



“Swallowing the red pill”: the coronavirus pandemic and the political imaginary of stigmatized knowledge in the discourse of the far-right

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Abstract

Pandemic disease is not merely a biological reality but also a cognitive and socially constructed phenomenon which intensely mobilizes a multiplicity of political frames. Far-right political entrepreneurs are, despite their remoteness from actual decision-making processes, active stakeholders in the current crisis. Existential threats to societies breed a sense of urgency and heightened cultural warfare that is a hotbed for extremism. Our study seeks to map, compare and contrast the symbolic responses to the Coronavirus crisis articulated by various far-right actors in two established democracies in the transatlantic area: The United States and France. We aim to shed light on how entrenched far-right mythologies and tropes—which appear increasingly transatlantic—are channeled into a new synthesis as part of an “alternative” political epistemology. Infused with the mythos of resistance and insurgency, resolutely anti-systemic, this alternative epistemology can better be described, following Michael Barkun, as a form of “stigmatized knowledge”. Our study will employ a Critical Discourse Analysis framework to bring into focus, in the response of the Euro-American far-right to the COVID-19 crisis, the ideological semiotics of the current “infodemic”.

Keywords Conspiracy theory · Far-right · Extremism · Stigmatized knowledge · Discourse analysis

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The perfect storm: politosomatics, the “paranoid style” and the symbolic economy of counter-knowledge

It comes hardly as a surprise that the far-right emerged as a major player in the Covid-19 pandemic. In Western liberal democracies, extremist subcultures appeared indeed ideally positioned at the crossroads of the converging fluxes of fear, anger and disenfranchisement to benefit from the upending of normal political rhythms. The UN warned against an upcoming “tsunami of hate¹” and worried about extremists using Covid-19 to recruit online youth²; the WHO and the UN both vowed to tackle the “infodemic” of misinformation, often peddled by radical groups online.³ In a similar vein, the European Policy Center ran an article titled “In chaos they thrive” in which it raised concerns that the sanitary situation might bolster far-right terrorism.⁴ *Politico* alerted that, on both sides of the Atlantic, the coronavirus is a “dream come true for any and every hate group, snake-oil salesman and everything in between⁵”. *Fair Observer* deemed the Covid-19 crisis a “PR opportunity⁶” for the radical right, while *Al Jazeera* echoed such concerns as it headlined “As world struggles to stop deaths, far right celebrates COVID-19”, stressing that the uncertainty constitute “fertile ground for claims about the need for change or the solutions the far-right purports to offer⁷”. A similar sense of political disquiet permeates European publications. French newspaper *L’Echo* ominously headlined “After the coronavirus, the brown plague?⁸” while *L’Obs* feared the virus might claim another victim: liberal democracy itself.⁹

¹ “Global report: virus has unleashed a ‘tsunami of hate’ across world, says UN chief”, *The Guardian*, 8 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/08/global-report-china-open-to-cooperate-with-who-on-virus-origin-as-trump-repeats-lab-claim> [accessed 14 May 2020].

² “Extremists taking advantage of COVID-19 lockdowns to recruit youths online: UN chief”, *The Federal*, 28 April 2020, <https://thefederal.com/international/extremists-taking-advantage-of-covid-19-lockdowns-to-recruit-youths-online-un-chief/> [accessed 14 May 2020].

³ “UN tackles ‘infodemic’ of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis”, *United Nations*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19> [accessed 15 May 2020].

⁴ Ivano di Carlo, “In chaos, they thrive: The resurgence of extremist and terrorist groups during the COVID-19 pandemic”, *EPC*, 5 May 2020, <http://epc.eu/en/Publications/In-chaos-they-thrive-The-resurgence-of-extremist-and-terrorist-group~32c800> [accessed 15 May 2020].

⁵ Mark Scott and Steven Overly, “Conspiracy bingo: Transatlantic extremists seize on the pandemic”, *Politico*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/far-right-conspiracy-theorists-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-lockdown-protests/> [accessed 15 May 2020].

⁶ Michael Colborne, “For the Far Right, the COVID-19 Crisis Is a PR Opportunity”, *Fair Observer*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.fairobserver.com/region/europe/michael-colborne-far-right-coronavirus-pandemic-assistance-covid-19-crisis-pr-news-10109/> [accessed 15 May 2020].

⁷ Micheal Colborne, “As world struggles to stop deaths, far right celebrates COVID-19”, *Al Jazeera*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/world-struggles-stop-deaths-celebrates-covid-19-200326165545387.html> [accessed 15 May 2020].

⁸ Vincent Laborderie, “Après le coronavirus, la peste brune ?”, *L’Echo*, 25 April 2020, <https://www.lecho.be/dossiers/coronavirus/apres-le-coronavirus-la-peste-brune/10222801.html> [accessed 15 May 2020].

⁹ Pierre Haski, “Derrière la pandémie, le populisme en embuscade”, *L’Obs*, 22 April 2020, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/chroniques/20200425.OBS27980/derriere-la-pandemie-le-populisme-en-embuscade.html> [accessed 15 May 2020].



To grasp the dynamics of this anti-liberal backlash on both sides of the Atlantic, disease needs to be conceptualized as a social and political phenomenon, not as a mere biological reality. Mike Aaltola's concept of "politosomatics" (i.e. "politico-somatics") re-emphasizes the intimate embeddedness of the cognitive, the social and the biological in our response to disease.¹⁰ Aaltola sees disease (especially contagious outbreaks) as an interface between the suffering of the individual body and the suffering of the body politics. It sets in motion affective and emotional flows that can further cohesion and compassion or, on the contrary, encourage sectarian retrenchment.¹¹ Historian of medicine Charles Rosenberg pertinently observed that: "An epidemic has a dramaturgic form. [...] Just as a playwright chooses a theme and manages plot development, so a particular society constructs its characteristic response to an epidemic."¹² Societies choose, therefore, the stories they weave around their suffering. Crises intensely mobilize meaning-making mechanisms. A dynamic body of literature, enacting a heterodox spin on traditional "crisis management" scholarship, helped knit a comprehensive framework for understanding crises (whether man-made or not) as *fields of struggle*, or as key sites where clashes of narrative materialize and, therefore, where anti-hegemonic counter-discourses can gain ground.

Reviewing the field of crisis studies in the early 1990s, Paul 't Hart recognized a marked unbalance in favor of practitioner-oriented crisis literature, which focused on actionable knowledge rather than on the "subjective data" of crises. He deemed the symbolic approach to be a "lost dimension of crisis management" and set out to restore the obfuscated salience of notions of ideology, antagonism and power.¹³ 't Hart defines crisis in relation to the broader socio-political dynamics, as *break-downs of familiar symbolic frameworks of legitimacy*.¹⁴ Crisis narratives, contends Colin Hay, compete in terms of their ability to find resonance with collective lived experiences, and not in terms of their "scientific" adequacy as explanations for the condition they diagnose.¹⁵ Strath and Wodak point out that major societal crises can be read as "condensed events with symbolic or iconic value", construed as "turning points" in history.¹⁶ To sum up, drawing on Everett Hughes' precocious intuition, crises appear as moments when the "cake of custom is broken"¹⁷ and, for a while at least, the world is up for grabs.

¹⁰ Aaltola (2012).

¹¹ See Cohn (2018).

¹² Rosenberg (1992).

¹³ Hart (1993).

¹⁴ Paul 't Hart, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Colin Hay, "Narrating crisis: The discursive construction of the Winter of Discontent", *Sociology*, vol. 30, issue 2, p. 254.

¹⁶ Bo Strath and Ruth Wodak, "Europe – discourse – politics – media – history: Constructing crises?", in Anna Triandafyllidou, Ruth Wodak and Michał Krzyżanowski (ed.), *The European Public Sphere and the Media: Europe in Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009.

¹⁷ Everett Hughes, "Institutions in process", in Alfred McClung Lee (ed.), *New outline of the principles of sociology*, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1946.



This growing body of literature reinforced the idea that legitimacy, not managerial skill or material resources, might be the most stringently needed currency in crisis management.¹⁸ It also recognized the crucial role of non-power holders and non-bureaucratic agents, as stakeholders outside of decision-making circles also engage in symbolic manipulation to achieve political ends.¹⁹ As *affective* categories, crises thus become privileged vantage points for the study of non-normative political phenomena, such as extremism, discrimination or conspiracy theories. Indeed, the shift from a technocratic, practitioner-oriented literature towards a political anthropology of “crisis coping” has also translated into a broadening of the focus to include movements operating on the fringes of society. Crises often constitute privileged “short-cuts” to political visibility and legitimacy for such fringe actors. They put the existing normative consensus through the wringer and challenge cultural, scientific and political establishments embodying the epistemological status-quo.

