Political thinking and rhetoric in conspiracy theories: Narratives of power, identity, and vengeance

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the potentially harmful influence of conspiracy theories on democratic politics. Despite such concerns and increasing academic research on many aspects of conspiracy theory, the political thinking expressed in conspiracy theories has been under-researched. Too often conspiracy theories are viewed through the lens of epistemology rather than politics, or are assumed to express a uniform political outlook, regardless of their particular content or context. In this research project, I seek to move beyond epistemological and overly general approaches without succumbing to apologism, focusing instead on how conspiracy theories adjust to the specific political moments they address. Using a combination of Rhetorical Political Analysis and the Discourse-Historical Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, I show that conspiracy theorists face a practical rhetorical challenge: how best to persuade an audience, when starting from a position of stigmatisation and marginalisation? The practical nature of this challenge requires us to analyse conspiracy theories in their specific contexts, and in this project, I focus on three cases: anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories, and COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. The analyses of these cases draw out the variety in the political ideas articulated in conspiracy theories, while also pointing to one recurring feature: a narrative of *ressentiment,* whereby an in-group is depicted as having been wronged by a threatening out-group, such that redress or vengeance is required. This narrative framework orders the political claims and identities articulated in a conspiracy theory, while also making a claim to victimhood. This thesis thus points to the benefit of taking conspiracy theories themselves as our object of study, examining cases' political thinking and rhetoric in relation to their particular context, rather than limiting ourselves to a one-size-fits-all approach to analysing conspiracism.

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Acknowledgments

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

1. Context

In the course of writing this PhD, I have had many conversations with peers who were quick to comment on the timeliness and relevance of my chosen topic. They pointed out that this must be the best time to be writing on conspiracy theories, as, surely, we are living through a period in which they are more influential than ever. The actual extent of conspiracy theory's influence is up for debate; some researchers have found conspiracy theory belief to be more common than we might expect (see Oliver & Wood, 2014; Goertzel, 1994), whereas others have reached the reverse conclusion, arguing that conspiracy talk has decreased somewhat in recent decades (see Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Likewise, researchers in cultural studies have stressed that conspiracy theory is marginalised and stigmatised, much more so than in previous eras (see Butter, 2020; Thalmann, 2019; Butter, 2014; Bratich, 2008).

Regardless of the full extent of their influence, it is clear that in the last few years some conspiracy theories have had an important impact on politics. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic struck shortly after I began this project, and in no time conspiracy theories had emerged to meet the occasion: did the virus really originate in a Wuhan wet market, or was it actually a bioweapon leaked by the Chinese government? Or could the virus have been concocted in the United States, and only subsequently brought to China? Was the pandemic a plot by China to wreak havoc in its rivals' economies, or was it part of a global elites' plan to impose a New World Order? Once life-saving vaccines had been developed to hamper the spread of the virus and lessen its impact on people's health, a different strain of conspiracy theories came to the fore. These claimed that the vaccines were unsafe, that pharmaceutical companies and the government knew this and were covering it up. Some alleged that the vaccines were part of a plot to depopulate the earth, or that they were implanted with tiny microchips through which the state could track and control its citizens (Goodman & Carmichael, 2020). These conspiracy theories were especially troubling as they posed an obstacle for the implementation of public health policy, opposing precisely those measures necessary for controlling

and restraining the spread of the virus (McCarthy, et al., 2022; Jolley & Douglas, 2014). The greater the number of people persuaded not to receive the vaccine, the greater the number of infections and severe complications that would occur, and the more difficult it becomes to bring an end to the pandemic.

Then, in the second year of my PhD, as the pandemic was still raging, Donald Trump lost his bid for re-election in the United States. Trump and his team promoted the notion that the election had been 'stolen' – that he had in fact been victorious, only for corrupt forces behind the scenes to cover this up. This aligned with the beliefs of QAnon, a pro-Trump conspiracist movement that believes in a threat to destroy America by globalist, satanic, paedophilic elites (Argentino, 2021; Coaston, 2020). In the weeks that followed, there was speculation that Trump might try clinging to power and refuse to leave the White House. The clamouring of Trump supporters to 'stop the steal' grew ever louder, culminating in the Capitol riots on January 6th, 2021. At that moment, American democracy seemed in real danger, and the spread of conspiracy theories was at least partly to blame.

Two years later, as I was in the final stages of writing this thesis, conspiracy theories contributed to yet another eruption of political violence, this time in Brazil. On January 8th, 2023, in a series of events that eerily mimicked the earlier Capitol riots in Washington, D.C., supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro stormed the congress building in Brasilia, as well as the supreme court and the presidential palace (Jeantet & Biller, 2023). Once again, a key factor driving the riot was a belief that the presidential election of the previous year, in which Bolsonaro had been defeated by the left-wing candidate, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, had been rigged (Nicas, 2023); that a conspiracy had handed the presidency to Lula. While the rioters did not achieve their goal of bringing about a military coup to overturn Lula's election as president, we were reminded again of the role that conspiracy theories could play in fuelling anti-democratic violence.

Regardless of whether one thinks conspiracy theories are particularly *prevalent* today, then, it is difficult to deny that they can have *significant consequences* for our politics and can pose *serious political and social problems.* Conspiracy narratives engage in cognitive mapping, "an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us"

(Jameson, 1992, p. 3). As in the cases mentioned above, conspiracy theories construct their own accounts of society and politics, and make claims about where power lies, who wields it, and how it is exercised. However, despite the clearly political dimension of such claims and narratives, the political contents of conspiracy theories have so far been under-researched by political theorists. In an overview of research in political science and political theory on conspiracy theory, Julien Giry and Pranvera Tika (2020) list all manner of sub-topics that researchers have written about, including: the social factors and reasons behind conspiracy theory belief; partisanship and conspiracy theory; the connection between conspiracy theories and social needs; and the consequences of conspiracy theory belief. It is striking that there is no mention of analyses of conspiracy theories themselves nor of the political statements and sentiments they express. Similarly, Nebojša Blanuša and Todor Hristov begin their piece on 'Psychoanalysis, Critical Theory and Conspiracy Theory' by boldly stating that:

> Conspiracism is not a set of rational political positions that can be easily explained by examining their ideological content.

(Blanuša & Hristov, 2020, p. 67)

An easy explanation may not be possible, but is this a good enough reason not to examine their ideological content? Blanuša and Hristov call for a greater focus on the role of desire in conspiracy theories, arguing that this is an overlooked factor that could help explain cases of their popularity. This is indeed a worthwhile avenue of research, but it is also an example of a recurring feature in the literature on conspiracy theories. There is a surprising reluctance to take conspiracy theories themselves as our objects of study. No sooner does an author introduce the notion of conspiracy theory than they hurry us on to what they deem to be the actual, more pressing matter. It is as though researchers cannot wait to get away from conspiracy theories (though, who can blame them?). We ask about the type of people who hold conspiracist beliefs, and we question what is behind their beliefs, and we even debate what course of action should be taken to deal with them (or whether any action is needed at all). Despite all of this, we seem remarkably reluctant to treat conspiracy theories as part of political discourse and investigate what beliefs and assumptions they are expressing about politics, power, and society.

It is this problem that I seek to address in this thesis – the neglect of the political content of conspiracy theories. My aim is to provide a new approach to analysing conspiracy theories, one that sees them as part of the dynamic realm of political discourse, examining the political thinking and rhetoric they exhibit, and demonstrating how this approach could be applied with a small number of some of the more impactful cases of conspiracy theory. Put simply, I seek to place politics at the heart of our understanding of conspiracy theory.

2. Contribution

With this thesis, I intend to contribute to the growing body of work written by political theorists on conspiracy theory. For example, Alfred Moore (2016) has explored Friedrich Hayek's anti-conspiratorial view of social order, highlighting its connection with Hayek's suspicion of democratic politics. Importantly for this thesis, Moore (2018a) suggests that greater attention should be paid to the political questions arising from conspiracy theory; he introduces the broader notion of 'conspiracy politics'. With this term, he refers to "political discussion—including questions, statements, jokes, accusations, narratives, and so on—that is driven by insinuations of malign and hidden intentional agency in relation to some event or phenomenon" (Moore, 2018a, p. 111). Moore focuses specifically on conspiracy politics' relationship with distrust in democratic institutions, and the question of how representatives could respond to the presence of conspiracist beliefs among their constituents.

Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead (2019) adopt a similar focus on conspiracism's relation to trust, while arguing that the rise of social media has contributed to the emergence of a 'new conspiracism'. This new form of conspiracism is based on bare assertions and the repetition of allegations rather than presenting any evidence; it is "conspiracy without the theory" (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019, p. ix). In their view, this forms a particularly pernicious form of conspiracy theory that works to sow distrust of democratic institutions and politicians.

Moore and Rosenblum and Muirhead push us in the right direction, examining conspiracy theory through the lens of politics rather than epistemology – questions about the truth or falsity of

conspiracy theories, or the (ir)rationality of those who believe them. However, in this thesis my concern is not so much with the impact of conspiracy theories generally upon democratic institutions, nor with the question of how one should respond to their effect on politics. While still looking at conspiracy theories from the perspective of politics, my focus in this thesis will be on the articulation of political thinking and the use of rhetoric within conspiracy theories – what political beliefs and assumptions conspiracy theories express, and how they articulate them in their particular contexts.

I am not the first political theorist to adopt conspiracy theories themselves as my objects of study, as Rod Dacombe, Nicole Souter, and Lumi Westerlund (2021) have already conducted a content analysis of the conspiracy theory newspaper, *The Light*. Focusing on COVID-19 conspiracy theories, they found that the newspaper mixed conspiracist material with non-conspiracist content and misinformation and encouraged readers to participate in activism and consume further conspiracy theory material. This is an insightful study of the content of a conspiracy theory text, but the approach I take in this thesis differs in that it conceptualises conspiracy theory as involving rhetoric, concentrating on how the construction of conspiracy theories is affected by the need to try to persuade a particular audience in a specific social and historical context. My focus here is not on the reception of conspiracy theories – why some audiences may find them persuasive – but rather on how the need to persuade influences the construction of conspiracy theories. I also place greater focus on the political thinking that is articulated in conspiracy theories, seeking to examine the particular ways in which political ideas are used and presented in conspiracy theories.

In stressing the importance of contextual factors upon conspiracy theorising, the approach I take in this thesis is influenced by research conducted in cultural studies and history, where scholars have generally focused more on examining conspiracy theories in relation to their particular social, historical, and political contexts (see Thalmann, 2019; Butter, 2014; Olmsted, 2009; Fenster, 2008; Knight, 2007; Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000). Still, while I see this thesis as complementing rather than contradicting these scholars' approaches, there are nevertheless some key differences. Cultural studies scholars and historians have typically approached conspiracy theories as a way in to understanding broader cultural conditions, whereas my focus is more closely on what we can learn about the political

thinking articulated in conspiracy theories themselves. Rather than looking at conspiracy theories to learn more about broader society and culture, I adopt the reverse perspective, using contextual factors to better understand conspiracy theories themselves.

This thesis makes an original contribution to this literature in three related ways: firstly, by conceptualising conspiracy theory in a manner that emphasises its rhetorical and political dimensions, as opposed to treating it as an epistemological concept abstracted from social and historical context; secondly, by applying a particularist and interpretative methodology that aims to grasp the specificities of conspiracy theories, rather than focusing only on the general category of conspiracy theory; and thirdly, by arguing that that conspiracy theories make use of what I refer to as a narrative framework of *ressentiment,* in which an in-group is described as having been victimised and needing vengeance. In the remainder of this section, I will provide a brief summary of each of these three contributions and the rationale behind them.

2.1. Shifting the focus from epistemology to politics and rhetoric

As stated above, in this thesis I aim to show that we should pay greater attention to the particular political content of conspiracy theories. Part of this will involve proposing a new conceptualisation of conspiracy theory – what I refer to in Chapter 1 as a critical conceptualisation – one that stresses the political and rhetorical dimensions of conspiracy theory as opposed the epistemological issues it raises.[1] This would entail a shift from seeing conspiracy theory as a matter of *truth* to a matter of *persuasion,* one that involves descriptions of politics – how it is and how it ought to be – that are intended to appeal to an audience. Persuasion implies something more relational than truth – the relationship between a speaker and a listener, and the attempt of the former to convince the latter to

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[1] In this sense, the conceptualisation I develop in this thesis is driven by similar concerns to those that motivate Moore's (Moore, 2018a) use of the term 'conspiracy politics' as opposed to 'conspiracy theory', though I myself will be concerned with the latter in this thesis.

accept something. As Peter Dixon notes: "To speak in public presupposes an audience which is spoken to, an audience which the speaker wishes to influence, to persuade, perhaps to exhort and instruct" (Dixon, 1971, p. 1). Conceptualising conspiracy theory as involving rhetoric thus pushes us to see a conspiracy theories and their claims as being necessarily specific to a particular context. Further detail will be given in Chapter 1 on the variety of salient contextual factors that may influence a conspiracy theory, but for now it will suffice to say that a conspiracy theory's truth claims are not formulated in a vacuum.

There is one further aspect of this conceptualisation that is worth highlighting at this early stage. Besides asking what the concept of conspiracy theory refers to, in this thesis I will also examine the social significance of the concept itself, viewing it as occupying the same reality as its referent. This aspect of my conceptualisation is influenced by the critical theorist Theodor Adorno (2008; 2007), specifically his materialist approach to analysing concepts.[2] Many scholars have already noted that conspiracy theory is far from a neutral descriptive term, and is typically used for it pejorative connotations, designating a speaker as untrustworthy or irrational (see Bratich, 2008; Fenster, 2008). As historians like Andrew McKenzie-McHarg (2020; 2018) and Katharina Thalmann (2019) have shown, the stigmatisation of conspiracy theory developed during the mid-twentieth century, while Gordon S. Wood (1982) has argued that conspiracy theorising was once taken to be a rational form of explaining events. Moreover, McKenzie-McHarg and Rolf Fredheim (2017) show that the stigma has affected the way in which people express claims of conspiracy, such as through the use of pre-emptive disclaimers, whereby a speaker assures their audience that they are not a conspiracy theorist at all, nor the type of person to believe in conspiracy theories. As such, in analysing conspiracy theories we should pay greater attention to how the concept of conspiracy theory (and its historically specific pejorative connotations) affect the articulation of conspiracy theories themselves. Therefore, just as

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[2] It is because of the influence of Adorno and other critical theorists on my thinking that I describe my approach as offering a *critical* conceptualisation of conspiracy theory; a more detailed explanation of these influences is given in Chapter 1.

we should see conspiracy theories as being necessarily bound up in particular contexts, so too should we see the concept of conspiracy theory itself as occupying a specific historical and social context.

2.2. An interpretative and particularist methodology

The second way in which this thesis contributes to the literature is through the use of an interpretative and particularist methodology for researching conspiracy theory (this will be outlined in greater detail in Chapter 2). This methodology is interpretative in the sense that I seek to analyse and explain the political thinking expressed in a conspiracy theory, looking at the level of individual texts. Similarly, it is particularist in the sense that it concentrates on particular conspiracy theory texts and sees the differences between them as important to our analyses, rather than remaining only at the level of the general category of conspiracy theory.[3] It is comprised of three elements: firstly, Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which offers a robust way of analysing texts while maintaining a focus on their sociopolitical and historical contexts, as well as their linguistic features (see Wodak, 2015; Wodak, 2001a); secondly, Alan Finlayson's Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA), which provides us with an insightful account of rhetoric and focuses specifically on the strategies used by a speaker or writer to try to persuade their audience (see Finlayson, 2012; Finlayson, 2007; Finlayson, 2004); thirdly, new readings of Marx's critical theory, through which we gain a more robust understanding of the specifically capitalist social context of the conspiracy theories we will be analysing (see Baumann, 2022; Bonefeld, 2022a; Adorno, 2008;

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[3] I must stress at this early stage that this methodological particularism is, once again, concerned with politics and rhetoric, rather than truth. Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor (2010) use the term 'particularist' to describe a set of epistemological perspectives on conspiracy theory, which argue that we cannot prejudge the truth or falsity of conspiracy theories generally, and must instead judge each one on its own merits. The position I develop in this thesis is not particularist in this epistemological sense. Rather than arguing that we should not prejudge the *truth* of conspiracy theories generally, my argument is that we ought not to assume that the *politics* of conspiracy theories generally will be the same.

Adorno, 2007; Postone, 1996).[4] In keeping with my approach to conceptualising conspiracy theory, this methodology discourages us from seeing individual conspiracy theories as merely inert iterations of the general category of conspiracy theory, and instead takes them seriously as articulations of political thinking (see also Maynard, 2017; Finlayson, 2012; Freeden, 1996). With this methodology, then, my aim is to better grasp what Alan Finlayson refers to as rhetoric's "exercise of an imaginative power" (2018, p. 68).

I will apply the DHA and RPA to three sets conspiracy theories: two anti-Semitic conspiracy theories; two conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy; and two conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines. A detailed breakdown of the rationale behind the selection of each text is beyond the scope of this introduction (and will be given in Chapter 2, with further detail given in each case study chapter), so for now it is just worth noting that the selection of these three cases has been driven by two concerns, namely impact and difference. I have opted for cases that have had a strong influence on common perceptions of the category of conspiracy theory and that have already interested academic researchers studying conspiracism. Moreover, each case has been chosen to illustrate different aspects of conspiracy theory, from anti-Semitism's allegations of an international superconspiracy, to the focus on a single event in Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories, and the focus on the body and individual in the case of COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. Of course, there will be other ways of conspiracy theorising besides these, and these are not intended to be an exhaustive representation of every type of conspiracy theory. Rather, my intention here is to apply a new method and approach in order to draw out the variety among a set of conspiracy theories that readers may already be familiar with.[5]

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[4] A more detailed explanation of Marxism's influence on my approach is given in Chapters 1 and 2. For now, it is simply worth reassuring readers that I do not take a reductive view of capitalism's influence on thought and am keen to retain a place for creativity and dynamism in our understanding of political thinking.

[5] One might ask why a case like QAnon has been omitted from this thesis, especially considering its impact on American politics during and after the Trump presidency. QAnon is certainly an impactful conspiracy theory,

In my first case study, I will analyse two anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, specifically extracts from Henry Ford's (2011; 1931) *The International Jew,* along with a recording of a talk given by the political activist Peter Gregson (*The Loss of Freedom of Speech on Israel, thanks to bogus anti-Semitism claims*, 2019)[6] alleging a conspiracy against critics of Israel. My second case study will examine a pair of conspiracy theories about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Here, I will analyse extracts from two books by the lawyer and activist Mark Lane (1968; 1966) and a documentary on the academic and private investigator Josiah Thompson (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021). In my third and final case study, I will analyse two more conspiracy theory texts, both of which express conspiracy theories about vaccination against COVID-19. I analyse a blog post by the psychiatrist and alternative health influencer Kelly Brogan, titled *Health as Spiritual Warfare* (2021), along with a video by the professional conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, in which he alleges that the manufacturers of vaccines also created the virus itself (InfoWars, 2022a). This decision to look at two or three texts in each case study chapter has been motivated by the aim of providing a more in-depth analysis. Considering the limits of what is possible within the confines of a single PhD thesis, I have chosen to prioritise detail and depth of analyses over breadth. A study focusing on a larger number of texts would struggle to provide the necessary detail to form a compelling analysis and argument. With each of the case studies, I will keep in mind the following questions:

- How do the authors of these texts view themselves? What identities do they construct or align themselves with, and what traits do they attribute to themselves?

- How do these texts characterise conspirators? What identities and traits do they attribute to them?

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but I have opted for other cases that could better illustrate the particular aspects of conspiracy theorising that I want to draw attention to. Moreover, with its positing of a superconspiracy and its coded anti-Semitic language about globalist elites, QAnon is itself significantly influenced by anti-Semitic conspiracism. In this thesis, then, I have chosen to go back to the source, so to speak, by looking at anti-Semitic conspiracy theory itself.

[6] Hereafter, *Loss* (2019).

- How do they describe or depict politics? How are political phenomena and events described or depicted? What do they see as the cause of political phenomena, both particular events of a political nature and more generally?

- How do they attempt to justify their description and depiction of politics? What arguments do they use? How do they try to persuade their audience? What resources do they draw upon?

In this way, I aim to build a detailed picture of how the conspiracy theories analysed here see politics. I aim to highlight commonalities between the texts, while also stressing the various ways in which they differ. This will help to ground my overall argument in an engagement with actual conspiracy theories, rather than taking the category of conspiracy theory as given.

2.3. Narratives of ressentiment

The third original contribution I make in this thesis is with my argument that conspiracy theories articulate narratives of *ressentiment,* in which an in-group is described as being victimised by a malevolent out-group, such that vengeance is required in order to restore the in-group's freedom. This argument is developed through the analyses of the three cases (which feature in Chapters 3-5). While the particular political ideas and claims of these cases differ from one another, we nevertheless find a recurring narrative framework, which serves to order the political content of the conspiracy theories.

Ressentiment is a term I borrow from Friedrich Nietzsche's (1998) *On the Genealogy of Morals.* Nietzsche uses the concept of *ressentiment* in his account of the development of Judeo-Christian morality, where it refers to a feeling of having been treated unjustly, combined with a desire for revenge (Huddleston, 2021; Jenkins, 2018). In Nietzsche's account, *ressentiment* motivates the powerless to reorder the moral framework of the society they inhabit, such that their weakness comes to be treated as a virtue while strength and the domination of others are treated as markers of evil. From this perspective, *ressentiment* works away internally; unable to exercise influence on society, the powerless change the terms with which they describe society, achieving their vengeance in the long run by replacing the master morality with their own slave morality. In Nietzsche's words, "the

impotent failure to retaliate is to be transformed into "goodness"; craven fear into "humility"; submission to those one hates into "obedience"" (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 31). Thus, *ressentiment* is tied to repression – "rationalizations born of repressed hatred and fear, attempts to make a virtue out of necessity, to transform weakness into positive merit" (Coser, 1972, p. 21).

While the term of *ressentiment* is most closely associated with Nietzsche's writing, later scholars have developed the concept further, most notably the German philosopher Max Scheler. Similarly to Nietzsche, he sees *ressentiment* as involving "revenge, hatred, malice, envy, the impulse to detract, and spite" (Scheler, 1972, p. 46). However, Scheler pushes the concept in a more sociological direction, arguing that the occurrence of *ressentiment* can be partly attributed to social structures. For instance, he points to old age as being conducive to *ressentiment,* describing how, if unable to accept the loss of "the values proper to the preceding stage of life", older people will feel *ressentiment* towards younger people (Scheler, 1972, p. 62). As with Nietzsche's use of the term, *ressentiment* is here associated with repression and reaction:

> The formal structure of *ressentiment* expression is always the same: A is affirmed, valued, and praised not for its own intrinsic quality, but with the unverbalized intention of denying, devaluating, and denigrating B. A is "played off" against B.

> (Scheler, 1972, p. 68)

It is something like this structure of *ressentiment* that I argue is to be found in conspiracy theories, though the way in which I will be using the term here differs somewhat from its use by Nietzsche and Scheler.[7] Their use of the term is social-psychological, as it describes a *"mental attitude,* caused by

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[7] I am not the first to refer to *ressentiment* when talking about conspiracy theory, as Luc Boltanski (2014) draws on Scheler's interpretation of the concept in his book on detective stories, spy fiction, and conspiracy theories. Boltanski (2014, pp. 177-189) sees *ressentiment* as part of the broader story of the social sciences' concern with describing social pathologies, and so as a precursor of sorts to Richard Hofstadter's notion of the paranoid style. Moreover, he identifies *ressentiment* as a feature of detective and spy fiction in the late nineteenth and early

the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects" (Scheler, 1972, p. 45, emphasis added). However, my focus in this thesis is not on the psychology of conspiracy theorists nor that of conspiracy theory believers more broadly. It is not my intention to assess whether or not a particular conspiracy theorist is experiencing genuine feelings of *ressentiment,* or whether their performance of *ressentiment* is merely for show.[8] There is always the possibility that a conspiracy theorist is not sincere when they make use of *ressentiment,* or that they are doing so only for strategic purposes (such as to achieve political or financial ends). This question of sincerity is beyond the scope of my thesis – my argument only concerns the kind of narrative framework we find in a conspiracy theory text.

As I concentrate on interpreting conspiracy theory texts in order to analyse the political thinking they articulate, I will be using *ressentiment* to describe the narratives we find in these texts. As suggested by Andrew Huddleston (2021), *ressentiment* contains both a 'backward-looking' and 'forward-looking' element – on the one hand, *ressentiment* is seen as emerging from an experience of perceived injustice or sleight, while also expressing a desire for redress in the future. This rudimentary narrative framework, we shall find, is exhibited by conspiracy theories when they explain politics and social phenomena generally, and so go beyond explaining only the cause of an event. In the course of expounding a *ressentiment* narrative, a conspiracy theory articulates the identity of the group that has experienced the perceived injustice, the precise nature of that injustice, as well as the identity of the perpetrators, while also articulating a desire for vengeance to right the perceived wrong.

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twentieth centuries, in that the person experiencing *ressentiment* in the story becomes a villain in the form of an anarchist or nihilist (Boltanski, 2014, pp. 184-187). My own use of the term is again different from Boltanski's, serving to describe the narrative framework of a conspiracy theory rather than the background or experiences of characters in tales of espionage, mystery, and conspiracy.

[8] A discussion of authenticity is given in Chapter 5 of this thesis, particularly in relation to the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones' performance of authenticity and emotion.

A couple of brief examples from this thesis will help to demonstrate my meaning. Firstly, the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory advanced by Henry Ford in *The International Jew* (2011; 1931) constructs a division between Jews and gentiles, describing the latter group as having been victimised by the former, such that action is needed to correct for the supposed wrongdoing. Secondly, in Mark Lane's (1968; 1966) conspiracy theory about the assassination of President Kennedy, the American people is constructed as haivng been wronged by a combination of the country's political leadership and mass media outlets, and calls on ordinary Americans to right this wrong by removing their trust of these authorities; instead, ordinary citizens are presented as possessing the means to determine the truth of the assassination on their own. In both of these examples, we find the construction of a division between two groups, with one having wronged the other, and prescribed actions for achieving redress. However, the particular identities of these groups, the nature of the sleight, and the prescribed actions all vary. Thus, while I argue that *ressentiment* narratives are a general feature of conspiracy theories, this is not prejudge the particular political content of a conspiracy theory.

Ressentiment, as noted above, comes into play when a conspiracy theory goes beyond explaining the cause of a single event. Why is this the case? When limited to explaining only *how* an event happened, the conspiracy theory avoids dwelling on *who* is involved in the plot or what their motivation might have been. The case of Josiah Thompson, which features in chapter 4 of this thesis, illustrates this well: in his efforts to prove that President John F. Kennedy's death was the result of a conspiracy and not a lone gunamn, Thompson focuses on the kinetics of the assassination; he looks at eyewitness testimony, photogrpahic evidence, and blood spatter, but does not try to identify who the conspirators were or what the motivation was for their actions. Thus, his conspiracy theory articulates little political content, nor does it seek to construct any political identity for an audience to identify with.

3. Structure

This thesis is divided into five chapters, excluding the introduction and conclusion. I begin with the conceptualisation of conspiracy theory in Chapter 1, approaching this task by combining insights from Adorno's (2008; 2007) critical theory with Michael Billig (1991) and Alan Finlayson's (2012; 2007; 2004) work on rhetoric and political thinking. This means putting the concept of conspiracy theory back into its historical and social context, while leaving open the possibility for the concept to change again in future. I draw upon Andrew McKenzie-McHarg's (2020; 2018) research on the history of the concept of conspiracy theory to show how it has changed over time from a neutral term to a pejorative one. I argue that this history has resulted in a tension within the concept itself – if not an exact contradiction – between its capacity to explain some events correctly and its status as an illegitimate form of explanation. This tension can be overcome from an epistemological perspective by taking the view that conspiracy theories are generally unwarranted, while remaining open to the possibility of exceptions. However, the tension results in a problem of a rhetorical nature for anyone expressing a claim about a conspiracy: how can the claim be expressed in a way that overcomes or avoids the stigma attached to conspiracy theory? This rhetorical dilemma is a practical question, and solutions will be particular to the specific context in which the claim is expressed – some speakers may pre-empt their denunciation as a conspiracy theorist, while others will embrace it as proof that they must be on to something.

Having given an overview of my approach to conceptualising conspiracy theory, Chapter 2 outlines the particularist and interpretative methodology I will use to carry out my analysis. I argue in favour of treating conspiracy theories as texts that convey political thinking and propose to make the articulation of this political thinking my object of study. This differs from previous attempts at analysing conspiracy theories, which have typically treated them as just symptoms of deeper problems or conditions in society (for example, see Melley, 2000). I then adopt the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which will aid me in my analysis of the linguistic features and strategies of conspiracy theory texts, and will help me to link these to the political beliefs expressed in the texts (Wodak, 2001a; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). I also adopt

Alan Finlayson's Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA), an approach that complements the DHA by focusing on how a speaker or author of a text tries to persuade their audience, with a focus on the context in which the text or utterance appears. Moreover, I draw on new readings of Marx's critique of capitalism to strengthen our understanding of the social and historical context in which the conspiracy theory texts are situated. An overly deterministic view of capitalism is avoided, and instead I adopt Moishe Postone's (1996) account of capitalist society as dynamic.

Chapter 3 will feature the first of my case studies, analysing two anti-Semitic conspiracy theory texts published almost a century apart: firstly, Henry Ford's *The International Jew* (2011; 1931)*,* originally written during the 1920s; secondly, a talk given by Peter Gregson (*Loss,* 2019) to the Keep Talking conspiracy theory group. Bringing these two texts together draws attention to the use of conspiracy theory to explain society and politics generally (as opposed to a single event) and highlights the variation in the political content and rhetoric that can occur, even among conspiracy theories that are concerned with the same topic. It is therefore shown that we should not restrict ourselves to talking about them in an abstract or general sense, and instead need to focus on particularities. In applying the DHA and RPA to these texts, I contrast Ford's openly ethnonationalist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theorising with Gregson's attempt to frame his anti-Semitic beliefs as leftist and anti-racist. Despite such differences in the political content of the texts, we also see strong elements of continuation, including the depiction of Jews as an oblique and almost ubiquitous power, exercising power in secret rather than openly. I highlight how anti-Semitic conspiracists, such as the members of the Keep Talking group, are able to somewhat counter the effects of their marginalisation and delegitimisation through the use of bridging mechanisms, aligning themselves with less-stigmatised political actors and groups (see Barkun, 2013). Moreover, I argue that a narrative of *ressentiment* is present in each of these texts, articulating a claim of having been wronged while constructing the Jews as a threatening enemy whose power must be curbed.

While the first case study looked at accusations of a global or international conspiracy, in Chapter 4 we will deal with two conspiracy theories that are far narrower in scope, concerned chiefly with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. I focus on three texts here: extracts from Mark Lane's

books, *Rush to Judgment* (1966) and *A Citizen's Dissent* (1968), and a documentary on Josiah Thompson's investigation of the Kennedy assassination (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021). Both Lane and Thompson agree that Lee Harvey Oswald was not the true assassin, and that multiple shooters must have been involved – hence, there must have been a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. By bringing these two figures together, we get a clearer picture of the conditions under which a narrative of *ressentiment* develops, while also seeing that conspiracy theories are not necessarily politically extreme. I argue that, in contrast to the texts analysed in the first chapter, what we find is the articulation of a counter-democratic politics, which argues that citizens should be watchful of those in power, and vigilant against tyrannical threats to democracy. Moreover, I argue that Thompson's conspiracy theory gives an idea of the conditions required for a narrative of ressentiment to be present – unlike the other texts analysed in this thesis, Thompson's conspiracy theory is limited to explaining the physics of a single event, and avoids drawing any conclusions about who the conspirators were or what their motive could have been. Therefore, Thompson's case indicates that a narrative of *ressentiment* only develops when a conspiracy theory seeks to explain politics and society generally, rather than restricting itself to an account of how an event occurred.

With our final case study in Chapter 5, I will apply the DHA and RPA to conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines. Here, I am focusing on two texts: a blog post by the psychiatrist Kelly Brogan (2021), titled *Health as Spiritual Warfare,* and a video featuring the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, in which he accuses vaccine manufacturers of having developed the coronavirus as well (InfoWars, 2022a). By pairing these two texts, we see how emotion and performance can take on a role of central importance in a conspiracy theory, and can act as types of proofs in place of concrete evidence or errant data. Once again, I show how a different sort of politics is being expressed in these conspiracy theories; in this case, narratives of *ressentiment* are combined with a neoliberal politics. Both Brogan and Jones express a form of state-phobia, accusing the state of being part of a conspiracy to oppress ordinary citizens; both encourage their followers to purchase their goods and services, framing commerce as a way of protecting the individual from the conspiracy.

Chapter 1 – A Critical Conceptualisation of Conspiracy Theory

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theory has lately come under greater scrutiny in countries around the world, with several conspiracy theories having gained infamy for encouraging dangerous behaviours and attitudes among their followers: QAnon in the United States (Coaston, 2020); claims that COVID-19 was brought to China by Americans (Chunshan, 2020); and the broader international anti-vaccination movement (DiRusso & Stansberry, 2022; Sturm & Albrecht, 2021), to name just a few of the most prominent. These and other conspiracy theories have contributed to undermining trust in political institutions and have even played a role in motivating political violence, as exemplified by events such as: Donald Trump's claims of fraud in the 2020 presidential election and the subsequent Capitol Building riot of January 6th, 2021 (Argentino, 2021; Bessner & Frost, 2021); the arrest in late 2022 of members of the *Reichsbürger* movement, a monarchist group associated with Holocaust revisionism and anti-Semitic conspiracism more broadly, for their involvement in a plan to overthrow the Federal Republic in Germany (Burchett, 2022; Hill, 2022); and the storming of the Brazilian Congress by supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro, on the pretext that his 2022 election defeat was also fraudulent (Nicas, 2023).

Despite the plainly political aspects of such conspiracy theories – both in terms of their content and their implications – when conspiracy theory is conceptualised or defined, politics has too often been overlooked. Conspiracy theory is often conceptualised solely (or at least chiefly) through the lens of epistemology, seen as a particular sort of truth claim, though precise definitions and assessments of this type of claim vary (for example, see Cassam, 2019; Dentith, 2018; Buenting & Taylor, 2010; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Coady, 2007; Pigden, 2007; Clarke, 2002; Keeley, 1999). This epistemological framing is not constrained to philosophical discussions on conspiracy theory, being also present in research by political scientists on conspiracy theory. For example, in their study of how governments could respond to conspiracy theories, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009, pp. 211-212) argue that belief in harmful and false conspiracy theories is the product of what they

term a 'crippled epistemology', in that the believer lacks sources for relevant and accurate information. Similarly, while their broader argument is that conspiracy theories are more likely to be endorsed by political losers, Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent (2014, Ch. 2) also conceptualize conspiracy theory chiefly through the lens of epistemology; the political aspects of conspiracy theory are largely omitted from their conceptualisation, and instead they focus on the standards that could be used to judge the likely truth or falsity of a conspiracy theory, such as Occam's Razor and falsifiability.

The question of truth is certainly a very important aspect of conspiracy theorising, as any conspiracy theory will try to persuade us that things are one way and not another. However, the role of *persuasion* here has been largely overlooked. A conspiracy theory will indeed make truth claims, but those claims are not made in a vacuum. They are articulated in a particular context and are influenced by factors such as the identity of the conspiracy theorist's audience, the medium through which they are communicating, and the political moment in which they are expressed. In the course of setting out its claims, a conspiracy theory may articulate certain political narratives and identities, such as by constructing a populist division between the people and the elite (see Fenster, 2008; also, Iqtidar, 2016; Silverstein, 2002). In this way, rhetoric and politics are of key importance, and yet have been largely excluded from definitions and conceptualisations of conspiracy theory.

In this chapter, I argue that we should adjust the way we think about the very idea of conspiracy theory. Rather than just taking the term as referring to a particular type of truth claim – one that posits the existence of a conspiracy – we should also see politics and rhetoric as necessary parts of the concept of conspiracy theory. Therefore, instead of only viewing conspiracy theories through the lens of truth and falsity, or rationality and irrationality, we should also ask about what a conspiracy theory is doing in a political sense; what are the political ideas and assumptions it is expressing?[9] What are

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[9] This focus on what someone is doing in expressing a conspiracy theory is influenced in part by Quentin Skinner's (2002) approach to the study of the history of ideas, but also Alan Finlayson's (2018; 2012; 2007; 2004) account of rhetoric. Much more detail on both of these will be given in Chapter 2.

the identities it is constructing? To whom is it being addressed, and in what context? By focusing more on such rhetorical and political questions, the conceptualisation I outline here encourages us to take conspiracy theories themselves as our objects of study, and to examine the political content of their claims, how they are articulated, and how they seek to persuade.

The conceptualisation I develop in this chapter draws on a combination of Theodor Adorno's (2008; 2007) negative dialectics as well Michael Billig (1991) and Alan Finlayson's (2012; 2007; 2004) writing on rhetoric and political thinking. I refer to this as a 'critical conceptualisation', as, in the spirit of critical theory, I seek to think "against the flow of the (reified) world" by neither taking the concept for granted nor treating it is as natural, instead examining its social constitution and place in social life (Best, Bonefeld, and O'Kane, 2018, p. 2). This critical conceptualisation builds on invaluable research by historians and cultural studies researchers that has traced the development of conspiracy theory from a legitimate to an illegitimate form of knowledge (for example, see Butter, 2021; Butter, 2020; McKenzie-McHarg, 2020; Thalmann, 2019; Butter, 2014; Bratich, 2008; Fenster, 2008).

In approaching the task of conceptualisation, I am also interested in how the concept of conspiracy theory influences the practice of conspiracy theorising. As many scholars have already noted, the term conspiracy theory as we encounter it today comes with a set of pejorative connotations (for example, see Thalmann, 2019; Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 29; Bratich, 2008). Besides referring to particular entities and activities (conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorising), then, the concept itself has developed a social significance of its own. As Uscinski and Parent state, "To label a theory as a conspiracy theory or someone a conspiracy theorist may place him or her on uneven terrain" (2014, p. 29). Via an overview of its changing meaning and significance, I argue that conspiracy theory as a concept contains a tension – if not an exact contradiction – between two ways in which it has been used: on the one hand, conspiracy theory has been used to denote a particular type of explanation that posits a conspiracy as the cause of something; on the other hand, it is used to mark out this type of explanation as illegitimate, assuming it to be unwarranted, irrational, or false. While the former aspect is neutral and descriptive and does not judge the truth or falsity of specific claims made in a

conspiracy theory, the latter aspect is pejorative and assumes such claims should be treated with suspicion.

The tension between the descriptive and pejorative meanings of conspiracy theory leads to a dilemma of a rhetorical kind. For the person whose utterance is at risk of being labelled as a conspiracy theory, the question is how best to respond to their likely marginalisation as a speaker. How can the conspiracy theorist persuade an audience and improve their chances of being treated as the exception to the general rule of suspicion and stigmatisation? While this dilemma affects conspiracy theories generally, a speaker or author's response to it will vary from one case to the next. As Finlayson explains, attempts at being persuasive "can be grasped only as strategic and contextual rather than as abstract and generalizable" (Finlayson, 2004, p. 536). How a conspiracy theory is articulated, and what is said and left unsaid, will vary depending on the specific context. In some cases, a speaker may refrain from expressing their claim for fear of stigmatisation and delegitimisation. In other cases, a strategy of pre-emption may be used, whereby the speaker anticipates the dismissal of their claim and tries to head it off early on, as we see in phrases such as "I am not a conspiracy theorist, but…" (McKenzie-McHarg & Fredheim, 2017, p. 157). Alternatively, a speaker may even turn the stigma to their advantage, using their delegitimisation as proof that they must be on to something, as the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones has been able to achieve (Thalmann, 2019). Therefore, our analyses of conspiracy theories must be grounded in the particular context of each one. As such, the critical conceptualisation I develop here does not offer a one-size-fits-all approach to studying conspiracism, but instead encourages us to pay greater attention to the specific context and content of a conspiracy theory, without losing sight of the general concept.

Now for some pre-emption of my own, and a brief word on what I am *not* trying to achieve. To avoid confusion, I should stress that my argument is not assessing the epistemic or conceptual value of conspiracy theory. I am not arguing that any particular conspiracy theory should be rescued from the stigma, nor that the broader category is undeserving of its pejorative connotations. What is more, this is not an argument about how to determine whether any conspiracy theory might be true. Rather, my

focus here is on developing a stronger basis for analysing conspiracy theories from a political theoretical perspective.

This chapter begins by outlining my approach to conceptualisation, starting by describing the solely epistemological conceptualisations to which I am opposed. In this section, I also highlight the relevance to my approach of Adorno's negative dialectics as well as Michael Billig and Alan Finlayson's work on rhetoric and political thinking. The next section begins to develop my critical conceptualisation by examining the history of conspiracy theory as a concept, drawing on previous research showing its development from a neutral term in the nineteenth century to a pejorative term in the mid-twentieth century. I also examine the role of the conspiracy theorist and its relation to the concept of conspiracy theory, arguing that we should see this role as historically specific. I show that the changing meaning of conspiracy theory brings about a tension within the concept between its neutral descriptive aspect and its pejorative aspect. While this tension can be overcome from a philosophical perspective, in the final section I argue that it causes a dilemma that only be overcome through rhetoric; the conspiracy theorist faces the challenge of persuading an audience while starting from a position of marginalisation and stigmatisation.

2. Approaching the task of conceptualisation

As stated above, my aim in this chapter is to outline a new conceptualisation of conspiracy theory that emphasizes its political and rhetorical aspects. The conceptualisation I develop here contrasts with previous attempts that view the concept of conspiracy theory solely in terms of epistemology, while also overlooking the context in which the concept has been situated. The form of conceptualisation I have in mind is about more than briefly defining the term 'conspiracy theory', and involves thinking not just about conspiracy theories themselves, but also about how the concept is used in discourse.

2.1. Framing conspiracy theory as an epistemological concept

Before outlining my own position, it is worth saying more about the sorts of approaches to conceptualisation that I see as inadequate. These are approaches that see the concept of conspiracy theory chiefly or solely in terms of epistemology – as referring to an attempt at gaining knowledge, detached from social context. For example, an early study by the political psychologist Ted Goertzel (1994) on conspiracy theory belief omits even a basic definition of conspiracy theory, assuming that the term's meaning and the irrationality of conspiracy theorising are already self-evident to the reader. It becomes clear that, whatever he understands by the term, he takes conspiracy theory beliefs to be problematic when they are part of monological belief systems – systems of belief that are impervious to evidence and "speak only to themselves, ignoring their context in all but the shallowest respects" (Goertzel, 1994, p. 740). While he suggests that these conspiracy theories are related to social problems such as anomie, job insecurity, and decreased interpersonal trust, they are seen as being problematic in themselves for epistemological reasons: "The key issue [with monological conspiratorial beliefs] is not the belief in a specific conspiracy, but the logical processes which led to that belief" (Goertzel, 1994, p. 740). These conspiracy theories are therefore a problem because they are an inadequate way of knowing. The social aspect of conspiracy theories is largely neglected; what they are saying that appeals to people experiencing social problems is not fully investigated, and instead the problem is framed chiefly as one of having a faulty way of knowing.

Similarly, Sunstein and Vermeule adopt a similarly epistemological framing in how they define conspiracy theory, defining it as "*an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)*" (2009, p. 205, emphasis in original). Conspiracy theory, therefore, concerns a particular kind of attempt at reaching the truth. Sunstein and Vermeule narrow their argument to focus on conspiracy theories that are proven to be false, and how governments could respond to the spreading of such false beliefs. This leads them to ask why a person would adopt such false beliefs, and part of their answer is that conspiracy theory believers may lack enough of the right kinds of information:

In some domains, people suffer from a "crippled epistemology," in the sense that they know very few things, and what they know is wrong. Many extremists fall in this category; their extremism stems not from irrationality, but from the fact that they have little (relevant) information, and their extremist views are supported by what little they know.

(Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, pp. 211-212)

As with Goertzel's study, conspiracy theory is taken to be an epistemological concept, with problematic conspiracy theories being specifically those that are born out of inadequate or incorrect knowledge; those which stop us from understanding the truth of a situation or event. The problem I see with this way of conceptualising conspiracy theory is not that epistemology has no role to play here – clearly it does, as conspiracy theories always involve the expression of truth claims (a conspiracy theory must at least be claiming *something*). Rather, the problem I find is that in framing the concept of conspiracy theory only through the lens of epistemology, we strip the concept of key contextual factors, and overlook the centrality of politics in conspiracy theorising. Acceptance of conspiracy theories is not a matter of isolated individual believers, but of a broader collective process, situated in particular historical, political, social, and cultural contexts (Butter, 2021, p. 35; Butter & Knight, 2015, p. 21).

Consider also the following examples from philosophical debates on conspiracy theory. Charles Pigden argues against that we should not be so quick to reject all conspiracy theories as false or irrational, basing his argument on the following condition: "*If conspiracy theories are theories that posit conspiracies*" (Pigden 2007, p. 224, emphasis in original). If this condition is true, Pigden argues, then we are all conspiracy theorists by the simple fact that we all believe that at least some historical events can be attributed to conspiracies. In certain circumstances, he argues, non-conspiratorial explanations will be plainly absurd. For instance, any non-conspiratorial explanation of a coup d'état would be clearly inadequate (Pigden 2007, p. 222). The arguments of those – like Goertzel and Sunstein and Vermeule – who reject conspiracy theorising are therefore argued to entail the rejection of a form of explanation that is necessary for understanding a significant portion of

political activity. Pigden thus denies that we have any duty to reject conspiracy theories, and instead argues that we can only dismiss a conspiracy theory because of its particular content:

Some conspiracy theories are sensible and some are silly, but if they are silly this is not because they are conspiracy theories but because they suffer from some specific defect – for instance, that the conspiracies they postulate are impossible or far-fetched.

(Pigden 2007, p. 219)

A similar argument has been advanced by David Coady (2018), who has argued that we should avoid using the term conspiracy theory as its pejorative connotations dissuade us from investigating the occurrence of real conspiracies. For the purposes of this chapter, the merits or faults in Pigden or Coady's arguments are not relevant; I am not making an argument about whether or not some conspiracy theories are worth considering as potentially true. Rather, my focus is on developing a conceptualisation that can ground the analysis of actual cases of conspiracy theories as we encounter them in society. From my perspective, then, the key flaw in their arguments is the erasure of the pejorative connotations of the concept of conspiracy theory, as it strips the concept of its social context, including what could be described as its social significance. Many scholars have already noted that the term conspiracy theory is typically used today for its pejorative connotations (Thalmann, 2019; Walker, 2018; Butter, 2014; Bratich, 2008). As Michael Butter and Peter Knight put it, "No one willingly admits to being a conspiracy theorist, because the term itself is in effect an insult" (Butter & Knight, 2015, p. 23). The articulation of conspiracy theories, including what their creators choose to say and how they say it, will not occur in isolation from social context. For example, Butter and Knight (2015, p. 23) note that conspiracy theorists often avoid the term 'conspiracy theory' because of its pejorative connotations. It thus seems to me that something vitally important is left out by adopting the neutral conceptualisations advocated for by Pigden and Coady. In their accounts of what conspiracy theories are, society is largely absent, and conspiracy theories are treated chiefly as only a philosophical puzzle that needs solving.

Quassim Cassam adopts the reverse position to the likes of Pigden and Coady, arguing that conspiracy theories generally should be rejected as they are "unlikely to be true" and "implausible by design" as they offer only speculative explanations without solid evidence (Cassam, 2019, p. 6). He adjusts for the existence of actual conspiracies with the assertion that if a conspiracy claim is proven true then it is actually a "conspiracy fact" (Cassam, 2019, p. 18). Once again, conspiracy theory is understood as referring to something epistemological, though on this occasion it refers to an epistemological fault.[10] Cassam's view goes a step in the right direction by correctly recognising that conspiracy theories are "a form of political propaganda and that the response to them also needs to be political" (2019, p. vii). However, his argument against conspiracy theories is at its root chiefly concerned with the reasons against believing in them, and so treats conspiracy theory as a mainly epistemological matter, while an analysis of how different conspiracy theorists propagandize and seek to persuade is not given. In this way, a conspiracy theory is not seen as a piece of communication between a speaker or author and an audience, nor as articulated in a particular context, but rather as a truth claim that simply appears fully formed to the audience. Ultimately, then, Cassam's account of conspiracy theory is also of little use to us in analysing particular conspiracy theories, as the most it can tell us about a case is that it is unlikely to be true and so should not be believed.

2.2. Approaching conceptualisation through negative dialectics and theories of rhetoric

Something important about conspiracy theory is missing from the conceptualisations I have been describing so far, namely the social context in which conspiracy theorising occurs and its political aspect. The truth claims made in a conspiracy theory are neither formulated nor communicated in a

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[10] Or, as Cassam (2016) has argued elsewhere, conspiracy theory belief can be an indication of the presence of 'intellectual character vices' in the believer – traits belonging to a person that prevent their inquiries into knowledge from proceeding correctly.

vacuum – they do not present themselves in such a neat and tidy way. A more productive starting

point for conceptualisation would be to follow Michael Billig's observation that by expressing a

belief, an individual does not only convey something personal to themselves, but also positions

themselves in relation to other beliefs within a broader public argument: "Our beliefs and our attitudes

do not merely occur in our heads, but they too belong to wider social contexts of controversy" (Billig,

1991, p. 43). For example, consider the conspiracy theories that appeared in the wake of the 2010

Smolensk air disaster, in which a plane carrying Polish president Lech Kaczyński crashed due to

human error and poor visibility, killing Kaczyński and ninety-five others (see The Guardian, 2011).

When a person expresses a belief in a conspiratorial version of this event, such as claiming that the

crash was the result of a plot by Vladimir Putin and Donald Tusk, they position themselves in

opposition to the non-conspiratorial accounts of the crash and distrust the state's ability to accurately

report on the matter. What is more, this opposition has broader political consequences, with

conspiracy theories about the disaster having contributed to a broader polarisation of Polish society

(Bilewicz, et al., 2019). As Hubert Tworzecki suggests, the Law and Justice party, led by Kaczyński's

twin brother, Jarosław, has adopted the conspiracy theory as "dogma" and has sought to "sow mistrust

by normalizing conspiracy theories" (2019, p. 103). In this way, there is far more going on here than

just the positing of a conspiracy's existence. The conspiracy theory is part of particular argumentative

and political contexts, and has taken on a political function, being used for the maintenance of power

and the articulation of political divisions.

Without recognising the importance of politics to conspiracy theorising, we risk stymieing our

analysis of particulars cases, narrowly interpreting them as attempts at reaching the truth at a remove

from social context, overlooking their efforts at constructing political narrative and identities, as well

as articulating political beliefs and assumptions. Therefore, the approach to conceptualisation I use in

this chapter is about more than briefly defining conspiracy theory as a certain (faulty) way of gaining

knowledge. What I mean by conceptualisation involves thinking not just about conspiracy theories

and their features, but also about broader contextual factors affecting the concept, including the

historical development of the concept and place it occupies in a particular social context –

specifically, recognising how the practice of conspiracy theorising has been impacted by the pejorative connotations Pigden and Coady sought to do away with.

This is a difficult and perhaps convoluted task, but one that I believe to be necessary. To start with, approaching conceptualisation in this way means that we gain a better understanding of what our object of study is – of what we are intending to analyse, in this case conspiracy theories. Put simply, if we want to learn more about conspiracy theories, it will help to know what one is. Of course, there are shades of grey and areas of crossover with other similar kinds of discourse, most notably with forms of millennialism and spirituality (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015; Barkun, 2013; Ward & Voas, 2011), but despite these opaque boundaries we are still referring to *something* when we talk about conspiracy theories.

