

# The Conquest of YouTube

COUNTER-IDEOLOGICAL STRATEGIES IN A NEW DIGITAL LEFT  
NOAH SAARELA

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GNVM03

VT20

Genusvetenskapliga Institutionen, Lunds Universitet

Handledare: Ov Cristian Norocel

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# Abstract

Over the last few years, the user-generated video-sharing online platform YouTube has been recognized by the academia as well as mainstream media as an arena for predominately right-wing political content, and radicalizing far-right extremism in particular.

This thesis introduces and explores the construction of a new digital left in the left-wing phenomenon LeftTube on YouTube. Through using critical feminist discourse analysis, it examines counter-ideological strategies to alt-right beliefs on gender and sexuality in 21 videos by the four popular content creators within the community. It analyses counter-speech tactics and alternatives to far-right constructions of masculinity as well as the possibilities of left-wing politics in the online community, concluding that LeftTube can be understood as a left-wing critical knowledge project adapted to an online audience to promote leftist feminist perspectives with emancipatory goals.

*Keywords:* LeftTube, Online activism, Right and Left (Politics), Feminism, Gender

*Nyckelord:* LeftTube, Onlineaktivism, Höger och Vänster (Politik), Feminism, Genus

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# 1. Introduction

In December 2018 Mermaids UK, an NGO working for transgender youth in Great Britain, was chosen as the winner of a 500 000 pounds grant by The National Lottery (Plummer 2019). Before year's end, Irish comedian Graham Linehan wrote a post on a British internet forum called *Mumsnet*<sup>1</sup> where he encouraged users to issue a complaint to the lottery (ibid). Many users did, resulting in the National Lottery freezing the reimbursement and started conducting an investigation of Mermaid UK's organization.

In response to Graham Linehan's internet stunt, a British Youtuber named Harris Brewis, the creator of the YouTube channel hbombguy, chose to create a so-called charity stream on the online streaming platform Twitch, where he filmed himself playing the Nintendo game *Donkey Kong 64* (1999) to raise donations for Mermaids UK. During the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2019, hbombguy streamed himself for 57 hours and 48 minutes straight while playing the game, sleeping and eating. Viewers could log on to the stream, watch the progress, donate money and interact with Harris Brewis the other guests on the stream as he was playing. The stream was guested by some other popular YouTube content creators within the YouTube left-wing community such as Natalie Wynn (ContraPoints), Lindsay Ellis (Lindsay Ellis) and Oliver Thorn (Philosophy Tube), sharing their perspectives on trans rights and other political issues. The initial goal of the stream was to raise 500 USD for Mermaids UK while Harris Brewis finished playing the game at 100 percent, but as the popularity of the stream grew outside the community, guests such as whistle blower Chelsea Manning, US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, actress Mara Wilson, journalists Paris Lee and Owen Jones visited the stream to discuss trans rights and show support (XOXO festival 2019). The stream got recognized by the mainstream media, which resulted in Harris Brewis raising 347 084 USD to Mermaids UK (ibid).

When presenting the sequence of events of the charity stream and the reasons behind it at the indie media creators festival XOXO 2019, Harris Brewis stated that even though the stream gathered people around the world in an act of community and solidarity, the incentive to the stream for him had not been a feeling of goodwill, but spite towards the comedian Graham Linehan. Harris Brewis argued:

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<sup>1</sup> A discussion forum website for parents in the UK known for its political engagement

[...] I recognize some people in the audience, and some of you are actually quite nice. You probably do things for people that are nice because you want to help them or you want to do good things. I wanted to annoy a guy on the internet \*AUDIENCE LAUGHING\* (XOXO festival, 2019:00:07)

Harris Brewis actions can be understood within the term commonly used on the internet named trolling, meaning a strategic attempt to provoke an emotional response in a specific target (Condis 2018:22). But whereas trolling usually aims to provoke anger and frustration in the unsuspected reader serving as spectacle for the crowds, the emotional outcome in this case was instead a call to action, solidarity and community built on a shared goal for social change.

In addition to creating charity streams for trans rights, the YouTube content creator Harris Brewis, hereafter called by his YouTube account name hbomberguy, upload videos on his YouTube channel addressing topics such as class, gender, racism, and ecology from a left-wing perspective. Hbomberguy is not alone in creating this sort of content, and together with other content creators these specific forms of YouTube videos have been discussed online under the name *Leftist YouTube*, *LeftTube*, or *BreadTube*, the lastly named after the anarcho-communist classic *The Conquest of Bread* (Kropotkin 2007 [1892]). The videos can be understood within a particular YouTube video format called video essays, which aims to engage and entertain the audience while making an argument on a topic from a specific viewpoint. Some videos delve into a specific cultural phenomenon or debate, others come from an angle of popular culture through media criticism, focusing on film, literature or video games. Each content creator has a different style, but a majority of the videos contain some sort of pre-written script that is recorded either both audibly and visually, or narrated voiceovers over clips regarding the video topic to emphasize their argument.

A crucial understanding for this thesis is that there is no coherent definition of what LeftTube actually *is*. Though some attempts of using YouTube's inbuilt system by creators to hashtag content has been done, what counts and does not count as LeftTube content is not necessarily dependent on the content creator's own view of their work, but instead constructed socially within a canon of a left-wing feminist viewer collective through how it is perceived. Viewers engage in discussions about the videos various topics in the comment section below the videos or on other social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Discord, Tumblr<sup>2</sup> and Reddit, discussing the content and categorizing the political views expressed in the videos as either

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<sup>2</sup> Overall activity on the platform has had a distinct decrease since the permanent ban of adult content the 17<sup>th</sup> December 2018

aligned with LeftTube or not. Viewers has also been arguing whether there is a distinction in definition between the different names of the genre and the importance of that distinction. Some use *BreadTube* and *LeftTube* interchangeably, while others have argued that *BreadTube* should be understood as a more progressive, radical, anarchic form of left-wing content, and others has argued that *LeftTube* is more leaning towards social democratic, sometimes liberal politics<sup>3</sup>. These discussions and argument changes over time and platform, leading me for the sake of clarity in this thesis to use LeftTube as an umbrella term for all the videos understood by the viewer collective as left-wing YouTube content.

What LeftTube *does*, is perhaps more graspable. Content creators within LeftTube both engage in discussions within the group in a proactive left-wing critical political project, as well as a more reactive engagement through participation in debates and reactions with right-wing content creators. A common theme of the LeftTube videos falls within the common YouTube genre of “debunking” videos, a genre where the content creator critically scrutinizes a specific phenomenon, belief or discourse with the aim to persuade the viewer of its falseness through different arguments and presentation of information. Content creators from both the right-wing and the left-wing of the political discussion on YouTube engage in discussions through these debunking videos, each arguing against and/or ridiculing the other, which can result in long strings of references, creating a web of intertextuality and memes as the viewers engage with the material in comment sections of the video or on other forums.

In social movements and activism today, it is hard to make a clear separation between the offline and the online. While some social movements has used internet as a tool to mobilize and share information, such during the Arabic Spring, some are born on the internet and moved to a public space such as the Occupy Wall Street movement while other remain mostly online, such as denial-of-service attacks (DoS attacks) or other forms of hacktivism. Users have the ability to gather in online spaces and connect with others with similar interests, ideas and beliefs, creating norms and ways of speaking for the specific space. Popular examples of this has been the “safe space” of Tumblr.com, or the “free speech” of 4chan.org, while YouTube as a social platform has been especially dominated with alt-right political content, as argued in mainstream American reading:

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<sup>3</sup> Discussion can be found in r/Breadtube thread:  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/BreadTube/comments/asfyse/okay\\_why\\_is\\_this\\_called\\_breadtube/](https://www.reddit.com/r/BreadTube/comments/asfyse/okay_why_is_this_called_breadtube/)



When we talk about politics on YouTube, we are usually talking about the alt-right. YouTube is one of the most powerful tools in the right wing's war for the hearts and minds of Americans, particularly white men under the age of 30. From Christchurch to Poway, case after case shows that YouTube is one of several platforms capable of radicalizing viewers, plunging those susceptible to conspiracy theories and racial hatred into a rabbit hole of extremist content. (Amin 2019, para. 6)

Assisting the possibilities of radicalization has been traced by the author to the structure of the site itself, through YouTube's algorithm of recommended videos, which is tailored for each specific viewer. Through tracking the history of previously watched and liked videos to suggest more videos relevant to that specific watch history, it has created the saying of "falling down the YouTube Rabbit hole" of recommended videos with specific topics, be it lifestyle videos, cute cats or far-right extremism.

Julia Ebner (2019) discusses the online far-right's successes in recruiting so called "digital natives", meaning individuals born around 1981 to 1996 (millennials), or individuals born around 1997 to 2012 (Generation Z)<sup>4</sup> growing up in the digital age of social media and its great impact on the development of new social identities, forms of communication and ever evolving terminologies, and argues;

Their use of computer game references, anti-establishment rhetoric and exciting counter-culture activities has allowed them to appeal to large proportions of Generation Z and the millennials. By hiding racial slurs behind funny memes and jokes, and by replacing traditional swastika-ridden attire with cool jeans and Ray Ban sunglasses, the far right has increasingly polished its image among younger generations (Ebner 2019:175)

Ebner underlines that in the political influence young people are faced with today, there is not a clear cut between politics and non-politics. The belief of what happens on internet stays on the internet is far from the truth in today's global digital landscape, which became especially evident in the virality of Donald Trump during the last US president election (Dignam & Rohlinger 2019). Without further research on these online communities from critical feminist perspectives, the authors argue that feminists will continue to be unaware of their potential political strength "until it is too late" (Dignam & Rohlinger 2019:590).

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<sup>4</sup> The exact age span for Generation Z is debated. Some has argued that Gen Z starts 1993, while other argue 1997.

## 1.1 Purpose & Research Questions

This thesis focuses on left-wing critique within an increasingly adversarial political climate. Taking inspiration from scholarship analysing right-wing populism, anti-gender movements and ethno-centrism within Europe and the US, as well as critical feminist research analysing power, mobilization and possibilities of resistance, the overall aim of the study is to contribute to the academic discussions of contemporary political participation online. Through the introduction of the left-wing phenomena “LeftTube”, conceptualized as a form of counter-cultural activism, to an academic discussion I aim to expand contemporary research of left-wing political movements from a feminist research approach within the academic discipline of gender studies. The purpose of the thesis is therefore to examine proactive strategies deployed by content creators in constructing LeftTube as a left-wing feminist political project promoting social change as well as reactive engagement and resistance to alt-right ideological claims. My research questions are as follows:

*What strategies are used by content creators in the construction of a digital left-wing project?*

*How are counter-ideological claims to alt-right beliefs on gender and sexuality constructed in LeftTube content?*

## 2. Research Field

The previous research field examined in this thesis may be broadly described as digital culture, as the term seeks to acknowledge “a departure from earlier forms of media largely dominated by print, radio, and television and a movement toward personalization, user-generated content, algorithmic news feeds, and a fear of missing out” (Wiggins 2019:22). The following chapter gives an overview of YouTube as a site, LeftTube as a phenomenon as well as an overview of previous research on political movements on the internet and the alt-right in particular. Starting in YouTube and participatory culture as a place of departure, it emphasizes that the internet has taken an increasingly bigger part of our everyday lives which has influenced our way of participating in society as well as how we are influenced politically.

### 2.1 YouTube and Participatory Culture

Patricia G. Lange (2014) explains that YouTube was created 2005 by former PayPal employees Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim (Lange 2014:8), and was later purchased by Google for 1.7 billion USD (ibid). Today YouTube is accessible in 100 countries and in 80 different languages, and is visited by over 2 Billion monthly users, making it the 2<sup>nd</sup> most visited website in the world, just behind Google.com<sup>5</sup>, and more than 500 hours of content is being uploaded to YouTube every minute (Hale 2019).

Available content includes various forms of media videos such as TV show clips, music videos, short films, audio recordings and movie trailers, as well as user created content such as live streams, video blogging, short original videos, and educational videos. The Swedish Media Council 2019 survey shows that YouTube was the most popular application for Swedish children in the age of 6 to 12, showing that YouTube especially for younger children has become an alternative to television and other form of entertainment (Swedish Media Council 2019:20). Patricia Lange underlines the importance of researching new forms of digital communication since they “invite us to reconsider the skills, knowledge sets, and tools that future generations need to master to be able to participate fully as networked citizens and self-actualized individuals.” (2014:9), and YouTube as a site especially since “Social media skills are becoming widely perceived as crucial for participating in everyday civic processes, discussing issues, and influencing voter outcomes” (2014:10)

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/youtube.com>

Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009) state that YouTube “has a place within the long history and uncertain future of media change, the politics of cultural participation, and the growth of knowledge” (2009:14), which has become evident today. Burgess and Green argues YouTube’s most fundamental characteristic is the co-creative environment understood within the concept of participatory culture, where participants are all at various times and to varying degrees audiences, producers, editors, distributors, and critics depending what feels meaningful for one’s self in a globalizing site of virtual border crossings (2009:82-83). But participation is never power neutral, which the authors emphasise by asking “who gets to speak, and who gets the attention; what compensations or rewards there are for creativity and work” (2009:11) varies, which rings true perhaps even more today in a time where being an influencer has become an well-established, and often quite powerful career. The authors underline that not all voices are evenly heard geographically;

‘Voice’ is still unevenly distributed; particularly noticeably in YouTube – a website that is US-dominated demographically to an extent; but whose common culture – at least as represented by our sample – feels culturally US-dominated out of all proportion. (Burgess & Green 2009:82)

Even though representation has grown with YouTube’s popularity until today, the US-centric content production remains. The majority of content on LeftTube is centred around US, and in some cases UK, creating a hegemonic idea of ‘politics’ being synonymous with western politics. To participate in LeftTube becomes therefore a reproduction of western-centred debates and ideas. This uneven distribution in voices and participation as well as its economic aspects of having a small or larger voice is highlighted by Bradly Wiggins who argues;

A participatory culture where some are remunerated for their activities and others merely participate is at best an uneven and wildly optimistic view of online participatory communities of scale. (Wiggins 2019:22)

Burgess and Green argue that even though the platform holds the form of a participatory culture, there is no getting away from the fact that YouTube is a commercial enterprise, and call the platform a “highly visible example of the broader trend toward uneasy convergences of market and non-market modes of cultural production in the digital environment” which has incorporated subcultural, community-based modes of cultural production into commercial logics of major media corporations (2009:76). The authors are however quick to underline that even though YouTube as a commercial enterprise probably never intended to, it can “be a *site* of similar opportunities as those offered by community media, not in spite of but *because* of its mainstream commerciality” (2009:76, authors emphasis).

The vast popularity and mainstreaming of the platform centres YouTube in a web of digital popular culture, where the site becomes an arena of cultural and political discourse and power. Stuart Hall's (1998) works within culture studies has pointed out "why popular culture matters", which has influenced my own view of the political potential of YouTube (Hall 1998:453).

