

*Composition of the Political Caricature in the Journal “Neue Freie Zeitung”
as a Result of Difference-Thinking*

Ján Demčišák, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia

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Abstract

Right-wing populists in Europe are employing sophisticated strategies to convince their voters of their cause and the political caricatures they produce can be seen as one of these strategies. This study seeks to analyse the cartoons appearing in *Neue Freie Zeitung*, a newspaper published by the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), focusing both on their thematic spectrum and composition. Accordingly, one of the constitutive features of these caricatures is how they highlight the differences in opinion toward political opponents and between outside cultures and the party’s own culture. There are also concrete examples of how the differences are specifically used journalistically and artistically to communicate the party’s own political message.

Keywords: Political Caricature, Populism, Political Satire, Enemy Images, *Neue Freie Zeitung*

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Introduction

This paper analyses caricatures (cartoons) from *Spitze Feder* (The Sharp Pen), a regular column that appears in *Neue Freie Zeitung*. Because the newspaper is published by the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the political cartoons are not necessarily independent, but instead reflect how it interacts with the public. The newspaper's primary readers are members and potential supporters of the FPÖ, so a certain agreement in opinion and values between the cartoonist and readers about his ideas can be expected. Our objective is to approach some of the key topics, pointing out how populist caricatures are typically composed and what their specific are.

What are political cartoons?

The term “*caricature*” is etymologically derived from the Italian word *caricare*, which means, among other things, to exaggerate or stretch a point. It underscores an essential feature of political cartoons, how they exaggerate and excessively emphasise certain characteristics or characters to the point of travesty. Even though satirical depictions have existed since antiquity, they only gradually became established as a fine art genre in late medieval Europe and at the dawn of the Renaissance. As the Reformation progressed, a flood of caricaturist leaflets, pamphlets and mocking images appeared to let people think for themselves, among other things intended for the illiterate in the tradition of the *Biblia pauperum* (cf. Koschatzky, 1992, p. 17). After a boom in the drawing of cartoons and reaching enormous popularity in 18th century England, the first half of the 19th century saw the emergence of the first illustrated humour magazines, especially in France, joining caricature and political journalism together and spreading slowly to other European countries (Krekovičová & Panczová, 2013, p. 32).

When considering the meaning and function of caricatures, the comic aspect is necessarily the place to start. The mechanism of action can be best elucidated by the superiority theory of humour traced to Plato and Aristotle. They understood humour to be a response to the world around them, where laughter itself gives those laughing a sense of superiority over those laughed at (cf. Platon, 1861; Aristoteles, 1982, p. 17), as it makes the recipient of the laughter a wiser, more informed and morally better person. On the one hand, it leads to a feeling of satisfaction and yet, on the other, it creates a feeling of community with other like-minded people on the side of those laughing. Thomas Hobbes latched onto this concept, understanding laughter as an act of self-affirmation, while also stressing the importance of a “foreigner” because mistakes made by close friends and relatives do not encourage laughter (Hobbes, 2005, p. 16).

Austrian art historian Walter Koschatzky sees laughter not as the objective of caricature, but rather a possible visible outcome. Here he distinguishes between malicious and liberating laughter (Koschatzky, 1992, p. 18).

It can be said that caricature and political cartoons are essentially populist in nature - a genre trying to be understandable to a wider population and thus, unlike artistic drawing, it seeks to be more unambiguous and less abstract or “coded”. It should be “understandable even without an in-depth study of the author's intention and able to pass to its audience a current, ridiculing perception of political, other social aspect or even just everyday life” (Valter, 2014, p. 85). Nonetheless, a certain summarisation and

abstraction cannot be denied and even Werner Krüger believes the formal, abstract aspect, approximating a cipher, to be a basic component; yet it remains down to earth and another, inseparable element is its realistic, journalistic nature (Krüger, 1969, pp. 10-11).

But the *Neue Freie Zeitung*, whose cartoons we studied, is not a humour magazine and its journalistic context is quite clear. Krüger even speaks in general about the literary, journalistic component found in political caricature and, following up upon Theodor Heuss's 1910 article *On the Aesthetics of Caricature*, he draws attention to the text usually accompanying the cartoon and emphasises literary stylistic elements therein such as satire, irony, persiflage, parody and travesty (Krüger, 1969, p. 12).

