



TALKIN' 'BOUT A REVOLUTION

The Free Association



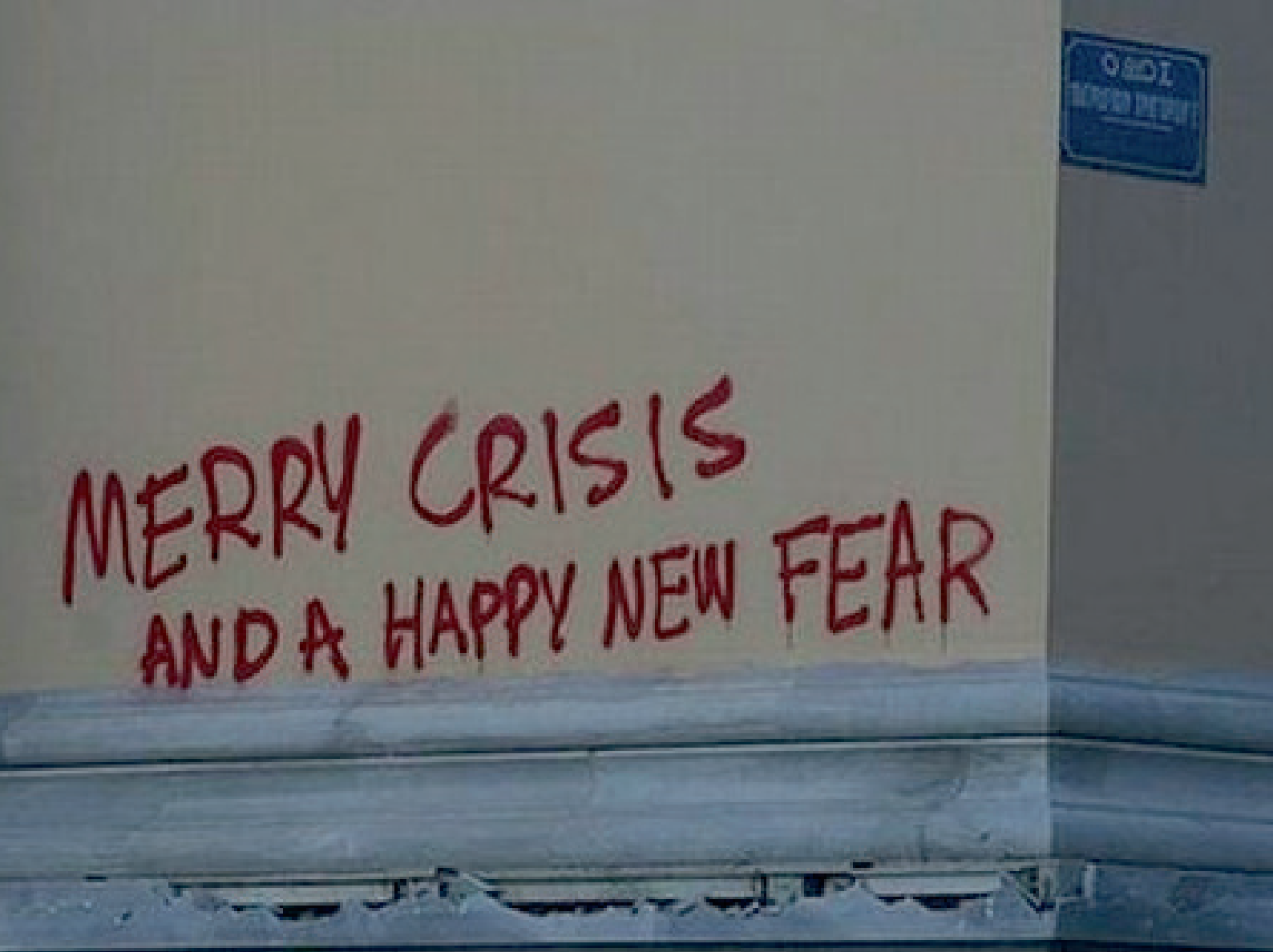
Overview of talk

We are not doing a comedy sketch we are doing a talk about politics which revolves around comedians

Why are comedians like Brand & Grillo (or Dieudonné) capturing a political mood, in a way that pop stars would have done years ago?



