

»I really enjoyed the laughs that made people think«

On anticapitalist stand-up comedy in the USA and censorship by big media platforms. A conversation with Lee Camp

Von Marc Bebenroth

Lee Camp is an American comedian and writer who was born in the early 1980s in Washington, D.C., and started doing stand-up comedy at the age of 18. He was the host and head writer of the weekly comedy news show »Redacted Tonight«, which aired on *RT America* from 2014 to March 2022, when the state-funded channel was shut down due to US sanctions against Russia. Over the years, he published a series of books and columns. Lee Camp currently writes columns for his Substack and hosts multiple podcasts. He also hosts a livestream called »Dangerous Ideas« three days a week. Recently, he published episodes of a new travel documentary series about his visit to Tibet (Xizang) called »Xizang Untangled«.

You often introduce yourself as the most censored comedian in America. How hard did you have to work to earn that title?

(Laughs) Well, I suppose I've been working pretty hard for many years. But I wasn't really trying to become censored. Most other comedians that people think of as censored are maybe guys like Dave Chappelle or so. But he got \$100 million deals with the biggest platforms in the world ...

Like Netflix.

Yes. Being a canceled comedian for most people might mean some people don't want to watch them. But that's different from what I'm referring to. I've been doing stand-up comedy for 25 years. I had a TV show on *RT America* called »Redacted Tonight«, a weekly comedy show that was very well received and did very well. Then in 2022, the US sanctions against Russian media hit, and they basically banned the channel, which meant my show ended as well. That same week, my YouTube channel with a quarter million subscribers was banned around the world. My Spotify podcast was banned around the world, too. A couple of years later, my TikTok channel was banned with no reason or an ability to appeal. My Facebook page has been shadow-banned, and my Twitter/X has been shadow-banned as well.

I found some quotes on your website, leecamp.com. To pick just three of them, they describe you as »the Che Guevara of comedy«, an »integral part of a longstanding satirical tradition« and »like Jon Stewart from the Daily Show but with sharper teeth«. Your work is indeed ripe with anticapitalist, antiimperialist politics. You take a

stance against Big Oil, Big Pharma, against the military-industrial complex, against Democrats and Republicans - in short: against the system of US imperialism. Are you or have you ever been a member of a communist organization?

(Laughs) I like it! No, I have never been a member of a communist organization. I do not subscribe to communism, but I just don't subscribe to many -isms. I try to look at things from a perspective like, »I am in this group, and everything that doesn't align with this group is wrong.« I try to analyze it more from a humanity- and a peace-based outlook. That's really what I'm fighting for: to get rid of exploitation and war. I'm opposed to things - which may have its own issues. I am anti-capitalist, anti-exploitation, and anti-war. Those are perhaps the best ways to describe me.

The quote »Che Guevara of comedy« came from Paul Provenza, a wonderful comedian. Years ago, he was a bit of a mentor for me. I think he was being a little cheeky with that description. Certainly, I have not been in the jungles shooting the enemy. Che Guevara might have an issue with that comparison.

But you do have a class perspective; that much is clear.

Sure. American presidents are not just at war with other countries like Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc., but they're also at war with the American people. It's definitely a class war.

The quote about you being a part of the satirical tradition is by the late writer and satirist Paul Krassner. One is tempted to compare your comedy with that of legends like George Carlin or Bill Hicks. How heavily were you influenced by them?

They definitely influenced me. I started out just wanting to be a regular comedian. Observational, not political. And so back then I was influenced by well-known comedians, but not the political ones particularly. In my late teenage years, I got into some more political comedians, Carlin for one. Chris Rock had some great political stuff. Doug Stanhope, especially back during what he would call his libertarian years when he was talking more politics. Stanhope was important. Hicks was definitely important, too. He did amazing stuff. And then there were even some people who are maybe less often referred to as those kinds of icons of political comedy. Lewis Black was important to me in certain regards. With Lenny Bruce, you have another comedian who was basically chased to his death (on August 3rd, 1966, jW) by the US government. He ultimately overdosed on drugs, but he did that with the US government on his back, making it impossible for him to make a living. They were arresting him for his words on a regular basis. So he did it under great oppression.

How would you describe your own take on political comedy?

I like all brands of comedy. I'm even a big Stephen Right and Mitch Hedberg fan as well. People would call them abstract or absurdist. They're certainly not making any political points. But on top of that, they're not making any points about anything.

