MEMES, SATIRE, AND THE LEGACY OF TV SOCIALISM

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Abstract: This article examines the phenomenon of internet memes not just as a pervasive form of digital communication with implications for political culture, but as a new satirical medium. Through the lens of socialist television satire, this article details how memes are an evolution of the venerable history of political satire that abridge past and future traditions of political humour as subversive criticism. This analysis is conducted primarily through a case study of Hungary, although similar memes in other contexts are cited to demonstrate the externalizability of these conclusions.

Keywords: memes, satire, TV socialism, digital media, political humour, subversion, political critique

1 Introduction

Internet memes have become a mainstay in modern digital culture, popular culture, and political culture. More than just funny images that spread through social media, chronically viral internet memes are a digital communication phenomenon that has developed into a significant means of information, interaction, and even political deliberation. But the power of these funny images is not new. Rather, memes are an evolution of the venerable history of political satire that abridge past and future traditions of political humour as subversive criticism.

Growing literature has established the value of memes as an expression of political satire with subsequent potential for encouraging political participation, challenging political power and established norms in both democratic and repressive regimes. Yet research on the phenomenon of political memes beyond the American and Western European context is rare, especially in relation to Central and Eastern Europe.[1] Moreover, while memes are a recognized legacy of satire,[2] no research has sought to connect the satirical evolution to rich history of political satirical television in the late socialist period in Central and Eastern Europe. The paradigms created by television studies are influential across disciplines, so there is value in applying the well-established trans-geo-historical conception of critical satirical television as a mass media in the socialist period[3] to gain insight into the modern mass media of internet memes. Just as TV navigated official and unofficial spheres to serve as a barometer of political, economic, and cultural life under socialism,[4] memes today are a "visual archive of political debates and culture wars", expressing the values and preferences embedded in communities both online and offline.[5] This is by no means to say that memes and socialist TV are the same (or that modern TV is irrelevant), rather that we can perhaps understand memes and their current political and satirical function better by understanding how the logics and frames of socialist TV might apply to them, especially when looking at memes in contexts of post-socialist states or states with repressive media environments.

This article examines political memes challenging the dominant power structure in contemporary Hungary, through the empirical collection and qualitative content analysis of a limited selection of memes from Hungarian political forums on social media sites. This helps illustrate how Hungarian netizens can be seen participating in the creation and dissemination of memes as a means of satirical political expression. Since the Fidesz government came to power in 2010, and following their subsequent tightening of media regulations, this article argues that the frames of satire that characterized the late-socialist period have become more evident and prevalent in both television and on social media. Through the lens of the legacy of TV satire, this article investigates how memes can function as a satirical form of expression to challenge hegemonic political narratives in Hungary.

This limited investigation of the Hungarian case shows how memes might be considered both an evolution and legacy of the discourse of socialist TV satire, as a medium that uses the same frames of communication and understanding for challenging political power and norms in a novel mass media context. The popular cultural and political satirical space in post-socialist Europe has expanded beyond television and is now present in the phenomenon of internet memes. The deployment of satire through internet memes suggests that memes are themselves a politically significant medium, and thus worthy of theoretical comparative lens with other established politically significant mediums. But, as examples of recent research in meme studies show, this is hardly isolated to Hungary or post-socialist states. The established frames of subversive socialist TV satire from a trans-historical perspective can theoretically be applied to conceptualize the globalized digital phenomenon of political internet memes at large.

2 What's in a Meme?

Internet memes are undoubtably fundamental features of modern society and online networks. Teens, young adults, parents, and even grandparents all log on to social media platforms and like, comment on, or share these funny pictures, videos, and texts – and memes increasingly flow out of social media and populate the public sphere.[6] At their most basic level, memes are a piece of media that is adapted humorously and shared among internet users.[7] Anything from an 'image macro',[8] to a GIF,[9] social media post, YouTube video, Tik Tok and so on.[10] Any expression of the visual creativity of the internet can be and probably is a meme. While memes are inherently obtuse and 'weird', their discursive intent is to express a particular point of view or idea through different forms of humour like hyperbole, irony, parody, sarcasm, and especially satire.[11]

Organic in their initial iteration and dispersion, memes are eventually manipulated as they are further shared – created, transformed, and circulated through anonymous users on digital participatory platforms.[12] Only shared if they are agreed with, memes represent a human agency and motivation in their creation and spread, a product of communal coordination and participatory culture showing common, resonant ideas both globally and locally.[13] As such, memes are a kind of symbolic text, condensing ideas and ample connotations into a single neat package.[14] Within the picture and text of a meme, there is a concept, opinion, thought, or reaction to a situation, even if it is communicated in a witty and sarcastic (often juvenile) style.[15]

As a visual entertainment form based on humour, memes are both highly contextual and intertextual. Memes depend heavily on intertextuality as they often relate to each other,[16] and more so to popular culture at large – which requires knowledge of the cultural references and context to get the joke.[17] But still, memes are a surprisingly international inside joke, in large part because of their visual nature. Thus, common meme templates that express frames of humour resonant across cultural contexts.[18]

Yet a question rings through scholarship again and again: "is there anything serious about memes?".[19] Put simply, yes. Memes are an "important, shared social phenomenon" that can represent common opinions, cultural norms, carry political power, or even motivate social change.[20] For no small reason, this is in part because of the ever-increasing engagement with political memes.[21] But it is also a function of the inherent satirical humour of memes. By drawing people in the promise of entertaining humour, memes bridge popular and political culture. Through their

digital, user-generated, and anonymous nature, memes make it accessible for a variety of people to engage with and participate in the political.

