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Revolution by other memes: on the playful subcultures of r/PoliticalCompassMemes

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ABSTRACT

Based on an analysis of 300k opening posts to the popular image-based discussion forum r/PoliticalCompassMemes, in this paper we offer an empirical analysis of how the ‘political compass’ meme template is used to playfully work out speculative political imaginaries that reconfigure existing ideologies into niche political subcultures. We observe various dynamics over time, including how participants self-identify with different ‘quadrants’ of the compass via meme characters and ‘flair’ metadata. To analyze these dynamics, we revisit a classic argument of the ‘Birmingham School’ of culture studies, concerning the latent relationship between revolutionary politics and youth subcultural styles. While finding value in the latter, we identify a fundamental shift in digital political subcultures from style as a proxy for politics to politics as a kind of style.

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Introduction: digital political subcultures

In March of 2020, at the height of the pandemic lockdowns, the government of Donald Trump issued every income tax paying US resident a \$1,200 USD check, intended to offset a feared economic collapse. In the context of American, and particularly conservative American, skepticism about government spending, the prospect of accepting the Trump administration’s check caused a degree of confusion across the ideological spectrum, as captured in a meme posted to an popular Reddit forum at the time (Figure 1). The image features a grid of four frames with a crudely drawn cartoon of a young woman in various emotional states. With its crudeness indicating that it was dashed off in a hurry, the image is not particularly attractive – although a self-consciously ‘ugly aesthetic’ is common to subcultural Internet memes (cf Douglas, 2014). Moreover, its imagery may be hard for ‘outsiders’ to decode, yet for those ‘in the know’ it struck a nerve, as it was the all-time most discussed post on r/PoliticalCompassMemes (r/PCM), a very popular Reddit forum (over half a million subscribers) devoted to exclusively to variations of one single meme template, the political compass – which is used to joke about extreme political polarization and to play with ideas of revolutionary politics in symbolic form.

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Figure 1. Most discussed meme on r/PCM (u/chimichangaboy).

In what follows, we conceptualize this apparently banal memetic play as a powerful form of contemporary political subjectification, and therefore a crucial site to investigate how digital culture is reshaping political identifications of young people – indeed, their very understanding of ‘politics’ in general. To do so, we consider political meme production on r/PCM through an older tradition of subcultural theory associated with the so-called ‘Birmingham School’ of cultural studies. Our aim is to demonstrate the relevance of subcultural theory to understanding the politics of digital culture, and especially its usefulness in interpreting political memes. First, we critically reconstruct the Birmingham School’s theorization of the politics of subcultures. We then provide an account of the political compass’s journey to becoming a meme template. We then analyze a corpus of 300,000 memes posted to r/PCM to view how users negotiate these binaries and rework the relationships among political categories. We conclude by revising Birmingham School theory in order to account for how the digital subcultures of r/PCM speculatively construct political subjectivities, and how this activity may be read as a symbolic (and ironic) commentary on the contemporary foreclosure of radical alternative political imaginaries (cf Fisher, 2009).

Although online discussions of arcane memes like this may seem somewhat removed from discussions of the ‘properly political’ concerns of mobilizing masses for

transformative change (cf Berlant, 2011) – scholarship on digital culture points to their increasing centrality to a contemporary personalized mode of contentious politics (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), which is typically characterized by antagonistic play (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). Against the broader political context of a global populist uprising, much of the research on ‘political memes’ has pointed to their role in promoting extremist or fringe political positions, often on the radical right (cf Devries, 2021; Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Lumsden & Harmer, 2019; Tuters and Hagen, 2020) – though there has also been growing attention to a genre of playfully ‘memeish’ radical leftist political commentary (cf Merrill et al., 2024). This research often alludes to a depth heuristic, whereby subcultural signals originate at the bottom of the internet before making their way into the mainstream (Finlayson, 2023).

Revolution by other means

While the word ‘subculture’ is frequently invoked in current discussions of reactionary digital cultural production (cf Lewis et al., 2021; Venturini, 2019), it generally rests on a common sense understanding of the term as a community outside of mainstream culture. However, subculture also has a long and varied history as a specific object of scholarly analysis. The earliest work on the topic emerged from the field of criminology, and was concerned with teenage delinquency. This ‘functionalist’ approach tended to frame participation in youth subcultures essentially as a passing ‘phase’ in early adult development, an interregnum between childhood and marriage (Eisenstadt, 1956/2017). An alternative to the conservative functionalist approach developed out of ‘labeling theory’, which proposed that what was normally called ‘deviance’ could also be seen as the result of society’s labeling it as such. Associated with the Chicago school of sociology and in specific the work of Howie Becker (1973), this latter theory was also characterized by its pioneering use of ethnographic fieldwork. This approach would in turn become a source of inspiration to the emerging field of cultural studies – pioneered at the famed Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, England, also known as the ‘Birmingham School’ – which sought to combine ethnographic fieldwork with ‘structural analysis’.

Through a lens that its director, Stuart Hall, referred to as ‘complex Marxism’ (Hall et al., 2003, p. 23), the Birmingham School approach saw subcultures as working out ‘contradictions’ inherent in capitalism. They undertook semiotic analysis of youth groups as engaging in *revolutionary politics by other means*. Focussing on how groups such as mods and punks distinguished themselves from mainstream culture, and one another, via distinct aesthetic choices and practices, the Birmingham School developed a theory of how discrete and uniform working class culture was fragmenting under the pressures of consumer culture and the restructuring of postwar economies. Combining a structural semiotic approach, with post-Marxist concepts from Gramsci and Althusser of ‘hegemony’, ‘relative autonomy’ and the ‘imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ from (Hall & Jefferson, 1975/1993, p. ix), subcultures were seen as engaging in *culture war by proxy of style*. ‘Through dress, activities, leisure pursuits and life-style’ subcultures were seen as ‘project[ing] a different cultural response or “solution” to the problems posed for them by their material and social class position and experience’ (Clarke et al., 1975/1993, p. 101). The resulting subcultures were

characterized by their performative aesthetic practices and rituals, which operated to distinguish groups both from mainstream culture, as well as competing subcultures.

The most frequently cited of the Birmingham School's texts, Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979/2012), developed the concepts of 'bricolage' and 'homology' to discuss 'structured improvisations' in which 'prominent forms of discourse are radically adapted, subverted, and extended' (Hebdige, 1979/2012, p. 104). For example, punks' appropriation of incongruous or inappropriate objects into their attire – such as safety pins or the swastika – were read as attempts to overturn hegemonic norms of style, beauty and bourgeois propriety and dominant symbolic order via 'semiotic guerilla warfare' (p. 105). Through this lens, subcultures were seen as inherently – though not explicitly – political. Anticipating themes that would later come to define contemporary digital culture, Hebdige also famously described subcultures as 'hiding in the light ... in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance' (1988, p. 37).

