((They))) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering on 4chan

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Abstract
Previously theorised as vehicles for expressing progressive dissent, this article considers how political memes have become entangled in the recent reactionary turn of Web subcultures. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe’s work on political affect, this article examines how online anonymous communities use memetic literacy, memetic abstraction, and memetic antagonism to constitute themselves as political collectives. Specifically, it focuses on how the subcultural and highly reactionary milieu of 4chan’s /pol/ board does so through an anti-Semitic meme called triple parentheses. In aggregating the contents of this peculiar meme from a large dataset of /pol/ comments, the article finds that /pol/ users, or anons, tend to use the meme to formulate a nebulous out-group resonant with populist demagoguery.

Keywords
4chan, alt-right, antagonistic speech, anti-Semitism, conspiracy, floating signifier, memetic abstraction, nebulous othering, political memes

Introduction
In February 2017, a post on the Facebook page of conservative US TV pundit Sean Hannity ranted about the influx of ‘(((ILLEGAL MEXICANS)))’ (Figure 1). While xenophobic and racist vitriol had become normalised during the candidacy and eventual presidency of Donald J. Trump, what was notable here was the odd use of three parentheses: an Internet meme with an anti-Semitic connotation. It began in 2014 as an ‘echo’ audio effect used on an anti-Semitic podcast whenever a Jewish-sounding surname was
In 2016, the same concept was employed by anti-Semites and ‘alt-right trolls’ on Twitter, seeking to draw attention to the apparently Jewish ancestry of journalists by placing their surnames within triple parentheses (Weisman, 2018). Considered by historians of American conservatism as a ‘genuinely new’ movement (Hawley, 2017), the alt-right became notorious during the 2016 US presidential election period for its strategic promotion of slang expressions, such as the term ‘cuckservative’, as a means to promote an anti-liberal and ‘white nationalist’ agenda (Heikkilä, 2017). While many of the alt-right’s ideas were not necessarily new, what was novel was the way in which their ideas became entangled with the abstract dynamics of Internet memes and subcultural practices of Internet ‘trolls’, both of which arguably find their home in the notorious anonymous imageboard 4chan.

While Internet memes may have different meanings and uses in different online contexts, they frequently originate on subcultural or fringe corners of the Web (Zannettou et al., 2018). 4chan is exemplary of the latter; a simple image-based forum dedicated to the discussion of various topics, ranging from video games to politics. It is argued that 4chan’s ephemeral design – in which posts are deleted after a certain amount of user engagement – functions as a ‘powerful selection machine’ for the production of attention-grabbing Internet memes (Bernstein et al., 2011: 56). Moreover, in the absence of the persistent markers of identity and reputation common to social media platforms like Facebook, 4chan’s anonymous users continually demonstrate their subcultural status and reformulate the boundaries of their community (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). As a result of these affordances, 4chan has been viewed as a source of subcultural innovation on broader mainstream Web culture (De Zeeuw and Tuters, 2020; Douglas, 2014; Phillips, 2015). While this alleged influence was of relatively narrow significance so long as it pertained to LOLcat memes, this changed with the recent rise in popularity of 4chan’s /pol/ ‘Politically Incorrect’ board, which has been described as the source of ‘the real creative energy behind the new right-wing sensibility online today’ (Nagle, 2017). Acknowledging how such memes can often provide ‘cloaks for covering racism’, in line with emerging scholarship on the topic, our approach may be described as a ‘critical tracing’ of ‘politically incorrect participatory media’ (Topinka, 2018), in this case of the dynamics of the subcultural milieu of 4chan from which new expressions frequently tend to emerge.

This article does not directly concern the alleged diffusion of the vernacular style associated with 4chan/pol/ from the fringe into the mainstream, nor does it directly tackle the important question of why it is that anti-Semitic speech is so ubiquitous in these online spaces at this particular historical juncture. Rather, we consider how memes can
function as ‘floating signifiers’ that bring together a cross-section of actors who may not necessarily share a common political agenda, but who are nevertheless temporarily united through affective bonds. In particular, we explore how anonymous 4chan posters, or ‘anons’, use the triple parentheses meme in order to create a sense of community based around the construction of a shared yet vaguely defined nebulous ‘other’. We discuss this nebulous othering as a specific instance of what we call memetic antagonism. In order to distinguish our framework, we begin the article by looking at how it is that ‘political memes’ had previously been theorised within the field of new media studies as a means of expressing progressive dissent aligned with the work of political theorist, Chantal Mouffe. Although Mouffe herself has written little on new media, her thought has been influential in theorising the process within activist politics, by which floating signifiers can catalyse political alliances, in specific through negotiating a shared out-group, or ‘them’. While Mouffe’s theory has been influential in theorising political memes (see Milner, 2016), her theory depends on the maintenance of a moral distinction between desirable adversaries and unacceptable enemies (Mouffe, 2013). However, as we will see with the case of triple parentheses on /pol/, this threshold of decency seems to be fundamentally at odds with the transgressive attitude of anonymous imageboard subculture. To answer to this theoretical gap, this article builds on Mouffe to theorise processes of collective political identification within anonymous online communities unbound by civility with a specific attention to the role of political memes in ritualised form of antagonism.

