

Jokes That Bern: One, and That's Not Funny

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In her article, “Null and Nuller: Laughing about Injustice, from Jon Stewart to John Oliver,” Liz Jackson asks us to carefully problematize the potential relationship between humor and political passivity. She argues that we mistake humor to itself be a political act when it actually diverts us from political action by salving our inability to act politically. In so doing, she simultaneously points us to how entertainment-based responses to political issues, while they do have the potential to educate and stimulate political action (as Megan Boler has compellingly argued¹), they may have the effect of creating contexts where being humorously in the know itself becomes an enjoyable goal. Humor, she suggests, can set social justice concerns apart from the world in which they are disputed and put into action, and so in a sense objectify them into spectacles for enjoyment of our status as people who are “in the know.” This potential for subversive humor to create or reinforce an in-group is, I think, a return of superiority humor that helps confirm for the audience that their ability to understand political critique is enough. As Jackson puts it, the work of Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and John Oliver shames the audience for what they don’t know, and, in a complicated way, provides humorous relief for not having known what they do not have to know because they are in a position of privilege that shields them from having to be knowledgeable. Their ability to laugh, in other words, lets the audience off the hook for taking responsibility for the very inequality that enables their laughter.

Jackson’s analysis is useful for thinking about the Bernie Sanders/Hillary Clinton meme in which Bernie will always like or say the culturally sensitive thing - whether choosing the Mexican-style taco or knowing which music is most authentic - whereas Hillary will always choose something mass-market, like the Taco Bell Americanized taco, and show herself to be hopelessly white and fake. The meme, rather than focusing on reasonable critique of actual policy differences, shifts to not-so-covert classic sexism: for all the particular political critique one might make, ultimately, the problem with Hillary is that she is a woman who cannot be real, cannot adequately occupy the position of someone who understands difference, either because she has sold out to get as far as she has or because her negotiation of femininity and authority has made her brittle and false. Bernie, of course, is not shtick at all, he’s the real deal, and we know this because the meme shows us that his authenticity goes all the way down, even into areas he is unlikely to know about or care deeply about.

Because the meme focuses on the workings of humor more than the political stakes of humorous critique. It is humor for the sake of humor and so becomes humor as superiority, using sexism indirectly and thus dodging responsibility for its usage. We are not invited to wryly respond to Clinton’s political policy but are instead directed at her mask of inauthentic femininity and her desire to seem like she understands difference. We are not invited to consider Sanders’ plans for economic justice, but

rather to see him as an authentic Self, and to understand just how deeply Clinton is the inauthentic Other who can never become Self. So I think Jackson is right to point out that invitations to consider complicity in injustice are erased by enjoyment of humor. The meme recirculates sexism in the guise of hyper-progressivism, and does so with a delicious gleefulness that denies any potential for sexism. The doubled speech of humor allows incongruity, joy, and bias to circulate simultaneously and it is precisely the complexity of the utterance that enables those who articulate it to chide, “Can’t you take a joke?”

Ryan Broderick suggests that this meme positions Clinton as “fake geek girl” who tries to be down with it but misses the mark miserably and, as such, will never be one of the boys.² Amanda Hess considers the meme not only to replicate a kind of sexism (and I think ageism) that has Hillary hopelessly out of step in her tastes, but also to construct Sanders as in the know on topics that he clearly doesn’t know about, and, perhaps worse, to position him as interested in things that he has publicly rebuffed questions on; he wants to talk about issues and will not be sidetracked by the personal questions.³ Indeed, Hess suggests that the meme offsets his gruff refusal to answer trivial questions and so helps to soften his edge, while it positions Clinton as a perpetual corporate shill.

The meme positions Sanders as exaggeratedly authentic (he does have long-standing and passionate attachment to his political ideals) even on issues the real Sanders is not interested in. Hess writes:

When *New York* magazine’s Rembert Browne asked Sanders to name his favorite David Bowie song at *Fusion*’s January [Brown and Black Democratic Presidential Forum](#), Sanders replied, “I know he passed away, and the answer is that I wasn’t much of a follower of his.” Weeks later, Bernie [closed an Iowa speech](#) to the tune of “Starman,” and *Newsweek* raved that the choice “felt sincere.” Close readers of Bernie’s musical tastes know it was as calculated as any other candidate’s pandering playlist, but it “feels” sincere because Bernie feels sincere.

Sanders did not do well after his debate performance dated him as a 1960s radical, but this meme brings him up to date in literally inauthentic ways. This all happened, of course, in an election year, and the campaign propaganda on all sides was designed to use our biases and prejudices to encourage alliance with a particular candidate. But the meme not only functions by using sexism; it pre-empts our ability to point out sexism. If we do, we are out of step.

Jackson asks us to consider how we can use humor to “implicate and complicate,” and argues that we should not to let ourselves off the hook or replicate our complicity through our consumption and circulation of humor. I agree that this is tricky, and I don’t want to return to the joyless feminist who answers the lightbulb joke with “that’s not funny.” At the same time, subversive humor, because it tracks along the lines of power and crosses them in sometimes unexpected ways, does re-emerge to reinforce superiorities that should be “old-fashioned” by now. I admit that I began to lose patience with some political discussions against Clinton on facebook when the word “cigar” came up. Those moments where the seeming joy of riffing on Hillary’s inauthenticity verge into blaming her for her husband’s infidelity remind me that under that joy and even invited by that joyful abandon of seemingly absurdist humor,

are currents of the old gender superiority that clearly cling to even well-reasoned critiques of her political life. But maybe I just can't take a joke.

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1. Megan Boler, "The Daily Show and Political Activism," *Counterpunch*, 20 February 2007.
 2. Ryan Broderick, "There's A New 'Bernie Or Hillary' Meme, But Is It Just Reinforcing Sexist Stereotypes?," *Buzzfeed*, 2 February 2016, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/theres-a-new-bernie-or-hillary-meme-but-is-it-sexist-stereot#.saBkkNZA9Q>.
 3. Amanda Hess, "Bernie vs. Hillary: The Weird, Ceaseless, Kind of Sexist Meme that the 2016 Campaign Deserves," *Slate*, 9 February 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/users/2016/02/the_bernie_vs_hillary_meme_is_weird_ceaseless_and_kind_of_sexist_just_like.html.