Political memes are more than just a niche, they are a pervasive form of political communication that facilitates polyvocal and participatory digital communication as networks of collaborators actively and critically evaluate, reshape, and disseminate media content beyond traditional media.[22] Because the popularity of memes and their production is based on the saliency of what they represent – be it a political idea or stance or opinion – memes effectively "monitor and show quick shifts in public opinion, some of which add up to a political groundswell".[23] While individually, memes are forgettable and leave little mark on culture, taken as a *whole*, memes "draw attention to poignant cultural and political themes".[24] This is why Barnes et al.[25] and Sieffert-Brockmann et al.[26] both use analysis of memes on social media as exposition of "what the public is noticing most" and an expression of values and preferences embedded in online communities in terms of poignant cultural and political themes. While memes as a generality are politically significant in a variety of ways, the significance of individual political memes might vary depending on the degree of their dissemination throughout social networks and specific reach. Nonetheless, a meme does not have to go viral to be meaningful. Even the least impactful memes are significant as they reflect larger patterns and trends, and allow individual people to discuss their views and express their own opinions, critically evaluating modern politics.[27]

Memes are undoubtedly a key part of how we communicate and engage with politics in this digital age, as such debates about meme culture abound in scholarship. Although memes themselves are an ideologically neutral conduit, their aggressive character has been mobilized and channelled across the political spectrum.[28]

As a medium of anonymous, user-generated information, pessimists see memes as particularly adept at spreading misinformation – with startling implications for the dissemination of radicalization, propaganda, or just pure 'trolling'.[29] While it is true that memes have a particularly **robust life on the political right**, and have been fully weaponized as technologies of harassment and hate-mongering – illustrated by the notable example of the preeminent meme Pepe the Frog being appropriated as an ideological mascot for white supremacy and white nationalism in the United States and Western Europe – **the political right does not 'own' memes as a tool**.[30] (See Figure 1).

Optimists see the ability of memes to offer a parallel and often critical discourse to mainstream media and public discussion, giving voice to more opinions (polyvocality), as beneficial for political participation and engagement in and of itself, although primarily in liberal democratic contexts.[31] Scholars studying memes beyond the United States and Western Europe have emphasized the role of memes in forming and disseminating political narratives that oppose

Figure 1. Pepe the Frog, co-opted as a symbol of white supremacy, pictured here as a Nazi concentration camp guard.

dominant state discourses, as well as vehicles for dissent and activism in more repressive media environments.[32] But memes are by no means novel in this capacity.

Above all, the most meaningful aspects of memes as a means of communication media stem from their inherently satirical humour. Memes, aside from their digital aspect, are not really new. They are a part of the evolution of alternative media and art, the interaction of popular culture and the political, from the carnival as a form of dissent to satirical cabaret as political humor and resistance.[33] While many might point to memes as a closer allegory to political cartoons – and memes do indeed borrow from the tradition of the medium – these were a top-down elite production of satire, especially in the socialist or society context, and thus differ greatly from the bottom-up participatory nature of memes.[34]

These debates in meme literature offer a familiar echo to discussions of television media, specifically socialist television satire in Central and Eastern Europe. Understanding memes as satirical medium, and a legacy of the storied history of subversive and critical satire though the lens of TV socialism brings further light to the trans-historical and trans-geographical continuity of these debates.

3 Legacy of Socialist TV Satire

Not unlike memes, socialist television too was written off as a medium without real meaning, as 'pure entertainment', because of the "Eurocentric hierarchy of high and low culture".[35] Yet there is often a political dimension to the cultural productions relegated to the box of entertainment, blurring the line between the informational and the entertaining, as entertainment often engages in forms of subversion and political engagement in and of itself.[36] While some want to consume media simply for the sake of entertainment, television nonetheless grants access to an image of everyday life, and acts as a barometer of political, economic, and cultural values.[37] This is true not only with television, but now the modern mass medium of memes.

Beyond these parallels between memes and television as mass entertainment mediums, the (subversive) satirical frames of socialist television can be applied theoretically to contemporary internet memes. For this framework, I rely on Aniko Imre's argument that late-socialist television satire serves as a model for contemporary satirical political communication.[38]

3.1 History of Political Satire

Political satire is playful and designed to elicit laughter, while simultaneously passing judgment.[39] Satire inherently "questions the existing political or social order" – typically by juxtaposing the existing imperfect reality with visions of what could or should be, by drawing out the absurdity of a position so that all can see it.[40] Because of this, satire can be biting or aggressive, but the underlying premise is questioning as well as optimistic, "as it suggests we (collectively) deserve better"[41], and offers a criticism of either institutions, politics, or societal norms.[42]

Satire has a storied history of various forms – from pamphlets to novels, poems, cartoons, films, and songs – so understanding memes as another iteration of satire is not a stretch. The roots of satire trace back to antiquity, with debated origins from Greek plays, Roman festivals, to Renaissance verse.[43] Regardless, satire, irony, and parody have long been used to explore themes of status, power, and conflict, and as a way of levying subtle critiques of society, culture, and politics.[44] The 'comic genius of political criticism'[45] dates as far back as people have been trying to understand the very concepts of the political and the balance of power. Mikhail Bakhtin illustrates this with the role of

satire in the European medieval carnival as a form of dissent through parody and 'inside out rationality'.[46] Parody and satire have often been seen as protected forms of expression with a privileged role in democratic societies,[47] so much of the history of satire relates to Western Europe, North America, and democratized societies - exemplified by icons of satire like George Orwell and Aldous Huxley.

