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What Makes a Symbol Far Right?

Co-opted and Missed Meanings in Far-Right Iconography

Cynthia Miller-Idriss

“Many right-wing extremists don’t understand their own T-shirts”, a VICE-Germany headline proclaimed in March 2018 (Vorreyer 2018), summarizing research I had conducted with youth in and around far-right scenes about the meaning of far-right symbols, codes, and iconography (Miller-Idriss 2018). I had found that German young people do not always correctly interpret the messages in symbols on T-shirts marketed to and by the far-right – even when those codes are on brands that those same youths know are banned from their schools because of their far-right ideological connections.

As I was writing up the findings about the German case, across the Atlantic a cartoon character with no relationship whatsoever to the far right, Pepe the Frog, suddenly became co-opted by the emerging Alt-Right¹ – in part through a series of memes depicting Pepe with a Hitler-style mustache, in a KKK hood and robe, and wearing a Nazi uniform, among other caricatured links (Roy 2016). Within a year, the connection between Pepe the Frog and the US far right was so strong that Hillary Clinton

1 | The phrase Alt-Right is contested. Created by the modern US far right, it is criticized for the ways that it can soften or mask the extremist ideas of the varied groups that constitute it. Despite these concerns, the term carries a specific connotation to a unique development in the far-right scene in the US since 2015, which is distinct from older factions of the American far right such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Brotherhood. I have opted to deploy the term here but use single quotation marks around my first mention of the phrase to signal its contested nature.

denounced Pepe publicly, and the Anti-Defamation League added the cartoon character to their hate symbols database (Daniels 2018).

These two examples reflect the complicated nature of far-right iconography and messaging in both offline and online spaces. Sometimes symbols are created and distributed with intentional messages that are not received as such – and other times, symbols with no deliberate messaging may be co-opted and marked as ideological in ways that were never intended. These developments challenge both our understanding of how far-right ideas spread and social scientists’ understandings of symbology more generally. What happens to a symbol if its meaning is not understood, even by its own consumers? What happens when new meaning is assigned in ways that were never intended?

How Do SYMBOLS WORK?

Social scientists have long relied on the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure to help understand how symbols and signs work to construct and convey meaning. De Saussure’s work in the field of linguistics separated signs into two parts: the concept (signified) and the sound-image (signifier). Crucially, de Saussure argued that the relationship between concept and image is arbitrary: there is no logical reason why the word ‘sister’, he explains, is linked to the concept of a sister. However, he argued that symbols were different in this regard:

“One characteristic of a symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot” (de Saussure 2017[1966]: 120).

If de Saussure is right, then far-right symbols should be logically connected to, and understood as, far-right concepts or ideas. But in fact, as this essay will show, that is no longer clearly the case. The rapid evolution of symbols in online spaces offers a specific challenge to de Saussure’s argument about symbols, while the ‘missed messages’ in coded clothing iconography raises additional questions about how symbols work and whether their power holds even when those who display them do not understand them.

ICONOGRAPHY AND THE FAR RIGHT

In the following sections, I outline three ways in which symbols and iconography are deployed in far-right clothing and products: brands created by or for far-right consumers, in products deliberately laced with far-right symbols and codes; brands, logos, images and symbols that at their origins have no relationship to the far right, but become co-opted as far-right symbols; and brands and products which deliberately or accidentally deploy far-right symbols and codes, either through attempts to draw media attention, or through ignorance and coincidence. Each of these three cases also illustrates the ways in which online and offline iconographies interact with one another as images, memes, symbols and iconography circulate in both domains.

