

## **Memeing the Great Reset: Circulating post-COVID conspiracies in the UK Freedom Movement**

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### Abstract

This paper argues that memes can be regarded as social practices for understanding how conspiratorial narratives circulate and are transformed within the UK's "conspiracy-attuned" Freedom Movement. The Movement first emerged in opposition to COVID-19 lockdowns and vaccine mandates in 2020. It has expanded to organise around a wider range of issues, including opposing urban Low Emission Zones (LEZs) and "15-Minute City" schemes, Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs), and "chemtrail" sightings. These issues are understood to form part of an (allegedly) unfolding "Great Reset": a secretive plot to abolish democracy and establish a technocratic world government, to the terms of the World Economic Forum (WEF). The paper draws on a year of online and in-person fieldwork conducted with Movement activists in 2022 and 2023. Introducing the concept of memeing, I argue that memes are not only digital artefacts but practices which invoke mutually recognised genres across both online and in-person interactions. I demonstrate how the "Great Reset" is made recognisable, portable and affectively resonant across protest marches, Instagram parody accounts and webshow discussions. In doing so, this paper contributes to anthropological approaches to digital politics, in which boundaries between online and in-person life are increasingly fluid.

Can memes march in the streets?<sup>1</sup>

On a Saturday morning in Oxford in 2023, I joined the periphery of an assembling crowd as it prepared to march against the city’s allegedly looming transformation into a “15-Minute City.” Between Oxford University’s Magdalen and Trinity colleges, the march organisers had set up a PA system and a makeshift stage constructed, with some irony, from traffic-stopping bollards. From here, a Telegram-circulated programme of guests, incorporating grassroots campaigners, actors-turned politicians and former reality television personalities would give speeches (Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Jonathan Tilt, leader of the Vote Freedom project, makes a speech. cited “Guitar Monkey” (2023).*

Peppered throughout the crowd were banners, homemade placards and flags reflecting the confluence of causes and campaign groups which constitute the UK Freedom Movement: the “conspiracy-attuned” social movement which had coalesced in response to COVID-19 lockdowns and the rollout of vaccines (Davis 2025). Those of the Together Declaration (“Take Back Democracy”) and the Heritage Party (“Stop Agenda 2030”) mixed with homemade efforts sounding alarm over suspected post-COVID-19 vaccine sudden death (‘#suddendeadth’), by which observers might search social media for “the truth”, as well as opposition to climate change policy (‘Net Zero is a joke. Without CO2 we die’). Spotting faces familiar from “Freedom Marches” I had attended across the UK, I gathered that many in attendance had travelled from far and wide.

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<sup>1</sup> I am reformulating a famous graffitied challenge made towards Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism during the 1968 student protests in Paris. On the wall of the Sorbonne, it declared: ‘Structures do not march in the streets!’ I thank Charles Stewart for suggesting this association.



*Figure 2: The march coalescing on Broad Street.*

The day's march was by no means only a local issue. Rather, in the words of the former leader of the Freedom Alliance political party, Jonathan Tilt, it represented a confrontation with a central plank of the 'WEF [World Economic Forum] endgame', to 'force [us] to live in little pods' ("UnityNewsNetwork" 2023). The protest had been organised in response to a decision by Oxford County Council to introduce a system of traffic filters from 2024.<sup>2</sup> Designed to discourage private car use in the city's congested streets, the scheme would be policed by automated number plate recognition (ANPR) cameras, through which fines would be issued to those without a permit. Local motorists would be "rationed" to a maximum of 100 journeys through the traffic filters, after which they would be subjected to fines. For Tilt, under the guise of a "climate lockdown" – a continuation of "COVID lockdowns" – the freedom to drive one's own vehicle unhindered would become a privilege enjoyed only by a minority, affluent elite.

For those marching, this continuation could be witnessed taking shape in the form of car-blocking bollards and traffic reduction schemes, as the "15-Minute City." The "15-Minute City", it was claimed, was just one branch of the unfolding "Great Reset:" a programme through which a shadowy "globalist elite," centred on the World Economic Forum (WEF), sought to abolish democracy and introduce system of global technocratic rule.

<sup>2</sup> As of March 2026, the traffic filtering scheme has not been introduced, due to ongoing roadworks on a major route into the city centre. It is expected to be introduced in August 2026.

As the rally transformed into a march, I encountered – to my surprise – the then-Chairman of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab.<sup>3</sup> Or, rather, an iteration of him (Figure 3). Despite his high profile, the arch “globalist of globalists” was gracious enough to stop for photos. Dressed in black, satanic-looking robes, he wore a voice-changing device through which, pitch-shifted and distorted, he pronounced, in Darth Vaderesque tones: *‘I control the future. I control the world.’* “Klaus” carried a sign depicting ‘Oxford 2024’ as communist-era East Berlin meets Orwell’s *1984*, inflected further with themes of restrictive travel zones derived from the dystopian *Hunger Games* novels. Manning the border post, a Klaus in military fatigues denies – in caricature of his Swiss German accent) anything to do with ‘ze climate lockdown.’ “Hiding in plain sight” are logos associated with the (allegedly) unfolding dystopian masterplan, which had brought “Klaus” and his fellow protestors to march through the city’s streets: ‘Net Zero’ and ‘Build Back Better (for the billionaires)’. Included, ominously, is a statement signifying the ulterior motives of worldwide “population control”, seemingly being enacted by a shadowy “globalist elite:” *‘You are the carbon they want to reduce.’*

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<sup>3</sup> Klaus Schwab was Chairman of the World Economic Forum from 1971 until 2025.



