TAKING A STAND

Contemporary US Stand-Up Comedians as Public Intellectuals

Edited by Jared N. Champion and Peter C. Kunze

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LAUGHING OUT LOUD

Stand-Up Comedians in the Public Sphere

Jared N. Champion and Peter C. Kunze

In 2015, the journalist Megan Garber proposed in *The Atlantic* that comedians had harnessed the power of social media to become public intellectuals. "Comedians are fashioning themselves not just as joke-tellers," she observed, "but as truth-tellers—as intellectual and moral guides through the cultural debates of the moment."[1] Holding up the recent television success of Amy Schumer (*Inside Amy Schumer* [2013–2016]), Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele (*Key and Peele* [2012–2015]), Abby Jacobson and Ilana Glazer (*Broad City* [2014–2019]), and such seasoned stand-up comedians as Patton Oswalt, Sarah Silverman, and Nick Kroll as examples, Garber argued that comedians' jokes double as arguments. In so doing, she said, they insert themselves into the national dialogue as voices of reason dedicated to social change.

These claims undoubtedly amused scholars of comedy and humor, who have long explored how comedians operate as spokespeople for and commentators on society. In US culture, one need only look to the wisdom of the crackerbox philosophers, the varied works of Mark Twain, the Semple stories of Langston Hughes, the newspaper columns of Will Rogers, or the poetry of Dorothy Parker for a nuanced balance of cultural criticism and humor.[2] Garber's argument, in fact, depends on a blatant straw man that pigeonholes contemporary comedy as the onetime "province of angsty and possibly drug-addled white guys making jokes about their needy girlfriends and airplane food"—a bold swipe at the likes of Bill Hicks, Marc Maron, and Jerry Seinfeld. Garber not only dismisses the complexity of these performers' comedy, but she also neglects a wealth of comedians of color and women comedians who perform much of the same intellectual labor as those more recent comedians she exalts. The work of Moms Mabley, Dick Gregory, Joan Rivers, Phyllis Diller, and Lily Tomlin engaged with the social politics of their

time while also imagining radical futures where political power would be redistributed and cultural citizenship would be guaranteed. Indeed, Rebecca Krefting's influential work on "charged humor"—that is, politically engaged humor that contests social injustice and the marginalization of minoritized citizens—clearly demonstrates how comedians see themselves not just as entertainers, but very often as advocates, gadflies, and even moral authorities.[3] While Garber admits that Carlin, Pryor, and Rivers were engaged in "productive subversion," she hesitates to elevate them to the public intellectual status she so readily affords to Schumer and company.

But Garber does make one point that even scholars of humor and comedy might build upon in their own work: the reception of these comedians as intellectuals. While we can find intellectualism in the work of humorists and comedians dating back to the earliest days of American humor, we would be well served to examine not just what these individuals said, but the power they were afforded in the public sphere as knowledgeable, credible articulators of these ideas. Late-night television was long been a forum for this kind of intellectual performance, as shows such as *Politically Incorrect* (1993–2002) gave stand-up comedians equal footing with academics, activists, and politicians. When Janeane Garofalo decried Tea Partiers as racists to Keith Olbermann on MSNBC or Dennis Miller railed against liberal "snowflakes" on Fox News's *The O'Reilly Factor* (1996–2017), they were mobilizing their public status as prominent comedians to vocalize their personal political investments. Similarly, when Sarah Silverman appeared at the Democratic National Convention, she channeled her popularity as a comedian to draw attention to the need for unity among Democrats after a tense showdown between the party's nominee, Hillary Clinton, and her primary opponent, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, whom Silverman had publicly supported throughout the primary. Garofalo, Miller, and Silverman demonstrate stand-up comedians' long-standing commitment to engaging with the major issues and ideas of their times. In fact, one might rightly argue that such engagement is essential to what comedians do. Comedians are rare as entertainers in that their acts are in a constant state of flux, as jokes may be tweaked depending on the venue, the audience, or the day's events. They must be rhetorically sophisticated about assessing and understanding the context they are entering into in any given performance to ensure maximum comedic effectiveness. Furthermore, the very art of stand-up comedy requires performers to assume an upright posture and to address (and respond to) the audience in front of them; this essential posturing conveys "status and power as well as qualities of aggression and authority."[4] By necessity, they are very often astute observers of the sociopolitical moment in which we live,

prepared to comment on it and defend their point of view against potentially unresponsive or hostile audiences.

