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Self-heckle: Russell Kane's stand-up comedy as an example of 'comedic sociology'*

Daniel Smith

abstract

This article explores the possibility that stand-up comedy may provide sociology with a new lens for interpreting social life. Using British comedian Russell Kane as a case study, the article argues that his observational material shares affinities with the sociological tradition of interpretivism. Drawing upon the works of Simmel, Bakhtin, Douglas and Kane himself, the article outlines the concept of a 'self-heckle' – an interpretive device whereby comedy acts as cultural criticism providing sociological insight into the lives of people. Derived from Kane's stand-up comedy, 'comedic sociology' is able to explore social and biographical narratives intersection with wider socio-historical transformations, demonstrating comedy's ability to provide sociological insight into the contradictions, absurdities and incongruities of 'the social' and the potential to imagine life differently.

Introduction

In this article I want to outline comedy's potential to invite people to think differently about the established order through an analysis of the observational stand-up comedy of prominent UK comedian Russell Kane. Kane's observational comedy provides not only a disruption to conventional assumptions but also insights that are potentially of value to the discipline of sociology. While by no

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means suggesting that all stand-up comedy is applicable to these claims, Kane's material and position as a stand-up comedian may be considered 'comedic sociology'. Kane's material offers not only insight into social life, where stand-up comedy acts as the vehicle for social commentary (Mintz, 1985), cultural criticism (Koziski, 1997) or communal revelation (Kirby, 1974) but may provide sociological truths not captured by mainstream sociology.

Using Kane's stand-up as my starting point, I want to argue that sociologists may be able to look to certain comedians for methodological insights for illuminating 'the social' in a way which illustrates the absurdities of the social order and its ability to be 'otherwise', a democratic goal. When Bakhtin observed in *Rabelais and his world* (1984: 91-92) that medieval man took refuge in carnival as it turned official images inside out, he noted that it produced an 'ephemeral truth' that, however brief, became the source of an unofficial truth of the people. Kane's stand-up comedy may have such a truth-value. This extends the 'stand-up comedian as anthropologist' thesis (Koziski, 1997) as I explore the 'stand-up comedian as sociologist'. Kane's observational material provides a means to conduct a 'comedic sociology' which consists in observing, recording and dramatising the contradictions, absurdities and incongruities of social life (cf. Koziski, 1997).

In order to achieve this, I illustrate that Kane's stand-up comedy is of operative use to stimulating the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959). The contradictions of Kane's own life, illustrated in his comedic routines, act as a reflexive device to connect personal troubles of biography with historical and social change. By way of an example, I will demonstrate how Kane's biographical narrative and comic material in his award-winning *Smokescreens and castles* (2011a) can be fruitfully complimented by (as well as being an extension to) Young and Wilmott's classic in British sociology, *Family and kinship in East London* (1957). By placing Kane's material alongside Young and Wilmott's classic text I will illustrate how Kane provides a comedic sociological commentary on the realities of social mobility, embourgeoisment and his sense of self. Using Kane's *Smokescreens and castles* as his starting point, Friedman (2014: 364; emphasis in original) has recently called for a sociological research agenda which is attentive to the experience of social mobility:

one which attends to the possibility that people make sense of their social trajectories not just through 'objective' markers of economic or occupational success, but also through symbols and artifacts of class-infected *cultural identity*.

As we will see, Kane's experiences of social mobility manifest in his comic observations in *Smokescreens and castles* itself provides this call for a sociology attentive to mobility through symbolic narratives; comedic material provides an

interpretive framework for understanding the meaningful realities of the social. By drawing upon the works of Douglas (1975) and Bakhtin (1981; 1984) I will make the case that comedic sociology can be considered a branch of interpretive sociology in the tradition of Simmel (1971a; 1971b).

Comedic sociology; or, self-heckles

Before I proceed by outlining what comedic sociology is and how certain stand-up comedians, such as Russell Kane, are apposite for producing the contents of comedic sociologies, I should emphasise: *not all stand-up comedians are apt for this role*. British stand-up comedy at present is diverse and not all acts are appropriate for consideration for comedic sociology. British society has witnessed a ‘stand-up comedy’ renaissance in recent years and, with this, a diversity of material is currently on offer (Friedman, 2011). The diversity of acts spans from surreal, absurdist comics – Tim Key to Adam Buxton – to family-friendly observational material – Michael McIntyre – to satirical, political humour – Stewart Lee and Josie Long.

Since the ‘alternative comedy’ movement of the 1980s, many ‘acts’ are social commentators as they make use of the intellectual resources of high-culture to prefigure social and political mandates (Scott, 2005). This spans the ‘alternative comedy’ of Ben Elton to contemporary political acts, e.g. Mark Thomas (Quirk, 2010), to feminist acts such as Sara Pascoe. The legacy of the ‘alt comedy’ movement is that ‘the culturally privileged are, to some extent, creating new forms of ‘objectified’ cultural capital via the careful consumption of ‘legitimate’ items of British comedy’ (Friedman, 2011: 348). Friedman (2011: 354) points out – in a similar vein to this article – that comedy has been ‘consecrated by academics’ in scholarly analysis of their material. With certain comedians – e.g. Stewart Lee – sociological observation and arguments appear in their acts as much as they inform it. Yet not all observational material which satirises or becomes social-cultural commentary is comedic sociology, even if the arguments their material presents have validity, currency or what Witkin (2003) would call the ‘truth-value’ of a work of art as its contents mirrors the realities found in the organisation of social life.

