

Grimwood, Tom ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8099-6191> (2021) The politics of irony, reconsidered. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 25 (2). pp. 175-188.

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**To cite this article:** Tom Grimwood (2021) The politics of irony, reconsidered, Journal for Cultural Research, 25:2, 175-188, DOI: [10.1080/14797585.2021.1922803](https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2021.1922803)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2021.1922803>



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Published online: 29 Apr 2021.



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# The politics of irony, reconsidered

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## ABSTRACT

Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi concludes his analysis of critical malaise in late capitalism with a bold call to arms: post-liberal dystopia must be faced and dissolved by irony. He argues for a renewed ironic autonomy, which emphasises the independence of mind from knowledge and the excessive nature of the imagination. Developing Berardi’s argument, I suggest there are three obstacles to theorising irony as a form of politics. The first is that a politics of irony is often accused of being either a fraudulent or amoral form of politics, which has itself allowed a post-liberal malaise to fester and grow. The second problem is that irony may no longer be simply an ambivalent tool of critique from the edges of political discourse, but instead a tool which perpetuates its very centre. The third problem is that theorising the performance and place of irony in relation to political critique often results in a slippage from the complexity of the second problem to the impasse of the first. I argue that Berardi’s ‘ironic autonomy’ is entirely possible, so long as the politics of irony is understood as depending on the different forms and media of interpretative space through which contemporary politics takes place.

## KEYWORDS

Irony; post-truth; Berardi; Rorty; liberalism; political critique

## Irony and hope

To what extent can irony be a form of political critique? In recent years, this question has occupied a number of thinkers from the broad liberal tradition of philosophy: for example, Cynthia Willett (2008) has aligned irony with a pluralistic conception of liberal freedom; William Curtis (2015) has developed Rorty’s (1989) notion of contingency in order to argue that irony creates civic virtues; Jonathan Lear has framed irony as an uncanny disruption to our everyday roles and identities which provides us the capacity to live a ‘distinctively human life’ (Lear, 2011, p. 9); and Bernstein (2016) has turned to irony as a way of disrupting the theoretical orientation of contemporary philosophy and returning it to a concern with practical, lived existence. While differing in approach and conclusions, all of these share two assumptions: first, that the present social, cultural and political climate demands a critical response; second, that irony serves to subvert, puncture and challenge rigid practices, whether such practices are embedded within stale or overly-formal traditions of thought, or within newer trends within the context of critical thought – ‘post-liberalism’, ‘post-truth’, ‘populism’, and so on – which may stifle critical debate and robust political discourse.

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But if these two assumptions frame the recourse to irony as a form of critique, the practice of a politics of irony is troubled by three interlinked problems. In this paper, I will unpack these problems, in order to argue that at their root lies an assumption about the communicative structure of irony. In order to explore this, I want to begin with a thinker who is, initially, working from out of a very different tradition to the examples above: Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. For Berardi, the prospect of irony that it is not only a form of critique, but also a medium of hope; indeed, it is only irony that can resist the contemporary political malaise. But Berardi remains elliptical on the matter of how this is put into action, both practically and conceptually. In this sense, while Berardi's extensive work on the neoliberal technologies of society marks out a very different route to his conclusions, his concept of irony itself is aligned with theorists such as Rorty, Willett, and Bernstein: for all of these thinkers, irony offers a way of subverting the seeming inevitability of the present age. But by the same token, Berardi's claims remain just as open to the three problems for a politics of irony as his liberal counterparts. Thus, rather than present an account of Berardi's thought in its entirety, the aim of this paper is to examine his claims through the lens of irony. By exploring these problems, the distinctive possibilities that Berardi's work offers in relation to our initial examples, and the direction for a politics of irony to take shape, can be brought to the fore.

