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New Comedy Reappraised: Back to Little England? 'Yeahbutnobutyeahbutnobutyeah'

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 *'The Catherine Tate Show'*. The article now considers 'Little Britain's' contribution to the contemporary debate concerning the divide between satire and inappropriate racist offence. The article examines the trends that emerged in the Little Britain series of this era, specifically referencing the 'Ting-Tong' series of sketches and that appeared to present discredited stereotypes of race prevalent before the 'alternative' comedy of the 1980's. 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 move from what is termed 'old fashioned racism' to what Gaertner & Dovidio (1986) describe as 'modern or aversive racism'. 'Aversive 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. The article will then develop the argument to discuss concepts of 'principled racism' termed by Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock in 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

Little Britain
television comedy
principled racism
stigma
aversive racism

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

(Hume 2005)

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.

In searching for a theoretical framework, it became evident that the psychology and comedy performance are intrinsically linked and to address the issues separately is like looking at racism in comedy without considering the stereotypes that informs it.

The authors' interest involves the social psychology that describes the function and uses of humour and in particular in identity formation and reinforcement. There are a number of traditional social psychological theories which can be used to explain why racist humour is still prevalent in our multi-cultural society. In particular this article will illustrate the move from what is termed 'old fashioned racism' to what Gaertner & Dovidio (1986) term 'modern or aversive racism' from which we will develop the concept of 'principled racism'.

In short, 'aversive 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.

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

'New British Comedy' of the previous decade found an 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; Daffyd* 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.

Mick Hume in his article *'Is Little Britain the slightest bit funny? The clear answer is 'Nobutnobutno'*, 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”’ (Walliams quoted in Hume 2005). 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, ‘aversive racism’, a form of ‘principled racism’ based on the *stigmatization* of particular ethnic groups.

‘Principled racism’ could be defined as well-meaning actions/attitudes which appear to be liberal in outlook but which mask an underlying racist stance, for example, opposing affirmative action because it undervalues minorities who are genuinely able. The difficult issue for comedy writers and performers is that Britain/Europe has a long tradition of exploiting ‘stigma’ at the heart of the joke or comedy sketch.

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.

According to Erving Goffman 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). 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.

In *Jokes and their relation to the Unconscious* Sigmund 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. D. 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.

As Michael Billig puts it in *Humour and Hatred: The Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan* (Billig 2001) – aggressive humour depends on a crucial element of self-deceit...which sits interestingly alongside Walliams's ‘you're laughing with...not at them’. Jean Paul-Sartre described this syndrome as ‘bad faith’ in his 1943 essay *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Sartre suggests that the joke mocks the demands of reasonableness for the excessive stereotype which is claimed to be true.

That conclusion is useful defined as a psychological state but all we have to analyse here are the characters and the quote, so using Michael Billig's rhetorical approaches to humour as described in *Laughter and ridicule: towards a social critique of humour* (Billig 2005) we can deconstruct Walliams's justification above. In order to laugh 'with' someone, the performer needs audience interaction, so they also laugh. 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.

In discursive terms, Walliams's account is one of those common devices used to justify a potentially racist position, in other words presenting 'stake inoculation'. It is typical of strategies identified by Johnathon Potter and Margie Wetherell in their 1987 analysis of New Zealand race talk such as "I'm not being racist but....." clauses.

However, this is a micro-perspective concerned with the function of language. There are broader theoretical and social perspectives. In *Ideology and Lay Theories of Stigma: The justification of Stigmatization* Christian Crandall states that 'Justification ideologies let people feel that discriminatory treatment is natural, sensible and fair game' (Crandall 2003: 127). Or put another way, 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 stand-up Cubby Brown's stage set), minorities were/are always easier to hit. But maybe Bernard Manning was operating more honestly than many of the 'New' comedians of the last decade, whose character depictions of minorities were cloaked in a 'Middle-England' uncritical acceptance of what was trendy and cool. We're back to 'aversive racism'.

Christian Crandall outlines the belief systems that underlie the 'justification' stigmatization responses – he identifies two kinds of 'justification': 'Attributional approaches' and 'Hierarchical approaches' (Crandall 2003: 19-20).

Crandall argues that 'attributional approaches' focus on attributions that make a stigmatized person responsible for his or her own stigma. They are responsible for their own fate and deserve the consequences. For example in *Little Britain*, 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 even support, superior-inferior relationships as inevitable which can be seen as a modified Social Darwinism which espouses that the elite *and* the poor both deserve what's coming to them.

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 characterisations, exemplified by *That Was the Week That Was* (BBC), *Spitting Image* (Channel 4) or

more recently *The Thick of It* (BBC). However, the authors contend that *Little Britain* as an apolitical show, displays none of the moral authority to utilise stigmatising approaches.

R. Desouza in *When is it wrong to Laugh?* (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.

To illustrate this point, consider a joke that Greeks find funny: “How does the Albanian recipe for an omelette start?

Answer: We steal 2 eggs.

The stereotype put forward is that of an Albanian who steals, and implicitly *all* Albanians steal.

Georgios Antonopoulos of Teeside University in his paper *Epikindyno Humour: I ‘Anekdoti’ Eglimatopoiisi ton Metanaston stin Ellada* (2004) [translated as: *Dangerous Humour: The ‘Unpublished’ Criminalisation of Migrants in Greece, Poiniki Dikaiosyni*] confirms this:

‘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 we still think the stereotype as funny.

Question: I say, I say, I say: “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 stereotype we have for an Englishman is different to that for the Albanians. Antonopoulos’s conclusion was 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 Lithuanian?

Returning to ‘principled racism’ that we argue *Little Britain* displayed, this phenomena described by Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock (1991) 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 which we have also described as ‘aversive racism’. (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991)

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) depicting provocatively gay stereotypes and *Borat: Cultural Learnings 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’.

The conclusion of all this creates a satisfying and self-satisfied moral and self-justification for treating the stigmatized with social, economic and moral exclusion – the polar opposite view to David Walliams’s *Times* quote.

Also 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)

Secondly ‘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 normalising 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)

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 and take your house and jobs’.

As we enter ‘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 comedy *‘Til Death Do Us Part* (BBC 1966-74) 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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