

# Jokes As Propaganda

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## Presidential Address

On October 27, 2024, Tony Hinchcliffe, a comedian performing at Donald Trump’s Madison Square Garden rally sparked outrage when he made a series of racist and xenophobic jokes. In one of the controversial jokes, Hinchcliffe said, “There’s a lot going on. I don’t know if you know this, but there’s literally a floating island of garbage in the middle of the ocean right now. I think it’s called Puerto Rico” (McCausland). Trump himself has made jokes (or joke attempts) about making himself a dictator. He has said that people should go out and vote in 2024, as there won’t be a need to replace him with anyone else since “[f]our more years, you know what? It’ll be fixed, it’ll be fine, you won’t have to vote any more, my beautiful Christians.” Trump has made references to staying in office as a dictator (even if only for one day). When pressed about this, Trump supporters cried out in disapprobation of his critics, saying things like “[o]f course he’s joking... You can’t be a dictator with a constitutional republic” (Bayoumi).

But what if both the critic and defender are both right in a certain way? What if Trump is “joking”, but also stating what he means in the “format of a joke?” The tool of using jokes as a form of political rhetoric, in this case specifically, humor as that rhetorical tool, is rather new in the brief history of modern fascism. In this paper, I will first explain what fascism and macho populism are. Next, I will move on the “Master Class” teacher of the use and abuse of offensive for political gain: Rodrigo Duterte. I will give a very brief overview of his rise to power and look at his use of offensive humor to gain mass appeal. I will lastly argue that these jokes are used as fascist rhetoric, following the path of dog whistle, fig leaf, to howling. They are used to promote a political agenda, fail to qualify as humor, in similar ways that art as propaganda fail as well: their intentions are not to promote/invoke

mirth, but to authoritatively dominate a crowd. They are more appropriately what I will call “humor howling.”

## UNPACKING FASCISM: TERMS OF THE FIGHT

To avoid being accused of throwing around terminology as a form of *ad hominem* or equivocation, I will first clearly, but far too briefly, define terms like fascism, totalitarianism, authoritarianism, populism, especially macho populism, which of course, all connects the figure of a strongman, the teller of such “jokes” as fascist rhetoric.

### *Fascism*

The word fascism gets thrown around a lot and is often used as a form of dismissing an opponent’s view outright. To avoid any unnecessary wolf-crying, I will give a definition of it before applying the term to the political rhetoric in my analysis. Here are some generally standard characteristics of fascist regimes:

- Fascists are opposed to democracy, liberalism, pluralism, and socialism (or what is perceived as any of these things). Instead, those who follow a fascist ideology believe in autocracy
- Believe in the subordination of the individual interest to the dominant power
- Ascribe a set/fixed natural social order/class system (“it is only natural”)
- Appeal to a mythic past where things were great
- Favor a one-party state and militarism. Since fascists support militarism, and fixed dominant/subordinate power systems, their view towards violence leans more positive than other systems of political beliefs.
- Unreality/“truth” as authenticity, as fabricated by the strongman leader
- Victimhood narrative/scapegoating, in which the more dominant class is made to feel oppressed by the less powerful or minority class

Fascist regimes and movements are hard to pin down, but often they will have many of these qualities bundled together in a variety of ways.

In his work *The Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini writes that, “Democracy is a kingless regime infested by many kings who are sometimes not exclusive, tyrannical, and destructive than one, even if he [the king] is a tyrant” (Mussolini 243). The *hoi polloi* are clearly not seen to be the origin of the power of a fascist state, nor should they be, but a strong authoritarian or totalitarian leader.

Some have claimed that it is hard to pin down exactly what fascism itself is,

as much of its ideology is against liberalism and reactionary, but hopefully the nature of fascism will become clearer when I get to talking about fascist strongmen's rhetorical strategies.

### *Totalitarianism*

Fascism is often argued to be a form of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is a form of government characterized by a strong central government that attempts to control and direct all aspects of individual life through coercion and repression. Under various forms of totalitarian regimes, from communist to fascist, the state's power is unlimited and virtually controls all aspects of public and private life: under communism, by the state itself, while under fascism, AKA corporatism, meaning this is achieved through the merger of business and governmental power. Totalitarian regimes have an explicit or implied national ideology, a set of beliefs intended to direct the entire society.

