

Animating Irony: making sense of irony in online and offline political movements

On May 9th, 2022, days before murdering ten black shoppers at a community supermarket in Buffalo, NY, Payton Gendron posted about his planned attack on the messaging app, Discord: “Honestly, this entire thing is a meme, I’m actually just doing a high quality shitpost” (Hall 2022). ‘Shitposting’ has become part of the vernacular of a range of online communities, as a term for irreverent, sometimes even playfully surreal jokes. By analogising racist mass murder with flippant internet humour, Gendron’s statement presents a disorienting mix of irreverence and deadly seriousness. Yet this coupling, we suggest, conforms to a wider turn towards irony within contemporary politics, in which ambivalence and irreverence mesh with compelling conviction.

This ironic orientation has played a major role in online, radical-right communities. But it is not confined to such spaces. Irony drives the politically fluid vigilantism of the hacktivist collective Anonymous (Coleman 2014). It guides how Southern Europeans reassert first-world status or reimagine once-promised futures in the face of austerity and economic collapse (Pipyrou 2014). It characterises how young, displaced Syrians in Beirut navigate and contest their marginality (Saleh and Zakar 2018). It enables Indian factory workers to voice “anti-communal perspectives on public life” at a time of rampant sectarianism (Sanchez 2016: 296). Through all this, irony also generates what Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 31) call intensities: Affects, energy, forms of motion and momentum. Such intensities can play a major role in *animating* people’s beliefs – transforming them from propositions to convictions, investing them with a sense of possibility, and compelling adherents to act.

We write as a multi-disciplinary collective, interested in tracing and theorising irony across lively and diverse political contexts: Black American abolitionist literature; contemporary #BlackLivesMatter activism in Ghana; the so-called ‘alt-right’; the veneration of the Greek socialist party PASOK; and the gun-loving, millenarian Boogaloo Bois. The pivotal role of irony across such varied settings speaks to the growing role it plays in contemporary politics—a role, we suggest, which has gone largely under-appreciated.

Tracing common dynamics across varied political projects, we argue that the political potency of irony is twofold: Irony works as an orienting analytic, enabling people to imagine common-cause and possible futures within a radically uncertain world; irony also generates surpluses and intensities in excess of understanding, cultivating embodied tensions that can become animating forces. We attend to each of these potentials, in turn.

The embrace of irony takes shape against an unstable, slippery present. Daniel Knight (2021: 4) describes the sense of vertigo that emerges as ‘crisis’ transforms from being a disjunctive event to a chronic condition. Under such circumstances, existential projects become radically destabilised, as it grows increasingly difficult to identify historical trajectories, diagnose political ills, identify avenues for viable action, and plot a course within a reeling world. In response, irony enables people to critique the crippling political and economic restructuring of their worlds, to navigate an uncertain present, and to reorient toward the future.

This existential instability may be especially characteristic of late modernity. For years, anthropologists have alerted us to the “strange evacuation of the temporal frame of the ‘near future’” emerging from the logic of contemporary economic governance (Guyer 2007: 409) coupled with entrenched inequality, growing social complexity, and the breakdown of established political certainties (Eriksen 2016: 3-4). These same conditions not only make it harder to imagine plausible near-futures, but also make it harder to trace political cause-and-effect, leading to a corresponding evacuation of mid-scale analysis within socio-political imaginaries (Crockford 2021: 187). Many campaigners, activists, and political leaders are finding it increasingly difficult to grasp how they might act effectively, and to imagine forms of social transformation that do not demand total upheaval. Yet, experiences of existential vertigo, and the challenges such experiences pose for the formation of viable political imaginaries, are not necessarily new. This is especially true for those whose worlds have long been subject to the predations and disruptions of modernity.

Precarious conviction

To understand how irony offers a route back into political analysis and conviction when the ground has fallen away we can follow a thread between the writings of Black American anti-slavery activists in the mid-1800s and BlackLivesMatter activists in Ghana today. In both cases, we contend that irony becomes politically effective by opening up a space of committed indeterminacy. In situations where those who invoke values of freedom, collective struggle, and human dignity are often also complicit in undermining these, irony works to reveal the contingencies and partiality behind such values, without disavowing these outright. In doing so, irony reveals, and operates at the level of, what Michael Carrithers calls “sub-certainties” (Carrithers 2012: 55).

