



# They Say We Can't Meme: Politics of Idea Compression ( Geert Lovink & Marc Tuters)

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“I am a forest, and a night of dark trees: but he who is not afraid of my darkness, will find banks full of roses under my cypresses.” Friedrich Nietzsche

In his torturous 2017 book *Futurability* Franco Berardi states that “we should go beyond the critique of the techno-media corporate system and start a project of enquiry and self-organization for the cognitive workers who daily produce the global semio-economy. We should focus less on the system and more on the subjectivity that underlies the global semio-cycle.” (1) In this spirit, let’s consider memes as one of many ways to understand the fast and dark world of the mindset of today’s online subject. We see memes as densely compressed, open contradictions, designed to circulate in our real-time networks that work with repeating elements. As the far-right have discovered, memes express tensions that can’t be spoken in the political correct vocabulary of the mainstream media. To what extent can these empty formats symbolize the lived experience of global capitalism? Is it true that the left can’t meme? These are the strategic questions faced by activists and social media campaigners today.

Whereas a public deconstruction of the hidden meanings of memes can serve as a part of media literacy policies, the ultimate challenge concerns creating alternative imaginaries that can overcome—and overrule—the cynical and often reactionary logic that tends to dominate internet meme production. As a provocation we propose to consider memes in relation to the left’s enduring question of how to overcome the deadlock of the neoliberal post-political situation. What follows then might be understood as a kind of sketch, like a still life with flowers; what is to be done... with memes?

Let’s begin with the case of a former Hillary Clinton staffer, in his early 20’s, who approached us with a long email exposé on the “political potentials and pitfalls of memes.”(2) Seeing “a great kind of community building potential in memes,” as part of the Clinton’s campaign’s digital audience development team, he proposed to copy the success of Bernie Sanders Dank Memes

Stash.(3) In response he was simply told “We don’t do memes. The Internet doesn’t like us.” Whilst we all heard the conventional explanations for this—that Clinton’s persona was, for example, too rehearsed—we might also understand their response as what has been referred to as “cruel optimism”,(4) a denial of what this young man calls “a suffering that is being lived through” that he sees as “a foundational aspect of meme culture.”

Citing the popularity of the Nihilist Memes Facebook group with its 2-million followers (5) the staffer posits memes as a means of expression for a generation paralyzed by a sense of powerlessness—in spite of having “always had access to all the political realities of the entire world”—a generation who have lost their faith in a political system that completely fails to acknowledge the reality of their lived experience.

Offering us a psychoanalytic diagnosis for this situation, he posits that “the internet has destroyed any separation between us”; an absence of psychological interiority and of the fundamental distinctions on which an autonomous self is said to be constructed. It is to this cultural condition, as much as anything else, then, that memes respond.

“When grievances are expressed in memes” he goes on however to point out “they’re not expressed with solutions in hand”. In spite of their triviality and vulgarity, he thus presents memes in the tradition of continental philosophical thought as struggle to come to terms with Western nihilism.

If the Clinton’s campaign team responded to this problematic with flat-out denial then the alternative response is resignation, what Nietzsche referred to disparagingly as European Buddhism. For a generation that lives in public, this inward path is not however an option. As such, our interlocutor opts for a third course, an attempt to build something out of this desiccated landscape, deconstructing and transvaluing the ‘dankness’ of memes. “Politically,” he says, “this is the underlying sentiment of a generation that doesn’t not see an alternative to their current system.”

In an attempt to conceptualize the relationship between memes and his own generation’s sense of self he references Jonah Peretti, the creator of clickbait journalism, considered by some as having done more than anyone person to

destroy reader's attention spans.(6) Prior to founding BuzzFeed, Peretti in fact had a career in media art theory, where he wrote a text drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's Nietzschean take on the concept of transvaluation, their call to "challenge capitalism" and "the contemporary acceleration of visual culture and its impact on identification" by "develop alternative collective identities."(7) While the argument concerning the compromised quality of Deleuze and Guattari's thought has been made before,(8) it should be noted that twenty years after Peretti's text, his Deleuzo-Guattarian frame of "acceleration" has made comeback in fashionable cultural theory — and, indeed, not since that same period of the first dot-com boom has media theory seemed to hold such promise for a disempowered generation of young idealists.

