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The Comedy of Cancel Culture in a Post-Carlin United States: On the Politics of Cultural Interpretation

Abstract

Taking the form of a critical review of the HBO documentary *George Carlin's American Dream*, this essay explores the character of George Carlin's political and cultural criticism, its implications for contemporary debates about so-called "cancel culture," and the broader political significance of cultural interpretation.

Keywords

cancel culture, cultural interpretation, politics of culture, George Carlin, Dave Chappelle

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Cover Page Footnote

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Cancelling the Appropriation of Carlin

There is a widely held belief, how widely we do not know, that speech is being sanitized due to political correctness to an exceptional degree and this is especially true in the realm of stand-up comedy. There is another similarly widely held view that artists and performers of all kinds, from musicians to professional athletes, should keep their political views to themselves and simply “shut up and play.” In similar though nonetheless distinct ways, each of these perspectives is motivated by a political agenda, whether or not the people reproducing these discourses are always consciously aware, focused on silencing not certain forms of political expression by workers in the culture industry, but on the content expressed by these often-prominent figures. There is also an increasingly large cottage industry of successful cultural workers making names for themselves precisely on the basis of standing against the scourge of so-called “cancel culture” and its supposed ideological motivator, “wokeness.” Commentators and content-producers like Joe Rogan and Bill Maher epitomize this mode of pseudo-social criticism, and they have each used their enormous platforms to expose their audiences to all manner of opinions, which has often entailed maintaining a safe and welcoming space for overt bigotry and revanchist views (well-beyond what one could justify on the basis of presenting a perspective in order to make people aware of it so they are better prepared to defend society against such views).

Right-wing commentators have even attempted to dragoon the legacy of the late great George Carlin into their unintentionally farcical project. It is with those attempts in mind that I watched *George Carlin's American Dream* (2022) directed and executive produced by Judd Apatow and Michael Bonfiglio on HBO Documentary Films. The documentary is, without ever saying so directly, a project designed to destroy the possibility that anyone would ever reasonably think that George Carlin would have ever supported the delusional and unjust politics his right-wing appropriators have claimed. Drawing on dozens of powerful interviews with Carlin's living family, friends, close associates, and other prominent comedians, interspersed with clips from Carlin's performances and short clips of personal recordings, the documentary tells a story of profound artistry, personal tragedy, and relevant moments of US history, with an emphasis on Carlin's diverse and definitional role of the development of contemporary stand-up comedy. As Carlin fans know, his style was defined first by his commentary of the weirdness of everyday life with a poetic use of language and vocalization. He was dually expert in the scatological and the political. This is the second defining feature of Carlin's comedy portrayed forcefully in *George Carlin's American Dream*: political, social, economic, and cultural criticism that “punched up,” assailing and ridiculing the cruelty and hypocrisies of elites—those with power and those who abuse power. As I will emphasize throughout here, and as the documentary shows repeatedly, Carlin's oeuvre—his entire mode of thought and performance—was entirely antithetical to the right-wing attempt to use bad faith defenses of free speech to cover over cultural and literal “punching down” against people of color, poor people, working class people, women, and LGBTQ+ people.

Carlin notoriously pilloried politicians, businesspeople, and (typically Christian) religious zealots (the empowered ones). He was a critic of capitalism and the superiority of the profit-motive over caring for people. He was aggressively supportive of bodily autonomy and abortion. He was staunchly anti-nationalist, anti-patriotism, and anti-war. Carlin criticized racism and supported equality of all kinds. He was pro-worker and anti-police. And my all-time favorite object of criticism that in some ways encapsulates all of these other targets, Carlin hated golf with a perfect passion. Beyond the exclusionary class, race, and gender aspects of golf, it is an ecological nightmare and a waste of space that, among other things, could be used to address homelessness (or, houselessness, as Carlin rightly points out is a more practically accurate term).

