The Discourse of Memes: Regressive Politics and Internet Culture

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By Shahbaz Khayambashi

ABSTRACT

A new popular form of political debate has appeared in the meme, a simple, repeatable and ephemeral medium that mixes images and words to pass on information. This form has become extremely helpful for regressive and reactionary politics, as right-leaning groups now use the meme to spread misinformation and disinformation to their supporters. This paper discusses the meme's use in the spread of willful disinformation in online spaces around the Black Lives Matter movement through humor, false information and appropriation of talking points.

Keywords: memes, internet culture, right-wing politics, social media

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RESUMEN

Una nueva forma popular de debate político ha aparecido en el meme, un medio simple, repetible y efímero que mezcla imágenes y palabras para transmitir información. Esta forma se ha vuelto extremadamente útil para la política regresiva y reaccionaria, ya que los grupos de derecha ahora usan el meme para difundir información errónea y desinformación a sus seguidores. Este artículo analiza el uso del meme en la difusión de desinformación deliberada en espacios en línea en torno al movimiento Black Lives Matter a través del humor, la información falsa y la apropiación de puntos de conversación.

Palabras clave: memes, cultura de internet, política de dere-cha, redes sociales

模因话语：倒退的政治与网络文化

摘要

模因是一种简单、可重复且短暂的媒介，它将图像和文字加以混合以传递信息。模因出现了一种新的大众政治辩论形式，这种形式对于倒退和反动的政治非常有帮助，因为右翼集团现在利用模因向他们的支持者传播错误信息和虚假信息。本文探讨了模因在围绕"黑人的命也是命"运动的网络空间中通过幽默、错误信息和挪用谈话要点来故意传

关键词：模因，网络文化，右翼政治，社交媒体

THE ROOTS OF A NEW WEAPON

The meme is a comparatively new social medium, its modern usage going back a few decades at the most, and yet its appeal and political power should not be under-stated. The meme as a concept is an often ill-defined one. Fortunately, there are enough studies on memes that one can use to attempt to reach a consensus on what a meme is and what its purpose is. The term meme goes back to evolutionary biol-ogist Richard Dawkins, who first coined it as a shortening of the ancient Greek word, *mimema*, or "imitated thing" (192). Dawkins took the term meme, shortened similarly to the term gene, to be defined as an idea or behavior or something similar that spreads within a culture from person to person. While originally meant for a genetic purpose, the idea of the meme began to become more common with the concurrent

rise of market consciousness and internet culture, eventually becoming enveloped in what Bill Wasik refers to as viral culture, a culture based on new phenomena becoming relevant through a sudden culture, that is speedy, shameless, ephemeral and, perhaps most importantly, interactive (8). It needs to be pointed out that this analysis is being done around the meme as a phenomenon of internet culture. Even then, there are many different kinds of memes in internet culture, whether one considers viral videos or webcomics or even questions of what constitutes a meme as memes—after all, meme is autological, as the idea of a meme is a meme itself. This study will be mainly focused on a specific object which has in turn come to be referred to as a meme without clarification. This is the object that was once known as an image macro, which went on to colloquially stand in for memes in general. An image macro version of a meme is fairly simple, often taking the form of an image with words written on it. They are designed to be easy to create and easy to spread.

Throughout the 21st century, the meme has transformed from underground internet esoterica to an important ephemeral political tool. In fact, the right-wing employs a variety of different memes in their opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement. These varieties can be differentiated as humorous memes, informative memes and appropriative memes.[1] While these varieties of memes have many things in common, each of them has a series of identifiers and styles that can be used for vastly different reasons. With each covering a particular area, all of them together become an extremely effective weapon in the right's newest self-created attempt at a race war.

The meme introduces an oversimplified version of a topic, verifies said topic through nothing more than its visuality

and disappears before anyone can fact check its claims. Of course, by the time it disappears, its "fact" begins to spread, as a meme does, gaining further veracity the more that it is repeated. While the meme has been weaponized by the right, the left has also begun to use it to its full potential, discovering its power. This is the central tenet of this chapter: the meme's format is an extremely important tool for reactionary politics, owing both to its simplicity, so as to be able to appeal to anyone regardless of education or sociopolitical class, and to its inability to be held accountable. Reactionary politics requires something that is ultimately the opposite of the imagery used for revolutionary means.

The two most important questions from this point on are how is a meme used in a sociopolitical context and why are they so successful? First off, memes have all the abilities of images, with all the trust that comes with them. As WJT Mitchell has insisted, the 21st century's main concern is that of imagery, as our communicative style and rhetoric have moved away from Richard Rorty's linguistic turn into the new pictorial turn (11), an idea also mentioned by Barbie Zelizer as a visual turn (115). It is with this turn that images become so much more important, not only to possess but also to understand. Nicholas Mirzoeff's study of the human right to look discusses the history of visuality, wherein both the objects of looking and the ability to look have been heavily controlled in one way or another. Visuality, as defined by Mirzoeff, refers to the authority behind the ability to look (2). It is important to remember that this visuality has consistently been a part of the state ideology. It is under this visuality that the pictorial turn must operate—when there are a group of people in charge of visuals, the pictorial turn will benefit those people, just as the literate turn benefitted those who could afford higher education.

So, within this pictorial turn with everything that it entails, the image macro-style meme must empower the hegemonic status quo. While the idea of an organized race war is not necessarily part of the hegemonic status quo, it is the final result of many elements of hegemony within American society, specifically white supremacy. Even those in power who disavow fringe white supremacist groups need to embrace white supremacy to hold onto their power. This is done through a powerful two-pronged system of populism and trustworthiness. These are the two running themes through the majority of analysts working on memes as their objects of study. Carl Chen points to the power of memes coming from their inexpensive (15) and contagious (7) nature, pointing to their lack of value, allowing them to be more easily exploited, replicated and shared and to their relatability as a strong point (11). Patrick Davison is more interested in their speed of transmission and fidelity of form, leading to something that is honest despite being so easy to spread (122). He also notes the medium's constant evolution and yet anonymous nature (127). And Ryan Milner notes the meme's reliance on pop culture, remixing the works of others in a multimodal way (2357). This can all be used to define the meme as a valueless—or perhaps even post-value—object whose purpose is to mutate and spread, while still holding a certain fidelity to the original, dependent on a reliable sense of understanding, gained through inside jokes and pop culture.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that memes are a successful form of discourse simply because they place images with words. After all, decades before the internet, Susan Sontag stated that "photos furnish evidence" (5). Despite the fact that photos can lie or misinform, viewers are more likely to assume that images are trustworthy and less likely to question them as inaccurate. In fact, a psychological study by

