The Comedian as Populist Leader: Postironic Narratives in an Age of Cynical Irony

Abstract:
In October 2013 during a fractious interview with Jeremy Paxman for the Newsnight TV programme, the comedian Russell Brand called for a revolution against a self-serving political and economic elite. Over the following 18 months Brand became a prominent Left-wing political figure in the UK. This paper suggests that Brand’s experience was not isolated but forms part of a wider contemporary trend of comedians becoming populist political leaders. Other examples include the French comedian Dieudonné and the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo, whose political party Movimento 5 Stelle is currently the largest in the Italian Parliament and part of the governing coalition. Using Brand as a case study the paper examines his political storytelling for its structure and mode of deployment. Whenever Brand ventures forward a sincere statement he always stands ready to ironize it in order to avoid the perception on piety. Using Peter Sloterdijk’s discussion of cynical reason and Slavoj Zizek’s concept of cynical irony I suggest that a post-political ironic detachment has become the dominant mode of ideology. I then argue that this ironic detachment has come under increasing pressure since the economic crisis of 2008 and the increased political engagement it has provoked. The comedian as political leader, I argue, shows a particular route through this problem. They represent transitional figures pioneering the shift from ironic detachment to postironic statements and narratives of political sincerity of the kind that sustained political engagement requires.

Keywords: Irony, Comedy, Populism, Leadership, Russell Brand

Introduction

In October 2013, the journalist Jeremy Paxman conducted a now infamous interview with the comedian Russell Brand for the Newsnight TV programme (2013). The interview was fractious, with an initially dismissive Paxman eventually put on the back foot by Brand’s
trenchant critique of the political establishment and the post-crisis austerity policies of the Coalition government. Brand ended by stating he thought a revolution was inevitable. The interview became a sensation. It was the focus of huge media attention and was watched over 11 million times on YouTube. Over subsequent months Brand emerged as a prominent left-wing political figure in the UK and engaged in a flurry of activity. He toured his new political stand-up show, *Messiah Complex*, which was subsequently turned into a bestselling DVD. He published a book *Revolution* (Brand 2014) outlining his political views. In 2014, he started a daily YouTube channel, *The Trews*, which by March 2015 had gained over a million subscribers. He also began to support activist campaigns in London including the E15 and New Era housing campaigns (Arthurs and Little 2016). His status as a major political figure was confirmed when in the run up to the May 2015 UK General Election the Labour Party leader, Ed Miliband, agreed to be interviewed by Brand on an episode of *The Trews*. His call for a vote for Miliband contradicted his previous position of not voting and caused controversy among some of his supporters. When the Conservative Party unexpectedly won the election, Brand appeared to end his political activities and retired from public life.¹

The initial impetus for this paper lay in a desire to understand the significance of that brief period of time between October 2013 and May 2015 when the comedian Russell Brand became a major UK political figure.² Unlike other treatments of Brand I want to position him as part of a wider contemporary trend of comedians becoming populist political leaders. I argue that this trend is a reflection of the kinds of stories that these figures tell and embody. Through a close reading of the performances of both Russell Brand and Beppe Grillo I aim to show that they exercise leadership through storytelling and the stories they tell are about moving from post-political cynical irony to postironic political commitment. I argue that this story is particularly attractive during the present moment of economic and political uncertainty and a concomitant increase in populist political engagement.

¹ It has since transpired that much of his time following this period was occupied by the birth of his first child in 2016 and his studying for an MA at SOAS. Late in 2016 he restarted *The Trews* and in 2017 began a new politically based podcast called *Under the Skin*, in which Brand interviews authors and documentary makers he admires.
² The initial framing for this article was developed in a newspaper comment article for which I was a co-author. The argument has been significantly developed for this paper.
Brand Positioning

Many of the attempts to think through the transition of Russel Brand into a significant political figure begin from his status as a celebrity rather than his standing as a comedian. Arthurs and Shaw (2016: 1136) provide a good example as they trace the repurposing of Brand’s “celebrity capital to political ends”. They read Brand’s move towards politics through Bourdieu’s field theory, which can trace the movement of social capital across different social fields. This allows them to reveal the constraints and allowances placed on his transition by the different dynamics of celebrity capital and political capital. Similarly, Brookes and Nolan (2015) position Brand within the tendency of market-oriented celebrities to transition toward engagement with populist politics. This produces, they argue, a problematic interpolation of the audience as consumer-citizens, a category that only reinforces what they see as the political limitations of populist politics.

While Brand retains his status as a major celebrity, the period of his politicization overlaps with his disengagement from ‘Hollywood’, his disenchantment with celebrity and his re-engagement with standup comedy. I will argue that contemporary comedy has its own dynamics, distinct from the dynamics of celebrity, which played out in their own way during Brand’s transition. Those that agree with this, such as Brassett (2016), often assess Brand alongside other contemporary political satirists. This is certainly necessary and we will examine the affects created by contemporary political satire later, but Brand has distinguished himself through his attempts to move beyond satire towards sincere political engagement. In this paper, I want to think through the political problems revealed by this move. In order to do so I position the ‘Russell Brand’ phenomenon as part of a wider trend of comedians becoming actual political leaders. Examining this trend, and positioning it historically, reveals very different dynamics to those driving contemporary political satire.

