

A Socio-Historical Perspective for the Study of Conspiracy Movements

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Conspiracy movements—mobilizations of people united by a shared belief in a conspiracy theory and a shared desire to expose and subvert this conspiracy (Halford 2023: 188) provide a rich case for sociological study. The stakes of combating their spread are politically significant and their examination can teach us much about the contemporary social world as conspiracy theorists are a population unusually excited to explain their worldview to others. While contemporary studies of conspiracy theories have typically been the domain of psychologists who argue that conspiratorial frameworks are most often adopted by highly emotional, low SES individuals that are susceptible to psychological fallacies and scholars that highlight the particularities of New Media, I argue that the sociological literatures of the “cultural turn” of state formation and on comparative-historical methods offer distinctive historical insights into the study of the Anti-vaccine and QAnon movements. Through qualitative analysis of cultural texts created by QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists, trends stemming from a capitalist mode of production and the political reforms in 16th-century Europe are located as fruitful historically imbedded avenues for scholarship.

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¹ Conspiracy theorists are a population unusually excited to explain their worldviews to others.

²See van Prooijen 2017; Lantian et al. 2021; Smallpage et al. 2020: 266.

recently, scholars that highlight the particularities of New Media, I argue that the sociological literatures of the “cultural turn” of state formation and on comparative-historical methods offers distinctive insights into the study of the Anti-vaccine and QAnon movements.

QAnon is a predominately right-wing conspiracy movement³ that began in 2017 when the mysterious figure “Q” reported on the Japanese network 4-chan that the CIA had completed plans to arrest the then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Although its members have diverse and wide-ranging beliefs, core QAnon beliefs include that a group of pedophiles run the world, lizard-like elites harvest the blood of children, and Donald Trump is the “chosen one,” destined to overthrow the current political order.⁴ Anti-vaccine conspiracy theories have circulated since the invention of vaccination, but their political prominence waned significantly over the 20th century. This trend reversed in 1998 with the publication of Andrew Wakefield’s study that falsely linked administration of the MMR vaccine with early-onset autism in infants (Jolley and Douglas 2014). My focus is on anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists that mobilized after this reversal. Today, anti-vaxxers claim that the administration of vaccines has dangerous or otherwise unwanted effects which benefit political and economic elites.⁵

In this paper, I argue that a key limitation of these dominant approaches is that they are “presentist,” meaning that they locate causal mechanisms in temporally-contiguous timeframes to the current conspiracy movements. To better understand these conspiracy movements, I offer the literatures of the comparative-historical methods and the cultural turn

³ PPRI, 2022

⁴ Bloom and Moskalenko 2021; Moskalenko and McCauley 2021; Amarasingam and Argentino 2020.

⁵Walter, Ophir, Lokmanoglu, and Pruden 2020; Zuk and Zuk 2020

as possible pathways to realize a more historically informed perspective. First, I outline how the QAnon and Anti-vaccine conspiracy theories have been studied by social-psychologists and scholars of New Media, highlighting contributions by these literatures and, more importantly, key limits. After a literature review, I propose a sociological approach more attuned to long-term historic factors.

Next, I apply these theories to the study of the QAnon and Anti-vaccine conspiracy movements. Overall, I find that the cultural-turn literature helps us understand how social actors that propagate conventionally fringe ideas as “the world is run by pedophilic lizard-like elites” have gained legitimacy in recent decades, and the comparative-historical methods literature provides us with a methodological and linguistic toolkit to understand the longer causes of these conspiracy movements. Longer-timescales stretching back to the foundations of the economic system of capitalism and the political reforms in 16th-century Europe are located as possible historically imbedded avenues for scholarship.