Traditional totalitarian states have these qualities:

- There is a dictator
- A single ruling party
- Strict censorship and/or total control of the press by some unitary party (state of corporate/government merged)
- The private becomes public
- Routine dissemination of various forms of propaganda
- Mandatory population control practices, either additive or subtractive
- There is a prohibition of certain religious or political practices, as well as prohibitions on any public and often private criticisms of the government

Under totalitarian regimes, the state uses fear to control and organize the citizens into submission and to ensure their "cooperation." Some notable totalitarian regimes were: The People's Republic of China under Mao, Nazi Germany under Hitler, and the Fascist Kingdom of Italy under Mussolini.

### *Authoritarianism*

For brevity's sake, I cannot dive into the debates around delimitating the differences between totalitarian and authoritarian states. What I might say is that authoritarianism is the Diet Coke of totalitarianism. Authoritarian states are characterized by a strong central government, limited political freedom but the government has no constitutional accountability and operates unchecked by a judiciary. Authoritarianism is often used as a broad umbrella category for all non-democratic regimes, as totalitarianism as practiced does not seem to fit these sorts of regimes in enough ways.<sup>1</sup>

An authoritarian state is often marked by the following traits:

- There is limited political freedom, strict controls of political groups/parties, even on the legislatures
- The ruling government is justified as a “necessary evil” to dealing with economic and social ills
- There is a ruling executive with loosely defined powers/shifting powers and little judiciary pushback
- There are government-imposed constraints on some social freedoms, such as anti-regime protests and political opposition (while keeping the veneer of multiparty systems in place in some cases)
- Has the appearance of being democratic while not actually being democratic

Familiar authoritarian regimes/states are Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela, Xi Jinping’s Modern People’s Republic of China, Russia under Vladimir Putin, and Chile under Augusto Pinochet. And, as I will focus on in this analysis, the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte. One can see the variety here of systems, from Authoritarian Socialism to Authoritarian Capitalism.

### *Macho Populism*

Before proceeding further into Duterte and a study of his “humorous language,” I would also like to define what has been dubbed “Macho Populism.” Firstly, populism itself is “a common term for the parties and movements that carry forth...illiberal...democratic politics” (Ben-Ghiat 6). Through this ideology, we can see the combination of the fascist disdain for liberalism with an approval of the popular vote (however temporary that vote will be or how imagined its authenticity is). A populist movement’s rhetoric often revolves around an “us versus them” dynamic and combines entertainment with politics.<sup>2</sup> Populism cannot be properly defined as a political organization or practice, but the performative/visual aspect of authoritarian, and sometimes totalitarian, leaning states (or states on that trajectory).

As with many iterations of populism, the main form comes to us under “strongman rule” (more in future work) and “macho populism.” Macho populism is marked by “hypermasculine performances of toughness against “enemies” (them, the other, the foreigners, those not aligned with the state’s narratives) “and benevolent paternalism towards their supporters. They display larger than life personalities that command the loyalties of many” (Curato and Yonaha 384). Strongmen politics, often signaled by macho populist rhetoric, is seen when “executive and fascist power is asserted at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches of government” (Ben-Ghiat 5). Strongmen rulers often seek to destroy democracies, often the same ones which brought them into power.

Examples of Strongmen leaders, some of whom embody/enable macho populism: Gaddafi, Berlusconi, Erdoğan, Putin, Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Orbán, and Duterte.

## DUTERTE AND STRONGMAN “HUMOR”

### *Rise to the Presidency*

Rodrigo Duterte, born in 1945 in Maasin, Philippines, came from a political family with political connections: his father Vicente was a lawyer-turned-governor under early Marcos's rule. His mother, Soledad, was a teacher and civic leader against the Marcos regime (after her husband's death). In his youth, Duterte ran with his father's police bodyguards who exposed him to street life, booze, and violence. Duterte later also admitted that he shot one of his classmates in high school. As Davao City mayor (1988-2016), Duterte transformed the city into one of Southeast Asia's safest (but only through highly controversial methods).<sup>3</sup> He openly endorsed extrajudicial killings by death squads. He also cultivated an image as “the Punisher,” calling himself “Duterte Harry,” and admitting to personally killing criminals himself.

