



THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Are Students Humorless?



Nate Kitch for The Chronicle Review

By Mikita Brottman | SEPTEMBER 05, 2016 ✓

PREMIUM

In the fall semester of 2014, I invited the author, critic, and essayist Mark Dery to give a lecture to my students based on a chapter from his book *I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts*. I have always admired Dery's writing, and his talk, titled "Waiting for the Zombie Apocalypse,"

was just as shrewd, witty, and elegant as his prose. His lecture explored the ways in which our cultural fascination with zombies is indicative of our social fears: of economic collapse, of class exploitation, of racism, of sociopathic business kingpins, of the Wall Street elite. It was sharp, on point, and very funny. But it did not go over well.

Dery's punch lines came right on cue, but nobody was laughing. I started to realize he was too fast and astute for the undergraduate audience; his easy allusions to Freud, Hobbes, and Nietzsche served not to enlighten but to discomfort, perhaps even to annoy. Even worse, when, after a scattering of lukewarm applause from the crowd, I asked if there were any questions, I was met with a long silence. Finally, a hand went up in the middle row. The student had been offended by Dery's lecture. Why?

Dery had been unfair to sociopaths.

I had managed to repress this dreadful moment until it was brought back to me by *Can We Take a Joke?* a new documentary directed by Ted Balaker and produced by Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a national nonprofit that fights for free speech on college campuses. The premise is that today's



College students are cripplingly hypersensitive and far less tolerant than previous generations were of opinions different from their own. The comedians Gilbert Gottfried, Adam Carolla, Lisa Lampanelli, Karith Foster, Jim Norton, and Heather McDonald, some of whom are notorious for their insult comedy, describe how not only college students but even regular comedy-club audiences seem to have become more easily offended.

The film examines some of the cases defended by FIRE, including that of Chris Lee, a talented theater major at Washington State University who, in 2005, wrote and produced a satire depicting the last two days of the life of Jesus called *Passion of the Musical*. Lee said he

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wanted to create a show "so offensive to everyone, they would have to speak about things that are important to them." He made it very clear that the show was designed to be "inflammatory to all audiences" and that those unwilling to be offended should stay away. Nevertheless, a large group of audience members grew angry, disrupted the play by heckling, and finally invaded the stage and threatened the cast with physical violence. When Lee called campus security for assistance, he was told he would not be protected since he had refused to self-censor his play. WSU claimed that the heckling was an exercise of the students' rights to free speech. "Disrupting a play with censorship is not protected expression," Lukianoff argues in the documentary. "It is mob rule."

The hero and lodestar of the film is Lenny Bruce, whose name and image are invoked at every turn. No one would disagree that Bruce had a huge influence on stand-up comedy. But he was not the lone revolutionary, the free-speech founder whose battles banished censorship from comedy, that he is depicted as here. Balaker isolates Bruce from the huge cultural shifts that made his style of comedy possible — the civil-rights movement, the Vietnam War, drug culture, emergent media, the changing lifestyles of the young, developments in social activism, and everything else that led to the rise of the '60s counterculture. There is no sense in the documentary of why, when, or how those changes happened.

As the film points out, the last routine Lenny Bruce performed was at the University of California at Los Angeles. "Lenny Bruce would not last a minute on the modern college campus," claims Lukianoff. "They would hate him," agrees comedian Jim Norton, of today's college students. "They have become what they hated. They have become the speech repressors. They have become the free-thought policers." Even major comedians like Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, and John Cleese have announced they will no longer play college campuses, since students find their comic routines racist, misogynist, and otherwise offensive. Gottfried puts it best. "I'm in favor of free speech," he deadpans. "Of course, that's because I'm a Jew. I don't want to pay for it."

The journalist Jonathan Rauch, author of *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought*, argues in the film that airing painful ideas may make us uncomfortable in the moment but that it strengthens society in the long run. Listening to other people's attitudes and opinions, even if we find them offensive, is how we exchange ideas and build knowledge. Rauch believes that we must accept that in a free society we are going to be confronted by words and ideas we dislike, and the sooner we get used to it the better.

The ideas the movie examines have been a cause of concern for some time. In *The Atlantic* in 2015, Caitlin Flanagan reported from the annual meeting of the National Association for Campus Activities, the college booking circuit for stand-up comedians and other entertainers. She described the difficulties of today's fledgling comics in devising funny routines that adhere to the codes of the association, which is dedicated to "promoting the importance" of "eliminating" any language that is "discriminatory or culturally insensitive." This speech code, Flanagan asserts, is part of the "the infantilization of the American undergraduate, and this character's evolving status in the world of higher learning — less a student than a consumer, someone whose whims and affectations (political, sexual, pseudointellectual) must be constantly supported and championed."

