THE JOKE IS ON US
POLITICAL COMEDY IN (LATE) NEOLIBERAL TIMES
Chapter 6

The Political Economy of Late-Night Comedy

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This chapter explores the degree to which comedy can speak truth to power, especially in a time when those in power use comedy to serve their own truths. From a systemic and institutional perspective, I position late-night comedy television shows in the overall political economy of media. Three insights are generated about the challenges that comedians face at a neoliberal, structural level: the expectation for institutional returns, the containment of comedy as small revolutions, and the advance of a cynical labor that precedes and informs modern comedy production. I conclude with some thoughts on what late-night shows and their audiences might do to better serve the public interest and counter co-optations by powerful figures and institutions.

Nearly two decades ago on NBC’s Saturday Night Live, a sketch called “Conspiracy Theory Rock” delivered a blistering critique of NBC, its parent company General Electric, media executives, and the overall concentrations of “media-opoly” power in mainstream networks (Conspiracy 2011). Although it wasn’t subtle about its targets, the show’s producers and other vetters decided that the sketch’s comedic stylings were enough to land it a prime time spot on national television. With a dose of institutional self-deprecation and a sense that the consequences would be as fleeting as the laughs, the sketch aired, the show went on, and business continued—no harm done.

As this example points out, speaking truth to power is a tricky endeavor. Speaking truth to power through comedy is even trickier. After the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump to the highest office in the United States (a result arguably attained through some comedic prowess [Bershidsky 2016]), media pundits asked a reasonable question: “Is late-night political comedy useless?” (Crouch 2016). Night after night, joke after joke, our political comedians take to the airwaves to deliver smart and hilarious barbs at the forces that continue to devastate our environment, promote social
inequalities, and slash public services, among other issues. Given the ways that politics and business as usual continue unperturbed, however, comedy with the best intentions of social change can often seem like a molehill looking up at a mountain.

In a trend that shows few signs of waning, we also increasingly see those in power using comedy to serve their own political ends. Consider how candidates such as Sarah Palin, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump have been both made fun of and performed on shows like Saturday Night Live. Comedy by the powerful has shifted from an informal tool to a formal expectation. Even the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency now engages in satirical tweets (Schwartz 2015; for some historical background, see also Waisanen 2015). Emily Nussbaum (2017) notes how

by 2016 the wheel had spun hard the other way: now it was the neo-fascist strongman who held the microphone and an army of anonymous dirty-joke dispensers who helped put him in office. Online, jokes were powerful accelerants for lies—a tweet was the size of a one-liner, a “dank meme” carried farther than any op-ed. . . . Ads looked like news and so did propaganda and so did actual comedy, on both the right and the left—and every combination of the four was labelled “satire.” In a perverse twist, Trump may even have run for President as payback for a comedy routine: Obama’s lacerating takedown of him at the 2011 White House Correspondents’ Dinner. (p. 1-2)

Comedy has always been porous in both form and content, but there are now larger developments at hand. Nussbaum’s comment indicates that comedy’s boundaries have been collapsed in a swirl of players, platforms, and policies. If anything, this suggests that scholars should be thinking more about the higher, structural levels of influence in which political comedy plays out.

Examining comedy in neoliberalism’s context is hence a timely endeavor. Neoliberalism has been defined as “the defining political economic paradigm of our time—it refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit” (McChesney 2008, 283–284). It is “a philosophy viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action” (Dean 2009, 51). Neoliberalism has invaded just about every sphere of modern life, from politics to religion to academia, circumscribing substance and style to the range of what is profitable (McChesney 2008, 421). So it should come as little surprise that comedy itself might be affected by the opaque pressures of neoliberal structures.

While I’m generally supportive of political comedy, my previous work has analyzed the problems with crossing politics and comedy from a textual
perspective, recognizing that all types of communication have limitations and tradeoffs (e.g., comedy's fixation with distortion and difficulties in dealing with complexity) (see Waisanen 2013a). In this chapter, I use the "political economy of media" as a perspective for thinking about how comedy's potential for social change can be thought about from a higher, structural viewpoint, especially when positioned within neoliberalism's architectures and offshoots. Scholarly work on comedy more often than not looks to single texts or audience reception to address how comedy works and what it does (Becker and Waisanen 2013). A next step is to focus on how neoliberalism affects political comedy, especially in late-night shows that act as one of the main platforms for developing and repeating certain systemic commitments.

