

Fighting Thatcher with comedy

Schaffer, Gavin

DOI:

[10.1017/jbr.2015.229](https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2015.229)

License:

None: All rights reserved

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Schaffer, G 2016, 'Fighting Thatcher with comedy: What to do when there is no alternative', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 374-397. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2015.229>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Publisher Rights Statement:

Checked for eligibility: 20/04/2016. *Journal of British Studies* / Volume 55 / Issue 02 / April 2016, pp 374-397 Copyright © The North American Conference on British Studies 2016

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Fighting Thatcher with Comedy: what to do when there is no Alternative

Word Count: 12338 (including notes)

I: Introduction

On 19 May 1979, only sixteen days after 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.¹ 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 non-sexist, non-racist, leftist performers reinvented stand-up comedy as innovative and socially conscious, and "kick-started a mutiny in the populist performing arts," challenging in the process both the new Conservative government and a generation of older comedians who they perceived as old-fashioned, unoriginal, stale and offensive.² Explaining the alternative

¹ 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.

² Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 8.

challenge, Double asserts, “They threw aside the stolen Pakistani jokes of their predecessors and instead lashed out at the mood of the times.”³

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, Orwell famously contended, might be seen as “a tiny revolution.”⁴ The comic form, some theorists have argued, has historically offered opportunities to give voice to causes and arguments that are silenced in society.⁵ Comedy’s inherent lightness has allowed different social voices to come to the fore, promoting confidence and resistance in marginalised communities.⁶ Despite these radical potentials, most historians have shied away from ascribing revolutionary agency to comedy and humour. Seminal scholars such as Bakhtin, Gatrell and Bailey have each in turn cautioned against reading revolution into comedy, instead arguing that challenges posed by humour need to be

³ Oliver Double, *Stand-Up: On Being a Comedian* (London, 1997), 164-5.

⁴ George Orwell, *As I Please: the Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 3* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 325.

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

⁶ 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), 30-4 and Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (Abingdon, 2007), 67.

understood as limited, ambiguous and unclear.⁷ For both Bakhtin and Bailey, the impact of comedy was bound by the limits of time and place, unable to evolve into bigger messages and movements.⁸ Indeed, even Orwell concluded elsewhere that jokes were best understood as “a momentary wish.”⁹ Going even further from an analysis of comedy as revolutionary, other scholars have presented jokes and humour as forces of conservatism, policing social boundaries and allowing for the release of tension, ultimately supporting the preservation of the status quo.¹⁰

Following in the wake of these cautionary analyses, this article does not address any political challenges posed by alternative comedy in order to set up its protagonists as straw men, political failures who could not match with their jokes the feats of Robespierre or Lenin. Given the inherently unstable nature of jokes and their limited impact such an analysis would be unlikely to yield much in the way of historical fruit. Instead, I want to 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

⁷ See Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 2006), Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* [trans. Hélène Iswolsky] (Bloomington, 1984) and Bailey, *Popular Culture*.

⁸ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, 149 and Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 94.

⁹ See Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries*, 62.

¹⁰ 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).

date-of-birth offers insight into anything more than the history of one, albeit influential, London club. In particular, this article will 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. It will question whether the alternative comedy movement, in so far as it can be described as such, should be historicised in terms of its opposition to the neoliberal “mood of the times” or whether it was something different, even perhaps ultimately a manifestation of Thatcherite hegemony.

II: 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.”¹¹ This engagement, however, has been paralleled by frequent disapproval of art forms seen as decadent or ideologically questionable.¹² In this context, 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.¹³ In the 1980s,

¹¹ Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884-1914*

(Manchester, 1990), 2.

¹² Lawrence Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951-64: Old Labour, New Britain?* (Basingstoke, 2003), 191-3.

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

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.”¹⁴

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.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ This opposition yielded, as we shall see, a myriad of hostile jokes about Thatcher and her government in alternative stand-up performance and the television sitcoms and sketch shows that soon brought its stars to national prominence in *The Young Ones*, *The Comic*

¹⁴ 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 (2011), 354-90, 362.

¹⁵ Interview with Pauline Melville, 16 September 2014. Arthur Smith confirms: “We hated the woman and all Tories and we took the bus,” Smith, *My Name is Daphne Fairfax* (London, 2010), 157. Also see Tony Allen, *Attitude: the Secret of Stand Up* (Glastonbury, 2002), 73 and 88.

¹⁶ Keith Allen, *Grow Up* (Reading, 2007), 230.

Strip Presents and *Spitting Image*.¹⁷ Moreover, alternative comedians frequently joined the political arena through benefit concerts in support of a range of left-wing political causes at home and abroad.¹⁸ Pauline Melville remembers performing “all the time” for “left-wing solidarity,” supporting the striking miners, and political challenge in Palestine and Nicaragua.¹⁹

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.²⁰ Thatcher’s Conservatives seemed to offer “a new kind of popular common

¹⁷ 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, *The Young Ones*, “Demolition”, tx. 9 November 1982. In *Filthy, Rich and Catflap* (which reunited Mayall, Edmondson and Planer in a story about a floundering TV star), Mayall met Norman Tebbit’s “get on your bike” employment rhetoric with a Nazi salute, “Ritchie’s Rash,” tx. 7 January 1987.

¹⁸ See Malcolm Hardee, *I Stole Freddie Mercury’s Birthday Cake and other Autobiographical Confessions* (London, 1996), 111 and 125, Smith, *My Name is*, 185, and Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill*, 218. Worley highlights similar commitments from punk bands in this period in “Shot by Both Sides,” 334.

