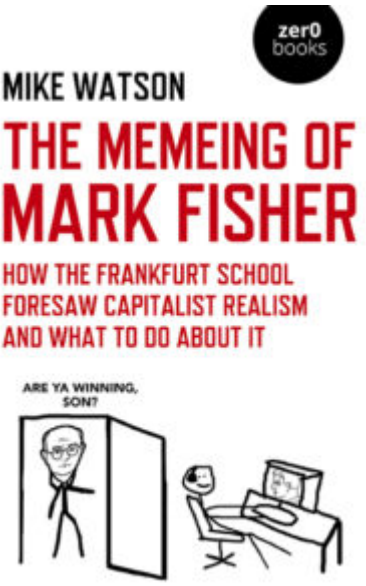
It’s Easier to Imagine a Mark Fisher Meme than the End of Platform Capitalism

written by Eudald Espluga | October 17, 2021



Editor’s note: A constellation of events has thrown left wing memes into the mainstream, leading to a confirmation of the late Mark Fisher’s thesis that countercultural trends tend to be co-opted by capitalist media. The viral spread of AOCs ‘”Tax the rich” dress and of Grimes’ ostentatious public walkabout reading Marx’s Communist Manifesto have coincided with an explosion of memes featuring the late British theorist, Mark Fisher himself—subjecting one of our era’s most powerful critics of capitalism to the whims of internet algorithms. Eudald Espluga examines these trends in the light of the publication of Mike Watson’s The Memeing of Mark Fisher (Zero Books) in which the author analyses the paradox of Mark Fisher and his book “Capitalist Realism” becoming a viral trend. This article was originally published in Spanish in El Salto Diario, *25th September 2021. Mike Watson has translated it for us.*

Last month a meme circulated comprising a photo of the dress that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wore to the Met Gala, bearing the words ‘TAX THE RICH’ across its back, and a Wikipedia text about Mark Fisher arguing that, under the logic of capitalist realism, anti-capitalist expressions were not an antithesis of the system but a way of reinforcing its dynamics. The image was placed at the center of a heated debate over whether the US congresswoman’s gesture was revolutionary or hypocritical. That is, whether it served to foster class consciousness and strengthen the fight against inequality or was merely the latest fuss made by an identitarian left who think about *likes* more than people’s material problems.

However, within a few hours, the meme had already mutated: someone had superimposed the template of the meme Two Soyjaks pointing, in which two overexcited men are seen pointing at an image, thus ridiculing the moral and intellectual superiority of those who had earlier used Mark Fisher’s words to criticize Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Though, as if often the case with memes, things did not end here. The meme cycle was accompanied by a discussion between journalists, artists and cultural critics about what Mark Fisher would have made of AOC’s “TAX THE RICH” dress.

The writer Owen Hatherley was among the first to intervene, arguing that Fisher would have been enthused, even imagining the title of the article that Fisher would have written on his blog: “Ultra-

libidinal socdem glam kontinuum". Matt Colquhoun, a writer and photographer who has worked on and edited some of Fisher's work, tweeted in response a photo of a scarf bearing text that read "Mark Fisher would have loved Cardi B," thereby demonstrating that posthumous discussions of Fisher's views have become common.

It is perhaps no coincidence that much of the AOC dress debate occurred through Mark Fisher memes. Although seemingly absurd and baroque, the controversy pointed to some of the fundamental ongoing tensions of the left on the internet. And in fact, this very week the writer and art critic Mike Watson has published *The Memeing of Mark Fisher* (Zero Books), a book in which he argues that popular culture – memes included – can serve as a barrier to the depressive effects of neoliberalism, helping to break with the demobilizing idea that "there is no alternative" and opening fissures for the political imagination: "The sickness caused by capitalism may be necessary or useful to the cure. Somehow, as will be argued here, our depressive refusal to abide capitalism's perversity might lead us away from it."

Watson refers to the paradoxical fact that Mark Fisher and his book *Capitalist Realism* (Zero books, 2009) have become a meme in themselves, this being seen as the ultimate confirmation of his thesis on the difficulty of imagining a post-capitalist society. Just type "Mark Fisher" in the Instagram search engine to see the sheer number of meme pages dedicated exclusively to him. The resulting images take on widely varying forms from pure *shitposting*, such as a photo of a duvet featuring the cover of *Capitalist Realism*, to elaborate posts with quotes from Fisher's texts, to photomontages of public figures holding Fisher's books.

Perhaps the most significant memes, in terms of their massive circulation, are those that use the figure of the "doomer", the portrait of a young nihilist who must deal with political, economic and climatic crises. In one viral meme we see this young man breathing from an oxygen cylinder with the cover of *Capitalist Realism* stamped on it.

"The memes go faster and faster," explains Mike Watson to El Salto, "this speed makes it hard for us to discern any sense in Mark Fisher memes. This is a great irony, which is both sad and funny. Ultimately Mark Fisher memes co-opt Fisher's anti-capitalist message, leading him feed into the algorithms, making money for internet giants but also weakening his message." As an indication of this, this weekend the AOC meme has been superseded by memes appropriating images of artist and musician Grimes reading The Communist Manifesto ostentatiously in public.

