The technology of the ridiculous, or how to ridicule democracy: the political instrumentalisation of absurdity

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Abstract: The Technology of the Ridiculous examines the systematic instrumentalization of absurdity, ridicule, and political theatricality as mechanisms of democratic degradation. It advances the argument that the ridiculous, when deliberately cultivated and politically deployed, ceases to be merely a matter of individual conduct, eccentricity, or comic spectacle and becomes an operational technology of power. Through the elevation of the ridiculous leader, the circulation and normalization of absurdity, the instrumentalization of ridicule, the mobilization of unconditional defenders, and the progressive degradation of democratic attractiveness, this technology undermines the symbolic, moral, and institutional foundations of democratic governance.

The essay identifies five interconnected operations through which the ridiculous acquires political effectiveness. First, the elevation of the ridiculous leader transforms personal inadequacy and performative excess into instruments of political visibility and influence. Second, the continuous circulation of absurdity destabilizes shared standards of rationality, truth, and public judgment. Third, ridicule becomes an instrument of political aggression, humiliation, and the displacement of substantive deliberation. Fourth, unconditional defenders provide the social infrastructure necessary to normalize contradictions, protect political irresponsibility, and perpetuate the spectacle. Finally, the cumulative effect is the erosion of democratic dignity, institutional legitimacy, public confidence, and the attractiveness of democratic values.

The essay distinguishes between ridicule as a legitimate instrument of democratic criticism and ridicule as a technology of democratic disarmament. In the latter configuration, the systematic production of absurdity does not merely expose political weaknesses; it progressively disables the capacity of democratic institutions and citizens to recognize, articulate, and resist political irresponsibility. The resulting condition may be understood as a form of institutional necrosis, in which democratic structures formally survive while their normative and communicative vitality deteriorates.

The central proposition is that the technology of the ridiculous represents a consequential yet insufficiently conceptualized mechanism of contemporary political degradation. Its operation deserves critical attention not only as a phenomenon of political communication but also as a problem of democratic theory, institutional resilience, and collective responsibility. The essay therefore proposes that understanding the political uses of the ridiculous is essential to understanding how democracy can be weakened from within without necessarily abandoning its formal institutional architecture.

Keywords: technology of the ridiculous; political absurdity; political spectacle; ridicule as political instrument; democratic degradation; democratic disarmament; narcissistic leadership; institutional necrosis; political irresponsibility; democratic legitimacy; political communication; institutional resilience

Abstrakt: Esej podejmuje problem politycznego instrumentalizowania absurdu i ośmieszenia jako potencjalnego mechanizmu stopniowej degradacji demokracji. Wprowadza autorskie pojęcie **technologii śmieszności (the technology of the ridiculous)**, rozumianej jako system wzajemnie powiązanych praktyk komunikacyjnych i politycznych, za pomocą których groteska, narcyzm, teatralizacja władzy, prowokacja oraz demonstracyjna nieodpowiedzialność stają się narzędziami osłabiania autorytetu instytucji demokratycznych. Autor wskazuje, że zagrożenie dla demokracji nie musi przyjmować postaci bezpośredniego zamachu na jej konstytucyjne podstawy. Może dokonywać się również poprzez systematyczne obniżanie jej godności, wiarygodności i społecznej atrakcyjności, a także przekształcanie debaty publicznej w permanentny spektakl politycznej groteski. Esej identyfikuje pięć podstawowych operacji składających się na technologię śmieszności oraz analizuje ich wzajemne powiązania i potencjalne konsekwencje instytucjonalne. Szczególną uwagę poświęca mechanizmom normalizacji politycznego absurdu, roli bezwarunkowych obrońców ośmieszanej władzy oraz mediom wzmacniającym obieg politycznego spektaklu. Główna teza zakłada, że ośmieszenie demokracji może stać się pośrednim sposobem jej delegitymizacji, a w dalszej perspektywie ułatwiać koncentrację władzy i osłabianie mechanizmów demokratycznej kontroli. Autor postuluje włączenie technologii śmieszności do programu badawczego politologii, komunikologii politycznej i socjologii instytucji demokratycznych, traktując ją jako kategorię analityczną wymagającą dalszych badań porównawczych i empirycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: technologia śmieszności; demokracja; delegitymizacja instytucji; absurd polityczny; ośmieszenie polityczne; komunikacja polityczna; groteska polityczna; teatralizacja władzy; degradacja instytucjonalna; kryzys demokracji

Democracy is rarely destroyed in a single spectacular act. More often, it is gradually discredited, emptied of dignity, deprived of authority and transformed into an object of public amusement. Its institutions remain standing, its procedures continue to operate, its representatives retain their titles, and its constitutional vocabulary remains in circulation. Yet something essential has already begun to disappear: public confidence in the seriousness, legitimacy and moral authority of democratic government. One of the most disturbing mechanisms in this process is what I propose to call **the technology of the ridiculous**.