This stereotype of supersensitive undergraduates is perpetuated, to a degree, in *Can We Take a Joke?* Notwithstanding my experience at Mark Dery's lecture, which I assume was an unhappy aberration, I do not recognize my own students in Flanagan's description. Nor do I believe the students I teach today are, generally speaking, any more sensitive or

SECTION 1

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

easily offended than those I taught 25 years ago. Students are individuals, after all; they come from a wide spectrum of classes, cultures, and countries, and do not arrive on campus as *tabulae rasae*. Their values and beliefs are neither consistent nor uniform. Some are more sensitive and tolerant than others, and always have been. If racist and misogynistic stand-up routines are no longer in fashion on college campuses, that doesn't mean today's students lack a sense of humor, or are closed-minded, unable or unwilling to take a joke.

Humor is an essential part of teaching and learning. Like most professors, I joke around with my students and use humor reflexively in class. It takes a while to gauge the mood, to get to know the students and for the group to bond, but when I think it will be appreciated, I will use even risky material to help make a point. In a graduate class on aesthetic theory that I taught last spring, I advanced our discussion of music criticism by posting on the class forum a link from the British website Popbitch that used Freud's five stages of psychosexual development to "explain Kanye West's anal fixation" through an analysis of his lyrics over time. "This is kind of brilliantly gross in so many ways," responded one student. Another added, "I wonder if it would be possible to do something like this for visual artists as their career grows, or even curators?"

An even better indication of tolerance was the students' reaction to John Waters, who in March 2016, brought to campus his one-man show *This Filthy World*. Most of the audience spent an hour doubled over with laughter at the kind of anecdotes for which "obscene" would be a euphemism. No one was the least bit offended. In fact, the following month, MICA bestowed on the "People's Pervert" an honorary degree. You might imagine that Waters is a special case. Beloved in Baltimore, he is the court jester who speaks weirdness to power, disrupting conventional norms of behavior, thought, and identity, saying what the rest of us dare not even think — and being rewarded for it. But every campus has its own jester, someone permitted to say what others dare not, whether they are a local celebrity like Waters in Baltimore, a beloved alumnus like Hank Azaria at Tufts or Seth Meyers at Northwestern, or someone who shares the college's interests and values, like Jim Gaffigan, a big hit at Catholic campuses, or Benji Lovitt, a favorite of Jewish colleges.

When I was an undergraduate, stand-up comics weren't brought to campus. Much of

the humor my friends and I enjoyed was at the expense of our professors. We would repeat anecdotes and folklore about them: Professor X was rumored to fall off his bicycle when drunk; Professor Y was so absent-minded she once gave a lecture with her dress on inside out; Professor Z, who taught Anglo-Saxon, had a daughter named Grendel. Now I realize it works both ways. Professors joke about their students just as students make fun of their professors; the repartee can be playful or it can be cruel. And the topical parameters are similar on both sides.

Dull meetings will come to life when someone makes a joke about a student we all recognize, usually due to their memorable attire. Since I work at an art college, there are plenty of originals: the young man who wore only pajamas; the woman who made matching outfits for her dog; the guy who insisted on wearing his own homemade chain-mail armor that he forged with a hammer in his dorm room (students complained about being kept up at night by his "clinking"). You could always hear when he was on his way to class, and he always had a desk to himself because chain mail can't be laundered.

On my campus, jokes about student dress and style are welcome. They are a version of the eternal theme, "what will these crazy kids think of next?" If, as I believe, we laugh at what makes us most anxious, this kind of affectionate mockery has its roots in the joke-tellers' sense of their own aging bodies, their distance and alienation from the young people they themselves used to be.

Whether among faculty or students, each generation has its own comedy no-fly zones, but that doesn't mean that campus humor has vanished. In former times, it would have been inappropriate to make explicit jokes about politicians, to mock religious figures, or poke fun at institutions like the church and family. Today, on the other hand, no professor at a faculty meeting would dare joke about a student's race, disability, or gender. In the current political climate, these subjects are not laughing matters. They are too fear-ridden, too close to home, even for humor.

Who knows what subjects the students of 2040 will find uproarious? As Lenny Bruce said: "Satire is tragedy plus time. You give it enough time, the public, the reviewers will allow you to satirize it."

Can we take a joke? Sure we can. But not all of us can take every joke. We never could and we never will.



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