In the section ‘Memes as political dissent’, we present a brief historical account of how political Internet memes were initially optimistically received as lowering the barrier for progressive dissent, which we relate to Mouffe’s framework of ‘post-politics’. In the section ‘4chan’s Reactionary Turn’, we introduce 4chan as the site of a particularly ‘memetic’ style of political activism and its recent rightward shift. In trying to make sense of this, the section ‘Collectivisation through Abstraction’ considers the affective dimension of memes in processes of collective identification, both politically and otherwise. Using the notorious example of Pepe the Frog to illustrate how political memes create ‘chains of equivalence’, we return to Mouffe in order to argue that floating signifiers and adversarial language games are vital to the construction of an in-group ‘us’ within anonymous Web communities. Having done so, the section ‘(((They))) as Memetic Antagonism and Nebulous Othering’ offers an exploratory data analysis of how /pol/ anons use the aforementioned triple parentheses meme to construct an out-group or ‘them’. To that end, we analyse the aggregate contents of the triple parentheses meme in all /pol/ posts over time, in an effort to explore the meme’s dominant meaning within this community, finding it to function above all as a marker of nebulous othering.

**Memes as political dissent**

The *meme* was initially theorised by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) to refer to cultural units, akin to genes, that ‘propagate themselves [. . .] by leaping from brain to brain’ (p. 192). While objecting to this initial scientistic framing, new media scholars adopted the term, long used in vernacular discussions online, in order to discuss artefacts of participatory online culture created and circulated in awareness of common
and ever-changing genres (Shifman, 2013) – a notion of memes we also follow in this text. In this literature, it is argued that these once-subcultural online memes only started to go truly ‘mainstream’ at around the same moment political events started to become ‘memetic’, notably during the 2012 US election during which iconographic moments were avidly transformed, repurposed and diffused online (Phillips and Milner, 2017; Shifman, 2013). As such, it was at this point that a new category of political memes emerged, though they would only receive widespread international recognition in the subsequent 2016 election with the notoriety of Pepe the Frog – to which we will return.

In the context of movements and events from Anonymous and Wikileaks to Occupy Wall Street and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, political memes were initially interpreted in progressive terms as lowering the threshold for engaging in online activism. Following a framing established by media scholar Ethan Zuckerman’s (2007) so-called ‘Cute Cat Theory’ of digital activism, which prophesied a new golden era for media activism in the era of visual social media, political memes were discussed in terms of a new kind of subaltern discourse. Within this dominant framing, political memes were theorised as instances of symbolic ‘meme speech acts’ (Graeff, 2015) that both demarcated in-group status within the new category of a ‘networked public’ (boyd, 2010), while at the same time serving to expand the broader spectrum of political debate to include otherwise marginalised viewpoints (Shifman, 2013). It was in this spirit of progressive activism, inaugurated by Zuckerman, that the influential Dutch media design collective Metahaven published a manifesto in 2014 titled ‘Can jokes bring down governments?’, in which they celebrated the emergence of the political meme as ‘an open-source weapon of the public’ capable of disrupting what they referred to as ‘reality-management’. In this sense, political memes offered ‘configurations of experience [that] create new modes of sense perception’ and which thereby ‘induce novel forms of political subjectivity’ (Rancière, 2004: 9). According to this view, which sees politics and aesthetics as fundamentally intertwined, political memes were theorised in terms of a radical (and radically progressive) ‘dissensus’ against the dominant political order. This framing conceptualised political memes in terms of a protest against ‘consensus politics’, where consensus is seen as ‘the crystallisation of relations of power’ (Mouffe, 2000: 49). If consensus functions as a mask for domination, from Zuckerman’s initial framing it would follow that political memes represented a form of ‘impure dissent’ exposing us to otherwise unspoken political opinions and thereby expanding the scope of progressive political debate (Graeff, 2015). In this framing, authors have championed memes as an ‘enjoyable route for expressing political opinions’ (Shifman, 2013: 123) in which ‘democracy benefits’ since ‘more people [. . .] engage in political discussion from more perspectives’ (Milner, 2013: 2361).