In the 21st century, through the naughts and 2010s, political satirical TV shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* became the touchstone of popular political satire, as political themes and information spread into entertainment and comedic forms.[48] With the advent of the internet, political satire expanded even more with satirical blogs, YouTube channels, and 'news' sites like **The Onion**.[49] Political satire is effectively omnipresent in modern popular culture, especially in the medium of memes. But the subversive and critical potential of political satire is much more diffuse than this Westernized perspective.

Satire has a long history in Africa and the subcontinent, as well as Black communities in North America.[50] While history prizes the subversive power of satire to criticize governments (such as the celebrated works of privileged elites like Orwell and Huxley), examples like the satire produce by Black Americans during slavery as a form of survival in decidedly undemocratic circumstances show that satire has long been a meaningful way for the oppressed to express political agency and criticize dominant power structures.[51] Using the satire of double-speak and self-deprecation to recognize their oppressed position in American society is a satirical tradition that still lives on in Black American humour.[52] The 'tiny revolution'[53] of a joke has long been a pivotal form of political expression for many communities.

There is a tradition of humour as a form of political resistance in Central and Eastern Europe, and a satirical stance towards political authority has long flourished in the region.[54] From stage cabaret, gallows humour under Nazi occupation, to the infamous 'socialist joke', humour runs deep.[55] The socialist joke in particular represents this culture of satire challenging political authority, as it was a popular response to authoritarian repression, "an act of everyday subversion… to 'live in truth'".[56] Under state socialism, the potential of laughter was called a form of 'heroic scepticism' – emphasized by humour's capacity for self-liberation, if not political emancipation.[57] This, in addition to the Black American example, suggests that satire is particularly the domain of those oppressed and removed from the mainstream narrative in a society, those with little or no capacity to engage in rational or recognized forms of political discourse. As such, the particular political humour and satire seen in the context of Central and Eastern Europe in the socialist period can serve as a kind of jumping-off point for illustrating the capacity of satirical mediums as vehicles of political critique and resistance.

3.2 Socialist TV Satire

During the late socialist period of the 1970s and 1980s, satire flourished in socialist television media throughout Central and Eastern Europe.[58] By then, principles of a utopian Marxist-Leninist social transformation had lost much of their legitimacy. However, the cliched political communication of the talking points of the regime continued to be repeated, characterized by the ironic overidentification with regime rhetoric, slips of the tongue, playing dumb, ambiguity, and double language inherited from the comedians of interwar stage cabaret. during World War II and early socialism.[59] Television was an instrument of absurdity that constantly foregrounded the distance between the utopian world depicted and the actual experience of socialist lives. As Imre explains, "satire is used worldwide as a way to amplify the absurdity of monologic news, which seeks to establish through repetition the very epistemological certainty it claims as its basis. By replaying the echoes that reverberate in the self-referential echo chamber of "serious" news, satire has created a dialogic discourse in the Bakhtinian sense in which multiple, simultaneous voices play against one another."[60] This absurd juxtaposition is itself the logic of satire, and was present not only in purposefully satirical programming, but how audiences perceived even unintentionally comical programming through a satirical lens.[61]

The predominance of satire as a means of political communication in many ways allowed socialist television to critique and challenge the dogma and ideology of socialism. By parodying the regime, humour expressed criticism of it with a knowing wink to the audience. Dominant political narratives were challenged and subverted through illustrating their absurdity. TV satire was both a critical interrogator of politicians, and at times an effective mouthpiece of the people's displeasure with those in power.[62] In this way, television satire in the late socialist period inherently allowed a critical form of political communication that was not outwardly and explicitly critical, but hidden behind satire. Additionally, laughter has a community-building function, inviting only those in the know. In many ways, this offer of inclusion was as important as the satisfaction over fooling censors.[63]

Imre argues that the political communication of the television satire in the late socialist period is a 'post-trust' lens on politics.[64] This 'post-trust' suspicion about authority gains particular legitimacy "when historical reality presents periods of social and political rupture (such as culture wars, actual wars, and unpopular leaders) or mind-numbing manufactured realities (such as celebrity culture, media spin, and news management). In these times, satire becomes a potent means for enunciating critiques and asserting unsettling truths that audiences may need or want to hear."[65] In the Eastern European region, the entire period of socialism, and arguably the entire twentieth century, was a long series of ruptures and upheavals. Thus, satire has long been an indispensable filter for public discourse for these now post-socialist states.[66] This post-trust era, with the predominance of TV satire, is now obvious in both post-socialist states and 'late capitalist' spaces like the United States and Western Europe, and bears striking resemblance to the political communicate of late socialist TV. Imre therefore argues that the contemporary model of political communication through satire was first modelled by late socialist cultures.[67]

Applying this theory of a post-trust lens allows one to understand how satire, in various forms, often has been and continues to be a salient and popular means for people to challenge political norms and therefore offer criticism.