Dieudonné
Anelka doing the quenelle



The context, the background to our talk, is crisis.

Or rather crises (plural). We currently face a set of intersecting crises. These include:



Economic crisis.

Starting with the financial crisis of 2007/08, which has generalised into a more or less global economic crisis – so-called Great Recession. Widening inequality: the top 1% increasingly living like sun gods, whilst for a rising proportion of the rest of us what Ed Miliband has been calling “the cost of living crisis” and what others have described as a crisis of social reproduction. That is, a crisis in our abilities to meet our need, to survive, and, increasingly, a crisis in our ability to imagine a better future, to hope.



Climate crisis



Energy crisis – these are the Alberta tar sands



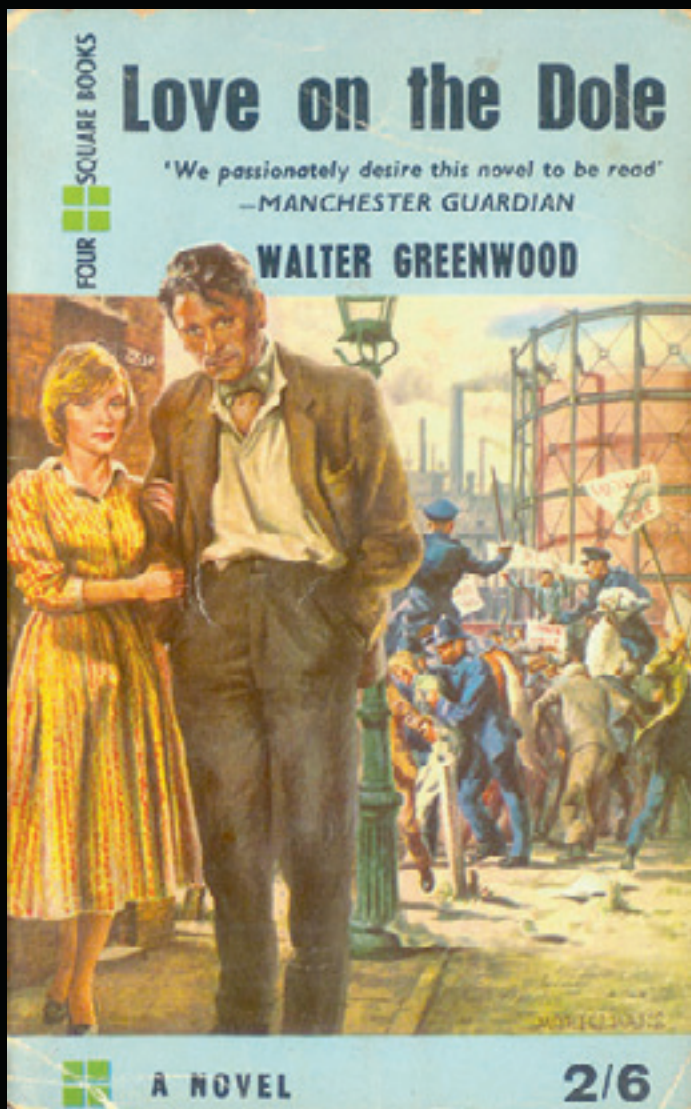
Finally, there exists a **crisis of political legitimacy**, even a crisis of democracy.

Plebgate is actually a rather minor chapter in this story. (No duck ponds or subscriptions to porn channels paid for by the taxpayer. No deaths in police custody or undercover officers fathering children by the women they're spying on. No hacking into the phones of murdered school girls.) But what's interesting about it is that it involves three major institutions or sets of actors: politicians, police and the Fourth Estate, the media. And that it doesn't really matter what actually happened. The courts have now decided that Andrew Mitchell, the politician, was set-up. But all of the competing accounts are entirely plausible. Lying, arrogant politicians who treat with contempt everyone outside of the elite. Lying, conspiratorial police officers who believe they are above the law. A media which is anything but impartial, which is not interested in discovering or reporting the truth (whatever that is), which has its own political agenda which it will pursue with impunity – including developing cosy relationships with the police.

WTF?

