

SATIRE AS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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'Public expressions of amusement must especially be encouraged provided they remain honourable, and those works that, in the guise of laughter, provide salutary advice should particularly be emphasised. And I feel that this joyfulness, far from hindering the operations necessary for assuring our liberty, would instead serve to maintain each and every individual in his proper duties, thwart any potential intrigue, warn of self-aggrandizing intentions and, most importantly, punish bad citizens by denouncing with excessive irony their turpitude and their baseness.' (Extract from *Le Regiment del La Calotte*, January 1790; cited by De Baecque, 1977, 191)

Introduction

Using satire as its focus, the paper will discuss ways in which satire is being used effectively in critical pedagogy, especially – but not only – in political education. In a context where there would appear to be increasing political apathy, the use of political satire is a means of engaging learners in learning about political processes as well as to be political thinkers. A case study will illustrate how critical pedagogy can use popular cultural forms to support the arguments in the paper. In turn, this paper will inform the development of critical pedagogy both as theory and practice.

On conviviality

This paper is based on ongoing research into the significance of conviviality for learning. Building on an earlier paper in which I define conviviality, and argue for a research agenda which seeks to examine the significance of conviviality in processes of learning (Armstrong 2004), this paper will focus on the use of satire as critical pedagogy.

There appears to be a good deal of consensus around the fact that learning is increasingly becoming a serious business as its purpose is made vocational, and its outcomes linked to economic rather than social or cultural interests. This paper seeks to challenge this consensus by reiterating and reinforcing arguments for ensuring that cultures of learning are characterised by conviviality. This paper is particularly interested in the development of political literacy using convivial tools, as theorised by Illich (1973). Illich said that he used 'convivial' to describe '*a society, in which modern technologies serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers*', but adds:

After many doubts, and against the advice of friends whom I respect, *I have chosen convivial as a technical term to designate a modern society of responsibly limited tools.* (Illich, 1973, 12)
[emphasis as in the original]

Illich wanted to use conviviality to support his arguments about the manufacture and control of the social and cultural environment through the creative and communal actions, through free, and individually autonomous, agency of its members.

Some would argue that conviviality and critical pedagogy are incompatible, as ideas of convivial discourse trivialise those really serious issues raised through critical pedagogy. This idea needs investigation, both philosophically and empirically. Philosophically, there are no reasons why critical pedagogy (for example, as theorised by Aronowitz, Giroux and McLaren) as practice should not be mediated in a humorous and enjoyable way: particularly through the use of satire.

On satire

Satire: the use of ridicule, irony, sarcasm etc. to expose the folly or vice, or to lampoon an individual (Ross, 1998, 115)

It is hard to precise about the meaning of satire because it belongs to a genre of humour that is intentionally cynical or critical. It has related, but different, concepts such as parody, lampoon and spoof. In this paper, the use of satire will emphasise the critical rather than the cynical or sarcastic. However, the thin line between them will need to be addressed in the paper, particularly when linked

to pedagogical practice. Many forms of humour are doubled-edged, and satire is the sharpest of all its forms in this respect.

Satire appears to have had moments of popularity in the history of humour. Among the Ancient Greeks and Romans it was apparently very much linked to pedagogy, with the classic example being Aristophanes, whose comedies were not part of everyday life, but special performances at symposia through which the elite demonstrated its superiority over the masses through the use of mocking humour (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1987, 13; Hodgart, 1969, 34-37). In short, satire was used as a means of ideological control. But by the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Europe satire was largely a literary activity, but with a revolutionary social and political purpose – to challenge the control of the elite through ideology. It was used to lighten the tasks of the revolutionary leadership which had become obsessed with repressive forms of control – punishment and vengeance. Instead, the revolutionary leadership needed to demonstrate a ‘serene gaiety’ which was ‘no less patriotic’ (De Baecque, 1977, 191). The challenge for successful satire, then, was to have a critical edge whilst at the same time being aesthetic, and having a sense of playfulness:

‘All good satire contains an element of aggressive attack and a fantastic vision of the world transformed: it is written for entertainment, but contains sharp and telling comments on the problems of the world in which we live offering ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them.’ (Hodgart, 1969, 12)

We might also add that satire must not stray too far from accuracy, and must demand to be taken seriously. It should be based on observation of everyday realities, with a vision of a better future, rather than being merely destructive (Massie, 2001). Contempt for politicians and the political process should not go beyond deconstruction into destruction.

