

The Parodic/Sincere Political Satire of Loyalists Against Democracy (LAD) and its Digital Remixing of Northern Ireland

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This article results from anthropological research on the anonymous online profile Loyalists Against Democracy (LAD), which has been a social media hit in Northern Ireland since the flag protests at the end of 2012. The online engagement and content circulation that characterises LAD's operation, and the ambivalences that constitute its political satire, are analysed here. As part of its intervention, LAD has constantly reworked digital texts, shared by its followers or mined on the web as a whole, into narratives related to the Northern Irish conflictive context. This article will deal with these remixes. Understood here as a peculiar form of politics, LAD demonstrates how the region's traditional conflict can develop new features and variants, and how social media has been a space for the making of contemporary Northern Ireland.

Introduction

Social media in Northern Ireland has been a setting where different narratives about the region and its conflict have been expressed, negotiated and confronted. The period of the so-called loyalist/unionist flag protests offers an example of such interactions. When Belfast City Council voted in December 2012 that the British flag would no longer fly at City Hall during the whole year, but only on 18 designated days, social media was a platform to coordinate the demonstrations against the decision and to express discontentment with the disruption caused by these protests. These platforms

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hosted sectarian exchanges between Catholic nationalists/republicans and Protestant loyalists/unionists (Nolan *et al.* 2014: 70), as well as productive debate about unsolved topics of the peace process (Reilly 2013). The episode signals the increasing relevance of websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for observing and engaging with Northern Ireland.

In the present article, the anthropological analysis of the political satire of the social media profile Loyalists Against Democracy (LAD) will allow an insight into some of this activity. LAD has been an internet phenomenon in Northern Ireland. It was launched on Facebook in December 2012 during the flag protests. The profile assumed a loyalist/unionist persona and posted parodic protest messages, making fun of the demonstrations. The parody spread, and LAD has not stopped since then. The profile, still anonymous, has incorporated new administrators and diversified its content. In May 2015, it had 15,000 followers on Twitter and 26,000 likes on Facebook. LAD does not generate income for the people involved, and its operation reveals a skilful use of accessible digital tools. The profile has loyalist/unionist protesters as its main target. It has criticised sectarian polarisation, attracting supporters and contributors. At the same time, it has been accused on social media of raising tensions further in the region and stereotyping loyalism/unionism.

In order to discuss LAD's polemic satire, this article will first characterise the social media engagement in which the profile participates, since it builds its intervention from these exchanges. On social media, where content production and circulation are tightly interconnected (Fattal 2014), one's impact depends not only on authorial impulse, but crucially on the active influence of other users, that is, their retweets, shares, comments, memes. This online participatory circulation has been intensively discussed in the field of media studies (see for example Shifman 2014, 2011; Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013; Burgess and Green 2009). Anthropology has recently begun to make a contribution to the understanding of these interactions. The works of anthropologists Alex Fattal (2014) and John Postill (2014, 2012) will be important references here for dealing with LAD's intervention in Northern Ireland. Both assess social media circulation in relation to specific political contexts.

At the same time as anthropology has increased its attention to the politics of online engagement, it has also harboured a growing number of recent works on humour (Bernal 2013: 300), especially on satire as a form of political action and mediation (Boyer 2013: 277). Boyer's contribution to this scholarship will be key in the assessment of LAD's content. His formulation about a "constitutive ambiguity" (2013: 280) between parody and sincerity in some forms of contemporary political satire is a crucial tool to use in addressing the profile. This ambivalence is manifested in the profile's piece in varied ways. This article will also discuss how LAD, within its online engagement and in this parodic/sincere dynamics, has produced narratives in relation to Northern Ireland, processing digital material available on the internet and recirculating the results on social media. The analysis will show how this remixing takes place.

Entrepreneurship towards engagement

The flexibility and ubiquity of the internet have allowed an intense and potentially expansive circulation of different kinds of content among social media users and the possible transformation of this material in the process. This engagement involves the widespread and constant reworking of references and digital texts by users and the redisplay of them in derivative compositions and formats (Shifman 2011: 188). Accomplishment on social media has been linked to the relationships that one is able to build and sustain in this web. It has been related to the reach – the spreading – that a post can attain through the constant interaction and reconfiguration of content among users. The engagers, therefore, have a crucial role in the repercussion of a fellow user. Burgess and Green state, for instance, that successful vloggers, apart from their video skills, need to have a "grounded knowledge of and effective participation within YouTube's communicative ecology" (2009: 104).

