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The Truth is Everywhere: Reconceptualizing Far-Right Conspiracy Theories in the Information Age

BY

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"From where did you receive/research/develop your beliefs?
The internet, of course. You will not find the truth anywhere else."
-Manifesto of the Christchurch Mosque Gunman

Introduction

On the morning of October 27th, 2018, a gunman entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, interrupting a baby-naming ceremony. Robert Gregory Bowers, "armed with an AR-15-style assault rifle and at least three handguns," began "shouting anti-Semitic slurs" as he opened fire on the congregation, killing eleven people, the deadliest attack on Jews in American history.[1] Prior to the mass shooting, Bowers frequented Gab, an alt-tech social networking website that proclaims itself the "home of free speech online."[2] Under the moniker "@onedingo," Bowers composed a profile biography in which he claimed "jews [sic] are the children of satan [sic]. (john 8:44) — the lord jesus christ [sic] is come in the flesh," and shared dozens of anti-Semitic and anti-globalist conspiracy theories. On the morning of the attack on the Tree of Life congregation, Bowers produced a cryptic Gab post, writing, "HIAS likes to bring invaders that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in." Believing the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society to be financially backed by Jewish investor George Soros in a plot to force a migrant caravan through the southern border of the United States, Bowers expressed an urgent desire to commit an act of anti-Semitic violence in retaliation. Depicting migrants as "invaders," the theory that motivated the mass shooting is firmly

[1] Campbell Robertson, Christopher Mele, and Sabrina Tavernise, "11 Killed in Synagogue Massacre; Suspect Charged With 29 Counts," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2018, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html.
[2] From Gab's "about" page. See "About," Gab, 2021, https://gab.com/about.

situated within the larger Great Replacement narrative. Popular among white nationalists, the Great Replacement narrative maintains that "minorities are progressively replacing white populations due to mass immigration policies and low birthrates," threatening to dismantle the white Western culture and way of life.[3]

In the weeks before the attack on the Tree of Life congregation, Representative Matt Gaetz of Florida produced several tweets commenting on the same migrant caravan, portraying the situation as an immediate threat to national security, sentiments echoed by President Trump.[4] On his popular Twitter account, Gaetz presented theories paralleling those of Bowers, posting videos he claimed proved George Soros and "US-backed NGOs" funded the caravan as a tool for malicious "social engineering," later retweeted by Trump. On the 24th of October, guests of the *Ingraham Angle* program on Fox News lamented the deliberate "destruction of American society and culture" by migrants "invading our country," language reminiscent of that used by Bowers on Gab. The following evening, Chris Farrell, the Director of Investigations and Research at the right-wing Judicial Watch watchdog organization, appearing on the Fox Business Network, alleged that the caravan represented an "invasion" of the United States formulated by "highly organized leftist-groups" in coordination with a "Soros-occupied State Department," the use of "invasion" being dog-whistle for the Great Replacement.[5] On October 27th, in the hours following the Tree of Life shooting, Vice President Mike Pence spoke with Peter Doocy of Fox News and maintained that the Trump

[3] Robert A. Pape, "What an Analysis of 377 Americans Arrested or Charged in the Capitol Insurrection Tells Us," *Washington Post*, April 6, 2021, sec. Opinion, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/06/capitol-insurrection-arrests-cpost-analysis/.
[4] Adam Serwer, "Trump's Caravan Hysteria Led to This," *The Atlantic*, October 28, 2018.
[5] Following the Tree of Life shooting, Fox News banned Farrell from appearing on the network, though Gaetz, who endorsed the same theory, still maintains an active presence on the channel and its affiliates.

administration possessed evidence suggesting "the caravan was organized by leftist organizations" and was "funded by outside groups."[6] The same anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant White replacement theory that motivated a domestic terrorist to commit a mass murder was also endorsed and shared by the Vice President of the United States, an elected member of Congress, and several guests of the most popular television network in the country.

The attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue is just one example of several hundred violent far-right extremist incidents related to conspiracy theories in the last decade.[7] Most notably, during the January 6th Capitol insurrection, a violent group of around two thousand Americans sought to overturn the results of an election in part because of the conspiracy theories espoused by President Donald Trump.[8] Results from a recent survey conducted by the Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST) suggest that "nine percent of Americans believe the use of force is justified to restore Donald J. Trump to the presidency" and that "more than a fourth of adults agree, in varying degrees, that, the 2020 election was stolen, and Joe Biden is an illegitimate president," with "8.1 percent—that equates to 21 million American adults—shar[ing] both these radical beliefs."[9] Conspiracy theories are achieving unprecedented popularity and quickly