Eryn Newman et al. found that when individuals were shown statements with nonprobative images, they were ultimately more likely to believe them than when shown statements by themselves (973). This is because the very placement of an image, no matter its relation to the statement, rapidly inflates the sense of perceived truth. This also goes a long way in explaining why a statement with a vaguely related image would be more likely to be believed as truth than questioned, because an image suggests evidence and evidence suggests truth. Another related reason why memes work is because, in the words of Andreu Casas and Nora Williams, images mobilize because they trigger emotions (372). Their study of tweeted images of Black Lives Matter protests found that tweets with imagery tended to be retweeted and interacted with far more frequently than those that were text only, especially when those images evoked feelings of anger, enthusiasm, and fear (372). In other words, imagery leads to more affective reactions and more interaction, ultimately becoming more effective than words ever could.

Heidi Huntington points out that memes are a perfect tool for the spread of subversive ideas, allowing an individual to make their thoughts known to a mass audience without fear of governmental or social retribution, owing to the meme's inherent anonymity (1). And, if enough of these anonymous subversive memes are released at one time, it becomes difficult to stop the rhetoric from being spread. This also allows for a populist notion behind the memes, as they will be spread by the people. Unfortunately, a lot of this populist subversive rhetoric, especially in a post-Trump era, is regressive and right-wing in nature, with the position of the powers that be moving away from just the government and into a failed notion of the "politically correct" or "woke" elites. This leads to far more aggressively bigoted and anti-social justice

ideas being spread on public platforms. Owing both to their speed of production and their facetious presentation, memes are often introduced as objects to not be taken seriously, with any question of their political meaning being dismissed with a simple "it's just a joke." As Helen Lewis suggests, it is this dichotomy between real and joke that causes great societal harm and furthers the political indoctrination of the new alt-right, where racist signs and symbols continue to be dismissed as jokes even though they have been adopted by racists ("The Joke"). This is where the importance of the meme to the political right begins, at the corner of joking and completely serious.[2]

USAGE OF MEMES IN ANTI-BLACK LIVES MATTER RHETORIC

Humorous Memes

Arguably the most common form of anti-Black Lives Matter meme, the humorous meme is what most people think of when they think of memes. These memes place text on an image, that text often taking the form of a joke or a reference. These jokes can be harmless or offensive, but the general idea behind them is to make the viewer laugh without necessarily causing harm. This may seem anti-intuitive with more offensive memes, but that is explained away by the location-specificity of these images, with certain memes having their own communities, separated from others. The reasoning is often portrayed as an attempt to keep people deemed unworthy out, as opposed to keeping the memes in, but there is a certain form of gatekeeping at play. Other offensive memes will often operate under a similar style of gatekeeping. While racist, misogynistic, or otherwise bigoted memes exist, as do the communities that share them, these communities often exist within a bubble of sorts. Whether on mainstream websites

like Reddit or separate forums like 4chan, these memes are essentially contained, acting as warnings for those who do not wish to view them to leave.

The way that the anti-Black Lives Matter humorous memes operate is the exact opposite. Instead of existing within a space where their racist views would be appreciated, they are meant to be uploaded into spaces where Black people and their allies would be more likely to see them, often on very mainstream platforms like Facebook or Twitter, frequently in the comment sections, as responses to people who dare to speak against the murder of Black people. Certain trolls will even forgo any pretense of attempting to have a good faith argument and simply spam dozens of these images in a row, in an attempt to hide the supportive comments and fill up the page with offensive memes.

These memes are not particularly creative either. A general perusal of anti-Black Lives Matter memes shows that the vast majority of the humor in these memes consists of outdated racist jokes, such as jokes about Black people not knowing their fathers, Black people enjoying stereotypical foods, like fried chicken and watermelon, and Black people resembling gorillas or other apes. Often, the alleged humor is simply a thinly veiled attempt to say exactly what they mean without outright saying it—a dog-whistle—like a meme comparing Harambe, a gorilla shot by a zookeeper in 2016, to George Floyd.[3] This example confirms that there is no real purpose to this variety of meme. The meme is not meant to convey emotion or logic; the cruelty of it is the sole point.

Similarly, there are other memes of this variety which at least make an attempt at appealing to emotion or a twisted sense of logic to get their point across. However, again, without a humorous veneer, these points would be rightfully called out

as racist. As such, these memes will take very blatant positions, stating their racist opinion outright, with some sort of meme-based formal decision. For example, these memes may write their statement in a way that references a meme: an image of a Black man holding a white woman at gunpoint is captioned "These the kinds a dudes that be like 'I can't breath!' When police come" [sic], quickly—sloppily, in fact, as if the point was less to make a coherent point and more to be racist—stating their position, their racist beliefs and their denial of the established narrative but doing so with a fake vernacular similar to that of memes created by Black netizens.

Similarly, they may simply replace humor with a reference to something humorous. These memes will simply take on the disguise of joking by using the image of a character who viewers will recognize as humorous. One example of such a meme incorporates an image of Squirrely Dan, a character from the Canadian sitcom *Letterkenny*. This image is captioned "have you ever noticed the police leave you alone if you aren't doing anything illegal?" Nothing about Squirrely Dan suggests any right-wing leanings. In fact, the character is often shown as an unusually progressive man when juxtaposed with his working-class, small-town upbringing. This meme did not even bother to incorporate his distinctive style of speech. One might even assume that the creator of this meme has never watched the show. The only point at hand is to make a reference to a pop culture icon as a way to suggest humor where none exists, in order to create a pretense of racial humor, as opposed to humorless racism. Squirrely Dan is an unusual object for this, but he is not the only pop culture character to fall victim to this phenomenon. He is joined by the likes of the Minions from that eponymous franchise, Sam Elliot, the Dos Equis guy and a variety of other, disparate characters. In cases like these, the mere recognizability of the

individual photographed and their connection to popular humor replaces the telling of a joke.

