Basil Fawlty as a 'pre-Thatcherite' conservative in *Fawlty Towers*

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Abstract

The article analyses the popular British situation comedy *Fawlty Towers* (1975, 1979) as a comedic representation of conservatism and its lead character, Basil Fawlty (played by John Cleese), as a 'pre-Thatcherite'. The article discusses how the character of Fawlty can help us understand the processes that led to Margaret Thatcher winning the election in 1979 and becoming prime minister. Fawlty promotes similar values to Thatcher, but with ambiguity as the series is a comedy; comedy makes interpretation of ideological issues problematic as it is an alternative meaning-making system to non-comedic forms.

Keywords

Thatcherism, conservatism, declinism, 1970s Britain, situation comedy, *Fawlty Towers*

Introduction

The now-classic situation comedy, *Fawlty Towers* (1975, 1979) was created by John Cleese, the English comedian who had left Monty Python in 1973, and actress Connie Booth, his American wife. The programme was first aired in 1975 and was not a success initially, quite the contrary: in fact, only the ratings of the reruns encouraged the BBC to commission a second series, which was broadcast in 1979. Because of the show's now remarkable popularity, the BBC offered the chance to make a third series, but Cleese in particular felt that there was no new material to be extracted from the concept ('2009 Extended Interviews': 2009).[1]

The central character of *Fawlty Towers* is Basil Fawlty (Cleese), a rude and catastrophe-prone owner/manager of a fictional but real-life inspired (owned by a man called Donald Sinclair, 1909–1981) hotel in Torquay, England ('2009 Extended Interviews': 2009). There are three other main characters: Sybil Fawlty (Prunella Scales), Basil's wife who helps in running the hotel, being far more competent at it than her husband; Chambermaid Polly (Booth), a good-willed voice of reason who constantly finds herself desperately trying to solve problems caused by her employer; and Manuel (Andrew Sachs), a slow-witted Spanish waiter who bumbles around, often being on the receiving end of the show's slapstick comedy.

As Mills highlights, sitcom characters are based on comedic functions and thus are stereotypes at least to an extent. However, it is crucial to understand that stereotyping works both ways: on the one hand, stereotypes in sitcoms must come across as recognizable, no matter how fictional they are intended to be, and on the other, stereotypes of fiction will affect conceptions of social groups outside the media (Mills 2005: 104). For Palmer (1988: 106–07), British sitcom characters do not refer to a 'universal' feature of the 'British character' but, instead, to a 'social type'. In the case of Fawlty, it is above all a middle-class conservative who comes across as a bit too snobbish in the context of the shortcomings apparent in his character and professionalism. However, he is also an ambivalent character in the sense that while his values and morals are constantly ridiculed, he is also, as I argue, a potential object of identification beyond people who share his values.

The article[2] understands Basil Fawlty as a ‘pre-Thatcherite’ conservative and its objective is to analyse the character in order to understand the process that resulted in Thatcher winning the election in 1979 and becoming prime minister. As will be discussed below, there can be little doubt that Basil Fawlty would have, eventually, voted for Thatcher in 1979. The character’s values and attitudes are analysed in those contexts important for 1970s Britain, and in relation to the ideas and mentalities expressed by Thatcher on the same issues. Fawlty is clearly a conservative who is not happy with social and political developments in society. In 1978, Conservatives had reached the conclusion that people were tired of change and new models that do not work. This led to Thatcher’s political programme in the late 1970s being arguably based more on what it opposed than promoted (Saunders 2012: 27–28, 40). Fawlty’s discourse compliments this, as he is mostly complaining about social and political change. It is important that they were historical contemporaries – there is even the amusing coincidence that the first series of *Fawlty Towers* was broadcast the same year that Thatcher became the opposition leader and the second the same year she became prime minister. However, it is crucial to highlight the point that no direct parallel is established between Fawlty and Thatcher. My argument is that Fawlty articulates much of the same issues, values and ideas as Thatcher, and as such, he can be understood as a ‘pre-Thatcherite’.

Conservatism and Thatcherism

Two concepts must be defined in order to explain the article’s perspective. First, by conservatism I refer to its general, dictionary meaning, rather than in any specific ideological meaning. As *Oxford English Dictionary* has it, conservatism is a ‘tendency to resist great or sudden change’ and ‘adherence to traditional values and principles’ (http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39567?redirectedFrom=conservatism&). Fawlty matches this perfectly, as will be discussed below. A second entry in *Oxford English Dictionary* links conservatism to conservative parties, in Britain, to the Tories (http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39567?redirectedFrom=conservatism&). This is, of course, logical, but even if Fawlty is most likely a loyal Tory-voter – he is a hotel owner and an employer – it is notable this is not articulated in the series, as will be discussed below.

Thatcherism is understood here as a relatively open-ended term referring to Thatcher and her politics for at least two reasons. First, the article focuses on a period that predates 'Thatcherism', the period during which Thatcher was in power. For example, in their overview of Thatcher's career, Jackson and Saunders use (2012) the term the first time in relation to Thatcher's second term (1983–1987). Many voters in 1979 were angry at Britain's competitive decline, and eager for a fresh start, but as Sandbrook writes (2012: 802–05), 'Britain was a long way from being a Thatcherite nation in 1979'. Yet, it is clear that Thatcherism emerged as a political project from the political and social situation of 1970s Britain (Jackson and Saunders 2012: 7, 17, *passim*).[3] In this article, I see Fawlty as the kind of person that made that project possible.