Conspiracy theories as Studied in Psychology and New Media Studies

Historically up until the present, psychology has been the dominant arena in which the study of conspiracy theories has taken place (van-prooijen 2018; Bilewicz, Cichocka, and Soral 2015; Freelon 2023). This research centers on demographic and cognitive factors. On the demographic side, research has focused on education level and income. Large swaths of psychological research have argued that conspiracy theorists are less educated than the general population. This approach is indebted to Richard Hofstadter’s (2012 [1964]) seminal essay that argues that conspiracy theories are “political pathologies,” undesirable social problems believed by the least learned of society. In the decades since, Hofstadter’s claims have gained empirical support from studies that find that conspiracy theorists are less educated and financially advantaged than the

general population (e.g. van-prooijen 2017; Lantian, Bangeux, and Gauvrit 2021; Swami et al. 2014). As Smallpage, Drochon, Uscinski and Klofstad conclude in a review of contemporary conspiracy theory literature, “one highly consistent finding across studies is that income and education are negatively correlated with conspiracy thinking in the U.S.A (2020: 266).

On the cognitive side, research largely focuses on cognitive biases and psychological fallacies (Brotherton 2014; van Prooijen, Klein, and Dordevic 2020). Four especially important cognitive biases in explaining belief in conspiracy theories are the conjunction fallacy (Brotherton 2014; Agnoli and Krantz 1989; Rogers et al. 2009; 2011; Wabnegger et al. 2021), stereotyping (Khaneman 1983), confirmation bias (Weigmann 2018; Knoblock-Westerwick et al. 2017) and intentionality bias (Brotherton and French 2015; Douglas et al. 2016). This literature especially emphasizes two automatic cognitive processes—pattern perception and agency detection—as key in understanding contemporary conspiratorial thought (van prooijen, Klein, and Dordevic 2020).

QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy movements have seen a steady stream of scholarship of cultural sociological scholarship, and one causal mechanism located time and again is social media (Hannah 2021b; Bleakely; Forberg 2021; Conner and MacMurry 2021). And this approach is not without merit. First, both QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracies are “Big-tent” conspiracy theories, meaning that there is much variety in geography and beliefs within the movement (Rothchild 2021; Bodner et al. 2020). Social media is a unique space where people of diverse locales both connect through digital means and are siloed into echo-chambers. For example, people in the Facebook Group QAnon Patriots may have different views than the Gab group QAnon Supporters. Second, social media is a place where algorithms steer even political moderates to news stories and other visual media (such as memes and videos) that cover the

topics of, and often endorse, Right-wing extremist positions such as QAnon (Forbert 2021; Conner and MacMurray 2021).

Contemporary research has documented that the most popular, and thus economically profitable, news stories center upon elites, controversial figures, and emotional debates (Harcup and O'Neill 2001; 2017; de los Santos and Nabi 2019). Discussions of QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories serve well the needs of for-profit media, as the stories are virtually guaranteed to gain an audience. Anti-elite sentiment is a crucial component of the anti-vaccine and QAnon conspiracy theories. Many anti-vaxxers believe that political elites profit from vaccines they know to be deadly, while many Qult members hold that pedophilic elites are responsible for a litany of social and political problems (Kata 2012; Hughes et al. 2021; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). Additionally, leaders of both movements characterize themselves as “outsiders” to the current order (whether epistemological or political). Thus, it is hardly surprising that news stories about QAnon and the anti-vaccine conspiracy theory are often referred to, categorized, and coded as “controversial” by the algorithm (Xu and Sasahara 2022; Maci 2019; Dube, Vivion, and MacDonald 2015). Finally, emotional appeals are key in the discourse of both camps (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021; Cuesta-Cambra, Martinez and Gonzalez 2019).

Thus, research has focused on how the desire for “clicks” also causes information to be disseminated repeatedly even to those who do not seek it out. News stories covering QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories are widely broadcasted over various media, as the motive for profit encourages the spread of arresting mis/disinformation. These structural constraints are especially pernicious in a social environment thoroughly permeated by media sources that deify sensationalism and conflict. For example, note the difference between the saturation of

