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# EU've Got to Be Kidding: Anxiety, Humour and Ontological Security

*"We answer them but the trouble is our answers aren't funny"*  
(Brussels Eurocrat, 1995)<sup>1</sup>

*"BREAKING: All EU passports to become dark blue*  
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/Lex...>  
(Europarl UK@EPinUK 1 April 2018)

## Introduction

Recent years have seen a turn to humour in EU discourses of public and international diplomacy. From European Council President Donald Tusk's playful use of social media, to the Dutch PM's description of the UK's Brexit 'strategy' as reminiscent of Monty Python's *Black Knight*, it is evident that humour and joking are increasingly used as a mechanism to conduct (and cope with) global politics. This turn to humour is not unprecedented, of course. In an age of nation branding, with social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube and Facebook, the new diplomacy has witnessed a range of highly cultivated and staged uses of humour (Brassett and Browning, 2018). For NATO, humour is a form of strategic communication that is central to Russian hybrid warfare, a mode of communication designed to undermine 'the credibility of western political leaders' and to manipulate and influence the hearts and minds of citizens and non-citizens alike (Austers et al. 2017: 6-7). For critical academics, it is taken as symptomatic of a broader *commodification* of the global public sphere, whereby political leaders of all shapes and hues are increasingly *expected* to adopt humorous modes of communication; part of the 'permanent carnival' of global politics (Berlant and Ngai 2017: 236-7; Szokolczai 2013). Across the board, joking is understood as a serious and consequential political practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Sarah Helm (1995) 'Brussels chuckles as reality hits mythmaker', *Independent* 23 July 1995, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brussels-chuckles-as-reality-hits-mythmaker-1592828.html>.

Against a vision of humour as a fundamentally destabilising or corrupting influence on modern politics, this article suggests that the prevalence of comedy and joking may tell us rather more about the power relations, hierarchies and instabilities that characterise contemporary global politics. Drawing from the literature on ontological security, we argue that humour may reveal much about the particular and sometimes generalised role of anxiety in modern political discourse, as subjects attempt to respond to global narratives of crisis and a loss of liberal norms. While we focus on the EU case to illustrate, our aim is to develop a number of broader claims about the role of humour as a practice of ontological (in)security management in IR.

This argument is developed over three sections that first introduce the growing body of work on ontological security in IR before, second, theorising how humour can be rendered as a practice of ontological (in)security management. Given that theories of humour emphasise the importance of joking and laughter as a response to anxiety, we think there is fertile ground for engagement with ontological security. Bringing the two ideas together, and specifying the relationship between them, is a key contribution of this article.<sup>2</sup> A third section deploys our approach to examine how the EU has drawn upon humour and joking. We operationalise ontological (in)security management to examine four empirical dimensions of EU humour: (i) the politics of establishing *biographical narratives* of the EU as a polity committed to values of free speech in the form of satire; (ii) a mechanism of *vicarious identification* with a counter cultural politics of irony that seeks to re-legitimize the European project; (iii) as a mechanism to *shame* politicians or states that do not live up to EU expectations about normal politics; and, (iv) as a means of mobilising an *idealised self*, in particular through branding.

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<sup>2</sup> The role of humour in ontological security has been addressed previously, of course. For instance, Croft (2012a; 2012b) looked at the role of jokes in securitising Islam in the UK, while affirming particular (exclusionary) notions of British identity. Such work is important, not least because it contributes to IR's growing engagement with popular culture and the everyday. However, existing research can sometimes portray humour and joking as an additional arena within which established ontological security-seeking practices play out. In contrast, our aim is to engage humour and comedy as a rather more constitutive and substantial practice, indeed, a field of research with its own traditions of philosophical and social theoretic argument that carry implications for how we understand ontological security and global politics, more broadly.

## 1. Ontological Security: Anxiety and/as IR

Debates about ontological security start from the presumption that subjects are vulnerable to being overwhelmed by anxiety (e.g. Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). Such anxiety can take different forms, with Tillich (2014: 38-51) identifying a broad range; from existential anxieties connected to death, through a more general emptiness as we search for meaning in our lives, and on to anxieties related to guilt or moral condemnation. Indeed, these latter anxieties can be related to shame dynamics that arise whenever we fail (or stand accused of failing) to live up to a chosen moral identity. From an ontological security perspective, the ability to manage anxieties is central to developing a healthy sense of subjectivity and being able to act concertedly in the world, failing which subjects are at risk of slipping into melancholic states, lacking purpose and direction (Giddens 1991). At its worst, such anxiety can take on a neurotic manifestation or result in a sense of personal fragmentation and paralysis (Laing 1959).

A basic observation of the ontological security literature is that subjects have a tendency to seek out stability and certainty. This is because anything that challenges established patterns, routines and beliefs has the potential to be considered threatening insofar as it introduces uncertainty and the spectre of anxiety. Anxiety can therefore appear as inherently unwelcome. As a generalisation this is no doubt true, but as a generalisation it is also problematic. For instance, ‘too much’ stability can be stultifying, generating feelings of boredom and ennui. As Kustermans and Ringmar (2011) have noted, people often want to feel a part of world-historical-events. They suggest this might explain the otherwise puzzling enthusiasm that often greets the onset of war – when anxieties about death might presumably be on the rise – but where war offers a stage on which meaning might be found. In other words, people’s desire that their lives be meaningful and fulfilling *can also produce* uncertainty (and the anxiety it brings). Thus, while a life lived in constant anxiety could easily become unbearable, anxiety is not *de facto* ‘bad’, or something to be avoided (Browning and Joenniemi 2017). In this respect, ontological security might say more about the

ability to *manage* anxiety. On this view, anxiety is a constitutive part of the human condition, a basic corollary of human freedom (e.g. Kierkegaard 1980); with the ability to meet it, learn from it, embrace it even, central to human development (see May 1977).

