

# Anxiety, humour and (geo)politics: warfare by other memes

International Relations  
1–8

© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00471178231151561

[journals.sagepub.com/home/ire](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ire)

**Christopher S Browning**  
**and James Brassett** 

University of Warwick

## Abstract

Humour is usually overlooked in analyses of international politics, this despite its growing prevalence and circulation in an increasingly mediated world, with this neglect also evident in the growing literature on ontological security and anxiety in IR. Humour, though, needs to be taken seriously, crossing as it does the high-low politics divide and performing a variety of functions. In the context of the Covid pandemic we argue that the link between humour and anxiety has been evident in three notable respects: (i) functioning as a (sometimes problematic) form of stress relief at the level of everyday practices of anxiety management, (ii) working to reaffirm biographical narratives of (national) community and status and (iii) most significantly for IR, as a form of anxiety geopolitics.

## Keywords

anxiety, anxiety geopolitics, Covid, humour, ontological security

‘If people are fighting over toilet rolls instead of booze, there’s something wrong’.

(Ricky Gervais)

*Doctor:* ‘Unfortunately the tests came back positive for COVID-19. You have coronavirus’.

*Patient:* ‘That can’t be correct. I have over 40 cases of Costco water and 200 rolls of toilet paper’.<sup>1</sup>

---

## Corresponding author:

James Brassett, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Gibbet Hill Road, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK.

Email: [James.Brassett.1@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:James.Brassett.1@warwick.ac.uk)

‘Did you know that there was a guy on the beach swimming with a mask? I dived with a mask too, so as not to give Covid to the fish’.

(President Jair Bolsonaro, 4 January 2021)

‘This is apparently Cummings and his Brexit friends’ rule: that they leave when they should stay’.

(Donald Tusk, Twitter 25 May 2020)

## **Introduction**

We live in anxious times,<sup>2</sup> with this generalised mood exacerbated by a global pandemic that has confronted whole populations with their mortality, often via rolling 24 hours news and social media. The broader social effects of Covid have activated further anxieties of meaning, for instance, about national cultures of scientific knowledge (e.g. Sweden, UK), or the irony that some of the most socially meaningful jobs – care worker, checkout assistant, hospital cleaner – may be the least socially valued. Yet, notwithstanding its evident tragedy of mass death striated with social inequality, Covid has also been a source of considerable humour. In everyday life, people have mediated the pandemic with jokes about toilet rolls, colleagues have laughed (sometimes genuinely) at their mutual inability to use mute and countless memes have gently mocked our (lack of) productivity during lockdowns.

Many will recognise the role humour can play as a mechanism for coping with stressful or difficult situations. Humour’s apparent ability to deflect or ‘take ownership’ of our sense of vulnerability means it has become a prevalent and resonant practice for managing ontological (in)security.<sup>3</sup> On these terms, we would suggest, the literature on anxiety in IR has thus far understated the importance (and consequences) of humour – and its associated panoply of jokes, memes, snark, etc. – that increasingly permeates global politics, from Twitter storms and prankster resistance, to the use of memes in new diplomacy or the hybrid warfare of authoritarian states.<sup>4</sup>

In this short intervention, we argue that humour and joking are relevant to the global politics of anxiety in a number of ways – some everyday, some ‘high politics’ – that can also reflect a pronounced set of geopolitical dimensions within Covid humour. Specifically, during the Covid-19 pandemic the link between humour and anxiety had three notable elements: (i) functioning as a (sometimes problematic) form of stress relief at the level of everyday practices of anxiety management, (ii) working to reaffirm biographical narratives of (national) community and status and (iii) most significantly for IR, as a form of anxiety geopolitics.

## **Covid humour, stress relief and everyday politics**

In the early days, the apocalypse was hilarious. Bischetti et al., note that following the outbreak in 2019 humorous posts began to circulate widely on social media and accounted for 25% of all viral tweets mentioning Covid-19.<sup>5</sup> While the content of jokes varied, many

focused on the effects on everyday life, epitomised perhaps by the proliferation of jokes about toilet paper (a particularly First World problem!), weight gain, relationships and life in lockdown. Such jokes clearly operated as a form of stress relief in the context of massive disruption to everyday routines and fear of unknown futures. We should not be surprised. As with other crises (climate change, the financial crisis, the rise of populism) a prevalent and highly circulated response to Covid has been to joke, make light and generally laugh at the larger existential questions. In this respect, Covid humour has often been presented as a fundamentally ‘good thing’, helping to relieve anxiety and build community through establishing a sense of shared experience.<sup>6</sup> However, certain fissures in these new communities of humour bear testament to the double-edged nature of joking.

