
**CLASS, LANGUAGE, AND
AMERICAN FILM COMEDY**

CHRISTOPHER BEACH



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Christopher Beach 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Adobe Garamond 11/14 pt. *System* QuarkXPress [HT]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beach, Christopher.

Class, language, and American film comedy / Christopher Beach.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 80749 2 – ISBN 0 521 00209 (pb.)

1. Comedy films – United States – History and criticism. 2. Speech and social
status – United States. I. Title.

PN1995.9.C55 B43 2001

791.43 617 – dc21 2001025935

ISBN 0 521 80749 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 00209 5 paperback

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> vii
Introduction	1
1 A Troubled Paradise: Utopia and Transgression in Comedies of the Early 1930s	17
2 Working Ladies and Forgotten Men: Class Divisions in Romantic Comedy, 1934–1937	47
3 “The Split-Pea Soup and the Succotash”: Frank Capra’s 1930s Comedies and the Subject of Class	67
4 Is Class Necessary?: Preston Sturges and Howard Hawks in the Early 1940s	95
5 Desperately Seeking Status: Class, Gender, and Social Anxiety in Postwar Hollywood Comedy	125
6 Is There a Class in This Text?: Woody Allen and Postmodern Comedy	155
7 Yuppies and Other Strangers: Class Satire and Cultural Clash in Contemporary Film Comedy	179
<i>Notes</i>	213
<i>Works Cited</i>	231
<i>Index</i>	237

A TROUBLED PARADISE

Utopia and Transgression in Comedies of the Early 1930s

Although Hollywood films of the Depression era would never take the vanguard of social critique, they exerted a powerful influence on the way Americans perceived their place within an increasingly divided society. Social commentators of the late 1920s and early 1930s saw film as a way of exposing class disparities. The movies were a potential means of “undermin[ing] the ideological structure of the middle,” of “consolidat[ing] the working class,” and of bringing the artist and intellectual into direct contact with the masses.¹

Among the genres of Hollywood film, comedy was to prove one of the most effective in reflecting the social crises of the Depression era. Although Depression comedies may not have satisfied the desires of critics like Dwight MacDonald and Robert Gessner for a socially engaged cinema, they did provide a commentary on wealth, power, and class privilege that functioned as a popular indicator of current social perspectives. Hollywood responded to the ideologically charged early years of the Depression with two very different kinds of comedy, each of which exploited the possibilities of cinematic speech but which used spoken language for very different purposes.

The first of these comic modes was exemplified by two films made by Ernst Lubitsch in the early 1930s: *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) and *Design*

for Living (1933). In these films, a smooth, effortless, and highly stylized use of language becomes an end in itself, as the brilliantly witty dialogue of the central characters displaces the need for any direct treatment of social issues. The second direction taken by sound comedies in the early 1930s is exemplified by the Marx Brothers' Paramount comedies. In these films language becomes a medium in which difference – whether defined in terms of ethnicity or class – is actively foregrounded. To use the terms of Bakhtin, language in Lubitsch's comedies is relatively monologic – remaining within a fairly narrow sociolinguistic spectrum – whereas language in the Marx Brothers' films erupts in a continual play of dialogic or heteroglossic difference, a disruption of linguistic similarity and continuity.² This disruption, or negation, of normative social discourse takes its most extreme form in Harpo's completely silent performance, but it can also be heard in the ethnic accent and continual malapropisms of Chico, and in the ad-libbing and associational free play of Groucho.

Both the Lubitsch comedies and the Marx Brothers' films can be inserted into comedic subgenres, which have been called “sophisticated comedy” and “anarchistic comedy,” respectively. These in turn are the source of what have been to this day the two dominant modes of Hollywood sound comedy: romantic comedy and comedian comedy.³ *Trouble in Paradise* epitomizes the trend in early 1930s romantic comedies, marking a high point in the genre of sophisticated comedies that included films such as *Design for Living*, as well as *Private Lives* (1931), *Tonight Is Ours* (1933), and *Reunion in Vienna* (1933). All of these films were adapted from stage plays, and all involve characters who are either wealthy or sophisticated, or both. In “anarchistic comedy,” on the other hand, as represented by the early 1930s films of the Marx Brothers, Eddie Cantor, Joe Cook, W. C. Fields, and the comedy team of Wheeler and Woolsey, the comedy emphasizes not the narrative coherence of the plot or the stylistic coherence of the film itself, but the performances and personalities of individual comedians. Stylistically, these films do not foreground the seamless continuity of plot, dialogue, and characterization typical of a Lubitsch comedy. Instead, they seek an expressive anarchy that places the comic performer on a different level from the film's other characters and that at times allows the performer to break character and confront the audience directly. In one example of this form of linguistic spontaneity, Groucho Marx moves in the course of one scene in

A TROUBLED PARADISE

Monkey Business through the rhetorical styles of a patriotic stump speaker, a dance instructor, a gangster, a quiz show host, a little boy, and a flirtatious woman.

