

**Louis R. Franzini, *Just Kidding, Using Humour Effectively*, Lanham MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2012, pp. 197, \$ 38 print version. (Also on kindle) <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442213364>**

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Louis Franzini has written a useful self-help book for ordinary Americans who wish to attain a greater mastery of the act of being humorous in an everyday social setting. It may well prove helpful but it is both too detailed and too uncritical.

Franzini believes humour and laughter can make people healthier and happier and provide greater social cohesion. *Using Humour Effectively* is firmly part of an American ideology of cheerfulness, uplift, self-improvement, how to make friends and influence people and boosting. Babbitt would have liked this book but Dutch or French intellectuals will not.

The author is well-aware of the facets of humour that do not fit this pattern and discusses them, often very entertainingly, but is also very wary of them. He can see clearly that “the PC police”’s [p 165] restrictions on humour have cast a blight on jokers, particularly in America, and he dreams of a world in which these enforcers of equality no longer operate. However, Franzini unduly expands the meaning of PC to include restrictions on humour that long preceded the rise of the PC ideology and which may even be said to be inimical to it. The Roman Church’s Legion of Decency’s stranglehold on Hollywood humour, whether involving Catholicism and its sacred beliefs or sexuality, a great unmentionable no-no since Pio Nono, was total and it would have had a chilling effect on the informal humour of ordinary people. A joke about homosexuals would have led to outrage because it was treating that ‘unspeakable and abominable sin’ with levity. Today a joke about a queer, brown-hatter, arse-bandit, *faegele*, ducky, *maricón*, pansy, pogue or poofter would lead to utter condemnation by liberals as being demeaning to gays. The latter ban is PC inspired; the former is quite the opposite. The two phenomena have much in common, notably a humourless closed-mindedness, but the practical implications for those who want to use humour effectively are very different.

A large part of Franzini’s advice to those who would use humour effectively is that they should avoid offending people and he gives many examples of who might be offended and of cases where attempts at humour went wrong because offense had been caused. But this is

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merely part of an American ideology of ‘niceness’, an ideology that sits strangely with a society racked by culture wars. The culture wars mean that Franzini’s implicit assumption of shared values and of shared community standards of acceptability, within which humour should be used, is false. Sadly too, much everyday life in America is politicized and individuals persecuted by an institution and expelled or suspended for their use of humour have had to go to court to invoke their Second Amendment rights to free speech. Watchfulness is necessary not because one wishes to avoid hurting another individual’s feelings but because American organizations, either because they are in the grip of ideology or else are fearful of being sued. Where there is so much conflict, people who seek to use humour effectively may wish to use it to please and entertain their own group by offending the members of an ‘opposed’ one, when they think it is safe to do so. In many cases this may be a very moral thing to do. Also offensive humour in a free society makes people happier, as it did with political jokes in the former Soviet Union because it is time off from having to bottle up forbidden thoughts utterances and conversations. It is an area of freedom and it preserves the self-respect of the individuals sharing it. Let me add that I am only singling out America for criticism because Franzini’s book is for and about America. The same horrid tendencies I have described are to be observed in much of democratic Europe and are at their very worst in Canada, where a square in Toronto dedicated to free speech also boasts a long notice listing the categories of speech that are strictly forbidden; these countries not only lack that shining American miracle, the Second Amendment, guaranteeing freedom of speech, but would like to undermine it by entangling free America in international agreements restricting speech, particularly in relation to the internet. America is the guarantor of all our freedoms of speech. God bless America.

It is utterly valid to use humour in an aggressive way either as a means to a justifiable end or for its own sake and there is a need for people to learn to do so effectively as, say, in debating. Like most sports debating is an aggressive clash between individuals or teams, not as a sublimation of hostility as Freud absurdly suggests [see Franzini p.124-5], but because without it there would be no excitement. The use of humour is a valid part of that aggression and when the supporters of the other side gets offended and your own side’s supporters are gleeful that is a valid social achievement. It is a way of using humour effectively, is entirely congruent with the American ethic of unbridled competition and is nothing like as nasty as American football. Much of everyday social life is a form of competitive debating, ranging from purposefully using humour to help an argument forward to banter for its own sake. Franzini in places seems to admit all this but restricts his assessment to the discussion of

formal, one might almost say electoral, politics. He shows political bias in picking on the verbal infelicities of George Walker Bush [pp. 73-4], a great American President who unflinchingly hit out at Islamic extremism, whose resolute Keynesianism saved the world from economic meltdown and who did more for global health than any other President. Bush, unlike Al Gore, who had an auto-cue, or J. F. Kennedy, propped up by script writers, was a spontaneous wit in the tradition of Calvin Coolidge and Harry S. Truman. When a Sunni threw a shoe at him in Iraq as a kind of weird Arab insult, George Bush ducked and said he took a different size of shoe. Franzini [p.74] suggests the same with Sarah Palin's "verbatim classic comment":

"If God had not intended us to eat animals, how come he made them out of meat?"