Figure 3: "Klaus Schwab". His placard is emblazoned with the logos of various "globalist" NGOs and initiatives, a communist hammer and sickle and envisages a dystopian near-future Oxford.

Practising "live action roleplaying, or "LARPing," as a form of political satire (Chaudhary 2022; Tuters 2018), the "Klaus" figure brings to life a web of linguistic, sonic and visual references which proliferate in *memes* shared across Freedom Movement social media platforms. His robe, (re)presented via Halloween costume realisation, mimics a well-known depiction of the *real* Schwab from 2017, wearing the academic dress of Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), from where he holds an honorary doctorate (Figure 4). The academic medallion visible in the photo becomes, in the rendition of the Oxford "Klaus," one depicting the goated-head symbol of Baphomet; the "satanic" motivations of the "global elite" suspected by many Movement members brought, semi-seriously, to the foreground.



Figure 4: Klaus Schwab receives an honorary doctorate from KTU, Lithuania in 2017.

In Oxford, the marchers would frequently stop for photos with “Klaus.” In turn, photos of “Klaus” would appear on Movement-associated Telegram groups, as part of real-time footage of march and the imageries which mediated its significance for their members. Activists’ recognition of the montage-like imagery underscored the march’s sense of communality; as a gathering of “like-minded individuals” fully attuned to what the real Schwab was “all about.” Through satirical and theatrical transformation the WEF’s leader – the (alleged) arch-instigator of the Great Reset – is parodied, through webs of humour typically encountered on social media. Here, I suggest that the real Schwab is being subjected to practices of *memeing*, as played out in the streets of Oxford.

### Introduction

As demonstrated in the negotiation of the Great Reset, and its key antagonist embodied by the “Klaus” performer, this article argues that memes should not *only* be regarded as objects but in terms of *practices*. Employing images, speech-acts, performance, impersonation and protest theatre-like displays, *people meme things*. These memed things are perceived,

(re)circulated and (re)performed, across both online and offline contexts. Encapsulating each facet of production, reception and circulation, I suggest that we can call this *memeing*, to encompass both the process, events and social relationships through which phenomena are both made into a meme, and understood, recirculated and reenacted by a receptive public who are “in the know.”

Within digital and media anthropology, foundational accounts have spoken to the central place of memes in digital culture. Daniel Miller and his co-authors describe memes as being ‘moral police’ of the internet, allowing users to establish norms and shared values, and to advance critique through humour, irony and constructing webs of referentiality and recursivity (2016, 166-168). John Postill foregrounds the role of memes in digital politics, accounting for how their remixing and “viral” amplification can come to (re)shape political practices and strategy (2014). While emphasising how memes mediate or have social effects, they focus on memes as *objects* which circulate within specific contexts. I shift analytical attention to the practice of memeing, to emphasise how meme-objects and the contexts which make them intelligible are together continually (re)produced together.

I conceptualize memeing as I encountered it during fieldwork conducted with UK Freedom Movement activists between June 2022 and July 2023. Alongside in-person and offline participant observation, I conducted 20 interviews with Movement members. A ‘conspiracy attuned’ social movement (Davis 2025), the Movement coalesced in opposition to the introduction of COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing measures in March 2020, and the rollout of vaccines from December 2020. Movement-aligned campaign groups organised large-scale anti-lockdown marches, often while social distancing legislation remained in force. The Movement continues to exist as a loosely connected network of campaign organisations, community meetups, “awakened” music festivals and “off-grid” communities. Alongside raising awareness of (alleged) ongoing harms caused by COVID-19 vaccines, Movement members organise in response to an array of conspiracy-related causes, such as Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDC) and Digital ID” schemes, as well as Low Emission Zones (LEZ) and “15-Minute City Schemes.” During my fieldwork, activists would share news stories, memes and details of upcoming talks and demonstrations primarily via public groups and channels on the social media platform Telegram.

This article takes the following structure. Firstly, I situate my understanding of memeing in relation to explorations of mimesis, citationality and the invocation of genre, through which people render the seemingly opaque machinations of the Great Reset recognisable. I then present an overview of the Great Reset, both as a very real policy proposal of the World Economic Forum and its reading by Freedom Movement activists. The article then presents two empirical examples, the content of an Instagram account “Eatzebugmemes” and a discussion of Klaus Schwab on the *Joe Rogan Experience* webshow, to demonstrate how memeing employs varied forms of genre-hopping, parody and intertextuality, within a self-recognising “in-the-know” collective. Concluding, I suggest that memeing offers a useful framework for examining how digitally mediated content appears to *jump* between contexts, and between online and in-person worlds; that is, in which world events are increasingly related to through a framework of memes.