This approach also has the benefit of greater reflexivity, as it encourages greater awareness of how we think about this object of study, and what we are doing with the concept of conspiracy theory. This point may become clearer if I explain the theoretical background to it. Here, I am drawing on Marxian critical theory, particularly Theodor Adorno's (2008; 2007) negative dialectics, and his approach to conceptualisation. Adorno warns us against treating a concept as though it were sealed off from the non-conceptual thing to which it refers. As he explains, "all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation, primarily for the control of nature" (Adorno, 2007, p. 11). The implication of this for our current purposes is that, just as conspiracy theories are themselves embedded in a particular social context, so too is the concept of conspiracy theory a part of a specific historical and social context. Put differently, a concept is not constrained to the mind of the scholar, but to some extent "holds sway in reality" (Bonefeld, 2016, p. 68). Thus, from this perspective, conceptualisation involves examining the social constitution of a concept:

Conceptuality has to do with the recognition of reality – not with the analysis of concepts. Concepts are required to render reality intelligible, to grasp and comprehend the reified relations and to understand the power of compulsion that issues from them. Conceptualization goes beyond the immediate perception of reality in order to comprehend what is hidden in its immediacy or immediate

appearance. What is appearance an appearance of, and what appears in appearance?

(Bonefeld, 2022b, p. 187)

Therefore, if our concern is with studying conspiracy theory as a social phenomenon, as a practice or type of utterance that has impacts on politics and society, then we need to consider its concept within its particular social and historical contexts, and determine what appears in the concept. Moreover, rather than taking the concept as static and unchanging, we need to examine how it came about and developed over time.

From this perspective, then, conceptualisation is not merely about the definition of concepts nor the identification of entities as belonging to certain categories – although identification is a necessary part of thinking. Here, we can turn to Adorno's criticism of "identifying thought", also known as identity thinking (Adorno, 2007, p. 146). This is a form of thinking that tries to classify and categorise the world and its contents, mapping out the relationship between entities, and identifying particulars which exemplify a concept (Rose, 1978, p. 44). As Adorno himself puts it, this is "thought which depreciates a thing to a mere sample of its kind or species only to convince us that we have the thing as such, without subjective addition" (Adorno, 2007, p. 146). Finlayson expresses a similar idea in outlining the task of the analyst of political thinking, as he notes, "The challenge is not to subsume such performances [of political thinking] within the philosophy of which we think they are expressions but to disclose or make visible the philosophy they bring forth and dramatise" (2012, p. 754).

It is not enough to categorise the expression of political ideas, saying which philosophy they belong to. This assumes the identity of the concept and its nonconceptual referent, failing to see the dialectical relationship between the two (Adorno, 2007, pp. 11-12). No concept will be able to exhaust its referent, and not every aspect of a conspiracy theory can be captured in a single definition. Our conceptualisation should therefore seek to understand this dialectical relationship over time, and so recognise that the concept of conspiracy theory could change again in the future and that its meaning may vary between different societies.

3. Historical and social context

Having argued against treating the concept of conspiracy along solely epistemological lines and detached from context, and having proposed an approach based on Adorno's negative dialectics and Finlayson's account of political ideas, I now begin to construct my own conceptualisation, starting with the historical and social context in which the concept of conspiracy theory has developed. Drawing in particular on invaluable research by Andrew McKenzie-McHarg (2020; 2018), Katharina Thalmann (2019), and Gordon S. Wood (1982), I describe how conspiracy theory as a concept has developed and changed over time, paying particular attention to its stigmatisation since the mid-twentieth century. Conspiracies have long been a feature of human history, but as we shall see, the way we think about them has changed over time.

3.1. The nineteenth century origin of 'conspiracy theory'

As McKenzie-McHarg (2020; 2018) has shown, the term 'conspiracy theory' has its origins in the print journalism of the 1860s and 70s, where it was used to explain particular crimes rather than broad, all-encompassing plots, and did not carry the pejorative connotations it does today, which only came about in the mid-twentieth century. McKenzie-McHarg emphasises that the term came about in the context of 'scientization', a process by which scientific principles and methods were brought into non-scientific parts of society. For example, as the authority of science grew at the expense of religion, the field of journalism increasingly aspired to the principle of objectivity by introducing scientific standards and vocabulary into reporting. As McKenzie-McHarg himself notes, "by the 1880s readers of a newspaper found themselves often encountering notions of *evidence, proof, refutation, fact,* and–most significantly for present purposes–*theory"* (McKenzie-McHarg, 2018, p. 66, emphasis in original). He observes that 'theory' has an ambiguous quality to it, as it sometimes appears to be the goal of an investigation to build an accurate theory of an event, while at other times

it suggests a speculative account whose truth is yet to be determined (McKenzie-McHarg, 2018, pp. 67-68).

Journalists aspiring to objectivity may not necessarily have engaged in speculation themselves, but they did report on the speculative theories and opinions of other people. McKenzie-McHarg gives the example of a newspaper article on the discovery of a set of bones, which reports that someone had devised a 'murder theory', speculating that the bones had belonged to a murdered human – they were ultimately found to be animal bones (McKenzie-McHarg, 2018, p. 71). In this case, 'theory' lends an air of scientific rigor to what may have been mere speculation by a bystander. Besides 'murder theory', terms such as 'suicide theory', 'blackmail theory', 'abduction theory', and 'conspiracy theory' also began to appear in newspapers during the latter half of the nineteenth century (McKenzie-McHarg, 2018, p. 72). 'Conspiracy theory' thus appears as just one of many ways of explaining a crime. At this time the term was not a generic concept and had to be "generated each time anew by the specific needs of each case" (McKenzie-McHarg, 2020, p. 24). Put differently, there was no talk of conspiracy theories in an abstract or general sense, nor did the term denote a class of speculative explanations. Instead, 'conspiracy theory' was always tied to a particular incident and lacked the pejorative connotations we find in it today. This should not be construed as meaning that there were strictly no conspiracy theories existed prior to the creation of the term; as Thalmann (2019, p. 9) shows, the creation of this label has certainly impacted on the beliefs and texts it refers to but did not create them out of nothing.

3.2. The pejorative status of conspiracy theory

Karl Popper is often cited as the first scholar to have offered a critique of conspiracy theorising (see deHaven-Smith, 2013; McKenzie-McHarg, 2020; Pigden, 1995; Thalmann, 2019). In his book *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* originally published in 1945, Popper describes what he terms the 'conspiracy theory of society' as part of his critique of historicism (Popper, 1963, p. 94). This is the view that social phenomena can be explained by identifying the people who have caused them to

happen, or who have an interest in their occurrence. According to this view, everything happens according to someone's design, whether they be "the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists" (Popper, 1963, p. 95). Popper dismisses this as an irrational way of understanding society, seeing it as a hangover from a time when religious superstition held sway. The sheer number of individuals acting to achieve their own ends (often in contradiction to those of others around them) means that society cannot be explained by uncovering conspiracies – things are just far too complicated to warrant such an explanation. No matter how much we may plan to achieve certain goals, things rarely run so smoothly in the real world, and human interaction will result in unintended consequences that cannot be foreseen.

Popper's notion of the conspiracy theory of society indicates a move towards a general concept of conspiracy theory. 'Conspiracy theory' is still tied to an object requiring explanation, but that object is no longer a crime like those in the newspapers of the nineteenth century. Nor does it refer to one particular explanation but is used to classify a category of explanations. Thus, Popper contributes to a shift towards a new use for 'conspiracy theory', classifying a range of irrational, superstitious explanations of social phenomena, taking us closer to the pejorative connotations the term has today (Thalmann, 2019).

While Popper characterises conspiracy theory as irrational and superstitious, the historian Richard Hofstadter goes further by drawing a comparison between conspiracy theory belief and mental illness. His notion of the 'paranoid style' describes a "style of mind" found among political extremists, characterised by a feeling of persecution and a belief in expansive conspiracy theories (Hofstadter, 1966, p. 3). Examples of the paranoid style identified by Hofstadter include the anti-Illuminati conspiracy theories (1966, §2), anti-Freemasonry (§3), and the anti-Communism of the mid-twentieth century (§4). Hofstadter identifies several cases of this inclination towards detecting fictional conspiracies throughout American history, and attributes it to "some considerable minority of the population" (1966, p. 39). He criticises these partly for similar reasons to Popper: they wrongly depict conspiracy as the "*motive force*" in history (Hofstadter, 1966, p. 29, emphasis in original). The main thrust of Hofstadter's argument is against the people who hold conspiratorial beliefs, choosing

the term *paranoid* to describe these people despite insisting that he is not making clinical judgments about anyone's mental state. Hofstadter is open about taking advantage of the pejorative connotations of paranoia, commenting that, "Of course, the term "paranoid style" is pejorative, and it is meant to be" (Hofstadter, 1966, p. 5). The term thus has a touch of the rhetorical about it, which makes more sense when we consider the context in which it came to prominence. The essay first appeared in Harper's Magazine in November 1964, coinciding with the American presidential election of that year, and was directed against the right-wing Republican candidate Barry Goldwater (see Hofstadter, 1964). This context is crucial: Hofstadter's argument serves to maintain a boundary between acceptable and unacceptable forms of politics. Just as the Popper's notion of a conspiracy theory of society was part of an effort to defend liberalism from totalitarianism, the paranoid style is part of a defence of the American political system against extremists like Goldwater. As Mark Fenster argues:

Hofstadter's brand of modernist politics was based on a series of crucial divisions between the legitimate and the illegitimate, the rational and the emotional, and the political and the personal. Retaining that boundary was crucial, and he and his contemporaries worried that McCarthyism, Goldwater, and any "extremist politics" or "irrational" political discourse would prove victorious over the legitimate and rational (though such fears were certainly present), and that the border between order and its other would disappear.

(Fenster, 2008, p. 39)

Thus, the paranoid style is not a neutral concept, with its function being to shore up the political status quo. Those whose politics are radically divergent from the norm are depicted as being beyond the pale and not worth engaging with. The connotations of mental illness invoked by the paranoid style imply that the problem is with the individual's personality. Despite Hofstadter's claim that he is not casting aspersions on anyone's mental state, it is clear that the paranoid style relies on the stigma of paranoia and mental illness to denigrate opponents and their beliefs.

The influence of Hofstadter's approach on our understanding of conspiracy theory has been profound, though problematic – as Butter describes, "it is impossible to overemphasize [Hofstadter's essay's]

importance for the academic engagement with conspiracy theories" (Butter, 2021, p. 22). Since the term's creation almost six decades ago, the paranoid style has become a go-to term used by journalists to cast aspersions upon on a wide variety political actors, including: Barack Obama (Hayward, 2013); Jeremy Corbyn (Robbins, 2016); Vladimir Putin (Berman, 2018); anti-Brexit campaigners (Young, 2019); and Donald Trump (Zirin, 2019). However, as Butter (2021) notes, Hofstadter's account of the history of the paranoid style and his positioning of the phenomenon always on the fringes of American politics has since been shown to be incorrect. Rather than being a perennially fringe phenomenon, Butter (2014) argues that for most of American history talk of conspiracies was far more mainstream and accepted than it is today. This historical error by Hofstadter leads to an ahistorical treatment of the concept of conspiracy theory, and its erroneous application to periods in which the concept was in fact absent. Gordon S. Wood's (1982) writing on the Founding Fathers demonstrates this well. Woods writes that a number of historical studies of the Founding Fathers attribute psychological pathologies such as paranoia to them, on account of their conspiracist beliefs, and so mistakenly assume that our currently negative attitude towards conspiracy belief would have been the same in the eighteenth century. As he explains, by applying these assumptions in an ahistorical fashion, we fail to appreciate the fact that the meaning of rationality has changed over time: "If we are to make sense of that period's predilection for conspiratorial thinking, we must suspend our modern understanding about how events ought to be explained and open ourselves to that different world" (Wood, 1982, p. 409).

To put the problem somewhat differently, by taking the concept of conspiracy theory (including its pejorative connotations) as given, we commit the mistake of assuming that the concept refers to a transhistorical and unchanging phenomenon. We assume that our way of viewing reality is perennial and fail to appreciate that other concepts and perspectives on reality would have been legitimate at other points in history. This is not to say that those were better ways of grasping reality, merely that they were different, and that these differences should be kept in mind when studying historical cases of conspiracy theory. As such, nuance and care are needed when analysing conspiracy theories from different historical periods, otherwise we make the mistake of reifying the concept – treating it as

fixed, unchanging, seemingly natural; we miss the fact that not only are conspiracy theories themselves products of human activity, but so too is the concept of conspiracy theory a product of our activity.

This pejorative and expansive version of conspiracy theory underlies the way in which the concept is commonly used today in the mainstream public discourse, such as by politicians and media outlets, where it is used as a marker for irrationality (Walker, 2018; McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim, 2017). As McKenzie-McHarg and Rolf Fredheim (2017) have found in their study of the prevalence of talk of conspiracy in the British parliament between 1916-2015, the term 'conspiracy theory' is often used in a pre-emptive way to resist the speaker's categorisation as a conspiracy theorist. This is evident in phrases like, "I am not a conspiracy theorist, *but...*" and "If I *were* a conspiracy theorist, then I *would* almost say..." (McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim, 2017, p. 163, emphasis in original). What is more, the study found a decline in the number of conspiracy claims being made in parliament between 1916-2015, coupled with a heightened chance of conspiracy claims being dismissed, often being labelled as conspiracy theories in the process (McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim, 2017, p. 162). Such findings suggest that the pejorative status of conspiracy theory has become a key feature of how the concept is used in public discourse, and that it looms over any conspiracy claim regardless of its particular content.

3.3. The historically specific role of the conspiracy theorist

We can take these historical insights one step further by applying them to role of the conspiracy theorist. This entails treating the conspiracy theorist as an historically specific type of person. That is, the conspiracy theorist emerged in a particular historical context, and did not exist prior to that context. Rather than defining away the figure of the paranoid, irrational conspiracy theorist, we should try to explain how that role came to exist. To achieve this, we can draw upon Ian Hacking's (2002) notion of dynamic nominalism. This is the view that new ways of classifying people's behaviour facilitate the development of new types of people. As Hacking himself summarises:

The claim of dynamic nominalism is not that there was a kind of person who came increasingly to be recognized by bureaucrats or by students of human nature, but rather that a kind of person came into being at the same time as the kind itself was being invented. In some cases, that is, our classifications and our classes conspire to emerge hand in hand, each egging the other on.

(Hacking, 2002, p. 106)

Our classifications of people therefore impact upon the way in which they behave, and that in turn influences the classifications we use. One example from Hacking's (2002) own work is that of multiple personality disorder. He argues that there were very few instances of multiple personality disorder prior to its classification in 1875; in some cases, a person may have behaved in a way that resembled the disorder, but they would not have been classified as suffering from it. However, since its classification a large number of cases were recorded for the first time. Its classification created a new possibility of a way to be, as though a new reality had been created. This is in comparison to previous centuries, where concepts such as possession categorised a similar set of behaviours, though without the scientific aspect of multiple personality disorder. Applying dynamic nominalism to conspiracy theorists will prevent us from treating that type of person as if it were transhistorical, while also ensuring that we are dealing with a type that is not wholly abstract and removed from social context. It is beyond the scope of this project to give a comprehensive explanation of the creation of the role of the conspiracy theorist, but I can nevertheless attempt a brief sketch of its development here.

The term 'conspiracy theory' may have its origins in the nineteenth century, but the idea of the 'conspiracy theorist' emerged more recently. McKenzie-McHarg finds the earliest use of 'conspiracy theorist' in a newspaper to have only been in 1962 (2018, tab. 4.1). This suggests that the term came about quickly after 'conspiracy theory' started being used pejoratively. The terms used in Popper's discussion of the conspiracy theory of society supports this view. In *Open Society and Its Enemies* (Popper, 1963) there is no mention whatsoever of conspiracy theorists, while in a lecture given by Popper (1972, Ch. 4) in 1948 at Oxford, the term "conspiracy theorist" (p. 125) features only once and is preceded by the similarly worded "conspiracy theoreticians" (p. 123), which he also uses only once.

Keeping in mind that conspiracy theory was not a generic concept when Popper was writing in the 1940s, the fact that he switches from 'conspiracy theoretician' to 'conspiracy theorist' in the same lecture (and uses each term only once) suggests that the idea of conspiracy theorist had not been fully articulated at that time and that a name for this type of person had not been settled on. The role of the conspiracy theorist became a full-blooded character in Hofstadter's writing on the paranoid style, where he characterised the paranoid as someone with a pathological commitment to seeing conspiracies afoot in politics.[11] Working from a dynamic nominalist position, I would argue that Hofstadter was not simply classifying a set of behaviours and attitudes. By describing a class of behaviours and attitudes, he simultaneously articulated a type of person. By describing the paranoid, or conspiracy theorist, Hofstadter gave greater definition to that role, helping to make it possible for other people to inhabit that role.

While we can retrospectively find examples of figures from history such as the Founding Fathers who may resemble conspiracy theorists, caution is needed when categorising them as conspiracy theorists – indeed, as we have already seen, their beliefs would have seemed rational and acceptable at the time, in contrast to the contemporary conspiracy theorist (Wood, 1982). Our categorising of them as conspiracy theorists is only retrospective, and, in a sense, they never really were conspiracy theorists as that type of person had not been created at that time. Only after Hofstadter does the conspiracy theorist take shape as the type of person we would recognise today, and only then is it possible to be a conspiracy theorist in our contemporary meaning; even if someone exhibited similar behaviour and beliefs to a conspiracy theorist prior to its classification, their behaviour would not have been understood as such at the time. This may seem convoluted, so let me put my claim more simply: we can categorise people in the past as conspiracy theorists, while remembering that neither they nor their

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[11] While Hofstadter contributes a great deal towards the articulation of the conspiracy theorist as a type of person, he does not use the term himself, and this suggests once again that there was no established type of the conspiracy theorist for him to draw upon nor an agreed-upon term for him to use.

peers would have seen them as such; the act of categorising these people has made it possible for people in the present to be conspiracy theorists.

In a somewhat ironic way, then, the classification of the conspiracy theorist by the likes of Hofstadter has made it more possible for people to inhabit the role of the conspiracy theorist. Prominent conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones and David Icke could only be conspiracy theorists in a society where that classification exists, because otherwise they would not have been categorised as such and would not have had the conspiracy theorist as a type they could become. As Katharina Thalmann explains:

Only because conspiracy theory has been stigmatized by mainstream discourse, does Jones attack the political and cultural elite in his conspiracist rants; only because mainstream discourse has dismissively labeled him a conspiracy theorist and positioned him on the discursive fringes, is he able to build a (corporate) identity that reframes and rebrands dissent and opposition to mainstream discourse into a subject position that openly and publicly claims and celebrates the stigma attached to conspiracy theorizing.

(Thalmann, 2019, p. 12)

Furthermore, the classification has impacted on the behaviour people who want avoid being classified as conspiracy theorists, through the use of pre-emption before making a conspiratorial claim, or by simply steering clear of such claims altogether (McKenzie-McHarg & Fredheim, 2017). This brief outline of the development of the conspiracy theorist as a type of person does not seek to treat it as a coherent category from a philosophical perspective, but as a category that nonetheless has an existence in social reality. Applying dynamic nominalism in this way helps us to avoid ahistorical arguments about conspiracy theorists and maintains the common meaning of 'conspiracy theorist' in everyday speech. It thus prevents an abstract treatment of the concept, but does not take the pejorative status of the concept as given, instead showing that it is the result of a relatively recent development in how we view conspiratorial explanations.

4. The rhetorical challenge of conspiracy theory

In this section, I develop my critical conceptualisation of conspiracy theory further by describing a rhetorical dilemma that emerges as a result of the two contrasting moments in the concept's history. From one perspective, conspiracy theory denotes a particular type of explanation that posits a conspiracy as the cause of something. This descriptive aspect of the concept corresponds to the original nineteenth century meaning of the term. However, this aspect stands in tension with the pejorative meaning of the term, which characterizes this particular type of explanation as either unwarranted, irrational, or false. As McKenzie-McHarg and Thalmann's research indicates, this pejorative aspect of the concept can be traced to the mid-twentieth century and the work of scholars such as Popper and Hofstadter. The result is an intractable challenge for the conspiracy theorist: As Alfred Moore observes, "the rise of 'conspiracy theory' as a pejorative label has raised a new problem – namely how to talk about conspiracies without sounding like a conspiracy theorist" (2018b, p. 9). Put differently, how should the conspiracy claim be expressed so as to persuade an audience, bearing in mind the stigma that is likely to be attached to that claim?

The answer will invariably involve rhetoric – the effort to persuade an audience. Rather than taking part in a philosophical debate about epistemology, the conspiracy theorist engages in a more creative activity, articulating their claims in a manner that is intended to suit the expectations of their audience at a particular moment in time, and in a particular setting.[12] So, for example, the use of a particular

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[12] From an epistemological perspective, one solution to the tension is to point out that an attitude of skepticism towards conspiracy theories generally does not rule out the possibility of some proving true – this is the view adopted by Steve Clarke, who, despite believing that we should be suspicious of conspiracy theories generally, states that, "Giving a thousand conspiracy theories some consideration is a small price for us to pay to have one actual nefarious conspiracy, such as the Watergate conspiracy, uncovered sooner rather than later" (2002, p. 148). While this may be a reasonable solution from an epistemological perspective, it is of little use to us if we are concerned with analysing a conspiracy theory within its particular social context, due to its silence on the role of rhetoric in conspiracy theorising.

medium can facilitate the development of a certain kinds of rhetoric, as Finlayson (2022; 2021) has shown in his research on political rhetoric on internet platforms like YouTube. Whereas the creators of the infamous anti-Semitic pamphlet, *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (hereafter, *Protocols*, n.d.), articulated their conspiracy theory through means of a lengthy forgery purporting to be a record of a meeting of the conspirators, conspiracy theorists in the present are able to reach a wide audience through the far more truncated format of a tweet. As Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019) argue, such platforms as Twitter have facilitated the rise of what they describe as new conspiracism. Rather than citing evidence to support their claims, cases of new conspiracism rely on bare assertions and innuendo, developing no arguments to support their claims but nevertheless insisting on the existence of a conspiracy. Rosenblum and Muirhead take Trump's conspiracist claims as prime examples of this, such as his assertion that a great number of illegal votes had been cast for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election (2019, p. 3). There is thus no single way of expressing a conspiracy theory, and multiple ways in which a conspiracy theorist can respond to the stigma they anticipate; it cannot be grasped in abstraction from the particular context in which the conspiracy theory is expressed. Finlayson's account of political ideas and rhetoric expresses this point well:

The question of how ideas have influence or effects on government and politics cannot be abstract but must be understood as *practical* in nature: it can be asked and answered only in relation to *specific* ideas as it concerns how such come to have effectivity through being persuasive to particular people at particular times.

(Finlayson, 2004, pp. 531-532, emphasis in original)

Therefore, the implication of the rhetorical challenge in conspiracy theory is that to better understand the politics of conspiracy theory, we must take particular conspiracy theories themselves, along with the contexts in which they are situated, as our objects of study. Rather than only dealing with conspiracism as a general category, and so observing conspiracy theories only from afar, one should also analyse specific cases in relation to their context. For example, when faced with the rhetorical challenge, one potential response to the would-be conspiracy theorist's dilemma is to say nothing – to refrain from expressing one's conspiracy claim for fear of being labelled a conspiracy theorist. Others

may choose to pre-empt the stigma against conspiracy theorising, as described by McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim (2017). Another possible option is to challenge the stigma head-on, or to incorporate it into one's conspiracy claims, as described briefly above in the case Alex Jones (Thalmann, 2019, p. 12). Jones' case is particular noteworthy as it demonstrates how the stigma applied to conspiracy theorising has helped to give greater definition to the role of the conspiracy theorist and has become part of the conspiracy theorist's appeal for some audiences. The strategic response to the stigma can thus have a creative impact of its own, not only by pushing the conspiracy theorist to find their own way of persuading others, but also contributing to the general understanding of what a conspiracy theorist is, and what conspiracy theories are. As Finlayson notes, "in politics ideas are always aspects of strategy in a way that is not secondary to or derivative of the 'real' idea" (Finlayson, 2004, p. 538). We should therefore avoid seeing cases of conspiracy theory as just examples of the broader category, and instead see them as actively drawing upon and influencing understandings of that category. In this way, the critical conceptualisation developed in this chapter allows for the possibility that the concept of conspiracy theory may change further in future, as conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists push and pull at the boundaries of the category in different directions. To reiterate, the aim of thinking of conspiracy theory in this way is not to decide whether conspiracy theorising is valid from an epistemological point of view, nor to judge the (ir)rationality of those who believe in conspiracy theories. Instead, its aim is to draw attention to political and rhetorical aspects of conspiracy theory, and so to provide a more robust framework for the analysis the politics of particular cases of conspiracy theory.

I am not the first to push for greater attention to be paid to the political content of conspiracy theories. In his influential book, *Conspiracy Theories,* Mark Fenster emphasizes the political aspects of conspiracy theory, arguing that "conspiracy theory has always been a significant element of American political rhetoric," and sees it as closely linked to populism (2008, p. 9). For him, both populism and conspiracy theory posit an opposition between 'the people' and a shadowy elite (Fenster, 2008, p. 89). In an article on conspiracy theories during the Algerian Civil War, Paul A. Silverstein (2002) argues that conspiracy theorising contributed to the construction of a common political culture for Algerians,

amidst a climate of censorship and strict control of the national media. Similarly, Humeira Iqtidar (2016) argues that we should pay greater attention to the content of specific conspiracy theories, their historical context, and their role in political change. Focusing on conspiracy theories from Pakistan about the Blackwater private military firm, she takes these to be political imaginaries that hold potential for collective change, serving as possible strategies for calling for greater accountability of such companies in the areas where they operate.

The argument I have been outlining in this chapter seeks to complement these earlier pieces on the politics of conspiracism, rather than contradicting them. As with these earlier authors, the critical conceptualisation of conspiracy theory encourages us to focus on what conspiracy theories are saying about politics, and how they are saying it. This will involve studying the discursive construction of political identities and narratives, as exemplified in the populism Fenster detects in conspiracy theory. However, it will not presume all conspiracy theories to be articulating a uniformly populist political vision – while there is a clear structural affinity between conspiracy theory and populism, we should avoid with conflating populism and other related beliefs, such as authoritarianism and ethnonationalism (Bonikowski, 2017). The argument I have been making here also encourages us to pay far greater attention to conspiracy theory's conceptuality, recognising that the concept itself occupies the same reality as the phenomenon it describes and influences the articulation of conspiracy theories. The rhetorical challenge faced by conspiracy theorists – how best to persuade an audience to accept a conspiracy theory, when starting from a position of marginalisation and stigmatisation – comes into view here, pointing to the need to study rhetoric used in a conspiracy theory, and how this is used to articulate political ideas and claims.

5. Conclusion

When we try to grasp the concept of conspiracy theory, we should not leave society out of the picture. The critical conceptualisation I have been developing in this chapter views the concept itself not as transhistorical, but rather as historically specific, as is its pejorative status which came about during

the mid-twentieth century. While conspiracy theories are indeed making claims about what is true and false, if our focus is on conspiracy theories as we find them in society, then we must also recognise the crucial role of rhetoric. That is, conspiracy theories are articulated in a particular context, to a particular audience, and such factors will impact upon the way in which the claims are expressed. Moreover, we should pay greater attention to the political nature of conspiracy theorising, recognising that conspiracy theories do more than just expressing truth claims – they articulate political identities and narratives, express political beliefs and assumptions, and make claims about what should be done in light of the alleged conspiracy. Therefore, we should be careful not to focus too heavily on conspiracy theory in the abstract, and should instead analyse cases of conspiracy theories in their particular contexts, along with their use of rhetoric and the political claims they make.

Drawing on a combination of Adorno's (2008; 2007) critical theory and Billig (1991) and Finlayson's (2012; 2007; 2004) writing on rhetoric and political thinking, in this chapter I have highlighted a key tension in the concept of conspiracy theory, between its descriptive and pejorative aspects. Again, this tension is not a transhistorical feature, but is historically specific, the result of the changes in how the concept has been used over time, whereby a neutral way of explaining a particular event by means of a conspiracy took on a new, pejorative meaning. The neutral descriptive meaning of the concept has not disappeared entirely, such that all conspiracy theories are subject to the same pejorative connotations as the irrational explanations of social phenomena that Popper and Hofstadter criticised.

The critical conceptualisation put forward in this chapter points to a rhetorical dilemma emerging from this tension. Unlike previous conceptualisations, this approach grounds the concept in particular historical and social contexts rather than dealing with it in the abstract. It therefore avoids reifying conspiracy theory, without also abandoning the concept altogether (as Coady, 2018, would have us do). The critical conceptualisation of conspiracy theory thus improves our understanding of our object of study by refusing to see it as unchanging and isolated from history, society, and politics. Just as we should study particular cases in their specific contexts, so too should we be aware of the context within which conspiracy theory as a concept exists. Doing so could enable us to strengthen our understanding of conspiracy theory's place in modern societies, and to incorporate a critique of

conspiracy theorising into a broader critical theory of society. The critical conceptualisation

developed here does not mean that we can or ought to separate the good conspiracy theories from the

bad, nor that we should seek to rehabilitate the concept of conspiracy theory. Instead, it requires us to

take conspiracy theories seriously as cases of political communication and rhetoric, without accepting

the truth of their claims.

Chapter 2 – Methodology: an interpretative and particularist approach to analysing conspiracy theories

1. Introduction

So far, I have been arguing that politics and rhetoric should be important parts of our conceptualisation of conspiracy theory, that conspiracy theorising involves making practical decisions that cannot be understood abstractly, and that we should therefore concentrate more on particular cases and their specific contexts. I have also argued that, in undertaking this task, we ought to keep in mind the concept's changing social significance, especially the pejorative connotations it has today and their influence on how conspiracy theories are articulated. Having thus outlined a new way of thinking about conspiracy theory as a concept, in this chapter I move on to how we should go about analysing actual cases. I propose a methodology that is both interpretative and particularist, arguing that the politics of conspiracy theory cannot be understood without analysing the meaning of cases in relation to their particular context.

Speaking of the meaning of a conspiracy theory may seem vague, but what I mean is to follow Quentin Skinner's instruction to study an author's intention in writing a text, "to grasp not merely what people are saying but also what they are *doing in* saying it" (Skinner, 2002, p. 82, emphasis in original). It is this notion that someone is actively *doing something* when they express a conspiracy theory – something that is often political – that has so far been overlooked in much of the literature and should animate our approach to the analysis. James Phelan's observation that "narrative is not just a representation of events but is also itself an event" is equally applicable to our topic, such that we should see conspiracy theories as cases "in which someone is doing something with a representation of events" (Phelan, 2007, p. 203). To analyse conspiracy theories' political aspects, then, we need a methodology which treats them not as inert or epiphenomenal, but as the author's intervention into a discourse.

This methodology I propose here combines three elements, the first of which is the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as outlined by Ruth Wodak

(Wodak, 2015; Wodak, 2001a); this will help us to analyse the language of a text in relation to the particular social and historical context in which it is situated. The second element is Alan Finlayson's (2012; 2007; 2004) Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA), which complements the DHA by encouraging us to focus on how an author or speaker attempts to persuade their audience in a specific political moment. Thirdly, this methodology situates conspiracy theory within the broader context of capitalist society, drawing on new readings of Marx's critical theory to understand how this historically specific form of society impacts upon conspiracy theories (see Bonefeld & O'Kane, 2022; Lotz, 2016; Postone, 1996).[13] When brought together, these three aspects allow for a methodology that sees conspiracy theories as both *influenced by* and *impacting upon* the context in which they are situated. This context is comprised of multiple factors, capitalism being one such factor, as is the identity of the audience, and the medium used to communicate the conspiracy theory. This allows for a more detailed and nuanced analysis of conspiracy theories and their politics, enabling us to better understand those aspects which are too often overlooked when viewing conspiracy theory only through the lens of epistemology, or when adopting an overly generalising view.

This chapter begins by summarising three implications of the critical conceptualisation of conspiracy theory for our methodology: the importance of context; the need to avoid imposing rigid preconceived paradigms onto cases; and the recognition of the potential role of emotion in conspiracy theory. I then explain the influence of the DHA and RPA upon my methodology, summarising how both of these will influence my analysis of texts themselves. Following this, I argue that historical and social context is key to our interpretations of conspiracy theories. Informed by new readings of Marx's critique of capitalism, I argue that the political beliefs and assumptions conveyed in conspiracy

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[13] This Marxian aspect of my methodology may appear to undermine my view of conspiracy theory as dynamic. A detailed response to this concern will be given later in section 4.1. of this chapter, but for now the reader will have to trust that I do not take a reductive view of thought, politics, and culture in capitalist society; I do not subscribed to the notion that these are simply epiphenomena of the economic base.

theories are mostly shaped by the capitalist context in which they are situated. In the final section, I explain my rationale for case selection in this thesis.

2. Treating conspiracy theories as cases of political thinking

In the previous chapter, I argued that we should think about conspiracy theory more in terms of politics and rhetoric than epistemology, and so focus more on the political claims articulated in conspiracy theories, rather than their truth claims. How does this argument affect our priorities when approaching the analysis of actual cases? In this section, I describe three implications to keep in mind: firstly, that each conspiracy theory ought to be viewed in light of its particular context; secondly, that rigid preconceived paradigms should be avoided (here, I follow Skinner, 2002; see also Finlayson, 2018); thirdly, that the political thinking in conspiracy theories will not always be coherent or rational, and may involve emotion.

The first thing to keep in mind is that a conspiracy theory will be situated within a specific context. This is a basic point, but one that needs stressing. A simple example of this would be the conspiracy theories that emerged in response to the 9/11 attacks; they are about a specific set of events and moment in time, so an understanding of both is needed to start grasping what these conspiracy theories mean. Of course, there are always choices to be made about which contextual factors are relevant, and which are not (a more detailed discussion of this is given in section 4). For example, to understand what 9/11 conspiracy theories are about, at the very least we need to know something about the attacks themselves, how they unfolded, and who the perpetrators were. Our analysis would also benefit from knowledge of the political situation in the United States at the time of the attack, as well as American foreign policy both before and after the attacks. These contextual factors are specific to 9/11 conspiracy theories – if we were looking at a different set of conspiracy theories from a different time and place, then chances are our knowledge of American foreign policy at the turn of the millennium would be irrelevant. Similarly, we need to know if the pejorative connotations of conspiracy theory are present in this particular context, so as to be able to examine how the

conspiracy theories adjust to this factor. The meaning of terms and concepts change over time, so care is needed not to explain an author's intentions in terms that were not available to them at the time (Skinner, 2002, pp. 77-78). Gordon S. Wood's (1982) argument against attributing paranoia to the Founding Fathers, touched on in the previous chapter, is a useful warning not to apply concepts in an anachronistic fashion. Behaviour that is commonly deemed to be pathological today may not have been seen as such in previous eras.[14]

This leads to the second methodological implication of my argument, that is the need to avoid rigid preconceived paradigms when analysing conspiracy theories.[15] This too is a basic point, but one that is overlooked too often. This is the other side of the point raised in the previous paragraph; rather than

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[14] Does this mean that conspiracy theories did not exist prior to the origin of the term in the nineteenth century? Or maybe that there were none before the development of conspiracy theory as a general concept in the mid-twentieth century? I think these are the wrong questions to be asking here; the purpose of this thesis is not categorisation, nor the clarification of the boundary between conspiracism and non-conspiracism. In my mind, it is not so much the labelling of a historical text or utterance as a conspiracy theory that is problematic, but rather the assumption that this term and its modern connotations would have been active at the time it was produced. So, I do not think it is a cardinal sin to say that the Founding Fathers' belief in a British plot *resembles* a conspiracy theory, or that it is *what we would today call* a conspiracy theory, so long as we make clear that this is not how they or their contemporaries would have understood this belief. This permits us to examine texts which have been influential upon conspiracy theories but which predate the introduction of the term; while we would not be able to describe the authors of such texts as conspiracy theorists proper, we could nevertheless analyse their writing in light of its influence on later conspiracy theorists. Still, in such a case one would need to be open to the possibility that such texts would differ in some ways from our preconception of what a conspiracy theory is, and not force this onto any texts where it does not fit (Skinner, 2002).

[15] The term 'preconceived paradigm' is again drawn from Skinner's (2002) writing on method in the history of ideas, but my thinking on this topic has been chiefly influenced by Finlayson's view of rhetoric as practical and contextually specific (see Finlayson, 2018; Finlayson, 2007; Finlayson, 2004), as well as Adorno's critique of identity thinking (see Adorno, 2008; Adorno, 2007).

being cognizant to the influence of context, we approach a text with a set of expectations to instil upon it. This is arguably the approach that Wood criticises, which he describes as having "sought to relate Americans' recurring fears of conspiracy to some underlying social or psychological process" (1982, p. 404). Richard Hofstadter (1966) is an example of this, subsuming McCarthyite anti-communism, anti-Catholicism of the nineteenth century, anti-freemasonry, and anti-Illuminism, all under the category of the paranoid style. Similarly, David Brion Davis (1969) takes talk of pro-slavery conspiracies in nineteenth century America to be another appearance of this phenomenon. There is a danger here of losing sight of the role of agents in all of this, and so succumbing to reification (Skinner, 2002, p. 62). What a speaker was doing in articulating a claim of conspiracy is neglected, and instead we only see it as belonging to an overarching, abstract category. The text itself is wrongly treated as secondary to the philosophy it is seen as channelling, a hazard that Finlayson (2012) identifies as facing political theorists of ideology more broadly.

A more recent variant of this shortcoming is exhibited by Quassim Cassam, who characterises conspiracy theories as belonging to "a predominantly, though not exclusively, right-wing political tradition" (2019, p. 79). For him, even conspiracy theories that are not ostensibly right-wing or racist are part of that same tradition, and so "come with political baggage" (2019, p. 79). I would agree with Cassam's point that conspiracy theories carry a political baggage of sorts, but this observation on its own can only take us so far, as it overlooks the observe side of the situation: that while conspiracy theories generally belong to a problematic tradition, how they interact with that tradition is not predetermined (Byford, 2011; Billig, 1978). One conspiracy theory may embrace that tradition, while another may distance itself from it. It is not that conspiracy theorists who choose the latter option are necessarily more trustworthy or benevolent, as distancing could occur simply for rhetorical and strategic reasons. My point, then, is only that we cannot prejudge what someone is doing in articulating a conspiracy theory without analysing the context in which they are speaking or writing.

Our methodology should therefore do more than just categorising conspiracy theories and the political beliefs and assumptions they. It should instead show how these beliefs and assumptions are put across

in conspiracy theories themselves.[16] Nor should we see them solely as reflections of broader political or cultural trends – although they are influenced by contextual factors, how they respond to these is neither automatic nor predetermined. Rather, they are moments of political thinking that have an impact on political life. Of course, taking conspiracy theories seriously as expressions of political thinking does not mean that we should assume that the claims they make are true, nor accept their descriptions of how things are or how they should be. Instead, it means that we seek to understand what conspiracy theories say about politics and how they say it, and offer explanations as to why they seem intelligible, plausible, and persuasive to some people. As such, we need to pay attention not just to the political contents of conspiracy theories but also to their linguistic and rhetorical features too.

The third implication to draw attention to is the need to avoid forcing upon a conspiracy theory a level of rationality or coherence that is not there in the text itself. One might recall that in the introductory chapter of this thesis, I referred to Nebojša Blanuša and Todor Hristov's (2020) suggestion that the political positions held in conspiracy theories are not rational, such that their ideological content is not worth focusing on. However, as Michael Freeden describes, ideologies are not merely matters of rationality, but rather "mix rational and emotive debate freely" (1996, p. 30). Remember, conspiracy theories are not simply making truth claims that can be judged to be rational or irrational from an epistemological perspective; they are making use of rhetoric to articulate political claims, and so may appeal to an audience's emotions and feelings towards particular topics, issues, or identities. We can see them as being able to be incorporated into ideologies and used to express these. As Freeden describes, "ideologies are *groupings* of decontested political concepts" (1996, p. 82, emphasis in orignal). According to this view, ideologies seek to establish their usage of political concepts as *the* correct and socially legitimate usage, overcoming rival ideologies' own interpretations and usage of those concepts (Freeden, 1996, p. 77).

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[16] As Finlayson suggests, we should not see the articulation of political thinking simply as belonging to a broader philosophy but should instead examine what it does with that philosophy (Finlayson, 2012, p. 754).

When it comes to analyisng the articulation of political thinking in conspiracy theories, then, we should not hold out hope for a strictly rational argument supporting a set of truth claims, as though we were looking at an academic work of philosophy. Instead, we should analyse the creative and practical aspects of the political thinking articulated in conspiracy theories, approaching them in a similar way to what Alan Finlayson refers to as the "thinking that goes on in everyday politics" (2012, p. 754). This means recognising that how political concepts are used in conspiracy theories will vary, as each will be expressed differently to fit a different audience and address new events as they occur. They do not leave political concepts and ideologies untouched, but instead manipulate and combine them in different ways.

Taken together, the three implications I have discussed here point to the need for a methodology that is both interpretative and particularist. Such a methodology needs to be cognizant to the particularities of individual conspiracy theories, recognising that relevant contextual factors must be understood in order to grasp what the author of a conspiracy theory is doing. Rather than taking a conspiracy theory to be an inert example of a broader category, this methodology adopts a more dynamic view of conspiracy theorising, seeing the conspiracy theorist as actively making choices about which political ideas to include, and how they will articulate these.

3. Analysing the linguistic features of a text

We now have a grasp of the concerns that need to be considered when developing a methodology for analysing the political thinking in conspiracy theories, and the principal factors to keep in mind when selecting cases and texts to analyse. In this and the next section, I outline the interpretative and particularist methodology that I will be applying to our three case studies, focusing firstly on the analysis of linguistic features of the text; the role of context will be discussed in the next section. The interpretative-particularist methodology I am proposing combines two existing approaches in its analysis of the linguistic features of a text: firstly, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), an approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed chiefly by Ruth Wodak (Wodak, 2015;

Reisigl & Wodak, 2005; Wodak, 2001a); secondly, Alan Finlayson's (2012; 2007; 2004) Rhetorical Political Analysis. Taken together, these approaches help us to interpret conspiracy theories within their specific contexts and provide us with tools for understanding their construction.

CDA offers a perspective on how the meanings of texts and discourses can be understood, by looking beyond texts themselves to the social and political processes and context in which they were produced and in which meaning is created (Wodak, 2001b; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Within this perspective, the DHA sets out the procedures to be taken in analysing a text and the factors that are to be focused on, such as "the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive 'events' are embedded" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2005, p. 35). Applying the DHA will mean treating conspiracy theories as texts, that is "materially durable products of linguistic actions" (Wodak, 2001a, p. 66). A text, from this perspective, does not need to be written, but can be spoken too, meaning that video and audio material promoting conspiracy theories can also be analysed. Texts come together to comprise a discourse – that is, as a collection of interrelated linguistic acts that can have different functions and belong to different genres, but which are linked by a common theme (Reisigl & Wodak, 2005, p. 36). Thus, one conspiracy theory may function to sow distrust of the government and take the form of a written pamphlet; another could have the opposite function and take the form of a political speech. Both, however, would belong to the discourse of conspiracy theory.

Using the DHA will also require me to identify the particular discursive strategies at work in a text, which contribute to the construction of collective identities. These include the naming of social actors (what Wodak calls referential or nomination strategies); the attributing of traits and stereotypes to social actors (predication); the justification of these attributions (argumentation); the speaker's positioning in the discourse (perspectivation); and modification of the force of an utterance (intensification or mitigation) (see Wodak, 2001a, table 4.1). For example, in a study of a David Cameron's 'Bloomberg Speech' on Britain's membership of the European Union, Wodak identifies a number of ways in which Cameron constructs the British in his speech (Wodak, 2018, table 2). 'We', as 'the British', are predicated with being: "an island nation"; "a European power"; "a family of

democratic nations" (Cameron, as quoted in Wodak, 2018, table 2). In terms of studying the argumentative strategies used in an utterance, Wodak directs us to identify the *topoi* that are present, that is the "content-related warrants or 'conclusion rules' which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim" (Wodak, 2001a, p. 74). These include *topoi* such as the *topos* of danger, which posits that, "If there are specific dangers or threats, one should do something against them", or the *topos* of people, which states that, "If the people favour/refuse a specific action, the action should be performed/not performed" (Wodak, 2015, p. 53).[17] For example, Wodak shows that in his Bloomberg Speech, Cameron positions himself within the in-group – as belonging to the British nation, and as speaking for it – and appeals to a *topos* of danger, outlining the threat of the UK's departure from the EU if a new settlement is not reached that suits his definition of Britain's interests and national identity (Wodak, 2018, table 2). In this example, Britain's character as distinct from continental European countries is taken to be immovable, such that it is up to the EU to make the necessary adjustments to prevent Britain's exit from the EU.

Following Reisigl and Wodak's example, the analysis enabled by the DHA will be "three-dimensional" (2005, p. 44): firstly, it will identify the content and topics of the texts; secondly, it will examine the discursive and argumentative strategies used; thirdly, it will consider the linguistic means used in the texts. To achieve this, I will ask how each conspiracy theory text: describes politics and the occurrence of political phenomena; tries to justify these descriptions; presents the author(s) of the text themselves; characterises the alleged conspirators it identifies. [18]

Alan Finlayson's RPA complements Wodak's DHA. With a theoretical background in the political theory of ideology, Finlayson's RPA is concerned with "political ideas as they are found 'in the wild'" (Finlayson, 2012, p. 751). By this, he means the political ideas expressed in "speeches, statements, debates, interviews, pamphlets, newspaper columns, websites, posters, placards,

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[17] For an extensive list of different *topoi* available to a speaker, see Wodak, 2015, table 3.2.

[18] These are based on the questions I outlined in section 2.2. of the introductory chapter of this thesis.

demonstrations and performances" (Finlayson, 2012, p. 751). According to Finlayson, political scientists have largely overlooked the importance of ideas and rhetoric in affecting policy change. He attributes this oversight to a tendency to see politics only as a passive output of social phenomena, as well as a reliance on abstract models that treat things as homogenous. For Finlayson, the study of political ideas must instead examine the practicalities of how particular ideas influence politics, rather than taking an overly abstract view (Finlayson, 2004, p. 532) As with the DHA, key implication of this is that the analyst should go beyond just categorising or describing the political ideas they encounter. As already argued, while these are necessary aspects of any analysis, we should avoid forcing a text or discourse into our predetermined categories. Instead, the RPA pushes us towards a dynamic perspective on political ideas, concentrating on how the rhetorical strategies can themselves alter the ideas they are articulating. As Finlayson summarises:

RPA foregrounds the intersubjective, dynamic, formation and reformation of arguments and the elements of which they are composed. It observes the dissemination of concepts, words and ideas showing how they pass through institutions, getting promoted, destroyed, redefined and redeployed; examines 'genealogies' of the way in which 'common sense' is constituted and altered and identifies replicated patterns of political argument.

(Finlayson, 2007, p. 560)

Like the DHA, RPA involves a focus on the context in which an utterance or text appears. As Atkins and Finlayson note, the contents of a political idea cannot be separated fully from its particular presentation, which is judged by the audience against the historical and cultural expectations of argumentation (2013, p. 163). For example, Finlayson (2022; 2021) has shown how the structure and cultural expectations associated with the online video platform *YouTube* encourage content creators to develop a distinct persona through which they can express their political ideas and beliefs.

RPA also requires us to consider three main forms of appeals (Finlayson, 2007, pp. 557-558): an appeal to the speaker's character or authority (ethos); to our emotions (pathos); and to quasi-logical arguments (logos). Finlayson provides a useful and succinct example of an appeal to logos:

For instance, one party leader may claim that a rival cannot be trusted with rule because he has changed his position in a short space of time. The quasi-logical argument here is something like this: people who change their minds often cannot be trusted, 'X' has changed their mind often and therefore cannot be trusted."

(Finlayson, 2007, pp. 557-558)

In terms of an example of an appeal to pathos, Andrew Crines et al. (2016) describe how Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech used anecdotal evidence to build an emotional connection with his audience, appealing to their anxieties over immigration to Britain. Finally, for an example of an appeal to ethos we can turn to Samuel Marlow-Stevens and Richard Hayton's observation that "an ethos characterised by ordinariness, duty and determination, and sacrifice and weakness" was central to Theresa May's premiership (2021, pp. 873-874). Such appeals rely on certain commonplaces – "common-sense values of what is just or unjust, honourable or dishonourable" – and how they are used in an argument (Finlayson, 2007, p. 557). For example, Finlayson (2018) has analysed the same David Cameron speech on British membership of the EU, and argued Cameron's strategy of appealing to the commonplace conservative view of Britain's ethos as distinct from that of continental Europe may have appealed to his Conservative Party audience, but also undermined his broader argument in favour of continued EU membership.

To a significant extent, the differences between the DHA and RPA are ones of theoretical background and emphasis. As Finlayson (2018, p. 69) himself suggests, the two may be combined, as while CDA aims at exposing the reproduction of ideology, RPA focuses more on the particular moments and the possible rhetorical strategies they entail. As such, while DHA is useful for understanding the discursive construction of identities and social agents, RPA can help us to better understand how political ideas are used, altered, and affected in different contexts.

There are nevertheless tensions between the DHA and RPA that are worth acknowledging here. Proponents of CDA – the broader category to which DHA belongs – have been criticised by Finlayson (2013) for overlooking the role of rhetoric in political language. For example, Finlayson

(2013, 317) argues that Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough (pioneers of CDA) miss that much of political debate is not about one political actor convincing their interlocutor to share their view on a given matter, but is instead about persuading a third-party to the debate, namely the audience. Moreover, Finlayson rightly observes that CDA fails to see that "the core of political dispute is contest *over premises,* over representations of the situation to be addressed" rather than over the logical deductions to be made from shared premises (2013, p. 319, emphasis added). Finlayson's emphasis on contestation of premises is worthwhile, and something I try to incorporate into my own methodology in this thesis. Nevertheless, while his criticisms of Critical Discourse Analysts understanding of political discourse is correct, these concerns will help us to improve our use of the tools given to us by the DHA, rather than stopping us from applying the DHA at all.

The methodology I am advocating, then, is an interpretative and particularist approach that takes the political thinking in conspiracy theories as its object of study, and that applies the DHA and RPA to conspiracy theory texts in order to analyse in detail the linguistic features they employ to express political thinking. This should give us a good idea of the political beliefs and assumptions expressed in a conspiracy theory text, as well as an understanding of how the text is put together and the linguistic and rhetorical devices used. As already noted in this thesis, there are scholars (chiefly those working in history and cultural studies) who have sought to analyse the political and ideological aspects of conspiracy theories and similar phenomena (for example, see Butter, 2020; Butter, 2014; Fenster, 2008; Melley, 2008; Melley, 2000; Dean, 1998; Knight, 2000). These are worthwhile contributions to the literature on conspiracy theories, and this thesis seeks to build on this earlier researcher rather than contradicting it. However, unlike these earlier scholars, my research is concerned with providing sustained analyses of conspiracy theory texts, how they are constructed and how they articulate their political and ideological content. Rather than studying conspiracy theories to see what they can tell us about a society, its politics and culture, my focus is on the political thinking that goes on in conspiracy theorising and that is expressed through conspiracy theories themselves. However, to reach a better interpretation of conspiracy theories as political thinking, one needs to look beyond the immediate text itself to the context in which it is situated.

It is worth explaining further the rationale for adopting what could be categorised broadly as a textual approach. Why not take an ethnographic or anthropological approach (as used by Ela Drazkiewicz, 2022), or use digital methods (such as those used by Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, 2023), when researching the politics of conspiracism? To be clear, such methodologies could indeed be used to good effect in researching this topic, and I do not consider the methodology I use in this thesis to be the only correct way of studying conspiracism. My decision to take a textual approach, analysing what certain conspiracy theorists have said or written publicly, is best suited for answering the research questions I have set for myself, which are essentially concerned with how conspiracy theories describe politics, how they construct characters to populate their view of politics, and how they try to make their view persuasive to an audience. Analysing texts will enable me to get at that public aspect – the way in which conspiracy theories are constructed and communicated to an audience. An ethnographic study could give insights into how networks of conspiracy theorists operate and the ways in which individual believers interact with each other and non-believers. However, in this thesis I am concerned more closely with a conspiracy theory itself – how it is put together and expressed – rather than the individuals and communities who believe in it. As such, focusing on the texts (written or spoken) is a useful way of analysing conspiracy theories themselves.