A lot of this style of humor is also heavily dependent on juxtapositions between strawman arguments, often taking the form of "us" versus "them" images, us, of course, being whatever right-wing cause is being supported at the time. These memes run the gamut of the varieties, often taking on informative or appropriative guises. The most important part of the creation of these memes is a total stripping away of context. For example, a meme was posted onto Facebook with the title "notice the difference," in that classic all-caps, impact font. The top image depicts "how Republicans protest" while the bottom image depicts "how Democrats protest." The top image depicts a series of cars driving down a road, in single file, surrounded by people waving American flags. Not many of the people in the photo are overly visible, but the few that are visible are white. The bottom photo depicts a Black man standing atop a burning car, holding a police shield that has been spray-painted with the letter ACAB—a rallying cry that stands for "All Cops Are Bastards," as a reminder that all police officers are complicit in police violence when they are unwilling to turn against the bad police officers—while surrounded by a large number of other, mainly Black, individuals.

There are several things going on in these photos. For one thing, dog whistles are employed heavily, conflating whiteness with patriotism and Blackness with violence and a proposed sense of criminality. There is also a political game being played, signaling back to the conspiratorial implication that Black Lives Matter are a Democratic organization used by the party for political gain. Even though the group has clearly stated Marxist leanings, the American right wing's belief in the Marxist leanings of the center-right Democratic

party sees this as enough reason to conflate the two. Finally, the rest of the context that is stripped from these images paints a different picture. The bottom photo depicts an event that took place on the 29th of May 2020, in Atlanta, Georgia. The image, distributed by Getty Images, is one of a limited number of images depicting violence by Black individuals—it may even be unfair to characterize it as violence, as that violence is towards an object and not an individual—among a larger collection of images of peaceful protest and police violence, so the choice of image is extremely telling. What is even more telling is the cropping and text placement on the image. The way that this meme is composed hides the fact that the car on fire is a police car. With the clear political placement of the meme's creator, it is difficult to tell why they attempted to hide that, but an image of an unmarked car being destroyed would surely lead to the type of result being sought.

Meanwhile, what is missing from the top image is the fact that it depicts the right-wing protests of anti-lockdown protests, likely those that took place in Lansing, Michigan on the 15th of April 2020. Despite right-wing calls to make it legal to run over protestors who block roads and sloganeering with phrases such as "all lives splatter," Republicans began to travel *en masse* to places like Lansing and block access to hospitals with their cars, in order to call for an end to lockdown measures. In the time since this meme, Republicans have even gone as far as to storm the American Capital building with a stated mission to murder politicians and yet this style of meme has not slowed down. For some, the inability to see their own hypocrisy is what leads to this variety of meme making, while others simply do not care about their own hypocrisy. Specifically, many of those who monetize or turn such activity into an occupation have shown themselves

again and again to be incapable of honesty, but many of those who simply share or make such memes as a hobby appear unaware of their own hypocrisy, especially when questioned in online spaces.

One should also be aware of the large number of online comics that make a career out of anti-Black—and frequently specifically anti-Black Lives Matter—sentiments. Some have made a career out of it—the likes of more enigmatic figures like StoneToss and Shadman and more traditional figures like Ben Garrison and A.F. Branco have an online following and make a variety of right-wing bigoted comics, to varying degrees—but there are also individuals who seem to make one-off strips, because they believe that their beliefs would be best described in such a format. It is important to point out that the medium does not make much difference, as these comics are still made to be easily spread and border on ephemerality. They also allow for a more timely, so to speak, take on issues of the day. This accounts for a lot of anti-Black Lives Matter comics taking the guise of editorials while incorporating imagery that would be at home in a minstrel show. In fact, this editorial aspect is more than likely why the creators of these comics feel they can get away with them.

Of course, this raises the question of why it is that these humorous memes are so popular, and why it is that blatant racists insist on disguising their racism behind a thin veneer of humor. The short answer to this question is that it is an attempt at plausible deniability. Despite the blatant racism that is often displayed by members of right-wing political parties, there is still a realization that it is a negative thing, especially for one's public image, to be a racist. While these individuals will gladly espouse racist beliefs, a large number of them—pretty much anyone to the left of self-avowed

Nazis—will refuse the label of racist, because they recognize it as a negative label. In the last decade or so, a variety of terms have been created to suggest one's racist views without being referred to as a racist—terms like race realist are often used to bypass this dilemma. As such, these people will often suggest that they are not anti-Black racist; they are merely anti-Black Lives Matter, an ultimate BLMization of the Black body. They will further suggest that their issue is with Black Lives Matter, the organization, and not with the slogan.[4] It is with this bit of mental gymnastics that they will be able to repeat their racist beliefs under the guise of anti-organizational rhetoric. However, it does not take much to realize that the jokes being posted against the organization are no different from those that would be posted against the individuals. In fact, they often find themselves without any mention of Black Lives Matter. So, they claim plausible deniability in four simple words: it's just a joke.

The greatest strength of the humorous meme is that thin layer of alleged comedy that surrounds the racist beliefs therein. While the opinions and beliefs are very real, this veneer allows the meme's creator to essentially play victim when called out. Owing to the image's guise as humor, the cry of "can't you take a joke" takes the meme's creator out of the defensive position, replacing them with their critic. It is no longer an issue of racism, but rather an issue of one's right to make an offensive joke. This gives the critic a vast variety of negative labels running the gamut from humorless and easily offended to censorious—both as a condemner and as a censor—and an infringer on the freedom of others. This singular act of criticizing a racist statement will immediately demonize the critic and let the meme's creator off the hook, especially in digital spaces where freedom of speech is given more importance than freedom to criticize. In fact, there

is a whole new vocabulary being built around this style of censure—when the urge to criticize is deemed political correctness, the act of criticism is deemed cancel culture and the point behind the criticism is called critical race theory, and all three are oversimplified to a point where it becomes easier to demonize them, sometimes it is easier to keep out of the dialogue.

