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MOVIES

Adjusting to a World That Won't Laugh With You

JUNE 5, 2015

Cross Cuts

By **A. O. SCOTT**

It is often said that we are living in a golden age of comedy, when new varieties of funny sprout from every screen and nightclub stage. We are lucky to be around in the era of Hannibal Buress and Amy Schumer, of “Jane the Virgin” and “black-ish,” of “Broad City” and “Louie,” of Amy Poehler and Tig Notaro and a “Saturday Night Live” cast that may have finally broken that show’s 40-year cycle of tokenism and dude-centrism. Every week, on cable and the networks, YouTube and Twitter, boundaries are breached, categories scrambled and stereotypes shattered as hot-button topics are transformed into grist for fresh riffs, gags and flights of goofiness.

But we’re also in the midst of a humor crisis. The world is full of jokes and also of people who can’t take them. It can seem, if you dip into social media or peruse the weekly harvest of Internet think pieces, that comedy swings on a fast-moving pendulum between amusement and outrage. We love jokes that find the far edge of the permissible, but we also love to turn against the joker who violates our own closely held taboos. In the blink of an eye, social media lights up not with twinkles of collective liking but with flames of righteous mob fury. We demand fresh material, and then we demand apologies.

Laughter is supposed to be a unifying force, a leveler of distinctions and a

healer of divisions. But it often seems to be just as divisive as anything else in our angry and polarized climate. Can't we just all have a good time together? But maybe comedy has become the way we argue about matters that are too painful, awkward or explosive to address in other ways. In our self-conscious, suspicious and defensive time — when the default settings of public discourse seem to vacillate between piety and rage — comedy might be the only widely available vehicle for the arguments we otherwise don't want to have.

Fighting about what is or isn't funny is our way of talking about fairness, inclusion and responsibility. Who is allowed to tell a joke, and at whose expense? Who is supposed to laugh at it? Can a man tell a rape joke? Can a woman? Do gay, black or Jewish comedians — or any others belonging to oppressed, marginalized or misunderstood social groups, or white ones for that matter — have the exclusive right to make fun of their own kind, or do they need to be careful, too? It's pretty clear that these questions are not only about what happens on television or in front of a brick wall under a spotlight.

There is so much to be angry about, including the fact that people keep getting angry. Were you appalled by Louis C.K.'s pedophilia jokes in his "S.N.L." monologue? Offended by Lena Dunham's sketch in *The New Yorker* in which she compared her Jewish boyfriend to a dog? Furious at the tweets from Trevor Noah, the South African comedian who is Jon Stewart's designated "Daily Show" heir, that poked meanspirited fun at Israel, Jews and "fat girls"? If so, you were in good — or at least noisy — company. If not, you were probably a hypocrite for complaining about something else. The art of outrage requires the constant turning of tables and forcing of analogies, the endless iteration of the words "But what about ..."

It's no good longing for a simpler age, though it is possible to imagine that once upon a time things were clearer. Through the middle decades of the 20th century, people went to hear jokes in places that were segregated by race, taste and gender. The guys at a stag smoker could guffaw at dirty jokes about women without the awkwardness of having real women present. Racist humor could flow freely at country clubs where the only black faces belonged to waiters and caddies. With a few exceptions, African-American humorists plied their trade on the chitlin

circuit, and Jews mostly stuck to the borscht belt. Television enforced these divisions and also upheld puritanical standards of decency. But as it tried to expand and homogenize a broad, fractured audience, the medium also helped to loosen old, restrictive customs. The wider American public was introduced to Flip Wilson and George Carlin, Joan Rivers and Richard Pryor. On TV, those comedians could be simultaneously countercultural and mainstream. And if they sometimes pushed against the walls of the box, getting into trouble for being too risqué or too political, their new fans knew that outside that box — in concert or on a record, for a clued-in crowd or a basement full of your friends — they could push even further.

What they were pushing against seemed self-evident, if also sometimes allegorical: the Man, the establishment, the agents of official centralized power. Lenny Bruce became a free-speech martyr because he faced arrest and banning when he performed bits that would barely merit a parental advisory on basic cable these days.

