

## Fighting Thatcher with Comedy: What to Do When There Is No Alternative

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**Abstract** This article offers a history of British alternative comedy as a case study of political challenge and opposition in the 1980s and considers the role of humor in political campaigning more broadly. It explores left-wing thinking on culture as a potential political weapon, and questions how this informed the development and impact of alternative comedy as a genre. The article observes that pioneering alternative comedians went some way to change British comedy values and inform political discussions. However, it also argues that the complex operation of jokes and the tendency of comedians to become “incorporated” within the political and cultural mainstream ensured that the impacts of radical alternative material were limited and ambiguous. It contends that the practice of alternative comedy was undermined by business and political values that were often influenced by Thatcherism, and that alternative comedians mostly failed to capture the imaginations of working-class Britons. These communities retained instead an affection for more traditional, differently rebellious, comedic voices. Ultimately, this article frames alternative comedy within a longer history of radical humor, drawing out broader lessons concerning the revolutionary potential of jokes and the relationship between comedians, their audiences, and politics.

**O**n 19 May 1979, only sixteen days after Margaret Thatcher’s first general election victory, a new comedy club opened in London, hosted in a Soho topless bar named the Gargoyle, accessed through the Nell Gwynne strip club in Dean Street.<sup>1</sup> The Comedy Store was the brainchild of insurance salesman Peter Rosengard, who teamed up with local businessman Don Ward, having been inspired by the Los Angeles Comedy Store while on holiday. Still open after thirty-five years and numerous changes of location, London’s Comedy Store has become an iconic venue, seen as the birthplace of British alternative comedy. Here, so the story goes, a new generation of nonsexist, nonracist, leftist performers reinvented stand-up comedy as innovative and socially conscious and “kick-started a mutiny in the populist performing arts,” challenging both the new Conservative government and a generation of older comedians who

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<sup>1</sup> See Roger Wilmut and Peter Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law? The Story of Alternative Comedy in Britain from the Comedy Store to Saturday Live* (London, 1989), 2, and William Cook, *The Comedy Store: The Club that Changed British Comedy* (London, 2001), 7–19.

they perceived as old-fashioned, unoriginal, stale, and offensive.<sup>2</sup> Explaining the alternative challenge, Oliver Double asserts, “[t]hey threw aside the stolen Pakistani jokes of their predecessors and instead lashed out at the mood of the times.”<sup>3</sup>

This article offers a social and political history of this alternative wave as a historical case study of comedy as an agent of change, challenge, and rebellion. That comedy might work to rebellious ends is an idea rooted in the nature of jokes, each of which, George Orwell famously contended, might be seen as “a tiny revolution.”<sup>4</sup> The comic form, some theorists have argued, has historically offered opportunities to give voice to causes and arguments that are silenced in society,<sup>5</sup> allowing social voices to come to the fore, promoting confidence and resistance in marginalized communities.<sup>6</sup> Despite these radical potentials, most historians have shied away from ascribing revolutionary agency to comedy and humor. Seminal scholars such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Vic Gatrell, and Peter Bailey have each, in turn, cautioned against reading revolution into comedy, instead arguing that challenges posed by humor need to be understood as limited, ambiguous, and unclear.<sup>7</sup> For both Bakhtin and Bailey, the impact of comedy is bound by the limits of time and place, unable to evolve into bigger messages and movements.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, even Orwell concluded elsewhere that jokes were best understood as “a momentary wish.”<sup>9</sup> Going even further from an analysis of comedy as revolutionary, other scholars have presented jokes and humor as forces of conservatism, policing social boundaries and allowing for the release of tension, ultimately supporting the preservation of the status quo.<sup>10</sup>

Given the inherently unstable nature of jokes and their limited impact, an analysis that sets up comedians as revolutionaries is unlikely to yield much in the way of historical fruit. Instead, I use the alternative wave to explore further the ambiguous and uncertain relationship between comedy and rebellion that has perplexed historians. I question why alternative comedy emerged when it did in 1979, and whether, in fact, this date of birth offers insight into anything more than the history of one, albeit influential, London club. In particular, I look at alternative comedy performance as an agent of political challenge in the context of the long and complex relationship between culture and the British left. I question whether the alternative comedy movement, insofar as it can be described as such, should be historicized in terms

<sup>2</sup> Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Double, *Stand-Up: On Being a Comedian* (London, 1997), 164–65.

<sup>4</sup> George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 3, *As I Please, 1943–1945* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 325.

<sup>5</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 182, and Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London, 1960).

<sup>6</sup> See Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, 1998), 129; David Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929–39* (Exeter, 2000), 30–34; Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (Abingdon, 2007), 67.

<sup>7</sup> See Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 2006), 181; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984), 94–97; Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, 150.

<sup>8</sup> Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, 149; Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 94.

<sup>9</sup> See Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London, 1911). For analysis, see Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London, 2005).

of its opposition to the neoliberal “mood of the times,” or whether it was something different—even perhaps, ultimately, a manifestation of Thatcherite hegemony.

### ALTERNATIVE COMEDY AND THE LEFT: A NEW CULTURAL CHALLENGE?

Since the nineteenth century, British socialists have repeatedly engaged popular entertainment for political ends, believing culture to be “too important ... to be left to the purveyors of commercial entertainment.”<sup>11</sup> This engagement, however, has been paralleled by frequent disapproval of art forms seen as decadent or ideologically questionable.<sup>12</sup> In this context, Matthew Worley asserts that the left dismissed “rock and pop music ... as irrelevant or little more than a product of American cultural imperialism,” and were similarly unsure about the merits of popular television.<sup>13</sup> In the 1980s, Lucy Robinson concurs, Labour Party attitudes to popular culture remained confused and ambivalent, “blaming the popular media for youth apathy, and embracing the same media for its salvation.”<sup>14</sup>

Whether or not the political left saw alternative comedy as a potential avenue of political engagement, the alternative comedy scene unquestionably constructed itself—and is often remembered—as a focal point of leftist opposition to Thatcher’s government. Pioneering alternative comedian Pauline Melville was only half joking when she recalled her motivation (and that of some of her colleagues) as a hunger for political “revolution.”<sup>15</sup> As figures of hatred, Thatcher and her government gave energy and material to alternative comedy. Alternative comedian Keith Allen has commented in this context, “She was exactly what we needed—a distinct enemy, a target.”<sup>16</sup> This opposition yielded, as we shall see, a myriad of hostile jokes about Thatcher and her government in alternative stand-up performances and the television sitcoms and sketch shows that soon brought its stars to national prominence: *The Young Ones*, *The Comic Strip Presents*, and *Spitting Image*.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, alternative comedians frequently joined the political arena through benefit

<sup>11</sup> Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884–1914* (Manchester, 1990), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951–64: Old Labour, New Britain?* (Basingstoke, 2003), 191–93.

<sup>13</sup> See Matthew Worley, “Shot by Both Sides: Punk, Politics and the End of ‘Consensus,’” *Contemporary British History* 26, no. 3 (September 2012): 333–54, at 339; Des Freedman, *Television Policies and the Labour Party, 1951–2001* (London 2003), 197–206.

<sup>14</sup> Lucy Robinson, “Sometimes I Like to Stay In and Watch TV ...” Kinnock’s Labour Party and Media Culture,” *Twentieth Century British History* 22, no. 3 (August 2011): 354–90, at 362.

<sup>15</sup> Pauline Melville, in discussion with the author, 16 September 2014. Arthur Smith confirms, “We hated the woman and all Tories and we took the bus.” Arthur Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax* (London, 2010), 157. See also Tony Allen, *Attitude: The Secret of Stand Up* (Glastonbury, 2002), 73, 88.

<sup>16</sup> Keith Allen, *Grow Up* (Reading, 2007), 230.

<sup>17</sup> In the first episode of student-house sitcom *The Young Ones*, which made famous Comedy Store performers Rik Mayall, Ade Edmondson, Nigel Planer, Ben Elton, and Alexei Sayle, “Maggie” was invited by Elton’s TV host character to explain the meaning of unemployment to young people. “Demolition,” *The Young Ones*, episode 1, aired 9 November 1982, BBC 2. In *Filthy, Rich and Catflap* (which reunited Mayall, Edmondson, and Planer in a story about a floundering TV star), Rik Mayall met Norman Tebbit’s “get on your bike” employment rhetoric with a Nazi salute. *Filthy, Rich and Catflap*, episode 1, aired 7 January 1987, BBC 2.

concerts in support of a range of left-wing, political causes at home and abroad.<sup>18</sup> Melville remembers performing “all the time” for “left-wing solidarity,” supporting the striking miners, and political challenge in Palestine and Nicaragua.<sup>19</sup>

This unusual block of opposition arose at a time of unprecedented trouble for Britain’s Labour Party and the political left more broadly. In the face of Thatcher’s charismatic campaigning, Labour found it difficult to articulate a clear vision for the future.<sup>20</sup> Thatcher’s Conservatives seemed to offer “a new kind of popular common sense” while the Labour Party was increasingly trapped in destructive, backward-looking battles with trade unions, and internal schism.<sup>21</sup> Over one election cycle, while alternative comedy prospered and grew from inauspicious beginnings to mainstream success, Thatcher’s Conservatives “essentially dismantled the Labour Party, trade unionism, and the efficacy of dissent represented by the left.”<sup>22</sup> In his 1984 “The Crisis of Labourism,” Stuart Hall complained that Labour did “not seem capable of forming a credible alternative or making a decisive political impact on the electorate.”<sup>23</sup> In a conflict recently historicized as a “culture war,” Labour looked outdated and out-thought.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Hall and others began to think about whether a challenge to Thatcher might need to emerge from a different party or from outside Westminster politics, amid a certainty that “the cultural dimension” needed to be addressed as a “constitutive dimension of society.”<sup>25</sup>

The problem, as Hall saw it, was that the Labour Party had lost touch with the cultural values that could mobilize a leftist challenge to Thatcher. There was, he asserted, a “massive disjuncture” between the Labour Party and “the real movements, issues, and subjects of politics.”<sup>26</sup> These issues related to global and social justice, to environmentalism, and to antiracism and antisexism. Hall complained about the leadership of Britain’s left: “no one who thinks feminism and the women’s movement is a bit of a joke will lead Labour towards socialism in this century.”<sup>27</sup> If this

<sup>18</sup> See Malcolm Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury’s Birthday Cake and Other Autobiographical Confessions* (London, 1996), 111 and 125; Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 185; Wilmot and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 218. Worley highlights similar commitments from punk bands in this period in “Shot by Both Sides,” 334.