One way to boil down the Birmingham School's approach to subcultural politics is to say that it found a *structure* to subculture in the form of binary semiotic play that aimed to carve out an oppositional space to everyday normativity, as well as a *function* of subcultural practices: imaginary or symbolic resolution to actually existing political antagonisms – a lens through they would interpret subcultural styles both as reimagining working class solidarity and even as a sort of prototypical form of inter-racial intersectionality (Clarke et al., 1975/1993, p. 24; Hebdige, 1979/2012, p. 64). In this sense their approach bears a family resemblance to theories, in the analysis of digital culture, of play and of games as contingent explorations and allegorical representations of how algorithms structure digital realities, and how those realities could be different (cf Gallo-way, 2006).

The Birmingham School's account of subcultures was also subject to critique, including from within its own ranks. Projecting anticapitalism in nominally apolitical fashion-oriented youth was deemed a kind of academic wish fulfillment (Cohen, 1980/2002) and arm-chair theorizing (e.g., Muggleton, 2000). In particular, Thornton (1995) persuasively argued that, rather than offering symbolic resolutions to structural contradictions, subcultures were motivated by a system of capital accumulation, just like in any other market – indeed, the compulsion towards guerilla semiotics noted by Hebdige was, in fact, an incredibly generative disposition which was also (perhaps even above all) useful to marketers (cf Frank, 2002).

In spite of these critiques, we find much useful in the Birmingham School's approach when it comes to analyzing aspects of digital culture, specifically how digital subcultures *play at revolutionary-style politics*. This approach frames play as a kind of nonwork, or 'occasion of pure waste' that explores the rules that structure social systems often by breaking them, as opposed to games which tend to instrumentalize them (Caillouis, 1961, p. 5). As with the anti-normative praxis analyzed by the Birmingham School's subculture project, memetic play – particularly on subreddit discussion forums – is highly structured around semiotic oppositions which reflect tensions with both the mainstream 'parent culture' as well 'intra' conflicts against other memetic subcultures (cf Hagen, 2023). Drawing on the Birmingham School, our objective in what follows is to combine an empirically-driven approach (using digital methods in place of ethnography), with a 'symptomatic' approach (cf Jameson, 2004), which reads artifacts of cultural production,

whether fashion or memes, as symbolic commentaries on large and ‘serious’ questions of politics and power, even if their tone is anything but serious.

Political compass as expressive format

Whereas the Birmingham School interpreted subcultural politics via the forms of semiotic play, such as bricolage, the cultural milieu we examine uses *politics as content*. This content – a schematizing of the space of possible political positions – has its own idiosyncratic story, which is also entangled with a few key moments in the history of liberalism.

The left-right political spectrum traces back to spatial arrangement of the late-eighteenth century French parliament (Bobbio, 1996). Many critics note the ideological suppositions in such a diagram. For some, the left – right political spectrum tends to imply that the ‘center’ somehow transcends ideology altogether – the political scientist Marcus Gilroy-Ware calls this the ‘goldilocks’ position (2020) – which arguably leads to fence-sitting and paralysis for the sake of political convenience. Others point out that, for all its faults, the left – right political spectrum nevertheless refers to irreconcilable differences and that, historically, politicians who have claimed to transcend the spectrum were well represented on the far-right (Sternhell, 1983). The political compass proposes to transcend the limitations of the left-right spectrum by adding a whole new dimension by which to categorize the space of possible politics.

The addition of a vertical axis to the left-right spectrum was arguably first developed in 1968 in the pages of the libertarian journal *Rampart* (Bryson & McDill, 1968 – see Figure 2).¹ This purported to measure the relationship to state power, with poles labeled ‘STATISM’ and ‘ANARCHY’, which created a two dimensional (x/y) grid with four quadrants into which political positions could be mapped. Initially, its creators claimed to be primarily interested in using the compass to map out historical and contemporary political coalitions. Yet the compass also served two important ideological functions: in its presentation of the libertarian position, relatively obscure and unpopular at the time, it created a sharp distinction between libertarians and other far-right tendencies, such as fascism, while simultaneously positing a congruence between socialism and anarchism.

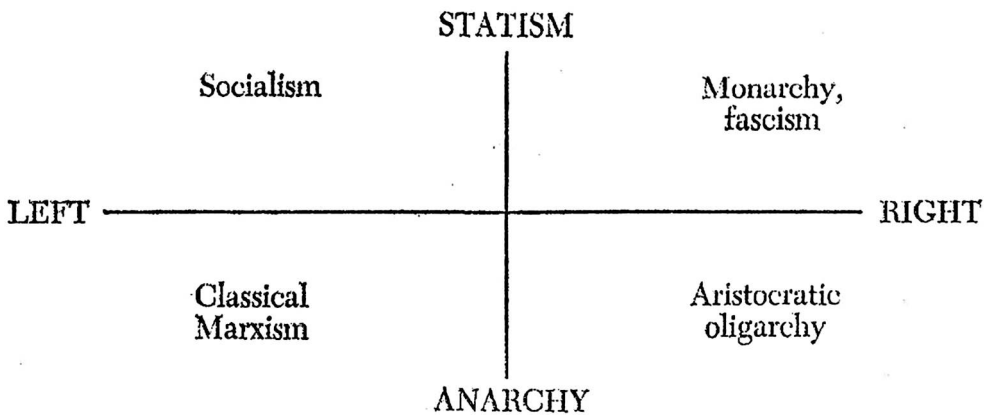


Figure 2. The original political spectrum graph (Bryson & McDill, 1968).

Following its somewhat arcane origins as means for articulating a broader range of political positions, and prior to its uses as a meme template, the political compass was taken up online as an interactive diagnostic tool for determining one's political 'type', somewhat akin to the popular Myers-Briggs personality test. On the website politicalcompass.org, one can fill out a questionnaire about one's beliefs and values and find these translated into a x/y coordinate within a space of possible political positions. The poles of the vertical axis measure the relation to state power ('authoritarian' to 'libertarian') and the horizontal axis measures economic (left/collectivist to right/individualist) positions, which results in four color-coded quadrants: authoritarian left, authoritarian right, libertarian right, and libertarian left.

If the original political compass test is about discerning one's own positions, then by contrast political compass memes are often about doing so through comically disparaging others' positions or stance – antagonistic play being characteristic to the form of political memes (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021).² A successful political compass meme on r/PCM cannot map a single object into a single quadrant, but must create clever oppositions, thus 'filling in' the compass with the positions of one's antagonists. The most basic political compass meme format organizes all manner of other phenomena (positions on political issues, but also an endless variety of other kinds of objects: celebrities, novels, films, etc), into categories that are also understood to be *ideological positions*.³

Ideological positions as expressed using political compass memes do not stand alone as idiosyncratic individual choices, but instead exist within a universe of other similarly articulated, but differentiated political possibilities. This is not unlike the way memes' existence has been theorized as never singular, but always existing in relations of 'contested cultural capital' to other memes (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). In this way, quadrants of the compass are only legible as political categories in relation to other quadrants; as structural semiotics argues more generally, political positions only signify in distinction to other explicit or implicit positions. Digital political selves are thus constructed as members of pre-existing categories who share politico-cultural features, and who are structurally antagonistic towards other groups occupying alternative positions on the compass – thus out-group memes are used to retroactively construct an in-group via 'othering' (Tuters & Hagen, 2020; Lumsden & Harmer, 2019).

