The Pandemic as “Joke”: Meme Culture, the Alt-Right, and Steve Bannon’s “War Room”

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“Pepe the Frog,” a now iconic memetic symbol of the alt-right, has become a global phenomenon

[https://unsplash.com/photos/-cePvX96qBA]

Abstract:
This text plots the analogical and memetic conveyances of the COVID-19 pandemic by the so-called alt-right. Arguing that the pandemic stages a complex transgression situated at the borders of Chinese global expansion, Traditionalist philosophy, and online meme culture, and taking as instance Steve Bannon’s War Room: Pandemic, we follow “the joke” that informs and deforms the claims of community, sovereignty, and truth.

Keywords: alt-right; COVID-19; memes; pandemic; sovereignty; Traditionalism
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It’s not uncommon to read that the alt-right collapsed after the “Unite the Right” rally at Charlottesville. We certainly hear less from its core cast of characters, like Steve Bannon, Milo Yiannopoulos, and Richard Spencer. However, it’s not easy to argue that something has collapsed, disappeared, or, worse, has been secreted and continues to operate underground, when that arcane something is so difficult to define. One thing that contemporary theorists of the alt-right seem to agree on, at least in a very general sense, is that 4chan has something to do with this difficulty—especially given the jokes that come from there. Dale Baren, for his part, has claimed that the alt-right emerged when the manufacturing of need in the 1960s—that is, the manufacture and advertisement of counter-culture as a route to identity formation—transformed from the infinite choice of identity to the nihilism of infinite possibility of cultural remix, and finally into the abandon of the screen’s void (4chan), so that any part of this matrix “could be refashioned, snippet by snippet, into a homemade culture of jokes—memes” (2019: 17). An almost identical story was told by Angela Nagle (2017), for whom 4chan’s joke was nothing if not the infinite maze of uncertainty. On both accounts, the joke is both the wellspring of a noxious anti-establishment, anti-immigrant, and predominantly online form of “activism,” and the counter-cultural pulse whose rhythm amounts not only to a complex influence on meme culture, but to the presidency of Donald Trump. Such a story may feel particularly persuasive, now, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and a Trump tweet on 29 May 2020 that contains nothing more than one word: “CHINA!” (Trump 2020).

And so there seems to be some cryptic knowledge, some secret, or even some kind of joke informing Bannon’s multi-platform online show War Room: Pandemic, a far-right “news” and interview program ostensibly dedicated to covering the COVID-19 pandemic (Bannon WarRoom 2020). Bannon casts a long shadow of mis- and disinformation in the contemporary American mediascape, whether in his tenure as founder and chief chairman of Breitbart News, while serving on the board of Cambridge Analytica, or as Chief Strategist to Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, and later as White House Chief Strategist during the first seven months of
the Trump administration. Started as an outcrop of a different show called *War Room: Impeachment*, which followed Trump’s impeachment proceedings, the first episode of *Pandemic* was released on 25 January 2020, well before mainstream American media focused on the pandemic threat and, it would turn out, its overwhelming impact on everyday life.

Just five days after *Pandemic* first went online, an anonymous user on 4chan’s infamous far-right /pol/ (“Politically Incorrect”) board made a post urging people to pull their 401k’s and protect their investments. Claiming to work for a brokerage firm with connections in the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the user warned of an upcoming market panic and collapse of the global economy, accusing the WHO, the CDC, and American and Chinese politicians of a deliberate misinformation campaign to downplay how infectious and widespread the virus would be: “The WHO is already talking about how ‘problematic’ modeling the Chinese response in Western countries is going to be, and the first country they want to try it out in is Italy” (Anonymous 2020).