In 2016, amid widespread discontent with the variety of failures of central leadership, Duterte won the presidency. It has been widely argued that the Philippines had been primed for this populist leader, given the inept government, long-standing do-nothing leaders, and political offices dominated by a few affluent families. Within the first 18 months of Duterte's presidency, his administration saw over 12,000 killings via extrajudicial police and vigilante action. But this did not stop him from being popular with the average Filipino; centered on a combination of vulgarity and perceived authenticity (more in future work on this issue), he spoke to those who were tired of crime (even though those who supported him were those most likely to be targets for his death squads). Despite his misogynistic rhetoric, crude jokes, and open disregard for human rights, 16.6 million Filipinos embraced him as an anti-establishment figure. *Or perhaps because of his misogynic and cruel rhetoric, they did.* Sociologist John Andrew G. Evangelista was asked how a country like the Philippines with some of Asia's highest ratings for gender equality could produce a president prone to rape jokes. “Duterte did not make politics sexist,” Evangelista explained, “It was already sexist to begin with.”<sup>4</sup>

### *The “Jokes”*

I will now share some of Duterte's collection of jokes, or joke attempts, as it is up for debate whether they are actually jokes, or perhaps, even actually funny. I have broken his jokes into three genres here: Murder, Rape, and “Dick Talk.”

Duterte was very committed to presenting himself as a supporter of violence, and his jokes clearly intended to showcase this. Consider the following:

- He secured the presidency largely due to his reputation for crime reduction as the mayor of Davao. During his mayoral tenure, Davao established civilian militias to combat communist insurgents, but quickly these groups became death squads, targeting individuals perceived as threats to public order. Duterte pledged to implement this same approach nationwide upon becoming president, pointing to the fact that vigilante violence “works.” He said at his final presidential campaign rally, “Forget the laws on human rights. If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as mayor. You drug pushers, hold-up men and do-nothings, you better go out. Because I’d kill you. I’ll dump all of you into Manila Bay and fatten all the fish there” (“Philippines President”).
- In referencing his tough on crime stance, he said he would kill as many drug pushers as Hitler killed Jews in the Holocaust (incorrectly claiming this number to be three million). He then quipped, “If Germany had Hitler, the Philippines would have...” before pointing to himself. (Miller 9)
- In just this year, 2025, he spoke during his party senatorial proclamation rally in San Juan City, at which its nine senatorial candidates were announced. During the speech, the now ex-president joked about using a bomb to kill 15 senators, some of whom were campaigning under the ticket of his successor, President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., to create more vacancies for the party’s candidates to contest. Duterte said, “Now, there’s many of them. What should we do? Let’s kill the senators now to create vacancies. If we can kill around 15 senators, we can all go in. But they’d be pitiful. Yet they’re irritating—not all of them, though. Talking of opportunities, the only way to do it is to use a bomb” (Strangio).<sup>5</sup>

I do not have time to tell you every single rape joke or “playful” sexual misconduct Duterte has been engaged in, but here are a handful of them from throughout his time as mayor and president.

- In 1989, an Australian missionary, Jacqueline Hamill, was raped and murdered during a prison riot at her workplace in Davao City. Duterte, who was mayor at the time, was recorded making comments about this incident during a presidential campaign speech. He told the crowd, “They raped all of the women ... There was this Australian lay minister ... when they took them out ... I saw her face and I thought: ‘Son of a bitch. what a pity ... they raped her, they all lined up. I was angry because she was raped, that’s one thing. But she was so

beautiful. I thought, the mayor should have been first. What a waste’” (Rafeal 43-44). When asked to apologize for this, he said he meant what he said. He also declared, “This is how men talk” and took back a previous apology for his statement about the murdered woman (ibid).