Finally, returning to story of the template's origins, it is worth noting that while the design of the political compass appears to treat all quadrants equally, our findings would reveal that r/PCM has been almost always dominated by 'libertarians' (initially by:libleft: and then by:libright:), a peculiarly American political position that also has a long and influential history in internet culture (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). Indeed, at the outset it is also worth noting that for all its imagined diversity of perspectives, as far as we can tell, the profile of r/PCM would also seem to hew to that same familiar demographic. With this in mind, in studying r/PCM through the lens of subcultural theory, our objective was to try and understand what happens when style moves from being a proxy for politics to the main event itself.

R/politicalcompassmemes: dataset & method

r/PoliticalCompassMemes (r/PCM) started in 2017, but did not take off until shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, when forum activity grew at a near exponential rate

for close to a year, topping out at nearly a million posts per month and with a user base of five hundred thousand at the time of writing. The forum is dedicated to posting memes that play with the two-axis political compass (left/right, libertarian/authoritarian). This is done by mapping phenomena onto a grid with four color quadrants, but it also includes fashioning a variety of personas associated with the ideologies indicated by the quadrants. The resulting memes are posted to the forum where they are debated in the comments and, following the platform's affordances, voted up or down – typically based on their perceived humorousness and the precision of their associations.

Our dataset was collected on 29 August 2022, using the '4Cat' research tool (Peeters & Hagen, 2022) whose Reddit dataset was based on the Pushshift dataset (Baumgartner et al., 2020), which had been archiving the platform that since 2015 by querying Reddit's application programming interface (API). The timing of this data collection was crucial since Reddit would shortly thereafter change their API, thereby shutting off researchers' access. Our initial r/PCM dataset contained over twenty million posts (see Figure 3 above), each of which included field for: 'thread_id,' 'id,' 'timestamp,' 'body,' 'subject,' 'author,' 'author_flair,' 'post_flair,' 'image_file,' 'domain,' 'url,' 'image_md5,' 'subreddit,' 'parent,' 'score,' and 'unix_timestamp.' In the process of 'cleaning' this dataset, removing all comments left us with 304,331 'opening posts,' each of which corresponded to a unique image.

To study this dataset, we combined 'distant' quantitative and 'close' qualitative reading methods. There are a number of different names for this mixed methods approach,

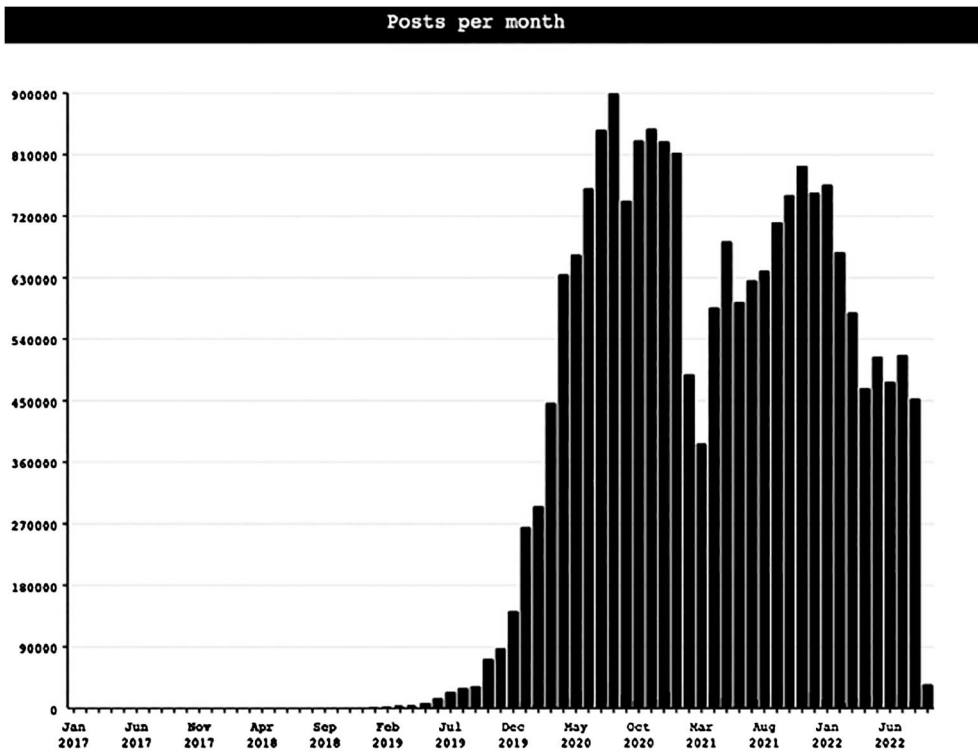


Figure 3. Time series graph of total posts to r/PCM.

including ‘digital methods’ and ‘digital hermeneutics’, which respectively advocate to follow ‘the methods of the medium’ in order to ‘trace the boundaries between medium, methods and social reality’ itself (Rogers, 2013, p. 1; Romele, 2020, p. 62). The thinking here is that socio-technical infrastructures, like web forums, present new methodological possibilities for social research while, at the same time, they actively shape our objects of study, as well as potentially aspects of the broader socio-political reality beyond. For example, past research has argued that Reddit’s design facilitated the growth of an anti-feminist ‘toxic technoculture’ which also resonated well beyond the platform (Massanari, 2017) – although there have since been many changes to the governance of the platform (DeCook, 2022).

While our objective was not to make general comments on the platform as a whole, our analysis is interested in how ‘mechanisms of affordances take shape through material and social circumstances’ (Davis & Chouinard, 2016, p. 245). In our case this requires looking both at how design features like `author_flair` structure interactions within the forum, as well as understanding how the very *format* of the political compass works to shape a certain understanding of the politically possible. Our analysis focussed on primarily on the ‘`image_url`’ field in the dataset (which is to say: the memes), which we ordered by their ‘score’ (up and down votes), by their ‘`unix_timestamp`’ (to see patterns over time) and by their ‘`author_flair`’ – the latter a form of metadata which, as we will discuss, plays a very active role in r/PCM’s speculative imaginary.

Almost all of the posts in our dataset had been categorized by the posters themselves using author flair: colored icons derived from the political compass template (for example, `:authleft`: is red, `:libleft`: is green), which we then repurposed as the basis for our qualitative analysis: subdividing the corpus by political position (left, `authleft`, `libleft`, `lib-center`, `centrist`, `authcenter`, right, `authright`, and `libright`) and then ‘probing’ these sub-corpora by reading those posts that received the most post engagement, in terms of upvotes or comments. The following discussion is based on findings that emerged out of dialogues that included 13 other researchers all of whom were invited to work on this same corpus – on a variety of different subprojects – in the context of a week-long ‘data sprint’ in the summer of 2023, hosted by REDACTED. Although made to a public forum, we should not presume that their authors expected their posts to be studied (cf Fiesler & Proferes, 2018). For this reason, our analysis focuses on patterns in metadata and does not profile posts that might be considered as uncontroversial.