This theoretical application must recognize that there are very different production cultures and realities between television and internet memes. Broadcast TV in the socialist era was ostensibly a top-down state-run and regulated affair, whereas memes are the unregulated (except for the restrictions of social media sites) productions of countless anonymous internet users in a platform outside traditional media hierarchies. But, while socialist political elites encouraged the use of TV as a tool for the social mobilization of the communist cause, as TV became a mass medium in the 1960s it became more a medium of leisure and entertainment.[68] Because of TV's lower cultural status, it often flew under the radar of censorship. Though nominally centralized, there was a bottom-up momentum throughout the socialist period that allowed viewers a great deal of leverage in developing the medium.[69] These leniencies in this underestimated, low-cultural entertainment medium where what **allowed critique and subversion of regime norms in the form of political satire to slip through** and become a pervasive lens.

Memes too are a low-cultural mass medium primarily for entertainment that have been largely underestimated, despite their pervasive popularity across the internet. Just as memes do not spread unless the ideas and humour they express are popular, socialist TV entertainment programming (beyond the state-sanctioned necessities) would not endure if it was not popular with the masses. TV in many ways was itself a participatory means of entertainment, shaped by the viewers demands for entertainment – memes have just taken that logic to the extreme, cutting out the middleman with content directly produced by users. They may be very different types of media, but arguably each was the visual mass medium zeitgeist of its day. In the age of Web 2.0, global tendances have generally shifted from traditional media to online, and a new generation of internet content producers and consumers have emerged.[70] TV was *the* mass medium of the late 20th century, and arguably memes are *the* mass medium of today, thus comparing the two can shed light on the evolution of the post-trust lens of satire in popular mass media.[71]

While Imre's trans-geographical and trans-historical framework is modelled with regard to television as a dominant mass medium, mass media has evolved beyond television in the digital age. 'Post-trust' eras of social or political ruptures and mind-numbing manufactured realities only accelerate, and political satire continues to proliferate in various forms. This theory of understanding satire as a means for enunciating critiques and subverting narratives can therefore be applied to a new mass visual medium like internet memes. The logics of satire from the socialist period in

Central and Eastern Europe not only inform the logics of contemporary TV satire, but the expansion of political satire into media beyond TV with the advent of the Web 2.0.

4 Hungary, Satire, and Memes

While the growth of satirical news and political comedy is always grounded in specific sociohistorical contexts, it is also reflective of a large geopolitical situation, with unexpected historical parallels.[72] Memes too, while surprisingly universal, are grounded in contextual popular and political cultural references. Therefore, to illustrate the trans-historical legacy and evolution of socialist television's satirical political communication, I will first conduct a visual content analysis of political memes counter to the dominant power structure from the specific national context of Hungary.

Hungary itself was a bastion of the socialist TV satire, as Imre describes during its late socialist period.[73] Political television satire was still very much alive and well in post-socialist Hungary, with the success of popular 'news' programs like *Heti Hetes* (The Weekly Seven), which targeted the absurdities of politics and public life, both silly and consequential.[74] This was as much due to the deep historical continuity with the older, national and regional tradition of political cabaret, as with the flourishing satirical sensibility of late socialist television.[75] Licensed network shows like *Heti Hetes* demonstrate the progression of socialist television's genres of political satire and comedy into the age of globalized and commercialized postsocialist television. Memes could be seen to extend the globalization of these genres even further, through well-known intertextual and specific contextual references which enable the transnational flow of images and ideas.

But Hungarian satire today is not what it once was in late socialism or early post-socialism. The change in the political cultural climate of Hungary post-socialism, which has significantly impacted the manifestation of political humour and satire in the country, is the result of cumulative actions of the Fidesz government under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

When Fidesz first initiated the tightening of media regulations with the 2010 'media law' – a major step to recentralized control over media and curtailment of freedom of expression – discussions of the restrictive law were common on shows like *Heti Hetes*. The famously funny panellists discussed the law and other controversial steps taken by the Fidesz government, with rhetoric distinctly steeped in satire and a form of double-speak similar to the rhetoric of the 1970s and 1980s late socialism.[76] But, as Aniko Imre clarified in a July 2021 interview, this was simply a "moment in time".[77]

(Although it was taken off the air due to declining viewership after the loss of iconic participants, for an example of the nostalgia Hungarians feel for shows like *Heti Hetes*, see Figure 2.)

The specific brand of satire Imre discusses existing in post-socialist Hungarian media of the 2010s is conspicuously lacking in the mainstream media. Many TV networks that aired critical programs like *Heti Hetes*, critical news media, and news sites alike have been taken over by Fidesz cronies like Orbán's childhood friend Lőrinc Mészáros.[78] Hungary in many ways is a '**textbook case' of media capture**, with the mainstream public narrative largely influenced by the government and powerful media conglomerates. Traditional media in Hungary is now largely overtaken by Fidesz-imposed censorship and self-censorship,[79] which **critical voices in Hungary argue** promotes the Fidesz government's populist ethno-nationalist 'Christian' ideology.[80] There are notable exceptions and bastions of critique, including the popular ATV, and the largest and most watched TV station RTL Klub.[81] Although the allegiance of ATV is now garnering some suspicion, as the church that owns the long left-wing channel is closely aligned with the Fidesz government.[82] While RTL Klub even includes some satirical comic programming, this is the exception rather than the rule.

