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The Great Reset and the Cultural Boundaries of Conspiracy Theory

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"The Great Reset" is a conspiracy theory that has become popular among people resisting public health recommendations related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The name comes from the 2021 theme of the World Economic Forum's annual summit and claims that global elites have manipulated the course of the pandemic to implement various forms of economic and social control. While the conspiracy is easily debunked, we argue that it also reflects important cultural trends at the heart of the current epistemic crisis. Our study adopts a theoretical approach that frames conspiracy theories as cultural expressions of social problems. We conducted a qualitative analysis of media content shared on Twitter related to the nascent campaign #StopTheGreatReset. We found that Great Reset narratives not only relied on traditional conspiracy tropes but also reflected a newer and concerning anti-institutional discourse that expressed social anxiety about the pandemic as a form of antidemocratic politics.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, culture, COVID-19, social media, democracy

In September 2020, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau gave a brief presentation at a United Nations conference about the steps his government was taking to address the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. A few minutes into his remarks, Trudeau emphasized that any government measures should not only address the current crisis but should, in concert with nations around the world, work to address the most pressing global challenges. To underline this point, he stated "*this pandemic has provided an opportunity for a reset. This is our chance to accelerate our pre-pandemic efforts to re-imagine economic systems that actually address global challenges like extreme poverty, inequality and climate change*" (as cited in Wherry, 2020, para. 4; emphasis added). In his presentation, Trudeau was using the language of the World Economic Forum (WEF) theme for its upcoming annual meeting, which was published as *COVID-19: The Great Reset* (Schwab & Malleret, 2020) and focused on the type of global coordination that Trudeau was calling for. On the Internet, however, this speech was interpreted as proof that Trudeau was part of a

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sprawling globalist conspiracy known as "The Great Reset."[1] While not the most coherent conspiracy theory, in the broadest terms, it supposes that liberal world leaders and corporate elites are using the pretext of the pandemic to establish an authoritarian world government. Since Trudeau made these remarks, the language of the Great Reset conspiracy (hereafter we use "TGR" to denote the conspiracy version as a cultural phenomenon separate from the WEF's Great Reset theme for the 2021 annual meeting) has been mobilized in a wide variety of movements opposing public health measures, including a weeks-long anti-vaccine mandate rally in Canada's capital, Ottawa, in early 2022.

Our research asks how and why TGR has emerged as a popular touchstone for groups opposing pandemic mitigation measures. Conspiracy theory scholars have long argued that such theories are not peripheral phenomena but have been a consistent feature of mainstream political life in Western democracies (Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2000). As such, we see TGR as a particularly interesting conspiracy theory because it has challenged the increasingly fuzzy cultural boundary that separates conspiracy from legitimate political critique. In many cases, the language of TGR evokes a critique of liberal global internationalism that has much in common with the Left critiques of the WEF Annual Meeting held in Davos, Switzerland, and its key role in justifying the expansion of global capitalism (Slobodian, 2020). This discursive overlap compelled some Left intellectuals (e.g., Klein, 2020) to distinguish their own critical accounts of corporate opportunism (cf. Klein, 2007) from TGR narratives about large corporations working with liberal governments to plan the COVID-19 pandemic. While it has garnered far lesser media and academic attention than U.S.-centric conspiracies such as the QAnon phenomenon (Bleakley, 2021; Hannah, 2021; Zuckerman, 2019), we argue that the discursive flexibility of TGR provides a link between traditional scholarship on conspiracy theories and the current epistemic crisis that has come to define political discourse.

To understand TGR as a cultural phenomenon, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of online media—videos, articles, blogs, memes, GIFs, and other posted items—related to the nascent social media campaign #StopTheGreatReset at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021. This research builds on recent scholarship that sees the blurring of lines between conspiracy theories and legitimate political discourse as an important structural feature of our digital media ecosystems (Bodner, Welch, & Brodie, 2021; Harambam, 2020; Marmura, 2014; Thalmann, 2019). Rather than treating conspiracy theories as a pathological or marginal set of individual beliefs, cultural theorists have claimed that conspiracies can act as a lens through which people interpret the social world (Boltanski, 2014), as a central feature in the logic and development of online culture (Dean, 2002), or as an expression of what Žižek (2009) identifies as a broader decline of symbolic efficiency in the cultural meaning of key social institutions. The latter formulation has been used more recently to make sense of the social media era's epistemic crisis (Andrejevic, 2013; Dean, 2010) and anticipates many of the ways that suspicion of public authority took shape during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on our analysis, we argue that TGR has had three main advantages that have made it a popular conspiracy: (1) it has mobilized the language of oppression to characterize public health measures, (2) it provides an epistemic foundation that matches the scale of a global crisis, and (3) it uses an affective language of authority and control that is both stimulating and reassuring to right-wing and antidemocratic perspectives. These features are concerning because the reality that TGR rejects is the possibility of a

[1] According to BBC Monitoring, the British Broadcasting Corporation's media research division, online mentions of the Great Reset, worldwide, spiked after Trudeau's speech (BBC Monitoring, 2021).

democratic politics that can respond to a crisis such as the pandemic. As such, we argue that TGR may be a bellwether for an expansion of antidemocratic political movements.