conspiracy theories today with the partisan or ideological media of the past. Consumers of a different generation could purchase the Republican Chicago Tribune or the Democratic Chicago Times, or even the Chicago Socialist newspaper The American Appeal. Conversely, today's consumers find it almost impossible to avoid QAnon and anti-vaccine sentiments. Even aimlessly viewing "shorts" on YouTube featuring humorous TikTok clips are no respite from conspiracy theories, as even these shorts are interspersed with QAnon and anti-vaccination propaganda (Cho 2022). Media scholars Couldry and Hepp (2016) insist that media participation is no longer an individual choice, arguing that we are entering a new phase of "deep mediasation" that overarches "every domain of life." Expressing a similar notion, Deuze (2012: xiii) argues that, "we do not live with, but in media" in our contemporary hyper-real age." When events occur that involve the QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, ideas associated with them spread quickly through digital means. For example, when Q made his/her first post in nearly two years in July of 2022, media attention was immediate and overwhelming—covered by CNN, Fox News, Mashable, the Guardian, the Daily Beast, Vice, and the NY Times.

The psychological and media-focused approaches offer real and important contributions to the study of conspiracy theories, but they do not paint a comprehensive picture. What is missing from these studies is a focus on cultural factors and history. It is these traditions as studied in sociology that I turn to next.

The Cultural Turn

Cultural turn scholars challenge so-called theories of state autonomy and "Bellicose" theories of state formation. State autonomy theorists contend that state actors can implement political decisions without having to meaningfully contend with factors aside from economics (of chief importance, the ability to levy taxation) and coercive means (war, police, and other threats of

violence). By contrast, cultural turn scholars assert that the possible actions of state actors are constrained by additional factors that are neither fully economic nor coercive in nature.

A central constraint on state actors discussed by cultural turn scholars is the need to contend with the phenomena of legitimacy (Weber 2019 [1921]; Bourdieu 1994; Schaar 1981; Loveman 2005; Michelman 2013; Morgan and Orloff 2017). No matter how many economic and coercive resources that states control, if political leaders fail to be seen as legitimate, their claims will fall on deaf ears. And the consequences of lacking this crucial quality are significant. States seen as illegitimate may struggle to implement even the most banal and seemingly straightforward practices—such as civil registration and conducting a census (Loveman 2005: 1654). Additionally, legitimacy helps determine the effectiveness of the economic and coercive resources that states control. Morgan and Orloff (2017: 4) build upon Max Weber’s argument that, without legitimacy, states and the actors within cannot maintain a “monopoly of violence.”

Importantly for cultural turn theorists, legitimacy is “socially constructed,” meaning that it is neither natural nor inevitable. Bourdieu (1994: 15) famously defines legitimacy as a “politically produced phenomenological relation.” More recent sociologists on the whole agree with Bourdieu that legitimacy is socially constructed but enrich his theory with historical and conceptual contributions (Zelditch and Walker 2003; Johnson, Towd, and Ridgeway 2006; Lado 2018). Loveman (2005) provides a concrete historical example in which state actors and institutional mechanisms contend with the issue of legitimacy.

Thus, the cultural turn literature attempts also to understand how state actors come to be seen as legitimate and how the validity of claims come to be taken for granted, or “reified.” Bourdieu famously defines the concept of “symbolic power,” as the ability of political leaders deemed legitimate to determine what “constitutes the given” (1994: 14). Loveman builds critically upon

Bourdieu to answer the historical question of how *states* acquire symbolic power, treating the Brazilian “war of the wasps” as her case study (Loveman 2005: 1654) For Loveman, states acquire symbolic power through two cumulative mechanisms. The first mechanism is the “primitive accumulation of symbolic power,” or the processes by which state practices come to be seen as legitimate (ibid, 1657). The second is the “routine exercise of symbolic power,” or the process by which these forms of legitimacy come to be reified through “regulation, codification, routinization, and socialization” (ibid, 1659). Recent cultural-turn scholars further complicate simplistic notions of state autonomy by adding more nuanced dimensions to the conceptualization of the state. For example, Bourdieu adds the categories of cultural/information capital (knowledge) and symbolic capital as constitutive components of a state.⁶ Importantly, forms of capital still function according to their “own logics” and are “interdependent” upon each other, meaning that economic and coercive capital cannot operate without having to contend with cultural/information capital and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1994: 5, 9).

