**Taming the culture war: a theory of why humour gets fought over**

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Introduction

Core idea: When values confer legitimacy, values become goods.

What I am seeking to show: Ways in which humour can be taken to ground a right to rule using at least semi-respectable ways of thinking.

(1) First, I look at wit and public reason

(2) Second, there is humour as the power to set social boundaries

(3) Finally, there is humour as an aligned interest and a heroic act

Terms

I want expansive understandings of “humour” and “politics” because I’m trying to catch what is expected of humour and politics.

Humour as a conjunction of three accounts:

(1) Internalist accounts, where humour is defined by something within the body or mind

(2) Social accounts, where humour is defined as a practice of behaviour

(3) The World’s Laziest Ordinary Language Account

Politics in three steps:

(1) the distribution of resources, power, authority, and other goods within a society

(2) the justification of (1), and  
(3) the process of discussing (1) and (2)

One: Wit and Public Reason

Core idea: Wit identifies virtues which are valued within a system of public reason.

Following Holm (2017), liberalism is a political which operates by public reason. A system which operates by public reason gives value to public reasoners.

Wit is a form of humour which is taken to connote a superior intelligence and a superior hold on conversational norms. These can both be taken to indicate someone who should be given more power within a system of public reasoning.

Two: Humour as the power to set social boundaries

Core idea: Humour is a way of determining and managing group membership.

We can talk about humour in terms of “affiliative” and “disaffiliative” laughter (Glenn 2003). Affiliative laughter is laughter that either represents or attempts to create an aligned group amongst the people laughing. Disaffiliative laughter is laughter that either represents or attempts to create multiple groups with boundaries such that one or more people or targets are excluded. We can correspondingly talk of “affiliative” and “disaffiliative” humour.

The humourist is valued because they can be taken to both set group boundaries (thereby defining the nature of the group) and enforce boundaries by including or excluding people as desired. A political humourist (or a humourist with politics) sets and enforces politically-relevant boundaries.

Three: Humour, aligned interests, and everyday heroism

Core idea: The quotidian nature of humour is used to make politics and political conflict ubiquitous

Following Robin (2011), a key challenge of (reactionary) politics is to build a mass base for a politics that benefits the few at the top. He gives a picture which involves a politics of loss, where that loss is of something that was held in common.

Political correctness as a politics of loss. “There are some things you just can’t say anymore.” The denial of humour as a denial to be seen as an elite reasoner, and the denial to manage social boundaries.

The frustration of political power in everyday existence lets humour be understood as a constant political contest. Insisting upon “politically incorrect” humour becomes a heroic act of resistance.

Elites are taken to be humour-representatives, who set a normative order for society. The ubiquity of humour allows for a sort of “democratic feudalism” where many people can enjoy the benefits of elite humour.

Consequences

In the discussion between ethicism (Gaut 1998, 2007) and moderate moralism (Carroll 1996, Smuts 2009), there is the challenge against ethicism that it has difficulty account for how a joke can be made funny by way of positive ethical content. “Political correctness” provides a way of thinking about.

Any attempt at a politics of humour must lie downstream of a politics of politics. The stories I’ve provided, while they may maintain some initial plausibility, fall apart if one actually attempts to use them to answer serious questions of power and distribution.