Extremism is built upon an alternative cultural ecosystem of beliefs and a radical rejection of the “stinking normal” society. The lexicon of the political culture of the far-right is saturated with terms which enact the “othering” of non-extremist elements. In the slang of the German Skinhead subculture, a *Stino* or *Stinknormaler* was a derogatory word for the politically passive, regular person.²⁰ A more recent iteration of this frontier between the initiated and the non-initiated is the growing popularity within far-right circles of the term *normie*. According to *The Urban Dictionary* (the iconic, semi-parodic crowdsourced slang dictionary), what defines a normie is his “lack of interest in ideas not easily accessible or being outside of their society’s current range of acceptance.”²¹ Another definition catalogues them as “so mainstream im [sic] loseing [sic] brain cells²²”. In the far-right vernacular, normie (and its gendered equivalent “basic bitch”) refers specifically to clueless, safe, mainstream people who engage in uncritical consumption of the cultural and political goods provided by establishment media and large corporations. They therefore hold “mainstream truths”, violently reject what does not fit “hegemonic” narratives and are easily manipulated and trained into submission through political correctness:

“Normie” is a term used to refer to individuals who have not yet joined the Alt-Right, remaining trapped in the mental-prison of the Jewish system. These

¹⁸ See Arjen Boin, “Lessons from Crisis Research”, *International Studies Review*, vol. 6, issue 1, 2004; Alastair Stark, “Legislatures, Legitimacy and Crises: The Relationship Between Representation and Crisis Management”, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, vol. 18, issue 1, 2010; Paul ‘t Hart and Arjen Boin, “Between Crisis and Normalcy: The Long Shadow of Post-Crisis Politics”, in Uriel Rosenthal, Arjen Boin and Louise K. Comfort, *Managing Crises: Threats, Dilemmas, Opportunities*, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, 2001; Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay, “Communication and Attributions in a Crisis: An Experimental Study in Crisis Communication”, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, vol. 8, issue 4, October 1996.

¹⁹ See Paul ‘t Hart, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Paul Hockenos, *Free to Hate: The Rise of the Right in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, Routledge, New York, 1994, p. 77.

²¹ “Normie”, *Urban Dictionary*, 23 May 2016, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Normie> [accessed 16 May 2020].

²² “Normie”, *Urban Dictionary*, 22 April 2018, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Normie&page=2> [accessed 16 May 2020].



*people are incapable of objectively processing information, and will instead revert to programmed slogans whenever they are presented with ideas that conflict with their synthetic value system.*²³

The “mainstream” cultural space is discursively constructed in contrast to the tightly-knit far-right subculture. The fundamental ambiguity of the figure of the *normie* resides in the fact he is simultaneously a dangerous foe (because it has behind him the entire weight of the hegemonic value system) and a laughable, clueless and emasculated clown. This sort of epistemic segregation between the pacified masses and a marginal but hyper-conscious aristocracy is streaked with Nietzschean echoes of the eternal struggle between the lone-philosopher-hero and the “abject popular”.²⁴ It would however be wrong to assume such anti-conformist sensibility has entrenched the far-right into an elitist ivory tower: its cultural and political proselytism implies that the frontier between the “knows” and the “know-nots” is fundamentally porous, and that crossing over is a voluntarist political gesture. The explicit aim of the far-right ideology is recruiting new members amongst normies, thus “creating a counter culture which eventually becomes the dominant culture²⁵”. The process of converting a normie is known as “red-pilling” (or taking/swallowing the red pill). The term is another example of the far-right’s innovative, pop-culture-soaked vernacular: the reference comes from the iconic movie *The Matrix*, which portrays an uprising against a malignant AI who has enslaved humanity by creating an all-encompassing virtual reality. The only way to shake off the make-belief reality of the Matrix is taking a mysterious medicine. The antidote is explained by an enigmatic character called Morpheus (portrayed by Laurence Fishburn):

*The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. [...] It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth. This is your last chance. After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends; you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.*²⁶

In the far-right imaginary, the “blue pill”/“red pill” dichotomy has been refashioned to reflect a certain type of political awakening and break away from what American sociologist Egon Bittner dubbed “the common sense outlook²⁷” (or the normie outlook, in far-right lingo). The act of red-pilling is performed within a strictly binary axiological system of deception and lies on one side and courageous but *stigmatized* truth on the other. In the far-right imaginary, what mediates and organizes the interaction of these two realms are a series of counter-cultural narratives, known as *conspiracy theories* (a term which, albeit its derisive ring, is sometimes embraced unabashedly by its proponents itself—for example, the online

²³ Andrew Anglin, “A Normie’s Guide to the Alt-Right”, *Daily Stormer*, 31 August 2016, <https://daily-stormer.su/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/> [accessed 16 May 2020].

²⁴ See Nagle (2017).

²⁵ Andrew Anglin, *op. cit.*

²⁶ *The Matrix*, directed by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, Warner Bros, 1999.

²⁷ Bittner (1963), p. 932.



“hub” of conspiracy narratives on the social news site Reddit is a community named r/conspiracy²⁸). The scholarship on conspiracy theories constitutes a growing body of research, yet one with still fuzzy contours. The first cluster of approaches are psychological and sociological. They tend to view belief in conspiracy theories as a propensity of the individual, correlated with certain psycho-social traits such as low interpersonal trust, perceived economic precarity or minority status.²⁹ They ascribe belief in conspiracy theories to lower analytic thinking skills and open-mindedness.³⁰ In other words, they posit that conspiracist ideation is produced by individuals, not groups, and is fueled by psychology rather than ideology. The second main cluster takes a more diachronic perspective and roots its understanding in the dynamics of political culture: building on Norman Cohn’s³¹ and Richard Hofstadter’s³² pioneering insights, authors like Martin Lipset and Earl Raab,³³ Nigel James³⁴ or Michael Barkun³⁵ highlighted how conspiracy theories are fashioned within certain ideological matrixes, and therefore need to be analyzed as an *ideological* phenomenon. Such approaches build upon the assumption—successfully tested by van Prooijen et al.³⁶—that extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theory. In the French-speaking world, such an approach was upheld by historians like Leon Poliakov³⁷ or Pierre-André Taguieff.³⁸ We tend to lean towards the second approach: while conspiracism undoubtedly purveys to psycho-social needs, it doesn’t appear or mature into an ideological vacuum. Moreover, nurturing the stringent need of “being in the know³⁹” which underpins adherence to conspiracy theories can be seen precisely as a crucial function of ideology: the ideology provides answers and meaning through alternative explanations and give its adherents a sense of epistemic superiority over unsuspecting, acquiescing masses. The feeling of not being a *normie*, of having the eyes wide open to the hidden truths of the world, feeds back into the identity-building processes of far-right communities. Conspiracy narratives are essential to community-building. According to Jamie Bertlett and Carl Miller, they have a three-fold role:

²⁸ See “r/Conspiracy”, *Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/conspiracy/> [accessed 16 May 2020].

²⁹ See Goertzel (1994).

³⁰ Viren Swami, Martin Voracek, Stefan Stieger, Ulrich S. Tran and Adrian Furnham, “Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories”, *Cognition*, vol. 133, issue 3.

³¹ Cohn (1957).

³² Hofstadter (1964).

³³ Lipset and Raab (1970).

³⁴ James (2000).

³⁵ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, University of California Press, Berkeley, (2013) and “Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge”, *Diogenes*, no. 249–250, January–July (2015).

³⁶ van Prooijen et al. (2015).

³⁷ See Poliakov (1980).

³⁸ See Pierre-André Taguieff, *La foire aux Illuminés. Ésotérisme, théories du complot, extrémisme*, Mille et Une Nuits, Paris, (2005) and *Court traité de complotologie*, Mille et Une Nuits, Paris, (2013).

³⁹ See Byford (2011), pp. 139–143.



*First, conspiracy theories create demonologies of ‘the other’ or ‘the enemy’ that the group defines itself against. Second, they delegitimize voices of dissent and moderation by casting them as part of the conspiracy. Finally, they can encourage a group to turn to violence, acting as rhetorical devices to portray violence, both to the group itself and their wider supporters, as necessary to ‘awaken’ the people from their acquiescent slumber.*⁴⁰

Conceptual and methodological mapping of our research

This research will attempt to shed light on the nexus of extremism, conspiracism and crisis symbolic management. We focus on the ideological and cultural dynamics that shape the radical right’s responses to the Coronavirus crisis, with a particular emphasis on how alternative narratives on the origin, dangerousness and adequate response to the novel pathogen enact a particular form of anti-systemic discourse (and therefore of “counter-knowledge”). Since Lyotard’s seminal work on post-modernism,⁴¹ the concept of narrative undergirded much of the research on symbolic politics. Following Sanjoy Banerjee’s pleasingly straightforward definition, we regard narratives as “stories with heroes, villains and a plot”, with a (seemingly) logical progression: *this* happens because of *that*.⁴² According to Fischer, narratives are key sites of the construction of meaning and should therefore be seen as the building blocks of political socialization.⁴³ Drawing on these insights, our paper posits that far-right conspiracy culture function primarily as a collection of stories, aggregated around one core narrative. We explore the manner in which a grand narrative of oppression and elite betrayal is discursively construed, through which dissenters can deploy strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

We have opted to review the responses of a total of 25 publications and personalities, in two established liberal democracies within the transatlantic area: The United States and France. Our comparative research design is driven by the “most different cases—similar outcome” (MDSO) model.⁴⁴ There are deep entrenched differences between French and American political culture, which are unsurprisingly mirrored into the far-right’s *Weltanschauung*. This is patently clear in the appraisal of the role of the State. The libertarian, anti-Big Government stance of the American radical right and its quasi-ritualistic invocations of the Founders’ inalienable “freedoms” reflect the robustness of the Anglo-Saxon liberal imaginary. The weakness of liberal culture in France, on the other hand, spawned a much less State-adverse, authoritarian and sometimes overtly paternalist discourse. Given the distinct ideological underpinning of militant extremism in the two countries, we aim to explore

⁴⁰ Bartlett and Miller (2010), p. 5.

