

## **Mette Mortensen, and Christina Neumayer, *The Playful Politics of Memes*, London/New York: Routledge, 2023.**

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*The Playful Politics of Memes*, published by Routledge, is a compendium of insightful works that were previously published as articles in the *Information, Communication & Society* journal 24(16) in 2021. The book is an intriguing look into the use of memes in online communication and the effects and tactics behind them. The volume focuses predominantly on memes tied to political issues, while specifically looking into ‘playfulness’ which connects the humorous aspects of memes with the political. As the editors note, the book provides a “critical examination of how [memes] playfully demarcate and move frontiers between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the political” (p. 1) and this is thoroughly demonstrated through the varied contributions within.

The articles included in the book cover numerous topics and examine several online (and offline) environments in their research, thus providing the reader with insights into how varied are the political issues and significant events, as well as the creative and playful ways the public has responded and commented on them. Mortensen and Neumayer present the relevant concepts and topics in question in a concise and comprehensive way, introducing the reader to the thought-provoking works included in the volume. The one concept which might elude a clear definition is the internet meme itself, or rather a clear outline of which online communication features are considered a meme. Is a remixed image macro a meme without the humorous, without the political, without the playfulness? With a concept as broad and rapidly perpetually evolving as the internet meme, however, it is better left defined in more detail in the varied methodologies of the articles themselves, and to get a clearer picture, the reader has many interesting instances to explore via the research conducted by the authors.

Sulafa Zidani’s contribution to the book, “Messy on the inside: Internet memes as mapping tools of everyday life”, looks into the specific context of Palestinians living in Israel. This topic was researched and published by Zidani before the armed conflict between Israel

and Hamas-led Palestinian groups broke out in the Gaza Strip in 2023, and currently it provides a very interesting insight into the attitudes and values of Palestinians living on Israel territory before the open aggressions. It demonstrates everyday thoughts and portrayals of identities and values and gives the reader a chance to glimpse into societal divides permeating between the shaky coexistence of these nations. The chapter demarks memes as mapping tools and it uses many relevant examples of these memes that function as “mapping tools that chart out the connection between the cultural, political and spatial boundaries and participate in playful negotiations of these boundaries.” (p. 18) The article demonstrates how memes can be observed working on a global level, state level, and to portray in-group Palestinian diversity. The chapter is an insightful look into the inherent segregation between the Jews and the Palestinians apparent in their online expressions, but it also highlights a “culture shift to make room for and maintain connections across Palestinian culture.” (p. 32) Zidani explores the divide between the cultures and the signs of togetherness among Palestinians with a very well-conducted research.

“Memes, brands and the politics of post-terror togetherness: Following the Manchester bee after the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing”, a chapter by Samuel Merrill and Simon Lindgren, examines the reactions of the public following a terrorist attack in Manchester. Specifically, as the title suggests, it follows the Manchester symbol of the worker bee and its use by both official city channels, the wide public, as well as more radical groups. There is no question about the relevance of the research and the insights it provides into the behavior and attitudes of people following a tragic event, however the article really shines with several selected aspects of its methodology and approach. For one, the authors focus on long-term observation of the reactions and look for resurgence of the bee symbol in the dataset for over 7 years, in order to confirm its ties to the aforementioned bombing. Furthermore they looked for the resurgence and peaks of the use of the symbol in the years following the bombing. Another insightful approach in their methodology is the focus on ‘hybrid forms’ of communication, “blurring the so-called online and offline with the potential to involve copresence or not.” (p. 40) The chapter not only looks into the memes shared online, but also the offline actions and implications of their popularity (such as a trend of worker bee tattoos). The authors note that, as the bee became a symbol, a way of branding and showing support, despite a few attempts at its adoption by certain far-right organizations, the online posts depicting the bee remained predominantly anti-racist and promoted peace, thus providing an interesting view into post-terror togetherness.

