# *A Crisis of Truth? Conspiracism in an Age of Political Turmoil*

RIDGWAY, VICTORIA

# A Crisis of Truth? Conspiracism in an Age of Political Turmoil

Victoria Ridgway

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Geography

Durham University

2025

# Abstract

This thesis examines the role of conspiracism within the broader context of a "post-truth" crisis that is felt to either accelerate or erupt from a shift in political hegemony taking place in North American and Western European liberal democracies. In this context of disorientation, this thesis proposes to stay with the uncertainties of this new and unstable category of thought and subjectivity. I ask: what new affective and ideological formation is the category of "conspiracism" attempting to name in this moment? What norms, imaginaries, and affects are mobilized and reshaped in this problematization of dissent? How is this affective and ideological formation lived, performed, and contested?

By focusing on the case of vaccine conspiracism in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, I trace the emergence of conspiracism as a category of intense concern across a media archive. Across ethnographic work carried with movements that took shape in the contestation of Covid-19 mandates, I trace some of the affective and ideological threads which shape the singularity of this category.

By staying with the indeterminacies of conspiracism as a new, unstable category of thought and subjectivity, this thesis contributes to recent geographical work which is reinvigorating a conjunctural style of analysis. Throughout this thesis I indeed provide an outline of the different conditions, pressures, and contradictions which give shape to the singular sense that truth is in crisis: attachments to critique, troubled relations to the expression of dissent, moral disarray, anxious relations to authority, inclinations for mysticism, and encounters with the impossibility of truth. A second key contribution upon which this thesis focuses is to explore how conspiracism can be approached as an object of geographical inquiry. I bring attention to how conspiracism engages questions of interpretation and dissent, which need careful consideration and negotiation. This is mainly because conspiracism, as a "bad" form of interpretation, troubles the legitimacy of the social sciences, and as an uncertain category of dissent, troubles our generous disposition towards popular expressions of dissent. Rather than suggesting a way out of these impasses, this thesis suggests that acknowledging these limits can be a way to fight the fantasy of absolute knowledge.

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# Statement of Copyright

# Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks to Ben Anderson and Anna Secor for the many generative comments they have provided on various versions of this thesis. Sincere thanks to Ben for the generous care and diligence he showed in reviewing my work. I am profoundly grateful to Anna for welcoming my interest in psychoanalysis so generously; her support through various conversations and reading groups has been essential to the development of my theoretical perspective and confidence as a thinker. I am grateful to Paul Harrison for many conversations and valuable advice that have greatly influenced my thinking for this thesis. Thank you to Charlotte Lock and Bridget Shaffrey for their support throughout this thesis, and in particular for their valuable advice on approaching fieldwork. Many thanks to the participants of the monthly PGR work-in-progress workshop in Durham, whose feedback and advice on various pieces of writing have greatly supported the development of this thesis, namely: Esha Afsana, Cécile Blouin, Hoaxu Chen, Chung-Yen Cheng, Jing Chu, Joaquim Gaignard, Robbie Gilmore, Rosie Haffenden, Ruizhe Hong, Huixuan Huang, Siewying Shee, Jay Sinclair, Jingshu Xia, Shuyue Xie, Yuan Zhang, and Nawal Ali Watali. My sincere thanks to the research participants who have contributed to this thesis. I am very grateful for their time and for the openness with which they welcomed my presence and questions.

# Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis investigates the role of conspiracism within the broader "post-truth crisis" in North American and Western European liberal democracies[1]. More precisely, I focus on conspiracism, amidst a new vocabulary of truth (disinformation, fake news, misinformation, infodemic, conspiracy theories or simply 'conspiracies') whose emergence responds to a diffuse sense that truth is under threat (Bratich, 2008). While conspiracism may be described in narrow terms as a tendency to see hidden plots behind world events, this thesis begins with the observation that the term carries a social, political and affective weight that extends its meaning beyond its logical definition (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017). Indeed, throughout this thesis I hold on to the idea that the term "conspiracism" functions more as an attempt to name a range of elements that are forming a new but unstable affective and ideological formation, amidst shifting political hegemonies. Each of the articles composing this thesis therefore represents an attempt to understand how this formation is taking shape, as well as what political work it is doing and revealing. Overall, this thesis aims to document and understand how, amid the felt presence of a 'crisis of truth', 'conspiracism' emerges as a shifting and unstable category which attempts to capture a cluster of emerging affective and ideological tendencies – one that remains in suspension within the broader context of changing political hegemonies.

Because of this framing, it has often felt as though I was researching something that is and is not at the same time. On the one hand, by suggesting that conspiracism names a felt threat to truth I could stop my analysis at describing the social construction of a crisis. In that sense, conspiracism, as a label, would only exist as a discourse originating from cultural producers (the media and academia) that names a pre-existing form of dissent. Conspiracism would then only be a word, which becomes tied to the material world through its a *posteriori* effects. This thesis would consist of documenting the construction of this discourse and its effects. On the other hand, I could not ignore that this word seemed to respond to the very real impetus to name the new and strange alignment of a range of practices and beliefs under the sense that the world is moving along the rhythm of a conspiracy. Indeed, even if not articulated in the belief of a singular nameable plot, I could also sense the development of a shared feeling

[1] In the following section, I come back in more details to the problem of spatializing this phenomenon and justify my choice to anchor it in this spatial and political formation.

flowing throughout a mixture of new age spirituality, occult beliefs, political paranoia, and hatred of the elites that what is deemed normal, believable, and acceptable has been secretly and willfully preordained and made irrevocable. But in that sense, it would mean that conspiracism only becomes researchable from the practices and beliefs that are already decided to constitute and condition its existence. This is why this thesis is also an attempt to resist holding the crisis by only one of its extremities. Throughout this thesis my aim is also to take up a position in the eye of the crisis; temporarily arresting flying debris for examination, tracing my disoriented steps amidst crosswinds while acknowledging my own effect on the storm's swinging movements. More concretely, in this thesis I carve out a space to understand how in a field where "conspiracism" installs a new but always uncertain way to understand a category of thought and subjectivity, this new signification is also lived, performed and negotiated. Down to its bare bones, this thesis, in a way, grapples with the problem of the constitutive distance between signifier and signified and chooses to remain in this aporetic milieu.

In some respects, the topic of this thesis can seem rather broad and loose. Put simply, it asks: what is this thing that we call conspiracism? What does it mean to have this word to understand a category of thought and people? This is not an attempt at confessing and excusing the shortcomings of this project, but to draw attention to its particular position in human geography and the social sciences more broadly. While conspiracism has emerged as a topic of inquiry in communication and cultural studies from the early 2000 (e.g. Dean, 2000; Knight, 2000, 2002), it is only recently that it has been seriously positioned as a topic of sociological inquiry (e.g. Harambam, 2020). As a new topic of sociological inquiry, researching conspiracism therefore raises the question of what kind of object it is and can be for the social sciences. Without going into too much depth for now, approaching conspiracism from a social science perspective is distinct in part because it involves studying a stigmatizing label and carefully navigating this issue with participants. Another element is that, as disciplines that often grapple with establishing their own legitimacy, the social sciences have a delicate relationship with conspiracism, which frequently symbolizes precisely the flaws they seek to repudiate (e.g. the overstatement of intention in interpretation). The difficulty here for studies of conspiracism is to avoid, or at least acknowledge, the ways in which they become engaged in boundary-making by naming the constitutive difference of conspiracism. This thesis therefore also approaches conspiracism as a new problem for the social sciences.

In this section I have laid out the approach that shapes my understanding and initial interest in conspiracism, and that I further develop throughout the three papers that compose

this thesis. In the rest of the introduction, I further contextualize this approach within the personal, spatial, and political situation that shaped my research. I follow by contextualizing my research in the relevant literature that this thesis draws from and extends. I then go over the methods and methodological approach that guided the empirical portion of this thesis. I conclude this introduction by stating the research aims of this thesis and proceed to outline how each of the articles attempt to make sense of these aims.

## 1.1. Why study conspiracism (in this way) now?

In this section, I take the time to situate my project in the personal, spatial, and political situation in which it took place. I do this with two aims in mind. First, understanding this situation is part of what is at stake in researching conspiracism. As a new phenomenon, that is increasingly gaining relevance as it seems to run undercurrent a number of recent crises (e.g. the pandemic or the rise of right-wing populism), part of what is at stake in researching conspiracism is to understand what it may be revealing and/or activating in the present. This thesis is therefore conjunctural in spirit. With this I do not claim to offer a complete conjunctural analysis of the present, insofar as conjunctural analyses can only come in fragmented attempts to capture parts of the present, that may (or may not) make sense once they are positioned against other conversations about the ongoing present (Grossberg, 2019). This thesis remains conjunctural in spirit then in the sense that it offers a contribution to a broader tapestry of work attempting to make sense of the complexity of the present.

Second, describing this situation is also an effort to outline the positionality that informed my choices throughout this project. This is important because our ability to perceive a conjuncture is always informed by our position in it. To state that positionality matters to inquiry may seem axiomatic in a geographical thesis. But it bears repeating in the context of conjunctural analysis, where the in/ability to tune in to the flow of the moment becomes a methodological hindrance/resource. So, while I strive to maintain a level of academic rigor in the following section - by relating my description to academic sources that share a similar diagnosis - this description is very much produced to reflect my own situated sense of “the spirit of this time”.

### a) A characteristic phenomenon of our times

The feeling that truth is under threat is one that we have had to live with for a while now. From where I stand, I noticed this feeling taking flight around 2016 when Donald Trump's first election and the Brexit vote simultaneously came to symbolize and trigger a larger shift in Western politics. In this moment, it is truth – amongst other things – which appeared to have become lost along the way. Yes, political commentators agreed, "Clinton has been caught *misleading voters* about her email arrangement, her handling of classified information and her policy prescriptions. But her violations are of a *different kind* than those of Trump" (Alter and Scherer, 2016 para. 16, emphasis added). And in the UK, yes Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May "were capable of being *devious* but … they were not *habitual liars*, and all three were driven (like Wilson and Major before them) by a sense of public duty and integrity" (Osborne, 2021, p. 4, emphasis added). While many agreed that something had shifted in the way new political forces and actors handled truth and facts, it remained difficult to name exactly where this shift stood amidst the propaganda, obfuscation, and confusing jargon that routinely roamed free in traditional liberal politics. At the same time, a flurry of new words accompanied the rise of this uneasy feeling. "Conspiracism", "conspiracies", "fake news", "disinformation", "misinformation", "alternative facts", "post-truth", "infodemic", all seem, indeed, to try to capture this sense that a new mishandling of truth was taking shape.

In this effervescence, the truth became an object of intense political struggle and general concern. "Fake news" became a recurring buzzword shaping new journalistic ventures and narratives. Debunking units and fact-checking initiatives sprang up across major media outlets. And across the political spectrum, positioning oneself as a defender of truth – whether that is the evidenced-based truth of the scientist or the instinctual sense of truth of the masses – became a regular fixture of political discourses. Raising alert and promoting action in relation to climate change partly became an issue of diffusing and protecting the truth (Karnik Hinks and Rödder, 2023). Likewise, the Covid-19 pandemic had further installed the feeling that our survival hinged upon people's ability to recognize and accept the truth. In the everyday, this sense of the new vulnerability of truth translated in or erupted from various, and sometimes seemingly contradictory, responses. Podcast series, books, or magazine articles provided advice on "how to talk to a science denier/conspiracy theorist" further establishing new moral rewards and a sense of individual responsibility related to the protection of scientific truth (e.g. McIntyre, 2021). But this sense could very much coexist with the newfound popularity of new

age spirituality and alternative medicines, which without necessarily taking their transgression all the way to the conspiracy theories of the politically paranoid, nevertheless shared with them the sense that a more authentic life could be reclaimed from the "lies" of modern medicine. All of this to say that, from where I stand, it seemed that a dominant "we" had burst open. A shared reality had crumbled, and filling its cracks were no longer just differing points of views but reptilians and microchipped vaccines.

From here the story seems well known. Whether cause or symptom, the crisis of truth was voiding the liberal democratic model of the possibility to build consensus on evidence-based democratic debates. In doing so, this crisis was also bleeding throughout other overlapping crises (climate, economic, political, cultural) resulting in a sense of a definite rupture. In the US and the UK, at least, this corresponds to a well-known crisis of hegemony engaged by the 2008 economic crisis. To give a very brief overview, this economic crisis was a moment when it felt like economic instability had bled into the ideological (Fraser and Sunkara, 2019). A number of signs, but most notably the Occupy movement, made it possible to believe that a neoliberal common sense had finally ruptured. "The people" had somehow finally recognized and united around the defense of their economic interests and now craved radical change. Surfing on this desire for change a progressive neoliberalism repackaged its regressive economic policies with the coating of emancipatory aspirations born in civil society. But as this new neoliberalism reinstated business as usual, it left a gap open where desires for a revolutionary change now intermixed with a drive to enact vengeance upon those who were perceived to have come out on top in this new hegemony (e.g. racialized groups, women, LGBTQ+) (Brown, 2019). Or, perhaps, initial analyses of the 2008 crisis always overestimated its rupturing effects and underestimated people's attachment to the social hierarchies which allowed neoliberalism to function, and that right-wing populism was now promising to extend. In this gap, new revolutionary figures emerged (Corbyn/Sanders vs. Farage/Trump) promising a way out of this impasse. More recently, Trump's triumph, as well as a range of far-right victories across western Europe, seems to announce a new step in hegemonic instability, possibly entrenching the presence of a new and radicalized right across liberal democracies.

Central to this thesis is therefore the observation that, amid a range of conditions, conspiracism is what is perceived to act as one of the distinctive features of this crisis of hegemony. Without truly reaching a definite definition, "conspiracism" both names something that allowed the ascendency of right-wing populism and what right-wing populism has installed in the political arena. And in this moment of instability, "the truth" which becomes the object

that needs to be saved, very much feels like a useful signifier for the common-sense that an exposed neoliberalism is trying to protect. To be able to unpack what "conspiracism" attempts to name in this moment, but also what fantasies are traversing the performance of conspiracism, could therefore be a step towards understanding the re-composition of hegemonic forces in the present moment.

### b) A situated political project

The broader situation outlined above has deeply shaped the choices I made in this thesis, specifically, the decision to investigate conspiracism within its broader historical conjuncture. However, this account remains necessarily partial, as it does not yet address the position I occupy within this situation. Since conjunctural analysis involves understanding the present to transform it (Hall and Massey, 2010; Peck, 2024), it is always bound up with the analyst's own frustrations and hopes. These are not necessarily present in the articles that form this thesis, where I focus on constructing a diagnosis, but I believe that clarifying my position in this introduction is necessary to understand what I perceive to be at stake in doing this work.

I began thinking about this project in France, where I was born and lived for 30 years. Although the French context shares many similarities with the Anglo-American context, they also diverge in ways that continue to shape how I perceive and approach conspiracism. In this section, I focus on how my geographical and political inscription in the French national context continues to orient my relation to my object of study. In doing so, I do not pretend to give a full account of my positionality, but to reflect on key elements that remain crucial.

In France, the 2016 period also corresponded to the fragmentation of our traditional governing parties. But out of our "populist moment" (Mouffe, 2018), the most surprising thing wasn't the eruption of the far-right in the presidential runoff (a situation that we had already encountered in 2002 (I was 9) and that further installed the far-right in our political landscape since then), but rather the emergence of a new center led by Emmanuel Macron. Entering the presidential race with a book titled *Revolution* (Macron, 2016), Macron caught the wave of post-post-2008 dissatisfactions and promised radical change. And, to be fair, the outcome didn't lend far from the promise. For a country still attached to many of the ideals of its post-war social democracy, Macron's embrace of aggressive neoliberal reforms felt abrupt, and indeed, revolutionary. But what felt distinctive to me about this period nevertheless remains

how, through its discourses, policies (see for example Chrisafis, 2023), government appointments (see for example Pedro, Albertini and Pascual, 2024), and repression of the yellow vest and *banlieues* revolts, this new center was installing the far right's common sense into our political landscape (most notably around immigration, security, and Islamophobia) (Mondon and Winter, 2020). Under the pretext of keeping the far-right at bay, this centre was making the far-right's ideas its own. This new center's main stated purpose became to keep the peace between the "extremes" on the right and left.

In this context, conspiracism became one of the threads which allowed this center to stitch together "the extremes." A situation similar to the one described in the last section took shape, where debunking units, fact-checking and governmental commissions sprang up to counteract this new threat. But in this context, where the far-right's ideas were enjoying increasing legitimacy, its legacy party had little need to position itself as an opposition. Even if a conspiratorial spirit did run in the French collective psyche, the far-right didn't necessarily need to agitate it to gain support. Interrogated on the "great replacement" conspiracy theory for instance, Marine Le Pen, declares that this theory "presupposes a pre-established plan" and that she doesn't "subscribe to this conspiratorial way of seeing things" (Valerio, 2014). Continuing its strategy of "dédiabolisation"[2], and aided by the new legitimacy afforded by the center, the far-right was working hard to present itself as a respectable option for a presidential candidacy and dissociate from its anti-system image. In this landscape, it is more so the left that was suspected of holding and diffusing this pathology of thought. Conspiracism became detectable in the left's denunciation of a "system", and now had to defend itself against this accusation (e.g. Courrier International, 2021). At this point, the critique of this "obsession for the people who believe in conspiracy theories" could be found sporadically in interventions of habitual commentators of public life (Lordon, 2015, 2017 para. 3; Le Monde Diplomatique, 2018; Comité Invisible, 2022).

It was important to lay out the specificity of my position in this subsection as it significantly shapes my choices in the rest of the thesis. As I recognized in the beginning of the section, I knowingly paint this position with a broad brush to convey my intuition of the "sense of the time". Since the threat of conspiracism functions at the level of a diffuse feeling, my position means that I straddled different realms of the sensible. While I could rationally

[2] This can roughly be translated as "de-demonization," a term used to describe Marine Le Pen's strategy to normalize her party following the expulsion of her father and party founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in 2015. The strategy amounts to distancing the party from the overtly racist rhetoric of its founder, by softening its rhetoric, image, and anti-system aspirations (see France 24, 2022).

comprehend the risks of an instrumentalization of conspiracism by the US and UK far-right, as well as feel solidarity for those who may be the most exposed to its political rise, I still mostly found myself unmoored from this shared feeling. Beyond the geographical distance, I also felt little more than a desire to shrug at the breakdown of nations that, in my lifetime, have not ceased to restrict their political field to right-wing fixations. But, while I would like to believe that I can always match my political ideals with my conscious decisions, I also know (without being able to fully know) that being white, abled, and cis invariably ties me to a specific field of sensibility that orients my sense of what feels like a political threat.

Throughout my thesis, I therefore felt more drawn to the hope that, if 2008 was indeed a moment where a new spirit of dissent took flight in western liberal democracies, the ongoing success of the left in France meant that it could be funneled towards a more progressive direction – even as I still hold some reservations about this direction. From there, my defenses raised more naturally at the threat posed by a new category that could constrain our capacity to name power and class relations. If the payoff of this new category is to name a new class of political enemies, it also does not offer the rigor necessary to set in motion political struggle. And beyond any reasoned argument I might offer to explain my position, I simply know (without ever being able to articulate why I know) that being a first-generation university student, having grown up in the Parisian *banlieues*, and spending most of my adult life as a fast-food worker, will always make panics and snickers at the stupidity of the conspiracy theorists feel like class disdain.

Ultimately, my position also explains the evolution of the work that I present in this thesis. Increasingly, I became more open to acknowledging the social reality that the term "conspiracism" was trying to name while remaining aware of the complex political stakes involved in framing it as a category of thought and subjectivity. With this personal geography of emotion, I have wanted to make present how attachments and ruptures inevitably shape conditions of attunement. This attempt similarly remains dotted by the gaps and tears that form the im/possibilities of offering a testimony (Harrison, 2007). As an introduction to the rest of this thesis, this section has also sought to establish a shared terrain with readers - hopefully opening a dialogue that does not rely on assumed sameness.

## 1.2. Situating research on conspiracism in geography and beyond

In this section I situate my thesis in some of the key stakes and literatures which I take up and extend throughout the rest of the chapters. As these stakes and relevant literature are discussed in more depth in each chapter, this section focuses on providing a concise overview intended to offer a sense of direction to readers.

### a) A (new) uncertain form of dissent?

In my reading, research on conspiracism is characteristically haunted by the specter of definitional uncertainty. When approached as a deviant form of thought, it is shadowed by the doubt that it could be suppressing warranted expressions of dissent. Yet taken as warranted expressions of dissent, this research becomes cornered by the uneasy feeling that it could be reacting too generously to regressive political ideas.

This situation arises from the fact that there is no agreed upon definition of what a conspiracy theory is (Butter and Knight, 2020). After all, secret agreements between people do happen. What 'conspiracism' names is a more diffused and degenerated mode of interpretation, which signals a kind of overreliance on 'the plot' as a framework for interpretation (Keeley, 1999). In the vernacular, "conspiracism", as a label, overspills to gesture at a broader deviant mode of thought - mixing political radicality, medical heresies, and occultism - that is unworthy of serious consideration (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017; Franks *et al.*, 2017).

As this first set of difficulties is well-established in conspiracy theories scholarship, work on conspiracism becomes dotted with the negotiation of its own confusion and discomfort. Can conspiracy theories be waved away as "just being paranoid"? Or are people who believe in them right in thinking that "you're not being paranoid if they're really out to get you"? It is maybe the case, then, that conspiracy theories are a new, or not so new, form of dissent, and that we have somehow lost the capacity to hear them as dissent along the way (Bratich, 2008). Surfing on their own conspiratorial tendency, some go on to wonder if the stigmatization of conspiracism could be a strategy to disqualify dissenting voices (Husting and Orr, 2007).

As an object of inquiry for geographers, and for the social sciences more broadly, these tensions are met with additional unease, as our discipline is historically marked by a critical tone of sympathy for the expression of dissent (Blomley, 2006). In geography – even as conspiracism remains a rare object of inquiry– this natural move of sympathy towards dissent has translated in interventions which focus on highlighting how the distrust expressed by conspiracy theories originates from warranted situations of marginalization (Jones, 2010, 2012; Cairns, 2016; Johnson-Schlee, 2019). In these, conspiracism stands in as a form of devalued and confused vernacular dissent that attempts to make sense of its oppression. Yet, some take the problem of conspiracism by the other end and focus on its instrumentalization by right-wing populism and other regressive political forces (Stephens, 2020; Lizotte, 2021; Sturm and Albrecht, 2021). In these interventions, conspiracism stands in as a form of thought that mixes bigotry, anti-intellectualism, and intolerance, and which should be diminished through refutation. When approached as a form of uncertain dissent, conspiracism therefore becomes a problem of judgment and responsibility for researchers. The judgments we make – or do not make – hold political and ethical stakes. In this sense, conspiracism as an object of geographical inquiry, tests and muddies the line we would sometimes like to be able to draw between *le politique* and *la politique*. How long can judgment be suspended in the name of the potentialities of uncertainty (Harrison and Anderson, 2016a), before we inadvertently contribute to unleashing harmful political trajectories?

Haunted by definitional uncertainty but still deploying a diffuse presence across a variety of socio-political phenomena, conspiracism therefore presents a unique challenge for geography. As conspiracism increasingly becomes legible in a range of phenomena such as medical heresies, new age spiritualities, and political paranoia, it becomes necessary to find ways to consider the form of dissent presented by conspiracism and its associated forms of activism. Throughout this thesis I navigate the challenge of finding ways to relate to dissent in ways that acknowledge and/or escape the impasse of being either for or against everyday expressions of dissent.

### b) A problem of/for critique

A second related key characteristic that can be identified from the onset in conspiracy theories scholarship, is that it is troubled by the uncanny similarity between its own interpretative

practice and that of its object of study. Conspiracy theories indeed appear to be a problem of critique in instances where conspiracism is taken to symptomatize a degeneration of critique characteristic of our socio-political present. Conspiracism then appears as a problem for critique as many research efforts see the phenomenon of conspiracism as proof that critique, as a hermeneutic of suspicion, is no longer sustainable and must be transformed through other modes of criticality.

Conspiracy theories as a problem of bad critique is perhaps most notably formulated by Karl Popper, who uses the term to strike offense at a tendency he perceives in the sociology of his time. This tendency, for Popper, is manifest when sociological interpretation delivers explanations of state actions through the personification of collectives that act according to their desires and are able to foresee the result of their actions (Popper, 2006). From this vague definition of "bad sociology", escaping "Popper's curse" becomes, according to Luc Boltanski (2012, p. 240), a landmark test for the discipline and its repertoire of metaphors that endeavors to render the operations of power visible without projecting upon it the intentionality of human agency. The line we must travel remains thin and cutting, and echoes Freud's own troubled reflection upon his treatment of paranoia: 'the delusions of patients appear to me to be the equivalents of the constructions which we build up in the course of analytic treatment' (in Melley, 2002, p. 67).

It follows that, taken as an object of sociological inquiry, conspiracy theories find themselves in a particular context where the issue of their definition becomes at the same time an issue of scientific legitimization. Definitional evaluations of conspiracy theories have thus been acknowledged to enact boundary-work, where the strict limits of conspiratorial thinking appear out of the consecration of sophisticated and expert understandings of social relations (Birchall, 2006; McKenzie-McHarg, 2020). The epistemic authority of social science further becomes caught in a game of tug-of-war as conspiracy milieus, in turn, center their critique of scientific dogmatism within their practice of researching and producing alternative knowledge (Harambam and Aupers, 2015). Adding further confusion, these critiques voice condemnations of technocratic certainty and obtuse rationalism in ways that resonate with longstanding concerns within social theory. Such concerns, for example, can be found in research efforts that seek to open their investigations to indeterminate sense-making abilities such as affect (e.g. Massumi, 1995; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995) or to affirm the historically marginalized epistemologies and ontologies of indigenous communities (e.g. Quijano, 2007; Santos, 2016). In this sense, conspiracism as an issue of critique is related to the challenges it poses when it is

understood as an uncertain form of dissent. To reject or put distance between our "good" style of critique and this "bad" monstrous form risks flattening and suppressing transgressive impulses that could subvert the many dogmatisms of modern academia.

This is why conspiracism also becomes a problem for critique in the sense that it poses a challenge to our capacity to practice critique beyond a hermeneutic of suspicion. As argued most powerfully and notably by Bruno Latour (2004), conspiracism performs suspicion so convincingly that one might wonder whether it is, in fact, the illegitimate child of social critique. Acting either by mimicry or defiance – or both - the critical style of conspiracism indeed seems to usurp the very tools of critical inquiry. With the problem of conspiracism, social critique, for Latour, should therefore bear its load of responsibility for spawning this disease of interpretation into the world. The critique of conspiracism as a starting point for the critique of critique therefore becomes a launching pad for many attempts to stage an alternative practice or tone of critique. It is there for Latour to support his mode of descriptive criticism which subverts demystification in favor of descriptions that trace the contour of an assemblage. The burdening presence of conspiracism is also evoked when Rita Felski (2011, p. 45) and Eve Sedgwick (2002, p. 124) initiate experimentations with more affirmative and reparative styles of critique. Rather than proposing a definite guide for critical inquiry, these approaches to critique unite around a desire to foreground different kinds of sensibilities, such as ambivalence, humility, vulnerability, and openness (Ruez and Cockayne, 2021; Diaz *et al.*, 2023).

Throughout this thesis, I therefore stay with the problem of conspiracism as both a problem of critique and a problem for critique, while acknowledging the limits of sociological inquiry into this problem. As I reflect on the limits of a hermeneutic of suspicion, I strive to be cautious about not reproducing the tone of this patronizing critical attitude that may have, in part, gotten us here in the first place. Simultaneously, as elaborated below, I approach the turn away from suspicion with caution, aware that every orthodoxy carries its own set of problems and the risk of naturalizing its own exclusions.

### c) Tracing the moving present with Foucault, Hall, and Berlant

In the middle of the problem of conspiracism as a problem for critique, this thesis is therefore also animated and inspired by a desire to experiment with different styles of critical analysis.

Since this problem is also always caught up in the problem of relating to an uncertain form of dissent, this thesis also struggles through the challenges of chronicling resistance without starting from the position of being for or against. Along the way and in situated cases, I remain committed to expressing political judgment, but I hold that when abstracted to the level of "conspiracism" as a broad category, such judgment becomes meaningless. With these tensions and limits in mind, I turn to a style of analysis committed to teasing out the historical significance and complexity of a given conjuncture. But, following Berlant (2011, p.124), in making these moves 'I also resist idealizing, even implicitly, any program of better thought or reading'.

To do this, I draw inspiration from multiple sources that I read as being united around the project of tracing the moving present. In turning to these various sources, I selectively draw elements I find to be analytically generative for what each moment of analysis demands. As I trace this way for myself, I remain loosely committed to any definite style of critical analysis. Although this lack of commitment could be placed on the side of weakness or imprecision, I conceptualize it instead as stemming from a prior commitment to concerns and questions that don't neatly align with any single analytical framework. Or, as Cindi Katz (2017, p. 596) puts it, I can certainly 'talk the talk', but still refuse to take it all the way to absolute mastery. This is in part a politics of refusal, which attempts to resist the masculinist capture of speculative modes of analysis under the dogma of certain and fixed genealogies of thought. It is also then a politics turned towards the promise of experimentation in its ability to generate lines of escape from dogmatic images of thought (Deleuze and Guattari, 1975; Deleuze, 2011). With these commitments quietly acting in the background of this thesis, I therefore pick analytical tools from a variety of sources with the hope of crafting an analytical framework opened to individuation and the unexpected.

In Michel Foucault's framework of problematization, I find the articulation of the problem of knowing what our present is (Foucault, 1994, 1996). By focusing on problematizations, Foucault enters the problem of collective historical and social actualities by seizing moments when new objects enter the domain of collective knowledge. Problematization, as a critical method, assesses how these objects become identified, singularized, and associated with specific problems. To do this, Foucault traces the new practices of regulations, assessment, and compliance that emerge or are revealed in these moments, and which draw new possibilities for us to know and see ourselves. By centering his analyses on marginal experiences and their institutional responses, Foucault's gambit is that a

system will not become known by interrogating it from the inside (what is reason?) but will come to be known by understanding its breaking points and margins (what is insanity?). While his work is often referred to and remembered as being chiefly preoccupied with the structuring effect of institutions, I read in Foucault's work a great preoccupation for the collective subjective experiences that can exist alongside historical transformations. For example, following the creation of letters of denunciation to be addressed to the king in 18th-century France, a breach opens through which 'a murmuring that shall know no bounds [begins] to swell: the one through which the individual variations in conduct, the disgraces and the secrets are offered up through discourse to the clasp of power' (Foucault, 1979, p. 86)[3]. In Foucault's description, a murmur of discontent did not wait for letters of denunciation to exist, and as it rushed into the breach opened by this technique of power, it exceeded the intentions of this technique and created new opportunities of action. In Foucault, I am therefore intrigued by an ability to trace the present in which dynamics between intimate and public orders are chronicled in ways that do not presume a primacy of effects of one over the other.