Memes, he tells us, seem to operate in a "different temporality." In contrast to early cyberculture, preoccupied with the endless virtual potential of the web, his lived experience seems characterized by an overabundance of actuality—what Whitehead referred to as "actual occasions"—with his subjectivity caught-up in and animated by the vitality of memes. If in the course of his live experience it seems impossible for him to disentangle himself from memes, as a self-aware young man he's thereby forced to face the impact that these vital (pre-individual) forces seem to be having on the production of his own subjectivity. As such, though his engagement with the issue began in the field of political communication, in the course of unpacking it he came to articulate a problematic that has long confronted thinkers of modernity.

As we all know, a successful meme's value degrades rapidly. "If it doesn't spread it's dead."(9) From the user's perspective this pace translates as FOMO (the Fear Of Missing Out), which the young man describes in terms of a feeling of "entrapment" by the chrono-politics of real-time media. While Sigmund Freud would have identified the pitiless pace of memes with the death-drive, Martin Heidegger would have associated FOMO with the folly of tying one's sense of self to the inauthentic being of an imagined "they", what he called "das Man".

Having thus laid out the existential stakes of his meme-Being, our interlocutor

concludes with the question of how to position himself politically in relation to these forces, a problematic which we suggest can be seen as a long-standing concern of Marxist theory—and which has recently returned to preoccupy debates within both internet criticism and academic media theory.

Many of the questions concerning the laws of cultural production form the starting point for discussions that inaugurated the critical theory, positions held respectively by Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin of the Frankfurt School. Their foundational media criticism developed out of an empirically-grounded philosophical analysis of the use of mass media by mid-20th political demagogues to coordinate public opinion.

From the perspective associated with Adorno, we can imagine how the contemporary media environment might appear to as a living hell to the Freudo-Marxist scholar. He would have diagnosed the white nationalist politics of the alt-right, with its notorious anti-Semite memes, as symptomatic of the same kind of the politics of resentment that gave rise to fascism in 1930's Germany; where changes in the mode of production had precipitated a loss of class privilege amongst that segment of society which saw themselves as having built the country. (In the analysis of Erich Fromm, Adorno's Frankfurt School colleague, the rise of fascism was facilitated by changes in the mode of production which rendered the petit bourgeoisie, whom Max Weber identified with the rise of capitalism, essentially redundant). In alt-right's memes, then, which frequently picture Trump as a Teutonic warrior king, Adorno would thus have diagnosed the symptoms of this very psycho-social situation of male existential resentment concerning loss of power which the Frankfurt School considered as the conditions of possibility which give rise to fascism.

In what would become an influential analysis that Adorno developed together with Max Horkheimer while in exile in Southern California during World War II, the two identified a telos to Western instrumental reason, the objective of which was the self-preservation of the ego and of the domination of nature, at any cost. As part of this same philosophical project Adorno's later media analysis was unremittingly bleak, leaving no room for engagement with popular culture, since interventions amounted to manifestation of the

system's own diabolical agenda. Seventy years later Adorno's mass media critique no longer commands much respect in the field of media studies—as, in fact, it has not for some forty years now.(10) Neither, for that matter, does the political communications framework of propaganda a top down phenomenon developed by Adorno's contemporaries offer much purchase when attempting to make sense of the phenomenon of political memes, nor of the chaotic state of American politics today. While Trump, for example, was opposed by large parts of the right wing media establishment, he nevertheless managed a stunning victory, all the while portraying Adorno's "Culture Industry" as his implacable opponent.

We can contrast the "diabolical negativity" of this critique (in Jean-François Lyotard's characterization of Adorno (11)), with the populist vitalism of his Frankfurt School colleague Walter Benjamin who famously saw popular culture as subversive in contrast with the fundamentally conservative quality of elite culture. As such, we can imagine how Benjamin might have been intrigued by the progressive political potential of memes. In comparison with Adorno's more totalizing approach to philosophical narrative, Benjamin was a *monteur*, a collector of ideas, juxtaposing fragments of images in the manner of an editor in order to create intuitive, sometimes paradoxical connections. His unfinished *Magnus Opus Das Passagen-Werk*, a collage of found text has been identified as the *Ur-text* of the contemporary digital appropriation aesthetic.(12)

What is relevant about Benjamin work now, in the context of the contemporary meme problematic, is how his theory sought to preserve paradox and ambiguity in a way that actively called on the synthetic function of the reader's own imagination. In this sense he arguably anticipated the interactive dimension of the contemporary experience of social media. Already in his own time his contemporaries, notably the Kabbalist Gerhard Scholem, identified a theological dimension in Benjamin's project. (In Jewish esoteric mysticism, the object is not to gain access to a transcendent heaven but rather to identify the scattered broken pieces of the immanent divine.)

