

Intervention Symposium:

“The Sanitization of/via Populism during the COVID-19 Pandemic”

**The Karen-ization of Politics: Moral Panics and Political Nihilism in the Wake
of Left Populism**

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2wXQjHXZIs&feature=emb_logo

“Karen mad at teenagers berry picking”, YouTube, 29 June 2020

“Listen: I pay my taxes, I pay for this park, and I don’t want to see people wrecking it.” An older, middle-aged, White woman confronts two women who are much younger than her. She must have seen the two as her juniors: the two could pass as college-aged undergraduates, or high school students. Importantly, unlike the older woman, the students are racialized. One of the students holds the camera, directing it at the older woman as they speak. They had encountered each other while hiking along the trail of a conservation area, when the students detached a twig from a berry bush.

“Oh my God, we are not wrecking it, there are literally so many berries out here”, one of the students responds.

“Oh my God! We aren’t wrecking it! There are so many berries out here!” The older woman flails her arms, and in a mocking tone mimics their response. “You two are complete twits!”

The name “Karen” (from the title above) refers to a meme that circulated through social media publics prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, it was in the Summer of 2020 that Karen took the global Anglosphere by storm. “Karen” is a middle aged, middle class White woman who carries an indignant and entitled attitude. She is the person who argues with cashiers and clerks: she asks to speak to the manager when you refuse to bend over backwards to serve her. Karen is quick to report you to police dispatchers for the mere fact that you are racialized and she has been inconvenienced by your presence. Karen represents – in images and videos that circulate throughout social media – a kind of hostile and irrational antisociality, buttressed by a degree of social power embedded in her class position and racial identity. The remainder of the interaction between Karen and these two students is transcribed below:

Student: We’re twits? You are the one coming up to two young girls, getting mad at them for picking berries.

Karen: Eat all the berries you want, just don’t take the bush with you!

Student: Why don’t you mind your own business!

Karen: You know that is the fucking rudest thing that you have said to me – go back to where you came from if you want to use language like that.

Student: Ohh! Go back to where you came from you fucking colonizer!

Karen: Are you First-Nations? No? Then don’t call me a colonizer.

Student: You are a colonizer. Where did you come from? I am actually curious.

Karen: The US.

Student: The US? So you aren’t Canadian? I was born here [in Canada] and you weren’t born here, and yet you are telling me to go back to where I came from?

The lockdowns that ensued after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in February and March were a great time for TikTok, the social media application dedicated to short homemade videos.

After the first few weeks and months (as many were quarantined indoors, and were bored enough to make and consume TikTok), the Black Lives Matter uprisings provided ample material for the application to draw in new users and consumers. Airwaves were flooded with violent and graphic videos that allowed the world to witness the extreme brutality that America’s police forces directed towards unarmed protestors. However, it might be fair to say that for a moment in time the antiracists controlled the narrative;[1] Karen was an aid to that effect. Viral videos formatted and framed to name, shame, and humiliate those caught in the act of so-called “White caller crime”[2] had already existed for a few years (McNamara 2019; Williams 2020). Likewise, for years clips captioned as “public freakouts” captured and disseminated the abuse that frustrated and angry customers directed towards frontline service industry workers. Yet it was Karen who united these two genres of viral videos as the culture war about the efficacy and necessity of wearing masks in public and in shops ensued over the spring and summer months of 2020.






The Right's turn towards a politics of resentment and revenge was noted first in political theory before the mainstream media itself recognized that Trump's re-election campaign had adopted a strategy to intentionally escalate conflicts between police and protestors by the end of the Summer of 2020 (Brown 2019; Dawsey 2020). Viral videos showing police brutalizing "rioters" was the intent, as the strategy sought to energize and engage Trump's base. Insofar as it gave people permission to demean and humiliate those thought to be political enemies, the Karen meme seemed to be doing something very similar. In videos titled "Karen spits at pizza delivery" and "Karen assaults Black man & son", the meme appeared as a genre of comedy that "punched up", as if there was a kind of subversive pleasure found in the consumption of the meme. Notwithstanding, it is worth reflecting on how – very much unlike the Trump campaign's attempt to aestheticize politics for Trumpism – the Karen meme emerged after the defeat of Left populism in the US and UK. Rather, if the end of the Corbyn and then Sanders projects could speak to what has been over a decade of debate on the merits and potentials of populism for the Left (see Mouffe 2018; Žižek 2008), such an inquiry might need to begin with a thorough review of the role that traditional media played in delegitimizing alternatives to the thirdwayist consensus. And while research has shown (in the UK at least) how press bias disadvantaged the socialist movement, it would be an oversight to neglect how discourse shaped and was shaped by less mediated forms of spectacle – viral memes portraying quotidian violence (Deacon et al. 2019).