<sup>19</sup> Melville, discussion. See also Allen, *Attitude*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Hall argued that Labour “possesses no image of modernity .... It has failed so far to construct an ‘alternative’ philosophy of socialism for modern times” in Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London, 1988), 209. See also A. Beaumont, “‘New Times’ Television? Channel 4 and My Beautiful Launderette,” in *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho (Basingstoke, 2010), 53–74, at 73.

<sup>21</sup> Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, 206.

<sup>22</sup> Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho, “‘The Lady’s Not for Turning’: New Cultural Perspectives on Thatcher and Thatcherism,” in Hadley and Ho, eds., *Thatcher and After*, 1–28, at 2.

<sup>23</sup> Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal*, 196.

<sup>24</sup> See Jon Lawrence and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, “Margaret Thatcher and the Decline of Class Politics,” in *Making Thatcher’s Britain*, ed. Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (Cambridge, 2012), 132–47, at 140. See also James Curran, Ivor Gaber, and Julian Petley, *Culture Wars: the Media and the British Left* (Edinburgh, 2005), 28.

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Hall, “Life and Times of the First New Left,” *New Left Review* (January–February 2010): 177–96, at 187.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal*, 201.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 198. Amy Black and Stephen Brooke have subsequently argued that Labour failed to understand gender politics in “The Labour Party, Women, and the Problem of Gender, 1951–66,” *Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 4 (October 1997): 419–52.

new focus was missing from traditional Labour it was active in other places, specifically in nongovernmental organizations and the cultural arena, manifesting itself in events such as Rock against Racism “that involved spectacle, pop music, celebrity and agitprop.”<sup>28</sup> Robinson has described these challenging forms of “liberational and identity politics” as “competing forms of socialism,” offering a leftist challenge from new places and spaces.<sup>29</sup> The success of Rock against Racism and other similar events increasingly convinced some socialists to engage with the more “subjectivist or identity-based politics” emerging from cultures such as punk and, of course, alternative comedy.

The extent, however, to which these new identity-based challenges were sufficiently stable to be incorporated within one political platform, was a matter for debate, then and now.<sup>30</sup> In research that compares the political behaviors of US and British comedians, Stephen Wagg has argued that American comedy, in the 1960s, similarly witnessed the emergence of new “alternative” comedians with a strong “liberationist thrust,” speaking out for black people, women, and liberals.<sup>31</sup> But these comedians, Wagg concludes, figures like Lenny Bruce, Joan Rivers, and Mort Sahl, did not sustain avenues of political opposition, instead descending into a “politics of the personal, of consumption and of desire.”<sup>32</sup> Extending this argument to the British alternative scene, Wagg argues that politics in comedy was too slippery to promote one ideology or one party, a case similarly made about the potential of punk rock by Worley.<sup>33</sup> In this mind frame, Wagg concludes that British alternative comedy promoted a more general antipolitical environment in which politicians were “universally dismissible,” a narrative that places the alternative comedians as inheritors of British 1960s satire (about which the same has frequently been argued).<sup>34</sup> This argument flies in the face of the self-fashioning of British alternative comedians, who nearly always saw themselves as a firm force of the left and fierce opponents of Thatcher.

The origins of this self-fashioned anti-Thatcher radicalism in alternative comedy are often credited to the efforts of actor and pioneering performer Tony Allen, a comic who was both determined to use his art for political ends and well aware of the challenges posed by merging the two worlds. Nicknamed “Lofty Tone” by

<sup>28</sup> Curran, Gaber, and Petley, *Culture Wars*, 11. See also Matthew Hilton, “Politics is Ordinary: Non-Governmental Organizations and Political Participation in Contemporary Britain,” *Twentieth Century British History* 22, no. 2 (June 2011): 230–68. See also Dick Hebdige, “After the Masses,” in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, ed. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London, 1989), 76–93.

<sup>29</sup> Robinson, “Sometimes I Like to Stay in and Watch TV ...,” 362.

<sup>30</sup> Worley, “Shot by Both Sides,” 348.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Wagg, “‘They’ve Already Got a Comedian for a Governor’: Comedians and Politics in the United States and Britain,” in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, ed. Stephen Wagg (London, 1998), 244–72, at 254.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>33</sup> See Wagg, “‘They’ve Already Got a Comedian for a Governor,’” 267, and Worley, “Shot by Both Sides,” 344.

<sup>34</sup> See Wagg, “‘They’ve Already Got a Comedian for a Governor,’” 270. For the general antipolitical stance of satire, see Stephen Wagg, “Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness: The ‘Satire Boom’ and Its Inheritance,” *Contemporary Politics* 8, no. 4 (December 2002): 319–34, at 328, 332; and D. Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2005), 592.

colleagues because of his ideological passion,<sup>35</sup> Allen encouraged like-minded left-wing comics to “pack” the Comedy Store,<sup>36</sup> and he soon gathered together a radical troupe to tour nationwide under the banner of the “alternative cabaret.”<sup>37</sup> For Allen and his like, alternative comedy needed to be about radical values, creating material that was both “serious and funny.”<sup>38</sup> This new comedic opposition would coalesce around radical thinking on antisexism and antiracism that challenged the Labour Party as well as Thatcher’s government but was nonetheless firmly of the left.

### ALTERNATIVE INTENTIONS: PRINCIPLES OR POPULARITY?

Without doubt, antiracism and antisexism ostensibly took pride of place at the center of alternative comedy values. On opening the Comedy Store, impresario Peter Rosengard told the press that in terms of censorship, “‘anything went’ as long as it wasn’t racist or sexist!,” a rule Martin Soan (member of the influential *The Greatest Show on Legs*) remembers they “really seriously adhered to.”<sup>39</sup> In this atmosphere, Soan explained, Ben Elton would “get the audience to boo people off” if they attempted racist or sexist material.<sup>40</sup> Store veteran Arnold Brown recalled that “a distaste for the sexist, racist and apolitical” united the Store’s comedians.<sup>41</sup>

To some extent, it is possible to see the impact of these principles on alternative comedy output. The Comedy Store, albeit belatedly, set aside specific nights for black comedians and female comedians, creating some new spaces for re-inventing race and gender in stand-up comedy.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, alternative comedians in live performance and on television championed antisexism and antiracism, and viciously attacked those who they held responsible for perpetuating bigotry. *The Greatest Show on Legs* performed “The National Front Can Can” in stockings and suspenders, to ridicule the far right.<sup>43</sup> The first *Comic Strip Presents*, “Five Go Mad in Dorset,” served up a stinging parody of an Enid Blyton children’s story, which tore at Blyton’s gendered and racialized fictional world.<sup>44</sup>

In the ITV sitcom *Girls on Top*, Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders, Ruby Wax, and Tracey Ullman included risqué vagina jokes—French telling one journalist that they were trying to “delve into the inner thighs, plucking the bikini line,” opening up

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 147.

<sup>36</sup> Allen, *Grow Up*, 231–32, and idem, *Attitude*, 98.

<sup>37</sup> Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 37.

<sup>38</sup> Allen, *Attitude*, 88.

<sup>39</sup> Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 11. Martin Soan, in discussion with the author, 1 October 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Soan, discussion.

<sup>41</sup> Chrissie Macdonald, *That’s Anarchy: The Story of a Revolution in the World of TV Comedy* (Hartwell, 2002), 17. Comedy producer Jon Plowman concurs with Brown: “Its politics was the manifesto that we’re gonna be non-sexist, non-racist. We’re not gonna do old fashioned frilly shirt comedy.” Jon Plowman, in discussion with the author, 7 February 2014.

<sup>42</sup> The black comedy night at the Comedy Store was called “In the House.” “Cunts on Comedy” brought all-female line-ups to the venue.

<sup>43</sup> Soan, discussion.