So the questions we're interested in are:

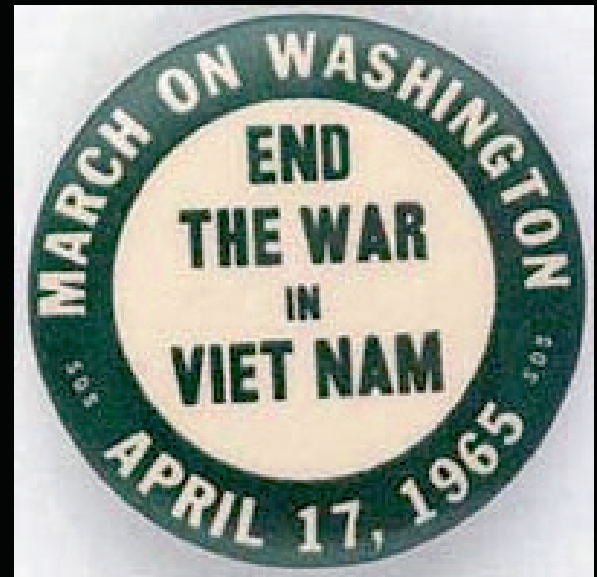
How do we make sense of crisis – or crises? Not as individuals. But collectively. How can we think and act our way out of them? How can imagine alternative futures, alternative actions? How can we repotentialise the world? And here we're not so much interested in theoretical analysis – which operates on the head – but cultural forms, which operate more viscerally, which affect our bodies.



First thing to point out is that there are historical antecedents. This is not the first time there have been crises. The present economic crisis has been compared with the Great Depression of the 1930s.



Have to remember that a century ago, political leaders were more charismatic, played an important role in mobilising political movements



The second crisis period is that of the 1960s and 1970s and it's those crises – and social movements which both provoked and responded to them – which really shaped us. We were born in the 1960s, grew up in the 1970s and became adults in the 1980s. In the 1960s there was the movement against the Vietnam war, the civil rights movement and, later, the Black Power movement, the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, the student movement, and all manner of workers' struggles both within and outside the trade unions. Much of this culminating in the social explosions of 1968. Outside the First World, there were various independence movements, anti-colonial movements and struggles of workers and peasants. All this continued into the 1970s. In 1971, US president Nixon ended the convertability of dollars into gold, so plunging the international financial system into crisis. There were a series of energy crisis following doubling and quadrupling of the oil price. The Club of Rome published *The Limits to Growth*, an early marker in the new environmental movement. There was both unemployment and economic stagnation at the same time as fast-rising prices, inflation: so-called stagflation. Worker militancy continued, leading in Britain to 1978's winter of discontent and the 3-day week. Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979. Ronald Reagan became US president a year later. Into the 1980s there was the international debt crisis, and political turmoil in Latin America: Pinochet had staged his coup d'état in Chile in 1973 and there were right-wing dictatorships in countries in the region too. But there were also many liberation movements and in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas had staged a successful revolution.



For many of us – for many young people – it was **pop culture** that helped us make sense of this. It was pop culture that reflected this turmoil, these social and political movements. Pop culture was, to a large extent, a part of these social movements.

So in the 1960s we can think of artists such as John Lennon (and Yoko Ono), Joan Baez, Jimmy Hendrix and Bob Dylan. Partly these people were *stars*. That is, they had their own energy. They emitted heat and light. But really, they – or most of them – were more like comets. That is, they reflected – and sometimes refracted and focused – the energy of the culture from which they emerged, of which they were a part. Simultaneously they an expression of this counter-culture and they expressed it.



In the 1970s, there was the explosion that was **punk**. Culturally, for us personally, it's punk and post-punk that have most shaped our lives. There's many a person of our generation who's received a rudimentary political education from Joe Strummer of the Clash – who was inspired to discover more about some issue about which he'd lyricised. Strummer was didactic in that sense.

But more interesting is the potential, the sense of possibility, the promise and example of reinvention that punk contained and which many punks embodied. So it wasn't what came out of their mouths that was important. The pronouncements of the Johnny Rotten of 1977 are hardly more profound than his attempts to sell Country Life butter – as John Lydon – three decades later. But John Lydon embodied potential, possibilities, alternatives.... The message he – along with other punks – conveyed was: you don't have to remain as you are; you can become someone else; you can reinvent yourself; you don't have to accept the world as it is; you can change the world; WE can change the world.



And we see this drive, this thread, continuing into the 1980s – we experienced it, we benefited from it – with post-punk, with ska, with rap and hip-hop; and into the 1990s with the techno, rave and free-party scene.



