Generalised Comedy Production: British Political Economy and Stand-Up[1]

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Abstract
Building on recent work on the political and everyday nature of comedy, this paper seeks to situate the genre of stand-up comedy as a form of capitalist social relations. The paper focuses on the emergence of Alternative Comedy in the 1980s in contrast to the comedy of Working Men's Clubs. This cultural development is placed in the context of Marx's understanding of capitalist society and a critique of Adorno's notion of the culture industry. The paper argues that this radical change in British comedy was only made possible by the policies of the British state in the 1980s. In particular, the paper considers the changing ideas comedians had of property, propriety and performance. While Alternative Comedy was highly critical of Thatcherism and neoliberalism, it owed its existence to these modes of state management. The paper contends, then, that comedy can be seen as a form of class struggle and should not be judged by its capacity to be a mere instrument of resistance, or condemned by some spurious inability to achieve this. The paper concludes by considering the development of comedy production since the 1980s.

Introduction
This paper considers the emergence of Alternative Comedy (AC) in the 1980s, ostensibly seen as a reaction to Thatcher's Britain and a form of resistance to these substantial and state-led changes to British society. However, the paper, basing its approach in Marx's understanding of capitalist society and a critique of Adorno's account of the culture industry, argues that AC should be understood instead as a form of these social changes occurring in Britain and throughout the world in this period. This argument, then, critiques instrumentalist accounts that see AC as an unproblematic or pure form of resistance to changes in British society, as well as determinist accounts that see cultural production solely as a tool for oppression.

The first section of the paper provides an account of cultural production grounded in Marx's critique of capitalist society. In this view, the stand-up comedian is forced to enter a market to subsist, selling their labour, which appears as comic performance. The conditions of producing and distributing comic content are not, however, uniform and vary across time and space. As such, this section adopts a form analysis to understand comedy as a manifestation of historically specific class struggle. Critiquing instrumentalist and determinist approaches to cultural analysis, this section considers both the production and content of comedy as a means of providing an insight into social relations

The second section argues that changes in the global economy in the 1970s saw the demise of the Working Men's Club (WMC) comic. The WMC stand-up had a distinctive comic style and content, which, the paper argues, can only be understood in terms of their historical conditions. Post-war Britain was an era of growing affluence and leisure time for the working class, a consequence of the post-war settlement between capital and labour, but also substantial social change. Changes to *inter alia* gender relations, immigration, sexuality led to the undermining of the relatively recently established idea of the white working class. Crucially, the paper argues that the production of stand-up comedy in this period was also distinct, with comic content freely distributed among performers with little sense of ownership.

[1] Ernest Mandel (1990:13) uses the term 'generalised commodity production' to describe Marx's characterisation of the capitalist mode of production in his introduction to Capital Volume I.

The third section of the paper contrasts the content and production of WMC comic performance with AC, focusing on the impact of state policies in the late-1970s and 1980s for stand-up comedy. The paper argues that this process intensified the exploitation of the comedian and the commodification of stand-up. AC acts were required to commercialise their work due to cuts in arts funding by the Thatcher government. This saw a boom in a variety of comic performances but, crucially, saw substantial change in how jokes were considered proprietary and the relationship between the comic and the marketplace.

The final section of the paper considers the legacy of this transformation in stand-up comedy, particularly the diversification of stand-up comedy and comedians, the growth of stand-up as a business and the consequences of this for contemporary political discourse. The paper argues that the AC shift in the 1980s did not simply see the birth of a new form of resistance to capitalism but that this resistance embodied the essence of historical changes to capitalism during the 1970s that can still be observed today. This argument does not, importantly, seek to argue – as Adorno – that AC is simply a new manifestation of the culture industry. Instead, the paper argues that embodied in both WMC and AC performance is class struggle and, inherent to this, is an identification and critique of capitalist social hierarchies.

Culture and Class Struggle

This section of the paper argues that culture is a form of social relations, a mode or manifestation of how society itself is constituted. It further argues that capitalist social relations are historically particular and prone to moments of transformation. This paper adopts Marx's characterisation of capitalist society as unstable and exploitative, arguing that culture is a form of this crisis-prone society. Further, while accepting Adorno's view that cultural production is a form of capitalist production, this paper critiques Adorno's closed and determinist representation of the culture industry.

For Adorno (1975:18), the culture industry, the manner in which culture is produced in capitalist society simply sustains capitalism rather than being a manifestation of the essential struggle of that society. It is a homogeneous and totalising force of oppression. Distinguishing between mass culture, an organic form of working-class culture, and the culture industry, capitalism's capacity to produce culture for profit, Adorno specifically condemns comedy as lumpen.

