British Comedy, Global Resistance:

Russell Brand, Charlie Brooker, and Stewart Lee

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Introduction: Satirical Market Subjects?

An interesting facet of the austerity period in mainstream British politics has been the rise (or return) to prominence of an apparently radical set of satirists.[1] Comedians like Russell Brand, Charlie Brooker and Stewart Lee have consolidated already strong careers with a new tranche of material that meets a widespread public mood of disdain for the failure and excess of 'global capitalism'. This can be seen through Brand's use of tropes of revolution in his *Messiah Complex* and Paxman Interview, Brooker's various subversions of the media-commodity nexus in *Screenwipe*, and Lee's regular *Guardian* commentaries on the instrumentalisation of the arts and social critique.

While radical comedy is by no means new, it has previously been associated with a punk/socialist fringe, whereas the current batch seems to occupy a place within the acceptable mainstream of British society: BBC programs, Guardian columns, sell out tours, etc.

Perhaps a telling indication of the ascendancy of these 'radical' comedians has been the growing incidence of broadsheet articles and academic blogs designed to 'clip their wings'. For example, Matt Flinders has argued that Russell Brand's move to 'serious politics' is undermined by a general decline in the moral power of satire:

Out Paxo'ing Paxman might be one thing but it is quite another to make the leap from comedian to serious political commentator. Russell Brand claims to derive his authority to speak out on the state of democratic politics from a source beyond 'this pre-existing paradigm' which can only really relate to his position as an (in)famous comedian. The problem with this claim is that – as many comedians have themselves admitted – in recent years the nature of political comedy and satire has derived great pleasure and huge profits from promoting corrosive cynicism rather than healthy skepticism.[2]

While it is unclear whether Brand actually does aim to become a 'serious political commentator' (whatever that might mean?), it is fair to say that Flinders taps a nerve. On the one hand, a tradition of political satire that includes the 'Upper Class Twit of the Year Award' and *Yes Minister*, is experiencing something of a gear change with 24 hr news/social media and the rise of snark (Denby, 2010). Well thought out and targeted political satire has become a rare commodity, since the broad success of *Spitting Image* and *Rory Bremner*. Such shows represent the declining water mark of political satire as headline grabbing, broadly-based, cynical critique has increasingly predominated. On the other hand, when the art of satire is retained - or even elevated - as in *The Thick of It*, such work is made to wrestle with its own place in the very structures it seeks to subvert: markets, celebrity, class.[3] Indeed, when asked whether it was acceptable to receive an OBE, Armando Iannucci remarked that it probably wasn't, but regardless, "it was really, really funny".[4]

In these ways, the problematic of political satire goes to the heart of some ongoing and broad dilemmas of how we might think about resistance. What is a credible form of resistance? Does resistance have to change a context or situation in order to be considered 'serious'? Will resistance always be co-opted within the system it questions? And would such co-optation render resistance futile or less worthy in some deeper ethical or political sense? In short, can/should there be a universal standard of 'correct resistance' against which all practices of resistance are judged?

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[2] https://www.shef.ac.uk/politics/news/comedy-disengagement-1.324346
[3] 'Alistair Campbell Attacks Armando Iannucci for accepting OBE' in the Guardian, Saturday 16th June, 2012. http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/jun/16/armando-iannucci-honours-system
[4] Richard Herring's Leicester Square Theatre Podcast

The broad idea which I want to develop is that comedy is (serious) politics. Comedy reflects the social and historical contingencies of our individual and collective impulses to think (differently), both with(in) and against a particular set of hierarchies (and pathologies). Laughing at, subverting, or otherwise undermining aspects of social existence can be seen as a vernacular form of resistance (Scott, 1987). Like all forms of resistance this can both shore up and legitimate existing political structures, yet it can also, in certain moments, work to encourage re-vision and/or re-imagination.

The satirical interventions of Brand, Brooker and Lee, reveal something of the deep imbrications between political possibility and market subjectivity. Their routines generate a sophisticated (form of) critique of market life that reaches a large audience in a manner which is potentially democratising: inclusive, participatory, edifying. Of course, irony over the signs and symbols of capitalist market relations is itself easily commodified, but, to some extent, that is precisely the point. In the course of their routines, each comedian acknowledges their own 'stake in the game' as part of a wider questioning of resistance; *how does a radical politics survive the markestisation and commodification of subjectivity?* But an ongoing critique of the very possibility of voicing alternatives from 'outside' the market *is not the same thing* as cynicism. It can in certain circumstances anticipate new modes of engagement, new questions. Thus, all three comedians address the role of the media in narrating a distinct form of market life; they problematise, inhabit, and subvert this narrative in ways that reflect important dilemmas for resistance.

This argument is developed over four sections. Section 1 foregrounds the politics of comedy by situating discussion in terms of recent theories of resistance in IPE. Beyond romanticised images of class or global civil society 'rising up' against the 'oppressors', everyday and cultural approaches allow us to see resistance in more nuanced terms: as performative of certain possibilities and limits. In particular, the idea of resistance as an ethico-political 'practice' is established in order to question how we engage the terms of political intervention. Rather than seek a universal standard – which defines an appropriate subject, an ethics, or a metric of political credibility, e.g. parliamentary representation, – a performative approach is proffered: *what does resistance do?* In terms of British comedy: what narratives (of the subject/history) does it tell? What possibilities and limits are instantiated?

Section 2 draws a historical line from the 50s/60's heyday of political satire, through the alternative comedy of the 80s, the 'ironic nineties', and into the current period that combines radicalism and snark. This brief genealogy is used to situate the changing facets of British comedy and to develop its role as a vernacular form of resistance: a space in which to think critically about politics and 'the political'. Different facets of British comedy come to light including irony, satire, self-deprecation, an anarchist bent, and a general love of the playful/absurd. However, a dilemma between conservatism – whether working class racist, or upper class apologia – and radicalism can be observed. It is argued that comedy, like resistance, is neither essentially conservative nor radical. Instead, we should read the turn to radical comedy in a period of snark as unstable; it could as easily uphold or undermine patterns of hierarchy.

Section 3 then turns to examine the current trend for 'radical comedy' in light of the global financial crisis and austerity politics. It discusses how comedy can question and bring to light important dimensions of the everyday politics of market life. In particular, the work of Brand, Brooker, and Lee is examined in terms of their contribution to a subversive understanding of market subjectivity: in terms of emotion, absurdity, and tragedy. Thinking about comic resistance in performative terms allows us to reflect upon the political possibilities and limits of our contemporary global imaginary, shot through as it is with norms of market subjectivity which both discipline and produce a particular form of life. In this way, the discussion highlights a number of ambiguities associated with resistance: the contingency of power; the structural situation of agency; and the potential for co-optation. This serves as the backdrop for a final section that returns to the politics of resistance; thinking the subject of markets in a contingent relation to (British) power.