In Stuart Hall and his colleagues' (Hall *et al.*, 2019) framework of the 'moral panic', I find a way to enter the problem of collective experiences of the present through the crystallization and displacement of various uncertainties about the present onto a diffused threat. I initially turned to this framework because it is the primary explanatory tool used in conspiracy theory scholarship to explain the discrepancy between the public concern for conspiracism and its actual impact on the socio-political body (Bratich, 2008; Birchall and Knight, 2023). However, I find that much of this scholarship falls short of connecting the moral panic framework to a broader project of developing a conjunctural analysis of the present. In conjunctural analysis, I find a way 'to understand politically active "situations", critical junctures, unfolding crises, or problem spaces, which in turn are understood to be embedded in (and constituted with) social formations, often in circumstances of disruption or transformation' (Peck, 2023). But nevertheless, I still do not pretend to be "doing a conjunctural analysis", insofar as what I find and borrow in conjunctural analysis is not a strictly defined method but a style and tone that can supplement and disrupt other practices of critique (Anderson, 2021; Peck, 2024). In line with Lawrence Grossberg (2019), I situate my work in a conjunctural project, which can only ever be partial, collective, and tentative. What I take as the most distinctive element of this style of critique – and which I try to carry with me

[3] On the subject of Foucault's archival work on ordinary lives and the interplays between intimate and public orders also see his collaborative work with Arlette Farge, as well as Farge's (1994) work on popular opinion.

throughout this thesis – is the merger of a speculative and propositional tone with an attention for explanations. This practice of multiplying speculative claims about causality as sets of conditions is indeed what sets this style of critique apart from other more descriptive and contextualizing styles of critique (e.g. assemblage theory and its methods (e.g. Vannini, 2015a) and affect related work (e.g. Stewart, 2007)) (Anderson, 2021; Anderson and Secor, 2022).

In Lauren Berlant's work (2011), and other related work on collective affective life (e.g. Ahmed, 2004; Anderson, 2014; Closs Stephens, 2022), I find ways to characterize and analyze what I already detect in Foucault's interest in collective 'murmurs' or Hall's interest in the collective sense of a diffuse threat. I therefore draw inspiration from Berlant's (2011, p. 4) insight that 'the present is perceived, first, affectively' when I speculate about the mood which can color collective experiences of the present. If, indeed, conjunctural analysis demands the construction of complementary material-structural and affective maps (Grossberg, 2019), then Berlant provides the language that can rigorously construct the latter. This is partly because, from Berlant, I also draw a sense of fidelity to taking seriously the work of understanding feelings beyond the act of naming their existence. In the background of Berlant's work is indeed a psychoanalytically informed theorization of the splits, blockages, and defenses that give rise to specific modes of attachments (e.g. cruel optimism) (Seitz, 2023). My encounter with collective feelings - as I notice their trace or as they become repeatedly named as structuring an experience of conspiracism – is therefore informed by an understanding of the unconscious psychic structures that force themselves into the world in the form of collective feelings. In that sense, this thesis is also indebted and contributes to other geographical work which centers the overwhelming presence of the unconscious into collective life (Pile and Kingsbury, 2014; Kapoor, 2018; Secor and Kingsbury, 2021; Secor, 2023).

As I began this thesis in the middle of the problem of conspiracism as a problem of an uncertain form of dissent and a problem of critique, I sought to establish a mode of analysis which could meaningfully engage with these problems while navigating their tensions. In this way, the critical ethos animating the thesis focuses on tracing how this formation comes to matter, take shape, and move affectively across the conjuncture we inhabit. Refusing the lure of mastery and the security of pre-established frameworks of analysis, I embrace a position of in-betweenness that seeks to respond to the problems at hand.

## 1.3. Methodology and methods

In this section I provide an overview of the methodology and methods used throughout my PhD. For this section, I present my methodology as investigating separately: the social construction of a problem and the lived reality of a problem. This is a necessarily artificial distinction that I make to explain the choices of methodology for this project. In the chapters to come, I offer different methodological frameworks that blur the distinction between these two categories. This section will also give an overview of the methods I used throughout the PhD, namely: discourse analysis of news media, digital observation, interviews, and participant observation.

This project is grounded in a case study of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, focusing on the rise of anti-vaccination protests and sentiments during the Covid-19 pandemic. I chose this case study as it helped establish a concrete starting point for my research - with a clear temporal mark beginning in 2020 and traceable ongoing effects in the present. However, this does not mean that I only gathered data that relates to vaccine conspiracism. In my analysis of news media, vaccine conspiracism and anti-vaccination movements are often framed as symptoms of the broader post-truth crisis. And in articles published after the height of the pandemic, vaccine conspiracism is often portrayed as a driving force behind the post-truth crisis. My ethnographic work with anti-vaccine mandates groups has also shown me that, while these groups had formed around the concern of opposing vaccine mandates, they had since then constituted into a larger movement (Freedom/Truth movement) opposing and theorizing the state as an entity of control felt through the implementation of certain policies (e.g. '15-minute cities') and the threat of a plot for world governance (e.g. 'the new world order', 'the great reset'). So, while anti-vaccination conspiracism is the broad anchor that allowed me to start generating data, the materials that I eventually gathered for analysis are not limited to conspiracy theories on vaccines. See for example this picture (Figure 1) of a board displayed by participants of outreach events in Newcastle - with whom I participated in observation and interviews - which summarizes key concerns related to a broader 'great reset' of which medical mandates are only one aspect amongst many.

Figure 1- a board summarizing key concerns for outreach events in Newcastle

a) Tracing the construction of a crisis

By tracing the construction of a crisis, I mean to understand how conspiracism becomes named, felt, and recognized as a problem. If the problematization of conspiracism is, as Bratich (2008, p. 13) suggests, a 'diffuse anxiety over a diffuse menace', then I am concerned with how to follow and make sense of what is only subtly or vaguely felt. More broadly, how does the problem of truth and our "shared reality" emerge in this new form amid a sense of disruption that crosses the economic, political, social, and cultural? In this section, I therefore stay with the problem of representing 'the feeling of the present as it emerges' (McCormack, 2023, p. 68). This problem engages reflections about representation, the im/possibilities of attunement, uneven fields of affectability, and the blurred lines between being an affected subject and being a researcher with a research timeline. After giving a brief overview of the genealogy of geographical work that grapple with these questions, I reflect on some of the problems raised by the promises of attunement as a key method to identify and trace socio-political feelings in a moving present. I then show how I supplemented and extended a traditional method of discourse analysis by reflecting on the concern and limits of attuning to the moving present. As work influenced and inspired by conjunctural analysis continues its 'search for method' (Grossberg, 2019; Peck, 2024, p. 505), I indeed find in discourse analysis a way to give weight and an anchor to the archival practice that always trails a sense of attunement.

- Attunement

The questions of knowing and representing the present as it emerges engage a long history of geographical work that grapples with the problem of representing what always escapes or silently shapes experience (e.g. Thrift, 1996; Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000; Harrison and Anderson, 2016b). Running through my own inquiries and engagements with non-representational geographies is a similar concern for the capture of emergent processes under stale systems of representations that crush the possibility of engaging with the new. Different modes of responses to this problem have given birth to their own methodological inclinations, most notably: performativity (Dewsbury, 2009; Vannini, 2015a, 2015b), a particular attention to the body and proprioception (Colls, 2007; McCormack, 2008; Paterson, 2009), engaging and representing under-researched categories of experience (Gallagher, Kanngieser and Prior,

2017; McCormack, 2018), and experimentation with creative methods that attend to the excess of events (Gibbs, 2007, 2014; Cameron, 2012).

Amongst these methodological inclinations, the practice of attunement is a distinctive promise that runs undercurrent many efforts to stay with the emergence of the present. If this body of work can indeed be united around a shared concern for emergence, then attunement, on many occasions, becomes the principle that inflects modes of responses to this concern. In some occasions, it is referred to as a response to the too-muchness of the world, and names a range of methods that strive, but can never succeed, to tune in the eventfulness of the world (Stewart, 2011; Ash and Gallacher, 2015; Brigstocke and Noorani, 2016; McCormack, 2018). As a gesture of openness to the plural materialities of the world, attunement here is concerned with the relation between the individual and the pre-symbolized world. In another strand, attunement becomes a different kind of promise, as it names a gesture towards the emergence of shared feelings that compose and emerge from socio-political shifts (Berlant, 2008[4]; Anderson, 2014; Stephens, 2022). Here the difference lies in the intuition that a certain kind of intuition can be enhanced and turned towards a particular *something* already brewing across and shaping the socio-political field. Attunement here names a disposition to cultivate in order to stay in the middle of a process of mediation while 'rejecting any kind of privileging of the interiorization (of thought) or mirrored reflection/representation (of a separable outside world)' (Seigworth and Coleman, 2023, p. 181). At the heart of the call to '[learn] to attune' (Anderson, 2014, p. 115), is therefore the conviction that the social and historical happen in and through shared affective processes.

As I seek to understand how conspiracism becomes an object of concern, partly through the sense of its danger, the promises of attunement have therefore become important. This methodological disposition nevertheless brings a range of challenges. First, attunement is a process that always enfolds through mis-attunement. As an embodied process, attunement takes shape in an uneven field of vulnerability, where identity, experiences, and capacities matter to how 'the hum of the world' (Berlant, 2011, p. 34) can be encountered (Ahmed, 2014; Zhang, 2020; Yao, 2021). This is not a limit that deals a death blow to a methodology of attunement, but rather a constitutive element that deserves to be noted[5]. When trying to become attuned to how socio-political objects take shape atmospherically, for example, it is also important to

[4] While the word attunement is not present in this article, intuition, as a close correlate, is the term that Lauren Berlant picks to discuss how historical situations become sensed as historical events.
[5] See section 1. 'Why study conspiracism (in this way) now' for an attempt at naming the limits of my capacity to attune.

cultivate a certain degree of mis-attunement in order to, at least temporarily, resist the wave of common-sense that conditions how this object can become known.

Second, the processes through which the affective can be tracked as a research object remain unclear. Methodological overviews of attunement indeed tend to focus on the difficulties of representing what takes place at the level of the affective and atmospheric, once attunement has been achieved. These methods can vary between the descriptions of embodied sensations (McCormack, 2008, 2018), representational tactics such as naming an atmosphere or listing its elements (Anderson and James, 2015), or rich contextual descriptions (Stewart, 2007; Berlant and Stewart, 2019). But what comes before attunement remains less clear. What, indeed, comes before attunement for the possibility of attunement to even emerge as a possibility for a research project? For Kathleen Stewart (2011, p. 445), this distinction seems irrelevant since the processes of attunement is 'a kind of haptic description in which the analyst discovers her object of analysis by writing out its inhabited elements in a space and time'. In this perspective, attunement is an ongoing practice or sensibility tied to the personhood of the researcher rather than a separate method that can be picked up for a research project. One of the immediate difficulties of 'learning to attune' to the affective and atmospheric is therefore that it supposes a stability – of self, employment, knowledge - that feels misaligned with the instabilities of early academic life. For me, this has meant that attunement felt more like catching up to what I was already incoherently sensing, rather than a deliberate choice of method.

Thirdly, attunement as a method to identify socio-political feelings is an archival practice. This is something that mainly goes unsaid in research that attempts to describe political feelings. Angharad Closs Stephens, for example, proposes to trace national affects through experiences that 'describe a sense of being enclosed in ideas about 'us and them', before the moment passed, changed or shifted' (Closs Stephens, 2022, p. 6). Ben Anderson and Anna Secor similarly offer propositions which describe and speculate over the affective qualities which condition the emergence of right-wing populism (Anderson and Secor, 2022). But whether the affective is offered through propositions or experiences, its trace is always evidenced through an assemblage of newspaper articles, YouTube videos, political speeches, and mass-market books that hints at an archival practice that is only visible as a cluster of references. What I mean by this is that contemporary geographical work on political affect is very much focus on naming its methodology – the theoretical framework informing its research choices – and not so much in describing its methods - the actual practice of gathering evidence

and information. Perhaps in an effort to distance itself from research that has tended to overestimate the media's ability to prime and perfectly mirror the mood of a given public (e.g. Hall *et al.*, 2019), this research on political affect seems to avoid making its media archiving practices explicit. Mediation in this line of work cannot simply be synonym for the media, and yet, it remains the case that 'affects are invisible without their mediation through such forms … Affects show up when they rise from the petri dish of the culture' (Ingraham, 2023, p. 161).

Here again by counting on the presence of a personal archive (Blackman, 2023) that can trace the presence of emergent affects, attunement is tied to the personhood of the researcher - as the fabric upon which this personal archive of feelings can be registered. There is therefore something frustrating about the ways often-romanticized stories of becoming attuned to the 'hum of the world' thereby hide the brutality of doing this labour. To be able to trace emerging affects means being constantly "plugged in" to the many ways its emergence draws visible traces in a shared culture. But as I tried to retrace steps that I didn't remember taking, in a field of affectability that I wasn't sure I belonged to, I found no guide that could help me name a definite method. The closest thing that seemed available in the catalogue of neat research methods taught in university classrooms was discourse analysis. But discourse analysis still always felt like coming up short of composing a personal archive. To identify a specific media and specific dates of inquiry may be requirements of doing research in a university setting, but they also create distance between a research object and a researcher that felt contrary to a practice of attunement. To truly attune to my object of study it felt like I would have to reduce the distance between myself and this object. In practice this means that my analysis could no longer consist of a fixed set of newspaper articles but had to include any medium that could register a trace of the feelings that accompanied the constitution of conspiracism as a distinctive problem. Attunement therefore blurs the line between living and producing knowledge. The archive *it* composes is inevitably more fragmented than what can be directly represented through citation or even captured in conscious introspection – organizing itself incoherently in the background of life through: songs, jokes, YouTube videos, Twitch streams, adverts, social media trends, memes, bodily and emotional reactions etc. More than absolute and mastered knowledge, attunement produces a diffuse sense arising from the pressures of (over)exposure and absorption.

- Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis, as a way of reading that tracks the installation and circulation of common-sense (Waitt, 2005), is what I found to be aligning the most closely to my aim of following the trace of emergent feelings. Discourse analysis indeed always already includes a reflection on feelings insofar as texts and representations are thought to mirror and influence public feelings, while also functioning through affective means (Paltridge, 2012). Doing research on collective feelings nevertheless varies from doing traditional discourse analysis, in its distinctive approach to mediation as a processual middle (Pedwell, 2023). This shift is elusive, as it can simply mean adopting a different orientation and tone to the way the media is theorised and positioned in stories of emergence. For John Durham Peters (2022) this could mean reviving the 'the middle voice, a grammatical in-between that is neither passive nor active, but almost reflexive ... Once you could say, *the meal is eating*, but now we would need to say, *the meal is being eaten*. *The meal is eating* sounds weird—precisely because the agency is off; it's neither passive, with an unidentified agent, nor active, with an identified one.' In this way, attunement becomes not only a mode of sensing, but a method of writing. Whatever stylistic or grammatical device supplements or disrupts traditional discourse analysis, reworking discourse analysis to account for affect also means learning to tell stories that stay with immanence.

The main way in which I trace the construction of the crisis therefore remains through a traditional method of discourse analysis – albeit stretched in the ways described above. This means that I conducted a textual analysis of 578[6] newspaper articles published from December 2019 to July 2023 (when I started my analysis) in *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, containing the key words 'conspiracy theories' and 'vaccines'. The goal of this analysis was to understand how the category of conspiracism was discursively composed during that time, what unwritten assumptions underwire its composition, and what ideologies and fantasies underwire its enunciation. The analysis started with a quantitative overview of the articles, mapping their publication dates onto a timeline of events happening at the same time. I followed this first overview with an analysis of the headlines, and finally I read the articles and extracted passages that related to different patterns: the vocabulary used to describe conspiracy theories; the lab break/natural origin discourse; conspiracism as a threat; explanations of the causes of conspiracism; ambiguities and ambivalence about conspiracy theories; the

[6] This number is an estimate, as some articles retrieved from the GALE digital database appeared more than once or in slightly altered versions, having been repurposed for international editions of the newspaper.

relationship between conspiracy theories and science. Doing this close reading also allowed me to gain access to a variety of other media and events that were covered in the articles: speeches delivered by political or public figures (e.g. UN News, 2021), polls (e.g. Ipsos MORI, 2020) or events (e.g. tennis player Novak Djokovic missing an Australian tournament because of his stance on vaccines).

In addition to doing this formal discourse analysis, I also kept a diary to reflect on my evolving intuitions about my object of study:

> There is a trend that I'm struggling to pin down but that conflates conspiracism with other political or not so political "things" like misinformation, the far right or extremism. Many representations are attached to this, but mainly it gives a sense of equivalency between many forms of protest and dissensus. This is mostly apparent in articles after Covid, but I'm struggling to extract anything meaningful, because it just comes in the form of long list of these things.
> (Diary entry: 13/10/2023)

In this entry I express frustration at not being able to extract anything 'meaningful' in the form of a definite quote that could express my sense of the problematization of conspiracism. The constant juxtaposition of conspiracism with other forms of dissent and expressions of political radicality, is not something I can definitely catch. Keeping this diary, amongst other forms of writing, allowed me to keep track and work through my own uncertainties and intuitions. In addition to formal codes, it allowed me to register gaps in articulation or accumulations of tropes that matter to the development of my own sense of the texts.

In this section I have offered some reflections on the limits of the promise of attunement as a method to identify and trace socio-political feelings. I present some of the ways I have sought to extend my original plan to carry discourse analysis, not as a definite answer to these limits, but as an attempt to stay within these tensions. I have suggested that if the capacities of attunement of the researcher are centred as a research method, they cannot be presumed to take place in a shared field of affectability. This calls for conscious efforts to articulate the researcher's positionality as an affected subject. Secondly, doing discourse analysis with the perspective of attuning and tracking the moving present requires a different kind of orientation to a media archive. Here, tone and style matter to how media are understood to register traces

and exert effects, without assuming them to be the sole origin or determining force. Thirdly, to attend to and record the researcher's shifting intuitions over time. It remains that there are not enough considerations of the practice of attunement as a form of labour that blurs the lines between researching and being. For now, I wonder, if opening such considerations will begin with more honest conversations about the work that goes into building personal archives. From here we may consider: what can count as evidence when our research tools blend with our own sense of being? Could we imagine ways to constitute and share open access archives that track the sense of the time? How can the limits of self-awareness and self-control be written into stories of attunement?

Before turning to the portion of the methods grappling with 'the lived reality' of the crisis, I would like to finish this section by offering some initial and brief reflections on the viability of doing discourse analysis centred on newspaper in an age of social media. This is because relying on the written press to track a sense of the time may seem outdated in an age where social media seems to eclipse any stable notion of "public opinion". While the availability of an even and unified "public opinion" has never truly been attainable, it is certain that social media creates a range of difficulties for the qualitative research of a shared sense of the present. But beyond the inexistence of a "before" where a "public opinion" was easily available for research, I would like to bring some nuances to stories which position social media as an unknowable black box holding an infinity of fragmented publics. First, there is a specific relation between conspiracism and journalism that makes a discursive analysis of the written press pertinent. In an era of shifting information flows, journalism is a key player in knowing conspiracism as it emerges as an object that threatens to erase its distinctiveness as a profession (see Farkas and Schou, 2018, 2019; Farkas, 2023). Second, social media and news media are not two separate realms. News media articles often react to social media trends; social media feeds can be partly made up of media organizations and journalists; twitch streamers provide live commentary of newspaper articles; some social media influencers aim to be relays in communicating journalistic and scientific information (see for example the trend of 'zetetic' in France (Sartenaer, 2020)). Third, while social media certainly reshapes the field of information, providing a wide access to different voices, it doesn't mean that they are met with the same level of trust and beliefs. (e.g. news media received on TV or Radio broadcasts are still seen as the most trustworthy source for a majority of people interrogated, when social media is the least trusted (see JIGSAW research, 2018; Ofcom, 2018)).

b) Tracing the lived reality of a crisis

By tracing the lived reality of the crisis, I mean trying to understand how conspiracism, as an always uncertain category of thought and subjectivity, is enacted and made legible in everyday practices. Or, to put it bluntly, I am interested in understanding the things that people are doing that are being named conspiracism. Within the broader scope of the thesis, the goal is to identify patterned forms through which the loose and shifting boundaries of conspiracism become socially and politically meaningful.

An immediate difficulty that arises from researching the lived reality of conspiracism is that it is fundamentally a relational category bound up with struggles for epistemic authority[7] (Harambam, 2020). To delimit a field of study therefore raises the questions of how to decide who is a conspiracy theorist, and what counts as conspiracy theory. One way to stay with the socio-political tensions of the problematization of conspiracism, is to adopt, following Jaron Harambam (2020), a relational approach to the demarcation of a field of study. This means following 'what is seen and labelled as' the conspiracist milieu (Harambam, 2020, p.36).

I had a prior knowledge of what would be seen and labelled as conspiracism from reading articles from debunking units (e.g. Les Décodeurs du Monde) and from visiting the site Conspiracy Watch: *l'observatoire du conspirationnisme* (which roughly translates to The Conspiracism Watchdog). This, combined with my analysis of the British news media, made it apparent that anti-vaccine mandate protests were widely understood to be driven by conspiracy theories. I therefore restricted my field of inquiry to groups which had originated around a concern for vaccination mandates. As time went on, I also included the internal demarcations that I noticed in my ethnographic work. Both in digital spaces and in conversation, the terms 'Freedom'[8] or 'Truth movement' were regularly invoked to describe a sense of belonging to a larger movement. I also noticed the terms being sporadically used in the British press (e.g. Badham, 2022), even though the broader term 'anti-vaxx movement' was largely preferred. On a few occasions, some people, however, contested these terms when I approached them online, putting forward a concern for not wanting to be perceived as being a formal political movement. I nevertheless continued to use these terms as a way to approach people and choose online spaces to observe, as I needed a coherent thread that would allow me to follow a phenomenon

[7] Chapter 3 returns to these issues in more depth
[8] The term 'freedom movement' in this instance probably originates from the 2022 Canadian 'freedom convoy' organized to oppose COVID-19 vaccine mandates for cross-border truck drivers.

with a recognizable and shared core. While I had never used Telegram before this project, I also knew from reading the press that it was an online space which had fewer moderation rules than other messaging applications or social media platforms, and that as a result, it was known for being used for a variety of marginal activities. I originally planned to carry digital observation on multiple social media platforms, but as I started to notice that groups related to the Freedom movement were mainly active on Telegram, I decided to make it my main digital field site.

What follows is a chronological account of how I conducted my research through digital observation, participant observation, and interviews. This account serves to illustrate how I navigated the process of accessing the field and building relationships with participants – specifically, in the context of doing research with hard-to-reach[9] groups in an online context, which raises distinct ethical and trust-related challenges.

- Digital Observation[10]

The first step[11] in selecting and accessing my digital field site involved entering keywords into google and Telegram search functions - terms I had identified through my media analysis as commonly associated with the concerns of the freedom movement: *covid vaccine injuries/damage/side effects*, *freedom fighters*, *freedom activists*, *truth protests*, *vaccine mandates*, and *mandatory vaccines*. While digital observation often dissolves geographical boundaries - especially on platforms like Telegram where users can join from anywhere - I aimed to narrow my focus to the UK, as I intended to recruit participants for interviews and in-person observation. To do this, I combined the original keywords with geographic markers such as "UK," "Newcastle," or "Durham," and also consulted local news coverage to identify relevant groups in specific areas.

[9] Participants of the freedom movement constitute a hard-to-reach population because they often display mistrust towards researchers (whom they often conflate with journalists, anticipating similar misrepresentation), but also because they have retrenched to parts of the internet where they can escape the moderation of bigger platforms like Facebook or Twitter.

[10] In this section I do not reference sociological or geographical work on digital life as I approach digital spaces as a means to gain access to a phenomenon and population that I couldn't have reached. This is different from approaches to the digital which are concerned with the specificity of digital mediation in organizing online/offline life (e.g. Ash *et al.*, 2018; Ash, Kitchin and Leszczynski, 2018). While it would be interesting to research the specific relation between the digital and conspiracism, this is not my concern here.

[11] I started digital observation in November 2023 and stopped gathering new material in April 2024

My second step was to focus on five Telegram public discussion groups[12]. I chose these first groups because they all seemed to capture a different facet of the description of vaccine conspiracism that I had already encountered in media analysis and my literature review (libertarianism, the feminisation of this specific conspiracism and the question of children and care, the prolongation of this conspiracism through the tracking of injuries, the specific involvement of health care workers and the formation of a specific activism organised around the question of mandates/the judicial)[13]. For each conversation I went back to the creation of the channels (2021) and used different colour highlighters to identify common themes and concerns (see figure 2). Going back to the creation of these channels allowed me to see how the purpose of these channels was articulated, the rules that structured them, and the moments when conversations reached repetitions. By identifying moments of repetition and circularity in their conversation (e.g. how they couldn't decide on a mode of action), I was able to get a better sense of what still held them together in spite of the apparent failure of their primary purpose. This step also allowed me to understand the history of the constitution of the freedom movement: most of these groups had formed in 2021 out of fear that mandates in their workplaces would force them to be vaccinated; by joining these online groups they sought to help each other by sharing (pseudo)legal ways to evade mandates (e.g. templates to use with employers). At some point they organized offline events in the form of formal protests or weekly meetup and outreach events. When the threat of vaccine mandates disappeared, the groups became much less active, a small group keeps sharing information on current events and theories and continue to meet weekly for outreach events.

[12] Telegram is constituted of chats which are divided into two categories: channels and groups. Channels are used to share information to which people can react via comments and emoticons (depending on what the owner of the channel decides to allow). Groups are discussion chats monitored by admins where any member can post and interact with others.

[13] In this section, and throughout this thesis, I do not provide the names of the groups that I research. I come back to this in my discussion of the ethical challenges of my research.

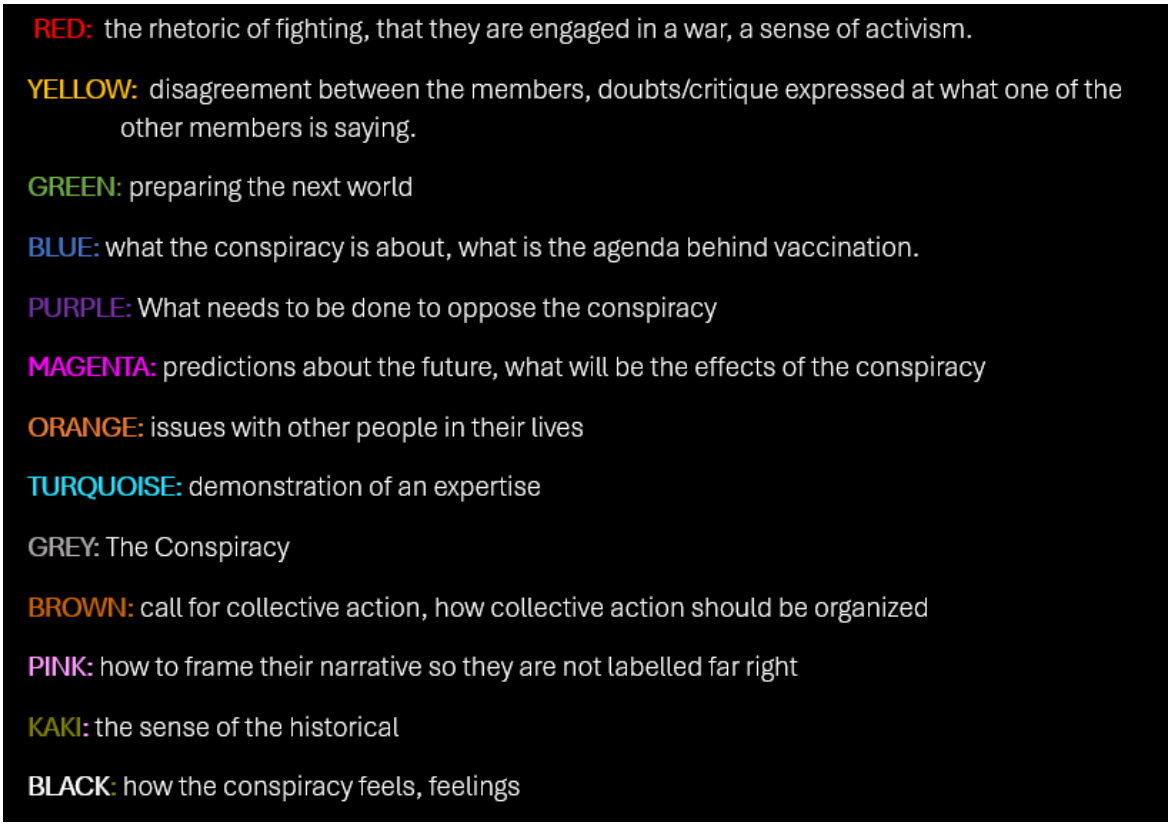

Figure 2- codes for one the observed group discussion

These first conversations presented a launching pad into the freedom movement, as I had access to invitations into other groups, recommendations of certain groups (mentioned in the groups and eventually in interviews) and gained knowledge of certain keywords. Joining more groups and channels eventually snowballed into what is now an innumerable number of channels and groups. This is (according to interviews) a common experience for people who join these chat groups. From here data generation mostly took the form of field notes which I took every day as I read through the new posts which had been posted since the previous day. Depending on the time I had that day, I would sometimes privilege certain chats which I perceived to have the most impact in the ecology of the chats that I follow (they organize most of the outreach events, are the most structured, have the most followers, are the most active, are referenced the most in interviews). Since digital observation enables specific possibilities of capture (copy/paste, saving documents, extracting chats into pdfs) I was able to also augment my field notes with the capture of information presented through various mediums (see figure 3). Given the potentially infinite amount of information available online, I was selective in what I chose to capture. I prioritized content that offered something notably new, that exemplified familiar patterns in especially clear or compelling ways, or that provoked a strong emotional response in me. To avoid the trap of endlessly collecting data without engaging

deeply with it, I developed a regular practice: on the first day of each month, I printed out all the material I had gathered over the previous month and reviewed it closely, together with what I had already printed in previous months. This allowed me to reflect on emerging patterns, revisit earlier observations, and draw new connections across the data.

| Data | Type of Data | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Daily Field observations | Field observations, journbal notes and reflections | The notes that I made daily while observing the channels/groups and reading posts. These are important to identify the key themes and concerns that circulate within these communities. |
| Saved messages | Telegram posts | Messages that are shared in groups and channels. These are selected because they address an important dimension of these communities (something previously idenified or, on the contrary, unexpected, that goes against common expectations of what these communities would be interested in), or that addresses topics that are the subject of much debate/reactions in the group. |
| Pinned messages | Telegram posts | The pinned messages of Telegram Groups. These are the messages that administrators have decided to 'pin' as important messages in the group. I am taking these messages as indicators of what matters the most to the groups. |
| Saved images | Images (photos, memes, drawings...) | Images that are shared in groups and channels. I have selected these because they capture an important dimension of the movement (they are shared multiple times, accross many groups or capture a theme previsouly identified) an/or they create a lot of reactions in the chat. These are used to evidence what is important for these groups, but also a potential images to show during interviews to prompt discussion. |
| Documents | Infographics, leaflets manifestos, templates, charters, articles etc. | Various documents collected on sites, or telegram posts. These are mainly used to evidence the main concerns of these communities via documents they have created to inform the general public. Letter templates addressed to various authorities also represent a significant portion of these documents as they evidence the concerns of these communities, but also constitute a distinctive political strategy within these communities (such templates are also shared directly via telegram posts and as such are also collected via saved messages). |
| Videos | Documentaries, vlogs, live streams, interviews etc. | Videos shared in groups and channels. I have selected these because they capture an important dimension of the movement (they are shared multiple times, accross many groups or capture a theme previsouly identified) an/or they create a lot of reactions in the chat. |

Figure 3 - summary of data generated through digital observation

- Ethical considerations of doing internet research

This chronological outline of this digital observation has sought to show how I navigated concerns around the excess of information available online, and accessing and selecting a field site in the context of hard-to-reach population. In this section I reflect on some of the key ethical challenges of doing this research, as doing online research presents distinctive ethical challenges which necessarily orient choices of the collection and representation of data.