II

On the surface, at least, these stylistic differences would appear to have sociopolitical implications that might lead us to read them in terms of the changing class dynamics of the early 1930s. A film like *Trouble in Paradise* is most easily read as socially reactionary. As Gerald Mast suggests, it is on the most overt level a “slick, shiny, escapist comedy about rich people in Europe.”⁴ Although Lubitsch can be seen to problematize this reading by subtly satirizing the very class he appears to celebrate (“carefully sticking a pin into the pretensions of high society,” as Mast puts it [218]), the film’s overall sense of stylistic decorum, and the fact that it fails to challenge the social order in any profound sense, lead us to read it as ideologically conservative, especially within the context of Depression-era America. In the relationship between Gaston Monescu (Herbert Marshall) and Mariette Collet (Kay Francis), the sociological reality of Gaston’s less elevated class status is subjugated to the need for a romantic plot. Within the intensely verbal medium of Lubitsch’s film, their relationship is developed on a linguistic plane that leaves little room for social codes based on class habitus. Although the film hints at Gaston’s social background, his character in the film is in no sense defined by any sociohistorical reality other than that which is conveyed through his elegant and witty speech. In one speech to Mariette, Gaston refers to “the crash” and “the market,” and he characterizes himself as a member of the “nouveau poor.” The reference remains vague, however, and it is impossible to make any definite assumption about his class or social background.

If the film is a satire, as Mast suggests, it is a very gentle one. Lubitsch may enjoy poking fun at certain members of the upper class – the “genteel nincompoops” who populate the world of the film and who serve as foils for the sophisticated crooks Gaston and Lily, but there is no overriding indictment of the rich, and the filmgoer has no sense that Lubitsch would trade this rarified world of wealth, beauty, and luxury for any other. In fact, the developing romance between Gaston (the crook) and Mariette (the

millionairess) is intended to be sincere, and his betrayal of her at the end is too poignant to be read as entirely satirical. That the romance of Gaston and Mariette is meant to be both genuine and aesthetically appealing is made clear in both the film and the screenplay. After the passionate scene between them in Mariette's bedroom toward the end of the film, Gaston is described as "a man in love, completely shaken," and his decision to leave with Lily at the end of the film is extremely difficult. Gaston later tells Mariette, in what we must take as an honest avowal: "I came to rob you, but unfortunately I fell in love with you."

Mast misreads the film in injecting it with a more cynical social attitude and a more trenchant social critique than it in fact contains: "Although the social-realist milieu never intrudes into the film . . . it always hovers alongside it – even further ridiculing the wasteful emptiness of Paradise" (219). But the "paradise" of the title is not simply a "clockwork toy" to be played at will by Gaston; it is a momentary glimpse of a potential utopia in which beauty, love, wealth, and social privilege are combined. The utopia appealed as much to Lubitsch (who was also the director of a number of operettas more unequivocally celebrating a similar upper-class milieu) as it does to Gaston and Mariette, and, presumably, to the audience. That the film's paradise falls apart is not of Gaston's own choosing (never in the film does he "beat the toy" of society by "knock[ing] the workings out of it," as Mast suggests). Instead, the "trouble" is caused by the actions of others who for their own reasons want to derail the seemingly too perfect relationship. Lubitsch's film, with its brilliant screenplay by Samuel Raphaelson, is at its best when it combines in bittersweet fashion the sense of a real passion with an ironic awareness of its ultimate impossibility. This dual sense is conveyed by the language of the final dialogue between Gaston and Mariette:

GASTON: Goodbye . . .

MARIETTE: Goodbye . . .

GASTON: It could have been marvelous . . .

MARIETTE: Divine . . .

GASTON: Wonderful . . . But tomorrow morning, if you should wake out of your dreams and hear a knock, and the door opens, and there, instead of a maid with a breakfast tray, stands a policeman with a warrant – *then* you'll be glad you're alone.

A TROUBLED PARADISE

MARIETTE: But it could have been glorious.

GASTON: Lovely.

MARIETTE: Divine . . . But that terrible policeman!

GASTON: Goodbye . . .

While on the page such dialogue can appear overstylized and even stilted, it is very effective on screen, especially since its distinctive rhythm has been set up by earlier dialogues in the film. The synchronization of the two characters' speech, emphasized by the repetitions of phrasing and the alternating use of the single adjective, framed by the "goodbyes," and interrupted by the intrusion of a level of reality (the policeman) which Mariette only partly acknowledges, represents the perfect concordance of the characters, a linguistic harmony that seemingly overcomes any class boundaries. While earlier in the film Gaston used language to deceive Mariette (as in the scene where he convinced her to leave more money in her home safe with the argument that "every conservative person should have a substantial part of his fortune within arm's reach"), now he uses it out of respect for her as an equal in love.

If there is any cynicism in the film, it is directed equally at everyone, including the audience. As Pauline Kael remarks: "The cynicism . . . isn't disillusioning – the cynicism intensifies the lovers' feelings of helplessness. We're all in the same gondola."⁵ While the film's final "joke" may in a sense be played by the two thieves on the wealthy Mariette – who loses her pearl necklace, her handbag, and 100,000 francs along with Gaston – it is significant that she retains her dignity even at the end. When Gaston shows her the necklace he has taken (her "gift" to Lily), Mariette graciously offers it "with the compliments of Colet and Company," thus making clever reference both to her own wealth and magnanimity, and to Lily's scornful exit line of the previous scene – "Goodbye, Madame Colet and Company."

