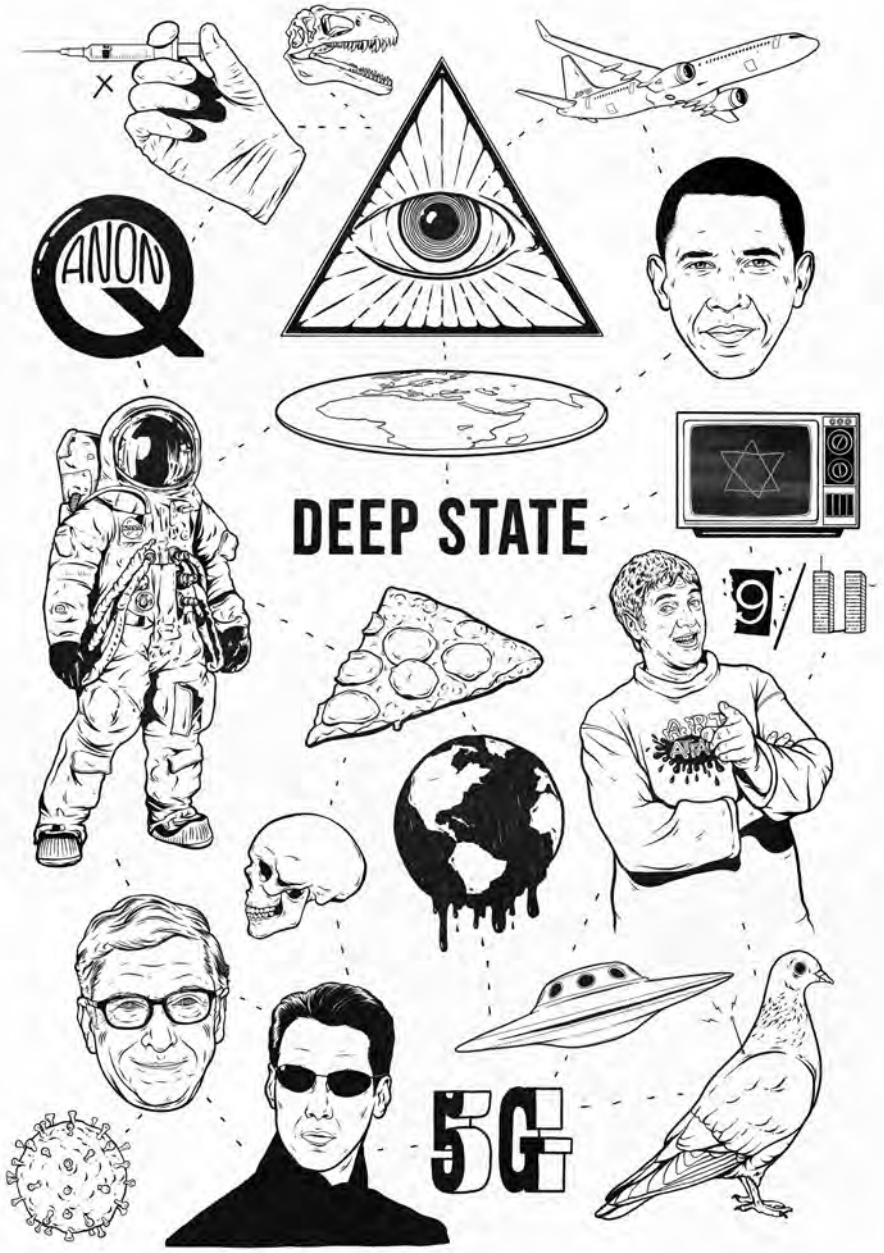

CONSPIRACY THEORY

Flat Earthers, Anti-vaxxers, Coronavirus, Jeffrey Epstein: the period since 9/11 has brought a discordant parade of conspiracies to the mainstream. In our socially stressed and narrativistically uncertain times, official accounts start to seem brittle and uncertain, always one conspiratorial gotcha away from total collapse. There are no commonly circulating explanations for how the world works, no systems of thought to rely on.

