

Uses of Rorty's Irony: Literature, History and Political Identity in México

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English Abstract

This article clarifies the different possible uses of irony by exploring irony as a key concept in Richard Rorty's pragmatism. It starts with the Björn Ramberg distinction between existential and epistemic irony. It then develops Rorty's irony as an epistemic and political tool, namely, as an antiauthoritarian device, and connects this instrumental view of irony to the cultural role of literature, mainly the novel, as a kind of redescription, which Rorty ascribes. This framework is subsequently used to analyze several features of a well-known historical novel by the Mexican writer Jorge Ibarguengoitia. Accordingly, this article uses literary analysis techniques to argue that Ibarguengoitia's use of irony in his fictional redescription of some crucial episodes in Mexican history shows a number of important characteristics of Mexican political identity. A discussion ensues on the political use of irony in this particular case, according to the Rortian perspective. The article ends by highlighting some tensions in the Mexican case and pointing out some of the nuances and difficulties that Rortian irony may face.

Key words: Rorty's irony, Mexican political identity, Ibarguengoitia, antiauthoritarian device, cynicism.

Resumen en español

Este artículo explora algunos posibles usos de la ironía en tanto concepto clave del pragmatismo de Richard Rorty. En primer lugar, tomaré como punto de partida la distinción que hace Björn Ramberg entre ironía existencial e ironía epistémica. A continuación, desarrollaré el concepto rortiano de ironía como herramienta epistémica, principalmente, como un dispositivo antiautoritario, y conectaré esta perspectiva instrumental de la ironía con el papel cultural de la literatura, principalmente de la novela como forma de redescipción, tal como Rorty la concibe. Este cuadro teórico lo usaré para analizar algunas características de la novela histórica del escritor mexicano Jorge Ibarguengoitia. Dicho análisis me permitirá argumentar que el uso de la ironía de Ibarguengoitia en su redescipción ficticia de algunos episodios de la historia mexicana muestra características de la identidad política mexicana. En seguida, discutiré el uso político de la ironía en este caso particular, de acuerdo a la perspectiva rortiana. El artículo finaliza enfatizando algunas ventajas y tensiones del caso mexicano, así como señalando algunas dificultades que la ironía rortiana puede enfrentar.

Resumo em português

Este artigo explora alguns usos possíveis da ironia como conceito-chave do pragmatismo de Richard Rorty. Em primeiro lugar, tomarei como ponto de partida a distinção de Björn Ramberg entre ironia existencial e ironia epistêmica. Em seguida, desenvolverei o conceito *rortiano* de ironia como uma ferramenta epistêmica,

basicamente, como um dispositivo antiautoritário e conectarei essa perspectiva instrumental da ironia com o papel cultural da literatura, principalmente, do romance como forma de redescrição, como Rorty o concebe. Utilizarei esse referencial teórico para analisar algumas características do romance histórico do escritor mexicano Jorge Ibarguengoitia. Essa análise me permitirá argumentar que o uso da ironia por Ibarguengoitia, em sua redescrição fictícia de alguns episódios da história mexicana, mostra características da identidade política mexicana. A seguir, discutirei o uso político da ironia, neste caso particular, segundo a perspectiva *rortiana*. O artigo termina destacando algumas vantagens e tensões do caso mexicano, além de apontar algumas dificuldades que a ironia *rortiana* pode enfrentar.

1. Irony: from literary trope to epistemic attitude

Over the last few decades, the concept of irony has received considerable interest and increased popularity in philosophy, perhaps because of its frequent appearance in the public language and political practices of contemporary life. Moreover, irony is often related to an attitude resembling the *postmodern life style*, and, like it, has become a confusing and tricky concept.

For example, in his book *Ironic Life* Richard Bernstein summarizes some of the different approaches to irony from Literary Theory, Cultural Studies, Rhetoric, or Philosophy, fields that provide quite dissimilar or even contradictory perspectives of it (Bernstein 2016, 1-6). Sometimes this variety in perspective can darken our understanding rather than illuminate it. Inasmuch as I am interested in the epistemological and political perspective of irony, my starting point is the account by G. Vlastos in his book *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, that in irony we mean both what we say and what we do not say (Bernstein 2016, 9). Consequently, irony does not exactly *fit* in the opposition between truthfulness and falsehood, says Bernstein, because it is not a completely defined assessment (Bernstein 2016, 67).