One key ethical concern in conducting online research is whether one can and should ask for people's informed consent when passively collecting publicly available data (Hewson, 2021). While seeking informed consent is always ideal, it is not always feasible in research such as mine, which involves large-scale online spaces with numerous participants - some of whom had deactivated their accounts by the time of data collection. It is not, however, possible to determine that publicly shared posts can be collected with no regard for the users' consent. While content may be posted in public forums or channels, users might not be fully aware that these posts are accessible to researchers or could be repurposed for academic publication. Moreover, the boundary between public and private spaces is often blurred on the internet: users may be posting on public channels, but in the private comfort of their homes; privacy settings of channels may change over time; a public online space may be public but nevertheless feel private when it involves a niche subject or has a limited number of participants (Hewson, 2021; Cera, 2023).

A second key ethical risk associated with doing research online involves ensuring participant anonymity and sensibly representing the data. The representation of data and anonymity are joint concerned in digital research because pseudo anonymization is not enough to guarantee anonymity. Direct quotes scraped from an online forum could be linked to a user through an internet search engine. One way to address this issue may be to create composite representations of online posts that have been collected. But this solution raises concerns around the mischaracterization of meaning and the credibility of that fabricated data (Cera, 2023).

To mitigate the ethical risk involved with using someone's data without their explicit consent, I have therefore adopted these precautionary measures:

1. Only access public channels with more than 500 followers.

2. Use a public profile which clearly states that I am a researcher with a link to my institutional page and email.
3. Describe data rather than represent or fabricate (following Cera, 2023). This means providing a qualitative account of the posts encountered online rather than using collected or fabricated materials. This, however, engages the credibility of my account which I try to strengthen by corroborating my description with anonymized interview quotes, and accounts from academic and journalistic sources which report similar patterns (as in chapter 3).

I offer these reflections on some key ethical concerns of doing internet research not as a way to offer an absolute guide or way out of these concerns, but as a way to open a discussion on how to navigate these relatively new ethical concerns. To be sure, the risks I identify here are present in any research, but their mitigation produce new challenges for the representation of data in research outputs.

- Interviews and participant observation

In this section I continue to provide a step-by-step account of my ethnographic research[14] with the freedom movement through interviews and participant observation. From here, my research involves one on one interactions with participants which raises distinct questions about recruiting people online and doing research with activists with whom I don't share political aims and ideals. In the following section I reflect on how doing research in this context poses particular ethical challenges around managing participants' expectations and understanding of the research.

The first step of my ethnographic work has been to find a way to reach out to people that could, at the same time, be simple enough for a non-specialized audience and be short enough to be mindful of the time people could devote to me, while not misleading people about my research. The challenge of remaining truthful about my research was also complicated by my own uncertainties about what my thesis would end up being about. For a period of time, when I had just discovered the existence of the 'freedom movement', I believed that my project

[14] This phase of the research consisted of 17 interviews and participant observation with a group of the freedom movement doing outreach events in Newcastle. Interviews lasted between 1 and 5 hours and consisted of less semi-structed interviews (see interview guide in annex). I participated in 4 outreach events where participants distributed flyers and newspapers to passers-by. These events lasted between 2 and 4 hours during which I observed the event and engaged in discussions with participants.

would focus on freedom, for instance. As a first contact with people, I therefore focused on explaining that I was contacting and interested in their perspective as participants of the freedom movement (see figure 4).

Once I initiated a conversation with someone, and as I encouraged them to ask questions about my research and the research process, I explained how my interest in the freedom movement stemmed from my broader research on the politics of truth, conspiracism, and from the fact that members of the freedom movement were labelled as conspiracy theorists. But explaining my stance on conspiracism was consistently delicate. Participants were happy to know that I questioned the labelled. But I worried that, in trying to keep my explanations accessible and build trust, I might be inadvertently misrepresenting my position - potentially leading them to believe that I would defend their activism in my papers. My department's internal ethics process had prepared me to protect the identity and data of my participants (something that my participants didn't really care about), but I was not ready to navigate how much they would care about how they would be represented in research outputs. This is a line I would consistently have to tread carefully with participants - and to which I come back to in the next section on the ethical considerations of doing research on the freedom movement.

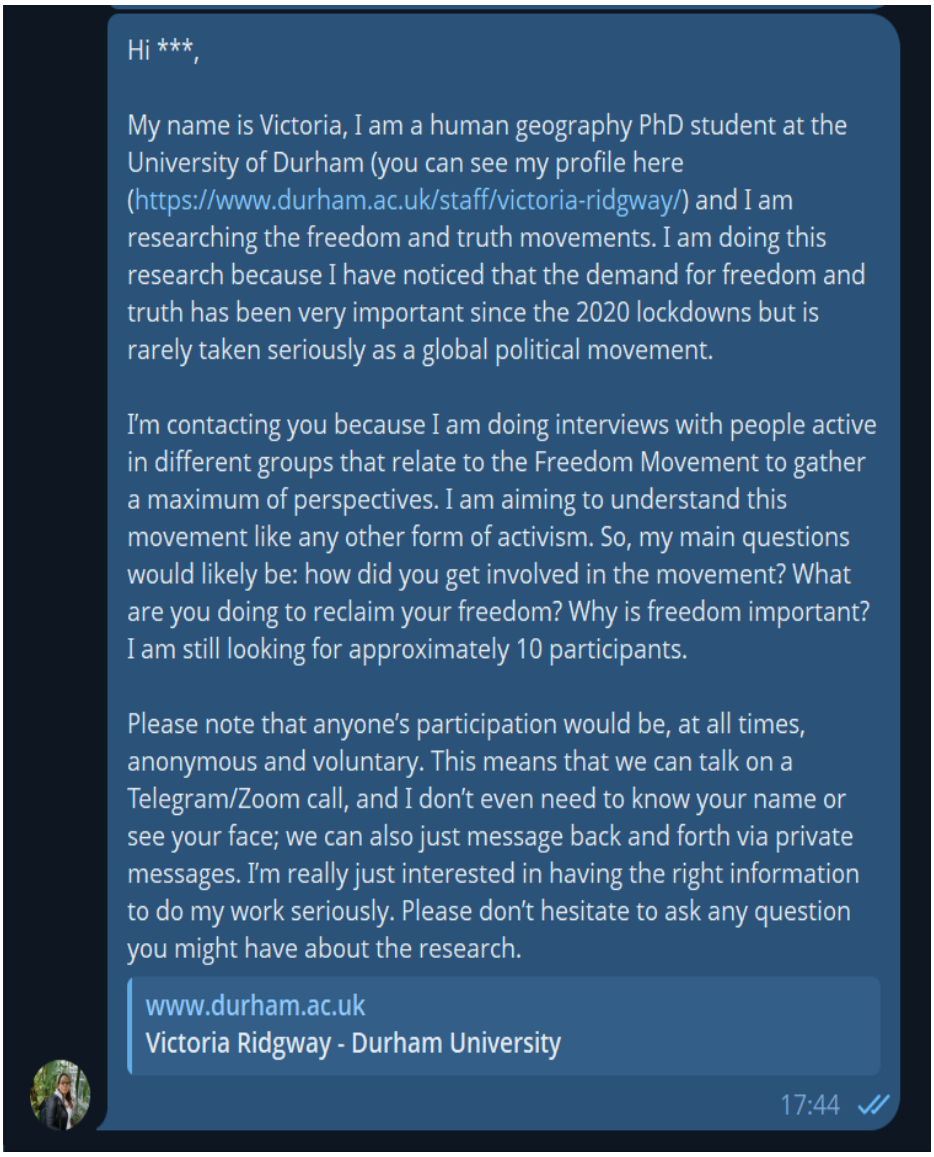


Figure 4 - example of a message I sent to establish contact with participants

Another, related, difficulty of establishing contact with people in an online context was finding people to contact and who would agree to talk with me. In total I sent 68 different messages to either individuals or groups of people on Telegram or via email, and only 11 responded positively – from there I made other contacts through snowballing. Although online research might appear to offer the advantage of reaching a large number of people quickly through mass messaging, I was concerned with not being perceived as spamming the freedom movement and being banned from accessing their channels This was made further difficult by the fact that members of the freedom movement were already wary of outsider, especially as they often conflated researchers with journalists. Many participants shared past negative experiences with journalists, whom they felt had used disingenuous tactics to gain their trust,

only to later misrepresent them in their reporting. To mitigate the risk of being mass blocked across the channels used by the freedom movement, I focused on sending targeted messages to moderators and people that were the most active in these channels. I also observed discussions before sending messages to people to assess whether people appeared capable of understanding the research process and offer their informed consent to participate (e.g. people who posted coherent and constructed posts).

Once I had established contact with people, I carried out 17 interviews and did participant observation with a group of the freedom movement doing outreach events in Newcastle. Interviews lasted between 1 and 5 hours and consisted of semi-structured interviews (see interview guide in figure 5). Since I had already a good idea of the ideas that circulated and composed the freedom movement from doing digital observation, in my interviews I focused more on people's individual experiences and everyday lives to understand people's motivations to participate in the movement and the place it took in their lives. I participated in 4 outreach events where participants distributed flyers and newspapers to passers-by. These events lasted between 2 and 4 hours during which I observed the event and engaged in discussions with participants. As such, these events were mostly an occasion to build trust with participants and to have conversations with them in a less formal setting than an interview.

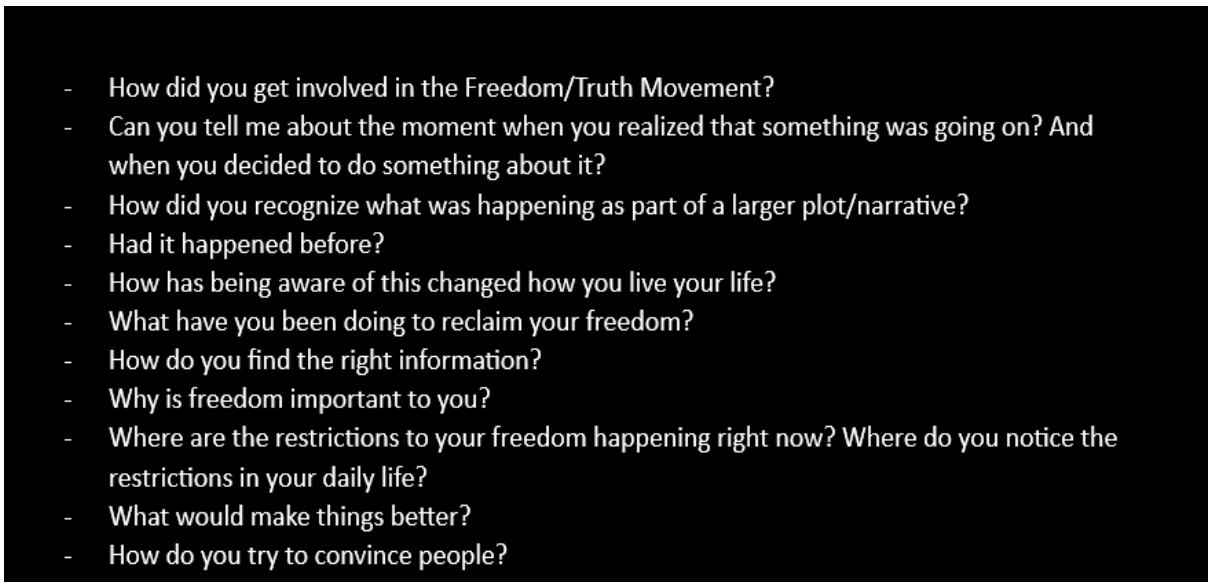

Figure 5 - interview guide

- Ethical considerations of doing ethnography with the freedom movement

The step-by-step account of my ethnographic work that I provide above has aimed to outline how I navigated recruiting participants in an online context, where I tread the line of establishing trust with participants and presenting my research in an accessible way, while not misleading them about the outcomes of my research. In this context, one key ethical challenge becomes: how to build trust without suggesting complicity? In what follows, I come back more precisely on the specific ethical risks of this research context and the mitigations I implemented as they surfaced.

The first ethical difficulty that I faced was to establish a relationship with activists with whom I didn't share clear political aims and ideals with. This is challenging because approaches to activisms in geography have distinctively been shaped by an ethos of scholar-activism which positions the researcher as a supporter of the activists' causes (Ince and White, 2021). The critical tone which informs much of this type of research is therefore one of support for a common-cause, where critique is targeted at the adversaries identified by the activists rather than the activists themselves (Blomley, 2006, 2007). Some scholar-activists have made recent and important contributions towards carving out a space for a type of activist research that would be more open to relating ambivalently to activists (Closs Stephens and Bagelman, 2023; Robson, 2024). But the problem I face in my research is of another kind. While scholar-activists grapple with the difficulties of criticizing participants who have become friends, they remain in a space where disagreements are voiced on the basis of shared political aims and ideals.

This is a central difference with the research I carried where I did not share the same aims and ideals as my participants. At the same time, I was also not in a situation as clear-cut as doing research with groups that would be politically organized around the discrimination and abuse of targeted groups (e.g. far-right activists or incels). In my case, participants didn't hold constructed or coherent political aims that would be shared across the freedom movement. While members had first united in 2021 to oppose vaccine mandates, the outreach events I participated in were aimed at alerting people of a broader threat of 'world governance' (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, political affiliations within the movement were not uniformly stated, with some participants expressing affinities or having experience campaigning for the Left and Right, while others claimed to rise above partisan divisions altogether. In this context, how can/should their opposition to a threat of a 'world governance' or 'great reset' perpetuated by

'a global elite' be heard? Could this be a subtle dog whistle referencing antisemitic tropes of an international Jewish conspiracy? Or could this be a confused attempt at naming and resisting class oppression? Many things could be said about the political positioning of the freedom movement in the contemporary moment, but this is not the aim of this thesis – in following chapters (2&3) I challenge approaches to conspiracism which seek to establish it as something either good or bad, to either be for or against, and propose a different kind of critical relation. It remains, nonetheless that this research context poses ethical difficulties in the field. While I do not have a shared political foundation with my participants, they also rarely express ideas which I could actively support or reject. This poses the ethical difficulty of not misleading participants who may expect me to support their movement when I don't voice active rejection.

The difficulty of working with activists with whom I do not share political aims and ideals is therefore also related to the ethical difficulty of managing participants' expectations about the research. This is a common challenge for researchers, which typically relates to not making vulnerable research participants believe that the research will effect positive change in their lives (Darling, 2021). In my case, the primary and shared vulnerability between my participants was the social stigma associated with their belief and activism. This means that their expectations with my research often resided in the hope that my research could legitimize their activism.

To mitigate the ethical risks described above, I have therefore adopted these precautionary measures[15]:

1. Share my research outputs with participants once they are published.
2. Ask participants to consider that they may disagree with what I eventually write in my research papers, before they agree to do an interview with me. This is not and could never be a way to enter in a contractual obligation for my participants – they may feel comfortable with this prospect in the moment but could still end up feeling betrayed, misunderstood, or disappointed when they read my paper. But I believed that for the participants who had not considered this before – a lot of them had already – doing this was a positive step in managing feelings of betrayal or hurt – feelings that naturally arise in the interviewer-interviewee relationship but which could be even more salient in my research context.

[15] This is in addition to the more standard mitigations that I have identified, and which have been reviewed by my department's ethics committee (i.e. pseudonymization and data protection). Here, I reflect more specifically on the ethical risks and mitigations I put in place as I encountered specific challenges in my research context.

3. State my political views as clearly as possible, when asked by participants. Participants were often anxious to situated me politically to assess whether I could be an allied or enemy to their activism. As a way to manage their expectations, I tried to be as clear as I possibly could about my political sensibilities and affiliations. During discussions in outreach events, or when interviewees asked my opinion directly, I also didn't hesitate to openly disagree with them.
4. Avoid sensationalist or stigmatizing vocabulary in my research outputs. For example, I do not use the term 'conspiracy theorists' to talk about my participants but describe the freedom movement as 'labelled and seen' as such.

## 1.4. Research aims and questions

Set against the conceptual and methodological backdrop outlined in the previous sections, the overall aim of this thesis is to document and understand how "conspiracism" installs a new but always uncertain way to understand a category of thought and subjectivity. But in doing so I am not only interested in registering the discursive construction of a category. I seek to understand how this categorization of thought, in its attempt to capture what can be felt to be at the same time cause and symptom of a broader 'crisis of truth', also gestures at an emerging and unstable ideological and affective formation. As such, this thesis also investigates how this new signification is experienced, enacted, and continually renegotiated in everyday life. With these aims in mind, my thesis aims to respond to these research questions:

1) How does conspiracism, as a phenomenon, emerge as an object of concern?

With this question I am interested in the ways in which "conspiracism" emerges as a category. By object of concern, I do not mean that conspiracism emerges only as a category through the feeling of concern – in the sense of concern as a worry or anxiety. By concern here I mean how does conspiracism emerge as a matter of interest, a category that becomes thinkable and that delineates a knowable object.

2) What are the imaginaries and practices which compose conspiracism?

If "conspiracism" is an attempt at naming an uncertain set of ideas and affective sensibilities, can we identify some of the elements which compose this set? This question aims at exploring and documenting the fantasies, affects, ideologies, and practices which compose the emergent formation that "conspiracism" names.

3) How can conspiracism be approached as an object of geographical inquiry?

This question grapples with the difficulty of encountering conspiracism as an object in the world. Since conspiracism does not have a decided constitutive core, to locate it in certain phenomenon, people, and spaces, engages choices. To be sure, naming a field always involves making choices with varying degrees of socio-political effects. But conspiracism is specific as it is a relatively new category for the social sciences, and a category that name alternative knowledge that can pose as a threat to institutionally produced knowledge.

## 1.5. The articles

The rest of this thesis is composed of three research articles, which each represent an attempt at understanding how conspiracism, as an uncertain and unstable category, is taking shape – and what this process reveals about broader political and epistemological struggles.

Article 1: Conspiracy Theories and Geography: who gets to say where is power? Published in *Dialogues in Human Geography.*

This article's main purpose is to propose an approach to conspiracism from a geographical perspective. To do so I begin by reviewing existing literature on conspiracism within geography, and other disciplines, where a dedicated scholarship on the matter has developed.

Following other analyses, I identify three tendencies within this scholarship. I contend that the first two of these tendencies, pathologization and normalization, understand conspiracism as a form of everyday dissent and oscillate between impulses to either affirm or diminish it. As underlying predispositions to interpretations of conspiracism, these tendencies limit analyses of conspiracism to condemnation or tolerance. This false choice draws an impasse: conspiracy theories are either synonymous with a range of regressive political ideas on the rise and as such need to be condemned; or they are misguided, vernacular attempts at naming oppression and as such need to be tolerated until their uncertainty can be resolved and translated into proper, acceptable forms of dissent.

As a way out of this impasse, I turn to and propose to extend a third tendency which is concerned with the geo-historical significance of the problematization of conspiracism. In this tendency, research on conspiracism becomes about understanding how conspiracism become an object of concern, rather than revealing or determining the socio-political value of an abstract category. This approach to conspiracism, grounded in communication and cultural studies, has largely focused on its discursive construction as a category. From a geographical perspective I argue that this approach can be extended to encompass how conspiracism is also a category that is felt and lived. To that end, I make two propositions. First, that conspiracism is the performance of a critical attitude that is activated in a field conditioned by the felt pressures and limits of a collective commitment to the liberatory promise of critique. Second, conspiracism, as a collective geohistorical experience, is born from the pressures of knowing,

locating, and naming power. Having established conspiracism within this affective field, I provoke geography to think through its position, as an institutional science within this field.

Article 2: The freedom movement as resistance? Situating counter-conducts in moving fields of power. Under review and revised after major corrections and with *Political Geography*.

This article takes up the problem of researching conspiracism from the perspective of geographies of resistance.

I start this paper with the observation that geographical approaches to resistance have been mostly animated by a critical ethos of research-activism which makes common-cause with its case study. At the same time this scholarship consistently calls for an extension of what can count as resistance to include more mundane, everyday practices that can't directly be connected to oppositional tactics of resistance. The aim in doing so would be to extend our understanding of the functioning of power, but also to capture - in the manifold ways in which processes of power are contested - nodes where power loses its grip on subjects. I nevertheless observe that, while the forms that resistance can take have been extended in geographies of resistance, the type of subjects, affects and practices which compose its case studies remain stable. Implicitly, geographies of resistance therefore circumscribe resistance to practices and subjects which can be made common cause with. As a result, we are insufficiently prepared to understand contemporary forms of dissent such as conspiracism and its associated modes of political action.

In this article I therefore propose a mode of critical analysis which seeks to understand why this movement emerged in this specific time and place, and what pressures shaped how it articulates its political claims in a specific way. In doing so I propose an understanding of one of the fantasies of resistance to state power that runs across the freedom movement. In addition to extending my reflections on how to encounter conspiracism as an object of geographical inquiry, this paper is also concerned with documenting and understanding the imaginaries and practices which compose conspiracism. To that end, I propose a set of conceptual vocabulary which help me tease out and make sense of the conditions and pressures which give rise to this particular form of resistance. I do so by characterizing the resistance of the freedom movement as: a specific practice of resistance which seeks to produce new ways of being (a counter-conduct); as a performance of dissent which takes place in a particular atmosphere of hatred for the state (state phobia); and as happening in and through a relation of anxiety with the state

(phobia). In proposing this account of the resistance of the freedom movement, I therefore also provide an understanding of the ideological and affective threads which shape the conspiracism that runs through the freedom movement.

The last section describes how the freedom movement takes shape in a relation and atmosphere of phobia which conditions how the state becomes known as a conspiratorial all-knowing and all-powerful entity of power. I then focus on one popular theory in the freedom movement, as an example of a counter-conduct which introduces the possibility of escaping this entity of power. Ultimately, I show how this theory creates a new conduct, in the form of a new mode of being which escapes the possibility of being known and controlled by the state. In the conclusion I come back on the ethical and political stakes of finding new ways to chronicle resistance. The surge of new right-wing forces across liberal democracies shows that resistance to the liberal order is not only enacted by progressive political forces. Politically there is therefore a need to understand how new expressions of dissent, such as conspiracism - which can easily be instrumentalized by right-wing forces - are taking shape

Article 3: The Threat of Conspiracism: Anxiety, Atmospheres, and the Politics of Truth in Antidemocratic Times. Under review with *Theory, Culture & Society*.

With this paper I return to the central question of how conspiracism has come to be defined as a distinct category of thought and subjectivity.

More precisely, I consider whether the problematization of forms of dissent as conspiracism can be understood as a moral panic. I do this because it is a frequent argument encountered in research that explores the problematization of conspiracism. In this strand of work, the moral panic framework is used to understand how a perceived threat can diverge from its actual impact on the social and political body. When applied to conspiracism, this framework becomes invoked to highlight how mediatic and political discourses construct conspiracism as a threat. I contend that the way the framework of the moral panic is deployed in this scholarship is underdeveloped, as it remains separated from the conjunctural project for which it was originally devised. This absence of reflections on the broader geo-historical situation in which a moral panic emerges leads to narratives of mediatic manipulation which inscribe feelings of moral outrage as mere reaction to a static system of meaning, and anxiety as a simple panicked reaction to uncertainty.

As I consider this framework's usefulness in understanding the problematization of conspiracism, I seriously consider the analytical value of morality and anxiety as they are advanced by Stuart Hall and colleagues' analysis of the 'mugging moral panic'. I put the moral panic framework in conversation with theories of collective affective life to show how the affective atmospheres that imbue moral panics – 'a feeling good about being good' - are not a reactionary force to ideological dislocation but an active force of social change. I then supplement this framework with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, to show how social anxiety arises not in situations of uncertainty, as it is posited by Hall et al., but in the encounter with an overwhelming presence that exposes people to the certainty of the impossibility of their cherished ideals. Ultimately, these theoretical positionings allow me to propose that the conspiracism moral panic could signal an encroaching presence of truth which, in turn, exposes people to the incapacity for truth to release the harmony that imbues fantasies of knowledge. I propose an account of how this experience of the impossibility of truth was conditioned and made palpable through atmospheres that orient people into ways of life that rescue the self from the shattering experience of waning collective values.

To conclude I explore some of the political implications of this diagnosis. Intensifying crises in the present seem to call for the protection of truth to secure the possibility of a democratic future, but this reaction may only continue to expose people to the traumatic encounter with the impossibility of truth.

Summary of the conclusion of the thesis

In the conclusion of this thesis, I return to the main contributions that these three papers, taken together, offer towards the overall aims of the thesis, and towards geography.

A first contribution that this thesis makes is towards a style of critical analysis that aims to stays with the conditions, pressures and contradictions that shape a given conjuncture. Towards that end, throughout these three papers I examine and propose a range of elements that participate in giving shape to the sense that truth is in crisis: attachments to critique, troubled relations to the expression of dissent, moral disarray, anxious relations to authority, inclinations for mysticism, and encounters with the impossibility of truth.

My second main contribution is to offer "conspiracism" as an object of inquiry to geographical analyses. Throughout this thesis I indeed examine how conspiracism presents an

opportunity for geography to stay with the limits of its own relation with uncertain forms of dissent and vernacular modes of critique. Rather than suggesting a way out of these impasses, this thesis suggests that acknowledging these limits can be a way to fight the fantasy of absolute knowledge.

This thesis also makes a contribution towards an understanding of the fantasies, imaginaries, and ideologies that make up the uncertain formation of conspiracism. Each article proposes different lists of these elements. I especially suggest and examine how conspiracism takes shape in the encounter between an atmosphere of hatred of the state and the anxiety of the absence of authority. This proposition contributes to an understanding of the loose boundaries that compose the category of conspiracism.

Throughout this thesis I also make several contributions towards scholarships that takes seriously the materiality of the unconscious as a force that silently shapes the world. In my analysis of the ideas and imaginaries of the freedom movement, I bring attention to the unconscious fantasies and defenses that animate the expression of dissent that runs in this movement. Throughout this thesis, I also bring attention to how conspiracism as a category of thought and subjectivity is also shaped by unconscious attachments, enjoyments, and defenses of the symbolic and imaginary values of truth.

Finally, I finish this thesis with an afterword which offers some reflections on the political stakes of researching conspiracism in the present moment.

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# Chapter 2. Conspiracy theories and Geography: Who gets to say where is power?


## Abstract

Conspiracism has become a powerful explanatory category for major political events (Brexit vote, January 6th Capitol attack) and the subject of a diverse body of research. Yet geography has largely ignored such debates and has, on some occasions, adopted this term with little critical examination. I call on geographers to think through the implications of this silence. I especially highlight how conspiracism presents an opportunity to think through the questions of epistemic authority, the hegemonic control of knowledge production, and the limits of the regulation of dissent. I argue that further work is needed to understand the historical and spatial conditions that make it possible for practices, attitudes, and speeches to become available to be invested and discerned as a distinctive mode of thought called "conspiracy theories". To that end, and drawing on Foucault's method of problematization, I make two propositions. First, conspiracism is the performance of a critical attitude that is activated in a field conditioned by the felt pressures and limits of a collective commitment to the liberatory promise of critique. Second, conspiracism, as a collective geohistorical experience, is born from the pressures of knowing, locating, and naming power. These propositions seek to destabilize the certainties that allow conspiracism to function as a category of individualized 'bad thinking' by inscribing it as a collective experience held together by an ensemble of affective conditions. Having established conspiracism within this affective field, I provoke geography to think through its position, as an institutional science within this field. Keywords Conspiracism, critique, liberalism, power, problematization, public dissent



Keywords: Conspiracism, critique, liberalism, power, problematization, public dissent

## 2.1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories, fake news, post-truth[16] are phenomena that have become the subject of much mediatic, academic and political attention in the global north over the last two decades. They have become capacious and available terms to address the crisis of democracy that western liberal democracies are seemingly facing. As phenomena they raise concerns over the possible triumph of emotion over reason in politics, and the desecration of expertise. These concerns have ramified into multiple reactions noticeable through the flourishing of debunking units in media groups (e.g. Jackson, 2017), anti-disinformation legislations (e.g. Oltermann, 2018) and official state commissions (e.g. Le Monde, 2021)[17]. Since the COVID-19 pandemic especially, the intensity of the issue of conspiracism has been further inscribed in the rhythm of everyday life through journalistic scrutiny, mockery, exasperation, celebrity gossip, Facebook rumours shared over now tense Christmas dinners, collective surveillance of good thinking that warrant the pre-emptive: 'I am not a conspiracy theorist but...', and so on. As geographers, such phenomena prompt concern over the viability of our commitments to sustain open dialogue with participants and members of the public 'in an age of intense and often vitriolic political polarization' (Rose-Redwood et al., 2018a: 116, 2018b). At the same time, these concerns remain intertwined with abstract attachments to free speech and tolerance which bind up the issue of conspiracism with epistemic authority, the hegemonic control of knowledge production, and the limits of the regulation of dissent.