Hungary today is undoubtedly in a post-trust era, with the culture wars, divisive leaders, and mind-numbing manufactured realities that Imre describes. As such, satire remains an important filter for public discourse and political communication. But, with the ideological hegemony and limits on media freedom, satire as a means for enunciating critiques and subverting dominant narratives has increasingly found less space in mainstream media. This has pushed
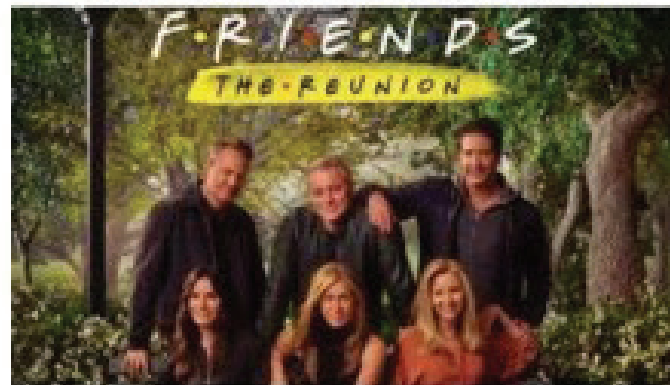
Figure 2. Reunion of popular American sitcom Friends compared to Heti Hetes.

political satire even more into the periphery of media, relegating dissidence more so to the internet and the new mass media of internet memes.[83] Other scholars agree, and point to the democratic degradation of Hungarian politics as a catalyst for shaping a distinct environment in which resistance, social activism, and overall criticism increasingly manifest online.[84] This does not necessarily counter the new media structure of concentrated power, or mean that such resistance and criticism are wholly absent from all mainstream media. But, political critiques through memes on social media offer an important capacity to disrupt mainstream narratives and contribute to sustaining a resistant counter-public in Hungary.[85]

Critical satirical political comedy being edged out of the mainstream media has galvanized internet memes as a predominant satirical space. While satirical critique of the Fidesz government exists in other online spaces like YouTube, these do not exhibit the same bottom-up subversive groundswell as memes. In this post-trust era of politics, frames of satire that use means like parody, irony, overidentification, double talk, and ambiguity to point out the absurdity in the political are obvious in memes today. Much like with socialist TV, these satirical means serve as political communication of criticism, as well as subversion and challenging of dominant narratives and ideologies.

4.1 Other Examples

But Hungary is far from an isolated case. Recent scholarship increasingly highlights the capacity of memes as a form of political communication, critique, and challenging dominant narratives.

Radka Vicenová and Daniel Trottier show online how memes on a Slovak Facebook page were used for the mockery and denunciation of societal and political actors.[86] While they identify the significant popularity of political satire in Slovakia as only beginning in the 1990s – likely as a consequence of defining political satire as "an example of freedom of speech… part of all democratic societies" – the model of socialist television satire's political communication can still be applied to the memes they present.[87]

Anastasia Denisova's seminal work establishes memes as vehicles of political resistance in the context of Russian discourse on the Crimean war.[88] As she relates this capacity (as well as the capacity for memes to promote propaganda) to Russia's long history of satire, Denisova does not discuss Russian memes as a legacy of their Soviet-era television.[89] Nonetheless, the logic of socialist TV satire can be applied to the contemporary Russian memes she presents.

Beyond the European context, Cristina Moreno-Almeida demonstrated the prevalence of political meme culture in Morocco, and hidden discourses on power relations and oppression embedded in memes, which serve to disempower systems of oppression by opening up debates that challenge dominant political discourses.[90] As such, the memes she presents can be seen as an evolution of the logic of socialist TV satire, for they employ absurdity and overidentification in order to subvert dominant narratives in a repressive mainstream media environment.

There is therefore a good deal of evidence that both post-socialist and post-imperial cultures utilise memes for political satire and critique, although they might not have explicit origins and relation to the socialist TV experience in Central Eastern Europe. These cases show that while different national contexts do have significant impact on the formation, circulation, and specific manifestation of satirical humour, satire is nonetheless reflective of a large geopolitical situation. The post-trust lens of political communication modelled by socialist TV satire is evident and applicable across the globe, in both repressive and more open media environments, just as Imre argued it was applicable to the late-capitalist American and European context. Beyond the specific context of Hungary, memes in general can be seen as a theoretical (although not always literal) legacy and evolution of the satirical style of political communication that characterized television in the late socialist period.

4.2 Analysis

To investigate this specific brand of subversive satire, a limited sample of Hungarian memes countering the dominant power structure have been collected from prominent social media sites.[91] These memes are by no means an exhaustive or completely representative sample of all memes related to Hungarian politics, but are illustrative of a major strand in the discourse of Hungarian political memes. Far-right memes also proliferate in Hungarian meme spaces, but the political significance of those is a whole other question which has been addressed in other contexts.[92]

Within this limited scope, Hungarian memes can be seen to take on many themes to challenge and criticize the dominant power structure: Viktor Orbán; Fidesz ideology; Fidesz supporters; other Hungarian politicians; Orbán cronies; fiscal corruption; Hungarian relations to the international community and EU; bureaucracy and government disfunction in general; opposition political parties; specific Fidesz policies or political happenings; the state of media freedom. By making these topics the butt of the joke, people are using a satirical mass medium to express their criticism of and subtle resistance to the Orbán regime at large.