¹⁹ Interview with Pauline Melville. Also see Allen, *Attitude*, 76.

²⁰ 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*

sense” while Labour increasingly was trapped in destructive backward-looking battles with Trade Unions, and internal schism.²¹ 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.”²² Writing of a “Crisis of Labourism” in 1984, Stuart Hall complained that Labour did “not seem capable of forming a credible alternative or making a decisive political impact on the electorate.”²³ In a conflict recently historicised as a “culture war,” Labour looked outdated and out-thought.²⁴ 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 of Westminster politics, amid a

Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left (London, 1988), 209.

Also see Alexander 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, 73.

²¹ Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal*, 206.

²² Hadley and Ho, “ ‘The Lady’s Not for Turning’: New Cultural Perspectives on Thatcher and Thatcherism” in *Thatcher and After*, 1-28, 2.

²³ Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal*, 196.

²⁴ 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, 140. Also see James Curran, Ivor Gaber and Julian Petley, *Culture Wars: the Media and the British Left* (Edinburgh, 2005), 28.

certainty that “the cultural dimension” needed to be addressed as a “constitutive dimension of society.”²⁵

The problem, as Hall saw it, was that the Labour Party had lost touch with the cultural values that could mobilise a leftist challenge to Thatcher. There was, he asserted, a “massive disjuncture” between the Party and “the real movements, issues, and subjects of politics.”²⁶ These issues related to global and social justice, environmentalism and to anti-racism and anti-sexism. 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.”²⁷ If this new focus was missing from traditional Labour it was active instead in other places, specifically in NGOs and the cultural arena, manifesting itself in events such as *Rock against Racism* “that involved spectacle, pop music, celebrity and agitprop.”²⁸ Robinson has described

²⁵ Stuart Hall, “Life and Times of the First New Left,” *New Left Review* (January-February 2010), 177-96, 187.

²⁶ Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal*, 201.

²⁷ Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal*, 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 (1997), 419-52.

²⁸ Curran (et al), *Culture Wars*, p.11. Also see Matthew Hilton, “Politics is Ordinary: Non-Governmental Organizations and Political Participation in Contemporary Britain,” *Twentieth Century British History* 22, No.2 (2011), 230-68. Also see Dick Hebdige, “After the Masses” in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, eds. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London, 1989), 76-93.

these challenging forms of “liberational and identity politics” as “competing forms of socialism,” offering a leftist challenge from new places and spaces.²⁹ 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.³⁰ In research which compares the political behaviours of US and British comedians, 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.³¹ 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.”³² 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.³³ In this mindframe, Wagg concludes that British alternative comedy promoted a more general

²⁹ Robinson, “‘Sometimes I like to stay in and watch TV’,” 362.

³⁰ Worley, “Shot by both Sides,” 348.

³¹ 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, 254.

³² Ibid. 262.

³³ See Wagg, “‘They’ve already got’”, 267 and Worley, “Shot by Both Sides,” 344.

anti-political environment in which politicians were “universally dismissible,” a narrative which places the alternative comedians as inheritors of British 1960s satire (about which the same has frequently been argued).³⁴ 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 alternative comedian Tony Allen, a performer 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 colleagues because of his ideological passion,³⁵ Allen encouraged like-minded left-wing comics to “pack” the *Comedy Store*³⁶ and soon gathered together a radical troupe to tour nationwide under the banner of “Alternative Cabaret.”³⁷ For Allen and his like, alternative comedy needed to be about radical values, creating material that was both “serious and funny.”³⁸ This new comedic opposition would coalesce around radical

³⁴ See Wagg, “‘They’ve already got’,” 270. For the general anti-political stance of satire see Stephen Wagg, “Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness: The ‘Satire Boom’ and its Inheritance,” *Contemporary Politics* 8 No. 4 (2002), 319-34, 328 & 332 and D. Sandbrook, *Never Had it So Good: a History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2005), 592.

³⁵ Smith, *My Name is*, 147.

³⁶ Allen, *Grow Up*, 231-2 and Allen, *Attitude*, 98.

³⁷ Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill*, 37.

³⁸ Allen, *Attitude*, 88.

thinking on anti-sexism/anti-racism, which challenged the Labour Party as well as Thatcher's government, but was nonetheless firmly of the left.

III: Alternative Intentions: Principles or Popularity?

Without doubt, anti-racism and anti-sexism ostensibly took pride of place at the centre 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 *Greatest Show on Legs*) remembers being “really seriously adhered to.”³⁹ In this atmosphere, Soan explained, Ben Elton would “get the audience to boo people off” if they attempted racist or sexist material.⁴⁰ Store veteran Arnold Brown recalled in this context that “a distaste for the sexist, racist and apolitical” united the Store’s comedians.⁴¹

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

³⁹ Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill*, 11. Interview with Martin Soan, 1 October 2014.

⁴⁰ Interview with Martin Soan.

⁴¹ 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,” Interview with Jon Plowman, 7 February 2014.

gender in stand-up comedy.⁴² Moreover, alternative comedians in live performance and on television championed anti-sexism and anti-racism, and viciously attacked those who they held responsible for perpetuating bigotry. *The Greatest Show on Legs*, in stockings and suspenders, performed “the National Front Can Can” to ridicule the far right⁴³, while 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.⁴⁴

In ITV sitcom *Girls on Top*, French, 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 subjects that were only previously dealt with “heavily and unfunnily (sic).”⁴⁵ *The Young Ones* attacked police racism while *Filthy, Rich and Catflap* presented the BBC as an institution riddled with bigotry.⁴⁶ At their most polemical, alternative comedians used television

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

⁴³ Interview with Martin Soan.

