

Comrade Britney and the Critical Potential of Marxist Memeing

by Sophie Publig

“It’s comrade Britney, bitch” is written in pink pseudo-cyrillic letters over a red background.¹ In the center of the image, we see the famous counterfeits that form the classic genealogy of Marxist thinkers: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Britney Spears. Wait, Britney Spears, US-American pop hit machine since the late 1990s? If she never struck you as a thinker of the proletariat, perhaps it’s time to go through her lyrical œuvre that has not been short of making labor a subject of discussion. Take, for example, the 2013 electro pop classic “Work B*tch”:

*You want a hot body? You want a Bugatti?
 You want a Maserati? You better work bitch
 You want a Lamborghini? Sippin’ martinis?
 Look hot in a bikini? You better work bitch
 You wanna live fancy? Live in a big mansion?
 Party in France?
 You better work bitch, you better work bitch
 You better work bitch, you better work bitch
 Now get to work bitch!*²

Performed over an up-tempo beat using an instructor-like tone, Britney is indoctrinating us with the classic neoliberal myth: the more you work, the more you can consume. Although “Work B*tch” can easily be dismissed as one of countless post-2008 dance pop songs trying hard to overshadow the bleak reality left by the economic crises still clinging to the ideology of the American Dream, a surprisingly large part of Britney’s œuvre focuses on notions of work, service, exploitation, empowerment and agency. The oppressive entertainment industry is directly addressed in her hit singles “Circus” and “Stronger”, while songs like “Piece of Me”, “Gimme More” and “Overprotected” deal with the exploitation of her persona through the media, to name but a few. But even if Britney seeks to openly denounce the working conditions of the entertainment industry, how did she end up becoming a Marxist meme?

In order to approach this question, we need to examine the contemporary rise of Marxist images among the digital cultures of Millennials and Gen Z. Mostly distributed through pop culture and memes, leftist slogans are widespread and easily accessible – even purchasable in the form of merchandising – via platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and reddit.



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It's Comrade Britney, Bitch meme, from: KnowYourMeme, 2020, URL: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/001/800/632/6fd.png> (17.1.2021).

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Genius, URL: <https://genius.com/Britney-spears-work-bitch-lyrics> (17.1.2021).

Marxist memes seem to be especially popular among the generations that would only know about realist socialism from textbooks, the stories of their parents, or the partially still ongoing reconstruction of Post-communist countries since the 1990s. So, in what way are Marxist memes in general and *Comrade Britney* memes in particular important for taking political action, considering they even bear any kind of critical potential?

On March 23, 2020, Britney Spears reposted a text image of leftist writer Mimi Zhu on Instagram with the caption “Communion goes beyond walls 🌹🌹🌹”³.⁴ Zhu’s text referred to the isolation caused by global lockdowns due to Covid-19, putting virtual connection at the basis of community so “[...] we wil[l] feed each other, re-distribute wealth, strike.” As can be seen in the comment section, this post was understood as Britney’s long-speculated outing as Socialist,⁴ mostly due to her use of the red rose emoji.⁵ Fans left comments from “We Stan a communist queen 🤩” to “Please advocate for wealth redistribution and solidarity on the air. We need powerful voices like yours to advocate for us, *Comrade Britney*. Your unique position can allow you to be the voice that awakens class consciousness in everyday Americans. 🌹🌹🌹” and “We need Britney Spears statues to replace the confederate ones. Comrade Britney is queen 🙌🔥❤️”. Britney’s post also resuscitated a form of memeing known as *Comrade Britney* memes that recontextualize her songs as Marxist ideas through an interplay of song lyrics: a resurfacing article from the satire website The Daily Mash from 2013⁶ depicts a meme interpolating a line from her 1998 breakthrough song “... Baby One More Time” from “my loneliness is killing me” to “my ruling class is killing me”.⁷ So, did a pop icon worth several millions of dollars suddenly become aware of unjust power relations fueled by capitalism and responsible for serious systemic inequalities or is it simply “woke” to be anti-capitalist on Instagram in 2020?