Agreeing with this perspective, S. Martínez finds that there is some polyvalence in irony because it suggests the interrelation of opposite sides of something, producing confusion in the audience and calling for a non-literal interpretation. That is, irony brings together a literary statement which alludes, evokes, or suggests an underlying and conflicting dimension (disapproval, some failed expectation, etc.). From a logical point of view, irony is an enthymeme that should be completed by an active audience as the speaker or writer suggests through his tone of voice, oppositions or comparisons between facts, styles, beliefs, facts and expectations, etc. In addition, it is usually coated in a comic tone that makes mockery of the contradictory consequences of a statement (between the literal and the non-literal interpretation). Because of this, irony

demands an audience with additional knowledge about the content of the statement to create the intimacy and complicity needed to generate an ironic attitude. Therefore, Martínez conceives irony as an effective dialectical tool and a form of indirect argumentation rather than just a rhetorical figure of speech (Martínez 2014, 2-6). This is the perspective we endorse here.

As a result of the above, epistemologically, an ironic attitude can be interpreted as an ambivalent, skeptical, or undefined attitude towards the truth about something, conditioned by pragmatic circumstances. As is well known, this kind of distance from a definitive truth of irony has been used in different philosophical perspectives in some historical periods for dissimilar purposes, such as Greek Tragedy, Romanticism or Existentialism. In particular, Richard Rorty's contemporary pragmatism uses epistemic irony to reject any kind of final truth in Philosophy or in any other vocabulary or social practice (e.g., political, scientific, etc.).

2. Irony as a political tool

From the previous outlined perspective, says Bernstein, even though the Rortian conception of irony was developed later, *The Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is already an ironic performance because, through his genealogical and historicist interpretation of modern epistemology, Rorty rejects the foundational systematic perspective of philosophy and culture, and, at the same time, suggests embracing a more edifying and therapeutic perspective of them (Bernstein 2016, 28-9). Therefore, irony as the romantic rejection of an ultimate authority, such as God, Truth, or Reality Itself is an epistemic device that reveals our finitude.

This epistemological reading of irony, as Bernstein also notes, is linked to the refusal of the existence of a definite, rationally founded vocabulary, and thus encourages a post-metaphysical culture. According to Rorty an "ironist" is someone who fulfills three conditions:

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her final vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself (Rorty 1989, 73).

However, several commentators have noted that this characterization that Rorty provides in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* implies some conflicts and/or problems. In the first place, for some of them, Rorty's *ironism* and its rejection of final truths leads to relativism (Blackburn 1998) or skepticism (Williams 2003; Schneewind 2008). Secondly, relativism or skepticism are incapable of conviction at all, so *ironism* impedes the committed public participation of citizens, rendering it morally evasive (MacIntyre 1999) or, moreover, turning it into cynicism (Haack 1995).

There are several responses to these objections[1], but with a few simplifications, we can cluster some of them for our purposes. Several of them differentiate between two versions of irony in CIS: one moderate, the other more acute (Bacon 2006; Voparil 2016; Curtis 2015; Ramberg 2014). As William Curtis says: "The first sense is the civic virtue that all liberal citizens should ideally possess because it helps them to be tolerant, adaptable, and just. The second sense is the more active and radical mental habit that 'ironist intellectuals' exhibit as they challenge the conventional wisdoms of the cultural domains in which they work" (Curtis 2015, 93). In a general appreciation, the second sense is described by conditions (1) and (2) in CIS, and it is closer to what Bjørn Ramberg and Michael Bacon call an existential irony that "appears as the response of the individual subject to the realization that final vocabularies stand forever unjustified" (Ramberg 2014, 23) and should be linked to the project of self-creation: a private irony.

The first sense is aptly described in condition (3), and as Christopher Voparil notes, it is the one which leads to anti-foundationalist citizens. This means they would be "commonsense nonmetaphysicians", and this condition encourages a more tolerant, more pragmatic, and more liberal attitude (Voparil 2016, 8). Therefore, this ironism should not be confused with a radical skepticism or with relativism, but only with the awareness that our beliefs and commitments are temporary and fallible. This sense of irony is the one used in this paper.

Certainly, in this sense, for Rorty, 'public' irony is an epistemic and political tool. As Bernstein[2] puts it, for the former, the ironist is the kind of person who faces the contingent nature of his main concerns, desires, and beliefs; someone historicist and nominalist enough to know that such beliefs are not beyond time and chance. Such a sense of contingency was for him a powerful anti-authoritarian device.