### On memes and memeing

To recognise something as “being a meme” is to claim that it holds a distinctive kind of detachability, transformability and viral transmissibility (cf. Spitulnik 1996, 683). Here, Limor Shifman’s definitions of internet memes and meme genres are both salient. Inherently intertextual, she understands memes to be: ‘groups of digital items that share common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated and transformed by many users via the internet’ (2013, 41). Memes package form and content, and mediate, moral, ethical and political stances amongst mutually recognising groups of people (Miller et al. 2016, xv). As with LARPing and digital culture (Chaudhary 2022; Tuters 2018), common cultural conceptions of memes as being “internet memes” ties them to notions of the digital. Yet boundaries between the in-person and the digital in daily life are increasingly blurred, and hierarchies over which is more “real” are decentred (Boellstorff 2016). In turn, their social understanding comes to transcend hard distinctions of ‘digital dualism’ (Rey and Boesel 2014, Jurgenson 2011).

Shifman notes that, ‘[if] memes are collections of texts, meme *genres* are collections of collections’ (2014, 342). Crucially, she does not define meme genres by formal characteristics – for example, specific image macros, or linguistic formulas. Rather, Shifman defines genres in terms of the ‘interaction between texts, readers, and authors’ which they create (ibid).

Genres create: “horizons of expectations” for their readers and “models of writing” for authors (Todorov 1976, 163, cited in Shifman 2014, 342). Thus, a meme genre is a collection of collections united by shared social and cultural recognition. In the example of the “Schwab memes” genre, which I turn to shortly, it is the identification of satirising Klaus Schwab, and the Great Reset conspiracy, about which he becomes largely indexical, to those who are attuned to the specific meme genre and its invocation.

Memeing can therefore be regarded as the invocation of a specific genre when making meaning around an identified collection of phenomena. It resonates with Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman’s understanding of genres as powerful framing devices (1992). Reading Bakhtin’s (via Kristeva’s) understandings of intertextuality (1986; 1980), they describe genre as a ‘process’, by which ‘discourse is linked to a particular genre’, and ‘the process by which it produced is mediated through its relationship with prior discourse’ (1992, 147). Genres, whether meme, literary or otherwise, ‘shap[e] discourse into ordered, unified and bounded texts’ as soon as they are heard’ (147). They ‘point to the inherent dialogicality of the world. Just as genre can create order and sense in a text, it can render texts chaotic, fragmented and nonsensical’ (149). As Freedom Movement members *meme* the Great Reset (the terms of which I set out shortly), they make concrete its perceived political agenda while playing out its constituent parts and protagonists via absurdist parody.

As attested to the Oxford “Klaus,” memeing in the UK Freedom Movement encompasses the online and in-person. Following Anastiina Kallius and Rik Adriaans, I understand memes to be ‘only partially content “on the internet”’ (2022, 692). Their account explores how liberal-minded high school students in Budapest parody the imagery and messaging of the right-wing Hungarian government and its prime minister, Victor Orbán, through meme-making and sharing. Kallius and Adriaans describe how the students appear to view the world through “meme-tinted glasses” (692), developing a ‘radar’-like sensitivity towards those verbal, sonic or visual fragments of life which have “memeable” qualities (683). This encompasses content encountered online, but also on television and radio broadcasts, political billboards, and things observed during in-person daily life. While predominant cultural conceptions of memes are grounded in “what happens on the internet,” their referencing, invocation and transformation can be seen to spill beyond the realms of media feeds and chat groups.

In summation, I suggest that “memeing” is the act of *making something into a meme*. An intertextual practice, to meme something is to subject it to remixing and recontextualising in terms of existing genre forms which are encountered in digital culture. Just as a situation might be depicted via a “traditional” image macro-style internet meme, these same meme-like qualities can be described within non-digital contexts; for example, during a face-to-face conversation. This can take place while drawing upon the same shared semantic references and citations as those invoked in an online image macro-style meme. Nevertheless, just as social media-associated concepts – for instance, “virality,” “ghosting” and “trolling” – are increasingly used outside of social media, they, like memeing retain an inextricable reference to the digital. Before turning to the how the Great Reset is *memed*, I next present a summary of both “official” and Freedom Movement understandings of what it relates to.

*“You’ll Own Nothing and You’ll Be Happy”*: The Freedom Movement’s Great Reset

The Great Reset serves as the key “named object” of opposition for Freedom Movement activists. However, while boldly titled, its precise implications are semantically vague. As I outline below, the Great Reset is simultaneously tangible and yet highly transformable. It exists in both its “official” form and through the liberal-minded readings of Movement activists.