[6] Peter Doocy, "Mike Pence Claims He's Learned Migrant Caravan Funded By 'Outside Groups,'" Fox News (Fox News, October 27, 2018), https://www.foxnews.com/politics/mike-pence-claims-hes-learned-migrant-caravan-funded-by-outside-groups. It is worth noting that while Pence did not directly inculpate Soros or any U.S.-based leftist organizations, his remarks echo theories that do.
[7] "H.E.A.T. Map," Anti-Defamation League, 2021, https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resource-knowledge-base/adl-heat-map.
[8] Ryan J. Reilly, "The Feds Have Made 625+ Capitol Riot Arrests. They Still Have A Long Way To Go.," HuffPost, October 6, 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/feds-made-capitol-riot-arrests-quarter-way-there_n_615c6fafe4b0f7776310fe37.
[9] Robert Pape, "Why We Cannot Afford to Ignore the American Insurrectionist Movement," Chicago Project on Security and Threats, August 6, 2021, https://cpost.uchicago.edu/research/domestic_extremism/why_we_cannot_afford_to_ignore_the_american_insurrectionist_movement/.

becoming a fundamental part of the right's political discourse. Reviewing research in the field of media studies, Deen Freelon, Alice Marwick, and Daniel Kreiss conclude that the "right tends to eschew offline protest (notwithstanding a few prominent exceptions), preferring instead a combination of 'trolling' or manipulating mainstream media and protest against and even strategic exit from platforms owned by Big Tech,"—favoring sites like Gab—and investing "far more than the left in disinformation and conspiracy theories as core components of activist repertoire."[10]

Despite the evident association between the political right and conspiracy theories in the United States and Europe, the role of conspiracy theories in right-wing extremist movements is often overlooked by contemporary scholars.[11] What is more, the corpus of conspiracy theory-related literature collectively fails to account for the resurgent popularity of these narratives, with some scholars portraying belief in conspiracy theories as symptoms of an irrational and paranoid worldview, and others arguing that conspiracy theories have been stigmatized and marginalized by "academics, elite journalists, and intellectuals."[12] Both of these perspectives, as I will later demonstrate, inaccurately relegate conspiracy theories to the fringes of society. The field of conspiracy theory studies must now turn toward understanding how these narratives shape and interact with ideology, and influence political behavior and acts of violence, a

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[10] Deen Freelon, Alice Marwick, and Daniel Kreiss, "False Equivalencies: Online Activism from Left to Right," *Science* 369, no. 6508 (September 4, 2020): 1197.
[11] Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Extremism and Counter-Terrorism," *Demos*, 2010, 3; Samantha Walther and Andrew McCoy, "US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 2 (2021): 101.
[12] Katharina Thalmann, "'John Birch Blues': The Problematization of Conspiracy Theory in the Early Cold-War Era," *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 15, no. 1 (June 1, 2014): 3, https://copas.uni-regensburg.de/article/view/182.

task for which interpretive perspectives are uniquely suited.[13] Consequently, this paper reexamines the contemporary right and its significant association with conspiracy theories in order to provide a new theoretical framework for future research.

Research Questions

The evident growth in popularity of conspiracy theories among both far-right extremists and more mainstream conservatives raises several critical questions that the current body of literature fails to comprehensively address. (1) In an era of unprecedented access to information, why are conspiracy theories increasingly being produced and shared, and why are they inspiring violent action? (2) Why is the political right particularly engaged in conspiratorial discourse and extremist violence, and how do right-wing figures, movements, and organizations mobilize conspiracy theories? (3) Given that similar conspiracy theories are increasingly being endorsed by both violent extremists and elected officials, why are these mobilization strategies so successful? What success have recent deplatforming measures had, if any? (4) Is the growth of online conspiracy theory followings a matter of irrational perception of, or a lack of access to, credible information as some suggest?[14] If not—as I argue—we must then ask, (5) how have digital spaces altered the right's perception of truth?

Argument

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[13] Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* 40, no. S1 (2019): 23.

[14] E.g., J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 952–66; Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 202–27.

To make sense of the unprecedented growth in popularity of conspiracy theories and related violent extremism in recent years, the contemporary far-right is best understood as a collection of movements and organizations with diverse ideologies and worldviews but bound by a shared underlying populist logic.[15] Through this lens, I argue that (1) conspiracy theories constitute and produce "subjugated" or "popular" knowledge within Foucault's model of "official" and illegitimate knowledges, and are thus useful for the political right as populist narratives, representing the knowledge of the "people."[16] Conspiracy theories, as popular knowledges, both subvert conventional sources of authority over truth, and frame powerful elites as perpetrators of secretive plots in service of their own nefarious interests. (2) These narratives attract right-wing extremists in particular because, within the far-right's populist paradigm, truth is defined and evaluated in opposition to the official ways of knowing imposed by society's cultural, political, and academic elite. Often, the right portrays truth as being—pardon the *X-Files* reference—"out there," readily available to those willing to undergo an intellectual "awakening" by rejecting the hegemonic knowledge of the elite. The far-right views the internet as an inherently libertarian technology through which this awakening can occur, offering the ability to democratize authority over truth. From this perspective, recent instances of widespread deplatforming of far-right conspiracy theorists represent yet another chapter in a continuous history of the suppression of the truth. What is more, being deplatformed acts as a "badge of honor" among those on the right, further legitimizing those that are "silenced" within the far-right's populist

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[15] Lane Crothers, *Rage on the Right: The American Militia Movement from Ruby Ridge to the Trump Presidency*, Second edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), 4.
[16] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, 1st edition (New York: Vintage, 1980), 82.

paradigm. (3) In recent years, the far-right has increasingly embraced accelerationist tactics and ideologies. Conspiracy theories, though not only associated with extremists or extremist movements, act as a kind multiplier for extremism and accelerationism in that, through narratives that assign nearly limitless power to shadowy actors, they present seemingly insurmountable challenges for democratic solutions to the problems populists perceive in contemporary society.

