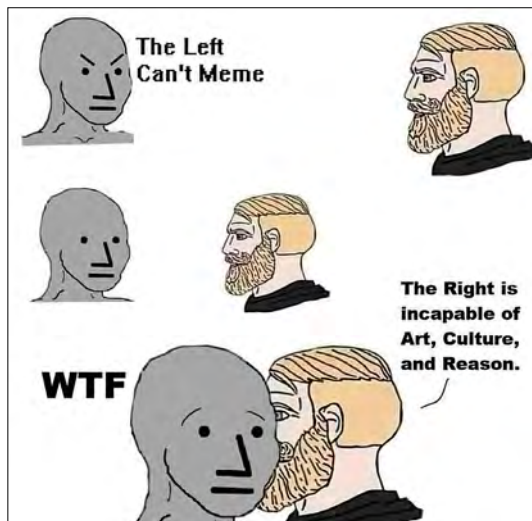


Left Memes



In the run up to the 2016 US presidential election, the internet was flooded with right-wing memes. Both commentators and the right-wing's opponents were caught off guard by this new type of mobilization. The scope and intensity of the hyper-cynical, derogatory, and often downright fascist content that reached millions of people inside and outside the US had not been anticipated. Counter-strategies hence were not immediately available and especially the left found itself scrambling to respond adequately. It is here that the catchphrase "the left can't meme" originated, as memes were hardly used at all in left-wing contexts, giving the right-wing a head start in the field of internet culture.

A lot has changed since then, and the left has long started meming. This contribution wants

to explore the potential of left memes in times of increasing authoritarianism and a general radicalization of politics. Memes as carriers of meaning are as visceral and immediate as present-day politics: in order to be successful, they must evoke an emotional response from the onlooker or else be buried in the depths of social media algorithms. In order to achieve this, left memes comically summarize often complex topics in an average of one to four images. The topics range from left infighting, discussions on left theory, and responses to current events, to general commentary and pop-cultural references. The format of a meme can vary and extends to only text, to images with or without text, to collages of multiple images, or even to gifs and videos. Therefore, there are no real limitations as to what a meme can look like. While there certainly are patterns, many memes defy them. It might hence even be argued that any form of online content, which conveys a meaning that is readily understandable and which is passed on to other people, is a meme.

The circulation of memes mostly occurs on social media platforms. This makes them accessible to whoever frequents these platforms, but it also places them out of reach for everyone else. Age and tech-savviness thus clearly demarcate potential target groups. Regarding the practical political value of left memes, it can be argued that they offer easy entry points into theoretical debates and help elevate an understanding of existing problems. While basic content is mostly humorous, deeper layers of hope, despair, and criticism are also often present.

Resistance, Ridicule, and Belonging in Times of the Internet

Fabio Braun
Carrasco



Copyright issues are usually not taken very seriously when it comes to memes.



Left memes, moreover, take part in the constant recycling of images, as is inherent to all memes. Popular meme templates hence find their way

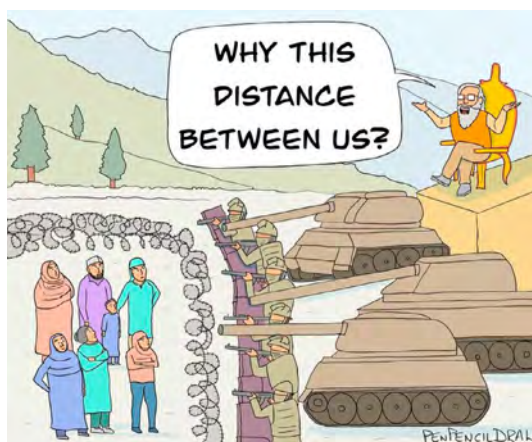
into left meming. The “Trade Offer Meme” and the “Suspicious Girlfriend Meme” are repurposed here to convey specific interpretations of British colonialism and of the oil industry. While drawing from the general meme stock in circulation, left memes often reproduce the gendered stereotypes present in the underlying meme. This is the case both with the “Suspicious Girlfriend Meme” and the meme about Hindi further along, in which women are portrayed as concerned only about trivial and profane things, while men are concerned with *real* political problems.



In times during which politics is often layered with opposing sets of meaning, memes can condense analysis into a few sentences. While liberalism in the US or social democracy in Europe usually portray themselves as benevolent and progressive alternatives to conservative politics, memes manage to point out how they merely represent the other side of the coin in the capitalist parliamentary party system. The unwillingness to implement fundamental changes and the complicity in oppression are transmitted almost effortlessly in a few sentences or in a short text combined with an image.



