

Book Review

Sienkiewicz, Matt and Nick Marx. 2022. *That's Not Funny: How the Right Makes Comedy Work for Them*. University of California Press.

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This slim book (it comes in at 229 pages including the bibliography and index, but the text is just shy of 200 pages) is an interesting and important book. It is based on the premise that humor scholars have neglected the field of right-wing humor. As prime evidence of this they quote Young (2020), a book dedicated to the explanation of why the right is psychologically incapable of producing humor and prefers outrage, whereas the left has historically produced satire and used humor. More broadly, there is a long-standing bias within humor studies to look at the positive, progressive, and healing effects of humor and neglecting its darker aspects, a bias for which Billig (2005) justly chastised the field. The “that’s not funny” reaction toward right-wing humor and its consequent dismissal is a serious weakness, not only in humor studies, but in political science and cultural studies at large. If we assume that right-wing attempts at humor will simply fail, we will ignore its existence, at the risk of being blindsided by the phenomenon.

While Sienkiewicz & Marx’s point is broadly speaking correct, it would have been nice if they acknowledged the (admittedly scarce) literature that does cover the negative aspects of the field. For example, Oring’s 2003 book contains an enlightening and profound discussion of the racist humor used by US white supremacists, who have been active online at least since 1995. The chapter is titled “The humor of hate” and was an eye opener for me when I first read it. Considering the status of Oring within humor research, it seems a hard-to-miss reference.

Sienkiewicz & Marx’s first point then is that, contrary to the claim that the right is constitutionally unable to produce humor and satire, not only do they produce plenty of it, but it is in fact quite successful. Indeed, there have been numerous news reports of the success in ratings and readership of web sites such as *Babylon Bee* and TV shows such as *Gutfeld!* While ratings and readership data are not necessarily scientific-grade evidence, they certainly paint a circumstantial case in favor of Sienkiewicz & Marx’s thesis.

So, having established both that the right can produce satire and humor and that it has been/is successful, in the sense of attracting an audience, Sienkiewicz & Marx set out to explore how the right has been using humor and satire to further its agenda. Here the argument becomes a lot more complex and nuanced. The crucial

thesis that Sienkiewicz & Marx propose is that the various personalities, shows, blogs, web sites etc. that constitute the network of right-wing humor sources are an integrated, complex, self-supporting network. This network circulates ideas (memes) and is used to recruit new adherents by introducing them first to the more palatable mainstream acts and slowly providing access and connections to the increasingly less mainstream and more extreme forms of humor and ideology, all the way into the most extreme, fascist, white supremacist, racist, and misogynist humor, that reflects the ideology of the alt-right.

In particular, the process involves several layered components which Sienkiewicz & Marx analyze in separate chapters. This provides an excellent organization for the book, which makes it easy to follow their argument. The mainstream right-wing comedy is exemplified by the television channel *Fox News* or by web sites such as *The Babylon Bee*. Shows such as *Gutfeld!* and *Watter's World* (2015–2022) are the right wing equivalent of Jon Stewart *The Daily Show* (1999–2015), *The Colbert Report* (2005–2014), and *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* (2015–present). Another relatively mainstream component of the right-wing network is labeled “paleocomedy.” By this clever term, Sienkiewicz & Marx characterize formerly out of fashion comedians who have revitalized their careers such as Dennis Miller, Tim Allen, Jay Leno, Roseanne Barr, and Bill Burr. Paleocomedians hark back to a fictional Archie Bunkeresque social order in which modern conflict is elided in favor of a fictional society in which all conflictual or non-normative stances are resolved in favor of a patriarchal, white, cis-sexual stance (in short normative ideology). By looking back nostalgically to the (non-existent) world of, say, Mayberry, the fictional town in which *The Andy Griffith Show* was based, in which there are no black characters, there is no class strife, the police are friendly, etc. the paleocomedians effectively advocate the kind of rebirth (palingenesis, to be technical; Griffin 1993) advocated by fascist movements (and exemplified in the slogan “Make America Great Again”). The mainstream layer also includes slightly more edgy pundits such as Steven Crowder and Ben Shapiro who openly push conspiracy theories, which all lean right (for example alleging that the Clintons had Vince Foster killed; on this particular conspiracy theory, see Yglesias 2016).

Another component of the mainstream right-wing network are podcasters. Here the big name is Joe Rogan (*The Joe Rogan Experience*) a podcast which appeals primarily to young white males, a demographic that is obviously crucial to the right wing. Sienkiewicz & Marx argue that while Rogan's politics are ambiguous, but skewing right, his role is to draw audiences to more extreme (and thus less mainstream) podcasts such as *Legion of Skanks*, a far less popular podcast with more extreme views which caters to anti-politically correct views (read, racist and misogynist). This is, according to Sienkiewicz & Marx, the process whereby the right-wing cultural complex starts its recruiting process: by attracting with

relatively mainstream programming (web sites, tv shows, podcasts, etc.) an audience that is not particularly politicized. Then recommendation algorithms on platforms such as YouTube, mutual endorsements among podcasters, TV show hosts, and websites, and/or clickthrough advertising, funnel the audience to increasingly less mainstream and more radical shows that pitch an us versus them world view and push a view of white males as “victims” of political correctness.