Political economists of media tend to think about the role that systems and institutions play in media and depoliticization (McChesney 2008, 12). My goal here is less to examine the specifics of policies than to think more structurally about political comedy as a heuristic lens for examining late-night comedy shows. Ultimately, "The central question for media political economists is whether, on balance, the media system serves to promote or undermine democratic institutions and practices. . . . And equipped with that knowledge, what are the options for citizens to address the situation" (McChesney 2008, 12). With these questions in mind, I point toward "the discourses of the social structure which clearly have an existence which is in some measure at least independent of comic texts" (Palmer 1987, 59–60).

I only bring up examples from shows, particular jokes or bits, or other features as illustrative of more general problems in comedy's wranglings with neoliberalism writ large. Part analysis, part thought experiment, I offer three interlocking themes about late-night shows in the political economy of media that would largely remain hidden without a structural criticism. I conclude with thoughts on what comedy producers and audiences might do to better serve the public interest and counter co-optations by powerful figures and institutions.

**INSTITUTIONAL RETURN**

Late-night shows answer to institutional profits. Amidst all the comedy writing and performance that carries through our airwaves, profit-making still remains the core concern around which most work transpires. Although this fact is seldom acknowledged, late-night shows drive profit for their respective overlords, so much that any show that works against that mission will quickly be cut. Just ask Larry Wilmore, whose short-lived show on Comedy Central experimented with pointed debates and continually focused on U.S. race
relations, leading to low viewerships and an eventual cancellation (Littleton 2016).

This isn’t to judge the quality of late-night shows and their writing and performance skills, but rather to highlight how the institutional constraint of profit-making limits the types of comedy we’re even able to see. Scholars now underscore how “strong hegemonic elements” can exist within programs like *The Daily Show*, creating a “paradox of sociopolitical comedy” (Anderson and Kincaid 2013, 1). As much as late-night television shows lambaste public foolishness at every level, they are still part of many of the same institutional structures they critique.

If there’s any fault in modern comedy studies, it may be that we’ve been too forgiving of how, for example, Stephen Colbert relies on advertising dollars to keep his show going. Our political comedians generally do a masterful job of working within those structures and pushing the boundaries of what can be thought and said. To Colbert’s credit, he has gone from late-night cable to a mainstream channel and increasingly amped up his political critiques, especially of the Trump administration (Reilly 2017).

Yet the elephant in the room still remains corporate advertising as a necessary condition to continued success. Ultimately, many corporate sponsors are happy for the jokes, sketches, and other comedic elements to fly thick about political figures each evening. They know that at the end of the day advertisers will still pay up, pockets will be filled, and portions of these monies will still flow from their media organizations to those same representatives, who won’t get in their way when it comes to creating media policies and regulations.

An objection could be made that these steps are too removed from the day-to-day operations of late-night shows. But this is precisely where thinking about political comedy from a higher, neoliberal, and structural level becomes useful. We can certainly look to the compelling comic strategies and effects that these shows manifest with viewing audiences (Becker, Xenos, and Waisanen 2010), and how they promote divergent thought in an environment where our corporate and governmental leaders would rather citizens focus on short-sighted or error-filled narratives (Waisanen 2011). If it’s the case that the funding that keeps shows like Colbert’s or even Samantha Bee’s *Full Frontal* in place trickles up to decision-makers who have no interest in the social and political changes these shows implicitly and explicitly assert, however, it’s more than a thought experiment to argue that the sum of these efforts may be as much about neoliberal perpetuation as radical insight.

Although it may seem like a glum prognosis, to get accurate about the comedy’s conditions of possibility, it’s worth targeting how comedy speaking truth to power is dwarfed by the larger neoliberal players and structures who have the last word on political decisions. In the “commedification”
of the public arena (Szakolczai 2012, 4), armies of writers and performers produce cutting-edge, hilarious material that makes important contributions to the public discourse at the cost of sustaining powerful actors whose jobs are defined by profit and loss statements. There’s a common saying in comedy that “you’re only as good as your last joke” (Carr and Greeves 2006, n.p.). With neoliberalism in mind, perhaps a clarification is order—“you’re only as good as your last joke’s ability to fund this institution and its network of influence.”