Rather, the crux of comedic sociology is that it stems from a comedians’ sociological imagination, the narrative intersection of biography with socio-historical horizons. This is at the heart of Kane’s stand up:

The genre I work in most frequently is what I like to call socio-observational – a blend of angry sociology and silly observations that allows me to make pseudo-Marxian arguments with an air of *joie de vivre*; basically silliness which may or may

not have a message...I have large sections with jokes and ponderings upon the received differences between working-class and middle-class culture - ...how working class culture functions on a reverse value-system – how as a child my peers and I would compete to *fail* exams...I bring in various characters, my father, my brother; places...and suddenly the observations and humour are lifted into the realm of what I call the ‘utterly human’ – to be human is to be simultaneously involved in many narratives at once (Kane, 2007: 127 original emphasis).

Hence certain stand-up comedians, even observational comedians, do not fit these criteria, e.g. Jim Davidson, Michael McIntyre, James Acaster. A comedic sociology rests upon the comic’s ability to provide sociological observations which illustrate wider socio-cultural realities; this may or not may arise from the point of intersection with their own biography. In the case of Kane, the biographical element is crucial but this is not essential for ‘comedic sociology’¹. C. Wright Mills’ statement that ‘men do not usually define the troubles they have in terms of terms of historical change and institutional contradiction’ (1959: 3) is able to be contended with Kane’s comedy shows as they define personal problems in the light of wider sociological transformations. Penfold-Mounce, et al. (2011: 153) have reminded sociologists that Mills included many practitioners, not just sociologists, into his definition of the sociological imagination: journalists, novelists and, for Penfold-Mounce, et al., the writers of HBO’s *The Wire*, or for myself, comedian Russell Kane.

Since it derives from his biography, Kane’s observational material is also a branch of interpretative sociology – a hermeneutic commentary upon one’s own life. Below I will use Kane’s *Smokescreen’s and castles* (2011) as an illustration of this comedic sociology but first I want to, theoretically, elaborate upon the parallels between Kane’s material and the epistemological position taken in interpretive sociology, especially that of Simmel (1971a; 1971b). By elaborating upon Simmel’s philosophy of social science in relation to comedy, I want to draw some connections with the works of Bakhtin (1981; 1984) and Douglas (1975) to illustrate the comic dimensions of the interpretive procedure and illustrate what I mean by a ‘self-heckle’.

1 As a referee of this article has pointed out to me, the biographical element is not essential to comedic sociology but rather a strategy employed by Russell Kane. To be clear, the examples and thinking expressed in this paper refer to Russell Kane but, hopefully, will be able to be applied or explored in more general terms. It is, however, beyond the scope of this article to substantiate this and as such I stick solely to Russell Kane as an exemplar of ‘comedic sociology’ or, as the referee suggested, a reflexive form of ‘comedic sociology’.

In Simmel's sociology we find a similar approach taken by the observational stand-up comic, especially Kane². Observational comedians and interpretive sociologists' share an epistemological starting point to their respective crafts and professions. A sociology that interprets life is one that rests upon the comprehension of the ideas and ideals that define it (King, 2004). It follows that to provide a hermeneutic critique of life, that is, draw out the limits of our understanding and comprehension of it, is to adequately understand it and its central ideas and principles of legitimacy (King, 2004: 213). From this, to 'make fun' is to have understood the contents of social life and show their limited conceptions, their internal contradictions and inadequacy to provide a 'full picture' through humour – i.e. incongruity and comic reduction. The 'self-heckle' of this paper is therefore the sociological value of comedy as cultural criticism: it brings to light inadequate, everyday conceptions of the 'social' and demonstrates our partial, limited understanding we may hold about 'other' people.

Self-heckle 1: Stereotypes

Anyone acquainted with Kane's comedy will know the phrase 'self-heckle' comes from his act; a frequent comic refrain, a 'self-heckle' arises when Kane draws attention to his own comic persona, his own material and status as a performer. Owing to his background in English literature, Kane uses the refrain to highlight the reflexivity of comedy, its ability to dissolve the solidity of genres and highlight the constructed-ness of any text, e.g. '*He's so postmodern, he's heckling himself.*' '*Self-heckle. Postmodern!*' This device, however, is also a feature of comedic discourse that, when applied to social commentary and observation, acts as a scheme for alternative modes of knowing: comedy provides the realisation that life 'could be otherwise' (see Bakhtin, 1984; 1981; Douglas, 1975).