So, the link between politics and satire is long established. Until the seventeenth century, it took the form of drama, but with the development of the printing press, it appeared in literary forms as well, including both fiction (for example, Swift’s *Gulliver Travels*) and in philosophical and political writings (including Hobbes’ *Leviathan*), and by the eighteenth and nineteenth century the popular press was responsible for a new genre – magazines, newspapers and comics – *Punch* being perhaps, the most famous example, which combined satirical text with cartoons. By the 20th, new technologies had enabled broadcast media to develop new forms of satirical communication, with both radio and television eventually coming to play an important role in using the genre, though the development of the media was at a time when social, political and cultural life was far too serious and far too polite. Now, with computer, satellite and digital technologies, satire has taken on a less parochial, and more global perspective.

According to Griffin (1994) satire had lost its critical edge and had become ossified in the twentieth century. However, from the 1960s, satire on television and radio has been used very much for commenting on social and political events, and for exposing rhetoric and mystification. Why the 1960s is subject to much debate (Carpenter, 2000), but from the standpoint of this paper this most recent legacy, from *That Was The Week That Was*, *Beyond the Fringe*, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, *The Men from the Ministry*, *Yes (Prime) Minister*, *Spitting Image*, *The New Statesman* through to *Have I Got News for You*, *Bremner, Bird and Fortune* and *Don’t Watch That Watch This* has produced much audiovisual material, which combined with US programmes, such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *An Evening with David Letterman*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* provides a plethora of teaching material. In addition, there has been a significant number of political satires in the movies: *Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to stop worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *Whoops Apocalypse* (1986), *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Primary Colours* (1997), *Wag the Dog* (1998) *Bulworth* (1998), *Dick* (1999), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *Team America* (2004).

The outcry caused by the latter two films, focusing as they do on post-September 11th American politics with respect to the Middle East and terrorism, demonstrates that political satire does still have a political edge, but so sharply attacking dominant ideologies that the accusation of ‘unpatriotic’ has been attached to both the films and their directors (Gilbert, 2004). Kauffman (1998), in reviewing some of the above films, starts off by saying that political satire makes us feel good, for it is the means by which an ‘audience of the powerless could enjoy criticism of the powerful’. His interpretation, however, is that this is based on vengeance and cynicism. At the time Aristophanes was poking fun at the Ancient Greek politicians, the Macedonians decided to declare the ridiculing of

government illegal. In both contemporary Britain and the USA, whilst it is not yet illegal to be critical of government, the paradox of freedom of speech under democracy is coming under scrutiny (Gilbert, 2004). There are supposedly some topics that are so serious that they should *not* be treated humorously. The events of 9/11 appear to be one such topic. A recent stage musical based on the *Jerry Springer Show*, was controversially broadcast by the British Broadcasting Company. The religious satire, *Jerry Springer – the Opera*, received over 63,000 complaints. The debate as to whether it should or should not be shown, was expressed through discourses of freedom from censorship. Its real impact, however, has been commercial. The stage performance was supposed to go on a national tour, but after the controversy, a number of local theatres were put under pressure by Christian groups to withdraw it from their programme. On the other hand, the numbers watching the show *because* it was controversial rather than because they were interested in the subject matter, suggest that DVD sales could be quite profitable. On a different level, in teaching about inspection and accountability in schools, I make reference to *OFSTED! The Musical*, written, staged and performed by students of Hull University at the Edinburgh Festival in 2004, taking the form of a musical political satire of the contemporary regimes in UK schools. It is unlikely to have the same impact among OFSTED inspectors as *Jerry Springer – The Opera* has among Christians.