The epistemic reading of irony is easily connected to Alexander Nehamas' perspective in which irony "does not consist in saying the contrary, but only something different from, what one means" (Nehamas 1998, 12). It is a form of silence, because "sometimes you may yourself not be sure what the truth is even if you are convinced that it is not what your words mean." (Nehamas 1998, 57) Such statements implicitly enlighten the skeptical attitude toward the commitment to a final truth, as we said before, and thus, from an ultimate cultural authority, they are in line with the anti-foundationalism explored by Rorty. It also highlights, as he says, the fact that the ironist has to overcome authority without being authority. He has to be an anti-authoritarian without contradicting himself; denying the idea of a definitive foundation without providing a new one, instead merely offering an alternative redescription from the general metaphysical thought. As Ramberg states:

Substituting hope for knowledge here means protecting the critical space of gradualistic, fallibilistic, ameliorative political experimentation and reform against blockage by claims to knowledge of something more authoritative than historical narrative and specific hopes. This, politically speaking, is the job that irony is

designed to do: ironism is Rorty's *deep theory filter*, it is an anti-authoritarian device (Ramberg 2014, 14).

Accordingly, by embracing the contingency of his moral and political language or community, the ironist makes it easier to weaken differences with other communities or languages (Rorty 1991,111). Thus, the ironist and the *hermeneut* share a kind of vocation for tolerance and openness to narratives which make him sensible to suffering and cruelty; probably, the suffering of someone whose final vocabulary is different from his. From this perspective, irony does not cultivate moral disintegration, just as it does not guarantee solidarity, either. However, says Rorty, historically, a tolerant society which has learned to have some kind of *lightness* (a relaxed and open attitude) toward its beliefs has been an important tool for moral progress (Rorty 1991, 263).

This perspective also concurs with Santiago Gerchunoff's claim that irony as a trope is the result or expression of a political practice developed in public conversation. This means that its political reality, namely, the skeptical crushing of knowledge in irony, precedes its literary use. This made it plausible and perhaps even necessary to think of the free political space in which irony emerges, amidst struggles against or among the universal proposals of power. This perspective, says Gerchunoff, shows that a modest irony is a hope repressed by reactionary powers, (Gerchunoff 2019, 26-31).

Furthermore, as Ramón del Castillo claims, an ironic spirit should not be confused with cynicism (as Susan Haack does); it is not false consciousness (Del Castillo 2015, 104), as is often perceived in the contemporary public opinion. Rorty was convinced that it is possible to build a society with a historicist common sense, committed to the eradication of cruelty, all the while keeping a plural and open conversation because its members are aware of the contingent character of such a commitment. Therefore, "a public rhetoric with historicist values" could generate an ironic society in a politically healthy sense. The key is that we need a public irony, open to conversation and opposed to fanaticism and fundamentalism, but different from frivolity and cynicism.

However, in recent years, strong critiques against irony have appeared in the public sphere: internet, newspapers and write-ups point out that the copious presence of irony in the public opinion, especially in social networks, is a manifestation of a society that is cynical, arrogant, and devoid of social commitment.

According to this criticism, along with *post-truth* and some other new social diseases of contemporary public conversation, irony is one of the main characteristics of this cynical society. Indeed, this diagnosis is supported by features of some theories on irony itself. Firstly, they say that irony implies a trivialization of the relation between reality and language. Therefore, irony perverts that relation, undermining the social importance of epistemic truth (Gerchunoff 2019, 66). Secondly, as Nehamas says, irony always includes an element of dissimulation, a distancing between the speaker and audience that shows a sense of the speaker's superiority (Nehamas 1998, 57). As described in the previous section, irony assumes two speakers: one who talks and

another who means and does not mean what he himself is saying. At the same time, the speaker always assumes two audiences, one that understands and another one that does not understand what the speaker means. Thus, this sense of superiority has its main source in the intimacy between the speaker and the initiated audience (Nehamas 1998, 60).

Conversely, as Nehamas points out following Kierkegaard, irony is infinite because it casts doubt on the validity of the culture as a whole, and it is negative because "it undermines what it opposes but is incapable of offering any serious alternative to it". (Nehamas 1998,71). In this sense, ironists:

are unwilling to accept full responsibility for what they say, but they are equally unwilling to deny it explicitly: as Kierkegaard put it, they remain "negatively free". Irony creates an essential uncertainty. It makes it impossible to decide whether ironists are or are not serious either about what they say or about what they mean (Nehamas 1998, 86).