> 'Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness. To moments of happiness laughter is foreign... In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality' (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:112)

Adorno and Horkheimer's approach can be characterised as treating culture in a instrumental and determinist way. In regard to the former, culture is seen as a tool, only valuable in so far as it can achieve a political goal. In terms of the latter, the instrument is blunt in revolutionary terms since capitalist society makes culture an instrument of its own use, for the continued subjugation of society. Alternative ways of thinking about popular culture allow for a more open-ended approach that does not privilege instrumental or determinist thinking (Brassett & Sutton 2017:246-248). In this view, analytical value can be derived from treating popular culture as a form of class struggle. As per Stuart Hall (1981:239), popular culture is a venue for and a means through which class struggle is engaged. In an implicit critique of Adorno, Hall (ibid) contends that it is not an arena in which socialism exists as 'already fully formed' but rather a place where it *might* develop. Hall's open understanding of culture is a useful means of analysing the material basis and social relations of cultural production. Brassett & Sutton (2017:247) develop this point in relation to political comedy:

'Satire is fundamentally situated in the social relations that it seeks to criticise and, as such, the performance can both critique and embody the problems and contradictions of that society. This is not necessarily 'direct' in the sense that the satirist intends, because these contradictions manifest – in part – through the performance itself. Thus, the significance of the satirical performance is not predetermined and should not be treated as a 'closed' event. Rather, the manifestation of these contradictions through the performance is open ended, and the satire can develop its form of critique in unintended directions.'

Here, form can be seen as a way of understanding social phenomena: culture as a form of social relations. While Adorno, rightly, frames cultural production in terms of capitalist social relations, it leads him to treat culture in capitalist society as essentially regressive. As Bonefeld et al. (1992:vxi) note, determinist theory becomes complicit in society's oppression as it accepts social conditions as inevitable, denying the open character of class struggle. When understood, however, as a form of class struggle, the material basis of cultural production can be analytically retained but allows for the character and content of culture to become critically significant. Adorno, in treating cultural production as merely a tool for sustaining capitalist exploitation, refuses to account for the complexity and struggle within cultural production. For him, the class struggle in the culture industry is lost: the significance of culture in capitalist society is already determined. Viewing culture – here, stand-up comedy – as a form of class struggle gives us an analytical lens to understand the historical particularities of capitalist society. This emphasis on class struggle permits us to understand social transformation since the ever-changing nature of the struggle creates new opportunities and obstacles for further exploitation and resistance in unanticipated ways.

This view, then, opens up the possibility of seeing cultural products as means of interrogating and understanding social life itself. In more recent scholarship, this view has come to be known as 'vernacular theory' (Randall 2011:263-264; Rogers 2017:2; Beer 2016:410). As per Simon Critchley (2002:87), 'the genius of jokes is that they light up the common features of our world, not by offering theoretical considerations… but in a more practical way. They are forms of practical abstraction, socially embedded philosophizing'.

Taken together, this approach allows us to situate the production of stand-up comedy at the same time as reading its content as a way of understanding society. In this view, comedy can indeed be a form of resistance against capitalist society but this is not to suggest that comedy is *always and only* a form of resistance (Brassett 2016:8-9; Grayson 2013:379; Critchley 2002:10-12). Instead, following Jameson (1991:38), comedy should be seen 'as catastrophe and progress all together'. The development of stand-up comedy then is a dialectical process, and the form of specific iterations of stand-up comedy explained as expressions of class struggle, representative of geographically and historically specific differences within a globally constituted society. Each transformation of comedy is not a definitive outcome of that struggle but merely a new basis for its renewal. Rather than trying to think of what comedy *can do*, we should instead try and see how comedy *is constituted*. This is achieved by considering both the basis of comedy production and the content of that production.

Club Comedy

This section of the paper contextualises changes in British comedy in the post-war years. It first looks at the comedy of the Working Men's Club (WMC) circuit, situating this in terms of the management of the global economy and the particularities of the British post-war settlement.

The post-war years in the global economy are often portrayed by the broad acceptance of Fordism (Lipietz 1982; Foster 1988; Schoenberger 1988; Harvey 1989). Fordism can be

characterised by the mass production of goods by a deskilled and homogeneous mass workforce, organised into large trades unions, which engaged in mass consumption of standardised commodities (Clarke 1990:73). For Gramsci (1977:302), Fordism was 'inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life. One cannot have success in one field without tangible results in the other.' As such, Fordism sought not only to increase the efficiency of workers but to create a certain type of worker. However, as Clarke (1990:96) notes, this was not a unique form of capitalist production since it was prone, as ever, to the inherent crises of that capitalism. Indeed, Fordism was itself a response to an earlier crisis (ibid.:94).