⁴⁴ “Five Go Mad in Dorset,” *The Comic Strip Presents*, tx. 2 November 1982.

⁴⁵ *Girls on Top*, “Hark,” tx. 4 December 1985. French’s comment on the show’s purpose was for the Press Release for Series Two, 30 October 1986, British Film Institute Archive, South Bank, London.

⁴⁶ 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 (Episode 4, tx. 28 January 1987). In *The Young Ones*, the police threatened a

performances to lecture audiences about the perils of racist and sexist behaviour. Double recalls Ben 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.⁴⁷

There are, however, good reasons to pause before historicising alternative comedy as a new, bold or effective articulation of a values-centred radical challenge in 1980s Britain. For one thing, as we shall see below, 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 by alternative comedy 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.”⁴⁸ 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

man before discovering that he wasn’t in fact black and apologizing: “Sorry John. I thought you was a nigger,” “Boring,” tx. 23 November 1982.

⁴⁷ Allen was appearing on *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*, tx. 14 October 1980.

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*, 248-51.

⁴⁸ Mitchell Symons, “Filthy, Rich...and Funny,” *Today*, 4 January 1987. Also see Smith, *My Names is*, 367-8.

“tended not to regard themselves as political performers, but simply as comics.”⁴⁹ 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” motivations of his peers.⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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.”⁵³ This was not so much selling-out as 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

⁴⁹ Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill*, 53.

⁵⁰ Allen, *Grow Up*, 240.

⁵¹ *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*, tx. 14 October, 1980.

⁵² Interview with Pauline Melville. Allen describes how he borrowed this comedy approach from Lenny Bruce in *Attitude*, 91.

⁵³ Press Release for *Girls on Top*, Series Two.

loosely shared.⁵⁴ Part of what differentiated the second tranche of alternative comedians from the pioneers was generational. Whereas the likes of Tony Allen and Pauline 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.”⁵⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly in this context, little or nothing about Mayall’s and Edmondson’s material was political. Longstanding producer of French and Saunders, Jon Plowman, joked, “Rik and Ade hitting each other over the heads with saucepans...that’s not going to bring the government down.”⁵⁶

This prioritising 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

⁵⁴ 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” in “Heard the One about the White Middle-Class Heterosexual Father-in-Law?: Gender, Ethnicity and Political Correctness in Comedy”, *Because I Tell a Joke or Two*, 291-312, 298.

⁵⁵ Interview with Pauline Melville.

⁵⁶ Interview with Jon Plowman. Also see Rik Mayall, *Bigger than Hitler Better than Christ* (London, 2005), 39.

convenience.”⁵⁷ This turn away from radicalism was not lost on journalists, one of whom complained that Edmondson was so much a part of the “establishment” that he “was on Wogan before Christmas plugging his latest book.”⁵⁸ 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.”⁵⁹

IV: 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 of the straightforward stand-up delivery that had come to dominate club comedy, keen to move away from unoriginal material and punch-line joke endings.⁶⁰ 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

⁵⁷ Interview with Martin Soan. 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.

⁵⁸ Symons, “Filthy, Rich...and Funny.”

⁵⁹ Interview with Jon Plowman.

⁶⁰ Double, *Stand-Up*, 189 and 205 and Smith, *My Name is*, 184.

poetry, while Sayle, describing himself as a “mod two-tone poet”, did both.⁶¹ *The Greatest Show on Legs* began as a subversive Punch and Judy show and became globally famous for a naked balloon dance routine.⁶² As well as moving away from joke telling, alternative comedians criticised their predecessors for “sharing” material and not writing their own jokes.⁶³ 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.”⁶⁴

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 traditional sitcom *The Good Life* cemented the point.⁶⁵ 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 Ben Elton’s *Happy Families*) went out of their way to distance themselves from more traditional offerings. Saunders, commenting on her role in *Happy Families*, explained the importance of this perceived

⁶¹ These alternative stand-up routines were recorded and broadcast in *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*, tx. 14 October 1980. For a broader record of eccentric alternative performances see Paul Merton, *Only When I Laugh* (St Ives, 2014), 108-9.

⁶² Interview with Martin Soan. The balloon dance became world famous after the *Greatest Show on Legs* appeared on Central Television’s *OTT* in 1982.

⁶³ See Merton, *Only When I Laugh*, 205.

⁶⁴ Smith, *My Name is*, 188.

⁶⁵ *The Young Ones*, “Sick,” tx. 12 June 1984.

distance. “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.”⁶⁶

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 1979.⁶⁷ Malcolm Hardee, for example, recalls performing alternative-style material in Devon “years before the Comedy Store” opened.⁶⁸ Hardee’s partner, Martin Soan, similarly remembers spaces and places of alternative performance in street theatre in the 1970s, while Trevor Griffiths’s play, *Comedians*, was developed after witnessing alternative-style (as well as mainstream) comedy in Manchester in the early 1970s.⁶⁹ In the context of earlier “folk” comedians like Jasper Carrott and Billy Connolly, little of the Comedy Store material was that original. 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.”⁷⁰

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

⁶⁶ G. Baker, “Carry on the Young Ones,” *Daily Star*, 10 August 1985.

