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The Language of Conspiracy Theories: Defying Reality in a Post-Truth World and Digital Era

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Dossier

Introduction

Alma-Pierre Bonnet

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TEXT

The publication of this special issue of ELAD-SILDA on conspiracy theories should be considered as team work. I would like to personally thank Prof. Massimiliano Demata (University of Turin) and Prof. Denis Jamet (University Jean-Moulin Lyon 3) for the co-organisation of the Lyon seminars and for providing useful feedback and advice. A special thank goes to the authors, who worked very hard to challenge our understanding of conspiratorial discourse through their very insightful contributions. Last but not least, the publication would not have been possible without the valuable help from the ELAD-SILDA editorial board, the Prairial editing committee, and of course, the constructive feedback from the various reviewers.

Thank you all very much and I hope you enjoy this special issue of ELAD-SILDA.

- 1 Following the publication of a seminal book on conspiracy theory discourse by Demata *et al.* (2022) and a series of seminars in Lyon (Centre d'Études Linguistiques – Corpus, Discours et Sociétés, Université Jean-Moulin Lyon 3), which brought together established international scholars in conspiratorial studies, political studies and discourse analysis, this special issue of ELAD-SILDA proposes to explore how conspiracy theories are linguistically constructed. However –and in line with the holistic ambition of the Lyon seminars– the various contributions presented here are by no means limited to linguistics. They offer a wide range of approaches, drawing on many disciplines – such as political studies, history, sociology, philosophy or narrative analysis – to provide a better understanding of conspiracy theories as discursive –but also cultural– constructions. As such, this special issue of the journal aims to shed (some) light on a phenomenon which has always influenced human social interaction and framed political debates and which continues, nowadays, to defy reality in a post-truth world and digital era.

- 2 The first two articles, by Christopher Jon Delogu and Armin Langer, offer general framing elements about conspiracy theories. The following two papers, by Alma-Pierre Bonnet and Emma Bell, focus on how British politicians resort to conspiratorial discourse for political gain. The remaining four articles, by Lexi Webster, Lucie Donckier de Donceel, Laura Levstock and Damien Lenoir, propose case studies and helpful material to provide a better understanding of several types of conspiracy theories.
- 3 As the introductory contributor, Christopher Jon Delogu proposes to set the scene and offers a review of “conspiracism” from the 1950s to the present. Drawing on seminal works from many disciplines, the article offers an explanation of conspiracy theory discourse by political leaders who exploit the economic vulnerability of many and the status loss anxiety of many others. The objective is to increase the polarization of the American society and suspicion between opposing camps which then weakens confidence in public institutions and democracy. The objective of the paper is therefore to lay bare the socioeconomic, cultural, and rhetorical levers that allow leading politicians –and other “predatory con artists”– to “control the narrative” and frame the political debate in ways that serve their personal interests.
- 4 Armin Langer proposes a discourse analysis of the manifestos published by far-right extremists from the United States, Norway, and Australia, in order to illuminate how these manifestos mirror and amplify the narratives espoused by far-right populists. By doing so, the article contributes to the growing academic literature on the link between the rise of far-right populism and the increase in far-right attacks. Against the backdrop of rising far-right terrorist activities across the Western world, the article aims to decipher and deconstruct some of the most common far-right conspiracy myths promoted by far-right political parties and compare those with the conspiracy myths in the terrorist manifestos.
- 5 Through a critical approach to narrative analysis, Alma-Pierre Bonnet sets to establish whether the so-called “Turkey story”, which was a key pro-Brexit argument during the 2016 referendum campaign to leave the European Union (EU) and which stated that Turkey was “in the pipeline to enter the EU”, could effectively be considered a

conspiracy theory. The analysis reveals the complexity of this narrative – and its potential for manipulation – and introduces the concept of “strategic conspiracy”, to account for the rhetorical impact of this argument, but also to explain why leading Brexiters so eagerly tried to distance themselves from its political/geopolitical fallout.

- 6 Emma Bell further explores the strategic use of conspiracy theory discourse in the United Kingdom by analysing the way Conservative politicians promote an “anti-woke” agenda against what they perceive as “the enemies of the people”, namely anyone suspected of being left-wing, anti-Brexit, pro-immigration and unpatriotic. She analyses the political implications of the “deep state” argument put forward by leading politicians, such as Boris Johnson, and offers to trace back the discursive origins of this controversial term. Such conspiratorial framing of the public debate is usually associated with the far right, but it is now widely used by Tory politicians to wage what researchers call a “war on woke”, in a bid to attack supposedly “woke” organisations, such as universities, the BBC or the legal system, so as to reinforce post-Brexit political polarization in the country, for political gain.
- 7 Drawing on methods from cultural political economy and socio-cognitive discourse studies, Lexi Webster analyses Twitter and Mumsnet data in order to explore the socio-behavioural phenomenon of “transvestigations” in social media discourses. Social media so-called “transvestigators” refer to a person’s physiological features and behaviour as indicative of their (secret) transgender status. As such, they deploy cis-normative ideological framing and appeal to pseudo-scientific expertise to legitimize transphobia and conspiratorial thinking about transgender ubiquity and their secret ambition to enslave the world’s cisgender population. Within the prolific academic field of gender studies, the article therefore seeks to deconstruct “transvertigation” discourse to raise awareness about the negative role of social media in the dissemination and legitimization of hate speech.
- 8 Lucie Donckier de Donceel proposes to discuss the persuasive power of historical examples in conspiracy discourse around the Covid-19 pandemic in the French-speaking world. Through a corpus-based analysis of digital documents from Twitter and YouTube, she

illustrates how the use of *paradeigma* (that is, “rhetorical examples”) can reinforce the persuasiveness of conspiracy discourse. Drawing on the rhetorical use of the “Shoah example” during the Covid-19 vaccine rollout, she demonstrates how *paradeigma* helps construct a positive ethos for the speaker, mainly by providing some semblance of legitimacy. Besides, the framing dimension of the historical example proves particularly useful in terms of rhetoric: it creates scenarios and characters that people are familiar with, which, arguably, help the (unconscious) dissemination of political/conspiratorial ideologies.

- 9 Laura Levstock studies the antisemitic codes and structural antisemitism at the heart of QAnon’s conspiratorial discourse. Through a bottom-up perspective, using applied linguistics and the DIMEAN model as a theoretical framework, she proposes to analyse how antisemitic topoi frame the language of QAnon supporters on Facebook. The analysis reveals the quantitative and qualitative significance of antisemitic topoi in the QAnon spectrum and calls for a better understanding of the language of conspiracy theories in order to contribute to a possible prevention of their further spread.
- 10 Finally, Damien Lenoir’s paper aims to establish how conspiracy theorists construct their legitimacy and authority in discourse by studying the marking (or lack thereof) of epistemic and authoritative stance. Focusing on online articles written by Jon Rappoport, known for his conspiracy theorist opinions, the paper analyses the plausibility hedges and certainty boosters to unveil the marking of authoritative and epistemic stance in Rappoport’s discourses and the function(s) they perform.

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Vulnerability and conspiracism in the United States from McCarthyism to Trumpism

Vulnérabilité et complotisme aux États-Unis de Joseph McCarthy à Donald Trump

Christopher Jon Delogu

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ABSTRACTS

English

This text offers an overview of conspiracism in the United States from the 1950s to the present. Even if contemporary conspiracy mongering extends certain practices and attitudes that were already well-known at the time of Richard Hofstadter's classic study of the "paranoid style in American politics" (1964) and Robert Goldberg's more recent study of "the culture of conspiracy in modern America" (2001, 2010), it also introduces new techniques by savvy strategists, such as Donald Trump and Tucker Carlson, who exploit the economic vulnerability of many and the status loss anxiety of many others to destabilize the faculty of judgment of American citizens, increase polarization and suspicion between opposing camps, and weaken confidence in public institutions and democracy. This new conspiracism, we claim, serves to console the most vulnerable and turn the attention of the American public away from a forty-year social trend (conspiracy or not) which would be a neoliberal globalization that deepens inequalities and advances most often with total impunity to advance the interests of powerful deciders and loyalists—the first being to retain power and their control over narratives of power. The paper concludes with some recommendations for combatting this highly cynical and corrosive new conspiracism.

Français

Ce texte offre une synthèse du complotisme aux États-Unis depuis la guerre froide. Même si le complotisme contemporain prolonge certaines pratiques et mentalités déjà connues à l'époque des commentaires classiques de Richard Hofstadter sur le « style paranoïaque dans la politique américaine » (1964) et celui plus récent de Robert Goldberg sur « le complotisme comme tradition dans la culture américaine » (2001, 2010), il comporte de nouvelles techniques de manipulation par de fins stratèges (Donald Trump et Tucker Carlson en première ligne) qui exploitent la vulnérabilité économique des uns et la peur d'un déclassement social des autres afin de déstabiliser la

faculté de jugement des citoyens américains, augmenter la polarisation et la suspicion entre camps adverses et affaiblir la confiance dans les institutions et la démocratie. Nous affirmons que le complotisme sert à consoler les plus vulnérables et à détourner l'attention de l'ensemble de la population américaine d'une tendance sociale de quarante ans (conspirationniste ou non) qui serait une mondialisation néolibérale creusant les inégalités et opérant le plus souvent en toute impunité pour servir les intérêts des dirigeants et de leurs proches – en premier lieu de conserver le pouvoir et contrôler les récits de pouvoir. Enfin, nous proposons quelques pistes pour combattre le fléau de ce nouveau complotisme cynique et corrosif.

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Mots-clés

conspirationnisme, théorie du complot, vulnérabilité, style paranoïaque, anxiété de perte de statut, agent du chaos, extrême inégalité

Keywords

conspiracism, conspiracy theory, vulnerability, paranoid style, status loss anxiety, chaos agent, extreme inequality

OUTLINE

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1. Traditional conspiracism and two leading commentators: Richard Hofstadter and Robert Goldberg

2. Exceptional witnesses of 1950s conspiracism: Arthur Miller and Hannah Arendt

3. Understanding the new conspiracism with the help of Keith Payne's *The Broken Ladder*

Conclusion: Combatting the corrosive effects of the new conspiracism

TEXT

Introduction: The new conspiracists are not crazy, they're foxy

- 1 A first claim of this paper is that most conspiracy theorists (in the US and elsewhere) are not crazy—in other words, they are not

“certifiable lunatics...with profoundly disturbed minds” (Hofstadter 1964), though it’s easy to pretend they are.¹ Instead they belong to one of two groups of basically normal people: either 1) the large number of economically vulnerable and/or socially insecure folks who find in conspiracism a consoling subculture of the like-minded who speak the same language within a presupposed meaningful, just world; or 2) a relatively small but influential number of wealthy and socially dominant individuals who find it to their advantage to operate as calculating conspiracy theory strategists and who boldly use this destabilizing technique that scrambles the brain’s ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, true and false (Arendt 1951). This technique, now commonly called *conspiracism*, has four goals: a) to erode confidence in public institutions and ordinary people-powered democracy; b) to create disorder and delays that consume a lot of energy, money, and airtime; c) to render community-based democratic deliberations and problem-solving more divisive and less functional; d) to allow other agents (notably authoritarian and corporate leaders) to fill the breach and seize control amidst the chaos they have manufactured and offer their own services as uniquely gifted rescuer-saviors. The preparation, execution, and aftermath of the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol, supposedly to “stop the steal” of the 2020 US presidential election, offers clear empirical evidence of conspiracism in action that media outlets on every continent covered.

- 2 This paper follows the observation made by Robert Goldberg many years before Trumpism (in 2001 and 2010) and relayed by Matthew Dallek (2023) that conspiracy theorists of this second predatory type (e.g., Donald Trump, Tucker Carlson, Rush Limbaugh, Alex Jones) are “entrepreneurs in search of customers.” In other words, both parties (“buyers” and “sellers”) are meeting in the marketplace of ideas—whether top-tier media outlets, supermarket checkout tabloids, or today’s social media platforms—with the goal of having a dose of certain basic human needs met, notably some *fun*, *power*, *freedom*, *love*, and *a sense of belonging and mattering* within a supposedly ordered and just universe. My claim is that conspiracism (the production and consumption of the discourse of conspiracy theories and the mindset that goes along with such practices) is a fluid relationship between chaos agents who act as predatory con artists

(Carlson and Trump today, Joseph McCarthy and the John Birch Society in the 1950s) and their prey. The latter audience can be called conspiracy theory amateurs or conspiracy relaying hobbyists. These include today's QAnon Shaman (Callaghan 2022) and other ordinary citizens involved in the January 6, 2021 insurrection (some now convicted of "seditious conspiracy," see Feuer and Montague 2022) as well as, going back in time, outspoken people (Republicans and Democrats alike) who have claimed that 9/11 and JFK's assassination were both an "inside job" carried out by a branch of the US government (a claim also made about January 6), that men never really walked on the moon, that Jews use the blood of non-Jewish children in rituals and further back plotted with Romans to have Jesus killed, and many other air-tight, plot-driven conspiracy narratives in which, as Goldberg remarks, "everything can be explained; all the dots can be connected" (2010). The second claim of this paper is that conspiracism is more active and virulent in times of high vulnerability and status loss anxiety provoked, in the American context at least, by three main factors: a) two generations of increasingly extreme economic and social inequality (roughly ever since the 1980s era of neoconservative Reaganomics that initiated the rollback of the forty-year FDR to LBJ egalitarian trend in American society), b) higher rates of immigration since 1965 that raise questions about foreigners' behaviors and motives (are they American or un-American?), and, more recently, c) asymmetrical exposure (depending on one's race, class, gender, and citizenship status) to the effects of globalization, climate change, extreme weather events, climate and economic migration, housing and food insecurity, and ecosystem collapse. The purpose of the following pages is to provide the historical background necessary to understand the damage to society caused by conspiracism and propose possible solutions to combat this persistent problem of exploitation of the power-less by the power-full.

1. Traditional conspiracism and two leading commentators: Richard Hofstadter and Robert Goldberg

- 3 Fundamentally, I share the view expressed by Richard Hofstadter in his landmark essay on “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964) that “It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant.” I also share Hofstadter’s commitment, relayed by Robert Goldberg (and by other prominent historians and concerned citizens from Jason Stanley and Timothy Snyder to Jamelle Bouie and Anna Merlan) that *calling out the excesses and abuse of conspiracism*—a habit of mind that goes well beyond healthy skepticism, provocative contrarianism, and normal scientific and journalistic methods—is *an important and never-ending task*. Why ? Because conspiracism is about power, both a story about power and an exercise of power, and power and storytelling are two basic human needs.
- 4 My interest in conspiracism grew out of a seminar and subsequent book on far-right threats to democracy (*Fascism, Vulnerability, and the Escape from Freedom: Readings to Repair Democracy*, 2022).² Chapter 10 of my book, a discussion of Keith Payne’s *The Broken Ladder: How Inequality Affects the Way We Live, Think, and Die* (2017), takes up the problem (i.e., the pain, the harm) of conspiracism by making use of Payne’s chapter 6, “God, Conspiracies, and the Language of Angels: Why People Believe What They Believe.” That chapter confirms many of Robert Goldberg’s observations in his 2001 assessment of “the culture of conspiracy in modern America” published, coincidentally, around the time of the terrorist attacks of September 11 that would provoke a swarm of conspiracist discourses and counter-discourses and thus add further empirical evidence to support Goldberg’s argument.
- 5 In 2001, Goldberg was an early user of the word *conspiracism*. The term has not yet been accepted by Dictionary.com, but that could happen any day now given its increasing use by those commenting on

the twenty-first century intensification of conspiracy talk, now turbo-charged since 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic that killed over one million people in the United States (US) starting in the last year of the conspiracy-filled Trump presidency (see Robertson 2016, Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, Kelly 2023). With former president Trump now accused of “conspiracy to obstruct justice” (in the Mar-a-Lago classified documents case, see Savage 2023)—one of many conspiracy charges he faces in Washington D.C., Florida, New York, and Georgia—it is worth re-reading the original *New York Times* review of Goldberg’s 2001 history of conspiracism, *Enemies Within*, especially the reviewer’s concluding pushback against Goldberg’s portrait of America:

Conspiracism is an American tradition, Professor Goldberg writes, although only rarely, as in the 1850's and 1930's, do the conspirators seem even temporarily to have penetrated vital institutions. In that context his finger wagging over the emergence of a new nationalism of conspiracism seems a trifle alarmist. Conspiracy thinking has moved Americans beyond a healthy skepticism of authority, he writes. Lacking public confidence, core institutions become unstable and lose their ability to govern. The cancer of conspiracism has begun to metastasize. Without a new awareness of its character and quick intervention, countersubversion may overcome the body politic. Sounds to me like the makings of a conspiracy (Roberts 2001).

- 6 In hindsight, given all that has happened in this area since 9/11, the reviewer’s attempt at humor (insinuating that Goldberg slips and falls into yet another overwrought example of the very phenomenon he set out to study) and his dismissive words “finger wagging” and “trifle alarmist” may sound smug and naïve. Idealism and hoping for the best are admirable traits in many contexts, but Sam Roberts might have adopted a more cautious “wait and see” approach in his December 18, 2001 book review. Goldberg, on the other hand, ends up looking like a genius and prophet (especially after the conspiracy theorizing about 9/11), which is probably why he gets invited to deliver a prestigious lecture at Florida Atlantic University nine years later—a talk that allows him to scold his early doubters and repeat a call for vigilance in his conclusion:

Conspiracy thinking is not harmless. It is not merely wrong thinking and poor reasoning. Conspiracy theories are potentially dangerous because they demonize public officials and erode faith in national institutions. Negotiation and compromise become impossible when charges of betrayal and treason pepper debate. The loss of trust in America's leaders and institutions has gone beyond healthy skepticism. Allegiance has become suspect and governance more difficult.

This is not merely a matter of history. It is our present [in 2010]. Witness that the Secret Service reported more death threats against Barak Obama than any other president-elect. Twenty-five percent of Americans have heard the rumor that Obama is the Anti-Christ. Obama has also been tagged as a racist, Muslim, usurper, radical communist, Hitler, and Manchurian Candidate in both conspiracist and mainstream circles. A Birther movement insists that he was born in Kenya and is ineligible to be president of the United States. Fifty-eight percent of Republican voters believe that President Obama is not an American citizen or are unsure. In an August, 2010 poll coinciding with Obama's birthday, 27 percent of Americans remained convinced that he was not or probably was not born in the United States. Eleven members of the US House of Representatives have sponsored a bill requiring future presidential candidates to provide proof of citizenship. This despite repeated confirmations of his American citizenship, that hundreds of people would have to be in on the plot, and that a time machine would be necessary to plant false evidence. Yet, CNN's Lou Dobbs concluded, "questions won't go away."

Conspiracy thinking will not go away. It is a long time American tradition. We must learn to inoculate ourselves from it by education. Do not accept the sensational, however tantalizing and emotionally soothing it appears. Do not deny your American birthright to question. Reach beyond easily [sic] answers. Read, question, and think. Conspiracy theories, must not by default, become the conventional wisdom.

- 7 Viewed from 2024, there's a lot of truth to what Goldberg says (see my italics above). But Goldberg's remarks also contain a form of naiveté, namely his idea that we can "inoculate ourselves" and his repetition of the teacher's unproven article of faith that education

and critical thinking will set us free. He forgets, it would seem, that the typical conspiracy theorist considers himself the very model of the critical, enlightened freethinker (a personality trait that Hofstadter, also a distinguished professor, pointed out 50 years earlier). Indeed, the speech's very last sentence with its call to prevent conspiracy thinking from becoming conventional wisdom seems forgetful of Goldberg's own opening claim which is that between 1945 and 2000 (because, he says, of Hollywood's endless thirst for juicy plots, America's sense of mission, and its love/hate relationship with both "diversity" and "big government") conspiracy thinking became "a mainstream phenomenon"; i.e., common and conventional. Looking back from 2024, we can also point out that it was unhelpful for Goldberg to speak flatly about "Republican voters" and "Americans" instead of distinguishing between ringleaders and enthusiastic followers; in other words, influencers with superspreading power by virtue of their wealth, reputation, charisma, technical know-how, or public office versus ordinary consumers of social media consulting their Facebook feeds, "friends," and "likes." In short, that Goldberg mentions the media circus known as the "Birther movement" but not its most famous promoter, Donald Trump, seems like a glaring omission.

- 8 However, the major flaw in Goldberg's lecture—also somewhat surprising since he himself says that conspiracy thinking "is not merely wrong thinking and poor reasoning"—is his unwillingness or inability to see conspiracism as anything besides a lack of the right kind or quantity of thinking and vigilance, instead of including in his calculus the role of possible material concerns, notably status loss anxiety among lower-middle and middle-income Americans, especially those who are predominantly white (and therefore accustomed to the "wages of whiteness," Haney López 2014), less educated, and located relatively far from coastal or interior metropolitan hubs and relatively close to the Mexican border.³ Status loss anxiety—provoked by fears of faraway Chinese or neighboring Latinos "stealing" American jobs, among other causes—is real in 2010, especially after the subprime housing crisis, massive nationwide foreclosures, and huge asset losses of the 2008-2009 Great Recession that Barack Obama was put in charge of mopping up after his history-making inauguration as the first African American president

in January 2009. Goldberg's silence about the possibility that *anxiety over vulnerability and loss of power* were driving conspiracy thinking between 2001 and 2010—and, we can add, in the years from Obama to Trump to Biden too—is another striking omission that this paper, along with my book on fascism and vulnerability, aims to correct.

- 9 In sum, Goldberg's book and lecture offer an instructive though incomplete Internet era update of Richard Hofstadter's Cold War assessment of "paranoid thinking" and "conspiratorial fantasy" from 1964.⁴ That earlier study was also stronger at giving a backstory and lists of personality traits than it was at thinking about material causes. Hofstadter was inviting his reader to look *back* at both early American history and the country's recent recovery from the mass hysteria of McCarthyism and communist "witch hunts" as well as *forward* with a warning about the future potential for such harmful thinking and politically motivated persecution to continue away from the front pages and Congressional committees in less visible, banalized forms through the work of the John Birch Society and its neoconservative offshoots and networks of country clubs, alumni associations, and corporate boardrooms. Fundamentally, Hofstadter's essay underscores that conspiracy theories have always been a way for the power elite to control the narrative and retain power even if the subordination enforcement of outgroups occasionally comes with histrionic displays of petulant, feigned vulnerability (i.e., playing the victim).

2. Exceptional witnesses of 1950s conspiracism: Arthur Miller and Hannah Arendt

- 10 Before turning to Keith Payne's observations in *The Broken Ladder* and the problem of "the new conspiracism" under Trumpism, which still holds a tight grip over the Republican party more than three years after Trump's decisive and yet persistently disputed loss to Joe Biden, it is important to say a word about two canonical texts from the early 1950s—first, because that is the time of America's mission pivot from fighting European fascism to combating the worldwide spread of communism (with Joseph McCarthy as the self-appointed

lead crusader against that supposed new evil), and second because it is the virile time that Trump and many of his white, traditionalist, nationalist, and evangelical followers are nostalgic about, namely the pre-Civil Rights Act America that they consider “great” and say they want to restore. The first text is Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* from 1953. The second is Hannah Arendt’s magisterial treatise, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1951. Obviously, there are countless studies of these two monuments of twentieth century writing, and adding two more would go well beyond the scope of this essay.

- 11 About *The Crucible* and its reception history, it’s worth knowing that during the Clinton years in the context of a new film version of the play and a conspiracy (or “witch hunt” as some claimed) to remove the president from office, Miller looked back on his creation in a valuable *New Yorker* piece entitled, “Why I Wrote ‘The Crucible’” (1996). A writer’s testimony about their own work is not to be taken as gospel, nor however should it be ignored. Miller’s backward glance has the virtue of giving the reader in 1996 and today a “distant mirror” along with other interesting tidbits of the “making of” variety. We learn, for example, that Miller witnessed the pivot from fighting fascism to containing communism as all-consuming and paralyzing of protest—two features he was determined to resist:

There was magic all around; the politics of alien conspiracy soon dominated political discourse and bid fair to wipe out any other issue. How could one deal with such enormities in a play?

“The Crucible” was an act of desperation. Much of my desperation branched out, I suppose, from a typical Depression-era trauma—the blow struck on the mind by the rise of European Fascism and the brutal anti-Semitism it had brought to power. But by 1950, when I began to think of writing about the hunt for Reds in America, I was motivated in some great part by the paralysis that had set in among many liberals who, despite their discomfort with the inquisitors’ violations of civil rights, were fearful, and with good reason, of being identified as covert Communists if they should protest too strongly. (159)

- 12 Later in the piece, Miller repeats the observation famously made by Melvin Lerner in *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*

(1980) and later restated by Goldberg, Payne, and other commentators on conspiracism. The punchline comes in the three last sentences:

The more I read into the Salem panic, the more it touched off corresponding images of common experiences in the fifties: the old friend of a blacklisted person crossing the street to avoid being seen talking to him; the overnight conversions of former leftists into born-again patriots; and so on. Apparently, certain processes are universal. When Gentiles in Hitler's Germany, for example, saw their Jewish neighbors being trucked off, or farmers in Soviet Ukraine saw the Kulaks vanishing before their eyes, the common reaction, even among those unsympathetic to Nazism or Communism, was quite naturally to turn away in fear of being identified with the condemned. As I learned from non-Jewish refugees, however, there was often a despairing pity mixed with "Well, they must have done *something*." Few of us can easily surrender our belief that society must somehow make sense. The thought that the state has lost its mind and is punishing so many innocent people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied. (163-164)

- 13 "And so the evidence has to be internally denied" is a sentence that resonates strongly today for anyone who followed the aftermath of the 2020 US presidential election, witnessed the riot at the US Capitol, read the detailed and damning findings of the January 6th Committee, and heard Republican elected officials refer to participants in that riot as "heroes" and "hostages."
- 14 I include one more quotation to reconstitute Miller's effort in the 1990s to convey for his reader the frenzied atmosphere of the 1950s, just as his play recreated the frenzy of the 1690s. Here Miller states where he thinks the play's enduring force and appeal is coming from. He does not use the words *vulnerability*, *insecurity*, or *status loss anxiety*, but I believe, following Keith Payne and Thomas Edsall, that those terms offer a better answer than do the theatrical but rather fuzzy words "fanaticism," "paranoia," and "paranoid center" chosen by Miller.

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that, especially in Latin America, "The Crucible" starts getting produced wherever a political coup appears imminent, or a dictatorial regime has just been

overthrown. From Argentina to Chile to Greece, Czechoslovakia, China, and a dozen other places, the play seems to present the same primeval structure of human sacrifice to the furies of fanaticism and paranoia that goes on repeating itself forever as though imbedded in the brain of social man. (164)

I am not sure what “The Crucible” is telling people now, but I know that its paranoid center is still pumping out the same darkly attractive warning that it did in the fifties. For some, the play seems to be about the dilemma of relying on the testimony of small children accusing adults of sexual abuse, something I’d not have dreamed of forty years ago. For others, it may simply be a fascination with the outbreak of paranoia that suffuses the play—the blind panic that, in our age, often seems to sit at the dim edges of consciousness. Certainly its political implications are the central issue for many people; the Salem interrogations turn out to be eerily exact models of those yet to come in Stalin’s Russia, Pinochet’s Chile, Mao’s China, and other regimes. (Nien Cheng, the author of “Life and Death in Shanghai,” has told me that she could hardly believe that a non-Chinese—someone who had not experienced the Cultural Revolution—had written the play.) But below its concerns with justice the play evokes a lethal brew of illicit sexuality, fear of the supernatural, and political manipulation, a combination not unfamiliar these days. The film, by reaching the broad American audience as no play ever can, may well unearth still other connections to those buried public terrors that Salem first announced on this continent. (164)

- 15 Now as then, one often finds imaginative metaphors of fever, sickness, magic, and madness being used to characterize the furiously unrelenting and seemingly irrational character of conspiracism. One also hears optimists such as Barack Obama, for example, express the hopeful (others would say delusional) view that “the fever is breaking” or will break, by which they mean that people they consider deranged are now “coming to their senses” (Tomasky 2012). These metaphors are unhelpful because they shut down inquiry into where the conspiracism is coming from (namely from status loss anxiety and power loss anxiety, which of course are related, plus vulnerability caused by extreme inequality, unregulated globalization, contradictory immigration policies, and fear of change and disorder). These metaphors also facilitate the naïve belief that the problem will take care of itself and that conspiracy theorists will eventually just go

away. Here it might be helpful to recall the wise words of James Baldwin from 1962: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

- 16 Turning to Arendt, let’s first say that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* meets Mark Twain’s definition of a classic: a book that everyone wants to have read but no one wants to read. Those who do venture in will discover a densely argued and documented presentation written in a tone of high seriousness with occasional darkly humorous touches reminiscent of ironists such as Paul de Man or Jane Austen. For our purposes Arendt’s study clarifies the attraction and the harm of conspiracy theories. She explains how antisemitism becomes the template for all later conspiracy theorists—the main strategy being to allege a large and increasingly negative influence of a marginal group (Jews) whose actual power, they omit to say, was in decline starting in the 1850s as imperialism intensified. It’s easier to punch down at a weakened group after your conspiracy narratives have slyly (mis)represented that group as something powerful and menacing. Arendt also usefully explains how totalitarian propaganda relies more on domination than persuasion—the main strategy being the use of *repetition* and *consistency* to satisfy the common human desire to believe in a just world and reject chance, gaps, and indeterminacy. Arendt’s observations in 1951 about how “modern masses” behave—in particular their thirst for consistency and causal narratives—is strikingly resonant when one considers the operation of today’s conspiracy-laced information spaces in the US and elsewhere:

[Modern masses] do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part. Repetition, somewhat overrated in importance because of the common belief in the masses’ inferior capacity to grasp and remember, is important only because it convinces them of consistency in time. What the masses refuse to recognize is the fortuitousness that pervades reality. They are predisposed to all ideologies because they explain facts as mere examples of laws and eliminate coincidences by inventing an all-

embracing omnipotence which is supposed to be at the root of every accident. Totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency (351-52).

- 17 Arendt later returns to the same point with a zinger that hits home for anyone who sees totalitarian neofascism as a genuine threat to democracy in their own neighborhood or nation: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist" (474).
- 18 Arendt is an excellent guide to the similarities and differences between classical and modern tyrannies that first Tocqueville and then later historians such as Robert Paxton and Timothy Snyder would also place at the center of their work. As a final example, we can cite Arendt's observations on the usefulness of isolation to the modern tyrant. Isolation and loneliness are constantly being singled out as a major problem in today's America of smartphone addiction, the aftershocks of covid lockdowns, and the collapse of local newspapers and associative life that dates back at least to Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* lamentation from 2000.

It has frequently been observed that terror can rule absolutely only over men who are isolated against each other and that, therefore, one of the primary concerns of all tyrannical government is to bring this isolation about. Isolation may be the beginning of terror; it certainly is its most fertile ground; it always is its result. This isolation is, as it were, pretotalitarian; its hallmark is impotence insofar as power always comes from men acting together, "acting in concert" (Burke); isolated men are powerless by definition (474).

- 19 Arendt's presentation continues with a stimulating discussion of the differences between isolation and loneliness. For example, one glimpses in these pages a possible attraction for actual conspiracists and conspiracy theorists alike: by conspiring, literally "breathing together" as Goldberg reminds us, conspirators are undertaking an unauthorized, Promethean act of powerful and empowering collaboration and community building. An important takeaway suggested by Arendt's study is that conspiracists of all stripes see

themselves as powerful heroes on a mission, a band of brothers, not rogues or sinners. In the Christian tradition this goes back to Adam and Eve's alliance to transgress God's interdiction to eat from the Tree of Knowledge—a story discussed by Erich Fromm in his *Escape from Freedom* (1941) which is a centerpiece of my book on fascism and vulnerability. Classic works such as those by Fromm, Arendt, and Miller are infinitely suggestive, clarifying, and helpful—in vulnerable times especially.

3. Understanding the new conspiracism with the help of Keith Payne's *The Broken Ladder*

20 As a transition between Arendt and Keith Payne, I offer this quotation from Hofstadter's "Paranoid Style" essay which until now I have mostly left aside because it is generally so well known to those interested in the conspiratorial mind:

Perhaps the central situation conducive to the diffusion of the paranoid tendency is a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise. *The situation becomes worse when the representatives of a particular social interest—perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of its demands—are shut out of the political process. Having no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception that the world of power is sinister and malicious fully confirmed. They see only the consequences of power—and this through distorting lenses—and have no chance to observe its actual machinery. A distinguished historian has said that one of the most valuable things about history is that it teaches us how things do not happen. It is precisely this kind of awareness that the paranoid fails to develop. He has a special resistance of his own, of course, to developing such awareness, but circumstances often deprive him of exposure to events that might enlighten him—and in any case he resists enlightenment. We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well. (my italics)*

- 21 In short, the paranoid rejects the quip by Hegel (perhaps the “distinguished historian” Hofstadter has in mind?) that “the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.” In any case, these 1964 observations by Hofstadter on the isolation and grievances of the paranoid about “the world of power” can serve as a bridge to Keith Payne’s 2017 study of the psychological effects of extreme inequality and the related problem of political polarization that many also see as a factor in the recent spike in the use of force, fraud, and conspiracism.
- 22 The Crux of Payne’s *The Broken Ladder* is that extreme inequality deranges the faculty of judgment of both the highly vulnerable and the less vulnerable: the former become fearful and meek (at least on the surface, while in private chatrooms and at political rallies they may be loud and raucous), while the latter tend to be arrogant, preachy, and insensitive everywhere and all the time. As more people become vulnerable and lose power, the more they are susceptible to conspiracy theories which give the illusion of power and control because they provide the security of a knowable narrative. In exchange for loss of power and control in the real world, one has the consolation of being the narrator of a (self-pitying and/or self-righteous) story of one’s loss: “The system may not be working for them, but at least there is a system” (146).
- 23 With some clever experiments, Payne shows his reader how our brains fill in gaps and seek patterns. Not only do we want a “just universe” (Payne’s debt to Melvin Lerner, 143) where the bad are punished and the good are rewarded, but we seem to need it to be so at a very basic, physiological level; and if a rational order does not manifest itself spontaneously, we’ll invent and customize the logic, order, and rules. Payne: “We are especially likely to manufacture meaningful patterns when we feel powerless. The predictability, and therefore controllability, of patterns provides a bit of solace from the lack of control. This might help explain why it never seems to be the Volvo-driving accountant who sees Jesus in his cinnamon toast” (140). What Payne’s humorous punchline covers over, however, is that in today’s world the Volvo-driving accountant or other more powerful people can see it in their interest to play along as a means to retain their domination over the rubes and plebes who fall for such stuff—because while the many are staring at their toast, a few are

consolidating their control over the whole Volvo dealership and all other assets. To borrow from Muirhead and Rosenblum's account of "the new conspiracism," the dominant are able to leverage their advantages in a context of "malignant normality" that the conspiracist discourse spawns like so many toxic algae blooms, except here it's democracy, civil society, and whole communities that get poisoned not just plants and animals.

- 24 What's different about Payne, as compared to a Goldberg, Hofstadter, or Arendt, is that he backs up his claims with the evidence of psychological experiments, not with political speculation, historical narratives, or philosophizing:

All told about half of Americans believe in some form of conspiracy theory [...] At bottom, conspiracy theories are about two things: power and distrust. [...] The best predictor of which conspiracy theories people believe at any given time is which political party is in power. [...] People who feel powerless tend to believe in conspiracies carried out by the powerful. [Payne then recounts some experiments that prove this] Distrust—not facts or logic—made even contradictory theories seem more plausible than the official account. To believe in a conspiracy, you trade a bit of your belief that the world is good, fair, and just in exchange for the conviction that at least someone—anyone—has everything under control. [...] One of the simplest ways that people maintain the sense that the world is orderly is merely to insist that it is so, and then backfill their reasoning to make everything add up." (142-143)

- 25 A few pages later in the same chapter Payne allows himself to step back and make a hypothesis about where all this might be going:

Although no research has yet firmly established why inequality and religion are linked, I predict that when the research is done, the key factor will be inner feelings of status [loss] and [in]security. [...] In predominantly Christian countries, inequality is linked to greater belief in Jesus; in predominantly Muslim countries, inequality is linked to greater belief in Mohammed, and so on. People tend to turn to whatever belief system they were raised with when they feel insecure in the world. [...] [W]hen people feel that they are being left behind, that life is chaotic and their position is precarious, their brain picks up the pace in its work of steadying the world. And the

method works. Individuals who are religious tend to be happier and less anxious—about both life and death—than those who are not. Some belief systems provide comfort and reassurance in ways that ordinary thinking cannot.” (150-154)

- 26 Note, Payne is saying that secularism—the rejection of religion as superstition and the embrace of reason—will not protect people against conspiracism as much as will the sense of security that comes with lower vulnerability when the many are having their basic needs met most of the time; and not just *food, shelter, and clothing* but also their emotional needs for *freedom, fun, love, power, and a sense of belonging and mattering*. Without that basic sense of security about needs being met, conspiracism, says Payne—with or without God or other supernatural phenomena—is likely to proliferate, even within the most educated and rational civilizations.

Conclusion: Combatting the corrosive effects of the new conspiracism

- 27 That’s enough on Payne, but this review of older and newer forms of conspiracism would be incomplete if we did not offer some practical solutions. As should be clear by now, my claim is that conspiracism is not the main problem but part of the coping mechanism (for amateurs) and cover up (for professionals) when confronted with the pain caused by extreme inequalities of power. What happens when inequality is too large and unruly to ignore or hide? Answer: censorship and other forms of resistance, including conspiracism—which ultimately is about power and controlling narratives of power. Polarization in the US, due in large part to extreme power inequalities—which are societal choices not natural disasters or fate—has greatly increased since roughly 1980 (Payne 4-8). Lately this is causing the brain’s normal anxiety reduction mechanisms (through pure belief and happy talk, no matter how “crazy”) to break down even though paranoid thinking (which is hardly exactly calming) and conspiracy theorizing are today working at top speed and being further boosted in the Internet age by Twitter and other dizzying rage platforms. Extreme power inequalities, vulnerability, and status

loss anxiety form a vicious circle leading to 1) more high-risk behavior such as unplanned parenthood, drug abuse, and other addictions and recklessness; 2) reduced education and fewer skills; 3) poorer mental and physical health; 4) fewer friends and more isolation and loneliness. The cumulative effect of 1-4 is a generally shorter and poorer life, in all senses of the term, with less personal fulfillment.

- 28 If extreme inequality is unjust (though some disagree, more on that later), what happens when that injustice becomes too large to ignore or hide? Answer: more censorship, suppression, and oppression. The message about the effects of extreme inequality and the extreme vulnerability that it produces is effectively covered up—especially within filtered information spaces such as Fox News and other ideologically pure “silos”—by the chaos and confusion of conspiracy theories. All the time spent by the Anti-Defamation League, for example, challenging libelous “theories” about Jews is a bonus for the dominant group whose goal is subordination enforcement and diverting attention from the injustice of extreme inequality (economic, but also political and social). Conspiracy-mongering (by Fox News, Trump, Tucker Carlson, and their epigones) keeps attention away from the fifty-year “new Jim Crow” history of an organized and consistent effort by minorities of powerful elites and slim legislative majorities (often achieved through gerrymandering) to advance a political, social, and economic agenda that serves the wealthy and powerful, and produces more inequality and vulnerability for everybody else.
- 29 To summarize, the “bait and switch” strategy of the new conspiracism is this: While you are busy debunking conspiracy theory a, b, or c, you are paying less attention to X, Y, and Z that are often not even secretive nor exactly illegal actions. On the one hand there are (fake) threats and conspiracies, we are told and “a lot of people are saying,” led by: Jews (or Catholics or Muslims); witches, uppity women; communists, socialists, liberals; punks, poets, artists; illegal aliens, immigrants; the sexually deviant; Blacks, drug users, rapists; the “Woke”; the “Deep State”; Anthony Fauci, scientists; Anne Hidalgo, Carlos Moreno, “the 15-minute city,” and the list goes on. On the other hand, there are questionable practices going on mostly in broad daylight. These include individuals and large companies operating without oversight or accountability; extra-governmental “free zones”

and “freeports” with their own rules and 100% impunity; massive tax avoidance and tax evasion; verifiably rigged elections or no elections at all; land and other resource capture, smuggling, dumping, polluting; human trafficking and slavery; blatant ignoring of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and other international laws, charters, treaties, and protocols; judicial branch capture, and the list goes on. Conspiricism wins and democracy loses when the conversation becomes an endless loop of claims and counter claims about which threats are real and which are fake.

- 30 It is important to remember that not everyone believes in *Equality* or is opposed to inequality—quite the contrary. Many people, not just Protestants or those raised within authoritarian regimes, are at peace with large amounts of inequality; they consider it natural and normal, and see no reason, for now at least, to lift a finger to reduce it, even if it reaches extreme levels.⁵ Low solidarity and tribalist “us” versus “them” thinking, though highly corrosive of democracy (Stanley), is the norm in much of the world and rising inside many democracies. Three symptoms of US tribalism: 1) the 2017 Charlottesville riots (“Jews will not replace us”); 2) the January 6 riot at the US Capitol and the self-righteous “vice signaling” of some participants; 3) the entertaining 24/7 broadcasting of Fox News (more tactical storytelling than fact-based reporting) for whom a \$787.5 million fine for spreading conspiracy theories is just an operating expense to run a profitable anti-political business.
- 31 To conclude, I offer my answer to the old question “What is to be done?” First, remember that chaos agents spreading conspiracy theories win when they get you to believe that conspiracy theories are the main problem, when in fact conspiracy theories are the epiphenomenon, the entertaining side-show, diverting attention from the material problem (for the 99%), namely extreme inequality and vulnerability that result in shorter, poorer lives (Wallace-Wells 2023). Second, persuade the 1% that *they too* are negatively impacted by extreme inequality (see Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, 2010). Third, speak and write clearly, directly, and accurately. The authors in this essay and bibliography are models of clear, argument-driven prose. Do not yield in advance to those who deal in “alternative facts” or who celebrate or lament a “post-truth” world. (“Post-truth is pre-fascism,” writes Timothy

Snyder in *On Tyranny*, 2017). Do not give a debate platform to conspiracy theorists who are unwilling to submit real evidence in advance to back up their claims. Only participate in rule-governed public debates and avoid forums that risk degenerating into chaos theater or worse. That does not mean abandoning the field to “the crazies”—it means insisting on reality-based discussion and the consistent enforcement of ground rules. Similarly, one should defend real politics as argued confrontation between policy alternatives under the utilitarian principle of advancing the general public good and call out the anti-politics of chaos agents who want to replace politics with unmediated domination by force, fraud, and cruelty toward demonized and dehumanized “enemies of the people.” And most importantly, because individual vigilance has proven over and over to be inadequate, we should work collectively at *reducing extreme inequality* to more manageable, peaceful levels that most people consider normal and to be expected, even desirable, within an open society composed of individuals and groups with different backgrounds, gifts and talents, practices and projects. Reducing extreme inequality may not eliminate all conspiracism, but it has the best chance of reducing the vulnerability and insecurity that stoke conspiracism to uncontrollable and destructive levels that punish everyone. That some professional and amateur conspiracists may revel in chaos, stick to their stories, and refuse to back down is not a reason for those who believe in truth, facts, science, and democracy to walk away or stay silent.

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NOTES

¹ In a piece about the tendency of very wealthy people (from Henry Ford to Elon Musk) to make baseless claims and spout conspiracy theories, the economist Paul Krugman seems to believe that “The Rich Are Crazier Than You and Me,” (*The New York Times*, 6 July 2023). However, he may not mean that literally and is instead making a serious point similar to my own which is that rich people can be cagier—more opportunistic and foxy—than many people. The tip-off is his concluding paragraph: “In any case, what we’re seeing now is something remarkable. Arguably, the craziest faction in US politics right now isn’t red-hatted blue-collar guys in diners [i.e., the typical MAGA crowd], it’s technology billionaires living in huge mansions and flying

around on private jets. At one level it's quite funny. Unfortunately, however, these people have enough money to do serious damage.”

2 This paper, by the way, is adapted from a lecture on “Vulnerability and the Language of Paranoid Thinking and Conspiracy Theories from McCarthyism to Trumpism” that took place on April 25, 2023 on the invitation of the CEL (Linguistics Research Center) at the Université Jean-Moulin Lyon³ as the third in a four-day “Seminar on Conspiracy Theories.” Coincidentally, that one-hour talk happened the very day after the notorious conspiracy strategist Tucker Carlson was fired from Fox News for undisclosed reasons, and one week after Fox News settled a lawsuit for libel brought by Dominion Voting Systems for \$787.5 million. Dominion Voting Systems had been the target of conspiracy theories spread by Carlson and other Fox journalists who, with no evidence to back up their claims, had repeatedly attacked the reliability and neutrality of the company’s voting machines that were used in the 2020 US elections.

3 Another expert on conspiracy theories, Cynthia Miller-Idriss (*Hate in the Homeland*, 2020), is primarily interested in how they contribute to catalyzing far-right movements (“the mainstreaming of extremism,” 46); but she too is conspicuously silent about possible material causes and instead recommends “inoculating against hate” (161) with more and better information and conversations about “the *where* and *when* of far-right extremism” (162).

4 These lines from Goldberg’s 2010 talk are as good as anything in Hofstadter’s essay, and even include the key word *vulnerability*, but unfortunately in a way that is looking back to the *spiritual* shakeup of September 11, 2001 and not to the catastrophic *economic* fallout of the Great Recession that was happening in 2010: “Conspiracy theories like those surrounding 9-11 offer much to believers. In the face of national crisis and human failure, conspiracy thinkers rush to find purpose and meaning in tragedy. Conspiracy theorists order the random and bring clarity to ambiguity. They respond to the traumatized, those who cry for vengeance and demand to know who is responsible. Conspiracy thinking poses as a cure for powerlessness. It lifts the despair of vulnerability by arming believers with tantalizing, secret knowledge to expose the enemy.”

5 Astra Taylor (2023) continues Payne’s efforts from 2017 in a piece about how capitalism breeds insecurity and what to do about it. It begins with a stark reminder of what *extreme* inequality means today: “Since 2020, the richest 1 percent has captured nearly two-thirds of all new wealth globally

— almost twice as much money as the rest of the world’s population. At the beginning of last year, it was estimated that 10 billionaire men possessed six times more wealth than the poorest three billion people on earth. In the United States, the richest 10 percent of households own more than 70 percent of the country’s assets.”

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Populist conspiracy myths in far-right terrorist manifestos: A transnational perspective

Mythes populistes du complot dans les manifestes de terroristes d'extrême droite : une perspective transnationale

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ABSTRACTS

English

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in the electoral success of far-right populist movements in various Western countries, coinciding with an alarming increase in far-right terrorist attacks. While far-right populists seek to attain power through democratic means, their rhetoric has inadvertently fostered an environment conducive to the growth of extremist ideologies. This article delves into the manifestos published by far-right extremists from the United States, Germany, Norway, and Australia, illuminating how these manifestos mirror and amplify the narratives espoused by far-right populists. Beyond sharing common conspiracy myths, these terrorists often reference one another and populist politicians in their manifestos, further showing the entanglement between far-right populism and extremism. This paper undertakes a discourse analysis of these terrorist manifestos, probing into how right-wing extremists make use of conspiracy myths promoted by the populist right-wing. As far-right terrorism increasingly threatens peaceful coexistence, it becomes imperative to conduct new research that assesses the role of conspiracy myths in fueling terrorism and devises strategies to avert further radicalization.

Français

Ces dernières années, on a constaté une montée notable du succès électoral des mouvements populistes d'extrême droite dans divers pays occidentaux, coïncidant avec une augmentation alarmante des attaques terroristes d'extrême droite. Alors que les populistes d'extrême droite cherchent à accéder au pouvoir par des moyens démocratiques, leur rhétorique a involontairement favorisé un environnement propice à la croissance des idéologies extrémistes. Cet article se penche sur les manifestes publiés par des extrémistes d'extrême droite aux États-Unis, en Allemagne, en Norvège

et en Australie, mettant en lumière comment ces manifestes reflètent et amplifient les récits véhiculés par les populistes d'extrême droite. Au-delà de partager des mythes conspirationnistes communs, ces terroristes font souvent référence les uns aux autres et aux politiciens populistes dans leurs manifestes, montrant ainsi davantage l'entrelacement entre le populisme d'extrême droite et l'extrémisme. Cet article entreprend une analyse du discours de ces manifestes terroristes, examinant comment les extrémistes de droite exploitent les mythes conspirationnistes promus par la droite populiste. Alors que le terrorisme d'extrême droite menace de plus en plus la coexistence pacifique, il devient impératif de mener de nouvelles recherches qui évaluent le rôle des mythes conspirationnistes dans l'alimentation du terrorisme et élaborent des stratégies pour éviter une radicalisation supplémentaire.

INDEX

Mots-clés

terrorisme, extrême droite, Europe, États-Unis, manifeste, internet

Keywords

terrorism, far-right, Europe, United States, manifesto, internet

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- 2. Far-right terrorist manifestos
- 3. Populist conspiracy myths in terrorist manifestos
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Conclusion: Analyzing manifestos as a counter-terrorism strategy

TEXT

Disclaimer: For the sake of the academic inquiry, this article cites terrorist manifestos including their violent language.

Introduction: Populist and extremist entanglements

- 1 In recent years, there has been a significant increase in far-right terrorist activities across the “Western” world.¹ The DC-based national security think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies reported that right-wing terrorism not only accounts for most terrorist attacks in the United States (US) but has also grown in quantity between 2014 and 2020. They observed that “the United States faces a growing terrorism problem that will likely worsen” (Jones *et al.* 2020). There is an increase of far-right extremist activities in many European countries: Swedish authorities reported increased racist violence, the French police reported in 2020 as much far-right violence as never before, figures of far-right crimes are hitting the highest level in Germany since records began (Liger and Gutheil 2022: 75, 83, 85). While there are limitations to the available data as the data on far-right extremist violence is often incomplete and subject to interpretation, these trends suggest that there has been a rise in far-right extremism and violence in recent years.
- 2 The rise in far-right extremist violence takes place at the same with the rise of far-right populist parties. Building on Cas Mudde’s division between “far right” and “extreme right” (Mudde 2019), I distinguish between far-right populists and far-right extremists by their approach to liberal democracy. While far-right populists are trying to gain power within a democratic framework and abolish liberal democracy after having been elected to power, far-right extremists believe in violence as a tool for achieving this goal. Although their methods are different, there is a serious overlap in their ideology and belief system. In the general social environment of increasing polarization of political discourse and the growing influence of social media, the rhetoric of far-right populist parties has in particular created a fertile ground for extremist ideology to flourish. Far-right populist parties’ discourse has promoted the notion of a perceived threat posed by members of various outgroups (“Muslims”, “immigrants”, and so forth) and encouraged a sense of victimhood among members of the ingroup (“Christians”, “European nation states” and so forth). Aristotle Kallis (2013) has shown how these far-

right populist messages have reached beyond the mainstream into extremist scenes since far-right messages tend to target both a mainstream audience and people who can be qualified as extremists.

- 3 Not all far-right populist parties promote extremist views, and they regularly condemn acts of terrorism. Most supporters and members of these parties do not engage in violent or extremist behavior. However, this article will argue that the rise of far-right populist parties and the legitimization of their anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric has contributed to the normalization of far-right views and the radicalization of some individuals who may be more sensitive to extremist messages. Paul Wilkinson (1995) suggested that these far-right parties' racist and anti-immigrant propaganda were conducive to right-wing terrorism. studies have also raised awareness to the connection between the emergence of far-right parties and the increase in far-right extremist activities (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, Banteka 2019).
- 4 This article will contribute to the growing literature body on the link between the rise of far-right populism and the increase in far-right attacks. To shed light on this link, this paper will analyze some of the most common far-right conspiracy myths² as they are promoted by the far-right parties and compare those with the conspiracy myths in the terrorist manifestos. The article is comparing different types of texts in order to demonstrate the correlation: The paper will look at the writings by the far-right terrorists responsible for the 2011 Oslo and Utøya, Norway, 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand, 2019 Poway, California, 2019 El Paso, Texas, 2020 Hanau, Germany, 2022 Buffalo, New York, and attacks. It will contrast these primary sources with public statements by far-right populist politicians Gunnar Beck, Alexander Gauland, Björn Höcke and Martin Renner (Germany), Marine Le Pen (France), Malcolm Roberts (Australia), and Donald Trump (US). Given the troubling trend of incorporating far-right populist rhetoric into terrorist manifestos, this article demands serious consideration and necessitates concerted efforts to combat both virtual and real-life radicalization, alongside extremist speech and crimes targeting immigrants and minorities. In the following, this article will analyze some of the most common conspiracy myths used in such manifestos.

1. Conspiracy myths and dog-whistle politics

- 5 In the aftermath of the Holocaust, open expressions of antisemitism and racism have not been tolerated in Europe and the US. On the contrary, probably every single mainstream European and American leader has called for civic engagement against antisemitism and racism. But despite the general condemnation of these sentiments, prejudices against Jews, Muslims, and other minorities which have been part of European and American civilization for centuries (Langer 2020, Langer 2021a: 680), have not disappeared. The Anti-Defamation League's 2012 opinion survey in ten European countries revealed that pernicious antisemitic beliefs continue to be held by nearly one-third of those surveyed (ADL 2012). In 2023, they found the same percentage of Americans supporting antisemitic views (ADL 2023). At the same time, even larger percentages of Europeans and American sign up for anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant views (Tazamal 2022, Sisemore and Elsheikh 2022).
- 6 To exploit the antisemitic and racist stereotypes that are still alive in European societies today, nationalist and populist politicians turn to dog-whistle politics. Political columnist William Safire (2008: 190) defined this communication strategy as "[t]he use of messages embedded in speeches that seem innocent to a general audience but resonate with a specific public attuned to receive them." The term uses the analogy of the dog whistle used by shepherds. The whistle's high-frequency sound is audible to dogs but not to sheep and humans. Dog-whistle politics uses antisemitic and racist coded words that recognized by antisemites and racists but might be glossed over by those unfamiliar with these resentments and conspiracy myths (Haney López 2014, Langer 2022a, Langer 2022b).
- 7 Far-right populists use dog-whistle politics rather than being explicitly antisemitic and/or racist firstly because the coded language allows them to avoid being immediately detected and condemned by the wider public. This is particularly important in the current political culture, where expressing explicit antisemitic and racist views can be met with strong social backlash. In most European countries, this can even have legal consequences as there

are laws prohibiting antisemitic and racist speech (Gleiß and Laubenstein 2021). Another reason why the populist far-right turns to dog-whistling is to appeal to individuals who may not consider themselves antisemitic and/or racist but are nevertheless receptive to such conspiracist thinking.

- 8 These dog-whistle discourses of far-right populist parties and movements often involve a demonization of certain groups, most commonly immigrants and/or Muslims and present them as a threat to the “white” and/or “Christian” nation and its values (Langer 2021b). Drawing on a sense of victimhood, these discourses portray the “white” and/or “Christian” in-group as under threat of marginalization, displacement or extension. They also frequently involve a call for action against these perceived threats. While the dog-whistling does not include a call to act on the alleged conspiracy, it implies it. This is where extremism comes into the picture: Dog-whistle populism with its divisive and paranoid rhetoric can create an environment in which extremist ideologies flourish – and lead of acts of violence. The terrorist manifestos released in the past years suggest that this populist dog-whistling has shaped the ideological basis for the extremists’ violent actions.

2. Far-right terrorist manifestos

- 9 Far-right terrorists have been releasing manifestos or statements for several decades. One of the earliest manifestos is by David Lane, a white supremacist involved in several violent crimes in the 1980s and 1990s. Lane's manifesto, titled “88 Precepts,” outlined his beliefs in white supremacy and racial separatism (Kaplan 2000: 167). Notably, the choice of the number 88 holds significance in far-right circles, as the eighth letter of the alphabet is “h,” hence “88” symbolizes “Heil Hitler” (Miller-Idriss 2009: 104). Another significant example was the manifesto published by Anders Behring Breivik before he carried out the 2011 Norway attacks, which involved a car bombing in Oslo and a mass shooting on the island of Utøya, resulting in the deaths of 77 people, primarily targeting young participants in a left-wing youth camp (Bangstad 2012).
- 10 Just hours before the attacks, Breivik’s manifesto was published online. Without the traditional media gatekeepers, it quickly spread

through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. It was also shared, praised and promoted on far-right and white supremacist websites and forums like Stormfront, 4chan, 8chan (later known as 8kun) and Gab. Breivik (2011) titled his 1518-pages long document “2083: A European Declaration of Independence,” which detailed his anti-Muslim and anti-multiculturalist views and served as a justification for his attacks. In his manifesto, Breivik reproduced the notion of “white Europeans” losing their lands to foreign “invaders”. Breivik (2011: 993, 1109) describes an allegedly ongoing “Islamic colonization of Europe through demographic warfare” facilitated by the “political and cultural elites” who are selling white Europeans “into Islamic slavery”. In order to prevent this alleged sell-out and punish those responsible for it, Breivik (2011: 826) says that violence if necessary:

We train to kill but that doesn't mean we love violence. We use violence only for self defence, as pre-emptive actions and as a last option. We cannot allow our politically correct elites to sell us, their people, into Muslim slavery. [...] We, the resistance movements, are dispersed all across Europe. The essence of our actions is to convince our enemy that there is nowhere to hide. We are coming for every single one of them, if not today then tomorrow, if not tomorrow then in 10, 30 or even 50 years.

- 11 By publishing manifestos, Breivik and other terrorists gain access to a platform to disseminate their beliefs and calls to violence to a wider audience. By articulating their motivations in writing, the terrorists may feel that they are making their violence more understandable. But, more importantly, these documents serve as propaganda that seeks to promote extremist views and encourages others to join their cause and carry on their legacy. In his manifesto, Breivik (2011: 1264) invites “all European patriots to actively target all members of patriotic related Facebook groups (and non-FB networks) and invite them as friends, then send this compendium to all members of these related groups.”
- 12 In fact, Breivik's manifesto has been cited as a major influence by several far-right terrorists who have carried out attacks since 2011 (Macklin & Bjørge, 2021). Apparently, the manifesto served as a blueprint for Brenton Tarrant, who opened fire at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people and injuring dozens

more. In his manifesto, Tarrant (2019: 24) states that Breivik was the “true inspiration” for his attacks. Similarly, Patrick Crusius, who targeted Latinx shoppers at a department store in El Paso, Texas, resulting in the deaths of 23 people and numerous injured, claimed to have been inspired “by the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto” (Crusius 2019: 1). Crusius (*ibid.*) added that before having read Tarrant’s manifesto, he did not see Latinx people as his target. Payton S. Gendron, who killed ten Black people outside of a supermarket in Buffalo, New York in 2022, credited Crusius and Breivik as his inspiration and highlighted Tarrant’s manifesto in his formation as a white nationalist (Gendron 2022: 13).

- 13 Publishing a manifesto seems to have become a standard among far-right terrorists in recent years. Apart from the above-mentioned manifestos by Breivik, Tarrant, Crusius and Gendron, a number of far-right extremists released such documents. For instance, Dylan Roof, the perpetrator of the 2015 Charleston church shooting in South Carolina killing nine Black Americans, released his manifesto under the title “Last Rhodesian,” expressing white supremacist and anti-black views and referencing previous acts of white supremacist violence. John Earnest (2019), who killed a Jewish woman in a synagogue in Poway, California, in 2019, published a manifesto entitled “An Open Letter,” making use of antisemitic and white supremacist views and praising previous acts of far-right terrorism (Schiff and Justice 2023).
- 14 Many of these terrorists refer to far-right politicians to justify violence as a means of defending the perpetrator’s perceived threatened identity and cultural heritage. In his compendium, Breivik (2011: 383, 1267) praised Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders as a “patriot” and recommended to follow the politician’s Facebook page. The manifesto of the Christchurch shooter praises several far-right populist leaders. Tarrant (2019: 22) described Donald Trump as “a symbol of renewed white identity” and expressed his support for Brexit, which he perceived as “the British people firing back at mass immigration, cultural displacement and globalism.” Crusius (2019: 1) endorsed the Republican Party, because “with Republicans, the process of mass immigration and citizenship can be greatly reduced.” Breivik (2011: 1414) claims to have been a supporter of the Norwegian Progress Party, a right-wing party with representation in the

Starting, before getting disillusioned with democracy. *Nota bene*, all these right-wing politicians and formations condemned far-right violence at one point. I believe that they do not bear any direct responsibility for these acts of terror. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that they all promoted conspiracy myths which the far-right terrorists see as justification for their actions. In the following, this article will review some of the most common myths in far-right discourses, which are shared both by the normalized far-right political movements and far-right extremist scene.

