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Memes, Emotional Engagement and Politics

Abstract: This chapter highlights the increasing importance of memes in our post-digital society. Memes, blending visual and linguistic elements, have emerged as a distinct form of communication rooted in popular culture. They exert a significant influence, including in politics, transcending digital and non-digital boundaries; they also succinctly reinterpret complex emotions, ideas and cultures, acting as a new mode of expression. Moreover, memes contribute to political activism by presenting political ideas through various means, including humour, puzzles, or provocative content based on cultural and ideological perspectives. This chapter delves into pragmatic discourse analysis, examining memes that convey amplified messages through a fusion of language and visuals, with the aim of shedding light on the mechanics of political engagement.

Keywords: memes, emotion, culture, postdigital, parody

During the recent years, memes have gained popularity as a form of language, combining visual and linguistic elements in a condensed format while drawing on popular cultural references. They represent a typical product of our postdigital society, blurring the boundaries between the digital and non-digital, and spreading quickly while having an impact on society, notably on a political level. In this chapter, we will explore memes as complex objects in the postdigital era.

Memes play a role in the reinterpretation of complex emotions, ideas and cultures in a concise, transactional way; they represent a new form of sign. However, memes can also contribute to activism and engagement in public discourse, by presenting political representations in funny, puzzling, or offensive ways, through language and visual signs based on popular culture, ideological stances and actual controversies.

Their unique features, such as their simplicity, visual impact and shareability make them powerful tools for spreading information and influencing public opinion (see Milner 2016). In the context of politics, memes can serve as a means of expressing dissent, critique, or support for candidates or policies. Through their use of humour and irony, they can also serve as a form of political satire or parody, critiquing the status quo and offering alternative perspectives.

The following chapter thus aims to study the pragmatic/linguistic structure of memes, as it possesses properties that play a role in the ideological polarisation of the contemporary world, not mechanically and directly (memes do not inherently polarise), but by fuelling practices of identity reinforcement and ideological alignment among groups of users, both on and off platforms.

This pragmatic discourse analysis focuses on a corpus of memes that convey excessive messages through a unique blend of linguistic and visual elements. Through the semiotic analysis of these memes, we aim to shed light on the mechanics of political engagement in public discourse, specifically using hypertextual forms and emotional engagement as a pretext and an argumentative form.

This chapter thus proposes a theory of memes, followed by a methodology of analysis; both of which will be applied to the hypertextual nature of memes using two case studies.

1 A Theory of Memes

The emergence of the “web 2.0” and the rise of social media platforms have caused memes to experience a surge in popularity (see Cormode 2008). However, it is important to state that the core structure of memes, which involves combining images with text, has been used for many years in various mediums like newspapers and posters. Nevertheless, the present-day manifestation of memes in their pure digital context can be traced back to much earlier instances. For example, the *Kilroy was here* graffiti (Fig. 1) from 1944 or even a drawing¹ published in *The Judge*, a student journal from the University of Iowa in 1921, can be considered precursors to the contemporary format of memes.

These examples serve to illustrate that memes are not necessarily reliant on digital tools for their creation. This, in turn, has shaped our perspective on memes, which is heavily influenced by postdigital theory, a theoretical framework that has gained prominence since the advent of the web 2.0 era (see Herring 2013) and centres on the collaborative creation of digital content and social interactions. In line with this, Florian Cramer (2015, 19) proposes a definition of postdigitality that shows the messy state of diverse topics and fields (media, arts, design, politics, etc.) after their digitisation, and how this digitisation in turn shapes their “non-digital” version.

¹ See the comic strip at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mbxkwy/meme-1921-expectation-vs-reality-judge-magazine-comic-twitter>.

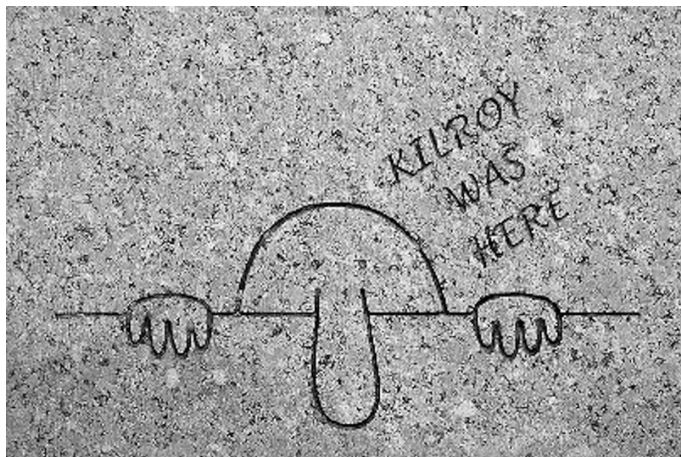


Fig. 1: Kilroy was here (France, 1944), CC 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kilroy_Was_Here_-_Washington_DC_WWII_Memorial.jpg.