My central argument is that comedy can – *but does not necessarily* – allow for a critical distance between and within market subjects. Rather than begin from a critique of market rationalities which 'constrain' market subjects in particular and limited ways, I examine practices of resistance that perform subjects in creative, vital terms. In this way, the argument seeks to foreground the creative – indeed the 'poetic' - elements of subjectivity identified in Foucault and drawn out by Butler (2005, 17), in order to animate the potential of the comic form to (re-)imagine market subjects (as hopeful, angry, tragic, etc.).

Thought as a continual and incomplete performance, the subject of markets is always-already becoming. The comic resistances highlighted in the article add a set of affective dimensions to this performance – poetic, absurd, self-hating, etc. – which do not seek after a resolution to the political form of markets, but rather inhabit them as a form of life which is ongoing, political.

1. IPE and the Question of Resistance

Resistance occupies a curious position in the self-identity of IPE as a discipline and field of enquiry. From its inception, the broad analytical scope of the discipline has been understood as a form of epistemological refusal against the twin hegemonies of IR and Economics. Indeed, for Susan Strange (1970) *the point* of IPE was to overcome the tradition of mutual neglect between IR and Economics in a manner that might politicise the economy and address questions of where power lies (beyond the deadening weight of neo-realism). For Strange, an IPE that addresses wider social structures of power – knowledge, security, production, finance, etc. - is better able to reflect the 'mix of values', including justice and democracy, in market arrangements (Strange, 1991).

Thus, a critical aspect is written into the epistemological eclecticism of IPE via a general doubt over mono-logical accounts of the world economy: state-cetrism, economism, or methodological individualism. Indeed, Strange's own 'Westfailure system' (1999) sought a subversion of realism to resist its analytical blindness to financial instability and ecological breakdown. Other scholars have taken this general scepticism further to articulate how a critical theory of IPE should step away from approaches that treat the world as they find it, and instead, reflect upon the conditions of possibility – material, ideational, etc. – that allow such views to exist/succeed (Cox, 1981). In this way, critical IPE might be seen as a form of disciplinary resistance which seeks to articulate forms of knowledge that can work to envisage and enact alternative systems of political economy.

Developing from these foundations, IPE has generated a sensitivity to a wide set of social structures, agents, and issues in world politics, so as to reveal new ways to think

about poverty (Tooze and Murphy, 1996), governance (Murphy, 2000) migration (Phillips, 2009), the role of 'scientific' knowledge in producing markets (De Goede, 2005a), and global development (Phillips, 2005; Rai, 2002). This self-identity has imbued IPE with a general inclination to reflect the actions of resistance organisations; studying and celebrating the activities of trade union activists, feminist rights campaigners, global civil society organisations, NGOs, and indigenous movements (Scholte, 2004).

More forcefully, a number of neo-Gramscian and/or neo-Polanyian scholars have envisaged IPE as part of a wider critical praxis geared towards the reconstruction of global politics (Birchfield 1999; Cox, 1981; Gill, 1991). For such scholars, the figure of the 'organic intellectual' looms large in an effort to locate the circuits of 'neo-liberal hegemony' and proffer located, culturally resonant alternatives. Ideas like the 'post-modern prince' (Gill, 2000), agendas like 'global environmental Keynesianism' (Murphy, 1995), and projects like 'Global Democracy as the Art of the Possible' (Patomakki, 2002) all speak to the idea that there is a manifest neo-liberal global hegemony, which requires us to make connections between critical thought and the activities of multiple actors at multiple levels in the global political economy.

While such work has established an important space for thinking about resistance in IPE, there is a sense in which it has begun to form a theoretical hegemony of its own. Perhaps the central limitation of this literature is that it conflates resistance with the analytical project of IPE, i.e. to bring together states, markets and justice. Of itself, such a project is clearly attractive, especially insofar as it refocuses attention upon historical contingency, lived experiences and alternative practices of political economy. Moreover, the critical intent to move beyond positivism entails an important correlative: to relinquish the Western bias of much research in IPE and extend the range of empirical subjects to include more than the gamut of OECD-centric concerns and goals (Phillips, 2005). However, despite such laudable pluralism, it can be argued that a tendency has been to re-connect this impetus for resistance with some form of a uniting, if not explicitly universal ethics (of reform, of development, etc.).

Resistance is often valued insofar as it can connect up with other forms of critical refusal so as to change the course of decision making at the political centre (Amoore and

Langley, 2004). Through a celebration of critical positions on neo-liberalism, the (cosmopolitan) idea(l) promoted becomes that global scale governance (including the institutions, rationalities, languages, and 'democratic' practices) is potentially salvageable, *if only we all just connect and participate* (Brassett, 2014). For example, considerations of the World Social Forum in critical IPE have tended to focus on its capacity for political agency, rather than to celebrate its role as an alternative and open political space, *per se* (Patomakki and Teivan, 2004; Worth and Buckley, 2004).

For these reasons, I would argue that resistance is currently a poorly articulated concept in IPE that is nevertheless quite central to its theoretical and political precepts. The conflation of a disciplinary interest to overturn the analytical hegemony of neo-liberalism with the normative valuation of particular actors (and not others) is problematic. Studies of resistance tend to focus on the practices of positive agents (i.e. the ones that we like): the marginal, the disenfranchised, etc. and not, for example, the powerful, white male resistance of the Minutemen.

Within IPE theory this reflects a deeper issue with the inception of the discipline around the study of structural power. Whereas neoliberals see the benign operations of free market and the price mechanism, critical IPE tends to see the dominating power of capital (Brassett and Holmes, 2010). Thus, critical approaches to resistance have turned to an analysis of the role of agency, ideas and intellectuals in *changing, re-structuring, or overturning* such power. In this way, practices of resistance are produced as important precisely because they are considered to be 'outside of', or 'against' neo-liberal (understandings of) politics. The idea is that through the potential to connect up and animate people in marginal, sub-altern, or otherwise alternative registers, small acts of refusal can create a momentum which can connect up with larger reformist or transformational agendas.

Why might this all be a problem? Principally, I think, it is because a number of unspoken linkages between ethics, power and agency are woven into the analytical concern of resistance. The subject of resistance comes to be understood as a component part of a wider theory of political agency, (and the idea of agency is always-already conceived in ethical terms) (Brasett and Smith, 2010). Thus, resistance is conflated with a

limited range of functions: a mechanism for reflection, change, the expression of solidarity/justice, or the construction of alternative systems, within which the wider theory of political agency might claim to realise such ethical values. Ultimately then, resistance is performed as a corrective, an opposite, or an ameliorative to power (Tooze and Murphy, 1994). Not only does this approach fail to recognise the conservative dimensions of resistance, as per the Minutemen, or indeed, British comedy (with its racial, class, and gendered hierarchies). It also performs a number of dichotomies that limit how we think about the politics of resistance.