According to Berardi, late capitalism is not simply an economic position, but also a moral and ontological one, which leads individuals to exhaustion, depression and anxiety. Drawing on the analyses of post-industrial capitalism informed by Deleuze, Guattari, Baudrillard, Negri and Marazzi, Berardi's writing focuses on the ways in which the development of capitalism and neoliberalism have entered the human psyche, emotions and desires as well as working practices. In both *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (2015) and *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (2012), he concludes with an assertion that this current dystopia 'has to be faced and dissolved by irony.' (2015, p.224). For Berardi, this need for irony is threefold. First, he notes a 'desperate lack of irony' in modern identity; a consequence of our traditional models of heroic agency being replaced with 'gigantic machines of simulation' (2015, p. 5), and the resulting uncertainty producing aggressive desires for identities and sub-cultures. Second, this is enforced by what Berardi terms the prevalence of 'positive feedback' in the social field. In cybernetics, he notes, negative feedback is when the output of a system opposes changes to its input, thus reducing the significance of the change. But positive feedback increases these agitations in response to the agitations themselves. This model serves Berardi as a model for his thinking on our social interactions: 'in conditions of info-acceleration and hypercomplexity, as the conscious and rational will becomes unable to check and to adjust trends, the trends themselves become self-reinforcing up to the point of final collapse.' (2012, p. 12) Positive feedback here reflects in many ways what Pariser (2012) termed *filter bubbles*: the combination of personalised algorithms presenting information to a digital media user they are likely to agree with, and the social psychological principle of groupthink, produces a limited reality tailored to views and beliefs we are already comfortable with. Yet for Berardi this is not simply an issue for digital media, but for politics and its 'techno-financial authoritarianism' which blends it with economics. Rather than offer a site of challenge or improvement to existing systems, as a system of negative feedback might, he argues that contemporary politics works to only ingrain itself as the only system, by regulating education, limiting public inquiries, and so on (2012, p. 13).

Third, Berardi acknowledges that within such self-reinforcing systems, the question is not 'what can be done?', but 'what can be done, when we know nothing can be done?' When 'everybody knows' what the wrongs of neoliberal theology and capitalist absolutism are, he argues, 'denunciation is feeding frustration and leading nowhere.' (2015, p. 200)

A different modality is therefore required to introduce negative feedback, and challenge the circularity of the current social field. The modality Berardi recommends is a renewed 'ironic autonomy' (2015, p. 225). More than simply a rhetorical trope, Berardi appeals to both an ontological and ethical emphasis on 'the independence of mind from knowledge' and 'the excessive nature of the imagination' (2015, p. 226). Together, these build 'sympathy among those who, engaged in the ironic act, arrive at a common autonomy from the dictatorship of the signified.' (2012, p. 167) This constitutes the antidote to positive feedback: ironic autonomy constitutes 'the ability to escape environments where the positive feedback is switched on.' (2012, p. 13)

But 'facing and dissolving' neoliberalism with irony is problematic. The history of irony bears an uncomfortable relationship with political interventions: as Grimwood notes, 'the various incarnations of the "age of irony" (an age which has been invoked in a number of different contexts in the past 300 years or so) are repeatedly identified by a refusal or inability to form recognisably accountable "positions", particularly in response to "serious" events.' (2008, p. 350) Furthermore, ages of irony are typically identified *post hoc* by the announcements of their death, rather than the prospect of their arrival. In part, this is due to the inherent problem of defining that which seeks to problematise immediate interpretation: an issue we will discuss in the next section. But while being wary of committing to some kind of referential register which would defeat the purpose of ironic autonomy, some more detail is needed to supplement Berardi's call to arms. However hopeful this recourse to irony may be, situated as it is within a history of Romantic idealism, Weimar hedonism and postmodern subversion it clearly needs to negotiate the core problems facing any prospective contemporary politics of irony.

## First problem: Fake Irony

The first, and perhaps most obvious, problem is the fact that irony itself is persistently theorised as a fraudulent form of political critique. For many, it is *precisely* the prevalence of irony which allow malaise to fester and grow. One example of this view was presented in Christy Wampole's *New York Times* article following Trump's election, 'How to Live Without Irony (For Real This Time).' Here, Wampole recalled her earlier criticisms of the cultural dominance of 'apolitical irony', 'a vacuity and vapidness of the individual and collective psyche' which served as a defence mechanism against blunter realities. 'For the relatively well educated and financially secure,' she argued, 'irony functions as a kind of credit card you never have to pay back.' But with the election of Trump, the self-serving recourse to irony had been undermined:

That Age of Irony ended abruptly on 9 November 2016, when people in many of the irony-heavy communities [...] — blue bubbles of educated, left-leaning, white middle-class people in cities, suburbia and college towns, of which I am a part — woke up to the sobering news of Donald J. Trump's victory, and perhaps a new reason to ditch the culture of sarcasm and self-infantilization. (Wampole, 2016)

In the wake of what she saw as the political failure of this age of irony, Wampole argued that a 'new sincerity' is needed. When irony has undermined the sincerity of politics, only the re-establishment of that sincerity can save us. While not an in-depth philosophical treatise, Wampole's article nevertheless represents well a current of philosophical thought that seeks to expose irony's pretensions to critique: a current as old as irony itself, which remains prescient to any attempt to privilege irony as a form of critique. Something is wrong, and this wrong requires, if not quite a 'final vocabulary,' a response that is stronger than the celebration of endless contingency that the ironists seem able to offer. In this way, the spirit of Wampole's criticism captures the urgency provoked by both the contemporary political situation, and the need to resist the seduction of irony as a response to it.