Thinking about ontological security as a more dynamic process that may actually *embrace change* speaks to another important element of subjectivity, namely: that social subjects desire recognition, status and self-esteem. Indeed, such concerns are closely linked to anxieties about meaning and shame, for example, where status seeking requires action that may flirt with anxiety and when the desired recognition ‘may not’ be forthcoming. Such self-esteem dynamics point to how ontological security can speak to a wider politics of establishing and/or challenging social hierarchies. For example, the ontological security seeking practices of one subject may at times serve to undermine the sense of ontological security, status and self-esteem of others. Across these dimensions, the ability of subjects to manage potentially debilitating anxieties is related to their ability to deploy ‘ontological security seeking strategies’ (Browning and Joenniemi 2017). There are different ways of breaking such strategies down, not least because they are inevitably interwoven, but here we provide a heuristic framework that highlights four important elements.

First, subjects need to cultivate **biographical narratives of self-identity** that locate them in time and space. Such narratives are important in providing the subject with a sense of identity and role in respect of significant others, while they also establish expectations for the self and others about appropriate modes of behaviour. Such narratives therefore provide an ordering function within which everyday events, experiences and relationships can be understood and processed (Giddens 1991: 39, 54; Kinnvall 2004: 746; Steele 2008: 10-12). Biographical narratives of self-identity are typically routinised in habituated behaviours that both reinforce those narratives, becoming performative of particular role identities, but which also serve to establish expectations about the nature of society and one’s relations with others in it. Such routines are often (indeed typically) mundane. For example, in diplomacy this would include the routinisation of particular policy mechanisms, standard operating procedures (see Steele 2017), or declaratory

performances. The mundanity of such routines and their importance as carriers of biographical narratives of self-identity becomes evident, however, whenever they are disrupted or challenged. For example, consider the ontological and civilizational salience attached to ‘café culture’ following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, as expressed through the meme *Je suis en terrasse* (Browning 2018). In such high stress situations, or when biographical narratives are challenged and ontological anxieties are on the rise, subjects may seek to securitise particular concepts of self-identity (Kinnvall 2004; Malksoo 2015).

Second, subjects may also seek to enhance their sense of ontological security, or respond to emerging anxieties, through practices of **vicarious identification** (see Browning et al., forthcoming). Vicarious identification is evident whenever a subject appropriates and ‘lives through’ the experiences and achievements of others (Goldstein and Cialdinin 2007; Norrick 2013). This is particularly evident between individuals, such as when parents live through or gain reflected glory from their children. However, vicarious identification is also present whenever individuals live through the experiences of collective actors. This is a central component of nationalism (Marlow 2002; Krolkowski 2008), as well as the often tumultuous relationship sports fans experience with the teams they support, e.g. the England football team. Yet it is also evident in practices of cultural appropriation – the attaching to the self of cultural artefacts and practices that are not obviously, straightforwardly or uncontestably one’s own. What this suggests is that while practices of vicarious identification are often accepted, they can also be contested and highly politicised, and can sometimes backfire.<sup>3</sup> The key point is that vicarious identification can help subjects respond to anxieties by enhancing the subject’s sense of self-esteem, not least by compensating for failings, or lack of meaning, by becoming part of a larger project. Embedding the self within a larger collective subject can be a way of enhancing status, standing and recognition - an idea that is arguably central to the whole European project.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, consider the controversial case of Rachel Dolezal (Dolezal 2017), or broader debates around the rights and wrongs of ‘passing’ (Ahmed 2000: 125-33).

A third key aspect of ontological security seeking is **shame management**. As Steele (2005) has argued, subjects will typically seek to try and avoid anything that might result in condemnation from others, and accusations of failing to live up to one's own (moral) self-identity. He highlights how Abraham Lincoln's issuing of the Emancipation Declaration in 1863 generated British anxiety over slavery and consequently removed intervention on the side of the South in the American Civil War as a viable option, forcing Britain to remain neutral. Thus, the prospect of 'ontological dissonance' (Lupovici 2012) that support for the South would have engendered in British identity was deemed problematically shaming; likely to generate external condemnation that would affect the country's status and standing. Similarly, Zarakol (2011) argues that feelings of shame and the lack of recognition generated by the stigma of being 'behind the West' has been a significant source of low self-esteem and ontological insecurity in Russia, Turkey and Japan. Her claim is that this can help account for long histories of trying to 'catch up' and gain acceptance from the Western club of nations.<sup>4</sup> What these analyses also highlight, however, is that shaming can also be utilised as a tactic *to activate* ontological anxieties in others; pushing them to change political behaviours.

Finally, a fourth ontological security seeking strategy, and one drawing on a more Lacanian reading of subjectivity, concerns the development of **fantasy narratives of an idealised self** (e.g. Eberle 2019; Kinnvall 2018; Vieira 2018). This can be seen as an extension of the development of a biographical narrative of self-identity, or a particular manifestation of it. But the point about such idealisations – and why they are fantasies – is they are ultimately out of reach.<sup>5</sup> Subjects are drawn to them because they offer the prospect of self-fulfilment. As Glynos and Howarth (2008: 164) argue, to establish a sense of being and to orient themselves in the world, subjects identify with

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<sup>4</sup> As Adler-Nissen (2014) notes, stigmatization can result in a variety of responses. So, while the implied 'shame' may be accepted and measures taken to remove the stigma, stigmatization may also be rejected, e.g. Putin's Russia.