Undoubtedly, social media has been instrumental in revealing the importance of the postdigital phenomenon. However, it is fundamental not to overlook the role of formerly underground platforms (or boards) such as 4chan, Reddit, or 9gag in understanding social controversy and postdigital creativity (see Massanari 2015). Moreover, memes draw upon what Tim Barker has dubbed the aesthetics of error, or glitch aesthetics (Barker 201, 43).

The postdigital environment creates rich opportunities through the introduction of new devices and their unique functionalities and affordances (see Ghliiss, Perea and Ruchon 2019). This dynamic setting gives rise to a fresh method of storytelling known as hypertextuality, which has been thoroughly studied by Ellen Rose (2012):

The web in its entirety offers an experience of information that has no beginning, middle, or end, and that is always unfinished and unfinishable, as social networking sites and video games, tweets and web pages ceaselessly flow into each other to create a ubiquitous information surround through which we journey, blithely leaping from one disconnected information nugget to another. (99)

Postdigitality also means that we are collectively interconnected in narrative networks (see Benhabib 2002) and that we can choose to create and weave out of depending on the social context. It is evident that memes conform to the same underlying principles and have gained prominence as a result of the concepts of virality (see Zanette, Blikstein and Visconti 2019) and seriality (see Oltean 1993).

To define memes, I choose to draw on Christian Bauckhage's all-encompassing definition that encapsulates the essence of memes as well as their social significance (Bauckhage 2011, 42), as it highlights the social aspect of memes. Nonetheless, it is evident that internet users propagate memes by engaging in memetic behaviour (see Shifman 2013) and by adhering to specific rules that imply that memes follow a specific grammar and convey particular technodiscourses (see Paveau 2019). The use of a grammatical metaphor is significant since it emphasises that, like any language, memes possess their own way of constructing and conveying meaning and that it requires a specific kind of literacy to comprehend, generate and communicate memes effectively.

2 Analysing Memes

Generating memes has been made easy by the availability of various tools (smart-phone apps, websites, or databases) such as Memegenerator² and Knowyour-meme³, which provide a variety of resources for users to create their own memes or use existing templates. The process of creating a meme typically involves three steps: choosing a template in a database or importing a picture; adding a text above the picture or on it; saving or sharing the meme on various social platforms, such as social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), messaging apps (Telegram, Whatsapp, etc.) or boards (9gag, Reddit, etc.).

Other productions, such as gifs (which could be defined as a subcategory of memes), have already made their way onto Facebook Messenger, Whatsapp or even Telegram – which may raise the puzzling question of the absence of integrated meme generators on such apps.

The composition of a meme consists of three separate components, which when combined, form the memetic metasign, as suggested by Wagener (2022, 62–63):

- the pragmasign: The meme itself and what it represents;
- the pragmadesign: It is the way text and image are placed to form the meme, the font used, the way the message is formulated, colours, etc.;
- the pragmacontext: The context and environment in which a meme is transmitted and received, such as a Facebook group or a WhatsApp conversation, and the way it is presented in the media, whether as an opening statement or a response, which are crucial factors that contribute to its overall impact.

² <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>.

³ <https://knowyourmeme.com/>.

Furthermore, the pragmasign is based on two dimensions:

- the refereme: Cultural and social references that are visually represented or used within a meme, such as elements from popular culture, TV shows, political events, video games, and so on;
- the topeme: The topic or subject matter, which refers to what the meme is addressing, such as everyday life, politics, or the economy.



Fig. 2: Example of a memetic analysis: Description of a meme based on the US TV series *The Office*, with actor Steve Carell. Accessed 1 March 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/DunderMifflinMeme/photos/a.362528484572849/870933320399027/?type=3>.

By conducting a memetic analysis, it is possible to isolate topemes and referemes, as illustrated in the previous example (Fig. 2). It is important to note, however, that memes can also serve as both conversation starters and answers.