Either power is ameliorated or not. Either capitalism is overthrown or not. If resistance does not 'work' (on the terms prescribed within the theoretical conflation of ethics, power and agency), then it has either been 'co-opted' or a more radical approach is required, *pace* the traditional critique of social democracy for legitimating a new stage of capitalist accumulation. However, this limited range of possibilities for resistance reflects a circumscribed view of what power is: power as essentially limiting, imposed upon, used against, rather than productive, relational and creative (Brassett and Holmes, 2010). A key reason that this view of power persists, I would argue, is that it fits a version of IPE that orientates around large scale, systemic and structural visions of the global economy. Big visions require big theories.

One potential avenue for subverting these dilemmas may be to examine the recent rise of everyday and cultural approaches to IPE (Best and Paterson, 2010; Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007; Langley, 2008). Such approaches highlight the way political economy is always-already a product of small, local activities, cultural norms and the behaviours of everyday subjects, not the privilege of grand 'structures' or 'states and markets'. Decisions to save or borrow, market resonant images of gender, or perhaps the persistence of marginal economies like free-cycling, or allotments, can be taken as important dimensions of global political economy. Therefore a turn to everyday and cultural political economy is a promising avenue for thinking about resistance.

First, it increases the range of sites and practices that might be *studied as* resistant, beyond the prevailing discussion of meta-groupings like 'class' or 'global civil society'. Thus, we might begin to think about alternative practices of consumption or farming, for

example, as important potential sites of resistance in their own right. Such approaches to resistance do not seek to oppose (and therefore re-ify) something large and monolithic like 'the global market', and instead consider the production of new subjectivities as a credible practice of resistance.

And second, the turn to everyday and cultural political economy allows a more comfortable appeal to a range of critical, post-structural and post-colonial theoretical traditions which always-already problematize the weight of power (and responsibility) involved in the constitution of market subjectivity. From a post-colonial perspective, for instance, the very idea of markets is bound up with notions of violence – through imperialism, slavery, practices of knowing – in a manner that invites a decentring of the universalist conventions of IPE. On these terms, the mode and the manner of conceiving of global markets becomes a political problematic, *per se*, and thus resistance is afforded a wider range of conceptual possibilities; as thinking differently: that there might be other ways of being otherwise.

Drawing these points together a cultural political economy approach conceives of the market subject as an ongoing performance. As such, markets are not thinkable without the ongoing and active uptake of subjects capable of inhabiting them. As Langley (2008: 33) argues, "[t]he everyday financial subject positions that we wish to explore are dynamic and multiple – including, for example, "investors" and "mortgagors" – and also coexist with economic and non-economic subject positions such as "worker", "consumer", "father", and "mother"". Thus, we might begin to trace the emergence of new subjects such as the entrepreneurial debtor, who brags to peers about credit scores and mortgage rates, or the rise of peer lending that is widely seen as an alternative to traditional credit scoring.

On this view, rather than imagining a set of pre-existent, universal market logics that structure or discipline subjects in particular and limited ways, markets require subjects to act upon themselves in order to enhance and/or re-shape them. Importantly, the subject does not spring forth fully formed, nor is it ever complete or identical with its discursive performance. As Langley and Leyshon (2012: 371) argue, there is always a gap: "the processes of identification in which…subjects are produced and propelled are

necessarily partial and incomplete." As such the subject is never fully disciplined, or docile, but is better thought of as 'uncertain' (Langley, 2007).

A performative approach to market subjectivity can re-phrase the question of resistance in IPE, less as an 'opposition to' or 'movement against', and more as an issue of self-making; in Foucauldian terms, a 'care of the self' (1990). For Foucault, the idea of resistance was never about an *escape* or an *overcoming* of power relations, but of re-fashioning the subject within power, that "the will not to be governed is always the will not to be governed *thusly*, like that, by these people, at this price" (Foucault, 1997, p. 75). Indeed, Judith Butler extends this idea to argue that the subject retains the potential for a kind of *poiesis*; not that this self-making implies a subject born of nothing, but that it is part of the play and interplay of the subject with the conditions of subjectivity:

> "This work on the self…takes place within the context of a set of norms that precede and exceed the subject. These are invested with power and recalcitrance, setting limits to what will be considered to be an intelligible formation of the subject within a given historical scheme of things. There is no making of oneself outside of a mode of subjectivation and hence no self-making outside of the of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take" (Butler, 2005: 17)

From this perspective, the question of resistance in IPE is less about opposing a systemic rationality of markets, and more about understanding the intimate entwinement between historical context – (which includes markets, but also culture, race, gender, etc.) – and the subject.

Resistance is thus a performative practice; as central to the making of power relations as it is to their re-imagination over time (Stierl, 2014).

2. British Comedy as Resistance

The previous section established a disciplinary context for engaging the question of comic resistance. Rather than thinking IPE in grand, international and/or structural terms, it was argued that a turn to everyday and cultural political economy is an important

move. This is because it allows us to de-naturalise resistance, away from the romantic tropes of opposing, or overcoming, towards the productive, imaginative, and relational. Importantly, the move to everyday and cultural political economy encourages us to think the subject as intimately tied to historical and cultural norms. As such, it was argued that we might productively conceive of resistance as 'aesthetics of the self' in historical context. Understood in performative terms, it is possible to think about British comedy as an important practice of political resistance in its own right.

Discussions of comic resistance are not new in politics. Indeed, a range of authors in IR and IPE have sought to address the question of how comedy might be understood as an important political subject for analysis. Louiza Odysseous (2001) suggests that comedy can highlight the limitations of rationalist discourses of politics, allowing for critical reflection on common sense versions of politics. In this vein, Marieke De Goede (2005b) has argued that carnival and laughter have the ability to challenge the rationality and expose the contingency of (scientific) finance. For his part Simon Critchley (2002: 10-12) has argued that "[b]y producing a consciousness of contingency, humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a critical function with respect to society." Such arguments open a way to think about comedy as a potentially reflective and critical idiom for thinking about politics. They each suggest a direct confrontation between comic subversion and rationality. Indeed, this is something that Judith Butler particularly highlighted in her discussion of drag, a parodic practice that, on her view, immediately engaged with the cultural situation of apparently 'natural' traits of gender. Butler argues that in:

> "imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency. In place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity." (2006: 187-188).

For example, Chris Rossdale (2014) has examined how subversive practices are used and deployed by the London based anarchist group *The Space Hijackers*. Their brand of direct action seeks to de-naturalise the apparent unity of commodified public space, by

inhabiting it differently, *ridiculously even.* In one action, The *Space Hijackers* bought a tank to sell at an arms convention; although as they noted, the Police seemed to be somewhat concerned about the activities of a group of anarchists in a tank. When the Police began watching the tank, they then bought a second tank, in an urban arms race of increasingly satirical proportions. After the ensuing Benny Hill chase around London they eventually arrived at the arms convention, although they were not allowed in because they were not a registered company.

Such actions are an interesting use of comedy to expose the silence and (strange) normalcy of even the most violent of markets: police upholding the property rights of the arms trade against satirical attempts to 'breach the peace', for asking questions about the morality of a global market for weapons. However, while existing work has done a good job of highlighting the political techniques of comedy and parody, my concern in this paper is somewhat distinct. Here I am concerned to think through the political dimension of *national traditions* of comedy and – more specifically - the work of *professional comedians*. This presents a number of challenges.

