Dispatches from the asylum

On satire in the age of political correctness.

We have often had occasion to remark on the melancholy state of affairs that the advance of political correctness has precipitated for the practice of satire. Satire depends for its effect on a certain distance between reality and the joke. That distance describes the space in which both humor and moral recognition may congregate. When that space collapses, satire is impossible. We know, when reading Jonathan Swift’s Modest Proposal, that he is not really advocating requisitioning babies for food. That knowledge licenses our laughter. A “young healthy Child well nurs’d,” Swift earnestly tells us, “is, at a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a Fricassée, or a Ragoust.”

What a card. Nothing like that could ever happen. Right? In Virginia a few years ago, a legislator named Kathy Tran proposed a law making it easier for women to receive third-trimester abortions. When asked about a hypothetical scenario in which a woman requested an abortion during labor, Tran confirmed the bill would allow that, before later claiming to have misspoken. Ralph Northam, then as now the Governor of Virginia, supported the legislation and explained how it would work. “[I]f a mother is in labor,” he said on a radio show, “I can tell you exactly what would happen. The infant would be delivered, the infant would be kept comfortable, the infant would be resuscitated if that’s what the mother and the family desired, and then a discussion would ensue between the physicians and the mother.” And then? As far as we have been able to discover, Governor Northam did not go on to offer, as did Swift, any tips for gustatory preparation (“the fore or hind Quarter will make a reasonable Dish, and seasoned with a little Pepper or Salt, will be very good boiled on the fourth Day, especially in Winter”). But then, we have not reviewed the rest of his remarks.

Our point is that so much in modern life outruns the satirist. Political correctness is a major engine of that race. The advent of “wokeness”—that strange, frenetic species of somnolence from which any hint of irony, historical perspective, and (especially) common sense has been excised—has supercharged the motor. But the truth is that the trial for satirists long predates political correctness, a toxin whose name did not enter common currency in America until the 1980s. Already in the preceding decades there was much in the cultural life of the West that
strained the ingenuity of satirists. When John Cage offered the world 4’33” in 1952—a “composition” for any number of instruments consisting solely of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of rests, meaning the musicians just sit there—a limit that beggars satire had been reached. When John Chamberlain exhibited his crushed cars as sculpture or Walter De Maria spread two hundred fifty cubic yards of dirt across a 3,600-square-foot room in SoHo (The New York Earth Room), other termini had been reached. A Tom Wolfe could ridicule these “artistic” acts, but ridicule is not the same as satire. One sense, political correctness might be described as the weaponization of such fatuousness, the introduction of hard edges, of political imperatives, to that species of conventional wisdom that Lionel Trilling memorably described as the “adversary culture” of intellectuals.

Wokeness, silly though it often appears from the outside, is anything but silly when experienced from the inside. It is the bureaucratization, aiming ultimately at the universalization, of those strictures promulgated by political correctness. And where an earlier dispensation—one that once upon a time, without irony, we could call “liberal”—explicitly made room for alternatives, for dissent and disagreement, this new order brooks no opposition and requires not just acquiescence but full-throated approbation. We have not yet, not quite, revived the French revolutionary practice of requiring citizens to carry a certificate of “civisme,” of political orthodoxy, but we are everywhere confronted with slogans that draw from the same well of rancor: “the personal is the political,” “words are violence,” and, of course, “silence is violence.”

The political and moral contours of our situation make initiatives like The Babylon Bee so valuable. The Bee is intended as a satirical site, and its satire can cut very close to the bone. Consider some recent headlines: “Media Relieved To Be Covering The Good Kind Of Riots Again,” which speaks for itself. “Sesame Street Introduces ‘Todd,’ A White Male Muppet Who Is Blamed For Everything.” The story is not by Ibram X. Kendi, the author of the bestselling anti-white diatribe How to Be an Antiracist, but it would take a sharp man to tell. Or how about this one? “New Disney+ Premium Service Will Send A Satanist Drag Queen To Your House To Teach Your Kids About Communism.” You might need to check on that—right after you digest Disney’s announcement that it is adding to several classics from its children’s catalogue, including Dumbo, Peter Pan, and Swiss Family Robinson, a disclaimer advising that the programs contain “negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now.”