Discussion: going meta

To begin our discussion, it is important to acknowledge that r/PCM functions as an ‘imageboard’, which is to say a forum where threaded discussion centers on memes in an ‘opening post.’ Imageboards are notoriously arcane spaces where discussions reference all kinds of in-jokes and where memes develop their own ever-evolving worlds of symbolic reference. Many of these symbols have an open-ended quality of a floating signifier, which can be repurposed to express all kinds of different sentiments – the ‘classic’ example here being Pepe the Frog. This is an important observation for understanding how the r/PCM forum supports a subculture organized around what has been called ‘robust vernacular innovation’ (Peeters et al., 2021, np). All discussions on r/PCM center on memes that speculate playfully on the space of possible politics as imagined through

an evolving pantheon of memetic characters, mainly variations on ‘Wojak’ – a subcultural trend in recent years (cf Lankshear & Knobel, 2019; Gallagher & Topinka, 2023). These discussions do not imagine politics in the terms of successfully enacting policy or advancing positions on specific issues. Rather, what we find on r/PCM are *discussions about memes about politics* all of which use the same template. Posting to r/PCM has a game-like quality, due both to the fact that the template resembles a gameboard as well as the generally ‘gamified’ affordances of the subreddits metrics: i.e., karma, badges, up/down votes, etc. (cf Massanari, 2015, pp. 95–126). However, if we think of r/PCM as a game, then it should have rules and ‘win-state’. But while the forum has rules, as practically all subreddits do, they are not, however, especially game-like.

On r/PCM we see how what Mortensen and Neumayer (2021) refer to as the ‘playful politics of memes’ affects how r/PCM memes reimagine *the space of possibilities for politics*, in particular through ‘playfully appropriat[ing] political contexts and form[ing] frontiers between “us” and “them”’ (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021, p. 2372). While we found abundant evidence for such boundary work, in distinction to Mortensen and Neumayer, one of our main findings was a tendency of posts on r/PCM to undermine these ‘frontiers’. We suggest that the endless subversions of the political compass meme on r/PCM can be read as reflection of the meme template’s structural position as a contested subcultural ‘territory’ (Clarke et al., 1975/1993, p. 35), in relation to one another as well as through a shared antagonism to the mainstream. Through playful subversion, posters to r/PCM demonstrate their intimate understanding of the compass meme itself, as well as the culture of the forum, through displays of mastery over its ‘contested cultural capital’ (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). As Kate Miltner has observed: ‘the majority of memes are part of a complex, interconnected, and esoterically self – referential body of texts that are inextricably bound to the context of their creation and consumption’ (2014, para 11), with the memes often becoming so arcane and formally abstract as to be practically unintelligible to all but the most memetically literate (cf Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2226). This literacy can be rewarded through the affordances of Reddit in the form of ‘karma’ upvotes, a quantified representation of Thornton defines as ‘subcultural capital’ (1995) – though a paradox here is that while memes need to be popularly shared in order to count as memes, they lose their subcultural ‘value’ if this goes too far (cf Literat & van den Berg, 2019).

A significant amount of the r/PCM’s content is dedicated to playing around with political ideologies (with ‘isms’) often in the form of discussions about how the compass works and what its categories signify in the form of memes that rework the format of the compass: blurring its lines, bending its axes, adding extra dimensions, exploring speculative political convergence, or simply redesigning the diagram entirely (see Figure 4). The forum’s rules, used to keep discussion on topic and clearly posted to its opening page, state that while ‘all posts must relate to the political compass’, they also allow what they call ‘Meta Content.’ Following this logic, we noticed that many of the most successful posts, across all categories, were not the ones that upheld the integrity of the compass or its categories, but instead it was the ones that subverted it. As ‘meta’ posts accrue the most subcultural capital, the forum’s culture tends towards more ironized and abstracted approaches to political categories, rather than intense investment in them. We identify three modalities by which this quality of ‘meta’ is expressed: memetic commensurability, speculative realignment, and ‘based’ taste.

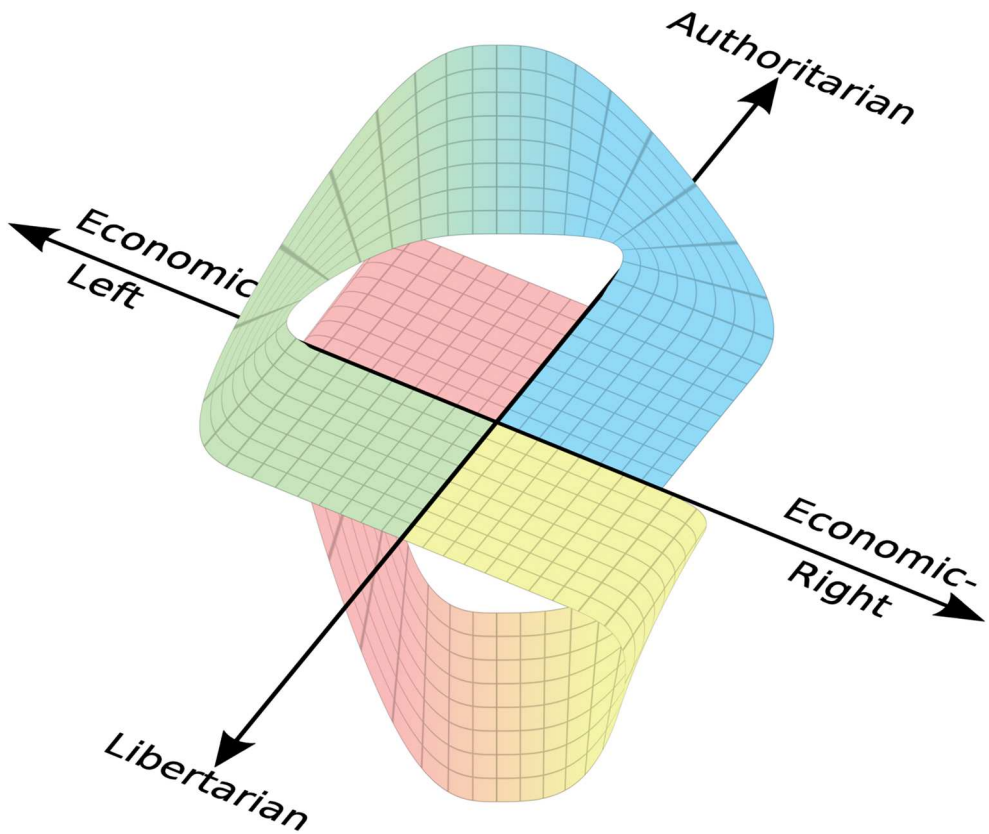


Figure 4. 'Meta' compass (u/qrani).

Memetic commensurability

Memetic commensurability refers to the way that the particular aestheticization practices of the forum contribute to a sense that all political classifications are, in some sense, equal and comparable. To some extent, this is present in the origin of the political compass as a comparative tool which literally flattens politics into a grid. The specific practices of the forum push even further in this direction. One notable practice is the use of 'flair' as identity categories.