Simmel's 'How is society possible?' (1971a) offers an intellectual starting point for this feature of comic observation. Simmel (1971a: 6-8) begins with the premise that the 'contents' of social life are not given by any objective reality but rather formed by the individuals who compose them. When it comes to how we conceive of those we interact with, Simmel (1971a:9) claims that all our understandings are 'based on certain distortions'. We never appreciate the absolute individuality of others but rather always have a limited conception of

2 Consider, for example, how Erving Goffman is often accused (somewhat unfairly) that his sociology consists of 'no more than a series of idiosyncratic observations about trivial features of social life' (Giddens, 1988: 252). Giddens's criticism is more the description of some observational comedy than that of a sociologist. What I am suggesting here is that interpretive sociology, which consists in various inferences from the idiosyncrasies of everyday life, is in fact a virtue for comedic sociology and the epistemological position of interpretive sociology as such.

them as a social type, e.g. officer, priest, slave, lord, prostitute, etc.; these are imposed objective categories which are not real in and of themselves. For Simmel (1971a: 10), to fully appreciate the absolute individuality of others is impossible: 'all relations... are determined by the varying degrees of this incompleteness'. Ironically, however, the absolute individuality of each person depends upon the generalisations of social type, e.g. a typical pious priest is such only insofar as he could be equally considered what he is not (Simmel, 1971a: 12-13). Simmel points out that it is in fact the very cloaked or veiled understandings we have of others which 'makes possible the sort of relations we call social' (1971a: 12).

In the case of stand-up comedy, routines rely upon cloaked understandings of others, notably stereotypes, as comedic devices. Through these comedic conceits we gain appreciation of Simmel's philosophical conception of the social. But we also appreciate how Simmel's position allows comedic routines to reveal that the 'world could be otherwise'. Exposure of cloaking allows for a possible release from cloaked social positions. Kane's use of 'self-heckles' on his class position is a case in point. In a BBC Radio 1 broadcast, Kane (2014) asks a woman her name and where she comes from:

Audience member: Abby.

Kane: Abaaay. The Essex spelling would be ABAAAY, 'Abaaay!' But you're not, you're from London, right Abbs? Where are you from?

Audience member: Suffolk.

Kane: Random! Abbs is so from Suffolk, she's going to heckle me with a Quails Egg! 'Take that you pickey brute!' 'Here's a tomato, that's sun-blushed you Essex mo-fo!'

Here Kane uses cloaked classed stereotypes to illustrate partial understandings of both Abby and himself; Abby's middle-class position is inferred by Kane from her being from Suffolk, extended into food preferences and prejudice toward Kane's Essex-based working class position. Kane's exaggerated, veiled dramatic characterisations of class personages fill in his sociological narrations and observations. By giving class identity an exaggerated veil we gain appreciation that the distorted gaze, which Simmel states is a necessary presence for 'social interaction', is ultimately a fictional personification of someone 'not ourselves'. We are not solely bound to the realities of a stratified society. We are all equally inadequate versions of ourselves. As Simmel (1971a: 10) observes, 'all of us are fragments, not only of general man, but also of ourselves'. Comedy can joyously highlight this facet of the social and, manifest through the comic, laughter is able to free people from the realities that social typologies impose (Bakhtin, 1984).

It is in comedic discourse where this epistemological position on the social is made tenable and, also, where a claim to possible release from class distortions of self gets validity. As Bakhtin (1981) notes, the use of comic verbal style relies upon heteroglossia, the many tongued nature of speech; the diversity and unlimitedness of subject positions available³. Comic speech uses ‘parodic stylisations’ (as Bakhtin calls it) of other people’s speech to wrestle authority away from any discourse or claim to a single (and partial) point of view. As Kane parodies classed prejudices, his active bringing together of competing viewpoints of British social class acts as a device to reveal the limits of one-sided class positions. But it also liberates both him and others from class personifications: through the parody we realise the conditions of our own views on other people and how these distortions limit our view of ‘the other’.

Self-heckle 2: Persona and ideal-types

That comedy is not ‘serious’ does not limit its claim to certain visions of the social world (Bakhtin, 1984). Comedy’s fictions are similar to sociology’s constructed categories. For Simmel, sociology is the study of societal forms and types – from economic exchange to social characters (the poor, the nobility, etc.) – where social processes form their content and determine their specific empirical reality. However, in ‘The Problem of Sociology’ (1971b), Simmel notes that despite the fact that categories employed (‘nobility’, ‘prostitution’, etc.) have no objective reality, ‘we’ – members of society – are compelled into believing there ‘is’ a society which constitutes a totality. Simmel (1971b: 27) notes:

The fact that an extraordinary multitude and variety of interactions operate at any one moment has given a seemingly autonomous historical reality to the general concept of society. Perhaps it is this hypostatization of a mere abstraction that is the reason for the peculiar vagueness and uncertainty involved in the concept of society and in the customary treatises in general sociology.

The empathy required to ‘understand’ the realities of the social hypostasis, or what Weber (1949) called ‘ideal types’, is crucial to interpretive sociology’s methodology. The quotations from Simmel rest upon the Kantian claim that our knowledge of social reality is dependent upon the point-of-view of the observer (Weber, 1949). As already noted, comedy – like interpretive sociology – relies upon assumed fixed characterisations. And comedy also relies upon a similar hypostasis that Simmel refers to with regard to ‘society’. Comedians often use hypostatic ideal-types in their acts, relying upon an empathetic identification with collective categories.

