent roles of intellectual criticism. These were 1) You could publish criticism in academic journals and 2) In the last year of a presidency, you could increase criticism.

³⁶ Niblo, *Mexico*, p.244.

³⁷ Thomas Rath, "Paratroopers Under the Volcano: Animal Disease, Sovereignty, and Scandal in Cold War Mexico", lecture, University of Warwick, February 2015; Pablo Piccato, "Pistoleros, Ley Fuga, and Uncertainty in Public Debates about Murder in Twentieth-Century Mexico" in Paul Gillingham and Benjamin Smith, (eds), *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), pp.321-341, pp.329-334; *Novedades*, 10 Mar. 1948.

autonomous command of military zones.³⁸ They were offered juicy sinecures and allowed a free hand in illegal businesses. But the election of Mexico's first civilian president changed this.³⁹ The number of military personnel in the cabinet declined.⁴⁰ Governors with military backgrounds were shunted from power.⁴¹ And a new generation of young lawyers now dominated official positions close to the president. Generals complained that these new bureaucrats "paid little attention to the deserving revolutionaries", made them wait in line outside their offices, and rarely answered their demands.⁴² During the 1948 crisis these ageing generals would form an important opposition to President Alemán. There were even credible rumours of a military coup.

Alemán simultaneously lost the support of many Mexican workers. Successive revolutionary governments had relied on workers to push through controversial policies and secure the popular vote.⁴³ Even during the early 1940s, when high inflation had pushed down real wages, Avila Camacho had managed to keep unions in line by appealing to wartime nationalism.⁴⁴ But in early 1947 the alliance split. More moderate workers, often organised in state or regional unions, maintained their government support. More radical workers sought autonomy, wage increases, and protection from rising prices. Alemán had began his relations with independent labour by sending

³⁸ Thomas Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2013), pp.115-143; Roderic Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage* (London: Praeger, 2005).

³⁹ Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization*, pp.94-101.

⁴⁰ Niblo, *Mexico*, pp.176-79.

⁴¹ Benjamin T. Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements: The Politics of State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), p.289.

⁴² AGN/DGIPS-112/Exp.1, Informe, 23 July 1948.

⁴³ Alan Knight, "The Rise and fall of Cardenismo, 1930-1946" in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Mexico Since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1991), pp.241-320.

⁴⁴ Kevin J. Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution, Labor, the State and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University 1995), p.111.

the army to break an oilworkers' strike in Poza Rica in December 1946, occupying installations and arresting leaders on the excuse of a supposed Padillista conspiracy. Within a year, they had joined together to form their own independent coalition. For Alemán's increasingly right-wing government, they presented a real threat. During the crisis of summer 1948, they would not only provide a vocal mass of disenchanted workers but also try to harness the anger of a broader section of Mexico City residents.⁴⁵

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Alemán lost the support of the Mexico City crowd. Housing crises, university unrest, and summer floods played a major role.⁴⁶ But, the key problem - the one that alienated Mexico City residents from across the social spectrum, triggered the 1948 crisis, and threatened to bring down the Alemán government – was the devaluation of the peso. Within months of Alemán's accession, Mexico's balance of payments started to decline. As the US eliminated price and export controls, the cost of US imports increased dramatically. In contrast, Mexican exports barely grew. Increased post-war competition and the lowering of demand for raw materials cut into Mexico's industrial and agricultural sectors. Foreign exchange reserves dropped. And the "smart money" started to leave Mexico. Large businesses, fearful of devaluation, reduced their inventories and sent their money to the US. Foreign loans managed to keep the peso afloat during the first half of 1948. But money kept flowing out. Medium-sized enterprises started to convert their pesos into dollars as well. Finally, on 21 June 1948 the Mexican government was forced to float the peso and hence devalue. It immediately fell from its fixed exchange rate of 4.85 pesos to around 6 or 7 pesos to the dollar before

⁴⁵ Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution*, pp.107-158.

⁴⁶ *La Nación*, 24 April, 1 May, 15 May, 31 Jul., 1948.

being fixed again at 8.65.⁴⁷ The devaluation had two important secondary effects. First, it increased the price of foodstuffs and other staples. These had been on the rise since the late 1930s.⁴⁸ But the devaluation caused a rapid upsurge. The day after the devaluation the price of some foods, like tinned products, ham, and cooking oil, rose 40 percent; eggs and vegetables rose 20 percent. Within a week, meat was running out. Medicines, most of which were imported from the US, also climbed in price by around 40 per cent.⁴⁹ Second, the devaluation revealed an explicit causal link between high-level corruption and widespread poverty. Whatever the broader economic reasons for the devaluation, many perceived the move was the fault of the new revolutionary bourgeoisie. They had destabilised the currency by buying expensive, foreign-made consumer goods. They had undercut the peso still further by importing contraband from the United States. And, they had even made fortunes from the policy by converting their pesos to dollars ahead of time. For the Mexico City crowd, Alemán's *amigos* triggered the devaluation, the price rises and their consequent hunger. The smiling president was no longer laughing with them; he was laughing at them.⁵⁰

Satire in the Streets

In late July 1948, corruption, the shift in military power, anti-union policies, housing, floods, and price rises combined to produce serious unrest across Mexico City society.

⁴⁷ Blanca Torres Ramírez, *Hacia la utopía industrial* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1984), pp.117-43; FRUS, United States Department of State / Foreign relations of the United States, 1948. The Western Hemisphere (1948), pp.603-46.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Lawrence Bortz, *Los salarios industriales en la ciudad de Mexico, 1939-1975* (Mexico City: FCE, 1984)

⁴⁹ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2 (Carestia), Informe 25 July 1948; Informe 28 July 1948; Informe, 18 August 1948.

⁵⁰ A point made by León Ossorio, *El Pantano*, p.6.