'Flair' is an affordance of Reddit that is used as a form of self-identification by posters; on r/PCM, users indicate where they fall on the political compass (for example, libleft: bottom left corner, or: authright: top right corner). Users that did not use flair were bullied by a bot that automatically responded to their posts with insults. Flair categories and their corresponding colors subsequently become 'personas' for use in memes, which poke fun at stereotypical qualities of particular positions (for example, green: libleft: is oversensitive about racism; yellow: libright: has libertine sensibilities that shade into pedophilia), which then become generic 'types.'

The other way political identities are visually presented on r/PCM is through the vernacular of 'Wojaks.' The subreddit has curated dozens of Wojak images on a public Google Drive for posters to use to make their own memes, helpfully categorized into folders

according to ideology. Originally derived from the ‘I Know That Feel’ meme, Wojaks are a large family of crudely line-drawn meme characters. Variations on Wojaks include Soyjak, Doomer, Chad, Brainlet, NPC and others, each of which represents a different ‘vibe’ (see Figure 5). Users personify their own positions on the compass and satirize those of others through these characters.

A less charged icon than the notorious Pepe the Frog, Wojak functions as a meme template, a “collective avatar” (Devries, 2021), a mascot and *an emblem of human genericity* – as seen from perspective of Millennials and Gen Z. The compass, ‘flair,’ and the Wojaks all contribute to an aestheticization of possible political positions. This aestheticization also flattens these positions, constructing them according to basic relations that imply a commensurability across these positions. In other words, political positions that would otherwise be sworn antagonists appear in a shared visual vernacular, and because they possess a shared resemblance, as we will see, they also often playfully imagine new configurations that overcome or transcend ideological polarization. Finally, beyond such playing at politics, through the Birmingham School lens we might also consider memetic

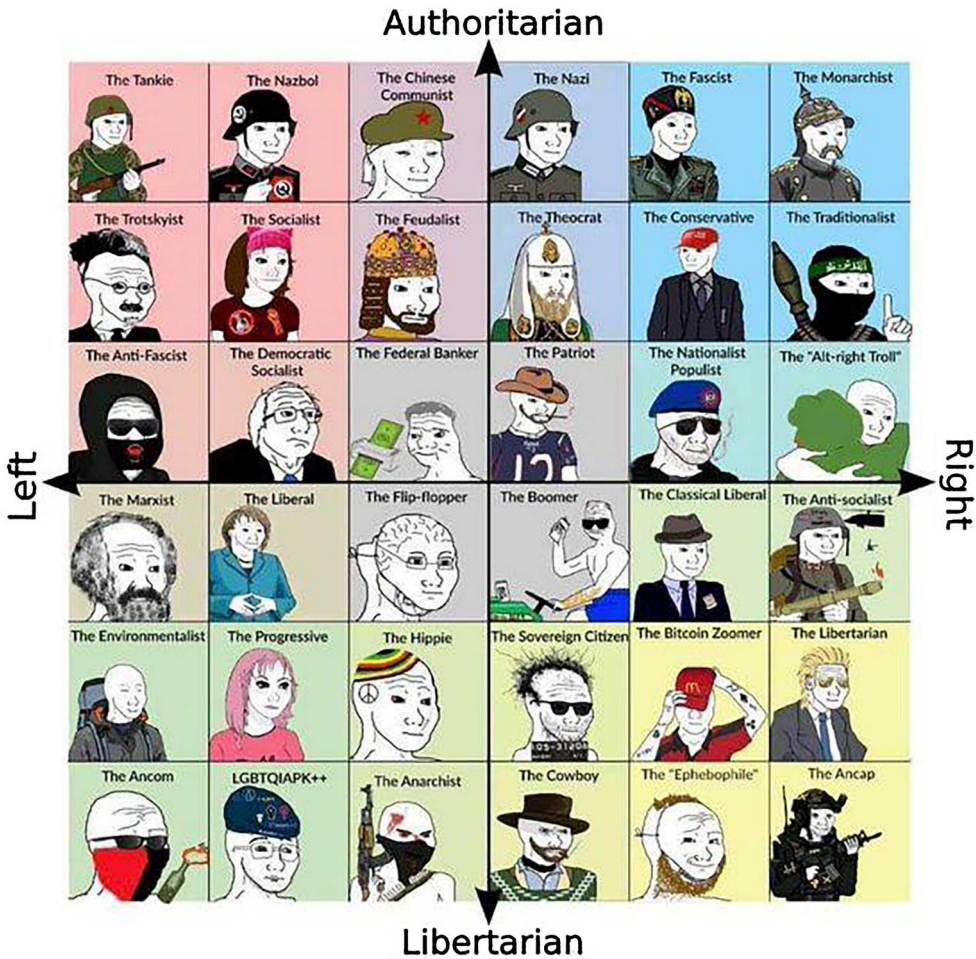


Figure 5. ‘Wojak’ compass (u/youngandaspire).

commensurability as a sort of manifest symbolization of the latent processes of online algorithmic identity production (Cheney-Lippold, 2011).

Speculative realignment

Another way ‘meta’ appears on the forum is through a focus on the *instability* of the political compass. Indeed, and counterintuitively, many of the forum’s most popular memes focus on the *inability* of the compass to adequately map political oppositions and alignments. This manifests in several different meme genres. Rather than exploring the positions of the compass, we found new trending genres of memes that sought to revise the compass itself by ‘discovering’ unlikely affinities between opposed quadrants – in other words, how opposed categories might actually converge towards shared positions.

In their most simplified form, such memes consist of in/out group commentaries about each of the quadrants and arguments about the ‘duality’ or ‘unity’ between opposed positions. An example of this is the ‘capcom’ (capitalist-communist) meme which speculates on the ‘diagonal’ alignment of:libright: anarchocapitalist and:authleft: statist socialist positions (see [Figure 6](#)). The capcom meme is used to refer to a variety of ‘real-world’ positions from ‘Dengism’ to ‘Champagne Socialism’.

We term this playful experimentation with the convergence of otherwise opposed political camps as *speculative realignment* in reference to the concept of ‘partisan realignment’ that contemporary political science researchers use to make sense of the rise of populist nationalists like Trump (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2019). According to this theory, political party affiliations that had been more or less handed down across generations have realigned along the lines of hot-button ‘culture war’ issues (Lind, 2016).

During the pandemic lockdown, the period in which r/PCM exploded in popularity (see [Figure 3](#)), researchers have also remarked on the rise of a new kind of left/right ‘diagonalism’ emerging from movements of self-described ‘freethinkers’ (Göpffarth, 2020; Klein, 2023). Though serious empirical research tends to refute the ‘horseshoe theory’ – which posits the convergence of political extremes – as positing ‘false equivalencies’ (Freelon et al., 2020; Mayer, 2011), it certainly appears popular in the context of the playful politics of memes. Indeed, as a space of play, r/PCM seems to push its players to the extreme, in what we could call its centrifugal tendency. In this context the ultimate meta-move would presumably be to somehow transcend the compass by folding all extremes into each other. In having observed this centrifugal tendency, we were thus surprised by the curious growth of ‘centrism’ on the site.

