



# Louis C.K. and Philosophy

You Don't Get to Be Bored

Edited by Mark Ralkowski

# If You're Not White, You're Missing Out

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Louis C.K. is not afraid to talk about . . . well, anything really. Donned regularly in a black T-shirt on stage, he opines about his daughters, his sex life as a fat guy, social media and how we have ruined the environment. But the one thing that's rare for a white comedian to discuss in his act is the topic of race and his experiences with racial privilege. Louis talks about it and seemingly feels comfortable with it. He's the satirical Tim Wise, brilliantly revealing to us the reality of race, racism, and privilege—from a white male perspective, under the genius of comedic rhetoric, perfect timing, and societal truth.

Instead of sounding like he is trying too hard to be an ally to blacks, or an anti-racist whose mission is to transfer white guilt to his white audience, Louis's comedy instead makes us laugh and think and see at the same time. Louis is a "comedic philosopher of race" whose racial content in his act helps us understand a current social buzzword known as privilege.

## The Joys of Being White

Louis admits in *Chewed Up*,

I'm a lucky guy. I got a lot going on for me. I'm healthy, relatively young . . . I'm white. Thank God for that . . . that's a huge leg up. Are you kidding me? I love being white . . . Seriously, if you're not white you are missing out . . . it's thoroughly good! . . . And I'm a man. How many advantages can one person have?"

These advantages that Louis speaks of are called “identity privilege.” Privilege is a systematic structure that grants unearned advantages to a select few based on their identity. Peggy McIntosh describes privilege as an “invisible package . . . of special provisions.” These provisions are based on our identity. Louis explains that by thanking God that he is white. He is not implying that white people *are* better. Instead, he is suggesting that white people *have it* better. There is a difference. The idea that white people are better is a scientific claim that has been debunked. The idea that white people have it better is a cultural claim that social science continues to show is true. For Louis, privilege is unearned and has nothing to do with merit.

A comedic philosopher of race, Louis explains that just as our identities vary, so too do our privileges. This is emphasized when he states, “And I’m a man.” In an interview with Opie and Anthony in which Louis reveals he was born in Mexico, black comedian Patrice O’Neal says, “I’m more American than Louis C.K. and he gets to live the American Dream.” Louis responds, “That’s right, because I look white.” Louis knows that privilege comes with being a man, but greater privileges come with being a white man. Just as oppressed people can experience various kinds of oppression based on the intersection of their identities, so too can people experience privilege based on certain intersections of their identity. There can exist white privilege and heterosexual privilege, but also white American privilege and white male privilege. Louis recognizes that he benefits from being at the intersection of white and male. He makes us aware that this intersection comes with benefits that other intersections such as black and male or white and female may not experience.

For Louis, white privilege can create what he calls “white people problems.” White people problems are not really problems at all. It’s when your life is so amazing you make up things to be upset about. While other identity groups experience inequity in the job market, heightened racial targeting, brutalization and arrests for crimes they didn’t commit, Louis jokes that white people complain about having to choose a language at the ATM machine. What Louis hints at is the ability to distinguish people who have white privilege or male privilege from non-privileged people by the “troubles” they complain about. If they are complaining about a lack of job opportunities,

they are probably black or a woman. If the biggest complaint at hand is about how slow the ATM machine is, the person living this experience is most likely white or male.

If they are complaining about the former, perhaps we should give them the time and freedom to complain because they actually have something worth complaining about. Louis explains this idea further in a *Tonight Show* interview, telling Jay Leno of a time when he informed his daughter that she had no room to complain. For him, she was doing well because, "She looks good on paper. She's a white girl in America . . . she has more clothes made by children her age professionally," so she doesn't get to complain. For him, he wasn't saying that if you are white you don't get to complain. His intention in telling the story was, "if you're black you get to complain more."

Why is this so? Well 'privilege' is not meant to refer to the special advantage you receive in elementary school when you get unlimited recess because you scored high on tests or earned five stars for the week while those other fifth-grade slackers clowned around all day. The real world application of the notion of privilege means there are other groups of people who are locked out of the social advantages and opportunities you have. These people are locked out, not because they're slackers, but because of their skin color, gender, sexual identity, social class, or their disability.

This is why some people have a problem with the concept of "privilege." For them, it obscures our understanding of oppression. They believe that the concept of privilege pertains to an excess of social goods. As a result, "privilege" refers to advantages and fails to capture the denial of human rights and the exclusion of certain groups. But Louis uses the term to refer to the unfairness, disadvantage, and rights restrictions carried out by political and economic systems. For him, it is also a social system that individuals benefit from. Unfortunately, individuals can be in denial about the privilege this social system grants them.

### **Why Won't We Admit Our Privilege?**

Some people are privileged but unaware of it and deny it; others are aware of their privilege but deny it anyway. Louis acknowledges his white male privilege and shuns those who

refuse to admit the same. He explains in an interview with Jay Leno on the *Tonight Show*, "If you are white and you don't admit that it's great, then you are an asshole."

"Asshole" is Louis's term for privileged folks in denial; I will call them "privileged deniers." Given the history of America, it's a historical fact that white Americans have had certain social and economic advantages over other groups because they are white. White Americans were never slaves, never held in internment camps, and never subjected to Separate But Equal laws. That's why Louis jokes about time machines being "exclusively a white privilege." A white man can go into a time machine and go to any time and be welcomed. However, a black man may not want to go anywhere before 1980 because of the systematic oppression blacks as a group have experienced throughout American history.