But now? The Smiths were one of the most overtly political bands of the 1980s. This photograph is interesting. It was taken in the mid-1980s. Three decades later, David Cameron paid homage to the Smiths by posing for his photo outside Salford Lads Club – causing some controversy.

As Johnny Marr, the Smiths' guitarist, explained: "in the culture I came up in, if you were a British indie band, you were against Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative party".

And that's not the only thing's that's changed. "When I was doing interviews in the early 2000s, I was starting to be talked to like I was a lad," he says, with a grimace. "There was an assumption that because I came from Manchester, and was a certain age, and looked a certain way, that it was OK to fire loads of questions at me about football and ... laddism. It started to piss me off ... I wasn't going to go along with this idea that the British man, particularly from the north, was all right with low-level sexism and loutishness and the celebration of low intellect."

He calls the stereotype he was resisting "Manc-man", and talks about changes to rock music and its wider milieu that would have been unthinkable in the 1980s. "I started to remember my peers, and where we came from," he says. "And the idea of people going to a show, and because there's a girl onstage, it being OK to shout 'ironic' sexist comments – it would have been an absolute no-no in the culture I came from. That made me re-identify with [that culture], and feel really proud."

So what's changed? Has pop music played itself out? And, if so, why?



Of course it's a truism that pop music's dead. Ask anyone and you'll get the same answer: pop music reached its peak precisely during the period that they were aged between 16 and 25 and then it all started going downhill. Nowadays it's just too loud, vacuous and you can't even hear the words...

But seriously something has changed in pop music. I'm talking specifically about "pop music" here – not music in general, or gigs, or folk music or the dance scene. By "pop music" I mean the commercialised short form songwriting which first emerged in the 1930s & 40s but really took off from the mid-1950s onwards in the shape of the three minute single, radio airtime and the charts.

Perhaps the most obvious way to look at this is in terms of changes in **technology**, changes in the way music is produced. Back in the late 1970s I can remember mates at school having to beg, steal & borrow to find £500 to record and press their first single. Nowadays you can do it all for virtually nothing without leaving your bedroom. Digital production is clearly a lot more "democratic", but we have to be careful here. The fact that pop consumers have also become pop producers can serve to undermine the power that music has as a shared experience. It's much harder to give yourself over fully to the latest single from Taylor Swift when what you're really thinking about is the remix or mash-up you're going to do.



These changes in production have gone hand in hand with huge changes in the way music is delivered and consumed. We live in a world of mp3s, smartphones and Spotify. Shopping, commuting, watching TV – music is constantly ‘on’. It saturates our lives in a way it has never done before. And there are consequences to this: music has become just another thing to consume – something you stream not something that you own, let alone something that owns you.

But I think there’s more to it than simple changes in technology. Or rather those changes are part of much wider changes in the way we live and work, changes in the way society is organised. Music is leaching into every area of our lives, just like work. And music is always on, just like we are, 24/7. If you ever hear Marxists talking about the real subsumption of society, this is I think what they mean: all of society becomes a moment of capitalist production.

But let’s rewind a bit before we get all theoretical. If we want to understand the death of pop music, we need to go back to its birth. That means going right back to the end of WW2 and the invention of a new social category called ‘youth’. It was a time of full employment, improving social conditions, steadily rising wages and a social contract... This is the point when teenagers first appeared as separate economic units, rather than simply younger versions of their parents.



Pop music captured the voice of this new category perfectly: its energy and endless potential matched the restlessness and emotional turmoil of youth. This is “youth” understood as a time of minimal responsibility, maximum experimentation. This is youth that’s all about going out on a Friday night. This is youth as desire.

Pop music has two things to say to this new category of youth. One is the age-old story of love gained and love lost. But the other message is a new one – it’s the injunction to “Be yourself”, to become what it means to be truly you.

“Do anything you wanna do” by Eddie & the Hot Rods:

Gonna break out of this city / Leave the people here behind / Searching for adventure / It’s the type of life to find / Tired of doing day jobs / with no thanks for what I do / I’m sure I must be someone / now I’m gonna find out who

OK, so it’s hardly The Communist Manifesto but you get the point. And for the lucky, talented few, a pop career itself would be the escape route from the drudgery of day jobs.