On the one hand, there is a difficulty with any form of cultural analysis that seeks to define 'a national' sense of humour. For instance, an elite form of satire, a sense of irony, a dry wit, an affection for pun, and, more recently, an interest in the absurd, and (a sometimes brutal form of) self-deprecation all arguably exist within British comedy. How one typifies and then examines such comedy in contradistinction to other national forms is a difficult task. There is a widespread (and healthy) suspicion of national(-ist) cultural forms in critical thought, which tends to associate national tradition with parochialism. In the case of humour, for example, Simon Critchley (2002: 12) argues, "the British laugh at the Irish, the Canadians laugh at the Newfies, the Americans laugh at the Poles […] Such humour is not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless." Caution and several qualifications are therefore required. For example, British comedy is itself bound up with a number of problematic hierarchies and privileges, empire, class, patriarchy, nation (is it British or English?), and – increasingly – market value. Following the arguments of the previous section, in looking at comedy we are not somehow stepping 'outside' of power.

On the other hand, more critically, existing work tends to favour the way comedy is 'used' and 'deployed' by resistance organisations themselves. While this is clearly an important line of analysis that speaks directly to recent innovations in protest strategies; a corrective to the norm of objectifying resistance practices in terms of their ability to 'influence outcomes' and/or 'get a seat at the table', it potentially rehearses the problem identified in Section 1: to identify with particular forms of resistance by, and for, the people we like. Thus, comedy might become objectified insofar as it subverts the things we are critical of, e.g. drag-gender, satire–security, etc. But comedy can be conservative as well as radical, violent as well as inclusive, ignorant as well as edifying. Comedy does different and complex things, subverting market subjectivity in one instance, or commodifying that very critique in another. It would be a mistake to focus exclusively on the use of comedy 'as a strategy' of resistance when comedy has been 'a space' of political thought in its own right, since long before the rise of clever activists in civil society.

A brief genealogy of British comedy

Understood in performative and everyday terms, we can begin to think about British comedy as a cultural space that can (but does not necessarily) reflect and resist political hierarchies, violences, and exclusions. British comedy has a history, a set of works, a repeated set of idioms that protagonists speak to and reflect. This conversation is sometimes aggressive – as in the opposition between alternative comedy and the white working class comedy of the 70s/80's – and it is sometimes celebratory – as in the case of Miranda's homage to Morecombe and Wise (and Tony Hancock). Like all cultural forms, aspects of British comedy uphold the system and the hierarchy; it is dominated by educated white men, and often reflects the interests and concerns of the upper middle class. Yet equally, British comedy has a long running critical/near anarchist thread that can subvert or undermine these hierarchies.

What is perhaps most distinctive is that British people take comedy *very seriously*. It is a cherished aspect of our history, a point of contact between generations. Leading comedians are regularly elevated to the status of 'national treasure', and aspects of the satirical method have become commonplace in the everyday conversation. For example,

when reporting of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Charles Wheeler, remarked that the noise level meant it had become "pure Monty Python, having a serious political discussion in the middle of a fireworks display".[5] For these reasons, I would suggest that British comedy offers up an interesting and important cultural form; a potential site of resistance where the traditions of a country can serve as an everyday site for the subversion of its political economy, its market life.

The political dimensions of British Comedy can be plotted in chronological terms, from the satire boom of the 50s/60s through the rise of alternative comedy in the 80s, and on to irony and snark in the 90's and early 2000's. By no means an exhaustive history, these periods can be taken as the comic high points that cluster around different political dilemmas in British society. The satire boom of the 50'/60s, especially as embodied in the elite comedy of *Monty Python* and *Beyond the Fringe* pronounced a widespread disquiet and doubt over the continuing claims of the upper classes after Empire. The 'Upper Class Twit of the Year Award' and sketches about the relative utility of Wittgenstinian language philosophers for buying the weekly groceries pointed to a dislocation of the previous ruling class. If we no longer held the prowess of the Empire, if the world did not look to us for lessons in civilization, then the grandeur of the upper classes lacked legitimacy.

British comedy is intimately bound up with the experience and protracted self-analysis of the imperial decline. As Stuart Ward (2001, p.12) argues, "Ideas about British 'character'…became difficult to sustain as the external prop of the imperial world was progressively weakened. Notions of duty, service, loyalty, deference, stoic endurance, self-restraint and gentlemanly conduct were insidiously undermined by the steady erosion of the imperial edifice." The satire boom was, in part, a mechanism of public critique and questioning of the establishment: a particular(ly) British mood of self-deprecation reflected an uncertain position in the world and doubts over the excess of Empire.

The 1980's rise of 'alternative comedy' and a general cultural turn against successive Tory governments saw an explicitly political dimension emerge. A range of young comedians from across social classes and from different regions and ethnic

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[5] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiuCiGSNah4 (2.20)

backgrounds developed a form of comedy that directly questioned British social attitudes. While satire and self-deprecation remained in the mix, programs like the *Young Ones*, *The Comic Strip* and *The Lenny Henry Show*, sought to re-create elements of the tradition, like the sitcom, in more radical terms. For its part the *Young Ones*, with self-proclaimed 'lefty' writers like Ben Elton, was the most politically attuned and ambitious, including a hippy, an anarchist, a punk, a yuppie and a Marxist (Alexei Sayle): a group of "wide eyed, big bottomed anarchists".

By exposing the plurality of the newly emerging British social scene, alternative comedy has been seen as openly contesting the rise of working class nationalism, racism and misogyny, associated with 'Thatcher's Britain' and comedians like Bernard Manning. Indeed, the political intensity of this movement was arguably best voiced by Alexi Sayle (2007), writing an Op Ed about Bernard Manning on the occasion of his death. Sayle described Manning as a nasty unkind man. He conceded that he and some of his ilk may have been good comedians, practitioners of the craft, but they were mean and cynical. Sayle regarded comedy as deeply political, and chastised (even the dead) for where they stood:

> To placate whatever frazzled part of their mind acts as a conscience, Manning and his kind always draw some arbitrary line that they swear they won't cross, like an alcoholic telling himself that his drinking is under control as long as he stays off the barley wine. I seem to remember Bernard stating that though he might use terms like "nigger" and "coon" in his act, he would never, ever tell a joke about "disabled kiddies". You could hear the self-regarding tremor in his voice as he said this, as if he was reluctantly admitting to being a humanitarian of similar stature to Nelson Mandela, Noam Chomsky or Aung San Suu Kyi. He always denied being a racist, claiming that he made fun of everybody, equally – "politicians, bald-headed people, people with glasses on, the lot. I have a go at everybody and that's what makes everybody roar with laughter." I notice he left "nigger, coon and Paki" out of his list, though. Those were the words people objected to him using; I can't remember much of a furore about his specky four-eyed barbs.