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply 'expressed'. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. (Hall 1998:453)

LeftTube as a phenomena is for me a telling example of the constitution of socialist culture within popular culture, since it uses the themes, artefacts and topics of mainstream media and popular culture as a hotbed for left-wing critique and knowledge production on a popular digital format on one of the most popular spaces of the internet today.

## 2.2 LeftTube

Although LeftTube can be understood as a fairly new and under researched site of study within the field of online activism, Dmitry Kuznetsov and Milan Ismangil has tentatively begun to explore the phenomena while using the term *BreadTube*<sup>6</sup> and describes it as "a form of digital praxis promoting new types of digital engagement with leftist and socialist thought" (2020:205). The authors and I share the view of the difficulties in defining what content and content creator that can be defined as a part of leftist YouTube and which cannot, further suggesting that it is "through consensus that work gets incorporated into the canon" and that "a shared ideology binds them together" (Kuznetsov & Ismangil 2020:209, 2020:204). The authors examine the potential to frame BreadTube as a socialist movement and its possibilities to spark political engagement and mobilization, further conceptualizing BreadTube as a "catalyst, an agent preparing and hastening up conditions for change" (2020:205), arguing that "BreadTube subverts techno-capitalism and hijacks YouTube's algorithms in order to spread leftist thought." (2020:216). Though it is not yet a fully peer-reviewed paper, its argument that socialist revival in grassroots movements are growing within internet spaces and that BreadTube might either play a part in a global left-wing movement or subdue to neoliberalism strengthens its position as pioneering work on a phenomena that would benefit to be explored further within academia

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<sup>6</sup> See discussion about the different terms on p.5 in the Introduction

against the backdrop of the contemporary right wing online political movements within Europe and the US.

The phenomenon has also been explored over the last three years outside of an academic context in news articles online. Journalist Shaan Amin has examined the phenomenon against the contemporary political backdrop of right-wing populism, arguing that LeftTube came as a reaction to “the national emergencies of Brexit and the Trump presidency, an immune-system response to the depredations of racism, misogyny, and poverty” (Amin 2019, para. 23). Amin further traces the phenomenon back to the YouTube content creator and media critic Anita Sarkessian and the 2014 GamerGate<sup>7</sup> harassment campaigns against her, other women and feminists. The GamerGate backlash against women within the gaming culture, the attacks and hate towards individual feminist scholars and the misogynist discourse can be understood as a political environment to which feminist left-wing ideological claims within LeftTube are articulated.

Shaan Amin introduces LeftTube as a fairly small genre, having around one hundred major content creators, and with videos that tend to be “researched, fact-checked, scripted, and edited, and are subjected to high production values”, while the journalist John Bogna describes left-wing content creators as “funny, smart, and ruthlessly irreverent”, and fluent in alt-right jargon:

Creators drop terminology like “cuck<sup>8</sup>” and “Chad<sup>9</sup>” into their dialogue — mocking the way anti-feminist groups like the men’s rights movement use them — and meme-ifying their counterparts on the right. (Bogna 2019, para. 7)

Amin argues that “most LeftTubers seemed to consider LeftTube to be a consumer demographic, defined by users rather than creators”, putting an emphasis on the community revolving around the content and a participatory culture (Amin, 2019, para. 24). Viewers connect with each other in the comment section of the videos as well as other forums outside of YouTube, such as the subreddit forum /r/breadtube<sup>10</sup> on the discussion platform Reddit. With the slogan “youtube, but good” the forum has 112 000 followers, and apart from discussing

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<sup>7</sup> GamerGate has been researched by Andrea Braithwaite (2016), and the events can be further overviewed in Torill Elvira Mortensen (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Slang derived from Cuckold. Used within this context as a derogatory term to men by other men.

<sup>9</sup> Slang used within incel communities for an “Alpha Male”, meaning a stereotypical heterosexual hypersexual hypermasculine man.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/r/BreadTube/>

videos posted by above mentioned content creators also covers different current political topics<sup>11</sup> from a left-wing perspective.

When outlining its origin, Amin argues that LeftTube as it is known today started with two of the content creators analysed further in this thesis, the media critic Lindsay Ellis and the responses on her channel to the GamerGate harassments and misogyny, and philosopher Natalie Wynn (ContraPoints) and her responses to the uncontested supremacy of the alt-right online (Amin, 2019, para. 10), framing LeftTube within feminist and anti-fascist critique.

When discussing the success in political content on YouTube, a large focus is put on the YouTube algorithm. Journalist Kevin Roose explains YouTube's recommendation algorithm as "the software that determines which videos appear on users' home pages and inside the 'Up Next' sidebar next to a video that is playing", stating that this algorithm is responsible for more than 70 percent of all time viewers spend on YouTube (Roose 2019, para. 9). The recommendations guide the viewer towards content similar to the video they are watching, creating webs of custom feeds, which affect how many content creators edit and present their videos. Shaan Amin calls the platform's algorithm toxic to the format of LeftTube content, since instead of making several short videos with click-bait titles to evoke quick affective emotional responses in the viewer, LeftTube videos tend to be longer and slower paced, focused around well researched topics and themes.

Rather than devoting all of their energies to finagling the algorithm, many creators rely on each other. LeftTubers constantly cite, recommend, retweet, and otherwise promote others in the community. Many people discover new creators because of the cameos they make on a different creator's channel. (Amin 2019, para. 21)

This format suggests alternative ways of arranging economical, creative as well as personal relationships between LeftTube content creators than regular content creators on YouTube, aligning with a collective content production and a participatory culture.

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<sup>11</sup> During time of writing, the majority discussions are focused on left-wing political strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic

## 3. Theoretical Framework

This theoretical chapter begins with an outline on how terms such as gender, power, ideology, and discourse are used within this feminist thesis. It then moves onward to the second part where theories on melancholia and loss as a transformative force and socialist strategies for change are outlined as frameworks to examine how left-wing ideology in LeftTube is used to make political claims, and how gender and sexuality is constructed within counter-ideological narratives.

### 3.1 Gender Online

*There are no girls on the internet*<sup>12</sup>, has been a common saying in online spaces since the dawn of internet, albeit never once true. Heterogeneity online has been a fact since its very beginning, and can be understood as the root to the various utopian imaginaries arguing that the virtual wonderful world of the web had the potential to connect people of all ages, genders and nationalities. This approach, and the fall of utopian imaginaries of internet as transcending gender, class, Race/ethnicity and sexuality has been researched by various authors within the fields of anthropology, sociology, digital culture studies and netnography (Haverinen 2015) where many has come to the conclusion that bodies matter, whether it is the body of the webpage creator, user in the material world, or the miner extracting metals to build the circuit boards assembled in specific factories in specific places around the world. Feminist scholars have been arguing that gender is a part of how we view the world and how we are viewed in it, underlining that there are no neutral objective positions, only neutralized power relations. The critical view on power and the position of gender in the production of ideology is one of the reasons feminist research and gender studies has been at the trenches with right-wing populism, which became evident in Europe in the ban of gender studies in Hungarian universities 2018, where “gender” has been stigmatized as an “ideology”, posing a threat to the neutralization of right-wing populism ideology as “common sense” (Barát 2020:24).

The construction of feminist research on gender as an “ideology” becomes even more complex since gender, and especially masculinity, has been a focus point for right wing populism in the global digital arena as well as the research conducted on the field. In the political engagement online explored in this thesis especially, gender meaning-making has been the place of

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<sup>12</sup> *There are no girls on the internet* has been documented as #30 of “Rules of the Internet”, submitted to Encyclopedia Dramatica sometime in late 2006



discursive battles. A feminist approach to the phenomena is central not only because knowledge about gender and power can become fruitful in the quest of understanding these movements, it is also due to the fact that many far-right movements specifically target feminist knowledge production, and feminist scholars personally as a strategy to maintain their control.

Placing myself and this thesis within feminist scholarship and the discipline of gender studies, I view gender as socially constructed, where gender divisions and relations are produced and reproduced through social practice (Connell 2015:32). Bodies can be understood as on one hand as objects of social practices, but at the same time agents in them, living and breathing in a material reality (2015:76). Judith Butler reflects on the idea that gender as socially constructed sometimes can imply a certain sense of determinism, where gendered bodies become passive recipients in an inescapable cultural law as unavoidable as biological arguments (Butler 2007:57-58). Butler's concept of gender performativity has been a major contribution to feminist research in various disciplines, but has often been misread as that the individual is free to perform any type of gender and that society will read that individual based on their gender performance. To clarify this Butler explains her underlying understanding of gender performativity:

I argued that gender was performative, and by that I meant that there is no gender that is "expressed" by actions, gestures, or speech, but that the performance of gender was precisely that which produced retroactively the illusion that there was an inner gender core. (Butler 1995:175)

According to Butler, the inner core, be it called nature, essence or biology, is constructed through a repetition of gender performance, rather than existing as gender's ground zero.

A major contribution in the production of gender according to Butler is the dichotomous binary of gender in a complementary system of heterosexuality. Based on the naturalization of a heterosexual direction in sexual desire through heteronormativity, gender becomes produced and reproduced in this socially compelled ritualized repetition of conventions making heterosexuality a compulsory force. (Butler 1995:175). Central to these arguments is that there are power relations within these structures, where within the constructed dichotomy of men and women the latter has an often subjugated position, and heterosexuality has not only a privileged position within the sexual hierarchy, it becomes the default sexuality until proven otherwise. Heteronormativity therefore is integrated in all parts of society whether it is norms about family, labour, economy or politics, or how we understand ourselves and others.

When looking at the negotiation of gender and sexuality within a specific place like the internet, it is important to have in mind that even though norms can be diverse and work in a specific way within the context, the space is located within a larger system of power and subordination. Alva Träbert uses the German term *männliche Opferideologie* (ideology of masculine victimhood) to describe the mobilization of antifeminist social actors online loosely called “the manosphere<sup>13</sup>” on the internet and in research, stretching over different digital spaces (Träbert 2017:273). Patrik Hermansson et al. explains the manosphere as “a loose collection of websites, forums, blogs, and vlogs concerned with men’s issues and masculinity” (Hermansson et al. 2020:163). The ideology of masculine victimhood builds on decontextualizing and drastically exaggerating structural disadvantages by some groups of men while denying issues facing other demographic groups, and women especially (c). Within this skewed conceptualization, feminism and non-traditional, non-essentialist gender understandings becomes antagonized, since it prevents masculine victimhood from being interpreted as individual weakness (ibid).

In contrast to the “masculinity in crisis” discourse, the ideology of masculine victimhood assumes not merely a crisis of masculine identity that is manifest in certain constellations of dependency but rather a structural oppression of men in all areas of life. (Träbert 2017:276)

The exaggeration functions within the far-right concept of “strategic polarization”, a radicalization strategy which focuses on deliberately sowing discord, dividing communities and spreading binary world views promoting individuals to choose one side (Ebner 2018:172).

Furthermore, Michaela Köttig argues that different gendered aspects have been overlooked when researching right wing populism (Köttig in Baer, Kossack & Posselius 2017:355). Köttig problematizes the presupposed victimhood of women within extreme right groups, arguing that this often fails to acknowledge the parts of the extreme right movement that attract women specifically, as well as the active decision to join the movement, since this also overshadows the sense of improvement the movement can provide for their personal situation and the opportunity to give importance to their lives (ibid). The sense of self-interests is also argued by Silke Baer, Oliver Kossack, and Anika Posselius who states that ideologies of ethnic or nation based predominance can for the individual either function in a compensatory way, “experienced affronts can be compensated” or in an affirmative way through “confirming and preserving one’s

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<sup>13</sup> The manosphere include various movements which goes under different names and have different focuses, and comprehensive overview of this field is beyond the scope of this thesis but can be further examined by reading the work *Not All Dead White Men* by Donna Zuckerberg (2018).

own privileges” (Baer, Kossack & Posselius 2017:354). How the self-interest within these ideologies functions and why, has gendered aspects since the personal, social, and political problems are connected to the personal experiences within the societal structure (ibid). This means that counter-culture and counter-ideological claims also has gendered aspects, and require in some sense, gendered solutions.

Julia Ebner examines the possibilities of “counter-speech” to right wing populism and argues “A counter-culture to extremist counter-cultures can only be led by civil society itself” (2018:180). In relation to the “civil society” of online spaces and the alt-right of YouTube, the possibility of political resistance and counter-culture must come from within the platform itself as well as its format. Ebner underlines three important parts in successful counter-speech, arguing that it needs to be dynamic, innovative and bold (2018:180). Ebner argues however that counter-speech strategy only becomes effective if the counter-argument is tuned to the opponent’s sensibilities and ways of thinking.

Without a more thorough understanding of their grievances, language, insider jokes and reference points that are galvanizing, far-right communities, counterspeech efforts are likely to miss their objective (Ebner 2018:180)

Ebner explains that response systems to the radicalization of individuals in to the far-right has either been too slow, been proven ineffective or even counter-productive do to the often insufficient understandings of the far-right’s support base, its key target audiences and the characteristics of their various sub-cultures (2018:176).

### 3.2 Ideology and Discourse

Teun van Dijk states that ideologies have been defined as political or social systems of ideas and values by groups of people with the function of organizing and legitimizing the actions of that group (2000:3). Ideology bases the knowledge and attitudes, and create the self-image, its aims, norms and activities as the well as the resources used within the group (van Dijk 2001:115) Within the Marxist thought tradition, van Dijk clarifies that the term ideology has been attributed to the domination by the ruling class over the working class and used to legitimate inequality, and proposes instead that ideology can be understood as everywhere and not inherently negative (2000:140). In this sense, ideologies can serve to empower, organize struggle and create solidarity for dominated groups within a dominating ideology (2000:138). This use of ideology becomes fruitful to avoid biased pitfalls of ‘they have ideology, we have the Truth’ (van Dijk 2000:2), but instead becomes an analytical tool to map out social beliefs

of good or bad, right or wrong and true and false within a group with a shared set of general knowledge, such as LeftTube and the community around it.

For van Dijk, the social aspect is key since “There are no 'private' ideologies, only private opinions” (2000:141), and distinguishes a social group by its shared objective, problem or mutual fate either through an act of organizing or through a social conflict (ibid). The social group produce and reproduce social representations on social, political or economic problems, as well as a personal and social identity in relation to its group members and people outside the group (ibid). van Dijk’s social approach to ideologies is central to my view on the proactive construction of LeftTube as a political project for social transformation as well as the reactive counter-ideological project towards the alt-right, since it highlights how ideology is on a micro level collectively and purposely acquired, used and changed by content creators as well as the viewers in a discursive, communicative event (2000:191).

The understanding of discourse used within this thesis is that of critical discourse analysis, described by Teun van Dijk as a “social action and interaction, situated in social contexts of which the participants are not merely speakers/writers and hearers/readers, but also social actors who are members of groups and cultures” (2000:6). van Dijk uses the metaphor of the tip of an iceberg to exemplify how in discourse, only specific forms of contextually relevant knowledge are expressed while building on a vast portion of presupposed knowledge shared within a sociocultural common ground, meaning the part of the iceberg which is under water (2001:18).