What does it entail to apply the DHA and RPA to a series of texts? What do these methods prompt me to do that I might not have otherwise done? To begin with, the analysis of the texts will involve the identification of their various strategies and features – such as the referential and predicational strategies mentioned above, along with the appeals to pathos, ethos, and logos. At an early stage in this project, I attempted to code each of the texts using the NVivo software package, but soon found it would be much easier to code the texts on a basic PDF reader, using the in-built comment and highlighting functions. Having coded the texts, I then sifted the results to remove anything I judged to be irrelevant considering my stated research questions. For instance, for the purposes of this thesis it would be unnecessary to get caught up focusing on the naming of actors who are tangential to the conspiracy theory narrative – if a conspiracy theory about the Kennedy assassination names Cuba and Cubans, the Soviet Union and Soviets, Mexico and Mexicans, this in itself is not especially important

for our present study, only reflecting the fact that we today live in a system of nation-states and frequently use nationality to refer to groups of people.

Coding can only take us so far when using the DHA and RPA; it breaks up each text into useful categories but cannot reveal the significance of a text's particular linguistic, discursive, and rhetorical strategies. Therefore, the analyst has to consider the context in which these strategies were being used. In analysing these texts, I anticipated that, besides identifying the strategies used by a speaker or author, I would need to interpret the reasons why these strategies were used. A basic example of this is the use of implicitly anti-Semitic language in a conspiracy theory, as opposed to explicit and overt hatred of Jews: a speaker might emphasise the names of Jewish individuals identified with the alleged conspiracy without explicitly identifying them as Jewish, while non-Jewish figures are not named at all. In this context, we have to ask why certain people are being named while others are not – what does it achieve to name the Rothschild and Goldman-Sachs families but not the Rockefellers or the Morgans? Here, broader context is vital – without knowing that the former are Jewish families and the latter Christian, we would miss the construction of the conspirators as Jewish.

4. Moving from the text to context

Paying attention to the context surrounding a text will strengthen our interpretations of that text, and can improve our understanding of why the text was composed in the way it was. The idea of context can be rather vague, and as stated earlier in this chapter, we will always need to decide on what contextual factors are (ir)relevant for our investigation. To reach a clearer idea of context, we can consider the four levels of context identified by Wodak:

the immediate, language or text internal co-text;

the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses;

the extralinguistic social/sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific 'context of situation' (middle range theories);

the broader sociopolitical and historical contexts, which the discursive practices are embedded in and related to ('grand' theories).

(Wodak, 2001a, p. 67)

The first of these relates to the content of the text, and the way in which the meaning of a passage is made clearer by the words around it in the text (Oxford Reference, n.d.). The second level refers to the fact that texts draw on other texts, can refer to multiple topics, and can be part of multiple discourses simultaneously. For an example of this, we can turn to a video posted to the conspiracy theory website *InfoWars* (Watson, 2021)*,* titled 'Chinese Government Scientist Filed COVID Vaccine Patent Before Pandemic Began' (see Fig. 1). This video insinuates that COVID-19 was manufactured by the Chinese government and then deliberately leaked from a lab in Wuhan. It suggests that the conspiracy is led by the Chinese government along with other governments as well as involving the social media corporation Facebook, but the supposed purpose of the conspiracy is not stated explicitly in the video. The host of the video, Paul Joseph Watson, suggests that viewers should distrust their governments and corporations like Facebook, who have implemented measures to stop the spread of disinformation on COVID-19. We could thus say that this video is part of the discourse about a supposed COVID-19 conspiracy, but it could also be seen as contributing to the discourse about a purported global conspiracy, or even discourse about the power of social media companies. The video itself is embedded on a webpage that takes the format of an online news article, but it could also belong to the genre of advertising (note the heavy use of advertising for *InfoWars'* nutritional supplements). It also refers to other texts too, with the video including screenshots of news articles that support its claims, and the webpage on which it is embedded contains hyperlinks to other articles down the side of the *InfoWars* website. The article does not exist in isolation but as part of a range of overlapping discourses, combining multiple genres (it is trying to sell products as well as present its conspiracy theory claims) and is connected to a variety of other texts that are part of the same and related discourses.

FIGURE 1. Screenshot of the webpage on which Paul Joseph Watson's (2021) video for InfoWars was published.

In terms of the third level of context Wodak identifies – extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames – we should think of the setting and structures in which a text was produced, and the constraints and possibilities associated with its production in that setting. For example, Finlayson (2022; 2019) has argued that digital communication technologies have altered the possibilities for political communication, with online platforms like YouTube facilitating the expansion of 'ideological entrepreneurship'. That is, individuals can earn money by promoting a set of political views online, and the audio-visual aspect of this political performance emphasises their persona and character. Finlayson (2022) gives the example of the YouTuber (the same host of the *InfoWars* video described above) Paul Joseph Watson, who promotes a conservative, libertarian, and populist ideology in his videos, while maintaining a performance of outrage throughout. Watson, who mixes this ideology with a heavy dose of conspiracy theorising, appeals to viewers by presenting himself as someone who is 'in the know':

The visual, structural and verbal rhetoric of Watson's videos is oriented at showing what's 'really' going on, hidden behind otherwise seemingly random phenomena. He reveals what 'they' don't want you to know, what the media will not tell you and others do not realise but which is here presented before your eyes in living colour, given its proper name and assigned to the correct category. That is why a large number of the videos are titled 'The Truth About . . .' (e.g. Brexit, Yellow Vest Protests, Modern Advertising, Apu and the Simpsons, Migrants, The Border, Comedy, Oprah, Jerusalem, Kavanaugh, Incels, Shithole Countries and so on).

(Finlayson, 2022, p. 73)

Watson's use of YouTube also enables him to create a "simulated intimacy" with the viewer, as his videos are "consumed by individuals in their private space, [making] him the focus of identification with the political ideas and ideology" (Finlayson, 2022, p. 75). In this way, the platform and technology he uses influence his political performance, emphasising the outraged character he has developed while promising his viewers the revelation of the truth in each video. Another example of the influence of extralinguistic and institutional contextual factors can be seen in Nancy Rosenblum

and Russell Muirhead's (2019) writing on new conspiracism. They link the rise of new conspiracism to the use of digital communication technologies like social media:

> With the internet, repeating charges takes no effort. Bare assertions are easily echoed and affirmed. Whereas explanation can be difficult, innuendo is simple. Even the character limit built into Twitter aligns with the new conspiracism's avoidance of evidence and explanation. The medium invites emphatic, unelaborated assertion.

> (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019, p. 32)

Just as Watson's political performance is shaped by his use of YouTube, so too is the new conspiracism shaped by the medium in which it is expressed. While the audio-visual dimension of YouTube encourages users to create videos that emphasise their personality, the character limit on Twitter encourages brevity, with severely restricted space for elaboration on complex ideas or to justify any claims they make. Without knowing this level of context, our understandings of both of these examples would be severely stunted – we would have little understanding of why Watson is making online videos rather than using another medium, nor how the structure of YouTube influences the content of his videos; we would also have little understanding of how a form of conspiracism based on bare assertion has become so prominent today. In short, any text will be heavily influenced by the situation in which it is produced.

Wodak's fourth and final level of context is about incorporating sociopolitical and historical contexts into our interpretation of a text. This can take the form of paying attention to the events surrounding the production of the text that are necessary for reaching a better understanding of the text's meaning. For example, a knowledge of nineteenth century and early twentieth century history, as well as a knowledge of the long-running oppression of Jews, is necessary in order to understand a text like Henry Ford's *The International Jew* (2011; 1931)*,* which we will analyse in the Chapter 3. This text is a collection of articles purporting to expose a global Jewish conspiracy, and the influence of the Jews over every area of life – from fashion to the economy, politics and international relations. So much of the text is spent attributing the cause of historical events, particularly the First World War and the

Russian Revolution, to the Jews, that the reader needs at least a grounding in this historical context in order to make sense of the text. We also need to know about the author themselves and why they were writing. In the case of *The International Jew,* our understanding of the text would be hampered if we were unaware of Ford's role as a leading industrial capitalist of his time, and head of the Ford Motor Company. The text itself is a collection of anti-Semitic pieces written for the *Dearborn Independent,* a newspaper Ford bought in 1919 and which he used to wage a ninety-one weeklong campaign against the supposed influence and power of the Jews (Foust, 1997). Dearborn, Michigan, was (and remains) the headquarters of the Ford Motor Company, although the newspaper was sold nationally after its purchase by Ford – partly through the use of Ford dealers, who "were urged to employ canvassers to cover their local communities and use the same enthusiasm in selling the *Independent* as they would a Model T or Ford tractor" (Foust, 1997, p. 419). This historical context brings to the light the fact that the production of this text only came about due to Ford's own power and wealth – and that its prominence and our understanding of the text would be different without that contextual factor.

4.1. Interpreting conspiracy theories in a capitalist context

The levels of context outlined by Wodak are four certainly very useful in aiding our interpretation and analysis of a text, helping us to bring society back into our analysis of conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, further definition can be added to the fourth level of context by looking beyond sociopolitical and historical context to the capitalist economic system of the society in which the text is written – the way in which production is organised in a society, including the relations established between different agents involved in the production process. This includes factors such as the economic activities and positioning of conspiracy theorists themselves – for example, Ford's use of his company to sell his newspaper, and *InfoWars'* use of conspiracy theories to sell nutritional supplements – but also relates to how the economic system is dealt with in the contents of conspiracy theory texts themselves.

What exactly do I mean by the term 'capitalism'? What is the character of a capitalist society? These may seem like strange questions to be asking in a thesis on conspiracy theories, but if we are to analyse them within their historical and social context then it is important that we understand the sort of society in which they are situated. It would be impossible to give a comprehensive account of capitalism here, so I will venture only a brief summary. As Moishe Postone (1996) explains in his interpretation of Marx's (1992) critique of capitalism, in capitalist societies social wealth takes the form of value, which is constituted by the expenditure of labour in production. The organisation of labour and production in capitalist societies is distinct from how they might be organised in other forms of society – it is not transhistorical. Workers are paid a wage in exchange for their capacity to work but are not in possession of the means of production, which are held by the capitalist. Ideally, the commodities produced by the workers are then sold by the capitalist for a profit, and much of this is reinvested to increase production, such as by hiring more workers or implementing time-saving technologies. Postone takes the category of value as being "at the very heart of capitalist society" and so rejects the common perception that capitalism is defined by the widespread use of industrial means of production (Postone, 1996, p. 25). Furthermore, he sees this "specific form of social life [as having] originated in western Europe and […] developed into a complex global system" (Postone, 1996, p. 4). According to Postone, as value constitutes capitalist social relations, labour "has become the ontological ground of society–that which constitutes, determines, and causally controls social life" (Postone, 1996, p. 60). As labour constitutes value, capitalist society can thus be said to be constituted by human practice.

However, the categories of a capitalist society subsequently appear and impact upon people as quasi-independent forces. For example, the worker who fails to sell their capacity to work in exchange for a wage loses access to the means of sustaining themselves – they go hungry even if there is plenty of food to go around, and are left homeless even if there are empty houses waiting for new occupants. For the capitalist, failure to turn a profit in the face of competition will ultimately cause their business to close, ruining their livelihood. In both of these situations, neither the worker nor the capitalist is

victimised by *somebody*. The pressures they experience are a product of the way in which labour and production are organised in capitalism; they are *systemic*. Therefore, as Werner Bonefeld explains:

> It is not sufficient to criticize capitalists for their seemingly excessive addiction to profit, nor is it sufficient to criticize bankers for pursuing money for the sake of more money. On the pain of ruin, these behaviours manifest the 'objective necessity' of capitalistically constituted social relations. Neither the capitalist nor the banker, nor indeed the worker, can extricate themselves from the reality in which they live and which asserts itself not only over them but also through them, and by means of them.

(Bonefeld, 2022a, p. 21)

This point is key – that due to capitalist social relations, abstract and impersonal forces act upon and through individuals and appear as almost natural (Bonefeld, 2022a; Postone, 1996). This is despite the fact that these forces are ultimately socially constituted – they are the product of human activity, rather than being natural or divine in origin. The upshot of this is that these abstract forces and pressures would not appear, or would at least be manifested differently, if labour and production were not organised capitalistically but in another, non-capitalist manner.

Now that we have a rudimentary grasp of the fundamentals of capitalism, we can move on to the second part of my earlier point: how is a conspiracy theory influenced by being situated in the context of a capitalist society? Why would such a context be relevant to our analysis of a conspiracy theory? Following the critical discourse analysts Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough, we can reject orthodox Marxist accounts that reduce culture, thought, and politics to an economic base – this would lead us once again to misinterpret conspiracy theories as being only epiphenomena of another category. Instead, we can subscribe to a "dialectical view of the relationship between discourse and other, extra-discursive, facets of the social world" (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 6). The implication of this view is that conspiracy theories are not simple by-products of some economic processes in capitalism but are instead influenced by and have some capacity to influence the social world. Chouliaraki and Fairclough stress that "we see contemporary capitalist societies as heavily

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determined by (though certainly nor [*sic*] reducible to) their economic mechanisms" (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 20). Christian Lotz makes a different, but equally important point about the role of the economy in capitalist society:

> To repeat this simple point, it is clear that all politics, all ethics, and everything else human would disappear if we would stop being productive and would stop laboring; life is primary, and it cannot be grasped without the production of needs, its cooperative element, and its relation to the earth. The organization of these relations into an existing whole, a form, is necessary for the reproduction of this whole. *Society does exist*, but it does not exist in the universal. Since production as such cannot exist, society as such cannot exist either.

> (Lotz, 2016, p. 106, emphasis in original)

Thus, while we cannot say that everything that goes on in a capitalist society is just a by-product of or epiphenomenal to the system of capitalist production, what we can say is that it is reliant on that system in order to exist. As Lotz also states, social reality should be seen "as a dialectical relationship, i.e., as a mediated relation, which constitutes the social agent as an agent who is only able to *be* a social agent because she exists through and as a historically achieved level of social mediation and externalization" (2016, p. 110).

Like Chouliaraki and Fairclough, Postone rejects the orthodox Marxist base-superstructure metaphor, whereby a capitalist society's political and legal structures, as well as its civic society and culture (its superstructure), are merely epiphenomena determined by an economic base. Instead, he tries to find a way between this economic deterministic view and the idealist view of thought as "self-grounded and completely autonomous" (Postone, 1996, p. 225). The path he charts is one in which, "Marx tries to grasp the constitution of historically specific deep social structures by forms of social practice that, in turn, are guided by beliefs and motivations grounded in the forms of appearance engendered by these structures" (Postone, 1996, p. 224).

How we organise ourselves economically is influenced by thought, but this is itself influenced by the economy. As with Lotz, Postone sees our beliefs not as straightforward by-products of capitalism but

as nevertheless deeply influenced by it. While he sees thought as being mediated by the social forms of capitalism, Postone rejects the view of capitalist society as "statically circular and doxic, but [rather as] dynamic and contradictory" (Postone, 1996, p. 224). The contradictory character of capitalism in fact allows for the "social constitution and historical development of needs and perceptions–both those that tend to perpetuate the system and those that call it into question" (Postone, 1996, p. 224). Culture, politics, and thought are indeed framed and influenced by the capitalist economy, but not in a unidirectional manner. Postone's account of society can thus prevent us from throwing the baby out with the bathwater and mistakenly erasing capitalism from our accounts of contemporary society, while also avoiding reducing culture, politics, and thought to an economic base. In this way, it stands in contrast to other approaches such as the post-Marxist approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001; 1987), which shifts the focus away from the economic forces of capitalism and instead stresses contingency. As Jules Townshend (2003) has argued, there is a tendency in post-Marxist discourse theory to either ignore economic factors in any analysis and thus attribute too much to discourse, or to be simply unable to explain changes in political discourse.[19]

What is the implication of this view of capitalism for our analysis of conspiracy theories? Firstly, it discourages us from interpreting any conspiracy theory as just a by-product of underlying economic processes. For example, we might be tempted to read conspiracy theories about a New World Order as by-products of globalisation. An economic process like globalisation may be useful for understanding why such conspiracy theories became persuasive to many people at a particular point in

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[19] For example, Glynos and Voutyras argue that a focus on patriotism and nationalism in Greek political discourse "contributed decisively to the production of a highly polarized and volatile political order" (2016, p. 203) in the wake of the economic crisis of the early 2010s. But did the discourse achieve this polarisation on its own, or did the economic crisis itself not play a major part? As Slavoj Žižek has argued, Greece's Syriza government may have won the "democratic political battle, they risked a step further into disturbing the smooth flow of the reproduction of Capital. The lesson of the Greek crisis is that Capital, though ultimately a symbolic fiction, is our Real" (2018, para. 12).

time, but we cannot reduce them to this economic factor alone. A degree of creativity must have been involved in their development; each time they are expressed, certain choices are made about what to include and exclude, which aspects to emphasise or tone down, and what new material can be incorporated into the conspiracy theory. Therefore, it is not that these conspiracy theories were generated by the economic processes of capitalism, but that they speak to a particular moment in the history of capitalism. They are articulated in such a way that may be fitting of that period; in a different context, they may have been articulated differently. Other topics, discourses, and cultural resources could have had to be incorporated for these conspiracy theories to still appear relevant in another context.

Secondly, this view encourages us to examine how conspiracy theories may be incorporated into the economic processes of capitalism. Again, this is not to say that capitalism wholly shapes conspiracy theories. Rather, what I have in mind here is the use of conspiracy theories as part of the effort to sell commodities for a profit, one example being the advertisements for health supplements accompanying *InfoWars* video described above (see Fig. 1). From this view, we could see Alex Jones' conspiracy theories as outlining a threat to his viewers – such as that evil forces are conspiring to undermine their physical health – before offering a solution to their worries by promoting his own range of health supplements for them to buy. In this way, the conspiracy theory becomes part of Jones' sales pitch, although it is not entirely shaped by this need (once again, a choice remains on how to articulate the conspiracy theory in any particular context).

5. Principles for case selection

Having outlined the procedures that an interpretative and particularist methodology entails, it is now worth taking a moment to explain how I have approached the selection of texts to analyse in this thesis, and how this selection has been influenced by the methodological concerns I have raised above.

In terms of case selection, my thinking has been influenced by two considerations: impact and difference. Firstly, I have chosen to prioritise focusing on conspiracy theories that have had a greater impact on society and politics, as well as on the category of conspiracy theory itself, and which have thus already been of interest to scholars researching conspiracism. My intention here is to focus on conspiracy theories with which readers are more likely to be familiar with already. Secondly, I have been keen to avoid choosing conspiracy theories that are all alike, and have instead chosen three cases that illustrate different aspects and explananda of conspiracy theorising. In this way, each case has been chosen to bring something different to our understanding of conspiracy theory. My aim here is not to select cases which are representative of all conspiracy theories, but rather to show how my approach and methodology can be applied to draw out the differences among conspiracy theories.

With this in mind, I have created three groupings for the cases: anti-Semitic conspiracy theories; conspiracy theories about the assassination of President Kennedy; and COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. These three groups will ensure variety in the conspiracy theories featured. Each of these groups of conspiracy theories vary in terms of what it is they are trying to explain. For example, with anti-Semitic conspiracism we encounter the notion of a superconspiracy controlling politics around the world; in Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories the focus is far narrower, trained on a limited set of events; and in the case of COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, we find a focus on the individual, emotion, and the body. These groups are not exhaustive, and there will be other conspiracy theories that seek to explain different types of phenomena besides these, but they will help to demonstrate that there is not a singular approach to conspiracy theorising.

Furthermore, within each of the three groups there will be another level of diversity: cases have been chosen to illustrate the variety of discursive and rhetorical strategies that are used within conspiracy theory, and to show the importance of contextual factors in the articulation of a conspiracy theory. For example, in the analysis of two anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, we will see that while both ultimately attribute a significant, oblique, and malevolent power to the Jews, the way in which this claim is expressed varies: in the case of Henry Ford, writing in the 1920s, the anti-Semitic nature of his claims are overt, and part of an ethnonationalist discourse; in the case of Peter Gregson's talk

almost a hundred years later, anti-Semitic conspiracy theory is expressed through a discourse of rights and freedom of expression, with the anti-Semitic nature of the conspiracy theory being less overt. Thus, I have sought to capture the different ways in which political thinking is articulated in conspiracy theories.

In each of the three groups, I will be conducting in-depth analyses of only two or three texts. This is simply in order to ensure a high level of detail and argumentation in each analysis. As much as I would like to apply my methodology to a larger number of texts and so further demonstrate the applicability of my argument, including more case studies and texts in this thesis would mean sacrificing the depth of my analyses. Again, I do not claim that the conspiracy theory texts featured in this thesis will be perfectly representative, but rather that they are illustrative of certain features of conspiracy theory. That is, I have chosen these texts as they illustrate certain recurring – though not essential or universal – features of conspiracy theories that I believe are worth examining further. The anti-Semitic texts analysed in this thesis exhibit a type of conspiracy theory that posits the existence of a superconspiracy controlling whole societies, if not the whole world; the Kennedy assassination case study will demonstrate how conspiracy theorising functions when dealing with a single event; the Covid-19 anti-vaccination case will show conspiracy theory's concern with the individual body. The first two of these cases fit into two the categories of outlined by Michael Barkun (2013), namely superconspiracy theories and event conspiracy theories, while the last concerns an aspect of conspiracy theorising that is beyond Barkun's categorisation. As I am prioritising depth of analysis over breadth, I do not mean to suggest that the texts analysed here are the definitive examples through which we can learn all there is to know about conspiracy theory. There may be other types of conspiracy theory besides those that posit superconspiracies, event conspiracies, or conspiracies against the body, and there is always the possibility for new types of conspiracy theories to emerge.

One of the key limiting factors in the process of case selection was my restricted language ability – fluent in English and Welsh, with an intermediate understanding of German. I am yet to come across a specifically Welsh conspiracy theory, and from personal experience, code-switching occurs when the topic arises in conversation with the English term being used instead of the direct translation, 'theori

cynllwyn'. Conspiracy theories certainly have a place in German political culture and history, as evidenced by the rise of Covid-19 denialism and the 'Querdenker' (translated as 'lateral thinkers') movement (see Fürstenau 2021). However, I lack the skill to be able to analyse German texts well enough – especially considering the rhetorical and discourse-analytical aspects of my approach, which rely so much on understanding the nuances of a language.

Readers will notice that most of the cases featured in this thesis come from the United States. This focus on American examples is a byproduct of three factors. Firstly, as many scholars have argued, while conspiracy theorising is not unique to America, and appears in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere, it nevertheless holds an unusual degree of prominence in American politics and culture. For instance, Kathryn Olmsted describes Americans as having "a special relationship to conspiracy" (2009, 3), attributing this to the United States' history of being open to immigration and fears that newcomers may be controlled by foreign powers such as the Papacy, Freemason, or the Illuminati. Similarly, Timothy Melley, in his pioneering text *Empire of Conspiracy*, sets out to learn how "conspiracy theory [became] such a *fundamental form* of American political discourse?" (2000, p. vii, emphasis added). As Michael Butter describes, conspiracy theories are "ubiquitous in the United States" and "have pervaded the culture" (Butter 2014, 1). Moreover, the impact of American conspiracy theories has been felt in other parts of the world, with Butter noting how some conspiracy theories are extended to posit explanations for events in both the United States and Euorpe (Butter 2014, 2). In a sense, then, the United States has a highly prominent role in the conspiracy theory tradition described by scholars such as Michael Billig (1978) and Jovan Byford (2011).

I am keen to avoid succumbing to American exceptionalism, though, and one should keep in mind that the prominence of conspiracy theories in American culture and politics can be traced to historical reasons, rather than being caused by some innate American character or state of mind. While Butter speaks of an "American predilection for conspiracy theories" (Butter 2014, 27), he also argues that there are specific historical and cultural factors that have contributed to this predilection, and cautions against taking a transhistorical or universalising view of conspiracy theory. In his view, conspiracy theory's prominence in America can be explained by three factors:

> [A]n epistemological paradigm that postulates a direct relationship between people's intentions and their actions and denies the possibility of unwarranted and accidental outcomes; the ideology of republicanism according to which republics are fragile entities perpetually endangered by conspirators within and without; and the heritage of Puritanism which firmly divides the world into good and evil and insists on America's mission in a struggle of cosmic dimensions.
>
> (Butter 2014, 27)

This differs from the classic view first articulated by Richard Hofstadter, that the predilection for conspiracy theorising is a product of one's personality or psychology – instead, Butter sees the reasons for this predilection as historically specific and contingent.

The reader may be surprised to find that a number of highly impactful conspiracy theories are not featured in this thesis. Why do neither QAnon nor 9/11 conspiracy theories feature here? What about Illuminati or New World Order conspiracy theories? In most cases, the key reason for not looking at such important cases was simply a lack of time and space. When dealing with a fixed deadline and immovable word limit, it becomes unfeasible to look at a great many cases and so several prominent examples of conspiracy theories did not make it into my thesis. Initially, I had planned on casting my net far wider, and had envisaged analysing a set of around twelve texts overall, with about four texts in each case study chapter. I was biting off more than I could chew, and in my first attempts at writing a case study chapter I lacked the space for describing the contents and context of each text, let alone conducting an in-depth analysis of each one.

In choosing my set, several prominent cases were excluded on account of being too similar to others. For example, with restrictions on my time and the length of this thesis, I decided to prioritise analysing the anti-Semitic conspiracism of Henry Ford over similar cases such as New World Order conspiracy theories – especially as the latter are themselves heavily influenced by the former in both form and content. In the course of choosing my cases, I also considered and rejected a number of more obscure conspiracy theories. For example, the conspiracy theory about the disappearance of B-

25 bomber in the Monongahela River in Pennsylvania certainly interested me as an example of a conspiracy theory concerned with a singular event (White, 2003). As fascinating as this 'ghost bomber' case is, it would be a mistake to focus on this instead of the far more impactful conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy – especially as the latter are so important in the conspiracy theory tradition. Minor cases certainly warrant attention, but this thesis is the not the right place for such an analysis.

Besides the focus on anglophone, largely American cases, I should also clarify the reasons for focusing on cases drawn from the past century or so – why not go further back? Or why not focus only on the most recent prominent cases of conspiracy theory? There are two reasons for this aspect of the case selection process.

Firstly, I am interested in the stigma attached to conspiracy theorising today, and its development across the past sixty years or so. As I have already recounted in the previous chapter, the stigma attached to conspiracy theorising only truly solidified around middle of the twentieth century (McKenzie-McHarg 2020, Thalmann 2019, McKenzie-McHarg 2018). The texts featured in this thesis are partly intended to demonstrate the changing connotations of conspiracy theory, and to show the impact of the stigma that formed around conspiracy theorising from the mid-twentieth century onwards. With the anti-Semitic writings of Henry Ford, we find his conspiracy theory is expressed without needing to adjust or respond to the pejorative connotations attached to conspiracy theory in later decades. In Mark Lane's conspiracist account of the Kennedy assassination, we begin to see the influence of Hofstadter's idea of the paranoid style upon conspiracy theorising, with Lane reacting against the growing stigma. By the time of Alex Jones' rant against Covid-19 vaccination, we see that the stigma has become something that conspiracy theorists can work with and incorporate into the presentation of their claims – Jones' status as an outsider who has been dismissed and pilloried by the mainstream becomes a core part of his persona and appeal.

Secondly, by focusing on texts from the last hundred years, the set covers the emergence and development of several mass media technologies, taking us from print journalism to television and film, and on to the internet in the present day. In each case, we see conspiracy theory being adapted,

articulated differently in response to the change in media. Moreover, this gives an insight into the contradictory relationship between conspiracy theorists and mass media, as we find them expressing deep distrust of mass media while nevertheless being willing to use its means themselves.

6. Conclusion

An interpretative and particularist methodology is needed in order to grasp the articulation of political thinking in conspiracy theories, and their relation to their specific context. When approaching the task of analysing the political thinking articulated in a conspiracy theory, we ought to grasp the particular context in which the conspiracy theory was expressed. Moreover, we ought not to prejudge what a speaker or author is doing in expressing a conspiracy theory. We should also be aware that, due to their rhetorical character, we should not expect every conspiracy theory to appeal to rationality and should recognise the potential for emotion to play a greater role instead.

The crux of my methodology, then, is that we should look at conspiracy theorising as practical, and as involving decision-making over what to articulate and how to express it. Conspiracy theorising is a way for a speaker or author to intervene in a discourse, and the decisions made in the articulation of a conspiracy theory will be influenced by multiple layers of context. One such contextual factor, I have argued, is the influence of capitalism, though we must avoid reducing conspiracy theorising to an epiphenomena of some economic base. This methodology prevents us from seeing conspiracy theory simply as a by-product of other conditions or processes, and instead encourages us to examine the conspiracy theorist's choices on what to say and how to say it in light of the influence of context. This view of thought and politics as irreducible to an economic base is enabled by both Postone's account of capitalist society and Chouliaraki and Fairclough's overview of CDA. These authors acknowledge that thought and discourse influence social practices while also recognising that thought and discourse will be shaped by the structures of capitalism. In this sense, both Postone and the critical discourse analysts are able to find a balance between structure and agency.

Using the DHA and RPA to analyse conspiracy theories will mean paying close attention to the language used in conspiracy theory texts to express political ideas, assumptions, and identities. We Will need to look at who is being named, what is being attributed to them, how these claims and descriptions are justified, and how the speaker views their own position in the discourse. We will also need to examine the argumentative strategies used by a speaker, and whether they appeal to reason, emotion, or their own character. All the while, contextual factors must be kept in mind, including the character of the audience and the setting in which the text or utterance occurs. Who is the conspiracy theorist addressing? What sort of arguments would they be expecting in that setting? Does the speaker play up or tone down the conspiracist aspect of their rhetoric?

We are now equipped with a new conceptualisation of conspiracy theory, one that emphasises the concept's political and rhetorical aspects, and an interpretative-particularist methodology that examines conspiracy theories as a creative practice influenced by multiple specific contextual factors. We can now move on to the analysis of conspiracy theory texts, putting our conceptualisation and methodology into practice by examining three groups of texts, each one illustrating certain aspects of conspiracy theory. The first of these will be two anti-Semitic conspiracy theories; secondly, three JFK assassination conspiracy theory texts; thirdly, two COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theory texts.

Chapter 3 – "They're behind everything": society and politics as conspiracy in anti-Semitic conspiracy theory

1. Introduction

My aim so far has been to outline a new approach to analysing conspiracy theories. Combining Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) with Alan Finlayson's Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA), along with an original conceptualisation of conspiracy theory, this approach stresses the political and rhetorical quality of the claims made in conspiracy theories, as opposed to their epistemological status. It involves applying an interpretative and particularist methodology to examine how political thinking is articulated in a conspiracy theory text; it also looks at how an author or speaker is influenced by and interacts with their particular context. A key part of this context, I have argued, is the changing social significance of conspiracy theory, including the pejorative connotations the concept has today.

In this and the next two chapters, I put this approach to work in three cases studies, to better understand what conspiracy theories are saying about politics, and how they are saying it. These three chapters will focus on anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccination, respectively. With each new text we analyse, we will see that the articulation of these conspiracy theories is practical, responding to and intervening in the specific context in which the speaker or author is situated. In each case, we will find that some features of conspiracy theories are repeated, albeit with adjustments made to fit a new situation. Some features will be toned down, while others will be emphasised more strongly. Other features may be dropped entirely, and new ones added. The conspiracy theorist builds on this tradition, each time taking something from it but also adding to it (Byford, 2011, pp. 97-102; Billig, 1978, pp. 153-164).

The argument I will make across these three chapters is twofold and speaks to these aspects of continuity and difference across conspiracy theories. Firstly, I continue with my earlier line of argument, that greater care is needed when making generalisations about conspiracy theories. As the

analyses in the next three chapters will show, many of the political beliefs, assumptions, and ideas articulated in conspiracy theories vary from one case to the next, and from one context to the next – from racist and hateful views to a more liberal democratic politics, and from a commitment to the collective and community to an ardent defence of individualism. They are expressed by individuals from a variety of backgrounds – some from a legal background, others from business, political activism, journalism, and even the wellness industry. Secondly, in these analyses we will also see an important element of continuity: those texts that seek to explain society and politics more broadly (rather than just an event or limited series of events), do so through a narrative of *ressentiment.* This narrative framework orders past events into a tale of suffering and blames this on an Other. A key feature of this Other is its construction as more powerful than the in-group to which the conspiracy theorist belongs.

There are a few qualifications that need to be kept in mind for this branch of the argument. Firstly, this is not a claim about the psychology of anyone who expresses or believes in conspiracy theories. Rather, it is a claim about the political *narratives* found in these conspiracy theories – degrees of commitment to these beliefs will vary, as will the reasons for belief. Moreover, one need not have actually experienced suffering personally, or feel genuine *ressentiment*, in order to construct such a narrative. Secondly, it should be kept in mind that my focus is not on the truth or falsity of the conspiracy theories' claims of suffering, but on the politics such claims articulate. As such, this argument does not require us to accept claims of suffering when those claims are part of a hateful ideology. Thirdly, my claim here is minimal, in the sense that I am describing a narrative *framework,* a bare-bones structure into which different contents and claims can be inserted. I am not arguing that conspiracy theories necessarily adhere to a particular ideology, but rather that the ideologies and political concepts they *do* express are presented within this recurring narrative framework of *ressentiment.*

1.1. Analysing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories

In this first of three case study chapters, my focus is on two anti-Semitic conspiracy theory texts. The first of these is Henry Ford's *The International Jew* (2011; 1931), a series of newspaper articles originally published in the early 1920s, in which the arch-industrialist alleges that a Jewish plot is afoot to take over the world. Here we find an archetypical example of a superconspiracy theory, with its claims that the Jews are the secret power behind everything.[20] The second text is a recording of a talk given by the former Labour Party and trade union activist Peter Gregson to the conspiracist Keep Talking group (*Loss,* 2019). A superconspiracy is still posited here, but different referential strategies are used for the conspirators, and a more local focus is adopted; 'Israel' and 'Zionists' are named as directing a plot to restrict free expression and control politics in the United Kingdom. Still, an explicit anti-Semitism appears towards the end of Gregson's talk as his audience openly deny the Holocaust. Moreover, approaching these texts with the critical conceptualisation of conspiracy theory in mind, we find that in both cases conspiracy theory is being used for political ends – to explain marginalisation, construct political identities, and articulate exigencies – rather than simply acting as a truth claim about the existence of a plot. Pairing these two texts will help us to better understand the malleability of anti-Semitism – how anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are used in multiple ways by both figures of the left as well as right, and how it is adapted to fit new audiences and contexts.

Applying the DHA and RPA to these texts, I was pushed to think more deeply about who is named in these texts, how they are referred to, and what is attributed to them. This proved be particularly useful when reading Henry Ford's text, with its unusual construction of the two categories of 'makers' and 'getters'. Moreover, applying the DHA in particular required me to delve deeper into the context

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[20] I borrow the term 'superconspiracy theory' from Michael Barkun's categorisation of conspiracy theories (2013, p. 22). He describes three categories, which differ in terms of the scope of the alleged conspiracy: event conspiracy theories, which seek to explain an event or limited set of events; systemic conspiracy theories, which allege the infiltration of institutions by a conspiracy; and superconspiracy theories, which order different event and systemic conspiracies into a larger conspiratorial hierarchy.

surrounding their creation, and to consider the various factors that influenced their content – such as Ford's business practices and his attempt to culturally homogenise his workforce. The RPA's influence on my reading of these texts can be seen in how I interpret the function of the conspiracy theory in each of the texts. That is, the RPA led me to question what conspiracy theory was doing for Ford and Gregson. Was it serving as an end in itself, that is a political worldview that the reader or viewer was being encouraged to accept? Or was the conspiracy theory being used as a means to express another political outlook? This question becomes especially important in Gregson's case, where we find that he and his audience have arrived at their conspiracy theory beliefs in different ways. Moreover, in reading these texts, I was conscious to the fact that Ford was writing at a time when 'conspiracy theory' had not yet become a general concept and so did not have the pejorative connotations it does today, whereas Gregson was speaking at a time when a severe stigma was attached to both conspiracy theorising and anti-Semitism. Thinking back to the critical conceptualisation of conspiracy theory outlined in Chapter 2 of this thesis, I was eager to see how this contextual difference would play out in the text.

In both of these texts, certain features of earlier conspiracy theories reappear but in a modified form. Most importantly for our purposes, a narrative of *ressentiment* is present in each text. Drawing on the earlier anti-Semitic forgery, *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (n.d.)*,* Ford decries the supposed disintegration of non-Jewish nations at the hands of the cosmopolitan Jews. In his case, conspiracy theory is the key to understanding society, articulating social and political identities as well as offering an interpretation of the meaning of world events. In Gregson's presentation and his dialogue with audience members, a similar narrative is conveyed in which the British public are described as being deliberately stripped of their democratic rights by an intrusive Israel and its Zionist allies. For Gregson, the conspiracy theory serves less as a worldview and more as an implication of his position on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Put differently, we could describe Ford as ideologically conspiracist, whereas Gregson is better described as a leftist who endorses a conspiracy theory. Nevertheless, in both cases, the narrative is one in which a claim of having been wronged is made by the author or speaker and Jewish actors are blamed. In each case, there is more going on than a simple attempt at

persuading others of the truth of a conspiracy theory. Instead, what we find is conspiracy theory being used in different ways: as a framework for understanding the world; to construct political identities; to explain a lack of political success.

While *ressentiment* is present in both of these texts, I also point to an element of change, namely a shift in the framing of anti-Semites' claims, and the *doxa* to which they appeal. By the term '*doxa*', I mean commonly held opinion, "a specific, local and historically developing collection of claims and references, assumptions and cognitive shortcuts, ways of thinking and arguing" (Finlayson, 2018, p. 68). *Doxa* can be drawn upon in an utterance or text to make it more persuasive for the audience, framing one's claims in terms that are familiar and accepted by the audience.[21] For example, the category of race is central to Ford's conspiracy theory, written at a time in which common opinion saw race as a scientific and natural category, and he openly blames the Jews for the plot. In contrast, Gregson appeals to *doxa* that are very different from those of Ford's context, framing his conspiracy theory in the discourse of a commitment to free speech and anti-racism. Moreover, Gregson's talk demonstrates the malleability of anti-Semitic conspiracism. For him, conspiracy theory is the conclusion he has reached through his political activism and his frustration at the Israel-Palestine conflict. Conversely, his audience express a view that is more closely aligned with that of Ford, where conspiracy theory becomes the lens through which all events are interpreted. In both cases, however, a narrative of *ressentiment* appears though different *doxa* are appealed to, such as common opinion on free speech and anti-racism. This shift in terminology, I argue, indicates a worrying bridging of right- and left-wing anti-Semites.

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[21] It might also help to think of *doxa* through the more familiar term, 'orthodoxy', which combines the Greek words *orthos* and *doxa* to denote correct belief (Siecienski, 2019, p. 2). Just as what is considered orthodox and unorthodox in a religion changes over time, so too are *doxa* not fixed and unchanging. What is common opinion in one context may count as radical or unfamiliar in another. Still, *doxa* should not be conflated as simply meaning belief; as Jessica Moss and Whitney Schwab (2019) argue, *doxa* was used by Plato and Aristotle as referring to opinion rather than belief, and as a counterpart to knowledge.

Anti-Semitism has been researched by many scholars, a number of whom have highlighted its severe influence over conspiracy theory generally (see Bronner, 2019; Arendt, 2017; Fine & Spencer, 2017; Bonefeld, 2014; Byford, 2011; Postone, 2008; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997; Sartre, 1965; Arendt, 1963). What marks this chapter out as different is its sustained interpretation and critique of two anti-Semitic conspiracy theory texts, with a focus on the rhetorical and discursive strategies they deploy to persuade their audiences in their specific contexts. Moreover, I point to the place of narratives of *ressentiment* in these two texts, and their use to order political claims and construct identities. In this way, I avoid treating the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories as inert or as just by-products of an underlying social or psychological condition, instead seeing them as products of the conspiracy theorists' own actions, the decisions they took on what to say and how to say it.

1.2. Structure of the chapter

This chapter is split into two parts, with the first part analysing Ford's *The International Jew* and the second focusing on Gregson's talk to the Keep Talking group. I begin the analysis of Ford's text by explaining its significance and my rationale for analysing it, describing how the text continues to influence anti-Semites and conspiracy theorists to this day. I go on to provide background information on Ford, the context in which the text was written, as well as giving a summary of its content. Following this, I examine Ford's use of binary divisions in his construction of the categories of Jews and gentiles, along with his erasure of the more familiar distinction between workers and capitalists. I argue that this conveys a productivist critique of capitalism in Ford's writing, in which production is treated as non-capitalist, natural, and hence good, while capitalism is conceived of comprising solely finance, as well as being an artificial creation of the Jews. I close the section by arguing that the political beliefs and claims in Ford's writing are expressed and ordered through a narrative of *ressentiment,* whereby the demise of a better past is blamed on the Jews and their unjust treatment of gentiles, followed with the promise of redress and vengeance for gentiles in the future.

In the second part of this chapter, I turn to Gregson's talk given to the Keep Talking group, starting once again by explaining the rationale for focusing on this text. I go on to explain the context surrounding the talk, focusing in particular on the anti-Semitism controversy that was affecting the Labour Party and its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, at the time. I then analyse the reversal of the roles of victim and victimizer in the text, whereby the conspiracy theorists deny victimhood to Jews and position themselves as victims instead. Finally, I examine the discursive construction of Zionists and Israel in Gregson's conspiracy theory, highlighting a shift away from Ford's racial framing. I argue that this shift in the framing of the conspiracy theory allows interaction between anti-Semitism, and the less controversial coalition of anti-imperialist politics. By shifting the terms of the conspiracy theory from the racial to the political – a shift from blaming Jews to blaming Zionists –anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists are able to reduce the impact of their marginalisation and delegitimisation.

2. Henry Ford's The International Jew[22]

The first text to be analysed in this chapter is Henry Ford's *The International Jew* (2011; 1931), a collection of articles written originally in 1920-22. This text is a mix of commentary on the infamous earlier anti-Semitic text, *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (n.d.)*,* and Ford's own thoughts on the so-called 'Jewish Question'.[23] In *The International Jew,* Ford depicts the Jews as rootless,

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[22] I delivered an earlier and much shorter version of the argument I make in this section in a talk on the topic of 'Populism and Anti-Semitism in Henry Ford's *The International Jew'* for the conference, 'Populism and Conspiracy Theories in the Americas', at the University of Tübingen (Koper, 2022a).

[23] The *Protocols,* described by Stephen Eric Bronner as "probably the most influential work of antisemitism ever written" (2019, p. 1), purports to be a collection of notes taken during a meeting of high-ranking Jews as one of them recounts the Jewish plot for world conquest to their co-conspirators. The *Protocols* is a forgery, though this has not stopped it from influencing anti-Semitism up to the present day. The text was originally published in 1903 (Ginzburg, 2008), but the edition I have cited in this chapter puts the original year of publication at 1905 and credits a Russian Orthodox priest called Professor Nilus, who claimed to have been

unproductive, and predisposed to conspiring. Moreover, Ford describes the Jews as capitalists, while also distancing himself from that role himself despite his involvement in industry. Ford uses a series of overlapping binary divisions to construct social categories, including: gentiles and Jews; makers and getters; producers and financiers; a natural economy and an artificial capitalism. In erecting these binary divisions, Ford erases the more conventional division between labour capital. He characterises the Jews alone as the only real capitalists and positions them as the common enemy of both gentile workers and bosses. I argue that the construction of these categories and divisions functions to express a productivist critique of capitalism, whereby capitalism is wrongly treated as comprising only its abstract elements; its concrete elements are treated as non-capitalist, natural, and hence good. In the final part of this analysis, I argue that Ford's conspiracy theory uses a narrative of *ressentiment* to order and articulate his political claims and values. While others have noted Ford's dislike of capitalism, none so far have analysed his anti-capitalism in detail nor how it was articulated in his conspiracist writing.[24]

2.1. Rationale for text selection – why focus on Ford's articles?

Why focus on this text in the first place? To begin with, in the century or so since they were originally published, the articles that make up *The International Jew* have had a significant influence on anti-

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given a translation of a document stolen from a meeting of freemasons in France (*Protocols*, n.d., p. 4). Since their publication and translation into English, the *Protocols* has been proven to plagiarise an earlier political text by the French author, Maurice Joly, which was a fictional dialogue between Machiavelli and Montesquieu intended as a critique of the regime of Napoleon III (Bronner, 2019; Ginzburg, 2008).

[24] For example, James C. Foust refers only briefly to Ford's "distrust of big business, bankers and Wall Street" (1997, p. 413). Similarly, Leo P. Ribuffo (1980, p. 443) notes that Ford saw the First World War as a capitalist conflict, but does not delve deeper into his peculiar critique of capitalism. Victoria Saker Woeste too notes that "Ford's pacifism was grounded in a scorn for a certain kind of capitalist, those who he believed controlled the money supply," but goes no further (2012, pp. 32-33).

Semitic conspiracy theory. These articles were first published as part of a long-running anti-Semitic campaign by the *Dearborn Independent,* a newspaper bought by Ford in 1919 (Foust, 1997). While the newspaper ultimately lacked the staying power of Ford's automobile company, closing down at the end of 1927, it nevertheless had a sizeable readership and reach, with Ford lifting the number of readers from 1,200 to nearly 700,000 (Woeste, 2012, p. 3). As part of efforts to expand the readership, dealers of Ford motorcars were required to market and distribute the newspaper and even expected to meet a quota of new subscriptions (Foust, 1997, p. 419). Moreover, the newspaper was "sent unsolicited to schools, libraries, and universities across the country" (Woeste, 2012, p. 3). Later on, the anti-Semitic articles written for the *Dearborn Independent* were sold as a series of collected volumes with the title, *The International Jew.* As Leo P. Ribuffo describes, "More than any other literary source, these articles spread the notion that Jews menaced the United States" (1980, p. 437).

The *Dearborn Independent* was shut down following a lawsuit brought against Ford by Aaron Sapiro, a Jewish lawyer who had been victimised in a later anti-Semitic campaign by the newspaper (Woeste, 2012). Nevertheless, the influence of Ford's anti-Semitic writings persisted, with *The International Jew* being translated and published in Europe and South America, and Ford himself going on to receive the Grand Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle from the Nazi regime (Lewis, 1984). Ford's writing was also serialised in the National States Rights Party's newspaper, the *Thunderbolt,* as well as by the far-right figure Gerald L. K. Smith (Lewis, 1984). Woeste observes that the influence of *The International Jew* persists to the present day due to it being readily accessible on the internet (2012, pp. 330-331). All of this has contributed to Ford's reputation "as one of the twentieth century's foremost purveyors of vicious antisemitism" (Rockaway, 2001, p. 467).

A number of scholars writing about conspiracy theories have noted Ford's influence in promoting anti-Semitism and conspiracism (see Bangerter, et al., 2020; Simonsen, 2020; Butter, 2014; Kuzmick, 2003, Ruotsila, 2003). For example, Michael Butter refers to Ford, along with the Catholic priest Charles Coughlin, as anti-Semitism's "most vocal spokesmen in the first half of the twentieth century" (2014, p. 31). Marlon Kuzmick even describes Ford's writing as having had an influence on the Nazi regime in Germany, pointing out that he is the sole American referred to by Adolf Hitler in

Mein Kampf (Kuzmick, 2003, p. 267). Markku Ruotsila sees Ford as a key influence on the content of both anti-Semitic and Illuminati conspiracy theories, and as "responsible for the unprecedented spread and popular acceptance of the Jew-Bolshevik equation, which coincided with his period of greatest antisemitic activity, the years 1920-1927" (Ruotsila, 2003, p. 83).

Despite such statements about the influence of Ford's anti-Semitic writing upon conspiracy theorising, no in-depth analysis of *The International Jew* or the conspiracy theory it articulates has so far been published. Several compelling studies about Ford's anti-Semitism have been published, but none of these have analysed the text as a piece of political thinking or a conspiracy theory. For example, Ribuffo (1980) gives a fascinating historical account of the articles and provides many insights about their content as well as the context of their writing and publication but does not engage in a sustained analysis of the text itself. James C. Foust (1997) offers an equally compelling account of the *Dearborn Independent* from the perspective of media history. Neil Baldwin (2003) provides a highly detailed history of Ford's antisemitism, focusing in part on the reaction of the American Jewish community to his hate speech. Woeste (2012) focuses on the lawsuit that led to the closure of the *Dearborn Independent,* and on its implications for civil liberties and responses to hate speech. While each of these authors contributes a great deal to our understanding of Ford's anti-Semitism and the broader context in which he was writing, none of them engage in a detailed analysis and interpretation of *The International Jew* as a political text, nor with the conspiracy theory it articulates.

With the analysis presented here, I seek to overcome this gap in the literature, by focusing our attention on the text itself. What does Ford's writing convey about his beliefs about politics and society? How is his conspiracist and political thinking influenced by context? And how does his writing differ from the earlier *Protocols?*

2.2. Ford's background, and the context for the publication of The International Jew

Before diving into a detailed analysis of *The International Jew,* it is worth providing some background information on Ford and his venture into the world of journalism. Born to a protestant

farming family in Dearbornville, Michigan, in 1863, Ford showed an interest in engineering from a young age, moving to the city of Detroit at the age of seventeen where he worked in a variety of mechanics' workshops (Baldwin, 2003). Ford finished his first automobile in 1896 – a "gasoline quadricycle" – for which he received praise and encouragement from Thomas Edison (Baldwin, 2003, pp. 12-14). After a series of setbacks, the Ford Motor Company was founded in 1903, and stood out from its competitors thanks to its Model A car being "lighter, less expensive, and less mechanically daunting" than other cars on the market (Baldwin, 2003, p. 21). The company pushed things further with the Model T, which "brought down his focus to a single, simple, egalitarian, and uniform car, each one manufactured as much like the next as pins or matches" (Baldwin, 2003, p. 22). With the Model T, Ford sought to make travel by car more accessible and affordable for Americans, at one point selling the car for the low sum of $260 (Ford UK, n.d.). Charles E. Sorensen, one of the most powerful of his employees, described Ford's greatest achievement as "changing the face of America and putting the world on wheels" (Sorensen & Williamson, 2006, p. 301). This aspect of Ford's legacy persists to the current day through the automobile company that still bears his name.

Ford's name is also associated with a certain period in the history of capitalism – Fordism – that is remembered as a period that saw the expansion of mass production and consumption, along with increasing compromise and cooperation between organised labour and business owners (Jessop, 2016). Ford himself is remembered for introducing a $5-a-day wage for his workers, though this move was less benevolent than is often remembered. As Neil Baldwin describes, this wage was only offered to workers who acquiesced to the company's intrusion into their private lives:

> To qualify for the five-dollar day, an employee had to put up with an exhaustive domestic inspection, show that he was sober, clean of person, saving money through regular bank deposits, "of good habits," and not living "riotously" or taking in too many boarders.
>
> (Baldwin, 2003, p. 39)

Ford's intervention into the lives of his employees went further still with his programme to Americanise those who were originally from outside the United States. Immigrant workers were

encouraged to abandon their particular national language, traditions, and heritage, and instead adopt Anglo-Saxon American habits and culture. This programme was led by the company's Sociological Department, comprised of investigators who assessed the private lives and habits of Ford employees and gave compulsory English classes, in a bid to enforce uniformity and discipline among the workforce (Baldwin, 2003, pp. 38-41). This programme of Americanisation culminated in a bizarre graduation ceremony, in which graduating workers would climb into a model of a melting pot, wearing the traditional clothing of their countries of origin; they would then emerge from the melting pot, "dressed in derby hats, coats, pants, vests, stiff collars, polka-dot ties, […] singing the *Star-Spangled Banner*–and wearing the distinctive Ford Motor Company badge on their lapels" (Baldwin, 2003, p. 42).