⁴¹ See Lyotard (1979).

⁴² Banerjee (1998).

⁴³ Fisher (1984).

⁴⁴ See Adam Przeworski et Henry Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1970.



how far-right actors choose to articulate their loud, strident rejection of the sanitary emergency measures with their core values. In order to keep our corpus manageable and keep the focus firmly of the right-wing fringe, we also made the choice not to include in our sample mainstream populist movements or figures, such as Donald Trump or the Marine le Pen's Rassemblement National, instead concentrating on more peripheral voices unbridled by electoral incentives for moderation. We have selected figures and movements spanning multiple ideological sensibilities, ranging from neo-fascism to religious fundamentalism. Data gathering was conducted on a predominantly qualitative basis, through searching for pertinent keywords in the internal search engines of the target websites and social media accounts. In the selected three-month time span (March through the end of May 2020), our research yielded over 250 pieces directly addressing the coronavirus pandemic and its impact: of these, about 50 were deemed highly relevant for the purpose of this article and retained, the others being either repetitive or unopinionated factual reports. Readers will find in Fig. 1 down below the complete mapping of our empirical corpus.

We will approach the data gathered with a theoretical framework which draws largely from the field of socio-linguistics, namely the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model developed by Norman Fairclough,⁴⁵ Teun van Dijk⁴⁶ and Ruth Wodak.⁴⁷ CDA emerged as a distinct strand within socio-linguistic studies in the 1990s, as a corrective to the static and ahistorical approach of traditional discourse studies. It is essentially a two-pronged approach, which fuses the study of the discursive meaning-making strategies (such as predication, nomination, usage of tropes such as metaphors, similes or hyperboles, choice of words, argumentative topoi, etc.) and the wider cultural embeddings of texts. This interdependence can only be grasped through an analysis grid capable of zooming in and out between the different scales of discourse, from the overarching macro-structures (such as the cultural and political embeddings of discourse) to micro-structures at the level of individual words and morphemes. It also posits that texts routinely fit into a dynamic, historical process, by integrating earlier texts—a process known as intertextuality or interdiscursivity. This constant dialogicality⁴⁸ means that a discursive occurrence is always located within a larger ideological field, in close interconnectedness with other discursive productions.

The CDA's interdisciplinary toolbox is eminently suitable for the study of highly complex objects such as narratives. Indeed, its strength lies mainly in its wide range of analytical approaches, in a bid to “transcend the purely linguistic dimension and to include [...] the historical, political, sociological and/or psychological dimension in the analysis and interpretation of a specific discursive occasion⁴⁹”. CDA offers

⁴⁵ See Fairclough (2001); Fairclough (2003).

⁴⁶ See van Dijk (1998).

⁴⁷ See Wodak (2015); Wodak and Meyer (2001); Wodak and Rieslig (2009); Ruth Wodak & Jakob Engel, “Calculated Ambivalence and Holocaust Denial in Austria”, in Ruth Wodak & John E. Richardson (dir.), *Analysing Fascist Discourse: European Fascism in Talk and Text*, Routledge, London, (2013).

⁴⁸ For the concept of dialogicality, see Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1986.

⁴⁹ Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, Routledge, London, 2001.



a roadmap for analysis by breaking up the macro, meso and micro levels at which specific and distinct cognitive and discursive processes occur, thus yielding a quasi-kaleidoscopic move towards the research object.⁵⁰

“It’s just the flu, bro”: the *mise-en-discours* of far-right conspiracism

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into distinct focus some of the entrenched demonologies of radical extremism: the phobia of “experts” and “technocrats”, the disdain for the “gullible” multitude and the abhorrence of the modern democratic state formula. In line with this mythology, we have identified in our corpus five archetypal actors, three of them discursively construed as “evil” or and two construed as “virtuous”: villains are a) the State, b) the perverse expert and c) the apathetic brain-washed “sheeple”; virtuous players are d) the good doctor, often portrayed under the guise of the brave whistleblower, and e) the far-right “rebel”. The table below tries to render and organize the main narratives that structure far-right discourse.

Each narrative aggregate around a central *topos*; as *topoi* are key components of the conceptual grammar of discourse studies, and as such will feature persistently in our paper, we deem it is necessary to grant the notion a concise theoretical elaboration. Etymologically, a *topos* is the contraction of the Greek *tópos koinós* (“common place”) and fittingly refers, through a rather transparent semantic shift, to a commonplace idea or a cliché. John Richardson talks of *topoi* as “reservoirs of generalized key ideas from which specific statements or arguments can be generated⁵¹”; Ruth Wodak conceptualizes *topoi* within the framework of a wider argumentation theory, describing them as “content-related warrants [...] which connect the argument to the conclusion or the claim.⁵²” *Topos* are arguments grounded on cultural, ideological or moral assumptions that have “hardened” into actual micro-narratives. Let’s deconstruct such a *topos* present in our own corpus: say the *topos of Socialist plot*. The *topos* seeks to connect a statement (the State is getting involved into economy to a much wider extent than before) to a conclusion (we are headed towards a tyrannical liberticide regime) not through objective logic but by playing on the association of Socialism with tyranny in Western right-wing political culture. In a way, they are a form of ideological *prêt-à-porter* which eminently make sense within the confines of a certain representation system; one can easily see how the above-mentioned *topos* would miserably fail if addressing far-left interlocutors. A different *topos*, such as that of *Big Pharma conspiracy*, could fare much better as far-right and far-left political culture are both imbued with the imagery of greedy transnational capitalists. This is, essentially, how *topoi* work. In our corpus, we have identified nine such recurrent *topoi*. All but one—the *topos of inalienable Constitutional Freedoms*—are mirrored in both the French and the US corpora.

⁵⁰ Norman Fairclough, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ Richardson (2004), p. 230.

⁵² Ruth Wodak, “The discourse-historical approach”, in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, Sage, London 2006, p. 74.



	United States	France
Religious fundamentalism/traditionalism	- Rodney Howard-Browne - Scott Lively	- Le Salon Beige
Populist right/alt-light	- Breitbart News - Rebel News - Paul Joseph Watson	- Le Média pour Tous - Riposte Laïque - Riposte Républicaine
Neo-fascism/white supremacy/alt-right	- Daily Stormer - VDare - Occidental Observer	- Egalité et Réconciliation (Alain Soral) - Rivarol
Hardline conservatism	- American Thinker - WDN & Whistleblower Magazine	- Eléments (Nouvelle Droite) - Éric Zemmour
Conspiracist	- Info Wars - Truth News Network - Red Pill University	- Media-Presse.Info - Contre-info
Milita movement	- Ammon Bundy	- <i>Non-applicable</i>

Fig. 1 Corpus of radical right personalities, publications and groups surveyed. Sources used: United States—Southern Poverty Law Center (<https://www.splcenter.org/>); Anti-Defamation League, (<https://www.adl.org/>) Right-Wing Watch, (<https://www.rightwingwatch.org/>) The Righting, (<https://www.therighting.com/>) Barry J. Balleck (2019) (Balleck 2019); France—Observatoire des radicalités politiques (<https://jean-jaures.org/observatoires/observatoire-des-radicalites-politiques/>); Dominique Albertini and David Doucet (2016) (Albertini and Doucet 2016); La Horde—Cartographie de l’extrême droite française (“Cartographie de l’extrême droite française [mise à jour hiver 2019–2020]”, *La Horde*, 16 december 2019, <https://lahorde.samizdat.net/2019/12/16/cartographie-de-lextreme-droite-francaise-mise-a-jour-hiver-2019-2020/>.)