The focus on discourse within this study is centred around the productive and reproductive process of ideologies which signals to members of a social group such as LeftTube “This is apparently how we do it” (van Dijk 2000:191). LeftTube discourse can be categorized within a political discourse genre, and a specific type of political discourse within online left-wing political projects (van Dijk 2000:196). It is within this discourse members express and formulate abstract ideological beliefs which lay as the base for implicit and presupposed information of what storytelling and other forms of meaning-making that convey abstract opinions and ideological claims actually “means” (2000:192).

Ideology can be expressed and produced through text and talk as well as social and semiotic practices of nonverbal interactions such as photos, images, signs and gestures (van Dijk 2000:192). Images and signs are especially evident in the meme-culture of LeftTube, where the constant adding, remixing, parodies and satire creates a complex web of intertextuality in online communication (Wiggins 2019:33). These complex sets of meaning depend on their intertextual

relationships with other texts, since “An internet meme cannot exist without referring to something other than the subject matter it contains” (Wiggins 2019:34). For meaning and ideology in memes to be understood, there is a need for semiotic constructions of meaning between individuals or groups of individuals and the given meme (Wiggins 2019:25). This means that ideological projects online require specific knowledge of the semiotic interactions, language use, and meaning-making which is specific to the domain where it takes place and the specific social group.

### 3.3 Feminist Critique

Feminist scholars has formed various kinds of critiques on classical Marxism which is incorporated in the foundation of the theoretical approach to left-wing ideology in this thesis, such as Heidi Hartmann’s (1979) critique that even though feminism and Marxism has been crucial for analysing capitalist societies, a combination of them both can have a tendency of absorbing feminist perspectives into a “sex-blind” class struggle (Hartmann 1979:1).

The left has always been ambivalent about the women’s movement, often viewing it as dangerous to the cause of socialist revolution. When left women espouse feminism, it may be personally threatening to left men. (Hartmann 1979:23)

Hartmann argues that many Marxists has been content with traditional analysis of “the women question” within Marxism, meaning women’s relation to the economic system rather than a feminist question of gender inequality between men and women, where the “Sex conflict must not be allowed to interfere with class solidarity” (Hartmann 1979:23). Hartmann argues that even though socialism is in the interests of both men and women, gendered aspects can affect both the perceived goal as well as the conception of the struggle itself (1979:5).

The “one oppression or the other” approach to inequality was further developed through the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s critique of feminist as well as anti-racist discourse (1991). Through focusing on the intersectional identities of women of colour in discourse on violence against women, Crenshaw underscored the multidimensional aspects of marginalized positions through the coining of the term intersectionality, which is crucial in many forms of feminist research today (Crenshaw 1991:1242-1243). Intersectionality has then been used within feminist research as an analytical tool to examine not only sexism and racism, but multiple forms of marginalization in a broader sense related to class, sexuality, ableism and age to name a few. Intersectionality as a theory and method not only functions as a visualization of oppression, but also has a strong emancipatory goal, focusing on the epistemic advantage of marginalized vantage points to form systemic critiques (Nash 2008:90).

The understanding of intersectionality in this study is grounded in an understanding that intersectionality enables the possibility to examine difference and power relations within categories visible in a specific context, space and time, namely to analyse different ways how gender and sexuality is constructed and interacts with left-wing ideological claims in LeftTube. In this sense, I view is consistent with Cho, Crenshaw & McCall's (2013) analytical approach to the term, where intersectionality is understood as an analytic sensibility guiding how the researcher think about and conduct analysis which the authors argues "emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is" (2013:795). This approach also moves away from the common critique of intersectionality's "supposed reification of categories" (2013:797), and instead focusing on revealing how power works in producing and reproducing difference and hierarchy in overlapping identity categories, through analysing "the way things work rather than who people are" (ibid).

### 3.4 The New Left and Strategies for Social Change

To analyse LeftTube as a contemporary left-wing project I build my understanding of "The left", although described by Willie Thompson as a very slippery term not easily pinned down due to its various branches bound to its politically historic context such as the instances of communism, social democracy and anarchy (Thompson 1997:1, 1997:9), as an economic, political and ideological progressive project focusing on social equality, justice and solidarity, and the struggle against inequity, inequality, racism and discrimination through social transformation and economic redistribution towards unprivileged social groups (1997:9). Thompson has mapped out what he describes as "the new left" in the twentieth century, as social forces where oppression has been located not merely in social relations such as class conflict between a social group of workers and elites, but within modernity itself in a market-orientated capitalist society (1997:187). When presenting social forces prominent in the left today, Thompson focuses on a western Marxist pessimist cast of thought grounded in the works of Hegel, Freud and Marx (1997:186), the cultural and sexual revolution in the 1960s in the US and Europe (1997:190), gay and lesbian liberation and the advancement of feminism through the transformative force of the notion "the personal is political" (1997:204), identity politics, community building and civil rights movements (1997:198), environmentalism (1997:120), postmodernist denunciation of universalist claims to knowledge (1997:217) and the "ghost of anarchy" as a form of critical awareness of institutional hierarchy and control (1997:186). Building on these broad social forces of a new left presented by Thompson, Left-wing ideologies in this study can also be contextualized as a counter-ideological claim to the right,

meaning claims that social stratification and gendered hierarchies are natural and desirable, and that there is an elite group/gender/class/"Race"/ethnicity that can and should rule the rest.

While looking towards the political projects of the new left in the future, Thompson argues that upcoming social forces has three challenges ahead of them (1997:231), firstly to move beyond one-dimensional power analyses and political movements and actively create an understanding of intersecting complex systems of oppression, as emphasized by Thompson through the then emerging and now established tendency of individuals with working class background moving towards populist and extreme right-wing politics in the US and around Europe, underlining that especially the uncertainty facing the young struggling with unemployment and the influence of "electronic media" (1997:228-229). Secondly the work towards establishing believable perspectives of historic hope and evolve them to convincing alternatives to the present, and lastly working towards an intellectual rather than organisational hegemony within the existing left to build the future resistance (1997:231).

Crucial for my analysis of LeftTube as a political project is also Laclau and Mouffes well-known work of post-Marxist political theory presented in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2001 [1985]). Starting with socialism in a theoretical crisis, the authors maps out the dissonance between the various social movements and social complexities of today, and the politics focused on a single, united working class and a "capital 'r' Revolution" resulting in perfect unity (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:2). Building on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, which emphasizes that production and reproduction of structural power relations within the status quo between the elites and the rest is not maintained only through cohesion, physical and economic force, but through a dominant ideology, which the authors underlines is "considered as a discursive surface and fundamental nodal point of Marxist political theorization" (2001:3). The authors expand the concept further to develop a framework to understand and analyse mobilization of social movements today, and their possibilities to generate social change.

Core contributions of the book to my theoretical framework are firstly that social change is not deterministic, since "The political meaning of a local community movement, of an ecological struggle, of a sexual minority movement, is not given from the beginning" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:87). Instead, the authors suggest that the political meaning of the social movement "crucially depends upon its hegemonic articulation with other struggles and demands." (ibid). In order to analyse social movements, we therefore need to explain and how they are successful

in generating social change, how and why they are not. Thus, social change is not inevitable, nor does necessarily go in the direction the social movement had in vision. Secondly, the authors emphasize that there is not an ontologically privileged subject, such as the worker class imagined within Marxism, which will bring forth social change. Questioning the objectiveness in the construction of a universal working class and critiquing the epistemological privilege of such a group (2001:83), the authors argue that “The era of 'privileged subjects' - in the ontological, not practical sense - of the anti-capitalist struggle has been definitively superseded” (2001:87). This further implies that antagonism purely based on class will not be sufficient to mobilize enough citizens to generate social change in a world with increasing social complexity. Instead, the authors point away from class reductionism and towards interest as a unifying force of social movements, emphasizing that social change can be possible when a plurality of actors, across different social categories, share an interest to mobilize change (2001:83). And lastly, oppression is not fixed, and norms change over time and space. A large part of the work of new social movements is therefore to frame a narrative in which relationships of subjugation becomes perceived as legitimate to question this power relationship and push for change, like civil right movements and feminist movements. Thus, in order to accomplish social change, a hegemonic discourse that allows actors to articulate and frame narrative of struggle as an unjust power inequality, as subordination, and a form of oppression is required within the social imaginary (2001:155-156).

### 3.5 The Transformative Force of Melancholia, Failure and Loss

Theoretical concept used in my analysis are loss, melancholia and failure as containing a transformative force. Enzo Traverso distinguishes in his book *Left-Wing Melancholia* (2016) the twentieth-first century as a time shaped by a general eclipse of utopias and use the concept of left-wing melancholia embedded within left-wing movements to explain understandings of historical failure of various political movements and revolutions (2016:26).

we cannot escape our defeat, or describe or analyze it from outside. Left-wing melancholy is what remains after the shipwreck; its spirit shapes the writings of many of its “survivors,” drafted from their lifeboats after the storm. (Traverso 2016:45)

Through exploring different concepts of melancholia, Traverso describes left-wing melancholia as melancholy derived from the loss or the absence of a beloved object, a person or even an abstract category such as an ideal, the country or liberty, leaving utopian ideas such as communism as a form of impossible collective loss (2016:67). Traverso features first waves of feminism within this framework, underlining that the utopian imaginaries of “revolution as



global liberation that transcended class exploitation toward a complete reconfiguration of gender relationships and forms of human life” (2016:25) also became lost and defeated, or in some ways redefined within liberal democratic free-market societies as juridical equality and individual self-determination (2016:26). This shift reformulated the systemic critique of gender and race oppression and its revolutionary potential within the utopian imaginary to gender as argued by Wendy Brown “something that can be bent, proliferated, troubled, re-signified, morphed, theatricalized, parodied, deployed, resisted, imitated, regulated, but not emancipated” (Brown in Traverso 2016:26). For Traverso, melancholia is not a paralyzing defeat, but instead can be understood as a transformative force.

This melancholia does not mean lamenting a lost utopia, but rather rethinking a revolutionary project in a nonrevolutionary age. This is a fruitful melancholia that, one could say with Judith Butler, implies the “transformative effect of loss.” (Traverso 2016:41)

In Judith Butler’s understanding of “successful grieving”, it is not forgetting or substituting which is lost, instead “one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever” (Butler 2003:11). Butler argues that a sense of impossible loss can also be understood as a central part of gender, sexuality and identification, visible especially in non-normative sexualities within compulsory heterosexuality (1995:168).

[...] the fear of homosexual desire in a woman may induce a panic that she is losing her femininity; that she is not a woman, that she is no longer a proper woman; that, if she is not quite a man, she is like one and hence monstrous in some way. Or, in a man, the terror over homosexual desire may well lead to a terror over being construed as feminine, femininized; of no longer being properly a man or of being a "failed" man; or of being in some sense a figure of monstrosity or abjection. (Butler 1995:168)

Butler’s conceptualization of loss and failure accentuates how sexuality is connected to power relationships in hegemonic ideas, and that loss can harbour political possibilities and resistance. Jack/Judith Halberstam explores this further in the concept of the queer art of failure, which “turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (2011:88). Halberstam argues that even though “nothing essentially connects gay and lesbian and trans people to these forms of unbeing and unbecoming” they are connected to social and symbolic systems that relate queerness to loss and failure (Halberstam 2011:97-98). Halberstam emphasizes that this connection is not necessarily a bad thing, but argues that queer lives has the possibility to exploit a “difference in form” not as an essential attribute of sexual otherness, but rather through the possibility to break from heterosexual life narratives and see alternatives

to “seemingly organic models we use for marking progress and achievement” (2011:70). Halberstam argues that a “heteronormative common sense” includes an equation of success, advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct and hope while queer and other counterhegemonic modes of common-sense lead to associating failure to nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique. (2011:89) This destabilization of heteronormative models of time and transformation opens up difference in form within the frames of ideological imaginaries, since as J. K. Gibson- Graham argues “if we represent capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and racist economies as totalizing and inevitable, as seamless and impermeable, then we have ‘little possibility of escape’” (J.K Gibson-Graham in Halberstam 2011:74). Melancholia, loss and failure are crucial analytical frameworks for situating LeftTube in a continuing left-wing transformative project as well as its possible vantage points to form critical perspectives and counter-ideological claims in destabilizing modes of common sense.

## 4. Method

The method used in this thesis to analyse proactive and reactive strategies in the construction of ideological claims by content creators in LeftTube is critical discourse analysis, a wide framework used to analyse language use and meaning-making while allowing the researcher freedom to tailor the approach to the specific research questions of one's project. Described by Norman Fairclough, Jane Mulderrig and Ruth Wodak critical discourse analysis (CDA) is defined as a problem-oriented interdisciplinary movement including various approaches with different theoretical models, research methods and agendas (2011:357). What unites them, the authors argue, is "a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society" (ibid). By looking at LeftTube through a CDA framework, I examine how discourse is socially constituted by political practice in a dialectal relationship where the discourse shapes what can be said and at the same time is shaped by what is being said (ibid). This means that discursive practices influence knowledge production, social identities and relationships between individuals and groups of people, which can have ideological effects since it sustains the power relations or resist dominant discourses about them (2011:358). van Dijk explains that CDA research is often used to study ideologically biased discourses, and how these discourses create and polarize representations of ingroups and outgroups, meaning an "us" and a "them" (2001:9). The interdisciplinary approach to the method is also emphasized by van Dijk who underlines that CDA does not provide a ready-made, how-to-do approach to social analysis, since the method is constructed through the research questions of that particular research, and the theoretical background the researcher uses to view and analyse its material (2001:5). Instead what unites CDA is the critical perspective on doing scholarship, since the analysis focuses on "the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination" (2001:3) as well as the emancipatory agenda, traced by Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak back to Marxist philosophy and the Frankfurt School of critical theory, "in which critique is the mechanism for both explain(ing) social phenomena and for changing them" (2011:358).

I also have a feminist approach to CDA. Michelle M. Lazar highlights that feminist research had a "discursive turn" towards language and meaning making not only within linguistics but within feminist research as a whole, and within post-structuralist knowledge production especially (2005:4). The emancipatory project of CDA is what makes it compatible with

feminist research rather than solely descriptive discourse analysis methods, since “feminist CDA has the advantage of operating, at the outset, within a politically invested programme of discourse analysis” (ibid). Lazar argues that previous critical feminist perspectives on discourse and power has been conducted within feminist linguistic and discourse analysis without necessarily using the label CDA (2005:2). The term feminist critical analysis not only implies a feminist canon of feminist thinkers and locations of knowing not placed at the centre of hegemonic white, western, cis<sup>14</sup> academia but also implies, as Lazar argues, a theoretical understanding of patriarchal social order and that social practices are not neutral and natural but gendered and socially constructed (2005:5). Gender in this sense becomes omni-relevant in most social practices, since it operates in complex ways in systems of oppression (2005:3). Lazar argues that this political perspective on gender focuses on “demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology in discourse”, arguing that this scope makes it applicable to study text as well as talk and other semiotic modalities such as visual images and sound (2005:5). The feminist CDA approach with its sensitivity for gender relations in discursive practice are especially valuable when exploring LeftTube as a political project in this thesis since it captures how gendered aspects work within the self-interest in ideology, and its relation to personal experiences in societal structures of power.

