The distribution of non-sense and the cultivation of the less-than-sensible

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Abstract
Ben Gerlofs’ article on the transgressive qualities of humour reminds us that it humour is a deadly serious business. Getting it wrong can be costly, even fatal. Comedians and humourists have along with journalists and academics been targeted by regimes and individuals who don’t care for interventions that expose either the nonsensical nature of regimes and/or assault cultural and religious norms. In this short intervention, some comments are offered about the popular geopolitics of humour and laughter alongside a discussion about future directions.

Keywords
Humour, laughter, nonsensical popular geopolitics, transgression

Introduction
Humour is a deadly serious business. Getting it wrong can be costly, even fatal. Comedians and humourists have along with journalists and academics been targeted by regimes and individuals who don’t care for interventions that expose the nonsensical nature of regimes and/or assault cultural and religious norms (Hansen 2012). Humour, particularly satire, is not for everyone. The cultural embeddedness of satire may not travel well inside and outside the informal borders of communities and the formal boundaries of the nation-state. Geography matters (Hale, 2020).

In his intriguing interrogation of the politics of aesthetic transgression, using Mexico City and Mexican popular culture as context, Ben Gerlofs (2022) has written a thought-provoking paper that provides plenty upon which to reflect.

The opening sentence of the paper posits that humour has ‘rarely received serious treatment from human geography’. However, newspaper cartoons of 19th-century explorers and geographers played their part in the making of popular cultures of exploration. Did not novelist Mark Twain (1872 cited in Fatout, 2006: 72–74) skewer Stanley’s reported account of meeting Dr Livingstone in an after-dinner speech in October 1872? Maybe Stanley became famous precisely because he was the object of laughter and mockery? If satire is understood to be a mode of address or representation that pointedly assaults the double standards and hypocrisies of those who enjoy cultural, political, and scientific power then there would be plenty of material with which to work. Apart from the satirical interrogation of the
‘modern explorer’ (see Armston-Sheret, 2021), there have been interventions here and there that hint at a concern for the nature of geographical discourse, the scope and range of geographic rhetoric, and the cultivation of an audience including the use of irony and satire (e.g. Buttimer, 1982; Smith, 1996). Another strand of literature has considered the efficacy of cartoons for the teaching of geography in Anglophone and other pedagogic contexts (Marsden, 1992; Roberts, 2013; von Reumont and Budke 2021).

Historians of maps, satire, and laughter have performed an admirable academic service in alerting us to the way objects such as maps were freighted with satirical intent and in interrogating how satire travelled through objects such as pamphlets in the modern period (Harley and Woodward, 1987; Baynton-Williams, 2015). Jeremy Black identifies the presence of what he terms ‘geographical satire’ (but not the first to use this term, see e.g. Yonemoto, 2003) in his reading of British imperial power in the period between the 17th and 19th centuries (Black, 2017: 26-28, also Hale, 2020).

In this short commentary, I pursue two themes. First is the literature emanating from the popular geopolitics of humour and satire that the paper draws upon. Second, a brief reflection about where this sort of scholarship might lead to next.

**Popular geopolitics of humour**

When I first wrote about the satirical force of the British cartoonist Steve Bell and his depictions of the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War, it was a chapter in my PhD that I discarded prior to submission (later published as Dodds, 1996). I discarded it at the time because I was not confident it would be taken seriously by my PhD supervisor and my doctoral examiners. In part, this reflects the point made at the start of this commentary that it was hard to find the supporting academic literature in human geography. What has changed from the mid-1990s to the present day is, of course, in part the digital media revolution (Steve Bell’s cartoons are all now digitally archived) and as authors such as Ngai (2012) have contended, the way in which we experience the public sphere has been transformed by a highly performative cultural-social media capitalism.

The genesis of the chapter lay in Argentina. I spent some of my doctoral research time in Buenos Aires and quickly became aware of the satirical depictions, often brutal and misogynist representations of the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, of the British invasion and re-occupation of those disputed islands (as noted in Aulich, 1992). It was only later in the British Newspaper Library in Colindale north London that I encountered the art of Steve Bell and his If... column. Much to my surprise and pleasure, Steve Bell agreed to talk with me at his home in Brighton and very generously showed me his studio, explained his artistic practice, and gave me permission to not only reproduce his cartoons but also gifted me several prints of his work at a later stage.