In fact, the more you look into those stereotypes, the more harmless they seem. Chinese characters with long pigtails and the like: so what? Less harmless is Disney’s high dudgeon when anyone edges into a serious point that contravenes The Narrative. This is something that the Star Wars actress Gina Carano discovered. Carano’s tort was sharing a post on her Instagram account this winter after the Left declared open season on supporters of Donald Trump. “Because
history is edited,” the post read, “most people today don’t realize that to get to the point where Nazi soldiers could easily round up thousands of Jews, the government first made their own neighbors hate them simply for being Jews. How is that any different from hating someone for their political views?” You might agree or disagree with this observation, but anyone who has read Hannah Arendt’s Origins of Totalitarianism (to say nothing of Daniel Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners) knows that there is much to support the historical point. The brutish side of totalitarianism did not appear overnight. It accreted slowly as societal safeguards fell by the wayside and public vigilance atrophied. For its part, Lucasfilm, the Disney-owned production company, put its collective finger in the air, calculated the direction of the prevailing winds, and summarily fired Carano, declaring her comment “abhorrent and unacceptable.”

Readers interested in the insinuation of the ideology of wokeness into corporate culture will want to avail themselves of Stephen R. Soukup’s new book, The Dictatorship of Woke Capital: How Political Correctness Captured Big Business (Encounter Books). Disney is far from the only or even the chief offender, as anyone who has followed the recent woke grandstanding of the Coca-Cola Company, Delta Air Lines, and even Major League Baseball will know.

We think that the injection of this species of intolerant cultural politics into business life is a particularly noxious and particularly dangerous development. But let us return to the subject of satire. Is it possible to satirize the recent bulletin that the University of Oxford music faculty, anxious to declare its sensitivity to the Black Lives Matter movement, was considering reforms to address the “white hegemony” of the traditional classical music curriculum? A story in the London Telegraph reported that the university was even “rethinking the study of musical notation because it is a ‘colonialist representational system.’” A spokesman for Oxford disputed that claim but was curiously ambiguous about the larger question of making Oxford’s musical pedagogy more “inclusive,” i.e., less beholden to traditional “white” canons of achievement.

Or consider Lester Holt, the longtime broadcaster for NBC. In his remarks on receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, Holt reflected on how things had changed in the news business since the 1960s. The plethora of sources of information today, he said, has eroded “our critical thinking skills,” by which he means your skills at critical thinking. His skills, since he is a paid-up member of the fraternity of official pundits, are just fine, thank you very much. The hard place for satire comes when he gets around to discussing the effect of the past four or five years, the Age of Trump, on the task of reporting the news. It used to be so simple. But the advent of Trump led him to a revelation. It “has become clear that fairness is overrated. . . . The idea that we should always give sides equal weight and merit does not reflect the world we find ourselves in.” Had the media been fair, the public might have realized that the whole “Russian collusion” narrative was what Donald Trump said it was: a hoax, a fabrication designed to destroy the Trump administration. But destroying Trump was the James Comey–style “higher loyalty” that the media owed to its presumption, so fairness and even-handedness had to be tossed out. We would love to see what The Babylon Bee could do with Lester Holt’s apologia for media bias. Is it beyond satire? Maybe. But it’s elementary stuff compared to a vertiginous effusion of woke-speak by the New York Times columnist Timothy.
Egan. Hark: “I used to believe that the remedy for bad speech is more speech,” Egan begins. “Now that seems archaic.” Why? Because of “toxic misinformation.” What’s that? Once again, it’s a metonymy for Donald Trump, “the man at the top of the falsity food chain.” In fact, when you scratch a little, it turns out that Egan thinks misinformation is toxic to the degree that it is anything to do with Republicans generally. “Lies help them stay in power,” you see, “and a misinformed public is good for their legislative agenda.” What, as Lenin once asked, is to be done? Why, we must get our news from organs like The New York Times. They are always correct about what may and may not be said, what counts as “toxic misinformation,” and who should be accorded the rights guaranteed by the Second and First Amendments. It’s a breathtaking performance, undertaken in the best Times style: one tendentious assertion after the next supported not by facts but by carefully deposited moral outrage. It’s another example of something beyond satire but not out of reach of ridicule or repudiation.

A nd speaking of “repudiation,” we’d like to put in a good word for the Idaho House of Representatives, which has just rejected the state’s proposed higher education budget by fifty-seven to thirteen. Why? Because the state’s colleges and universities have gone woke and are pushing the “social justice” agenda of “critical race theory” and kindred programs of racialist redress. We heartily concur with Paul Mirengoff at Power Line about Idaho’s action. “Generally speaking,” Mirengoff observed, it’s not a good look when politicians hold education budgets hostage to demands about curriculum. However, legislators shouldn’t stand by while schools use public money to teach students that they are racists, that their country is evil, and other noxious tenets of woke identity politics. States shouldn’t subsidize efforts to create self-hating students and to erode belief in America.

We’ll only add, Q.E.D.