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FOLLOWING LENIN AND STALIN THROUGH INSTAGRAM: VARIETIES OF DISSIMULATIVE PLAY IN LEFT-REVOLUTIONARY MEMES

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Introduction

Instagram has become a lively site for a subculture exploring and debating political ideology and theory using memes. Participants in this largely unstudied subculture have referred to it as Politigram or Theorygram. Pseudonymous accounts on Politigram often develop and debate political positions that are either idiosyncratic (e.g. “Feminist-Monarcho-Primitivism”, see Baciu et al., 2020) or outside the so-called Overton window of publicly acceptable political ideologies. In Politigram’s memes, political ideas are often represented through characters that personify them, for instance, through historical leaders or developers of political theory. Frequently occurring characters on Politigram include the primitivist Theodore Kaczynski, the philosopher Nick Land and historical leaders such as Lenin and Stalin.

Online political ideation and how fringe political perspectives circulate widely through memes have become pressing concerns for research, particularly after meme culture has been appropriated and weaponised by reactionary political forces. Some authors have begun to view anonymous or pseudonymous online spaces as inherently problematic, as they expect the provocative play with taboos to veer towards far-right imagery and to mainstream such images under the pretence of irony (Hawley, 2017; Heikkilä, 2017).

This study focuses on memes about left revolutionary ideology, which is understudied compared to right-wing online extremism (Zienkiewicz, 2020, p. 1, though see Merrill et al., 2024; Greenwalt & McVey, 2022). Ideas from the left are not equally transgressive or taboo as those from the far-right. However, both Politigram and far-right communities

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on 4chan exhibit “dissimulative identity play” (de Zeeuw & Tuters, 2020, p. 218), i.e. the adoption of stances distinct from those of one’s everyday self. It is important to understand the variety of content and practices in online spaces with dissimulative tendencies and fringe politics to develop more nuanced normative accounts of them (ibid, p. 224-227).

Our analysis follows memes that feature Lenin and Stalin through a large number of Instagram accounts posting memes. Lenin and Stalin were chosen as a focus since they represent simultaneously the provocative, discredited form of politics frequently present in Politigram but still maintain some relevance in contemporary public political discourse (as the “other” to liberalism, see Nelles, 1997). We ask, firstly, how memes these memes thematically address and feature Stalin and Lenin. We also ask how Politigram establishes itself as a community through memes and how participants express political stances.

Methods and data

We identified accounts posting political memes on Instagram by combining several search strategies. We started with accounts that posted with the #politigram and #theorygram hashtags and five accounts that focused on memes about Lenin and Stalin. We then selected related accounts based on follower networks and Instagram’s suggestions for similar accounts. This resulted in 43,812 accounts.

We retrieved all 4,531,515 images posted by these accounts in 2021. From this dataset, we identified the memes that matched our analytical focus, i.e., images depicting or discussing Lenin or Stalin. We included all images that feature the text “Lenin” or “Stalin”. We utilised OpenAI’s CLIP model (Radford et al., 2021) to do zero-shot classification with ten text prompts to identify visual depictions of Lenin or Stalin.

We selected the most popular memes for thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) by grouping the images with perceptual hashing and excluding groups with fewer than six images. After manual classification, 172 groups included images featuring Lenin or Stalin. Both authors coded recurring ideas, people, and references in the image groups to identify common themes in the images.

Results

We present the results in three parts. Each of these describes a distinct way Lenin and Stalin feature in memes, and our interpretation of boundary work and positioning is done with the memes.

Theoretical literacy as cultural capital



Figure 1. A meme with Stalin explaining to Bordiga that the development of communism can be understood based on his theories

Many memes featuring Lenin or Stalin posit distinctions or oppositions between political positions or theories. Figure 1 juxtaposes Italian Marxist theorist Amadeo Bordiga with Stalin's book *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*. In such memes, Lenin and Stalin are ideologues, representing particular ideas or bodies of work associated with them.

The memes could be read as succinct ways of communicating political ideas. However, the point is just as much to perform boundary work (Gal et al., 2016), i.e. establishing and policing distinctions between an in-group and an out-group. Memetic communities commonly require knowledge of the correct application of meme templates and vernacular terminology (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). Politigram additionally requires familiarity with political ideas, often made explicit in the invocation to "read theory".

Militancy as a communicative value



Figure 2. An anarchist stating that Nazis should be killed but calling Stalin a "Red Fascist" when he sends a Nazi to the Gulag.

Lenin and Stalin appear in many images as historical figures embodying particular attitudes or actions rather than as political thinkers. In memes such as Figure 2, Stalin is

often depicted based on the stereotype of a ruthless militant and bloodthirsty agent of revolution. In contrast to Lenin and Stalin as ideologues (as described above), the attitudes and values ascribed to the character of Stalin in these memes are not that of intricate conceptual knowledge but rather a resolve that is firmly held and requires no explanation.