<sup>5</sup> To clarify, the distinction between biographical narratives and fantasy narratives is heuristic and analytical rather than categorical, since it is not unreasonable to suggest that all narratives have elements of fantasy about them (and vice versa). Analytically, however, it enables us to distinguish between the repetitive nature of biographical narratives, where uses of humour act as a supplementary layer for an established biography, and the more overtly idealised, imaginative and creative (fantastical) nature of fantasy narratives, in which humour takes on a more overtly performative dimension.

various social signifiers that offer the prospect of becoming. At times, however, certain signifiers can emerge as ‘fantasised idealisations’ that exert a particular and affective hold over the subject. The fantasy, for example, may be the acquisition of an object or the cultivation of a relationship or idea like freedom, peace, or prosperity, which becomes central to the subject’s very concept of fulfilment, e.g. ‘the American Dream’. Typically, of course, the nature of such fantasies is that they fall short. This is because the acquisition of the object/idea can only provide a temporary sense of relief, and thus the idealisation always remains just out of reach. For example, in populist fantasies like those expressed by Brexiteers in the UK (Browning 2019), it is the ‘elite’, or ‘migrants’, or even ‘the EU’, that need to be overcome again and again. By contrast, in EU fantasies of European democracy, populists often perform this role. The key point, however, is that falling short does not delegitimise the fantasy, but generally strengthens its affective hold, thereby promoting new efforts at fulfilment (Eberle 2019; Arfi 2010).

## **2. Humour as Ontological Security Management**

Developing from the previous discussion, this section will try to fix ideas about the role of humour in IR by reading it through the prism of ontological security management. This is primarily a conceptual contribution to the literature on ontological security, not least in terms of how humour and joking can speak to the politics of anxiety. Yet, this section will also argue that figuring humour as ontological security management may open an important line of research for thinking about humour and global politics more broadly.

The most obvious contribution of humour to ontological security concerns its role in stress relief; that laughing and joking can help to relieve anxiety, even in difficult situations. In this respect, humour operates to dispel anxieties by creating the illusion that the subject is actually ‘not’ vulnerable. Humour can therefore operate as a comforting psychological defence mechanism (Austers et al 2017: 32; Berlant and Ngai 2017: 233; Dittmer 2013: 500). A good example of this is gallows humour – jokes made in the face of grim or desperate situations such as death or illness.

Brown and Penttinen (2013) have shown how humour is central to people's experience of war, focusing particularly on the role of humour as a form of psychological resilience amongst soldiers (also Kyiak 2017). Similarly, Silvestri (2018: 3998) argues that in a context of new social media the proliferation of ironic, parodic and satirical memes frequently operates to provide 'an affective comic blanket for those still suffering in the present'. At the same time, however, while humour can provide a comfort blanket, we also know that it can sometimes *generate* anxiety or discomfort (Berlant and Ngai 2017: 233). Think of how 'edgy' comedians like Sacha Baron Cohen deliberately play with tension, confusion and anxiety, for example.

In different ways, we would argue, humour is also an important mechanism for building community and (re)producing collectively held *biographical narratives* of self-identity by distinguishing an 'in-group' from 'out-groups'. As social identity theorists emphasise (Tajfel 1982), out-groups are often prone to stereotyping, a stock component of humour, and jokes about 'outsiders' can therefore layer over more fundamental and violent structures of exclusion like race and empire (Critchley, 2002). As Dodds and Kirby (2013: 50-51) note, humour is something we are socialised into and can be an important aspect of citizenship. Jokes typically depend upon the existence of shared cultural knowledge, and so humour can actively test 'what it means to say "us"' (Berlant and Ngai 2017: 235). In this respect, humour can be an important way for subjects to *vicariously experience* and identify with the broader community – its successes and achievements, but also its humiliations (think of Dad's Army in the UK). Equally, *biographical narratives* of self-identity can be reproduced through the routinised repetition of jokes (Croft 2012a: 45). Most communities (including academic communities!) have their little 'in jokes' which are repeated – often *ad nauseum* – and to which community members respond even though they have become routine (and often unfunny), because making and responding to the joke reaffirms collective self-identity and membership.

Developing from this point, humour is often deeply embedded within – *and re-productive of* – social and political hierarchy, indeed with some regarding jokes as an important practice for

marking superiority. According to Thomas Hobbes, laughter results from a ‘sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves; by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly’ (quoted in Elias 2017: 292). For Hobbes, therefore, humour is understood as a triumph over those we are laughing ‘at’. Indeed, it has even been suggested that laughter is the sound of victory, in contrast to the crying of the defeated (Elias 2017: 293), with this pointing to how laughter can sometimes take the form of *schadenfreude* (Simon 2017). Such views correspond to the points made above, whereby humour and *laughing at others* can be a mechanism for ‘in-groups’ to cultivate a sense of self-esteem in relation to ‘out-groups’ (Austers et al. 2017: 23).

Of course, humour is also often utilised by those seeking to challenge established power relations (Brassett, 2016). For Kant humour should be used ‘against those who give themselves airs: aristocrats, courtiers, and members of the ruling circles who suffer illusions of grandeur’ (Elias 2017: 295). Humour therefore carries a subversive or emancipatory function (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2018: 10; Bakhtin, 1984). While it might be argued that such subversion often does little to *actually change* power relations - and may even reinforce them by providing a mechanism through which societal tensions are relieved, rather than brought to fruition (Zizek: 2008) - the key point is that humour is a mechanism through which status and self-esteem is sought, challenged and enacted; an everyday vernacular of political engagement (Brassett, 2021).