Figure 3. (translated from Hungarian) 'It's dangerous to go alone! Take this with you, an aid to [understanding] government media' (Bingo title) 'Government communication' Bingo squares: *Ferenc Gyurcsány *Family/ Family *Friendly *Liberal/ Liberals *Gay Lobby/ Gay *Propaganda *Intentional misunderstanding *George Soros *Hungarian People *Communist/ Commie/ Bolshevik *Gender Lobby/ Gender *Propaganda *Misleading address *Left *Fake News *Quote from Viktor Orbán *Anti-Vaccination *Opposition *Karácsony Gergely [Opposition Figure] *Unsuitable *Success Propaganda *Last Year/ Show-Back *Migrants

Overidentification with regime rhetoric, a mainstay in socialist TV satire, also used in memes as a way of mocking the absurdity of the disjuncture between ideology and reality in order to subvert and resist the dominant ideology. This meme also expresses the generational tensions between the (typically) young meme-makers and the elderly people who are an essential voting base of the ruling Fidesz party, further illustrated with its form as a bingo card – a popular game in nursing homes for the elderly. (See Figure 3.)

This meme (Figure 4) shows a rather literal illustration of this disjuncture, as the head of the seal – which references the 'Christian Democracy' (or 'Christian freedom') defined by Orbán, that embodies Fidesz's ideal illiberal ideology – is divided from the body labelled 'Hungary' with an optical illusion. Simple as it may be, this implies that this ideologized idea of Hungary as a Christian Democracy touted by Fidesz ideology is in a way itself an illusion, or patently wrong. The underlying message is a mocking and criticism of the whole host of ideological implications behind the **label of Christian Democracy** in Hungarian politics (ethno-nationalism, anti LGBTQ+, and so on), and the separation of these values from what Hungary means.

Other memes directly parrot common Fidesz ideological rhetoric as a means of taking aim at Fidesz supporters (again referencing the elderly voting bloc), subverting these narratives (like the conspiratorial '**Soros plot**')[93] through illustrating their increasing absurdity by pairing them with increasingly absurd images.

Just as socialist TV would make open jokes about food shortages and other failures or ideological contradictions of the socialist system.[94] Hungarian memes poke fun at the **near-propagandic and biased media**, **political** and **fiscal** corruption, as well as **various scandals** – including local representatives offering deprived neighbourhoods sacks of potatoes in exchange for their votes. In joking about the dysfunctionality of the political system through irony and parody, the discursive intent of these memes is to reflect the absurdity of the political system.

Figure 4. (Top text, translated from Hungarian) 'Christian Democracy' (Bottom text) 'Hungary'.

Figure 5. "I am voting for Fidesz" - "Mészáros deserves to be rich" – "Brussels must be stopped" - "Soros' plan must be blocked".

Figure 6. "Yes, I voted for Fidesz" "To prevent migrants from coming in" "So we got the potato" "Why would Gyurcsány do a better job?".

Figure 7. 'When you want to "free press" in Hungary'.

Figure 8. Mészáros and Orbán as Krang, the literal strawman.

Figure 9. Orbán's implied spending preferences.

Figure 10. Potato King Orbán.

A final important element is the use of mocking to criticize political figures. Socialist television satire would parody a figure in order to challenge their legitimacy and the established order, and memes today have a special preference for making political figures the butt of the joke as a means of subverting everything they stand for.

An exemplary illustration of this in the Hungarian case is a meme (Figure 11) which depicts Prime Minister Orbán famously puckered lips while speaking, over which is imposed an anus with an anal bead sex toy protruding. The most obvious implication of his words being shit is very clear, and this also harkens to the Hungarian proverb "Segget csinál a szájából", someone who "makes a butt out of his mouth" meaning one who does not fulfil his promises or talks out of his ass. An additional layer relates to the inclusion of a sex toy – especially anal beads which are predominantly popular among the gay community – which over the mouth of a famously homophobic man is especially mocking. While ridiculous, it is the absurdity of memes like these mocking Orbán personally that serve as a challenge and subversion of his political legitimacy and image as a competent leader.

Figure 11. Orbán and anal beads.

5 Discussion

Clearly, there is a rich use of memes for the purpose of political satire. Much like the satire modelled by late socialist television – which amplified and parodied the absurdity of hegemonic narratives of the dominant power structure in order to subvert and criticize it – this sample shows a genre of memes that employ irony, parody, overidentification, and many other frames of humour to challenge and critique political figures, ideology, and action in Hungary. In the limited media landscape of Hungary and age of Web 2.0, memes have in many ways taken up the mantle of satirical zeitgeist. The legacy of socialist television satire – and its capacity to subtly subvert and challenge power, norms, and ideologies – has evolved over the years into this digital form. Memes are an important satirical space, especially in a media environment that is hostile to critical political satire.

5.1 Conclusion: What Does It All Meme?

Insight into understanding memes as a means of political communication today can be gained through the lens of the legacy socialist television satire. Just as TV socialism registered and aired out the failures of the socialist system,[95] memes have the potential to register the failures of current regimes – from democratic to authoritarian. Certain genres of memes, in many ways, can be seen to embody the legacy of socialist television that uses satire as a means of political communication to critique, subvert, and expose hegemonic political realities.