While these concerns already operate in the background of a variety of geographical research[18], they have rarely been straightforwardly addressed in the discipline. Geography has indeed been strikingly absent from debates that have otherwise conjured up many research efforts across many other disciplines[19]. This is especially surprising considering that conspiracy theories make a claim over the contemporary spatiality of power. Indeed, if these theories posit

[16] The rest of this paper will focus on the terms 'conspiracy theories' or 'conspiracism' exclusively, for the sake of clarity, however my discussion of such phenomena is intended to address a greater historical shift in the global north denoted by a breadth of new vocabularies and concerns (fake news, alternative facts, post-truth, hyper-suspicion, political paranoia).

[17] See Farkas and Schou (2020) for a detailed survey of State responses to Fake News (specifically chapter 5).

[18] This is the case, for example, in environmental Geography where populist knowledges trouble the lines of expertise (Bosworth, 2019) and where misinformation impede environmental protection (Van Der Vet, 2024), in health geopolitics as conspiracy theories make up new popular geopolitical imaginaries that could pose a risk to public health (Sturm et al., 2021), or in electoral Geographies as misinformation presents a new threat to voter confidence (Weichelt, 2022).

[19] See for example the recent Routledge Handbook on Conspiracy theories (Butter and Knight, 2020) which gathers perspectives from philosophy, history, political theory, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.

the existence of a small colluding group as the main operators of global events, they map a geography of power located in closed intimate spaces, intentional network relations, obfuscation, and traceable causality. As such, conspiracy theories pose a number of questions for the discipline.

First, as theories that propose to systematise power as conspiracy, they provoke geographers to take inventory of the conceptual vocabularies that inform our geographies of power. Where might we situate geography's expertise in relation to conspiracy theories? What might be repudiated, reclaimed, or reconciled from this moment of epistemic uncertainty? Some might see my invitation to open such dialogue with suspicion, arguing that geography should not take the risk of corrupting itself by putting its expertise on an equal level with such ambiguous 'alternative' claims to knowledge. But my call to foster such dialogue is not made under the auspices of the dream to smooth over antagonism and irreconcilable differences. I make this call in the hope of bettering our knowledge of the libidinal, mystical, and ideological imaginaries that inform political imaginations in general (Muniesa, 2022). As I will further demonstrate in this paper, the questions of intention and personification might be at their most dramatised in the imaginary of conspiracism, but this imaginary is still telling of the magical thinking that imbues our collective imaginary geographies of power today, and the 'distinctive hopes, anxieties, and hostilities they inspire' (Muniesa, 2022: 732).

Second, as troubling popular knowledge claims, conspiracy theories disenchant geography's now routine promise to make space for modes of thinking that emerge outside of traditional and hegemonic institutions of knowledge production. Can geography approach conspiracy theories without betraying an ethos of openness to ideas that might unsettle hegemonic processes of knowledge production? Or, on the contrary, might conspiracy theories present an opportunity to rethink abstract commitments to enact generosity towards new modes of thinking? These questions come at a time when geography is rightfully coming to terms with calls to renew the voices that make up its scholarship (Jazeel, 2019; Oswin, 2020; Rose-Redwood, 2021). As the 'conspiracy theorist' now regularly stands in the place of one of liberal democracy's contemporary irrational Other, opening a dialogue on the functioning of such a category in western societies plays an important part in understanding the current logics of de/valuation of vernacular knowledges. As discussions of the hegemonic control of knowledge production become more pressing, it become equally urgent to understand the functioning of an economy that adjusts the values of speech according to the embodied, cultural, and linguistical capital of speakers (Bourdieu, 1991).

Third, as a manifestation of political dissent commonly associated with the contemporary far right, conspiracism challenges geographers to develop modes of investigation of activism and resistance that stay with the trouble of unsettling expressions of dissent. This does not mean that I am advocating to withhold judgement in the face of explicitly farright conspiratorial narratives (QAnon, antisemitic 'global elite' conspiracies). What I am suggesting is that this common association – between the abstract and unspecified category of conspiracism and the Right – should be evaluated as a component of the problematisation of conspiracy theories. Indeed, recent movements such as anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests call for a closer engagement with the everyday political thought and practices that preface the formation of movements that sit outside of already known political formations and action groups. By rushing to politicise such movements from already known political formations there is a risk of missing how Right forces are effectively recomposing and travelling in the social field. Only from a position which stays with the trouble of the problematisation of the conspiracism might we be able to ask: what precise work are the motif and fantasy of 'the conspiracy' doing in the re-composition of the Right? Why is 'the conspiracy' so dramatised in this precise geo-historical moment? Why is the narrative structure (the conspiracy) superseding the content (racism, transphobia, antisemitism) in our attempts to name contemporary fascism? What is at stake here is to avoid that the category of conspiracism becomes an all-encompassing, depoliticised, and unspecified category which diminishes our capacity to characterise and call out precisely the fantasies and discourses which prop up contemporary fascism. This is therefore not a call to affirm or reclaim conspiracism as a set of counter-conducts but to examine the political and libidinal work they are doing – as narratives but also as their critique plunges more and more into an unspecified condemnation of the irrational. The aim of such a critical analysis is to situate these contemporary counter-conducts within the affective, spatial, and historical conditions that make it possible for them to emerge and to be apprehended as a singular object.

There is therefore much that geography can say about the problematisation of conspiracism. But what I am suggesting throughout here as well, is that this task also presents an opportunity for geography to think through its position as an institutional science and its relation to vernacular knowledges. In fact, central to this paper, is the claim that debates over discourses and practices recognised as 'conspiracy theories' should include reflections on how disciplinary boundaries are being drawn through this act of recognition. While calls to open geography to knowledge produced outside of institutions can run freely in the discipline, this

openness is most often entrusted to inherently work towards a progressive and emancipatory political project. In this story, openness and generosity only becomes extended to what is already decided to be working towards the politics of the Left, while alternative claims to knowledge can be, partly through the category of conspiracism, easily dismissed. What is therefore disavowed by geography's avoidance of conspiracism, as a question of knowledge production, is an openness to the possibility of what cannot be welcomed (Derrida, 1998). To think about conspiracy theories therefore always entails staying with question of how we might stay within a field of indeterminacy necessary to the emergence of radical difference (Deleuze, 1994). Relatedly, a second aporia arises when we consider what happens when the knowledge produced by geography itself (the spatialisation of power) encounters vernacular ways to make sense of power which unsettle its authority. The authority upon which geography perches itself to call forth new epistemic paradigms necessarily becomes unsettled by the coming of new epistemic paradigms. This paper therefore suggests that staying with the trouble of this aporetic terrain is temporarily necessary to understand how conspiracism can function as a category of exclusion.

If conspiracy theories can offer geographers a provocation to think through geography's ability to stay with the trouble of the aporias brought by contemporary dissent, it is because conspiracism is a category that has been resistant to any fixed meaning. Indeed, the indefinability of the category 'conspiracy theories' has been a central challenge for the investigation of this phenomenon. Nobody claims to be a conspiracy theorist, and identifying core characteristics of conspiracy theories has proven to be a challenging problem. This definitional problem typically follows the now exhausted observation that conspiracies do, in fact, happen. The word 'conspiracy theory', then, functions on a different register of meaning than what would simply be a way to designate a theory that explains events as resulting from the intended action of a small colluding group. Instead, the expression holds the implicit connotations that the theory is false and unworthy of serious considerations (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017). This is in large part because the question of what is 'conspiracism' goes beyond the simple designation of a theory that posits the existence of a conspiracy and is used to gesture at a wide range of attitudes, beliefs and practices which relate to the irrational, the spiritual, and the occult[20]. The use of this category then, can act as a stigmatising label that

[20] See for example Franks et al. (2017: 8) who propose a typology of conspiracy theories in which one of the type of conspiracy theory is linked to conceptions of reality that depart from a 'commonsense ontology' (p. 8). In this study the practice of reiki or meditation are linked to the most radical (type 5) form of conspiracism they identify in their study. See also, for example, a 2017 French survey (Ifop, 2017, p. 128) where the belief that

excludes the supporter of the theory from the realm of reasonable dialogue (Husting and Orr, 2007; Lantian et al., 2018). The troubling matter of fixing a definition has been further reinforced by the recognition that definitional evaluations of conspiracy theories enact boundary-work, where the strict limits of conspiratorial thinking are given by the consecration of sophisticated and expert understandings of social relations (Gieryn, 1983; McKenzie-McHarg, 2020). Two of the core issues raised by conspiracy theories are thus the questions of epistemic authority, and of the boundaries that academic disciplines draw around them.

These concerns gain specific meaning and significance against the particular conditions of life in western European and North American liberal democracies. While theories of conspiracy can and have happened in different places and time, I will show that the category of conspiracy theories corresponds to a set of specific practices, attitudes and performance of speech that operate under a distinctive mode of investment, discernability and problematisation. Centrally, by positing a nefarious collusion standing behind world events and state governance, they engage the response of institutional powers to secure their legitimacy and the social cohesion of the body politic. But since any defensive move from the suspected target of the theory can always be interpreted as an admittance of guilt by conspirators trying to cover their tracks, conspiracy theories seem to trap liberal democracies in a double bind. Conspiracy theories therefore emerge as an object of intense concern in the midst of untenable paradoxes that operate within liberal democracies (Harjuniemi, 2022). They put a magnifying glass over the problems posed by the promise of freedom in a political system that has to restrict collective and individual liberties to secure freedom (Agamben, 2005; Foucault, 2008). Collective attachments to abstract promises of free speech and tolerance are troubled by the necessity to regulate dissent. This is not to say that such empty promises are not already regularly broken. On the contrary, this paper proposes to understand how the problematisation of conspiracism partly takes root upon attempts to secure such empty promises. Thus, this paper proposes that geography's distinctive perspective can unearth the geo-historical roots that make up conspiracism as a phenomenon that exists as problem for contemporary western liberal democracies.

In this paper I therefore propose an understanding of conspiracism as an object which was able to gain prominence and intensity against the particular backdrop of life in western

'God created man and the earth less than 10 000 years ago' is listed as a conspiracy theory, and the frequency by which respondents check their horoscopes is interrogated as a practice that could indicate adherence to a conspiracist worldview.

liberal democracies. This understanding of conspiracism foregrounds the material, discursive and affective conjuncture which conditions conspiracism's emergence and possibility of discernability. To arrive at this proposed understanding of conspiracy theories, Part II gives an overview of the debates that have structured research on conspiracy theories. My aim in providing a rather detailed overview of this literature is to alert geographers to the risk of replicating assumptions that exist within the opposing and sometimes unspoken theoretical orientations that have structured this literature. I show that this scholarship has been structured around a concern to move away from accounts that pathologize conspiracism, while remaining attached to the securitisation and affirmation of the proper modalities of dissent in liberal democracies. Part III further develops work on conspiracy theories that has sought to recalibrate their analysis to a mode that integrates the discursive and relational fields that condition the emergence of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Through the Foucauldian lens of problematisation, I bring into focus the processes by which a set of practices, attitudes, and speeches more or less connected to the idea of a conspiracy, have become available to be invested and discerned as a distinctive mode of thought called 'conspiracy theories'. Part IV uses problematisation to propose an account of conspiracism as a phenomenon that arises from and makes present the problem of critique and power for western liberal democracies. In relation to critique, I show that conspiracism can be understood as a particular performance of critique which gains its singularity in the midst of an intense concern for the good practice of dissent. In relation to power, I show that conspiracism as a phenomenon arises from the pressures of naming, knowing, and locating power. These accounts demonstrate how geography can play a role in the identification of the spatial and historical grounds which delimit a specific field from which conspiracism - and by extension similar counter-conducts - becomes problematised. My conclusion discusses the larger implications for geographical work concerned with understanding dissent and resistance in the contemporary moment. With this understanding I offer a space for geographers to engage in a dialogue on conspiracism and other unsettling forms of dissent (e.g. populist movements or the use of violence in protests) as no longer needing to rest on preestablished categories deserving of condemnation or demanding of tolerance, but as geo-historical phenomena requiring careful examination and contextualisation.

## 2.2. Between the normal and the pathological: Situating the good measure of suspicion

Research that addresses conspiracy theories is preoccupied with the issue of finding a neutral and value free definition of such theories - but one that would nonetheless set conspiracy theories apart from legitimate forms of political dissent. This part of the paper presents an overview of how this problem has been taken up in specialized scholarship and in geographical work. This overview will show that discussions of what conspiracism is, circulate around an implicit claim over what constitutes deviant thought. Posed in this way discussions of conspiracism stay confined by the false choice of either condemning or tolerating incorrect beliefs.

This issue of knowing conspiracism has translated into a first trend, which is to define conspiracy theories based on the identification of key individual psychological factors that can explain a predisposition to adhere to the conspiracy explanation. This trend has mainly taken shape around work in social psychology which describes conspiratorial beliefs or ideation as faulty modes of reasoning that satisfy, amongst other things, a disposition towards intuitive thinking, mono-causal explanations and an exaggerated belief in intention and agency (Douglas et al., 2016; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018; van Prooijen and van Lange, 2014). Following the path set forth by Hofstadter's (1996) oft-cited essay 'The Paranoid Style in North American Politics', some work in political theory and philosophy takes on the diagnosis of individual psychological biases as the root issue of conspiratorial beliefs (Barkun, 2003; Clarke, 2002; Keeley, 1999). The issue for scholarship such as this, that remains very much attached to the democratic ideals of pluralism and freedom of speech, becomes how to find metrics by which to objectively assess the point at which healthy levels of suspicion fall into irrationality. This conundrum is indebted to the widely shared diagnosis that, yes, of course, conspiracies do happen, but we really shouldn't believe that they happen that much. Keeley (1999: 126) is one of the first to pose a definition that strives to make a distinction between good and bad levels of suspicion and finds that time will reveal the inadequate theories that entail 'more scepticism than we can stomach'. This definition, which provides the basis for much of the future work that will follow in this direction (see for example Coady, 2006; Dentith, 2016, 2018; Pigden, 1995), is a profoundly affective definition which opposes theories that posit that 'something is not right' in official narratives, with the claim that 'something is not right' with their scepticism.

The implicit political claim stated here is that conspiratorial thinking is a deviant mode of thought and perception, that exists in an otherwise well-functioning system of knowledge production and political governance. It is expected that time will be enough for our usual institutional safeguards to expose conspiracies and come to a consensus on the ones that are worthy of being subject to debate (Douglas et al., 2019). If anything, it would be advisable that these systems face the threat of conspiracy theories by reinforcing their authority. This leads some to voice policy recommendation that, ironically enough, align state action with the shadowy machinations speculated by the conspiracy theorists. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009: 224), for instance, suggest that government agencies should lead interventions of 'cognitive infiltration' within conspiracists milieus as a way to rectify their incorrect beliefs.

In geography, conspiracy theories have, for the most part, been apprehended as a pre-established category that remains unquestioned. As such, these works take on many assumptions posited by pathologising narratives that frame conspiracy theories as deficient modes of reasoning posing a threat to the body politic. Conspiracy theories can therefore figure as a useful device to set the scene of the contemporary moment. They can thus appear in the background of other inquiries implicitly associated with other preoccupying circumstances like the growth of the far right (Ho and Maddrell, 2021: 4; Luger, 2022). Conspiracy theories are framed through the unevidenced claim that conspiracy theories are 'dangerous' (Maddrell, 2020: 109), associated with the threat of violence (Stephens, 2020: 279), or of public health breakdown (Sturm et al., 2021).

Some recent geographical works however present a willingness to sustain a more direct engagement with conspiracism. This is the case of Lizotte's (2021) recent editorial on 'the geographies of truth and lies' or Warf's (2023) Post-Truth Geographies. In both of these conspiracism is re-anchored within the complex philosophical history of truth. In doing so, these authors are able to engage straightforwardly with the main issues raised by conspiracism. For them, conspiracism can be situated within a post-structural relativist moment that, in its wish to level the epistemological playing field, broke down the capacity to distinguish truth from lies. Beyond this, they sustain that neoliberalism can be blamed for weakening democracies and increasing the spatial and social inequalities that led to mass ressentiment of 'the elites'. While I can see the value of both of these arguments individually, I am more sceptical of the stories they tell and the eventual solutions they invite. Ultimately, both Lizotte (2021) and Warf (2023) leave us with an impossible choice to make in the face of this story; we either need to offer our sympathetic tolerance to the misguided disenfranchised and

marginalised people who have lost their ability to recognise truth, or to condemn the desecration of truth altogether as the only possible way to safeguard democracy. While both of these authors offer nuanced accounts of the politics of truth, they go on to negate these accounts by settling the issue of conspiracism with an appeal to reaffirm the commonsensical distinction between 'truth' and 'lies'. With this proposition I worry that the questions of legitimacy, authority, and the long, ongoing, and brutal history of the devaluation of knowledges that sit outside of a prominently white, bourgeois, male, and European academy, is too easily settled. Specifically, I believe that a definition of truth based on the good faith willingness to 'acknowledge when voices from the margins are reproducing long-standing false geographic imaginations' (Lizotte, 2021: 2) negates the material, embodied and libidinal grounds on which a statement comes to be recognised as true.

The issue with this set of studies, then, is that they run the risk of pathologising legitimate distrust of authority, as well as demands for accountability in a democratic system based on representation. By relying on a commonsensical mode of recognition of the theories of conspiracy that 'go too far', they legitimise institutional systems of knowledge production and political governance as possible censors of the correct mode of expression of political dissensus. This scholarship also demonstrates a non-reflexive and uncritical stance towards its own participation in the game of hegemonic knowledge production, wherein the very action of dismissing these truth-claims reinforces institutional legitimacy. This tendency to view conspiracy theories as cognitive deficiencies is now widely known as a moment of pathologisation of conspiracy theories (see Butter and Knight, 2015, 2019) from which much of the later scholarship on conspiracy theories has sought to extricate itself.

The response to this first set of pathologising studies has been carried through a series of interventions that contextualise conspiracy theories within their social, historical, and cultural circumstances. This scholarship delinks from the pathologisation of conspiracy theories that took root in Hofstadter, by turning to Jameson's (1988: 356) conceptualisation of paranoia as the 'poor man's cognitive mapping'. Jameson's analysis of postmodern subjectivities anchors paranoia as a distinctive feature of our times which works to give order and remythicise the real in a reaction to the fragmentating and disenchanting effects of capitalism (Paradis, 2007). This movement from Hofstadter to Jameson, has initiated a normalisation of conspiracy theories that recast them as warranted ways by which people come to apprehend an increasingly complex and crisis shaken world.

This second wave of scholarship characteristically moves away from the analysis of the internal structure of conspiratorial narratives and the psychological factors that stand behind them. They look instead at the cultural context that explains the mainstream appeal of the motif of the conspiracy - and the social function it fulfils. Central to their claim, is the identification of a large cultural movement that plays with the motif of paranoia, as an available and desirable tool to understand relations between individuals and collectives (Knight, 2000, 2002). Thus, as the expression of popular understandings of power relations, conspiracy theories might be wrong 'but they are one of the few popular attempts to address problems of power and secrecy in modern society' (Butter and Knight, 2020: 33). This is why they shouldn'tbe dismissed for this group of scholars. Indeed, conspiracy theories here are heard as the expression of a reaction to a political order, and thus contain the belief that another world is possible (Dean, 1998; Fenster, 2008). The implicit claim that distinguishes this scholarship from the trend of pathologisation of conspiracy theories, is that here conspiracy theorising is a phenomenon that is deeply attached to the failures of our system of knowledge production and political governance. They happen in a political system that has been emptied out of the promise of political participation by the 'kind of antidemocracy and anti-politics demanded by the capitalist system and its market-premised conception of political participation' (Farkas and Schou, 2020: 154).

Less prominent in the field of research on conspiracy theories, but still important for the alternative they pose to pathologising accounts, another strand of research normalises conspiracism by portraying it as a libidinal and affective fantasy that fulfils incomplete wishes. In short, it becomes quite evident that very few actually believe that a shadowy elite meets every five years to decide with precise accuracy the future of the world. But acting as if we might believe, fulfils a subject's inchoate and ambivalent attachments to a power it fantasies as both an idealised omnipotent and omniscient figure, and a repressive and dangerous force (Marasco, 2016). This fantastical version of power soothes the need to know and brings order to an ever-present threatening power, while also offering a vessel to project resentment onto this vengeful force. This psychoanalytical perspective deals a blow to the hoped-for resurrection of the will of the people posited by some tenants of the Jamesonian tradition described above, by reminding us that this fantasy of Big Power only betrays and reaffirms collective attachments to totalising forms of power (Nebojša and Todor, 2020).

In geography, efforts to normalise conspiracy theories have been taken up to explain mainstream understandings of complex events (Cairns, 2016; Cayli, 2018), popular

geopolitical speeches (Jones, 2010, 2012), or as a strategy for marginalised communities to make sense of large-scale web of power relations within which they are captured (Johnson-Schlee, 2019). It has also been foregrounded, by work that sits at the intersection of affect theory studies and psychoanalytic geographies, by explaining conspiracy theories as powerful fantasies that orient and satisfy the circulation of a surplus of desire in society (Laketa, 2019; Young, 2021). Yet, in all of these works the category of conspiracy theories is taken on as a legitimate category of inquiry. Where these works fall short then is in their unquestioned adoption of a category that has emerged from mainstream political and journalistic accounts. I contend, however, that what we must ask of geographers to conjure their specifically geographical perspective to help us move away from conspiracism as a category of condemnation to an understanding of conspiracism as a geo-historical phenomenon. This would mean questioning how and why conspiracy theories became an object of inquiry. Because of the pervasive under theorisation of conspiracism, these geographical works have taken on many of the limitations of the normalisation paradigm sustained by conspiracy theories scholarship, which I will further detail next.

As described, the normalisation of conspiracy theories has been enacted by creating distance from accounts that define conspiracism as a faulty mode of reasoning that can be recognised with common sense. They have done so by situating conspiracy theories along the lines of mainstream forms of dissent warranted by specific cultural and historical contexts. In doing so they usefully draw attention to the function that conspiracy theories can fill in a given social context. Where the normalisation paradigm never truly escapes the pathologising narrative, however, is in their belief that conspiracy theories represent flawed understandings of a totality that can be effectively captured given the correct vocabulary and research practices. Furthermore, these scholars fear that conspiracy theories, by offering a mainstream understanding of global events, offer a 'distorted critique of neoliberalism, while at the same time also distracting and diverting their believers from more concerted forms of political opposition' (Knight, 2021: 198). For these scholars, conspiracy theories, as a manifestation of political dissent, thus need to be tolerated because they can potentially be remodelled into healthier expressions of dissent. Efforts to normalise conspiracy theories therefore never truly escape their inscription as a deviant mode of thought. Through a process that sought to think about conspiracy theories amongst normal forms of dissent, they leave conspiracism dwelling in the space of ab/normal. This normalisation effort can therefore be understood alongside Canguilhem's (1989) conceptualisation of error and deviance as constitutive of the norm. It is

because I know that I can be ill that I know that I am healthy. And it is via Foucault (1976) that we further understand how practices of constant measure and regulation of deviance against the norm play into power's hand. It is because the threat of unreason looms within practices of the (self)regulation of reason that reason is reaffirmed. By staying within the preoccupation of the norm, the normalisation paradigm therefore implicitly secures the harness that tames political dissent.

What transpires from this effort of normalisation is an increasing call for the tolerance of deviant thought. Tolerance is made possible here by conspiracy theories' recalibration from pathological to incorrect beliefs that can be explained by a set of circumstances. But in doing so this scholarship implicitly sanctions and affirms the proper modalities of dissent in liberal democracies. It remains attached to the traditional processes of knowledge production and governance and overly confident in the efficiency of established forms of dissent. One risk here is to further secure the boundaries that delineate legitimate and illegitimate ways of knowing along the lines of the institutional and the mainstream. Another risk is posed if researchers become unreflective of their own participation in the politics of knowledge production and normative regulation.

Whether the research presented in this section conceptualised conspiracy theories as a threat to a well-functioning body politic, an issue of flawed understandings, or the consequence of inescapable existential dispositions, it always presents conspiracy theories as a problem. This calls for further reflections on the processes which render possible the emergence of conspiracy theories as a problem. I invite geographers to consider a geohistorical mode of critical analysis that asks: how and why did practices, attitudes, and speeches more or less connected to the idea of a conspiracy, become available to be invested and discerned as a distinctive mode of thought called 'conspiracism'? What is at stake in the regulation of this new object of concern for western liberal democracies? My aim in proposing this understanding of conspiracism to geographers is to offer space for a discussion of this matter to take place.

## 2.3. Towards the problematisation of conspiracy theories: Understanding conspiracism as a geo-historical phenomenon

The problematisation of conspiracy theories has been advanced by a set of scholars who have pivoted research on the conspiracy theories to the investigation of the discourses which construct 'conspiracy theories' as an object of concern. These investigations interrogate the processes by which some speeches that relate more or less to the motif of the conspiracy come to be recognised as conspiracy theories and problematised as an object of concern.

This is done, for example, by Birchall (2006) who examines how the paranoia that works within conspiracy theories and other popular knowledges closely aligns with a tradition of suspicion that sometimes operate in the social sciences. As illegitimate and uncertain knowledges they also sit closely to cultural studies within a landscape of disciplines dominated by so-called hard sciences. With these claims Birchall makes present the unwritten stakes activated by the denigration of conspiracy theories for disciplines that seek to legitimise their claims to knowledge. Coming from the field of media studies, Bratich (2008, 2020) examines the mediatic construction of conspiracy theories as problems that threaten the body politic through discursively arranged moral panics. Through what he calls 'conspiracy panics' he shows that 'conspiracy theories are taken to be enemies, [and] a pervasive and nonspecific threat against democracy' (Bratich, 2008: 22–23). Bratich takes the impossibility of defining conspiracy theories as a clue which signals a mode of relation to these speeches as precisely one of a panic, directed against an undefinable mood or style of dissent. The strong aversion signalled by panicked reactions delineates the contour of the acceptable and hearable modes of dissent in contemporary liberal democracies. A turning point in this history of this problematisation is situated in the 1960's with the emergence of a counterdiscourse produced by journalists following the multiplication of theories of conspiracy relating to the Kennedy assassination, in an effort to disenfranchise these claims (Thalmann, 2019). From then on 'journalists identified as part of the very establishment that had come under suspicion in these conspiracy theories, and construed conspiracy theory as an illegitimate attack on hegemonic constructions of authority and traditional processes of knowledge production and regulation' (Thalmann, 2019: 123). Thus, within journalistic discourses conspiracy theories become an available term whose meaning can adapt to different project of hegemonic control of knowledge production (Farkas, 2023).

What is regrettable about these accounts of how conspiracy theories come to be problematised is that they never stray far away from the story of a phenomenon with a linear causality posited by prior understandings of conspiracy theories. If the pathological account of conspiracy theories situated the origin of the problem in the defective psychological resources of the conspiracy theorist, then the tenants of the normalisation perspective situated it within the opaque and troubling conditions that structure people's fl (awed) understanding of power. Here problematisation is posited as operating through the superimposition and ensnarement of institutional discourses onto emerging and cohesive dissenting speeches. In doing so they pass by a version of Foucault (1996) method of problematisation that tells a more transient and looser story – and thereby also a more geo-historical one – of how things come together.

To give an example, Foucault's (1965) history of the problematisation of madness theorised an experience of unreason situated within precise historical, institutional, and social fields. He asks: what are the characteristics of each of these fields and what role do they play in the emergence of a collective experience of madness? What allows an ensemble of varying practices to be recognised as the experience of madness, and to constitute practices that will further co-construct this experience? How does the interaction of these different fields shape a specific subjective experience of reason and unreason? The causality implied here is closer to one of immanence, where the originating moment of the phenomenon of 'conspiracy theories' would be the untraceable articulation of a historical shift of a regime of truth and the everyday lived relations that delineate a social field (Foucault, 1979, 1996). Further, this version of problematisation hinges on an understanding of power that circulates through different modalities that can be at times repressive and positive (Foucault, 1978). The oftendownplayed positive effects of power are graspable through the advent of new areas of concerns and their vocabularies, as well as new interactions with power which enable new opportunities for alluring acts of obedience and transgression. So while previous attempts to disturb the problematisation of conspiracism have mostly presented this process as the discursive creation of an object which didn't exist, I take problematisation to name more precisely 'a set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether under the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)' (Foucault, 1996: 456–457).

This turn towards conspiracism as a geohistorical phenomenon that is at the same time filled by the objective delineation of an object of concern, and subjective experience of a specific mode of relation to power, signals the importance of building investigations of

conspiracism that consider the practices of so-called conspiracy theorists. This is something that has been strikingly absent from research on conspiracy theories. Indeed, most of the research presented so far base their research on an imagined stereotypical enunciator of conspiracy theories, but very few seek to verify her existence through the gathering of primary empirical data. Doing this immediately puts research on conspiracy theories in front of its internal paradoxes: where does conspiracism happen? How do I find participants if no one claims to be a conspiracy theorist? How can I produce this data without participating in a regulatory game of good/bad thinking assignations? Harambam (2020: 36) chooses to resolve these paradoxes with the adoption of a strictly relational framework within his methodology where he follows what 'is seen and labelled' as conspiracy theories. This allows Harambam to bring attention to the ways in which the phenomenon of conspiracism is constructed relationally. This is the case in the way the conspiracy theorist label is used by individuals in milieus that would commonly be seen as conspiracist to distinguish themselves from 'the real conspiracy theorists' and present themselves as critical thinkers (Harambam and Aupers, 2017). This shakes the ground onto which the stereotypical enunciator of conspiracy theories used to be displayed and reveals that the label irrevocably functions as 'a collectively shared adage to emphasize one'sown superiority/rationality' (Harambam and Aupers, 2017: 118). Additionally, the critical mount onto which the researcher usually perches herself to designate conspiracy theorists is destabilised by the fact that these milieus centre a critique of scientific dogmatism within their practice of researching and producing alternative knowledges (Harambam and Aupers, 2015).