- After declaring military rule on Mindanao in May 2017 (due to a political-religious uprising), Duterte told his soldiers not to worry about committing any war crimes or abuses while fighting, that “he would take responsibility for their actions. Then, he joked: ‘if you rape three, I will say that I did it. But if you marry four, son of a whore you will be beaten up’” (ibid)
- In Feb 2018, when Duterte spoke to 200 surrendered communist NPA (New People’s Army) members, he noticed that ¼ of the fighters were women. He said that his soldiers should not kill the female fighters, but instead, “shoot their vagina” because without that “they are useless.” He said it multiple times, and directly addressing the rebel women at least once (45). He defended this as “sarcastic.”
- Also, he has a strange “folksy” tale of being molested by a priest as a young teen and then attempting to assault his household maid in her sleep, but “chickening out” (49-50).
- In a speech at a campaign rally in April 2019, Duterte bragged about the size of his penis and how he would strut around naked and “erect” at the gym, inspiring awe from other men.

But one might ask: is Duterte just “telling jokes”? Can a macho populist authoritarian strongman be telling jokes about murder and rape and have it truly qualify as simple humor? Or is something else less funny really going on?

### THE DEFENSES OF DUTERTE’S JOKES

Before making my case that Duterte’s joke attempts are not truly jokes, I would like to share defenses of Duterte from supporters in the Philippines, many from those who know him personally. I want to address these defenses from inside the Duterte camp, or even from the people of the Philippines to avoid being a colonial *putang ina* [son of a bitch] (Strangio).

*Defense 1:* it is his *Bisaya* or his *Bugoy* nature (so you can’t really judge him but have to accept that culture/background).

In his book, *Rodrigo Duterte: Fire and Fury in the Philippines*, journalist Jonathan Miller asks the question if Duterte’s “flippant crude language” is just “Bisayan social culture,” or perhaps just part of his “bugoy” culture. He asks if perhaps

Duterte is “yaga yaga,” meaning he is someone who lacks “politeness, mocks pretension, treats others contemptuously, wounds their feelings, and humiliates. But because it is done in good humor, it’s all okay” (Miller 114-115).<sup>6</sup> Bisayan people are happy people, Miller reports from an interview with Professor Ramon Beleno, one time chair of political science at Ateneo de Naga University. “Jokes are very important...[Duterte] inserts them in serious matters, even in matters of national security, and people just don’t understand that... [T]he problem is, it gets him in trouble because people take him seriously.” At this point, Professor Beleno added that Duterte is just an old guy being “flirty” when he’s groping and sexualizing women (Miller115-116).

After Duterte “joked” about shooting rebel women in the vagina, he was criticized by Congresswoman Emmi de Jesus. Speaking on behalf of the Gabriela Women’s Party, she called him out as being a “macho fascist,” a “terrorist against women,” and “the epitome of misogyny and fascism rolled into one.” To this, Duterte spokesperson, Harry Roque, replied, “Feminists were “OA,” overreacting. “That’s funny. Just laugh.” (131).<sup>7</sup>

*Defense 2:* This is just how he (as a man) is, so you can’t really judge him, as this is how men like him are created.

When asked about his foul language directed at the Pope (in which he called the Pope a son of a whore), he said, “We are all creations of God. We have God given talents. The God given talent that God gave me is cussing. Instead of blaming me, blame God, because He created me. (108).

*Defense 3:* He doesn’t really mean it, so you can’t really judge him.

Jesus “Jess” Dureza, Duterte’s oldest friend turned cabinet member, said of Duterte’s language, “Don’t take him at his word. He’s a very colorful person. He exaggerates...he never smiles, even though he jokes.... When he says a joke...he puts on a poker face so that you don’t know he’s pulling your leg” (111).

But also, Dureza also commented that Duterte is very good at sounding the “whistle of the dog”, that the jokes are meant to be for those “he feels should get the warning.” (ibid).

When Duterte was pressed again on the issue of the rape comments about the missionary, he snapped back, “It wasn’t a bad joke...It wasn’t a joke!... It is my style... My mouth. Do not control my mouth! God-given!” (129). We also see here an appeal to “just how he is.” Duterte said in Feb 2017 that of every five things he says “only two are true. The other three are wisecracks. (110).