As the Apatow and Bonfiglio documentary explores, George Carlin was a truly poetic wordsmith with and a philosopher's attention to conceptual relationships and a sociologist's attention to the function of power. But he was also an opponent of all forms of censorship and policing of thought and language. These are the bits dealing with those concerns that the Right point to to try to make the absurd and self-serving appropriation of Carlin for their perverse cause. Conservatives want to believe—or want other people to believe that they believe—that George Carlin would agree that conservatives are being censored and political correctness has run amok. The first reason to think this is the fact that there were similar claims made by conservatives during the 80s and 90s about feminism and multiculturalism, claims which Carlin showed precisely zero sympathy for. In all likelihood this is because those movements (the movements to limit feminist and multicultural influences) were movements *for* censorship, not *against* censorship (not at all dissimilar from the absurd attacks on “critical race theory” we’re hearing all about). Carlin was concerned about the powerful attempting to limit the discourse of those challenging their unjust claims to power and authority. He was all about “punching up” not down.

Punching Down with Dave Chappelle

“Punching up” versus “punching down” in comedy has been a major point of debate in recent years as well. One of the most controversial events in the stand-up comedy world that permeated the general culture was the outrage against Dave Chappelle in 2021 for ignorant and bigoted comments made against the transgender community. Chappelle is a great comedy writer in his own right, often with sharp political commentary. Well before his more recent controversy, Chappelle proved his capacity for superb political commentary; during the days of *Chappelle's Show*, it wouldn't be overstating it to say that his famous “Blind Supremacy” (aka “Clayton Bigsby, the Black White Supremacist”) bit was one of the greatest sketch comedy skits of all-time. While it is true that the skit could be offensive to the visually-impaired or to genuine victims of white supremacist violence, the bit is making two crucially important points that are valuable, those two potential issues notwithstanding. First, Chappelle is mocking the sheer stupidity of white supremacy (not difficult to do). Second, and far more complicatedly, the skit offers a deeper critique of identity politics. Through the humor of the dialogue and context, Chappelle is showing how Black people can transmit and reproduce white supremacist ideas and can also contribute to structural racism, despite being Black.

Since I first saw the episode it reminded me of Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, and more recently of political commentator and professional troll Candace Owens—two prominent people of color who have made important contributions to the endurance of structural racism in the US, all the worse because they *know* they're Black. As is typical of stand-up comedy that also functions as political commentary, the reality of the relationship between identity and political perspective is far more complex than Chappelle portrays. That's okay. Chappelle's political insights in this skit and throughout much of his stand-up, particularly on white/Black race relations, are sharp and often laugh-out-loud funny.

Fast-forward to 2017, Dave Chappelle comes out of his semi-retirement to record a number of stand-up specials for Netflix between 2017 and 2021. All of them are peppered with creatively written and well-delivered jokes, covering his typical range of topics: race, sex, police violence, politics more generally, and gender/sexuality. He also repeatedly expresses in basically every show that he is being targeted by cancel culture, particularly by the transgender community. There is a problematic pattern throughout these specials, nearly without exception: the jokes about gender and sexuality are badly-written, poorly thought-out, and blatantly unfunny. And we can be somewhat objective about this, if

we look at how other jokes Chappelle delivers are constructed: the punchlines are more creative and function differently at a rhetorical level. Many of Chappelle's worst jokes in this category fail because they are unironically regurgitating tired, often very old-fashioned, tropes and stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people. Chappelle is at his worst in this mode. And we know he is a knowledgeable and sophisticated artist (crudity across the board aside) who can think and perform critical commentary on these subjects.