Shared between CDA and feminism is the view of the researcher as well as the research as biased, arguing that who we are impact how and what we can see, and that the research itself has an emancipatory goal (Lazar 2005:4). Though the emancipatory agenda within the ‘critical’ of critical discourse analysis can be used in different ways depending on what you look at and where you look from, the more common use of the term has been through critiquing institutions of power and hegemonic ideas (2005:6). Feminist scholars have however also used this way of seeing to critically reflect on their own knowledge production and movements, exemplified in this thesis through Hartmann’s feminist critique of Marxist works, Judith Butler’s works on heteronormativity as well as black feminist critique of western feminist thought traditions, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw’s influential work as mentioned above. In the case of my analysis on LeftTube where belief and ideology are at the centre, I approach the ideological claims in the material not with the aim to critically examine injustice and systemic reproduction of power

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<sup>14</sup> Cis/-male/-female/-gender refers to a person whose gender identity matches with the gender they were assigned at birth

abuse, but rather use the critical approach as an analytical tool to examine how ideological claims are constructed in LeftTube in relation to counter-ideological claims.

#### 4.1 Way of Analysing

This thesis is based in a broader field of digital studies, with a focus on video in particular, building on the limited academic research of online left-wing activism. The empirical material of videos on YouTube is analysed not simply as “text”, but instead in a multimodal sense where the audio-visual aspects includes spoken and written language, intertextuality, gestures and symbols as well as viewer engagement through comments and likes.

My analysis is focused on strategies of meaning-making. By meaning-making I refer to not the abstract properties of words or expressions, but instead the kind of things content creators assign to such expressions in the process of interpretation or understanding (van Dijk 2000:204-205). Here I am interested in how these interpretations function in relation to power, how they are formulated as counter-discursive attempts of alternative meanings to hegemonic understandings or counter-ideological claims suggested by an alt-right rationality. In relation to counter-ideological claims, I examine how content creators use counter-speech tactics and how they challenge the validity in epistemic positions of knowledge by the alt-right. By analysing strategies, I refer to the systematic practices of language use and meaning-making by content creators in promoting a specific social or political goal (Wodak 2001:73). In the construction of LeftTube as a new digital left project I examine how content creators engage in a form of translation work of academic discourse to a language suitable to the online audience as well as translating online-speak to make it accessible for viewers without pre-existing understandings of internet language. I also examine how content creators use their personal narratives to re-negotiate and challenge dominant discourses about gender and sexuality.

The process of analysing the material consisted of several watch-throughs of the videos, each time focusing on different aspects in the interrelationship of gender, sexuality, power and ideology in the discourse. To get an overview of the beliefs and claims of each video, I firstly used van Dijks approach of “macropropositions” to distinguish and summarize overall topics in the videos with the aim to get a more general idea of the rich body of material (2001:102). An example of this would be that for the video of *Outsiders: How To Adapt H.P. Lovecraft In the 21st Century* by Hbomberguy (2018a), on my first look through I identified three macropropositions; (1.) The lived experience of queer people can provide alternative readings to literary works, (2.) Through time and growth you might see previous emotions in another

light and (3.) Fiction is not the opposite of facts and can be more powerful than facts on their own. These abstract principles were used as a grounding when examining socially shared representations within my analysis.

For the second reading of the material, I used a more in-depth approach of coding meaning-making through using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software Nvivo 12. I collected quotes from the transcriptions of the material under various nodes of themes, such as class, gender, sexuality and Race/ethnicity and cross-coded them with other nodes such as activism, politics, academic references and intertextuality. The purpose of this was not necessarily to get a rigid frame for my analysis, but rather to serve as an aid when navigating in the different topics of my material. The second in depth reading also included semiotic readings of the material, where I examined images and symbols, gestures and tones, sound scaping, sound effects and music, costumes, props and make up, scene changes and editing, since these semiotic practices also contribute to the construction of ideological claims (van Dijk 2000:192). Lastly, I examined how personal narratives and meaning-making becomes politicized in the ideological construction of LeftTube as a social movement, and if these claims resonated with the viewer statements given in the videos comment section.

#### 4.2 Ethical Considerations

The empirical material used in this thesis is collected online without the content creator's knowledge or consent, which leads to several ethical questions. Nathan Rambukkana uses the term "Gray data" to describe the ethical gray area that user-generated content such as tweets, comment threads, response videos, and the like create since it could either be understood as published public material or the product of human research subjects and therefore require an informed consent (Rambukkana 2019:313). Rambukkana discusses the ethical considerations in relation to the expectations by the content creator within the venue in which the data is gathered, and underlines the differences if "participants in this environment assume/believe that their communication is private" (2019:314) or if the data is publicly accessible or actions intended by their authors as public, or intended as a public act or performance that invites recognition for accomplishment (2019:315). The issue of venue is a highly ethical one due to its expectations or assumptions within that particular digital forum, since it builds the base of whether or not participants in this environment assume or believe that their communication is private (2019:314).

The empirical data used in this thesis can be understood within Rambukkana's framework as public, since the content creators has published their videos within a venue built on sharing and reacting. YouTube as a social platform is created for users to upload their videos on their personal channels and share them either publicly or use either the private<sup>15</sup> or unlisted<sup>16</sup> setting. The user also has the possibility to choose between an open or closed comment section, as well as showing "thumbs up/thumbs down" ratings on their video.

All empirical data used in this thesis come from public YouTube videos with comment sections open and "thumbs up/thumbs down" ratings visible. However, this doesn't mean that content creators expect nor welcome a researcher's attention to their online interactions, or even understand that such research is possible (Bassett & O'Riordan 2002; Kim & Kim 2014 & Zimmer 2016 in Rambukkana 2019:314). Many of the content creators in this thesis has been vocal about risks of speaking publicly and making LeftTube content, and the amount of hate, insults and abuse by viewers of them and their videos, as well as instances of doxxing<sup>17</sup>, career interference, and death threats both from the LeftTube community as well as the alt-right. Rambukkana underlines that this is a common risk as well for scholars researching games, internet culture and politics (2019:313). This poses the question of accountability, and asks an important yet difficult question to me as a researcher: what risks poses my thesis to the people I study and to myself, and does those risks outweigh the potential gains? (The Swedish Research Council 2017:20). As a researcher I have no control in how my thesis can be viewed and used by people opposing critical research on online political movements, both from the right and the left, making me an potential accomplice if my thesis would be used against the content creators discussed in my analysis. Since this thesis focuses on analysing discourse, there is a desire for me to separate and anonymize the content creators in an attempt to divide the artefact from the individual, since this would ensure higher safety for the content creators and be further aligned with feminist ethical considerations. But doing that would be a rather naïve approach to the level of exposure individuals has in a small, localized community publicly viewable online. Different feminist strategies to create a higher sense of anonymity, such as morphing participant's statements and thus creating metanarratives where the reader has a harder time

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<sup>15</sup> Private means only those invited to view the video can view it, the video will not come up under any search results or the creator's channel list

<sup>16</sup> Unlisted means the video will not come up in search results or on the creator's channel. Only those who know the link can view it

<sup>17</sup> Doxxing means searching for and publish private or identifying information about a particular individual on the Internet, typically with malicious intent

localizing individual experiences could have been an approach if not for the fact that any reader of this thesis can at any time view the material online for themselves and find the exact quote, which makes such an attempt of anonymization fruitless. Furthermore, many videos contain personal life narratives and draws strength from these narratives for their argumentation, making an anonymization of the material a form of illegitimizing, as well as silencing practice.

Important to note is that this thesis is one of the first of a new but growing field of online participation and activism. The lack of research on LeftTube becomes ethically relevant since there is to my knowledge little alternative academic research which would contribute to nuancing the view on the phenomena. It is also this shortage of knowledge that led my interest to LeftTube in the first place, since I believe that high quality research would benefit the community as well as academia. The ethical precautions I can therefore take is making sure that this thesis possess the highest possible standard of quality available to me and hope that my thesis has a positive impact on LeftTube and future research.

### 4.3 Positionality

How I chose to frame and interpret my material may come to affect the view on LeftTube and its content creators by the academia and a more general public, which makes it crucial to present my position from where I engage with the material. For me, self-reflexivity means awareness in the position from where I approach and view a topic, and an emphasis that others might approach it differently.

Sharing my birth year with the operation system Windows 95, I am one of those pesky millennials who grew up on the internet and would be considered a “digital native” (Ebner 2018:175). The best and worst times of my life does not have a clear online/offline distinction, always bleeding over one way or the other, which indicates that the understanding and knowledge I produce will be situated within this position and lens from where I write. Getting introduced to our family computer (and my father’s pirated first-person shooter games) I started to roam the internet too young and far too naïve, finding my way to forums, chats, MMORPGs<sup>18</sup> and communities my parents never knowingly would allow, gradually getting numb to the content I viewed. Thinking back now, League of Legends, memes, anime and manga becomes caught up in a web with 4chan and its graphic content of mutilations, porn, misogyny and racism. When trolling, incels and the alt-right made it to mainstream media I was not in any

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<sup>18</sup> Massive multiplayer online role-playing game



way shocked, since I had seen it grow and bloom on the dark corners of the internet for years. Finding LeftTube through the YouTube's recommended videos algorithm was therefore a pretty emotional experience for me. What intrigued me by the phenomena was the translation work content creators did to make current political debates and mainstream events and academic theoretical debates and abstract themes accessible to a younger, online audience through using examples of popular culture, internet phenomena and memes in a way where the different genres built on each other. In a way, I think I had thought that part of me, the "internet nerd" had been something that needed to become lost or remain hidden in the forward march of Pepe-memes and the alt-right online, making the association with such spaces shameful as a gender student. Within the context of LeftTube, those lived experiences was not only accepted, but politized in counter-tactics.

In this sense, I see myself in a position of an insider with subjective perspectives and theoretical grounding included in the feminist epistemological framework of situated knowledge, rather than an outsider, completely new to the field. Situated knowledge implies the epistemological understanding that knowledge production is never objective in the sense of a single Truth with a capital T. Instead, through situating oneself and being transparent and reflexive of where and how knowledge is produced it is possible to make a claim for "stronger objectivity" (Harding 1993), rather than knowledge production from a neutralized, all-seeing gaze from an omnipotent position (Haraway 1988). An insider position can provide a dynamic, more in-depth reading of somewhat contradictory and pluralistic projects of meaning-making than perhaps an outsider position. It is however through research from various positions with different entries a more nuance and "stronger" knowledge production can be achieved, and I do hope that my position and work can in some way be a part of that collective effort.

#### 4.4 Material

My material was gathered online on the social media platform YouTube, but social media platforms is not just the site where something has been said, but also becomes a part of *how* something can be said. YouTube as a social media platform has its own format, layout and aesthetics, as well as specific video presentations, styles and language uses. YouTube is in this sense seen both as the source, meaning that research is on the internet, and research material, meaning that research is about the internet (Haverinen, 2015:82). The empirical material consists of 21 videos uploaded online on YouTube by the four most popular content creators within LeftTube, Hbomberguy<sup>19</sup>, Lindsay Ellis<sup>20</sup>, ContraPoints<sup>21</sup> and Philosophy Tube<sup>22</sup> and consists of a total of 736 minutes and 58 seconds of video.

#### 4.5 Content Creators



Figure 1. ContraPoints YouTube Profile Picture

ContraPoints is an American content creator that has 918 000 subscribers and currently 24 videos published on her YouTube channel which covers topics about gender and sexuality, trans rights, politics, philosophy, and the alt-right. The current earliest<sup>23</sup> LeftTube video on her channel is *Decrypting the Alt-Right: How to Recognize a Fascist* from 2017. Early content on the channel was focused on philosophy and politics, especially fascism, sexual politics and transphobia.

Hbomberguy is a British content creator, whose channel with currently 68 videos and 562 000 YouTube subscribers covers topics about gaming, politics, films, internet memes, popular culture as well as response videos to alt-right content creators. Hbomberguy videos can be described as gamer content and political content, where he in the latter frequently make “measured responses” to alt-right content creators, debunks popular alt-right



Figure 2. Hbomberguy's YouTube Profile Picture

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/hbomberguy>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/chezapoctube>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/ContraPoints>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/thephilosophytube>

<sup>23</sup> Transcriptions of the previously public but now private videos can be accessed via ContraPoints website <https://www.contrapoints.com/transcripts/archives>

opinions and explains left-wing beliefs. Earliest LeftTube content on his channel is currently the video *The Sarkeesian Effect: A Measured Response* from 2014, a critique of an indie alt-right documentary focused around GamerGate.



Figure 3. Lindsay Ellis YouTube Profile Picture

Lindsay Ellis is an American content creator and author which has 940 000 subscribers and currently 108 videos published on her YouTube channel, making her the most popular content creator in my material. On her channel she covers films, books, comics, and politics, with the majority of her videos focused on film and tv series critiques, where she makes in-depth readings of popular films and series such as Disney movies, Star Wars and Game of Thrones. Earliest LeftTube content is the 2016 reuploaded video series of *The Nostalgia Chick* originally posted 2012 and hosted on the YouTube channel *Channel Awesome* which she was a part of until 2014, where Lindsay Ellis does an in depth reading of *The Lord Of The Rings* franchise. As a pioneering voice in creating the LeftTube phenomena as it is known today, Lindsay Ellis early content is not as explicitly political as other content creators in this thesis but has clear critical and feminist approaches to media production and the market.

Philosophy Tube is a British content creator and actor which has 639 000 followers and currently 399 videos published on his YouTube channel, making him the content creator with most published videos in my material. Philosophy Tube cover topics about philosophy, politics, popular culture, gender, sexuality and viewer interaction livestreams about his content. Earliest philosophy content on his channel is the video *I think therefore I am - Philosophy Tube* from 2013, but the theatrical format for which Philosophy Tube currently is known for within LeftTube started around 2019 with the video *Jordan Peterson & The Meaning of Life | Philosophy Tube*.





Figure 4. Philosophy Tube's YouTube Profile Picture

The content creators were selected through my previous knowledge about their popularity with around 500 000 to 900 000 subscribers each, as well as through their impact in discussions and reference by other content creators within LeftTube. Selecting data through the criteria of

popularity has also been an ethical strategy, since these content creators are the closest to what can be called public figures within LeftTube since they are at the centre of discussions, are often mentioned or referenced by other content creators and been actively making LeftTube content for years. There are of course other content creators<sup>24</sup> outside the scope of this thesis who could have been analysed to deepen the knowledge about LeftTube as a phenomenon, which would benefit a broader understanding in the future.