This description of irony creates a negative political and moral reading. The lack of seriousness produces a negativity that does not propose an alternative, and so is often criticized in the irony of contemporary political discussions. Following this reading, it cultivates an elitist, cynical, irresponsible, and disdainful social immobility, as McIntyre and Haack have noted.

Nonetheless, Voparil and Bacon, as well as Bernstein, reject the moral evasion and cynicism implied in irony. On the one hand, Voparil upholds that the recognition of pluralism and contingency of Rortian irony leads to a pragmatic conception of obligation, commitment, and responsibility, along with the development of sensibility "as a remedy for moral blindness through cultivating particular virtues" (Voparil 2016, 6). Imagination allows the ironist, as Rorty says, to be impressed with new final vocabularies to be aware of forms of cruelty and suffering she may not have noticed before (Voparil 2016, 15). On the other hand, as Bacon explains, Bernstein thinks that "we are able to make sense of our beliefs, values and commitments, without needing backup from the fixed foundations offered by religion or philosophy" (Bacon 2006, 405), therefore, we do not need an epistemological final foundation for truth. Moreover, says Bacon, irony allows us to focus on increasing sympathy and concern for more people (Bacon 2016, 407). Definitely, Rorty "draws parallel between the growth of ironism and that of secularism. The latter has not weakened liberal societies, and indeed has strengthened them" (Bacon 2006, 415).

This social function is exemplified in the re-description of political leaders, which is done by cartoonists or satirists more effectively than by philosophers. However, it is true that the line between irony and cynicism may be thin, and we must be aware of such delicate tension. This tension in the public possibilities of irony became particularly noteworthy in Mexican political identity. I explore this tension using an example from Mexican literature.

3. History as irony: Jorgue Ibarguengoitia's novel

In the Rortian perspective, the instrumental view of irony is closely related to the cultural role of literature, mainly of the novel, as a kind of re-description which allows us to interpret any kind of writing as an inspiring and exploratory reading of culture. It is precisely through narrative that the ironist avoids the temptation of metaphysics. This way, narrative offers itself as the model of a post-metaphysical culture. In particular, the novel is the best means to reveal the contingency of a narrative's authority in any culture. This perspective is also expressed by Milan Kundera (1986) when he talks of irony as the structural method of a novel.

This literary attitude is self-evident and forceful in several historical novels by the Mexican writer Jorge Ibarguengoitia. In 1962, he published *El atentado* (The Attack), a satiric drama that makes a simile of the murder of the Mexican president Álvaro Obregón. He decided to become a novelist after winning the Casa de las Américas Prize. In 1964, he published his first novel, *Los relámpagos de Agosto* (*August's Lightnings*), and continued with other writings such as *Maten al leon* (*Kill the Lion*, 1969), *La conspiración vendida* (*The Conspiracy Betrayed* 1975), *Los pasos de López* (*Lopez' Steps*, 1982), and *Instrucciones para vivir en México* (*Instructions for living in Mexico* 1990). Ibarguengoitia uses a lively rhetoric for dissecting, mocking, and embarrassing the historical characters from political power in Mexico. He dynamites official history and reality to undo the myth of the Mexican democratic institutions.

From the very start of *El atentado* (*The Attack*), he warns about its ironic character when he says "this is a documental mockery, the more fantasy you can use, the worse it is..." or "any resemblance between this play and any fact in our history is not a coincidence, but a national shame". This narrative introduces a paradoxical character, explains Juan Campesino, that was fundamental to the origins of the political institutions of Mexico after the revolutionary period. Through this character, the author shows the personal charisma of the prototypical revolutionary character, who legitimizes violence and arbitrary authority with egotism and megalomania (Campesino 2005, 38). The author makes a cartoon of the revolutionary leader, but with a reliable narrative. He himself plays with the narrator, the meta-narrator, and the timeline, generating a discontinuity between reality and appearance, intrinsic to irony (Campesino 2005, 46).

In *Maten al leon* (*Kill the Lion*), he makes a travesty of the dictatorial Hispano-American model of government. The novel is described by Gustavo García as a masterpiece of Mexican irony because it is a story in which nobody achieves his goals and yet, paradoxically, everything ends well. *La conspiración vendida* (*The Conspiracy Betrayed*) y *Los pasos de López* (*López's Steps*) are two novels about the armed struggle for independence in Mexico. In them, the author describes characters with a political attitude full of inconsistencies and divergent convictions, revealing the hypocrisy of the political class. He also shows a discredited conspiracy to initiate a rebellion for independence with an ironical subtext that underlines the paradoxical situation (betrayed by many participants), using quotation marks, opposed styles, and

incorporating comments of “delusional applauses” from the audience to generate this ironical mood. In *Conspiración*, from a historical point of view, it is ironic that, in a world ruled by men, the decision for the armed uprising can be only made by a woman who disobeys her husband (Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez). Consequently, thanks to this “female folly”, says Campesino, Mexican independence became possible (Campesino 2005, 84).