While it’s ridiculous to argue over Britney becoming the new Marxist messiah, I do believe that as a leading pop icon that has been part of the industry since her early childhood, her influence on millions of people is indisputable. However, we need to be clear that it wasn’t Britney who outed herself as belonging to the Democratic Socialists of America or some other organization, not to mention that she didn’t address any issues like class struggles or the necessity of wealth redistribution. Instead, the community of her fans and other interested parties created the meme blueprint of *Comrade Britney* and circulated it on the internet. In this regard, the praxis of memeing is seemingly direct democratic: anyone can create, publish and spread a meme and hope for it to blow up. The impossibility lies rather in predicting which memes will go viral. In her 2014 book *Memes in Digital Cultures*, Limor Shifman gives six factors necessary to enhance potential virality: “positivity, provocation of high-arousal emotions, participation, packaging, prestige, and positioning.”⁸ For example, positioning means that cute memes might perform better after some days of mainly negative news when there seems to be a growing desire among people for positive content. Humorous and positive memes seem to perform better in general, which was especially evident in the catastrophic year of 2020, when memes became a quasi-coping mechanism for many and

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Instagram, 23.3.2020, URL: https://www.instagram.com/p/B-FppKxAFxm/?utm_source=ig_embed (17.1.2021).



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Screenshot of Britney's repost of Mimi Zhu's text, from: Instagram, 23.3.2020, URL: https://www.instagram.com/p/B-FppKxAFxm/?utm_source=ig_embed (17.1.2021).

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In the context of US-American politics, I want to emphasize that in this text, I am referring to US-American understandings of Socialism that perhaps correspond more to Democratic Socialism than Socialism from a European perspective.

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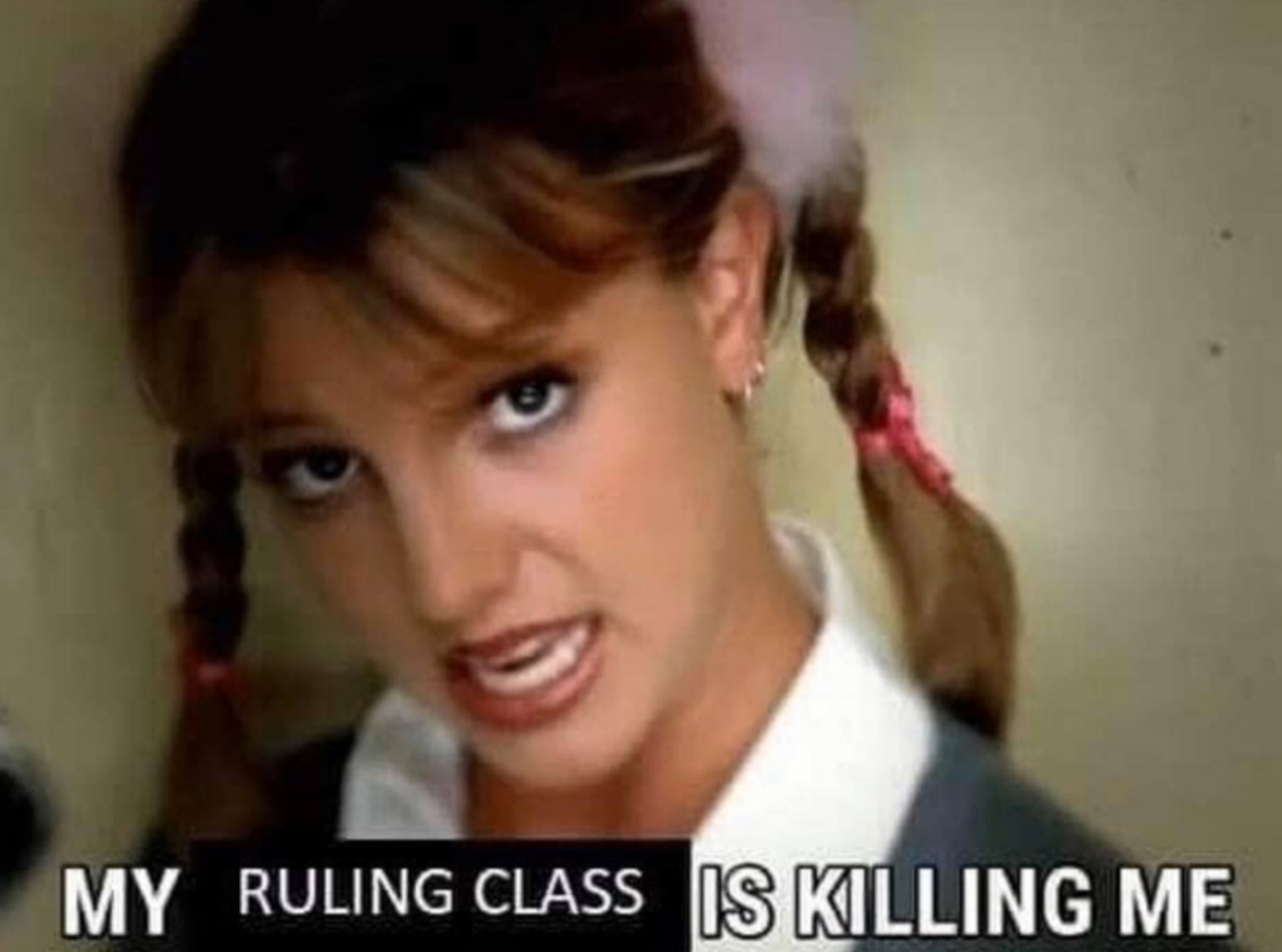
The red rose is a symbol for Socialism and can also be found in the logo of the Democratic Socialists of America. See <https://www.dsusa.org> (17.1.2021).