#### 4.6 Table of Empirical Data<sup>25</sup>

Video Title	Content Creator	Publication Date	Views			Length
"Are Traps Gay?"	ContraPoints	17/1/2019	2 020 801	110 283	4 761	44:53
Canceling	ContraPoints	2/1/2020	1 982 014	136 025	3 349	1:40:27
Gender Critical	ContraPoints	31/3/2019	2 039 708	108 923	3 879	33:48
Incels	ContraPoints	17/8/2018	3 459 619	156 903	5 172	35:04
Men	ContraPoints	24/8/2019	1 747 687	109 604	5 356	30:34
Opulence	ContraPoints	12/10/2019	1 485 510	92 686	1 864	49:06
Shame	ContraPoints	16/2/2020	1 136 216	84 263	1 564	42:02
Cultural Marxism: A Measured Response - Hbomberguy	Hbomberguy	11/12/2015	993 005	25 497	2 404	24:08
My Transformers Midlife Crisis	Hbomberguy	2/4/2019	731 294	31 213	618	45:55
Outsiders: How To Adapt H.P. Lovecraft In the 21st Century	Hbomberguy	3/7/2018	792 581	356 613	1 271	33:25
SOY BOYS: A MEASURED RESPONSE	Hbomberguy	3/2/2018	1 932 594	69 108	15 296	31:01
Framing Megan Fox: Feminist Theory Part 3   The Whole Plate: Episode 7	Lindsay Ellis	23/9/2017	1 004 933	39 536	822	14:22
My Monster Boyfriend	Lindsay Ellis	3/3/2018	1 156 734	42 588	1029	24:22

<sup>24</sup> Examples of other content creators within a loosely defined LeftTube are content creators Shaun, TIJ, Kat Blaque and Mexie,

<sup>25</sup> Updated 21/5-2020

The Male Gaze vs. The Men: Feminist Theory Part 2   The Whole Plate: Episode 6	Lindsay Ellis	6/9/2017	670 564	25 214	930	13:39
The Problem of Lady Robots: Feminist Theory Part 1   The Whole Plate: Episode 5	Lindsay Ellis	1/7/2017	850 823	32 051	1 441	12:26
Artists & Fandoms   Philosophy Tube	Philosophy Tube	18/3/2020	460 844	36 011	635	45:08
Men. Abuse. Trauma.   Philosophy Tube ★	Philosophy Tube	26/7/2019	875 898	73 661	708	34:59
Queer 🏳️   Philosophy Tube	Philosophy Tube	28/10/2019	618 294	46 432	876	36:39
Suicide and Mental Health   Philosophy Tube ★	Philosophy Tube	28/9/2018	622 334	50 549	347	33:30
Transphobia: An Analysis   Philosophy Tube	Philosophy Tube	12/10/2018	923 347	40 811	4 241	23:33
Witchcraft, Gender, & Marxism   Philosophy Tube	Philosophy Tube	26/10/2018	711 770	35 865	940	27:57

The criteria used for material selection has been video length, popularity, theme and representation, language and accessibility. LeftTube videos length can differ from fifteen minutes up to a hundred minutes or more, with an average around thirty minutes. My selection has therefore been videos around thirty minutes, with some exceptions of longer or shorter videos presented above. To have a broad representation across the different content creators, a minimum of 4 videos per content creator has been chosen. Popular videos within LeftTube can have between one million up to three million views, indicating that the more popular video has either created debate between different political groups on YouTube or made it to a more mainstream audience. To ensure a representation of content popular within the LeftTube viewer community, I have chosen videos that have a minimum of 500 000 views. One video excepted from this criterion is the video *Artists & Fandoms | Philosophy Tube* (2020), which is the latest published material included and falls around 30 000 views short<sup>26</sup>. Guiding my selection was also whether the videos explicitly included topics around gender and sexuality, either through

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<sup>26</sup> Based on the previous popularity of the content creator I believe the views will be close to 500 000 views by the time this thesis is published.

the video title, the overall theme or through the theories used within the video or through its explicit focus on ideology.

Since I am exploring discourse within LeftTube where the main language used within the group as well as content creators is English, I have only selected videos in English. Videos that have been selected has also included a pre-transcription in English, either done by the content creators themselves or by a viewer and then approved by the content creator before being included in the video. By approving viewers transcriptions of a video, the content creator can reach a broader audience. The transcriptions consist mostly of the spoken word in the video but can also include descriptions of sound effects and song lyrics. Pre-existing transcriptions of the material has made my data gathering more time efficient, since transcribing material is a time-consuming activity in any research process. By using pre-transcriptions there is however a risk of relying on another person's reading and interpretation of what is being said, which opens the possibility for exclusion, misinterpretation as well as an addition of text to the video which is not there in the original. There is also the possibility that the transcriptions might be altered over time. To reduce other's interpretations, I have before quoting any content creator in my analysis always re-watched the material to transcribe the section myself.

## 5. The Construction of a New Digital Left

The first section of my analysis focuses on the active project of anchoring LeftTube to a left-wing social movement in the new left of the twentieth century as a continuum of the location of oppression within modernity itself (Thompson 1997:187), creating a social force that I define as a new digital left. I analyse different strategies by content creators of adapting, modernizing and democratizing previous left-wing critical theories to fit the digital online context, and in that sense, intellectualize a contemporary existing left (Thompson 1997:231).

### 5.1 Transformative Narratives

When engaging in the material through locating macropropositions, meaning the method of distinguishing and summarizing overall topics expressed in the videos (van Dijk, 2001:102), I found that three out of four content creators used personal “coming out” narratives as a strategy to make ideological claims. This section of my analysis is therefore centred around how narratives of “coming out” are expressed and assigned with meaning in the material by hbombguy (2018a), Philosophy Tube (2019b) and ContraPoints (2020b), and how previous movements of social transformation in the left politicizing the personal such as the LGBTQIA+ movement is adapted to empower, organize struggle and create solidarity in the ideological project of LeftTube (van Dijk, 2001:204-205, 2000:138). I have also included a theorisation of the use of monsters as a symbol in western media by Lindsay Ellis (2018) to further examine how the symbol is used within the narratives to represent otherness.

Crucial to my view on non-heteronormative narratives are three things. Firstly, as argued by Halberstam that even though as stated by Gayle Rubin, sex is always political, “there is no guarantee as to what form the political will take when it comes to sex.” (Halberstam 2011:148-149). This means that I understand non-heteronormative narratives not inherently as left-wing, since other political movements can use them to make other ideological claims. Instead, it is the context of the left-wing ideology discourse, which is presupposed within the coming-out narratives that frames them within the left-wing. Secondly is the point made by Laclau and Mouffe in their theory of hegemonic and socialist strategies, that political meaning is not given from the beginning, meaning that social change is not deterministic or inevitable (2001:87). A narrative which aims to promote a left-wing political view could change its meaning and result in another form of social change. And lastly, that a shift away from a “ontologically privileged subject” towards a plurality of actors unified with a shared interest is required for a political project to become successful, meaning that non-heteronormative narratives need to be framed

within other struggles and demands to include other forms of oppressions (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:83).

Within the framework of left-wing melancholia, the absence of “a beloved object” such as an ideal creates a loss which becomes preserved within a left-wing movement (Traverso 2016:67). Combined with Butler’s use of melancholy, the loss also becomes preserved within a sense of self through gender and sexual identity (1995:168). It is this loss which can become a transformative force, since it disrupts how to think about change/political struggle and the self-identification and idea of how to live your life. In Butler’s use of the term, heteronormativity, as well as its part in the construction of a complementary gender system, has a transformative potential showed in hbomberguy’s reflection of the realization of his bisexual identity in a video where he shares his own relationship with the literary works of the author H.P Lovecraft (2018a). Hbomberguy reflects on his emotions after viewing a movie based on Lovecraft’s writing called *Cthulhu* (2007), which is centred around a gay college professor returning to his homophobic, highly religious family in his hometown for his mother’s funeral (2018a:00:03). Hbomberguy describes his initial negative reactions towards the movie, feeling a sense of betrayal in the fact that it had moved away from the themes he previously identified with and enjoyed in Lovecraft’s writing, arguing that he did not “want any of this” (2018a:00:05):

I wanted something big, something epic, something focusing on the horror of the big monsters, the sheer scope of the cosmos beyond our reach, and the nihilistic implications of being unimportant in the face of seemingly all-powerful things that can decide our fate on a whim. For so much of it, it was such an uncomfortable and personal and low-key horror, a human horror I wasn't really prepared for and was sure I didn't want. (Hbomberguy 2018a:00:05-00:06)

Hbomberguy explains that upon the realization, he had naturally seen himself as straight, “even if I didn't think I thought of it this way, on some primal level, I'd thought of being straight as being normal” (2018a:00:06-00:07). In Butler’s concept of successful grieving, a transformation starts when “one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever” (Butler 2003:11) which is prominent in hbomberguy’s reflection on his own sexual identity (ibid).

One day I looked in the mirror, and saw myself as not who I thought I was. I saw myself as an outsider from me, from the identity I'd assumed for myself (Hbomberguy, 2018a:00:06-00:07)

Butler argues that “the terror over homosexual desire may well lead to a terror over being construed as feminine, feminized; of no longer being properly a man or of being a “failed”



man; or of being in some sense a figure of monstrosity or abjection.” (Butler 1995:168). When the identification with heterosexuality became lost, the idea of normality becomes disrupted both in relation to sexuality as well as gender, which becomes visible in hbomberguy’s reflection in experiencing homophobia in the past (2018a:00:06).

I was an effeminate boy growing up, but I hadn't really cared, because at the time I'd not really accepted it [Gay] as an insult, or seen anything wrong with being called gay by losers in high school (...) But, when I actually was one of those people and knew it, all of a sudden, it was a real judgment of who I actually was. To them, I'd actually become lesser. (Hbomberguy, 2018a:00:06-00:07)

In this sense it was not until the loss of an assumed heterosexuality and an identification with homosexuality, the homophobia as well as notions of being “effeminate” in dominant social norms on sexuality becomes connected to being “lesser” and “unnatural”. The narrative seems to have had an impact with the viewers as well as the director of the movie himself, since the top comment on the YouTube video, rated with 13 552 “thumbs up” is written by the director of *Cthulhu* (2007) Dan Gildark who states that he is touched by the fact that the film eventually resonated with hbomberguy in such a deep way, and continues saying “I made it for all of us outsiders. Your video is a beautiful testament that the art we create can help us feel less alone.” (daniel gildark 2019, Re: hbomberguy 2018a). The personal narrative presented by hbomberguy and his “failing” of being a man makes other narratives of masculinity possible within the LeftTube project and becomes politicized within a collective social identity within the social group, where the “outsider” becomes a place of solidarity and community within the LeftTube phenomenon.

The video examined above inspires content creator Philosophy Tube to share his own experiences about queer theory and identity, where he claims that he “used to think that queer meant not for me...Not of me” (2019b:00:16). Having a similar view on his sexuality as Hbomberguy, Philosophy Tube argues that “It never really occurred to me to ask the question. I always just assumed that I was straight.” (ibid). The presumed heterosexuality also affected how he performed gender and sexuality within a heteronormative society arguing that he is “what they call ‘straight-passing’” (2019b:00:22, authors citation marks). His gender performance was more aligned with heteronormative understandings of masculinity, instead of Hbomberguy’s more “effeminate” gender performance which sparked homophobic comments (Hbomberguy, 2018a).

Philosophy Tube explains that upon suspecting that he “might be deviant” the narratives available for him online did not necessarily feel representative for him since the majority of them were bisexual American women, making hbombberguy’s personal narrative in the video discussed above impactful for his own view on his sexuality (Philosophy Tube 2019b:00:22-00:23).

When my good friend Harry [Hbombberguy] came out as bi on YouTube, I felt incredibly validated because if bisexual meant somebody like him, it could mean somebody like me, as well. (Philosophy Tube 2019b:00:23-00:24)

The narratives of non-heterosexuality and a representation of “straight passing” masculinity reflected on by Philosophy Tube seems to resonate with parts of the LeftTube community, emphasized by a viewer in the comment section who states “This is the first time as a masculine bi male I've felt understood and represented comprehensively. Thank you.” (Jordan Lindsey 2019, Re: Philosophy Tube 2019b). The perceived lack of non-heterosexual representation of masculinity demonstrate that these narratives might not have been fully compatible with previous LGBTQIA+ identities within the new left, which had perhaps excluded “straight passing” bisexual, and also perhaps cis-gender, men. However, I propose the question if this type of identification can be understood as sexualities which challenges heteronormativity, or reproducing societal structures of internalized homophobia and misogyny, where femininity and feminine men are devalued.

Philosophy Tube’s coming out story shows a disruption in an imagined possible life narrative, but the loss is more portrayed as a gain (2019b:00:32-00:33):

[...] there's no plan like there is in straight time, but it's also exciting. I feel like a Time Lord<sup>27</sup>. I could go anywhere; I could do anything now. Anything could happen to me! (Philosophy Tube 2019b:00:32-00:33)

This uncertainty and irregularity in queerness which Philosophy Tube reflects on has been framed by Halberstam as disregarding the so-called natural bonds between memory and futurity (Halberstam, 2011:74). When accepting the “failure” in heterosexuality, Halberstam argues that “hidden transcripts” of resistance to other forms of dominant orders can be possible (2011:88). But which these dominant orders can be, is not necessarily determined beforehand.

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<sup>27</sup> The Time Lords are an ancient extraterrestrial species in the British science fiction television series Doctor Who, who can travel through time and space

ContraPoints discusses her gender identity and sexual orientation in various videos and concludes the journey in her video *Shame* (2020b). ContraPoints reflects on her personal relation to the concept of “failed masculinity”, claiming “I admit I do have some kind of erotic fascination with masculinity, and maybe that stems from my pre-transition sense of having failed at masculinity, so I'm mesmerized by the real thing?” (ContraPoints 2020b:00:13). The video centres around the theories that gender and sexuality is constituted and constitutes each other in complex social practices, where, as Butler argues “gender is produced as a ritualized repetition of conventions and that this ritual is socially compelled in part by the force of a compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler 1995:175). ContraPoints starts the video by making an announcement of the themes that will be explored:

You're probably worried this is a coming out video, and I'm sorry to tell you that it is, but it's so much worse than just that. You know, one coming out may be regarded as a misfortune, two, looks like carelessness, and three, well, at that point you're just doing it for attention. (ContraPoints 2020b:00:00-00:01)

The tone can be viewed as both a satirical approach to the whole genre of coming out videos on YouTube, as well as a self-deprecating approach to her own “indecisiveness” and failure in presenting a static gender and sexual identity, which might come across to the viewer as insincere. This failure is not only a failure in regard to heteronormativity, but also in relation to acceptable narratives in the LGBTQIA+ movement of the new left.

there's so much pressure on trans women to be extremely gender conforming. And even more so if you're a \*AIR QUOTES\* representative of the community. (ContraPoints 2020b:00:33-00:34)



Figure 5. ContraPoints 2020b, 00:33:08

ContraPoints explains that she thinks of herself as “a woman who used to be a man” rather than the popular and accepted trans narrative within the community of that transwomen “always been women” (ContraPoints, 2019b:00:08).

it's just accepted as obvious that trans men know what it's like to be raised as women and to be influenced by those formative female experiences, but when it comes to the early life experiences of trans women, we're supposed to say, "When I was five years old, I loved wearing my mom's high heels, or else say nothing at all." (ContraPoints 2019b:00:16-00:17)

ContraPoints narrative further problematizes the position of an “outsider” when emphasizing that because of her previous gender-nonconforming social presentation, “by the time I came out as a trans woman that was actually a step up in terms of social acceptability from where I was before.” (2020b:00:32). But the coming out is not portrayed as a narrative of transformation, but a narrative of shame.