In this debate about the demise or otherwise of satire, there is another dimension that needs to be considered. We live in a time when there might be what is referred to as the 'cult of the celebrity' (Street, 2004; West and Orman, 2002; Mukherjee, 2004). Satire has always carried a force because it impacted negatively on those with power and the power structures. Contemporary versions have to be located with an individualistic paradigm. So, modern satire does not attack British politics *per se*, nor democratic processes – it focuses on individual celebrities such as Bush or Blair. As Oscar Wilde once said, 'The only thing worse in the world than being talked about is *not* being talked about', which undermines the power of satire to ridicule politicians. Now everyone is a publicity-seeking comedian, and everyone wants to be on the limelight, and to be laughed at, rather than being ignored. Bee's (2003) analysis of British satire on television concludes that irreverence will be tolerated because it mainly involves calling people names, not all of whom are politicians. It has been argued that William Hague was voted into the leadership of the Conservative Party in 1996 because he was lampooned through political satire. O'Farrell (1999), a writer for *Spitting Image* and *Have I got News for You*, speaking at the Oxford Union said that he thought many considered political satire as a 'powerful weapon that had been used throughout history to bring down governments ... But my years writing political jokes have taught me that satire is approximately as powerful as Margaret Thatcher was witty'. He went on to add that 'satire can only be effective only when a politician is already in a weakened position', and to illustrate this he discussed the portrayal of David Steel (leader of the Liberal party) in *Spitting Image* as being weaker than David Owen (Leader of the SDP), which led to Steel trying to assert himself after the 1987 election to force the SDP to merge with the Liberal Party, and they ended up fighting each other and thereby splitting the Alliance vote in the Richmond by-election in 1989. This benefited William Hague who won the election, and went on to become leader of the Conservative Party: *Spitting Image* 'may not have been able to damage the Tories in the eighties but we certainly planted a time bomb to scupper their chances of winning anything 15 years later'. The irony of the significance of political satire is that writers such as John O'Farrell and Mark Burton were subsequently invited to write speeches for politicians, including Gordon Brown. O'Farrell concludes: 'Such is the fate of the political satirist in Britain. In Iraq or Indonesia we would be dragged off to a darkened cell to be tortured. Here we are invited to media parties and eventually to the centre of government to hobnob with the establishment we originally set out to undermine' (O'Farrell, 1999).

On critical pedagogy

So what has all this got to do with lifelong learning? An immediate link is its relationship with political literacy. In Britain we had a significant period from 1988 until 1997 when there was virtually no explicit political education in the school curriculum. The introduction of a very overcrowded National Curriculum specifying in detail what had to be taught left little space for political literacy. According to Kerr (2003), citizenship had never been far from the top of governments' education agenda, and was eventually introduced into the National Curriculum. Following the publication of the report by the *Advisory Committee on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (Crick, 1998), a non-statutory framework for citizenship and personal, social and health education (PSHE) was introduced into English schools in 2000. Citizenship education then quickly became a statutory national curriculum subject in secondary schools from September 2002. The government had realised the 'importance of citizenship and democracy' (DfES, 2005).

After a decade without such learning, why was it now such a matter of concern? Answer: 'political apathy'. After nearly twenty years of Conservative rule, there had been a growing awareness of a high degree of consensus among the mainstream political groups, an awareness that was heightened after New Labour came to power in 1997, and to a large extent, particularly through its education policies, merely continued the work of the previous administration. In adult education, we now have a generation of learners who came through the National Curriculum without developing their political literacy.

Now this assumes that schooling prior to the National Curriculum was previously successful in educating its students' political literacy. From a critical pedagogy perspective, we might wish to question the effectiveness of the curriculum as a place for developing political literacy if it is delivered outside of any critical perspective. In fact, research since the early 1970s has indicated that political socialisation takes place through the *hidden* rather than the *official* curriculum. Through critical pedagogy, the hidden curriculum is brought to the surface, and exposed for critical discussion and debate. Space is created between borders, on the margins, to have such discussion, which enables a 'way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relationships of the wider community, society and nation-state' (McLaren, 1999, 454). This is itself a political process that engages political ideas beyond party politics and politicians. It does not depend whether there is space or not in the curriculum for political education, for that space is to be found within pedagogy, integrating political literacies within curriculum subjects. The task of critical pedagogy is for students and teachers to engage in the process of making explicit the political construction of knowledge, and in whose interests that knowledge serves (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991; Giroux, 1992). Through this process, students and teachers should critically challenge inequalities and undemocratic processes, but at the same time critically challenge the political constructions of both equality and democracy, and their inherent contradictions.