Second, the term Thatcherism is multifaceted and, importantly, a subject to historical change. In fact, according to Black, the original impact of Thatcher is difficult to comprehend in retrospect as Thatcher's later reputation influences it so heavily (2004: 140–41). In an ideological and political sense, Thatcherism is largely a retrospective term and one that is made more ambiguous by the fact that it was adopted and used mainly by Thatcher's opponents (Jackson and Saunders 2012). This is related to McSmith's point that Thatcher never really put together her political ideas in such a way that we could define Thatcherism from her own writings. In addition, Thatcher emphasized that she often acted on instinct – a claim with which McSmith agrees (2010: 18–19). For conservative politician and journalist Nigel Lawson, Thatcherism's definition would have to include support of a free market economy, economic discipline, strict control of public expenditure, tax cuts, nationalism, ‘Victorian values’,[4] privatization and a pinch of populism (cit. McSmith 2010: 18–19). While Fawlty does not comment upon, for example, tax policy or privatization, he is arguably quite close to that set of ideas and values.

Fittingly, then, author John Connor wrote in *The Guardian* in October 1989 that Margaret Thatcher could have been a Monty Python invention (cit. Wagg 1992: 279). Wagg interprets this as Connor meaning that Thatcher represented the ‘narrow-minded, *petit bourgeois* English bigot that Python had been trying to subvert’ but that for him, Wagg, ‘Python and the other “satirists” also helped to invent what became known as Thatcher*ism*’ (1992: 279, original emphasis). This is clearly related to the notion that Thatcherism was ‘invented’ from the outside, by Thatcher’s political opponents, as noted above.

Finally, it should be quite clear by now that Thatcherism is a multifaceted, complicated term. I share Jackson and Saunders’ view (2012: 5–14, 17–19) according to which Thatcherism is better understood by analysing its discourses than as a tool that is used to explain Thatcher’s political actions. This is how Thatcherism is understood in this article – as discourses, but not primarily as Thatcher’s discourses but as the discourses of Basil Fawlty. The method of this article is to analyse Fawlty’s discourses on society and politics and understand them in the context of 1970s Britain, and Thatcher’s rise to power.

***Fawlty Towers*, class and the politics of sitcom**

Even when the aim is to reach serious – non-comedic – conclusions, it is crucial to understand and remember that *Fawlty Towers* is a comedy. This is important for at least two reasons. First, there is much humour in fiction outside comedy, but unlike in much humour, in comedy the comedic is the dominant level of meaning. As Mulkay argues (1988: 217–19), when humour is used to convey a serious message, humour is subordinate to the serious message. In contrast, comedy is a genre in which comedy is the primary content and the non-comedic is the secondary (see King 2002: 3–5; Stott 2005: 9) – comedy is 'comedy-in-intention', as Palmer writes (1987: 21–23). This applies to *Fawlty Towers*, which is, beyond doubt, a comedy show. This means that the social and political commentary made in the series is always comedy, but secondary – non-comedic –meanings can be deduced from the comedy. The notion that comedy always primarily refers to itself and secondarily to non-comedic realms makes its meaning-making processes unique.

This aspect is evident in *Fawlty Towers* from the first episode on. In the episode 'A Touch of Class', first broadcast in September 1975, a confidence trickster who poses as 'Lord Melbury' gains Fawlty's trust by posing as a lord. This happens, by coincidence, right after Fawlty has decided that the hotel needs a better class of customer than they are currently receiving. Sybil accuses her husband of making this far too obvious, blaming him for 'spitting venom' at unwanted customers and toadying others, namely, upper-middle class people. As Palmer points out, 'Melbury' immediately recognizes these characteristics of Fawlty's personality and exploits them (1987: 115–17). After finally accepting that he has been fooled because of his idea of the (class) society clouding his judgement, he attacks the 'Lord' by breaking all social codes involved: Fawlty unashamedly corrects him that he is not 'Fawlty' but 'Mr Fawlty' to the Lord, and addresses the man as 'mate'. The man is stunned until Fawlty reveals that he knows the truth. Fawlty calls the man a 'bastard' and even kicks him when he is down; such is his anger at the man.

This showdown is witnessed by an increasingly shocked-looking elderly couple. They introduce themselves as Sir Richard and Lady Morris, the aristocrats Fawlty has never met but who have written beforehand that they will be staying at the hotel. The couple inform him that they are leaving as they cannot possibly stay in such a place. Fawlty begs them to stay but to no avail. He shakes his fist and yells after their departing car, ‘You snobs! You stupid, stuck-up, toffee-nosed, half-witted upper-class piles of […] pus!’. The diegetic comedic situation is based on the fact that the Morrises do not know ‘Melbury’ is not a real aristocrat and that is why they leave. Fawlty, in turn, does not appear to realize he has offended Sir Richard and his wife by abusing a representative of the upper classes and kicking him about. However, the middle-class Fawlty – a fictional comedy character in a BBC comedy – gets to say what he really thinks about the upper classes. It is very much possible that the contemporary audiences realized this and that this was the actual source of pleasure, not the diegetic misunderstandings committed by both Morrises and Fawlty. Thus, arguably the scene works more on the secondary, non-comedic level of comedy.