The trend of comedians becoming political leaders reveals a political problem, which is both obscured by political satire and partly caused by it. It’s the problem of putting forward sincere political statements in an age of widespread cynical irony. This is, in part, a problem of storytelling and the stories told within contemporary satire are very different from the stories that must be told by any comedian that wants to become a populist political leader.
Political satire and its stance of ironic detachment is the point of departure for comedians but it is insufficient for transformative political leaders who require popular engagement with politics. Contemporary comedians becoming populist political leaders must tell a very particular story, one that pioneers, or prefigures, a journey from ironic detachment to political commitment, while avoiding accusations of naïve sincerity.

**Political Leadership, Populism and Storytelling**

Russel Brand is not a political leader in the most straightforward sense of the word. He is not the leader of a political party. However, the literature on political leadership has long acknowledged that leadership can take different forms. To map this, we could begin from Weber’s (1964: 358) analysis of the three sources of authority: traditional, legal and charismatic. The elected leader of a political party would have legal authority relating to their position within a bureaucratic entity. Charismatic leaders, on the other hand, need not be formal leaders of formal political parties as they derive their authority from their perceived possession of “exceptional powers or qualities.” This allows them to mobilise the passions, supposedly banished by bureaucratic administration, in order to directly transform people’s beliefs. They lead by acting as a point of political identification.

To these distinctions we could add Freud’s (2001) conception of the relationship between a leader and a crowd, or group. For Freud (2001: 116) a crowd or group consists of a “number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego.” The bonds within a group do not form horizontally but through the shared projection of libidinal bonds upon the figure of the leader. It’s a model that’s followed in more recent post-Freudian political theory, such as Ernesto Laclau’s (2005: 100) conception of populism, in which “the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality… is inherent to the formation of a ‘people’.” Laclau’s contribution is useful to us here because, in line with a Freudian conception of political leadership, he steers us away from a focus on the (perceived) exceptional nature of the charismatic leader, while retaining the connection between different types of political leadership and different types (or logics) of collectivity. For Laclau all political formations fall on a continuum between the poles of populism on the one hand and post-political administration on the other. Populist leadership acts through political identification, while
leadership within regimes of post-political administration rest on claims of technocratic competence.

Laclau’s conception of populism rests on a formalist analysis. He is concerned with how a particularity (a demand or an individual) is raised to stand in for the universal (the people) by acting as an empty signifier. It must be emptied of its content so it can receive the projections of others. While this removes the requirement, found in charismatic leadership, for exceptional individual qualities, and so opens the way for other mechanisms of political identification, it leaves a certain arbitrariness in the elevation of a particular individual to the position of leader. The focus on the form of articulation through which a leader arises leads to a disinterest in the specific content involved in any particular instance of political identification. This is problematic as without examining the content of the leader’s political stance it becomes difficult to differentiate between Left and Right populisms or to relate their prominence to the conjuncture from which they arise. I argue that political leadership can result from people identifying with particular figures because they seem to reflect their own political feelings or aspirations. One form that this can take is identification with the stories that political leaders either tell or embody.

Denning (2011), who has been foundational in the study of leadership as storytelling, emphasizes the ability of stories to help individuals transform their perspective. They are powerful mechanisms for doing so because stories mobilize emotional registers, as well as rational ones (Denning 2004). If we accept Weik’s (2001) conception of organizations as sensemaking entities, and the practice of leadership as primarily concerned with the management of meaning within organisations (Smircich and Morgan 1982; Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003), then the utility of transformative storytelling becomes apparent. During those moments of change, when an organisation’s sensemaking collapses or gets out of kilter with the new situation, the right kind of stories can, “overcome protecting barriers

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3 Indeed, for Laclau (2005), and in this instance Mouffe (2000), the democratic moment in leadership lays precisely in the recognition, and indeed institutionalization, of this arbitrariness. It’s this that prevents the perception of a natural right to rule.
humans develop against the new” (Mladkova 2013: 86). In order to do so, Howard Gardiner (1995: 14) argues, leaders must present:

a drama that unfolds over time, in which they – leaders and followers – are the principal characters or heroes. Together, they have embarked on a journey in pursuit of certain goals, and along the way and into the future, they can expect to encounter certain obstacles or resistances that must be overcome... the story needs to make sense to audience members at their particular historical moment, in terms of where they have been and where they would like to go.

Stories, as opposed to mere rational proof, exercise the kind of power that Goffman (1974) would call framing, and Lukes (2005) would designate as non-decision-making power or ideological power. This constitutes the power to determine or influence the presuppositions upon which choices and decisions are made. It’s this, along with Gardiner’s insistence that the stories leaders tell must make sense of the particular historical moment, that brings us into contact with the field of ideology critique and the constricting role played by assumptions about other people’s beliefs (Zizek 1989). 4 We will look at theories of ideology as they relate to cynicism and irony a little later in the paper at which point we will also distinguish postirony from discourses of post-truth. Now we’ve established more precisely what the phrase ‘political leadership’ can refer to we can move on to establish the trend of comedians becoming political leaders.

Comedians become leaders
The period between Russell Brand’s interview with Jeremy Paxman in October 2013 and his May 2015 interview with Ed Miliband certainly saw Brand act as a figure of political identification. We will look later at the narratives he was telling and embodying but in establishing his status as a political leader we should also return to the role he played in direct political activism through his support for the E15 and New Era housing campaigns in London. Accounting for these actions as political leadership requires one last update to our discussion through reference to Chadwick’s (2013) conception of a hybrid media system. In

4 For Zizek (1989) ideology operates less by influencing what you believe and more by influencing what you believe most other people believe.
his recent work, Chadwick shows how those individuals with large social media followings, often overlapping with access to more traditional forms of media, have an enlarged ability to focus attention on, and help frame, a political campaign, issue or demand. Russell Brand, with 11 million twitter followers and a YouTube channel, The Trews, which had a million subscribers, was able to exercise leadership by mobilising a tremendous amount of attention for the campaigns he supported.