This refusal to engage is ultimately what these meme makers are hoping for, because they recognize the absurdity of their claims of being non-racist and they further recognize that they cannot defend themselves against this designation. This is exactly why they insist that it is all just a joke. Of course, it is not just a joke. Even in cases where it is a joke, the addition of *just* is inaccurate, because there is no such thing as "just a joke," especially in a political joke. Numerous studies have found a deep personal connection between racist humor and actual, unquestionable racist beliefs. These studies have been conducted in the United States (Yoon 93), Canada (Baker et al. 103) and Australia (Grigg and Manderson 195) and they all lead to the same results; the fact that racist humor is simply an offshoot of actual racist beliefs, often in countries that claim to be post-racial and color-blind, wherein the only way to respectfully state one's racist beliefs is to disguise them as jokes. Unfortunately, it is this appeal to humor that often brings out comedians in defense of the alleged joke, out of a fear of some slippery slope where not being able to use a racial slur will eventually lead to comedy becoming illegal. This hyperbole makes it difficult to criticize such bad faith humor. And yet, it is this inability to criticize this style of humorous meme, out of fear of being deemed humorless or censorious, that is its greatest strength as a tool for regressive political rhetoric.

Informative Memes

It is necessary in introducing the informative meme to immediately point out that it is an absolute misnomer. In the world of memes, this variety fulfills the role of a tabloid, allowing a medium for the quick and easy distribution of misinformation. It could be occasionally argued that this misinformation is not the primary purpose, that the creator is not attempting to create misinformation, and that is indeed a fair assessment. However, the format of the meme, as a medium, would inherently lead to the creation of misinformation. The meme is not meant for complex information. It is meant to be exclusive on the amount of text, direct to the point and somewhat confrontational. In order for information to be transmitted through a meme, it must be cut down to its most basic elements and exclude any sense of nuance or certain contextual cues. This is not *necessarily* an exclusively right-wing issue, as many issues of importance to all political backgrounds fall victim to a similar loss. However, when speaking of anti-Black Lives Matter memes, it is an almost exclusively right-wing issue.[5]

The issue does not end with misinformation, however. Owing to the meme's baffling ascension to political relevance, many bad faith right-wing commentators also use it to spread disinformation. Where misinformation can be the result of a mistake or of one's unintentional location within an echo chamber, disinformation is intentional and depends on an echo chamber; knowing one's audience is extremely necessary in situations like this and this audience is exactly what is needed for this disinformation to become an ideology and for that ideology to become action. This disinformation does not even necessarily need to be realistic or logical because the meme gives it an air of legitimacy. It is important to remember that the roots of QAnon, possibly the most successful

modern right-wing, regressive political grift, exist in memes on websites like 4chan, Facebook and, to some extent, YouTube, locations of minimalist, meme-dependent rhetoric.

This meme style is also noteworthy because of its surprising ability to be monetized. While a lot of people do create these memes for nothing more than political gain—often just to "own the libs," as they might say—there are whole organizations based around creating these informative memes, occasionally with a hint of humor, based on the belief or assumption that younger people will be more easily swayed by providing them your rhetoric in a meme format. These groups, with names like Turning Point USA, Liberty Hangout and Prager U, attempt to create a sense of legitimacy for themselves through a variety of signifiers. First, they tend to give themselves educational designations. Prager U takes the guise of a university, while Turning Point advertises their ideology on American college campuses rid higher education of its "liberal bias." Secondly, they push their ideas as revolutionary—despite the right wing being inherently anti-revolutionary—whether they are calling for a turning point or advertising their love of liberty. Finally, these organizations place publicity above even their own message. Ultimately, being seen is more important than what they say, because they recognize that their ideas need to be seen by many for the few who accept them to have any large numbers behind them. This is why they often participate in publicity stunts meant to reframe transgression as reactionary, like the Liberty Hangout founder walking around a campus with a rifle or Turning Point employees wearing diapers to show how modern students are "babies." Once they are seen and accepted, their messages can be spread to their audience who will, in turn, spread it to their own captive social media audience, which will continue the spread.

At this point, the informative meme's power becomes apparent. The point of an informative meme, at its base, is not to spread established, accurate and confirmed information, but rather to create "information" which can be spread to an audience who will refuse to confirm anything that agrees with their sensibilities. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, numerous studies and theories have shown that images realize falsities. In other words, placing an image next to a textual caption is much more likely to convince a viewer that the caption is accurate, even if the photo does not provide visual proof of the statement being made. Creators of this style of meme take advantage of this bias and create memes which incorporate images which often fall into one of three categories, neutral, contextless and photoshopped. The neutral images are unusually the rarest variety. What this means is that they will simply use an image of the person or organization to whom they are referring. The only purpose that this variety of image serves is to essentially remind the viewer of the person to whom they are referring. A meme accusing a politician of a heinous act could simply incorporate an official photograph of said politician to give reality to the accusation through a simple reminder of the politician's face.

The contextless image is far more prevalent and involves using an unflattering image to give credence to the claims being made by making the accusation appear more legitimate. For example, an accusation of violence against Black Lives Matter might use an image of a looter who is not affiliated with Black Lives Matter or an image of someone who has been beaten by protestors without mentioning that they had threatened the protestors with violence first. This variety also depends heavily on images of individuals appearing crazed or sickly. Often, these memes need to push an idea of their opponents as mentally or physically damaged, in order to show

their own superiority. This is done by finding images of their opponents appearing less than presentable. There is a very serious racial and gender-based issue at play here, as white men are far less frequently victims of this visual manipulation. Black and brown racialized men are often darkened and given exaggerated stereotypically racialized characteristics, while women are either made to look older, sicker, or less intelligent than they are. Meanwhile, someone who happens to be a racialized woman is given the worst of both worlds. In these situations, the truth is irrelevant—as long as the text attached to the image seems true, based on the properties of the image. These memes recognize the importance of visual proof to their cause, doing their best to gather proof even if that proof is inaccurate.

