

## “*Todo a relajo*”: Jorge Mañach and Metaphysical Rebellion

by Adam Glover

### English Abstract

Jorge Mañach’s *Indagación del choteo* is a classic of the Latin American essay tradition. First published in Havana in 1928, *Indagación* is a detailed analysis of the *choteo*, a distinctly Cuban form of mockery or ridicule that manifests itself as an obstinate refusal to “take anything seriously.” Although Mañach was trained in philosophy, English-speaking philosophers have yet to submit his essay to sustained analysis. This owes in part to the fact that *Indagación* does not at first glance appear to have any obvious philosophical import beyond the narrowly nationalistic project within which it was first conceived. The task of the present article is to challenge that appearance. I argue that Mañach’s analysis of the *choteo* presupposes a more generalized philosophical posture which I shall call “metaphysical rebellion.” I borrow the term from Camus’s *The Rebel*, but my essay is neither a comparative study of Camus and Mañach, nor an attempt to cast the latter as a tropical existentialist. Instead, I wish to employ the category of metaphysical rebellion as a heuristic device to investigate the possible philosophical implications of Mañach’s analysis.

### Resumen en español

*Indagación del choteo*, de Jorge Mañach, es un clásico de la tradición ensayística latinoamericana. Publicada originalmente en la Habana, en 1928, *Indagación* es un análisis detallado del “choteo”, una forma típicamente cubana de escarnio o burla que se manifiesta como un rechazo obstinado de “tomar nada en serio.” A pesar de que Mañach estudió filosofía en la universidad, los filósofos de lengua inglesa no han sometido su ensayo a un análisis detallado. Esto se debe, en parte, al hecho de que *Indagación*, a primera vista, no parece tener relevancia filosófica alguna más allá del proyecto estrictamente nacionalista dentro del cual fue inicialmente concebida. El objetivo del presente artículo es cuestionar esa percepción. Mi argumento es que el análisis de Mañach del *choteo* presupone una postura filosófica más generalizada que yo denomino “rebelión metafísica”. Este término lo tomo de *El rebelde*, de Alberto Camus. Sin embargo, mi estudio no es ni un estudio comparativo de Camus y Mañach, ni una tentativa de tratar a éste último como un existencialista tropical. Por el contrario, propongo emplear la categoría de rebelión metafísica como instrumento heurístico para investigar las posibles implicaciones filosóficas del análisis de Mañach.

### Resumo em português

*Indagación del choteo*, de Jorge Mañach, é um clássico da tradição ensaísta Latino Americana. Publicada pela primeira vez em Havana, em 1928, *Indagación* é uma análise detalhada do “choteo”, uma forma tipicamente cubana de escárnio ou zombaria

que se manifesta como uma recusa obstinada de “levar qualquer coisa a sério”. Apesar de Mañach ter tido uma formação em filosofia, filósofos de língua inglesa ainda não submeteram seu ensaio a uma análise detalhada. Isso se deve, em parte, ao fato de que *Indagación*, à primeira vista, não parece ter qualquer relevância filosófica óbvia para além do projeto estritamente nacionalista dentro do qual ela foi inicialmente concebida. O objetivo do presente artigo é o de questionar essa percepção. Meu argumento é o de que a análise de Mañach acerta do *choteo* pressupõe uma postura filosófica mais generalizada, a que chamo de “rebelião metafísica”. Pego o termo emprestado de “O Rebelde”, de Albert Camus. No entanto, meu estudo não é um estudo comparativo de Camus e Mañach, ou uma tentativa de tratar esse último como um existencialista tropical. Objetivo, na verdade, empregar a categoria de rebelião metafísica como um instrumento heurístico para a investigação de possíveis implicações filosóficas da análise de Mañach.

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First delivered as a lecture in Havana in 1927, and published a year later, Jorge Mañach’s *Indagación del choteo* belongs to a long line of what might be called Latin American “ontologies of national identity.”[1] Like other such texts, many of which emerged in the first half of the twentieth century as a response to the exhaustion of positivism as an intellectual paradigm, *Indagación* seeks to articulate a coherent vision of Cuban identity on the basis of certain “idiosyncrasies” or “essential characteristics” of national culture. In this case, the relevant “idiosyncrasy” is the so-called *choteo*: a distinctly Cuban form of mockery, ridicule, or irony that manifests itself, in Mañach’s words, as an obstinate refusal to “take anything seriously.”[2] In light of Mañach’s theme, and of the context in which his essay was composed, *Indagación* has typically been read as part of a broader nationalistic movement born of the political and economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s (the time of the Machado dictatorship).[3] But other readings are possible. Despite the fact that Mañach was trained as a philosopher (taking a B.A. in the subject at Harvard in 1920 and a doctorate at the University of Havana in 1928) and that *Indagación* has been called “la primera obra de tipo fenomenológico en la filosofía cubana,” philosophers in the English-speaking world have yet to submit it to sustained analysis.[4] This owes in part to the sorts of people who are likely to read Mañach’s work (literary critics, cultural theorists, historians, and so forth), and in part to the fact that *Indagación* does not at first glance appear to have any obvious philosophical import beyond the narrowly nationalistic project within which it was first conceived. The task of the present article is to challenge that appearance.