3. Populist conspiracy myths in terrorist manifestos

3.1. The Great Replacement myth

- 15 The perpetrator of the 2020 Hanau shootings in Germany, Tobias Rathjen (2020), who targeted Muslims and individuals of immigrant backgrounds, released a manifesto and a video statement promoting anti-immigrant conspiracy myths related to the so-called “Great Replacement.” Rathjen (2020: 5, 7) believed that his *Volk* (“people”) were “the best and the most beautiful,” while Islam was “destructive.” He saw his act of terrorism as part of a “war...against the generation of our people” (Rathjen 2020: 24) caused by the alleged displacement of populations. Popularized by the French writer Renaud Camus in his 2012 book *Le grand remplacement* (“The Great Replacement”), the Great Replacement myth (also known as Great Replacement Theory) alleges that white European populations are being systematically replaced by non-European immigrants, particularly Muslims, leading to the decline of Western civilization (Önnerfors 2021).
- 16 The Christchurch terrorist’s manifesto also contains several explicit references to the “Great Replacement” myth (Ganor 2020: 5-12). Tarrant (2019: 4-5, 49) described “[m]illions of people pouring across our border ... to replace the White people who have failed to reproduce... This crisis of mass immigration and sub-replacement fertility is an assault on the European people that, if not combated, will ultimately result in the complete racial and cultural replacement of the European people.” To prove his point, Tarrant (2019: 49) refers

among others to London mayor Sadiq Khan, who was born to a Muhajir family, as a proof for the alleged replacement. Gendron (2022: 13) reproduces this notion in a more dramatic fashion:

No longer would I just accept our replacement. No longer would I just accept our genocide. No longer will I willingly serve the people who are trying to end me and my race.

- 17 Indeed, among the most popular conspiracy myths one can identify in populist narratives and terrorist manifestos is the Great Replacement. This far-right narrative suggests that there is a deliberate plot to replace white populations in Western countries with non-white immigrants. This myth reinforces other far-right extremist beliefs, including the idea that there is a global/Jewish conspiracy to undermine “Western” values and culture. This process is often labeled by the people who believe in it “white genocide” (Obaidi *et al.* 2022; Önnersfors 2021). For instance, Tarrant (2019: 6-7) defined “white genocide” as a combination of “the decline of fertility rates” among white Europeans and “mass migration” which will “disenfranchise us, subvert our nations, destroy our communities, destroy our ethnic binds, destroy our cultures, destroy our peoples.”
- 18 In his manifesto, Rathjen (2020: 21-22) suggested that it was the *Schattenregierung* (“shadow government”), a mysterious entity more powerful than the US President, that was responsible the alleged replacement of white populations by non-white immigrants. Although Rathjen does not explicitly implicate Jews as members of this shadow government, the rhetoric surrounding such theories often contains antisemitic undertones and can contribute to the promotion of antisemitic sentiments within far-right circles. (Crawford and Keen 2020). Unlike Rathjen, John Earnest (2019: 1, 6) made it clear that “[e]very Jew is responsible for the meticulously planned genocide of the European race” and that immigrants of color “are useful puppets for the Jew in terms of replacing Whites.” Earnest’s statement reflects the antisemitic myth of Jewish control, attributing to Jews an alleged agenda to destroy or replace white populations. Furthermore, the terrorist’s remark about immigrants of color being “useful puppets for the Jew” implies that non-white immigrants are merely tools manipulated by Jews to facilitate the

replacement of white populations. This statement perpetuates the dehumanization of immigrants of color, portraying them as mere pawns in a larger conspiracy. Earnest (2019: 2) goes as far to tie his extremist views on Jews to the Simon of Trent antisemitic trope. This trope is a medieval blood libel accusation against the Jewish community, alleging the ritualistic murder of a Christian boy named Simon in Trento, Italy, in 1475, which has perpetuated harmful stereotypes and prejudices against Jews ever since (Teter 2020).

- 19 The myth of a “replacement” of white populations with people of color has been promoted by several prominent far-right politicians in both Europe and the US. In a 2018 speech, Marine Le Pen, a far-right French politician, argued, “Never in the history of mankind have we seen a society that organizes such an irreversible submersion of such unmanageable magnitude, which, in the long run, will lead to the disappearance of its culture and way of life through dilution or substitution” (Rastier 2019). In April 2019, during his campaign for the 2019 European Parliament election on behalf of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Heinz-Christian Strache asserted that the notion of “population replacement” posed a genuine threat to Austria. He emphasized that the goal was to prevent Austrians from becoming a minority within its own borders (Reuters 2019). Similar ideas find endorsement from Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary and leader of the far-right Fidesz party (Langer 2021b). Orbán often portrays the European Union's immigration policies as a threat to Hungarian cultural integrity and advocates for policies to boost the birth rate among native Hungarian populations while simultaneously limiting the influx of migrants whom he labeled as “invaders” (Norris 2023).
- 20 In the US, Donald Trump has made several comments that echo the Great Replacement myth during his 2016 campaign, when he claimed that Mexican immigrants were bringing crime into the US, echoing the Great Replacement narrative of the “invading” immigrant of color (Langer 2024). He also called for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” in response to terrorism, a view that reinforces the narrative of the Muslim invading enemy (Beydoun 2021). Moreover, during a rally in Minnesota in October 2020, Trump claimed that refugees were being resettled in Minnesota to change

the demographics of the state and accused his Democratic opponent Joe Biden of being behind this plan (Choi 2020).

- 21 The Great Replacement myth has often been used to justify acts of violence, including mass shootings and other forms of terrorism, by claiming that such actions are necessary to protect the white race from extinction, as I have shown above. The far-right populist politicians quoted above, of course, do not endorse violence. Yet, both groups seem to agree on who is to blame for this alleged replacement: “the globalists.”

3.2. Globalists

- 22 A generally accepted definition of “globalist” refers to someone who advocates for globalization, which is the process of increased interconnectedness and integration of economies, societies, and cultures on a global scale. Arising in the post-war debates of the 1940s in the US, globalists typically believe in the importance of international cooperation, which they see as a positive force for economic growth, development, and cultural exchange (Rosenboim 2017). But in a context of conspiracy myths, the term “globalist” is used pejoratively. Those who perpetuate the Great Replacement myth, often envision a secretive elite pulling the strings behind the scenes. This secretive elite is often described as “globalists” who are in a discursive opposition to “nationalists” or “patriots”, which is the self-identification of the far-right.
- 23 The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany has been actively promoting the Great Replacement myth and connecting it to a manipulation of so-called globalists. The party's platform frequently references the idea of *Umvolkung* (“population replacement”) in Germany. For instance, during the 2017 German federal election campaign, one of the AfD's campaign posters depicted a heavily pregnant white woman with the caption “New Germans? We'll make them ourselves!” (Waring 2019: 212). Within this narrative, there exists an alleged globalist conspiracy aimed at undermining the nation state, a notion widely promoted by AfD representatives. Thuringia AfD leader Björn Höcke has argued that “[p]eoples and cultures are worthless in the eyes of the globalists and, as possible powerful adversaries, are annoying troublemakers in their bizarre agenda,”

hereby asserting that the so-called globalists are trying to eliminate nation states (cited in Netzpolitik 2019). Party leader Alexander Gauland has expressed similar sentiments, suggesting a connection between the myths of population replacement and globalist efforts to erode national sovereignty:

We are in a struggle against forces that sell their globalist program of nation dissolution, ethno-cultural unification and tradition annihilation as the humanity and goodness itself. We allow ourselves to be displaced in the service of the progress of humanity. We are to dissolve ourselves as a people and nation in a great whole. But we have no interest in becoming humanity. We want to remain Germans (cited in BfV 2019).

- 24 Gauland's quote articulates a common narrative in far-right rhetoric, which portrays globalization and the actions of so-called globalists as a threat to national identity and sovereignty. Gauland suggests that these forces are selling their agenda as representing humanity and goodness, but in reality, they seek to undermine traditional values, cultures, and national identities. Gauland's rhetoric positions the German nation as under siege, facing existential threats from external forces seeking to dismantle it. Emphasizing the desire to preserve and maintain German identity and culture separate from broader global trends, he reflects a sentiment of nationalism and isolationism.
- 25 Trump, too, prefers the term "globalist" to talk about this alleged conspiracy. For instance, in his address to the United Nations General Assembly, Trump (2019) asserted that "The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots." Trump (2020a) accused the previous administrations of "[o]ne cold-hearted globalist betrayal after another". At a protest for "Law and Order", Trump (2020b) noted that "For half a century — shipping your jobs to China. That's what they've been doing. ... And selling you out to the rich, globalist Wall Street donors." Nota bene, establishing a link between globalists and Wall Street has been a common argument in antisemitic narratives for a century at least. In these narratives, Jews are portrayed as wielding disproportionate influence in finance and using this power to advance alleged globalist agendas (Achinger and Fine 2015: 4, Rensmann 2017: 410). Indeed, the antisemitic association of the

banking system with the Jewish has become a common place in far-right thought. To quote Gendron (2022: 14): “Banks are run by the Jews, we should all know this by now.”

- 26 Similarly to the above-mentioned populist politicians, extremists see globalists as responsible for the alleged Muslim threat to Europe. Breivik (2011: 1299) stated that “capitalist globalists will do everything in their power to prevent us from deporting the Muslims living in Europe.” Breivik saw an economic interest beyond this alleged globalist conspiracy:

The globalists (lead by the US) want to preserve Europe as a stable market for their products. It is in their interest to prevent us from becoming truly sovereign. In reality this is called slavery. They want to keep us as slaves. They will therefore do everything in their power from preventing us from uniting and as we already know; Western European countries will remain broken as long as there are large Muslim enclaves (mini-Pakistan's) in all major cities.

- 27 Tarrant (2019: 10, 81), too, saw the threat of “internationalist, globalist, anti-white” politicians and called Americans to engage in a civil war “overthrowing the global power structure and the Wests’ egalitarian, individualist, globalist dominant culture.” It is worth noting that the use of the term “globalist” in far-right extremist and populist circles is often associated with antisemitic conspiracy myths that suggest that Jews are part of a shadowy, international “cabal” that seeks to undermine the interests of the nation and the wider world. Often, these globalists are casted as individuals seeking to create a one-world government, also known as New World Order (NWO). Myths around a NWO have been propagated by far-right politicians for decades (Mudde 2007: 193-195). This narrative has its roots in centuries-old antisemitic tropes, such as the idea of a Jewish conspiracy to control the world and the idea that Jews form a “state within a state” (Langer 2020). At other times, certain individuals are mentioned instead of the abstract figure of the “globalist”, such as the Rothschild family (Langer 2022a) or George Soros (Langer 2021b). The use of these tropes and applying them to Jewish figures reinforces the idea that Jews are behind a plot to control the world and serves to demonize and dehumanize Jews.

28 By using these coded words, the far-right can convey its extremist views to potential followers while avoiding direct accusations of antisemitism, which can be more easily detected and condemned. Indeed, some of these terrorists refuse to be called antisemites (Tarrant 2019: 20). Others take an even more deceptive approach by characterizing Judaism as a “friendly religion/ideology” (Breivik 2011: 1304) and advocating for the reconstruction of the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem as a shared Christian-Jewish place of worship (Breivik 2011: 1320). At the same time, both Breivik and Tarrant emphasize that the Jews’ genuine place is in Israel, thus, outside of Europe (*ibid.*).

29 While not all far-right terrorists mask their true attitudes towards Jews, the degree to which they openly express these sentiments varies. Breivik’s and Tarrant’s philosemitism stands in clear contrast with other perpetrators of far-right violence, such as Rathjen (2020: 6), who called for the destruction of the “people of ... Israel”, even though as part of a broader list of Middle Eastern peoples to be destroyed, rather than specifically targeting Jews. At the same time, Gendron (2022: 7) identified as an antisemite and wished “all JEWS to HELL! Go back to hell where you came from DEMON.” Gendron (2022: 12), who is one of the most explicit of the terrorists case studies in this investigation, admits that the Jews are actually responsible for the alleged great replacement and does not use the term “globalist”:

Why attack immigrants when the Jews are the issue? Because they can be dealt with in time, but the high fertility replacers will destroy us now, it is a matter of survival we destroy them first.

30 Gendron's explicit acknowledgment of Jews as responsible for an alleged population replacement underscores the intertwining of antisemitism with the Great Replacement ideology, portraying Jews as the primary agents behind demographic shifts. Additionally, his rejection of the coded term “globalist” in favor of direct accusations against Jews further emphasizes the centrality of antisemitism within his worldview and extremist narrative.

3.3. Cultural Marxism

- 31 Another recurring enemy in the far-right manifestos is “cultural Marxism.” The term originated in the 1920s among Marxist scholars like Antonio Gramsci, who argued that the socialist revolution failed due to its neglect of cultural values enabling capitalism. Gramsci believed that political change necessitated cultural transformation. This concept was later embraced by the Frankfurt School, a Marxist social theory institution founded during the interwar period. When Jewish members of the Frankfurt School fled Nazi Germany to the US, Americans ultraconservatives suggested that these “cultural Marxists” were undermining traditional Christian values through promoting feminism, gay rights, and atheism (Busbridge *et al.* 2020: 4). In recent years, the term has enjoyed a growing popularity both among far-right extremists and populists and is used to describe a supposed plot to subvert “Western” values by promoting multiculturalism, political correctness, and other progressive ideals (Tuters 2018). Commenting on religious nonprofits helping refugees in Europe, Tarrant (2019: 70) asserted that “NGOs hide their true intentions behind a facade of religiosity,” but...

the people running the show are in fact far from religious themselves and more often than not are actually atheistic cultural marxists using naive Christian Europeans to both labour and fund their own attempt at class and racial warfare.

- 32 This excerpt from Tarrant's manifesto reflects a belief that individuals in positions of power, despite presenting themselves as religious, are actually atheists exploiting the goodwill of Christian Europeans, using them as unwitting participants in their agenda of perpetuating class and racial conflict. Tarrant (2019: 28-29) also suggested that the press and education system have “fallen to the long march through the institutions carried out by the marxists (sic)”. Gendron (2022: 11) took over the same observation from Tarrant. But “cultural Marxism” is especially visible in Breivik's manifesto: according to my research, the expression “cultural Marxist” appears 453 times and “cultural Marxism” a further 88 times in his document. According to Breivik (2011: 1352), the “biggest threat to Europe is the cultural Marxist/multiculturalist political doctrine”, which “involves

destroying Christendom, the Church, our European cultures and identities and opening up our borders to Islamic colonization.”

- 33 The “cultural Marxism” narrative often posits that Jews are using these “cultural Marxist” ideas to weaken and ultimately destroy “Western” civilization (Hanebrink 2018). For example, John Earnest (2019: 1) writes in his manifesto that “Every Jew is responsible [...] for cultural Marxism.” By tying the concept of “cultural Marxism” to Jews, far-right extremists can leverage a long-standing conspiracy myth to promote their extremist agenda and incite violence against Jews: Allegations around the elite’s so-called cultural Marxist agenda is very much in accordance with the fabrication of “Judeo-Bolshevism”, according to which Jews are left-wing and intent on destroying Christian and traditional values. Adherents to this conspiracy myth claim that there is a Jewish–communist takeover of the “Western” world. After the 1917 Soviet revolution, Polish Jews were accused by Catholic nationalists in the country of sympathizing with the communist revolution, hence the term *Zydokomuna* (‘Judeo–Communism’). Indeed, several Eastern-European Jews expressed interest in left-wing ideas because they believed in Communism’s promise of equality for all. These individual cases were often abused by antisemites to promote the idea of a “Judeo–Bolshevism” (Caumanns and Önnerrfors 2020 : 447, Hanebrink 2018).
- 34 Apart from terrorists, many far-right populists have used the term “cultural Marxism” to criticize what they see as a progressive cultural agenda that seeks to undermine traditional values and institutions. They argue that this agenda is the result of a conspiracy by left-wing academics and intellectuals who have been influenced by Marxist ideas. The AfD has used the term cultural Marxism on several occasions, for instance when suggesting that it is a “cultural Marxist” agenda that is pushing Germans towards facing responsibility for Germany’s colonial crimes (Ziai 2023). This rhetoric proved particularly advantageous for the party especially during Germany’s center-left government tenure post-2021. AfD Member of the German Bundestag Martin Renner (2022: 3938) accused the center-left government of pushing a “cultural Marxist” agenda that goes against the interests of the majority of Germans:

You and your politics have not only installed insurmountable ideological membranes in the realm of culture and media, but everywhere. These membranes are supposed to feign democratic freedom, but they are only permeable to a zeitgeist, the cultural Marxist spirit. Those who support the trigger themes of your eco-socialist, globalist [...] policy will have their feeding troughs filled with taxpayers' horn of plenty, singing "hosanna!" In this way, you [...] continue to work on a new society that the majority of citizens do not want.

- 35 In a similar vein, in a speech at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, AfD Member of European Parliament Gunnar Beck (2022) said that there is "a cultural war between an unholy alliance of globalists, their gatekeepers and the cultural Marxist left versus traditional Europe." These statements by Beck and Renner also show the link between myths on globalists and cultural Marxists. Australian senator Malcolm Roberts (2017) from the far-right party One Nation accused the state government of harassing Christians and for having "the real aim" of "closing down Christianity," which is "part of the cultural Marxist march." Roberts (2019) also accused the Labor party of promoting "cultural Marxist" schools by promoting "sexual radicalism and anarchy", referring the party's declaration against the discrimination of queer students and faculty in religious schools. The "cultural Marxism" myth has gained traction also beyond the "Western" world, such as in Brazil, where Jair Bolsonaro's Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo famously labelled climate change a "Marxist conspiracy" (Casarões and Flemes 2019).

Conclusion: Analyzing manifestos as a counter-terrorism strategy

- 36 As this paper has shown, far-right terrorist manifestos reproduce conspiracy myths perpetuated by normalized far-right political parties and individuals. The entanglement of far-right populism and extremism is intricately tied to language and rhetoric. Far-right populists employ narratives, demonizing and othering certain groups while promoting conspiratorial thinking and using coded language. This rhetoric normalizes extremist ideas and can also erode

democratic norms and institutions by undermining trust in essential pillars of democracy, like the media when these are discredited as “fake news” or the judiciary when they are labeled as “biased” for reports and decisions that go against the far-right’s political interests. The use of social media further amplifies the reach of these narratives, fostering echo chambers and potential radicalization. Countering this entanglement requires vigilant scrutiny of political discourse, media literacy promotion, and active efforts to counter extremist narratives to protect democratic societies from its corrosive effects.

- 37 Analyzing terrorist manifestos can provide insights into extremist groups, which can help in the development of more effective counter-terrorism strategies. I see various potential uses of this knowledge derived from the manifestos: first of all, terrorist manifestos can provide insights into the extremist ideology of the group or individual responsible for the attack. By understanding the ideology and beliefs of the attacker, law enforcement agencies can develop more targeted strategies for countering and preventing future attacks. Manifestos can also provide information on the types of targets that the terrorists are likely to attack. For example, the Christchurch shooter’s manifesto contained information about his plan to attack mosques. By analyzing the manifesto, authorities were able to identify other potential targets and take steps to prevent further attacks.
- 38 Apart from identifying potential targets, manifestos can help law enforcement agencies identify and track extremist groups, as well as individuals who may be at risk of radicalization. By analyzing the language and content of manifestos, authorities can develop a better understanding of the networks and support structures that exist within extremist groups. Once having identified these groups and the individuals who are at risk of radicalization, manifestos can be used to develop effective counter-narratives to extremist ideology. By analyzing the language and content of the manifesto, researchers and policymakers can identify the underlying grievances and social factors that lead individuals to embrace extremist ideologies and develop strategies for countering these narratives.

- 39 While analyzing these manifestos can be a key strategy of counterterrorism, I would like to point out that not all terrorists publish manifestos, and not all manifestos are easily accessible or comprehensible. Furthermore, even if a manifesto is available, it is often difficult to predict or prevent specific acts of violence. Preventing terrorism requires a multifaceted approach that includes addressing the underlying social factors that can lead individuals to embrace extremism, as well as developing effective law enforcement and intelligence strategies to detect and disrupt terrorist plots. It is also important to recognize the role of social media and online platforms in spreading extremist ideologies and facilitating radicalization. Efforts to counter online extremism encompass a range of strategies, including improving online content moderation, promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills, and fostering strong partnerships between tech companies, law enforcement, and civil society organizations (Langer 2023: 28-30). Manifesto analysis emerges as a valuable component within this broader strategy, crucial for confronting the multifaceted nature of the challenge posed by terrorism. By providing in-depth insights into the rhetoric and ideologies perpetuated by far-right extremists, this paper contributes to the development of effective counter-narratives and informs targeted interventions aimed at preventing radicalization and extremist violence.

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NOTES

1 By putting the term “Western” in inverted commas throughout the essay, I wish to express my discomfort with this term. Edward W. Said (1979) showed how the idea of a “Western civilization” created a binary between “the West” (“the Occident”) and “the East” (“the Orient”) and justified colonialism and imperialism by depicting “the West” as superior to “the East.”

2 Throughout this paper, I avoid using the term “conspiracy theory,” because these narratives are not theories as they cannot be verified. Instead, I will refer to them as “conspiracy myths”.

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The “Turkey story”: A critical narrative analysis of a potential “Brexit conspiracy”

La « Turkey story » et le Brexit : analyse narrative critique d'une théorie du complot potentielle

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ABSTRACTS

English

Extensive academic literature has been devoted to the way “Brexit narratives” were used during the 2016 referendum campaign. Both camps dwelt on this rhetorical tool to create stories about the advantages of leaving or staying in the European Union (EU). Overall, studies have revealed the construction of broadly similar stories, in particular within the “populist narratives” of the Leave campaign, which depicted the EU as a “failure”, an “oppressor”, and an object of anti-establishment “fury”. Within the field of narratology, cognitive linguistics and conspiratorial studies, this paper proposes a discursive analysis focused on one particular narrative which, we argue, has received relatively little attention but which might constitute an example of “Brexit conspiracy”: what we call “the Turkey story”. Indeed, one key element in the Brexit narratives elaborated by the official pro-Brexit campaign, Vote Leave, was the fact that Turkey, and other poorer – and predominantly Muslim – countries, were “in the pipeline” to join the EU. At first marginal, this story soon took centre-stage to justify the necessity to leave the supra-national organization before “hordes” of illegal immigrants from those countries, and from neighbouring Iraq and Syria, decided to emigrate *en masse* to Britain. Thanks to the narrative analysis of speeches and declarations by leading Vote Leave members, this paper sets to examine whether “the Turkey story” amounts to a conspiracy theory and how it was used to defend the anti-EU agenda, which will lead to the introduction of the concept of “strategic conspiracy”.

Français

Une abondante littérature académique a été consacrée à la manière dont les « récits du Brexit » (*Brexit narratives*) ont été utilisés pendant la campagne référendaire de 2016. Les deux camps ont créé des histoires sur les avantages de quitter ou de rester au sein de l'Union européenne (UE). Dans l'ensemble, les études révèlent une trame narrative similaire, en particulier dans les récits populistes de la campagne Leave, qui a dépeint l'UE comme

un « échec », un « oppresseur » et un objet de « rejet furieux » de l'élite. Dans le cadre de la narratologie, de la linguistique cognitive et des études conspiratoires, cet article propose une analyse discursive axée sur un récit particulier qui, selon nous, a reçu relativement peu d'attention mais qui pourrait constituer un exemple de « conspiration du Brexit » : ce que nous appelons la « Turkey story ». La campagne officielle pro-Brexit, Vote Leave, a en effet affirmé que la Turquie et d'autres pays plus pauvres – et majoritairement musulmans – étaient sur le point de rejoindre l'UE. D'abord marginale, cette histoire s'est rapidement propagée pour justifier la nécessité de quitter l'organisation supranationale avant que des « hordes » d'immigrés clandestins de ces pays, ainsi que de l'Irak et de la Syrie voisins, ne décident d'émigrer en masse vers la Grande-Bretagne. Grâce à l'analyse narrative critique des discours et des déclarations des principaux membres de Vote Leave, cet article propose d'examiner si la « Turkey story » s'apparente à une théorie du complot et de voir comment elle a été utilisée pour défendre l'agenda anti-UE, ce qui conduira à l'introduction du concept de « conspiration stratégique ».

INDEX

Mots-clés

analyse narrative, théorie du complot, Vote Leave, Brexit, Turkey story, conspiration stratégique

Keywords

narrative analysis, conspiracy theory, Vote Leave, Brexit, Turkey story, strategic conspiracy

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TEXT

Introduction

- 1 Soon after the result of the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's continued membership of the EU, many journalists, and scholars, have started (or continued) to question some of the claims made during the campaign, in particular by the pro-Brexit side of the debate (Begg 2019; Mallaby 2019). What turned out to be, most of the time, "Brexit lies" (Grey 2022, 2023), along with Trump's victory the same year, are symptomatic of what Fisher and Gaber (2022) call "strategic lying", which seems to be part of the post-truth political era we currently live in (Marshall and Drieschova 2018; Allen and Stevens, 2018: 11; Musolff, 2022: 122). "Strategic lying" is defined by both "its misleading content and its strategic use within the context of a political campaign in which parties battle to control the campaign agenda" (Marshall and Drieschova 2018). It helps frame certain issues by giving prominence to a particular – and deceitful – understanding of political narratives.

- 2 As a matter of fact, storytelling, of which political narratives are the "communicative product" (Reisigl 2021), played an important role during the Brexit campaign and so-called "Brexit narratives" (Ridge-Newman *et al.* 2018) were instrumental in the overall framing of the Brexit debate (Bonnet 2020). This is why abundant literature has been devoted to the "populist narratives" (Brusenbauch Meislová 2021), elaborated by the Leave campaign, and based, in part, on the claims/lies that leaving the EU would bring an extra £350M to finance the National Health Service (NHS) (Schnapper and Avril 2019: 50), or that non-EU countries would line up to strike new free-trade deals with the United Kingdom (UK) (Clarke *et al.* 2017). It seems however that little attention has been devoted to the fallacious argument/ narrative that the EU was secretly plotting to ensure that Turkey would soon join the European organisation, and how leading

Brexiters narrated this idea for political gain, in what we might call “the Turkey story”.

- 3 In line with the general theme of this special issue of *ELAD-SILDA*, the aim of this paper is therefore to determine whether Vote Leave’s narrative about Turkey being “in the pipeline” to enter the European Union (EU) amounts to a conspiracy theory, or whether it might be considered as mere disinformation – or “strategic lying” – to fuel resentment at the EU, by dwelling on “ethnocentric sentiments” (Sobolewska and Ford 2020: 228) and resorting to what Wodak calls “the politics of fear”, through the discursive construction of “scapegoats and enemies” (2021: 8). Turkey’s accession to the EU has indeed led to highly sensitive political debate within the European organisation (Aydin-Düzgit 2012).
- 4 To examine how the argument about Turkey was narrated in discourse, we have assembled a corpus of documents from Vote Leave’s official website. The theoretical, contextual and methodological framework, defined in the first part, will help us understand the results of the narrative analysis, in the second part. The conclusion will discuss the conspiratorial potential of the “Turkey story” and introduce the concept of “strategic conspiracy”.

1. Contextual approach, theoretical framework and methodology

1.1. Setting the scene: Brexit as fertile ground for the emergence of the “Turkey story”

- 5 In a bid to mend political and ideological divisions within his party and reinforce his leadership – by neutralising the UK Independence Party (UKIP) threat and settling the European question for a generation – David Cameron proposed, in January 2013, a referendum on the UK’s continued membership of the EU (Dorey 2021). After negotiating a new deal with the EU, albeit quite limited, he led the Remain campaign. “Stronger in Europe”, the official group to stay in the EU, faced a fragmented, yet extremely determined, well-funded

and highly organised opposition. Two groups, with different agendas, at first, campaigned to leave the EU: one unofficial organisation, Leave.EU, close to UKIP (Browning 2019), and Vote Leave, more “respectable” (Clarke *et al.*, 2017: 31) and close to the Conservative Party, which was designated as the official Leave campaign by the Electoral Commission (Schnapper and Avril 2019).

- 6 The issue of sovereignty was at the heart of both Leave groups. Vote Leave focused on economic sovereignty and Leave.EU decided to lay the emphasis on territorial and cultural sovereignty (Browning 2019). The “heart vs. head” narrative dominated the campaign, as the crux of the debate was to win over wavering voters, who resented the EU but who thought that leaving might be too risky (Clarke *et al.* 2017: 33). As the economic arguments were clearly in favour of the Remain campaign, Vote Leave decided to change its strategy and to “turn up the volume on the one issue that was dominating the minds of most voters”: immigration (Clarke *et al.* 2017: 53). The overall narrative now was that uncontrolled EU immigration was putting immense pressure on the ailing UK social services, such as the NHS and the school system. Resorting to container metaphors, Vote Leave members depicted Britain as overwhelmed by immigrants and on the brink of collapse (Bonnet 2020). One month before the referendum (Worral 2019), Vote Leave senior member Michael Gove warned that Turkey and four other countries could join the EU as soon as 2020.
- 7 The “Turkey story”, as we have decided to call it in this paper, was simple: along with other Eastern – and predominantly Muslim – countries, Turkey was “in the pipeline” to enter the European Union and both the EU and the UK government were paying huge amount of money to facilitate the process. In addition to the claim that 15 million Turks would settle in the EU in the first ten years of membership, Turkey’s entry would stretch the EU borders all the way to “dangerous” countries, such as Syria, Iraq and Iran. Ker-Lindsay (2018) argues that the significance of this story should not be downplayed:

Ultimately, the claim that Turkey was on course to join the European Union, and that this would lead to an almost immediate surge of immigrants into Europe, and thus the United Kingdom, seems almost certain to have shaped the views of a significant number of voters.

Whether this was merely an additional reason to leave – or was the issue that swung it – is hard to say. However, given the significance of the immigration debate and Turkey’s central role in that discussion, and given how close the final result was, there is a good case to be made that the unfounded claims made by the Leave campaign about Turkish membership of the EU have ultimately cost Britain its own membership of the Union.

- 8 The emphasis laid on Turkey is, arguably, not random. Aydin-Düzgit (2012: 1) explains that the country’s potential entry “poses a profound challenge to the European project due to the perceived ambiguities over its ‘Europeanness’”. Amid highly emotional – and sometimes heated – debates, many EU politicians have argued that “Turkey’s democracy, geography, history, culture and the mindset of its politicians as well as its people qualify it as a non-European state that is unfit to become a member of the EU” (*ibid.*). Turkey, as a predominantly Muslim country that is geographically straddling Europe and Asia Minor, raises ontological fears and cultural anxieties which were duly exploited by politicians, in order to use the “Turkish Other” as “a mirror for defining not only the ‘European Self’, but also European values” (Tekin 2010). In reality, the pace of Turkey’s potential accession has significantly slowed down in the past decade, in part because of Turkey’s authoritarian turn (Ker-Lindsay 2018), which means that VL members’ assertion that the country was about to enter the EU was not vindicated by political facts (Marshall and Drieschova 2018: 94).
- 9 The impact of this story, however, and its unfounded dimension, highlights the conspiratorial potential of the Brexit debate. As a matter of fact, belief in conspiracy theories tend to increase during political campaigns (Golec de Zavala and Federico 2018) and the Brexit referendum campaign was indeed no exception (Payne 2016). As such, the inherent link between Brexit and conspiracy theories has been the subject of much academic research. Digital media in particular played a key role in the dissemination of conspiracy thinking (Del Vicario *et al.* 2017) about how the Remain side tried to undermine the Leave campaign by manipulating the mainstream media or by “voluntarily” crashing the government’s voter registration website (Bienkov 2016). Douglas and Sutton (2018) argue that conspiracy theories tend to change people’s attitude on

important political matters, this is why much attention has been paid to the influence of such conspiracy theories on people's voting in the referendum (Jolley *et al.* 2021). As "alternative narratives" (Douglas and Sutton 2018), conspiracy theories are both subversive and empowering, and in this article, we propose to study them as discursive constructions (Catenaccio 2022). This approach, nonetheless, calls for terminological clarification.

1.2. Conspiracy theories as narrated explanations

- 10 As "feature of civilised social life" (Douglas and Sutton 2018), conspiracy theories are a constant of human societies (Demata *et al.* 2022: 1). The creation of the term "conspiracy theory", on the other hand, is fairly recent and is usually attributed to Austrian philosopher Karl Popper, who talked about so-called "conspiracy theory of society" in his 1952 book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Diéguez and Delouvée, 2021: 96). At its most basic, conspiracy theories are "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events as secret plots by powerful and malicious groups" (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka, 2017). They usually emerge in times of crises (Desormeaux and Grondeux 2017). This is why the European Commission, along with the UNESCO, have recently issued "educational infographics" to debunk the recent spread of Covid-19 pandemic-related conspiracy theories. In a similar vein, the EU-funded research program Compact (Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories) has issued a "Guide to Conspiracy Theories" to provides an overview of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and recommendations on how to deal with them.
- 11 The term "conspiracy theory" remains nonetheless ambiguous as no consensus seems to have been reached to propose an accepted, and definitive, definition. In what might amount to an academic continuum, Dieguez and Delouvée (2021: 66-67) argue that some researchers adopt a neutral approach and see conspiracy theories as an explanation for a historical event which happens to involves a conspiracy. Others consider conspiracy theories as alternative explanations. As it comes *in addition* to the official version, it is, by definition, false and unreliable, if not preposterous. However, most

researchers today tend not to discard conspiracy theories as totally irrational (Giry 2017). Growing attention is devoted today to so-called “conspiratorial studies”, which, according to Forberg (2023) “aims to treat conspiracy theorists not as engaged in irrational, anti-political responses but as ‘a rational attempt to understand social reality’ by ‘more or less normal people’”. As a matter of fact, many scholars acknowledge that “conspiracy theories can be a way of expressing opposition, or can be part of what creates a sense of group identity” (Compact 2020: 9), which makes conspiracy theories particularly relevant as far as Brexit is concerned because, as Sobolewska and Ford (2020: 234) argue, Brexit is the political expression of “new identity divides over immigration, national identities and equal opportunities”. Conspiracy theories therefore help create antagonism between different social groups, which vindicates our focus on the “Turkey story”, as “belief in conspiracy theories constitutes a ‘mentality’ based on individuals’ and groups’ fears and antipathy against minorities and outgroups” (Moscovici 1987).

- 12 As stated before, conspiracy theories represent an alternative story, supposedly coming from regular people. Demata *et al.* (2022: 1) argue that “conspiracy theories attempt to make sense of the world by constructing narratives running directly counter to the ‘official’ ones, often by ‘connecting the dots’ between otherwise seemingly unrelated events that, for them, are evidence of a conspiracy”. As narratives, they play with reality, or at least overlook concrete – and contradictory – elements that seem not to fit with the overall narrative structure (Uscinski 2020). We might therefore argue that most of the power of attraction of conspiracy theories, and their reassuring dimension, resides in their narrative forms. The emotions they create are in opposition to the rationality of both the official version and the complexity of the world. Indeed, as stated in the Compact guide (2020: 4), conspiracy theories “do not spring from nowhere [...] often, they are responses – albeit simplified and distorted – to genuine problems and anxieties in society”.
- 13 The narrative format of conspiracy theories is universally recognized in the academic literature and yet very little research has been conducted on conspiracy narratives *per se* (Mason 2022: 171). This academic void has been partly filled by Demata *et al.*’s recent book

(2022) on conspiracy theory discourse. Our research intends to draw on this work, by proposing a narrative analysis of the “Turkey story”.

1.3. Stories, narratives and the persuasive dimension of storytelling in political communication

- 14 Narratologists tend to differentiate stories and narratives (De Fina 2017: 234). Abbott (2008: 21) explains that “a story is the series of events at issue, while narrative is the story “mediated” through how the teller presents it”. Generally speaking, “story” can be defined as “a sequence of events, experiences, or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole” (Feldman *et al.* 2004: 148). It is a series of “temporally and causally ordered events”. A narrative, on the other hand, is “one verbal technique for recapitulating past experience” (Labov and Waletzky 1967: 13) which constitutes a cognitive activity (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012: 5) that is inherently subjective and has an emotional (Reisigl 2021) and persuasive (Polletta 2006) effect on the story recipient. In political communication, we envisage the concept of story as “the use of an amusing, or otherwise emotion-generating anecdote to make a point, break the ice, or in some other way support an effective public utterance” (Schnur Neile 2015: 1). As such, our understanding of story in political discourse is “a spreading story aimed to explain an aspect of reality or to interpret events, and it is able to influence the opinion and behaviour of people” (Casagrande and Dallago 2023: 125).
- 15 Stories, and the way they are narrated, play a key role in political communication (Gabriel 2015: 276; De Fina 2017). Narratives are often favoured in political discourse today because they are “seen as representing a non-argumentative, more common-sense and therefore more grass-roots inspired mode of conveying political views” (De Fina 2017: 239). Atkins and Finlayson (2012) explain that, over the past 40 years or so, narratives, which are “the communicative products of the process of storytelling” (Reisigl 2021), have become ubiquitous in political rhetoric (De Fina, 2017: 236). Storytelling is a “polymorphous concept” and “a relatively old marketing technique, whose aim is to use narration to arouse interest by telling stories to audiences” (Gallot and Leroux, 2021: 3). Political

storytelling is sometimes considered as deceitful and dangerous propaganda, because it operates, supposedly, without the knowledge of the recipient (Salmon 2007). This negative – and restrictive – understanding has been criticized and researchers nowadays call for a more neutral approach, so as to better appreciate all the facets of this polymorphous discursive tool. Storytelling plays indeed a key role in political communication because it reinforces the mobilisation of people around certain values (Berut 2010) and contributes to the construction of a “ritualization” (Dayan 2006: 166), i.e., a worldview that is specific to a given society. The narrative format is indeed particularly valuable in political communication, as Feldman *et al.* (2004: 148) explain: “through the events the narrative includes, excludes, and emphasizes, the storyteller not only illustrates his or her version of the action but also provides an interpretation or evaluative commentary on the subject”.

- 16 Storytelling seems to be one of the fundamental characteristics of the human species, because, as Fludernik (2009: 1) argues: “the human brain is constructed in such a way that it captures many complex relationships in the form of narrative structures, metaphors or analogies”. Communicating narratives allow us to mobilise our senses and share our emotions, which is crucial to the process of social interaction. Fisher (1985: 74), who developed the “narrative paradigm” theory, even talks of “Homo Narrans” – the idea that “humans are storytellers” – and argues that meaningful communication is in the form of storytelling. Stories therefore have a foundational dimension (Barthes 1966: 1).
- 17 What makes narratives appealing, in terms of political persuasion – and conspiratorial thinking – is their structural and conceptual power. White (1980: 5) considers narrative as a “metacode” that can be understood as the solution to the problem of “fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning”. Stories simplify complex issues by ordering the chaos of the world through the introduction of a familiar narrative pattern: a beginning, a middle, and an end that contains a conclusion or some experience of the storyteller (Titscher *et al.* 2000: 125). As such, stories bring (superficial) cohesion and meaning to what could sometimes be seen as a (naturally) chaotic – and ruthless – world. Besides, shared

narratives enable us to create the ties that form a sense of belonging and identity within a community.

- 18 Narratologists have long recognized the cognitive dimension of narratives (Prince 1982; De Fina et Georgakopoulou 2012; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2015). Labov (1972) explains that narrative is nothing but “the cognitive representation of reality” imposed by narrative structure on our experience of the world. Brooks (2001) even argue that narratives constitute “a universal cognitive tool kit” to make sense of the world and to construct our sense of self. Narratives appeal to powerful emotions which constitute “potent, pervasive, predictable [...] drivers of decision making” (Lerner *et al.* 2015 1). Drawing on Lakoff’s conceptual approach, Seargeant (2020: 63) argues that stories function as “an organizing framework for our thoughts”, notably in political persuasion:

Through careful management of language, those in power can influence the way our brains interpret important political issues and thus influence the way we perceive reality [...] the associations that build up around a concept, that become the ‘natural’ way of thinking about that idea, are often structured by an underlying story (2020: 141).

- 19 Polletta (2015: 37) identifies two main cognitive drivers to explain the ubiquity of storytelling in political communication. First, the so-called “willing suspension of disbelief” entailed by the narrative structure tends to inhibit counterarguing, simply because when people use narratives rather than arguments as a means of persuasion, the audience is less concerned about the credibility of the speaker (Green and Brock 2000, cited in Seargeant 2020: 78). Second, she argues that people tend to naturally “adopt the views of the character with whom they identify” which encourages to “vicariously [share] the emotions and perspectives of the character” (Polletta, 2015: 38). Fludernik (2009: 6) explains that “the experience of these protagonists that narratives focus on, allows readers to immerse themselves in a different world and in the life of the protagonists”.
- 20 In a similar vein, by relating stories, a politician effectively acquires the status of storyteller, that is, the person who makes stories

possible, and by extension, the person who is able to set things in motion. Storytellers are therefore in a position of control and authority. Anthropologists have showed the social and societal importance of stories, as storytellers tend to coordinate social behaviour and encourage cooperation (Smith *et al.* 2017). This is why storytellers are often associated with the notion of wisdom: they are in possession of a certain knowledge, and more importantly, they are able to share and pass on this knowledge to others, by making complex situations or events more intelligible. Storytelling is therefore a powerful tool which helps build the ethos of a politician and reinforces their position of power and their leadership over a given community.

1.4. Corpus and methodology: The moral economy of critical narrative analysis

- 21 To investigate Vote Leave's rhetoric and in order to carry out a comprehensive narrative analysis of the "Turkey story", we uploaded all the documents available on VL's official website in the "Key speeches, interviews, and op-eds" section onto corpus manager and text analysis software Sketch Engine. From this initial set of documents (statements, speeches, open letters and newspaper articles, 53,389 words in total), we extracted every occurrence of the terms "Turkey" and "Turkish" which allowed us to trim down our corpus to 15 texts (Table 1 in Appendix).
- 22 Vote Leave was a cross-party organisation, with both Labour and Conservative MPs, however, the extraction process shows that the terms "Turkey" and "Turkish", and by extension the "Turkey story", were overwhelmingly present in documents produced by or about Conservative politicians. The only Labour MP in the corpus, Gisela Stuart, is always writing with Conservative politicians (CO10, CO11, CO12, CO13 and CO15) and the only document not produced by a politician (CO5) is an opinion piece on Tory MPs, in a conservative-leaning newspaper. This restrictive use, we argue, calls for a critical approach. Van Dijk (2001: 352) describes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and

political context”. Wodak (2011: 38) understands CDA as “a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research programme” which effectively subsumes “a variety of approaches, each with different theoretical models, research methods and agenda [...] what unites them is a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, identity politics and political-economic or cultural change in society”.

- 23 CDA linguists are mainly concerned with two interrelated concepts, context and persuasion, and believe that language is crucial “in determining social power relationships” (Charteris-Black 2014: 83). The aim of CDA, therefore, is to bring to light the manipulative use of language by people in position of power and to show how “difference in power and knowledge are created by inequalities in access to linguistic resources” (83). Hence the importance of power, as Charteris-Black (84) argues:

Power is a central notion in CDA and can be taken to mean the way that a particular social group is able to enforce its will over other social groups. Power is when a powerful social group (A) persuades another social group (B) to do things that are in A’s best interests, and prevents B from doing things that are B’s best interests.

- 24 As such, CDA enables to decode the political ideology – and personal ambitions – behind the rhetoric used by politicians, as Waugh *et al.* (2016: 72) explain:

By studying discourse, [CDA] emphasizes the way in which language is implicated in issues such as power and ideology that determine how language is used, what effect it has, and how it reflects, serves, and furthers the interests, positions, perspectives, and values of, those who are in power.

- 25 We argue that CDA is probably the most appropriate theoretical approach for our study, for two main reasons. First, because VL was the official campaign to leave the EU, which provided it with important public resources and significant media exposure. Zappettini (2019: 404) argues that Vote Leave “had the power to influence public opinion on the meaning of Brexit and to frame the context of the debate by reproducing, challenging or silencing certain discourses and ideologies”. As such, the Out group was able to

control the narrative, which is a prerequisite to the process of political persuasion but also calls for critical deciphering.

- 26 The second element of interest, as noticed before, is that our corpus is composed only of documents produced by or evoking Tory politicians, most of whom Conservative heavyweights, such as Boris Johnson or Michael Gove. VL, hence, represented the “respectable” side (Clarke *et al.* 2017, 31) of the leave campaign, which means that a potential conspiratorial, even xenophobic narrative about Turkey, seems to run counter to the social liberal values that incumbent Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron had tried to promote when he set to “decontaminate” his party’s brand in 2005 (Bale 2010: 285). CDA will therefore enable us to decipher how leading Conservative members of VL used their supposed respectability to convey a conspiracy-inspired message.
- 27 Since our intention to focus on the “Turkey story”, we will combine CDA with narrative analysis, what Souto-Manning (2014: 163) calls “Critical Narrative Analysis” (CNA) and which, she explains, “allows us to learn how people create their selves in constant social interactions at both personal and institutional levels, and how institutional discourses influence and are influenced by personal everyday narratives”.
- 28 Charteris-Black (2014) argues that CDA must follow a three-stage methodological process. The first stage consists in analysing and explaining the overall context, or “speech circumstances”. The second stage involves both the identification of storytelling units and their eventual classification according to their inherent meaning, and function within the text. To this end, the theoretical framework of our research is based on Soteris’ work. Drawing on Taguieff’s ground-breaking analysis of conspiracy theories, she proposes three “key pillars” (2020: 74) that seem to underpin and structure every single example of conspiracy theory. This typology will constitute the backbone of our analysis:
 - The first pillar argues that a group of conspirators secretly act behind closed doors, for their own vested interest. Conspiracy theorists believe that there is “a secret, omnipotent individual or group that covertly orchestrates the events of the world” (Fenster 2008: 1). The key question is “cui bono” or “who profits from this?”. The emphasis on secrecy and

the inherent link with powerful – and malevolent – actors are at the core of every definition of conspiracy theories. In terms of narrative structure, those conspirators are “villains” to be defeated whereas conspiracy theorists become whistle blowers and selfless “heroes”.

- The second pillar highlights the idea that nothing is as it appears and people are being lied to. The aim of conspiracy theorists therefore is to “connect the dots” so as to correct the official version and unveil the truth by revealing the identity of the culprits. This detective work aims to propose an alternative narrative to the one put forwards by official sources. As such, conspiracy theorists are inherently anti-establishment, which aligns them, ideologically, with populism in their rejection of the elite and their defence of regular people (Demata *et al.*, 2022: 4). Many scholars recognize that conspiracy theories and populism “share the same basic tenets” (*ibid.*: 4) and that populist leaders often construct conspiracy theories to create “a strategically ‘useful’ scapegoat” (Wodak 2021: 84).
- The last pillar claims that everything is connected, nothing happens by accident, there are no coincidences. In that way, conspiracy theories have a reassuring dimension in that as they “make the world meaningful because they exclude chaos and coincidence [...] they also make the world intelligible because they provide a simplistic explanation for political and social developments [...] they are a strategy for dealing with uncertainty and resolving ambiguity” (Compact 2020: 7). This pillar is often underpinned by paranoiac behaviour: because conspiracy theorists are supposedly aware of hidden secrets, they are “not content with denouncing this or that conspiracy, real or imagined [...] on the contrary, the conspiracy becomes the systematic and systemic grid through which the whole of human history is read and interpreted” (Giry 2017).

29 This three-part typology provides a mechanism of categorization that conceptualizes the boundary work that narratives perform in the elaboration of conspiracy theories and simplifies the identification of narrative elements by framing their distinctive features. It will therefore help us determine whether the “Turkey story” can be classified as a conspiracy theory

30 The final stage studies the interaction between the overall political context, the image of the speaker and the choice of storytelling elements. Feldman *et al.* (2004: 154) propose a three-level analysis. The first level consists in identifying the storyline. The objective here

is to determine the type of narrative archetypes being used to convey political ideologies and worldviews. Seargeant (2020: 87) argues that the two most relevant archetypes in political narratives are what he calls “rags to riches”, which is an initiatory trip in which the speaker acquired the wisdom to lead a community, and “overcoming the monster”, in which a community is being threatened by some evil force and, in response, a hero sets out to fight and eventually defeat this monster. The second level of analysis consists in establishing the opposition(s) in the story because, according to Feldman *et al.* (2004: 155) “looking for oppositions allows the researcher to uncover the meaning of a key element of the discourse by analysing what the narrator implies the element is not”. The third and final level of analysis consists in determining the argument at the heart of the story. In other words, the objective is to “reproduce the story in the form of syllogisms, logical arguments that help the storyteller express the ideas in the story”, in order to explicit the storyteller’s arguments. Very often, one part of the logical reasoning is left for the hearer to imply, which reinforces the persuasive effect of truncated syllogisms, or enthymemes.

2. Key findings: The narrative boundaries of a potential Brexit conspiracy

2.1. Speech circumstances

- 31 The abundant literature on the 2016 referendum often highlights the very negative tone of the Brexit campaign, which was “divisive, antagonistic and hyper-partisan...” (Moore and Ramsay 2017: 168). The debate became extremely emotion-driven (Rivière-De Franco 2017) and both camps accused each other of lying and dishonesty. Marshall and Drieschova (2018: 91) argue that the referendum campaign was shaped by post-truth politics, which is “a politics which seeks to emit messages into the public domain which will lead to emotionally charged reactions, with the goal of having them spread widely and without concern for the accuracy of the messages provided” (*ibid.*: 90). This form of politics, they explain, has been made possible by two

recent developments: the growing and widespread usage of social media for acquiring information and a growing distrust in traditional elites as well as expertise (*ibid.*: 92). Against the backdrop of exacerbating political tension and within weeks of the vote, Vote Leave decided to change its strategy and focus on immigration, in place of the economic argument they had promoted at the beginning of the campaign, but which had failed to provide a clear alternative to the EU's economic advantages (Clarke *et al.* 2017: 53). This is when several stories about Turkey being on the verge of entering the EU began to emerge in the Vote Leave literature.

2.2. Pillar 1: A group of conspirators secretly act behind closed doors

- 32 The first pillar rests on three main elements. First, the belief that events are secretly manipulated, behind the scenes, by powerful and malevolent forces. This is at the heart of the conspiracy theory dogma. Second, a plot is being orchestrated by an opaque organisation which aims to promote its own interests, to the detriment of the common good. Those so-called “conspirators” are therefore enemies of the people, which enables conspiracy theorists to divide the world between good and evil, using basic “us vs. them” rhetoric (Wodak 2021: 8). Third, conspirators supposedly try their best to hide their purposes, which reinforces “the assumption is that if you dig deep enough, you will find hidden connections between people, institutions and events that explain what is really going on” (Compact, 2020: 4).
- 33 Vote Leave’s rhetoric seems to draw on some of these elements. The most prominent argument is the fact that the EU is working against the interests of the UK and might actually take decisions that British people did not approve of and did not vote for. The EU is therefore depicted as an undemocratic organisation whose decisions have a negative impact on regular British citizens. The following three examples are quite significant:

The Government has failed because of the simple reality that inside the EU we cannot control immigration – it is literally impossible because we have no choice but to accept the principle of free

movement and the European Court has ultimate control over our immigration policy [...] the Prime Minister's deal has given away control of immigration and asylum forever [...] the rogue European Court now controls not just immigration policy but how we implement asylum policy under the Charter of Fundamental Rights. And, on top of all of this, new countries are in the queue to join the EU and the EU is extending visa-free travel to the border of Syria and Iraq. It is mad (CO8).

Nearly ninety million people in Turkey and four Balkan countries are being lined up for free movement followed by EU membership [...] if those countries join, EU migration is forecast to go over 400,000 a year by 2030, that is a city the size of Bristol every 12 months. Meanwhile, control of our borders will ebb away to Brussels. Unaccountable EU judges already stop us turning away criminals or people who come here without a job, despite Cameron saying he could win curbs to unrestricted freedom of movement. The judges are now extending their power so they control immigration to Britain from outside the EU (CO13).

Inside the EU we have to accept that anyone with an EU passport – even if they have a criminal record – can breeze into this country. That will include countries in the pipeline to join the EU – Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey (CO2).

- 34 The overall storyline in these three representative examples reads like a study in failure – or a Greek tragedy: the UK is battling against powerful and malevolent forces trying to subdue its legitimate will to control its external borders, but however hard it may try, the UK, as a nation, is doomed to fail. An aggravating factor is the secret complicity of the UK government, as “the Prime Minister’s deal has given away control of immigration and asylum forever” (CO8). The omnipotence of what VL consider as “villains” is highlighted by the fact that even the duly elected UK government has “no choice but to accept” decisions over EU immigration, and beyond. The lack of legitimacy and credibility of what amount to “conspirators”, in the conspiracist creed, are being discursively reinforced, as the European Court is a “rogue” (CO8) organisation and EU judges are “unaccountable” (CO13).
- 35 There are several key oppositions: the UK vs. the EU obviously, but also political legitimacy vs. authoritarianism and more importantly, as

far conspiratorial studies are concerned, accountability vs. a clear lack of EU transparency. The main argument developed in this first pillar, we argue, can be summarized in the following enthymeme: sound democracy rests on accountability and transparency (major); the EU cannot be held into account (minor); the EU is therefore not a democratic institution and the UK should leave (implicit conclusion). It should be noticed that although the major and minor premises are explicit, the conclusion is not and is left for the audience to imply.

- 36 It seems, however, that one essential element is missing from this first pillar, as no stated – and more importantly, hidden – purpose is mentioned. The EU and the UK government are not working in the best interest of the UK population, but Vote Leave members do not give any explicit motive for this. We might assume that it is in order to subjugate Britain, but this is not clearly stated. The conspirators are therefore not trying to hide their objectives, as no objective is given, and if the EU is indeed depicted as a powerful and malevolent organisation trying to manipulate events to the detriment of the UK, it is done in plain sight.

2.3. Pillar 2: Nothing is as it appears, people are being lied to

- 37 In line with the previous pillar, which assumes that powerful and malevolent forces manipulate events behind the scenes and try to hide their evil purposes, conspiracy theorists claim that you need to look beneath the surface to see the truth. Their role is thus to decipher the lies of the conspirators so as to unveil the truth and, even if they are often stigmatized, conspiracy theorists usually “take comfort from the idea that – unlike the rest of the population – they have woken up and understood what is really going on” (Compact 2020: 6-7).
- 38 We saw that Vote Leave members accused the government of being in collusion with the EU over “uncontrolled” immigration, which reinforced the fear that official politicians were teaming up with occult forces to work against the general interest of British people. In a *Telegraph* article (CO14), senior political correspondent Tim Ross defended the idea that the government’s handling of immigration was detrimental to the UK population:

For the first time, a government report reveals the full impact of years of immigration from Europe on the state education system, at a time of growing strain on classroom places [...] Priti Patel, the employment minister and a member of the Leave campaign, warned it would get worse, with countries including Turkey “in the pipeline” to join the EU [...] the official estimates emerged at a critical time in the battle over Britain’s future in Europe, with the referendum campaign about to enter an intense final six weeks [...] the latest government figures, released by the Government’s chief statistician, John Pullinger, were published without fanfare last week on Parliament’s website, on a page listing papers deposited in the House of Commons library. It follows a row last month when ministers were attacked for refusing to publish an investigation into the impact of migration on state schools until after the referendum. More than a year ago, Nicky Morgan, the Education Secretary, launched a major government review into the issue, and promised before the election to provide extra help for teachers who have to cope with new pupils who do not speak English [...] however, the Telegraph disclosed in April that Mrs Morgan would not publish the findings of the report until after the referendum on June 23 at the soonest, and may not publish them at all (CO5).

- 39 This is the story of selfless and patriotic politicians trying to uncover what the UK government is attempting to hide from the public. In what amounts to political betrayal of public trust on the part of the government, Vote Leave members claim to reveal a truth that UK officials would prefer to hide. The UK government is not directly accused of lying about immigration, but they voluntarily try to mislead the British public by publishing discreetly (“without fanfare”) the latest official figures on the subject. The narrative twist comes with the claim that the government is supposedly withholding a damning report until after the referendum, which entails that it would be bad publicity for the Remain campaign – which means that official authorities are biased and promoting the In-campaign. As the report is not being published, Vote Leavers assume that immigration has a very negative impact on state schools, even if the claim cannot be corroborated by facts. However, Vote Leavers do not accuse the government of lying directly. Instead, they pretend that the government is lying by omission, which fuels suspicion and reinforce the idea that the safer choice is to leave the EU altogether.

- 40 The clear set of oppositions is between good and decent British people vs. the deceitful UK government; between truth and lies and quite significantly, between public trust and political dishonesty and potential covering up. The line of argument put forward here is that sound government is about transparency (major); the EU's immigration conundrum is forcing the UK government to lie by omission (minor); real transparency is not achievable as long as the UK is part of the EU, so the UK should leave to safeguard democracy in the country (implicit conclusion).
- 41 The "Turkey story" developed by Vote Leave members, and the general narrative about uncontrolled EU immigration, seems to fit in with the second pillar of Soteras' typology, but only to a certain extent. Indeed, in a similar vein to the first pillar, it is not possible to find all the defining features of this second pillar. Here, Vote Leave members do not assert that people are directly being lied to. Instead, it would be more accurate to say that their claim is that people are being misled and that the political elite is voluntarily selective with the truth.

2.4. Pillar 3: Everything is connected, nothing happens by accident and there are no coincidences

- 42 The conspiracy creed seems to rest on a deterministic approach to how the world works. Giry (2017) argues that "the conspiratorial approach is concerned with gathering and ordering, within a unique and coherent narrative framework, scattered facts and events which, a priori, do not make sense together [...] the intention is to provide proof that the facts and events in question are necessarily linked, because they result from a single cause, i.e. a conspiracy".
- 43 This third pillar does not seem to be predominant in the "Turkey story". What is nonetheless interesting is that what is being connected is the link between mass immigration and the current difficulties of the public services, in particular the school system and the NHS:

On Monday, parents across the UK will be told whether their children got into their primary school of choice. Tens of thousands are expected to be told that they will not obtain their first preference. Membership of the EU means we are completely unable to control EU migration, and that puts unsustainable pressure on school places. This will only get worse with five more countries - Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey - in the pipeline to join the EU. The fact is, the UK has to pay £350 million to the EU every week - if we Vote Leave we can take back control over that money and reinvest it in our vital public services (CO1).

As we have set out before, it is government policy for five new countries to join the EU: Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. We are paying billions to these countries to help them join. The EU is already opening visa-free travel to Turkey. That would create a borderless travel zone from the frontiers of Syria and Iraq to the English Channel. The EU's plans for future growth will lead to demands being placed on the NHS far beyond what its funding can cope with (CO11).

- 44 The storyline is that the EU is a failed institution that is incapable of regulating internal migration, which dramatically affects the lives of EU citizens. This is once again a tragedy that befalls regular British people. The opposition is between vulnerable British people and highly technocratic, yet inefficient, EU bureaucrats. The logical structure is that sound governance should provide strict immigration control (major), but the EU has no control over immigration (minor), so the EU is politically irresponsible and should be left (implicit conclusion).
- 45 In terms of political economy, as those two examples are extracted from speeches delivered by senior Conservative MPs Priti Patel (CO1) and Michael Gove (CO11, along with Boris Johnson and Gisela Stuart as signatories), we argue that linking Turkey's potential entry into the EU and the ailing public sector in the UK might amount to a deliberate use of the so-called "dead cat strategy" (Clarke *et al.* 2015; Gaber and Fisher 2022 developed by Tory spin doctor, Lynton Crosby. A shocking announcement is made in order to divert media attention from an embarrassing situation, as Boris Johnson (2013) put it:

Let us suppose you are losing an argument. The facts are overwhelmingly against you, and the more people focus on the reality the worse it is for you and your case. The solution is to perform a manoeuvre that a great campaigner describes as ‘throwing a dead cat on the table, mate’, the aim of which is to distract your onlookers to the point where they will be talking about the dead cat, the thing you want them to talk about, and they will not be talking about the issue that has been causing you so much grief.

- 46 Scholars and journalists alike tend to link the sorry state of the public sector in the UK, in part, to the budget cuts of the Cameron government and the so-called austerity policy imposed by then Chancellor George Osborne (Bach 2016; Emery and Iyer 2022; Campbell 2022). We might assume that creating a connection between Turkey’s potential entry and the pressure on public services that it would entail is a strategy not to talk about the Conservatives’ record, while blaming the EU for the current situation.
- 47 Once again, the “Turkey story” does not seem to fit in perfectly with Soteras’ pillars. If Vote Leave members show that there is a link between Turkey’s entry and the difficulties of the public sector, there seems, however, to be no “unique and coherent narrative framework” which would emerge from an EU conspiracy aiming to grant Turkey access to European organisation. The connection being drawn here between Turkey and the UK public sector seems rather to be purely political, to fuel resentment at the EU and divert attention from the consequences of the economic measures taken by the Conservative government, and not an EU plot to destroy the UK service sector.