Defining Key Concepts: The "Far-Right" and Political Extremism

Before constructing a framework for better understanding conspiracy theories within the context of online political discourse, it would first prove useful to establish a working definition of the far-right itself. Throughout this paper, I use the term "far-right" to collectively describe what Lane Crothers calls the "culturally embedded, right-wing, populist social movements" of contemporary Western societies.[17] Where far-right movements and organizations diverge from mainstream or traditional conservatism is in their tendency to endorse political extremism, which Crothers defines as an unwillingness to compromise "one's core values" within a democratic system.[18] Crothers's somewhat nebulous conceptualization of extremism proves more useful when paired with that of Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab. As J.M. Berger notes, the infamous Justice Potter Stewart "I know it when I see it" test remains in widespread use for classifying extremism today, with the popular use of the term—the far reaches of the ideological scale—being implicitly reliant on an explicit understanding of its antithesis—the ideological norm.[19] Lipset and Raab circumvent this complication by framing

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[17] Crothers, *Rage on the Right*, 4.
[18] Crothers, 6.
[19] J. M. Berger, *Extremism*, The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 2.

extremism as "not so much a matter of issues as one of procedures," arguing that extremists share a willingness to go "beyond the limits of the normative procedures which define the democratic political process."[20] As we will later explore,

Approaches to Conspiracy Theory Research

In the 21st century, conspiracy theories have transcended their status as fringe phenomena, influencing both popular culture and politics. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the science fiction television drama, *The X-Files,* embedded the phrases "the truth is out there" and "I want to believe" within the popular lexicon. Netflix's *Stranger Things,* a series following a fictional conflict between middle schoolers, supernatural forces, and the U.S. government in a grand conspiracy, smashed streaming records to become the 2nd most viewed television show of all time. Two of The History Channel's most successful programs, *Project Blue Book* and *Ancient Aliens,* both claim to document massive cover-ups of human contact with sentient extraterrestrials. International conventions continue to draw flat-Earther crowds from around the globe, and 60 percent of Americans believe that the CIA was involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy.[21] Recent figures even suggest that all Americans subscribe in some way to at least one conspiracy theory, further proof of their greater social significance.[22] But what are conspiracy theories, and how can we conceptualize them to better

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[20] Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (HarperCollins, 1970), 3–4.

[21] Rob Picheta, "The Flat-Earth Conspiracy Is Spreading around the Globe. Does It Hide a Darker Core?," CNN, November 17, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/16/us/flat-earth-conference-conspiracy-theories-scli-intl/index.html; Adam M. Enders and Steven M. Smallpage, "On the Measurement of Conspiracy Beliefs," *Research & Politics* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2018).

[22] Joanne M. Miller, Kyle L. Saunders, and Christina E. Farhart, "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4 (2016): 824–44.

understand their unprecedented popularity and particular association with the far-right?

In 2019, *Business Insider* published an article titled "24 Outlandish Conspiracy Theories Donald Trump has Floated Over the Years," exploring the former President's widespread consumption and mobilization of conspiracy theories. While Zeballos-Roig et al. detail several conspiracy theories endorsed by Trump, like birtherism—the popular theory that former President Barack Obama was not born in the United States—they also list examples of false or misleading information that are markedly *not* conspiracy theories, including claims that "windmills cause cancer," Fox News is partially "owned by a Saudi Billionaire," and "questions" regarding "whether childhood vaccines cause autism."[23] A 2020 CNN article makes the same category error, as Daniel Dale labels Trump's speculation that Biden had been taking performance enhancing drugs before debates a "conspiracy theory."[24] Largely baseless (and at times absurd) allegations? Yes. Conspiracy theories? No. In the strictest sense, conspiracy theories are narratives that attempt "to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors;" allegations of conspiracy that may or may not be true.[25] Although sensational and false, these examples of disinformation do not suggest that powerful actors collaborated in a secret plot (claiming that cover-ups took place *would* be a conspiracy theory). Donald Trump has indeed often mobilized what would meet the technical definition of conspiracy

[23] Joseph Zeballos-Roig, John Haltiwanger, and Michal Kranz, "24 Outlandish Conspiracy Theories Donald Trump Has Floated over the Years," *Business Insider*, October 9, 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-conspiracy-theories-2016-5.
[24] Daniel Dale, "Fact Check: A Guide to 9 Conspiracy Theories Trump Is Currently Pushing," CNN, September 2, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/02/politics/fact-check-trump-conspiracy-theories-biden-covid-thugs-plane/index.html.
[25] Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," 4.

theories for electoral support, alleging that—among many other things—the death of a Clinton administration White House attorney was "very fishy," that Senator Ted Cruz's father played a role in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and that Democrats committed widespread election fraud in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.[26]