SMALL REVOLUTIONS

George Orwell once said that jokes are “tiny revolution[s]” (Orwell 1968, 284). Looked at from a purely textual viewpoint, this comment suggests that Trevor Noah’s or Jimmy Fallon’s nightly prods at politicians play a small but significant part in fomenting incremental changes. Yet, when thought about less as a matter of formal properties and more in terms of comedy’s structural milieu, the phrase unlocks another idea: that jokes are tiny contributions to subversion. What’s worse, using another meaning of “revolution” (Waisanen 2013b), they may only bring all of us full circle, revolving to the same conditions we started with.

This idea is worth taking seriously. Among the national and global flows of finance, the widening gaps between rich and poor, and corporations’ influence on governments (some find the whole point of neoliberalism is not just corporate influence but to eliminate politics altogether [Brown 2015]), nightly monologues by Seth Meyers look very small indeed. That the jokes, sketches, parodies, and more may only bring us all back to exactly where we began—comedy as a peripheral revolution around a neoliberal axis—lessens the stakes for late-night shows in the political economy of media further.

There’s good reason to position late-night shows in terms of small revolutions. In the United States, as a whole, late-night shows are relentless. Neoliberalism is little without the offer of endless choice and competition (Kotsko 2017), so not only are there many choices to watch at around the same time—an impossible task—but most shows run just about every week night. The sheer volume of comic material and choices has its own effect: none of us can take it all in. Even when a particularly insightful or funny segment from Jimmy Kimmel goes viral, it’s all in the knowledge that another show will be produced tomorrow—not because we need it, but because relentlessness is the condition upon which most late-night shows are premised.

A late-night segment might get us to think momentarily about counterfactual political possibilities, but systemically, these shows keep bringing us back to their same starting points the following day. John Oliver’s Last Week
Tonight is one exception to this trend that further focuses the problem. Having at least a week between airings has allowed Oliver to create something more reflective and investigative than what a lot of other shows offer. It also airs on a channel whose content is less directed by advertising dollars and, most important, in a Sunday night spot when there are few other late-night comedy options. At a minimum, by operating off the beaten schedule, Last Week Tonight offers viewers a bit less paralysis and more distinction in the overall political economy of media.

That said, a fragmented media landscape only compounds the problem of late-night comedy as small revolutions. The audiences for these shows are still small and skewed in the younger, liberal direction. In a national U.S. poll, the Pew Research Center revealed that 24 percent of those surveyed found cable news the most helpful source for learning about the presidential election, compared to only 3 percent for late-night comedy shows (Gottfried et al. 2017, “Beyond,” par 7). Overall, the level of usage differed notably by political party identification for late night comedy shows. They are a source for three-in-ten Democrats, but only 16% of Republicans and a quarter of independents. About a third of those ages 18-29 (34%) learned about the campaigns and candidates from late night comedy shows, higher than any other age group. (par 7)

If late-night comedy influences political thought in the United States, it’s mostly constrained to a niche portion of the population who are already sympathetic to its politics.

Additionally, although there have been spikes in viewership for the more politically oriented shows, such as Colbert’s and Bee’s during the Trump administration (Nededog and Gould 2017), the least political of the shows, such as Fallon and Kimmel, tend to skew more moderate (The Political 2016). If late-night shows that generally engage in political critiques are leftist “echo chambers” (Jamieson and Capella 2008), rarely preaching to the unconverted, then the problem of small revolutions becomes even more acute—those watching the comedy shows always end at the same place they started.

It’s not just about leftists only hearing what they want to hear, however. It’s what the other side hears and does on a systemic level with these shows that makes these revolutions even tinier. Caitlin Flanagan (2017) makes the case directly: “Though aimed at blue-state sophisticates, late-night comedy shows are an unintended but powerful form of propaganda for conservatives.” In essence,

When Republicans see these harsh jokes—which echo down through the morning news shows and the chattering day’s worth of viral clips, along with those
The problem of late-night comedy is not isolated. As Gottfried notes, the late-night shows are a national U.S. obsession. According to Gottfried, only 16% of households with television viewers regularly watch late-night comedy programs. This is a significant shift from the past, where late-night shows were primarily watched by younger audiences. Now, the audience for late-night comedy has expanded to include older viewers as well.