As already mentioned, the articles that make up *The International Jew* were originally published in Ford's newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent;* these were first published as part of an anti-Semitic campaign that ran between May 1920 and January 1922 (Foust, 1997). Ford had bought the newspaper in 1919, using it as a mouthpiece through which he could communicate his ideas with a large audience (Baldwin, 2003, p. 69). To aid him in this venture, Ford hired William J. Cameron, a "moralistic wordsmith" who acted as a ghost writer, turning Ford's utterances into lengthy written articles that would give readers an insight into his thoughts on the pressing matters of the day (Baldwin, 2003, p. 74; Foust, 1997, p. 414). Ford had his own regular column in the *Dearborn Independent,* titled 'Mr. Ford's Own Page' (Baldwin, 2003).

There is broad agreement in the literature that the articles were not written by Ford himself in a literal sense. As Foust puts it, Ford's articles were based on "impromptu talks with Cameron", with Ford himself being rather aloof from the running of the newspaper prior to the start of its anti-Semitic campaign (1997, p. 414). Ribuffo makes much the same observation, explaining that Cameron "listened to Ford's ruminations and then wrote "Mr. Ford's Page."" (1980, p. 444). Cameron would later accept responsibility for the articles in the libel case that led to the *Independent's* ultimate demise (Lewis, 1984, p. 5). However, Ribuffo also describes Ford's increasing involvement with the newspaper once its anti-Semitic campaign was underway, noting that "Ford visited the Independent

almost every day, concerning himself only with "Mr. Ford's Page" and *The International Jew"* (Ribuffo, 1980, p. 446). In this way, while Ford provided the ideas that went into these articles, it would be a mistake to see them as the product of a single creator, as it was Cameron who "translated" his employer's beliefs into a weekly column ready for public consumption (Baldwin, 2003, p. 74).

Ribuffo suggests that Cameron's influence on the text is particularly evident in how *The International Jew* deals with the matter of religion (1980, p. 455). He notes that the newspaper claimed that Jesus Christ and Moses were not Jewish, reflecting Cameron's adherence to a minor strand of Christianity known as 'Anglo-Israelism' (1980, p. 455). According to Anglo-Israelite dogma, Anglo-Saxons were the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, meaning that their British and American descendants were God's actual chosen people, with the Jews being merely pretenders to that title (Baldwin, 2003, p. 263). While Ford did not share Cameron's Anglo-Israelism, this belief in the superiority of people of Anglo-Saxon descent certainly chimed well with the former's belief in the ascendancy of white protestants in America and his attempts to stamp out cultural diversity in his workforce. Still, we should be wary of diminishing Ford's role in the publication of *The International Jew,* and of accepting the claim made in the 1927 trial that Cameron aloe was responsible for them. It is clear that Ford's anti-Semitism predated the publication of his articles in the *Independent.* For example, during a meeting with anti-war campaigner Rosika Schwimmer in 1915, Ford repeatedly blamed the outbreak of the First World War on German-Jewish bankers – Schwimmer was herself Jewish (Baldwin, 2003, pp. 58-60).

2.3. Summary of content and structure of The International Jew

Ford's anti-Semitic articles were published in a series of four volumes (Ribuffo, 1980, p. 437, n. 2). Due to the length and number of these volumes, it would be unfeasible to analyse each and every article in this chapter. Instead, for the purposes of my analysis, I will be analysing select extracts from two editions of *The International Jew:* firstly, a selection of Ford's articles from across the four volumes published in 1931 under the title *The Jewish Question*; secondly, some extracts will come

from articles included in the complete first volume of *The International Jew* (Ford, 2011)*,* but which were omitted from the 1931 collection.

The conspiracy theory expressed in these articles is not revealed gradually over the course of the books but has an episodic style to its presentation; each article deals with a particular topic or issue and relates this back to the broader conspiracy Ford has supposedly detected. For example, the articles frequently refer back to the *Protocols,* and deal with topics such as the question of whether there is a Jewish conspiracy at all (Ford, 1931, Art. IV); the Jewish conspirators' involvement in the Russian Revolution (Art. XIX); Jewish control of motion pictures (Art. XXXII); Jews' promotion of jazz music (Art. XLVII); Jewish involvement in bootlegging (Art. LXIV); and an address to gentiles about what they can do to counter the conspiracy (Art. LXXX).

As is the case with the earlier *Protocols*, Ford's articles explicitly predicate control over large areas of society to the Jews: he blames them for the First World War and claims that they control national economies and governments; he blames them for jazz and the popularity of "sport clothes", the latter of which he describes as having had "so deleterious an effect on the youth of the times" (Ford, 2011, p. 65). Other things attributed by Ford to the Jews in the articles include Marxism, Darwinism, Nietzscheism (p. 92), both the French and Russian revolutions (p. 71), the decline of Christianity (p. 63), and the collapse of society into competing factions (p. 58). Drawing again on the *Protocols,* Ford's text is largely focused on depicting the Jews as a threatening out-group, one whose members are "individually excellent but socially harmful" (p. 18).

While Ford cites the *Protocols* repeatedly and positively throughout *The International Jew*, there are still some changes that mark his conspiracy theory out as different. Much of the difference arises from the particular contexts in which these texts were produced and the different *doxa* which they draw upon. The *Protocols* was put together by the secret police of Czarist Russia, likely with the intention of stoking antipathy at the Romanovs' court towards advocates of liberalisation and industrialisation at the imperial court (Bronner, 2019, p. 75). It was thus produced as a propaganda piece, intended to undermine the modernising influences that threatened the interests of the Russian aristocracy and the imperial family. In contrast, Ford's text was part of a business venture undertaken in the context of a

capitalist liberal democratic society. The defence of aristocracy has little room in Ford's

understanding of the *Protocols.* Instead, he draws on *doxa* of American democracy, as he stereotypes

the Jews as lacking democracy and of being naturally autocratic, claiming that "the Jew wherever he

is found forms an aristocracy of one sort or another" (Ford, 2011, p. 41). This is the most striking way

in which *The International Jew* differs from the *Protocols,* and our first example of how a conspiracy

theory may be altered or built upon by other conspiracy theorists to fit with their own particular

political context.

2.4. Ford's construction of the categories of the Jew and the gentiles

In this sub-section, I begin the in-depth analysis of extracts from *The International Jew* by examining

the referential and predicational strategies used by Ford, including the division he constructs between

Jews and gentiles. As the title alone would suggest, much of *The International Jew* is concerned with

describing the category of 'the Jew'. Even the basic referential strategy being used here – the way in

which individuals and groups are named and referred to – can provide an important insight into how

Ford constructs this category over the course of the articles. The use of the singular rather than plural

term – *The International Jew* instead of *Jews* – already suggests homogeneity and a lack of

individuality among Jews. This use of the singular is prominent throughout the text – for example, in

asserting that Jews are overrepresented in national and international elites, Ford states that "we meet

the Jew everywhere in the upper circles" (Ford, 1931, p. 21, emphasis added). Elsewhere, the

supposed homogeneity of the Jews is attributed by Ford to what he deems to be their uniquely strong

sense of *racial* or *national* unity.[25] Ford characterises the Jews as too particularistic, as fundamentally

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[25] Ford's use of the language of race and nationality can be confusing and inconsistent. At various points in

these articles, he characterises the Jews as both a race and a nation, such as when he writes that "the Jew will go

on thinking of himself as the member of a people, a nation, a race" (Ford, 2011, p. 23). What exactly he means

by these terms, and whether he takes them to be distinct or synonyms, is unclear. On the Jews' status as a nation,

Ford mostly endorses the view that they are indeed a nation, which he takes to be an innate quality that cannot

different from the rest of humanity and unable to integrate or assimilate like other groups and communities have done. A focus on the category of race is a key aspect of Ford's predicational strategy. For instance, Ford asserts that the Jew "avails himself of a racial loyalty and solidarity the like of which exists in no other human group" (1931, p. 24). In doing so, Ford draws on the *doxa* of race operative in his context, where the common opinion saw race as a natural and immutable characteristic, rather than as something socially constructed.[26]

Ford shows comparatively little interest or concern with the Jewish religion, as, "There is really nothing in his religion to differentiate the Jew from the rest of mankind" (Ford, 1931, p. 25). The predicational strategy of using the language of race and nationality functions to fix the qualities attributed to the Jew in place, treating them as though they were innate to all Jews and unable to be erased or changed. Thus, in Ford's view the Jew will always remain a potential threat. Were the difference merely a matter of religion, one could imagine that Ford might envision conversion to Christianity or the abandonment of the Jewish faith as a prescriptive step. However, by describing the Jews with the language of race and naturalising the negative characteristics he attributes to them, taking these qualities to be innate rather than socially constructed, even this severe and oppressive option would not go far enough for Ford. In this way, the figure of the Jew is forever branded with certain negative traits:

> An Irishman who grows indifferent to the Church is still an Irishman, and it would seem to be equally true that a Jew who grows indifferent to the Synagogue is still a Jew. He at least feels that he is, and so does the non-Jew.

be shaken off or altered. Elsewhere, he suggests that the Jews were previously a nation but are no longer. For instance, in the very first article of the first volume, he writes: "*If, therefore, the Jews had retained their status as a nation,* and had remained in Palestine under the Law of Moses, they would hardly have achieved the financial distinction which they have since won" (Ford, 2011, p. 5, emphasis added).

[26] For a detailed overview of attitudes towards race in the United States around this time, see Smithers (2017, Ch. 9) and Heinze (2004).

This stereotyping of the Jews as homogenous and racially loyal stands in contrast to Ford's construction of another social category, that of the gentiles. For instance, he claims that the "cement of racial unity, the bond of racial brotherhood cannot in the very nature of things exist among the Gentiles as it exists among the Jews" (Ford, 1931, p. 30). Moreover, in Ford's construction of the categories of Jew and gentile, the racial unity of the former is what enables their conspiracy to dominate the latter. In commenting on an article written by a Mr. William Hard for another magazine on the 'Jewish Question', Ford argues that:

> Of course, Mr. Hard says he does not believe in conspiracies which involve a large number of people, and it is with the utmost ease that his avowal of unbelief is accepted, for there is nothing more ridiculous to the Gentile mind than a mass conspiracy, because there is nothing more impossible to the Gentile himself. Mr. Hard, we take it, is of non-Jewish extraction, and he knows how impossible it would be to band Gentiles together in any considerable number for any length of time in even the noblest conspiracy. Gentiles are not built for it. Their conspiracy, whatever it might be, would fall like a rope of sand. Gentiles have not the basis either in blood or interest that the Jews have to stand together. The Gentile does not naturally suspect conspiracy; he will indeed hardly bring himself to the verge of believing it without the fullest proof.

A binary division is drawn by Ford here, giving greater definition to the two categories he is assembling in the text. Ford presents the Jews and gentiles as direct opposites of each other – everything the Jews are, the gentiles are not. The latter group is defined by its opposition to the former. Just as the language of race and nationality serve to fix his characterisation of the Jews in place, so too does it cause this binary division to appear as immovable and fundamental. Thus, from Ford's perspective, whether or not a Jew is directly involved in the conspiracy is of little concern. In his view, the tendency towards conspiring is a natural part of the character of 'the Jew', one that can

be explained by their race. As Ford writes elsewhere, these are part of the "qualities which are inherent in their Jewish natures" and their "Jewish character and psychology" (Ford, 1931, p. 27). In this way, their persecution is able to be framed not simply as desirable but as a necessity, stemming from the harmful and immutable traits Ford attributes to them.

2.5. Ford's productivist critique of capitalism

What else is attributed to the Jews by Ford, besides racial loyalty and homogeneity? In the very first article of the first volume, Ford asserts that they control global finance and exercise "the power behind many a throne" (2011, p. 4). In his following description of the Jew, Ford states that "he is in business" (2011, p. 4). Later on in the article, this aspect of Ford's characterisation of Jews is developed further:

> The Jew is the only and *original international capitalist*, but as a rule he prefers not to emblazon that fact upon the skies; he prefers to use Gentile banks and trust companies as his agents and instruments. The suggestive term "Gentile front" often appears in connection with this practice.

> (Ford, 2011, p. 5, emphasis added)

This may sound like as an unusual claim for Ford to make, considering that he himself was in possession of an international business empire (see Baldwin, 2003, p. 104). Moreover, as already mentioned, Ford lends his name to Fordism, a period in the history of capitalism. How then can Ford be so bold as to mount an attack on the Jews as the *only* international capitalists? Surely, he belongs to that category as well? Towards the end of this first article, this notion that the Jews alone count as capitalists appears once again:

> That which we call capital here in America is usually money used in production, and we mistakenly refer to the manufacturer, the manager of work, the provider of tools and jobs— we refer to him as the "capitalist." Oh, no. He is not the capitalist in the real sense. Why, he

himself must go to capitalists for the money with which to finance his plans. There is a power yet above him—a power which treats him far more callously and holds him in a more ruthless hand than he would ever dare display to labor. That, indeed, is one of the tragedies of these times, that "labor" and "capital" are fighting each other, when the conditions against which each one of them protests, and from which each one of them suffers, is not within their power to remedy at all, unless they find a way to wrest world control from that group of international financiers who create and control both these conditions.

There is a super-capitalism which is supported wholly by the fiction that gold is wealth. There is a super-government which is allied to no government, which is free from them all, and yet which has its hand in them all. There is a race, a part of humanity, which has never yet been received as a welcome part, and which has succeeded in raising itself to a power that the proudest Gentile race has never claimed—not even Rome in the days of her proudest power. It is becoming more and more the conviction of men all over the world that the labor question, the wage question, the land question cannot be settled until first of all this matter of an international super-capitalistic government is settled.

(Ford, 2011, pp. 9-10)

By 'capitalist', Ford has a very particular role in mind. He associates capitalism with international finance alone, which he sees as the source of the problems faced by both workers and their bosses. Here we encounter another of Ford's binary distinctions, this time between the realms of non-capitalist production and capitalism finance. The more familiar division between labour and capital is erased, dismissed as obscuring the truly fundamental division between those involved in production and finance. As we saw with his construction of the category of the gentiles, those working in production (regardless of their position in the production process) are defined by their common enemy, the capitalist or international financier, who he describes as the source of the problems afflicting both workers and their bosses.

Having set up this division between producers and financiers, Ford swiftly shifts the focus from the economy (super-capitalism) to politics (super-government) and finally to race (the Jews, though they are not explicitly named in this extract). Thus, the division between producers and financiers is treated as one of several manifestations of the more fundamental opposition between Jews and gentiles, with the activities of the Jews being characterised as capitalist and those of the gentiles as somehow non-capitalist. Moreover, in constructing these divisions Ford is able to exclude himself from the category of capitalist. Without seeking to divine Ford's intention – especially as these articles were not strictly his alone, due to the Cameron's involvement – the effect of these binary divisions is to absolve Ford of responsibility for any of the social ills caused by capitalism. Economic problems relating to labour, wages, and land are reinterpreted as ultimately racial problems, such that Ford positions himself as an ally of the (in his mind, presumably, gentile) workers and as a victim of oppression himself.

Here we begin to see what I would describe as Ford's productivist critique of capitalism. This is a term I borrow from Moishe Postone, who summarises a productivist critique as being one that affirms the concrete aspects of capitalism such as industrial production and proletarian labour, while attacking its abstract aspects like finance and money (Postone, 1996, p. 17). Moreover, a productivist critique argues that capitalism is characterised by an unjust imbalance in the distribution of profits across society (Postone, 1996, p. 309). In short, a productivist critique would leave production untouched, and is only concerned with what it deems to be unproductive elements that restrain or misdirect production.[27] In the case of *The International Jew,* we see a similar argument being made with the equating of Jews with international finance, and the claim that they have implemented gold as a form

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[27] Postone is not the only scholar to use the term productivist in relation to Marx's work, and elsewhere we see it being used slightly differently. For example, Sarah Vitale pushes back against the criticism that Marx was "a productivist essentialist, who defines the human as the productive animal" (Vitale, 2020, p. 633; see also Vitale, 2016). Michael Löwy (2005) has used 'productivism' in a way similar to Postone, as he argues that Marx was highly critical of the logic of production for its own sake, while also accepting that both Marx and Engels and Marxism have been guilty of seeing the expansion of production as the route to progress.

of (fictional) wealth. Ford's anti-Semitism and conspiracism are thus intertwined with a productivist critique of capitalism. Not only does he see capitalism as non-productive and exploitative of producers, but these qualities are explained as being products of the supposed Jewish conspiracy; capitalism is non-productive and bad, for Ford, *because it is Jewish.*

To recap what we have found so far: Ford constructs overlapping and linked binary distinctions, such that he is able to pursue a strategy of predicating that the Jews are capitalists and financiers, and the gentiles are non-capitalist and producers. Other social divisions that may contradict Ford's ideology are erased, deemed to be distractions from the more fundamental division between Jews and gentiles. Moreover, as we have already seen, Ford depicts the Jews as exercising their power in obliquely, working through other agents and institutions rather than in a direct and open manner (see Ford, 2011, pp. 4 & 5). As indicated both by the title of the text and Ford's claims that the Jews constitute a "super-government" controlling the governments of the world, he attributes an international quality to the Jews (Ford, 2011, p. 5). Similarly, he depicts them as almost omnipresent and yet unable to assimilate into other nations, claiming that "Jews never become assimilated with any nation. They are a separate people, always were and always will be" (Ford, 2011, p. 14). Elsewhere, he states this sentiment more brutally, by means of quoting an unnamed young Jew: "A Jewish American is a mere amateur Gentile, doomed to be a parasite forever" (Ford, 2011, p. 123).

This construction of the Jews as international, parasitic, and heavily involved in finance is strikingly reminiscent of the abstract dimension of capitalism. Here, we can turn to Postone (2008) once more, this time focusing on his critique of anti-Semitism. As already described, a productivist critique of capitalism relies on the affirmation of capitalism's concrete aspects, such as production and concrete labour, and wrongly takes these to be non-capitalist. The reverse of this is that the abstract dimension of capitalism, such as finance and distribution, is attacked as harmful and parasitic. Thus, Postone argues that that modern anti-Semitism constructs a personification of capitalism in the form of the Jew.

Through his reinterpretation of Marx's critique of political economy, Postone argues that the categories of the capitalist economy are characterised by their double character, in that they combine a

concrete dimension with an abstract dimension. As Marx himself states, commodities are "something two-fold, both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value" (Marx, 1992, p. 13). They combine a use-value (the particular use of the object) with a value realised in exchange (putting qualitatively different objects into relation with one another). The same is true for the category of labour: concrete labour (the particular productive activity carried out by the worker) is in tension with abstract labour (the source of value, which also allows the comparison of qualitatively different types of activity). These two dimensions – the concrete and the abstract – are reliant on each other, despite their contradiction; abstract labour can only appear in the material form of the commodity, while concrete labour is itself shaped by the expansion of value (Postone, 2008, paras. 17 & 24).

The tension within the commodity is externalised, however – "It appears "doubled" as money (the manifest form of value) and as the commodity (the manifest form of use-value)" (Postone, 2008, para. 19). Thus, the abstract and the concrete appear to be separate and in conflict with each other – they appear as an antinomy (Postone, 2008, paras. 20-22). Modern anti-Semitism, as an example of fetishised thought, fails to recognise that these are two dimensions of the same system and that each needs the other in order to persist. Instead, it vilifies the abstract dimension of capitalism while treating its concrete dimension as natural and good and mistakes the former for capitalism as a whole (Bonefeld, 2014; Postone, 2008).

Thus, we see that the figure of Jew in Ford's text is a case of fetishised thinking and is informed by this misperception of capitalism. This figure functions as a personification of (the abstract aspects of) capitalism, rather than as a reflection on any actual Jewish person – the category is assembled in the text and could be read as an aspect of Ford's anti-Semitic conspiracist ideology that is then projected onto reality. As Jean-Paul Sartre observes: "Far from experience producing [the anti-Semite's] idea of the Jew, it was the latter which explained his experience. If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him" (1965, p. 13). This is not to imply that Jewish identity is in any way false, but rather points out that anti-Semitism is a problem stemming from anti-Semite themselves and not Jews (Sartre, 1965, p. 152). Brian Klug similarly describes anti-Semitism as "a form of hostility to Jews as Jews, where Jews are perceived as something other than what they are. Or more succinctly: hostility

to Jews as *not* Jews" (2013, p. 473, emphasis in original). The figure of the Jew, as we encounter it in a text like Ford's, can thus be seen as a discursive creation by the anti-Semite, developed by drawing on earlier anti-Semitic and conspiracist traditions and fitting them into a new context.

2.6. The narrative of ressentiment in The International Jew

What should be clear by now is that Ford's anti-Semitic conspiracy theory is expressed through the discursive construction of a series of binary distinctions that in turn aid his definition of social categories. Moreover, the conspiracy theory is rooted in a productivist understanding of what capitalism is, one that sees capitalism as both parasitic, artificial, and unproductive, and as having been intentionally created by somebody, with blame being attached to the Jews. In this next sub-section, I argue that the conspiracy theory into which Ford places the Jews and the gentiles constitutes a narrative of *ressentiment.* That is, Ford's conspiracy theory articulates and orders a series of political values and claims, presenting them as part of a narrative in which one group is depicted as having been treated unjustly by another, resulting in a need for vengeance to correct the injustice.

As already described in the introduction to this thesis, the concept of *ressentiment* is most closely associated with Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1998)*,* though my application of the term differs somewhat from how he uses it. While there is dispute between scholars over the precise meaning of the term, what is clear is that *ressentiment* involves feelings of having been wronged by someone, coupled with a desire for vengeance (see Huddleston, 2021; Jenkins, 2018). For Nietzsche, *ressentiment* has a key part to play in the emergence of Judeo-Christian morality, used by the powerless to overcome the notion that might makes right and instead recast their vanquishers as immoral. As he explains, the "man of *ressentiment"* is unable to exert power externally, and so directs his efforts inwards, changing the terms through which he views the world:

> This is the very place where his deed, his creation is to be found–he has conceived the `evil enemy', the '*evil man*'. Moreover, he has conceived him as a fundamental concept, from which he now derives another as an after-image and counterpart, the 'good man'–himself!...

There is already a parallel here with Ford's conspiracy theory. Just as Nietzsche's man of *ressentiment* constructs an image of himself through his opposition to the evil man, so too does Ford construct the category of the gentile through its opposition to the Jew. The latter category is laden with everything Ford opposes, everything from cosmopolitanism and control of global finance to responsibility for jazz music. Moreover, Ford depicts the Jews as occupying a position of power over the gentiles, in a manner reminiscent of the noble man in Nietzsche's account of the slave revolt of morality.

Nevertheless, there are some key differences in how I want to use the term *ressentiment* in this thesis. For instance, both Nietzsche and Max Scheler (1972) treat *ressentiment* primarily as a psychological condition, whereas I intend to use the term only to describe the sort of narratives we find in conspiracy theories. I am no psychologist, and so I shall avoid making strong judgments about an author or speaker's psychological state just from reading a few of their texts. There are a number of reasons for this, besides my own lack of psychological know-how. For example, considering Cameron's involvement in writing *The International Jew,* whose psychology would be talking about? To whom would we attribute *ressentiment*, Ford or Cameron? This would be nigh on impossible to determine, without more detailed information on exactly what each individual contributed to the text. Moreover, there is always the chance that the expression of *ressentiment* does not correspond to the actual psychological state of the author or speaker, just as an actor is able to give a performance of sadness without needing to feel genuine sadness themselves. In short, the text itself does not necessarily tell us the truth about the author's psychology. So, when Andrew Huddleston writes that *ressentiment* "is a psychological condition involving a perception of something done to one (thus, partly backward-looking), an affective response to this, and certain forward-looking attitudes and wishes for redress", I would substitute 'narrative framework' for 'psychological condition' (Huddleston, 2021, p. 677). Following David Herman (2007), I take narrative to prototypically involve three elements, namely an account of particularised events in time (as opposed to abstract

situations), disruption and the restoration of equilibrium (or conflict and resolution), and finally an account of the experience of the events and disruption (whether the experiencer is real or fictional).

Huddleston's point that *ressentiment* is both backward- and forward-looking is also worth thinking about more deeply. What we have here are the foundations of a narrative: something unfair or unjust happened in the past, but in the future that injustice will be corrected. We have already had a glimpse of this in *The International Jew,* but it is worth investigating this narrative aspect further. To this end, we can turn to the sixty-fifth article in *The International Jew,* titled, "ANGLES OF JEWISH INFLUENCE IN AMERICAN LIFE" (Ford, 1931, pp. 266-280). Partway through this article, Ford draws yet another binary distinction, this time between two economic characters: the "maker" and the "getter" (Ford, 1931, p. 268). In this extract, we see that these categories echo the earlier distinction between capitalist financiers and non-capitalist producers:

> The creative, constructive type of mind has an affection for the thing it is doing. The non-Jewish worker formerly chose the work he liked best. He did not change employment easily, because there was a bond between him and the kind of work he had chosen- Nothing else was so attractive to him. He would rather draw a little less money and do what he liked to do, than a little more and do what irked him. The " maker " is always thus influenced by his liking.

> Not so the " getter ". It doesn't matter what he does, so long as the income is satisfactory. He has no illusions, sentiments or affections on the side of work. It is the " geld " that counts. He has no attachment for the things he makes, for he doesn't make any ; he deals in the things which other men make and regards them solely on the side of their money-drawing value. " The joy of creative labor " is nothing to him, not even an intelligible saying.

> Now, previous to the advent of Jewish socialistic and subversive ideas, the predominant thought in the labor world was to " make " things and thus " make " money. There was a pride among mechanics. Men who made things were a sturdy, honest race because they dealt with ideas of skill and quality, and their very characters were formed by the satisfaction of having performed useful functions in society. They were the Makers. And

society was solid as long as they were solid. Men made shoes as exhibitions of their skill. Farmers raised crops for the inherent love of crops, not with reference to far-off money-markets. Everywhere The Job was the main thing and the rest was incidental.

(Ford, 1931, pp. 268-269)

Ford's productivism is clearly visible here once again, though we also find it being put into a narrative structure; labourers *used to be* emotionally invested in their own work, we are told, *but then* the supposedly Jewish idea of getting has stymied or undermined this – note the recurring use of the past tense in this extract, which helps to foster this notion that work was better in the past. Here, we have the backward-looking attitude mentioned by Huddleston earlier, with its articulation of a time when things were good, until the intrusion of the insidious idea of 'getting'. In presenting the maker as existing prior to the getter, Ford is able to imply that it is in some may transhistorical or natural. This certainly would chime with another text by Ford, namely his book *My Life and Work* (Ford & Crowther, 1923). In this title, which sets out his business philosophy, Ford states that labouring is natural and good, while the avoidance of work is the cause of social ills (Ford & Crowther, 1923, p. 3). Moreover, he explains his view on the value of technological progress, stating that without a grasp of "machines and their use," along with "the mechanical portion of life, we cannot have the time to enjoy the trees, and the birds, and the flowers, and the green fields" (Ford & Crowther, 1923, p. 1). Production and technological progress are thus presented as being at their best when they are guiding humanity back to nature. In Ford's view, the ideas behind his approach to business form "something in the nature of a universal code" and should be seen as "not a new idea, but as a natural code" (Ford & Crowther, 1923, p. 3). In this way, labour – including the industrial labour required of workers in Ford's factories – is treated as natural and transhistorical, essentially unchanging even if the particular activities of labourers today differ from those of workers in the past. Thus, while Ford is presenting a rose-tinted view of the past, it is still one in which his own line of work fits well, with technological progress and industry depicted as being in harmony with humanity's natural need to labour. This leads Ford to decide that what is needed is for production (making) to re-establish its priority and

dominance over finance (getting); it is only "when held in company with " make " and as second importance, [that getting] is legitimate and constructive" (Ford, 1931, p. 269).

What about a forward-looking attitude? Can we find this in the text, too? Here, we can examine Ford's eightieth article in *The International Jew* – his 'ADDRESS TO "GENTILES" ON THE JEWISH PROBLEM', in which he writes that the solution for overcoming the Jewish conspiracy and the imposition of capitalism (or getting), is to "let the business men of the country adopt the old way of the white man, when a man's word was as good as his bond, and when business was service and not exploitation" (Ford, 1931, p. 311). Here, the forward-looking aspect of the narrative still has one eye on the past.

By placing his values into this narrative of *ressentiment,* by articulating them as being rooted in a past prior to oppression and suffering, Ford is able to depict his own political beliefs as natural, timeless, and hence good – the way things ought to be. It also enables him to tie his values to a particular group, namely the gentiles – though, to be more specific, Ford has non-Jewish Americans in mind. He comments that the Jewish conspiracy's strength grows "as we cease to be what we ought to be" (Ford, 1931, p. 313). Towards the end of this article, he states that, "The Government must be Americanized" (Ford, 1931, p. 314). Thus, we see that the conspiracy theory relies on *ressentiment* to order its political claims, articulating: a better past, in which Jews and capitalism were absent, while labour was gratifying; a present in which the Jews are causing suffering through economic misery and social upheaval; and an Americanised future, in which Jewish influence has receded and conflicts between labour and capital have been resolved.

3. Peter Gregson, The Loss of Freedom of Speech on Israel, thanks to bogus anti-Semitism claims

Turning to our second text of the chapter, we jump ahead almost a century from 1920s America to Britain in 2019. Whereas the previous section focused on a collection of written material that reached a wide audience through a national weekly newspaper, the next text we will be analysing is a video

recording of a political activist's presentation to a comparatively small audience of conspiracy theorists, before being uploaded to the internet. The speaker is Peter Gregson, a former Labour Party and trade union activist who recounts the circumstances surrounding his suspension from Labour and his expulsion from his union, the GMB (see *Loss*, 2019). The cause of Gregson's expulsion from the union was his description of Israel as a racist endeavour and his open assertion that the significance of the Holocaust has been exaggerated by Israel for political ends, specifically to stop others from criticising the oppression of Palestinians (Hannan, 2019; *Loss*, 2019).

The talk took place on the 5th of March 2019, coinciding with the news that Gregson's appeal against expulsion had been rejected by the GMB (Community Security Trust & HOPE not hate, 2020, p. 6). The event was hosted by the Keep Talking group, a conspiracist network who summarise their activities rather innocuously as being "Critical thinking and open discussion" (Keep Talking, n.d.). In the talk, titled *The Loss of Freedom of Speech on Israel, thanks to bogus anti-Semitism claims*, Gregson argues that allegations of anti-Semitism are being manufactured by Israel in order to undermine the then leader of the Labour Party and long-time critic of Israel, Jeremy Corbyn, and to prevent the party from coming to power. While much of the talk concerns Gregson's own activism and the pushback he has faced, towards the end some members of the audience openly express a denial of the Holocaust; Gregson neither agree with nor challenges their claims.[28] The talk concludes with Gregson himself alleging that all Jews in Britain have an inordinate amount of leverage, and that Zionists choose to exploit that leverage in a relentless manner (*Loss*, 2019, 1:50:00 – 1:51:27).

My reasoning for pairing *The International Jew* with this much later text is not just to show that the problem of anti-Semitism is very much still with us today. Indeed it is, but what is more, anti-Semitism is not solely a problem belonging to the far-right, and can rather be incorporated into other

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[28] To be clear, in the course of the talk Gregson does accept the figure of six million dead during the Holocaust. He nevertheless claims that the significance of the Holocaust has been exaggerated by Israel, and suggests – as we shall see below – that Jews' victim status has been deliberately fuelled by Israel to prevent criticism of its oppressive policies towards Palestinians.

kinds of ideologies as well. Too often, figures on the left have succumbed to the problems of 'methodological separatism', whereby anti-Semitism is treated as irrelevant to understandings of racism, and a 'methodological historicism', whereby it is seen to have only been a problem in the past (Fine & Spencer, 2017, pp. 7-8).[29]

While other scholars have already noted the structural similarity between left-wing anti-imperialism and anti-Semitism (see Bolton & Pitts, 2018; Stoetzler, 2018; Bonefeld, 2014; Postone, 2010), our analysis of Gregson's talk yields further insights on how a dialogue between left- and right-wing anti-Semitism can play out, and how it is feasible in the first place. I argue that a narrative of *ressentiment* is once again of prime importance to the conspiracy theories expressed by Gregson and members of his audience, though in this case *ressentiment* is used more for explaining the speaker's own experiences of marginalisation and delegitimisation. While Gregson, like Ford, espouses a superconspiracy theory of sorts, with politics being depicted as driven by conspiracy, the articulation of this conspiracy theory is notably different to what we find in *The International Jew.* Both Gregson and his audience present themselves as having been unfairly and deliberately excluded from public discourse by Israel and its Zionist allies as part of a coverup of their activities in Palestine. In Gregson's talk the *ressentiment* narrative is accomplished chiefly in two ways: firstly, through the discursive strategy of a victim-victimizer reversal centred on the Holocaust, whereby the Jews are ultimately denied victim status; and secondly, through the language of free speech and anti-racism. This latter strategy serves the purpose of repositioning anti-Semitic conspiracism closer to mainstream public discourse by appealing to commonly held values such as free speech and an opposition to racial prejudice, while also distancing it from its associations with Nazism and the overt racism of

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[29] Fine & Spencer (2017, pp. 8-9) also name two other methodological problems in contemporary leftist attitudes towards anti-Semitism: 'methodological dualism', which divides the world into the two categories of Them and Us, a division between oppressors and the oppressed, where the racism and anti-Semitism of the latter can be overlooked as they belong to the in-group; 'methodological nationalism', which projects the problems of nationalism are projected on Zionism, such that Jewish nationalism is treated as being uniquely harmful.

earlier figures like Ford. Thus, Gregson (as a leftist) and his audience (with their far-right anti-Semitism) are able to treat each other as victims of the same conspiracy, despite differences in the content of their beliefs; stigmatisation and marginalisation thus become important parts of their conspiracy theories and are presented as proof of the coverup.

3.1. Rationale for text selection – why focus on Gregson's talk?

I have chosen to analyse Gregson's talk to the Keep Talking group for three main reasons. Firstly, the talk is illustrative of the crisis that occurred on the British left during Jeremy Corbyn's time as Labour leader, during which Corbyn and others on the left were accused of either neglecting to challenge anti-Semitism among their ranks, or even of expressing anti-Semitic views themselves (see Beauchamp, 2016). Part of the controversy concerned the use of personalised critiques of capitalism by leftists, whereby capitalism and its ills are attributed to a group of individuals, such as bankers or political elites (see Collord, 2019; Bolton & Pitts, 2018). This form of critique bears some resemblance to conspiracy theory on account of it positing a small group of individuals as the cause of social problems (Kurz, 2017, describes this individualising of social problems in greater detail). Productivism comes back into the mix here as well, with Corbynism expressing a disdain for those deemed to be unproductive in society, specifically those seen to belong to financial elites (Bolton & Pitts, 2018). A similarly conspiracist attitude is exhibited in the name of the campaign group Labour Against the Witchhunt (LAW), which has campaigned on behalf of Labour members suspended or evicted for expressing anti-Semitism, including Gregson.[30] The group's use of the word 'Witchhunt' implies the view that allegations of anti-Semitism are not genuine, but are merely being used to suppress a certain faction within the party – hence, the shadow of conspiracism already looms large

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[30] A blog post on the LAW's website states that Gregson is "clearly not anti-Semitic" and yet acknowledges that he has "[failed] to distinguish clearly between the Zionist movement and the Jewish population" (Labour Against the Witchhunt, 2019, paras. 2 & 6).

over this case. In the midst of this long-running controversy, Gregson's talk gained attention thanks to a joint report on the Keep Talking group by the Community Security Trust (CST) and HOPE not hate charities (2020). Details of the talk made their way into the mainstream press, with *The Guardian* newspaper publishing a story under the headline: "UK left activists attended events with far right antisemites" (Townsend, 2020). A number of prominent British conspiracy theorists were named as being present at Gregson's talk, including Holocaust denier James Thring, Keep Talking co-founder Ian Fantom, and climate change denier (and now anti-vax campaigner) Piers Corbyn (Townsend, 2020, para. 13). Thus, the Gregson talk can be seen as encapsulating the key issues of the broader anti-Semitism controversy on the British left, including the proximity of leftist discourse to conspiracy theory; a disproportionate focus on the actions of Israel over those of other states; and a lack of understanding of the specificity of modern anti-Semitism and its differences from other forms of racism.

A related reason for analysing Gregson's talk is that it illustrates the persistence of the problem of anti-Semitism and its ideological malleability, giving us insights on the interactions between left- and right-wing anti-Semitic conspiracism and highlighting the different roles conspiracy theory can play in a person's political outlook. Pairing Gregson's talk with Ford's conspiracist writing will thus help us to better understand the elements of continuity in anti-Semitism that persist even in starkly different contexts, such as the explanation of politics and society as conspiracy. The mixing of left and right is noted in the charities' joint report on Keep Talking. Thring in particular is described as "a constant presence in the world of both left and right wing antisemitism" who has had connections to both Libyan dictator Muammar Ghaddafi and former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke (Community Security Trust & HOPE not hate, 2020, p. 27). Analysing Gregson's talk can therefore help us to answer Jovan Byford's question about anti-Semitism on the left: "what is it that leads writers who belong to a political tradition that has in the past been opposed to expression of antisemitism to adopt the motifs of antisemitic conspiracy theory?" (Byford, 2011, pp. 115-116). Byford suggests the answer may lie in the "well-established fact that conspiratorial explanations tend to flourish in response to unusual, dramatic and unforeseen events" (2011, p. 116). Thus, in his view left anti-

Semitism can be explained by human psychology, and the desire to know the truth about what has caused an event. Psychology is certainly part of the answer, but does not give a complete answer – it overlooks the content and structure of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories themselves and fails to consider how rhetoric is used to make these beliefs seem more plausible and persuasive for an audience. To understand how some leftists may be susceptible to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, we must analyse the conspiracy theories themselves and the political beliefs and assumptions they articulate.

Finally, by analysing Gregson's talk we start to see the impact of stigmatisation and marginalisation on the articulation of conspiracy theories. It is especially noteworthy that Gregson's presentation takes place in a post-Holocaust context, unlike Ford's *The International Jew*. Gregson and the conspiracy theorists in his audience start from a position of having been delegitimised due to their anti-Semitic conspiracism and face the difficulty of persuading an audience despite this setback. The rhetorical and discursive strategies used in their bid to achieve this will see them articulating their conspiracy theories in ways that are very different from what we saw in Ford's writing, moving away from the language of race and instead appealing to commonly held values around individual rights and freedom of expression. In this way, analysing Gregson's talk in light of Ford's text gives us a greater understanding of how perceptions of anti-Semitism and conspiracy theory have changed over time, and how these perceptions affect the articulation of conspiracy theories.

3.2. Summary of content of Gregson's talk and the immediate context

Before we proceed with the in-depth analysis of the recording of the talk, I should briefly summarise what Gregson says as well as the immediate context in which he is speaking. As already noted, Gregson was speaking to an audience comprised of the members of the Keep Talking group. We cannot say for certain whether the meeting was open to the public, but footage recorded by an infiltrator for CST and HOPE not hate shows that Gregson's audience was not large (HOPE not hate / Community Security Trust, 2019). What is clear is that this is not an impromptu speech, as Gregson

has prepared slides to accompany his talk and is introduced by Fantom, who describes how some of the Keep Talking members had been to show their support for Gregson earlier that day ahead of his tribunal at the GMB's offices (*Loss*, 2019, 0:00:10). It seems unlikely, therefore, that Gregson is unaware of who his audience are, and we can discount the possibility that it is purely coincidental that he is delivering a talk to a group of conspiracy theorists.

Who exactly are Keep Talking? The group was co-founded by the conspiracy theorists Ian Fantom, a 9/11 and 7/7 truther, and Nick Kollerstrom, a Holocaust denier (Community Security Trust & HOPE not hate, 2020). Besides Gregson's talk on Israel, Keep Talking has hosted talks by speakers claiming that the moon landings were faked (LetsKeepTalking911, 2022a), and that the 2017 Westminster Bridge attack was staged (LetsKeepTalking911, 2022b). The group brings together several prominent British conspiracy theorists, having hosted talks in the past by the climate change denier Piers Corbyn (brother of Jeremy), and Mark Windows, host of the online conspiracy theory channel *Windows on the World* (LetsKeepTalking911, 2022c; LetsKeepTalking911, 2022d; Community Security Trust & HOPE not hate, 2020; Keep Talking, 2018). As the joint report on the group explains, "There are few people who can bring fascists and other far-right activists and pro-Palestine Labour activists into the same group, but Kollerstrom and Fantom have made it a regular occurence [*sic*]" (Community Security Trust & HOPE not hate, 2020, p. 8).

In the course of the talk, Gregson recounts how he came to be politically active, interested in the Israel-Palestine conflict, and ultimately expelled from the GMB. Much of the talk concerns the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism by Labour and the GMB, which refers to "claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor" as an example of anti-Semitism (IHRA, n.d., The working definition of antisemitism section). Gregson takes this to be part of a deliberate attempt to silence Israel's critics in the UK, and suggests there had been a lack of consultation prior to the adoption of the IHRA definition by his trade union (*Loss*, 2019, 0:08:55). Following Labour's decision to adopt the IHRA definition, Gregson wrote a petition titled "Labour members declaring Israel a racist endeavour ask NEC to abandon full IHRA" (*Loss*, 2019, 0:18:06). He later took a banner to the Labour Party conference

featuring a political cartoon featuring Corbyn and Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that suggested allegations of anti-Semitism were being manufactured to silence critics of Israel (see Fig. 2).

Gregson goes on to claim that Israel exercises an inordinate degree of influence over British politics through its lobbying activities, financial power, and the exploitation of the memory of the Holocaust. He also suggests that newspapers representing the British-Jewish community are an extension of Israel's influence, asserting that a group of such newspapers had conducted "a very coordinated onslaught on [Jeremy] Corbyn" (*Loss*, 2019, 0:05:57). In a later part of his presentation, Gregson claims that the Independent Group – a short-lived group of MPs who split away from both Labour and the Conservatives in 2019 – had received Israeli financial backing as part of the campaign against Corbyn (*Loss*, 2019, 1:32:30). The similarities to Ford's conspiracy theory should already be clear, as both portray the plotters as exercising power obliquely, always working through others (in this case, the media and disgruntled MPs) rather than directly and openly influencing events.

While both Ford and Gregson posit superconspiracies, Gregson does not describe the conspiracy as having such a pervasive effect on day-to-day life (for instance, he does not blame fashion and music trends on Jews). For Gregson, conspiracy theory is not so much an all-encompassing lens through which to view politics and society but is instead an explanation for the perpetuation of the Israel-Palestine conflict and his own marginalisation. The conspiracy theory, in Gregson's case, functions to explain the anti-imperialist left's failure, as he claims that the Israeli state holds too much leverage over British politicians and exaggerates cases of anti-Semitism in order to silence critics of its actions in Palestine. However, his audience exhibit a belief in a far broader conspiracist worldview, chipping in at times with their own claims about Jewish control of finance, the media, and their fabrication of the Holocaust (*Loss*, 2019, 1:44:23). In this way, the talk can be viewed as an interaction between two different degrees of conspiracism – Gregson's conspiracy theory belief being an addition to his anti-imperialist politics, while conspiracism is the core of his audience's politics.

FIGURE 2. The banner brought by Peter Gregson to the Labour Party conference (Loss, 2019, 0:31:37).

Towards the end of this talk (which lasts almost two hours), Gregson's audience become increasingly vocal, occasionally shouting out their agreement or disagreement with his claims. The discussion shifts onto the topic of the Holocaust, with Gregson claiming that Britain's feelings of guilt around the failure to prevent the Holocaust have been exploited by Israel (the suggestion being that anti-Semitism is being exploited for political ends). Gregson questions Winston Churchill's inaction over the Nazi's extermination of the Jews, when one audience member, James Thring, interjects to allege that the Holocaust did not occur. He states that Jews were placed in "work camps" rather than death camps, and had merely been put to work "distilling coal to make fuel, that sort of thing" (*Loss*, 2019, 1:44:23).[31] Gregson does not agree with Thring's open statement of Holocaust denial, but this does not stop him from closing the talk by toying with the taboo around overt anti-Semitism. Coming to the end of his talk, Gregson claims that Jews have an inordinate degree of leverage in British society, before adding the caveat: "whilst all Jews have leverage most of them just want to get on and live their lives. But the Zionists capitalise on that leverage from the Holocaust and they use it relentlessly" (*Loss*, 2019, 1:51:18). In this way, despite his protestations that he is not anti-Semitic, Gregson

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[31] James Thring's identity as speaker here was only revealed in the CST and HOPE not hate's report (2020).

finishes the talk by nevertheless playing up to the anti-Semitic and conspiracist motif of disproportionate Jewish power.

3.3. Victim-victimizer reversals and the recurrence of ressentiment

In response to the stigma attached to anti-Semitism, both Gregson and members of his audience employ the discursive strategy of a victim-victimizer reversal, denying Jews victimhood while appealing to their ethos as victims of Jewish power.[32] Certainly, the open denial of the Holocaust by some audience members is the clearest example of this:

> James Thring: Can I offer an explanation? Can I offer an explanation? The archives from the listening posts show no evidence that they heard anything about deaths in Auschwitz.
>
> Peter Gregson: Germans?
>
> JT: In England.
>
> PG: We're talking about Germans here.
>
> JT: Yes but, we didn't know that this was going on, because it wasn't.
>
> (*Loss*, 2019, 1:44:06)

Thring's claim here is that as *we* were unaware of the genocide, then *they* must be making it up. This in itself asserts a distinction between *us* and *them*, with the former being England (standing for the United Kingdom as a whole) and the latter the Jews. Importantly, the two are treated as separate, with

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[32] Wodak summarises this discursive strategy as "literally '[turning] the tables': the victims are transformed into the powerful perpetrators, and the perpetrators into victims" (2015, p. 64). Similarly, Deborah Lipstadt describes how anti-Semites have sought to "devictimize" the Jews in order to position themselves as the true victims of the Second World War (1994, p. 7). For a detailed analysis of how this reversal is used by the far-right in practice, see Kovács and Szilágyi, 2013.

the Jews treated as an Other. The in-group, the British, are assumed to be correct and trustworthy, while Jews are assumed by Thring to be untrustworthy, and by implication so is the testimony of Jewish survivors of the death camps and the masses of physical evidence proving that the Holocaust did indeed happen. Soon after this, Gregson speaks of ordinary Germans' support for the Holocaust during the Second World War when an audience member interjects to claim that "they were made to feel guilty for something that was never- it was impossible" (*Loss*, 2019, 1:47:20). The assertion here is that the victimizers were in fact the victims all along, and that this truth has been deliberately hidden. During these closing few minutes of the talk, Gregson comes across as frustrated by these repeated interruptions from his audience and does not agree with their total denial of the Holocaust, but nevertheless engages in a victim-victimizer reversal himself:

> Jewish people carry this mantle of victimhood. And they don't want it, but they've got it.
> Because every time I meet a Jewish person I'm just thinking, 'Oh my god, what if Hitler had
> found you and put you in a gas chamber.' [Audience groans in disagreement] Because-
> because that is- but that- but that's the narrative that's drives - Israel drives this narrative that
> all Jews, constantly, were victims. And this victim status is what Jew- what Israel drives.
> Israel drives this victim status cos it serves its purpose.

(*Loss*, 2019, 1:48:13)

The precise claims being made here by Gregson and the audience members in these extracts are not strictly the same, though both nevertheless deny Jews victimhood. In the case of Thring and his fellow audience member, the claim is that the Jews were never really victims and that the Germans were the actual victims of the Second World War. In Gregson's case, the claim is that Jews' victim status can be attributed to Israel and its political aims, the implication being that it is artificial, unwarranted, and an instrument of manipulation. Moreover, this claim is reminiscent of an argument already advanced by Holocaust deniers, specifically the notion that Israel was founded due to the international sympathy generated as a result of their alleged oppression at the hands of the Nazi regime. As Lipstadt describes, this serves as a "linchpin of their argument" as it "constitutes a motive for the creation of the Holocaust "legend" by the Jews" (Lipstadt, 1994, p. 23). We could see this as a depiction of the

Jews as too particularist, in that the specificity of their persecution by the Nazi regime is downplayed, and suggested to have been deliberately overstated by Israel to make Jews seem more unique (Fine & Spencer, 2017). Thus, while Gregson does not go so far as some of the members of his audience, he nevertheless engages in much the same strategy to de-victimize Jews and espouses views that are compatible with what Lipstadt (2017) describes as 'hard-core denial' of the Holocaust.

Such victim-victimizer reversals are a reaction to knowledge of the Holocaust and the subsequent unacceptability of expressing overt-anti-Semitism in public. Gregson and his interlocutors in the audience encounter much the same sort of rhetorical difficulty to the one described in the first chapter of this thesis. Because of the unacceptability of expressing open anti-Semitism in public, they face the task of persuading an audience despite starting from a position of having been delegitimised and marginalised. The unacceptability of anti-Semitism in public is far stronger than the stigma against conspiracy theory, with denying the Holocaust being illegal in many European countries, and it would be unnecessary to try to separate the two in this case. Indeed, due to the centrality of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories for the conspiracy theory tradition, even conspiracy theories that do not make overtly anti-Semitic claims can be subjected to the same delegitimisation and marginalisation (Cassam, 2019; Byford, 2011). What matters for our analysis then is simply the fact that the speakers here must react to the delegitimisation of their views, and as the strategy of victim-victimizer reversal shows, their response is not to back down, but to double down on their conspiracism. Rather than trying to distance themselves from the labels of 'anti-Semite' and 'conspiracy theorist' through a strategy of pre-emption, delegitimisation is instead incorporated into the conspiracy theory and its *ressentiment* narrative – it is explained as further illustrating the extent of the plot and the duplicity of the Jewish conspirators. In this sense, the conspiracy theory has the added function of explaining the marginalisation of the speaker from political discussion.

Gregson also advocates embracing marginalisation and delegitimisation, turning it on its head and using it as a badge of pride – a sign that one has succeeded in irking Israel and its allies. Articulating his experience of marginalisation, he alleges that his trade union has been "supporting oppression of the Palestinian people more or less by *stopping me talking* about Zionism" (*Loss*, 2019, 1:08:59,

emphasis added). Gregson also describes his difficulties in getting his articles published in the media, expressing surprise that some Jewish newspapers have been willing to publish some of his writing, while the pro-Labour *The Clarion* magazine and *Labour Briefing* refused to do so as "they think I'm a nutcase" (1:10:07). Similarly, he comments that the *Morning Star* newspaper "just blank me" (1:10:20) and tells us that despite inviting media outlets to a protest he organised outside the headquarters of the Trade Union Congress, none showed up. In response to this marginalisation, he states that, "You've got to come out and shout about it" (1:11:54). He also argues that anyone, "If people have been accused of fake anti-Semitism, come out, come out proud, let yourself be seen, let it be seen why you're being charged." (1:11:32). In this way, Gregson makes a worrying challenge to the stigmatisation of anti-Semitism, reframing this stigma as something to be proud of, in an effort to re-legitimise anti-Semitism of this sort.

The message here is not to be dissuaded by marginalisation, but rather to turn it on its head and use it to increase one's visibility and promote the conspiracy theory even more vigorously. In this way, marginalisation can itself be exploited, as it can be pointed to by the conspiracy theorist as proof that those in power consider them a threat; that they must be on to something and are 'in the know' about what is really going on (Lantian, et al., 2017). In this way, by appealing to their exclusion from public discourse and their experiences of stigmatisation, the conspiracy theorist is able to draw like-minded people to their cause, as though it were evidence of their credentials – a way of signalling that, 'If you oppose *them*, then come and join me.' The media studies scholar Jack Bratich (2008) has proposed that the left should adopt a similar approach. Taking conspiracy theories to be defined by their exclusion from hegemonic form of knowledge production, he argues that leftists should consider reaching out to conspiracy theorists who share their radical and counter-hegemonic outlook (Bratich, 2008, p. 119). Such an oppositional stance can thus become an important tool used by the conspiracy theorist to attract fellow travellers, such as is the case in Gregson's cooperation with the Keep Talking group.