Therefore, political cartoons clearly bring together artistic, journalistic and opinion forming aspects. As understood from the inspirations of previous creators, they are a caricature of might in the broadest sense of the word, of constellations of power and the power to form opinions. In this spirit, it can pertain to politicians, political actors and to all people in the spotlight and the institutions involved in forming public opinion, as it defines and influences cultural and social values. The immediate aspects are criticality and topicality. Analysing caricatures becomes a challenge precisely because the diverse aspects and hybrid nature of this method of communication have to be taken into account alongside the need to judge it at least in the context of the fine arts, journalism, literature and political linguistics.

Topicality and substance in political cartoons

At first glance, defining political cartoons in terms of theme and content seems very simple. Illustrator Jan Valter saw them as a caricature “touching upon a political event or personality”, while separating them from community caricatures and other types that employ humour, poetry, portraits, philosophy and propaganda. But he adds that the dividing lines between individual categories are in a state of flux, even as the transitions between these types are smooth (Valter, 2014, p. 87). On the other hand, this diffusion creates a barrier to any clear perception of political caricature and demarcates it from other types of caricatures. This study opines that political cartoons are frequently associated closely with a portrait or propagandistic caricature. Valter's own differentiation between political and social caricature, where political events are caricatured through their impact on society, also contradicts Werner Krüger's approach, directly linking political cartoons to criticism of society (Krüger, 1969, p. 17).

Walter Koschatzky differentiates the content in another way, identifying the 12 most common themes in political cartoons. They are the ideal and truth about humans, railing against inhumanity, railing against the power of rulers, revealing immorality, unmasking criticism, targeting politics and politicians, showcasing stupidity and selfishness in appearance and reality, comical accidents, small weaknesses and great nonsense, the absurd and grotesque, humour to make you think and pictorial stories like comic books (Koschatzky, 1992, p. 17). These classifications were made during the organisation in 1992 of an exhibition called *Karikatur und Satire: Fünf Jahrhunderte Zeitkritik (Caricature and Satire: five centuries of criticising the ages)*, which was held in the *Kunsthalle der Hypostiftung* in Munich, Germany. Although political caricature is too held up as a separate type in this classification, it encountered the same problem as experienced earlier because several of the mentioned aspects of content had been

already manifestly or latently intertwined with the topic of politics, such as railing against the power of rulers, unmasking criticism and humour to make you think, notwithstanding others.

In political caricature, Friedrich Georg Jünger's 1936 essay *Über das Komische (About the Comical)* appears a suitable starting point. Here he wrote "Everything comic is based on conflict. Without it, nothing comic is conceivable, only if we are aware of it, we are able to perceive comicism. Therefore, something comical can never emerge from non-conflict situations and conditions" (Jünger, 2005, p. 104).

Conflicts are inherent in the repertoires of populists, as Paul Diehl notes, talking about instruments that dramatise and exacerbate conflicts and the compatibility of such motivated self-promotion with the media (Diehl, 2012, p. 20). The potential for conflict in the rhetoric of both populism and right-wing populism stems primarily from constructing the image of an enemy and a general negativism in their logic, something numerous studies have noticed (Priester, 2017; Schellenberg, 2017; Decker & Lewandowsky, 2017). Enemies and what they call "others" are defined and shunned because of exaggerated ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual and political criteria (Schellenberg, 2017, p. 15) and the nature of the caricature reflect it. Similar determinants were stated by Bratislava political scientist Radoslav Štefančík (2020) in his analysis of the communication strategies right-wing extremists use. He lists eight categories to describe the image of the enemy, several of which expand or clarify the options for classifying them that his German counterpart Britta Schellenberg (2017) had earlier outlined. These include the media, international organisations and institutions, which both extremists and right-wing populists criticise strongly.

The next section examines the lines of conflict that have been drawn and the variable renderings of how the enemy looks.

Analysis of composition and specifics

The enemies appearing in the cartoons below are the opposition political parties seen as direct political competitors (Figure 1); the media, particularly state television exemplified by ORF 2 (Figure 2); government institutions such as prosecutors (Figure 3); migrants (Figure 4) and international institutions like the European Union (Figure 5). Some of these examples have moreover accumulated different enemies. Examples include Figure 3, which makes fun of biased judges and uses catchy text to present symbolically the competing Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) as the judge's "black font"¹ and Figure 4's concern not just about the influx of migrants, but also its criticism of the solution provided by the Socialist Party of Austria (SPÖ).

