



THE STRANGE DEATH OF COMEDY

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Three white men walk into a bar. You're a racist!

Is that a joke?

In today's hyper-sensitive world, it's hard to know what's funny anymore. And as someone who makes his living as a comedian, that's a big problem.

Ask Jerry Seinfeld. He's announced he won't play college campuses. He doesn't want to deal with all the political correctness. And he's not exactly edgy.

Comedy is important. Why? Because it's a pressure valve that allows us to discuss uncomfortable truths in a friendly way—laughs are better than punches.

But identity politics is killing the gag. How many times have you heard someone say something like this:

“You're not black, so you don't know what it's like to be me.”

“You're a man, so you can't have an opinion about any issues affecting women.”

“As a left-handed, pansexual leprechaun, only I really know about elevator safety.”

Comedy only works when we agree on certain realities.

Take this joke. “Why do you always go fishing with at least two Baptists? Because if you only take one, he'll drink all your beer.”

The reason this gets a laugh is because most of us recognize that many religious people are a little more religious around other religious people. That hypocrisy is funny because everybody can relate to it on some level. We're all a little hypocritical now and then. The problem is that today, fewer and fewer people seem to agree on the basics. You know—shared assumptions.

I recently did a joke on stage: “People keep comparing Donald Trump to Adolf Hitler. He's nothing like Hitler... Hitler would've never let CNN talk like that. Anderson Cooper wouldn't have made it through the Night of Long Knives.”

There are people that don't understand that joke. And the reason is, that joke requires us all to agree—and, stick with me here—that Hitler was a bad, bad man, and that the Night of Long

Knives was a bad, bad thing, and that President Trump—whether you like him or not—isn't anything like that bad, bad man who did that bad, bad thing. And I wouldn't want him to be!

But, since we now live in a world where some stupid people like Hitler, and some other stupid people think Trump is Hitler—well, we just can't agree that this obviously absurd joke is funny. We can't even agree that it's obviously absurd.

How about this: “Why did the chicken cross the road? Why is the rooster being paid more for crossing the same road?” Is that absurd enough for you?

During the run-up to the release of the movie *Black Panther*, all of the marketing push was about how—finally!—there was a black movie made by black people with black people for black people. I found this to be fairly hilarious, so I simply took any statement about the film and responded as a white person that actually had that insane way of viewing the world:

“I just saw the trailer for *Black Panther*. Ugh. No white people. Looks terrible. Hard pass! Who am I supposed to relate to? No one's white.”

Not one, but two prominent black actors—Don Cheadle and Jeffrey Wright—started tweeting me about how it's time black people had a movie and how I should be more sensitive to their situation. Keep in mind, both of these black actors are already rich and famous.

I figured this was such an obviously satirical take on identity politics that no one could miss the joke. Nope! I was releasing a little social stress through satire. That's what comedians are supposed to do.

Releasing social stress used to be the special task of late night comedy—the place that everyone could meet at the end of a long day. But that's dead, too. Nobody takes themselves more seriously than these former comedians. Seems like Jimmy Kimmel cries more often than he tells jokes these days, and Stephen Colbert is just Rachel Maddow with punchlines. As if we weren't already divided enough, they're only telling jokes for half the country now.

There's no shortage of things to laugh about. We just need to find them. Together. And if we don't, we'll explode.

And that's not a joke.

I'm Owen Benjamin for Prager University.