The chapter titled “Memetising the pandemic: Memes, covid-19 mundanity and political cultures”, by the contributors Maria Francesca Murru and Stefania Vicari, looks into ‘mundane memetics’ in times of crisis. The article studies a large dataset of covid-19-related memes produced by Italians on Twitter during extreme lockdown conditions, asking “[h]ow does every day social media memetics acquire political significance during extraordinary events?” (p. 57) During the early days of the pandemic outbreak, Italy has been considered the European ‘hotbed’ of the virus and was a pioneer in adopting extreme prevention measures. The selection of the region for this study is therefore very inspired and relevant to capture primary attitudes and reactions to the unprecedented globally-broadcast health crisis. The study uses Shifman’s three dimensions of memes for a close analysis of memetic posts in the selected dataset. It demonstrates the prevalence of varied themes across the dataset, such as the divide between the ‘good citizens’ and the ‘bad’ ones, or criticism of the Italian model of dealing with the pandemic, etc. The chapter shows that political expressions of the public were more focused on anti-elite discourse and provided more of mundane life observations than in-depth political commentaries (p. 56):

In early everyday pandemic memes the political stake did not manifest itself in the explicitness of values, attitudes [...]. It rather surfaced in the form of *mundane* political culture – one that was primarily performative, irrespective of any future political action, and marked by populist values.

The chapter includes interesting insights into the attitudes in one of the most watched places in the world in the early days of the pandemic with well-practiced methodology and relevant data.

The following chapter, one with a very catchy title: “‘Don’t panic people! Trump will tweet the virus away’: Memes contesting and confirming populist political leaders during COVID-19 crisis”, written by Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Mette Mortensen, continues to introduce the reader to more invaluable research regarding the pandemic and the political upheavals surrounding it. The chapter deals with the portrayals of populist political leaders (namely Donald J. Trump and Boris Johnson) during the early pandemic months, asking “[h]ow did memes thematically address and criticize populist leaders and their handling of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020?” (p. 77). The authors surmise that memes about these two leaders create a paradox – the memes strive to criticize the populist approach the politicians utilize to their advantage, however the memes themselves function on a similar approach. The article covers the populist political leaders extensively and looks into their tactics and speech, then it

follows with insights on political memes in general. The methodology is well thought-out, along with the measures the authors took to avoid algorithm bias (such as utilizing the DuckDuckGo software). The article provides a lot of insight and excellent examples of the memes depicting this paradox. The one thing it could have benefitted from would be depicting the memes along with the visual elements utilized in them, as the dataset specifically included only memes including visually significant features (cartoons, photos, etc.). While the authors did a good job in their descriptive endeavors, visualization would have aided their work further. Nevertheless, the research has a lot of merit and raises thought-provoking further questions by pointing out the paradox (p. 89):

How might populist political leaders be criticized and their actions subjected to scrutiny without feeding into their own communicative patterns and logics, and thus indirectly confirming their worldview and interpretations of events?

“#OkBoomer, time to meet the Zoomers’: Studying the memefication of intergenerational politics”, a chapter contributed by Jing Zeng and Crystal Abidin, transports the reader from the local contexts and the pandemic to the conflicts between generations. The article examines the “political culture of young people and gen Z in particular” (p. 93). It provides insight into the memefication of politics across generations and close examination of Gen Z attitudes towards ‘Boomers’. The authors introduce the reader to the concept of ‘discursive activism’, specifically its tactics among the Gen Z generation – a way of disparaging politically incorrect assumptions and notions in older generations by using the ‘Ok Boomer’ slogan. Authors manage to define the generations in question well and they use a good methodology for their research. From their corpus of hashtagged videos, the content they study within, and divide their examples by, are: ‘controversial issues’, ‘meme form’ and ‘communication function’. Based on these classifications, the authors provide both extensive quantitative analysis of the dataset, as well as a detailed qualitative look into selected examples. The study gives interesting insight into generational divide and its expressions in varied forms, as well as the attempts at conciliation and togetherness in self-deprecatory posts made by the Boomers. As the authors note, “[t]he intergenerational politics between Gen Z and Boomers are engaged by the former to construct and imagine their own generational consciousness [...]” (p. 110), and the work demonstrates that fact splendidly in this intriguing chapter.