The expression refers to a politically instrumentalised system of actions through which absurdity, narcissism, theatricality, deliberate irresponsibility and public humiliation are converted into instruments of institutional degradation. Its ultimate objective is not necessarily to overthrow democracy directly. Rather, it is to make democracy appear so incompetent, grotesque, ridiculous and unworthy of respect that its eventual weakening, circumvention or replacement becomes progressively acceptable. The ridiculous, in this sense,

is not simply a matter of bad taste, political comedy or the occasional eccentricity of public figures. It is a method. It is a technology of political destabilisation.

1. From political absurdity to political technology

The distinction between an absurd political event and the systematic production of political absurdity is fundamental. Every democracy occasionally produces incompetent politicians, embarrassing parliamentary performances, irresponsible statements and spectacular failures of leadership. Such phenomena are neither exceptional nor necessarily dangerous. Democratic systems possess mechanisms for correcting them.

The situation changes, however, when ridicule becomes recurrent, predictable and politically functional. When the public sphere is persistently occupied by grotesque performances, narcissistic self-presentation, provocative declarations, institutional insults and deliberately manufactured controversies, political communication ceases to serve primarily the purposes of deliberation and public accountability. It becomes a theatre of distraction.

The citizen is no longer invited to evaluate policies, institutional competence or the public interest. Instead, the citizen is compelled to consume an endless succession of political spectacles. Serious questions are displaced by entertaining scandals; institutional responsibilities are obscured by personalities; and the distinction between political leadership and political performance becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The overall result is a peculiar inversion: the more ridiculous the political spectacle becomes, the less visible its potentially serious institutional consequences may be.

2. The five operations of the technology of the ridiculous

The technology of the ridiculous can be provisionally conceptualised as a sequence of five mutually reinforcing operations.

First: the elevation of the ridiculous leader.

The process begins with the emergence or promotion of a leader whose public persona is characterised by narcissism, theatrical self-importance, impulsiveness, provocative behaviour and an apparent indifference to conventional standards of political dignity. The leader's eccentricities are not necessarily obstacles to political advancement. They may become its

principal instruments. The ridiculous leader attracts attention, monopolises public discourse and converts political communication into a permanent performance. The spectacle itself becomes a source of power.

Second: the unrestricted circulation of political absurdity.

The leader is allowed, encouraged or simply permitted to operate within an environment in which institutional restraint becomes progressively weaker. Political conventions are violated, established procedures are ridiculed, public offices are trivialised and the boundaries of acceptable conduct are continuously tested. In other words, what would once have been regarded as disqualifying behaviour becomes normalised through repetition. The extraordinary becomes ordinary; the unacceptable becomes familiar.

Third: the instrumentalisation of ridicule.

The leader's public performance may then become an instrument through which the dignity of democratic institutions is systematically diminished. The spectacle of incompetence, humiliation and political disorder creates the impression that democracy itself is inherently incapable of producing responsible government.

An important distinction must be made here: the object of ridicule is no longer merely the individual politician. The ridicule is gradually transferred to the institutions that surround him or her. Parliament, public administration, political parties, constitutional procedures and even the idea of democratic representation become implicated in the spectacle.

Fourth: the mobilisation of unconditional defenders.

No technology of political ridicule can operate efficiently without a supporting social and communicative infrastructure. This includes groups of unconditional defenders, political loyalists, ideological intermediaries and what might provocatively be termed *useful idiots*.

Their function is to neutralise criticism, rationalise contradictions, excuse misconduct and transform every institutional objection into evidence of hostility towards the leader. They provide a protective interpretative environment in which absurdity is continuously reclassified as strength, unconventionality, authenticity or political courage. The defence of the ridiculous

leader thus becomes detached from the assessment of his or her actual conduct. Simply, loyalty replaces judgement.

Fifth: the degradation of democratic attractiveness.

The cumulative consequence is the weakening of the perceived dignity, competence and attractiveness of democratic government. Citizens become increasingly cynical, distrustful and exhausted. Political participation may appear pointless, institutional procedures may seem theatrical, and public accountability may be perceived as merely another element of the spectacle.

Democracy is not necessarily abolished. Something more insidious may happen: it becomes increasingly difficult to defend because its symbolic and moral foundations have been progressively undermined.

3. The political economy of absurdity

The technology of the ridiculous also deserves attention as a possible component of a broader political economy of power. Political absurdity generates attention. Attention generates visibility. Visibility can be converted into political influence, commercial value and communicative dominance. The permanent circulation of scandal and spectacle creates an environment in which the serious and the ridiculous compete under profoundly unequal conditions.

A dichotmy is formed: the serious requires explanation, argument, evidence and patience. The ridiculous requires only repetition, provocation and an audience.