Apart from Russell Brand the other most obvious example of a comedian turned political leader is Beppe Grillo, a well-known comedian turned anti-corruption campaigner who in 2010 established a political party called Movimento 5 Stelle (the Five Star Movement). In this sense, Beppe Grillo is straightforwardly a political leader as he was the formal head of a constituted political party. However, his leadership began in a mode similar to Brand’s. The party formed out of face to face meet ups of fans of his satirical political blog, bepegrillo.it. Indeed, his political rallies are often said to resemble the stand-up shows through which he first became famous (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). In the 2013 elections for the Italian Chamber of Deputies the Movimento 5 Stelle gained 25% of the vote, becoming the largest single party in parliament and in 2018 the party became the largest component of the governing coalition of Italy.

To this list we could add the French comedian, Dieudonné, who gained notoriety in the UK in 2013 when football player Nicolas Anelka was photographed doing the comedian’s quenelle salute. Dieudonné is a comedian, whose stand-up shows resemble political rallies for the dispossessed and disgruntled. As Stille (2014: np) notes, he “has made a career out of walking (and often crossing) a fine line between mocking racial stereotypes and using them.” In particular, he is renowned for making anti-Semitic jokes and remarks, which have drawn controversy and criminal proceedings. Although he stood for parliament in 1997 his claim to political leadership stems from his role as a figure of political identification among the youth of the Banlieue who interpret his anti-Semitism, and the censorship it provokes, as an ‘up yours’ to the political and economic elite (Stille 2014: np).

5 In 2017 Grillo was replaced as leader of M5S by Luigi Di Maio.
Next in the list is John Gnarr, “well known in Iceland as a Stand-up comedian”, and famous for his T.V. comedy sketch show, who in 2009 formed an “anarcho-Surrealist” political party called the Best Party (Ryde et al. 2014: 93). The crisis of 2008 had caused Iceland to suffer the near collapse of its banking system and the period through 2009-2011 saw regular protests in Reykjavik known as the ‘Saucepan Revolution’ after the protestor’s practice of banging saucepans to add noise to demonstrations (Gerbaudo 2017). The Best Party was originally meant as a satire on party politics, aiming to build on the protests, which had forced the government to resign. However, in the 2010 city elections the Best Party gained 34.7 percent of the vote and Gnarr became mayor of Reykjavík serving until 2014 (Brokes 2014).

The final example of a comedian turned political leaders appears, at first glance, to buck the trend of anti-establishment, anti-politics. Jimmy Morales is a former comedian who was elected President of Guatemala in September 2015 for the Frente de Convergencia Nacional (National Convergence Front), a right-wing party who had polled only 0.5% in the 2011 Guatemalan presidential elections. Morales, however, was elected on an anti-corruption ticket. His campaign slogan stated he was, "neither corrupt, nor a thief" (Davies R 2016: np). In this light, we can position him as a kind of anti-establishment, populist centrist.6

While these examples might seem a relatively short list from which to extrapolate a trend, we can reinforce the claim by noting the short a period of time within which these examples are grouped, from 2009 to 2015. We should also note how historically unusual it is to have a wave of comedians transitioning to political leader.7 This provokes two questions: ‘why comedians?’ Rather than other kinds of celebrities, and ‘why now?’

6 There are other examples that I’ve excluded from this list. UK comedian Eddie Izard has talked about entering politics and even standing for London Mayor, while comedian Al Murray stood against Nigel Farage in the 2015 UK General Election. The centrist politics of those two characters would seem to put them outside the populist trend I’ve been describing. However, I’ve excluded them not because they aren’t populist but because, as political leaders, they didn’t prove popular. They failed to become figures of popular identification and I believe their political stance has something to do with that.

7 Over the last century there have been occasional instances of comedians who have engaged with politics, mostly as an extension of their comedic activities. Very few have made the move from comedy to sincere political engagement and then gone on to become figures of political identification and there has certainly never been a confluence of comedians doing so over a short historical period. There are some other potentially viable examples that I’ve excluded from the list. The most prominent is the ex-comedy writer and performer, now US senator, Al Franken. Elected in 2008, although due to legal challenges only confirmed in
Why Now?

Asking the question, ‘why now?’ leads us to think about the historical conjuncture within which the recent phenomena of comedians becoming political leaders belongs. Brassett (2016), for instance, positions Brand alongside other contemporary British satirists such as Charlie Brooker and Stuart Lee. Brassett (2016: 186-7) argues that, “[i]t is not the comedy per se... so much as its wrestling with a specific context that is interesting for the study of resistance”. The context he identifies is Britain’s history of “neoliberal restructuring... the accommodation of global finance, post-Fordism and the individualisation of welfare”.

Within this context the political promise of comedy is its ability to open up some “critical distance between and within market subjects” in order to “(re)imagine market subjects (as hopeful, angry, tragic, etc.)” (Brassett 2016: 171). He is undoubtedly right when he says comedy grapples with and so reveals its context but his periodization seems too broad, leading him to underestimate the extent of contemporary political possibility. By positioning Brand not within contemporary satire but within the more circumscribed tendency of comedians becoming political leaders, we can be more precise in our periodization. A quick glance at the figures I list above shows a commonality despite the divergence of their political positions. Although they veer from far-left to the far-right, they would all be classed as anti-establishment and indeed anti-political populist figures. When we add this to the brief period in which the trend we’re concerned with emerges, from 2009 – 2015, then the ‘now’ we are referring to becomes much clearer.