<sup>44</sup> “Five Go Mad in Dorset,” *The Comic Strip Presents*, episode 1, aired 2 November 1982, Channel 4.



subjects that were only previously dealt with “heavily and unfunnily [*sic*].”<sup>45</sup> *The Young Ones* attacked police racism while *Filthy, Rich and Catflap* presented the BBC as an institution riddled with bigotry.<sup>46</sup> At their most polemical, alternative comedians used television performances to lecture audiences about the perils of racist and sexist behavior. Double recalls Elton ending one routine by telling the audience to “watch out” for “sexism in comedy,” while Tony Allen, on a rare foray onto television, began a joke, “This drunk homosexual Pakistani squatter takes my mother-in-law to an Irish restaurant,” before pulling a face and refusing to offer a punch-line in disgust.<sup>47</sup>

There are, however, good reasons to pause before historicizing alternative comedy as a new, bold, or effective articulation of a values-centered, radical challenge in 1980s Britain. For one thing, narratives of a 1979 comedy revolution mask the reality of alternative comedy’s long inheritance in British and American performance. Moreover, despite the “lofty” aims of Tony Allen and like-minded comedians, the political challenge offered was mostly short-lived and inconsistent. Reporting on the rise of alternative comedians on television, one journalist claimed that “real alternative comedy only lasted for a year—by 1981 it was all over.”<sup>48</sup> The decline of the “real” in this instance related to the political values that supposedly underpinned the new genre. Alexei Sayle remembers that these values disappeared amid the second generation of alternative comedians, who “tended not to regard themselves as political performers, but simply as comics.”<sup>49</sup> For these performers the comedy, and the commercial success that followed, was everything. Keith Allen stopped appearing at the Comedy Store in exasperation at the “career-orientated” focus of his peers.<sup>50</sup> These careerist motivations ensured that second-generation alternative comics (such as Mayall, Edmondson, French, and Saunders) saw their future in television, a medium dismissed by Tony Allen as “the greatest breakthrough in anaesthetic since chloroform.”<sup>51</sup> For Allen, careerist attitudes were likely to lead to “incorporation” into capitalism, which he vigorously resisted. In this context, Melville remembers his insistence on “what he called free-forming,” a “completely undisciplined” anarchic approach to comedy performance that, to her mind, “repressed and suppressed” the development of his career.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>45</sup> “Hark,” *Girls on Top*, episode 7, aired 4 December 1985, ITV. French’s comment on the show’s purpose was for the press release for season two, 30 October 1986, British Film Institute Archive, South Bank, London.

<sup>46</sup> In *Filthy, Rich and Catflap* the BBC’s head of light entertainment “Jumbo Whiffy” (played by Mel Smith) sexually assaulted his secretary and ogled every woman in the BBC bar. *Filthy, Rich and Catflap*, episode 4, aired 28 January 1987, BBC 2. On *The Young Ones*, the police threatened a man before discovering that he was not in fact black, apologizing, “Sorry John. I thought you was a nigger.” “Boring,” *The Young Ones*, episode 3, aired 23 November 1982, BBC 2.

<sup>47</sup> Allen was appearing on *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*. *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*, aired 14 October 1980, BBC 2. Elton’s performance is discussed in Double, *Stand-Up*, 173. For analysis of Elton’s political approach see Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 248–51.

<sup>48</sup> Mitchell Symons, “Filthy, Rich ... and Funny,” *Today*, 4 January 1987. See also Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 367–68.

<sup>49</sup> Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 53.

<sup>50</sup> Allen, *Grow Up*, 240.

<sup>51</sup> *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*.

<sup>52</sup> Melville, discussion. Allen describes how he borrowed this comedy approach from Lenny Bruce in *Attitude*, 91.

As the desire to be funny and successful overwhelmed radical intentions, politics slipped down the agenda of second-generation alternative comedians. As French explained in advance of the second series of *Girls on Top*, “We’re not trying to make a point as such—we’re just aiming to be funny.”<sup>53</sup> This was not so much selling out as it was a reflection of comedians who had never really been radical but who were afforded early opportunities in a performance space that operated according to leftist values that they loosely shared.<sup>54</sup> Part of what differentiated the second wave of alternative comedians from the pioneers was generational. Whereas the likes of Tony Allen and Melville were inspired by the radicalism of the 1968 student and worker rebellions, comedians such as Mayall and Edmondson were ten years younger. Melville recalls Mayall telling her, “we always felt we just missed something and we didn’t quite know what it was ... so we often felt we had to act it but we didn’t quite know what it was that we were trying to do.”<sup>55</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly in this context, little or nothing about Mayall’s and Edmondson’s material was political. Jon Plowman, long-standing producer of French and Saunders, joked, “Rik and Ade hitting each other over the heads with saucepans ... that’s not going to bring the government down.”<sup>56</sup>

This turn away from radicalism was not lost on journalists, one of whom complained that Ade Edmondson was so much a part of the “establishment” that he “was on Wogan before Christmas plugging his latest book.”<sup>57</sup> This incorporation made it hard to identify a distinct alternative comedy scene by the mid-1980s. As Plowman recalls, “Time has blurred the edges ... of what was alternative and what wasn’t alternative and I think probably that meant the edges were probably pretty blurred at the time.”<sup>58</sup> This prioritizing of comedy over ideology, combined with huge success, ensured that much of what had once been an alternative, challenging scene was indeed incorporated quickly into the capitalist cultural mainstream, almost entirely without its political baggage, while the label of alternative was maintained as a “badge of convenience.”<sup>59</sup>

## RADICAL OR ROUTINE? ALTERNATIVE COMEDY, INNOVATION, AND INHERITANCE

Even at the outset it was clear that the alternative which many comedians wanted to offer was not always, or even primarily, political. For some comics, the alternative related to comic form and had little to do with the rest of society. They were tired

<sup>53</sup> Press release for *Girls on Top*, season two.

<sup>54</sup> Jane Littlewood and Michael Pickering have argued that second-generation alternative comedians showed limited commitment to politics aside from the fact that they “generally shared left wing beliefs”; Jane Littlewood and Michael Pickering, “Heard the One about the White Middle-Class Heterosexual Father-in-Law? Gender, Ethnicity and Political Correctness in Comedy,” in Wagg, ed., *Because I Tell a Joke or Two*, 291–312, at 298.

<sup>55</sup> Melville, discussion.

<sup>56</sup> Plowman, discussion. See also Rik Mayall, *Bigger than Hitler, Better than Christ* (London, 2005), 39.

<sup>57</sup> Symons, “Filthy, Rich ... and Funny.”

<sup>58</sup> Plowman, discussion.

<sup>59</sup> Soan, discussion. Colin Campbell explains a broader history of radical intentions becoming subsumed in capitalist agendas in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford, 1987), 139–42.



of the straightforward stand-up delivery that had come to dominate club comedy, and they were eager to move away from unoriginal material and punch-line joke endings.<sup>60</sup> Embracing a broader observational form of comic performance, in many early alternative comedy sets there were no jokes at all. Nigel Planer performed songs in character; Mayall read poetry, and Sayle, describing himself as a “mod two-tone poet,” did both.<sup>61</sup> *The Greatest Show on Legs* began as a subversive Punch-and-Judy show and became globally famous for a naked balloon dance routine.<sup>62</sup> As well as moving away from joke telling, alternative comedians criticized their predecessors for “sharing” material and not writing their own jokes.<sup>63</sup> Typifying the attitude of alternative comedians, Arthur Smith claimed, “on the Northern club circuit, jokes belonged to everybody, such that before a show stand-ups would consult over which comic was doing which joke.”<sup>64</sup>

Alternative comedians were similarly dismissive of traditional sitcom. *The Young Ones*, with its anarchic cartoon violence, disregard for plot sequences, and musical and surreal stand-up interludes, embodied this alternative challenge. Repeated attacks aimed at a traditional sitcom, *The Good Life*, cemented the point.<sup>65</sup> Jennifer Saunders, commenting on her role in Elton’s *Happy Families*, explained the hunger for comedic change: “If we were doing *Terry and June* or *Rings on their Fingers* we’d see it as a sell out. *Terry and June* represents a whole field which is bland and predictable.”<sup>66</sup> This was television comedy in an original form, for a new generation. *The Comic Strip Presents* offered one-off comedy films (as opposed to continuing characters in sitcom), while other shows (such as *Filthy*, *Rich and Catflap* and *Happy Families*) went out of their way to distance themselves from more traditional offerings.

Even on comedy terms, however, the alternative scene was not as iconoclastic as was contended by the surrounding hype. In reality, unconventional, radical, and challenging comedy performers were working across Britain and elsewhere long before the opening of the Comedy Store in 1979.<sup>67</sup> Malcolm Hardee, for example, recalls performing alternative-style material in Devon “years before the Comedy Store” opened.<sup>68</sup> Hardee’s partner, Soan, similarly remembers spaces and places of alternative performance in street theatre in the 1970s. Trevor Griffiths developed his play *Comedians* after witnessing alternative-style (as well as mainstream) comedy in Manchester in the early 1970s.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Tony Allen later conceded that “in retrospect, the 1979 wave of performers can be seen as a belated grittier London response to what was already going on around the country and beyond.”<sup>70</sup> In the context of

<sup>60</sup> Double, *Stand-Up*, 189 and 205; Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 184.

<sup>61</sup> These alternative stand-up routines were recorded and broadcast on *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*. For a broader record of eccentric alternative performances see Paul Merton, *Only When I Laugh* (St. Ives, 2014), 108–9.

<sup>62</sup> Soan, discussion. The balloon dance became world famous after *The Greatest Show on Legs* appeared on Central Television’s *OTT* (“Over the Top”) in 1982.

<sup>63</sup> See Merton, *Only When I Laugh*, 205.

<sup>64</sup> Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 188.

<sup>65</sup> “Sick,” *The Young Ones*, episode 5, aired 12 June 1984, BBC 2.

<sup>66</sup> G. Baker, “Carry On the Young Ones,” *Daily Star*, 10 August 1985.

<sup>67</sup> See Allen, *Attitude*, 81.

<sup>68</sup> Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury’s Birthday Cake and Other Autobiographical Confessions*, 89.

<sup>69</sup> Trevor Griffiths, in discussion with the author, 4 October 2013; Soan, discussion.

<sup>70</sup> Allen, *Attitude*, 119.

earlier “folk” comedians like Jasper Carrott and Billy Connolly, little of the Comedy Store material was that original.