Yet, as any Bible believing Christian or Orthodox Jew will tell you, this statement can be inferred in its entirety from the creation story in the book of Genesis and from the Noachic commandment binding on all peoples not to consume blood when you eat meat. Besides if animals were not made of meat and created specifically for us to eat, there would be no Jews, since they are a people defined and delineated by what animals may be eaten and which are forbidden. To make fun of, indeed even to disagree with, Sarah Palin on meat is to be a pagan, scripture-denying vegetarian. Even those who believe in evolution think that we evolved bigger brains in order to get more meat and the more difficult the hunting the bigger the brain. Only creatures with bigger brains could know and worship their Creator; that is why God made animals out of meat and gave us stomachs to digest it. Laughing at Palin is religious bigotry. Franzini may say that he is merely following and quoting his sources but why did he choose these sources and not, say, consult the much funnier works of P. J. O'Rourke? Surely a book teaching the effective use of humour to Americans should also cater for G.O.P. supporters, followers of Ayn Rand and von Mises, the religious right, imperial patriots and upholders of the right to bear arms. Franzini slides too easily between jokes in circulation among the people, those his readers are likely to use, and quips that are generated by the mass media. Soviet jokes about Brezhnev could not be told in the hegemonic Soviet media, so we know they are of the people and that they circulated widely. Humour about Sarah Palin is a mere product of media bias. Also note that Joe Biden's gaffes never get mentioned, only those of Dan Quayle. If the utterly comic Milliband and Mitterand had been American, there would have been no humour at their expense.

Franzini [p. 161] sensibly tells his readers to avoid 'psychological buttons', that is, jokes on a sensitive point that will enrage a particular individual about whom you have special

knowledge. He is right. It would be unfair to exploit this knowledge and to pick on an isolated individual's weak point. It might also give rise to an unseemly hoo-ha that would disrupt the exchange of humour within a particular group of intimates. I have often wondered in relation to the tales told by the Miller and the Reeve in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* what effect their telling had on the harmony of that group of pilgrims. But Franzini [p.161] then goes on to add "Avoid jokes reflecting international disdain". Why? Why not revel in them? A Frenchman might well refrain from telling put-down jokes about Belgians in a town close to the Belgian border such as Roubaix/Robaais, where it might annoy his listeners but why should he not use them to set the table in a roar at a gathering in Vichy? Whom could it harm? What come-back would there be? Franzini suggests that such jokes were and are rarely very funny. If they were not funny, why were they so popular? What is clear is that he does not like them but that is not a good basis for telling others to avoid them anymore than my defence of Bush and Palin is. Franzini [p. 162] gives himself away by quoting a media person's condemnation of New York Post columnist Stephen Francis Patrick Aloysius Dunleavy, for making a "negative generalisation". The Australian Dunleavy had written: "The French are against everything, including that curious American habit of showering everyday". Franzini adds, "Thankfully this kind of derisive humour is dying out". It isn't. 'What does it say on a bidet? Only clean moving parts'. If such joking did die out, everyone with a sense of humour would regret its passing. What Franzini has failed to notice from his own footnote about Dunleavy is that the latter made his wisecrack about the French in 2003. This was a time when there was bitter disagreement between the French and American governments about what became the second Iraq war. Talk shows and websites suddenly filled with jokes about the French, some of them directly linking in Saddam Hussein. The jokes were generated by the late night media, not the people and were part of a political conflict (e.g., <http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/blfrenchjokes.htm>)

That is what happens in conflicts. Franzini may disapprove but so what? Conflicts destroy, Jokes do not.

In his discussion of jokes about religion Franzini [p.152] does seem to take a more detached and purely precautionary view saying "a joke that references religious faith in general or any particular religious group may easily run afoul of the P.C. police". He later [p. 153] writes:

"Comedian Mark Normand in his act describes a loophole in the P.C. ban on humorous attacks on religion. He notes that most religions have advocacy groups who are alert to any hints of defamation. Normand suggests joking about Scientology works because their weird beliefs make it acceptable to make fun of them and everyone in your audience will

jump on board. We might add that the Jehovah's Witnesses seem to have achieved the same easy-target status. Comic Bob Zany (what a perfect surname) jokes, "This week I made a killing in real estate. I shot a Jehovah's Witness on my front porch" [p. 153].