The language of the film, while it is used in certain scenes for clearly satirical effect (as in the dialogues between Gaston and Giron), more often functions as a link between mutually sympathetic characters: Gaston and Lily, and later Gaston and Mariette. In another scene near the end of the film, the symmetry of dialogue between Mariette and Gaston is used to suggest through *double entendre* a sexual liaison that could not have been directly expressed:

CLASS, LANGUAGE, AND AMERICAN FILM COMEDY

MARIETTE: What are you going to do with my day tomorrow,
M'sieu Laval?

GASTON: Well, we'll have breakfast in the garden.

MARIETTE: Um-hum . . .

GASTON: Then riding together.

MARIETTE: Um-hum . . .

GASTON: Then lunch in the Bois –

MARIETTE: Together.

GASTON: Then a little nap –

MARIETTE (*restraining an automatic "together"*): How do you like
my dress?

GASTON: Beautiful.

The success of this kind of dialogue depends on the audience being pulled along with it, seduced along with Mariette into the inevitable idea of “a little nap . . . together.” Such artificially stylized dialogue draws us further into the utopian vision rendered in the film, a vision reinforced by the striking Art Deco decor, the gorgeous costumes, and the elegant cinematography of Victor Milner.⁶ Furthermore, the dialogue illustrates Pierre Bourdieu's point that “[l]inguistic exchange . . . is also an economic exchange which is established within a particular symbolic relation.”⁷ It is Gaston's linguistic competence, the “expressive style” of his discourse, which seduces Mariette and which gradually establishes the terms of their economic, as well as their romantic, relationship. If, as Bourdieu suggests, “the whole social structure is present in each [linguistic] interaction” (67), then we can read the linguistic economy of this film as one in which Gaston's linguistic superiority balances Mariette's social and economic superiority, allowing them to occupy a temporarily equal footing. Yet by relying so much on the seamless flow and perfect balance of language, the film also covers up the social and ideological dimension of linguistic exchange, providing, in Richard Dyer's terms, a utopian form of entertainment rather than a form of meaningful social critique.

If the film's box-office success was any indication, contemporary audiences wanted (or needed) to be entertained in exactly that way.⁸ James Harvey calls the film “an idyll,” a utopian form that establishes a complicity between the film and its audience. If the film creates a “community of cleverness,” as Harvey suggests, by projecting a dream of

A TROUBLED PARADISE

“supreme, effortless, omnipotent authority and self-possession,” it is a dream that unconsciously assumes an identification with the kind of upper-class environment that could make such authority and self-possession possible.⁹ As the Depression deepened, the urbanity and wit of *Trouble in Paradise* came to represent a stylistic perfection that was also a dead end in the development of sound comedy. As the Depression continued, such idyllic visions of society and romance would disappear from the screen, yielding to the streetwise comedy of the screwball genre.

III

The Marx Brothers' Paramount films, appearing concurrently with Lubitsch's comedies and made by the same studio, represent in many respects their polar opposite, the only evident similarity being the brilliant quality of the comic writing.¹⁰ If Lubitsch's film deemphasizes the function of language as a marker of social status, the Marx Brothers' films offer a cinematic space for the continual contestation of “the linguistic relation of power” described by Bourdieu. Although they may not constitute the “hymn to anarchy and whole-hearted revolt” which Antonin Artaud found in them, the Marx Brothers' first five sound films certainly use plot, physical action, and language to disrupt social norms and conventions, to challenge the habits and the rules of society, and at times to challenge even its cultural and political institutions.¹¹ It is always dangerous, as Henry Jenkins suggests, to elide form and content in such a way as to “blur the boundaries between thematic anarchy and a set of aesthetic practices that can be labelled anarchist” (8), but it is equally important to recognize, as Jenkins also does, that the anarchistic comedies of the early 1930s do contain “elements of political satire,” and that several of them “use a political setting as a backdrop for their star comedian's gags and performances.”¹² Among the Marx Brothers' films, the clearest example of a film with direct historical and political relevance is the 1933 *Duck Soup*, which takes place in the mythical kingdom of Freedonia, a state that is far from utopian and that actually ends up in a brutal war with its neighbor Sylvania. As Joe Adamson has pointed out, it does not require a great deal of imagination to derive a sociopolitical context for this film:

CLASS, LANGUAGE, AND AMERICAN FILM COMEDY

Duck Soup was prepared amid an atmosphere of ruin, disruption, and veritable collapse. Not only was Hitler taking over Germany, but Roosevelt was closing the banks in America, Paramount was tottering near bankruptcy, and financiers were flitting in and out of the picture like moths. Groucho was spearheading a movement to form a Screen Actors' Guild, which was only going to benefit the majority of Hollywood actors who were not movie stars, and was only going to alienate everyone else.¹³