⁶⁷ See Allen, *Attitude*, 81.

⁶⁸ Hardee, *I Stole*, 89.

⁶⁹ Interview with Trevor Griffiths, 4 October 2013 and interview with Martin Soan.

⁷⁰ Allen, *Attitude*, 119.

and Soan both saw themselves in the mould of Tommy Cooper while Andy de la Tour cited the influence of Billy Connolly and American icons such as Bruce and Sahl in shaping his approach to comedy.⁷¹ Tony Allen, for his part, was so influenced by Bruce that he recalls his concern that his act, with its “free-forming”, might plagiarise him.⁷² When the *Young Ones*’ writing team was asked by the BBC to explain their brand of humour, they situated themselves firmly in the British comedy stable, claiming that theirs was a comedy of “surprise” like *Monty Python* and the *Goons* and of “rejection” like *Fawlty Towers* and *Till Death Us Do Part*, while also citing the influence of slapstick.⁷³ 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 labelled *The Young Ones* as the “counter-culture Fawlty Towers” while another described *The Comic Strip Presents* as “the Carry On team on steroids.”⁷⁴ Discussing *Filthy, Rich and Catflap*, Mitchell Symons argued that Ben Elton’s scripts “evoke strong memories of Ealing in its heyday.”⁷⁵ *Carry On*

⁷¹ Chuck discusses his influences in Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!* 119. Soan told the author that Cooper was his “hero” in interview. Also see de la Tour, *Stand Up*, 22-3.

⁷² Allen, *Attitude*, 88

⁷³ File T70/14/1, “The Young Ones, A Paper on the Intention of the Programme” (undated), BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC), Caversham, UK. 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 (2013), 5-21.

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

⁷⁵ Symons, *Filthy, Rich*.

matriarch Barbara Windsor made a guest appearance in *Filthy, Rich and Catflap* playing the mother of a woman filing a paternity suit against Mayall's lead character.⁷⁶ This appearance, Mark Lawson noted, exposed "the programme's closeness to the Carry On tradition."⁷⁷ Moreover, some traditional comics were afforded time and respect at the *Comedy Store*, most notably Les Dawson who "was very well received."⁷⁸ Overall, while making much of their apartness and originality, the alternative comedians were very much a logical progression in British comic tradition.

V: 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 alternatives comedians for comic, not 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 organiser, recalls:

⁷⁶ *Filthy, Rich and Catflap*, tx. 7 January 1987.

⁷⁷ Lawson, *Rik Up*.

⁷⁸ Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn't You Kill*, 9. Lenny Bennett also appeared although he was less successful.

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.⁷⁹

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."⁸⁰ 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 Bar⁸¹ at the very least that were about Mrs Thatcher, the Falklands particularly, would have brought the government to its knees but apparently not."⁸²

The unsuitability of comedy as a force for radical challenge was famously explained by Bergson, who argued that laughter policed the boundaries of society on

⁷⁹ Interview cited from Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!* 264.

⁸⁰ Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn't You Kill*, 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.

⁸¹ Raymond's Review Bar hosted *The Comic Strip*, a nightly alternative comedy event organized by Peter Richardson.

⁸² Interview with Jon Plowman.

behalf of power-brokers.⁸³ 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.”⁸⁴ According to this way of thinking, even committed radical comedians ultimately supported the status-quo by marking out borders of inclusion and exclusion and safely venting social tensions. On these terms, humour 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.⁸⁵

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 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.⁸⁶ Malcolm 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

⁸³ See Bergson, *Laughter*. For analysis see Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*.

⁸⁴ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, 149. Also see Bakhtin, *Rabalais and his World*, 97 and Herbert Marcuse, “Art as a Form of Reality,” *New Left Review*, No: 74, July-August, 1972, 51-8.

⁸⁵ Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, 237. See Bailey, *Popular Culture*, 150 and Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries*, 61.

⁸⁶ See James English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humor, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Ithaca, 1994), 12-14.

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.”⁸⁷ 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 thin indeed.⁸⁸

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.⁸⁹ The backfiring of political material was most evident, however, in the reception of Central Television’s puppet-based satirical sketch show *Spitting Image*.⁹⁰ This programme, McSmith argues, attacked Britain’s political leaders “with a venom that had never been seen before on television,” and focused in particular on Thatcher

⁸⁷ Cited from 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.

⁸⁸ Sutton has argued that comedy always preaches to the converted in *A Chorus of Raspberries*, 56.

⁸⁹ See Graham Stewart, *Bang! A History of Britain in the 1980s* (London, 2013), 247 and Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 119.

⁹⁰ See Stephen Wagg, “The Subversive Laugh,” *Marxism Today*, February 1987, 35-7.

and her Cabinet.⁹¹ 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.”⁹² Indeed, in numerous episodes, Thatcher was portrayed as a monstrous, psychopathic dictator, who bullied her Cabinet and took policy advice from an ageing Adolf Hitler.⁹³ But far from damaging the Prime Minister, this construction seemed to make Thatcher even more popular, fuelling her reputation for toughness.⁹⁴ As Vinen has concluded, “attacks on Thatcherism helped to define it in the public mind.”⁹⁵ Indeed, *Spitting Image* was loved by most of those on the right who were the subject of parody, an appropriation of challenging images that resonates with historical precedent regarding comedic impact.⁹⁶

⁹¹ 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.

⁹² Viewer to Managing Director of the BBC (forwarded to the IBA), 8 February 1988, File 3996159, *Spitting Image*, Independent Broadcasting Authority Archive (IBA), University of Bournemouth Special Collections.