Here we see tangled, indeed muddled, together, differing kinds of the exercise of power that the would-be joke-teller might need to beware of. The menacing P.C. police only ban humour about groups that have been able to gain the coveted status of 'PC officially approved oppressed minority'. Roman Catholics in America complain that they are excluded from this protection but they certainly constitute an advocacy group that you would be ill-advised to annoy. Some groups are powerful in their own right, unlike others whose power depends entirely on the P.C. police and its sordid army of fat-cat lawyers. The latter are ever keen to make money by helping a complainant sue an institution within whose walls a noxious joke has been told by an employee. It is a vital distinction because it affects the circumstances under which, when and where it is safe to tell a joke that might offend someone—the would-be joker needs to know that. Curiously Franzini has shifted his ground from moral finger-wagging about offensiveness to a consideration of whether you can get away with it. This is, of course, a matter of informed judgement. I am not sure I would have the courage publically to mock the Scientologists as having "weird beliefs", for I have seen them take very strong measures against those who make fun of them, such as those German cartoonists who pilloried them as a cult. In any case who decides which beliefs are "weird" and why does this make mockery acceptable? Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, agnostics and atheists tend to find the beliefs of Muslims not only 'weird' but morally repellent but, as with the Scientologists, the Muslims cannot be mocked with impunity. The French humorous magazine *Charlie Hebdo* discovered this when the Muslims bombed its offices [see also Franzini p. 94]; among other things the French satirists ran a cartoon showing Mohammed in a wheel-chair being pushed along by an orthodox Jew in traditional garb. It is not a question of morality but of power. By contrast the Jehovah's Witnesses have no power. Why do the P.C. police not take up the cause of this hapless and unpopular group, who were put in concentration camps by Hitler and whose American members are often poor and black? Boycott Zany Zany now! The distinction is again not made sufficiently clear in Franzini's [p.155] discussion of "The Whisper Rule". He writes:

"Whenever a storyteller or jokester changes his or her voice to a whisper, the speaker is likely at some level to be aware that the coming comment could be offensive or over the line. The whispering is likely to be accompanied by furtively looking around to check whether someone else might be within earshot".

This of course exactly describes the German *Flüsterwitze* (whispered jokes) of the Nazi period, told with *der Deutsche Blick*, the German glance, made to make sure someone wasn't listening. Such behaviour is not about saying something 'offensive' but about the fear that someone who, whether they are offended or not, will use your telling a joke against you. We should not reify 'offensiveness'; there is no 'social consensus' about offensiveness. People choose to take offense and can easily choose not to, whereas you cannot choose not to be hurt if you are hit with a baseball bat. 'Offense' is socially constructed by particular individuals on particular occasions and for particular reasons. It may well be our duty to evade such restrictions and to use 'offensive' humour when it is safe to do so. Some groups have got it coming, they are the bad guys; it pays them out and it serves them right. Do it effectively. Although aimed at a popular market, Franzini's book also has academic qualities and there are quotations from many eminent humour researchers – Salvatore Attardo and Lucy Pickering, M. Billig, Peter Derks, S. Freud, Paul Lewis, Rod Martin, Paul McGhee and R. Provine and there are a number of other references to articles in that erudite periodical *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. I was duly impressed until I came to a quotation from my own work which didn't look quite right and so I checked it. It reads:

“In regard to the latter point, the ethnic (and indeed non- ethnic) jokes that are likely to prove the most revealing are those told about stupidity. Where jokes of this type occur, we can be reasonably sure that the joke-tellers regard the butts of these jokes as a similar people but occupying a peripheral position relative to themselves. The jokes thus indicate who is at the center of a culture and who is at the edge and that the culture of the butts of the jokes is subordinate to and derivative from that of the joke-tellers. Ethnic jokes about stupidity are also jokes at the expense of groups seen as static and unenterprising by those who see themselves as (and indeed often are) dynamic and competitive. In an *open* society, the jokes indicate the existence of a known and established cultural and economic pecking order of ethnic groups regardless of official rhetoric about equality or pluralism. The butts of the jokes may be liked or disliked, but they are not esteemed” (Davies, 1990, p. 322, emphasis added).