In examining the flair that posters used to describe their positions, we found that, while:libright: remained the single most popular flair, over time:centerist: and:libcenter: both grew to such an extent that, when combined, they tipped the overall balance of the forum away from the extremes towards the compass’ center. We see this in the apolitical ‘grill dad’ meme ([Figure 7](#)). In its abjectness, centrism develops into an outsider position within the self-referentiality of forum-based meme culture. The centrist’s blissful ignorance of, or agnosticism towards, the investments of extreme politics takes on the characteristics of outsider authenticity – in the context of the forum, the ‘normie’ is Becker’s (1973) deviant outsider.

Whereas the mantra of an earlier phase of meme subculture had been to ‘kill all normies’ (Nagle, 2017), the rise of centrism constitutes a subcultural inversion in line with

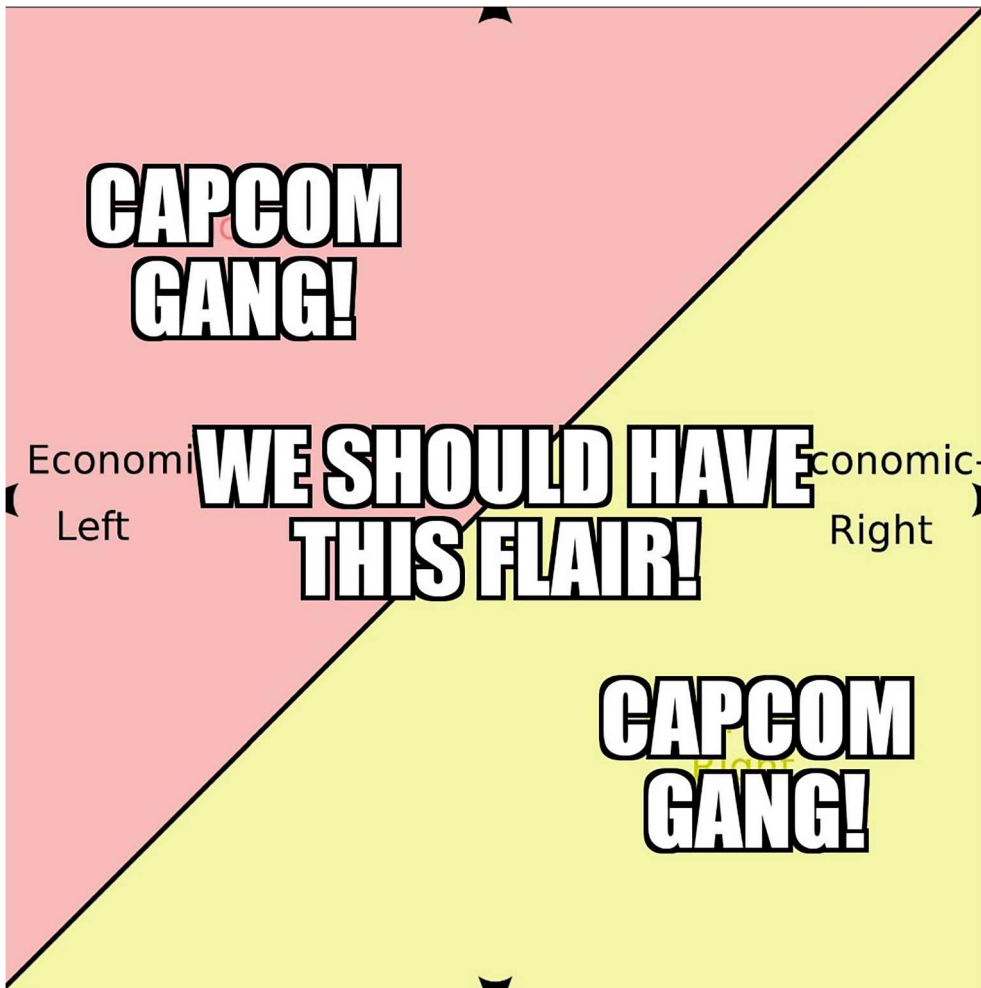


Figure 6. ‘Capcom’ unity meme (author unknown).

Gen Z’s fondness for so-called ‘normcore aesthetics’, which as the art collective K-Hole remark, can be understood as a ‘move away from a coolness that relies on difference to a post-authenticity coolness that opts in to sameness’, and which does not ‘pretend to be above the indignity of belonging’ (2014, p. 28). We could view this development against the broader context of Anglo-American politics in the 2020s, as an exhaustion with radical politics during the ‘Biden moment’ and the faltering of left-populist movements, such as those associated with Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, at least prior to the wave of protest responding to Israel’s invasion of Gaza, which is not represented in our data set. However, it also typifies the subcultural logic of r/PCM.

Based taste

The Birmingham School saw the notion of authenticity as integral to subcultures. Likewise, authenticity is often considered as a key communicative practice in digital culture