⁹³ Thatcher consults with Hitler (without knowing who he is) in repeated episodes, telling him (in episode 2, tx. 4 March 1984) that his advice on immigration had been “terribly useful”.

⁹⁴ See Stewart, *Bang!* 254.

⁹⁵ Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain* (London, 2010), 280.

⁹⁶ Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, 155.

Thus even when its intentions were clear, comedy was inherently unreliable as a political weapon. And as we have seen, as they pursued careers and focused on fame and success, the intentions of many alternative comedians 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 increasingly-ripe-for-ridicule forces 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. Jokes at the expense of the crumbling opposition were seemingly too tempting, low-hanging fruit harvested time and again in performance and sitcom. 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.⁹⁷ But as the alternative comedians became famous, their material was accessed far beyond its 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.⁹⁸

In the alternative sitcoms, left-wing characters were frequently the most despised and ludicrous. French's socialist-feminist Amanda Ripley, in *Girls on Top*, offered a vicious parody of the feminist movement. In the show, Ripley volunteered for

⁹⁷ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, 137.

⁹⁸ Melville recalled adapting her material as she began to play to more diverse venues such as the Hackney Empire. Interview with Pauline Melville. Allen highlights this problem in the work of Melville and others in *Attitude*, 114-5.

the magazine *Spare Cheeks*, a very thinly-veiled re-working of the iconic *Spare Rib*. Work on this magazine, described by Amanda 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,”⁹⁹ saw French’s character reduce feminism to farce. Ripley ran courses such as “know and understand your toilet parts” and, on consecutive days, “Women for Power” and “Women against Power.”¹⁰⁰

In *The Young Ones*, Rik (the student radical) and Neil (the hippy) were similarly ridiculous and hypocritical. When Rik realised that he and his housemates had not paid their television licence he delighted in the anarchy, claiming that he was going to form an organisation 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 licence man arrived.¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰² At the end of the series, Rik revealed what was evident all along, that he was in thrall to Mrs Thatcher, who had “certainly put this

⁹⁹ Dawn French, Ruby Wax, Jennifer Saunders, *Girls on Top* (London, 1986).

¹⁰⁰ *Girls on Top*, “My Yummy Brownie”, tx. 4 December 1986 and French, Wax and Saunders, *Girls on Top*.

¹⁰¹ *The Young Ones*, “Bomb,” tx. 30 November 1982. Andy de la Tour has highlighted the legacy of the attack on the left that was epitomized through Rik in *Stand Up or Die* (London, 2013), 18.

¹⁰² Nigel Planer and Terence Blacker, *Neil’s Book of the Dead* (London, 1984), pages not available.

country back on its feet.”¹⁰³ 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 counselled: “It’s only because of oppressors like Margaret Thatcher that you don’t believe you are a reggae band.”¹⁰⁴

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. 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.”¹⁰⁵

VI: New Values and Old Prejudice: Anti-Racism and Anti-Sexism

Despite the limitations of the challenge, there is little doubt that anti-sexism and anti-racism were taken very seriously by alternative comedians in a way which had hitherto not been the case. Paul Merton and Arthur Smith (as we shall see below) agonised over

¹⁰³ *Young Ones*, “Summer Holiday,” tx. 19 June 1984.

¹⁰⁴ *Girls on Top*, “Skanking,” tx. 27 November 1985.

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

the legitimacy of jokes they wanted to tell, removing material from acts at the suggestion that it might be offensive.¹⁰⁶ Determined not to undermine her strongly held political beliefs, Pauline Melville invited the feminist communist leader Bea Campbell to the *Comic Strip* to “see what she thought.”¹⁰⁷ But despite this care and focus, while making big claims of anti-sexist 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).¹⁰⁸ Recalling the venue, Tony Allen describes a space that looked like “the complete antithesis of everything we stood for.”¹⁰⁹ In this seedy environment, alternative comedy and the sex industry merged at every turn.¹¹⁰ 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.”¹¹¹ Some alternative comedians would sneak off to watch the strip show before and/or after their act, and strippers sometimes tried their hand at

¹⁰⁶ See Merton, *Only When I Laugh*, 146 and Smith, *My Name is*, 154-5.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Pauline Melville.

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

¹⁰⁹ See Allen, *Attitude*, 96.

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

¹¹¹ Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 74 and Mayall, *Bigger than Hitler*, 49.

stand-up, including one performer who would “get her tits out” if she wasn’t getting laughs.¹¹²

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.¹¹³ While 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*), their long-standing producer recalled the extent to which their inclusion in such programmes was rooted in guilt about the overall female absence, noting that Richardson and Ritchens “thought there needed to be some girls in the show.”¹¹⁴ In this male-dominated terrain, feminism often remained something to be laughed at, as we have seen 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

¹¹² Comedian Lee Cornes in Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 53-5. Also see Allen, *Attitude*, 105. Cornes’s memory of this act and its meaning in itself is revealing of alternative comedians’ questionable anti-sexist credentials.

¹¹³ 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*, eds. Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg (London, 1992), 254-84, 270.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Jon Plowman.

feminist.”¹¹⁵ Similarly, Edmondson quipped that male students should join University feminist societies for “all-night stormy sex sessions” with women who were “desperate.”¹¹⁶ 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.”¹¹⁷ Of course, all of these comics were only joking, playing with misogyny in a spirit of disavowal.¹¹⁸ 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.”¹¹⁹

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 (usually making a defence of irony). Nowhere was this “ironic” sexism and misogyny more prominent than in alternative comedians’ attacks on Mrs

¹¹⁵ Mayall, *Bigger than Hitler*, 174. Mayall later continued the joke, explaining that he was a feminist like “Hugh Hefner,” 237.