Launched by the World Economic Forum over the course of 2020 and 2021, the Great Reset refers to a policy agenda, conference theme, and co-authored book by Klaus Schwab. The Great Reset reformulates the principle of stakeholder capitalism long espoused by Schwab, which argues for closer collaboration between national governments, non-governmental organisations and multinational businesses. In the accompanying book, Schwab and his co-author, the economist and former investment banker Thierry Malleret describe an array of ‘resets’ said to be taking place across the world as a direct result of the pandemic: ‘economic’, ‘societal’, ‘geopolitical’, ‘technological’ and ‘industrial’ (2020, 6). They argue that “global leaders” should seek to “build back better” from the pandemic (74), which would require states and business conglomerates to work in ever-closer collaboration; as equal “stakeholders.” In an article supporting the launch of the Great Reset initiative, Schwab describes the pandemic to be an opportunity to ‘reset our world,’ and its ‘economic social

foundations’: ‘Every country ... and every industry,’ he declared, ‘must be transformed,’ in a “‘Great Reset” of capitalism’ (Schwab 2020).

Within Freedom Movement framings, a close interrogation of the “official” Great Reset discourse, alongside additional WEF-produced texts, unveils “*what is really going on*”: the multi-pronged unveiling of total “globalist” control and the radical reduction in individual freedoms. Through this lens, marchers in the streets in Oxford in early 2023 could perceive road-blocking bollards introduced as part of a traffic filtering system as “climate lockdowns”: an embedding of the national zone-based restrictions introduced under COVID social distancing legislation. It follows that, just as Schwab and the WEF had appealed for a COVID-induced “reset” across every aspect of human life, one could witness its unfolding in the form of policies predicated on social control and tracking: of “Digital IDs, climate change-related policy, and the discouraging of private car use.

Within the Freedom Movement, this Great Reset (re)framing is expanded through highly circulated excerpts from WEF-associated texts. Frequently memed, this material introduces new facets to the Great Reset’s unfolding and its alleged implications. Most prominently is a 2016 essay by the Danish politician Ida Auken which, written for the WEF’s website, is titled: “Welcome to 2030. I own nothing, have no privacy, and life has never been better.” Written speculatively, the essay imagines a near-future urbanity defined by subscription-based access to products, widespread digital tracking, and the end of private car and property ownership. In these snippets of text, the essay is highly remixable and, in 2018, the WEF

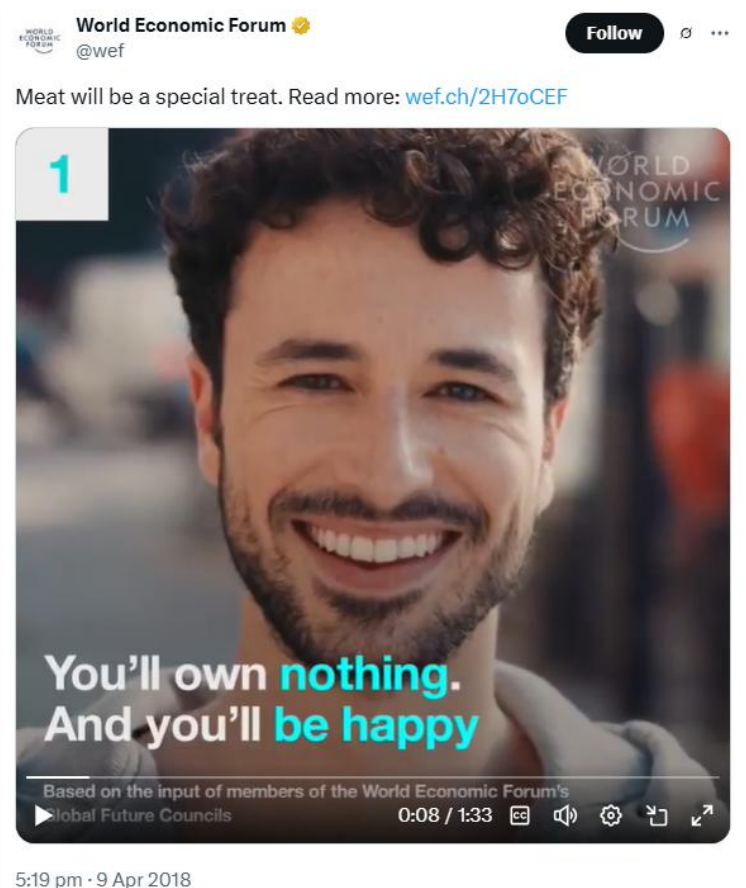


Figure 5: “You’ll own nothing. And you’ll be happy” (“World Economic Forum” 2018).

would itself utilise its content in a Twitter post and accompanying video titled: “8 predictions for the world in 2030.” In the video, an anonymous man is pictured smiling under the phrase: *‘You’ll own nothing. And you’ll be happy.’* (“World Economic Forum” 2018). The post is accompanied by the additional text: ‘Meat will be a special treat’ (Figure 5), prompting a “bug-eating” future imagery within Movement memeing (considered below). The “official” Great Reset makes no mention of reduced meat consumption, nor does it advocate for a reduction in private ownership.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this evocative material offers an “expanded universe” for the Freedom Movement, through which memeing can take place. Like the expansion of a popular fiction franchise, it provides an additional cast of images and characters, through which the underlying (alleged) thematics of the Great Reset can be elaborated. In the section which follows, I demonstrate how this meeming practice plays out online.

