Post Memes

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Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures: Memes as Sites of Collective Imagining

Thomas Hobson and Kaajal Modi

“I like to think (and the sooner the better!) of a cybernetic meadow where mammals and computers live together in mutually programming harmony like pure water touching clear sky.

I like to think (right now, please!) of a cybernetic forest filled with pines and electronics where deer stroll peacefully past computers as if they were flowers with spinning blossoms.

I like to think (it has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal
brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace.”
— Richard Brautigan,
All Watched over by Machines of Loving Grace¹

“I want freedom, the right to self-expression,
everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things.”
— Emma Goldman²

Introduction: It Was the Memes Wot Dun It

On Friday June 9, 2017, UK residents woke up to a state of serious uncertainty as to which political party, exactly, was in power. The subsequent days would see a reshuffling of the narrative into an apparently easy Tory win, and a smoothing over of the initial surprise at Labour having gained 36 seats (albeit having lost 6), but for one brief, shining moment, the left, under Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party, had categorically Not Lost a General Election. So how, despite all of the punditry and expertise saying otherwise, had this happened? According to myriad editorials, opinion pieces and other forms of Serious Journalism, it woz the memes wot dun it.³

An elderly, awkwardly sincere socialist had become the poster boy for the revolution. Jeremy Corbyn had arrived, and he was both a rockstar and your dad in a homemade cardigan. He had motivated a previously “apathetic” group of youth voters that everyone else had given up on. Corbynmania galvanized a generation of young people, and those young people had not only voted Labour, they had convinced their families to vote Labour, they had organized, and they had gotten out onto the streets and knocked on doors and convinced others to vote Labour. Here was the holy grail of politics.

Suddenly, memes were valuable currency. The Tories found themselves with a need to get in on the act by pretending that they had young new media-savvy members in their ranks and by starting the thankfully short-lived Activate Twitter account (#meme, anybody?), and even hotly tipped young pretender to the Conservative Leadership Jacob Rees-Mogg, got himself an Instagram where he could post twee selfies of himself, presumably from his country estate in the 1920s.

While a tracing of the phenomenon of Corbynism and its many offshoots through online meme culture and into mainstream politics would be a worthy endeavor, by necessity it sits outside of the scope of this particular investigation. What we’re instead interested in, is getting to grips with some aspects of a fairly fundamental set of questions: what do memes do and what are they for?

In offering some tentative answers to these questions, we focus on the productive capacity of political memes — seeing them as both sites and practices of world building, and as places where understandings of what is and our visions of what ought to be can be produced collectively. What we are interested in,
specifically, is the potential for online memes to act as sites of intersubjective imagination and world building.

This is a study in two parts. Firstly, we engage with the concept of the “sociotechnical imaginary,” bringing it to bear on the future as imagined of Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC) — an online meme that gained currency around the same time as the rise of Corbynism. Secondly, we look to a second articulation of luxury communism, Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism, and the manner in which it, both substantively and materially, acts to “queer” the imaginative space of FALC.

By doing so, this chapter offers a tentative and exploratory investigation of the following:

1. “Imaginaries” as useful conceptual frameworks for studying online memes, and;
2. The usefulness of these as a starting or staging point for collectively imagined futures.

While we acknowledge that this represents rather a substantial undertaking, we readily acknowledge the limited scope of a short chapter in addressing these goals. Rather than advancing the work here as a comprehensive investigation, we instead present it as an opportunity to open new avenues for discussion and research, and most particularly as a chance to lay the groundwork useful framework through which to view this new and exciting activist community.

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Fully Automated Luxury Communism

In November 2014, Aaron Bastani uploaded a video to the Novara Media YouTube channel, as part of his “IMO” series, in which he outlined a concept called Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC). Prior to this, the term FALC had been circulating online as a(n at least partially) tongue-in-cheek meme among (predominantly) London-based lefties.5

In this video Bastani asked why, at a time when capitalism is in crisis, and living standards, profitability, and wages are all falling in a manner unprecedented in modern history, we are still afraid of automation and unwilling to consider the potential for technology to act for the public good. Automation, he proposed, and crucially, automation for the people, rather than for profit, might prove to the answer to all of our problems in this era of devalued labor.

