

On Political Satire: A Humorous Attempt to Subvert the Status Quo

At the end of a grueling Sunday of attending office hours, working on projects, and shuttling around Cambridge, I made my way to the Westin Waterfront in Boston for a comedy show. I was hardly in the mood to be away from the safety and comfort of my bed, let alone at a performance where I was supposed to be active and engaged. And the show was hardly an ordinary comedy show; it was *Trump Takes on Boston*, a tour de force of a performance by comedian David Carl, poking fun at the terrifying campaign of then-presidential-candidate Donald Trump. I had been increasingly anxious as the election approached and was not finding Trump's bigoted speech to be humorous, yet was curious to see whether the show would lend me insight into his inscrutable success.

I invited my parents - who live outside of Boston - to join me for the comedy show since I hadn't seen them in a few weeks and thought they might enjoy it. They're both New York Times-reading staunch liberals who were deeply disgusted by Trump's antics. I arrived at the shimmering hotel by the Boston waterfront, a financial and liberal epicenter. The comedy club - Laugh Boston - was situated off the side of the grandiose, glass-paned, chandelier-lit hotel lobby. My parents and I hid our complimentary hotel hot cider and entered the dimly lit, intimate club. We chose timid seats a few rows back from the stage to the far left, as we were all quite nervous about the prospect of being picked on by the performers.

Within minutes, *Born in the USA* boomed off of the walls and an orange-faced, pursed lipped, shaggy wig-wearing Trump roller bladed into the room, inciting a chorus of boos from

the crowd. He made circles around the audience, rambunctiously greeting people and cursing at them if they showed any animosity. I felt myself recede into my seat and my chest tighten. The clown-like portrayal of the hateful politician felt too realistic and made me deeply uncomfortable.

The performance was a hyper hour and a half of tomfoolery. From bickering with the audience, to performing folk songs about Ted Cruz calling him “Ted Lose,” to a full-blown rap battle with Hillary Clinton, Carl rarely finds any moments of respite. In an almost perfect allegory for the illusory interactivity of the town hall, the performers invite eager audience members to ask Clinton and Trump their questions. Questions surrounding education, LGBTQ rights, policy, and global warming were asked. But instead of offering genuine interactivity, the cast already had a pre-planned agenda for the overall structure and outcome of the show, and thus, the performance was merely a simulacrum of a simulacrum of interactivity. Clinton was consistently unrelatable and restrained while Trump was completely incoherent and never truly answered the questions. However, in response to global warming, I did find Carl’s twist to be scarily stark and honest, using humor’s propensity to sugarcoat hard truth. Trump first responds that global warming is not real and then backtracks to say that if it is real, it’s too late so we should all just have fun. I found this statement to be quite dark and emblematic of the sheer intractability of the current issues at stake and the bleak helplessness and lingering nihilism I had been feeling. In one unique moment, Trump breaks down and tells the audience that he’s really just an insecure, sad, and bored petulant child. He asks an audience member for forgiveness, allowing for a chance to subvert power, but then laughs in his face, saying that his plea was a sham.

At the end of the show, David Carl waits outside of the venue in his garb to take photos with audience members. I had already connected with him via email to tell him about my project and he had agreed to let me conduct an interview with him. I introduced myself and although he was out of character and spoke as an extremely thoughtful and rational person - also disgusted by Trump - I couldn't quite stifle a deep animosity toward him in his Trump persona. I asked him a few questions but he assured me that we would discuss further when we met for the interview. He seemed thoroughly exhausted after the performance so I let him retreat to remove his wig and makeup.

The show left me feeling quite dismayed and disturbed about the state of the election and American politics. Watching a comedic performance of Donald Trump is particularly jarring since the line between send-up and reality seems almost non-existent. While I had hoped to learn more about the underlying mass appeal of Trump, I found myself even more lost. Part of what had been so confusing to me is the dissonance between what Trump says, what he means, and how his claims are interpreted by an increasingly polarized electorate. I believe in humor's potential to help people to process and understand the underlying complexity of issues through breaking down social theater, but did not find the comedy show to be effective in changing people's minds or creating a dialogue.

Three days before the election I met with David Carl in Boston's North End over coffee to discuss the development of the show and his insights on Trump and his method of campaigning. Carl told me about his intentions for putting on the show, such as giving the audience an outlet for tension and that putting on the show was his way to be involved in the political sphere. He told me that there are not many places where people can come and release

the anxiety that builds up from watching the election and feeling helpless. He tells me that it is better to be open than numb and that releasing tension helps people to think about what's happening. He shared with me a brief anecdote from one of the shows where a young boy came on stage to ask Trump a question, but just ended up looking him straight in the eyes and saying, "f*** you".