However, it must be considered how serious that non-comedic level here really is. According to Mulkay, employing sitcom for a serious critical political message leads to the message being weakened, if not swamped, by the comedic intention (1988: 5). In addition to this, Mills argues that the centrality of sitcom in popular comedy, both in comedy as such and in studies made of it, has led to a situation in which the political element of comedy is not always taken seriously – the immediacy of sitcom’s humorous intent may actually have the effect that its aim at saying something serious is not even considered properly (Mills 2001: 7–8, 61–62). I agree with Mulkay and Mills, and the conclusion is that the comedic level should never be ignored when analysing the non-comedic level of comedy, including sitcom, and here specifically *Fawlty Towers* and Basil Fawlty’s ideas of society.

As will be discussed below, *Fawlty Towers* avoids direct political commentary, but it is interesting for this article's topic that Thatcher is mentioned, as the only contemporary politician, in the series, though only once: a young, virile working-class man jokes that among the world's shortest books are 'What's on in Torquay', 'Great English Lovers' and 'The Wit of Margaret Thatcher' ('The Psychiatrist', February 1979). Fawlty is the only person present who does not laugh. There are several reasons for this. First, the young man insults Fawlty's home town, which Fawlty proudly calls 'the English Riviera'. Second, the man is dressed highly informally and wears striking jewellery, such as ancient Egyptian fertility symbols; Fawlty likens the man to a caveman and a monkey and is clearly upset that his wife finds the man attractive.

Sybil actually juxtaposes the man, 'the Mediterranean type', with upper-class British men, and accuses the likes of her husband of asking British women ('we girls') to be aroused by figures such as Gladstone, Earl Haig and Baden-Powell. The juxtaposition is highlighted in the man's joke but, importantly, he has not heard the exchange between the Fawltys – the two diegetic references to the subject construct a non-diegetic, non-comedic context that no doubt was very much understandable to contemporary British audiences.

Finally, the young man makes fun of the Conservatives, directing his criticism, light hearted as it appears to be, at their leader – Thatcher – and the joke can be seen as a potential political comment to the audiences in form of a joke, especially as the election was to be held only a couple of months after the broadcast. That Fawlty does not laugh at the joke is above all because it ridicules things he believes in – decency, national greatness, conservatism – values he no doubt considers to be being undermined by the working-class man. All this is a part of a greater national issue, the notion of Britain being in decline.

Britain in decline

When the first series of *Fawlty Towers* was broadcast, Britain was still recovering from what Sandbrook has dramatically referred to as ‘the last days of Pompeii’: in late 1973, because of power cuts, the oil crisis and a general shortage of goods the situation in the country was the bleakest since the war (2010: 595, *passim*). To put this notion into context, it should be remembered that food rationing lasted in Britain until 1954. The point that these issues are largely absent in the series – voiced only by criticism by Basil and the Major (Ballard Berkeley), a somewhat demented army officer – can be understood above all as a stylistic choice from the makers: the series clearly avoids direct political commentary. This is especially clear when the series is compared to the long-running, politically charged sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965–1975). In January 1974, for example, *Till Death Us Do Part* featured straightforward episode titles such as ‘Strikes and Blackouts’ and ‘Three Day Week’. As Beckett writes (2009: 125–26, 132–43), for many Britons the phenomena referred to in the episode titles were a key experience of 1970s: it was gloomy everywhere, with closed stores and empty streets (see also Sandbrook 2010: 595, 601).

This gloominess is seemingly completely absent from *Fawlty Towers*, but is referred to in small comments and pieces of dialogue. What is more, Beckett mentions the series in a highly interesting context as he writes that *Fawlty Towers* served the contemporaries ‘declinism with laughter’ as it is centred on a frustrated middle-aged man in decaying Britain. He adds that even if the idea of the decline of Britain is typically considered to have begun in the nineteenth century, it is unlikely that the Labour Government enjoyed watching the series’ topical representation of the state of the nation (Beckett 2009: 14–16, 180–81), even if the approach of the show is considerably less direct than that of *Till Death Us Do Part*. The question that was very likely to have divided the audience was that of whether the current difficult situation resulted from recent political failures or caused by people such as Fawlty, who try to cling on to the past? As Fawlty is the main target of laughter, it can be speculated that the latter is the stronger message possibly read by the audiences. In other words, Fawlty can be seen as representing declinism – he can only bitterly comment upon the changes in society without any ability to influence the change – or as merely commenting upon the decline. For example, his angry outburst at the upper classes in the first episode, discussed above, can be understood in this context, too: the elite who dominated Britain for so long are responsible for allowing, if not directly causing, the decline of the country.