In *Pasos*, he shows the distinctive ineffectiveness of the independence movement, which is a consequence of the misfortune and bad communal work that, according to the author, shapes national identity (Campesino 2005, 59). On the one hand, the characters are described as ordinary human beings with fears, weaknesses, and contradictions. On the other hand, some of these weaknesses or imperfections can be identified with undesirable features of Mexican idiosyncrasies. For example, the involvement of opportunistic participants who betray the conspiracy for their own sake; the narrator is tricked into the cause for independence through deceit; the founding father (Miguel Hidalgo) is a womanizer and gambling priest who squanders his scholarship; some independence supporters (*criollos*) are classist and racists. In addition, the narrator is involved in the insurrection almost by accident and without any understanding of the political position of the independence movement.

Therefore, the author removes the grandiloquence of political speech when he shows that the heroes of the independence movement are confused, their actions are chaotic, and some of them are moved by selfish reasons. In particular, he demystifies Miguel Hidalgo, showing his imperfections and weaknesses but also his virtues. He also re-describes the mythical, inaugural “El grito de Dolores” episode of independence in a much more colloquial and uneven way. Thus, Ibarguentoitia reveals the contingent character of the revolution itself without minimizing it. In this way, his irony has a critical purpose in questioning and unmasking uncomfortable truths, concerning the authoritarian and unfair colonialist regimen, as well as, the paradoxical and chaotic Mexican way to face it.

Ibarguentoitia deals with the great historical episodes of Mexico in a relaxed and casual fashion with an irreverent irony because from his perspective this is the only way to describe the history of a country whose culture is based, precisely, on ambiguity, ineffectiveness and contradiction. Consequently, the national institutions seem empty as tools of popular power, and the revolutionary speech becomes quackery. In a nutshell, he puts to test the post-revolutionary, supposedly democratic Mexican institutions. In his narrative, we can clearly see the cracks in the political system and the old evident imperfections and burdens of Mexican political identity (Campesino 2005, 114-15).

However, he does not have to force much history to achieve this ironic effect; rather he merely emphasizes the silly details and uses a mockingly colloquial speech. This way, through the similarities between the dramatic writing and the historical record, he becomes ironic or he uses different historical contents with a similar shape in a parodic mood. However, as Martinez notes, the perception of this irony depends on

pragmatic conditions: expectations that enable the reader to perceive the inconsistency or unlikelihood of the apparent meaning, and then to construct an alternative one.

One common theme in his characters is that their projects are beyond their capabilities and commitments, and they soon spiral out of control, but this becomes a problem more cultural than personal. Thus, his narrative goes beyond the specific historical characters to criticize the Mexican archetype in general and his nature as a cultural being. Rooted in irony, he gives a new meaning to historical events, thereby revealing a cultural truth: namely, the Mexican inability to achieve common goals.

In this sense, Ibarguengoitia's novels achieve unsuspected levels of Kierkegaard's negativity of irony because they challenge national identity itself (their culture as a whole) when he destroys the official legitimacy of Mexico's past, undermining the agreed value of what it means to be Mexican. And yet, he offers no serious alternative. If, as Kierkegaard says, irony pursues suppression of reality by replacing it with a reality which it is not, in Ibarguengoitia's case, this reality is literature.

Indeed, he proposes a new kind of historical novel setting itself off from the traditional model inherited from romanticism and from the official Mexican novel of the revolution. He is imaging the hidden features of the formal history and then, reveals them to the reader using an artistic perspective which suggests an ironic truth (Arizmendi & Meza 2011, 74). His irony makes the 'Great History' a more mundane and concrete narrative, trivializing its transcendental character. However, such gesture, can be also seen as a democratization of history, by saving these characters from the official demagoguery implied in the hegemonic history.

4. Irony and Mexican Political Identity

Ibarguengoitia's use of irony in his fictional redescription shows important trademarks of Mexican political identity. But, what kind of tool is this?

