



# Is Irony Good for America? The Threat of Nihilism, the Importance of Romance, and the Power of Cultural Forms

Cultural Sociology

7(1) 23–38

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DOI: 10.1177/1749975512453545

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## Abstract

This paper examines three discussions in the American public sphere between 1998 and 2008 about whether irony is good for America: the response to a 1999 book against irony, the declared 'death of irony' after the events of September 11, 2001, and concerns about the ironic nature of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. After reviewing the literature on irony from various academic disciplines, the author shows how 'knockers' worried that irony was a counter-narrative that would distract from romantic progress, while 'boosters' claimed irony was a trope that could only strengthen the romantic story of the nation. Rather than answering the title question, the author uses the evidence of these 'ironic crises' to show how such questions reveal the cultural forms and reflexivity that structure the American public sphere.

## Keywords

cultural sociology, irony, narrative, popular culture, satire, sociology of culture, Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show*

## Introduction

There has recently been a lot of discussion about making public reason accessible to culture. John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, for example, both reconfigured their work to give more space to culture (particularly religion),<sup>1</sup> focusing on the way in which culturally motivated actors might speak in the public sphere using a form of reason that is intelligible or at least translatable to all (Rawls, 2002; Habermas, 1998 [1992]: 107, 2009 [2005]). Yet discussions of the civil sphere typically ignore culture (Jacobs and Smith, 1997). What if, however, it is culture rather than reason that forms the structure of public

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discourse? What if, further, the interlocutors in this discourse are capable of discussions of cultural structure just as Habermas proposes discussions of the various modes of rationality? In this paper, I analyze three cases of the American public sphere's discussion of irony: together, they form a useful correction to a rationalistic reading of American public life. From this latter perspective, these ironic crises are relevant only in their descriptions of irrationality; from a cultural sociological perspective, they reveal actors who not only understand their world through cultural structures – narratives and myths, genres and codes – but who can themselves discuss how and why these structures matter for social life.

The media discussed in this paper are pulled from searches conducted in 2008 on Lexis-Nexis, EBSCOHost, Google, and the websites of various American magazines and newspapers for the keywords 'irony' and 'ironic' from 1988 to 2008. The articles, books, and editorials I found tended to aggregate around three 'ironic crises': the reactions to Jedediah Purdy's 1999 book against irony, *For Common Things*, the 'death of irony' after the events of September 11, 2001, and concerns about Jon Stewart's ironic television show. After noting these aggregations, I went back and did more research on the three cases, finding as many references as I could using the search engines listed above. Within each of these crises, two camps rapidly emerged about irony: to borrow Charles Taylor's (1992) terms, boosters and knockers. What is most remarkable about these boosters and knockers is that they fundamentally agreed on the threat of nihilism, the importance of a romantic vision of American progress, and the power of cultural forms. Where they disagreed is only in reference to irony's role in this romantic narrative: is it a tool towards progress or a counter-narrative against it? Differing answers to this question drive each of these 'ironic crises.'

Making the kind of arguments this paper advances about the public sphere<sup>2</sup> – and using journalistic debate as evidence – provides the opportunity to show that it is not only academics who ask questions about cultural forms: journalists, pundits, and other members of the media public also want to understand how what we say is informed and made meaningful by the form in which we say it. Of course, all people are not members of the formal media, and it could be argued that what a community of critics writes is not sufficiently representative. Yet such an assertion ignores that American critics come from the same cultural formation as other Americans; indeed, in order for the mainstream writers profiled here to maintain their position in the mainstream, they must tap into this common culture to make a convincing argument. It is these Durkheimian structures which provide the cultural logic through which certain arguments make sense and take on moral weight. American critics not only use this logic; they are also – like all Americans – formed by and within it. To think of critics as lone geniuses who perceive the world differently from 'regular people' is to forget that critics *are* regular people, using that same American cultural logic that is both reflexive and rooted in a romantic narrative of progress.