Finally, while humour is an important mechanism for establishing a sense of ontological security for the self, it can also have the effect of undermining others. Sometimes this may be inadvertent, but humour may also feature as a deliberate strategy designed to induce anxiety in others. This is most evident when humour is used as a shaming tactic and as a method of social control (Billig 2005). The suggestion here is that humour can be used by the powerful to enforce conformity with the social order. To quote Durkheim: ‘Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed’ (quoted in Elias 2017: 298). Or as Austers et al (2017: 8) put it: ‘What politicians cannot achieve

with the power of rational argument, they can master with the assistance of humour'. In this form, the practice of 'laughing at' can activate shame dynamics, whereby ridicule, mockery and humiliation have a disciplinary function (Billig 2001). Think of the portrayal of feminism, left wing politics, or the working class in popular comedy, for instance. Going further, a refusal to acknowledge the humour of others can have the same effect. As Berlant and Ngai (2017: 242) note, disrespecting what others find funny is often experienced as shaming, condescending and diminishing. In this respect, Billig develops the idea of *unlaughter*. This is not simply the absence of laughter, but the deliberate 'display of not laughing when laughing might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded' (Billig 2005: 192; also Dodds and Kirby 2013: 53).

Drawing these points together, humour can play an important and as yet underspecified role in the practice and politics of ontological security management. Humour is a culturally resonant form of affective communication that can provide a rich empirical manifestation of the role (and management) of anxiety in global politics. The next section will operationalise this insight by asking about the specific role of humour in crafting and maintaining ontological security through what might be described as a 'challenging period'.

### **3. Ontological (In)security, Humour and the EU**

The EU is an interesting question for the study of ontological (in)security management, not least because its status as a collective actor is one of the primary instabilities that recurs in its diplomatic and – increasingly – political discourses (Krolkowski 2008). Indeed, the contested nature of EU identity is one reason why humour is so interesting to think about. The capacity of humour to bring an informal note to discourse, to define an 'in group' of like-minded people *who get the joke*, and to 'other' those who serve as the butt of the joke, can suggest new ways of apprehending the contested ontology of the EU, precisely by foregrounding how its identity is in a perpetual process of construction. Moreover, the recurrence of humour through the current period of EU diplomacy, which has needed to respond to a set of overlapping crises – inter alia sovereign debt,

immigration, populist, recidivist, health, etc. - can lend original insight on the everyday practices of ontological security. The challenge is potentially grave. As Krahmman (2018: 359, 362) notes, ‘the EU itself has been put into question – both as an identity and a collective security community’, while its ‘failure to deal with these crises has weakened its ability to sustain a common identity through narratives of community, solidarity and collective sovereignty’. When faced with such crises of ontological security actors will try to respond by asserting a sense of stability, either by reaffirming established self-understandings and routines, or by embracing new ones.

In what follows, we argue that humour has been an important mode through which the EU has sought to manage ontological (in)security. We chart how humour increasingly features in the EU’s own biographical narrative of self-identity, how it is being deployed as a (re)legitimation strategy that explicitly seeks to offer a sense of biographical stability, belonging and home (to young Europeans in particular). This can take the form of encouraging people to *vicariously identify* with the identity and values of the EU, yet it can also manifest in practices of *shaming*. Indeed, EU diplomacy has frequently used humour, especially snark<sup>6</sup>, to activate anxieties in waverers as a means of reasserting social control, not least by implicitly/explicitly securitising threatening others. Finally, we discuss the potential role of humour in *fantasies of an idealised self* as the EU engages in some prominent, if sometimes ill-conceived, efforts at re-branding in the face of an uncertain world.

### *Biographical narratives of self-identity*

Two important events and the EU’s response too them can help to figure how humour has become embedded in biographical narratives of self-identity that constitute the EU as a polity committed to values of free speech in the form of satire. The Danish cartoon crisis of 2005 and the *Charlie*

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<sup>6</sup> Snark is the popular name given to a form of mocking or irreverent humour that is easily and routinely deployed in popular culture, especially through popular entertainment, the internet and politics (Denby, 2010).

*Hebdo* attacks of 2015 both prompted a variety of European leaders to defend the role of satire in European values of free speech.

To recall, the Danish cartoon crisis emerged from the decision of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* to publish satirical cartoons of the Prophet, cartoons that were subsequently reproduced across European media. These included a cartoon depicting the Prophet wearing a bomb on his head and another depicting him asking suicide bombers to stop because ‘Heaven was running out of virgins’. For many Muslims it is blasphemous to publish images of Muhammed, but for *Jyllands-Posten* this was part of an editorial move to foster ‘critical debate’ about Islam, the idea being that free speech about Islam could foster a democratic dialogue about the ‘challenges’ of multiculturalism (Kuipers 2011: 65-7). The publication of the cartoons sparked mass protests in Pakistan, Gaza, and throughout the Middle East that included attacks on Danish embassies and led to the deaths of over 100 people (Kuipers 2011: 66). Meanwhile, the Paris terrorist attacks of January 2015 saw two gunmen attack the offices of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 12 people and injuring several others. The attack appeared to echo elements of the Danish cartoon crisis as *Charlie Hebdo* had also been targeted for publishing images of the Prophet, although as the mediated nature of the event unfolded different narratives of French (and European) identity came to the fore. For Didier Fassin (2015), the event became portrayed as an attack on the French Republic and on civilization, with a popular hashtag - *#jesuischarlie* – emerging to typify the public and international mood.