Memes are highly multidimensional and can be used in various ways in online conversations. This complexity requires a sophisticated approach to analyse their pragmatic implications. Memes involve visual and textual elements, cultural references and contextual communication, making them difficult to study using only traditional methods or conventional models. To address this issue, I refer to a methodological proposition called the systemic grid for memetic analysis (Tab. 1) (Wagener 2022, 99). This method is intended to be used to study different aspects of a meme, including:

- the refereme (the cultural references used in the meme, both in text and image);
- the topeme (the topic of the meme itself, both in text and image);
- the pragmasign (the sign itself, meaning the combination of refereme and topeme);
- the pragmadesign (graphic and visual elements used to format the meme);

- various elements of the pragmacontext:
 - Enunciation: Who publishes the meme and in what context?
 - Multimodality: What is the number of texts and images used and what are they made of?
 - Intertextuality: What does the meme display and how does it play around specific references?
 - Interdiscursivity: What types of discourse and representation does the meme trigger?
- The semantic nodes used in the meme to convey specific meaning. For example: How are the references connected, how are text and image connected, how are topemes connected with social representations, etc.

Tab. 1: Systemic grid for meme analysis (Wagener 2022, 99).

Pragmasign		Pragmadesign	
Refereme			Text
			Image
Topeme			Text
			Image
Pragmacontext			
Enunciation	Multimodality	Intertextuality	Interdiscursivity

This proposal, I posit, could prove helpful for analysing instances of memes that propagate political content, especially in the context of democratic elections, social tensions, or extremist propaganda. However, it is crucial to provide clear definitions of the terms used as descriptive criteria, as proposed earlier. Doing so enables the analyst to take note of the various attributes of a meme and gain a deeper understanding of its multifaceted, multimodal and interdiscursive character.

One of the fundamental characteristics of memes is their multimodality, as highlighted by Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017). This means that creators often merge textual and visual elements to construct a coherent and meaningful image. Multimodality is a critical aspect of memes, as it enhances their communicative potential in terms of both cognitive and emotional impact (see Schlaile et al. 2018). Intertextuality is another vital component of memes, as it strengthens their multimodal nature; intertextuality involves the use of multiple layers of meaning and references, drawn from various sources such as popular culture, news, politics, and real-life events. Bradley E. Wiggins (2019, 35) has elaborated on this, explaining how memes rely on intertwined references to create their meaning.

Intertextuality is only one aspect that highlights the multireferential nature of memes, which partly explains their widespread use for entertainment purposes – including the political area. However, interdiscursivity serves to emphasise that intertextuality alone cannot fully account for the persuasive impact of memes. The circulation of discourses through memes conveys social representations and political ideologies, and reflects multiple narratives that are never neutral, but always conveying something about society or the world we inhabit from the creator’s or sharer’s perspective. Therefore, interdiscursivity becomes a critical component in understanding the social and political nature of memes, and the role of both senders and receivers in shaping their meaning (see Garric and Capdevielle-Mougnibas 2009, 108).

The discursive nature of memes highlights their potential to function as a new form of language that can communicate social representations through a combination of textual and visual elements, often referencing popular culture or current events. This multimodal structure allows memes to convey powerful messages that can participate in shaping public discourse and opinion. However, it is important to note that funny memes are not neutral in their messaging and can also be used to propagate political messages as well as harmful ideologies such as racism or antifeminism. As such, it is crucial to consider the political implications of memes in a democratic society, where the circulation of information and the freedom of expression are highly valued.

3 The Hypernarrativity of Emotional Engagement and Politics in Memes

Internet memes have emerged as a powerful tool for the dissemination of political messages due to their ability to communicate ideas and emotions rapidly and effectively in an appealing and shareable format (see Wagener 2022). Political messages can be implemented through memes by integrating text or images that support a specific political viewpoint or position. For instance, memes may employ a popular image or character to convey a political message or quote that advances a political agenda. Memes can also employ humour or satire to critique or ridicule political figures or policies. Such memes aim to highlight inconsistencies, contradictions, or other negative attributes of a political position or party, often utilising irony or sarcasm to articulate their point; their goal is to make us react and engage with the discourse they convey. Additionally, memes can endorse or promote a specific political candidate or party by utilising images or slogans that evoke positive emotions or associations with the candidate or party.

