

Can I Say That? Stand- Up Comedy in the Age of Political Correctness

by Jon Lisi

Although the complex relationship between freedom of speech and censorship in the United States has always been contested, the debate has recently made headlines again. At the center of this debate are American stand-up comedians, who have warned the world that efforts to censor their material will signal the demise of the art of comedy and, more importantly, the First Amendment in the US.

For most stand-up comedians, the culprit is political correctness. As Jerry Seinfeld states in an interview with talk show host Seth Meyers, “there’s a creepy PC thing out there that really bothers me.” Seinfeld cites an example of a recent joke he made in which he utters the phrase “gay French king”, and he explains that audience members expressed outrage over his use of the word “gay.” Some commenters

point out Seinfeld’s privileged status as a Caucasian heterosexual male, and suggest that he wouldn’t express this belief if he were a minority comedian. These responses fail to account for the many minority comedians who have also pushed back against political correctness.

African-American comic Chris Rock, for instance, shares Seinfeld’s view, and blames politically correct college students for “their social views and their willingness to not offend anybody.” Lisa Lampanelli, a controversial female comic, takes it a step further and asserts that political correctness “sounds a lot like prejudice.” Scott Capurro, an openly gay comic, contests that “most people have no sense of humor.”

According to these stand-up comedians and many others, Americans have become too sensitive,



Comedian Jerry Seinfeld, on Late Night with Seth Meyers, says, “there’s a creepy PC thing out there that really bothers me.”

and as a result, boundary-pushing humor is under threat. This is not strictly an American issue, either. Canadian comic Russell Peters and British comic John Cleese also challenge political correctness.

But the question must be asked: Who is under threat by whom? The First Amendment in the US protects citizens from government persecution. It promises stand-up comedians that they can express themselves without fear of imprisonment or another form of government-sanctioned punishment. However, the First Amendment does not demand that other citizens in society must automatically support a comic's act. Rather, the First Amendment makes room for dissent, disagreement, and disapproval, however misguided and misinformed such reactions may be.

This obvious clarification is necessary to make. It's baffling that stand-up comedians believe that their speech is currently under threat in the US when, in reality, there hasn't been one comic in the still young 21st century who's been persecuted by the US government for speech. Moreover, even if the country has become more politically correct in the new millennium, there haven't been many stand-up comedians whose careers have significantly suffered from excessive controversy over speech. Indeed, in

the US, the most popular stand-up comedians are often the most offensive.

It seems, in general, that American stand-up comedians are frustrated that all audiences don't share their sense of humor. Consider, for example, Rock's Saturday Night Live monologue on 1 November 2014, in which he jokes about 9/11 and the Boston Marathon bombing. This monologue caused much controversy on social media, and prompted Andrew Roberts of UPROXX to ask, Did Chris Rock's 'SNL' Monologue Go Too Far? One's answer to this question depends on one's sense of humor. Some social media users like Josh Jordan are offended, and describe the monologue as "awkward and uncomfortable." Others like Tukach Shakur support Rock because "he said nothing bad."

The response to Rock's monologue mirrors the response to Louis C.K.'s monologue on 16 May 2015, in which he makes fun of Israel and Palestine, racism, and child molestation. This time, Jeremy Gerard of Deadline is the one to ask, "Did Louis C.K. Go Too Far with 'Mildly Racist' & Pedophile Monologue on SNL?" Again, one's response is determined by one's sense of humor. One commenter, TVFan, deems the monologue "sick and offensive" and an "insult to those who suffer from abuse". Another



Chris Rock's opening monologue on SNL in 2014 caused much controversy on social media.

commenter, Stick the landing, defends C.K. because “it’s just comedy”.

This is a harmless, healthy debate, and contrary to the claims of those who rile against political correctness, Rock and C.K. are not victims of tyranny. Like any work of art, some audience members respond positively, and some respond negatively; Rock and C.K. must have expected this before they delivered their monologues.

It’s problematic that those opposed to political correctness want to live in a world where negative responses to confrontational comedy are eradicated. If stand-up comedians have the right to make jokes about whatever they want, then audiences, as well, should have the right to respond to the jokes however they want, so long as their responses do not infringe upon a comic’s civil liberties. As it stands, Rock and C.K. have not been sent to prison by the US government for their speech, their careers have not suffered any consequences as a result of their controversial jokes, and the offended haven’t turned into vigilante mobs.