Finally, the photoshopped image is fairly self-explanatory. These are images which do not see a need to conform to reality, instead creating their own reality through the modification of images. The photoshopped variety of meme image is an interesting one, because of the various layers of its ability to convince. For example, one can question the realism of the image, whether it was photoshopped by someone who knows how to flawlessly manipulate images or an amateur who leaves too many digital artifacts for the image to be convincing. There is a point where the photoshopped image stops being realistic and finding that point could be a challenge. Finally, there is a question of audience. The meme creator needs to be aware of who they are planning to trick. For example, a younger, more technology-literate audience may be tricked by a particularly well-done photoshop, but a badly done photoshop would only find success on a platform with a less technology-literate audience, where the images are either less likely to be shown to more aware people or where the audience would be less likely to believe the more aware

people when they question the image. As such, this variety is often less successful, but more dangerous when successful.

And, of course, it is when these memes are successful that the real issue begins, because, with informational memes, once a "fact" is stated once, it remains a fact forever. Just as nothing can be removed from the internet, no statement can be forgotten from the internet either. No matter how many times a false statement is refuted, its original existence means that someone will still continue to believe it. The interesting thing about this process of "factification" is that, first, the un-sourced nature of these memes makes them more difficult to prove and therefore to disprove—not impossible, but it requires more work than can be done in the attention span of the internet—and second, the facts are designed to outlive the images. When one side has no interest in good faith arguments, it is much easier to get past the criticism. So, while the image is available, the arguments will often revolve around fallacious reasoning around the critic's inability to disprove the facts at play: the more nonsensical the facts, the better this "argument" works. It is when the image disappears, how-ever, that the true power is revealed, as the factification con-tinues, as people will often remember hearing a fact but not where they heard it. As such, these lies become truths upon something as simple as remembrance. A falsity is given legiti-macy first by an image, then by memory, never receiving that legitimacy through a legitimate venue.

There are numerous informative memes that cover a vast variety of topics, often going with whatever is in the news at the time. As such, it is important to look at the various subjects that are covered within an anti-Black Lives Matter sphere. Perhaps the most common theme of this variety of meme is the "criminal record" theme. These memes attempt

to absolve the murderous police officers of wrongdoing by pointing out the victims' past criminal records. These memes will occasionally incorporate a mugshot or caricature of the victim, but the text is often the most important part. By pointing out the victim's past criminality—often ignoring the context for why young Black men are criminalized at a young age—the strain of wrongdoing is immediately taken removed from the status quo—often white, often male police officers[6]—and placed back where the right wing believes it belongs, on the backs of Black individuals who refuse to step in line. This criminalization makes these memes easier to create, but a lack of a criminal record does not harm their creations, as "innocent" victims can still be accused by way of the criminalization of Black bodies, prevalent in statements about how a young, Black man looked "crazed" or "dangerous" or "older than he was." The right-wing is reliant on Black bodies being criminalized and white supremacy remaining unquestioned, which makes this theme extremely popular.

This theme can be somewhat extended to two similar themes: memes questioning the innocence of protestors and of Black Lives Matter as a whole. In response to calls for better training for the police, one such meme suggests that "maybe it's the people, not the cops, that need better training." This quote is attributed to Larry Elder and is accompanied by an image of a white woman giving a Black police officer the middle finger. Once again, the police are placed in the role of victim—racialized victim, at that—while all protestors are represented by a singular, (rightfully) enraged woman who let her emotions come out in the form of an "inappropriate" gesture. One of the most frequently used bad faith arguments of the right has to do with civility and public appropriateness. As such, they will pretend to be indignant about something

that they would not look at twice if it was done by one of their own. Even beyond that, the singular middle finger is stripped of all context and presented as an inappropriate response—as if it was not a response to, not just murder, but chemical warfare against protestors.

Another element to take note of is the use of this particular quote. The quote could have been spoken by anyone, but this particular speaker was chosen. Larry Elder is an American conservative talk radio host. He is also a Black man. These individuals may hate Black people, but they love Black people who agree with them. Such individuals are helpful for the cause, as they can be put forth as proof of plausible deniability when the right is accused of racism. These people are also the first to be cast aside when they are no longer useful. This casting aside has historical precedence—Ernst Rohm as the resident gay Nazi being an obvious example—but it has also been seen in online discourse, wherein racialized, gendered or otherwise othered individuals are quickly banished when they go against the party line or are otherwise deemed no longer useful. Another similar meme quotes former Wisconsin sheriff David Clarke, who is quoted as saying that the statement "Black Lives Matter suggests racial superiority." In other words, the meme maker took the statement that their side has been ignorantly saying for years, found a Black man who agreed and used him as their spokesman. This comes from the belief that, if a Black man agrees with them, that means they are not racist.

Black Lives Matter and its founders are also constant victims of attacks by these posts. Firstly, the organization is constantly accused of various crimes through this medium. Images of fires or injured individuals are frequently attributed to Black Lives Matter with no evidence. One such meme depicts som-

eone who attempted to stab rioters outside a bar and received a beating as a result. In this reasoning, Black bodies equal Black Lives Matter and, if Black Lives Matter committed an act of violence, it is inherently intolerable and must be repudiated, even if it was in self-defense—essentially, the exact opposite of the treatment of police officers. Similarly, another such meme depicts an old man bleeding from the face and speaking to a news reporter. This man was later found to have been attempting to shoot protestors with a bow and arrow. However, like the earlier examples of informative memes, the truth travels much more slowly than meme "facts."

Finally, one of the most insidious themes in these memes is the "rich BLM leader" archetype. Black Lives Matter is a decentralized organization which was founded by several queer, Black women, which gives to charities. This is at once the most contemptible organization for a right-wing agitator and something that cannot be outwardly criticized to avoid giving away their prejudicial ideology. As such, it becomes necessary to question their ideology from a perspective to which they do not necessarily subscribe. One of the most common meme narratives that applies to this theme is the frequent attacks on movement co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors. Once again, the general way to attack these individuals is through cognitive dissonance, pushing racist and sexist ideas while insisting on their lack of racism and sexism and supporting capitalism while decrying it. The attacks on Khan-Cullors tend to focus on her participation in capitalist society, questioning her possession of several properties and insisting that these properties were bought with stolen donations. Essentially, if she is a Black woman, she must be a thief and if she is part of an organization that holds any Marxist beliefs, she must starve and own nothing. It is important to keep in mind that these individuals only care

because of Khan-Cullors' political leanings, as they would likely celebrate her if she agreed with them.