Harvey (1989:125) makes a valuable point that the origins of Fordism derive from the early efficiency movements of the 19th Century, as well as being linked to temperance movements on both sides of the Atlantic. This was also the origin of the WMC, developed as a means of educating, entertaining and managing the worker during his leisure time. In identifying this continuity, as per Clarke (1990), it is important to remind ourselves that Fordism is not a unique period of production or social relations, or a necessary phase of capitalist development, but instead a contingent manifestation of historic class struggles. Indeed, this paper does not argue that changes to stand-up accord to rigid periods of capitalism. This approach would reify particular features of capitalist society and obscure the continuous nature of class struggle. Rather, the point here is that these features derive from enduring and historically embedded characteristics of capitalism (Bonefeld 2006:133).

A key feature of the cultural life, particularly for the working class, of the post-war era in Britain was the WMC. These had originated in the mid-19th Century as a consequence of legislation regulating work hours and, therefore, created additional leisure time for workers, particularly men (Cherrington 2009:189). These clubs were generally organised through the Club and Institute Union (CIU), which had been founded in 1862. The fear arising from this new free time for workers was that it would lead to public depravity, violence and drunkenness (Beaven 2005:48; Cherrington 2009:189). Due to the general squalor of home life and the proximity to their wives, it was believed that working men would not feel comfortable at home during their leisure hours. The WMC, therefore, was an attempt to both keep the male worker entertained during his leisure time and, at least initially, to educate and uplift the working man as a means of social improvement (Cherrington 2009:191-192). Challenging the notion that this is a unique feature of Fordism, this was linked to an argument made in the 19th Century that exposure to culture and art would improve the productivity of the working man (Minihan 1977:37-43). As Horkheimer and Adorno (2002:109) remark:

> 'Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again. At the same time, however, mechanization has such power over leisure and its happiness determines so thoroughly the fabrication of entertainment commodities, that the off-duty worker can experience nothing but afterimages of the work process itself. The ostensible content is merely a faded foreground; what is imprinted is the automated sequence of standardized tasks. The only escape from the work process in factory and office is through adaptation to it in leisure time.'

The immediate post-war era was the heyday of the WMCs. They existed as a means of surviving and sustaining the working day for working-class people. As such, the WMC comic was a part and product of working-class life (Double 2014:36-7; Smith 2018:50). Entertainment in WMCs during the immediate post-war era was generally composed of variety acts, combining singing and comedy, but these performances eventually divided between stand-up comedy performances and musical acts, especially from the 1960s onwards as television's popularity grew (Friedman 2014:18). This comedy tended to be gag-based: a series of short, rapid-fire jokes made by the comedian that

the audience had often heard before, always on the same themes and ideas (ibid.:19).[2] Returning to the above quotation, and to Gramsci's point earlier in this section, then, methods of mass production can be seen in this form of comedy and, indeed, this entertainment also provided a means for sustaining post-war methods of mass production.

The production of comedy for WMC comics was not seen as a private process, nor were jokes seen as private property. Rather, 'comics worked under the assumption that jokes were common property; jokes were to be told not owned' (Smith 2018:51).[3] For example, on the variety television show *The Comedians*, which ran from 1971 to 1992, producers would place a list of jokes behind the camera so that comedians would know which jokes had already been performed so that they did not repeat the same material (Channel 4 2000). This was not seen as theft from one comic by another but, and only in the worst-case scenario where two comics were performing at the same venue on the same night to the same audience, merely impolite. In one episode of *The Comedians*, for example, Bernard Manning had deliberately used all of George Roper's material as a practical joke, leaving him to ad lib his performance (Bowen 1994:125).

In this era, therefore, club comics had a communal pool of jokes and gags that existed as a kind of folk knowledge and their audience existed and were available to them through the WMC circuit. Club comics did not have to seek out their audience as they could perform in WMCs around the country and they did not have to *write* (their own) material as they could use already available material. This is not to say that the rule of the market was not present in stand-up comedy prior to the 1980s but that the particular manner in which comedy was produced meant that this pressure on individual performers was substantially less keen than on later comics.

Perhaps the most famous and successful of the club comics, Bernard Manning, was a self-declared racist (BBC 1998). Manning owned his own club, the Embassy Club, in Manchester and performed there everyday until his death in 2007. Manning's performances were characterised by gag-based humour, featuring principally racist and sexist jokes.[4] Manning was by no means alone in the bigoted content of his humour. Indeed, club comic performances were marbled by all manner of bigotry, predominantly racism but also homophobia and sexism. Bigotry was a staple of the performances of club comics, including Freddie Starr (Jeffries 2019), Mike Reid (Chortle 2002), Jim Davidson (Daily Mail 2018) and even Charlie Williams, whose father was from Barbados, would joke in his Yorkshire accent to audiences, 'If tha don't laugh at this joke, I'll come and live next door to thee' (Bowen 1994:124).[5] The club comics could be characterised by paraphrasing Henry Ford's apocryphal quip: audiences can have any joke they want, as long as it's a racist one. Even comics who were considered relatively family-friendly and 'clean', such as Bob Monkhouse (Kirby 2003), Frank Carson (Independent 2008) or Ken Dodd (Powell 2018), performed material that relied on sexist and homophobic content.