Alternative comedy was about equality between races and sexes, freedom of expression, modernity and progress in a critical liberal vein. However, for all that alternative comedy challenged a certain set of reactionary tendencies in an increasingly dislocated Britain suffering from industrial decline, rapid urbanisation and the vagaries of privatisation in the 80's/early 90s, its success was also arguably a failure. Alternative comedy expounded the values of a newly emergent liberal class, educated, cosmopolitan, travelled. It thus began to form a new consensus that, far from changing the world, probably legitimated it and the *Guardian* sales it gave rise to. In a recent set of stage performances, Alexi Sayle (2014) has tied this apparent decline to splits 'within the movement', including the alliance between alternative comedy and the 'Oxbridge set', as well as the 'selling out' of Ben Elton. However, it is probably fairer to suggest that a new common sense emerged. The opposition between 'alternative comedy' and 'white racist stand up' was gradually deconstructed into a social compromise of political correctness. Importantly, this newfound political correctness provoked a reaction itself, through new lad-ism and an ironic swagger among comedians in the 90's and early 2000's.

The rise of 'postmodern ironic reconstructions of masculinity' through lad mags like *Loaded* – (or 'porn', as Ben Elton called it) - meant a field where conservative elements, e.g. *The Mary Whitehouse Experience*, *Top Gear*, etc. could return. However, I would argue that a liminal product of this ironic turn is found in Ricky Gervais. Gervais' more personal deprecation nurtured a form of social pain, partly a social pain of being British, and partly the pain of surviving a post-industrial Britain. If the economy was the centre of politics, then *The Office* was the appropriate stage for examining the tensions of social life. A more brutal irony allowed for the return of reactionary tropes albeit with a perpetual ironic question as to where the meaning of each joke lay, and, thus, the reactionary gesture was (potentially) critical:

> Brent: This is Sanj, this guy does the best Ali G impression, Aiiieee. I can't do it, go on, do it.
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> Sanj: I don't, must be someone else
>
> Brent: Oh sorry, it's the other one…
>
> Sanj: The other what? …Paki?

Brent: Ah, that's racist.

3. Brand, Brooker, and Lee on Market Subjectivity

The politics of British comedy is a cultural form that engages the historical contingency of power, class, decline, race, radical critique, and social pain/discomfort. For all that the Alexi Sayle critique of Bernard Manning can be/has been deconstructed to a form of wet, Guardian reading, political correctness, where language masks genuine feelings, and positive discrimination enforces a marketised conception of the political (where we put women and ethnic minorities on every interview panel), I would argue that the move to irony was not simply conservative. Irony can critique the certainty of Blair/imperialism, of political correctness, of globalisation and can question our own position in social violence of a global scale (Brassett, 2009).

However, the current period marks a dilemma for the politics of British Comedy. Is it heading into a period of cynicism and snark – as per *Mock the Week* or *Top Gear* – or is there room for a re-invigoration of radical or resistant politics? Do satirical interventions like *The Thick of It* or *Screen Wipe* challenge the contemporary mode of (media) politics or do they simply relay its central logics as a form of entertainment? A new batch of radical comedy suggests that there is reason for hope.

This section will introduce the work of (arguably) the three key protagonists of British comedy in this period: Russell Brand, Charlie Brooker and Stuart Lee. It is suggested that they each perform and subvert elements of the British comedy tradition, in the process re-phrasing how we might think about politics and the political. They each reflect elements of the limit of British politics currently: Brand as the limit of celebrity and sexual/emotional labour; Brooker as the limit of smug snark, that looks at capitalist culture and sneers (without offering much by way of alternative); and Lee with his protracted introspection on futility and lost dreams, the limit of a peculiarly British (middle aged) melancholia. However, despite such limits, I argue that each comedian is performative of new possibilities: Brand's attempted inclusion of a new generation in a credible critique of the state form of democracy; Brooker's method of deconstructing the media narrative, with its intimate portrayal of how we inhabit market imaginaries; and

Lee's subversion of his own market subjectivity through critiques of the use of emotion in commercial branding. In this sense, they can read in line with Butler's understanding of resistance (with)in, not against, subjectivity:

> "The practice of critique…exposes the limits of the historical scheme of things, the epistemological and ontological horizon within which subjects come to be at all. To make oneself in such a way that one exposes those limits is precisely to engage in an aesthetics of the self that maintains a critical relation to existing norms." (Butler, 2005: 17)

Russell Brand

Russell Brand occupies an interesting place in British comedy. His technique combines extrovert personality with free form, stream-of-consciousness style engagement. Despite the 'novelty' of his style, the humour tends to revolve around a fairly standard mix of self-deprecation and absurd or exaggerated points of comparison.

He is an important case precisely because of his explicit turn to politics, both in his personal actions – drug treatment campaigns, anti-austerity protests, highlighting Hugo Boss's links to the Nazi's, etc. – and in his comedy material. Recent shows like *Messiah Complex* (2013) have focused on the qualities of good political leadership and his daily video, the TREWS, has presented critical analyses of advertising, news coverage, and Israeli aggression in the Middle East. Perhaps most famously, Brand appeared in a high profile interview on *Newsnight* where he outlined his main critiques of state level democracy and called for people to revolt against the system.

In his routines, Brand has turned to a sustained questioning of the state form of politics and its role in upholding structures of domination and inequality on a global scale. Importantly, he locates his critique in terms of the imagined narrative of politics, the media discourses that present stories about 'heroes and villains', which inculcate fear and secure support for the system. For example, in *Messiah Complex* he satirises media coverage of migration, for essentially shouting the word *'immigrant!'* repeatedly, and asks Fox news: "you do know that an immigrant is just someone who used to be somewhere

else?" The point is exaggerated with absurdity, mockingly taking on the persona of Fox news, he says to an immigrant:

> "Keep still!...Keep still on the spherical rock in infinite space, keep still on the spherical rock with imaginary geo-political borders that have been drawn in according to the economic reality of the time. Do not pause to reflect that free movement of global capital will necessitate free movement of a global labour force to meet the demands created by the free movement of that capital. That is a complex economic idea and you won't understand it! Just keep still!"

This notion of media critique is personal, of course, and reflects an ongoing fascination that Brand has with his own place in the spotlight. At various points he argues that when he was poor and criticised capitalism, he was told it was because he was just jealous, yet when he was rich and criticised capitalism, he was told he was a hypocrite. So maybe it's just that people don't like him criticising capitalism? But this love/hate relationship with the media has also begun to form an ongoing method in the Trews[6], where, for instance, Brand deconstructs the racial dimensions of McDonald's adverts, which seek to traquilise the targeting of poorer socioeconomic groups, by offering a saccharin view of their Latino hiring policies. Equally, with reference to riots in Ferguson, he deconstructs the news coverage to criticise the attempts to de-legitimise dissent, and the related promotion of (good) black politicians appealing for calm.

