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Humorous States: IR, New Diplomacy and the Rise of Comedy in Global Politics

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INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL POLITICS OF HUMOUR AND COMEDY

In December 2019, footage emerged of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Britain's Princess Anne at that year's NATO summit (Lyons & Wintour, 2019). In the video, Trudeau appeared to be mocking American President Donald Trump: 'He was late because he takes a 40-minute press conference off the top…', Trudeau told the group. 'I've watched his team's jaws just *drop* to the floor…'. Although much of the conversation is inaudible, the gist is clear: the group are smiling and laughing; they are trading anecdotes, stories and jokes behind one particular person's back and at his expense.

When asked about the incident the following day, Trump described Trudeau as 'two-faced', before leaving the summit early, without holding a closing press conference. His departure was framed by both American and international media as a response to the leaked video: 'Trump leaves NATO summit early after video flap', the *Wall Street Journal* reported (Lucey & Meichtry, 2019), an angle echoed by the *Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy* and *The Guardian*, among other outlets (Birnbaum, 2019; Townsend & Kendall-Taylor, 2019; Wintour & Mason, 2019).

It should come as no surprise that political actors make appeals to humour and comedy, whether at NATO summits or elsewhere. The circulation of jokes, memes and laughter forms part of the affective economy of everyday life across communities and collectives of every imaginable stripe. Who people laugh with, and what (or whom) they laugh about, discloses important

information both about their identities as subjects, and about the affinities, alliances and antagonisms through which these subjectivities find meaning. Most people will have experienced the way a shared laugh can amplify and deepen the emotional ties that bind them to other individuals and to familial or friendship groups. Many will likewise recognise the sense of diminishment that comes with being the butt of a joke: the painful realisation that one's exclusion from a community of laughers is the precise thing around which that community has coalesced.

In addition to these interpersonal exchanges, many states and state leaders have begun to cultivate a sense of humour as part of their diplomatic communications and broadcasts. The Dutch Prime Minister has likened the UK to *Monty Python's* Black Knight in its blind insistence that it is 'winning' its negotiations with the EU over Brexit. The Nordic states have trolled the US President for holding a glowing orb while on a state visit to Saudi Arabia. Comedians have taken office in Iceland, Italy and Ukraine, while politicians elsewhere have projected clownish, buffoonish personae. Humour and comedy have also served as the focal point for profound – even mortal – political anxieties, most notably perhaps in the 2005/6 and 2015 crises that followed the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad by *Jyllands-Posten* and *Charlie Hebdo* respectively (Brassett and Browning, this volume).

Here and elsewhere among the many sites that comprise IR's objects of study, the presence of humour and comedy demands explanation and evaluation. Yet although humour and comedy are increasingly prevalent in (and relevant for) International Relations [IR], the intellectual resources required to address them are scattered across several literatures and sub-disciplines. This special issue seeks to pull these conversations together through a collection of original articles that explore the rich and complex intersection between humour and global politics. In this brief introduction, we will set out the context and rationale behind the special issue, the theoretical challenges facing researchers in this area, and a number of possible avenues for empirical research. In so doing, we hope to establish humour and comedy as important fields of study in Politics and IR.

HUMOUR, GLOBAL POLITICS, AND IR

How should IR scholars approach humour, comedy and satire as global-political practices? Recent years have seen bursts of scholarly activity across three areas of particular relevance to this problem. Taken together, however, these literatures bear witness to the disjointed nature of approaches to humour and comedy in IR.

First, attention has been drawn to changing practices of international diplomacy. A so-called 'new diplomacy' is emerging whereby states place greater emphasis on related activities of public and cultural diplomacy, often by investing in nation branding programmes (Aronczyk 2013; Browning 2015; Browning and de Oliveira 2017; Mellisen 2005; Pamment 2013). What unites the 'new diplomacy' is a concern with the ability of governments to control (or not) the diplomatic agenda in a world of globalisation and an increasingly mediatised public sphere of (international) politics. While the ability of governments to 'control the message' may be declining, it can be observed that creative practitioners of the 'new diplomacy' have nurtured new opportunities for states to communicate with and mobilise their populations, often seeking to leverage their nation's cultural assets in search of attention, status, and investment (Cull 2019). On this view, the cultivation of humour, or even a sense of irony, might be associated with softer cultural values, a liberal openness and tolerance for difference.

