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Racism in Comedy Reappraised: Back to Little England?

ABSTRACT

The article was originally researched to consider issues of taste in the self-acclaimed 'New British Comedy' (circa 2003-09) exemplified by television, film, and stage shows of the previous decade, such as 'Little Britain', Sacha Baron Cohen's 'Borat...' and 'Mock the Week'. Considering the contemporary and continuing debate concerning the divide between satire and inappropriate racist offence, the article now considers and focuses on reappraising racism in comedy, with particular reference to the trends that emerged in the 'Little Britain' series of this era. As American commentators mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird' (1989) through a critical reflection on racism in contemporary American culture, the authors believe it is timely to revisit the ways in which comedy reflects broader British attitudes towards race and racial stereotypes. A number of traditional social psychological theories will be used to explain why racist humour is still prevalent in Britain's multi cultural society. In particular the article will seek to illustrate the ways in which developments in contemporary comedy reflect the move from what is termed 'old fashioned racism' to what Gaertner & Dovidio (1986) term 'aversive racism'. The article will then develop the argument to illustrate the ways in which the interactional qualities which exemplify 'aversive racism' are manifested in the broader socio-political context as 'principled racism' which warrants racist humour through the rhetoric of 'race-blind' liberal principles (Sniderman, Brody & Tetlock, 1991.)

Early drafts of a paper on which this article was based were presented at: Leicester De Montfort University Symposium (2008), The International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) Conference Political Performance Working Group in Stellenbosch, South Africa, (2007) and The Salford International Comedy Conference (2007).

KEYWORDS

television comedy

racism

aversive racism

principled racism

stigma

Little Britain

Matt Lucas

David Walliams

Little Britain reflects the cultural trend towards infantilism...less cutting-edge comedy than comedy conformism.

(Hume 2005)

CONTEXT

It is welcome, and hardly unsurprising, that with the passage of time a more objective analysis of the comedy of the previous decade can now commence. It is also evident that a move to 'safer', less 'edgy' broadcast comedy programming than was prevalent in the 'naughties' (2000-09) has occurred, especially at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), provoked in great part by the Brand/Ross furore on Radio Two in October 2008, (when actor Andrew Sachs privacy was invaded on air) with the result that BBC programmes are now routinely reassessed for 'editorial risk'. This change of commissioning climate helps frame the debate when examining the merits and weaknesses of comedy that challenge the boundaries of 'taste and decency', exemplified by the television and stage show *Little Britain* (BBC 2003-09) written and performed by David Walliams and Matt Lucas.

The authors concluded, however, that the original rationale of the article concerning issues of taste in British comedy, needed to re-focus on an analysis of more universal and politically contemporary issues of social stigma and racism, and how they are/were reflected in popular comedy programming. This appears to be a much more urgent debate, especially considering the context where race and immigration issues were highlighted in the 2010 British General Election campaign debates and which now form part of the government's longer term policy agenda.

It is accepted that 'New British Comedy' (and especially *Little Britain*) of the previous decade found a large audience amongst young people in their late teens and early twenties. As developmental psychology tells us, this is a crucial transition period for many young people and a time when social, individual identity and group membership is 'up for grabs'. The use of 'aversive racism' in mainstream media is a potentially insidious development which warrants social psychological attention.

Many of the *Little Britain* characters such as: ugly bloke *Dudley* buying his Thai bride *Ting-Tong Macadangdang* from a magazine; *Vicky Pollard*, single mum and teenage delinquent; the Home Counties projectile vomiter; the over-sized, naked fighting women; the incontinent senior citizen who pees on the supermarket floor; carer *Lou* and the not-so-wheelchair bound *Andy*; *Dafydd* the only gay in the village – all had an enormous following amongst young people, evidenced by the character catchphrases being repeated parrot-fashion in many a school playground. As the show transferred from Radio 4 (in 2003), via BBC 2 and 3 to, eventually screen on BBC 1 (in 2005), the ethos, let alone the one-liners, of the programme entered the mainstream of British culture. The fact that *Little Britain* characters and catchphrases were appropriated by advertising agencies (for example, to promote The Nationwide building society in 2010), is not insignificant.

In terms of the comedy aesthetic of the last decade, there also appeared to be an increasing reaction to the norms of 'political correctness'. It had become fashionable to react against pressures to suppress prejudice and the writer/comedian's civil and moral duty to defend 'free speech'. For example, the campaign that comedian Rowan Atkinson launched in December 2004 against the government's Serious Organised Crime and Police bill that outlawed inciting religious hatred to protect faith groups, particularly Muslims, from attack.