If we look at the controversial 2019 special *Sticks & Stones* specifically, we can see a powerful example of the juxtaposition of sharp, humorous commentary degraded by a final joke that is dually racist (against Asians) and bigoted in its wild misrepresentation of what it means to be transgender. And in the earlier two-thirds of the joke he shows he knows better. This isn't actual ignorance. It is unknowable mix of some degree of bigotry and a lot of not caring about who is offended or what the implications of a joke are, besides the fact that some percentage of a thoughtless or uninformed audience laughs. Chappelle begins by telling the audience that people think the LGBT movement is one movement but instead it is actually many movements traveling in the same car. Sticking with the car analogy, Chappelle explains that gay men (particularly gay white men) are driving the car because when it comes to challenging oppression ("the roads") they're the experts, because white men by and large built "the roads" in the first place. Funny—and accurate. Skipping his simple jokes about lesbians in the front passenger seat, Chappelle explains that for whatever reason both gay men and lesbian women tend to have issues with people who identify as bisexual because they're "greedy" and will sleep with anyone. The joke here doesn't rely on the audience knowing the complex relationship between gays and lesbians and bisexuals to work, but it is also accurate in portraying a certain kind of internal prejudice in the LGBTQ+ community. He is clearly in this instance portraying the prejudices of others, not his own. That internal prejudice is not as prominent among the newer generation of LGBTQ+ people, but it certainly endures to a lesser degree. The prejudice of gays and lesbians against a third category seems like another sharp but well-made political commentary that also worked as a joke. Then in the process of delivering several jokes about transgender people, Chappelle explains through the car metaphor another belief held by some in the LGB community that the inclusion of transgender people, however important and justified, is perceived as slowing progress on LGB rights. He also includes an incisive criticism of states that have draconian "bathroom bills," here mocking the bigotry of those state-level politicians and right-wing activists supporting these terrible bills, not transgender people. Ruining what was otherwise smart, difficult political comedy, Chappelle proceeds to compare being transgender to transracialism with a portrayal of Chinese people that would have been considered racist about 30 or 40 years ago.

In the other specials Chappelle makes other unfunny comments about the silliness of using proper pronouns (something he shows in other specials is quite easy by, you know, doing it), and cliché jokes about which partner in a lesbian couple might attend a father-child picnic at school. Again, it was like hearing a joke from 20-plus years ago that you've heard a thousand times since and hasn't really ever been funny. The worst of the bits on gender and sexuality are the simple repetition of comments commonplace on Fox News on a nightly basis. Bad—but nothing unprecedented. They are somewhat bigoted, but from an artistic perspective, they're just not well-written jokes. There is no misdirection or surprise. There is no hyperbole or clever wordplay. There is little to no anger directed at the powerful. Chappelle is inartistically "punching down." Though Chappelle claims that as a Black man in the US he is constitutively incapable of punching down, because being a Black man is as low as it gets. Well, I suppose unless you're a Black transwoman in the US. But I guess that possibility slipped his mind.

He is also missing the more important point that critics, and earlier comedians like Carlin, are making about “punching down.” The point is less about whether a group of people targeted by a joke is in a worse position than the comic (as an individual), but instead, the issue is whether they are an oppressed group at all—and then it is a matter of what is being mocked in the joke. People rightly take issue with Chappelle’s LGBTQ+ “jokes” because he is typically making fun of precisely the same things that are claimed to justify their oppression by their oppressors in real life.

It is also worth noting here that simply because one makes a strong criticism of Chappelle’s bits about LGBTQ+ people does not necessarily mean that we are required to accept government or corporate censorship. And as of the publication of this piece, all of Chappelle’s specials remain fully accessible on Netflix’s streaming platform. Punching up or down is not necessarily a criterion we use to decide whether a comedian should be allowed to be a comedian, but more importantly it is a factor that we use to determine the quality of their comedy, and more specifically, whether their comedy contributes positively to our political goals. For the progressive and socialist Left (which neither Carlin nor Chappelle ever explicitly identify with), Chappelle’s LGBTQ+ bits are decidedly uncomradely.

Given the insistence by far right-wing commentators, and Chappelle himself, that he is being cancelled. He isn’t being cancelled. A preliminary round of research returned precisely zero evidence that any of Chappelle’s bookings have been cancelled or that he has come to any significant professional or financial harm due to the outrage against him. This is pretty typical for the supposed victims of supposed cancel culture. Even when they lose their current gigs, without exception, after some time every single instance where a person was supposedly cancelled, they have found gainful employment in their profession, oftentimes without ever acknowledging or apologizing for the problematic behavior or comments (though some do acknowledge and apologize). Let us not forget what real cancellation looks like: the Hollywood Blacklist, Lenny Bruce being arrested for obscenity, and George Carlin being both arrested and sued for his “Seven Dirty Words,” a case that made it all the way to the US Supreme Court—which is explored in detail in *George Carlin’s American Dream*.

However, this is where Chappelle’s case gets even more interesting. The outrage against Chappelle was primarily led by employees and contractors working for Netflix. The workers at Netflix had a problem with the company promoting this kind of bigoted material. LGBTQ+ employees tweeted and made public statements, leading to Netflix being accused of retaliating against three of these employees with temporary suspensions (claims that Netflix says are unrelated to their public criticisms of Chappelle or their organizing efforts among other workers). So, despite all the handwringing among Chappelle and conservatives about him being cancelled, the only people who were “cancelled” were the organizing workers who spoke out against their corporate employer.