Topos	Description of topos/narrative	Sample discourse
Topos of conspiracy	The virus has been devised and weaponized as a means to further an occult elite agenda	<p>“Now there is a real virus, that came out of a weapons lab, and it has a great gain of function, so that a lot of people get it. Soo, you can all be suspect. And so that in tests it will match regular coronaviruses, one of the most common forms of death, so that they can create fear. It is a fear weapon. Period.” (Alex Jones)</p> <p>“What that means is that the goal of this virus hoax agenda goes far beyond simply destroying the economy and making everyone poor so the elite Jews can do whatever they want. There is also a plan to maintain a constant state of fear, with the “invisible enemy” used as an excuse to engage in any action.” (<i>Daily Stormer</i>)</p> <p>“Let’s dig deeper. It’s deeper (and broader) than Fauci, Birx, and Gates</p> <p>Fauci and Birx are the obvious pawns in all this. But they are not the “players.” Gates, on the other hand, has the desires and capability to load the gun AND fire shots. Let’s assume for a moment that’s the case.” (<i>Truth News Network</i>)</p> <p>“Vaccined and chipped: Gates trialed for crimes against humanity” (<i>Riposte Laïque</i>)</p>



Topos	Description of topos/narrative	Sample discourse
Topos of hysteria	The virus is relatively mild and does not pose a civilizational threat, and the panic is grossly overblown	<p>“It’s just the flu, bro” (<i>Daily Stormer</i>)</p> <p>“The thirst for apocalypse [...] is permeating our collective consciousness” (<i>Éléments</i>)</p> <p>“This phantom pandemic” (Rodney Howard-Browne)</p> <p>“But we’re not talking about something here that’s gonna wipe out your town or your city if it finds its way there.” (Rush Limbaugh)</p> <p>“We have caused a dangerous and even deadly cataclysm by overreacting to a disease outbreak wholly within normal parameters” (<i>Le Salon Beige</i>)</p> <p>“All of this for some form of seasonal flu” (<i>Égalité et Reconciliation</i>)</p>
Topos of sheeple	Masses are blindly and cowardly accepting the official narrative, abdicating critical spirit	<p>“Contrary to what the average joe—the one who made it through the lockdown, clutching his sanitizing gel and demurely covering his face while religiously enforcing all barrier gestures—believes, conspiracies do exist” (<i>Rivarol</i>)</p> <p>“We will have indomitable Gauls on the one side, and sheepish French on the other” (<i>Égalité et Reconciliation</i>)</p> <p>“Clapping for lockdown and the police state. Such pieces of shit. I copiously insulted them” (Alain Soral)</p> <p>“Extending the lockdown little by little appears to have successfully trained people into enjoying no freedoms and feeling great about it. It’s kinda like Stockholm Syndrome. We can call this Lockdown Syndrome, or Netflix House Arrest Syndrome.” (<i>Daily Stormer</i>)</p>



Topos	Description of topos/narrative	Sample discourse
Topos of inalienable Constitutional freedoms	The Constitution provides our people a series of inalienable rights and freedom and even in times of emergency they cannot be suspended on whim by political decision-makers	<p>“Even by government decree, I mean, they would have to change the Constitution to force these things. Local officials cannot overrun the Constitution. They cannot. The Constitution is the supreme law of the land.” (Rodney Howard-Browne)</p> <p>“[...] a Harvard Law Professor says that this coronavirus “pandemic” is a great opportunity to update the Constitution — and by “update the Constitution” I mean tearing it apart and writing some Jewish gibberish on top of it.” (<i>Daily Stormer</i>)</p> <p>“Yes, the Constitution is suspended in total. The reason? People got really scared of the flu, and thought that it was really going to kill a lot of people in nursing homes.” (<i>Daily Stormer</i>)</p> <p>“The last time it was illegal to be together as a people on this land was before the Revolutionary War. Since we won our independence it has never been illegal to assemble as a people. [...] I would like to reintroduce you to the Bill of Rights.” (Ammon Bundy)</p>
Topos of malevolent/incompetent experts	Experts in charge are either incompetent or they have a secret agenda—either way they have no legitimacy	<p>“Anthony Fauci, the NIH’s face of the coronavirus, is a Deep-State Hillary Clinton–loving stooge” (<i>American Thinker</i>)</p> <p>“So how can we even entertain the idea that these incompetent “experts” have any idea about what the common good is and how to achieve it?” (<i>Daily Stormer</i>)</p> <p>“Let’s go back to the fight against oligarchy, the swamp [...] I think Raoult is a tad too optimistic: they have the IHU in the crosshairs and when this corrupt caste [...] is bringing out the big guns, to oppose them is exceedingly difficult” (<i>Riposte Laique</i>)</p> <p>“Big Pharma against dr. Raoult’s 5 euro cure” (<i>Riposte Laique</i>)</p>



Topos	Description of topos/narrative	Sample discourse
Topos of heroic doctor	While the medical establishment is corrupt, some courageous individuals dare defy the omerta and speak the truth	<p>“Doctor: Our voices are being silenced by media and ‘experts’” (<i>WND</i>)</p> <p>“Forced to put the population under surveillance, a doctor decides to resign” (<i>Le Salon Beige</i>)</p> <p>“Populists with dr. Raoult, cosmopolitan leftists behind Big Pharma” (<i>Riposte Laïque</i>)</p>
Topos of Socialist plot	The pandemic is used to impose a dictatorial socialist system	<p>“We may be evolving here, at a revolutionary speed, [towards an] emerging Beast government. And if these people truly are intending to destroy America so they can bring in their global Socialist system, even a national Socialist system, violence is appropriate in response, in the most measured possible way.” (Scott Lively)</p> <p>“They are giving up all their rights and their safeties to become part of a system where they are dependent upon the government. This is not the way this country was designed to be. And if you read my book on Socialism you will understand what is going on today.” (Rodney Howard-Browne)</p> <p>“We are heading towards a communist, collectivist society because despite of global free trade, there is a form of communist, as we can reasonably expect taxes to soar, and, on the other hand, the people who were still able to make a living out of their work, skill, efforts and dynamism, they will have a very difficult time.” (<i>Rivarol</i>)</p>
Topos of censorship	The government and giant multinational companies in the information technology industry are trying to stifle information contrary to their agenda	<p>“Share this thorough report to defeat Big Tech censors!” (<i>InfoWars</i>)</p> <p>“Big Tech continues to censor anyone who doesn’t regurgitate the establishment narrative” (<i>InfoWars</i>)</p> <p>“Plandemic Documentary is the Most Censored Thing Since the Daily Stormer” (<i>Daily Stormer</i>)</p>



Topos	Description of topos/narrative	Sample discourse
Topos of authoritarianism	The pandemic is ushering an age of tyranny and is exposing a deep-seated authoritarian tropism of Western government	<p>“Pandemic crisis reveals many politicians’ love affair with totalitarianism” (<i>WDN</i>)</p> <p>“Elected officials have dismissed the Bill of Rights as an irrelevancy, forcibly closed down houses of worship, harassed and threatened worshipers, arrested political protesters, and declared that protests are non-essential.” (<i>Whistleblower Magazine</i>)</p> <p>“But the Left is using that good will, good sense, and respect for the law to expand state power and insidiously erode our basic civil liberties.” (<i>VDare</i>)</p> <p>“Slippery slope to despotism: paved with lockdowns, raids and forced vaccinations. Government wants to make it clear that we have no rights.” (<i>Infowars</i>)</p> <p>“The much-touted aim of protect the people is concealing a cunning strategy to shell-shock and place it under mass surveillance” (<i>Le Salon Beige</i>)</p> <p>“But why, you might ask, are they so fierce, why are liberties negated, trampled and assassinated, every day a little bit more? Well simply, because there has been no real backlash to it” (<i>Rivarol</i>)</p> <p>“Today, with the benefit of hindsight, it clearly transpires that the coronavirus is, too, an ideal ploy to lay the foundation of a global sanitary dictatorship” (<i>Riposte Laique</i>)</p> <p>“They are using the crisis to force on us Chinese-style surveillance tactics” (<i>Riposte Laique</i>)</p> <p>“Lockdown imposes soviet-style control and ruins the country” (<i>Riposte Laique</i>)</p>

First cluster of topoi: the topos of hysteria, the topos of the sheeple and the topos of conspiracy

Many far-right actors chose to deny altogether that there is such a thing as a Covid-19 crisis. Rush Limbough, a popular radio host sometimes seen as a bridgehead



between mainstream conservatism and far-right activism, contended that “the coronavirus is the common cold” hyped up by the “drive-by media”:

*It's really being hyped as a deadly, Andromeda-Strain or Ebola pandemic that oh-my-God is going to wipe the nation and the population. Two percent of the people who get coronavirus die. That's less than the flu. That's a far lower date statistic than any form of influenza [...] Nobody wants to get any of this stuff. I mean, you never... I hate getting the common cold. You don't want to get the flu. It's miserable. But we're not talking about something here that's gonna wipe out your town or your city if it finds its way there.*⁵³

Similar language is audible also further right. Neo-Nazi website Daily Stormer satirized the hygiene guidelines offers by authorities: “You don’t need to wash your hands for 20 s unless you literally just performed an emergency autopsy on a rotten corpse without wearing any kind of gloves. The idea that coronavirus is dangerous is a hoax. It is about as dangerous as the flu.⁵⁴” The same website flaunted on its banner for weeks the now-infamous “It’s just the flu, bro” jingle, as a badge of all-American, laid-back and no-nonsense ruggedness. The same ethos of virility also transpires in the refusal to accept state-mandated protective regulations (“We do not need the government or anyone to take care of us. We can take care of ourselves, and we have a right to take the risks that we want to take⁵⁵”) and the insistence on the fact that only weak, “unmanly” individuals (older, disabled...or gay⁵⁶) are in actual danger: “Nice try, media: now go see if you can find a healthy heterosexual who experienced these issues.⁵⁷” In a piece published at the beginning of May, Andrew Anglin, Daily Stormer’s editor-in-chief, commented:

*We knew this only affected old people or people who otherwise have extremely serious health problems (cancer, morbid obesity, GRIDS, etc.). We knew it from both China and Italy. This entire thing was done for the ostensible purpose of adding a few months or at most a couple of years onto the lives of very sick people, who probably weren't enjoying life all that much anyway. I just don't even have the words to describe how insane it is that people were stupid enough to go along with this.*⁵⁸

⁵³ “The Rush Limbaugh Show Podcast Monday—February 24, 2020”, *BitChute*, 24 February 2020, <https://www.bitchute.com/video/0LZpFvfrryuV/> [accessed 10 June 2020].

