

Dear Rick 8 – Laughter, Election, Mechanization

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Scott: Long before the election, we were talking about joke writing.

Rick: I and another person think laughter is a reaction to getting information at a discount. The setup of a joke takes a certain amount of mental real estate. It can be complicated, but the punchline solves it simply and people can get a simple chunk of information rather than a complicated one.

Our general orientation is to be avid consumers of information that has personal relevance to us. That is the human model for survival, where more than any other species, I assume – unless dolphins or octopuses have some thing going on; we seek out information relevant to us and try to exploit it.

And there are lots of reasons why Trump got elected, but among them, I believe, are a couple things that reflect the fact that we're in the era of big information. One thing, I don't think this election could have happened without social media.

Social media, one of its most important functions is to be a personal information feed. People who are really into it, which is tens of millions of Americans, spend a great deal of time glued to various devices hit you moment-by-moment with personal information.

Information that is relevant you. It is empowering. It exalts you. It raises your self-esteem. In some way, it makes your personal information feed viewable by thousands of people a day if you're part of the big social networks. You feel important.

I believe this goes along with some social trends that reinforce individuality versus collective action. Hillary's slogan is "stronger together," but based on the elections results. Tens of millions of people were like "F- that!" I am interested in blatant self-interest like Trump who is a reality star.

I call it "lottery culture" or "lottery thinking." People have wondered for years why so many people have voted Republican against their economic interests. In that, Democrats are known for being wealth redistributors. The states that vote Republican are states that are net receivers of tax money. Certain states send more in taxes to the federal government than they receive like California.

Other states receive more in tax revenue from government programs than they send to the federal government in taxes. Those are generally the less rich, generally Southern states, but those states generally are politically conservative and Republican. So, it seems weird that people who vote for the party that it is against government handouts actually receive more from the government than the states whose citizens generally vote for the party who is in favour of government programs that give people money.

Among the explanations, what I might think be the reason, is that people who feel empowered and feel like they're on the verge of success don't want to vote against being penalized for that success, whether or not they have that success or not. So over the last 20 years, you've seen the coming of reality shows, where any kind of yahoo can get on TV and become rich and famous.

You have the empowering nature of a personal information feed that is reinforced every few minutes throughout the day. One of the reasons people would vote for a self-interested individualist like Trump is their individualism has been pumped up via the celebration and the constant treats of social media.

Besides that, there are a zillion other reasons including weird electoral college stuff. FBI Director James Comey saying Hillary was suspicious 11 days before the election. The bad strategic moves on the Clinton campaign and not hitting states like Pennsylvania and states they thought that they had.

Beyond that, I think it was the first AI election. People were voting on the consequences of increased mechanization taking away work functions. I just read an article that says that based on current technology 40% of things people do at work can be mechanized. It doesn't mean 40% of jobs will go to robots immediately, but it does mean work can be hollowed out and thinned out by mechanization, and that this will increasingly cost jobs, which candidates only talk about tangentially. Nobody really makes it a huge issue.

There are basic things that don't get talked about politically because nobody can offer a solution to it. For instance, we've been arguing over Obamacare for 8 years. He got into office and made it a priority. Before that, we have been arguing over the cost of medical treatments since Bill Clinton was in office before that. Everybody talks about eliminating waste and coming up with better ways to not cost people money for insurance.

But nobody ever makes a point that medicine is much better now than it was 50 years ago. To some extent, good medicine costs a bunch of money. So, nobody ever talks about how to pay for something that is inherently expensive and people haven't even really looked much at medicine to see what parts of it – it is so tangled – need to be looked at to see what expenses are legitimate expenses and how much costs are due to our shitty system, which means that the debate is like the debate with jobs.

People talk about job training on the Left. They talk about educational subsidies to prepare people better to take the new jobs of tomorrow, but the Right talks about getting rid of regulations and taxes that make it hard for employers to bring jobs to America. Both of these arguments don't do much to address the deal that many, many types of jobs are being shrunken or going away entirely.

100 years ago, or over 150 years ago, well over 90% of Americans worked in Agriculture. We were a farming nation. It took a bunch of people to farm. Now, the percent of Americans in agriculture is under 5%. I want to say 2%, but that sounds crazily low. But it's not. Farming jobs have evaporated, but that's because farming became mechanized, and also corporatized.

Regardless of the exact flavour of the structure of farming, farming jobs went away because machines do most of the things people used to do 100 years ago. Nobody is talking about bringing back farming job. That is walking behind a mule with a plough. Nobody wants to do that because that's ridiculous.

Only a few fringy people, and only politicians very occasionally, talk about what to do when more, and more, work gets turned over to machines. It is a source of job loss. It is also a source of income inequality. Karl Marx was an interesting theoretician because he thought he could lay out the course of the future exactly via the way people are and the way work is. He said that workers would eventually get sufficiently pissed off that they would take over the means of production. That is communism.

But what he didn't imagine was a world in which you didn't need are freakin' workers. The movie that has been the theme of the election is *Idiocracy*. It is a Mike Judge movie from ten years ago. It is set 500 years in the future. Everyone is dumb. They watch crap TV. They eat crap food. The country is about to collapse because nobody knows how to grow plants anymore because everyone is an idiot.

But certain aspects of the world make sense and align with the world we live in, which is, we're living in a world in which workers are more superfluous and how do you build a world that addresses that. You could come up with hundreds of millions of new high-tech jobs that would make use of everybody, but that's not how high-tech works. High-tech isn't about job creation.

It is about people making money trying to figure out apps that make life easier for people. That leads to systems that make Americans crazy like Guaranteed Minimum Income like some Nordic countries are experimenting with.

Scott: Some experimentation with Universal Basic Income ongoing in Toronto, Ontario, Canada now. It is similar to the Mincome experiments in Manitoba.

Rick: That doesn't sound horrible, but it sounds socialist. Many Americans would go crazy about that. Another thing, as mechanization takes over, things cost less. Things are cheaper. Relative to average income, food and clothing cost a quarter of what they did a 100 years ago because it is easier to make food and clothing thanks to food and clothing. An 'Idiocratic' future wouldn't cost that much for a decent living, but it is socialist.

And American doesn't like socialism.

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