Conclusion

- 48 The idea that Turkey was on the verge of entering the EU, which would give millions of Turks access to the UK ailing public sector, and that the only way to avoid this situation was to vote to leave the EU before it was too late, reads like a powerful story indeed. In terms of narrative archetype, the “Turkey story” falls within Seargeant’s “overcoming the monster” category (2020: 87). As such, the narrative structure is straightforward: the EU, as the “enemy”, has devised an evil plan – to let Turkey enter the supranational organisation – which

will be detrimental to the British nation, and more generally, to Britishness. This desperate situation calls for “heroes” to intervene and right the wrongs. Vote Leave members take on this role by uncovering the EU’s Machiavellian plan and revealing the UK government’s collaboration.

- 49 The oppositions are somewhat revealing of populist undertones (Wodak 2021) on the part of Vote Leave: the EU elite vs. the regular British people; the collaborating UK government vs. the Vote Leave whistle blowers; lack of accountability vs. transparency and more importantly, tyranny vs. democracy. The overall enthymemic framing of the “Turkey story” could be summarized as: sound politics is about trust (major); the potential entry of Turkey is hidden by EU politicians (minor); the EU cannot be trusted and therefore should be left (implicit conclusion). Other syllogisms could also be elaborated. A more ethnocentric argument could be: Europe is a Judeo-Christian continent; Turkey is a predominantly Muslim; Turkey’s entry will upset the cultural balance of the continent. Last but not least, a Britain-centred argument would read as: the UK civil services are in a poor state; Turkey’s entry would increase the burden on the UK civil services to breaking point; the UK should leave the EU to safeguard the UK civil services.
- 50 This narrative analysis reveals the rhetorical potential of the “Turkey story”. However, determining whether this amounts to a conspiracy theory or whether it could be considered as mere disinformation – and “strategic lying” – is not as straightforward as one might expect at first. The EU, with the help of the UK government, is making decisions that are deemed negative for the UK population. Vote Leave members therefore assume that a powerful elite is working against the interests of regular people. Such “us vs. them” narrative is usually at the heart of conspiracy theories rhetoric (Wodak 2021: 8); however, no ultimate motive seems to emerge to explain the “secret” ambitions of the EU. Besides, the EU and the UK government are not directly lying to British people, they are simply withholding the truth, or just showing part of it. Still, Vote Leave members, in a move reminiscent of conspiracy theorists, do try to connect the dots in order to question the overall aim of the EU and the reasons why the UK government is supposedly not being straightforward with British people. Last but not least, a connection is being created between

Turkey's entry and the current difficult situation of the public sector in the UK, but once again, it seems to be more of a political argument rather than telling evidence of a conspiracy theory. The "Turkey story" proved nonetheless useful during the referendum as it allowed Vote Leave members to focus on emotional topics, rather than technical – and dull – arguments, like the Remain campaign (Schnapper 2017).

- 51 To answer the initial research question, we might argue that Vote Leave members created some form of rhetorical continuum between conspiracy theories and strategic lying, in what might amount to "strategic conspiracy", or simpler, "Brexit conspiracy". They used some important elements of the conspiratorial creed in order distort reality in a way that was beneficial to their cause, as "populist politicians often use conspiracy theories strategically in order to mobilise their followers" (Compact, 2020: 5). What seems to make the "Turkey story" tilt slightly towards strategic lying rather than conspiracy theory, however, is the rapidity with which some prominent Vote Leave members distanced themselves from it (Worrall 2019). Its emotional appeal made it relevant *during* the referendum, but the plain lies it was built on, and the racism it carried, made it toxic for politicians aspiring to have an important role in the UK government *after* the referendum.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Corpus of interest.

Code	Date	Name	Political affiliation	Role	Context
C01	18 Apr	Priti Patel	Conservative	Employment minister	Speech on EU immigration
C02	19 Apr	Michael Gove	Conservative	Secretary of State for Justice	BBC interview
C03	27 Apr	James Cleverly	Conservative	Conservative MP	Speech on the EU
C04	28 Apr	Priti Patel	Conservative	Employment minister	Speech at the Spring Conference of the Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers
C05	7 May	Tim Ross	—	Senior Political Correspondent	Article for The Telegraph
C06	10 May	Iain Duncan Smith	Conservative	Former Conservative leader	Speech on the EU
C07	18 May	Michael Howard	Conservative	Former Conservative leader	Speech on the EU
C08	26 May	Boris Johnson	Conservative	Conservative MP	Speech on EU immigration
C09	31 May	Chris Grayling	Conservative	Leader of the House of Commons	Speech on the EU
C010	1 June	Gove, Stuart, Johnson and Patel	Cross party	—	Speech on Brexit
C011	3 June	Gove, Stuart and Johnson	Cross party	—	Speech on the NHS
C012	5 June	Gove, Stuart and Johnson	Cross party	—	Letter to PM
C013	6 June	Gove, Stuart, Johnson and John Longworth	Cross party	—	Speech on Brexit
C014	8 June	Gove and Dominic Raab	Conservative	—	Speech on the EU
C015	16 June	Gove, Stuart and Johnson	Cross party	—	Letter to PM

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The British Conservative Party's drift to the right: Taking on the “deep state”

La dérive droitière du Parti conservateur britannique : s'attaquer à l'« État profond »

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ABSTRACTS

English

The British Conservative Party has increasingly embraced a right-wing conspiracy theory according to which a host of unrelated actors are said to be working against the best interests of ordinary British people to advance a “woke” agenda that is left-wing, anti-Brexit, pro-immigration and unpatriotic. Some conservatives, namely former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, have even gone so far as to suggest that these forces form part of a “deep state”, working in the shadows against the elected government and therefore against the people themselves. They purportedly do so by advancing “cultural Marxism” – pushing a silent revolution through, rather than against, the key institutions of the British State. Through an analysis of political speeches and of reports from right-wing think tanks close to the Conservative Party, this article seeks to analyse the British government's recent attacks on those who it has designated as the principal enemies of the people: the universities, the BBC, the police and the judiciary. These attacks are not just rhetorical but have concrete effects on the ground which may seriously undermine their independence. Whilst there is scant evidence for the apparent left-wing bias of these institutions, painting them as “woke” serves primarily as a useful populist political strategy, placing the Conservative Party firmly on the side of “the people” in the context of the culture wars” and serving as a distraction from serious economic problems.

Français

Le Parti conservateur britannique adhère de plus en plus à une théorie du complot de droite selon laquelle une multitude d'acteurs sans lien apparent entre eux travailleraient contre les meilleurs intérêts des Britanniques pour faire avancer un programme « woke » qui serait anti-Brexit, pro-immigration et antipatriotique. Certains conservateurs, notamment l'ancien Premier ministre Boris Johnson, sont même allés jusqu'à suggérer que ces forces font partie d'un « État profond », agissant dans l'ombre contre le gouvernement élu et donc contre le peuple lui-même. Elles le feraient en

promouvant le « marxisme culturel » menant ainsi une révolution silencieuse à travers, plutôt que contre, les institutions clés de l'État britannique. Cet article vise à analyser les récentes attaques du gouvernement britannique contre ceux qu'il a désignés comme les principaux ennemis du peuple : les universités, la BBC, la police et les juges. Ces attaques ne sont pas seulement rhétoriques mais ont des effets concrets sur le terrain qui peuvent sérieusement compromettre leur indépendance. Alors qu'il n'existe que peu de preuves du biais de gauche de ces institutions, le fait de les dépeindre comme « woke » constitue avant tout une stratégie politique populiste utile, plaçant fermement le Parti conservateur du côté du « peuple » dans le contexte des « guerres culturelles » et servant à détourner l'attention des graves problèmes économiques.

INDEX

Mots-clés

conspiration, Parti conservateur britannique, populisme, État profond, marxisme culturel, woke, analyse de discours

Keywords

conspiracy, Conservative Party, populism, deep state, cultural Marxism, woke, discourse analysis

OUTLINE

Introduction

1. "We All Live on Campus Now": The universities and the "deep state"
2. The BBC: "Systemically woke"?
3. The legal system: "Rooting out the leftist culture"

Conclusion

TEXT

Introduction

I do not think we can seriously contemplate delaying article 50, because after two and a half years of procrastination, the public would accuse us in this place of deliberately setting out to frustrate their wishes. They would conclude that there was some plot by the

deep state to kill Brexit, and that is precisely—[Interruption.] That is what many people would conclude, and that is precisely why we cannot now treat the public as idiots (Johnson, House of Commons, Hansard 2019a, col. 905).

Some people will say, as I leave office, that this is the end of Brexit. Listen to the deathly hush on the Opposition Benches! The Leader of the Opposition and the deep state will prevail in their plot to haul us back into alignment with the EU as a prelude to our eventual return (Johnson, House of Commons, Hansard, 2022, col. 732).

- 1 Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's suggestion that the "deep state" is at work in the United Kingdom (UK), thwarting the will of the people and their elected representatives, is a striking example of how leading members of the Conservative Party have come to embrace conspiracy theories more usually associated with the far-right. The notion of the "deep state" (*derin devlet*) originated in Turkey in the mid-1990s (Gürpınar and Nefes 2020: 617). Although it was initially advanced by the political left, it was soon adopted by the authoritarian AKP (the Justice and Development Party: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and pro-government media to refer to a power bloc composed of businessmen, the military, state bureaucracy, NGOs, intellectuals and the cosmopolitan upper-middle classes who are purportedly conspiring against the elected government (Gurpınar and Nefes 2020: 618-619). It was an idea also taken up by the Trump administration in the United States where it served to demonise and delegitimise its critics (Michaels 2018). It has been framed as a very real threat to freedom. According to Gilbert T. Sewall, writing in *The Spectator*, "America's thought-manufacturers and mind-manipulators" in the liberal media, the military, the universities, the federal civil service, big industry and big-tech are seeking to create "a progressive monoculture" and redistribute "power, wealth and status at the expense of property holders and taxpayers" (2022). As illustrated here, the term "deep state" "seamlessly connects a plethora of seemingly unrelated groups and renders them parts of the same overarching power network" (Giry and Gürpınar 2020: 324).
- 2 For Boris Johnson, the "deep state" is collaborating with the Leader of the Opposition to reverse Brexit and thus "frustrate" the wishes of

the people. Although he did not explicitly declare what groups might comprise the “deep state” in the House of Commons speeches cited above, he and other senior conservatives have suggested that there are forces acting against the popular will in the universities, the media, the criminal justice system, the Treasury and the civil service more generally. “They” do not just seek to bring Britain back into the European Union, but to undermine the very foundations of British society. The finger has been pointed at “left-wing troublemakers” who are “woke-washing” or “editing” history (Longhi 2021; Rees-Mogg 2020; Johnson 2020); at “the woke brigade” who are threatening free speech (Rees-Mogg, 2021); at left-wing protesters who are threatening public order (Braverman 2022a); at the civil service that engages in “wokeism that strays into antisemitism” (Truss, cited by Gutteridge, 2022). As Cammaerts has argued, the term “woke” has thus been “weaponized” by the Conservative Party: it has been “deturn[ed] from its initial meaning in the struggle for civil rights into an insult used against anyone who fights fascism, racism and other forms of injustices and discrimination as well as to signify a supposed progressive over-reaction” (2022: 735). Whether they are opponents of Brexit or Black Lives Matters protesters challenging conservative narratives of Empire and its legacy, “they” are presented as unpatriotic, which of course helps to frame them as enemies. These groups are seen to form part of a coherent whole who work together as part of a “deep state” to advance a “woke”, progressive, liberal agenda that is deviant, extreme, intolerant, and even anti-democratic (Cammaerts 2022: 734-6). This “agenda” is presented as being wholly at odds with the basic common sense of ordinary people. It is used “as a kind of shorthand, allowing populists to contrive an omnipresent, omnipotent force that conspires against the interests of the people” (Giry and Gurpınar, 2020: 324). Senior conservatives embrace populist tropes, pitting themselves against the “deep state” and placing themselves firmly on the side of the “ordinary British people” they claim to represent. Indeed, populism is often defined as an appeal to “the people” against the “elites” (See, for example, Taggart 2000).

- 3 The idea of the “deep state” is a perfect conspiracy theory to the extent that it embraces “a simplistic dualism” common to all conspiracy theories whereby the ordinary people – the majority – are

pitted against a shady minority working in secret to take power and harm them (Giry and Tika 2020: 114-15) by advancing a specific agenda, no matter how diverse and incoherent the elements of that agenda might be. The “deep state” is more specifically a *right-wing* conspiracy theory, framing the “enemies of the people” as left-wing out-of-touch elites who seek to overturn British values. Once a narrative put forward by the hard right, the Conservative Party has become particularly susceptible to it, even if the specific term “deep state” is not widely used (Ellis 2022). Some senior members of the Party, including former Home Secretary Suella Braverman (Braverman 2019), have also largely embraced the hard right idea that those who work to conspire against the British people are seeking to bring about revolution via “cultural Marxism”. This term might be used in a neutral way to refer to the strain of Marxism pursued by left-wing scholars from the Institute for Social Research (the Frankfurt School) to the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies which analysed the role of culture in the domination of the individual, thus shifting focus away from the purely economic analysis of earlier Marxists (Jamin 2014; Blackford 2015). However, it is commonly used today by the political right to suggest that it is the principal method via which the left seeks to achieve domination and pursue a totalitarian agenda. The American right-wing think tank, the Heritage Foundation, which boasts close links with senior conservative politicians such as former Home Secretary Priti Patel, believes that “cultural Marxism today presents a far more serious and existential threat to the United States than did Soviet communism” (Gonzalez and Gorka 2022). Other right-wing think tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs present intellectuals in the Frankfurt School and on the New Left in conspiracy theory terms, suggesting that they have been developing a decades-long project to bring about “a silent revolution” (Sidwell 2022). The notion of cultural Marxism began to be popularised in the 1990s by right-wing conservatives such as Pat Buchanan in the United States (Jamin 2014; Tuters 2018). They argued that since Marxists had failed to bring about revolution based on class struggle and violent conflict, they instead embarked on a project to bring about ideological hegemony based on identity politics (Gonzalez and Gorka 2022). In doing so, they claim that they have captured the institutions of the liberal states, in particular the universities, but also the courts and the civil service – to impose their

leftist agenda, through totalitarian means, the most visible of which is the purported attack on free speech. Social justice movements are depicted as mere fronts to advance that agenda which entails “discredit[ing] institutions such as the nation, the homeland, traditional hierarchies, authority, family, Christianity, traditional morality in favour of the emergence of an ultra-egalitarian and multicultural, rootless and soulless global nation” (Jamin 2014: 86). Whilst this pejorative use of “cultural Marxism” was once the preserve of the extreme right, adopted by figures such as Anders Breivik in Norway and Nick Griffin in the UK (*ibid.*) it seems it has also now moved into the mainstream.

- 4 Current Home Secretary Suella Braverman used the term in 2019 at a meeting of the right-wing anti-EU think tank the Bruges Group, declaring “I do believe that we are in a fight against cultural Marxism. We have a culture evolving from the far-left which is about snuffing out freedom of speech... It’s absolutely damaging for our spirit as British people and British genius” (cited by Walker, 2019). Conservative MP, former minister and founder of the informal “Common Sense Group” of Tory MPs, Sir John Hayes, also used the term in the context of a House of Commons debate on Black History Month, decrying “the institutions” purportedly involved in advancing a “cultural Marxist agenda” which is “dogmatic, doctrinal” and “simplistic” (Hayes 2020). The narrative of cultural Marxism ignores the extent to which its chief protagonists – such as Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Antonio Gramsci –, together with those at the forefront of social justice movements in past and present, are critical of state power and concerned with individual freedom. It nevertheless provides a convenient and convincing account of how and why various movements challenging the status quo purportedly share a common agenda to take power. Whilst the term “cultural Marxism” remains marginal in government circles, many senior conservatives have publicly endorsed the notion of a threatening “woke”, liberal agenda, thus acting as “political entrepreneurs in conspiracy theories” (Giry and Tika 2020: 111). This does not necessarily mean that they believe in them, but they do play a role in constructing and reinforcing them, allowing the Party to show clearly where it stands in the culture wars, especially at a time when it is struggling to appeal to voters on economic issues (Sleigh 2023). The

culture wars can be understood as a political technique used to manufacture popular consent (Featherstone 2022). Right-wing populists tend to use culture wars as a means of pitting ‘the people’ against a dangerous minority who threaten to undermine basic common sense, thus securing support for authoritarian policies.

- 5 This paper seeks to analyse how the Conservative Party uses discourse and policy to discredit the key actors in the “deep state” conspiracy. It is based on a corpus of political speeches made by conservative MPs between 2019 and 2023 both inside and outside Parliament. 2019 is considered as a good starting point as this is when Boris Johnson became Prime Minister and conspiracy theories started to become normalised amongst conservative MPs on the right of the party. The chapter also examines reports from right-wing think tanks which advance conspiracy theories. Think tanks such as the US-based Heritage Foundation and the UK-based Institute of Economic Affairs and Policy Exchange have long had close links to the Conservative Party and often help to inform the direction of policy (James 1993; Dixon 2008; Ramsay and Geoghegan 2018; Garnett and Lorenzoni 2020). It is argued that they have contributed to constructing a discourse on conspiracy within the contemporary Conservative Party. The chapter begins by focussing on right-wing discourse on universities, the institutions identified as being central to the advance of cultural Marxism and thus a left-wing agenda. It then moves on to discussing discourse on institutions such as the BBC, the judiciary and the police. The aim is not just to bring to light the use of the language of conspiracy theorists among conservative MPs but also to demonstrate that these theories are indeed spurious and debunk them.

1. “We All Live on Campus Now”: The universities and the “deep state”

- 6 The idea that “we all live on campus now” has been employed in policy papers by Policy Exchange (Kaufmann 2022) and the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) (Sidwell 2022), right-wing think tanks close to the British Conservative Party. It was originally coined by

conservative journalist and blogger Andrew Sullivan in the *New York Magazine* who asserted: “The goal of our culture now is not the emancipation of the individual from the group, but the permanent definition of the individual by the group. We used to call this bigotry. Now we call it being woke. You see: We are all on campus now” (2018). Marc Sidwell, in a policy paper for the IEA, argues that cultural Marxists deliberately orchestrated an attack on free speech on campus with the ultimate aim of curtailing free speech beyond the university and controlling behaviour throughout wider society (Sidwell 2022: 20-21).

- 7 Given that universities are seen as being at the forefront of a drive to spread an illiberal left-wing agenda, much attention has been concentrated on the issue of free speech. Madsen Pirie, president and co-founder of the neoliberal think tank the Adam Smith Institute has claimed that “Many universities devote attention to social engineering and politically correct stances rather than to attracting and educating the best students. Many do not allow effective free speech on campus lest a minority of students might feel ‘offended’” (Madsen Pirie 2022: 3). To support these claims, universities have been accused of “no platforming” and of fostering a broader “cancel culture” that it is said to give rise to. The notion of “cancel culture” can be understood as an attempt to silence those we disagree with. For Boris Johnson, it is an agenda advanced by “the woke” who purportedly wish “to rewrite our national story” and thus pose a threat to “our history and cultural inheritance” (Johnson 2021).
- 8 The policy of “no platforming” was officially adopted in 1974 by the National Union of Students (NUS), the confederation of affiliated students’ unions in the UK, in an effort to resist the rise of the fascist National Front (Smith 2020: 4). The policy entailed withholding student union funds from fascist and racist organisations and speakers, protesting to exclude certain speakers from campus, or disrupting events where unwelcome speakers might appear (*ibid.*: 3). Since the 1980s, the policy has been used against sexists and homophobes and, more recently, against gender-critical feminists such as Germaine Greer and Julie Bindel who have been accused of transphobia (*ibid.*). It is often suggested that the practice has become so widespread that UK universities are faced with a “crisis” of free

speech, as “campus censorship has reached epidemic levels” (Slater 2016: 2).

- 9 Those who engage in “no platforming” are described as “fundamentalists” of “the campus thought police” (*ibid.*). There is a certain paradox here as students are accused of being both authoritarian and overly-sensitive, incapable of listening to views that might offend them: “students are at the same time both fragile, risk averse ‘snowflakes’ and heavy-handed McCarthy-like warriors. Students are to be both pitied and feared” (Smith 2020: 3). The suggestion is that the practice is an entirely new phenomenon, yet its history can be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s (*ibid.*). Indeed, long before the NUS officially adopted its “no platforming” resolution, well-known figures such as Oswald Mosley, founder of the British Union of Fascists, Conservative MP Enoch Powell, and the controversial historian Samuel Huntington, were prevented from speaking at British universities (*ibid.*). Indeed, it was largely in response to it being applied against Conservative MPs such as Home Secretary Leon Brittan, who was met by a large crowd of protesters when visiting the University of Manchester in 1985, that the Thatcher government introduced the Education (n°2) Act in 1986 (*ibid.*: 6-7). Section 43 of that Act places a legal duty on British universities to “take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees... and for visiting speakers”.
- 10 Nonetheless, it is only recently that “no platforming” has received such widespread media and political attention, leading to an inquiry by the Human Rights Joint Select Committee into the freedom of speech in universities (Human Rights Joint Select Committee 2018). Focusing on the specific policy of “no platforming”, the report concluded that “a large amount of evidence suggests that the narrative that ‘censorious students’ have created a ‘free speech crisis’ in universities has been exaggerated” (*ibid.*: col. 35). It based its findings on the collection of written and oral evidence from students, student society and student union representatives, vice-chancellors and university administration staff which demonstrated that a very small proportion of external speaker requests were rejected, and that when they were, this was largely for administrative rather than political reasons (*ibid.*: col.34). The report was particularly critical of

the on-line magazine *Spiked's* Free Speech University Rankings project, which ran from 2015 to 2019 and ranked universities according to the degree to which it believed they respected free speech. The Committee found that universities with a poor *Spiked* ranking might simply be complying with the law rather than being forced to limit free speech by over-zealous students (*ibid.*: col.32).

- 11 Universities' duty to protect free speech affirmed in the 1986 Act must be balanced with the Equality Act 2010 which outlaws speech considered discriminatory. That duty must also be balanced with universities' duty under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 to "have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism". This means that they must ensure that speakers do not express "extremist" views that might have such an effect. According to Malcolm, the definition of extremism provided in the Act is broadly-drawn and ambiguous and "could be interpreted so as to encompass many views and ideas not usually concerned with drawing people into terrorism" (Malcolm 2021: 525). Furthermore, it may lead to students becoming fearful of expressing their views or inviting others to do so for fear of being labelled as "extremist". The Joint Select Committee on Human Rights highlighted this problem and called for an independent review of the Prevent duty to "include consideration of its impact on free speech and association in universities" (Human Rights Joint Select Committee 2018: col. 70-78). It has therefore been suggested that the biggest risk to free speech in universities comes not from "no platforming" – the instances of which have been "negligible" and "justified" to the extent that they have aimed to prevent speech that may be in contravention of the Equality Act – but from self-censorship on the part of students worrying about associating themselves with views deemed controversial (Malcolm, 2021: 532-534). For example, Muslim students have been found to self-censor for fear of being associated with extremist positions (*ibid.*). The government's own "Prevent" duty is considered to have such an effect (*ibid.*).
- 12 Nonetheless, the current Conservative government has identified the key threat to freedom of speech as resulting from "no platforming" within universities. Senior conservative MPs have described the practice as "modern McCarthyism" (Davis 2021: col.61) aimed at securing the "censorship of speakers who do not fit left-wing woke

narratives” (Longhi 2021). Although the problem is seen as originating on campus, it is considered to constitute a threat to society as a whole. As one Conservative MP claimed:

The campus is merely a staging ground for wider civilisation and society. Those who wish to do away with freedom of speech are attempting to dismantle the foundations of our society and to supplant them with their own totalitarian doctrine. By removing freedom of speech, dissenting voices can be silenced and submission ensured. For proof of that we need only look at recent attempts to subject British history to a radical revision and the accompanying attempts to taint our greatest heroes. This is a deliberate and concerted attempt to erode the pillars of our nation so that we are left with nothing to believe in. Once that point is reached, those responsible—the anarcho-Marxist, hard-left agitators—will be able to impose their own, ever-changing standards whereby yesterday’s truth is tomorrow’s crime. (Bacon, 2021: col.74).

- 13 The universities are presented here as the principal actors leading a “deep state” conspiracy to overthrow British society and against popular interests. It was therefore deemed necessary to resist this “cancel culture” and its “dystopian, Orwellian indoctrination” via new legislation (*ibid.*). The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 introduces a Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom to ensure that free speech duties are respected on campus and to impose penalties if those duties are found to have been breached. There is a danger that this may be counterproductive as increased state control may lead to further self-censorship. As the campaign groups *Index on Censorship*, *English PEN* and *Article 19* pointed out in a letter to the former Secretary of State for Education, “additional legislation, including the imposition of a ‘Freedom of Speech Champion’, may have the inverse effect of further limiting what is deemed ‘acceptable’ speech on campus and introducing a chilling effect both on the content of what is taught and the scope of academic research exploration” (2021). Given that the threat to free speech on campus and beyond is widely thought to be exaggerated, the government’s desire to push ahead with the law appears to be motivated by a populist strategy to place itself firmly on the side of ordinary people against the “scholarly elites” (Jones 2022: 183).

2. The BBC: “Systemically woke”¹⁴?

- 14 The BBC has also been singled out for criticism as a partner in the “deep state” conspiracy, promoting a culturally liberal agenda against the interests of the mass of ordinary British people. A recent report by History Reclaimed, a group of academics seeking “to challenge distortions of history”, has argued that a certain number of BBC documentaries dealing with issues such as slavery, race, empire, and war “give a voice only to one side of a disputed past” and “favour extreme and provocative claims” that “seem calculated to create prejudice and ill feeling against this country” (History Reclaimed 2022: 20–21). Similarly, a report by the Campaign for Common Sense, a group founded by Mark Lehain, once a Conservative candidate and adviser to a former Conservative education secretary, found a lack of balance in BBC drama output, claiming that “a discernible left-wing bias can be detected, with distinctly anti-Conservative and anti-institution sentiments appearing frequently in its programming” (2022). These reports were widely picked up by the right-wing press. *The Daily Mail* claimed that the BBC is “warping modern Britain” by allowing “woke viewpoints” (Lockhart 2022) whilst *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the BBC is “going for woke in rewriting British history” (Rayner 2022). They serve to reinforce widespread accusations of BBC “liberal bias” or “wokery” that have even been endorsed by former BBC reporters and broadcasters such as Robin Aitken (2018), John Humphries (Townsend 2019) and Nigel Rees (2022).
- 15 There is nothing new in these reports about left-wing BBC bias, which can be traced back to the earliest days of broadcasting (Mills 2016), but today they help feed into contemporary conspiracy theories about elite networks operating to undermine the commonsense views of ordinary British people. They have been fully endorsed by Conservative ministers. Indeed, in August 2020, 14 Conservative MPs, including Lee Anderson, the recently-appointed Deputy Chair of the Conservative Party, wrote to the new Director-General of the BBC, Tim Davie, complaining that “the BBC is fundamentally failing ... to ensure that the diverse perspectives and interests of the public and audiences, including licence fee payers across the whole of the United Kingdom, are taken into account”

(Eida 2020). The letter was written in the wake of the false controversy over the BBC's alleged refusal to play the patriotic anthems "Rule Britannia" and "Land of Hope and Glory" at the annual classical musical festival "Last Night of the Proms". Even though it transpired that the BBC had in fact planned to play the songs but without any singing, this incident was taken as further evidence that the BBC was pursuing a "woke agenda" against the better judgement of the British people (Davies 2020). Boris Johnson, then Prime Minister, reacted to the furor by stating, "I think it's time we stopped our cringing embarrassment about our history, about our traditions and about our culture, and we stopped this general bout of self-recrimination and wetness" (cited by Shariatmadari, 2020). In a similar vein, the BBC has been accused of being somewhat unpatriotic in failing to represent a positive vision of post-Brexit Britain. In 2017, 72 MPs led by Conservative MP Julian Knight, now chair of the government's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee that monitors the BBC, accused the institution of bias in its reporting of Brexit, claiming that its "pre-referendum pessimism" meant that it was "unfairly representing" Leave voters (BBC 2017).

- 16 In reality, there is scant evidence that the BBC is pursuing a "woke agenda". A report by researchers at the University of Cardiff analysing the breadth of opinion represented by the BBC over a 5-year period found that while the ruling party always has a larger share of the voice, Conservative dominance tended to be greater than Labour's voice when it was in power (Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.* 2013). It also showed that the broadcaster's coverage of the UK's relationship to the EU was more likely to be framed as a problem than not, hardly a stereotypically "woke" position. Furthermore, the BBC's own review of the impartiality of its coverage in the fields of taxation, public spending, public borrowing and debt found that where bias could be found, it tended to lean both left and right, showing that "a charge of systematic political bias... is hard to sustain" (Blastland and Dilnot 2022: 3). Another study investigated the extent to which the BBC's impartiality might be threatened by its reliance on think-tanks (Lewis and Cushion 2017). It concluded that the majority of think-tanks referred to in its news coverage are centrist and non-partisan, such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, demonstrating the organisation's commitment to impartiality. Yet, in 2015, in the lead-up to the Brexit

referendum, current affairs programming showed a slight bias towards right-leaning over left-leaning thinktanks (*ibid.*: 14). Yet another recent study into BBC journalists' following of and interactions with MPs on Twitter found an orientation towards high-profile MPs from the right of the political spectrum (Mills, Mullan and Fooks 2020).

- 17 It has been suggested that while the BBC does not consciously pursue any particular political agenda, its output tends to be biased towards networks of power, notably on account of the porous nature of the boundaries between the worlds of politics and the media (Mills 2016). Impartiality might also be affected by the fact that journalists often find themselves reporting on issues of which they have little knowledge or understanding. Economics reporting is a case in point. The BBC impartiality review cited above noted the tendency of journalists to make false and misleading analogies between government and household debt, enabling debt to be presented in simplistic terms as automatically “bad” (Blastland and Dilnot 2022: 14). This kind of reporting surely helped to legitimate government discourse about the need for austerity, despite that fact that many economists believed that the policy was damaging (Krugman 2015). Even the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), the UK’s official independent economic forecaster, suggested that austerity policies had harmed economic growth in an open letter sent to former Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013 (Inman 2013). Recently, former Prime Minister Liz Truss added the OBR to the list of organisations purportedly conspiring against the government, forming part of the “wider orthodox economic system” of which the UK Treasury and the IMF are also thought to form a part (Truss 2023).
- 18 Regardless of the evidence, the notion that the BBC is biased against the government has led to ministers seeking to undermine the organisation by threatening to cut funding and abolish the licence fee. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson himself boycotted BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme for a period of two years and encouraged other cabinet ministers to follow suit. Johnson instead appeared on *Times Radio*, a new broadcaster launched in 2020 by the Murdoch press as a direct rival to Radio 4 (Davies 2020). Senior Conservative MPs, such as Jacob Rees-Mogg have also been happy to appear on GB News, the new TV channel launched in 2021 whose chairman

described as “anti-woke” due to the political stance of its key presenters and feature segments such as “wokewatch” (Neil 2021). The position taken by senior conservative figures against the BBC has surely helped fuel the anti-BBC sentiment which has coalesced around the “Defund the BBC” campaign, a new lobby group established in 2020 against the BBC licence fee. The individuals behind the campaign are particularly critical of what they perceive as the BBC’s lack of impartiality, notably surrounding Brexit (Anglesey 2020). It should therefore come as no surprise that its actions have been widely reported by the right-wing press such as the *Daily Mail* (Carlin 2021). Interestingly, “Defund the BBC” frames its arguments against the BBC in terms of the defence of the poor who are often unfairly criminalised for failure to pay the licence fee (Anglesey 2020). This chimes with the former culture secretary, Nadine Dorries’ justification for reducing the cost of the licence fee to protect families from “the threat of bailiffs knocking on their door”, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis (Dorries 2022: col. 39). This is another illustration of the government framing its attempt to silence those who it perceives as its detractors in populist terms as enemies of the people.

3. The legal system: “Rooting out the leftist culture”

- 19 A number of senior Conservatives have suggested that key actors in the criminal justice system are also part of the deep-state conspiracy to advance a leftist agenda. Boris Johnson, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* in 2019, promised to “root out the leftist culture of so much of the criminal justice establishment” (2019b). Former Home Secretary Priti Patel lashed out against the “leftie lawyers” who defend a “broken asylum system” (2020), an idea that was picked up on by Johnson himself when he criticised “left human rights lawyers” in his own speech to the Conservative Party conference (2020). Current Home Secretary Suella Braverman endorsed the claim made by Chief Constable Stephen Watson from Greater Manchester Police that policing has become too “woke”, advocating a return to “common sense policing” (Braverman 2022b). Judges have also come under fire. The most blatant example was the reaction to the High Court’s 2016

ruling that article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to set in motion Britain's exit from the EU could only be triggered by Parliament, not the executive alone. Most famously, the *Daily Mail* carried the headline "Enemies of the People", claiming that the High Court judges were seeking to overturn democracy and thwart the will of those who had voted in favour of Brexit (Slack 2016). When the decision was upheld by the Supreme Court in January 2017, Dominic Raab, currently Deputy Prime Minister, echoed this idea, warning that an "unholy alliance of diehard Remain campaigners [and]... an unelected judiciary" had "thwart[ed] the wishes of the British public" (cited by The Secret Barrister, 2020). The claim was reiterated in 2019 when the Supreme Court ruled that the Prime Minister's decision to prorogue Parliament for five weeks was unlawful: speaking shortly after the ruling, Johnson declared, "Let's be in no doubt, there are a lot of people who want to frustrate Brexit" (cited by Woodcock, 2019). These are not isolated incidents: direct criticism of judges by conservative ministers have become something of a trend, with judges being described variously as "wet", "liberal", "interfering" and "left-wing" (APPG 2022: 16-26).

- 20 Government criticism of criminal justice professionals has been widely echoed by the right-wing press and think tanks, as suggested above by the case of the *Daily Mail*. The Adam Smith Institute has criticised the police for "pursu[ing] 'hate speech' rather than burglaries" (Madsen Pirie 2022: 3) and asserted that the English judiciary and English law enforcement have restricted free speech to such an extent that "British speech code is designed to protect the heckler, not the speaker... the offended, not those who would cause offence" (Byrne 2020: 3-4). Policy Exchange has questioned the political impartiality of the police, expressing concern about their handling of political protest and their adoption of gestures of solidarity, such as the wearing of a badge on their uniform, or "taking the knee" (Spencer 2022: 18-21). The *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* have carried a number of stories on "woke" police. For example, the former carried a story on a police officer who wore a rainbow-coloured helmet, asking the question, "Is this Britain's wokest cop?" (Levy 2022), whilst the latter printed an article penned by Iain Duncan Smith, former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, in which he called for an end to "ridiculous 'woke' policing"

(Duncan Smith, 2022). In the *Daily Mail*, controversial columnist Leo McKinstry has derided human rights lawyers and campaigners as “ideologues” and “parasites” who are failing to respect democracy and carrying out a “relentless assault on the Government” in their pursuit of a “fashionable woke agenda” that clashes with the desire of British people to have tougher immigration controls (McKinstry 2022). “Left-wingers” are seen to be not just challenging immigration law but posing a threat to society itself: “The acid of their self-righteousness is corroding our civilization” (*ibid.*).

- 21 These attacks on criminal justice professionals are not just rhetorical, but have concrete effects. According to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and the Constitution, in recent years the judiciary has been “accused, by both politicians and the media, of ‘interfering in politics’”, despite the lack of evidence supporting this claim (APPG 2022). It concluded:

the behaviour of the executive towards the judiciary may be considered constitutionally problematic. Although we have only seen evidence of one direct attempt by a minister to influence a particular judicial decision, ministers have generally acted in a manner that may be considered improper or unhelpful given their constitutional role. This includes making public statements which misrepresent judicial decisions, launching ad-hominem attacks on judges who decide against them, responding to adverse decisions with threats to “reform” the judiciary (including to bring it under political control), and conflating “decisions with political consequences” with “political decisions”, thereby giving the misleading impression that judges are stepping outside their constitutional bounds. This behaviour can, in extremis, be constitutionally improper because it erodes public confidence in the judiciary and implies that ministers are better able to decide on matters of law than judges (*ibid.*: 7-8).

- 22 The Conservatives have been particularly critical of the procedure of judicial review which enables members of the public to hold government to account by examining the legality of an administrative action by a public body. The procedure was notably used to challenge the legality of the executive’s attempt to trigger article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty without consulting Parliament, the prorogation of Parliament in 2019, and government plans to send migrants to

Rwanda. In its 2019 manifesto, the Party promised to ensure that judicial review “is not abused to conduct politics by another means or to create needless delays” and thus facilitate “effective government” (Conservative Party 2019: 48). The Judicial Review and Courts Act 2022 subsequently limited the use of judicial review regarding immigration cases, yet some Conservative ministers have reportedly claimed that it does not go far enough and are seeking to place further limitations on the procedure (Siddique 2022).

- 23 It has been argued that government attempts to curb the power of the judiciary, together with reforms to clamp down on protest, have led to “democratic crisis” whereby it is becoming increasingly difficult for the public to scrutinise and challenge the government (Liberty 2021). Indeed, there is some concern that repeated criticism of, and at times outright attack on, the judiciary has led to it becoming somewhat more deferential towards the executive (APPG 2022: 38-40), which of course risks undermining its independence and capacity to check the power of public officials. Yet, the government has presented its reform of judicial review as a means of upholding the sovereignty of Parliament against “the unelected branches of the state” (Buckland 2021). The government thus holds itself up as the only legitimate defender of the public interest, thus conflating the will of the executive with the will of the people.

Conclusion

- 24 The British Conservative Party’s trenchant criticisms of key institutions such as the universities, the BBC, the police and the judiciary serve to support former Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s assertion that there is a “deep state” working against the interests of the elected government and therefore seeking to undermine the democratic “will of the people” (Johnson 2019). Although the term “deep state” is not commonly used within the Party, many senior figures within it, together with the right-wing press and think tanks, have suggested that there are a plethora of different groups working together to push a left-wing “woke” agenda that might be defined as anti-Brexit, pro-immigration and diversity and unpatriotic. In order to further that agenda, they are prepared to use authoritarian means, such as clamping down on free speech, infiltrating the nation’s

national broadcaster and politicising the law. This account might be considered as a conspiracy theory to the extent that it relies on gross exaggeration of what the evidence suggests are in fact relatively minor problems (Giry and Tika 2020: 109); on a simplistic division of the world “into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot” (Butter and Knight 2020: 1); and on the drawing together of apparently diverse issues into a seamless narrative (Giry and Gürpınar 2020: 324).

- 25 Why has the Conservative Party resorted to this populist strategy that is more commonly associated with the extreme right? According to openly right-wing academic Eric Kaufmann of *Policy Exchange*, the vast majority of British people oppose a “cultural leftist position” which he describes as “the belief that minorities must be protected from psychological harm arising from forms of dominant culture, and that a radical transformation of science, institutions, narratives and culture can redistribute power from dominant to subaltern groups” (Kaufmann 2022: 8). He thus argues that appealing to cultural issues can be a useful electoral strategy, serving to unite the right and the centre-ground whilst fomenting divisions on the left (*ibid.*: 56). It would appear that this is a widely-shared view within the Conservative Party. Indeed, Iain Anderson, a leading Conservative business leader, who recently renounced his Party membership to join Labour explained his decision by his belief that the Conservatives are planning “to run a culture war to distract from fundamental economic failings” in the run-up to the 2024 general election (Parker 2023). In doing so, they are not just responding to public opinion, but helping to frame how voters understand key issues (Sobolewska and Ford 2020: 326).
- 26 This is, however, a risky strategy. Firstly, because the adoption of radical right discourse might increase support for rival right-wing parties as that discourse becomes normalised and legitimised (*ibid.*: 329). Secondly, because the conclusion that the majority of British people are anti-woke might be erroneous. Using data from the British Election Study, Jennings has concluded that “British society overall is headed in a more liberal direction” on cultural issues (2023). Finally, the importance of economic issues to the electorate should not be underestimated: at the time of writing (March 2023), the economy is at the forefront of people’s concerns (Statista 2023), and they are

increasingly likely to support left-wing economic ideas such as redistribution (Jennings 2023). If the Conservative Party is seen to be failing to tackle “bread and butter” issues, it may ultimately find itself depicted as “the enemy of the people”.

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NOTES

¹ The term is taken from Nigel Rees, former BBC broadcaster (Rees 2022).

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“We Are Detective”: Transvestigations, conspiracy and inauthenticity in ‘gender critical’ social media discourses

« We Are Detective » : Transvestigations, conspiration et inauthenticité dans les discours des médias sociaux « critiques à l'égard du genre »

Lexi Webster

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ABSTRACTS

English

This article explores the socio-behavioral phenomenon of “transvestigations” in social media discourses. This phenomenon is most often characterized by users referring – erroneously – to apparent physiological cues of one’s assigned sex at birth, which motivate their interpretation of one’s transgender status, particularly among those who do not identify as transgender and focus primarily on cisgender celebrities. It is difficult to know whether these behaviors and interactions are symptomatic of an authentic “gender critical” ideology or inauthentic practices that only fan the flames of antagonism in an ongoing social struggle. In this paper, I explain how transvestigations are primarily based on transphobic “gender critical” discourses and are fundamentally underpinned by a conspiracy of transgender ubiquity. I also explain how transgender users and their allies troll transvestigators by mocking the same discourses and assumptions. To do so, I analyze social media data using methods from cultural political economy and social-cognitive discourse studies. I argue that the possibilities and uses of social media for misinformation, conspiracy, and mimetic antagonism facilitate a discursive landscape in which authentic “gender-critical” discourses are indistinguishable from potentially inauthentic conspiratorial discourses. By highlighting how social media and its users (re)construct a world without distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity, this article raises questions about the im/possibilities of change in contexts of ongoing and ever-increasing antagonisms.

Français

Cet article explore le phénomène sociocomportemental des « transvestigations » dans les discours des médias sociaux. Ce phénomène se caractérise le plus souvent par le fait que les utilisateurs se réfèrent – à

tort – à des indices physiologiques apparents du sexe assigné à la naissance, qui motivent leur interprétation du statut transgenre d'une personne, en particulier parmi les personnes ne s'identifiant pas comme transgenres, avec une attention principalement portée sur les célébrités cisgenres. Il est difficile de savoir si ces comportements et interactions sont symptomatiques d'une idéologie authentique de « critique du genre » ou de pratiques inauthentiques qui ne font qu'attiser les antagonismes dans une lutte sociale permanente. Dans cet article, j'explique comment les enquêtes sur les personnes transgenres s'appuient principalement sur des discours transphobes de « critique du genre » et sont fondamentalement sous-tendues par une conspiration de l'omniprésence des personnes transgenres. J'explique également comment les utilisateurs transgenres et leurs alliés trollent les transvestisseurs en se moquant des mêmes discours et hypothèses. Pour ce faire, j'analyse les données des médias sociaux à l'aide de méthodes inspirées de l'économie politique culturelle et de l'étude du discours sociocognitif. Je soutiens que les possibilités et les utilisations des médias sociaux pour la désinformation, la conspiration et l'antagonisme mimétique facilitent un paysage discursif dans lequel les discours authentiques « critiques à l'égard du genre » sont impossibles à distinguer des discours conspirationnistes potentiellement inauthentiques. En soulignant comment les médias sociaux et leurs utilisateurs (re)construisent un monde sans distinction entre authenticité et inauthenticité, cet article pose des questions sur les im/possibilités de changement dans des contextes d'antagonismes continus et toujours croissants.

INDEX

Mots-clés

transvestigations, transgenre, transphobie, médias sociaux, complot, authenticité, discours de haine

Keywords

transvestigations, transgender, transphobia, social media, conspiracy, authenticity, hate speech

OUTLINE

Introduction

1. An ABC of mediatized transphobia
 2. Examining transvestigations as a socio-discursive phenomenon
 3. Discursive codes and online-offline mutuality
 4. Reclaiming hate, challenging received wisdom, and the art of trolling(?)
- Conclusion: Indeterminable authenticity in the attention economy

TEXT

Introduction

- 1 The term *transvestigation* is a relatively new coinage referring to a specific socio-discursive phenomenon as it is platformed on various social media. Transvestigations are characterized by users referring to a person's physiological features and behaviours as indicative of their transgender status. These primarily erroneous assignments of a person's secret transgender status are often directed at celebrities and politicians, though they are also directed at fictional – including animated – characters from popular media and people in the transvestigator's offline life. By focusing on rudimentary assumptions of sexed physiological difference and hegemonic expectations of gendered behaviours, transvestigators deploy cis- normative ideological framing and appeal to pseudo-scientific expertise to legitimize transphobia and conspiratorial thinking.
- 2 Despite the new nomenclature, these practices are not at all new on social media and in popular media cultures, more generally. Reality shows like *There's Something About Miriam* (2004) and the infamous 'Female or Shemale' segment aired on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009 – 2023) have relied on the same tropes of transgender women's trickery and misogynist examinations of women's bodies. Indeed, even before the term *transvestigation* was coined, conspiracies surrounding some – primarily celebrity or otherwise publicly known – women's secret transgender status have been platformed in various quarters. For example, Michelle Obama has long been victim of body-shaming for her purportedly masculine features – like the shape of her arms and shoulders – and unfounded allegations of her husband's sexual activity with other men.¹ These long-standing transvestigation discourses, albeit known by other names, highlight the intersectional nature of the hate and victimization on which they are built. Transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, and racism are enmeshed – albeit in various and variable permutations – in order to entertain others and/or direct the critique of other's bodies as evidence of a social deception.

- 3 What is specific to social media transvestigations, as opposed to similar practices historically platformed in popular media, is the conspiratorial framing that underpins them. The conspiratorial basis of transvestigation discourses is threefold: 1) transgender ubiquity, 2) the threat of social contagion, and 3) the framing of transgender people as belonging to some elite cabal seeking to enslave the world's cisgender population at large. Again, these conspiracies build on long-standing fascist ideologies. That is, antisemitic and homophobic conspiracies of the 20th century were predicated on similar premises (see Kerl, 2022). That these have found a public resurgence among the rising neo-fascism platformed on today's social mediascape is unsurprising. Indeed, that they are now deployed against a new target is indicative of a shift in the locus of attention for reactionary politics and its associated socio-legal discourses in recent years.
- 4 This paper examines the manifestation of transvestigations on social media – focusing on posts from X (formerly known as Twitter) and Instagram – and their relationship with contemporary political and techno-discursive formations. First, I argue that transvestigations contract some mutuality with offline political discourses in the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (USA), which similarly rely on pre-occupations with sexed bodies and work to reify conspiracies of social contagion. Second, I argue that the techno-discursive properties of social media interaction and its mimetic antagonism render the distinction between transphobia and (potentially *anti-transphobic*) trolling a near impossible task. This paper therefore critiques: (1) how social media and its users discursively (re)construct a world without distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity², and (2) the mutually constitutive relationship this indeterminably (in)authentic mediascape contracts with real- world politics. In doing so, I seek to highlight the infeasibility of social reform in these contextual conditions. In an age of significant and ever-increasing societal transphobia, this paper therefore seeks to provoke critical conversations about media literacy and the role of social media in reproducing, reinforcing, and resisting movements to hegemonize hate.

1. An ABC of mediatized transphobia

- 5 In this paper, I focus on three core elements of transphobia as it is currently mediatized: antagonism, bigotry, and conspiracy. I argue that this ABC of transphobia represents the building blocks of the so-called 'gender-critical' narratives that are embedded in some of the neo-fascist ideologies increasingly platformed on social media and that are reflected in reactionary politico-legal shifts in the West.
- 6 Gender-critical ideologies are largely predicated on an antagonistic positioning between sex, gender, and sexuality (Webster, 2023). Primarily, this antagonism is constructed vis-à-vis the intersectional experience of womanhood, wherein the experience, safety, and rights of cisgender women – and, often, specifically cisgender lesbians – are positioned as conflicting with those of transgender women (see Webster, 2022). Whilst there has been evidence in the past to suggest that the majority of cisgender women – including those identifying as lesbian or otherwise sexually and/or romantically attracted to other women (Curtice *et al.* 2019) – are supportive of transgender recognition, vocal minorities in various mediated spaces have sought to perpetuate this ideological and experiential antagonism. On social media, X (the platform formerly known as Twitter) is perhaps the platform most readily associated with the mediatization of these gender-critical voices and narratives. Given that antagonism is arguably a long-standing communicative norm on social media (Farkas *et al.*, 2018), and X/Twitter, in particular (cf. Evolvi 2019; Jane 2017), its use in the articulation of transphobic antagonism is no real surprise. However, since 2019, transphobia on Twitter – and other social media platforms – has gained significant visibility and traction. Celebrities and politicians past and present have espoused their own brands of transphobia, whether by posting their own content or supporting the content of individuals and organisations that seek to falsely pit cisgender and transgender women against one another (see Gwenffrewi 2022; Ryan 2022). Moreover, the platform chose to remove protections for transgender people from its hateful conduct policy (Yang 2023). It is therefore also, perhaps, unsurprising that positive attitudes towards transgender people have significantly

decreased year-on-year since earlier polls (Billson 2023). And these shifts have had great impact in real-world politics. In the USA, legislative and policy changes have variably been called for – and, in several instances, passed – that reify the antagonism between cisgender and transgender women in the domains of education, healthcare, and sports (Funakoshi & Raychaudhuri 2023). In the UK, this antagonistic positioning has been deployed in policy changes on prisoner placement and in debates over overarching equality legislation (Webster 2023). As such, though underpinned by a gender-critical ideological fiction, the antagonism between gender, sex, and sexuality is a key feature of current articulations of mediatized transphobia.

- 7 The bigotry of present-day transphobia is grounded in a cis-hetero-patriarchal hegemony, comprising sex essentialism, compulsory heterosexuality, and male supremacy. As Erspamer (1997: 153) astutely notes: '[bigots] must oppose all those who contradict their "single Supreme", their principle of unitary consciousness'. Indeed, Erspamer's equation of overt antisemitic bigotry and the more covert bigotry of liberal tolerance is directly analogous to the current mediatization of transphobic bigotry. For example, overt transphobia can be found in the recent sloganeering around transgender women's inherently predatory nature, including their victimization of women and children. Whilst entirely unfounded, these claims have also been deployed in the legitimization of the politico-legal changes discussed above. Despite ongoing discourses of transphobia from other far-right LGB groups (e.g. *LGB Alliance*, *Gays Against Groomers*), these narratives often coincide with parallel narratives that conflate trans identities with drag performance and which also refer to other gender, romantic, and sexual minorities as paedophiles or otherwise as sexual predators. Much of this is also platformed on social media, by groups like *Libs of TikTok*, leading to multiple platforms banning the use of the term *groomers* to refer to LGBTQ+ people (Drennen 2022). More covert transphobia – or, at least, that which is perceived as less extreme – can also be found in similar quarters. For example, the very notion that gender-critical and trans-affirming views have equal moral and intellectual worth based solely on an unwavering – and flawed – commitment to the ideological bounds of democracy (cf. Webster 2023) is evocative of Erspamer's critique of tolerance. In the

UK, this has been repeatedly evidenced in the domain of politics and education, including in the passing of the *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023*, which saw 8 of 26 public evidence submissions variably reference this equivalence, including gender-critical beliefs (Ahmed, 2021; Stock, 2021), ‘transgender ideology’ (Biggar 2021), ‘transgender Orthodoxy’ (Kaufmann 2021), or ‘transphobia row’ (Durham Students’ Union 2021), in their justification for the bill to be passed. Similar are calls for the creation of a ‘third space’ in service provision (e.g. Lamb Tod 2018) and guidance that encourages educators to misgender pupils and out them to their parents (Hunte 2023), which are legitimized as a solution that protects cisgender women and children from perceived threats whilst also recognizing transgender identities. Such positions evoke Erspamer’s (1997: 152) narrative of compelling the outsider to ‘restrict themselves to “officially” sanctioned discursive formations’. As such, whilst there are contextual nuances unique to today’s transphobic bigotry, such mediatized discourses bear stark similarities to historical fascist bigotries, particularly with regards homophobia and racism.

- 8 Identity with historical – and ongoing – antisemitism and homophobia is as prevalent in the conspiratorial underpinning of transphobia as with the manifestations of its bigotry. The parallels between transphobia and homophobia are perhaps most easily identified. For example, the legitimization of new bills and guidance surrounding the teaching of transgender identities – and teaching *by* transgender educators – in both the USA and the UK are an exact replica of the ideology underpinning ‘Section 28’ (Local Government Act [1988]) in 1980s Britain. This conspiracy of *social contagion* via education in historical homophobic discourse directly correlates with contemporary anxieties surrounding viral contagion of HIV/AIDS (Haydon and Scraton 2002). This same confluence of medical discourse and a social contagion threatening children can be seen in conspiracies of ‘rapid onset gender dysphoria (ROGD)’, which transphobes claim is a symptom of transgender visibility (see Ashley 2022). Ironically, such transphobic discourses are arguably reliant on a manifestation of the earlier described covert liberal transphobia, with proponents of banning gender-affirming care for transgender children and young people citing a prevention of gay and lesbian erasure. That is, gender-affirming care for transgender children and

young people will force those who would otherwise identify as either gay or lesbian to transition in order to ‘fit in’ with a homophobic transgender zeitgeist. These conspiracies are even legitimized in – albeit significantly methodologically flawed and evidently aligned with so-called ‘gender critical’ ideology – academic literature (see Littman 2018). The logical conclusion to this *social contagion* conspiracy, then, is the ubiquity of transgender identities and the wholesale replacement of otherwise gender-nonconforming LGB identities. This is, of course, patently untrue. But this conspiratorial framing also taps into some kind of transgender scheme to amend the social order in one way or another. Indeed, although the intersecting conspiracies of homophobia and transphobia are seemingly obvious, the re-appropriation of antisemitic conspiracies in narratives of transgender ubiquity is perhaps more subtle. For example, a particularly common (neo-)fascist trope is the conspiracy of a ‘slave-like new world order’ driven by a Jewish elite and their otherwise leftist co-conspirators (Lamy 1997: 106). I argue that it is exactly this parallelism with antisemitic conspiracy that is simultaneously the most dangerous and most ridiculous foundation of transvestigations as platformed online. It is the discursive manifestation of a transgender ‘new world order’ conspiracy that most explicitly calls into question the authenticity of transvestigations as what one might call ‘authentic’ hate. Indeed, the well-evidenced neo-fascist pre-occupation with disinformation and conspiracy, coupled with a consistent engagement with social media for propagating such narratives, relies on a re-deployment of historical conspiracies to stoke fear and legitimize ‘authentic’ bigotry. I argue that these very contextual conditions – of neo-fascist propensities for disinformation and the affordances of social media – make it impossible to determine the authenticity of these discursive manifestations of transphobia as neo-fascist conspiracy, as opposed to a unique form of (potentially *anti*-fascist) trolling.

- 9 In the age of social media’s attention-industrial complex, the impact of mediatized transphobia is far-reaching. That is, it the transphobia platformed on social media does not occur in a digital vacuum. Rather, it is evident that social media manifestations of transphobia are largely inextricable from the ‘real-world transphobia’ evidenced in recent social, political, and legal changes in the UK and USA. This

paper therefore examines transvestigations as a socio-discursive phenomenon that exists in a mutually constitutive relationship with offline structures of increasing structural inequality.

2. Examining transvestigations as a socio-discursive phenomenon

- 10 The platforming of gender-critical ideology on social media is nothing new. Renowned for their connection with transphobia and gender-critical discourses are X/Twitter and Mumsnet (Pearce *et al.* 2020). Other transphobic discourses have notably been platformed elsewhere (see, for example, Thach *et al.*, 2022). However, the ‘transvestigation’ phenomenon has surfaced on most major platforms, including X/Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. I analyse in this paper 26 instances of ‘transvestigation’ discourses as platformed on X/Twitter and Instagram. These data were selected via platform-internal searches for the terms *transvestigation* and *transvestigations*. Engagement with these search results in turn led to the identification of new key terms and phrases within this conspiratorial lexicon, including EGI (or, *elite gender inversion*), and of responses to such posts in the form of both satire and conspiratorial solidarity. I recognize that the contextual nuances of a platforms’ affordances, its users’ engagement, and its platform-internal conditions directly influence how discourses are manifested. This paper focuses on the general structural conditions of today’s social mediascape, which prioritises attention and antagonism, that render the authenticity of transvestigation discourses and their conspiratorial underpinnings indeterminable. As such, I do not argue for or seek to identify differences in the manifestation of such discourses across and between platforms. Instead, I focus on the unifying features of transvestigations as a socio-discursive phenomenon that spans both transphobia and trolling.
- 11 Whilst I rely on a broadly interdisciplinary approach to critical media studies, I primarily draw from socio-cognitive discourse studies (e.g. van Dijk 2009) as a methodological approach and theoretical framework. In so doing, I rely on a tripartite theoretical and analytical structure. At the theoretical macro-level, there are the largely unchanging structural conditions that variably enable and constrain

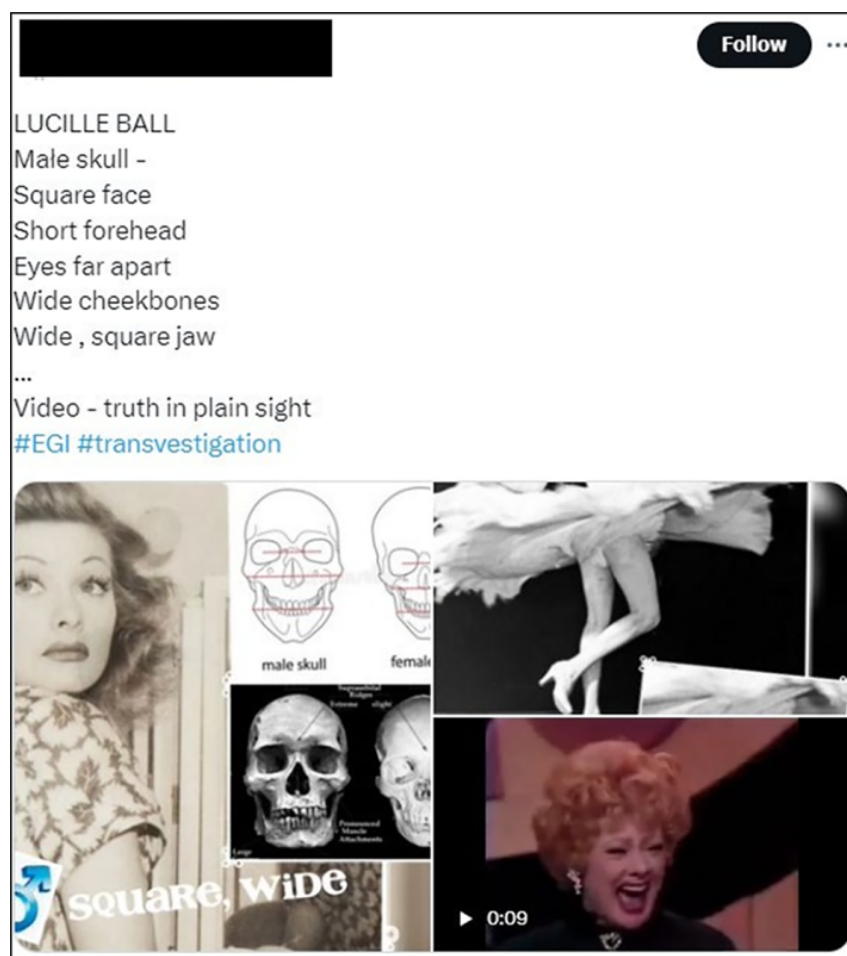
the ways in which we can go on in the world. These are analysable at varying scales, including the political- economic conditions of the offline world (within which the online world is embedded), the prevailing conditions of social media communication in an age wherein it is inextricable from our daily lives, or the local conditions of a specific platform and its internal techno- social ecosystem. At the micro-level, there are the discursive manifestations of our experiences, ideas, values, and beliefs. On social media, these are variably analysable as the text, images, audio-visual content, and meta-communicative functions (e.g. likes, shares, follower/friend connections) that are produced, distributed, and consumed in social media interactions. It is at the *meso*-level of cognition – of interpretation and construal – that I argue the trouble with transvestigations occurs. Cognition is theorized as a mediatory process bridging macro-level structures and micro-level discourse. However, because the prevailing structures of today's attention-industrial complex broadly encompasses norms of disinformation, the radicalization of political ideology, and extreme antagonism, it calls into question how users' discursive interactions interact with those structures. That is, do discourses authentically reflect the social structures most directly associated with their *linguistic content* (i.e. an increasing societal transphobia)? Or, do they represent an interpretation of the context's *communicative function* (i.e. disingenuous communication, disinformation, and antagonism)? Indeed, given that the relationship between discourse and society is mutually constitutive and therefore bi-directional, (how far) do *transvestigation* discourses reify societal transphobia and/or the indeterminable authenticity of social media communication? In this paper, I primarily argue for the indeterminacy of transvestigations as an authentic discursive manifestation of transphobia. I also argue, then, that the interplay between transvestigation discourses, users' responses to them, and authentic examples of transphobia in both online and offline spheres, renders this indeterminacy of its status as an *authentically* transphobic discourse a moot point. Rather, I contend that it is exactly the mutual reinforcement of online and offline communicative practices as indeterminably authentic in contexts of hate that should provoke us – as scholars, activists, and global citizens alike – to reassess the role social media play in reproducing, resisting, and reinforcing socio-structural inequalities.