Turning marginalisation on its head in this way also contributes to Gregson's victim-victimizer reversal and his broader narrative of *ressentiment*. Rather than seeing the possibility that his behaviour

could be hurtful or even hateful, Gregson presents his marginalisation as evidence that he is indeed a victim, and that Israel and its Zionist allies are the ones persecuting him. Thus, his marginalisation is pointed to as proof that a wrong has occurred (in his view, the violation of the right to free expression), before attaching blame to specific actors (in this case, Israel and Zionists) and signalling how redress could occur (for Gregson, this means allowing greater criticism of Israel and rolling back the adoption of the IHRA definition).

This need to react to marginalisation was largely absent from Ford's *The International Jew.* By thinking about this difference through the lens of the critical conceptualisation of conspiracy theory, we see that the stigma against conspiracism would have been far less sever at the time when Ford was writing, as would have been the case for overt anti-Semitism too. Indeed, the difference between the setting of the two texts is telling: Ford was far from marginalised and able to publish his own anti-Semitic and conspiracist claims in his own national newspaper. Gregson's talk is given to a far smaller audience, delivered to a group whose YouTube channel has since been taking down for violating the platform's terms.[33] In Ford's case, a narrative of *ressentiment* was constructed around the alleged destruction of non-Jewish nations by the Jews, but for Gregson and his audience the *ressentiment* narrative is used to explain their common experience of marginalisation from public discourse. In this way, it is their common articulation of an experience of marginalisation that serves to bind them; while they may disagree on the precise details and extent of the conspiracy, they are nevertheless able to recognise each other as victims of the same plot to cover up the truth.

3.4. Appeals to freedom of expression and efforts at repositioning conspiracy theory

It is also noteworthy that Gregson's conspiracy theory features an appeal to the *doxa* of free expression. We see this in the title of the talk itself, *The Loss of Freedom of Speech on Israel,* and in

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[33] As of the time of writing, another copy of the recording is still available through Gregson's personal YouTube channel, and it is this version that is cited throughout this chapter (see *Loss*, 2019).

the opening slide that precedes the talk (see Fig. 3), which depicts a figure reprensenting the pro-Palestinian cause having their mouth taped shut with the a label reading "Anti-Semitism". Gregson's main claim throughout the talk is that he has been denied his freedom of expression, and that allegations of anti-Semitism are being manufactured in order to silence legitimate critics of Israel. As he puts it, when Labour adopted the IHRA definition in full, "they just took away my freedom of speech on Israel" (*Loss*, 2019, 0:11:35). This framing of the issue as being one of freedom of expression is also exhibited in a photo that features early in the video of the talk, showing Gregson's supporters protesting outside the GMB's office on the day of the rejection of his appeal against expulsion, including Keep Talking co-founder, Ian Fantom (see Fig. 4). Much of the photograph is taken up by a supporter from Labour Against the Witchhunt, carrying a sign emblazoned with the message "Defend free speech".

The framing of the issue as one of defending freedom of expression should be interpreted as an example of what Michael Barkun terms bridging mechanisms, "organizational devices that link the domain of stigmatized knowledge to accepted forms of political expression" (2013, p. 260). With free expression commonly seen as a vital political value in the context of British politics, Gregson's appeal to free expression serves to shift the issue away from the controversial topics of anti-Semitism and conspiracy theory and onto *doxa* that will be far less contentious and accepted by a wider audience. We have already seen a related example of this, namely Keep Talking's strategy of referring to themselves as a group engaged in critical thinking, while avoiding terms such as conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorists (Keep Talking, n.d.). Here too we see that the group's conspiracist ethos is obscured by linking it to more commonly held opinions around freedom of thought and expression. In this way, the group is able to put some distance between themselves and the stigmatising label of conspiracy theorists.[34] Similarly, by aligning themselves with anti-imperialsts and pro-Palestine

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[34] A further example of this is the absence of references to conspiracy theory on the group's website. As of the time of writing, the sole reference to conspiracy theory on Keep Talking's website appears in a lengthy

FIGURE 3. Cartoon featured on the opening slide preceding Peter Gregson's talk (Loss, 2019, 0:00:03).

campaigners like Gregson, conspiracy theorists like those of the Keep Talking group are able to reposition themselves within a broader, more socially accepted political coalition. In this way, the effect of their marginalisation and delegitimisation can be lessened somewhat, as they attempt to draw on the greater perceived legitimacy of other groups belonging to this coalition.

Another key feature of Gregson's talk is his and the audience's referential strategy of using of the terms 'Zionists' and 'Israel'. As Gregson's activism is heavily focused on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and what he sees as the racist policies of Israel and their oppression of the Palestinian people, his references to Israel as a political actor are to be expected. But what exactly is being attributed to Israel and Zionists by Gregson and his audience? There is a mixture of continuity and difference when we compare the discursive construction of Israel and Zionists here and Ford's characterisation of the Jews. In terms of continuity, we find that Israel is depicted as exercising its power in an oblique way, largely in secret and via intermediate agents rather than controlling politics openly and directly. For example, in one part of the talk Gregson discusses the Israeli lobby, a recurring motif in modern anti-Zionist discourse.[35] He recommends a documentary about Israeli lobbying of the British government to the audience, though it transpires that many audience members have already seen it. Gesturing to his presentation slides, Gregson states that "that is the Israeli lobby in the UK; that's who's running

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quotation of the Campaign Against Antisemitism, who had forced the cancellation of one of the group's meetings (Keep Talking, 2017).

[35] For a summary of the idea of the Israeli lobby in anti-Semitic discourse, see Byford (2011, Ch. 5).

FIGURE 4. Photograph from Ian Fantom's introduction to Peter Gregson's talk, showing protestors outside the GMB offices (*Loss*, 2019, 0:00:36).

our politics these days" (*Loss*, 2019, 0:31:16). Later in the talk, Gregson details one example of what

he sees as Israeli influence over British politics, namely the founding of The Independent Group for

Change (also known as Change UK), a short-lived attempt by a group of seven MPs to form a centrist

counterweight to the polarised politics of 2019. The MPs who comprised the group were a mix of

disaffected Conservatives who opposed the UK's departure from the European Union, and rebel

Labour MPs who were critical of Corbyn's leadership and his response to the anti-Semitism

controversy that was afflicting the party. In Gregson's view, the forming of this breakaway group can

be attributed to Israeli influence:

> PG: You remember this bunch, the gang of seven. So they all say [imitating deep voice] "Oh,
>
> Labour's rife with anti-Semitism, that's why we've got to get out" and form the independent
>
> group, who is bankrolled by who? Any guesses?
>
> Audience: Tony Blair [PG: No], Israel, and George Soros
>
> PG: There is a uh, Israeli millionaire who's paying all their costs. Erm.
>
> Audience Member 1: They're behind everything.

PG: Sorry? [AM1: They're behind everything.] Well it's not the Israeli government, Israeli millionaire but I'm sure they're connected [Audience: *Garrard is* and *David Garrard*].

Audience Member 2: Have you got his name?

PG: I don't know- [Audience: *David Garrard*] someone said? [Audience: *Garrard*] Yeah yeah. So he's bankrolling these guys, erm, so the thing begins to stink even more.

(*Loss,* 2019, 1:32:30)

They're behind everything – this notion of Israel as a hidden influence exerting financial control is shared by both Gregson and the audience members. Moreover, as our analysis of Ford's text has already shown, this is hardly a new element in anti-Semitism, though here it is being attributed to the ethos of Israel rather than that of the Jews explicitly and directly. There are, therefore, both elements of continuity and change in the ideology being articulated here. Rather than simply repeating the claims of past anti-Semitism and hard-core denial, with their direct and open attacks on the Jews, what we see here is the adaptation of anti-Semitism for a context in which such open hatred of the Jews is unacceptable in public due to the legacy of the Holocaust. The accusations are here directed against a real entity, Israel, which is itself engaged in a genuine oppression of Palestinians. In this way, anti-Semitic and conspiracist accusations are combined with criticism of Israel more generally, and with a broadly anti-imperialist political outlook. As Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts argue, the politics of Corbyn and the Bennite left, as well as anti-imperialism, can be particularly susceptible to such a 'two-campist' view of the world.[36] As they explain:

For the two-campists of Stop the War (StWC), the world is severed into two halves or 'camps', one irrefutably 'good' and the other irredeemably 'bad.' In this Manichean world,

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[36] Much the same argument is made by Robert Fine and Philip Spencer (2017), who describe left anti-Semitism as succumbing to a 'methodological dualism' that divides the world into two camps, namely imperialists and anti-imperialists. The former group are treated as the absolutely evil enemy, and anyone who opposes the imperialists are treated as a friend.

'my enemy's enemy is my friend.' The 'West' – primarily the 'imperialists' of the USA, Israel, the UK, the EU – falls squarely in the enemy camp. Whoever styles themselves as the opponents of the 'West' are in turn considered 'friends,' comrades in the anti-imperialist struggle, regardless of the content of their wider political programme.

<div align="right">(Bolton & Pitts, 2018, p. 79)</div>

In this world where all is either black or white, friend or foe, Israel is accompanied by its allies, the Zionists. Like Israel, Zionists are depicted by Gregson as a hidden force in British politics, and he suggests at multiple points that certain public figures subscribe to a Zionist ideology without providing any substantial evidence to support these claims. For instance, the media is mentioned as one area in which Zionists hold sway, with Gregson singling out two journalists in particular:

PG: So Laura Kuenssberger [sic; Laura Kuenssberg], BBC political editor, comes from Glasgow, went to private school, I wonder [puts finger to his temple] if she's a Zionist.

Audience: *Hmm, ahaha,* and *Sounds like it.*

PG: I don't know. Sounds like it. She tanks Corbyn at every opportunity and has done from day one. What's going on? This is the woman who runs our political- is political editor of the biggest public service broadcaster in the UK, and we're getting all our news, from Laura. And then, Jonathan Freedland, from the Guardian, he same thing. He he thinks we're all anti-Semites. So, these people have got a massive amount of influence. A couple of individuals can shape the agenda.

<div align="right">(*Loss,* 2019, 1:31:36)</div>

Here, Kuenssberg's fault is that she has been overly critical of Corbyn in her role as a television journalist. This is taken as evidence of her being a Zionist, as belonging to the opposing camp. Likewise, Freedland's Zionism is taken as being evident due to him speaking out against anti-

Semitism.[37] The 'Zionists', as Gregson has constructed them, can be identified not by their open espousal of a belief in a Jewish homeland or state, or in a form of Jewish nationalism, but in undermining Corbyn's leadership. This is reminiscent of what we saw with Ford's construction of the figure of the Jew, and here to we find the Zionist taking on the same position as an abstraction. As Werner Bonefeld writes, "Antisemitism does not "need" Jews. The "Jew" has powers attributed to it that cannot be defined concretely. It is an abstraction that excludes nobody. Anyone can be considered a Jew" (2014, p. 320).

Much the same could be said for the category of Zionist in Gregson's leftist anti-Semitism. Though, they are hardly predicated with being as cunning or clever as Israel, instead acting in a manner akin to the earlier anti-Semitic motif of the gentile front as mentioned by Ford in an earlier quotation in this chapter. The gentile fronts were described as the secret agents of the principal, the Jewish conspirators; here, the Zionists act as the secret agents of a somewhat different principal, Israel.

4. Conclusion

The truth claims made in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories do not deserve our attention. As Quassim Cassam (2019) has argued, conspiracy theories chiefly function to advance a political agenda rather than offering truth claims that can be evaluated from an epistemological perspective. But this should not mean that we ignore the problem of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories – it is not a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. Instead, their political and rhetorical aspects means that we must retain a focus on them and track this moving target. Deborah Lipstadt's rationale for examining the activities of Holocaust deniers is also relevant for the study of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories generally:

> Although we do not take their conclusions seriously, contradictory as it may sound, we must
> make their method the subject of study. We must do so not because of the inherent value of

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[37] The comment from the audience member, that it *sounds like* Kuenssberg is a Zionist, may well exhibit anti-Semitism's fixation on Jewish-sounding or sometimes simply non-English sounding names.

their ideas but because of the fragility of reason and society's susceptibility to such farfetched notions. Many powerful movements have been founded by people living in similar irrational wonderlands, national socialism foremost among them.

(Lipstadt, 1994, p. 28)

In this chapter, I have sought to go beyond the current literature on anti-Semitic conspiracy theories by engaging in a sustained analysis of the political thinking articulated in two anti-Semitic conspiracy theory texts. The analysis points to the importance of narratives of *ressentiment* in these texts and highlights the conspiracy theorists' articulation of claims of victimhood. The narrative framework of *ressentiment* functions to order and articulate particular political claims, which (while remaining plainly anti-Semitic) are adjusted to fit the specific context in which the conspiracy theorist is writing or speaking. In each case, the conspiracy theorist seeks to position themselves as having been wronged by another, though the precise contents of their claims differ somewhat.

For Ford, the claim to victimhood is articulated by accusing the Jews of harming the gentiles, destroying their cultures, subjugating them through capitalism, and sowing the downfall of their nation states. The analysis of *The International Jew* also contributes to our understanding of Henry Ford's ideology by highlighting the centrality of a productivist critique of capitalism in his writing. This involves the separation of capitalism's concrete and abstract aspects, with the latter alone treated as capitalist. In Ford's writing, the Jews are then treated identified with the abstract aspects of capitalism, and so are viewed as the personification of capitalism.

In Gregson's case, the claim to victimhood it is made by depicting Israel as persecuting its critics and controlling British politics from the shadows, while also attributing an inordinate degree of power to Jews generally. The function of the *ressentiment* narrative is somewhat different hear, as marginalisation and delegitimisation were found to be more prominent themes than in Ford's text. In Gregson's talk, these were seized upon and pointed to as proof of a coverup. The denial of others' suffering, and the reversal of victims and victimizers are framed by these conspiracy theorists as just part of an innocent discussion, while their marginalisation is re-framed as an attack on their personal

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rights and freedom of expression. Thus, we see one example of how the experience of marginalisation can be exploited by conspiracy theorists and turned on its head, used to build bridges with fellow-travellers and treated as a badge of honour.

In this chapter, the conspiracy theories we have been examining are positing explanations of politics and society, and in doing so employ narratives of *ressentiment.* In the next chapter, we will look at conspiracy theories that are focused on a single event, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. *Ressentiment* will make an appearance once again, but we will also see under what conditions a narrative of *ressentiment* can be absent from a conspiracy theory. We have also seen that anti-Semitic conspiracy theory is ideologically malleable, able to be adapted and adopted by leftists as well as rightists, and hence is a broader problem that should be seen as restricted to a single ideology. In the next chapter, this theme of the malleability of conspiracy theory will continue, as we see that conspiracy theories can become part of ideologies that are far less fringe, as it is used to articulate a counter-democratic politics that constructs the citizen as a watchful counterbalance to the power of a political elite. Thus, the problem of conspiracy theory will be shown to be far broader than we might initially assume.

Chapter 4 – Mass media, participation, and counter-democracy in Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory

1. Introduction

On 15 December 2022, over thirteen thousand documents relating to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy were released by the United States' National Archives (Nation Archives, 2022; Biden, 2022). The release had been ordered by President Joe Biden, according to whom it was "critical to ensure that the United States Government maximizes transparency by disclosing all information in records concerning the assassination, except when the strongest possible reasons counsel otherwise" (Biden, 2022, §1). At the time of writing, the impact of the released documents has been minor. Advocates of the official account of the assassination still see Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone gunman; supporters of a conspiratorial version of events still argue that multiple shooters must have been involved. So far, no bombshell discoveries have emerged from among the documents, with CBS News reporting that their initial survey of the release "did not appear to uncover groundbreaking revelations" (Becket, 2022, para. 5).

Though the documents did not provide any concrete proof of a conspiracy, the pro-conspiracy theory website *JFK Facts* urged its readers not to lose hope. The site's co-founder, Jefferson Morley, argued that far too few of the documents had been fully declassified, describing the release as "a shell game", part of an effort at "fostering the illusion of transparency" (Morley, 2022, Dealey Plaza Gunman? section). Morley signed off with a warning about the supposed coverup:

> It was a very Washington exercise, but I don't think it's going to work. At least I hope it doesn't. At a time when American democratic institutions are under siege and delegitimized, there can be no doubt that the CIA's obtuse secrecy on JFK files actually undermines President Biden and democracy.

(Morley, 2022, Dealey Plaza Gunman? section)

Both the official and counter-narratives about the files' release, then, take transparency as their guiding principle. Biden's memorandum on the release stated that it "will provide the American public with greater insight and understanding" of the official investigation into Kennedy's death, making it possible for Americans to see some of what had been previously hidden from them (Biden, 2022, §2). In contrast, for Morley the story was not one of increasing transparency but of a continuing secrecy that threatens democracy, and that yet more material must be brought into the light for democracy to survive.

Rather than focusing on the likely truth or falsity of the conspiracy theorists' claims, this chapter is concerned with these closely related concepts of transparency, publicity, and democracy, and their place in the discourse of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories. Moreover, in analysing conspiracy theories about the shooting, what interests me is the masses' transformation into observers and scrutinizers of politics, and how this was facilitated by the growth of visual and mass media technologies, such as television, film, photography, and illustrated magazines.

Why focus on Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories in the first place? The assassination occupies a crucial place in the history of conspiracy theory, and conspiracy theories are a key feature of the cultural memory of the shooting. As Peter Knight comments, "It's no exaggeration to say that when most Americans think of the Kennedy assassination, they think of it through the lens of conspiracy theory" (Knight, 2007, p. 94). Half a century after Kennedy's assassination, Gallup polling found that most Americans still thought that Lee Harvey Oswald had not acted alone in the shooting, and so rejected the official account of the event (Swift, 2013). Conspiracy theories about the assassination have had a lasting influence on conspiracy theorising, serving as a touchstone for later conspiracy theorists such as those of the 9/11 Truth Movement (Knight, 2007, pp. 163-164). Their key contribution has been to introduce what Jovan Byford has described as a "*participatory approach* to conspiracism" whereby ordinary people were encouraged to actively search for the truth and uncover evidence of what might have really happened that day (Byford, 2011, p. 67, emphasis in original). Their influence can even be seen in QAnon, with one group belonging to the conspiracist movement

asserting not only that Kennedy survived the shooting but that he also appeared onstage at a pro-Trump rally in 2022 (Gilbert, 2022; Coaston, 2020).

It is surprising that researchers in political theory and science have so far paid little attention to Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories, despite their lasting influence and their clearly political aspects – from the political nature of the event they want to explain, to the political distrust they exhibit, along with their attempts to grasp how power works in America. The major texts dealing with Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories have been written by historians, social psychologists, and researchers in cultural studies, rather than politics scholars (for example, see McKenzie-McHarg, 2019; Byford, 2011; Olmsted, 2011; Olmsted, 2009; Knight, 2007; Knight, 2000). These texts give valuable insights into the broader cultural significance and impact of JFK conspiracy theories, framing them against a backdrop of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and paranoia's emergence as a prominent motif in American popular culture.[38] In this chapter, I aim to build on these previous studies by approaching JFK conspiracy theories from the perspective of political theory, analysing the political thinking and rhetoric they exhibit rather than concerning myself with the truth or falsity of their claims of conspiracy.

Besides their plainly political character and their lasting influence on conspiracy theories today, I have chosen to focus on JFK conspiracy theories due to their apparent dissimilarity from the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of the previous chapter. The two sets of conspiracy theories are chiefly concerned with different explananda: the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of Ford and Gregson were seeking to explain how politics and society function, to different degrees; JFK conspiracy theories are focused primarily on a single event. This poses a challenge for some of the more commonplace criticisms of conspiracy theory. For example, it proves an obstacle for anyone seeking to apply Hofstadter's notion of the paranoid style to JFK conspiracy theories, as it far from clear that the two conspiracy theorists featured in this chapter do indeed "regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as *the motive force* in

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[38] For other scholars who briefly examine JFK conspiracy theories, see Butter, 2020; Fenster, 2008, pp. 136-140.

historical events" (Hofstadter, 1966, p. 29, emphasis in original). A similar challenge would be encountered by adopting the criticism of Marxists like Robert Kurz (2017) that conspiracy theories and similar beliefs mistakenly individualise the causes of social problems – how else can a murder be explained than by studying the actions and intentions of the individuals involved? This is not to suggest that JFK conspiracy theories are impervious to criticism, they are certainly not, but rather to point to the need for a new approach to look again at this case of conspiracism.

Applying the DHA to the three texts featured here proved more difficult than with either of the other cases. In the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory texts of the previous chapter, much of their focus had been on constructing the Jews as an evil enemy, referring to this enemy in different ways and attributing certain characteristics to it. The DHA is particularly well suited to such cases, with its focus on how social actors are discursively constructed. The texts featured in this chapter take a largely different approach to articulating their conspiracy claims. The emphasis in these texts is less on constructing a set of conspirators (this is largely absent in Josiah Thompson's case) and much more on constructing a logical, coherent argument that can explain more than the official account of the Kennedy assassination. Looking at these texts from the perspective of RPA, then, we could say that these texts make greater use of logos (advancing quasi-logical arguments), whereas the previous case saw much heavier use of pathos (appeals to emotion) and ethos (appeals to character). While the DHA was still used here – there is still some naming and characterisation going on, and the DHA's framework for looking at contextual factors remained useful – the RPA comes to the fore in this chapter. In using the RPA in this chapter, I was pushed to think more deeply about the place of the conspiracy theory in each of the texts. Is the conspiracy theory used as a means to promote a particular political philosophy or view, or is conspiracism itself the philosophy that is being offered here?

1.1. The counter-democratic politics of JFK conspiracy theories

In this chapter, I apply the Discourse-Historical Approach and Rhetorical Political Analysis to three texts: firstly, extracts from lawyer and civil rights activist Mark Lane's two books *Rush to Judgment* (1966) and *A Citizen's Dissent* (1968); secondly, a documentary about the conspiracy theorist Josiah Thompson (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021), which presents a summary of his work while advertising his latest book.

Through our analysis, I argue that the conspiracy theories expressed in these texts try to challenge their exclusion from mainstream political debate by appealing to doxa of American politics. They try to place themselves within American political tradition, rejecting their characterisation as pathological and Other. This is accomplished primarily by expressing a counter-democratic politics, whereby the ordinary citizen is encouraged to take on the role of an overseer of politics, observing and scrutinising events and the actions of those in power (Rosanvallon, 2012). This prominent yet so far overlooked aspect of JFK conspiracy theories sees the vigilant citizenry constructed as a bulwark against the destruction of democracy and the imposition of tyranny, and as a counterbalance to the power invested in elected representatives. Transparency, visibility, and publicity are thus of prime importance to these conspiracy theories.

Building on Andrew McKenzie-McHarg's (2019) argument that the central importance of images for JFK conspiracy theories helped to undermine the possibility of an epistemic consensus in society, I argue that there is a tension brought about by their counter-democratic aspect. While they suggest that anyone should be able to look for themselves and see what truly happened to Kennedy and not blindly accept the government's version of events, the conspiracy theorist puts themselves forward as someone with a superior understanding of the assassination. Similarly, while easy access to images of the assassination means that almost anyone can become an eyewitness of sorts, the truth of what happened is not innate to the images themselves; interpretations of those images vary wildly, and while conspiracy theorists may encourage us to look for ourselves, they nevertheless guide us towards their own interpretations. In this way, the participatory approach they encourage is undermined by their own claims to epistemic authority.

In terms of the broader argument of this thesis, by pairing these two conspiracy theorists in this chapter we get a clearer idea of the conditions under which a narrative of *ressentiment* can be expressed in a conspiracy theory. I argue that for such a narrative to be possible, the conspiracy theorist must go beyond explaining how an event happened and also explain *who* made it happen and *why*, as well as showing it to be politically significant. Thus, in blaming the assassination and supposed coverup on the government and media, Lane expresses a *ressentiment* narrative in which the American population and the conspiracy theorists themselves have both been wronged and require redress. In contrast, Thompson's conspiracy theory only concerns how the assassination took place, trying to show that a conspiracy is the only possible explanation, without speculating about who was involved in the conspiracy or what their motive might have been – no *ressentiment* narrative is expressed. This suggests that, for a narrative of *ressentiment* to be possible, the claims made in the conspiracy theory must be political.

1.2. Structure of the chapter

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I examine how President Kennedy pioneered the use of visual mass media to craft his own public image, in turn becoming an unprecedently visible and accessible president. I also examine how the recording of the assassination was enabled by these same visual media, allowing millions of Americans who had not been present the chance to observe a political event that would otherwise have been out of view to them. I argue that the increased visibility of politics encouraged a form of counter-democracy centred on a watchful public. The second section of the chapter looks at the network of amateur investigators who developed their own conspiracist explanations of the assassination in opposition to the findings of the official investigation. I argue that descriptions of these early conspiracy theorists suggest a similarly counter-democratic politics, due to their open membership and the significant involvement of women in the network, as well their belief that ordinary citizens could discover truths hidden by the state.

The two remaining sections feature the analysis of the three texts, starting with Mark Lane's books *Rush to Judgment* (1966) and *A Citizen's Dissent* (1968). I argue that Lane too articulates a form of counter-democracy, while also expressing *ressentiment* narrative that calls for the restoration of true democracy in the United States. Finally, I analyse a documentary on the work of the private detective Josiah Thompson, (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021), who presents a conspiracy theory with a less of overtly political content and a much narrower scope, focusing on the physics of the assassination without articulating a narrative of *ressentiment*. While this shows that a *ressentiment* narrative is not a universal feature of conspiracy theories, I argue that it also indicates that such narratives only feature in conspiracy theories that make political claims.

2. The proliferation of visual media and the construction of Kennedy's image

In this section, I examine a key contextual factor impacting on conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination, namely the increasing accessibility of visual media as well as technologies for creating images at the time in the United States. This is in order to better grasp the context from which JFK conspiracy theories emerged, focusing in particular on the importance of visual media technologies for these conspiracy theories. Drawing on biographical writing on Kennedy, I look at how his unprecedented use of visual media like television and photography led to the development of a public image as a highly visible and accessible president. Following this, I explore the use of visual media in recording the Kennedy assassination, from photographs and films by unsuspecting well-wishers to these images' dissemination around the world in magazines and on television. I argue that these visual media enabled a more visible form of politics centred on images, and that this fostered a form of counter-democracy in which ordinary citizens were better able to observe and scrutinise politics. As we will see in later sections, this same counter-democratic politics would become a key feature of JFK conspiracy theories.

2.1. Kennedy's public image and use of visual media

Kennedy was not the first American president to be assassinated while in office: John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln in 1865; James A. Garfield was killed by an angry office seeker in 1881; and William McKinley was shot by an anarchist in 1901. However, none of these earlier assassinations achieved the same degree of cultural significance as Kennedy's death. As Thurston Clarke describes, the assassination had an exceptional emotional impact on many Americans:

> A poll conducted within a week of his assassination by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago reported that 53 percent of Americans, ninety million people, had shed tears during the four days between his death and funeral. Blacks and Northerners were most likely to have wept, but even one in three Southern whites admitted crying. A majority of Americans said his assassination had been a "unique event" in their lives, more traumatic than Pearl Harbor or President Franklin Roosevelt's sudden death. Seventy-nine percent reported mourning him like "someone very close and dear."
>
> (Clarke, 2014, p. 350)

This feeling of closeness and familiarity helps to explain the strength of the impact of Kennedy's death on ordinary Americans and its prominent place in American culture. As Clarke explains, "Americans felt they knew him almost as well as someone sitting across the breakfast table" (2014, p. 350). Still, it raises the question of why many ordinary citizens felt such familiarity towards their president, someone they were highly unlikely to have met face to face.

Kennedy's pioneering use of visual media like television and photography in his political career can help to answer this question for us. The 1960 presidential debates with Republican candidate Richard Nixon are a prime example of the importance of television in Kennedy's career. This was the first time that a debate between the two main presidential candidates had been broadcast on television, giving Americans an unprecedented opportunity to become more familiar with both Kennedy and Nixon (Silvestri, 2019). The debates occurred during a period in which the medium of television was becoming increasingly popular with Americans, as 80% of households had a television (Silvestri,

2019, p. 975). What is more, the television industry was dominated by a small number of well-established companies, such as the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbian Broadcasting System (CBS), with competition limited in part due to a freeze on licences issued to new stations between 1948-52 (Murray, 2003). Thus, during Kennedy's political career, audiences had not yet been fragmented by the expansion of cable television and an increasingly wide variety of channels to choose from (Mittell, 2003). In the struggle for viewers' attention, Kennedy's television appearances were up against a far narrower field of competitors than would have been the case decades later.

Whereas radio had been a powerful campaigning tool during earlier elections, privileging the sound of a candidate's voice over their appearance, television now heightened the importance of a candidate's visual appearance (Silvestri, 2019). Kennedy's handsome appearance was therefore of great benefit to him during his television appearances, with Clarke writing that he was "so telegenic that his appearance more than his words had accounted for his victory in his debates with Nixon" (Clarke, 2014, p. 108). His tactic of speaking directly to camera could be read as an appeal to pathos, giving viewers at home the sense that he was addressing them personally, while Nixon made the error of looking over at the studio clock repeatedly, "an eye behavior that on the screen suggested a "shifty-eyed" stereotype" (Silvestri, 2019, p. 978). While Nixon seemed uncomfortable and was sweating under the studio lights, Kennedy "appeared as a purposeful and poised figure" (Silvestri, 2019, p. 979). The importance of this visual aspect to Kennedy's appeal was reflected in viewers' responses to the debate: those who had listened on the radio were more likely to think that Nixon had won the debate, while those who watched on television were more likely to see Kennedy as the victor (Silvestri, 2019, p. 979).

Image was therefore becoming an increasingly important aspect of American politics, and occasions such as the televised presidential debates gave the opportunity for Kennedy to develop and manage what the public saw of him, and what they saw *in* him. As Ned O'Gorman describes, Kennedy's image came to be associated with a particular set of ideals:

Here was a president, unlike Eisenhower (and Kennedy's electoral opponent, Nixon), who could act as an image of America: youthful, energetic, bold, articulate, and equally comfortable in the world of politics and celebrity. The image of John F. Kennedy was never divorced from the ideals he forwarded. In the image of Kennedy, the world could see that American ideals were not mere code words for capitalist domination, but rather the expression of a desire to better humankind.

(O'Gorman, 2016, p. 60)

In this way, O'Gorman sees Kennedy's image as an icon – an image that embodies the values it represents, that nevertheless encourages us to look beyond the image itself to the values which are represented (O'Gorman, 2016, pp. 47-51). From this perspective Kennedy's image is seen as representing a transcendent set of American values. What is most important for our analysis, however, is simply the fact that visual mass media had given people a curated view of Kennedy's ethos as both a person and a politician, in a way that was unprecedented at the time. The importance of images for Kennedy's political career continued beyond his electoral success in 1960 and into his time in the White House. During his presidency, television continued to be used to craft his public image, as he became the first president to use live unedited televised press conferences to communicate with the electorate (Silvestri, 2019, p. 980). As Clarke describes, Kennedy thrived in these televised appearances:

The conferences played to his strengths. He looked younger in black and white, had a quick wit, a good memory for facts and statistics, and was a superb extemporaneous speaker. Like his debates with Richard Nixon, they were unequal contests in which he came off as more intelligent, charming, confident, better-looking, better-dressed, and more amusing and thoughtful than his opponents–in this instance, the White House press corps.

(Clarke, 2014, p. 76)

These regular appearances (Clarke puts their frequency at about one every sixteen days) gave ordinary Americans an unprecedented view of their president, increasing their familiarity with Kennedy as a

politician. This sense of familiarity was not confined to Kennedy alone, however, as Americans were also given greater access to the President's family, too. For instance, photographs of Kennedy playing with his children showed a more relatable side to the President (Silvestri, 2019, p. 982). Similarly, Jackie Kennedy's televised tour of the White House, shown simultaneously on CBS and NBC and watched by 46 million Americans, helped to create the image of a successful family that viewers could empathise with (Silvestri, 2019, p. 982; Kryczka, 2014, p. 124). The broadcast gave many viewers the sense of having been invited into the White House personally, as though the medium of television had entirely collapsed the space between viewers at home and the President's family (Kryczka, 2014). All of these photographic and television appearances contributed to making Kennedy "the most accessible president thus far in American history" (Silvestri, 2019, p. 981).

2.2. *The increasing accessibility of visual media and image-making technologies*

Just as developments in visual media technologies had been used to boost the visibility of the President, and to make him seem more familiar and accessible to ordinary Americans, so too would these technologies be central to the public's view of his death. As Fredric Jameson observes, the rolling media coverage in the days following the assassination had the effect of uniting Americans through their media consumption, as it "bound together an enormous collectivity over several days and vouchsafed a glimpse into a Utopian public sphere of the future which remained unrealized" (1992, p. 47). However, the moment of the shooting itself was captured neither by television cameras nor professional photographers. Instead, the visual record of the shooting is made up of films and photographs taken by unwitting bystanders, who merely wanted a personal record of Kennedy's visit to Dallas (Morris, 2013).

The ability to record this political event was itself only possible due to developments in visual media technologies, such as photography and home cinema. While cameras for non-professionals had been first popularised during the 1920s and 30s (Salazkina & Fibla-Gutiérrez, 2020), filmmaking equipment had been out of reach to consumers during the Second World War (Howe, 2014). Having

been deeply bound up in the war economy (Allbeson & Oldfield, 2016), the end of the war saw camera manufacturers shifting their attention back towards ordinary consumers and the renewed availability of 8mm filmmaking equipment (Howe, 2014, p. 39). As well as this, there had long been a trend towards democratisation in amateur filmmaking – thanks to innovations by camera manufacturers such as Kodak, consumers were no longer responsible for developing their own photographs (Turquety, 2020). Instead, film would be sent off to professionals for development, meaning that "the photographer now had merely to find an angle and focus" (Turquety, 2020, p. 34). It is for this reason that Turquety sees amateur cinema and photography as "open to the whole body politic without distinction" (Turquety, 2020, pp. 29-30). Without the proliferation of filmmaking equipment and the low barrier to entry into amateur photography and filmmaking, conspiracy theorising about the Kennedy assassination would have been very different indeed. As shown by McKenzie-McHarg's (2019) description of conspiracy theories about the attack on Pearl Harbor, conspiracy theorists, working prior to the near-ubiquity of images, relied largely on written documents that had to be sought out from newspapers and archives. In contrast, the proliferation of images of the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath made conspiracy theorising a more accessible activity. As McKenzie-McHarg has argued, the visual record of the assassination facilitated the "democratization of conspiracy theorizing" by making it more accessible to ordinary people, both through the use of images (making it easy for anyone to understand) and the widespread dissemination of these images (2019, p. 155). All that was required to take part was a television set and decent reception. Thus, the participatory approach to conspiracy theorising introduced in the case of the Kennedy assassination (see Byford, 2011), was itself made possible through the more open and democratic technology used to record the event.

While the availability of cameras had made it possible for these private citizens to document the event themselves, it was mass media that was able to disseminate these images and turn almost every American into a 'virtual eyewitness' to the assassination (McKenzie-McHarg, 2019). The infamous film recorded by Abraham Zapruder (which captured the moment at which Kennedy was shot) may have been the work of an amateur, but the film was soon launched into the realm of professional

journalism as it was swiftly bought by *Life* magazine, with a series of frames from the film included in the magazine's November 29th edition (Life, 1963). Oswald was shot by Jack Ruby two days after the assassination and this time the murder was captured live on television, the moment of the crime being transmitted into people's homes across the country, making events visible to them and almost immediate. The public would be called upon to play the role of observer in the assassination yet again over a decade later in 1975, when the Zapruder film was shown on *Good Night America* – the first time that the recording had been played on television (Good Night America, 1975). On this occasion, viewers were encouraged not just to observe but also to scrutinise what they saw, as the film was used to cast doubt on the official account of the assassination and to call for a new investigation.

I want to make a somewhat different, yet related point to McKenzie-McHarg's argument. Not only did visual technologies such as television lower the barrier of entry into conspiracy theorising, but in the case of JFK conspiracy theories it also encouraged a counter-democratic politics. The concept of counter-democracy, which I am borrowing from Pierre Rosanvallon (2012), does not describe an opposition to democracy, but rather the powers of society to protect democracy outside of elections; it is a "durable democracy of distrust," characterised by the surveillance of the state by vigilant citizens (Rosanvallon, 2012, p. 8). For a democratic society to persist, Rosanvallon argues, citizens must be vigilant against the threat of tyranny and be able to denounce those they uncover undermining democracy. Publicity is key here, and by denouncing those whose misdeeds have been uncovered, citizens "reaffirm [their] faith in the possibility of using publicity to administer a direct corrective" (Rosanvallon, 2012, p. 43). From this perspective, we can see both Kennedy's development of his public image through visual media and the accessibility of image-making technologies as having given politics a more public, visible, and seemingly transparent quality. Regardless of whether the public image of Kennedy matched his private personality, the impression was one of a president achieving greater visibility and familiarity with his electorate. Similarly, the expansive visual record of his death once again enabled Americans to look, observe, and scrutinise politics, though on this occasion the stakes were far higher.

Even if bystanders such as Zapruder had not been motivated by a counter-democratic politics, the images they created would soon be put to counter-democratic ends regardless, with conspiracy theorists combing through each frame and photograph to prove that the government was lying to them, and that the President had died at the hands of a conspiracy. Indeed, the very fact that the images were created by ordinary citizens is itself taken as proof of their trustworthiness by conspiracy theorists, with Josiah Thompson stressing that they can be relied upon as they were made neither by the government nor by professional journalists (see Morris, 2013). Hence, while the technology of the time helped to democratize conspiracy theory, lowering the costs of taking part in conspiracy theorising, the political nature of what viewers were seeing facilitated a counter-democratic politics in JFK conspiracy theories. Political happenings of national significance were now visible and observable for ordinary citizens, and could be visually recorded by ordinary citizens in a way that had not been the case in previous eras. In short, there were more images for the vigilant citizens to scrutinize, and greater access to the means of capturing images of politics.

3. Early amateur investigators of the Kennedy assassination

There is one further contextual factor that deserves examining before moving on to the analysis of the texts, and this is the network of sceptics and amateur investigators that developed in the years after the Kennedy assassination. As Kathryn Olmsted (2011; 2009, Ch. 4) describes, early efforts to prove the existence of a conspiracy were led by private citizens working in their own time; they lacked connections to powerful actors in government or business, and many had themselves been investigated by the state during the Red Scare of the 1950s. Moreover, many of the grassroots network's leading figures were women such as: Sylvia Meagher, author of a book on the assassination, *Accessories After the Fact* (1992), and compiler of the first subject index for the Warren Commission's report (Meagher, 1966); Sylvia Martin and Maggie Field, both of whom were housewives who actively investigated the assassination in their own time (Olmsted, 2011). As Kathryn Olmsted explains:

Many of these "amateurs" were women. In the past, when conspiracy theories flowed from the pens of prominent journalists or congressmen, most of the theorists tended to be men. But with the Kennedy assassination, the field was open to ordinary, untrained researchers–and to women.

<div align="right">(Olmsted, 2009, p. 136)</div>

The democratisation of conspiracy theory is evident here once again, with a broader segment of the population being able to partake in conspiracy theorising than had previously been the case. Mass media played an important role here too, and just as television had brought Kennedy and his family into people's homes, so too did it project his death and its aftermath (including the death of his assassin) into the domestic realm, and in so doing catalysed conspiracy theorising. With images of the Kennedy assassination being beamed into the home, some of the barriers that had prevented women from partaking in conspiracy theorising, such as exclusion the professions associated with conspiracism, as well as pressures of domestic work, were bypassed:

Yet this development might not so much represent women breaking out of the domestic sphere as new forms of media breaking into it. It was no longer necessary to leave home in order to tap into those sources of information necessary to sustain the production of a counter-narrative opposed to the one disseminated through the official channels.

<div align="right">(McKenzie-McHarg, 2019, pp. 154-155)</div>

In this way, the more open and democratised character the network of early JFK conspiracy theorists was facilitated by the mass media technologies that were making images of politicians and politics increasingly ubiquitous. While access to conspiracy theorising and conspiracist communities was undergoing a degree of democratisation, we can also identify a counter-democratic aspect to the network's functioning once again, specifically in its members' faith in ordinary people's capacity to hold their leaders to account, and their belief "that they could expose this conspiracy *on their own*" (Olmsted, 2011, p. 672, emphasis in original). Regardless of what we make of the truth or falsity of

these early JFK conspiracy theorists' claims, we nevertheless see a resemblance to Rosanvallon's (2012) theory of citizens attempting to act as a counterbalance against the government's power.

As has already been described, such counter-democratic activities rest on the assumption that publicity can act as a corrective and protect democracy, but it is also worth noting that counter-democracy also requires an assumption that citizens are able to determine the truth for themselves rather than simply accepting the government's pronouncements as gospel – a degree of distrust of authorities will be necessarily for democracy to persist (Rosanvallon, 2012, p. 8). And, as Rosanvallon also notes, "The history of *real* democracies has always involved tension and conflict" (Rosanvallon, 2012, p. 3, emphasis in original). Part of this tension and conflict, therefore, has to do with the question of who can determine what is true. In the case of conspiracy theories generally – not just JFK conspiracy theories – we have the conflict between rival accounts of an event or social phenomena, with conspiracy theories being pitted against official accounts. Moreover, as we have already seen in this thesis, conspiracy theories start from a position of stigma. It is for this reason that Jack Bratich (2008) describes conspiracy theories in Foucauldian terms as 'subjugated knowledges' that are excluded from the 'game of truth'. While we need not agree with Bratich's argument that conspiracy theories are effectively neither true nor false due to their exclusion and stigmatisation (see Bratich, 2008, p. 3), his framing of knowledge and truth as a site of contest and struggle can nevertheless prove enlightening:

> Studying conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledges would demonstrate how some accounts become dominant only through struggle. An official account comes to be official only through a victory over, and erasure of conflict with, conspiracy accounts. Among the competing accounts for any event, the official version is not merely the winner in a game of truth—it determines who the players can be.
>
> (Bratich, 2008, p. 7)

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Thus, we need to bear in mind that what we are studying here is a contest not only over what is true, but over who is able to determine what counts as true – experts, state officials, or amateurs? Again, we see the need to view conspiracy theories as pieces of political communication.

At this stage, it might seem that the answer to this question would be rather straightforward for the JFK conspiracy theorists: that ordinary citizens should have the capacity to determine what is true or false, rather than leaving it to experts and state officials alone. However, there is one further aspect of the network of JFK conspiracy theorists that suggests a more complex answer. While the JFK conspiracist network may have been surprisingly open and had involved women to an unprecedented extent, it is noteworthy that the individuals who became the public faces of the network – and who would become recognised as the leading figures of the field – were largely white, professional men. For instance, the two conspiracy theorists analysed later in the subsequent two sections – Mark Lane and Josiah Thompson – both fit this mould, with Lane being a lawyer while Thompson has a background in academia, having held the position of a philosophy professor. The same is true of other leading JFK conspiracy theorists, such as Peter Dale Scott, a former English professor at the University of California (Scott, n.d., Education and Teaching section), as well as Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney depicted in Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991). In the case of the depiction of Garrison in *JFK,* we find that the loose network of amateur conspiracy theorists is erased in favour of the story of a single man's heroic quest for the truth.[39]

The fact that individuals such as these became the most visible and impactful JFK conspiracy theorists indicates that the counter-democratic aspect, and the democratisation of conspiracy theory at the time, had its limits. On the one hand, we have the increased involvement of women in conspiracy theorising and the assumption that ordinary citizens could reach the truth themselves; on the other hand, we have professional white men – in positions that can command some epistemic authority in most cases – promoting their own version of events as the true and correct account. In this way, while the network was characterised by its openness and the involvement of amateurs, those who went on to make

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[39] For a brief analysis of this aspect of *JFK* and the political thinking articulated in the film, see Koper (2022b).

careers of sorts out of their participation – appearing on television and radio, publishing books and appearing in films – were more akin to the more typical and elitist notions of expertise in 1960s America .

4. Mark Lane, Rush to Judgment and A Citizen's Dissent

In this section, I analyse excerpts from two books on the Kennedy assassination by the lawyer and activist Mark Lane: the bestseller *Rush to Judgment* (1966) and its follow-up, *A Citizen's Dissent* (1968). Lane began probing the official account of the assassination soon after Oswald's murder by Jack Ruby, first writing an article for the *National Guardian* questioning whether Oswald had really been involved (see Lane, n.d.). Marguerite Oswald then hired him to represent her late son, who Lane believed had been the victim of a state coverup, though the Warren Commission rejected his attempt to defend a suspect posthumously (Carlson, 2016). Lane's criticisms of the Commission were channelled into *Rush to Judgment,* which stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for six months (Olmsted, 2009, p. 136). Through a lawyerly critique of the Warren Commission's report, Lane suggests that Kennedy's death was the result of a conspiracy rather than a lone gunman and that a coverup has prevented the public from learning the truth. The success of *Rush to Judgment* led to its translation into other media formats: first, a documentary film adaptation by Emile de Antonio (*Rush to Judgment,* 1967)*,* and then an abridged version of the film sold on vinyl, allowing buyers to listen to Lane's interviews with witnesses, from the comfort of the consumer's own home (de Antonio & Lane, 1967). Lane even went on to co-author the story for a conspiracist movie about the assassination, titled *Executive Action* and starring Burt Lancaster (see Ebert, 1973).

Lane's work became a touchstone for later Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists, with one such conspiracy theorist describing him as "the prime mover in the dissent movement against the official version of the Kennedy assassination" (DiEugenio, 2016, para. 2). However, as Olmsted explains, while Lane's work on the assassination brought greater publicity and respectability to the conspiracy theorists' cause, it was nevertheless indebted to the work of the amateur investigators (Olmsted, 2011,

p. 682). She describes the political identity of those amateur investigators as "one-time liberals who had lost faith in the liberal state" (Olmsted, 2011, p. 679), and Lane himself fits this description too. A lawyer and social activist, Lane had been known for his opposition to McCarthyism (2011, p. 682), but also his work on civil rights and participation in the Freedom Rides in the southern United States; he had even been arrested as a Freedom Rider while an elected member of the New York State Assembly (Carlson, 2016).

The analysis of Lane's *Rush to Judgment* and *A Citizen's Dissent* shows how conspiracy theories may appeal to commonly held opinions in an attempt to position themselves within more mainstream politics and call their own stigmatisation and exclusion into question. I argue that the ideology articulated in these texts is counter-democratic, in that it calls on citizens to be more vigilant against tyranny and to denounce the state's wrongdoing. Moreover, Lane does not challenge the established rules and procedures for knowledge production. Rather, he accepts those rules and procedures and argues that it is the state that has failed to uphold them. Hence, we will see that Lane's rhetoric serves to depict his conspiracy theory as being in keeping with his liberal democratic society's dominant values, rather than seeking to transform those values. This is noticeably different from what we saw in the previous chapter. For example, Lane's rhetorical strategy contrasts with that of Gregson, who wears his exclusion as a badge of honour, using it to signal to his audience that he is truly one of them – one who has been unjustly sidelined and stigmatised.

Despite this difference, there is nevertheless one important element of continuity between the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of the previous chapter and Lane's conspiracy theory. A narrative of *ressentiment* emerges once again, though the precise details of the narrative are somewhat different. Rather than constructing an in-group through language of race or religion, what we find in Lane's writing is a subtler construction of the American people as a victimised in-group, contrasted with a shadowy and pernicious state willing to violate democracy and the rule of law. Moreover, the *ressentiment* narrative here calls not for the expulsion or destruction of the conspirators, but for citizens to be more vigilant and actively involved in scrutinising politics. Thus, while a *ressentiment* narrative features, it is adjusted to fit a counter-democratic ideology.

4.1. Rush to Judgment

Rush to Judgment (1966) is Lane's critique of the Warren Commission's investigation and findings. The crux of Lane's argument is that the American government failed to conduct a truly rigorous investigation of the assassination, as it "released its conclusions before securing the facts […] these conclusions were widely and repeatedly published" (Lane, 1966, p. 275). No explicit outline of a conspiracy is given, though one is strongly implied in the book's prologue, such that "the spectre of a conspiracy […] haunts the rest of the book" (Knight, 2007, p. 79). The book's suggestion is that Oswald had not been involved in the assassination, and that two shooters had been involved, with one firing at Kennedy from the grassy knoll ahead and to the right of the motorcade. *Rush to Judgment* is very much in dialogue with the official report on the assassination, contesting the report's findings as well as the conduct of the Warren Commission's investigation. The focus of the book is thus largely negative and is largely given over to questioning and criticising different aspects of the official investigation, as indicated by the book's subtitle – 'A Critique of the Warren Commission's Inquiry into the Murders of President John F. Kennedy, Officer J.D. Tippit and Lee Harvey Oswald'.

Lane's book does not seek to question or revolutionise his society's standards and rules for the production of knowledge, and instead appeals to doxa around the rule of law in order to make his case. He is not undertaking a radical questioning of the principles embodied in the American legal system, nor those by which the Warren Commission professed to be guided, but is instead arguing that the Commission failed to live up to those principles. In a style appropriate to his career as a lawyer, Lane matches the Warren Commission report's use of forensic rhetoric and relies on much the same kinds of evidence as the report, including eyewitness testimony, expert opinion, and photographic evidence. For example, *Rush to Judgment's* appendices include items such as an autopsy descriptive sheet depicting Kennedy's wounds (Lane, 1966, p. 405), part of an FBI report on the cartridges and bullet found after the shooting (Lane, 1966, p. 406), and the affidavit of Seymour Weitzman attesting that the weapon he recovered from the crime scene was a Mauser rifle, not the Mannlicher-Carcano mentioned in the official report (Lane, 1966, pp. 409-410). Furthermore, much

of the evidence Lane draws upon was itself originally included in the Commission's own investigation – for instance, the autopsy descriptive sheet is listed as 'Commission Exhibit 397' (Lane, 1966, p. 405) . Thus, not only is Lane's critique presented in largely the same terms as the official account, but it also draws upon much the same body of evidence as the official investigation. Another, more direct example of Lane's appeal to *doxa* of the rule of law can be found in his summary of his case against the Warren Commission, given at the very end of the book:

> Sir Edward Coke wrote, 'Reason is the life of the law, nay, the common law itself is nothing else but reason.' When principles of law and rules of evidence are dispensed with or relaxed, reason must continue to prevail. The Commission disregarded these rules and principles, making no explanation and adopting no substitute. Hearsay evidence was freely admitted, while crucial eyewitness testimony was excluded. Opinions were sought and solemnly published, while important facts were rejected, distorted or ignored. Dubious scientific tests were said to have proved that which no authentic test could do. Friendly witnesses gave testimony without fear of criticism or cross-examination, were led through their paces by lawyers who, as the record shows, helped to prepare their testimony in advance and were asked leading questions; while those few who challenged the Government's case were often harassed and transformed for the time being into defendants. Important witnesses with invaluable evidence to give were never called, and the secrecy which prevailed at the hearings was extended, in respect to many important details, for another 75 years.

> (Lane, 1966, p. 398)

Lane's allegations against the Warren Commission is expressed here via an appeal to the ethos of the American legal system as rational, contrasted with the Commission's characterisation as violating this system's traditions with dishonesty and lack of reason. First, there is the quoting of the English lawyer of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, followed swiftly by references to commonly held values and norms of American society – law, evidence, reason, and a distrust of the government. Lane's effort at persuasion thus rests on fitting his conspiracy theory into a pre-existing consensus, rather than seeking to revise that consensus. It is worth comparing this with Peter Gregson's conspiracy

theory from the previous chapter, which sought to exploit his fringe status by using anti-Semitic utterances to ingratiate himself with his audience of conspiracy theorists, signalling to them that they shared beliefs around Jewish power. In contrast to this, Lane seeks to ingratiate himself with a far broader audience, by appealing to widely held beliefs and values, as though he was trying to work the conspiracy theory into the mainstream – to frame it as being more in keeping with those common opinions than the official account.