This might seem to make metapolitics (of whatever type) more difficult: conspiracies, like viruses, spread without centralised coordination, and prevent any one group from directing the flows of explanation entirely. The far right's conspiratorial narratives are just as susceptible to being undercut as any other explanation. But the general condition does benefit them: rising uncertainty is fertile ground for far-right conspiracy, where moral simplicity, a baroque intricacy masquerading as sophistication, and operationalised prejudice thrive. Although informational chaos doesn't spread *only* the ideas of the far right, it benefits them more than anyone else.

Conspiracy theories are the recruiting tools of the far right, but they are also its paradigmatic mode of thought. We might even ask if there is anything to distinguish far-right conspiracies from others. Might, as Andrew Wilson has suggested, the "extent of far-right usage of conspiracy theory [mean] that an articulation of current conspiracy theories is to evoke political positions on the extreme right, wittingly or not?"[35]

The psychological explanation for conspiracies is obvious: the world, which is an intimidating and increasingly confusing place to be in, can be made simple. All its complexities – and the intense sense of ignorance that one must face when trying to say anything – can be reduced into a single narrative. Better yet, this narrative is flattering to an individual's prior beliefs about themselves, others, or the groups to which they belong. Conspiracy theories' explanatory simplicity, which cuts cleanly through thick jungles of information, comes at the price of any tests for truth. Because explanations go untested, they feel deeply true, even certain, as they fit flush to your most basic prior beliefs. This can feel like 'thinking for yourself' – maintaining a certain intellectual hygiene – which is rare and pleasant in our informational deluge. As society demands more and more cognitive power to navigate, explanatory ability becomes a defining marker of a person's worth, and turns explanation into a saleable commodity hawked by far-right influencers.

Why, despite this apparent freedom to think anything, do the contents of conspiracy theories follow such predictable

patterns? It's not mere individual psychology that explains the often-predictable themes of conspiracies – their texture and uptake is afforded by the organisation of society. Our prior beliefs are not simply stuck in our heads, rather, they circulate, are played out in practice, and are selected at a wider social level.

There is no exhaustive list of where this selection might happen. After neoliberalism shredded the sites of democratic contestation, conspiracy theories provided a site for antagonism to be expressed. The traditional sense-making institutions of society are present here mostly negatively, as everything that conspiracists resist, although arguably news organisations in the Anglophone world have taken a turn for the conspiratorial too – perhaps most prominently The Sun's publishing of neo-Nazi conspiracy theory materials in 2019.[36] Instead, we must look to an ever-expanding list of dark and private places to see where this bubbling of conspiratorial thinking is going on: in conversations and their disappointments, in political organising and its failures, in individual hunts for information online, in the slow drifting apart of already atomised individuals, in a rapidly swelling and ramifying sense of personal betrayal.

Broad social and technical changes have shifted the landscapes in which conspiracy communities form. They are obviously not exclusively modern phenomena – anti-semitic conspiracies, for example, have been operative for far longer. But their density has increased in the modern period, and accelerated further since the rise of the internet.

Why? Sociologist Luc Boltanski argues that, in modernity, national boundaries of predictable reality have been overrun by capitalism's international drive. As capitalism overflows these stable sense-making boundaries, '*the reality of reality*' becomes suspicious – things start to seem uncertain at a profound level.[37]

Because there exist now, either on the far right or in society at large, almost no structured programme of political education, ideas can rarely be overturned wholesale – they must be changed piece by piece. It is this transformation that memes afford, in part. They shift from very amorphous perceptions of isolated phenomena to very high-level and general explanations.

In modernity, everything can seem to be coming from the outside: zoonotic viruses, hijacked airplanes, government intervention into life, alien masters of the universe. Conspiracy theories are often concerned intimately with space – not only with the location of the conspiracy's enormous distance from the conspiracist, but also with the need to localise power in space. In truth, of course, power *is* highly dispersed, nigh on unlocalisable. Fiat money, for example, is suspicious because it seems to be the mere assertion of the government's emanating power over society. It is juxtaposed often to the apparently clear, intrinsic, and localisable value of gold. Conspiracy theorists resist the distributed and complex character of modern life by reducing all manner of social stress to the *merely elaborate* effects of some more simple but overwhelming power. In

the contemporary period, society's general mediatedness, violent complexity, and crisis-riddled quality, as well as pronounced uptick in volatility to life, make fertile terrain for conspiratorial thought.