The discussion below has four parts and starts by outlining the WEF's version of the Great Reset campaign and provides a brief history of the WEF itself. The second section situates TGR within a broader history of conspiracy theories and compares it with another recent conspiracy theory, the QAnon phenomenon. We then follow with a third section explaining the data collection and analytical framework before presenting the evidence for our argument, in the fourth section, about TGR as a cultural tool for making sense of contemporary global crises.

What Is the "Great Reset"?

While our study focuses on TGR, the WEF annual meeting represents an interesting cultural phenomenon. The WEF was originally founded by Klaus Schwab and colleagues as the European Management Forum in 1971. As Pigman's (2006) history of the institution suggests, it started as a way for European business leaders to learn the latest management techniques used in the United States. However, organizers of the forum quickly realized the value of inviting politicians to talks aimed at responding to the major political issues of the day, such as the 1973 oil crisis (Pigman, 2006). By the 1980s, the structure of the forum had become explicitly global in its focus by setting up regional meetings around the world and hosting a large annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland. It changed its name to the World Economic Forum in 1987 and fully embraced an agenda focused on economic globalization. As scholars (e.g., Garsten & Sörbom, 2016; Pigman, 2006; Schiølin, 2020) who studied the WEF have pointed out, one of the most appealing aspects of the WEF to its members is the informal nature of forum meetings, which provides space for corporate executives to build relationships with each other and with politicians. The opportunities for networking and dealmaking made possible by this format have gradually attracted more and more members of the political and economic elite, and the WEF now exists as an exclusive organization supported financially by 1,000 leading member companies, which are chosen by the WEF membership committee. The annual summit in Davos has thus become an exclusive event that restricts participation to executives from each of its members, along with a curated list of invited guests from among global political and civil society leaders.

The mythology of Davos, which WEF organizers themselves work to produce, is partly what makes the WEF such a rich target for conspiracy narratives. As Garsten and Sörbom (2016) conclude from their ethnographic research on the WEF, this mythology is central to the "magic" (p. 19) that makes the summit more than just a business networking event for its participants. In each summit's program, this is manifested through some variation on the theme that good corporate social responsibility is a win-win endeavor that can both change the world for the better and lead to prosperity and profit. For Garsten and Sörbom (2016), this makes Davos a place where the economic elite can find meaning and purpose and collectively envision the future with others who have the means to implement such a vision. As a collective ritual, then, Davos produces a type of re-enchantment of the world for the economic elite, and part of the way that this is structured is through the visionary language of its annual theme.

As an agenda for global policy during the pandemic, the WEF's 2021 annual meeting theme, the Great Reset, had three main components. The first described an effort to push for fairer outcomes in the global market

and to address the massive inequalities produced by global capitalism. The second component included efforts to address equality and sustainability by urging governments and businesses to take things like racism and climate change more seriously. A third component involved embracing what previous WEF publications have called the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" (see Schwab, 2017), which outlines how innovation and technological solutions could be used to address global social problems. For each of these components, the Great Reset agenda highlighted how the crisis of the pandemic has, appropriately, pushed world leaders to rethink their priorities in a way that reflected the "big thinking" that is consistent with the WEF brand. By framing a Great Reset around the principles of a fourth Industrial Revolution, the WEF's language imagines a future defined by radical technology-driven changes (Schiølin, 2020). While the conspiracy version of TGR does not directly engage the policy issues brought up by the WEF's Great Reset, the discussion below outlines the connection between the language of revolutionary change in the TGR narratives and the WEF theme.

On the Cultural Politics of Conspiracy Theory

As a cultural phenomenon, TGR belongs to an ideational space in which the COVID-19 pandemic, whether considered real or a hoax, was the purposeful creation of powerful global actors. TGR has become one of the most common theories within this genre and has proven to be discursively flexible enough to include wild dystopian claims as well as political critiques that combine legitimate criticisms of global capitalism with very real anxieties about the social and political impacts of the pandemic. This is partly because, as Klein (2020) observed, TGR is more of a "conspiracy smoothie" that combines elements of older conspiracy tropes with contemporary anti-vaccination conspiracies and coronavirus denialism. While it is difficult to quantify how popular TGR has become, recent public opinion polling has suggested that openness to pandemic-related conspiracy thinking, if not belief in specific conspiracy theories, is widespread in Western democracies. In a study by the Pew Research Center (2020), 72% of the respondents had heard of at least one COVID-19 conspiracy theory and of those who had, 36% believed that the conspiracy was "probably true." Likewise, a recent Elections Canada (2021) survey found that 40% of Canadian respondents agreed with the statement that "certain significant events, including the pandemic, have been the result of the activity of a small group who secretly manipulate world events" (p. 3). Based on these and similar studies around the world, it seems clear that there is a significant potential audience for cultural narratives that can explain the pandemic as a global conspiracy.