The virality of memes enables them to spread rapidly and widely through social media and other online platforms, presenting an effective strategy for reaching a large audience and shaping public opinion. However, it is critical to recognise that memes can also be employed to disseminate misinformation and propaganda (see Mina 2019). Hence, it is crucial to evaluate the source and accuracy of any political memes encountered online. To comprehend the circulation of political messages through memes, I propose to study three samples of memes using the systemic grid of memetic analysis: a) general political memes, b) memes targeting conservative movements and c) memes targeting progressist movements.

These three datasets contain messages that overstep boundaries related to stereotyped representations, cultural narratives and discrimination towards targeted political groups or figures. Indeed, they illustrate how memes can be employed to propagate political messages or produce comments regarding the life of democracies, the impacts of economic systems, or the ideologies of political adversaries. This also highlights the potential use of memes to propagate political messages within the public and digital spheres. It underscores the importance of upholding ethical standards in political discourse and the potentially crucial role of memes in undermining or stimulating the democratic process. The use of case studies to analyse memes in a more nuanced and contextualised manner could contribute to a better understanding of the role of memes in contemporary politics and their impact on democratic discourse.

As previously indicated, memes possess both linguistic and visual attributes that facilitate their dissemination of political messages. The political potential of memes, I contend, is heightened by their reliance on visually impactful content that enables easy association with the message. This political aspect assumes significant importance since offensive or extreme interpretations of memes reveal prevalent social representations within society. In this regard, the guise of humour provides a useful cover for transmitting messages that expose systems of domination.

Memes are a product of a process known as resignification, which involves combining disparate elements to produce a novel meaning that can attain widespread popularity and, in turn, be reinterpreted or transformed into new memes. As Paveau (2019) notes, this resignification process is integral to the construction of memes, enabling them to become carriers of ideas and emotions in a way that is both accessible and relatable to their audience. Moreover, the grammar of memes is characterised by the use of specific references, templates and patterns that aid in the creation and interpretation of memes – including in political spheres. These references may include popular culture icons, historical events, or political figures that are recognisable to the intended audience. The use of tem-

god where has this meme been all my life

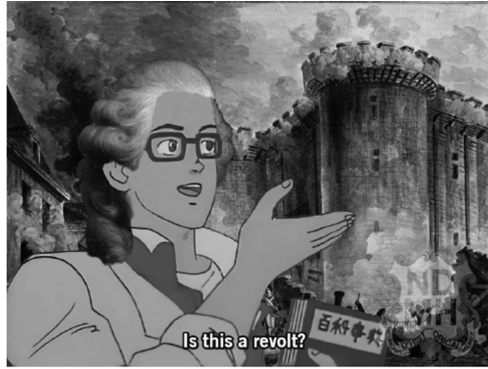
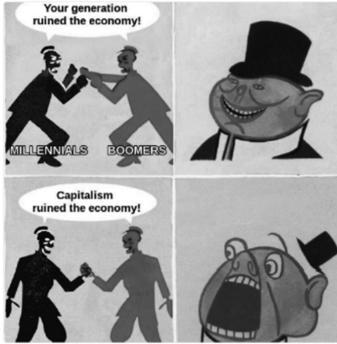


Fig. 3: Examples of general political memes (from left to right starting from top: https://www.reddit.com/r/MemeTemplatesOfficial/comments/13g9qwu/shocked_capitalist_template_request/; from the French closed Facebook group “Neurchi d’Histoire,” only open to members; https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/jpv8ll/orange_was_ejected/; from the French closed Facebook group “Neurchi de flexibilisation du marché du travail,” only open to members. All accessed 2 March 2024).

plates and patterns further contributes to the grammatical structure of memes, providing a framework for the creation of new memes and ensuring their easy recognition and comprehension.

Memes are inherently connected to the nature of the web 2.0 era, which accentuates their postdigital dimension and their capacity to create hypertextual narratives. Memes are an effective means of conveying messages in a concise and efficient manner, allowing complex arguments and elements to be communicated in a compressed format. In this sense, they can be thought of as *messages.rar/.zip* that contain a wealth of information (see Wagener 2020). However, memes have a broader significance beyond their utilitarian value. They also enable individuals to creatively comment on contemporary social issues and events, offering a



Fig. 4: Examples of political memes targeting conservative movements or right-wing parties (from left to right starting from top: https://www.reddit.com/r/starterpacks/comments/98evfn/the_condescending_conservative_meme_starter_pack/; <https://cheezburger.com/8796849408/conservatives-be-like/>; <https://imgflip.com/m/politics3/tag/15+year+old+conservatives>. All accessed 2 March 2024).

unique form of expression that is grounded in popular culture and accessible to a broad audience (Fig. 4). By combining humour, irony and satire, memes can highlight the absurdities and contradictions of contemporary society and current politics, contributing to a critical reflection on social norms and values.