## Culture in America

Scholars have long recognized the central role of culture in America's self-understanding. Lincoln and Washington form totems of the national sacred (Schwartz, 1987, 2000); the

frontier provides a guiding narrative that drives American progress and empire (Smith, 1970; Slotkin, 1992); a civil religion supplies 'beliefs, symbols, and rituals' (Bellah, 1970: 175) to a nation where 'religion ... should be considered the first of their political institutions' (Tocqueville, 2000 [1835, 1840]: 280). All of these cultural structures are rooted in a narrative of American romantic progress, from Winthrop's City on a Hill to Obama's 'Yes We Can'.

If the American public sphere is built on cultural structures, then debate about cultural forms – irony, for example – are more than simply peripheral distractions from the 'real issues'. Form dictates content (White, 1987: ix), and certain conceptions of the good life are impossible outside of narrative forms (Nussbaum, 1990). These forms are not peripheral to normative discussion, as narrative genres advance political (Jameson, 1981) and ethical (Booth, 1988) conceptions of social life. These discussions of irony are sociologically and theoretically important not only because they are public, rational debates about a literary structure, but because this rationality is encased in narrative and symbolic forms that are common to much of American social life.

In their study of these forms, academics have sometimes acknowledged Americans' awareness that they use, live within, and manipulate cultural structures. For example, previous scholars – many of them in communications or literature departments – have written about audience response to narrative genres, such as (among many examples) Geraghty's study of feminism in soap operas (1991) and Kucich's studies of transgression in Victorian fiction (1994). In contrast, 'Strong Program' cultural sociologists such as Alexander (2006), Smith (2005) and Jacobs (2000, 2001) have studied genres in the sense of Aristotle or Northrop Frye, though, in Smith's words, they show that actors in the civil sphere engage with genres 'largely through a critique of empirical details and typifications without any real reflexive discussion about genre-as-such and in itself' (Philip Smith, personal correspondence, 2nd Dec. 2009). There is an important distinction here between the identification of Frye's genres in social life – such as, for example, the tension between a romantic and tragic narrative – which is a territory that 'Strong Program' sociologists have thoroughly explored, and this paper's identification of how social actors are capable of reflexive discussion of those very genres, which is largely untraveled ground. For example, even though Alexander's recent monograph on the 2008 American presidential race (Alexander, 2010) shows political operatives and journalists who are much more aware of the role of narratives than those portrayed in previous 'Strong Program' studies, these actors still struggle to conform their candidates and stories to certain genres of narrative rather than to debating the *quality of the genre itself*.

The three discussions profiled here are all examples of this debate and thereby manifest a public awareness that culture – rather than reason – provides the *lingua franca* of the public sphere, and it is through this cultural idiom that public debate plays out. Irony is not unique in this respect. American exceptionalism and stoic self-reliance, for example, are not rational commitments: they are cultural structures that have had significant effects on American foreign and domestic policy. Like irony, these structures are much-debated and, also like irony, what they actually mean should be less important for cultural sociologists than how those meanings are revealed within a conversation that depends on a cultural logic and appeals to even deeper cultural structures like the romantic narrative of American progress.

## What Is Irony?

The genre of irony has often been used by moderns to characterize their own age, a popular claim even before postmodern theory made it seem obvious.<sup>3</sup> Literary critics argue that ‘there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding [and] that it is essentially ironic’ (Fussell, 1977: 35) and that the modern West finds its origin in the irony of its first novel, *Don Quixote* (Kundera, 1988 [1986]).<sup>4</sup> Only modernity could produce ‘a figure like the proto-postmodernist Marcel Duchamp, most of whose career was devoted to a series of mockeries, or ironic comments on art ... or like Samuel Beckett, the bard of a condition of nearly terminal detachment’ (Sass, 1994: 36). Northrop Frye is equally expansive, arguing that irony is the last in a cyclical series of four narrative types, and that modern life can best be characterized by Joyce’s ironic novel, *Finnegan’s Wake* (1971).

This understanding of irony as central to modernity is not limited to intellectuals, and neither is it absent from the American experience. Irony has played a critical role in American culture as far back as Benjamin Franklin and Washington Irving, through Thomas Nast and Mark Twain, onto the protest songs of Tom Lehrer and the comedy of the Smothers Brothers, and up to the television show *The Simpsons*, the fake newspaper *The Onion*, and the satirical news duo, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. American irony also draws from a variety of sources, with comics like Jerry Seinfeld and Jon Stewart pulling from the ‘Borscht Belt’ of ethnic Jewish humor, and both conservatives like PJ O’Rourke and liberals like Gary Trudeau pulling from a long tradition of mocking important elites in public.