Irony is not always recognised as a hallmark of anti-slavery literature. Many of the best-known works, like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, were written in a sentimental mode. These works made frequent appeal to readers’ sympathies to advance the anti-slavery cause. Such appeals were premised on decidedly unironic values like interpersonal transparency and sincerity. But irony and sincerity were not always easily separable, and irony was often deployed to advance sincere argument. In his famous speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”, abolitionist Frederick Douglass rehearses familiar arguments against slavery with a tone of exasperation, insisting that the pro-slavery side recognised the contradictions in their own reasoning but persisted in their views nonetheless. Given this situation, Douglass argues that slavery calls for “scorching irony, not convincing argument”: “Had I the ability, and could reach the nation’s ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke” (2013 [1852]: 36).

For Douglass, like many abolitionists, irony meant verbalising hypocrisy, and anti-slavery activists relished exposing the ironies inherent to Democratic and Christian arguments for slavery. A young Søren Kierkegaard acknowledges the structural similarities between irony and hypocrisy, observing that both “have an external side that is opposite to the internal”

(Kierkegaard 2013 [1841]: 256). The U.S. slavery debates saw accusations of hypocrisy hurled in all directions: At both enslavers in the South and abolitionists from the North. And insofar as abolitionist anti-hypocrisy remained invested in individual sincerity, it often got lost in the noise of ad hominem accusation and counteraccusation. But the records of the slavery debates also contain an irony that looks beyond personal, ethical incongruence to perform a materialist critique of slavery and racial capitalist exploitation.

This materialist irony features in the period's anti-slavery fiction, especially that composed by Black abolitionist authors who challenged the premises of the dominant sentimental mode. In works like *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*, the only novel by the formerly enslaved author and activist William Wells Brown, published in 1853, or Douglass's foray into fiction with *The Heroic Slave*, abolitionist authors employed a materialist irony that highlighted the tension between different (abolitionist and pro-slavery) ideals, and underlying economic and political investments. In doing so these authors also developed an innovative, ironic poetics: Their formal experiments implicate readers in irony's dynamics of recognition and repudiation. They employ a shifting and destabilising irony that cuts along lines of race and class, pointing to complicity and complacency in the white American readership through unexpected and unrelenting twists of plot, genre, and tone. Such authors worked to compel readers to recognise the injustices of slavery, and to support the abolitionist cause, without allowing them to forget their ongoing complicity in relations of slavery and find a pure identification.

In this mode, irony can work not only to resist simplistic moral identifications or disavowals, but to assemble and orient political communities as well. Irony produces a centripetal force that can gather collectives. This orienting capacity is deftly deployed by Ghanaian activists, who play with the irony and ambiguity of invoking the BlackLivesMatter cause in Ghana—a majority-Black nation—to point to both global patterns of racial injustice and local political oppression.

The murder of George Floyd, on May 25, 2020, sparked a global protest movement and declarations of solidarity from around the world. Ghanaian President, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, was one of the first African leaders to issue a public statement on social media criticising the continued hate and racism suffered by African Americans. He posted it on Twitter with the accompanying hashtag #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd, and the statement received international praise. It was accompanied by other statements from Ghanaian officials inviting African Americans to visit or return to Ghana, as part of the country's Year of Return—launched by Nana Akufo-Addo in 2019 at an official ceremony to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to Jamestown, Virginia. Barbara Oteng Gyasi, Ghana's tourism minister, said at a televised ceremony: "We continue to open our arms and invite all our brothers and sisters home" and Akwasi Agyeman, chief executive of Ghana Tourism Authority, announced: "We want to remind our kin over there that there is a place you can escape to" (quoted in Paquette 2020).

The image of Ghana as a place of escape, however, sits at odds with the experiences of many citizens themselves. Nana Akufo-Addo's declaration of solidarity with Black lives in the US asserted the false belief that "[p]ostcolonial Ghana, with its mostly Black population, is... distant from the direct legacies of slavery, as well as from global processes of racism" (Pierre 2013:

163). In June 2020, an activist group in Ghana, Economic Fighters League, organised a vigil called #AccraBlackOut in solidarity with BlackLivesMatter while also using the event to highlight the Ghanaian lives that had been violently taken at home. They were critical of the lack of accountability of the police and military under the Akufo-Addo government. Incidents highlighted by the protesters included the murder of a homeless man with mental health issues, who was gunned down by a military soldier during the COVID-19 lockdown. The vigil had barely started when police and military showed up, carrying sticks and guns, to disrupt the peaceful gathering. One of the organisers, Ernesto Yeboah, was taken into custody. When others continued to the police station to protest Yeboah's abduction, the police responded by firing shots into the air to disperse the group.