To understand the ambiguity and even paradoxical nature of the character of Fawlty it is important to point out that Thatcher had a ‘powerful dislike for the tradition, ethos and practice of compromise and consensus’, which she saw as having led to Britain’s decline. In particular, she was critical of the ‘Wets’ as ‘spineless’ conservative ‘one-nation paternalists’, seeing Heath’s government as harmful for Britain as any Labour government (Black 2004: 125–126). It can be speculated that Basil would have not have understood Thatcher’s thinking on this rather important issue, but the key thing is that he would have understood Thatcher’s message: Britain is a great nation that has had difficulties before and survived. It will survive once more. According to Thatcher, Britain must regain her confidence and self-respect (Beckett 2015: xv–xvii) – the same things that Basil has clearly lost, too. For example, when Sybil asks, rhetorically, whether Basil knows what she will do if she finds out that he has started betting again (taking more or less calculated risks to improve one’s economy), Fawlty replies, ‘You’ll have to sew them back on first!’. If *Fawlty Towers* had been a political programme in the style of *Till Death Us Do Part*, it can be speculated that Fawlty would have said he agreed with Thatcher and that he, perhaps after some hesitation because of Thatcher’s gender, no doubt would have voted for her in May 1979. The reason for this is, above all, that Thatcher appealed to the public's nostalgia regarding national greatness at difficult and uncertain economic times.

In her campaign speech in April 1979 Thatcher appealed to frustrated people such as Fawlty:

> Somewhere ahead lies greatness for the country again. I know this in my heart. Look at Britain today and you may think that an impossible dream. But there is another Britain which may not make the daily news, but which each of us knows [...]. (cit. Krieger 1986: 77)

Fawlty would have known what Thatcher was talking about, or perhaps more precisely, Fawlty was one of the people Thatcher was addressing. The difficult economic and social situation, highlighted by the recent 'winter of discontent', is an obvious point of reference, but perhaps even more importantly, the crisis of values that influence economic and social action. Thatcher criticized the current social values and economic system as being wrong for Britain. Fawlty would have agreed with this, and there are two themes that particularly bother him in the series – social permissiveness and the 'threat' of socialism.

The crisis of 'Traditional' values and the menace of socialism

As Neale and Krutnik point out (1990: 59), a major part of the comedy in *Fawlty Towers* is based upon Fawlty's repeated failures and resulting frustration. This works, above all, on the level of single episodes as stories, but for this article, it is important to consider over-arching issues and mentalities. Fawlty is clearly fighting a losing battle against the growing permissiveness in British society, and he most likely realizes this, but this does not prevent him from trying. This is particularly interesting in relation to Thatcher. According to Grimley, the crisis of values in the 1970s – growing permissiveness and liberalization – was a part of a larger crisis that Britain was facing. For Thatcher, one of the solutions to the situation was a re-moralization of society, in other words, restoring Christian values – the problem was, however, that Thatcher did not believe that this was something the state could achieve and that the laws of the 1960s which had advanced liberalization should be touched. Grimley highlights that because later evaluations of Thatcherism have placed emphasis on its achievements, the questions of morals have been somewhat overlooked (2012: 78–81). This article focuses on these questions rather than political achievements, as noted above, and this makes analysing Fawlty's 'world-view' especially fruitful.

Even if Fawlty clearly appreciates Polly the maid, for Fawlty she is also an indicator of her generation's attitudes and morals, especially in relation to sexuality. This is apparent in two episodes, 'A Touch of Class' (September 1975) and 'The Wedding Party' (October 1975). In 'A Touch of Class', a young man with a working-class accent asks for a double room as he 'feels lucky today'. In addition to this, he also flirts with Polly in front of Fawlty. The man, Mr Brown, is revealed to be a policeman undercover, with the task of capturing 'Lord Melbury' discussed above. It is perhaps crucial that it is Polly who tells Fawlty this information, which the latter dismisses as rubbish. Fawlty warns Polly that the 'vulgar Cockney git' – Mr Brown – is simply taking advantage of the 'poor, innocent, misguided child' that Polly is in order to seduce her. In 'The Wedding Party' Polly is escorted to the hotel – to work – by her boyfriend. They kiss passionately in the lobby as Fawlty walks in. He walks straight over to the man and asks if he wants a single for the night. Before the man manages to respond to the unexpected question, Polly introduces the man and Fawlty to each other. Fawlty's mock-surprised reply is, 'Oh, you know each other do you!'. Fawlty's attitude is made considerably more comedic by the fact that as they kiss, Polly and her boyfriend are positioned on opposing sides of the counter, as if a receptionist and a guest. After the man has left, Fawlty asks Polly if she thinks that Fawlty Towers is a massage parlour and blames her for jeopardizing the hotel's reputation.