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Britney Spears espouses Marxist theory of labour as value, in: The Daily Mash, 14.10.2013, URL: <https://www.thedailymash.co.uk/news/arts-entertainment/80353-2013101480353> (17.1.2021).

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Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge 2014, p. 66.



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Marxist lyrical interpolation of "... Baby One More Time", form: Sassy Socialist Memes, 29.3.2020,
URL: <https://www.facebook.com/sassysocialistmemes/photos/2634715596849388>
(17.1.2021).

remained one of the few possibilities of digital coming-together. While often dismissed as nothing more than funny images with texts, memes raise a lot of substantial questions, for example, on collective authorship. The author is not dead here, but plainly not important as an individual. The author may create a meme, but it will only go viral once it is liked, commented and reposted by others, thus highlighting the importance of public participation. In this regard, the multi-layered praxis of memeing makes collective and horizontal modes of authorship accessible.

But we also need to keep an eye on who is primarily consuming memes. Without affirming any vicious preconceptions about Boomers, memes are especially popular among the digital natives of Millennials and Gen Z. Both generations have also been labeled as crisis generations, where most people – especially the less privileged ones – have endured a variety of crises before ever hitting the age of 30: the global panic after the terrorist attacks in 2001, the 2008 financial crisis, climate change and all its corresponding environmental crises, the European migration crisis, structural racism as criticized by the Black Lives Matter movement, the Covid-19 pandemic and the general trend toward more social inequality all while growing up in a time unironically dubbed “surveillance capitalism”⁹. So, we shouldn’t be surprised that people are getting fed up and turn toward different ideas of governance and society. Even in countries traditionally wary of Marxism and Socialism such as the United States – we’re recalling the excitement among her followers after Britney supposedly came out as “democratic socialist” – there has been a downright hype about left-wing politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. It turns out that these political agents are especially popular among people born in 1982 and after.¹⁰ The Democrats seem to be aware of that, also focusing on Millennials as a target group as exemplified in a video of Cardi B interviewing Bernie Sanders.¹¹ Adopting a cultural-pessimistic stance, we could argue that members of the Democratic Party simply understood how to ride a wave to reach more voters, knowing very well that they operate in a condition referred to as “capitalist realism” by Mark Fisher. This “widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it”¹² turns Socialism into a dusty ideology of the past, unjustly culminating in a lifestyle whose sole purpose is to annoy your conservative family members. Unfortunately, this reproduction of by Marxism is further propelled in Marxist memes: as an image, an aesthetic, something to appropriate on the outside. Sharing Marxist memes is neither activism, a public confession on how to imagine a different system than capitalist realism nor is it revolutionary – in most cases, it is nothing but a cheap laugh.

However, staying culturally pessimistic does not bear any disruptive potential either. Let’s turn a blind eye to the illusive activism of Marxist memes for a moment and turn toward the new possibilities of coming-together and the circulation of political content: as a Millennial, I believe that for most of my peers, memes are an uncomplicated and humorous way of relating to others, similar to an inside joke in a friend group, politics aside. Although it is

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Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, New York 2019.

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According to YouGov ratings of US-American politicians.

