

## **Post Modern Governance and the Sometimes Missing Jester**

Chapter 10 in Responsibility and its Avoidance.

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### **10. Post Modern Governance and the Sometimes Missing Jester**

*We do not find a slot labelled 'Jester', 'Joker', 'Fool' or 'Praise-singer' on present day government organisation charts, but such characters have cropped up historically in many parts of the world. They have apparent purpose; to speak truth to power. If power is with the people, then the people need the truth. Jesters there are but do we listen?*

Academic theorising about contemporary governance can make heavy reading. It is not just that the subject has an air of high seriousness about it; there are, after all, serious issues or situations that need to be governed. It is not simply the endless questioning of other people's meanings while attempting to pin new meanings onto thoroughly slippery concepts. No, it is more likely that the mental constructs that we build and seek to share must not only explain but be able to provide a moral base for action: for making war, building peace, doing business or - my theme here - fixing the environment. Theories of governance are never purely positivist; norms are hidden in there somehow. Explanations have to serve also as justifications. My present reflection might appear to be an escapist indulgence in this respect. I want to talk about the Joker, the Fool, the Praise-singer who can also blame and various equivalents. Indulge the thought that these social roles are totally marginal to our governance theme. But note that such characters recur in literature, history and anthropology with some regularity and be prepared to think otherwise.



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to talk to the Chief and saw his face turn to thunder. The song being sung at the time was questioning whether it was he, the Chief, who had stolen the post from the village post box or whether it was the elected Councillor who had done it, perhaps to discredit him. <sup>1</sup> On the face of it the song was an open confrontation with authority, yet the singers were evidently immune from the normal, well established principles of Tswana jurisprudence. Chief Tobega could apparently do nothing about it. <sup>2</sup> An aspect of social order had been inverted for the occasion. Clearly there was a political dynamic behind these harmonies that I might have missed. Maybe the upside down bit of governance is as important as the upright.

What do I take from this? It is not going to be simple. Social life can probably rival biological life in its connectivity and complexity. James Lovelock with his Gaia concept was ridiculed back in the 1960s by professional biologists, <sup>3</sup> each into his or her own kind of worm or plant or aphid, but eventually won recognition as each worm studier found that changes in worm nourishing conditions mattered, not a bit but fundamentally to the success or failure of said worm and that these conditions are shaped by other worms or plants or aphids that in turn .... Life in other words is a big and complicated thing. So, I recognise, is our social means of getting a place in it.

Lovelock's big idea was that the Earth is self-regulating. Kick it and it will kick back. We humans are kicking it with over-consumption and pollution and it will kick back with - he might have said - storms, pestilence and things unpredictable. That is how his Gaia image has entered common minds - such as mine. And there it echoes the cries of a deranged King who, having botched his relationships with his three daughters, stomps the moors with his friend the Fool - Shakespeare's King Lear.

The grand theme in all this is regulation: a theme much talked about in the field of government and governance. Our modern or post-modern governments -

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- 1 The mail service often carried remittances. The chief was the licensed agent at the time but the box had been broken into, to cover tracks ....?
  - 2 Other songs had wide ranging but always critical themes. One song encouraged 'sister' so and so to go and chase the former school headmaster who had impregnated her before he was transferred to another village. Another urged a group to take an unspecified complaint to Tau Tona [big lion], the then President, Sir Seretse Khama in the capital city, Gaborone; a procedure that would have conformed to traditional governance norms but would be unlikely to be well received by the security details that surrounded the modern head of state.
  - 3 My mind refreshed on the Gaia theme by the Big Issue, April 13-19, 2009.



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perhaps particularly the British government - are very keen on 'putting in place' regulatory systems through which to control the price of gas, the frequency and timeliness of trains, the disposal of waste, the performance of schools or the extraction of fish from the North Sea. The problem with such 'put in place' systems, I argue, is that they do not always fit. They assume a rather mechanical model of connectivity: that all the bits behave as did the bits of James Watt's steam engine, the speed of which was governed by a regulator - a device that sat atop the machine and responded to acceleration by centrifugal expansion to slow its rotation. James Watt's governor worked for slow, stationary engines - though not very well apparently. In the mechanical world the governor concept has been theorised and refined over a century and a half to provide a range of useful devices. A governor can be fitted to curb the exuberance of drivers of fast cars and some such could be used to enforce motorway speed restrictions - if there were the political will to do so. Aye, there's the rub; at a certain point regulation becomes a social matter rather than mechanical, introducing other dynamics entirely.