¹¹⁶ Adrian Edmondson (with Mark Leigh and Mike Lepine), *How to be a Complete Bastard* (London, 1986), 22.

¹¹⁷ Hardee, *I Stole*, 90.

¹¹⁸ Salvatore Attardo, “Violations of Conversational Maxims and Cooperation: the Case of Jokes,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 19, No: 6 (1993), 537-85. For analysis see Billig, “Humour and Hatred: the Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan,” *Discourse and Society* 12, No.3 (2001), 267-89.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Martin Soan.

Thatcher, a reality that exemplifies the problematic nature of opposition in this context.¹²⁰ Highlighting a blind spot seemingly shared by much of the left and alternative comedy when it came to misogyny, Malcolm Hardee recalled a performance of his famous balloon dance at a TUC conference which 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.¹²¹ 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.”¹²² It is perhaps unsurprising that other leading female performers from this period, such as Dillie Keane’s *Fascinating Aïda* and Victoria Wood, struck out their own territory, almost entirely apart from other alternative comedians.¹²³

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

¹²¹ Hardee, *I Stole*, 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, Interview with Martin Soan.

¹²² See Wagg, “Punching Your Weight: Conversations with Jo Brand” in *Because I tell a Joke or Two*, 111-36, 132 and 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,” *The Comedy Store*, 155.

¹²³ See Dillie Keane (with Adèle Anderson and Nica Burns) *Fascinating Who? Fascinating Aïda: the Anatomy of a Group on the Crest of a Ripple* (London, 1986).

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.¹²⁴ 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.”¹²⁵ 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.”¹²⁶

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

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

¹²⁵ Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill*, 49.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

about an “unwashed” Chinese bank robber who told everyone to “fleas.”¹²⁷ Lee Cornes, as well as Sayle, remembers telling jokes about the Japanese in the *Comedy Store*,¹²⁸ while *The Comic Strip Presents* portrayed Japanese characters running a prisoner of war camp to protect consumer goods, barking orders in grotesquely stereotypical accents.¹²⁹ East Asians were not the only victims of the changing focus of racist humour. Harry Enfield’s character, the Greek kebab-shop-owning 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.¹³⁰

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

¹²⁷ *Boom Boom: Out Go the Lights*, tx. 14 October 1980.

¹²⁸ Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill*, 81.

¹²⁹ *Comic Strip Presents*, “War”, tx. 3 January 1983. 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,” 2 February 1990. *Spitting Image* also employed problematic constructions of the Japanese, relating to the Nissan factory in Sunderland, (series 1, episode 4), tx. 1 April 1982.

¹³⁰ Andy Medhurst, “Funny Games,” *Sight and Sound*, 1 (November 2000), 31.

Davidson explains the evolution of his character, Chalky White, in his autobiography, *Close to the Edge* (London, 2001), 104-5.

perceived as political censorship within the scene.¹³¹ Having initially been an environment where a comedian could be shunned for racist or sexist material, Soan recalls that later alternative comics turned to non-politically correct jokes as “a breath of fresh air.”¹³² 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.¹³³ 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!”¹³⁴ In this way, Allen teased the political correctness that he perceived was proscribing comedy material, entering with the audience in a complicity of disavowal as the “robot” spoke its mind. When the *Young Ones* included jokes about Arab regimes dismembering people, Neil intervened

¹³¹ Comedy has often been driven by this desire. See Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 154 and Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 182. Allen has argued that this argument was used as an excuse to “feed prejudice” in *Attitude*, 84.

¹³² Interview with Martin Soan.

¹³³ 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 and Freddie Starr, *Unwrapped* (London, 2001), 77 and 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 already have a comedian,” 260.

¹³⁴ Allen, *Grow Up*, 249.

with a similar brand of faux concern: “Don’t say that about the Arabs, Mike. You’ll get us all into terrible trouble.”¹³⁵ 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.” Sadowitz, Hardee recalled, opened his one-man show at the Albany Empire in Deptford with the line, “Nelson Mandela: What a cunt!”¹³⁶

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.¹³⁷ The word, Hardee has explained, had become taboo amid concerns about sexism in the early 1980s.¹³⁸ 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.¹³⁹ Smith himself had been forced by anti-racist 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

¹³⁵ *The Young Ones*, “Oil,” tx. 16 November 1982.

¹³⁶ Hardee, *I Stole*, 145.

¹³⁷ Smith, *My Name is*, 189.

¹³⁸ Hardee, *I Stole*, 90.

¹³⁹ Hardee argued that by restoring Pakistani jokes Sadowitz was “breaking a real comedy taboo,” in *I Stole*, 211. 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”.

Davidson.”¹⁴⁰ This kind of association, taken alongside Sadowitz’s Pakistani jokes and the continuing performance of racist material at the *Comedy Store*¹⁴¹ and elsewhere, 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.¹⁴² Undermined by ambivalent values, alternative comedies struggled to articulate truly distinct values or offer “any clean-cut break” from what had gone before.¹⁴³

VII: 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 which resonated strongly with Thatcherism. 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.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ 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*, 154-5.

¹⁴¹ See Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 50 and 269.