See Bernie Sanders,

URL: https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/explore/public_figure/Bernie_Sanders

and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,

URL: https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/explore/public_figure/Alexandria_Ocasio_Cortez-Public_Figure (17.1.2021).

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Bernie Sanders, Bernie x Cardi B, in: YouTube, 15.8.2019, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1ubTs-rZFBU> (17.1.2021).

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Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism. Is there no alternative?*, Winchester 2009, p. 2.

tempting to think of Marxist memes as foregrounding community in form and content, the way it is practiced right now, it could not be farther away from it. Speaking from a privileged position as a Doctoral researcher, I admit that the jokes of Marxist memes don't hold a candle to studying Marxist philosophy. The packaging of instantly recognizable photos of historical people like Marx or Stalin paired with easy-to-digest punchlines produces images that are desirable due to their simplicity, suggesting that even people with limited knowledge of these topics are able to understand them – at least as long as they can read the basic structure of memes as a triad of image, text and layout. But is it possible to transfer complicated, twisted and meaningful knowledge in this way, or are these always abstracted? Without evoking the classist stance that Marxist philosophy may only be taught properly in academia, in memes, Marxism inevitably dumbs down to the aesthetic of an old revolutionary guy with a funny beard, that may or may not be Santa Claus.¹³ The memes known as *Handsome Stalin* shine a light on this logic: in contrast to many memes parodying Stalinist communism with his familiar visage as a middle-aged man, *Handsome Stalin* depicts him as an attractive 23-year-old. While the “old” Stalin memes focus on jokes about the Soviet Union or the dictator's passion for rewriting history,¹⁴ *Handsome Stalin* memes solely focus on his one-of-a-kind appearance.¹⁵ Although Soviet symbols are literally inscribed onto his photoshopped body, they do not necessarily recall any political context; they appear solely as recognizable symbols. This is precisely why Marxist memes cannot transport all the contents of Marxism: when boiled down to an image, it is too easy to stop at the joke and don't dig deeper into the structural and historical premises shaping the very condition parodied by the memes. Emma Dabiri describes a similar issue when comparing the Black Power movement to contemporary activism in her book *Don't Touch My Hair*:

Our Black Power forebears were anti-consumerist, grounded in socialist and Marxist theory. Today, 'activism' is seen by many as a legitimate hustle through which to 'get your coin'. On top of this, we buy products and 'lifestyles' that demonstrate our wokeness; we are persuaded that we can 'shop ourselves free'.

*Thus, today's protestations remain largely devoid of any analysis of capitalism. The fact that most forms of inequality find their origins in the neoliberal logic underpinning the industries and institutions in which we want to be represented is largely ignored.*¹⁵

Quite likely, the mere possibility of ordering sweatshop-made sweaters with Marx's portrait via Amazon would leave him turning in his grave. But where can we draw a line between spreading the word for a cause and selling it out? Are memes just too easy to appropriate for capitalist realism?

A crucial factor often neglected is that even the funniest, richest in content and most inspiring memes arise from a capitalist mode of thinking and production. I believe that we need to situate Marxist memes as fragments of ideas on the history of class struggles circulated inside a capitalist system via technocratic software, meaning: while the content

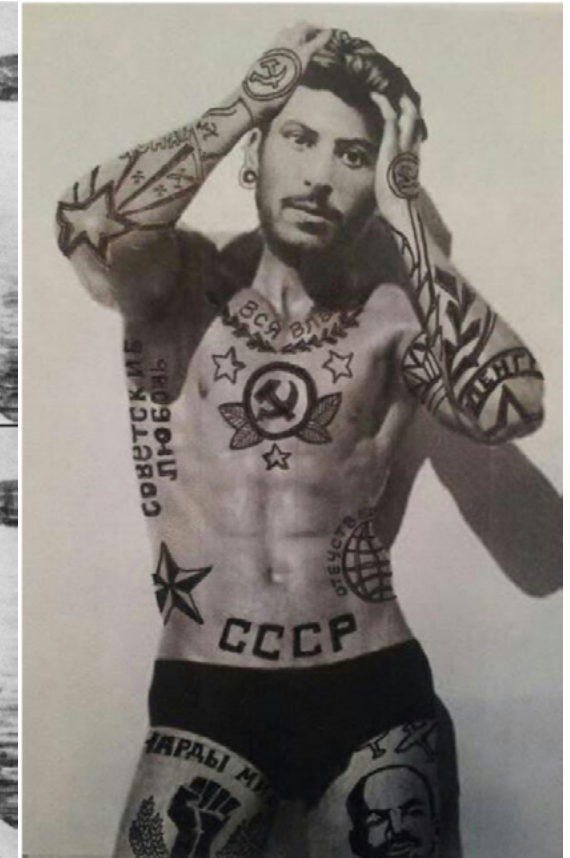
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The topic of Marxist merchandising requires an analysis on its own. For reference, Amazon sells lots of clothing and accessories with Marx's portrait. Amazon, URL: <https://www.amazon.com/Not-Santa-Claus-Communist-Marxist/dp/B07NCCPZQM> (17.1.2021).