Although I agree with Adamson about the importance of placing the film in its social context, I am less interested in tracing the direct political or social reference of the Marx Brothers' films than in looking at the ways in which their use of language and imagetext contributes to their more general critique of social norms, and in particular of class distinctions and hierarchies. The Marx Brothers' films offer an extreme case of destabilizing the "normal" laws of social discourse; in these films, linguistic competence often bears little relationship to the social or class structures that might under normal circumstances produce it. The comic antiheroes represented by the Marx Brothers do not use and misuse language simply for the purpose of seducing others or ingratiating themselves with society. Even in his dialogues with Margaret Dumont, in which his ostensible object is seduction or ingratiation, Groucho nearly always manages to offend her. Throughout their films, Groucho and the other brothers use language in order to frustrate the normal rules of society and puncture its pretensions. Groucho's linguistic skills allow him to disarm a murderous gangster (in *Monkey Business*) and to run a college (*Horse Feathers*), a sanitarium (*A Day at the Races*), and an entire country (*Duck Soup*). At the same time, Groucho is continually frustrated by the linguistic incompetence of his brothers Harpo and Chico. Harpo frustrates Groucho by silently undermining his authority, as when he responds to Groucho's admonition in *Horse Feathers* that "you can't burn the candle at both ends" by pulling from his pocket a candle doing just that. Chico, on the other hand, uses his misunderstanding of the English language to his own advantage, frustrating Groucho with strings of bad puns. Unlike the world of Lubitsch's *Trouble in Paradise*, where Gaston's intelligence allows him to triumph over the stupidity of his upper-class dupes, the world of the Marx Brothers is one in which, to quote Allen Eyles, "stupidity defeats intelligence every time."¹⁴

We might begin by analyzing the most basic level of speech in these films: the quality of the voice and vocal mannerisms of the Marx Brothers themselves. As Amy Lawrence has suggested, “it is the voice in sound film that makes dialogue *matter*, that takes it out of its narrative function and makes it sound, that invokes a psychological, imaginary system of spectacle as opposed to the purely representational association of title and image in silent film.”¹⁵ A written transcription of dialogue conveys only a part of the meaning of filmic speech and fails to capture the tone of voice, intensity, and timbre of the spoken utterance.¹⁶ The Marx Brothers’ films are a perfect illustration of the need to *hear* filmic speech in order to understand fully the use of language. The dialogue is often humorous on the page but many times funnier as delivered in the films themselves. The contrast with the suave, sophisticated, imperturbable, socially refined speech of Hollywood actors of the early 1930s – represented by Herbert Marshall and Kay Francis in *Trouble in Paradise*, for example, or William Powell and Myrna Loy in *The Thin Man* – could not be more pointed than in the case of the Marx Brothers. Groucho’s grating voice, his constant “gagging,” and the barrage of language he inflicts on his interlocutors form one set of antitheses to Herbert Marshall’s normative Hollywood speech and decorum; Chico’s non sequiturs, fragments, and malapropisms constitute another. Whereas Gaston’s speech is always to the point, Chico’s speech is hilariously pointless. Whereas Gaston always observes the social pretense of seeming to respect his interlocutor (even while subtly making fun of him), Groucho overtly parodies and frustrates anyone who attempts to engage him in conversation.

Although both Gaston and Groucho survive by the use of their verbal intelligence to manipulate others, they go about that manipulation in completely different ways. As Gerald Weales suggests, “the Ernst Lubitsch touch is rather far removed from the Marx bludgeon.”¹⁷ Groucho, whether as Mr. Hammer, Captain Spaulding, Professor Wagstaff, or Rufus T. Firefly, is a relatively harmless and ineffectual grifter/shyster figure impersonating a nonethnic (presumably WASP) character but clearly identified with an ethnic background. In class terms, he would appear to be self-educated (whereas the Chico and Harpo characters, despite their intelligence and musical talents, are marked as uneducated and illiterate) and from lower-middle-class origins. In most of the films, however, Groucho has managed to gain some temporary position in society: he is, as

Allen Eyles observes, a social parasite who has reached that position not by talent or hard work, but by some form of trickery or misunderstanding.¹⁸ Since he cannot successfully disguise his true class or ethnic background for long by assimilating into the dominant (upper- or upper-middle-class WASP) society represented by the Margaret Dumont character, his attempts at manipulation and graft usually fail. But while he will never triumph over upper-class society in the overt way a more elegant trickster like Gaston Monescu can, his ability to deflate the pretensions of high society is far greater than Gaston's, and the resulting satire is far more radical in its undercutting of bourgeois speech and manners.

The status of language in these films is itself significant, since language as it is used in society appears to be constantly devalued, or at least revalued, by the linguistic creativity of the Brothers. Harpo is the most extreme example of the devaluation of language, since he manages to get along perfectly well without using it at all, substituting various objects and physical mannerisms for speech. He whistles, plays his harp, honks his horn, pulls endless objects out of his coat, and does his annoying leg routine in what amounts to a constant gag on the very superfluity of speech (in contrast to Groucho, in whom speech becomes superfluous by its abundance). *Written* language is almost nonexistent in the films, and when it does exist it usually ends up being destroyed by Harpo (books in *Horse Feathers*, the mail of the hotel guests in *The Cocoanuts*, the telegram in *Duck Soup*, the immigration papers in *Monkey Business*) or becoming inconsequential, as when Zeppo leaves out the "body of the letter" dictated by Groucho to his lawyers in *Animal Crackers*. This destruction or effacement of written text, which reaches its comic high point in *A Night at the Opera* in the scene where Groucho and Chico systematically tear apart their contracts for signing an opera singer, also has class implications. The illiterate Harpo and Chico and the literate but socially anarchic Groucho have no use for contracts, letters, and official papers, all of which are documents serving the interests of the dominant class and perpetuating an unequal social order. They also seem to have little use for the telephone, mocking its use as an aural transmitter of "important" social messages. In *The Cocoanuts* Harpo eats the desk telephone, and in *Duck Soup* Harpo and Chico thwart the efforts of Groucho (Freedonian president Rufus T. Firefly) to answer the phone, prompting Groucho to quip sarcastically, "You know, I'd be lost without

a telephone.” In *Horse Feathers*, a telephone is used as a nutcracker, and in *Duck Soup*, Harpo attempts to use one to light a cigar.