Club comics would make two claims to justify their use of this material, especially as they were falling out of favour during the 1980s. Firstly, that they were not actually racist but simply making a joke, being equally derogatory and offensive to all people irrespective of race, gender or

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[2] Usually mother-in-law jokes, 'my wife' jokes, racist, sexist and homophobic jokes, jokes on the Second World War.

[3] Smith (2018:51) makes the claim that the CIU held a vast repository of jokes that could be, and were, sold in bulk to comics. This is based on a claim made by Friedman (2014:17) that the CIU exercised a monopoly on jokes, which Smith cites. Friedman's support for this claim seems to derive from a citation to Critchley (2002:56-60). However, Critchley makes no such claim in those pages or elsewhere in that text. This author could find no evidence whatsoever to support Friedman's claim of monopoly ownership of comic material by the CIU. Rather, comics would write their own material, or have writers to do it for them, or simply appropriate the jokes they heard on the circuit.

[4] For extensive examples of the use of racism, sexism and homophobia in Bernard Manning's material, please see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTMyImTuHCk

[5] For Freddie Starr, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJrnXxXyVFE. For Mike Reid, see https://youtu.be/tcFJAoTVbxQ?t=90. For Jim Davidson's 'Chalky White' character, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=16&v=4njiljpDIEg. For Charlie Williams, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrzAz6RfoxE.

sexuality (Dixon 2007). Secondly, their backgrounds in deprived working-class communities required a humorous approach to everyday life and therefore all things were game for making fun (Channel 4 2000). Certainly, the club comics tended to be men from white Northern working-class backgrounds; however, their comic targets were rarely, if ever, white Northern working-class men. Rather, WMC comic performances focused on the social issues that had come to dominate everyday working-class life. As Charlie Williams noted, 'I told jokes that I thought would suit the audience' (Harry 2000) or in the words of Bernard Manning:

> 'I hope [my children are] broad minded enough to realise that that's the era I had to get my living in and that's what I had to do to fill theatres and clubs and make my club a success for forty years and make them live in a beautiful home with beautiful cars and want for nothing' (Channel 4 2000)

Where Walter Benjamin (2007:91-92) characterised storytelling as a form of craftsmanship, understanding everyday culture as a productive activity that revealed features of the storytellers' lives and environment, the same can be said of stand-up comedians: 'traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel' (ibid.:92).

This point is worth dwelling upon as the content of the gags of club comics reveals not just the performances required for a comic to make a living but the insecurities felt by working-class people concerning, particularly, the end of empire, British decline and social changes brought about by the post-war settlement. The focus of these comics on race, immigration and the changing role of women in the home and the workplace mirrored broader social changes. With increased levels of immigration from a disintegrating Empire into Britain in the post-war years, the British white working-class, brought up on an ideological diet of British racial and cultural superiority, also fearing the loss of their livelihoods to lower-paid and non-union immigrant labour, had become increasingly racist (Clarke 1990:86; Spencer 1996:32-33; Hansen 2000:5; Shilliam 2018:92-4). There was a gender dimension to this insecurity as women's roles were changing. Men were becoming unsure of their traditional positions as the head of a household, being required to support and be supported by their mothers-in-law, and increasingly reliant on their wives' incomes as workers. The post-war years were also an era of relative social progress, with abortion and homosexuality both being made legal in in 1967.[6]

In the post-war world, as Shilliam (2018:80) notes, the white working class was crystallized 'as a constituency firmly installed within imperial coordinates and their racist determinations.' The white men's working class was insecure not as a consequence of social change but marbled in its essence from the moment of conception. The comic focus of WMC stand-ups therefore reveals the contours and constitution of this class fragment. The next section will consider the demise of WMC comics in the same terms.

An Alternative to Comedy

The development of AC in the 1980s was premised on a break with two dominant forms of comedy. Alexei Sayle, one of the pioneers of AC, and the first compere of the Comedy Club, stated that 'the whole point of what we were doing was surely to challenge the smug hegemony of the Oxford, Cambridge, public-schoolboy comedy network, as well as destroying the old-school working men's club racists' (Sayle 2013). Indeed, this is the hagiography for later AC comics also:

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[6] One could make a comparison between how the club comics understood these changes in contrast to how the Oxbridge-educated comics understood them through the so-called Satire Boom. While, for Ward (2011), the Satire Boom showcased the upper-middle-class' sense of impotence and their mournful disappointment with a political elite that had given away British power, the performances of WMC comics reveal the sardonic humour of the white working-class angry at those they believed had gained from this loss of British power.