3. Discursive codes and online-offline mutuality

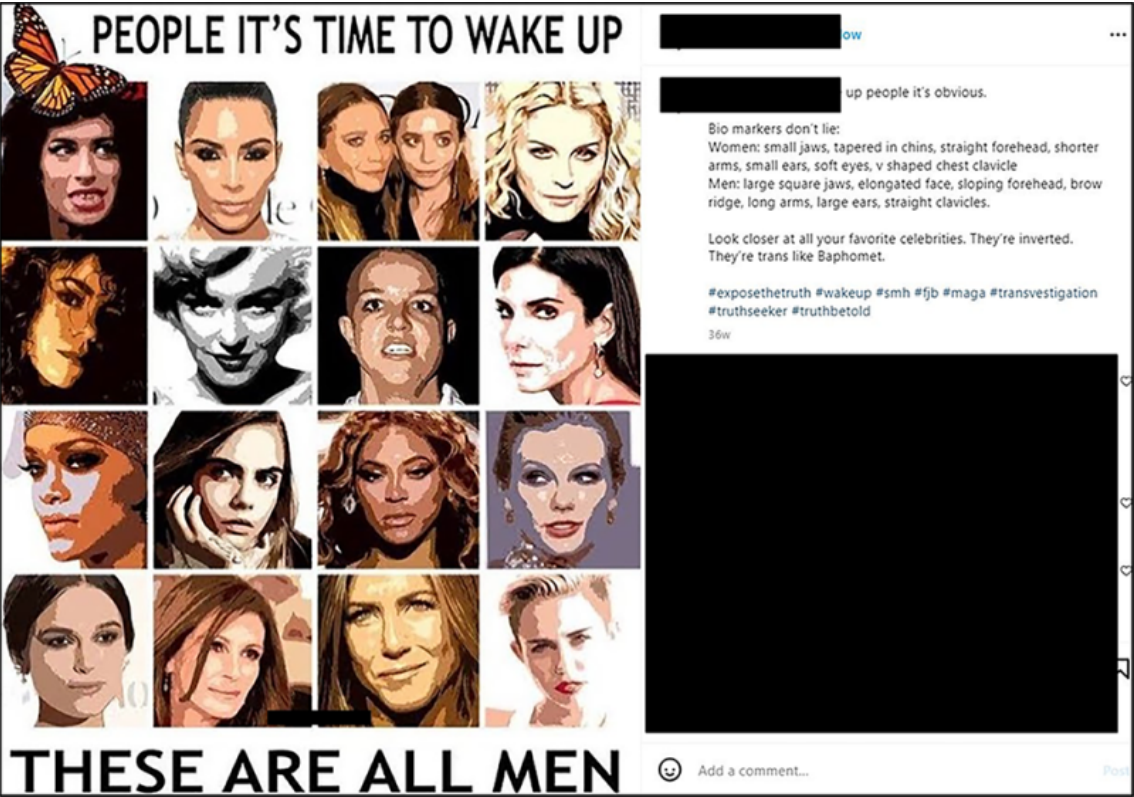
- 12 A basic textual analysis unveils discursive codes that are both commonly shared among transvestigation posts and shared with offline politicking around transgender identities in the USA and the UK. I focus here on the pre-occupation with sexed physiology – including musculoskeletal features and external sex characteristics – and false appeals to scientific expertise as a legitimization strategy. From these features, I argue that transvestigation discourses online share features with offline political discourses in their discursive manifestations of transphobia. I also discuss some coinages specific to transvestigation discourses that highlight their conspiratorial underpinning and indeterminable authenticity.
- 13 There is a significant focus on the size, shape, and spatiality of a person's musculoskeletal features in transvestigation discourses. Transvestigators often reference the skull and the placement or shape of facial features as a purportedly fool-proof and consistent means of identifying an individual's sex as assigned at birth (examples 1-2). Other examples also focus on the size and shape of specific body parts (examples 3-4). Some of these examples appropriate rudimentary means of identifying the sex of skulls and/or skeletons, which rely on averaged measurements and do not consistently account for what bodies would look like with muscle, flesh, hair, and clothing (cf. University of Sheffield 2023).
- 14 Again, other examples deviate from this and make use of completely arbitrary measurements for sex distinction that are reminiscent of children's tall tales and nonsense 'folk' knowledge, such as the number of heads that should fit within a person's shoulder span or the relative length of their index and middle finger (example 5). The logical fallacy – *argumentum ab auctoritate*, or argument from authority – of uncritically appealing to science and folk knowledge is a means of legitimizing the assignation of (secretive) transgender status to the person under analysis, positioning the user posting the content as an expert. Indeed, this is reinforced in those posts that seek to instruct others on how to engage in transvestigations (examples 5-6). Despite the ridiculousness of these claims, they are

by no means harmless. Aside from the transphobia (and, most often, misogyny) inherent in *pejoratively* questioning a person's sex assigned at birth with reference only to physical features, these discourses bear more than a passing resemblance to historical applications of pseudo-science to violent ends, which used physiological features to classify individuals as *less than*, *other*, or otherwise *undesirable* (e.g. phrenology; eugenics).

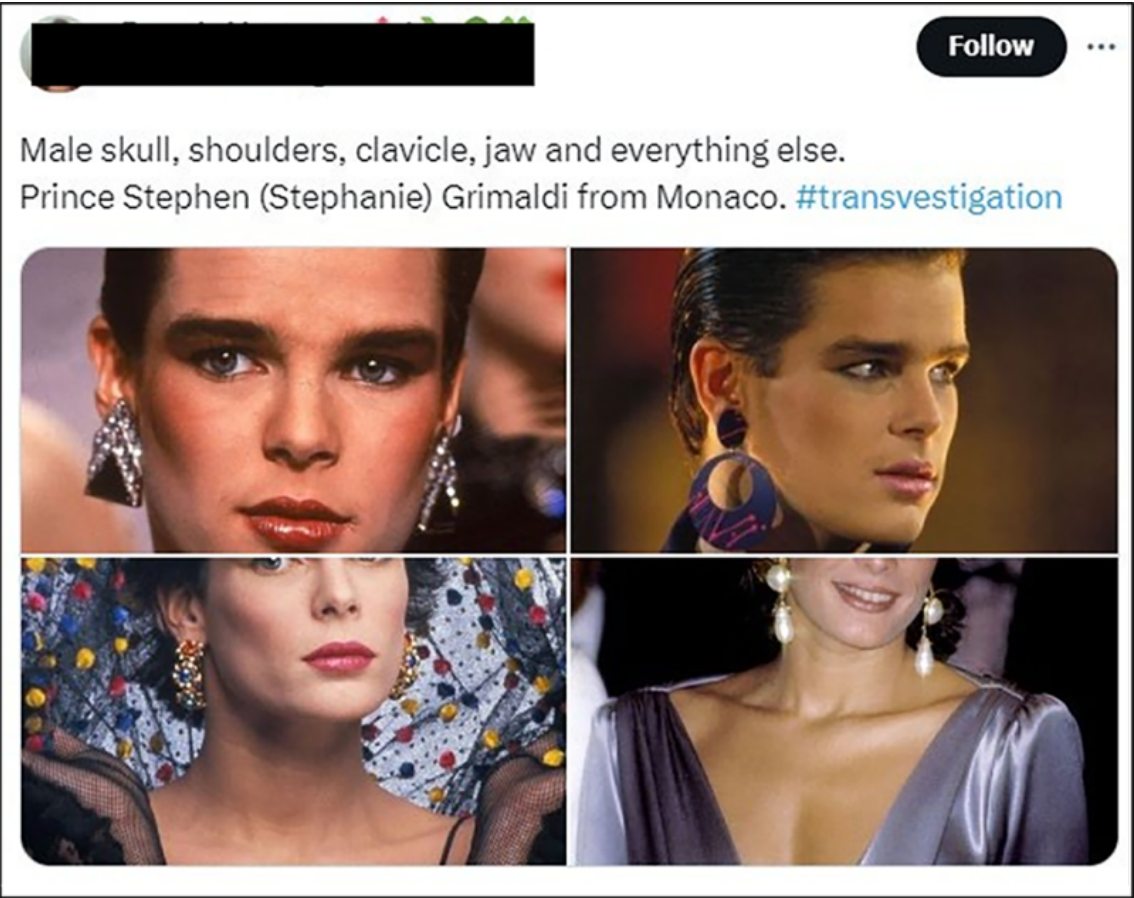
Example 1. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



Example 2. Retrieved from X/Twitter.

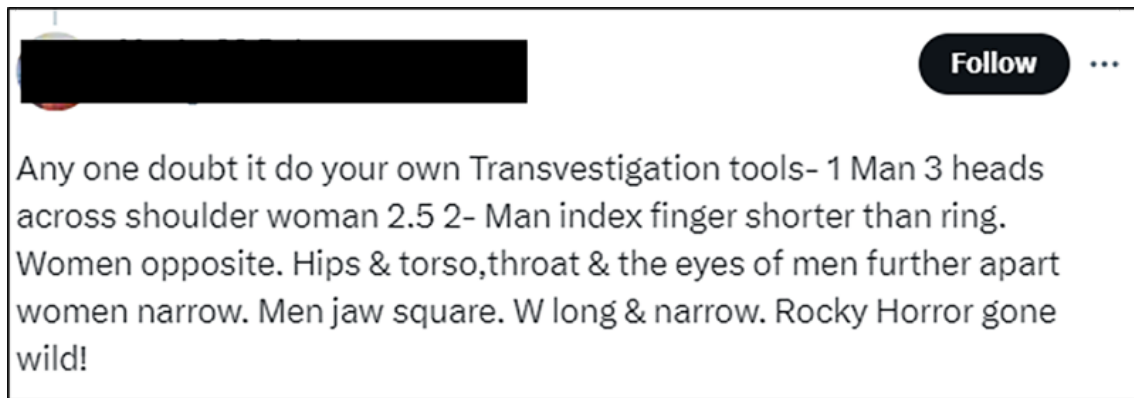


Example 3. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



Example 4. Retrieved from Instagram.



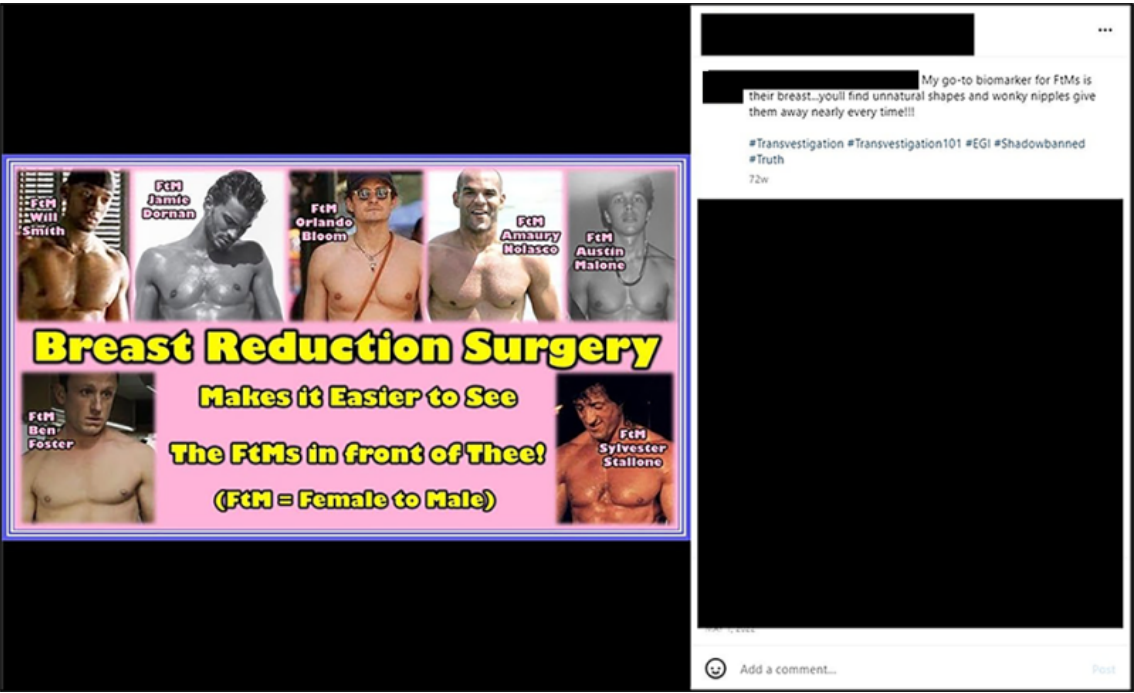
Example 5. Retrieved from X/Twitter.

- 15 As can be gleaned from the above examples, visual accompaniments range from the obvious to the outlandish. With reference to the former, there is some pre-occupation with the (in)visibility of genitals or secondary sex characteristics as an indicator of a person's sex (examples 6-7). The latter, then, use bizarre image overlays and other symbols to visually demonstrate the sexed shapes and measurements described in the above paragraph (examples 8-9). A pre-occupation with genitals is perhaps unsurprising, given that a common transphobic trope surrounds the concept of genital reconfiguration – or lack thereof – and that gender-critical discourse is often underpinned by the threat of the 'physiologically intact' transwoman-as-predator. As such, whilst the examples appear ridiculous and can be easily explained by such concepts as lighting, dress, pose, and intentional editing, they do serve to reinforce existing transphobic ideologies. The more bizarre use of visual overlays (i.e. drawings of skulls, spines, and pelvises) and symbols indicating spatiality in the musculo-skeletal structure, then, simply serve to reinforce the logical fallacy of transvestigations' appeal to authority. Again, this is reinforced by pseudo-tutorials on how to apply such investigative tools (example 10), which further construct an expert positioning among some users within transvestigation discourses.

Example 6. Retrieved from Instagram.



Example 7. Retrieved from Instagram.



Example 8. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



Example 9. Retrieved from Instagram.

Les acteurs du film Barbie Margot Robbie & Ryan Gosling ont des genres inversés (transgenres MTF & FTM)



male skull



female skull



male skull



female skull





91 likes

Add a comment...

Example 10. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



- 16 Whilst many of these posts merely allude to a conspiracy of transgender ubiquity, particularly among celebrities, others explicitly name it. These range from the simplistic and explicit phrasing of 'illuminati trannies are everywhere' and similar constructions (example 11) to more obscure references invoking other conspiratorial discourses (examples 12-20). Coinages like 'elite gender inversion' and '[the] wonky eye' take the conspiracy of social contagion implied in other posts to greater lengths. Specific reference to 'elites' – in the form of celebrities and politicians – as somehow inverted and otherwise in a position of power over others is evocative of antisemitic conspiracies of a new world order (cf. Lamy 1997). A pre-occupation with eyes, as can be seen in other examples above, and a focus on '[the] wonky eye' arguably also invoke similar conspiratorial discourses. For example, the conspiracy of the 'Illuminati', which is also oft-associated with antisemitism (see Garner *et al.* 2022), is

heavily associated with eye imagery (see Stæhr 2014). Within conspiracy models, the placement of secret imagery is seen to be indicative of a secret code or clues as to the cabal's existence (cf. Dyrendal 2012). Again, these allusions to conspiracy and antisemitic tropes indicate a similarity with other manifestations of fascist ideology, both past and present.

Example 11. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



...

Have had to begin my own tranvestigations. There are secret illuminati trannies everywhere. It's worldwide, since way back before.

Example 12. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



...

I agree. No women in politics. G.K Chesterton was right - no votes either. There is a massive deception going on though. Elite Gender Inversion [#EGI](#) Look at the forensic evidence - elite leaders including politicians are predominately gender inverted. See these accounts and learn

Example 13. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



Example 14. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



Example 15. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



- 17 Of course, many of the examples cross the line from the laughable to the utterly ridiculous. However, some of the features of transvestigation discourses are not without their direct counterparts in offline politicking against transgender people in the UK and the USA. Politicians readily rely on the same tropes to legitimize their ideological positions and justify politico-legislative changes. Whether a pre-occupation with physiology in the form of genital configurations (Brooks 2023; Laviates 2023) and other unsubstantiated references to biology (Meighan 2023), or false appeals to science to support conspiracy theories of social contagion in relation to both identity (Dodds 2023) and behaviour (Kessler 2023), there is evidently some mutuality between transvestigations discourses and politicised transphobia offline. Indeed, the more (seemingly) ridiculous aspects of platformed transvestigation discourse aside, it is exactly this mutuality between online and offline

transphobia that arguably make the indeterminacy of transvestigations' authenticity somewhat irrelevant. That is, many elements of such discourses and ideologies are granted legitimacy by dint of their reification in real-world practices that have significant and concrete impacts on – both transgender and cisgender – people's capacity to safely and freely go on in the world.

4. Reclaiming hate, challenging received wisdom, and the art of trolling(?)

- 18 Other users' responses to transvestigation posts also highlight key features that impact the indeterminacy of the wider transvestigation discourse's authenticity. I categorise these responses into three main themes. The first is what I call 'reclaiming hate', wherein users respond to transvestigations – either directly to specific posts or more generally to the wider discourse – with humour and satire in order to mock the ridiculousness and question their authenticity. The second category I dub 'challenging received wisdom', which represents users who position themselves as sympathetic to the transvestigator's cause, or at least broadly to gender-critical transphobia, but challenge their conclusions and methods. Finally, and perhaps the most indicative of transvestigations' indeterminate authenticity is the category that I have deliberately named with/as a question: "the art of trolling?". In this discursive manifestation, transvestigations are directed at known transphobes and gender-critical figures. As opposed to the 'reclaiming hate' category, a satirical intention in these posts is not evident and they are instead indistinguishable from other transvestigations.
- 19 By re-contextualising transvestigation discourses as an object of humour, users deride their conspiratorial underpinning and attempt to negate their harmful intentions. In doing so, users share favourites (examples 16-17), post satirical re-appropriations (example 18), and directly challenge their authenticity (examples 19-20). Whilst users often take care to ensure that these responses are explicitly satirical and that they do not enable transvestigator's to accumulate attention from such satire (e.g., by posting screenshots, rather than sharing

content via a platform's internal sharing mechanism), this re-appropriation of discursive strategies of one's 'ideological opponent' is a direct example of the propensity for social media users to engage in *mimetic antagonism*. This phenomenon refers to the 'type of [discursive] mirroring where combatants increasingly come to resemble each other' (Jane 2017: 467).

- 20 Albeit an intentional mirroring, in the attention economy of social media, this kind of provocative satirisation potentially represents a direct attack on transvestigation discourses and its – assumedly – gender-critical and transphobic ideological bases. Indeed, this again calls into question the redundancy of determining the authenticity of transvestigation discourses. For those users without the capacity or inclination to critically interrogate the media they consume, these practices of satirisation may also serve to reinforce ongoing antagonism and vitriol in more general gender-critical fora.

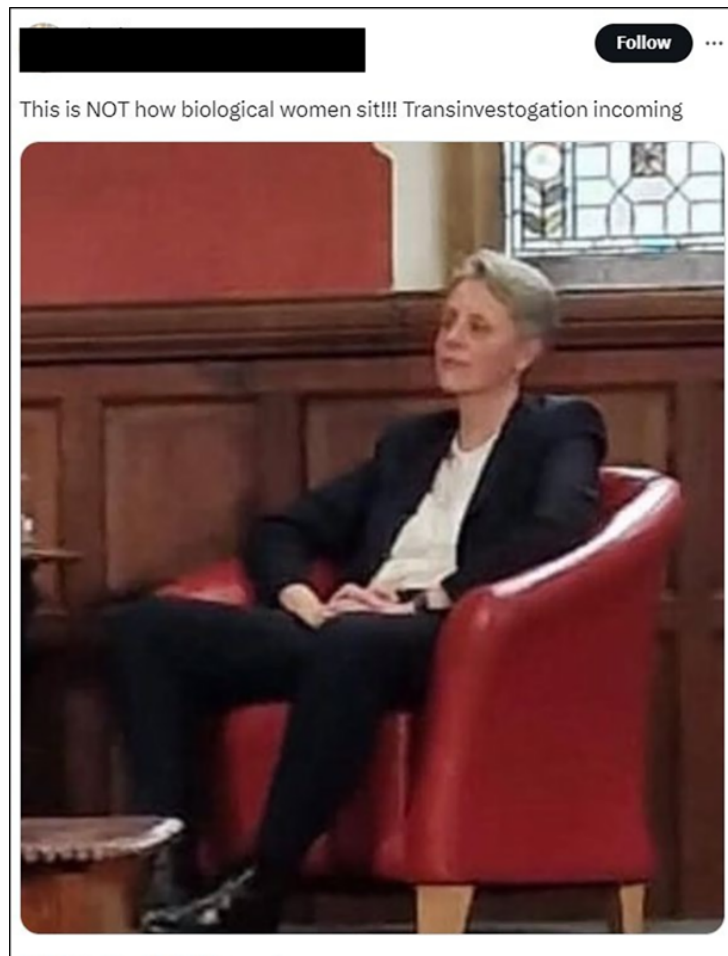
Example 16. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



Example 17. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



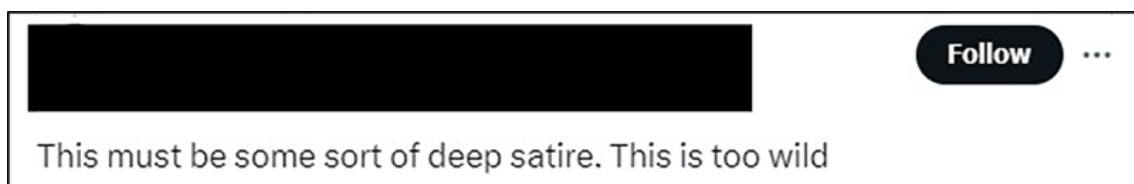
Example 18. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



Example 19. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



Example 20. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



- 21 The argument that transvestigations could well be indistinguishable from other forms of authentic platformed transphobia, even by gender-critical individuals themselves, is reinforced in the way such users challenge the received wisdom of transvestigation posts. Such examples do not explicitly challenge the ridiculousness of transvestigations, more generally, but seek primarily to challenge the methods applied and conclusions drawn (examples 21-22). These challenges can also rely on personal experiences and anecdotes to refute claims made about specific celebrities (examples 23-24). Whilst these challenges evidently call into question the constitutive elements of transvestigation posts, they do not explicitly challenge

the authenticity or appropriateness of transvestigations as a general socio-discursive *practice*.

- 22 Indeed, this lack of direct challenge to transvestigations, more broadly, lend legitimacy to the argument that they are indistinguishable from other socio-discursive manifestations of transphobia. The possibility of all such challenges *also* being posted by users pretending to be gender-critical notwithstanding, this has striking implications for the online-offline mutuality of transphobic discourses. That is, if ordinary citizens and organisations are already influenced by transvestigation-*esque* discourses in the justification for policing gendered spaces (e.g. Billson 2022; O'Sullivan 2021), then there is little in the way of preventing transvestigations from being directly referenced or otherwise re-appropriated in offline political discourse in the same way as other features of transphobia have already. After all, I have explained above how such offline political discourses already show substantive identity with tropes of more general transphobic discourse, which are also evident in transvestigations.

Example 21. Retrieved from X/Twitter.

Follow ...

(THREAD)

FRAUD SURROUNDING EGI TRANSVESTIGATIONS

Well here we go. This is something that, although it shouldn't, needs to be discussed. I will lose some followers, some will block me, and I am not only okay with that, I am thankful for it.

This shit is getting out of control.

14

12

34

9

Before I begin, I'd like to make my position regarding this topic overtly clear, as so many don't.

I acknowledge that the world stage is ridden with trannies. I acknowledge that biology, anatomy, skeletal kinetics, and forensic science in general, are very useful tools...

3

2

9

880

...In identifying whether or not someone you're looking at is in fact a tranny. I acknowledge that the male and female skeleton have distinct differences that allow us to differentiate between them for the most part. I am NOT saying EGI is completely false. It's visible.

Example 22. Retrieved from X/Twitter.

...

Not always true. My index finger is shorter than my ring finger. Also I have very broad shoulders which I inherited from my father..

Example 23. Retrieved from X/Twitter.

 ...

I started out following those top transvestigation ppl n ended up believing it was Everyone until Sono did that lottery winner Michael Carrol with a skull check n claimed him a FTM. Well I know that's Not remotely true as my DiL had a sexual relationship with Him before my Son.

Example 24. Retrieved from X/Twitter.

 It's entirely possible. I'm convinced that Britney and Sandra Bullock are. The only thing, though is that certain traits can be on a female; such as a wide chin. I have cousins like that. 

17w 1 like Reply

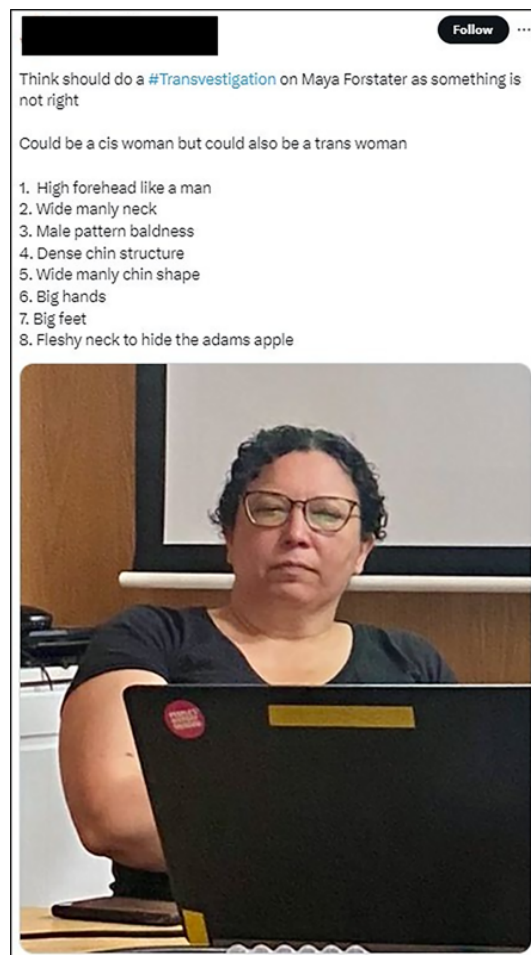
 I have seen Britney Spears naked and she is a woman. 

22w 3 likes Reply

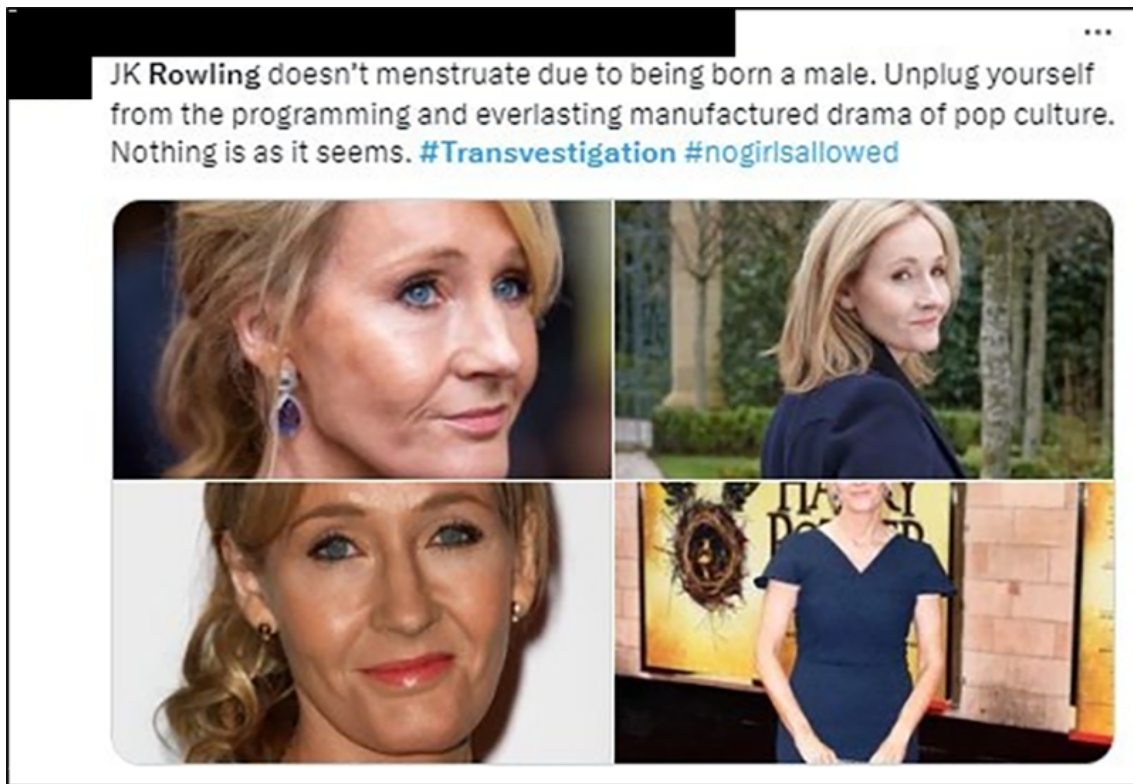
- 23 Another potential example of transphobia 'eating itself' is found in the final category of transvestigation responses, wherein there are specific examinations of and calls to transvestigate known gender-critical figures. Whilst such calls have been used by transgender users and their allies in the past during explicit attempts to troll transphobic users, there are also examples that are not explicitly satirical (examples 25-26). Given that there is no explicit indication of satire, and that such posts also include many of the transvestigation-specific discursive codes identified earlier in this paper, these examples represent the most direct challenge to the determinability of transvestigations' inauthenticity. Perhaps these are examples of anti-transphobic trolling, which seek to highlight exactly the ridiculousness of transvestigations and their conspiratorial underpinning. Otherwise, they may represent a significant extension of the conspiracies of transgender ubiquity and the existence of an elite transgender cabal. That is, if taken as an authentic theory, the

conspiracy potentially extends to the premise that an elite transgender cabal is so deeply engrained in society's structures that elite transgender individuals are also embedded at the upper echelons of their *own* ideological opposition (i.e. within the ranks of transphobic and/or otherwise 'gender-critical' ideologues). Regardless of whether this is particularly sophisticated and 'layered' trolling or an over-extension of a transphobic and antisemitic conspiracy theory, these examples offer the most direct explanation for why we must reassess our critical engagement with social media as a vehicle for resisting, reproducing, and hegemonizing hate.

Example 25. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



Example 26. Retrieved from X/Twitter.



- 24 Each of these categories of response arguably contributes to and represents examples of a social mediascape wherein authenticity – whether of hate, satire, or some other discursive function – is largely indeterminable. Indeed, the antagonistic communicative norms of social media’s attention economy – wherein ideological polarization is seemingly predicated on an ever-increasing radicalization of narrative – mean that even users *engaged* in the antagonism over transgender recognition (and on both sides) are evidently unsure of the (in)authenticity of transvestigations as a form of platformed transphobia. Again, this renders the authenticity – or not – of such discourses a moot point insofar as, regardless of their authenticity, transvestigations serve to reinforce antagonistic communication between ideological opponents in the social mediascape. Moreover, their indistinguishability from otherwise authentic gender-critical narratives means that transvestigations also represent a significant potential threat similar to that of more mundane manifestations of transphobia, which have already gained a foothold in offline political discourse. This is especially true in an offline politico-legal context

that is, itself, increasingly indistinguishable from the attention-industrial complex of mass (social) mediatization.

Conclusion: Indeterminable authenticity in the attention economy

- 25 This paper sought not only to explain the indeterminable authenticity of transvestigation discourses and their conspiratorial underpinning, but also to highlight the implications such indeterminable authenticity has on our critical engagement with social media as a vehicle for reproducing, reinforcing, and resisting socio-structural inequalities. In so doing, I constructed two primary arguments: (1) transvestigations are partially reified in ongoing offline politico-legal manifestations of transphobia and risk being increasingly reified in the future; and (2) the techno-social affordances of social media render the authenticity of transvestigations as transphobic discourse a largely meaningless concept.
- 26 The indeterminable authenticity of transvestigations and the existing mutuality between online and offline transphobia arguably serves to shift the Overton window of what is palatable in Western political discourse. Transphobia evidently already has a foothold in ongoing politico-legal movements in the UK and the USA. Some features of transvestigation discourses, including the pre-occupation with genitals and fallacious appeals to scientific expertise, are already manifested in offline politics and (calls for) legislative change. That transvestigations are largely indistinguishable from other forms of – what we might call – *authentic* transphobia means that it is not unrealistic to presuppose that the further embedding of the foundational principles of transvestigation discourses is also a potential threat to social harmony and the (continuing) equitable socio-legal recognition of transgender identities and individuals. Indeed, similar narratives are already used to justify citizen policing of gender-segregated spaces, which has impacted both transgender and cisgender people. It is important to note that I am not, myself, engaging here in conspiratorial thinking. I do not think that politicians will introduce bone-measuring practices in order to

enable access to sexed spaces. Rather, given the apparent similarities between transphobia and other (neo-)fascist discourses past and present, I am suggesting that such practices may also begin to bear similarity to such discourses. That is, people – cisgender and transgender alike – may (feel the) need to carry identity documents to prove their gender or sex at specific points in their daily lives.

- 27 Perhaps more critical to this forum as an exercise in academic dialogue, the indeterminable authenticity of transvestigations provokes significant questions about our engagement as critical discourse/media analysts with social media communication as an object of enquiry. My analysis here is intended to highlight that it is not (necessarily) enough to see social media as a direct reflection of society or as a causal mechanism of social inequality. Instead, I argue that the indeterminable authenticity of transvestigations points to the mutually constitutive relationship between social media discourse and society at large (both online and offline) is not simply bi-directional, but far more deeply enmeshed, entangled, and confused. What we might have previously identified as one discursive phenomenon or another – for example, satire or conspiracy – or even as one masquerading as another is not sufficient to account for the hypercomplexity of social media discourse.
- 28 Instead, transvestigations are an example of how discourses can be representative of both one thing *and* another simultaneously, albeit variably interpreted and interpretable. I therefore contend that hypercomplexity and indeterminacy is a largely unchangeable structural-discursive condition of our contemporary social mediascape. I end this paper, then, with a provocation: without radically rethinking our approach to critically analysing social media discourse, we are at risk of misunderstanding its ongoing, ever-evolving interaction with and impact on wider society, rendering our (inter)disciplinary pursuits towards social change redundant.

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NOTES

- 1 See Farand (2017) and Stanley (2023) for examples of press coverage from supposedly well-reputed outlets on various elements of these unfounded allegations.
- 2 See also Sawyer (2018) on 'social media as an apparatus that implodes the concept of "truth"'.

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L'exemple historique au service de la persuasion complotiste. Une analyse rhétorique

Historical example for conspiracist persuasion. A rhetorical analysis

Lucie Donckier de Donceel

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ABSTRACTS

Français

Le but de cet article est d'analyser l'usage de l'exemple historique comme procédé persuasif dans les discours complotistes, en contexte francophone, autour de la pandémie de covid-19. Le corpus étudié se compose d'un ensemble d'extraits de discours complotistes produits en ligne, il fait partie d'un plus vaste corpus de thèse, articulé autour des trois genres (délibératif, judiciaire et épideictique) de la rhétorique. Dans le corpus sélectionné, nous pensons que l'effet persuasif produit reposerait, notamment, sur la mobilisation d'un exemple historique paradigmatique pour nos sociétés – la Shoah – et sur la construction d'un *ethos* comme témoin. En nous appuyant sur une analyse rhétorique inspirée de la triade aristotélicienne des trois preuves (*ethos*, *pathos* et *logos*) et de plus récentes études en argumentation et analyse du discours, nous faisons l'hypothèse que la construction réciproque d'un *ethos* de témoin et le recours à l'exemple historique de la Shoah permettent aux orateurs complotistes de présenter des discours dont la force persuasive relève moins de l'argumentation factuelle que d'un effet d'évidence propre au témoignage.

English

The aim of this article is to analyse the use of historical examples as a persuasive device in conspiracy discourse around the covid-19 pandemic in the French-speaking world. The corpus studied is made up of a set of extracts from conspiracy discourse produced online and belongs to a larger thesis corpus articulated around the three genres (deliberative, forensic and epideictic) of rhetoric. In the selected corpus, we believe that the persuasive effect produced is based on the mobilisation of a paradigmatic historical example for our societies – the Shoah – and on the construction of an *ethos* as witness. Drawing on a rhetorical analysis inspired by Aristotle's three modes of persuasion (*ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*) and more recent studies in argumentation and discourse analysis, we hypothesise that the reciprocal

construction of an *ethos* as witness and the use of the historical example of the Shoah enable conspiracy theorists to present a discourse where persuasive force is not derived from factual argumentation so much as from an effect of evidence specific to the testimony.

INDEX

Mots-clés

rhétorique, persuasion, exemple historique, *ethos*, Shoah, témoignage, complotisme

Keywords

rhetoric, persuasion, historical example, *ethos*, Shoah, testimony, conspiracism

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TEXT

Introduction

- 1 Dans le prolongement des travaux menés par Danblon et Nicolas (Danblon et Nicolas 2010 ; Nicolas 2014 ; Danblon 2020) et des récentes réflexions en analyse du discours sur les théories du complot (voir notamment Demata *et al.* 2022), cet article se propose d'analyser un mécanisme persuasif – le recours à l'exemple historique – à l'œuvre dans certains discours complotistes¹. Nous considérons en effet les discours complotistes comme des discours qui refusent l'explication communément admise d'un événement. De fait, ils se présentent comme des contre-argumentations qui doivent non seulement exposer leurs arguments, mais surtout persuader les auditoires de leur version des faits de l'événement dont ils traitent (Nicolas 2014 ; Herman et Oswald 2022).
- 2 Nous situons ainsi notre analyse des discours complotistes dans une approche rhétorique descriptive (Amossy 2021 [2000] ; Piazza 2004 ; Danblon 2013) qui cherche, non pas selon une démarche normative à identifier les potentielles erreurs de raisonnement présentes dans ces discours, mais bien à comprendre pourquoi et comment ils peuvent avoir un effet persuasif. En rhétorique, on a coutume de considérer trois niveaux de preuves² dans la persuasion : la construction discursive d'un raisonnement logique (*logos*), le caractère de l'orateur qui se donne à voir par le discours (*ethos*) et la disposition émotionnelle de l'auditoire (*pathos*). Au niveau du *logos*, dans les discours complotistes en particulier, le seul niveau factuel de l'argumentation logique ne suffirait pas à emporter l'adhésion.
- 3 En effet, avec cette étude, nous pensons pouvoir soutenir que la persuasion complotiste n'est pas simplement d'ordre logique et factuel – niveau sur lequel portent principalement les travaux autour des biais cognitifs et de *fact-checking*³ – mais qu'elle repose aussi sur un effet persuasif lié à l'exemple historique (*paradeigma*⁴). Nous nous concentrerons sur trois de ses fonctions persuasives : une fonction

d'argumentation par l'analogie [3.1], une fonction épidiétique [3.2] et une fonction exemplaire [3.3] (Paissa 2016).

- 4 Nous ferons ensuite l'hypothèse que produire une argumentation fondée sur l'exemple historique contribue à la construction d'un *ethos*⁵, pour les orateurs complotistes, comme des témoins de l'événement dont ils traitent. D'une part cet *ethos* particulier aux orateurs complotistes légitime et authentifie leurs discours, et d'autre part, leur permet de proposer un discours persuasif pour les événements dont ils se font les porte-paroles.

1. Présentation du corpus

- 5 Pour explorer cette hypothèse, nous avons choisi un corpus composé principalement de différents extraits de discours complotistes, en français, qui soutiennent l'idée que la pandémie de covid-19 aurait été orchestrée par des puissances extrêmes à dessein de nous contrôler au moyen de la vaccination⁶. L'ensemble de ces discours ont été produits entre juin 2020 et septembre 2021 sur différentes plateformes numériques (Twitter et YouTube ou des équivalents).
- 6 Le corpus [4] est un extrait de discours prononcé par Jean-Jacques Crèvecoeur, figure notoire de la scène complotiste francophone, dans une émission qu'il enregistre seul : « Les conversations du lundi ». Cet extrait est le plus ancien (29 juin 2020), il s'agit d'un extrait de discours prononcé au début de la crise du covid-19.
- 7 Le corpus [2] est un tweet du chanteur français Francis Lalanne, posté le 27 mai 2021 et repris d'une vidéo de L'Extracteur autour du complotisme⁷ et de la figure essentialisée du Juif.
- 8 Enfin, les corpus [1] et [3] sont des extraits de l'émission « L'info en question », présentée également par Jean-Jacques Crèvecoeur. Le corpus [1] reprend l'une de ses interventions dans l'émission du 9 septembre 2021, et le corpus [3] reprend l'une des interventions de Muriel Hubin, autre participante à la même émission.
- 9 Pour chaque corpus, à la première occurrence de celui-ci, un lien URL renvoie à la séquence en question, avec le minutage précis permettant d'écouter le discours.

- 10 Ce corpus a été choisi pour étudier l'effet persuasif produit par la mobilisation d'exemples historiques dans les discours complotistes. Ce raisonnement, que l'on peut définir comme un raisonnement argumentatif par analogie avec un événement passé, est, dans la tradition rhétorique, le propre des discours délibératifs ou politiques. Nous avons donc délimité notre corpus parmi un ensemble de discours complotistes qui répondaient à des questions d'ordre délibératif dans la gestion de la crise sanitaire du covid-19, telles que : « devons-nous respecter les directives sanitaires ? » ; « devons-nous porter le masque en public ? » ; « devons-nous rendre la vaccination obligatoire ? » ; etc.
- 11 D'une façon remarquable, dans la majeure partie de ces discours, l'exemple historique mobilisé était toujours le même : le rappel et le renvoi à la Shoah. Au-delà de la Shoah en elle-même, ces discours invoquent l'ensemble du *topos* qui lui est associé, c'est-à-dire également la figure du « Nazi » et celle du « Juif ». La Shoah est en effet mobilisée non seulement pour désigner le génocide perpétré contre les Juifs, mais aussi une sorte de paroxysme du mal et de l'horreur. Comme le suggère Stoenner, la Shoah est pour ainsi dire « universalisée »⁸ au point de produire une nouvelle forme d'antisémitisme, plus implicite, se réalisant soit par la comparaison déloyale, soit par une inversion du rapport entre victime et bourreau (Stoenner 2016). Dans le corpus ici pris en considération, le rapport au *topos* de la Shoah est ambivalent et participe notamment de cette nouvelle forme d'antisémitisme. D'une part, l'imaginaire autour du Juif et de la Shoah, rapporté à des figures essentialisées, est assimilé à la supposée culpabilité des Juifs dans de nombreux discours complotistes⁹. D'autre part, ce même imaginaire est aussi assimilé à celui de la victime à laquelle être comparé, dans un contexte de concurrence victimaire, serait valorisé (Giglioli 2014 ; Grinshpun 2019 ; Horvilleur 2019). Dans notre corpus, les figures de la Shoah et du Juif sont de nombreuses fois évoquées (Treblinka, Joseph Joffo, régime nazi, etc.) et remplissent trois fonctions : une fonction argumentative par analogie [3.1], une fonction d'ordre épидictique [3.2] et une fonction relative à la constitution d'un modèle pour l'action [3.3].

2. Retour sur l'exemple historique

- 12 Dans le *Traité de l'argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique*¹⁰ (2008 [1958]), Perelman et Olbrechts-Tyteca, parmi la catégorie des arguments qui structurent le réel, considèrent quatre types de raisonnements qui fonctionnent par analogie (Perelman et Olbrechts-Tyteca 2008 [1958] : 257). Ceux-ci sont la métaphore, l'illustration, le modèle et l'exemple historique (*ibid.*, en particulier 471-542). Dans cette étude, nous nous concentrerons principalement et d'abord sur l'exemple historique ; et ensuite sur le modèle. L'exemple historique, comme le rappelle aussi Koren, est défini par les deux auteurs comme un raisonnement par analogie (typiquement « A est à B » ce que « C est à D ») dont on peut tirer une prémisse à valeur argumentative¹¹ : de l'évaluation (positive ou négative) d'un événement passé, nous tirons une conclusion qui a valeur de prémisse argumentative dans l'évaluation d'une situation actuelle (Koren 2016).
- 13 Dans notre étude, à l'instar de Paissa (2016) et de Ferry (2011), nous considérons que l'exemple historique peut assumer trois fonctions persuasives différentes : une fonction analogique, une fonction d'ordre épideictique et une fonction de modèle (ou fonction exemplaire)¹².
- 14 La fonction persuasive analogique de l'exemple historique est telle que nous venons de la décrire : d'une situation passée analogue à une situation présente, une prémisse argumentative est proposée. Par exemple : « face à telle menace passée, nous avons réagi de la sorte et avons obtenu de bons résultats donc, face à une menace contemporaine analogue, nous ferions bien d'agir de la même manière que dans le passé ». Il s'agit d'un procédé argumentatif qui a l'avantage d'être accessible et concret et de provoquer un effet d'évidence fort dans l'esprit de l'auditoire (Danblon *et al.* 2014). Cette fonction analogique de l'exemple historique est imbriquée avec deux autres fonctions persuasives possibles pour ce type de raisonnement : une fonction épideictique et une fonction de modèle.
- 15 Ces deux fonctions sont très proches : toutes deux supposent une reconnaissance immédiate de l'exemple historique mobilisé. En effet, pour que l'effet persuasif escompté soit produit, l'orateur doit s'assurer que l'exemple qu'il invoque fasse écho à une mémoire

commune et partagée¹³ entre lui et son auditoire (Ferry 2011). De fait, l'évocation d'un événement historique particulièrement marquant pour une société, au-delà d'une fonction argumentative pour la décision (« nous devrions à nouveau agir de telle sorte » par exemple), a une fonction de cohésion forte (Trovato 2016). Cette fonction de renforcement de la concorde est l'un des marqueurs principaux du genre épideictique¹⁴ (Danblon 2001). Ainsi, la fonction de l'exemple historique n'est pas toujours de tirer les enseignements d'une situation passée en vue de la décision à prendre, il peut aussi s'agir d'un moyen pour incarner les valeurs d'une société (Ferry 2011).

- 16 Cette fonction épideictique de l'exemple historique partage beaucoup avec la fonction de modèle pour l'action. En effet, ce qui distingue principalement ces deux dernières sont les modalités. Dans le cas de la fonction épideictique, l'exemple invoqué se réfère à une situation, à un événement historique ; dans le cas du modèle, l'exemple mobilisé s'incarne dans une personne (souvent élevée au rang de prototype) dont on se sert comme modèle¹⁵. La prémisse sera tirée du comportement d'une personne dont on fera un modèle pour l'action. Par exemple « Telle personne que nous admirons, a agi de telle façon face à tel événement passé, cela a eu des effets positifs ; ainsi, agissons aujourd'hui comme l'aurait fait cette personne ».
- 17 Bien que ces trois fonctions soient liées les unes aux autres, nous les étudierons, à des fins de clarté de présentation, en les séparant artificiellement.

3. Trois fonctions pour l'exemple historique

3.1. La fonction analogique de l'exemple historique

3.1.1. Usage et fonction analogique de l'exemple historique

- 18 Le raisonnement analogique par l'exemple historique fait partie des moyens de persuasion traditionnels à la disposition de l'orateur. Il

s'agit, nous le disions, d'un raisonnement qui, par la comparaison analogique, permet, à partir d'une situation passée, de proposer une conclusion pour une situation actuelle. De l'analogie entre une situation passée et présente, naît une nouvelle conclusion qui a valeur argumentative (Danblon *et al.* 2014). C'est par exemple le cas d'un raisonnement proposé par Barack Obama dans un de ses discours pour l'État de l'Union tel que Ferry l'étudie (Ferry 2011). Dans ce discours, prononcé en vue, notamment, de faire voter le budget annuel proposé par l'ex-président des États-Unis au Congrès¹⁶, celui-ci argumente par l'exemple historique. Obama raconte un épisode de l'histoire américaine (relatif à la guerre froide) et en tire les enseignements pour affronter les défis contemporains. Son raisonnement peut se résumer de la sorte :

Comme l'investissement dans la recherche et l'innovation a conduit à une victoire technologique sur les Soviétiques, un budget destiné à augmenter le niveau de recherche et de développement devrait nous permettre de relever les défis actuels. (Ferry 2011 : 12)

- 19 Ainsi, de l'évaluation d'une situation passée, l'orateur propose une conclusion qui a valeur de prémisse dans l'évaluation d'une situation actuelle. L'effet persuasif induit par la mobilisation d'un exemple historique est tel que la décision proposée par l'orateur (ici, le choix d'adopter le budget destiné à la recherche et au développement) apparaît comme la bonne décision à prendre.

3.1.2. Usage et fonction analogique de l'exemple historique dans les discours complotistes

- 20 Si nous nous replaçons dans le contexte des discours complotistes autour de la vaccination et des mesures sanitaires relatives à la pandémie mondiale de covid-19, nous observons que ce type de raisonnement est en effet mobilisé pour répondre, par la négative, à la question de savoir s'il faut ou non respecter les indications sanitaires émanant des différentes autorités. Dans l'exemple ci-dessous, l'orateur argumente son refus d'obtempérer face aux mesures sanitaires en proposant un raisonnement complotiste qui

repose sur l'évocation des camps de concentration pendant la période nazie :

Corpus [1¹⁷] : « Et je me suis laissé dire, mais je n'ai pas pu vérifier encore cela, que du temps d'Hitler, les camps de Treblinka, Dachau, Auschwitz et compagnie étaient dénommés par le régime nazi comme des camps "sanitaires". Est-ce que vous avez eu cette information ? Et ce ne sont que les Américains, en 1945, qui ont rebaptisé ces camps des camps de "concentration". Et donc, c'est très intéressant car, actuellement, nous avons des camps "sanitaires", hein, des camps de quarantaine... Et je me dis : "merde ! C'est une répétition de l'histoire 80 ans plus tard." »

- 21 Dans ce cas particulier l'évocation de la Shoah et des camps nazis permet d'inférer une prémisse générale selon laquelle si un gouvernement organise la concentration de sa population, ou d'une partie de celle-ci, dans un camp, c'est que ce dernier organise un génocide. Selon ce raisonnement par analogie, si les autorités actuelles demandent aux non-vaccinés et/ou malades de séjourner dans des camps de quarantaine, c'est que ces mêmes autorités sont en train d'organiser la disparition de ces dites personnes ; c'est qu'il ne faut pas obtempérer face à leurs recommandations et injonctions.
- 22 Une limite doit cependant être indiquée : pour que le recours à l'exemple historique soit efficace, l'événement évoqué doit faire écho à la mémoire collective de l'auditoire. Pour reprendre l'exemple emprunté à Barack Obama, il manquerait probablement sa cible pour un auditoire européen contemporain (Ferry 2011). À l'inverse, présenter un événement comme analogue à la Shoah est une stratégie rhétorique dont l'efficacité est largement observable de nos jours. En effet, la Shoah est devenue l'un des exemples paradigmatiques les plus couramment utilisés dans les discours contemporains¹⁸, et les discours complotistes n'y font pas exception.

3.2. La fonction épидictique de l'exemple historique

3.2.1. Usage et fonction épидictique de l'exemple historique

- 23 Cela étant dit, nous pensons que le choix de la Shoah comme exemple historique ne repose pas uniquement sur l'assurance d'utiliser un exemple connu de l'auditoire. Nous pensons en effet pouvoir identifier derrière ce choix, une seconde fonction de l'exemple historique. Le choix de se référer à la Shoah participerait également d'une stratégie persuasive épидictique, c'est-à-dire d'un choix argumentatif qui vise à renforcer la cohésion au sein d'une société (Trovato 2016 ; Ferry 2011). Le genre épидictique est l'un des trois genres de la rhétorique¹⁹. Il a pour but le renforcement de la concorde au sein d'une société (Aristote, I, 3, 1358b 27). Dans cette optique, le recours à des exemples historiques connus de toutes et tous, et particulièrement à des souvenirs douloureux, aurait une portée argumentative par voie indirecte : l'exemple historique et son invocation participent au processus de construction de la concorde. Le rappel d'un exemple historique renforce le sentiment d'appartenance à une même communauté (Ferry 2011 : 126, 129). C'est par exemple le cas d'un second extrait du même discours de Barack Obama, toujours dans l'étude de Ferry. Celui-ci évoque une (alors) récente fusillade²⁰ dans le but de placer son auditoire dans une même disposition émotionnelle. L'évocation de cet événement présenté comme tragique et encore présent dans la mémoire de l'auditoire auquel s'adresse l'ex-président, produit un ressenti commun et renforce la concorde au sein de l'auditoire (Ferry 2011 : 11). Dans ce cas, comme nous le disions, l'exemple historique est mobilisé non pas tant pour induire d'éventuelles conclusions dont il faudrait s'inspirer pour la décision à prendre, mais bien pour renforcer la cohésion parmi une communauté (Ferry 2011).

3.2.2. Usage et fonction épидictique de l'exemple historique dans les discours complotistes

- 24 Dans notre corpus, la référence aux programmes nazis sert, dans cette perspective, de topique commune pour désigner les valeurs autour desquelles l'auditoire ciblé par l'orateur complotiste²¹ se rassemble, c'est-à-dire les valeurs que cette communauté considère comme centrales pour ses actions. Rappelons d'une part que, dans nos sociétés occidentales, la mention de la Shoah est l'un des événements les plus fréquemment mobilisés pour évoquer un contexte de peur, d'urgence et de mal absolu (Seymour 2013 : 26-27 cit. in Stoenner 2016 : 488). Et d'autre part, que les discours épидictiques fonctionnent selon des logiques de blâme et d'éloge : l'orateur et la communauté à laquelle il s'adresse, se construisent dans la projection d'un univers commun et partagé. Dans le cas des discours d'éloge, les valeurs invoquées servent d'horizon dans lequel se projeter, dans les discours de blâme, les attitudes pointées par l'orateur servent, au contraire, de repoussoir (Pernot 1993 ; Dominicy et Frédéric 2001). L'orateur et son auditoire se reconnaissent soit dans les valeurs invoquées et louées, soit comme étant l'incarnation des valeurs (positives) opposées des attitudes décriées (Herman 2001) :

Corpus [2²²] : « Cacher un programme nazi derrière une fausse épidémie pour justifier l'eugénisme et la dépopulation mondiale ! Ils le font ! #vaccinationobligatoire »

- 25 Avec ce tweet, cette communauté se regroupe et s'accorde derrière l'idée que les autorités en charge des mesures sanitaires pour contenir et freiner la pandémie de covid-19 incarneraient une autorité équivalente à celle des autorités nazies, en ce compris tout l'affect que cette période convoque dans nos sociétés occidentales. À l'inverse, la « communauté complotiste » représenterait le pôle opposé à cette tendance, elle se projetterait et s'incarnerait dans des valeurs opposées à celles véhiculées par le nazisme.

3.3. La fonction de modèle de l'exemple historique

3.3.1. Usage et fonction de modèle de l'exemple historique

- 26 Enfin, une troisième fonction de l'exemple historique, qui relève également de l'épidictique, consiste à choisir un modèle à imiter. L'exemple historique fournissait un événement modèle dont il faut s'inspirer pour l'action. Ici, c'est une figure (réelle ou imaginaire) qui va servir d'archétype dont il faut s'inspirer pour la décision. Il est d'ailleurs connu que la référence à une personnalité prestigieuse contribue à la construction de l'*ethos* de l'orateur (Herman 2001 ; Pernot 2015 ; Sini 2016). Plus précisément, cette fonction spécifique de l'exemple historique permet d'élever un individu au rang de « modèle », c'est-à-dire de conférer une valeur d'autorité à une attitude particulière, qui sert ensuite de caution ou garant « moral » pour l'action envisagée (Perelman et Olbrechts-Tyteca 2008 [1958] : 490). C'est par exemple le mécanisme qu'étudie Sini dans une étude qui porte sur les discours de campagne électorale de Marine Le Pen et l'évocation de la figure de Jeanne d'Arc. Marine Le Pen, en mobilisant cette figure, non seulement propose une analogie entre la situation que connaît la France en 2015 et la guerre de Cent Ans, mais surtout, elle met en exergue certaines valeurs et certains principes moraux qu'elle appelle à servir de modèles pour les prochains dirigeants de la France (Sini 2016). Ainsi, le modèle, qui s'incarne dans une personne dont le comportement est considéré comme louable, devient une sorte de repère pour l'action envisagée ; ici Jeanne d'Arc et ses actions deviennent les lignes de conduite à suivre pour incarner une certaine France²³.

3.3.2. Usage et fonction de modèle de l'exemple historique dans les discours complotistes

- 27 Nous pensons que ce type d'usage de l'exemple historique se retrouve dans l'extrait présenté ci-après. En effet, dans ce discours, l'oratrice

complotiste fait le parallèle entre son action (au moment des faits, elle travaillait dans un centre de dépistage du covid-19 et proposait à des enfants, à l'insu de leurs parents, de ne pas leur faire de test PCR) et un acte de résistance face au régime nazi. Avec toute la charge émotionnelle dont la « Résistance » et l'image du « Juste »²⁴ bénéficient dans l'imaginaire collectif, notamment francophone, elle utilise donc cette analogie pour justifier le fait qu'elle encourageait des enfants à mentir aux adultes :

Corpus [3²⁵] : « Et donc pendant que vous discutiez de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, ben il m'est venu l'image : enfin vous voyez qui est Joseph Joffo ? Il a écrit "Un sac de billes". Eh bien il a été préparé par son père à mentir sur ses origines. Et je me rends compte que j'ai fait le lien avec ce que je fais avec ces tests PCR d'encourager les enfants à mentir. Et je me vois vraiment encore en fait, faire ce lien entre les deux et donc, avec ces enfants à protéger. »

- 28 En mobilisant la figure d'un père juif qui encourage son enfant à mentir aux nazis pour se protéger, cette oratrice met en scène une logique argumentative selon laquelle, face à un danger tel qu'il implique un risque vital, il est nécessaire de mentir. Le modèle qu'elle mobilise dans la justification, a posteriori, de son action, est celui du « Résistant », du « Juste » qui n'hésite pas à prendre des risques. En cela, nous retrouvons un trait caractéristique, mais non exclusif, des discours complotistes, qui est la glorification du courage comme valeur²⁶ : eux, les complotistes, prennent des risques pour agir pour la Vérité, pour le « Bien » face au « Mal ».
- 29 Nous pensons cependant que le fait de faire du père de Joseph Joffo un modèle pour l'action permet plus que la valorisation du courage. En effet, le Juif reste malgré tout la victime d'un système injuste. Comme le père de Joseph Joffo, l'orateur complotiste prend des risques malgré sa position de (supposée) victime. Le recours à un tel exemple historique permettrait ainsi à l'orateur de construire un *ethos* qui relève à la fois du héros et de la victime. Dans un jeu de miroir inversé, l'oratrice complotiste se compare ici, non seulement à une résistante au régime nazi, mais aussi à une personne juive, c'est-à-dire à une victime opprimée. La construction d'un *ethos* de victime et de héros, ancré précisément dans ce topos de la Shoah nous permettra, dans le second temps de cette étude, de

considérer comment *ethos* et *logos* dialoguent et participent tous deux de la force persuasive des discours complotistes²⁷.

4. Le *logos* au service de l'*ethos* dans la persuasion complotiste

30 Avant de poursuivre, nous tenons à préciser que certains procédés argumentatifs, notamment ceux étudiés dans cette contribution, peuvent être plus saillants dans les discours complotistes, mais ne sont pas exclusifs de ceux-ci. Au contraire, il nous semble que l'efficacité persuasive de ces discours reposerait en partie, sur le fait qu'ils partagent de nombreux mécanismes argumentatifs avec d'autres types discours²⁸.

31 Compte tenu de cette observation, nous soutenons l'hypothèse suivante : nous pensons que le recours à l'exemple historique de la Shoah, en tant que *logos*, a un impact sur la construction d'un *ethos* bien précis dans les discours complotistes. Comme nous l'avons vu, les orateurs complotistes se présentent, d'une part, comme des victimes et des héros, ceux qui prennent la parole en public et n'hésitent pas à défendre les opprimés. La victime et le héros favorisent la crédibilité de l'orateur. D'autre part, ces orateurs complotistes, s'ils sont reconnus comme des interlocuteurs crédibles, sont ceux qui, à voix haute, dénoncent ce qu'ils observent et se constituent ainsi en témoins de l'histoire.

4.1. Une hypothèse : l'*ethos* de témoin dans les discours complotistes

4.1.1. Le témoin en rhétorique

32 L'*ethos* est généralement défini comme « le caractère de celui qui parle, [...] [sic. et ce qui provoque la] persuasion quand le discours est ainsi fait qu'il rend celui qui parle digne de foi. » (Aristote, 1, 2, 1356a 5). Pour Aristote, l'*ethos* se construit dans et par le discours, en partie indépendamment de la réputation de l'orateur (ce que recouvre la notion contemporaine d'*ethos* prédiscursif, voir Amossy 2010). L'orateur doit ainsi obtenir la confiance de l'auditoire, principalement

par la construction d'un *ethos* crédible et légitime (Amossy 2010 ; Angenot 2013).