For Watson, this speed is inseparable from the structure of social media platforms, which are designed to favor antagonisms and ideological polarization. He argues that the digital infrastructure governing our internet use is by definition reactionary and that is why far-right memes appear to predominate, defining the frameworks for any possible debate. Yet in the data driven economy and its algorithms, even left memes tend towards a reinforcement of right wing economic values, often turning the left against itself. "Given that Fisher identified the tendency of elements on the left to do the work of capitalism for it," Watson continues, "the way that Fisher's memes often distort or misrepresent his theory is both ironic and disturbing, as well as amusing. However, there is another aspect, which is more positive. Fisher's memes clearly encourage people to explore Fisher's theory. We have this problem in which the internet offers enormous potential in terms of spreading class consciousness, but in blocking it".

As such, Watson argues that we need to hold on to the positive aspects of the internet, as he did in his previous book, *Can the Left Learn to Meme?* (Zero Books, 2019), presenting the possibility of a movement of "slow memes" that takes advantage and reappropriates the tools offered by the internet to challenge platform capitalism, creating communities that can also function 'in real life'. For him, in material terms, memes are a type of cultural production like any other, and he resorts to

the aesthetic theories of Adorno and Benjamin to argue that memes can also be opposed to the mercantilist logics of the present, in the same way that modernist art and avant-garde movements once were. “I think a sense of abstraction created collectively through memes can destabilize things and allow a ray of light to break through to an otherwise grim capitalist existence.”

To achieve this, Watson believes that it is not enough to break with the accelerating rhythms of the platforms and reject the trend towards monetization, but that memetic production has to be both challenging and disruptive. Following the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, Watson points out in *The Memeing of Mark Fisher* that “only the most opaque, dark and unfathomable artistic productions can escape these forces.” For Watson it is important that these memes serve to channel social unrest towards organized discontent and not towards outbursts of anger and frustration. “We can use the internet’s infrastructure to try to slow down our consumption, creating thoughtful works. In the book I refer to Benjamin’s use of flaneurism and the possibility of making constellations of memes and other online objects in the hope of better understanding what resides beneath them. In this way we may catch glimpses of the underlying class and economic structure that has led to today’s online culture.”

The fact of seeing memes – and, in particular, Mark Fisher memes – as part of a collective work of theorizing about the material conditions of digital subjects is especially interesting insofar as it invites us to demolish certain academic prejudices about the political function of cultural theory and criticism. The debate about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s dress and the ensuing memes might also be understood from this perspective: in the face of the virality of the image of the dress, and the transgression involved in wearing it to the Met Gala, Fisher’s words were brandished as a mode of superior knowledge situated beyond all practice. However, the common practice of using *Capitalist Realism* as a nihilistic and demobilizing scourge not only goes against the ideas of the book, but also contributes to making Mark Fisher the academic springboard from which to judge the alleged hypocrisy of any form of political action that does not culminate in the total and radical suppression of capitalism.

In fact, this authoritarian use of Mark Fisher’s thought in the form of a moralistic scolding has become possible because in recent years the mass reception of his work has made him “an editorial corpse”: far from being perceived as a former member of the CCRU (the Cyber Culture Research Unit), who bet on anonymity and institutional independence, or as a worker who was exiled from the academy to end up publishing principally on his blog, today we see Fisher cloaked in the aura of the Authorial figure, consuming his work as a registered trademark. And what’s even worse: as Pepe Tesoro has pointed out, is that this fetishist approach has ended up making Fisher something like the last prophet of anti-capitalism, a mythical figure we turn to with longing and impotence.

With a bit of luck, the memeization of his figure can serve to break with the nostalgic veneration that has ended up turning him into the Francis Fukuyama of the *doomer* generation. And in fact, the announcement of the publication of *The Memeing of Mark Fisher* – the cover bearing a meme featuring Adorno and Fisher himself – was initially received and mistaken for a memetic joke, only to later come under severe criticism for ostensibly trivializing his figure and degrading his ideas. But as Watson reminds us, not only did Fisher not dislike memes, but in 2015 he mounted the “Summer is coming” meme campaign in support of Corbyn, and even created a Facebook page – which he subsequently deleted when it started to be successful – called “Boring Dystopia”, in which he collected images of the banality and dysfunctionality of late capitalism, with a special predilection for broken vending machines.

Thus, although “the Memeing of Mark Fisher himself indicates the tendency of capitalism to neutralize all opposition,” as Watson argues, this contradiction warrants exploration in an attempt to develop new uses for digital infrastructure and cultural production on the internet. *The Memeing of*

Mark Fisher suggests that given the impossibility of imagining the end of capitalism, perhaps making memes of Mark Fisher is not such a bad option. At least if we approach them as an attempt to create, both on and offline, politicized communities that combat resignation, nostalgia and frustration. As Watson concludes: “If nothing is to be found outside of the dark madness of capitalism, the *doomers* among us will have to make our sickness into a credible protest movement.”