The "Pathologizing Paradigm"

As the classification of the disinformation espoused by Donald Trump demonstrates, the term "conspiracy theory" is now largely associated with any "implausible theory, whether or not it involves a conspiracy."[27] This is not a coincidental linguistic shift, but rather a consequence of deliberate attempts to delegitimize and dismiss certain unwanted knowledges that threaten hegemonic political, social, and epistemic institutions. The body of scholarship on conspiracy theories is in part responsible for, and a product of, this "weaponized" categorization of conspiracy theory. As a dominant institution in the production of knowledge, the academy has largely relied on pathologizing conspiracy theorists—a line of thinking Michael Butter and Peter Knight refer to as the "pathologizing paradigm," which has dominated the study of conspiracy theories in the social sciences since the mid-

[26] Callum Borchers, "Yes, There Actually Are People Who Believe the Clintons Killed Vince Foster," *Washington Post*, May 24, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/05/24/yes-there-actually-are-people-who-believe-the-clintons-killed-vince-foster/; Callum Borchers, "How on Earth Is the Media Supposed to Cover Trump's Wacky JFK-Cruz Conspiracy Theory?," *Washington Post*, May 3, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/05/03/how-on-earth-is-the-media-supposed-to-cover-trumps-wacky-jfk-cruz-conspiracy-theory/; Jose A. Del Real, "Here Are 10 More Conspiracy Theories Embraced by Donald Trump," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/09/16/here-are-10-more-conspiracy-theories-embraced-by-donald-trump/.
[27] Jesse Walker, "What We Mean When We Say 'Conspiracy Theory,'" in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 59.

twentieth century.[28] Attempting to explain how lay people could still possibly *believe* in conspiracy theories when credible information remains accessible, studies from this perspective seek to identify "individual-level correlates of belief in conspiracy theories and general conspiratorial predispositions."[29] Ignoring what exactly conspiracy theory narratives communicate, and how, these studies frame conspiracy theorists and the "epistemic character of [their] claims" as the objects of inquiry, rather than investigating the political character and consequences of conspiracy theory narratives.[30]

The treatment of conspiracy theories as symptoms of irrational and unscientific thinking can be traced to the foundation of conspiracy theory as a category of research. Though scholars such as Seymour Martin Lipset, Edward Shils, and Earl Raab developed an academic interest in conspiracy theories in the United States in the 1950s, Richard Hofstadter's seminal 1964 essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," synthesized and popularized their work, and continues to significantly influence conspiracy theory research today. Examining what he calls, "paranoid modes of expression," Hofstadter is correct in his suggestion that "style has more to do with the way in which ideas are believed than with the truth or falsity of their content."[31] The right-wing, Hofstadter argues, "as Daniel Bell has put it, feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. The old American

[28] Michael Butter and Peter Knight, "The History of Conspiracy Theory Research," in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 33.
[29] Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning," 1.
[30] Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2014), 94–95.
[31] Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1, 1964, https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals."[32] However, Hofstadter frames this perspective, and by extension, belief in conspiracy theories, as symptoms of an irrational "paranoid" worldview. This aspect of Hofstadter's analysis remains popular among scholars of conspiracy theories today. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule maintain that belief in conspiracy theories arises as a result of a "crippled epistemology;" a state in which people lack credible information or cannot process information properly.[33] Uscinski and Parent attribute conspiracy theory belief to "losers," individuals and groups who feel threatened, often due to being on the defeated side of an election.[34] Oliver and Wood suggest conspiracy theorists lack the capacity to rationally gather and assess information, with an inherent "willingness to believe in other unseen, intentional forces and an attraction to Manichean narratives" that portray struggles between good and evil.[35] By portraying belief in conspiracy theories as symptoms of an irrational worldview or broken epistemology, these studies represent contemporary interpretations of Hofstadter's work. Ultimately, this "approach to conspiracy theories has impeded research because it pathologizes and marginalizes them."[36] Furthermore, this perspective fails to address another key aspect of conspiracy theory—sometimes, conspiracy theories are *actually* true.[37]

Conspiracy Theories as Subjugated Knowledges

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[32] Hofstadter.

[33] Sunstein and Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories."

[34] Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 130.

[35] Oliver and Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," 952.

[36] Butter and Knight, "The History of Conspiracy Theory Research," 35.

[37] Jeffrey M. Bale, "Political Paranoia v. Political Realism: On Distinguishing between Bogus Conspiracy Theories and Genuine Conspiratorial Politics," *Patterns of Prejudice*, January 30, 2007.