¹⁴² Pauline Melville argues that it is difficult to remember the *Comic Strip* as an anti-racist space “because they didn’t have any black people performing.” Interview with Pauline Melville. For analysis see Small, “ ‘Serious T’ing’ ”.

¹⁴³ Littlewood and Pickering, “Heard the one about,” 298.

¹⁴⁴ Smith, *My Name is*, 158. Also see Lee, *How I Escaped*, 5.

Responding to the adverse climate, pioneers of the alternative scene, Double argues, became “shoestring impresarios”, building up new comedy venues in pubs and clubs, which succeeded or failed according to simple business logic.¹⁴⁵ This was a reality which ultimately undermined Pauline Melville’s interest in the scene. She recalls, “It’s always bothered me because I do support subsidised theatre ...but this was commercial really.”¹⁴⁶ As they strived for success, comics frequently harnessed tools that Thatcher’s government put in place to encourage local entrepreneurship, particularly the Enterprise Allowance Scheme.¹⁴⁷ Many pioneers of the alternative scene became successful businessmen with their own television companies, like Julian Clary and Jack Dee, while Don Ward’s *Comedy Store* remains a global brand.¹⁴⁸ Success for alternative comedians’ television companies was supported by Conservative changes to broadcasting. The commitment placed upon 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.¹⁴⁹

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,

¹⁴⁵ Double, *Stand Up*, 192.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Pauline Melville.

¹⁴⁷ Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 123.

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

¹⁴⁹ See Beaumont, “‘New Times’ Television?” and Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 128.

which was not, after all, the sole font of enterprising behaviour in this period and did not culturally colonise the whole of British society.¹⁵⁰ It could reasonably be argued that alternative comedians simply used the weapons at their disposal to make their way in Thatcher's 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 making 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.¹⁵¹ Breaking through at the start of their careers, much was made of non-elite backgrounds amid the argument that alternative comedy was rescuing British humour from Oxbridge-dominated cliques. Writing about *The Comic Strip Presents* for *Time Out*, Martyn Auty championed the new stable of comedy in these terms.

¹⁵⁰ See Beaumont, "'New Times' Television?," 70-3. Also see Stephen Brooke, "Living in 'New Times': Historicizing 1980s Britain," *History Compass* 12, No: 1 (2014), 20-32.

¹⁵¹ On the social backgrounds of comedians of the satire boom see Wagg, "You've Never Had it So Silly," 255 and Sandbrook, *Never Had it So Good*, 591. On the social origins of punks see Worley, "Shot by Both Sides," 337-8.

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.¹⁵²

In the same spirit, Stewart Lee celebrated the alternative comedy scene as the “egalitarian Polytechnic of laughs.”¹⁵³ *The Young Ones* railed against the elitism of British society, especially in the episode “Bambi” where 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.”¹⁵⁴ In stand-up, similar battle lines were drawn. Richard 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.”¹⁵⁵ 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.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Martyn Auty, ‘The Comic Strip Presents,’ *Time Out* (681), 8 September 1983, 11-12.

¹⁵³ Lee, *How I Escaped*, 3. Also see Merton, *Only When I Laugh*, 87.

¹⁵⁴ *The Young Ones*, “Bambi,” tx. 8 May, 1985.

¹⁵⁵ Cited from Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!* 240.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Sayle on *The Young Ones: the Guest Stars*, BBC DVD, 2007.

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 Peters, the university (but non-Oxbridge) backgrounds of the alternatives led to a “chip-on-the-shoulder envy,” which was articulated as anti-elitism.¹⁵⁷ Mayall recalled this complex position: “we secretly all thought that the Pythons were great, and half of us were redbrick and university anyway.”¹⁵⁸ Lines of anti-elitist 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.¹⁵⁹ On the first night of the *Comedy Store*, Clive Anderson, Emma Thompson and Sandi Toksvig all performed, an Oxbridge contribution that continued throughout the history of alternative comedy writ large.¹⁶⁰ In this atmosphere, Oxbridge backgrounds and family wealth were “swept under the carpet,” something to be embarrassed about.¹⁶¹ Hardee recalled that Elton and Richardson reinvented themselves as working-class lads, masking families that were “well-heeled” and “well connected.”¹⁶² Lee remembers being celebrated because of his ability to “show these Oxbridge wankers,” only to have to confess his own Oxford education.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁷ Peters, “The Roots,” 10.

¹⁵⁸ Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill*, 95.

¹⁵⁹ Plowman recalls Mayall’s presence on this tour, Interview with Jon Plowman.

¹⁶⁰ See Cook, *The Comedy Store*, 34 and Stewart, *Bang!* 251.

¹⁶¹ Double, *Stand Up!* 190.

¹⁶² Hardee, *I Stole*, 108.

¹⁶³ Lee, *How I Escaped*, 14.

For some comics, such as Victoria Wood, the barely-masked elitism of the alternative scene was alienating.¹⁶⁴ Hardee felt “frowned upon” because his comedy wasn’t “cerebral,” while his colleague Soan recalls the scene as “smug and up its own arse.”¹⁶⁵ 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 programme’s “grossness”, *The Young Ones*’s writing team defended their work with reference to Volpone, Tartuffe and Aristophanes.¹⁶⁶ Jim Moir (the BBC’s Head of Variety) was reassured personally by Mayall on this subject, who compared his work to a “passage in Longinus.”¹⁶⁷ On screen, *The Young Ones* included parodies of Chekhov, while French and Saunders’s sketch shows famously ridiculed the films of Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman.¹⁶⁸ 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 Freddie Starr, they were all just an “Oxbridge mob.”¹⁶⁹ But within alternative communities themselves the idea that they represented non-elites was far from a joke. Ronald Muldoon recalls that alternative comedians were “in love with the notion of the mass, and the people in

¹⁶⁴ Neil Brandwood, *Victoria Wood: the Biography* (London, 2003), 270.