Before proceeding, however, it may be useful to step back for a moment and ask what a “philosophical reading” of a text such as *Indagación* might look like. I doubt that there is any single, uniquely correct answer to this question, but it may still be possible to lay out some general parameters. On the one hand, such a reading would not seek to

wrench *Indagación* from its original context and inspect it merely as the bearer of atemporal, transhistorical truths. This temptation is to be avoided for at least two reasons: first, because texts are uninterpretable except contextually; and, second, because an acontextual reading would violate the very spirit of *Indagación*, whose attempt to rehabilitate the importance of cultural peculiarity acquires its full weight and measure only against the backdrop of the universalizing and de-historicizing tendencies of nineteenth-century positivism. And yet, as Jonathan Lear has recently argued in his masterful analysis of the demise of the Crow Indians, philosophical readings of non-philosophical texts are finally less concerned with “what actually happened” and more concerned with “the field of possibilities in which all human endeavors gain meaning.”[5] This is not to say, I repeat, that historical actuality is to be sacrificed without remainder to philosophical possibility. It is simply to say that reading philosophically means, at least in part, approaching the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of an historically conditioned text with an eye to what those peculiarities might be able to tell us about the broader field of meaningful possibilities in which we all live and move.

In what follows I trace out some of those possibilities in Mañach’s text. My essay begins squarely within the matrix of existing interpretations of *Indagación*. I assume, for instance, that Mañach’s attitude toward the *choteo* is largely negative and that his project is therefore broadly melioristic in orientation. He thinks, in other words, that by exposing the *choteo* to the harsh light of critique, one may be able to counteract its pernicious effects on Cuban political and social progress. I move beyond existing interpretations, however, by suggesting that there may be some value in holding in abeyance (yet without rejecting) this sociological interpretation and lingering instead over the *choteo*’s distinctly philosophical components. Specifically, I argue that Mañach’s analysis at once presupposes and opens upon a more generalized philosophical posture that I call “metaphysical rebellion.” I borrow the term from Camus’s *L’Homme révolté* (1951), but let me make clear from the outset that the present essay is neither a comparative study of Camus and Mañach, nor an attempt to cast the latter as a kind of tropical existentialist. (In any event, Heidegger will figure more prominently than Camus in my argument.) Instead, I wish to employ the category of metaphysical rebellion as a heuristic device to investigate the possible philosophical implications of Mañach’s ostensibly non-philosophical analysis. With this in mind, let us begin with a brief overview of the broad contours of the *choteo* and then return to what I take to be its philosophical importance.

## **I Contours of the *Choteo***

If Mañach begins *Indagación* on the defensive, it is because the nature of his analysis demands it. The *choteo* is not, after all, an obviously appropriate object of intellectual inquiry, and what Mañach will variously call its “insignificance,” “triviality,” or “non-seriousness” seems better suited for the bar or the street corner than for the lecture hall or the academic journal. As Pérez-Firmat points out, at times Mañach appears almost embarrassed by his topic—so much so, in fact, that he will largely refrain from giving examples of the *choteo* and from using its near-synonym, *relajo*,

whose sexual overtones he regards as potentially offensive to female members of the audience.[6] The awkwardness of delivering an academic lecture on a seemingly non-academic topic is compounded by a second, methodological difficulty. Because previous scholars have largely ignored the *choteo*, Mañach appears uncertain about how best to approach it. One cannot, after all, simply go to the library, nor can one rely on etymology, both because the term lacks any clear etymological derivation, and because any such a derivation would tell us little about its semantic range in everyday Cuban speech.[7]

Mañach’s response to these two difficulties sheds important light on his larger project. On the one hand, the shift from the ostensibly serious to the ostensibly non-serious tracks a broader philosophical reorientation, one due in part to a rejection of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century positivist epistemology. As Mañach himself notes, whereas positivism sought to articulate abstract, overarching, indeed “transcendental” epistemological principles, his own work seeks instead to “*reivindicar la importancia de las cosas tenidas por deleznales, y se afana en descubrir el significado de lo insignificante.*”[8] Central to reclaiming the “significance of the insignificant” is appreciating the extent to which things like the *choteo*, despite their mundanity and apparent inconsequence, nevertheless condition our existence at its most basic level. In this sense, Mañach’s project is at once historicizing and localizing because it attempts to resituate philosophical reflection within the context of concrete, lived experience.