You can see all of this as just a safety valve to facilitate a life of subordination. Here’s your three minutes of anger and alienation before you knuckle down, get a job and join the grown-up world. But I think such a cynical view misses the crucial contradiction at the heart of pop, which is that it was never just something handed down to us from on high.



When “Rock around the Clock” hit the UK in the 1950s, it caused a moral panic as cinema-goers ripped up seats to make room to dance. Rock & roll was **dangerous**, subversive, underground. And of course pop music was lowbrow and literally ‘vulgar’ – the people’s music. It was, to be blunt, what the working classes did. Critics looked down their nose at it (they still do) but pop music was part of a collective project which everyone had a hand in shaping and moulding. It was a space where people symbolically encoded their experiences and then communicated them socially. It was everyday culture.

Pop music reflected people’s lives, so it’s hardly surprising that hedonism played a major part. “**Good Times**” as Chic sang.

Good times, these are the good times
Leave your cares behind, these are the good times
Good times, these are the good times
Our new state of mind, these are the good times...

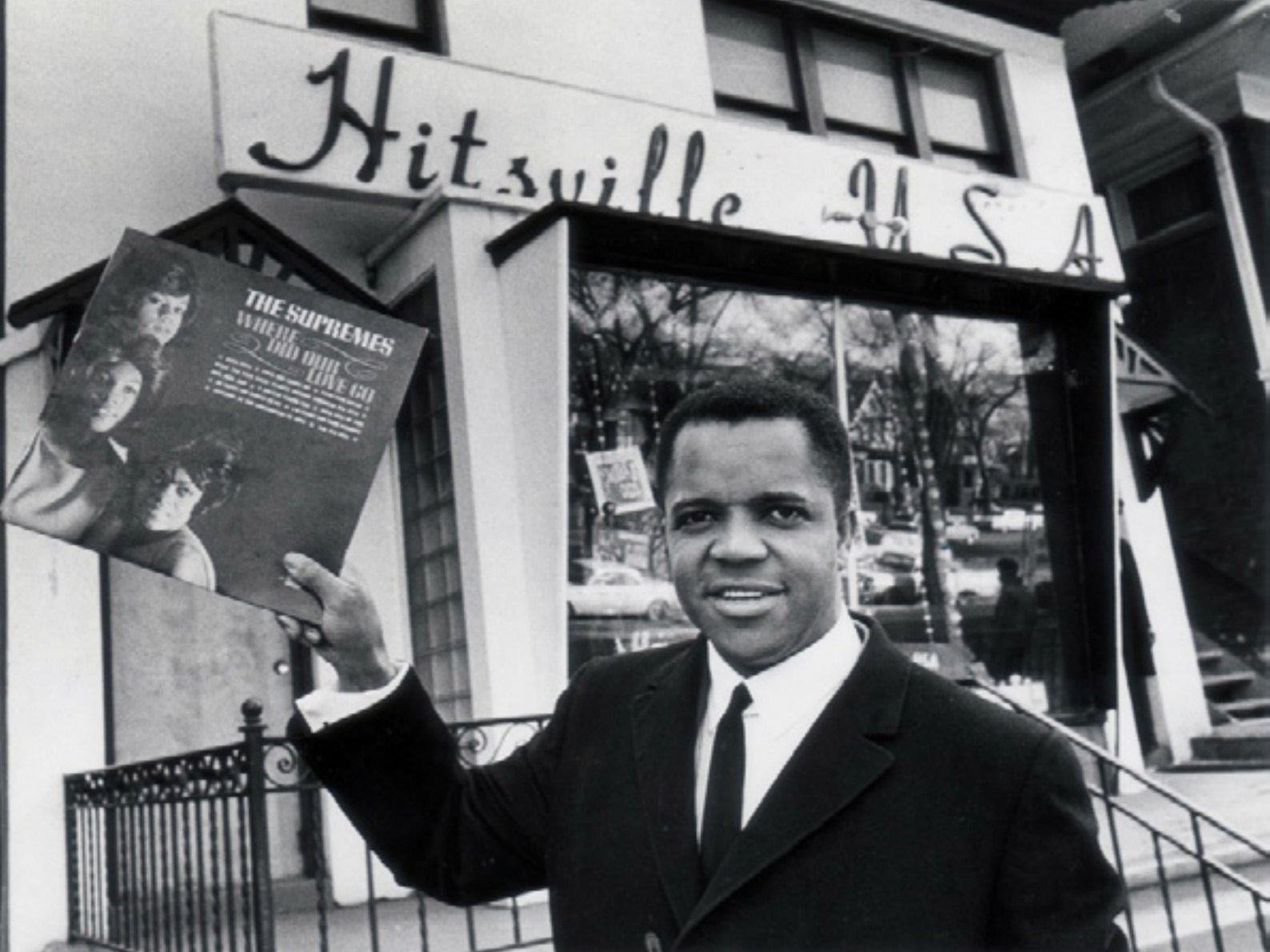
OK, terrible lyrics but a killer tune... This idea of good times is fundamental to pop: it’s the promise of something better, either by escaping the old world or at the very least copping off at the disco.