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Stalin - My plans/2020 meme, in: KnowYourMeme, 2020, URL: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/001/885/014/b6f.jpg> (17.1.2021).



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Handsome Stalin/Stalin Model meme, from: KnowYourMeme, 2018, URL: <https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/001/300/513/5fe.jpg> (17.1.2021).

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Emma Dabiri, *Don't Touch My Hair*, New York 2019, p. 137.

may be political or even anti-capitalist, we cannot disregard where it came from and through which means it circulated. Particularly consistent people might even go so far as to claim that Marxist memes cannot exist within capitalist realism. This ideology may be as self-critical as it is self-defeating, incapacitating everyone aspiring for change even with the smallest means/memes. I cannot stress enough that this kind of self-induced critique is at fault for blocking new modes of coming-together: it's true, there will always be more important things to criticize than ephemeral jokes using Britney's face – but it is also a really good place to begin with! In this respect, I propose to dive even deeper into the twisted entanglements of memes, capitalism, Marxism and pop culture.

Approaching “Work B*tch” from a lyrical perspective, we can understand Britney's exhortation as a reminder to get our tools and machines and work manually if we want to be able to afford a Bugatti or Maserati one day. However, in the first verse, Britney sings: “Work it hard, like it's your profession”. The phrase “work it” can also be understood as “making your physical assets work for you” like in the chorus of RuPaul's famous song “Supermodel (You Better Work)”: “You better work, cover girl, work it girl, give us a twirl”¹⁶. It's interesting to note that this saying is speculated to have its origin in sex workers strutting around during work.¹⁷ Whatever interpretation of “work” we settle on, both understandings are directly related to selling your labor power – and regarding that Britney has been doing so for most of her life, we can put this in the greater context of her life. With the release of her first album at the age of 17, she was groomed into a career as a pop star since her early childhood days. In fact, songs like “Lucky” already pointed at the predicament of having-it-all-but-not-being-able-to-enjoy-it,¹⁸ just like her media image oscillated between an innocent teenage girl and slutty vamp. While the tabloids didn't lose any opportunity to feature Britney and her alleged escapades on the front page, the drawbacks of growing up in the public eye finally culminated in Britney's notorious mental breakdown in 2007.¹⁹ This also proved to become a turning point in her career, causing her to not only lose custody of her two children, but also the legal rights over her financial means.²⁰ This practice known as conservatorship named her father James P. Spears the legal ruler of Britney's estimated fortune of \$60 million in 2008.²¹ Nevertheless, Britney has been working perpetually for the past twelve years – she just didn't get unconditional access to her rewards. Theories about her wellbeing and possible exploitation have been on the internet since the late 2000s, arguing that the strict conservatorship bears no relation whatsoever to her combined burden of world tours, a four-year-long Las Vegas residency, and the release of five albums since 2007. In the early summer of 2020, a series of highly staged and badly done videos of Britney were released on Instagram²², further fuelling conspiracy theories and leading to dubious remarks by fans, such as instructions to wear a yellow top in her next video to show she's in danger.²³

Although Britney has never made a statement on these videos, legal records confirm that she officially requested her father to step down from his duties as a sole conservator. Britney's wish is not to get out of the conservatorship, but to appoint Bessemer Trust, a private family

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Genius, URL: <https://genius.com/Rupaul-supermodel-you-better-work-lyrics> (17.1.2021).

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“While not proven or confirmed, the expression may have originated among “working girls”, i.e. prostitutes/streets walkers, who would make a sultry walk etc. “work” for them to attract business.” Urban Dictionary, “work it”, 12.8.2014, URL: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=work%20it> (17.1.2021).