The following chapters introduce the reader to another topic of focus as it shifts towards the examinations of far-right movements and ideologies. Starting with “Memetic

commemorations: Remixing far-right values in digital spheres”, written by Tommaso Trillò and Limor Shifman, the reader gets a glimpse into the world of far-right values and the blends of different directions they take. The research stems from the innate disparity from these two facts: “the political family of the far-right typically shares a commitment to the values of authority, hierarchy and order [and] rejection of individualism, rationalism, pluralism, and egalitarianism.” (p. 117), whereas the values embedded in memes are “authenticity, creativity, communal loyalty, freedom of information, and expressive egalitarianism.” (p. 117). Much like in chapter five, there is an inherent paradox presented and extensively examined. The study is situated in an Italian context and uses a well-thought-out methodology for finding and examining their sample set. The authors give proper attention to the visual aspects of memes and conduct a thorough analysis of the paradox. They provide excellent methodological paths for further research into such phenomena, as well as many insights into language and visual feature manipulation and appeal.

“Sharing the hate? Memes and transnationality in the far right’s digital visual culture”, a collaboration of Jordan McSwiney, Michael Vaughan, Annett Heft, and Matthias Hoffmann, works with the notion that memes are a key medium for far-right message spreading and it compares their prevalence to other visual media sharing within those identifying with the ideology. Not only that, but the chapter looks into the oft-neglected transnationality aspect of memes. The article cleverly points out that “the interest in memes as a specific form of online visual media often omits the broader ‘cultural soup’[...] at the exclusion of other elements of the digital visual cultures” (p. 137) and that studies often focus on one country or organization and do not look into transnationality extensively. With this nuanced approach, the chapter examines several websites and uses mixed method, while also examining the dataset across different countries and organizations. The study takes an impressive methodical approach to its quantitative part, focusing on three aspects of discourse: fascist continuity, western civilization identity, and pop culture appropriation. Despite expectations, memes were however found to have limited salience in the dataset and the authors found that they have not “flowed through from the subcultural to the organizational layer of the far right” (p. 149), all the while carrying limited evidence of transnationality. This surprising and interesting find is supported by well-conducted research and presented to the reader in a very concise and comprehensive way.

Lastly, the volume ushers the reader into much darker memetic depictions, where light-hearted or disparaging humor turns into incited violence and disturbing imagery. “Murder fantasies in memes: Fascist aesthetics of death narratives and the banalization of white

supremacist violence”, a chapter contributed by Tina Askanius and Nadine Keller, provides a chilling look into the online expressions of a militant neo-Nazi group Nordic Resistance Movement. The article examines memes crafting white supremacy, xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny and anti-Semitism in the selected dataset and it looks into symbolisms promoting violence and death and trivialization and normalization of these themes. As the authors note, “[f]ar-right actors have co-opted [memes] to dress up hate speech with dark humor, pop-culture references, quirky GIFs and catchy phrases.” (p. 158). The study outlines five categories of themes prevalent in the dataset: anti-establishment, racial strangers, anti-Semitism, NRM self-promotion, and anti-feminist/LGBTQ rhetoric. The authors apply a good methodology with focus on the extreme violent images, provided with an in-depth analysis. As is noted in the work, “[m]emes are helping move ideas, previously considered beyond the pale in public discourse, to travel and have bearing online.” (p. 169). The study demonstrates this on the chilling examples perfectly. A striking difference is also noted in some of the memes which point out extreme and disturbing practices while calling upon historical places or facts, “evoking death symbolism through past atrocities and fantasies of future genocides.” (p. 170). The chapter gives the reader an insightful look into these practices through the data and its implications.

The book gives the reader an engrossing look into memes in the political sphere and their nuanced uses by the wide public. The collected articles are structured very well, with thematically similar works following one another in a logical way. Overall the book was a very comprehensive read with great insights into numerous meme-related topics. The endeavor to collect the articles into this volume is a very helpful one for the academic community and the works within will surely inspire many further studies, help scholar devise varied methodologies when studying memes and their features, and give valuable looks into the political, the memetic, the humorous, and the playful.