We’re living through a period of extended and unresolved economic and political crisis. The neoliberal economic settlement, which Brassett (2016) refers to, one version or other of which has been in place since the end of the 1980s, went into crisis in 2008. This crisis has still not been resolved. Post-crisis growth among OECD countries has been insipid enough to provoke talk of ‘secular stagnation’ (Summers 2016). Indeed, ten years on from the start of the crisis the world economy has still resolutely failed to return to the levels of pre-crisis trend growth, while developed economies are hooked on an unsustainable regime of

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post in 2009. He could, therefore, be squeezed into my time frame, however, Franken hasn’t adopted a populist style of politics, and is reported to have “shed his comedic persona” (Condon 2013: np).
‘quantitative easing’ and close to negative interest rates (Roberts 2016). More than this the key test of an economic settlement, the test upon which claims of technocratic competence rest, is the ability to maintain or raise living standards. The Resolution Foundation, analysing the Office for Budgetary Responsibility projection from Spring 2017, recently concluded that UK workers “are on course for average pay across the decade to 2020 to be lower than the average for the decade before. That would represent the worst decade for real earnings growth in 210 years” (Clark Et al. 2017: 27). This extended period of economic uncertainty provides the context in which the crisis of post-political administration and the rise of populist parties and sentiment have occurred (Gerbaudo 2017). Indeed, the unexpected ‘Yes’ vote in the Brexit referendum, along with the surprise election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, both in 2016, have been suggestive of a political settlement in crisis and flux (Davies 2016). The trend of comedians becoming anti-establishment, populist, political leaders appears to fit well within this picture of the conjuncture.

Having established a better understanding of our phenomena’s periodisation, we can now turn to our second question, ‘why comedians?’ In previous periods of extended crisis, such as the 1930s and 1970s, it was much more likely that musicians and pop stars, rather than other kinds of celebrities, would emerge as important political figures. We could think of Paul Robeson in the 1930s or John Lennon in the 1960s and 70s, for instance. Yet, in the period with which we are concerned with they were more likely to be comedians.  

**Politicians Becoming Comic Figures**

If we are to address the question, ‘why comedians?’ then we need to distinguish the tendency we’re concerned with from related but distinct phenomenon. One of the most obvious points of comparison are politicians becoming comic figures. Examples of this are useful as they represent a transition taking place in the reverse direction to comedians becoming political leaders. In the UK the prime example of a politician deliberately taking on

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8 I should add here an interesting and important qualification. In the U.S. there has been a small but significant trend of sports stars, such as Colin Kaepernick, acting in solidarity with the Black Lives Matters movement. This in turn has provoked instances of political leadership among pop stars, such as, Beyoncé’s politicized performance at Superbowl 50. In short, we could say that the gravity of Black Lives Matters lends itself to immediate statements of sincerity and does not need an intermediary move on the journey from irony.
the characteristics of a comic figure is former Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, although the former UKIP leader Nigel Farage has also dabbled in this strategy (Coe 2013).

As the veteran U. S. comedy writer Gerald Mulligan once observed, “most [political] comedy is based on reducing somebody to two characteristics and ignoring the rest” (Sella 2000: np). Bergson (2008) would argue that the humour in such caricature comes from the recognition by the audience, “of a certain inflexibility of the body, of the mind and of the character that society would like to eliminate to obtain a greater elasticity and a better sociability of its members. This inflexibility is the comic, laughter is the punishment.”

Both Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage have, at least partially, adopted caricatured personas by presenting a comically limited range of characteristics. This strategy of self-caricature is risky as it invites social punishment in the form of laughter. It can, however, also be useful to politicians on a number of counts. Firstly, you get to choose the structure of your own caricature and so ensure that the satire takes place on your own terms. Secondly, the ironic distance that comes with self-caricature aids the evasion of critique. It makes your political positions, opinions and actions much harder to pin down and allows your critics and opponent to be cast as humourless and dour (Coe 2013).

On Satire and its Limits
In a seminal article for the London Review of Books, Jonathan Coe (2013) forensically details the emergence of Boris Johnson’s comic persona over a series of appearances on the British satirical show Have I Got News For You. He pinpoints the moment Johnson stumbled across the benefits of self-caricature as he struggled to defend himself against fellow participant Ian Hislop’s persistent interrogation of an infamous tape capturing Johnson allegedly discussing the possibility of having an unfriendly journalist beaten up. This unintentional complicity between one of the UK’s leading satirical shows and a politician seeking to avoid hard questions should provide a strong indication of the political limitations of contemporary satire. As comedian Andrew Watts (2015) has noted, “[m]ost jokes, especially political jokes, are essentially conservative, reinforcing the ideas and prejudices of the listener; if they did not rely on shared premises, they would not work” (Watts, 2015: np). While this is uncomplicated in times of relative political stability it becomes much more
problematic during periods of crisis and change when the assumed consensus upon which satire relies is at risk of breaking down.