In this section, I have built upon work which has interrogated the phenomenon of conspiracism as a discursively constructed object of concern. By operating a return to Foucault's articulation of problematisation I have sought to reorient this mode of analysis from the strictly discursive to open it up to the exploration of the manifold categories of experience which compose conditions of emergence. In the next part,, I propose an understanding of conspiracism that seeks to make present the complex, relational and contingent ground that has allowed conspiracism to become an object of knowledge for western liberal democracies. I seek to make present what Bratich (2008: 8) has been able to helpfully underline, which is that the problem of conspiracy theory is felt and understood through the identification of a 'mood, a tone, and an indeterminate quality'. The mode of analysis I am setting forward is one that seeks to pay equal attention to the conditions that made it possible for conspiracy to be available as a way to represent power, and to the conditions that made it possible for conspiracism to

become an object of concern. The vocabulary of the 'problem' or of 'concern' is maybe unhelpful in setting this forward here, as it would be more appropriate to say that I wish to bring attention to the conditions that made it possible for something to even be recognised. In doing so I am aiming to render legible a causality close to immanence, where practices of doing conspiracism and discourses naming conspiracism co-emerge and give shape to a mutable object. In what follows I therefore present an understanding of conspiracism that makes present the different forces, pressures and contradictions that compose its conditions of possibility.

## 2.4. The feeling of conspiracism: Negotiating dissent and agency in liberal democracies

In this section, I trace the contours of conspiracism as a phenomenon that arises from and makes present the problems of critique and power. Having stressed that attempts to confine the phenomenon of conspiracism within strict definitions fail to capture how this phenomenon operates from a particular problematisation, it might appear contradictory to fixate conspiracism within only two distinct fields of experience. In doing so I am not suggesting, however, that conspiracism is reducible to only these two fields. In proposing the following stories, I borrow from Anderson and Secor (2022) propositional style to propose that conspiracism is, amongst other things, a performance of critique and an experience of power. Rather than foreclosing this phenomenon these propositions 'are ways of acknowledging that we write from our imbrication in that present, whilst also amplifying for attention and discussion specific tendencies which give the present its character and feel' (Anderson and Secor, 2022: 3).

### a) 'Be critical...but not like that': striking the right tone of dissent as a free thinker

Conspiracy theories and critique are entangled in a complicated relationship that circulates around the question of striking the correct modalities of dissent in liberal democracies. How to negotiate the liberal ideals of free speech and pluralism with the regulation of incorrect and potentially harmful ideas? Could conspiracy theories simply be a form of critical dissensus that has become devalued through a mixture of class disdain and stigmatisation? In that case do they signal the return of class consciousness and class antagonism? Or could conspiracy

theories reveal that critique has run its course and no longer holds any revelatory and emancipatory force in the citric-saturated era of cynical reason?

Within this complicated terrain, conspiracy theories have become an available and apt category from which to voice discontent over the contemporary status of critique. For Parker (2000: 198), for example, conspiracy theories exist in a direct line with classical Marxist analysis and its conceptual catalogue that ranges from 'false consciousness' to 'alienation' which 'has functioned as a pervasive conspiracy theory for most of this century'.And for many, conspiracy theories act the ultimate proof of the degeneration of critique into a selfindulgent show of mastery that does little more than to debunk and reveal what is already known (Felski, 2015; Latour, 2004; Sedgwick, 2002). In all of these 'critiques of critique', it is a particular attitude, mood or tone of critique that is gestured at. Accusatory, self-indulgent, totalising, swollen with self-importance, and absorbed in the careermaking game of being the most critical of all, critique seems to have become trapped in a habitus that has lost its capacity to voice dissensus and enact change. The availability of the category of conspiracism to name incorrect modes of criticality, functions in tandem with the equally open enactment of critique through an attitude that lends itself to being performed. It is because critique operates under the guise of the performance of an attitude, more than a set of strict guidelines, that conspiratorial thinking can become recognised as an improper modality of dissent. In this section, I propose to seise the phenomenon of conspiracism through its manifestation as a critical attitude that is performed, enjoyed, and negotiated within its encounter with differential critical attitudes.

Foucault's (1994, 2024) discussion of critique and its inscription within the formation of modern subjectivities already proposes a definition of critique as an 'attitude' (Foucault, 2024: 24) which arises from the self-declared right to question 'truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth' (Foucault, 2024: 39). It is undetachable from a moment of consolidation of the modern project of emancipation from any authority other than one's own reason (Massonet, 2016). Critique as the practice of modernity is an attitude that signals one's belonging and attachment to the modern task of reaching emancipation through reason. Foucault's genealogy of critique illustrates how the field of critique became filled with the promise of emancipation and autonomy. The critical attitude that is discursively and affectively constituted and made available to post-Kantian subjects is one that funnels attachments to self-emancipation, self-perfection, self-fulfilment obtained through the faculties of individual experience. Here, I am not arguing that the project of critique is necessarily effective in attaining its aim, nor that conspiracy theories can be mapped directly

under this general practice. Rather, I am proposing to understand how the practice of critique has become an object of intense concern, enjoyment, and regulation for subjects of liberal democracies. This can be further unravelled by placing this collective relation to critique under the modality of attachment proposed by Anderson (2023) as a way to account for a specific type of relation that is distinctive in its ability to hold endurance, ambivalence, and optimism. Our collective and enduring relation with (self)critique has gained an intense and promissory value as that which guarantees our co-existence, by ensuring that we remain free from each other'sinfluence. In this sense, this precise attachment can act as a precious tool that holds together the existential dread of living apart from one another, and the panic that comes with loosing ourselves in otherness (Freud, 2003).

Such an understanding of critique can, in turn, explain how a concern with conspiracy theories fits within an overall concern for the good practice of critique. This understanding doesn't remove conspiracy theories from the relation that tightly links liberal subjectivities to critique, nor does it reclaim it as the purest expression of a lost art of dissent, as some problematisations of conspiracy theories sometimes do. I wish to bring us closer to an understanding of conspiracism as the performance of a critical attitude that is activated in a field conditioned by the felt pressures and limits of a collective commitment to the liberatory promise of critique.In other words, the relentless stretch towards an ideal critical attitude that does not exist creates the conditions that makes conspiracism an experience of dissent that can be desired but also stand as a repulsive fiction about an unreasoned Other. This understanding can hold together the distinctive mood of conspiracism, and its destabilising proximity to other critical attitudes that have been operating under a tradition of suspicion in the social sciences, or political activism.

The aim of holding conspiracism in this ambivalence is not to reconcile these different attitudes especially because they mark different orientations to distinct political ideals - but to give an account of conspiracism as a set of practices and attitudes. This is, for example, perceptible in the way conspiracy theories are not only recognised by virtue of their meaning (a speech that explains events as resulting from the intended action of a small colluding group), but also from a set of practices and attitudes that comes to constitute clues by which adherence to conspiracism can be assessed. Belonging to this set of practices and attitudes we might consider: specific interests (international affairs, the occult, the nebulous promise of freedom), practices (alternative medicines, meditation), rhetorical devices ('I'm just asking questions'), emotions (anger towards the elite, disdain for the 'sheeple'), postures (superiority over the

‘sheeple’), social determinants (low income, low status, limited education), cliché phrases (‘they don’t want you to know’, ‘the truth is about to come out’), etc. I am not prescribing here a set of characteristics that would be the correct or incorrect ways to identify a ‘conspiracy theorist’.Iam descriptive of a set of practices and attitudes which already offer clues to the everyday circulation and apprehension of conspiracism. In sum, they make up the uncertain frontiers of the territory of conspiracism.

What stories of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories lose, by anchoring their analysis neatly to one of these speeches, practices, or attitudes, are the ways in which they overlap with each other to constitute an atmosphere which conditions how conspiracism is sensed, recognised, and negotiated in the everyday. Additionally, they also miss how this performance can be felt through other modalities of dissent, unsettling the neat borders we assign to different modes of thought and, in turn, giving conspiracism its distinctive flavour as something untraceable, yet so precisely fathomable. We can think of, for instance, the ways in which the attachment to and felt pressures to enact dissensus as a means to elaborate oneself as an emancipated subject, is just as much present in practices of debunking and fact-checking as in the conspiracy theories they expose as erroneous.

In short, critique holds a peculiar place in the history and attachments of modern liberal subjectivities. Conspiracism has become possible as a phenomenon that can be felt, recognised, and negotiated in the everyday through the struggle to enunciate and regulate the proper modalities of dissent that are essential to the realisation of the modern project of emancipation. Delinking conspiracism from precise territories that make up already known and foreclosed modes of political thought (the right/the left, populism, extremism), allows for a looser understanding of conspiracism as a performance that exists in tension with other performances of critical dissent.

### b) ‘I’m not a conspiracy theorist but...’: the tricky task of naming power as a free subject

What unites any statement alluding to a conspiracy is a discussion of power. Theories that argue that the earth is flat, that aliens live among us, or that 9/11 was an inside job, all have in common the idea that people perceived as having power conspire to cover the truth. Similarly to other representation of power, the issue conspiracy theorists grapple with is always: how to talk about

something which can't be seen, but to which we attribute the causes of mass effects? Conspiracy proposes to personify power and make its action tangible through the course of the execution of a plan with known ends. What is at stake when we identify a statement as a conspiracy theory is thus the degree of intention that we attribute to the collective we identify as exercising power. I propose, to guide us through this section, a simple definition of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are what happen when we try to answer the question: where is power? Rather than reproducing the definitional attempts of conspiracy theories scholarship that seek to establish definitive sets of characteristics to recognise conspiracy theories, this definition is a tentative proposition to capture conspiracism as an affective experience. With this temporary definition, I delink the questions of conspiracy theories from the location of a bad subject of enunciation and reposition it within a more collective troubled relation to the representation of power.

Knight (2021) helpfully weights in on the status of intention in assessing whether we are dealing with a conspiracy theory, by turning to contingency theory and complexity theory as two alternative ways to represent power. The first theory aligns with Popper's sociology of unintended consequences, by privileging accidents as the governing principle of the social reality. Complexity on the other end discards the question of causality by promoting a theory of society as a system where actions are guided by the 'complex interaction of rules, incentives, institutions, traditions, and processes' (Knight, 2021: 203). Just like theories of conspiracy, these two competing theories are not without fault. Contingency theory seems to leave us no choice but to bury our face in sand when faced with social friction. And if theories of conspiracy fantasise omnipotent and omniscient modes of power, then complexity theory goes to the other extreme, only to 'mystify the operation of power by ascribing all agency to impersonal (albeit personified) social structures and forces' (Knight, 2021: 206). Borrowing from Moore's (2018: 11) perplexed consideration of this dilemma, I would add that 'between the pure "smoky room" ideal of a conspiracy and the pure "invisible hand" account of emergent order there is a spectrum of intermediary and interlocking forms'. The principle that guides explanations from one end of the spectrum to the other, are the degrees of agency that are attributed to the subjects of power relations. What separates the two opposing views seems to be the extent of the awareness that individuals have of the effect of the power of their action.

The complex task of drawing imaginary geographies of power is, paradoxically, contained within the term 'conspiracy'. From the Latin 'con' meaning together and 'spirare' breathing (onto), 'to conspire' gestures at a mode of action that is well nestled into the murky

waters of intention (McKenzie-McHarg, 2020). Breathing together can indicate a mode of action that starts from the identification of common goals and the implementation of a plan towards them (to breath onto together), but also the untraceable convergence of interests and affinities that arise from a common 'spirit of the time' unconscious of its own desires (to breath together) (Castoriadis, 2011).

On a spectrum of theories that represent power from the smoky room to the black box of emergence, conspiracism then begins to happen when power is represented and named as a force which acts in accordance with the actions and desires of intentional and collaborating subjects. It is in the identification of this narrative structure that scholars have diagnosed a disturbing proximity between conspiracy theories and critical theories (Latour, 2004; Parker, 2000). This is how Heins (2007: 793–794) identifies the conspiratorial tendencies of Horkheimer's theory of the society of racket as the thinker 'tends to depict trade union bosses, politicians, doctors and others as actors who do not just exploit favorable situations for their own purposes, but who are impelled by a deep-seated disposition to enter into collusive agreements to the detriment of society as a whole. We find Horkheimer succumbing to a form of conspiratorial thinking.' Conspiracism can therefore be felt in Horkheimer's attempt to trace network relation of power in a ruling class. But such tracings of power also permeate structural accounts of power as a hegemonic force which pre-exists practices and relations. We thereby encounter traces of conspiracism, as the representation of power as an intentionally wielded force, in theories which 'conceptualize an appearance of power as anything other than a form of representational practice [and therefore] represent that representation in accordance with the intentions of a particular agent or force' (Rose, 2002: 384). In trying to stabilise and explain the repetitive and coherent appearance of processes of power, such theories infuse power with a core (hegemony) and cause (to dominate) which lend themselves to conspiratorial articulations. But even beyond structuralist representational practices similar narrative structures still find their way in theories which strive to evade the certainties of representations (32). For Barnwell (2016), for example, critical work centring affect, along the lines of Stewart (2007) Ordinary Affects, while holding forth the promise to rid critique of its paranoid tendencies, nevertheless betrays this promise by filling affect with all-powerful agential capacities. In the midst of a ubiquitous and undeterminable force like affect this work urges us to nurture capacities of vigilant attention and attunement. As such this work introduces a sort of micropolitical activism where 'you have to catch up with what's been going on unbeknownst to you, or sort of' (Stewart, 2011: 449, original emphasis), that is not so estranged from the

suspicious paranoiac who traces the lines of intended actions in the macropolitics of class antagonism.

This brief outline of theories which take up the narrative structure of conspiracism has sought to unsettle the certainty that conspiracism can effectively be grasped as the propriety of bad theories or bad theorists. Instead, I am proposing to locate conspiracism in a spectrum amongst other representation of power relations. As we have seen, the stabilisation of power relations through representation is a perilous act which is never totally immune to the temptation to rely on a framework of intention and collusion to explain the coherence of social reality. We can then understand how conspiracism becomes part of the experience of answering the questions of where is power, as the feeling of conspiracism is produced in the encounter of a particular representation of power and a performance of a critical attitude. Within the particular conditions of life lived in liberal democracies acts of representing and performing a critique of power become affectively charged as they hold the promise of an autonomous and self-sufficient life. As Melley (2002) has helpfully been able to show, conspiracy culture, indeed, holds strong by affirming the core fantasies of liberalism. In the more radical theories of brain washing and thought control, for instance, theories of conspiracy resort to a version of influence that can only be enacted through mysterious and magical processes. (Melley, 2008). In doing this, they rescue from theories of ideology the fantasy of a free and bounded individual who can only be penetrated by outside influence through quasi-magical processes. This is similar to the move made by representations of power which are open to the narrative structure of the conspiracy, as they systematically locate power as a stable force creeping into the subject from an outside location.

By understanding conspiracism as a way to represent power which exists on a spectrum of possible representations my aim is not to beat down bad practices of representation, but to unsettle the certainty that conspiracism can easily be cast aside as the practice of bad theorists. Conspiracism is a theoretical move that is intensely preoccupied with the idea of locating power. As a category of everyday (self)regulation of bad thinking, conspiracism therefore makes present complicated relation with questions of agency, intentions, and power. If theories of conspiracy, and the practices and attitudes that come with them, provide such a strong sense of excitement (either from their denigration or consumption) it may have more to do with the difficulties that come with representing and speaking about power under the conditions and felt pressures of life lived in liberal democracies. How can we materialise a force that hinders free will, in a system that rests upon a conception of individuals as fundamentally free to undertake

whichever they desire? How do we make room to describe the coercive attributes of the constitutive force of the social, in a system that understands compliance only in the form of a contract between two willing individuals? Rather than simply dismissing it, the intensity with which the question of the spatiality of power has surfaced as a motif that troubles everyday life, could on the contrary be seen as an occasion for Geographers to address how our vocabularies and imaginary geographies of power can respond to the challenge. Geographical work which grapples with experiences of opacity in a priori liberal states (Belcher and Martin, 2013) or on the precarious act of speaking about obfuscation within democratic systems without being viewed as paranoid (Garnett and Hughes, 2019), for example, demonstrate that the difficult task of mapping and knowing power already labours within our discipline.

## 2.5. Conclusion

This paper started from the perplexing absence of geographical work on conspiracy theories precisely at a time when they seem to be everywhere. Many reasons could explain this silence; a simple lack of interest could be one of them, the absence of disciplinary formations where this work could readily be inscribed could make up another. But what if this silence also betrayed a form of resistance? Held implicitly throughout this paper is the belief that the avoidance of the core questions posed by one of the characteristic phenomena of these last two decades betrays geography's discomfort with its own legitimacy and with troubling contemporary forms of public dissent. In calling forth new modes of thinking, but systematically deferring their arrival by failing to recognise them - in the mode of 'create new epistemic paradigms... but not like that' - I detect a move made by geography to save itself from the annihilation it has itself called forth. To some such suspicion might be slipping too closely to a conspiracy theory. But even if I resist the urge to fiddle with geography's unconscious, I still maintain, as demonstrated in this paper, that the default positioning of conspiracy theories as problems betrays a desire to secure and affirm the normative modalities of dissent in liberal democracies. Equally present in work that classifies conspiracism as a deviant mode of thought, is a disavowal of its own enjoyment of intellectual distinction and of the reasonable exercise of critique. The implication for geography centrally resides in reflecting on the terms of its relationship with illegitimate knowledge and modes of dissent. While claims of openness and generosity can run freely in geography, its avoidance and sometimes uncritical

adoption of the category of conspiracism expose the emptiness of such claims. This is not to say that geographers should retreat to a posture of unconditional openness. On the contrary, this paper has sought to strike precisely at the impossibility of limitless affirmation, to provoke geographers to further reflect upon on their participation in the protection of the institutional production of knowledge.

This paper has thus sought to further develop work that problematises conspiracism, by putting forth an understanding of conspiracism as a geohistorical phenomenon. The specific capacity of geography to grasp the social, historical, and spatial characteristics that make up the conditions of emergence of phenomena is needed to uproot conspiracism from the terrain of the easily condemnable miscellaneous news item unworthy of further investigation. At stake more broadly for geography, is the possibility to stay with the trouble of expressions of dissent such as spontaneous populist movements or the use of violence as a mode of political action. Rather than explain these phenomena from already known causes and determinants we must ask: how did such categories come to be problematised in this way? What does this problematisation tell us of the current affective fields that orient life in contemporary western democracies? What hegemonic formations are maintained and negotiated through this process?

Centrally, this paper has located the negotiations of the proper modalities of critique and the proper characterisation of power as two sites where the issue of conspiracism takes particular prominence. In this paper I therefore made two propositions for future investigations of conspiracism. First, conspiracism is a performance of critique that exists in tension with other performances of critical dissent. Second, conspiracy theories exist in tension with other imaginary geographies of power.

Situating conspiracism as an issue of contesting performances of critique and imaginary geographies has several implications for geographers. First, as conspiracy theories make claims about the spatiality of power, they put in question the legitimacy of geography and challenge us to think about how our available catalogue of metaphors make present networks of power. The question of conspiracism cannot be settled with a reactionary appeal to secure and affirm our disciplinary commitment to ‘truth’ (see Lizotte, 2021) but demands of geographers that they carefully interrogate the conditions of their expertise, in this precise moment of uncertainty. Second, as conspiracism becomes more and more present within the everyday and becomes available to name a multiplicity of speeches and practices, it can be anticipated that research on conspiracy theories is set to intensify. There is a pressing demand to question the

pre-fixed category of conspiracy theories (and by extension a series of related categories such as post-truth, alternative facts, fake news, etc.) and to question its unwritten assumptions. My call here is not for a ‘geography of conspiracy theories’, but a geography that does not turn away from the complex questions that movements of mainstream political dissent pose.

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# Chapter 3. The freedom movement as resistance? Situating counter-conducts in moving fields of power.


## Abstract

This paper begins by considering the limitations of current geographical approaches to resistance, arguing that they are insufficiently prepared to address contemporary forms of dissent such as conspiracism and anti-vaccination activism. I argue that geographical scholarship on resistance has become over-fixated on the investigation of types of resistance which can be made common cause with. I show that this implicit criterion leaves geographers unprepared to apprehend troubling contemporary modes of dissent. I use the case of the freedom movement - a movement born from the contestation of Covid-19 policies – to propose an analysis of resistance which seeks to understand the geo-historical context in which particular forms of resistance take shape. In doing so, my aim is to understand how power is encountered, known, and constructed in the freedom movement. By focusing on one narrative that participants of this movement used to make sense of their relationship with the state, I propose an account of how the freedom movement takes place in and through a particular performance of dissent (counter-conducts), an atmosphere of hatred of the state (state phobia), and a relation of anxiety with the state (phobia). Ultimately, I show that this narrative allowed participants of the movement to regain a sense of stability when the authority of the state was felt to be failing. In the conclusion, I come back on the ethical and political stakes of finding new ways to chronicle resistance.



Keywords: resistance, counter-conducts, state phobia, biopower, conspiracy theories, freedom movement, anti-vaccination, myths

**Sophia** (research participant): I had to act because I had nothing to lose. I absolutely did not want to live in a world where I would be restricted simply due to a choice that everybody else thought was the correct choice. I began to think about the implications of such enforcement, and this made me rethink my opinion about freedom. Can we have true freedom if we must apply restrictions? Who determines how one individual lives? Who has the right to tell one individual what is best for their individual circumstances?

## 3.1. Introduction

Sophia's narrative of her entry into activism is one that is probably familiar to geographers researching resistance movements. As is the case for many of the people I interviewed for the project that led to this paper, Sophia shares a narrative of politicization that begins when she is forced into deeper thought and action by overwhelming feelings of anger about a situation perceived as an injustice. This is the moment that grants Sophia the ability to question the grounds of collective life, and to constitute a new subjectivity in relation to this collective as a political subject who isn't 'going to obey anymore'. This is a story of the emergence of a political subjectivity through the encounter of the problem of living together, that subsequently calls into question meaningful stakes and prompts tangible action (Barnett, 2012; Häkli and Kallio, 2014). In Sophia's case, this story of becoming a political subject started during the Covid-19 pandemic when she became an important figure of an action group contesting vaccination related policies in the United Kingdom.

I met Sophia, and others like her, while researching groups involved in the freedom movement (sometimes 'truth movement'), an unstructured movement born around 2020 from the contestation of Covid-19 related policies (e.g. on vaccination, lockdown etc.), which has now developed into a larger contestation and theorization of the state as an entity of control felt through the implementation of certain policies (e.g. '15-minute cities') and the threat of a plot for world governance (e.g. 'the new world order'). The boundaries of this mostly online movement can be hard to trace, but in this paper, I focus on how it appears and resonates within the political landscapes of liberal democracies in North America and Western Europe.

For people outside the movement, it is unlikely that the participants of this movement have been encountered and known as thoughtful political subjects. It is more likely that they have

been made familiar through depictions that go along the lines of this description, provided by Van Badham (2022), a *Guardian* columnist and chronicler of the Qanon movement:

> Wherever this "freedom movement" manifests, a similar cast of characters emerges. Light-in-the-eyes zealots holler conspiracy theories. Grifters solicit to camera like a roll of tabloid clickbait. Burly, closed-mouth types appear to be handling secretive logistics. Around them are impassioned, often inarticulate – and poorly-costumed – clowns.

Badham's description, while particularly harsh, captures what has become a commonplace sentiment felt towards the figure of the 'conspiracy theorist'. For parts of the Left in particular, as conspiracism has come to broadly signify bigotry, anti-intellectualism, and intolerance, the figure of the 'conspiracy theorist' has become a receptacle of resentment towards those who hinder progressive change. In geography, some raise concerns over the dangers posed by conspiracism, especially as it becomes a crucial resource for right-wing populism to stage its rescue of the 'people' from the 'global elite' (e.g. Stephens, 2020; Lizotte, 2021; Sturm *et al.*, 2021). Yet, others, in geography and elsewhere, read conspiracy theories as forms of devalued vernacular dissent, and raise concerns about the political dangers of participating in the suppression of marginalized voices (e.g. Jones, 2010; Dentith, 2018; Johnson-Schlee, 2019). Conspiracism therefore poses a challenge to the study of resistance in political geography. On the one hand, its permeability to right-wing populism may call for a mode of critical analysis that diminishes its presence through refutation. On the other hand, conspiracism's capacity to challenge the neoliberal common-sense appraisal of critical measure, technocracy, and biopolitical governance may call for modes of critique that affirm its transgressive capacities. This dilemma is especially salient in geography where approaches to resistance have been mostly animated by a critical ethos of research-activism which makes common-cause with its case study (Blomley, 2006). As conspiracism expresses a new form of resistance to a neoliberal order, it becomes more pressing to find new ways to chronicle resistance which disengage from the task to affirm or negate, in order to gain a better understanding of the specificity of their emergence and mode of action.

In this paper, I propose another mode of critical analysis for the study of resistance as I engage with the freedom movement as a movement of resistance. To do so, this paper follows

and extends work on conspiracism which has drawn attention to the historical significance of conspiracism and favoured a mode of critique set on describing the various elements which compose this phenomenon (Bratich, 2008; Ridgway, 2025). This is a mode of critique which finds its political and ethical value not in diminishment or affirmation, but in the comprehension of the complex forces giving rise to a situation[21]. Since I do not share the political aims and ideals of this movement, my position departs from the traditional ethos of research activism that structures resistance research in geography. A first aim for this paper is therefore to propose an account of resistance that is not set on affirming the claims of my case study. My purpose in doing so is to propose an understanding of resistance committed to teasing out the way power is encountered, known, and constructed in the freedom movement. This is important to understand in order to grasp why this movement emerged in this specific time and place, and why it needed to articulate its political claims in a specific way. The second aim of this paper is therefore to open geographical research on resistance to under-studied types of resistant subjects in order to gain a better understanding of power relations in their geo-historical actuality.

The capacity of practices of resistance to say something about power is something that geographical scholarship on resistance is well aware of. Indeed, the discipline has continuously sought to broaden its study of the *forms* that resistance can take in order to expand its understanding of the processes of power. Geographers have particularly opposed an understanding of resistance as acts that only take place through the tangible oppositional mobilisation of well-defined groups constituted through oppressive structures (Pile and Keith, 1997; Paddison *et al.*, 2002; Hughes, 2020). This is the classical Marxist subject of resistance, one who is naturally conscious of its class interests and its place in the teleological progression of history. In contrast, recent geographical work on resistance draws out new subjects of resistance as they emerge from everyday practices that cannot directly be connected to oppositional tactics of resistance. Resistance now comes in forms that are more incoherent, everyday, processual, and relational, and which are manifested in quotidian acts of play (Flusty, 2000), dance (Thrift, 1997), or tactics of passive refusal (Mullings, 1999). This reconfiguration

[21] I allude here to a range of influences which delineate a critical orientation characterized by a commitment to diagnosing the conditions of the present, notably: Michel Foucault's (1996) problematization, Stuart Hall's (2019) conjunctural analysis, and Lauren Berlant's (2011) tracking of the affective present. In geography, this style of critique is already present in geographies operating under the large umbrella of non-representation theories, but these have also characteristically favored the everyday as a site of political exploration over large scale movements of resistance. I leave these influences in the background of this text however, as my aim, in this paper, is to demonstrate the value of this critical orientation through the empirical exposition of a situation, rather than through a theoretical defense and discussion of this tradition.

of resistance finds its roots in post-hegemonical theories of power which move social analysis from an understanding of power as a structuring and unidirectional force that grants power-over, to a force that puts in motion, a power to act, in a field of complex forces (Lash, 2007). Resistance to power can therefore no longer only be captured in revolutionary movements that unmask a structuring relation of power but must be momentarily stabilised in the unfolding of everyday power relations.

In this paper, I wish to build upon and extend this reconfiguration of resistance by opening up geographical scholarship on resistance to under-researched *types* of activism and subjects of resistance. While this scholarship has foregrounded its desire to move away from resistance as the oppositional strategies of oppressed groups, the type of resistant subjects which constitute its case studies remains faithful to the pre-determined subjugated identities and activist movements posited by critical Marxist analysis. This is, for example, apparent in the recent edited volume *Critical Geographies of Resistance* (Hughes, 2023) which promises to renew the vow to unsettle geographers' imaginaries of the forms that resistance can take, but nevertheless falls back on well-known scenes and figures of resistance – for example: feminist archival work (Fannin and MacLeavy, 2023), the everyday lives of disabled people (Butler-Rees, 2023) or struggles around housing (Schouw Iversen, 2023). What this example shows is that while the forms that resistance can take have been expanded, resistance continues to be encountered in the same types of movements, practices, subjects, and affects. By coming back to the same scenes and subjects of resistance, scholarship investigating resistance holds together notions of power as a downward and structuring force that only grants power-over (see Rose, 2002 for a similar argument).

In that sense, *resistance is only ever enacted by subjects who are already known to be affected by power, and who are already assumed to be in a relation of successful transgression with power.* What this means is that geographical research on resistance is not so much driven by the study of resistance in all its forms, but rather by the affirmation of practices of resistance which are assumed to have a meaningful and positive political value. This is not to say that the resistance of a variety of subjects is not already documented in geographical work, however it is rarely discussed as a practice of resistance and incorporated within scholarship on resistance. And while geographical work that attempts to engage with resistance conceptually can often note that resistance does not have to be a practice which can be made common cause with[22],

[22] This is something that is often, perhaps tellingly, pre-emptively denied by scholarship on resistance. As an example amongst many, Steve Pile (1997: 4) notes that 'it is possible to recognize that resistance can involve

this is *not reflected in the case studies that make up studies of resistance*. Resistance as a marker of difference therefore becomes foreclosed in an image of thought that locates difference in already known types (e.g. grassroots movements), practices (e.g. dance, art), affects (e.g. care, joy, solidarity), and subjects (e.g. categorical identities formed through shared oppression). These are important forms of resistance to document, but political geography's tendency to foreground these types of resistant subjects limits our understanding of the functioning of resistance and power.