> 'For my generation of London-circuit stand-up comedians there was a Year Zero attitude to 1979. Holy texts found in a skip out the back of the offices of the London listings magazine *Time Out* tell us how, with a few incendiary post-punk punchlines, Alexei Sayle, Arnold Brown, Dawn French and Andy de la Tour destroyed the British comedy hegemony of Upper-Class Oxbridge Satirical Songs and Working-Class Bow Tie-Sporting Racism. Then, with the fragments of these smashed idols and their own bare hands, they built the pioneering stand-up clubs The Comedy Store and the Comic Strip. In so doing, they founded the egalitarian Polytechnic of Laughs that is today's comedy establishment. Every religion needs a Genesis myth, and this is contemporary British stand-up comedy's very own creation story' (Lee 2010:2-3)

This attitude, while aware of the mythical nature of the origins of AC, remains focused on the comedians and performers of AC itself (Quirk 2018:1-11). This paper argues that this origin and the decline of WMC comedy can instead be found in changes to global capitalism pioneered by states.

The transformations implemented by the British state in the late-1970s and early 1980s were to erase the post-war compact between capital and labour and institute a new order. This new order was to be achieved by unleashing the market to drive through social change, thus making Britain more competitive and entrepreneurial (Gamble 1994:35). This change was keenly felt in culture and the arts. In the words of Margaret Thatcher (1993:632), 'I wanted to see the private sector raising more money and bringing business acumen and efficiency to bear on the administration of cultural institutions… [and] to encourage private individuals to give by covenant, not the state to take through taxes'. As Norman Stevas, Thatcher's first Minister for the Arts, stated in 1980:

> 'The arts world must come to terms with the situation and accept the fact that Government policy in general has decisively tilted away from the expansion of the public to the enlargement of the private sector… We look to the private sphere to meet any shortfall and to provide immediate means of increase' (Hewison 1987:112)

As noted in the previous section, the WMC comics had established venues with an audience that knew exactly what it was paying for and wanted, and a source of comic material that was available as if from a *folk ether*. The proto-AC performers, meanwhile, were resident in arts centres, performing niche material to a handful of other comics and performers, often working part-time jobs in the public sector to make ends meet (Lee & Sayle 2016). These arts organisations were supported through state funding, which was distributed around the country and provided on the art world's terms through the Arts Council (Alexander 2018:72). A watershed came in 1975 as it marked the end of growth in the Arts Council's public income; however, cuts to arts increased substantially from 1980, with an announcement that the Arts Council would cease to support forty-one arts organisations (Hewison 1987:111-115; House of Commons 2016:24; Bennett 1995:213; Alexander 2018:72). An additional support for arts organisations in Britain was local councils; however, this source of funding was also diminished as a consequence of cuts to grants from central to local government (Hewison 1987:120).

As planned by Conservative governments, when arts funding cuts began to accelerate in the 1980s, arts centres had to find ways to support their activities commercially or make cuts to their provision. As such, they were required to limit their capacity for supporting niche or non-marketable performers. In effect, the performers who had been resident at arts centres throughout the country were given a stark choice: change profession or become commercially viable. These performers were now, as per Marx (1996 [1867]:179), doubly free: freed from their means of subsistence and free to sell their labour-power. In other words, performers were compelled to enter

the marketplace to sell their labour-power in order to survive. In its historical form, therefore, Alternative Comedy represented the logic of no alternative.

Louise Amoore (2004:175) notes that more recent developments in global production, generally referred to as neoliberalisation, saw a shift away from regular patterns of work towards more precarious forms of employment. The life of the so-called 'worker entrepreneur' became itinerant, with an emphasis placed on the potential rewards of such a lifestyle (Amoore 2004:183). Above all, for Amoore (2004:190), 'behind the glamorous image of the risk-taker entrepreneur, however, there lies a much less visible shift in the ways in which people perceive and experience the nature of employment, their working practices, and the insecurities of their lives.' For the risk-taker entrepreneur in the above quotation, one could easily read the stand-up comedian. One impact of these changes, then, was to create a new stand-up comedian, thrust into a marketplace to make a precarious living, forced to become an entrepreneur of their own comic content.

Daniel Smith (2018:51) characterises the development of AC in direct contrast to WMC comedy. Unlike the WMC comic, the AC comic had to depend on originality and the distinctive persona and performance of the comedian (ibid.:50). The shift I wish to emphasise here is the transformation from communal property to private property, deriving from specific policy choices made by the British state. The removal of state support from the arts and the efforts made to marketize culture and performance provided the foundation upon which AC was able to develop. The change in how stand-up comedy was produced opened up the possibility for acts to perform in front of audiences in the hundreds of thousands but success depended on identifying themselves as distinctive and marketable performers. May (2013:203) argues that it was no coincidence that AC 'moved increasingly towards identity-driven material... If the material is strongly bound with your comic persona, then it will be more difficult for another comic to appropriate it.'[7] However, while May is conscious of this link, he provides no explanation for why or how this transformation occurred in the first place.