Looking back at my earliest foray into the popular geopolitics of cartoons, the appeal of Steve Bell was perhaps too easy a choice to make. The transgressive works undertaken in the If... strip cartoons were none too subtle. He rips into the hyper-nationalism and patriotism of the then Thatcher government and makes a repeated textual-visual assault on the bombastic self-justification of the British task force and subsequent removal of the Argentine forces. Where the canon of work by Jacques Rancière adds value, as Ben Gerlofs’ article makes clear, is this notion of the distribution of the sensible. Indeed, Nicholas Holm (2017) has done a great service by pursuing further the distribution of the nonsensical. It seems to me that what I was attempting to grasp, in retrospect and without the benefit of this body of scholarship, was an interest in how the apparent seriousness of the underpinning experience, practice, and power of diplomacy and war was being questioned as simply non-sensical.

Humour, thus, is something scholars of popular geopolitics can and should explore further as it questions and distorts not only the distribution of the sensible but also the apparent seriousness of the nation-state and its authoritative presence. One thinks of the Stephen Colbert show, and the way much of the stand-up comedy rests on the ability of Colbert and his writing team to expose how then President Trump’s grievances and resentments
so unfair) were simply non-sensical. Conversely, what that might also demand is that any popular geopolitics of humour also take equally seriously how and why such things might make some sense in the first place. As a host of scholars and journalists have noted, for all the comedy and jokes directed at right-wing populists, there was as British political economist Will Davies warned at the time ‘[t]he fact that these men attracted laughter and mockery from educated liberals, and did not shy away from it, no doubt played a crucial role in building their appeal in the eyes of those who felt belittled and sneered at by “elites”’ (Davies, 2019). Comedy might have provided a space for the powerful to be satirised but not everyone found it amusing to be laughing at demands to restrict further national borders, reject leaving the European Union, and an insistence to embrace a more cosmopolitan outlook on everyday life.

Cultivation of the less-than-sensible

Political geographers have charted the role of political satire, live comedy, and the everyday encounters with caricature, laughter, and un-laughter (e.g. Dodds and Kirby, 2013; Ridanpää, 2014; Thorogood, 2016). Much of this work concentrated on the communicative techniques and practices associated with humour (exaggeration, silliness, simplification, and vilification), and/or tracked and traced public impact. Gerlofs’ paper provides some welcome insights into what comes next. The cultivation of the less-than-sensible is perhaps another way of expressing ‘generative ambiguity’. Other authors such as van Ramshorst (2019) adroitly demonstrate the emotive and affective qualities of joking and how humour becomes integral to simply coping with everyday indignities and the spectre of violence. In case studies hailing from Egypt and Palestine, the cultivation of the less-than-sensible is a form of disavowal (Bhungalia, 2020; Winegar, 2021). It is, in other words, a response that actively refuses to engage with the received legal and civic norms and social-political hierarchies that punctuate everyday life.

There might even be scope for geopolitics and allied disciplines such as IR and political science to find some common comedic cause (e.g. Brassett et al., 2021). The complex and contradictory socio-spatial effects of humour that are traced in Gerlofs’ interrogation of Mexican popular culture would surely resonate with some of the work taking place as part of a ‘comedic turn’ in IR (Brassett, 2016; Foot, 2017; Holm, 2017; Brassett, 2021). Areas of shared interest might include: the creative potential of the ‘nonsensical’; the ambiguous use of comedy and humour and the manner in which it reveals diverse experiences and affects ranging from awkwardness, discomfort, and absurdity to comfort and hope; as well as something that also might provoke further reflection on dominant modes of geopolitics and IR that reveal social structures and hierarchies that help to police and patrol what is appropriate academic and societal discourse. As Jennifer Fluri; (2019) work on Afghanistan reminds us, alongside the work of Sarah Luna on the US-Mexican borderlands, there is an ongoing urgency to all of this (also, see Luna, 2020).

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