Madagascar T-shirts: Brands Marketing to the Far Right

The first category of iconography appears in brands created by or for the far right. This is a relatively recent European innovation – the first high-quality, commercial brand marketing products to far-right consumers was Thor Steinar, a German brand which burst onto the scene with a slick mail-order catalog in 2002, but quickly developed physical stores and a sophisticated online presence with a website offering international currency conversion and translation (Miller-Idriss 2018). Other brands rapidly followed in Thor Steinar’s footsteps, marketing T-shirts, hoodies and other clothing products coded with messages and iconography that directly invoked or indirectly evoked the Nazi and colonial era, Norse mythology, the Christian crusades, and other contemporary and historical anti-immigrant and Islamophobic references.

Some of the references in these brands are quite arcane, drawing on historical allusions that are rarely understood by consumers or observers. For example, the brand Erik & Sons sells a T-shirt depicting a passenger ship with the phrase “Sweet Home Madagascar”. Madagascar was discussed as an original Nazi ‘final solution’ – an island to which European Jews could be deported – before concentration camp gas chambers were constructed (Herf 2006: 146–47; Miller-Idriss 2018: 62). But when I showed an image of this T-shirt to 51 students as part of a series of far-right symbols and images during interviews in 2013–14, only three of them understood the historical reference. Four respondents understood a similarly

obscure historical reference in a T-shirt depicting the ‘Expedition Tibet’, which refers to the National Socialists’ *Schutzstaffel* (SS) expeditions to Tibet that were part of the broader *Ahnenerbe* (ancestral heritage) movement to research the Indo-Germanic roots of the Aryan ‘race’ (Reitzenstein 2014). But even then, one of those students’ responses was an educated guess about the Nazi origins of this code, based on other contextual clues in the image, including the old German script and the use of the word ‘expedition’ – rather than a response that indicated understanding of the meaning behind the ‘Expedition Tibet’ reference (Miller-Idriss 2018).

Pepe the Frog: Co-opted Symbols

The second category refers to brands and symbols that are appropriated from non-far-right contexts and infused with far-right messages and meanings. In some cases, it is simply some coincidental symbolic resonance of their logos that leads to assimilation by the far right. Thus the ‘N’ in New Balance sneakers signified ‘neo-Nazi’ for a generation of racist skinheads in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s, while the American military-style bomber jacket produced by Alpha Industries was co-opted in the same period because the Alpha Industries logo is similar in appearance to a civil badge used to denote the Nazi *Sturmabteilung* (SA). German neo-Nazis wear the sporty British brand Lonsdale because when displayed under a half-zipped bomber jacket, the letters NSDA are visible – the first four letters of the Nazi party’s initials, NSDAP (Miller-Idriss 2018). Other symbols, images, or brands are favored because they are perceived as aligning with radical right ideologies in some way. In the US, a well-known far-right website named the pizza company Papa John’s the “official pizza’ of the Alt-Right” due to the CEO’s donations to the Trump campaign as well as statements and positions that many viewed as aligned with Alt-Right ideologies (Maza 2017).

But still other symbols have been appropriated with little explanation at all. The evolution of Pepe the Frog is a perfect example, and also illustrates how seamlessly online and offline iconographies are interacting with one another as a means through which symbols spread and evolve. Originally created by cartoonist Matt Furie for the comic *Boy’s Life*, Pepe’s original character was an affable if crass frog whose antics revolved around life with his three roommates and the pranks that characterized their everyday interactions. Furie originally produced the character in paper form, in

zines that he printed himself at a local copy shop and distributed (Serwer 2016). Eventually, Pepe made his way to online spaces, and sometime in 2015, the nascent Alt-Right decided to “remake Pepe” as a “white nationalist icon” (Daniels 2018: 64). Memes began to circulate on sites like 4chan and Reddit that adapted Pepe the Frog in varied right-wing extremist ways – dressed as a Nazi, spouting racist and antisemitic vitriol, and in images accompanied by far-right figures (Serwer 2016).