In Fattal's view, anthropological research can be crucial to reveal the political charge of these social media exchanges "within a given context" (2014: 321). The author bases this point on his study on the "recombinatory circulation" of YouTube videos about the Colombian conflict (320). He defines recombinatory circulation as the interactive reconfiguration of these videos with a political purpose as part of their

circulation among users. According to him, “[o]nline, the Colombian conflict plays out through likes, favorites, shares, comments and reedited videos” (320). Online remixing, for Fattal, is a locus of politics (321). Another author who has adopted an ethnographic approach to deal with the politics of online circulation is Postill (2014, 2012). For him, anthropologists should borrow the expertise of media studies (2012: 178), but at the same time apply a field-grounded “ethnographic eye for technopolitical detail” (2014: 56), tracking new forms of digital political life when observing specific processes (2012: 165, 178). Postill shows, for example, how the Spanish *indignados* turned social media into “viral media” during their protests (2014: 55), enlarging mobilisation through specific practices of social media engagement (2014: 51-69).

In my research, I attempted to follow this anthropological path, pursuing the “technopolitical details” (Postill 2014: 56) of LAD in Northern Ireland. I applied Postill’s “media epidemiographic” approach – the term comes from the combination of epidemiology and ethnography – which aims to track and reconstruct online trajectories (2014: 55). If Postill emphasises the pursuing of viral content, my investigation focused on a user, LAD, its interactions, and the resultant digital output. I implemented my online research mostly on Twitter, but my tracking there took me to other websites as well, such as Facebook and YouTube. In addition, I conducted separate semi-structured interviews with 12 followers of LAD and with the creator of the profile. I also observed in loco two events, the Rally Against Racism (May 2014) and the Twelfth parade (July 2014) in Belfast, with a concomitant accompaniment of the related social media traffic through a smartphone, in order to experience how this online engagement can connect to the offline.

The tracking of LAD revealed a permanent initiative by the profile to acknowledge and embrace its followers’ contributions and reactions, and as a result, to increase its repercussion on social media and in Northern Ireland. This entrepreneurship towards engagement, as I call it, relinquishes strict control of conversations in order to enlarge influence on social media. LAD is in itself an engagement. The first parodic messages posted by a single individual during the flag protests spread quickly. The profile

gained followers and started receiving contributions. The creator of LAD invited collaborators to form an administrative group for the profile. The group, which has changed members since then, keeps in touch and coordinates the work through a chat page on Facebook. Each administrator has a relative degree of autonomy in the task. Users' feedback and contributions (tips, ideas and digital material) have continued, feeding content and circulation.

The Northern Ireland conflict and politics and their daily developments have been a drive for this engagement. I interviewed, for instance, a LAD follower/contributor who showed me, on her/his iPad, a collection of political memes about the region, as well as photos she/he had sent to LAD as ideas and raw material for photomontages to be posted online. In another example, with the intention to build rapport with the profile's administrators, I myself sent them by email an online news piece about a Ukrainian satirical party that was launching Darth Vader for president of the country. The link was immediately reworked to tease a unionist politician and reposted on social media. The two cases illustrate how the satirical output of LAD is preceded by, and reflects, online everyday political interactions that are not always visible in its content. In a conflictive context, the conversations around the profile can involve angry exchanges. "Even people who really hate us follow us", William H. Smyth², the creator of the profile, told me during an interview³. Retaliations are a possibility. In 2013, LAD's Facebook page went down automatically successive times, allegedly because loyalist/unionist users reported it *en masse*. The page would be definitively restored later. The episode was reported by local media outlets in Northern Ireland (see McKernon 2013:11 and Ó Néill 2013).