Many things have no machine-like connectivity at all. In these cases, putting in place a so-called independent regulator with powers to demand information on this and that and to set limits upon behaviour of this kind or that kind can have quite perverse consequences. Between declining fish stocks in the North Sea and the rate of extraction of fish from that stock and the behaviour of fishermen or their unions and the propensity of consumers to consume fish, there are innumerable linkages and feedback processes that are not really understandable by, or reducible to, a readily applicable formula. What a regulator then does can have quite perverse consequences. When the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission and the European Union enforcers set limits on the size, type and quantity of permitted catch their rules sound logical but vast quantities of fish, deemed ineligible for landing, finish up being thrown back dead into the sea. Meanwhile, French fishermen protest and block harbours at the thought of any restriction on their rights to fish.<sup>4</sup> A seemingly endless process of attempted conflict resolution follows;<sup>5</sup> which might just be missing the point. Catch limitation is not necessarily the most effective way of controlling a wild stock. Exclusion zones might work better. Rotating catchment zones might allow for accelerated recovery after intensive extraction.<sup>6</sup> Regulatory systems have to reflect sophisticated understandings of underlying

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4 Press reports 13th April 2009.

5 [www.neafc.org/page/743](http://www.neafc.org/page/743)

6 see Fikret Berkes, Carl Folke and Johan Colding, (1998), eds Linking Social and Ecological Systems Cambridge.



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technical possibilities. They also have to be compatible with feasible social processes, the main criterion of which is that the perpetrators have some interest in successful outcomes. Ordinary minds would see the weakness of a crude 'putting in place' approach to regulation if an Atmospheric Pollution Regulator decided that - to control CO<sub>2</sub> emissions - citizens should be licensed to breathe only on alternate days. System survival and human survival within our biosphere requires more sophisticated understandings to drive more sophisticated processes.

### **Is there not scope for self-regulation?**

The idea of self-regulation is very attractive and has been adopted in various disciplines. In economics the idea that the market is self-regulating has been central to the discipline since its founding and has survived the plentiful evidence that history has thrown up to the contrary. Many people responding to price signals, supply responding to demand, ought to do the trick; other things being equal; which of course they seldom are. When markets crash there are always two plausible interpretations:

- 'they would have been self-correcting had not governments intervened' and
- 'look what happens when external regulation is inadequate'.

The first survives mostly in the minds of believing economists. The latter recurs in the minds of sceptical statisticians. Crashes happen when market players don't self-regulate because they are testing the boundaries of government indulgence [moral hazard]. Slumps follow when government bail-outs fail to re-establish the risk sharing basis of trust. Might it not have been better had some Joker on the side-lines ventured:

(rubbish) + (rubbish) = asset?

In the functionalist tradition of Anthropology and Sociology the idea that social systems are self-regulating is built into the underlying methodological suppositions. Not only do courts function to restore ordered relations in society - which might be obvious enough - but witchcraft accusations or other allocations of blame <sup>7</sup> function to maintain the credibility of authority and its supporting beliefs or ideologies. While functionalism as such is out of fashion, the basic observation that people in society seem to like self-confirming

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<sup>7</sup> as in the tale of Baby P.



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accounts is itself confirmed by post-modernist fascination with discourses and narratives; particularly those of people in power.

Among the 60's Sociologists Talcott Parsons was the most prominent functionalist. A little quote from a Wikipedia entry may help us to understand his method:

In Parsons' theory of history and evolution, the constitutive-cognitive symbolization of the cybernetic hierarchy of action-systemic levels has in principle the same function as the function of genetic information in DNA's control of biological evolution but this factor of meta-systemic control does not "determine" any outcome but it defines the orientational boundaries of the real path-breaker, which is action itself.

- on the other hand it might not. I think that what this says is that people are free to act, within social constraints, constraints being societies' means of regulation. Note however that such regulation is a supposition of method rather than an observation of fact. All actions of all social agents - in this conceptualisation - tend towards socio-stasis. [If the Jester is there, he is ipso facto necessary, if not there, ipso facto unnecessary.]