One common approach to understanding this phenomenon has assumed that the rise of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and other forms of post-truth politics is a product of increasing populism, irrationality, and illiberalism (e.g., Kakutani, 2018; Nichols, 2017; Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2020; Sunstein, 2014). This understanding draws on a tradition of mid-20th-century scholarship on conspiracy theory starting with Popper's (1967) definition of conspiracy theory as bad science, and Hofstadter's (1964) essay on the paranoid style in American politics. Hofstadter's (1964) essay is considered an important reference point for conspiracy theory scholarship because it cataloged historical examples of imagined Masonic, Catholic, or Jewish conspiracies that were common throughout the early American republic. His description of conspiracy thinking as a unique form of politics based on suspicion and rumor, rather than reason, grounds a discussion of populist American conservatism that embraced far-Right organizations like the John Birch Society. This framing of conspiracy theory as a threat to rational politics has been carried forward by scholars who, like Hofstadter, saw any type of radical political movement challenging mainstream accounts of political

reality, including the civil rights movement, as generally dangerous for democracy (e.g., Pipes, 1999). However, our study is influenced by conspiracy theory research that has critiqued Hofstadter's (1964) assumption that conspiracy theories are the product of individuals engaged in "bad thinking" (see Fenster, 1999). Such critiques have instead focused on the cultural significance of imagined conspiracies as an expression of structural changes and social anxieties. Through the lens of this cultural/sociological literature on conspiracy theory we are better able to understand TGR as an expression of two important social forces, a collective response to the pandemic and the expanding influence of the right-wing media sphere.

One early example of the cultural approach can be found in a study of a local conspiracy theory in 1969 Orléans, France. In this case, a team of researchers, led by French sociologist Edgar Morin, investigated a rumor that the Jewish owners of trendy dress shops were abducting young women and selling them into the international sex trade (Morin, 1971). The rumor adopted many of the classic tropes of conspiracy narratives, including anti-Semitism and sexual exploitation, but through interviews with the people involved, researchers found that the rumor was an expression of social anxieties about youth culture, the social liberation of women, and the anxieties associated with urban, bourgeois individualism (Morin, 1971). Morin (1971) also notes that the mobilization of "archaic" ideas, about the Jewish scapegoat, in this case, functioned as a platform to resist the cultural changes of the 1960s. As Guilhot (2021) has argued, the study led by Morin (1971) was one of the first to model an approach that favored social explanations over identifying conspiracies as merely the products of cognitive pathologies.

The cultural approach to conspiracy theory research expanded in the 1990s and 2000s as critical theories about the culture of late capitalism intersected with a pop-culture fascination with conspiracy and the nature of reality in the emerging digital age (e.g., Dean, 2002, 2010). Knight (2000) identified a "cultural turn" (p. 8) in conspiracy theory research that started to see conspiracies as an epistemic strategy for navigating an information-rich world. In one influential account within the cultural theory, Žižek (2009) describes a broader turn to conspiracy theory resulting from "the decline of symbolic efficiency" (p. 355), broadly referring to a decline of trust in the symbolic order. This decline in trust emerges in a (post)modern society that no longer defers to the traditional symbols of authority associated with, for example, political or legal systems.[2] Such a situation, according to Žižek (2009), is terrifying and tends to produce an ideological stance that combines a "cynical distrust of any public ideology" with paranoiac fantasies (p. 362). For Andrejevic (2013), the Internet has only exacerbated this problem. When any discussion is potentially subject to information overload and endless opinions, it can be difficult to find a trusted and authoritative position. In this void, conspiracy theory can be a "short circuit" to reinscribe some sort of order and clarity, even if imagined, onto reality (p. 112). This theme has been picked up by contemporary scholars who have argued that epistemic instability is a defining feature of our digital era and that conspiracy theories are useful for both contesting epistemic authority and for collective meaning making (Harambam, 2020; Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Madisson & Ventsel, 2020). Clearly, the public health measures that evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic created just this type of epistemic instability. As such, the analytic framework we employ therefore views TGR as a window into this broader political discourse.

[2] In a similar formulation, Bauman (2013) describes this crisis of trust and authority using the metaphor of aircraft passengers who "discover to their horror that the pilot's cabin is empty" (p. 59).

Such a framework does not reduce or excuse the extremist, racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise hateful views that are sometimes found in TGR narratives. Instead, we model our framework on Morin's (1971) analysis of the rumor in Orléans, which he framed as an expression of social anxieties situated within a broader context of anti-Semitism in French society. In a similar sense, our analysis contextualizes TGR as a part of far-Right political culture. Many right-wing conspiracy narratives circulate within the field of cultural production of online content in which critiques of mainstream ideas or institutions can be an important mechanism to amplify social media posts. Recent research on so-called "alt-right" influencer culture has focused on the strategies of individual influencers (e.g., Lewis, 2018; Maly, 2020), and TGR fits well within the broader cultural logic of right-wing influencing. As Lewis (2018) argues, individual influencers often gain notoriety in the right-wing "alternative influence network" through their individual stories and personal branding efforts, but the content of their successful social media posts often includes their opinions on recent controversies and conspiracies. In the framing of our analysis, this meant that we looked at the ways in which TGR content was positioned to engage with popular topics that drive polarization and draw clear lines of demarcation from perceived liberal and elitist political views. Such an approach also provided an important connection between TGR and the more participatory QAnon phenomenon.