For the most part, the new stars of the alternative scene were significantly influenced by, and built careers on the foundations of, British and American comedians from entirely different political stables and periods. Anarchic comedian Charlie Chuck and Soan both saw themselves in the mold of Tommy Cooper, while Andy de la Tour cited the influence of Connolly and American icons such as Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl in shaping his approach to comedy.<sup>71</sup> Tony Allen, for his part, was so influenced by Bruce that he recalls his concern that his act, with its “free-forming,” might plagiarize him.<sup>72</sup> When the *Young Ones*’ writing team was asked by the BBC to explain its brand of humor, the writers situated themselves firmly in the British comedy stable, claiming that theirs was a comedy of “surprise” like *Monty Python* and *The Goon Show* and of “rejection” like *Fawlty Towers* and *Till Death Us Do Part*, while also citing the influence of slapstick.<sup>73</sup> The press picked up on these influences and also asserted the similarities between alternative comedy and earlier genres of British film comedy (especially the *Carry On* films). One newspaper labeled *The Young Ones* as the “counter-culture Fawlty Towers,” while another described *The Comic Strip Presents* as “the Carry On team on steroids.”<sup>74</sup> Discussing *Filthy, Rich and Catflap*, Mitchell Symons argued that Elton’s scripts “evoke strong memories of Ealing in its heyday.”<sup>75</sup> *Carry On* matriarch Barbara Windsor made a guest appearance in *Filthy, Rich and Catflap* playing the mother of a woman filing a paternity suit against Richie (Rik Mayall).<sup>76</sup> This appearance, Mark Lawson noted, exposed “the programme’s closeness to the Carry On tradition.”<sup>77</sup> Moreover, some traditional comics were afforded time and respect at the Comedy Store, most notably Les Dawson who “was very well received.”<sup>78</sup> Overall, while making much of their apartness and originality, the alternative comedians were very much a logical progression in British comic tradition.

## CONTROLLING LAUGHTER: COMEDY AS A FORCE FOR POLITICAL CHALLENGE

The strong influence of earlier American and British performers on the work of alternative comedians, and the striving of alternative comedians for artistic—not

<sup>71</sup> Charlie Chuck discusses his influences in William Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha! Comedians Talking* (London, 1994), 119. In discussion with the author, Martin Soan said that Tommy Cooper was his “hero.” See also de la Tour, *Stand Up or Die* (London, 2013), 22–23.

<sup>72</sup> Allen, *Attitude*, 88

<sup>73</sup> File T70/14/1, “The Young Ones, A Paper on the Intention of the Programme” (undated), Caversham, BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter WAC). For analysis of the comic inheritance of Mayall’s and Edmondson’s comedy see Lloyd Peters, “The Roots of Alternative Comedy? The Alternative Story of 20th Century Coyote and Eighties Comedy,” *Comedy Studies* 4, no. 1 (April 2013): 5–21.

<sup>74</sup> *Sunday Times*, 27 May 1984; and Victor Lewis-Smith, “Virgin on a Masterpiece,” *Time Out*, 30 April 1993.

<sup>75</sup> Symons, “Filthy, Rich ... and Funny.”

<sup>76</sup> *Filthy, Rich and Catflap*, episode 1.

<sup>77</sup> Mark Lawson, “Rik Up Your Ears,” *Independent*, 8 January 1987.

<sup>78</sup> Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 9. Lenny Bennett also appeared, although he was less successful.

political—innovation, refocuses historical understanding of alternative comedy away from the idea of a radical political challenge, and away from 1979 as a zero hour for a new wave of oppositional comedy. For while the bulk of early alternative comedians supported leftist causes, and most opposed Thatcher, comedy, and the lifestyle that success allowed, was the priority. When Red Wedge, a collective of musicians and comedians that performed concerts on behalf of the Labour Party, was established to help challenge Thatcher in the 1987 elections, the limited possibilities of using comedians to fight political battles became clear. Comedy agent Addison Cresswell, a Red Wedge organizer, recalls, “We were out for the Labour Party, but after a while it became irrelevant. We were all getting pissed in the hotel. ... We were losing them votes, but it was good fun. After that, I became more of a capitalist and got on with it.”<sup>79</sup>

The depth of comedians’ commitment, arguably, was not the primary problem; the real issue was the lack of suitability of comedy performance as a vehicle to achieve political change. Certainly, the comedians themselves were not confident that their jokes could achieve anything. Jenny Lecoat quipped, “If you really want to change the world, you don’t go into comedy—you learn to fire a gun and you go to fight in El Salvador.”<sup>80</sup> Plowman was similarly dismissive about the potential to offer political opposition through jokes: “You’d have thought the number of gags done in Raymond’s Revue Bar at the very least that were about Mrs. Thatcher, the Falklands particularly, would have brought the government to its knees but apparently not.”<sup>81</sup>

The unsuitability of comedy as a force for radical challenge was famously explained by Henri Bergson, who argued that laughter policed the boundaries of society on behalf of power brokers.<sup>82</sup> This understanding of culture foreshadowed the arguments of later theorists and historians that even subversively intended art would invariably serve a purpose for the political establishment, trapped between “challenge and collaboration.”<sup>83</sup> According to this way of thinking, even committed radical comedians ultimately supported the status quo by establishing borders of inclusion and exclusion and safely venting social tensions. On these terms, humor was likely to serve as a “culture of consolation” but not an agent of social change especially because, as both Bailey and Sutton have noted, the meanings of comedy did not travel well beyond the immediate environment of their creation.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Interview cited in Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!*, 264.

<sup>80</sup> Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 273. Scholars of humor have made similar arguments about the limited utility of jokes as political weapons. See Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington, 1990), 8.

<sup>81</sup> Plowman, discussion. Raymond’s Review Bar hosted *The Comic Strip*, a nightly alternative comedy event organized by Peter Richardson.

<sup>82</sup> See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London, 1911). For analysis see Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, 149. See also Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 97; and Herbert Marcuse, “Art as a Form of Reality,” *New Left Review* 74 (July–August 1972): 51–58.

<sup>84</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), 237. See Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, 150; Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries*, 61.

Even if the jokes of alternative comedians could aspire to the “tiny revolution[s]” envisaged by Orwell, they could never circumvent the ambiguity of their reception. As Sigmund Freud famously argued, it is impossible to build a political constituency around jokes, as it cannot be known if audiences are laughing for the right reasons, with you or against you.<sup>85</sup> Hardee recalled performing in an alternative comedy event at a pub, at the end of which the landlord’s wife (who had sat through the politically correct routine night after night) asked him to tell a joke “about a nigger with a parrot on his shoulder.” Hardee concluded, “She’d sat through all those acts for a week, and she still didn’t realise I couldn’t get up on stage and tell that joke.”<sup>86</sup> If the alternative comedians were not preaching to the converted, which they often were, the chances of changing views or outlooks through jokes were seemingly very small indeed.<sup>87</sup>

The inability of comedy to send political messages was exemplified by the mileage gained by Thatcher and her government from jokes that were designed to undermine them. Harry Enfield’s nouveau-riche plumber, Loadsamoney, was introduced to the nation on the alternative comedy showcase *Saturday Live* as an unsubtle assault on Thatcherite values. The character, however, was appropriated as an affectionate pastiche by the right—to the extent that Enfield later killed him off in dismay.<sup>88</sup> The backfiring of political material was most evident, however, in the reception of Central Television’s puppet-based satirical sketch show *Spitting Image*.<sup>89</sup> This program, McSmith argues, attacked Britain’s political leaders “with a venom that had never been seen before on television,” and focused, in particular, on Thatcher and her cabinet.<sup>90</sup> The targeting of Thatcher led to numerous complaints to the Independent Broadcasting Authority, one viewer typically claiming that *Spitting Image* was “a determined socialist attempt to undermine normal standards of patriotism and decency.”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, in numerous episodes, Thatcher was portrayed as a monstrous, psychopathic dictator who bullied her cabinet and took policy advice from an aging Adolf Hitler.<sup>92</sup> But far from damaging the prime minister, this construction seemed to make Thatcher even more popular, fueling her reputation for toughness.<sup>93</sup> As Richard Vinen has concluded, “attacks on Thatcherism helped to define it in the public mind.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, *Spitting Image* was loved by most of those on the right

<sup>85</sup> See James English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humor, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Ithaca, 1994), 12–14.

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!*, 280. Stewart Lee describes a similar experience in *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Life and Deaths of a Stand-Up Comedian* (London, 2010), 25.

<sup>87</sup> Sutton argues that comedy always preaches to the converted in *A Chorus of Raspberries*, 56.

<sup>88</sup> See Graham Stewart, *Bang! A History of Britain in the 1980s* (London, 2013), 247; Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 119.

<sup>89</sup> See Stephen Wagg, “The Subversive Laugh,” *Marxism Today* (February 1987): 35–37.

<sup>90</sup> Andy McSmith, *No Such Thing as Society* (London, 2011), 143. On the politics of *Spitting Image*, see Lewis Chester, *Tooth and Claw: The Inside Story of “Spitting Image”* (London, 1986), 87–90 and 136.

<sup>91</sup> Viewer to Managing Director of the BBC (forwarded to the IBA), 8 February 1988, File 3996159, *Spitting Image*, Independent Broadcasting Authority Archive, University of Bournemouth Special Collections.

<sup>92</sup> Thatcher consults with Hitler (without knowing who he is) in repeated episodes, telling him that his advice on immigration had been “terribly useful.” *Spitting Image*, episode 2, aired 4 March 1984, ITV.