In terms of contemporary debates in political theory, this framework may be identified with Chantal Mouffe’s concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’. Of crucial importance in understanding the significance of Mouffe in relation to theorising contemporary progressive political protest is her broader thesis concerning the relative absence of real political alternatives in the post-Cold War period of neoliberal hegemony – or what has been referred to as the ‘post-politics’ critique of liberalism (Dean, 2009). In the post-political critique, ‘real’ politics takes place outside of the sphere of phoney liberal consensus. From this perspective, it is on the ground and in the margins of activism that the
important ideological struggles take place. Mouffe may be understood as contributing a foundational theory of political activism capable of challenging this dominant liberal hegemony, premised on the idea of grassroots collectives uniting in opposition to a clear adversary. Her theory of agonism, which is resonant with the aforementioned theory of memes as tools of democratic dissent, is based on the simple idea that democratic politics are reducible to an existential struggle between the polis (us) and its adversaries (them), a concept whose essence she borrows from the political theorist and one-time Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, whom she claims ‘highlights the fact that democracy always entails relations of inclusion/exclusion [. . .] a vital insight that democrats would be ill-advised to dismiss because they dislike its author’ (Mouffe, 1998: 164). While she follows Schmitt’s anti-liberalism to a point, Mouffe (1998) rejects what she correctly diagnoses as his essentially atavistic and essentialist view of ‘political and social identities as empirically given’, arguing instead that they ‘must be seen as the result of the political process of hegemonic articulation’, a process of homogeneity that paradoxically must remain open to ‘certain forms of pluralism’ (pp. 171–172).

Citing Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous communitarian theory of language use, Mouffe (2018) argues that it is through an ‘inscription in “language games” [. . .] that social agents form specific beliefs and desires and acquire their subjectivity’ (p. 75). It is thus not always rational argumentation, but rather the libidinal engagement in an ‘ensemble of language games that construct democratic forms of individuality’ (Mouffe, 2018: 75–76). Moreover, Mouffe (2018) emphasises ‘the decisive role-played by affective libidinal bonds in processes of collective identification’ (p. 73), a dimension which she argues is completely overlooked in the public sphere theory of communicative rationality. Needless to say, the corollary to Mouffe’s hegemonic, discursive and affective articulations of an ‘us’ is the construction of a ‘them’. For theorists of post-politics, the problem thus becomes one of how to expand the scope of ‘the political’ so as to include a much broader range of otherwise excluded and marginalised actors while avoiding a fatal descent into a state of unalloyed antagonism that Schmitt (2004) referred to as ‘the abyss of total devaluation’ (p. 67). Post-politics theorists put forth the normative argument that symbolic dissent should exhibit a sense of propriety – what has been referred to as a ‘reasonable hostility’ (Tracy, 2008) – that should ‘remain sensitive to the socially rooted contextual standards of judgement’, limiting their forms of symbolic dissent exclusively to responding to existing injustices as opposed to initiating any type of active attacks (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 172). As a particularly influential voice in these debates, Mouffe has developed her anti-essentialist political theory through an analysis of on-the-ground organisation by social movements. Although, Mouffe (2018) has recently raised the alarm about right-wing populisms potentially leading to ‘nationalistic authoritarian forms of neoliberalism’ (p. 24), nowhere does she appear to seriously consider the problem of how political subjectivity is constructed in online environments – spaces with their own history of various idiosyncratic types of antagonisms, including flame wars, bullying, doxing, trolling and so forth (see Reagle, 2015).

While earlier new media literature, informed directly or not by Mouffe’s framework, advocated the confrontational use of political memes to create us/them agonism, its progressive assumptions are in need of revision in the light of the tremendously successful reactionary use of what we call memetic antagonism. As exemplified on 4chan/pol/
politics. Memes can be extremely effective in the formulation of an organic and classless ‘us’ bound together by existential antagonisms against a nebulous ‘them’, a process which is also considered as a key element in the overall ‘anatomy of fascism’ (Paxton, 2004). Overtly, antagonistic and toxic forms of speech are no strangers to the online sphere. As detailed below, however, as a meme develops and finds new audiences, initially overt antagonism can become nebulous, in the process becoming a floating signifier – the semiotic term for a sign whose ultimate meaning is changing and open-ended (Buchanan, 2010: 173). By this process, the capacity to distinguish between agonism and antagonism, so essential to Mouffe’s normative political theory, is lost. It is this very blurriness that makes the subcultural milieu of political discussion on 4chan/pol/ a kind of petri dish for concocting extreme and extremely virulent forms of right-wing populist antagonism. When 4chan memes spread from the fringe to the mainstream, it is often the case their floating quality is simplified, stabilised and closed-down. As in the case of the opening example from the Fox News pundit’s Facebook page, this paradoxically works at once to normalise memetic antagonism as well as to efface its more extreme origins. While the tone of political discussion on 4chan has become unambiguously extreme in recent years, looking more closely at its peculiar cultural and technical affordances helps to account for why the site has been and continues to be so productive of subcultural innovation.

