

The Influenza Of Evil

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I

A recent Cracked piece: [Five Everyday Groups Society Says It's Okay To Mock](#). It begins:

There's a rule in comedy that says you shouldn't punch down. It's okay to make fun of someone rich and famous, because they're too busy molesting groupies with 100-dollar bills to notice, but if you make a joke at the expense of a homeless person, you're just an asshole. That said, we as a society have somehow decided on a few arbitrary exceptions to this rule.

“Somehow decided on a few arbitrary exceptions” isn't very technical. Let's see if we can do better.

Earlier this week, I wrote about [things that are anti-inductive](#). Something is anti-inductive if it fights back against your attempts to understand it. The classic example is the stock market. If someone learns that the stock market is always low on Tuesdays, then they'll buy lots of stocks on Tuesdays to profit from the anomaly.

But this raises the demand for stocks on Tuesdays, and therefore stocks won't be low on Tuesdays anymore. To detect a pattern is to destroy the pattern.

The less classic example is job interviews where every candidate is trying to distinguish themselves from every other candidate. If someone learns that interviewers are impressed if you talk about your experience in tropical medicine, then as more and more people catch on they'll all get experience in tropical medicine, it will become cliché, and people won't be impressed by it anymore.

Evil, too, is anti-inductive.

The Nazis were very successful evildoers, at least for a while. Part of their success was convincing people – at least the German people, but sometimes also foreigners – that they were the good guys. And they *were* able to convince a lot of people, because people can be pretty dumb, a lot of them kind of just operate by pattern-matching, and the Nazis didn't match enough patterns to set off people's alarms.

Neo-Nazis cannot be called “successful” in any sense of the word. Their PR problem isn't just that they're horrible – a lot of groups are horrible and do much better than neo-Nazis. Their PR problem is that they're horrible in exactly the way that our culture formed memetic antibodies against. Our pattern-matching faculties have been trained on Nazis being evil. The alarm bells that connect everything about Nazis to evil are hypersensitive, so much so that

even contingent features of the Nazis remain universally acknowledged evil-signals.



It would be premature to say that we will never have to worry about fascism again. But for now, we are probably pretty safe from fascism that starts its sales pitch with “Hi, I’m fascism! Want a swastika armband?”

Huey Long supposedly predicted that “Fascism in America will attempt to advance under the banner of anti-fascism.” I’m not sure I like the saying as it stands – it seems too susceptible to Hitler Jr. telling Churchill Jr. that he’s marching under the banner of anti-fascism which proves he’s the *real* fascist. Then again, in a world where capitalism marches under the banner of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, who knows? I would prefer to say that fascism will, at the very least, advance in a way which carefully takes our opposition to fascism into account.

Sure enough, people who had learned to be wary of fascism were still highly susceptible to communism, which wore its anti-fascism proudly on its sleeve as a symbol of how great it was. It convinced a lot of very smart people in the free world that it was the best thing since sliced bread, all while murdering tens of millions of people. Meanwhile, our memetic immune systems were sitting watchfully at their posts, thinking “Well, this doesn’t look at all like Nazism. They’re saying all the right stuff about equality, which is like the *opposite* of what the Nazis said. I’m giving them a pass.”

In fact, I’ll make the analogy more explicit. Every winter, there’s a flu epidemic. Every spring and summer, people’s bodies put in a lot of effort making antibodies to *last year’s* flu. The next winter, the flu mutates a little, a new virus with new antigens starts a new epidemic, and the immune system doesn’t have a clue: “This virus doesn’t have the very very specific characteristic I’ve learned to associate with the flu. Maybe it wants to be my friend!” This is why we need the WHO to predict what the up-and-coming flu virus will be and give us vaccines against it; it’s also why their job is so

hard; they don't know what's coming, except that it will look different from however it's looked before.

Nowadays most people's memetic immune systems have some antibodies to communism, and people talking with Russian accents about how we need to eliminate the bourgeoisie and institute a dictatorship of the proletariat sends shiver up the spines of a lot of people. Nowadays an openly Communist party faces the same uphill battle as an openly Nazi party.

But that just means that if there's some other evil on the horizon, it probably won't resemble either fascism or communism. It will be movement about which everyone's saying "These new guys are so great! They don't pattern-match to any of the kinds of evil we know about at all!" By Long's formulation, it may very well be marching under the banners of anti-fascism *and* anti-Communism.

(I'm not vagueblogging, by the way. I honestly don't have anyone in mind here. The whole point is that it's probably someone I'm not expecting. And if you say "I KNOW EXACTLY WHICH GROUP IT WILL BE, BASED ON THOSE CRITERIA IT'S CLEARLY X!" consider the possibility that you're missing the point.)



But getting back to the Cracked article.

We as a society have mostly figured out that shouting “GET A JOB, LOSER!” at the homeless is mean. We have mostly figured out that shouting “YOU’RE GOING TO HELL” at people of different religions is bad. We’re even, slowly but surely, starting to wonder whether there’s something problematic about shouting “FAGGOTS!” at the local gay couple.

Stupid bullies will continue to do those things, just as stupid investors will continue to read “How To Beat The Stock Market” books published in 1985, and stupid socialites will continue to wear the fashion that was cool six months ago.

But smart bullies are driven by their desire to have their bullying make them more popular, to get the rest of the world pointing and laughing with them. In a [Blue Tribe](#) bubble, shouting “FAGGOT” at gay people is no longer a good way to do that. The smart bullies in these circles have long since stopped shouting at gays – not because they’ve become any nicer, but because that’s no longer the best way to keep their audience laughing along with them.

Cracked starts off by naming mentally ill celebrities as a group society considers it okay to mock. This doesn’t seem surprising. Nowadays people talk a lot about punching-up versus punching-down. But that just means bullies who want to successfully punch down will come up with a way to make it look like they’re punching up. Take a group that’s high-status and wealthy, but find a subset who are actually in serious trouble and mock *them*, all the while shouting “I’M PUNCHING UP, I’M PUNCHING UP!”. Thus mentally ill celebrities.

The other examples are harder to figure out. I would argue that they're ones that are easy to victim-blame (ie obesity), ones that punch down on axes orthogonal to the rich-poor axis we usually think about and so don't look like punching down (ie virginity), or ones that are covertly associated with an outgroup. In every case, I would expect the bullies involved, when they're called upon, it to loudly protest "But that's not real bullying! It's not like [much more classic example of bullying, like mocking the homeless]!" And they will be right. It's just different enough to be the hot new bullying frontier that most people haven't caught onto yet.

I think the Cracked article is doing good work. It's work that I also try to do (see for example [number 6 here](#), which corresponds to Cracked's number 5). It's the work of pointing these things out, saying "Actually, no, that's bullying", until eventually it sinks into the culture, the bullies realize they'll be called out if they keep it up, and they move on to some new target.

All of this ties way into the dynamic I talked about in *Untitled*. I mean, look at the people on Cracked's list of whom society says it's okay to mock. Virgins. The obese. People who live in their parents' basements. Generalize "mentally ill celebrities" just a little bit to get "people who are financially well-off but non-neurotypical" and there you go.

I apologize for irresponsibly claiming to have found a pattern in an anti-inductive domain. You may now all adjust your behavior to make me wrong.