The postdigital dimension of memes is also significant, as it underscores the blurring of boundaries between the digital and physical worlds. Memes exist within a larger ecosystem of online platforms and networks that enable their creation, dissemination and interpretation. They are characterised by their fluidity and malleability, capable of evolving and transforming as they circulate through online communities.



Fig. 5: Examples of political memes targeting progressist movements or left-wing parties (from left to right starting from top: <https://imgflip.com/i/5yv39>; anonymised screenshot of a Twitter post; https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRightCantMeme/comments/feeisu/the_left_cant_meme_immediately_posts_2010_pepe/; <https://br.ifunny.co/picture/things-that-make-liberals-cry-1-guns-2-flags-3-XPUdws98>. All accessed 2 March 2024).

Memes possess a unique strength: They can be shared amongst individuals to reinforce a sense of belonging to a particular community (see Durieux 2010, 70). In some cases, memes can even serve as identifying markers of specific communities, as exemplified by the notorious Pepe the Frog meme. This particular example has been widely used in alt-right forums, symbolising white pride and conservatism, as noted by Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz (2021). Despite its association with the alt-right, Pepe the Frog has also been subject to a process of resignification, serving as an interesting case study of the transformative power of memes. For instance, protesters in Hong Kong appropriated the image of Pepe and reinterpreted it as a symbol of peaceful democracy, thereby giving it new meaning and significance.

4 A Politics of Memes: Two Case Studies

The following case studies aim to examine how memes are utilised to convey political messages and how these viral images express political discourse. It is important to note that memes are part of a larger narrative concept known as “hypertales” (see Wagener 2021b), which are rooted in hypernarrativity. These hypertales are constructed by drawing on smaller stories and combining various platforms to create a more comprehensive narrative, as analysed by Laura West (2013):

This type of narrative-telling through small stories deserves researcher’s attention due to its prevalence in social media, which itself is now a prevalent form of interaction in many parts of the world; in the social media framework, texts are preserved and stacked (blogs, twitter, myspace, etc.), creating a history. (12)

The emergence of hypertales in postdigital communication is closely linked to a significant degree of intertextuality (see Laineste and Voolaid 2016), which implies that despite the “Internet ugly” (Douglas 2014, 315) or “high-tech trash” (Kane 2019) aesthetic often associated with memes, they convey social representations that are inherently meaningful and never neutral.

The first meme I propose to study, “Things that make liberals cry⁴” (Fig. 5) proposes an antiliberal or antiprogressivist topeme (with a list of items), as well as a referemic image depicting a crying man with glasses and a light beard.

The methodology used to analyse this meme is the systemic grid for meme analysis (Tab. 1). I follow the path of the grid by giving details for every item:

- Refereme: Depiction of a stereotype of a liberal man, crying;
 - Text: the origin of the meme is noted, with a small image inscribed in the meme, showing the US flag and the Southern US flag, with the mention “Conservative DAD memes”.
 - Image: A photograph of a lightly bearded man with glasses, crying.
- Topeme: A list of nine items that are supposed to upset liberal or progressive people and make them cry;
 - Text: A list of items that trigger or upset liberals, according to conservatives, namely guns, flags, names of football teams, leader criticism, Christianity (but not Islam, as mentioned in the meme), hunting for food, Fox News, the Constitution and patriotism.

⁴ See an example of this meme at: <https://br.ifunny.co/picture/things-that-make-liberals-cry-1-guns-2-flags-3-XPUdwkS98?s=cl>.