*Addendum to Defense 3:* Unless he does mean it...so the two things he said that he meant, not the other three, and those who know he meant it

“get the warning.”

This defense pattern may sound familiar to us here in the United States. And it should alarm us, as it follows a pattern that fits into a pattern often found in liberal democratic states floundering towards fascist authoritarianism. The jokes that pave the way, therefore, are hardly just jokes.

### JOKES AS FASCIST/AUTHORITARIAN POLITICAL TOOLS

In this section, I will first give a very brief overview of some traits of fascist rhetorical practices, give Vicente L. Rafael’s argument on the use of obscenity as system of power in which “the private is made public,” and add to his argument, adding a layer of rhetorical and/or philosophical analysis.

#### *Rhetoric as Spectacle: Fascism*

As a rather-hard-to-pin-down-political structure itself, it is true that fascism relies on a specific kind of rhetoric to produce its power. Fascist rhetoric is one of the main ways by which fascist movements and leaders create their political power, solidify their authority. Communication scholar Nathan Crick writes, “Fascism represents the systematic deployment of the totality of rhetorical devices that identify both victimhood and the inborn dignity of a newly crystalized social group whose mythic rebirth requires internal and external purification through redemptive violence” (Crick 5). This rhetoric might not just the product of preexisting sentiments in the state, but as “an assemblage of intentional persuasive efforts and strategies” (ibid). The call is coming from both inside and the outside of the house. Rhetorical devices often employed by fascist strongmen leaders can be: Saying the Opposite, Insulting the Hospitality, Undo by Overdoing, Spiritualization, and Deflection (6).

Some qualities of fascist rhetoric are, according to Crick and Jason Stanley

- Divide citizens into two classes: lawful and “inherently lawless”
- Embracing of “the cult of irrationality,” in the name of “a higher rationality,” anti-intellectual
- “Fascist politics preys on the human frailty that makes our own suffering seem bearable if we know that those we look down upon are being made to suffer more” (Stanley 183).
- A romantic version of the past, often non-historical and mythic
- A constant appeal to victimhood, predominately the victimhood of those who have more power in society, though feel entitled to more
- A narrative of natural hierarchies, such as patriarchy, white power (1-4)

Often, the charismatic speaker deceives the audience in a way that it desires or

is already deceived. The audience is not a passive being, absorbing the message, but one that feeds the message being fed to them actively. Think of a Human Centipede that both shits and vomits. All the rhetorical symbols given to the audience become symbols for their use, their own gratification. Crick writes, “Rhetorical devices are most effective as means of deception precisely in those situations when people are eager to be deceived. It is for this reason that fascism can be understood in terms of the rhetorical devices that audiences choose to consume, for these devices become their motives” (6). And here, we are considering jokes as the device.

Much of the style of fascist rhetoric is based on spectacle. Gershberg and Illing write, “...the goal of fascism is to overwhelm a democratic society with spectacle” (57). Fascism is built on the modern life of mass media, and now, social media. “Fascism harnesses and magnifies the power of the spectacle in a society of the spectacle” (60). But at the core of this practice of power, the truth, reality, must be sacrificed for the spectacle. This is why, Arendt writes, that the fascist rise to power involves propaganda that shows an extreme disdain for facts “for in their opinion fact depends entirely on who can fabricate it” (65).<sup>8</sup> Greshberg and Illing argue that fascism cannot exist outside of spectacle, as its power is based on it; “Fascism’s strength is that it has no ideological core other than its own spectacle” (69). And this spectacle should entertain and outrage to hold attention (power). And humorous rhetoric can provide this.

*Argument ad Obscaenus: Rafael’s Aesthetics of Authoritarian Vulgarly*

In his book, *Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter*, Professor of History and Southeast Asian Studies, Vicente L. Rafael, dissects Duterte’s multifaceted governance across domains like the drug war, systematic policing, extrajudicial violence, the neoliberal subject, political rhetoric, and the visual politics of journalism. He analyzes the regime’s intricate mechanisms—its “humor,” strategic obscenity, and performative masculinity—revealing how political power operates through language, intimidation, and inflammatory social spectacle.