Comparative-Historical Methods

Recent comparative-historical scholarship has been structured around debates regarding temporality, causality, and structural analysis (Sewell 1992; 2005; Pierson 2003; Mahoney 2004; Lange 2012; Collier and Munck 2022; Bagpy 2022). As scholars in this subfield are by definition taking a historical perspective on the study of the social world, they are united in a belief that a long temporal emphasis in the studying of “causes” is an important one. This longer

⁶ Even more pointedly, Morgan and Orloff claim that “[s]tates concentrate and deploy both material *and* symbolic powers.” The authors argue that this has been emphasized since Weber took seriously both “states’ control of the means of coercion” and “the centrality of legitimacy to any form of rule” (Morgan and Orloff 2017: 17).

historical emphasis allows crucial mechanisms seemingly outside of the causal picture to enter the center of causal analysis.

Pierson's 2003 article is a critical piece of scholarship that brings home many points in comparative-historical methods and has been built upon substantially. Pierson argues that the study of causal mechanisms has seen too much work that is focused on "immediate" causes that are "temporally contiguous and rapidly unfolding," especially in the fields of political science and economics (Pierson: 178). Pierson likens this set of "quick/quick" explanations to a tornado in that both processes develop rapidly and last a short period of time (Pierson 2003:178). Arguing against the overemphasized use of these "Quadrant 1" explanations, Pierson locates three other sets of "time horizons" that he contends can also meaningfully explain social phenomena—short outcomes with a long causation period, long unfolding outcomes with a short causation period, and long outcomes with a long causation period (Pierson 2003: 179). Additionally, Pierson aims to differentiate between different sorts of slow-moving causal processes, as well as different sorts of slow-moving causal outcomes. In his analysis of previous historical research, he pinpoints three varieties of slow-moving causal processes—cumulative causes in which the changing variable is continuous but "extremely gradual" (e.g. Putnam 2000; Gellner 1983), threshold effects in which a variable increases until large-scale changes occur rather quickly (e.g. McAdam 1982; Granovetter 1978), and causal chains in which a change in one independent variable— either directly or indirectly—yields large-scale social change (e.g. Mahoney 2000; Swank 2001).

Sewell's 2005 article has seen similar amounts of profitable engagement. Sewell advocates for an "eventful sociology," arguing that significant moments in history may continue to shape the options possible for future social outcomes. Events are "relatively rare and influential

happenings” that “significantly transform structures” (Sewell 2005: 100).⁷ And events that occurred even hundreds of years in the past can significantly shape future events and social relations. This is because Sewell insists that an eventful sociology assumes that social relations are “characterized by path dependency” meaning that what has happened at an earlier point in time affects the possible outcomes of future sequences of events (Sewell 2005; 102).⁸

The Cultural Turn and Conspiracy Movements

The cultural turn literature’s emphasis on the importance of legitimacy in constraining state actions is an important perspective to consider when analyzing the rise of the QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy movements. A belief shared among members of both conspiracy movements is that government employees and mainstream scientists form an evil cabal and should not be trusted. Thus, the claims and actions of government employees and mainstream scientists carry low levels of legitimacy for members of these conspiracy movements. By contrast, QAnon believers and anti-vaxxers see the claims and actions of other social actors as highly legitimate—Trump among the former group, Anti-vaccine activist Andrew Wakefield among the latter (Rothschild 2021; Motta and Stecula 2021). The implications of this are profound. National and state-level vaccine mandates promoted by government

⁷What Sewell and other comparative-historical sociologists mean by “structures” is both complex and debated. As a way of entry, in his 1992 article *A Theory of Structure*, Sewell defines structures as “mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resonances that empower and constraint social action and tend to be reproduced by that action” (p. 27). Yet, less than a decade later, Sewell changes his tune by adding to this initial definition “modes of power as a constitutive component of structures” (1996: 879).

