

# Is Brexit funny? The cultural significance of comedy about Brexit



*Since mid-2016 there has been a vast amount of jokes, comedy and satire about the EU referendum and Brexit. Is Brexit funny? Is it controversial for comedians to joke about Brexit? Where are all the pro-Brexit comedians? In this blog, **Simon Weaver** and **Sharon Lockyer** look at the cultural significance of comedy about Brexit.*

There has been very little academic research on Brexit comedy. In March, on the eve of the first anniversary of the triggering of Article 50, these and other questions were discussed at an event on comedy, populism and Brexit held at the Museum of Comedy in London. Organised by the [Centre for Comedy Studies Research \(CCSR\)](#) and the [Magna Carta Institute](#), the event featured the political commentator and columnist, [Ayesha Hazarika MBE](#).

The former Labour Party and Remain campaign advisor argued that Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump in the US, happened because “we have all been in a massive echo chamber”. This, she argued, applies to comedy, politics and the media. For Hazarika, the Brexit vote was caused by “a disconnect between populist sentiment out in the country, whether you agree with it or not ... and what they are being presented in terms of how they see the media and politics”.

She argued that comedians are very anti-Brexit and that at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, in 2016 and 2017, “I didn’t find a single comic, in the biggest arts festival on the planet, we’d just been through Brexit, not a single comic that made any jokes pro-Brexit”. Hazarika argued that this is because of the political stance of most comedians, rather than because of the nature of Brexit itself. “There’s one guy Geoff Norcott, who’s absolutely fantastic and does a lot of stuff on the Mash Report, but even he was quite gentle about how he approached the Brexit thing” said Hazarika. “Just from a democratic point of view, surely that is not healthy”.

Making the argument that comedy is very left-wing, she suggested that “our comedy in this country reflects the BBC, it reflects the Guardian ... it’s a monoculture, and we might laugh at how stupid Boris Johnson is or how crap Theresa May is, or whatever, but we’re all just laughing in our own sort of echo chamber. Where is the comedy which challenges the other narratives?”. Hazarika concluded that “comedy, like politics, like the press, has got to get out of its little comfort zone”.

[Ellie Tomsett](#) argued that comedy allows us to shore-up our sense of self or our identity and that Brexit represents “major complication to these identity categories”. Arguing that there are many “unpredictable alliances” around Brexit and that support for it “cuts across such a wide range of identity characteristics”, Tomsett suggested that comedy about Brexit has both a ridiculing and conciliatory potential. “We can see that comedy is being used to ridicule conflicting political or Brexit positions and place one in a position of superiority”, and the caricature of ‘Brexiters’ and ‘Remoaners’ are examples of this. On the other hand, we “can find a sense of the collective in comedy” that can avoid conflict. Tomsett also argued that “much of the satirising of [Theresa] May can be seen as playing into the idea that women have no sense of humour”.

[Neil Archer](#) argued that the EU referendum felt like “a line drawn between ideological viewpoints and feelings that accepts no mediation”. Examining a wide range of comedy including the *The League of Gentlemen*, *This Country*, and the animated film *Early Man*, he suggested it is important to understand the relationship between film production and power, and the processes that we are swept up in as viewers. He discussed representations of the ‘rural mob’ in comedy as a form of cultural division. These comedies can be read as commenting on the social conditions in which Brexit emerged as a popular concept. Archer argued populism “often tends to imply a people, to whom the speaker, especially if they are an academic, is removed. Did populism cause Brexit? Maybe”. He proposed that “there is a danger in assuming that just because a comic discourse targets all that the liberal, cosmopolitan mind finds to be abhorrent, it is therefore immune from the more populist connotations of ... ‘incorrect practises’”. He concluded that comedy about Brexit should begin to look forward rather than backwards.

Interestingly, irony has been a recurring trope in remain descriptions of Brexit. For example, in a recent report for the pro-remain *Open Britain*, [Lis](#) argued that “the central irony of Brexit is that, far from enhancing Britain’s free trade links and its trading reputation, it risks crippling them”. For [Simon Weaver](#), all of the uses of irony that describe Brexit can be put into focus through an understanding of Brexit as both a populism and inherently ironic on a number of levels. This is perfect material for comedy. For Weaver, the irony of Brexit is that it is both a call for more and less globalisation, and such contradictions are picked up on in political satire, such as the work of John Oliver. He argued that more comic tropes and the serious mobilisation of comic tropes are required in response to Brexit irony.



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The recent BBC comedy *Cunk on Britain* is an example of a popular, ironic response to Brexit. This is not a comedy about Brexit but rather a comedy of the post-referendum period. It is an absurdist, historical mockumentary that opens by signalling leave discourse: ‘Britain stands at a fork in its crossroads. Its people are asking questions. Now we’ve got our country back, what actually is it? Who are we? And why?’ The comedy is a satire of leave discourse as an ambiguous mix of English and British nationalism, localism and nostalgia. It is a comedy of ridicule, and in *Cunk on Britain*, it is easy to read a blaming of dumbing-down, historical ignorance and populist misunderstandings for the leave vote.

The lively and wide-ranging audience discussion, chaired by [Sharon Lockyer](#), explored the differences between the diversity of political opinions on the live comedy circuit and the singularity of political comic voices on mainstream television programming, the institutional and regulatory differences between American and British television satire, the possibility of ‘satire fatigue’ and a move away from political comedy, and the impact of the immediacy of social media on audience’s engagement with political satire.

Overall, comedy about Brexit is a multifaceted research topic that scholars are only just beginning to lift the lid on.

*This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of LSE Brexit or the London School of Economics.*

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