- 33 Dans notre corpus, comme énoncé précédemment, on trouve une articulation entre un *ethos* de victime et de héros, comparables aux victimes et héros de la Shoah. Cette articulation (héros-victime) est la condition pour la construction d'un *ethos* de témoin.
- 34 En rhétorique classique et contemporaine, le témoin est celui qui a vu et qui au nom de cette prérogative est appelé à témoigner, à rendre public ce qu'il a vu. Dans cette logique, l'authentification et la crédibilité du témoin sont centrales : elles construisent l'effet d'évidence persuasive propre au témoignage (Dulong 1998 ; Guérin 2015 ; Danblon 2017). Lorsque sa crédibilité est reconnue, et sa légitimité à prendre la parole est actée, le témoin s'exprime en général dans deux cadres distincts : soit dans les tribunaux, soit dans la sphère publique (Detienne 1967 ; Dulong 1998). Le témoin judiciaire est celui appelé à témoigner, sous serment, devant les tribunaux, et le témoin historique est celui qui témoigne, dans la sphère publique, d'un événement exceptionnel afin d'en inscrire le récit dans la mémoire commune d'une société²⁹. Nous faisons l'hypothèse que les orateurs complotistes, en évoquant la Shoah construisent un *ethos* proche de celui du témoin historique : ils « témoignent comme » les victimes des grandes catastrophes humaines du xx^e siècle (Dulong 1998).

4.1.2. Le témoin dans les discours complotistes

- 35 À travers les exemples historiques analysés auparavant, les orateurs complotistes induisent une idée de proximité entre eux et les événements dont ils nous font part. Dans le cas des corpus [1] et [3] principalement, les orateurs se présentent comme des victimes d'un régime analogue à un régime dictatorial nazi et le recours à l'exemple historique leur permet d'inscrire leur discours dans une optique de témoignage.
- 36 Dans le corpus [1], l'orateur nous dit explicitement que s'il n'a pas pu « vérifier » ce qu'il en était durant la seconde guerre mondiale, il peut désormais affirmer, grâce à son vécu et son expérience, la présence

de « camps sanitaires ». L'orateur exprime ici l'une des prérogatives du témoin : il est celui qui a vu et celui dont l'expérience permet d'accréditer son discours.

- 37 De façon analogue, dans le corpus [3], la même dynamique est imposée par l'oratrice, qui, elle aussi, au nom de son statut supposé de victime et résistante, témoigne de son expérience.
- 38 En effet, les orateurs complotistes présentent leur récit comme des témoignages qui mériteraient d'être consignés dans les annales de la société ; ils incarneraient ainsi un rôle de devoir de mémoire. Voici un dernier exemple particulièrement représentatif de cette tendance :

Corpus [4³⁰] : « Parce qu'effectivement priver un peuple de son histoire c'est le priver aussi de point de repère pour comprendre et pour décoder le présent ; parce que qui maîtrise le passé, maîtrise le présent et qui maîtrise le présent peut maîtriser le futur. Vous voyez ? Donc en fait, ce qu'il fallait faire et ça, ça c'est superbement bien fait c'est nous raconter des histoires justement, des histoires qui sont totalement fausses par rapport à la réalité de ce qui s'est passé, mais comme le temps avance on a de moins en moins de témoins directs de ce qu'il s'est passé au moment de la guerre 40-45 – il y a pratiquement plus personne qui vit aujourd'hui qui ait connu la guerre 40-45 à un âge où il était déjà adulte hein ; ce sont des gens qui sont [sic. nés] dans les années 20. Donc ce sont des gens qui sont centenaires actuellement. Dans quelques dizaines d'années plus personne ne sera des témoins directs ce qui s'est passé au moment du 11 septembre et donc on pourra nous raconter n'importe quelle couillonnade à propos du 11 septembre et là on sera obligé de le croire de la même façon qu'on va croire, qu'on croit à des histoires comme l'incendie de la bibliothèque d'Alexandrie qui paraît-il ça je n'y étais pas pour confirmer, paraît-il est un canular complet. Là aussi c'est quelque chose qui est totalement inventé pour justement, manipuler la conscience du peuple. »

- 39 L'orateur nous explique que s'il ne témoigne pas de son expérience « on » pourrait, d'ici une génération, nous raconter « n'importe quoi », à l'instar de ce qui s'est produit dans le passé.

Conclusion

- 40 C'est donc dans cette logique que le recours à des exemples historiques qui évoquent la Shoah permet aux orateurs complotistes de construire un *ethos* de témoin particulièrement crédible. La crédibilité du témoin reconnue, son témoignage, lorsqu'il est mobilisé dans un discours, présente, la plupart du temps, un effet d'évidence et de persuasion fort.
- 41 Cette proximité entre discours complotiste et témoignage permet d'expliquer, en partie, pourquoi ces discours sont si résistants à la réfutation. En effet, si l'on considère les discours complotistes comme analogues à des témoignages, ils peuvent être perçus non plus comme des discours qui cherchent à argumenter et expliquer un certain événement, mais comme des discours qui exposent « simplement » ce qui s'est passé. Il s'agirait alors de discours qui présentent une volonté d'exposer la vérité, comparable à la façon dont un témoin raconte ce qu'il a vu et/ou vécu. Dans cette logique, où le témoignage a valeur de discours factuel et véridique, le témoin n'argumente pas sa version des faits, mais la donne à voir.

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NOTES

1 Les termes de « complot » et de « conspiration » sont désormais considérés comme équivalents. En revanche, on distingue clairement les complots et les conspirations – qui ont été fomentés dans l'histoire – des théories complotistes ou conspirationnistes – fictives (Cetro 2020 ; Taguieff 2021 : 16-43).

2 Dans la *Rhétorique* aristotélicienne, les « preuves techniques » sont définies comme les « moyens de persuasion fournis par le moyen du discours » et sont de trois types : « le caractère (*ethos*) de celui qui parle, les autres dans le fait de mettre l'auditeur dans telle ou telle disposition (*pathos*), les autres dans le discours (*logos*) lui-même, par le fait qu'il démontre ou paraît démontrer. » (Aristote, I, 2, 1356a 1-5).

3 Dans le récent rapport Bronner, outre le fait de souligner que le phénomène complotiste doit être appréhendé selon un prisme multidisciplinaire, les auteurs soulignent aussi un échec relatif des pratiques de *fact-checking* et de *debunkage* : celles-ci seraient nécessaires mais non suffisantes (Bronner 2022). C'est également à partir de ce même constat que se développent certaines initiatives en psychologie sociale qui tendent à se concentrer sur le *pre-bunkage* plutôt que le *debunkage* (Lewandowsky et van der Linden 2021).

4 Déjà dans la *Rhétorique* l'exemple historique était considéré comme l'argument type du discours politique, ou délibératif (Aristote, III, 1417b 31 – 1418a 5).

5 Sur l'*ethos*, nous renvoyons principalement aux travaux de Amossy (2010) ; Woerther (2007); Guérin et al. (2022).

6 Précisons d'emblée que nous ne considérons pas la position antivaccin en tant que telle comme complotiste. Dans cette contribution, lorsque nous parlons de complotistes antivaccin, nous nous référons à eux lorsque, pour

justifier leur rejet du vaccin, ils utilisent une explication complotiste, ils mobilisent des explications qui incluent la présence de divers produits chimiques intentionnellement nocifs dans le vaccin et la production dudit vaccin comme résultant d'un plan mondial de contrôle et destruction de la population mondiale. Pour de plus amples développements, voir le récent volume complet sur le sujet (Butter et Knight 2023) et en particulier la contribution de Giry (2023) pour la France.

7 Dans une vidéo intitulée « Pandémie covid-19 : obsession autour des Juifs et du nazisme », L'Extracteur met en lumière une ambivalence dans les discours complotistes autour du « Juif » comme figure essentialisée. La vidéo (postée le 3 juin 2021, consultée le 24 janvier 2023) est disponible sur le canal YouTube de l'Extracteur : <https://youtube.com/watch?v=A2mEuWsaBVs&si=EnSIkaIECMiOmarE>.

8 Les observations proposées par Stoenner, à partir notamment des travaux de Wodak, trouvent un écho dans la construction de l'*ethos* des orateurs complotistes. Des préoccupations similaires, dans une démarche linguistico-argumentative, sont au centre du récent ouvrage dirigé par Di Figlia et Di Piazza (2023).

9 Dans une même logique, soulignons la récurrence entre antisémitisme et discours complotistes. Voir notamment Braut Simonsen (2020) ; Taguieff (2020).

10 Rappelons l'héritage aristotélicien dont Perelman se réclame.

11 L'argumentation par l'exemple historique, *paradeigma* en grec ou *exemplum* en latin, était déjà présentée dans les traités classiques de rhétorique. Dans sa *Rhétorique*, Aristote propose plusieurs illustrations de ce mécanisme argumentatif (I, 2, 1357b 30-36 et II, 20, 1393a 31- 1393b 3).

12 De manière générale, nous renvoyons notamment au volume collectif *Rhétoriques de l'exemple. Fonctions et pratiques* (Danblon et al. 2014) et au volume n°16 de la revue *Argumentation et Analyse du Discours* portant sur « L'exemple historique dans le discours » (Paissa et Trovato 2016).

13 Selon la perspective développée par Assmann, nous pouvons considérer qu'une société invoque deux types de mémoire : une mémoire communicationnelle, de type orale qui correspondrait à une génération, et une mémoire culturelle, écrite et qui transcende les différentes générations (Assmann 2010).

14 Le genre rhétorique épideictique se réfère aux discours de blâme et d'éloge, aux discours de circonstances dont la fonction persuasive est le

renforcement de la concorde au sein d'une société. Voir notamment Pernot (2015).

15 Nous savons que le choix de distinguer la fonction de modèle de la fonction épидictique pourrait être critiqué au regard même des caractéristiques du genre épидictique et de la spécificité des discours d'éloge qui tendent à faire des personnes louées l'incarnation de certaines valeurs et donc, des modèles dans lesquels une société se retrouve. Quoiqu'il en soit, nous considérons qu'il est ici pertinent de traiter ces trois fonctions de l'exemple historique de façon distincte dans la mesure où notre étude ne porte pas sur le genre épидictique mais sur les différents usages de l'exemple historique dans les discours complotistes. Pour une discussion plus approfondie sur les différentes fonctions du genre épидictique, nous renvoyons à l'ouvrage collectif *La mise en scène des valeurs. La rhétorique de l'éloge et du blâme* (Dominicy et Frédéric, 2001).

16 L'étude proposée par Ferry porte sur le discours de l'État de l'Union prononcé le 25 janvier 2011 par Barack Obama, alors président des États-Unis. Comme le précise l'auteur « le discours de "State of the Union" est prévu par l'article II section 3 de la constitution américaine [sic. et] à cette occasion, le Président est censé faire état de l'union de la nation américaine et présenter son agenda législatif et ses priorités nationales au Congrès » (Ferry 2011 : 8).

17 Extrait de l'émission *L'info en question*, séquence 78, 9 septembre 2021, minutage [02 :41 :57 – 02 :42 :30]. <https://fulllifechannel.com/video/495/ifu78---emission-du-9-decembre-2021-avec-philippe-bobola?channelName=JeanJacquesCrevecoeur>.

18 Comme le soulignent Garello et Carapezza, et comme en témoigne leur état de l'art, la Shoah est devenue l'un des événements le plus souvent invoqués dans l'espace discursif occidental, que ce soit dans un cadre persuasif ou non (Garello et Carapezza 2023).

19 À côté du judiciaire qui a pour objet les discours d'accusation et de défense et du délibératif qui a pour objet la décision politique (Aristote, I, 3, 1358b 5 – 14).

20 Obama fait référence à la fusillade de Tucson qui a eu lieu le 8 janvier 2011 et a provoqué la mort de 6 personnes, blessant 12 autres. Parmi les personnes décédées, il y avait notamment une petite fille de 9 ans.

21 À quelques exceptions près, l'appellation « complotiste » (ou conspirationniste) est toujours attribuée depuis l'extérieur et jamais

revendiquée par le groupe qualifié de « complotiste » (Taïeb 2010 ; Boltanski 2012 ; Di Cesare 2021). Ensuite, lorsque nous nous référons à une « communauté complotiste », nous nous référons à un groupe qui se fédère autour d'un événement particulier dont il conteste l'explication officielle et communément acceptée. Ce groupe s'organise dans le but de mettre en lumière une autre explication dudit événement, et cette explication sera ensuite considérée, par ce groupe, comme valide et, par les autres autorités et institutions, comme « complotiste » (Giry 2014; Giry et Tika 2020).

22 Tweet posté par Francis Lalanne le 27 mai 2021.

23 Comme c'est le cas pour les discours complotistes, étudier les effets persuasifs présents dans certains types de discours et reconnaître leur force ne veut pas dire que nous partageons automatiquement les points de vue exprimés par les orateurs que nous mobilisons.

24 À l'instar du discours prononcé par André Malraux à l'occasion du transfert des cendres de Jean Moulin au Panthéon le 19 décembre 1964, les tropes de la « Résistance » et du « Juste » sont chargés d'une valeur émotionnelle forte, ils renvoient à des actes de bravoure et de justice.

25 Extrait de l'émission *L'info en question*, séquence 78, 9 septembre 2021, minutage : [02 :45 :25 - 02 :46 :00].<https://fulllifechannel.com/video/495/ifq78---emission-du-9-decembre-2021-avec-philippe-bobola?channelName=JeanJacquesCrevecoeur>.

26 Dans la *Rhétorique*, Aristote stipule qu'un orateur, pour apparaître crédible, doit faire preuve de vertu, de bienveillance et de « sagesse pratique ». Parmi les vertus listées par le Stagirite, nous retrouvons le courage (Aristote, II, 1, 1378a 6-9). Dans cette optique, la mobilisation de la figure du « Résistant » nous semble participer de la crédibilité générale de l'orateur. La crédibilité de l'orateur, notamment à travers l'évocation de la figure du « Résistant », à l'instar de la construction d'un *ethos* de « victime » permet donc, dans les discours ici étudiés, à l'orateur d'apparaître comme crédible. Cette crédibilité est préalable et nécessaire à la qualification ensuite du discours complotiste comme un témoignage (Guérin 2015) ou tout du moins comme un discours qui récupérerait un effet persuasif analogue à celui produit par le témoignage.

27 Le *pathos* joue lui aussi tout son rôle dans cette stratégie rhétorique. Il a fait l'objet d'un développement spécifique sur le ressentiment (Danblon 2010 ; Di Cesare 2021 ; Donckier de Donceel 2023).

28 Dans ce seul article, nous avons évoqué l'usage de raisonnements persuasifs mobilisant l'exemple historique dans au moins trois autres types de discours : dans un cadre délibératif (avec le discours sur l'État de l'Union), mais aussi dans un cadre épideictique (avec les discours de commémoration) ou bien encore dans le cadre de discours de campagne électorale.

29 En ce sens, le témoin historique s'apparenterait plutôt à la qualité du témoin antique dans l'Antiquité (Detienne 1967).

30 Extrait de l'émission *La conversation du lundi* n° 44, 29 juin 2020, minutage : [1 : 02 :05 - 1 :03 :47], URL : <https://fulllifechannel.com/video/14/cdl44---la-theorie-du-complot-enfin-revelee-episode-iv---conversation-du-lundi-44?channelName=JeanJacquesCrevecoeur>.

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QAnon in den sozialen Medien: Zur Reproduktion antisemitischer Topoi auf Facebook

QAnon on social media: On the reproduction of antisemitic topoi on Facebook
QAnon dans les réseaux sociaux : sur la reproduction des topoï antisémites sur Facebook

Laura Levstock

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ABSTRACTS

Deutsch

Die Superverschörungstheorie (vgl. Butter, 2020: 34) QAnon bedient sich einer Reihe antisemitischer Codes und strukturellem Antisemitismus (vgl. Beirich, 2021: 92). Dieser Beitrag illustriert, wie erschreckend deutlich antisemitische Topoi im QAnon-Spektrum reproduziert werden. Im Fokus stehen dabei nicht die *Ideology Broker* (vgl. Blommaert, 1999: 9) dieser Diskursgemeinschaft, sondern kleine Akteur:innen, die im sozialen Medium Facebook unter Beiträge kommentieren. Um zu analysieren, ob und wie sich Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen antisemitischer Codes bedienen, wird eine Diskursanalyse angewandt, die sich am DIMEAN Modell nach Warnke & Spitzmüller (2008) orientiert. Die wort- und propositionsorientierte Analyse erlaubt es in Kombination mit der transtextuellen Analyse auf Topoi zu schließen, die im Zuge der Diskussion unter den Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen reproduziert werden. Zusätzlich wird eine Nominations- und Prädikationsanalyse (vgl. etwa Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) durchgeführt, durch die verdeutlicht wird, wie die betreffende Diskursgemeinschaft die vermeintlichen Verschwörer:innen imaginiert. An dem relativ kleinen Korpus zeigt sich eine außerordentliche Varietät an antisemitischen Inhalten. Zu den antisemitischen Topoi, die reproduziert werden, zählen die Mythen des Weltjudentums, des Geld- und Wucherjuden, der Ritualmordlegende, der Brunnenvergiftung etc. Mit den zunehmenden Möglichkeiten diversifizierter Informationsverbreitung und -produktion wächst auch die Gefahr der Weitergabe von Falschinformationen bis hin zu Verschwörungstheorien. Die Verbreitung von Verschwörungstheorien auf sozialen Medien – nämlich auch auf mainstream Plattformen wie Facebook – zeigt die Wichtigkeit, solche Diskurse zu verstehen. Die (angewandte) Linguistik kann dabei helfen, die

Sprache von Verschwörungstheorien zu analysieren und so zu einer möglichen Prävention der weiteren Verbreitung beizutragen.

English

The super-conspiracy theory (cf. Butter, 2020: 34) QAnon makes use of a number of antisemitic codes and structural antisemitism (cf. Beirich, 2021: 92). This article illustrates how shockingly clearly antisemitic topoi are reproduced in the QAnon spectrum. The focus does not lay on the ideology brokers (cf. Blommaert, 1999: 9) of this discourse community, but on small actors who comment on posts on the social medium Facebook. In order to analyze whether and how conspiracy theorists use antisemitic codes, a discourse analysis based on the DIMEAN model according to Warnke & Spitzmüller (2008) is applied. The word- and proposition-oriented analysis in combination with the transtextual analysis allows to infer topoi that are reproduced in the course of the discussion among conspiracy theorists. In addition, a nomination and predication analysis (cf. for example Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) is conducted, which clarifies how the discourse community in question imagines the alleged conspirators. The relatively small corpus reveals an extraordinary variety of antisemitic content. The antisemitic topoi reproduced include the myths of the international Jewish conspiracy, the blood libel, the well poisoning, etc. With the increasing possibilities of diversified information dissemination and production, the danger of passing on false information, including conspiracy theories, is growing as well. The spread of conspiracy theories on social media – even on mainstream platforms like Facebook – shows the importance of understanding such discourses. (Applied) linguistics can help to analyze the language of conspiracy theories and thus contribute to a possible prevention of their further spread.

Français

La super-théorie du complot (cf. Butter, 2020 : 34) QAnon se sert d'un nombre significatif de codes antisémites et d'un antisémitisme structurel (cf. Beirich, 2021 : 92). Cette contribution a pour but d'illustrer à quel point les topoï antisémites sont reproduits de manière effrayante dans le spectre de QAnon. L'accent n'est pas mis sur les *ideology brokers* (cf. Blommaert, 1999 : 9) de cette communauté discursive (*discourse community*), mais plutôt sur les commentaires des petits acteurs actifs sur Facebook. Afin d'analyser si et comment les théoriciens du complot se servent de codes antisémites, une analyse du discours est appliquée. Celle-ci s'oriente sur le modèle DIMEAN de Warnke & Spitzmüller (2008). L'analyse au niveau des mots et des propositions permet, en combinaison avec l'analyse au niveau transtextuel, de déduire les topoï qui sont reproduits au cours de la discussion entre les théoriciens du complot. En outre, une analyse de nomination et de prédication (cf. par exemple Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) est effectuée, qui met en évidence la manière dont la communauté discursive concernée imagine les conspirateurs présumés. Le corpus relativement court révèle une variété extraordinaire de contenus antisémites. Parmi les

topoi antisémites reproduits, on trouve les mythes de la théorie du complot juif, la légende du meurtre rituel, l'accusation de l'empoisonnement des puits etc. Avec les possibilités croissantes de diffusion et production d'informations diversifiées, le risque de transmission de fausses informations, voire de théories du complot, augmente également. La diffusion de théories du complot sur les réseaux sociaux – ainsi que sur des plateformes grand public comme Facebook – montre l'importance de comprendre de tels discours. La linguistique (appliquée) peut aider à analyser le langage des théories du complot et contribuer ainsi à une éventuelle prévention de leur diffusion ultérieure.

INDEX

Mots-clés

antisémitisme, topoi, Dimean, réseaux sociaux, Facebook, QAnon

Keywords

antisemitism, topoi, Dimean, social media, Facebook, QAnon

Schlagwortindex

Antisemitismus, Topoi, Dimean, soziale Medien, Facebook, QAnon

OUTLINE

Einleitung

1. Definition und verwendete Begriffe
2. Antisemitismus, soziale Medien und Verschwörungstheorien
3. Die Reproduktion von Antisemitismus im QAnon-Verschwörungsspektrum auf Facebook
 - 3.1. Fragestellung und Methoden
 - 3.2. Wort- und propositionsorientierte Analyse
 - 3.3. Diskursorientierte Analyse
 - 3.4. Zusammenfassung: Topos-Themen-Verknüpfung

Fazit

TEXT

Einleitung

- 1 Onlinebeiträge, durch die Verschwörungstheorien verbreitet werden, tragen maßgeblich dazu bei, dass ihre Anhängerschaft immer weiter wächst. Diese Beiträge zu verstehen, bedeutet annähernd fassen zu können, wie die Welt aus der Sicht von Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen aussieht, wer in ihren Augen die wichtigsten gesellschaftlichen Akteur:innen sind, welche Entwicklungen wieso geschehen, wie soziale, historische und politische Entwicklungen vonstatten gehen und was bzw. wer wie zu bewerten ist. Versteht man ihre Sprache, so erlangt man einen Blick in eine bestimmte Art zu denken und in für eine bestimmte Diskursgemeinschaft legitimes Wissen.
- 2 Im Zuge dieses Beitrags versuche ich einen Einblick in die Diskurse von QAnon Anhänger:innen zu erreichen und diese besonders auf antisemitische Codes zu untersuchen. QAnon ist eine relativ neue Verschwörungstheorie, die sich etwa seit 2017 online in nationalistischen und konservativen *Communities* verbreitet hat. Die zentrale Figur für die Verbreitung der Verschwörungstheorie ist Donald Trump, der besonders während seiner Präsidentschaft eine vermeintliche geheime und satanische Elite bekämpft habe, die Kinder entführe, foltere, töte und aus ihnen Adrenochrom gewinne, eine Droge, die der Verjüngung diene. Diese Elite sei aber stark und bilde eine *Deep State*, der nicht nur die USA, sondern die ganze Welt unterwandern wolle. Abgesehen von dieser Kernbehauptung lassen werden viele weitere Verschwörungstheorien eingliedern, sodass sich ein Netz aus unterschiedlichen Verschwörungstheorien bildet, auf die je nach kommunikativem Bedarf zurückgegriffen werden kann. Aus dem Grund wird hier auch von einem QAnon-Spektrum gesprochen.
- 3 Dieser Beitrag setzt in der Untersuchung von QAnon den Fokus auf die Reproduktion von Antisemitismus, antisemitischen Codes sowie antisemitischen Topoi. Dazu werden zuerst die wichtigsten verwendeten Termini geklärt und der theoretische Rahmen besprochen, der sich an der Schnittstelle zwischen Antisemitismus, Verschwörungstheorien und sozialen Medien befindet. Um zu analysieren, ob und wie Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen des QAnon-Spektrum Antisemitismus auf Facebook reproduzieren, wird eine an

das DIMEAN Modell nach Warnke & Spitzmüller (2008) angelehnte Analyse durchgeführt. Dabei sollen folgende Fragen beantwortet werden:

1. Welche Äußerungen weisen in den Korpora auf antisemitische Tendenzen hin?
2. Auf welche antisemitischen Topoi wird dabei Bezug genommen?
3. Wie werden die vermeintlichen Akteur:innen der Verschwörung imaginiert? D.h. Wie werden sie benannt und mit welchen Merkmalen werden sie attribuiert?

1. Definition und verwendete Begriffe

- 4 Um den Terminus *Verschwörungstheorie* bestimmen zu können, muss vorerst geklärt werden, was unter *Verschwörung* und unter *Theorie* zu verstehen ist. Es ist keine Überraschung, dass der konspirationistische Theoriebegriff nicht mit traditionell wissenschaftlichen übereinstimmt, da Verschwörungstheorien weder systematisch noch falsifizierbar sind. Aus diesem Grund wurden im Laufe der Verschwörungstheorie-Forschung durchaus andere Termini vorgeschlagen, teilweise aber wieder verworfen (vgl. Butter, 2020: 53). Hepfer (2015: 23) betont zudem, dass Theorien „vereinfachte Modelle der Wirklichkeit“ seien und lediglich das Ziel hätten, ein gegebenes Phänomen zu erklären. Auch wenn Verschwörungstheorien nicht durch allgemein als legitim anerkanntes Wissen die Wirklichkeit darstellen, so sind sie doch für bestimmte Diskursgemeinschaften valide Erläuterungen eines gegebenen Phänomens. Mit dieser Reflexion wird der Terminus *Theorie* im Zuge dieses Artikels verwendet.
- 5 Da Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen davon ausgehen, „eine im Geheimen operierende Gruppe, nämlich die Verschwörer“, versuche Einzelne, Gemeinschaften, Nationalstaaten oder gar die Welt zu beherrschen bzw. zu untergraben, wird eben von Theorien um Verschwörungen gesprochen (Butter, 2020: 21). Verschwörungstheorien können zwar relativ heterogensein, aber drei Annahmen, die nach Barkun (2013: 3-4) universell für Verschwörungstheorien zu sein scheinen, fasst er recht

selbsterklärend so zusammen: „Nothing happens by accident. [...] Nothing is as it seems. [...] Everything is connected.“

- 6 Spezifisch im Zusammenhang mit QAnon muss zudem der Terminus der Superverschörungstheorie besprochen werden, der eine Häufung mehrerer einzelner Verschwörungstheorien meint (vgl. Butter, 2020: 34). Ein Beispiel im Zusammenhang mit QAnon wäre etwa die vermeintliche Adrenochromverwendung der *Eliten* oder das angebliche Eingreifen Israels in die US-Regierung. Diese Verschwörungstheorien werden in das gesamte QAnon-Spektrum eingegliedert. Von einem Spektrum spreche ich hier, weil nicht alle QAnon-Verschörungstheoretiker:innen in ihren Annahmen, Ideen und Theorien eben vollkommen übereinstimmen. Auch aus den Daten dieser Untersuchung kommt heraus, dass einzelne Mitglieder unterschiedliche Theorien heranziehen, um ihre Behauptungen zu unterstützen.

2. Antisemitismus, soziale Medien und Verschwörungstheorien

- 7 Da Antisemitismus (im Folgenden AS) eine Geschichte aufzuweisen hat, die bis in die Antike zurück geht und sich über die Zeit teils stark verändert hat, kann es auch keine allgemein gültige Definition davon geben. In dem Sinne wird hier auf die für den Kontext von Verschwörungstheorien relevanten Charakteristika von AS eingegangen.
- 8 Wenn Adorno (2001 [1951]: 200) von AS als „das Gerücht über die Juden“ spricht, so ist darunter zu verstehen, dass im AS Erzählungen über eine entindividualisierte Masse verbreitet werden, die als jüdisch imaginiert wird. Dabei spielt es keine Rolle, ob sich ein Individuum, auf das dieses Bild geworfen wird, sich selbst als jüdisch wahrnimmt (vgl. Klug, 2013: 5). AS richtet sich demnach „gegen alles, was als jüdisch imaginiert wird“ (Grigat, 2007: 312).
- 9 AS dient laut Peham (2021: 2:26:19-2:26:24) u.a. dazu „abstrakte[...] Furcht in konkrete Angst“ umzuwandeln. Er kann also gut dafür herangezogen werden, um problematischen Situationen zu entgegenzutreten, diese in einer bestimmten inneren Logik zu erklären und vermeintlich Schuldige zu konkretisieren. Im AS kann

scheinbar Unerklärbares durch ein vermeintliches Komplott einer bestimmten Gruppe, nämlich der jüdisch Imaginierten und Konstruierten, erklärt werden (vgl. Levstock, 2023: 4).

- 10 Über die Geschichte hinweg erscheint AS immer wieder in stärkeren und schwächeren Phasen, wie es Klemperer (2007 [1947]: 179) bekannterweise zusammenfasst: „Antisemitismus als soziale, als religiös und wirtschaftlich begründete Abneigung ist zu allen Zeiten und in allen Völkern, bald hier, bald dort, bald schwächer, bald stärker, aufgetreten.“ Tatsächlich hat AS seit der Antike in sich konspirationistische Züge, wie folgend kurz illustriert wird.
- 11 Die Judenfeindlichkeit der Antike ist wohl auf christliche Argumentation zurückzuführen. Schon zu dieser Zeit wurde Jüd:innen vorgeworfen, sie würden im Geheimem Komplote gegen die christliche Gesellschaft planen (vgl. Simonsen, 2020: 357-358). Im Mittelalter fand AS einen neuen Höhepunkt; beginnend mit der Ritualmordlegende bis hin zum Vorwurf der Brunnenvergiftung und der Hostienschändung wurden Jüd:innen für das Übel der Welt und die Pest verantwortlich gemacht (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 51-64). Der mittelalterliche AS sah Jüd:innen vor allem als eine im geheime agierende, bestens organisierte, übernationale Elite (vgl. Simonsen, 2020: 358). Nach einer Phase der Emanzipation im Zuge der Aufklärung folgte eine weitere, in der AS wieder einen Aufschwung erfuhr und als politisches Mittel gebraucht wurde (vgl. Claussen, 1987: 20). Besonders von konservativer Seite wurden Jüd:innen als Drahtziehende der Moderne dargestellt, die alle bisher geltenden Werte und vor allem das Konzept der Familie zerstören wollen; zudem wurden sie zunehmend als eine Elite konstruiert, die das Bankenwesen weltweit kontrolliert, was bereits die Grundlage für den Mythos um die Jüdische Weltverschwörung stellte (vgl. Simonsen, 2020: 360). So wurde ihnen vorgeworfen, sie kontrollierten geheime politische Bünde, was besonders ab den 1850ern zu einem erneuten Anstieg von AS führte. Es erschienen zudem sowohl weitere bis heute bestehende Vorurteile als auch antisemitische Schriften, wie etwa die weit verbreiteten *Protokolle der Weisen von Zion*. NS-Deutschland machte konspirationistischen AS zu seinem politischen Programm, was in einem Bruch mit der Menschheit endete. Selbst danach noch führte politischer AS sowie jener im Privaten zu moralischer und gerichtlicher Verurteilung von Jüd:innen; etwa in der

stalinistischen Sowjetunion, die AS hinter Antizionismus versteckte, im mittleren Osten, wo konspirationistischer AS als legitimes Wissen gilt, sowie in Europa und den USA, wo politischer AS als Tabu gilt und aus diesem Grund in Codes kommuniziert wird, die nur „Eingeweihte“ entschlüsseln können (vgl. Simonsen, 2020: 364-367). An dieser Stelle muss betont werden, dass bestimmte Bezeichnungen wie etwa *Bänker* oder *Zionisten* nicht inhärent antisemitisch sind. Sie machen aber „jenen Teilen ihres Publikums, die danach suchen, entsprechende Bedeutungsgebote, indem sie, ohne explizit [Jüdinnen und] Juden zu erwähnen, Motive aufgreifen, die aus der antisemitischen Verschwörungstheorie stammen“ (Butter, 2020: 169).

- 12 Klar ist, „antisemitism was for a very long time a dominant conspiracy narrative“ und aus diesem Grund ist er auch heute noch tief im verschwörungstheoretischen Denken verankert (Simonsen, 2020: 364). In Verschwörungstheorien wird grundsätzlich angenommen, eine im geheimen agierende, machtvolle und gut vernetzte Elite stehe hinter dem Übel der Welt. Genau das wurde seit Beginn des AS Jüd:innen vorgeworfen. Die Geschichte des AS zeigt, dass Verschwörungstheorien zu Gewalt, Verfolgung, Stigmatisierung bis hin zu Pogromen und Mord führen können.
- 13 Heute stellen das Internet und soziale Netzwerke maßgebliche Medien zur Verbreitung von AS dar. Tatsächlich erleben Betroffene in den sozialen Medien aktuell einen Anstieg an antisemitischen Konfrontationen (Hübscher & von Mering, 2022: 6; Schwarz-Friesel, 2020: 16; Czymmek, 2022: 191). In dem Zusammenhang kommt der Terminus *Antisemitismus 2.0* immer wieder zur Sprache (vgl. Oboler, 2008). Damit sind die neuen Möglichkeiten der Verbreitung von AS gemeint, die User:innen von sozialen Medien durch diverse Arten der Informationsdarstellung und -verbreitung bekommen. Dazu gehören sowohl multimodale Darstellungsformen als auch annähernde sprachliche und geografische Grenzenlosigkeit. Hinzu kommt das Problem, das *social media* Unternehmen bisher nicht dafür sorgen, dass antisemitische Inhalte wirksam genug von den jeweiligen Plattformen entfernt werden, wie das Center for Counting Digital Hate (2021: 8) meldet. Zusätzlich zur Problemlösung durch das Einsetzen von Moderator:innen (vgl. Gillespie, 2018: 5-7) wird die Diskussion um die Anwendung künstlicher Intelligenz (KI) immer präsenter. Hierbei zeigt sich allerdings das Problem, dass u.a. implizit

Formuliertes und antisemitische Codes – wie sie auch in diesem Artikel analysiert werden – für KI noch schwer identifizierbar sind. Hübscher & von Mering (2022: 11) identifizieren daher einen Forschungsbedarf für individuelle Studien, die die Verbreitung antisemitischer Inhalte in den sozialen Medien aufzeigen. Besondere Beachtung sollte laut Bossetta (2022: 228) dabei der Analyse von Topoi, Codes und implizit formulierten Inhalten geschenkt werden, da diese besonders normalisierend wirken können.

- 14 Insgesamt ist anzunehmen, dass die Präsenz von Verschwörungstheorien online ihre Wirkung und Verbreitung durchaus verstärkt. Dennoch sollte der Einfluss nicht überschätzt werden, vielmehr seien sogenannte Filterblasen von Bedeutung, in denen sich User:innen ständig gegenseitig in ihrem Glauben bestätigen und möglicherweise bestärken (vgl. Butter 2020: 180-181). Gleichzeitig gilt es, den intensiven Informationsaustausch auf *social media* nicht zu unterschätzen. Die Deutungshoheit über Plausibilität von Informationen liegt schon lange nicht mehr allein bei den traditionellen Printmedien. Der Zugang zu alternativen Informationsquellen ist durch das Internet maßgeblich vereinfacht worden (vgl. Stano 2020: 483). Zudem hat jede:r User:in die Möglichkeit, hochzuladen, was er:sie möchte und sich als Expert:in für ein Thema auszugeben (vgl. Gualda Caballero 2020: 140). Wie Butter (2020: 188) dieses Problem sehr passend beschreibt: „[O]rthodoxes und heterodoxes Wissen [...] stehen oft gleichberechtigt nebeneinander.“

3. Die Reproduktion von Antisemitismus im QAnon-Verschwörungsspektrum auf Facebook

- 15 QAnon bedient sich einer Reihe antisemitischer Codes und strukturellem AS. Im Fokus dieses Artikels stehen nicht die diskursleitenden Akteur:innen der Verschwörungstheorie (*Discourse Broker* nach Blommaert, 1999: 9), sondern Beiträge der Personen, von denen ausgegangen werden

kann, dass sie die Verschwörungstheorie zwar mitkonstruieren, nicht aber maßgeblich bestimmen.

3.1. Fragestellung und Methoden

- 16 Um zu analysieren, ob und wie sich Facebook-User:innen antisemitischer Codes und strukturellem AS bedienen, wird eine Diskursanalyse angewandt, die sich am DIMEAN Modell nach Warnke & Spitzmüller (2008) orientiert. Der Fokus liegt bei der intratextuellen Ebene auf der wort- und propositionsorientierten Analyse und auf transtextueller Ebene, also bei der diskursorientierten Analyse, auf den Topoi und der Sozialsymbolik. Die wortorientierte Analyse zeigt vor allem auffällige Schlüsselwörter, Stigmawörter, Namen sowie Ad-hoc-Bildungen auf. Im Zuge der propositionsorientierten Analyse werden diese Schlüsselwörter etc. im Kontext von AS interpretiert und näher erläutert. Dadurch ist es möglich, die Implikationen davon für die betreffende Diskursgemeinschaft zu erkennen. Die Analyse auf transtextueller Ebene macht es möglich, diese Bezeichnungen und Schlüsselwörter mit typischen antisemitischen Topoi in Verbindung zu bringen, die in den untersuchten Beiträgen reproduziert werden.
- 17 Zusätzlich wird eine Nominations- und Prädikationsanalyse durchgeführt, durch die ersichtlich wird, wie die Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen die vermeintlichen Verschwörer:innen benennen und mit welchen Merkmalen sie versehen werden.
- 18 Beim Korpus dieser Analyse handelt es sich um Kommentare und Beschreibungen von Videos eines Facebook-Users und Verschwörungstheoretikers aus den USA, dessen Profil nicht mehr öffentlich ist. Dabei wurden zwei Sets seiner Videos ausgewählt, die sowohl thematisch (s. Tabelle 1) als auch zeitlich begrenzt sind. Das erste Set besteht aus seinen veröffentlichten Videos vom 19. September bis zum 24. September 2018 und das zweite aus jenen vom 17. Dezember 2018 bis zum 18. Februar 2019. Insgesamt handelt es sich um 16 Videos unterschiedlicher Länge und mit unterschiedlich vielen Kommentaren. Einige Videos wurden gar nicht kommentiert und jenes mit den meisten Kommentaren zählt 75 Beiträge. Dabei handelt es sich um ein Video, in dem die Shoah geleugnet wird. Unter diesem

Video wurde heftig debattiert, was allerdings die Ausnahme darstellt. Für die Analyse auf transtextueller Ebene wurde auch der Inhalt der Videos berücksichtigt. An der Vielfalt der Themen in diesem kleinen Korpus ist bereits zu erkennen, dass sich dieser User generell einer sehr breiten Varietät an QAnon-bezogenen Themen widmet. Die Themen der Facebook-Videos sind in der folgenden Tabelle ersichtlich gemacht. Kurze Beschreibungen der Videos 1-16 sind in Anhang A zu finden.

Tabelle 1: Themen der Videos

Themencode	Thema	Videos
A	Vergiftung von Wasser und Lebensmitteln	1, 2
B	(Eingriff in die) Industrie	2, 3, 15
C	Kindermord und Pädophilie	3, 6, 7, 8
D	Freimaurertum	4, 5, 14
E	Rituale	4, 6, 7
F	Satanismus	5, 7, 8, 15
G	Adrenochrom	7, 8
H	Holocaustverharmlosung und -leugnung	9, 10, 11, 14
I	Zionismus und Weltbeherrschung	11, 12, 13, 14, 16
J	Homosexualität	15

- 19
- Folgende Fragestellungen sollen Zuge der Analyse zu beantwortet werden:

 1. Welche Äußerungen weisen in den Korpora auf antisemitische Tendenzen hin?
 2. Auf welche antisemitischen Topoi wird dabei Bezug genommen?
 3. Wie werden die vermeintlichen Akteur:innen der Verschwörung imaginiert? D.h. Wie werden sie benannt und mit welchen Merkmalen werden sie attribuiert?

3.2. Wort- und propositionsorientierte Analyse

- 20
- Da es sich bei QAnon um eine Superverschwörungstheorie (s. Abschnitt 1) handelt, gehen einige der Wortkomplexe Hand in Hand

oder schließen sich gegenseitig ein. Folgend werden die einzelnen Komplexe, die im Zuge der wort- und propositionsorientierten Analyse erarbeitet wurden, anhand von Beispiel aus dem Korpus erklärt.

21 I Satanismus

Satanismus als Thema findet sich vor allem in Ausdrücken wie *lucifer* (5.¹), *satan* (10.70.), *satanism* (15.) oder im biblischen Begriff *synagogue of satan* (10.48.) besonders, wenn von „falschen“ Jüd:innen (s. Zionismus in diesem Abschnitt) die Sprache ist. In Abgrenzung zu christlichen Lehren werden Jüd:innen oft als Anhänger:innen Satans nominiert, wobei ihr „jüdisch-sein“ nicht unbedingt explizit gemacht werden muss. Durch den Kontext wird es aber meist eindeutig, dass es sich um antisemitische Nominierungen handelt:

(1) Lyor Cohen is the music industries Executive and is the reason why artist's today are partaking in satanism and homosexuality (15.).

22 Oft wird dabei auch Bezug auf *jüdische Lehren* (8.17.²) oder auf altisraelische Mythologie genommen, um zu beweisen, dass Jüd:innen *teuflische Wesen* seien (7.2.). Generell scheint die untersuchte Facebook Community sehr christlich zu sein, da etwa Bibelausschnitte als legitimes Argumentationselement gelten.

23 II Rituale

Eng damit in Verbindung steht der Wortkomplex um Rituale, die als *child sacrifice* (8.), *blood sacrifice* (6.9.), *spirit cooking* (6.) oder *slaughter* (F.8.17.) bezeichnet werden. Diejenige Gruppe, gegen die die QAnon-Anhängerschaft verfeindet ist, führe zu unterschiedlichsten Zwecken Rituale durch. Der Großteil der Opfer seien Kinder, die für die Adrenochromgewinnung gebraucht würden. Generell werden Blutrituale und Opfergaben außerordentlich oft erwähnt. Die satanischen Anhänger:innen seien aufgrund ihres Kults dazu verpflichtet, an den Teufel Opfer zu geben. Am besten dazu geeignet seien männliche Babys von höchster Intelligenz (Video 7). Spannenderweise werden diese Rituale in fast jedem thematischen Schwerpunkt, also in den Kommentaren zu den unterschiedlichsten Videos, erwähnt. So wird bei einem Video über Freimaurer beispielsweise darüber diskutiert, dass bei deren Ritual, während dem

eine Ziege geschlachtet und deren Blut getrunken worden sein soll, auf Hebräisch gesprochen würde (Video 4).

24 III *Adrenochrom*

Die Annahme um diese Rituale stehen oft in Verbindung mit dem Mythos um *Adrenochrom*, wobei es sich in der Tat um ein Stoffwechselprodukt des Hormons Adrenalin handelt. Im QAnon-Spektrum wird die Erzählung verbreitet, dass *Adrenochrom* im Zuge von satanischen Riten durch das Quälen von Babys und Kindern unter 18 gewonnen werde. Mit 18 Jahren scheint diese chemische Reaktion im Blut einfach zu verschwinden. In weiterer Folge werde es als Verjüngungsdroge konsumiert. Diese Erzählung fand im Zusammenhang mit der Beschäftigung der Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen mit Menschenhandel Einzug in das QAnon-Spektrum. Unter dem Deckmantel des Kampfes für Kinder- und Frauenrechte und gegen Pädophilie können auch Anhänger:innen von Organisationen angesprochen werden, die sich für traditionelle Familien- und Frauenbilder sowie gegen Abtreibung einsetzen.

25 Abgesehen von den offensichtlichen Bezeichnungen wie *Adrenochrome* (Videos 7 und 8) oder „*drug*“ (6.), sind hier auch der Rituale-, Eliten- und Kindermord-Komplex mitzudenken. Immerhin handle es sich bei *Adrenochrom* um eine Verjüngungsdroge, die die *Elite* konsumiere, um nicht zu altern und in einen Drogenrausch-ähnlichen Zustand zu gelangen. Traditionell wird *Adrenochrom* mit einer *Elite* in Verbindung gebracht, die der demokratischen Partei nahestehe (8.34.). Überraschend ist ein Video, in dem zu hören ist, dass auch die republikanische Partei nicht davon ausgeschlossen sei (Video 8). In den Kommentaren zu diesem Video wurde heftig darüber diskutiert. Tatsächlich scheinen einige der Meinung zu sein, dass beide Parteien bereits „verdorben“ seien (8.22.). Daran ist zu erkennen, dass es unter den Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen zwar inhaltliche Auseinandersetzungen gibt, der Grundkonsens aber der gleiche bleibt. Alle sind sich darin einig, dass es eine geheime *Elite* gebe, die irgendeine Art von Verbrechen verübe und alles beherrsche, was sie letztendlich zu Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen macht.

26 IV *Elite*

Da die *Elite* ein so weitgefächerter Begriff ist, ist die Benennung dieser *Elite* besonders heterogen. Aus der Nomination

und Prädikation³ der *Elite* kommt der inhärent antisemitische Charakter von QAnon deutlich heraus.

- 27 Die Nomination der *Elite* erfolgt durch unterschiedliche Instrumente. Teilweise werden dabei Namen unterschiedlicher politischer und popkultureller Figuren (manche davon Israelis, mit jüdischem Namen oder aus jüdischen Familien), teilweise auch Unternehmen genannt. Bezeichnungen in diesem Zusammenhang wären natürlich *Rothschild* (10.47), aber auch *Hil[l]ary* (8.27.), *John Podesta* (8.27.) oder *Marina Abramovic* (7.). Wenig überraschend ist, dass zudem auf vermeintliche geheime (politische) Bünde hingewiesen wird, auf staatliche Organisationen bzw. Organe (etwa Geheimdienste oder die Justiz), aber auch auf Einzelstaaten (z.B. England oder Israel). In manchen Beiträgen wird auch auf Bünde wie *Freemasons* (4.) oder *Jesuits* (12.3.) Bezug genommen, um die es selbst einige Verschwörungstheorien gibt. An der Grenze zur Prädikation befindet sich wohl die Bezeichnung der *Elite* mit bestimmten politischen Einstellungen. Teilweise wird sehr breit von *politics* (10.47), aber auch von *Democrats & [L]iberals* (8.35.), teilweise von *both parties* (8.16) oder den *Republicans* (8.26) gesprochen. Eine weitere sehr breite Bezeichnung wäre *Blue Bloods* (7.3). Grundsätzlich handelt es sich hierbei um eher konkrete Beschreibungen der *Elite*. Sehr bemerkenswert ist die Benennung schlicht mit Pronomen. Alle Kommentierenden scheinen dann zu wissen, um wen es sich handelt, wenn auf *they* verwiesen:

(2) They are so evil (8.24.).

- 28 Die Verwendung von Pronomen ermöglicht zudem eigenständiges Interpretieren. Womöglich ist es auch egal, um wen es sich genau handelt. Die *Elite* sind im QAnon-Spektrum die Bösen und dabei sind sich alle einig. An dieser Stelle muss noch auf die Reihe an *Maledicta* hingewiesen werden, die gleichzeitig als Wertung und als Beschreibung fungieren.
- 29 An der Schwelle zur Prädikation ist die Mythologisierung der *Elite* zu nennen. Es wird etwa von Wesen der altisraelischen Mythologie gesprochen, wie auch davon, dass sie einer Sekte oder einem Kult angehören, Opferriten durchführen und im Zusammenhang mit Adrenochrom Kinder töten würden. Dadurch wird ihnen Brutalität,

Kälte, Grausamkeit, Gefährlichkeit und Bosheit zugeschrieben. Zudem sei die *Elite* lügnerisch, betrügerisch und korrupt, was suggeriert, dass es sich dabei um Menschen in (politischen) Positionen handelt. In diesem Zusammenhang wird sie auch als beherrschend beschrieben. Die *Elite* agiere gegen die Bevölkerung (ist demnach kein Teil von ihr), kontrolliere Regierungen und staatliche Organe und handle so vor allem übernational. Zudem sollte auf die vermeintlich zerstörerischen Eigenschaften der *Elite* hingewiesen werden. Abgesehen von der Zerstörung einzelner Staaten, zerstöre sie traditionelle und christliche Werte. Hier findet sich sehr stark das Motiv der Jüd:innen als Drahtziehende der Moderne (s. Abschnitt 2).

- 30 Die *Elite* wird oft in Verbindung mit Adrenochrom und Blutritualen erwähnt. Oft wird aber schlicht nicht erklärt, worum es sich dabei handelt. Das macht es für Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen möglich, genau das, was sie wollen, in diese *Elite* hineinzuiinterpretieren. Diese Bezeichnung gilt auch als bekannter Code unter Antisemit:innen, der das vermeintliche Weltjudentum bezeichnet (s. Abschnitt 3.3).
- 31 *V Kindermord*
Dieser Komplex hängt stark mit jenen um die *Elite*, Adrenochrom und Rituale zusammen. In diesem Zusammenhang sind die offensichtlichsten Bezeichnungen *dead babies* (3.), *killing children* (7.), *kidnapp children* (8.33.) oder die Behauptung, eine gewisse Anzahl an Kindern verschwinde täglich in den USA (6.4.).
- 32 In den Beiträgen herrscht der Konsens, die *Elite* lasse Kinder verschwinden, um durch satanische Rituale Adrenochrom zu gewinnen. Die Benennung der Personen, die für das Verschwinden der Kinder verantwortlich seien, steht in starkem Zusammenhang mit dem Perversions-Komplex. Teilweise wird von *pervert[s]* (8.35.) oder *child rapists* (8.26.) gesprochen. Diese Benennung ist extrem emotionalisierend und verstörend. Da unter manchen User:innen die Annahme herrscht, dass *human baby meat* (6.11.) oder andere Stoffe durch *aborted fetuses* (3.2.) gewonnen werden, ist in diesem Zusammenhang auch Abreibung als Schlüsselthema zu sehen. An dieser Stelle findet sich erneut der Zusammenhang zum christlich-konservativen Hintergrund, dem die Community auf Facebook anzugehören scheint.

33 VI *Perversion*

Der Konservatismus dieser Diskursgemeinschaft zeigt sich ebenfalls darin, dass *homosexuality* (15.) als Abnormalität konstruiert und neben *pervert[s]* (8.35.), *pedophile[s]* (7.1.) als Pejorativum verwendet wird.

34 Ein bekannter antisemitischer Topos macht Jüd:innen für die angeblich zunehmende Transgression von Geschlechtsidentitäten verantwortlich. Besonders Männer würden dadurch verweicht, effeminisiert und als Superlative schließlich homosexuell (s. Abschnitt 3.3). So habe etwa Lyor Cohen, ein israelischer Staatsbürger, dessen Nachname ein typisch jüdischer ist, Homosexualität in die Musikindustrie und nach Hollywood gebracht (15.).

35 VII *Freimaurerei*

In starker Verbindung mit diesem Komplex stehen jene um Rituale und Satanismus. Die Bezeichnungen hier sind allerdings weniger weit gefächert. Es handelt sich hier hauptsächlich um die Schlüsselwörter *Freemasonry* (4.) und *Freemason* (5.).

36 Freimaurer sind in die Liste antisemitischer Bezeichnungen aufzunehmen, weil einerseits behauptet wird, dass Jüd:innen die Freimaurer beherrschen würden (5.) und andererseits, weil in den untersuchten Beiträgen von Ritualen gesprochen wird, die häufig in antisemitischen Verschwörungstheorien auftauchen; wie etwa dem Trinken von Ziegenblut oder dem Beten auf Hebräisch (4.). Es kommt zur Verschmelzung von Ritualen von Freimaurern und satanischen Kulturen. Das würde auch aus Freimaurern kindermordende Satanisten und Teil der *Elite* machen.

37 VIII *Industrie/Firmen*

Das Thema der „verdorbenen“ Industrie steht in starkem Zusammenhang mit der *Elite*, mit den *corrupt men* (8.18.), die vermeintlich Hollywood und die Medien beherrschen. So gelten als wichtige Bezeichnungen in diesem Zusammenhang etwa die *music industry* (15.) oder der *news broadcast* (10.34.). Teilweise werden aber auch einzelne Namen von Unternehmen genannt. Dazu zählen *Monsanto* (2.), ein Unternehmen, das durch Lebensmittelvergiftungen der *Elite* dabei helfe, die Bevölkerung wehrlos zu machen und an die Macht zu kommen bzw. die Macht zu halten und *McDonald's* (6.6.), eine Fastfood Kette, die das Babyfleisch von der *Elite* abkaufe, nachdem diese bereits das gesamte

Adrenochrom daraus extrahiert habe. Daraus liest sich der Vorwurf, die *Elite* sei gut vernetzt und perfekt organisiert.

38 IX Zionismus

Um einiges mehr verschleiert sind die Benennungen des Zionismus bzw. der Zionisten. Das liegt daran, dass im untersuchten Material Zionismus nicht die Bestrebung eines selbstständigen jüdischen Nationalstaats meint, sondern die angebliche Verschwörung des kommunistischen Rothschild-geführten Bankenkartells, das sich dadurch erhoffe, mehr Einfluss in den USA bzw. auf der ganzen Welt zu erlangen. Laut Video 14 wurde Zionismus zudem erfunden, um vom britischen Kolonialismus abzulenken.

39 Sehr offensichtlich sind die Benennungen *zionism* (10.47.), *zionists* (12.5.), *zionist jews* (16.), *zionist regime* (10.27.) und *Rothschild State of Israel* (12.). Zudem werden Behauptungen geäußert wie *the Rothschilds created Zionism* (10.48.), Gott sei enttäuscht von Israel wegen der *corruption by the Rothschild[s]* (10.47.) oder

(3) [I]srael has so much [to] say on what goes on with OUR country (10.48.).

40 Dies suggeriert einerseits das Bild des Weltjuden (s. Abschnitt 3.3) und andererseits den vermeintlich aktiven Eingriff in die US-Politik. Besonders verdächtig gilt in den Beiträgen dabei, dass der israelische Geheimdienst Mossad, kurze Zeit nach einer Einwanderungswelle an europäischen Jüd:innen nach Israel gegründet wurde (10.48.). Die europäischen Migrierenden werden in den Beiträgen oft als *Aschkenasim* bezeichnet (10.70.), die eigentlich als die ethnische Gruppe der osteuropäischen Jüd:innen gelten. Für die Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen in den untersuchten Beiträgen sind sie aber nicht echte Jüd:innen, weil sie „ethnisch nicht semitisch“ seien (10.54.). Genau diese „falschen“ Jüd:innen seien es, die den Zionismus forciert hätten bzw. forcieren (10.54.). Die „echten“ Jüd:innen würden das nicht tun, weil sie mit orthodoxem Judentum gleichgesetzt werden (12.), laut dem Zionismus (nicht im verschwörungstheoretischen Sinne) deshalb nicht valide ist, weil ein jüdischer Staat nur von Gott begründet werden könne.

(4) These people (zionists) hijacked Judaism. Like they say their [sic] Jews and serve God but they really dont (F.12.5.).

41 Gleichzeitig werden aber zwei orthodoxe Juden, die behaupten, laut dem Sohar werden alle Nicht-Jüd:innen dem Judentum dienen wollen (Video 16), eindeutig nicht als orthodox erkannt und als *Zionists* (16.) bezeichnet. Besonders der User, der die Videos postet, scheint nicht zwischen den unterschiedlichen Strömungen und Gruppen unterscheiden zu können. Er entscheidet selbst, wer Zionist:in ist und wer nicht. Dabei werden Zionismus und Judentum, teilweise aber auch Israeli zu sein, weitgehend vermischt und verwechselt. Es ist zu vermuten, dass der User zwischen guten und schlechten Jüd:innen wie folgt unterscheidet:

- Gut: Ethnisch semitische Jüd:innen bzw. Sefardim und Misrakhim.
- Schlecht: Orthodoxe Jüd:innen und Jüd:innen, die er als zionistisch annimmt und als *Aschkenasim* bezeichnet. Gemeint sind damit Israelis mit europäischem Hintergrund.

42 X Globalisten

Der Begriff der Globalisten ist ausgesprochen vage gehalten. Er könnte alles von Zionist:innen, bis hin zu Mitgliedern der demokratischen Partei, große Hollywood-Stars und Teilhabende der „Industrie“ und der Medien bezeichnen. Wichtiger als die Bezeichnungen sind in diesem Fall wohl ihre Eigenschaften: *[they] destroy our country* (8.24.), *erect a world state under their joint rule, disrupt Christian civilizations* (10.30.). Dabei finden sich Brücken zum Zionismus-Komplex. Das zeigt sich etwa in Aussagen wie *create unfair foreign policies with israel* (10.27.) oder in Video 12, in dem es um die vermeintliche zionistische Infiltrierung der USA geht. Teilweise werden Verbindungen zu Verschwörungstheorien um 9/11 hergestellt:

(5) These people keep coming up when I [sic] doing my research on 9/11. I wonder why that is (16.4.).

43 Wiederum ist die Bezeichnung in die Liste aufzunehmen, weil es sich um einen bekannten antisemitischen Code handelt und all jenen

erlaubt, eine jüdische Weltverschwörung zu sehen, die danach suchen.

44 XI *Abwertung des Judentums*

Die Abwertung des Judentums bzw. jüdischer Kultur oder altisraelischer Mythen findet sich auf den unterschiedlichsten Ebenen. Hierbei wird stark mit Bibelstellen argumentiert. In der Bibel selbst sind einige Referenzen auf vorjüdische, phönizisch-kanaanäische Kulturen zu finden. So wird etwa auf eine Bibelstelle Bezug genommen, in der phönizisch-kanaanäische Opferriten beschrieben werden, durch die die eigenen Kinder verbrannt würden (8.17.). Dies gilt als Beweis für die teuflische „Natur“ semitischer Bevölkerung.

45 Immer wieder wird auf die Zerrissenheit innerhalb des Judentums hingewiesen, indem ein vermeintlicher Rabbi „zugibt“, dass irgendeine Behauptung innerhalb der Verschwörungstheorie stimme (10.56.). Dies wird besonders in Zusammenhang mit Moishe Arye Friedman erwähnt, ein ultraorthodoxer Jude, brennender Antizionist und Holocaustleugner, dem Betrug und Titelfälschung vorgeworfen werden (vgl. dazu DerStandard.at Redaktion, 2006).

46 In einem Beitrag wird auf das Judentum mit *Jewish mysticism* (16.) verwiesen, was als eine Abwertung zu verstehen ist, weil die Religion auf eine Mystik reduziert wird. Zusätzlich wird sie dadurch verlächerlicht, dass einige Male der Begriff *Goj(im)* (גוי/ים) für Nicht-Jude:Jüdin verwendet wird, um gegenseitig auf sich zu verweisen. Dies soll untereinander als Erinnerung dienen, dass man von Jüd:innen als nicht gleichwertig angesehen werde.

47 Schließlich muss in diesem Zusammenhang auf den Begriff *Nephilim* eingegangen werden. Bei der alles kontrollierenden *Elite* handle es sich laut einem Post um *Nephilim* (7.2.), Mischwesen der altisraelischen Mythologie, die von menschlichen Frauen und göttlichen Wesen gezeugt wurden (vgl. Petruzzello, o.J.). Laut der Bibel handelt es sich dabei um Wesen, die Menschen überlegen seien (vgl. Petruzzello, o.J.). Da die *Elite* als das Böse schlechthin gesehen wird, ist die Abwertung der altisraelischen Mythologie durch ihre Attribuierung an die *Elite* in diesem Fall als antisemitisch zu werten.

48 XII Vergiftung

Dieser Komplex basiert auf der konspirationistischen Annahme, es gäbe Menschen, die für die *Elite* arbeiten und das Wasser und die Lebensmittel vergiften würden. Die offensichtlichsten Schlüsselwörter sind dabei natürlich *poisoning* (1.10.), *toxic* (2.) und *contaminants* (1.7.). Ein bestimmtes chemisches Mittel, das genannt wird, ist *Sodium Fluoride* (1.), das die Bevölkerung widerstandslos, apathisch und nebenbei noch krank machen soll (Video 1). Wird ein Arbeiter der *Elite* als „Devil’s Whore“ (F.1.8.) bezeichnet, so findet sich wieder die Annahme um einen satanischen Kult, der dahinterstecke und diese Industrie kontrolliere. Ein bestimmtes Unternehmen, das in diesem Zusammenhang von großer Bedeutung zu sein scheint, ist „Monsanto“ (2.).

49 XIII Holocaustleugnung

In einigen Videos wird der Holocaust aktiv geleugnet und maßgeblich verharmlost. Dies wird durch eine unglaublich weite Variante an Behauptungen veräußert; beginnend mit

(6) The Holocaust is a LIE (10.) und

(7) hitler brought germany back out of a deppresion [sic] (10.25.)