Furthermore, nearly every possible kind of speech act and discourse is parodied in the films: the land auction in *The Cocoanuts*, the pretentious “I-have-returned-from-darkest-Africa” speech in *Animal Crackers*, the opening convocation and biology class in *Horse Feathers*, and the trial scene, political speeches, and cabinet meeting of *Duck Soup*. Usually, these parodies are attacks on some more general form of linguistic and social pretension: of high society and the art world (*Animal Crackers*), of academia (*Horse Feathers*), of government and international politics (*Duck Soup*), of real estate investments (*The Cocoanuts*), and of the bureaucracy of passport and customs authorities (*Monkey Business*). Parodies also take the form of allusions to other films, film genres, plays, and books: O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude* in *Animal Crackers*; Dreiser’s *American Tragedy* in *Horse Feathers*; Maurice Chevalier vehicles, Westerns, and gangster films in *Monkey Business*; and the “mythical kingdom” film in *Duck Soup*.

The carnivalesque settings of the Marx Brothers’ films, both at Paramount and MGM, lend themselves to a heteroglossic play with linguistic differences that deregulate the status of the discourse being parodied, allowing the Marx Brothers to upset the presumed class system of each environment. Such settings as a resort hotel, a weekend house party, an ocean liner, and a college campus, and in later films the opera, the race-track, the sanatorium, the circus, and the department store, allow the Brothers to engage in certain forms of broader cultural parody. The climactic opera scene in *A Night at the Opera*, for example, burlesques the high cultural pretensions of the opera, a class-identified form of entertainment that seems to have inspired the particular scorn of the Marx Brothers. Here various forms taken from popular or mass culture – such as a baseball game, a sword fight, a circus (with Harpo on the flying trapeze), and a popular film (Groucho as Tarzan) – interrupt and make fun of the “serious” opera (Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*), as the appropriate scenery is replaced by backdrops of streetcars and battleships. Ultimately, however, the opera itself is not undermined as other cultural forms are in the earlier films. At the end, order is restored to the opera company as the “good” singers triumph and Groucho and Chico both get commissions. We might compare this treatment of the opera in the MGM film with the more subversive trial scene in *Duck Soup*, its Paramount counterpart,

in which Rufus T. Firefly's declaration of war causes the entire assembly, including generals, ministers, and guards, to break into song. The song ("Freedonia's Going to War") turns into something between a vaudeville theater and a revivalist meeting, as the Brothers and the rest of the cast perform versions of "Hi-De-Hi-De-Ho," the parodic "All God's Chillun Got Guns," and a folksy rendition of "Comin' Round the Mountain."¹⁹

Another means of disrupting linguistic and cultural conventions in the Marx Brothers' films is the use of what Michel Chion has called "relativized speech."²⁰ When cinematic speech is "relativized," it is taken out of the strict linear continuum of the theatrical model. Such "relativizing" can be accomplished in a number of ways, several of which occur in the Marx Brothers films: by the rarefaction of speech or dialogue, for example, in the alternation of silent and spoken sequences (Harpo's scenes vs. those of the other Brothers) or the insertion of silent sequences into a sound film (the mirror scene in *Duck Soup*); by the overproliferation or superimposition of speech, as when characters interrupt each other or speak over each others' lines, or in Groucho's rapid-fire speech; by the submersion of speech beneath other sounds (Margaret Dumont's speech to Groucho at the beginning of *The Big Store* is completely drowned out by Harpo's furious typewriting); by having a character speak directly into the camera as an aside for the theater audience (Groucho in most of the films); or by the use of non sequiturs and irrelevant digressions (i.e., the famous "Why a duck?" scene in *The Cocoanuts*, the O'Neillesque soliloquies by Groucho in *Animal Crackers*, the impromptu geography lesson in *Monkey Business*, and the biology lecture in *Horse Feathers*). In each of these cases, the disruption of cinematic convention becomes the formal equivalent for the flouting of social caste and tradition.

Like Gaston in *Trouble in Paradise*, Groucho and Chico are defined by their use of language, but whereas Gaston's transgression is against the society he robs and the woman he loves and leaves, in the case of the Marx Brothers the transgression is also against language itself, against the class-based codes of language use. This transgression is, in the words of Mark Winokur, "the most visibly resentful action allowed the anti-heroes," a form of "contained anarchy, more effective than the gangster's because motivated by the desire to replace power structures not with other structures but with critiques of power."²¹ Although this form of barely contained anarchy can be found in the work of various comics of the early

A TROUBLED PARADISE

sound era—from Laurel and Hardy to W. C. Fields to Eddie Cantor—it is in the Marx Brothers' films that it reaches its most dizzying proportions.