<sup>93</sup> See Stewart, *Bang!*, 254.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Vinen, *Thatcher’s Britain* (London, 2010), 280.

who were the subject of parody, an appropriation of challenging images that resonates with historical precedent regarding comedic impact.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, even when its goals were clear, comedy was inherently unreliable as a political weapon. And as we have seen, as alternative comedians pursued careers and focused on fame and success, their intentions could hardly be relied on in any case. Comedians (alternative and otherwise) nearly always cherished the essence of their craft—their ability to make people laugh—above all else. Facing Thatcher, from an alternative comedy point of view, thus prompted jokes not only about the government but the forces, increasingly ripe for ridicule, in opposition. In this atmosphere, like the satire generation before them, alternative comedians couldn't resist, and all politicians (not just the Conservatives) were held up as comic targets. In low-key (generally left-wing) alternative comedy clubs, this material could be seen as teasing among friends, diffused by the “well-tested cultural and social competence” of specific audiences.<sup>96</sup> But as the alternative comedians became famous, their material was accessed far beyond their initial communities. While some, like Melville, changed the targets of jokes to avoid popular misreading, alternative comedians mostly maintained their material about the left—seemingly without concern about the impact it might have.<sup>97</sup>

In the alternative sitcoms, left-wing characters were frequently the most despised and ludicrous. In *Girls on Top*, French's socialist-feminist Amanda Ripley offered a vicious parody of the feminist movement. In the show, Ripley volunteered for the magazine “Spare Cheeks,” a very thinly veiled reworking of the iconic *Spare Rib*. Described by Ripley in a fictional letter to Germaine Greer as “a magazine for women, by women, to women, of women, under women, about women, and basically a lot of other things to do with women-type things,”<sup>98</sup> “Spare Cheeks,” and French's character, reduced feminism to farce. Ripley ran courses such as “know and understand your toilet parts”<sup>99</sup> and, on consecutive days, “Women for Power” and “Women against Power.”<sup>100</sup>

In *The Young Ones*, Rik (the student radical) and Neil (the hippy) were similarly ridiculous and hypocritical. When Rik realized that he and his housemates had not paid their television license he delighted in the anarchy, claiming that he was going to form an organization named “People who don't pay their TV licences against the Nazis,” only to write a signed confession in panic (on behalf of his three housemates) when the TV license man arrived.<sup>101</sup> Neil, a vegan, ate “blubber crunch” cereal (made from whales) and threatened to sue the company when he was not paid for developing an advertising slogan for the brand.<sup>102</sup> At the end of the

<sup>95</sup> Gattrell, *City of Laughter*, 155.

<sup>96</sup> Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, 137.

<sup>97</sup> Melville recalled adapting her material as she began to play to more diverse venues such as the Hackney Empire. Melville, discussion. Allen highlights this problem in the work of Melville and others in *Attitude*, 114–15.

<sup>98</sup> Dawn French, Ruby Wax, Jennifer Saunders, *Girls on Top* (London, 1986), n.p.

<sup>99</sup> “Mr Yummy Brownie,” *Girls on Top*, episode 5, aired 4 December 1986, ITV.

<sup>100</sup> French, Wax, and Saunders, *Girls on Top*, n.p.

<sup>101</sup> “Bomb,” *The Young Ones*, episode 4, aired 30 November 1982, BBC 2. Andy de la Tour has highlighted the legacy of the attack on the left that was epitomized through Rik in de la Tour, *Stand Up or Die*, 18.

<sup>102</sup> Nigel Planer and Terence Blacker, *Neil's Book of the Dead* (London, 1984), n.p.



series, Rik revealed what was evident all along, that he was in thrall to Mrs. Thatcher, who had “certainly put this country back on its feet.”<sup>103</sup> Like Rik, Amanda Ripley was presented as a rebel without a cause, a laughable and dogmatic individual who had nothing whatsoever to offer politically and was articulating rebellion on behalf of no one. In one episode, Amanda lambasted three young black men for telling her that they were not reggae musicians. She counseled, “It’s only because of oppressors like Margaret Thatcher that you don’t believe you are a reggae band.”<sup>104</sup>

This ridiculing of the left also reflected something of the extent of Thatcherite hegemony in the 1980s, which penetrated into terrains of ostensible opposition in ways that raise important questions about the metal of any values-based leftist challenge, and go some way to explain Labour’s failure to regenerate in this period. As Robinson’s research on Kinnock’s Labour Party has suggested, the “radical potential ... hoped for in popular cultural production was undermined by its position in the market.”<sup>105</sup> Mostly living and working in urban left-wing communities, the alternative comedians could not resist parodying the characters they saw around them, as the hunger for good comedy transcended any concerns about political impact.

### NEW VALUES AND OLD PREJUDICE: ANTIRACISM AND ANTISEXISM

Despite the limitations of the challenge, there is little doubt that antisexism and antiracism were taken very seriously by alternative comedians in a way which had hitherto not been the case. Paul Merton and Arthur Smith agonized over the legitimacy of jokes they wanted to tell, removing material from acts at the suggestion that it might be offensive.<sup>106</sup> Determined not to undermine her strongly held political beliefs, Melville invited the feminist communist leader Bea Campbell to the *Comic Strip* to “see what she thought.”<sup>107</sup> But despite this care and focus, while making big claims of antisexist challenge, alternative comedy in many ways reinforced and entrenched age-old sexist dogmas. The roots of the problem lay in the geographical origins of the London scene, in the heart of Soho’s red light district. The location of the Comedy Store—in a topless bar, below a strip club—hardly created a welcoming space for women (the aptly named *Comic Strip* also opened within a strip bar).<sup>108</sup> Recalling the venue, Tony Allen describes a space that looked like “the complete antithesis of everything we stood for.”<sup>109</sup> In this seedy environment, alternative comedy and the sex industry merged at every turn.<sup>110</sup> Comedian Norman Lovett remembers being served by a topless barmaid as he waited to perform his act, a situation that Mayall recalled mischievously as “fantastic.”<sup>111</sup> Some alternative comedians would sneak off to watch the strip show before or after their act, and strippers sometimes

<sup>103</sup> “Summer Holiday,” *Young Ones*, episode 6, aired 19 June 1984, BBC 2.

<sup>104</sup> “Skankin’,” *Girls on Top*, episode 6, aired 27 November 1985, ITV.

<sup>105</sup> Robinson, “‘Sometimes I Like to Stay in and Watch TV...,’” 389.

<sup>106</sup> See Merton, *Only When I Laugh*, 146; Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 154–55.

<sup>107</sup> Melville, discussion.

<sup>108</sup> This incongruous setting is discussed in Macdonald, *That’s Anarchy*, 19.

<sup>109</sup> See Allen, *Attitude*, 96.

<sup>110</sup> Cook claims that Alexei Sayle and Keith Allen met while working on a porn film. See *The Comedy Store*, 60.

<sup>111</sup> Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 74; Mayall, *Bigger than Hitler, Better than Christ*, 49.



tried their hand at stand-up, including one performer who would “get her tits out” if she wasn’t getting laughs.<sup>112</sup>

The undertone of sexism and misogyny which attended its London birth remained a core part of the alternative scene as it evolved, despite the sincere efforts of many comedians. As had been the case with *Monty Python*, the absence of recurring female characters in the defining alternative comedy television of the age, particularly *The Young Ones*, was striking.<sup>113</sup> French and Saunders became famous as part of the alternative scene, particularly through their roles in *The Comic Strip Presents* (as well as cameos in *The Young Ones*). However, Plowman recalled the extent to which their inclusion in such programs was rooted in guilt about the overall female absence, noting that Peter Richardson and Pete Richens “thought there needed to be some girls in the show.”<sup>114</sup> In this male-dominated terrain, feminism often remained something to be laughed at, as in the character of Amanda Ripley in *Girls on Top*. Mayall joked that he drank in a bar called GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS because he was a “hardcore feminist.”<sup>115</sup> Similarly, Edmondson quipped that male students should join university feminist societies for “all-night stormy sex sessions” with women who were “desperate.”<sup>116</sup> For Hardee, too, feminism was little more than a new avenue of sexual possibility. He recalled that feminists “got off with the most sexist men” and that he had “shagged loads of ‘em.”<sup>117</sup> Of course, all of these comics were only joking, playing with misogyny in a spirit of disavowal.<sup>118</sup> Nonetheless, these problematic constructions of women and feminism sat within a broader tendency among alternative comedians to address sex in a chauvinistic manner. As Soan observed, racist and sexist jokes crept back into the scene, revived as acceptable although comedians were “saying they were being ironic.”<sup>119</sup>

Ultimately, women’s politics, and women in general, were only taken seriously by some (mostly early) alternative comedians, while others frequently descended into extreme misogyny. Nowhere was this “ironic” sexism and misogyny more prominent than in alternative comedians’ attacks on Thatcher, a reality that exemplifies the problematic nature of opposition in this context.<sup>120</sup> Highlighting a blind spot seemingly

<sup>112</sup> Comedian Lee Cornes in Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 53–55. See also Allen, *Attitude*, 105. Cornes’s memory of this act and its meaning in itself is revealing of alternative comedians’ questionable antisexist credentials.

<sup>113</sup> One reviewer of *Filthy, Rich and Catflap* complained that the cast had a “fear and loathing of women.” See S. Vincent, “Filthy, Poor and Drivel,” *Today*, 8 January 1987. On women and *Monty Python*, see Stephen Wagg, “You’ve Never Had it So Silly: The Politics of British Satirical Comedy from Beyond the Fringe to Spitting Image,” in *Come on Down? Popular Media Culture in Post-War Britain*, ed. Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg (London, 1992), 254–84, at 270.