⁸ It is important to note that, while the authors contend that historical moments hold important keys to understanding the present, they steadfastly deny that all answers about our present world can be found in these moments of time. Sewell derides Tilly and Wallerstein as “teleological scholars” that mistakenly contend that careful historical study guarantees a full understanding and predictive capacity of “the entire future of social systems” (Sewell, 88). And while Pierson believes that Q1 explanations are over-represented, he affirms that all temporal structures are important lenses to cast upon the social world. He asserts that that one’s decision to choose a temporal structure depends on how “the analyst frames the research question” (Pierson 1003; 179).

employees and immunologists faced great difficulties in improving enforcement partially because anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists did not see the claims of these antagonized groups of legitimate (Haeder 2023; Wollers and Steel 2017).

The key *historical* question beckoned by this situation is—how did it come to be that Trump’s and Wakefield’s claims were considered “legitimate” among conspiracy movement members while those of epidemiologists are not? The cultural turn literature provides us pathways to answer this question. One possible path forward is to investigate the infrastructural means through which Trump and Wakefield’s claims come to be seen as legitimate. In the case of Wakefield and Trump, it is not the infrastructure of a census in which their claims are constantly displayed and eventually reified. Instead, claims that support the QAnon and Anti-vaccine conspiracy theory are frequently displayed through the infrastructure of social media and far-right news programs. Taking Loveman as a case, how did it come to be that the mediums through which Wakefield and Trump communicate with their followers come to be seen as legitimate? Of Loveman’s four modes of “administrative extension,” (processes that “enabled the accumulation of symbolic power” and made easier extraction and coercion) imitation sheds the most light on the spread of the anti-vaccine and QAnon conspiracy movements (Loveman 2005: 1654).

Politically extremist television news programs (such as Sky News) gain their legitimacy largely through copying aspects of mainstream news programs that are seen as more traditionally legitimate. Extremist news programs imitate the structure, format, and even pictorial layout of the mainstream. Recurrent tropes include: an (often male) news anchor placed in center of the screen wearing a suit and tie, logos of the network placed in the bottom and top corners of the screen, and lower-third banners which display the issue at hand

through a combination white text on red background, signaling that the issue is of utmost importance. Sky News’s expansive profits reminds us that imitation,⁹ like the other modes of administrative extension, functions to increase extractive capacities (Statista 2023).¹⁰

(Figure 1)

(Figure 2)



A Sky News Anchor discussing the debate over the use of hydroxychloroquine. Although the medicine was designed to treat autoimmune diseases, it was promoted among the anti-vaccine conspiracy movement community as an alternative method of combating Covid-19, even though taking hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for the disease is associated with increased risk of heart rhythm problems, blood disorders, and liver failure (WHO 2023)



A NBC News Anchor discussing a “special report” on the white house briefing from a coronavirus task force.

Extremist news websites similarly gain legitimacy through imitating the interface of mainstream media websites. Both interfaces place the title of the news platform at the top of the screen separated by a banner, include pictures of key figures to the right of descriptions of the news

⁹ Sky News made nearly 18 billion dollars in revenue in 2022.

¹⁰ Yet, at the same time that alternative news channels gain legitimacy through the imitation process, the mainstream news channels on which these imitation practices are based are seeing drastic declines in legitimacy (Fenton 2010; Waisbord 2018). Moreover, individuals most likely to find alternative sources of televised news media legitimate are often those who find traditional news media coverage the least legitimate. There are at least two different rationales for this outcome. First, imitation may not be the only causal mechanism at play. Taking a more psychological approach to the issue, large swaths of cognitive psychological literature demonstrate that individuals are more likely to fall prey to psychological fallacies when encountering large quantities of information at great speeds (Kahneman, Sibony, and Sunstein 2021; Costello and Watts 2016). This psychological causal mechanism has profound social consequences, as large-scale information exposure and, increasingly, information overload has been felt widely throughout Western societies (Rutkowski and Saunders 2010; Furlow 2020). Without more descriptive information about the demographics and practices of anti-vaccine and Qanon conspiracy theorists, we cannot definitively state that these social actors are more likely to fall prey to psychological fallacies than the general population. Yet, there is reason to think that psychological fallacies are important; psychological fallacies are a key driver toward anti-vaccine and Qanon conspiracy beliefs, as well as various conspiracy theories more broadly (Stolle et al. 2020; Brotherton and French 2014; Cohen 2022).