For both Thatcher and Fawlty, traditional British-Christian values such as family, decency, work ethic, patriotism and democracy were in crisis and under unprecedented attack in the 1970s. In the latter half of the decade, Thatcher declared that the forces behind the attack were Marxist intellectuals and scholars, and the Left more generally. They comprised out-of-touch-with-reality sociological analysis and theoretical models that abandoned morality, common sense, legality and categories of right and wrong (Grimley 2012: 87–88). Unlike Fawlty, Thatcher resented the class society. For her, the majority of Brits situated between the upper and the working classes represented the same values as she did: decency and a will to work hard. She spoke of 'employees' in general to diminish the significance of class: for Thatcher and her closest followers, the class society as such was a Marxist/socialist model. Hence, her middle-class values were represented if not as universal then national (Lawrence and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2012: 132–35). Even if Fawlty, then, accepts and in some ways clearly embraces the class society, what they share is a general conservatism in values and an anti-socialist mentality. In the 1970s, the most visible and distinct sign of socialism were the strikes.

This aspect of social reality is accentuated right at the beginning of the first episode, and it is returned to in subsequent episodes. This is a notable feature in a series that in general avoids commenting upon topical political issues. In 'A Touch of Class', Fawlty hands the morning paper to the Major. The Major takes a look at the front page and sniffs at a headline about yet another strike. Fawlty agrees and says that the times have changed: 'What happened to the old idea of doing something for your fellow man?'. Comedy logic dictates that as Fawlty is getting worked up on the subject another guest asks for service. The annoyed Fawlty responds in an unfriendly tone that he is coming (when he is ready). He comments that people treat each other like dirt, completely oblivious of the irony.

As Turner points out, during the 1970s the middle classes, who Fawlty is a representative of, were increasingly caught up in the struggles between the economy and the unions. In public debates, the working classes were often targeted as the guilty party, and Fawlty's complaints for their part conform to this pattern (2008: 259). In a much later episode, 'A Corpse and a Kipper' (March 1979), he is once again going on about the strikes. He sees that it is utterly wrong that British industries are being supported by millions of tax-payers' money, and yet the workers dare strike: 'It's called socialism', he angrily states, and makes an argument that strongly resembles the populist side of Thatcher's discourse: If the workers do not like manufacturing cars then why do they not change jobs, such as to designing cathedrals or writing concertos? He answers the rhetorical question himself: 'I'll tell you why, because they're not interested in anything except lounging about on conveyer belts stuffing themselves with my money!'.

As noted above, *Fawlty Towers* is a comedy and this should never be overlooked when analysing it: as Palmer underlines (1987: 14–15, 1988: 105–07), comedy should not be reduced to the play of serious values: if a comedy appears to be attacking a set of values ('A'), it should not mean it is automatically promoting what is perceived as an opposing set of values ('B'). The primary comedic element of the scene is that Fawlty performs his 'rant' right after entering a room to deliver a breakfast tray to a guest. As Fawlty enters the room in the morning he is so agitated that he does not realize the man has died in bed during the night. This allows a secondary comedic function for the scene. Fawlty is the main target of laughter in the series and as with the scene discussed above with him blaming (other) people for forgetting the 'old idea of doing something for your fellow man' with the result that he is guilty of the same, here his political ‘speech’ is falling on ‘deaf’ ears. In other words, there is typically a shifting comedic position (see, e.g. Le Goff 1997: 49–50; Parvulescu 2010: 75–76) in quality comedies such as by Monty Python, and here, Cleese and Booth. Fawlty is allowed to make a critical comment that is then comedically undermined, but this does not prevent simultaneous identification with his opinions or ideologies such as being critical of the strikes and the power of the unions.[5]

Turner makes an intriguing observation about 1970s’ British sitcom. According to him, explicitly left-wing characters are underrepresented in them. Instead, they have a great percentage of middle-class characters who would have voted for the liberals in 1974, but by 1979, in secret and possibly a little embarrassed, would have voted for Thatcher (Turner 2008: 126–30). Critic Kenneth Tynan, in turn, felt that television shows, sitcoms included, of the period were full of openly pro-capitalist propaganda (Turner 2008; see also Lawrence and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2012: 135–38). It is, however, also important to consider, keeping in mind the arguments presented above about sitcom’s suggested weakening effect on political messages, that the lack of left-wing characters implies that the comedic focus was put on conservative-voting characters.

This notion is present in a scene in the episode ‘Waldorf Salad’ (March 1979). Fawlty tries to persuade the hotel’s chef, Terry (Brian Hall), to work overtime as guests have arrived late and would like to have a supper. Terry finally agrees but only if he receives an hour and a half’s pay, in cash. Fawlty accepts, but adds that he knows Terry will finish the job in a half an hour; ‘This is socialism’, he declares. ‘Oh, no, that’s the free market’, Terry snaps back. The ironic juxtaposition is that they are both right but Terry’s argument is heavier, as Fawlty realizes. Fawlty is still willing to make the deal but is allowed an escape by Polly who enters the room. Terry has used his karate lesson as the reason to be unwilling to work overtime. Unaware of the negotiation, Polly says

Terry's girlfriend is waiting outside. Realizing Terry has lied to him, Fawlty calls the deal off. Doing so, Fawlty appears to share Thatcher's conception of man as above all a spiritual and moral being, as represented by Christianity in particular (Grimley 2012: 88). Fawlty, then, defines Terry as a person to whom money is the primary value; Terry is a 'Marxist' in the way in which Thatcher understood the term.