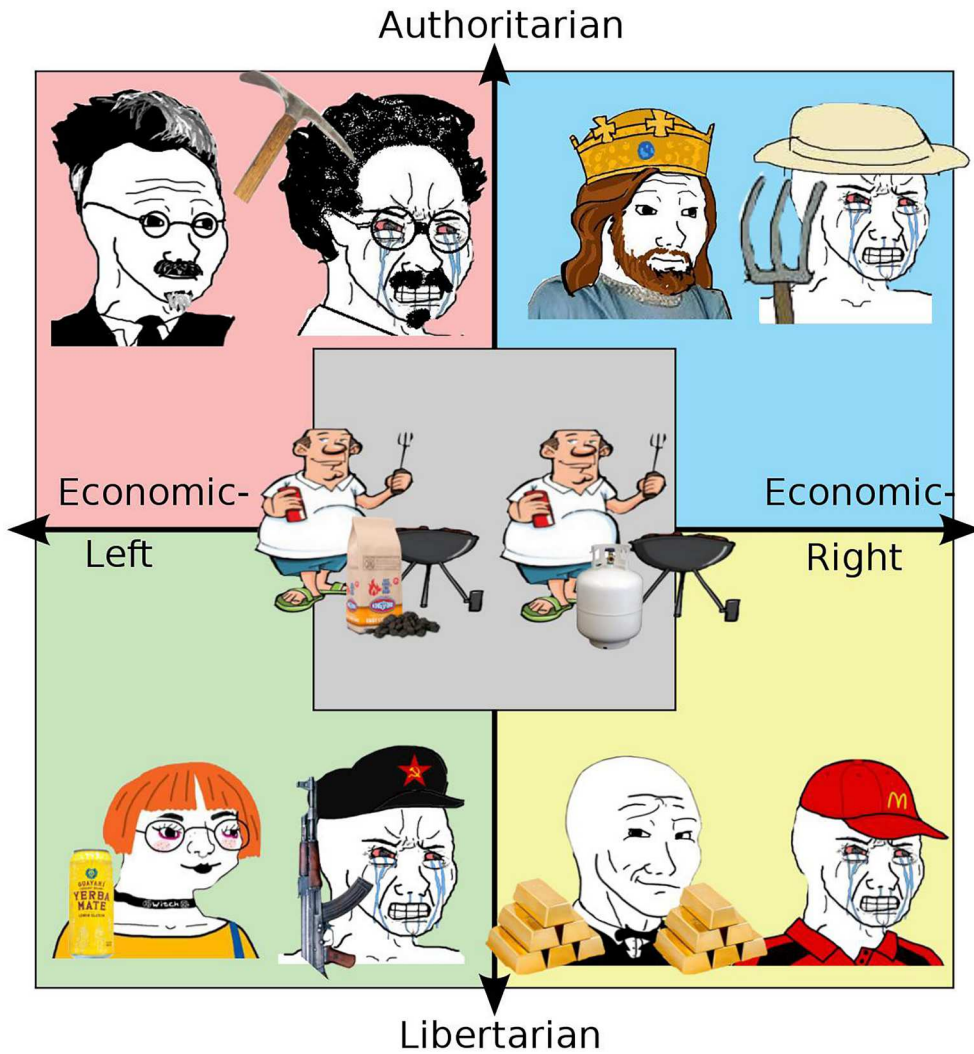


Figure 7. ‘Grill dad’ meme (u/TheDarkLord329).

(Tolson, 2010). In line with these observations, on r/PCM, participants can be seen to designate authenticity through the online vernacular slang term ‘based,’ (see Figure 8) a term that started its life on ‘Black Twitter’ before being take up by digital reactionaries, and which came to be used more on r/PCM than on any other subreddit (Hagen & Zeeuw, 2023). Commenting on a post as being ‘based,’ as is very often done, indicates respect for (if not agreement with) a particularly authentically rendered meme or statement. So significant is this practice that the subreddit operates a bot that tracks the number of ‘based’ comments each user earns, another method of concretizing subcultural capital.

Following Sarah Thornton, for the based/authentic to become subcultural capital in this way, it needs to co-exist in a symbiotic relationship with the debased or ‘cringe’ in the vernacular. Thornton critiques the Birmingham School as having overlooked this

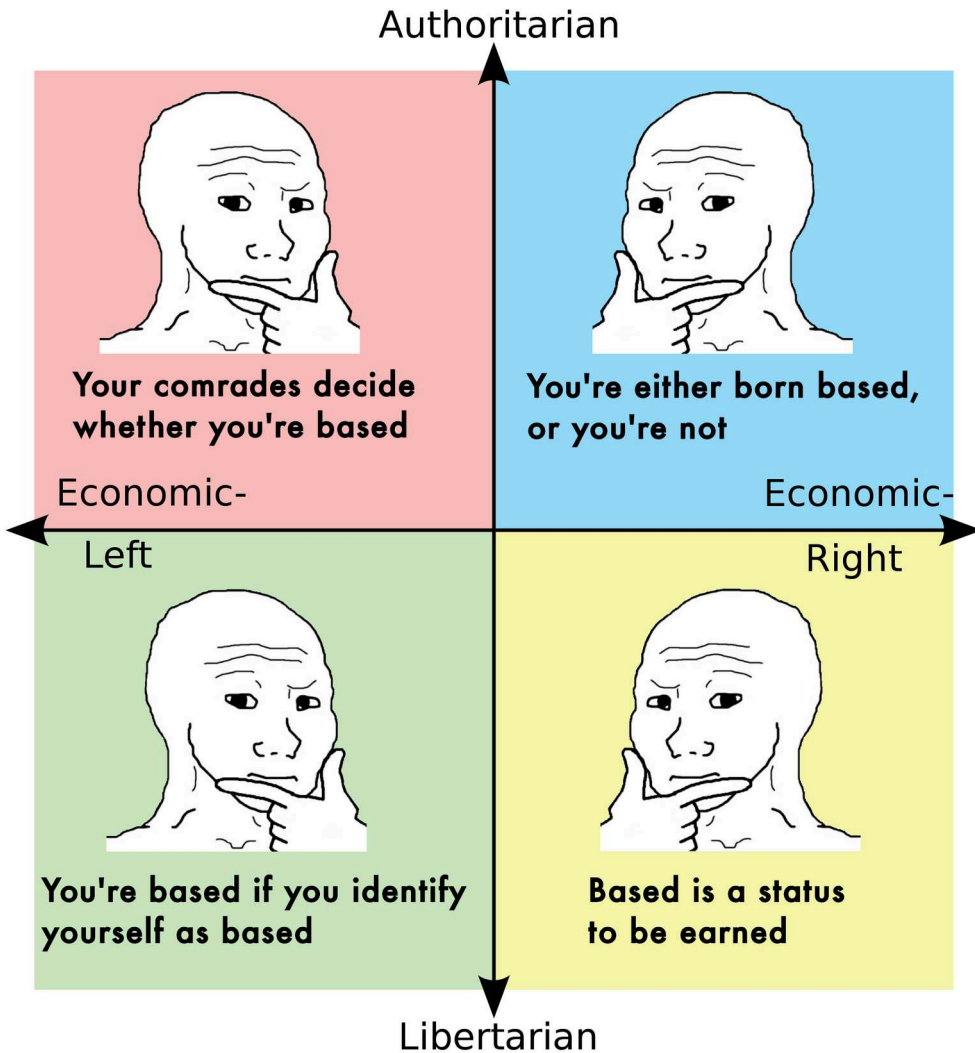


Figure 8. Critical based theory meme (u/pcm_memer).

sympiotic entanglement in their efforts to posit a symbolic subcultural position *outside* of the dominant (capitalist) hegemony – a position that doesn't 'sell-out.' Thornton's approach, by contrast, draws on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, from which perspective taste is seen as the highest and most exclusive form of capital(ist) accumulation, based above all on extreme nuanced expressions of distaste for everything that is plebian or cringe. As Bourdieu puts it: 'In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56).

Through the taste categories of 'based' and 'cringe,' participants navigate the political compass' tension between authenticity and novelty – between what is expected and what is unexpected. 'Based' is a disregard for (but not an explicit opposition to) the superficial codes and rules of normativity; its antonym, 'cringe,' is an overattentiveness and intense adherence to such codes. By contrast, as a form of media literacy, based taste represents

what Bourdieu would call the ‘affirmation of power over a dominated necessity’ (1984, p. 56), in other words, *not giving a fuck*.

As a space of play, we observed evolving longitudinal tendencies in r/PCM, in particular an emic perspective through which:libleft: (which had been the most popular flair when the forum first started to become popular) came to be seen as the ‘cringiest’ of all position to hold on the compass. Often represented by a ‘social justice warrior’ Wojak,:liblefts: are hypervigilant about pervasive forms of inequality and discrimination, and invested in social justice politics centered around discursive codes of conduct. They are both too aware of the rules of the existing social structure, and too willing to respond to it by creating yet more rules – for example, concerning what might be seen as inappropriate to make fun of. In contrast, the other positions tend to be seen as more ‘based’ in part for their disregard for such issues as being ‘current year’ trends as opposed to having deeper ideological significance.