For his part, Berardi agrees that irony may well be mistaken for what he terms cynicism – hallmarks of which may well be 'sarcasm and self-infantilization.' While both irony and cynicism imply a 'dissociation of language and behaviour from consciousness' (2012, p. 165), cynicism is a 'deceived moralism'. Drawing on Peter Sloterdijk's momentous *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Berardi sees contemporary cynicism within the 'conformist majority, fully aware that the law of the powerful is bad, but bending to it because there's nothing else to do.' (2012, p. 162) Cynicism internalises the 'impotence of truth'; left with the ashes of failed utopias, the cynic is the critic who has lost their faith that truth can ever be fulfilled. But 'the ironist,' Berardi states, 'never had faith to begin with' (2012, p. 166), and therefore offers a more radical vision of critique: it implies an infinite process of interpretation.

Simply defining irony as one thing and cynicism as another is not, however, particularly convincing in this case. As Paul de Man commented, after providing a long list of philosophers each of whom criticises the last for failing to successfully identify what irony is: 'definitional language seems to be in trouble where irony is concerned. [...] It is very difficult, impossible indeed, to get to a conceptualization by means of definition.' (1996, p. 165) Indeed, Grimwood (2012) argues that irony is first and foremost an interpretative practice, and this means that it must be identified in terms of themes and currents of its use, rather than abstract, fixed definitions. Because irony always infers moving beyond the immediate word or sentence, any definition of irony must necessarily itself be potentially ironic (2012, p. 70). In this sense, while the content responds to different events, it can be said that the ethos of Wampole's criticism sits firmly within a well-established theme within the politics of irony. It is a theme echoed in Roger Rosenblatt's infamous claim that if there was one good thing to come out of 9/11, it was the end of irony: a violent reminder of the seriousness of what was 'real' could draw to a halt the perceived relativism of postmodernity (2008, p. 349–50). And if irony were to be taken seriously, then it was left open to the charge that ironic interpretation, like Bergsonian comedy, could only ever uphold the status quo: a sentiment famously summed up by the 1980s slogan of the Los Angeles-based artists' collective, Inventory: 'Ironic mimesis is not critique, it is the mentality of a slave!'

Philosophically, the first problem for a politics of irony brings us to an impasse where discussions focus on how to discern 'good irony' from 'bad irony', and defending what counts as good (disruption, humour, contingency) from what is charged as bad (cynicism, scepticism, relativism). This impasse is difficult to overcome, because the two sides don't necessarily oppose each other in a conventional manner. After all, humour can be cynical,

scepticism can be disruptive, and so on. Instead, critics of ironic approaches take the strategy of exposing irony as something else: when cast as political critique, it becomes something other than irony in the traditional sense (scepticism, relativism, naivety, etc. – see, for example, Bacon, 2005; Haack, 1995). In response, the ironists may counter that this reduction is too blunt, and that the fundamental appeal of irony (as opposed to cynicism, pure and simple) is lost (2012, p. 62–3). The impasse remains.

## Second problem: the politics of sincerity

The second problem for a politics of irony can be seen when one considers what both sides of this impasse share. Whether advocating irony, or furiously rejecting it, both sides of the debate typically assume that the issue is how we choose to enter into an otherwise un-ironic space of politics and political critique. For Berardi, ironic autonomy constitutes a form of resistance precisely because it presents what is absent from, and seemingly impossible within, contemporary culture. But the fields of practice within which political critique takes place is far from un-ironic. As Don Waisanen notes:

in a trend that shows few signs of waning, we [...] increasingly see those in power using comedy to serve their own political ends. [...] Comedy by the powerful has shifted from an informal tool to a formal expectation. Even the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency now engages in satirical tweets. (2019, p. 160)