Saunders argues that Thatcher's rhetoric was often eschatological. She attacked the left by claiming that it was socialism, not capitalism, that was in crisis in the late 1970s' Britain. As the leader of the Opposition, she warned the nation that if the 'socialists' win the next election, Britain is inevitably on course to become a socialist state. In her campaign, she promised to get rid of the 'albatross of socialism', and lead the country out of 'socialism's sandpit'. Just to be sure, she also reminded the British that Nazism was National *Socialism* (Saunders 2012: 30–33). Fawlty's recurring comments about socialism follow Thatcher's rhetoric. In the scene discussed above, Terry the chef points out, indirectly, that it is a matter of perspective which ideology is crisis. However, for Thatcher and many of her fellow Britons, the crisis of the 1970s was about a longer, deeper decline of Britain. Ironically, despite the similarity of opinions in many other issues, Fawlty represents the kind of conservatism that caused the decline.

Fawlty 'versus' foreigners: The potential of comedic identification

Fawlty is an outstanding example of Thatcher's appeal: he knows the past, with its national greatness and social values, cannot be returned to. Yet, he wishes that it *somehow* could be possible. Thatcher's rhetoric played with notions of a glorious, but also forever gone, past and a glorious but undefined future; these were separate yet somehow connected to each other. 'Unless we change our ways and our direction, our glories as a nation will soon be a footnote in the history books', Thatcher said during her 1979 campaign (cit. Sandbrook 2012: 804–05). As Sandbrook (2012: 804–05) argues, millions of Britons clearly agreed, whether they liked Thatcher or not. It is therefore useful to look at how nationality is played out in the series; how Fawlty, as a Briton, is comedically juxtaposed with foreigners.

Despite Fawlty being the obvious main target of laughter in the series, there are cases in which he can be seen as a figure with whom the show's primary audience – the British – potentially could have identified. For example, in 'The Wedding Party' (October 1975), a French lady, Mme Peignoir (Yvonne Gilan), makes Fawlty extremely uncomfortable with her flirting with him. The episode makes it clear that Fawlty is not able to tell the difference between what seems quite harmless flirting and an invitation for sex, but there is a positive side to his character as it is made clear that adultery is completely out of the question for him. For many viewers, this must have appeared an identifiable side to his character, especially as it appears in an encounter with a foreigner, who is a 'continental', and in particular, French.

It is characteristic for quality comedy, such as that by Monty Python or its individual members, that the comedic perspective is constantly altered. In *Fawlty Towers*, this means that Fawlty is also allowed to make funny quips about others, placing them under comedic-critical scrutiny. This is very apparent in the episode 'Waldorf Salad' (March 1979). Fawlty is extremely welcoming and polite to an English lady at first, but when her American husband arrives, the tone changes. Mr Hamilton steps in and starts to complain about the weather and the poor road network of Britain: he calls the M5 'a little back street' and asks, 'What do you people get for living in a climate like this?'.

Hamilton corresponds to one American stereotype: behind his general politeness he is a man who loses his temper easily. He even urges Fawlty to treat his staff physically unless they agree to ignore union rules and work overtime. Hamilton is aghast not only at the power of the union in Britain but with the strict regulations and half-hearted service culture that Fawlty also represents. Sandbrook (2012: 95–97) argues that sitcoms of the 1970s were so popular because they 'struck such a chord' with reality – *Fawlty Towers* being perhaps the best example as it was based on Cleese's and Booth's experiences in Sinclair's hotel and, hence, contains a satirical truth.[6] In the episode, the critique is presented by a foreigner, as it were. An American is an appropriate 'tool' for this because one of the recurring themes of the series is that the British are extremely reluctant to complain about bad service.

In relation to the discussion above, Genovese (1993: 178) connects the notion of 'British decline' to the country's post-war situation, in which Britain was reduced to a 'peripheral power to the American core'. However, a popular idea that appears to work as compensation for the United States' dominance politically and economically in the decades following the Second World War is that Britain remains culturally superior – Britain being 'Greece' to America's 'Rome', as Harold Macmillan put it during the Second World War (Haseler 2012: 36). According to Lundén and Srigley (1992: 240), this notion is based on British views that Americans are 'materialistic, vulgar, and excessively violent' (Lundén and Srigley 1992). This is how Mr Hamilton comes across when he becomes frustrated with Fawlty. Stereotypes often have an ideological function in sitcoms (Woollacott 1986: 209–12; Wagg 1998: 20–21), and Hamilton is a prime example of this. Here, it is not only the supposed arrogance of Americans that is being comedically examined but the character's function is also to say something a British character, even in a comedy, would not typically say.