The public roles that comedians have assumed over time warrants our continuing attention, and this collection draws attention to recent endeavors along these lines. Our focus on the present has two goals. First, we want to direct scholarly consideration to both emerging and established comedians, some of whom are being discussed here at length by academics for the first time. Second, we want to consider the current social and cultural moment as one of change—technologically, politically, and intellectually. To this end, we continue the critical conversation around stand-up comedy as a cultural form that is, in the words of Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt, "uniquely rhetorical and capable of engaging discourses of social change by calling into question dominant cultural practices and assumptions."[5] Discussing stand-up comedians as public intellectuals allows the writers included here to consider the enduring importance of both comedians and intellectuals to US culture and the national discourse around social and political issues. We hope that this work furthers the ongoing public and scholarly conversation of the sociopolitical *and* intellectual significance of comedy in the United States.

Before proceeding any further, we need to unpack the term "public intellectual," a concept that is seemingly self-evident in the naming and yet takes on many meanings depending on who is using it. Most discussions of intellectualism rightfully return to Antonio Gramsci's foundational work on traditional and organic intellectuals. Whereas traditional intellectuals continue the long-standing convention of learned individuals being trained within the academy for lives of institutional service and administration, the organic intellectual emerges from within the group itself to inspire, organize, and lead her people. Gramsci proposed that "All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."[6] Edward Said largely supports this notion, noting how both radical and reactionary movements have found leadership through the labor of intellectuals.[7] Said importantly adds:

> The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by gov-

> ernments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.[8]

We can see in Said's words an affinity with Rebecca Krefting's aforementioned proposal that charged humor serves to empower the marginalized through a direct confrontation with power structures that perpetuate inequality and disenfranchisement. Especially important here is the idea of the public intellectual as a communicator both of and for these people. Megan Garber herself admits that "laughter [serves] as a lubricant for cultural conversations—to help us to talk about the things that needed to be talked about,"[9] an idea often articulated by humor scholars. Regina Barreca, for instance, contends that humor and comedy have "always been the most effective way to put abstract impressions into specific and precise language: to reduce experience, emotion, or thought into its essence—without misrepresenting it—is a kind of alchemy."[10] Stand-up comedians must be able to build intimate relationships with their audiences, and their ability to do so allows them to push against established worldviews, thereby prompting laughter.[11] The artfulness of stand-up comedy lies in the careful combination of complex ideas, accessible communication, and engaging performance. If comedians falter on any of these fronts, they risk alienating their audience.

This is not to say that all comedians assert themselves as public intellectuals; rather, understanding comedians as such requires us to give credit to the arduous task of translating nuanced concepts, theories, or positions in a way that is succinct, understandable, and captivating. In his study of public intellectuals, Richard A. Posner observes that most intellectuals remain in the academy because their role as specialists rarely prepares them for a life of public intellectualism, in which they have to serve occasionally as a "critical commentator addressing a nonspecialist audience on matters of broad public concern."[12] Much of that labor, Posner argues, rests on journalists, who explain the ideas for a general audience.[13] Posner's definition, therefore, distinguishes between a scenario in which the intellectual works within their academic discipline to develop sophisticated ideas and the journalist who translates that intellectual's ideas for a reading public, and a second scenario in which the public intellectual translates his or her ideas directly for the public through editorials, talk show appearances, and trade books. According to Posner, then, stand-up comedians may be translators, but they are rarely public intellectuals.

In his recent book, *The Ideas Industry*, Daniel W. Drezner separates public intellectuals from thought leaders. While he acknowledges that both groups

engage in "acts of intellectual creation," public intellectuals have a broad knowledge they can use to critique and even expose "intellectual charlatans," whereas "thought leaders" tend to become cheerleaders for a single, game-changing idea.[14] Boiling it down to a series of oppositions, Drezner sees public intellectuals generally to be critics, skeptics, and pessimists by trade, and thought leaders as creators, evangelists, and optimists.[15] In reading this list, one can see how stand-up comedians can move among these categories. Like public intellectuals, stand-up comedians benefit from a certain status, wherein they develop an outsider personality that allows them to present themselves as uncompromised individuals who can comment on their society without being tainted by its influence.[16] John Limon has gone so far as to suggest that stand-up comedians are compelled to channel their abjection into their art, which allows them to escape it precisely by "living it as an act."[17] Similarly, Jessyka Finley explores how Black women comics have employed stand-up comedy "from the position of their own marginality . . . as an attempt to equalize the duties and responsibilities of citizenship and everyday life."[18] On the other hand, stand-up comedy is a commercial endeavor that requires participants to satisfy their customers in order to achieve a livable income, let alone popularity and prestige.