Over the last Forty years the developed world has gone through a sustained period of mass disengagement from politics. This has led the political theorist Colin Crouch (2004) to describe contemporary political systems as ‘post-democratic’; democratic forms remain but are hollowed-out and routed around. Indeed, such a description fits well with what Laclau (2005) would term post-political administration. Political satire can appear non-political, or more accurately non-partisan, during times of political disengagement as it critiques all parties equally. This approach of ‘a curse on both your houses’ works well enough when political triangulation has caused both houses to share the same premises. While non-partisan satire can produce a feeling of generalised cynicism about politics and politicians this isn’t an immediate problem for regimes of post-political administration, which don’t rely on mass political engagement (Coe 2013; Crouch 2004). The situation changes when, as in the last few years, political distinctions reemerge and there is an increase in populist political engagement and even enthusiasm (Gerbaudo 2017). Contemporary non-partisan political satire tends to rely on the shared assumption that all politicians are self-serving hypocrites but there is no existing consensus to extend this accusation beyond the political class to groups of ‘ordinary people’ newly engaged in politics. Luckily for political satirists, and unluckily for the rest of us, the very structure of irony indicates a solution to this problem. It provides a readymade position within which episodes of sincere, mass political engagement can be placed.

Irony constructs a notional double audience. A naïve audience who doesn’t understand that what’s being said is not meant literally, and another audience that both understands the double meaning and recognises the naïve audience’s potential incomprehension. The humour comes from the complicity between the ironist and the knowing second audience (Konstaninou 2016). Those, such as the newly politically enthused, whose actions don’t fit

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9 Tormey (2015) details how voter turn-out in general elections across Europe have declined by an average of 10% since the mid 1960s. This only began to turn around following the post-2008 emergence of anti-political populist parties. Tormey also describes the precipitous decline in party membership over the same period. Although there are recent instances which buck this trend such as the huge increase in membership of the UK’s Labour Party since the 2015 rise of Jeremy Corbyn as leader.
the cynical premise of non-partisan political satire that says that all politics is self-serving hypocrisy, are automatically constructed as the naive audience who can’t recognize the double meaning of political statements. This presents a problem for those whose political hopes require mass engagement. How do you make sincere political statements without getting cast as cynical or naive?

**The Era of Cynical Irony**

This would be of little significance if it was only a problem for guests on satirical comedy shows but many social and political theorists have suggested that cynical irony and ironic detachment have become much more widespread attitudes. Peter Sloterdijk (2008: 3), for instance, argues that cynicism has ceased to be a peripheral and individual affect and has instead become “a universal and diffuse phenomenon”. He, along with Slajov Zizek, argue that cynical reason, or cynical irony, has become the dominant ideological formation of contemporary capitalism. Zizek (1989: 24-5), renders this argument by making a distinction between Marx’s idea of false consciousness, in which "they do not know it, but they are doing it" and the ideology of cynical irony in which “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it". The latter originates as a response by the ruling ideology to: “the popular, plebian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm”, which acted to expose “the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power” behind “the sublime noblesse of... ideological phrases” (Zizek 1989: 26). Cynical irony nullifies this critique by absorbing it. People can be as cynical as they like about capitalism as long as they continue to act in a way that subordinates their needs beneath capital’s need to grow. More than that, cynical irony universalises cynicism to undermine belief that change through collective action is possible. Anyone advocating collective action is cast as cynical, as motivated by personal gain. Anyone believing the advocate must therefore be naïve. In these analyses the dominance of cynical irony is linked to material changes in the historical conjuncture. Franco Berardi (2012: 162) is the most precise in his diagnosis, “[c]ontemporary mass cynicism can be linked with two different roots: the failure of twentieth century utopian ideologies, and the perception that the exploitation of labor, competition, and war are inevitable and irreversible.”
It is within this setting that we can best position the recent discourse on the term “Post-Truth”. As the phrase suggests those who hold to this concept posit a narrative in which the public sphere has been gripped by a recent epistemic crisis. Although advocates of this idea don’t agree on the geographical range of the crisis or, relatedly, the date the crisis struck, there seems little doubt, even going on the publication dates alone, that the discourse on Post-Truth was provoked by the unexpected political events of 2016, primarily the Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as US President (Ball 2017, D’Ancona 2017, Davies 2017). Indeed, Evan Davies (2017: 3) is candid in his assessment that the discourse of Post-Truth is “an expression of frustration and anguish from a liberal class discombobulated by the political disruptions of 2016.” But the list of political disruptions must surely include the near defeat of Hillary Clinton by avowed socialist Bernie Sanders and could easily include the shock of Jeremy Corbyn’s unexpectedly good showing in the 2017 UK General Election, including an unprecedented 20% increase in support during the course of the campaign. A Post-Truth framing only really works if these examples are excluded.

When we reframe the problem around determining the principal cause of 2016’s political shocks then the Post-Truth narrative seems premised on another exclusion. I argue above that the events of 2016 should be understood as the political effect of the economic crisis of 2008. The political crisis would have occurred much sooner, but State support of the financial sector, including huge bail outs, prevented a political crisis at the time. The policies of austerity, ostensibly to deal with deficits in public finances caused by the bail outs and reduced tax take from the decreased economic activity of the recession, delayed the political crisis because the severity of austerity increased over time. Positioning Brexit and Trump within causes such as the decline of print media and the rise of social media (Ball 2017, D’Ancona 2017) or within a collapse of moral values (D’Ancona 2017) serves to obscure the relation between 2008 and 2016. In fact, the Post-Truth aspects of Brexit and Trump are better understood as a symptom of the breakdown of the ideological compact between a regime of post-political administration and a generalized air of cynical irony. Technocratic administration gains the passive consent it requires by delivering the growth, or at least maintenance, of living standards to a decisive portion of the population. As living standards have fallen since 2008 passive consent has increasingly been withdrawn and
cynical irony has become a less attractive posture. We will examine later how, what has been called, Post-Truth leadership is one of the ways that ways this can play out.