In this context, BlackLivesMatter takes on a dramatically different meaning for activists themselves. By invoking the movement in a Black African nation, activists refuse the encompassing utopianism of an Afropolitan project that prioritises a class-privileged position (Adjepong 2021), in favour of highlighting blackness as *both* a category of hope and of oppression. In this latter guise, blackness emerges through the infrastructures that sustain contemporary forms of global inequality and extraction, and through the use of unaccountable police and military violence in Ghana—which both echoes the tactics of former colonial elites as well as current injustices in the US. As Michael Lambek (2021: 35) writes: “Acknowledging inconsistency can manifest as irony”. Here, BlackLivesMatter becomes an ironic rallying call, poised between sincere conviction and a way of pointing to experiences which clearly contradict this conviction.

Nana Akufo-Addo's statement on George Floyd's murder enabled activists to highlight the irony of the Ghanaian government's doublespeak, and to challenge political authority. For example, in response to the police-military disruption of the #AccraBlackOut vigil, political cartoonist Bright Ackwerh tweeted: “It is... very ironic that non politician[s] and non-affluent Ghanaians living in Ghana also get a special kind of strong armed treatment from the local police force”. Activist Nana Ama Agyemang Asante (2020) wrote: “If we mean it when we say Black lives matter everywhere, then we shouldn't only hold racist police and white supremacy to account for the murder and dehumanization of Black people in the diaspora. We should hold Ghanaian police and security forces to the same standard”. The additional question regarding who benefitted from the Ghanaian government's invitation to African Americans was not lost on others, who noted that: “the Year of Return inevitably revolved around the black cultural elite, and people with the economic means to travel and attend these events” and that its “celebrations will primarily revolve around politicians, state institutions and a number of cultural centres based in Accra and other major cities, removed from a majority of the populace” (Antwiwaa 2020). While both the government and activists expressed solidarity with George Floyd, it was the latter that paid attention to the situated legacies of police and military violence on Ghanaian lives, and to social class. For many less-privileged Ghanaians, the stakes of anti-Black violence were not just about public declarations of support but also a matter of life and death (Smith 2015: 384-386).

In both anti-slavery literature and among Ghanaian activists, then, irony works to create new political ground even as it resists delineating this ground in precise terms. If irony is a scorching force, what it clears away are too-easy certainties and identifications. Through opening a space

for forms of uncertainty, ambivalence, and partial commitment, irony can nonetheless allow people to take aim at political ills, and stand for *something*, in the face of existential vertigo—even if it is not precisely clear what this *something* is. In this sense, irony also produces the forms of motion to gather and orient political collectives.

These collective potentials sit in contrast to how the political force of irony is typically theorised, where irony is often presented as a more inward and responsive disposition. Among social scientists, the work of Richard Rorty on liberal irony looms large. For Rorty (1989: 73), irony provides a register for sustaining a belief in progress and justice, without subscribing to the totalising strictures of any “final vocabulary”. Rorty’s liberal ironist is someone who is always reflexively interrogating their own ideals and attachments, even as they tentatively strive to enact them. In embracing irony as a core political value, Rorty reimagines political life as an ultimately personal affair—grounded not in collective ideologies or values, but in the individual capacity for rational scepticism. Anthropologists have highlighted how such ironic dispositions allow individuals to question, challenge, or complicate powerful, received ‘truths’, and to cultivate an inner space of ethical freedom (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Lambek 2010; Steinmüller 2013). Linda Hutcheon (1994), however, warns against such celebrations of irony, arguing that irony cannot form new social ties, it can only consolidate pre-existing bonds. Indeed, anthropologists have also highlighted the “complicity in irony” (Fernandez and Huber 2001: 5), in which irony reconciles individuals to unjust circumstances by making critique and freedom into a personal project. Yet, in its insistence on clearing and occupying unstable ground, we contend that irony also contains the potential for gathering incipient collectives, oriented not towards clear-cut convictions but towards sub-certainties that offer speculative routes forward, in a world in tumult.