There are many overlapping assumptions in TRG narratives and the QAnon conspiracy theory. In basic terms, the latter also mobilizes the "myths, symbols and codes" of the far-Right media ecosystem (Cosentino, 2020, p. 59) to present an anti-globalist view of current events. However, a key difference, which made QAnon much more popular in the United States during the Trump presidency, was the particular way it embraced the participatory nature of the contemporary Internet.[3] As Hannah (2021) argues, part of what set QAnon apart from other conspiracy theories was the way it mobilized *apophenia*, or "the tendency to see linkages between random events or data points" as a participatory strategy (p. 2). Yet, even if TGR was not organized around a central figure commenting on current events, such as "Q," it had much in common with QAnon and other counter-mainstream conspiracy theories, which tend to support and complement one another (see Merlan, 2020). For example, the anti-Semitism and racism at the heart of the rhetorically similar "great replacement" conspiracy theory, which supposes that global (Jewish) elites are replacing White Americans with immigrants, is easily aligned with the main assumptions of both TGR and QAnon. Each of these theories builds on epistemic insecurity, which makes conceptual inconsistency a feature that is usefully mobilized to drive engagement.

Framing an Analysis of TGR

To examine TGR narratives, we started collecting Twitter data in November 2020, shortly after the Canadian finance critic, Pierre Poilievre, posted an online video and petition calling on supporters to "Stop the Great Reset."[4] This invocation of TGR from a prominent Canadian politician provided an opportunity for online supporters to "educate" each other about the dangers of TGR. We collected tweets that used the #StopTheGreatReset hashtag over the four months between November 12, 2020, and February 20, 2021.

[3] See Zuckerman (2019) for a description of the QAnon conspiracy theory, and Bjork-James (2021) for an analysis of how QAnon evolved after the Trump presidency.

[4] This campaign followed shortly after Trudeau's speech at the United Nations and coincided with the rapid increase in online mentions of the Great Reset (see footnote 1).

We collected Twitter data using Twarc, a command line tool and Python library for collecting and archiving Twitter data via the Twitter Search application programming interface.[5]

As individual tweets only offered very thin descriptions of the conspiracy, we focused on the URLs (links) embedded within tweets to access richer narratives found in the articles, videos, and other media shared on Twitter. Similar to other qualitative studies of Twitter data (e.g., Bogen, Mulla, Haikalis, & Orchowski, 2022; Bradshaw & Henle, 2021), we used a two-step topic-based sampling approach (see Bradshaw & Henle, 2021, p. 4601) to produce a relatively concentrated data set, approximately 16,000 tweets that were targeted to TGR narratives and then used a purposive sampling method to collect 414 tweets that included unique links to media content for analysis. This approach produced a rich sample of TGR narratives that was better suited to our qualitative design than the variety of non-probability samples that are often found in quantitative Twitter-based research (see Rafail, 2018). The distribution of this analytical sample across our timeframe reflected the quick rise and slow decline of the hashtag on Twitter, so we selected links in proportion to the total volume of tweets with the hashtag during that week. Our inclusion criteria mirrored those of other qualitative analyses focused on understanding pandemic narratives shared on Twitter (e.g., Sleigh, Amann, Schneider, & Vayena, 2021) to ensure that each link in our sample (a) was not duplicated, (b) was in English, (c) included a link to an image, text-based content, or a video, and (d) addressed the Great Reset, either the conspiracy version or the WEF version. We then manually captured the content of each link in the sample using the Ncapture browser extension to save the content in a format readable in the NVivo qualitative analysis software. We categorized the linked media content into four areas in our analysis: images/memes/GIFs (117 links); YouTube videos (56); non-YouTube embedded video content (77); and articles/blogs/other text-based content (164; N = 414). While few of the individual Tweets in our sample had significant engagement metrics—only eight individual tweets had retweet or favorite counts greater than 100—some of the linked content had significant engagement, including some of the documentaries or exposé-style videos on TGR that had six-figure view counts. In other words, although the nascent #StopTheGreatReset hashtag campaign had limited reach on Twitter, our sample produced content that had a much broader reach on other media platforms.

To unpack the meaning of TGR and distinguish it from legitimate information about the WEF and the Great Reset, we designed a qualitative content analysis built on a grounded approach (Charmaz, 2006). Using this approach, we adopted an iterative coding process to identify the key themes in the videos, images, and text-based content. Through this coding, we developed a codebook that included analytical and descriptive codes. Our descriptive codes represented broader categories, in which the individual linked content was grouped, whereas our analytical codes described overarching themes and sub-themes of the TGR narratives. The most relevant descriptive codes for this study were the codes related to political narratives. We identified 59 of 414 files as content produced by reputable and well-known press outlets or as materials from the WEF itself. The remaining files included content from a range of partisan news outlets, blogs, video channels, and unidentified sources. Instead of focusing on the political location of these sources, which was not always apparent, we instead coded the material according to political narratives expressed by the content. We divided this coding into two groups of either Right/libertarian narratives or the Left political narratives. In our sample, Right/libertarian narratives outnumbered Left narratives at the rate of

[5] This was before Twitter expanded access to their developer platform.

just more than 3:1 (355 Right/libertarian references vs. 163 Left references).[6] One interesting trend observed in our sample was that identifiable right-wing publications (e.g., the *Washington Times*, *Breitbart*, and *Sun* newspapers) occasionally mobilized the language of anti-corporate/anti-capitalist left-wing perspectives to explain TGR. We found that such traditionally Left political narratives were used not only as a way to open the discursive space for interpretations as to why TGR was a threat but also in an ironic way to mock Left political positions.