3 For the influence of Simmel’s sociology and philosophy of social science on Bakhtin, see Nielsen (2002: esp. 96-99).

Kane may be said to be engaging in ideal-type constructions to frame his comedic narratives and observations. The collective ‘we’s’, as in ‘we [nationality]’, ‘we [ethnic group]’, etc., is a performative device which does not merely engage an audience but also constructs a line of argument through comic material. Mintz (1985: 75-76) states that comedians act as mediators as they themselves take on collective categories of class, race, gender and so forth to establish their persona and frame their material on this. Russell Kane’s 2009 Edinburg Fringe show *Human dressage* is a case in point, reviewed by Cavendish (2009):

it’s the codified, subtly coerced ‘dressage’... the way we perform dances – ‘social, biological, physical’ – to attain approval and acceptance. [...] The more you listen to him, though, the more you’re forced to concede that he might well have a valid point. He reduces British behaviour – with its repressions and sudden violent outbursts – to a simple formula: ‘the passion and the pause’. Hence all that drunken Friday-night bother we get on the streets – it’s the flipside of the rest of the week’s restraint. Kane rams his abstract ideas home with clusters of research and concrete examples from his working-class upbringing. His uptight, BNP-supporting dad, his own tortured, autodidactic adolescent self – at once diffident and defiant – and his free-thinking cockney Nan are all trotted out as supporting evidence for his arguments.

What is being implied in Cavendish’s review is something like sociological observations becoming the well-spring of comic material. Kane will perform the ‘dressage’: his role as comic personifies the performative aspects of his social observations. However, his routine engages in ideal-type construction to provide an attempted social aetiology. The fetishisation of national character (as the central facet of nationhood), here ‘British repression’, is used to *explain* binge drink culture. The conventional point-of-view that people have of ‘the British’ becomes a source for comedic routines as much as a sociological explanation of ‘binge drinking culture’. Such sociological content is a sociological exegesis of wit; to laugh at the social world by way of its own jokes immanently within it. This is not dissimilar to Douglas’ claim that ‘a joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time.’ (1975: 98) Because of this, social forms/ideal types provide the possibility for jokes to reveal the limitations of human thought on the social.

Self-heckle 3: Narratives beyond society?

The content of Kane’s comedic material and its performance is not affirmative of social life as it is established and lived. This is what Bakhtin (1984) refers to as carnival laughter’s ability to move beyond official truths to unofficial, universalised truths of the popular assorted masses. For Bakhtin, laughter involves freeing from truths particularised around caste, church and family. The oppressive ‘official’ thought patterns that are brought to bear on social actors are relieved in the mirth of carnival, ultimately liberating them from internal and

external censor (Bakhtin, 1984: 94). For Bakhtin, the carnival festival gave this popular, ‘social consciousness of all the people’ (1984: 92) laughter a form and a means to express this libidinal release. Festival became a way to assert alternative truths in a living ritual practice. And yet it remained only a ‘mere festive luxury’ (1984: 95), a facet of a comedic ‘institution’ with its own time, place and structured chaos. But the luxury of laughter is not to denounce its power.

While stand-up comedy in Britain is a part of what Adorno would call the culture industries, the material by certain comedians such as Kane cannot be solely reduced to the claims made by critical theorists: ‘the paradise offered by the culture industry’, to paraphrase Adorno (1973: 142; brackets added), ‘is [*not*] the same old drudgery’. In British stand-up comedy, the site of ‘festive’ popular laughter is the ‘set’ routine. That said, Bakhtin’s ‘carnival’ has no analogue in contemporary society; the fleshy, convivial experience has little parallel with stand-up comedy. However, the central point to take away from Bakhtin is that the ‘people’s laughter’ is an invitation to imagine the world differently. As such our ‘carnival’, if we can still use the term, is the institutional comedic ‘set’ which Kane (2007: 130) identifies as having six types: ‘the five-minute ‘open spot’; the ten minute half-set; the fifteen minute; the ‘paid’ twenty; the forty-minute headline set; and the solo show’. These sets are limited in terms of time, of course. Yet Kane argues that the best means to achieve cathartic laughter is the use of story-telling. Narrative is at the heart of the comic’s ability to deliver an argument, theme and series of unofficial truths beyond the official reality. This is what Kane (2007: 133), with obvious irony, calls his “‘Kaneian” narrative tools’:

Comedy can highlight the hidden narratives of life. It’s the opportunity for a blind comic to convey a unifying piece of storytelling to a room full of randomly assembled people and bring them together in empathy, interest and finally, hopefully, laughter of recognition; for narrative, whilst enabling the audience to enjoy the perspective of The Other, a life view of the seemingly alien, can paradoxically show the humanness, the sameness, the ordinariness of this world view.

Beyond our limited experiencing and understanding of the world, the aim of Kane’s comedic ‘self-heckles’, the reflexive-ness of genre and constructed-ness of the social, are an attempt to move ‘us’ beyond the lived realities, not to a utopia but a re-evaluation of our worlds in conceptual terms.