I can appreciate the kind of cathartic release that would ensue from yelling at an inaccessible, terrifyingly powerful political figure. I, too, felt quite frustrated by the lack of genuine interaction that campaigns elicit. As this was my first major election as an eligible voter, I felt hopeful that perhaps presidential elections have the potential to bring a vast population together and stimulate horizontal discourse. However, I grew increasingly distraught and disillusioned as the campaign continued and did not evolve into more than an empty and vapid performance. As Stromer-Galley writes in *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age*, "the purpose of a presidential campaign is not to genuinely engage citizens as coequal actors. Instead, citizen involvement in the campaign historically has been and continues to be a means to an end: winning the election for the candidate." I have felt extremely disillusioned watching the 2016 election and noticing the limited amount of engagement that is possible as a citizen. In a political culture which creates the illusion of citizen engagement and the exchange of ideas, media appears to be one platform through which citizens can access political engagement. But really, these media forms end up reinforcing American political mythologies. And while Carl's intentions for putting on the show are good - fueled by his own discomfort with the increasingly greedy, sexist, xenophobic ideals becoming more normalized - his portrayal of Trump did not leave me feeling empowered. I found that perhaps Carl's goal to make people feel less helpless

actually led to me feeling more helpless and that the American mainstream political system is even less influenceable. Additionally, attending a comedy performance in order to decompress from the stress of the presidential election is a way to avoid confronting the political system and further contributes to the complacency of the electorate.

I was curious also to ask whether Carl believed that his show was specific to the liberal, Hillary-championing crowd at Laugh Boston or whether it would appeal to a more diverse crowd, perhaps even Trump supporters. And in response, he said that there were actually Trump supporters at one of his performances and that they also laughed at his mockery of Trump. But he also noted that they did not support Trump as a character, but rather what he represented. In a 2016 article on the Atlantic, Salena Zito declares of Trump that, “the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.” This sentence perfectly crystallizes one of the core problems with Carl’s portrayal of Trump. Rather than questioning what it means to take Trump seriously, or considering the massive appeal of Trump, the performance attacked the surface-level mannerisms of Trump and was not able to make Trump supporters question their stances or liberals question their literal interpretation of Trump.

On my way to the train station from my interview with David Carl, I came across a group of people canvassing for *Mass for Trump*. They were mainly middle-aged men holding signs and aggressively making fun of people walking by, calling them dirty liberals and shouting “lock her up.” I stood and watched them for a moment, trying to muster the courage to talk to someone. A man of around sixty noticed me and came over to ask if I was voting for Hillary. I seized the opportunity to flip the interaction and ask him about his own beliefs. He told me that a vote for Trump was a vote for change, while a vote for Hillary was a vote for the status quo. He also

asked me repeatedly about whether I wanted to have a family, and if so, if I would feel comfortable with my children living in a country led by Hillary Clinton. He told me that he had been laid off in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and had been struggling since. I was curious about his claims about change and asked him what he thought about Bernie Sanders. As I expected, he told me he also like Bernie, but socialism doesn't work. After about 20 minutes of talking to him, I said I should head to the train. He asked me if he had changed my mind about Trump and I laughed and shook my head. At this point, what had been a reasonably civil conversation completely devolved. He told me that he couldn't believe I would want to have children - though I never said this - if Hillary were to be president and that I should go on birth control immediately. This interaction left me feeling deeply saddened. This man was so disappointed by the state of American mainstream politics that had left him without a job, that he was desperately hoping for radical change, even if the result might be more damaging for him economically. And even deeper than his support for Trump, was his hatred of Clinton. His persistent invasive questioning of my desire to have a family hinted at his ingrained familial, patriarchal views.

In my post-election reflection, I have begun to feel less amused by the outrageous, farcical nature of Trump's platform. At some point, I felt vaguely amused by his attacks on the corruption within the political system. Trump has painted himself as a champion of the disillusioned and disenfranchised, promising to turn a corrupt political system on its head. Trump is paradoxically a billionaire while being relatable and inspirational to the white working class. But this paradox isn't necessarily novel to this election, but plays into a larger American political mythology where power is naturally held by a wealthy elite. Schudson discusses the idea that

wealthy people were believed to be fit to govern since they show more restraint while poor people are more prone to manipulation (Schudson, 1998). In a Harvard Business Review article, Joan C. Williams further discusses the rift between liberal, professional America and the white working class that led Trump to his victory. She explains that the white working class people see Trump's wealth as a sign of hard work. Professionals are seen as arrogant as they often micromanage workers, but it is aspirational to own one's own business. For many, Hillary Clinton represents this smugness and academic removal from real, hard work. Additionally, at the crux of many people's support for Trump is a Lakoffian moral scheme where social interest and morality - such as a belief in punishment and patriarchy - is held above economic interest.