Middle-class housewives, merchants, workers, and soldiers concentrated their anger against the president and his coterie of hangers on. They used four means to express their dissatisfaction: insults, rumours, jokes, and songs. Most insults criticized those members of Alemán's administration held responsible for the current situation. They included Beteta, the head of the treasury, Ruíz Galindo, head of the ministry of the economy, Casas Alemán, mayor of Mexico City, and Pasquel, amigo and contrabandist in chief. At the city's markets, agents recorded "virulent attacks", "harsh commentaries" and "expressions of ill-feeling and disgust" against the amigos.⁵¹ Such verbal assaults reflected changes in both public opinion and in people's willingness to express their anger. One agent remarked that, "men as well as women were more violent and less cautious and didn't hesitate to slander the government".⁵² Another noticed that these insults went "beyond simple censures and arrived at personal insult".⁵³ Ministers were described as "merchants of hunger, bandits, and thieves"; the government was labelled a "bunch of bandits starting from the top"; and crowds shouted "death to the exploiters of the people".⁵⁴ The president was not immune. Throughout July and early August, worried agents repeatedly noticed that Alemán was "the target of the attacks", and that some of the most vocal street critics "arrived at a lack of respect for the president". They accused him of incompetence, being incapable of "reining in the hunger merchants or the influential politicians".⁵⁵ They accused him of lacking political sense, being unable to

⁵¹ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2. Informe, 2 Aug. 1948; Informe, 10 Aug. 1948; Informe, Lamberto Ortega Peregrina. 24 Jul. 1948.

⁵² AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp.2, Informe, Lamberto Ortega Peregrina. 24 Jul. 1948.

⁵³ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Memorandum, 22 Jul. 1948 Jesus González Valencia

⁵⁴ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Memorandum, 28 July 1948; Informe, Lamberto Ortega Peregrina. 24 July 1948.

⁵⁵ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Memorandum, 23 July 1948

“glean public opinion” “or read the papers”.⁵⁶ And most concerning, they started to voice the idea that he was no better than his amigos. They whistled at his image when it appeared on cinema screens. By late August, flyers doing the round of the markets read, “Death to the Spurious President Alemán, Death to the Exploiters of the People, Prepare... to kick the STUPID and BANDIT Alemán and his thieves from power”.⁵⁷ For good reason, agents concluded that Mexico City’s inhabitants were “losing respect for the high office”.⁵⁸

During summer 1948, rumours were also rife. Some tales were explicatory. They made the direct link between the current problems and high-level corruption. They were based on selective readings of the press, and they had some factual basis. They provided comprehensible, moralistic organizing narratives for complex changes; and they exacerbated the overall dissatisfaction with the administration. For example, many Mexicans reduced the causes of the devaluation to illegal contraband. Smuggling in US goods was illegal, involved the transfer of dollars to pesos, undercut Mexican businesses, and reduced tax income. On 16 July, one agent said he heard people on the buses blaming the move on the government “permitting contraband on a massive scale”; they pointed to Pasquel as “the principal contrabandist”.⁵⁹ Other rumours did not offer explanations. Instead, they organised people’s understanding of political instability. They expanded the parameters of the conceivable, the boundaries of what people thought could happen.⁶⁰ For

⁵⁶ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Memorandum, 23 July 1948, Inspector, SF 54.

⁵⁷ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Cadena de Libertad.

⁵⁸ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Informe, 10 August 1948.

⁵⁹ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Memorandum, Inspector 15 RJD, 16 July 1948

⁶⁰ See Louise White, “Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History”, *History and Theory* 39: 4 (December 2000), pp.13–14.

the government, this looked pretty bad. In early August, a rumour emerged that assassins had ambushed Alemán on the Mexico City-Cuernavaca road, killing his driver and injuring the president.⁶¹ It may have been started deliberately. DGIPS agents suggested that two air force pilots turned PP activists were first overheard loudly discussing the plot on a Mexico City bus; they had done so on purpose in order to generate uncertainty and instability.⁶² Some whispered that it was the start of a military coup. Among the railway workers, they claimed that “poor salaries” had driven to soldiers to revolt.⁶³ In the US embassy, they held that a dozen army generals headed by the chief of the Military Academy were responsible.⁶⁴ Whatever rumours’ origins, people believed them, and in a vicious circle they reinforced the instability that underlay them.

Mexico City crowds also swapped jokes. Most employed a distinctly black humour and mixed frustration with rumours of official corruption. In La Merced, one woman complained to a vendor about the price of eggs. “You’re robbing us, I bet you came to an agreement with the inspectors to sell at this price”. Then she softened her tone and followed it up with “well, the price probably covers the bribes you have to pay at least.” Both vendor and consumer laughed.⁶⁵ By creating a common enemy, such jokes often deflected blame away from the stall owners and smoothed over tensions with their consumers. But jokes did not smooth over tensions with the leaders they named. Playing on the name of the recent US film, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, street jokers started to

⁶¹ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Memorandum, 13 Aug. 1948.

⁶² AGN/DGIPS-24/Exp. 3, memo, 31 August 1948,

⁶³ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Informe, 12 Aug 1948.

⁶⁴ NARA RG 59, John R Speaks, legal attaché, to ambassador, 3 Aug 1948.

⁶⁵ AGN, DGIPS, Fernando Fagoaga Informe, 22 July 1948.

refer to the president and his friends as Alemán and his Forty Lawyers.⁶⁶ And such wags often invoked violence. One man, who was buying a large knife in the Tepito street market, remarked “either these things go down in price or we will have to lower them with this”. “Yeah, and you’ll be Juan Charraqueado” [the macho hero of a 1948 film] the stall owner replied.

Finally, the capital’s residents also produced a flurry of satiric songs.⁶⁷ In a society with a large illiterate population, they still formed the key means of condensing, transmitting and popularising the insults, rumours, and jokes mentioned above.⁶⁸ They were sung in plazas, in bars, and in the centre of apartment courtyards. The journalists and skit writers who wrote them made them easy to remember, lifting the melodies from and often parodying the lyrics of popular tunes. Songsheets were printed on cheap paper and sold for a few cents by street sellers and newsboys; many were republished in newspapers and magazines. The most widespread of all, *Miguel*, referred to the president. A parody of the popular Agustín Lara song, *Madrid*, it was catchy and easy to recite; it also neatly summarized the central themes of rising prices, corruption, anti-presidentialism and threatened violence. But Miguel was the gentlest of the satiric songs.⁶⁹ Other tunes, dotted with sexual references and swearwords, were less family-friendly. “Los

⁶⁶ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Informe, 23 July 1948’

⁶⁷ Mexico’s leading humorologist, Samuel Schmidt, has played down the importance of satirical songs. But, during the 1940s they were still important. Samuel Schmidt, *Seriously Funny, Mexican Political Jokes as Social Resistance* (Translated by Adam Schmidt) (Tucson: University of Arizona press, 2014), p.33.