Much of the content in our sample could not be easily categorized into tidy ideological boxes and represented in a quantitative way. Additionally, the multimedia content in our sample posed analytical challenges. For example, an hour-long TGR documentary-style video included more examples of a given theme than a simple meme about the WEF. For this reason, we focused on coding the narrative themes of TGR only once per source. Using this technique, we developed a codebook structured around four main narrative themes, including narratives about (1) the WEF and its supposed influence over key social institutions, (2) globalist interference in national or local politics, (3) authoritarian threats posed by pandemic mitigation measures, and (4) allusions to historical events or conspiracies (see Figure 1).

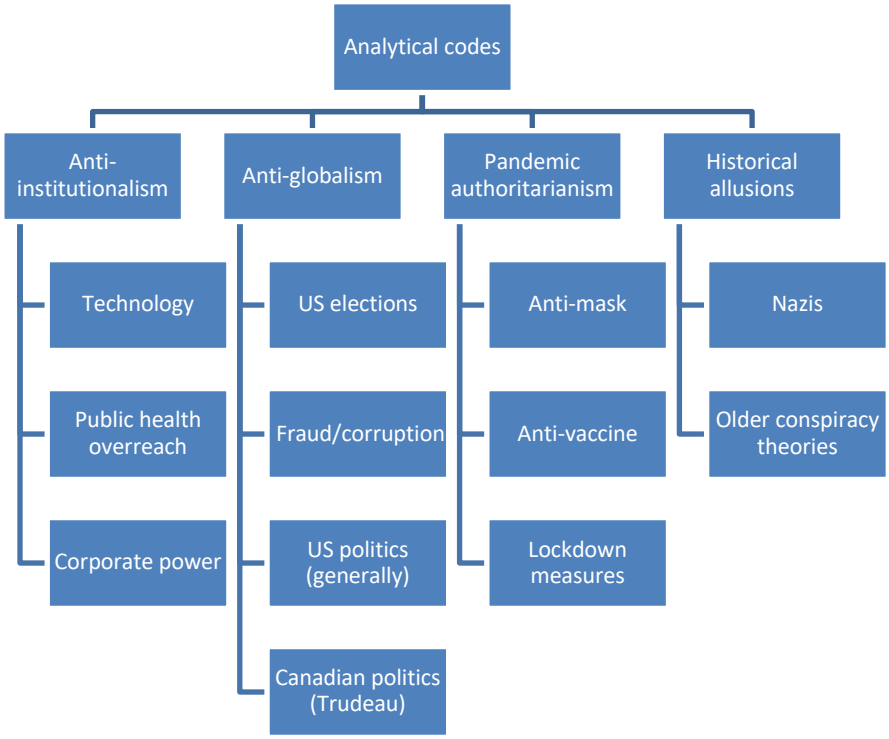

Figure 1. Narrative themes of TGR.

[6] Some videos and articles included both Right/libertarian narratives and Left narratives.

As a conspiracy theory, TGR brought together what Morin (1971) called "archaic" suspicions about nefarious global actors (organizations and specific elites) with contemporary events related to the pandemic, which were the source of massive upheavals in people's daily lives. While these analytical codes represent the collection of TGR narratives from our sample, there was no consistent or coherent story that could claim to be definitive. However, the first three themes corresponding to our analytical coding—anti-institutionalism, anti-globalism, and the resistance to authoritarian control—represented the key examples of these narratives.[7]

Anti-Institutionalism and the Politics of Authenticity

One of the broad patterns we identified across the main TGR narratives was a rejection of public institutions because of their supposed ability to implement WEF priorities. We label this phenomenon anti-institutionalism rather than anti-elitism because, following McCool's (2019) study, the former refers more directly to a type of politics of authenticity that has come to define much of the resistance to pandemic mitigation measures. This perspective sees public institutions such as the government, academia, science, and media[8] as illegitimate sources of authority that constrain the personal expressions of "authentic" (usually defined according to ethno-nationalist criteria) citizens of Western countries. In our sample, we found two main types of anti-institutionalism. The first type could be characterized as strictly partisan and right-wing in the way it grouped liberal politicians, or intellectuals, together with billionaires and corporate leaders as part of a coordinated left-wing global elite that had come to influence public institutions. Here, the perceived goals of elites often included priorities of the Left including lifestyle consumer trends, restrictive climate change mitigation measures, and anti-capitalism. In the context of critiquing the WEF and TGR, this perspective was common among the articles or videos that claimed to oppose what was, somewhat counterintuitively, called the "corporate communism" of the WEF. One example of this theme is a story titled "World Economic Forum Encourages Plebs to Eat Weeds & Drink Sewage" on a junk news website,[9] written by popular British conspiracy theorist Paul Joseph Watson (2020). While the article itself was little more than a few paragraphs, it interpreted a WEF blog about the need to move away from carbon-intensive meat production as a TGR narrative:

> Maybe the WEF will be satisfied when we're all forced to eat tree bark and roots, food sources that starving peasants in Stalinist Ukraine were reduced to consuming during the Holodomor. And that's the point. The "Great Reset" is about enacting a drastic reduction in living standards for the plebs which will force them to put bugs, weeds and sewage on the menu while the Davos elites continue to feast on the finest cuisine in their ivory towers. (Watson, 2020, para. 12)

[7] The fourth analytical code was commonly found within each of the other themes and therefore did not constitute a unique type of TGR narrative.