#### “Eatzebug”: “Klaus Schwab” posts to Instagram

As encountered in the streets of Oxford, the online memeing of the Great Reset in the Freedom Movement also centres upon the figure of Klaus Schwab. Through his representation, the loosely defined terms of the “official” Great Reset find a convenient embodiment. Browsing through Freedom Movement Telegram in April 2023, I spotted a link to an Instagram meme page called “eatzebug” shared across multiple groups and channels. Adhering to the established meme genre of the parody account, “eatzebug” purports to be the personal account of Klaus Schwab (Figure 6). Echoing the Great Reset representations outlined above, “Klaus’s” bio restates this (alleged) WEF ideal: of rented pod-living, bug-eating life for the masses (in a German-accented manner). Klaus “has pronouns,” a critically minded reference to recent discourse on their stating during online and in-person introductions. “Eatzebug” produces visual memes which apply Movement-read Great Reset thematics to recognised meme formats.

In a post from March 2023, the linguistic meme trope, “If your party isn’t this lit don’t bother inviting me,” is superimposed atop a satanic mass attended by Schwab, George Soros, Bill

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<sup>4</sup> Auken clarifies her positionality in an ‘Author’s note’ later added to the essay: ‘Some people have read this blog as my utopia or dream of the future. It is not. It is a scenario showing where we could be heading - for better and for worse. I wrote this piece to start a discussion about some of the pros and cons of the current technological development. When we are dealing with the future, it is not enough to work with reports. We should start discussions in many new ways. This is the intention with this piece’ (2016).

Gates and the leaders of various western governments (Figure 7).<sup>5</sup> A post from October 2023 features an AI-animated video reformulation of the visual “salt bae” meme (Figure 8). In its original form, the meme depicts the Turkish chef Nusret Gökçe’s flamboyant approach to seasoning meat. Reformulated, Schwab seasons a meal with bugs; a citation of awakened fears of imposed bug-eating. Annotating the post, commentators participate in this memeing, writing in the German-inflected accent deemed, to an audience who are au fait with this Freedom Movement discourse, to signify the figure of Schwab.



Figure 6: "eatzebug" User bio) Instagram. Publicly accessible account. Accessed 4 September 2025. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/eatzebug/>

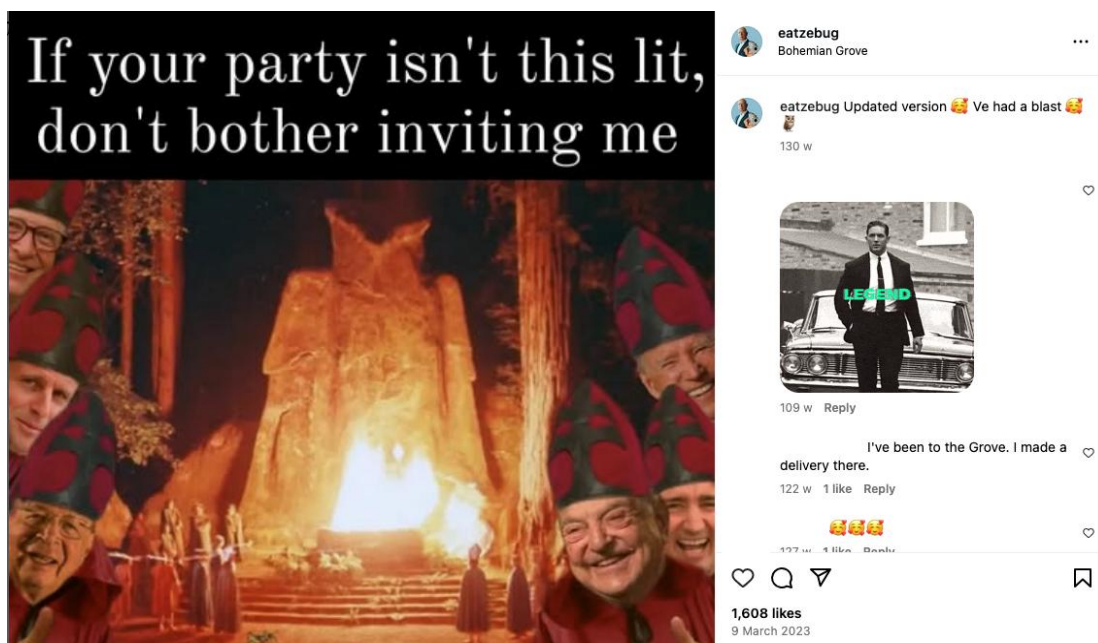


Figure 7: "eatzebug", Satanic mass, Instagram, Publicly accessible account (details redacted). Accessed 4th September 2025. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CpkpVuftq6X/>

<sup>5</sup> In this post, the satanic mass is geo-tagged as taking place at the Bohemian Grove in Monte Rio, California. In July, the Grove hosts an annual two-week meeting of the Bohemian Club, an all-male private members’ club which includes high-profile figures in politics, journalism, the arts, business and civil society as members.

