

Justice versus Just Us: Insider/Outsider American Political Satire

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Laughter may be the best medicine, but is it the best engine for justice? Does the fact that humor is seen by many to be, by its nature, silly or frivolous render it a poor choice for trying to advance progressive political positions? History would seem to argue that humor has, in fact, long been seen as an excellent way to push progressive narratives against the hegemony. From the comedies of Aristophanes and the political graffiti of Pompeii we know that people have been making fun of governmental and civic leaders since, well, forever. Satire aimed at pushing the audience toward a more just world is as old as satire itself. Political humor has been and remains a major way that many people engage with American political life. As many people cite *The Daily Show* as their primary news source as cite *USA Today*,ⁱ and among younger people upward of a quarter say that shows like *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* are their primary news source.ⁱⁱ Despite winning multiple Peabody Awards, *The Daily Show* never claimed to be journalism and Jon Stewart (and Trevor Noah after him) always made a point of reminding viewers that they were not news anchors, which implies that they feel their interest is not in being impartial, but in exposing the ridiculous wherever they find it.

If comedy news programs are not bound by journalistic integrity, comedians are even less required or expected to present any sort of “fair and balanced” approach to politics, current events, or news stories. Comedians exist to push boundaries and speak uncomfortable truths. Sometimes those truths land, sometimes they don’t, but the risk of failing at being funny has not stopped some politically minded comedians, including some very high-profile ones, from continuing to express their critiques of American culture and politics through their comedy. Jewish comedians in the first half of the

twentieth century occupied a sort of liminal space in which they could make critiques of perceived American injustices based on being not quite part of the hegemony. As Jews have become less and less minoritized in the United States their political comedy has become that of insiders. They are part of the American social fabric and critique the government and American policies from within the system. One could argue that Jewish comedians shifted from “this doesn’t apply to me so I can get away with saying it” to “this applies to me, so I am allowed to say it.” This sense of “I can say that about my folks, but you can’t” is seemingly instinctive, and Freud devoted significant portions of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* to it. The exact same joke can be fine, or offensive, based entirely on who is telling it and who is hearing it. If it’s “just us” in the room there are often different limitations on satire and critique.

This insider/outsider dichotomy is very apparent in the way that two contemporary comedians approached comedy and injustice in Trump-era America. From 2017–2019 Sarah Silverman produced and starred in *I Love You, America with Sarah Silverman*. Silverman is a notably left-wing figure who supported Bernie Sanders in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections and the show was premised on her desire to go meet Americans who politically disagreed with her. In the first episode, for example, she visits with a Republican family in Louisiana. On subsequent episodes she visited other conservative states, met with a doomsday prepper, talked to an anti-choice group, refereed a game of HORSE with leaders of different religious groups, and even went on a blind date with a self-described conservative.

The show, unsurprisingly, retained Silverman’s left-wing sensibilities; while she traveled the country to encounter and speak with Americans who were unlike her, nearly all of her in-studio guests were liberal political figures. One could certainly argue there was a voyeuristic quality to the show that treated both conservative people and conservative areas of the country as exotic. The show could function almost like a zoo in which politically liberal Americans get to observe their conservative counterparts from the safety of their living room, but Silverman approached the project with a sense of honest—if sometimes naïve appearing—interest in engaging with people. The very title of the show expresses her sincere