Hamilton’s ultimate insult at Britain is when he snaps, ‘What is this, is the war still on?’ and provocatively calls the British Pound ‘Mickey Mouse money’. Fawlty, notably not attacking the US society and culture directly, responds by calling Harold Robbins books ‘American, no, Trans-Atlantic tripe’. The most important element is that Fawlty always snaps back at Hamilton, and always supports the British side. Just as with the case of being a loyal husband, Fawlty’s patriotism and championing of Britain – issues Thatcher emphasized in her campaign, as discussed above – can be seen as identifiable characteristics for many British viewers. Indeed, Rojak argues (2007: 156, *passim*) that the British are ‘tepid about Europe, pining for the long-lost global authority that Empire vested in British opinion’, as well as ‘pressure for devolution from Whitehall to national and regional assemblies’, which results in a ‘troubling assessment of who they are and where they figure in relation to other nations’. This also leads to anger and repression, which he sees as a British characteristic – ‘The Basil Fawlty Tendency’ in British life.

For Fawlty, the Second World War is a central reference point for his patriotism and an overall sense of national pride. In the episode entitled ‘The Germans’ (October 1975), Fawlty’s hotel receives German guests. He wants to be polite and friendly to them, so he tells his staff to not mention the war. However, he himself is suffering from concussion and cannot control his behaviour. This escalates after a while as he is taking lunch orders from the Germans. He asks them if they would like to have a drink ‘before the war’, quickly rectifying, ‘before the lunch’. He takes the food orders as the ‘Prawn Goebbels’ (the actual order: prawn cocktail), the ‘Herring Goering’ (pickled herring) and the ‘Colditz Salad’ (cold meat salad). The Germans stoically ignore further references to Hitler, Himmler, Göbbels and von Ribbentrop until, finally, one of the German ladies bursts into tears. Fawlty enquires what is wrong and another German asks him not to mention the war. Fawlty snaps back that it was the Germans who started it. The German denies this, to which Fawlty responds, making a transition of context from the verbal exchange taking place in the present to history: ‘Yes you did, you invaded Poland!’ Fawlty then does an exaggerated Nazi/Hitler impression by ‘goose-stepping’ across the dining room shouting mock-German phrases (see also Palmer 1987: 129–33; Mills 2005: 86–88; Ramsden 2007: 387–88; Turner 2008: 126–27).

As the argument becomes more intense, Fawlty calls one of the Germans ‘a stupid Kraut’ and blames the Germans for having ‘absolutely no sense of humour’. When the Germans argue the war is not funny for any German and that Fawlty is not being funny at all, Fawlty snaps, ‘Who won the bloody war anyway?’. This silences the German opposition. It is important to be aware of the possibilities contained by the scene. The use of concussion as a comedic vehicle explains Fawlty’s behaviour on the one hand, but on the other, because it is such an established comedic vehicle, it can also be used to provide Fawlty with an opportunity to say what he really thinks about Germans (see also Mähkä 2011: 147, 2016: 188–89). This notion is certainly supported by another *Fawlty Towers* episode, ‘Basil the Rat’ (October 1979), in which a misheard ‘vermin’ is taken as ‘a German’. The demented retired officer/war veteran character Major is trying to ambush a rat with a shotgun, but because he mishears him, Fawlty believes the major is having some sort of flashback to the war. Fawlty duly reminds him, ‘Not legal actually anymore: murder’. The major responds by arguing, ‘But they are animals!’ Fawlty replies, ‘Still, forgive and forget, eh?’ (see also Ramsden 2007: 387–88; Mähkä 2016: 188–89). He then adds, ‘Pretend we do?’ which can be understood as pointing to the difference between official gestures made by the nation and the private and popular sentiments.[7] A combination of war nostalgia and anti-German feelings showed in the polls: in 1974, only 13 per cent of the British population said they liked Germans, the majority described Germans as ‘violent, lacking in tolerance and unfriendly’. Notably, the hostility was strongest among the young (Sandbrook 2010: 174). For Ramsden (2007: 381–82), British television ‘has unrelentingly offered reminders of the Second World War over the entire period since it resumed broadcasting –

with a victory concert in 1946'. In *Fawlty Towers*, it is clear that Basil is intent on keeping up the British end, and here, notably 'against' the Germans.[8]

As Rojek writes, it would be an exaggeration to say that Basil Fawlty embodies Britishness, but at the same time, the character is recognizable to the British in its combination of 'sarcasm, xenophobia, deference to higher classes, inhibition and unease' (2007: 153). In general, as Langton argues, in Fawlty contemporary television audiences recognized features of the national culture at which they could cry with laughter as they were watching a sitcom (1999: 62, 64). This distanced acknowledgement of 'national' features also helps in understanding the increase in Thatcher's popularity in the latter half of the 1970s.

Conclusion

This article argues that the fictional character of Basil Fawlty can be understood as a 'pre-Thatcherite' conservative and, as such, can help us in understanding the processes that led to Thatcher becoming the prime minister of Britain. There are three characteristics to Fawlty that are commonly seen as conservative: He has a strong belief in marriage and being faithful, which is connected to his traditional conception of sexual relationships belonging to the marital realm. He is a patriot who believes things have gone terribly wrong in Britain: the country is threatened by socialism, represented, above all, by the trade unions, and this despite society supporting their industries with tax-payers' money. Fawlty's patriotism draws its strength from the glorious British past, with allusions and references to the empire, but above all to the Second World War. These themes were all shared, and spoken about, during the same years, from the mid- to late 1970s, by Thatcher.