The comic imagetext also plays a particularly important role in the Marx Brothers' films, figuring their indebtedness to traditions of both vaudeville (with its emphasis on verbal play and song) and silent film. Each of the Brothers is associated with a highly iconographic physical appearance that finds its verbal accompaniment in a particularized style of speech (or, in the case of Harpo, the absence of speech). Thus Harpo's lack of speech is paralleled on a visual or imagistic level by his curly blond wig, battered top hat, oversized raincoat, and bug-eyed, puff-cheeked stare. The imagetext created by Harpo denotes the "transcendent fool," suggesting an impoverishment that is socioeconomic as well as mental. Chico's dunce-cap hat, ill-fitting jacket, and generally vacuous expression, along with his ethnic accent and truncated speech, signal the wise fool immigrant, a step above Harpo's position on the social scale, and an intermediary link between Harpo and Groucho in most of the films.²² Groucho's greasepaint eyebrows and mustache, cigar and glasses, oversized tuxedo, bent-over lope, and lecherous leer, are all commensurate with the verbal overabundance, the unquenchable appetite (for money, sex, power, or whatever he can hope to get), and the impulsive, antisocial, obnoxious behavior that mark him as an obvious *arriviste*.

Groucho's imagetext is more difficult to place on the social scale than those of Chico and Harpo, but he often appears as a parodic version of the self-made man, whose dubious origins have not quite caught up with him. This status takes its most extreme form in the character of Rufus T. Firefly, who at the start of *Duck Soup* has just been named president of the tiny republic of Freedonia. It is clear that his appointment has nothing to do with his own qualifications but is entirely due to the influence of the wealthy Mrs. Teasdale, who for some unknown reason has developed a tremendous admiration for him. As his name suggests, Firefly has appeared from nowhere and will disappear again just as quickly. Firefly's ephemeral nature is literalized in the brilliant gag of the opening scene. While the assembled guests await Firefly's arrival as the country's new leader, Mrs. Teasdale leads them in repeated choruses of the national anthem, "Hail, hail Freedonia, Land of the Brave and Free!" as we see Firefly waking up and getting out of bed, sliding down a fireman's pole, and, arriving from the rear of the hall rather than through the door

everyone is expectantly watching, taking his place among the guards and holding up his cigar in place of a sword.

Other examples of such parodic roles are the college president Quincy Adams Wagstaff in *Horse Feathers*, with a name that manages to be both high WASP and somewhat ridiculous at the same time, and Captain Jeffrey T. Spaulding, the African Explorer, a parody of the big-game hunter from *Animal Crackers* who is so self-important that the minute he arrives (to the chorus of "At last, the Captain has arrived") he sings "Hello, I Must Be Going."²³ The parody of respectability and social importance in all these films also functions as a parody of the typical Hollywood lead: Groucho is always paired romantically with a taller woman, either Margaret Dumont or Thelma Todd.

Although Winokur focuses more on the Marx Brothers' ethnicity than on their class identification, he indicates that the Marx Brothers' accents "define them regionally and economically": the Brothers are "ethnic and poor, no matter their financial position within the story" (138–39).²⁴ The persistence of this poverty and ethnicity in the Marx Brothers' films acts as a subversion of the American ideal of ethnic assimilation and the classless society. Groucho is also often paired with another male character who is higher on the social scale but who is an even greater, if better disguised, phony than Groucho himself. In *The Cocoanuts* there is Harvey Yates, a fortune hunter and jewel thief who poses as a real estate investor; in *Animal Crackers*, there is Roscoe Chandler, whose current position as a wealthy patron of the arts disguises a former identity as a fish peddler from Czechoslovakia, Abe Kabibble ("Ab-ie the Fish Man"); and in *Duck Soup*, there is Ambassador Trentino from the neighboring republic of Sylvania, a shady character who, despite his aristocratic pretensions, is just as interested in marrying Mrs. Teasdale for her money as Groucho is.²⁵ The Marx Brothers' films never permit the kind of refined gentility Gaston and Mariette represent in *Trouble in Paradise*.²⁶ In all their films, the Marx Brothers attempt to reverse the process of class distinction by undermining the class privilege of those above them in the social scale. As Groucho most succinctly phrases it in *Monkey Business*, "the stockholder of yesteryear is the stowaway of today." These films, released during the early years of the Depression, recognize more fully than any others made in Hollywood during those years the grotesque

A TROUBLED PARADISE

nature of social and class pretensions – and the social inequalities they are based on – during a period marked by intense economic hardship and social dislocation for many Americans.

As performers and creative collaborators in their films, the Marx Brothers were acutely aware of such class discrepancies. The Marx Brothers' parents on both sides were Jewish immigrants. Their father Sam Marx (born Simon Marris) had arrived in New York from the contested region of Alsace and went by the nickname "Frenchie"; their mother Minnie had immigrated from Germany. Sam Marx was an unsuccessful tailor whose income, according to Groucho, hovered "between eighteen dollars a week and nothing."²⁷ Sam's limited command of the English language may have been at least a partial influence on the representation of immigrants in the Marx Brothers' films as either silent (Harpo) or linguistically backward (Chico).