But if irony is so essential to modernity, what happened to irony simply meaning one thing instead of another? Wayne Booth’s *Rhetoric of Irony* roots the ironic in ‘stable irony’, which depends on the receiver’s rejection of the statement’s literal meaning, awareness of the speaker’s beliefs, and the choice of a new meaning based on this awareness (1974: 10–12; see also Muecke, 1976). In contrast, unstable ironies are those which do not translate immediately into another clearly intended meaning; instead, they reveal the deep ambiguities of human existence (1974: 233–77). He also distinguishes between local and infinite irony: while local irony simply means that one thing could mean something else, infinite irony applies this ironic distance to all of existence (1974: 253). However, Booth is clear that all these forms of irony can be divided into further sub-categories, making any simple definition of irony ‘a kind of pedantry that deserves the touch of a clever ironist’ (1974: 277).

As opposed to linguists and cognitive scientists, most philosophers and social scientists accept that irony is no longer simply one speech act but an entire worldview marking life’s ambiguity. Colebrook takes issue with linguists’ one-sided analysis,<sup>5</sup> arguing that ‘any description of irony as a speech act already raises the question of the relation of language to the world and therefore cannot be separated from an understanding of irony as a particular position, attitude, or worldview’ (2002: 21). In Holdcroft’s (1983) words, irony is both a trope and a discourse. Most of the social scientific work on irony uses this broader conception of an ironic worldview to describe social lives or to suggest a more ironic detachment within social scientific work.<sup>6</sup>

But what does this work mean for the world? Is irony good – for America or for anywhere else? Is it inherently progressive or reactionary, a force for solidarity or

exclusion, or both? Many agree with Denise Riley that ‘irony has ... an inclination towards the good’ (2000: 166): an ironic commitment, they claim, could strengthen democracy, challenging rigid political structures and self-important leaders (Brown, 1983; Conway and Seery, 1992; Fernandez and Huber, 2001; Machalek, 1979; Magill, 2007; Riley, 2000; Willett, 2008). For example, O’Brien (2004) and Szerszynski (2007) argue that an ironic worldview could provide a needed remedy for the ecological crisis, while Jacobs and Smith (1997) discuss how irony could be linked with the narrative of romance in the pursuit of normative political goals. In contrast, Frederic Jameson has argued that irony is ultimately a hindrance to effective social action, as irony represents and is represented by a ‘monadic relativism’ (Jameson, 1991: 412). For Daniel Bell, a worldview marked by irony is a mixed bag: ‘at worst a form of quietism, at best a mode of self-consciousness’ (Bell, 1996 [1976]: 120). Others argue that an ironic worldview, such as that advocated by Richard Rorty, is irreparably incoherent (MacIntyre, 1990) or, worse, a form of deadly ‘autism’ (Poulain, 1993). Linda Hutcheon points to the ‘transideological’ nature of irony, which can support authoritarian regimes or those who want to overturn them (Hutcheon, 1995: 9).

It is this disagreement about the political nature of irony that forms the empirical content of this paper, yet what is striking about these three ‘ironic crises’ is how similar the discussants’ presuppositions are. Everyone is committed to a romantic narrative, and the only question is whether irony gets us there. While Northrop Frye defines irony as an ‘archetypal narrative’ (1971: 367) that ‘usually tak[es] the form of a parody or contrasting analogue to romance’ (1971: 366), the ‘ironic crises’ profiled here are more emblematic of *worry* about the ironic narrative than the ironic narrative itself. Indeed, both irony’s boosters and knockers agree that a society driven towards an ironic (as opposed to romantic) end is a very bad thing indeed. Where they differ is on the status of irony *as a trope*: for boosters, irony is a useful tool in the romantic narrative of America’s (often imperiled) moral worth; for knockers, irony is no tool, but rather a counter-narrative, one of fundamental carelessness in the face of grave moral stakes.<sup>7</sup>