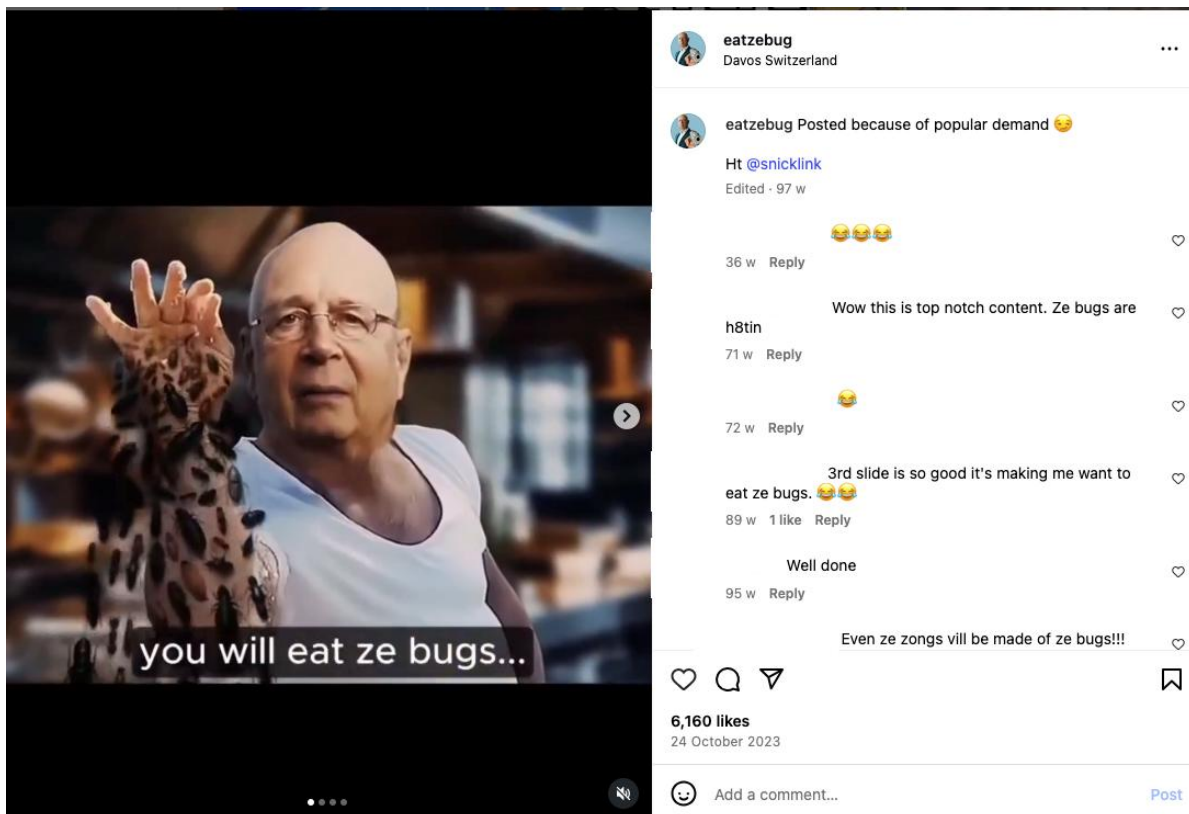


Figure 8: "eatzebug", Klaus salt bae, Instagram, Publicly accessible account (details redacted). Accessed 4 September 2025. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CpkpVuftq6X/>

Certainly, these “Schwab memes” can be considered a niche genre. Encompassing readings of the Great Reset which motivate awakened movements, they address what Michael Warner refers to as a counterpublic (2002). That is, they address an audience who understand themselves to be in conflict with the ‘dominant’ mode of discourse (119), and who reject associations with a ‘universal’ – or, “normie” – public (117). Nonetheless, counterpublics are ‘fundamentally mediated’ and co-constituted, by the public forms that they seek to subvert (121). Counterpublics *need* the public who fall outside of its terms. “Schwab memes” address a conspiracy attuned audience, who appear assured that a “normie,” *unattuned* public would not understand the semantic content of the collection of images and texts of which they are constituted.

Whether through parody Instagram pages or the in-person performance described above, impersonations of Schwab bear some resemblance to what Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak describe as *stiob* humour: an ‘ironic aesthetic ... that thrived in late-Soviet socialism’ (2010, 181). Like *stiob*, the Klaus performances present a kind of exaggerated, hyperbolic reproduction of its target. However, unlike “classic” *stiob*, the Schwab parody is politically explicit; it is not so much an ironic overidentification with its subject than the

enactment of an already-central figure of a particular genre of memeing. Nonetheless, like *stio*'s emergence in the context of state censorship, many Movement activists experienced social media bans and/or heavy moderation on mainstream social media platforms, upon attempting to perform their activism “straight.” That is, in attempting to get the message out about (alleged) COVID vaccine harms and their sincerely held concerns about the Great Reset.