While each event unfolded in a distinct manner, the key point is how both of these ‘shocks’ to the narrative biography of the EU – as open, tolerant and peaceful - augmented into passionate statements of EU identity. Importantly, the practice of satire itself became interpreted as an epitome of free speech and European identity. For example, responding to the Danish cartoon crisis Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso reflected the basic mood of Danish liberals who advocated the idea of free speech, arguing that ‘It is better to publish too much than not to have

freedom’.<sup>7</sup> ‘Freedom of speech’ he declared, ‘is part of Europe’s values and traditions. Let me be clear. Freedom of speech is not negotiable’ (Barroso 2006). Similarly, following the *Charlie Hebdo* attack EU institutions held candlelit vigils and expressed condolences via the hashtag *#jesuischarlie*. German Chancellor Angela Merkel set out to speak for all Europe, emphasising: ‘we stand by the French people...we stand up for freedom of the press in such a resolute way, as for the other basic freedoms that we hold dear in all of our countries’ (Merkel 2015). President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, likewise described it as ‘a brutal attack against our fundamental values, against freedom of expression which is a pillar of our democracy’ (quoted in Morris 2015).<sup>8</sup>

Across both events, the EU response was to script satire as a fundamental component of European rights and values. Satirical cartoons were endorsed by high ranking officials, institutions and European leaders. In a moment of insecurity and heightened anxiety, the EU sought to shore up its sense of ontological security via a biographical narrative that weaved reaction to the events through its own cherished liberal identity. Importantly, this was enacted *despite* the controversial elements of the cartoons in question, which carried offensive and racist meanings, and a widespread recognition that Muslims had a right to be offended. In short, freedom of expression through satire was – *inter alia* – equated with the ‘best of our values’, ‘our fundamental values’, ‘freedom’ and a ‘key pillar of our democracy’.

Yet, the privileging of good European ‘satire’ could also securitise (and shame) a specific other. As Kuipers (2011: 74-6) argues with respect to the Danish cartoon crisis, one effect of the response was to further other Muslims from European society for ‘lacking a sense of humour’. The suggestion might be that you now have to joke - *or at least be able to take a joke* - if you want to be considered European/modern. As Agius (2018: 18) notes, the cartoons were, in many respects, part of a broader tendency in both Denmark and Sweden (where the cartoons were later reproduced) of ‘testing Muslim (in)tolerance’ and immigrant Muslims’ willingness to embrace

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/02/2008410145119897327.html> (last accessed 10/08/19)

<sup>8</sup> These official responses were often replicated across civil society. For instance, following the Charlie Hebdo attack memes quickly circulates to suggest that cartoons could only ever be pacific, i.e. guns, not pencils, kill people.

democracy. Meanwhile, in the context of the Paris attacks, Fassin (2015: 4), has noted a considerable social pressure to identify with *Charlie Hebdo*, noting how school children who questioned if the magazine was racist were punished; a critical hashtag *JenesuispasCharlie* (I am not Charlie) was even associated with a number of arrests. What these cases demonstrate is precisely how satire functions as a site of ontological (in)security management, both through making claims about the self, but also as a source of tension and social discipline. Humour even emerges as a source of anxiety for those accused of failing to embrace what has now become framed as a distinctly ‘European’ relationship to humour and satire (Kuipers 2011: 72-4).

### *Vicarious Identification*

Humour also appears as a mechanism of *vicarious identification* in EU attempts to cultivate affective attachment to the European project. Indeed, the EU is involved in something of a re-branding exercise designed to promote a new image of itself through social media. This is made explicit in *Reaching out to EU Citizens – A New Opportunity*, an October 2017 report written by Luk Van den Brande, special adviser to Jean-Claude Juncker, which emphasises the EU’s need to develop a ‘new attitude’ and adopt new social media and communication strategies targeted at the more than 40 percent of Europeans under the age of 35, in order to win over ‘hearts and minds’ and foster their ‘emotional engagement’ (European Commission 2017: 6-7, 20). This theme is particularly apparent in *#Battle4YourVote*, a bold event in which a number of MEPs sought to involve young people in European politics by teaming up with professional rappers to produce a ‘rap battle’ about European values.<sup>9</sup>

While rap is clearly distinct from practices of satire considered above, its relationship to humour is nonetheless pronounced. In this respect, rap battles commonly trade on jokes and personal insults in a spirit of play. By dressing up MEPs as rappers and encouraging them to battle

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sz0opYU0tcA>; <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/video/straight-outta-strasbourg-meps-rap-battle-for-the-youth-vote/>

for the vote, there was evidently a sense of irony in the conception. Yet the rap battle also included a more serious message: to ‘keep Europe free from slavery, poverty and corporate monopoly’, while ‘kicking populism right off the stage’ because populism ‘ain’t welcome in democracy so deny it its place’. According to Felman, one of the rappers, such messages are an important part of the reinvigoration of Europe, invoking the classic frame of legitimacy that the EU is the home of ‘wealth, peace and unity’, with the caveat we now need to *#Battle4YourVote*.<sup>10</sup>

In strategic terms, a focus on parliament as a potential site of humour is interesting, given its reputation as a dry institution, more focused on producing lengthy reports through committee than providing entertainment. Indeed, what humour there has been, emanated primarily from Eurosceptic and right-wing MEPs, with Nigel Farage being a standard bearer, but the more Europhile factions have never quite managed to respond in kind. In terms of humour, the event had a few interesting elements. Clearly, there is a suggestion that MEPs are not taking themselves too seriously, and there is an obvious attempt to make fun of themselves with Timo Wolken performing an animated mic drop. But in other respects the attempt at vicarious identification through such play was more problematic. As people who commented on the event on social media made plain, the event was itself an irony-free zone. Seeking to energise youth support for the EU through lyrics like ‘liberal equals equal’, indeed by employing three white (British) rappers with disses that reference the *Lion King*, creates a deeper problematic. Vicarious identification is also evident in practices of cultural appropriation – the attaching to the self (or assuming within oneself) of cultural artefacts and practices that are not obviously, straightforwardly or uncontestedly one’s own. Indeed, the video for the event that was initially circulated on social media was, ‘Straight Outta Strasbourg’, a play on the original rap album by NWA (Niggaz wit Attitude), ‘Straight Outta Compton’. In this way, there is an explicit attempt to appropriate and vicariously identify with the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5F21w-Er5E>

counter-cultural politics of rap; albeit with only very limited evidence of ethnic diversity amongst those attending the event.

