

Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, **That's Not Funny: How the Right Makes Comedy Work for Them**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2022, 238 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Madelijn Strick
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

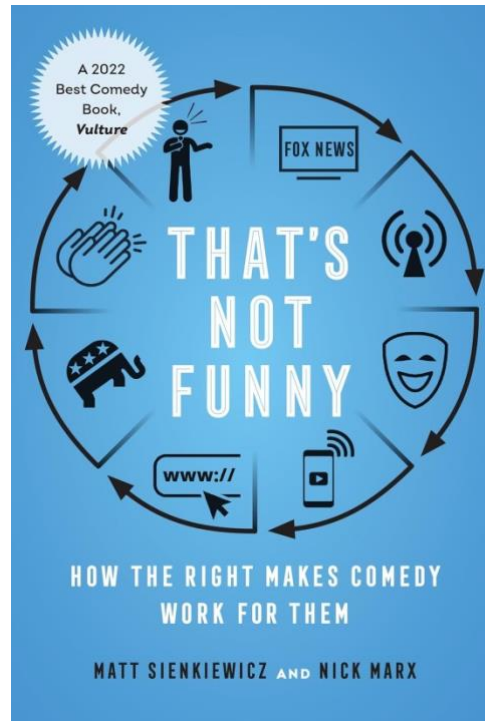
In *That's Not Funny: How the Right Makes Comedy Work for Them*, Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx challenge a long-standing liberal assumption: that conservatives are constitutionally bad at comedy. For decades, much scholarship and popular commentary on U.S. political humor have centered on the liberal dominance of satirical news, casting the right as either incapable of comedy or uninterested in it. Sienkiewicz and Marx argue that this narrative is no longer tenable in the current media environment.

The book's central claim is both empirical and strategic. Empirically, the authors map a burgeoning right-wing "comedy complex": a financially lucrative and politically impactful ecosystem of comedians, podcasters, television personalities, and digital platforms that work in concert. Strategically, they urge liberals to abandon the reflexive response ("That's not funny") and instead confront how and why conservative comedy resonates with millions of Americans.

The authors write explicitly as liberals. They refer to "our fellow liberals" and acknowledge their own aesthetic and moral reservations about much right-wing humor. Their explicit political stance underpins the book's self-critical tone. The right's comedy complex, they argue, has flourished partly because liberals have dismissed it. Two "complexes" are at work: a cultural-industrial network of right-wing media institutions and a liberal psychological complex that makes this infrastructure easier to dismiss as unserious. Together, they have enabled conservative comedy to grow largely unchallenged.

This metaphor of the "complex" is the book's most productive conceptual contribution. On one level, it refers to an integrated network of media outlets, personalities, and audiences that sustain one another economically and culturally. On another, it denotes a set of unconscious beliefs among liberals that humor is inherently progressive and that conservatism is humorless. By playing with this double meaning, Sienkiewicz and Marx frame the rise of right-wing comedy as both an industrial achievement and a cognitive blind spot.

The book unfolds across five substantive chapters. Chapter 1 examines the "quiet rise" of conservative late-night satire, focusing particularly on *Gutfeld!* (p. 19) and, to a lesser extent, Jesse Watters



(p. 29). The authors dismantle the liberal belief that right-wing audiences dislike political comedy by revisiting earlier failed attempts to create a conservative *The Daily Show*. Such a conclusion, they argue, is akin to judging the Tour de France by observing a nineteenth-century gentleman wobbling on a penny-farthing bicycle: early missteps do not invalidate future success.

The analysis of *Gutfeld!* is especially sharp. The show, Sienkiewicz and Marx contend, functions as a hub within the broader right-wing complex. It offers humor that allows conservatives to view figures like Donald Trump as both ridiculous and admirable. This ambivalence is not a flaw but a feature; it enables viewers to reconcile contradictions within contemporary conservatism. *Gutfeld!* exemplifies how comedy can serve as connective tissue within a fragmented political movement of religious conservatives, populists, and libertarians.

Chapter 2 turns to what the authors term "paleocomedy," a nostalgic mode rooted in sitcom conventions and patriarchal domesticity, exemplified by Tim Allen's sitcoms *Home Improvement* and *Last Man Standing* (p. 59). Paleocomedy expresses political contention through longing for a mythic past, resolving social tensions through orderly domestic hierarchies and masculine hobbies such as cars, tools, and "common sense."

The authors convincingly show that liberals often underestimate paleocomedy because it appears banal rather than provocative. Yet its reach is significant, and its affective power lies precisely in its gentleness. By offering comfort to viewers disoriented by cultural change, paleocomedy ties older, more traditional conservatives into the larger right-wing complex. The case of *Roseanne* (p. 76), who rose to high ratings before collapsing after racist tweets, illustrates both the potency and limits of this genre. Strategic ambiguity is key to its stability. Once implicit cues become explicit, the broader coalition can fracture.