This difference between comic styles can be seen in various instances of so-called 'joke theft' between WMC and AC comics, as well as the more general sense of ownership over jokes in contemporary comedy (BBC 2004; Green 2009; MacInnes 2009; May 2013). Further illustration of this point, however, can be found in the material of alternative comics themselves. For example, from a joke made by Stewart Lee on this very matter.

> 'Joe Pasquale goes into a bar. He says to the barman, 'I'd like a pint of beer, please.' And the barman says, 'Why don't you just come around the bar, help yourself to the beer and walk off without paying for it? After all, you are Joe Pasquale. Or perhaps send in someone else to steal the beer for you and then deny that beer can actually be owned. Say that you find the very concept of ownership of beer 'hard to understand'. Or better still, insist that it is your beer and that you brewed it at home in your house even though your home lacks the most rudimentary of brewing facilities' (Lee 2005)

Here, Lee is referring to a joke performed by Joe Pasquale, a British comic with a distinctive high-pitched voice, identical to a joke made by the comedian Michael Redmond.[8] In the original, Redmond would walk on stage, dressed in a long coat, stand in silence for a moment and then say, 'A lot of people say to me... [pause] get out of my garden.' There are two points to make here about the above quotation. Firstly, Lee, as a contemporary avatar of the AC tradition, is reiterating the

[7] This is in a didactic section titled 'How to Protect your Material'

[8] For illustrative purposes, here is Michael Redmond's comic performance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnrHaMa4xnE&t and here is Joe Pasquale's: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbgsWL-pCGo. Pasquale was accused of plagiarism by another comic, Frank Skinner, in 2010 (Chortle 2010).

significance of jokes as private property for comic performers. Lee, despite his radical or left-wing credentials, lambasts Pasquale for treating jokes as communal property while Lee likens a joke to a product such as beer. The rule of the market permeates the AC understanding of jokes and comic performance: jokes have been commodified. Only when accepting this point does it become possible to understand Lee's anger: jokes and comic performance are the only goods that the comedian has available to sell.

Secondly, Lee (2005) argues that the Redmond joke fails to work when Joe Pasquale uses it since anybody looking out of their window at the then-celebrity Joe Pasquale in their garden would more likely say 'Is that… Joe Pasquale?'. Only if Redmond, an unknown and mildly sinister-looking man in a mackintosh, said it would there be an adequate juxtaposition to satisfy the punchline. Here, then, Lee is emphasising a significant quality of AC material: it can only be meaningfully delivered by the performer who originated the joke. This resonates with a subsequent characterisation of AC by Lee (2013a) as the 'writer-auteur-comedian model' of comic performance (Smith 2018:51; Dessau 2013). This view can be observed in an earlier article in which Lee, admittedly for comic effect, considers a fantastical ideal performance:

> 'Ideally, routines as told by comedians, as opposed to jokes told by blokes in the pub and cab drivers, will reach a stage where they are impossible to plagiarise. In the year 2525, the futuristic supa-comedian in his silver suit will have developed an act so distinctive and steeped in his own individual specialised world view, that his lines would be incomprehensible in the mouth of anyone else, and we can see the beginning of this evolution in the work of Harry Hill, Simon Munnery and, er, Eddie Izzard. In the meantime, most jokes are still viewed as part of the public domain' (Lee 1995)

Taking these two points together, the emergence of AC was not an emancipation from capitalist social relations but simultaneously their renewal and critique. It would be a mistake here to denounce all AC comics as mercenary, or, as Adorno, merely tools of the Culture Industry. Julie Webber (2013:36-37), writing about US comedy, states that 'we must not assume that the embedded scripts in comedy performances are progressive in the sense that they move history forward into new eras and understandings of social and political life.' While comic performances do not necessarily move history forward according to some Liberal notion of progress, combining an analysis of comic production and content allows us to see how comedy actually *embodies* contingent historical transformation.

The Comedy of No Alternative

The emergence of AC had a profound impact on stand-up comedy in Britain, transforming the industry completely. Alexei Sayle now laments the failure of AC to deliver on its early radical promise. He pinpoints the exact death of this promise during the filming of *The Young Ones* episode Bambi, a moment he compares to Cromwell's suppression of the Levellers (Sayle 2013).

> 'I turned up to find several members of the Cambridge Footlights were appearing in the show… Stephen Fry being delightful, Hugh Laurie singing blues numbers, Mel Smith offering us a ride in his gold Rolls-Royce and Griff Rhys-Jones entertaining us by screaming abuse at minions… I thought these people were the enemy… But the others said, "No that was just you; we never signed up for your class war".' (Chortle 2014)

As with any workplace, AC comedians, such as and particularly Sayle, were eager to criticise working conditions and the process that created them. Amoore (2004:187) also remarks on the 'small and everyday acts of resistance' that occur in a 'lean', or neoliberal, factory, where workers

would use communication cards to distribute jokes around the workplace. So too did the early AC comics initially focus their ire on Thatcherism. However, the compact and compromise for AC performers was not with the working-class club comics but rather the inheritors of the Satire Boom, as the above quotation from Sayle demonstrates. As Schaffer (2016:394) notes, AC came to represent not a radical critique against Thatcherism but instead an acceptance of neoliberalism: 'Frequently uninspired by the realities of working-class tastes and values, alternative comedians tended to offer a middle-class critique for middle-class audiences'.