‘Thatcherism’ itself was born, or invented, and defined several years later, mainly by her political opponents. This article does not attempt any new definition of the word. Instead, its point is to highlight those attitudes and values in 1970s’ Britain, as represented in *Fawlty Towers*, which help us in understanding the political and ideological climate that led to Thatcher winning the election in 1979. Like so many Britons, Fawlty ‘saw’ Thatcher as the only candidate to guide the country out of the crisis of the 1970s. The irony is that Thatcher saw the kind of ‘spineless’, compromising conservatism that Fawlty represents as a major reason for Britain’s decline.

Fawlty does not have just one position or identity in the series but several. The most important division is him, and his conservatism, being the main target of laughter, although frequently he is the one the audience laughs with. In addition, the criticism directed at his values and ideas is typically direct while his criticism, despite often delivered as a rant, is something large segments of the audience agreed with, for example, the power of the trade unions, of which strikes were a very pragmatic sign.

Fawlty’s patriotism and his championship of Britishness to other nationalities – ‘continentals’, especially Germans, and Americans – are the clearest aspects with which audiences, regardless of political ideas, could identify, at least momentarily. All this is made all the more possible by the series’ genre, sitcom. The most important point here is that despite Fawlty being the butt of the joke most of the time, the viewers are invited to laugh with him.[9]

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Notes

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[1] Langton (1999: 62, 64) highlights the fact that *Fawlty Towers* was anything but an instant success in terms of both critical success and viewer ratings. At the BBC, the series was considered clichéd and a likely flop, and Cleese's decision to leave the *Flying Circus* was generally regarded as a mistake. By 1979, the series was a definitive hit. It can be said that Thatcher's career saw a similar development during the same years.

[2] This article is part of the research project 'Thatcherism, Popular Culture and the 1980s', funded by the Kone Foundation. A Finnish version of this article was published in the Finnish journal of audio-visual culture and media research. I wish to thank both parties.

[3] It is fitting that Jackson and Saunders use the expression 'emergence' here as my idea of Fawlty as a 'Pre-Thatcherite' is not dissimilar to Raymond Williams' concept of 'emergent culture' (Williams 1981). Another study that has inspired this article is Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), in which Kracauer argues that 1920s' German films display a fear of chaos and a related desire for order, and that this explains Germans' submission to Nazism (Kracauer [1947] 1974).

[4] Thatcher was very skilful at playing with meanings: she turned political issues into moralistic ones, and used value-driven terminology to enhance her arguments at one moment, and to attack

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her opponents the next. ‘Victorian’, for example, was a positive term when it referred to ‘traditional’ values. However, for her ‘Victorian’ was a ‘Marxist’ mindset as it meant the nineteenth century, as she wanted to represent her party as a progressive, establishment-shaking force, as Grimley argues. Thatcher also said that Socialist ‘propaganda’ had given the ‘Victorian Age’ an unjustifiably bad name. Samuel concludes that ‘Victorian’ ended up in Thatcher’s rhetoric by coincidence, highlighting its contradictory usage (Samuel 1999: 332–34, *passim*; Grimley 2012: 88–89).

[5] This is related to the superiority theory of humour, according to which laughing at something or someone requires at least momentary feeling of superiority to the object of laughter (see, e.g. Billig 2005: 42–43; Stott 2005: 131–37).

[6] Cleveland (2014: 138–39) recalls how in the hotel restaurant, Sinclair walked over to tell Terry Gilliam that ‘You’re in England now Sir, and the British use a knife AND fork’, leaving the Monty Python party speechless. In comparison, Sandbrook cites (2012: 95–96) Michael Palin who, incidentally in 1975, was filming *Three Men in a Boat* (Frears, 1975) in Streatley. His entourage tried, in vain, to get supper in the evening, finally ending up in the local pub. ‘This is Southern England with a vengeance’, Palin wrote to his diary, adding that ‘We feel like lepers as we walk down the pretty, the fucking pretty little main street, clutching some of the crisps she [the barwoman] was good enough to let us have’.

[7] Kline (1993: 156) offers a rather pessimistic explanation for laughing at Fawlty raving about defeating the Germans: it is about repressed xenophobia, and the setting is especially funny for ‘those who regard themselves as liberal and enlightened’, ‘the enlightened middle classes who have found it within themselves to forgive Belsen and Auschwitz’. On the other hand, as Kline highlights, it is crucial that the ‘joke’ is well written; otherwise, it is impossible to laugh at it.

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[8] Noakes argues (1998: 105–07, 122–24, 131, *passim*) that in 1982, during the Falklands crisis, memories of the national past were ‘filtered through the political lens’ of the Thatcher government, placing the party ‘as the heirs of the Second World War’. The message was that the Conservatives now upheld the old traditions that had, apparently, been forgotten by the consensus politics after the war – the same years that had seen Britain’s decline as an imperial power. The mobilization of memories and images of the Second World War ‘acted as a form of reassurance’, as Noakes writes: Britain was still, in essence, ‘the same’, despite the political changes after the war.

[9] An earlier version of this article was published, in Finnish, by the *Lähikuva* journal, in 2016. https://journal.fi/lahikuva.