The imperative behind FALC, in both its substantive critique and its capacity as a rhetorical device, was a recognition of the ways in which technological systems, under capitalism, are deployed in the service of profit. Challenging the idea that this is an inevitable consequence of industrialization and the natural state of things, FALC instead proposes that these technologies could serve the cause of emancipation. The increasing sophistication of technologies in the present age — with, for example, substantial innovations in autonomization, global communications, advanced production techniques, AI and machine learning, and biotechnologies — could, it is argued, create abundance rather than austerity.

FALC proposes a post-scarcity economy where we are no longer beholden to a capitalist idea of wage labor and, there-

5 Novara Media, “Fully Automated Luxury Communism!” YouTube, November 10, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmQ-BZ3eWxM. While Aaron Bastani’s long-awaited FALC book has now been published, the authors would like to note that the critique presented here is based on the partial elaborations that were extant at the time of writing and does not engage with the (presumably similarly fantastical) contents of that book.
fore, can work “10–12–15-hour weeks.” With the rest of our time, the population would be free to learn languages, retrain as engineers, make art, and travel the world. He then asked the question: “what would you do with your remaining time?,” and the responses, hashtagged #falc, began to pour in.

Post-Scarcity and Techno-Utopianism

While there most certainly have been a number of important and necessary critiques of the conceptual limitations of FALC, very few, on the left at least, would challenge the basic merit of such a bold and Utopian vision. These critiques have been put forward by, amongst others, other members of Novara, and in an excellent and readily accessible essay published on LibCom.

Some of the key criticisms have included that:

— FALC misapprehends how social relations and commodity values are mutually constructed, and the ways in which technologies embody and reproduce social and political orders;
— The fundamental conceptualization of labor within its formulation is deeply gendered, and;
— In very much the same vein as other techno-utopian thought systems, it almost entirely neglects consideration of the social, economic, and ecological impacts of the production cycles of luxury goods in an age of globalization.

6 Ibid.
The most fundamental criticism of FALC that we make in this work is that it employs somewhat paradoxical understanding of technology. Rooted in rather commonplace and Whiggish mis-reading of Marxist thought, FALC sees technology as capable of embodying (or, at least, facilitating) the immanence of social, political, and economic emancipation, but to a large degree ignores its substantive effects.

We wish to avoid to lengthy a detour into a critique of FALC’s misapprehension of the co-constitutive relationship between social systems and technologies, and as such, direct the reader towards some useful initial reading on these ideas below. We also recommend further useful reading on the ideas of co-production, socio-technical relations, and the substantive effects of technology in this chapter’s footnotes. We see these critiques of the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of FALC as invaluable, and certainly hope that their insights can become more prominent in left conversations about technology and its role in conditioning social and economic relationships in the future.

Before moving on, however, we note that this particular understanding of technology—one which sees technology as both instrumental and deterministic—is a troubling one for those among us who spend time thinking about the relationship between technologies and the societies that produce them. In FALC, technology is seen as creating the conditions for emancipation—with technological and scientific advance a promissory force—but is then able to be unproblematically directed towards utopian social ends in entirely instrumental terms. We should likely ask whether a utopian vision that is so dependent on technology, that comprehends technology so poorly, really represents as convincing an idiom as is often claimed.

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8 The idiom of co-production is cited as particularly useful in this work, for more on this, please see: Sheila Jasanoff, ed., States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order (London: Routledge, 2004). However, it is also worth noting that several other valuable approaches to sociotechnical relations exist. For additional reading, we recommend Andrew Feenberg, Critical Theory of Technology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
**FALC, Memes, and the Future**

For the purposes of the present work, we are rather more interested in understanding how FALC has acted as a catalyst for memetic conceptualizations of not only labor value, but for social transformation and the possibilities that technological advances are increasingly affording us. Our intention is to uncover some of the ways in which FALC has been captured by, and is continually re-invented and reproduced in, online memes. And it is to this end that, in the paragraphs that follow, we make the claim that online memes can be usefully understood as sites of intersubjective imagination — wherein communities can be united by certain shared socio-cultural or socio-technical visions of what kinds of futures could, and indeed, should (or should not) be realized.