Pryor made the networks so nervous that they broadcast his material with a 10-second delay so that any offending words could be bleeped. And he and other black comedians — precursors like Dick Gregory and Redd Foxx, heirs like Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock — changed the face of “ethnic humor.” They bypassed easy insults and ignorant caricatures in favor of confrontation and analysis, forcing listeners of whatever color to think about the thorny contradictions of identity in America and to laugh at them together.

Those contradictions have only multiplied, and the fantasy of an audience united in derision against unsmiling authority has tangled and frayed. Top-down censorship, applied by the state or cautious broadcasters, is a distant memory. Now, on “The Daily Show,” the bleeps are part of the act, and if you watch a segment online the next day you can hear every word.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not lamenting a decline in standards of propriety, much less the desegregation of culture. On the contrary: The fact that we are in one another's faces and one another's business is one of the great achievements of democracy. The Man is not going to tell us what we can or can't say, which means we have to tell each other. This is not a terribly comfortable situation. There is less

protection offered to cruel and offensive humor, even as the definitions of what constitutes cruelty and offense are subject to vigorous and often uncivil debate.

That this debate has grown more insistent and intense in recent years is partly a consequence of the very cultural and technological changes that fueled the comedy boom. Twitter may function as a global open-mike night. But it is also a hive of hecklers, a haven for the literal-minded and an amplifier that can turn wry, whispered asides into obnoxious shouts. Everyone at the club has a smartphone, which means that the ugliest and most brilliant parts of a set can be uploaded and shared. Your joke can go viral. Which is also to say that there's no place to hide.

It's hard to ponder these issues without thinking about Charlie Hebdo. While the murder of editors and cartoonists is the kind of event that defeats comparison — a Tweetstorm of shaming is in no way similar to automatic-weapons fire — the aftermath of the January attack on that satirical magazine's Paris offices has reignited longstanding quarrels in Europe and America about the limits of free expression and the ethics of humor. In the months following the killings, after the initial outpouring of horror and the international expressions of "Je suis Charlie" solidarity, attention turned to the content of the magazine itself, not only to cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed but also to what seemed to some to be a pattern of racist and anti-Muslim bigotry.

Nobody was excusing violence or suggesting that free speech be curtailed. But Charlie Hebdo found critics where it had also found champions, among the legions of Europeans and Americans who had long been content to ignore its existence. In a widely reported April lecture, Garry Trudeau, the creator of "Doonesbury" and as such the dean of American satirical cartoonists, took Charlie to task for "punching down," for aiming its mockery at the vulnerable and the powerless, in particular France's Muslims and immigrants. Mr. Trudeau's remarks were echoed later in the spring when a group of writers, including Peter Carey and Francine Prose, boycotted a PEN gala at which the magazine's surviving staff members were given an award for freedom of expression.

There was a fair amount of self-righteousness on both sides of that fight, and a lot of patient explaining from newly minted experts on the feelings of French Muslims and on the secular republican traditions of French humor. The same

images were used as evidence for opposing claims. Racially inflammatory caricatures — of a black French government minister as a monkey; of young Nigerian women kidnapped by Boko Haram as unwed mothers demanding welfare benefits — were interpreted as mockeries of racist thinking and also as poisonous examples of racism. If any of this seems far-fetched or parochially French, think of the *New Yorker* cover from the summer of 2008 that depicted Barack and Michelle Obama as terrorists fist-bumping in the Oval Office. Obviously it was spoofing a dismayingly common right-wing fantasy about the Obamas. Just as obviously, it was reproducing that fantasy.

And this is where the humor crisis lives: in thorny, almost philosophical questions of intention, context and social power. It's easy enough to formulate a distinction between the redemptive satire that aims upward, toward the seats of privilege and authority, versus the bullying kind that picks on the powerless. It can be quite a bit harder to figure out which way is up, and to make a clear distinction between solidarity and aggression. It can be virtually impossible to make a joke about racism that isn't also a racist joke.

Does this mean we should shut up, and either insist that our comedy give no offense or that no one ever take any? That “It's just a joke” or “You just didn't get it” should end the discussion? Not at all. It just means that laughter is something we should all take seriously. And also that we should all lighten up.

A version of this article appears in print on June 7, 2015, on page AR1 of the New York edition with the headline: A World That Won't Laugh With You.