**4chan’s reactionary turn**

Over the past decade, the Web has seen a trend towards ‘platformisation’ where the infrastructures of a handful of social networking sites have become the dominant spaces for online social interaction (Helmond, 2015). The prevalence of ‘profiles’ and ‘friends’ within these platforms is said to have eclipsed a culture of anonymity of an ‘older’ Internet of forums and message boards (Auerbach, 2011). Arguably, the most notorious region of this anonymous ‘other’ Web is indeed 4chan. With a million daily posts, 4chan is a so-called ‘imageboard’ with subsections, or boards, dedicated to the discussion of specific topics. Posts in a set amount of threads are usually accompanied by images. 4chan has two crucial affordances. First, it is anonymous: a lack of user accounts means everybody appears more or less the same. Second, it is ephemeral: posts are deleted after a few days or even minutes, depending on the rate of user activity (Bernstein et al., 2011; Hagen, 2018c; Knuttila, 2011). In academic literature, 4chan has been scrutinised in relation to its anonymous activism, unique subculture of memes, and ‘trolling’ ethos (Coleman, 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Phillips, 2015). This literature mostly concerns the /b/ ‘Random’ board, considered as the birthplace of many of the Web’s most successful Internet memes like Rickrolling, Rage Faces, and LOLcats. This text, however, focuses on a different board: /pol/ ‘Politically Incorrect’. /pol/ started in 2011 as a ‘containment board’ to syphon politically extremist discussion from other areas of 4chan, but has since become the most popular out of all 70 boards. Despite this popularity, /pol/ has received a limited amount of original academic research (see Hagen, 2018b; Hine et al., 2016; Zannettou et al., 2018). It has, however, received a substantial amount of journalistic attention over the course of the past few years: it was identified as a far-right recruitment zone (Wendling, 2018), it was connected to various acts of extreme violence...
(Hankes and Amend, 2018), and it was claimed to have played a significant role in the 2016 US elections (Beran, 2017; Schreckinger, 2017) – though the latter is also disputed (Phillips et al., 2017).

4chan has a track record of innovating with vernacular Web culture, whether those be memes, slang expressions or some other subcultural ephemera. As such, chances are that edgy memes will have either started on 4chan, or else its users, so-called ‘anons’, are likely to be at the forefront of the most novel use. One of the reasons for 4chan’s status as a source of subcultural innovation is that memes have no standardising authority (unlike, for example emojis). When considered in terms of speech acts, memes ‘mean’ something different to different recipients in different contexts (Grundlingh, 2018: 153). This approach, in turn, offers a frame by which to consider how anons may imagine themselves as participants in a kind of noninstitutional vernacular discourse standing in opposition to the mainstream (Howard, 2008). If, following Wittgenstein (1953: 80), a word’s meaning may be understood as a function of its use, then we may observe different uses of memes in different regions of the Web, with 4chan anons imagining their particular use as being the most up-to-date (see Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). As such, when a meme like triple parentheses gets picked up by the so-called ‘normies’ of mainstream social media, as in the opening anecdote, anons will likely shift their own use of the vernacular expression or simply stop using it altogether. While such dynamics may be common in nonstandard dialects, they take on particular significance when it comes to the expression of seemingly hateful ideas.

Related to its characterisation as a site for meme innovation, scholarship has identified 4chan as the pre-eminent venue and subcultural front of trolling. Although trolling now more broadly refers to any number of ‘bad actors’ online, historically, it refers specifically to an antagonistic rhetorical practice which aims at eliciting emotional responses from unwitting or unwilling targets (Phillips, 2015). While its subcultural origins, in fact, predate the World Wide Web itself (see Donath, 1999), Phillips (2015) argues that trolling experienced a proverbial ‘golden age’ on 4chan in the late 2000s and early 2010s. In her account, trolling on 4chan sought to mock the sensationalism of American corporate media, for example by baiting Fox News into labelling the imageboard as an ‘Internet Hate Machine’ in 2007. It was roughly in this same period that 4chan would be host to the Anonymous movement, described by the anthropologist Gabriella Coleman (2014) as ‘a wellspring of hackers and geeks who were taking political matters into their own hands and making their voices heard’ (p. 107), a characterisation arguably in line with the aforementioned ‘Cute Cat Theory’ of digital activism. Among the many instances of coordinated online action from this period, anons would engage in trolling Time Magazine’s 2008 Most Influential Person poll to place 4chan’s founder at the top of its list (see Deseriis, 2015: 166). However, as meme culture went mainstream, post-2012 trolling seemed to have turned darker. An example of this was the successful trolling of an online contest to name a new Mountain Dew soft drink flavour, a contest which anons won with the name ‘Hitler did nothing wrong’.