Contrary to the traditional liberal conceptualization of communism as rooted in misery, austerity, and predicated on superhuman forbearance free from excess or private desire, FALC (in spite of any conceptual limitations one may charge it with) allows us the permission and the space to imagine the possibility of abundance, of a future where the enforced privation of capitalism is overthrown in favor of a vision of communal living where the basic needs of food/water/housing/medicine are not only met but overcome, and where we can imagine new futures free from such prosaic concerns. In opposition to the sparse utilitarianism suggested by dominant representations of “the Eastern Bloc” or the scarcity and corruption prevalent in depictions of Latin American socialism, it invokes an image of the future where emancipation is intrinsic to material satisfaction, rather than coming at the expense of it.

**Imagining the Impossible**

Thinking critically about culture memetically is not a new undertaking. That scholars, artists, and theorists have been discussing the definition and significance — indeed even the basic
usefulness of the concept—of (what can broadly be described as) memes for upward of half a century now, is perhaps testament to the persistence and attractiveness of them as both a tangible artefact and trope for analysis.\(^9\) Clearly though—as evidenced by the prominence of online memes in contemporary discourse, and by the variety of societal and political ends for which they are credited as the means—there must be at least something more to say on the subject. It is certainly to be hoped that this is the case, lest we have rather wasted our collective energies as contributors to this book.

We expect, however, that there is little cause for concern on that front, with this volume prompting its readers to consider the politics of memes from a variety of fascinating perspectives. Here, we argue that, in the image-saturated world of the early 21st century, the political is ever more inextricably linked to the production and sharing of iconic imagery and text, and that—in light of this—it is crucial that we develop critical theoretical and pragmatic understandings of this evolving relationship and its substantive consequences. From a more normative standpoint we, along with the other contributors to this volume, are concerned with understanding how memes can be usefully deployed in the service of emancipatory, inclusive and progressive Left politics. Our contribution to this effort is (hopefully) a rather straightforward one. We ask our readers to consider the relationship between memes and imagination.

The task facing those of us who aspire to a better world is, inherently, an imaginative one. In seeing the world as it is, and believing that a fairer, more just world is possible—we, however faintly, look toward a future that we imagine to be desirable. The making and sharing of memes, we suggest, represents a site of imagination as a cultural and social practice—and therefore that memes themselves are an important component of the

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\(^9\) In tracing this idea of the meme from its origins in evolutionary theory, through to its current status as an idiom of communication, please see James Gleick, “What Defines a Meme?” *Smithsonian*, May 2011, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/what-defines-a-meme-1904778/.
evolving shared perceptions of the desirable or utopian futures that are fundamental to the project of emancipatory politics.

We argue that political memes are sites of collective world building. In creating and/or sharing a political meme, we offer our visions of the future worlds we imagine to be possible or desirable. These visions are incredibly significant — shaping discourse, guiding action and uniting communities. The challenge, of course, is in usefully conceptualising this relationship between memes, shared imaginaries, and the social and material relations of a society.

Seizing the Memes of Production

Returning to the title of this volume, we argue that one valuable way forward in this endeavor is to begin considering the interconnectivity between the means of production and the memes of production — and, somewhat turning this on its head, the ways in which the production of memes can influence the production of means. Our central thesis here rests on the following key arguments:

Firstly, that ideas and imaginaries have a substantial impact upon material conditions and technological processes. Technological and industrial advances don’t occur in isolation from social contexts, and are never just rational, scientific, necessary events on a linear trajectory of improvement. Instead, technologies are inherently social — the types of technologies we create, the problems we try to solve, and the sorts of worlds we try to create with technology are all guided by our understandings of how the world is, how it has been, and how it ought to be.

Similarly, despite the pervasiveness of claims very much to the contrary (made by liberals and conservatives the world over), the material conditions of our societies and distributions of wealth are never representative of a linear progress narrative, and do not embody the rational and inevitable course of history. Rather, they are always political and always predicated on judgments about how the world is and ought to be, on what out-
comes are desirable, and on who should be allowed to benefit from these desirable outcomes.