## The Problem of Seinfeld

Jedediah Purdy is a knocker of irony. His 1999 book, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, was a call-to-arms against ironic detachment and the ‘irony incarnate’ (1999: 9) of Jerry Seinfeld:

Anonymous by virtue of his detachment, disloyal in a manner too vague to be mistaken for treachery, he is matchless in discerning the surfaces whose creature he is. The point of irony is a quiet refusal to believe in the depth of relationships, the sincerity of motivation, or the truth of speech – especially earnest speech. In place of the romantic idea that each of us harbors a true self struggling for expression, the ironist offers the suspicion that we are all just quantum selves – all spin, all the way down. (Purdy, 1999: 9–10)

Everything is contained here: the contrast of irony with romance, and the worry that ironic detachment imperils deep moral commitments. Purdy asked his fellow Americans to abandon the individualism that irony engenders and to turn with hope, discipline, and commitment towards the ‘common things’ that encourage dignified lives and maintain

the natural and social world. The proper life is in service to a cause greater than oneself, convinced that the world can and should be bettered. This is in marked contrast to a more tragic narrative, which sees the world as something ultimately destructive and at best survived. Jerry Seinfeld, according to Purdy, is not even tragic, because his 'survival' lacks the moral stakes of high tragedy. For Seinfeld, the world is just not that important: this is irony in Frye's narrative sense of a parody of romance, and this is simply terrifying to Purdy.

Purdy's critics thought differently. *The New York Times*' Christopher Lehmann-Haupt (1999) called the book 'crashingly obvious' and 'self-righteous', while other reviewers (*Harper's*, *New York Observer*, *Salon*) were similarly critical of the book's tone, style, and seemingly facile solutions (Warren, 1999). 'Purdy-pounding', wrote Yvonne Zipp (1999) of *The Christian Science Monitor*, 'has become something of a favorite pastime among critics'. Yet, even if these pundits disagreed with Purdy's approach, nearly all of them agreed that an ironic attitude can be a problem. Lehmann-Haupt (1999) also wrote: 'you have to admire [Purdy] for taking on the disease of irony', and Jonathan Leeman (1999) argued in *The New York Times* that the book, however over-simplistic, is 'right on target' in its call for greater civic participation.

The problem for many critics was that Purdy went too far. His ideal society might leave too little room for humor or for recognition of life's contingency; it might require a common transcendent good that simply does not exist. Others agreed with his assessment of American life but defended irony, claiming that what Purdy was attacking was actually cynicism. Regardless, few critics had a problem acknowledging that some level of earnestness is a necessary part of social life. Michael Kelly wrote in *The Washington Post* that critics' reactions to Purdy's book demonstrated the fundamental earnestness of the United States, which Kelly saw as a good thing. 'We are people', he wrote, 'who take Monica Lewinsky seriously, people who take Jedediah Purdy seriously. You can't weave irony from wool like that' (Kelly, 2000). Regardless of whether people thought Purdy was right, they generally agreed with him that there are two forces in society: the earnest and the ironic (or cynical). As Charles McGrath described it in *The New York Times*: 'One set of these prophets is telling us to please, get serious; the other to lighten up, dude' (McGrath, 2000). People might have disagreed about the names or moral weight or actual size of these competing groups, but nobody denied that the battle was on.

The question of Purdy's or his critics' accuracy about irony misses the point, which is that the American public sphere decided that irony – whether its demise or its defense – was an issue worth discussing publicly. More importantly, the critics rarely had a problem with irony as *irrational*; nor was the problem that irony prevented people from having good conversations (in fact, many on both sides appreciated the social impact of a good satire). Instead, what was most troubling was the possibility of an ironic narrative, a world in which nothing actually mattered all that much. It was the tension between romance using irony, and irony as a narrative that motivated these battles: culture was debated via culture.