⁵⁴ Pomidor Quixote, “Brave Doctor Says Soap is Bad for Your Health”, *Daily Stormer*, 26 May 2020, <https://dailystormer.su/brave-doctor-says-soap-is-bad-for-your-health/> [accessed 10 June 2020].

⁵⁵ Pomidor Quixote, “British Physician Points Out That Coronavirus Only Kills Very Old, Sick People”, *Daily Stormer*, 4 June 2020, <https://dailystormer.su/british-physician-points-out-that-coronavirus-only-kills-very-old-sick-people/> [accessed 10 June 2020].

⁵⁶ Andrew Anglin, “I Renounce My Views on Corona Because a Healthy 43-Year-Old Got It and—Oh, Never Mind. He’s Gay”, *Daily Stormer*, 21 May 2020, <https://dailystormer.su/i-renounce-my-views-on-corona-because-a-health-43-year-old-got-it-and-oh-never-mind-hes-gay/> [accessed 10 June 2020].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Andrew Anglin, “Ultimate Doom: Vengeance: Roy of Siegfried and Roy, A 75-Year-Old Vegetable, Dies of Coronavirus”, *Daily Stormer*, 9 May 2020, <https://dailystormer.su/ultimate-doom-vengeance-roy-of-siegfried-and-roy-a-75-year-old-vegetable-dies-of-coronavirus/> [accessed 10 June 2020].



He also, in a different article, rhetorically mused whether Americans should accept to abide with draconian lockdowns to prevent “beloved elderly Jew actors to die from the virus⁵⁹”. By discursively constructing the victims of the novel pathogen as minorities, infirm elderlies or deviant individuals leading debauched lives—thus also tapping into the imaginary of purity reminiscent of the AIDS far-right discourse⁶⁰—, the Daily Stormer champions the idea that white, healthy, virile and therefore “good” America is not at risk from the virus.

In our French corpus, we witness the deployment of similar themes, focusing mainly on an allegedly exaggerated number of death reports⁶¹; along a similar vein, it is noteworthy to point out to a debunking video published by Alain Soral, where the far-right essayist is drawing a parallel between the Coronavirus pandemic and other alleged media-fabricated medical panics of the last decades, notably AIDS, considered to be a minor disease only linked to “aberrant” behaviors like promiscuity or drug use.⁶²

However, the hysteria topos is part of a three-pronged approach, whose second and central component is the topos of conspiracy. According to the far-right narrative, this hysteria has been carefully engineered. Through strategies of nomination, three actors are alleged to be behind the mass scare-mongering. The Daily Stormer, using the results of an antibody tests in California, claimed that the results are “destroying the baseless and hysterical claims by the *Western health establishment, governments and media* [the emphasis is ours] that this virus is significantly more dangerous than the flu.⁶³” Later in the same article, it announced emphatically that “This will be buried”, arguing that mainstream media will cover-up the story: “The media was not only complicit in this hoax, they were the driving force behind it.⁶⁴” The three actors, supposedly acting on a convergent agenda, are construed as a monolith through the use of the third-person pronoun (“they”); existing literature already pointed out that an insistent use of the third-person deixis can be a linguistic clue of conspiracy behavior.⁶⁵ The deliberate, ominous vagueness and the implicit dichotomization thus implied (when there is a “they” there is also a “we”) reveal an enemy-building formula that’s eminently conspiratorial in nature:

⁵⁹ Andrew Anglin, “George’s Dad from Seinfeld Dead from Coronavirus”, 11 May 2020, <https://daily-stormer-su/georges-dad-from-seinfeld-dead-from-coronavirus/> [accessed 10 June 2020].

⁶⁰ See Andrew Anglin, “I Renounce My Views on Corona Because a Healthy 43-Year-Old Got It and—Oh, Never Mind. He’s Gay”, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ “Des sur-déclarations de décès liés au coronavirus?”, *Le Salon Beige*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/des-sur-declarations-de-deces-lies-au-coronavirus/> [accessed 10 June 2020].

⁶² Alain Soral, “Soral a (presque toujours) raison—Couillonavirus, la suite”, 4 May 2020, <https://www.egaliteetreconciliation.fr/Soral-a-presque-toujours-raison-Couillonavirus-la-suite-59258.html> [accessed 10 June 2020].

⁶³ Andrew Anglin, “It’s Over: California Finally Does Random Coronavirus Antibodies Testing, Infection Rate 50 Times What They Claimed”, *Daily Stormer*, 22 April 2020, <https://daily-stormer-su/its-over-california-finally-does-random-coronavirus-antibodies-testing-infection-rate-50-times-what-they-claim-ed/> [accessed 11 June 2020].

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ See Klein et al. (2019), <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0225098> [accessed 11 June 2020].



*They have to keep pushing this because they are locked in, they are using this hoax to roll out an entire new society, and they are not going to be stopped by the fact it's been proven to be the biggest hoax of all time. [...] It is now time to attempt to understand why they did this, as we try to grasp the direction that things are going in.*⁶⁶

Similar language is used by Alex Jones on his website InfoWar, one of the most prolific global conspiracy hubs. He contends that the virus has been devised so that “they can create fear⁶⁷”. Truth News Network, an alternative media platform who routinely promotes conspiracist material, ran a piece entitled “How Deep Is It and What’s at the Bottom?”. It furthered the narrative of a *trompe-l’oeil* scenario, with façade actors (“We certainly know the names of some of those directly involved in this COVID-19 debacle. What we still have not been able to reveal is the purpose(s) for the “noise” and who are the ones that are loading the gun.⁶⁸” and “Fauci and Birx are the obvious pawns in all this. But they are not the Players.⁶⁹”) and hidden puppet-masters. The powerful visual metaphor of the “pit”, often invoked in the conspiracist imaginary, is suggested through verbs such as “digging”, adjectives like “deep” or nouns like “bottom”. Another strategy is also used to heighten the sense of secrecy and urgency: using an investigation-like storytelling device, with partial revelations incrementally leading to the big final reveal. The progression is punctuated with rhetorical questions and figures of speech like “Let’s dig deeper”, “The plot thickens”, “The story doesn’t end here” or “Let’s pull all of this together”. Conspiracy theories, like murder mysteries, are haunted by the question of “Who?” At the heart of the conspiracy—or the “bottom” of the proverbial pit—we find a dense network of transnational corporate giants, billionaires (Bill Gates, George Soros) and foreign powers (China’s Communist Party) whose fuzzy contours largely overlap traditional right-wing demonologies.⁷⁰ Further right still, it is also noteworthy to signal the explicit “ethnicization” of the enemy, with Jews being identified in anti-Semitic publications such as *The Daily Stormer*, *Rivarol* or *Egalité et Réconciliation* as the main string-pullers.

The “layered” structure of conspiracist narratives reveal however, at a closer look, not only a distinction between the powerful occult shadow players and the governmental pawns, but also a wider more diffuse outer circle of the “system”: the manipulated archetypal normie, lacking political consciousness and uncritically feeding off official narratives. The Covid-19 crisis indeed saw high levels of public approval for lockdown measures worldwide, but especially in Western countries. That was a fact that the far-right couldn’t deny. Nonetheless, “stigmatized knowledge” is eminently

⁶⁶ Andrew Anglin, “It’s Over: California Finally Does Random Coronavirus Antibodies Testing, Infection Rate 50 Times What They Claimed”, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ See “The Lockdown Narrative Is Crumbling”, *Info Wars*, 25 May 2020, <https://www.infowars.com/the-lockdown-narrative-is-crumbling/> [accessed 11 June 2020].

⁶⁸ Dan Newmann, “How Deep Is It and What’s at the Bottom?”, *Truth News Network*, 5 May 2020, <https://truthnewsnet.org/how-deep-is-it-and-whats-at-the-bottom/> [accessed 11 June 2020].