Conspiracies have a complex relationship with detail. They focus on particular moments, often circulating around stunning but unexplained coincidence (more common the more complex the world becomes). However, they evaporate on specifics: they condense the 'gears level' account of how the world operates into increasingly general statements, become unconcerned by the mechanisms through which power operates, as well as increasingly (as they totalise) concerned only with a general clash of abstractions. They therefore become immensely intricate as they run up against their own inconsistency – an inconsistency that can be used as further proof of secrecy.

This inconsistency also lets them split apart and mutate into variations that differ depending on their hosts' proclivities. These variations are not necessarily antagonistic, and endless variation allows their spread. The image of conspiracy theorists as isolated is largely untrue; they form large and complex communities online and in person, communities with particular features that work to sustain the conspiracy's power. Indeed, community is a consequence of the conspiracy's strangeness, a strangeness that makes them spread like pathogens. The anxiety they bring must be externalised: release from the panic of seeing beneath the surface comes from retelling, momentarily easing disquiet

at the cost of putting more of the conspiracy in the environment. Other people catch it, and they have the same reaction. Even at a low dose, it can be effective. Even if not explicitly believed, the conspiracy can morph your worldview, as one moment of doubt metastasises into another.

Online informational fragmentation is complex. This holographic stack of content, everything on top of each other, with the relations between them continually changing, lets people sift out information freely. This mixture of fragmentation, opacity, and world-wide accessibility (within certain limits) allows conspiracy-flourishing, as well as viral inescapability. The media architecture of the internet seems to lend itself to something like conspiracy: we are presented online not with a narrative thread to follow (unless we visit exclusively a single website or read a single blog, which is obviously atypical) but essentially a large and ever-expanding relational database, whose linkages are many but obscure, lending the force of finding connections itself a greater significance, even though their possible number is inconceivably vast.[38]

On some platforms, communities engage with events and arrange their ideas collectively, mechanisms that allow for a degree of coherence and stability to emerge, and for individuals to be held to account for their pasts, often in punitive ways. None of these conditions are true on imageboards. There, multiple users pick over events and content in a detailed way, without those explorations being in any way coordinated. The lack of stable identities means

users can schism on their interpretations of things without the social group falling apart. Each to their own explanation. The most potent explanations escape the imageboard and make their way out into the wider more 'suburban' internet.

However, there is no straight arrow of conspiracy theories flowing from the darker internet to the lighter; they travel back and forth. What continual circulation drives is not necessarily greater political extremism, so much as amalgamation: QAnon, the ultimate (for now) conspiracy theory, whose subgroups take in everything from ancient aliens to chemtrails to baby-eating, is a product of this mash-up without limit.

QANON

In the era of Trump, how might conspiracy theorists become enamoured of state power? Having long been suspicious of the government, in all its forms, those on the far right who think of Trump as *their guy* must now work to resolve this contradiction. Enter QAnon. QAnon is a conspiracy theory which states that Donald Trump is fighting a complex and secret war against a paedophilic cabal in 'the deep state'. It is sustained online by a series of 'drops' – essentially, cryptic posts from the person also known as QAnon, who purports to be a high-ranking official in the US government, aware of this secret struggle. These posts on usually anonymous imageboards, each bearing the same cryptographic code, are

picked over by a large group of conspiracists, all with their own particular interpretation of their exact meaning, but broadly in agreement on some major points.

This is somewhat anomalous among recent far-right conspiracy theories. Birtherism – the conspiracy that Barack Obama wasn't born in the US and was therefore ineligible to be President – was a piece of blatant racism and it fit a conventional logic. The Republican base needed to explain to itself its defeat. Similarly, the Jade Helm 15 theory stated that the government was preparing to put in place martial law under the cover of a military training exercise. A similar logic applies to conspiracies about the mass-shooting at Sandy Hook, where denying the reality of the violence shields oneself from the implication that gun violence is endemic to society.

