

Dave Chappelle for gender realism

A Hollywood A-lister shows how hollow—and marginal—the arguments of the woke left are

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HOW DOES a millionaire celebrity comedian with a boatload of awards retain his subversive edge? The great Richard Pryor solved the problem in the 1970s and 1980s by ever more extravagantly—and hilariously—going off the rails. “I say, ‘God, thank you for not burning my dick,’” he deadpanned on Sunset Boulevard, after having set himself on fire while free-basing cocaine. For Eddie Murphy, a follower of Pryor’s who has drifted into schmaltz and Shrek, the solution has proved more elusive.

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Dave Chappelle is luckier than his two heroes. Having pocketed a reported \$50m for six shows on Netflix, the 48-year-old stand-up is even bigger than they were at their

peaks. And Mr Chappelle, who lives with his wife and children on a farm in deepest Ohio, shows no appetite for Pryor-level debauch or for voicing cartoon donkeys. No problem. The subversion bar has been reset so low by the censorious left that his irreverent, observational comedy has never seemed more topical or edgy. Thus the furore stirred by his jokes about transgender politics in the last of those shows, entitled "The Closer", which was released last week.

Even many of his critics concede that the lead-in to Mr Chappelle's long transgender riff is pretty funny. Because of his past jibes at the community, Mr Chappelle claims, in mock fear, a conspiratorial well-wisher warned him, "they after you". "One 'they' or many 'theys'?" he hissed back. But whatever the critics thought of his craft, they adjudged his act "transphobic" and to be condemned. As evidence, many cited his defence of J.K. Rowling's insistence on the biological reality that trans identity and sex are different. (No wonder, he deadpans, that women are annoyed that Caitlyn Jenner won "woman of the year her first year as a woman, never even had a period...") "The phobic jokes keep coming," sighed the *Guardian*. "He needs new ideas," huffed *Vulture*.

Mr Chappelle is of course foul-mouthed and shocking. He delivers an anti-Semitic one-liner in his show, chuckles as his audience gasps, then repeats it slowly, three times.

Transgressing public mores, to deliver laughs, or social

insight, or just to make people squirm and wonder why, has been the dominant tradition in stand-up ever since Pryor put a match to institutional racism, too. This reflects a singularly American set of conditions: high levels of social tension, a dominant place in popular culture for the most persecuted group and strongly protected free speech. Mr Chappelle, who, like Pryor and Mr Murphy is African-American and a master of many forms of comedy, calls stand-up his favourite form and an "American phenomenon".

Because of its connection with social justice, most standup comedians, especially black ones, are of the left. But, again, the phenomenon must be edgy to be funny. So no whites are excluded from Pryor's or Mr Chappelle's racially loaded critiques, including the sympathetic left-wingers laughing wanly in their audiences. And that dramatic tension, between performer and fans, has increased in recent years as the activist left has increasingly presumed to police speech. A declaration in 2014 by Chris Rock, another top black comedian, that he could no longer perform for college crowds because they had become "way too conservative... [in] their willingness not to offend anybody," was a signal cultural moment. For Mr Chappelle, who was in the process of relaunching his career around that time, it was also inspiring.

He does not seem transphobic, in fact. If his comedy has a

moral theme it is that everyone is flawed and everyone should be accepted. Its force lies in showing how quickly that truth is lost when group politics takes hold. Mr Chappelle has spent much of his career railing against racial injustice. Pointing out the equally manifest reality that women lose out when sex is redefined as a state of mind is consistent with that record.

Even when justice is served—as in the advance of gay rights—his subversive mind ponders why such progress is not general. “Why is it easier for Bruce Jenner to change his gender than it is for Cassius Clay to change his name?” he asks. “Empathy is not gay. Empathy is not black. Empathy is bisexual. It must go both ways.”

This is not exactly rigorous. Muhammad Ali’s name change predated Ms Jenner’s by 50 years; and there are plenty of non-whites banging the transgender rights drum. But Mr Chappelle is a comedian, not an essayist, and his emphasis upon anti-black discrimination is a dramatic device as well as a political choice. It maintains, rather improbably, his claim to underdog status. And that can be a source of empathy, as well as credibility, as he shows in movingly describing his friendship with a minor comedian, a trans woman called Daphne Dorman.

“I don’t need you to understand me, I just need you to believe... I’m having a human experience,” she once

schooled him. He was stunned; then slowly responded. "I believe you ... because it takes one to know one." Group politics, zero-sum and exclusionary, is dehumanising; his profane, moral comedy is a corrective.

And the leftist Pharisees who disagree with that should reflect on Ms Dorman. When Mr Chappelle was lambasted as a trans phobe after his previous Netflix show, she tweeted that he was nothing of the kind and her friend. She was hounded in turn; then jumped to her death off a towerblock. Can that story—so vindicating of Mr Chappelle and damning of his accusers—be true? Her grieving family confirmed it this week. So who is the victim now?

Chapeau, Chappelle

Not Mr Chappelle, at least. Besides torching the pieties of the identitarian left, he has also shown how marginal it is. His gender-realist views are far more in step with public opinion than his critics'. And if the unpopularity of their views is rarely off-putting to the Twitterati, good luck to them taking on an African-American superstar. This week Mr Chappelle, surrounded by a throng of adoring A-listers, was given a standing ovation at the Hollywood Bowl. "If this is what being cancelled is like," he chuckled. "I love it." ■

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