Not only does the "pathologizing" approach to understanding conspiracy theories largely ignore the political character and consequences of conspiracy theory narratives, but it also undermines potential democratic solutions to present challenges resulting from conspiracy theories. After all, how do you "fix" an inherently irrational epistemology? What is more, are we to believe that an increasing number of Americans have abandoned reason entirely? Jack Bratich, Michael Barkun, Clare Birchall, and Kathrarina Thalmann present one solution to this problem in conspiracy theory research, arguing that conspiracy theories represent illegitimate knowledges within the Foucauldian characterization of "official" and "subjugated knowledges."[38] These knowledges have been "disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity."[39] Relative to the "regime of truth" described by Foucault—the accepted rules, procedures, mechanisms, and politics through which truth is constructed and evaluated—conspiracy theories are not merely false or misguided, they are irrational, excluded entirely from science's concept of rational knowledge.[40]

As Katharina Thalmann notes, "to propagate conspiracy theories has become almost socially unacceptable, and more often than not the term is used in a pejorative sense to prevent someone from participating in an ongoing debate."[41] Thalmann's relation of early conspiracy theory research demonstrates that throughout the 20th

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[38] Jack Z. Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008); Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Second edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Clare Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Routledge, 2020); Thalmann, "'John Birch Blues.'"
[39] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 80–83.
[40] Foucault, 131.
[41] Thalmann, "'John Birch Blues,'" 1.

century, "academics, journalists, and intellectuals [have] denounced conspiracy theory as an outdated, irrational, and inherently dangerous worldview in order to distinguish between what they considered to be legitimate and illegitimate knowledge and legitimate and illegitimate politics."[42] Bratich's work similarly reveals that conspiracy theories, as subjugated knowledges, have productive power in that they inspire panic over particular forms of thought, defining the conditions for "social integration and political rationality."[43] Conspiracy theory becomes a categorical weapon enabling institutions like journalism and academia to dismiss certain forms of knowledge and maintain authority when facing periods of popular distrust. Outlining what she calls the "knowledge-scape," Clare Birchall argues that conspiracy theories and gossip are forms of popular knowledges—equivalent to the Foucauldian concept of subjugated knowledges in that they are unofficial and illegitimate "knowledges that traditionally have not counted as knowledge at all," being "officially discredited (for different reasons) but which still enjoy mass circulation."[44] Furthermore, she demonstrates that dramatic changes in technologies that facilitate the transfer of information, like the internet, have eroded previously manifest boundaries between popular and legitimate knowledges.[45] As we shall later explore, the far-right has embraced these democratizing elements of the internet.

A New Approach: Reconceptualizing Conspiracy Theories within the Far-Right Populist Paradigm

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[42] Thalmann, 3.
[43] Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, 11.
[44] Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop*, 3.
[45] Birchall, 31.

While the poststructuralist approach to conspiracy theory research provides a new foundation for understanding conspiracy theories as forms of popular knowledge, studies from this perspective often incorrectly relegate conspiracy theories to the fringes of society. Thalmann, Bratich, Birchall, and Barkun are correct in asserting that conspiracy theory narratives represent and produce subjugated knowledges, but their analyses suggest that because of this, conspiracy theories "have increasingly lost value in political culture" having "been marginalized by mainstream discourse."[46] Building on the frameworks of these scholars, I argue that—as subjugated or popular knowledges— conspiracy theories maintain significant value in populist political culture, in that they subvert established hegemonies in the production of knowledge, as we will explore further in this section.

Conspiracy Theories as Populist Narratives

Populism is as much "a mode of expression" as an "explicit political agenda."[47] Populist logic relies on the construction of two distinct and opposed identities, the underserved "people," and the malevolent self-serving "elites." Lane Crothers contends that "for populists, the political problems of the moment are almost always the result of some elite group's conscious strategy. The 'people' are good; however, the community is seen to be in trouble because elites are working to promote their own values, not the authentic needs and ideas of the people they are supposed to serve."[48] Likewise, Ernesto Laclau suggests that "populism has no referential unity because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic whose effects cut across many phenomena.

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[46] Thalmann, "'John Birch Blues,'" 2.
[47] Crothers, *Rage on the Right*, 6.
[48] Crothers, 6.

Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political."[49] Populism's reduction of the political space into a simple dichotomy is not merely "a by-product of populist politics" but "the very condition of all political action, the actual form of political rationality."[50] It is critical to establish that populist logics, "far from corresponding to marginal phenomena," are "inscribed in the actual working of *any* communitarian space," which is also the case for conspiracy theories.[51] Populism and extremism produce a volatile reaction when synthesized in right-wing movements, as the far-right seeks to purge the political system of the policies of elites they feel have ruined society by means outside of the liberal democratic process—the January 6th insurrection being a prominent example of the consequences of this line of thinking.

Crothers has argued that "right-wing populist movements are prone to conspiracism, the sense that the current, corrupt state of affairs is the result of a conscious plan led by actual people who intend to harm "real" people."[52] While I object to his use of the term "conspiracism"— a practice rooted in Hofstadter's work, which, as Jack Bratich astutely points out, is a "more sophisticated [way] of calling someone a crackpot," Crothers's sentiment stands.[53] Populist movements, like the contemporary far-right, maintain a particular association to conspiracy theories because they already rely on the constitution of an "elite" identity that serves as the perpetrating class of secretive plots for their own nefarious interests. In this way, conspiracy theories are entirely rational narratives within the paradigm of populist logic. Mark Fenster alludes

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[49] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Reprint edition (London: Verso, 2007), xii.
[50] Oliver Marchart, "In the Name of the People: Populist Reason and the Subject of the Political," *Diacritics* 35, no. 3 (2005): 5.
[51] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, xii.
[52] Crothers, *Rage on the Right*, 6.
[53] Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, 4.

to this in his work, arguing that "conspiracy theory is thus an aspect of the longstanding populist strain in American political culture—an especially intense strain, to be sure, that can have violent, racist, and antidemocratic effects (as well as salutary and democracy-enhancing ones) on the political and social order."[54] The symbiotic relationship between conspiracy theories and populism that Fenster describes is easily recognized in far-right conceptions of truth.