One, I'm ashamed of being trans, two, I'm ashamed of being a lesbian, and whatever one times two is, I'm really ashamed of being a trans lesbian. (ContraPoints 2020b:00:28-00:29)

ContraPoints explains that it felt “difficult and risky” to talk openly about her feelings of shame towards her gender and sexuality, arguing that there is an expectation that “visible queer people are supposed to perform pride”, and continues to ask the question “Why is no one talking about the shame? Because we're ashamed of the shame. But we shouldn't be.” (ContraPoints 2020b:00:29). Upon reflecting on how being trans have affected her sense of sexuality, ContraPoints underlines that as a transwoman, heterosexual relationships might uphold a sense of womanhood since the attention from a heterosexual man not only reproduces her gender identity within a heteronormative society, but also shields her from the multiple forms of oppression as being a trans person and a lesbian which ContraPoints describes as making her “feel like a monster sometimes, like a mutant that has no place in society” (ContraPoints 2020b:00:34). In this sense, the “outsider” or “monster” in ContraPoints narratives is not connected to the “we” in the political project, as the feelings of shame seems to create a dissonance with the previous narratives of visible queer people. These personal stories of coming to terms with one’s sexuality engages with established narratives in the context of LGBTQIA+ discourse, problematizing them and presenting alternative ways of being, which creates possibilities of boarding understandings and in that sense, promoting greater inclusion of alternative life narratives.

The figure of monstrosity, and the “outsider” linked to gender and sexuality as present in the narratives above is further explored by Lindsay Ellis as she examines portrayals of monsters within various media productions and literary works (2018). Lindsay Ellis uses the example of the movie *The Shape of Water* (2017) to illustrate a narrative turn in how portrayals of a constructed other and the intimate relationships characters form with them. Lindsay Ellis argues that in contrast to popular stories such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991, 2017) the monster in *The Shape of Water* is not a changeling that turns into a prince at the end, which marks a shift from the previous narratives where the monster has symbolized societal anxieties like idea of female purity and white womanhood being challenged by a “racial other” that needs to be defeated (2018). Instead, the monster in *The Shape of Water*, a fishman, becomes someone the viewer as well as the female main character can reflect her own “otherness” in (Lindsay Ellis, 2018:00:19-00:20).

Maybe the maiden isn't terrified of being carried off by the fishman. Maybe she relates to the fishman. Maybe the fishman is lonely like she is. Maybe the fishman is treated the same way that you, a woman, or a disabled person, or gay man, or person of color, in your unfair era feel treated by society. Maybe that fishman just wants what most of us want, which is to feel loved and safe (Lindsay Ellis 2018:00:00-00:01)

There can also be anxieties in LeftTube related to not having the lived experience of “otherness” and the impact such position might have on what theoretical arguments one can make. At the end of her video about monsters in media, Lindsay Ellis becomes “interrupted” by a phone call while she is making the claim that there is no coincidence that people from marginalized communities, immigrants, queer people and people of colour might find their marginalization reflected in portrayals of monsters in media (2018:00:20-00:21). The person calling is another content creator within the community called Readus101, making sure that Lindsay Ellis “weren't trying to speak for a group of individuals that you don't necessarily represent”, where upon Lindsay Ellis uneasily answer “No, no, I wouldn't, I'm woke. I'm the wokest” (ibid). The segment continues with the content creator arguing “Well, considering that I'm actually a queer person of color living in America, do you mind hearing my opinions on the matter?” followed by a reflection of Lindsay Ellis analysis by Readus101 (ibid).

The interaction, I suggest can be understood as a form of manufactured accountability where Lindsay Ellis creates a scenario of a critique which might have been articulated later in the comment section of her video, of her attempt to make a claim of the solidarity created in the position of “outsiders” without having presented the narrative needed to support the position as ContraPoints, Philosophy Tube and Hbomberguy did as argued above. In the manufactured

scenario, she can address critique on her own position while at the same time have control of what is being responded to her, which is further underlined as the content creator Readus101 agrees with all the points in the analysis she previously made. Readus101 lived experience of being a queer person of color living in America can on one hand be understood as an attempted strategy to legitimize Lindsay Ellis argument to strengthen her own position, but on the other an attempt to reframe the need for a lived experience and instead move towards the shared interest as a unifying force and place of solidarity where actors with different lived experiences can mobilize social change (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:83).

## 5.2 Translation Work for an Online Audience

Focusing more in-depth on strategies of ideological production in the discourse, meaning the systematic practices of language use and meaning-making used by content creators to promote a specific social and political goal (Wodak 2001:73), this section of my analysis presents the genre of LeftTube videos as a form of emancipatory project which challenges structural power relations and conceptual frames of knowledge production while promoting social change within the format of video essays. The proactive left-wing ideological project has been emphasized by Dmitry Kuznetsov and Milan Ismangil has argued that LeftTube can create the conditions necessary for socialism to become an acceptable and achievable social reality (2020:205), which I argue is demonstrated in the strategic translation work conducted by content creators through a reconceptualization of academic critical theories and applied to understandable examples within the sociocultural common ground within LeftTube (van Dijk 2001:18).

Clarified by the content creator Lindsay Ellis, the format of video essays is described as follows:

An essayist will present an idea, for instance, in this case: in Michael Bay movies, women are rarely depicted as being in positions of power. And when they are in positions of power, they're depicted as either being duplicitous, incompetent, or both. The writer would then use examples from the media in question, and from other academics, to help support their thesis. (Lindsay Ellis 2017c:00:01-00:02)

The format can also include, I argue presented in Lindsay Ellis (2018) positioning in the previous section, elements of reflexivity and contextualization as content creators engage in a meta-dialogue of beliefs and ideas of the imagined audience, which might agree or disagree with the perspectives and ideological claims presented by the content creator. Content creators either incorporate hypothetical events and questions and critiques from imagined viewers with various beliefs or play different characters to personify them, creating the possibility to present

a plurality of arguments specifically suited for different understandings, opinions and emotions within the viewer base (van Dijk 2001:112).

Academic references and theoretical concepts used throughout the material can be understood as resources in the production of LeftTube discourse, functioning to construct a shared view on social, political and economic problems and in that sense legitimizing the ideological project (van Dijk 2001:115). Theories are often introduced to the viewers in an academic language, and then adapted to a more popular understanding and lastly applied to a piece of popular culture, internet phenomena, joke or meme and in that sense revealing it to the audience as an arena where consent or resistance to hegemonic ideas can be formulated (Hall 1998:453). Lindsay Ellis exemplifies this when summarizing Laura Mulvey's theoretical work of the male gaze in a typically academic language, and then adding the clarification (2017c:00:05-00:06):

So really, with all this talk of Mulvey and feminist theory and post-modernism and rejection of objectivism and binarist modes of thinking, what I'm really, really trying to ask is: why do all the robots gotta' be dudes? (Lindsay Ellis 2017c:00:05-00:06)

How the content creator presents their argument through text and talk as well as style and semiotic practices varies, which can cradle to the different tastes as well as needs for the audience. Content creators use different tactics in presenting the academic theories, where some just get mentioned, and others are presented through including a quote which is then read out loud either by the content creator themselves in different tones and accents or by other content creators within LeftTube to give a variety. In a video about transphobia by Philosophy Tube, he acknowledges that not the whole audience might have previous knowledge about the various terms and thinkers in ancient Greek philosophy on scepticism, and argues:

If you've studied A-Level philosophy you might have encountered Rene Descartes, and his idea of radical doubt? Similar sort of thing. If you haven't read Descartes though, don't worry about it. (Philosophy Tube 2018b:00:05-00:06)

Philosophy Tube's reassurance suggests that he will provide the viewer the information needed for the meaning and ideological claims to be understood, and in that sense simultaneously provide an introductory as well as in-depth analysis depending on the previous knowledge of the viewers. This attempt of accessibility further is emphasized by Philosophy Tube when reading out loud a lengthy quote by the Pyrrhonian sceptic Sextus Empiricus, as the quote appears on the screen for the viewer to read along (Philosophy Tube, 2018b:00:07-00:08). The text is then switched over to an image of a Twitter post capturing what Philosophy Tube identifies as the essence of the argument reinterpreted in a more accessible format of internet

language (see Figure 6.). This example shows how LeftTube content creators purposely use complex webs of intertextuality combining and remixing academic and internet language (Wiggins 2019:35). The ideological aspect in referring to an ancient Greek philosopher as a “wise man” solemnly bowing his head while calling the viewer a “fucking moron” expresses an awareness of academic philosophical language though perhaps is needed within the intertextual event might be inadequate for persuading the audience, which calls for other forms of intertextual artefacts. Or as highlighted by Philosophy Tube, some people in LeftTube can get “put off by academic jargon”, so when using a technical theoretical term, he then “undercut it by taking the piss” (Philosophy Tube, 2019b:00:14).



Figure 6. Philosophy Tube 2018b, 00:07:49

Philosophy Tube acknowledges as well that not all viewers might have prior knowledge about certain types of internet language and applies the same translation work to memes as he does to academic theories. When explaining transphobia and bigotry, Philosophy explains the concept of “Yer Dad”, a British meme used to describe a certain type of ignorance often vocalized by older men:

First thing's first, Yer Dad is not Daddy<sup>28</sup>. Daddy is something else, put Daddy out of your mind. Yer Dad is not necessarily your actual Dad, or my actual Dad, he's more like the platonic ideal of a certain kind of opinion-haver. Typically Yer Dad is relatively privileged, not always male, not always older, there's varying degrees of Yer Dad, maybe you are Yer Dad, but here's Yer Dad: 15 years ago, if he's straight, Yer Dad would have said something casually homophobic. (Philosophy Tube 2018b:00:01-00:02)

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<sup>28</sup> Here referring to a dominant, authoritarian or protective role of “Daddy” in sexual power-exchange or other form of intimate relationship



This sort of translation work by content creators can on one hand be understood as a counterstrategy to the alt-right movement success in appealing to a younger audience through memes and jokes, but on the other be a way to engage in an imagined audience which has not been in contact with those particular ideological projects but is used to the internet language format (Ebner 2019:175). The translation back and forth further suggests that there are nuances, strengths and weaknesses in both academic language as well as internet language working in the LeftTube project which can become lost if only using one or the other.

Being fluent in the rules of internet language however also means that one can break them, visible in Philosophy Tube's meta-commenting on his own strategic use of internet language through saying:

That's internet language, baby! Very access! Much engagement! Whomst feels like this is a friendly space that they can contribute to by doing a hecking subscribe (Philosophy Tube 2019b:00:14-00:15)

Through the word such as very access and much engagement, which refers to the Doge meme<sup>29</sup>, whomst<sup>30</sup>, which is a fake word used digitally to signal ironic superior intelligence, calling his channel a "friendly space", a synonym for the "safe space" rhetoric used to describe accepting online places, and using "hecking"<sup>31</sup> Philosophy Tube communicates a wish to relate to the internet audience which can rather show an extreme of "trying too much" by someone who do not necessarily have the presupposed information needed to understand what internet language actually "means" (van Dijk 2000:192).

The translation work can on one hand be viewed as an attempt to make critical theoretical thinking more accessible for a younger, non-academic audience, and a way of intellectualizing the political project (Thompson 1997:231), as well as an reconstructing project of radical critical thinking in a contemporary, nonrevolutionary digital space (Traverso 2016:41). I propose this strategy exemplifies a larger trend in LeftTube content to invite the audience to participate in a transformative political project without reproducing hierarchies of academia/non-academia, and make theories and critical thinking accessible to different types of audiences who might have been structurally denied it without making them feel inadequate for perhaps not understanding them completely. Through creating new accessible narratives

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<sup>29</sup> The Doge meme typically consists of a picture of a Shiba Inu dog with a text deliberately written in a form of broken English including "much", and "very".

<sup>30</sup> Whomst refers to the "whomst meme", and is typically used to signal extravagance.

<sup>31</sup> Used in instance when swearing has not been allowed in internet forums.

and adapting theoretical concepts, content creators increases the chances for a popular rather than an elitist political movement with a common interest in an emancipatory project of social change (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:83, Thompson 1997:231).

The construction of shared meanings is however not beyond dispute within the larger social context of YouTube, as Lindsay Ellis demonstrate while conducting a critical reading of *The Transformers* franchise (2007-2018) through the lens of feminist theory, and start by expressing an awareness of the contemporary political climate as well as the specific political context the platform of YouTube inhibits by saying “Boy, oh boy. So this is the one that everyone's been looking forward to, I'm sure. Time to talk about some feminist theory on YouTube, that always goes over well.” (Lindsay Ellis 2017c:00:00-00:01). The statement suggests a counter-ideological positioning to dominant ideology from where Lindsay Ellis engage with the viewers, foreshadowing an attempt of constructing alternative meaning-making (van Dijk 2000:138). Lindsay Ellis continues by reflecting that feminism will be “an interesting topic” due to her previous knowledge of contesting ideological beliefs within her imagined YouTube audience:

[...] most of you kind of have like at least a passing knowledge of how like feminist film theory works. And then there's the segment of the audience that thinks it's like the matriarchal tentacle of the globalist new world order to destroy all men. So that's going to be an interesting tightrope to walk. (Lindsay Ellis 2017c:00:00-00:01)

The two social groups within the audience described by Lindsay Ellis underlines the tension within the different ideological views in regards to feminism, where contesting meaning-making depict feminism either as a tool for critical analysis or as threatening to the victimization of men as being structurally disadvantaged within the gender hierarchy (Träbert 2017:276). Lindsay Ellis contextualizes the ongoing political debate through claiming that she has witnessed the circulation of buzzwords online “such as feminism, post-modernism, Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, the Jews, and so on” as a part of an decontextualizing and antagonizing practice of critical theory within the online space of YouTube (Träbert 2017:276), creating a type of “boogeyman” (Lindsay Ellis, 2017c:00:01). Lindsay Ellis proceeds to present alternative meanings to these attitudes, explaining feminist theory as a collective knowledge project with a “ever evolving praxis”, where thinkers depending of their theoretical views and beliefs approach various topics in different ways, while providing ironic claims and comic relief to the audience:

[...] the whole of feminist theory as it pertains to media studies is not to destroy all men, though that is certainly a priority, but to question the role of gender in our society, and in particular the portrayal of women in media. So the rest of this twenty six part series will be exploring the many nuances of post-modernist, cultural Marxist, feminist, intersectional film theory. I'm kidding, I'm kidding! \*PAUSE\* Only twenty-three of them will be that. (Lindsay Ellis 2017c:00:02-00:03)

The joke is further exaggerated by the inclusion of an image of a white and pink “to do list” with heart-shaped bullet points stating “Pick up eggs :)”, “Topple the patriarchy”, “Pick up Tampons”, “Listen to Enya” and “KILL ALL MEN” (Lindsay Ellis 2017c:00:03). The ridiculing can be understood as a disarming tactic and tension relief directed towards antifeminist viewers who might attempt to antagonize her viewpoint by connecting her positioning to the “boogeyman” buzzwords, all while proposing a reframing which invite the audience to consider the role of gender in society as a shared social problem (van Dijk 2000:141).