<sup>114</sup> Plowman, discussion.

<sup>115</sup> Mayall, *Bigger than Hitler, Better than Christ*, 174. Mayall later continues the joke, explaining that he was a feminist like Hugh Hefner. *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>116</sup> Adrian Edmondson, Mark Leigh, and Mike Lepine, *How to Be a Complete Bastard* (London, 1986), 22.

<sup>117</sup> Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury’s Birthday Cake and Other Autobiographical Confessions*, 90.

<sup>118</sup> Salvatore Attardo, “Violations of Conversational Maxims and Cooperation: The Case of Jokes,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 19, no. 6 (June 1993): 537–85. For analysis see M. Billig, “Humour and Hatred: the Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan,” *Discourse and Society* 12, no. 3 (May 2001): 267–89.

<sup>119</sup> Soan, discussion.

<sup>120</sup> Cook has noted that attacks on Thatcher “often degenerated into blatant misogyny.” Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 102.

shared by much of the left and alternative comedy when it came to misogyny, Hardee recalled a performance of his famous balloon dance at the Trades Union Congress that concluded with him and Soan appearing naked with their penises protruding from the mouth of photographs of Mrs. Thatcher—to the acclaim of the audience.<sup>121</sup> In this atmosphere, French and Saunders became something of an exception as other female acts frequently felt that the alternative comedy scene was not for them. For Jo Brand, the Comedy Store was “a very laddish environment” and “didn’t really epitomise ‘alternative’ values.”<sup>122</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising that other leading female performers from this period, such as Dillie Keane’s *Fascinating Aida* and Victoria Wood, struck out on their own, almost entirely apart from other alternative comedians.<sup>123</sup>

If alternative comedy failed consistently to articulate radical values when it came to sexual politics, its handling of racial issues was hardly more encouraging, and did not amount to the kind of seismic shift that has frequently been claimed. Indeed, the failure of alternative comedy to launch the careers of British black comedians problematizes the idea of 1979 as a key moment of change.<sup>124</sup> No doubt, the prevalence of banal jokes at the expense of black and Asian people did decline in alternative comedy, but this was due primarily to changes in comic delivery (away from punch-line jokes), and the desire to assert a line of differentiating originality between the alternatives and their predecessors. Alternative comedians lambasted mainstream performers for picking on vulnerable communities with racist material. Sayle, for example, argued that he would not tell jokes about black people or Pakistanis “because they are oppressed, and I don’t want to make that oppression any greater.”<sup>125</sup> This position, however, immediately opened up new avenues of racist possibility—material about communities that were not considered “oppressed” in the same way. Sayle continued, “I think that in many ways we are oppressed by the Japanese, and therefore I would be perfectly happy to do stuff about the Japanese.”<sup>126</sup> According to this kind of logic, East Asian people became regular targets for alternative comedians.

In *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*, Keith Allen told a joke about an “unwashed” Chinese bank robber who told everyone to “fleas.”<sup>127</sup> Lee Cornes, as well as Sayle, remembers telling jokes about the Japanese in the Comedy Store,<sup>128</sup> while *The Comic Strip Presents* portrayed Japanese characters running a prisoner of war camp

<sup>121</sup> Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury’s Birthday Cake and Other Autobiographical Confessions*, 111. Hardee recalled that the audience “loved it.” While highlighting the primacy of the political challenge, Soan conceded that the act could be construed as misogynistic; Soan, discussion.

<sup>122</sup> See Stephen Wagg, “Punching Your Weight: Conversations with Jo Brand,” in Wagg, ed., *Because I Tell a Joke or Two*, 111–36, at 132; Jo Brand, *Look Back in Hunger: The Autobiography* (London, 2009), 286. In interview with Cook, Brand claimed that The Comedy Store was “one of the most macho venues.” Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 155.

<sup>123</sup> See Dillie Keane, Adèle Anderson, and Nica Burns, *Fascinating Who? Fascinating Aida: The Anatomy of a Group on the Crest of a Ripple* (London, 1986).

<sup>124</sup> The British black comedy scene emerged from the late 1980s. See Stephen Small, “‘Serious T’ing’: The Black Comedy Circuit in England,” in Wagg, ed., *Because I Tell a Joke or Two*, 221–43.

<sup>125</sup> Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 49.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*.

<sup>128</sup> Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 81.

to protect consumer goods, barking orders in grotesquely stereotypical accents.<sup>129</sup> East Asians were not the only victims of the changing focus of racist humor. Enfield's character, the Greek kebab-shop owner Stavros, was little more than a racist stereotype, leading Andy Medhurst to question "what differentiated Enfield's impersonation" from Jim Davidson's earlier impressions of Caribbean immigrants.<sup>130</sup>

The continuation of racist material on the alternative circuit was not, however, solely based on new, "more acceptable," targets. More importantly, it was rooted in a hunger among alternative performers to say the unsayable, and challenge what they perceived as political censorship within the scene.<sup>131</sup> Having initially fostered an environment that would shun a comedian for racist or sexist material, Soan recalls that later alternative comics turned to non-politically correct jokes as "a breath of fresh air."<sup>132</sup> This desire resonated strongly with the motivations of mainstream comedians such as Roy "Chubby" Brown, Jim Davidson, and Freddie Starr, and earlier television comedies such as *Love thy Neighbour* and *Till Death Us Do Part*—as well as with American comedians such as Andrew Dice Clay.<sup>133</sup> While the alternative comedians shunned this inheritance, in many cases they continued to cover the same bases, seemingly for similar reasons. Keith Allen, for example, performed a one-man show called *Whatever Happened to the AA Man's Salute*, where he used a robot to "tell racist jokes" while he shouted, "Stop it! Stop it!"<sup>134</sup> In this way, Allen teased the political correctness that he perceived was proscribing comedic material, entering with the audience into a complicity of disavowal as the "robot" spoke its mind. When the *Young Ones* included jokes about Arab regimes dismembering people, Neil intervened with a similar brand of faux concern: "Don't say that about the Arabs, Mike. You'll get us all into terrible trouble."<sup>135</sup> Indirect racist jokes such as these were too tame for Glaswegian comedian Jerry Sadowitz, for whom "political correctness was a particularly annoying bee in his bonnet." Hardee recalled that Sadowitz opened his one-man show at the Albany Empire in Deptford with the line, "Nelson Mandela: What a cunt!"<sup>136</sup>

<sup>129</sup> "War," *The Comic Strip Presents*, episode 2, aired 3 January 1983, Channel 4. An article in the *Independent* about *The Comic Strip Presents* episode "South Atlantic Raiders" later accused Peter Richardson of creating "the same comic types who thrived in the days of mother-in-law jokes"; K. Jackson, "A Strip off the Old Block," *Independent*, 2 February 1990. *Spitting Image* also employed problematic constructions of the Japanese, relating to the Nissan factory in Sunderland; *Spitting Image*, season 1, episode 4, aired 1 April 1982, ITV.

<sup>130</sup> Andy Medhurst, "Funny Games," *Sight and Sound*, 1 November 2000, 31. Davidson explains the evolution of his character, Chalky White, in his autobiography. Jim Davidson, *Close to the Edge* (London, 2001), 104–5.

<sup>131</sup> Comedy has often been driven by this desire. See Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 154; Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 182. Allen argues that this argument was used as an excuse to "feed prejudice" in *Attitude*, 84.

<sup>132</sup> Soan, discussion.

<sup>133</sup> These comedians repeatedly challenged what they perceived as the political silencing of their comedy. See Davidson, *Close to the Edge*, 170; Roy "Chubby" Brown, *Common as Muck!* (London, 2006), 286; Freddie Starr, *Unwrapped* (London, 2001), 77, 266. For analysis of the earlier sitcoms, see Gavin Schaffer, *The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television 1960–80* (Basingstoke, 2014), 178–230. For this turn in American comedy see "'They've Already Got a Comedian for a Governor,'" 260

<sup>134</sup> Allen, *Grow Up*, 249.

<sup>135</sup> "Oil," *The Young Ones*, episode 2, aired 16 November 1982, BBC 2.

<sup>136</sup> Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury's Birthday Cake and Other Autobiographical Confessions*, 145.

Sadowitz's overt transgression was well received by other alternative comedians, at least some of whom were disturbed by what they perceived as the stifling effect of political correctness. Smith recalls that it was "hard not to sit back and applaud" as Sadowitz restored "cunt" into the alternative comedy lexicon.<sup>137</sup> The word, Hardee has explained, had become taboo amid concerns about sexism in the early 1980s.<sup>138</sup> But Smith's applause at its restoration was possibly also motivated by the re-opening of racial comedy that Sadowitz promised with his Mandela joke and later material about Pakistanis.<sup>139</sup> Smith himself had been forced by antiracist heckling to stop performing a poem in a Caribbean accent called Rastafarian Wordsworth, a routine he later conceded linked his material in an undesirable way to "rabid comedian Jim Davidson."<sup>140</sup> This kind of association—taken alongside Sadowitz's Pakistani jokes and the continuing performance of racist material at the Comedy Store and elsewhere<sup>141</sup>—make it difficult to construct alternative comedy as offering a clear or consistent message on race, especially given the very limited number of black and Asian comedians on the circuit.<sup>142</sup> Undermined by ambivalent values, alternative comedians struggled to articulate truly distinct values or offer "any clean-cut break" from what had gone before.<sup>143</sup>

### ALTERNATIVE ELITISM AND THE IDEA OF A RADICAL MAINSTREAM

Alternative comedy's failure to set itself apart in terms of values was compounded by work practices that resonated strongly with Thatcherism. Arthur Smith quipped, "What could be more Thatcherite than a stand-up comedian? Self-employed, un-unionised, unsupported by any namby-pamby arts grant, he has got on his bike and got a gig."<sup>144</sup> Pioneers of the alternative scene, Double argues, became "shoe-string impresarios," building up new comedy venues in pubs and clubs, which succeeded or failed according to simple business logic.<sup>145</sup> This was a reality, which ultimately undermined Melville's interest in the scene. She recalls, "It's always bothered me because I do support subsidised theatre ... but this was commercial really."<sup>146</sup> As they strived for success, comics frequently harnessed tools that Thatcher's government put in place to encourage local entrepreneurship, particularly the Enterprise Allowance

<sup>137</sup> Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 189.