But the ultimate ‘based’ position is a disregard for the rules of the compass memes entirely: either the nihilistically apolitical centrist memes, the diagonalist unity memes, or memes which revise the compass entirely. In this way, a ‘based’ post on r/PCM at its most ‘meta’ represents a kind of truth that penetrates the surface-level positions of the compass, revealing a transcendent reality that scrambles the categories of the grid, while remaining legible in terms of the subcultural codes of the subreddit. Unsurprisingly a number of ‘meta’ memes visualize the compass as a cube with a third based/cringe dimension.

Conclusion: the subculturalization of politics?

What can we conclude about the significance of this remarkably popular online community? Like many large subreddits r/PCM also has its own smaller spinoff communities, several of which are dedicated to studying the site through data analysis and survey research – the latter suggests that r/PCM’s user base are largely young Anglo-American males, which would reflect the demographics of Reddit of a whole (Massanari, 2015).⁴ If these statistics are correct, then we should thus be cautious in generalizing our findings. Here it is worth recalling Angela McRobbie’s (2024) critique of the early influential Birmingham School subculture research as having drawn on a similarly narrow demographic. In spite of this critique McRobbie still aligns herself with the Birmingham School’s broader political project. As we have seen, others, however, characterized their project as a kind of revolutionary wish fulfillment fantasy, incongruously projected into the realm of style. By contrast, we consider this critique to be far less persuasive in the case of a community whose participants explicitly emphasize their political commitments through playing with the signifiers of revolutionary politics. Moreover, our analysis – for example, around the popularity of memes that broke r/PCM’s rules – speaks to the somewhat overlooked role of play theory for the Birmingham School, and hopefully to its continued value in the analysis of digital culture.

In the Birmingham School tradition, subcultures performed a function: allowing creative expressions of sublimated working-class dissent that acted as a kind of stand-in for actual working class politics at a time when the vehicles of such politics were on the wane. So, what kind of function might political compass memes perform in contemporary politics? The experimentation with fringe political positions might represent a response to

the foreclosure of radical alternatives to the present politics – as evoked by the lament that it has become ‘easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’ (Fisher, 2009, p. 1). Much commentary has analyzed the strictures placed on the political imagination in the era of neoliberalism, where political contention must be conducted within the bounds of liberal democracy to produce a future that looks more or less like the present. Even as liberal democracy itself falls into crisis, unable to meet the urgent needs of the moment, alternative politics struggle to take hold. Yet in the wake of this failure, the semiotic play inherent to meme culture arguably provides fertile ground for the regrowth of what Alain Badiou calls ‘the passion for the real’ (2007). It is easier to imagine the end of capitalism and liberal democracy than to pull it off in real life.

But while this might explain the compass’ centrifugal tendency toward archaic or fringe ideologies like ‘Marxism-Leninism-Maoism’ or ‘anarchocapitalism’, it does not speak to the ‘meta’ tendencies to rework the political compass itself. What imaginary solutions underpin the desire to form odd coalitions like ‘CapCom’? Here we offer a number or possible explanations. One explanation could be to counter the perception of increased political polarization, revealing a yearning for the declining value of ‘bipartisanship.’ Another explanation could be simply a desire to flee from politics altogether, as in the trend towards apolitical centrist ‘grill dad’ memes. There is, perhaps, one more explanation. Thornton (1995) critiqued the very notion of subcultures as offering imaginary resolutions to contradictions. Rather than a fantasy alternative to the liberal capitalist status quo, Thornton argued that subcultures erected their own hierarchies and economies *in parallel* with the dominant culture, rather than against it. The power of subcultures were not their sublimated political stances, but the way that semiotic play generated new possibilities for the accumulation of subcultural capital – new games of status jockeying, yes, but also financial opportunities that accrued from one’s privileged status within a subcultural hierarchy. Clarke et al.’s avowal that ‘[t]here is no “subcultural career” for the working-class lad’ (1975/1993, p. 47) may have been true of the class as a whole, but not for those who could ascend to the top of the ladder. In the context of political subcultures, supported by the affordances of Reddit, successful political bricolage can clearly ‘win’ by accruing upvotes.

The other victory on offer from subcultural activity is the feeling of being a righteous or canny outsider, of being *based as fuck*. As a growing literature observes, antagonism is perhaps the defining characteristic of what Mortensen and Neumayer (2021) call ‘the playful politics of memes’. This antagonism, pitched against a symbolic ‘them’, once a reliable marker of subculture, is now integral to meme cultures, who construct a ‘nebulous other’ (Tuters & Hagen, 2020, p. 2220). This anti-mainstream orientation is also the defining feature of ‘populism’ (Müller, 2016). While we can and should understand the rise of populism in terms of a reactionary restoration project, it is also a big ‘up middle finger’ to the establishment. Not for nothing is the front runner for the Republican candidate of the US presidency currently using an actual mugshot as his campaign image.

Rather than a niche internet activity, then, perhaps the process under view can be understood as the *subculturalization of politics*. It is a ‘big tent’ approach to politics that uses communications technologies to develop ‘out of the box’ ideas like a media programmer A/B testing content. In a time of ‘political entrepreneurs’ (Finlayson, 2023), who attempt to speak to those with a more outré tastes than what mainstream tolerates,

these successes of subcultural capital can become the grounds for more elaborated and popularized, if still experimental, political vocabularies and aesthetics. Much as on r/PCM, formats, alignments, positions, slogans and the like are advanced, tested, and either abandoned or further developed. In learning from critiques of the Birmingham School, we should be careful not to over-interpret the political significance of r/PCM. Nevertheless, as with so many earlier subcultures, it seems likely that their destiny is to see their vernacular innovations recuperated by more mainstream politicians.

The structural logic of r/PCM, where the political compass acts as a schematic for speculatively mapping antagonisms and alliances, is a characteristic not only of a web forum of diverse political leanings, but of ‘real world’ political subcultures themselves – such for example as the ‘Tankie’ subculture, whose commitment to Marxism-Leninism manifests not in worker-based social movement activism so much as in symbolic rejections of the liberalism and geopolitics of its Western parent culture, and in the process serves as apologists for Russian imperialism (Balci et al., 2023). More work needs to be done on the relationship between political subjectivity and the kinds of cultural production undertaken by what we have begun calling ‘digital political subcultures.’ While much of this work is ironic and playful, against the context of platform-enabled post-truth populism, the idea that *real* politics requires an ‘un-ironic space’ to ‘bind a political community nowadays appears increasingly dated and ‘naïve’ (Grimwood, 2021, p. 186).

Notes

1. The PDF copy of the journal we found in the course of our research is located on the libertarian website mises.org.
2. Here we draw on Shifman’s (2013) threefold conceptualization of Internet memes as content, form and stance.
3. Another example of this comes in the form of ‘starterpack memes,’ which boil down political, intellectual, and social positions into a series of signifying accessories: clothes, books, music choices.
4. <https://www.reddit.com/r/PCMStatsLibrary/> & https://www.reddit.com/r/PCM_University/.

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