In the age of Trump, of Brexit and of right-wing populism, contemporary theorists seeking an answer to the question of "what is to be done?"—which

the Frankfurt School interpreted in terms of a Marxist framework—are inclined to look for answers in the analysis and manipulation of social data. This split between hermeneutics and scientism, can be understood in relation to the 1960's Positivismus dispute (13) in regards to which Adorno's Frankfurt School colleague Herbert Marcuse argued that scientific positivism, was an "intrinsically ideological character" insofar as it sought "to coordinate mental operations with those in the social reality." (14) The one approach says that we can win the argument with the correct data whereas the other says we need a new powerful narrative — and it's the latter that has been ascendant in the case of Trump and of Brexit. Thus, bearing in mind the caveats already introduced above, an argument can be made for reading memes in line with approaches developed by the scholars in the Frankfurt School, in contrast to the contemporary trend for positivistic methods of big data analysis.

In addressing the strategic question of "what is to be done" in relation to the current political situation, with regards to political memes, it is in fact the reactionary right that been most successful in recent years with their oft-repeated slogan that "politics is downstream from culture"; this is what is meant by the line that "the left can't meme". This new right idea that politics is downstream from culture can understand in terms of the far-right's somewhat unlikely engagement with another strain of Western Marxist theory associated with Antonio Gramsci's concept of "meta-politics". A leading figure of the Popular Front jailed by the Italian fascists, Gramsci asked the same question as many of his German colleagues in the 1930's, "why did socialism fail?". In contrast to the Frankfurt School, Gramsci arrived however at a different tactical type of response which came to play a significant role 50 years later — upon the translation of his prison notebooks into English — in inaugurating the field of cultural studies which sought to interpret the semiotics of style culture as a proxy for class struggle.(15)

If the Frankfurt School was set-up as think tank whose objective was to provide an analysis of root causes, why is it that today's think tanks are so preoccupied with symptoms? Why is it that so many of them look to more data to address the question of strategy? Kittlerians would insist that it is because data forms the epistemic framework of our time. Every episteme is mutually exclusive of every other. It's a romantic notion, one invented by

Germans in response to the Enlightenment, that one can operate outside of that episteme—today this is no longer possible, if ever it were. The perennial Luddite option to smash the machine—or else, somewhat less dramatically to shut off our devices(16)—ultimately fails to address the underlying problematic as initially introduced by the protagonist of our short essay. Instead we necessarily need to develop an understanding of the data analytics industry through a new kind of analytics that recognizes the depths of our own subjective entanglement with the object of our critique. May be we can understand the function of the meme in these terms, as a kind of vernacular cultural compression technique, a means by to “decode” and “encode” the operative dynamics of dominant hegemony—to put it in Gramscian cultural studies terms.

In spite of the seeming epistemological chaos associated with social life online today, technocratic solutions currently being designed, for example, to detect the problem of right-wing populism in the EU(17), imply that oversight and control of the social remain possible—an approach which treats society as a body susceptible to diseases which can be neutralized if identified early-on. In formulating a response to this chaos, critical deconstruction is not enough, it needs to be accompanied by reproduction. Deconstruction alone is human all too human, while memetic reproduction alone is altogether inhuman. It is in combining them that something else might happen.