Parodying conceptions of communism or anti-fascism

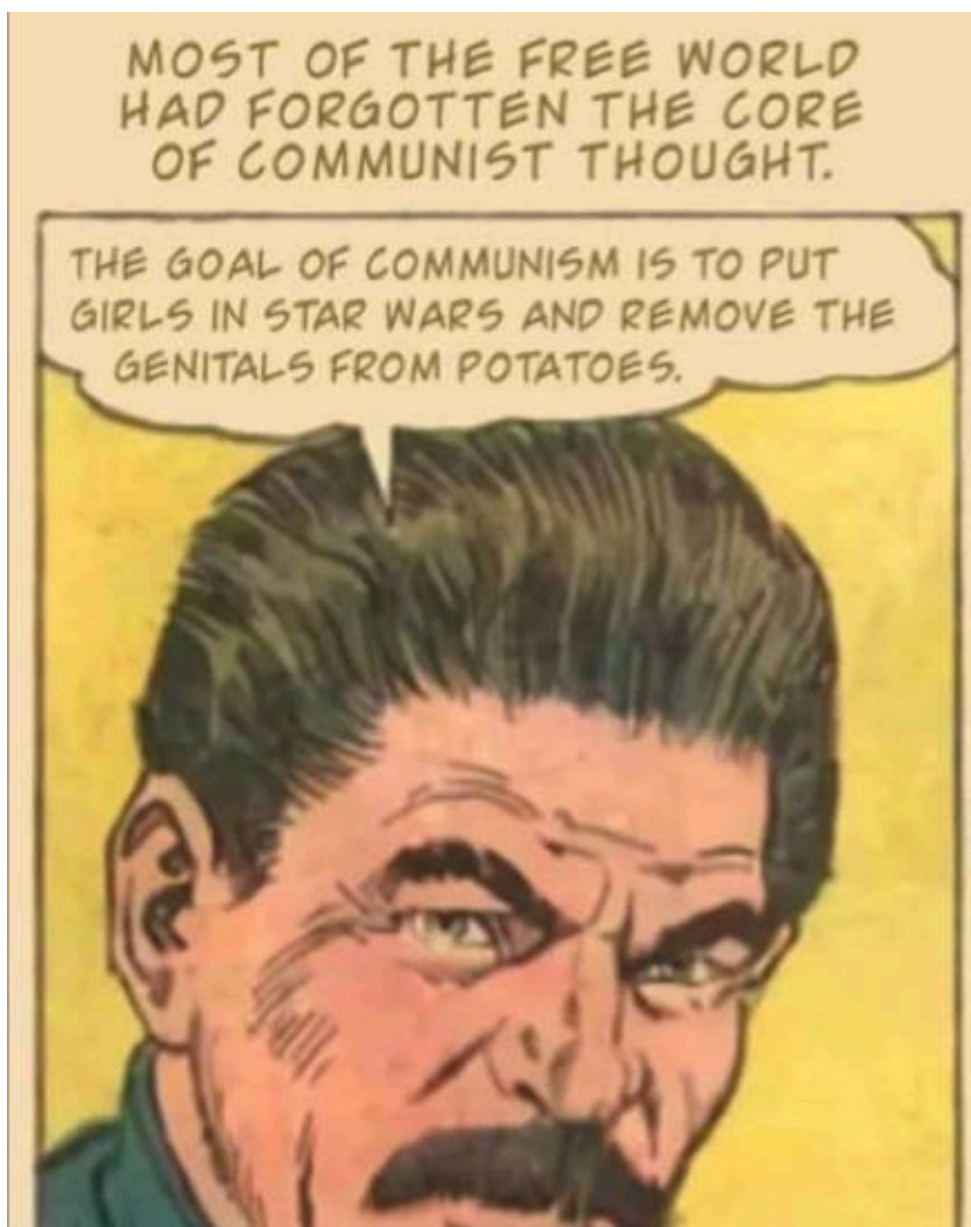


Figure 3. A meme with Stalin commenting on leading roles in Star Wars films and on Hasbro removing the title of "Mr." from the plastic toy Potato Head.

Though Lenin and Stalin are far removed from contemporary events, they are still mobilised on Politigram to comment on twenty-first-century politics. In these memes, Lenin or Stalin frequently speak out exaggerated examples of contemporary talking points related to communism or anti-fascism. Figure 3, for example, attributes to Stalin a statement about female representation in Star Wars. The joke builds on the fact that some fans attribute this change in Star Wars to far-left or communist political activities. The memes discussed present contemporary politics less through argumentation and more by producing “perspective by incongruity” (Burke, 1973), highlighting the inconsistencies of established political ideas (Metahaven, 2016).

Discussion and conclusions

This study has clear limitations: Our research material is from one year and follows only two of Politigram’s numerous meme characters. Even a relatively narrow focus, however, reveals various potentially contradictory ways in which Politigram establishes its identity and expresses political positions. We found that literacy in political theory functioned as a form of cultural capital that established a boundary between insiders and outsiders. This logic was reversed in memes that equated valorising conviction over conceptual sophistication. Lastly, some memes used Stalin to parody contemporary American political discourse and its conception of communism.

On the surface, memes about past dictators appear similar to the “dissimulative identity play” of, for instance, trolls playing with far-right symbols on 4chan. Participants taking stock of each others’ theoretical literacy, however, suggests a different set of shared goals than, for instance, the culture of trolling that seeks reactions from others through provocation (Phillips, 2015, p. 25). Analysis of meme cultures can offer scholars of media and extremism sensitivity and ways to differentiate between online communities. It may help us distinguish genuinely dangerous antagonism from speech that appears similar but results from a different set of shared rules.

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