In contrast, the first 'Q drop' came in October 2017 – *after* Donald Trump had won. Why would a victorious political force need a conspiracy? The election of Trump was experienced by many as an exhilarating disinhibition, a marker of almost total possibility. QAnon allows the far right to exist both as a government and as a movement, struggling *against* another, deeper, government. Conspiracy here resolves the contradiction between the movement-form and the state-form of far-right politics. In doing so it reveals that the disappointment to which QAnon attends is with Trump for not locking up the Clintons.

By reigniting this possibility, QAnon allows access to the distant figure of Trump. A felt personal connection with

Trump was enough for Anthony Comello, a Q follower, to murder Frank Cali – a New York crime boss who Comello believed was in the 'deep state' – under the impression that he was doing what Trump wanted. At the same time, QAnon allows for the conspiracy theorist far right to swing into line behind greater state control, operating under a fantasy in which the state is cleansed by a military operation involving both the military itself and the population at large. In its formation of a group who believe the truth has been revealed to them, QAnon – probably the most complexly syncretic movement in history – begins to resemble a religion.

In Germany, the *Reichsbürgerbewegung* (Reich Citizens' Movement), like 'sovereign citizens' and 'freemen on the land', believes that the modern German state is illegitimate. It has also been growing at a rapid pace, doubling since a member shot a police officer in 2016 to approximately 19,000 members.[39] Members of this conspiracy have syncretised it with QAnon. The international anti-lockdown demonstrations of 2020 were awash with QAnon's elaborate symbolic language.

This openness to other forms of thought – syncretism – has long been regarded as a fundamental component of fascist politics. The leaps and generalisations that syncretism implies are raised in QAnon to a high, directly weaponisable pitch: a form of political belief in which nothing is too grotesque to be believed about one's enemies. Child sex trafficking – the subject of many QAnon conspiracies – is simply the end result of a tendency towards debauchery

that QAnon believers see in their demonic opponents. As it generalises further and targets more than just specific elites, it may come to serve very well as the cognitive foundations of a mass fascist movement.

WHITE EXTINCTION THEORY

On the far right, the theory of white extinction spawns endless variations. It has a simple core: white people are being slowly erased in a process of massive demographic transformation, either as the by-product of neoliberalism (or 'globalism') or through the deliberate actions of a particular group, most commonly Jews. This is, of course, false. Demographic change is highly abstract, but, as with the idea of degeneracy, 'evidence' is easy to come by – more or less any anecdotal experience with someone deemed insufficiently white can contribute to its confirmation. This abstractness – demographics is an almost technocratic concern – paradoxically lends the theory an apocalyptic air: proof is all around you, and thus it seems to warrant almost limitless violence.

Unlike QAnon, which is still distinctly subcultural (in form, if not necessarily size), white extinction theories permeate much of what the far right says, thinks and does. Forms can be found in far-right tendencies that share little in the way of strategy or presentation – from the prescriptions

of race scientists to the manifestos of mass shooters. On the internet, white extinction theories, once the preserve of niche movements, can now command audiences of millions. The Christchurch shooter's manifesto, which contained such conspiracy theories, spread across the internet as his attack was streamed on Facebook.

Such theories are comprehensible only from a certain view of race: that racial identities are immutable and their boundaries strict; that those identities imply distinct and unchangeable cultural or genetic characteristics; and that 'civilisation' is a consequence of those characteristics. From this view spring two entailments: birth rates must be controlled (and ergo, some non-white people must be removed, be that through deportation or extermination); and white people must be induced to have children.

Conceptions of a white race under existential threat are not a product of the internet, nor are they in any way new. In 1920, eugenicist and Ku Klux Klan member Lothrop Stoddard published *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* in which he bemoaned the decline of white birth rates, rising populations of non-white countries and the growing influence of nationalist movements in colonised countries which, he argued, would lead to the downfall of empire and the destruction of white supremacy.[40] It was largely a journalistic translation of Madison Grant's 1916 *The Passing of The Great Race*,[41] which was itself an updating and focusing of the works of European race theorists such as Arthur de Gobineau, Houston Stewart Chamberlain,

and Georges Vacher de Lapouge. Richard Spencer wrote a forward for this latter book in 2013; Hitler called it his 'bible'. The theories expounded by these men bear a striking resemblance to the white extinction theories of today, although 'whiteness' in the earlier theories is more focused on its supposed 'Nordic' subtype. The boundaries of 'immutable racial types' turn out to be themselves somewhat changeable.