The logic of comedic sociology; or, how jokes register social contradictions

Comedic sociology will interpret the world *differently* but will not actively *change* it. As Critchley (2002: 17) puts it, ‘humour does not redeem us from this world, but returns us to it ineluctably by showing that there is no alternative’. Comedic

sociology, as I want to define it, engages in comic abstractions of wider sociological realities mediated by performative jest so as to illustrate the realities of the social. But nonetheless jokes are discursive; they make arguments for alternatives. Jokes figure in the total modes of speech and argumentative schemes social actors may employ (see Palmer, 1994). Indeed, Douglas (1975) argues that a joke's occurrence should be studied in relation to all modes of linguistic expression found in a society. For Douglas (1975), a joke is something like a logical possibility found within a series of social patterns, practices and symbols. It is an expression which offers a commentary upon the wider pattern of social relations.

Douglas' (1975: 96) argument states that a joke is an utterance founded doubly upon economy of expression and incongruity:

A joke is a play upon form. It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first.

Douglas goes beyond this formula to stress the social dimension and context of the joke's utterance – a joke can only appear, Douglas argues, if there is a contradiction within the social structure: 'if there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear' (Douglas, 1975: 98). Jokes express the social situation: the patterns of social relations, their orchestration and implicit, shared assumptions. Kane would agree. For Kane (2007: 125), jokes are also plays upon form, 'a representation of the opposite' which induces a cathexis, as Freud suggested. Crucially, Kane introduces the importance of narrative. The narrative element is crucial to *how* Kane's jokes register social patterns (Palmer, 1994).

Narratives are the keystone to the whole joke material:

comedy *can* express itself visually...but ultimately it is a language art – and there ARE some rules...[T]here is always a build, a cumulative effect that grows and swells toward a satisfying narrative release. (Kane, 2007: 128, emphasis in original)

This is how Kane's comedic sociology works: it establishes a narrative whereby social contradictions lead the audience through humorous realisations of the social order's contradictions, incongruities and injustices. All via the medium of the joke itself. As Palmer (1994: 113) observes, the narrative structure offered in jokes are often 'realist' in genre, where a point 'a' to 'b' is achieved. In the case of Kane, social realism underlines his comic material. This is what I want to call the 'logic of comedic sociology': it offers observational narratives on key concepts

(e.g. class, race, etc.) in order to produce a symbolic narrative upon wider social realities through the guise of incongruous witticisms.

The clown's propositional fallacies

That being the case, Kane is first and foremost a comedian – not a sociologist in disguise, or political campaigner whose medium is comedy (cf. Koziski, 1997: 92). And his comedy is, as stated, a mixture of social observation and silliness – he is a social commentator who is first and foremost a ‘fool’, a social type whose paradoxical status makes him simultaneously venerated and denigrated (Klapp, 1949: 161). This is a problem for a comedy that is sociologically resonant. Is Kane actually a fool and therefore not worth listening to? Or is he playing the fool and really an astute social commentator? Following Mintz (1985), I want to argue that Kane’s use of foolishness in his comic persona is in fact a mediatory device to construct arguments, a special type of argument I am calling ‘propositional fallacies’. Kane combines foolery with foolish discourse in order to provide a narrative means to argue for alternative social-cultural outlooks and understandings.

To begin this claim, Kane’s novel *The humourist* (2012) is a good place to start. In a climactic scene, Kane’s protagonist, a comedy-savant, is forced to accept Woody Allen’s dictum that ‘there is no such thing as substance or material, only pure “ineffable funniness”’ (2012: 252) by a comedy shaman. Additionally, Kane has argued against the motion of ‘does comedy need to have a point?’ on BBC Radio4xtra podcast *What’s so Funny?* Starting unequivocally, he states:

Absolutely not. Not at all. I write shows that have a point but I will cry with laughter at Tim Vine [...] I’m what I call socio bi-lingual. I can speak and write in this mode I’m speaking in now, full of self-insight, but I can also can go home and laugh because my mate’s farted. [...] This is something I want to explore in the novel I’m writing. Some things are just funny. (Kane, 2011b)

The distinction between ineffable funniness and point-laden material rests upon the social practice of ‘comedy’, its performative accomplishment, i.e. how ‘successful’ comedian’s acts are.

What Kane calls ‘ineffable funniness’ is what comedians, as social actors, wish to achieve: they want to make a room laugh. Comedy with a ‘point’ is achieved if and only if the comedian is funny. David Robb’s (2010) study on GDR political ‘clowns’, Wenzel and Mensching, pin-points this distinction. As Wenzel remarks to Robb: ‘The political doesn’t interest me in the first instance as a clown. For me the problem becomes political only after I’ve solved it aesthetically’ (in Robb, 2010: 91). Wenzel’s point is that, for the clown, the aesthetics comes prior to

point proving. As such, Robb (2010: 91) cogently argues, a clown's act, 'while containing a symbolic revolutionary component, should not merely be reduced to political subversion'. Ineffable funniness is such an aesthetic abstraction; it relies not upon an epistemological argument but rather can be seen to arise from the desire for comedic actors to prove their 'funniness'. Ineffable funniness is sought in comedic practice; it is achieved 'on stage'. However, being 'funny' is what allows comedians to formulate their arguments. Being funny pre-figures the logic and organisation of comedic material, that is, 'the point' or argument they are trying to make.