¹ In Austria and Germany, the philosophies of political parties are represented by different colours. The Christian democratic parties are "black" to reflect their clerical background; the socialist parties "red", the environmental parties "green" and at one time the pro-business liberal parties "blue". However, the liberal Free Democratic Party in Germany had over the years shifted to yellow and the Alternative for Germany took over blue, following the lead of the FPÖ, which as a one-time liberal party had always used it. Previously, the extreme right-wing parties in Germany used brown as their colour.



SPITZE FEDER Oppositionsarbeit 2019

Fig. 1: NFZ No 8/2019.



SPITZE FEDER Unabhängigkeit und Objektivität à la ORF.

Fig. 2: NFZ No. 18/2019.



SPITZE FEDER Stand der Ermittlungen zum „Ibiza-Video“.

Fig. 3: NFZ No 34/2019.



SPITZE FEDER SPÖ-Wien und das Islamismusproblem.

Fig. 4: NFZ No 38/2018.



SPITZE FEDER Unbeirrt auf dem falschen Weg.

Fig. 5: NFZ No 47/2018.



SPITZE FEDER Österreich im „Nazi-Fieber“.

Fig. 6: NFZ No 6/2018.

In some cases, the enemy is more abstract than what is documented in Figure 6. Here the FPÖ is stylised as a victim of persecution and bullying. The constellation of friend versus enemy becomes a narrative of aggressor and victim. There are several clues in this caricature indicating this motive. The number 88 the mouse is photographing with a lot of interest and the allusion to the colour brown both point toward suspicions of right-wing extremism and fascism. An understanding of these well-known ciphers is further facilitated by the question of whether another Nazi has been found (*Wieder einen Nazi gefunden?*). Both the use of relatively simple ciphers and direct, non-cryptic formulations let ordinary readers easily understand the cartoon and this is essentially its intention. It is equally clear from another chosen stylisation, which is underscored by the victim of the inscription “Kill HC!” written as graffiti on the wall. In this case, the letters are the initials of former Vice Chancellor and FPÖ head Heinz-Christian Strache. The issue of intolerance both critiques political opponents, who do not necessarily show any love for the FPÖ, and others advocating the acceptance of foreigners (see also the graffiti “*Ausländer rein!* – “Foreigners, come in!”) to remind those coming to Austria from elsewhere of the ongoing suspicions and accusations against them. The final cipher in the cartoon is the extraterrestrial contemplating the words of the Austrian national anthem and it has perhaps the most hidden meaning of

all. It refers to the scandal that has erupted over supposedly anti-Semitic lyrics found in the anthem that cynically sympathise with the Holocaust. While the ruling party's official rhetoric sought at the time not to apply its previously frequently used narrative of victimisation, the political cartoon could afford to be stylised as such because it is considered an artistic genre.

The cartoons do not necessarily depict someone from the local political scene. Figure 5 caricatures German Chancellor Angela Merkel and she likewise appears in Figures 7, 8 and 9. Other examples include former Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) leader Martin Schulz (Figure 7), Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and EU Commissioner Jean-Claude Juncker (Figure 10). However, it is more than just a style of politics incompatible with the FPÖ that anoints them as “enemies”. Their relationships with international institutions, as well as other cultural or value differences, are alleged to be threat to Austrian national sovereignty.



SPITZE FEDER Berliner Sternwandler.

Fig. 7: NFZ No 1/2017.



SPITZE FEDER Nur noch Ärger mit Österreich.

Fig. 8: NFZ No 23/2018.



SPITZE FEDER „Kindergerechte“ Unterbringung in Österreich 2018.

Fig. 9: NFZ 49/2018.



SPITZE FEDER Zwei besondere Freunde Österreichs.

Fig. 10: NFZ 24/2018.

Any explicit unfolding of an “enemy” position in religious or gender related issues are rather rare among the cartoons studied here. The religious aspect and especially attacks on Islam are more typically visible in the text (see the linguistic analysis of the *Neue Freie Zeitung* by Fraštková, 2019). Although Figure 4's theme is explicitly Islam, more often the illusions are subtle and coded, which is also evident in the examples so far presented. In Figure 10, Erdogan ironically alludes to the Crusades, while Figures 7 and 9 in turn banter flippantly about Biblical themes, the former retelling the story of the Star of Bethlehem and the latter of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. In the context of gender and sexuality, the emphasis is on masculine traits in women (hairy legs in Figure 8) and the slightly less common feminisation of men. However, the gender and religious aspects of the cartoons examined here were not mainly intended to highlight

conflicts, but rather they more accompany the main issue and are an additional element. The cultural aspect appears to be much stronger (see Figure 11's exploiting of cultural cross-dressing), which may also include an understanding of gender or religion. Should an explicitly cultural aspect come to the forefront, however, the cartoon can then cease to be political. The example of Figure 12 could be discussed as a caricature of society (according to Valter, 2014). However, the response to the COVID-19 crisis is inseparable from politics (Figure 12) and the fear of going outside may also reflect the power of the state to restrict freedom of movement.