Furthermore, the 'principled' stand against the agents of censorship was/is also seen as 'avant-garde' and 'pushing the envelope' as characterised by Sacha

Baron Cohen in the feature films *Brüno* (2009) portraying provocatively gay stereotypes and *Borat: Cultural Leanings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) depicting provocatively anti-Semitic characters. A common anecdotal reading of these films is that the humour needs to be viewed within the context of post-modern irony - and not to recognise the 'knowing wink' is to be considered by logical extension, unknowing and therefore 'un-cool'. In other words, a member of the 'out-group'.

PSYCHOLOGY OF RACIST JOKES

In searching for a theoretical framework for this article, it became clear that traditional theories of racist humour take a predominantly interpersonal approach, focussing on the psychological mechanisms in play during the telling or hearing of racist joke (Billig 2005). Before moving on to analyse the wider social psychological mechanisms of racist comedy, a brief outline of the ways in which the racist joke works on an individual level will provide the foundation for understanding the ways in which broader society seemingly ameliorates the racist elements of 'New British Comedy'. The authors will later challenge the strategy where many contemporary comedians (knowingly or unknowingly) align themselves to accept the 'satire' rather than 'offence' argument when defending routines and sketches which contain offensive and racist material.

Key to understanding the 'racist joke' is that the stereotypes which inform this humour are based in contemporary attitudes towards particular groups in society. In order to 'get' a racist joke, stereotypes must be recognised and credible for the hearer. Ronald Desouza (1987) identifies that when a person finds jokes expressing either sexist or racist stereotype assumptions funny, they implicitly accept these stereotyped assumptions about the nature of the other. In order to illustrate this point; this article will present a joke using unfamiliar racial stereotypes. The joke below is taken from a body of racist humour common in Greece which plays on perceived attributes of ethnic minority Albanians.

Question: How does the Albanian recipe for an omelette start?

Answer: We steal 2 eggs.

The stereotype promoted is that of an Albanian who steals and, by implication that *all* Albanians steal. Without culturally informed knowledge of the target group or the prevailing social prejudices, the joke has little resonance. Georgios Antonopoulos (2004) confirms this by stating that, 'Racist jokes about migrants and crime make us laugh because we, as listeners, perceive the stereotype presented in the jokes to be real' (Antonopoulos 2004). So the only way to test this logic is to use different ethnicities and see if the 'joke' still works as an example of racist humour.

Question: How does the English recipe for an omelette start?

Answer: We steal 2 eggs.

It's not funny, at least for the Greeks, because the culturally available stereotype for the English are different to that for the Albanians and whilst this stereotype may include behaving in a thuggish and drunken manner, they do not include being inherently criminal. Antonopoulos's conclusion is that racist jokes about migrants and crime do not create racism in the Greek context but they reproduce and validate the already existing racism. They reinforce it and consequently, they become another

vehicle of racism in the Greek society. This begs the question: in the *Little Britain* 'Ting-Tong' sketches, would the joke still work if the bride was French?

So, racist jokes are only effective if underlying racist attributions are socially acknowledged. Although the mechanism of the racist joke works by recognition of the racist stereotype, the enjoyment of the racist joke is not characterised by open recognition of a racist attitude on the part of the hearer. Freud describes telling jokes as an 'economy of pity' (Freud 1976: 295) - a socially accepted means of breaking taboos and a strategy to deflect anger. Zillman develops this theory as 'disparagement humour' (Zillman 1983) where the pleasure is derived from the expression of aggression against the target. Crucially, the joke-teller will not admit to themselves that this is the source of their pleasure. This aspect of self-deception on the part of the hearer is further developed through recognition of aggressive humour and teasing as part of socialization and developmental processes through which children are often guided by parental teasing and disciplining through aggressive and deprecatory humour (Billig 2001).

It may appear that 'old fashioned' racism is increasingly marginalised and individuals or groups identified as exemplifying this 'brand' of racism rightly condemned. In parallel to this socially acceptable distancing from groups like the British National Party and English Defence League, the production and popularity of broadcast comedies like *Little Britain* and *Mock the Week* (BBC 2005-present) would suggest that racist and offensive stereotypes are still prevalent in mainstream media and simply repackaged in a more manageable and acceptable form. In theoretical terms, this would support Gaertner and Dovidio's (1986: 124) assertion of a move towards 'aversive racism'. This form of racism is produced when the tension between expressed egalitarian attitudes of our post-modern society and pervasive negative stereotypes produces a conflict which leads to an unease and reticence in recognising these negative stereotypes as being overtly racist.