At first glance, Ibarguengoitia's use of irony seems quite effective, in the very Rortian sense, as an antiauthoritarian device. When he undermines the official history as a cultural authority of the Mexican political identity, he constrains the dominant power discourse and its authority by portraying its contingency and precariousness. In this way, irony is the revival of a hope repressed by the authoritarian political power that ruled Mexican public life. Moreover, it is quite meaningful that the writer is re-describing history, one of the most usual narratives in which are rooted totalitarian conceptions of eternal and monolithic truths (Rodríguez 2008, 697). Instead, Ibarguengoitia shows history as a challenged, parodied, and criticized speech in order to recreate and subvert it (Rodríguez 2008, 698).[3]

As mentioned earlier, irony is often connected to a humorous side. Martínez reminds us that the word irony derives from *eiron*, one of the characters of classical comedy. Consequently, comedy is usually exploited by ironic argumentation to create an

intimacy with the audience in which laughter is a form of comic relief from dramatic tension) (Martínez 2014, 7). Because Ibarguengoitia is a comic ironist, I will examine some noteworthy features of comedy to take a deeper look at the political use of his irony.

As Alenka Zupančič points out, comedy accepts and deals with human finitude, its limitations and shames. It is deeply materialist because it invokes and emphasizes a defective, dirty reality as our condition of life, giving voice to the impasses and contradictions of this materiality (Zupančič 2012, 76-8). When we laugh, as in these novels, some pleasure is released because of the inconvenient dimension that shows the precariousness of our world and its dependence on contingent mechanisms to give meaning to our lives (Zupančič 2012, 214). This can make us more tolerant to the contingent and paradoxical nature of reality: Mexican reality. It is the expression of a fundamental ambiguity of our world, as Ibarguengoitia shows in these novels.

However, she claims, comedy is not just the voice of finitude and the acceptance of our weakness, disappointments, and misfortunes. It is not just a reconciliation with imperfection (Zupančič 2012, 81). According to her, the universal and the particular come together in comedy, and thus, the concrete lays the foundation for the universal. As a result, we identify with the weakness of heroes, but their symbolic function is still respected, as is the case with Miguel Hidalgo (Zupančič 2012, 53-4). Thus, the core of our political being can be represented in comedy not because we need to keep a distance from the *pathos*, from what can harm or shake us, but because it is the way to go directly to the point of the critique (Zupančič 2012, 267).

In particular, travesty gives an account of an *empty repetition*. In Ibarguengoitia's novels, such repetition is a revolution or revolutions that in many ways only perpetuated the established authoritarianism and inequality of the Mexican political system. However, interestingly, Zupančič says, comedy is not just a futile repetition of such emptiness, but an ongoing attempt to achieve something, despite the results and the expectations (Zupančič 2012, 227). Accordingly, comedy is not just the expression of the unsuccessful efforts of heroes who look for something they might not be fit to handle. On the contrary, such characteristic insistence of these comedies leaves the heroic perspective behind, and it is ruled by something that is successful through such failures (Zupančič 2012, 233). In this sense, the comic narrative means a new social hope that strives to achieve these goals, also in a Rortian sense.

Following this interpretation, Ibarguengoitia's novels could be an inspiring political tool of experimentation to reshape our national identity and social reality, when he treacherously points out several uncomfortable truths. Therefore, Ibarguengoitia's irony is a new breath that produces new perspectives, because as Julian Barnes states in *The Noise of Time*, irony is the crack between how we imagine or expect life, and the way it actually is. In this way, his irony, as Ramberg suggests, may substitute hope for knowledge, protecting the critical space of ameliorative political experimentation.

But as Barnes also says, it has limits, not just because it can become a conceit and prepare the ground to cynicism, but because it can cultivate an irresponsible and disdainful social immobility, as we mentioned above. In this sense, as also noted above, is irony's dependence on an intimate relation with an initiated audience that can understand what the speaker not only says but also means. Thus, as Gerchunoff asserts, a social irony is essentially paradoxical because it demands the popularization of an elitist gesture, so it can easily fail (Gerchunoff 2019, 39). Again, in its Socratic roots, it is also reactive, so it cannot ground anything (Gerchunoff 2019,42). Therefore, these elements open the door to misunderstanding irony and/or a cynical attitude and to the undermining of social commitment, which are often found in contemporary public conversation.