⁶⁸ They were also ubiquitous in eighteenth century France. Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p.159.

⁶⁹ In fact, such tameness probably Explained its cross-class appeal. It could be printed and declaimed in front of middle class audiences and even kids. AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp.2, Memoradum, 12 Aug. 1948; Magdalena Mondragón, *Los Presidentes Dan Risa* (Mexico City, np, 1948), p.134.

Ahuehuetes” (literally the cypress trees, but used here to denote Alemán’s amigos)⁷⁰ started as follows:

Los Ahuehuetes ladrones	The Ahuehuetes are thieves.
Parra, Pasquel, y Parada	Parra, Pasquel and Parada
Son puritos cabrones	Are complete assholes
E hijos de la chingada.	And sons of bitches.
Roban al pueblo sufrido	They steal from suffering people
Llevando putas al jefe	Taking whores to the chief
Quien despues de haber cojido	Who after fucking
Los agradece y los protege	Thanks them and protects them. ⁷¹

Such songs concerned the listening agents. Their lyrics underlined popular frustrations, indicated a deep distrust of the president and his advisors, and threatened insurrection. They were extremely popular. *La Prensa* admitted that “everyone on Mexico knew the jokes, funny stories, allusions and musical parodies that freely circulated mouth to mouth throughout the republic”.⁷² They formed a direct link between the cultural worlds of stage, print and the street, and they fitted the mood of the 1948 Mexico City crowd - half way between carnival and revolt.

⁷⁰ *La Prensa* 19 Aug. 1948.

⁷¹ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp.2, Esta es la cadena de liberación.

⁷² *La Prensa* 19 Aug 1948.

Satire and Censorship

In summer 1948, high-level corruption, political problems, and social deprivation also generated an upsurge in the production of all sorts of satire. While *Presente* was the most notorious of these there were also plays, skits, and books, which interacted with, fed off (and fed into) street-level humour. But they went further. They organised diffuse dissatisfaction into coherent narratives; they offered credibility to rumours; and they popularised a cogent indictment of the Alemán administration. Like the slander rags of eighteenth century France, they “reduced the complex politics of the regime into a storyline that could be grasped by any reader at any distance from the centre of the action”.⁷³

In the context of 1948’s street satire, those close to Alemán deemed productions like *Presente* dangerous. And they started to combat humorous magazines and plays in a variety of ways. Some were aimed at the audience for satirical culture. Emergency food markets and a handful of firings bought off some. Anticommunist rhetoric, which blamed the unions for the country’s economic woes, split working class Mexicans from their temporary middle class allies. Other measures were aimed at the satirists. Officials rewarded compliant writers with well-paid sinecures. They deprived stubborn journalists of paper and funds. And they started a mainstream campaign, which attacked both professional and amateur satirists as *murmureadores* or gossipmongers.

The founder, director, and editor of *Presente* was the columnist, Jorge Piño Sandoval. Piño was not your average Mexico City journalist. He was not middle class, university

⁷³ Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers*, p.158.

educated, or, at least initially, right-wing. He was born in San Luis Potosí in 1902. During the Revolution, he was orphaned and moved to Mexico City. Here, he moved in with the painter and communist, David Siqueiros. First, he was employed as a delivery boy, hawking Siqueiros' paintings around town for a small commission. By the late 1920s he also distributed the radical newspaper *El Machete*. The job gave him a taste for journalism and he started to write the occasional story for the publication.⁷⁴ Over the following decade, Piño shed his links to the Mexican communist party and moved into the world of journalism full time. He leveraged his friendship with another former leftist, Carlos Denegri, to gain a job at *Excelsior*. Here, he gradually climbed the hierarchy, moving from the cultural section to political news. In 1940, he was given his own column. But Piño's place in the newspaper establishment was always precarious. He found the social world of journalists suffocating and infuriating. Salvador Novo described him as "moody...always in crisis, a misfit, inflexible, always in a state of protest and rebellion." The tension between his radical past and his present role as an *officialista* columnist often caused confrontation. He walked out of *Excelsior* twice over differences with the editor.⁷⁵

Such tensions also shaped his brief subsequent employment by Jorge Pasquel's revamped *Novedades*. In 1947 Piño joined the newspaper and was given a front-page column entitled *Presente*. In general, his articles were overtly pro-government.⁷⁶ But in May

⁷⁴ Martínez S. *La Vieja Guardia*, pp.88-96; José Clemente Orozco, Robert C. Stephenson, *Jose Clemente Orozco: An Autobiography* (New York: Dover, 2001), p.114.

⁷⁵ Martínez S. *La Vieja Guardia*, pp.88-96; Roberto Blanco Moheno, *Memorias de un reportero* (Mexico City: Libro Mex, 1965), p.98; Salvador Novo, *La vida en Mexico en el periodo presidencial de Miguel Alemán* (Mexico City: Conaculta, 1994), p.226.

⁷⁶ e.g. *Novedades*, 4 Feb., 6 March 1948.

1948 something changed. Whether Piño's conscience finally caught up with him or he fell out with Pasquel (or another of Alemán's amigos) is unclear. On 19 May, *Presente* was relegated to the inside pages. And the following week the column radically changed tone. In a strangely personal article, which seemed to reflect his ambiguous relationship with the role of the modern Mexican journalist, Piño interviewed himself. He explained that in order to become a columnist, he had been forced to "conquer the friendship" of "thousands of contacts". Yet, such friendships came with expectations. "Before public men, we [journalists] are little or nothing... they tolerate us and nothing more". In return for friendship, these public men wanted publicity. When journalists were unwilling to provide it, they were cut off. Liberty of the press, and the apparent freedom of Mexico's political columnists was a sham, invented by businessmen and politicians to secure exposure.⁷⁷ The next two columns were similarly vitriolic. Presaging his work on the magazine *Presente* he employed rumours of government corruption to attack those close to the regime. Inevitably, such revelations caused a confrontation with the newspaper's owner. According to Piño, Pasquel offered him a round-the-world trip, the direction of a new magazine, and a substantial salary increase to tone down his column. Piño refused and was sacked. Later he claimed that he "could not convince them that my motive was not money but a clean Mexico".⁷⁸

Less than six weeks later, he founded the weekly satirical magazine *Presente*. In the magazine's first editorial Piño explained the publication's aim. Building on his self-critique of a few months earlier, he claimed that he had started *Presente* to "liberate

⁷⁷ *Novedades*, 23 May 1948.