Parsons was a particular hate-figure for the other kind of 60's Sociologist - Rex, Dahrendorf, others - who wanted to account for conflict and to give individuals the mental liberty to be outsiders, the other side of the police lines, even if such freedom often petered out in smoke. For them, society was a construct, real enough to be oppressive to the rebel, real enough also to make that rebel reach for collar and tie when unemployment struck. For conflict theorists, regulation was a matter for fisticuffs. Well, we can see it in the streets. It is real. It is also something that many, perhaps most people in most societies try, pragmatically, to find some way to do without. Hence, the search for opportunities to debate, mediate, resolve; perhaps leaving room on the edge for the Jester, to ease things along a bit when debate gets sticky.

The Gaia model was built upon the idea of self-regulation, again with huge functionalist suppositions. It made the rather anthropomorphic assumption that Earth can behave in a manner that responds to human behaviour; our misbehaviour prompting vengeful returns. Earth System Scientists have refined the model, making it comply with the established objectivist tenets of the scientific tradition, and finding facts to take the place of suppositions. The outcome still allows them to see human behaviour as the driving force that threatens chaos. And what is chaos? Is it an end to self-regulation or an interim phase between one self-regulating regime and another in which human

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populations may not feature? Not many of us want to hang around to await the outcome of this drama. We would like voice, choice, a touch of agency. But how? A well placed word in edgewise? But where?

Shakespeare builds his dramas around similar assumptions about social and natural order, tin sheets in the wings rattling thunder as King Lear or that Scottish fellow are exposed for their unnatural social ways as they walk the wilds. In Shakespeare's case however, Nature has no agency. Unnatural human behaviour is the driver; reflected in unnatural events in nature. The sun will only shine again when proper social order is restored. In the theatre, caught up in a tale of human folly, the mind is quite prepared to suspend disbelief in this pattern of implied causality. We also note that King Lear, having handed his kingdom to his avaricious daughters, has a voice in his ear, the Fool, who says, without much disguise, 'who is the fool here, you or me?' <sup>8</sup>

The Fool, Jester or Joker of the Medieval European court seems to have been a ubiquitous character. By most accounts these characters had some licence to speak truth to power. Southern African societies have also featured similar characters, there referred to as Praise Singers. A South African Zululand tourism website makes the point that <sup>9</sup> such singers could also, in round about ways, temper praise with criticism. Tswana society historically had also recognised Praise Singers. One man, in the other village in which I lived for a while [Manyana], attempted the style, standing on occasion to deliver a staccato flow of high oratory. He was much enjoyed by the assembled men, but lightly dismissed since he was regarded to be slightly 'touched', with a history of mental illness. How authentic his efforts were I could not say, mostly because his diction left me behind, but, as I read now, to be 'touched', simulated or real, may often have been self - protection, justifying the licence to speak their mind

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8 Shakespeare's King Lear, Act 1 Scene 4.

9 [Quote] The office of the praise singer, the only professional artist in traditional society, was the most important in the culture of African people. His duty was to recount both the positive and negative deeds of the. This would include, for example, details on the King's bad temper or his latest misdemeanour. Everyone of the King's battles - victory or defeat, was faithfully recounted in elaborate and ceremonial language. A praise singer had to be an intelligent, deeply spiritual person of the highest repute amongst his society. The songs he sung had to be memorable, composed in such a way that every line which was spoken in classical, poetic language, would be easy to remember. For example, in the praise song of King Dingane his is referred to as the "butterfly of Punga and Mageba" - "the butterfly with very bright colours, a butterfly which, when touched, suddenly darkened its colours." This line, sung by a Zulu praise singer attests to Dingane's very, very quick temper and his displeasure at even the slightest joke.

[www.warthog.co.za/dedt/tourism/zululand/usiko/singers.htm](http://www.warthog.co.za/dedt/tourism/zululand/usiko/singers.htm)



that Jesters and such-like characters in different historical settings seem to have enjoyed.

What is apparent about the license that the Jester or Praise Singer is allowed, is that it always seems to require a touch of artistry. Lear's Fool uses a riddle-like form to make his point.

"Fool. Canst tell how an oyster makes his shell?

Lear. No.

Fool. Nor I neither; but I can tell why a snail has a house.

Lear. Why?

Fool. Why, to put his head in; not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns with-out a case."

King Dingane's Praise Singer wrapped his comment on the King's short temper in a charming butterfly picture. The choir that stood before Chief Tobega to test the implications of the stolen post, harmonised their tale in verse.

A different protective technique would be to approach the truth obliquely, using a typical joke - like inversion, even when humour was not called for:

Jesters could also give bad news to the King that no-one else would dare deliver. The best example of this is in 1340, when the French fleet was destroyed at the Battle of Sluys by the English. Philippe VI's jester told him the English sailors: "Don't even have the guts to jump into the water like our brave French."