This commitment to the local and historical yields a philosophical method that likewise substitutes the traditional aims of positivist epistemology—the articulation of generalized scientific truths on the basis of a strict application of the scientific method—for a quasi-ethnographical attention to cultural specificity. In fact, as Mañach argues near the beginning of the essay, since the *choteo* is a “typically Cuban” phenomenon, the only truly appropriate object for the study of the *choteo* is the “typical Cuban” (“*el cubano medio,*” “*el cubano de la calle*”). And it is from this figure that Mañach will derive an initially simplistic, though finally authoritative, definition: “*no tomar nada en serio.*”[9] The crucial term is “*nada,*” and though Mañach will shortly concede the impossibility of taking (literally) nothing seriously, he nevertheless insists from the beginning upon the *choteo*’s “systematic” and “absolutist” character [10]. The *choteador*, in other words, is almost by definition a professional. His is a form of mockery, sarcasm, and ridicule that exceeds that of the amateur jokester, not in intelligence, trenchancy, or humor, but in sheer scope. Indeed, part of the *choteo*’s peculiarity resides in the fact that its practitioners regard it not as the momentary, jocular interruption of an otherwise level-headed apprehension of life’s grave seriousness, but instead as an attitude, a habit, even a worldview. The *choteador*, to use Mañach’s own locution, is a “systematic opposer.”[11]

But what could it mean to “take nothing seriously”? What sort of thing are we doing when we grant, or withhold, seriousness? And what does our propensity for the one or the other tell us about how we understand ourselves and the world in which we live? Before taking up these questions in the abstract, perhaps an example is in order.

Midway through *Indagación*, Mañach tells the story of a woman sitting in an upstairs room playing the piano and singing a romance. So astute is her playing, and so beautiful her voice, that a group of young boys listen in silent rapture from the street below. No sooner does the woman finish, however, than “*los jóvenes se retiran de la ventana y, engolando la voz, hacen una mofa despiadada de la misma aptitud que acaba de deleítarles.*”[12] Trivial though it may seem, the basic contours of the *choteo* are contained in this brief anecdote. In the first place, the young boys’ inability to take seriously the woman’s playing and singing—that is, their insistence that the scene be greeted with mockery and laughter—is the product of what Mañach terms “a habit of disrespect,” where “respect” carries the etymological sense of *respicere*: to “look back at” or “to consider with care and attention.”[13] The link between respect and seriousness lies in another key Mañachian term: “authority.” We respect things, Mañach contends, because we believe they somehow merit our attention, because something about them demands consideration. Such authority can take various forms. In perhaps its weakest sense, authority may simply be a corollary of perceived importance or prestige. In our culture, as in Mañach’s, musical proficiency is widely regarded as important and prestigious (though, lamentably, not nearly as prestigious as proficiency in basketball or stockcar racing). As a result, we may be inclined to say that those who possess it, like the woman in Mañach’s anecdote, merit our attention and consideration. Or consider an academic example. When we say that so-and-so is the authority on Roman history, we mean not only that so-and-so knows a great deal about Roman history. We also mean that his work is important, and, hence, that other scholars of Roman history must, on pain of intellectual irresponsibility, take it seriously.

Besides these and other similar examples, authority may also assume more traditional forms. I respect police officers, for instance, because they have the authority, among other things, to award me a ticket should I exceed the speed limit. And when I drive, especially in haste, I often find myself quite literally “looking back” just to be sure no one is around. But if respect is care and attention premised upon a recognition of authority, then disrespect is just the opposite: lack of care and attention premised upon an inability (or an unwillingness) to recognize authority. This failure to recognize authority discloses in its turn what Mañach will later call “an obsession with independence” or “a suspicion of limitation.”[14] The point in both cases is the same: the rejection of external authority is finally a rejection of the notion that anyone ought to be able to impose restrictions, constraints, or limitations upon my life—that anyone ought to be able to inhibit my capacity to do, to act, to live exactly as I choose. It matters little, of course, whether that hindrance is explicit and coercive (being incarcerated, for instance) or implicit and covert (e.g., being told that something is significant and ought to be taken seriously). This latter is, after all, what the *jóvenes* in Mañach’s anecdote react against: music’s cultural prestige dictates that the woman’s proficiency be accorded respect, and it is precisely this external imposition of value that they cannot abide.

The rejection of limitation and constraint is central to Mañach’s account of the *choteo*. But even this conclusion conceals an important ambiguity. Suppose that the