I don't go at it thinking I need to create political comedy. It's just that as I was performing every night of the week in New York City as a very young comedian, in my early 20s, two things happened: One, I became more political outside the stage, and I wanted to inject my new understanding of things, my new passions, into my stand-up comedy. Second, there are different kinds of laughs when you're a comedian performing every night: the ones that are kind of simple laughs and then the laughs that are deeper and darker. I really enjoyed the laughs that made people think. The room feels different when you're making people think about big issues.

One of the earliest ones that I really loved was when I was just starting to become more political. It was a joke that went like this: What the hell are we doing now? We have people sleeping on the streets and dogs in sweaters. We're clothing the animals and meanwhile, people are suffering! At least that was the idea of the joke. It did really well, it got a big laugh. But it also had a different feeling in the room, like people were thinking about: Why is our society like that? I want them to walk home thinking about these ideas.

Without moralizing. You don't tell people, »Don't buy that!«, or »Don't consume!«

I don't. I've done big segments that are anti-Nestlé or anti-Monsanto. I don't feel like I need to say to people, »Stop buying that.« I just tell them how shitty it is. And I hope that they take the next step on their own. I also understand that we all live on a hypocrisy spectrum because we live within this society. Right now, I'm talking to you on a computer that has conflict minerals within it, and they may have been mined by children for all I know. It infuriates me, and I don't like it. But I also understand that if you try to be this pristine thing that is operating outside the insane capitalist world, you'd be living alone on an island.

And the system wouldn't have changed.

Exactly. It wouldn't even have awareness of you in any way. You have to exist. Greta Thunberg has to use products that were made with gasoline, for example.

You host the podcasts »Moment of Clarity« and »The Lee Camp Show«. You co-host »Common Censored« with artist, journalist and filmmaker Eleanor Goldfield. Furthermore, you co-host another podcast with comedian Graham Elwood called »Government Secrets«. And you host a regular livestream called »Dangerous Ideas«. That sounds like a lot of work.

I don't even think you got to everything (laughs). What most people don't know is that if you see just about any comedy news show on television - I imagine it's probably similar in Germany and other European nations - they have writers. Even a show that's just once a week, like John Oliver's »Last Week Tonight«. They have writers and researchers. I'm doing all that myself. As I did with »Redacted Tonight«. So it is very time-consuming to do those types of shows, which was another reason I had to end »UnRedacted Tonight« a few weeks ago. I still do my live streams. I also have been writing a lot more columns than I used to write. I've written for many outlets online, but now I mainly just write for my Substack at realleecamp.substack.com.

Now, the third quote compared you to Jon Stewart and his »Daily Show«. He calls out the bipartisan bullshit of Washington politics. He sits in a TV studio environment and makes silly jokes about serious issues. Or take John Oliver: A guy in a suit talking into the camera about political issues while some funny graphics are shown next to his head. Your show had many similarities. The difference: Stewart and Oliver are on national TV, have a big budget and staff writers - you don't. What went wrong?

That's a good way to put it. Nothing really went wrong. What went right was me deciding to be outwardly and be presenting anti-capitalist views. Jon Stewart never does that. He is a great comedian. John Oliver's a great comedian. Stephen Colbert is a great comedian. But none of them - occasionally Oliver will get close - really get at the heart of the issues. Chris Hedges, the famed author and journalist, put it best when he said: These other comedy news shows point out the foibles of the leaders. They'll make fun of the leaders, but they don't get at the heart of the US empire. They don't trace it back to capitalism and the exploitation of so many countries around the world. So even on topics where they're right, like: Jon Stewart has called out Israel - although I am not certain if he's used the word genocide in reference to Gaza. Even then, they're still not getting to the heart of the matter, which is a capitalist US empire subjecting the world to just endless extraction and destruction in order to enrich a tiny cabal of - for lack of a better term - dickheads.

John Oliver did spread anti-Venezuelan propaganda.

Yes, he did a whole 20-minute segment that was just that.

In Germany, we have copycat shows. They usually teach the audience that politicians are stupid or crazy or are fumbling, as you say. I figure the same is going on in the US, especially with Trump being president.

Yes, but that gives people the impression that if they just vote out Trump, then this stuff will be fixed. I try and regularly let people know that this stuff may have gotten worse under Trump, but it existed under Biden and Obama and everywhere else. The US empire killed, according to Brown University, 4.5 to six million people just in the global war on terror. And that was before Trump was in charge, mainly.

In your shows, you often cite news articles to ground your comedy in facts - facts that might not be reported in the mainstream news shows. Do you consider yourself a journalist, or are you just a news junkie who reads a lot?