Throughout most of their childhoods, the Brothers lived in a three-bedroom apartment in Yorkville, where the four older boys shared one room, and for a time even one double bed. One coal stove in the parlor provided heat for the apartment, and a single bathroom for eight people meant long lines and few baths. The deep mistrust and resentment of authority and socioeconomic privilege featured in the Marx Brothers' films certainly had roots in their early childhood, a time when they were taught to fear the visits of the rent collector. As Groucho recalled, "We were so poor that when somebody knocked on the door we all hid."²⁸

Also typical of their working-class immigrant experience was the Marxes' lack of formal education. Chico was the only brother to finish high school; Groucho left school before his thirteenth birthday; and Harpo only completed the second grade. While Groucho, and to a lesser extent Harpo, were avid readers who became authors in their own right, the Marx Brothers treat higher education with relative contempt, as is most clear in the college satire *Horse Feathers*. This satiric attitude toward the institutional aspects of higher learning has clear class origins, as is evident both in the spoof on the WASPy Huxley College in *Horse Feathers* and in the claim by Dr. Hugo Z. Hackenbush (Groucho) in *A Day at the Races* to have attended the exclusive Vassar College. When informed that Vassar is a women's college, he says that he only discovered that fact in his junior year. The satire on academia, and on "experts" of all kinds, is a motif throughout the Marx

Brothers' films. In *Animal Crackers*, Harpo is incongruously identified as "The Professor." In *Horse Feathers*, Groucho plays Professor Wagstaff, the new president of the college, who goes on a mission to recruit football players for the college team in a local speakeasy. He also recommends doing away with the academic curriculum altogether in order to promote the chances of the football team. Wagstaff's anatomy lecture, which he delivers after having the real biology professor removed from the classroom, breaks down into a spitball fight between Chico, Harpo, and himself. In another scene, all the books in Wagstaff's office are destroyed by Harpo, who throws them on the fire. In the scene intended for the finale of the original film, now extant only in stills, the Brothers contribute to the literal destruction of the college itself. Harpo accidentally sets fire to the college, and the Marxes sit playing cards, apparently unaware of the conflagration as the college burns down around them.

Of the Marx parents, Minnie was the more socially and economically ambitious. She put her sons on the vaudeville stage starting with Julius (Groucho) in 1905, and in 1910 she moved the entire family to Chicago in order to improve the Brothers' chances for a career in small-time vaudeville. Vaudeville may have been the lower-class alternative to the "legitimate" theater, but it still offered significant opportunities for financial reward, especially for its top-billed performers. Even as early as 1906, the fifteen-year-old Groucho (billed as "Master Julius Marx") was earning more on the International Circuit than his father was as a tailor. Over the next seventeen years, Groucho was joined by Gummo, Harpo, Chico, and finally Zeppo; the Brothers worked their way slowly up the ranks of vaudeville until in 1923 they were able to perform their first "legitimate" musical comedy *I'll Say She Is!* on the Broadway stage. The move from vaudeville to Broadway represented not so much an opportunity to rise in social status as a change necessitated by their current economic situation and by the gradual decline of vaudeville as a viable career option. By this time, in the words of Glenn Mitchell, the Marxes were "blacklisted, broke, and very close to abandoning show-business altogether."²⁹ The show went on a lengthy national tour before finally opening in a minor Broadway theater, the Casino, where it had a highly successful run of 304 performances, thus propelling the Brothers to a new career in legitimate theater and eventually in the movies.

A TROUBLED PARADISE

The poverty experienced by the Marxes in their early years is a clear motif throughout their autobiographical writings. In one anecdote told by Groucho to his son Arthur and later recounted in *Life with Groucho*, Groucho nearly lost an arm in a disagreement over who was to get the last sweet roll at dinner.³⁰ Whether the story is real or apocryphal, it clearly reflects the kind of socially inflected humor characteristic of the Marx Brothers' filmic interactions. It is a brand of humor involving situations that could equally well have been treated as tragic rather than comic. Chico's legendary addiction to gambling, and Groucho's penchant for stock market investing and his famously tightfisted nature, can also be traced to an obsession with money brought on by a childhood marked by poverty and material deprivation.

From their early vaudeville acts to their later screen personas, the Marx Brothers' performances were strongly marked by their class and ethnic status. This fact in itself accounts for much of the difference between the Marx Brothers' early films and other comedies of the period. As Charles Musser points out, "in the period through 1930 and beyond, American film comedians seldom played overtly with both [the immigrant experience and the working-class experience] at the same time."³¹ It is in fact the juxtaposition of the permanently lower-class identification represented by the Marxes as performers with the often very disparate class positions occupied by their characters within the films (presidents and cabinet members, professors, wealthy African explorers, hotel owner-managers) that provides much of the humor and contributes to the deflation of class pretension. Furthermore, the occupations the Marx Brothers (and their screenwriters and directors) chose to satirize are often strongly identified with a very different ethnic type. As of 1930, there were in all probability no Jewish "African explorers," very few Jewish college presidents (especially not on campuses with names like Huxley College), and no Jewish presidents of European republics. The idea of presenting a character identified with lower-class Jewish New York as leader of a European "magical kingdom" at a time of growing nationalistic and antisemitic sentiment was an even more radical transposition of class and ethnic roles than in Groucho's other films.³² Perhaps, given the disappointing reception of *Duck Soup* in the fall of 1933, it was *too* radical a gesture for contemporary audiences. It is significant that Groucho never

portrayed a character with a similarly exalted social status in the MGM comedies, where he is given more conventionally comic roles.³³ The social marginalization and downward mobility of Groucho and the other Brothers in the MGM films of the late 1930s can be read as indicative of a greater social conservatism of Hollywood and perhaps of the nation as a whole. It represents a retreat from the more progressive forms of social and cultural critique and the more probing analysis of class and ethnicity found in at least some comedies of the early part of the decade.

IV

Before turning to more detailed analysis of an exemplary film from the Paramount period—the 1930 *Animal Crackers*—I will provide a brief anatomy of the forms of class-based humor in the Paramount films, drawing primarily on examples from *Duck Soup*.