Good times are always contextual, they relate to the world we're in. So in the early 1980s, for example, pop gave us Ghost Town and The Wham Rap – two very different songs by different bands, The Specials and Wham, who emerged from very different backgrounds. But they're both songs that dared to talk about the reality of recession and mass unemployment in a way that wasn't being expressed anywhere else. They are songs of escape which gave a voice – however imperfect and transient – to working class kids.

This then is the glaring contradiction at the heart of pop – these ideas of authenticity, desire and escape were encapsulated in seven inches of disposable plastic.

In one sense pop is all about **commercial** success, selling the biggest number of units in the shortest possible time.



Many of the early **Motown** songs were written and recorded on a shoestring within a couple of hours: it was a hit factory with assembly line production. And of course for every band like the Beatles, there was someone like the Monkees – contrived, cynical, bubblegum pop. But on the other hand, pop music was a public process: it was a two-way thing. And because it operated in a shared public space, the meanings it threw up could be contested, challenged or transformed – and then fed back into pop music again. So Motown songs might have been churned out of its Hitsville headquarters, but the experience of hearing those records for the first time as the Civil Rights movement unfolded in 1960s America, was something different again – and that experience from below fed straight back into the next record release.

The social theorist Mark Fisher wrote something last year about why The Jam were such a great band. One of the points he makes is that he was never a huge fan: the first time he heard Eton Rifles it was blasting out of the radio when he went to get his hair cut. Pop in a public space. At its best it was able to provide those watercooler moments, like seeing Marc Bolan on TOTP or watching Michael Jackson's Thriller video for the first time.



Compare that to today where pop music feels like a much more private affair – it speaks to you and to no-one else. And it's rarely rough, or contradictory, or unpredictable. Instead the whole thing feels one-sided. **One-Directional** even. It's a product put together in Tin Pan Alley and handed down to us by someone who's already more of a celebrity than star. And just like any other commodity it's organised by corporations, and managed by posh boys and specialist graduates from the BRIT School for Performing Arts.

In fact this last point needs emphasising a little more. Part of the reason that pop music in the 1960s and 70s was a two way thing was that pop itself offered a viable route out of poverty. There was a sense that with a bit of talent and a lot of luck, anyone could make it. And when you saw bands on TOTP having the time of their lives, a little bit of you couldn't help thinking that one day it might be you – because in many ways those stars looked and sounded a bit like you. OK, the whole idea of authenticity in pop is pretty slippery: people can talk about Keeping It Real, but pop has always been about performance and artifice. All the same, there is something powerful about hearing someone singing of experiences that so closely tally with your own, and I think that's where the notion of authenticity fits.



All that seems a lifetime ago now. Tuition fees, changes to the benefits system, the rise of an intern culture, the destruction of housing stock, the explosion of the property market – these have all combined to close down prospects for working class talent, not just in music but right across all the arts. It's been termed the **poshification of culture**. And as those other, rougher voices are edged out, you get a "creeping blandness", a flattening, as music becomes just another form of entertainment. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a Coldplay single looping on the radio – forever...

[As an aside this seems to be the opposite of comedy's trajectory: the origins of contemporary British satire (Monty Python, Private Eye, That Was The Week That Was) seem bound up with private schools, the Cambridge Footlights and a whole series of Establishment institutions. But that satire also went on to create a space where other comedians – working class, women, non-white – could start to flourish.]