Following from this, we argue that online memes are sites where ideas are made and imaginations are explored, shared, and popularized. When considering the pithy or even surrealist nature of some political memes, this may seem like something of a stretch (though even here we would argue that memes are an increasingly important component of political discourse) however, in our present study, FALC provides a clear example of how this can be the case.

FALC memes, and indeed, political memes in general, even at their most abstracted or satirical, invoke various ideas about how industry and society relate to one another (specifically in regard to who should benefit from and govern their production), and, at least in the case of FALC, about how a desirable, emancipatory, future can be realized through technology. We would further argue that these memes of production (that is, images and text that capture and invoke a set of ideas about how social and industrial relations can be reorganized and emancipation realized through technology) can, and should, be understood as important aspects of left-wing perceptions of how the means of production can, and should, be reorganized.

If technologies are always embedded in and conditioned by ideas and shared understandings, and the means of production are increasingly dependent on the technological, then our ideas are capable of producing new means — new relations between labor and technology and new sociotechnical systems for organizing production and its benefits. Our memes of production as important sites of political imagination represent important opportunities to rethink our means of production.

Collective Imaginaries

Leftist politics have always tended toward the proudly utopian; activism is, after all, the project of imagining better worlds, and collectively, endeavoring to realize them. It is only in recent years that these practices have, by necessity, become bogged down in
the mundane realities of bureaucracy and capitalist productivity. This study is part recovery of that tendency towards action, and partly a new paradigm through which that action can be viewed.

As a culture, we often celebrate the power and potential of the individual imagination — and with some justification — lauding especially those who promote, or appear to create, transformative or radical visions of the future. Reflect for a moment on the celebrity status of (shamelessly self-promoting tech-bro poster boys) Elon Musk or Steve Jobs. Or, perhaps consider the instant attention garnered by Labour MP Liam Byrne’s (in our view, rather misguided) book *Dragons*, which recounts the contribution of innovative entrepreneurs to the making of modern Britain.¹⁰

Imagination though, is not just the preserve of the visionary, but also operates intersubjectively — uniting members of a community in shared perceptions of futures which can, and should (or shouldn’t) be realized.¹¹ It is this — the collective imaginary — that we are interested in exploring further in relation to political memes.

The idea that collective imaginaries not only exist, but are important sociocultural forces, shaping (variously) identity, social relations, desires and aspirations, and morality, has its roots in the philosophy of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. Most notable in the history of thought on collective imaginaries are the works of Benedict Anderson,¹² Charles Taylor,¹³ and Arjun Appadurai.¹⁴ Taylor, for example has defined his modern and social imaginaries as so:

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¹⁰ We urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to not waste your time on this book: *Liam Byrne, Dragons: 10 Entrepreneurs Who Built Britain* (London: Head of Zeus, 2016).

¹¹ See here the open-access introduction to Jasanoff, cited in n. 4.


¹⁴ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*
By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.\textsuperscript{15}

This imaginary, for Taylor, entails an array of common understandings and practices based on a sense of what is real, and rejects the idea that politics is determined solely by deliberate and rational actions. Perhaps more immediately resonant to the arguments in this chapter, is the following reflection on the imagination, offered by Appadurai:

No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense of labor and of culturally organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (“individuals”) and globally defined fields of possibility.\textsuperscript{16}

Reading this, we can begin to engage with imagination not only as the site in which action is conceptualized, but as the staging point for future possibility. With relatively little effort toward reframing, we can apply some of these ideas on the imaginary to


\textsuperscript{16} Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” 31.
our earlier discussion of the ideational content and function of political memes. In doing so we start to gain some traction on not just the significance of shared imaginaries, but on how we can understand memes as a site for their creation and propagation. The imagination is a place for serious (whether deliberate or not) negotiation (and consensus) on the possibility of societal and human conditions. Returning to memes, we see that they represent a locale in which these imaginaries are developed, shared, and have affect.

**Dreamscapes of Modernity**

Our own definition of imaginaries rests rather more closely on that offered by Sheila Jasanoff in the introduction to *Dreamscapes of Modernity*. Jasanoff’s *sociotechnical* imaginaries engage more explicitly with two factors we are deeply concerned with in our discussion of FALC and the potentiality of political memes for an emancipatory politics, those being: science and technology — which we argue is not only one of the most powerful guiding forces in global modernity, but is intrinsic to the utopian visions of FALC (and of techno-positive leftism more generally) and; the future — which we argue is inherent to creative work of striving for an emancipatory politics, and is also implicated in the explicitly futuristic images invoked by FALC.