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jester#Political\\_significance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jester#Political_significance)

That such a person was entitled, or might be expected to speak out of turn would also have been indicated by deviance from proper dress code; adopting for instance the three-pointed hat and motley garb that still graces the odd card within the pack; the Joker, which can take, or be given, exceptional powers when it sits alongside the King, Queen and Jack in a pack of playing cards.

Functionalist Sociologists would no doubt just say that a Jester role was a necessary adjunct to hierarchical authority, functionally necessary for the maintenance of society in that form. But that tautology does not tell us much. Conflict theorists would say - much the same thing really - that jesting statements of awkward truths provide an escape from the everyday realities of power and domination; leaving that power in place. I think I am inclined to put a slightly different cast upon it, but first another question. Has not society, our



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modern, post-modern or whatever we now label it, changed so much that it no longer needs the Jester?

My rhetorical question needs putting more precisely. In whose ear would a Jester now speak his riddles or rhymes? Since power has been wrested from monarchs in most parts of the world there is no point in focusing upon kings. The Duke of Edinburgh can be left to his own wisecracks. But - insofar as 'sovereignty of the people' is the dominant idea in the democratic variant of modern society, is it not 'we the people' who now need the occasional word of truth?

If by 'we the people' in Britain we mean us couch potatoes who hunt through the channels on a Friday evening for a bit of light humour at the expense of government, society and just occasionally ourselves, then we have been nourished by a long tradition of such stuff - going back three centuries to Hogarth, Thackeray, Dean Swift, Dickens. They did pictures and books. That Was the Week That Was (TW3), which flourished briefly in the early 1960s, brought to the mass audience provided by television the kind of humour that had previously been confined to the Cambridge Footlights on the one, upper-crusty, hand and the Music Hall or the stand-up comedians' turns on the other, working class hand. The two had merged briefly on stage in Beyond the Fringe. In so far as TW3 material could be called satirical, calling upon us to question our daily suppositions and values - commentators question how far this was the case <sup>10</sup> - it could indeed be seen as a means whereby a Jester put some wittily self-critical words into the ear of the electorate. TW3 also made fun of authority, delighting in the Edwardian mannerisms of the Prime Minister of the time Harold Macmillan. But the program was closed down before the 1964 election not, it is said, because the government was agin it but because it had run out of steam (Sandbrook p588). In any case neither Macmillan nor the public needed a critical word in the ear when 'events' of the time - the Profumo scandal in particular - did so much to question the credibility of government.

More recently Spitting Image [using puppetry as its distancing mechanism], as well as programmes such as Bremner, Bird and Fortune have all brought critical humour back to the small screen in the corner of the room. One thinks of satirical elements in such programmes - Bird and Fortune in a mock interview discussing the credit crunch, balancing criticism of the venality of bankers or the foolishness of the Government Treasury with the gullibility of us the 'punters' <sup>11</sup> - but wonders what difference such awareness makes to us as citizens. Does it

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<sup>10</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good, A history of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* London, Abacus (2005).





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not just reinforce a feeling that doing anything about it is hopeless, contributing to citizen apathy rather than stimulating to action?

Of course the awakened citizen is also aware of the limited sense in which democracy is indeed anything like 'government of the people, by the people'. In varying degrees, we still have concentrated powers and government by representatives of an elite. In considering the role of humour, the jest and The Jester we should not perhaps be seeking to locate the necessary injection as being either in the ear of The Supreme Leader [as Private Eye mockingly labelled the UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown] or as pricking the consciousness of the democratic masses but as a part of the interactions that go on between the two. The same incidentally is true of Tswana society. The singers of the song of the stolen post made their mark on their fellow citizens in the kgotla as much as the chief, no doubt reminding them as well as him of the well known Tswana/Sotho saying that "A chief is a chief by the people" [Kgosi ke kgosi ka batho].

My last take. All systematic thought and - with greater certainty - all attempts at systematic political thought, are limited. Lots of ideas, observations, actions or events, will fail to 'fit' or to be explicable within any particular mind-set, action plan or ideology. The function of jest is to test boundaries and credibilities. The Jester is like the flea on the back of the hedgehog - without it there is no life-giving circulation. It is my contention that we, like hedgehogs, can't do without them: and there should also be one in the political entourage of any Supreme Leader.

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11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXBcmqwTVgs&feature=related>