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In “Lucky”, Britney sings: “She's so lucky, she's a star/But she cry, cry, cries in her lonely heart, thinking/If there's nothing missing in my life/Then why do these tears come at night?” Genius, URL: <https://genius.com/Britney-spears-lucky-lyrics> (17.1.2021).

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Although part of the promotion of her album “Circus”, the documentary “Britney Spears: For the Record” seeks to unearth possible causes for her public breakdown. Britney: For the Record, 2008, URL: <https://vimeo.com/441937549> (17.1.2021).

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Laura Snapes, Britney Spears' request to remove father from guardianship delayed to 2021, in: The Guardian, 24.8.2020, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/aug/24/britney-spears-request-remove-father-guardianship-delayed> (17.1.2021).

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Madeline Berg, Inside Britney Spears' Fortune: The #FreeBritney Movement And Why She's Not On Forbes' New List, Forbes Online, 13.10.2020, URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2020/10/13/inside-britney-spears-fortune-the-freebritney-movement-and-why-shes-not-on-forbes-new-list/> (17.1.2021).

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For example, Instagram, 31.7.2020, URL: https://www.instagram.com/p/CDUZtF-gYZm/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link (17.1.2021).

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BBC News, Britney Spears: What exactly is the #FreeBritney campaign?, 22.7.2020, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53494405> (17.1.2021).

office, on that role. After a repeated denial of Britney's request, her lawyer explained to the judge that Britney "[...] will not perform again if her father is in charge of her career."²⁴ Whatever her reasons for changing the conservatorship are, they won't change the fact that the voice of a 39-year-old woman is oppressed while her labor power is exploited, with her management, record label and own family profiting from her labor. In this case, refusing to work is probably the best thing she can do right now.

Of course, the oppression of one white woman is not meant to spark pity among the millions of underprivileged people suffering from exploitation and worse on a daily basis. It rather shows that the current condition of capitalist realism is rotten to the core to such an extent that even supposedly privileged superstars cannot escape from it. Sadly, there is a history of wrongful conservatorships in the entertainment industry that conforms to the same principle. It happened to Mariah Carey, who was legally controlled by her former manager and ex-husband and only made it out with the collective support of her family, her therapists and the public eye.²⁵ Joni Mitchell has been put into conservatorship ruling over her health decisions after suffering a brain aneurysm in 2015.²⁶ Amanda Bynes has had a legal conservator since 2014 after a public series of mental health issues that she is publicly seeking to annihilate.²⁷ Of course, all of these cases are different and some may be more justified than others. However, it is downright creepy that even for highly privileged superstars, there is a mechanism to render the fruit of their labour inaccessible for themselves. It is simply not just to enjoy Britney's music but not care for her ongoing working conditions. Therefore, standing with Britney, in this case, means not accepting the structures of oppression and exploitation but demanding every workers' right to autonomy and self-determination. The road to liberation is a process and not a direct checkpoint within reach, which is making every act of resistance to capitalist realism count. Perhaps, it is useful to look at Marxist memes in a similar way: even considering their mode of production, circulation and substantial shallowness, they might just motivate you enough to take political action and wear your voice – whatever that means to you. Who knows, one day, *Comrade Britney* might just live up to her name.

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Megan McCluskey, What to Know About Britney Spears, Her Conservatorship and the #FreeBritney Movement, in: Time, 8.1.2021, URL: <https://time.com/5921720/britney-spears-conservatorship-free-britney/> (17.1.2021).

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Spencer Kornhaber, There's Never Been a Story Like Britney Spears's, in: The Atlantic, 6.10.2020, URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/10/why-free-britney-saga-feels-so-familiar/616587/> (17.1.2021).

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Jennifer Maas, Joni Mitchell's friend appointed her temporary conservator, in: Entertainment Weekly, 5.5.2015, URL: <https://ew.com/article/2015/05/05/joni-mitchell-conservator-leslie-morris/> (17.1.2021).

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Sarah Midkiff, Amanda Bynes Plans To Challenge Her Conservatorship In Court, in: Refinery29, 22.2.2020, URL: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/02/9453461/amanda-bynes-conservatorship-challenge-court-instagram> (17.1.2021).