Returning, in conclusion, to our interlocutor’s question concerning the transvaluation of memes as part of an “accelerationist” strategy, while it’s clear that the right has succeeded at this tactic, it is less clear how the left should approach the problematic. If political economy and state intervention is our only demand we ignore the role of culture—a theoretical insight better understood by those on the right. It was, in fact, on this very point that came undone in the mid 70’s, a mistake that some seem keen to repeated. Understanding of the underlying extractivist economic logic of GAF A (Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple) isn’t enough. Memes activate and address powerful psychological tensions, mobilizing desires and resentments that such vulgar Marxist preoccupations with the economic base are powerless to address. What if you have all the evidence and no one is impressed? In the failure of the revolutions of the 1920’s critical theory in a way began from this



disappointment. these adventures in thought then began from a desperate realization. in spite of the paranoid readings of Frankfurt School currently in fashion amongst right wingers, they never imagined themselves as in possession of a totalizing solution. similarly memes don't necessarily offer any solutions, but rather open a number of questions onto the present. While Adorno would likely have dismissed their utopianism as crypto-totalitarian as he did with the counter-culture of the 60's, as was the case back then he probably didn't get the joke.

In considering their victory in the so-called "Great Meme War", we can appreciate how Gramsci's thought is more effectively applied to military strategic thinking than those ideas of the Frankfurt School. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Trump campaign's successful use of Facebook's Pixel to selectively target niche demographics with different messages, it is clear that political campaigning is increasingly turning into a kind of information war for which there are, however, no Geneva conventions.

It seems that everyone today learns from this behaviour targeting except for the do-good left. It is in this context, then, that we can understand danah boyd's call, in the aftermath of Trump's election, for the development of radically new form of media literacy: "We cannot simply assume that information intermediaries can fix the problem for us, whether they be traditional news media or social media. We need to get creative and build the social infrastructure necessary for people to meaningfully and substantively engage across existing structural lines."(18) Today the question of what is to be done? concerns what an infrastructure that overcomes "echo chambers" might look like?

Memes, however, are merely cultural bi-products of the app ecosystem; the medium, not the meme, is the message. Memes are eyewash of an optimization arms race that strives to reach as far down into the limbic system as possible. We can, however, see memes as a symptom of the accelerated state of our own technicity, and, as such, the political theological "event" bringing about meaningful change as the acceleration of our associated species being into that elusive half-second between action and thought.

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1. Franco Berardi, *Futurability*, Verso Books, London, 2017, p. 238.
2. Email correspondence, September 14, 2017. Email in possession of the authors.
3. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/berniesandersmemes/>.
4. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University, 2011.
5. <https://www.facebook.com/nihilistmemes>.
6. Jonathan Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things*, Little Brown and Company, 2017.
7. Jonah Peretti, "Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Contemporary Visual Culture and the Acceleration of Identity Formation/Dissolution", in *Negotiations*, 1996, <http://archive.fo/1kiSQ>.
8. "Above all, the techno-nomads possess a radical optimism about the future of the Net. Intoxicated by reading too much Deleuze and Guattari, these TJs are confident of being able to intervene within cyberspace to maximise its emancipatory social and cultural potential." Richard Barbrook, *Deleuzoguattarians: The Holy Fools*, 2005, <https://libcom.org/library/deleuzoguattarians-barbrook>.
9. Henri Jenkins et al, *Spreadable Media*, NYU Press, 2013, p.1.
10. The initial cultural studies critique of Adorno was that his overall rejection cut us off from proletarian culture. If Adorno's critique of Hollywood has a real analogue today it would paradoxically be in the alt-right's notion of The Cathedral. See: Breitbart, A. (2011). *Righteous Indignation: Excuse Me While I Save the World*. New York: Grand Central Publishing & Yarvin, C. (2008). A gentle introduction to Unqualified Reservations (part 1). Retrieved January 23, 2018, from <https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.nl/2009/01/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified.html>.

11. Jean-François Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil" in Telos (19), 1974.
12. Kenneth Goldsmith, Uncreative Writing, Columbia University Press, 2011.
13. Theodore Adorno, et al, The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology, Harper & Row, 1976.
14. Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 2nd Edition, Beacon Press, 1992 [1964] p.172.
15. Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Taylor & Francis, 1979.
16. See "Offline is the new luxury" (Dutch public broadcasting VPRO documentary from 2016): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzp6g1H52wQ>.
17. <https://www.odycceus.eu>.
18. danah boyd, Did Media Literacy Backfire, 2017, <https://points.datasociety.net/did-media-literacy-backfire-7418c084d88d>.