In this guise, irony can be an animating political force. Yet, as the case of Payton Gendron and the wider online radical right remind us, this potential for animation is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, irony enables those fighting for justice in an uncertain world to gather tentative collectives and make ambivalent claims on others. But, on the other hand, irony can launder inconsistency, insincerity, and even outright hate as speculation, simulation, or play.

Virtual conviction

By playing with incongruity between text and subtext, or between points of view, irony provides new ways of making meaning. In the examples above, irony was used to make sense of a fraught, contradictory world. But the power of irony is not simply semantic. Irony can provoke strong feelings, ranging from laughter, to disorientation, to the camaraderie that comes from being ‘in’ on the joke. More generally, however, the workings of irony can also evoke a sense of vital potential. Poised between avowal and disavowal, between a commitment to available ideas and structures, and their refusal, irony opens a liminal space. This space is suffused with potentiality—it exists beyond what is, without collapsing into negation.

We find that this space of liminal potential can become particularly charged among political movements that have significantly taken shape online. In highlighting online movements, we do not draw an ontological distinction between online and offline worlds (Boellstorff 2016). Instead, we attempt to trace how irony's intensities are often amplified online. Such amplification occurs in three, intertwined ways: Through the production and play of an excess of meaning; through a sense of freedom and the evasion of responsibility; and through memetic repetition within bounded communities.

Internet culture is endlessly varied, continually changing, and deeply multifaceted. Yet many online circles trade heavily in a variety of ironic humour and representation, which collapses any clear distinction between sincerity and insincerity. In such contexts, irony becomes virtual, in a double sense. On the one hand, as multiplying orders of simulacra, in which both things and representations are reproduced ad infinitum. Ideas, jokes, memes, images are quickly and prolifically reworked, recontextualised, reproduced, and responded-to, collapsing any notion of authenticity or originality. On the other hand, these layerings of the real and unreal (or the surreal), the sincere and insincere can generate a sense of excess meaning, affect, and possibility, spilling over into the virtual—in the Deleuzian sense, where the virtual is a domain of potentiality that generates and always exceeds the actual. Together, these virtual potentials are emerging as an animating force for new social movements.

The foment of this chaotic potential online is inextricably intertwined with the rise of the alt-right. The alt-right began from a reactionary backlash in online fan culture, especially among video-game devotees, self-styled 'gamers', against the perceived incursions of 'politically correct' liberals—almost all of whom also happened to be women. In short order, and with the strategic intervention of powerful vested interests, these online misogynists joined forces with white supremacism to form a neoreactionary movement that made substantial incursions into the political mainstream. Like former US President, Donald Trump, the identity of the alt-right was based on a reverse victimisation narrative. Also like Trump, they used ironic humour as a licence to partake in what Klaus Theweleit (1987: 432) speaking about proto-fascism called an "edenic freedom from responsibility", and to backpedal when confronted with the consequences of their reckless speech.

Today, the alt-right movement has lost significant currency. But the underlying patterns that led to its political mainstreaming have helped shape a range contemporary of reactionary, radical, and conspiracist online communities—from misogynistic incels, who blame women for a lack of romantic success, to the network of conspiracy theories known as QAnon. Such movements continue to take shape through the use of peculiar linguistic registers, which share an emphasis on instability, subversion, and the denial of responsibility. There is no reason to believe that these patterns will vanish any time soon.

While the internet has now swallowed us all, the demographics of some of these spaces continue to aggressively perpetuate extreme stereotypes—in both words and images—that reinforce the hegemonic norms of white, straight, geek masculinity, which have long dominated internet culture. From the perspective of technologically literate white men in developed countries, the internet has always been an 'anything goes' playground, especially those parts of

the internet that offer relative anonymity, such as discussion forums and image boards like Reddit and 4chan.

In addition to their relative anonymity, such places are often distinguished by a rapid pace of discussion, where participation demands an awareness of a variety of protocols and conventions. These spaces are designed to be highly niche, supporting tight-knit communities that imagine themselves—with their arcane conventions—as set apart from the ‘real world’. These qualities contribute to an accumulation of intensities, a collective effervescence where these spaces become sacred, or ‘comfy’, in 4chan vernacular. Yet, since it is easier, and more fun, to be a ‘hater’, these spaces also tend to be deeply nihilistic. Although these qualities can have the effect of undermining the very foundation of any positive expressions of identity or of belief on the part of any individual speaker, the community as a whole cleaves to this toxicity.