Figure 7. Lindsay Ellis 2017c, 00:02:19

While claiming that feminist media studies frequently has been used to critically analyse the portrayal of women in media, Lindsay Ellis subverts the viewers expectations and instead use the framework of male gaze to critically examine how the male director of The Transformers franchise, Michael Bay portray the male characters (2017b:00:03).

[...] it is a common, even cliché refrain now that Michael Bay doesn't respect women. But, as far as representations of whole groups go, he doesn't have much respect for men either. (Lindsay Ellis 2017b:00:13-00:14)

Through arguing that the male protagonist Sam can be understood as a reflection of how the director Michael Bay sees the male audience of the franchise, Lindsay Ellis proposes that Sam's character traits of aggressiveness, insecurity, overcompensation and self-entitlement are not considered character flaws to be overcome nor has socially negative consequences within the narrative, further suggesting a neutralization and attempted relatability in the portrayed masculinity (2017b:00:03-00:08).

Sam is shitty, ineffectual, and materialistic but that's okay because the audience is shitty, ineffectual, and materialistic. (Lindsay Ellis 2017b:00:08-00:09)

Through focusing in on masculinity from a male gaze perspective, Lindsay Ellis illustrate how feminist theories can be used to critically approach how a masculinity affirming aggressiveness and ridiculing vulnerability is constructed and neutralized through a “common sense” gender ideology within dominant discourse (Barát 2020:24), and challenges the idea that this form of normalized masculinity is a desirable reflection for male viewers to strive for. The tactic reconstruct previous defeats and loss of momentum in the organizing for social transformation in feminist critique focused around the objectification of women within contemporary media productions, and redirects the theoretical framework to a more acceptable example in the sociocultural common ground to highlight the possibility of a shared interest and a mutual problem across genders (Traverso 2016:26, van Dijk 2001:18). The possibilities in such a critique are further illustrated by the most upvoted comment with 4100 “Thumbs Up” in the video's comment section which states “Applying feminist critical theory to a medium nerds love, on YouTube, and you have barely any downvotes. Explain yourself, demon.” (andid 2018 Re: Lindsay Ellis 2017c). The description of Lindsay Ellis as a “demon” can be viewed as a form of acknowledgement of how well the argument has been received by the male coded “nerds” in the viewer audience, distinguished in this case by their decontextualizing and antagonizing practice of feminist theory. This shift in feminist strategy of systematic critique away from the portrayal of women to a focus on masculinity and the male audience becomes a direct action towards an emancipation project where men not only becomes included in feminist struggles for social transformation, they are provided with tools to challenge oppressing structures in patriarchal society which affect attitudes on masculinity as well as other forms of social norms and values (van Dijk, 2001:114).

## 6. Counter Ideological Speech: Resisting Far-right Ideology

This chapter focuses on reactive, counter-ideological claims to alt-right beliefs on gender and sexuality and knowledge production. Through using the theoretical frameworks of counter-speech and the reframing of masculine ideologies of victimhood narratives, I interpret content creators strategic use of lived experiences in their critique to challenge the polarization practices evident in the alt-right.

### 6.1 Counter-speech Tactics

LeftTube can be understood as a political discursive arena where left-wing content creators engage in different debates and topics before their viewers, as emphasized by Dmitry Kuznetsov and Milan Ismangil who has argued that a common tactic within the phenomena has been using right-wing talking points and “alternative facts” as an entry point for the discussion and then subverting it (2020:205). Through constructing dynamic, innovative and bold counter-arguments I argue content creators produce possibilities of what Julia Ebner has called counter-speech or counter-culture to right wing populism (2018:180).

Knowledge and fluidity in trolling rhetoric and tactics from an insider perspective as well as a subversion of the viewers expectation is visible in my material in the tactics of language appropriation of alt-right slang, memes and slurs. Some content creators use it as a form of reclaiming by using the words to describe themselves and fill them with new meaning, while others use the terms as an entry point to create counterarguments to the beliefs which the concepts rests upon. Through using the language created by opposing social groups, content creators can reach that specific audience with counter-ideological claims (Roose 2019). An example of transcending conventional debates and breaking taboos is ContraPoints tactic to use alt-right slurs such as “Tran<sup>32</sup>” and “Degenerate<sup>33</sup>” to describe herself (2018:00:18, 2018:00:33). In her video “Are Traps Gay?” (2019a), ContraPoints reflects on the transphobic language use within alt-right discussions and the use of the slur Trap<sup>34</sup>, and explains that on proposing making a video about the topic, many trans people on Twitter was outraged because

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<sup>32</sup> Short for the derogatory terms “Tranny” or “Transvestite”

<sup>33</sup> Slur used to describe someone with low morals and a disgraceful lifestyle

<sup>34</sup> A “Trap” was initially referred to Japanese manga or anime characters, but has now been used as a transphobic slur directed especially towards trans women, non-binary and gender non-conforming people

they felt that the subject was too harmful to discuss (2019a:00:04). ContraPoints argues that she has “always believed that if you want to persuade anyone, it helps to meet them where there're at. And in this case, ‘Are Traps Gay?’ is where people are at.”, and continues by asking the question “When those teenage boys go home and google ‘Are Traps Gay?’, who do you want to explain it to them?”(2019a:00:04-00:05). The counterargument provided by ContraPoints poses the question of who has the power to define and create knowledge about trans people and the transphobia they are exposed to by dominant ideology, and what lived experiences can become lost if trans people refuse to engage in the discursive battles about themselves. ContraPoints reflects on the possibilities of resistance in language use when stating that trans women has had little influence in language use and knowledge production in society, arguing:

[...] The people who lead conversations about us are bigger and stronger than we are. So we're like a jogger racing against a car. The only way to win is to hijack the car. And so this video is my attempt to hijack the conversation that straight men are having about us (ContraPoints 2019a:00:05-00:06)

Through “hijacking the conversation”, ContraPoints show innovative and bold tactics to change the discourse from within, as suggested by Julia Ebner as a civil societal counter-culture strategy to extremist counter-culture (2018:180). ContraPoints asks the viewers the question “Why would you be worried about this if you didn't think being gay was bad?” (2019a:00:36), to underline the homophobic and transphobic beliefs that lay behind the “joke”. ContraPoints reflects on the feelings of shame men might have if they would feel attracted to a person that would fit within the discursive constructions of a “Trap”. Through tracing those feelings of shame to attempts to justify violence directed at transwomen, non-binary and gender non-conforming people in attempts to distance oneself from accusations of being gay, ContraPoints come to the conclusion that if homosexual and transgender people would be more accepted in society, these sort of “jokes” would not be as potentially damaging (2019a:00:07),

Though “Trap” in this instance is somewhat reclaimed through ContraPoints use of the word, ContraPoints has emphasized that accepting hate speech, hurtful language use or euphemisms of transphobic or racist rhetoric such as replacing TERF (Trans exclusionary radical feminist) with “gender critical” or racist with “Race realist” can make her an “accomplice in their scheme to legitimize bigotry” (ContraPoints 2019b:00:25-00:26). This underlines the great understanding of the power related to meaning-making and language use required to accomplish counter strategies without missing the objective and instead reproducing the attitudes and ideas, or fall pray to trolling tactics aimed to provoke anger and frustration (Ebner 2018:180, Condis

2018:22). ContraPoints shows reflexivity around the gains possible in appropriating language use to “meet people where there’re at” at the end of her video, where she concludes:

I guess today we learned that "Are Traps Gay?" is not a debate worth winning, because just by participating, we're accepting the validity of an insincere question and the bigoted assumptions it relies on. (ContraPoints 2019a:00:38-00:39)

The acceptance of validity in alt-right claims and language use in counter-speech tactics is also challenged by hbomberguy, who focuses on the two different concepts “Cultural Marxism” and “SoyBoy” which has been used in alt-right spaces to construct left-wing ideology and individuals, and show two different approaches in engaging in counter-speech (2015, 2018b) . In his video on Cultural Marxism (2015), hbomberguy use various tactics to delegitimize the use of the concept previously done by The Golden One, a well-known alt-right YouTuber (Hermansson et al 2020:184) among other alt-right content creators. Through laughing out loud at their arguments, mocking their video style, audio quality and editing skills, creating Karl Marx misquotes based on their understanding of Marxism, comparing their rhetoric to propaganda videos made by the youth section of the far-right British National Party (BNP) and asking the audience “I can't tell if half of these are parodies anymore. Is this all an elaborate joke at my expense?” (hbomberguy, 2015:00:04), hbomberguy attempts bold counter-speech tactics as attempts to convince the viewer that the concept of Cultural Marxism from the alt-right can be understood as an conspiracy theoretic history reconstruction with empty meaning which is then filled contradictory opinions content creators might find beneficial for their argument, whether its anti-feminist or anti-Semitist claims.

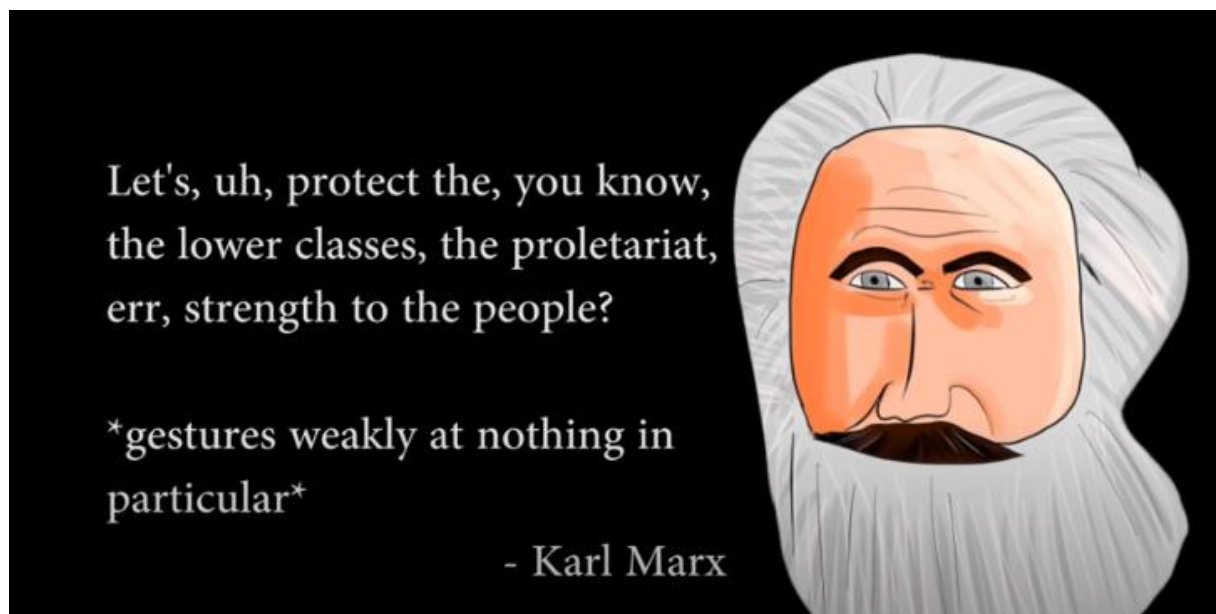


Figure 8. Hbomberguy 2015, 00:12:04

Hbomberguy also express an awareness of how some viewers might critique fruitfulness in this counter-speech strategy, providing an answer to the hypothetical question why he did not take these people's knowledge claims seriously, and argues:

when someone rants about cultural Marxism as if it were real, yet mandates themselves to rewrite history to suit their ends [...] it seems pretty clear that reason hasn't factored into these people's thoughts for a long time. So why capitulate to the idea that they are by taking them seriously? (Hbomberguy 2015:00:18-00:19)

This counterargument regarding knowledge production and reason in alt-right meaning-making becomes further developed in his video about Soyboys (2018b) where hbomberguy challenges a previous argument made by alt-right content creators that the consumption of soy products raise oestrogen levels and lower testosterone levels in the human body, causing leftist ideological values, which is the background for the term. Hbomberguy examines the validity of the academic research behind it, coming to the conclusion that no academic research support the claim that soy lower testosterone or sperm count, nor hold any evidence to the argument that men who consume high amount of soy become feminist or leftist (2018b).

Instead of laughing and mocking the argument as in his video about Cultural Marxism, hbomberguy continues instead with asking the viewer what reasons might lie behind such arguments within the alt-right in the first place, asking "why do right-wing idiots keep sharing obvious lies in order to perpetuate the things they want to believe? Why isn't the truth enough?" (2018b:00:24-00:25). Hbomberguy then attempts a more dynamic counterargument more attuned to alt-right strategies of meaning-making through coming with the suggestion that knowledge production within right-wing spaces on the internet is constituted not by challenging and developing the individuals critical thinking, but instead functions as justification of the individual's beliefs through creating an echo chamber of internal claims and buzzwords (2018b:00:25-00:26). Underlining the need for binary thinking within alt-right ideological projects (Ebner :172), Hbomberguy argues that "Without spreading ideas like that soy causes leftism, these folks would have to come to terms with the possibility that people might have good reasons to think differently from them, and admitting that would be too much." (2018b:00:26). Hbomberguy then ends the video with perhaps an even bolder strategy than before, moving away from the ridiculing tactic to a more empathic approach to reach out to the viewers.

[...] the truth can't hurt you. In fact, it can set you free. Having a greater understanding of the world can only ever be a good thing, and being able to change your conclusions when



presented with new evidence is a far more important skill than happening to be right first time about something. (Hbomberguy 2018b:00:27-00:28)

Lastly arguing that there is a possibility that he has interpreted the data wrong, hbomberguy encourages the viewer to read the academic articles used in his argument and see if they come to another conclusion, saying “Go to the evidence and maybe, together we can all live in a beautiful world, soy or not, and maybe we'll be gentler, and nicer that way.” (2018b:00:28-00:29).

The three approaches in hbomberguy’s argument can be viewed under the counter-speech tactic of debunking the alt-right knowledge claims, discrediting the reasons behind the strategy and providing a counter message promoting anti-hate and critical thinking (Ebner 2018:177). The possible impact of the strategy is exemplified in the third top comment on the video with 2932 “Thumbs Up” submitted by a viewer that expresses that the video changed their way of thinking, who states;

I came here looking for "soyboy" prodding memes to stimulate my masculinity a bit, and I was kind of a sheep that took Paul's<sup>35</sup> content at face value. I always had gut feelings that some of his content was just out of ignorant hate, but I took at as fact, since he had a couple of biased articles, and I was too lazy to look things up myself. This video has made me rethink that sheep-like thinking. All I'm saying is, thank you for looking at these videos more in-depth -- reading info that I didn't have the energy to look up. (IntergalacticNobody, RE: hbomberguy 2018b)

The referenced material I propose can be further understood as that being wrong does not necessarily mean a loss, but a failure that harbours the possibility to change one’s opinion and personal growth (Halberstam 2011:88). This can create a new dynamic in the debate where the opponents can have different perspectives and come to different conclusions which can change over time or as new evidence or perspectives presents themselves, rather than having to statically persuade each other of being right or wrong.