In the above extract, then, Lane separates reason and power, taking the former as being the basis of law and suggesting that truth can only be accessed if one is impartial and indifferent to political interests. This is reminiscent of the view Olmsted (2011) detects among the early amateur investigators of the Kennedy assassination; the truth is out there, so to speak, and anyone can access it if they know where to look. One could read this as an expression of a naïve view of truth, one that fails to recognise the way in which power affects a society's understanding of what can count as true (see Bratich, 2008; Foucault, 1991). Regardless of whether or not Lane subscribes to such a view, in invoking this separation of reason and power Lane presents his opponents' ethos as biased and hence untrustworthy while implying a contrast with his own character. Here too, then, we see that Lane is trying to portray the American government as failing to measure up to commonly held norms around the production of knowledge, and so once again tries to position himself within the mainstream. Moreover, the separation of reason and power allows for anyone to access the truth if they proceed in the correct manner, regardless of whether they are a professional politician or an ordinary voter. This commonplace notion that truth is unaffected by power – that truth is not created by an observer but is merely detected – also enables the counter-democratic aspect of the text, as it allows for a bottom-up approach to knowledge production where citizens can determine for themselves what is true, rather than simply accepting everything that the state says as true.

We also see Lane appealing to commonly held values in his depiction of those who oppose the official account of the assassination as victims of harassment by the state, with the state being characterised as predatory as well as untrustworthy. As we find in the book's next paragraph, the undermining of

reason and the victimisation of citizens during the investigation is taken as symptomatic of a broader

problem:

> If the Commission covered itself with shame, it also reflected shame on the Federal
>
> Government. The readiness with which its findings were accepted I believe to have been
>
> symptomatic of disease. Perhaps it was like that collective illness which anthropologists have
>
> observed to afflict tribal societies after the death of the chief. Then too the law is suspended
>
> and traduced. Should this be attended to, the illness may yet be arrested–though leaving
>
> behind its indelible traces.

(Lane, 1966, p. 398)

The metaphor of illness would likely be grasped easily by Lane's audience and enables him to move

from merely blaming the Warren Commission to also blaming the federal government – the coverup

is thus suggested to be symptomatic of belong to something much bigger. Here, then, we move away

from the matter of the assassination itself to a broader criticism of society, as we get a look at Lane's

critique of the political elite, which will be articulated in stronger terms in *A Citizen's Dissent*. Hence,

Lane moves from positing an event conspiracy to a systemic conspiracy. This leads to the expression

of a more obviously political set of beliefs and assumptions, as well as prescriptions for overcoming

the problem of which the conspiracy is a part. Indeed, the metaphor of illness used here helps to

accomplish this, as it combines an appeal to the emotions with a *topos* of danger – as Aristotle writes,

danger is "*the proximity of the frightening*" (2004, p. 153). Illness can be treated in most cases, and so

too does Lane indicate that it is not too late to act and resolve the problems he has described. What

exactly does he think needs to be done? The answer is for citizens to take a more active role in

holding their leaders to account:

> There is no natural law that rights wrongs. The rule of law rests upon those who affect to
>
> admire it. One important communicator has written, 'No material question now remains
>
> unresolved so far as the death of President Kennedy is concerned.' As long as we rely for
>
> information upon men blinded by the fear of what they might see, the precedent of the Warren

> Commission Report will continue to imperil the life of the law and dishonor those who wrote it little more than those who praise it.

<div align="right">(Lane, 1966, p. 398)</div>

In this passage, Lane's counter-democratic ideology becomes more apparent, as he stresses that the law is dependent on human agency and that greater action is needed to prevent its erosion. He also sets up a subtle distinction here, one that we will see becoming more prominent in *A Citizen's Dissent*, between an in-group (note his use of the first-person plural here) and the 'men blinded by the fear'. With the former being predicated as reliant on the latter for information, we can read this as referring both to the government and the media as epistemic authorities. In this sense, breaking free of this reliance would mean that 'we' become actively involved in gathering our own information, uncompromised by political interests.

In articulating his view of the vigilant citizen guarding against tyranny, observing and scrutinising politics as it occurs, Lane draws upon certain aspects of the political context of the United States during the mid-twentieth century. For example, his comments above echo broader concerns about the expansion of the state during the Cold War, such as was expressed in President Eisenhower's warning about the rise of the 'military-industrial complex'. In his farewell speech, Eisenhower spoke of the "potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power" without an "alert and knowledgeable citizenry" ready to protect liberty (Eisenhower, 1961, p. 3).[40] Lane's writing also speaks to fears that emerged during the 1950s around the supposed erosion of individuality and a rising conformity in American society. The success of books like David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) in the years before the assassination conveyed a fear that "Americans had become less autonomous, less individual, and more subject to external, corporate, and social controls" (Melley, 2008, p. 160). Mass media was seen as playing a key role in

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[40] The military-industrial complex would become one of a handful of potential culprits often blamed by conspiracy theorists for the assassination (see Scott, 1993; *JFK*, 1991; Garrison, 1967, p. 178).

undermining individual autonomy, and similarly, *Rush to Judgment* (and *A Citizen's Dissent*) can be read against this backdrop of these fears about passivity and conformity; Lane's message is for ordinary Americans to be wary of what the media tell them, and to proactively find things out for themselves. In this way, Lane's conspiracy theory draws upon broader concerns of the period, and in so doing calls into question its own exclusion and stigmatisation.

Now, questions may arise at this stage about the extent to which Lane's writing would have been stigmatised and excluded, whether he was aware of this exclusion and whether the text responds to it. We must be cautious here – I do not want to make too strong a claim about the intentions of Lane as the author and point to the absence of a mention of either conspiracy theory or the paranoid style as proof that of his deliberate avoidance of the terms, and hence pre-empting stigmatisation and exclusion. Instead, we need to think more deeply about the context in which this text would have been read, one in which conspiratorial accounts of the assassination had already been largely dismissed in the press and by the official investigation. Even if we are not able to determine whether Lane's claims were stigmatised and excluded *as a conspiracy theory,* we can see that they were nevertheless stigmatised and excluded as a JFK assassination *counter-narrative;* for disputing the official account of the assassination. Therefore, what we *can* say is that in order to persuade a broad portion of the American population, Lane and other JFK conspiracy theorists would have had to overcome their exclusion from mainstream discourse, though the reason for their exclusion may have had less to do with their belonging to the general category of conspiracy theory and more to do with the particular topic of their conspiracist claims. The counter-democratic ideology of *Rush to Judgment,* along with its appeals to commonly held opinions about politics, truth, and the rule of law, serve to call this exclusion from mainstream politics into question, suggesting to the reader that there may not be very much separating this conspiracy theory has been unjustly dismissed by both the press and the government.

A further note of caution: I am not suggesting that Lane's appeals to commonplace views, along with his framing of his conspiracy theory as fitting into liberal democracy rather than opposing it, have a merely instrumental role in the text, backed up not by sincere political belief but by a cold-hearted

aim to persuade an audience. After all, it is perfectly possible for a speaker to tailor their message to a particular audience and still believe in that message. What matters for us is that Lane's rhetoric highlights certain values and assumptions while overlooking others, and in so doing articulates a certain political position or outlook (one that I have described as counter-democratic). Regardless of whether he as an author truly believes in the particular politics of the text (and I have no reason to doubt his belief), for the text to be successful its audience must believe in it. What is more, we should keep in mind that conspiracy theorists often draw upon earlier conspiracy theories in the course of articulating their own claims (Byford, 2011; Billig, 1978). In doing so, they use conspiracy theory texts – not the original intentions or thoughts of the author – as a resource with which to build their own conspiracy theory. As such, we need not commit ourselves to a position on whether Lane wholeheartedly believed in the counter-democratic politics of his writing, but rather we should think in terms of what his rhetoric is achieving for him, and how the requirements of the text's rhetorical situation are impacting on how Lane articulates his politics.[41]

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[41] This prevents us from succumbing to the extremes of total cynicism and naïveté. My thinking here has been guided by concerns about attempts by Holocaust deniers to use academic language and pretences to articulate their basically hateful claims (for example, see Deborah Lipstadt's (1994) work on Holocaust deniers such as David Irving). The cynic would see this just as a trick to fool unwitting readers into accepting and spreading Holocaust denial. The wholly naïve reader would be the one who falls for that trick, taking the Holocaust denier's avoidance of overtly anti-Semitic statements as evidence of an absence of anti-Semitism. Rather, I would suggest that it is entirely possible for Holocaust deniers to recognise the need to keep their anti-Semitism implicit and to put on a respectable show for a public audience *and* to believe that their writing has merit and their findings are accurate. To put it crudely, we can recognise that an author or speaker can believe their own hogwash.

4.2. A Citizen's Dissent

The exclusion of Lane's conspiracy theory from mainstream political discourse becomes more evident in the later book, *A Citizen's Dissent* (1968). Here, Lane surveys the response to his first book, arguing that a coverup by the government and media has sought to undermine his efforts to reveal the initial conspiracy. Whereas *Rush to Judgment* was largely silent on the exclusion of conspiracy theorists from mainstream discourse on the Kennedy assassination, in *A Citizen's Dissent* Lane tackles the issue head on, describing his own experiences of being excluded from television debates on the assassassination and the difficulty he faced in getting his writing published. In a further difference from his earlier book, *A Citizen's Dissent* presents these experiences of marginalisation through a more overtly conspiracist lens, taking them as proof of the existence of a coverup. What is more, the conspirators Lane blames for the coverup are given greater definition in this book, with Lane describing them in far more populistic terms. For instance, he explains that *A Citizens' Dissent* concerns "the powerful, the influential men and forces who have been enlisted in the sad cause of saving the unsalvable" (Lane, 1968, p. xi). Soon afterwards, Lane again characterises this elite's behaviour as pathological:

> If *Rush to Judgment* and other critical works helped to isolate a symptom, then this volume seeks to take the full measure of the disease. If a numerically insignificant segment of society was discovered in that episode to have been involved in corrupt practices, then a phalanx of patricians are here found to be their associates, their accessories after the fact. The ease with which the princes of the networks, who share a Government-created monopoly, at first accepted and, when that was proven to be insufficient, then embraced the conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald alone assassinated President Kennedy suggests a closer than arm's length relationship between the media and the Government.

> The difficulty of presenting a dissenting view in the face of such constraint is predictable. The draconic power of those who would negate reasonable disagreement is our subject. In pursuing it we will meet police directors, television commentators, Pulitzer Prize winners, doctors, lawyers and FBI chiefs–the makers of public opinion, except perhaps in this instance.

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Then we may better know why the freedoms we cherish and speak of have become more and more illusory and why our nation moves, imperceptibly to those who will not observe the phenomenon, but nonetheless significantly, toward the strictures of a closed society.

(Lane, 1968, p. xii)

Once again, the language of illness is used to make the move from discussing a single event to a broader condition. Lane is more open in blaming the conspiracy and coverup on a minority undermining society from within, an elite comprising both the media and the government, who exert great influence over the opinions of ordinary citizens. The appeal to common opinion is present once again, with Lane stating that the in-group's values are under threat, though here it takes a back seat to the severe distrust of politics and the media. The distinction implied here between an Us and a Them can itself be seen as an important aspect of counter-democracy, already implied in its separation of the vigilant citizenry from the authorities they are meant to be watching and scrutinising (Rosanvallon, 2012, p. 251).

Coloured by distrust, Lane's counter-democratic politics singles out the media for particular condemnation, as he predicates them as being beholden to the government, but he also takes aim at the 'makers of public opinion'. This distrust can be seen as drawing once again on pre-existing concerns prevalent in American society around the role of the mass media in the supposed erosion of individual agency and autonomy. As Timothy Melley (2008) describes, the rise of mass media during the mid-twentieth century contributed to the emergence of the concept of brainwashing along with fears of the manipulation of ordinary citizens through public opinion surveys, advertising, corporations, and the government. In his view, portrayals of mass media as the manipulating public opinion were born out of a contradiction: a need to explain social and ideological influencing while at the same time remaining committed to liberal individualism. We can detect this in the above extract too, as Lane attributes a 'draconic power' to the media and government. The rejection of the conspiracy theory of Kennedy's assassination is therefore explained by pointing the finger of blame at powerful individuals.

The in-group which Lane is addressing in the above extract lacks the definition of the out-group, that is the media and the government, but it is nevertheless incorporated into a narrative of *ressentiment.* That which 'we cherish' is deemed to have been attacked by this elite within society, leading to a situation in which our values are yet to be truly realised. Yet again, the solution to this wrongdoing, Lane suggests, is a more active and vigilant citizenry: "Unless thinking people can distinguish false governmental edicts from proper ones and unless they are prepared to act against the invalid ones, hopes for a democratic society cannot be realized." (Lane, 1968, p. 150). Lane's discourse is reminiscent of populism here, with its division between the good 'people' and the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2017). While these exact terms do not appear in his writing, the structure of populist ideology is to be found here in Lane's division between a political elite that misleads the broader population in order to keep power to itself. This chimes with Mark Fenster's (2008) argument that conspiracy theories express a form of populism, though I would not see this as a uniform feature of all conspiracy theories.

What is this *ressentiment* narrative doing for Lane? While his precise claims and recommendations are unlike those of Ford or Gregson, the narrative still functions to aid the construction of an in-group based around a perceived injustice or wrongdoing; it also works to provoke the in-group into taking a particular course of action. In the case of Ford, for instance, the in-group of the gentiles were defined by their common victimisation and opposition to the Jews and were encouraged to marginalise and subjugate Jews in order to prevent their own demise. Hence, we see that while narratives of *ressentiment* serve to order political claims and categories in much the same way, the particular contents of those claims and categories may nevertheless vary greatly.

As noted above, in *A Citizen's Dissent* Lane is far more upfront in dealing with his own marginalisation than was the case in *Rush to Judgment*. The book was published at a time when the concept of conspiracy theory as we would recognise it (with its pejorative connotations) was still novel, only a few years after Hofstadter's (1964) introduction of the concept of the paranoid style. Indeed, in studying *A Citizen's Dissent* one finds only one use of 'conspiracy theory', and it is wholly absent from *Rush to Judgment*. The only mention of conspiracy theory in *A Citizen's Dissent* occurs

when Lane quotes a Henry Steele Commager in his appearance on a CBS television programme about the assassination:

> And we were–I think we have been persuaded very largely since the beginnings of the Cold War to be more receptive to conspiracy theories. I don't think we'd become paranoid. But we were on the road to a paranoid explanation of things.

> (Steele, as quoted in Lane, 1968, p. 96)

Note the use of past tense in the second and third sentences of this quotation, which suggests that a trend towards paranoid or conspiracist explanations of events had been largely averted in American society. This suggestion that a drift towards paranoia had been stopped fits well with arguments made by Andrew McKenzie-McHarg (2020; 2018) and Katharina Thalmann (2019) that the stigma attached to the concept of conspiracy theory only took shape during the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the phrasing used by the individuals Lane quotes in this section of the book, titled 'Americans are conspiracy-minded', suggests that Hofstadter's essay had already had a strong influence on how Americans viewed claims of conspiracy (see Lane, 1968, pp. 96-98). For example, Lane also quotes Eric Sevareid, who also appeared on the same CBS programme:

> Sevareid suggested that Americans are conspiracy-minded in general. Present in his fellow citizens, he had discovered, was "this automatic reaction that there must be a conspiracy somewhere." Disbelief in the official findings was equated with the belief that "obscure Reds in the State Department, teachers and writers here and there must have delivered vast China to Communist hands" or that "Roosevelt conspired with the Japanese to bring about the Pearl Habor attack." Referring gratuitously to Oswald as a "skinny, weak-chinned, little character," he observed, according to the CBS transcript, that those who do not accept his lone guilt are to be compared with "people who think Adolph [*sic*] Hitler is alive, people who think the so-called learned Elders of Zion are engaged in a Jewish plot to control the world." He added that the "notion" that the Commission members "knowingly suppressed or distorted decisive evidence" is "idiotic."

The idea articulated by Sevareid here is very similar to Hofstadter's framing of the paranoid style. Hofstadter himself mentions anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (1966, p. 6) and those about Franklin D. Roosevelt (p. 24) in his essay on the paranoid style. He also warns against the misinterpretation of blunders in the Second World War as signs of conspiracy, noting that "for every error and every act of incompetence one can substitute an act of treason" (Hofstadter, 1966, pp. 24-25). Most strikingly, Hofstadter also describes conspiracist claims that "Marshall and Acheson were intent on delivering China to Russia" (1966, p. 27). Further possible signs of Hofstadter's influence can be found soon after within the same section of Lane's book, as he accuses the media of inconsistency. According to Lane, the media initially characterised Europeans as being "conspiracy-minded" and so more likely to believe conspiracy theories about the assassination, but as more information about the shooting became available to Americans, they were now the ones described as "uniquely conspiracy-minded" (Lane, 1968, p. 97). Again, this is reminiscent of a point made by Hofstadter, as he states that, "One need only think of the response to President Kennedy's assassination in Europe to be reminded that Americans have no monopoly of the gift for improvisation" (Hofstadter, 1966, pp. 6-7).

Lane is thus faced with a challenge, in the form of Hofstadter's notion of the paranoid style and the pejorative connotations it carries with it. Here we see the rhetorical challenge theorised in the first chapter of this thesis, whereby the conspiracy theorist is faced with the task of persuading an audience in the face of stigma. How does Lane seek to persuade his audience when he encounters these allegations of paranoia against those who believe in a conspiratorial account of the assassination? He responds by turning once again to his distinction between Us' and Them, and yet again expresses a distrust of the media. Having quoted his comments on conspiracy-mindedness, Lane suggests that Sevareid should visit the National Archives and try to access files on pieces of evidence that have been suppressed. That this evidence is not available to the public "may seem to be idiotic, the "notion" that the documents are suppressed is based on fact" (Lane, 1968, p. 97). Thus, Lane once again brings the question back to the public's ability to scrutinise those who hold power and influence. On the following page, Lane refers to a congratulatory press release issued by CBS News

President, Richard S. Salant about the programme, and implies that it shows CBS' lack of impartiality and hence untrustworthiness (Lane, 1968, p. 98). Lane then closes the section by noting that in the CBS programme, Sevareid had commented that the existence of a free press would preclude a media coverup, and sarcastically states that this indicates "that [Sevareid] had not been home watching the show with us" (Lane, 1968, p. 98).

The distinction Lane is constructing between an in- and an out-group becomes somewhat clearer here. Consider Lane's positioning of the in-group as watching television in the home, adding a sense of ordinariness and domesticity that stands in contrast with the highly public and influential role of a television commentator. The nameless in-group is depicted as observers, watching politics unfold from their own homes, as though they were constituted by the very mass media that Lane wants them to distrust. Here we see something of a tension in Lane's construction of the group, as they are constructed as counter-democrats engaged in observing and scrutinising politics through mass media, and yet he is also very distrustful of the mass media. Mass media is thus treated both as a way of watching and scrutinising, of publicising wrongdoing and holding the powerful to account, *and* as a site where wrongdoing occurs in the form of the misleading of citizens. This feeds into the distinction implied by counter-democracy between the ruled and the rulers, is articulated more clearly here. The CBS News President is treated as not being one of 'us', as being apart from the in-group. Here, the populist aspect of Lane's writing mentioned earlier becomes clearer, though we still do not encounter terms like 'the people' and the 'elites'.

In this way, we see that the politics of Lane's conspiracy theory cannot be simply labelled as extreme or moderate. Lane's rhetoric appeals to the *doxa* of the American political and legal systems, with his separation of truth from power and his call for a watchful citizenry. Lane frames his conspiracy theory not as a call for the radical transformation of American politics and society into something new, but as a push for the restoration and realisation of values that are already central to America's political culture. From this perspective, the conspiracy theory is being used to articulate a rather moderate political outlook. Still, through his response to the pushback against conspiratorial explanation of the

assassination in the media, Lane's politics comes to be articulated somewhat differently, with a more overt focus on an antagonistic distinction between an 'us' and a 'them'.

'We' cannot reinstate the principles that once guided our society, because 'they' are stopping us. Here we see how Lane's conspiracy theorising articulates a narrative of *ressentiment,* not simply through an antagonistic division between us and them but also through relating oppression in the present to the loss of certain values of the past, with the promise of an overcoming of the opponents in the future. The values upon which America's republic was built have been trampled upon by the conspirators and their allies in the media, but ordinary American citizens may restore these values through proactively informing themselves about what is going on. It is worth momentarily comparing this with what we saw in Henry Ford's *The International Jew* and Peter Gregson's talk to the Keep Talking group. In those texts, it was the Jews who were blamed for submerging certain principles and values that needed restoring in the future (whether those be the priority of making over getting, or the restoration of free expression in contemporary Britain). While the construction of the identity of the conspirators, the traits and events attributed to them, and even the political values and ideas being promoted in these conspiracy theories may differ, we nevertheless retain this narrative framework of *ressentiment.* This goes beyond scapegoating; it is more than a case of one group blaming another for their misfortune, and instead involves the articulation of certain political claims and principles by relating them to the past.

5. Josiah Thompson and JFK Unsolved: The Real Conspiracies

The third and final text analysed for this chapter is a recent documentary film, *JFK Unsolved: The Real Conspiracies* (2021)*,* published on the YouTube channel of the television channel ABC7 News Bay Area. The film centres on the research of Josiah Thompson, a former academic and private investigator who has spent decades studying the Kennedy assassination, referred to by Knight as the "author of one of the most important early works by the assassination critics" (2007, p. 136). With his book *Six Seconds In Dallas* (1967) Thompson presented the results of his own investigation into the

Kennedy assassination, concluding that a second shooter must have been positioned on the grassy knoll ahead and to the right of the motorcade. Similarly to Lane, Thompson argues that the Warren Commission's investigation was biased, alleging that it was chiefly concerned with proving Oswald's pre-determined guilt rather than uncovering the truth of the assassination. However, he does not suggest that either the state or members of the Commission were involved in the alleged conspiracy to kill the President.

Having become more involved in Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorising, Thompson appeared along with Mark Lane on an episode of the television programme *Good Night America,* hosted by Geraldo Rivera (Good Night America, 1975). In this appearance, Thompson outlined his criticism of the Warren Commission, focusing in particular on the theory that Kennedy and Governor Connally were both hit by a single bullet. A revision of Thompson's account of the assassination was recently published as *Last Second in Dallas* (2021)*,* which is promoted in parts of the documentary analysed here. The documentary features a mix of interviews (with Thompson himself, as well as other researchers, eyewitnesses to the assassination, and a historian), original footage and photographs of the assassination, and photographs of historical figures and events from the period of the early 1960s (see ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021). Dan Noyes, a television news journalist, presents the documentary, interviewing guests and also narrating segments of the film.

Besides his prominent position within the broader community of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists, Thompson is worth focusing on due to his particular contribution to the use of the visual record of the assassination, especially the Zapruder film. It was Thompson who first undertook a frame-by-frame analysis of the film, accessed through his work with *Life* magazine (Colloff & Hall, 1998; Dingus, 1998). Indeed, the Zapruder film features heavily in the *JFK Unsolved* documentary, as do other films and photographs of the assassination, with Thompson's comments about the film being dubbed in. I have chosen to focus on the documentary *JFK Unsolved* partly for this very reason, to be able to analyse Thompson's heavy reliance on moving images of the assassination which could only ever be rendered as stills in either of his two books. Analysing the documentary can therefore provide greater insight into the place of images in conspiracy theorising.

What we find from analysing this documentary is a reappearance of counter-democracy, albeit in a less overtly political form. Once again, truth is suggested as being the antidote to a pathological society. Thompson also implies that truth can be accessed by anyone, simply by consulting the visual record of the assassination, as though truth was innate to the photographs and films of Dealey Plaza themselves. However, Thompson is far more constrained with his conspiracist claims than was the case with Lane, refusing to speculate on the identities of the conspirators or what their motive might have been. Because of this, Thompson's conspiracy theory is less obviously political, and lacks the sort of narrative of *ressentiment* that we have encountered in every other text so far in this thesis. In this way, by comparing Thompson and Lane's approaches to conspiracy theorising, we get a clearer understanding of the conditions under which a *ressentiment* narrative develops. I argue that the documentary's emphasis on these aspects of Thompson's conspiracy theorising speaks to a context of increased distrust in American politics and the association of conspiracy theory with right-wing figures such as Donald Trump.

5.1. The presentation of Thompson's conspiracy theory as apolitical and unbiased

On multiple occasions during *JFK Unsolved*, Thompson is characterised as being unbiased and modest in his approach to understanding the Kennedy assassination. This results in a conspiracy theory that is much less plainly political than what we encountered in Lane's writing. For example, the historian and curator of the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, Stephen Fagin, appeals to Thompson's ethos as unbiased and scientific, and as being only concerned with the details of the shooting itself, rather than with the identity of potential conspirators or the broader political context:

> Stephen Fagin: Josiah Thompson looked at this very differently. He examined Dealey Plaza as a crime scene, and laser focused his attention on the science of the assassination. He wasn't interested in the bigger picture questions about who was involved, was it the CIA, was it the Mafia. Thompson was exclusively focused on how many shots were fired and what did those shots do.

The use of the terms 'crime scene,' 'laser focused' and 'science' here plays on science's connotations of rigour, reason, and impartiality, and contributes to Thompson's characterisation as someone the viewer can trust. Thompson's pursuit of the truth, the documentary suggests, has not been compromised by a preoccupation with the political and social aspects of the assassination. Thompson is thus differentiated from other conspiracy theorists, who seem to only feature elliptically in the opening of Fagin's remarks here. As Thompson himself explains at the end of the documentary, while he believes that there was a second shooter involved in the assassination, he wants to avoid speculation about their identity or whether they were part of a larger conspiracy:

> Thompson: I think we gotta (.) gotta review our history now, in seeing that this was a professional hit. I dunno what one does with that, that's not my job. I just wanted to find out what happened. And what I found happened was a professional hit.
>
> [Wistful guitar music starts to play]
>
> Noyes: But just as a, as an investigator, doesn't that kinda drive you nuts? Don't you want to know the why? And who else was involved?
>
> Thompson: [Laughing] Many people have disappeared down that road and never been seen again, right? Of course! Sure I'd like to know. But, I don't. I don't.

The scope of Thompson's conspiracy theory is therefore much more limited than was the case with Lane's writing. No individual or group are blamed for the assassination or the coverup by Thompson, nor does he speculate about a motive. His conspiracy theory is suggested to be unbiased by politics, even though its topic is profoundly political. Whereas Lane took the assassination as a symptom of a broader social pathology, Thompson draws no such conclusions about the assassination's significance or what it might mean. In contrast to Lane's call for ordinary citizens to inform and educate

themselves rather than relying on the media, Thompson restricts himself to talking about the physics of the assassination itself.

The result is a conspiracy theory that is notably lacking a narrative of *ressentiment.* Constrained to explaining how the assassination took place, without reflecting on its political significance or the identities and motives of the people involved, Thompson's conspiracy theory lacks the construction of an in-group and the casting of blame onto an out-group. This suggests certain conditions under which a narrative of *ressentiment* will not occur, namely when the conspiracy theorist does not make political claims nor constructs political identities, but instead restricts themselves to describing how an event occurred. Returning to Barkun's (2013) categorisation of conspiracy theories, then, Thompson's conspiracy theory suggests that event conspiracy theories are better able to avoid articulating *ressentiment* narratives, as they can be restricted to describing *how* an event occurred without making political claims about *who* caused it or *why.*

This professed lack of interest in the bigger picture might be seen by some as a failing on Thompson's part. After all, one would assume that part of what makes this murder intriguing for so many people is its political significance – that the victim was an American president, that the murder could have been politically motivated, and that it might have marked a change in the political direction of the United States. One might conclude that Thompson's conspiracy theory is rather disingenuous; he goes to all the effort of trying to prove that a conspiracy is the only possible explanation, only to leave us hanging, wondering who was in on the conspiracy and what their motive had been.

However, in the documentary this potential point of criticism is actually treated as proof of Thompson's ethos of credibility, and used to distinguish him from other conspiracy theorists – those who have 'disappeared down that road and never been seen again'. His restraint is cited to imply that he has a deeper sense of responsibility than others who have engaged in speculation about the political motivation for the assassination. Rather than being a sign of the inadequacy of his account of the assassination, Thompson's acknowledgement he does not know why the assassination took place is used to suggest that he is a more trustworthy source; background music evokes a sense of poignancy, and suggests that his ignorance here is a sign of his maturity, perhaps even wisdom. All of this further

implies a contrast between Thompson and the commonplace view of conspiracy theorists as strange, pathological, and as ceaselessly incorporating more and more material into their conspiracy theory.[42] Hence, I would argue that we should interpret this differentiation as a response to the rhetorical challenge described earlier in this thesis, whereby a conspiracy theorist faces the task of persuading an audience despite starting from a position of stigma. By appealing to his ethos as trustworthy and moderate, the documentary does not challenge the stigma against conspiracy theorists, but rather tries to signal to the viewer at home that Thompson is exceptional, and should not be categorised as a conspiracy theorist.

In fact, Thompson is never referred to as a conspiracy theorist in the documentary – the term is totally avoided – and instead other referential strategies are used, such as referring to "critical researchers and theorists" (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021, 55:56). This can be read as a case of pre-emption, as we see the effect of the stigma associated with conspiracy theory, with the documentary makers avoid the use of a term laden with negative connotations that would undermine Thompson's authority (see McKenzie-McHarg & Fredheim, 2017). By avoiding the pejorative term 'conspiracy theorist', the documentary avoids invoking the pejorative connotations of the term, thus contributing to Thompson's portrayal as a rational and responsible investigator.[43]

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[42] For example, Michael Butter notes that conspiracy theories are appealing to some as they "connect disparate things, rejecting coincidence and contingency in favour of coherence and sinister intent" (2020, p. 79). Similarly, Jovan Byford describes conspiracy theories as irrefutable, in that an absence of evidence, or the presence of contradicting evidence, is taken as proof of the extent of the conspirators' mastery of deception (Byford, 2011, p. 36).

[43] A similar case of pre-emption can be found in a much earlier news article by ABC7's Dany Noyes, the presenter of *JFK Unsolved.* Once again, we find an appeal to Thompson's ethos of credibility:

> Before you dismiss Thompson as another conspiracy theorist, consider his background. He served on
> Underwater Demolition Team 21 -- the precursor to the Navy SEALs -- graduated from Yale with a

The framing of Thompson's activities in chiefly technical and scientific language – his 'laser focus' on the 'science of the assassination' – rather than political terms is in itself noteworthy. Whereas Lane presented himself as a citizen seeking to protect American democracy from an allegedly authoritarian government, such a political framing is absent in Thompson's case. Thompson is not depicted as entirely apolitical, however, as the documentary refers briefly to his involvement in protests against the Vietnam War (see ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021, 31:30). Nonetheless, the emphasis of the documentary is on depicting Thompson almost as an unbiased scientist, rather than a politically motivated researcher. For instance, over the course the course of the film we see Thompson discussing research on matters such as: the behaviour of different types of ammunition upon impact with a target (1:04:49); acoustic evidence taken from a police radio recording (1:06:52); and the direction of the blood spatter caused by the final bullet's impact (1:15:24). In contrast, politics is only mentioned briefly in the context of Thompson's conspiracy theory, as he explains that his guiding question in his research has been "Was this a professional hit? That is, part of politics? Or was it an amateur assassination?" (1:03:12). The question here is framed as one of determining whether or not the assassination is political (though, surely, even the lone gunman theory describes a political assassination?); what this political dimension could be is beyond the scope of Thompson's investigation.

Ph.D. in philosophy, taught college courses and had a long career as a private investigator. His most famous case was investigating Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh.

(Noyes, 2013, para. 4)

The stigma of conspiracy theory is tackled with references to Thompson's impressive accomplishments, suggesting to us that Thompson is indeed worth trusting or at least worth listening to, unlike the other conspiracy theorists. The commonly held notion that conspiracy theorists are untrustworthy, not worth listening to or taking seriously, is left unchallenged here too, with Noyes' claim simply being that Thompson is exceptional.

The documentary's presentation of Thompson's conspiracy theorising as pared back, scientific, and largely apolitical speaks to the broader context of depoliticisation in the early twenty-first century. Recent decades have witnessed an increased disengagement of citizens from democratic politics, coupled with a decrease in party loyalty and cohesion among electorates (Mair, 2013; Rosanvallon, 2012). As Peter Mair describes, the gap between the electorate and their representatives has widened, to such an extent that, "There is a world of the parties, or a world of political leaders, that is separate from the world of the citizenry" (2013, p. 40). Rosanvallon expresses a similar sentiment, describing a rising dissatisfaction with politics that he attributes to the structure of counter-democracy:

> [T]he "age of political consumerism" has been characterized by high expectations of political institutions and growing demands upon them. The problem stems from the way in which these demands are expressed, which tends to delegitimate the powers to which they are addressed. This is the source of the contemporary disenchantment with democracy. Disappointment is an almost inevitable consequence of a distrustful citizenry.
>
> (Rosanvallon, 2012, p. 254)

In this context of disengagement and increased distrust of politics, the restrained, seemingly non-political quality of Thompson's conspiracy theory can be presented as proof of his own trustworthiness, rather than as a shortcoming. My point here is not that Thompson's approach to conspiracy theorising has been brought about by a broader trend of depoliticisation – I am not making an argument about causation. Rather, my point is simply that Thompson's approach is particularly well-suited to our current context, and that the documentary's emphasis on his approach's lack of politics is itself a response to this contextual factor. Whereas Lane was writing in a context of mass politics prior to our era of distrust, *JFK Unsolved* was released at a time when political participation itself has come to seem naïve or useless. In such a context, the emphasis on the lack of politics in Thompson's conspiracy theorising can be seen as part of the documentary's rhetorical efforts, seeking to persuade the audience of his credibility by signalling that he is unbiased, uncorrupted by politics.

Thompson's investigation itself is portrayed as largely apolitical and devoid of speculation on the political dimension of the conspiracy he has outlined. Nevertheless, in the reasoning Thompson gives for his investigation, and how he uses images in his conspiracy theory, we can once again detect a counter-democratic politics. As noted above, Thompson's interest in the Kennedy assassination stems from an apparent discrepancy between the Warren Commission's report and the Zapruder film. While the Warren Commission describes the President as having been shot in the back of the head, the Zapruder film is often interpreted as showing a shot coming from the front, causing Kennedy to recoil backwards. Thompson's interest in the Kennedy case can thus be interpreted as coming out of an experience of an apparent lie by the state, directed against the general public. For Thompson, uncovering the truth of the assassination will be beneficial for society:

> Noyes: Why should this be important for all of us to understand? Uh, what actually happened that day?
>
> Thompson: Because if a society believes in alternative facts you get in deeper and deeper trouble. You need the truth, a healthy society needs the truth. And this is a little truth that I can help with.

> (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021, 25:01)

Here, the counter-democratic element is on show, showing a greater similarity with the likes of Lane than initially seemed to be the case. Both of these conspiracy theorists see their investigative work as helping to protect against a societal pathology. The warning about 'alternative facts' alludes to the Trump administration and its association with spreading disinformation (see Blake, 2020), and positions Thompson against those who might seek to undermine social consensus on what is true. From Thompson's perspective, it seems, the conspiracy theorist (or assassination researcher) plays an important political function, preventing society from losing the certainty of truth.

The counter-democratic aspect of Thompson's conspiracy theorising is developed further through the documentary's use of visual evidence to support his case. Here, we once again find the notion that ordinary citizens are able to find the truth without direction from the state. In Thompson's case, all the vigilant citizen has to do is look at the photographs and films of the assassination in order to be able to reach the truth of what happened. As has already been noted, much of *JFK Unsolved* features home movies and photographs taken at the moment the assassination occurred. These are used to cast doubt on the official account of the assassination and to persuade us of the likely truth of Thompson's conspiracy theory. These photographs and film recordings are thus treated as a way of determining the truth of what happened during the assassination. The clearest example of this is in the documentary's use of the Zapruder film, particularly the moment at which the second bullet strikes Kennedy in the head. Noyes speaks with Thompson about his reaction upon watching the film for the first time, and Thompson tells him, "I couldn't believe what I was seeing" (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021, 34:11).

What he saw was Kennedy being pushed backwards by the second bullet, from which he concludes that the shot must have come from ahead of the motorcade – not from the rear, as the official account of the assassination had it. As he puts it, "He got hit from the front! This is crazy!" (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021, 34:37). For Thompson, then, studying the images of the assassination gave one access to the truth that the Warren Commission had either missed or covered up – that a conspiracy had killed Kennedy. This fits well with the view we found in Lane's writing, namely the assumption that anyone can access the truth about the assassination, and that political power does not confer the right to dictate the truth that others must follow.[44] It is also a view exhibited not only by Kennedy

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[44] In an earlier short film by the documentary-maker Errol Morris on the assassination, Thompson states this view on the usefulness of images for determining the truth of what happened to Kennedy: "I know this happened one way rather than another. It had to happen one way, right? If you could get inside the photos, you would know what happened" (Morris, 2013, 2:39). Later on in the same documentary, Thompson speaks on the authenticity of the images of the assassination, arguing that the images can be trusted as "none of this stuff is controlled by the government. It's pristine, as it were. It's a great source of evidence" (Morris, 2013, 5:58). The

assassination conspiracy theorists, but by conspiracy theorists more broadly in recent decades. As David Hickman (2014) has argued, conspiracy theorists' interaction with images typically conveys a notion that photographs and films express an inherent truth, regardless of who has produced them.

However, there is more to these images than meets the eye. From the manner in which Thompson describes the visual evidence on the Kennedy assassination, it is as though meaning and truth are innate to the images themselves, and that these can be drawn out of the images simply by watching them. Yet, as John Berger writes, "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (Berger, 1972, p. 8). In making sense of images such as those of the Zapruder film, we bring with us any a priori information we may have about what we are looking at. We may approach the film with the understanding that this is a recording of a real event, that what we will see is not fictional. We may or may not know who the individuals in the film are, and we may already have an awareness or recognition of what exactly these images are showing us – the death of President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963, rather than the death of any other man at another time and place. Another viewer, lacking or disbelieving of that information, may reach a different understanding of what it is they are watching. For example, the conspiracy theorist William Cooper asserts that Kennedy was killed on the orders of a committee belonging to the Bilderberg group, as he was on the verge of making public the existence of aliens (Cooper, 1991, p. 215). Cooper thus offers a different interpretation of the Zapruder film:

> President John F. Kennedy was murdered by the Secret Service agent who drove his car in the motorcade and the act is plainly visible in the Zapruder film. WATCH THE DRIVER AND NOT KENNEDY WHEN YOU VIEW THE FILM. All of the witnesses who were close enough to the car to see William Greer shoot Kennedy were themselves all murdered within two years of the event. The Warren Commission was a farce, and Council on Foreign

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availability of image-making technologies like film and photography thus enables the demos to carry out its counter-democratic function – even if inadvertently, as in the case of the Kennedy assassination – by allowing for events to be documented beyond the reach of the state.

Relations members made up the majority of its panel. They succeeded in snowing the American people.

(Cooper, 1991, p. 215)

Other conspiracy theorists, such as James Fetzer (2003), claim that the Zapruder film is in fact a hoax, devised as part of the cover up the to conceal the conspiracy that killed Kennedy. Perhaps Cooper and Fetzer are simply misinformed about the film – but who determines what being informed means, in this case? My point here is not to suggest that either Cooper, Fetzer, or Thompson have got it right, but merely to show that the truth and meaning of the Zapruder film, and the other pieces of visual evidence of the assassination, are not innate to the images themselves, but is rather constructed through viewing them. Thompson, Cooper, and Fetzer all seek to impose their own interpretations onto the viewer of the Zapruder film and present these interpretations as *the truth* contained in the film. Each time, this truth is presented as if it were latent in the film itself, when in fact it is constructed through the conspiracy theorists' engagement with the film, and through their retelling of what the film shows.

For example, in *JFK Unsolved* the Zapruder film is played alongside Thompson's own description of what he sees in the film, and he acts out the movements of Kennedy's body after being hit (see Fig. 5). The Zapruder film, it seems, does not speak for itself, despite what Thompson implies, but must be described and interpreted for truth to be constructed. Thompson is therefore putting himself forward as our guide in understanding the film, drawing out what he takes to be its truth and meaning – we are reliant on him for this understanding. He shows us what he takes to be relevant for making sense of the film, and disregarding whatever is irrelevant to his interpretation. Yet, there is a tension here, one present throughout the conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination. Truth is deemed to be accessible to anyone, with the visual record of the assassination enabling citizens to scrutinize what happened and hold those in power to account, but we are still reliant on individuals putting themselves forward as authorities who can provide us with the conclusive truth of the event, who can act as those who are 'in the know'. In this sense, the counter-democratic function of the conspiracy theories retains an element of hierarchy: the conspiracy theorist positions themselves above the rest of the

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FIGURE 5. The Zapruder film is played alongside Josiah Thompson's explanation of his revelation (ABC7 News Bay Area, 2021, 34:24).

demos as the one who knows the truth and who should therefore be trusted; epistemic authority as such is not challenged, only who counts as holding epistemic authority.

The truth may not be innate to the Zapruder films and other images of the assassination, but this naïve view of truth may nevertheless have a rhetorical function. As we saw with Lane's similar separation of truth and power, it opens up the possibility for those not in positions of power to have a say on what is true and false, and to present their version of the truth as impartial, uninfluenced by political pressures. Moreover, presenting truth as innate to the evidence and as conclusive could be read as functioning to put the conspiratorial nature of the event beyond debate, treating it instead as plainly obvious. While further investigations may be required to prove exactly how the conspiracy killing occurred, the notion that a conspiracy was responsible for Kennedy's death can then be treated as axiomatic – this notion is treated as fact, not as one person's opinion.

6. Conclusion

When we start looking at conspiracy theories as political rather than chiefly epistemological, we soon find that there is more variation between conspiracy theories than we might otherwise assume. Conspiracy theories do not express a uniform political ideology, but instead, they may appeal to different political ideas and values while downplaying or omitting others. In the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories analysed in the previous chapter, we found that the emphasis was being placed on the construction of a distinction between an in- and out-group, with the Jews being built up as an evil

and threatening Other. We also saw how anti-Semitism can be accompanied by a productivist view of capitalist society, whereby only finance is treated as capitalistic, so that production comes to be seen as non-capitalist, natural, and hence good. In contrast, the JFK conspiracy theories featured in this chapter place less emphasis on the construction of an us-them division; although such a division is certainly present in Lane's writing, it is not as well-defined nor as exclusionary as those anti-Semitic texts. Instead, we find an implied division between ordinary citizens on the one hand and mass media and the state on the other; this conveys a counter-democratic politics, whereby citizens are encouraged to be watchful of those in power, scrutinising political events so as to stop the imposition of tyranny.

The counter-democratic ideology of JFK assassination conspiracy theories is also matched by the democratisation of conspiracy theory that has occurred through its increasing focus on images (McKenzie-McHarg, 2019). The widespread dissemination of images of the Kennedy assassination made conspiracy theorising more accessible to a broader sweep of the American population, and conspiracy theorists like Lane and Thompson have pointed to such images in order to question the state's official narrative of the assassination. While they suggest instead that ordinary citizens can reach the truth themselves by studying the images of the assassination, these conspiracy theorists nevertheless position themselves as being 'in the know', as ones who possess a superior understanding of what happened. In this sense, there is a certain tension to the use of images here, as on the one hand truth is treated as innate to the images and accessible to laypeople; on the other hand, the words of the conspiracy theorist instruct us about what we should be seeing.

In bringing these three conspiracy theory texts together, we have also reached a better understanding of how a conspiracy theory may come to express a narrative of *ressentiment,* and how such a narrative can be absent from some cases. A *ressentiment* narrative was not found in the case of *JFK Unsolved*, and instead we saw an emphasis on Thompson's restrained approach to conspiracy theorising. In contrast, Lane broadened his conspiracy theory outwards, not only taking the Kennedy assassination to be indicative of a broader pathology afflicting society, but also attributing his own exclusion from public debate as part of the coverup of the conspiracy. Thus, we see that a narrative of *ressentiment* is not a strict requirement of every conspiracy theory, but instead comes about when the conspiracy

theorist moves beyond explaining how an event occurred and makes claims about the significance of the event for society and politics more broadly.

The relationship between conspiracy theory and media will be examined further in the next chapter, as we turn to look at anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. We will focus in particular on the change brought about by the advent of the internet, especially its undermining of traditional epistemic authorities. The political outlook identified in Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories, with its need for citizens to mobilise to protect society from internal threats, is developed further in anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, with an even greater focus being placed on the individual and the body. However, in these conspiracy theories the ideology articulated is neoliberal, with a far greater focus on the individual, and the depiction of the state as an ever-present threat to individual freedom.

Chapter 5 – The body, performance, and neoliberal ideology in COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theory

1. Introduction

Anti-vaccination beliefs have become especially worrying due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the dissemination of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories on the internet (see Baker, 2022; Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021). Belief in conspiracy theories is associated with increased vaccine hesitancy and so poses a risk to efforts to achieve herd immunity to the virus (Freeman, et al., 2022; McCarthy, et al., 2022; van Prooijen, et al., 2022; van Prooijen, et al., 2021; Romer & Jamieson, 2020). Although not every case of vaccine hesitancy or scepticism will be motivated by conspiracy theory belief, there is still a worrying overlap between anti-vaccination conspiracy theorists and other equally worrying conspiracist groups, such as the QAnon movement in the United States (Guerin, 2021; Weinberg & Dawson, 2021). Unlike the other conspiracy theories we have examined so far, COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theories stand out for their focus on the individual and the body; the alleged conspiracy is here directed at the level of individual, their physical and mental health, and that of their family. This stands in contrast to the cases of anti-Semitic conspiracy theory and Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory, where the emphasis was far more on the threat posed to a nation or society, rather than the individual. We will also see that emotion and performativity are of increased importance in the two texts analysed in this chapter, with the conspiracy theorist presenting themselves and their performances of authenticity as proof of the truth of their claims.

So far there has been relatively little research published on the political aspects of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of what has been published in adjacent fields has focused on interactions and overlap between anti-vaccination communities and QAnon, militia, conspiracist, and even millennialist groups, as well as their use of social media (see Sturm & Albrecht, 2021; Johnson, et al., 2021; Weinberg & Dawson, 2021). The rhetorical dimension of COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theories has also been overlooked. These conspiracy theories are used to *persuade* their audience to alter their behaviour, to refrain from receiving

vaccinations and undertake other actions instead. What is needed, therefore, is a greater focus on this overlooked political content of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, and an understanding of how anti-vaxxers express political ideas and try to persuade others.

This chapter is just an initial step in this direction, providing an in-depth analysis of two cases of COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. My focus here is on two texts that espouse conspiracist beliefs about COVID-19 vaccination: firstly, a blog post titled *Health as Spiritual Warfare*, published by the psychiatrist Kelly Brogan in January 2021; secondly, an online video by the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, uploaded to his *InfoWars* website in 2022 and titled *EPIC RANT: Alex Jones Rages At Moderna For Creating COVID-19 Gene Sequence* (hereafter *EPIC RANT*). I make an original contribution by addressing the current gap in literature, strenghtening our understanding of the political ideas articulated in COVID-19 denialism and anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. Moreover, this chapter will shed light on their rhetorical aspect – the strategies used in these conspiracy theories to try to persuade an audience – as well as considering how this in turn affects the ideas themselves.

Analysing these texts through lens of the critical conceptualisation of conspiracy theory, we find Brogan and Jones using two different answers to the rhetorical challenge facing conspiracy theorists. Brogan draws on the stigmatised status of conspiracy theory by connecting it with similarly marginalised practices and beliefs from alternative medicine. Jones exploits the pejorative connotation of conspiracy theory by playing up to the stereotype of the irrational, hysterical, and obsessive conspiracy theorist. Neither Brogan nor Jones attempt to distance themselves from the label of conspiracy theory or its pejorative connotations, and instead turn the stigma of conspiracy theory on its head, using it to grow their audiences. The DHA and RPA once again proved useful for examining how different characters are constructed in the texts, in particular how Brogan and Jones construct their own ethoses. Moreover, the combination of DHA and RPA help us to think through the ways in which economic context affects Brogan and Jones' discourse – that is, the fact that conspiracy theory has become part of a business venture for both of them.

1.1. Articulating neoliberal ideology through COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theories

In this chapter, I argue that the conspiracy theories expressed in these two texts should be read as articulations of neoliberal ideology. In each text, the values and subjectivity that are threatened by the alleged conspiracy point to the presence of a form of neoliberal ideology. What we find are descriptions of a plot by an enemy to destroy individual freedom, autonomy, and personal responsibility by breeding dependence on an exploitative state and health system. Moreover, both Brogan and Jones emphasise payment and monetary investment as part of the solution for overcoming the conspiracy. I argue that these features need to be grasped via four crucial contextual factors: The first of these is *conspirituality*, which denotes the synthesis of conspiracy theory with esotericism and New Age spirituality (see Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015; Ward & Voas, 2011). Secondly, we should also consider the texts in the context of changing attitudes towards health, whereby health comes to be seen primarily (and sometimes solely) as a personal and private issue, such that poor health is taken as a personal and moral failing (see Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Kata, 2012; Crawford, 2006; Crawford, 1980). Thirdly, there is also the resurgence of right-wing populism to consider, which has expressed strong distrust not only towards politicians but also towards conventional epistemic authorities such as doctors and scientists. Finally, these conspiracy theories should also be viewed in relation to the broader history of anti-vaccination beliefs and movements, such as the anxieties that arose in the wake of Andrew Wakefield's discredited claims of a link between the Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. These contextual factors also impact on the quality of the *ressentiment* narratives present in these texts. Once again, we encounter narratives in which a victimised in-group begins to fight back against its oppressors, paving the way for the restoration of the group's freedom. However, Brogan and Jones place the individual subject at the heart of their narratives, describing not only an attack on the collective but also on the body and soul of the individual, whose health and very individuality is described as being under attack from the intruding forces of the conspiracy. In this

way, while these conspiracy theories once again make certain truth claims, they are also strongly political, constructing narratives and identities through which to articulate their political claims.

Both of these texts express these features, but they differ in terms of how these features are expressed. For example, in Brogan's *ressentiment* narrative the solution for overcoming the conspirators is spiritual and focused on changing the self. The victim of the conspiracy, described by Brogan as the 'embodied human', is constructed as a subject that is wholly autonomous and independent, and so innately powerful that they are able to heal themselves of any illness. Therefore, instead of political action, Brogan encourages her audience to realise the embodied human in themselves by providing a list of self-help tips as well as links to her online self-help courses that must be paid for. In contrast, while Jones' video also presents the purchasing of his products as the main way for viewers to help fight the conspiracy, there is also a more overtly political and populist angle to his discourse. Rather than only asking his viewers to turn inwards and improve themselves, Jones presents himself as involved in a struggle with globalist political elites who are seeking to destroy the United States America.

Hence, in pairing these two conspiracy theory texts we see once again that there is no one way of articulating a conspiracy theory; even when the claims being articulated in a set of thematically linked conspiracy theories are in broad alignment, there are still significant differences that prevent us from treating them as a uniform bloc. Nuance is required, and just as we should not conflate populism, authoritarianism, and ethnonationalism (Bonikowski, 2017), we should also avoid conflating any of these with conspiracism. Even if many express extreme views, there are nevertheless qualitative differences between the politics they are trying to promote. Thus, once again we see the need to move beyond generalising formulae such as Richard Hofstadter's (1966) 'paranoid style' and instead pay greater attention to particularities of each conspiracy theory we encounter.