Having moved past its golden age, it is not clear what 4chan had become or will be in the future. In its grotesquity, the imageboard now appeared like the babbling corpse of participatory culture, mocking the cyber-utopianism eschatology that had framed so much of the social media activism of the early 2010s. How, in the space of few years,
could activists activity on 4chan, which scholars had described in terms of an ‘ethical and political turn’ (Deseriis, 2015: 197), become so manifestly and self-evidently reactionary? One answer is that 4chan was always already a reactionary site, and that it had simply been misconstrued through the distorted lens of cyber-utopian eschatology (Cramer, 2017; Phillips, 2019) – as, for example, in the case of playing with Nazi imagery, some incisive observers had indeed long viewed 4chan’s subculture as fundamentally reactionary (Dibbell, 2008). Another answer may simply lie in the emergence of /pol/, whose initially limited infamy might have drawn in various extremists. In eclipsing other boards including /b/ in terms of overall popularity, /pol/ has broadly come to define 4chan in the public mind as a place of hate. Indeed, what seems remarkable in retrospect is how, within the space of a few years, supposedly ironical 4chan in-jokes would provide an opening for a new style of white supremacist humour also appearing in the comment sections of websites like The Right Stuff with its podcast ‘The Daily Shoah’ – where the triple parentheses meme first emerged – as well as The Daily Stormer, whose founder memorably described this new philosophy as ‘non-ironic Nazism masquerading as ironic Nazism’ (O’Brien, 2017).

Collectivisation through abstraction

To further understand 4chan’s aforementioned tendency towards transgression and antagonistic speech, we here turn to its subcultural norms as well as its technical affordances. Since 4chan is effectively anonymous, in distinct opposition to social media, it affords no persistent reputational capital. Instead of connected networks of user accounts, memes alternatively allow otherwise complete strangers to demonstrate and negotiate in-group belonging through their vernacular fluency. Accordingly, meme use on 4chan has been theorised through Pierre Bourdieu’s lens of cultural capital (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). Extending this framework may also allow for consideration of 4chan as what Bourdieu referred to as a ‘linguistic market’, in which language use bestows a kind of wealth and authority on those who master the language, especially in the case of in-group slang, which Bourdieu (1991: 94) considered as a quasi-aristocratic expression of distinction. Like all other forms of capital, Bourdieu conceptualised linguistic capital as being unevenly distributed, such that in licencing some to speak, it also has the effect of silencing others. In the struggle for this linguistic capital, actors on 4chan engage in ‘ritual opposition’ in which language is used to negotiate relationships of superiority (Tannen, 1995: 140). Within 4chan, this opposition exists as attempts at outsmarting other anons with provocations, wit or insults (Phillips, 2015), a gendered form of discourse with currency in the contemporary Web culture of so-called ‘toxic geek masculinity’ (Salter and Blodgett, 2017). Returning to Mouffe, one is thus led to question the extent to which a progressive theory of agonism can be usefully generalised to discuss forms of activism that emerge from these particularly antagonistic conditions.

Apart from 4chan’s subcultural norms, the formal characteristics of ‘memetic logic’ (Milner, 2016) may also stimulate in-/out-group distinctions; not through political opposition, but rather through the implicit formation of an ‘us’ and ‘them’ comprised, respectively, of those aware and of those unaware of a meme’s subcultural currency. Independent of questions of their relative tastelessness, from a formal perspective, memes tend to
exhibit complex layers of intertextual references, which require literacy in order to decode (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2013). On 4chan especially, the use of memes operates according to a set of broader dynamics that tend towards abstraction and ironic subcultural style so that only those on the ‘inside’ will ‘get’ the latest innovation in the meme. This requires community members to stay up to speed with its changing meaning – or multiple meanings – in terms of various proliferating subgenres and the intertextuality between them. Scholars of meme subcultures argue that these formal exercises can thus form ‘subcultural bat signals’ (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 112). Anons may identify the presence of these formal and stylistic qualities by deeming a given meme as ‘dank’, which is to say that it engages with – or better yet innovates within – what scholars of 4chan have referred to as ‘the magical world of [4chan’s] play frame’ (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 112).

Given these dynamics of subcultural innovation, the use of memes can become so arcane as to exceed the very boundaries of comprehension, at least so far as the ‘normies’ are concerned. In what may be referred to as a dynamic of abstraction, the minimal elements of a given memetic grammar can be isolated and reduced, often to the point that these memes become totally incomprehensible to outsiders. Since such exercises occur at the level of grammar, they are just as likely to occur in the case of ‘harmless’ memes as with political memes, including the most reactionary ones. Figure 2, for example, shows memetic abstraction for both a harmless ‘Loss’ meme (left) as well as the ‘Happy Merchant’ meme, having anti-Semitic connotations (right). These exercises of formal abstraction hinge on the reader’s degree of meme literacy – indeed, an instance of the anti-Semitic meme posted to /pol/ was accompanied by the following post: ‘I’m actually impressed with how ingrained that image is in my head that I can identify it almost instantly even in this minimalist form’. Echoing Mouffe’s (2013) observation that ‘[t]he political is from the outset concerned with collective forms of identification [through] the formation of “us” as opposed to “them”’ (p. 4), subcultural meme creation similarly concerns establishing boundaries between an in-group of those up to speed with ever-changing intertextual meme usage and an out-group of those who are not.