SPITZE FEDER Präsidiäle Bedenkenträger.

Fig. 11: NFZ 45/2018.



SPITZE FEDER Corona-Krise beim Osterhasen.

Fig. 12: NFZ 15/2020.

While religion and gender are not necessarily important themselves as themes, they are nonetheless natural elements in the cartoons and function to exaggerate and ridicule, thereby creating something comical. Disregarding the political content in the cartoons and returning to the content and thematic definition of caricature Koschatzky earlier mentioned, the mechanisms woven into these cartoons can also be identified.

Even in a political context, a cartoon can illustrate immorality (the corrupt behaviour shown in Figure 13) or make fun of human nature (Figure 14 – minds changing).



SPITZE FEDER Glawischnigs nächster Nachhaltigkeitsversuch.

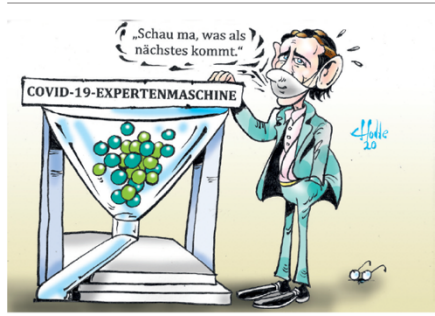
Fig. 13: NFZ No. 10/2018.



SPITZE FEDER Alt-ÖVPler mit Orientierungsverlust

Fig. 14: NFZ No. 7/2019.

References to the incompetence of political opponents, whether real or fictional, is equally common (Figures 15 and 16), yet there are also cartoons that stylise an enemy as a saviour acting to make a mockery of human follies (Figures 17 and 18).



SPITZE FEDER Der „Experten-Beirat“ des Bundeskanzlers.

Fig. 15: NFZ No 19/2020.



SPITZE FEDER Blümelsche Treffsicherheit.

Fig. 16: NFZ No 22/2020.



SPITZE FEDER Der Kaiser und sein Herold.

Fig. 17: NFZ No. 48/2019.



SPITZE FEDER Kanzler sein, ist schon längst zu wenig.

Fig. 18: NFZ No. 21/2020.

The remaining two examples are interesting from a different perspective. They underscore how populist caricature can also become an instrument for publicising the aspects and elements that are the typical features of populism (the images of the charismatic leader and Messianic character), while exploiting them to mock a political opponent. Figure 18 again documents, among other things, the persiflage of religious motives, as it accumulates several ciphers and have them simultaneously interact with each other.

Besides the political and critical aspects, along with the sense of political order the cartoons analysed here create, no-one can certainly deny the artistic qualities of the genre. The stylistic elements earlier mentioned, such as the use of ciphers, abstract art, condensation (*Verdichtung*) and persiflage, highlight how political caricature is not only able to communicate political content, but also works at the meta-level of literary and artistic communication, like in the example provided in Figure 19, which underlines the principle of intertextuality and cites a well-known story created by German writer Wilhelm Busch.



Fig. 19: NFZ No 20/2020.

Conclusion

It is possible to talk about targeted political marketing, political advertising or election campaigns in connection with the cartoons analysed in this paper. It is their association with the political party they endorse that makes them different from ordinary political satire or caricature. Yet they show all the typical features and elements of this artistic genre. Their constitutive element is most of all the imagining of diverse enemies that can be classified and differentiated in various ways. The mechanism of how populist caricatures function implies the humiliating of opponents and their features, opinions, values and political convictions. An important element is also the situational aspect that results from a spontaneous reaction to the current socio-political situation, and especially the various missteps of other politicians. In many respects, however, the situations and conflicts are either incredibly exaggerated or purposefully constructed. In communication terms, the cartoons attempt to use transparent, comprehensible codes and only a limited amount of abstraction to let readers understand clearly what they are trying to say. Humour and comedy are employed for the political party producing them to reach out more closely to its supporters and to give them a sense of belonging, power and both intellectual and moral superiority over a common enemy. The image of an enemy is based on differences of opinion and culture, which turns the cartoons into an instrument for fulfilling the party's political objective and leads to the enemy becoming discredited.

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Contact email: jan.demcisak@ucm.sk