If comedy is merely unserious laughter, then how does Kane's comedy resonate with the serious issues of sociology? The point is that Kane uses the figure of the clown to mask his more explicit, serious claims. The clown, as Bakhtin (1981: 159) observes, has

the right to be 'other' in this world, the right to not make common cause with any single one of the existing categories life makes available...Therefore, they can exploit any position they choose, but only as a mask.

Silliness gives Kane comedic licence to figure sociological arguments in his act – that is, 'propositional fallacies'.

Propositional fallacies have the essential feature of a joke as they rest upon incongruity and produce false conclusions. Kane will employ them as a part of his comedic act by way of identifying a contradiction. For instance, 'who invented the equation of overly posh dining room table and working class household?' when the posh table becomes a nuisance and point of contention due to fear of scratches and breakages (Kane, 2011a). Propositional fallacies are a way into the mode of joking Kane performs; they begin a routine. But with jokes, propositional arguments do not produce valid conclusions which affirm the state of affairs in the world, as with official rituals. Jokes may be conceptualised as what anthropologists call rites, or more specifically anti-rites (Douglas, 1975). Unlike rites which resolve contradictions for the celebration of the social order, anti-rites leave the contradiction open to question the social order – for instance, 'who invented the equation posh table and poor family?'

Typically rites have three phases and we may draw comparisons with certain jokes in this respect. While anthropological theory treats rites as a performative practice, the argument I am making here applies to jokes more conceptually rather than as sourced from ethnographical field research as found in anthropology. Van Gennep's *Rites de passage* (1960) states rites have a three-fold structure: A (separation from social order and accepted reality) to B (liminality, movement into uncharted territory) to C (re-integration into social order and

official reality). Conceptually, jokes, however, are anti-rites (Douglas, 1975: 102). In an anti-rite the jester will move from A to B and then back to A so as to not reintegrate but leave contradictions open. A joke connects symbols of social life where the ‘the kind of connection of pattern A with pattern B...is such that B disparages or supplants A’ (Douglas, 1975: 102) as opposed to official ritual which triumphs existing ideologies. Using the example just given, the pattern is (A) ‘who invented posh table / poor family?’ to (B) the liminal comedic space where the social situation is questioned, i.e. the comedic content, back to (A) again. As such, material is able to be a propositional fallacy by employing what Freud called the ‘tendency to economy’ (or thrift) found in wit. Jokes exemplify ‘the manifold application of the same words in addressing and answering’ (Freud, 1916: 51). A propositional fallacy addresses and answers in the same terms. This tautological operation (of A to B to A) undertaken in observational material on sociological cases is of operative use in critiquing the social world so as to show its inadequacies and limitations.

Jibes on sociological realities use propositional fallacies to critique the existing order. Kane uses this when he critiques what he takes to be negative aspects of social life, a key example being his father’s racism. In a bit concerning recycling, he asks,

Why is it that someone who is right wing and racist, like my Dad is, naturally disbelieves climate change? There is no link whatsoever between hating brown and black people and not being into recycling...If anything you’d think that recycling would appeal to the racist mind: tin in one bag, paper in another bag, cardboard in a separate bag. Everything in its different groups...off to the incinerator. (Kane, 2011a)

Following Quirk (2010: 121) we notice that ‘by building on the easily-accepted premise’ of the racist, Kane’s material seeks to seduce the racist into that which they ‘naturally’ disparage in order to support his conclusions. This works as a propositional fallacy of the type ‘*P* therefore *Q*’:

If you are a racist you like to discriminate ((*P* therefore *Q*))

Recycling discriminates (& *Q*)

Racists like recycling. (- *P*)

Of course, this is fallacious logical reasoning. Its premises are true but conclusion false – it is what philosophers call a ‘modus morons’: it can be written, $[(P \text{ therefore } Q) \ \& \ Q] \models P$ (Teichman and Evans, 1995: 221). This fallacy in the comic routine is thus able to act as a comedic rite. By using the connection of two symbols, racism and recycling, it sociologically translates them into ‘right-

wing person' and 'left-wing person' as well as 'working class, right wing father' and 'embourgeoisied, left wing son', so that B (recycling, left wing son) disparages A (racist, right wing father). In doing so, the propositional fallacy comes to stand for social structure and its contradictions. By way of jest, it celebrates *anti-structure* – *communitas* and separation from the world (Douglas, 1975:103-104), a freedom from its categories by disparaging them through false but ingenious logic.