But perhaps the keynote intervention was made in an interview with Paxman, where Brand melded his critique of state level politics to the media's ability to legitimate Westminster.[7] In the interview Brand critiques the paradigm of parliamentary democracy for upholding the privileged interests of a ruling class, and for being complicit in processes of ecological degradation and the creation of an underclass. When Paxman pushes him on what should be done, Brand states that he never votes and urges people *not to vote* for MPs who are complicit in a system that creates inequality. He claims to look beyond the pre-existing paradigm for alternatives and argues for a revolution in very broad terms, a socialist egalitarian system with a massive re-distribution of wealth.

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[6] http://www.russellbrand.com/2014/02/the-trews-true-news-with-russell-brand/
[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YR4CseY9pk

Importantly, the discussion turns to subject positions. When Paxman pushes him on whether people could possibly take him seriously, Brand says, 'I don't care if people take me seriously', highlighting that there are plenty of serious politicians who haven't changed anything: "at least being facetious is funny". So Paxman tries a different tack and asks if he is angry about politics, Brand replies:

> "Yes I am angry I am angry, because for me it's real. It's not just some peripheral thing that I turn up to once in a while,...for me this is what I come from, what I care about. [...] I remember I see you in that program where you look at your ancestors, and you saw the way your grandmother had to brass herself, or got fucked over by the aristocrats who ran her gaff, you cried because you knew that it was unfair and unjust, and that was, what a century ago? This is happening to people now! I just come from a woman who's being treated like that, I've just been talking to a woman today who's being treated like that. So if we can engage that feeling instead of some moment of lachrymose sentimentality trotted out on the TV for people to pour over emotional porn. If we can engage that feeling and actually change things, why wouldn't we? Why is that naïve..?"

Charlie Brooker

If Brand targets his political commentary at the state form of politics, Charlie Brooker directly inhabits and satirises the medium of its reproduction: news and current affairs. In a series of *Weekly Wipepe* sequences and *Guardian* columns Brooker uses a combination of crafted text and quick visual sequences to portray a media narrative that has run away with its own importance. Brooker's style might be typified as high snark, or thoughtful buffoonery, in that it undercuts the superficiality of mainstream politics, yet is nevertheless capable of using sexual innuendo or 'wank-gag' to punctuate.

The timing of the rise of Brooker's *Weekly Wipe* has meant that large tracts of his satire have been targeted at issues relating to the economy, and especially the global financial crisis and relating discussions of austerity. In one sequence, he pulled apart the

mainstream news coverage of the financial crisis through a critique of the melodramatic discourse of the economy:[8]

> 'Unemployment now so huge it has to be depicted by plummeting monolithic numbers. [...] The news itself is becoming less of an easily digestible summary of events and more a grotesque entertainment reality show with heavy emphasis on emotion and sensation and a swaggeringly comically theatrical sense of its own importance …[...]
>
> Jeremy Paxman: Today stock markets across the world tumbled, imploded, continued to collapse like deflated dirigibles.
>
> Brooker: After all if the boom of the last decade was all a dream the current situation is a nightmare rendered in calculus, meaninglessly huge numbers, sliding graphs, a CGI red arrows display team crashing repeatedly to the floor, and one frightening prognosis after another. It's so bad leaders of the G20 are having to get together in the world's most disappointing razzle pile up in a desperate bid to save the world from **global cash-pocalypse**. Of course, the news hasn't been too scared of using the current financial mess to pad out their bulletins. On a slow news day you can tie almost any story into it. It's the gift that keeps on giving. You can shoot out some churpy guff about feeding your pets on a budget.
>
> GMTV: Don't worry about spending lots of money on tasty treats cos dogs are actually far happier with something simple like a nice raw carrot.'

Brooker charts the invocation of the French revolution of an episode of *Loose Women* and parodies the litany of flawed metaphorical devices used to explain quantitative easing: these include spanners, petrol cans and railways tracks. Finally, we learn about Dermot O'Mernahans's 'Economic Cycle', where Dermot 'rides a bicycle' around England attempting to interview 'individuals' who were bearing the brunt of the downturn in the economic cycle. Unfortunately, the majority of the individuals interviewed were actually doing pretty well and were mildly optimistic about economic prospects.

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[8] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVpgcAeksVw (Emphasis added.)

Such interventions are important because they challenge the way knowledge about the economy (and therefore the economy itself) is produced. Brooker's incredulity at the grand, apocalyptic stories of the crisis, told from his comfortable sofa satirise how many of us – market subjects – are informed. The question mark check on such excessive stories is one mechanism whereby snark might do more than simply 'shrug off' the difficult issues? Indeed, Brooker deconstructs the coverage of complaints about *Benefits Street*, a Channel 4 documentary about 'real life' in austerity Britain: "In order to function without exploding, [...] British society seems to require a regularly-updated register of sanctioned hate figures, about whom it's OK to say more or less anything [...] (Brooker, 2014). Here he makes an interesting link here between *anger* and the functioning of the market. While fear is a good way of justifying bailouts - as per the 'cash-pocalypse' - anger can mobilise moral support for austerity:

> Barry Shitpeas: There was this sort of anger making program called *Benefits Street*. It gave you a fascinating insight into the lives of these people who've got next to nothing, so you can judge 'em.
>
> [...]
>
> Philomena Cunk: When I was watching it I felt sort of pity for the people in it, but when I went on Twitter everyone was angry with them so I thought, oh I've got it wrong I'd better join in with that, so then I wrote these little tweet things, about how they were scum and bastards and about how I hope the government fucking shoots them, and then stands over their bodies pumping bullet after bullet into their benefit scum bastard bodies. And I got like 20 new followers for that so it was a pretty good program... People say there's no community anymore but watching that interesting show and joining in with everyone on the internet hating them together, sort of outdoing each other to express how much hate you felt, was amazing. I don't think I've ever felt so much part of a huge group with all this fun anger surging through us. It really made me feel alive.[9]

Stewart Lee

[9] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUYEk5nRlFw

If Brand points to the emotion of change, and Brooker points to the way anger can be used to legitimate neo-liberal restructuring, then Stewart Lee extends the critique to expose an aporia between (the very possibility of) meaning and market subjectivity. Lee is on a comic level above Brand and Brooker and is arguably one of the finest stand-up comedians in British comedy. His style is one of perpetual deconstruction, irritation, and absurdity. The incongruous mix of pedantry, anger and – by Lee's own admission – his turn to inserting material that *simply is not meant to be funny*, means that there are often several ways in which the humour can be understood.

In the recent *Carpet Remnant World* (2012) he builds an anti-joke around a narrative of boredom, about being a dad, who drives around to gigs all the time, whose only cultural activity is watching Scooby Doo films with his son. In particular, he has watched Scooby Doo and the Pirate Zombie Jungle Island "180 times".