Jasanoff defines sociotechnical imaginaries as: “collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures (or of resistance against the undesirable) [that are] animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology.”

One could then, rather readily, reconceptualize the FALC meme itself as a recognizable imaginary — with the making and sharing of memes representing the public performance of a collectively held vision. The vision, of course, is one

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wherein automation and technological advance facilitate a future of emancipatory politics — and consequently the imaginary is supportive of certain modes of technological advance and advocates for certain reorganisations of industrial and economic relations.

While FALC memes take many forms, ranging from the naïve to the ludicrous to the vital and instructive — in each instance the cooperative, communal, and crucially, discursive practice of imagination is taking place. Whether understood through the semiotics of image macros, or through the production of shared understanding in discourse, we argue that FALC memes invoke a communal set of ideas (or at the very least a shared framework for thinking) about how the world as it currently is may be reimagined and re-ordered toward emancipatory ends.

For Jasanoff, the imaginary is also necessarily culturally particular, and temporally situated. This goes some way towards helping conceptualize the ways that our visions of the future — even (in fact especially) our utopian ones — are conditioned by our experiences and, often, prejudices in the present. Returning again to some of the earlier critiques of FALC that we touched upon, understanding imaginaries as conditioned by, and reproductive of, contemporary judgements of what and who is important, can help us get to grips with some of the extant limitations of popular iterations of FALC — especially in relation to some of the issues we will discuss below.

Signs and Signifiers

Since 2014, memes relating to FALC have seemingly appeared with ever-increasing frequency. They are regularly posted in threads under (often apparently unrelated) posts about, variously: technology, feminism, space, gender, race, sexuality, Marxism, and often all (or none) of the above. They have appeared across groups and collectives on Leftbook, left Twitter, Tumblr, and beyond, taking the forms of gifs and image macros. Frequently they evoke the classic Soviet constructivist iconography of revolutionary leftist politics, and of the (perhaps un-
surprisingly) similar off-planet science fiction or abstract utopias. In practice, the memes are often collaborative and evolve continually in-situ, being overlaid with, or accompanied by, increasingly detailed or often esoteric text threads.

While we have argued above in favor of understanding memes as imaginaries—framing their production and sharing as a practice of collective imagination, we turn here to the work of Stuart Hall—whose insight into culture, discourse, and materiality is instructive in getting to grips with how political memes can embody, communicate, and produce understandings and ideas. When considered through Hall’s theory of encoding/decoding, memes, like any other media, and like Appadurai’s imagination, are discursive, in that they contain both symbolic and material potentiality that is only realized in moments of interpretation or negotiation between the meme space and the viewer. In fact, unlike traditional media, they go one step further, as they are encoded by one audience, as it were, in one symbolic context, and decoded in another context by another audience. While new media theorists often find this a useful stepping-off to start to think in terms of “affordances,” let’s stay here a moment and consider what this means.

It means that there is no “wrong” way to meme, in the same way that there is no “wrong” way to consume any other media. Seeming “user errors” are absorbed into the fabric of the practice of meme-ing, and spawn their own semiotic offshoots. If you decide that your utopia has automated cats, for example, then automated cats are immediately incorporated into the visual language of that discourse (robot cats in space, robot cats with laserbeam eyes, robot cats that resemble Vladimir Lenin standing proudly in front of a Soviet sunrise in full Soviet uniform, etc).

That a great deal of this interaction is consciously humorous or even deliberately ridiculous shouldn’t discount them from being taken seriously on the terms laid out above. Satire, even the involuntary kind, is a valid critique, and intention does not necessarily undermine the impact of situated cultural forms. In fact, it is this irreverence, and seemingly deliberate postmod-
ernism, which is itself an intrinsic part of meme culture; it is persistently and (often unconsciously) anarchic in its lack of reverence for any traditions whilst at the same time borrowing heavily from revolutionary, particularly soviet/communist, ideas and symbology. It is this dichotomy that allows it to occupy a space that is at once meaning-making and subversive, and at the same time representative of wider socio-cultural tendencies. To paraphrase Hall, the individual memer is always living some larger socio-cultural narrative, whether they like it or not.  