Smokescreens and castles: The comedic sociology of embourgeoisment

The culmination of Kane's comedic sociology is his historic double award-winning *Smokescreens and castles* (2011a). What I want to demonstrate here is how Kane's comedic sociology, his use of 'self-heckles' (stereotypes, hypostasis and narratives) as well as 'propositional fallacies', all come together in *Smokescreens and castles* as it develops a narrative arc which is able to illuminate wider socio-historical structures in British society. Kane's narrative in *Smokescreens and castles* provides a personal journey: from working-class council estate in Essex to middle-class stand-up comedian. Throughout there is a series of 'hidden injuries' associated with this self-transformation (cf. Friedman, 2014). It is this biographical narrative which provides the space for the critique of the social structure, the joke of 'becoming middle class'.

Kane's narrative, I claim, is a comedic sociology as it resonates with socio-historical transformations in the British class structure, notably embourgeoisment since the 1950s. With the assistance of the sociological classic, *Family and kinship in East London* (Young and Wilmott, 1957), I will demonstrate how *Smokescreens and castles* is a comedic extension to the sociological realities Young and Wilmott elucidate in their interview/ethnography of ex-London Essex council estate residents. While I do not wish to make any unsubstantiated trans-historical claims regarding the content of *Family and kinship* and *Smokescreens and castles*, I am claiming that one may read the two stories in tandem, one sociological research with a conceptual narrative and the other a comedy show with a biographical narrative⁴.

Peter Young and Michael Wilmott's *Family and kinship in East London* (1957) is a study of social change and its sociological narrative is 'about the effect of one of the newest upon one of the oldest of our social institutions. The new is the housing estate...The old institution is the family' (Young and Wilmott, 1957: 11).

4 There is no evidence that Kane has read *Family and Kinship* but he has stated, via personal communication, 'you've intuited most of what I'm up to behind the scenes as it were' (Kane, personal correspondence, 25/01/2013).

Specifically, the impact of the suburban housing estate on the working classes documented through a focus upon residents of Bethnal Green moving to Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. This transformation is where Kane (2008) fits in as *Smokescreens and castles* is about his relationship with his childhood home (the castle) and his father, ‘18 stone of cockney, shaven headed, racist Bethnal Green, Dad’, and *his* growing up in Essex, Leigh-on-Sea.

Family and kinship stands as a sociological document which vividly depicts the experience of post-war ‘embourgeoisment’ in Britain. The working-class, extended family and neighbour relations with strong social ties of community and social capital was exchanged for ‘suburbia’ where houses are dotted around the countryside, neighbours are strangers and there is an absence of extended-kinship. Life in Bethnal Green was traded, Young and Wilmott (1957: 128-129) point out from interviews, for the promise it brought to the children – it was ‘better for the kiddies’ in the form of housing, health benefits and opportunity. Embourgeoisment, symbolically expressed in the move to Greenleigh, bought the Bethnal Green migrants to a comparatively ‘unfriendly’ environment. Whereas Bethnal Green privileged community and open-ended exchanges between families, Essex offered a polite yet ever present hostility between neighbours. It gave rise to a mentality of ‘keeping ourselves to ourselves’ as keeping up with the Joneses crept in: ‘Just because they’ve got a couple of ha’pence more than you they don’t want to know you’, as one Mrs Morrow put it (in Young and Wilmott, 1959: 149).

Kane’s *Smokescreens and castles* is metaphor for this mentality of ‘keeping ourselves to ourselves’ and embourgeoisment producing a ‘being better than others’ hostility. Kane expresses this by taking as his starting point his father building an extension on their council home and installing a swimming pool in the garden: a ‘castle’ of a council house. Kane’s narrative is situated within the sociological transformation documented by Young and Wilmott and how the 1980s Thatcherite, individualistic bourgeois housing policy impacted upon his upbringing. As Kane explains, buying the council house is a metaphor for the personality of his father but also embourgeoisment. After the council house extension was finished, he says, his parents Julie and Dave become ‘Juliet and David overnight’ so as to entrench, via elocution, their movement between classes as described by Young and Wilmott: ‘their [Kane’s parents] accents changing from the broad London accent to the pinched Leigh-on-Sea slightly try-hard Essex accent, which ironically slightly sounds more moronic than the original because the vowels aren’t fixed but the end of the words are making the effort’ (Kane, 2011a). The joke in the social structure is of social mobility being a contradiction in how Britons classify their world (Cannadine, 2000) through speech patterns: open-vowels means working class, closed vowels means upper

class (Fox, 2004: 73-75). Essex embourgeoisment is performed as a mixture of cockney vowels with pinched upper-class ends of words, a dramatisation of the move from Bethnal Green to Essex manifest in the figure of Kane's father. This offers a symbolic commentary upon the social contradiction of embourgeoisment.

Embourgeoisment becomes the joke in the social structure as it follows the propositional fallacy that social mobility therefore means enjoying the lifestyle of the class they economically now occupy, which Young and Wilmott (1957: 161) explicitly note is in fact not the case: with 'the possession of a new house having sharpened the desire for other material goods, the striving becomes a competitive affair. The house is a major part of the explanation'. Young and Wilmott (1957: 156-157) make the observation that the house is, much like Kane's material, a source of promise and frustration:

The house is also a challenge, demanding that their style of life shall accord with the standard it sets...They need carpets for the lounge, lino for the stairs, and mats for the front door. They need curtains. They need another bed. They need a kitchen table. They need new lampshades, pots and pans, grass seed and spades, clothes lines and bath mats, Airwick and Jeyes, mops and pails – all the paraphernalia of modern life for a house two or three times larger and a hundred times grander than the one they left behind...The first essential is money for material possession...A nice house and shabby clothes.