[8] As McCool (2019) points out, in 2011 conservative talk radio personality Rush Limbaugh identified these institutions specifically as the "four corners of deceit" as they were supposedly completely corrupted by a drive to spread liberal lies (pp. 146–147).

[9] Junk news sites are hyper-partisan news aggregators that often post misinformation or outraged takes on news events (see Howard, Kollanyi, Bradshaw, & Neudert, 2017).

This example was typical of partisan interpretations of TGR that defined the pandemic and climate change as manufactured crises because their proposed solutions were framed in a way that combined imagined Left political priorities with the interests of elites. The key lesson of these narratives was that public institutions that used the language of these manufactured crises must naturally favor the interests of elites. Projects or policies that might restrict freedom, especially if proposed by liberal or Left politicians, were only further evidence of these interests.

The other main form of TGR anti-institutionalism was more aligned with what have traditionally been left-wing communities characterized by an interest in alternative health and an openness to worldviews that reject mainstream media, public health recommendations, and corporate power. In this cultural milieu, the pandemic had created strange alliances between alternative health and wellness communities and far-Right extremists. The messages of anti-vaccination activists are common in this space, but these alliances have partly grown from the pre-pandemic rise of "conspirituality," a phenomenon identified by Ward and Voas (2011) as a confluence of conspiracy narratives and a form of lifestyle spirituality common in wellness cultures. This was most apparent in the way TGR was tied up with a critique of political elites and their impact on people's choices about their own health. In one video posted on a YouTube channel called Ice Age Farmer (2021), TGR is cited in a story about Bill Gates buying up American farmland. The conclusions drawn by the video's host were typical of narratives that saw TGR—along with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was often assumed to be part of TGR in our data—as a threat to healthy ways of living:

> [The issue] . . . is these billionaires and their technocratic agenda to implement a transhumanist food supply. A total takeover of our food supply, replacing everything that is good and true with a fake synthetic food which, for one, makes us weak and dumbed down. (Ice Age Farmer, 2021, 00:02:36)

Unlike the more partisan version of this populist anti-institutionalism, many of the health-centric narratives tried to use apolitical language and characterized globalism as an elite project, not necessarily a liberal project. Terms like "technocracy" and "transhumanism" were common in these narratives, and were (mis)identified, respectively, as rule by technology and the corruption of human life through technological interventions. These perspectives could be described as seemingly agnostic on partisan politics by the way they intentionally refrained from naming political parties or viewpoints as part of an elite agenda. They also mobilized traditionally Left critiques against big business and the global power of capital. This critique explicitly appropriated the type of Left political sentiments that were popular in the mid-20th century and advocated autonomy, humanism, and justice against controlling systems of oppression. The appropriation of such language is not a new phenomenon (see Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005), but both the right-wing and new-age versions of anti-institutionalism in TGR narratives used the rhetoric of authenticity to specifically frame public health efforts as part of an agenda working against the interests of the people.

Comprehending a Global Crisis

The interpretation of public health measures as a form of globalism was the second common thematic pattern identified among the TRG narratives. This theme most relied on the tropes of historical conspiracies,

using narratives of the traditional conspiracy language of the "New World Order (NWO)," a term that references old, anti-Semitic conspiracies about a global cabal run by "international bankers," such as the Rothschild family, who pull the strings of puppet-like world leaders and manipulate global events. As Hofstadter (1964) pointed out, such narratives date back to the 19th century, but contemporary versions have updated the conspiracy to include other wealthy Jewish public figures such as George Soros. The threat of globalism is a particularly flexible narrative, and somewhat counterintuitively, most TGR narratives in the anti-globalism theme were about some national or local issue. In our sample, this included stories about the NWO using the pandemic to undermine Christianity by canceling Christmas festivities in Sydney, Australia, and claims that the global pandemic response is really a covert TGR attempt to threaten the Albertan energy-sector jobs. In this way, the threat of globalism was a way to frame what were essentially local social anxieties. While these more conspiracy-oriented narratives about globalism might seem easy to dismiss, we found that material working on the boundary of legitimate news also played up these anxieties by hinting at possible conspiracies. The language used often suggested that liberal politicians, such as President Biden or Prime Minister Trudeau, *wished* to implement a world government, but avoided stating that there is an *actual* conspiracy. This minor rhetorical move acted as an important mechanism that maintained the pretense of legitimacy. This is one important reason that such narratives are difficult to fact-check. Many sources used these vaguely conspiratorial narratives about globalism to make sense of local concerns about the pandemic.