Postironic leadership offers another route out of the situation and we can best understand that through reference to the work of Lee Konstaninou (2016) who constructs a historical chronology of the attitudes towards irony found in post-War American literature. By studying the changing interaction between irony, on the one hand, and critique and political commitment, on the other, he produces a series of characters who sum up the dominant narrative on irony in specific historical periods. He starts with the character of ‘the (post-war) hipster’, an oppositional figure possessing the knowing, oppositional irony found in texts such as Norman Mailer’s *The White Negro*. He then moves through characters such as ‘the punk’, who relies on brute irony, in which, for instance, the ironic display of a Swastika is meant to destabilise established meaning through shock.

Interestingly, he critques the character of ‘the believer’, which he links to David Foster Wallace’s pleas for a ‘New Sincerity’, for seeking “to defeat bad institutions that give rise to toxic incredulity by constructing a characterological model committed to belief rather than constructing a characterological model committed to challenging (let alone seizing) power”. Our aim, he argues, must be to change the “institutional relations that facilitated the rise” of cynical irony rather than simply challenge irony by generating moments of re-enchantment (Konstaninou 2016: 215). This analysis allows him to develop his final, most recent character, ‘the occupier’, which figures “postirony as the end of a process of either individual or collective political maturation” (Konstaninou 2016: 275). He finds in two recent novels, Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers* and Jonathan Lethem’s *Dissident Gardens*, both from 2013, an emerging literary genre he calls “the postironic Bildungsroman” (Konstaninou 2016: 275). Here he finds a new narrative relationship to irony. “In order to become something like an occupier, one must traverse from a state of political naïvety through a state of cynicism or postmodern irony, arriving finally at a state of postironic political commitment” (Konstaninou 2016: 275). I want to suggest that this is the kind of journey that needs to be made by contemporary subjects who are looking to change the world through mass collective action. Any such project will need statements of sincere political belief which evade accusations of cynicism or naïvety. In the next section I want to look at the narratives
presented in the performances of Russell Brand and Beppe Grillo in order to show how closely they match the narrative of ‘the occupier’. From this I will suggest that it’s their embodiment of this story that provides at least part of the basis of people’s political identification with them and is, therefore, at the heart of their political leadership.

**Brand vs Grillo**

Russell Brand’s stand up show *The Messiah Complex* (2013) marks the point at which he moves back to stand-up comedy as a reflection of his disenchantment with Hollywood stardom. It also marks his move towards overt politicization and is the best example of the terms upon which he re-engages with politics. Arthurs and Little (2016: 45) argue that this return to stand-up was provoked by the experiences of the 2011 protest wave, “as a performer he realized it was only through the risky intensity of live stand-up that he could capture the communal effervescence that had emerged in the street protests of the Occupy movement.” During the performance we can see Brand’s attempts to foster a feeling of communality. He begins the show by entering the audience to interact with them. At one point, he asks them to cooperate in passing his microphone lead over their heads, “to show that we can work as team and that socialism might work in this country” (*Messiah Complex* 2013). The overall theme of the show picks up from this by specifically, although ironically, positioning Brand amidst political leaders and icons, such as Gandhi, Che Guevara and Malcolm X, before ending on a comedic comparison with Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, very similar themes and techniques can be found in Beppe Grillo’s show *Grillo vs Grillo* (2017). Grillo also descends into the audience to create a sense of community through tactile interaction. Through the show he also interacts with a recording of himself, which represents Grillo the politician, while his live performance represents Grillo the comedian. It is this double persona and the confusion between them that makes up the heart of the show,

> I was a comedian now I’m a politician. What am I now?... I have undergone a remarkable personality change. Yet my mental faculties are still intact. A comedian can joke, use paradox but a politician can’t. When I was a comedian if I cracked a joke, it was satiric license. Now I’m a politician I don’t even have parliamentary immunity, I just get screwed. (*Grillo Vs Grillo* 2017)
In their discussion of *Messiah Complex*, Arthurs and Little (2016: 48) focus on Brand’s use of “storytelling as therapy”. In continuity with his previous performances Brand veers “between comic abjection and hyperbolic narcissism”. Arthurs and Little (2016: 49) link this to the stories he tells about the flawed yet inspirational nature of the leaders he presents. The show revolves around ironic claims that he is ‘a little bit like’ the iconic figures he is discussing.

Yet at the height of these hyperbolic claims... he is simultaneously presenting himself as vulnerable and psychologically damaged... It is a confession of delusional, ‘mad’, thinking, making him ‘a little bit like’ the mental patients with a Messiah Complex he referred to at the start when explaining the significance of the show’s title. This injects comic ambiguity into his role as a political guru – just how seriously should we take this madman?

Arthurs and Shaw (2016: 1141) argue these acts of self-abnegation “distances Brand from the ‘armoured masculinity’ that is still the default identity in contemporary UK politics.”

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It’s a narrative structure that produces a “sense of forward-moving progress” (Silva 2013: 21), but it has severe political limitations. Silva (2013: 142) compares it unfavourably to “social movements like feminism”, in which,

self-awareness, or naming one’s problems, was the first step to radical collective awareness. For this generation, it is the only step, completely detached from any kind of solidarity; while they struggle with similar, and structurally rooted, problems, there is no sense of ‘we’... without a collective sense of structural inequalities, the suffering and betrayal born of de-industrialisation, inequality, and risk is interpreted as individual failure.

