

*The Wisdom of the little Bunny:
Animals in the Pesti jokes*

*“Errare humanum est” said the hedgehog and
climbed down from the scrubbing brush.*

“Jokes are the creations of the Renaissance man”, starts *Zsuzsa Bereznai* her short essay *Jokes in public life: 1956*. “Jokes liberate men from taboos ingrained into their mind in the Dark Ages. “ *Bereznai* traces back Renaissance jokes to the ancient Greeks. Some jokes are rooted in the “*Philogelos*”, the oldest existing collection of jokes which may have been written down in the 4th century A.D. “ Certain archetypes can resurface even after several centuries of latency – reborn and linking up with actual historical and social circumstances. *Bereznai* believes the most typical examples of this “philogenesis” are animal jokes.

Aesop’s popular fables, in which animals speak and have human characteristics, are very close to contemporary animal jokes. Although Aesop’s existence remains uncertain and no writings by him survive, numerous tales credited to him were gathered across the centuries and in many languages in a storytelling tradition that continues to this day. These tales are not only parables with didactic purposes but may express the political views of the story teller. *Bereznai* quotes examples of how Aesop’s fables may transform into modern jokes. The well-known “The Fox and the Crow” tale, for example, reappeared in a (then) popular 19th century anecdote reflecting the traditional hostility between Hungarians and the oppressing Austrians. The best-known opus of the legendary French fabulist, Jean de La Fontaine, has also gone through some changes to land on the lips of the people in our times:

In a field the Ant and the Cricket live next to each other. The Ant works hard in the withering heat all summer long, hoarding supplies for the winter. The Cricket laughs and dances and plays the summer away. The Ant warned the Cricket that summer will be over soon and that the Cricket should also prepare for wintertime. However, the Cricket did not listen to the Ant. One late autumn day the Cricket knocks on the Ant’s door.

- Listen Ant, I’m going to town for a concert. Should I bring you anything?

- No, thank you. I have worked hard and have everything I need – replied the Ant.

A few weeks later, the Cricket knocks again.

– Hello Ant! I’m going to tour the country. Do you want to come with me?

- Sorry, I can’t. I’ll have to prepare for the winter. During the cold winter the Cricket knocks again on the door of the Ant. Poor Ant is very cold and hungry and can hardly wait for the spring.

- Hi Ant! I’m leaving for a European tour. Should I bring you anything from abroad?

- Oh no. I would just ask you to do me a favor.

- Of course. What is it?

- Will you give a concert in Paris?

- Of course, I do.

- Well, would you go then to the Père Lachaise Cemetery?
- Yes. And then what?
- Find La Fontaine's grave, please, and just spit on it.

László Erőss, offers a classification of animal jokes in his book about Pesti jokes (A pesti vicc, Gondolat 1982). Although every animal joke has certain anthropomorphic attributes, a horse joke obviously would have a completely different context than a parrot-joke. "Elephant-jokes are extremely popular among children, probably because the huge and formidable-looking, but clumsy and hulking super-animal personifies the higher authorities, namely the Father and the School in children's mind." In the elephant-mouse dialogues it is usually the quick-witted mouse that outsmarts the pachyderm, a very satisfactory outcome for children who happily identify themselves with the little mouse.

Györgyi Horváth, a lecturer at the Eötvös Lóránd University, bring us closer to understanding the philosophy of animal tales in an article published in *Tiszatáj*, September 2009. "These stories are actually educational tales, with an obvious objective: to give a clear idea of the moral rules of living. They are simple, brief and effective with clear-cut and easy-to-understand moral lessons. A very simple story without additional episodes or tinged characters. Each character has an anthropomorphic role: the ant is hard-working, the fox is cunning, the lion is majestically presumptuous, etc. These short fables, thus, are extremely suitable for "coded" speech, for hinting to implications and conveying contents which, explicitly, would be much more difficult to communicate. It's no wonder then that animal jokes come very handy in politically sensitive times. And this is the very reason why, while also known and favored universally, animal jokes earned extraordinary popularity in Eastern Europe during communist times. Animal jokes are the core of Russian jokes (which draw their roots from old Slavic fairy tales) and they are present in the particular genre of Pest jokes, as well, at times of severe political oppression.

In Hungary, animal jokes were used as political metaphors first after the failed communist revolution in 1919. Boldizsár Vörös, media analyst and candidate in historical studies, quotes some of these in his study about the subject ("Even the inhabitants of the zoo have convened to elect a warden to promote their interests." AETAS 2006, issue 2-3). The Hungarian Soviet Republic lasted for 133 days in 1919, and after its fall several jokes criticizing and attacking various aspects of the regime were born. These jokes earned posterity and remained in circulation in the next few decades during the rule of successive authoritarian regimes.

Similarly, several jokes were born during and after the Hungarian revolution in 1956, as Zsuzsa Bereznai's research revealed. "We may even say that the chronicle of the revolution was preserved in jokes, anecdotes and true stories – in unwritten tradition that is, as other forms of documentation were out of question for quite a long time to follow. This one became very popular after the revolution was crushed by the Soviet army and during the times of retaliation (ironically, the joke is probably of Russian origin):

The little Bunny runs like crazy through a forest and meets the Wolf. The Wolf asks: "What's the matter? Why such haste?" "The camels there are getting caught and shot!" The Wolf says: "But you're not a camel!" — "Hey, after you are caught and shot, just you try and prove them that you are not a camel!"

Interestingly, although the Kádár regime was the least oppressive of all Communist rules, this era produced the most fundamental and most philosophical animal jokes in Hungary. Like the next one, a perennial favorite.

One day mother mole and kid mole climb to the surface. Kid mole is amazed. – Mother what is this beautiful blue thing above? – This is, my son, the blue sky. – And what is this brilliant brightness? – This is the sun which brings warmth and light to the earth. – And what are these splendid colorful things which smell so good? - These are the flowers. – But mother if here we have this beautiful warm sunshine, the blue sky, and the colorful flowers, then why do we spend our entire life in the dark, cold underground? – Because it is our homeland.

No doubt, unlike some other types of the Pest joke, the relevance of animal jokes will never fade away. The violent Wolf, the sneaky Fox, the cocky cowardly Hare, the strong, simple-minded Bear, the invincible Lion and the other characters will have to stay to remind humans of their ubiquitous frailty and fallibility.

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