In order to understand the relationship between memetic abstraction and the processes of collective identification in anonymous online fora, let us turn briefly to Pepe the Frog. Long used as a ‘reaction face’ to accompany a textual post on 4chan, for a

Figure 2. Minimalist versions of the Loss meme (left) and the Happy Merchant meme (right) derived from KnowYourMeme.com and 4plebs.org.
period Pepe achieved notoriety as a right-wing mascot (BBC, 2017), before being once again reinvented by anti-extradition protestors in 2019 in Hong Kong (Victor, 2019). The meme’s extreme adaptability (see Figure 3) makes it a nearly perfect example of a *floating signifier*, a concept developed by Mouffe’s long-time collaborator Ernesto Laclau (2005) as a central concept in his influential analysis of populist politics. In Laclau’s analysis, floating signifiers are indispensable to populism as their very emptiness allows them to be invested with significance by a diverse variety of political constituencies. In this analysis, it is thus the very nebulousness of these signifiers that allows them to create what Laclau refers to as a ‘chain of equivalence’ across various otherwise disparate publics. While Laclau, like Mouffe, seems to have intended for this theory to benefit the left, in the case of the 2016 US election, it was actors on the right who managed to mobilise Pepe as floating signifier to temporarily hold together their loose ‘alt-right’ network that influential analysts described as including ‘conspiracy theorists, techno-libertarians, white nationalists, Men’s Rights advocates, trolls, anti-feminists, anti-immigration activists, and bored young people’ (Marwick and Lewis, 2017: 3).

While Pepe had been used in essentially apolitical contexts for many years on 4chan and other platforms like Tumblr, in the summer of 2016, the Anti-Defamation League, a US-based hate speech watchdog, put the frog into its database of hate symbols in recognition of the new trend to combine him with Nazi imagery (BBC, 2017). Despite
categorising Pepe as a hate symbol, the Anti-Defamation League did, however, recognise the meme had other uses. As it has been used on /pol/, Pepe thus exemplifies how a meme can act as what Mouffe would call a ‘libidinal bond’ in the formation of an ‘us’. As we will now discuss, the same collectivising process can occur through using shared object of antagonism expressing a nebulous ‘them’.

(((They))) as memetic antagonism and nebulous othering

This final section returns to the triple parentheses meme, introduced at the outset, to provide some exploratory empirical insights into a case of memetic antagonism on 4chan/pol/ and how it is used specifically as a vehicle for nebulous othering. Methodologically speaking, what is unique about the triple parentheses meme is how, from a semiotic perspective, the sign contains the signified. Consequently, the meme offers a convenient handle through which to study how anons literally construct a ‘them’, and with it, an ‘us’. While advanced computational methods exist for tracing memes on 4chan (see Hagen, 2018b; Zannettou et al., 2018), we could easily quantify ‘who’ or ‘what’ this meme was referring to by merely extracting, aggregating and ranking the textual content within triple parentheses, whenever it was used in the dataset. Although lists of word frequencies tend to overlook the subtleties of local contexts, in comparison with more complex methods, which have also been explored (Tuters and Hagen, 2018), the former approach illustrates quite clearly and accurately how the meme has typically been used in language games of antagonism and of abstraction on 4chan/pol/.

In terms of methods, we used 4CAT (Peeters and Hagen, 2018) to collect posts from 4chan/pol/. This tool scrapes and makes available posts from a variety of online sources, including imageboards. Its 4chan/pol/ corpus consists of all /pol/ posts imported from the archive 4plebs.org supplemented with data collected through the 4chan API. Together, it comprises practically all 4chan/pol/ posts from November 2013 onwards. To filter on posts containing the triple parentheses meme, we fetched all instances containing at least three opening and closing parentheses. We then plotted the monthly occurrences of these posts as a histogram (Figure 4). Since this shows the meme was frequently used from May 2016 onwards, we limited the dataset to posts from this month until February 2019, the time of research. From this dataset, we extracted, aggregated and ranked the lowercase-converted text within three or more opening and closing brackets. We visualised the top 50 most-used contents in all the posts with a treemap (Figure 5) and, to see whether usage changed over time, the top 10 contents per month as a streamgraph (Figure 6).

As discussed at the outset of this article, triple parentheses began as an explicitly anti-Semitic meme on an alt-right podcast. When the meme first appeared on 4chan/pol/, it similarly appears as clear anti-Semitism, posted in a discussion concerning the 19th century Jewish activist and author of the famous poem at the foot of the American Statue of Liberty, Emma Lazarus. The parentheses encapsulate her surname and the text is accompanied by the aforementioned ‘Happy Merchant’ meme (Figure 7). It was, however, not for another year that the meme became commonly used on /pol/, rapidly rising to roughly 35,000 occurrences in almost 1% of all posts after June 2016 and remaining consistently popular thereafter (Figure 4).
Figure 4. The frequencies of posts on 4chan/pol/ containing triple parentheses (i.e. ‘(((' and '))))).