In this paper I therefore propose an account of the resistance of the freedom movement that subverts the critical ethos of research-activism in favour of a more geo-historical stance. I do so, not by proposing a strict method for reproduction, but by showcasing a critical ethos centred on proposing contextual articulations of resistance for the exploration of a situation. As such my aim is not to affirm or diminish the resistance of the freedom movement but to explore: what are the tools of their resistance? Why do they need these tools in this precise geo-historical moment? What are the contextual pressures which are orienting this movement of resistance? To explore these questions in the context of the freedom movement I focus on one narrative, which has systematically surfaced in my research, as it has been mobilized by the movement to ground their resistance of the extension of state power into intimate spheres of life. I begin this paper by providing further detail on this one narrative (theories of common law) and discuss some of the methodological implication of researching 'conspiracism'. I explain how this narrative, which makes the claim that the state is the actor of a plot that confers people with a dual identity, has become popular in the freedom movement. In the next section I propose a set of conceptual vocabulary which help me tease out and make sense of the conditions and pressures which give rise to this particular form of resistance. I do so by characterizing the resistance of the freedom movement as: a specific practice of resistance which seeks to produce new ways of being (a counter-conduct); as a performance of dissent which takes place in a particular atmosphere of hatred for the state (state phobia); and as happening in and through a relation of anxiety with the state (phobia). The last section describes how the freedom movement takes shape in a relation and atmosphere of phobia which conditions how the state

resistance to any kind of change, to progressive and radical politics and to social transformation', and Sarah Hughes (2020: 1155), citing Elisabeth Grosz (1999), similarly claims that 'this disruption of certainty is political. It is not necessarily, however, politically progressive. As Grosz argues: '[i]f the future revolution can carry no guarantee that it will improve the current situation or provide something preferable to what exists now, what makes it a sought-for idea? What prevents it from blurring into fascism or conservatism?' (1999: 17). At the level of geographical scholarship on resistance, however, these claims of acknowledgement of the ambiguous nature of resistance rarely congeal in an exploration of types of resistance which cannot be directly and evidently be made common cause with.

becomes known as a conspiratorial all-knowing and all-powerful entity of power. I then focus on theories of common law as an example of a counter-conduct which introduces the possibility of escaping this entity of power. Ultimately, I show how these theories create a new conduct, in the form of a new mode of being which escapes the possibility to be known and controlled by the state. In the conclusion, I come back on the ethical and political stakes of finding new ways to chronicle resistance. The surge of new right-wing forces across liberal democracies shows that resistance to the liberal order is not only enacted by progressive forces. Politically there is therefore a need to understand how new forms of resistance, such as anti-vaccination and conspiracism, are taking shape.

## 3.2. Naming and researching conspiracism as resistance

My account of the theories that circulate in the freedom movement is supported by a 10-month long research project which encompasses digital observation, participant ethnographic research with a UK based group formed during 2021 anti-mandates protests doing weekly outreach events (on the topic of Covid-19 vaccination, world governance, digital surveillance etc.), and 17 interviews lasting between 1 to 5 hours with participants recruited on line and in the action group. The digital observation portion of this research involved almost daily observation of Telegram channels and groups pertaining to the freedom movement. The main groups and channels that compose the data were created by UK based actors. As the research progressed, I also accumulated resources (books, films, documentaries, documents etc.), found online and as they were recommended by research participants.

Researching what is commonly known as conspiracism comes with the challenge of naming practices and theories as 'conspiracism'. This is partly because the term 'conspiracy theories' is a pejorative label that runs the risk of delegitimizing legitimate critics of the state and authority, that are recognised as being irrational (Johnson-Schlee, 2019). This does not mean that conspiracism cannot be researched, but that it must be taken as a relationally constituted object that becomes recognised, singularised, and problematised as conspiracism in a particular context (Bratich, 2008; Harambam, 2020). As such, conspiracism can be best described as *an attempt to name* a wide range of practices and narratives that blend, but are not reducible to, libertarian ideologies, new age spirituality, neo-nationalism and moral

conservatism. In the context of the crisis of neoliberalism, they form a new spiritual-political formation that crystallizes the shifting political hegemony of neoliberal commonsense (Brown, 2019; Secor and Anderson, 2024). In this crisis of hegemony, conspiracism is therefore one of the ways in which resistance to a liberal order is taking shape in the present moment.

In the freedom movement, I was able to locate this formation from the consistent repetition of a set of concerns (vaccination, digital surveillance, freedom); practices (alternative medicines, meditation); theories (world governance); vocabulary ('they' to name an entity of control, 'awakening' to the existence of this entity); beliefs (in occult forces); and spatialized patterns (online spaces concerned with privacy and censorship such as Telegram). This list is not to suggest that only one of these elements is sufficient to identify a subject or narrative as pertaining to conspiracism, but that together they make up a loose assemblage problematised as conspiracism. The possibility to identify conspiracism in the freedom movement, as a relationally constituted object, is also supported by a growing literature that traces similar patterns in anti-vaccine mandates protests that took place around the world around 2021-2022, and their aftermath (e.g. Canada and Sweden (Askanius, Molas and Amarasingam, 2024); Ireland (Curley, Siapera and Carthy, 2022); Australia (Gillespie, 2023)).

While this resistance posed by conspiracism has been manifested formally in anti-mandate protests around 2021, it is more prominently enacted in the creation and promotion of theories which explain how the state operates as an entity of control. I have chosen to focus on one theory encountered in the freedom movement as it is one of the narratives that provides the most coherent and systematic way in which participants of the movement make sense of the state, their relation to the state, and produce a practice that aims to escape its reach. As such, it is an example of the ways in which people's relation to the power of the state is being negotiated and resisted in the present moment. These theories are what participants of the movement, and others who have a pre-existing interest in these theories, refer to as 'common law'. Common law, in judicial vocabulary, refers to 'the body of customary law, based upon judicial decisions and embodied in reports of decided cases, that has been administered by the common-law courts of England since the Middle Ages' (Kiralfy et al., 2025, para 1.). Common law, which is composed of case laws written by courts, differs from civil law, which is composed of legal statutes written by legislators. But within contemporary conspiracism a corpus of theories has developed around common law which has *superimposed ontological, political, and epistemological claims onto this specific category of law*. In this paper I use the phrase 'theories of common law' to refer to this former body of pseudo-legal theories.

Theories of common law find their origin in a 1970s American movement known as the 'Sovereign citizen Movement', an anti-tax and anti-government movement, that found in common (or 'natural') law a way to evade the legal system in place (Hodge, 2019). These theories hold that the state is the orchestrator of a plot that confers people with a dual identity. This dual identity is activated by the creation of a false legal identity which enables the state to impose demands, such as taxation, to individuals. Since the 2008 financial crisis, these theories have gained a new momentum and transnational popularity, in part, due to the fact that they offer the possibility to evade financial responsibility (Sanchez, 2009; Hodge, 2019). During the covid-19 pandemic, these theories have similarly resurfaced across different context (e.g. Australia (Day and Carlson, 2023); Sweden (Dyrendal, 2023); Germany and France (Van Buuren, 2023)). During the period of my research (November 2023 to September 2024), I observed that these theories gained momentum outside of the US within online and offline groups that formed in 2021 in the UK around the question of vaccine mandates[23]. For people working in professions where mandates had or could be implemented, theories of common law quickly became disseminated as a way to evade the risk of termination. These theories were similarly appealing to business owners who faced financial pressures - or feared that they would - as a result of lockdown policies. Their influence is principally materialised in the freedom movement through templates written and shared by members, that take on the vocabulary of theories of common law (see figure 1 & 2, and explanations below). These templates were directed at employers or courts as a means to resist the imposition of vaccine mandates. Before beginning my research with the freedom movement, I was unaware of these theories and did not specifically seek out information about them when I started my research. My knowledge and interest in this theory emerged as I repeatedly encountered Telegram posts and channels referencing it, and as participants[24] mentioned "common law" in interviews and during outreach events. Through this process, I ascertained that these theories serve as one of

[23] A pattern similarly reflected in journalistic reports covering anti-vaccination mandate protests, and their aftermath, in the UK (e.g. *BBC News*, 2020; *The Week*, 2022; Coleman and Sardarizadeh, 2022; Fowles, 2024; Parkin, 2024)

[24] As is the case for any theory, people have varying degrees of expertise and varying abilities to convey their knowledge. I have particularly relied on two interviewees (Camden and Justin) who have articulated a coherent and particularly well-informed understanding of the theories. But like any other theory, these theories are also used by people to make sense of the world in a more loose, incoherent, and incomplete manner. I therefore also recognize the importance of these theories in the consistent encounter (online, during interviews, and informal conversations during outreach events) with a concern for the link between the action of the state and its effect on the nature of humanity, a concern for the law in general (e.g. out of the 18 people I have interviewed, 9 have directly expressed an interest in law (5 specifically common law, unprompted by me), a desire to study law, and/or have been involved in legal cases where they have taken the role of self-litigants), and most importantly through the creations of templates used to evade legal and financial responsibility that use the language of theories of common law (see figure 2 and accompanying explanations).

the most structured and foundational narratives within the movement (for example, narratives about "world governance" and depopulation also play significant roles). But this is not to say that the movement can be reduced to these theories, nor that all of its members necessarily believe in these theories. For most of the people I encountered during my research the only certainty that they held is that "things aren't right", and this theory is considered as *a possibility* amongst many to explain this situation.

## 3.3. Feeling and understanding the pressure of the state: counter-conducts, state phobia, and mythmaking

In this section, I offer a set of conceptual vocabulary that contextualizes the resurgence of theories of common law in a specific field of power. I do this as an attempt to chronicle resistance that isn't beholden to the task to diminish or affirm. My aim in doing so is to seize resistance as it exposes troubled relations between subjects and power to expose the places where power loses its grip on the subject and the world.

I focus on bringing together the particular practice (the performance of counter-conducts), atmospheric condition (state phobia), and relation (phobia) which intersect in this particular form of resistance. As theories of common law principally make sense of the state's reach into people's intimate life, I borrow Foucault's concept of counter-conducts as a particular mode of resistance that produces new ways to conduct the self. I then look at how state phobia, as the affect which imbues concerns over the potential excess of governmentality, both conditions and orients the freedom movements' concern over the state as an entity of total control and knowledge. Finally, by supplementing Foucault's understanding of state phobia with psychoanalytic literature, I take phobic articulations of the state as myths that help people cope with the emptiness of the law. I do not attribute causal determinations to these elements but rather to show how resistance is produced amidst a particular field of power which is graspable across practices, relations and atmospheres.

Conducts are an ensemble of techniques and procedures, arising in early European Christian pastorate and paving the way to biopolitical governance, which attempt to guide human consciousness (Foucault, 2007). The term conduct is a way to name the field of action in which neoliberal reason rationalizes and relates the principles of a market economy to the

governance of its population (Foucault, 2004). Pastoral power therefore prefaces biopower in naming the field of action in which human behaviour is realised in 'a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized' (Foucault, 1982: 790). The art of conducting (oneself/others) therefore bridges the realms of politics and ethics insofar as self-formation is a struggle which actualizes effects of power. This is why counter-conducts has been a useful concept for Foucault, and scholars of governmental studies in his suite, to name a form of resistance which interrogates power's right to conduct conducts (Cadman, 2010; Legg, 2019). Counter-conducts therefore do not take place 'outside of power' but pursue other ways of being conducted/of conducting oneself still within the concern of finding the right way to be conducted/to conduct oneself (Lorenzini, 2016; Foucault, 2024). To put it simply, counter-conducts name 'the space for a kind of subjectivation that unbalances the production of what we are in the direction of a practice of freedom but always within the determinations that cross us' (Revel, 2016: 170; also see Butler, 2002). Resistance to medical rationality is thereby one of the keyways in which counter-conducts produce a range of 'medical heresies around practices of medication using electricity, magnetism, herbs, and traditional medicine' (Foucault, 2007:266). This is visible in contemporary vaccination conspiracism which produces alternative ways of reinforcing the body's defences perceived as more 'natural' (see Birchall and Knight, 2023). This can explain how conspiracism has taken shape through the *distinctive mixture* of concerns for the state as an absolute entity of knowledge and control, and the production of alternative ways to care for the self through new age remedies, mysticism and holistic health practices.

Counter-conducts have already been useful in geography and beyond to challenge narratives which present a totalizing account of neoliberalism's infiltration and determination of subjectivation. These studies show, for example, how the self can become a space of resistance (Roy, 2018), how technologies of modern power can be redefined by indigenous actors (Anthias and Hoffmann, 2021), or how the governance of NGOs pave the way towards the opening of transformative political spaces (Pieck, 2015). These engagements with the concept of counter-conducts work well to show how resistance is co-constitutive of power. It is nevertheless Carl Death's (2010, 2011, 2016) approach which access the full potential of a counter-conduct approach. This is because Death's focus is on how this approach can upset 'actor-centric' (2010: 236) studies of resistance to include 'social practices which are much darker, more troubling and unsettling than the "usual suspects" of idealistic global justice campaigners' (2016: 217). The counter-conduct approach offers this possibility because of a

methodological shift which takes resistance to be a contextually embedded performance rather than a 'coherent and progressive counter-hegemonic challenge to the status quo' (Death, 2016: 201). Crucially, the counter-conduct approach shows its strength by proposing an alternative vocabulary to narrate resistance that resists heroization (Foucault, 2007: 268). The counter-conducts approach therefore gives us the ability to name the performance of dissent taking place in the freedom movement while resisting the impetus to either be 'for or against'.

If counter-conducts names the practice of resistance of the freedom movement, then 'state phobia' can delineate one of its atmospheric milieux. Counter-conducts, as performances, take shape in the question of the excess of government. State phobia can therefore be thought as an affective corollary to counter-conducts as this atmosphere conditions their possibility and translates their emergence affectively. As a movement principally concerned with the threat of a plot for world governance instigated by institution such as the World Health Organization, 'the freedom movement' is structured by a demand for limited government intervention. This hatred of the state can be related to an affective condition which emerges in 20th century European liberal democracies which accompanies the formation of neoliberal governance (Foucault, 2004). As an atmosphere, state phobia is a 'mobile condition' (Anderson, 2016: 741) which does not map on directly upon neoliberal reason nor allow us to reduce neoliberalism to this affective expression. This is because state phobia covers a range of political reasons, imbuing: 'liberal-bourgeois concern with a 'crisis of democracy'; concern from left and right with the surveillance state; and radical left-wing critique of the state as repressive' (Anderson, 2016: 741). State phobia also does not lock neoliberalism in an unending movement of destatization but rather allows for the state to become stronger in some areas albeit in less visible ways (e.g. nudge policies or private/public merging) (Whitehead *et al.*, 2017; Brown, 2019; Stiegler, 2019). In the context of the freedom movement this can explain how this movement is rendered politically ambiguous by a detestation of 'the elites' - concentrated in the figure of the 'government' - as an affect which travels equally in the right and left's concerns for corporate greed or digital surveillance. This can also explain how the state becomes an object of hyper-fixation for this movement, obscuring how neoliberal reason exceeds the drive to reduce the state's presence.

Phobia can delineate an atmosphere which is composed and imbues movements of repulsion from the state, and as such it can also name the particular condition which orients people's relation to the state. Taking the concept of phobia closer to its psychoanalytic origin, we can understand a phobia to be a representation of anxiety. Anxiety, put very simply, appears

when the subject encounters and is unable to assimilate the excessive and ungraspable dimension of reality (the Real) – for example, the distance between what you are / can do and what you imagine to be / should be (Lacan, 2016). By definition, anxiety is therefore objectless – or more precisely, has an unknowable, unnameable object (Freud, 1959; Lacan, 2016). Phobias come in to provide the subject with a temporary and permutable object which can make anxiety function in the world and exhaust it – it is the slowness of the spider's legs, but also its sudden scuttle, that can stand as the father, the mother, the friend etc. (Owens, 2019; Rodríguez, 2019; Lacan, 2020). In a psychoanalytic framework, phobias therefore work similarly to the structure of myths (Rodriguez, 2019). Where the law that structured the Real breaks (it no longer provides the meaning that tied together reality), myths come to reorder reality thanks to their immutable symbolic quality (e.g. the permanence of the tropes of evil force) but permutable imaginary function (e.g. the tropes can be reemployed in a range of narratives). This can explain how when the state's function as a provider of order and authority failed from the perspective of the freedom movement (e.g. the hypocrisy of its laws was exposed), it found in theories of common law a way to reorder reality. This is not to say that anxiety in relation to the state is necessarily misplaced, but that critiques of the state as a domineering, coherent and autonomous entity work to reinstate an order that (re)constructs the state as such.

In the next section, I return on theories of common law as one of the narratives that I most systematically encountered during my research with the freedom movement. The conceptual vocabulary that I have outlined allow me to propose an account of how the freedom movement takes place in and through a particular performance of dissent (counter-conducts), an atmosphere of hatred of the state (state phobia), and a relation of anxiety with the state (phobia).

## 3.4. The myth of the strawman: the soul as the true nature of the self

For most of the participants in this study, the story of their involvement in the freedom movement begins with a feeling of unease in the face of a perceived discrepancy in the action of the state. This is what Chloe, John, and Peter explain when I ask them to describe the event that made them interested in the theories that circulate in the freedom movement:

**Chloe**: It was just literally that mask thing when everything was dying down and suddenly, you're still laying on some more, well, why are you laying it on now? You come and tell me what to do. Some of the rules were just absolutely crazy, you know, like if you walk into a room you've got to wear a mask. But when you sit down, you take it off. It's just, like…what? Oh, what? Do you think we're thick or what?

**John**: The thing that did it for me was when it was just building up to lockdown and I was seeing there was this virus over in China or Wuhan and they were letting planes. There was three a day coming into Heathrow from Wuhan, I think. Well, if this is a kind of virus, how come there's three planes in the day. Heads of businesses they were just allowed to go straight through with no masks, no nothing like that. And they were able to just get on planes, whether they were normal planes or business planes and they were coming in as well.

**Peter**: The fact that I've worked in a lab myself. And I knew that it was all about air flow and not one shop or supermarket did anything about air flow and still to this day they don't, you know, we're in the middle of summer, all businesses, I mean, should have an air flow system you know. Even though I know that all of this was a hoax, I do believe that viruses exist, I do believe in disease prevention.

In these accounts, the incapacity for the state to enact its law in an absolute manner led participants to lose their capacity to make sense of the law of the state. John, for example, identifies a disconnect between the idea that 'this is a kind of virus' and that air travel is able to continue. In these examples, the expectation that the law should be absolute is what is betrayed when the law that was received (e.g. social gathering are dangerous, transnational travel leads to propagation, air flow is important), is not categorically executed (restaurants are not closed, air travel is not stalled, air flow devices and practices are not installed). This is the moment where a relation of phobia to the state can be seen to develop. It begins with the feeling of having been cheated out of something (Chloe's 'Oh, what? Do you think we're thick or what?') by a law that is now exposed to be arbitrary (Rodríguez, 2019). The lack of coherence that is now found in the authority who is supposed to enforce the law is unbearable, insofar as the law appears to fix the parameters of what the subject is able to want in a given cultural

order (Rodríguez, 2019). This is where anxiety enters into play as *the absence of law exposes people to the possibility of not being restricted in their desire*[25] (Lacan, 2020). And it is in this gap that the subject enters into contact with the Real as the realm of the unknowable that paralyzes subjects in fear. Indeed, as they gaze into the precipice of limitless possibilities subjects encounter the possibility of becoming undone - everything that forms the 'I am' could be recomposed. Fundamentally then, the relation of phobia that we can see taking shape in Chloe, John and Peter's feeling of being taken as fools by the state, papers over an anxious relation to this figure of authority who is not capable of fixing the parameters of the law.

Working in the background of this concern the feeling of state phobia can also be seen to work as an active affective condition of how the state is always felt to be governing too much. This is noticeable in the way that the failures of the state to enact its law in a complete manner raises the suspicion that the state must still be governing too much. Instead, the suspicion that floats around the state as always excessive fills absence with intention. What becomes apparent for Chloe, John, and Peter when they notice the incoherence of the state's action, is that it must be operating in secrecy. The plot or the conspiracy, is therefore what comes as an explanation that can hold together the feeling of the state's over-presence in the midst of its absence. But state phobia also takes place in and through an affective structure that circles the hypocrisy of a neoliberal reason which claims minimal intervention while acting as a key support of the accumulation and circulation of private capital. During the pandemic, this hypocrisy was made manifest by the unwillingness to regulate the flows of people and capital at the expanse of public health. But this reason becomes inaccessible under a structure of state phobia where the action of the state must always be minimized. So, if for Chloe, John and Peter the critique of the state as a support to the circulation of capital is inaccessible it may be because state phobia oversaturates the experience of how the state may be constructed, encountered, and known. If the state's presence is always suspicious, if its will and reason are supressed, then maybe one of the ways to make sense of this state becomes the subterranean conspiracy.

[25] This claim may seem to sit uncomfortably with a counter-conduct approach insofar as Foucault's thought exists in close conversation with work that enacts a rupture with such psychoanalytic understandings of desire (e.g. Foucault, 1983). Crucially, this opposition exists between the idea that desire is born from the negation of the law and the idea that desire is a positive and generative force (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983). In this paper, I nevertheless hold these two ideas in tensions as I read them as historically situated claims with differing prescriptive aims, and not essentialist ones. I understand Lacan's claim as the descriptive statement of a clinician anchored in a particular socio-economic terrain and its corresponding mode of organization of desire. This doesn't take away the possibility for desire to act as a force of radical production when this socio-economic order loosen up, and insofar as organizations of power are never total. In the conclusion I return more explicitly to the political possibilities offered by the encounter with the Real, as an example of a moment when the law loses its grips on the subject.

Phobia as a relation of anxiety and as an atmosphere of suspicion therefore condition and intersect in the encounter and construction of a state power that is always felt to be governing too much. In the freedom movement, this results in the state taking the form of a mythical entity[26] of evil which possess total knowledge and control, as Jerry and Tim explain:

> **Jerry:** they've already built a profile. They've been building a profile for many years as everyone's been on social media for many years. So then they already know who you are, and then they'll know when you wanna, you know, you're thinking of going to the capital. For whatever reason they'll know you're going there. They'll know who you're going with. They'll know why you're going. They'll know what you're gonna say, if you talk there, they'll … even if you don't talk, they'll be able to predict your speech. This is the problem. And it is the prison planet.
>
> **Tim:** These people. Elites, they call themselves. Are very, very small in number so they can't impose this on people by force. There has to be bias, like deceptive means, and get people to actually go along with their own enslavement

As these accounts show, the state is encountered as an entity that is able to know (e.g. Jerry: 'they know who you are'), predict (e.g. Jerry: 'they'll be able to predict your speech'), and orient (e.g. Tim: 'get people to actually go along with their own enslavement') the subject's actions and desires. Here we see how the state, whose authority and presence come under question in the relation and atmosphere of phobia, is rebuilt as an entity of total control and knowledge. The counter-conduct created by the freedom movement therefore function as a myth that simultaneously (re)builds the state as an entity of control and knowledge and proposes a way to escape this entity. One of such narrative devices can be located in the myth of a dual identity that exists in theories of common law.

[26] The entity of power that exists in the narratives of contemporary conspiracism must be understood as more than what is typically understood by 'the state'. Indeed, this entity is referred to as 'the government' by participant but it exceeds the limits of the state, and the ontological plane of the human. While it is regularly localized in specific institutions (e.g. the world economic forum), or people (e.g. Klaus Schwab), people intertwine political, spiritual, and occult beliefs about its origin and mode of functioning.

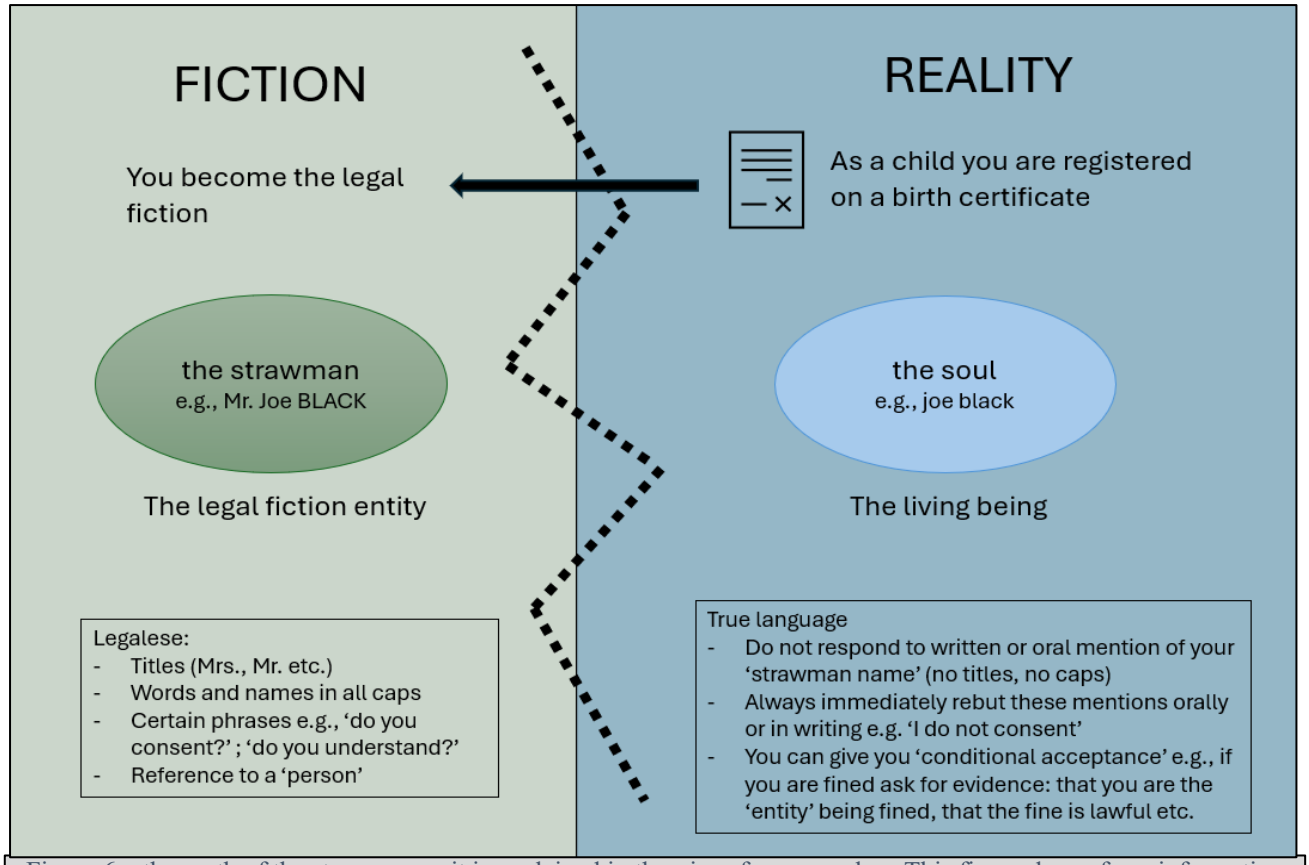


Figure 6 – the myth of the strawman as it is explained in theories of common law. This figure draws from information gathered from participants and Telegram channels.

These theories hold that, behind the growing importance of statute laws, hides a plot to rob human beings of their existence as living beings. This plot (as summarised in Figure 1) is centrally operated through the birth certificate which acts as a contract between the state and a living being, that grants the state ownership of the living being registered through the birth certificate. This living being becomes 'the strawman', a fictitious legal entity which is the entity upon which the state has custody. This fictitious legal entity is what grants the state the power to apply statute laws and make a profit (through imprisonment, taxation, charges etc.). In his widely shared book *Meet Your Strawman and whatever you want to know,* David Robinson (2013: 4) further explains:

> A Strawman is a fictitious legal entity, created with the hope that as the child grows up, he will be fooled into believing that he is actually the Strawman (which he most definitely is not) and pay all sorts of imaginary costs and liabilities which get attached to the Strawman by con artists.

To be registered as a strawman therefore cuts away your ability to see and understand yourself as you really are: a free and equal living being who is submitted to no other laws than the duty to not harm or kill, to not steal or damage, and to not swindle (Robinson, 2013: 6). As Camden therefore explains, the implications of the creation of 'the strawman' are profoundly ontological:

> **Camden:** Who are we? What are you and I? The word person doesn't mean human being. The word child or kid doesn't mean human being, it all relates to stock. You're not classified as a living breathing entity, so there's all this legalese that kind of intertwines into us, who we think we are but we're not.

The registration of the birth certificate enacts an ontological rupture which is extremely difficult to revert. The subjugation of the human being after the signature of the birth certificate continues throughout the life of the subject by tricking her into believing that she is the strawman thanks to the creation of a secret language. This is the 'legalese' that Camden references and that 'uses English words but attaches secret meanings to those words' (Robinson, 2013: 5). In court, for example, the phrase 'do you understand?' becomes 'do you under-stand?' which slips into meaning '"do you stand me?' meaning "Do you grant me authority over you so that you have to obey whatever I tell you to do?" (Robinson, 2013: 5). Likewise capitalized names or titles are used as a way to trick you into answering as your strawman (see figure 1). Courts and institutions use this legalese to trick people into believing that they are the strawman and that they have to agree to do things that are actually optional (appearing in court, registering a car, paying taxes etc.). Theories of common law therefore act as myths that are used to severe ties from the state by subtracting from its reach the identity that is constructed by the language of the state. The language of the state has an ontological reach and effect which can be opposed by the creation of a different being.

Theories of common law therefore create a language - or a way to use language - in order to escape this trick, and to reconnect you to your true self. This vocabulary is particularly mobilized in the freedom movement in the form of 'templates' created by members of the movement to help each other evade legal and financial responsibilities (see figure 2). As the highlighted content in the excerpts chosen in figure 2 shows, these templates mobilize the ideas of a dual identity, and a magical force tied to language which are characteristic of theories of common law. In excerpts A and B the emphasis put upon 'natural rights' (A), 'inalienable rights'

(A), ‘natural law’ (B) reference common law. Likewise, these excerpts make a distinction between a ‘person’ and a ‘living wo/man’ (A), ‘living men/women’ (B), ‘living souls’ (B), ‘a contract signed by us’ (A) (and by extension, a contract that would not be signed by ‘us’), which are ways to designate the true self in opposition to the strawman, who is believed to be the entity targeted by the letters these templates are aiming to respond to. In excerpts C, D and E it is the magical force of language that is invoked, as it is the act of signalling the withdrawal of consent in a text that is taken to produce the effect of regaining sovereignty of one’s soul. In the myth of the strawman, the enunciation of one’s true identity and one’s refusal have the magical effect of shifting one’s state of being.