1.2. Structure of the chapter

This chapter is split into two halves, beginning by focusing on Brogan's blog post *Health as Spiritual Warfare*. I begin by explaining the rationale for focusing on Brogan's work and analysing this blog post in particular. I then provide some exposition on Brogan's career as well as her anti-vaccination beliefs and activities and summarise the content of the blog post. Following this, I examine the values and subjectivity entailed by the text's construction of the conspiracy theory, and argue that these exhibit a form of neoliberal ideology. I then show that Brogan offers an apolitical and spiritual solution to the problem of the conspiracy, resulting in a clear tension within the narrative of the text. Nevertheless, I argue that this shift from the political to the spiritual is also in keeping with the text's peculiar form of neoliberal ideology.

In the second half of the chapter, I turn to analyse Jones' video, *EPIC RANT*. Once again, I begin by explaining the rationale for looking at Jones' conspiracy theorising and for focusing on this video in particular. After this, I sketch a brief outline of Jones' career, ranging from his early days working in television to his recent court case and bankruptcy, before summarising the content of the video. I then analyse Jones' performance of the role of the conspiracy theorist, arguing that he exploits the stigma around conspiracy theorising, drawing his viewers in with a transgressive and seemingly authentic display of his character. I then examine Jones' claim to victimhood and show how it sets up the *ressentiment* narrative he develops over the course of the video. Finally, I show that Jones presents shopping at his online store as the solution for defeating the conspiracy and overcoming victimhood, and in this way expresses a neoliberal ideology similar to Brogan's.

2. Kelly Brogan, Health as Spiritual Warfare

In this section, I provide background information on Kelly Brogan's career as a psychiatrist who has become increasingly involved with alternative medicine, the wellness industry, and the anti-vaccination movement. Following this, I examine Brogan's personal website where *Health as*

Spiritual was posted and show that Brogan's role is that of an alt. health influencer, using self-branding strategies in order to maintain her online following.[45]

Health as Spiritual Warfare was published both to Brogan's own website and to *GreenMedInfo* on 13th January 2021.[46] The post jumps through an eclectic set of topics, from anti-vaccination claims and criticisms of public health measures to a supposed conspiracy by pharmaceutical companies, and even a personal story about treating flea-infested pets. In the course of the blog post, Brogan outlines a conspiracy theory about the use of vaccination to combat the virus: the medical establishment, working with the government and philanthropists like Bill Gates, is undermining people's natural independence and freedom; the pandemic represents a false-flag event (a staged incident used as a pretext for implementing an authoritarian policy) used to justify the use of vaccinations that are intended to harm people's health; the conspirators' ultimate goal is the enslavement of humanity.

It is important to note how flexible Brogan is in articulating this conspiracy theory across her website and social media accounts. As Eliza Mary Wells (2020) observes, Brogan has espoused an inconsistent set of beliefs about the virus: COVID-19 does not exist; COVID-19 does exist and was created by Bill Gates; only unhealthy people are affected by COVID-19. In one blog post, Brogan and co-author Sayer Ji (2020) suggests a conspiratorial link behind the installation of 5G networks and the development of COVID-19 vaccines. She goes on to claim that the conventional narrative around vaccination is merely "a smokescreen for deeper agendas that we have been strategically manipulated to accept" (Brogan & Ji, 2020, Tactical capture section).

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[45] For further detail on the role of influencers and their cultivation of 'micro-celebrity' status, see Baker (2022) and Khamis, et al. (2017).

[46] For this chapter, I have accessed the blog post through *GreenMedInfo,* as one has to register with Brogan's website to access her blog.

2.1. Rationale for text selection

I have chosen to focus on Brogan's work due to her role as a prominent proponent of COVID-19 anti-vax conspiracy theory material online. Brogan has been identified by the Center for Countering Digital Hate as one of the 'Disinformation Dozen', a collection of "twelve anti-vaxxers who play leading roles in spreading digital misinformation about Covid vaccines" (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021, p. 5). In a study of over 812,000 posts on Facebook and Twitter, the CCDH found that 65% of anti-vaccination content was attributable to these twelve individuals (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021, p. 6). The CCDH argue that platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have failed to prevent the spread anti-vaccine content by removing the accounts of the Disinformation Dozen. Brogan's account on Facebook has been removed, but she retains a strong following on other social media platforms (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021, p. 31). As of the time of writing Brogan's Instagram account remained active with 130,000 followers (Brogan, n.d.-a); 19,100 followers on Twitter (Brogan, n.d.-b), and 14,759 subscribers on Telegram (Brogan, n.d.-c). Despite her prominence on social media, and her importance in the dissemination of anti-vaccination content, Brogan's rhetoric and her role in spreading misinformation about COVID-19 have not yet been the subject of academic research.

Rather than focusing on Brogan's output on Instagram, Twitter, or Telegram, I have chosen to analyse the blog post, *Health as Spiritual Warfare,* due to the greater level of detail it provides about her worldview. Whereas memes shared over social media may have a broader reach, being reposted and shared by users who are unaware of their origins, their conciseness discourages detailed explanations of ideology. I have chosen to look at *Health as Spiritual Warfare* specifically as it is in this blog post that Brogan goes into the most detail in articulating her conspiracy theory and setting out her worldview. In this blog post, she goes into detail in espousing her political and spiritual beliefs, developing characterisations for both the conspirators and their victims, and outlining the steps that need to be taken to defeat the conspiracy. In this way, it provides a better opportunity for a detailed analysis of Brogan's conspiracist beliefs than any meme, tweet, or similarly brief social media post.

2.2. Kelly Brogan: holistic psychiatrist and alt. health influencer

On her website, Brogan describes herself as a "holistic psychiatrist" with a background in neuroscience and specialising in "a root-cause resolution approach to psychiatric syndromes and symptoms" (Brogan, n.d.-d, About section). She lists qualifications and training from two prestigious American universities, receiving an MA and BS from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and studying to become a Doctor of Medicine at Cornell University Medical College. Brogan also lists many academic publications on her website, some of which appear in conventional medical and psychiatry journals though several others feature in journals of alternative medicine (Brogan, n.d.-d, Publications section). These publications cover a variety of topics, from using lifestyle interventions to treat a range of mental illnesses, nutrition during pregnancy, and neuroinflammation.

Brogan's career is characterised by her having operated on both sides of the boundary between conventional medicine and science on the one hand, and alternative medicine and spirituality on the other. Her impressive qualifications and training enable her at times to adopt the position of a critic speaking from *within* the field of psychiatry. Matthew Remski (2020) situates Brogan within a broader trend of disillusionment in psychiatry, especially towards the discipline's relationship with the pharmaceutical industry. He describes Brogan as having appealed directly to women with an argument that psychiatry "was rooted in a medical model steeped in patriarchal and controlling attitudes that lead to women being prescribed antidepressants at double the rate of men" (Remski, 2020, para. 14).[47]

By describing herself as a 'holistic psychiatrist', Brogan also positions herself outside of conventional medicine and within what Robert Crawford (1980) describes as the holistic health movement. This refers to a broad set of unorthodox health treatments, such as meditation, nutritional therapies, dance

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[47] This indicates an important aspect of Brogan's rhetoric. Brogan does not always start with her conspiracy theory, which readers may reject out of hand due to the stigmatised status of conspiracy theory generally. Instead, she mixes conspiracy theorising with more socially acceptable critiques that identify real problems.

therapy, and massage (Crawford, 1980, p. 366). Holistic health tries to take a more comprehensive view of illness, placing greater focus on the patient as a whole individual rather than limiting themselves to treating a physical illness. Crawford also notes that holistic health often includes a spiritual or religious component, promising a greater sense of meaning for the individual:

> Similarly, enthusiasm for holistic health can in large part be understood as a response to the alienation experienced in the medical encounter, to the structural inability of medicine to provide satisfactory explanations for the questions "Why me?" and "Why now?" Holism rejects the medical destruction of socially grounded interpretation and offers instead an overtly experiential understanding of disease.

> (Crawford, 1980, p. 374)

What meaning, then, does Brogan ascribe to illness? According to her website, symptoms can be read as messages about unaddressed problems in our lives:

> I have come to believe that those labeled as **mentally ill** are, in fact, the **canaries in the coal mine**, sounding the alarm with exquisite sensitivity in service to the rest of us. Symptoms including fatigue, insomnia, ceaseless unrest and worry, disconnection, and deep sadness, carry the message of unrecognized physical, emotional and even spiritual factors. **They are telling us all that something is missing**, very "off", and we need to wake, pay attention, and respond with inspired action.

> (Brogan, n.d.-e, para. 2, emphasis in original)

There is some intuitive truth about this statement. It touches on the commonplace view that symptoms are signs of underlying problems, and that symptoms of mental illness in particular arise from problems in our lives that need solving. For example, we might attribute a person's anxiety and depression to being overworked in their job. Brogan's view also has an initial resemblance to some radical critiques of conventional models of thinking about mental health, with its suggestion that the cause of mental illness may be located outside the individual. For instance, a psychologist writing recently in *The Guardian* argued that we have been lied to about the nature of mental illness:

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In efforts to destigmatise mental distress, "mental illness" is framed as an "illness like any other" – rooted in supposedly flawed brain chemistry. In reality, recent research concluded that depression is not caused by a chemical imbalance of the brain. Ironically, suggesting we have a broken brain for life increases stigma and disempowerment. What's most devastating about this myth is that the problem and the solution are positioned in the person, distracting us from the environments that *cause* our distress.

(Ahsan, 2022, para. 5, emphasis in original)

I quote this comment piece simply in order to show that not every point Brogan makes is that outlandish or strange. Just as her career blurs the line between conventional psychiatry and alternative medicine, so too does she cross the line between more a socially acceptable critique and conspiracy theory. However, in Brogan's case this critique of conventional views of mental health is combined with a highly unorthodox set of beliefs about the body and mind. Symptoms are taken as surface manifestations of hidden spiritual factors rather than of illness. This is reminiscent of what Barkun describes as bridging mechanisms, and which we have already seen to some extent with the case of the Keep Talking Group's interaction with Peter Gregson in Chapter 2; these are "organizational devices that link the domain of stigmatized knowledge to accepted forms of political expression" (Barkun, 2013, p. 241). However, in the case of Brogan, bridging occurs as a rhetorical or discursive strategy, rather than being organisational, with the linking of conspiracy theory to less stigmatised forms of discourse.

On the 'Our Mission' section of her website, we find a self-affirming message about the individual's ability to be healthy, as we are told that Brogan's aim is to "empower individuals with tools for radical self-healing" (Brogan, n.d.-f, Own your body section). We are also told that "only you can get you well" (Brogan, n.d.-f, What We Believe section). It should be noted that this message of self-healing is intended to be taken literally, as Brogan states that she has given up all pharmaceutical products and believes in the body's ability to heal itself of any illness (Brogan, 2021, para. 10). As extreme as this may be, it is not an unprecedented belief, and is already a recurring idea in alternative medicine. For example, a similar view is found in the practice of Reiki, a practice of alternative

medicine that purports to encourage mental and physical healing by guiding the patient's 'life force energy' (The International Center for Reiki Training, n.d.). Similarly, in an article on self-healing and its potential relevance in nursing, Wendy Waldspurger Robb writes that self-healing is "rooted in the phenomenon of energy" but has been overlooked as it resists experimental testing. (Waldspurger Robb, 2006, p. 66).

Such a focus on the self can be seen as an extreme case of what Crawford refers to as healthism, the view that good health is to be achieved by making changes to an individual's lifestyle, including their behaviour, attitude, and emotions (Crawford, 1980, p. 368). While both holistic health and healthism may try to treat the individual as a whole person rather than just a collection of symptoms, each understates the impact of external factors such as wealth, culture, and discrimination on a person's health. Brogan pushes this view to the extreme, with a message that one must *want* to heal in order to recover from mental illness. Failure to overcome an illness is one's own responsibility and represents the patient's own unwillingness. For example, Remski recounts one case in which a patient came to Brogan for help with tapering off her psychiatric medication, only to then experience severe withdrawal symptoms. Brogan was far from helpful or sympathetic, and terminated the client's care:

> Jillian [not the client's real name] recalls Brogan saying that because she was such a powerful "manifestor" her beliefs were causing her symptoms to appear to worsen. She also recalls Brogan speculating that Jillian was not old or mature enough to do the necessary work. In an interview, Jillian described the call [with Brogan] as "the most terrifying and hopeless experience to have at that stage."

(Remski, 2020, para. 43)

This is the flipside of the affirming message of healthism: if the individual is innately in control of their health, ill-health can be interpreted as a personal failing. This moralisation of health has been part of a broader shift in American society towards neoliberal values (Crawford, 2006). As David Harvey (2005) explains, neoliberalism is a political economic theory that seeks secure the freedom of the individual through expanding free markets and trade, supporting private property rights; its

implementation in countries around the world came about, he argues, due to a crisis in the accumulation of capital accumulation in the 1970s, and the collapse of Keynesian economic policies. The imposition of neoliberal doctrine has had impacts well beyond the macroeconomic and has contributed to an increasing emphasis on the individual as an entrepreneur and hence an economic actor. As Harvey explains, "each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. This principle extends into the realms of welfare, education, health care, and even pensions" (2005, p. 65). Individual responsibility replaces collective responsibility, such that "Health talk became responsibility talk" (Crawford, 2006, p. 410). Anna Kata (2012), using the term the 'postmodern medical paradigm', describes a similar set of developments whereby patients have become more actively involved in making decisions about their own care. This paradigm places "an emphasis on values as well as evidence; preoccupation with risks over benefits; and the rise of the informed patient" (Kata, 2012, p. 3779). For Kata, the postmodern paradigm is associated with the growth of the internet, with patients often turning to the internet for information on illnesses and to connect with supportive communities. While it empowers the individual patient, it has also seen decreased trust in traditional medical authorities, such that "the infinite personalized truths presented online are each portrayed as legitimate" (Kata, 2012, p. 3779).

Kata's observation is also reminiscent of aspects of the controversy surrounding Measles Mumps Rubella (MMR) vaccination during the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1998 a paper by the now-discredited gastroenterologist Andrew Wakefield suggested that the MMR vaccine may cause autism, following a study of twelve children, with part of the measles virus being found in participants' guts (Ahearn 2010, Smeeth, et al. 2004). Publicising his work through press conferences, Wakefield suggested that a causal link existed between the vaccine and autism, despite acknowledging in his initial paper that such a link had not been proven (Ahearn, 2010, pp. 46-47). The claim that there is a link between the vaccine and autism has since been disproven (Smeeth, et al. 2004, Hviid, et al. 2019), Wakefield has been struck off the medical register (BMJ 2010), and his research paper on the topic has been retracted from the *Lancet* journal (Dyer 2010). In their study of the impact of Wakefield's paper on reporting of vaccine injury claims in the United States, Matthew Motta and

Dominik Stecula find that the paper "led to an immediate increase of about 70 MMR injury claims cases per month" (Motta and Stecula 2021).

During the controversy that followed the publication of Wakefield's paper, parents took a prominent role in pushing for greater scrutiny of vaccine use and for the use of alternative therapies. The movement that developed in support of Wakefield placed particular value on parents' intuition as opposed to the knowledge and expertise of doctors and scientists. Michael Fitzpatrick (2004), a general practitioner, observes that parents who believe their child's autism to have been caused by the MMR vaccine make a claim to expertise on the basis of knowing their child better than others. As he argues, this knowledge of one's child is distinct from medical knowledge, pointing out that "it does not give you any particular insights into the science of autism" (Fitzpatrick 2004, 95).

Neither Wakefield's claims nor parents' concerns were innately conspiracist at the outset of the controversy. With vaccine scepticism and hesitancy, there is no necessity to believe in a vast coverup or a hidden plot to harm children – a parent might simply believe that more research is needed to better understand the risks associated with a vaccine. Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that Wakefield's argument at the start of the controversy was not directed against vaccines generally – as Clare Dyer explains, Wakefield "suggested during a press conference at the Royal Free Hospital in north London, where he worked at the time, *that single vaccines for measles, mumps, and rubella might be preferable to a triple vaccine*" (Dyer 2010, 281, emphasis added). That is, the figure now associated closely with the anti-vaccination movement began by advocating for a *greater number* of vaccinations, not *fewer*.

However, over time and with the discrediting of his research, Wakefield's view has become increasingly conspiracist. For example, in 2016 he directed a film, called *Vaxxed*, which claimed a coverup around the true dangers of the vaccination and restates his claim that the MMR vaccine causes autism (Cha 2016). Wakefield has become a part of broader conspiracist networks, even speaking at a cruise for conspiracy theory believers – aptly titled 'Conspira-Sea' (Glaser 2016). During the Covid-19 pandemic, Wakefield was a vocal opponent of vaccination against the virus, speaking at online events for the anti-vaccination movement such as the 'Health Freedom Summit'

(Buncombe 2020, Jamison 2020). In this way, while his initial claims did not refer to an alleged conspiracy, in the years since his marginalisation Wakefield has shifted ever closer towards conspiracism.

2.3. Brogan's online presence: self-branding and micro-celebrity

Another key factor in Brogan's success has been her use of social media and her personal website to promote her beliefs, products, and services, as well as to cultivate an online following. Brogan's ethos is central to much of her work online. In contrast to a platform like *GreenMedInfo,* which promotes a similar message to Brogan's, her website is highly personal, titled *Kelly Brogan MD,* and featuring her image heavily on almost every page. On her website, Brogan uploads videos of herself talking directly to camera on health issues, along with video recordings of her appearances on podcasts such as *The Joe Rogan Experience* (Brogan, n.d.-g*).* A photograph of Brogan's flawless image also features as the cover for her second self-help book, *Own Your Self* (Brogan & Marriott, 2019). Remski also notes the importance of this persona, with the former client Jillian bowled over by their initial meeting:

> She recalled waiting to meet "some kind of magical celebrity" in the gently lit, medical-spa vibe of Brogan's office. "She's extremely charismatic. She's extremely beautiful," Jillian said. "How could she be real? She's too perfect." The appointment felt comforting and validating, Jillian said, and more like a conversation with a friend than a doctor.
>
> (Remski, 2020, para. 29)

This development of a public image and ethos is part of the practice of self-branding associated with the role of the social media influencer. As Khamis et al. explain, social media influencers engage in a practice of micro-celebrity, which they describe as "the concerted and strategic cultivation of an audience through social media with a view to attaining celebrity status" (Khamis, et al., 2017, p. 196). Micro-celebrity constitutes an effort at shaping one's ethos, requiring the individual to engage in self-branding and craft a public image while curating a view of their private life. The aim here is to boost

the perceived authenticity of the individual, and to establish a more intimate relationship with their audience (Khamis, et al., 2017). Finlayson (2022) describes a similar development with the use of the online video platform YouTube, as he describes the importance of ethos in online political videos, where the character projected by the speaker is put front and centre, and viewers are encouraged to identify with the individual.

As with other micro-celebrities, there is a clear commercial aspect to Brogan's work too. Through her website, she sells her own books on mental health, as well as access to two online self-help services. The first of these, Vital Mind Reset (VMR), is a 44-day programme for self-care and self-healing through nutrition and lifestyle changes (see Brogan, n.d.-h). Among other things, clients on this programme receive a step-by-step guide for self-healing, handouts and worksheets, video lessons and meditations, a meal plan calendar, as well as Q&A videos and workshops. The programme emphasises that it helps clients achieve health and wellbeing without the use of drugs. The cost of this programme is either a single payment of $997, or three-monthly payments of $347. On the webpage where prospective clients can pay for access to the VMR, a short message below the price describes the fee as an "non-refundable investment" (see Fig. 6).

There is a clear elitist element to this: health is only available to those who can pay. As Susannah Crockford (2021) has argued, such elitism in the wellness industry stems from its promotion of the notion that one can achieve perfection by buying the right products, so that only the wealthy are able (and deserve) to be truly healthy. Moreover, the framing of this purchase as an investment in one's health indicates the presence of a form of neoliberal ideology. The consumer is re-framed as an entrepreneur, investing in their own human capital by trying to ensure good health, an element that Foucault (2008) identifies in neoliberalism's particular vision of the *homo œconomicus* – the subject as an economic actor.

The same message can be found with Brogan's other online service, the Vital Life Project. This is an online community, where clients receive access to weekly group calls, Brogan's videos, guides, worksheets, and assessments. The VLP is described as a "**one-stop-shop** for you to step into self-ownership" as well as promising a "space for radical healing, for awakened consumerism, and for the

FIGURE 6. Pricing for Kelly Brogan's Vital Mind Reset Program (Brogan, n.d.-h).

mystery and beauty of a life lived from wonder, rather than fear" (Brogan, n.d.-i, Join Us in Vital Life Project section, emphasis in original). All of this can be achieved at a cost of $47 per month, or $470 per annum (Brogan, n.d.-i, Reclaim your vitality in like-minded community! section).

In summary, Brogan's role as an alt. health influencer takes place in the context of a broader trend of seeing health and wellbeing as primarily personal issues that the individual is ultimately in control of and therefore responsible for. From this perspective, poor health is seen as a personal failing, while health inequalities are written out of the picture. Being healthy is presented a sign of good character but is only made available to those who can afford to pay for access to costly online programmes. In this way, health is restricted to a severely limited group of clients.

2.4. Brogan's construction of the threat in Health as Spiritual Warfare

Thinking in terms of rhetoric, we could say that Brogan's conspiracy theory starts by outlining the 'exigence' of the rhetorical situation of the text. This term refers to "a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). Rhetorical strategies are then used to try to alter this situation, and bring about a certain change by persuading an audience to carry out an action. Lloyd Bitzer offers the example of air pollution, which he describes as a rhetorical exigence that "strongly invites the assistance of discourse producing public awareness, indignation, and action of the *right* kind" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 7, emphasis added). However, it is worth bearing in mind that not everyone will agree on what constitutes a problem, nor what the right action could be. As Alan Finlayson states, "part of any political or rhetorical situation is what those involved construe the situation to be" (Finlayson, 2018, p. 67). In some circumstances, those involved may disagree over the very existence of a problem. Hence, to complicate Bitzer's example somewhat, a person living downwind from a coal power station may feel that air pollution is indeed a problem that requires action, while the owners of the power station may dispute the existence of a problem in the first place. Similarly, the rhetorical situation Brogan addresses in *Health as Spiritual Warfare* features an exigence that many of us (rightly, I would argue) do not believe to be a problem: the use of vaccination to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. For Brogan, this, along with the other public health measures taken during the pandemic, constitute the obstacle to be overcome.

A speaker or author's description of the exigence (their articulation of the problem they are responding to), will reflect certain beliefs and assumptions about politics and society. In a conspiracy theory, for instance, we typically find something akin to the *topos* of danger mentioned in Chapter 2, in that the conspiracy is described as threatening someone or something that is valued, such that a certain policy or action is needed to counter the threat. This notion that something cherished is under threat is key, as it is part of the narrative framework of *ressentiment* that we have already encountered in other conspiracy theory texts, and adds a sense of urgency and anxiety to a conspiracy theory. For example, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, some early conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the conspiracy is described as though it were directed not only

against the president, but against democracy more broadly. Democracy is taken by these conspiracy theorists as requiring publicity, transparency, and the active participation of citizens as observers, whereas conspiracy necessarily requires secrecy and is thus deemed to be antithetical and threatening to democracy. For example, Jim Garrison saw the assassination as being part of a broader dismantling of American democracy and claimed that, "In a very real and terrifying sense, our Government *is* the CIA and the Pentagon, with Congress reduced to a debating society." (Garrison, 1967, p. 178) Mark Lane presents a similar view, stating that, "Unless thinking people can distinguish false governmental edicts from proper ones and unless they are prepared to act against the invalid ones, hopes for a democratic society cannot be realized." (Lane, 1968, p. 150). From this perspective, citizens must wise up to the political decisions and activities that are happening in the shadows, or else face the erosion of democracy. Both the problem of the conspiracy and the action required to fix it are seen through a counter-democratic lens. The real locus of power, Lane and Garrison suggest, has shifted away from the public arena of the legislature; citizens are threatened with being permitted only a passive role in politics.

In *Health as Spiritual Warfare,* we find a different sort of exigence being articulated. As with the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories, Brogan is chiefly concerned with a supposed conspiracy that needs stopping. However, this conspiracy is not viewed through a counter-democratic lens. Instead, that which is constructed as having been victimised in Brogan's *ressentiment* narrative is the individual and humanity itself. Brogan begins the blog by raising anxieties about the reality of the pandemic:

> Have you had an experience recently, of trying to share information with someone who, even if they engaged with the video or article of your choice, seemed completely impervious to it? Like scientific facts and data did nothing to change their perspective?

> We are entering a post-science world.

And like when wars were fought and blood was shed over seeming differences in religious doctrine, ideology, and faith -- we are now in a spiritual war, and your body is the battlefield.

(Brogan, 2021, paras. 1-3, emphasis in original)

These questions work to build a degree of intimacy between Brogan and her audience and establish the relatability of what she has to say. These rhetorical questions are not meant to be answered (to clarify, there is no below-the-line comment section on Brogan's blog), but instead appeal to the *assumed* personal experiences of the reader. Brogan is here giving a performance of familiarity with her audience, indicating to the reader that she is familiar with their experiences during the pandemic. While these rhetorical questions will not resonate with every visitor to the blog, we can assume that in asking them Brogan intends for them to chime with at least some of her readers.

Brogan interprets these assumed experiences of the audience as revealing a hidden reality, comprising a conflict in which the reader themselves is caught up. The threat is highly personal, with both the reader's physical body and spirit under threat. The use of conflictual language here adds to the tension and sense of urgency, suggesting to the audience that we are at a critical moment in which the conspirators may succeed if we do not act immediately. As we shall see in the second half of this chapter, such rhetoric is a recurring feature of conspiracist anti-vax discourse today – one need only look as far as the title of Alex Jones' conspiracist media outlet, *InfoWars*. Nor is such rhetoric a wholly new development, as we see from Richard Hofstadter observation that the devotee of the paranoid style "traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds," and is "always manning the barricades of civilization" (Hofstadter, 1966, pp. 29-30).

2.5. *The construction of a parasitic enemy*

As with any conflict, Brogan's spiritual war involves a struggle between opposing sides. We have seen that Brogan identifies the body and the individual as being attacked; now, we shall see a further development in her *ressentiment* narrative, as she constructs the enemy that she sees as having caused

this suffering. Conspiracy theories can often revolve around a conflict described in populist terms –

for instance, Alex Jones' conspiracy theory worldview pits "George Soros" and "big billionaires"

against "we the people" (InfoWars, 2022b, 43:45). Unlike these more overtly populist conspiracy

theories, what we find in *Health as Spiritual Warfare* is a conflict between a more nebulous set of

belligerents:

> And what is the nature of this war? Who is fighting who?
>
> It may be a distraction to imagine that this is a war between free civilians and government,
> natural medicine and allopathy, liberals and conservatives…what I've come to conclude is
> that this is a **war between the energy of sovereign human vitalism and dehumanizing**
> **parasitism**. Yes, it's the power of the **embodied human** against those forces that feed off of
> human emotion -- chiefly fear -- to enslave and control humanity as a perpetual source of vital
> force energy.
>
> <div align="right">(Brogan, 2021, paras. 5-6, emphasis in original)</div>

Two opposing sides are mentioned here, but what does Brogan's construction of these opponents

convey about the politics of the piece? Let's begin by looking at the conspirators, who are variously

referred to as: "Medical tyranny" (Brogan, 2021, para. 4), a "parasite" (para. 4) or "parasites" (para.

22), "dehumanizing parasitism" (para. 6), "vampires" (para. 7), and "Parasitic energy" (para. 9). From

this, it should be clear that the precise identity of these conspirators is obscure. It is unclear if Brogan

is describing an impersonal ideology or substance (as 'parasitism' and 'Parasitic energy' would

suggest) or a group of physical being (as 'parasites' and 'vampires' could imply). What is certain is

that this enemy is non-human, either because it is a fantastical monster (like a vampire) or because it

is unindividuated, a disembodied *ism*.

This parasitic enemy is also depicted as somehow ubiquitous, and the conspiracy itself is presented as

reaching into almost every aspect of everyday life. Once again, Brogan draws on the assumed

experiences of her audience when listing the myriad ways in which the conspiracy may manifest

itself:

It could be as seemingly benign as agreeing to attend a family holiday gathering that has required days of recovery in years past, those critical comments on Instagram that make you pause the next time you want to express yourself, or that "friend" who somehow never asks how you're doing and always has a laundry list of life grievances to process. Or it could be as toxic as your drug abusing son who is resistant to help but needs money every six months just to "get back on his feet," or that pill bottle you reluctantly open every day -- with your name on it -- that whispers *something is seriously wrong with you*.

(Brogan, 2021, para. 9, emphasis in original)

A range of potential experiences are used here as proof of this parasitic energy's existence. These relatively common experiences that the reader may have had are reframed as proof of the extent of the conspiracy. Judi Atkins and Alan Finlayson (2013) find that anecdotes are being increasingly cited by politicians and used as a form of proof to justify their arguments. For instance, in a conference speech a politician might recount an encounter with a constituent to justify a policy, rather than citing expert knowledge on the policy area. For Atkins and Finlayson (2013), the incorporation of such anecdotes elevates the experiences and knowledge of the lay person and is expressive of a populist ideology that is wary of experts. Brogan's inclusion of the assumed personal experience of her audience expresses something similar, namely a distrust of traditional epistemic authorities and the validation of the reader's life as meaningful. As Brogan tells her audience towards the end of the blog post, "I choose to live in a world where everything has meaning and all challenges represent a spiritual opportunity to further **own my self**" (Brogan, 2021, Eleven travel tips section, emphasis in original).

This indicates a strong difference from other varieties of conspiracy theory that make use of 'errant data' – pieces of information that are absent from or contradict the official account of an event (Keeley, 1999). Consider, for example, Mark Lane (1968; 1966), whose conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy we examined in the previous chapter. In the course of arguing against the official account of the assassination Lane draws upon a variety of different types of resources, including: eyewitness testimony; the report of the official investigation into the assassination; an autopsy report detailing Kennedy's wounds; and information about the capabilities

of the assassin's rifle (see Lane, 1966). While personal experience – in the form of interviews with eyewitnesses – have a place in Lane's conspiracy theory, this is certainly not the only type of source he uses.

Another important quality attributed to the conspirators are their parasitic nature. As we see from the passage quoted above, the parasites extract 'vital force energy' from their human victims. As Brogan goes on to describe, "a whole spiritual prison harvests the energy of fear, anger, angst, and helplessness […] in order to enslave us" (Brogan, 2021, para. 9). There are a couple of different – though not mutually exclusive – interpretations we could make of this; I will begin with the least troubling.

There is a striking resemblance here to the plot of the science fiction film, *The Matrix* (1999). The film is centred on the protagonist Neo's journey as he discovers that his world is an illusion, that he has been living in a computing-generated reality, and that machines have enslaved humanity. Neo learns that in this dystopian reality the machines have fought and won a war with humanity, and now harvest their 'bioelectricity' to power themselves. The film shows human beings kept sedated in pods and fed with intravenous fluid until their bioelectricity has been expended, at which point their bodies are turned into liquid and fed into new-born humans. This may seem like an unusual influence upon the text, but the film has become an important touchstone in the online culture of conspiracism and the far-right. For example, another motif from *The Matrix* is that of the red pill, which awakens the Neo to his dystopian reality. The concept of the red pill has become especially prominent among conspiracists and the far-right, often used to describe the moment at which someone achieves their ideological awakening and realises the extent of the conspiracy against them. As Owen Gleiberman (2021) suggests, the red pill's popularity with a conspiracist right can be attributed to their distrust of both the mainstream media and the government. The red pill served as a useful rhetorical device through which conspiracy theorists could question reality. In this way, we could even read Brogan's blog as a red pill of sorts – an attempt to awaken the reader to the illusory nature of their own reality, and to the real dystopia that lies behind the deception.

There is also a far more worrying interpretation we could make. The repeated references to parasitism throughout the text, along with the characterisation of the conspirators as nonhuman, malevolent, and unindividuated, are all evocative of anti-Semitic tropes. Caution is needed here, and I want to stress that Brogan does not express any explicitly anti-Semitic views in the text. Nevertheless, it is worth examining the anti-Semitic connotations of the text in greater detail. We could start by considering Brogan's suggestion that certain visible divisions in society – "between free civilians and government, natural medicine and allopathy, liberals and conservatives" – are in fact a distraction from a more fundamental division (Brogan, 2021, para. 6). This is evocative of a recurring trope in anti-Semitic thought, whereby apparent social divisions are deemed to be illusions hiding a more fundamental division between gentiles and Jews. For example, in the infamous anti-Semitic pamphlet *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (n.d.), political differences are described as being artificial and deceptive, constructed by the Jews to hasten the non-Jews' downfall. Similarly, in *The International Jew* (2011; 1931)*, Henry Ford dismisses class divisions as being illusory, and instead argues that the real division affecting modern society is that between economically productive gentiles and parasitic Jews. This suggests a further anti-Semitic trope – the notion that Jews are unproductive and parasitical, undermining what would be an otherwise healthy economy.[48] As we saw in Chapter 1, in Ford's (2011; 1931) view, the gentiles represented a natural tendency for humans to manufacture goods and create new technologies, while he believed that the Jews contribute nothing and merely

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[48] I must clarify that further aspects of *Health as Spiritual Warfare* are evocative of anti-Semitism, though I cannot deal in detail with each of them here. For example, in a later part of the blog post Brogan describes her experience of delivering babies as a medical student. She describes "premature cord cutting" as "an unconscious sacrifice of [the parents'] baby to […] the medical cult" (Brogan, 2021, para. 16). She goes on to describe the process of circumcision, stating that "babies [were] strapped down to a Christ-like board," and suggests that the procedure is part of a cycle of "ritualized occultist practices hiding in the secularized domain of medicine" (Brogan, 2021, para. 17). All of this is reminiscent of anti-Semitic tropes, especially the blood-libel, whereby Jews were accused of sacrificing Christian boys and re-enacting the crucifixion of Jesus (Bronner, 2019, pp. 36-37).

pursue money for money's sake. While Ford centred the division around the two groups' relation to the economy, in Brogan's piece, what we find instead is a division centred on the more obscure category of energy. Nevertheless, the implication in both cases is that one group is naturally productive while the other is innately parasitic.

To summarise, what we find in *Health as Spiritual Warfare* is the recurrence of the narrative framework of *ressentiment,* and an attempt to provoke anxiety in two main ways. Firstly, the text seeks to bring reality into question by posing the problem of a vast conspiracy hidden in American society. Secondly, the text constructs a monstrous conspiratorial enemy, one that is the very opposite of the idealised neoliberal subject: unindividuated, unproductive, and parasitic. In the next sub-section, we will proceed to examine Brogan's construction of the conspiracy's target, the embodied human.

2.6. The embodied human, and Brogan's spiritual resolution for a political problem

Brogan frames the problem as a largely political one – in the sense that it operates primarily through the state and public health policy – but the solution she outlines is directed inwards and focuses on transforming the self. Brogan gives a series of eleven self-help tips for anyone seeking to overcome the parasitism and escape from the conspiracy (see Brogan, 2021, Eleven travel tips section). These include suggestions such as avoiding interactions with the medical system, using one's mobile phone less, recovering aspects of ourselves hidden by trauma, and viewing everything that happens in our lives as meaningful. Furthermore, Brogan explicitly warns her audience against partaking in political activism and charity work and echoes the right-wing psychologist Jordan Peterson, writing: "Focus first on cleaning up your own house, then save the world" (Brogan, 2021, para. 25).[49] How are we to understand this shift from a distinctly political threat to such a seemingly anti-political solution?

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[49] The sixth of Peterson's *12 Rules for Life* (2018) is titled 'Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world'.

The notion of conspirituality can help us here. Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) identify a seemingly recent trend of conspiracy theory groups interacting and overlapping with New Age spiritualists. While Ward and Voas suggest this is a novel development, Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal (2015) argue that it is far from new, and show that the same syntehsis of conspiracism and spiritualism was occurring in the nineteenth century, through movements such as Theosophy. Conspirituality, they argue, can be explained by the structural similarities between its constituent parts. Both conspiracy theory and New Age spiritualism promise access to stigmatised and hidden knowledge. For conspiracy theory this is hidden knowledge about politics and society, while for spiritualism deals in hidden knowledge of the self and spirit. In this way, proponents of each claim to be 'in the know', able to enlighten their followers. We can therefore see how Brogan's shift from the political to the spiritual could be appealing to her audience. The common thread is that she promises to reveal hidden knowledge to the audience, letting them in on secrets that have been kept from them by the conspiracy of the medical system and the state. In this way, conspiracy theory and spiritualism are seen as two sides of the same coin, with both promising to make the audience part of the select few who are 'in the know'.

A further aspect of the tension comes to light when we consider the figure of the embodied human, the bearer of "the energy of sovereign human vitalism" and target of the conspiracy (Brogan, 2021, para. 6). This figure acts in the text as a kind of idealised subject for us to live up to, rather than a concrete individual. Early on in the blog post we catch a glimpse of how Brogan characterises this subject:

> What is being ushered in under the cover of a "**pandemic**" is the fulfillment of what was initiated with Homeland security under the cover of "terrorist attacks"…protection from an unseen enemy justifying the stripping of liberties and ever-expanding surveillance and control of the people for our "safety." In order to actualize this digital police state, we must be convinced that our bodies -- including our childrens' [*sic*] -- are not our own responsibility and that they (especially the most vulnerable to adverse effects among them) should be offered up for the greater good. Medical tyranny imposes unconsented medical interventions

on the populace as a strategic form of bio-power and bio-governance. And these medical interventions -- be they **masks**, compulsory **vaccination**, social distancing, mandated chemotherapy, or court-ordered injected psychotropics -- represent more than simply the preferred and popularly accepted way of responding to illness. This entire system is preying on your devotion, compliance, complicity, and allegiance for it to exist. Remove that, and it withers and dessicates [*sic*] like the parasite it is.

(Brogan, 2021, para. 4, emphasis in original)

What stands out initially here is a kind of state-phobia expressed as a form of conspiracism – state intervention is viewed as a plot to undermine freedom. This is coupled with a commitment to individual responsibility, and the prioritisation of freedom over security. Moreover, the notion that public health measures taken to combat COVID-19 may work towards a 'greater good' is rejected – the individual's freedom takes priority over collective goals. So far, this is reminiscent of the notion of embodied neoliberalism – the internalisation of neoliberal values of individual responsibility (Luna, 2019; Cairns and Johnston, 2015). This is a recurring theme in studies of the social and political dimensions of health – for instance, Cairns and Johnston (2015) identify embodied neoliberalism in attitudes towards dieting, whereby being overweight is viewed as a personal failing while being a healthy weight is considered evidence of one's good character. Social factors, such as inequalities affecting access to healthier foods, are omitted such that ill-health or poor diet are viewed as the individual's responsibility alone. As we have already seen, Brogan herself expresses much the same perspective, viewing health as so personal and private that the individual is able to heal themselves without depending on any medication or help from health professionals.

Brogan's conceptualisation of the subject becomes clearer still later in the blog post, as she argues that the conspiracy operates only through the compliance of individuals. Liberation from the conspiracy, she suggests, is to be achieved through individual action rather than any collective effort:

The thing is that consent is the primary natural law operative in this domain of energetic combat, and, each time we give our energy over to the forces that would seek to harvest it, we

are (often unwittingly, but with full volition and culpability) agreeing to that enslavement and to the associated self-violation. The thing about vampires is that you have to open the window for them…they can't come in otherwise. The subtext of that deal with the devil is, *I can't do it…I trust you have what I need*. And it is an illusion that you can't do it. It's the one big lie that we are enculturated around as children and that persists into our adulthood because we are never initiated beyond our helpless dependency, to our own innate power, which is far greater than most can even imagine.

(Brogan, 2021, para. 7, emphasis in original)

At the end of the blog post, she provides a list of self-help tips, action points for the reader to carry out to achieve sovereignty in their own life, the second of which is particularly concerning:

2. Don't outsource protection

If you are an adult, there is no one who can protect you, but you. As children, our parents were charged with that responsibility, and in many cases offered our bodies to the medical system, our minds to the educational system, and captured our spirits in obedience-oriented power dynamics. If you think the medical system -- it's screenings, vaccines, and public health measures -- is here to protect you, you've been captured through your **traumas**, in a web of illusion. What seems like protection is the generation of a dependent dynamic that serves the system itself.

(Brogan, 2021, Eleven travel tips section, emphasis in original)

The message here is that only total independence can bring the individual subject security. Responsibility is personal and individual – it is as though the neoliberal subject has been pushed to its extreme, such that any interference by outsiders in an individual's life is seen as another step on the road to serfdom. Brogan encourages her readers not just to cut themselves off from the medical system but also to engage in "**cutting cords** with those who drain us -- systems and people" (Brogan, 2021, Eleven travel tips section, emphasis in original). We are encouraged to find a community to be a part of, but only with like-minded people, and Brogan includes a link to her Vital Life Project to

encourage the reader to pay the fee and sign up. Community here becomes something that one should pay for, just as one would pay for any regular commodity or service. We are left with a thoroughly neoliberal view of the subject: an individual who is totally independent and powerful, who is not interfered with by the state, who takes sole responsibility for themselves and their family, and who only engages with others through the market.

At this point, it is worth reflecting on the tension that arises from this particular kind of subjectivity. Having initially outlined a grave and urgent threat to the individual and raised the stakes almost as high as they can go, we then find that the individual is in fact so innately powerful that it can become invulnerable to the conspiracy. As Brogan herself puts it:

> There's a nagging voice in all of us -- the skeptic -- that says, this won't work. I can't do it. I'm not powerful enough. And this voice is supported by generations of infused faith and belief in medications as a ritual endowed with the power to cure. But is it really the medications doing that job? Not according to placebo data that suggests it's, in fact, your belief in the medications. So how can you soothe that little voice that says, I can't, and begin to really expose that doubt, honor it, and then let it go. You have the power to heal. You always have.

> (Brogan, 2021, Eleven travel tips section)

Is the conspiracy a threat, or isn't it? If we are innately and immensely powerful, why should we be worried about Brogan's parasitic enemy? On the *Conspirituality* podcast, Matthew Remski describes Brogan's narrative as containing a 'rhythmic flip', which he summarises as follows: "I'm going to scare the shit out of you, and then I'm going to be loving and caring, and maternal towards you" (Beres, Remski, and Walker, 2020, 16:18). Thinking back to the narrative structure of the detective stories Boltanski describes, we can see this as playing a similar role to the solving of the mystery and capture of the criminals. Having initially brought reality into question and suggested that society's order is an illusion, Brogan then restores loosens the tension by promising us that we, as individuals are still in control. Here we have the forward-looking aspect of the *ressentiment* narrative, as Brogan

promises us that we will ultimately be victorious over the conspiracy. The world around me may be one enormous illusion, but ultimately, I retain the power to shape my own life.

Rather than simply reaffirming her audience's faith in the existing social order, Brogan instead reaffirms a particular kind of subjectivity – one that chimes with the neoliberal subjectivity described by Foucault (2008). This subject – the embodied human – is wholly independent and autonomous, their affairs are totally private. This subject is depoliticised, constantly looking inwards in search of ways of improving and transforming the self while remaining aloof from others around them. For the embodied human, health is an entirely private matter, an issue that the individual is solely responsible for. The subject Brogan constructs is also unable to conceive of having responsibilities towards others, such that the notion that one could inadvertently infect another person with COVID-19 becomes incomprehensible (Beres, Remski, and Walker, 2020)

In this way, while Brogan's solution to the conspiracy may indeed cause tensions within the narrative of the blog post, it makes more sense from the perspective of this form of neoliberal ideology. The embodied human reaffirms this ideology by stepping away from politics and returning again to the market. The solution is to invest more in one's human capital by purchasing access to the VMR, and the only just community is formed through economic exchange, by those who pay and sign up for the VLP.

3. Alex Jones, EPIC RANT: Alex Jones Rages at Moderna For Creating COVID-19 Gene Sequence

The next text to be analysed in this chapter is an online video by the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, posted to his website *InfoWars* (2022a). In this video, Jones claims that COVID-19 was designed and manufactured by the pharmaceutical company Moderna, responsible for designing and manufacturing one of the vaccines for COVID-19; he accuses Moderna of having designed the coronavirus years before the pandemic began.

The analysis of this video points once again to the articulation of a neoliberal ideology and a *ressentiment* narrative, with Jones framing the purchasing of his products and services as a way of protecting oneself against the conspiracy, and of contributing to his struggle to stop elitist conspirators from destroying the American people. Jones presents his online store as offering consumers more than just the products they are buying; he is also offering membership of a broader group, one centred on Jones' avowed mission to stop the globalist takeover of America. In this way, community is once again formed primarily through commerce, with membership being determined by whether one is willing and able to pay, though now with a more clearly populist angle. However, unlike Brogan, Jones' conspiracy theorising has a far more overtly political aspect to it. Jones articulates a right-wing populist form of politics through his performance of the role of the conspiracy theorist; anger and authenticity are both central to this performance, as is victimhood, with Jones presenting himself as a victim of the more powerful conspirators.

3.1. Rationale for text selection

Why is Jones an important figure to be focusing on? Firstly, Jones has achieved a unique level of success and prominence for a conspiracy theorist. It would be difficult to have written this thesis without focusing at some point on Jones, because, as Michael Butter puts it, he is "the most famous and commercially successful conspiracy theorist in the USA, and probably in the entire world" (Butter, 2020, p. 97). Jones' hypermasculine performances and many on-air outbursts have gained him a significant following over the years while also making him a subject of ridicule by others (for example, see Berger, 2019). Much of his fame comes from a penchant for making provocative, outlandish, and often bizarre claims, such as his notorious claim that America's water system was

being poisoned with chemicals that "turn the freaking frogs gay" (Scandinavian Clean Television, 2018, 0:22).[50]

Jones is also worth focusing on due to his prominence in right-wing populist politics in the United States, with his recurring talk of a globalist and elitist threat to the American people. In recent years, Jones gained notoriety for his support of Donald Trump, and his increased prominence could be seen as part of what Michael Barkun describes as the "mainstreaming of the fringe" (Barkun, 2017, p. 441). We should be cautious not to overstate Jones' influence here, but it is noteworthy that through his support for Donald Trump's successful presidential election campaign in 2016, Jones became a more visible figure in American politics. Jones was able to interview Trump for his online platform, *InfoWars*, and has also claimed that the then-president called him to thank him personally for his support after his election victory (Vitali, 2016; Finnegan, 2016).[51] Moreover, Trump even gave accreditation for White House press conferences to *InfoWars* journalists (Butter, 2020, p. 99), signalling a potential move away from the fringes for the news outlet. Here, Jones is somewhat different from Brogan, as he offers a far more overtly political approach to conspiracy theory, lacking the focus on spirituality that was present in *Health as Spiritual Warfare.*

Besides his political campaigning, Jones is noteworthy because of the extent to which he inhabits the role of the conspiracy theorist (Thalmann, 2019). Most of the figures featured in this project so far have been wary of the label conspiracy theorist, often pre-empting the term and distancing themselves from the role. In contrast, conspiracy theory and its negative connotations are key to the ethos Jones is constructing, as he has embraced the outsider status of the conspiracy theorist and seems aware and accepting of the nature of this role. One early example of this apparent self-awareness can be seen in the science-fiction film *A Scanner Darkly* (2006)*,* in which Jones has a bit-part; he plays a version of himself, a conspiracy theorist yelling at passers-by on the sidewalk, before being bundled into a van

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[50] See Boast (2022) for a compelling analysis of the genealogy of the 'gay frog'.

[51] Jones appears to have stopped supporting Trump in 2021 (Harvey, 2021).

and taken away by armed police officers clad in black. Years later, during a custody battle with his ex-wife, Jones' own attorney suggested that the on-screen persona his client had cultivated was not a true reflection of his personality but only an act (Wootson Jr., 2017). Regardless of whether or not the Jones we see on *InfoWars* is authentic, what is clear is that he has managed to exploit the marginalisation and stigmatisation that comes with being a conspiracy theorist. As we will see later on, his exclusion from the mainstream is incorporated into his conspiracy theorising, used as proof of a conspiracy and of Jones' victimisation. Exclusion also plays into his populist politics, with Jones routinely positioning himself as belonging to 'the people' and their struggle against globalist elites and adds to his performance of authenticity. Here too, Jones differs from Brogan, as he offers a hyper-masculine ethos and performance of the role of the conspiracy theorist, whereas Brogan directs her efforts specifically towards women, and has cultivated a character that plays on values associated with femininity, such as beauty, motherhood, and emotion. In this way, by bringing these two texts together we see how ethos, performativity, and emotion can be of central importance to a conspiracy theory, though the particular emotions and performances that are used will again vary in relation to contextual factors.

It is surprising that Jones and his conspiracist rhetoric has so far been under-researched. Only a small number of academic articles have been published on Jones, and none of these engage in a detailed analysis of any of his conspiracist material. In the field of communication studies, Aaron Hyzen and Hilde Van den Bulck (2021; Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2020) have written a couple of compelling articles analysing Jones' celebrity performance and his role as a counter-hegemonic ideological entrepreneur. The American studies scholar Michael Butter devotes a few pages to the case of Jones and *InfoWars* in his book on conspiracy theories (Butter, 2020, pp. 85-90). Butter provides a useful overview of some of the key moments from Jones' career, including his interactions with Trump, but little detail is given on the discourse, rhetoric, or political thinking he expresses. In religious studies, David G. Robertson (2015) has examined the material aspects of Jones' conspiracist millennialism, from the material things he uses as proof of a conspiracy, to the material products he sells through his own website. In the following analysis of Jones' COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theory, I seek

to build on these authors' work by overcoming the dearth of research on Jones' political discourse and rhetoric. In particular, I aim to add to our understanding of Jones' populist performance and his exploitation of his own stigma and marginalisation.

3.2. Contextual factors and overview of video's content

Before providing an in-depth analysis of the text, it is worth giving an overview of the context for the video, Jones' career, and a description of its content. Jones started out as a host on public access TV in the 1990s, before moving to radio (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021). He then developed an online presence through his website *InfoWars,* where he still broadcasts his live show as well as uploading video clips and written pieces. While syndicated radio shows conventionally make revenue through selling advertisement time to other businesses, Jones operates differently – advertising slots are taken up by Jones himself to promote products available through *InfoWars'* online store (Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2020). The *InfoWars* website is awash with adverts for the same products, primarily health supplements – for example, visitors to the website are often greeted with large pop-up advertisements for health supplements sold on the *InfoWars* store (see Fig. 7). As Seth Brown describes, "[a]n examination of his business seems to indicate that the vast majority of Infowars' revenue comes from sales of these dietary supplements" (Brown, 2017, para. 2). There is a distinctly masculine bent to the products available through his website:

> The Infowars Life brand consist of health-related and survivalist products, mainly geared towards men, including dietary supplements, brain pills and survival shields with names like Infowars Life Brain Force Plus (allegedly 'supercharging cognitive abilities'), Infowars Life Silver Bullet Colloidal Silver ('indispensable part of any preparedness supply') and Infowars Life Super Male Vitality ('to boost testosterone'), amongst others. Lab testing suggests that these are equally (un)effective but overpriced versions of similar products in the market.
>
> (Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2020, p. 52)

FIGURE 7. Pop-up advertisement encountered upon visiting the InfoWars homepage (InfoWars, n.d.).

As already mentioned, Jones was also embroiled in a custody battle with his wife in 2017, during which his lawyer argued that his client was merely performance artist, the suggestion being that Jones' persona on *InfoWars* is not representative of the man himself (Solomon, 2017). Such arguments threaten the image of authenticity Jones has developed, which mixes a public and private image to create a sense that there is no gap between the performance we see on *InfoWars* and his private self (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021). His conspiracist claims have repeatedly caused controversy, particularly his claim that the Sandy Hook school shooting was a false flag event – a staged event played out by 'crisis actors'. This claim led to his recent demise, having been successfully sued by the parents of one of the victims of the shooting; in court, Jones' lawyers argued that no reasonable person could have taken his client's claims as factually true statements (Solomon, 2018). After losing the case, Jones was ordered to pay $1.44 bn, resulting in the bankruptcy of both Jones and his company, Free Speech Systems LLC (Knauth, 2022; BBC, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, and prior to his bankruptcy, Jones courted controversy once again by claiming that the virus was in fact designed and manufactured in a lab, and that the pandemic was therefore orchestrated by a conspiracy. Jones has also claimed that vaccination against the coronavirus causes infertility in women and is part of a deliberate plot to depopulate the world (Johnson, 2020). He attributes this conspiracy – as well shall in this particular video – to a range of figures, mostly

associated with American liberalism, including George Soros, Bill Gates, Barack Obama, and Anthony Fauci.