For example, through an analysis of Italians’ reactions to the outpouring of Covid humour in March 2020 – a point when the situation in parts of Italy was particularly dire – Bischetti et al., note that demographic factors, personality traits and psychological distance significantly affected people’s appreciation of (and *aversion to*) different forms of humour.<sup>7</sup> While there was general appreciation for the lighter (more diversionary) aspects of Covid humour focusing on the silly side of lockdown, for example, ‘dolphins returning to the canals of Venice, we are the virus!’, darker forms of humour highlighting death were appreciated more by those characterised by lower age, optimism and sense of limited vulnerability (either because of distance from the outbreak’s epicentre or because of strong underlying health). In particular, jokes like those suggesting Covid might finally resolve the Italian pensions crisis did not play well with older and more vulnerable Italians and could indeed exacerbate anxiety.

In social terms, therefore, while humour can function to affirm solidarity and empathy amongst ‘insiders’, it also has a pronounced capacity to ‘other’. Indeed, it is easy to see how those at potential risk of dying may not feel as if darker jokes are really made ‘for them’, or that they might actually be the ‘butt of the joke’. Similar dynamics accompanied widespread jokes about ‘boomers’ in the US, which widely referred to Covid as the ‘Boomer Remover’. While such fissures arguably disrupted the online bonhomie of the early period of the crisis, a more pervasive strain of comic ridicule became central as the lockdown matured. Such humour reflects other elements of ontological security enhancement, especially those concerned with reinforcing biographical narratives and cosmological views about the nature of the world – or what became known as the ‘new normal’. We see this, for instance, in how particular forms of joking were routinised, not least in repeated moments of ridicule that functioned as a form of social discipline.<sup>8</sup> Quintessentially, humour emerged as a popular and widely circulated idiom for shaming people or groups failing to comply with public health guidelines; for example, the widespread social media hashtag #Covidiot sought to judge, blame and stigmatise anyone at the beach, in parks, without masks or wearing them incorrectly, shaking hands, etc. As one popular meme summarised the point: ‘The spread of Coronavirus is based on two factors: 1. How dense the population is. 2. How dense the population is’.

While aspects of this ridicule were funny, not least Sara Coopers’ viral parodies of Trump ‘doing science’, much of this humour also played to an established set of divisions. In the UK, for instance, Covidiot has operated as a marker of ridicule that rephrases pandemic politics in terms of the ‘culture wars’, even replaying Brexit divides, where covidiot is assumed also to have voted to Leave the EU and are probably

'anti-vaxxers' to boot.<sup>9</sup> This parallels US 'debates' between Democrats and Republicans on the wearing of facemasks, and where in both cases humour has *reinforced* claims about self-identity through othering political opponents, that is, securitising subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> Consider, for instance, how (populist) leaders have deployed humour as a means of reinforcing their (masculinised) political brand, as in Jair Bolsonaro's dismissal of Covid as 'mild flu' and joking that he wears a mask when he goes diving in order to protect the fish.

However, rendered as a vernacular language of 'normal' politics, Covid humour has also been a site of resistance. In the UK, this was evident following Boris Johnson's special adviser, Dominic Cummings', justification for taking a *forty-mile drive* during lockdown, in order to check that his eyesight was sufficiently *ok to be able to drive*. What followed was an outpouring of eyesight memes and gags – for example, Captain (of the Titanic): 'I felt the best way to test my eyesight was to sail into the iceberg field' – exposing the underpinning politics of hierarchy, that is, *who gets to break the rules?* – a mood swing in the previous 'all in it together' mantra of British lockdown. Exposed, then, were the inequities of personal sacrifice during lockdown and the politics of privilege. While we would not wish to claim too much for these moments of Covid humour 'punching up', not least since there was little let-up in cronyism in government contracts related to Covid, the fact that critical positions have been phrased through humour consolidates the significance of the vernacular for thinking about *and practicing* politics. Yet, if Covid humour has illustrated and crystallised divisions *within* national communities, it has also, rather ironically, served to *reinforce* national frames of reference in the global domain.