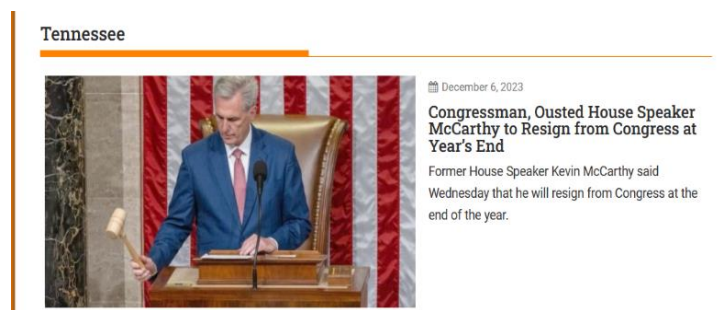
story and include comment features whereby what previously was mere onlookers can enter the debate through digital means. Alternative news websites are also highly profitable, and their legitimacy is also increasing at the expense of the legitimacy of traditional news (Kenix 2013).

(Figure 3)



The front page of the New York Times Website on December 6, 2023.

(Figure 4)



The front page of the Tennessee-Star on December 6 2023, an alternative website that shares writers and funding sources with the Alt-right platform Breitbart

The cultural turn's emphasis on reified notions also bears heavily on the study of conspiracy movements. The high variance in demographic markers among of conspiracy theorists casts doubt on the claim that they have a priori categories or schemas that invoke them to use their lived experience as evidence that the shadow government is constituted of lizard-people or that vaccines cause autism. The cultural turn literature provides us with fertile ground to pose hypotheses of how members of these conspiracy movements are primed to use their daily experiences as evidence of their conspiratorial beliefs.

Loveman's accumulation of symbolic power provides us with one such pathway. The claims that Trump and Wakefield make are likely to generate significant media attention and engagement. This is because both the topics they invoke and their claims are often politically controversial, emotionally charged, and involve anti-elite rhetoric— three topics that are

practically guaranteed to generate engagement (Harcup and Oneil 2001; 2017). When media consumers repeatedly see arguments that support Trump and Wakefield’s claims at the expense of counterevidence by accredited scientists and more nuanced political commentators, these media consumers are more likely to believe the former claims and change their activity (Karell et al. 2023).¹¹ Moreover, the content of such arguments regularly provides purported evidence that maligns the legitimacy of scientists and mainstream politicians, the very actors most likely to advance arguments that challenge those embraced by conspiratorial actors.

Comparative-Historic Methods and Conspiracy Movements

The comparative-historical literature’s emphasis on long temporalities in studying causal mechanisms provides a fruitful framework for studying conspiracy movements. A Piersonian Q1 explanation would locate important causal mechanisms in the invention of the internet and even more recently, the invention of social media. As described above, this has been the dominant approach, with a colossal corpus of literature describing the relationship between social media use and belief in the QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories (e.g., Dow, Johnson, Wang, Whitson, and Menon 2021; Hannah 2021b; Clark et al. 2022; Puri et al. 2020). Yet, Pierson’s thesis that Q1 explanations are over-represented in the social sciences holds well for the current case, as a large proportion of research on the QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories locates

¹¹ Research has shown that, in many instances, repeated exposure results in a heightened likelihood of a favorable stance, if not full acceptance, of worldviews. Especially important was Robert Zajonc’s discovery of the mere exposure effect: a psychological phenomenon in which individuals tend to develop a preference for familiar stimuli (Zajonc 1968; 2001; Bornstein and D’Agostino 1992). Scholars have demonstrated that repeated exposure to news stories is associated with more favorable opinions towards the topics that the stories cover—ranging from transgender rights to political candidates (Flores et al. 2018; Kim 2021). Other scholars have linked mere exposure and several social pathologies, including smartphone addiction and anti-Black racism (Chen et al. 2016; Ramasubramanian and Martinez 2017).

recent technological advancements or political outcomes as *the* key causal mechanisms (e.g., Dow, Johnson, Wang, Whitson, and Menon 2021; Hannah 2021b).