In an environment of heavy political polarization, it is extremely difficult to discern which media platforms and portrayals are effective in stimulating political conversation and discourse and which are deepening divides and reaffirming biases. My mother was disturbed by the comedy show because, "it felt like an 'inside the bubble' performance that didn't really disrupt our smug complacency (at the time we couldn't imagine Clinton wouldn't win), and challenge our assumptions about Trump's appeal to voters outside the bubble." Rather than diving into the nitty gritty of the systems and divisive inequality that has enabled Trump to pose as a "working class billionaire," Carl focused on critiquing Trump's mannerisms. Through this kind of gestural satire, the danger and reality of the political situation is trivialized. People come to the show expecting to be entertained, and leave with their biases reaffirmed. In a way, Carl's portrayal of trump disturbs me because it pokes fun at the surface-level symptoms or markers of deeper, more insidious problems in the American political system. The portrayal did not bring any new discourse forward or expose the grand farce of entertainment politics, but rather played

into an already well-defined trope of Donald Trump as domineering, unrestrained, and thoroughly mockable.

In my analysis of Trump's frightening success, I begin to wonder about the ability of political satire to subvert power structures. A research paper from Ohio State University studying biased perception of the Colbert Report, states that, "individual-level political ideology significantly predicted perceptions of Colbert's political ideology. Additionally, there was no significant difference between the groups in thinking Colbert was funny, but conservatives were more likely to report that Colbert only pretends to be joking and genuinely meant what he said while liberals were more likely to report that Colbert used satire and was not serious when offering political statements" (LaMarre et. al 2009). As such, it is very important to acknowledge the implications of giving media platforms to dangerous ideologies. On Malcolm Gladwell's podcast, *The Revisionist History*, he has an episode called *The Satire Paradox* in which he discusses the pitfalls of political satire. He interviews Heather LaMarre - from the above paper - who discusses the ambiguity of political satire, specifically on the Colbert Report. She says that the ambiguity of Colbert's portrayal of a conservative news reporter allows the audience to see what they want to see and reaffirm their senses of reality, rather than challenging them or critically thinking about whether or not the comic is correct.

But more so than merely reinforcing held beliefs and strengthening echo chambers, political satire may be dangerous since it can also "disarm" politicians and render them as benign and acceptable. In his podcast, Gladwell revisits Tina Fey's impersonations of Sarah Palin during the 2008 presidential election. Gladwell's analysis is scarily reminiscent of the 2016 election. He talks about Palin's impressions as being purely mechanical and strategic to evoke laughter from

the audience. When discussing her Palin portrayal, Fey divulges into the mechanics and influences that helped her to construct her impersonation without talking about the ideological and political drivers behind the sketch. Later, SNL actually invited Sarah Palin to come onto the show alongside Tina Fey to be “in on the joke.” Gladwell remarks that instead of using their platform to critique Palin’s policies, the actors were, “sipping the political situation through a straw.” He continues with an ominous foreshadow, declaring, “God help us if some even less qualified and more frightening political figure comes along.”

While much of Carl’s intentions in conducting his show were well-meaning, he plays into a larger scheme of lessening the necessity for action and normalizing terrifying political norms. Political satire may be attempting to uproot and critique establishments, but introducing laughter into political conversations helps normalize the idea of political intractability and helplessness. In his essay, *Sinking Giggling into the Sea*, Jonathan Coe discusses the acceptance of the status quo through political satire. He also discusses the mocking of politicians’ morals and the way in which political satire is often “not intended to convert one’s opponents, but to gratify and fortify one’s friends.” The comedy show that I attended did seem also to reaffirm beliefs and assumptions rather than challenge them or shed light on the underlying political systems and complexities that led to the rise of Trump. Additionally, Coe speaks about laughter as being a force that undermines serious political conversation and movements. He says that laughter is a last resort in the face of the human condition and the forces which we can do nothing about, but that most political situations are not intractable. Introducing laughter into difficult-to-digest politics deepens the assumption that citizens cannot make changes. This belief leads many people to shy away from engaging in politics since they it feels like an impossible battle.

What is so terrifying about Trump is that he has seemed to harness the platform of political satire and has subverted it for his own gain, rendering the tools of critical humor useless. In the paper *The Hands of Donald Trump*, the authors examine Trump's entertainment value that has helped him gain notoriety. "Trump's campaign to become the Republican nominee was successful because it was, in a word, entertaining-not just for the white rural underclass, not just for conservatives, but also for the public at large, even those who strongly oppose his candidacy." Trump's constant media presence is particularly dangerous since he is able to reach an audience and gain a following while simultaneously defaming his opponents. Even though many liberal media sources may believe that their coverage denounces him and is actively protesting his ideas, they are also contributing to his success. The paper also explores the ways in which Trump has harnessed the "heavily mediatized public sphere" to allow himself to be "shielded by entertainer magic". He has used the techniques of humor, the grotesque, and entertainment to make himself virtually enigmatic and untouchable.

In a political culture which creates the illusion of citizen engagement and the exchange of ideas - through town hall-style presidential debates, digital communication platforms, and polling - political satire has become a platform which attempts to challenge the status quo through the breakdown of social theater. But really, unless comedians are courageous enough to truly question the underlying assumptions and values of their audience, political satire functions to reinforce biases, disarm threatening political figures, and strengthen a feeling of helplessness in the electorate. With serious threats to civil liberties, the climate, and international relations, it is time to stop capitalizing on laughter unless it is able to truly make people think and act.

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