American stand-up comedians should celebrate the fact that they can joke about whatever they want without government persecution. At a time when countries like France, Egypt, and Burma, among others, place limits on what artists can and cannot express, stand-up comedians in the US are fortunate to be protected under the First Amendment. Consider the treatment of other stand-up comedians such as Egypt’s Bassem Youssef, Burma’s Zarganar, and France’s Dieudonné.

Youssef, a popular satirist in Egypt, was arrested in 2013 for jokes about former President Mohamed Morsi and the Islamic faith. After his arrest, which Youssef bravely mocked on Twitter, he received international support from important public figures, including American satirist Jon Stewart. Youssef avoided prison time, but his arrest was unconscion-

able to begin with, and it shows the fragility of free expression throughout the world.

Zarganar hasn’t been as lucky as Youssef. The Burmese dissident comic is notorious in his country for mocking Myanmar’s military junta, and on 4 June 2008, he was arrested for publicly criticizing the military’s response to Cyclone Nargis, a natural disaster that killed over 130,000 people. Zarganar was charged with “inducing public offense” and was initially sentenced to 59 years in prison. On 12 October 2011, he was released as part of a prisoner amnesty, but many human rights activists argue that the damage had already been done.



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Recently in France, comic Dieudonné was arrested for commenting on the Charlie Hebdo attacks. In a now deleted Facebook post, the comic quipped, “You know that tonight as far as I’m concerned I feel like Charlie Coulibaly.” For those who don’t know, Coulibaly took hostages of French Jews in a kosher supermarket the day after the Hebdo attack. As Laurence Dodds of *The Telegraph* reports, Dieudonné was charged under Article 421-2-5 of the French Criminal Code, a new law that criminalizes the use of social media to “directly promote acts of terrorism”. Dieudonné was given a two month suspended sentence.

Dieudonné is a controversial figure in France. Some groups support his punishment and believe that his speech is hateful. Others, like the Index of Censorship, argue that “commentary or jokes about terrorism—no matter how offensive or tasteless—are not [a crime]. Opinions are protected by the right to freedom of expression.”

Article 19 shares Index on Censorship’s point of view and raises similar concerns about freedom of expression in France. For example, Thomas Hughes proclaims that Dieudonné’s Facebook post wasn’t illegal because it did not “directly promote” an act of terrorism. He says, “The French authorities must consider the full context of Dieudonné’s posting, and protect his right to make offensive, tasteless, or bad jokes.”

Whether or not Hughes’ interpretation of Dieudonné’s post is accurate, the point is that Dieudonné shouldn’t have to defend a Facebook post and prove its humorous intent to the French government in the first place. As it’s written, Article 421-2-5 is vague, and it doesn’t account for satire, sarcasm, or irony. Who’s to say, then, if a professional comic like Dieudonné honors the spirit of Hebdo with a subversive joke on Facebook, or if he supports the attack? This is especially difficult to determine when jokes are written instead of spoken, since there’s no way to detect the tone of voice. Given this, it’s disturbing that “promoting terrorism” on the Internet is considered a more serious crime by the French government than “promoting terrorism” in public.

As European nations like France, once bastions of inclusion and liberty, are becoming more xenophobic and oppressive, the First Amendment in the US needs to be protected more passionately than ever before. US citizens should always stand up to the government when it violates first amendment rights, but they should also acknowledge when First Amendment rights are not being violated. Stand-up comedians need to comprehend that, for the most part, the first amendment works favorably on their behalf.

When American stand-up comedians equate social rejection of their humor with a First Amendment problem, they undermine actual First Amendment violations in the US, as well as the extreme persecution of artistic expression in other countries. The contradictions shouldn’t escape anyone. Stand-up comedians routinely reject politically correct responses to their material, and by insisting that political correctness be contained, they champion their own form of censorship.

The First Amendment should never be taken for granted in the US. Indeed, in recent instances, political correctness has caused more harm than good. Every once in a while, a news story will pop up about an American citizen who faced severe consequences for insensitive speech. Justine Sacco, for example, was fired for an off-color tweet about AIDS in Africa. Sacco’s story represents the growing number of individuals in the US whose First Amendment rights aren’t violated by the US government, but who nonetheless receive unfair punishments for self-expression. Stand-up comedians are not among these individuals, and they should stop using condemnation of their comedy to claim victimhood.