The relation between these two media events is perhaps only coincidental, but “coincidence” is a key to the esoteric “truths”—or secret knowledge—claimed by each. During the first months of the Trump presidency, the public was becoming familiar with a term called “meme magic,” which emerged during the heyday of the Pepe the Frog meme, an icon for the right’s “meme war” during the Trump campaign. At this time, and by “mere” coincidence, users on 4chan discovered an obscure frog-headed Egyptian god called Kek, an already familiar misspelling of “lol,” who was “portrayed as a bringer of chaos and darkness, which happened to fit perfectly with the alt-right’s self-image as being primarily devoted to destroying the existing world order” (Neiwert 2017). The joke of meme magic is that “by spreading their often cryptic memes far and wide on social media and every other corner of the Internet,” these jokes were by force of “spiritual energy” making manifest the intended event (ibid.). Behind the coincidence, an esoteric energy—a truth? If there is an arcane knowledge here, in the alternation of cause and media effect, it is not by coincidence that it is secreted in its joke.

Indeed, there’s an old joke from 4chan’s /b/ (“General”) board where an anonymous user will lament an overall decline in quality, often referring to the way in which the forum is now overrun with “cancer,” a reference to the expansion of in-jokes to outsiders that undermines, as one of the first to make this claim put it, the “Racist/Egotistical/Heartless/and downright disgusting bunch that /b/tards used to love” (Know Your Meme 2013). In response to this claim, another anonymous user will say some version of: “/b/ was never good.” As with every staging of a joke like this on 4chan, the crucial recirculation of the punchline anticipates even the complaint so that, it often turns out, no real complaint can be made in the first place. It is the punchline that avows, always in advance, that the implied community of the complainant was never experienced directly. In the response, the user who complains is never old enough to escape being “revealed” as too new to really know the truth, and the joke is that no one who makes the complaint, and indeed no one who even responds to it, could ever have been party to the originary and true membership of the implied community. Even if the anticipation of the joke—
and the continuous process of making itself redundant—is how users disclose *something* of their history and presence on the forum, that *something* is trespassed the moment it is enunciated. The joke is that to say anything at all is to undo what makes the saying possible in the first place.

“Don’t Tread on Memes,” and “Make Art Great Again” graffiti in France, covering Banksy and Steve Jobs murals


This joke is analogically recalled behind Bannon’s head every time *Pandemic* is streamed on YouTube. On a mantel beneath a television that continuously broadcasts CNN (a joke of another kind), Bannon proudly displays the now iconic red MAGA hat of the Trump presidential campaign—a dead meme if ever there was one. As with the 4chan joke that adjoins the ontology of a former glory, so too does the promise to “Make America Great Again.” But are these the same joke after all? Surely the “again” that makes this hat and slogan something of a punchline differs in content and spirit from the “never” (again) of the 4chan punchline. Whereas the latter undercuts the terms of community and origin, the former would gloriously reclaim both. What
these two jokes share, the analogical plot they tie together, isn’t immediately obvious, but they form a Gordian knot at the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic was then and is still only coincidentally useful to *Pandemic* as a kind of threat—economic or biological—within the context of a renewed war for global hegemony. This latter is the explicit claim of the show, and its content provides a set of cultural, political, and historical markers by which to gauge at least part of the horizon. Bannon’s messaging is largely consistent with Trump’s anti-China rhetoric, which has only amplified as the American election approaches and the death rate and jobless numbers continue to rise (Crowley et al. 2020). As *Pandemic*’s logo imposes a biohazard symbol over the Chinese flag, so too does the show position China as the ground-zero of a worldwide contagion and pestilence, a trope intended in the broadest possible sense. Indeed, the pandemic acts mostly as a convenient analogy for the borderlessness of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the increasingly global reach of the Chinese nation-state, with Bannon and his co-hosts offering frequent commentary on the strategic “Belt and Road” and “Made In China 2025” initiatives as threats to the West, and more recently making reference to the “Wuhan Flu,” “Chinese Virus,” and “Communist Party Virus.”