Another similar situation involves a man by the name of Christopher DeVries. DeVries was arrested in 2020 on child pornography charges. He also happens to be a supporter of Black Lives Matter. In order to disavow the movement, a series of memes were created calling him the founder of Black Lives Matter, making the obvious claim that Black Lives Matter was founded by a pedophile. There are a few things at play here. First, these memes often name the people they are attacking leaders of leaderless organizations. This can be seen in a lot of anti-Antifa memes. Perhaps more importantly, the fact that Black Lives Matter, as a hashtag and fledgling organization, was founded by women is being brought under question by these memes, because of the belief that, if there is a shadowy organization, it must secretly be controlled by a man. These memes, at once, criminalize Black men and diminish Black women. Ultimately, one must question if the individuals behind these memes are making an intentional point of spreading disinformation or if they are simply ignorant.

This question could potentially be answered with one interesting video found during this research. This video was posted to the social media platform TikTok. The video begins with a white man with a thick beard and an American flag hat talking in front of a *New York Post* article. While this is not a meme, it is important because it follows the general rhetoric of an informative meme. The man angrily and smugly discusses the news article, referring to how the "organization"—his finger quotes—Black Lives Matter took in 90 million dollars last year and how none of it went toward helping anybody. This is accompanied with a simply and frankly unnecessary image of several Black individuals in front of a black background and

a caption naming the group, how much money they accrued in 2020 and the line "funds used to help Black communities: $0." This is followed by the person responding to it, whose takedown of the video explains all the issues with this style of rhetoric. First, this man uses a conservative-leaning source in the *New York Post* and still mischaracterizes its argument. A link to the Black Lives Matter impact statement would have disproven his central thesis, but he avoids it. Then, this video is posted by a secondary source whose video is seen by many others. So, despite the primary source being ignorant at best and a malicious liar at worst and the secondary source deleting her account, everybody who saw the original uncited, mischaracterized video—including the secondary source—will believe the original statement and likely not even see its refutation. So, a total lie becomes the truth for many. As the poster states, "[Y]ou guys say that the left uses the word racist too often, but what the fuck else are we meant to call it when you deliberately lie to smear the biggest Black social justice movement in the country?"

And that is ultimately why this variety of meme is so useful for right-wing aggressors. As Stephen Colbert once famously stated "facts have a liberal bias." When the facts do not subscribe to your viewpoint, there are two options: you either change your viewpoints or you create your own facts. One of the most often stated ideas that is used to argue against provided facts in online discussion is that the source being used to refute your claim comes from a leftist source and it is therefore useless. Unfortunately, the shifting of the Overton window means that everything from Snopes to *The Washington Post* is now considered leftist media, with the only valuable sources being the sources that subscribe to right-wing ideology. The informative meme is essentially an attempt at creating a brand new, populist right-wing media platform. If

the right-wing internet can create its own facts, then there will be nothing to stop them from stating anything they wish as fact. And, if they have control over the facts, they have control over the narrative. In other words, this is less about putting their opponents down and more about raising themselves to their opponents' level, even if it is at the sacrifice of reality.

Appropriative Memes

Appropriative memes share a lot in common with informative memes, in that they forgo humor and introduce their idea through historical or political ideas. What separates these memes from the informative ones is that they do not establish their own facts, they merely recontextualize and reappropriate the facts and ideas of others. This variety of meme is slightly rarer, but it is also extremely damaging, as it often takes the form of racist individuals using the words of old, often deceased, anti-racism advocates to attack or question modern anti-racism advocates. This results from the constant evolution of social justice ideals, making the previous iteration seem more palatable in comparison to the more modern version. This is perhaps most blatantly apparent in anti-feminist circles, when anti-feminists suggest that third-wave feminism goes too far in comparison to the second wave, when many of the issues that they have with feminism were introduced in the second wave. Once again, their refusal to commit to research ensures that their ideas are wrong.

When it comes to anti-racism advocacy, there is a very similar process of normalization among racists. What follows is an oversimplified, non-intensive attempt at showing the absurdity at play. Slavery abolitionists were once considered overly radical. Then, with the arrival of the civil rights groups of the 1960s, the anti-slavery advocates would be the ones brought

up as the right way to fight for one's rights and the right goal to have. And yet, the same people who hated the leaders of the civil rights movement will now hold up Martin Luther King, Jr. as an example of how to protest racism, especially when compared to the inappropriate antics of Black Lives Matter. While the goals have always been the same things that the American dream promises every American, it just so happens that the newest person or organization fighting for those rights is doing it incorrectly.

The mention of King is not just a random selection—the vast majority of these memes incorporate his words as a way to speak down to Black people, often using King's speeches to question either the violence of Black people or their refusal to take responsibility of their own lives. One such meme compares King to Black Lives Matter, labelling the meme "liberal logic 101" and labelling the two sides "MLK" and "BLM," respectively. MLK is quoted as saying "hate cannot drive out hate," while BLM is quoted as saying "white lives don't matter! Kill the cops!!" It does not need to be stated, but the first obvious issue is that the second quote is not something that has been spoken by anyone. The multiple exclamation marks are likely there to indicate an uneducated piece of writing, but the fact is that these words were taken directly from the meme creator's brain. That is not important, however. What is important is the suggestion that Black rights and anti-racist advocacy has moved away from anti-hate beliefs and toward the hatred of white people and police officers. This meme says more about its creator than they likely meant by conflating whiteness with law enforcement, as if one cannot exist without the other. It also conflates Black lives matter with the idea that a statement being true makes their vision of its opposing statement—white lives matter, cops' lives matter—false. This meme insists on the idea that equality is a ze-

ro-sum game and that more Black rights means fewer white rights. Again, one cannot truly know if this is what the meme creator actually believes, or if this is being done to feed an ignorant audience.