In his essay *The Production of Sincerity*, Boris Groys discusses the question of whether art can engage in politics, or simply provide an aesthetic façade for political decisions. For Groys, this question in fact misses the point: the problem is ‘not art’s incapacity to become truly political. The problem is that today’s political sphere has already become aestheticised.’ (2010, p. 40, my emphasis) The result, Groys suggests, is ‘when art becomes political, it is forced to make the unpleasant discovery that politics has already become art – that politics has already situated itself in the aesthetic field.’ (2010, p. 39)

The machine of media coverage does not need any individual artistic intervention or artistic decision in order to be put into motion. Indeed, contemporary mass media has emerged as by far the largest and most powerful machine for producing images – vastly more extensive and effective than the contemporary art system. (2010, p. 40)

I do not read Groys as saying here that politics has ‘become’ art in the totalising sense that it now hangs in a gallery – that politics is art, and only art. Rather, identifying the aesthetic properties of politics wrong-foots the practical points of reference for artistic resistance: sincerity, authenticity, decision, affective reality, and so on. In the same way, could it not be suggested that politics has out-ironised the ironists? Far from an ambivalent tool of critique from the edges, irony now seems to perpetuate the circulation of political discourse. And if this is the case, this fact would not only displace the critical power of irony which Berardi promises (how can irony ‘disrupt’ that which is already, in some sense, ironic?); it would also challenge Wampole’s appeal to ‘sincerity’ as a mode for re-engaging politics, for it is not clear how sincerity could emerge so cleanly from a context that is saturated in irony.

There is a further aspect to the ironic space of politics. In *The Compass of Irony* (Muecke, 1969), D.C. Muecke introduced a now-common distinction between verbal and situational irony: one is intended by a speaker, the other observed from a situation. As Muecke notes, intentional, verbal irony dominates intellectual discussions – whether literary, aesthetic, philosophical or political – because it is more straightforward to account for and document. Situational irony, meanwhile, is far harder to theorise because it is transitional, fleeting and dependent upon variations of audience response. Yet, while it is true that, as discussed above, the use of irony as a tool of politics seems to have increased, the contemporary political discourse can also appear as an ironic space because of its situational characteristics. In many ways, this is captured best by the now-common refrain from across the political spectrum that the effect that satire (which depends almost entirely on irony) has become impossible due to each party's policies and actions effectively satirising themselves (see, for example, Goodfellow, 2018; Groskop, 2016; Stanley, 2015). This constitutes something different to the deliberate use of irony by political groups and politicians, and as such something beyond the reach of verbal irony alone. We can take some examples from off of the shelf: the British Conservative Party widely denounced the opposition Labour Party's economic policies in the 2015 General Election campaign, before adopting them once in office; the biggest recruiter of terrorists in the United States is reputedly the FBI; after leaving the European Union under the auspices of a campaign promising the ending of free movement, the United Kingdom flew in Romanian fruit pickers to relieve the economy during the Covid-19 crisis; rather than bring down the financial system, the 2008 banking crisis in fact served to confirm and consolidate neoliberal ideology (Berardi, 2012, p. 61–2). The ironies of COVID-19's political theatre would require a paper all to themselves.

It may be objected that the examples above do not really constitute irony; or, if they do, only in a minor way compared to better typologies – tragedy, hypocrisy, contradiction and so on. What is significant about these examples is, however, that their irony arises from specific juxtapositions and unintended curation of information. There is nothing ironic about the Conservative Party adopting a particular economic strategy, until it is placed next to an account of them discrediting the same policy only a few years before. In this sense, the media landscape upon which political discourse takes place establishes conditions for perpetual irony; but an irony which clearly goes beyond Muecke's verbal model. As such, the importance of identifying examples of ironic politics as bearing the functional characteristics of irony – rather than, say, tragedy, or hypocrisy – becomes significant only in relation to proposing or rejecting a politics of irony: that is, when facing the impasse between Berardi's ironic hope and Wampole's non-ironic sincerity. It is in this sense that they suggest a sense in which irony has become a condition of politics.