The process ends in the truly disturbing part of the right-wing complex: trolling culture and openly (or thinly veiled) neo-Nazi, white supremacist, holocaust denying, racist web sites and shows, such as *Million Dollar Extreme*, books (e.g., *Bronze Age Mindset*), *The Daily Shoah* (a pun on the *Daily Show*) and *Murdoch, Murdoch*, a video-series which literally engages in Nazi propaganda (Robertson 2019). The average reader may be forgiven for not having heard of these shows. That’s part of Sienkiewicz & Marx’s point: one gets there through the funneling of the mainstream shows one has heard of. That is exactly what the process of radicalization is supposed to do: take a general audience and identify those susceptible of being molded into the radical extremists.

Sienkiewicz & Marx provide no evidence for this radicalization slippery-slope argument. It is a reasonable claim, but it would have given more weight to the argument to have a discussion of the evidence for this. Demonstrating the interconnectedness of the network of mutual recommendations, links and endorsements certainly shows that there is a possible path for radicalization, but they stop short of showing that any significant number of people have travelled that path. What makes this gap in Sienkiewicz & Marx’s argument even more exasperating is that there is significant research, unrelated to humor/comedy, to be fair, that backs it up. For example, Bowman-Grieve (2013) argues that the internet is a significant tool in the bonding between recruiter and new recruits in terrorist groups. Specifically, in the case of right-wing groups in the US, as early as 2001, Ray & Marsh (2001) document the presence and effectiveness of recruiting in extremists right wing groups targeting young people via computer games, music videos, and cartoon characters. Bowman-Grieve (2013) documents “whites only” dating sites. She concludes that “virtual communities promote discussion, interaction and the formation of interpersonal bonds and relationships” among white supremacists and therefore contribute to the recruitment and radicalization of the recruits in terrorist groups.

The studies quoted above are qualitative. There also have been some studies of traffic and recommendations between mainstream right, “alt-light” and “alt-right” (Horta Ribeiro et al. 2020) and between anti-feminist and “alt-right” sites (Mamiè et al. 2021) which confirm quantitatively the connections and the pathways of recruits from mainstream to radicalization. The only caveat that we might point to is that these studies are not specific to humorous content, but there

seems to be no reason to believe that the mechanisms at play (mutual endorsement, algorithmic recommendations, links, etc.) have a different effect in the case of comedic content. Specifically, Horta Ribeiro et al. (2020) find “strong evidence” of radicalization on YouTube. About half of the users who watch mainstream right content also comment on alt-right content. “A significant fraction” of users who start out commenting only on the mainstream right content end up commenting on the alt-right content (i.e., they become radicalized) (p. 2). In conclusion then, Sienkiewicz & Marx’s general argument is empirically and quantitatively confirmed by some studies.

An important point that Sienkiewicz & Marx bring up repeatedly is the financial aspect of the right wing comedy complex. As they correctly point out, many of these entertainers, podcasters, and provocateurs capitalize on their popularity to generate significant revenue. For example, in discussing the politics of *The Joe Rogan Experience*, they note how the show’s wavered from a preference for Sanders, to Biden and finally Trump, in the 2020 election. Sienkiewicz & Marx conclude that “What first looked like a series of political endorsements from Rogan turned out instead to be a great strategy for selling” merchandise to his “target audience of young men” (p. 120). In other words, these podcasters or TV show hosts do not start from a political position and try to shift their audience toward it, but rather they start from polls that show them where their target audience stands and mirror their positions, to attract as large an audience as possible and of course sell to them. This sort of considerations is refreshing, in that most discussions of left-leaning comedy and political satire tend to start from the performer’s stance and discuss their virtuosic capacity to bring the audience to align with them. However, we ought to remember that this is true also of the most extreme forms of alt-right humor, which also starts from a political stance (Nazism, in this case). Yet another point that should also be considered, is that Jon Stewart, Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah and other progressive comedians also operate in a publicity or subscription supported model. So, the picture is more complex, but Sienkiewicz & Marx deserve credit for bringing the argument to the forefront.

The final argument that Sienkiewicz & Marx present in their conclusion is the rather grandiose claim that the right-wing comedy complex is the factor that “welds together contemporary right-wing politics” (p. 187). Here I believe Sienkiewicz & Marx are off the mark. It seems much more likely that the factor that unifies contemporary right-wing politics are the vast amounts of money with which billionaires, such as the Koch brothers, and many others, have flooded the space and that support numerous think tanks, institutes, TV networks such as Fox News, etc (see for example, Skocpol & Williamson 2012; Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

Despite these minor quibbles, I think that Sienkiewicz & Marx have produced a very significant book that will shift the view of the relationships between humor,

comedy, the media (including especially new media), and the political landscape. Their book is easy to read, devoid of jargon, and very clearly presented. The index is quite detailed. All in all, I would strongly recommend the book to anyone who wants to understand the role humor, irony and satire play in contemporary US politics.

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