Second, the 'everyday turn' in IR has shown how apparently banal, mundane practices can be important constitutive elements of world politics (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007; Solomon and Steele 2017). This focus on the everyday foregrounds the agency and productivity of a diverse range of political subjects and practices, in the process constituting humour as a realm of governance and resistance, *per se* (Brassett, 2021). Feminist scholarship has led the way in this regard, emphasising the ways in which international order (and the raced, gendered hierarchies that constitute it) are produced and reproduced through seemingly routine practices – what Cynthia Enloe describes as 'the yearly and daily business of maintaining the margin where it currently is

and the centre where it now is' (2004: 20). Building on these insights, the burgeoning field of popular culture and world politics has helped to foreground how cultural practices help to produce imaginative, interpretive, subjective and practical limits and possibilities (e.g. Grayson et al, 2009; Wedderburn, 2019; Redwood & Wedderburn 2019).

On this second view, humour and comedy might be said to perform two functions in parallel. First – tying in with the aforementioned developments in 'new diplomacy' – they form part of a politics of legitimacy whereby states and their leaders use the everyday language of comedy to shape and direct the interest, attention and concern of their (media literate) publics. And second, they help to shape the political terrain on which they operate. On the one hand, how people laugh and joke frequently reflects, reinforces, or codifies particular social arrangements and norms. On the other hand, however, such practices also often magnify social tensions and contradictions in ways that can (potentially) provoke their reimagining (cf. Wedderburn, forthcoming). Either way, humour and comedy play a productive – if ambiguous – role in the organisation of their social field, as many of the essays in this collection testify.

Third, and most directly, a number of authors have engaged the political potential of comedy across Political Science and IR. Established literatures on the role of humour in the construction of authenticity by politicians, or the diminished power of satire within democratic politics, can point to important qualifications about *how far* the new diplomacy should go in embracing comedy (Fielding, 2014; Higgie, 2017). More critically, IR scholars have begun to debate the ambiguity and ambivalence of humour, which can send mixed messages, insult or otherwise *humiliate*. For instance, keynote examples like the Danish Cartoons crisis and the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre have been interpreted as part of a deeper negotiation over the liberal identity of particular states (Hansen 2011; Kuipers, 2011). Finally, even while acknowledging such ambiguities, more radical arguments have sought to foreground the potential for resistance bestowed by comedy and related practices of subversion (Amoore and Hall, 2013; Brassett, 2016; Rossdale, 2019; Wedderburn, forthcoming). While it would be hard to attribute a coherent line to this literature, a

common thread is that humour and comedy have affective cultural power that can be a resource for both understanding and enacting politics.

The current special issue intervenes into this mosaic of diverse and sometimes conflicting approaches to the study of humour and comedy in global politics. Its contributions locate and develop a key set of research dilemmas and theoretical and empirical agendas. In so doing, it makes a double move. First, it looks critically at IR's existing frameworks of analysis, asking whether the discipline has the tools necessary to incorporate humour and comedy effectively into its analyses. Second, it offers a variety of constructive responses to these shortcomings, offering an empirically and theoretically varied range of investigations into humour, its relationship to global politics, and to IR itself. Broadly, these pieces question how and why the discipline of IR has overlooked or downplayed the importance of humour and comedy. From an idle obsession with tragedy (cf. Wedderburn 2018), through to a pervasive idea(l) of scientific rationality, IR has commonly sought to elevate the 'serious' over the 'silly', the 'sincere' over the 'ironic'. These pieces question this view in both empirical and theoretical terms.