Of course, there are comedians who deal with the consequences of their humor, such as Whoopi Goldberg and the late Joan Rivers. However, just as many of them cite criticisms of their comedy as an example of politically correct censorship, and suggest that those who don’t find them funny are degrading the art of comedy and the First Amendment.

This is nothing new. In the ‘60s, artists evoked the First Amendment in response to criticism of their work. The difference, however, is that artists in this decade actually faced government persecution. Comedian Lenny Bruce, for example, was arrested in a Greenwich Village nightclub for swearing on stage. On 21 December 1964, he was sentenced to four months in a workhouse for obscenity. He died soon after from a drug overdose, and received a posthumous pardon years later.

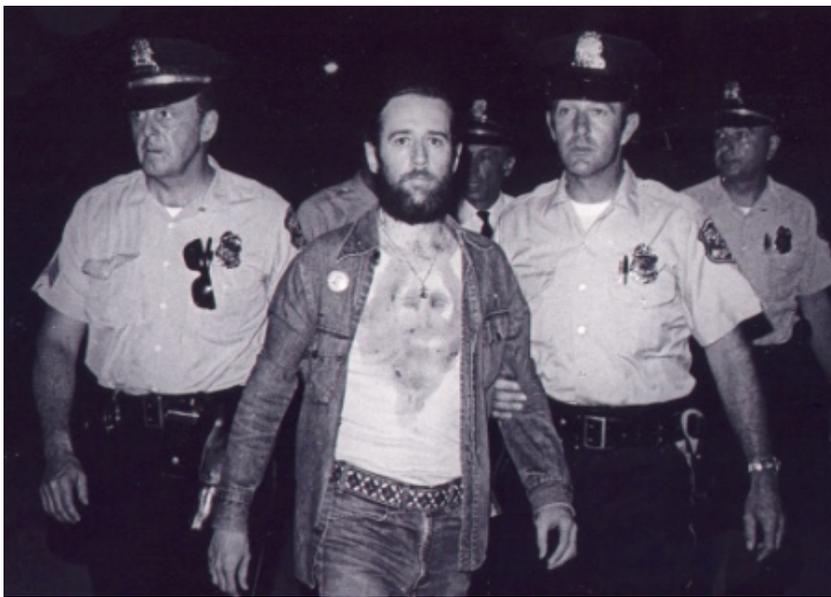
As in other nations, obscenity laws in the US are difficult to define, and have been regularly debated in the Supreme Court. What matters is that Bruce and his successor George Carlin received harsh punish-



Lenny Bruce being arrested for obscenity in the early '60s

ments for “obscene” jokes so that contemporary stand-up comedians don’t have to. When Carlin called political correctness “America’s newest form of intolerance,” his opinion was validated by his experience.

On 21 July 1972, Carlin was arrested in Milwaukee for his now classic “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” routine. Like Bruce, he was charged with obscenity, but unlike Bruce, his case was dismissed. Contemporary American stand-up comedians who complain about political correctness ought to put the opposition they face into perspective. If Bruce and Carlin were still alive, it’s possible that they would also be annoyed, but it is hard to believe that they would consider today’s politically correct outrage worse than yesterday’s obscenity charges and imprisonment.



George Carlin being arrested for obscenity in the early '70s

To add insult to injury, many of the stand-up comedians who whine about political correctness have studied Bruce and Carlin. They should be aware of popular culture’s progression since the ‘60s and ‘70s. Not too long ago, a comic could be arrested in the US for a sex joke at a local nightclub. Today, a comic can joke about child molestation on national television without legal consequence (taste notwithstanding). These are monumental strides, and yet stand-up comedians act like the country has regressed.

It goes without saying that stand-up comedians can complain about whatever they want, and if they truly believe that political correctness signifies the downfall of American civilization, so be it. They are

not the only ones who promote this belief; there are many politicians and media pundits who have made careers out of comparing political correctness to a First Amendment violation. However, the hypocrisy is maddening, and the lack of historical and cultural perspective is ignorant. What’s worse, they seem to be inciting another unnecessary wave of culture wars for the social media age.

In *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, Andrew Hartman’s historical account of the culture wars, Hartman explains that the US culture wars of the ‘60s, ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s were inevitable because people’s civil liberties were at stake. Artistic expression was one of the most important issues in the culture wars. Artists such as Bruce, Carlin, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Mike Diana, among countless others, were persecuted by the US government for their work.