## 9/11: R.I.P. Irony

9/11 provided another opportunity to debate the nature of irony. For pundits like *Time*'s Roger Rosenblatt, 9/11 marked 'the end of an age of irony', a division between when

'nothing was real' and the modern, 'too real' pain of a nation under attack. Before 9/11, he wrote, 'nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously' (Rosenblatt, 2001). Rosenblatt was not alone. Graydon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair*, founder of *Spy* magazine, and marquee ironist, agreed that 'it's the end of the age of irony'. Gerry Howard, the editorial director of Broadway Books, said that 'somebody should do a marker that says, "Irony died on 9-11-01"', and Peter Kaplan, editor of *The New York Observer*, called irony 'the mold that grows on old things' (all in Kirkpatrick, 2001). In an article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Gloria Goodale interviewed Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, who agreed that 9/11 would 'bring a big bucket of cold water on irony' (Goodale, 2001). For all of these writers, irony was not a tool for romantic advancement but instead a counter-narrative of detachment and delinquency, a bitter parody of romance.

Others were skeptical – both of irony's death notice and its apparent uselessness. *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* ran a tongue-in-cheek obituary of irony: 'Irony, the friend of satirists and constant companion of current events for many generations, has died, according to press reports' (Henry, 2001). Only a few weeks after the attacks, an editor at *New York* said her fellow urbanites 'will still have a limited tolerance for earnestness' (Kirkpatrick, 2001). The first post-9/11 issue of the humor magazine *The Onion* told readers: 'God Angrily Clarifies Don't Kill Rule' and 'Hijackers Surprised to Find Selves in Hell', proof enough for various pundits that irony was just fine (O'Rourke and Rodrigues, 2004). Gradually, nearly every comedy show (even the ironic ones) came back on air. Jon Stewart (2001) wondered why Graydon Carter had to single out irony, his specialty, asking why Carter could not have chosen puns. In a 27 September interview, *The Onion* writer John Krewson said that: 'What we're seeing isn't the death of irony ... it's the death of apathy. And thank fucking God. You can't have irony with apathy. There is no upside to this, except in making people think about how far up their asses their heads have been' (Benner, 2001).

Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* also referenced *The Onion*'s return, alongside those of other comedians and ironists. She argued that 'the belief that the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 will lead to kinder, gentler entertainment belies the historical record of reactions to earlier tragedies, wars and social upheavals'. Citing the literary critic Paul Fussell (1977), she wrote that irony, 'permeate[s] modern consciousness and art, acknowledged not only as a sneering, overused pose of detachment, but also as a potent weapon for delineating a fractured and frightening world. At least until last month, when commentators suddenly, and prematurely, announced its demise' (Kakutani, 2001). Most critics reacted similarly, arguing that irony as a tool is important and irony as a worldview (or narrative) is destructive. Laurel Wellman of *The San Francisco Chronicle* distinguished between irony as a 'rhetorical device' with 'a long and honorable history' as opposed to 'the nihilistic acceptance of the worst of human nature, the universal "whatever"' (Wellman, 2001). At *Salon.com*, David Beers also called for irony as a tool towards a better world, seeking 'a golden age ... of engaged irony' in contrast 'to the über-smart-ass, the kind of "ironist" so detached that heart and head were all but amputated' (Beers, 2001). Stanford linguist Geoffrey Nunberg wrote in *The Los Angeles Times* that 'Irony is a way of seeing things and seeing through them at the same time', which 'has become so rare in American life that people like Rosenblatt ... confuse irony with cynicism and fatuousness' (Nunberg, 2001). Tom Feran also distinguished irony from an attitude of

detachment, predicting in *The Cleveland Plain-Dealer* that irony will ‘rediscover its serious roots as a weapon against phoniness, misplaced zealotry or even sweeping cultural pronouncements’ (Feran, 2001).

The problem is ultimately one of figuring out what irony is. For example, Richard Leiby wrote in *The Washington Post* that the many kinds of humor and detachment that had marked pre 9/11 America had been ‘smeared ... into one big bad signifier called irony’ (Leiby, 2001). Like Purdy, Rosenblatt and Carter are concerned about an ironic narrative, a detached and fundamentally unserious relation to the world. In contrast, their critics are eager to point out that irony can be used as a ‘device’, ‘weapon’ or ‘way of seeing things’ for progressive change. Irony matters to both its boosters and its knockers, and it matters because of a cultural logic common to all Americans, whether critics or not: they all speak of a romantic narrative, marked by engagement and honor, and with irony either a vital tool in the effort or a cynical abandonment of the quest.