The flexibility of LAD's operation to take on board users with different motivations and perspectives, including in its administrative group, to process varied contributions, to respond to supportive and hostile interaction, has defined its entrepreneurship towards engagement. The profile has showed a constant state of alertness to engage in the best way and with the best timing with a given circumstance or communication in

² William H. Smyth is the pseudonym used by the creator of LAD.

³ The interview was conducted on 1 August 2014.

order to provoke their followers' reactions and optimise circulation. LAD's regime is not an improvised one, but it has improvisation as a resource and unpredictability as a component. Burgess and Green (2009: 104) are correct in stating that online success is very much a consequence of one's understanding and participation in the medium. However, such comprehension comes from the interaction itself. The engagement is built live.

In the next two sections, the focus will be the object of this engagement: LAD's content. Boyer's (2013) idea of a constitutive ambiguity between parody and sincerity in some forms of contemporary political satire will guide the analysis. Pieces produced by LAD will be examined in relation to this parodic/sincere ambivalence, and the assessment will make clear how the profile has combined references and digital texts, directly related to Northern Ireland or not, in satirising the region's politics. The example above of my accidental contribution, when the profile reworked a news piece about Ukraine to address the Northern Irish context, has already indicated how these remixes emerge from LAD's interactions and are processed in its content.

Constitutive ambiguity

Boyer (2013) develops his notion about a constitutive ambiguity between parody and sincerity in some forms of political satire from his analysis of the Icelandic Best Party. The party won the mayoral election in Reykjavic in 2010, one year after being created by a group of artists to mock and challenge the political status quo, amid the economic crisis in the country. At the same time that the group made statements in favour of cancelling Iceland's debts, it refused to ally with anyone that had not watched all seasons of the TV series *The Wire* (*Ibid*, 278-279). The party, Boyer (*Ibid*, 281) says, has showed an "affective disposition" and a "playfulness" that contrast with conventional politics. For Boyer (*Ibid*, 276-277), some current modes of satire have gone beyond ironic commentary and performatively invaded the sphere of "normal politics". He asks: is the Best Party a sincere and genuine intervention in the Icelandic political sphere, or some kind of joke about it? (*Ibid*, 277). For its participants, the party is both, he argues. They have been refusing to choose between being either parodic or sincere, and this ambiguity defines the initiative (*Ibid*, 279-280). According

to Boyer (*Ibid*, 280), it is not “that sincere politics was hidden inside a satirical shell”, but rather that the “mode of political performance simply denied a categorical distinction between satire and sincerity”.

Boyer points out that the Best Party and satirical TV shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* can be compared to *stiob*, a parody technique in late socialist regimes. It consists in performing an over-identification with the dominant discourse, that is, mimicking the predictable rhetoric, “squatting” it (*Ibid*, 283), to the point that it becomes difficult to perceive if a manifestation is supportive or ironic (*Ibid*, 282-283; Boyer and Yurchak 2010: 181, 191, 211). In the West, *stiob*-like satire could be considered a reaction, a disruption, to the over-formalisation of liberal discourse, the increasing political concern with image rather than substance, the gap between promises and actions, and the abundance of similar news coverage (Boyer 2013: 276-283; Boyer and Yurchak 2010: 181-184). With regard to a polarised context, such as the one in Northern Ireland, where ethnic and political disputes and alignments keep emerging and repeating themselves in daily life, parody, and the original perspective it offers, can create a critical distance from the embedded dichotomy, a “space of reflexivity” that may allow new understandings and responses to it (Bernal 2013: 307).

The section below will show that on some occasions LAD has had this disruptive effect in Northern Ireland. Concomitantly, it will argue that the profile’s humour can be seen through the parodic/sincere ambiguity discussed by Boyer (2013). The question that the author asks about the Icelandic Best Party – is it a consequent and sincere intervention in the region’s politics, or a case of parody? – could be repeated in relation to LAD, achieving the same answer. It is both of these things. However, being a different phenomenon in a different context, the profile will manifest this constitutive tension in distinct ways. The analysis of LAD’s content will assess some of these manifestations. In addition, it will deal with the profile’s satirical digital remixing and illustrate how it can be considered, following Fattal (2014), a locus of politics.