I would argue that there are other narratives to be found within the Messiah Complex show, which follow quite closely to the narrative structure of Konstantiou’s (2016) occupiers. It is this narrative, which is the real point of departure for Brand and can lead to a collective political engagement beyond therapeutic adjustment.

One of the drivers of the Messiah Complex’s narrative is the problem of cynicism and a lack of belief.

What is left to believe in... when Nietzsche says god is dead... when our heroes are flawed, when our villains are mundane? What can unite all of us together? What can we all share? What can unify us against the tyranny, the oppression, the fear, the loneliness, the emptiness? What’s left for us? (Messiah Complex 2013)

The answer from Brand is not resignation but the working through to a postironic embrace of belief and commitment.

His method in the show is to present sincere statements of political belief and analysis that are then undercut by stories of self-abnegation, but what these stories actually reveal are the institutional forces that ultimately produce feelings of cynical irony. A good example comes in his mid-show skit on the London Olympics. He begins with an apparently sincere political critique of the Olympics as “a distraction from what’s truly important, to keep us spellbound and docile, passive consumers, reduced to non-entities, inactive and not participating in our society” (Messiah Complex 2013). This reads like a rendering of Guy Debord’s (1983) notion of the Spectacle but it’s also the kind of statement that can sound hectoring, alienating and over-familiar. Brand wards off this danger with a story of his
getting caught up in Olympics enthusiasm to such a degree that he ends up in the closing
ceremony “dressed as Willy Wonker, on top of a bus, singing ‘I am the Walrus’.” Brand
manages to make a sincere statement of critical analysis, yet by showing that he too can get
caught up in the power of media narratives he guards against a castigation of naivety. He
acknowledges the truth of his original statement while highlighting the insufficiency of
straight critique in the face of the affective mobilisation of spectacle. He moves from
sincerity through irony to postironic commitment.

The Role of the Comedian as Leader
Konstaninou (2016: 276) derives the name of his character ‘the occupier’ from the Occupy
movement and it is from the practice he found there that he derives a prefigurative
function.

This notion of prefiguration is also figural because the occupier strives preemptively
to become a figure in the present that will, in time, be fulfilled by inhabitants of
some postcapitalist future. Those who discursively construct the rhetorical
(normative) 99% aspire in time to have that figure fulfilled by an empirical 99%,
which will take the rhetorical 99% as its genealogical precursor.

We can construct the ‘comedian as political leader’ as playing a similar prefigurative role.
They pioneer the move from ironic detachment to post-ironic political commitment that
others have a desire to follow.10 Such an analysis helps us answer the ‘why comedians?’
question. The natural starting position of a comedian is an ironic one. It is their facility with
irony that allows comedians to shift so assuredly from irony to sincerity. They are also well
practiced in moving back within the protection of irony if they have misjudged the mood
and their sincerity has gone down badly.

We can see Brand using this tactic in the Newsnight (2013) interview. Jeremy Paxman begins
the interview by casting Brands as too naïve, and so unqualified, to comment on politics.
“Who are you to edit a political magazine?... You don’t even vote... you can’t be arsed to

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10 Not all of the examples of ‘comedians as political leaders’ would wish for a ‘postcapitalist’ future but all fit a
populist mode, which wants, at least rhetorically, the future to be different to the present.
vote... You’re a very trivial man.” Brand response is serious but couched as a joke, “Boris, he used to do one, didn’t he? So, I’m kind of a person with crazy hair, quite a good sense of humour, don’t know much about politics, I’m ideal!” Following this mode, Brand steps back and forth from irony to sincerity, and back again. By the time he goes on the attack he has undermined Paxman’s own position as the holder of political authority.

As a prefigurative character the comedian as political leader’s own political authority should logically be a temporary one. Beppe Grillo’s show ends by gesturing towards this theme. He makes audience members eat food made of insects in mimicry of Catholic rituals using bread and wine. “This is the transposition”, he says, “You have become me and I am free at last... I’m free. You are now part of me, you become your own leader. You’ll make your own decisions. I don’t know what will become of me. I won’t be a comedian or a politician. I will become transcendent” (Grillo vs Grillo). The show ends with the display of a giant picture of Grillo as the Christ. “We have to stop him”, he says, before leading the audience in shouting ‘Vaffanculo’ at the Grillo Christ.11 Yet despite this iconoclastic display Grillo has been criticized for his reticence in relinquishing control over Movimento 5 Stelle after bringing the party together. This has been seen by some as a betrayal, despite his rhetorical admiration, of the internet’s potential for bottom up, distributed decision making (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013).

A different model can be found in Russell Brand’s film The Emperor’s New Clothes (2015). In a departure from Brand’s previous work the film includes very little comedy, or indeed irony, it is rather a fairly straight telling of a populist political narrative that, pace the title, is widely known but which can’t find public voice. The film begins with Brand’s biographical story but as the film goes on Brand begins to remove the focus from himself, replacing it with a series of interviews, conducted by Brand, in which low paid workers and social housing tenants lay out their difficulties and problems. In this way, the film appears to take its model from a comment in the film from Occupy Wall Street veteran David Degraw, “What we did through Occupy was that we created that space where people could come

11 This ritual contains a self-referential moment. In 2007 Grillo organised a mass rally called Vaffanculo day, a protest in which citizens shouted vaffanculo at corrupt politicians (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013).
and express their problems and realise it’s not just me, I’m not the only one getting fucked” (The Emperor’s New Clothes 2015).