### Jon Stewart and the Role of Irony

Another discussion about the role of irony in public life has centered on the relationship between *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*<sup>8</sup> and the news it both parodies and composes. Various commentators used Stewart’s program as an opportunity to demonstrate that irony was alive and well in American discourse despite Rosenblatt’s and Carter’s predictions. Two articles written five years after September 11 both mentioned Stewart in their assertions that irony in America might have stumbled for a few months after the attacks, but that it has actually strengthened significantly since then (Kim, 2007; Lubrano, 2006). In fact, various pundits argued that it was the Bush response to the 9/11 attacks that actually strengthened an ironic sensibility in the United States (Magill, 2007). There was, as usual, disagreement about whether or not this irony was good for America. Both sides agreed that Americans, particularly young people, had grown cynical about political life because of the Bush administration’s flimsy case for the war in Iraq and its perceived manipulations of domestic and foreign policy for partisan political ends. Because of this cynicism, young Americans were most responsive to the ironic ‘fake news’ of magazines like *The Onion* and TV shows like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

As with the discussions above, critics worried that this irony might harm American civil life. Courtney Martin of *The Baltimore Sun* reminded her readers that laughing at Stewart is fine, but they must also act: ‘We should be so uncomfortable with the state of things that we can’t sit idly by, giggling at our daily dose of fake news and then falling asleep’ (Martin, 2007). Others were more forceful. Michael Kalin wrote in *The Boston Globe* that ‘Jon Stewart undermines any remaining earnestness that liberals in America might still possess’, and he blames Stewart for corrupting an entire generation into seeing ‘politics as a supply of sophisticated entertainment, rather than a powerful source of social change’ (Kalin, 2006). A *Washington Post* article presented research on *Daily Show* viewers’ opinions of politics with an inflammatory lead: ‘This is not funny: Jon Stewart and his hit Comedy Central cable show may be poisoning democracy’ (Morin, 2006). Again, nearly all of these criticisms worry about the kind of ironic narrative which Frye describes, a parody of romance with ultimately low moral stakes. To live out

the ironic narrative is to live a parody of romantic commitment, rather than the actual romantic commitment that social life requires.

Stewart's fans – like irony's boosters – saw his irony as a tool for serious commitments, an ironic trope for a romantic narrative. In a *Rolling Stone* profile, Maureen Dowd called Jon Stewart and regular collaborator Stephen Colbert 'the Cronkite and Murrow for an ironic millennium' and discussed the mock-campaign T-shirts for Stewart/Colbert 2012 'popping up all over the place' (Dowd, 2006). Michiko Kakutani asked, via headline, 'Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?' Her answer seemed to be yes, calling Stewart 'Mr. Common Sense, pointing to the disconnect between reality and what politicians and the news media describe as reality, channeling the audience's id and articulating its indignation. He's the guy willing to say the emperor has no clothes' (Kakutani, 2008). During the beginning of the Iraq war, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich agreed with Stewart's insistence that his show is more idealistic than cynical: 'During this war, the notion of exercising cant-free speech on an American TV network, even a basic cable network, has proved to be idealistic, quaint, and too often restricted to Comedy Central at 11 o'clock [the time of *The Daily Show*]' (Rich, 2003). A *Rolling Stone* profile concurred: 'The comedic tone of *The Daily Show* is all deadpan irony, but the mood behind the scenes is one of intense youthful passion, and even fury' (Colapinto, 2004). The profile, along with various other articles, made much of an Annenberg Center study that claimed viewers of late night comedy – especially of *The Daily Show* – were more likely to know the positions of presidential candidates than those who did not watch such shows, proving that Stewart 'like Walter Cronkite before him, deserved to be known as the most trusted name in TV news' (Colapinto, 2004). In the *Wall Street Journal*, Lee Siegel called Stewart a 'master of the reality-reprimand' who, along with Stephen Colbert, is 'returning the comedian to the role once played by the court jester, who was allowed to speak truth to power with impunity' (Siegel, 2008).