Brought into the realms of hyperreal absurdity, the memeing of Schwab appears to evade the terms of social media censorship. Couched in humour, they simultaneously sidestep mocking and dismissive labelling as attributions as “crazy conspiracy theorists.” The otherwise opaque political agenda of the Great Reset is made concrete, and its (alleged) constituent parts are satirised. In doing so, its programme is brought into ridicule, while nonetheless reinforcing, via easily digestible forms, what the Movement believes to be at stake. Simultaneously, these representations of legitimately held concerns resonate with notions of carnivalesque politics described by Petrović and Klumbytė (2018; 2014), in which satires of “mainstream” discourse come to hold more political salience, in the minds of many publics, than which explain serious topics in more straightened terms.



Figure 9: "eatzebug", Living meme, Instagram. Publicly accessible account (details redacted). Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> September 2025. Available at: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CqQVzkvtMKq/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CqQVzkvtMKq/?img_index=1)

Constructed via a shared set of images and dystopian imaginaries, both the Oxford “Klaus” and that of “Eatzebug” can be understood as iterations of the same genre of memeing. In these Freedom Movement representations, the line between the “real” Schwab and his satirical representations is blurred to the point of virtual indistinguishability. As such, it becomes difficult to encounter the “real” Schwab free of association with the depictions and thematics which they create. In an “eatzebug” post from March 2023, (Figure 9), the similarity is taken to its endpoint: Schwab *is* a meme. In the composed image, his face is superimposed on a recognised image macro template, depicting a grief-stricken person unable to sleep, while he clutches a large bug; a citation of the WEF’s supposed advocating of bug-eating as a substitute for meat. Lamenting his transformation into meme, Schwab appears to acknowledge the efficacy of his memeing in revealing, and therefore undermining, his Great Reset agenda. It echoes Michael Taussig’s assertion: that in recreating the original, the copy subverts the original and takes on its power (1993, 13).

Having considered these instances of memeing shaped through a back-and-forth across online and in-person spheres, I next consider an instance of “live” memeing, during a webshow invocation of Schwab and the Great Reset.

### Memeing, Live on the *Joe Rogan Experience*

As genre practices which are inextricable from digital culture, memeing and LARPing share many characteristics. For Chaudhary, LARPing is an elaboration of a “LARP,” a live-action iteration of tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, in which participants adopt the identity of a character and play out scenarios to the terms of fixed rules (2022, 107). He observes how, shaped by ‘internet parlance’, the verb form of LARPing has come to describe the enacting of a new persona, which deliberately blurs the line between ‘fantasy and the real’, and which typically employs forms of absurdist humour (2022, 107-108). Marc Tuters draws attention to the appearance of LARPing political activists campaigning for Donald Trump and in support of Germany’s far-right Identitarian Movement (2018). They do so while dressed as figures recognised in the meme-driven culture of imageboard websites such as 4chan. Unlike cosplaying, LARPing is not constrained by a requirement to accurately represent its subject. It is an open-ended practice. As enacted by the LARPing “QAnon Shaman” Jacob Chansley, during the January 6th storming the US Capitol building in 2021, it

affords a montage-like melding of multiple representations, actions, and shifting degrees of ‘play-acting, phoniness and collective fun’ (Chaudhary 2022, 103). It is a performance which appears ‘dissonant’ to the unattuned, bearing in mind the “extreme” political contexts in which it takes place (ibid).

Memeing and LARPing can be separated by degrees of commitment. Memeing does not require one to inhabit a character; say, by dressing up. In turn, as practised by the Oxford “Klaus,” *LARPing can involve memeing*, through the invoking of material recognised as being “like a meme.” Memeing can be invoked more fluidly – performed, commented on, and then passed over with ease.

Invoked in passing, I encountered an example of face-to-face memeing during an appearance of the Freedom Movement-aligned influencer Maajid Nawaz on the *Joe Rogan Experience* in February 2022. Interviewed at length by the eponymous mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter turned podcast host, Nawaz spoke about the perceived dangers of the Great Reset, and its figurehead, Klaus Schwab. A British-Pakistani political activist, Nawaz is described by John Postill



Figure 10: "Tommy Robinson News" on Nawaz's *Joe Rogan Experience* appearance. 20th February 2022. Publicly accessible channel.