50 bis hin zu Verharmlosungen des Hakenkreuzes⁴ (9.). Hitler habe das Symbol lediglich ausgeliehen (9.). Implizit wird mittransportiert, dass man sich nicht vor der Verwendung des Zeichens scheuen muss. Weiters werden *Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion* als echtes Dokument zu bezeichnen, das nur deshalb als gefälscht gebrandmarkt wurde, um alle Kritiker:innen als Antisemit:innen abtun zu können (Video 13). Die Shoah sei ohnehin *mathematically impossible* (10.) und Skeptiker:innen dieser Verleugnung werden aufgefordert: *do the math* (10.9.), *it simply doesn’t add up* (10.14).

51 Der Höhepunkt dieses Diskurses findet sich wohl in der Behauptung, zionistische Jüd:innen hätten die Shoah orchestriert *to create unfair policies with israel* (10.27). Der Rabbi Friedman gebe das sogar zu (10.48.).

52 An diesem Komplex sind der Globalisten- und Eliten-Komplex anzugrenzen, da aus dem Material implizit zu lesen ist, dass durch

den Holocaust niemand mehr Jüd:innen kritisch gegenüberstehen dürfe und diese so ungehindert an die Macht kommen können.

53 *XIV Banken*
Dieser Komplex befindet sich in enger Verbindung mit dem Industrie- und teilweise mit dem Eliten-Komplex, da davon ausgegangen wird, dass die *Elite* die Banken beherrschen (12.3.). Es wird auch das *Swiss gvt [=government]* (12.3.) genannt, also die Regierung des Landes das bekannt für sein Bankenwesen ist. Dieser Komplex baut auf dem bekannten antisemitischen Topos des Geld- und Wucherjuden auf (s. Abschnitt 3.3).

3.3. Diskursorientierte Analyse

54 Die durch die wort- und propositionsorientierte Analyse identifizierten Wortkomplexe lassen auf sieben unterschiedliche antisemitische Topoi schließen. Tabelle 2 illustriert die Zusammenhänge zwischen den Wortkomplexen (I-XIV) und Topoi (in der linken Spalte).

Tabelle 2: Zusammenhänge zwischen den Topoi und Wortkomplexen aus 3.2

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	XIII	XIV
<i>Weltjudentum</i>				✓					✓	✓	✓		✓	
<i>Geld- und Wucherjude</i>				✓				✓		✓				✓
<i>Ritualmordlegende</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓					✓			
<i>Dämonisierung</i>	✓										✓			
<i>Brunnenvergiftung</i>								✓				✓		
<i>Freimaurer</i>				✓			✓			✓			✓	
<i>Geschlechtertransgression</i>						✓					✓			

55 Wie aus dieser Tabelle hervorgeht, ist der am öftesten reproduzierte Topos jener der Ritualmordlegende, was natürlich auf den Fokus des Users auf Adrenochrom zurückzuführen ist. Angesichts der Kernaussage des QAnon-Spektrums wäre allerdings eine stärkere Reproduktion des Topos des Weltjudentums oder der Jüdisch-Freimaurerischen Verschwörung erwartbar gewesen.

56 *Ritualmordlegende*

Die Ritualmordlegende besagt, dass Mitglieder jüdischer Gemeinden vor allem zu Pessach christliche Kinder (meist Buben) verschleppen, sie entführen, mit ihnen Rituale durchführen, sie foltern, töten und sich an ihrem Blut nähren (vgl. Erb, 2010: 293; Wolf, 2021: 152). Die ersten Vorwürfe über angeblich von Jüd:innen entführte Buben (William von Norwich, Richard von Pointoise), um mit diesen die Kreuzigung Jesus auf makabre Weise zu karikieren, stammen aus dem 12. Jahrhundert (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 57). Die Verbreitung der Legende ging hauptsächlich von England aus nach Frankreich, Spanien, entlang des Rheins und Mains bis zum Bodensee, in den Alpenraum und ab dem 16. Jh. auch nach Polen (vgl. Erb, 2010: 293). Eine weitere solche Schuldzuschreibung ereignete sich 1235 außerhalb von Fulda, nachdem fünf Söhne eines Müllers nach dem Brand der väterlichen Mühle in dessen Abwesenheit umkamen (vgl. Banning, 2003: 64). Der jüdischen Gemeinde von Fulda wurde vorgeworfen, sie hätten die Kinder regelrecht geschlachtet, um an ihr Blut kommen, und anschließend die Mühle niedergebrannt, um die Beweise zu verstecken (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 57). An zeitgenössischen Berichten dieses Falls zeigt sich erstmals die Annahme, dass diese Gräueltaten nach Vorgaben des Talmuds stattgefunden hätten (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 58). Aufzeichnungen illustrieren nämlich, dass Kaiser Friedrich II des Heiligen Römischen Reichs eine Untersuchung veranlasst hat, in der spezifisch erarbeitet werden sollte, ob es jüdische Vorgaben zum Konsum vom Blut gibt, was von den von ihm ernannten Fachpersonen verneint wurde, woraufhin er die Angeklagten befreite (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 58). Im Zuge des 13. Jahrhunderts wurden solche Anschuldigungen über einen großen Teil Europas hinweg laut, allerdings vorwiegend mit der Begründung des Parodierens der Kreuzigung Jesus, manchmal auch in Verbindung mit (schwarzer) Magie (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 58). Im 14. Jahrhundert wurden die Vorurteile verbreitet, dass das Blut gebraucht werde, entweder um Matzah für das Pessachfest oder um Heilmittel herzustellen (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 58–59). Diese Annahmen wurden ab dem 15. Jahrhundert zum Kern der Legende, die durch Geständnisse nach Folter etwa zu den Fällen von Endingen (1470), Trient (1475), Regensburg (1476) und Freiburg (1503) bestätigt wurden (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 59). Besonders der Fall gegen die Juden von Trient verbreitete sich aufgrund von Predigten, aber auch durch die Möglichkeit der Vervielfältigung durch Druck (vgl. Erb,

2010: 294). Eine der wohl extremsten Anschuldigungen ereignete sich in La Guardia in Spanien, wo einigen Zugehörigen der jüdischen Gemeinde vorgeworfen wurde, sie hätten ein Kind entführt, gefoltert und getötet, um sein Herz mit einer geweihten Hostie zu vermischen und damit die spanischen Christ:innen auszurotten (vgl. Soyer, 2021: 311, 321). Es wurde zwar weder ein Kind vermisst noch eine Kinderleiche gefunden, aber dennoch gestanden die Beschuldigten unter Folter (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 59–60). Der Kult des Kindermartyriums lebt heute noch in La Guardia fort.

57 Bei der Ritualmordlegende handelt sich um die ultimative Form der Entmenschlichung und Dämonisierung von Jüd:innen im Mittelalter (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 57; Johnson, 2016: 12). Die Annahme, dass christliches Blut für Pessach benötigt werde, macht das rituelle Morden zum integralen Bestandteil des Judentums (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 61), wodurch Jüd:innen als dämonisch charakterisiert werden können (vgl. Johnson, 2016: 15). Zusätzlich zur Fremdkonstruktion ergab sich dadurch während einer Zeit beginnender diverser Auslegungen des Christentums die Möglichkeit der Bildung einer homogenen christlichen Identität (vgl. Johnson, 2016: 15).

58 Die Geschichte von AS ist repetitiv, da dieselben Topoi immer wieder reproduziert werden, wozu aber keine exakte Wiederholung notwendig ist, sondern einfach ein Hervorrufen derselben Konnotationen ausreicht (vgl. Johnson, 2016: 17). Da der moderne AS ab dem 19. Jahrhundert zunehmend vom Christentum gelöst war/ist, wurden neue Behauptungen in die Legende eingespeist. Dazu gehört, wer alles als Opfer und Täter gelten kann, wie sich der Tatbestand an den vermeintlichen Leichen darstellte und was als Beweise für die Tat galt (vgl. Erb, 2010: 294). Im Laufe der Zeit kam immer wieder die Frage auf, wieso es nur so wenige Ritualmorde gebe, wenn es sich doch um eine religiöse Vorschrift handle. Einer der antisemitischen Antworten auf diese Frage aus der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts zufolge seien nicht „nicht alle Juden, sondern nur eine kleine, fanatische Elite ausgewählter Männer [...] in das talmudische Blutgeheimnis eingeweiht“ (Erb, 2010: 294). Der Aspekt der Elite sowie der gesamte Inhalt der Ritualmordlegende zeigt eindeutige Parallelen zu den Erzählungen um Adrenochromgewinnung.

- 59 Zudem folgt aus dem angeblichen Agieren im Geheimen (vgl. Johnson, 2016: 22) ein Zugrundeliegen des Topos des Weltjudentums (vgl. Wolf, 2021: 154).
- 60 *Weltjudentum*
 Als Basis der Ritualmordlegende und vieler weiterer Verschwörungstheorien gilt der weit verbreitete Mythos der jüdischen Weltbeherrschung bzw. des Weltzionismus, etc. Dabei wird angenommen, dass eine jüdische *Elite* die Weltherrschaft anstrebe bzw. bereits innehave, dabei Kriege orchestriert (vgl. Wetzel, 2010: 335) oder wie in rezenten Fällen etwa ein Virus auf den Rest der Gesamtgesellschaft loslasse. Oft wird nicht eindeutig gemacht, dass es sich bei der *Elite* um eine „jüdische“ handle, implizit oder durch bestimmte Kontextualisierungen aber dennoch deutlich gemacht. Ein Beispiel dafür wäre die Prädikation der *Elite* als *Nephilim*, Mischwesen aus der altisraelischen Mythologie, die von menschlichen Frauen und göttlichen Wesen gezeugt wurden (vgl. Petruzzello, o.J.). Die Weltverschwörung wird zwar oft kommunistisch genannt wird, was aber als Schirm für eine Jüdische steht und wird (bzw. wurde auch im Nationalsozialismus) oft gemeint, wenn vom jüdischen Bolschewismus die Rede ist/war (vgl. Pufelska, 2010: 47).
- 61 *Dämonisierung*
 Damit und ebenfalls mit der Ritualmordlegende einher geht der Topos des teuflischen, satanischen Juden. Die Argumentation dahinter fußt auf christlicher Theologie. Dies führt zu einem Bild, dass Jüd:innen als Oppositionelle oder sogar Mörder von Jesus gesehen werden (vgl. Blum, 2010: 113). Ihnen wird dabei etwas sehr mythisches, antichristliches, diabolisches zugeschrieben (vgl. Gow, 2010: 26). Stark mit diesem Topos sind natürlich Mythologisierungen vom Judentum zu verbinden, die ebenfalls oft antisemitische Auswüchse haben. Es ist anzunehmen, dass sich der Topos des „dämonischen Juden“ besonders im streng-christlichen Umfeld verbreitet (vgl. Gow, 2010: 28).
- 62 *Geld- und Wucherjude*
 Eng damit verbunden ist das seit dem Mittelalter bestehende Bild der jüdischen Finanzherrschaft (vgl. Escher, 2010: 348-349). Später wurde auch davon gesprochen, dass sie die Wall Street, die Medien sowie

die Weltwirtschaft beherrschen würden. Daraus entstanden die Vorurteile, Jüd:innen seien reich, geizig und geldgierig (vgl. Escher, 2010: 348-349). Besonders aus der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus ist die Dichotomie des schaffenden Deutschen und des raffenden Juden bekannt (vgl. Wyrwa, 2010: 172).

63 *Jüdisch-Freimaurerische Verschwörung*

Die Jüdisch-Freimaurerische Verschwörungstheorie entstand im christlichen Umfeld des post-revolutionären Frankreich, um rezente politische Entwicklungen zu erklären (vgl. Taguieff, 2013: 28). Zu Beginn wurden Freimaurer als allesbeherrschenden, im Untergrund agierende *Elite* verstanden (vgl. Butter, 2020: 110). Kurz danach aber gab es schon fast keinen Unterschied mehr zwischen Freimaurern und Jüd:innen; es kam und kommt oft zu Gleichsetzungen (vgl. Butter, 2020: 163-164). So ist also die Verschwörungstheorie um das Weltjudentum auch mit jener um Freimaurer verbunden. Grundsätzlich gleichen sie auffällig antisemitischen Verschwörungstheorien. Es war also sicher kein Zufall, dass die Propaganda des Nationalsozialismus Judentum, Freimaurerei und Marxismus in einem Atemzug nannte.

64 *Brunnenvergiftung*

Ebenfalls seit dem Mittelalter existiert der Vorwurf der Brunnenvergiftung als ein alter Stereotyp zur Verleumdung von Jüd:innen, dem zufolge sie lebensnotwendige Nahrungsmittel und vor allem Trinkwasser absichtlich vergiften würden, um die Allgemeinbevölkerung so hinterlistig zu töten (vgl. Soyer, 2019: 64). Besonders während der Pest fand diese Legende anklang und führte zu europaweiten Judenverfolgungen und Pogromen, aus denen hunderttausende Todesopfer hervorgingen (vgl. Herzig, 2010: 49).

65 *Geschlechtertransgression*

„In der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts, spätestens im *Fin de Siècle* setzten sich im Bildarchiv der Moderne Verschlingungen von antisemitischen und frauenfeindlichen Imagerien durch, welche zu den gesellschaftlich und kulturell überaus wirksamen Repräsentationen des ‚effeminierten Juden‘ und der ‚maskulinisierten Jüdin‘ führten.“ (Stögner, 2008: 70). Stögner (2008) beschreibt den antisemitischen Topos des effeminierten Juden, der besonders im Nationalsozialismus aufgegriffen wurde, in dem eine strikte Trennung

der Geschlechterrollen sehr wichtig war. Dieses Muster existiert aber über den Nationalsozialismus hinaus und wird heute noch oft verwendet, auch (und wie im analysierten Material) verbunden mit der Abwertung von Homosexualität.

3.4. Zusammenfassung: Topos-Themen-Verknüpfung

66 Betrachtet man, in welchen thematischen Schwerpunkten welche Topoi aufgegriffen werden, so fällt auf, dass fast immer der Topos des Weltjudentums zugrunde liegt (s. Tabelle 3). Ähnlich häufig findet eine Dämonisierung bzw. Mythologisierung von Jüd:innen statt. Auch der Topos des Geld- und Wucherjuden findet bei fast jedem thematischen Schwerpunkt Anklang. Die Brunnenvergiftung ist der mit Abstand am seltensten vorkommenden Topos, auf den lediglich in einem thematischen Schwerpunkt Bezug genommen wird. Grundsätzlich sei angemerkt, dass all diese Topoi Hand in Hand gehen, sich teilweise gegenseitig einschließen und niemals isoliert voneinander zu betrachten sind. Dasselbe trifft auf den Charakter einer Superverschwörungstheorie zu, wie sie QAnon eine ist.

Tabelle 3: Verknüpfung der Topoi mit den Videos nach Themencodes

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Weltjudentum		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Geld- und Wucherjude	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
Ritualmordlegende			✓		✓	✓	✓			
Dämonisierung	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Brunnenvergiftung	✓									
Freimaurer				✓		✓			✓	
Geschlechtertransgression		✓	✓							✓

67 Die Nomination und Prädikation der Elite stimmen mit sehr vielen der Topoi überein. Die Elite wird als übernational gesehen, als agierend im Geheimen, als vernetzt, als traditionelle Werte zerstörend, als unterschiedliche Staaten beherrschend und als wichtige staatliche Organe unterwandernd. Diese Analyse unterstreicht, was durch die vorhergehenden Analysen bereits in

Erfahrung gebracht werden konnte, dass nämlich in der QAnon Verschwörungstheorie sehr starke antisemitische Tendenzen zu finden sind.

- 68 QAnon kommt aus dieser Analyse als klassische Superverschwörungstheorie heraus (s. Abschnitt 1). Mit Fokus auf AS konnten einerseits die für QAnon typischen Verschwörungserzählungen (wie etwa jene um Adrenochrom), aber auch unerwartete (wie die Ereignisverschwörungstheorie um 9/11 oder der Topos der Brunnenvergiftung) herausgearbeitet werden können. Eine interessante Dynamik ergibt sich aus dem Vorwurf, die Elite gehöre einem Kult, einer Religion an und dem eigenen Verhalten der Kommentierenden. Auch hier argumentiert ein Großteil von ihnen mit Bibelstellen. Das heißt, religiöses Verhalten gilt als Vorwurf und als Habitus gleichzeitig.
- 69 Auffallend ist zudem, dass die Kommentierenden zu einem gewissen Teil selbst entscheiden können, wer oder was zur Verschwörungstheorie gehört oder eben nicht. Damit ist den einzelnen Kommentierenden eine gewisse Deutungshoheit überlassen. Die Entscheidung, wer oder was im Detail Teil der vermeintlichen Verschwörung ist, liegt beim Individuum und vielleicht stellt genau diese Möglichkeit, die Realität selbst gestalten zu können, eine gewisse Attraktivität dar.

Fazit

- 70 In Zukunft ist nicht davon auszugehen, dass die Verbreitung von Verschwörungstheorien Halt macht. Weil Verschwörungstheorien oft antidemokratische und menschenfeindliche Potenziale in sich tragen, gilt es, Verantwortung zu übernehmen und zu versuchen, dieser Verbreitung etwas entgegenzusetzen. Wie kann ein solcher Widerstand aber aussehen? Butter (2020: 227-229) betont, dass es keine allgemeingültige Lösung dafür gibt. Eine Möglichkeit, der Verbreitung von Verschwörungstheorien in Zukunft entgegenzuwirken, ist ihm zufolge das Lehren und Lernen von Gesellschaftskompetenz, Medienkompetenz und Geschichtskompetenz. Da Verschwörungstheorien durch Sprache leben und weitergetragen werden, zählt zu diesen Kompetenzen sicherlich das vorzeitige Erkennen konspirationistischer

Terminologien und sprachlicher Strukturen, bestenfalls bevor sie in den Mainstream eindringen können. So können Personen, die sie sich langsam diese Sprache und womöglich dieses Denken anzueignen scheinen, rechtzeitig darauf aufmerksam gemacht und zu Reflexion angeregt werden.

- 71 Anfang 2021 haben Verschwörungstheoretiker:innen versucht, das Kapitol der USA zu stürmen, ein Gebäude, das symbolisch für Rechtsstaatlichkeit und Demokratie steht. Während der Hochzeit der Covid-19 Pandemie, einer Zeit, in der gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt und gegenseitige Rücksichtnahme stark von Nöten waren, haben online und auf den Straßen viele besorgniserregende Protestaktionen stattgefunden. Im Zuge davon wurden einige Verschwörungstheorien öffentlich verbreitet und sichtbar. Die Sprache vieler Personen in politischen Machtpositionen hat sicherlich dazu beigetragen, dass sich diese Gruppen bestärkt und unterstützt gefühlt haben bzw. fühlen. Das ist ein Beweis dafür, dass Worte – auch wenn sie über soziale Medien verbreitet werden – reale politische und wie im Falle des Sturms auf das Kapitol auch tödliche Konsequenzen haben können. Es ist daher von fortwährender Wichtigkeit, auf die gesellschaftliche Relevanz radikaler Kommunikation wie jener der QAnon-Verschwörungstheorie aufmerksam zu machen und einen Anstoß zu setzen, solche Muster bei anderen Personen zu erkennen und die eigene Sprache kritisch zu reflektieren.

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[utm_term=Autofeed&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR3Q5QWQi7QV2ee6K](https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000122221071/hippies-nazis-und-verschworer-die-antisemitische-gefahr-der-querdenker?utm_term=Autofeed&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR3Q5QWQi7QV2ee6K) (9 Jänner 2020).

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APPENDIX

Anhänge

Anhang A: Titel und Beschreibung der Videos

1. Water Plant Worker Films Himself Dumping Sodium Fluoride into Water Supply

In dem Video wird ein Arbeiter einer Wasseraufbereitungsanlage gezeigt, der vermeintlich Natrium-Fluorid in Trinkwasser schüttet. Anschließend werden unveröffentlichte „Fakten“ über Natrium-Fluorid gezeigt, wonach diese chemische Mischung das Immunsystem schwäche, zu Krebs und anderen schweren Krankheiten führe und zudem die Bevölkerung widerstandslos mache.

2. Monsanto Lobbyist Says Glyphosate is safe to drink

In diesem Video wird ein Interview mit einem vermeintlichen Lobbyisten der Aktiengesellschaft Monsanto gezeigt, die besonders für ihre Glyphosat-Produkte als umstritten gelten. Darin argumentiert der Lobbyist, dass Glyphosat nicht krebserregend sei, weigert sich aber, ein Glas davon zu trinken. Dies wird als Beweis dafür gesehen, dass Glyphosat als Mittel benutzt wird, um die Bevölkerung zu vergiften.

3. Dead Babies are In your Makeup, Food, And Soft Drinks

In diesem Video geht es um die vermeintliche Existenz einer Industrie, die abgetriebene Föten oder Teile davon verkauft, um „Wirkstoffe“ ihrer Haut oder Organe in Kosmetikprodukte oder Lebensmittel einzuarbeiten, die verjüngend wirken und die Potenz steigern sollen.

4. Freemason Lodges Exposed

Es wird eines Freimaurer-Ritual „entlarvt“, in Zuge dessen neue Mitglieder aufgenommen werden. Dabei wird vermeintlich eine Ziege geopfert, deren Blut das Oberhaupt trinkt und Gebete auf Hebräisch gehalten.

5. Shriner Freemason Admits To Worshiping lucifer!

In diesem Video wird ein vermeintlicher Freimaurer des Alten arabischen Ordens der Edlen vom mystischen Schrein (Shriners) „entlarvt“, dass er

Luzifer verehere. Der „Interviewer“ fragt den Mann nach christlichen Werten, die der Mann wiederrum auf Luzifer umbettet.

6. McDonald's Sells HUMAN MEAT In their Food

In diesem Video wird ein vermeintliches Gespräch zwischen Rabbi Finkelstein und Pastor James Wickstrom, einem antisemitischen Radio-Präsentator, der Verschwörungstheorien verbreitet, gezeigt. Wickstrom „schafft“ es, Finkelstein aus der Reserve zu locken, der zugibt, dass Kinder zu Opfern jüdischer Blutrituale werden und durch koschere Schlachthöfe in das Fleisch gelangen, das an McDonalds verkauft werde.

7. Adrenochrome Comes From Killing Children

Hierbei handelt es sich um ein Video, in dem die vermeintliche „Gewinnung“ von Adrenochrom beschrieben wird. Es handle sich dabei um ein satanisch-jüdisches Ritual von, das bereits seit der Antike existiere.

8. Ex CIA Officer Exposes Adrenochrome Users

Ein vermeintliches Ex-CIA Mitglied „entlarvt“ in diesem Video die Republikanische Partei, die laut ihm sehr nahe zu statistischen Illuminati stehen. Diese gewinnen laut ihm durch Kindesfolterung Adrenochrom verwenden dies als Verjüngungsdroge.

9. Ohne Titel

Das Video ist eine Art Ode an die Swastika, an das Hakenkreuz, dessen Geschichte im Video aufgezeigt wird. Die erste Aufzeichnung des Symbols geht auf ca. 10 000 Jahre zurück. Hitler habe das Zeichen auf eine Art und Weise „entehrt“. Es wird implizit mittransportiert, dass die Verwendung des Zeichens nichts Negatives per se ist.

10. The Holocaust is a lie and is mathematically impossible!

In diesem Video wird rechnerisch am Beispiel des Vernichtungslagers Treblinka vermeintlich „bewiesen“, dass der Holocaust nie stattgefunden habe, da nicht genug Platz für die Ermordeten gewesen sei, um sie zu begraben. Dies wird anhand einer Rechnung, also anhand der Mathematik, also anhand von Wissenschaft argumentiert. Zudem basiere der Beweis für die Existenz des Vernichtungslagers Treblinka „lediglich“ auf Augenzeugenberichten.

11. Rabbi Moshe Aryeh Friedman exposes Zionism and the truth

In diesem Video wird ein Interview mit Moishe Arye Friedman gezeigt, ein ultraorthodoxer Jude, Antizionist und Holocaustleuger, dem Betrug und Titelfälschung vorgeworfen werden. Im Video wird er als Rabbi betitelt,

„Experte“ vom Judentum sozusagen. Tatsächlich aber hat er kein anerkanntes Rabbiner-Diplom und ist laut der jüdischen Kultusgemeinde "lediglich ein Selbstdarsteller". Das Interview läuft wenig überraschend ab. Friedmann delegitimiert Israel, da ja nur Gott einen jüdischen Staat schaffen könne und leugnet den Holocaust.

12. Zionists Are Your Enemy

Hierbei handelt es sich um ein Video, in dem zwei orthodoxe Juden über Nicht-Jüd:innen sprechen, die laut religiösen Texten Sklaven für die Jüd:innen sein werden. Danach folgen Bilder von berühmten US-amerikanischen Politikern, die mit Juden abgebildet wurden. Dies ist sei ein Zeichen für die zionistische Infiltrierung der US-amerikanischen Regierung.

13. Ohne Titel

In diesem Video wird das Protokoll der Weisen von Zion eindeutig als Nicht-Fälschung besprochen wird. Das Protokoll als Fälschung dazustellen, diene dazu, alle als antisemitisch zu bezeichnen, die es „durchschaut“ haben. Als Beweis wird ein Interview herangezogen, das Milton William Cooper geführt hat, ein Radiojournalist und Verschwörungstheoretiker.

14. William Cooper's Teaching On Zionism

Hierbei handelt es sich um Video, in dem William Cooper eine Radiosendung hält, in der er über den Beginn und die Geschichte des Zionismus spricht. Laut Cooper sei Zionismus eine Art Ablenkung gewesen, um den britischen Kolonialismus zu verdecken.

15. Lyor Cohen The Zionist Behind The Music Industry

In dem Video werden die Geheimnisse von Lyor Cohen vermeintlich „aufgedeckt“. Cohen habe Homosexualität und Satanismus in die Musikindustrie gebracht. Implizit wird mittransportiert, dass er an dem „verdorbenen“ Hollywood sei. Cohen ist ein typischer jüdischer Name. Lyor Cohen ist israelischer Staatsbürger.

16. Zionist Jews See All Non Jews as Beasts & Slaves

Video, in dem ein orthodoxer Jude über eine Prophezeiung aus dem Zohar spricht, laut dem Nicht-Jüd:innen den Jüd:innen dienen wollen würden.

Anhang B: Nominationen

Kategorie	Nominationen
Pronomen	they

Einzelpersonen	John Podesta, Marina Abramovic, Blue Bloods, Rothschilds, Ashkenazim (gemeint sind europäische Jüd:innen im Vergleich zu arabischen), Lyor Cohen
(Geheime) Organisationen, politische Einstellung & Einzelstaaten	Monsanto (lobbyist), Freemasons, Democrats, both/all parties (uneinig), Globalists, Zionists, Mossad, Jesuits, England, Swiss Government(s), Rothschild state of Israel
Mythologisierung	satanic witches, Nephilim
Firmen/Unternehmen	Monsanto (lobbyist), McDonalds, media, news broadcasts
Maledicta	Motherfuckers, Assholes, Devil's whore, Jerk

Anhang C: Prädikationen

Kategorie	Prädikationen
Mythisch/Kultisch	worshipping lucifer, Spirit-cooking, sacrifice, kidnapping children
Böse/Brutal	evil, poisoning, sick
Zerstören Werte	Destroy our country, disrupt Christian civilizations, destroy belief in god, Zionism hijacked judaism
Betrügerisch	crooked, corrupt
Beherrschend	Joint rule, against the common people

NOTES

- 1 Zitate aus dem Korpus werden mit *Videonummer.Kommentarnummer* abgekürzt. Wird nur eine Zahl angegeben, so handelt es sich um ein Beispiel aus der Videobeschreibung. Für Einsicht in das Korpus wird um Kontaktaufnahme mit der Autorin gebeten.
- 2 In diesem Kommentar wird auf eine Schrift der laodizeanischen Kirche Bezug genommen, eine christliche Gemeinde, die in der antiken Stadt Laodikeia bestand, nun aber keine Anhängerschaft mehr hat. Allerdings finden sich auch Erzählungen um die Kinderopfer in Ge-Hinnom im Tanach und sind deshalb Teil der jüdischen Lehre.
- 3 Ausführliche tabellarische Darstellungen und Beispiele befinden sich in Anhang B und C.
- 4 Natürlich gilt in manchen Teilen Ostasiens die Swastika nach wie vor als Zeichen des Friedens. Diese Bedeutungsambivalenz machen sich Verschwörungstheoretiker aber zugute. Die Swastika hat seit dem

Nationalsozialismus auch eine andere Bedeutung, die es nicht zu verharmlosen gilt.

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Authoritative and epistemic stance in the construction of conspiracy theories: A case study

Marquage épistémique et construction de l'autorité dans les discours de théories du complot : étude de cas

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ABSTRACTS

English

What is central to conspiracy theories is the revelation of a hidden or manipulated truth. In addition, the speaker/writer who believes in a conspiracy theory and shares their views on it also seeks the listener's/reader's adhesion to the theory. As a result, the speaker/writer must solve two problems: first, the version in which they believe has to be perceived as plausible by the audience and, second, the speaker/writer must have, or gain, credit in order to appear credible. These two aspects are somewhat subsumed under what Biber and Hyland, among others, refer to as *stance* and *stance-taking*, which correspond to the positioning of a locutor towards viewpoints and interlocutors. In order to analyze these aspects and the relations between the linguistic markers and the discursive strategies (pragmatic, argumentative, or rhetoric), this study is based on a corpus analysis of online articles written by Jon Rappoport, an unequivocal conspiracy theorist. I only focus on plausibility hedges and certainty boosters so as to study the marking of authoritative and epistemic stance in his discourses and the function(s) they perform. The results show that both plausibility hedges and certainty are used to legitimize Rappoport's theories and strengthen his authority in various ways, depending on the devices used. Plausibility hedges are mainly used to voice a dissenting interpretation of reality, presented as a possibility that cannot be ruled out, and downplay the elite's viewpoints. Certainty boosters are used to express the author's confidence and commitment towards his theories, by presenting his interpretation of reality as unquestionable, self-evident or consensual. Finally, the use of first-person pronouns and booster or hedge verbs are also used to strengthen the legitimacy of the theories and the authority of the author by explicitly indicating his contribution to the construction of conspiracy theories or to introduce and support a dissident viewpoint.

Français

Les théories du complot sont des contre-discours dont l'une des caractéristiques fondamentales est la révélation d'une vérité soi-disant cachée ou manipulée. En outre, celui ou celle qui croit en une théorie du complot et la diffuse cherche à convaincre autrui du bien-fondé de sa croyance. Ainsi, il ou elle doit résoudre au moins deux problèmes : rendre plausible la théorie à laquelle il/elle adhère et apparaître comme une source de savoir crédible. La construction de la légitimité du discours et de l'autorité du locuteur correspondent, ainsi, selon moi, à la notion de « *stance* », terme que j'emprunte à l'anglais (et notamment à Biber et Hyland). Afin d'analyser les relations entre marqueurs linguistiques et stratégies discursives, mon étude s'appuie sur l'analyse d'un corpus composé de billets de blog d'un complotiste notoire, Jon Rappoport. L'analyse montre que l'auteur recourt à la fois à des marqueurs de certitude (« *certainty boosters* ») et de plausibilité (« *plausibility hedges* ») pour légitimer ses théories et asseoir son autorité. En effet, il se montre plutôt sûr de lui et de ce qu'il avance dans ses théories, en cela qu'il présente sa vérité comme factuelle et incontestable, notamment parce qu'elle se caractérise par un certain effet d'évidence. En outre, les marqueurs de plausibilité servent avant tout à introduire une possibilité parmi d'autres, potentiellement plus valide que les interprétations des élites dirigeantes, industrielles ou scientifiques, ce qui participe de la relativisation de la vérité. Enfin, l'auteur intervient explicitement et en son nom au sein de son discours dans le but de mettre en valeur sa contribution à la construction d'une théorie du complot ou pour exposer et renforcer une interprétation alternative.

INDEX

Mots-clés

épistémique, positionnement, modalité, modalisation, certitude, autorité, légitimité

Keywords

epistemic, stance, modality, certainty, authority, legitimacy

OUTLINE

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TEXT

Introduction

- 1 Simply defined, conspiracy theories are “the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces” (COMPACT). Moreover, conspiracy theories are counter-discourses which mainly oppose consensual and/or mainstream discourses. Conspiracy theorists strive to reveal the supposedly hidden or manipulated truth. Yet, when a speaker/writer (from now on, locutor) says that they reveal such a truth, it is not at all sufficient for the theory to gain credit and spread. To be successful, the locutor has to secure the interlocutor's adhesion to the theory. In order to do so, the locutor must solve two problems: first, the version in which they believe has to be perceived as plausible by the interlocutor, which is how I conceptualize legitimacy, and second, the locutor must have, or gain, credit in order to appear credible, which is how I conceptualize authority. In other words, one strategy is to minimize objection and maximize reception, which can be successful when the degree of reliability of the conspiracy theory in question is secured. In addition, not only is the truth-value of a propositional content the object of the theory, but so is the persona of the locutor, who appears as a whistle-blower.

- 2 These two aspects are somewhat subsumed under what Douglas Biber and Ken Hyland, among others, call “stance” and “stance-taking”, for “stance” is a more general, semantic category that includes epistemic marking. Though the two terms are mostly used in sociolinguistics, stance is a useful notion in linguistic analysis for the study of the use of epistemic markers in discourse as it essentially refers to how the locutor positions themselves with regard to discourse objects and propositional contents, that is, viewpoints, as well as to their interlocutors’ reactions and expectations. In simple terms, I conceptualize stance as a process by which the locutor positions themselves regarding a private viewpoint in order to be believed and appear as reliable and by which they manage the intersubjective relation with the interlocutor.
- 3 Intuitively, one possibility for the conspiracy theorist to make their theory plausible is to appear assertive and confident regarding the viewpoint they support and present it as factual. In other words, the locutor can warrant that the viewpoint is truthful. However, the interlocutor expects some degree of balance between certainty and likelihood, as being too assertive or too tentative can both be detrimental to the spreading of one’s own viewpoints in general (Hyland 1998: 354; Zou and Hyland 2019: 722), and of the conspiracy theory in question in particular. In other words, a degree of balance (or, perhaps, even an explicit distinction) between facts and opinions is expected.
- 4 The aim of this paper is not to study the construction of a particular conspiracy theory through language, but is to study the way an unequivocal conspiracy theorist constructs their legitimacy and authority. More specifically, its aim is to study the marking (or its absence) of epistemic and authoritative stance in conspiracy-theory discourses, using a specific corpus of blog posts by one conspiracy-theory author as a case study, which is part of a broader corpus of vaccine-hesitancy, pseudo-scientific and conspiracy-theory discourses, and should be viewed as a preliminary work on conspiracy-theory discourses in general. I decided to focus on authoritative and epistemic stance, because those two notions are concerned with the notions of “truth” and “reality” regarding the extra-linguistic world, whose interpretation is also a key feature of conspiracy theories.

- 5 In sum, I am interested in finding the function(s) performed by the marking of authoritative and epistemic stance, that is, the role they play in constructing one's legitimacy and authority. I start by presenting the analytical framework I follow in this study, before presenting the analysis corpus. Then, I present the general quantitative results. In three longer sections, I offer detailed contextual analyses of plausibility hedges, certainty boosters and explicit authorial presence in discourse. More precisely, I examine how both plausibility hedges and certainty boosters allow the author to present his theories as plausible, probable, or even factual, and project an image of authority and credibility, that is, of a reliable source of knowledge.

1. Analytical framework and method

1.1. Stance and epistemic modality

- 6 *Stance* is a broad term, which is defined by Biber as follows:

In addition to communicating propositional content, speakers and writers commonly express personal feelings, attitudes, value judgments, or assessments; that is, they express a “stance”. (Biber *et al.* 1999: 966)

- 7 At first glance, *stance* appears to be yet another term for (linguistic) modality. However, I prefer the term *stance* for it is, by definition, concerned with interaction and the way the locutor manages their audiences, while modality is mainly concerned with “the status of the proposition” (Palmer 2001: 1) and the locutor’s “attitude” towards the propositional content.

- 8 In this paper, I follow Hyland’s stance framework (Hyland 2005), which can be summarized as follows:

Stance [...] is an attitudinal dimension of interaction and concerns how [writers] stamp their personal authority or perspectives on their arguments. (Hyland and Zou 2021: 3)

- 9 As is becoming clear from the definitions, stance refers to the way(s) a locutor legitimizes their discourses and constructs their authority. In other words, stance is concerned with the status of the propositional content, the locutor's persona and the audience's reaction(s). Typically, a locutor assesses the likelihood of a viewpoint, presents themselves as a reliable author and tries to secure the audience's agreement that their viewpoint is believable. Therefore, stance is the position entertained by the locutor regarding both his viewpoints and his interlocutors, making it an intersubjective tool used to manage both the construction and the reception of a given viewpoint.
- 10 There are many devices that can express stance, ranging from paralinguistic and non-linguistic devices, such as gestures or pitch (Biber *et al.* 1999: 967), to linguistic devices, including lexical items, such as adjectives ("good", "happy", "difficult", "important"), nouns or verbs ("love", "need", "want"), and grammatical markers, like stance adverbials ("unfortunately", "kind of"), stance complement clause ("I hope/believe/think that...", "the fact that..."), modals and semi-modals, etc. (Biber *et al.* 1999: 968-969). According to Biber *et al.* (1999: 972), there are three major semantic categories conveyed by stance markers: epistemic, attitudinal, and style of speaking. In particular, epistemic stance refers to the marking of the locutor's degree of knowledge (i.e. certainty, doubt, hedging) or the "marking of the source or perspective of knowledge" (Biber *et al.* 1999: 973).
- 11 Contrary to Biber, Hyland's stance framework does not make semantic distinctions. Rather, it draws four distinctions based on devices: "hedges", "boosters", "attitude markers" and "self-mention" (Hyland and Zou 2021: 3). Though the last two subcategories are self-explanatory, the first two need further explanation. They are defined by Hyland as follows:

Hedges and boosters are communicative strategies for increasing or reducing the force of statements [...], conveying both epistemic and affective meanings. That is, they not only carry the writer's degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition, but also an attitude to the audience. (Hyland 1998: 350)

- 12 Though the two frameworks are not exactly the same, they share similarities, especially regarding the expression of “epistemic stance”. More specifically, a limited view is adopted here, following the merging of the two frameworks. Thus, epistemic stance can be marked by hedges and boosters (in Hyland’s framework), which correspond, respectively, to doubt/likelihood and certainty/actuality in Biber’s framework, though hedges and boosters do not only express certainty or doubt. More precisely, boosters, in Hyland’s framework, whether they are verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs or other grammatical structures, have an intensifying function, which should be understood in a non-technical way, which will be the case throughout this paper. On the other hand, the main function of hedges is to weaken the locutor’s claim, so that they appear less assertive and more cautious. In order to illustrate how hedges and boosters¹ work, I will use extracts taken from the analysis corpus.

(1) Interestingly, as depicted in the table below, the total decrease in deaths by other causes **almost** exactly equals the increase in deaths by COVID-19. This suggests, according to Briand, that the COVID-19 death toll is misleading. Briand believes that deaths due to heart diseases, respiratory diseases, influenza and pneumonia may instead be [may have been] recategorized as being due to COVID-19. (johns-hopkins-study-explodes-covid-death-hoax²)

- 13 In this extract, the adverb “almost” can be described as a downtoner, which is a category of items mainly comprising adverbs and which “are used to mitigate the intensity of a statement” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 6). In so doing, the author avoids making a categorical assertion on the number of deaths by Covid-19.

(2) A study undertaken in 1979 at the University of California, Los Angeles, under the sponsorship of the Food and Drug Administration, and which has been confirmed by other studies, indicates that in the U. S. A. **approximately** 1,000 infants die annually as a direct result of DPT vaccinations, and these are classified as SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) deaths. These represent **about** 10 to 15% of the total number of SIDS deaths occurring annually in the U.S.A. (between 8,000 and 10,000 depending on which statistics are used). (how-many-of-these-vaccine-facts-do-you-know)

- 14 Here, both the adverb “approximately” and the preposition “about” are rounders, as they are “associated with lack of precision and indicate an (often numerical) approximation” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 6). his “lac of precision” should not be understood as uncertainty or doubt. Rather, the author seeks to signal that numerical precision is not what matters. Hyland and Zou (2021: 6) also suggest to regard rounders as “adding an element of informality to proceedings and reducing any possible negative effects of seeming hyper-precise”.

(3) Well, uh, we’ve said that 36, 000 people die from the flu every year in the US. But actually, it’s **probably** closer to 20. Who knows? (corona-if-they-lied-then-why-wouldnt-they-lie-now)

- 15 In this extract, the adverb “probably” is a plausibility hedge, as it is “used to signal that a claim is based on plausible assumptions rather than evidence” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 6).

- 16 Boosters can also be divided into sub-categories:

(4) These days, in 2016, things are different: meaning the authorities do better PR and propaganda. Although the **extremely** lax regulations may still be in force, the assurances of safety are broadcast more convincingly. And that’s what matters. It’s all good. Take your shot. Love your vaccine. (behind-the-massive-vaccine-scandal-in-china)

- 17 Here, the adverb “extremely” is an intensity booster, whose function is to “amplify the emotive strength of a statement” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 7) “by raising the volume rather than expressing an attitude” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8). In so doing, the author does not directly express his certainty regarding the viewpoint in question, but he does so indirectly through intensification, which tends to indicate that what he claims is relevant and valid.

(5) Dr Peter Fletcher, who was Chief Scientific Officer at the Department of Health, said if it is proven that the jab causes autism, ‘the refusal by governments to evaluate the risks properly will make this one of **the greatest** scandals in medical history’. (boom-another-vaccine-whistleblower-steps-out-of-the-shadows)

- 18 In this extract, it would be tempting to regard the superlative “the greatest” as an intensity booster amplifying the degree expressed by the adjective “good”. Yet, it is best described as an extremity booster in so far as it “emphasise[s] the upper edge of a continuum” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8). Intensification is also at play here, as extremity boosters “help remove any doubts about statements” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8) by “emphasis[ing] the significance, uniqueness or originality of [the] arguments without the need for elaboration” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8).

(6) Many persons and organizations within the medical system contribute to the annual death totals of patients, and media silence and public ignorance are **certainly** major factors, but the FDA is the assigned gatekeeper, when it comes to the safety of medical drugs. (225000-us-patients-die-in-doctors-hands-silence-of-the-lambs)

- 19 Finally, here, the adverb “certainly” is a certainty booster, as it serves to “indicate the writer or speaker’s epistemic conviction” regarding the truth-value of the propositional content (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8).
- 20 In this paper, I first and foremost focus on epistemic stance markers, that is, on plausibility hedges, which are “used to signal that a claim is based on plausible assumptions rather than evidence” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 6), and certainty boosters, which “indicate the writer or speaker’s epistemic conviction” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8), because both directly express the locutor’s degree of confidence regarding the truth-value of their viewpoints and anticipate the interlocutor’s reaction to the viewpoints.
- 21 Another aspect of stance markers is that they can be divided according to the “source” of the stance, as they can express an explicit, implicit or ambiguous “attribution of stance to the speaker or writer” or to “some third person” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 976). More precisely, stance is explicitly attributed to the locutor in cases where first person pronouns or determiners are used: “I think”, “I know”, “My impression is that”, “I am sure”, etc. (Biber *et al.* 1999: 976). Implicit attribution refers to the use of impersonal structures (like cleft or extraposed structures), modal verbs or adverbials. Passive structures as well as stance nouns followed by a complement clause or a

prepositional phrase, but not determined by a first-person determiner, are considered to be ambiguous in their attribution of stance, as it is not clear “whether they mark the stance of the speaker/writer or that of some third party” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 977).

1.2. Corpus analysis method

1.2.1. Corpus identification

- 22 In order to study the epistemic marking of stance, I built an analysis corpus, which is part of a broader corpus used in the PhD thesis I am currently working on and which is concerned with anti-vaccine, pseudo-scientific and conspiracy-theory discourses. The corpus consists of articles written by Jon Rappoport on his personal blog (<https://blog.nomorefakenews.com>). Rappoport introduces himself as an investigative journalist and a writer who used to work for American newspapers and magazines, such as the *LA Weekly*, *Spin Magazine* (a magazine about music whose paper version was discontinued in 2012) or *CBS Healthwatch*. He is also the head of his own publishing house called *The Truth Seeker Company*.
- 23 Generally speaking, Rappoport firmly believes that the global elite³ (mainly American) has secret plans to rule the world and the peoples. He also staunchly opposes (mandatory) vaccination and, contrary to what the title of his website suggests, does not hesitate to spread false and misleading information about vaccination and Covid-19. More precisely, Rappoport denies the existence of the SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the Covid-19 disease, as well as the ensuing pandemic as suggested by the beginning of one of his articles published on May 20, 2022, and entitled “Stop Arguing About the Existence of the Virus”: “As my readers know, I’ve devoted considerable space, over the past two years, to presenting evidence that SARS-CoV-2 is a scientific fairy tale, a con, and the virus doesn’t exist.” (last access on 11 August 2023)
- 24 All of those characteristics tend to show that Rappoport is an unequivocal conspiracy theorist, as are his articles in so far as they spread conspiracy theories. In my PhD thesis, I start with such unequivocal conspiracy-theory discourses in order to characterize anti-vaccine, pseudo-scientific and conspiracy-theory discourses in

the USA that are more equivocal and less easy to define, especially when the author is not as committed as Jon Rappoport is. The aim of this paper is not to determine what makes a conspiracy-theory discourse, in terms of discourse genre, nor does it aim to discuss whether such a genre actually exists. But, what is certain is that one can identify a conspiracy-theory discourse by studying its contents. Indeed, conspiracy theories can be defined as follows:

[conspiracy theories are] the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces (COMPACT)

“Conspiracy theories” are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors. [...] While often thought of as addressing governments, conspiracy theories could accuse any group perceived as powerful and malevolent (Douglas et al. 2019: 4)

- 25 Those definitions will serve as the basis for the selection of the analysis corpus, which I shall now explain.

1.2.2. Corpus selection

- 26 The corpus was compiled using a method called web-scraping, which consists in downloading and parsing web pages. An algorithm written in *Python* was developed specifically for this corpus. All of the articles belonging to the following categories of the website were first selected: “covid; vaccine-fraud; vaccinegate; covid-revisited; medical-fraud; science-fraud; government-fraud; censorship; corporate-fraud; autism; press-fraud”⁴. I chose those categories because they were likely to be in accordance with the two definitions of conspiracy theories retained for the present issue. Indeed, behind the term “fraud” lies the notion of deception; when combined with “medical”, “science”, “government” or “corporate-fraud”, it is very likely that the articles in those categories deal with the intentional deception of the people by scientists, the press, the government or pharmaceutical companies. The “covid” category was also selected in order to include articles written during the pandemic, some of which conveying conspiracy theories regarding the intentional creation of

the Sars-Cov-2 virus or of the pandemic in order to control the world population.

- 27 Once all of the articles were downloaded and parsed (that is, when only the metadata and the body of the article had been extracted), a list of keywords was drawn, using the above definitions as a base (see Appendix A). Such keywords include “control; power; cover; psy-op; story; government; fake; proof; scam; fraud; truth”. Eventually, only the articles which contained at least five of those keywords were retained. It is not uncommon for Jon Rappoport to copy and paste his own content from one article to the other. In order to remove duplicate articles, I coded a *Python* script that compares the title of the articles as well as their contents, in both cases using the Levenshtein distance. When two articles were very similar, I only kept the longest, in order to have extra contents. Besides, Jon Rappoport amends his own articles (for the sake of clarity, to correct mistakes, or to rephrase his opinion); so, I only kept the version that presented the most significant changes. When in doubt, I used an online tool (*DiffChecker*) to visually highlight the differences between the texts and choose which one to keep.
- 28 Finally, a little cleaning was needed in order to remove URLs, personal data (phone numbers, addresses, etc.; this process was necessary to comply with the European GDPR), “references/sources/bibliography” sections, autobiographical sections, etc.
- 29 In total, there are 831 articles⁵ written between 2009⁶ and 2023 (the collect of the data ended on February 2nd, 2023), with great discrepancies between the years (with 2020 and 2021 being the most “productive” years, very likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic), as can be shown in the following table:

Table 1: Number of articles per year in the analysis corpus since 2009.

Year	Nb of articles	Year	Nb of articles	Year	Nb of articles
2009	3	2014	63	2019	18
2010	3	2015	61	2020	143
2011	6	2016	76	2021	108
2012	54	2017	104	2022	49

2013	88	2018	49	2023	3
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30 Below is a summary of the size and composition of the analysis corpus.

Table 2: Corpus size and composition.

Corpus	Number of files	Tokens	Types	Lemmas
Analysis corpus (JR)	831	1,113,351	35,756	32,906

31 As stated before, the aim of this paper is not to study the construction of a particular conspiracy theory; that is why the analysis corpus comprises articles dealing with various conspiracy theories in which Jon Rappoport believes. Nonetheless, there are similarities and unifying themes from one theory to the other.

1.2.3. Main themes

32 In order to find out the main themes developed by Jon Rappoport in his articles, a keyword list was drawn from the titles and the contents of the articles. Collocations and collocation networks of those keywords were then identified (using #LancsBox and its GraphColl tool ⁷) and analyzed in context (i.e. by analyzing concordance lines).

33 The analysis of Jon Rappoport’s articles reveals that, even though some themes are specific to one given conspiracy theory, there are, in fact, unifying themes which help Rappoport develop a consistent view of the world.

34 Generally speaking, he opposes groups, people, or powerful organizations and institutions, which I will call “the elite” from now on. According to him, the elite is not trustworthy and has malevolent and secret plans, which makes him an unequivocal conspiracy theorist. The media, and especially the news media and social media, are accused of playing into the hands of the (American) government or companies, in particular pharmaceutical companies, by spreading their ideology and shutting down dissident voices by means of censorship (for instance, Jon Rappoport accuses them of violating people’s fundamental right to free speech under the pretext of

preventing the propagation of online misinformation), or even by spreading falsehoods. As for the American government, the federal agencies (among which are the CDC, the FDA, the FBI and the CIA), and the pharmaceutical or technological companies (often referred to as “Big Pharma” and “Big Tech” respectively), they are accused of lying to the people, manipulating them or taking action against them (it is not uncommon to find words relating to war, confrontation or death). In addition, pharmaceutical companies are accused of influencing the government as well as the writing, the vote or the rejection of laws.

- 35 The overarching idea in which Rappoport believes is that the elite has mainly one goal: to control the people (not just the American people, but the world population). Such control takes on a variety of forms: intellectual indoctrination in school curricula and in the media, restriction of civil liberties, tracing, censorship, or even depopulation. This can be achieved through various means, with public lies and medical treatments and drugs being the preferred means. For example, according to Jon Rappoport, almost all of the aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic serve the elite’s interests. Thus, he explains that the pandemic and the SARS-CoV-2 virus (as well as the Ebola / Zika / HIV / flu viruses and any pandemic) do not exist or have been invented in order for the elite to reach their goals; that vaccines are dangerous (especially for children) and ineffective, can cause autism or alter human DNA; that 5G aims to control and trace the population, while being a health hazard whose symptoms are attributed to the Covid-19 disease (e.g. he believes that the Chinese government invented the Covid-19 disease in order to hide the health problems posed by 5G). For Jon Rappoport, science and scientific data are manipulated and tampered with in order to conceal the elite’s schemes and allow them to spread their ideology through propaganda.
- 36 In writing his articles, Jon Rappoport poses himself as an investigative journalist whose aim is to reveal the elite’s secret schemes or offering “alternative facts”, as suggested by many of his article titles which include the following terms: “fake; real; truth; expose; lie; story; hidden; secret; fraud; stage; say; tell; prove; know; speak; hide”. In addition, the adverbs “how” and “why” are two of the most used adverbs in titles, which is not surprising as they help Rappoport put forward a dissident viewpoint, that is, a counter-discourse.

37 The analyses of the main themes pervading Jon Rappoport’s articles chosen by the selection algorithm I coded support the claim that the author is an unequivocal conspiracy theorist. Still, the analysis of the contents of those discourses is necessary to identify them as conspiracy theories.

1.2.4. Method and procedures

38 Using Biber (2004), Biber *et al.* (1999) and Hyland (1998), a list of stance markers and structures was devised before being searched for in the corpus (see Appendix B). The markers were classified as expressing either “certainty/actuality” or “doubt/likelihood”. Evidential devices marking the source of knowledge (like the verbs “to infer; to guess; to conclude; to demonstrate” or the adverbs “apparently; evidently; obviously”) were also included since a locutor can be more or less certain of what they say depending on the source of their knowledge. In total, 210 markers (79 markers of likelihood/doubt; 131 markers of certainty/actuality; modal auxiliaries excluded) were identified. An inter-rater agreement test was also conducted to ensure that the categorizing was relevant. In total, four independent annotators took part in the test: the author of the present article as well as three other linguist colleagues. They were tasked with classifying each marker into three categories: “certainty/actuality”, “doubt/likelihood” and “don’t know”. Fleiss’s kappa formula was used and showed substantial agreement between raters ($\kappa = 0,69$).

39 TXM⁸ was used to search for the devices identified as marking epistemic and authoritative stance. A list of all the queries used is available in Appendix C.

2. General results

40 Table 3 summarizes the absolute and relative frequencies of plausibility hedges and certainty boosters in the analysis corpus.

Table 3: General results of the use of plausibility hedges and certainty boosters in the analysis corpus.

Semantic category	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency (per 100,000 words)
Plausibility hedges	1,566	140.65 ^a
Certainty boosters	3,231	290.20
a. Relative frequency results are truncated to two digits right of the decimal point.		

- 41 Overall, I found 1,566 occurrences of hedges and 3,231 occurrences of boosters in the analysis corpus¹⁰. Even if the list of boosters in Appendix A shows almost twice as many boosters as hedges, there still is a clear overuse of certainty boosters by Jon Rappoport, which suggests that he favours an authoritative and assertive style in his articles and chooses to present his viewpoint as certain, that is, as “the truth”, or, at least, as the most probable description of reality. On the other hand, he does use hedges, which seems to contradict the previous claim. Therefore, a contextual analysis of the occurrences is absolutely necessary to account for his uses of hedges and boosters.
- 42 Note that the results do not include modals. If included, the results are quite different: I counted 12,294 hedges and 8,558 boosters. This is mainly due to an overuse of two modals, “can” and “would”, which are usually categorized as hedges. However, I disagree, to some extent, with this view. There are many cases where those modals can, in fact, be categorized as boosters as they enable the locutor to express a dissenting and/or a self-evident viewpoint, while heavily relying on the interpersonal nature of those modals. To learn more, see Douay (2003) and Douay and Roulland (2023). I also develop this analysis in my upcoming PhD thesis (2024).
- 43 Still, the overall results hide great discrepancies in the use of the devices that mark epistemic stance, as suggested by the detailed results in Appendix D. For example, Jon Rappoport favours adverbials and verbs with first person pronouns as their subjects and complemented by a THAT- or ZERO-clause over adjectives followed by a complement clause. As far as nouns followed by a complement clause are concerned, he tends to use the pattern “DET + N + CC” more than any other pattern. This is not really surprising as those stance markers are relatively common in both oral and written registers, according to Biber *et al.* (1999: 979). Yet, “Overall, adverbial stance markers are considerably less frequent than the other grammatical categories” (1999: 979), even though “Single adverbs are the most common category of stance adverbial in all registers.” (1999:

981) The authors also find that “Stance adverbials are most plentiful in conversation, especially single adverbs [...]. The large majority of single adverbs are epistemic, with the forms *actually*, *really*, and *probably* being particularly frequent” (1999: 982). Therefore, the overuse of adverbials by Jon Rappoport can be explained by at least three reasons: first, there is a diachronic evolution in favour of adverbials in registers other than conversation (but a diachronic analysis would be needed to confirm this hypothesis); second, he tries to adopt a conversational style in his written texts; third, specific stance adverbs and/or adverbials and their scopes are responsible for this overuse. Because it is not the aim of this paper, separate research is needed to account for adverbials as the most frequent stance markers in the corpus. Table 4 presents the 20 most frequent hedges and boosters used by Jon Rappoport:

Table 4: The 20 most frequent hedges and boosters in the analysis corpus.

Hedges			Boosters		
Device	Abso- lute frequency	Relative frequency (per 100,000 words) ^a	Device	Abso- lute frequency	Relative frequency (per 100,000 words)
perhaps maybe idea that idea of appear to apparently possibly seem to notion that supposedly tend to probably I think notion of I hope possibility of impres- sion of impression that I thought theory of	127 111 98 88 86 80 79 77 68 50 43 40 40 39 37 30 26 24 22 19	11,41 9,97 8,8 7,9 7,72 7,19 7,1 6,92 6,11 4,49 3,86 3,59 3,59 3,5 3,32 2,69 2,34 2,16 1,98 1,71	of course actually in fact really fact that we know obviously certainly evidence that sign of clearly I know evid- ence of indeed claim that proof that surely evidence for claim of truth about	608 481 255 244 235 149 142 131 92 84 80 73 69 62 57 50 41 37 34 34	54,61 43,2 22,9 21,92 21,11 13,38 12,75 11,77 8,26 7,54 7,19 6,56 6,2 5,57 5,12 4,49 3,68 3,32 3,05 3,05
a. Results are rounded to two digits right of the decimal point.					

- 44 As implicit attribution of stance is the most common according to Biber et al. (1999: 977), it is not surprising to find that the most used devices in the corpus mark implicit stance. Though some articles have marks of orality, the texts remain articles to be published on a personal blog; so, finding explicit attribution is not really surprising either. Moreover, even if implicit and ambiguous attributions of stance are common, this does not mean that Jon Rappoport is objective. It simply means that he minimizes his overt presence in his articles, though only from time to time in so far as some devices marking explicit attribution of stance are not uncommon. These characteristics are dealt with in the next sections.
- 45 As “Hedges and boosters are interpersonal aspects of language use, complex textual signals by which writers personally intervene into their discourse to evaluate material and engage with readers” (Hyland 1998: 358), and because the stance they express can be explicit, implicit or ambiguous, meaning that the locutor can adopt “a clear authorial presence or linguistically [suppress their] identity” (Hyland 1998: 358), their presence or absence in discourse can be viewed as a personal and discursual choice “influenced by individual personality factors” (Hyland 1998: 358) as well as by the locutor’s endeavour to legitimize and authorize their viewpoints so as to secure the interlocutor’s agreement.
- 46 In order to analyze how Jon Rappoport’s involvement in his discourses at the epistemic level help him construct and secure the legitimacy and authority of his theories, I shall first study his use of plausibility hedges, before turning to his use of certainty boosters and his explicit authorial presence.

3. Plausibility hedges: A cautious stance?

- 47 Hyland (1998) and Biber et al. (1999) agree on the definition of hedges as tools that weaken the locutor’s claim. Thus, hedges can be used “to show doubt and indicate that information is presented as opinion rather than accredited fact” (Hyland 1998: 351). So, one of the functions of hedges seems to allow the locutor to state uncertain claims with caution or to indicate that the viewpoint in question is

the result of the locutor's plausible or inferential reasoning rather than a reasoning based on (available) facts, as exemplified in the following extracts:

(7) But there was one major issue. **Apparently**, once again, the all-knowing and all-seeing and all-controlling controllers of the Deep State, who manage society flawlessly, as Hegelians par excellence, had screwed up royally. They hadn't talked with Hillary's doctors. These gods, who can execute the synthesis of opposites on a grand scale, who know the future decades in advance, had failed to notice Hillary was sick. Quite sick. Sick enough so that if she won the election, she might have to hide from the public for the better part of her term, and even that (absurd) tactic might not work. So **perhaps** midway through the 2016 election campaign, the Globalist gods of the Deep State decided to back off and let Trump win. (why-has-the-deep-state-gone-to-war-against-donald-trump)

(8) Again—the 2016 Orlando shooter had extensive contact with the FBI in 2013 and 2014. The FBI investigated him twice and dropped the investigations. The FBI used an informant in a previous Florida case, and that informant had the same last name as the Orlando shooter. **It's quite possible** the previous informant was told to give a false statement which incriminated a man for terrorist acts. You can say this is a coincidence. **Maybe** it is. But **it seems** more than odd. Are the two Siddiqui men connected? (orlando-shooter-deeper-hidden-ties-to-the-fbi)

- 48 In these extracts, one can argue that Jon Rappoport uses hedges in order to make cautious assumptions and indicate a lesser degree of confidence in his beliefs. In mitigating his claims and limiting self-assurance, Jon Rappoport seems to leave room for debate while anticipating the interlocutor's objections to the actuality of the viewpoint by indicating that his reasoning is speculative.
- 49 Though this function cannot be totally discarded, I would argue that plausibility hedges first and foremost express a possibility among others, the expression of the locutor's uncertainty being a consequence of the expression of possibility. Looking at the list of the most frequent hedges used by Jon Rappoport, one can note that they all express, more or less explicitly, the general notion of possibility. This is particularly clear, of course, of the adverbs “possibly” and

“probably” as well as the noun “possibility”, but also of the adverbs “perhaps” and “maybe”, whose definitions by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) explicitly mention “possibility”:

[perhaps, adv.] 1. Expressing a hypothetical, contingent, conjectural, or uncertain possibility: it may be (that); maybe, possibly.