It depends on how you define journalist. There are so many awful ones where I feel like, I'm better than that. I do try and ground it all, linking it to other sources, even to mainstream sources and respected journalists, to show that this is something that people can put together on their own. These sources and these writers are out there, it's just that most of those doing the best work are sidelined and pushed out of mainstream media. Because mainstream media is built on defending the US empire and Western exploitation.

You said about »Redacted Tonight« that show was for you »the craziest amount of free speech ever seen on American television«. How so?

RT News presented Russia's view on the world. Like the *BBC* used to say, they are Britain's view of the world. My show was part of the entertainment or opinion branch of *RT America*. They just brought me there to do what I do. They never told me what to say, they never told me I couldn't say something. That type of freedom really does not exist anymore here or anywhere else. In a book about »The Daily Show« it was revealed that if they ever want to make fun of one of their sponsors or advertisers, they've got to try and convince them that it's okay to be made fun of. Half of corporate America is connected with someone advertising on »The Daily Show«. It shows the level of censorship and self-censorship that's involved. I didn't have any of that. But I knew while I was there during those eight years that it wouldn't last forever. And sure enough, the US empire decided it was not strong enough to deal with true freedom of speech on a US network. So they crushed it eventually.

You relaunched the show last year on a much smaller budget and called it »UnRedacted Tonight«. Why did it become too costly to sustain?

My live streams I can produce myself. There is no need to write a script. I just set up news stories and riff on them. All it needs to go live is one click. But with something like »UnRedacted« or »Redacted Tonight« there's the research and the writing, which I did all myself. Then there's the filming: you need a camera guy, a teleprompter, and all that stuff. Then you need an editor. And you've got to pay these people. All of that was coming out of my pocket for »UnRedacted«. It wasn't a crazy expense, but it was enough that the show needed to make some money.

When I started it on YouTube, all I really wanted to see was that it was growing. Then eventually, after two or three years, it would be making its money back. What happened was in about three months it started doing very well - considering my YouTube page was shadow-banned. An average episode could get 50,000 views or more. It showed growth and did well enough. After about four months, all of that stopped. If you look at the analytics, it crashed back down to tiny numbers. I could see that YouTube basically stopped telling subscribers that a new episode was up. And they stopped showing it to people who browse for certain topics I'm covering. It was generating no income while costing me a lot of money. I couldn't keep it going.

What it comes down to is a level of suppression and censorship. In 2016, they shadow-banned me on Facebook. I had 330,000 followers back then. And until nine months ago, I had the same number of followers because no one could follow my page on Facebook. Then I tweeted at Facebook, and they undid the shadow-banning for a while, and I gained a bunch of followers - which shows that it's literally possible to just turn it on and off.

Switching to alternative platforms has a downside: The main audience remains on the big platforms. How do you cope with that?

I just throw a lot of shit at the wall and see what sticks. I'm on YouTube, but now I'm also on Substack a lot. I still do my Facebook page, I still have Twitter

and Instagram, even though they are all shadow-banned. I hope that I can get close to a fraction of what I would have if I were allowed to grow an audience organically. When these alternative platforms pop up, I usually try and use some of them. But you're right: The majority of people are on the big platforms. There's no getting around that. YouTube has billions of people watching, whereas a new upstart platform has a few hundred thousand.

You're currently releasing episodes of a documentary series you did on Chinese national television. Will we see more material like this from you?

I'm open as long as I can say what I want to say. I'm open to working with whoever wants to work with me. The new travel doc series with me in Tibet actually was filmed a year and a half ago. The first two episodes are out now. On my Substack, it is free to watch. It's not what I normally do. I get to be a little funny, but for the most part, a lot of it is just straight up: What would an American make of being in Tibet?

You like to end your shows with the promise »The revolution will have laughter«. How can you be so sure?

Even in the worst of times, there's been laughter. There was laughter in the Holocaust camps. There was laughter at the most horrific times on the Civil War battlefields. Many Palestinians right now have an amazing ability to maintain laughter and some tiny little bits of joy in their lives. That's so important because people who have laughter tend to abandon hope less quickly. If we're going to have a chance of creating a better, sustainable, peace-filled world, it's going to require those of us who are not sticking our heads in the sand. It's going to require us to have some laughter, to not burn out, and to keep fighting.

- Die deutsche Übersetzung des Gesprächs mit Lee Camp finden sie hier: <https://www.jungewelt.de/artikel/523442.politische-comedy-in-den-usa-ich-genie%C3%9Fe-das-lachen-das-die-leute-zum-nachdenken-bringt.html>

About Lee Camp

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