The parodic/sincere satire and its remixing

The starting point for the assessment of LAD's content is controversial material, which has, nevertheless, been popular among the profile's followers: the reposting of sectarian messages of loyalist/unionist users. This has been a significant component of LAD's intervention related to loyalism/unionism. Administrators and contributors to the profile have mined Facebook, sometimes using fake identities, in search of extremist posts. The profile then republishes the comments in its platforms, usually presenting them with an ironic remark. In this way, LAD makes the extremist posts available for criticism and/or ridicule by its followers. The profile has argued that its intention has been to expose sectarianism. The tactic has divided opinions and angered the targeted users. The reposting is a process in which LAD collects sincere pieces of others and reworks them into parody. It can be seen as a manifestation of the ambivalence described by Boyer (2013). It could be argued that the constitutive ambiguity also opens the critical space referred by Bernal (2013), in which new perceptions of the conflictive routine are forged. The targeting of sectarianism here consists in making it potentially laughable. The satirical reposting gives visibility to day-to-day extremism that, otherwise, might have gone unnoticed in polarised Northern Ireland.

Another kind of LAD content related to loyalism/unionism was its initial jokes, mentioned above, when the profile assumed the persona of a flag protester and posted parodic angry statements on Facebook. A notorious example urged loyalists to only fly with British Airways and avoid the Irish company Aer Lingus (Figure 1). The post reproduced sectarian expressions and perceived shortcomings in the use of the English language. Some social media users who I interviewed during my research did think, at the time, that LAD was a true loyalist protest group, before realising its satirical intentions. The profile's "squatting" (Boyer 2013: 283) of the protesters' discourse made them, and probably other people, believe that the parody was sincere. The ambiguous intervention was a distraction in the disputes about the flag that were prominent on social media at that period. Following Bernal (2013), the practice provoked users to momentarily, at least, distance themselves from the pattern of exchanges and readjust their perspectives to decipher those posts.

Figure 1

Source: Facebook

LAD has also constantly processed Northern Irish current affairs and hacked the news format with a satirical eye in its content. During the Queen’s trip to Northern Ireland in 2014, LAD circulated a photomontage and a video, both simulating a visit by the monarch to the Twaddell camp, set up as a loyalist/unionist demonstration against a parade restriction in North Belfast. The protest camp has been a target of the profile’s irony. In the photomontage posted on Twitter, the Queen was photoshopped into an image of the camp, under the headline: “EXCLUSIVE: Queen at Camp Twaddell” (Figure 2). In the video, old images of the Queen were accompanied by a sober voiceover which, in referring to the fictitious visit, provides a sarcastic description of the camp. In both pieces, two different current affairs news items, the Queen’s visit and the protest camp, were combined, transforming but maintaining a sense of the “real”. The fusion of current affairs topics and the employment of journalistic language gave a coherence to the satirical materials that simulates sincerity, at the same time that the parody tends to be evident. The remixing of the images and references to the Queen and Twaddell were crucial to achieve this effect.