Language not only conveys information; it also marks and maintains community boundaries. On platforms such as 4chan, repeated registers, references, and jokes, create the in-group through othering. To participate in such communities does not require one to ‘believe’ in any specific ideology. Cultural commentators have long remarked that online, absent any additional contextual cues, sincere and ironic expressions of belief are effectively indistinguishable. This premise—dubbed ‘Poe’s law’ (Ellis 2017)—is knowingly exploited: As a framework for humour; as a means of baiting and baffling observers and opponents; and as a form of plausible deniability that disguises genuine belief.

To really participate in this edenic freedom from responsibility requires an understanding of the local rules of the language game. Part of the effervescent pleasure in participation comes from the experience of being part of a living language community, which is always evolving through the innovation of new vernaculars. Once one has mastered these protocols, the game becomes similar to that of theatre improv: ‘Yes, and?’ Since nothing is true, then everything is possible. This inevitably leads to the feverish generation of new and evermore extreme memes. And since, for something to be a meme it needs to expand beyond its original niche, through a process of replication and iteration, irony becomes a medium for both the growth and spread of toxic ideas online.

This febrile ambivalence, fuelled by irony, not only shapes new radical movements, but doubles back to reshape responses to existing political possibilities, well beyond anglosphere discussion forums. In Greece, online discourse involves a swirl of mocking memes and dedicated trolling aimed at ridiculing PASOK, the first socialist party in government in Greek history.

Known by its acronym, The Panhellenic Socialist Movement was founded by Andreas Papandreou in 1974, at the end of a military dictatorship and the start of a period of *metapolitefsi*, or ‘regime change’—a term used initially to signify a transition to democracy. PASOK built a grassroots movement, including neighbourhood administrations, labour and student unions, championing an agenda of national independence, popular sovereignty, and social liberation. After a landslide victory in 1981, it led a systemic reform of wage, labour, and family laws, the pension, education, and health systems, and women’s rights. At its peak, PASOK was a dominant force in Greek politics, and commanded significant popular respect.

From the 1990s, however—and in line with other European social-democratic parties—PASOK shifted from being a grassroots, socialist party to a hierarchically-structured, neoliberal/centre-rightish party. The EU- and IMF-recommended neoliberal measures PASOK acceded to, following the 2010 financial crisis, prompted a sharp decline in living standards in Greece. PASOK was the governing party when the financial crisis broke, and its approval among voters tumbled. As its popularity and credibility crumbled, PASOK became an object of ridicule.

Today, PASOK is often met with laughter. Online memes present PASOK as an absurd cult—as a failing football club, cheered on by delusional hooligans, or as a dark power, venerated by occultists. Other memes, meanwhile, contrast bygone prosperity with the harshness of present conditions, ambivalently implying PASOK’s responsibility for both. Offline, such jokes come to life in PASOK-themed parties. Starting with an Athenian underground party in 2010, these parties cultivate a collective, kitschy feel: PASOK symbols provide kitsch decoration; 1990s trash-TV stars sing PASOK’s anthems; crowds dance amidst flying fake Greek banknotes (*pentochiliara*), printed with the face of Andreas Papandreou—PASOK’s founder and former leader. These parties deliriously enact an ironic image of the PASOK era, which ended when most revellers were still children, imagined as a time of easy living, cigars, whiskey, and women. Online and offline, these forms of ridicule reimagine PASOK expansively. It seems that PASOK is not just a political party, but a system of things, values, beliefs, concepts, and attitudes. In the words of a leaflet distributed by a local PASOK chapter at the party’s conference in 2019: “PASOK is the Universe”.

This prolific ridicule involves a decidedly ironic positioning. PASOK is simultaneously framed as an embodiment of collective hope and collective failure. In turn, those who mock PASOK position themselves ambivalently between identification and disavowal. Humour imbricates power-relations, and in the case of PASOK it seems that the cultural trauma of missed political chances and vision is reinscribed through laughter. The giddiness of laughter, or the embodied effervescence of PASOK parties, reanimates a sense of possibility in the face of deeply adverse political conditions. Yet this ambivalent attachment to past possibility also creates and deepens the present political impasse. Dealing with collective memories in an ironic way “threatens the formation of new political subjectivities” (Potts 2012: 234). The intensities which overflow from ironic humour and celebration help substitute play for politics.