For the latter reason, Elizabeth Bruenig of *The New Republic* dismissed Garber's argument because the Jon Stewarts and Stephen Colberts of the comedy world possess a "special motivation to flatter their audiences . . . win some laughs and get good ratings."[19] This rather facile response echoes a vulgar Marxism that fails to acknowledge the sophistication of stand-up comedy as an artform, preferring instead to dismiss it out of hand as commercial dreck. Again, we might return to Said, who argued that rather than dismissing, for example, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre for his friendships and rivalries, one should embrace "these complications [to] give texture and tension to what he said, expos[ing] him as a fallible human being, not a dreary and moralistic preacher."[20] Indeed, comedians are very often what Lawrence E. Mintz has called "*negative exemplars*" whose numerous defects allow us not only to find them amusing, but to identify with them.[21] It is here, with our guard down, that we may become open to new ideas through suggestion or musing rather than overbearing didacticism. Bambi Haggins proposes this very notion at the end of her influential study of post-soul African American stand-up comedians:

> Although the black comedy of both the civil rights era comics and post-soul comics, like the entertainment-based moments of philanthropy discussed earlier, might seem unlikely repositories for serious

> discourse on race and class, it is within spaces not marked as necessarily pedantic or particularly threatening that folks might actually become open to questioning their ideological presuppositions—whether during their spectatorial experience or in their postviewing musing. And the comic messenger makes a difference.[22]

In a culture long criticized for its anti-intellectualism, stand-up comedians in the United States have become one avenue for the exploration and promotion of a range of ideas, whether one is discussing gender roles, immigration, post-racialism, or mental illness. Even if the idea is not originally their own, it is rather hard to dismiss completely the valuable work being performed by such comedians in rendering these ideas public, accessible, and (perhaps most impressively) funny.

With this observation in mind, we might be better served by shifting our understanding of "public intellectual" from an identity in society to a type of labor one can perform for the public. Discounting the social and cultural value of comedians who introduce, repackage, and endorse these ideas because they do so in a shorter form, in a commercial context, or on the backs of "real" intellectuals is an arbitrary distinction. Both labors are important, and just as journalists provide a valuable service in translating ideas for their readers, so too do comedians, although they provide that valuable service in a different medium and context. Both "services" are intellectual in nature; they are simply different in the kind of intellectual labor that they perform compared to the specialist based in a university setting. Considering stand-up comedians as public intellectuals, therefore, allows us to examine different roles that comedians play within our national discourse while also re-examining the oft-cited presumption that the United States has long been afflicted by anti-intellectualism—at least, periodically.[23] In a political moment when a president attempts to enact authoritarian measures and the very concept of truth is called into question, comedy becomes an invaluable weapon for interrogating the powers that be. At the same time, comedy can empower the same individuals, and as the #MeToo movement has shown, some comedians misuse the power to demoralize and subjugate others rather than directing it toward defusing oppressive officials and power structures. The Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby's 2018 special *Nanette*, for example, powerfully addresses how comedy can reinforce the domination it claims to resist. Scholars of comedy have the opportunity and obligation to reveal how comedy and laughter both can undermine and reinforce the hegemony.[24]

We should also make clear that we are not claiming that scholars have not considered stand-up comedians as intellectuals before. They most certainly

have done so, though they have rarely used that term. Rather, by focusing our attention here on recent stand-up comedians we seek to explore how stand-up comedians have expanded into other media, including books, television shows, social media, and film, to exalt their various intellectual priorities. In so doing, they do not so much give up their reputation as stand-up comedians as leverage themselves into the role of public intellectual, very often of the organic variety theorized by Gramsci. This framing builds on foundational and emerging scholarship on stand-up comedians as anthropologists (Koziski), social and cultural mediators (Mintz), cultural critics (Gilbert), activists (Krefting), and rhetoricians (Meier and Schmitt) to explore how the enduring and changing significance of stand-up comedians impacts our social, cultural, and intellectual life in the United States.[25] In the chapters that follow, scholars (much like their subjects) adapt an accessible approach to analyze, understand, and even critique how stand-up comedians present complex ideas to their public. They complicate Garber's presumptions while conscientiously avoiding simple explanations of how these comedians balance politics, comedy, and commentary. Through these nuanced explorations, *Taking a Stand* reveals that quite often the most pleasurable comedy in fact offers a forceful, even radical stance that deserves more attention and analysis than those outside of comedy are willing to give it.

No edited collection is either complete or without flaws, and we want to acknowledge the deficits of this collection. We had commissioned chapters on more women comedians, for example, but various circumstances led those authors to withdraw. The absence of those contributions is made even more lamentable by the volume of excellent feminist scholarship, both historically and recently, on women's stand-up comedy. We hope this present collection will continue the discussion on stand-up comedians as public figures, including articles and books that will address the gaps herein.

The chapters have been clustered thematically, starting with chapters that focus on the local perception of bodies, broadening to works that address the interactions between subjectivities and audiences, and finishing with pieces about comedians working with broad national themes ranging from religion to politics. As with any organizational approach, many of the chapters could fit seamlessly in other sections, but the current groupings bring order to an otherwise often unwieldy topic.