Perpetually dividing his audience between the clever ones who get the joke and 'new people' who've come because he's on the TV now (who he politely warns: "I'm not like Michael MacIntyre, I haven't noticed anything in your lives") - he then presents a satire of Tory cuts, for their lack of investment in jungle canyon rope bridges. 'Have you seen those rope bridges?...They're always broken aren't they?' The good/clever ones in the audience are praised because they not only get the call backs, but they also enter into an imaginative universe where they pretend to remember social history of Britain in terms of the rise and fall of a functioning infrastructure of jungle canyon rope bridges. Much like the alternative comedy of the 80s, the pivotal decline in jungle canyon rope bridges is attributed to 'privatisation'; it 'didn't affect the shareholders if the canyons were infested with zombies or not, no their dividends were ring fenced against pirate zombie infestation'; because: "Thatcher, Thatcher, Thatcher, the jungle canyon rope bridge snatcher!!"

To round off the anti-comedy, Lee turns against the joke to reminisce about how in 1986 he and Richard Herring drew up a list of the subjects it was too cliché to cover that included Scooby Doo and Thatcher routines, lamenting: "you grow up to become the things you hate." This theme of lost hopes and possibilities is recurrent, not least because his on stage persona is a 90's Comedian, who most people have forgotten or

suspect is really someone else (e.g. "Terry Christian has let himself go", etc.). But, I would argue, this subversion also works to identify a gap in the presentation of ourselves within market society.

In the final crescendo of *If you'd prefer a milder comedian please ask for one* (2010), Lee remarks on how his family used to relay difficult events – the death of a pet dog or that he was adopted – with the phrase: "I'll give it to you straight like a Pear Cider made from 100% pears." The phrase is repeated several times throughout his life to refer to different things, both traumatic and mundane. Lee extends the revelation to form a 'folk history', using the phrase to chart the movement of his family from the rural to the urban life, and how the upheaval of British working class history, was mediated by retaining certain cultural idioms. He recalls how his granddad had bombed Dresden, but never spoke about the war except for one time in reply to a question from Stew:

> "Well' he said, 'I'll give it to you straight like a Pear Cider that's made from 100% pears. There was nothing moving down there, just a dog,…and I think that on that occasion what we did to the Germans was wrong'. And I remember my Gran interrupted him and she said 'its nothing compared to what they did to Coventry' and he said 'You don't know what you're talking about, shut up.'

Overall, such gravity, the centrality of the phrase in his family and class history, is why he takes it as a symbol, of holding onto something in the face of change. He says it's about memory, but also this bigger thing about 'what it means to be'. And that is the reason why Lee experienced such sadness when he was watching the Television and an advert came on, for pear cider, where a little Welsh lad says to a barman: 'give it to me straight like a pear cider made from 100% pear'.

At this point Lee drops the mic, nearly in tears, and begins to shout; asking whether he is expected to believe that it's just a coincidence: 'they heard that! They heard that and they said oh let's take that!' He runs into the audience, up the stairs, ranting that advertisers take everything: people's memories, songs, and beliefs; 'stolen out of the hearts and minds of ordinary working people!' The subversion is to ridicule the invention of history in advertising, by inventing a (ridiculous) history and hating them for the theft. The very possibility of meaning is re-phrased in terms of the market.

In another *Guardian* article (2014), he links the idea of critique to this production of the market subject. Taking the use of the Angel of the North to advertise a Morrison's baguettes, as well as Paddy Power's act of drawing a jockey on the 3,000 yr old White Horse of Uffington, Lee recalls:

If we can advertise on ancient hill figures, and publicise on public art, I wondered, as I drove home across Wales, what other monetisable spaces, previously considered sacred, are we failing to optimise? And then it struck me. The subconscious itself is going to waste. What of those unmanageable moments, where we are struck by beauty and meaning we had not foreseen? They are what makes us human, admittedly, but is there some way to make them pay?

Aiming to cross the Severn by the M4, I stopped at Tintern Abbey, and dragged our sleeping children into the sunlight. Normally I would have pointed them at the romantic ruin and lectured them on how it inspired in Wordsworth, Turner and Tennyson the apprehension of the sublime. Instead, I forcibly marched them around the site, chanting: "Buy Morrisons bread! Gamble at Paddy Power! Buy Morrisons bread! Gamble at Paddy Power!" until, crying and ashamed, they begged me to stop.

Dovetailing through Caerleon, where the Welsh mystic Arthur Machen saw the Great God Pan, I wandered the woodland glades shouting at walkers, "Buy Morrisons bread! Gamble at Paddy Power! Buy Morrisons bread! Gamble at Paddy Power!" and then, somewhat distressed, I vomited in the churchyard of St Cadoc's, the residue forming the perfect outline of a Morrisons baguette upon an ancient grave.

We drove on, to the Aust service station on the M4, where, just short of the Severn Bridge, a Vauxhall Cavalier, belonging to Richey Edwards from the Manic Street Preachers, was found abandoned in February 1995. In the Costa Coffee I carved into my arm with a razor blade the words "Buy Morrisons bread! Gamble at Paddy Power!" Now no one could doubt my sincerity, my fitness for purpose in this brave new age. My arm hurts. My children are embarrassed. There is sick

everywhere. And blood. Who do I invoice? There must be some way of getting all this thoughts and feelings shit to pay for itself? Come on!

4. The Politics of Comic Resistance

In treating comedy as vernacular form of resistance, it is possible to entertain a notion that critical thought and politics is acutely active in the UK in a manner that is not normally reflected in mainstream considerations of politics. Indeed, I would argue that the way in which we think the politics of this resistance has been somewhat captured by a modernist conception of satire, i.e. does it inform and educate the public discussion of politics in a manner that checks government? This can read in the interventions of Flinders, and Fielding,[10] where the failure to offer a solution in the terms prescribed by the democratic traditions mocked is taken as a deferral of politics, rather than its incitement.

In developing upon the cultural political economy of comic resistance, this paper has drawn out a different conception of possibility: that the performance of comedy might politicise subjectivity as emotional, hopeful, or futile. Taken historically, comedy reflects and engages important contingencies of the British experience, from post-imperial decline, to immigration and race relations, through to a rapid accommodation with post-Fordism and global finance. While this performative focus on resistance gives a more granular and sensitive appreciation of particularities of market-isation in British history, it also points to vital potentialities in the current moment. Importantly, all three comedians suggest an unstable, limited, yet, highly engaging way of thinking subjectivity that is capable of involving the audience in a critical engagement with markets.

This form of resistance is attractive, I would argue, because it provides a route into politics *and the political* in a manner that excites, is vital. Everyday acts of refusal – like joking, irony, and satire - are connected (in)directly to the (sovereign) centre of politics insofar as they animate the logics that fabricate a unified centre of politics in the first place. In this way, resistant practices might (but need not necessarily) re-phrase the

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[10] http://nottspolitics.org/2012/06/18/the-anti-politics-of-the-thick-of-it/

everyday market subject as a vital category, in a manner that carries affective power. Resistant practices – both conservative and radical – help to highlight the way markets and market relations are intimately bound up with *and known* through emotion.