Chapter 3 explores religious and religio-rational satire, including the work of Ben Shapiro, Steven Crowder, and the satirical website *The Babylon Bee* (p. 97). Here, the authors introduce the concept of "priming jokes," drawing on communication scholarship to argue that humor can encourage audiences to entertain propositions they might otherwise reject. By expressing arguments in satire, comedians can lower resistance and normalize extreme claims.

The discussion of *The Babylon Bee* is particularly nuanced. The authors note that its humor is more complex than many liberals assume, often including self-deprecating jokes about evangelical culture. At times, it achieves crossover attention, even among readers who would otherwise dismiss conservative satire. This complexity underscores the book's broader warning: dismissing right-wing humor as uniformly crude obscures its stylistic diversity and persuasive potential.

Chapter 4 shifts to libertarian podcasting, analyzing figures such as Joe Rogan (p. 117), the hosts of *Legion of Skanks* (p. 121), and Andrew Heaton (p. 132). The authors argue that the right-wing comedy complex offers a pathway from mainstream libertarianism to more extreme spaces. Rogan's platform, while ideologically eclectic, attracts young men intrigued by a masculinist ethos and skeptical of political correctness. From there, listeners may drift toward more overtly reactionary content.

This movement from mainstream spaces to more extreme ones becomes even clearer in the final chapter. Chapter 5 confronts the most disturbing elements of the complex: trolling, white supremacist comedy, and openly hateful programs such as *The Daily Shoah* (p. 167) and *Murdoch Murdoch* (p. 173). The authors reproduce this offensive material not for shock value but to make clear that its intended audiences find it genuinely funny. Even when morally indefensible, humor remains central to its appeal.

Ironically, the “basement” may be the part of the right-wing comedy complex that many liberals recognize most readily, particularly in the wake of meme culture and the visibility of online trolling. What often goes unnoticed, however, is how closely this dark world is connected to more mainstream conservative outlets. Rather than treating extremist comedy as an aberration, Sienkiewicz and Marx trace the circulation of personalities across platforms, from the basement to cable news, popular podcasts, and back again. The chapter thus sketches multiple routes linking “above-ground” and subterranean spaces, challenging the comforting notion that fringe humor remains sealed off from broader publics.

Throughout, the book is historically grounded. The authors situate the rise of the right-wing comedy complex within broader trends of media convergence and audience siloing in the twenty-first century. They also caution against overgeneralizing from a specific historical moment. Earlier scholarship on Comedy Central’s “irony demo,” they argue, was tied to a particular media environment. The same risk inevitably applies to their own study. Indeed, some references (such as “retweets” on what is now called X) already reflect how quickly media platforms and their vocabularies evolve. A reminder that analyses of online culture are unavoidably time-bound.

The book will interest scholars of political communication, media and cultural studies, as well as journalists and practitioners concerned with comedy’s political role. The prose is accessible and often witty, combining empirical detail with conceptual framing. The analysis will also interest international readers seeking to understand U.S. conservative media, though its focus remains firmly national. Comparisons to European right-wing comedy or global populist humor are largely absent.

One of the book’s key achievements is its dismantling of the comforting liberal myth that humor is ontologically progressive. The authors show that right-wing comedy is not a failed imitation of liberal satire but a thriving cultural formation with a substantial audience that genuinely finds it funny. Precisely because it produces shared laughter, it performs important political work. The right-wing comedy complex, they argue, does not merely reflect conservative coalition politics but actively helps to hold it together, smoothing over tensions between religious traditionalists, libertarians, populists, and more radical factions.

Moreover, they urge liberals to rethink their own approach to comedy. Rather than policing missteps or narrowing the boundaries of the acceptable, they suggest cultivating freer, more adventurous comedic spaces. If liberal comedy grows overly cautious, they warn, ideologically ambivalent audiences may be drawn toward a right-wing ecosystem that openly celebrates transgression and pleasure.

There are, however, limitations. While productive, the concept of the “complex” may risk becoming overly expansive, as many networked media environments could plausibly be described in similar terms. The book occasionally conflates structural coordination with looser forms of ideological affinity. Additionally,

although the authors emphasize economic integration, the analysis leans more heavily on textual interpretation and case studies than on systematic industry or ownership data.

Nevertheless, *That's Not Funny* makes a timely and necessary intervention. It challenges scholars and commentators to look beyond their own aesthetic preferences and ideological commitments. Even when one concludes, as the authors anticipate, that conservative humor is "Still not funny" (p. 185), that reaction does not negate the existence or influence of the right-wing comedy complex.

In their conclusion, Sienkiewicz and Marx liken the potential decline of liberal comedy to the slow disappearance of *Blockbuster Video* stores; an outcome they describe, with irony, as "not funny." The warning is clear: ignore the right's comedic infrastructure at your peril. By mapping its contours and confronting liberal blind spots, this book provides a crucial starting point for understanding humor as a central arena of contemporary political struggle.