Queering the Problem Space

While an in-depth tracing of the FALC meme and its various offshoots falls outside of the scope of this work, it is here that a reading of one of its more persistent offshoots is particularly illustrative as an example of the manner in which meme-ing can act as a space for intersubjective, dialectical, and discursive future-making among online collectivities.

This section examines the Fully Automated Luxury Gay (or Queer) Space Communist (FALGSC) society, reading it as an imaginary space that acts to queer the classic FALC meme (both literally and figuratively speaking). According to Know Your Meme, FALGSC

envisions an idealistic society where gender norms have been abolished to such an extent that there is little to no difference between gay and straight, and due to automation, luxury is available to all people[.]. The term has inspired the creation of communism-themed memes and image macros.  


For those readers unfamiliar with queer theory, it is important here to note that “queering” is not necessarily just a process that explicitly reads a text through the binary of the homosexual and heterosexual (although it is that), but is instead a heuristic that acts to dismantle “the dynamics of power and privilege persisting among diverse subjectivities.” Queer Studies is a critical position rather than a sexual one; queer can mean “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps […] and excesses of meaning.” “Queer gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual.” Queering is an act that can be performed.

When read through this paradigm, FALGSC becomes an in-joke, a meta-reference, a wink and a nod to those of us in the know about FALC, and about the current rift in the left between traditional Marxism and the new identity politics. These latter post-Marxist formulations of society, culture, and gender, that seek to be more inclusive of non-hegemonic and marginalized experiences and understandings of the world, therefore require an envisioning of futures that can encompass difference.

These memes are ridiculous, and they are gay as hell. They incorporate the semiotics of queerness while at the same time, both in its literal and academic definitions, “queering” the traditional forms of communist futuring. If FALC is the neo-capitalist faux socialist utopianism of Star Trek, FALGSC is the post-scarcity civilisation of Iain M Banks’s “the Culture,” wherein sentient post-gender pan-humans and artificial intelligences co-exist in an automated interstellar collection of societies that has no discernable end.

Returning, briefly, to our earlier discussion of memes as imaginaries, the divergent futures described above illustrate the constitutive effect of how we understand the present—our experiences, prejudices, and priorities—on the futures we strive to create. If we don't understand gender and sexual equality to be issues worth fighting for in the present, are we likely to make room for them in our imaginaries—even utopian ones—of the future?

Memes as Sites of Political Contestation

Online fora are increasingly the battlegrounds on which political battles are fought, and if not where hearts and minds won exactly, then at least where they can be exposed to alternative political ideas, causes, and crusades. They are a rich recruiting ground for previously antithetical or apolitical young people who might feel disenfranchised by the established politics of our time. One doesn't have to look far to see examples of online political movements on both the right and the left that spread through their memetic conceptualizations; the more shareable the better. From ISIS and InCel to Bernie Bros and Corbynmania, to the rise of Trump and the new British nationalism via the terrifyingly (and apparently insidiously) shareable content of Britain First.

Successful memes transcend echo chambers; they overspill. We’ve all come across memes that expose us to new ideas in a manner that is pithy, funny, or particularly striking, and we are all more likely to share something that makes us pause to think, and/or laugh (preferably both). One of the most notable things about memes, particularly image macros, is that they do not display a particularly refined design aesthetic; and that might in fact constitute a large part of their power. Those of us in the global minority tend to live in highly sophisticated visual societies, and to cultures overloaded by slick advertising tropes and hyper-real soft focus filters, an inexpertly made image can often seem like the last authentic voice in a sea of artificiality.
The self-replicating and somewhat simplistic nature of the meme lends itself well to utopianism — and to the production of shared meanings. They are accessible, and they are democratic (in that anyone can make or share them). This is political propaganda, for the people, by the people. It is writ small, but it is infinitely modular, replicable, scalable, and modifiable. One can imagine worlds in these creations, and indeed the democratic format of the standard image macro is one of its most compelling and, indeed, sustaining features. If memes are the basic units of cultural (re)production, then FALC and its offshoots are both an evolving dialectic and a representation of the current state of the (online) left.