In the particular video analysed in this section, published in February 2022, Jones angrily claims to possess evidence that Moderna designed and manufactured the coronavirus in 2016 (InfoWars, 2022a). As is typical of many of his videos, Jones gets visibly furious – but this time, he also appears to try to prevent this, trying to calm himself down due to health issues he has been warned about. For much of the video, he swings between shouting furiously and trying to be calm. At one point, he blames the Deep State for starting a war with Russia (the Russian invasion of Ukraine had begun days earlier), and for paying people to lie about him. The video ends with a lengthy advert for infowarsstore.com, with Jones urging viewers to spend money at the online store in order to support his work.

This video clip appears on the *InfoWars* website, under the title 'EPIC RANT: Alex Jones Rages at Moderna For Creating COVID-19 Gene Sequence'. The capitalisation in the title points to the centrality of Jones' performance in his approach to conspiracy theorising, seeking to attract viewers by foregrounding the promise of one of his characteristic displays of anger. This promise is also conveyed through the image that accompanies the video at the top of the webpage (see Fig. 8). This composite image combines an image of Jones taken from the video juxtaposed with an image of the *InfoWars* article that details his conspiracist claims about Moderna; flames have been superimposed along the bottom of the image, once more stressing the centrality of anger to Jones' performance in the accompanying video.

3.3. Jones' ethos and performance as a conspiracy theorist

In this first part of the in-depth analysis of the video, I will examine the ethos Jones appeals to and the way in which he performs the role of a conspiracy theorist. What I have in mind here goes beyond anything we have seen so far in the other texts analysed for this thesis; none of the previous conspiracy theorists we have looked at inhabit the role like Jones does. So far in this thesis, we have

FIGURE 8. Image accompanying the video of Alex Jones' rant against COVID-19 vaccination (InfoWars, 2022a).

seen a variety of strategies being used in response to the marginalisation and stigma associated with conspiracy theory: pre-emption, whereby a speaker tries to head off anticipated accusations that they are a conspiracy theorist (McKenzie-McHarg & Fredheim, 2017); avoidance of the term 'conspiracy theorist' entirely, and its replacement with less value-laden labels such as 'critical researcher'; the interpretation of conspiracy theory's critics as being part of a coverup; and the use of bridging mechanisms that seek to join conspiracy theory with less stigmatised types of political expression (Barkun, 2013, p. 260). However, what makes Jones different from the other conspiracy theorists we have studied is the centrality of his performance and character to his conspiracy theorising.

Other figures we have examined in this thesis have had a conspiracist message they are trying to get across to their audience in the face of stigmatisation and marginalisation. In the case of *InfoWars,* Jones *is* the message, his character being as important as the conspiracy theory he is articulating; stigmatisation and marginalisation are worked into the character, exploited rather than avoided. For example, after an introductory preview, the main segment of the video begins not with an outline or summary of the alleged conspiracy. Instead, Jones starts by bringing the focus onto his character:

Just this stack right here [taps stack of papers on desk] (.) is so horrible, and I refuse to rationalise what's going on and like not make it a big deal in my brain and go into Stockholm syndrome. If there's one thing Alex Jones doesn't have, it's the Stockholm gene, where, when I'm being abused I can make excuses for it, and and and I can decide I don't like it. And and you know just go along with it. I can decide I don't like being awake. I don't have the Stockholm gene, and instead when people are enslaving me and my family and enslaving you I get extrEMELY upset about it.

(InfoWars, 2022a, 1:00)

What Jones' supposed evidence consists of is not yet revealed. Instead, he appeals to his own ethos – his character – as someone who is awake to the true severity of the conspiracy. In this moment of self-presentation, Jones provides us with exposition about his character, characterising himself as someone who is unsusceptible to Stockholm syndrome, uncompromising in his commitment to the truth, and unable to go along with the lies and abuses he has been exposed to. This characterisation is joined by a claim to authenticity through the apparently unscripted expression of anger, as Jones loudly shouts part of the word 'extremely'. Such moments of spontaneity and displays of emotion serve to act out the authenticity and ordinariness (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022), differentiating Jones from the typical news presenter's performance of restraint and politeness. What we are getting, Jones suggests, is a genuine and intimate view into his personality, and what we find there is a person who is prone to anger when he and his family are threatened. All of this is telling us what Jones is like without divulging any details about the conspiracy he has supposedly uncovered.

Whether or not this characterisation corresponds to the truly private figure, the person who is not captured by media, is largely irrelevant to our analysis – what matters for us is the performance of authenticity itself (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022, p. 441). As with the case of John F. Kennedy, who used mass media to craft a particular image of himself, so too does Jones use this video to craft an image of his own character. That character, as we are told in the above quotation, is someone who cannot ignore the truth, no matter how uncomfortable. Only after telling the viewer about his own character does Jones start to explain what he claims to have discovered:

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[Jones picks up a stack of paper and shakes it furiously, while clenching his jaw] And just this stack alone right here is UNBELIEVABLE. Do you know what happened? [Holds up three fingers] They had three more universities with CRISPR gene editors scan the damn COVID-19. [Jabbing finger] And it is one hundred percent made in a lab, and it's one hundred percent made by Moderna, and its one hundred percent made in TWO THOUSAND AND SIXTEEN.

(InfoWars, 2022a, 1:38)

Even when setting out his core conspiracy claim, Jones continues to emphasise his own character. Here, he makes good on the earlier appeal to ethos, by starting to show us how his angry character manifests itself. There is something almost comical about Jones' physical performance of anger, which is combined with the occasionally shouted word, and regardless of his intentions such performances have certainly boosted his appeal – as Van den Bulck and Hyzen (2020) write, a portion of Jones' audience are not committed to his conspiracist claims or political, nor fellow travellers of his populist brand of politics. Instead, they simply watch for Jones' persona and his hyperbolic performances.

A further claim to authenticity occurs in our next extract from the video. Jones has just finished addressing accusations that he is somehow connected with the Russian state. Having worked himself up into a frenzy, Jones then stops his rant for a moment in order to address his viewers' expectations of him. This extract from the video begins with Jones panting, looking downwards, covering his face with one hand:

See what's happened is (.) people used to love these rants but they're not good for me when I do 'em. And I stopped doing the rants over the years, you noticed? But then I get pissed I gotta walk off the show, because I don't wanna start doing this but… [Pausing to pant]

(InfoWars, 2022a, 3:16)

We can see Jones's comment on his ranting as an example of what P. David Marshall (2010) terms a 'public private self', where aspects of a celebrity's private life are revealed and become part of their public image. This too serves to assert Jones' authenticity, as his display of self-awareness about what

viewers expect of him (a display of rage) seems to give us a glimpse at what the real Alex Jones thinks. Similarly, while the harm done to Jones by his ranting is never explained, merely offering of a look into his private life adds to the sense of intimacy and authenticity. The seemingly spontaneous nature of this break in the fourth wall also functions in the same way, giving the viewer the impression that in this unscripted moment we are seeing Jones' real, private self.

In this way, Jones' performance takes centre stage in the video, almost to the extent of obscuring the conspiracy theory he is articulating. To persuade his audience – or at the very least to keep them engaged – Jones does not point to the strength of any evidence he has on the plot, but instead encourages us to believe in *him*; to believe that this character is genuine, that his anger is real, and that we should invest (both emotionally and financially) in him as a conspiracy theorist. Bearing in mind the commercial aspect of Jones' work – his sale of films, prepping equipment, and health supplements – we can see Jones' performance to be part of an ongoing effort at self-branding, and his displays of anger as part of a promise of brand consistency (see Khamis, et al., 2017). That is, Jones is aware of what his viewers want, and will give it to them. Brogan was engaging in a similar practice of promoting a supposedly authentic character as part of an effort to spread her conspiracy theories and sell her services. Next, Jones unleashes another burst of anger, before trying to reign in his rage once again:

> I'M- I'M NOT GONNA STAND HERE AND WATCH GEORGE SOROS, and and BARACK OBAMA, BLOW THE DAMN PLANET UP, BECAUSE THEY GOT (.) SOME KIND OF SATANIC FETISH WITH IT. [Exhales] See I told you I was gonna focus and cover the news. I'm gonna behave myself (.) [Inhales deeply] I'm a take deep breaths, and we're gonna go through all of it in the next hour, and if I have to I'll push the great Owen Shroyer [*InfoWars* presenter] back, 30 minutes so I can cover all this because I got ready to cover all this, and I got prepared, probably a little too much. Anytime I prepare fifteen hours for a show- it's the weekend, but I don't ever stop working. I apologise I have to learn I gotta just prepare for a couple hours that's enough, instead of literally reading three times more than what you see on my desk here I read. AT LEAST three times- THOUSANDS of pages.

And THOUSANDS of videos and photo- hundreds of videos and just- [Holds hands up to face] Oh my god. [Looks down, shuts eyes, and covers face with hand].

<div align="right">(InfoWars, 2022, 3:30)</div>

Here, Jones once again engages in a moment of self-characterisation, presenting himself as overly fixated on his work, and deeply affected by the conspiracy he has uncovered. In this way, the performance fits with what is typically expected of a conspiracy theorist – that they are obsessive and emotional, rather than rational. The first line of this extract is what many have come to expect of Jones – raging anger that is preoccupied with the transgression of conventional sexual boundaries (as with his 'gay frog' comments). All of this suggests a performance that does not shy away from the connotations of conspiracy theorising – that it is paranoid, irrational, unbelievable – but rather takes these to be what the viewer wants to see from Jones. As Jones himself suggests, viewers tune in to see him rant and rave – the focus of the video is on him, as much as it is about the conspiracy theory he is outlining. What we have, therefore, is something akin to the character of newsreader Howard Beale in the film *Network,* and his famous appeal for viewers to "get up right now and go to the window, open it, stick your head out and yell, 'I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!'" (Network, 1976). Just as the viewers in *Network* watch Beale for his display of anger, quite unlike what would have been expected of newsreaders of the time, so too does Jones emphasise his own (supposedly) authentic rage, placing it front-and-centre throughout the video.

3.4. Jones' claim to victimhood

Victimhood is also a key part of Jones' discourse, and it is here that we see the presence of a *ressentiment* narrative most clearly. For example, in responding to suggestions that he might have connections with the Russian state, Jones uses graphic language to position himself and his family as direct victims of a plot to silence criticism of the deep state:

If Vladimir Putin had his fingerprints on a bioweapon I'd say go to war with the Russians. I've never been to Russia. I don't have a dog in that fight. But I don't ever catch the Russian

messing with me. [Seemingly on the verge of tears] All I get's the criminals raping me and my family, [jabbing finger] and raping you, telling me I'm a Russian! And you know why they call me a Russian? Because the Russians aren't bowing down to their crap either. THAT'S WHY they call us a Russian. They call ANYBODY that doesn't get down on their knees, and bow down to Hollywood, and let 'em screw our kids, and F us over, the RUSSIANS!

<div align="right">(InfoWars, 2022a, 2:34)</div>

By positioning himself as a victim of the conspiracy, Jones suggests a need for redress that begins with standing up to the deep state, here referred to only as a nameless 'they'. This victimhood is extended to the viewer at home, so that redress becomes not a matter only of personal transformation but of collective resistance. This is one example of how Jones incorporates criticism levelled against him into his conspiracy theory – critics are taken to be part of the conspiracy, committing a wrong not only against Jones himself but against 'us' as a whole too. Criticism is turned on its head, proof that one is independent-minded, autonomous, and unwilling to submit to the forces behind the conspiracy. Jones's self-presentation here fits the mould of the persecuted hero, as described by Stephanie Alice Baker (2022); not only is he unable to look away from the truth, but he is also unhealthily wedded to the pursuit of the truth, as represented by his supposedly lengthy preparation time. Jones thus constructs his character as being someone who is willing to sacrifice themselves in order to uncover and disseminate the truth.

As already hinted at, articulating a claim to victimhood here also facilitates the construction of a populist distinction between Us and Them. In outlining the wrongs that he has experienced – and that he suggests his audience has also experienced – Jones is able to build up a characterisation of his opponents while contrasting their behaviour and values to his own. On the one hand, we have the deep state that forces people to submit to Hollywood (typically treated by the American right as a bastion of liberalism), paedophilia, and a manufactured pandemic; on the other hand, we have Jones and his followers (as well as Russian in this instance), refusing to yield to such perversions and corruptions. While the latter are only concerned with controlling others and violating the boundaries of the nation,

the family, and the body, Jones stands for the reinforcing of those boundaries. This distinction is developed further later in the video, when Jones alleges that people have been paid to tell lies about him on television:

> And so because I tell the truth, the deep state goes around and pays Judas Iscariots off to lie about me in HBO, CNN, Netflix, you name it specials. And it doesn't hurt me when they're lying about me; it hurts me that people I never did ANYTHING to are LITERALLY WHOLE CLOTH LYING ABOUT ME (.) for twenty pieces of silver [tapping fingers on stack of papers on desk] when their own future is hanging in the balance- [emphasising each word] they don't even have life force.

<div align="right">(InfoWars, 2022a, 8:56)</div>

Once again, Jones presents himself as the persecuted hero in his *ressentiment* narrative – note the not-so-subtle references to Judas' betrayal of Jesus. The mass media are here positioned as belonging to the deep state's conspiracy, employing corrupt methods to tarnish Jones' reputation. Here too, Jones interprets the criticism directed against him as being a product of the broader conspiracy, with critics being described not simply as mistaken but as corrupt accessories to the plot. What is more, his critics are framed in emasculating language as lacking 'life force', the suggestion being that they do not have Jones' level of autonomy and agency. Jones and his followers are thus implied to be strong individuals, standing in opposition to the weak, submissive lackeys of the deep state.

We should also take note of the historically specific conditions for such a performance. Jones' performance relies to a significant extent on the stigmatisation and marginalisation of conspiracy theory. This is not to suggest that Alex Jones is a necessary by-product of the stigma associated with conspiracy theory since the mid-twentieth century. Rather, my point here is simply that it is the association of conspiracy theory with paranoia and irrationality facilitates his characterisation of himself as a persecuted hero, while also informing viewers of what to expect. On this point, we can think back to Ian Hacking's notion of 'making people up', as discussed in Chapter 1, whereby the "spaces of possibilities for personhood" change over time as new categories and concepts for people

develop (Hacking, 2002, p. 106). From this perspective, we can see Jones' performance as a response to the general concept of conspiracy theory and the stigmatised role of the conspiracy theorist. His displays of anger, obsession, along with his outlandish fears of gay frogs and satanic fetishes draw on our preconceived notion of what sort of person a conspiracy theorist is, putting together features that may not have been so closely associated prior to the marginalisation of conspiracy theory. Thus, we see how the role of the conspiracy theorist can be actively embraced in some cases, whereas in other cases a speaker or author may adopt the tactic of distancing themselves from it.

3.5. Neoliberal ideology and the commercialisation of Jones' conspiracy theorising

So far, we have seen how Jones articulates a claim to victimhood, positioning himself and his followers as having been oppressed by the deep state. In this final part of our analysis, we will see what Jones offers in terms of the forward-facing aspect of his *ressentiment* narrative – the particular actions he puts forward as being necessary to right the wrong done to him and his followers. As with Brogan's conspiracy theory, the solution to the conspiracy theory expresses a neoliberal ideology. Jones emphasises the need to protect and improve the self over encouraging political action by his followers, and instead sets himself up as the instrument of the people in their battle against the deep state.

As with Brogan, the commercial aspect of Jones' activities is not merely a supplement to his conspiracy theorising. The conspiracy theory itself puts commerce forward as an integral part of the solution for thwarting the conspiracy, once again indicating the articulation of a neoliberal ideology. The clearest example of the combination of conspiracy theory and neoliberalism can be seen during a coda to the main segment of the video – an advertisement for the *InfoWars* online store, which sells health supplements, *InfoWars* merchandise such as t-shirts and baseball caps, and documentaries made by Jones and others. The advertisement begins by once again combining a *topos* of danger with a performance of masculinity, as we see Jones riding in what looks like an armoured vehicle; he holds a microphone with loudspeakers and a camcorder is set up in front of him. This is followed by footage

of him at pro-Trump political rallies. As these images play, Jones explains the scale of the threat facing humanity:

> We are fighting the New World Order at point blank range. I am absolutely going up against the worst people at every level, and it's only been your prayers, and your support, that's kept us on air so I'm telling you now: we have reached the thick of the battle; we have reached the heart of the war; we are entering the most important phase of the war against tyranny, and and fighting back against their unrestricted, undeclared war against us.
>
> (InfoWars, 2022a, 10:25)

Militaristic language and imagery intensify the sense of danger and of imminent doom. As we shall see below, this topos of danger is used to foster a need for safety and protection from the coming threat. In this passage, Jones once again asserts a strong connection with his audience, as he suggests that his activities – his pursuit of the truth – has only been possible with their support, so that viewers at home are part of the same broader struggle as he is. In this way, the division present throughout the video between the deep state or New World Order and the ordinary people is developed further. Jones constructs the in-group in such a way that supportive viewers are already included, while the out-group threatens both Jones and his members. However, Jones is also at pains to explain that he is particularly threatened by the New World Order:

> People come after me [Cuts to footage of Jones slapping self in face] I fight fifty times harder. [Clenching his jaw] So now the globalists have declared war on me and my family, well we are gonna turn up the heat [overlayed animation of flames appears at bottom of video; followed by more animation overlayed over footage of Jones, emphasising his visible anger] Open up the cans of anti-New World Order resistance, ladies and gentlemen.
>
> (InfoWars, 2022a, 10:47)

Once again, we find Jones presenting himself as a persecuted hero and victim, which is followed up once again with a masculine performance of anger. The threat is described as being directed against his family, and he takes up the role of the violent protector of the boundaries of the family. In this

way, Jones positions himself in the role of patriarchal protect, or reflecting the American right's concern with protecting established gender roles. A recurring theme in Jones' work and that of other right-wing populists is a belief that the traditionally privileged role of white men is under attack (Lowndes, 2017). As Casey Ryan Kelly describes: "Representations of masculinity in uncertain times intensify the masculinity-in-crisis motif to cultivate anticipation of an apocalyptic event that promises a final resolution to male alienation" (Kelly, 2016, p. 1).

Jones' distinctly masculine rage thus plays into this sense of coming doom, while also portraying the very thing that is supposedly threatened. We also see another indication that Jones is fully aware of his audience's desire to see his angry outbursts, with the animation overlayed on the video turning the performance of anger almost into a cartoon (see Fig. 9). Next, Jones states his request plainly:

> So, I need money to prosecute WAR of INFORMATION AND TRUTH, and I need MONEY at infowarsstore.com. I got the best durable food; I got the best supplements; We've got amazing t-shirts- [quieter] cos there are better t-shirt designers than me out there but ours are pretty good. [Louder] We've got incredible everything: films, books, everything; it's an arsenal of freedom; it's an arsenal of resistance. Infowarsstore.com, and then we will continue to give you the truth; we will continue to stand against the New World Order; we will continue to not back down because I will never give up (.) I will never back down (.) but I could collapse, I could give out. And it's you that's gonna hold us up in this fight, and I need money to prosecute this war against Soros and the New World Order, our defensive war for our children. Infowarsstore.com: go there now, we need major funding in our counter-offensive against the New World Order. Infowarsstore.com.

> (InfoWars, 2022a, 11:00)

Having earlier created a need for safety and protection from the coming doom, Jones now offers viewers the solution: buying his products will not only help you to protect yourself, but it will also enable Jones to continue his quest for the truth, which will benefit us all. In this way, the conspiracy theory becomes subordinated to the commercial aspect of Jones' work – it has become a tool for

FIGURE 9. Animations overlayed onto footage of Alex Jones, intensifying his performance of anger (InfoWars, 2022a, 10:57).

selling commodities. The authenticity Jones seeks to cultivate, we see, is not simply in order to get

viewers to believe his claims but is also needed to sell his products. His performance of masculinity

can be read as a testimonial for his health supplements, which are generally marketed towards men,

and promise solutions to problems of men's health, such as hair loss and erectile dysfunction. The

products promise to restore men's masculinity, with Jones's own character being a testament to their

apparent efficacy. What is more, Jones promises to bear the burden of this fight himself. Rather than

instructing his viewers to become politically engaged in order to stop the conspiracy, Jones puts

himself forward as their instrument in this fight. This echoes similar tactics used by other populist

figures, most notably Donald Trump, who is thus able to depict "any attack on him [as] an attack on

the people" (Yagmur & Edgell, 2022, p. 898).

It is worth briefly discussing some of the products Jones is selling through his website. These include

supplements such as vitamin D supplements, as well as sleep aids and treatments to support hair and

beard growth (InfoWars Store, n.d.-a). Another health supplement, titled 'Living Defense Plus',

promises not only to support a healthy intestine, but also to "Eliminate unwanted invaders from your

body" (InfoWars Store, n.d.-b). The rhetoric of populism is thus translated onto the body, just as it

was with Brogan. What we have, therefore, is a politics that is also very individualist, though the

message of self-empowerment is different, taking on a far more masculine tone. In its place we find an urgent masculinist topos of danger. But the fear of violation remains, and Jones' performance of hypermasculine protector plays up to this – the boundaries of the family, as are those of the body.

The *ressentiment* narrative expressed in the video takes us from an initial claim of victimhood, specifically a claim that Jones was being attacked by the deep state, and labelled a Russian lackey as part of a deliberate attempt to further marginalise him. Moreover, the threat was directed against the family, with the suggestion that the conspirators engage in paedophilic acts. Jones includes the viewer in this victimhood too, describing them as having been oppressed too. The redress Jones seeks is somewhat vague, as it is not entirely clear how he intends to defeat the vast conspiracy he has detected. Nevertheless, he offers a solution to viewers – they can purchase products from the *InfoWars* online store. Not only will the products they buy help to protect them and their families, but their money will be put towards the Jones' war against the New World Order. Shopping is thus put forward as being key to the plotters' downfall, while also promising customers a sense of belonging in the conflict Jones has described.

4. Conclusion

In the cases of Brogan and Jones, we have seen how conspiracy theorising, and the political thinking it articulates, can be incorporated into a broader attempt to turn a profit. As Clare Birchall and Peter Knight have recently observed:

> Despite the vaunted idealism of anti-vaxx and anti-lockdown campaigns during the pandemic, they are often tied up with attempts to monetise their efforts. At the end of the day, it is nearly always about the grift.
>
> (Birchall & Knight, 2023, p. 156)

Some of the claims made by anti-vaxxers like Brogan and Jones are probably too outlandish and bizarre for most of us to take seriously. Nevertheless, the politics and rhetoric of these conspiracy

theorists needs to be analysed in order to better understand how they seek to persuade others, both to purchase their goods and services and to follow their instruction to opt out of receiving a vaccine against the coronavirus, thus putting themselves and people around them at greater risk. Therefore, it is important that we understand exactly what people like Brogan and Jones are saying to their audiences about politics, society, and the self. We should also try to grasp the rhetorical aspect of these conspiracy theories – what it is about their articulation and presentation that makes them persuasive for some people.

In this chapter, my aim has been to start working in this direction, strengthening our understanding of the political and rhetorical dimensions of COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracism. By focusing on only two cases, I have sought to show how we might go about pulling such cases of conspiracy theory apart – focusing not only the different components of the text in front of us, but also on the broader context in which the text is embedded.

I have argued that Brogan and Jones articulate a distinctly neoliberal conspiracy theory about COVID-19 vaccinations, though the ways in which they do this differ somewhat. Moreover, both Brogan and Jones employ a narrative framework of *ressentiment.* In *Health as Spiritual Warfare,* we find that the conspiracy is directed against the supposedly natural and innate independence and freedom of the individual; a character who is also implied to be productive, a source of vital force energy. This particular subject resembles the neoliberal *homo œconomicus,* as described by Foucault (2008), an individual who is willing and able to invest money in wellbeing products and services in the hope of expanding their own human capital. We have also seen that Brogan's construction of the conspirators is worryingly reminiscent of anti-Semitism, with its depiction of a parasitic and unproductive character, one who is treated as inhuman and unindividual, even engaging in the ritual sacrifice of children. This should be especially concerning, as it points to a possible path connecting certain beliefs and practices from the wellness industry and New Age spiritualism with the far-right and anti-Semitism. From this perspective, the overlap and interaction between anti-vaccination groups and QAnon starts to look less surprising.

In Jones' *EPIC RANT,* we find that he too describes a conspiratorial threat to his viewers' autonomy, portraying those who submit to the alleged conspiracy as lacking life force. Here too, the solution to the conspiracy primarily involves spending money on products for protecting and improving the self, such as Jones' wide range of health supplements and survival equipment. Jones also places his performance of the role of a conspiracy theorist at the core of his conspiracy theory, emphasising his own character as a persecuted hero, fanatically committed to the truth and prone to furious outbursts, and showing a self-awareness that these bombastic displays are part of the appeal to his viewers.

This points to an area in need of further research in future, particularly on the use of rhetoric to promote conspiracy theories and sell commodities and services. Some research has already been conducted on commodification of conspiracy theory as well as the material used by conspiracy theorists (see Birchall & Knight, 2023, Ch. 6-7; Robertson, 2015). However, further in-depth analyses of the rhetorical and discursive strategies used by anti-vaccination conspiracy theorists could help to shed light on whether Brogan and Jones' articulations of neoliberal ideology are common or rare. Furthermore, future research could examine the ideological similarities between far-right conspiracy theorists and anti-vaccination groups, focusing particular to the ways in which certain ideas or forms of rhetoric are used to build bridges between such groups. Insights from the study of esotericism and cults could prove particularly useful here, helping us to better understand the role of figureheads like Brogan and Alex Jones in conspiracist communities and their use of self-branding techniques in crafting their public image.

This points again to the need to appreciate the particularities of each conspiracy theory. Instead of merely dismissing them all as simply unwarranted or unbelievable (though many of them are), or subsuming them all under a homogenising category such as the paranoid style, we should instead focus on analysing their particular political content in its specific context. This will help us to improve our understanding of what fuels a conspiracy theory, what implications it could have for politics, and what could be done to counter its claims and arguments.

Conclusion

1. Moving from an epistemological to a political framing for conspiracy theory

In Douglas et al.'s (2019) paper titled 'Understanding Conspiracy Theories', the authors provide a detailed review of a variety of areas of research pertaining to conspiracy theories. We find a discussion of the various factors that could motivate a belief in conspiracy theories (including epistemic, demographic, and political factors), how conspiracy theories are communicated, and the consequences of conspiracy theory belief. While the review gives a helpful picture of where researchers have been making progress and of areas that need greater attention in future, something integral is missing from their article: an understanding of conspiracy theories *themselves,* both in terms of their content and how they are articulated. It is this assumption that I have been trying to dispel in this thesis, namely that conspiracy theories can be understood without actually examining them, and by focusing instead on adjacent issues such as the profiling of the conspiracy theory believer (Butter & Knight, 2015). Similarly, I have also been arguing that in seeing conspiracy theories through the lens of epistemology, we miss much of what is going on in conspiracy theorising. As Alfred Moore suggests, an epistemological perspective can miss the vital political aspect of conspiracy theory:

> Rebuttals, debunking, fact checking, and attempts to correct misperceptions are surely valuable contributions to democratic citizenship. However, this framing of conspiracy theory draws attention to epistemic rather than directly political questions.

> (Moore, 2018a, p. 111)

We are thus nudged towards asking questions such as: Do conspiracy theories have the capacity to be correct? Or are they fundamentally irrational and unwarranted? If the answer is the latter, then what explains why some people adopt such irrational beliefs? These epistemic questions are worth asking – after all, conspiracy theories all feature a truth claim of some sort – but by shifting our thinking from epistemology to politics, we open up new avenues for research and a more complex understanding of

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conspiracy theory. The conspiracy theories we have analysed here are not only making truth claims, positing the existence of a conspiracy; they are constructing political identities, claiming victim status, delineating enemies, and telling stories about past injustices that need avenging. In each case, we have seen that contextual factors have a strong impact on how conspiracy theories articulate their political claims. For example, who the conspiracy theorist is addressing, and in what circumstance, changes the way in which the conspiracy theory is expressed.

We have encountered conspiracy theories that express anti-Semitism and ethnonationalism, productivist views of capitalism, counter-democratic perspectives on the role of the citizen, the mixing of conspiracism and spirituality, as well as a neoliberal state-phobia that combines conspiracism and commerce. In each case, the conspiracy theory in question responds to specific contextual factors – for example, we have seen how Ford's conspiracy theory is intimately linked to a productivist view of his capitalist context, and that the counter-democratic ideology of JFK conspiracy theories is facilitated by consumers' increased access to image-making media like cameras and television. We have also seen that the way in which conspiracy theorists present themselves differs from one case to the next – at one extreme is Josiah Thompson, who shuns the label conspiracy theorist entirely and seeks to position himself within the mainstream, while at the other extreme we have Alex Jones' exploitation of the stigma attached to the role, putting his character and performances of anger and authenticity at the heart of his conspiracy theorising. In this way, we cannot assume that every case of conspiracy theory is driven by the same underlying psychological traits in the conspiracy theorist, nor can we treat them as though they are all products of the same pathology or form of irrationality.

This points back to the need to get to grips with conspiracy theories themselves, adopting a methodologically particularist and interpretative approach so as to better grasp what they are saying about politics and how they are saying it, along with the significance of differences between conspiracy theories. Much of this would have been overlooked had we stuck with an epistemological framing for conspiracy theory.

There is an opportunity here for political theorists to apply their expertise to strengthen our understanding of a form of political discourse that can have detrimental effects on democracy. Condemning conspiracy theories will not make them disappear; if Jack Bratich's (2008) argument is correct, their condemnation is in fact a key to the constitution of conspiracy theory. Thus, when Quassim Cassam characterises conspiracy theories as "*first and foremost forms of political propaganda*" (Cassam, 2019, p. 7, emphasis in original), this should serve as a starting point for further inquiry for political theorists, rather than being the conclusion of our investigations. How do they propagandise? What rhetorical and discursive strategies do they use? And what are the political ideologies and causes they promote? Cassam's suggestion that we "shame or embarrass people into not flirting with [conspiracy theories]" may be a practical suggestion for combatting worrying cases, but this cannot be the end point for political theorists (Cassam, 2019, p. 123). We should instead seek to better understand the particularities of conspiracy theories, and how they seek to persuade their audiences.

2. Contribution to the understanding of conspiracy theory

In this thesis, I have sought to contribute a new approach for understanding conspiracy theory, one that stresses the need for political theorists to do more than only condemn conspiracy theories and their worrying impacts on politics. As noted above, political theorists need to get to grips with particular conspiracy theories, their specific political content and rhetorical strategies. To aid in this effort, I have demonstrated one approach that political theorists could use to analyse conspiracy theories, namely the critical conceptualisation of conspiracy theory working in combination with the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) and Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA). While the critical conceptualisation provides an account of the broader category of conspiracy theory, the DHA and RPA supply the tools for interpreting particular cases.

The critical conceptualisation expands our understanding of conspiracy theory by pointing to a tension within the concept of conspiracy theory: the term was once purely descriptive, applied to explanations

that posited a conspiracy as the cause of an event; later, the term took on pejorative connotations, coming to refer to a pathological form of explanation. Despite the development of a stigma around conspiracy theory, the term is still applied to almost any explanation that posits a conspiratorial cause for an event. The result is that the stigma is encountered whenever a conspiracy theory is expressed, regardless of the particular content of the claims being made. Thus, conspiracy theorists face the challenge of achieving rhetorical success from a position of disadvantage – of stigmatisation and marginalisation. In short, they must persuade an audience despite starting on the back foot. How a conspiracy theorist addresses this challenge will be practical, depending on the context in which the conspiracy theory is being articulated. As we have seen in this thesis, some conspiracy theorists pre-empt the stigma and seek to head it off early on; others avoid mentioning the term 'conspiracy theory' at all; some reach out to other marginalised, though less stigmatised political actors; and finally, some embrace the stigma and incorporate it into their conspiracy theories, depicting their marginalisation as being the result of a coverup. These practical aspects of conspiracy theorising would be lost if we stuck with the usual one-size-fits-all approach.

One effective methodology we can use to analyse particular conspiracy theories combines the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA). While there are some tensions between CDA and RPA (see Finlayson, 2013), both appreciate the importance of context for interpreting political discourse, and both are broadly concerned with how a speaker constructs political characters, group identities, and arguments. This combination takes conspiracy theories to be political and rhetorical, in that each one is involved in describing political problems that they want to address, constructing political identities, and articulating claims about where power lies and who ought to wield it. It sees each conspiracy theory as trying to persuade a particular in audience in a particular setting and political moment. This stands in contrast to an epistemological perspective, by recognising the influence of contextual factors on the articulation of truth claims. Combining these two approaches has practical benefits for the analysis as well, increasing the number of analytical tools at our disposal.

For example, the attention paid to referential and predicational strategies with the DHA and RPA's focus on ethos proved beneficial for cases such as Henry Ford's *The International Jew*, with its overlapping categories of gentiles and Jews, makers and getters, and the construction of Alex Jones' character in his rant on Covid-19 vaccines. In such cases, the DHA and RPA helped us to understand how these characters are constructed and what resources the conspiracy theorists are using and adapting to this end. They also helped us to interpret the reasons why characters and political identities were constructed in one way and not another. The RPA in particular pushed me to think about the audiences being addressed in each of the conspiracy theory texts, and how the need to persuade an audience was affecting the presentation of the conspiracy theory. A key example of this is Josiah Thompson's documentary on the Kennedy assassination, in which the terms 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorist' are omitted entirely, while Thompson is depicted as an unbiased and scientific researcher. In that case, the need to persuade an audience, coupled with the pressure of the pejorative connotations of conspiracy theory, result in a documentary that is silent on the Kennedy assassination's prominent position within the conspiracy theory tradition. Thus, the DHA and RPA helped to home in on aspects of the cases that might otherwise have been overlooked.

3. The political context and goals of the conspiracy theory case studies

In the introduction to this thesis, I outlined a series of questions that would guide my analysis of the three case studies. In this part of the conclusion, I would like to revisit these to summarise and evaluate the findings of my analyses:

- How do the authors of these texts view themselves? What identities do they construct or align themselves with, and what traits do they attribute to themselves?

- How do these texts characterise conspirators? What identities and traits do they attribute to them?

- How do they describe or depict politics? How are political phenomena and events described or depicted? What do they see as the cause of political phenomena, both particular events of a political nature and more generally?

- How do they attempt to justify their description and depiction of politics? What arguments do they use? How do they try to persuade their audience? What resources do they draw upon?

Looking back on our three case studies, what we see is that the texts we have examined show the particularity of conspiracy theories; they vary in terms of their construction of both in-group and conspiratorial out-groups, and we have seen that not all conspiracy theories depict politics as *tout court* conspiratorial, nor see "conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events" (Hofstadter, 1966, p. 29, emphasis in original). Of course, some do – Ford's anti-Semitic conspiracy theory being the obvious candidate here – though others do not – most notably Josiah Thompson's pared back conspiracy theory about the Kennedy assassination. Moreover, the way in which these conspiracy theories have sought to justify their descriptions and depictions of politics varies too, from those present errant data as proof of a coverup and conspiracy (such as the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories) to those that rely on a performance of authenticity and emotion (such as the COVID-19 anti-vaccination conspiracy theories we looked at). Ultimately, then, we see that there is no single way of conspiracy theorising.

There is also much variety between the political contexts in which our cases of conspiracy theory are situated. We began with Henry Ford writing shortly after the end of the First World War and with the Russian Civil War still ongoing, and finished about a century later with Alex Jones speaking during the Covid-19 pandemic. Across the case studies, we have seen conspiracy theorists addressing a variety of political issues, including immigration and race; transparency and accountability; and public health policy and individual freedom.

There has nevertheless been a recurring theme across these cases, namely political distrust. This is not to say that levels of distrust are the same across the contexts covered by the case studies, only that each conspiracy theory has exploited and amplified pre-existing distrust in each context. For example,

we saw how Ford expresses a distrust of appearances that is already present in the *Protocols,* enabling connections to be drawn between the chaotic political events of his time. In Peter Gregson's case, we encounter a strong distrust of the news media, which is seen as having undermined Jeremy Corbyn and leftist politics in Britain, leading to conclusion that a plot is afoot to prevent Corbyn becoming Prime Minister. Mark Lane and Josiah Thompson both speak to a moment of political distrust influenced by the legacy of McCarthyism and the Cold War, in which the state is increasingly seen as a threat to its citizens. Finally, Kelly Brogan and Alex Jones draw on an existing distrust of the state's public health policies, prefigured by events like the scandal of Andrew Wakefield's claims about the MMR vaccine. In each case, distrust is seized upon and amplified by conspiracy theorists, to such an extent that the existence of a conspiracy appears a reasonable claim. This highlights again the degree to which conspiracy theories are political rather than simply epistemological, with each conspiracy theory speaking to a specific political moment and drawing on distrust that is already present in that context.

In terms of the political goals of each of the cases, we again find much variety. In some cases, the author or speaker's goal is rather narrow, such as with Josiah Thompson's efforts to bring about a re-evaluation of the events of President Kennedy's death. For others, the conspiracy theory is used to promote a political position, as with Peter Gregson's use of a conspiracy theory to promote an anti-imperialist and leftist political position. Elsewhere, the goal is to promote a conspiracist worldview and accompanying political identity, as with Henry Ford's claims of a Jewish plot to control the naturally productive gentiles or makers. Out of this conspiracist worldview stem normative political claims, such as Ford's indication that the Jews need to be somehow suppressed due to their allegedly aristocratic and conspiratorial character. We have also seen how political and economic goals can become intertwined. This was especially true for Jones and Brogan, both of whom use conspiracy theory as a marketing tool of sorts, articulating a problem for consumers that can only be resolved through purchasing their goods and services. For instance, Jones' presents the deep state or New World Order as a threat to his viewers' lives, but promises to stand up to the conspiracy if they buy his online merchandise and dietary supplements. Similarly, Brogan's opposition to vaccination is tied

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in with the promotion of her own alternative health services – for her, the conspiracy to control people through vaccines can be fought by paying for her online psychiatric services.

4. The role of ressentiment in conspiracy theories

One key recurring feature has emerged through this thesis, namely narratives of *ressentiment.* We have seen that when a conspiracy theory moves beyond explaining a single event, and starts to explain politics and society more broadly, it employs a narrative in which an in-group is depicted as having suffered an injustice at the hands of a threatening out group, along with a need for redress in future. For example, Ford presented a narrative in which good-natured gentiles have been oppressed by the Jews, and must overthrow their oppressors to restore their freedom. In the case of Lane, the narrative was more populist in tone, centred on the oppression of the American people by the media and government. In Josiah Thompson's pared-back conspiracy theory on the Kennedy assassination, we found an absence of a *ressentiment* narrative. This suggests that such a narrative only comes into play when the conspiracy theory seeks to explain politics and society, rather than just how a limited set of events occurred.

Why do such narratives of *ressentiment* emerge? As noted above, these narratives emerge when a conspiracy theory seeks to explain politics and society generally, instead of restricting itself to a single event. To be more precise, the *ressentiment* narrative comes about from two considerations arising from this move: *who* is responsible for this conspiracy? And *why* have they done this? For someone like Thompson, the question is whether or not a conspiracy happened at all, but the identity of the actors behind the conspiracy or their motives is beyond the scope of his work. Once a conspiracy theorist starts asking about the conspiratorial actors and their motives, a *ressentiment* narrative comes into play. As the conspiracy is almost always malevolent – I am yet to come across a conspiracy theory in which the plotters had the best of intentions – the narrative becomes one in which someone is doing something harmful for particular reasons, usually personal gain or political

control. In asking *who?* and *why?* conspiracy theorists start to populate their stories with characters – such as the conspirators and their victims – and invites their audience to identify with the victims.

The functions of *ressentiment* in a conspiracy theory can be multiple, including the construction of political identities, the articulation of a political issue around which an audience is meant to rally, or the offering of an explanation of why a speaker has been marginalised or failed to achieve their political goals. For instance, in Ford's writing, *ressentiment* serves to construct two identities: the Jews and the Gentiles, with Ford encouraging his readers to see themselves as belonging to the latter. Moreover, in constructing these two categories, Ford recharacterizes problems associated with capitalism – in which he has a major part – as problems of race, blaming the Jews while deflecting attention away from his own activities. For Ford, then, *ressentiment* is central to the ideology that he is promoted. For him, a *ressentiment* narrative provides the worldview through which all events are to be interpreted – rather than being the means for promoting a political message, *ressentiment* is that message. In the case of Peter Gregson, *ressentiment* functions to explain Jeremy Corbyn's lack of success and Gregson's own marginalisation within Labour and the trade union movement, and works to gain support for his leftist and anti-imperialist politics. Opposition to Jeremy Corbyn and worries about anti-Semitism are reframed as simply products of a plot to prevent the Labour left from succeeding in the UK. When *ressentiment* is absent, as in the case of Josiah Thompson, the political goal of the conspiracy theorist is narrower, due to the focus on a single event and the lack of attention paid to the construction of political identities.

My argument about narratives of *ressentiment* may appear similar to some other arguments that have already been made about conspiracy theory. Indeed, it may seem to some readers that I have wound up presenting a similar argument to that made by Hofstadter (1966) in his essay on the paranoid style, thereby recreating the very sort of argument that I had initially opposed. There are certainly some similarities, as both emphasise the themes of victimhood and vengeance in conspiracy theories, as well as their construction of threatening enemies. Nevertheless, I would hasten to point out some important differences between my argument and that of Hofstadter. Hofstadter's concern is with "a style of mind," one that he compares to the psychological symptom of paranoia (Hofstadter, 1966, p.

3). This suggests that the paranoid style is tied to a person's psychological makeup. In contrast, I have been concerned how political ideas are expressed through conspiracy theories – not so much with the mentality of the individual who expresses them. My claim has not been that the conspiracy theorist necessarily experiences feelings of *ressentiment* themselves, but rather that the narrative structure of conspiracy theories resembles descriptions of the philosophical concept of *ressentiment.* In this way, the argument I have been advancing avoids succumbing to the mistake of making strong claims about a person's intentions or mental state. There is always the chance that the conspiracy theorist does not believe their own utterances (that they are trying to deceive an audience) or that they genuinely do believe – the question of intentions, however, has been beyond the scope of this thesis.

My argument in this thesis is also distinct from the of Luc Boltanski (2014, pp. 177-189), who also uses the term *ressentiment* in his book on detective stories, spy novels, and conspiracy theories. Boltanski gives an overview of the development of the concept, from its use in describing an individual's psychology to its application to whole societies. Boltanski also discusses the use of characters displaying *ressentiment* in detective fiction, and suggest that the concept was a precursor of later attempts at drawing a boundary between rationality and irrationality, such as with the notion of paranoia. My argument does not go against Boltanski's, but rather applies the notion of *ressentiment* in a different way. Rather than using it in a social-psychological sense, or using the term to describe characters in fiction or even real individuals, my use of *ressentiment* has been confined to the narrative implied in the concept. That is, a narrative in which an injustice has been done by one party to another, leading to a situation of oppression in the present, with the promise of vengeance in the future. Again, I only use the term to describe a narrative framework, onto which political claims and identities are grafted.

The argument I have presented in this thesis also differs somewhat from that of Mark Fenster, an early pioneer of academic research on conspiracy theories. Fenster (2008) argues that conspiracy theories belong to populism, and indeed the similarity between conspiracism and populism is striking. My argument does not go so far as classifying conspiracy theory as a sub-type of populism, but rather suggests that narratives of *ressentiment* could be the common theme linking the two. From this view,

it is not that conspiracy theories belong to the broader category of populism, but rather that both adhere to the same narrative framework. The argument I have developed here also goes beyond that of Timothy Melley, another leading figure in the study of conspiracism. Melley (2000) has argued that the prevalence of conspiracy theories in post-war America conveys 'agency panic' – an anxiety over a perceived lack of agency and autonomy. This agency panic, Melley writes, can be attributed to broader worries about the growing role of bureaucracies and mass media in people's lives, which were seen as corroding Americans' individuality. While Melley's argument is an insightful and compelling analysis of post-war American culture, it is too rooted in the era it is examining, and is unable to explain the presence of conspiracy theories in earlier periods. My approach has not been limited to a single era or context, and so avoids this problem, producing an argument that is more applicable to conspiracy theories generally.

5. Discursive resources and the conspiracy theory tradition

The conspiracy theories we have encountered in this thesis belong to an overarching tradition. This idea of a conspiracy theory tradition has been used by earlier researchers such as Michael Billig (1978) and Jovan Byford (2011). As Billig describes:

> The themes in the present-day conspiracy theories can be traced back to the myths which developed around masonic sects and secret societies in the eighteenth century, and in particular around one society–Adam Weishaupt's Illuminati, founded in 1776.

Billig, 1978, p. 155

What else might this tradition contain, besides ideas about secret societies? Most obviously, the conspiracy theories we have seen here repeatedly employ an account of power as being exercised in the shadows, rather than in the open – what really matters is always hidden, and what is visible is a sham. Anti-Semitism is also an important aspect of the tradition (Byford 2011, 102). As we have seen in the case of Kelly Brogan and Peter Gregson, anti-Semitic tropes continue to be used and adapted today, even if their anti-Semitism is more implicit than what we find in the writing of Henry Ford or

the *Protocols.* As with every tradition, the conspiracy theory tradition contains elements of continuity and change – even if an idea or trope stay unchanged over time, it will be seized upon to explain new events going in the world. Jovan Byford summarises this well when he observes that "conspiracy theorists seldom set out to write the history of the conspiracy from scratch" (2011, 100). Material produced by earlier conspiracy theorists is often incorporated – either implicitly or with explicit references – into the conspiracy theories we encounter today. The tradition should be seen as a collection of resources that conspiracy theorists can draw upon. A particular conspiracy theorist may choose to use some aspects of the tradition while omitting or toning down other aspects, or may bring something new to the tradition.

How has this tradition been used in the cases we have examined in this thesis? In *The International Jew,* we saw that Ford drew heavily on the earlier *Protocols,* adopting its core claim of a Jewish world conspiracy. We also saw the adaptations Ford made when incorporating this material into his writing, such as swapping the pro-aristocracy message of the *Protocols* for a pro-democracy perspective that was more suited to his American audience. In Peter Gregson's talk to the Keep Talking group, we saw that the trope of hidden Jewish power appeared again, although in this case adapted to the explain the Israel-Palestine conflict, while employing more implicitly anti-Semitic discourse. With the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists, we saw that both Mark Lane and Josiah Thompson tried to distance themselves from the conspiracy theory tradition. While neither Lane nor Thompson position themselves within the tradition, they are nevertheless drawn into its orbit through association. For instance, we saw how Lane was irked by the implication that his claims were signs of paranoia. Thompson, meanwhile, reacts to the association with conspiracy theory by avoiding the term altogether; the *JFK Unsolved* documentary goes as far as to differentiate Thompson from other conspiracy theorists while never using the term, instead referring to 'assassination researchers'. As the Kennedy assassination has become a touchstone event in the history of the conspiracy theory tradition, it has become harder for the likes of Thompson to escape its connotations of pathology and irrationality. In the case of the anti-vaccination conspiracy theories of the Covid-19 pandemic, we found that both Kelly Brogan and Alex Jones drew on conspiracy theory's preoccupation with firm

boundaries and the risk of intrusion, and adapted these concerns to the human body. Whereas Ford was fearful of Jewish intruders corrupting the United States from within, for Brogan and Jones the fear is now of harmful materials intruding into the human body through the Covid-19 vaccine. Again, an aspect of the conspiracy theory tradition is used and adapted to fit a new situation.

How does this tradition affect the political dimension of these conspiracy theories? It is clear that, if one embraces the conspiracy theory tradition, the risk of employing anti-Semitic tropes or beliefs grows significantly. As Byford writes, "when authors today reflect on the history of the plot – a task that requires them to recognise the relevance of past conspiracies and past conspiracy theories – they invariably come into contact with the antisemitic legacy of the conspiracy culture" (Byford 2011, 102). In this way, a descent into political extremism remains a risk when the conspiracy theory tradition is endorsed by a writer or speaker. As we witnessed in the case of Peter Gregson, a kind of bridging can occur, where connections are made between those on the periphery of the tradition and those who embrace it wholesale. The conspiracy theory tradition gives a speaker or writer many resources to use and adapt, and can also enable ties with other individuals and groups who might not otherwise have become connected. However, it also involves a degree of marginalisation – as we saw in the Gregson case, this common experience of marginalisation can be used to attract new followers, even if they are not so deeply embedded within the conspiracy tradition. In this way, the conspiracy theory enables different marginalised actors to come together in loose agreement and opposition to the status quo.

6. Avenues for further research

In this thesis, I have argued that we should be more inclined to take conspiracy theories themselves as our objects of study, rather than merely using them as a way in for talking about adjacent phenomena. I have shown that in order to grasp the political thinking expressed in a conspiracy theory, we cannot rely on overly abstract theories but should instead turn out attention to the specific content and context of the conspiracy theory. Ultimately, I have sought to highlight the practical aspect of conspiracy

theorising – the fact that conspiracy theories are articulated in a particular way, to a particular audience, during a particular political moment. This is not a claim about the truth or falsity of conspiracy theories generally; my argument is about their politics, not their epistemological status.

What avenues for further research are opened up by this approach? Certainly, there is need for further analyses of other conspiracy theory texts, ones that I was unable to feature here. QAnon would be the obvious candidate for a future analysis, due to its severe impact on American politics in recent years. While it may be tempting to see QAnon simply as a rehash of older anti-Semitic and ethnonationalist conspiracy theories, it would nevertheless be worthwhile to examine how the rhetoric of QAnon differs from that of other conspiracy theories, particularly due to its mass participatory dimension. There is also the need to analyse conspiracy theories from other national context besides that of the United States, which has long dominated the focus of academic research into conspiracism. Indeed, I myself have focused heavily on the United States in this thesis, partly due to the prominence of conspiracism in American culture and partly because of language constraints. Nevertheless, there is a strong need to expand our focus onto other regions of the world, and to engage in comparative work in order to see how conspiracy theories are articulated differently in different national, political, and cultural contexts. There is also a need to focus more on borderline cases of conspiracy theory. For instance, anti-vaccination views are not always conspiracist – one may believe that experts do not know enough about the long-term impacts of particular vaccines, rather than seeing them as deliberately harmful. Further insight is needed on the relationship between conspiracy theories and adjacent non-conspiracist views, in order to better understand how a person might make the move from one to the other. Do such views and claims express similar notions of power and politics? Or are the rhetorical and discursive strategies they use different?

Besides the possibility of examining further cases of conspiracy theories, there is also an opportunity to start working towards a new approach in terms of policy. It has been well beyond the scope of this thesis to explain what governments, the civil service, and other political institutions and actors should do about conspiracy theories, though I have indicated that there are certainly grounds for taking the spread of some conspiracy theories to be a risk for democratic politics. While fact-checking and

disproving disinformation is certainly a worthwhile approach, the cases we have examined in this thesis suggest that this is not enough. A broader consideration needs to be given to why certain concerning conspiracy theories are persuasive for some people and to their rhetorical and discursive strategies. We might also want to consider ways of countering such conspiracy theories with rhetoric and discourse of our own, developing persuasive counter-arguments of our own, and also examining the conditions (such as quality of education or opportunity for political involvement) that may be helping a conspiracy theory to resonate with believers.

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