One reason for this condition is, of course, provided by Berardi's account of positive feedback in post-industrial capitalism: the rise of simplistic truths and moral judgements aligning with the increased complexity of the globalised world. It is no surprise if attempts to produce a clear and concise sense of moral agency in response to such contingency end up producing situations which project irony, accidentally or otherwise. This condition presents itself through the affirmation of non-contingent truths in response to contingent contexts: or, to put it another way, contingency being a formative foundation for the strength of the non-contingent claim. This is perhaps another way of describing what has



been termed 'post-truth'. Underlying this is a far more banal reason: the sheer array of digital and social media carrying, storing and presenting information and narrative. Under such a condition, we are always faced with a range of possible links, juxtapositions and resonances which all offer the possibility of an ironic situation emerging, and sincerity being placed in question.

### Third problem: the slippage

Where does this leave a potential politics of irony? Perhaps the most conventional response is that a world of ironic possibilities will remain nothing but latent possibility, until it is used in some way. This then returns us to the prospect of discerning 'good' uses of irony from 'bad', and thereby using irony to puncture the tyranny of universalism without leading us into an abyss of nihilistic in-jokes. This solution is, of course, familiar from archetypal texts such as Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Irony*, whereby he explicitly focuses on 'stable' or 'controlled' irony; or from the appeal to the 'liberal' irony found in Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, which suggests that using irony as a form of civic virtue is a way of tempering our truth-claims. The acknowledgement of contingency (placed within certain limits) can then form the basis of a better politics: it 'helps make the world's inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality.' (Rorty, 1991, p. 193) Rorty's critique of universal truth-claims depends on groups recognising the integral limits of what truth they can claim. In this sense, everything is context-dependent: 'It seems to me that I am just as provincial and contextualist as the Nazi teachers [...]; the only difference is that I serve a better cause, I come from a better province.' (Rorty, 2000, p. 22) This depends, in turn, on a provincial ability to claim that 'we are ironists'. There is, it seems, no irony without boundaries. As such, the politics of irony would involve gatekeeping our pretensions to holding a universal truth, and thus becomes merely a function of the wider liberal philosophy to keep our truth-claims humble and our political views honest.

But such gatekeeping is neither the self-protection which ironists are accused of (removing themselves from a critical, or challengeable position, because everything is ironic), nor the political criticism which Berardi argues offers us hope. Rather, it is a re-modelling of Roland Barthes' essay 'Operation: Margarine': 'To instil into the Established Order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks has nowadays become a paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting it.' (Barthes, 1973, p. 41) Through a range of examples, from films and novels about the Army to *Astra* margarine adverts, Barthes shows how established values are exposed for their 'pettiness' and 'injustices' (the Army is stupidly tyrannical; margarine is cheap), but are then saved not only '*in spite of*,' but '*rather by* the heavy curse of its blemishes.' (41) The discipline of the Army allows the hero of the story to overcome the wrongdoers; margarine is, in fact, just like butter but cheaper. Irony threatens our capacity to control our meaning, but is rescued by re-asserting a controlled, meaningful irony.

The problem here is that we seem to have simply slipped from the second problem (that politics is itself ironic) back to the first (the impasse between 'good' and 'bad' irony). In fact, this slippage is itself a consequence of the ironic conditions of politics. The case of 'post-truth' serves as a useful analogy here. On the one hand,

the nomenclature of post-truth is often used to describe the highly publicised criticisms of scholarly expertise within political arguments: from British MP Michael Gove's claim that 'Britain has had enough of experts' (see Authers, 2016) to Donald Trump's comments that 'nobody really knows' if climate change is real (Eilperin, 2016), and all in between. The Oxford Dictionary defines the term as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.' (Oxford English Dictionary, ND) The somewhat natural response to this on behalf of the 'experts' is to re-assert the foundations of a rational politics of truth and progress. The very term 'post-truth' thus becomes a *de facto* victory of truth; and accompanying this victory is an industry of conferences, academic papers and even research centres (such as <https://posttruthinitiative.org/>) that have arisen in its wake. But in this response, there is a sense that rather too quickly, 'post-truth' becomes merely 'non-truth', and the complexity of the 'post-' prefix is lost. Too quickly, post-truth is shaped into a straw man figure to be bested by conservative epistemological mantra; a figure uncannily similar to older enemies of that mantra such as radical feminism or post-modernism (see, for example, Calcutt, 2016). Too quickly, terms such as 'post-truth' and 'fake news' that are embedded within the complex and interactive circulation of new media become ciphers for nothing other than a yearning for an ideal model of academic institutions of truth. The result is an inevitable impasse: on the one hand, a post-truth politics that understands the fallibility of truth, while at the same time insisting upon ever-more strident truth-claims; on the other hand, those dismissing that truth might be fallibility by appealing to a crude nostalgia for, if not 'facts' themselves, then the social and academic structures that produce facts.