**NOTICE-OF-CONDITIONAL-ACCEPTANCE**

To: Name of person fining you,
Re: Fine refernce number
We, a wo/man, known as you name claiming and reserving all natural rights, conditionally accept your offer to comply with Covid-19 regulations at business name, on proof of claim of the following:

1. That we are a 'person' and not a living wo/man,
2. That you know what a 'person 'actually is, legally speaking,
3. That Covid-19 regulations are law without our consent,
4. That Covid-19 regulations specifically name us or our business,
5. That there exists a lawfully binding contract signed by us wherein compliance with Covid-19 regulations is clearly stated,

A – Excerpt from a template for business owners to challenge fines received for opening businesses during lockdown

It is unethical and unconstitutional to force healthy living sovereigns, living men/women, living souls to comply with measures that can cause physical and emotional harm, as well as restrict their freedom to travel freely and without discrimination across society.

Mask demands violate the ability of persons with firmly held religious views to obey by natural law and follow their convictions to walk in faith, not fear. As a result, wearing a mask is a very personal decision that should not be made universally; measures meant to protect the community as a whole are futile if they harm individuals inside it.

B – Excerpts from a template to challenge mask mandates

You have failed, you are no longer fit for purpose, you must resign your position. I do not consent to you receiving anymore public money. You must be replaced with a man or woman whose sole aim is for the betterment of society, to improve the lives of every man, woman and child in the United Kingdom.

**You are hereby being notified that I withdraw my consent, as is my fundamental right, to be governed by any corrupt, compromised, belligerent, criminal Parliament or Government. I will not comply but I will remain lawful and keep the peace.**

C – Excerpts from a template letter to send to British authorities

I would like to make a very clear and bold statement that my child will NOT be receiving any vaccines. I have made an informed decision and I do not need to give any legal reason to decline the vaccines. Vaccines are neither compulsory nor mandatory in the UK. I do not need to sign any 'refusal' form, nor will I sign any disclaimer.

D – Excerpt from a template letter to send to GP to refuse the vaccination of a child

I am EMF sensitive since 2017. I have reviewed a considerable amount of information on the web and I believe smart meters to be a health risk, a fire hazard, a security risk and a breach my rights under Common Law. They also breach my human and unalienable rights. I strongly object to any tracking or monitoring technologies. My privacy is important to me.

For these reasons **I DO NOT CONSENT** to having a smart meter installed on my property or any meter that uses WiFi or radio frequencies, either now, or at any point in the future.

E – Excerpts from a template letter to oppose smart meter installation

Figure 7 – Different excerpts (A, B, C, D, E) collected from templates shared on Telegram channels, sites, and blogs that pertain to the freedom movement. These are screengrabs from the documents, as they were shared – I have only modified the text's size in excerpt A to make it more legible.

But to regain complete sovereignty of one's true soul is not an easily achievable goal, because, as Camden signals, legalese 'intertwines into us'. While the entity that represents the true self can have different names (the living soul, the real you, the flesh and blood, the human being), I follow Fabian Muniesa (2022) here in focusing on the term 'soul' as a way to name and localize this separate being that is created by the myth of the strawman, and to insist upon its mythical origin and mode of functioning. As a theory of monetary value, as Muniesa shows, theories of common law locate value in the eternal soul of a people mystically allotted by a creator. Beyond the legal fiction of the strawman 'the genuine holder of true rights is always the soul. This means the divine, embodied essence of the "I am."' (Muniesa, 2022: 741). As a practice of resistance, these theories create a myth around a true identity constructed around the practice of deciding what is right. In each case, this separate entity is theorized along the lines of a monistic theology; souls form a unique substance that are one and the same as their creator. As court decisions are what creates law in common law, this unique substance is what orients the capacity to make just decisions, as Justin explain:

> **Justin:** It is the conscience of the people. It's what they believe is right. It's natural law. It emerges out of: 'but we can't do this! This is wrong'. It's our conscience. It tells us this is wrong.

The soul (e.g. the 'conscience of the people' in Justin's account) therefore manifests itself through the instinctual knowledge of what is best for the people. Through the soul, theories of common law introduce a new dimension of the self which escapes the determinations imposed by a power that knows what is best for the mind and the body. The eruption of this natural law as that which must orient life is a way for counter-conducts to stand against power and say, 'my law, the law of my own requirements, the law of my very nature as population, the law of my basic needs, must replace the rules of obedience' (Foucault, 2007: 454). Theories of common law build a counter-conduct, precisely in the sense that they don't propose to radically do away with the conducts of the state – which would mean to state that there is no truth of the subject, no truth of what is good for the subject – but rather to constitute these conducts differently. And because law, as it is articulated in theories of common law, has profound ontological implications it is precisely a different conduct which they introduce. Through the reintroduction of case laws as the primary means to build a body of law, theories

of common law claim that the truth of the human must be made and remade through case-by-case decisions oriented by the soul of the people. By introducing this 'true nature' of being they compose a self that is sovereign and beyond the grasp of a state imagined as omnipotent and omniscient.

This section has explored the geo-historical conditions in which the resistance of the freedom movement takes shape. I have shown how this resistance is oriented by a deep suspicion that the state is engaged in a conspiracy, and by anxieties over the state's reach into intimate spheres of life. Phobia, as a relation of anxiety, emerges when the law of the state no longer provides the support for people to define the limits and possibilities of their being. Within this relation the production of myths becomes a way to reorder reality by symbolically reinstating the state as a figure of authority. As an atmosphere, phobia conditions how people can know the action of the state. Since the action of the state is always suspicious, as an actual mode of governmentality and way to know the state, the conspiracy can be a way to make sense of the absence of the state in an atmosphere of suspicion. Phobia, as a relation and atmosphere, can therefore name one of the conditions for how the state is known and constructed in the freedom movement. The movement therefore produces a performance of resistance which must escape an entity of power that is known as omnipotent and omniscient. The myth of the strawman provides the means to construct the self beyond the determination of this entity, by constructing the soul as an unreachable and unknowable true nature of the self.

## 3.5. Conclusion

This paper arose from the necessity to find a place for a critical analysis of resistance that isn't propelled by the tasks to either diminish or affirm. My response is to propose an analysis which situates resistance within a specific field of power. In this instance, I have shown that the freedom movement uses the myth of the strawman to escape a mode of power it constructs and experiences as an entity of complete control and knowledge. I have proposed that this situation emerged when the authority of the state was felt to be failing. In the interplay between a relation of anxiety and an atmosphere of suspicion it becomes necessary for subject to reinstate the possibility to obey and transgress. The myth of the strawman therefore creates the soul as a new bearer of being and knowledge that still functions within the biopolitical concern of guiding human conscience. What remains is a figure of the human which has a true

nature, but that undermines the rational devices of demographic and economic sciences by giving the human a new self that escapes the realm of rationality.

The methodological promise behind this paper is to be able to know resistance without relying on representations of resistance which have become commonplace in studies of resistance. By siding with movement of resistance or diminishing them when they fail to meet our ideals, power is still built up to be a downward and oppressive force that needs to be toppled down through resistance. To find new way to chronicle resistance is necessary to understand how processes of power are experienced and constructed in the present moment. This is especially the case since across liberal democracies a new and radicalized right is either building on or displacing the dominant neoliberal common sense (Brown, 2019; Fraser and Sunkara, 2019). The renegotiation of commonsense introduces a crisis of hegemony that recomposes how people can experience and know power. In the freedom movement we see how when the state is experienced as absent it can be reconstructed as a plotting entity of total control and knowledge to satisfy the need to the reestablish the presence of authority.

To promote a mode of analysis that refuses to either affirm or diminish may seem to betray a commitment to conduct research that supports progressive social change. To choose to either diminish or affirm existing resistance movement would therefore be the only way to uphold a political and ethical commitment to social justice. But at stake in the repetition of typical case studies of resistance, is the risk of losing sight of the fact that resistance does not come ready-made – in the form of a virtuous subject of resistance - to espouse the complex entanglement of forces that we might seek to escape, but that it requires careful experimental work (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008). To seize resistance as it exposes troubled relations between subjects and power can be a way to expose the places where power loses its grip on the subject and the world. In the case of the freedom movement, we see how people are eager to find new ways of being that escape the law of the state, but that this desire is always already foreclosed by the fantasy of an all knowing and powerful entity of power. To find an enactment of resistance that could stay within the space of possibilities can never occur, as it would break the necessary coherence that holds subjectivity together. But to bring attention to the encounter that precipitates the irruption of fantasy can point towards what current orders of power are difficultly and contingently holding together. As such, my call to let go of the task of affirming and diminishing practices of resistance does not promote an apolitical position. I still make the political choice and ethical commitment to change the conditions of the present, but I believe that one of the tasks of research is to map power relations to identify their fragility.

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# Chapter 4. The Threat of Conspiracism: Anxiety, Atmospheres, and the Politics of Truth in Antidemocratic Times


## Abstract

This paper interrogates the recurrent invocation of a new vocabulary of truth-making (conspiracism, but also disinformation, misinformation, fake news) which positions truth as both an object of salvation and in need of protection. Focusing on the Covid-19 pandemic, I use the moral panic framework developed by Hall et al. to explore how conspiracism became an object of intense concern, while never truly reaching its catastrophic prognosis. To deepen this analysis, I put the moral panic framework in conversation with theories of collective affective life to show how the affective atmospheres that imbue moral panics – 'a feeling good about being good' - are not a reactionary force to ideological dislocation, but an active force of social change. I then supplement this framework with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, to show how social anxiety arises not in situations of uncertainty, but in the encounter with an overwhelming presence that exposes people to the certainty of the impossibility of their cherished ideals. Ultimately, these theoretical positionings allow me to show that the conspiracism moral panic signals the encroaching presence of truth which exposes people to the incapacity for truth to release the harmony that imbues fantasies of knowledge. I recount how this experience of the impossibility of truth was conditioned and made palpable through atmospheres that orient people into ways of life that rescue the self from the shattering experience of waning collective values. To conclude I explore some of the political implications of this diagnosis. Intensifying crises in the present seem to call for the protection of truth to secure the possibility of a democratic future, but this reaction may only continue to expose people to the traumatic encounter with the impossibility of truth.



Keywords: moral panic, conspiracism, atmospheres, morality, anxiety, truth

## 4.1. Introduction

‘We need to make lying wrong again’
António Guterres (UN News, 2021)

It seems that truth is up for grabs again. This has perhaps been the case since Donald Trump made ‘fake news’ one of his distinctive catch phrases[27], altering the meaning of a term once used to expose the very manipulation of facts that enabled his political rise. Alongside the launch of his social media platform (Truth Social), this reversal contributed to Trump’s narrativization as a stateman who overturns political cant and reinserts truth into politics. But it was perhaps the Covid-19 pandemic that solidified the sense that our shared reality had finally crumbled. Echoing Trump’s concern for fake news – but of another kind? - Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO’s director-general, in a speech given in February 2020, warns that ‘fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus and is just as dangerous’ (WHO, 2020). From its early days, it was palpably clear that the Covid-19 pandemic would just as much be a health crisis as it would be a true crisis. In the UK, it is the figure of the ‘anti-vaxx’ that was able to unite Boris Johnson (Walker, 2020) and Keir Starmer (The Guardian, 2021), for example, around the denunciation of misinformation. So, when, at the height of the pandemic, António Guterres proposes that ‘we need to make lying wrong again’ we might pause to wonder about the political color of a statement that tries to delineate an ‘us’ – the truth-tellers – and a ‘them’ – the liars – in this precise moment. As Guterres invokes the specter of Trump’s ‘make America great again’ he also raises the uncanny feeling that truth has lost its footing.

This paper therefore proposes to return to and interrogate the constant invocation of truth as a wounded and promissory ideal of salvation during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. I identify this process in the emergence and centering of a new vocabulary of truth-telling – conspiracism, fake news, misinformation, disinformation. I take the repetition and imprecision of this vocabulary to signal an attempt at naming something which exceeds the possibilities of representation and signification. What I identify here is the emergence of a collective feeling of a diffuse threat menacing truth. In choosing this approach, I follow a

[27] Trump has, for example, mentioned ‘fake news’ more frequently than his also famous ‘build the wall’ during the campaign that led to his 2016 election (Waisbord, 2018).

growing body of work in cultural and communication studies that examine 'conspiracy theories' and 'fake news' as discursively constituted moral panics. As Jack Bratich (2008) argues, for example, 'conspiracy panics' emerge from a problematization of dissent that produces 'conspiracy theories' as a diffuse threat and an object of intense concern. Research in communication studies has similarly shown how the term 'fake news' has become a tool for journalists to label a deviant mode of knowledge production, thereby reasserting their authority in a time of shifting information flows (Carlson, 2020; Farkas, 2023a, 2023b; Farkas & Schousboe, 2024; Waisbord, 2018).

This paper similarly centers its discussion of the contemporary politics of truth that took place in the mediatic portrayal of vaccine conspiracism during the Covid-19 pandemic. The moral panic framework proves useful here in understanding how a perceived threat can diverge from its actual impact on the social and political body (Cohen, 2011). Moral panics tell the story of a pathologization of deviance that also dovetails with concerns raised in the medical humanities over the prevalence of discourses of individual blame in neoliberal health governance (Mannion & Small, 2019), and more specifically in news coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic (Court et al., 2021; Labbé et al., 2022). But in examining the conspiracism moral panic, this paper also aims to propose a renewed understanding of the moral panic framework, as articulated by Hall and his colleagues (Hall, et al., 2013) in their analysis of the mugging moral panic, by reconsidering the analytical value of morality and social anxiety. I open this discussion by evaluating these categories in the light of affect and psychoanalytic theories which uproot morality from a story of a mere reaction to a static system of meaning, and anxiety from a story of a panicked reaction to uncertainty. Instead, I show how morality can bridge together considerations for people's shifting attachment to both ideological and affective fields, and I show how anxiety can act as a signal of a traumatic encounter with the impossibility of wholeness.

If Hall and colleagues set their analysis in the scene of a waning consent for social democracy and the rise of a new coercive state in 70's Britain, this paper's scene is the slow demise of common-sense neoliberalism since the 2008 financial crisis in the UK and beyond[28]. This paper takes anchor in this scene, where a new stage of this unravelling is taking place as

[28] While the project that led to this paper is primarily anchored in the UK, it nevertheless extends to a wider phenomenon taking place in liberal democracies across the global north. This is because I have tracked the phenomenon of conspiracism through news coverage (i.e. publications from The Sun, The Guardian and The Daily Mail from January 2020 to July 2022) and social media activity (i.e. observation and interviews with anti-vaccination movements on Telegram) which exceed national boundaries.

a new and radicalized right is felt to either extend or replace neoliberal common-sense across liberal democracies. In its crisis, neoliberalism is further exposing its ability to tailor its defense of values, such as truth, to the pursuit of its technocratic elimination of the social (Brown, 2019). This situation is not so much the extension of market valuation to every sphere of life, but more so the result of a 'moral-political project that aims to protect traditional hierarchies by negating the very idea of the social and radically restricting the reach of democratic political power in nation-states' (Brown, 2019: 13). If we follow Wendy Brown further, the scene we are left with is one of devastation; neoliberalism has emptied the values upon which democracy could stand and in these nihilistic times right-wing populism accomplishes the apocalyptic demise of a world rendered meaningless. I find this to be a helpful depiction of the present as I raise the question of the role of morality in its contemporary regulation of truth-telling, but I nevertheless bring a variation to Brown's diagnosis. While I situate my analysis in similar antidemocratic times, I am less convinced that populism can be reduced to an apocalyptic drive, when its version of truth characteristically attaches people to the hope and excitement that a truer world could be recovered by the defeat of a 'global elite'. If truth is empty and only exists in populism as the rhetorical perversion of a stable norm, then we indeed miss how truth effectively holds together new moral landscapes which have their rationality and move people towards their own promissory objects.

My proposition in this paper is that the pandemic has not so much been an occasion where truth has disappeared from the political field, but rather, that it was characterized by its overwhelming presence – as the central ideal that organized pandemic life and discourses across the political spectrum. I specifically reflect on how vaccine conspiracism became an object of intense concern prior to the conception of vaccines but never reached its promised cataclysmic effect on the social and political body. Ultimately, this paper argues that the moral panic around conspiracism during the COVID-19 pandemic is best understood not as a reaction to misinformation, but as a defense against the unbearable certainty of the impossibility of truth itself.

As I propose an understanding of this moral panic, I first reflect upon some of the implications of this framework. My first observation is that, as a theory of the media and mediation, moral panics depend upon a passive model of communication realized through ideological infiltration. But by joining the questions of mediation and morality, this framework is also already open to how intimate sensations of outrage orient people into new ways of life that gain and refract historical significance. By putting moral panics in conversation with

theories of collective affective life I reposition moral panics as traces of emerging atmospheres that guide people into new ways of life (Berlant, 2011). A second step in my exploration of the moral panic framework, is to interrogate what is revealed in experiences of collective panic. Psychoanalytic understandings of anxiety here show us that anxiety works as a signal that a loved object has come too close for comfort (Lacan, 2016). It is in this situation of saturation that the loved object shows its inability to fully satisfy. We are thereby left with the absolute certainty that this object will invariably slip away. Anxiety rises here because the circuit of desire is broken. So, while moral panic frameworks place reactions of social anxiety in situations of uncertainty, I show that they miss a step by ignoring how doubt is introduced to fend off the certainty that gives rise to anxiety. These theoretical positioning allow me, in the final part of the paper, to propose that the social anxiety that rose around vaccine conspiracism can be understood as a signal of the encroaching presence of truth. It is not so much that the pandemic gave rise to uncertainty but that the enclosure of the pandemic in discourses of truth exposed subjects to the incapacity for truth to release the harmony that imbues fantasies of knowledge. More than the instrumentalization of a situation of uncertainty by the media, the positioning of conspiracism as deviance could signal a re-composition of collective relations to truth. In the conclusion I explore some of the political implications of this diagnosis. Intensifying crises in the present seem to call for the protection of truth to secure the possibility of a future, but this reaction may only continue to expose people to the traumatic encounter with the impossibility of truth.

## 4.2. Between moral panics and social anxiety

### a) Moral panics: encountering public feeling?

> ‘It was the “good” themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good’
>
> (Nietzsche, 1989, pp. 25–26)

> ‘Laws, norms, and events shape imaginaries, but in the middle of the reproduction of life people make up modes of being and responding to the world that altogether constitute what gets called “visceral response” and intuitive intelligence.’
>
> (Berlant, 2011: 53)

Whether it is in the form of Friedrich Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals, Hall and colleagues’ moral panics, or Lauren Berlant’s (2011: 2) ‘moral-intimate-economic thing called “the good life”’, morality becomes invoked to explain people’s enduring attachments to ways of life and the visceral responses they expose when these ways become threatened. Morality, in this sense, opens up a space between ideology and affect as it names both a shared set of norms and their internalization, but also the sensations of collective outrage and dismay that demonstrate its structuring presence. Morality always already mixes the known with the felt as it’s working presupposes ‘a feeling good about being good’. This is present in Hall et al. as they trace through the presence of an outraged public the sign of a shifting ideological terrain opening up to the entrenchment of Thatcherism.

When Hall et al. (2013) set out to understand the disproportionate social reaction to mugging that took hold of the UK in the early 70’s, they produce a historical and structural analysis of how old ideas about crime come to support new ideological formations. Hall and colleagues’ scene is the exhaustion of the post-war social-democratic consensus and its values of affluence and permissiveness whose resistance becomes primarily evidenced through movements of moral reform and regeneration of traditional values of respectability and

puritanism. Moral attachments surface in the form of social anxiety and become re-oriented by Thatcherism's installation of its common-sense appraisal of discipline, frugality, and respectability. Amidst hegemonic instability 'the first phenomenal *form* which the 'experience of social crisis' assumes in public consciousness, then, is the *moral panic*' (Hall, et al., 2013: 316, original emphasis).

But, for Hall and colleagues, moral unrest doesn't erupt solely from the natural pressures of a historical conjuncture. News media plays a key role by translating and distorting social reality into categories available for social reactions. Nestled in the framework of the moral panic is a traditional theory of media effects in which news media primes and represents public opinion (McQuail, 1979). More crucially, behind the questions of reproduction, mediation and the specific role of the media, it is implicitly the question of how power functions in society that is being posed (Schrøder, 2002). From the advent of mass communication, what the media is taken to explain, in communication studies, is how people come to accept the ideas of a dominant class as their own (Scannell, 2013). Through media analysis we are therefore granted access to how the ideological structure of a given time is produced, reproduced and amplified. What is often inherited from the framework's use of news media is a mechanist model of inculcation where what is put under the knife of analysis is the panic itself, or its immediate causes and consequences, rather than its place in the circulation of ideology (Hier, 2011). And while the relation between public feelings and ideology was interestingly opened by the question of panics and moral outrage, the moral panic literature never defined emotions beyond individually felt reactions (Walby & Spencer, 2011). A first step in the re-examination of the moral panic framework is therefore to ask how do moral attachments to ways of life reach the threshold of collective feeling and become a structuring force in the moving present? What can be said about the affective and ideological structure of a given period from the analysis of journalistic discourse? What is the mediating role of journalistic discourse in this relation?

The moral panic framework reproduces a central claim posited by classical Marxist analysis about how the reproduction of a dominant ideology is operated by a ruling class's grip on the material means of production which grants it the means of mental production (Marx & Engels, 2022). This political economy of mass communication can be explained straightforwardly by the ownership of media institution by private capital, but also by the stabilization of material conditions – e.g. the organization of labour – which determine how people are able to represent their world (Marx & Engels, 2022; Murdock & Golding, 1979).

Hall and colleague's analysis is an extension of this branch of historical materialism which looks at how the conditions for ideological transformation are introduced by the dissolution of the material support of an ideology and the decline of the social commitment to that ideology – at a time when this commitment is no longer providing the same moral rewards (Hall et al., 2013: 155). Public feelings emerge, in the form of social anxiety, as a reaction to this moment of dislocation. The media comes in to reclassify reality in a way that sustains and reproduces a dominant ideology (Hall et al., 2013: 67). In turn, folk devils are produced as a means by which 'all the disturbing experiences are condensed and then symbolically rejected' (Hall et al., 2013: 155). In this framework, attention to public feeling is mostly paid to the moment when feelings rise as a reaction to structural and ideological dislocation and become available for mediatic modulation. Hall and colleagues therefore produce a theory of collective feelings that proposes that ideological restructuration is lived affectively and that affective dispositions expose people to particular modulations.

Yet, in the question of an ideological disruption that partly takes root in the sudden loss of sense and reward that values used to provide there is also a concept of public feeling that upsets the linearity of stories of reactive feelings. Beyond a reaction to structural change subsequently instrumentalized by the media, why it is that traditional values no longer feel like they are worth the investment? Why do ways of life suddenly lose their value and meaning? And if people detach from the values that used to give meaning to their life only because of the dissolution of their material support, how come people reattach themselves to a project of moral reform rather than one that fights for the recuperation of these material conditions? What is already present in these questions is a theory of collective feelings as an active force of social change. What this means is that alongside ideological restructuration – and its effects on public feeling - we may pay attention to how the present is also lived and moved along through affectively (Berlant, 2011). A significant difference in this approach, particularly represented in Lauren Berlant's (2011) work, is the positioning of mediation as a dynamic process rather than a situated event of translation (Ingraham, 2023; Seigworth & Coleman, 2023). So, if in Hall et al.'s approach mediation is in the middle of affect and ideology – the event that impregnates a passive reserve of affect with an ideological content – for Berlant, mediation '*is* the middle' (Pedwell, 2023: 129, emphasis added) – the entanglement that blends affect and ideology, form and content, agency and structure. Mediation therefore exceeds the form of the representational media to include emergent forms such as public feelings which 'are both mediated and themselves an active form and force of mediation' (Anderson, 2016: 115).

Atmosphere can therefore name the missing link in Hall and colleagues' description of a moment of ideological dislocation where values do not feel like they are providing the same moral rewards. When values no longer provide the clarity of stable norms, atmospheres can name the collective feeling that accompanies and imbues attempts to recompose values which can host new fantasies of 'the good life'.

So, while the moral panic framework primarily centered on the forces of the dissolution of the material support for ideology and the weakening of social commitment to that ideology, I propose, by turning to theories of collective affective life, to incorporate collective feelings to this framework. What this means is that moral attachments may be apprehended not only as a reactionary force to ideological dislocation, but also an active atmospheric force of social change. We may ask: how do atmosphere take shape and come to orient and infuse the practices of a given period? What are the ideological and affective conditions which give form to particular atmospheres? In turn, we may see that moral panics are not the direct expression of a collective feeling of anxiety, but rather the momentary stabilization of an emerging mood not yet encoded with signification (Anderson, 2016). Before returning to these considerations in the context of the conspiracism moral panic, I focus, in the next section, on the affects of anxiety and panic to establish an understanding of the functioning of social anxiety.

b) Moral panics: encountering anxiety?

> In one sense, the Folk Devil comes up at us unexpectedly, out of the darkness, out of nowhere. In another sense, he is all too familiar; we know him already, before he appears. He is the reverse image, the alternative to all we know: *the negation*.
>
> (Hall et al., 2013: 160, original emphasis)

> The uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.
>
> (Freud, 2003b: 122)

For Hall and colleagues, moral panics manifest a clash between old moral values and the novel expression of looser moral values. In the early 1970's, public concern constructs the 'mugger'

because this figure condenses the moral attitude that had to be negated to allow traditional morality to function in the social body. This is why, for Hall et al., this moral panic first took hold of a lower-middle class which, being deprived of the working-class reward of solidarity or the upper-class reward of wealth, has only ever been rewarded by its status as guardian of traditional morality. As segments of the population become seduced by more flexible values, they are the ones who first become 'more outraged, more wracked with social and moral envy, and more vigorous and organised in giving public expression to its moral beliefs' (Hall et al., 2013: 162). The Folk Devil is therefore already familiar because it represents 'the profligate figure by whom Virtue is constantly tempted, the tiny, seductive voice inside inviting us to feed on sweets and honey cakes when we know we must restrict ourselves to iron rations' (Hall et al., 2013: 160). This figure therefore signals the return of the repressed insofar as it presents a figure of enjoyment that is unbearable for those who feel that they have had to sacrifice their enjoyment to gain the moral rewards attached to traditional values. This is how moral panics perform a function similar to what Sigmund Freud (2003) identified in the uncanny presence of the censoring authority of our 'conscience' (or 'super-ego' in Freud's later work (Freud, 2003a)). The story of moral panics, according to Hall and colleagues, is therefore one of collective repression, where one's lack is identified in another's enjoyment and shut down with the force of moral indignation. The co-authors remain aligned with Freud in positioning social anxiety as the affect that grips segments of the social body when the values that bring coherence to its way of life come under threat. The social anxiety upon which moral panics come to flourish therefore results from the threat posed by the hostility of the authority (super-ego) that seems to govern the system of rewards held in moral values (Freud, 1959). It is because people feel interrogated by this authority, when its values are under threat, that people are moved to react. The concept of anxiety that Hall and colleague take up is therefore one that is close to Freud's articulation of *a reaction to the danger of losing a loved object*.

My proposition in this section is to follow Jacque Lacan's extension of Freud's conceptualization of anxiety to refine and further open Hall and colleagues' description of social anxiety. Lacan's reconceptualization of anxiety is particularly relevant to the framework of the moral panic because it is precisely the articulation of anxiety as a fear of lack that Jacques Lacan challenges in his 1962 seminar on Anxiety. Lacan similarly draws inspiration from the uncanny to position anxiety as an affect that rises when a feeling of being questioned by an authority (the Other) takes hold of us. The affect of anxiety, according to Lacan (2016: 271), can be imagined as the feeling which imbues the moment when, gazing at a still image of an

idealized figure of desire, this figure suddenly and unexpectedly returns its desiring gaze towards us. This moment is distressing because this gaze comes to question our ability to answer its desire. This is why, according to Lacan, anxiety is caused by the encounter with a lack – what we cannot offer to this figure - represented by *objet petit a*. We can think of this object as composed out of our incomplete moments of identification. Moments which offer a temporary sense of wholeness and coherence to the self, but which invariably and quickly become snatched away by the threat of fragmentation, nowhere better captured than in the encounter with the eye of the Other. *Objet petit a* can indeed be thought of as huddling together the leftovers that remain on the various stages where the Other's gaze interfered with our capacity to reach a complete image of the self. It is the absolute void that haunts our illusion of coherence and remains resistant to the inscription of signification. For this reason, it is our most prized (unpossessed and unavailable) possession that drives our desire – the idealized (incomplete and inaccessible) version of ourselves that is the only thing that could satisfy the threatening gaze of the Other. It is because this object represents the possibility that we may be incapable to respond to the demand of the desiring Other, that its activation triggers anxiety.

With this description of anxiety, we remain close to Freud's – and by extension Hall and colleagues' - initial conceptualization. But Lacan introduces a central distinction when he proposes that anxiety does not arise when this object is threatened to be taken away, but rather that *it arises when this object is encountered as an overwhelming presence*. For this reason, anxiety is not a feeling of uncertainty that would rise under the Other's questioning eye, but is lived '*as that which deceives not*, precisely in so far as every object eludes it' (Lacan, 2016: 218, original emphasis). Questioned by the gaze of the Other we are faced with the unbearable certainty that we do not possess what could satisfy its gaze. Even worse, this certainty reaches the conclusion that we do not possess this object, because it never existed in the first place. This becomes a scene of unbearable loss as we lose our capacity to orient ourselves in the order that structures the Other's desire (Secor, 2018). In this scenario, doubt emerges not as the source of anxiety, but as a way to put the certainty of anxiety at a distance (Lacan, 2016: 76). Introducing the possibility of absence, even if it leaves us in the limbo of uncertainty, saves us from the terror of certainty.

A second distinction can be reached via Lacan's understanding of *objet petit a* as the object cause of our desire. We become desiring subjects, according to Lacan (2016: 174), in our wasted attempts to recover the signification of *objet petit a*. This is what opens the road to

enjoyment for the desiring subject – the possibility to reach the excessive, traumatic satisfaction of completion. But since this is always impossible – *objet petit a* always remains the absolute void which resists signification – this is where anxiety comes to locate itself. This place is the gap between desire and enjoyment, where we relentlessly present *objet petit a* to the Other's symbolizing machine. Since this is a vain pursuit, anxiety is what trips us on our way to *jouissance* and reactivates the force of our desire. This means that unlike Freud's version of the super-ego, the Other's questioning is not only experienced as a censoring authority that reattaches people to a moral order. Anxiety does not only produce repression, but also scrambled and frenetic attempts to produce enjoyment and coherence under the injunction of the Other (Lacan, 2000).