With reference to 'New British Comedy', whilst the stereotypes and racist assertions remain largely unchanged, they are reformulated and re-contextualised in a more palatable form which can be warranted through a variety of social discourses. In the arena of broadcast comedy, the most prevalent discourse drawn on to warrant the inclusion of racist jokes is the 'I'm being ironic' narrative. The key questions which drive this and other articles concerned with this trend in 'New British Comedy' is: haven't we talked this to death? Is there anything fresh to say about *Little Britain*? Does it matter?

The answer must take account of the social and political consequences of turning a 'race-blind' eye to the debate as to what constitutes the difference between racist humour and 'irony'. The consequence of ignoring the debate is to enable aversive racism to underpin not only continuing trends in British comedy, but also broader social and political policies. In order to outline the links between racist humour and social policy, it is worth considering the social function which humour serves.

We use humour to position ourselves socially for example, the use of 'in-jokes' which can strengthen group cohesiveness and a sense of shared belonging. However, for every 'in-group' there is an 'out-group' and as we align ourselves with particular groups, humour can be a powerful tool to distance and even marginalise other groups in society. Favourable 'in-group' comparisons can be reinforced by humour which enables downward social comparison to other more vulnerable or marginalised groups. Of particular interest is the way in which social groups justify

belief systems and attitudes which may appear to be based on racist stereotypes. Humour can be a powerful tool to enable social cohesion or reinforce social hierarchies.

THE POLITICS OF RACIST COMEDY

Whilst the arguments over the justification of potentially offensive jokes have become academic currency in journals which span the humanities and social sciences, do these positions have any real social relevance? The social psychological impact of aversive racism can be seen as mainstream acceptance of shows like *Little Britain* and thereby provide sometimes unintended support for more overt and extreme positions. In particular the rationalized arguments given by many comedians for the content of controversial material can be seen to feed into a broader system of social beliefs which are used to justify and warrant a range of racist positions and behaviours.

The belief systems that underlie the 'justified' stigmatization responses fall into two kinds categories': 'Attributional approaches' and 'Hierarchical approaches' (Crandall 2003: 19-20). 'Justification' ideologies reinvent old fashioned racist beliefs that discriminatory treatment is natural, sensible and fair game and repackage these notions in more palatable terms (Crandall 2003: 127). 'Attributional approaches' follow the 'just world' belief; that is 'bad things happen to bad people', in that the locus of responsibility for the stigmatized person is internal. They are responsible for their own fate and deserve the consequences. An attributional approach can be seen in the *Little Britain 'Ting Tong' sketches*. David Walliams who plays the 'ugly bloke' in the *Ting-Tong* series of sketches, feels his character has received a raw deal from a Thai Bride catalogue. The argument would play out that, the ugly guy got what he deserved; by inference, *Ting-Tong* got what she deserved because she's a large, ugly Thai - which plays against traditional stereotypes that oriental women are petite. *Ting-Tong* is played by a man (Matt Lucas), which casts against the traditional stereotype of the Thai Ladyboy who is tall, thin, willowy and ultra-feminine.

The second category: 'hierarchical approaches' accept and even support, the notion that superior-inferior relationships are inevitable. This approach represents a modified form of Social Darwinism which espouses that the elite *and* the poor both deserve what's coming to them. The importance of recognising justification ideologies is that when used in combination with aversive racist practices, they provide a powerful rhetoric to enable the maintenance of the cultural hegemony and socio-political emphasis of maintaining the status quo. This in essence is the mechanism which enables 'principled racism', a concept we discuss in more detail later. In terms of the characterizations and justifications apparent in *Little Britain*, this form of racist comedy is constructed on a well established connection not based on race hate, but rather on a range of 'race-blind' political, social and cultural beliefs (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991)

The issues become more problematic when it can be argued powerfully that the moral and political health of a nation is signaled by its ability to not only laugh at one's self, but has the moral imperative to 'stigmatize' the actions of members of the executive and institutions of the state – specifically through political satirical characterizations, exemplified by *That Was the Week That Was* (BBC 1962-63), *Spitting Image* (Central Television 1984-1996) or more recently *The Thick of It* (BBC 2005-present). However, the authors contend that *Little Britain* as an apolitical show displays none of the moral authority to utilise attributional approaches.