<sup>138</sup> Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury's Birthday Cake and Other Autobiographical Confessions*, 90.

<sup>139</sup> Hardee argued that by restoring Pakistani jokes Sadowitz was "breaking a real comedy taboo." Sadowitz, he recalls, performed a "short-changing shopkeeper called Raj ... by wrapping a towel around his head and shouting in a Peter Seller's style cod Indian accent." *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>140</sup> Smith was initially affronted by this silencing, complaining, "It's acceptable for a black comic to do gags about white people—impressions of them dancing—but the other way round, you get yourself into trouble." Smith in Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!*, 223. In his autobiography, however, he argued that he accepted the challenge and "never did the joke again." See Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 154–55.

<sup>141</sup> See Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 50, 269.

<sup>142</sup> Pauline Melville argues that it is difficult to remember *The Comic Strip* as an antiracist space "because they didn't have any black people performing." Melville discussion. For analysis, see Small, "Serious T'ing."

<sup>143</sup> Littlewood and Pickering, "Heard the One About," 298.

<sup>144</sup> Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 158. See also Lee, *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*, 5.

<sup>145</sup> Double, *Stand Up*, 192.

<sup>146</sup> Melville, discussion.

Scheme.<sup>147</sup> Many pioneers of the alternative scene became successful businessmen with their own television companies, like Julian Clary and Jack Dee, while Ward's Comedy Store remains a global brand.<sup>148</sup> Success for alternative comedians' television companies was supported by Conservative Party changes to broadcasting. The commitment placed on Channel 4 (and to a lesser extent the BBC) to fill schedules with content from independent companies created a rich market for cutting-edge alternative output.<sup>149</sup>

The fact, however, that Thatcherism created an atmosphere where alternative comedy could thrive did not in and of itself make Thatcherites of the alternative comedians. Indeed, this very idea tells us something about the myth of Thatcherism, which was not, after all, the sole font of enterprising behavior in this period and did not culturally colonize the whole of British society.<sup>150</sup> It could reasonably be argued that alternative comedians simply used the weapons at their disposal to make their way in 1980s Britain, creating a body of work that challenged Thatcherism while operating in its midst. But the alternative comedians' failure to articulate oppositional values, alongside their thriving in the Thatcherite work climate, suggests a different conclusion. Specifically, it seems arguable that alternative comedy did not so much make an anti-Thatcherite challenge as reflect the broader failure of the left in this period to do so—a reality that becomes clearer amid an exploration of the social elitism of alternative comedy.

Despite their claims of breaking down social elitism, the alternative comedians emerged almost exclusively from university-educated, middle-class communities, the same breeding ground as their comic predecessors in the satire boom—and many punk bands.<sup>151</sup> Breaking through at the start of their careers, much was made of non-elite backgrounds amid the argument that alternative comedy was rescuing British humor from Oxbridge-dominated cliques. Writing about *The Comic Strip Presents* for *Time Out*, Martyn Auty championed the new stable of comedy in these terms: “Unlike ‘Beyond the Fringe’ and Python, when the Comic Strip enlarges its cast for a show they’re not finding odd jobs for old college chums from Oxbridge. Because, thank God, none of them went there.”<sup>152</sup>

In the same spirit, Stewart Lee celebrated the alternative comedy scene as the “egalitarian Polytechnic of laughs.”<sup>153</sup> *The Young Ones* railed against the elitism of British society, especially in the episode “Bambi,” in which students from “Footlights College” were presented as laughable, hideous, and corrupt, and Sayle explained that public school and Oxbridge education ensured a “top job” and an “interest in perverse sexual practices.”<sup>154</sup> In stand-up, similar battle lines were drawn. Richard

<sup>147</sup> Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 123.

<sup>148</sup> Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!*, 10. Chester argues that *Spitting Images*' commercial triumph was “one of the industrial success stories of Thatcher's Britain.” Chester, *Tooth and Claw*, 144.

<sup>149</sup> See Beaumont, “‘New Times’ Television?”; Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 128.

<sup>150</sup> See Beaumont, “‘New Times’ Television?,” 70–73. See also Stephen Brooke, “Living in ‘New Times’: Historicizing 1980s Britain,” *History Compass* 12, no. 1 (January 2014): 20–32.

<sup>151</sup> On the social backgrounds of comedians of the satire boom, see Wagg, “You've Never Had it So Silly,” 255; Sandbrook, *Never Had it So Good*, 591. On the social origins of punks see Worley, “Shot by Both Sides,” 337–38.

<sup>152</sup> Martyn Auty, “The Comic Strip Presents,” *Time Out*, 8 September 1983, 11–12.

<sup>153</sup> Lee, *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*, 3. See also Merton, *Only When I Laugh*, 87.

<sup>154</sup> “Bambi,” *The Young Ones*, episode 1, aired 8 May 1984, BBC 2.



Herring, then in the Oxford University Revue, remembers being set up to fail by alternative comedians at the *Gilded Balloon* at the Edinburgh festival: “the minute we came on, they booed us off—it was a wall of sound.”<sup>155</sup> For many alternative comedians, this challenge was politically important. Sayle recalled his disgust when Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie, and Emma Thompson were asked to play the “Footlights College” roles in *The Young Ones*. He remembers thinking, “these are the enemy ... these are the devil and you are inviting them on to my show.” Tellingly though, Sayle admitted, “Nobody else knew what I was going on about.”<sup>156</sup>

Given the university backgrounds of nearly all the alternative comedians, this hostility to Oxbridge elitism seems somewhat hypocritical, especially in context of the debt that alternative comedians owed to *Monty Python*. To Lloyd Peters, the (non-Oxbridge) university backgrounds of the alternatives led to a “chip-on-the-shoulder envy,” which was articulated as antielitism.<sup>157</sup> Mayall recalled this complex position: “we secretly all thought that the Pythons were great, and half of us were redbrick and university anyway.”<sup>158</sup> Lines of antielitist challenge in this context were necessarily very blurred. Mayall himself had toured with the Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company in 1978, and a considerable number of pioneers from the alternative scene were from Oxbridge.<sup>159</sup> On the first night of the Comedy Store, Clive Anderson, Thompson, and Sandi Toksvig all performed, an Oxbridge contribution that continued throughout the history of alternative comedy writ large.<sup>160</sup> In this atmosphere, Oxbridge backgrounds and family wealth were “swept under the carpet,” something to be embarrassed about.<sup>161</sup> Hardee recalled that Elton and Richardson reinvented themselves as working-class lads, masking families that were “well-heeled” and “well connected.”<sup>162</sup> Lee remembers being celebrated because of his ability to “show these Oxbridge wankers,” only to have to confess his own Oxford education.<sup>163</sup>

For some comics, such as Wood, the barely masked elitism of the alternative scene was alienating.<sup>164</sup> Hardee felt “frowned upon” because his comedy was not “cerebral,” while his colleague Soan recalls the scene as “smug and up its own arse.”<sup>165</sup> Looking at some of the output of alternative comedy on television, it is easy to see how it could be intimidating and alienating. Facing BBC uncertainty about the program’s “grossness,” *The Young Ones*’s writing team defended their work with reference to *Volpone*, *Tartuffe*, and Aristophanes.<sup>166</sup> Jim Moir, the BBC’s head of variety, was reassured personally by Mayall on this subject, who compared his

<sup>155</sup> Cited from Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!*, 240.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Sayle, *The Guest Stars of “The Young Ones,”* directed by Richard Adamson (BBC DVD, 2007).

<sup>157</sup> Peters, “The Roots of Alternative Comedy?,” 10.

<sup>158</sup> Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 95.

<sup>159</sup> Jon Plowman recalls Rik Mayall’s presence on this tour; Plowman discussion.

<sup>160</sup> See Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 34, and Stewart, *Bang!*, 251.

<sup>161</sup> Double, *Stand Up!*, 190.

<sup>162</sup> Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury’s Birthday Cake and Other Autobiographical Confessions*, 108.

<sup>163</sup> Lee, *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*, 14.

<sup>164</sup> Neil Brandwood, *Victoria Wood: The Biography* (London, 2003), 270.

<sup>165</sup> Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury’s Birthday Cake and Other Autobiographical Confessions*, 108. Soan, discussion.