"The Internet, of Course:" Truth and Far-Right Extremism

Truth is a central concept in both far-right extremist and conspiracy theorist discourse. Robert Bowers attacked the Tree of Life synagogue believing he had discovered "the truth" regarding the activities of HIAS. In the manifesto he emailed to over a thousand accounts prior to killing 77 people in 2011, the Norwegian far-right extremist, Anders Behring Breivik, used the term "truth" over 200 times. Popular white nationalist content creator Stefan Molyneux includes "truth" in the titles of many of his provocative video essays, with the most viewed being "The Truth About the Fall of Rome: Modern Parallels," and "The Truth About the Coronavirus." Although the concept of truth remains vital to understanding right-wing extremist and conspiracy theorist discourse, startlingly little attention is devoted to the topic by scholars of extremism. In this section, I examine how the far-right understands, evaluates, and communicates "truth," and explore why further studies are critical moving forward.

Perhaps the most common trope invoked by the right online—behind Ben Shapiro's "facts don't care about your feelings"—is that of pills, a reference to the 1999

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[54] Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 9.

film, *The Matrix,* in which Morpheus offers Keanu Reeves's character, Neo, a choice between taking a red or blue pill. The blue pill shrouds the consumer in ignorant bliss, while the red reveals the unsettling and life-changing "truths" of society. The analogy, though simple, offers significant insight into how far-right movements perceive truth. Within the far-right's populist paradigm, truth is defined and evaluated through subverting the "official" knowledges imposed by society's cultural, political, and academic elite. For the right, the truth is readily available to those willing to undergo an intellectual "awakening." This "awakening" is not seen as easy. In fact, the difficulties associated with undergoing this process serve as a sort of rite of passage for members of the far-right—a sign of the total rejection of hegemonically imposed knowledges, which can include isolation and *anomie*.

"Q Conference"

In July of 2021, independent journalist, ethnographer, and YouTuber, Andrew Callaghan, released a video documenting the "God and Country Patriot Roundup" conference held in Dallas, Texas in May of that year. Titled "Q Conference," the video examines the event's strong ties to the QAnon conspiracy theory, opening with an interview with a middle-aged woman attending the conference. Identified as "Judy," the woman states, "I've kind of been searching for the truth my whole life," and claims that she found it when she "came across a video about Biden, and Kamala Harris, and Clinton, and Obama" that proved "they are Satan worshipers, Satanists. They're Satan worshipers, one hundred percent." She goes on to say that she "couldn't wait" to tell her family, who ostracized her for her beliefs. Callaghan asks her, "and how does that make you feel?" She replies, "sad, I cry all the time. But I just keep praying. That's all I do, I

just keep praying and asking God to open their eyes. I have a beautiful family, they're just blind." Callaghan then asks, "do you wish you had never stumbled upon… [QAnon]?" Before he can finish the question, Judy replies, "no. Once you learn you don't turn back. I know what God wants, and what Jesus wants, and it's what Trump wants, and it's what the patriots want. I will never turn back, no matter how many of my family I lose."

Later, Callaghan speaks to "Mickey," a female veteran wearing a "Make America Great Again" hat adorned with pins. In a triumphant tone, she declares, "I have been censored three times. Disabled. Permanently disabled on Facebook. Censored. Permanently suspended. They don't like my Q flag, they don't like my Q mobile, and they sure as hell don't like me in my Q patriot costume!" Another attendee, "Jaqueline," also brags about being censored for sharing conspiracy theories. Smiling, she exclaims, "I have been banned from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok…" Jason Frank, a paid speaker at the conference, describes losing "two YouTube channels, three Twitters, and four Facebooks. Everytime," he continues, pumping his fist, "it's like, uh, yes! I'm winning! If we weren't making a difference, if it wasn't that important, why would they spend so much effort and energy into it?" For the far-right, deplatforming demonstrates one's commitment to rejecting hegemonic knowledges and pursuing the truth.