Pepe’s popularity with the far right was not only due to the iconographic representation of the frog with Nazi and far-right symbols but also because of the way the frog symbolized a kind of superior nonchalance toward others, helping to normalize hostile attitudes toward minorities and political opponents. Part of the growing use of memes as “emblematic representations of words and images” that act as “short-hand tools for political communication online” (Önnerfors 2018), the Pepe meme communicated both far-right ideological positions and a kind of anti-elite arrogance and condescension. By the time a meme of Pepe as Donald Trump was re-tweeted by the Trump campaign during the 2016 election (Sanders 2017), Pepe the Frog had become a clear symbol of the Alt-Right, not only through online memes but also through the use of the cartoon character in emojis, pins, patches and more. In the autumn of 2016, the Anti-Defamation League added the cartoon character to its online database of hate symbols.² Then things got even stranger, as *Washington City Paper* reporter Baynard Woods concisely explains:

“At the same time as the far-right elements on message boards began to adopt Pepe, they also began using the letters KEK instead of LOL to indicate online laughter. Then, when they noticed that there was an Egyptian god named Kek, which was depicted as a frog-headed man, these guys – and they are decidedly guys – had a mythology and a god. ...To go along with their new half-ironic religion, they created a purely digital (and imaginary) country called Kekistan and after the election they made Trump their God-Emperor. And they started getting flags made” (Woods 2017).

2 | Anti-Defamation League (2016): ADL Adds “Pepe the Frog” Meme, Used by Anti-Semites and Racists, to Online Hate Symbols Database, 27 September 2016 (<https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-adds-pepe-the-frog-meme-used-by-anti-semites-and-racists-to-online-hate>).

In this way, a “prank with a big attention payoff” (Daniels 2018: 64) – the appropriation of a cartoon character designed for a homemade magazine – evolved into a widely circulated series of far-right memes in online spaces, inspired a fantasy mythological far right ‘nation’, and led to the production of physical flags that began to appear at Alt-Right rallies in offline spaces (Neiwert 2017). In 2018, cartoonist Matt Furie, Pepe’s creator, filed a lawsuit against the US right-wing media platform Infowars, charging copyright infringement (Sommerlad 2018), which is ongoing at the time of writing.

Pepe is an extraordinary case, but there are other examples where elements from the offline world are co-opted, infused with new meaning, and circulated online for and by the far right. The appropriation of the tiny Swedish industrial town of Finspång into a fantasy far-right ‘execution meme’ is one such case. Sometime in mid-2017, as Andreas Önnersfors (2018) explains, a far-right website posted a meme of two people dressed in protective clothing and gas masks entering through a doorway leading to a ‘white reservation’ named Finspång, described as a place established to protect the ‘biological exceptionalism’ of white Swedes. Subsequent images and text depicted a polluted, collapsed ‘multi-cultural Sweden’ outside the walls of Finspång, in contrast to the ‘clean’ and ‘free’ white reservation. In this future fantastical world, tribunals in Finspång will lead to executions of ‘traitors of the people’ in street-lamp hangings lining the roadways. The real town of Finspång was thus appropriated into a meme of a fictional place where national traitors would be executed under a future fascist regime. This evolved into a broader Finspång meme used to convey various far-right ideological positions and threats against groups and individuals through the phrase “See you in Finspång” alongside images of hangings, echoing German far-right extremists who use the phrase “See you in Walhalla”, the mythical hall of the dead in Norse mythology. The meme moved out of niche far-right subcultures into more mainstream usage, as Önnersfors describes in greater depth, when it was deployed by the leaders of a right-wing alternative news site that reaches 8% of Swedish news readership (Önnersfors 2018). In this way, a real place rooted in the offline world became a fantastical place in online spaces and was infused with far-right meanings.

Deliberately or Cluelessly Offensive

The third category refers to brands which deploy far-right or related iconography either unintentionally or as part of a strategy to draw attention or be ‘edgy’. The clearest example in this category is the so-called ‘Nazi’ logo adopted by the fashion label Boy London, whose trademark logo depicts the Imperial Eagle deployed in the Nazi eagle symbol, except instead of holding a wreath with a swastika in its talons, the eagle is holding the “O” in the word “BOY”. As journalist Sandy Rashty reported in 2014, a representative from the brand rejected the association to Nazism, arguing that the logo was “inspired by the eagle of the Roman Empire as a sign of decadence and strength. Its aim is to empower people rather than oppress”. Retailers pulled the brand off shelves anyway (Rashty 2014).