Each of the comedians addressed highlight and engage the role of the media in performing a political centre. In the work of Russell Brand, an ability to draw together – and subvert – apparently separate issues, such as between the state form of democracy and Paxman's role as an emotional subject, gives it an interesting reflexive function. This affective depth encourages, for Brand, a reflection on alternative political narratives, raising awareness for socialism and spiritual growth, such that the 'involving' and vital dimensions of resistance might open up new vistas for political engagement.

For Brooker and Lee, 'anger' is an equally important component of market subjectivity. For Brooker, the subject of austerity is increasingly produced as a hating being, 'resistant' in a manner that invites reflection on how market government is achieved. For Lee, anger at the self, becomes the only possible way of sustaining a critical reflexivity through the aporia of meaning and markets. Indeed, Lee's comedy generates a more tragic reflection, that there might 'not' be correct ways forward for resistance; that the subject is so intimately entwined with market rationalities, all we can hope for is some absurd sense of awareness:

> 'Did you see Stewart Lee?' 'Yeh.' 'Was it funny?' 'No. *But I agreed the fuck out of it!'*... I'm not interested in laughs. What I'm aiming for is a temporary mass liberal consensus…that dissolves on contact with air." (Lee, 2014)

For all that resistance is attractive, therefore, I would argue that we need to appreciate its fugitive quality; it eludes us. This is because opposing the state performs the state; ameliorating power legitimates power. Resistance is thus fleeting; any success would mean there was no longer a requirement. Politics would simply continue in another register and new forms of resistance would be nascent. A fugitive resistance may or may not open up the political, but will anyway disappear. Indeed, following Butler on subversion, the very possibility of even recognising a resistant practice would seem to depend on contingency and context, an observation which she takes to *undercut* the desire to make universal judgements:

"I am not interested in delivering judgements on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive. Not only do I believe that such judgements cannot be made out of context, but that they cannot be made in ways that endure through time ("contexts" are themselves posited unities that undergo temporal change and expose their essential disunity). Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening cliches through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where "subversion" carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to. (Butler, 1999, xxii)"

It is not the comedy *per se*, then, so much as it's wrestling with a specific context that is interesting for the study of resistance. Indeed, this chimes with recent work on post-colonial resistance which urges us to return to the Latin root of resistance, *re + sistere*, literally meaning to endure or withstand, in order to re-orient the older emphasis on opposition or negation, towards *a logic of negotiation* (Chandra, forthcoming).

And here lies the rub. In developing a critical analysis of British comedy, its capacity to generate a sophisticated form of market critique, we find an ambiguous ethical position: as dependent upon the contingencies it mocks, as it is critical of them. For all that British comedy undermines and questions imperial legacies, class and racial hierarchies; there is no escaping it's failure to escape such contexts. For example, the protagonists of this paper are all English white males, occupying an increasingly privileged position within (mediatised) British society. That this is so in a period when so many new, young comedians of different genders, racial and national backgrounds are coming through is perhaps an expression of the profound limit(s) of resistance?

Apologies might be made of course. For all that Russell Brand's celebrity star rises through his eeking out of an anti-establishment position, it is important not to understate his role in making a genuine difference to the profile (and eventual success) of campaigns like Focus E15: 'social housing, not social cleansing'.[11] Equally, the lack of diversity in British comedy is something that Stewart Lee has addressed directly in his Alternative

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[11] http://focuse15.org/

Comedy Experience, which dedicates itself to profiling and interviewing new or marginal talents like Josie Long, and highlighting the difficulty of making it in the hierarchical and elitist British comedy industry. But such apologia would miss the point.

On the argument developed here, resistance does not somehow step outside of power, or overcome it. As Foucault (2005) argued, "…there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case [. . .] by definition they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations." Therefore, to identify how British comedy – or indeed the author - occupies a place within power is not a de-legitimation of resistance so much as a signal of the ethical responsibility involved. Indeed, a negotiation of the possibilities and limits of British comedy might even (contingently) celebrate power(?!), that there might be something important in the British experience, violent and hierarchic as it is?

On this view, it was the cultural experience of Imperial decline that prompted a satire boom in the 50s/60s, which questioned class entitlement and the racial logics of Empire. Equally, it might be argued that the UK's response to decline (Gamble, 1994), which embraced neo-liberal restructuring and saw the accommodation of global finance, post-Fordism and the individualisation of welfare, might hold some seeds of possibility? That for all that UK society might be taken as a straight victory of neo-liberal market logics, the history of British comedy suggests engagement, resistance, and subversion is a more enduring experience, which might itself inspire.

Brand and Brooker demonstrate alternative modes and sites of political engagement; through networks, through the internet, and even snark. For Brand, his star value has been a useful attention booster for anti-austerity protests – even Sky News ran a special section on him taking his shirt off.[12] But his Trews video has also been an important new media form, available via his website but mainly through Twitter and Facebook. Equally, a range of new techniques of the political are mooted by Brooker, in particular, who provides a strong example of how to inhabit the media-market nexus in an empowering manner. Indeed, Brooker has been consistently impressive for his ability

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[12] http://news.sky.com/story/1287053/russell-brand-calls-for-joyful-revolution

to weave together snark with deeper intellectual critiques of the 'postmodern malaise', especially through the inclusion of short documentary sections by Adam Curtis, which introduce critical social theory inflected arguments to a broad comedy audience.

While there is no necessary association between this kind of work and wider practices of resistance, it is clear that Brooker, in particular, is able to embody a vital image of this mode of political engagement. Examples of how this kind of thinking can permeate and create new forms of resistance might include the proliferation of political satire through social networks (e.g. the *Daily Mash*)? Or else, it might be seen in line with a wider vernacular of commodity oriented resistance such as *Brandalism* or various spontaneous attempts to hijack the consumer review pages of Amazon?[13] Such lines of thought/action are attractive precisely because they allow everyday market subjects a novel route into the politics of their subjectivation.

In conclusion, comedy can be seen as subversive of market subjectivity, identifying variously a critique of state level politics, a critique of the media narrative of politics, and – in the case of Lee - a tragic reflection on the politics of the subject. Comedy allows us to think market rationality beyond governance or coercion, to reflect on how we inhabit markets: vitally, affectively. The central ambiguity of British comedy is arguably it's most attractive quality; it's resistance to market subjectivity is performative of new modes of market life – whether in facilitating new media nodes, or allowing some tragic reflection on the contemporary limits of the subject. Precisely for that reason, satire is not dead, but is proliferating through everyday market life. On this view, future research on comedy is an open field. Beyond the English White men of this article, we might look to the everyday (and highly inclusive) satire of memes on social media; the comic form as it is re-imagined in the rap of Akala, say; the (endless) margins of British comedy, whether it be female, black or (more famously) Scottish comedians; or the bizarre position of comic graffiti as both vandalism and (commodified) art.

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[13] http://www.brandalism.org.uk/;
http://www.amazon.co.uk/BiC-For-Her-Medium-Ballpoint/dp/B004FTGJUW

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