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*



comfortable with minority, esoteric worldviews and frequently builds its narrative around an inverted perspective of what is true. As Michael Barkun contends, conspiracist theories take rejection by authoritative institutions as a sign that a belief must be true.⁷¹ This applies, as we shall see, for expert and technocratic institutions, but also for a cornerstone institution of modern democratic political culture: majorities. Fringe far-right groups nurture an ambiguous and strained relationship with the mass (contrary to right-wing populism, which basks in it). The mythology of the “people” is counter-balanced with the equally deep-rooted myths of the “sheeple”. French far-right publication *Rivarol* scoffed at the “average joe” (“*le pékin de base*”), who barely “made it through the lockdown, clutching his sanitizing gel and demurely covering his face while religiously enforcing all barrier gestures⁷²”, while Alain Soral raged on his VK account against those who clap daily for medical professionals, dubbing them “cunts” (“*tas de cons*”) for acquiescing to their imprisonment and enslavement.⁷³ An emphatic aristocratic feeling of disillusionment and superiority streaks *Rivarol*’s editor-in-chief Jérôme Bourbon statement that:

*Contrary to what Descartes was writing, it is not common sense but cowardice that is the most fairly distributed thing in the world. If needed, this lockdown gave us a potent real-life example of a terrifying and utterly disturbing scale of this fact. More than ever, we need to relearn to become true Franks, meaning free, standing tall and brave.*⁷⁴

A copious body of far-right iconography also used the convenient comic device of the “sheeple” to advance its anti-lockdown agenda: a poster published by Soral’s *Egalité et Réconciliation* paraphrases the title of the movie “*Silence of the Lambs*” and illustrates it with the face of a man wearing a surgical mask (see Fig. 2), while *Info Wars* portrayed in one of their caricatures the “*Sheeple of the New Normal*” as a sheep-headed, “muzzle-masked” and emasculated clone (see Fig. 3).

Second cluster of topoi: the mimetic topoi of the evil expert and the good doctor

In the far-right pantheon of evil, transitional corporations and their billionaire owners often occupy the commanding heights, a reminiscence of the anti- plutocratic aesthetics of historical fascism.⁷⁵ However, other figures also feature prominently in conspiracist imaginaries: among those, the figure of the medical expert, evil or virtuous, is key to understanding the construction of the far-right’s anti-system

⁷¹ Barkun (2015).

⁷² Léon Camus, “La France placée en liberté surveillée...sine die”, *Rivarol*, no. 3424, 13 May 2020, p. 11.

⁷³ Alain Soral, “Ça y est, à 20 heures un nombre conséquent de connards (essentiellement des filles et des vieux) se sont mis à applaudir par la fenêtre... Applaudir à leur confinement et à l’Etat policier. Tas de cons ! Je les ai copieusement insultés !”, VK, 28 March 2020, https://vk.com/a.soral?w=wall463082074_78436 [accessed 11 June 2020].

⁷⁴ Jérôme Bourbon, “Leur pseudo-déconfinement, c’est l’infantilisation et l’humiliation pour tous et à tous les étages !”, *Rivarol*, no. 3426, 27 May 2020, p. 2.

⁷⁵ See on this subject Eugen Weber, *Varieties of Fascism*, Van Nostrand, New York, 1964.



worldview. As we have seen previously, doctors often act as proxies for overarching, invisible villains. But the “corrupt doctor” mystique, with his formidable reach upon the most intimate corners of the self, provides a potent metaphor for power gone horribly awry. This discourse, of course, is already deeply embedded into other related sub-cultures on the conspiracist spectrum, such as the anti-vaccination movement, which abounds in references to genocide-bent Nazi mad scientists and money-hungry corporate sell-outs.⁷⁶ Certain authors pertinently try to locate such arguments within the broader dynamics of “science-related” populism, which bolstered alternative epistemologies and credited the idea that there is a “morally charged antagonism between a (allegedly) virtuous people and an (allegedly) unvirtuous academic elite⁷⁷”. In manufacturing their response to the Coronavirus crisis, far-right actors seem indeed to enact such a worldview. The populist anti-élite animus cross-fertilizes another salient political tradition: a distinct strand of libertarian-hued, anti-governmental (occasionally anti-socialist) defiance underwrites the rejection of doctors, experts and “technocrats”. In a piece published on InfoWars, John W. Whitehead decries the “sanctimonious, self-righteous, arrogant, Big Brother Knows Best approach to top-down governing” of the coronavirus “Nanny State”.⁷⁸ Forced vaccination is central to this new form of totalitarianism, who claims control over mind and body:

According to legal experts, who have become little more than legal apologists for the power elite, “You have no right not to be vaccinated, you have no right not to wear a mask, you have no right to open up your business... And if you refuse to be vaccinated, the state has the power to literally take you to a doctor’s office and plunge a needle into your arm.” [They are] wrong: while the courts may increasingly defer to the government’s brand of Nanny State authoritarianism, we still have rights.⁷⁹

The author expresses a strong distaste for the 24 h surveillance carried out by medical and state personnel in hospitals:

With the help of Google and Nest cameras, hospitals are morphing into real-time surveillance centers with round-the-clock surveillance cameras monitoring traffic in patients’ rooms. Forget patient privacy, however. Google has a track record of sharing surveillance footage with police.⁸⁰

But, beyond (arguably justifiable) concerns pertaining to loss of privacy, some radical publications reveal more bizarre anxieties, with body horror overtones. A Daily Stormer article pretends doctor are injecting female hormones into male

⁷⁶ See Davis (2019).

⁷⁷ Mede and Schäfer (2020).

⁷⁸ John W. Whitehead, “Slippery Slope To Despotism: Paved With Lockdowns, Raids, And Forced Vaccinations”, *InfoWars*, 23 May 2020, <https://www.infowars.com/slippery-slope-to-despotism-paved-with-lockdowns-raids-and-forced-vaccinations/#inline-comments> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*





Fig. 2 “Silence of the Sheep” (retrieved from <https://www.egaliteetreconciliation.fr/Les-dessins-de-la-8e-semaine-de-confinement-59253.html>)

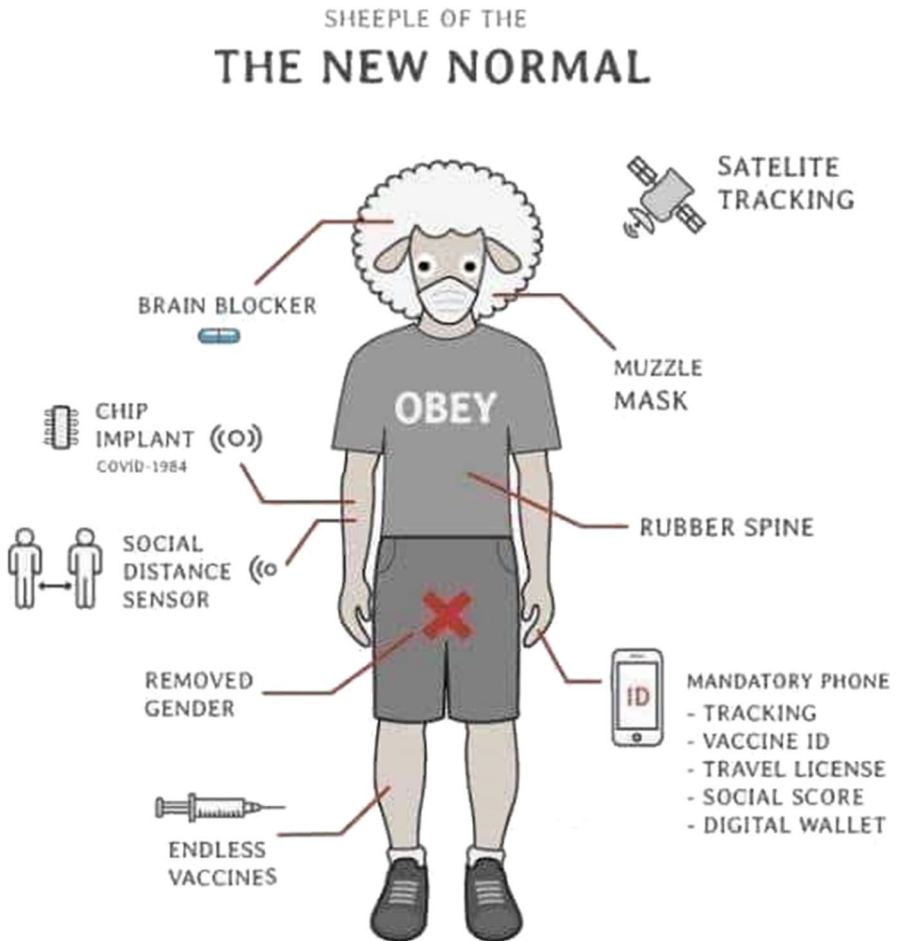


Fig. 3 Sheeple of the New Normal (retrieved from https://www.infowars.com/rl_gallery/political-illustrations/)



Coronavirus patients, thus effectively chemically emasculating unsuspecting victims. This would result in men with breasts and other physiological mutations. The far-right publication warns that “they are going to keep coming up with all kinds of weird stuff to put the population through⁸¹”; this time, the *they* pronoun refers to physicians and medical practitioners, who are thus included into the broader conglomerate of malevolent forces at play in American society.