*choteo* always involves a rejection of authority, and that this rejection turns upon a desire for independence and self-determination. What then? How, in other words, are we to understand that rejection? There appear to be at least two general answers. It may, on the one hand, be the case that the *choteador* simply fails to recognize the existence of anything meriting respect, that he fails to recognize the existence of authority as such. (For ease of exposition, let us call this *choteo*<sub>1</sub>.) But it may also be the case that he recognizes the existence of such authority and yet refuses to accord it the respect it presumably deserves. (Call this *choteo*<sub>2</sub>.) The first is an ontological claim: it says that the class of things meriting respect has no members. The second is also an ontological claim, but with a normative component: it says that the class of things meriting respects has members, but that those members ought not to be respected—or, more weakly, that the class of things meriting respect has members, but that at least some of those members, at least some of the time, ought not to be respected. However formulated, the distinction between the *choteador* who fails to recognize authority at all, and the *choteador* who recognizes authority and refuses to respect it, is crucial to Mañach’s analysis. For to the extent that *choteo*<sub>2</sub> admits, however begrudgingly, the possibility of genuine authority, it may likewise serve as an instrument of critique and condemnation: “*un recurso de los oprimidos*,” as Mañach puts it, “*para resistir las presiones políticas demasiado gravosas*” of those who would arrogate to themselves undue power and influence.[15] In this sense, *choteo*<sub>2</sub> signals a natural and healthy propensity to rebellion born of the tragedy and brutality of Cuban history, during the vast majority of which the island resembled nothing so much as the shuttlecock in a slightly perverse game of imperial badminton.[16]

And yet if *choteo*<sub>2</sub>—which Mañach will variously call “healthy” or “ironic” *choteo*—is a potentially useful instrument of criticism, its counterpart, *choteo*<sub>1</sub>, is altogether darker and more sinister. The difference is this: although both take as their starting point an assertion of individuality and independence in the face of authority, *choteo*<sub>2</sub> is, at least in principle, contextualizable as part of a larger, constructive project. Because its rejection of authority is a rejection of illegitimate authority rather than a rejection of authority as such, the moment of critique may (again, at least in principle) be construed as part of the salutary attempt to replace bad authority with better authority, bad values with better ones.[17] *Choteo*<sub>1</sub>, by contrast, is pure negativity, like an Hegelian dialectic shorn of the *Aufhebung*. Since it fails to recognize the very possibility of legitimate authority, *Choteo*<sub>1</sub> is likewise incapable of joining criticism and construction, of placing its skepticism in the service of any broader, positive project.[18] And, in this sense, *choteo*<sub>1</sub> is of course a form of nihilism. Mañach does not use this term, but it is clearly what he fears.

Mañach’s sense of the *choteo*’s dual function as instrument of critique and herald of nihilism has two equally important sets of implications. First, it allows us to see more clearly the relationship between the *choteo* and the nationalistic project to which it belongs; second, it permits us to begin more fully to appreciate the *choteo*’s specifically philosophical significance. Let me take these points in order: the first very briefly, the second in more detail.

Mañach, as I noted earlier, sees the *choteo* as, at least in part, a product of Cuban history: nearly 500 years of colonial oppression have rendered necessary a means of psychological defense against the brutal, illegitimate, and arbitrary imposition of external authority. And this task it performs marvelously. Where the *choteo* goes astray, however—and here Mañach is thinking of *choteo*<sub>1</sub>—is in its assumption that all authority is in some sense illegitimate and arbitrary. This, in turn, makes it perfectly useless, if not utterly destructive, in the context of post-colonial Cuba, where denouncing unjust social structures is less important than proposing better ones. Mañach’s preferred way of making this point is to cast the *choteo*’s rejection of authority as an excruciatingly generalized form of arrested development: appropriate, perhaps, for angst-ridden adolescence, when the whole world is of course out to get you, but slightly embarrassing in adulthood, when one ought really to have noticed that no one cares enough to be out to get you and hence when one’s capacity for personal insult and offense ought to have made room for something worthwhile. It is precisely because *choteo*<sub>1</sub> precludes the possibility of social and political maturation that Mañach not only rejects it but also proposes in its place a kind of sentimental education designed to impose discipline, respect, and order upon a nation distinguished by nothing so much as a somewhat ambiguous capacity for sheer, indiscriminate mockery.[19]

## II *Choteo* and Humor

This much is on the surface. It is part of Mañach’s explicit argument, and it should be relatively uncontroversial. I would like now to move to the second part of my argument. By way of preview, I am concerned, now, less with strict exegesis than with showing how Mañach’s account of the *choteo* opens upon a set of broader philosophical concerns, specifically the notion of “metaphysical rebellion.” Perhaps the best way to begin is by returning to the relationship between *choteo* and mockery.[20] These two terms should not be identified with one another, but they are closely related at several key junctures. In the first place, mockery, according to Mañach, is a social activity that, like the *choteo*, serves to affirm independence and individuality against those who would seek to curtail it.[21] As such, it, again like the *choteo*, always presupposes a figure of authority. Such figures come in a variety of flavors. The straight-laced principal who will not let you wear your Metallica t-shirt to senior prom, the buttoned-down middle manager who will not let you show your tattoos at work, the slightly self-important police officer who objects to your driving habits—all these are excellent, if somewhat trivial, candidates for mockery. Not just any figure will do, however. Indeed, Mañach insists that because mockery is designed to safeguard independence and individuality, it is truly effective only when directed against the strong, the powerful, the competent—that is, against those who represent a serious threat to our capacity to exercise autonomy. This, incidentally, is why we do not, or should not, mock the elderly or the infirm. They are weak, everyone knows they are weak, and nothing is to be gained by attacking them.[22]