White extinction is a kind of synthesising theory, a property that makes it infinitely adaptable. It amalgamates race science, the misogynist need to control women's bodies, anti-semitism, assertions of insurmountable cultural difference, and, ultimately, apocalypticism. Certain aspects can be emphasised or de-emphasised to taste. The version taken up by identitarian movements in Europe, the 'Great Replacement', draws on Islamophobia to portray Muslims as 'occupiers',[42] controlled by nebulous 'replacist elites'. The White Genocide Manifesto, authored by neo-Nazi David Lane, is more explicit, naming a 'Zionist conspiracy' intent on exterminating the 'White race'.[43] The former has found greater purchase precisely because it shies away from the extreme idea of an intentional Jewish plot and thus is able to appeal to wider sections of the right. Broadening our scope further, the outlines of white extinction theory are visible in the 'stranger in our own lands' narrative peddled by parts of the conservative right.

What is the experience of these conspiracies like? A feeling of unstoppability (also a wider hallmark of antisemitic

theories) marks out white extinction theory from others such as QAnon, where the 'great awakening' – a moment of redemption – is always just around the corner. The glacial pace of demographic change produces, paradoxically, a feeling of immense urgency: we have to act *now* before it becomes entirely unstoppable. Patriotic Alternative's website hosts a countdown to the day on which white British people will supposedly become a minority in the UK. The ticking of the huge and alarming seconds obscures that this purported event is still – at the soonest – 45 years away.

This conspiracy, like many others, starts out focused on particular events and spirals into an all-encompassing fight for survival. The story of the clash of increasingly general abstraction is also visible in the transformation of ideology on the extreme right. The far right's thinking since the Second World War has become more and more condensed – such that it can be 're-expanded' in any number of ways, to fit a huge variety of occasions – into a simplistic Manichaean struggle between 'the System' and 'the Order' (in the terminology of *The Turner Diaries*, for example),[44] a mythic antagonism that remains prominent today.

What will come to pass if the far right does not act? The apocalypse. The apocalypse, for the most part, is a kitsch idea, of extreme generality. In the most banal versions, people of colour form a permanent voting block against 'white interests'; in the most extreme, metaphysical race war breaks out and white people are exterminated. The chain from this proposition to preemptive murder becomes

obvious. If the apocalypse is just around the corner, it means there is no longer anything left to lose, which makes necessary – or finally allows – the genocide of the far right's enemies.

ANTI-SEMITISM

There is always anti-semitism. Anti-semitism is a theory apparently open to almost any data: the insularity of Jewish communities, just as much as their openness, is taken as further evidence, for the antisemite, of the conspiracy. And, like all the most dangerous conspiracies, the lack of evidence is taken as evidence for it. While *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious forgery, outlines a very specific plan for world domination, the openness of antisemitism allows it to explain more or less any phenomena, at more or less any scale. 'Cultural Bolshevism' or 'Judeo-Bolshevism' and later 'Cultural Marxism' are terms used to designate the supposed programmatic force behind large-scale social changes. They are wildly different at times, but each variation holds several things in common, perhaps most importantly a spectral quality, in which the purported Jewish conspiracy "is considered to stand behind phenomena, but not to be identical with them."[45]

Anti-semitism never left the far-right, but it has become a prominent marker of distinction between two tendencies: civic nationalism and ethnonationalist. It is difficult to

overstate just how often the latter blames Jews for the many and various ills of society. Jews incite urban disorder through the mainstream media (which they control) and by funding organisations like Black Lives Matter; they degrade Western masculinity through their control of the porn industry, and they control geopolitics through the financial system. The motivation for this seemingly endless mendacity is often left unexplained. Of course, if there is a belief in immutable racial characteristics (almost universal on the far-right) then one is not really required. There is no motivation beyond Jews *acting in their nature*. Such is the argument, for example, of the elaborate scientific racism of Kevin MacDonald.