BOY London logo on a Sweatshirt. Photo by Ranim Helwani from Drensteinfurt, Germany.

The US store Urban Outfitters has repeatedly produced and then pulled offensive products from its shelves too, including some with far-right references, like a yellow T-shirt with a nearly-identical star to the six-pointed star badge that Jews were forced to wear under the Nazis (Chakelian 2012) and a gray-and-white striped tapestry with a pink triangle which was strikingly similar to the uniforms gay men were forced to wear in Nazi concentration camps (Sieczkowski 2015). Other offensive products included a blood-red-spattered Kent State university sweatshirt (in reference to the

1970 shooting of unarmed college students by the Ohio National Guard) (Ohlheiser 2014). In each case, the brand issued an apology, but the frequency of the incidents has led to speculation that the offense is an intentional public relations strategy (Haruch 2014; Wang 2014).

Online spaces are largely responsible for the ways in which public outrage builds in reaction to such products. Both the fast-food hamburger chain Wendy's and the Spanish clothing chain Zara have issued public apologies after customers shared social media images linking their logos or products to Pepe the Frog. Wendy's was celebrated by the Alt-Right after a company representative tweeted a meme of Pepe-as-Wendy on the company's social media account; the company's official response was to plead ignorance, noting that the employee who had sent the tweet was "unaware of the recent evolution of the Pepe meme's meaning" (Maza 2017). In 2017, Zara pulled a denim skirt with a patch depicting a Pepe-like cartoon from both its "real and virtual shelves" (Serwer 2016) after a customer tweeted an image of the skirt. Like Urban Outfitters, this wasn't Zara's first offense; the company had previously apologized for selling a shirt similar to a concentration camp prisoner's uniform and pulled a purse it had sold with embroidered swastikas on it (Raab 2014; Roy 2017).

DISCUSSION: MISSED MESSAGES OR MIXED MESSAGES?

What does the simultaneous circulation of three separate categories of far-right symbols in online and offline spaces – intentionally-coded, co-opted, and deliberately-or-coincidentally offensive – mean for the way we understand the meaning and messaging of far-right symbols? There are several lessons.

First, the supposedly non-arbitrary nature of symbols that de Saussure pointed to has been clearly disrupted in the case of far-right symbols. While this process may well have started before the digital age, it is clear that online platforms and communities through sites like 4chan and Reddit have accelerated it. In many cases, it is the rapid and 'viral' spread of online memes and messages that has shifted the linear relationship between symbol and meaning to one characterized by more random associations. There is no clear reason why Pepe the Frog or the Swedish town of Finspång should become far-right symbols, for example, and their rapid

evolution as such defies explanation through traditional theories about how symbols work.

Second, these categories illustrate how the global nature of the internet itself has helped disrupt the logical or linear association between symbols and their intended meanings. On the one hand, online communities contribute to the rapid and global spread of far-right symbols, enabling icons and symbols from nationalist resistance movements from one particular geography to be claimed and appropriated by social and political movements in different locations, for example. As I have argued in greater depth elsewhere (Miller-Idriss 2018), the use of global codes and references is ubiquitous in far-right scenes and subcultures, and the very nature of online sharing has helped facilitate that usage. But online communities have also helped create completely new symbols that would be hard to imagine in the absence of online far-right culture. It is hard to imagine neo-Nazis raising a flag representing the fantasy nation of Kekistan – or embedding frogs on those flags – a decade ago. Online communities are primarily responsible for the rapid creation, evolution, appropriation, and circulation of far-right memes in the contemporary era, even when they later appear in offline spaces too.