Yet this is only part of the story. There are, after all, many ways to side-step, ignore, displace, or contest unwelcomed authority, and mockery is but one of them. What distinguishes mockery from other forms of self-assertive rebelliousness is that it targets the comedic element in authority, which, for Mañach, just means “*lo que ésta [la autoridad] tiene de ... contradictorio consigo misma*.”[23] We mock presidential gaffes, for instance, because it is funny when the powerful and (allegedly) intelligent say stupid things. We likewise mock the celebrity pastor who publicly and vociferously condemns homosexuality while privately consorting with male prostitutes because it is funny when intense homophobia masks equally intense homoeroticism. But humor alone is not the point. It is rather that by laughing at authority, by highlighting its inconsistencies and contradictions, we simultaneously desacralize it. And this has consequences of its own. For to the extent that we delegitimize the ruses and designs of those who would exercise authority over us, we likewise open up a space for self-authorization: for asserting our own autonomy and reclaiming authorship of own lives.

This yoking of mockery on the one hand and discernment of contradiction on the other means, however, that not all mockery is created equal. If mockery’s capacity to induce laughter is a function of its ability to detect and highlight incongruity and contradiction, then its best and funniest varieties will be those most adept at this task. [24] Mañach does not provide examples on this score, but any minimally exhaustive list would surely include such instances of social and political ridicule as Aristophanes’ *Knights*, Juvenal’s *Satires*, Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*, Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, and, more recently, anything on *The Daily Show*. All these are examples of what might be called “high burlesque” for two fundamental reasons. First, each identifies, and successfully lampoons, an authentic example of incongruity or contradiction among the rich and powerful (in order: Cleon’s questionable leadership; immorality and hypocrisy among Rome’s ruling elite; aristocratic vanity and pomposity; culpably unfeeling social engineering; the absurdity of American political debate). This combination of target-selection and execution means in turn that high mockery is not only irrepressibly funny but also mordantly critical. As a result, it opens up a space for broader reflection on the nature of authority and our attitude toward it.

These, as I have said, are my own examples, not Mañach’s. But he is clear about one point: arrange the hierarchy of mockery however you like, *choteo*<sub>1</sub> will be at the absolute bottom of the list because it fails to satisfy a necessary condition of effective mockery: it is not funny. Mañach’s judgment about the *choteo*’s lack of humor comes as something of a surprise, but it is actually a direct consequence of the analysis of the last paragraph. For if mockery is funny only to the extent that it identifies an appropriately ridiculous object, then the *choteo* is not funny both because it does not identify any object truly worthy of its attack, and because, when it does, it manages only to ridicule that object in the crudest and basest of ways. In fact, Mañach continues, because the *choteo* nearly always fails to denounce anything “*realmente cómico*,” it often appears as “*una burla sin motivo*,” or, worse, “*una burla que inventa su motivo*,” or, worse still, a *burla* whose object-pretext does not even exist.[25] Here an example may be useful. Of all the weapons in the *choteador*’s repertoire, none, says Mañach, is more ubiquitous

than la *trompetilla*: a spluttering noise, similar to the English raspberry, made by pressing one’s hands to one’s lips and squeezing out air. The *trompetilla* is an all-purpose gesture of contempt, and, given its scatological overtones, Mañach is surely right to note that the sound it produces is charged with “abject allusions.”[26] As Pérez-Firmat points out, the *trompetilla*, like the raspberry, is but “the fart of the upper body.”[27] In fact, imagine a loud, obnoxious, and deliberate exhibition of flatulence during a concert performance of (say) Bach’s Mass in B-minor, and you have a fairly good sense both of the sophistication of the *choteo* and of the atmosphere in which it thrives. In cases such as this, the *choteo* no doubt appears to be protesting something; it appears, in other words, to answer to some molestation, some irritant or annoyance on the part of its practitioner. But that “something” is so vague and imprecise as virtually to defy definition (just as vague and imprecise as its mode of articulation). There is, after all, nothing especially, or even remotely, ridiculous about Bach’s Mass; and if there were, a fart is unlikely to be the best way to point it out. So formless is the target of the *choteador*’s mockery that Mañach will call any laughter it induces a “*risa sin objeto*” or a “*risa sin rumbo*.”[28] In the end, then, the *choteo* appears, at least in certain cases, to be about precisely nothing.[29] It is protest without object, rebellion without provocation, an act of blunt, inarticulate remonstrance directed at no particular object.