Rafael directly targets Duterte’s obscene “jokes” as his locus of analysis, making a case for how this practice elevated him politically in the Philippines. He writes, quoting Achille Mbembe, “obscenity is an integral part of the stylistics of power,”<sup>9</sup> Rafael argues that Duterte delights in the “aesthetics of vulgarity” which establishes a relationship of “conviviality” between himself and the audience (42). The result of this obscenity-laced conviviality is the power over the audience as an “intimate tyranny” (ibid). One can argue that employing a tyrannical geniality via obscene jokes is authoritarian in nature, in that it makes “the private public,” which is one of the markers of any authoritarian regime, fascist or other.

Rafael writes extensively on Duterte’s phallic jokes, analyzing them through the very Freudian lens: “Who gets to own the phallus?” Of course, by this, Rafael means the basis of the obscene rhetoric around the penis is about power and who

gets to wield it, that the penis is to be seen here as “a symbolic weapon for exerting autocratic authority...over men and women alike...to impress and threaten, to unify and disperse; to induce pleasure but also coerce submission” (44). Power in this framework is conceived as something to in the end be feared, but also to be something desired. But under fascist and authoritarian frameworks, it is about fear as the main motivation for submission to the government.

Rafael argues that Duterte’s crude humor appears rebellious, but really, serves an autocratic purpose. His offensive language creates a false sense of intimacy between ruler and ruled that masks the underlying intent, transforming laughter into a tool of political control. The intent is not to make an audience laugh for mirth’s sake, but to take more control over a once liberal citizen, to turn them subject.

Rafael argues that Duterte wields humor as a one-way exchange; he speaks, others laugh, but genuine dialogue is not permitted. His stories demand unilateral acceptance, brooking no challenge or comedic response from his audience. Only laughs and acceptance: no heckling allowed. Rafael writes, “There is nothing Democratic in Duterte’s humor. Instead, the pleasure the audience gets from his jokes is intrinsically linked to their willingness to participate in the imagined violations of others, especially women” (53). Duterte’s stories serve a dual purpose of dominance: they attack his adversaries while subjugating his listeners, using narrative as a weapon of both external assault and internal control. Duterte’s “tyranny of intimacy” reads as rhetoric that “extracts your consent” and registers it “by your laughter” (ibid). I would add here that with this very intimate personal appeal, one can possibly see a threat beyond authoritarianism towards totalitarianism, which aims to make the private public.

Rafael also asks the question of how humor serves as a weapon of violence in the drug war. His answer is that Duterte becomes a trickster figure who “entertains by veiling his aggression with jokes and obscenities...[he] plays the role of *pusong* (trickster)...who makes fun of those in power while managing through the deceit of humor to gain power himself” (80). Two aspects of Duterte’s fascist authoritarian governing style (rhetorical style) can be summed up by two aspects, Rafael posits: The Sovereign Trickster. By sovereign, he means a strongman leader who can set aside law at his whim and exert authority over subjects’ lives and deaths (necropower). Rafael posits this brand of sovereign is that of a vengeful character, one that supports death squads and is unmoved by photos of death (and many of his supporters find themselves also unmoved).<sup>10</sup> By trickster, he means a persona that performs an excess of “what is taboo,” and acts out irreverence and injudicious behaviors, often aimed at critics of the regime and strongman (81-82).

We have seen the rise of a “Sovereign Trickster.” I think Rafael gives an excellent argument for this category of authoritarian strongman ruler, and his use of humor/obscenity as a coercive tool for intimate rule. Is it really humor that this Viagra-loving comic price is spinning, or is it more properly defined as something

else?

## LAUGH OR DIE: “HUMOR HOWLING,” OR WHY THESE ARE NOT JOKES

### *Saul on Dog Whistles and Figleaves*

Jennifer Saul’s *dog whistles & Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood* examines two powerful linguistic devices used in political rhetoric. Her book analyzes how dog whistles and figleaves function as tools of manipulation, allowing politicians to communicate racist messages while maintaining plausible deniability. Saul’s work reveals how these rhetorical techniques shape public discourse and reinforce harmful ideologies.