According to Erving Goffman's classic 1963 definition, 'stigma' is defined as a characteristic that makes a person different and less desirable. Colloquial language helps to identify a stigmatised and/or non-stigmatised persons or groups, depending

on who uses the word and in which context, for example, the use of ‘coloured’, ‘black’ and the ‘n-word’. The function of ‘stigma’ is a process of stereotyping – focusing on particular characteristic enabling social categorisation. In this longstanding model, stigma is a sign/mark which designates the bearer as ‘spoiled’ and therefore valued less than ‘normal’ people. These ‘marks’ may be behavioural, physical, involve membership of a particular group or identify a moral failing (Goffman 1990: 45). Although the targets which we stigmatise may change over time and across cultures, stigma is a universal concept which functions to downgrade or marginalise particular elements or groups in society. It is therefore important to address the recent re-visibility of these stigmatized groups and stereotypes and their journey, via broadcast comedy, to mainstream cultural narratives and forms.

Throughout the course of this article, we have pointed to features of both characterization and justification which reflect aspects of ‘aversive racism’. However, the acceptance of *Little Britain* onto mainstream broadcasting (from Radio 4 in 2003 to BBC 1 in 2005) in ‘prime time’ slots and the subsequent use of characters (for example in the 2010 advertising campaign by the Nationwide building society) would suggest that aversive racism with its emphasis on the features of interpersonal interaction may not be a sufficiently broad framework in which to account for the potential socio-political impact of this trend. ‘Principled racism’ may be a more appropriate and sufficiently broad perspective to enable a consideration of the trajectory that the characterizations that originated from *Little Britain* have taken from cult ‘satire’ to becoming part of our current cultural fabric.

The dangers of such ‘principled racism’ are that they can lead to public policy preferences that can be described as anti-minority and racist. It can consolidate and justify the disparities between ‘have’ and ‘have-nots’ leading to attributions that create aggression and rejection in response. As Christian Crandall puts it, ‘[...] reactance can occur when people feel forced to suppress prejudice. Decreasing such persons’ freedom to be prejudiced by enforcing social norms may lead to greater prejudice in response to this reactance’ (Crandall 2003: 141)

Also ‘principled racism’ tends to endorse the status quo that can solidify existing hierarchical structures of social relations and institutions. Far from being ‘cutting edge’ or ‘avant-garde’, ‘New British Comedy’ tended to confirm the existing order and lends credence to the assertion that comedy is more a conservative medium of expression, with a big and little ‘C’, than radically innovative.

Another major danger of normalizing such ‘race-blind’ comedy on mainstream television is that it can help reflect, and possibly foster, a cultural environment that accepts the stigmatization of immigrants and makes acceptable prejudicial social and political policy. This may add to the general consensus that believes immigration controls are essential and which result in quasi-racist policies, such as the ‘immigration cap’, proposed by the coalition government in 2010. The danger becomes especially acute when broadcast comedy that particularly targets the next generation of the electorate, appear to confirm outdated stereotypes and prejudices. As Johann Hari puts it in his 2005 on-line article ‘*Little Britain, and casual racism*’:

Ting Tong is nothing more than the pathetic flogging of another crass racist stereotype – yellow makeup, dodgy buck teeth and an inability to pronounce one’s “r”s and you have a winning formula. It’s interesting to note that while Spike Milligan’s browning-up in *Curry and Chips* and *The Black and White*

Minstrel Show have now been consigned forever to TV Hell (accompanied by lots of self-congratulatory back-slapping), *Little Britain* gets away with away with the exact same kind of thing. If you think I'm over-reacting, then consider this – is it any way likely that Matt Lucas would have instead dressed up as a Pakistani, put on a “goodness gracious me” accent, and done a sketch about arranged marriages?

(Hari 2005)

Indeed, there would seem to be little ‘casual’ about the racism evident in *Little Britain* and subsequent ‘New British Comedy’. The reinvention of racist humour as a lens to illuminate the tensions in our multi-cultural society is at best a risky practice. It is not without careful thought that the authors included their own anatomy of a racist joke. Does the notion that the racial stereotypes in the Greek omelette joke are not immediately culturally prevalent in Britain today, make this a less offensive form of racist humour? Whose perspective do we take when judging ‘offensive’ jokes – the teller; who may advocate that their intention was not to offend but to educate/highlight social fractures, *or* the target?

ACCOUNTING FOR RACIST HUMOUR

As deceased stand-up Manchester comedian Bernard Manning often philosophized: everyone is a target. It's just that in Manning's case (and similarly in Middlesbrough stand-up Cubby Brown's stage set), minorities were/are always easier to hit. More recently, comedians have mobilised a range of accounting devices to justify racist humour which stem from the justification ideologies already outlined.