However, this shift is not without its problems. As The Atlantic reports, conservative media are replete with these sentiments. Conservative critiques reduce to the "why can't we get Johnny Carson back" variety, and this certainly isn't an argument for Samantha Bee to stop her scathing assessments of her political opponents, it does beg the question of whether these shows do much at all in politics. In the political economy of media, if they are as much a foil as a source of relief, then in a real sense they may be as much about neoliberal reinscription as anything else. Comedy as small revolutions is a snake biting its own tail, so to speak.

For the more left-wing audience, the Trump era has been a turning point for late-night comedy. The "echo unconverted, acute"—those who started the Trump era—has made the late-night format more relevant than ever before. As Peter Sloterdijk (1988) highlighted, we're dealing with "highly armed centers of private reason, conglomerations of power bristling with weapons and science-supported systems of hyperproduction. None of them would even dream of bending to a communicative reason; rather, under the pretense of communication, they want to subjugate the latter to its private conditions" (544). In the political economy of media, late-night shows may have the
recursive potential to innovate upon the ground from which they stand, but they are goaded to incorporate and return to that ground at every juncture.

CYNICAL LABOR

Comedy doesn’t often get thought about as labor. Late-night shows may seem like all fun and games, but the products we’re presented with involve a tremendous amount of work. It’s common to hear comedians say that they had to write ten (or more) jokes just to find one that’s effective. In this sense, there’s a lot of hidden labor that also goes into producing, say, Bill Maher’s monologues every Friday night. And that’s before all the testing that goes on. Comedians and their teams adhere to data analytic protocols: did the audience laugh or not, what worked and didn’t, and so on. These are useful yardsticks for just about any endeavor, but take on a different look when positioned with neoliberalism’s endless drive toward accountability, measurement, ranking, and so on. In this larger sense, we should think both about the labor of comedy production and the labor that viewers are expected to perform.

Before getting a job on a late-night show, those who become writers, performers, and others involved in comedy production perform immense labor at a variety of institutions. Comedians coming from improv and sketch comedy backgrounds typically put in countless hours at organizations like The Second City in Chicago, the Groundlings in Los Angeles, or the Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) in New York City and L.A. Each of these institutions has signature emphases, such as The Second City’s focus on doing political satire, or the Groundlings’ character-behavioral comedy (Lynn 2004).

The joy of working in the craft and the communal structures that support it generally offer some rewards for all the time spent perfecting material and performances. But much of this labor is freely given, often for paying audiences, which has occasionally become a full-blown national controversy in its own right. One of the founders of the UCB commented that “I don’t see what [improvisers] do as labor. I see guys [sic] onstage having fun. It’s not a job” (Zinoman 2013, par 21). Trying to get a job in an area where authority figures tell you this isn’t a job highlights a structural cynicism toward comedic labor itself—a desire to occlude the actual work of comedy as work.

Although it’s more of an individualistic craft, those coming from stand-up comedy backgrounds perform a great deal of community labor by writing and traveling in teams to a variety of institutions, such as the Improv stand-up theaters all over the United States. This labor also involves many jobs at low or no-pay for a long time period. There’s more institutional support for paying gigs in stand-up in general, a fact that some argue has led to more diversity in the comedic sub-field than in others (Zinoman 2013, pars 24–25). Once one
finds “success” in industry (if ever) on late-night shows, among other routes for a comedy career, this kind of labor is only intensified greatly in the service of advertising and corporate returns.

While there’s much to praise about the supportive organizations and network that can be built in a comedy career, what’s critical to highlight from a systemic viewpoint are the habits and routines that have taken place over the course of that long labor period. If, as Kenneth Burke (1984) (referring to Thorsten Veblen) reminds us, we all face the danger of “trained incapacity” (7) in any profession (i.e., any line of work habitually commits us to acting and thinking in certain ways to the exclusion of others), then one danger of comedy as neoliberal labor is its commitment to a constant negativity. At the core of modern joking is slamming every topic, event, or person that it can with a negative attitude (Carter 2001). While it’s never talked about in this way, constantly applying a lens of “this is stupid” or “what’s weird or unusual here” (see Besser, Roberts, and Walsh 2013) are the horse blinders of comedy, which are elevated to an incessant level by late-night shows.