![Bannon’s War Room: Pandemic logo, which imposes over the Flag of China a biohazard symbol, draws Chinese global expansion into analogical relation with the pandemic](Screenshot of logo from Bannon’s War Room: Pandemic)
Bannon’s pandemic messaging on China thus circuits through anti-China sentiments that invoke the spirit of the common in a global conflict with the trespasses of the CCP. The language of American “patriots” and “deplorables” remains and recurs as a signifier of American purity and health, and Bannon has called for inquiries into Americans who have brokered Chinese power, like Joe Biden, or who have implicitly helped spread Chinese disinformation. Among other things, Bannon has called for trials similar to Nuremberg that would hold the CCP accountable, not only for the deaths of people in China, but globally, often making subtle (and not so subtle) references to the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 is a bioweapon developed in a Wuhan laboratory. By this logic, the U.S. should act unilaterally to hold China accountable for what amount to war crimes, as, Bannon argues, the CCP has lied about the severity of the novel coronavirus, about its transmissibility, and has conspired with a corrupted WHO to obscure the facts and deceive other nations, thwarting their ability to prepare for the pandemic. All roads lead to China, whether as military threat, as imperial power that threatens Westphalian sovereignty, as overly powerful economic powerbroker, or as the looming spectre from which a borderless contagion will spread in the future.

But as these explicit messages also recall the post on 4chan which lingers in a facetious undecidability, we must also consider the implicit aims of the show. Several authors, including Mark Sedgwick (2009), Joshua Green (2017), Dale Baren (2019), and most recently Benjamin Teitelbaum (2020a; 2020b), have called attention to the “Traditionalist” bent of Bannon’s ideological apparatus. Teitelbaum perhaps especially has, through a long-form ethnographic text based on years of interviews, uncovered the depth and nuance of Bannon’s philosophical positioning. Traditionalism, a philosophical outcrop from far-right and fascist thinkers like René Guénon and Julius Evola, broadly describes a mythological and symbolo-aesthetic philosophy concerned with what it calls “modernity.” Modernity is, to put it in the simplest terms, an emergence of materialism and a retreat of spiritualism, the progressive loss of timeless truths over four cyclical ages, and, relatedly, an increasing tendency to homogenization (singularity) over heterogeneity (difference). Bedrock to Traditionalism, and what distinguishes it from other far-right philosophies like “paleoconservatism,” is the way in which it rebukes modernity. Namely, how Traditionalists understand time—as composing the cycles of four great ages ending in the dark age (the Kali Yuga), the age we are in now, and returning upon the golden age of spirit and the priest—all hinges upon the reclaimed knowledge of the eternal. This, too, is a “never” (again).

Rather than apprehending time as a progressive linear development where the future advances toward some invention—whether to make America great again, to end the nation-state and devise the commune, to codify universal human rights and democracy worldwide, or create techno-capitalist global societies—the future of the Traditionalist is already a repetition that waits for them. The difference is a grand critique that composes, not simply the truth of an approaching glory, but the belief that true knowledge is the negation of invention in the question
of time. The future is not a place where community invents or reclaims the glory of a previous age, but rather waits for the return of an eternal truth in the cycle that expresses it. We might at this moment recall the joke on 4chan. Taking this into account, the MAGA hat behind Bannon’s head becomes something of a joke whose punchline waits in advance of its repetition. This is, by Bannon’s reasoning, an immanent and transcendental understanding of a form whose truth was discovered prior to its utterance. What makes the fourth period dark for the Traditionalist is the inability to distinguish the hierarchical divisions that constitute the eternal spiritual order—from race, which is coded as ontological and spiritual, to peoplehood, which is reckoned as a species of difference. These spiritual orders, if they name an aesthetic and spiritual dimension, also describe a disturbingly contemporary political reality, whether it’s Bannon’s attempts to unite the Judeo-Christian West, as with his attempted Academy for the Judeo-Christian West in Rome, or the mutual migrations between 4chan’s /k/ (“Weapons”) board and the streets claimed by insurrectionary far-right “Boogaloo Boys.” These realities are apiece with Bannon’s invocation of American “freedom fighters” and his calls for a new “crusade.”