To this end, the meta-discourse about the meme in opinion news media has overwhelmingly focused on Karen's racial politics – for example, a headline in *The Guardian* reads "How a meme changed the way Americans talked about racism" (Wong 2020). But this attention to the changing ways the general the public thinks about race comes at the expense of the oversight that Karen's victims are almost always service and "essential" workers: the earliest iterations of the Karen meme began as a critique of entitled and indignant customers.[3] My purposes here are not to give a valuation as to whether it is more significant that the meme express either a class consciousness or anti-racist politics, but rather to ask about the limits of the approach that reads Karen memes as a kind of "social text". I want to reflect upon this sense I have that watching Karen memes (after the initial laughs) induces a sense of melancholy that presents as nausea. Nausea, because at its core,


the meme is a perpetually unfulfilled revenge fantasy. I think it is reasonable that socialist intellectuals might hope that a spontaneous collective consciousness geared towards pushing back against the uneven distribution of rights and privileges that developed amidst “end of history” capitalism could not be born from such cynicism; but, I ask the reader to consider if this is the consequence of a meme that circulates a moral discourse that does not have a political voice.

Los Angeles Times

TELEVISION

Commentary: ‘Karen’ is an easy target. The truth about white nationalism is much worse



In an image made from a video provided by Christian Cooper, Amy Cooper holds her unleashed dog as she talks to Christian Cooper in New York's Central Park. (Christian Cooper / AP)

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To what extent did the Karen-ization of politics shift the responsibility for the pandemic's spread, for racialized police violence, and for declining social circumstances, onto individual citizens, and away from explanations linked to an understanding of public policy failures, of incompetence of government administration, or of structurally designed and enduring forms of inequality? To what extent does the pleasure of revenge fantasy, endlessly reiterated by virtue of the user generated nature of the media, create a "feedback loop" that reinforces a projection of a sense of political defeat and political nihilism? (Put another way: how are universalizing politics possible when people are training themselves to hate each other?) Brown's (2019) analysis of the Right's politics of revenge was a challenge to the prevailing left-wing narratives about the emergence of populism in the West. Political theorists had encouraged us to push back against the typical media narratives that characterized populism as a mere "vulgarization" of politics, and to understand populism as a form of grassroots and (often) anti-elite politics based in a reorientation of a political frontier; populism could be a movement towards a redistribution of who is legitimately and illegitimately positioned to make demands of the state (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018; Ranciere 2014).

While the liberal obsession with "decorum" in politics can only be viewed in this light (in that it presumes a reaction against this reorientation), it seems difficult for those anti-populist politicians and media figures to argue that Trump's election defeat signals the immediate return of decorum to politics and public life when the "warfare" of the culture war has seemingly been set free of any and all restraints. Likewise, the Left populists thought that a universalizing politics ("Medicare for All", UBI, a federal jobs guarantee, etc.) could force this reorientation of the polarization of people from "political camps" towards a polarization of the population by class; but this populism has been sanitized – *id* and *superego* are now never in conflict, and the Karen memes are here to remind people of that fact.

Endnotes

[1] Public opinion polling suggests that in June 2020, at least 67% of the American public expressed some form of approval or support for the Black Lives Matter movement (Parker et al. 2020).

[2] That is, racist calls to the police to report a Black person for the innocuous act of jogging, having a barbecue, sitting in a Starbucks, etc.

[3] Sophia Jaworski's piece in this collection discusses how essential workers have come to face new disciplinary regimes that regulate and mandate routine and pervasive forms of chemical exposure. There is an irony to the fact that in many places where government did not mandate that customers wear of facemasks inside stores and other public areas, essential workers were thrust into a situation in which they were forcefully and routinely exposed to sanitary chemicals by retail companies which then refused to mandate that customers wear masks in their stores. In early spring of 2021, an employee of a New York city branch of the grocery store Trader Joe's was fired after he wrote a letter to the company CEO asking that the company institute a policy that would allow employees to refuse service to customers who did not wear face masks (Bryant 2021).

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