- Image: For the sake of the topeme, the stereotype associated with liberals is a crying man with glasses, a light beard, and a red bowtie, which illustrates the list of items and ridicules the image of liberal/progressist citizens (Democrats).
- Enunciation: This publication was posted on Memedroid, in May 2021, with the title “*the Libtard removal kit*”⁵ (“libtard” being a lexical contraction of “liberal” and “retard”);
- Multimodality: One text in two parts created for the meme (the first one centred on top, the other one being a list of terms on the right) and one set of two images (the stereotypical representation of a liberal, and the label showing the origin of the meme);
- Intertextuality: Two main references are intertwined, namely important items valued by conservatives (as they represent themselves), which may in return reveal what is not appreciated by liberals;
- Interdiscursivity: Conservative patriotism seems to be one of the key features that distinguish conservatives from liberals, but also other topics such as sports, guns, religion, pro-life stances or hunting. This bucket list intends to draw a line between two political conceptions of the United States of America, thus showing two different discursive sets of values.

The first case study demonstrates how ideological references and particular visions of society are employed to satirise and criticise political adversaries (in this case, conservatives versus liberals) by leveraging values, traditions and hobbies. This meme’s primary narrative draws on a political war between conservatives and liberals, with the former’s values being attacked by the latter. The meme humorously portrays liberals as fragile beings who are easily triggered by various topics and only capable of reacting emotionally to what conservatives consider central to their definition of the USA. In contrast, conservatives are subliminally depicted as possessing strength and stability, with their values being reinforced by this imagined fortitude. Through this lens, the meme presents a favourable depiction of conservative values, while simultaneously portraying liberals as exaggerated and vulnerable individuals who are repulsed by traditional national items like the Constitution or Christianity.

The second meme I use as a case study, which is available on KnowYourMeme under the title “Porky- Capitalism ruined the Economy”⁶ (Fig. 3), proposes an anti-capitalist topeme, as well as an old *Porky* comic playing the role of the

5 <https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3354735/The-Libtard-removal-toolkit>.

6 <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1264000-porky>.

refereme; obviously, this meme follows a pattern that is different than the previous meme, insofar as it criticises social injustice, economic downfall and capitalism from the perspective of the union of workers.

The systemic grid for meme analysis informs us about the structure of the meme, using the following criteria:

- Refereme: A four thumbnail picture based on an old *Porky* comic, showing two fighting workers while a boss is smiling, which then changes as both workers unite while the boss opens his mouth in shock.
 - Text: No text directly linked to the visual referemes is used.
 - Image: Four images are used, namely a) the image of two workers fighting (a black one and a red one); b) the drawing of a smiling boss, represented with a pig-like face; c) the image of both workers shaking hands and uniting; and d) the drawing of the same boss, but gasping in shock while watching both workers unite.
- Topeme: The topeme of this meme involves a pointed critique of capitalism and its role in the economic crisis. Additionally, the meme employs a satirical portrayal of a stereotypical boss from the early twentieth century (coming from a Soviet agitprop poster published in 1920)⁷, characterised by a pig-like face, a round head, and a ruddy complexion. Simultaneously, the meme portrays workers as less healthy individuals who are struggling to survive, further reinforcing the message of the meme's underlying criticism of capitalism;
 - Text: Text only appears in the thumbnails that represent workers, namely a) the text which shows who is represented (millennials vs. boomers), b) the text that shows the reason why workers fight ("your generation ruined the economy"), and c) the text of reconciliation, based on the identification of a common cause for economic downfall ("capitalism ruined the economy").
 - Image: The two workers depicted in the meme embody the recurring conflict often seen in online debates, pitting millennials against boomers, both of whom work and live in a capitalist economy. On the other hand, the cartoonish image of the wealthy capitalist boss suggests that his wealth is derived from exploiting workers and the ongoing struggle to identify the root cause of the economic crisis. These four thumbnails thus wish to critique the exploitative nature of capitalism and how it creates an unequal power dynamic between the ruling elite and the working class.

⁷ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/porky>.

- Enunciation: The origin of the meme itself is unknown, but it is mentioned on Knowyourmeme in two versions, meaning that it has been posted online on different social platforms;
- Multimodality: Four textual utterances are created for the meme: Two speech bubbles to show the messages exchanged by millennial and boomer workers, and two lines to describe who represents millennials and boomers in the thumbnails;
- Intertextuality: By using an old comic, this meme brings attention to the long-standing nature of the issues associated with capitalism, particularly its negative and unfair aspects. It also references the current economic crisis and highlights the continuing relevance of these issues. Overall, the meme suggests that the problems associated with capitalism are not new, and have been present for at least a century;
- Interdiscursivity: The meme draws on the well-known generational conflict between millennials and boomers, which is often portrayed in the media and political discourse. However, rather than addressing the root cause of social inequalities, this conflict is depicted as a mere distraction. The meme argues that both generations are affected by the same system, which perpetuates these inequalities, and suggests that uniting across generations is necessary to challenge this system. By critiquing the tendency to pit generations against each other, the meme highlights the need for solidarity and collective action in the face of systemic injustice.