This is indicative of the real history of “cancel culture”: governments and corporations silencing critical voices, particularly of workers and particularly those on the left. Netflix keeping Chappelle’s specials online also has nothing to do with the massive corporation’s appreciation for the stand-up routine’s artistic value nor does it have anything to do with their appreciation for free speech. Netflix cares about its profits (and as a publicly traded company, it does so by law!). While some people might think that the angered and offended employees, and those in solidarity in the broader LGBTQ+ and ally communities, are being too sensitive and overreacting to a handful of jokes, the Chappelle case is far more interesting, because it was immediately also a workplace equity issue and a question of corporate power. Netflix would have precisely zero profits if not for the expropriated labor from their workers. These very same workers attempted to shape the content their labor was being used to produce and distribute—and they were punished for their effort. Chappelle, rightly or wrong, remains materially unscathed.

Democracy is probably always going to be messy. I say probably, because we actually don't have many, if any, examples of any of the different theoretical variants of democracy to point to in practice (unless shitty bourgeois democracy counts). More robust democracy would still likely be messy, particularly on cultural issues. However, we can assume that political and economic equality would at least ensure that cultural or artistic disagreements will be decided without the undue influence of disproportionate political and economic power. This is a far cry from the world we inhabit today, and why everyone on the left should be careful before "asking" corporations (or, the government) to police expression. We need power-free cultural debates and dialogue where peoples' livelihoods are not threatened by admitting mistakes, errors, or taking time off to learn and improve. The stakes would also be different for those who feel "targeted" by various forms of artistic expression. If all people were secure in their basic political and economic rights, the harms of culture offensiveness would be far less grievous. I'll take a democracy that is messy and uncomfortable over a pseudo-democracy that is messy, unjust, and violent any day.

If Carlin Were Still Alive...

Turning back to the previous discussion of George Carlin and what if anything he might have to say about "cancel culture" and the "woke" ideology guiding it (or so the story goes). *George Carlin's American Dream* quite firmly establishes, without ever directly stating it, that Carlin would have opposed any formal censorship of comedians for the content of their expression, but he would never have defended or supported the kind of content that Chappelle has been criticized for. These are entirely consistent positions. Now, at the risk of extreme arrogance, based on my own multiple viewings of every major George Carlin special, taking into account the interviews and notes contained in this recent documentary, I want to suggest that Carlin would have things to say about cancel culture and wokeness—and without trying to write these ideas as jokes (I'm arrogant here yes, but I'm not stupid)—I want to try to explain what some of these comments might be. It is also worth noting that these are all issues that are included as images in the final montage of the documentary while different clips of Carlin's are also being played.



The New Yorker, June 2020 (Photograph by Al Drago / Bloomberg / Getty)

Carlin's targets are primarily elites (and to some degree, the non-elites, the regular people, who are brought into the ideological mystifications of the elite). On race, the things that jump to the front of mind wouldn't be the endurance of traditional conservative bigotry (though surely he would continue

to find it vile), but instead I think Carlin would focus his ire on the Democratic Party and its leadership for masquerading as strong advocates for racial justice. The hypocrisy of these people is best captured in two sets of images. First, the image of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic Party leaders taking a knee while wearing kente cloth, mirroring in the most embarrassing of staged photo-ops the knee taken by Colin Kaepernick in opposition to state-sanctioned police violence against community of color, a knee that cost Kaepernick the remainder of his multi-million-dollar NFL career. Carlin would be entirely supportive of the grassroots elements and broader politics of the Black Lives Matter movement. He would highlight the fact that these politicians, these empowered elites, are abusing a radical message to gain and/or maintain their power, power that they would undoubtedly continue to use as they have done in the past: to promote and expand the capitalist machine, a machine that has too often turned inward against people of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, Native Americans, and working class people. These capitalist stooges were taking a knee, in reality, to defend “Blue Lives” and mass incarceration. (As an aside, it is brutal that we’ve all been deprived of the opportunity to hear what Carlin would have said about the imagery of Trump supporters storming the US Capitol with Thin Blue Line flags while attacking and killing police officers, ostensibly to prevent “the Left” from killing them first? Hard to know really. But Carlin would have shined commenting on this.).