Laughter plays a significant role “in fuelling discursive identity constructs and shaping a public’s view of its national self in times of change or transition” (Aitaki 2017: 69). The dominant narrative of the crisis remains that the responsibility lies with Greek people, and additionally, according to the neoliberal narrative, with PASOK (Kalyvas 2016). In response, the Greek people laugh ironically at PASOK—but ultimately, also at themselves, as those still living in Universe PASOK.

If the accumulation of ironic intensity can work to ambivalently reanimate failed futures and political horizons, it can also provide compelling charge to possibilities yet to come. Here, irony can drive forms of action, even where coherent ideology is lacking. This is the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the existence of the Boogaloo Bois, a loose, extremely online

network of pro-gun, anti-police activists who anticipate and desire a second American civil war. 'Boogaloo' is a shifting signifier, which can mean the participants or the war, and is often shortened to 'boog'. The name is a joke about poorly conceived sequels, styled after the 1984 breakdance movie: *Breakin 2: Electric Boogaloo*. References to "Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo" started on the pro-weapons board /k/ on 4chan, where participants regularly discuss preparing for a coming civilisational catastrophe. The Bois developed their own sensibility towards this millenarian event. For them, this expected new era will be violent. And it will be fun.

Having shifted from 4chan to Facebook, the Boogaloo Bois emerged into mainstream consciousness in January 2020 when they were seen at gun rights protests in Virginia. Next, they showed up in the summer as self-appointed 'security' at BlackLivesMatter demonstrations, before participating in the Capitol Siege in Washington DC on Jan 6, 2021. These disparate actions are animated by a belief among Boogaloo Bois that they are preparing for (or seeking to instigate) an armed confrontation with law enforcement, resulting in violent resistance on a mass scale.

Boogaloo Bois are known by their memes and their merch. A Hawaiian shirt with AR-15s among the floral print is their ironic emblem of the coming civil war. The word 'boogaloo' transmuted through typo-ridden, absurdist online discourse to 'big igloo' and 'big luau'. Hence the shirts. Boogaloo can be replaced with Icehouse Hoedown or Big Hootenanny or Spicy Fiesta or Baja Blast. The concept, not the word, is what matters. Such linguistic displacements are jokes, but they are also tactics and rituals. They evade censorship and scrutiny, while creating in-group affiliation. The conversion of a symbol that connotes civil war into a word that means a form of party is also a statement—a potent conflation of joy and violence. They expect that it will be a blast. Online trolls often declare they do what they do 'just for the lulz'; the Boogaloo Bois transform this into a credo of 'just for the boogaloo'. The act becomes for itself, with no further ideology or meaning. An impulse that seeks only chaos.

These intensities grow and take shape in an incoherent online world. Memes, slang, chats, perspectives, and merchandise proliferate wildly. Some disavow violent intentions—ironically or sincerely—some see war as inevitable, others are the 'bojahideen' who want to bring it on. Some imagine a second American revolution, others a race war, or a movement against law enforcement. Participants mash together disparate political stances. They make martyrs of people shot by police in standoffs, some associated with boogaloo and gun ownership, such as Duncan Lemp, others not, such as Breonna Taylor.

The incoherence and scale of this online world makes it hardly recognisable as a movement, much less an ideology, and yet, for some, it can and does spark offline violence. In California, Steve Carrillo went on a rampage, writing 'Boog' in his own blood on a car hood as he tried to escape. Some were associated with a plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan. A few participated in the Capitol siege on Jan 6, but most dislike Trump's pro-police stance. A couple went to Ukraine to fight against the Russians (Dickinson 2022). They are united by a desire to fight the government, any government, and especially law enforcement. The arrival of a single event that tips off the boogaloo is a "binding myth" for the movement (Evans and Wilson 2020).

Waiting for this single event has itself been the subject of boogaloo memes. The boogaloo is always imminent but never here; marked mainly by a desire for violence and yearning for a life transformed, without concrete action beyond consumption—buying guns, shirts, patches—and the dissemination of jokes and images online. The felt imminence of social breakdown emerges from the unruly nature of disinformation and conspiracy theories where the world is saturated with contending powers that never quite manifest themselves and whose ‘evidence’ never quite adds up. In other words, the chaotic online ecosystem in which the Boogaloo Bois swim works to build up an intensive charge, creating a feeling of societal breakdown as an immanent potential. The offline actions of a minority of Boogaloo Bois enact this imminence and make it feel more palpable for others. But the result is never the full-throttle conflagration they seek. Commenting via Facebook Messenger to Christopher Ledbetter, who has since been arrested and convicted of illegal possession of a machine gun, an anonymous user remarked: “Itll [sic] be fun as shit till we actually start shooting” (cited in Thompson et al 2021). The Bois sincerely expect the violent collapse of the social order but also that this event, when it comes, will be fun.