What has gone wrong, then? In thinkers such as Rorty we see an implicit model of agency which remains built around *verbal irony*; or, at least, the requirements of practical critique which shape verbal irony as the dominant mode of studying irony. Not only does this model suggest that irony is a tool of agency, but it also presupposes certain dialogical spaces which remain largely *abstract*: a speaker and an audience, a listener who understands a context, a shared understanding. These are fantastic tools for challenging, say, the hegemony of rationalist justification or pretensions to universal truths; or, as Richard Bernstein has argued recently, for redressing the imbalance between philosophy as a 'theoretical' discipline, and its original concern with living a good life. But it has always been the case that verbal irony is a product of the conditions of theory (that is, the practice of critique within particular institutional and cultural limits: the requirements of a 'well-evidence argument', the interpretative closure of a conclusion or standpoint), rather than a reflection of ironic reality. That is to say: verbal irony provides a clearer sense of what irony 'means' by locating it within a speaking agent. The risk and uncertainty of irony is then reduced to a question of should we use it or shouldn't we. But this has already resulted in the first problem for a politics of irony: the impasse. Furthermore, this impasse was premised on irony as a *tool* of agency – whether a tool for critique, or a tool for hiding behind the pretensions of critique – which the second problem for a politics irony suggested was not always applicable to the specific context of how political discourse circulates. Indeed, the situation of ironic politics calls more for De Man's observation that:

The way to stop irony is by understanding, by the understanding of irony, by the understanding of the ironic process. Understanding would allow us to control irony. But what if irony is always of understanding, if irony is always the irony of understanding, if what is at stake in irony is always the question of whether it is possible to understand or not to understand? (De Man, 1996, p. 166)

## Two examples

I am suggesting here that when irony becomes synonymous with contingency, we lose what we might term the *curatorial* aspect of irony's emergence and circulation that was fundamental to the notion of politics out-ironising the ironists. In the current media field, the spaces for interpreting irony are far more multifaceted and complex than the model of verbal irony allows for, and as such require particular positioning and representing of irony's relation to the material, social and political encounters. I want to illustrate this notion that the slippage from the second problem to the first is based on the spaces of interaction between irony and interpreter with two, necessarily arbitrary, examples of a politics of irony; in the interests of balance, the first is negative, the second positive, but both enact the problem of slippage discussed above.

First example. In *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* Angela Nagle provides an account of the online culture wars that have emerged from the margins of the internet to exert significant influence on political views and decision-making in the United States. At one point, she notes the alt-right distinguishes itself from older right-wing sensibilities by assuming 'the aesthetics of counter-culture' (2017, p. 28), and harnessing the mythos of the 'moral transgressor as a heroic individual' (31) previously the domain of the left. In this way, internet trolling, abusive or misogynistic comments and violent threats adopt a Bakhtinian carnival-esque modality. In 'the style of the rightist chan culture,' Nagle warns, 'interpretation and judgment are evaded through tricks and layers of metatextual self-awareness and irony.' (Nagle 2017, p. 31)

Without ignoring the problems that Nagle's illuminating research raises, her analysis frequently involves, in each case study, focusing on the original meaning and its initial small-scale circulation of particular memes, then suggesting that this originary meaning subsequently governs their proliferation in mainstream political commentary and dialogue. Thus presented, a localised irony between handfuls of members of an internet forum becomes something far more dangerous, with a presupposed and non-critical response. Nagle thus adopts an inherently conservative view of irony throughout her book: she positions it purely as an intentional, controlled trope which then functions as a cynical excuse for posting offensive words and images. But what is missed here is precisely the use of memes *beyond* their original creation: their circulation, amid the more general circulation and flows of the digital age, which, after all, constitute them as 'memes' in the first place. Missing out this element helps to position the activities of, say, 4chan memes as far more effective as they may well be, because Nagle looks at their actions through every lens *except* irony. In short, there is an everydayness which Nagle refuses to acknowledge: that one can see a meme which perhaps prompts a wry smile, perhaps a raised eyebrow; perhaps a 'like,' perhaps a 'share,' or perhaps a sigh before the thumb moves on to the

next one. For example, when the research group Revealing Reality recorded participants' Smartphone usage during the 2019 UK General Election, they found:

Charlie in Sunderland consumed much of his election news through memes on lad humour Facebook pages, spending more time looking at posts of Boris Johnson using the word "boobies" than reading traditional news stories. Fiona in Bolton checked out claims about Jeremy Corbyn's wealth by going to a website called Jihadi Watch before sharing the far-right material in a deliberate bid to anger her leftwing friends (Waterson, 2019).

