

Laughing at Power is Critiquing Power

Prompt:

According to Foucault, “There is a battle ‘for truth’, or at least ‘around truth,’”(1978:132). Choose two examples (from two different countries) that illustrate how parody challenges traditional regimes of truth. Drawing on course authors (i.e. Boyer, Baym and Jones, Doyle, Anikó, Day and Thompson, etc.), describe the strategies that each have used in order to mock the discourses and practices of those institutions usually awarded the responsibility to produce and transmit “truth.” How might parody allow us to see things we might not have otherwise?

Political Philosophy since the Enlightenment has often revolved around the democratization of truth in the public sphere. The simple idea is that if we all come together and discuss the common problems that we all share from a position of equality, whether this is done by secret ballot, public caucus, or the marketplace of ideas, we will eventually find a set of actions that are true, moral, and respect everyone as a member of society. This view has roots in thinkers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and Habermas. However, some have come forward to say that this democratic fundamentalism is not so clearly a good source of truth, notably French philosopher Michel Foucault. The concept of a public sphere in Habermas’ style assumes that this truth that we are after can be achieved independently from power structures. Foucault points out that at some level, every proposition or truth claim is influenced by power. The public sphere itself is a manifestation of some form of power. Foucault’s framework can at times seem hopeless. If every aspect of society is intrinsically a manifestation of power, how can we expect to ever escape to better things? In this essay, I will argue that because of the nature of humor as a form of discourse, it can be used to overcome the fact that social constructs are embedded in power, Humor grants us the ability to think outside the box, laugh at it, and then critique it.

Foucault’s project was to analyze power itself, rather than other public sphere theorists who in some sense wanted to ignore it. Habermas’s model begins with taking off our societal clothing, the positions from the market or the state that give us power over one another, and then coming together to discuss the truth in its purest form. Foucault claims that Habermas was sidestepping the fact that power isn’t something that happens in a society, it is what builds it. This is why Foucault focuses so much time on the study of psychiatry and the place that the concept of madness or insanity takes root in civilizations. What is defined as insane is already defined by the power structures that make up society. If any discussion begins saying that only the sane are invited, then they are already letting power judge the discussion. Foucault humbly makes the point that we can’t authentically have discussions without recognizing that power defines and creates the categories and lines by which we live. Power creates its own form of knowledge.

“These can all be summed up in two words: power and knowledge... For me, it was like saying this: if, concerning a science like theoretical physics or organic chemistry, one poses the problem of its relations with the political and economic structures of society, isn't one posing an excessively complicated question? Doesn't this set the threshold of possible explanations impossibly high? But on the other hand, if one takes a form of knowledge like psychiatry, won't the question be much easier to resolve...” (Foucault and Gordon 109)

Here Foucault argues that power uses psychiatry as its base for social control and categorization rather than physics because it is simpler. Certain kinds of knowledge will take the forefront if they best serve power. There is no knowledge created without power being involved and to deny that is more dangerous than to recognize it and cope with it. So how precisely does one achieve the goals that the enlightenment public sphere claimed to be able to fulfill, while recognizing the omnipresence of power? Power permeates all discussions when you let it define the terms of debate and make “norms” the only legitimate authority on what should or shouldn't be invited to discussions. An anarchist blowing up government buildings is one way of subverting these categories, but there are more peaceful ways of doing the same thing. Humor is a way of talking and commenting on issues without accepting the categories created by power. The following are examples of humor being used in this way.

South Park has been a staple of crass animated comedy since its inception in 1996. It was not constructed by the machination of network executives like a proverbial Frankenstein's monster. Rather, it was the hobby of two film students and best friends. Their animated short, the Spirit of Christmas spread like wildfire on VHS tapes and led to the program being aired on Comedy Central. The show features the adventures of elementary school age boys in a small Colorado town. Most episodes revolve around them dealing with some sort of inanity that they receive from the adult world. In one episode, the boys are made to choose between a Giant Douche and a Turd Sandwich for their school mascot. Both options are clearly ridiculous, but this is what society has determined is best for them. South Park imports this concept from the real world, and is in turn making fun of the binary choice between Democrats and Republicans that many Americans intuitively know is absurd, but are forced to follow regardless. As Thompson notes in *South Park Good Demo, Bad Taste*, “What South Park may most convincingly teach is that politics is too often reduced by the news media to the simplistic binaries that have alienated much of the public - Republican versus Democrat, liberal versus conservative, pro-life versus pro-choice, and so on.” (Thompson 215) This is not to say either that the kids in the show are a moral superior, but only to say that from their indoctrinated and innocent perspective, they have access to a more raw knowledge, one that recognizes absurdities when it sees them as it has not been so co-opted by power as the adults. Cartman is extremely bigoted, and his thoughts are similarly raw. What really matters is that the fact that since someone **can** recognize the absurdity of power-created knowledge then someone **can** speak outside of power.

In even more dire circumstances than contemporary American politics, comedy has been used to subvert power in Egypt. Bassem Youssef was a successful heart surgeon who had a passion for parody news shows such as Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*. He started making his own content on Youtube, but then switched full time to producing his show, *The Show*, on television. He was most popular after the

2011 Egyptian Revolution that ousted President Hosni Mubarak. The vacuum of power was filled by the Muslim Brotherhood and their representative Mohamed Morsi as president. Morsi was not the ideal replacement, and the people continued to be dissatisfied with their leadership as nothing had truly changed. Youssef caught a wave of distrust of Egyptian state-run media. He rode this wave by criticizing Morsi non-explicitly. Humor served a better way to validate and motivate the feelings of the people while avoiding the power of the state. For example, he was very close to committing a crime when he mocked Morsi's hat by wearing an absurdly large version of it. Wearing a hat is in-itself nothing, but still serves as a jab at Morsi. However, when things finally culminated to a second overturn of power, Youssef's attraction may have waned. General El-Sisi took power from Morsi in the name of the Egyptian people and Bassem still had criticisms to make.

"Youssef's star had perhaps turned. Or the state had grown far less tolerant of his pranks. When he appeared before the magistrate in March 2013, the mood had been festive. Supporters carried banners reading, "We are all Bassem Youssef," and one man in the crowd wore a replica of an oversized hat that had been a prop to poke fun of Morsi. Now, after his mockery of Sisi-adoration, the crowds gathered outside his studio, real or manufactured, burned his picture or beat it with sandals, and denounced him as a traitor" (Gordon and Arafa 39)

It was now apparent that Youssef's commentary had not started a movement, but rather exacerbated an inevitable one. The people were never tied to Youssef they were just tied to revolution.

Humor, because it is intuitive, raw, and non-manufactured, is an instrumental way to challenge power without being unconsciously caught in its grasp. However, from these two examples we can see its limits. The kids in South Park who critique power, don't simultaneously tell it's viewers what to do about it. Cartman may be an important voice as non-politically correct, but that doesn't mean his advice is the best advice. Similarly, when comedy does appear to motivate political change, it is unclear whether or not that change was caused by or is merely catalyzed by the comedian. Foucault's power created knowledge may not be as omnipresent as he postulates it. A public sphere where power is left behind may in fact be possible. We just need to allow people to speak in a way that makes us laugh before we demand to understand.

Works Cited:

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