The Great Replacement

Less than half a year after the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh, a similar incident motivated by related white replacement theories took place on the opposite side of the globe, in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand. Brenton Tarrant, a self-designated "ethno-nationalist and eco-fascist" from Australia, armed with two AR-15

style rifles, killed 51 worshipers at the Masjid Al Noor Mosque during Friday Prayer on March 15th, 2019. Minutes before the attack, an anonymous 8chan user posted links to a first-person perspective Facebook livestream of the mass shooting filmed from a camera mounted to Tarrant's head, along with a 87-page manifesto entitled *The Great Replacement*, on the website's "/pol/" board.[55] The manifesto details everything from Tarrant's motivation for committing violence to the travels that defined his young adulthood. Espousing "Third Position" far-right ideology—which maintains that existing governments should be overthrown in favor of monocultural ethnonationalist states—Tarrant advocates for violence and the use of accelerationist tactics. Disturbingly detailed, Tarrant's manifesto serves as a valuable case study for examining the far-right's relationship with the internet, conspiracy theories, and the concept of truth.

Using hypophora, Tarrant asks himself, "from where did you receive/research/develop your beliefs?" He then answers, "the internet, of course, you will not find the truth anywhere else." For Tarrant—and much of the far-right as a whole—the internet is the ultimate platform through which counter-hegemonic knowledges and ideologies can be explored, produced, and shared. What is more, these knowledges are presented as truth. In a section titled "Radicalization of Western Men," Tarrant states:

> "Once the corporate and state medias grip on the zeitgeist of modernity was
> finally broken by the internet, true freedom of thought and discussion flourished

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[55] Aja Romano, "How the Christchurch Shooter Used Memes to Spread Hate," Vox, March 16, 2019, https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/3/16/18266930/christchurch-shooter-manifesto-memes-subscribe-to-pewdiepie.

and the overton window [sic] was not just shifted, but shattered. All possibility of expression and belief was open to be taught, discussed and spoken.

This open and often anonymous discussion allowed for information, outside of the states and the corporation control, to be accessed often for the first time. The result is obvious. People are finding their way home. Finding their people, finding their traditions, seeing through the lies of history, the brainwashing of the institutions and they angry [sic], they are energized and yes, against their degenerate societies, they are radicalized."

The far-right idealizes the internet as an innately libertarian technology, a collection of decentralized spaces where free political discourse can take place outside of the jurisdiction of elites. Tarrant proceeds by claiming that far-right extremists "isolate themselves from mainstream, multicultural, egalitarian, individualistic insanity and look for allies anywhere they can find them, in the flesh or online." Via the internet, he continues, "they congregate, discuss, despair, strategize, debate and plan. They decry weakness, mock fecklessness and worship strength, and in this worship of strength they radicalize and find the solution." As Clare Birchall notes, "the internet is particularly suited to the presentation and endorsement of this romanticized image of the radical theorist" and has "increasingly become characterized (and I am making no claims for what actually is the case) as a relatively unregulated and non-corporate spere for the exchange of 'underground' ideas."[56]

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[56] Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop*, 47.

In the final pages of *The Great Replacemen*t, Tarrant offers further insight into his understanding of truth as he proposes a theory for how "great leaders arise." He describes a "society in crisis" that can only be saved by "men and women" that will "arise from their environment, their folk" springing "forth from the people." "These leaders," he continues, "will be paragon examples of your people, virtuous, incorruptible, speaking truth to power and a truth that resonates with your very soul." Concluding in entirely capital letters, he claims "WHEN YOU SEE THEM; WHEN YOU HEAR THEM; YOU WILL KNOW THEM, AS THEY ARE YOU, AND YOURS." Tarrant's concept of truth is clear: truth is an exclusive commodity of the people in the populist dichotomy—resulting from the proselytization of popular knowledges.

"The Time for a Political Solution has Long Since Passed:" Accelerationism and the Far-Right

A concept borrowed from Marxist philosophy, accelerationism is "meant to suggest that intensification of capitalism will eventually lead to its collapse."[57] However, in the context of the far-right, "it rests on the idea that Western governments are irreparably corrupt. As a result, the best thing [the far-right] can do is accelerate their demise by sowing chaos and creating political tension."[58] In recent years, the far-right has increasingly embraced accelerationist tactics and ideologies. As I will demonstrate in this section, this widespread adoption of accelerationism is a direct consequence of the movement's acceptance of conspiracy theories.

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[57] Walther and McCoy, "US Extremism on Telegram," 105.
[58] Zack Beauchamp, "The Extremist Philosophy That's More Violent than the Alt-Right and Growing in Popularity," *Vox*, November 11, 2019, https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/11/11/20882005/accelerationism-white-supremacy-christchurch.

Evidenced by the title, at the center of Brenton Tarrant's manifesto is the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, popularized by French novelist Renaud Camus in the early 2010s. In the opening three lines of *The Great Replacement*, Tarrant establishes the core tone and themes of the document, writing "it's the birthrates. It's the birthrates. It's the Birthrates. If there is one thing I want you to remember from these writings, its [sic] that the birthrates must change." Tarrant claims that mass immigration, which he calls an "invasion on a level never seen before in history," high immigrant birthrates, and low White birthrates, are all leading to the replacement of White populations "in the West." Outlining a global conspiracy "by the state and corporate entities to replace the White people who have failed to reproduce," Tarrant laments what he perceives as a "White genocide." For Tarrant, White replacement is not only a racial "genocide," but a deliberate scheme orchestrated by global and liberal elites to subvert and destroy "White culture."