Figure 5. Top 50 most-occurring contents within three or more parentheses on 4chan/pol/ (1 June 2016–1 February 2019). The top 50 words account for 36% of all appearances in the dataset (visualisation made with RAWGraphs; Mauri et al., 2017).
When /pol/ anons use the triple parentheses, who, or what, is their target? From the top 50 words in Figure 5, some general themes become clear. While individuals’ names do occasionally appear in the brackets (for instance ‘trump’, ‘stein’ and ‘soros’), the meme is more often used to target institutions (like ‘media’, ‘msm’, ‘hollywood’, ‘journalists’ and ‘cnn’) in a rhetorical technique similar to that often used by President Trump himself. Given this similar conspiratorial style, as well as many /pol/ anons’ dedication to support Trump (Jokubauskaitė, 2019), the appearance of ‘trump’ within the brackets may at first be counterintuitive. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that /pol/ anons’ political allegiances are notoriously fickle, often entirely reversing their previous support when a figure is deemed as an agent of ‘controlled opposition’.10 As such, /pol/ anons seem to use the parentheses to cast suspicion on almost anything or anyone as a suspicious actor, including themselves – as the presence of the words ‘you’, ‘mods’ and ‘op’ (opening poster) indicate. Above all, the most noteworthy takeaway is the fact that, by far, its most common contents are the plural pronouns ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘their’, accounting for almost 20% of the total instances within the dataset. This observation makes clear that /pol/ anons frequently use the meme to in order to demarcate a nebulous other whose identity, if not clearly deducible from the local context, is left to the reader’s interpretation. This nebulous usage and its haphazard selection of contents arguably make the triple parentheses meme align with the qualities of a floating signifier: it ‘absorbs rather than emits meaning’ and is ‘susceptible to multiple or even contradictory interpretations’ (Buchanan, 2010: 173).

To provide one example of its nebulous use and the corresponding uncertainty of the referent, Figure 8 shows a post on /pol/ that uses ‘(((they)))’ in a typically hazy manner.
Here, the poster uses the meme to point out those responsible for suppressing an esoteric ‘truth’ – in this case the archaic notion, popular in certain parts of the Web, that the Earth is flat.\textsuperscript{11} It thus resembles clichéd counter-cultural grievances against ‘the System’. Used in this way, the meme lends itself ideally to conspiracy theorising while at the same time appearing to function as a floating signifier, unifying multiple political constituencies under a common sign.

While one can still find instances in which anons use triple parentheses as an explicitly anti-Semitic slur, notably with terms like ‘jews’, ‘soros’ and ‘kushner’, its dominant nebulous use on /pol/ is abstracted from its original name-calling, to the extent that its anti-Semitic history may even be unknown to those unfamiliar with 4chan’s language games (as seen in the introductory example).\textsuperscript{12} However, one should assume that the triple parentheses’ ‘real’ anti-Semitic message is clear to those initiated within 4chan’s vernacular subculture, for whom the meme does not appear as a floating signifier at all. Despite this and ongoing appearances of the meme’s original use as an anti-Semitic targeting technique, what also comes to the fore is a type of nebulous use allowing the meme to at once seemingly abstract its referent into a floating signifier while at the same paradoxically reinscribing the narrative of anti-Semitic conspiracy theory into a playful language game – a combination which makes the meme all the more ominous.

While the subcultural practices and technical affordances underpinning memes like the triple parentheses are relatively novel, there is a long-standing tradition in American politics of using paranoid conspiratorial terms (Hofstadter, 1964). In abstracting the us/them antagonism that underlies the ‘thin ideology’ of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), the dominant usage of triple parentheses by /pol/ anons can be said to constitute
an old form of reactionary political communication through a new form of subcultural vernacular innovation. Furthermore, its combination of antagonism and nebulousness matches a combative style of innuendo-laden political communication, as favoured authoritarian demagogues like Trump, a rhetoric which Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019) refer to as ‘the new conspiracism’. Despite such apparent broader political resonances, some anons may indeed merely use triple parentheses as a way to signal belonging within the community of /pol/. As such, it becomes difficult to assess if and to what extent they actually believe in reactionary political ideologies or anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. In spite of this, it is nevertheless fair to say that in playing along with the meme they assent to the broader and implicit anti-Semitic conspiracy narrative that is a defining feature of essentially all political discussion on /pol/, no matter how ‘ironic’ in tone these discussions may present themselves.13

Conclusion

Political memes have been theorised as modes of post-political dissent in which a collective project arises through a ‘political process of hegemonic articulation’ (Mouffe, 1998: 172), which relies above all on the identification of a common opponent. This article has related this process the use of memes online and observed such a dynamic at work in the case of the triple parentheses meme on 4chan/pol/, which, at least from a macro perspective, seems to have developed into a technique for nebulous othering resonant with the vague antagonisms of populist xenophobic rhetoric. By juxtaposing an anecdotal instance of triple parentheses from Facebook as opposed to the meme’s overt anti-Semitic origin, this article’s opening speculated on the normalisation of anti-Semitic discourse. In conclusion, we may thus ask how symptomatic this particular anecdote is of the mainstreaming of anti-Semitic rhetoric online in the current American context. As we have just seen, our analysis of the use of triple parentheses on 4chan/pol/ revealed its most common use as a marker for a conspiratorial ‘them’ – a discursively constructed enemy so vague it could have easily been misread, or rather, repurposed by the Facebook user in the introduction.