Neoliberalism works on a subjective level by having individuals internalize a certain “interpretive repertoire” of response, such as entrepreneurial approaches that seek to compete with and reject others as a matter for routine performance (Scharff 2016, 111, 107). Neoliberalism also operates by trying to get citizens to believe that there simply are no alternatives to the present conditions, with its attendant ways of being, thinking, and acting (Fisher 2009). People step into spaces that are already constituted in certain ways (Charland 1987), so trained incapacity becomes especially relevant to a neoliberal, systemic view of late-night political comedy as limiting alternative ways of operating.

As scholars have highlighted, negativity can be incredibly important for critique, but it can also easily devolve into a relentless, detached cynicism unmoored from political action or affirmation (Waisanen 2013a; Hart and Hartelius 2007). With an endless cynicism, comedy’s ambivalence can be a problem for getting political footing and structures for governance (Waisanen 2013). In the name of institutional returns, we are bid to never stop producing, never call it a day, and never stop laughing as much as possible. This is partly why we have so much comedy flooding every conceivable space now, so that even the powerful can’t just tell an occasional joke, but must increasingly labor as entertainers. Hillary Clinton’s appearance on Between Two Ferns breaks records but still becomes a routine matter as cynical labor (she initiated the performance, after all) (Jarvey 2016, 7).

Organizational communication scholars have highlighted the idea of “emotional labor” or “jobs in which workers are expected to display certain feelings in order to satisfy organizational role expectations” (Miller 2015, 73). Although a waiter or waitress may not feel like it, being “forced” to smile on
the job can be considered emotional labor. Similarly, there’s emotional labor in working on a late-night show through the pressure to view any and all topics through a negative lens. Since laughter is the sine qua non of the industry, laborers must produce or be subjected to laughter as a condition for the job. If “an essential aspect of power is that it only likes to laugh at its own jokes” (Sloterdijk 1988), one also has to wonder how much a hierarchy of laughter is forced upon those who would rather not laugh in acts of everyday labor. As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai (2017) underscore, “It may be that we hold our pleasures closer than our ethics. . . . Enjoyment, as the psychoanalytic tradition has always told us, is a serious thing” (242).

There’s also a cynicism about the labor of these shows and their effects built into the media industry’s structure. Many still assume that there should be hard distinctions between news and entertainment in a new media environment better seen in terms of hybrid features and functions (Williams and Delia Carpini 2011). In terms of late-night shows, Matt Carlson and Jason T. Peifer (2013) highlight the “boundary maintenance” that media and other powerful institutions continue to draw in these matters (333). Neoliberal actors and organizations love late night shows to the extent that they can be consigned to a separate, cynical, ineffectual space through news and entertainment distinctions.

As James Caron (2016) adroitly states, moreover, “The postmodern condition exacerbates the dilemma of ethical ridicule that has concerned Western thought for centuries: its apparent lack of centering norms or standard values for making comic judgments inevitably complicates the contemporary production and reception of satire”; it is “comic political speech, but it is not political speech” that can fit within the “realm of the serious speech acts of policy statements and civic actions” (157). One thinks about Stephen Colbert’s testimony in character before the U.S. Senate (Adams 2010)—what of it, in the end? Inherent to the form and propelled by neoliberal institutions, “Because satire is structured as both—and neither—serious and nonserious, it falls prey to being understood as one or the other, as political speech or as mere entertainment” (Caron 2016, 165).

What starts out in comedy theaters as unpaid labor propelled by an axiom that “this is for fun, it’s not a job” is perpetuated at a systemic level as cynicism about the labor itself. Studies of the effects of political comedy show that audiences often “discount” jokes and other humorous textual devices (Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, and Byrne 2007), but a cynical discounting of late-night in general presents an additional challenge to the political potential in such work. And, “The more a modern society appears to be without alternatives, the more it will allow itself to be cynical. In the end, it is ironical about its own legitimation” (Sloterdijk 1988, 112). Lacking legitimation sets the stage for the growth of other political platforms; governments aren’t spaces willing to accept the 1970s conservative fact rem: their indi every nig potential person ra

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willing to remain without anyone or anything in charge, at the end of the day. According to Andres Huyssen, for instance, “The growth of cynicism during the 1970s actually provided the cultural soil for the revival of the ideological conservatism of the 1980s” (as cited in Sloterdijk 1988, xii).

Despite the teams that go into producing late-night shows, an additional fact remains: these shows are still mostly presented to viewers through their individual hosts. Whether it’s Conan O’Brien or John Oliver, almost every night viewers are implicitly asked to view political comedy’s political potential in terms of a great person narrative that focuses on an extraordinary person rather than citizens’ collective capabilities (see Mathews 2014, xvi).