These extensions of Freud's conceptualization of anxiety eventually mean two things for Hall and colleagues' articulation of social anxiety. The first is that social anxiety is not the result of a sense of disruption – at least unconsciously - but rather a sense of absolute certainty that the fundamental values which have given people the ability to settle into ways of life are lacking. As people lose their footing in the order that structures the Other's desire, the folk devil is not immediately encountered as a 'reverse image', but more so through the experience of 'a total collapse of the frame of reference by means of which I could possibly distinguish between 'here' and 'there,' or between image (mirror reflection) and reality (me)' (Robertson, 2015:28). From this we understand that social anxiety is not immediately a movement of reaction, but an experience of the impossibility to reach coherence and completion through symbolization. Rather than a moment when a moral order becomes secured, anxiety is the moment when all words and symbols fail. Social anxiety is not so much produced out of the threat of losing a loved object, but more so, from the certainty that this loved object cannot be reached. A second implication is that moral panics are not only instances of repression, where moral outrage comes to shut down the excess enjoyment of the folk devil by reaffirming a pre-existing moral order. Since the Other's gaze is experienced as questioning our ability to enjoy, the expression of collective moral outrage can also be read as an attempt to satisfy the demand to enjoy. Unrooting enjoyment from a story of repression and reaction can show how moral outrage is more incoherent than the perfect re-execution of a fixed moral order and more open to improvisation as people search in the dark to find new ways of life that escape the certainty of their incompleteness.

## 4.3. The Threat of Conspiracism

> With vaccine uptake of 80 per cent required to achieve 'herd immunity', some experts say 'anti-vaxxers' pose a bigger threat than the coronavirus. … Whatever their intention, the impact could be profound – trapping the world in relentless lockdowns that would cause economic ruin.
>
> (Grant, 2020)

> Research published by an FBI-associated nonprofit argues that given the obstacle they present to herd immunity, in a pandemic, anti-vaxxers may constitute a US national security risk.
>
> (Wilson, 2020)

> Fake news on social media is no joke. It should terrify us if mad Covid conspiracy theories convince almost a third of the nation to reject a vaccine, if one is released. Their stupidity will destroy our chances of developing herd immunity and stopping the virus.
>
> (The Sun, 2020)

These excerpts, taken respectively from *The Guardian, The Daily Mail, and The Sun*, illustrate a tendency, in British news media and broader public discourse, that positioned vaccine conspiracism as a threat to the resolution of the pandemic, and more broadly public health. These excerpts show how vaccine conspiracism was apprehended through anticipation, even before vaccines become available to the wider public. But while worrying polls predicted that the 'infodemic' would be responsible for low vaccine take-up, in most countries of the global north vaccine take-up exceeded the threshold required to achieve herd immunity (Birchall & Knight, 2023). This is where we meet a pattern already encountered in the moral panic framework – the exhibition of a diffuse threat marked by a disproportionate social reaction. While this pattern was already noticeable in other major events which were believed to symptomatize the desecration of truth (e.g. Brexit or Trump), the pandemic has further inscribed conspiracism as a threat to the possibility of collective life.

Similarly to how 'mugging' emerged as a 'new construction of the social reality of crime' (Hall et al., 2013: 32) rather than a new type of crime, it can be difficult to know what

'conspiracy theories' refer to. In everyday language, they indeed name more than theories which explain an event as the result of a secret plot, as the term always already implies a vague sense of deviant thinking (Bjerg & Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017). We can, indeed, think of how conspiracism has come to encompass a range of instances of 'bad thinking', such as: medical heresies (e.g. anti-vaccination or beliefs in natural cures), new age spirituality (e.g. holism or life energy as a guide to truth), or political paranoia (e.g. a hatred of 'elites' or distrust of state activity). Conspiracism, more than designating a strict ideology, doubles as a symbol of transgressive moral attitude that comes to question the respect for expertise, and the good measure that guides liberal critical attitudes (Ridgway, 2025). Following Hall and colleagues – and by extension Freud – we can understand the moral outrage expressed at the conspiracy theorist as the return of a suppressed 'will to know' (Foucault, 1978) that has been entrusted to expertise and confined to institutions in the order of neoliberal technocracy. For those who have sacrificed the enjoyment of fantasies of coherence held in the pursuit of knowledge, the conspiracy theorist - as folk devil – can embody the negation of the irrational and the self-actualization enacted in resisting authority. Joining the chorus of outrage and lamentation in the face of the idiocy, excessiveness, and toxicity of conspiracism provides the satisfaction of entering in coherence with the demand of the Other whose law sanctions rationally guided actions and obedience to expertise.

But if the Other is also, via Lacan, a figure who commands to enjoy we also see how the threat of conspiracism structures a field of enjoyment where the order of neoliberal morality can be re-produced and extended. The threat of conspiracism introduces the possibility of acting against a threat to truth as the guarantee of collective democratic life. But condemnation only offers an illusion of action which guarantees the endurance of the enjoyment of the symbolic order of neoliberal technocracy. Indeed, as the condemnation of conspiracism reasserts the legitimacy of a singular truth, rationality and expertise, it preserves the security of a symbolic order that always already subdues its commitment to truth to the circulation of capital (Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2023). As the commitment to truth is affectively, rhetorically and imaginatively enacted in the condemnation of conspiracism, it ensures that the structural conditions which allow the collective construction of truth and expertise do not have to be made anew. This is an enjoyment which provides the illusion of action but keeps intact and further hides neoliberalism's attack on the social (Brown, 2019). This is noticeable in the way that the figure of the conspiracist allowed outrage to be directed at an individualized figure of bad conduct rather than question the systematic weakening of public health. If this outrage

really related to the threat of democratic or public health breakdown, it may be more inclined to question the lack of resources allotted to public health workers to act preventively to build trust with patients, as well as assemble the resources necessary to face pandemics. A similar contradiction appears in how critical thinking skills can be simultaneously heralded as the best defense against conspiracism, even as the social sciences and humanities are further symbolically and economically voided of their value.

What is shown to be imperative here, for segments of the population, is that it is essential that knowledge – the examination of the structural conditions which make the collective construction of truth impossible under neoliberalism - is kept at a distance to enjoy the rewards of the symbolic order and the security of our position in it. This distancing that is put in action by moral panic is necessary, if continuing to follow Lacan, we remember that anxiety happens through the terror of proximity to a loved object. In this case, the conspiracism moral panic is then not so much the trace of a social anxiety that took shape around the uncertainties of the pandemic, but rather one that is characterized by its *too close encounter with the truth of truth*. That is, the impossibility for truth to ever map on its idealized function as an object which provides access to meaning and coherence.

The too close encounter with the truth of truth is perceivable in the political and mediatic discourses which have already been discussed in this paper, but as conspiracism comes to name a more and more diffuse threat we can also see how it denotes and takes on an atmospheric quality. This phenomenon is similar to how "the economy" became known from the 20$^{th}$ century onwards as a noun more than a science in people's everyday life, gaining an atmospheric quality 'palpable in cryptic statements by finance ministers, a bloom of construction, or a colorful newspaper graph that can induce expectations or worries about the economy's rhythms and directions' (Murphy, 2017: 1). Likewise, during the pandemic, the encounter with the pressure of knowing had already been conditioned through a whole range of atmospheric conditions, such as: hopeful attachments to techno-solutionism; a sense of moral duty, developed largely as a response to climate change, to trust science and to uphold its authority through the individualized responsibility to call out 'bad thinking' (e.g. McIntyre, 2021); a cruel attachment to the promise of critique, now encountered in the decadent form of the cacophony of social media indignation, but constantly reigniting the appetite for absolute truth (Stypinska, 2020, 2022); but, still, the diffuse sensation, encountered in recuring corruption scandals and filmographic portrayals of government plots, that something is not

adding up (Knight, 2000); and humming in the background a music of clicks and computer fans giving rhythm to deep dives on backrooms and red rooms that structure the feeling that anything could be possible if you only learn 'to do your own research'. And we can also think of the way this feeling continued to imbue overzealous performances of public health guidelines, demonstrations of knowledge and good health by public officials, or dismayed discourses over overwhelmed hospitals.

So whether the pressure of knowing was encountered during the pandemic in Trump's or Guterres' fake news, in Johnson's or Starmer's' fight against disinformation, in the attachment to the promise to expose the conspiracy of the 'global order' or to the promise to defeat the conspiracy theorist responsible for the collapse of public health – it is *truth* that further rose – discursively, imaginatively and atmospherically - as the wounded ideal that could ensure salvation. But by becoming overexposed to truth, the hollowness of the fantasy that allowed truth to stand as a promissory object of enjoyment also became exposed. The terror of proximity reveals the truth of truth – its impossibility, its lack, and its futility in the face of mortality. We can therefore see how social anxiety here took hold of parts of the social body, not through the uncertainties of the pandemic, but in a shared sense of certainty of the impossibility of truth.

While the construction of the folk devil can appear to materialize social anxiety and give it the certainty of a specific enemy 'this naming of names is deceptive. For the enemy is lurking everywhere. He (or, increasingly, she) is 'behind everything'. This is the point where the crisis appears in its most abstract form: as a 'general conspiracy'. It is 'the crisis' – but in the disguise of Armageddon' (Hall et al., 2013: 316). The folk devil can therefore be understood as a device which introduces uncertainty to escape the deadlock of the truth of truth. While the difficulty of naming exactly what is conspiracism has long been a subject of debate for conspiracy theories scholarship (e.g. Bjerg & Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017; Harambam, 2020; Knight & Butter, 2019), we can see how this uncertainty can be a necessary feature of its existence. It is because conspiracism allows doubt to function again in a situation of certainty that it can become a useful container for social concern. This is noticeable in how conspiracism comes to name not only an overreliance on a belief in conspiracies to explain world events, but also to name beliefs in the occult, the resurgence of libertarianism, the diffusion of evangelical beliefs of an apocalypse, or the naming of enemies both on the right and left. As conspiracism acts as a general threat of 'bad thinking', it can take hold of anyone. This is how the figure of

the conspiracy theorist has come to name, for parts of the left in particular, the sudden metamorphosis of old allies of revolutionary struggles into reactionary figures of an anti-establishment right-wing populism (see Klein, 2023). Where the uncanny double shatters the illusion that the 'I am' is a coherent and bounded being distinct from the monstruous unknowable Other, doubt comes in to reinstitute the sovereignty and coherence of the self. It is because subjects can now feel that the assault on truth can come from anywhere 'out there', that it is a situation preferable to the certainty that truth was never a possibility.

## 4.5. Conclusion

How may we now understand how making 'lying wrong again' has become a project which has gained so much currency in the current political landscapes of north American and west European liberal democracies? How did a moral reinvigoration, grounded in the securitization of truth and one's position as a truth-teller, come to imbue the promise of collective life? In this paper I have shown that a diffuse atmosphere exposed and participated in the construction of truth as a wounded ideal of salvation. In this scene of over exposition, the truth of truth is revealed: its impossibility, its lack, and its futility in the face of mortality. This is an impasse revealed by a social anxiety that signals a too close encounter with the truth of truth. In this scene, different political formations offer the means to escape truth's impossibility. So, whether people became attached to the salvation of truth in a struggle against an evil elite or the stupid mass of conspiracy theorists, I contend that these moves are a way to put the impossibility of truth at a distance.

We can understand this situation as resulting from a total collapse of the landscape of values that made democratic reciprocity possible (Brown, 2019). Truth has lost its footing because the moral rewards attached to truth-telling are shifting. These are nihilistic times chartered in by neoliberalism's prioritization of market logics over the values and material conditions that supported collective democratic life. This situation left the door open for right-wing populism to further desecrate any remaining attachment to moral values and install its revanchist politics of annihilation. In this scene, it may be tempting to follow well-worn, popular and academic, accounts of an era of post-truth where right-wing populism has gained its prominence through its ability to wield deceit with no concern for moral debasement (e.g.

Lapham, 2016; Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019; Osborne, 2021). But this paper has also shown that there is a danger in this story of an attack on truth that paves a path towards a political program based on the recovery of truth, as a stable ideal damaged by bad actors. This is because a project of defense and recovery further participates in diffusing the pressure of knowing by reaffirming the ideal of an absolute truth. What may be more pressing then would be to create new ways for people to relate to truth which accepts its politically and historically contingent nature. The struggle for truth is not one of loss and recovery or purity and corruption. It is, rather, a struggle which must equally involve changing the material conditions which can democratize people's participation in collective truth-building, as well as re-anchoring truth-telling in a field of reward which welcomes incompleteness and lack of mastery.

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# Chapter 5. Conclusion

## 5.1. Contributions of the thesis

This thesis has sought to stay with the problem of what the term "conspiracism" could be attempting to name. What is this sudden disease of thought that is taking over people's minds? How come attempts to track this disease raise a whole host of vocabulary that – if not new – becomes intensely and interchangeably used? Why is it that what is so often posed as a problem of people's respect for science and truth, overspills to gesture at political radicality and mysticism?

This thesis responds to these questions and problems by adopting a mode of critical analysis which seeks to trace how the singularity of the present and its problems – and problematizations - take shape in and through different conditions, pressures, and contradictions. This style of analysis does not privilege one matrix of explanation over the other – the economic, structural, affective, ideological, unconscious – but brings out the connections and interplays between them. My analysis is therefore conjunctural in spirit; it is indebted and contributes to growing efforts in geography to summon a conjunctural style to make sense and seek new paths in this moment of political turmoil (e.g. Anderson, 2021; Anderson and Secor, 2022; Lorne, Thompson and Cochrane, 2023; Peck, 2023, 2024; Secor and Anderson, 2024).

If this style is 'diagnostic' (Anderson, 2021, p. 204), I don't believe that its aim is to arrive at a final diagnosis. Instead, if it mimics a therapeutic treatment, it must be the 'chimney-sweeping'/'talking cure' devised by Sigmund Freud (Freud and Breuer, 2001, p. 30) which, through talking and making talk, brings out the latent field which silently shapes the rhythm of a situation. This field could never be fully known, but by attempting to display some of its elements and sharing our intuitions, we may be able to sense collective pressure points and resistances. How does it feel to put this name/feeling/explanation on this situation? Is this shared? Does it resonate with anything? What does it evoke? What reactions does it provoke?

My main contribution to this body of work is my re-evaluation of the moral panic framework. While *Policing the Crisis* is the most cited example of a conjunctural analysis in new geographical work interested in this style of analysis, the moral panic framework has received little attention. In Chapter 4 I have therefore proposed to re-evaluate the analytical

value of morality and social anxiety to trace the present as it emerges. I make two propositions that could develop into future work by applying this updated version of the framework to other situations. First, moral outrage is not solely the result of mediatic or political effects. Through theories of affect I propose an account of collective feelings as an active force of social change and show that intimate sensations of outrage can be a way to track how people are orienting themselves into new ways of life. Second, social anxiety is not a reaction to uncertainty, but rather a reaction that signals the absolute certainty of the impossibility of our cherished ideals. From here, the moral panic framework can be used not only to track mediatic manipulation, but the emergence of the present in and through collective atmospheres.

A second contribution that I make in this thesis is to offer conspiracism as an object of geographical inquiry. I do this by highlighting how conspiracism can be approached from geography as an object that can elicit internal reflections for our discipline. Chapter 2 encourages geographers to stay with conspiracism as a problem of critique and interpretation that frazzles geography's generous disposition towards vernacular forms of critique. Chapter 3 considers the problems that conspiracism poses to resistance research in a field animated by a critical ethos of research-activism which makes common-cause with its case study. As conspiracism becomes more legible across a variety of speeches and practices, from political radicality, to medical heresies and occultism, it is important to stay with the challenges of: conspiracism as a problem of/for critique; the ambiguity of our relation to uncertain forms of dissent; the negotiation of our complicity/distance with participants. While some geographical work already grapples with communities interested in occultism, medical heresies and new age spirituality (e.g. Lea, Cadman and Philo, 2015; Bartolini, MacKian and Pile, 2018; Kingsbury, 2019; Kingsbury and Keane, 2021; Pile, 2021), the contemporary political inscription of these communities raises new questions about how they may be approached. In this thesis I don't argue that we need to find solutions to these problems, but that they can have a place in investigations of conspiracism. They can be treated not as hindrances to overcome, but more so like limits that will always haunt any attempt to produce knowledge. In the context of this object of study, this is a necessary approach which also fights a fantasy of absolute knowledge, in favour of staying with the gaps, voids, and aporias which shape the world.

While I resist the temptation to claim absolute knowledge of my object of study, this thesis nevertheless provides an understanding of the affective and ideological composition of conspiracism, by bringing to the fore some of its constitutive elements. To that end, in each of the papers I propose a different list of the elements composing this formation, in sum:

libertarian ideologies, occultism, new age spiritualism, medical heresies, a hatred of the state, a desire for authority, and moral traditionalism. In chapter 3 I propose an understanding of the affective and ideological threads which shape the conspiracism that runs through the freedom movement. I focus on explaining how an atmosphere of hatred of the state which mixes with the anxiety of the absence of authority could explain why these movements need to rebuild the state as an entity of total control and knowledge that must be escaped. This understanding contributes to an understanding of conspiracism as an uncertain formation which gains its singularity in the encounter between an atmosphere of state phobia and an anxiety over the absence of authority.

Finally, throughout this thesis I take seriously the materiality of the unconscious by registering its presence through fantasies, gaps, and intensities. Many studies of conspiracy theories already centre the unconscious when they emphasize their ambivalent relation with power — as a force present in these theories that is simultaneously idealised and resented. Chapter 3 contributes to this strand of research by proposing that one of the narratives of resistance which animate the freedom movement is a fantasy that simultaneously builds the state as an inescapable presence — tied to the very structure of our being — while proposing a way to escape it entirely. But throughout this thesis I also bring attention to the materiality of the unconscious by underscoring the ways in which it structures our relationship with conspiracism as an object of concern. This contributes to an understanding of the unconscious as a constant absent presence that shapes the world, not only in the most hackneyed, predictable displays of "irrationality", but in the very fabric of our claims to rationality. In chapter 4, for example, I show that the performance of outrage at the amorality and stupidity of the conspiracy theorist is structured by its own enjoyment of the fantasy of acting for the defence of truth. In reality, this is only an enjoyment of the illusion of action insofar as its performance protects people from engaging meaningfully towards the underlying — economic, affective, ideological — structures which produce conspiracism.

## 5.2. Future Research

In future work I would like to continue exploring the potential of morality as a concept and methodological thread to understand the present as it emerges. Taking the propositions I made in chapter 4 I am intrigued by the work that could be done by following claims about morality. This is relevant to the way claims relating to truth and untruth are always tied to judgements

about who is and isn't sufficiently held by a common ideal of conduct and a set of shared norms. Telling the truth and being able to hear the truth are thus always tied to the silent notion of "the good". But morality is also relevant as accusations of moral superiority seem to intensely shape the structuration of enemies across the political spectrum.

As a concept, morality could form the basis for a review of the ways in which political theory links up ideals of conducts with the capacity to be truthful. The aim of this work would be to understand what is specific about the ways in which notions of the good structure our relationship to truth and the figure of the truth-teller in the present moment. This is important to understand in a moment where the future of democracy seems so tied to our capacity to regain a "shared reality". But against this program which articulates truth as a lost object in need of recovery — only to secure and affirm the order of a decaying liberal order — I see this future research as working towards a conceptualization of democracy that would not be predicated on truth. What would it mean to have a collective mode of existence that is not predicated on the ideal of a shared recognition of a stable truth?

In future research I would also be interested in investigating the multiple feelings which compose a contemporary relation to truth in north American and west European liberal democracies. While throughout this thesis I have captured part of this relation through affects of anxiety, fear, hope, concern, or phobia, this can only be seen as a small part of the story. What other dominant collective feelings are circulating around and underlying people's relation to truth in the present moment?

## 5.3. Afterword: an ongoing situated political project

> Something that we still haven't grasped is going on in the masses, and it is that "something" that enables them to think and to act against their own vital interests. The question is decisive, for without this attitude on the part of the masses, political reaction would be wholly powerless. It is the willingness of the masses to absorb these ideas – what we call a dictator's "*soil of mass psychology*" – that constitutes fascism's strength. Thus, it is imperative to seek a complete understanding of this.
>
> (Reich, 1970, p. 115, original emphasis)

> Taking even themselves by surprise, hard-right forces have surged to power in liberal democracies across the globe … We even have trouble with the naming - is this authoritarianism, fascism, populism, illiberal democracy, undemocratic liberalism, right-wing plutocracy? Or something else? … They conjoin moral righteousness with nearly celebratory amoral and uncivil conduct. They endorse authority while featuring unprecedented public social disinhibition and aggression. They rage against relativism, but also against science and reason, and spurn evidence-based claims, rational argumentation, credibility, and accountability. They disdain politicians and politics while evincing a ferocious will to power and political ambition. Where are we?
>
> (Brown, 2019, p. 1-2)

In line with the preoccupations reflected in these epigraphs, this thesis has taken up the problem of our disorientation in the contemporary political moment. I find in these epigraphs, and the scope of investigation they shape for their authors, a shared concern for the issue of naming a combination of elements emerging and shaping a new ideological and affective

formation – or at least, shaping the sense of its newness. Although these two authors, and their texts, remain distinct in many ways – not least in their theoretical orientation (Freud vs. Nietzsche) – I would like to finish this thesis by taking their similarities as a point of departure to reflect on my own practice of staying with the indeterminacies of a "something". As I do this, I extend and reflect on the discussion, which I began in the introduction, of the political choices, hopes, and fears that have oriented this thesis - and that continue to trouble me as I try to leave a piece of work which I am not sure has lived up to the urgency of the moment.

Wilhelm Reich, writing originally in early 1930s Germany, traces the contours of his "something" through the pattern of a desire for authority and sexual repression. At the core of this "something" is an irrational character structure which has had its primary needs denied for too long. The authoritarian family and the church, by prohibiting natural sexual expression, act as the main operators of this repression. This structure of repression gives rise to mystical feelings mixed with a devotion to figures of authority which provide an outlet for this repressed sexual energy. Writing through the rise and installation of Nazism, Reich goes on to describe how this "something" forms the foundation to a mass adherence to fascism. In doing so, Reich offers a political theory of fascism that takes us out of mechanistic socio-economic models and opens up the question of a specific libidinal arrangement.

Some 90 years later, picking up the question of an uncertain and unexpected new arrangement of political forces giving rise to a new radicalized right, Wendy Brown struggles with the problem of naming her own "something". In this version of the problem, Brown finds an apocalyptic drive rising from a devaluation of values launched through neoliberalism. This desublimation of values offers a reprieve from self-assessment and self-blame and frees people to desire beyond any attachments to higher values or purpose. Unbridled from any moral commitments, wounded forms of subjectivity (e.g. white masculinity) unleash a politic of revenge which can know no bounds. Writing through the rising popularity of right-wing populism in the US, Brown's "something" becomes a synonym for the drive that constitutes and supports the installation of Trumpism. Brown, nevertheless, is careful not to inscribe Trumpism as a simple return to fascism and stays with the trouble of the novelty of this specific political formation.

While many differences remain between Reich and Brown, I see in these two texts a shared concern to understand the ideological, libidinal, and emotional streams which run undercurrent the emergence of novel reactionary political formations. As these texts became

regular companions as I started to complete this thesis, I came to wonder: could my "something" be in any way similar to what Reich and Brown are grasping at? Like Reich I identify a desire for authority fuelled by anxiety in the fantasies of my participants. With Reich I am also struck by the mystical attitude that my participants seem to display as they envisage the possibility of the existence of the "strawman", and how this attitude mixes with their political fears and hopes. Inspired by Brown, I detect in the present a crisis of moral orders which leave us with uncertainty. Like Brown, I am perplexed by a reinvigoration of a libertarian ideology that integrates moral traditionalism and the regulation of self-ownership and self-determination.

But unlike Brown I am sceptical of a story of the devaluation of values brought on by neoliberalism, when neoliberalism has vigorously normalised and installed the values which form the bedrock of the contemporary far right (Mondon and Winter, 2020). Indeed, while I share much of Brown's diagnosis of the drive animating right-wing populism, I am less convinced by her analysis of neoliberalism's. Whereas for Brown (2019, p. 182) right-wing populism is boisterous in its path of destruction, neoliberalism's errors are more accidental. So, while right-wing populism is registered as an effect of neoliberalism, the latter's drive is emptied of its substance. This is something I struggle with; what I see in contemporary neoliberalism, following Aurélien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2020), is a constant and virulent positioning of immigration as a problem, a hatred of Islam often disguised as a defence of various freedoms, and an only opportunistic co-optation of the questions of social difference and inequalities.

In a similar vein, and presenting an alternative to Reich's argument that fascism takes shape solely in the will of the masses, Johann Chapoutot (2025), historian of Nazism, tracks in 1930s Germany a dying liberalism's attempt at securing its political hegemony. A new liberal consortium, worried about its decreasing popularity, finds it inconceivable to deal with a "radical left" which could disrupt the free market and traditional morality, but has no objection to open its government to the far-right. Writing from France, Chapoutot, as a serious historian, is careful to not trace a line of equivalence between 1930s Germany and the present. But, in the more relaxed space of his epilogue, Chapoutot goes on to confide his worry at the similarities[29] he encountered between the two contexts and warns against easy stories of an

[29] As a simple but striking example take this analysis of the French political landscape offered by Emmanuel Macron (News Wires, 2024). Defending his decision to call new parliamentary elections in 2024, he asserts his 'confidence in the French. They see well what is on offer'. Macron goes on to describe the far-right as primarily a problem of bad economic management: 'The RN and its allies offer things which may make people happy but

overpowering will of the masses as the sole explanation for the formation of Nazism. With this warning, Chapoutot continues a line of argument (see Chapoutot, 2014, 2020), which is vigorously attached to keeping alive the memory of how Nazism took shape in and through the apparent rationality and neutrality of the institutions of a liberal order.

Mondon, Winter, and Chapoutot bring a central nuance to the stories founds in Reich and Brown. Centrally they remind us of the importance of tracking and naming the responsibility of the dominant political class, sensibilities, and investments which accompanies the installation of reactionary political forces. To note this, doesn't mean to go back to the types of analyses which only track the betrayal of people's 'own vital interests' in the befogging of a political-media apparatus. It shows that what can feel like the sudden emergence of reactionary forces could also be the reterritorialization of libidinal drives onto known and gratifying political formations – albeit extended and rendered more monstrous. This does not take away the fact that a wounded whiteness will so wilfully fill the breach offered by a reterritorialization, where it will find satisfaction in the betrayal of its economic interests so long as it maintains its place in a system based on racial hierarchies (Mills, 2022). Pointing to the responsibility of a dominant liberal political class is also a way to remember that liberalism is also an active political project with its own libidinal investments. In Reich and Brown's stories this becomes lost, as reactionary politics are positioned as the only active political forces at play. Neighbouring these stories is also another story that conflates the radicality of the Left and Right under a vocabulary of "the extremes", emptying the differences in their political aims and ideals for the benefit of an authoritarian and radical centrist position - which invariably veers into the far-right (Serna, 2019). Too often stories of "conspiracism" inherit these tendencies and place political reaction solely on the side of the 'desire of the people', putting away, in the same movement, any expression of popular revolt under suspicion. Across these stories, I am afraid that a situated political formation could be confused with the energies it captures as it takes shape, leaving us with shields as our only mode of political action.

This is why when attempting to deal with my own "something", I resist the rush to map it directly under a political formation, whose key ideological and affective characteristics would form the object of conspiracism. The first reason is analytical; too many stories of conspiracism make it a synonym of something else (e.g. bigotry, Trumpism, or anti-

in the end we are talking 100 billion (euros) a year.' His opposition to the left however is more telling of his real political inscription: 'And on the other side, with the extreme left it's four times worse – there is no more secularity, they will go back on the immigration law and there are things that are completely farcical like changing your gender at the town hall.'

intellectualism), missing what could be unique in this formation. But my second reason is more political; what could be leaking from conspiracism that is not captured by contemporary right-wing populism? Following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980, 2013a), I am indeed committed to finding places of ruptures where new desiring machines can be set in motion. And what this means, precisely, is not unleashing any desire for the sake of desire, but to find in these places of rupture the possibility to inscribe meaningful – libidinal, material, and ideological - political struggle and confrontation. Following Deleuze and Guattari again, part of this struggle must lean on the fact that the unconscious is a transformative force in the world, and that what may seem like the most territorialized configuration can always be shaken up. What I hear in the political program launched by Deleuze and Guattari (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008; 2013b), is a call to take seriously the reappropriation of the means of production of the unconscious.

Or perhaps, Reich, Brown, and I were never clawing at different versions of a same "something". Reich and Brown, after all, are more definite about the political formations that can be mapped on top of their "something". Maybe this is because mysticism, a desire for authority, and moral disarray can only combine to reterritorialize under a reactionary impulse. Remaining open to the possibility of something else may very well be naïve and underplaying the ease with which liberatory energies are always already captured by paranoia. And really, why am I being so obtuse in my stubbornness to not let go of the problem of what "conspiracism" could be "naming", when I see so many around me already decided? All of this could just be my inescapable attachment to a fast-food worker's field of affectability – from where suspicion of the masses will always feel personal — tying me to a place I can never leave.

These last few pages are brief and scrambled reflections, which emerge from my reading of Wilhelm Reich and Wendy Brown, but which speak to a more general moment in geography and beyond where the rise of the far-right, across a variety of national contexts, is provoking more people to reflect upon the causes of this situation. In this moment, what is 'going on in the masses' is becoming a subject of high priority. Invariably this means that when people hear about the subject of this thesis, they believe that I am studying the far-right and ask me to come up with the final word on when, how, why, where the masses lost it and became enthralled by the political project of the far-right. In these moments I always feel at odds with

what is expected of me and my research: am I missing something in my “something”? Are we just talking about different “somethings”? Or am I right in thinking that this “something” could be made to be something else entirely?

In these last few pages, I have tried to make sense and reflect upon these questions. I reaffirm my commitment to write against easy stories of the irrationality of the masses as the sole vector of reactionary politics. This is not to say that the masses are not irrational – my point is that we all are – but that the irrational can still be a site of political struggle. I nevertheless see and note the dangers of this position. It is a deeply uncomfortable position, and I do not hold on to it strictly out of an unthought, reflexive attachment to “let the will of the people speak”. I have to hold on to it because the only hope that I can find in the political present is in searching for a space for political action that is not the repetition of well-worn lines of flight or the manic elevation of shields. If nothing else, I write this afterword as a way to provide myself an exit from this thesis, not in the assured march of mastery and the loud bang of a closed door, but in the more hesitant steps of the still-always-stubborn rat, balancing itself on a ledge and digging itself out through a precariously built, yet-unsealed tunnel.

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