Such an analysis suggests, just as Kerr et al. (2006) have before, that users of new media experience different and unique combinations of both 'cultural' and 'sensual' pleasure, in more manifold and heterogeneous ways than uses of traditional media. However, Revealing Reality's analysis of election news consumption focuses instead on the lack of accountability in the distribution of social media, and how this dangerously leaves all responsibility on the reader. To do this, like Nagle, they follow a particular reading strategy, which uses the passing interaction with social media as a form of passive consumption of what is presented as truth (rather than simply a passing interaction, perhaps ironically, perhaps disgustedly, perhaps uninterestedly). In the context of irony, they remain rooted in a verbal model of communication, rather than a situational one. There are, of course, a number of arguments to be made about the ways in which countercultural online memes pervade everyday discourse, but these are far more complex than either Nagle or Revealing Reality account for. Instead, their reading strategy follows the implicit need for political critique to be *serious*. Where the content to be critiqued is not conducted in a serious manner, the task of critique is to render it serious: to expose its seriousness, to reduce it to its naked force, power, cynicism, etc. But correspondingly, the task of critique refuses to reduce its objects to sheer banality. And this becomes a problem when banal circulation is precisely the rhetorical power of such objects, and precisely its use within individual's agency.

Second example. Richard Bernstein's *Ironic Life* attempts to develop Rorty's account of irony as a form of liberal politics by situating it as a form of 'rational justification' rather than a knowledge claim (2016, p. 52) Noting that the study of irony has long been considered to not belong to 'serious' philosophical study (6), Bernstein considers ways that a fuller understanding of irony can return philosophy's attention to the 'art of living.' (106) Turning this on to the training and schooling of philosophy students, he raises concerns about the way that Anglo-American philosophy has become 'almost exclusively [...] a theoretical discipline', linked to the 'growing academic professionalization of philosophy' (124) and thus risks becoming 'barren, pedantic and irrelevant.' (125) Bernstein argues that for the liberal ironist, 'irony is *not* a form of complete detachment from worldly affairs. On the contrary, irony is compatible with a *passionate* liberal commitment to diminishing cruelty and humiliation; indeed, it *enables* this commitment.' (2016, p. 118–9, emphasis original) In doing so, Bernstein offers a vision of a field of politics built upon a philosophically sound account of irony: a model to oppose to the nihilism of contemporary ironic politics without losing the inherent irony of any political discussion.

However, in this case Bernstein's argument that irony is a fundamental aspect of the liberal art of living is let down by a curious lack of any account of the materiality of life itself, other than examples from his teaching of theoretical philosophy, or conversing and critiquing other professors (who, despite Bernstein's claim that they are 'mavericks,' are or

were well-established professors in the field). As such, the irony that Bernstein pursues remains fundamentally verbal, and surprisingly inarticulate on the very situations it is supposed to affect. In doing so, it lays bare a core problem with his enterprise: this model of verbal irony is often taken literally *as* a discussion (speaker speaks; audience listens), without the sense of what other conditions are in play to ensure the success of a communication. This would include social and cultural capital, prestige, trust, respect, and so on; all of which are clearly present from Bernstein's chosen interlocutors. At the same time, the liberal agency inherent to Bernstein's argument *assumes* such a model: as Cynthia Willett notes, while liberalism 'rests on moral principles that call upon autonomy, self-determination, or rational decision to guide individuals' this notion is embedded within 'abstract notions of individualism' which is not 'designed first and foremost to negotiate parameters of freedom through the intricate social web that reaches into our libidinal core.' (Willett 2008, p. 64) Consequently, it slips from the complexities of ironic politics to a rather traditional, albeit implicit, account of 'good irony', this time informed by the underlying enablers of academic standing.