Figure 2



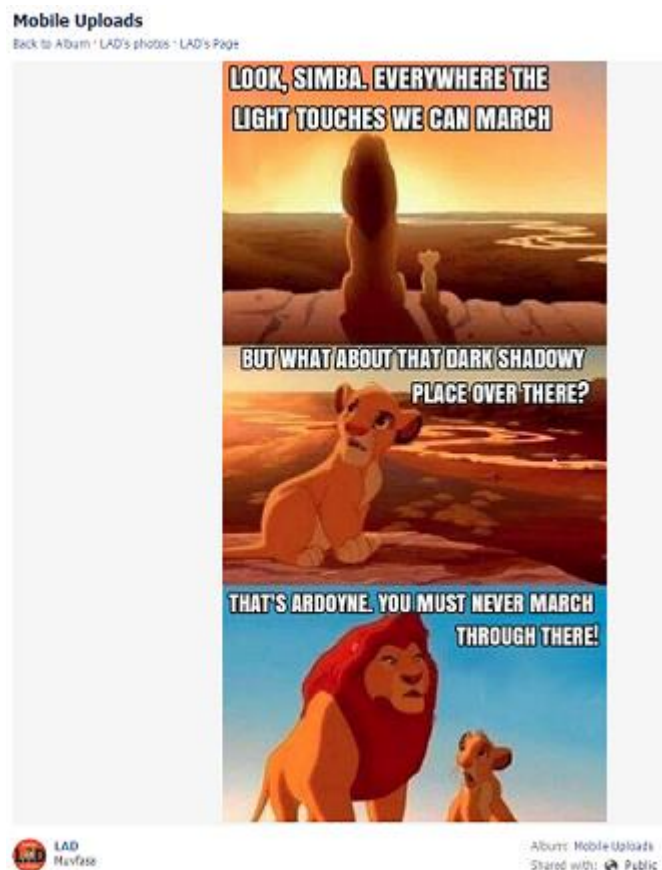
Source: Twitter

In processing Northern Ireland's current affairs, LAD has also used external references, recycling content available on the internet. In the manoeuvre, the profile negotiates the meanings of these texts to apply them to specific circumstances in the region. LAD transplanted, for instance, characters such as the Lion King and Willy Wonka to address the 2014 marching season (Figures 3 and 4). That specific photo of Gene Wilder's Wonka has been remixed in various other memes, adapted to different circumstances and goals (Figures 5 and 6). This illustrates the potential "transportability, or detachability" (Spiltunik, 1997: 181) of digital texts, how their meanings can be transformed in their circulation across contexts.⁴ Another of these

⁴ In 1997, before the social media era, Spiltunik already emphasised the mobility of "media fragments" through various social contexts (1997: 181). She analysed then how audiences in Zambia actively transformed the meanings of radio expressions in employing them in distinct situations. For her, "nothing begins from zero"; media communications are preceded by numerous other dialogues and texts (*Ibid*, 161). In her fieldwork and in contemporary web 2.0, the availability of content stimulates circulation (*Ibid*, 162).

recombinations executed by LAD is the musical video “We Didn’t Start the Riot”. The song is a parody of Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire” (1989) and directly targets the loyalist/unionist riots connected to a parade restriction in 2013 in North Belfast. However, the piece goes beyond this event, mentioning a number of references about the Northern Ireland conflict, politics and contemporary affairs. Joel’s original lyrics are structured as a list of personalities and events that made history from 1949, when he was born, to 1989. While he sings Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Marilyn Monroe, LAD sings Willy Frazer, Gerry Kelly, Nolan Show, Game of Thrones. The lyrics’ pattern allowed the profile to make a collage of images, reinforcing the effect of synthesis that the text transmits. This remix of NI by LAD is its most popular video on YouTube, with 55,000 views in May 2015.

Figure 3



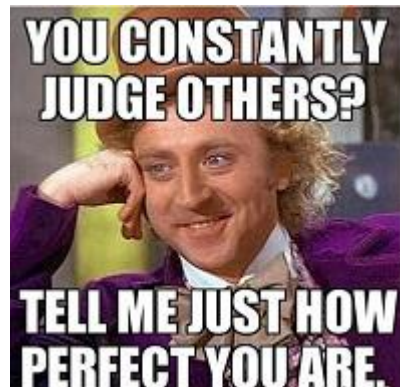
Source: Twitter

Figure 4



Source: Twitter

Figure 5



Source: funtumblr.com

Figure 6



Source: memecrunch.com

Amid ironic remixes, the satirical profile has also been a vehicle for sincere messages. LAD has been championing equality policies (gay marriage in particular) in Northern Ireland, combating racism and government inefficiency, varying from sarcasm to sincere advocacy in this process. In 2014, during my research, the so-called ‘Pastorgate’ was an occasion in which the profile intensely combined these satirical and sincere approaches. Pastorgate was the result of the comments made against Islam by the pastor James McConnell during a sermon, and the support given to him by the first minister Peter Robinson. The first minister said, in an interview to the *Irish News*, that he would not trust Muslims for spiritual guidance, but would “trust them to go down the shops” (quoted in Manley 2014: 1). LAD broke the story about the sermon, publishing an excerpt of the speech on its YouTube channel. After the first minister’s intervention, LAD was one of the main protest voices on social media. The profile posted its traditional photo-remixes and jokes, but also indignant and sincere messages (Figures 7 and 8). The online mobilisation led to the Rally Against Racism at City Hall on 31 May (BBC News Online 2014), and Peter Robinson had to apologise three days later (McDonald 2014).