Imagining the Future

At a recent Q&A at the Women of the World festival at the Southbank Centre in London, an audience member asked the prominent black activist and theorist Angela Davis whether she was tired of fighting against the same injustices as she had been since her youth in the seventies. Davis first, and true to form, took a moment to credit the young black activists of BLM in the US and the UK, as well as the Palestine solidarity movement, for inspiring her daily. She then pointed out that, despite the neo-liberal capitalist imperative to measure any form of labor in terms of progress, true change is slow, and it is inexorable. She went on to say that the work we do now would probably change the world in fifty years time, and “that today we are living the imaginaries of those who have been long gone. We are living the world they wanted.”

So who gets to participate in this world building? In Lizzie Borden’s 1983 cult feminist classic sci-fi film *Born in Flames*, in a not-too-distant American future, the revolution has come and gone, and women, particularly women of color, find themselves still fighting against classism, sexism, and racism. What certain

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techno-utopian Marxist thinkers seem compelled to ignore is that the form of revolution for which they are advocating excludes the needs of a sizeable chunk of the population, particularly those who are excluded by dominant and hegemonic social, cultural, and political formulations.

Again, to restate an earlier contestation, the ways in which we understand and order the present—that is, the sum total of our experiences, prejudices, priorities, and politics—have a substantial impact on the kinds of worlds we try to create, and on the possible futures we are able to incorporate into our imaginaries. If we don’t understand how gender, race, geographical, or sexual equality work in the present, how able are we to make room for them in our imaginaries of the future? Naturally we all want to live in a world that is post-racial and post-scarcity, and many of us even in one that is post-gender, but if we don’t make space for, and even center those voices that are marginalised even in the dominant narratives of current subcultures, we will find ourselves recreating the same inequalities even in our utopias.

It is easy to downplay the value of online politics; one cannot click on a news site without seeing yet another op-ed lambasting millennials and their apparent myriad social and cultural ineptitudes (these are the imaginaries of mainstream media, it seems). However, if we can understand interactive media as sites of collective meaning-making, indeed sites of culture, and of world-making, then it is imperative that we harness the emancipatory power of these new media formats. In order to do so, we must firstly understand the ways in which they work. We must understand the ways in which ideas and understandings are reproduced or made new through these interactions, and we must understand their relationship to the political and material conditions of the present and the potentialities of the future.

We should especially be alert to how memes themselves act to queer dominant cultures through their role as imaginaries, and secondly, we must approach them as a purely utopian endeavor (in the best sense of the word). It is this queering that acts to elevate the meme format from standard new media;
memes continuously trouble the boundaries and spaces below and between hegemonic cultural formulations, operating something like a virus (it is no wonder that popular memes “go viral”) or a catchy melody.

In these memes we can see entire worlds—cultures created through shared meaning and practice; some last hours, others days, months, or even years. They are constantly evolving and changing to fit the contexts in which they are being created and shared, and it is this quality that, at the same time as making them difficult to pin down and analyse, makes them impossible to commodify, and a useful site of resistance. As Hall argues: “in the study [of popular culture] we should always start here: with the double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it.”25 Our collective imaginaries are larger than all of us, and do not necessarily require our knowledge or even acknowledgement of the wider socio-cultural forces at play in order for us to participate in this world-building.

Imagining Freedom/Imagining Justice

Rather than closing with a summary of the discussion above, or with our own endeavors toward a grand theory of memes and political imagination, we instead choose to leave the reader with the wisdom of one of the 20th century’s greatest imaginers, Ursula K. Le Guin, who offers the following typically poetic reflection on the relationship between the imagination, justice, and freedom. We do this, in part, because of the provocative and opposite nature of her words, but also in part, to denote that—for all of us—our work here, in imagining emancipatory futures, is far from done. It is in fact, always, just beginning:

We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice. We will not be free if we do not imagine freedom. We cannot demand that anyone try to attain justice and freedom who has not had a chance to imagine them as attainable.26

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Bibliography


Post Memes