Though Tarrant identifies a dramatic increase in White birthrates as "priority number one," he frames White replacement as a symptom of deeper cultural and societal issues in Western nations. He asserts that white nationalists "must inevitably correct the disaster of hedonistic, nihilistic individualism." However, Tarrant concludes that this "will take some time, time we do not have due to the crisis of mass immigration" and that, because of this, his "belief in a democratic solution vanished." Endorsing accelerationist tactics, Tarrant argues that "the time for a political solution has long since passed," instead calling for widespread violent action. Tarrant directly ties conspiracy theories to accelerationism, claiming "democracy is mob rule and the mob itself is ruled by our enemies. The global and corporate run press controls them,

the education system (long since fallen to the long march through the institutions carried out by the Marxists [sic]) controls them, the state (long since heavily lost to its corporate backers) controls them and the anti-white media machine controls them."

In April of 2019, on the last day of Passover, a man named John Earnest, a 19-year-old nursing student, entered a synagogue in Poway, California, and opened fire on congregation members, killing one and injuring three. Committing the act of violence just one month after the Christchurch shooting, and six months after the Tree of Life shooting, Earnest cites both Tarrant and Bowers as inspirations for the attack in his manifesto, which he posted on 8chan. The document echoes Tarrant's manifesto, with Earnest claiming that "every Jew is responsible for the meticulously planned genocide of the European race," through "cultural Marxism and communism," the entertainment industry, feminism, and mass immigration. Earnest appeals to other white nationalists to commit similar acts of violence, writing, "to my brothers in blood. Make sure that my sacrifice was not in vain. Spread this letter, make memes, shitpost, FIGHT BACK, REMEMBER ROBERT BOWERS, REMEMBER BRENTON TARRANT." He makes his endorsement of accelerationism clear when he claims that "we are in the early stages of revolution. We need martyrs. If you don't want to get caught because you have children who depend on you, you can simply attack a target and then slip back into normal life. Every anon reading this needs to carry out attacks. They won't find us. They won't catch us. There are too many of us, and we are smarter than them." His use of a firearm in the attack was "for the same reason that Brenton Tarrant used a gun," he writes. "The goal is for the US government to start confiscating guns. People will defend their right to own a firearm — civil war has just started."

The endorsement of accelerationism based on conspiracy theory narratives extends well beyond the small percentage of individuals involved with the far-right that have committed acts of political violence. 23-year-old far-right political commentator and content creator, Nick Fuentes, has frequently called for violent and radical action for accelerationist ends. Two days before the January 6th Capitol insurrection, during a livestream hosted on DLive, an alternative to Twitch and YouTube popular among members of the far-right, Fuentes attacked Republican lawmakers for their complacency in allowing the results of a "stolen election" to stand. He claimed that "Republicans just screwed us every day for two months straight, and we have no recourse. Why? Because we have no leverage." Expressing a sense of powerlessness in the face of imperious political and social elites working to suppress the will of the people, Fuentes asked his live audience of over 20,000 users, "what can you and I do to a state legislator besides kill them?" Quickly adding, "we should not do that. I'm not advising that," Fuentes went on to say "what else can you do, right? Nothing." On January 6th, 2021, Fuentes gave a speech outside of the Capitol urging insurrectionists to "break down the barriers and disregard the police. The Capitol belongs to us." The next day, on another DLive livestream, Fuentes directly framed the Capitol insurrection and other acts of far-right political violence as responses to the perceived threats against the people expressed in conspiracy theories. "What do you get when people are denied a legitimate means through the system by which to change the course of the country and change outcomes in the country?" he asked. "You get violence," he answered, "and you get violence because then people challenge, the only way they know how, an illegitimate authority."

Conclusions

The body of conspiracy theory-related literature collectively fails to account for the resurgent popularity of these narratives, with some scholars portraying belief in conspiracy theories as symptoms of an irrational and paranoid worldview, and others arguing that conspiracy theories have been stigmatized and marginalized. However, both of these perspectives inaccurately relegate conspiracy theories to the fringes of society. To make sense of the unprecedented growth in popularity of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory-related violence in recent years, the contemporary far-right must be understood as a collection of movements sharing underlying populist and extremist logics. Through this lens of analysis, it becomes clear that conspiracy theories—as subjugated knowledges—are useful for the political right as populist narratives, representing the knowledge of the "people." They both subvert conventional sources of authority over truth, and frame powerful elites as perpetrators of secretive plots in service of their own nefarious interests. These narratives attract right-wing extremists in particular because, within the far-right's populist paradigm, truth is defined and evaluated in opposition to the official ways of knowing imposed by society's elite. The far-right views recent instances of widespread deplatforming as yet another chapter in a continuous history of the suppression of the truth, and the status of being deplatformed acts as a "badge of honor" among those on the right. Conspiracy theories serve as a multiplier of extremism and accelerationism. Through narratives that assign nearly limitless power to shadowy actors, conspiracy theories present seemingly insurmountable challenges for democratic solutions to the problems populists perceive in contemporary society. It is my hope that this analytical framework will serve as a foundation for future conspiracy theory and political violence research.