Figure 7



Source: Twitter

Figure 8

Source: Twitter

The discussion here has covered some ways in which the constitutive ambiguity between parody and sincerity (Boyer 2013) are manifested in LAD's content. The analysis has also shown that in polarised contexts, such as Northern Ireland's, the ambivalent satire and its representations have the potential to provoke distinct perceptions and reactions to the conflictive routine (Bernal 2013: 307). The reposting of sectarian messages by LAD, the making of sincere pieces into comedy, was discussed in relation to this point. The reposting was also a manifestation of the parodic/sincere dynamics described by Boyer (2013), as LAD's squatting of protesters' discourse in parodic posts, its remixing of current affairs and satirical simulation of sincerity, and the combination of external references to play with topics in the region's spotlight. In addition, the profile has adopted a genuine sincere voice, despite being a parodic profile. These manifestations signal that LAD has been building a political performance that, beyond ironic commentary, has inhabited the practice of politics in Northern Ireland, grouping itself with the contemporary forms of political satire discussed by Boyer (2013). In the case of Pastorgate, for example, in

performing the traditional journalistic role of breaking the story and contributing to the online mobilisation that led to the rally, it could be argued that the profile's satire invaded the sphere of "normal politics" (Boyer 2013: 276) in concrete terms, pushing it decisively towards the final outcome.

In parallel, the analysis showed how varied the pieces circulated by LAD are, and the extent to which references related to Northern Ireland can be exchanged in the profile's social media engagement and reconfigured in its content circulation. Loyalist/unionist protests, Facebook posts, news pieces, the Queen, the US President, parades, pop songs, and film characters were shared on social media, picked from the news, collected from the web as a whole, and reworked through accessible digital tools into content related to contemporary Northern Ireland. The political targeting and impact of these digital remixes were indicated in the description above. The case of LAD corroborates Fattal's (2014) point that such recombinations are a locus of politics. Like the Colombian conflict assessed by Fattal, the content of LAD discussed here evidences how Northern Ireland's disputes are played out through the procedures of social media circulation and online recombinatory practices.

Conclusion

LAD is a case that can bring together two emergent anthropological scholarships. One is about digital politics and has Postill (2008, 2011, 2012, 2014) and Fattal (2014) as contributors. The other deals with political humour and is exemplified by the works of Boyer (2013) and Bernal (2013). The analysis of the profile has the potential to integrate both Postill's (2012: 178; 2014: 56) and Boyer's (2013: 285) calls for ethnographic studies that address the phenomena discussed by them. Boyer (2013: 277) warns that the Icelandic Best Party leaves a lesson for political anthropology. Researchers should pay attention to emergent and still indefinable forms of political action and belonging that capitalise on the predictability of contemporary politics:

For one thing, these new experiments may not seek to develop political ideologies and movements in the traditional sense. For another (...), it seems precisely the point that whatever comes next need not be

recognizable in terms of categories drawn from the major political movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. (Boyer 2013: 285).

This article argues that the case of LAD gives further weight to Boyer's reflection. The digital politics of the profile, characterised by an effective entrepreneurship towards social media engagement and spreading, and a parodic/sincere ambivalent satire, has constituted a peculiar form of intervention in Northern Ireland. It is difficult to strictly fit the profile into a conventional political category. LAD combines entertainment and advocacy; exercises political correctness towards some issues, but not others; divides opinions to the same extent that it puzzles them.

As part of its online exchanges, LAD has reconfigured a number of references, whether directly related to Northern Ireland or not. As seen above, these recombinations play a crucial role for the parodic/sincere ambivalence of the profile's satirical content. In processing these digital fragments and transforming them into specific narratives about the region, LAD is a case that permits the anthropological grounding of these online exchanges and remixes, their "political charge" and effects, "within a given context" (Fattal 2014: 321). The profile is indicative of how the Northern Ireland conflict, despite being informed by history, is in permanent negotiation and change. LAD has demonstrated how social media has been an environment for the making of contemporary Northern Ireland.

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