However, even though irony reflects a distancing from an ultimate truth, it by no means underrates the political and ethical importance of truth (practical truth). On the contrary, cynicism is a false irony because it lies impudently. It is not a healthy skepticism or fallibility, but rather, a deliberated pretense. Consequently, for Rorty, it is still possible to have deep social commitments with a public ironic rhetoric and historicist values, if we only keep an ethical and pragmatic commitment with truth. This is not possible in a cynical society. We will briefly explore this difference between irony and cynicism in Mexican political identity through the perspective of two outstanding theoreticians of Mexican identity: Jorge Portilla and Octavio Paz.

Portilla says in his book *Fenomenología del relajo* that laughter can be very useful to understand important features of the human condition or to explore the spiritual structure of a nation (Portilla 1984, 13). In the Mexican case, irony has been a political tool against authoritarianism, challenging the political identity along with the community life built upon it, as Ibarra's novels show. Indeed, Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad (The Labyrinth of Solitude)* describes a Mexican identity characterized by a solitary or lonely temperament that he understands as a kind of social orphanage. Paz goes on to suggest that, as a result of their (ironic?) history, Mexican people are distrustful and hermetic. Therefore, the Mexican is stereotypically secretive and enclosed. In this enclosure, he uses irony as a common resource of a sneaky disobedience (also in addition to resignation and politeness) because of the historical colonial and post-colonial submission. Accordingly, the Mexican often uses indirect speech, his language is full of reluctance toward figures and allusions. Moreover, Paz says, in his silence there are retreats, subtleties or indecipherable threats.

As a result, the distance from direct speech, its connection to the lack of seriousness, and the consequent ambivalence of irony make irony a perfect linguistic resource to portray Mexican identity. The Mexican, Paz says, contemplates death with irony because of his indifference to life. This becomes not only an existential condition, but a social and political one, as Ibarra pertinently shows in his writings.

However, Portilla distinguishes between irony and “relajo”, a common Mexican word which describes a kind of social or collective suspension of seriousness about something.[4] In his phenomenology, Portilla describes irony as the distance between the full accomplishment of a value and its actuality in a concrete situation. He shows a dialectic relation or polarity between “facticity” and “value” as a fundamental feature of irony (Portilla 1984, 76). Even if this description is consistent with our previous characterization of it, Portilla stresses some additional metaphysical, political, and moral features of it that are quite different from the Rortian perspective: he states that irony is a constructive figure because it aims to release us from appearances to achieve truth (a kind of constructive liberation). Therefore, it is grounded on seriousness and responsibility. In contrast, “el relajo” is a form of liberation that, as said above, suspends seriousness, commitments with social values, and responsibility. It is a form of social detachment and irresponsibility (Portilla 1984, 19).

Despite this distinction between ‘relajo’ and ‘irony’, ‘relajo’ can be interpreted as a kind of Rortian irony. Indeed, as Maria de los Ángeles Rodríguez says, *Los pasos* can be interpreted as a ‘relajo literario’ for several reasons. Firstly, the narrative breaks with the idea of national identity by subverting the official history, as explained above. Secondly, ‘relajo’ has an important function in the development of the narrative itself, showing its importance as a cultural practice in México, namely, our “propensity” for slyly breaking rules. Nonetheless, it also exposes the difficulties and deep complexities implied in the planning and the accomplishment of great social changes such as the independence movement (Rodríguez 2008, 701). Contrary to Portilla’s analysis, this irony or ‘relajo’ does not encourage disrespect to national heroes, and it does not imply a form of social detachment. Because the suspension of seriousness is directed toward a set of social values, liberation from them helps create something else, perhaps a commitment to new values or new actions (Rodríguez 2008, 710). In sum, it can create new values and new responsibilities, and it is not necessarily (or not only) destructive.

I will go no further here into Portilla’s conception of irony. It is quite clear that it is much more metaphysical than Rorty’s or Gerchunoff’s conception. Suffice to say that for him, irony is a willingness of truth in a transcendental way (perhaps as a result of his Husserlian influence). This transcendentalism is inconsistent with the Rortian irony that refuses ultimate truths and any kind of foundationalism. In addition, his negative valuation of “relajo” seems excessive, and it ignores the lack of seriousness as a tool for moral progress that Rorty endorses. Nonetheless, even without strict endorsement of his distinction between irony and “relajo”, given that “relajo” can be ironical and responsible and the suspension of seriousness can be constructive, we may still see the limits of irony in Mexican political identity.