Irrespective of whether the event was successful or merely cringe worthy, the use of irony and self-deprecation was clearly an attempt to use humour in the service of EU public diplomacy. Indeed, it might be argued that what we see here is precisely an attempt to appropriate irony/self-deprecation as a way of promoting a reflexive postmodern identity. However, it also vicariously appropriated a cultural form associated with youth culture, but more particularly with a minority population. Appropriating the experience of rap culture therefore becomes a way of making a claim about European identities, but one that is obviously deeply contestable; ultimately revealing an ambiguous attitude. Interestingly, this can be related to ‘vicarious identity promotion’, where the aim is to encourage target audiences to generate a sense of self-identity, self-esteem, status and ontological security by connecting their own identities to and living through another self. The EU obviously has a track record of this sort of thing, most evident in its deployments of the various accoutrements of nation building (currency, flag, anthem...). Another example might be EU attempts to rebrand science (and itself) in terms of gender equality through its (apparently) ironic video ‘Science: It’s a girl thing’ (a message that fell flat as it was generally received as patronising and patriarchal).<sup>11</sup> In such cases, cultural appropriation and humour are used to appeal to a particular demographic, encouraging them tie their own sense of self-identity to the EU project.

### *Shaming*

EU representatives are also increasingly resorting to humour as a mechanism to shame politicians and states that do not live up to their expectations about normal politics. Humour is therefore being mobilised as an instrument of social control and ordering that correlates with ‘superiority’ theories of humour, where humour instantiates a hierarchy that can enhance a sense of status and

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2012/jun/29/science-girl-thing-viral-fiasco>;  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMOqpxlW66E>

self-esteem, thereby warding off ontological insecurity in situations in which anxieties are on the rise. As discussed earlier, however, this can take two forms: (i) the active deployment of humour as a public diplomacy strategy as an attempt to shame ridicule and humiliate, and (ii) seeking to silence those deemed normatively problematic by activating shame dynamics through practices of ‘unlaughter’.

With respect to the first, it is notable that utilising the shaming potential of humour appears to be emerging as an increasingly normalised aspect of EU diplomacy, as evident in the pronouncements of EU officials themselves. Examples include, for instance, Commission president, Jean Claude Juncker, greeting Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban at an EU summit in Riga in 2015, with ‘Dictator!’ followed by a slap on the cheek,<sup>12</sup> and various barbs that circulated around the time of the Greek bailout, including the quip of Jeroen Dijsselbloem, then the head of the Eurozone’s finance ministers, suggesting that southern EU countries in financial crisis were so because they had spent all their money on ‘drinks and women’, instead of adhering to the EU’s budgetary rules on debt and deficit limits – a comment that generated considerable indignation.<sup>13</sup> While we would not wish to claim too much for off-hand comments such as these – when have diplomats ‘not’ made a wry comment under pressure for instance? – it is interesting to note two things. First, such jokes now circulate widely through an international media and social media that is often starved of insight or detail on the subject of European diplomacy, which can otherwise be very secretive. Second, EU officials are now increasingly moving to proactively ‘stage’ such jokes.

By far the most prominent example of this has been the social media engagements of Donald Tusk, president of the European Council (2014-19), who built up a large social media following for his often snarky and witty online persona. In line with wider EU re-branding efforts, Tusk put most of his messages out using Instagram for the reason that his team concluded that while Twitter is good for communicating with journalists, Instagram is more likely to reach the

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hl83Jpd\\_OI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hl83Jpd_OI)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/2498740e-b911-3dbf-942d-ecce511a351e>

broader public, especially younger people.<sup>14</sup> Most famously, he used Instagram to stage a joke at British prime minister Theresa May's expense that was perceived by some to have crossed a diplomatic line. Tusk's joke was to post a picture of himself offering May 'A piece of cake', with the refrain 'Sorry, no cherries'. While not exactly cutting edge humour, the joke belies a depth of construction and staging that should give pause for thought. As one EU source indicated, the idea for the post had been 'talked about a lot and finally we had a good pic from a good angle'.<sup>15</sup>



The 'piece of cake' Instagram post is shaming insofar as it depicts the UK as greedy and as such seeks to try and play on (and foster) anxieties through such a depiction, but also through suggesting that the UK's negotiating strategy is going to fail and that it will be all the poorer in a new life outside the EU. Simultaneously, it performs a position of confidence, stability and ontological security for the EU. To this extent, the joke also belies a disposition of *schadenfreude*, in that it takes pleasure in the perceived self-harm, suffering and discomfort of the UK government, and Theresa May in particular, who was often cast as an isolated figure. Such a sentiment has also been evident throughout the post-referendum Brexit negotiation process in the prevalence (and almost routinised) reference by European leaders and non-British MEPs and commentators to Monty Python's 'Black Knight', whose unchecked overconfidence results in him continuing to fight King Arthur (and lose more limbs) despite the ridiculousness of his situation –

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45599122>

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45599122>

thereby utilising an iconic British cultural comedy product against the British themselves. Indeed, references to this have become so common as to have lost their comic edge, yet arguably continue to be made because they reinforce particular narratives about the self (and others).

Again, the practice of joking in this way can reveal something important about the politics on ontological (in)security. As Montaigne argued, the pleasure derived from *schadenfreude*, and therefore the sense of joy and exultation derived from staging such jokes, typically belies a deeper awareness that the misfortune that has befallen the other is something that might also have befallen the self. In other words, *schadenfreude* may mask (and as such provide only limited relief from) an ongoing sense of vulnerability (Simon 2017: 251-2), which in this context might suggest the EU vision of Brexit – as difficult, unnecessary, tragic, etc. – says more about fears for the broader European economy, not to mention the context of rising anti-EU populism across Europe. Thus, recurrent references to the ‘Black Knight’ in the context of EU-UK negotiations over Brexit masks anxieties that if the UK leaves, others may too.