Furthermore, one of the biggest complaints against this style of meme is just how sanitized King's message becomes in its presence. Many critics of the white appropriation of King have questioned why white people are so obsessed with his "I have a dream" speech or his quotes on non-violence—the last refuge of the colonialist bourgeois when they realize their hold on power is slipping, according to Frantz Fanon—while ignoring his more radical beliefs. The meme mentioned above is captioned "you can't pretend to honor a man while completely ignoring everything he stood for," making this point even more obvious. King's whole legacy—the things that made this meme creator's ancestors hate him in his day as much as they hate Black Lives Matter today—has been distilled to a more modern version of "love thy neighbor" without a hint of necessary context. King preached anti-hate sentiments, but he also preached the right to fight back. On March 10, 1968, King stated in his "The Other America" speech, that despite the fact that he condemns rioting, "a riot is the language of the unheard" ("The Other America"). This does not, however, go far enough in confirming the opinions of racist white people. As such, they need to pretend that such a quote has never existed. This is often the reason behind things such as the modern pushback against concepts such as critical race theory and the 1619 project. If the truth can be ignored, conservative beliefs can continue unquestioned.

This is also why these meme creators will often use these figures as nothing more than mouthpieces to spread their own racist beliefs. Using another example of King, a meme uses

an image of King during his "I have a dream" speech—the only thing some of these people know about King—with the caption "I have a dream that Black people will actually take responsibility for their actions, learn how to speak proper English and stop blaming white people for everything." A small watermark at the bottom designates this as comedy, as it bears the name of a humor website. This meme signifies itself as a humorous meme, but its appropriation of King's speech places it in this category. This meme's creator has taken a speech about unity and used it as a front for a racist attack, attacking not just the usual sense of victimhood that is placed upon the Black American population by racist white people, but also their speech. There is not connection that could possibly be made between the image and the caption, other than the appropriation of those first four words, but the connection to King makes the meme extra insulting with the suggestion that even King would be against the sensibilities of modern Black people.

If King is the most common target for such memes, Rosa Parks is likely a distant second. While other figures are far too controversial for the individuals who make these memes—Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon or any Black Panthers are often deemed as too violent or hateful by the sort of people who make these memes—Parks is still seen as mostly peaceful, even though her actions were criminal and anti-status quo for her time. Honestly, the criminality of her actions is likely one of the biggest reasons as to why she is less represented in these memes, along with the fact that she was a woman, as well as Black. One of these memes uses an image of Parks sitting on a bus with the caption "Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. But she didn't trash the bus. Big difference." Once again, a revolutionary, criminal act is stripped of all of its transgressive action and diminished to an acceptable act in

a modern sense to contest modern revolutionary acts. Parks' act of staying seated, which would have been admonished in her time, is established as the hegemonically correct way to protest—in other words, given white respectability—while the actions of Black Lives Matter are diminished to the most violent among them and explained away as an incorrect way to protest. Not only that, but these respectability politics come into play once more as the meme creator suggests that, despite Parks' actions being seen as acceptable, violence against the property of those in power is inherently unacceptable, both because property is often seen as more important than Black bodies and lives and because they believe that those in power should have no fear of losing that power.

The reason that these memes work is a bit more complicated. With the previous varieties of meme, the purpose is singular: the meme creator means to either mock Black people or to create misinformation about them. The appropriative meme exists somewhere in between the two: the image mocks, while the text misinforms. As Sontag points out, images are not inherently political: it is the text which gives them their political context (109). While this is not necessarily true within a pictorial turn context, it is definitely true about these memes. The image is meant to humiliate Black Lives Matter as an organization and Black people as a whole. It is meant to remind them of their past with the suggestion that they are devolving. Through this reminder, racist meme creators give themselves the right to decide what is right and what is wrong for people other than themselves.

The text, in turn, is meant to inform the viewer about the correct way to protest—the right way designated by the racist meme creator as dictated by hegemony—by further shaming the protestors. The basic idea behind the text of these me-

mes tends to follow a very basic template: the past, which was ostensibly successful—many people still believe that racism ended in the 1960s—is compared to the present, which is not successful. This lack of success is of course not taking into consideration the general novelty of the Black Lives Matter movement, nor the changes that they have in fact affected, because the meme creators do not believe that there are any changes to be made in the first place. This humiliation is what is being aimed for, but, in a strange way, Black populations are not the intended audience for these memes. Instead, these memes are meant for ignorant white audiences—ignorant meaning uneducated as opposed to unsophisticated—whose understanding of American Black liberation movements is limited to the radical non-violent resistance of the likes of King and Parks. There is a sense of recognition that those who are aware of the more righteously violent-if-need-be side of Black liberation will not be swayed by such arguments, but there is still an important audience available. These three varieties of memes show how important memes can be for regressive causes, but can memes be equally useful for progressive causes?

BLACK LIVES MATTER MEMES

While regressive and reactionary politics have certainly taken over large segments of meme creating communities, there is also a more niche competing leftist meme creating community. While Black Lives Matter is involved in a lot of meme creation—Black Lives Matter, as a slogan and as a hashtag, is itself a meme in a classical sense, after all—their contributions are a mere drop in the bucket when compared to the massive amounts of anti-Black Lives Matter memes. Still, the Black Lives Matter memes fill in certain holes of the online discourse on race relations.

While they are fewer in numbers, Black Lives Matter memes have two distinct qualities: first, the central arguments of their memes are often much more focused on the issues at hand instead of more generalized attacks, and second, they are much more likely to work in media that take more effort than their opponents. Firstly, the majority of the pro-Black Lives Matter memes tend to poke fun at police officers and anti-Black Lives Matter groups. The anti-police memes are fairly uniform— they often incorporate an image of the police committing acts of violence with a comment in form of text or, more rarely, performing an act of support followed by a comment on their hypocrisy. These memes are ultimately just as likely to incorporate pop culture elements, such as one such image of police officers taking a knee in Miami followed by an image of three men saying, "we were bad, but now we're good," an image that would be immediately recognizable to anyone who has seen the viral video "Sex Offender Shuffle." The memes about their opponents are often much more varied while still staying on point, so to speak: these memes often characterize their opponents as uneducated, self-centered or "bootlickers," people who are submissive to police. These memes also often make references to pop culture to get their points across, from *King of the Hill* and *Friends* to children's cartoons and pornography.[7] These are the memes that attempt to fight on similar grounds as their opponents. However, there are also plenty of memes that have had more work put into them whose real purpose is to educate or memorialize.