### III *Choteo* and Nothing

It is at precisely this point, moreover, that important philosophical questions emerge. In the first place, what could it mean to mock “nothing”? Does not mockery always presuppose, however implicitly, an object? Is not the fact that “to mock” can, on occasion, function as an intransitive verb merely a fluke of grammar? Further, given that the *choteo* involves an assertion of independence in the face of real or perceived limitation, what sort of thing are we doing when we *choteamos* about no particular thing at all? In what sense, after all, could we be said to be limited by “nothing”? Of far greater consequence, what does it say about “*el cubano medio*”—and about us—that such a thing is possible? Here Mañach offers a series of limited, mostly off-handed conjectures. Perhaps, he says, it answers to “*aquel vago fin subsidiario de reposo que Bergson le atribuye [a la risa]*.” Or perhaps it serves “*a manera de excitante artificial, con el cual procuramos vencer la fatiga, el aplanamiento, la lasitud del trópico*.” Or perhaps—and here Mañach seems on the verge of lapsing into *choteo* himself—it is explicable in terms of William James’s theory of emotions: we do not cry because we are sad; we are sad because we cry.[30] Or perhaps, to add one more, we just like to hear the sound of our own voice.

These are throwaway lines, and for a simple reason: besides noting its existence, Mañach is not especially interested in objectless *choteo*, in “mockery about nothing.” He finds it strange and incomprehensible, to be sure, but not nearly as dangerous, not nearly as prejudicial to the health of Cuban society as other, more pointed, if equally crude, forms of *choteo*. [31] Yet precisely this otherwise perplexing notion of mockery without an object seems to me rich with philosophical importance, and in the remainder of this essay I would like to examine it in a bit more detail. Let us begin by asking, this

time in earnest, what it could mean to say that at least one strand of *choteo* is best characterized as “mockery about nothing.” Assuming we have a fairly clear sense of what “mockery” is, the key term is “nothing.” What, then, do we mean by “nothing”? This is an impossibly broad question, one that, in a certain sense, implicates the whole philosophical tradition from Parmenides onward. But we may yet get some traction by turning, however briefly and cursorily, to the one truly obligatory reference. In *Was ist Metaphysik?* (1929), Heidegger distinguishes “dread” (*Angst*) from “fear” (*Furcht*).[32] Fear, on the one hand, is always “fear of” some determinate object. I may, for instance, fear a bear pursuing me in the woods; or I may fear losing my job; or I may fear running out of gas on a long, lonely stretch of highway. At any rate, the object of my fear is in each case specific and determinate, and as a result I may take correspondingly specific and determinate measures to prevent its realization (by staying clear of bear-infested woods, by filling up early and often, etc.). Dread is different. Although it shares fear’s “of-structure,” dread is not “about” this or that particular object. In this sense, it resembles what Heidegger calls “deep boredom” (*die tiefe Langeweile*).[33] Ordinary boredom, on the one hand, always has an object—boredom with this book, or this movie, or this essay—and can usually be cured by moving on to something else (picking a different book, taking a walk, etc.). In deep boredom, by contrast, it is not that I am bored by this or that particular object, but rather that objects as such sink into a kind of shadowy indifference. Nothing interests me, nothing holds my attention, nothing matters. I see no reason to pursue any given possibility over any other. Further—and this is the crucial move—because *Angst*, like deep boredom, is not “about” any particular object, Heidegger thinks that the experience of dread is an experience, not merely of “no-particular-thing,” but also of *nothingness* itself. In fact, he continues, when we reflect upon dread, we are forced to conclude that in it we experience not just “no-thing,” but also “the Nothing itself, as such” (*das Nichts selbst, als solche*).[34]

In the remainder of his essay, Heidegger will use this “revelation” or “manifestation” (*Offenbarkeit*) of “the nothing” in dread to argue that only when particular, concrete beings recede into indifference does the beingness of beings (i.e., not what they are, but that they are at all) first come into view. This bit of the argument need not detain us, however. Instead, with this rough sketch of the relationship between *Angst* and *das Nichts* in place, let us return to Mañach. The first thing to notice is that there is a rough analogy between *Angst* and *Furcht*, on the one hand, and *choteo*<sub>1</sub> and *choteo*<sub>2</sub>, on the other: whereas the latter pair is always directed at a particular object or target, the former is not, strictly speaking, “about” anything at all. I will return to this point in a moment. Meanwhile, let us also recall that in *Being and Time* (1929), Heidegger links the concepts of “dread” and “nothing” with another motif central to his philosophy: death. In the section on “being-toward-death,” for instance, Heidegger claims that precisely in the experience of *Angst* “Dasein finds itself before the Nothing [*vor dem Nichts*] of the possible impossibility of its existence.”[35] The yoking of *Angst*, death, and nothingness is, from a certain angle, unsurprising—not, to be sure, because the experience of *Angst* permits us to grasp our own death as an object of cognition, nor even because it allows us to imagine what it is “like” to be dead. (In fact, if materialism is true, there is nothing it is “like” to be dead any more than there is something it is like to

be a clock-radio or a bit of plaster.) It is rather this: since, during the experience of *Angst*, no possibilities rouse our interest, and since, for Heidegger, *Dasein* is nothing except the projection (and realization) of possibilities, the “nothingness” of the world (that is, the absence of meaningful possibilities) reveals to us that *Dasein* itself could be impossible. The “nothingness” of the world and the “nothingness” of our own death are thus two sides of the same coin. Let me put it another way: when we contemplate our death, we are contemplating the cessation of possibility. That is to say, we are contemplating that moment after which we will no longer be able to actualize any projects or goals, plans or desires (like reading books, or watching movies, or writing essays). And this, in a very real sense, is to be faced with “nothing,” for it means that we are contemplating the possibility of our not being able any longer to do anything at all.