Much of the initial meme production and circulation came from the US and Europe, but the rest of the world has quickly caught up, using memes to discuss either general topics or regional issues and contexts. Wherever right-wing and authoritarian politics are on the rise, left memes seem to appear, both as a counter-strategy and as a coping mechanism. They help to create a shared expression of discontent with and resistance to the status quo. Publicly shared memes hence create space for the realization that you are not alone with the disappointment, rage, or disbelief generated by the bleak reality of present-day politics. There are others who feel the same. Through this memes become a powerful vehicle of shared emotion – a digital marker of (political) community and belonging in an increasingly hostile world.



Despite memes focusing on regional or national contexts, their simple messaging allows them to be easily understood, even if the audience is not fully familiar with the contextual specificities. They sometimes even manage to convey information that the onlooker might not have known before, for example that there might be something problematic in Hindi being India's national language.



Authoritarian politics elicits all manner of responses. While many memes are concerned with analysis, mourning, or rage, others turn to head-on attacks through ridicule.



It is not only political critiques that are to be found in left memes. Mechanisms of social reproduction, gentrification, and the left's own occasional inability to create viable alternatives also find their way into meming. Memes hence invite the viewer to question and criticize both the outside world, but also the viewer's own position within it.



Climate change and capitalism's ineptitude in addressing it, are some of the most often recurring themes. Ecological degradation, the coordinated

shaming of individuals for problems that are systemic, and the Global North's responsibility for much of the destruction we witness today re-appear constantly in memes – reflecting the sense of urgency but also the anxiety associated with the impending climate crisis.



Feminism is another topic that can be found across the board and in many variations. Often, the approach is to look at male behaviour in order to propose feminist critiques of patriarchal society, as present in “woke” circles as it is anywhere else.

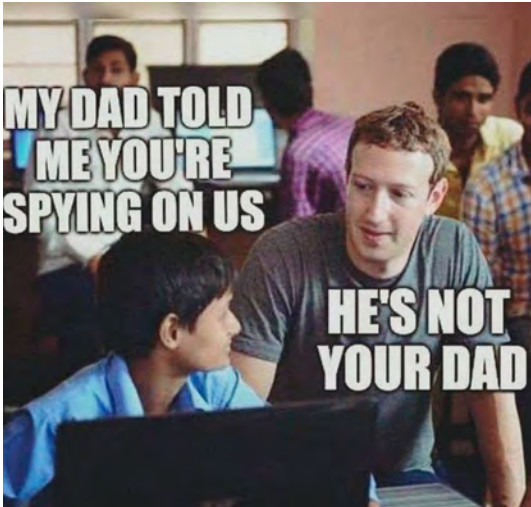


Toxic masculine, me? But – I'm a vegan!.

Left spaces – also online – would not be left spaces without infighting.



The alarming influence of social media algorithms and their power to create, shape, and distort meaning, is painfully felt on left-leaning meme pages. While right-wing echo-chambers continuously expand, left voices are increasingly silenced and marginalized on social media platforms. Mark Zuckerberg is hence one of the favourite targets for the occasional dig, as are Jeff Bezos and other tech billionaires. Their blatant attempts at directing public opinion are regularly scrutinized and ridiculed.



The internet and internet surveillance are also cornerstone topics in left meming. Firstly, because the internet is the meme's natural habitat – even though memes have long since crossed over into the analogue world as well – and secondly, because the realization has set in that the internet is neither as free as many people had initially hoped, nor as conducive to an unhindered circulation of information as it could be. Social media platforms seem rather to strengthen biases and to help radicalize formerly moderate opinions.



Left memes hence come in many forms and fulfil a variety of functions. They denounce and critique; they ridicule and attack; they console and uplift; they demand introspection and outward analysis. They are, furthermore, freed from the restraints usually placed on many forms of public communication with regards to wording, formatting, and other established patterns of transmitting information. Memes are snappy, witty, and often enough, blunt and harsh – especially when lashing out at a status quo perceived to be detrimental to the planet's and our own well-being.

While increasing authoritarianism and far-right mobilization seem to be becoming more common around the globe, memes offer a kind of solace rooted in the identification of common problems. By humorously – albeit sometimes bordering on cynically – expressing these problems, a common affective understanding emerges: something is going terribly wrong. Memes hence diffuse, and partly even create a shared conception of what is askew in politics today. Making a problem known, both factually and emotionally, is often the first step in addressing it.

Illustrations

The authorship information here almost exclusively refers to the Instagram and Twitter handles that posted the memes in question. There is, however, no guarantee that these accounts are also the original creators of the memes. It is to be assumed that many of the memes were “discovered” elsewhere. Listed in order of appearance. Top to bottom, left to right.

redheadrevolutionary
 leftistperspective
 antiimp_memes
 memetides
 theguerrillafeminist / @cullenenn
 penpencildraw
 unsavoury.indian.memes
 salt.xmt
 millennialreviewdotorg
 italyctuals_images_only
 @andrwfhenderson
 h0evietuni0nmemes
 @ThoughtSlime
 memetides
 grapejuiceboys
 possumkratom69
 literallyeverymeme
 possumkratom69