The second image Carlin would draw our attention to is the result of the amazing success the Democratic Party has had in the wake of the second wave of BLM: getting “Black Lives Matter” painted on some streets. Woohoo. That’s what the movement really wanted. Hell, the Democrats couldn’t even get their watered down anti-racist policing bill into law—a law that would have done nearly nothing, except outlaw certain mechanisms that police can use to arrest and summarily execute people of color for trivial crimes or, often, simply for existing. No more choke holds? But continuing to shoot unarmed Black people is fine. Real heroes of racial justice. Carlin would have made us laugh—and think. Now, we just get the least funny joke imaginable: pervasive hypocrisy with very little public criticism, alongside the continuation of racist police violence while the same elites who produced this system beg people of color to let them continue to run it.



Image of Washington, DC from screenshot of video from CNN.com, June 2020

On LGBTQ+ issues, Carlin’s comedic flamethrower would have found countless examples of abuses of identity politics by elite liberals to include amongst his angry screeds against the more materially dangerous policy instantiations of far-right bigotry. We can imagine a punchline where Carlin calls attention to the pronoun and sports controversies involving transgender youth, but without letting us forget that what transgender youth and people of all ages need is affordable—that is, free—fucking

health care. What is a poor transgender kid going to do with a right to gender-affirming care they have no financial means to exercise because of the genocidal for-profit health care industry in the US? We all deserve health care, and we'll take the proper pronouns of our affirmed gender too.

Maybe I'm wrong about all of the specifics. Maybe Carlin would have found all of this too obvious, but these counterfactual explorations do embody the kind of punching up that Carlin was known for. Sure, he had a wild nihilistic streak as well. He went too far all the time, but he never made the exploited and oppressed bear the brunt of even his most extreme annihilatory punchlines.

The Political Future of Cultural Criticism

What does all of this mean for the state of politicized cultural commentary today? The specifics are evolving but the basic premises are the same. Stand-up comics and artists of all kinds are at their best when they combine their natural talent and honed skills with their capacity to get people to see injustice and the possibility of better alternatives. The role of effective cultural critics is to help audiences see these interventions for what they are, including when they fail.

When you see a comedy routine or a film and then read about it, you are giving yourself the opportunity to see the art from a different perspective than your own, to think about things you may not have noticed or in ways you may not have considered the first time around. For the critical commentator, this is not a matter of presenting the audience with a "correct" interpretation (whatever that would even mean), and we should reject the idea that everything is *purely subjective* too. The politics of cultural interpretation is fundamentally about a thoughtful, motivated person with more time (and usually expertise) to make their case to the audience to adopt a certain interpretation of the art—for a political purpose that the audience may or may not already share. The audience then gets to decide if the critic or commentator has performed their role sufficiently. Carlin wrote in his notes, "Art is politics." Art is politics, and thus the interpretation of art is always political. What the artists and art critics do with this fact is something we all have to reckon with.

Lastly, for the Left in the US and around the world, we can lose ourselves by giving *too much* attention to these cultural fights. The terms of the controversies are usually set by anti-left liberals and authoritarian conservatives. They can become unwinnable distractions. At their best and most productive, they can help us hone our messages and prioritize our goals. They are a terrain we should fight on, but not on the terms set by conservatives or liberals interested in defending unjust state or corporate power. The offenses and harms artists can produce are nonetheless real and felt as such. However, fighting back against them are not the revolution. They are not really contributing to revolutionary change in any clear way. They are barely even defensive.

The HBO documentary includes the audio of an interview with Carlin where he is asked what he thinks about being considered a radical. Before I quote his powerful response, it can't be emphasized enough that George Carlin is probably the US's greatest radical comedian in history, but that means precious little in terms of the real, material struggle for transformative change:

"There are people out there fighting in streets, getting whacked out on picket lines and stuff. If these few jokes I make qualify me as a radical, then the movement is in big trouble." And if George Carlin isn't contributing to revolutionary change, Dave Chappelle isn't the one holding it back either.