In a funny way you could argue that neoliberalism (the way we currently organise society) represents the triumph of many of pop's ambitions. "Tired of doing day jobs/with no thanks for what I do". Well, for most of us the steady 9-to-5 has gone the same way as the industrial factory, replaced by flexible working, out-sourcing, short term contracts, increased precarity and so on. "I'm sure I must be someone/now I'm gonna find out who". In our jobs, in our homes, in our lifestyles, we're constantly urged to discover our authentic selves. In fact we're expected to embrace the whole ethos of voluntarism: "you can get it if you really want..." which is why we've turned from a nation of shopkeepers to a nation of entrepreneurs.



Meanwhile the category of **youth**, pop's original audience, has been stretched to include almost anyone who doesn't want to get old. In fact the attributes of youth (impatience, energy, flexibility, fearlessness) are precisely the characteristics we're expected to show in order to survive in the labour market. So on the one hand we have a generation of under-25s who are saddled with debt, doing vocational courses and planning for their pensions – and on the other, there's people like me, on the wrong side of 50, still singing "**hope I die before I get old**".

We're not saying there's no politically engaged music. But without figures we can identify with, music has lost its edge. And so it has lost the power to **mobilise**.



OK so far we've noted a phenomenon, there's a pattern across Europe of comedians becoming political figures.

1. Both as **figures of identification** – that people identify because they seem to reflect their own political feelings.
2. But also as **political leaders** who have a very real impact.

Most notable example – **Beppe Grillo** – who established a political party the **Five Star Movement** out of the face to face meet ups of fans of his Internet Blog. In the 2013 Italian elections for the Chamber of Deputies 5SM got 25% of the vote, becoming the largest single party in parliament.

In this country the example is **Russell Brand**, who with his **9,150,000 followers of twitter** can focus a huge amount of attention to a political campaign – which he has been doing, in particular with housing campaigns in London.

We've then discussed why **pop musicians** are **less likely** to be figures of political identification that they have been in the past.

But this doesn't explain why it's **comedians**, rather than say film stars, who have taken up the role.

To explain that we need to look at some other changes in our culture and wider society.



I want to start by suggesting that our culture has become more **ironic**.

In fact I'd say that '**being ironic**' is the **dominant posture in our culture**. We approach an ever-increasing range of our social interactions in an ironic mode.

Irony is the disjuncture between **what we say** and **what we mean**.

When we're being ironic, we **say something but we don't really mean it**. Although I'd argue that it's reached a stage where often it's not just the person we are interacting with who is unsure whether we are being serious or not. Quite often we're not too sure ourselves.

This disjuncture that has made it quite difficult and awkward to make **sincere statements of belief**. It's also difficult to take sincere statements of belief seriously. But of course you need the ability to take sincere statements seriously if you are to, not just point out what's wrong in our society but also put forward ideas for how to address them – how to change society for the better.

In fact irony has fallen into a kind of **all pervasive ironic cynicism**. Which, we would argue is no longer a sign of being edgy its a sign of **conformity** with society's norms. Actually I'd go further and say that a kind of **cheap, lazy cynicism has replaced thoughtful conviction as the mark of an educated worldview**.



Exhibit one – **Charlie Brooker’s Weekly Wipe**. I mean I like the show but he epitomises the kind of knowing cynicism I’m referring to.

Of course we aren’t claiming any novelty in noticing this hyper-ironisation of culture. It’s not a new thing. People have been commenting on it since the late 1980s.

The novelist **David Foster Wallace** was talking, in the early 1990s, about the tyranny of irony and the need to risk a new sincerity. And theorists such as **Peter Sloterdijk** and **Slavoj Žižek** have discussed ideas such as cynical reason or how cynical irony has become the dominant mode of ideology.

In fact these theorists have made very similar distinctions to the one I’ve just hinted at.

They try to distinguish between irony as a **moment** within culture – a moment that’s often a tool for the powerless – and the kind of ironic cynicism as an **ongoing mode of interaction**, which loses any focus and works to, in effect prevent social and political change.

So irony in itself isn’t – bad – it can serve useful purposes, it can provide an outlet for unspoken social tensions, for instance and it can expose the hypocrisies of the rich and powerful. The second kind of all pervasive cynicism produces a kind of entropy that ends up de facto on the side of the powerful as they work to entrench their power in an entirely un-ironic fashion.