As Blanca Estela Ruiz (2012) notes, when we do not accept an absolute truth, when we challenge a univocal perspective of reality, dogma, or fanaticism, we have three options: we cry, we shout, or we laugh. Ibargüentoitia chooses humor, stimulating reflection, and seeking out awareness, and this is not unusual in Mexican culture. Even so, the continuous presence of irony in the public sphere, the jokes, the *memes*, the

Mexican capacity of self-mockery, sometimes turns into a yielding political attitude that perpetuates irresponsible social immobility. In those cases, the ongoing joke hinders the construction of a serious alternative and commitment.

Therefore, the presence of irony in Mexican social life shows some dangers and disadvantages that have been pointed out about cynicism and social disaffection by Rorty's critics. This subtle shift from irony to cynicism and social irresponsibility and immobility is portrayed in Portilla's contrast between irony and the negative side of "el relajo". It also shows the limits of Ibarguengoitia's irony when he tries to describe a weak communal and political life. As Emilio Uranga notes about the essential features of our national identity: we have a deep feeling of fragility, inactivity, and an inclination to introversion.[5]

It seems that not only is irony present in Mexican identity, but that a disarticulated community develops a kind of cynicism as a defense movement. This may be a sign of hopelessness and an attitude or sense of failure, the feeling that Mexico has no social hope, and the consequent attitude to accommodate ourselves with what we have. This is a kind of social undernutrition, says Portilla, that results in suffocating the community itself (Portilla 1984, 131).

Indeed, Ibarguengoitia himself is often perceived as a lonely writer who is not committed to any clear political stance. According to Ana Rosa Domenella, even if the mismatch between appearance and reality is a feature of all his writings (a very Rortian attitude), socially and ideologically speaking, his ironical world means a lonely liberalism (1983, 44).[6] In this sense he remains, as Kierkegaard says, "negatively free", creating uncertainty without alternatives. However, the relative autonomy of his works introduces a refreshing critique which has a constructive social and political function.

Therefore, recovering the Rortian irony we develop in section 2, irony is a powerful political device that democratizes history, truth, and common sense, challenging the elitization of contemporary public discourse, a usual Mexican vice. As Del Castillo notes, it can generate a public rhetoric with historicist values that encourage a more tolerant society, but also as Voparil says, the development of sensibility and pragmatic commitment and responsibility. Even so, we must be aware of these tensions and limits that Rorty himself recognized, and that can only be pragmatically and contextually resolved. Such a resolution requires us to preserve the Mexican ironic attitude, as a political tool while avoiding cynicism and social immobility in a delicate and difficult balance. Then, the civic virtues involved in Rortian irony, empathy, and an ethical and pragmatic commitment to truth may prove helpful to achieving it.

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Notes

[1] Even though Rorty himself recognized the tension or conflict in his ironist description in (Auxier & Han 2010, 56).

[2] However, Bernstein provides a different, but not inconsistent, response to objections to Rortian irony. He accurately notes that Rorty is not using "radical doubts" and "final vocabulary" in the Cartesian way, or in the classical epistemological sense

(Humean, for example), but simply in the sense that no vocabulary can be definitely justified (Bernstein 2016:47). We believe this perspective is consistent with the Rortian attitude toward relativism, skepticism and, in general, toward the epistemological tradition. Nonetheless, we also consider that Rorty's word choice was unfortunate, because of the modern philosophical resonance it has.

[3] According to María de los Ángeles Rodríguez, Ibarguengoitia, Fernando del Paso, and Ignacio Solares represent the avant-garde of the new historical novel in Mexico, which intended to be critical about official history. At the same time, according to Sara Sefcovich, Mexican literary production during the 1970s and 1980s expresses the disappointment, skepticism, fear, and violence in which Mexico is living (Rodríguez 2008, 699).

[4] 'El relajo' is the temporal interruption of solemnity and formality, the disturbance of order or rules, which is expressed with spontaneity, jokes, or mockery. However, as Rodríguez explains, if the 'relajo' is excessive, it can have tragic or catastrophic consequences, which is then called 'desmadre' (2008, 700).

[5] However, some commentators note that, during the decades of "Mexican nationalism," the analysis about national identity of some intellectuals such as Octavio Paz, Jorge Portilla, Emilio Uranga and Samuel Ramos was intended to reshape national identity according to modern values, and overcoming the usual Mexican sense of inferiority. Therefore, they tried to 'purified' Mexican identity, removing any features that were disapproved of from such (elitist?) perspective (Palou 2006).

[6] Which also seems very close to private irony.