ABSTRACT

SUBVERSIVE HUMOR

Chris A. Kramer, B.A., M.A.

Marquette University, 2015

Oppression is easily recognized. That is, at least, when oppression results from overt, consciously professed racism, for example, in which violence, explicit exclusion from economic opportunities, denial of adequate legal access, and open discrimination perpetuate the subjugation of a group of people. There are relatively clear legal remedies to such oppression. But this is not the case with covert oppression where the psychological harms and resulting legal and economic exclusion are every bit as real, but caused by concealed mechanisms subtly and systematically employed. In many cases, those with power and privilege use cultural stereotypes in order to sustain an unjust status quo. This is so even if the biases are implicit, automatic, and contrary to the consciously professed beliefs of the stereotyper. Furthermore, since many of these biases are not consciously reasoned into one’s system of beliefs, and since they are notoriously difficult to bring to consciousness and dislodge via direct, logical confrontation, some other creative means of resistance is needed.

I argue that an indirect and imaginative route through subversive humor offers a means to raise consciousness about covert oppression and the mechanisms underlying it, reveal the errors of those with power who complacently sustain systematic oppression, and even open those people up to changing their minds. Subversive humor confronts serious matters, but in a playful manner that fosters creative and critical thinking, and cultivates a desire and skill for recognizing incongruities between our professed ideals and reality that does not meet those standards. Successful subversive wits create fictional scenarios that highlight such moral incongruities, but, like philosophical thought experiments, they reveal a moral truth that also holds in the real world. Such humor offers opportunities for “border crossing” where the audience is encouraged to see from the perspectives of marginalized people who, because they inhabit ambiguous spaces in between the dominant and subordinate spheres, are in an epistemically privileged position with respect to matters of oppression. Subversive humorists open their audiences to the lived experiences of others, uncover the absurdities of otherwise covert oppression, and appeal to our desire to be truthful and just.