This challenge of embourgeoisment sets the tone for Kane's material on his parents class-transformation, observing this through many aspects on Young and Wilmott's 'paraphernalia of modern life': a mother who desires Glade ('Airwick') air fresheners and an obsessive desire to clean; a father who works tirelessly for a Mahogany dining table, a Mercedes car and because of the demand it makes on his money is expressed emotionally in resentment. 'It broke me!' says Kane impersonating his father's hatred for his Mercedes.

Kane's narrative ends with a climatic routine bringing together the social contradiction of embourgeoisment, the promise of 'better for the kiddies' and the past realities of poverty:

Why work? Because of love and some primal drive for material wealth for the offspring. Brilliant. Then why, as you hand over that plastic-y bit of tat I've been begging for since October..., why do you have to provide that cancerous bit of sadness at the same time, constantly reminding us of how shit it was for you at an equivalent stage? 'Here you go boy, take your toys but remember I rocked back and forth WITH NOTHING and in some way you can't understand, ITS YOUR FAULT!!'...Coming in my room one Christmas...he'd always find me at Christmas, 'the sixth Stella [beer] is in the chamber, time to find the son and give him a tragic image of my childhood'. I'm surrounded by piles and piles of spoilt bastard plastic...I'm in bliss but...I can't stand to think of that little blonde boy in pain, I

hate to think of my Dad, as boy, sad. He came into my room, ‘you got all the toys you want, boy? Good. I’m glad you’re happy’...He went out diagonally and...said: ‘I’m glad you’re happy, boy, but I want you to know one thing...I was seven the first time I tried an egg!’...This was another one of his: ‘The first time I tried a fizzy drink I fucking cried!’ (Kane, 2011a)

The ‘better for the kiddies’ ethos mixed with the pragmatic strain on income of embourgeoisment is jokingly expressed in the private experience of a Christmas memory. The biography of Kane is steeped in the transformation of British society: gifts are tarnished with the brush of the sociological change, of a class on the move both geographically and symbolically. Kane’s depiction of his parent’s embourgeoisment becomes anthropomorphic, expressed in voice, material possessions and emotional guilt. One also notices the propositional fallacies at work: ‘if you experience embourgeoisment for the good of the children, the children will be better off and happy’. Kane goes to prove this to be the opposite as his emotional guilt is expressed in sociological guise of ‘alternation’ – competing systems of meaning (Berger, 1963). It is a rite which connects generations of ‘working class father’ with ‘bourgeois son’ so as to disparage the sociological realities of a presumed merit to class mobility (cf. Friedman, 2014). It is as much a critique of classed society as it is a critique of localised child-parent relations.

Conclusion

The value of Kane’s material is that it resonates with the audience in laughter as one recognises themselves within it or allows people insights into experience of a social world they are not part of. Yet we must remember that jokes have the capacity to express the contradictions and inadequacies of the social structure but not to change them. Joking resolves none of the contradictions with which the material is a symbolic commentary upon. Jokes instead leave contradictions purely at the level of the imagination. Kane offers no solution in practical terms, only stories whose comedic value allows the imaginative possibility, within himself and audience, to appreciate ‘life doesn’t have to be like this’. Friedman’s (2014: 364) recent call for a sociology of mobility attentive to the ‘psychic and emotional life of the individual’, specifically ‘how social space travel (upward, downward and horizontal) may disrupt the coherency of the self’ uses Kane as the case in point for such research. But notably Kane’s last words are ‘I want the big ideas to adumbrate the comedy without me saying, “Here’s my thesis – laughter optional”’ (Kane, in Friedman, 2014: 365).

Comedic sociology uses humour to bear out social contradictions, the example in this article being social class and mobility. But the interpretive model outlined

may apply to all areas of society and social life: workplaces and organisations, gender roles, occupational identity, race and ethnicity, age and aging to name a few. As such, the point I want to stress in conclusion is that comedic sociology's laughter, its figuration in astute observations upon social life, is neither to promote change nor to endorse the status quo. Rather the place of the comic is in the 'self-heckles' which this article has spelled out, from observation upon oneself to the social world we live in and the narratives which draw them together. The value of comedic sociology is that by identifying the arbitrary nature of the social, the insights it may make upon social life provides appreciation of the diversity of subject positions. The insights it may provide people on the 'life of others' and the 'life of yourself' are delivered at the level of incongruity, giving the audience an invitation to re-imagine the *doxa* of everyday life (if they wish).

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the author

Daniel Smith is Lecturer in Sociology at Anglia Ruskin University (Cambridge, UK). He has written on social class, British identity, value and celebrity and is currently completing a book entitled *Elites, race and nationhood: The branded gentry* (Palgrave MacMillan).

Email: daniel.smith@anglia.ac.uk