⁷⁸ *Novedades*, 24, 26 May 1948.

[him]self from political and commercial inducements”, avoid the pro-government lies of the mainstream press, and tell the truth about what was going on in Mexico.⁷⁹ To do so, contributors used two approaches – critiquing unpopular official policies, and tying these policies directly to Alemán’s amigos. Attacks on the foot-and-mouth campaign, for example, were frequent. But, after 22 July, like many Mexicans, they focused their critiques on the devaluation.⁸⁰ Six days later, Piño’s editorial mocked the government’s theory that the lowering of the currency made Mexican goods exportable. “Mexico exports nothing, in the north we are even forced to import gasoline from the US”. Industry was failing and over the past 18 months 300 factories had closed. In fact Mexico only “exported braceros” and all their money “goes into the hands of Spanish contractors”. In a follow up article, one of the contributors, writing under a penname, speculated that officials had hinted to bankers of the devaluation ahead of time. And in the next issue, they elaborated on the claim, claiming that in the days before the shift, elites had moved 70 million dollars over to the US. When Beteta publicized the names of those that had transferred money, *Presente* journalists rubbished the revelations, claiming that the treasury minister had deliberately left out the principal offenders.⁸¹

Such criticisms were pointed but not unusual. In summer 1948, mainstream newspapers published similar, if slightly toned down, versions of these claims. *Presente*, however, went further. Rather than leaving the accusations hanging, shrouded in vague accusations against bankers, elites, or “*influyentazos*” [“very influential people”] the magazine’s journalists started to name names. Like the street satirists, they connected economic

⁷⁹ *Presente*, 14 July 1948.

⁸⁰ *Presente*, 14 July 1948.

⁸¹ *Presente*, 28 July 1948.

mismanagement, poverty, and rising prices to high-profile corruption. In Leduc's column, he made this break with expected practice clear. "There is a tendency in the press not to personalise issues, not to name names". In contrast in *Presente* "we will name names and we will personalize problems".⁸² Such an approach not only infringed on the boundaries of *libertinaje*; it also transformed scattered rumours and murmured disquiet into a coherent, anti-systemic attack. Loose talk became coherent discourse. Mexico City's consumers were struggling, not because of the impersonal, uncontrollable, and impenetrable shifts of the international markets but due to individual acts of fraud and private enrichment.

In July, Piño, writing under a pseudonym, exposed the extent of treasury secretary Beteta's wealth. The article focused on his new house. The piece parodied the social pages, offering pictures of the establishment, its address, its size (484 square meters), its price and a description of its luxurious extent. But, unlike the social pages, the article also had bite. Piño claimed that Manuel Suárez, a close business associate of the president, had given the house to Beteta in a simulated sale. Suárez had also given Beteta's former boss a similar property just outside the Morelos holiday retreat of Tepoztlán. And Beteta was now so rich that he was doing the same, offering his secretary a 70,000 peso house in return for her silence.⁸³ These investigations culminated in an overt attack on Piño's former boss, Jorge Pasquel. After revealing that Pasquel had tried to bribe him to stay on at *Novedades*, he started to trawl through his other business interests. He repeated rumours that Pasquel had increased the price of food by charging high rates at his

⁸² *Presente*, 18 Aug, 1948.

⁸³ *Presente*, 28 July 1948.

customs houses. He also accused Pasquel of pushing up the price of wheat and bread, by monopolizing their import into the country. He insulted his kin, claiming that he came from a “rancid family”, a gang of Valle Nacional tobacco plantation owners, whose repressive labour practices “left cruel memories in the flesh of the people”. And he exposed his properties, including the cinemas in Veracruz, the offices on Ramón Guzmán, the “palace” in Tlalpan, and the lover’s retreat in the centre of the city.⁸⁴

At least initially, Piño and his collaborators were keen to demonstrate that they were attacking Alemán’s cronies rather than the president himself. In fact, on 11 August, *Presente*’s chiefs, Piño, Leduc and Arias Bernal managed to secure an interview with Alemán.⁸⁵ The article was a real coup. In Mexico one-to-one interviews with sitting presidents were extremely rare; critical, seemingly unmediated, discussions about failing policies, dodgy alliances, and corruption even more so. Yet, this was the format of the interview. During the talks, the three journalists threw a series of increasingly hostile accusations at the president. They attacked his economic policy, arguing that rich bankers had made fortunes out of the devaluation. They denounced his plans for Mexico City, arguing that the capital was “full of potholes, rubbish, the overcrowding of stalls” and the illegal sale of poor, underserviced lots. They pointed to the “huge, splendid residences” of his friends, which rubbed “the arrogance of those with influence” in the faces of the people who “suffer scarcity or lack of basic foods”. They followed this up by stating, “You, Mr President, with the greatest respect, don’t seem to care”. They even confronted

⁸⁴ *Presente*, 18 Aug. 1948.

⁸⁵ Renato Leduc had attended university with Alemán and seems to have secured the interview.

Alemán with his growing lack of popularity. “They whistle when your figure crosses the cinema screen”.⁸⁶

In response, the journalists presented Alemán as confused and weak. He batted away questions about the devaluation with the usual reference to larger economic forces. He agreed with the journalists about the state of the city’s press. And he even approved of their condemnation of his acquaintances, calling them “friends of the second or third class” and “a disgrace or a sickness that no government of any country has been able to cure completely”. But, as the accusations piled up, he appeared less and less in control. When they reproached him for not caring about the perception of the Mexican people, the journalists claimed, “an expression of surprise, which took the qualities of a painful rictus grin crossed his face”. For the remainder of the interview, he appeared to go silent, allowing the journalists to pile on more complaints with little or no riposte.⁸⁷

Presente’s exposés, bold illustrations, and critical style made the magazine extremely popular. At 20c per issue, the publication was cheap and affordable, half the price of a Mexico City broadsheet, and a fifth of the price of a glossy magazine. In July the US embassy estimated that the magazine sold around 30,000 copies. By late August the print run had increased to 120,000; Piño even claimed that circulation reached 182,000. Print runs ran out in a day; copies were changing hands for \$1.50.⁸⁸ Such figures were ten

⁸⁶ *Presente*, 11 Aug. 1948.