Franzini [p.18] thinks that I am being “prolix” here and wants to substitute his own natty, quick fire version: “in other words, ethnic jokes clearly communicate who is on top and who is on the bottom in a society's structure of subcultures”. This statement is empirically false and it misrepresents my argument. If readers look at the quotation again, they will see the phrase “in an open society”. It is not there in order to boost my prolixity score, but to point

towards the last sentence in the paragraph that Franzini has left out. The omitted sentence reads: “In more closed societies, where the butts of the joke enjoy political power, jokes about their stupidity are an indication that they lack that modern form of legitimacy known as merit.”

In other words, ethnic stupidity jokes *only* correlate well with the pecking order when that order is based on economic or cultural achievement within an open society allowing free competition. In other kinds of society, closed societies, an ethnic group at the top may well be the butt of stupidity jokes as was the case with the dominant Afrikaners (the van der Merwe joke) in apartheid era South Africa. Afrikaner power depended on force and franchise. Furthermore, those who are the butt of *stupidity* jokes are *not* “on the bottom in a society’s structure subcultures”. The Poles in America were made the butt of stupidity jokes from the 1960s to the 1990s because they were routine blue-collar workers, but this class, the proletariat, had as its core activities work and family, production and reproduction. It was not at the bottom of the social order. There was another class below it, the largely black *lumpenproletariat*, who were the subculture that occupied the lowest rung on the American ladder of class and ethnicity. The Blacks were the butt of quite different kinds of jokes from those told about the Poles – jokes about promiscuity and illegitimacy, about crime and an unwillingness to work at a proper job. There *is* a strong relationship between ethnic jokes and social stratification, but it is a complex one and only the prolix have proved able to disentangle and clarify it. Also the butts of stupidity jokes have to resemble the joke-tellers. In late nineteenth and early twentieth America, the Irish ranked above the Poles but the new Polish immigrants were too alien to joke about and so it was the Irish, earlier arrivals who spoke a version of English, who were the butts of stupidity jokes.

Franzini [p.162] also takes issue with the claim that jokes about Jews do not cause or further anti-Semitism and says that:

Few humour experts believe that repeatedly targeting Jews with negative stereotypes and as butts of jokes has no deleterious effects on the attitudes of world-wide audiences, saying:

Most of us recognize the psychological principle that telling big lies often enough and long enough leads to more believers.

Which humour experts? Where? Who? Why? What evidence? The problem here is that he has run together “negative stereotypes” and “as butts of jokes”, as if they were part of a single phenomenon. I have no doubt at all that the regular purveying of negative stereotypes about

the Jews in the Muslim, Norwegian or Turanist press or on Radio Maryja does shape attitudes towards them in a deleterious way. The cartoons in these papers are barbed rather than humorous and their intent is absolutely clear. By contrast jokes lack purpose. They are neither bona fide communication, nor are they lies, and everybody knows this. Having tried and failed, the reviewer [Davies 1990 pp. 118-130] knows that it is not possible to distinguish between a Jewish joke about crafty Jews and a similar anti-Semitic joke using the same theme by referring to the script of the joke alone. Do the Jewish circulators of jokes and editors of joke books, with Jews as the butts of their humour, have “a deleterious effect on the attitudes of a world-wide audience?” What if the readers and listeners in Bradford or Brick Lane take up these same jokes and tell them with a hostile gloss and venomous tone? Have the editors given a hostage to fortune? Even if Jewish jokes did have a very, very, very small effect, whether negative or positive, why would it matter? Perhaps there is a parallel here with fears about food irradiation or Genetically Modified meals. No one with any sense cares. Believing that jokes about Jews have a measureable effect on the world is almost on a par with believing in homeopathy.

Franzini’s book may be questioned but does, though, work as a book designed to help its readers make their own efforts at humour more effective in achieving the primary goals of their interaction: “to solidify friendships, preserve a marriage, obtain employment, close sales, defuse conflict, or simply enjoy life more” [see publisher’s website] and it should prove useful to its readers. But people have many other less benign but equally important primary goals in life, such as doing down a competitor or other rival or an implacable personal enemy, doubling the stakes in a legitimate conflict, enhancing one’s status through dominance, strengthening your own group’s identity and power against other sections, gaining and giving enjoyment from witty put downs and relished schadenfreude and these people also need advice on how effectively to use humour in pursuit of them.

## References

Davies, Christie 1990, *Ethnic Humour around the World. A Comparative Analysis*, Bloomington: IN, Indiana University Press.

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