This meme presents a critical view of the capitalist system and its effects on both millennials and boomers, who are portrayed as victims of an unfair ruling elite. The meme highlights the futility of generational conflict and the need for unity to address the real issue of social inequality. Notably, it also employs an old cartoon from the Soviet Union to emphasise the persistence of capitalist injustice over time. This serves to caution against overgeneralising generational divisions, which tend to mask deeper social class divisions that remain relevant in the present. Furthermore, this meme underscores the continued relevance of social class as a means of analysing the ways in which economic factors create social inequality and power struggles within society, given that the capitalist system that created these classes remains firmly entrenched – an interesting example of memetic strategy and the digital tactics used by political movements – or “memetic tacticality” (see Arkenbout and Scherz 2022).

Conclusion: Accelerating Political Engagement

Memes demonstrate how seemingly “fun” or “harmless” digital productions can significantly accelerate political engagement (see Mina 2019) by relying on entertainment (see Mortensen and Neumayer 2017), revitalising communication methods (see Kulkarni 2017), and creative content (see Chagas et al. 2019). As such, they draw on what Robin Nelson refers to as a new affective order, which emphasizes the role of emotions in shaping consciousness towards information in the digital realm (Nelson 2000):

[T]he new affective order involves a consciousness informed by: short, but intense, sound-vision bytes; non-linearity (in contrast with linear narrative); an information overload; constellatory access to diverse materials; bricolage as its principle of composition; reception- (as much as production-) driven aesthetic; polysemy, in respect of meanings; diversity, in respect of pleasures. (112)

This concept of a new affective order is highly insightful as it provides crucial insights into the widespread prevalence of conspiracy theories and fake news on the web 2.0. Memes can contribute to this phenomenon as they rely on the same emotional framing that may fuel the dissemination of misinformation. This is particularly worrisome in the political sphere, where the proliferation of post-truth atmospheres and alternative facts actively undermines democratic health (see Sengul 2019).

Memes can thus be seen as capsules of cognitive and affective expression (see Wagener 2020) relying on the following elements:

- The ability to mobilise cultural references (especially tied to popular culture);
- Intertextuality and interdiscursivity;
- Pragmatic relevance which may transform them into viral objects;
- Versatility and adaptability, especially insofar as memes can play with the constraints of digital communication;
- High values of socialisation and cultural sharing;
- Creativity as the main playful dynamics;
- A strong bond between the linguistic (textual), the visual (non-textual) and the expression and reception of the meme based on cognitive and emotional perception;
- The compression of different semantic nodes in a plurisemiotic agglomerate

While memes can be used to convey effective political messages by re-creating oppositions and mobilising citizens to reconstruct political imaginaries, their effectiveness is amplified by their nature in the context of open democracies, where the public and mediatic sphere represent a battleground, especially with

the rise of social media. Thus, memes are not inherently good or bad, and their use in political discourse can contribute to democratic vitality or democratic erosion (see Galipeau 2022). However, the use of memes in political discourse can be particularly effective due to their reliance on popular culture, entertaining content, active ideologies, stereotypical antagonisms and viral engagement (see Denisova 2019). In this sense, the discriminatory properties (identifying groups and opposing them) of memes resonate with the public sphere conceived as a battleground, with increased effectiveness due to their anchoring of the discourses they carry in a popular frame of reference.

However, the use of memes in political discourse is not without risks. They can perpetuate misinformation or stereotypes, reinforce partisan divides and contribute to a post-truth atmosphere in which facts are increasingly contested (see Zidani and Moran 2021). As such, the impact of memes on democratic health is a topic of ongoing debate, since they do not necessarily foster dialogue although they offer a new way of mobilising citizens and reshaping political imaginaries. While their use can contribute to democratic vitality in a creative and playful way, it is important to remain vigilant concerning their limitations, and to critically evaluate their impact on democratic discourse. In fact, memes and the discourse they carry underlines the fact that digital culture itself is changing the way we look at democracy and politics; it is something that needs to be thoroughly studied, since it may change the collective political future of our democratic societies.

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