

# What are we Meme-ing about Anyway? Politics, Education, and the Memetic-Right

Gideon Dishon

*Ben-Gurion University of the Negev*

Gabriel Keehn’s paper raises a timely question: What is the role of education in democracies in which political actors seem to longer accept basic democratic norms?<sup>1</sup> Specifically, he questions whether education for democratic dialogue is of any value in the face of what he terms the “memetic-right.” Keehn argues that this is the case, as the memetic-right is no longer “a political movement or ideology as ordinarily understood, but is rather a form of meta-ironic mystical occultism, where magical and occult rituals and symbols (often in the form of memes) are deployed, iterated on, and repeated in place of the traditional trappings of political discourse.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the uniqueness and urgency of the current political situation—in the United States but perhaps more broadly in the Western world—questions about the role of education in the face of threats to democracy are as old as democracy itself.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while Keehn raises vital issues concerning education for democratic dialogue in the face of a-democratic and a-dialogic actors, I set out to clarify what is unique about the memetic-right, and how it should inform our thinking about education for democratic dialogue. To do so, this response is structured along two questions pertinent to core aspects of Keehn’s argument: What is political, and what is the role of education?

## WHAT IS THE POLITICAL?

Keehn’s overarching argument concerning the memetic-right is that it should not be understood in the same terms as previous political movements:

Their orientation toward politics has become one in which political positions, as traditionally understood, have been superseded by the ritualistic sharing of memes (semi-broadly understood) as a means of engendering psychological connection and adherence, pseudo-religious worship of often

mysterious figures ... and meta-ironic nihilistic detachment.<sup>4</sup>

I return to Keehns' arguments concerning the characteristics of the memetic-right below, but I first want to challenge the extent to which it represents a unique phenomenon.

The underlying assumption that political movements are chiefly based on political positions or deliberative argumentation is one that has been persistently called into question: from the Marxist emphasis on underlying economic interests, through Foucauldian assertions concerning the primacy of power relations, and to psychologically motivated criticisms of the notion of reasoned deliberation, to name just a few notable examples. What is then unique about the memetic-right? Keehn argues that this lies not in the underlying motivation for their positions, but the fact that such actors do not feel the need to ostensibly hold any political positions or "any genuine beliefs in the ways required for dialogue at all." Instead, they are "driven by one non-cognitive imperative: 'own the libs.' This drive expresses no propositional content and is outside the space of reasons."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the memetic-right should not be characterized by beliefs, ideologies or reasons, but rather by a crude power struggle against its (often imagined) liberal opponents.

Even if we accept this assertion, the question remains whether this is an aberration from democratic politics, or one of its defining features. Famously, Schmitt asserted that the distinction between friend and enemy distinction is the defining aspect of the political.<sup>6</sup> Schmitt does not argue against the existence of other distinctions (morality, aesthetics, or economics), but rather that the friend-enemy distinction has the strongest intensity. Schmitt suggests that in most cases the friend-enemy distinction can be implicit or backgrounded. It is only in more extreme instances—a state of exception—in which this distinction is brought to the foreground.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the memetic-right is perhaps understood as not qualitatively different in its overall dispositions towards politics, but rather reflects an intensification and a unique expression of inherent dynamics of the political sphere.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, Keehn's argument is not limited to the memetic-right's views, but

also to how they are expressed and propagated—via ironic memes—and how this should inform our view of education.

### WHAT IS THE POLITICAL ROLE OF EDUCATION?

Keehn argues that the memetic-right can also be distinguished through how they propagate their views on the basis of memes that rely on humor and irony, what he refers to as irony poisoning: “the condition of being in a type of liminal space between sincerity and irony.”<sup>9</sup> Though Keehn’s paper does not delve into the unique communicate features of memes, for the cursory aims of this response, I focus on three aspects of memes as forms of political communication: (1) their brevity, (2) their lack of a specific source, and (3) their spread through ongoing replication and iteration.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, Keehn suggests that these features imply that memes resist the notion of a well-structured argument, promoted by a stable author whose doxa can be elicited. If this is the case, they create a communicative landscape in which one is hard pressed to engage in deliberative democratic dialogue.

How does this inform the aims of education for democracy? Keehn suggests that this is self-evident: as dialogue is no longer a viable option, it should be replaced with an agonistic view in which such players cannot be dealt with, instead they need “to be simply defeated.”<sup>11</sup> As Keehn has argued elsewhere, memes represent a mode of political participation that requires different forms of education, one focused not on deliberation, but on cultivating the capacity to use such forms of communication towards worthwhile ends.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that Keehn’s own position could be viewed as reflective of Schmitt’s view of the political—suggesting that we are in a state of an emergency, and that the memetic-right are beyond the realm of democracy and hence should be ousted.

A critical assumption underpinning this suggestion is that education needs to prepare students for the existing political landscape; if such a landscape is essentially non-deliberative, then there is no point in education for dialogue. However, one could arrive at a diametrically opposed conclusion, namely that education for dialogue is more important today than ever. According to such a view education is not solely, or perhaps even mainly, meant to respond to an

existing (and implicitly static) state of affairs, but is rather charged with changing or improving it. The fact that the current public sphere is not deliberative could motivate us to invest more in nurturing dialogic capacities in the upcoming generation. In fact, it could be the case that our current crisis could be partially attributed to the lack of proper education for dialogue in the first place. Therefore, education for democratic dialogue ought to cultivate the dispositions and habits that would support the motivation for deliberative engagement, in general, and particularly as preparation for critical engagement with the types of political action propagated by the memetic-right.<sup>13</sup> Put bluntly, the question is whether the memetic-right's unwillingness to engage in dialogue imply that we should throw out the dialogic project as a whole? Or even more broadly, whether education for democratic dialogue and preparation for memetic-engagement are mutually exclusive.

### CONCLUSION

Taken together, these arguments highlight the importance of Keehn's engagement with the memetic-right, while positioning the current state of affairs as reflective of the inherent difficulties of democratic participation and education for democratic dialogue. First, within such a view, bad actors aiming to undermine democracy are not an aberration, but an essential feature. Still, in line with Keehn's arguments, we should remain attentive to their modes of action, and the level of danger they pose to democracy. This implies developing Keehn's emphasis on memetic communication, exploring its mechanisms and how they shift political participation. Second, I argue that this should not lead to rejection of education for democratic dialogue per-se. Instead, we ought to rethink its methods, while attending to the delicate balance between appealing to an ideal deliberative public sphere and the (often harsh) realities of each political era.

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