The second way in which humour, shame and ontological (in)security are bound together is in practices of ‘unlaughter’. In the ‘piece of cake’ episode, of course, the refusal of many British people to laugh (despite no doubt getting the joke) and the show of indignation and accusations of disrespect, were intended to shine the light back on and embarrass the EU. For example, in a statement the day after Tusk’s Instagram post, Theresa May commented that ‘Throughout this process, I have treated the EU with nothing but respect. The UK expects the same. A good relationship at the end of this process depends on it’.<sup>16</sup> The EU, however, is also not a stranger to trying to deploy the shaming potential of unlaughter. For example, unlaughter has been the standard response of EU institutions, representatives and pro-EU MEPs to the often humorous/jocular speeches of anti-EU MEPs like Nigel Farage in the European Parliament, or to the humorous asides and anecdotes of populist politicians like Boris Johnson. It is also the standard

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-brexit-negotiations-statement-21-september-2018>

response to the increasingly comic stylings of the Russian diplomatic service (Manor, this issue). The irreverent humour of all the above is instead either ignored or greeted with rebuke. However, insofar as the EU has come to embrace humour in its diplomatic practices it has also arguably sanctioned the use of humour by others. In other words, by categorically endorsing the practice of ‘joking for our side’ i.e liberal reflexive Europe, it has arguably further licensed the use of humour by the less progressive political forces of populism.

### *Idealised Fantasy Identity*

Finally, in EU public diplomacy humour is also increasingly being utilised as a means of mobilising a fantasised image of an idealised self, in particular through cartoon and social media uses of humour. This can be seen in at least three examples. The first can be found in the comic strip *Captain Euro*, an obvious copy of Captain America, but a tongue-in-cheek superhero that has populated a number of social media accounts and websites.<sup>17</sup> Billed as ‘Europe’s superhero’. Captain Euro was initially invented to help launch the common currency (Fornäs 2012: 27-37), however, he has since been resurrected to continue the fight against his nemesis, Dr D. Vider. Captain Euro ‘uses the power of satire, humour and international intrigue to raise awareness of critical global challenges. He is also tasked with exposing areas which lack effective global governance, or systems with excess bureaucracy’.<sup>18</sup> The comic is produced by Brand EU, an independent brand marketing think tank that actively seeks to create an ‘exciting European brand identity, vision and culture that connects with citizens and the rest of the world’.<sup>19</sup> Again, the use of the comic book form is self-consciously oriented to a youth engagement, articulating pressing European challenges in simple and often snarky terms.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.captaineuro.eu/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.captaineuro.eu/about-captain-euro/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.brandeu.eu/>

Captain Euro, by his very nature, constitutes an idealised personification of EU-Europe. His appearance and physique, for instance, resemble that of superman – muscular, square-jawed, dynamic. He is also supported by a team of equally fantasised (as well as gendered and racialized (Fornäs 2012:33-4, 37)) stereotypical side-kicks.<sup>20</sup> Captain Euro and his team therefore offer the prospect of fulfilment and the realisation of European becoming. But, of course, as in any fantasy – and the reason why Captain Euro is even needed – obstacles remain to this fulfilment, obstacles though that only serve to reinvigorate and re-legitimise the fantasy. In principle, Captain Euro’s nemesis is Dr D. Vider and his team of baddies. In practice, however, in recent years the comic book has found a substantial circulation and media coverage for its ability to render Brexit and its ‘baddies’ – characters like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage – as comic book villains preventing self-realisation. Again, this is very much ‘joking for our side’, and where the causes of ontological anxiety, like populism, are belittled and humour is used to express confidence in the biographical narrative of cosmopolitan progress.

Another example, is a video the EU released on its YouTube channel (EUtube) in early 2012, but which was swiftly removed (but not before it had over 1 million downloads) because of the controversy it caused over its perceived racial stereotyping and imperialist undertones. The video, ‘EU enlargement: Growing together’, parodied the American movie, *Kill Bill*, depicting Europe as a young woman dressed in yellow in a deserted warehouse fighting three non-white men (a ‘yellow’ man representing China, a ‘brown’ man representing India, and a ‘black’ man representing Brazil) each of which start performing a martial art deemed characteristic of their designation (kung fu, kalaripayattu and capoeira).<sup>21</sup> In the face of this onslaught, the woman remains composed, closes her eyes and multiplies herself into 12 identical clones which in turn become the 12 yellow stars of the EU flag, encircling the men who then sit down and disappear into thin air. The video ends with the words ‘The more we are. The stronger we are’ (Mamadouh

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.captaineuro.eu/characters/>

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9E2B\\_yI8jrI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9E2B_yI8jrI)

2017). As Mamadouh (2017) notes, the video could be interpreted in different ways. The European Commission, arguably, was hoping to highlight the challenges posed by rising world powers and the idea that in the new competitive global economy Europe's strength would come through further enlargement. It could also be read as suggesting a non-violent approach to such competition. As noted, though, this was not how it was received. As such, the video's parodic form and reception could be read as an example of unlaughter and the inherent riskiness of playing with such forms of messaging. However, it is also relevant for its depiction of an idealised fantasised EU, personified through a beautiful woman able to overcome (hyper-masculinised) aggression and threats from external others.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, if Captain Euro and the Kill Bill parody play with fictionalised representations of the EU, the third identifies Donald Tusk in idealised form and is a 'trailer' in the style of an action movie that his office released in September 2018.<sup>23</sup> The video highlights various events he will attend in the coming Autumn and depicts him as a go-getter and problem solver who will be working on 'increasing internal and external security, strengthening multilateral cooperation, boosting the economy and trade, and managing Brexit'. The video has a pumping soundtrack with 'Bring it on!' in text at the top. Again, while obviously tongue-in-cheek the 'trailer' presents a fantasised image of Tusk, somewhat in Bruce Willis/Die Hard form, bashing heads, solving problems and getting results. Not least there is an idealisation of the EU as global player and of Tusk as some kind of international action hero. Again, though, the issues that Tusk is required to go out and tackle are of course obstacles to broader European fantasies that make such an idealised self-parody possible in the first place. In all the above, then, humour is becoming increasingly central as a part of idealised fantasies of European selfhood that are being actively deployed to