The malevolent doctor has been granted a face: it is the one of Antony Fauci, a world-renowned immunologist and a lead member of the Trump Administration’s White House Coronavirus Task Force. More than Deborah Birx or Jerome Adams (other medical practitioners in the Task Force), Fauci gained salience and a media following for his pondered attitude, often contrasting Donald Trump’s gushing outbursts. The French newspaper *Le Monde* dubbed Fauci the “adult in the room⁸²”, while the *Financial Times* hailed him as an “island of coherence⁸³”. More unexpectedly, Fauci even received his own action figures⁸⁴ and bobbleheads,⁸⁵ a farcical yet powerful testimony to the new-found pop magnetism of scientists. However, the nation’s “Coronavirus crush⁸⁶” came to embody not only the medical establishment and a form of “medical orthodoxy” but also, in the far-right’s view, the deeply dysfunctional core of “the system”. On the 30th of April, right-wing polemist Paul Joseph Watson highlighted in a tweet that Dr. Fauci provided funds in 2019 for a Wuhan laboratory, where the virus is alleged to have been originated.⁸⁷ The American Thinker branded Fauci is a “Deep State stooge” working for the Clintons and willfully sabotaging the American economy.⁸⁸ It is noteworthy to mention that the defiance against Fauci—and more generally against the medical elites—connects back with another element of the far-right imaginary: the denunciation of the

⁸¹ Pomidor Quixotte, “Doctors Now Injecting Estrogen and Progesterone Into Male Coronavirus Patients”, *The Daily Stormer*, 28 April 2020, <https://dailystormer-su/doctors-now-injecting-estrogen-and-progesterone-to-male-coronavirus-patients/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁸² Stéphanie Le Bars, “Face à Donald Trump, le docteur Anthony Fauci, la voix de la raison”, *Le Monde*, 21 March 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/03/21/face-a-donald-trump-le-docteur-anthony-fauci-la-voix-de-la-raison_6033954_3210.html [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁸³ Robert Armstrong, “Dr Fauci, the master of anti-style style”, *Financial Times*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/471500dc-7d8f-11ea-8fdb-7ec06edeef84> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁸⁴ u/WickedJoyful, “Dr. Fauci Action Figure”, *Reddit*, 28 March 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/The_Mueller/comments/fpon55/dr_fauci_action_figure_the_only_adult_in_the_room/ [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁸⁵ “Bobblehead Dr. Fauci raises money for face masks”, *AMNY*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.amny.com/coronavirus/bobblehead-dr-fauci-raises-money-for-face-masks/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁸⁶ Kaitlyn Tiffany, “America Is Thirsty for Anthony Fauci”, *The Atlantic*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/04/anthony-fauci-coronavirus-crush/609544/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁸⁷ @PrisonPlanet, “Newsweek has highlighted that the Chinese Scientists who were said to have been doing ‘crazy’ things with coronavirus in the Wuhan Institute of Virology, were funded by the White House senior health advisor Dr Anthony Fauci just last year”, *Twitter*, 30 April 2020, <https://twitter.com/PrisonPlanet/status/1255862654373068803> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁸⁸ Peter Barry Chowka, “Anthony Fauci, the NIH’s face of the coronavirus, is a deep-state Hillary Clinton-loving stooge”, *American Thinker*, 21 March 2020, https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2020/03/anthony_fauci_the_nih_face_of_the_coronavirus_is_a_deepstate_hillary_clintonloving_stooge.html [accessed 12 June 2020].



AIDS “mystification” as a psychodrama engineered to advance a particular agenda. COVID-19 is often painted as the “new AIDS”. Fauci’s much-lauded role in crafting the US’s response to the AIDS epidemics exposes him as the “missing link” between the two:

A look back at what Fauci and his colleagues did during their decades of pushing fear and the spending of billions of dollars of funding for HIV-AIDS is instructive. [...] Anthony Fauci, M.D. has been the director of the NIAID since 1984 and for the next two-plus decades, when HIV-AIDS was the ticket, Fauci was the cheerleading team captain of the effort. The real bottom line of what Fauci and his colleagues achieved over two decades [...] was the achievement of a near-total preoccupation with AIDS to the major detriment of much more serious diseases—most of them conditions for which the causes were not known and not the result of personal lifestyle choices (primarily unprotected sex among homosexuals and injecting illegal drugs).⁸⁹

But for every villain, there is a hero. While resentment and defiance against the medical profession runs deep, far-right political imaginary is also suffused with brave figures of renegade doctors on a mission to expose the evil workings of the system. The documentary film “Plandemic”, by the Californian film-maker and wellness advocate Mikki Willis, thus frames the last two decades of medical research—on topics such as AIDS, Ebola or Covid-19—as a confrontation between Judy Mikovits, a controversial researcher who severed ties with the scientific medical community, and Antony Fauci, the watchdog of a corrupt, criminal system. The 26-min documentary was promoted on far-right sites, including *The Daily Stormer* (who dubbed it “the most censored thing since *The Daily Stormer*⁹⁰”) or *Truth News Network*.⁹¹ Elsewhere, far-right content prominently features “marginalized” or “silenced” medical figures, often with accolades such as “brave” or “heroic”; their professional identities as doctors and health professionals are foregrounded, as a way to lend legitimacy and scientific weight to the claims of the far-right. Cases of doctors’ “rebellions” are featured, as they resign or quit their position in protest to alleged immoral requests.⁹²

In France, the good doctor mystique attached itself to an unlikely “populist” (and probably reluctantly so) hero, dr. Didier Raoult. Unlike Judy Mikovits, Raoult’s scientific credentials are impeccable. A former high-school drop-out who went on to become an internationally recognized microbiologist, Raoult gained significant worldwide attention after he fervently championed hydroxychloroquine, a cheap and

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Andrew Anglin, “Pandemic Documentary is the most censored thing since *The Daily Stormer*”, *The Daily Stormer*, 11 May 2020, <https://dailystormer.eu/plandemic-documentary-is-the-most-censored-thing-since-the-daily-stormer/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁹¹ Dan Newmann, “Meet Dr. Judy Mikovits”, *Truth News Network*, 12 May 2020, <https://truthnewsnet.org/meet-dr-judy-mikovits/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁹² Michel Janva, “Obligé de ficher la population, un médecin démissionne”, *Le Salon Beige*, 27 May 2020, <https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/oblige-de-ficher-la-population-un-medecin-demissionne/> [accessed 12 June 2020].



widely used anti-malaria prescription drug, as a treatment against the novel Coronavirus. However, his findings were contested by his peers who pointed at methodological flaws in his studies, in an increasingly bitter and politicized row.⁹³ Raoult's protocol was endorsed by populists such as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro, but also received enthusiastic support in fringe conspiracy circles. France's radical right encroached on the scientific debate, building a narrative which pitted the unorthodox, straight-shooting Raoult's against Big Pharma behemoths. The polemist Eric Zemmour stated in an interview for *Le Figaro* that “this is becoming a political battle—in the noble sense of the word –, a global battle, but more specifically a French battle”:

*It's a Homeric battle. [...] Professor Raoult is embodying this French antagonism between Paris and the rest of the country, between the establishment and the rebels, and even globally, it's in a way big pharmaceutical groups against the one small village of indomitable Gauls still holding out against the invaders.*⁹⁴

The anti-immigration and anti-Islam website *Riposte Laique* also carried articles such as “All the braindead, corporate sell-outs are on a mission to destroy Dr. Raoult⁹⁵”, “Populists with Dr. Raoult, globalist leftists with the pharmaceutical industry⁹⁶” or “Big Pharma against Dr. Raoult's 5 euro cure⁹⁷”. In the later, the author contended that the sole reason of the adamant rebuttal of chloroquine by medical experts (except, of course, for Raoult) was a thirst for profit: “It is obvious that a 5 euro chloroquine pack will not garner any profit for an industry more concerned about profit than public health⁹⁸”. *Egalité et Reconciliation* likewise published a drawing showing Raoult (recognizable by his signature rock star mane and goatee) threatened by a hulking figure in a white coat, brandishing an oversized syringe bearing “Gates Big Pharma” on it. The WHO's emblematic coiling snake menacingly hovers over its head (see Fig. 4).

⁹³ Sarah Owerhohle, “The hydroxychloroquine debate continues”, *Politico*, 27 May 2020, <https://www.politico.com/prescriptionpulse/2020/05/27/the-hydroxychloroquine-debate-continues-489342> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁹⁴ *Le Figaro*, “Zemmour: Non, Raoult n'est pas populiste”, *YouTube*, 27 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Re5SvfB-ukk> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁹⁵ Paul La Poulpe, “Tous les tocards, vendus aux labos, en mission pour démolir Raoult”, *Riposte Laique*, 26 May 2020, <https://ripostelaique.com/tous-les-tocards-vendus-aux-labos-en-mission-pour-demolir-raoult.html> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁹⁶ Pierre Cassen, “Les populistes avec le Pr Raoult, la gauche mondialiste derrière les labos”, *Riposte Laique*, 27 May 2020, <https://ripostelaique.com/les-populistes-avec-le-pr-raoult-la-gauche-mondialiste-derriere-les-grands-labos.html> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁹⁷ Jacques Guillemain, “Big Pharma vent debout contre le traitement à 5 euros du Pr Raoult”, *Riposte Laique*, 19 April 2020, <https://ripostelaique.com/big-pharma-vent-debout-contre-le-traitement-a-5-euros-du-pr-raoult.html> [accessed 12 June 2020].

