

Memes, Microbes, and Mockery: Popular Culture as Political Praxis

Thursday 4 June 2026 09:00 (1h 30m)

This panel examines how popular culture artefacts such as virus imagery, internet memes, inflatable costumes and fictional flags serve as dynamic tools for political expression, resistance, and reimagination. Across diverse contexts, the papers explore how visual and digital culture challenges conventional understandings of governance, security, and geopolitical identity.

Our papers centre on how the digital and 'offline' world cohere in fields such as health and finance and the power of humour and subversion in blending offline and online activity in myriad forms. Papers explore the visual semiotics of viruses in pop culture, arguing that their representations shape the health-security nexus by materialising invisible threats and deepening public engagement with biomedical discourse. In the realm of finance, visuals in the form of 'meme finance' show how digital humour and viral content destabilise traditional financial governance, questioning the authority of economic expertise and reframing investment as a gamified, participatory spectacle. Satire is also at the foreground of online artefacts like Polandball and Kekistan, which are fictional entities and digital spaces that foster alternative forms of organisation for citizens that blur the boundaries between satire, nationalism, and protest. Relatedly, we explore how 'performative transgressive frivolity' in the form of inflatable frog costumes and absurdist protest tactics disrupt authoritarian aesthetics and reframe resistance through humour and spectacle.

Together, these papers illuminate how popular culture operates as a site of political contestation and creativity. Whether through visualising invisible threats, mocking financial orthodoxy, or embodying resistance in inflatable form, the panel demonstrates that cultural artifacts are not merely reflections of politics but are active agents in shaping political imaginaries and practices in the digital age.

Track Classification: British International Studies Association