While it is easy to be pessimistic about the so-called early promise of AC, this development in stand-up also changed fundamentally the content of the performers and the performers themselves. This paper has argued that the critical focus of AC actually derives from a shift in how comedy was produced. Stand-up comedy though became much more diverse as a consequence of these changes. Where WMC was almost exclusively dominated by white men, AC permitted a much more diverse line-up of stand-up comedians, who were able to offer narrative comedy based around their own lives. As Julian Clary (2017) remarked, 'When you turn yourself into a product, as we do, you just have to keep talking about yourself.' This is, as noted in the previous section, a consequence of the shift to a worker-entrepreneur, or writer-auteur, model of comic content, which derived from a need to exert proprietary control over this content (Smith 2018:51). Due to a shift in comedy production, comics, rather than having access to a communal pool of material, were now required to produce their own material and in order to build a living on this material, exercised property rights over this material. As such, instead of producing short and indistinct gags, this material was narrative in form and personal in content, thereby making it difficult for other comics to perform – in effect, to steal – this material.

In this environment, novelty was valuable. Where novelty acts in the past had been curios, novelty, in the post-AC era, was synonymous with innovation in a crowded marketplace. Performers had to distinguish themselves so that their material might remain proprietary and so that they could be seen as distinct from other performers. Comedians therefore began to mine the rich comic seams of race, gender, sexuality and class but in more personal and considerate fashions than WMC comedians. Along with many other performers, comedians such as Lenny Henry, Julian Clary, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders were able to establish successful comic careers based on personal reflections and experiences of being, respectively, black, homosexual or women. Over time, and certainly not in a linear process, racism, sexism and homophobia slowly became stigmatised in stand-up comedy.[9]

This proliferation of divergent identities in stand-up comedy, however, was a consequence of the intensification of exploitation within the industry. Indeed, Sayle (2013) accounts for the content of contemporary comedy in terms of the need to appeal to a mass market, highlighting one positive continuity from the early AC comics:

> 'Their routines are also vastly different from those experimental early days. Just as McDonald's don't serve anything too spicy, it seems that if you want to cater to the comedy mass market, you have to keep your material extremely bland, telling people stuff they already know about such safe subjects as child-rearing and sheds. Still, on the upside, there is one legacy from the Soho days: there's not a hint of racism in any of these performances.'

[9] The embrace of 'lad' culture by stand-up acts and audiences in the 1990s shows that this was not a linear process, with the emergence of 'lads' comedians such as Frank Skinner, David Baddiel and Rob Newman. Their material, again following Liberal identity markers, tended to focus on the young male experience, considering issues such as masturbation, football, farting, sexual relations with women and the elusiveness of the female orgasm. These comedians, however, were some of the first to perform vast stadium tours, selling hundreds of thousands of tickets. For Baddiel, see: https://youtu.be/V8HpHYu354Q?t=731; for Skinner, see: https://youtu.be/ZdPc5LHcaro?t=3088; for Newman, see: https://youtu.be/YTPBkvkYuCU?t=1148.

With the growth of a mass market came greater rewards. Successful contemporary stand-up comedians can earn millions of pounds from a single tour. The comedian Michael McIntyre, for one example, earned £21m from his 2012 tour, performing to around 700,000 people (Walker 2011; Clark 2013). While successful WMC comics were able to earn enough to support a very comfortable lifestyle, the consequences of the shift to AC are that comedians can become extremely wealthy. Despite being born out of a left-wing tradition of political critique, and continuing to represent Liberal values of tolerance, contemporary stand-up comedy is now a big business.

Recent technological developments have allowed stand-up comedians to reach an even wider audience. Krefting and Baruc (2015:130) consider the significance of social media to comic content and critique the widely held notion that content has now overcome the demands of the market as a consequence of comedians being able to directly engage with their audiences. Rather, they observe that, while the advent of social media has led to further diversification in comic content, it has not actually democratised comedy (ibid.:136). Instead, as per Amoore (2004), while social media has empowered some popular and commercially successful comics, it has allowed broadcasters, venue owners, etc. to shift financial risk on to comics to prove themselves as commercially viable before being hired (Krefting & Baruc 2015:131-132).