Such effusive praise worried many in the media establishment. During the 2004 Democratic National Convention, *Nightline* host Ted Koppel told Stewart: 'A lot of television viewers – more, quite frankly, than I am comfortable with – get their news from ... *The Daily Show*' (Stevens, 2004). This charge was much repeated and debated, and it was denied by Stewart and company, who claimed their jokes only work because the audience gets its news from other sources. Stewart insisted to Koppel he's simply a 'dancing monkey'. Like *The Daily Show*'s other critics, Koppel worried that Stewart's ironic sensibility undercut the rationality necessary for conversations with important people or discussions of important events. The rationality Koppel sought was not purely Habermasian: it is instead a rationality that moves towards a romantic vision of American public civility. Koppel was worried about the romantic narrative, and he was concerned that Stewart's irony subverts it. (Of course, Koppel also might have been worried about his totemic status: he had a vested interest in being part of a certain elite and might feel threatened by a competing totem.)

From the other direction, long-time fan Renee Graham of *The Boston Globe* worried that Stewart's sudden rapport with high-level politicians (John Kerry and John Edwards among many others) and its new 'respectability' would make it less 'subversive'. She acknowledged that Stewart, 'without trying ... has become culturally important, and even politically influential', but she 'already miss[es] the days when he truly was just our

dancing monkey' (Graham, 2004). While these interlocutors disagreed about whether Stewart's irony can effectively be latched onto serious politics, they all agreed that serious politics matters. More importantly, they all believed that the *cultural form* of serious politics is itself a serious matter.

This debate came to a head when Stewart appeared on the CNN show *Crossfire* on 15 October 2004. A *New York Times* piece described Stewart's performance as 'satisfying', an 'outburst [that] stood out because he said what a lot of viewers feel helpless to correct: that news programs, particularly on cable, have become echo chambers for political attacks, amplifying the noise instead of parsing the misinformation' (Stanley, 2004). Stewart criticized co-hosts Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson for not taking seriously their commitment to democracy, instead presenting caricatured opinions that do nothing to further discussion. In response, Carlson critiqued Stewart for letting John Kerry off too easily in a recent interview on *The Daily Show*, to which Stewart, as usual, insisted that he is a comedian and not a news-anchor. Various journalists questioned this claim, with Damien Cave asking in *The New York Times* via headline: 'If you interview Kissinger, are you still a comedian?'. Cave went on to quote a Boston-area blogger: 'Sorry Jon, but you can't interview Bill Clinton, Richard Clarke, Bill O'Reilly, Bob Dole, etc., etc., and still say you're just a comedian' (Cave, 2004).

Yet that is precisely what Stewart said. Regardless of the relevance or topicality of his content, Stewart insisted, 'the only reason anyone would watch us is that we do have a monkey trick to make that funny' (Battaglio, 2004). Maureen Dowd quoted Stewart and Colbert's producer, who denied either wants to change the world. Instead, '[t]hey both really just want to get a laugh' (Dowd, 2006). The sentiment was a leitmotif in Stewart's self-presentation, and it is used for both deflation and defense. It also formed one of the central anxieties about Stewart and his ironic sensibility: to what extent can comic irony coexist with serious politics?

The answer to this question is less important than the question itself: after all, if literary critics and social scientists disagree about the normative spin of irony, it makes sense that media pundits would run into the same disagreements. Yet what is remarkable about these disagreements is less their differences than the common ground they shared: everyone agreed that politics should be serious – indeed, this is one of the few things Stewart seemed unapologetically serious about – and everyone agreed that an ironic attitude to *all* politics is dangerous and wrong. The only real disagreement is whether comic irony can be used *as a tool* in the service of serious politics – a trope in the romantic narrative. For all of his dodges, it seems clear that Stewart believed it can. And it seems equally clear that it is through culture and not only rationality that such a romantic narrative is defended, a point made perhaps most obvious by Stewart's fans: they compared him to previous heroes, wore his image on their clothes, and described him in the language of struggle. A practitioner of cultural forms is defended via culture.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted three prominent debates about the nature of irony in the American public sphere between 1998 and 2008: the response to the 1999 book *For Common Things* by Jedediah Purdy, the response to 'death of irony' pronouncement after