Mick Hume (2005) quotes David Walliams (writing about the characters in *The Times* newspaper) as saying, “You want to spend time with them. You don't despise them. You're laughing with, not at them [.....] We don't stereotype [.....] We celebrate difference”

This sounds not so much like quasi-New Labour spin of the time, but more defensive self-justification and, with specific reference to the *Ting-Tong* sketches, a form of ‘racial microaggression’ familiar in studies of aversive racism (Sue 2007). In common with the everyday microaggressions which deny race in order to justify racism; Walliams's rhetorical defense is undermined when the motivation for ‘you’ to spend time with the characters is unpacked. As the main force of *Little Britain* is to construct characters who are unaware of the ridiculous nature of their situation and appear as often grotesque exaggerations, then surely the motivation to spend time with them would be to continue to laugh ‘at’ rather than ‘with’ them.

As all we have to analyze here are the characters, the sketches and the quote, so using Billig's (2005) rhetorical approaches to humour we can deconstruct Walliams's justification above. In order to laugh ‘with’ someone, the performer needs audience interaction, so they also laugh. Furthermore in order to ‘laugh with’ someone, both parties must share the laughter and find humour in the situation. The dilemma here is that the characters are played seriously, they do not laugh at their situations - there are no ‘off camera’ asides to allude to a shared experience. The ‘joke’ is visible only to the audience, not to the characters and therefore we laugh *at* rather than *with* the characters.

For comedian Frankie Boyle, the controversial *Mock the Week* panelist, the rhetorical strategy used to account for racist humour is to focus attention on the skill and artifice of the joke-teller. In an interview with Stephen Dalton (2008) of *The Times* newspaper, Boyle says that the trick is smuggling taboo subjects inside an

elegantly structured joke, and insists that, '[...]gallows humour, soldier humour has always been with us[...] if it's got a subtlety to it, they almost give you points for that' (Dalton 2008). Boyle's rhetoric is to celebrate the sophistication of the joke itself as an allowance for including racist stereotypes; this justification reflects a hierarchical approach with the artistry and skill of the joke-teller used to warrant underlying racist assertions.

Boyle also aligns his potentially offensive humour with 'gallows humour' (Thorson 1997). The key difference between 'racist' and 'gallows humour' is that the social practice of 'gallows humour' has particular contexts and boundaries and it is rarely practiced and articulated to outsiders. For those communities of practice who have a strong tradition of 'gallows humour', these are in-group jokes which are shared by members in order to enable shared experience between group members (Sullivan 2000) and relieve stress in times of extreme trauma (Scott 2007). When these jokes are occasionally told to outsiders, they are used as an invitation to enable non-members to share intimate experiences and to ease tension when recounting potentially distressing narratives. Examples of 'gallows humour' to non-group members includes death jokes told by terminal cancer sufferers (Chapman 1997) and incontinence humour by epilepsy sufferers (Kilinc, Becker and Campbell 2008)

Is it possible, therefore, that Bernard Manning was operating more honestly than many of the 'new' comedians of the last decade? Many 'new' comedians sought to distance themselves from the old fashioned joke telling of Bernard Manning whilst presenting character depictions of minorities which were cloaked in a 'Middle-England' uncritical acceptance of what was trendy and cool. We're back to 'aversive racism'.

One of the final scenes (in Part 5) of the *Ting Tong* series of sketches features *Ting-Tong* and her waiter brother evicting *Dudley* from his council flat after they have turned the residence into a Thai restaurant. As *Dudley* walks dejectedly into the distance, the viewer is left with an uncomfortable sense of the consequences of inviting the ungenerous, foreign invader into Britain, which is not a million miles away from the extreme right-wing sentiment of 'give them an inch, and they'll bring their family, take your house and your jobs'.

As we enter what the government call 'an age of austerity', the consequence of writer-performers reinforcing a climate of 'principled racism', knowingly or unknowingly, could be profound. This is especially true when government expenditure cuts in public services begin to bite – minorities ('out-groups') historically bear the brunt of frustrations when majorities ('in-groups') feel threatened or deprived. In conclusion, it would appear important that contemporary comedy writers and performers are aware of the political and social impact of their material in order to avoid sleep-walking into providing the mass 'entertainment' back-drop that legitimises 'aversive' or 'principled racism'.

It was this consequence that writer Johnny Speight recognised following the responses to the later series of his immensely popular sit-com *'Til Death Do Us Part* (BBC 1966-75) when he observed an alarming number of viewers identified rather too sympathetically with his central character – the racist bigot *Alf Garnet*. In Speight's opinion, too many were laughing *with Garnet*, not *at Garnet* as intended. As Michael Billig puts it in his conclusion to *Humour and hatred: The Racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan* (2001): 'Far from saying to themselves that it is only a joke, they can assert that this is not just a joke' ...and then none of us will be laughing.

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