Like the aforementioned humorous memes, Black Lives Matter also incorporate a lot of comic strips into their meme-based communications, with a large number of them devoted to the ridiculous nature of responding to Black Lives Matter with all lives matter. Perhaps the most viral of all these comics is one that is attributed to the website chainsawsuit.com

which depicts a stick figure stating his belief that all lives matter before also declaring that all houses matter and spraying a house with a hose while another house burns down nearby. This comic is the most often posted and shared of these styles of comics, but it is not the only one. Similar comics include Matt Bors' explicitly political comics. One of these comics depicts an "All lives matter" protestor arguing with a Black Lives Matter protestor before telling a Muslim immigrant seeking help from who she assumes to be an ally "no Muslims allowed. Or can't you read?" Another such comic depicts the same man demanding a Black protestor protest peacefully, quietly, and respectfully, only being satisfied when the protestor dies. These comics are joined by an Adam Zygis comic in which an angry fuming white man steps into a variety of protests and demands that all the causes—including all cancers, all words, and all mammals—should matter, and a Steve Greenberg comic where people in positions of power remind others being victimized that there are a lot of people being similarly victimized. The format is almost a cliché, but it goes a long way in proving the ludicrous nature of this style of argument and seems to mainly serve the purpose of convincing those who hold this viewpoint. As a comic by Joel Pett puts it, we need to remember that we live in a time where the only lives that actually matter are "the obscenely rich, angry white dudes [and] fetuses," situating the right's priorities in simplified terms, namely capitalism, white supremacy, male chauvinism and anti-feminism, in a sort of left-wing dog whistle political style. It is often important for the left to imitate the right's simplification of political thought to both create successful satire and to show the other side how their tactics look.

The other style of meme-like creation is the Black Lives Matter memorial. This style of meme is wholly meant for the supporters. Unlike every other style of meme, these memorials

are not meant to make a point to outsiders and are meant exclusively to be consumed, appreciated, and spread by the inner group. These memorials are also surprisingly successful, often taking the form of a portrait of a victim or the ever popular "say his/her name" variety. These images may not be considered memes by most, but they share many of the characteristics, as they often incorporate images and text, are meant to elicit a response, and are meant to be spread virally on the internet. What differentiates them from other memes is the inherent *pathos* within them, whereas memes are almost meant to be emotionless. This *pathos*, in turn, has a tendency of enraging the opposition as they do not appreciate the connection between their own regressive culture and progressive politics. This also often leads to the opposition attempting to appropriate the memorial memes in a strange full circle process, but that should only be seen as a victory. Black Lives Matter has managed to defeat their racist opponents in their own field of combat without even making an attempt at doing so.

MEMES AS INJURY AND HEALING

Memes are simplistic, amateurish, and frequently offensive. However, they are also a new language, one which is "spoken" heavily by young people. As such, it is important to learn how to both understand it and utilize it. This chapter may appear to suggest that memes are a lost form, that they have been overtaken by the right-wing, but that could not be further from the truth. While Black Lives Matter is less involved in memes, online leftist politics are just as heavily dependent on memes as the right. There are even online communities wholly devoted to the creation and distribution of memes from a leftist standpoint. There is indeed a "political" meme war happening, at least in a modern, online definition of pol-

itics. In this definition, politics is a dirty word; these memes push ideology, but are seen as non-political by their creators, because they are also the ones complaining that everything is too political or insisting that it is a joke and jokes cannot be political. This leads to an unwinnable war fought entirely on their rules.

As such, it is important to recognize the weapons of the right-wing and how they incorporate those weapons in campaigns of humiliation and (mis/dis)information. These memes appear in the forms of humor, information, and appropriative imagery to mock the fight for civil rights and create a new narrative. This narrative must be recognized and combatted because it is this narrative which will sway a young generation of children and older generations of less educated individuals. When these vast swaths of people become convinced that these small, captioned, often crude images speak the truth, then the battle for their hearts and minds will be lost. One way to go about this is to create response memes which promote historical facts and alternative, progressive history. The better way to fight this is through education, fact checking and correction, but, unfortunately, these acts become extremely difficult in an online environment. As such, meme making could be the best option available on a smaller level while more comprehensive race studies and massive changes to the educational system are put into place at a more gradual pace.

END NOTES

1. It is important to note that the first two designations, the humorous and informative, should be read firmly in quotation marks. The humor in the humorous memes is the extremely outdated, punching-down style of humor one would find in a 1950s joke book, while the informative memes are often

full of intentional disinformation, used solely as a weapon to spread fake news.

2. On September 22, 2021, American congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene made a statement against the Green New Deal with the aid of several enlarged copies of memes. While this choice was rightfully lambasted by many, the act itself and the subsequent right-wing response went a long way to show the importance of the meme as a political medium.

3. Owing to their inherent anonymity and ephemerality, it is near impossible to cite these memes, as their origins are often unclear, and they may disappear without a moment's notice. As such, the images will be conveyed in words.

4. Some right wingers have gone so far as to conflate Black Lives Matter with Antifa, an anti-fascist belief system with no organization behind it, which has become a scare tactic in modern parlance. Just like they do with Black Lives Matter, these individuals will ignore the meaning behind the name Antifa and suggest that Antifa is an organization meant to harm and terrorize right-wing or American causes. As such, many have conflated the two groups, with online posts referring to the harm caused to a person or place by "Antifa/BLM."

5. Almost exclusively because Black Lives Matter, as an organization, holds Marxist beliefs, occasionally making them the targets of moderate liberals when they dare question the status quo.

6. Before Derek Chauvin's conviction, the two most high-profile cases of police officers being convicted as a result of murdering a civilian involved a white woman who murdered a Black man and a Black Somali who killed a white woman. While police officer is a highly protected class in the United States, there are still some layers of complexity.

7. In order: the *King of the Hill* meme uses an image of Bobby Hill holding up a piece of paper that reads "Black lives matter" to a classroom full of children and Donald Trump, at which point the school principal responds "if those kids could read,

they'd be very upset;" A scene from *Friends* where Phoebe attempts to teach Joey how to say a sentence is exploited to have her trying to teach him to say Black lives matter with him responding all lives matter; a scene from the 2000s kids show *Rocket Power* is labelled "what people really mean when they say all lives matter" with a character stating "look at the bright side … it's not happening to me"; finally, images for "bootlicker" memes often incorporate highly sexualized images of men licking boots being worn by others.

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