In spite of its supposedly humorous valence in 4chan’s discourse, the nebulous othering of triple parentheses marks-off an existential enemy opposed to a political adversary. This extreme form of memetic antagonism may be said to violate an implicit rule set that underpins the theory of agonistic pluralism – that there are particular lines that should not be crossed and rules that should not be broken in the expression of political dissent. Observing the dynamics of memetic antagonism may however bring us to legitimately question the extent to which Mouffe’s nuanced distinctions remain useful in a digitised era where national populist politicians like Donald Trump adopt a no-holds-barred style of anti-liberalism that arguably flirts with anti-Semitic sentiment (Lipstadt, 2019: 49), and whose campaign messaging has been observed to incorporate elements of memetic antagonism as developed on message boards (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2018: 381–394).

What we hope to have made clear is that, while marginal, subcultural and vernacular Web culture may nevertheless be considered as a site of innovation for new and extreme modes of political speech. These types of speech may furthermore resonate in the current anti-liberal nationalist populist climate. While it should be axiomatic in the study of
Internet memes that there is no transport without translation (Latour, 2005), the greatest concern here involves the normalisation of 4chan’s memetic antagonism beyond its relatively circumscribed boundaries. Our argument has thus been that political memes as protest against the apparent hegemony of liberalism take on a different valence when used in this style of memetic antagonism; that is, the use of memes as vehicles for antagonistically articulating an out-group, unbound by civility. These articulations can explicitly name and shame, but we highlighted how memetic antagonism can collectivise online strangers through floating signifiers that allow formats for nebulous othering.

While an assessment as to whether or not the collective identity of /pol/ is ‘dangerously’ right-wing because of these dynamics has not been our objective here. However, in the aftermath of the Christchurch and El Paso shootings in 2019, whose perpetrators were both connected to 4chan’s sibling forum 8chan (Knaus, 2019), such an assessment would not appear to be in question. Concerning the pressing need to understand the relationship between these fringe Internet communities and extremist ideologies, our contribution has thus sought to show the dynamics by which memes can be used to express forms of antagonism that are abstracted and thereby rendered nebulous.

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**Notes**

1. At the time, a number of public figures sought to defiantly reclaim the meme, as for example in the case of one democratic congress member (Nadler, 2016), whose official Twitter handle still continued to feature the triple parentheses at the time of writing.
2. In terms of number of users, 4chan/pol/ is roughly twice the size of the influential web forum r/The_Donald (see OILab, 2019), the latter which has played a significant role in galvanising Trump support online (see: Koebler, 2016).
3. This number is as reported by 4chan itself at the time of writing (see 4chan.org/advertise).
4. See 4stats.io for live activity metrics. At the time of writing, /pol/ receives 115,560 posts per day, above /v/ (114,586), /vg/ (98,593) and /b/ (84,217).
5. As many scholars of Internet memes have noted, meme subcultures have a history of acting with hostility to the recuperation of their artefacts by mainstream culture, especially when they are commodified by parties with monetary interests (Douglas, 2014; Milner, 2016; Phillips, 2015).
6. ‘Normies’ is a popular Internet term to denote ‘regular’ people, that is, those not up to speed with current Internet culture.
7. See archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/105649057/#105649189.
8. While there is evidence of violent neo-Nazis frequenting /pol/ (Thompson, 2018), the meme’s open-ended quality allows for other plausible explanations for Nazi Pepe, for example, that it is a case of an incongruous juxtaposition of evil and innocence; that it can be read as a sub-culture’s attempt to inoculate itself against commodification; or that it is simply an instance of the trolling tactic of ‘triggering normies’.
9. For the extraction, we used the following regular expression: \[(\{3,(.*?)\})\]{3,}. Regular expressions are common pattern-matching techniques to identify certain text. We chose a regular expression that also captures text within more than three parentheses since this occurs as a ‘variation’ of the meme to add even more emphasis.

10. Exemplary of this pattern was a trend, as of late 2017, in identifying Trump as a ‘Jewish puppet’ (Hagen, 2018b).

11. Also note the reference here to the ‘red pill’, another slang expression for esoteric awakening, which also developed on /pol/ before it trended in the mainstream (Wendling, 2018).

12. In spite of this, the meme’s very nebulous use by /pol/ anons is in fact totally consistent with a history anti-Semitic canards, which has long identified jews as the ultimate referent at the core of global conspiracy to control the world (Renton and Gidley, 2017).

13. Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019) argue that this distinction between ‘believe in’ and ‘assent to’ is a feature that differentiates the logic of the classical conspiracy theorist from the new conspiracism, which seeks above all the delegitimation of established forms of institutional authority without necessarily proposing any coherent ideological project in its stead.

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