[maybe, adv.] 1.a. Possibly; perhaps.

- 50 In the corpus, I found two major strategies used by Rappoport to legitimize his theories and construct his authority by resorting to plausibility hedges and the notion of possibility: voicing a plausible dissenting viewpoint and downplaying the elite’s discourses. I also found another, restricted strategy related to his use of the noun “impression” followed by a complement clause or a prepositional phrase.

3.1. Voicing a plausible dissenting viewpoint

- 51 The fact that plausibility hedges express possibility allows Jon Rappoport to voice a dissenting viewpoint that goes against what the elite consensually admits. Going back to the previous examples of plausibility hedges used by the conspiracy theorist, all of the markers introduce a possibility among others, which aims to give a reasonable explanation of the events referred to. This strategy is also exemplified in the following extract:

(9) “But now people in China are dying at a furious pace, suddenly.” Is this a report or a rumor? If it’s a true report, I suggest starting with the cause as something in the environment—not a virus. An escalation in the already toxic air pollution above Chinese cities. **Possibly**, the effects of deploying 5G technology widely in Wuhan. The intentional deployment of a highly dangerous chemical, whose effects would be far more predictable, in terms of intensity and duration, than a virus. (the-bio-weapon-theory-of-the-china-epidemic)

- 52 Here, the use of the sentence adverb “possibly” at the onset of the sentence is a clear indication that Rappoport’s theory is one more possibility among two others that he puts forward in order to explain the increasing number of deaths in China at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The possibilities he refers to are presented as more valid (or more “probable”) than the one put forward by the elite (that is, viral infections by the SARS-CoV-2), as suggested by the right-co-text as well as the very beginning of the article, which reads “NOTE: IF THE LATEST RUMORS SUPPOSEDLY COMING OUT OF CHINA ABOUT THE FURIOUS PACE OF ESCALATING DEATHS ARE TRUE...IF THEY ARE...AND THAT’S A VERY BIG IF...THEN LOOK TO SOMETHING OTHER THAN A VIRUS AS THE CAUSE... I’ll consider these rumors here, in this article, for the sake of covering all possible bases...I must emphasize, again, this is a very big IF...”. In so doing, Jon Rappoport does not express his uncertainty regarding the possibility put forward, nor does he show any kind of caution in his claims; rather, he expresses a possibility that contradicts the elite and refutes the existence of the virus.
- 53 This is particularly the case with all of the seven occurrences of “possibly” as a sentence adverb and of the 16 occurrences preceded by the modal “could”, which also expresses possibility. In addition, there are 7 occurrences of “quite possibly” and 24 of “couldn’t possibly”, which expresses impossibility. These are used to strengthen the plausibility of the dissenting view put forward by Jon Rappoport or to completely rule out the elite’s theories, thus reinforcing Rappoport’s in return.
- 54 Analyzing plausibility hedges as tools that explicitly mark that a given viewpoint is a possibility, and not, in the first place, the expression of the locutor’s uncertainty or a lesser degree of confidence in what they say, can also explain why there are occurrences where those hedges are modified by other lexical tools, such as adverbs, so that the degree of plausibility is increased. One could still argue that this is to strengthen the locutor’s certainty while still indicating that the viewpoint is not completely factual. Instead, I would argue that this is to give credit and legitimacy to the viewpoint, as exemplified in the following extracts:

(10) Scenario two: Let's be generous and **assume** the researchers did bother to look at electron microscope photos, derived from only a few patients, not hundreds of patients, as they should have. What did they actually see in the photos? **Maybe** they saw a few particles that looked similar to each other, BUT quite possibly these virus-like particles were just passengers that ordinarily live in the body and cause no harm. However, the researchers jump up and down and say, THIS IS IT. THIS IS THE NEW KILLING VIRUS. AND WE WILL NOW ASSEMBLE ITS GENETIC SEQUENCE. (how-to-stage-a-fake-epidemic-and-brainwash-billions-of-people)

(11) In my article, "Vaccine damage, hidden truth: not on the evening news," I examine the **probable** numbers of significant adverse reactions to vaccines in the US. There are no official figures. Barbara Loe Fisher, head of the National Vaccine Information Center, a private group, makes a strong case for at least 120,000 a year, with **the distinct possibility** of as many as 1.2 million. (the-vaccine-mafia-and-its-jury-of-thugs-your-rulers)

55 In the first extract, the noun phrase "Scenario two" unambiguously indicates that the author's theory is a possibility among others. More precisely, in his article, Jon Rappoport tries to answer this question: "If a group wants to stage a fake and frightening epidemic, how would they do it?" For an epidemic to occur and spread, he imagines the emergence of a virus, which would then be discovered and characterized by scientists. The second scenario in question deals with the latter process. The use of the adverb "maybe" marks the viewpoint as a possibility, and can be paraphrased as follows: "there is a possibility / it is possible that they saw a few particles that looked similar to each other". It does not express the author uncertainty (rather, it would be that of the scientists) and it even has, to some extent, a concessive meaning, as it acknowledges the existence of another possibility. However, this possibility is immediately challenged, first by the coordinating conjunction "but" (in capital letters), which marks contrast, and second, by the adverb "quite" that modifies the adverb "possibly" and which allows the author to offer a more valid or plausible possibility, thus rejecting the other ones.

56 In the second extract, Jon Rappoport indirectly states that the "numbers of significant adverse reactions to vaccines in the US" he is

about to give are the most accurate ones but were intentionally concealed by the elite (“probable”, “hidden truth”). In addition, he quotes Barbara Loe Fisher, head of the *National Vaccine Information Center* (NVIC), a non-profit organization that is, contrary to what its name suggests, vaccine-hesitant¹². He qualifies her claims as “a strong case”, which suggest that he believes the figures she gives are accurate. Finally, the use of the noun phrase “the distinct possibility”, complemented by a preposition phrase introduced by “of”, seems to indicate that he does not exclude the possibility that as many as 1.2 million Americans suffer from significant adverse reactions to vaccines. Because this possibility cannot be ruled out and because the co-text indicates that the figures are reliable, Jon Rappoport’s theory gains credit and legitimacy.

- 57 In sum, instead of marking doubt, uncertainty or caution, Rappoport uses plausibility hedges to give reasonable explanations of what happens in the extra-linguistic world. In addition, by expressing contrast and opening up debate about possibilities that cannot be ruled out, hedges present the issues at stake as debatable controversies, thus rejecting consensus and implying that the viewpoints of the elite are also possibilities among others, not necessarily truer than those of Rappoport. This pertains to what I refer to as “relativization of truth”, meaning that truth is dependent on the locutor’s beliefs¹³. As only the contents of the beliefs can be described as true or false, in very much the same way as a theory or a claim can be deemed true or false, it is impossible to negate that someone believes what they believe. Therefore, Jon Rappoport, and perhaps conspiracy theories in general, relies on the fact that as long as a possibility is believed by someone, whether it is himself or someone else, this possibility cannot be ruled out, which is the basis for legitimizing his viewpoints. More precisely, I would suggest that such a strategy pertains to what I refer to as “necessary possibility”¹⁴. I conceptualize this notion as the strategy by which a locutor presents their viewpoints as possibilities that are necessarily true. In other words, the locutor expresses that something is possible, which entails that it is necessarily possible. I develop this notion in my upcoming PhD thesis.

3.2. Downplaying the elite's discourses

- 58 Among the most used hedges by Jon Rappoport, some are used to downplay the elite's discourses and legitimize his own theories. This is the case of the adverbs “supposedly” and “apparently”, as well as stance nouns complemented by a complement clause or a prepositional phrase.
- 59 A contextual analysis reveals that the author does not always use “supposedly”¹⁵ to hedge his own statements, but attributes the source of the claim to the elite in order to assert that the elite's theories or the scientific consensus, are, contrary to what they claim, uncertain or precarious and dubious:
- (12) These researchers create a soup in a dish in a lab. They put toxic chemicals and drugs in the soup. They put monkey and / or human cells in the soup. There is much other genetic material in the brew—including, **supposedly**, the virus. (meet-the-medical-cia)

(13) If the experts are going to claim a particular virus causes a particular disease—how do they know that virus exists in the first place? For example, the **supposedly** new coronavirus in China. For example, Ebola. For example, HIV. For example, the coronavirus **supposedly** causing SARS (2003). How do researchers know these viruses exist? (how-are-viruses-discovered-and-identified-in-the-first-place)
- 60 In those two extracts, the author uses “supposedly” to reject the claims that the viruses referred to actually exist or cause certain diseases, casting doubt on the actuality of the elite's theories. In so doing, he voices a dissenting view, which contradicts consensual theories, and reinforces his persona as a free thinker and a whistleblower. In addition, the claims of the elite are downplayed as opinions (or, as “propaganda”) rather than facts supported by evidence or probabilities.
- 61 This downplaying of the elite's viewpoint is a reinterpretation by Jon Rappoport of the truth-value and validity of the elite's discourses. In the corpus, such a process is one of the main reasons why the author

uses stance nouns with a complement clause or a prepositional phrase.

- 62 As highlighted earlier, the most used hedge nouns are “idea”, “notion” and “possibility”. They are found in two types of structures that serve the same purpose: the two structures comprise a head noun that either controls a subordinate complement clause or is complemented by a prepositional phrase which both specify what the noun refers to. As explained by Issa Kanté (2010: 125) (though he only deals with stance nouns that control a subordinate clause), “The semantic function of this construction is to express the speaker’s stance towards a proposition, an event, or a state which has already been expressed mentally or verbally”. In other words, “the *that*-clause reports a proposition, while the head noun reports the author’s stance towards that proposition” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 648). Some of these nouns can be described as “metadiscursive nouns”, as they are used by the locutor to comment reflexively on their, or someone else’s, viewpoints (Jiang and Hyland 2017). The rhetorical force of this structure partly lies in the fact that the reference of the noun is presupposed, hence the numerous occurrences of the structure with the definite article “the”.
- 63 Even though they are used by Rappoport, it is not uncommon for hedge nouns to actually refer to the elite’s viewpoint which the author designates as “assumption”, “hypothesis”, “idea”, etc. For example, all of the 13 occurrences of “assumption that + CC” designate the elite’s assumptions with which the author disagrees, as indicated by the adjectives “false; naked; unfounded; unwarranted” that modify the noun “assumption” in a little bit more than 50% of the occurrences (7/13 occurrences):

(14) AND both tests rely on **the unwarranted assumption that** a virus actually causing illness—VX-20—was truly discovered in the first place. (how-to-stage-a-fake-epidemic-and-brainwash-billions-of-people)

(15) And furthermore, don’t make **the false assumption that** all these reported coronavirus cases are the result of NEW disease or never-before-seen disease. Where people are genuinely ill, many or most of them have the same health conditions that have been affecting

humans for a long, long time—now recycled and re-labeled
CORONAVIRUS. (how-many-people-have-coronavirus)

64 Other examples of stance nouns modified by an adjective and implying that the author disagrees with the elite include: “misapplied scientific / fatuous / crazy / illogical notion” (1 occurrence each) or “mindless / foolish / phoney idea” (1 occurrence each).

65 The noun “notion” is mainly used to characterize the elite’s viewpoints and question them: out of the 64 occurrences of “notion that” used by Rappoport, 55 refer to the elite’s viewpoints, including 27 occurrences relating to conspiracy theories. Characterizing the elite’s discourses as “notions” is a way of indirectly legitimizing the author’s own viewpoint:

(16) Finally, in the summer of 1987, I found several researchers who were rejecting **the notion that** HIV caused AIDS. Their reports were persuasive. (does-hiv-exist-explosive-interview)

(17) First of all, **the whole notion that** COVID-19 is one health condition is a lie. COVID IS NOT ONE THING. This is both the hardest and simplest point to accept and understand. Don’t reject the existence of the virus and then say, “So what is THE cause of people dying?” There is no ONE CAUSE. There is no one illness. There is no “it.” (covid-if-there-is-no-virus-why-are-people-dying-why)

66 In the two extracts, the noun “notion” is complemented by a subordinate THAT-clause which specifies a viewpoint (that “HIV causes AIDS” and that “Covid-19 is one health condition”). The choice of the noun “notion” is deliberately made by Jon Rappoport (hence my argument that this is an act of reinterpretation) in order to weaken the elite’s viewpoint and cast doubt on the solidity of the consensus regarding the two viruses and the conditions referred to. More precisely, by using “notion” to designate the elite’s viewpoints, Jon Rappoport implies that the elite’s interpretation of the extra-linguistic world is but a paradigm¹⁶, which, in turn, implies that other paradigms exist and are also valid representations of the world. In the two extracts above, Rappoport offers an alternative view of the world, supported by other “researchers” in the first extract.

- 67 The same reinterpretation process is at work, in the corpus, with several uses of “idea”: out of the 82 occurrences used by the author, 57 refer to the elite’s viewpoints, including 34 clearly referring to conspiracy theories. Those latter uses designate the elite’s viewpoints with which the author disagrees, as exemplified in the extract below, where the scientific consensus regarding the safety and efficacy of vaccines is reinterpreted by the author as “an idea”, rather than a fact, and where “vaccination” as a whole is designated as “a theory”, questioning the solidity of the consensus and the validity of the scientific theory:

(18) I’ve placed these lies in the context of a Q & A: Q: Let’s say I accept **the idea that** vaccines create protection against disease. Vaccines create immunity. What’s the problem? Why should I worry? Why should I go outside the mainstream for information? A: Well, let’s start here. **The theory of** vaccination states that the shots cause a person’s immune system to swing into action against a particular germ that is placed in the vaccine. (enormous-basic-lies-about-vaccination)

- 68 In the following extract, the author takes full advantage of the structure “DET + N + THAT-CC” to legitimize his viewpoint and delegitimize that of the elite:

(19) These are embellishments on the basic story, promoted to hide **the fact that** the cover story is a lie. The aim in 2020 is: get people arguing about the nature and origin and composition of the virus. Why? Because as long as people are arguing about these issues, they are re-enforcing **the idea that** the virus exists and is dangerous. Thus, the basic cover story is strengthened. (covert-op-the-virus-as-cover-story)

- 69 Here, “the fact that” acts to foreground and assert the author’s viewpoint (i.e. there is a cover story and it’s all about lies) while “the idea that” is the author’s interpretation and naming of the elite’s viewpoint (i.e. the virus exists and is dangerous). In this extract, his use of “idea”, instead of a booster noun, discredits the elite’s viewpoint, as it implies that it is based on opinion or imagination rather than on scientific evidence and research, while giving credit to his own theory.

- 70 In addition, when “idea” actually refers to the author’s viewpoint (25 occurrences, that is, less than a third of all the occurrences he directly uses), the structure helps Jon Rappoport to present a dissenting possibility worth investigating, or taking into account:

(20) There are still many people who blithely believe the medical establishment is making great progress in curing the brain damage labeled “autism.” For such people, it’s all about “finding genetic factors” and “chemical imbalances.” They discount entirely **the idea that** vaccine-caused trauma / damage is one major and direct cause, among others. They believe the spoon-fed propaganda they receive on the news. They believe the outraged experts who bray about the “anti-vaccine forces.” What about a vaccine manufacturer who admits his own product has significant dangers? (what-cdc-whistleblower-william-thompson-needs-to-do-now)

- 71 In this extract, one can argue that “the idea that” mitigates the author’s claim that vaccines can cause autism. Still, the co-text (“what about...?”) tends to indicate that “the idea that”, here, serves to introduce a plausible alternative explanation to what causes autism.
- 72 In short, these extracts support the analysis according to which hedge nouns (especially “idea” and “notion”) are used by Rappoport to imply that the elite’s theories are no more valid or relevant than his and his supporters’ theories, which gain credit by downplaying the actuality of the elite’s viewpoints.

3.3. Exposing the elite’s manipulation of events

- 73 Interestingly, all of the 24 occurrences of “impression that” used by Jon Rappoport do not designate his own viewpoints, but are used to characterize the elite’s actions, and, more specifically, those of the media (20 occurrences). Indeed, the most used verbs whose direct objects are the noun phrase “the impression that...” are “impart” (6) and “give” (12), with 2 occurrences of “create” and 1 of “deliver”, while all of the subjects refer to the elite (“Television/It” (5), “the (elite) anchor” (3), “FBI agent” (1), “CIA” (1), “CBS” (1)):

(21) Author Spector points out how researchers can manipulate results to create **the impression that** cancer treatment is becoming more successful (trump-seeks-to-slash-6-billion-from-govt-medical-research-why-not-more)

(22) In my previous article, I mentioned how, according to the latest WikiLeaks CIA data dump, the CIA can fabricate, yes, fabricate the “fingerprints” of Russian government hackers and create **the false impression that** Russians hacked the US presidential campaign of 2016. (trust-cia-hackers-who-hack-frances-election-campaign)

74 In all of the 24 occurrences of “impression that”, therefore, Rappoport’s aim is not to hedge his own statements or claims, nor to downplay the elite’s viewpoints *per se*, but to express the idea that the elite intentionally manipulates reality or create an “alternative reality”, thus lying and deceiving the people. Those are clear examples of a conspiracy-theory discourse as far as the contents of the discourses are concerned.

75 As for “impression of”, none of the 26 occurrences used by Jon Rappoport qualify his viewpoints. Instead, 16 occurrences of the noun “impression” relate to a feeling (the impression a situation or someone has on a person), so those occurrences are not real hedges. As with “impression that”, the other 10 occurrences refer to the elite’s actions (4) or the media’s (4), while 2 refer to the interpretation of the results of PCR tests.

(23) In my investigations of official science and medicine over the past 35 years, I’ve seen this strategy deployed time and time again: “The science is settled ...” “The evidence is overwhelming ...” “Credible researchers all agree ...” This is how the press creates **a fake impression of** consensus. News outlets issue identical stories, inventing an echo chamber. Don’t buy in. Crack the illusion. (australia-weather-experts-falsify-climate-change)

76 As Jon Rappoport writes, the use of the noun “impression” serves to indicate that the elite intentionally and, perhaps, secretly and malevolently, creates an “illusion” of reality. Therefore, in such cases, the stance noun cannot be described as a hedge. Rather, it is used in assertions to claim that the elite have secret plans and that they lie

and manipulate reality and the people. That is why the only adjectives that modify the noun “impression” are “false” (6 occurrences) and “fake” (2 occurrences).

- 77 To summarize the above analyses of the uses of plausibility hedges by the author, it appears that, if some uses can be described as actually hedging the writer’s positions, Jon Rappoport resorts to hedges to legitimize his theories and construct and strengthen his authority as a reliable source of knowledge in, at least, three ways: by voicing a dissenting viewpoint, that is, a possibility that cannot be ruled out; by downplaying the elite’s discourses, that is, presenting their viewpoints as subject to doubt; and, finally, by claiming that the elite, especially the media, manipulate reality.

4. Certainty boosters

- 78 With certainty boosters, Jon Rappoport is able to express his certainty and commitment towards a given viewpoint (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8). In other words, the author relies on certainty boosters to support his argument and theories. In addition, by using certainty boosters, the author indicates explicitly where he stands in relation to the viewpoints and seeks to convince his readers that he and his beliefs are truthful. In so doing, his theories gain credit and he appears as a reliable source of knowledge. In the corpus, I found three strategies to attain such goals.

4.1. Shutting down opposing views

- 79 The first strategy the author resorts to consists in expressing his certainty and showing his confidence in his theories, that is, he commits himself to the truth-value of his viewpoints. This is to shut down opposing views, as exemplified in the following extracts:

(24) Kennedy states that President Trump has appointed him to head up a task force investigating vaccine safety. The above quote indicates Kennedy, would, if given the green light, probe much more than the use of mercury in vaccines—his main topic of interest thus far. This would be a very good thing. The CDC is most **certainly** an edifice of fraud. It has concealed many of its crimes over the years. (robert-f-kennedy-jr-cdc-an-edifice-of-fraud)

(25) Coming up to the present, recent revelations about the Bill Gates-sponsored polio vaccine in India are quite staggering. 47,000 cases of paralysis from the vaccine. They're calling these "non-polio paralysis," but it's clear the vaccine has been doing the damage. Don't worry. Bill is still smiling. (cnn-goes-psychotic-on-bin-laden-vaccines)

(26) Well, you see, it's true that in the US, the federal database contains more than a million reports of injuries from COVID vaccines; and it's true that this number is a gross understatement; but the solution is more vaccinations and more boosters ... (truckers-forever)

80 It would be tempting to claim that certainty boosters are used to avoid developing one's arguments. Though it is not impossible, the extracts above show that the author elaborates on his theories and that, instead, certainty boosters are used as argumentative tools to indicate that the author's viewpoints, arguments or beliefs are right and to commit himself to their truth-value, that is, to comment, in a metadiscursive way, on their validity. In addition, the author also uses other booster items, which I underlined (some of which are analyzed in the next sections, though they still are certainty boosters) or categorical assertions (as in extract (24) "It has concealed many of its crimes over the years.") to support his claims and strengthen his commitment to them.

81 By using adjectives, adverbs and verbs in this way, the author relies on their implicit marking of stance, which allows him to comment impersonally on the validity of his viewpoints, perhaps in order to imply that his theories are shared by other people, increasing even more their validity.

82 Though adverbs are very frequently used by Jon Rappoport, impersonal or passive structures, like the ones in the extracts above, are not (see Appendix D). However, stance nouns, which express an ambiguous attribution of stance when not determined by a possessive determiner, are quite frequent in the corpus. As indicated in Table 4, the most used stance nouns are "fact" (235), "evidence" (198), "sign" (84), "claim" (91), "proof" (50) and "truth" (34). That they are among the most used certainty boosters can be explained by the

fact that they are “a powerful persuasive device as the choice of noun foregrounds an author’s assessment of the reliability of what follows and indicates to readers how the material should be understood.” (Jiang and Hyland 2015: 532)

- 83 Interestingly, almost all of the occurrences of “the claim that” (20/23 occurrences) used by Rappoport himself refer to the elite’s theories which the author designates as “claim”, either because they were presented as such by the elite themselves or because this is how the audience may perceive the elite’s discourses. In choosing “claim” to designate the propositional content of the elite, Jon Rappoport paradoxically questions the factual character of their discourses, especially when the noun is modified by adjectives like “false”, “fatuous” or “unproven”:

(27) Throughout this false pandemic, I’ve been listing and explaining the falling dominos: The **false claim** that a virus exists. (the-virus-that-doesnt-exist-lies-and-consequences)

(28) Chinese criminals launching an opioid war against many countries from Wuhan is ANOTHER fact covered up by the **fatuous claim** that a pandemic caused by a virus started in Wuhan. (wuhan-back-to-the-beginning-where-the-whole-fraud-started-buried-revelations)

- 84 In addition, the use of a noun like “claim” to indirectly report the elite’s viewpoint is a way for the author to strengthen his authority and express, somewhat indirectly, his stance towards this viewpoint (Barton 1993: 751). By choosing “claim”, indeed, the author points the unscientific, subjective and biased arguments of the elite, thus reinforcing his persona as a serious, objective and unbiased journalist. Even though “claim” does not refer to the author’s viewpoint, the way it is used by Jon Rappoport acts to give credit to his theories.
- 85 On the other hand, the other frequent stance nouns are often more used to designate the author’s own viewpoints: 32/42 occurrences of “evidence that”¹⁷, 11/35 occurrences of “evidence of”, 11/17 occurrences of “evidence for”, 24/34 occurrences of “truth about”, 6/10 occurrences of “proof that”, 10/29 occurrences of “sign(s) of”¹⁸ and 198/203 occurrences of “fact that”.

- 86 One of the advantages of this type of structure is to put the noun before the complement clause. In other words, the structure first expresses the author's stance or position towards the viewpoint in the complement clause. In so doing, the author relies on presupposition (marked by both the definite article "the" and the choice of noun) to impose his views. Indeed, "the reader is asked to accept it as a given, thus attempting to forestall disagreement and gain acceptance of the perspective." (Jiang and Hyland 2015: 533) Such a strategy is exemplified in the following extracts:

(29) But there is **further evidence that** huge numbers of published studies of drugs are fraudulent. We actually have statements from medical insiders. That's right. For example, here is one, and it comes from a devastating source, a woman who edited the most famous medical journal in the world (how-medical-criminals-are-faking-medical-science-every-day)

(30) GERMS ARE A COVER STORY. What do they cover up? **The fact that** immune systems are the more basic target for depopulation and debilitation of populations. (germ-theory-and-depopulation)

- 87 The use of "(the) fact that", the most used stance noun in the corpus, is quite particular. Indeed, it ambiguously attributes stance, meaning that it is not always clear to determine whether the viewpoint characterized by the noun is that of Jon Rappoport or someone else's. Compare the two extracts below:

(31) Many mainstream researchers, doctors, and even public health officials were exposing **the fact that** the pandemic was no pandemic at all. The adjusted case and death numbers didn't warrant excessive concern. (covid-19-and-riots-the-operational-connections)

(32) In previous articles, I've established **the fact that** the existence of the SARS-CoV-2 is unproven (the-virus-that-isnt-there-and-the-sales-job)

- 88 In the first extract, the viewpoint "the pandemic was no pandemic at all" is clearly that of "Many mainstream researchers, doctors, and even public health officials" as indicated by the author. But it is ambiguous whether it is also that of Jon Rappoport or not. In the

second extract, however, it is clear that “the fact that” introduced Rappoport’s viewpoint that “the existence of the SARS-CoV-2 is unproven”. Yet, even when the attribution of stance is ambiguous, it can be argued that Jon Rappoport agrees with the viewpoint in question. Therefore, in such cases, the stance is also attributed to Jon Rappoport, as he agrees with the choice of the noun “fact” to designate the viewpoint introduced by the complement clause. Such a claim is supported by the following extract, where the author uses “the fact that” to designate the viewpoint “the cover story is a lie” while he uses “the idea that” to designate the viewpoint “the virus exists and is dangerous”:

(33) There is another routine element in covert operations: FALSE TRAILS. These are embellishments on the basic story, promoted to hide **the fact that** the cover story is a lie. The aim in 2020 is: get people arguing about the nature and origin and composition of the virus. Why? Because as long as people are arguing about these issues, they are re-enforcing **the idea that** the virus exists and is dangerous. Thus, the basic cover story is strengthened. (covert-op-the-virus-as-cover-story)

- 89 Given that Jon Rappoport does not believe that the SARS-CoV-2 has ever been proven to exist and that the ensuing pandemic is a “cover story” for imposing “universal lockdown”¹⁹, it is unambiguous that “the fact that” serves to designate and introduce a viewpoint with which the author agrees, while “the idea that” is used to downplay the validity of the viewpoint attributed to the elite and to question the actuality of the existence of the virus.
- 90 That almost all of the direct uses of “(the) fact that” (198/203) can actually be described as referring to Jon Rappoport’s theories or a viewpoint with which he undoubtedly agrees is no surprise as to why the structure is frequently used. As the noun suggests, “the fact that” helps the author present his viewpoint as factual, actual or real. The definite determiner “the” is the most used item in front of “fact that” (in 221 of all the 235 occurrences of the structure “X fact that”). The construction is also modified by several adjectives, whose functions are to emphasize the truthfulness and/or relevance of the viewpoint considered as a “fact”: “basic” (2), “unpleasant” (2), “devastating” (1), “glaring” (1), “naked” (1), “obvious” (1), “remarkable” (1), “simple” (1),

“stark” (1). The structure acts as a categorical assertion, which aims at shutting down possible dissenting voices. In addition, the absence of subjective markers within the structure itself (but not necessarily in context) helps the author present his viewpoint as objectively factual, even when it is not:

(34) Therefore, their conclusion was a cover-up of **the naked fact** that they DID discover a significant association between mercury in vaccines and neurological damage. (cdc-whistleblower-also-a-player-in-the-vaccine-mercury-autism-fraud)

(35) Anyone with a grain of common sense could connect the dots: the CDC was lying to cover up **the fact that** Swine Flu, at best, was a very light non-epidemic, and all the fear-based hype was empty. The push for everyone to get vaccinated was venal and stupid. (medical-reporters-are-destroyng-our-knowledge-about-medicine)

(36) Let's go deeper. In general, so-called contagious diseases are caused, not by germs, but by IMMUNE SYSTEMS THAT ARE TOO WEAK TO FIGHT OFF THOSE GERMS. When we put the cart and the horse in proper alignment, things become clear. I fully realize this isn't as sexy as talking about bio-engineered gene sequences in viruses, but the cart and horse must be understood. GERMS ARE A COVER STORY. What do they cover up? **The fact that** immune systems are the more basic target for depopulation and debilitation of populations. (germ-theory-and-depopulation)

- 91 In those extracts, the author's categorical assertions are emphasized and legitimized by “the fact that”, though no actual evidence supporting the claims is provided, at least not close to the structure (of course, some articles try to argue in favour of the claims). Instead, as it is a marker of actuality, rather than simply a marker of certainty, the structure is used to prove the author right only on the rhetorical level.
- 92 Obviously, using “the fact that” is not always a manipulative device. It can be used when the fact in question is, indeed, an objective fact, as in “For Emergency Use Only’ refers to **the fact that** the FDA has certified the PCR test under a traditional category called ‘Emergency Use Authorization.’” (a-strategy-for-defeating-the-covid-narrative).

But in all instances, it always acts to legitimize the locutor's viewpoint by giving it credibility and the guise of objectivity. In addition, the author relies on the fact that "the fact that" is impersonal and ambiguously attributes stance, which implies that the factual character of the viewpoint is presupposed and is presented as shared knowledge. In other words, on the intersubjective level, the structure acts to mark that the author presupposes that the readers agree and does not expect them to disagree.

(37) **The fact that** no one is stepping up to the plate with a fast repeal is proof that multiple parts of the federal government are, in fact, tacitly supporting the opioid crisis and its devastating impacts on human life. (opioid-drug-crisis-could-the-whole-us-congress-be-impeached)

- 93 In this extract, the author accuses the "Ensuring Patient Access and Effective Drug Enforcement Act of 2016" of preventing the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) from freezing the shipments of opioid pills to US pharmacies and clinics. He presents the members of the US Congress's inertia in trying to repeal the law they passed as a fact and a proof of the malevolent intentions of the elite and the links between the government and pharmaceutical companies. In addition, the adverbial "in fact" emphasizes both the actuality and the contrasting nature of the viewpoint. Taken together, the three devices enable Jon Rappoport to voice a dissenting view and shut down opposing views by asserting and legitimizing his viewpoint rhetorically as well as logically.
- 94 In sum, whether they are used to designate the elite's viewpoints or the author's, head nouns controlling a complement clause or complemented by a prepositional phrase act to legitimize the author's theories, project an image of authority and gain support for his viewpoints from the readers (Jiang and Hyland 2015: 533). By using a head noun, the author can reinterpret the status of the elite's viewpoints, mainly to reject their actuality, or to strengthen his persona as an investigative journalist and a whistle-blower who knows what is true. In addition, the ambiguous attribution of stance enabled by the "DET + N + CC/PP" structure as well as the presupposition conveyed by the definite determiner and the head noun help the author to seek, or even impose, the interlocutor's

agreement. This is possible because the act of naming things and ideas is the author's responsibility: by the act of naming, he presents himself as the source of truth and imposes his own interpretation of reality on his readers. This act is also, to a certain extent, performative as it enables the author to create a reality that first and foremost exists in his discourse (Guilbert 2007: 154).

- 95 While the uses of certainty boosters in this section showed that they mark the author's stance and commitment towards viewpoints, by seeking to convince the reader that both the author and his viewpoints are truthful, all of this in order to gain reader's acceptance of the claims, some certainty boosters are used to express what I shall call "the indisputable and consensual truth", thereby building a sense of community between the author and his readers and presenting subjective interpretation as self-evident truths.

4.2. The indisputable and consensual truth

- 96 Among the most frequent certainty boosters, the adverbial "of course" and the adverb "obviously" are the two items that both convey the actuality of the viewpoint and act on an intersubjective level in so far as the locutor assumes that their readers share the same ideas or have come to the same conclusions (Hyland 1998: 368):

(38) But no, this was never done. In fact, there were, and are, many places around the world where people are still living free of COVID measures. Public health agencies don't report convincingly on their health status. Why not? **Obviously**, because if such a group, or several groups, remained healthy, the whole mad notion of the pandemic would begin to collapse like a house of cards. (coronavirus-island-x-24)

(39) The use of the term "quantified" in that phrase means: the CDC has no virus, because it is unavailable. THE CDC HAS NO VIRUS. One of the two most powerful public health agencies in the world can't obtain the virus from anywhere. Why? **Obviously**, because no one has it. (the-sars-cov-2-virus-was-never-proved-to-exist)

- 97 The OED defines the adverb “obviously” as follows: “1. In a clearly perceptible manner, evidently, plainly, manifestly; naturally, as might be expected from the circumstances.” The adverb, therefore, means that what it modifies both is factual and imposes itself to reason. In those two extracts, Jon Rappoport uses it to claim that his viewpoint is the right interpretation of reality, but also that he is not really responsible for the reasoning, as the explanation referred to is self-evident.
- 98 The phrase “of course” (582 out of the 608 direct occurrences by Jon Rappoport) also tends to express a self-evident truth with which the author does not expect the reader to disagree. In so doing, he imposes his own construal of reality, presenting it as a plain fact, while assuming that the factual character of the viewpoint is shared by the interlocutor, as can be seen in the following extracts:
- (40) Can you name a single large mainstream news outlet that has devoted time and space to a complete and rational debate about vaccine safety and efficacy, representing both sides of the issue fairly? Can you? **Of course not.** Does this seem reasonable? “The science is settled.” Only fools and unthinking minds would accept that position. Who is the culprit here? Critics of vaccination, or the delinquent imperious press? (basic-vaccine-lies-in-the-world-of-fake-news)

(41) For decades, elite Globalists have been asking themselves the question: How do you kill billions of people and get away with it? One of their prime answers has been: pandemics. **Of course**, the true pandemic is the response to the fake pandemic: vaccines. If, in the long-term, vaccines can induce the inability to produce children, the genocide would be invisible. (covid-vaccines-designed-for-depopulation)
- 99 In the first extract, “of course” follows a series of rhetorical questions providing an obvious answer (“of course not”) to those questions, an answer that the reader may very well have given, or at least thought of, while reading the article. In using rhetorical questions, the author also engages with his readers and presupposes that they share the same views as him. Such a strategy is not rare in the corpus (83 occurrences out of all the 706²⁰ occurrences of the adverbial) and

can also be found with “obviously” (in 10/169 occurrences), as can be seen in extracts (38) and (39) above.

- 100 With other instances of “of course”, not only does the author assume that the interlocutor agrees with his viewpoint, but he also appears to be himself an interlocutor who agrees with a viewpoint that he is not the first to express, thus strengthening the sense of commonality he weaves in his articles. As a result, the validity of the viewpoint is even more increased:

(42) **Of course**, pharmaceutical companies, who manufacture highly toxic drugs to treat every one of these “disorders,” are leading the charge to invent more and more mental-health categories, so they can sell more drugs and make more money. (a-whole-branch-of-science-turns-out-to-be-fake-2)

- 101 In this extract, the adverbial “of course” at the onset of the first sentence serves to indicate both that the viewpoint “pharmaceutical are leading the charge to invent more and more mental-health categories” is truthful and that it is presupposed, that is already known by the interlocutor (or presented as such); in such a case, Jon Rappoport appears to act as a messenger of all those who share his views.

- 102 Interestingly, there are several cases of “of course” which are not certainty boosters expressing the author’s conviction, but rather that of the elite or of the people who believe in what the elite claims. Such cases were found in 30 occurrences of (sometimes invented) reported speech by the elite or of ironical uses:

(43) The elite strategy is in for a penny in for a pound. “Well, **OF COURSE** the virus exists. So it’s a question of how serious and deadly it is. Now, the official figures suggest it was weakening by June 15th, but then the Variant emerged. That was a game changer. The latest measurements of antibody production against the Delta Variant indicate ...” Zzzzzz. (covid-madness-and-mass-conformity-vs-the-life-force)

(44) The rabid defenders of the virus twist and distort science to fit their agenda—and then claim **OF COURSE** everybody knows the virus exists. (a-new-point-about-the-missing-virus)

- 103 Such a strategy is pushed to its extreme in the two occurrences below, where “of course” is part of a complex noun phrase characterizing those who believe in the elite’s “propaganda”:

(45) “Some of the **OF COURSE** VIRUSES EXIST people are new to the way blogs and videos work. [...] these **OF COURSE** people are annoyed and irritated.” (stop-arguing-about-the-existence-of-the-virus)

- 104 Uses like those above are rhetorically persuasive as they act to question, and even denounce, the elite’s (and other people’s) blind faith in a variety of theories, like the existence of the SARS-CoV-2, which the author rejects.
- 105 While certainty boosters may express one’s own commitment to the actuality of a claim, whether by indicating that the viewpoint in question is truthful and/or that the author is trustworthy, or by imposing a self-evident truth, another way that they are used in the corpus is to express what I shall call a “contradictory alternative”, that is, a viewpoint that explicitly refutes or corrects the elite’s viewpoints.

4.3. The contradictory alternative

- 106 According to Hyland and Zou (2021: 8), certainty boosters can be used to “sidestep possible alternative views”. In the list of the most frequent certainty boosters, the expression of a contradictory alternative is performed by adverbs like “really” and “actually” or by adverbials like “in fact”:

(46) What CDC / WHO **really** want is a fake epidemic in which the chimerical virus is said to affect brain function. That’s the Holy Grail. Then words and thoughts will constitute de facto diagnostic evidence. (political-battle-over-covid-vaccine-your-health-is-of-no-concern)

(47) First of all, notice the CDC stopped reporting complete case numbers on a daily basis, for two and a half months. Remember that. I’ll cover a more egregious CDC stoppage in a minute. But here is the main event: The Atlantic fails to mention the true outcome of this

“test-combining mistake” at the CDC—which, **in fact**, is a purposeful maneuver. (mr-trump-deliver-knockout-blow-to-traitorous-cdc)

(48) The situation is even more stunning than that. All over the world, there are scientists in labs of various kinds who believe they’re working with “the virus” when they’re working with a cobbled-together IDEA of the virus. So, for the most part, in this COVID operation, the key players are only aware that researchers could arbitrarily choose one virus over another as the “cause of the pandemic.” They’re not aware that the choice is **actually** a fake virus. The choice of a new coronavirus was made for a simple reason. The diagnostic test would turn up huge numbers of false positives, thus jacking up case numbers and providing the rationale for the lockdowns and the economic devastation. Which were, all along, the real aims of the operation. (the-virus-that-isnt-there-and-the-sales-job)

- 107 In those three extracts, the adverbs and adverbials can be paraphrased by “contrary to what X says/believes”, where X represents any group or person related to the elite: “contrary to what the CDC / WHO claim, they want a fake epidemic...” (in the original, the author uses a pseudo-cleft structure to topicalize and assert the CDC/WHO’s supposed plans), “contrary to what the CDC claims, the outcome of the test-combining mistake is a purposeful maneuver” (note that the author first contradicts another source, *The Atlantic*, and asserts and commits to the actuality of his viewpoint by using the adjective “true”), “contrary to what those scientist believe, the choice is a fake virus”. As the paraphrase suggests, the author offers an alternative interpretation that contradicts what is admitted or assumed by the elite. In addition, the three items also assert the actuality of the viewpoints referred to.

- 108 This double function is clear in their respective definitions, as found in the OED:

[really, adv.]: 1.a. In reality; in a real manner. Also: in fact, actually. [...] 1.b. Truly, indeed; positively. In later use also as an intensifier: very, thoroughly.

[actually, adv.]: 1. In action; in fact, in reality, really. Opposed to possibly, potentially, theoretically, etc. [...] 5.a. As a matter of fact, in

truth; indeed; even. Now somewhat *colloquial*. Used to assert the truth of a statement which seems surprising, incredible, or exaggerated. 5.b. *colloquial*. As a sentence adverb: in fact, as a matter of interest; contrary to what one might think.

[in fact, phrases]: P.2. in reality, actually, as a matter of fact. Now often used parenthetically as an additional explanation or to correct a falsehood or misunderstanding

- 109 Therefore, all of them have the potential either to express that a viewpoint is objectively factual or to correct a previous viewpoint, or even both at the same time. By using them, Jon Rappoport is able to assert his viewpoint, and its actuality, and appear as a credible and reliable source of knowledge. Perhaps, this is why those three adverbs and adverbials are the most used certainty boosters after the adverbial “of course” in the corpus. Not only do they express the author’s certainty and commitment towards his theories and beliefs, but they also act to introduce a dissenting and/or corrective viewpoint, presented as closer to reality and in contradiction to the possible expectations of the audience²¹.
- 110 To summarize my analyses of certainty boosters in the corpus, it has become evident that they are used to express Jon Rappoport’s certainty and commitment to the validity of his theories. This is done in mainly three ways: first, by indicating a clear commitment that the theory in question is trustworthy (that is, by intensifying its validity); second, by indicating that the truth-value of the viewpoint is (objectively) self-evident; third, by introducing a contradictory alternative reality that disputes or rectifies the actuality of the elite’s theories and providing the interlocutor with a (supposedly) more accurate and valid interpretation of reality. In other words, from the same facts, two or more conclusions can be drawn, and Jon Rappoport favours one that is explicitly in contradiction with that of the elite or is presented as commonsensical.
- 111 So far, I only dealt with plausibility hedges and certainty boosters which mark either an implicit or an ambiguous attribution of stance. Yet, explicit attribution of stance can also be marked by both plausibility hedges and certainty boosters. In the next section, I

explore how the author's explicit involvement in his discourses allows him to construct and reinforce his authority.

5. Strengthening authority through authorial involvement

- 112 While Biber *et al.* (1999: 976) refer to “explicit attribution of stance” to deal with those markers and structures that explicitly express that the viewpoint in question is that of the locutor, Hyland and Zou (2021: 10) refer to “self-mention”, that is, “the extent writers/speakers intrude into their texts using first-person pronouns and possessives adjectives”. By using self-mentions, “writers explicitly indicat[e] a personal attitude to their [...] positions” (Hyland 1998: 367).
- 113 In the corpus, it appears that the structure “I/We + V + CC” (that is, a complement clause controlled by a verb whose subject is the pronouns “I” or “we”) is the prevailing device used to explicitly attribute stance to the speaker/writer. On the other hand, there are far fewer (or even none at all) occurrences of structures including possessive determiners (“my/our + N + CC” in extraposed structures or not) or object pronouns. Jon Rappoport seems to favour explicit attribution of stance, especially with the “I/We + V + CC” structure, in order to express his certainty or the actuality of his viewpoint.
- 114 With the latter structure, it is more common for epistemic verbs to be followed by a complement clause introduced by the zero complementizer than to be followed by a THAT-clause. As far as hedges are concerned, “think” (40), “hope” (38), and “guess” (17) are the most used verbs, all with the first-person singular pronoun (that is, in the “I + V + CC” configuration), while “know” (283), “discover” (22) and “believe” (17) are the most used booster verbs. Interestingly, and contrary to hedge verbs, “know” is far more used with the first-person plural pronoun (186 occurrences) than with the first-person singular pronoun (97).

5.1. Booster verbs

- 115 Booster verbs are epistemic verbs expressing the author's certainty, confidence or commitment towards the viewpoint in the complement

clause. By using them with a first-person pronoun, Jon Rappoport is able to unequivocally express his viewpoint while managing his persona. The use of the first-person pronoun “I” highlights his own contribution to the construction of the conspiracy theories he develops in his articles. Together with a booster verb introducing a complement clause, the structure helps Jon Rappoport strengthen his authority and credibility by highlighting his (supposed or self-attributed) knowledge. As a result, he reinforces his role as an investigative journalist and a whistle-blower who reveals hidden truths.

(49) **I know** major media won’t investigate medically-caused death numbers, because I’ve published reports for years, and I’ve contacted news people with the facts; and nothing happens. (who-pushes-the-idea-of-an-epidemic-what-are-their-crimes)

- 116 In this extract, the booster verb “know” enables Rappoport to categorically assert that the media are complicit of the elite and hide their misdeeds or plans (in the extract below, the noun “crimes” is even used). Though the source of knowledge is explicitly attributed to Jon Rappoport himself, the structure “I + booster verb + CC” first and foremost reinforces the strength of the claim being made.

(50) I then went on to study every so-called high-risk group for AIDS. **I found that** in each group, all the “AIDS symptoms” could be explained by non-viral causes. At that point, **I realized** I was looking at a classic intelligence-agency-type covert operation, applied within the medical universe. The virus was the cover story. It was being use to hide ongoing government and corporate crimes. For example—forced starvation. (turning-flu-cases-into-covid-through-manipulation-easy-as-pie)

(51) When I wrote my first book in 1988, AIDS INC., **I showed that** HIV was not the cause of AIDS. In fact, there was no AIDS. That was a label slapped on a variety of health problems all stemming from lowered immunity. (the-fixation-on-the-one-and-the-obsession-with-a-virus)

- 117 In these extracts, the three booster verbs serve two purposes: highlighting Rappoport’s efforts in seeking and revealing what he sees

as hidden truth, as the three verbs reinforce his role as an investigative journalist and as a whistle-blower; and presenting his viewpoint as valid, if not as “the one and only truth”. Of course, the context also helps reinforce the legitimacy and truthfulness of the viewpoints, as is the case with the adverbial “In fact” followed by an unmodalised and categorical assertion denying the existence of AIDS in the second extract and as is also the case in the first extract with the categorical assertion “the virus was the cover story”, which has a conclusive force.

(52) For the past year, **I’ve been demonstrating that** the SARS-CoV-2 virus is a fake. No one has proved it exists. Now let’s enter the bubble where people assume the virus is real, and examine a few of the major crimes and contradictions that exist inside that lunatic bubble. (covid-vaccine-revelation-sinks-like-a-stone)

(53) First of all, I have to re-emphasize a point I’ve made many times: SARS-CoV-2 doesn’t exist. **I’ve been proving** that for over a year. (fda-knew-there-would-be-many-covid-cases-among-the-fully-vaccinated)

- 118 In these two extracts, not only do the two verbs reinforce the truthfulness of the viewpoints, presented as demonstrable facts, but the use of the BE + -ING aspect also acts as a booster emphasizing the involvement of the speaker in the demonstrations he puts forward, thus reinforcing, yet again, his authority as an investigative journalist, a whistle-blower and a reliable source. In so doing, the author strengthens his persona by highlighting his contribution to the construction of the theory.
- 119 In addition, the use of the first-person plural pronoun “we” is almost exclusively found with the booster verb “know” (185 occurrences of “we X Y Z know/knew + CC”²² out of the 195 occurrences of “We X Y Z + V + CC”), which is a way for Rappoport to present himself as belonging to a community of people sharing the same views, or to present his viewpoint as being validated, accepted or agreed upon by other people (that is, as a shared knowledge), or to present his viewpoint as an obvious fact whose evident nature is known by all. In any case, Rappoport’s authority and discourse legitimacy are strengthened.

(54) My readers know I've spent a great deal of time exposing the destructive dangers of medical drugs, but now I'd like to home in on them from another angle. We're so used to their presence, we now take them for granted. Everyone ingests them. Many take them in combinations. [...] **We know** about the enormous profits to be made by the pharmaceutical companies. **We know** these companies exploit and create markets. **We know** they also invent diseases in order to sell the drugs. **We know** many people use the drugs as a crutch. (the-bio-chemical-matrix)

- 120 Here, all of the occurrences of the pronoun “we” are inclusive. Together with the booster verb “know”, they strengthen the degree of actuality of the viewpoints specified by the complement clauses, as they are presented as shared knowledge, thus reinforcing the strength of the claims themselves. In addition, the inclusive nature of “we” creates a sense of commonality between Jon Rappoport and his readers, whom he sometimes explicitly addresses, reinforcing the sense of belonging to a community of like-minded people.
- 121 On an intersubjective level, the first-person pronoun also plays a role in legitimizing and strengthening Rappoport's authority. The contrasting nature of the first-person singular pronoun (which only excludes everyone else but the author) enables him to voice a dissenting view and project an image of reliability and credibility, which also relies, to a certain extent, on the fact that “the truth” is presented as actual, though relative to the author's construal. In addition, the inclusive use of the first-person plural pronoun enables him to impose a sense of shared agreement with the reader, in an attempt to shut down opposing views.

5.2. Hedge verbs

- 122 While booster verbs express the locutor's conviction and commitment towards a viewpoint, hedge verbs express likelihood or doubt. It would be tempting to analyze hedge verbs as a way for a given locutor to appear more tentative, that is, less assertive. Such a rhetorical strategy can, indeed, be beneficial, as it leaves space for debate, as exemplified below:

(55) Because Trump was attacking CNN and other media as fake, CNN claimed THAT was making life more physically dangerous for journalists in war zones and at home. Wow. **I guess** the takeaway is: don't criticize mainstream news, keep your mouth shut and stay hypnotized ... (rise-and-fall-of-cnn-the-most-busted-name-in-news)

(56) **I'm estimating that** for less than \$5 million, the whole program can be launched—as opposed to the hundreds of millions of dollars that have been poured down unaccountable “investment” rat holes. (charlottesville-black-and-white-conflict-in-america)

- 123 In the first extract, the two verbs (“guess” and “claim”, though not a hedge verb) are, indeed, used to downplay the author’s assertiveness. In the second extract, the hedge verb “estimate” expresses a conjecture, or a personal evaluation (though barely based on evidence), but the estimation is not about a conspiracy-theory viewpoint. In fact, although all of the occurrences can be qualified as hedge verbs, as they express the author’s uncertainty, or lack of commitment, or even his tentativeness, the majority of the occurrences are not used to introduce a conspiracy-theorist viewpoint. For example, 10 occurrences of the verb “guess” (out of all the 17 occurrences) are used to offer an explanation of or to question the elite’s discourses, thus presenting their discourses as cryptic or ridiculing them.
- 124 Though hedges mainly act to downplay the author’s commitment to the truth-value of the viewpoint or to express his uncertainty, they still are quite powerful tools to legitimize the author’s discourse and reinforce his authority. By appearing not too assertive, the author’s viewpoint may become more acceptable for the reader. Though they also allow room for debate, hedge verbs like “I think” and “I suggest” are used to introduce and defend a dissident viewpoint, rather than to express the author’s doubt or uncertainty:

(57) I want to correct an inadvertent impression about the FDA story. I have no reason to believe the FDA is admitting to its own crimes or that it is thumbing its nose at the public by allowing its web page to remain standing. **I think** someone at the FDA made a serious mistake (or was trying to get word out) by posting that web page. It was

placed online as a come-on for an educational module about adverse drug effects. The module link no longer works. (when-mass-medical-murder-is-acceptable)

- 125 In this extract, the verbs “correct” and “believe” as well as the noun phrase “no reason”, which is restrictive, pave the way for an alternative view (introduced by the hedge verb “think”) that is presented as the true explanation of the real-world event referred to. In such a context, “I think” does not mitigate the author’s claim; rather it focuses on his role as a free thinker whose viewpoint is relevant and trustworthy.

(58) If they are, I would suggest investigating whether the rollout of new 5G wireless technology at 60GHz is occurring in those locales. It is possible 5G is causing oxygen deprivation, among other serious effects. And rather than an engineered virus—which has unpredictable effects owing to its rapid mutation—if we’re looking for sinister operations, **I suggest that**, to cause sensational alarm and bafflement and “proof” that a mysterious event is underway, the intentional seeding of locales with little-known toxic chemicals would be the action undertaken. The effects of chemicals are far more predictable in terms of intensity and duration, and if no one is specifically looking for them, they are undetectable. (people-dying-equals-coronavirus-an-engineered-virus)

- 126 In this example, the first occurrence of “suggest” is not a stance verb, which is not uncommon in the corpus (of all the 89 occurrences of “guess” as a verb, only 17 are stance verbs). The second occurrence, on the other hand, is a hedge verb of stance used by the author to put forward an alternative viewpoint. The author writes that the explanation he offers is only a possibility (as emphasized by the extraposed structure in the left co-text: “It is possible 5G is causing...”, as well as the preposition “rather than” meaning “instead of” and introducing a contrary choice). But even though he does not seem absolutely certain of what he writes, the context acts to present this possibility as a probable alternative scenario. The viewpoint put forward (i.e. 5G technology is what caused the Covid-like symptoms) is clearly stated at the beginning of the article, which then endeavours to prove the writer right: “Anything is possible, but so far,

what I see is this: when I add up all the reasons people are sick and dying, I don't see a new germ as the basis."

- 127 That hedge verbs explicitly attribute stance to the author so as to help him express a strong dissenting viewpoint is supported by the presence of boosters of certainty or actuality in the co-text, thus reinforcing the plausibility of the author's viewpoint, so much so that the hedge verb can barely be described as downplaying his commitment:

(59) I don't believe governments are telling the truth about how many people have taken the COVID shot. **I think** they're lying. Inflating the numbers because they're desperate; far more people than advertised are refusing the vaxx. In every war, spies and other hired hands try to demoralize the enemy. This is standard operating procedure. Inflating key numbers is one strategy. In this vaccine war, the ace in the hole is obvious: if enough people say NO to the shot, it's over. A tidal wave will engulf the governments and their corporate allies. (the-vaccine-war-who-really-has-the-upper-hand)

- 128 In this extract²³, the verb "think" explicitly introduces a contrasting viewpoint: at the beginning of the extract, the author states that he does not believe that "governments are telling the truth about how many people have taken the COVID shot". The verb "think" signals that the viewpoint is a possibility while the first-person subject pronoun "I" attributes the reasoning leading to this possibility to the author himself. The possibility that the elite lies is presented as the most probable possibility, almost as a fact: the progressive aspect in "they're lying" emphasizes the assertion that it is indeed the case, while the comparative structure "fare more...than", which expresses high degree, as well as the progressive aspect increase the force of the argument.

- 129 In such contexts, it appears that what matters is not so much objective actuality or the accuracy of the expressed viewpoints than the author's "involment in knowledge construction" (Hyland 1998: 363), thus strengthening his authority as an investigative journalist and a whistle-blower, that is, as a reliable source who knows hidden truths. In addition, hedge verbs used with a first-person singular pronoun are useful devices to legitimize the author's discourse by

voicing a personal, dissenting view and highlighting the relevance and trustworthiness of the viewpoint in question.

- 130 To summarize the above analyses of explicit authorial presence in Jon Rappoport's discourses, it appears that both booster and hedge verbs with a first-person pronoun as their subject are used to legitimize his theories and strengthen his authority as a reliable source of knowledge. Booster verbs are used to indicate that the viewpoint introduced in the complement clause is certain or factual while the first person-pronoun highlights the personal contribution of the author to the construction of the theory in question or his inclusion in a community of like-minded people. Hedge verbs explicitly indicate that the viewpoints in question are plausible alternative interpretations of reality, and even more probable ones as hedge verbs are sometimes found in combination with boosters of various kinds.

Conclusion

- 131 The analysis of Jon Rappoport's articles revealed that he uses significantly more certainty boosters than plausibility hedges. Yet, more than a quest for nuance and balanced assertions, the use of both boosters and hedges help him legitimize his theory and strengthen his authority as a reliable source of knowledge, an investigative journalist and a whistle-blower.
- 132 In section 3, I showed how plausibility hedges are not really used to mitigate the author's claims. Rather, they are used in three ways: to voice a plausible dissenting viewpoint (and this is from the expression of "plausibility" or "possibility" that the expression of doubt arises) that cannot be ruled out; to downplay the elite's discourses, that is, to reinterpret them as possibilities among others, as valid (if not less) or speculative as the author's discourses; to explicitly designate the elite's discourses as attempts at manipulating truth.
- 133 In section 4, I showed that certainty boosters do serve to express the author's confidence in his claims, which is achieved in, at least, three ways: by shutting down opposing views in committing to the actuality of the viewpoints; by presenting the theories as self-evident truths and consensual or shared interpretations of reality; by providing a

contradictory alternative interpretation that explicitly clashes with the elite's discourses or corrects them.

- 134 In section 5, I studied the explicit presence of the author in his discourses through the use of booster and hedge verbs whose subject is a first-person pronoun (either plural or singular) followed by a complement clause. The contextual analyzes show that both booster and hedge verbs are used to legitimize the author's theories by intensifying their validity and, more importantly, to strengthen the author's authority as a reliable source of knowledge, by explicitly attributing his personal and "scientific" (in terms of investigative methods) contribution in the construction of the theories in question or by indicating supposedly shared or consensual knowledge.
- 135 In any case, Jon Rappoport takes advantage of the intersubjective nature of both hedges and boosters in so far as they act to shut down dissident voices, secure readers' agreement and present his viewpoints as factual and as the only valid alternative views to the elite's discourses. In sum, they are used to manage both the author's positions regarding viewpoints and interlocutors, that is, they help him maximize agreement and reduce opposition.
- 136 Though I only analyzed the discourses of an unequivocal conspiracy theorist, meaning that I cannot conclude on conspiracy-theory discourses in general, this case study can be viewed as a preliminary work on such discourses, as I highlighted strategies that can possibly be used by other conspiracy theorists, especially those that tend to offer alternative interpretations of reality or oppose the elite's viewpoints.

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Analysis corpus

The analysis corpus is not publicly available, especially due to law issues. The political opinions in the texts are considered to be “sensitive” by the European GDPR, even though the articles are publicly available. Therefore, safety measures have to be taken in order to process, store and share the data; this work is still in progress. In addition, and to put it simply, my algorithm copies and pastes web pages, before parsing them. As far as the texts are copied for private use, this is legal. Yet, sharing such copy-paste contents breaches author’s rights. As a consequence, the sharing of the texts cannot be done. As a matter of compromise, all the post URLs of the texts used to build the analysis corpus are provided in Appendix E. As of January 11th, 2024, all of the web pages were still accessible.

NOTES

- 1 Note that Hyland’s terminology is not exactly the same as Quirk *et al.* (1985). The latter authors use the terms “downtoners” (which corresponds to Hyland’s hedges) and “amplifiers” (which can be “maximizers” and “boosters”). For Hyland, “boosters” are more or less equivalent to Quirk *et al.*’s “amplifiers”. Though they do not include “focusing subjuncts” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 604) and “content disjuncts”, which are concerned with the truth-value of a propositional content (“degree of truth”, Quirk *et al.* 1985: 620), such tools are included in Hyland’s boosters.
- 2 The metadata between parentheses is the unique ID of the text in the corpus, used to identify each text.
- 3 In this paper, I will use the terms “elite(s)” for the sake of simplicity, as this allows me to use one word to refer, in a general context, to all the

groups Jon Rappoport opposes (the mainstream media and politicians, pharmaceutical companies, US government agencies, etc.).

4 There were many other post categories on the website, but only those that were most likely to comprise conspiracy-theory articles were selected. The following is a list of some of the discarded categories: “X massacres” (where X is a year ranging from 2012 to 2017), “Americanism”, “Bordergate”, “Coaching”, “Entrepreneurs”, “Freedom”, “Free speech”, “ISIS”, “Law of attraction”, “Matrix Revealed”, “Marijuana”, “Nanotech”, “Socialism”, “Transhumanism”. Note that a given post can belong to multiple categories.

5 A list of the URLs of all the articles in the analysis corpus is provided in Appendix E.

6 Jon Rappoport had written other articles prior to 2009, but only those from 2009 on are available, as well as some from 2001.

7 Brezina, Vaclav, P. Weill-Tessier & Tony McEnery. 2020. #LancsBox. <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox>.

8 For more information, see <https://txm.gitpages.humanum.fr/textometrie/index.html> and Heiden, Serge. The TXM Platform: Building Open-Source Textual Analysis Software Compatible with the TEI Encoding Scheme. In *24th Pacific Asia Conference on Language, Information and Computation*, 10. Sendai, Japon.

10 Not all of the occurrences of the devices in Appendix A are used by Rappoport, as he quotes other locutors, who can be conspiracy theorists, dissenting scientists or politicians, or people I call “the elite” (mainstream scientists, politicians, journalists, etc.). Only adverbs and adverbials were counted individually to find those actually used by Jon Rappoport (as their uses were the entry point of this paper). Other than that, the frequencies of the devices in Appendix A are raw frequencies. Yet, later in the paper, I give the frequencies of some devices actually used by Jon Rappoport.

12 More precisely, the organization defends free choice and informed consent, but as a way to convince people (especially parents) to refuse vaccination. Their “Our mission” page, for instance, states: “The National Vaccine Information Center (NVIC) is dedicated to preventing vaccine injuries and deaths through public education and advocating for informed consent protections in medical policies and public health laws. NVIC defends the human right to freedom of thought and conscience and supports the inclusion of flexible medical, religious and conscientious belief

sion-vision, last accessed on January 11th, 2024). See also *The Anti-vaxx Playbook*. Center for Countering Digital Hate. <https://counterhate.com/research/the-anti-vaxx-playbook/>.