### **Irony autonomy, reconsidered**

The third problem for a politics of irony can perhaps be summarised by the suggestion that when irony becomes synonymous with contingency, we lose what we earlier termed the *curatorial* aspect of irony's emergence and circulation. For both Nagle (who is anti-irony) and Bernstein (who is not), there is an almost-exclusive focus on the production of irony, rather than its presentation and circulation. This, as we have noted, is a consequence of a focus on liberal agency framing ironic interventions (or resistance to ironic interventions) in the political sphere. The liberal model of politics that has shaped much of the philosophical treatments of irony can introduce an implicit emphasis on verbal irony – that irony is an agential act, in effect – which becomes deeply problematic for negotiating the contemporary political domain. Within such a domain, it should be clear that irony cannot simply hold a negative value – that is, the ability to say 'no', or the ability to distort horrible things in the world into amusing memes. Rather, the examples above suggest in blunt terms that ironic autonomy is constituted by our spaces of interpretation: 'the space where social relations are reproduced, the space where knowledge and income are distributed.' (2011, p. 102)

To this end, Berardi's notion of autonomy is important to the extent it highlights the wider systems shaping the materiality of those spaces. This does not constitute a straightforward rejection of verbal irony, however. This is because the materiality in question is already constituted, Berardi argues, by the use of language. For Berardi, our understanding of politics is not an 'exchange of signs supplied with a univocal referent,' but rather following 'the slides in the relations between signs and referents, reinventing signs as functions of new referents and creating new referents by circulating new signs.' Politics, likewise, 'does not have to respect any one law, because it invents the law when it creates new relations.' (2011, p. 105) This reinvention process is the hallmark of what Berardi, following Marazzi, identifies as semio-capitalism: a shift in the sphere of production from material objects to immaterial commodities such as knowledge, for which the essential tool is the mantra that 'there's no more truth, only an exchange of signs, only a deterritorialising of meaning.' (2012, p. 85) This form of

late capitalism does not separate communication from production, as its previous incarnations did; rather, it 'makes of their coincidence the very lever of economic development.' (2011, p. 34)

Thus, when Berardi argues that ironic autonomy 'refuses the game' of semio-capitalism, and instead 'implies a shared sense of assumptions and implications between oneself and one's listeners,' (2012, p. 167) this should not be read as appealing to a shared communion of equals; an in-group or 'blue bubble' which Wampole described. As Marazzi points out, the sense that political understanding requires an un-ironic space in order for some form of 'common usage' to bind a political community together nowadays appears naïve. Marazzi argues that if language is a set of conventions which enables politics, then this also 'implies an original violence, because it forces us to remain silent on lived experiences for which words do not exist and [...] to talk about contents that don't correspond to any experience' (2011, p. 38). As such, a critique of politics in terms of its linguistic affects, such as irony:

does not mean to step outside of the world of politics "depriving ourselves of speech." It simply means – but this "simply" is crucial – to assert that within linguistic mediation the existence of each subject is always conflicted: it is this conflict that constantly modifies any linguistic presupposition. (2011, p. 39-40)

Agency is always in conflict, in this sense, and such conflict always modifies any linguistic presupposition: to the extent that, we might suggest, irony is not a product of an agent, but agency is itself a product of, or response to, the inherent ironic possibilities of even the most straightforward political discourses, such as a manifesto launch or a migration policy. Ironic autonomy would then be fleeting and momentary instances when a space of interpretation is curated in terms of those possibilities, and in doing so reveals how the constellation of interests interacts to produce ironic non-sense: or in other words, reveals the situations that allow verbal irony to emerge. As Grimwood argues, 'the productivity of irony emerges within this relationship between the identification of an ironic moment and the establishment of a discourse of the particular event in which the ironic moment takes place.' (2008, p. 362)

This points to ironic autonomy emerging in somewhere like a middle-term between the emphasis on agency within liberalism, and the broader psychopolitical accounts of neoliberalism found in Berardi and his post-workerist colleagues: what Willett describes as expanding 'our focus from the individual and her choices to embodied social creatures and new forms of belonging.' (2008, p. 147) It is precisely within such a middle-term, I think, that ironic autonomy becomes politically effective. The task of the ironic critic is not to re-insert ambiguity into politics, to subvert or create vertical distance between themselves and the *realpolitik*; but rather to continue to articulate these interpretative spaces: to identify, not the commonality of territorial understanding of shared jokes, but the dysfunctional ways in which communication travels; the ways in which such territories are constituted not by verbal agreement but situational curation.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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