These artists and their supporters were often arrested for obscenity, and this sparked a national debate about freedom of speech and censorship. With time and a few significant Supreme Court decisions, the artists won the battle, and although censorship still exists in the US, it’s nearly impossible to convict an American artist of obscenity in the 21st century.

Further, social media has made it more difficult for governments to criminalize artistic expression. Many countries are still totalitarian and some even ban social media, but international outcry from social media users has the potential to persuade a regime’s punitive response to artists. For example, many political analysts make a convincing case that international social media pressure was a small but significant

factor in Russian band Pussy Riot’s release from prison.

Given this potential, it’s problematic that so many American stand-up comedians prophesize such a grim future for the First Amendment, and go to great lengths to blame political correctness for their imagined injustices. Not only do they have more liberty to express themselves than ever before, they also have more vocal supporters on social media, should they find themselves in another battle over First Amendment rights. Sure, a number of social media users take advantage of the technology and try to eliminate speech that offends them, but the vast majority of users understand that the price of an open society is offensive speech, and will go out of their way to support imprisoned speakers. If social

media users can pressure Vladimir Putin to release Pussy Riot, just imagine what would happen if stand-up comedians like Seinfeld, Rock, and C.K. were imprisoned for insensitive jokes.

There are many issues in the world for stand-up comedians to be concerned about, but political correctness is not one of them. The view that artistic expression in the US is under siege by political correctness is hyperbolic nonsense. In reality, the so-called “PC brigade” has little influence on public policy. For all the alarmist propaganda about political correctness that has permeated the culture since the ‘90s, insensitive speech is still protected by the First Amendment, and boundary-pushing artistic expression is more widely accepted than ever before.

The First Amendment isn’t perfect, and there are a number of provisions worth debating. In a pluralistic democracy like the US, it’s important to question whether or not the more common forms of censorship have a productive role at all. However, it’s not all doom and gloom. Since Bruce and Carlin, stand-up comedians in the US have expressed themselves freely and without government persecution. If, after all the progress, they cannot handle criticism, that says more about their insecurities as artists than it does about the state of free speech.

Jon Lisi works in the greater New York City area. His monthly column is about stardom, celebrity culture and performance. He also writes book and DVD reviews. He has contributed to the *International Journal of Communication*, the *Journal of American Studies* in Turkey, *Immediacy*, *Hollywood.com* and *the-artifice.com*.

Sarah Silverman sides with college students in the great P.C. wars

<http://www.avclub.com>

Sarah Silverman is the latest comedian to weigh in on the current debate about “P.C. culture.” But unlike Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, Patton Oswalt, and Bill Maher, who all think political correctness is destroying comedy as we know it, Silverman is hip with the P.C. kids. Or as she puts it, “You have to listen to the college-aged because they lead the revolution. They’re pretty much always on the right side of history.”

Silverman discussed the topic during an interview with *Vanity Fair* about her new film *I Smile Back*. She starts out by referencing Caitlin Flanagan’s *Atlantic* article that bemoaned the way “the infantilization of the American undergraduate” has forced comics to either “create the cleanest possible set” or to not perform on college campuses at all.

But Silverman doesn’t think that changing with the times is that big of a deal. For instance, she once fought for her right to use the word “gay” pejoratively but then one day asked herself, “What am I fighting?” I have become the guy from fifty years ago who says ‘I say colored, I have colored friends!’” As she points out, more often than not making little adjustments is actually pretty easy. Stopping herself from using “gay” as an insult “didn’t take long” and now she “[doesn’t] even think about it.”

She acknowledges this is still something of a gray area for her but explains:

To a degree, everyone’s going to be offended by something, so you can’t just decide on your material based on not offending anyone. But, I do think it’s important, as a comedian, as a human, to change with the times. To change with new information. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with changing with the times. I think it’s a sign of being old when you are put off by that.

It’s pretty basic stuff, and an apt description of the process by which comedy has historically moved away from the kind of humor we now (mostly) all agree is offensive—including minstrel shows and jokes that end with “a woman’s place is in the kitchen.” In other words, as much as this feels like a P.C. revolution, it can also be seen as the natural evolution of American culture. And Silverman isn’t quite as freaked out by it as some of her peers.



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