Another advantage of narratives that framed globalism in this way was that they provided an epistemic framework for interpreting the global pandemic. For example, some narratives cited so-called independent experts who claimed that public efforts to dismiss non–peer-reviewed claims about the nature of the virus, or possible cures, implied some kind of cover-up or hoax. TGR narratives capitalized on the claims of these alternative experts, especially those who minimized the urgency of the public health crisis. In an article by alternative medicine personality, Joseph Mercola (2020), TGR is framed as an exercise in social engineering: "Fear is but one manipulation tool. The focus on 'science' is another. Anytime someone dissents, they're simply accused of being "anti-science," and any science that conflicts with the status quo is declared 'debunked science'" (para. 40). Like many of the sources in our sample, this example used rebukes by mainstream scientific sources as evidence that alternative views were being suppressed by "technocrats." In this way, science-based mitigation measures, which were adopted in a seemingly coordinated way around the world, could by implication be interpreted as being the result of central global planning rather than as an isomorphic effect of information sharing among public health organizations. Here, people's everyday experiences with the virus, or lack thereof, fit well within an epistemic framework that made sense of the global crisis by claiming it was overblown or a hoax. This epistemic framework was common enough to proliferate other, smaller-scale, conspiracy narratives on social media. In one example from early in the pandemic, the hashtag #FilmYourHospital was briefly trending on Twitter. This trend asked people to record evidence of empty hospitals, with the assumption that there were no real COVID-19 patients (see Ahmed, López Seguí, Vidal-Alaball, & Katz, 2020). In many ways, a global conspiracy would really be the only plausible explanation if such widespread changes to public life were indeed the product of a hoax.

Finding Comfort in the Conspiracy

The third common pattern we found in the TGR narratives expressed a certain type of anxiety related to the threat of authoritarian control. Whereas anti-institutional narratives described an

ideological divide between the elites and authentic citizens, and anti-globalist narratives constructed a reality in which local or national events were manipulated by abstractly defined global forces, anti-authoritarian TGR narratives contextualized these issues in stark moral terms. In this way, TGR spoke to what cultural sociologists have called deep narratives (e.g., Hochschild, 2016) that people use to make sense of their lives. In deep narratives, the moral of the story is often more important than the verifiability of the claims. Based on our sample, the moral of many TGR narratives imagined a world in which the events of the pandemic were interpreted as part of a battle between good and evil. Polletta and Callahan (2017) point out that people seek out media that confirm these deep narratives because they are often pleasurable in some way in addition to having a sense-making function. They entertain, they titillate, and they reassure people about their understanding of the world. The threats posed by TGR, as articulated by much of the content in our sample, checked all these items off the list by raising the specter of a shadowy force behind the pandemic. They allowed people to read their own experiences into a larger story, or they offered a fantastical vision of authoritarian power that heightened the stakes of the perceived conflict. More importantly, they also allowed people to reduce their concern and stress about the danger of the pandemic itself.

An illustrative example of how this fear of the pandemic was displaced by a more abstract, but sensationalized, fear of authoritarian control was found in a popular documentary-style video linked in our sample called "The New Normal" (2021).[10] The hour-long video weaves together many of the main pandemic-related conspiracy theories, including TGR. The video edits several news reports together to give the impression that the pandemic was indeed planned. One scene, shortly after the WEF and the Great Reset are introduced in the video, details a pandemic-preparedness exercise called Event 201 that was held in October 2019 at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and co-sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the WEF. The exercise happened to use a hypothetical example of a novel coronavirus just months before SARS-CoV-2 was identified in China. The eerie timing of the Event 201 fact pattern was presented using a menacing tone to give the impression that the imagined pandemic developed for the exercise was, in fact, a dry run for the COVID-19 pandemic. This segment was immediately followed by a short history of the Rockefeller Foundation, which, in 2010, commissioned a similar report about future scenarios involving the use of biomedical technologies for surveillance in a global pandemic (The Rockefeller Foundation, 2010). While the video does not explicitly state that the Gates or Rockefeller foundations planned the COVID-19 pandemic, it implies as much through the ominous framing of public figures (the Gates and the Rockefellers) who are well known in the lexicon of conspiracy theories surrounding global elites.

"The New Normal" (2021) video is one of the more coherent and professionally produced examples in our sample, and it is illustrative of the ways that conspiratorial fears of authoritarianism can function to soothe anxieties about the pandemic. On the one hand, the video speaks to people's sense that the pandemic has led to a loss of control over their lives and identifies individuals, institutions, and policies that have caused this loss of control. On the other hand, it constructs a compelling narrative about a moral universe in which regular people are standing up to these evil forces and taking back control of their lives. In this and other items in our sample, the question that many of these conspiracy

[10] This film has since been removed from YouTube although it was linked multiple times in our Twitter data and was so popular that Reuters published an extensive "fact check" article debunking it (Reuters, 2021).

narratives try to answer, then, is what people can do to take back agency during a pandemic that left so many with feelings of loss and isolation. This proved to be a useful formula for both politicians tapping into pandemic-related frustration and for people trying to gain purchase in the sphere of right-wing influencers. In most cases, the TGR takeover was not framed as a fait accompli but as a plan that had just started to be put in motion. People were thus encouraged to resist in any way they could, such that in our sample, the threat of TGR was taken up by people selling survivalist gear, by a blogger selling wellness products, by pro-fossil-fuel-industry lobbying organizations, and as we highlight above, by a Canadian politician. In this sense, TGR was a product of mutually reinforcing discourses that expressed pandemic frustrations and pushed narratives that could capitalize on such sentiments.