### **Covid humour, (national) self-esteem, status**

Despite the global and inherently transnational nature of Covid, there has actually been a pronounced tendency to invoke national comparisons (i.e. league tables of infections, deaths and vaccines). Humour mapped onto this everyday thirst for national comparison, with jokes operating as a mechanism for enhancing ontological security; a comic vernacular through which citizens establish a sense of stability and (self)-esteem through reaffirming narratives of national community and standing. For example, the ridicule heaped on Trump from around the world for suggesting Covid might be tackled by injecting disinfectant – (or jokes targeting other populist leaders like Modi and Bolsonaro for their flippant comments and inaction) – arguably had a relief function. By highlighting the apparent stupidity of populists, numerous polities and their citizens have both contextualised their own perceived failures in responding to the pandemic and reinforced a sense of national cohesion, even self-esteem.

Intermingled with such jokes was also often a tendency towards national stereotyping – the suggestion being that countries differential experiences derived from inherent cultural attributes. For instance, the French network Canal+ angered Italian ministers by airing a mock advert for 'Corona pizza' in which the colours of the Italian tricolour were represented by a red tomato base, white mozzarella and green mucus coughed up by the chef with the narrator declaring 'Here's the new Italian pizza, which is going to spread around the world'.<sup>11</sup> Implicit in the joke was a disparagement of Italians as disorganised

and unhygienic. Jokes like this also exhibited elements of *schadenfreude*, where laughing at others (misfortunes) functions to enhance one's own self-esteem. Yet, as France was itself soon to discover the humour of *schadenfreude* is itself fraught with anxiety since the joy derived from such jokes often masks the deeper awareness that what has befallen the other could have (and might yet still) befall the self.<sup>12</sup>

This tendency towards stereotyping had another ironic dimension, in that jokes could also be used to reconfigure the apparent failings of certain national communities by reinscribing them as evidence of national *superiority*. Across the West this was evident in jokes, musings and memes that sought to account for the evidently flawed response of many Western/European states compared with those of Asian countries. Here anxieties about higher death rates were partially averted by reaffirming established and morally inflected narratives of liberal versus autocratic identities/cultures that had a distinctly orientalist tone, not least with widespread references to wet markets, eating bats, and a niche meme about Pangolins. Of course, much of this humour about Covid had a racialised dimension reflecting aspects of its public discussion in the West (e.g. Covid as 'Kung-Flu'<sup>13</sup>; Trump's repeated reference to the 'China virus'). Thus, while humour may have a community-building function through reaffirming self-narratives, during Covid, this has often taken notable forms of *othering* through reaffirming established national stereotypes.

## Covid humour as anxiety geopolitics

Such stereotyping clearly has geopolitical elements to it. Although much covid humour has been flippant in nature, produced and shared by citizens, interesting examples also exist of it being cultivated and staged for geopolitical effect by state actors. This is not a new development as such, as it relates to a growing trend connected to utilising new forms of public and cultural diplomacy in a context of globalisation and the increasingly mediated public sphere of (international) politics. Moreover, although it may be tempting to ignore state uses of humour as epiphenomenal, strategic actors are taking it seriously. For example, NATO now views humour as a form of strategic communication central to Russian hybrid warfare, its aim being to undermine 'the credibility of western political leaders' and manipulate the hearts and minds of citizens and non-citizens alike.<sup>14</sup>

*Is Covid humour a new form of hybrid warfare?* Caution is required on this point. As noted by Eberle and Daniel the concept of 'hybrid warfare' has itself become a form of 'anxiety geopolitics'.<sup>15</sup> The label itself responds to extant Western anxieties by providing a familiar mental map that re-plots Russia as a known enemy.<sup>16</sup> Yet, this anxiety-relieving potential is Janus-faced since hybrid warfare has also come to refer to all manner of insidious, invisible and constantly shifting threats, the result being that rather than 'securing', the discourse of hybrid warfare 'ends up producing more insecurity' and social anxiety about Russia and its actions and intentions. For example, how should we interpret President Putin's message sent via telegram when Boris Johnson was admitted to intensive care?