**Pre-Ironic Figures in a Postironic Culture**

Before I conclude I want to point two other tendencies in contemporary political leadership one that suggests an alternative route to postironic commitment and another which leads instead to the full embrace of cynicism. The first is sparked by the observation that some political leaders over the age of 65 have succeeded in enthusing young people into political parties and movements. The prime examples here are Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the British Labour Party, aged 68, and Bernie Sanders campaign for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Presidential election aged 75. Their age is of particular note because in the U.S. and UK age has recently been the biggest predictor of voting intention and so the key point of political divergence (Milburn 2015). Relating this to our topic I’d suggest that Corbyn and Sanders are attractive to young people because they are in some sense pre-ironic figures. They hark back to, and in fact date back to, traditions of uncomplicated political commitment. Indeed, both Corbyn and Sanders trade on their reputations as political leaders who refused to compromise their beliefs.

This could, and indeed does, lead to accusations of naïve sincerity to which Corbyn and Sanders have little natural defence. It’s interesting then that both figures have been subject to the mass creation of memes which use their sincerity to produce sympathetic irony. One popular meme uses a rare moment of ironic participation from Corbyn during his appearance on British satirical T.V. show *The Last Leg*. He arrived on screen in a sports car wearing a very uncharacteristic Tuxedo and white fur coat. The images produced have become a staple for memes that celebrate every instance in which Corbyn defies the expectations of a hostile media. For instance, when he won his second election campaign for the Labour Party leadership a meme circulated showing him in fur coat resplendence along with a quote from a gangster in the T.V. show *The Wire*, “You come at the king, you’d better not miss.” It’s through this method that different parts of the hybrid media system can position a pre-ironic figure within a postironic sensibility to construct the impression of a new, emerging consensus.
When Cynicism Trumps Irony

The discourse on Post-Truth was provoked more than anything else by a certain style of authoritarian political leadership best represented by US President Donald Trump.\(^\text{12}\) There is no doubt that Trump has told lies on an industrial scale and has done so in an insouciant manner, flatly contradicting himself day after day while bare-facedly denying he is doing so. *The Washington Post* keeps a running fact checking database on Trump and claims he has made 4,713 false or misleading claims in 592 days as President.\(^\text{13}\) The conception of Post-Truth motivating this database and also visible in accounts such as Ball (2017) and D’Ancona (2017), assumes a naïve audience who could be convinced otherwise if the facts are checked and the truth presented more forcefully. The picture looks very different if we start from the perspective that cynical irony is the dominant ideological formation.

Salena Zito (2016: np) produced one of the most astute formulations of the difference between Trumps supporters and his critics in the liberal media when he said of Trump, “the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.” Trump is not a politician turned comic figure. He has a paper-thin skin, with little apparent sense of humour, and can’t bear to be the subject of comedy.\(^\text{14}\) He demands that he be taken seriously no matter what actions he takes. On the other hand, he doesn’t appear to be presenting a façade to hide his true self. As far as we can tell he is Trump all the way down. If you begin from the assumption that all politicians are cynics, out for themselves, and more precisely if you assume that Hillary Clinton is masking her true feelings and beliefs in order to get elected, then Trump’s near open deceitfulness, venality and disregard for others can appear as the more truthful position.

As Zizek (1989: 24) explains, in an era of cynical irony “[t]he ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally.” Donald Trump has broken one half of this formulation. He

\(^{12}\) We could certainly put other leader in this category, such as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but for clarity’s sake we will concentrate on the most significant figure.


\(^{14}\) Trump famously sat thunderously stony faced while he was roasted at the 2011 White House correspondents’ dinner.
embraces cynicism in an almost open fashion, retaining the merest sheen of implausible
deniability. Leaders in Trumps mold are an answer to the crisis of cynical irony. T.

**Conclusion**
The rise of ‘anti-political’ populist politics has been much commented upon (Gerbaudo
2017; Tormey 2015). The role of comedians, and ex-comedians, in this upsurge, on the other
hand, has been under-analysed. In this article I’ve addressed that omission firstly by
highlighting the unusual historical trend over recent years of comedians becoming political
leaders. I then sought to distinguish this trend from contemporary satire revealing, in the
very structure of the contemporary use of irony, the political problem that faces any politics
that presupposes mass political engagement; how to make sincere statements of political
belief while avoiding accusations of either hypocrisy or naïveté. Contemporary political
satire, I suggest, presupposes the shared assumption that political actors are self-serving
hypocrites. This is an accusation that does not adhere easily to a newly politically engaged
public showing moments of seemingly sincere political enthusiasm. The structure of irony
assumes a notional double audience, one that misrecognizes the double meaning of ironic
statements and one that recognizes it. Sincere political actors risk being automatically cast
as the naïve audience who have failed to recognize the shared assumption of cynicism.

By positioning this construction of satire and irony historically we can begin to recognize the
strategies that comedians becoming political leaders are able to adopt. Through a close
reading of the writing and performance of Russell Brand and an analysis of this as leadership
through storytelling we can recognize the narrative he is performing as one also found in
contemporary literature. This is a narrative of a traversal ”from a state of political naivety
through a state of cynicism or postmodern irony, arriving finally at a state of postironic
political commitment” (Konstaninou 2016: 275). By examining Brand’s performance through
this prism, we get some examples of what ‘postironic political commitment’ might look like
in practice and why comedians might be pioneers of such an approach. By contrasting Brand
to a performance by Beppe Grillo we also saw how this particular narrative should lead to a
transitional leadership, in which the figure of the leader might become displaced by forms
of meta-therapeutic group analysis, in which participants recognize their commonality
horizontally, rather than vertically.
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**Filmography**


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