With all this in mind, we may be in a position to hazard a provisional interpretation of “*choteo* about nothing.” Might it not be the case that objectless *choteo* is not simply mockery of “no-particular-thing,” but also mockery of nothingness itself? Might it not be that the *choteador*’s “*risa sin objeto*” is in fact directed at the possibility of his own nothingness—which is just to say, at his own death? Mañach himself points, however obliquely, to precisely this conclusion. Midway through *Indagación*, he recounts a visit by a group of Cubans to a Parisian crematorium:

Al ver introducir un cadáver en el horno incinerador, uno de nuestros compatriotas exclamó, dirigiéndose al fúnebre operario: “Démelo de vuelta y vuelta.” Con dudoso gusto pero indiscutible ocurrencia, rebajaba aquel resto humano a la categoría de un bistec. Las mofas de los velorios son clásicas entre nosotros. El *choteo* no respeta ni la presencia sagrada de la muerte.[36]

By reducing the corpse to a piece of meat, the Cuban in Mañach’s anecdote not only blurs the line between human and non-human, but also mocks (and thereby denies) death itself. For the *choteador*, as Pérez-Firmat puts it, “old people never die, they simply turn into steak.”[37] Yet to deny the reality of death is also to deny the reality of one’s own death: it is, in Heidegger’s phraseology, to reject the possibility of one’s own impossibility, the possibility of one’s own nothingness. The *choteador*’s mockery of death is thus, in a very real sense, “about nothing.” It refers not to some particular object, but instead to the possibility of the impossibility of there being any objects—the *choteador* himself included—at all.

Here the analogy between *choteo* and *Angst* is perhaps reasonably clear. But the point is stronger still. For to deny death—to mock it as the *choteador* does—is not simply to reject the fact that each of us will, inevitably, die. It is also, and much more importantly, to reject one of the fundamental parameters of human existence. In *L’homme révolté*, Camus terms “metaphysical rebellion” that form of revolt by which “man rebels against his condition and the whole creation.”[38] Unlike the slave, Camus continues, who protests his condition as a slave, the metaphysical rebel protests his condition “as a human being.”[39] And part of what defines our condition “as human beings” is, of course, the inevitability of death, the inevitability of at some point no longer

“being” at all. By rejecting this inevitability, moreover, Camus’s metaphysical rebel rejects not merely this or that component of human existence, but what he perceives to be the injustice of human existence as such. That is to say, he rejects the necessity of living a form of life that he did not choose and whose inescapable terminus is death. In a similar fashion, *choteo* about “nothing,” *choteo* as denial of the nothingness of death, is not merely a rejection of this or that authority, this or that limitation, this or that constraint on freedom or autonomy. It is, instead, a denial of the fundamental and irrevocable conditionedness of human existence itself. For while a politician may curtail my civil liberty, and while an inadequately remunerated job may curtail my economic liberty, death limits my ability to do anything at all. Death is, in this sense, the ultimate authority, the final and insurmountable constraint on my capacity for self-determination. One might even say that, to the extent that *choteo* amounts to a rejection of authority premised upon a desire for independence and autonomy, all *choteo* is finally *choteo* about death, that all *choteo* is finally a denial of that ultimate limitation in the light of which all other limitations are secondary and derivative.

Understood in this sense, the *choteo* goes well beyond what Mañach terms “*nuestra idiosincrasia criolla*.”[40] In fact, its apparent “idiosyncrasy” turns out finally to be rooted in a deep and pervasive human desire—one as old as the Serpent’s contention that Eden’s forbidden fruit will make us “like God,” and as new as the peculiarly modern attempt to delay (or even conquer) death through medical and technological advance. And yet, in good dialectical fashion, even this universality betrays an unmistakable cultural specificity. For Camus’s metaphysical rebel, on the one hand, the recognition that life is irrevocably conditioned by the dumb necessity of death ends in an act of absurd, Sisyphean defiance. For Mañach’s “*cubano medio*,” by striking contrast, the same recognition ends in an eruption of aimless, uncontrollable laughter. It would perhaps be unwise to indulge in broad cultural generalizations—to claim, for instance, that there is a “uniquely French” or a “uniquely Cuban” was of facing up to the nothingness of death. But it may nevertheless be the case that part of the genius of Mañach’s account—and of the *choteo* itself—is the manner in which it bridges the gulf between the global and the local, between the general and the particular, between what is “typically Cuban” and what is “universally human.”