So when irony and cynicism become all pervasive then irony become a strategy open to the powerful as well as the powerless.



Just look how **Nigel Farage** and **Boris Johnson** both use laughter as the automatic defence mechanism. They both play variations on the same character – the upper class buffoon or 'twit'.

In this context the character **Al Murray** standing against Farage in the election is a work of genius. Al Murray is simply better at playing that character than Farage is.

It's a useful strategy for politicians because statements of sincerity often don't seem authentic when politicians make them. After all they have to hold the party line and they have to make the kinds of reversals in line that undermine authenticity. It makes sincerity difficult to pull off.

But we can see this kind of reactionary irony as far more pervasive in society

I've no doubt there were people on twitter defending those Chelsea fans who pushed the black guy of the Paris metro while singing about how the were racist and that's the way they like it – I've no doubt people were tweeting saying it's all just Bants, etc.

Allows the defense of the kinds of reactionary comedy that **punches down**

Traditionally comedy punches upwards – it makes those seen as 'social superiors' the 'but' of the jokes. This is the role of the fool – who is the only one to tell the truth to the king



The last ten years or more has seen a real explosion of comedy that punches down – **Little Britain** – the whole anti-Chav humour

Being equally nasty to everyone is not egalitarian – some people are dramatically more vulnerable to the effects of that nastiness than others. Acting equally to everyone just entrenches existing inequalities.

Once again we're not claiming this as a new insight.

What's new is that the situation of general crisis is at such a level that we to see the ways out of this situation. We've seen a series of very large social movements wanting to address the problems of the world – 2011 was the year of protest – within the frame we've set up we can call these – **explosions of sincerity**.

The situation is very serious, people's living standards and prospects have declined dramatically. Lots of people want to make this move to sincerity but are finding themselves trapped in an all-pervasive cynicism.

I think this is why we find **comedians** becoming figures of political identification.



Comedians are well practised in this shift from irony to sincerity. Their natural starting position is an ironic one.

When someone like Russell Brand moves from irony to sincerity then he is pioneering the move we all need to make if we are to break with cynicism and engage with the problems facing us.

Not just that but comedians know how to move back to irony if they have misjudged the mood and sincerity has gone down badly.

If you watch Russell Brand live he moves from a knob joke to a political statement to another knob joke.

And like I say, we don't want to ban irony – but we want to see it for what it is. It can be a useful ground clearing exercise – to undermine existing hypocrisies tied to existing inequalities

Of course we should be cynical about politics as usual. But we live in times that are almost beyond satire. The Onion or News thump websites often just come off as the most astute news commentary sites – but they do little to undermine the actual operation of power.

And Irony and cynicism merely gets in the way when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks.



OK I just want to add one more observation.

The countries where comedians have become political figures within populist politics, such as the UK, France, Italy, are all countries that haven't experienced explosions of really large social movements. Italy, for instance, is a country that has had large social movements. The early 2000s in Italy were called the springtime of the movements. But Beppe Grillo arose during a time when the movements were in crisis and on the retreat.

Other countries have seen the emergence of very large social movements since the economic crisis of 2008, such as Greece and Spain. In Spain you had the 15M movement – which was sort of like Occupy but where **65% of the population went on one of the demos**.

Those countries haven't seen comedians as political leaders – they've seen the emergence of Left populist parties such as **Syriza** and **Podemos**.

To understand why I think we've got to understand what it is that comedians such as Brand are doing.

They are expressing **hidden transcripts** – they are saying things that people think but which don't quite fit the semi-official story that we see on the news, etc.



That's one way of expressing discontent – but when **65% of the population** is on the streets expressing those sentiments then they aren't hidden transcript anymore.

A cynical ironic stance is often driven by fear of seeming **naive** or **unworldly**. This is exactly what is brought up in critiques of Brand – that he is naive! Or that he's trying to seem more intelligent than he is – he get's his pronunciation wrong.

The thing that can overcome this fear is the kind of **collective thinking**, the kind of **collective intelligence** that occurs in large social movements – in situations such as this assembly here in Madrid.

In this way perhaps the best we can hope for from this trend for comedians as figureheads is that they play temporary pioneering role – and that once we have rediscovered forms of intelligent collectivity then they can get out the way. As we'll have no more need for them.