The online nature of consumer goods laced with far-right messages has also affected the reception of messages. While previous iterations of commercialized goods – such as T-shirts and hoodies with far-right symbols or slogans – were sold on folding tables at concerts or in physical storefronts – most of today's commercial products marketed to far-right youth are sold through commercial websites and distributors. This reduces the likelihood of a conversation between consumer and salesperson, in which the meaning of particular symbols or messages might be discussed. Although some products are accompanied by website text that explains the meaning, this is not the case for all products, particularly those which rely on references to the Nazi era. These historical symbols and messages were not often understood by youths in my interviews (Miller-Idriss 2018).

Finally, it is also important to think about how online spaces might build online and offline community in new and different ways around consumer goods and symbols. Some brands marketing to far-right youths maintain their own Twitter feeds, Facebook and Tumblr pages, and Instagram accounts. Those pages then become a constantly-updating feed of posts from 'friends' and others who share information, update follow-

ers on new products, and issue announcements about political actions, events, rallies, and festivals that take place in offline spaces.

COUNTER-PRACTICES AND ‘STYLES’ OF RESISTANCE

The same viral nature of online spaces that led to Pepe the Frog’s rapid adaptation into a white nationalist icon also provides the means for the rapid development of public outrage and protest. Viral tweets of offensive products and symbols generate anger as consumers and observers share photos and videos on social media, often tagging brand representatives and CEOs in ways that force a more rapid response from companies than might have been the case through traditional media reporting. There have also been some viral efforts to combat the use of coded and co-opted symbols by the far right. For example, in 2016 the Alt-Right began using triple-parentheses ‘echo’ symbols around Jewish names online (aided by the use of an automated Chrome extension, which was removed by Google) – supposedly to signify the ‘echo’ or reverberating effect of Jewish people across generations. Both Jews and non-Jews aiming to show solidarity quickly began to claim the echo symbol directly, placing ((())) around their names on Twitter and other social media sites (Hern 2016), effectively taking the antisemitic purpose of the symbol away.

In Germany, a strong counter-protest culture has begun to deploy creative tactics to protest the far right in ways that co-opt or transform far-right symbols for the left. The de-radicalization group EXIT-Germany produced a ‘trick’ T-shirt in 2011, for example; the T-shirt had iconography which imitated typical far-right symbols and styles, and was distributed for free at a far-right concert. Once washed, however, the T-shirts revealed messaging and a telephone number to encourage people to seek help if they want to leave far-right extremism.³ Elsewhere, an antifascist group called Endstation Rechts created a parody of the brand Thor Steinar with a stork mascot called ‘Stork Heinar’ – a play on the brand name – and sells umbrellas, T-shirts, accessories and more, all adorned with the stork logo (Miller-Idriss 2018: 191).

3 | BBC News (2011): “Trojan T-shirt targets German right-wing rock fans”, 9 August 2011 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14465150>).

More research is needed in order to paint a fuller picture of the ways in which counter-protesters and resisters to the far right deploy similar or different kinds of tactics around iconography and symbols. There are also important distinctions across symbols according to their relative permanent or ephemeral nature that merit further study. Symbols that require bodily modification, like tattoos or shaved heads, likely require deeper kinds of ideological commitments than symbols on T-shirts that can be taken on and taken off. Online memes are more ephemeral still and might even be shared anonymously, enabling the most experimental or playful engagements with far-right ideas in ways that could act as a gateway to later, stronger commitments. More empirical research and analysis is needed to disentangle variations in the utility of symbols in offline and online spaces for insider and outsider recognition, communication of far-right messages, and the degree of commitment they require to far-right ideas. What is clear, however, is that symbols and iconography move between online and offline spaces as they are deployed and co-opted by the far right in ways that deserve our close attention. Whether meanings are missed, co-opted, or cluelessly offensive, far-right symbols have rapidly evolved. The visual nature of online spaces might suggest that their use will only accelerate in the years to come.

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