9/11, and concerns about the success of *The Daily Show* during the two presidential terms of George W. Bush, particularly after the American invasion of Iraq. Taken together, these debates provide a corrective to a description of American civil society as purely, or at least ideally, rational. These discussions of irony show a societal awareness that not simply what we discuss but also the narratives that form our discussions matter deeply to social life. Of course form dictates function, yet it seems that American society is aware of something else that literary critics have long argued: form also dictates content. More importantly, these discussions of culture are themselves culturally mediated: in discussing whether or not irony is good for America, critics and defenders appeal to narratives and romantic imagery, creating totems and appealing to notions of the sacred. Culture, rather than reason, forms the *lingua franca* of the public sphere, and this cultural language is deeply American, rooted – along with the totems of Washington and Lincoln and the stories of the frontier – in the narrative of Romantic Progress.

In the postmodern (or ‘ironic’) era, such meta-narratives might seem doomed to an existence of scare quotes and knowing winks, yet these conversations about irony reveal a cultural structure that, even if continually redeveloped and re-evaluated, is nonetheless quite real. As cultural sociologists have shown, the contestability of a certain cultural structure does not make that structure any less real. Discussions about irony matter for social life, and they therefore matter for the cultural sociologists who study it. Americans might be able to live without irony, or they might not. The relative normative spin of irony for Americans is less important than the fact that Americans care so much about it. Americans live within a romantic narrative they find precarious, which could easily become another narrative and which must be protected as a result. It is a narrative that uses certain tropes to form a certain story, a story Americans are constantly discussing, rewriting, reimagining, and striving to make true.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks for the extremely helpful advice from the editors and anonymous reviewers at Cultural Sociology, as well as Philip Smith, Jeffrey Alexander, and Ronald Jacobs. I am grateful for helpful comments from presentation of portions of this article at the Yale Cultural Sociology Supper Club, the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology, the Yale Comparative Research Workshop, and a roundtable paper presentation at the 2009 American Sociological Association.

### Notes

1. While the religious critiques of Habermas and Rawls are more famous, there are salient examples of non-religious cultural criticisms as well, such as Alexander’s (1985).
2. For a useful critique of Habermas’s public sphere while still ‘making use of it’ (with important implications for Alexander’s civil sphere as well) see Fraser (1990: 57).
3. Jacobs and Smith marshal an impressive list of postmodern intellectuals (1997: 71–3) in their contention ‘that what is common to virtually all postmodern theories is the figure of the ironist’ (1997: 72). This article does not make much of the difference between irony as fundamental to postmodernism or irony as fundamental to modernism, as, following Sass (1994) and Calhoun (1993) among others, postmodernism is understood to be in continuity with modernism.
4. For more on irony in the history of Western philosophy see Colebrook (2002, 2004) and Miller (1983).

5. Particularly the work of HP Grice, an interlocutor with Holdcroft. Linguists have trouble explaining how irony works (or doesn't). As Barbe writes, it 'is ephemeral, thus ... not a form but rather an experience. The main locus of irony is the deictic content' (1995: 92). Some linguists concentrate on how the ironic interaction works and how listeners come to know that a speech-act is ironic, often by comparing irony to other conceptual speech-acts such as metaphors, puns, or parody (Attardo, 2001: 112; Boudon, 1997; Haiman, 1998).
6. Machalek (1979) and Brown (1983) suggest that the social sciences could be improved by an ironic perspective. Edited collections from Fernandez and Huber (2001) and Conway and Seery (1992) in (respectively) anthropology and political science have diverse contributions, many of them emphasizing irony, like Rorty (1989), as the acceptance of contingency.
7. To put my cards on the table, I am ultimately more a booster than a knocker of irony. Yet I have seen enough sarcastic bullying and parodying of the marginalized to have lost any hope about irony's essentially positive nature. More importantly, attempts at finding these sorts of essential meanings miss the point of sociology, which has trouble getting at the meanings of things much less complicated than irony. For more on how sociologists ought to understand meanings *socially* rather than *essentially*, see Wuthnow (1987).
8. *The Daily Show* – since 1999 *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* – is a popular 'fake news' show on the basic cable channel Comedy Central. Hosted by the sharp-witted and satirical Jon Stewart, the show combines media commentary, sketch comedy, and celebrity interviews.

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