Adam Glover  
Georgetown College  
400 East College Street  
Georgetown, KY 43024  
[adam.glover07@gmail.com](mailto:adam.glover07@gmail.com)

## Notes

[1] Jorge Mañach, *Indagación del choteo*, 2nd ed. (Havana: La Verónica, 1940). Other examples include Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's *Radiografía de la pampa* (Argentina, 1933), Antonio Pedreira's *Insularismo* (Puerto Rico, 1934), and Samuel Ramos's *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (1934). Nor is Mañach's text the only Cuban treatment of the *choteo*. Others include Mario Guiral Moreno, "Aspectos censurables del carácter cubano," *Cuba Contemporánea* 4 (1914), 121-33; Calixto Masó, *El carácter cubano* (Habana: n.p., 1941); Fernando Ortiz, *Entre cubanos* (Paris: P. Ollendorf, 1914); and Jose Antonio Ramos, *Manual del perfecto fulanista* (Habana: Biblioteca "Studium," 1916). See also Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, "Riddles of the Sphinx: Another Look at the Cuban Choteo," *Diacritics* 14.4 (1984), 67, n. 2. For another treatment of the *choteo* by Mañach himself, see his *Crisis de la alta cultura en Cuba* (Havana: La Universal, 1925). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of this Journal for calling my attention to this text.

[2] Mañach, *Indagación*, 17.

[3] Miller, "De choteos y choteadores en *Indagación del choteo*, de Jorge Mañach," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 28.2 (2004), 377. See also Jorge Duany, "From the Cuban Ajico to the Cuban-American Hyphen: Changing Discourses of National Identity on the Island and in the Diaspora," *Cuban Studies Association Occasional Papers*, Paper 16 (1997) and Pérez-Firmat, "Riddles of the Sphinx," 69.

[4] For a good overview of Cuban philosophy from independence to the Revolution, see Pablo Guadarrama, Miguel Rojas, et al., *El pensamiento filosófico en Cuba en el siglo XX (1902-1959)* (Havana: Editorial Félix Varela, 1998). For Mañach's place in that development, see Felix Valdés García, "Sin hacer del monte orégano: Jorge Mañach en la filosofía cubana," *Revista Cubana de Filosofía* 1 (2004): n.p. See also Andrés Valdespino, *Jorge Mañach y su generación en las letras cubanas* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1971).

[5] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 7.

[6] Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, "A Minor-Key Note on Cuban Studies," in Damián J. Fernández, ed., *Cuban Studies Since the Revolution* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992), 217.

[7] Mañach, *Indagación*, 13-14.

[8] *Ibid*, 10.

[9] *Ibid*, 17.

[10] *Ibid*.

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] *Ibid*, 19.

[13] *Ibid*.

[14] *Ibid*, 41, 30.

[15] *Ibid*, 65.

[16] In addition to such collective historical experiences, Mañach will also assign special significance to the effects of the tropical climate on the emergence of the *choteo*. See Duany, “From the Cuban Ajico to the Cuban-American Hyphen,” 10.

[17] Mañach, *Indagación*, 65-66

[18] *Ibid*, 66.

[19] See Duany, “From the Cuban Ajico to the Cuban-American Hyphen,” 11.

[20] “Mockery” is intended as a translation of the Spanish *burla*. The two terms are not synonymous, however. In addition to “joke” or “mock,” *burlar* can also mean “to outwit” or “to deceive” (*engañar*) and “to evade” (*esquivar*). And it has sexual overtones: in Tirso de Molina’s *El burlador de Sevilla* (1630), Don Juan confesses that this favorite pastime “*es burlar a una mujer / y dejarla sin honor*” (1321).

[21] Mañach, *Indagación*, 26.

[22] *Ibid*.

[23] *Ibid*, 27.

[24] *Ibid*.

[25] *Ibid*, 28-29.

[26] *Ibid*, 66.

[27] Pérez-Firmat, “Riddles of the Sphincter,” 72.

[28] Mañach, *Indagación*, 29.

[29] The qualification “at least in certain cases” is important. Mañach does not claim that *all choteo* is about nothing at all, but one strand of it clearly is; and it is that strand with which I shall be concerned in the remainder of this essay.

[30] Mañach, *Indagación*, 29.

[31] *Ibid*, 29-30.

[32] Martin Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik?* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1943), 34. My discussion of Heidegger is indebted to Stephan Kaufer, “The Nothing and the Ontological Difference in Heidegger’s What is Metaphysics?” *Inquiry* 48.6 (2005): 482-506.

[33] Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik?* 33.

[34] *Ibid*, 34.

[35] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), 266.

[36] Mañach, *Indagación*, 35-36.

[37] Pérez-Firmat, “Riddles of the Sphincter,” 69-70 makes a similar point, but his interpretation of the anecdote is finally quite different both from mine and from Mañach’s.

[38] Camus, *L’homme revolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 39. The translation is mine.

[39] *Ibid*, 39-40.

[40] Mañach, *Indagación*, 43.