<sup>166</sup> “The Young Ones, A Paper on the Intention of the Programme.”



work to a “passage in Longinus.”<sup>167</sup> On screen, *The Young Ones* included parodies of Anton Chekhov, while French and Saunders’s sketch shows famously ridiculed the films of Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman.<sup>168</sup> In the context of these kinds of comedy outputs, it is unsurprising that some mainstream entertainers lost the nuance of whether the alternative comedians were from Oxbridge or other universities. To Starr, they were all just an “Oxbridge mob.”<sup>169</sup> But within alternative communities themselves the idea that they represented non-elites was far from a joke. Roland Muldoon recalls that alternative comedians were “in love with the notion of the mass, and the people in opposition.”<sup>170</sup> Indeed, for comedians like Soan, performing for the working classes has remained a key part of his “mission.”<sup>171</sup>

Whether this love for the working classes was reciprocated was another matter. Brand has observed that alternative comedians tended to perform in front of people exactly like themselves, “nice, middle-class intelligent people who were prepared to listen,” while Plowman similarly remembers alternative comedy’s audience as “a small, left-leaning metropolitan elite.”<sup>172</sup> Outside of this comfort zone, the efforts of alternative comedians to challenge audiences could seem patronizing and unethical. Wood expressed her discomfort at the tendency of comedians to look down on the public. “It’s patronising to try and change people when they’ve paid £6.50 to come and see you.”<sup>173</sup> Rob Newman concurred: “For all their love of the proletariat,” he noted, alternative comedians’ descriptions of working people were like “patricians’ descriptions of the mob.”<sup>174</sup> True to the left’s track record on cultural engagement, alternative comedians frequently found themselves estranged from their audiences, whose attitudes and aspirations did not chime with their political worldview.

Comedians were frequently disappointed with the apolitical attitude of their public. Tony Allen recalls telling an audience in a working men’s club that its atmosphere felt like “Margaret Thatcher’s living room.” “Sometimes up here,” he complained, “I feel like an avant-garde redcoat.”<sup>175</sup> Frequently uninspired by the realities of working-class tastes and values, alternative comedians tended to offer a middle-class critique for middle-class audiences.<sup>176</sup> When it came to capturing the imaginations of Britain’s broader population they were found wanting. While second-generation (much less political) alternative output such as *The Young Ones* and *Bottom* was popular nationally, the majority of Britons, especially outside

<sup>167</sup> Weekly Programme Review Meeting, 13/6/84, WAC. In Mayall’s obituary, one author claimed that *Bottom* had been written as a “cruder cousin to Godot.” Chris Maume, *Independent*, 10 June 2014.

<sup>168</sup> “Demolition.”

<sup>169</sup> Starr, *Unwrapped!*, 256.

<sup>170</sup> Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill My Mother-in-Law?*, 218.

<sup>171</sup> To this end, Soan is now leading a new comedy enterprise in Germany, “with the working-class people of Leipzig.” Soan, discussion.

<sup>172</sup> Jo Brand in Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!*, 185. Plowman, discussion. See also McSmith, *No Such Thing*, 144 and 148.

<sup>173</sup> Brandwood, *Victoria Wood*, 135.

<sup>174</sup> Rob Newman in Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!*, 196.

<sup>175</sup> See Allen, *Attitude*, 93 and 111. “Redcoats” were traditional entertainers who worked in the Butlins holiday resorts.

<sup>176</sup> Leftist disappointment with working class aspiration has been noted in other contexts in British cultural history. See Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture*, 4; Black, *The Political Culture of the Left*, 190.

London, were generally uninspired by alternative comedy, and continued to get their laughs elsewhere.<sup>177</sup>

Stewart has noted the “remarkable ... resilience of traditional mainstream family entertainment in the face of the challenge” of alternative comedy, highlighting the continuing popularity of traditional sitcom *Terry and June* and sketch duo Cannon and Ball.<sup>178</sup> Even television executives, it seems, were taken aback by the ability of mainstream acts to hold their audience. When the BBC decided to pull the plug on *Little and Large* (broadcasting what was to be its final season at 5:15 on a Saturday evening) it was forced to backtrack in the face of unexpectedly high viewing figures. Plowman recalls how a contrite Moir, who had taken the pair out to lunch to explain their cancellation, was allegedly forced to take them out again to beg them to continue.<sup>179</sup>

Arguably, it was these comedians who had the ear of the majority of the British public, who understood the mood of the times, and who frequently articulated popular discontent. Roy “Chubby” Brown, considered beyond the pale among alternative comedians because of his racist and sexist material, argued that it was performers such as himself that truly understood ordinary Britons, who “used humour as a way of getting away from the miserable realities of their lives.”<sup>180</sup> New-Left playwright Trevor Griffiths similarly understood the continuation of mainstream success in the 1980s as rooted in the class bonds between comics and their communities. Discussing the *bête noire* of alternative comedians, Bernard Manning, Griffiths explained the comedian’s popularity as rooted in his closeness to his audience: “he loves those people anyway not just because they laughed but because he knows they’re going home to two-up two-downs.”<sup>181</sup> For Griffiths, Manning’s success needs to be understood in these terms. “He lives there, red brick and shit, and he cares.”<sup>182</sup>

This proximity to, and understanding of, audiences seems to have ensured the continuing popularity of comedians like Manning and “Chubby” Brown, who offended the chattering classes at The Comedy Store but filled theatres week-in, week-out—speaking a language that better reflected their audiences’ desire to rebel than many alternative comedians ever could.<sup>183</sup> In this way, Brown’s comedic contribution has been described by Medhurst as “a rallying point for resisting globalisation” and “an indispensable tool which English people use in recognising, understanding, and placing themselves.”<sup>184</sup> While this kind of comedy was variously dismissed as

<sup>177</sup> For example, the top television comedy program in 1981 and 1982 was *The Benny Hill Show*. No alternative comedy programs charted in the top ten in any year of the decade, while mainstream comedies repeatedly did. See Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board chart records, <http://www.barb.co.uk/resources/tv-facts/tv-since-1981/1981/top10>.

<sup>178</sup> Stewart, *Bang!*, 252–53.

<sup>179</sup> Plowman, discussion.

<sup>180</sup> Brown, *Common as Muck!*, 182. For analysis of Brown’s comedic contribution and his role in British society see Medhurst, *A National Joke*, 187–203.

<sup>181</sup> Griffiths, discussion.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> “Chubby” Brown described the period between the late 1980s and the late 1990s as a “golden era” during which he sold out the Palladium, played seven nights a week over three-month summer seasons in Blackpool, and sold record quantities of his videos. See Brown, *Common as Muck!*, 320, 333, 335.

<sup>184</sup> Medhurst, *A National Joke*, 196 and 199.

outdated, racist, and sexist by the alternatives, people still flocked to hear comedians with whom they identified. Arguably, it was this stable of comedy that really represented opposition to Thatcher's Britain as far as the majority was concerned, articulating working-class struggles of poverty and disaffection, and offering a "culture of consolation" amid the onslaught of Thatcherism. Unpalatable though it may have been to alternative comedians, at least Manning—to Griffiths's mind—was "doing something" for his community.<sup>185</sup> This way of thinking re-focuses the concept of radical comedy away from London's Comedy Store and the 1980s, linking it to older tradition, such as the work of 1940s and 1950s comedian Frank Randle.<sup>186</sup> Viewed within this longer traditional of working-class stand-up, alternative comedians' work could seem patronizing and out-of-touch to many. When he criticized Manning, Smith received a letter that told him, "[Manning] made everyone laugh at his bawdy type of genuine comedy that we understood. And what have you done? ... You and your lot have never made any of our lot laugh."<sup>187</sup>

Despite their attacks on Oxbridge, most alternative comedians perpetuated an elitist approach to comedy, which only resonated with a small minority of people. Even in London, Hardee claimed, his audiences knew the work of Davidson much better than that of Eddie Izzard.<sup>188</sup> While speaking to a minority was no obstacle to good comedy, perhaps it was even a prerequisite of it, as a tool of opposition it was a nonstarter. Mainstream comedy, with its own ways of expressing disaffection and the desire to rebel, retained its popularity among working-class communities, and it was only the largely apolitical group of second-generation alternative comedians that came anywhere close to capturing the imaginations of most Britons. This second generation discarded alternative comedy's political edge, and often its anti-racist and antisexist credentials, attempting to disguise urban intellectual roots in search of mass audiences. Looking for success, Soan recalls, comedians went "from being Labour to telling fucking dirty gags in pubs."<sup>189</sup> Ultimately, as the values-based political critique offered by early alternative comedians receded, there was little that differentiated alternative comedy from longer British and American traditions.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, even those alternative comedians who wanted to oppose Thatcher struggled to communicate their message beyond a small minority (of people who mostly agreed with them anyway). Alternative comedy was, in any case, a difficult route for a political challenge, especially when its modes of operation were uncomfortably aligned with the Thatcherite environment and vulnerable to incorporation within it. Where comedy reached beyond London and resonated with the concerns and feelings of the British working classes, it did have the potential to vocalize and galvanize opposition (or at least to boost morale) in a way that challenges historical certainty

<sup>185</sup> Griffiths highlighted the amount of charity work taken on by Manning. Griffiths, discussion.

<sup>186</sup> Griffiths is currently completing a play about Randle, provisionally titled "Frank's Dick."

<sup>187</sup> Smith, *My Name Is Daphne Fairfax*, 182.

<sup>188</sup> Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury's Birthday Cake and Other Autobiographical Confessions*, 280.

<sup>189</sup> Soan, discussion.

about its limited political potential. In the 1980s, this tendency was sometimes evident in mainstream, or traditional, performances, just as it was often absent in the alternative scene—a reality that problematizes the idea of 1979 as a new dawn for British comedy, especially when we consider that alternative comedic treatments of race and gender were never wholly progressive. In the end, alternative comedy was neither a new genre nor a reliable force of opposition. Despite the best efforts of radical, first-generation alternative comedians, Thatcher's political project continued apace as Britain's left struggled to articulate an alternative.