Along these lines, Peter Sloterdijk (1988) argues that “cynicism” as an “enlightened false consciousness,” has become a hard-boiled, shadowy cleverness that has split courage off from itself, holds anything positive to fraud, and is intent only on somehow getting through life” (546). It’s the difference between “buffoonery” and “good old nasty satire,” the kind that Diogenes exemplified as a “distance-creating mocker, as a biting and malicious individualist who acts as though he needs nobody and who is loved by nobody because nobody escapes his crude unmasking gaze uninjured” (89, 4). The distinction between a toothless cynicism and a productive kynicism remains useful to thinking about how to speak truth to power. Yet under neoliberalism’s terms one fault in this line of thought becomes apparent—it still presents the extraordinary individual rather than movement as the natural loci of influence for anything comedy can and should do.

Finally, the labor of comedy cannot be separated from its invitations and interactions with actual audiences. It may seem too obvious, but these are late night shows, likely the time of day when audiences are least willing or ready to think about politics in much other than quick, shallow, ethereal ways. The day is done, so late-night bids for the path of least resistance, made material by laughs signifying that there’s not much energy to be spent. After all the labor of putting late-night shows together, viewers are too left with a cynical warrant: “Don’t labor too much about all this yourselves.” The comedy and laughter might be useful supplements or inspiring antidotes to political activism, but it may be too little labor for neoliberalism’s challenges, highlighting a problem that Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) has developed at length: we become “ironic spectators” and little else.

The system urges us to be “well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its false¬ness is already reflexively buffered” (Sloterdijk 1988, 5). At the same time, as much as modern laughter is “the shock of dislocation when mediation is revealed” (Hariman 2008, 262), the revealing of mediation can also serve to relocate and reinscribe one into the same picture again. Like the paradoxes built into Cecily Strong’s character on Saturday Night Live, “The Girl You
Wish You Hadn’t Started a Conversation With at a Party” (Coggan 2016),
viewers consistently receive the same message: it’s time to put labor into
being preachy about politics, but whatever happens, don’t put labor into being
preachy about politics.

TOWARD COLLECTIVE CHEEKINESS

Examining late-night comedy shows from a neoliberal viewpoint allows us
to see a great deal that would remain hidden otherwise. To this point, criti-
cics have seldom addressed the ways that mandates for institutional returns
guide decision making and influence what can even happen in this industry.
The institutional and systemic pressures that make late-night comedy small
revolutions are occluded by discourse highlighting “the power of comedy,”
riddled with questionable assumptions as it is. Nor have we much addressed
the cynical labor that goes into comedy careers, makes its way into institu-
tions, and has become a way of life for many writers, performers, and even
the audiences watching late-night comedy shows.

Raising these challenges is not meant to undermine the many positive
characteristics late-night comedy shows offer public discourse. Amber Day
(2011) reminds us that much comedy provides sympathetic audiences with
motivation and an opportunity to incrementally build opposition to powerful
forces. A stultifying joylessness is no answer to political dogmatism. But tak-
ing a high-level perspective on late-night shows allows us to see what range
of possibilities may exist for radical social critique. In this spirit, I’d like to
offer some thoughts on how late night shows and audiences might become
less limited by the systemic constraints discussed in this chapter.

For the time being, late-night comedy television programming isn’t going
anywhere, so I explore the following to find fissures for social change that
might blossom into something more along the way. Given her finding that
“corporate and anticorporate rhetorics do not oppose one another so much
as feed off and respond to one another. . . . The market is able to mutate in
response to adversity,” Christine Harold (2007) underscores that a productive
“pranking” of all sorts should address “the patterns of power rather than its
contents” (xxxii, 112). It may be the case that “neoliberalism maintains its
influence on political culture in large part because of its deep embeddedness
in political language” (Ong 2017, 1), but it’s undoubtedly in the systemic
patterns and forms of public life that that deep embeddedness thrives. Since
“contemporary commercial culture is dependent on consumers having some-
what routine responses to words and images” (think cynical labor), truly bold,
jarring, and more complex responses not easily reinscribed into present con-
ditions should be invented (Harold 2007, 107). In Harold’s terms, productive

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responses to hegemony mean “no longer working against, but rather working with” and “taking the cultural logics of late capitalism so seriously that they begin to undo themselves” (162).