This asymmetry is particularly consequential in technologically mediated public communication. Digital platforms, accelerated news cycles and the commercialisation of attention may amplify political performances irrespective of their intellectual or institutional value. The most outrageous statement can become more visible than the most responsible political argument. Obviously, under such conditions, democratic discourse risks becoming subordinated to the logic of spectacle.

There is also a more troubling possibility. The degradation of public confidence in democratic institutions may create opportunities for actors whose interests are better served

by weakened public accountability, concentrated economic power and reduced institutional oversight. In this sense. a corporate or oligarchic appropriation of political influence is therefore a legitimate subject of investigation.

It would, however, be methodologically incorrect to assume that every instance of political absurdity is evidence of a coordinated corporate takeover. The relationship between spectacle, institutional weakening and economic concentration must be demonstrated rather than presumed. The hypothesis is sufficiently important to warrant systematic investigation.

4. The ridiculous as an instrument of institutional necrosis

The deepest danger of the technology of the ridiculous lies in its capacity to produce what might be called *institutional necrosis*. Institutions do not depend exclusively on constitutions, regulations and administrative procedures. They also depend on symbolic authority, public recognition, trust and the shared conviction that institutional rules deserve respect.

Once this symbolic dimension is damaged, the formal structure may survive while its functional substance deteriorates.

A parliament can continue to meet without being regarded as a serious deliberative institution. A government can continue to administer the state without enjoying public confidence. Elections can continue to take place while the idea of democratic responsibility becomes increasingly hollow.

This is the paradox of democratic degradation through ridicule: the institutional body remains recognisable, but its normative and symbolic vitality is progressively impaired.

The ridiculous is therefore potentially more than a communicative disturbance. It can become a mechanism of institutional erosion.

5. Why democracy must not become ridiculous

Democracy is not inherently dignified merely because it is democratic. It must continuously earn public respect through competence, responsibility, transparency, accountability and the protection of human dignity.

Nor should democratic institutions be immunised against pure criticism, satire or public ridicule. Satire is an indispensable instrument of democratic freedom. It exposes hypocrisy, challenges authority and protects citizens against political self-importance.

The important distinction is between ridicule directed at the abuse of power and the instrumentalised ridicule of the democratic system itself. The former is corrective. The latter may be destructive.

A democracy capable of laughing at its leaders is healthy. A democracy whose institutional existence becomes a permanent object of contempt is vulnerable.

The appropriate response cannot be censorship, the suppression of satire or the restoration of artificial political solemnity. It must involve the recovery of institutional seriousness, the strengthening of public accountability, the cultivation of critical media literacy and the defence of the distinction between political entertainment and political responsibility.

6. Towards a research programme

The technology of the ridiculous should be introduced into the research agenda of political science, political communication, sociology and the study of democratic institutions.

Several questions deserve particular attention:

1. Under what conditions does political eccentricity become a systematic instrument of institutional degradation?
2. How does the repeated exposure of citizens to political absurdity affect trust in democratic institutions?
3. What communicative mechanisms facilitate the normalisation of political irresponsibility?
4. What roles are played by unconditional political defenders in maintaining the legitimacy of ridiculous leadership?
5. To what extent do commercial media structures and digital attention economies amplify the political effectiveness of absurdity?
6. Can the systematic degradation of democratic dignity facilitate the concentration of political and economic power?

7. What institutional and communicative mechanisms can interrupt the process?

A particularly important task would be to distinguish between spontaneous political incompetence, strategically cultivated absurdity and coordinated political communication. These phenomena may produce similar public effects while having different causes and intentions. The concept of the technology of the ridiculous should therefore be treated as an analytical hypothesis and developed through comparative, historical and empirical research.

Conclusion: the absurdity of power and the power of the absurd

The technology of the ridiculous identifies a potentially serious mechanism of contemporary democratic vulnerability. It draws attention to the possibility that democracy may be weakened not only through direct attacks on its constitution, institutions or electoral procedures, but also through the sustained degradation of its public image, symbolic authority and moral attractiveness.

Its central paradox is that the ridiculous can become politically consequential precisely because it appears politically insignificant. Laughter, embarrassment, scandal and disbelief may conceal processes of institutional transformation whose consequences are anything but amusing.

The ultimate objective of the technology of the ridiculous, whether deliberately pursued or emerging through convergent political and communicative practices, is to transform democratic seriousness into public comedy and democratic responsibility into political theatre.

Democracy must therefore defend not its solemnity, but its dignity; not its immunity from criticism, but its capacity for responsible self-correction. For when the ridiculous becomes the dominant language of political power, the danger is no longer simply that politicians will make democracy look foolish.

The danger is that citizens will eventually cease to believe that democracy deserves to be taken seriously.

The final note:

The technology of the ridiculous is thus not merely a technology of political mockery. It is a potential technology of democratic disarmament!