TGR as a Critique of Democracy

Taken together, the three TGR themes of anti-institutionalism, anti-globalism, and the resistance to authoritarian control are important because they represent a constellation of political, epistemic, and affective responses to the pandemic. While some of the details of TGR narratives in our sample were completely implausible, we argue that simply debunking TGR as a conspiracy theory misses the important lessons it offers about the nature of contemporary public discourse. One basic lesson of our analysis is that TGR represented a range of heterodox, and mostly right-wing, views of the pandemic. The main rhetorical goal of these narratives was not to deceive through orchestrated disinformation but rather to explain the pandemic. From this perspective, our article offers two key takeaways. The first is that TGR narratives contained several antidemocratic assumptions about how public institutions should, and do, function. The second is that conspiracy theories that are widely seen as outside the boundaries of traditional political discourse can be used to establish discursive credibility, in this case in a right-wing media ecosystem.

We found that the politics of authenticity drove many of TGR's antidemocratic assumptions. As McCool (2019) argues, by the 1990s, the discursive politics of the new Left had, to some degree, become adopted by elite institutions that symbolically deployed the language of movements opposing racism, sexism, and homophobia. In many right-wing media spaces, this perceived concern with political correctness has been interpreted as inauthentic or superficial and therefore signals a lack of legitimacy for any corporation or public institution using this language. This was the context in which many TGR narratives rejected official accounts of how the pandemic was unfolding and why public health measures took shape in the ways that they did. The idea that wearing a mask is a form of virtue-signaling is a common example. At root here is an assumption among pandemic skeptics that institutions charged with managing the pandemic were clearly pursuing a political project that excluded conservative perspectives. An acknowledgment that a democratic majority might support public health measures did not factor into this calculation and is not present in any TGR narrative. Thus, a type of democratic erasure occurred when these narratives reframed elected officials' calls for stronger public health measures. TGR narratives framed resistors and skeptics as the authentic citizens, and any politician's call for more public safety was interpreted as proof of an illegitimate agenda, framed in these narratives as primarily globalist in nature.

Regarding the discursive credibility of TGR, the flexibility of these narratives in our study to combine many elements into a "conspiracy smoothie" (Klein, 2020) made them culturally meaningful to diverse groups of people who were already suspicious of pandemic mitigation. While the liberal tradition of conspiracy theory research might see this as a pathological flight from reason, expertise, and legitimate authority, our cultural interpretation of TGR suggests that the content in our sample establishes alternative forms of reasoning, expert knowledge, and authority by speaking to what a substantial percentage of people in Western democracies see as deeper truths about the pandemic.[11] As Christensen (2017) has argued, trust in democratic institutions is often far more dependent on a type of personal credibility rather than on formal institutional rules that dictate what counts as legitimate authority. This is increasingly true in a media ecosystem saturated with dis/misinformation, propaganda, and other forms of media manipulation. In the cultural context of a global pandemic, conspiracy theories such as TGR can seem much more credible than legitimate sources of public health advice. They build forms of political community, provide epistemic resources, and communicate a tone of affective clarity that people respond to in uncertain times.

Conclusion

In this article, we build on a tradition of scholarship that takes conspiracy theories as an enduring feature of political discourse. Online media may have made conspiracy theories more accessible, but the broader cultural phenomenon of indulging rumors and suspicions to make sense of changing social structures is not new. Moreover, ignoring the social foundations of conspiracies and attributing them to individual failures of reason or mental health has been a common political reaction. In an article tracing the social roots of the QAnon phenomenon, Guilhot (2021) argues that an approach focused on debunking conspiracy theories "ultimately turns out to be a defense of the status quo—not because conspiracy theories may be true, but because it uses them to further restrict the space for politics" (para. 18). This has been so common during the pandemic that critics of public health measures have started using charges of conspiracy thinking as further proof that public authorities are unresponsive to the needs of everyday people and therefore illegitimate. COVID-19 conspiracy theories such as TGR are surely frustrating to public health officials who are simply trying to generate the best guidelines they can with the information they have available. Yet, the lesson to be taken from the popularity of these conspiracies is not that people have lost touch with reality. Instead, the lesson of TGR is that crises like a pandemic require clear and consistent communication that works to build credibility rather than assuming legitimate authority. At the same time, the TGR narratives we examined in this research suggest that there is an entire media ecosystem that has exploited opportunities stemming from a lack of trust in public institutions. The antidemocratic assumptions at the core of TGR are concerning and only offer further reasons to take pandemic conspiracy theories seriously as cultural expressions of collective phenomena.

[11] This is similar to the phenomenon Press and Cole (1999) identify among opponents of abortion rights, who look outside of mainstream discourses for alternative experts that lend epistemic authority to their beliefs.

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