Taking seriously Pierson’s thesis would urge us to investigate alternative mechanisms whose effects are felt over a long period of time. This paper focuses on the Q4 explanations about the replacement of feudalism by capitalism as the dominant economic system in the West and, even further back, the flourishing of Enlightenment reason in society.

The mass adoption of a capitalist mode of production has been historically and recently associated with various social outcomes housed under the Marxian umbrella of “alienation”—most notably a dissatisfaction with working conditions and a phenomenological feeling of fungibility (Marx 1844; Silva 2019; Hochschild 2016). Here, the *movement* aspect of conspiracy movements is key in understanding their prominence within capitalist countries. Against the fungibility of a capitalist work relation, vested members of conspiracy movements see their lives as possessing crucial meaning—their anointed purpose is to spread conspiracy theories and increase the size of their movement, actions which will eventually defeat the shadowy creatures of the deep state. A second way that a capitalist mode of production supports the spread of the QAnon and Anti-vaccine conspiracy theories is its association with communal decline, a widespread phenomenon found in, and some argue caused by, capitalist societies.

A capitalist mode of production is linked to communal decline in two ways. One mechanism is the feeling of scarcity of time that occurs within a capitalist mode of production, facilitated by the elongation of the working day and seen in the workaholicism that pervades U.S. culture (Putnam 2000: chapter 10; Marx 1867 Chapter 10). A second mechanism is widespread use of a highly-profitable mass and social media infrastructure (Putnam 2000: Chapter 11;

Hesmondhalgh 2016). The addictive qualities of these forms of media consumption makes it increasingly difficult for social actors to carve out in-person social time (Meshi and Ellithorpe 2021; Parigi and Henson 2014).

Contrary to public imaginations of conspiracy theorists as socially isolated and atomized individuals, conspiracy theories and the movements that spread them provide opportunities for community in two important ways. The mechanism largely occurs in the mental life of conspiracy theorists and involves being comforted by reading and utilizing the communal rhetoric of these movements. Key phrases of the QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy movements include “divided you are weak, together you are strong,” “We, the people,” and “Where we go One We go all! (WWG1WGA), the de-facto tagline of QAnon (Chandler 2020; Hodson and Gosse 2022; Berman 2020). QAnon has been described as “radically participatory” due to its emphasis on “active engagement with social media” and its “collaborative, participatory dynamic” (Zuckerman 2019; Thompson 2022; Hannah 2021a; 2021b; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). Similarly, scholars have found that community building “has been central to the growth of the anti-vaccination movement online” (Duchsherer et al. 2020: 420; Van Raemdonck 2019).

The second mechanism is more embodied in a Bourdusian sense, meaning that it relates to how we position ourselves in the world and to other social actors in bodily, somewhat unconscious ways (Bourdieu 1984). Qult members and anti-vaxxers often engage in well attended in-person events, a rare development in the current era of communal decline. Organized events are found throughout all corners of the Western and Eastern world, and include conferences, symposia, rallies and—in extreme cases—violent acts. Recent examples include the “Patriot Double-Down Convention” in Las Vegas, the “God and Country Patriot Roundup” in Dallas, “YamatoQ” demonstrations in Shibuya Japan, the storming of the German Parliament in

August 2020, and hundreds of “Save the Children Rallies” held worldwide, ranging from Los Angeles to London (Bracewell 2021; Keady 2021). At the U.S. Capital insurrection on January 6th, 2021, QAnon supporters sporting garb of the conspiracy were found widely throughout the crowd. The 2021 Conservative Political Action Committee saw an open embrace of QAnon followers as the organizers sold QAnon merchandise at the event (Monacelli 2021).¹²

Scholars of a Sewellian orientation would ask which were the relevant “events” that transformed structures to create the conditions for widespread conspiratorial movement participation? In both the cases of the Enlightenment and Capitalism, various influential movements occur. The history of capitalism is a history of changing economic structures.¹³ At a baseline level, of course, the replacement of the long-established tradition of feudalism with industrial capitalism was the most fundamental structural change. More recently, the constant dynamism of a capitalist mode of production has resulted in transition from an industrial base to a digital one in which the profits from service-industries and financial activities are increasingly important (Bell 1973; Krippner 2011). Important events that encouraged and ossified a capitalist mode of production include the profitability of the slave trade encouraging other means of the mass sale of commodities, the invention of the assembly line and other Fordist technological advancements that facilitated cheaper mechanisms of industrial production, and Joseph