Although times are not as bad as they once were in the United States, the idea that this is a post-racial society is wishful thinking. As Louis explains to Jay Leno, "It's not as if slavery ended and everything has been amazing . . . like it ended like a clean shit where you don't have to wipe." In another interview with Opie and Anthony he continues by stating that it's not as if slavery just ended "and we've been showering them with gifts since then."

There's empirical evidence that can be invoked to support Louis's point. One example is the wealth gap between whites and blacks, which remains very wide (Pew Research Center, 2011). Additionally, black crime is seen as pathological while white crime is rarely mentioned at all (Michael Jackson, 2013). When it is mentioned, mental illness is invoked to justify it. Black and brown criminals are disproportionately incarcerated for drug crimes. White felons are more likely to be called back for interviews than black applicants with no criminal record. Although racism is not as systemic and explicit as it once was, there is clear evidence that many people still hold biased and racist views. You only have to go on twitter, check the recordings and emails of a former NBA owner and current NBA executives, the comment sections of blogs, and the testimonies of countless minorities who have experienced hate crimes, harassment, and discrimination to witness the mayhem.

The privileged deniers may deny their identity privilege for several reasons: 1. they may have a utopian idea of society and

thus be unaware or refuse to believe society's ills; 2. they may like to think that their own efforts allow for their advantage, or 3. they may be so focused on their disadvantage that they refuse to recognize their social advantages. In any case, Louis thinks that anyone who doesn't admit his or her privilege is still an "asshole."

### **A "But for Now, Weeeeeeeeeee!" Mentality**

Is admitting one's privilege enough? In *Oh My God*, Louis notes that we can admit our privilege and still be complicit in it. To be complicit is to comply with or go along with a racist, classist, sexist, ablest, transphobic, homophobic, or any type of oppressive practice.

Louis claims that human greatness comes from the fact that we are shitty people. He notes that we have smartphones because the people who are creating them are making the technology under horrible conditions. We choose to text people and in doing so we let people suffer. We could be content with candles and horses and in turn be a little kinder to others but we are not.

Louis doesn't put all the blame on Apple or Samsung. It's the consumers who are aware of what they are doing and are therefore complicit in the suffering of others as a result of using the technology. Their complicity is blameworthy. They are aware that the benefits of technology come at the cost of other people's suffering. Likewise, a person can acknowledge that they have privilege and still be complicit in it. Someone can sustain an unjust system even when he or she does not intend to oppress others.

Louis is trying to highlight how complicity works. We may not directly oppress others, but if we are complicit within a system that does, then we are not all that innocent. When we have identity privilege and do not speak out against the unjust system that creates it or attempt to extend that privilege to others who do not have it, we are complicit in their suffering.

Although someone may be forthright in acknowledging their privilege, as Louis is about his own privilege, acknowledgment is not enough to fix the problem. Notice in his phone example that Louis suggests acknowledgement *as well as* an attitude of kindness in order to change things. We can admit we

have identity privilege, but that will not improve the social conditions that create the privilege. We will need more than acknowledgement. Acknowledgment alone will still have us complicit but an attitude change such as kindness may be a way to open up new possibilities to others who otherwise feel locked out of basic rights and opportunities.

For Barbara Applebaum, complicity is much more complex than Louis thinks. For instance, in *Being White, Being Good*, Applebaum quotes an example where she tells of a well-intentioned white person who decides to move out of her all white neighborhood. But the very fact that the white person has a choice to move, based on her race and economic status, is an example of her being complicit in privilege. Applebaum notes that with all good intentions, it may be difficult if not impossible for people with privileged identities to escape their privilege and become one hundred percent non-complicit. A White person, a cisman, a straight person, or an abled woman may find that they cannot escape their privilege.

Moreover, Applebaum believes we should move away from fault discourse and focus more on the mobilization of resources to disrupt unjust social systems. Instead of being obsessed with policing one's complicity in privilege, one should spend that time challenging unjust systems. If we focus too much on the individual and their guilt, we will forget that privilege and oppression are systematic and must therefore be fixed systematically.

Applebaum and Louis C.K. seem to be in disagreement with each other. In Louis's show *Chewed Up*, he admits that being white gives a person a leg up. He doesn't want to go to the future because white people are going to pay for what they have done. For Louis, they deserve it. Louis's white guilt is on display. He also challenges us to be kind. However, instead of going beyond the individual and saying "lets challenge the system that creates the privilege," he says, "I don't want to go to the future to find out what happens to white people; we are gonna pay hard for this shit . . . but for now, Weeeeeeeee!" In Louis's statement, the guilt is present but the social criticism and social action are not. The idea of an inevitable karma is present, but not a current suggestion on how to change things now. An acknowledgement that privilege exists is present but it seems as if Louis is endorsing complicity and inaction.

## **Tell Us What to Do, Louis!**

Before we get on Louis for not offering us solutions, perhaps we should view Louis as a comedic philosopher of race whose job is more descriptive than prescriptive. Maybe his job is to show us what privilege looks like and leave it up to others to give us a theory on how to change things. Louis has noted that he once went into a store, walked around a bit, and upon getting into his car, he realized he didn't pay for his bottled water. He assumed the cashiers didn't say anything because they believed he was a white man who would pay one day. That is some great privilege! That is one leg up! On the other hand, in many communities in America, people are being killed because their skin color, clothing, or where they decide to walk, make them *appear* as if they will steal something. Louis acknowledges his privilege and tries to get us to see the world as we all have created or contributed to it. Perhaps getting us to see our privilege and the social system that creates it is his only job as a "comedic philosopher of race." What to do and how to do it, is left up to us.