⁸⁷ *Presente*, 11 Aug. 1948.

⁸⁸ Confidential US State Department Central Files, Mexico, Internal Affairs, 1940, 1945-49 Roll 32, Report on *Presente*, 10 Sept. 1948.

times the sales of most magazines and almost double the sales of broadsheets.⁸⁹ In the streets, government agents observed that Mexico City residents were reading *Presente* and weaving the printed stories into their criticisms, rumours, and jokes. In late July, one agent found that *Presente*'s piece on Beteta had generated "bitter comments" about the minister, especially among the poor.⁹⁰ *Presente*'s Parra exposé inserted the "minister without a budget" into popular comic songs.⁹¹

During summer 1948, other cultural productions shared *Presente*'s satirical coverage of the government. Just two days before the devaluation, journalist Roberto Blanco Moheno also attempted to put on a political review at the *Lírico*. Entitled *El Cuarto Poder* (The Fourth Estate), no copy of the work survives. But according to Blanco Moheno it was "written after a bottle of rum and with a guitar" and included songs, skits, and jokes on the corruption of the mainstream press and Alemán's amigos. The piece certainly included jokes about Pasquel's contraband business.⁹² Less than a month later, the former editor of humorous magazine, *Chiste*, Magdalena Mondragón published her take on political humour, *Los Presidentes Dan Risa*. The book defended the social need for satire and offered an overview of jokes about those in power from the Revolution to the present. In the final section on Miguel Alemán she trod lightly. She admitted that there were "many very cruel jokes on Alemán, some of these [we]re very vulgar and intervene[d] in the private and family life of the president". These she refused to publish.

⁸⁹ John Russell Heitman, "The Press of Mexico: Its History, Characteristics, and Content", Unpubl. PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 1948. P.202.

⁹⁰ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp. 2, Juan Garcia Bernal to Lamberto Ortega Peregrina, 30 July 1948.

⁹¹ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp.2, Esta es la cadena de liberación.

⁹² *La Prensa*, 23 August 1948; Blanco Moheno, *Memorias*.

But she did print “Miguel”, the parody of the Lara song, Madrid.⁹³ The comic actor Palillo was also busy. His “Astillas” column in the popular bullfighting magazine *Redondel* made jokes at the expense of Alemán’s amigos. Meanwhile his show at the Follies theatre “put the government in the bin and told the truth about its worth”. According to one of his fans he said the government was “a mafia of the shameless, who if they had any shame, would have already resigned”.⁹⁴ Finally, out in the provinces other publications joined in. *El Diario de Yucatán* started a series entitled “Los Millonarios de la Revolución” which laid out the wealth of revolutionary leaders and highlighted the disparity between the government’s radical rhetoric and its creation of a new plutocracy.⁹⁵

The tone and popularity of such works worried the government, who, in summer 1948, brought in a raft of measures to end the popular dissatisfaction caused by the devaluation. Some were economic, aimed at the grumbling Mexico City consumers. They included cheap food. On 14 August, the authorities rolled out two state-subsidised markets in the upper class neighbourhoods of Colonia del Ex-Hipódromo de Peralvillo and Colonia Del Valle. By the end of the month, they had opened two others in the less salubrious barrios of Colonia Bondojito and Colonia Cuauhtémoc. Two more were established the following month.⁹⁶ In fact, Renato Leduc blamed the subsequent decline in *Presente*’s popularity on what become known as the “popular markets”. “The uproar ceased and the

⁹³ Mondragón, *Los Presidentes*, pp.134-48.

⁹⁴ *Presente*, 14 Sept. 1948; AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp.2, PS 16 Informe, 3 August 1948.

⁹⁵ *Diario de Yucatán*, 27 Jul. 1948.

⁹⁶ *La Prensa*, 14 Aug, 1948, *Novedades*, 30 Aug. 1948.

people of naïve opinion dedicated themselves to eating bruised but cheap bananas”.⁹⁷ Other measures were political: the uproar also ceased, or at least declined, when Alemán disposed of some of the most unpopular cronies. In mid August, the minister of the economy, Ruíz Galindo, resigned.⁹⁸ Parra left Mexico City and withdrew his candidacy from the governorship of San Luis Potosí.⁹⁹ And, perhaps most importantly of all, Pasquel also left the capital and (at least visible) power. On 18 August, he resigned as director of *Novedades*, and within a week he had gone into self-imposed exile in his country retreats in San Luis Potosí.¹⁰⁰

The government also gradually brought the capital’s newspapers back on side. Quite why editors and journalists changed tack remains unclear. Perhaps shared concerns over social instability and increasing union power kicked in. But financial considerations also seem to have played a role. There were rumours that the government had offered to cover newspaper losses on overseas purchases in return for more cautious treatment of the devaluation’s economic effects. And it seems no coincidence that Alemán donated land in Las Lomas for journalists’ houses at the end of the year.¹⁰¹ Whatever the reasons for the change, the pro-government press campaign started in early August. Beyond highlighting and lauding Alemán’s attempts to lower prices, the operation took two forms. First, writers tried to split the middle class and working class opposition by blaming union chiefs for street-level dissatisfaction. On 10 August, *La Prensa* ran the headline “Centres of Agitation against the Government”. The article declared that miners

⁹⁷ Renato Leduc, “Jajaja”, *Presente*, 17 Mar 1948.

⁹⁸ *Excélsior*, 18 Aug. 1948.

⁹⁹ *Presente*, 18 Aug. 1948.

¹⁰⁰ *La Prensa*, 19 Aug. 1948; *Novedades*, 18 Aug. 1948.