How does Saul define “Dog Whistles”? Saul defines “Dog Whistles” as coded messages that appear innocent to most listeners but communicate something specific to a targeted subgroup. Dog whistles allow speakers to communicate controversial or prejudicial views while maintaining plausible deniability. For example, in her work, Saul analyzes how certain political phrases, such as “urban” or “inner city,” can function as coded appeals to racial prejudice while seeming neutral on the surface. This allows politicians to appeal to voters with certain biases without explicitly expressing racist views.

Saul identifies two distinct categories of racist dog whistles. The first category, “overt code dog whistles,” functions by conveying racist messaging to specific audience segments, primarily those who reject the “Norm of Racial Equality,” while the general audience perceives only an innocuous interpretation of the speaker’s words (Saul 42). Trump’s reference to “bad hombres” in the 2016 presidential debate with Clinton illustrates this technique; for those opposing equality norms, it communicates negative sentiments about Mexicans as a whole (a proposition those opposed to the norm equality readily accept), while some “norm skeptics” interpret it as referring only to some Mexican individuals (47). Different audience groups responded predictably: “norm of equality” opposers appreciated such rhetoric, while “norm of equality” supporters condemned it. “Norm skeptics,” who nominally accept equality principles but subscribe to the “White Folk Theory of Racism” (that only monsters are racists, so the “true racism” of biological inferiority, “racial hierarchy” racists, are very rare) maintained their support for Trump by focusing on the *seemingly* inoffensive interpretation of his language. He’s not a monster; he just says things.

Saul’s second category, the “covert effect dog whistle,” works by unconsciously making race more prominent in the audience’s mind (48). For instance, deliberately darkening the skin tone of Black politicians in images aims to subtly trigger negative stereotypes, as in the case of negative attack ads against Obama in which this occurred (54). This approach seeks to influence public opinion on policy matters *without conscious awareness*. Unlike other dog whistles, this type can affect both those who embrace and those who reject racial equality

norms. Saul argues that both varieties of dog whistles may be deliberate strategies employed by pundits and politicians, or often by unfortunate and/or ill-informed unconscious use of them by some, with those very unconscious errors creating cover for those who purposefully deploy such tactics but wish to deny doing so, which is to say, to have plausible deniability.

How does Saul define “figleaves”? Saul writes that racial figleaves are “an utterance that provides cover for another utterance that—without the figleaf—would be recognized as racist” (71). Some statements disguise prejudice by using qualifiers like “I’m not racist but...” or “Some of my best friends are black...” Figleaves come in two forms: synchronic figleaves that occur simultaneously with the problematic statement, and diachronic figleaves that appear later as a defense of previous statements. When someone posts a seemingly racist Tweet and later claims “that doesn’t represent me,” they’re employing a diachronic figleaf to distance themselves from their earlier words. “I’m not racist, but” is a prime example of the synchronic variety.

Saul argues that racist figleaves are persuasive only to individuals who narrowly define racism as explicitly violent or overt (White Folk Theory). These linguistic devices successfully convince this specific audience that racist statements aren’t actually racist. According to Saul, those who accept figleaves typically believe that racism manifests only in “the most blatant, obvious, and monstrous” forms, while people who recognize racism’s more subtle everyday manifestations remain unconvinced by such rhetorical maneuvers.

Importantly, these figleaves aren’t intended for those with a nuanced understanding of racism’s various forms, but rather for individuals who conceptualize racism solely as an extreme phenomenon. Those with a more comprehensive understanding of racism view these figleaves not as legitimate qualifications, but as dangerous rhetorical devices that actually serve as further evidence of racist thinking. Figleaves further perpetuate racist thinking and spread its influence covertly through this rhetoric.