Narratives of transformative failure in LeftTube is further emphasized by Philosophy Tube when admitting that he previously was ignorant to his own participation in reproducing transphobia through Yer Dad<sup>36</sup> behaviour, “when I was an undergrad of about 18 I was Yer Dad. When I, in my enormously privileged bubble, first encountered the concept of being transgender this was the position I defaulted to” (2018b:00:03) or how he at age 19 through

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<sup>35</sup> Content creator arguing that soy lowers testosterone

<sup>36</sup> See previous explanation of “Yer Dad” on p.42

consuming content about atheism got caught up in feeling “clever, enlightened and modern“ until realizing that the content also contained racist beliefs (2018c:00:00-00:01). ContraPoints also admits previously being ignorant and benefitting from male privileged before transitioning, explaining “it did influence who I was, and who I was in my late teens and early twenties was an anti-feminist shithead who had no idea what women go through” (ContraPoints, 2019b:00:15-00:16). Through sharing their own narratives of changed beliefs and encouraging critical thinking, self-reflexivity and growth, I argue that content creators create possibilities for resisting ‘redpill’ strategies of ‘strategic polarization’ conducted within the far-right to deliberately sow discord, divide communities and spread binary world views (Ebner 2018:172).

## 6.2 Alternatives to Far-right Masculinity

In this last section of my analysis I argue that content creators engage in the beliefs of perceived victimhood and structural disadvantages within an ideology of masculine victimhood, and through using feminist strategies as a counter ideological claim which enables the perceived victimhood to be reframed not as oppression of men by women or feminism, but rather as patriarchal structures disadvantaging all genders. In this sense, I propose that LeftTube can be understood as a social strategy encouraging men to engage in an emancipatory project of social transformation where their own struggle and interests are recognized, while simultaneously creating possibilities to work in solidarity to counteract other forms of oppression under the patriarchy (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:155-156).

Julia Ebner has argued that two stumbling blocks when attempting to countering the growth of the far-right has been limited understanding of the emerging subcultures combined with the lack of creative and proactive approaches (2018:170). LeftTube’s unique position as a counter ideological project has shown as argued in the previous sections of my analysis both a deep understanding as well as bold, dynamic and creative strategies of counter-speech, which is in this section further examined in relation to sexuality and gender. ContraPoints uses strategies to approach alt-right beliefs about gender and sexuality in several videos (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) but the most viewed attempt is the video Incels (2018). Currently at 3.4 million views, the video centres about men living in involuntary celibacy, or as ContraPoints calls it, “men who’ve formed an identity around not getting laid” (2018:00:02). The strategy used is a form of counter-cultural tactics (Ebner 2018:180), where ContraPoints reframes mainstream as well as incel communities’ narratives of their identity. ContraPoints gives the viewer an introduction and an

overview of the history of incels and explain the different terms, rhetoric and memes used within the group to describe their worldview of misogynist gender and sexual hierarchy (2018). Through using her lived experiences of being socialized male, her internalized transphobia and insecurities and gender dysphoria ContraPoints analyses the feelings of hopelessness, self-hatred, and practices of digital self-harm within incel communities online (ibid). ContraPoints then attempt to bridge a sense of understanding and sympathy of experienced victimhood, while presenting alternative frames to the victimhood narrative through inviting the viewer to reflect themselves in the lived experiences of incels.

I know I said I wasn't gonna sympathize with incels, and I know they don't want my sympathy anyway, [...] but on some level I can't help it. The Internet is for introverts, so I'm sure a lot of people watching this feel the same way. I bet some of you have been this guy. I've been this guy. (ContraPoints 2018:00:17-00:18)

The video has shown to be effective in reaching alt-right leaning viewers, and has had an impact on men within incel communities perhaps because of the acknowledgement and affirmation of the perceived problems in social relationships and feelings of pain which makes men drawn to the community and its ideological beliefs (Baer, Kossack & Posselius 2017:354). But even though ContraPoints argues that she can sympathise with the pain incels are feeling, she underlines that this sympathy does not apply to the misogyny which “just needs a spark to turn to violence” (ContraPoints 2018:00:32-00:33). ContraPoints shares that upon reading comments from previously far-right/alt-right men who has started to question their ideological beliefs by watching her videos, she has witnessed tendencies that men who move away from the far-right to the left do not necessarily become de-radicalized (2019c:00:24-00:25).

[...] in reality it's not like they go from far-right extremists to complacent centrists. No. Most of them go far left. A lot of times they become communists or anarchists. So I watch them go from far to my right to significantly to my left. It's not really de-radicalizing so much as re-radicalizing. (ContraPoints 2019c:00:24-00:25)

The function of men's personal, social and political self-interests in ideologies and its relation to personal experiences in societal structures of power (Baer, Kossack & Posselius 2017:354) is further reflected on by ContraPoints when she argues that the left has not found a final solution to what she calls “the man question” (2019c:00:18). The man question can be understood as a counter question of feminist Marxist critique to the claim that gender conflict must not be allowed to interfere with class solidarity (Hartmann 1979:23). But instead of focusing on women, the question poses the counterargument of how men without a critical

understanding on gender inequality and the patriarchal structures that constricts both men and women can be included in the new digital left.

Even if we did succeed at ending capitalism, there would still be gender, and my boys would still need some model of what it is to live a good life as a man. (ContraPoints 2019c:00:26-00:27)

The skewed view on gender inequality within alt-right movements here understood within the ideology of masculine victimhood (Träbert 2017:276), meaning the belief that due to female emancipation and the mainstreaming of feminist ideas men hold a marginalized position within the gender hierarchy, becomes put in relation to “the man question” already prominent within the project of a new digital left, which according to ContraPoints lack alternative representations of masculinities. ContraPoints reasons that the privileged position and the lack of struggling can itself become a form of vulnerability (2019c:00:22-00:23).

If you're actually being oppressed you have a struggle. You have something to fight for, and therefore a purpose. But for a lot of men their lack of purpose puts them in search of a struggle. And that, along with the loneliness and the lack of a positive identity is what makes men vulnerable to recruitment by the manosphere groups and by the alt-right. (ContraPoints 2019c:00:22-00:23)

ContraPoints argues that the emotional response to victimhood is still being experienced, creating a form of “masochistic epistemology, whatever hurts is true” (2018:00:30). The masculinities presented by ContraPoints above can be understood within Laclau and Mouffes strategies for social change as an attempt to frame an narrative of struggle where men experience an unjust power inequality (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:155-156), which becomes a paradox in a new digital left discourse where social feminist forces critique of classical Marxism has decentred class as the universal base of oppression since men, and white men especially, due to their privileged position in a patriarchal, white supremacist society makes the perceived victimhood illegitimate (Thompson 1997:204).

[...] in a post-LeftTube internet, we're so used to laughing at this vocabulary, and to be fair it is very funny, but we forget, especially us grills<sup>37</sup>, that for a lot of men these words actually do tap into a deep, existential angst. (ContraPoints 2019c:00:22-00:23)

ContraPoints argues that to create a sense of improvement in their personal situation and importance to their lives, the transforming force has to come from the men in question, and not from her or any other woman, arguing “I can't mom you through this one boys. You're on your

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<sup>37</sup> Meaning Girls

own. You have to help each other.” (2019c:00:27-00:28). This exemplifies a self-reflexivity by LeftTube content creators in their own position, underlining that even though they participate in the transformative project through critically engaging in various topics in acts of solidarity, the actors of social change and emancipation need to be the viewers within these oppressive structures themselves.

In order to promote social change and a sense of improvement presented for men in their personal situation, different narrative of masculinity are framed within the discourse of LeftTube by Philosophy Tube’s videos centred around his personal experiences of mental health issues, suicide attempts and domestic abuse, framed against the backdrop of hegemonic ideas of masculinity, making the narrative of a man as a victim incomprehensible (2018a, 2019a). Philosophy Tube shares his own inability to recognize his own trauma without the help of therapy, and uses the symbol of the hero Super Man and a cosmonaut floating in space to illustrate societal norms on men to act rational, suppress their emotions and maintaining high functioning and productive even as they are suffering (2018a, 2019a). Philosophy Tube subverts these norms through expressing his own intense emotions of sadness, anxiety and fear, arguing “toxic masculinity's a hell of a ship to pilot when you're suffering” (2018a:00:24). In this sense Philosophy Tube does not only talk about other forms of performing masculinity, he also performs them for the viewer as a strategy to show that other ways are possible and it that sense provide an alternative masculinity that male viewers can reflect themselves in.



Figure 9. Philosophy Tube 2019a, 00:02:11

Philosophy Tube furthermore emphasizes that norms about masculinity affect both men and women in a negative way (2019a:00:20-00:21).

[...] there's a recognised phenomenon of cis men in particular, who are often encouraged to be independent and strong, becoming dependent on their female partners because what they really need is friends or a therapist. And that's obviously pretty emotionally draining for all you girls, and pretty emotionally precarious for us guys. (Philosophy Tube 2019a:00:20-00:21)

In this sense, the narrative is not framed as an injustice due to a societal structural oppression of men by women in the sense of an ideology of masculine victimhood (Träbert:276), but instead as a patriarchal structure where the norms of masculinity disadvantages men, making feminist theories of toxic masculinity compatible. In these the narratives around “the man question” or “the woman question” instead becomes reframed in a larger narrative of a shared question, which challenges structural relations of power affecting everyone across gender binaries and evokes a social movement where a plurality of actors can work towards social change (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:83).

Philosophy Tube argues that “there is no doubt that the stuff I make shapes my audience and their responses” (2020:00:40), and explains that he has had instances where he has become a positive role model of masculinity within LeftTube:

Whenever I do live events, I get people coming up to me, saying, "Your videos helped make me a better person." I especially get a lot of young guys coming up to me, saying, "You showed me a model of masculinity which I felt was wholesome and not toxic."(Philosophy Tube 2020:00:40-00:41)

Philosophy Tubes narratives evoke a form of recognition in emotions of pain perceived by men in general which has been politicized by alt-right, while providing perspectives of lived experiences as well as alternative to toxic masculinity, which can be used as a bridge between the alt-right and the left. Philosophy Tube shares that there have been instances where “big-name, right-wing YouTubers contact me and others behind the scenes trying to get out of the game” (2020:00:39). That these sort of interactions are possible I argue can be connected to the counter-speech tactics in LeftTube presented in the previous chapter, where changing one's opinion is not a failure but a possibility of growth and change which further challenges the polarization strategies deployed by the alt-right (Ebner 2018:171-172). The comment section of ContraPoints Incels video also show several examples of how the recognition of pain can have deradicalizing potential, which is exemplified by a viewer thanking ContraPoints for “helping me change myself for the better in ways that I thought were never possible, and for helping me to understand the societal and gender issues of our time better than anyone else has done.” (James MacN Cheese, RE: ContraPoints 2018).

Through the frame suggested by Willie Thompson for future left wing social projects (1997:231), LeftTube as a new digital left social project show through their understanding of grievances of far-right communities possibilities to move beyond one-dimensional power analyses and political movements and actively create an understanding of intersecting complex systems of oppression and privilege to reach groups of people who previously antagonized leftist feminist critical perspectives with convincing alternatives to social problem and previous self-interest within ideological claims.

Combined with the proactive intellectualizing project within LeftTube discussed in the first part of my analysis, LeftTube demonstrate a potential of challenging hegemonic discourse, expanding the hegemonic social imaginary on oppression, and further organizing a plurality of actors within a broad transformative project of social change.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis has examined strategies and ideological claims through the lens of gender and sexuality in 21 videos from 4 popular content creators within the phenomena of LeftTube on YouTube to contribute to the broad research field digital culture and online counter-ideological activism in particular. Building on the tentative research done on the phenomena focused on LeftTube's potential as a socialist movement with possibilities to encourage political engagement, I have further proposed that LeftTube can be conceptualized as a digital new left social force, organizing reactive counter-ideological claims to the alt-right as well as actively evolving previous left-wing transformative social projects and critical theories through adapting them to an online audience to promote feminist leftist perspectives with emancipatory goals towards men in particular. I have proposed that content creators deploy innovative and dynamic counter-speech strategies in tuned to alt-right grievances, and through using strategic meaning-making, and jokes and memes as bold tactics on the social arena where they previously been articulated, they provide a counter-cultural response disrupting polarization strategies and binary world views. Through inviting the audience to participate in a transformative political project based on critical theories without reproducing hierarchies of academia/non-academia, and using failure as a transformative force in relation to gender and sexuality, a source of growth in relation to one's own beliefs and a strategic vantage point to critically challenge destructive social practices, content creators promote social change for a plurality of actors under a shared interest. Responses by the viewer collective presented throughout the analysis concludes that these strategies can have a transformative potential for individuals, suggesting that further research centered on the viewer demographic specifically could provide insights in what counter-ideological claims and tactics are fruitful for some viewers and not others. Additional themes identified but outside the scope of this study where for example whiteness, the use of western academia in online grassroots movements, the possibilities for resistance of LeftTube in the centre of techno-capitalism and queer content creators precariousness in an economy based on parasocial relationships on YouTube, which could be entry ways to paint a broader picture of the phenomena and create a deeper and more nuanced understanding in the future.

The method of feminist critical discourse analysis has provided a politically invested scope focused on ideologically biased discourses where gender operates in complex ways in systems of oppression as well as in the organization of struggle against it, functioning to analyse how ideological values and ideas have been used to empower LeftTube as a social group and in



creating a shared social goal. Other methods such as quantitative research focused on the viewer demographic or on possible impacts LeftTube content has on its viewer base, as well as exploring the production of LeftTube content and reasons behind it through qualitative in-depth interviews with content creators could be used to provide a fuller understanding of the phenomena as it is today. The material used in this study has covered a selected sample from a handful content creators from a specific lens done at a certain time, and therefore explore the phenomenon from a particular perspective giving a partial analysis rather than a objective representation of LeftTube as a whole. The position from where I have conducted my method and viewed my material has certainly affected the knowledge production and what I have seen and not seen. If LeftTube content and the community around it continues to grow and how this will take form remains to see in the future, but I do hope further interdisciplinary work is conducted about the phenomena from different disciplines, perspectives, and methods.

I do suggest that academia in general, but gender studies and other critical disciplines interested in production and reproduction of power particularly, would benefit from future attentiveness and openness to the political debates and knowledge projects done on the internet, since they are often centred around contemporary great events related to power where gender in many instances is omni-relevant, and since the format itself produce a vast amount of easily accessible material of the production and reproduction of meaning-making and beliefs from heterogeneous groups around the globe. The impact this sort of knowledge can have has been perhaps best illustrated in the market of data mining, which purpose has been to extract knowledge of patterns, relationships and trends for economic as well as political gain. If the strategies and tools created within this specific interest could be adapted and used ethically within a progressive, intersectional feminist knowledge production, perhaps the conquest of the internet has not yet been lost.

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