¹⁰¹ AGN/DGIPS-111/Exp.1, 24 Jul. 1948; Heitman, “The Press”, p.198.

and railwaymen, infiltrated by “communist elements employed to create problems”, were orchestrating the attacks on Alemán’s cabinet members.¹⁰² Second, editors started a campaign against *murmuración*. In mid August the capital’s newspapers started to publish a rash of paid inserts by groups variously calling themselves the National Orientation Centre and the Committee for Struggle Against *Murmuración*. These inserts were broadly similar. They defended the devaluation using official arguments about the international economic situation and falling exports. And they attacked a new figure in Mexican politics, whom they termed “el murmurador” or the gossip. They claimed that the gossip was taking advantage of the devaluation to “go on to the street and spread slander and alarm”. He aimed not to help improve the Mexican economy, but to undermine it. “He leaves his machine to gossip. He leaves an urgent meeting to gossip. He abandons his children and prefers the streets to spread his gossip. He who gossips never works, for gossip needs leisure”. Newspaper columnists adopted the trope. *La Prensa* ran an editorial entitled “Pro-Confidence and Against Gossip” that lauded the goals of this hurriedly assembled group.¹⁰³

Beyond this general campaign to control prices and co-opt the dailies, government agents also attacked the satirists. Measures against *El Presente* started almost immediately. While Piño was readying the first issue of the magazine, the authorities tried to close down the venture by publishing a rival magazine with the same name. Government

¹⁰² “Focos de Agitación contra el Gobierno”, *La Prensa*, 10 Aug. 1948. For anticommunism and the press, see Elisa Servín, “Propaganda y Guerra Fría: la campaña anticomunista en la prensa Mexicana del medio siglo”, *Signos Históricos*, 11, (2004), pp.9-39

¹⁰³ *La Prensa*, 12, 16, 30 Aug. 1948.

lawyers claimed that the Piño's magazine infringed on the official journal's copyright.¹⁰⁴ The accusations came to nothing, but they foreshadowed the problems to come. On the publication of the magazine, the authorities used their most common strategy. They offered money for silence. The President's private secretary, De la Selva, approached Leduc and asked him "Hey, you bastard.... What do you want? It's fine that Piño and Arias Bernal are fucking around, they're not friends with the President. But you are a friend of Don Miguel and I need to know what do you want to shut your mouth." Leduc replied that he wanted nothing. "So why are you shouting in that little fucking paper?" De la Selva asked again. "Because as soon you university people got to power, people started to want the military back as they stole less", Leduc responded.¹⁰⁵ Government agents also harassed *Presente* staff. In an end of August interview the directors complained that both Jorge Pasquel and his brother had threatened them with death. Piño lived with three police guards outside and a machine gun trained on the door. His friends carried a pistol each. Arias Bernal protested that unnamed gunmen had kicked down his door and trashed his apartment. And Tomas Perrín moaned that his house was being watched by "suspicious types".¹⁰⁶

Presente survived these attacks relatively unscathed. Costs were low; sales were healthy; income was good; and Piño, Leduc and Arias Bernal, at least, expected this kind of provocation. But on 21 August an attack on the magazine's printing press threatened to close the magazine for good. At 10.40 pm twenty *pistoleros* broke into the press where

¹⁰⁴ "Editorial", *Presente*, 14 July 1948; Jesús Leonardo García, "Editorial", *Presente*, 14 July 1948.

¹⁰⁵ Jose Ramin Garmabella, Renato Leduc, *Apuntes de una vida singular* (Mexico City: Ediciones Oceano, 1982), pp.102.

¹⁰⁶ *Universal*, 28 Aug. 1948.

Presente was being printed. They held up the workers at gunpoint, smashed the presses, robbed copies of *Presente* and two other magazines, and stole watches, fountain pens, and a wallet containing over a thousand pesos. Workers put a call in to the police but the cops didn't arrive until an hour after the incident. According to the next day's newspaper reports, the gunmen did 70,000 pesos worth of damage.¹⁰⁷

From the beginning theories on who ordered the attack abounded. Many, including Piño, accused Pasquel. He had a motive: the previous issue of *Presente* had attacked him directly. The piece precipitated a further exposé in the tabloid *La Prensa* and Pasquel's hurried resignation from *Novedades*.¹⁰⁸ He also had form: Pasquel's temper was an open secret. He had beaten up workers for insulting his father, and he had shot a migration officer in a firefight in Nuevo Laredo just five years earlier.¹⁰⁹ Circumstantial evidence was also strong. The day before the attack, Pasquel had published an interview in *Novedades*, which defended his business practices, rubbished his critics, and seemed to suggest he would not leave Mexico City without a fight. According to Piño he had followed up this insinuation with a threatening phone call. Finally, the owner of the printshop recognised one of the gunmen as Veracruz hitman Manuel Felipe Villaverde, aka "El Asturiano". She had previously seen the man hanging around Pasquel's offices.¹¹⁰ But the case against Pasquel unraveled. Pasquel vehemently denied the charges, arguing that he would not have been stupid enough to destroy the press the day

¹⁰⁷ *Presente*, 26 Aug. 1948, *Excélsior*, 26 Aug. 1948.

¹⁰⁸ *Prensa*, 19, 21 Aug. 1948.

¹⁰⁹ Agundis, *El verdadero*, pp.97-100.

¹¹⁰ *Excélsior*, 28 Aug. 1948, *La Prensa*, 27 Aug. 1948.

after his defiant interview.¹¹¹ The potential witness Villaverde was shot in mysterious circumstances in a downtown cantina.¹¹² Finally government agents and policemen began briefing that the assault on *Presente* was not all it seemed. Journalists picked up on the rumours and hinted that the attack was actually an “auto-assault”, planned and directed by either Piño or a shadowy cabal of politicians funding the magazine.¹¹³ On 27 August, *La Prensa* pointed out other holes in the case. They indicated that the gunmen were clearly clueless, as despite the damage *El Presente* was published two days later without a hitch. And they suggested that, “it was strange that the manoeuvres of the squadron of assaulters was not seen by anyone in the barrio before the attack”.¹¹⁴

So who did order the attack? Pasquel was probably involved; Piño maintained his accusations against the playboy in the face of police denials. Yet Piño also suggested that other “pollos gordos” (fat cats, literally “fat chickens”) were involved.¹¹⁵ He never dropped names. However reading between the lines of various news stories and interviews it seems that he suspected Rogelio de la Selva, the president’s private secretary. Piño had regularly mocked De la Selva in the magazine; a representative from De la Selva’s sister’s magazine had visited the printworks just an hour before the attack.¹¹⁶ De la Selva took his orders directly from Alemán. Perhaps he acted alone to maintain his own reputation. But, it seems unlikely that the under-fire, foreign-born bureaucrat did something so risky without some kind of presidential authorization. The

¹¹¹ *La Prensa*, 27 Aug. 1948.