First, and perhaps most common, are actions that flaunt the social code, usually calling attention to the pretentiousness and rigidity of upper-class social convention. At the beginning of *Duck Soup*, for example, Groucho as newly appointed president Rufus T. Firefly is greeted rather pompously by Margaret Dumont as Mrs. Teasdale: “As chairwoman of the reception committee, I extend the good wishes of every man, woman, and child of Freedonia.” Firefly responds by pulling out a deck of cards and offering her one: “Never mind that stuff,” he tells her, “take a card.” When she inquires what she might do with a card, Firefly replies: “You can keep it, I’ve got fifty-one left.” Here, Groucho’s action is marked as socially inappropriate on two levels: it is irrelevant and silly, thus puncturing the high seriousness of the social occasion; and it is also a class-based reference to a cultural practice (card tricks) that would presumably fall beneath the dignity of an upper-class matron like Mrs. Teasdale. This class-based reading is confirmed by the string of insulting remarks that follow. Firefly compares Teasdale to a saloon or dance hall (“How late do you stay open?”) and to a decaying building (“I hear they’re going to tear you down and put up an office building where you’re standing”). Of course, the humor of such scenes depends on the obtuseness or self-seriousness of the

insulted party. In this case, Dumont as Mrs. Teasdale never misses a beat, ignoring Firefly's insults and telling him pompously that "the future of Freedonia rests on you." The implication of this exchange is clear: the social conventions guiding the behavior of a Mrs. Teasdale – or that of any of the other characters Dumont plays – are informed by such deeply embedded class dispositions as to be undisturbed by anything Groucho or the other Brothers can do to shake them. The humor comes in the discrepancy between Groucho/Firefly's exalted social status as a character within the film and his inability as a persona (Groucho as Groucho playing Firefly) to cause even a minor disturbance in the social order through his words and actions.

Other actions in *Duck Soup* convey the same disregard for social propriety. When he arrives at a party at the house of Mrs. Teasdale – greeted by another round of "Hail Freedonia!" by the assembled guests – Firefly takes a doughnut off one guest's plate and dips it in the coffee of another as he walks by, all with perfect nonchalance. (In this case, one wonders whether a high-society woman like Mrs. Teasdale would really be serving doughnuts at her garden party, but the success of the gag outweighs the requirement of social realism). The dipping of doughnuts, as we also know from the roughly contemporary *It Happened One Night*, is an act coded with important class implications.

As a sign of the carnivalesque reversal of social propriety, food and eating (or drinking) are involved in many of these scenes. At the beginning of the court-martial trial for the spy Chicolini, Firefly takes out his lunch and pours himself a glass of milk. He then turns to his assistant Bob Roland (Zeppo) and asks him why the original indictment papers were not placed in his portfolio. When Bob replies that he didn't think they were important, Firefly responds: "You didn't think they were important? You realize I had my dessert wrapped in those papers?" He then proceeds to hand the empty milk bottle to one of his generals: "Here, take this bottle back and get two cents for it." Here, the joke centers not only on food, but on a decidedly working-class concern for thrift within a totally inappropriate context.

The second type of jokes are those that mock the linguistic and social pretensions of the more educated or socially elevated classes. One exchange between Firefly and Mrs. Teasdale in *Duck Soup* illustrates the phenomenon:

CLASS, LANGUAGE, AND AMERICAN FILM COMEDY

MRS. TEASDALE: Your Excellency!

FIREFLY: What's on your mind, babe?

MRS. TEASDALE: On behalf of the women of Freedonia, I have taken it upon myself to make one final effort to prevent war.

FIREFLY: No kidding!

MRS. TEASDALE: I've talked to Ambassador Trentino and he says Sylvania doesn't want war either.

FIREFLY: Eether.

MRS. TEASDALE: Doesn't want war eether.

FIREFLY: Either.

(Mrs. Teasdale sighs.)

FIREFLY: Skip it.

Groucho continually undermines the speech acts of his interlocutor, whether by using inappropriately familiar or colloquial language ("Babe," "No kidding," "Skip it") or by interrupting the flow of overly pompous speech by correcting her pronunciation. The more inflated another character's speech becomes, the more opportunities Groucho has to ironize it. Throughout the film, the repeated use of the title "Your Excellency" to address Firefly, along with the general formality with which he is addressed, is mocked by Groucho's very presence and mannerisms. Such titles take on the absurdity of a formal language that has lost touch with the social reality of the situation. Similarly, in the scene in which Trentino tries to obtain information about Firefly from Chico and Harpo (the spies Chicolini and Pinky), he continues to address them as "gentlemen," ignoring the fact that they are acting less like gentlemen than like hyperactive five-year-olds.

The third type of class-based humor is one involving ironic allusions to elevated social origins. In *Duck Soup*, for example, Firefly remains relatively unperturbed when Trentino calls him a "swine" and a "worm," but appears to take deep offense when called an "upstart." Firefly slaps Trentino's face with his glove and hands him his card, which Trentino promptly tears up, declaring that "this regrettable occurrence may plunge our countries into war." After Trentino leaves (having been told by Firefly to "scram"), Firefly turns to Mrs. Teasdale:

FIREFLY: The man doesn't live who can call a Firefly an upstart.
Why, the Mayflower was full of Fireflies, and a few horseflies,