More than just a legacy, memes are also theoretically an evolution of socialist television satire, incorporating the new possibilities of the digital age. As with the transcultural genre logic with TV Socialism,[96] there too is a kind of genre recognition in the intertextuality of memes. The same way genres like dramatic soap operas had a satirical twist that was accessible even to those unfamiliar with local cultures and specific TV programs, familiarity with common meme templates allows one to understand the parodic or satirical intent of a meme even if you do not understand the exact reference. Socialist television was considered a medium that did "not belong to anyone",[97] as bottom-up demands for entertainment were just as integral as top-down attempts to influence viewers. Memes take this logic of a mass medium a step further as they are wholly user-generated, anonymous, and free from explicit top-down influence (absent the considerable influence of social media algorithms).[98]

But satire is not a perfect model of political resistance. "Parody is not free from the pressure of hegemony",[99] and even forms of resistant commentary can still reinforce convention while opposing it.[100] This was true in the 1980s when state socialist parties co-opted intellectual opposition and nurtured political humour to demonstrate benevolence and openness to critique,[101] and with memes today as trolls reinforce hegemonic ideologies.[102] Perhaps pessimistic, it is true that satire can just be used to release tension in a way that ultimately maintains the status quo of power.[103]

Some have claimed that "a political joke will change nothing" and it is not a form of active resistance, but others say that "having a laugh" allows people to resist their mundane circumstance and raise their political consciousness.[104] While humour might sometimes be a release valve that does not promote any real change ('slacktivism' as we call it on the internet), the value of humour is far too nuanced to make such essentializations. There is meaning in small acts of engagement and tiny actions of political criticism – even something as simple as liking a meme – which crack public illusions of unitary opinion.[105]

Nevertheless, there is value to examining the productions of political satire both in the context of socialist television and the evolution of memes. Taking socialist television seriously grants access to an image of life under socialism, and a reliable barometer of the political, economic, and cultural life of people.[106] In the same way, taking memes seriously shows us what issues are salient, what people care about, and what they think about the political world around them. Understanding memes as a legacy of socialist television satire shows that there is a trans-historical and globalized continuity – a powerful history – inherent in the mobilization of satire as political communication.

Notes

1. Anastasia Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 5; Katalin Vargha, "Creativity and Humor in the Online Folklore of the 2014 Elections in Hungary," *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 74 (2018), 8.
2. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 2.
3. Aniko Imre, *TV Socialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
4. Imre, *TV Socialism*, 4.
5. Emily Apter, "Alphabetic Memes: Caricature, Satire, and Political Literacy in the Age of Trump," *October Magazine, Massachusetts Institute of Technology* 107, (2019): 23; Jens Seiffert-Brockmann, Trevor Diehl, and Leonhard Dobusch, "Memes as Games: The Evolution of a Digital Discourse Online." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 8 (2018): 2862.
6. Apter, "Alphabetic Memes," 14.
7. Andrew S. Ross and Damian J. Rivers, "Internet Memes as Polyvocal Political Participation," in *The Presidency and Social Media*, eds. Dan Schill and John Allen Hendricks (New York: Routledge, 2017), 286.
8. *An 'image macro' is a piece of media with text superimposed over a fixed image.*
9. *A GIF is a short cyclical moving image.*
10. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 195; Ross and Rivers, "Internet Memes as Polyvocal Political Participation", 287.
11. Ross and Rivers, "Internet Memes as Polyvocal Political Participation," 287; Apter, "Alphabetic Memes," 10.
12. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 195.
13. Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014); Ross and Rivers, "Internet Memes as Polyvocal Political Participation," 286; Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 195.
14. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 195.
15. Laura Ambrus, "Categorization of Memes," *Opus et Education* 4, no. 2 (2017): 151.
16. The meanings of memes are shaped by this kind of snowball effect, as memes are understood and grounded in previous memes through linguistic structures or graphic features. There are common meme templates which have more concrete meanings, ascribed to them through repetition, and understood by the consumer because of intertextual knowledge. Essentially, you see a familiar meme template and you already implicitly understand how the joke is framed because of this intertextual knowledge. Images from popular culture may even be used in memes, and accumulate meaning not present in the original picture. But, because of the intertextual knowledge of the audience, the meaning is still understood. Given how self-referential memes are, they are thus a kind of common language that all internet users employ to communicate on all possible topics.
17. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 2014.
18. Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).
19. Apter, "Alphabetic Memes," 5.
20. Kate Barnes, Tiernon Riesenmy, Minh Duc Trinh, Eli Lleshi, Nóra Balogh, and Roland Molontay, "Dank or Not? Analyzing and Predicting the Popularity of Memes on Reddit," *Applied Network Science* 6, no. 2 (2021): 2; Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 2.
21. Barnes et al., "Dank or Not?" 2.
22. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 37; Ross and Rivers, "Internet Memes as Polyvocal Political Participation," 293.
23. Apter, "Alphabetic Memes," 23; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., "Memes as Games," 2864.
24. Barnes et al., "Dank or Not?" 1.
25. Ibid.
26. Seiffert-Brockmann et al., "Memes as Games," 2864.
27. Ibid., 2862.
28. Apter, "Alphabetic Memes," 8.
29. Benita Heiskanen, "Meme-ing Electoral Participation," *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017): 16, 20; Maria Brock, "Political Satire and its Disruptive Potential: Irony and Cynicism in Russia and the US," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 59, no.3 (2018); Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*; Barnes et al., "Dank or Not?" 3.
30. Apter, "Alphabetic Memes," 7.
31. Heiskanen, "Meme-ing Electoral Participation," 16; Ross and Rivers, "Internet Memes as Polyvocal Political Participation," 289.
32. Cristina Moreno-Almeida, "Memes as Snapshots of Participation: The Role of Digital Amateur Activists in Authoritarian Regimes," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 6 (2021): 1545; Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*.
33. Beth Innocenti and Elizabeth Miller, "The Pervasive Force of Political Humor," *Journal of Communication*, 66 (2016); Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 3; Heiskanen, "Meme-ing Electoral Participation."
34. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 45.
35. Imre, *TV Socialism*, 5.
36. Stephen Harrington, "How Can We Value entertainment? And, Why Does It Matter?" in *Entertainment Values: How Do We Asses Entertainment and Why Does It Matter?* ed. Stephen Harrington (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2; Milner, *The World Made Meme*.