(borrowing a term from Helen Lewis (2022) as a “perpetual seeker”, the kind of online guru who ... moves from ideology to ideology trying to find one that suits them’ (2024, 90). After youth involvement with Islamic fundamentalism, Nawaz founded a counter-extremist think tank Quilliam. In 2013, Nawaz was portrayed as having played a role in the ostensible “deradicalization” of the far-right campaigner “Tommy Robinson” (whose real name is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon). Nawaz stood as a parliamentary candidate for the Liberal Democrats in 2013. For several years, Nawaz presented a radio show on the *LBC* station. In 2021, he was sacked from his role, due to his public endorsement of anti-COVID-19 vaccination discourse. Becoming a frequent speaker at Freedom Movement events, he has

labelled vaccine mandates a ‘crime against humanity’ (cited in Postil 2024, 91), and endorsed claims that COVID lockdowns represented a Chinese government-backed conspiracy (Senger et al. 2021). In February 2022, via his Telegram channel “Tommy Robinson News,” Yaxley-Lennon – now wholly *reinvolved* in far-right activism, as self-described “independent journalist” – shared a link of an appearance of his erstwhile “deradicalizer” on *Rogan*. Captioning the video, Yaxley-Lennon declared that Nawaz had left Rogan ‘speechless’ (Figure 10).

On *Joe Rogan*, Nawaz begins to *meme* Schwab, via citations and referencing which melds popular culture and reframings of material derived from his official speeches. Schwab, he says, is a ‘pound-shop *Bond* villain’ (“PowerfulJRE” 2022). While the “realness” of the threat posed by Schwab and the Great Reset are acknowledged by both Nawaz and Rogan, their discussion which follows is inflected with what Robyn Marasco identifies as the pleasure and ‘satisfaction ... that come with being *in the know*’ (2016, 236). She argues that ‘conspiracy theory is a love affair with power that poses as its critique. Like so many love affairs, it is premised on a fantasy about its beloved’ (238). In this idealised fantasy, ‘power *really* is what it says about itself, really does have clear and known ends, and really can meet these ends with exactness and efficiency’ (ibid).

Drawing on an established vocabulary of “Schwab memes,” their memeing expands to include audio material. Rogan invites Nawaz to describe the ‘aims’ of the WEF. In response he opens an (evidently pre-prepared) recording of a speech by Schwab to the John F. Kennedy School of Government in 2017 (“PowerfulJRE” 2022). During the speech, Schwab states that, through its Young Global Leaders, a scheme selecting likely “future leaders” in politics, academia and industry, the WEF had successfully ‘penetrated the cabinets’ of various national governments. Before Nawaz plays the speech, Rogan interjects, asking his producer to begin playing ‘Darth Vader Music’ – referring to the “Imperial March” leitmotif associated with the *Star Wars* villain (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Maajid Nawaz and Joe Rogan, to the tune of the "Imperial March". ("PowerfulJRE" 2022).

Accompanied by the sinister marching music, Rogan effects a mocking imitation of Schwab's accent. Having found the "choice cut" audio sample for the memeing practice (before its turn to much duller concerns), Nawaz remarks: 'What you've got there is Emperor Palpatine in the first three *Star Wars* [films] talking about how he's going to use democracy to put his people in place' ("PowerfulJRE" 2022). Revoicing the same citations of Schwab as a robe-wearing sinister figure encountered in Oxford, Rogan and Nawaz enact a kind of pantomime without walls via intertextual framings of popular science fiction. While played for laughs, they invoke the central core of the Great Reset conspiracy: that, through the placing of "key agents" into positions of power, the WEF carried out its secretive manipulation of global governments, from behind a "veil" of liberal democratic artifice.

## Conclusion

This paper has made a case for memeing as a practice, one which captures the processes of production, circulation, recognition and performance surrounding memes. Memeing is a mode of invoking established genres, through which bundles of text and meaning, such as the Freedom Movement's conceptualising of the Great Reset, are met with stable forms of expectation (Briggs and Bauman 1992, 147). To engage in memeing is, implicitly, to invoke genre in a way which is tied to digital culture. To establish something as being "meme-like" is to recognise its resonance with online practices of remixing, recontextualising and viral

circulation. However, memeing is a highly mobile, with its genres invokable amongst both protest marchers and live webshow participants, as well as the producers of, and commentors on, image-based memes on Instagram. As memes increasingly encompass both online and in-person life (Kallius and Adriaans 2022), thinking with memeing allows us to account for how this multi-modal enacting takes place.

Thinking with memeing extends anthropology's concern with what Charles Stewart describes as how 'bundle[s] of emotions and sensations' can 'jump' across varied forms of representation, both material otherwise (2002, 302, 279). Such feelings, he suggests, 'transform' as they move from 'individual minds to collectively available media and back again....' (303). In the cases considered here, feelings of distrust and disavowal towards a political-economic mainstream take recognisable form through genres of memeing such as "Schwab memes." Circulating across protest performances, online imagery and conversational reference, feelings are shared, mediated and reworked through collective practice.

This framing holds broader implications for anthropological engagement with conspiracy activism. Accommodating sincerity, irony and normativity, memeing is salient in understanding how conspiracy narratives can be made portable and recognisable. It demonstrates how a highly diffuse conceptions, such as the Freedom Movement's reading of the Great Reset, can be reducible to a cast of characters and popular culture references. It does so in a manner, which is participative and engaging; where the conspiracy adage to "to your own research," becomes easily demonstrable. Addressing contemporary digital politics more broadly, memeing accounts for an increasing sense that memes leave the screen – they are witnessed to jump, or *march*, through varied material and immaterial forms of cultural representation.

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