¹² Also, various scholars in the comparative-historical tradition would urge us to remember that, at each historical stage, there existed alternative economic institutions and ideologies that were lost to the dustbins of history, often for continent reasons. Throughout its history, various economic systems challenged capitalism’s global hegemony. Around the turn of the 20th century, for example, strong socialist sentiments could be found throughout the United States. It was the success of ideas propagated during expansive capitalist projects, such as the first two World Wars and the War in Vietnam that made these socialist notions increasingly untenable in the minds of people and reinstated the globalized capitalist order of today (Welch 2013; Berg and Rowe 2019). And although flourishing of Enlightenment thought may seem a natural or inevitable outcome, rich historical accounts tell a much more complex story that contain other competing sets of ideas and political movements that ultimately failed to garner similar levels of support (Trevory-Roper and Robertson 2010; Outram 2019).

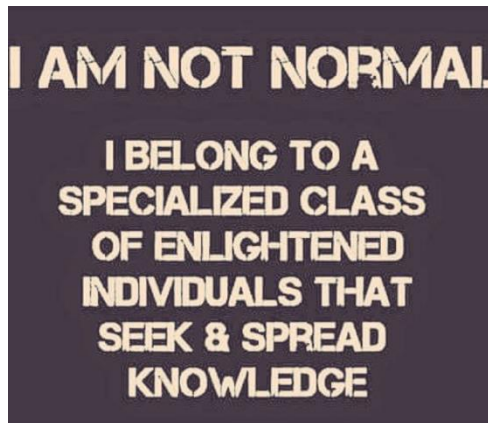
¹³ I stray a bit from Sewell’s conception of structures here, referring to economic structures and political structures.

McCarthy's famous anti-communist hearings in the mid-1950s (Smallwood 2008; Robinson 2000; Vidal 2015; Shogan 2009; Amade 2009: Ch 1).

The history of the Enlightenment is a history of changing political structures. Perhaps most notably, the long-established political structure of the monarchy was challenged by beckoning calls for increases in democratic participation. The spread of civic equal notions resulted in new political institutions where large swaths of the populus had their voices heard, such as democratically elected congresses (Outram 2019). A thorough line can be drawn between the creation of democratically inclined political institutions to contemporary claims about the importance of protected free speech.

Why is the "Enlightenment," conceptualized as an event, helpful for understanding the contemporary appeal of the QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy movements? Most notably, QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists regularly refer to themselves with language tied to the Enlightenment, including "truth-seekers" and, even more on the nose "enlightened individuals." Additionally, QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiratorial actors regularly reference the constitution and other political documents as evidence that conspiracy theories should not be censored by state actors. With these categories and cognitive schemas born in 16th century Europe present in the minds of conspiracy movement members, the seeming oppositions of enlightenment and ignorance, free speech and political violence, and democracy and autocracy are effortlessly transcended. A Sewellian approach helps us understand the process by which these antagonisms are smoothed over.

(Figure 5)



A social media post in the Gab group QAnon Patriots, a public group with over 150,000 members as of September 2023

Conclusion

Conspiracy movements are rightly designated as dismal vessels for the spread of socially-dangerous rhetoric, anti-scientific notions, and anti-democratic ideas spread through social media. But they are not merely this. Hopefully a deeper sociological lens can remind us that conspiracy movements are also the products of long-historical processes, technological advancements, the spread of ideas of various sorts, and reflections of generalized social grievances. And although established literature has located social media use, low SES, and susceptibility to psychological fallacies as key mechanisms, these regularities only constitute part of the story. In order to halt the various forms of injustice and violence associated with the spread of conspiracy theories, a nuanced and deep understanding of the polyphony of causal mechanisms that undergird their contemporary prominence in society is sorely needed.

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