Are comedians the political vanguard?

By L. Benjamin Rolsky
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Last month, *The Atlantic* published an online piece by staff writer Megan Garber, "How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals." The article documented how comedy today in both its standup and situational genres is expanding beyond its minutiae focus of the 1990s in favor of a harder-hitting, message-based style evident in the work of Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Amy Schumer.

Comedians have become public intellectuals because of the co-existence of two interrelated comedic tendencies in American popular culture: "moral messaging" and "mass attention." For Garber, the blending of these two types of comedy has produced social conditions conducive to a particular brand of cultural criticism designed to call forth laughter while at the same time pushing the audience beyond the joke towards its implications and significance in today's contentious politics. "Comedians are fashioning themselves not just as joke-tellers, but as truth-tellers—as intellectual and moral guides through the cultural debates of the moment . . . Their most important function," Garber argues, "is to stimulate debates among the rest of us."

Writing for the *New Republic* less than a week later, staff writer Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig argued that comedians have no business being public intellectuals, because their chosen stock-in-trade is not conducive to politics but rather to entertainment. She also argued that individuals such as Stewart and Colbert are part of the reason young adults know so little about politics, traditionally understood as sites of legislation, elections, and policies. In this scenario, a quick laugh at your political nemesis's expense takes the place of the dreary, dreadful business of politics. Like their cultural foremothers in the 1960s, these comedians rely entirely on culture in order to say something about politics and the country's moral health from a slightly left-of-center political position.

Bruenig's argument becomes especially poignant when she names these comedians and their respective audiences as the rearguard, rather than Garber's vanguard.

“Mistaking gentle jokes about Republicans for subversiveness is dangerous because it convinces those in the center that they’re on the vanguard,” Bruenig argues, “which severely delimits their view of the range of political possibilities.” Despite the fact that both Bruenig and Garber define comedy as inherently subversive, they understand the function of such subversion radically differently relative to the nation’s public life.

Garber’s description of message-driven comedy, a style that cares very little about the joke *for its own sake*, possesses its own documentary history dating back to at least the early 1970s and the situation comedies of Norman Lear. Instead of associating Lear’s comedy with a particular message, though it oftentimes had one, writers and critics in the pages of the *Christian Century* and other periodicals identified it as “relevant” or “topical” for its time. Unlike its primetime predecessors of the 1960s, Lear’s “relevancy” programming left no stone unturned when it came to America’s most difficult religious, racial, and cultural challenges.

In 1975 James Wall, newly appointed editor of the *Century* and a media enthusiast, penned an article, “Norman Lear in his Pulpit,” in which he described his experience of spending time with Lear as he attempted to “speak a moral word to the American public.” For this community of mainline Protestants, Lear’s task was a simple but profound one: “preaching about moral and social issues in an entertainment setting, purveying his message in a way that captures and retains the attention of more people than does any other preaching we know of.” Not unlike Garber’s comedy with a message, Lear’s writing was “comedy with a purpose . . . a style of social criticism.” In this sense, Garber’s contention that comedy helps structure our collective interpretations of current events is spot on, yet it possesses a fatal flaw that continues to haunt progressive politics to this day.

The editorial support of Wall foreshadowed the cooperative arrangements between Lear, the *Century*, and the National Council of Churches that undergirded his political activism in the early 1980s and the formation of his nonprofit People for the American Way. The liberal dependence on culture for much of its political efficacy, however, has resulted in a provincializing of knowledge in the name of mainstream authority. The common ground between the middling and the mainline, the mainstream and the consensus, has produced significant accomplishments in the political arena, such as PFAW—a comedian’s take on the nonprofit model. But it has also substituted subversion for the rough-and-tumble experience of politics itself.

For some, this is a welcome development. For others, it is yet another sign of liberalism run rampant. The fact that figures such as Lear and Stewart have received such attention says all we need to say about their political import—they matter, a lot.

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