'Dear Prime Minister, I would like to express my sincere support to you during this difficult time. I am certain that your energy, optimism *and sense of humour* will help to defeat the

illness. I sincerely wish you a speedy and complete recovery. Respectfully yours, Vladimir Putin (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup>

While it would be easy to see this as familiar, genuine well-wishing, *The Sun* (a popular and often nationalistic) newspaper described the tone as ambiguous, contrasting it with domestic Russian briefings that the UK had chosen to reject Russian medical help. Much like Cold War paranoia, at the very least, the rise of ‘anxiety geopolitics’ makes it interesting to consider the frequently ironic tones of the Russian government and Foreign Ministry.<sup>18</sup>

More obviously, and perhaps surprisingly, China deployed humour during the Covid crisis, precisely to destabilise the Trump administration. China is not renowned for embracing the irreverence of humour, once banning a *Winnie the Pooh* film to prevent the spread of memes comparing President Xi to the bear. Yet, in early 2020, as the pandemic’s first wave was hitting the United States, China’s Xinhua state run news agency released a short animation titled ‘*Once Upon a Virus*’. The animation featured two Lego-like figures. One, a terra-cotta warrior wearing a medical facemask, the other, an unmasked Statue of Liberty. The following is a shortened version of their dialogue, all of which takes place to the ragtime soundtrack of ‘The Entertainer’.

- ‘*We discovered a new virus*’, says the warrior. ‘*So what?*’ responds the Statue of Liberty. ‘*It’s only a flu*’.

The warrior continues to issue responsible-sounding warnings about the virus, while touting some of China’s challenges and achievements in containing it. The Statue of Liberty, meanwhile, makes glib, dismissive replies, many of them echoing President Trump’s early tweets and statements about the epidemic.

- ‘*It will magically go away in April*’, says the Statue of Liberty.
- ‘*Just listen to yourselves*’, says the warrior, as the statue gradually turns red and gets connected to an IV drip.
- ‘*We are always correct, even though we contradict ourselves*’, replies the statue.
- ‘*That’s what I love about you Americans — your consistency*’, the warrior says as the curtain closes.<sup>19</sup>

Arguably, this use of humour is less about relieving anxiety and more a form of geopolitical messaging that reflects a confidence that humour (at least in this instance) is not so much a threat as an opportunity. The animation is interesting in several respects. Not least, it reflects that China has a handle on ‘Western’ irony and is suddenly willing to deploy snark as a form of cultural diplomacy. More pointedly, it plays upon manifest anxieties in the US and where China signals an ability to mock the American president just like ‘we’ do. In other words, the animation prods at a legitimate weak point in the ontological security of the US and the West.

Geopolitically, we suggest the animation conveys a confident message about the transformation of global order, one with the potential to (re-)activate Western anxieties. By actively mocking the United States/Trump the suggestion is, first, that the United States is no longer a responsible member of international society and is open to shame and ridicule, and second, that China is now the responsible one, representing ‘the future’. Here, China’s (selective) use of humour is one that challenges social and political hierarchies. The fact that this is done in English, using the language of irony, consolidates the emergence of humour as a widely understood and ‘legitimate’ language of global politics. Yet it also reveals a Hobbesian element. China uses humour to actively mock a rival superpower in terms the West both understands (and largely identifies with). Humour here is deployed as a marker of geopolitical change and transformation. It playfully marks a new hierarchy and can be seen as a claim about superiority by laughing at the same idiocy identified by western humour. Warfare by other memes.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This paper is part of a research project on Humour and Global Politics generously supported by a British Academy Small Grant.

### ORCID iD

James Brassett  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7926-812X>

### Notes

1. Lindsey Olander, ‘18 Quarantine Toilet Paper Memes That Hit Too Close to Home’, *Jetsetter*, 7 April 2020, available at: <https://www.jetsetter.com/magazine/quarantine-toilet-paper-memes/> (accessed 17 January 2023).
2. Bahar Rumelili, ‘[Our] Age of Anxiety: Existentialism and the Current State of International Relations’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24(4), 2021, pp. 1020–36.
3. James Brassett, Christopher S. Browning and Muireann O’Dwyer, ‘EU’ve Got to Be Kidding: Anxiety, Humour and Ontological Security’, *Global Society*, 35(1), 2021, pp. 8–26.
4. Though see, *Global Society*, ‘Humour and Global Politics’, 35(1), 2021, special issue.
5. Luca Bischetti, Paolo Canal and Valentina Bambini, ‘Funny But Aversive: A Large-Scale Survey of the Emotional Response to Covid-19 Humor in the Italian Population During the Lockdown’, *Lingua*, 249, 2020, p. 102963. DOI: 10.1016/j.lingua.2020.102963.
6. Tom McTague, ‘Yes, Make Coronavirus Jokes’, *The Atlantic*, 3 April 2020, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/humor-laughter-coronavirus-covid19/609184/>
7. Bischetti et al., ‘Funny But Aversive’, p. 102963.
8. See, Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: SAGE, 2005).
9. Patrick Sturgis, Jonathan Jackson and Jouni Kuha, ‘Lockdown Scepticism is Part of the Brexit Divide’, *#LSEThinks*, 9 June 2020, available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2020/06/09/lockdown-scepticism-is-part-of-the-brex-it-divide/>
10. Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security’, *Political Psychology*, 25(5), 2004, pp. 741–67.