Sayle (2013) suggests that his 'true children' were the comics who spurned the 'huge paydays' and are the inheritors of the AC tradition. However, this ignores the insidious power of capital to exert pressure in unseen ways that make these comics just as much inheritors of state transformation in the 1980s as they are avatars of any *geist* of artistic freedom. As the early-AC performer Arthur Smith (2010:158) noted rather sardonically, 'What could be more Thatcherite than a stand-up comedian? Self-employed, un-unionised, unsupported by any namby-pamby arts grant, he has got on his bike and got a gig.' This applies not just to the megastars of comedy, such as Michael McIntyre, but also Sayle's true children, such as Stewart Lee, as we have seen in the previous section.

The absence of overt racism, and the diversification of stand-up comedians and their material, is certainly an improvement on the WMC comedians. However, as noted in the first section of the paper, this development must be understood in terms of the social relations and material basis of cultural production. Stand-up comedy today is dominated by 'left-wing' comedians and, indeed, the absence of 'right-wing' comedians is much commented upon (Brassett 2018; Bannerjee 2018; Logan 2019; Hennigan 2019). Brassett (2018:190) argues that British stand-up comedy entered into a 'saccharine consensus on political correctness and social democracy' with the Third Way. This view is consonant with the argument made throughout this paper: the form stand-up comedy has taken since the emergence of AC was market-orientated, avoiding extreme and overtly racist, sexist or homophobic content for commercial reasons, centred on London, and overwhelmingly Eurocentric and pro-EU. The rejection and critique of jingoistic patriotism by AC comics eventually became an internationalism in the form of an uncritical acceptance of European integration. In such a context, the fact that British comedians have found it a culture shock to offer jokes about Brexit outside of London becomes historically significant (Sabur 2017).

Conclusion

The paper has used a form analysis to link class struggle with the production and content of stand-up comedy in Britain since the immediate post-war period. It has argued that stand-up can be treated as a form of class struggle, embodying the tensions of capitalist social relations. This approach allowed the paper to identify changes in British stand-up since the 1950s with changes in the global economy over the same period.

Changes to the content and production of British stand-up comedy during the 1970s and 1980s were a consequence of changes implemented by the state, itself a manifestation of ever-shifting class struggle in a global society. The shift to AC in the late-1970s and early-1980s saw the

crystallisation of comic material as private property. It also saw the slow decline of the bigoted WMC comic. Where club comedians saw no private property relation in their comic material, sharing and purloining material as they saw fit, AC comics treated their written material as their own private property. This change occurred as a consequence of the advent of state policy undertaken mainly by the Thatcher governments that drastically reduced state capacity in cultural production. AC comics therefore were made more precarious, being forced to enter the market to sell their material in order to make a living. AC comics were also initially critical of the very process that produced them.

The content and focus of AC stand-up material changed drastically from WMC stand-up material, which was itself a manifestation of a particular post-war compact between capital, labour and the state. Where WMC comedy appeared homogeneous and undifferentiated, AC was diverse. This was, the paper has argued, a consequence of changing property relations caused by a state policy intended to transform the institutions of class relations. The marketisation of niche acts encouraged the development of narrative and standpoint comedy as this material was difficult for competing comics to appropriate, as well as being a means for comedians to probe the market for an audience. This led to a diversification of comics and their material, with comedians increasingly deriving from different ethnic, gender and sexual backgrounds. Since the early-1980s, these changes laid the foundation for the increasing commercialisation of stand-up comedy such that it has become an extremely lucrative business.

The US comedian Bill Hicks (1991) was often critical of his profession but identified one thing that he admired about his job:

> 'Aaaah, it's great to be here, it really is. I love my job and I love being here, performing for you. And I love my job. It's the greatest job in the world for one very simple reason, and it's not that sharing of laughter 'n' all that horse-shit. Aah… it's the fact that I don't have a boss'

Hicks identifies here that the stand-up comedian is not subordinate to a particular supervisor or manager. However, what Hicks does not take into account is that the work of the comic is still mediated by the impersonal power of the market. The comedian 'carries his social power, as also his connection with society, in his pocket' (Marx 1986 [1857]:94). Indeed, Hicks (ibid), in the same routine, rejects any notion that art and the market have a relationship:

> 'Let me tell you something right now and you can print this in stone and don't you ever forget it. Any… ANY performer that ever sells a product on television is – for now and all eternity – removed from the artistic world. I don't care if you shit Mona Lisas out of your ass on cue. You've made your fucking choice.'

This view can be found among British comedians too. Stewart Lee (2013) states that 'nothing any good is ever written with a view to making money really. You have to believe in what you want to do.' Ignorance of the profundity of the relationship between culture and capitalism, as well its contradictions, by the comedian is not entirely surprising and not limited to British comics. While comedians might be unaware of their position in capitalist society, they perform it anyway (Marx 1996 [1867]:85). The paper has argued that stand-up comedy embodies social change, both in how it is produced and in terms of its content. However, this is not to say, as per Horkheimer and Adorno, that comedians are mere tools of domination but that, as a form of historically constituted capitalist social relations, considering the content and production of stand-up provides a means to demystify those relations.

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