¹¹² *La Prensa*, 31 Aug. 1948.

¹¹³ Blanco Moheno, *Memorias*,

¹¹⁴ *La Prensa*, 27. Aug. 1948.

¹¹⁵ *La Prensa*, 29 Aug. 1948.

¹¹⁶ *La Prensa*, 30, 31 Aug. 1948.

interview with Alemán appeared in the issue preceding the attack. And Aleman certainly sympathised with the assault's aims. In the following months, the president publically sought to redraw the lines of acceptable journalism. On 31 August, *Excelsior* reported that Aleman supported the anti-murmuración campaign. "While the capital gossips, the rest of the country works" he stated.¹¹⁷ In his September annual report he directly condemned "opportunist critics" and journalists who took advantage of freedom of expression, "exaggerated" discontent, and disoriented public opinion.¹¹⁸

The destruction of *Presente's* printing press was the most prominent example of summer 1948's top-down censorship. But there were other examples of both legal censorship and dirty tricks. The day before the devaluation, police raided the Lírico theatre and banned the performance of the political review, *El Cuarto Poder*. Casas Alemán claimed the language and dancing was too risqué. Blanco Moheno responded that the Mexico City chief was trying to censor critical jokes about both his and the president's own administrations. After Blanco Moheno cut the offending gags the play went ahead, albeit with a much-reduced audience, unexcited by the rather bland rewrite.¹¹⁹ Government agents and the police also bought up or simply seized all the Mexico City copies of *Los Presidentes Dan Risa*. In late August, gunmen visited Magdalena Mondragón's house, banged on the door and, finding no one was home, shot up the outside of the building. A neighbour identified their getaway car as belonging to one of Alemán's personal

¹¹⁷ *Presente*, 19 Nov 1948.

¹¹⁸ See also his warning to the Mexican Association of Journalists, AGN, MAV, 542.1/700, Miguel Alemán to Asociación Mexicana de Periodistas, 27 Oct 1948

¹¹⁹ De María y Campos, *El Teatro de Genero Chico*, pp.424-5; Blanco Moheno, *Memorias*,

bodyguards.¹²⁰ Even Palillo was gagged. His column was cut from *Redondel*; his show at Follies was cancelled early.¹²¹

Humour Post-1948

Despite the assault, *Presente* continued. The tone, however, changed. Alarmist, if stimulating, conspiracies replaced the carefully compiled indictments of official corruption. In October, for example, they covered a bizarre story about big building works in Tacubaya. Author and poet, Jorge Ferretis, claimed that various women had approached the magazine to complain that their husbands, who were working at the site, had disappeared. They claimed shadowy government forces, including Alemán, were searching for the treasure of the bloody, nineteenth century conservative general Leonardo Márquez aka “the Tiger of Tacubaya”. The women suggested that state agents had murdered their spouses in order to cover up the plan. Ferretis seemed to confirm the story, denouncing soldiers for confiscating his camera at the site.¹²²

As the story suggests, after the assault *Presente*'s reporters were less cautious about implicating the president in these stories of murder and corruption. In November they ran a front page headlined “Machiavellian Alemán Valdés”. The article now laid the blame for the amigos firmly on President Alemán. The author claimed that the president practiced a narrow and unpatriotic form of favouritism, taken directly from Machiavelli's instructions.¹²³ And in early 1949, Arias Bernal adorned the front cover with a cartoon of

¹²⁰ Martínez S. *La Vieja Guardia*, p.92.

¹²¹ *Presente*, 14 Sept. 1948; AGN, MAV, 542.1/700, Asociación Mexicana de Periodistas, 20 Oct. 1948.

¹²² *Presente*, 5 Oct. 1948.

¹²³ *Presente*, 19 Nov. 1948.

a buck-toothed, smiling Alemán holding the keys to a prison. Inside, languished a woman, representing the Mexican Constitution. On the bars were scrawled “monopolies” “the halting of newspapers” and “zero democracy”. Underneath a peasant asked the president, “Why won’t you let her free?”¹²⁴ The message was now clear. Alemán, not his amigos, was the problem. Yet the greater racism failed; for the average Mexico City reader, *Presente*’s time had passed. The price of *Presente* rose to 40c a copy while circulation fell to around 25,000 per issue.¹²⁵ More importantly, the popular cross-class fury that had fuelled the magazine’s popularity dissipated. The provision of cheap food played a key role. So did the high profile dismissals. So did the anti-communist and anti-murmuración campaigns, which helped destroy the unity between middle class and working class Mexicans. By October support for anti-communism was so great that Serrano’s DFS agents, supported by a pliant press, helped a government stooge gain control of the breakaway railway union without causing any fuss.¹²⁶ Public opinion had changed. By September, government agents reported that Alemán’s annual report had made a “very good impression among all the social classes”. Citizens outside the Hotel Regis pharmacy “showed greater optimism” and commented that he should “put a brake on the blackmailing journalists and punish them with an iron fist”.¹²⁷ Fear-mongering and appeasement had trumped satire.

As *Presente*’s journalists admitted, popular disinterest killed the magazine. But, persistent government intervention didn’t help. In October the government cut the PIPSA

¹²⁴ Front cover, *Presente*, 3 Feb 1949.

¹²⁵ Novo, *La Vida*, p.346.