The “Boogaloo Boys,” a “joke” originated on 4chan’s /k/ (“Weapons”) forum, now gather in the streets to agitate for a new American civil war
In this context, homogenization is conceived as an effect of the movement from the golden to the dark age, wherein the collapse into heterogenous difference becomes the lodestar of a great spiritual and aesthetic rebirth. Difference here, however, underscores the truth of eternity that describes, not the heterogeneity of hierarchies per se, but the eternal expression of sovereignty. We can thus apprehend Bannon’s show—no less his appeals to the common, his claims against Chinese global expansion, and the very figuration of the pandemic itself—as the tributary of a secret river, the eternal “wisdom” through which his ideological allegiances run. The pandemic becomes a consequence, yes, but no less a coincidence, occasion, and opportunity: a consequential and symbolo-aesthetic representation of the absolute necessity of difference. The secret, then, is that China is merely symbolic of the breakdown of the border(s) of difference, the encroachment upon the sovereignty of difference as such. Indeed, in Bannon’s pandemic we are meant to apprehend the material consequences of undifferentiation—the condition of modernity within which he stakes his claims. As Bannon recently told Teitelbaum in an interview, “I think you’ll have a much more united, a stronger sense of community when we’ve come through this, because the only way we’re going to come through this is the sense of community” (2020b).

But with this emerges the memetic double of the pandemic, which Bannon’s arcane philosophical allegiance reveals as a dual question of sovereignty: on the one hand, of the will for a future of American hegemony; and on the other, as the spiritual sovereignty of difference. In both instances, the pandemic frames the sovereign claim of the West as it transgresses its borders. Whether through the explicit claim of American exceptionalism or the implicit claim of Traditionalist difference, the sovereign claim reinforces the necessity of strong borders which the pandemic analogically crosses and, thereby, summons the sovereign. Yet if the analogical transgression of the pandemic reveals the explicit and implicit summoning of the sovereign as a reactionary response against that transgression, what Bannon’s philosophical allegiance shares with 4chan’s joke is precisely in the anticipation of the disappearing name of the community that is invoked. Bannon’s explicit political aims are largely received by an online community who share in the implicit knowledge of the secret unnamed. And if Bannon were to enunciate the implicit philosophical aim of his “community,” it would be the joke that responds in turn, undoing in advance what would make any such enunciation possible. This transgression of the joke against the sovereign claim—explicit and implicit—has waited for Bannon’s claim before his show ever went online.
To endlessly repeat the summoning of the sovereign, to speak in its name and, in so doing, to merely attack or to forgive these claims as repetition is to miss what makes the pandemic such a salient form in (and of) the contemporary mediascape. We are begged to invoke the sovereign at such moments—and, perhaps, we recognize this. But it is in this recognition that we recognize, for we must, that recognition alone does not grant us access to some secret wisdom, esoteric power, or higher path. The truth of the pandemic—for there is truth in it, insofar as we might call anything by this word—is its sharing. And maybe ultimately this is what the pandemic reveals about the disputes that alight the border walls of far-right discourse online, along the frightfully transparent line between the truth and the joke. Yes, there is a “we” that is risked here, in that greatest and most terrible risk of sharing within which we are, and its distinctions and hierarchies, its war cries and dehumanizations, its cuts—literal and figural—do not emerge, any more than they codify, the mere divisions that open upon a counter-insurgency.

If the secret is that which the sentiments of jokes and shitposting trespass upon, we also find that there is no threshold for “us” to cross, finally and completely, into the community of truth. For to have recognized the joke of this pandemic—and this is what Bannon and his conspirators haven’t
reckoned with—is to have already implicated ourselves in its memetic and genetic sharing. The pandemic is already the joke that we named. This naming doesn’t mean that we’ve overcome this joke either, for the joke has already waited for us to try, and we’re in (on) it. Every moment that we seek to parse its borders or to secure our own, we withdraw once more, and in this risk, we all share.

Works Cited