Empirically, IR has simply tended to overlook the vast array of humorous and comedic practices that make up the 'stuff' of global politics. The papers in this special issue point to the use of humour in the foreign policy agendas of the EU, and Russia (Manor, Brassett, Browning and O'Dwyer); the role of laughter and 'banter' on the battlefield, whether in mediating the 'horrors of war', or, in gendering the body of the soldier in the discourse of national identity (Hartnett and O'Driscoll; Tidy); the role of comedy in resisting authoritarian political regimes in Zimbabwe (Kallstig); and the everyday construction of 'national identity', and 'class' and'race' through comedy and social media in Denmark and the UK (Suanders and Bruun; Sutton). Such sites bear witness to the complex and constitutive role of humour and comedy in constructing and contesting the international.

Theoretically, we would argue, a failure to reflect on the role of humour in global politics has meant downplaying the overlapping structures of power and resistance that humour both

reflects and (re)produces. For example, Brent Steele's contribution to this special issue discusses the role of humour and comedy in the disciplinary practices of IR itself. Constructively, Steele points to the role of humour and laughter in mediating the various anxieties produced within and through the professional demands of modern academia: a relief from the commodity form of academic IR. Of course, such everyday dynamics are complex and messy. For instance, we might point to the role of humour in *demonstrating* the (gendered) limits of these professional structures, a capacity illustrated recently by debates that followed Professor Ned Lebow's 'joke' in an ISA hotel elevator (Friedersdorf, 2018). Yet the point is the same: humour is performative of agency within problematic social structures and is therefore a question of politics.

For our part, we believe that a greater awareness of the philosophical and theoretical literatures on comedy might well go some way to redressing current blind spots in IR theory (See Brassett et. al., and Hartnett and O'Driscoll this issue). Too often humour is either derided as insignificant for the study or politics, or conversely, castigated for failing to achieve satirical ideals of 'punching up'. All the papers in this special issue move beyond such totalising images of humour by embracing the ambiguity and potentialities of this everyday affective economy. In different ways, they all speak to elements of the literature on humour. This scholarship posits three theories of humour, each of which suggests a particular relationship to power and to politics. First, the 'superiority' theory asks how humour might reinforce the assumptions and privileges of hegemonic groups. This approach is of particular significance for thinking about racist, sexist or otherwise socially hierarchic forms of humour. Second, the 'incongruity' theory suggests that humour can highlight the ambiguities that exist in the social construction of 'reality' or 'global politics'. Here we might point to the use of irony and subversion in practices of resistance (cf. de Goede, 2005; Amoore & Hall, 2013) – practices that often make appeals to humour as a way of performing tensions and contradictions in prevailing apparatuses of governance. Third, the 'relief' theory proposes that humour might help to relieve social, subjective, ontological or existential anxiety, allowing for moments and spaces of self-care in the theory, practice and pedagogy of global

politics. AIDS activist Douglas Crimp, to take just one example, has noted how humour 'has given us the courage to maintain our exuberant sense of life while every day coping with disease and death, and it has defended us against… pessimism' (Crimp with Rolston, 1990: 20). One might read the body of comic art produced by detainees in Nazi concentration camps in the same way (cf. Wedderburn, 2019).

In summary, this special issue provides a contribution to the study of humour and comedy in IR that can serve to orient and focus inquiry. In particular, we anticipate future research questions that reflect the three literatures identified above, on 'new diplomacy', the everyday, and comedy. First, how is humour contributing to the theory and practice of international diplomacy in a mediatised global public sphere? Here the so-called 'new diplomacy' attests to the role of humour and comedy in – inter alia – practices of 'nation branding', 'digital diplomacy', and international negotiation. Second, we hope to specify the importance *and particularity* of humour and comedy in global politics as an emerging sub-genre of research on everyday and popular culture in world politics. What do everyday practices of joking and satire do to global politics? Third, we hope to contribute to the emerging literature on comedy and politics by emphasising the role of international power relations and global actors in practices of humour and joking. How should we think about the comedy potential of Trump's uses of memes, or China's production of satirical videos about the US response to Coronavirus?

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