Online intensities do and do not break through into offline action, both in unexpected ways. They are like ocean currents—some which propel waves to crash down with sudden force on distant shores, others which swirl into eddies and depths that may go unnoticed. But these two dynamics—where intensities suddenly burst forth into the actual, and where they swirl, iterate, and coalesce—cannot be easily separated. The events which occur are often surprising, even to their perpetrators (upon Trump’s election a 4chan user famously celebrated “I’m fucking trembling out of excitement, brahs... We actually elected a meme as president”).

Emergent Lessons

Together, these cultural and political movements generate new political potentials, through the workings of irony. Irony offers a powerful expressive and interpretative practice in uncertain times, allowing understandings and convictions to emerge not through unequivocal affiliation or disavowal, but at the level of ‘sub-certainties’. Irony provides a way of committing to ideals that are themselves emergent, unclear, ambivalent, fraught, or contradictory, and in doing so it also has the power to gather and mobilise incipient collectives. At the same time, this capacity to gather and mobilise is not a product of irony’s semantic workings alone. It is also a result of the capacity of irony to generate charged intensities that go beyond meaning-making. These intensities are accumulated through the playful production of excessive meaning, through freedom and the evasion of responsibility, and through niche communities, where memetic repetition creates a sense of growing immanence. What are the lessons we can learn from such movements?

The first is a lesson in retuning our political attention. In moments when familiar ideological moorings seem to be crumbling away, we would do well not simply to look for new categorical certainties but to trace more ironic orientations. Many commentators have noted the declining capacity of established left-right divisions to characterise political affiliations today, only to attempt to replace these divisions with other unambiguous dichotomies, such as ‘open’ versus ‘closed’ (Johnston et al 2017). In contrast, we suggest that there is much to be gained by exploring how influential political coalitions, from the heterogenous collective behind the Brexit

vote in the UK to those animating decolonial movements across the world, may be held together through more tenuous and ambiguous sub-certainties. Not least because it is in this ironic, incipient, elusive form that political projects might be imbued with a particularly powerful sense of potential; potential deriving not from clear-eyed certainty, but from the charge of the liminal, the yet-to-be-resolved.

Secondly, ironic political movements provide lessons in driving mobilisation and action through playing with scale, context, and morphology. These are movements where mimetic repetition across shifting contexts – such as the take up of #BlackLivesMatter in Ghana – can work both to create new connections and a sense of scale, while also destabilising established understandings through the interplay of different referents. These are movements that play with scalar shifts between the few and the many – where online communities, generating large volumes of media, can disproportionately dominate public conversations or where such communities collectively build reservoirs of charged feeling that spur a smaller subset of their members into action. And these movements often leverage the distinctive features of online communities, including their large-scale, complex, amorphous, and heterogenous (but broadly self-reinforcing) nature, to generate an eruptive sense of potentiality.

Finally, understanding the political workings of irony also helps us better understand those political movements which seem to be defined by more clear-cut ideologies. Irony's semantic ambivalence and liminal charge can work to enhance, rather than diminish, the credibility or appeal of political propositions; the capacity of irony to gather and animate collectives can serve as self-reinforcing proof of the viability of such propositions. These potentials, we suggest, are fully capable of underwriting clear-cut ideologies, as much as they are capable of supporting more incipient or incoherent beliefs. Beliefs that may be expressed through reasoned argument or in terms of clear-cut values may nonetheless be anchored and animated through more ironic means. Indeed, the cases we survey here vary in the extent to which they relate to clearly-defined political agendas. Contra Rorty, irony does not only facilitate individual, rational scepticism; irony in fact gathers, orients, and animates collectives, and thus can uphold as well as challenge received ideologies. In instances where ideological convictions appear resistant to reasoned critique and contradictory evidence, we would thus do well to consider the ironic sub-certainties and intensities that may ultimately sustain such convictions. In turn, this should prompt us to consider other forms of political persuasion, contestation, and deliberation, beyond still-vaunted practices of public reasoning and debate. There is great power in irony, although as we have sought to demonstrate through the varied examples here, this power can be harnessed in many different directions.

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