¹²⁶ Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution*, p.140

¹²⁷ AGN/DGIPS-132/Exp. 33, Informe, 2 Sept. 1948.

provision of paper to *Presente* by 75 per cent. The magazine now only received two tonnes per week. Piño was forced to buy high import tax Finnish paper from abroad and beg for offcuts from friends in the journalism industry.¹²⁸ Over the next few months, the magazine shrunk in size, even as it increased in price. The final issue was printed on poor quality paper and was only eight pages long.¹²⁹ Finally, there is some evidence that government agents finally made good on a previous threat to kill Piño. Just before the closure of the magazine, Piño tumbled from a second story balcony onto the ground below, breaking multiple bones. He survived, but only just. Many suspected he was pushed.¹³⁰

The short-term effects of the authorities' campaigns were dramatic. Publications and theatres were closed; journalists were shot at and pushed from balconies. But the long-term effects were perhaps more significant. For at least two decades, Mexico City's production of political satire aimed at a mass audience disappeared.¹³¹ Here, satirical magazines declined.¹³² So did political reviews.¹³³ Only illustrative satire – in the form of cartoons – remained relatively free of self-censorship. The satirists and journalists who had used their talents to embarrass the Alemán administration became increasingly *oficialista*. Piño went into enforced exile in Argentina. When he returned in the 1950s, he reverted to his job as a political columnist, earning a 2000 peso monthly *iguala* for his

¹²⁸ *Presente*, 5, 12 Oct 1948.

¹²⁹ *Presente*, 17 Mar. 1949.

¹³⁰ Martínez, *La Vieja Guardia*, p.92.

¹³¹ In the provinces, satirical journalism and theatre continued relatively unabated. See Gillingham, this volume.

¹³² The 1952 follow up to *Presente*, *El Apretado*, was much less popular. Mraz, *Looking*, p.283. There were attempts to reintroduce a Cardenista satirical magazine in 1959, entitled *Rototemas*. It was only thinly satirical, had little purchase, and soon disappeared.

¹³³ De María y Campos, *El Teatro de Genero Chico*, pp.433-9.

silence.¹³⁴ Arias Bernal toned down his works and went back to producing anti-communist cartoons for overpriced colour magazines. Even the professional comics calmed down. Cantinflas became a government shill, marching arm-in-arm with Alemán, acting as an electoral observer at the controversial 1952 election, and producing a series of increasingly unfunny films.¹³⁵ Roberto “El Panzón” Soto sank so low that he took employ as Baja California governor Braulio Maldonado’s clown, doing shows to offset the minister’s declining popularity.¹³⁶

Political humour did not disappear completely. But, as text and stage versions declined, the audience for satire narrowed. Satirical jokes became part of elitelore, the informal system of gossip and rules, which were limited to Mexico City’s ministries, administrative offices, and newsrooms.¹³⁷ According to Monsiváis, a “sense of humour” was one of the three rights journalists kept to themselves. In private they were “acute and destructive commentators”; in public they were “corny and officialista”.¹³⁸ To enjoy such jokes, listeners needed an intimate knowledge of leaders’ personal foibles, the inner workings of the party, and the oblique language of the PRI. They also needed a shared cynicism about the actual aims of power. As a result, such gags rarely made their way onto the street. If they reached print, they were encoded in incomprehensible political columns in under-read newspapers or hidden away in “cartas secretas”, limited edition

¹³⁴ AGN, MAV, 272.2/272, Manuel Alvarez de Castillo to Rogelio de la Selva, 7 Jul. 1950; AGN/DGIPS-2953 B, Lista de Subsidios.

¹³⁵ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, p.147.

¹³⁶ AGN, ARC, 704/259, Correo Privado, 4 Sept. 1954.

¹³⁷ Schmidt, *Seriously Funny*, p.11; Samuel Schmidt, “Elitelore in Politics: Humor versus Mexico’s Presidents”, *Journal of Latin American Lore*, 16.1 (1990), 91-108.

¹³⁸ Julio Scherer Garcia and Carlos Monsiáis, *Tiempo de Saber, Prensa y Poder en México* (Mexico City, Aguilar, 2003)

political newsletters, which not coincidentally saw a rapid upsurge after 1948.¹³⁹ As a result, most Mexicans lacked the references, the context, and the values to make such jokes.¹⁴⁰ In fact, Samuel Schmidt goes as far as to argue that, “among the non-elite groups not a single political joke seems to have been produced” during the period. Satirizing the system was a game for the PRI’s inner circle.

Conclusions

This story of street jokes, satirical cultural works, and suppression helps explain the chronology of Mexican political humour, the connections between press readership and broader social and political forces, and the mechanics of state censorship. But, it also suggests some more general rules governing the production and reception of political satire. In 1948, satire was not simply an escape valve. It was a genuine threat. By providing a narrative, which linked popular suffering to elite corruption, satire provided a comprehensible, unifying language for dissent. But, the popularity and efficacy of this language - the level of this threat - depended on broader socio-economic and political processes, including in this case, the price of basic foods and the perceived possibility of government reform. (The economic crisis of 1973 would cause a similar outpouring of popular satire.)¹⁴¹ It also depended on satirical entrepreneurs, those inside the media prepared to leak the world of the elite to the public and organise these stories into wider

¹³⁹ The original *carta secreta* was the Buro de Investigaciones Políticas was established in 1948. For coding of political columns see Carlos Ortega, “Como se Hacen las Columnas Politicas”, *Por Que?* 10 Sept.1970; José Ibaranguoitia, *Instrucciones para vivir en México* (Mexico City, Joaquín Mortiz, 1990).

¹⁴⁰ For common frameworks that govern humor see Linda Hutchinson, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Linda Hutchinson, *Irony’s Edge, The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁴¹ Louise E. Walker, “Spying at the Drycleaners: Anonymous Gossip in 1973 Mexico City”, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 19.1 (2013), pp.52-61. Sadly no one has looked at the relationship between printed and street satire during this period.

narratives. And, temporarily at least, it intensified interaction between the world of journalists and readers.

The story also suggests more universal understandings of censorship. Censorship involved medium term cultural processes, including the development of broad understandings of nationalism, economic progress, and the proper practice of journalism. But, it also comprised moments of somewhat ad hoc, multi-agency repression. These included the covert use of violence. Such strategies not only stopped the immediate threat. Buttressed by the authorities' explanations in public statements and private letters, they also provided a new manual for journalists' behaviour.¹⁴² The story of *Presente* became an instructive myth. From 1948 onwards, Mexico City's reporters learned the limits of acceptable discourse, modified and coded the language of satire, rejigged the boundaries of their audience, and understood the prospective punishments for those who wandered off message.

¹⁴² For wider effects of violence see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp.32-72.