37. Imre, *TV Socialism*, 3–4.
38. Ibid., 255.
39. Dannagal G. Young, "Theories and Effects of Political Humor: Discounting Cues, Gateways, and the Impact of Incongruities," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, eds. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 873.
40. Ibid., 873; Imre, *TV Socialism*, 230.
41. Young, "Theories and Effects of Political Humor," 873.
42. Vasiliki Plevriti, *Satirical User-Generated Memes as an Effective Source of Political Criticism, Extending Debate and Enhancing Civic Engagement*. (University of Warwick, MA Global Media and Communication Best Dissertation, Centre for Cultural and Policy Studies, 2014), 14; Young, "Theories and Effects of Political Humor," 873.
43. Young, "Theories and Effects of Political Humor," 875.
44. Ibid., 871.
45. Ibid., 875.
46. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 3.
47. Young, "Theories and Effects of Political Humor," 887.
48. Ibid. 872; Imre, *TV Socialism*, 242.
49. Plevriti, *Satirical User-Generated Memes*, 2014, 12.
50. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
51. Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).
52. Ibid.
53. George Orwell, "Funny, but not Vulgar," *Leader*, (London: United Kingdom, 1945), **https://orwell.ru/library/articles/funny/english/e_funny**.
54. Martha Lampland and Maya Nadkarni, " 'What Happened to Jokes?' The Shifting Landscape of Humor in Hungary," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 30, no. 2 (2016): 465.
55. Imre, *TV Socialism*, 232.
56. Lampland and Nadkarni, "What Happened to Jokes?" 451.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 243, 347.
59. Ibid., 233.
60. Imre, *TV Socialism*, 243–4.
61. Ibid.
62. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds., "The State of Satire, the Satire of the State." *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era.* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
63. Serguei A. Oushakine, "Introduction: Jokes of Repression," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 4 (November 2011): 656.
64. Imre, *TV Socialism*, 243.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 244.
68. Ibid., 8.
69. Ibid., 10.
70. Heiskanen, "Meme-ing Electoral Participation," 1; Milner, *The World Made Meme*, 14.
71. YouTube video satire and the like are also a considerable element, but they arguably do not have quite the widespread proliferation that memes do (given their reliance on subscribers and the occasional algorithmic exposure to non-subscribers). This comparison would be interesting to do in future with the emerging and intensely popular short video form of TikToks, which can be seen as an extension of memes.
72. Ibid.
73. Imre, *TV Socialism*.
74. Ibid., 249.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 254–5.
77. Aniko Imre, Interview with author, July 5, 2021.
78. Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 162.
79. This 'self-censorship' was encouraged by the Fidesz government's favoritism in distribution of advertising revenues, withholding funding from media outlets that are not pro-government.
80. Tamas Toth, "Target the enemy: explicit and implicit populism in the rhetoric of the Hungarian right," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 28, no. 3 (2020), 369.
81. "Ramifications of the Hungarian Bill on Pedophilia," Hungarian Spectrum, 14 June, 2021, **https://hungarianspectrum.org/tag/rtl-klub/**

82. Bódis András, "A NER már a sajtó 50 százalékát kontrollálja – itt a nagy médiatérké," *Valasz Online*, 4 January, 2021m **https://www.valaszonline.hu/2021/01/04/a-ner-mar-a-sajto-50-szazalekat-kontrollalja-itt-a-nagy-mediaterkep/**

83. ibid.

84. Zsófia Nagy, *'Sorry About Our Prime Minister' – Social Movement Responses to Governmental Anti-Refugee Discourse in Hungary* (Doctoral Thesis, Eötvös Loránd University, 2019), 16.

85. ibid, 17.

86. Radka Vicenová and Daniel Trottier, "The First Combat Meme Brigade of the Slovak Internet": Hybridization of Civic Engagement Through Digital Media Trolling," *The Communication Review* 23, no. 2, (2020): 145.

87. Ibid., 146.

88. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 3.

89. Ibid., 44.

90. Moreno-Almeida, "Memes as Snapshots of Participation," 1562.

91. Sample of 104 memes were collected, spanning from 2018 to 2021. Websites memes were collected from: **https://www.reddit.com/r/hungary/**; **https://www.reddit.com/r/FostTalicska/**; **https://viktororbanmemes.tumblr.com/**; **https://9gag.com/tag/viktor-orb%C3%A1n**; **https://www.facebook.com/hungryhungarians/**

92. For more on the use of memes by the far right, see: *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US*, eds. Maik Fielitz, and Nick Thurston. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019).

93. Lendvai, *Orbán*, 208.

94. Imre, Interview, July 5, 2021.

95. Imre, *TV Socialism*, 2.

96. Ibid., 5.

97. Ibid., 7.

98. Milner, *The World Made Meme*.

99. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*, 26.

100. Ibid., 36.

101. Imre, *TV Socialism*, 229.

102. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society*.

103. Brock, *Political Satire and its Disruptive Potential*.

104. Owen Lynch, "Humorous Communication: Finding a Place for Humor in Communication Research," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (2002): 436.

105. Moreno-Almeida, "Memes as Snapshots of Participation," 1547, 1561.

106. Imre, TV Socialism, 3.

Biography

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