What does antisemitism provide for the people who believe in it? For those on the far right who imagine the fundamental unit of politics to be race, the lack of cohesive white consciousness, and, indeed, the innumerable really-existing conflicts between white people, require explanation. Anti-semitism in the 'Soros-funding' mode becomes a way of explaining why it is that white people join in with protests against police violence against black people. One of the key findings in Michael Mann's book *Fascists* is that the Nazis were people who found the class conflict of 1920-30s Germany distasteful.[46] They instead wanted to transcend it and re-establish the unity of the German people. 'The Jew' then becomes everything that frustrates the process of making this transcendent unity, namely, both politics and class conflict themselves. Even more abstractly, antisemitism is the result of *anger at the existence of politics itself*: the fury that

the community of white people, which in the racist's mind should be unified, turns out to be divided against itself. The Jews, in the contemporary period, by often, confusingly, *appearing to be white*, represent the minimal foundational distinction that constructs all political communities, with their unity and dividedness. The Jews, in antisemitic thought, are they who enforce the constitution of politics as such: as a broken unity.

One should be careful here of giving an overly-clever view of what anti-semitism contains. In an important fragment at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer write "One of the lessons of the Hitler period is the stupidity of cleverness. How many were the expert arguments with which Jews dismissed the likelihood of Hitler's rise, when it was already as clear as daylight."[47] As Adorno and Horkheimer say, in the pleasure of mindless violence against Jews, "the rational island sinks beneath the flood."[48]

FROM APOCALYPSE TO EXTERMINATIONIST ENVIRONMENTALISM

Michael Barkun categorises conspiracy theories into three types: event conspiracies, system conspiracies and super conspiracies. Event conspiracies explain a particular happening, often with reference to a deep and complex network of actors. System conspiracies discuss broad patterns of events, explained as the operations

of a particular group of people. In super-conspiracies, multiple conspiracies are linked together hierarchically and in a nested fashion, and the world is seen as controlled by a distant but all-powerful evil agent who decides the outcomes of lesser conspiracies.[49]

We are going to add two other important dimensions to the classification of conspiracies: the depth of who is implicated and the clarity of the referent. These are important, we think, because they tell you about the politicisation of a conspiracy theory. The deeper and broader the conspiracy goes – the more it expresses itself in everyday action, or in ways that are entirely secret even to those who want to prevent it – the more it seems that only a heroic act of social cleansing can eliminate such a conspiracy. What must be done to overturn the conspiracy is therefore quite different – as different as a reactionary preference for an imagined past world and the call for a total social revolution under fascism.

Apocalypticism – although it may seem like it *literally couldn't get any worse* – isn't actually the most extreme form of conspiratorial thinking. While it has an immense breadth, it sometimes lacks depth. Deep conspiracies concern the entirety of the social body, all the way down into its most intimate details: the chemicals that flow through your body, people's individual preferences, and, most importantly, the very ability to discern conspiracy itself. For example, the conspiracy theory that the government is putting stuff in your water is less extreme than the one that people enjoy eating soy. In the former, the government is your enemy.

In the latter, everything and everyone is degenerate. You can imagine the extremity that might be needed to escape such a condition. The conspiracist thinks they need not just opposition to a particular group but a complete phoenix-like burning and resurrection of society.

What is striking is that the far right almost never encounters a new event. What it encounters instead is each new event as a mere continuation of an existing conspiracy, modulated so as to accommodate (and retrospectively predict) whatever has just happened. This is how an event that started in Wuhan, China could be understood *both* as a Jewish conspiracy *and* as an attack on imagined Jewish global domination: both were existing narratives, and the COVID-19 pandemic merely an extension of what was already imagined. It can be placed on either side of the grand conflict. In 2021, the apocalypse *actually is* around the corner. Climate systems breakdown, global pandemics, imminent and ongoing financial crises, increasing antibiotic resistance, and a host of other potential calamities threaten the reproduction of human society on Earth. The far right are unlikely to be able to deal with climate breakdown, except as a function of what they *already* think. We will return to this in our chapter on ecofascism.

For now, let's turn to the production of trusted faces from this hell of noisy information and their propagation of conspiracy as a tool for constructing that most banal of objects: the personal brand.