### *Serber on Dog Whistling and Howling*

In his essay, “Dog Whistling and Howling: Covert and Overt Hate Speech and Plausible Deniability,” Bradley Serber argues that “Howling” is the fascist end of dog whistling. Dog whistling by fascist-leaning pundits and would-be strongmen pave the way for it. Serber makes the case that Trump and his supporters have moved beyond subtle dog whistles to outright howling. According to him, howling “rejects the subtlety of Dog Whistle rhetoric even as it retains its capacity to deny and deflect criticism” (Crick 191) and that “Dog Whistling carefully avoids the direct use of epithets, calls for violence, and other more overt kinds of hate speech, [but] Howling drops all pretense of civility and political correctness” (194). This strategy intentionally breaks democratic communication principles, suggesting a readiness to disregard other conventions to accomplish the group’s authoritarian

and fascist political goals. Trump essentially invites his supporters to experience the thrill of witnessing dramatic breaches of legal, ethical, and communicative boundaries without suffering any repercussions.

One example Serber relates of “howling” is in Trump’s description of certain countries (Haiti and African nations) as “shitholes.” He made no attempt to use racist dog whistles (“3<sup>rd</sup> world” or “developing nations” might fit the bill for dog whistling), nor did he attempt a figleaf to cover his words (he did deny they were a slur, which might count as a figleaf, but a very ineffective one). In this case, Trump’s rhetoric “howled” directly. It made no attempt to hide what it was.

We can see this in Duterte’s “humor” about shooting women in the vagina. He made no dog whistles about his violent sexism and violation of human rights, nor did he cover it with a figleaf (he took back his possible “apology” figleaf, leaving his words bare). This is another instance of “howling.”

Dog whistles and figleaves open the door for “Humor Howling.” By “Humor Howling” I mean saying exactly what violence, threat, oppression, or hate speech out loud in the form of a joke. The meaning in these “humor howls” are clear: if there is a figleaf, it is invisible, or perhaps a dead leaf. Humor howling is the “pervasive culture of weaponized communication” but covered in the sugar of humor to send that direct (but not necessarily palatable) message out in a personal, intimate, and persuasive style. And it need not be covert—it howls as we howl. And the need for plausible deniability has passed, and the dog whistles and figleaves paved the way for its demise.

### CONCLUSION: THE ICC ISN’T LAUGHING

On March 2nd, 2025, former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was surrendered to the custody of the International Criminal Court (ICC). His arrest was executed by Philippine authorities in compliance with an arrest warrant issued by Pre-Trial Chamber I, which charged him with murder, torture, and rape as crimes against humanity.

The Pre-Trial Chamber’s investigation found evidence of an organized attack against civilian populations, occurring during two distinct periods: first while Duterte led the Davao Death Squad (DDS), and subsequently during his presidency of the Philippines. The Chamber determined there were reasonable grounds to believe the alleged attacks were both widespread and systematic, spanning several years and resulting in thousands of fatalities. To facilitate its legal analysis, the ICC arrest warrant concentrated on a representative sample of the alleged incidents, providing a focused approach to examining the potential criminal actions during Duterte’s leadership.

Looks like the joke is on Duterte, though true justice is no joke.

### NOTES

1. See James Loxton, *Authoritarianism: A Very Short Introduction*.
2. See *The Rhetoric of Fascism* ed. by Nathan Crick
3. And might be the case that the safety touted by the government was not a reflection of reality. See <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/philippines-duterte-data/> “Despite the crackdown, Davao still ranks first among 15 cities in the Philippines for murder and second for rape, according to police crime data from 2010 to 2015.”
4. See Kenes, “Rodrigo Roa Duterte: A Jingoist, Misogynist, Penal Populist.”
5. The audience is also reported as laughing at this “joke.” Duterte now has a criminal complaint against him for this language.
6. Bisaya here means a Philippine ethnolinguistic family group native to the Visayas, to the southernmost islands south of Luzon, and to a significant portion of Mindanao. *Bugoy* translates to “bad boy” or “hood” in the Bisaya language, very closely related to Tagalog.
7. See also Ellis-Peterson.
8. Arendt quoted in Stanley by way of Gershberg, Illing.
9. Quoting Achille Mbembe.
10. See Rafeal 121-127 for moving discussion of the variety of responses to death photos from the drug war.

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