If this space is to be created, then there is a role for media literacy as well as political literacy. If there is declining respect for politics and politicians, this has been paralleled growth in political satire. For example, sales of the *Mad* magazine in the USA and *Private Eye* in the UK have been rising for the first time for over a decade. The Iraq war has had much to do with that, but also the awareness that the supposed 'political apathy' is mislabelled, because people *deciding not to vote* has little to do with removing 'barriers to access', the greater use of technologies – it is to do with the perceived relevance of politics to people's lives. The task is to develop political literacy through integration into mainstream curriculum via critical pedagogy.

On satire as critical pedagogy

There are many ways of enhancing the politicisation of the curriculum other than satire. However, for the purpose of this paper, the focus will be specifically on the use of satire, and related forms of parody and spoof. An actual example will be outlined here, and then conclude with a discussion about the potential and limitations of this strategy of critical pedagogy.

Given that satire will be the vehicle through which political literacy will be developed, it is important to critically analyse the nature of satire itself. One of the issues here is to be able to bring students' experiences of something they find pleasurable and everyday into the classroom without intending to take away the pleasure. From an adult learning perspective, this merely requires that learners themselves are encouraged to draw on such everyday experiences, and convert those experiences into learning. For example, in Stark's ((2003) outline of how he uses *Mad* magazine to teach media literacy, he stresses the importance of its relevance to people's lives, and beginning with where they are rather than imposing a teacher's view of the world upon them. In Stark's class, there is a plethora of material and issues to be drawn on in *Mad*, including the advertisements, which are typically spoof, which in itself raises questions about what is real and what is socially constructed, and the deeper meanings around consumerism that might be raised. The deconstruction of advertisements is a popular activity in critical pedagogy (Zuk and Dalton, 2003).

The idea of deconstructing a familiar programme, the news, or an advertisement, film or television show to understand satire or parody provides a way into critical media analysis. The use of a *South Park* episode that parodies realities TV shows, not only encourages students to critically reflect on reality TV but also its portrayal in *South Park*, and thereby *South Park* itself and its use of satire. The familiarity with a critical reading of *South Park* might encourage students to be 'open to consider learning about other examples of satirical mass media texts' including *Mad* (Stark, 2003, 306). What

quickly becomes obvious to Stark that to be effective, students need to understand the references in the satire. For example, watching re-runs of *Have I Got News For You* is less humorous if the references can no longer be located in memory. Being a topical news quiz means that it may not work particularly well when its subject matter is no longer topical. The recognition of parody or spoof is vital to its success. In *The Simpsons*, for example, any one episode might have a number of parodic references, which can often be missed on one viewing as the programme moves so quickly. At least in a classroom setting, the viewing is probably asynchronous allowing pause and replay in order to identify and establish the cross-referencing. Moreover, the satirical references may not be obvious to any students who have never seen the programme, film or magazine before, and this should not be assumed. However, in both cases, the point of developing political and media literacies is that this lack of reference can itself be subject to discussion as to why some people find something humorous whilst others do not. It may also require some background information, some contextualisation to be provided or researched, which is part of the learning process.

A second conclusion might be to try and avoid the cynical and sarcastic interpretations of the satire, particularly where politics is concerned. If the intention is to develop a critical perspective on politics, then the pedagogy should not feed, but challenge, existing cynicisms. The mocking of the president or the prime minister might be good fun, but satire needs to be approached respectfully through deepening understanding the nature and purpose of mockery and ridicule. Related to this is the point made by Stark that we should not overuse satire in the learning process, and he reiterates the dangers pointed out by West and Orman (1993):

Rather than using humour to engage the public in serious substantive issues, humour deflects from substance and draws our attention to personal or trivial aspects of the political process. When voters form impressions based on comedian monologues, it risks debasing the civic discourse. In this way, then, humour has political consequences that can affect campaigns and governing. (West and Orman, 2003, 98)

Whether or not what West and Orman conclude is correct should also be open to debate.

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