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<sup>22</sup> This opens a question of whether the EU is able to learn from such events, indeed as noted, it has been quick to downplay or even delete certain jokes because they have caused offence. It is therefore important to recognise the dual and conflicting logics of a biographical narrative that fully endorses satire/free speech as a fundamental value on the one hand, and a fantasy of an idealised self, which can be withdrawn at the first hint of bad publicity, on the other. Simply put, the dynamics of ontological security management appear to perpetuate further cycles of anxiety that require management in some – more or less political - way.

<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1037673158868959232?lang=en>

enhance the institution's legitimacy with younger audiences/citizens. In such fantasies, humour is used to constitute an EU identity that is liberal, reflexive and self-deprecating.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we figure the turn to humour in practices of (EU) public diplomacy in terms of its role in responding to stressful situations characterised by rising anxieties; anxieties that may challenge established biographical narratives of self-identity, raise questions about status and self-esteem and place subjects' sense of ontological security in question. Because of this, the turn to humour in public diplomacy should be taken seriously, since its deployment constitutes more than a meaningless aside. The use of humour in European diplomacy is clearly emergent and making a mark. Many of the jokes and humorous events covered in this article have circulated widely on news and social media, provoking their own satirical responses, critiques and often causing offence. The use of humour is therefore having constitutive effects, some of which are more positive than others as forms of EU (re)branding. Rather than simply summarise the argument above, though, we will conclude by raising a number of issues that emerge from the analysis and that we think raise critical questions about the problematic potentials of comic diplomacy.

First, there is the question of *who speaks/does humour?* Thus far, it is relatively clear that the main protagonists in this turn to humour in EU diplomacy are men, often white men, often senior. As has been highlighted, it is therefore worth considering the extent to which there is a gendered and racialized aspect to the forms of humour being utilised and the ways in which they may constitute hierarchical subject positions and boundaries of inside/outside along such lines. The tentative conclusion of this paper is that the use of humour to affirm the legitimacy of a youthful liberal progressive narrative of Europe is actually one that is often in danger of reproducing well-worn tropes of inclusion/exclusion, superiority/inferiority. Of course, it may be that such messages are unintended, but this itself highlights a key challenge in the turn to humour. Humour resides in particular cultural contexts and is itself a form of cultural exchange. It is also a mode of

communication that typically plays on ambiguity and double meanings. Insofar as humorous messages and jokes fall flat, generate (unanticipated) outrage or are ‘misunderstood’, it highlights the dangers of assuming, both cultural familiarity across intended audiences, and the presumption that audiences will appreciate the message and interpret it as intended. This is where subject positions matter and where in the case of EU diplomacy joke tellers are necessarily occupying positions of societal and political power and therefore always in danger of being seen to be ‘joking down’, (re)asserting hierarchy, and where their empowered position becomes cast as what enables them to employ humour in such ways in the first place.

Second, there is the question of *what does such a normalisation permit?* Thinking about the European context, for instance, while European/EU representatives might translate the current emphasis on self-deprecation/parody (e.g. the ‘Rap Battle’ and Donald Tusk trailer) in some uses of humour by the EU as a form of ‘transparency’, or a way of engaging the ‘youth vote’, it is clear that comedy can do different things. For example, just to fix ideas, the emergence of a geopolitical norm of ‘piss taking’ may be a problematic turn. Beyond Tusk’s various comedy stylings, there has been a notable uptick in barbs against the US and President Trump, in particular. A good example was the use of social media to respond to Trump’s failure to attend a WWI memorial in Paris ‘due to light rain’. The ensuing, and now traditional, Twitter storm about Trump saw the French Army tweet an image of them training in the rain, to say it was ‘no big deal’.<sup>24</sup> The idea of NATO allies actively trolling each other in this way might give pause for thought.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the licensing of humour in the public sphere also raises questions about *which types of humour are permissible (and who decides)?* In this respect, the EU has at times moved into the position of setting itself up as a *de facto* arbiter of good humour, accepting and endorsing the freedom of speech of (certain) satirists, and using light hearted jokes in its own public and global diplomacy,

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/12/french-army-trolls-trump-with-picture-of-them-training-in-rain>

<sup>25</sup> Another example was provided by the Nordic prime ministers who trolled Trump by posting a picture of themselves re-enacting a picture of Trump and several Middle Eastern leaders with their hands on a glowing orb. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/31/nordic-prime-ministers-troll-trumps-viral-orb-photograph>

yet all the while seeking to restrict certain jokes or comedy politicians because they are deemed not appropriate, e.g. Boris Johnson. The sustainability of such a position is questionable. On the one hand, to be happy with satire that offends Muslims (*Charlie Hebdo*/Muhammed Cartoons), but not (some) diplomatic allies, seems like a position that illustrates, rather than modifies the hierarchies that pertain. On the other hand, by categorically endorsing a practice of ‘joking for our side’, it becomes difficult for the EU to object to others with less progressive intentions doing likewise.

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