Against a paradigm that reduces human beings to atomistic competitors, one hope for late-night producers and audiences may be to focus on a “collective cheekiness” capable of critique, realistic assessments of the larger structural challenges comedy faces, and an optimism about the possibilities for many people to construct a common voice around what society most needs. I construct this suggestion as a counter not only to the pressures identified above, but also in line with scholarly thought in these areas. In response to the reproduction of neoliberal policies that isolates and rules via blameworthiness (like cynical labor), Kotsko (2017) argues for a “conscious collective agency” and efforts to emerge as a “meaningful ‘we’” (493, 497–498, 500, 506–507).

At the same time, Sloterdijk (1988) argued for “a source of enlightenment in which the secret of its vitality is hidden: cheekiness (“Frechheit,” a word whose meaning lies somewhere between cheekiness and imprudence)” (99–100). Cheekiness once had a positive connotation as “a productive aggressivity, letting fly at the enemy: ‘brave, bold, lively, plucky, untamed, ardent’” (103). Examples of a politically productive cheekiness in history include Martin Luther (who signaled frivolity in “here I stand . . .”), the carnival (“a substitute revolution for the poor”), the Bohemians, and above all, Diogenes, who generated forms of argumentation “respectable thinking does not know how to deal with” (117. 101). Just as pompous, sublime war rhetoric can be brought down to earth through comic rhetorical devices like “bathos” (Gilbert and Lucaites 2015, 382, 386), strategies for boldness against neoliberal recitations can surely be found within comic traditions.

Diogenes, of course, was a loner with little time for others, so we should remain conscious about putting into play cooperative public campaigns. We also need to recognize how the presidency of Donald Trump has put Diogenes on the national stage. Trump is an earthy, pretentious, pleasure-seeking, “go it alone” individualistic mocker in power par excellence. This turning of Diogenes on his head was once characterized as a “master cynicism” or “cheekiness that has changed side,” as in Marie Antoinette’s sick joke, “why don’t they eat cake” (Sloterdijk 188, 111–112). A way through these conditions is to draw attention to the patterns of power at play, “approach unchecked fantasy with caution” (McLeod 2014, 284), and above all, leave our media cocoons for collective mobilizations.

To get beyond the problem of comedy as small revolutions, citizens’ voices need to mean more than isolated laughs in safe settings. Attempting to build a common voice, the historic efforts of groups like ACT-UP manifest a collective cheekiness that was hard to miss and forwarded significant social changes (Christiansen and Hanson 1996). Many anti-Trump protest
signs created at marches around the United States too rise to the level of an
embodied, public, “collective cheekiness” that laughs, shouts, and speaks
truth to power in real geographical spaces that are hard to ignore (Kurtzman
2017, 4). In terms of late-night, Stephen Colbert’s intervention into the
White House Correspondent’s Dinner during the Bush administration—and
the forming of a satirical Super PAC to draw attention to ridiculous campaign
finance laws—were exceptional moments that set in motion further forms
of collective cheekiness among many viewers and Internet audiences (see
Waisanen 2018).

Crossing multiple platforms with such cheeky comic strategies also
appears to hold promise for countering neoliberal strongholds. Myles McNutt
(2017) has found that late-night show segments distributed throughout the
Internet prioritize a “collaboration common in the YouTube community at
large,” with sketches and all manner of content now “being ‘re-ritualized’ for
online audiences, disconnecting the segments from their linear broadcast con-
text and reframing them for nonlinear audiences in light of this one second-
ary space of distribution [for late night shows]” (569). At a minimum, new
media provide some opportunities to break beyond vertical media structures
so citizens can repurpose and build horizontal momentum for criticality while
on their computers, tablets, or phones.

Like the other authors in this collection, I have sought to advance scholarly
discussions about neoliberalism and comedy. These are topics easily swept
under the rug for the sake of laughs, careers, and as this chapter highlighted,
to reinforce distinctions between the serious and nonserious that too easily
return us to the status quo. They are difficult subjects to navigate, but
as election results continue to indicate, they’re now central to how politics
gets done. Ultimately, examining the political economy of late-night shows
reveals that comedy faces many systemic obstacles, challenging us to be
bolder, cheekier, hold more in common, and above all, think more deeply
about the systems in which we are all caught.

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