Leo Bassi springs onto the stage, picks up a mallet and smashes it into a row of watermelons splattering the audience in the front rows. Bassi is fifty-ish, bald, tightly besuited over his paunch and wears thick framed glasses. His show is physical in the extreme, punctuated with jerky movements, gymnastics, face pulling elasticity. He is highly scatological, fascinatedly celebratory of faeces and bodily fluids, which he happily consumes in the course of his performance. This reassertion of physicality is further reinforced by a constant dialectical relationship with his public, at times confrontational, on other occasions complicitous. Invited onto Canal Plus’ flagship TV program Lo más plus, whose smart alec interviewers specialize in smirking condescension to undermine their guests, Bassi took red paint to the spruce, pristine whiteness of the studio. Born in New York, resident of Mallorca and Madrid and an Italian national, Bassi is geographically rootless and apparently ageless. A rather feeble attempt to explain this away has been to attribute it to parentage. Bassi comes from a family of comics and his father worked with Groucho Marx and Laurel and Hardy. Whereas all this is indeed of interest, I hope to demonstrate that there is rather more to people like Leo Bassi than that.

In comedy there is a constant interweaving between the outrageous and the acceptable, between autonomy and appropriation, between foolishness and danger, between civil society and the state. Bakhtin, on language, identifies ‘centripetal forces’ that, in the words of Michael Holquist, ‘strive to make things cohere’ (Bakhtin, 1996: xviii) and the disruptive ‘centrifugal forces’ of real utterance. Among these centrifugal forces, Bakhtin singles out rogues, clowns and fools as important in the creation of disturbance. In Bakhtin, what is originally a linguistic formulation is extended into an examination of social relationships within the matrix of power.
The verb ‘cohere’, as used here by Holquist is rich in implication. Homi K. Bhabha uses it to describe the way in which colonial mimicry functions (1994: 86) and Gramsci employs it to imbue political projects with ideological ‘good sense’ (1971: 327). In all three instances what is clear is that the relationship between subaltern and dominant elements in society is not simply one of opposition but of compliance, alliance and overlap. José Ortega y Gasset, with a rather different idea in mind to the three previously mentioned thinkers, nonetheless conceives of the nation-state in similarly dynamic terms when he writes the following:

[T]he unifying, central energy of totalization – call it what you will – needs, so as not to been weakened, the opposite force, that of dispersion, of the centrifugal impulse that survives in collectives. Without this stimulant, cohesion atrophies, national unity dissolves, the parts come unstuck, they float away and have to live in isolation as independent entities. (1957: 29)

As we shall see, it is Ortega y Gasset who provides the theoretical framework for those who most fervently defend the Spanish native tradition and it is noteworthy that in such a framework the containing and freezing of oppositions, such as that described above, is an important factor. Hybridization is not always progressive; it often belies an impulse to subsume and absorb difference within a totality such as the nation itself.

As mentioned in the introduction, Gramsci describes state legitimacy as being dependent upon dominant groups securing the consent of subaltern groups. While this was true of Francoism, the post-Franco consensus has been established on the basis of quite literal negotiations. Its fragility was – and remains – such that it has had to reaffirm itself in written and highly ritualized form. The democratic process associated with the 1978 Constitution, the Moncloa Pacts\(^3\) and even entry into the European Union and NATO has been combined with the exaltation – to the point of mythology – of personages like Adolfo Suárez, Santiago Carrillo and Juan Carlos de Borbón.\(^4\) This has brought with it cultural repercussions.

Whereas the degree of coercion employed by the regime is undeniable, many of the manichean concerns of early Francoism floundered in the face of having to incorporate the popular masses, including those who had participated on the losing side during the Civil War, into the national project. Even before the war had ended Franco recognized the necessity of consolidating a cross-class consensus in an interview with Falangist