13 The adverb “perhaps” is, in the corpus, particularly useful for that. Though there are cases where Jon Rappoport writes “perhaps, I don’t know”, thus clearly expressing his uncertainty/doubt, the adverb first and foremost allows for the expression of a possibility, no matter the truth-value of the propositional content. As a result, Rappoport’s theories become more legitimate by the simple fact that they are presented as real possibilities. To oversimplify, I would say that, in “conspiracy theory worlds”, the viewpoint in question is a possibility that cannot be ruled out, or even a necessity (that is, the only valid interpretation of the world), while it is rejected as such in the “elite’s world”.

14 Or “la nécessité du possible” in French, which is an expression I borrow from the French translation of Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*.

15 In fact, only 2 occurrences can be described as hedging Rappoport’s viewpoint. 42 occurrences attribute the source of the viewpoint to the elite, mainly when dealing with viruses causing epidemics or with the benefits of vaccination.

16 One of the definitions of “notion” according to the OED is: “I.2. A belief, opinion, theory, or view, held by a person or (now more usually) a group of people.” Another one is: “I.4.a An idea in a person’s mind; a person’s conception or understanding of something.”

17 As with the other nouns, I excluded negative contexts like “there is no evidence that...” and questions, as well as cases where “that” is a relative pronoun. When I write “32/42”, this means that 32 is the number of occurrences actually used by Rappoport to designate his viewpoint while 42 is the number of occurrences not used in reported speech.

18 Describing “sign(s) of” as a certainty booster is, according to me, subject to caution. Indeed, it is often used to refer to physical, visual signs of a disease, which proves that a person suffers from a disease. But on an argumentative level, it is not a certainty booster in the same way as “I know”, for instance, can be categorized as such.

19 Here is an extract from the article from which the analyzed example is taken: “For months, I’ve been demonstrating that no one has proved SARS-CoV-2 exists (start here). Instead, elite planners have been selling A STORY ABOUT A VIRUS. In covert intelligence operations, this would be called a

cover story. It obscures true goals. It justifies crimes that would otherwise be nakedly exposed. [...] These days, the coronavirus cover story obscures crimes according to the same general pattern. EVERYONE is considered an agent of potential infection. Therefore, a new Chinese strategy: universal lockdowns. COVID-19 is essentially an intelligence-agency type covert op. The short-term goal is wrecking economies. The long-term goal is taking the population into a new world of technocratic control. Selling this as necessary all comes back to THE VIRUS COVER STORY.”

20 “Of course” in “as a matter of course” (4 occurrences) was discarded.

21 This strategy is taken to its full advantage in the 13 occurrences of “when in fact”, all of which are used by Rappoport himself and not the elite, where the conjunction “when” means “even though; despite the fact that”, thus clearly introducing a contrasting view that goes against someone’s expectations, while the adverbial “in fact” highlights the actuality of the viewpoint and its corrective purpose, as in: “FACT: Thompson states that he and his colleagues falsified data to make it appear that the MMR vaccine has no connection to autism, when in fact the vaccine does raise the risk of autism.” (lying-australian-press-and-the-vaxxed-scandal) This extract is taken from the very beginning of the article. Note how the author bluntly and straightforwardly claims that his viewpoint is factual with the noun “fact” at the beginning of the sentence and in capital letters. Note also how the so-called “emphatic” auxiliary “does” is used to support the claim made by the author. Taken together in so short an extract, one can see how Jon Rappoport uses such boosters to impose his interpretation of reality onto the reader and shut down possible dissenting views, regardless of the actual truth-value of the viewpoint.

22 “X Y Z” are placeholders for any lexical or grammatical items. The query in TXM searched for the following pattern: a subject pronoun, zero or up to three items, a verb and a complement clause.

23 Due to lack of space, I provide another example as a side note. I underlined boosters: “So which sets of statistics should we believe? Those that pump up the numbers of people who’ve taken the shots, or those that show millions of vials going to waste? I think the latter stats are the true indicators. Officials are less likely to confess to them, unless they’re accurate. Out in front, the movie called COVID VACCINE is being hailed as a brilliant blockbuster, but at the back end, ticket sales are dropping off a cliff. There are reasons for that. One is: People are having very serious and

severe injuries from the shot; they're dying; and their families and friends know about it." (the-vaccine-war-who-really-has-the-upper-hand)

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Politische Instrumentalisierung und Radikalisierung in Büchners „Danton’s Tod“ (1835): Ein Versuch, politische Agitation mit Methoden der Digital Humanities zu verdeutlichen

Political instrumentalisation and radicalisation in Büchner’s “Danton’s Death” (1835): An attempt to elucidate political agitation with methods from the digital humanities

Instrumentalisation et radicalisation politiques dans « La mort de Danton » (1835) de Büchner : une tentative de mettre en évidence l’agitation politique à l’aide des méthodes des humanités numériques

Patrick Huemer

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ABSTRACTS

Deutsch

Obwohl Georg Büchners Drama „Danton’s Tod“ von 1835 sich im deutschsprachigen literarischen Feld großer Beachtung erfreut, ist die Literaturwissenschaft vergleichsweise uneins darüber, wie der Text verstanden werden möchte. Dies liegt unter anderem an der unüberschaubaren Vielzahl an ambivalenten Figuren, Schauplätzen und Handlungsebenen sowie an der Abwesenheit von Sympathie- und Handlungsträgern, wie sie in einem politisch motivierten Stück üblicherweise zu erwarten wären. Der vorliegende Beitrag versucht mithilfe quantitativ ausgerichteter Methoden, die dem Forschungsparadigma der Digital Humanities verpflichtet sind, Aspekte und Zusammenhänge zu erhellen, die eine qualitative Lesart stützen können. Dies ist möglich dank einer von der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften besorgten Online-Ausgabe, die den Text TEI-konform annotiert, womit grundlegende den Damentext strukturierende paratextuelle Elemente einer maschinellen Auswertung zugrunde gelegt werden können. Im konkreten Falle wird hierfür die Programmiersprache Python genutzt. Die Absicht des Beitrages liegt dabei primär in der Illustration eines computergestützten Zuganges zu literarischen Texten, wenngleich auch einige qualitative Schlüsse über den Text gezogen werden. Beispielsweise lässt sich zeigen, dass die Gruppe der Dantonisten in Büchners Drama praktisch nicht an dem institutionalisierten juristischen Diskurs teilnimmt,

der schlussendlich zu ihrer Verurteilung und Exekution führt. Insgesamt wird eine Gliederung des dramatischen Raumes festgestellt, die eine starke Trennung unterschiedlicher sozialer Gruppen und Funktionsträger umfasst. In Büchners Darstellung der Französischen Revolution werden mithin deren moralisches und demokratisches Fundament zur Diskussion gestellt, wenngleich das Stück gerade keine Lösung für die sichtbar gemachten Probleme bietet.

English

Although Georg Büchner's 1835 drama "Danton's Tod" ("Danton's Death") receives considerable acclaim in the German literary field, literary scholars are comparatively divided about how the text should be understood. This is partly due to the confusing multiplicity of ambivalent characters, settings, and plot levels, as well as to the absence of sympathetic characters and clearly marked protagonists, that would normally be expected in a politically motivated play. Using quantitatively oriented methods committed to the research paradigm of the Digital Humanities, this paper attempts to shed light on aspects and contexts that can in turn bolster qualitative interpretation. This is possible thanks to the online edition provided by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, which annotates the text in a TEI-conform way, so that fundamental paratextual elements structuring the dramatic text can be used as a basis for machine analysis. In this specific case, the programming language Python is used for this purpose. Accordingly, the primary intention of the paper is to illustrate a computer-based approach to literary texts, although some qualitative conclusions about the text are also drawn. For example, it can be shown that in Büchner's drama the Dantonist group effectively does not participate in the institutionalized legal discourse that ultimately leads to the condemnation and execution of its members. Overall, a structuring of the dramatic space is detected that includes a strong separation of different social or institutional groups. In Büchner's portrayal, the moral and democratic foundations of the French Revolution are thus called into question, even though the play offers no solution to the problems made visible.

Français

Bien que le drame de Georg Büchner « Danton's Tod » (« La mort de Danton ») de 1835 jouisse d'une grande estime dans le champ littéraire germanophone, les études littéraires sont relativement partagées sur la manière dont il faut comprendre le texte. Cela s'explique entre autres par le nombre très important de personnages ambivalents, de lieux et de niveaux d'intrigue, ainsi que par l'absence de personnages sympathiques et d'acteurs principaux, trait atypique pour une pièce de théâtre à caractère politique. Cet article tente, à l'aide de méthodes quantitatives qui s'inscrivent dans le paradigme de recherche des humanités numériques, d'éclairer des aspects et relations afin d'étayer une lecture qualitative. Ceci est possible grâce à une édition en ligne réalisée par l'Académie des sciences de Berlin-

Brandebourg, qui annote le texte conformément à la norme TEI, ce qui permet d'utiliser des éléments paratextuels fondamentaux structurant le texte du drame comme base d'une analyse automatisée. Dans ce cas concret, le langage de programmation Python est utilisé. L'intention de cette contribution est en premier lieu d'illustrer une approche d'analyse de textes littéraires assistée par ordinateur, même si quelques conclusions qualitatives sont également tirées sur le texte. On peut par exemple montrer que, dans le drame de Büchner, le groupe des dantonistes ne participe pratiquement pas au discours juridique institutionnalisé qui finalement conduit à leur condamnation et à leur exécution. Dans l'ensemble, on constate une structuration de l'espace dramatique qui comprend une forte séparation de différents groupes sociaux et institutionnels. La représentation de la Révolution française par Büchner met donc en discussion ses fondements moraux et démocratiques, même si la pièce n'offre justement pas de solution aux problèmes mis en évidence.

INDEX

Mots-clés

Georg Büchner, Danton's Tod, humanités numériques, littérature allemande, Vormärz, discours politique

Keywords

Georg Büchner, Danton's Tod, digital humanities, German literature, Vormärz, political discourse

Schlagwortindex

Georg Büchner, Danton's Tod, Digital Humanities, deutschsprachige Literatur, Vormärz, politischer Diskurs

OUTLINE

Einleitung

1. Figurenliste und -statistik
 2. Prozess und Verurteilung der Dantonisten
 3. Gliederung des dramatischen Raums
- Fazit

TEXT

Einleitung

- 1 Georg Büchners Drama „Danton's Tod“ wird zu den bedeutendsten Werken des Vormärz gezählt und genießt auch abseits seiner literaturhistorischen Bedeutung noch immer große Beachtung, es hat beispielsweise nach wie vor einen festen Platz im schulischen und universitären Kanon und erfreut sich zahlreicher Inszenierungen. Dessen ungeachtet handelt es sich sowohl formal als auch inhaltlich um ein äußerst komplexes Werk, dessen Deutung alles andere als einhellig ausfällt. So schreibt etwa Rüdiger Campe im Büchner-Handbuch: „Die Stationen der *Danton*-Lektüren kommen einer kleinen Geschichte des Politischen im Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts gleich“ (Campe 2009: 20). Grundsätzlich wird immer wieder davon ausgegangen, Büchner benutze den Stoff (einen Abschnitt der Französischen Revolution), um die politische Situation Deutschlands während des Vormärz zu beleuchten, wenngleich sich auch hierzu divergierende Einschätzungen finden lassen. Um nur um eines von vielen möglichen Beispielen zu nennen: Helbig hält „Danton's Tod“ eher für ein „zur zeitlosen Wahrheitsaussage tendierendes Drama“ (Helbig 1973: 147). Im Bewusstsein dieser Deutungsvielfalt möchte der vorliegende Beitrag den Versuch unternehmen, mithilfe eines quantitativ ausgerichteten Ansatzes zu untersuchen, welche strukturellen Merkmale des Dramas sich fixieren lassen, die – idealiter – als vergleichsweise unstrittige Basis einer interpretativen (qualitativen) Verständigung genutzt werden könnten. Dank der von der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften besorgten und im Deutschen Textarchiv (<https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de>, im Folgenden DTA) verfügbaren Online-Ausgabe von Büchners Werken, die nach TEI P5 annotiert wurde, lassen sich mithilfe von computergestützter Auswertung Zusammenhänge verdeutlichen, die bei einer herkömmlichen Lektüre aufgrund des Textumfanges und der überaus komplexen Figurenkonstellationen nur schwerlich sichtbar werden.
- 2 Der Beitrag sucht sodann zu argumentieren, dass sich Büchners Stück durch ein manifestes Auseinanderklaffen zwischen dem dramatischen Leitmotiv, das den Rahmen des Stückes darstellt und die eigentliche Handlung vorantreibt, sc. die Radikalisierung gegen und Exekution von George Danton, und den zahlreichen

Nebenfiguren, -orten und -motiven auszeichnet. Wenn, wie zu zeigen ist, sich diese Kluft nicht auf eine Gegenüberstellung von Haupthandlung und opulentem Dekor reduzieren lässt, so wird die Frage schlagend, was Büchner damit beabsichtigt. Mithilfe von numerischen Auswertungen und Übersichten dazu, wer in dem Stück wann, wo und worüber spricht, soll untersucht werden, ob und wie sich die unterschiedlichen Figurenreden sowie die in ihnen artikulierten Diskurse aufeinander beziehen. Besonderes Augenmerk wird hierbei auf die Inszenierung der faktischen Verurteilung Dantons (bzw. der „Dantonisten“) und deren politische Legitimierung durch und für unterschiedliche Personengruppen gelegt. Es wird zu überlegen sein, welche heuristischen Kategorien angewandt werden können, um die unterschiedlichen performativen und diskursiven Akte erkenntnisbringend zu systematisieren, ohne der Analyse zu viele Prämissen zu imputieren, die sich ihrerseits in Zweifel ziehen ließen. Wie in „Danton's Tod“ Politik betrieben wird, welche Informationen auf welchen Wegen zirkulieren, wird sich als umso aufschlussreicher erweisen, als sich die Adressaten_innen des Stückes (das Publikum) in der privilegierten Position befinden, all jene Informationsflüsse zu überblicken, die den dramatischen Figuren nur partiell zugänglich sind.

- 3 Für die computergestützte Auswertung wird auf die Programmiersprache Python zurückgegriffen, wobei Erläuterungen der technischen Aspekte der Untersuchung aus Gründen des Umfanges nur exemplarisch und rudimentär erfolgen können. Desgleichen muss darauf verzichtet werden, den Programmiercode sowie große Teile der computergenerierten Auswertung in den Artikel zu integrieren; beides wurde jedoch als sogenanntes „Repository“ auf GitHub öffentlich verfügbar gemacht und ist unter dem folgenden Link abzurufen: <https://github.com/hu3bris/danton> Methodisch basiert die Untersuchung vornehmlich auf quantitativen Auswertungen der Figurendialoge, die herangezogen werden, um gewisse Merkmale des Stückes hervorzuheben. Da Dramentexte im Vergleich zu anderen literarischen Texten durch paratextuelle Elemente wie beispielsweise Szenenüberschriften, Sprechernamen und andere Regieanweisungen relativ stark strukturiert sind, können einige der in den *Digital Humanities* übliche Methoden hier besonders gut zur Anwendung gebracht werden. Andererseits

zeichnet sich „Danton's Tod“ in mehr als einer Hinsicht durch schwindelerregende Komplexität aus, weshalb bisweilen andernorts durchaus fruchtbare Ansätze wie Netzwerkvisualisierungen nur wenig Erkenntnisgewinn ermöglichen¹. Der erste Abschnitt des Artikels bringt einige dieser Schwierigkeiten zur Sprache.

- 4 Schließlich sei noch darauf hingewiesen, dass Einsichten und Ergebnisse der sehr reichen Forschungsliteratur zu „Danton's Tod“ selbstredend Berücksichtigung finden, dass aber weder eine fundierte Auseinandersetzung mit derselben angestrebt wird noch der Anspruch erhoben, die Diskussion durch inhaltlich grundlegend neue Einsichten zu bereichern. Die Absicht des Beitrages liegt im methodischen Rahmen und beschränkt sich auf den Versuch, Impulse des noch jungen Paradigmas der *Digital Humanities* aufzugreifen und ihre Nützlichkeit im literaturwissenschaftlichen Bereich beispielhaft darzustellen.

1. Figurenliste und -statistik

- 5 Büchner weist in den Regieanweisungen denselben Figuren bisweilen unterschiedliche Bezeichnungen zu. So wird beispielsweise die Figurenrede eines der Präsidenten des Revolutionstribunals, der im Figurenverzeichnis als „Hermann“ aufgeführt wird, im späteren Verlauf als „Präsident“, „Der Präsident“ oder „Hermann“ angekündigt. Aus diesem Grunde kann sich die Auswertung nicht unmittelbar auf die Figurenbezeichnungen der Regieanweisung verlassen. Die DTA-Ausgabe weist den unterschiedlichen Figuren TEI-Tags zu, mithilfe derer sich dieses Problem umschiffen lässt. Sämtliche Figurenreden Hermanns beispielsweise sind durch die Tags `<sp who="#PRAES">` und `</sp>` eingefasst, womit eine automatisierte Auswertung hiernach erfolgen kann. Am Rande sei darauf hingewiesen, dass in einzelnen Fällen auch die TEI-Tags des DTA problematisch sind. „Danton's Tod“ weist zahlreiche Figuren auf, die nicht durch ihren Namen, sondern durch ihre soziale Stellung, Funktion o.ä. charakterisiert werden. Was in der DTA-Ausgabe mithilfe des Tags `"#WEIB"` zusammengefasst und von Büchner als „Weib“, „Ein Weib“ oder „Einige Weiber“ ausgewiesen wird, entspricht eindeutig nicht einer einzigen Person, sondern mehreren. Obwohl sich diesem Beispiel weitere zur Seite stellen ließen, orientiert sich die

Auswertung mangels besserer Alternativen an diesen TEI-Tags. Wollte man eine Figurenliste ohne derartige Ambiguitäten, müsste für diese Figuren(klasse) fallweise untersucht werden, ob es sich um unterschiedliche Personen handelt oder nicht. Hierfür wäre jedenfalls eine inhaltliche Lektüre der Passagen erforderlich, die eine automatische Auswertung überstiege.

- 6 Um den Aussagegehalt einer solchen Figurenliste zu erhöhen, wurde zudem für jede Figur gezählt, wie häufig sie eine Figurenrede macht und wie lang ihre Reden insgesamt sind. Dies lässt sich wie folgt erreichen: In einem ersten Schritt durchsucht das Python-Skript den gesamten XML-Text (i.e. den vollständigen Text inklusive Regieanweisungen und TEI-Tags) nach allen Figurenreden² und sammelt diese in einer Liste. In einem zweiten etwas aufwändigeren Schritt untersucht das Skript schrittweise jeden Eintrag (i.e. jede der gesammelten Figurenreden) in dieser Liste nach folgendem Kriterium und erstellt dabei eine neue Liste: Ist der der Figur zugordnete TEI-Tag (e.g. `<sp who="#PRAES">`) schon in der neuen Liste enthalten? Wenn dies nicht der Fall ist, erstellt das Skript in der neuen Liste einen Eintrag, der die folgenden Informationen enthält: den TEI-Tag; den in der Regieanweisung angegebenen Figurennamen; einen Zählwert von eins, der die Gesamtzahl der Auftritte repräsentiert; die Figurenrede an sich. Wenn der TEI-Tag hingegen schon in dieser Liste enthalten ist, erstellt das Skript keinen neuen Eintrag, sondern sucht den Eintrag mit diesem TEI-Tag und modifiziert diesen nach folgendem Muster: Wenn der in der Regieanweisung angegebene Name sich nicht mit dem (bzw. denen) des Eintrages deckt, wird dieser Name ergänzt; der die Gesamtzahl der Auftritte repräsentierende Zählwert wird um eins erhöht; die Figurenrede an sich wird angehängt. Die sohin erstellte Liste kann nun nach der Gesamtzahl der Auftritte absteigend sortiert werden und gegebenenfalls weitere Formatierungen durchlaufen. Um ausgeben zu können, wie lang die Reden einer bestimmten Figur insgesamt sind, werden die Wörter sämtlicher der Figur zugeordneten Figurenreden gezählt. Der Einfachheit halber wird der gängigen Praxis entsprechend angenommen, dass Wortgrenzen mit Leerzeichen zusammenfallen, was im Deutschen in den allermeisten Fällen zutrifft.

- 7 Auf diese Weise lassen sich 65 unterscheidbare Sprecher bzw. Sprecherinnen ausmachen, wobei aufgrund eingangs umrissener Schwierigkeiten korrekter von *mindestens* 65 zu sprechen wäre. In jedem Falle eine erstaunlich hohe Zahl, wenn man mit dem Figurenverzeichnis vergleicht, das lediglich 33 Figuren nennt und ihnen ein „u.s.w.“ anfügt. Mehrere dieser Figuren nehmen, gemessen an der Länge ihrer Figurenrede, in dem Drama relativ viel Raum ein, obwohl nicht unmittelbar ersichtlich wird, welche dramaturgische Funktion ihnen zukommt. Die Figurenrede der jungen Prostituierten Marion zählt beispielsweise 575 Wörter (und damit halb so viele wie die St. Justs!), die des inkarzierten Philosophen Payne sogar 708. Es handelt sich in beiden Fällen um komplexe Dialoge, die Einblicke in ihre Gefühls- und Gedankenwelt erlauben. Es fehlt auch unter Figuren, die unmittelbar das Volk zu repräsentieren scheinen, nicht an Beispielen hierfür, wenngleich sich die Äußerungen tendenziell auf mehrere Dialoge und auf mehrere Figuren verteilen (so etwa das Gespräch zwischen Simon und seiner Frau in I.2³, das insgesamt 412 Wörter umfasst). Zum Vergleich: Die Figurenrede von Hérault-Séchelles, der einerseits ein historisch bedeutsamer Politiker während der Französischen Revolution war (u.a. aufgrund seiner Mitgliedschaft im Wohlfahrtsausschuss) und andererseits mitangeklagt in dem Prozess rund um Danton – grundsätzlich also sowohl ideengeschichtlich als auch dramaturgisch äußerst relevant – macht gerade einmal 615 Wörter aus.

Figurenname(n)	TEI-Tag	Figurenreden	Wörter	Durchschnitt
Danton	#DAN	117	4439	37.9
Camille	#CAM	46	1272	27.7
Lacroix	#LAC	43	1059	24.6
Robespierre	#ROB	29	2289	78.9
Hérault	#HERA	23	615	26.7
Simon	#SIM	23	309	13,4
St. Just	#STJU	23	1006	43.7
Julie	#JUL	20	299	14.9
Barrère	#BAR	17	466	27.4
Weib, Ein Weib, Einige Weiber	#WEIB	16	257	16.1

Erster Bürger	#ERBUER	16	244	15.2
Präsident, Der Präsident, Hermann	#PRAES	16	243	15.2
Ein Bürger, Bürger	#ZWEBUER	13	211	16.2
Lucile	#LUC	13	315	24.2
Philippeau	#PHI	12	264	22.0
Legendre	#LEG	11	276	25.1
Fouquier	#FOU	11	188	17.1
Ein Anderer, Eine Andere	#AND	10	132	13.2
Dillon	#DIL	10	234	23.4
Laflotte	#LAF	10	310	31.0
Mercier	#MER	9	186	20.7
Einige Stimmen	#STIM	8	55	6.9
Payne	#PAY	8	708	88.5
Rosalie	#ROS	7	52	7.4
Zweiter Herr	#ZWEHER	7	131	18.7
Marion	#MAR	6	575	95.8
Ein Bettler, Bettler	#BET	6	88	14.7
Callot	#CAL	6	131	21.8
Schließer	#SCH	6	50	8.3
Zweiter Fuhrmann	#ZWEFUHR	6	98	16.3
Junger Herr	#JUNK	5	71	14.2
Chaumette	#CHA	5	55	11.0
Billaud	#BIL	5	79	15.8
Dumas	#DUM	5	93	18.6
Erster Fuhrmann	#ERFUHR	5	46	9.2
Eine Dame, Dame	#DAM	4	33	8.2
Erster Herr	#ERHERR	4	38	9.5
Eugenie	#EUG	4	19	4.8
Dritter Bürger	#DRIBUER	3	179	59.7
Junger Mensch	#JUNM	3	11	3.7
Viele der Stimmen, Viele Stimmen	#VIE	3	15	5.0
Paris	#PAR	3	53	17.7
Soldat	#SOL	3	22	7.3
Wärter	#WAER	3	50	16.7
Eine Stimme, Stimme, Fabre	#FAB	3	9	3.0
Alle	#ALL	2	12	6.0
Ein Jacobiner, Die Jacobiner	#JACO	2	13	6.5
Adelaide	#ADE	2	13	6.5

Bänkelsänger	#BAEN	2	25	12.5
Madame	#MAD	2	26	13.0
Ein Deputirter	#DEP	2	22	11.0
Ein Gefangener, Der Gefangene	#GEFA	2	22	11.0
Amar	#AMA	2	21	10.5
Erster Henker	#ERHENK	2	12	6.0
Die Umstehenden	#UMST	1	2	2.0
Ein Lyoner	#LYO	1	173	173.0
Collot dHerbois	#COL	1	63	63.0
Die Andern	#ANDE	1	3	3.0
Voulaud	#VOU	1	5	5.0
Ein Weib mit Kindern	#WEIBKI	1	18	18.0
Erstes Weib	#ERWEIB	1	5	5.0
Zweites Weib	#ZWEWEIB	1	27	27.0
Drittes Weib	#DRIWEIB	1	19	19.0
Zweiter Henker	#ZWEHEN	1	5	5.0

2. Prozess und Verurteilung der Dantonisten

- 8 Zum besseren Verständnis der Dramenstruktur scheint es wünschenswert, die Verteilung der Sprechakte auf Akte und Szenen sichtbar zu machen. Hierfür kann ähnlich vorgegangen werden wie bei der Erstellung der Figurenliste, nur muss die Auswertung und Ausgabe durch das Skript nach jeder Szene unterbrochen und neu aufgenommen werden. Zahlreiche Details beiseite lassend, lässt dich das Vorgehen so erklären, dass das Skript also zunächst nach Akten und Szenen⁴ sucht, deren Titel sowie die erste Regieanweisung (welche die Namen der Figuren angibt, die sich in dieser Szene auf der Bühne befinden) festhält und dann eine Auswertung nach dem bereits beschriebenen Schema durchführt, die diesmal allerdings für jede Szene neu gestartet wird. Um den Aussagegehalt der Analyse weiter zu erhöhen, kann bei der Ausgabe eine Gegenüberstellung der Anzahl der Dialoge (sowie der Länge der Figurenreden in Wörtern) für die jeweilige Szene und die Gesamtheit des Stückes erfolgen. Aufgrund ihres beträchtlichen Umfangs kann die resultierende Übersicht an dieser Stelle nicht vollständig wiedergegeben werden

(sie ist aber auf GitHub einsehbar); beispielhaft und zu Zwecken der Illustration wird lediglich die zweite Szene des ersten Aktes dargestellt:

Akt 1, Szene 2, Eine Gasse		
Simon. Sein Weib.		
Simon	Dialoge: 12 / 23	Wörter in Szene: 194 / 309
Weib, Ein Weib, Einige Weiber	Dialoge: 12 / 16	Wörter in Szene: 217 / 257
Erster Bürger	Dialoge: 7 / 16	Wörter in Szene: 175 / 244
Zweiter Bürger	Dialoge: 7 / 13	Wörter in Szene: 64 / 211
Dritter Bürger	Dialoge: 3 / 3	Wörter in Szene: 179 / 179
Einige Stimmen	Dialoge: 3 / 8	Wörter in Szene: 21 / 55
Junger Mensch	Dialoge: 3 / 3	Wörter in Szene: 11 / 11
Die Umstehenden	Dialoge: 1 / 1	Wörter in Szene: 2 / 2
Robespierre	Dialoge: 4 / 29	Wörter in Szene: 99 / 2289
Alle	Dialoge: 1 / 2	Wörter in Szene: 2 / 12
Viele der Stimmen, Viele Stimmen	Dialoge: 1 / 3	Wörter in Szene: 6 / 15

- 9 Ein Umstand, der bei flüchtiger Lektüre leicht zu übersehen ist und auch in der Forschungsliteratur nicht oft in der Vordergrund gerückt wird, lässt sich durch diese Herangehensweise sehr gut sichtbar machen: die räumliche (und diskursive) Trennung des Figurenpersonals. Obwohl sich für Büchners Drama ein schwindelerregend breites Spektrum an Themen, Schauplätzen und Personen anführen lässt, ist sein Handlungsbogen deutlich um die Brandmarkung, Verurteilung und Exekution einer politischen Gruppe um Georges Danton organisiert. Gezeigt wird nicht die Französische Revolution als solche, sondern ein besonderer Abschnitt des *Terreur*. Es wäre fraglos verfehlt, in hiermit nicht unmittelbar in Verbindung stehenden Elementen bloße Digressionen zu sehen, gleichwohl ist eine Gegenüberstellung mehr oder weniger auf die Kernhandlung bezogener Szenen aufschlussreich. Wie also lässt sich der zur Exekution führende Niedergang Dantons nachzeichnen?
- 10 Der erste Streich erfolgt durch eine Rede im Jakobinerclub (I.3), die von einer Figur namens „Ein Lyoner“ gehalten wird, die lediglich

diesen einen Auftritt hat und im restlichen Stück nicht mehr vorkommt. In dieser Brandrede gegen die inneren Feinde der Revolution wird Danton namentlich noch nicht erwähnt, doch vermag Robespierre diese Gelegenheit zu nutzen, um eine politische Säuberung anzubahnen: „Beruhige dich tugendhaftes Volk, beruhigt Euch Ihr Patrioten, sagt Euern Brüdern zu Lyon, das Schwert des Gesetzes roste nicht in den Händen, denen Ihr es anvertraut habt. – Wir werden der Republik ein großes Beispiel geben ...“ (I.3) Sein Vorstoß wird mit allgemeinem Beifall gewürdigt. Danton ist in dieser Szene nicht anwesend, er sucht unterdessen „die mediceische Venus stückweise bei allen Grisetten des palais royal zusammen, er macht Mosaik, wie er sagt; der Himmel weiß bei welchem Glied er gerade ist.“ (I.4) Er wird etwas später (I.5) von Lacroix über die drohende Gefahr informiert.

- 11 Die erste Konfrontation zwischen Danton und Robespierre findet in der folgenden Szene (I.6) in einem „Zimmer“ statt, also in geschlossenem informellem Rahmen, wobei sich die Differenzen der beiden zuspitzen. Mehrere Szenen später (II.6) kommt es zur Verhaftung Dantons (und einiger Anhänger), wenngleich diese nicht direkt zu sehen ist, sondern erst etwas später (II.7) durch einen Botenbericht im Nationalkonvent geschildert wird. Es ist der Deputierte Legendre, der hierüber informiert und sich zugleich für eine Anhörung von Danton einsetzt. Allein, er kann sich nicht durchsetzen; nach einem kurzen Schlagabtausch einiger Deputierten und einer längeren Protestrede von Robespierre wird Dantons Anhörung abgelehnt. St. Just sekundiert ihm und fordert wortgewaltig, bloß keine Gnade an den Feinden der Revolution walten zu lassen. Seine Rede quittiert „(l)anger, anhaltender Beifall.“ (II.7)
- 12 Erst im Revolutionstribunal (III.4) kann Danton schließlich seine Stimme erheben, allerdings vor einer Schar voreingenommener Geschworenen und nicht lange: Sobald sich Anzeichen des Beistandes zeigen, wird die Sitzung aufgehoben und Dantons Verhör vertagt. Sein zweites Verhör wird auf der Bühne nicht gezeigt, sondern erneut im Rahmen eines Botenberichts diesmal im Wohlfahrtsausschuss (III.6) realisiert. Die Mitglieder des Wohlfahrtsausschusses scheinen darin einig, dass Danton ausgeschaltet werden müsse, fürchten allerdings die Reaktion des

Volkes. Das Problem löst sich durch eine Denunziation, die St. Just zugestellt und von diesem unmittelbar vorgelesen wird. Obwohl die Mitglieder des Wohlfahrtsausschusses durchaus nicht in allem übereinstimmen, versichert man St. Just „wir werden dir helfen, den Donnerkeil auf die Häupter der Feiglinge zu schleudern.“ (III.6) Dieselbe Denunziation dient sodann in der letzten Sitzung des Wohlfahrtsausschusses (III. 9) dazu, Danton und die anderen Angeklagten von der Debatte auszuschließen. Obwohl viele Stimmen sich hinter Danton stellen, wird dieser gewaltsam abgeführt. Der weitere Verlauf des Prozesses sowie die Urteilsverkündung werden nicht inszeniert; es ist neuerlich ein Botenbericht, der über die Verurteilungen informiert (IV.2). Inszeniert werden schließlich die Vorführung Dantons und seines Gefolges auf dem Revolutionsplatz sowie ihr Besteigen des Schafotts (IV.7). Das Drama schließt kurz nach der Exekution, die nur indirekt gezeigt wird.⁵

- 13 Der öffentliche und formelle Teil der Verurteilung Dantons vollzieht sich mithin an zwei Orten, die insgesamt drei Mal gezeigt werden: Nationalkonvent (II.7) und Revolutionstribunal (III.4 & III.9). Danton, der als großer Redner stilisiert wird, und als Einziger aktiv an der Verteidigung seiner selbst und seiner Freunde arbeitet, ist in nur einer einzigen dieser Szenen (III.4) anwesend. Von den insgesamt 4439 Wörtern, die Danton im Verlauf des gesamten Dramas von sich gibt, spricht er lediglich 504 in einem rechtlich wirksamen Rahmen. Man möchte versucht sein, einzuwenden, Danton richte sich bei seiner Verteidigung eher ans Volk denn an andere Politiker – das ist im Drama aber gerade nicht der Fall. Obwohl Danton durchschnittlich in genau jeder zweiten bzw. in 16 der insgesamt 32 Szenen das Wort ergreift, handelt es sich dabei (neben erwähnter Rede im Revolutionstribunal) nur zwei Mal um einen öffentlichen Raum, in dem Vertreter des Volkes anwesend sind: II.2 „Eine Promenade“ (Danton spricht hier nur 2 Mal und jeweils zu seinem Freund Camille) und IV.7 „Der Revolutionsplatz“ (unmittelbar vor seiner Exekution). Auf diese beiden Szenen entfallen insgesamt nicht mehr als 104 der von Danton gesprochenen Wörter; in Büchners Stück ist Danton also alles andere als „volksnah“.
- 14 Wenngleich die genauen Hintergründe und Botschaften von Dantons Verurteilung überaus kontrovers diskutiert werden, so lässt sich doch recht klar angeben, wer diese Verurteilung (im Stück) maßgeblich

instigiert. Der sichtbarste Gegenspieler des Stücks ist Robespierre (u.a. auch deswegen, weil Danton selbst ihn als solchen sieht und benennt), dessen Figurenreden mit insgesamt 2289 im Stück geäußerten Wörtern ungefähr halb so umfangreich wie diejenigen Dantons ausfallen. Noch bestimmter als Robespierre treibt St. Just die Verurteilung Dantons voran, wenngleich diesem mit insgesamt 1006 Wörtern nur halb so viel Figurenrede zukommt; wo Robespierre bisweilen von moralischen Zweifeln befallen wird, ist St. Just eine überaus statische Figur, die solche Zweifel nicht zu kennen scheint (dies wird nirgends so deutlich inszeniert wie in I.6). Robespierre tritt in nur 4 Szenen des Stückes auf: einmal in einer Gasse (I.2), wo er als geschickter Manipulator des Volkswillens gezeigt wird (wenngleich nur 99 seiner Wörter auf diese Szene entfallen), einmal im Klub der Jakobiner (I.3), einmal in einem Zimmer (I.6) und ein letztes Mal im Nationalkonvent (II.7). Insgesamt spricht er also vergleichsweise häufig im öffentlichen oder institutionellen Rahmen. St. Just kommt lediglich in drei Szenen vor: in einem Zimmer (I.6), im Nationalkonvent (II.7) und im Wohlfahrtsausschuss (III.6). Er tritt also nie im engeren Sinne öffentlichen Raum auf, sondern vor allem im institutionellen oder schlichtweg privaten. Übrigens begegnen sich Danton und Robespierre in dem ganzen Stück nur einmal und dies im nicht öffentlichen Bereich eines Zimmers (I.6), Danton und St. Just begegnen sich überhaupt nicht (St. Just tritt in I.6 erst nach Dantons Abgang auf). Das Entstehen der Denunziation, die schließlich dazu benutzt wird, Danton das Rederecht im institutionellen Raum zu entziehen, in einem Kerker des Luxemburg (III.5) sowie die Absprache zu ihrer Instrumentalisierung unter den Mitgliedern des Wohlfahrtsausschusses (III.6) werden in Büchners Drama dargestellt, beides fällt in den Bereich der politischen Winkelzüge und bleibt der Öffentlichkeit (nicht jedoch den Zuseher_innen) verborgen. Die folgende Liste gibt die vollständige Redestatistik dieser drei Figuren wieder.

Danton	Robespierre	St. Just	Akt	Szene
355			I	Erster Act
	99			Eine Gasse

	838			Der Jacobinerklubb
				Eine Gasse
306				Ein Zimmer
385	859	203		Ein Zimmer
616			II	Ein Zimmer
67				Eine Promenade
110				Ein Zimmer
198				Freies Feld
491				Ein Zimmer
				Strasse vor Danton's Hause
	493	527		Der National-Convent
91			III	Das Luxemburg
				Ein Zimmer
90				Das Luxemburg
504				Das Revolutions-Tribunal
				Das Luxemburg
		276		Der Wohlfahrts-Ausschus
321				Die Conciergerie
				Ein Zimmer
199				Das Revolutions-Tribunal
				Platz vor dem Justiz-Palaste
			IV	Eine Gasse
				Ein Zimmer
432				Die Conciergerie
				Platz vor der Conciergerie
237				Die Conciergerie
				Ein Zimmer
37				Der Revolutions-Platz
				Eine Gasse
				Der Revolutions-Platz
4439	2289	1006		gesamt

3. Gliederung des dramatischen Raums

- 15 Insofern ist auffällig, dass der Raum der politischen Entscheidungsfindung weder für Danton noch für seine Gegenspieler mit dem öffentlichen oder institutionellen Raum zusammenfällt. Danton: „Wär’ es ein Kampf, daß die Arme und Zähne einander packten! aber es ist mir, als wäre ich in ein Mühlwerk gefallen und die Glieder würden mir langsam systematisch von der kalten physischen Gewalt abgedreht.“ (III.7) Während Büchner große (und für den Handlungsbogen durchaus wichtige) Teile des institutionellen Prozesses mithilfe von Botenberichten ausspart, gibt er sich offensichtliche Mühe, die hinter verschlossenen Türen stattfindenden Winkelzüge und Absprachen sichtbar zu machen.⁶ Wie sehr sich Büchners Drama – trotz des für das Stück immens wichtigen politischen Diskurses – auf den nicht öffentlichen Raum konzentriert, lässt sich dank der quantitativen Auswertung gut zeigen.⁷ Dazu wird aus heuristischen Gründen eine Gliederung des dramatischen Raumes anhand dreier Kategorien durchgeführt: 1) ein im engeren Sinne öffentlicher Raum, der ein Raum der Begegnung ohne Zugangsbeschränkungen ist, in dem sich potentiell alle Figuren und Fraktionen treffen können; 2) ein institutioneller Raum, in dem Macht ausgeübt und legitimiert wird, der besonderen Diskursregeln unterliegt; 3) ein geschlossener Raum, der aus unterschiedlichen Gründen nicht allen Fraktionen oder Figuren zugänglich ist. In dem Stück handelt es sich dabei um einen bürgerlichen Rückzugsraum, einen Raum der philosophisch-politischen Diskussion und Nabelschau oder der Intrige.
- 16 Bei nur wenigen Szenen bedarf die Zuordnung einer Diskussion. Für die erste Szene fehlen Titelüberschrift und Regieanweisungen mit Ortsangabe. Aus dem Kontext wird jedoch klar, dass es sich um eine Spielhalle des *Palais-Royal* handelt. Grundsätzlich ließe sich dieser wohl als öffentlicher Raum (wenngleich auf die Pariser Bourgeoisie beschränkt) ansehen, doch wird dies dem Charakter der Szene nicht gerecht. Nur vier männliche Figuren treten in ihr auf: George Danton, Marie-Jean Hérault de Séchelles, Camille Desmoulins, Pierre Philippeaux – sie alle sind politisch aktiv und gehören zum Kreis um

Danton, sie alle werden am Ende des Stückes hingerichtet. Ferner ist Dantons Gattin Julie anwesend sowie „*einige Damen*“, von denen nur eine einige wenige Worte spricht, sie werden im Drama als „Grisetten“ bezeichnet und sind der Sphäre der Prostitution zuzuordnen. Es handelt sich um einen Teil der Exposition, nämlich der Fraktion der Dantonisten, die von Anfang an im Zwielicht von hehren politischen Parolen und privatem moralischen Verfall gezeigt werden. In der Szene gibt es keinerlei Konfrontation mit anderen Gruppierungen welcher Art auch immer, in der dramatischen Realisierung befinden sich die Dantonisten in einem bürgerlichen Rückzugsort und geben sich der Sinnenfreude hin.

- 17 Die sehr kurze Szene II.4 ist mit „Freies Feld“ überschrieben, dient aber lediglich als Schauplatz für einen Monolog Dantons. Der Kontext lässt keinen Zweifel darüber aufkommen, dass Danton alleine ist; tatsächlich scheint er die Einsamkeit zu suchen, um mit seinem Gewissen ins Reine zu kommen. Sie wird daher dem nicht-öffentlichen Raum zugeordnet.
- 18 Schließlich bedarf die Szene im Wohlfahrtsausschuss (III.6) gesonderter Aufmerksamkeit. Zusammengesetzt aus Mitgliedern des Nationalkonvents und mit vorrübergehend beträchtlichen Befugnissen ausgestattet, handelt es sich bei dem Wohlfahrtsausschuss fraglos um einen politisch-institutionellen Raum der Ausübung von Macht. Allerdings fanden die Diskussionen desselben historisch wie auch bei Büchner unter Ausschluss der Öffentlichkeit statt. Bei Büchner sind in dieser Szene nur vier Mitglieder anwesend, die allesamt in einem schlechten Licht gezeigt werden und St. Just ihre Unterstützung nicht aus rechtlichen oder moralischen Gründen zusichern; obwohl Barrère (gemeint dürfte Bertrand Barère sein) auf die Unhaltbarkeit der Anschuldigungen gegen Danton hinweist (die für uns Zuseher_innen, die wir ihr Entstehen mitverfolgen, augenfällig ist), erhält St. Just ohne weitere Diskussion die nötige Zustimmung. Barrère spricht etwas später fatalistisch: „Die Welt müßte auf dem Kopf stehen, wenn die sogenannten Spitzbuben von den sogenannten rechtlichen Leuten gehängt werden sollten.“ (III.6) Insofern ist die Szene nicht eindeutig einer bestimmten Kategorie zuzuordnen – es handelt sich um einen institutionellen Raum der Ausübung von Macht, der jedoch strikt nicht-öffentlichen ist und weder Legitimation anstrebt noch eine

Vermittlung unterschiedlicher Fraktionen.⁸ Wenn die Szene in der folgenden Übersicht dennoch dem „institutionellen Raum“ zugeordnet wird, so geschieht dies in Ermangelung einer besseren Alternative.

öffentlicher Raum	institutioneller Raum	geschlossener Raum
Eine Gasse I.2/4, IV.1/8 (= 4x)	Nationalkonvent II.7 (= 1x)	Palais-Royal I.1 (= 1x)
Eine Promenade II.2 (= 1x)	Revolutionstribunal III.4/9 (= 2x)	Jakobinerklub I.3 (= 1x)
Straße vor Dantons Haus II.6 (= 1x)	Wohlfahrtsausschuss III.6 (= 1x)	Ein Zimmer I.5/6, II.1/3/5, III.2/8, IV.2/6 (= 9x)
Platz vor dem Justizpalast III.10 (= 1x)		Freies Feld II.4 (= 1x)
Platz vor der Conciergerie IV.4 (= 1x)		Luxemburg III.1/3/5 (= 3x)
Der Revolutionsplatz IV.7/9 (= 2x)		Conciergerie III.7, IV.3/5 (= 3x)
Szenen gesamt: 10	Szenen gesamt: 4	Szenen gesamt: 18

- 19 Die Gegenüberstellung verdeutlicht die quantitative Prävalenz von Szenen, die in einem nicht-öffentlichen Raum stattfinden. Der mit Abstand häufigste Schauplatz ist „Ein Zimmer“, der von Büchner insgesamt neun Mal gewählt wurde (es handelt sich dabei übrigens nicht immer um dasselbe Zimmer) und damit fast so oft wie alle Szenen im öffentlichen Raum zusammen. Szenen nicht-öffentlichen Charakters machen mit 18 von 32 Okkurrenzen mehr als die Hälfte aller Szenen aus.
- 20 Durch eine geringfügige Modifikation des ursprünglichen Python-Skriptes, deren Darlegung an dieser Stelle unterbleiben soll, lässt sich auswerten, wie sich die Figurenreden auf diese drei Räume verteilen. Das Überwiegen des geschlossenen Raumes zeigt sich hier noch frappierender:

öffentlicher Raum	institutioneller Raum	geschlossener Raum
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Wörter gesamt: 3024	Wörter gesamt: 3174	Wörter gesamt: 11700
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- 21 Rund zwei Drittel der gesamten Figurenrede werden mithin im nicht-öffentlichen nicht-institutionellen Raum gesprochen. Der größte Teil der großspurigen Reden von Danton und seinem Gefolge (oder seiner Gegner) über individuelle Beweggründe, allgemeine Weltanschauungen oder politische Visionen werden vor Gleichgesinnten gesprochen. Es gibt so gut wie keine Diskussion zwischen den Lagern und auch der Anteil der juristischen Legitimation ist vergleichsweise dünn. Dafür dass Büchner so viele Menschen aus dem Volk auf die Bühne holt, kommt es zu bemerkenswert wenigen Begegnungen zwischen diesem und den politischen Entscheidungsträgern (obgleich die Furcht vor Willen und Reaktion des Volkes ein wiederkehrendes Thema des Stückes ist). Mithin lässt sich auch quantitativ gut das Auseinanderklaffen von politischer Praxis und sozialen Realitäten und Bedürfnissen erfassen, das für Büchners Werk oftmals reklamiert wird: „Das Geschäft, die bestehenden Herrschaftsstrukturen als Schauspiel zu denunzieren, und zwar als bei näherem Hinsehen wenig überzeugendes Schauspiel, betreiben alle Stücke Büchners.“ (Franz 2017: 152)
- 22 Vielleicht noch deutlicher lässt sich dieser Zusammenhang zeigen, wenn das Skript so verändert wird, dass es Figuren sucht, die ausschließlich im öffentlichen oder ausschließlich im geschlossenen Raum vorkommen.

nur geschlossen	nur öffentlich
St. Just	Simon
Julie	Weib, Ein Weib, Einige Weiber
Präsident, Der Präsident, Hermann	Erster Bürger
Fouquier	Ein Bürger, Bürger
Dillon	Zweiter Bürger
Laflotte	Zweiter Herr
Mercier	Ein Bettler, Bettler
Payne	Zweiter Fuhrmann
Marion	Junger Herr
Chaumette	Dumas

Eine Dame, Dame	Erster Fuhrmann
Paris	Erster Herr
Wärter	Eugenie
Ein Jacobiner, Die Jacobiner	Dritter Bürger
Adelaide	Junger Mensch
Ein Gefangener, Der Gefangene	Soldat
Amar	Alle
Ein Lyoner	Bänkelsänger
Collot d'Herbois	Madame
Voulaud	Erster Henker
	Die Umstehenden
	Die Andern
	Ein Weib mit Kindern
	Erstes Weib
	Zweites Weib
	Drittes Weib
	Zweiter Henker
ges. 20	ges. 27

- 23 Von den insgesamt 65 mit dem Skript erfassten Figuren kommen also 47 ausschließlich im öffentlichen oder ausschließlich im geschlossenen Bereich vor; lediglich 18 äußern sich in beiden. Die Tatsache, dass in dem Stück auch ein Teil des öffentlichen Lebens dargestellt wird, sollte nicht zur Annahme verleiten, Büchner schreibe dem Volke die Rolle einer aktiv in den politischen Diskurs eingreifenden Macht zu. Die Bedürfnisse und Ansprüche des Volkes werden zwar von diesem selbst ausgesprochen und als politische Forderungen artikuliert, doch bleibt die Diskurshoheit in den Händen von Menschen, mit denen sie (so gut wie) nicht in Dialog treten. Husser geht daher so weit zu schreiben, „die Gewaltbereitschaft der Bevölkerung ist eine Ersatzhandlung für unerhört gebliebene soziale Forderungen“ (Husser 2020: 81).
- 24 Es wurde einleitend darauf hingewiesen, dass gewisse Nebenfiguren erstaunlich viel sprechen, obwohl sie keinerlei unmittelbare Bedeutung für den skizzierten Handlungsbogen haben. Die Darstellung der geistigen, moralischen und materiellen Verfasstheit unterschiedlicher Personen und Personengruppen ist dem Umfang nach insgesamt nicht weniger wichtig als der Handlungsbogen an

sich. Es dürfte also nicht dem Zufall geschuldet sein, dass Büchner alles in allem ein Aneinander-Vorbeireden der Figuren inszeniert und über die Figurenrede auch anspricht: „Über all den Löchern, die wir in anderer Leute Körper machen, ist noch kein einziges in unsern Hosen zugegangen.“ (II.6)

- 25 Bedauerlicherweise lässt sich mit der für diesen Beitrag gewählten Methode nicht ohne weiteres erfassen, wie sich die Figurenrede auf unterschiedliche Personengruppen verteilt. Dies liegt vornehmlich daran, dass die Figuren in vielen Fällen mitnichten eindeutig einer bestimmten Interessensgruppe oder sozialen Klasse zuordenbar sind. In I.2 etwa wird ein „Junger Mensch“ (so die Bezeichnung der Regieanweisungen) von einigen „Bürgern“ beinahe gelyncht, weil diese aufgrund eines „Schnupftuchs“ glauben, in ihm einen „Aristokraten“ erkennen zu dürfen. Der Kontext gibt jedoch guten Grund zur Annahme, dass diese Zuschreibung übereilt und falsch ist. Nun, selbst wenn man die Figur entgegen der Meinung der Bürger nicht für einen Aristokraten hält, ist nicht klar, welcher Klasse man sie stattdessen zuteilen sollte. Eine Behelfslösung, die diese Schwierigkeiten vermeidet, besteht darin, nur drei Gruppen zu bilden: 1) eine Gruppe für Personen, die von Büchner selbst im Personenverzeichnis als Mitglieder einer politischen Institution identifiziert werden, 2) eine eher kleine Gruppe von Personen, die nicht zur ersten Gruppe zählen, aus unterschiedlichen Gründen aber auch nicht (unmittelbar) als Vertreter der Volksmasse anzusehen sind (etwa Dantons Gattin oder „Ein Jakobiner“), 3) eine Gruppe mit allen restlichen Personen. Offensichtlich kommen auf diese Weise drei in sich noch immer recht heterogene Gruppen zustande; insbesondere die dritte Gruppe vereint so unterschiedliche Figuren wie Henker, Prostituierte und „Die Umstehenden“.

Gruppe 1)	Gruppe 2)	Gruppe 3)
13371	1342	3185

- 26 Die Gegenüberstellung verdeutlicht, dass der mit großem Abstand überwiegende Teil der Dialoge auf die erste Gruppe fällt und damit auf politisch agierende Personen: Diese 20 Figuren sprechen weit

mehr als doppelt so viel wie die insgesamt 45 Figuren der beiden anderen Gruppen. Auch wenn man geneigt ist, dem Volk in dem Stück eine wichtige Rolle zu attestieren, so ist zu konzedieren, dass die Form des „Konflikt[es] zwischen Bourgeoisie und plebejischen Schichten“ (Hauschild 2013, 121) nicht die des Dialoges ist. Selbst unter der anfechtbaren Voraussetzung, auch Henker, Fuhrmänner, Gefängnispersonal etc. seien (wenigstens unter anderem) als Repräsentanten des Volkes angelegt, umfassen die Figurenreden nicht mehr als 3185 Wörter. Ihre Teilnahme am politischen Diskurs beschränkt sich in vielen Fällen auf kurze Zurufe oder Bekundungen von Zustimmung bzw. Ablehnung, die über Regieanweisungen mitgeteilt werden.

Fazit

- 27 Summa summarum bringt die computergestützte Analyse im gegebenen Fall kaum etwas ans Licht, das nicht bereits über „Danton’s Tod“ geschrieben wurde, doch erlaubt sie ein Erhellen von Aspekten, die ohne ihre Hilfe schwerer zu greifen und zu belegen sind. Abseits der konkreten Resultate bietet sie den weiteren Vorteil der Wiederholbarkeit an anderen Dramen. Aufgrund der normierten XML-Auszeichnung, die dem Standard TEI P5 zugrunde liegt, kann das erstellte Python-Skript mit geringfügigen Modifikationen für vergleichbare Analysen anderer Dramen herangezogen werden, sofern diese nach demselben Standard codiert wurden. Fraglos bietet jeder Text seine eigenen Schwierigkeiten, die mitunter auch von Fehlern beim Transkribieren oder der Textgrundlage selbst herrühren und eine fallweise Korrektur erforderlich machen, doch das grundlegende Paradigma lässt sich mit geringem Aufwand adaptieren. Auch „Danton’s Tod“ weist spezifische Merkmale auf, die gewisse in den *Digital Humanities* übliche Herangehensweisen nicht gangbar machten. So ist beispielsweise aufgrund der hohen Gesamtzahl der Figuren eine Netzwerkvisualisierung kaum mehr geeignet, die Verhältnisse bzw. Interaktionen derselben zur Darstellung zu bringen. Hier musste ein anderer Zugang gefunden werden. Zugleich erwiesen sich auch Wortfrequenzanalysen einzelner Sprecher oder Sprechergruppen als fruchtlos, weil sämtliche Dialoge selbst weniger eloquenter Figuren überreich an Metaphern und stilistischem Zierrat sind. Wenn Lacroix in I.3 von

„Halsweh“ spricht, meint er damit (wahrscheinlich) seine Furcht vor einer Hinrichtung (also geköpft zu werden); spricht der „Zweite Bürger“ in II.6 von „Löchern“, meint er damit einmal physische Verletzungen, ein andermal Verschleiß von Kleidern. Eine auf die bloße Häufung von Lexemen basierende Übersicht ist völlig blind für diese Dimension von Sprache.

- 28 Mithilfe des gewählten Ansatzes konnte verdeutlicht werden, dass die Verurteilung Dantons nicht im Zuge des öffentlichen Prozesses erfolgte, sondern hinter verschlossenen Türen beschlossen wurde. Der institutionelle Rahmen, in dem ein solcher Vorgang prinzipiell zu geschehen hätte, dient in Büchners Drama lediglich der Legitimation des Urteils vor der Öffentlichkeit. Dem Umfang und der Sache nach sind vorhergehende Absprachen wichtiger als die eigentlichen Sitzungen des Tribunals, in denen Danton seinen wahren Gegenspielern gar nicht begegnet. Durch den gehäuften Einsatz von Botenberichten gelingt Büchner die Inszenierung dieser Kluft zwischen dem Justizapparat, der zugleich die öffentliche Meinung informiert, und den im Verborgenen wirkenden Kräften, die für die öffentliche Meinung unsichtbar sind. Dies hat eine grundlegende Umkehrung zur Folge: Während die Meinungsbildung der im Stück dargestellten Öffentlichkeit auf dem institutionellen Prozess beruht (denn für sie ist nichts anderes sichtbar), wird die Aufmerksamkeit der Leser_innen des Stücks auf seine sinisteren Hintergründe gelenkt, womit die Beurteilung von Dantons Vergehen in einem gänzlich anderen Licht erfolgt.
- 29 Weiters konnte in der Trennung des dramatischen Raumes ein Indiz für den auch andernorts reklamierten „Realitätsverlust der politischen Entscheidungsträger“ (Neuhuber 2009: 71) ausgemacht werden. Der mit Abstand größte Teil der mit Politik assoziierten Figuren tritt ausschließlich in nicht-öffentlichen Bereichen auf, wohingegen alle anderen sich in der Öffentlichkeit begegnen. Für ein Stück, das mit so zahlreichen Diskussionen und politischen Kontemplationen gespickt ist, ist der Mangel an tatsächlicher Begegnung zwischen den Interessensgruppen frappierend und wohl auch als ein Grund für die Verurteilung der Gruppe um Danton anzusehen. Die meisten von ihnen treffen in dem Stück nur ein einziges Mal mit dem Volk zusammen, nämlich in IV.7, als sie das Schafott besteigen und ihrer Enthauptung harren. Selbstredend ist es

für seine Feinde einfacher, Danton als eigennützig agierenden Profiteur und Feind der Revolution hinzustellen („und [...] es ist, unter uns gesagt, so halbwegs was Wahres dran“ (I.5)), wenn dieser die Konfrontation mit jenen, deren Interessen und Nöte er Gehör verschaffen sollte, scheut und sich stattdessen in Spielhallen und anderen bürgerlichen Rückzugsräumen verbirgt, um dort der Nabelschau zu frönen. Büchners Darstellung der Französischen Revolution lehnt die Idealisierung des historischen Ereignisses ab: Wo in Delacroix' bekanntem Gemälde die Freiheit das Volk durch die Straßen Paris führt, dort zeigen Büchners „Dramatische Bilder aus Frankreichs Schreckensherrschaft“ (so der von seinem Verleger Sauerländer gewählte Untertitel für „Danton's Tod“) das in Hinterzimmern verborgene Agieren von Seilschaften.

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NOTES

- 1 Am Rande sei darauf hingewiesen, dass daher auch die von der DTA verlinkten Voyant Tools, ein einfach zu bedienendes Analyseinstrument der *Digital Humanities*, bei „Danton's Tod“ rasch an ihre Grenzen stoßen, wenn sie nicht sehr umfangreich konfiguriert werden.
- 2 Hierfür wird auf das Modul „Beautiful Soup“ zurückgegriffen (`soup.find_all('sp')`).
- 3 Die der DTA-Ausgabe zugrundeliegende Textvorlage weist eine Akt- und Szenenaufteilung auf, die in späteren Ausgaben modifiziert wurde. In diesem Beitrag werden Akt- bzw. Szenenangaben nach der jüngeren Einteilung in vier Akte (also von der DTA-Ausgabe abweichend) vorgenommen, um den Gepflogenheiten der Sekundärliteratur zu „Danton's Tod“ zu entsprechen.
- 4 Rein technisch lässt sich dies mit einer Suche nach „<div>“-Elementen realisieren, da sämtliche Akte durch den Tag `<div n=„1“>` ausgezeichnet sind, während Szenen die Auszeichnung `<div n=„2“>` aufweisen. Tatsächlich wird die Auswertung dadurch erschwert, dass in der DTA-Ausgabe die erste Szene des ersten Aktes nicht als solche ausgewiesen wird (die Szene hat keine eigene Überschrift, sondern wird nur durch den Titel „Akt“ sowie dessen Nummer eingeleitet). Die einfachste Lösung dieses Problems besteht in einer manuellen Auszeichnung dieser Szene.
- 5 Dass Büchner damit eine Art dramatischen Höhepunktes (vermutlich bewusst) vermied, findet sich insbesondere bei Wagner 2017 reflektiert. Wagner interpretiert dies sowie die Abwesenheit jeglicher direkt gezeigter Gewalt „as an implicit commentary on the question of historical progress and revolutionary violence that are raised in the play.“ (Wagner 2017: 175) Auf einer unmittelbaren Ebene hat Büchners Dramaturgie jedenfalls die Konsequenz, dass die Aufmerksamkeit der Zuseher_innen verstärkt auf das Zustandekommen des Urteils gelenkt wird und weniger auf dessen Vollzug.
- 6 Wie sehr sich Dantons Gegenspieler im Hintergrund zu halten verstehen und sich dieser daher vor „abwesenden, anonym bleibenden Klägern“

wiederfindet, wird beispielsweise von Elke Dubbels herausgearbeitet (cf. Dubbels 2017: 203sqq).

7 Es sei darauf hingewiesen, dass Irene Husser in einer jüngeren Studie eine sehr ähnliche auf den dramatischen Raum konzentrierte Fragestellung zum Ausgang einer Untersuchung über Büchners Stücke „Danton's Tod“ und „Leonce und Lena“ macht und dabei zu vergleichbaren Ergebnissen kommt (cf. Husser 2020).

8 Auch Husser urteilt in diesem Sinne: „der Wohlfahrtsausschuss (III,6) wird von Büchner als ein Raum der privaten Unterredung gezeigt, in dem Strategien zur Beseitigung der Dantonisten abgesprochen werden“ (Husser 2020: 83).

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