11. 'Italians Sickened by "Pizza Corona" Ad Video', *Ary News*, 3 March 2020, available at: <https://arynews.tv/en/pizza-corona-ad-video/>; 'Italian Ministers Furious at French "Coronavirus Pizza" Joke', *The Local.It*, 3 March 2020, available at: <https://www.thelocal.it/20200303/italian-ministers-furious-at-french-coronavirus-pizza-joke/>
12. David Carroll Simon, 'The Anatomy of Schadenfreude; or, Montaigne's Laughter', *Critical Inquiry*, 43(2), 2017, pp. 251–2.
13. Danielle Krantz, 'Joke Can Be Racist, Too', *The Shakerite*, 6 May 2020, available at: <https://shakerite.com/opinion/jokes-can-be-racist-too/06/2020/>; Josie Huang, 'Rage-Tweets, Jokes and Stifled Coughs: How Asian-Americans in LA Are Dealing With Coronavirus Fears', *LA-ist*, 5 February 2020, available at: <https://laist.com/2020/02/05/coronavirus-asian-american-los-angeles-racism-xenophobia.php>
14. Ivars Austers, Jurgis Škilters and Žaneta Ozoliņa, 'Humour as a Communication Tool: Designing Framework for Analysis', in Žaneta Ozolina et al. (eds), *StratCom Laughs: In Search of an Analytical Framework* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017), pp. 6–7.
15. Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel, 'Anxiety Geopolitics: Hybrid Warfare, Civilizational Geopolitics, and the Janus-Faced Politics of Anxiety', *Political Geography*, 92(1), 2022, pp. 1–9.
16. Christopher S. Browning, 'Geostrategies, Geopolitics and Ontological Security in the Eastern Neighbourhood: The European Union and the "New Cold War"', *Political Geography*, 62(1), 2018, pp. 106–15.
17. Will Stewart, 'From Russia With Love: Vladimir Putin Wishes Boris Johnson Speedy Coronavirus Recovery Insisting His "Sense of Humour" Will Help Him Defeat Bug', *The Sun*, 7 April 2020, available at: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11345476/vladimir-putin-wishes-boris-johnson-recovery-coronavirus/>
18. Ilan Manor, 'The Russians Are Laughing! The Russians Are Laughing! How Russian Diplomats Employ Humour in Online Public Diplomacy', *Global Society*, 35(1), 2021, pp. 61–83.
19. Reproduced from Patrick Brzeski, 'China Mock's Trump's Response to Coronavirus in Lego-Like Animation', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 4 May 2020, available at: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/china-mocks-trumps-response-coronavirus-lego-like-animation-1293049>

### Author biographies

Christopher S Browning is Reader of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick. His research centres on critical approaches to security, identity politics and critical geopolitics, with a specific focus on issues connected to ontological security, civilisational politics, nation branding, humour and public diplomacy. His most recent publications include *Vicarious Identity in International Relations: Self, Security, and Status on the Global Stage* (2021) and 'Hierarchies of Heroism: Captain Tom, Spitfires, and the Limits of Militarised Vicarious Resilience during the Global Pandemic', *Global Studies Quarterly* 2(3), 2022.

James Brassett is Reader in International Political Economy at the University of Warwick. He works on the politics of globalisation with a particular focus on ethical discourses of global governance, the cultural performance of crisis events, and everyday practices of resistance via film and comedy. His most recent book is *The Ironic State: British Comedy and the Everyday Politics of Globalization* (2021).