¹⁶⁵ Hardee, *I Stole*, 108. Interview with Martin Soan.

¹⁶⁶ WAC, File T70/14/1, “The Young Ones, A Paper on the Intention of the Programme”.

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

¹⁶⁸ *The Young Ones*, “Demolition,” tx. 9 November 1982.

¹⁶⁹ Starr, *Unwrapped!* 256.

opposition.”¹⁷⁰ Indeed, for comedians like Soan, performing for the working classes has remained a key part of his “mission.”¹⁷¹

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.”¹⁷² Outside of this comfort zone, the efforts of alternative comedians to challenge audiences could seem patronising 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.”¹⁷³ 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.”¹⁷⁴

True to the left’s track record on cultural engagement, comedians were frequently disappointed with the apolitical attitude of their audiences. Tony Allen recalls telling an audience in a Working Men’s Club that its atmosphere was like

¹⁷⁰ Wilmut and Rosengard, *Didn’t You Kill*, 218.

¹⁷¹ To this end, Soan is now leading a new comedy enterprise in Germany, “with the working-class people of Leipzig.” Interview with Martin Soan.

¹⁷² Brand in Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!* 185. Interview with Jon Plowman. Also see McSmith, *No Such Thing*, 144 and 148.

¹⁷³ Brandwood, *Victoria Wood*, 135.

¹⁷⁴ Rob Newman in Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!* 196.

“Margaret Thatcher’s living room.” “Sometimes up here,” he complained, “I feel like an avant-garde redcoat.”¹⁷⁵ Frequently uninspired by the realities of working-class tastes and values, alternative comedians tended to offer a middle-class critique for middle-class audiences.¹⁷⁶ 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 London, were generally uninspired by alternative comedy, and continued to get their laughs elsewhere.¹⁷⁷

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 double-act *Cannon and Ball*.¹⁷⁸ 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 their final series at 5:15 on a

¹⁷⁵ See Allen, *Attitude*, 93 & 111. “Redcoats” were traditional entertainers who worked in the Butlins holiday resorts.

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

¹⁷⁷ For example, the top television comedy programme in 1981 and 1982 was *The Benny Hill Show*. No alternative comedy programmes charted in the top ten in any year of the decade, while mainstream comedies repeatedly did. See

<http://www.barb.co.uk/resources/tv-facts/tv-since-1981/1981/top10>

¹⁷⁸ Stewart, *Bang!* 252-3.

Saturday evening) they were forced to backtrack in the face of unexpectedly high viewing figures. Plowman recalls how a contrite Jim 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.¹⁷⁹

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. “Chubby” Brown, considered beyond the pale among alternative comedians because of his racist and sexist material, argued that it was comedians such as himself that truly understood ordinary Britons, who “used humour as a way of getting away from the miserable realities of their lives...”¹⁸⁰ New Left playwright Trevor Griffiths, rightly credited for having “anticipated – with astonishing foresight – the coming of alternative comedy” in *Comedians*, similarly understood the continuation of mainstream success in the 1980s as rooted in the class bonds between comics and their communities.¹⁸¹ 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.”¹⁸² For Griffiths, Manning’s success needs to be understood in these terms. “He lives there, red brick and shit, and he cares.”¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Jon Plowman.

¹⁸⁰ 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.

¹⁸¹ Cook, *Ha Bloody Ha!* 10.

¹⁸² Interview with Trevor Griffiths.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

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 more than many alternative comedians ever could.¹⁸⁴ In this way, “Chubby” 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.”¹⁸⁵ While this kind of comedy was variously dismissed as 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 were 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.¹⁸⁶ This way of thinking re-focuses the concept of radical comedy away from London’s *Comedy Store* and the 1980s, linking it to older

¹⁸⁴ “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 *Common as Muck*, 320, 333 and 335.

¹⁸⁵ Medhurst, *A National Joke*, 196 & 199.

¹⁸⁶ Griffiths highlighted the amount of charity work taken on by Manning. Interview with Trevor Griffiths.

traditions, such as the work of 1940s and 1950s comedian Frank Randle.¹⁸⁷ Painted within this longer traditional of working-class stand-up, alternative comedians' work could seem patronising and out-of-touch to many. When he criticised 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."¹⁸⁸

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 Jim Davidson much better than that of Eddie Izzard.¹⁸⁹ 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 non-starter. 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 anti-sexist 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."¹⁹⁰ Given the extent to which these comedians were

¹⁸⁷ Griffiths is currently completing a play about Randle, provisionally titled "Frank's Dick."

¹⁸⁸ Smith, *My Name is*, 182.

¹⁸⁹ Hardee, *I Stole*, 280.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Martin Soan.

influenced by their predecessors in Britain and the US, as the values-based political critique offered by early alternative comedians receded, there was little that differentiated alternative comedy from longer British traditions.

VIII: 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, resonated with the concerns and feelings of the British working classes, and was based around changing personal and political values, it did have the potential to vocalise and galvanise opposition (or at least to boost morale) in a way that challenges historical certainty 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 which 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.