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*



Third cluster of topoi: the topos of authoritarianism, the topos of censorship, the topos of Socialist plot and the topos of inalienable Constitutional freedoms

In early May, the Occidental Observer published an intriguing article titled “100-Year Retrospective on the Great Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020⁹⁹”. Couched in emphatically Orwellian-*cum*-Huxleyan language, the piece describes a uber-medicalized universe tightly controlled by an overbearing World Collective. An interesting detail is the opening *caveat* the author slides into the first paragraph: “Before continuing reading, be assured that my comments have been approved by the World Collective Ministry of Public Health and can be freely disseminated.¹⁰⁰” The theme of the gutting of civic freedoms and of the advent of a sanitary Leviathan features prominently in our corpus. This lends a sense of danger and moral urgency to the argument. In the United State, the conversation was imbued with references to American constitutionalism and the values of the Founding Fathers, deemed to be under siege. Evangelist pastor Rodney Howard-Browne, who had suggested the outbreak was planned years ago at an event hosted by Bill and Melinda Gates,¹⁰¹ argued that “they would have to change the Constitution to force these things [enforce lockdowns and bans on mass gatherings].¹⁰²” The pastor warned that:

Local officials cannot overrun the Constitution. They cannot. The Constitution is the supreme law of the land. There is no other law than the Constitution. Whatever we give up because of fear, we will never get it back again. This is the final stand. [...] It's about a constitutional right, the First amendment, that allows us to worship freely and practice religion. That's the bottom line.¹⁰³

He then explained that, as an immigrant having been “adopted” by America, it is his sacred duty to uphold the values of its Constitution:

Now, you say, pastor, how come you're so hard on it. Because unlike many of you [...] I did not grow up here, I came from Africa as a missionary, I became an American citizen so I had to raise my hand to pledge to defend the Constitution of the United States against enemies foreign or domestic. So help me God.¹⁰⁴

Fundamentalists naturally gravitated towards freedom to practice religion; others, such as the militia movement, laid the emphasis on political liberties (such as freedom of assembly and protest) or the rights of business owners. Ammon Bundy,

⁹⁹ George McKenzie, “100-Year Retrospective on the Great Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020”, *Occidental Observer*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/2020/05/12/100-year-retrospective-on-the-great-coronavirus-pandemic-of-2020/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ See Rodney Howard-Browne, “Coronavirus in Today’s Ministry”, *Free Republic*, 17 March 2020, <https://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-chat/3825353/posts?page=1> [accessed 12 June 2020].

¹⁰² Rodney Howard-Browne, “03.22.2020 | The River Church Live | Sunday AM | End of Days Part II”, *YouTube*, 22 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSNYGJZbSU> [accessed 12 June 2020].

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*





Fig. 4 Raoult against Big Pharma/Bill Gates/the World Health Organization network (retrieved from <https://www.egaliteetreconciliation.fr/Les-dessins-de-la-8e-semaine-de-confinement-59253.html>)

a leading figure in the militia nebula,¹⁰⁵ offered on Facebook a brief lecture on the American Constitution, arguing that bans on citizens' assemblies have no precedent in American history: "The last time it was illegal to be together as a people on this land was before the Revolutionary War. Since we won our independence it has never been illegal to assemble as a people."¹⁰⁶ The Daily Stormer titled bluntly that "the Constitution is suspended in total" and that "people who think they have freedom must be punished"¹⁰⁷. This type of rhetoric is not new: in 2008, after hurricane Katrina, militias movements opposed martial laws on grounds that "bad weather" does not suspend the American Constitution.¹⁰⁸ "Bad weather" was replaced with the "flu" ("Yes, the Constitution is suspended in total. The reason? People got really

¹⁰⁵ See Jaime Fuller, "The long fight between the Bundys and the federal government, from 1989 to today", *The Washington Post*, 4 January 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/04/15/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-long-fight-between-cliven-bundy-and-the-federal-government/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

¹⁰⁶ Ammon Bundy, "People's Meeting Tonight—Order to Self-Isolate for the State of Idaho", *Facebook*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/1115723640/videos/10220808738144365/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Anglin, "New York City Bans All Forms of Protest", *Daily Stormer*, 7 May 2020, <https://dailystormer.com/new-york-city-bans-all-forms-of-protest/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

¹⁰⁸ See Finn (2019), p. 22.



scared of the flu.¹⁰⁹) but the language remained essentially the same. Such discourses fit a narrative of American exceptionalism, which translates into an intransigent loyalty towards the founding document of the American nationhood: its Constitution. The pandemic only lent a sense of renewed urgency to old anxieties that such exceptionalism will be sacrificed.

What is more surprising is that anti-lockdown far-right material also employs the political grammar of anti-totalitarianism in France. This shows that anti-statism is not siloed to American political imaginary. Rivarol proclaims that liberties are “negated, trampled and assassinated, every day a little bit more¹¹⁰”. Jerome Bourbon, the magazine’s editor-in-chief, asserts:

What we are experiencing, it is a form of mass social control, of mass surveillance, I would even say a real-life experiment of voluntary servitude. Never have in history any tyrant accomplished, or even dare dream of accomplishing, what is being done today. Staline would be put to shame. [...] It’s worse than during the War [the Nazi Occupation].¹¹¹

The ubiquitous Orwell references (from evocation of Big Brother to the rechristening of the disease Covid-1984) are interweaved with allusions to historical totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany (Ammon Bundy: “This is not the first time a NATIONAL HEALTH CONCERN has been used to get an entire country of people to accept what never could be imagined. Yes, Germany in 1933—The exactly same excuse was used, the NATION’S HEALTH¹¹²”) or Stalinist Russia. China, which unsurprisingly became a key element of the far-right’s coronavirus mythology, is also repeatedly cited as a model the government is covertly trying to emulate. InfoWars declared that “globalists are admirative of China’s response” and are planning to use the crisis to “subvert the Western model of governance, something coherent with their anti-fake news and anti-hate speech campaigns”. The website claimed that Western governments long tried to adopt Chinese-style censorship regulations, and expressed fears that the pandemic might usher in a new era of tyranny:

As the Coronavirus spreads around the planet, the Chinese model is again being praised by mainstream media and government officials. A recent piece from Bloomberg said that mistrust and conspiracy theories surrounding the virus are hurting efforts to stop it. The article praised China’s response, while bemoaning the fact that democratic governments have less control over their people. In an interview with the Mumbai Mirror last year, Khanna [Ro Khanna, a democratic congressman] said that “Technocratic governance”,

¹⁰⁹ Andrew Anglin, “New York City Bans All Forms of Protest”, *Daily Stormer*, op. cit.

¹¹⁰ Jerome Bourbon, “Leur pseudo-déconfinement, c’est l’infantilisation et l’humiliation pour tous et à tous les étages !”, *Rivarol*, no. 3426, 27 May 2020, p. 1.

¹¹¹ Hebdomadaire RIVAROL, “Tout sur le connardovirus (04.20) avec Jérôme Bourbon”, *YouTube*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wLOE1nOxVo> [accessed 12 June 2020].

¹¹² Ammon Bundy, “WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE SAID A YEAR AGO?”, *Facebook*, 8 April 2020, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10220955493373154&id=1115723640 [accessed 12 June 2020].



*“caution about free speech” and “self-censorship” will be part of the new value system of the Asian world order. Globalists bet on a Chinese dominated future that would submit to Chinese regulation of the internet. America must stand strong against pressure to conform to the Chinese model. If we fail, tyranny will crush our nation*¹¹³

These allows us a little to bring into focus the morphology of the archetypal tyranny that is discursively constructed by the far-right. It is interesting, however, to acknowledge that oppression is not only political, but also economical. In this respect, old right-wing tropes are reactivated and anxieties about the onset of a socialist regime are common: this trope of a Socialist covert plot is bizarrely congruent with an anti-corporate imaginary. It is claimed that the ruin of small independent businesses and the destruction (though cash handouts to compensate for business shutdowns) of the work ethos of local self-reliant entrepreneurs in favor of mammoth conglomerates is the first step towards the enactment of a centralized economy. Rivarol expressed concerns that the pandemic is hurting small businesses, which in turn accelerates the advent of a “communist” society and bring to their knee the healthy, productive forces in society:

*We are heading towards a communist, collectivist society because despite of global free trade, this is a form of communism, as we can reasonably expect taxes to soar, and, on the other hand, the people who were still able to make a living out of their work, skill, efforts and dynamism, they will have a very difficult time. They will be dependent on the State, and the crisis will destroy what was left of independent workers.*¹¹⁴

Sounding a similar note, Howard-Browne warned that if people “[...] are giving up all their rights and their safeties to become part of a system where they are dependent upon the government”, the only outcome can be a liberticide regime. He also proclaimed this development as profoundly contrary to the American moral and political culture, thus connecting back and reinforcing the narrative of America’s exceptionalism: “This is not the way this country was designed to be.” He concluded by trying to identify a pattern between the rise to power of socialist dictatorships and the current situation: “And if you read my book on Socialism you will understand what is going on today¹¹⁵”.

In discursively construing the new dictatorial “reality”, right-wing discourse employs specific devices and themes that carry historical and cultural significance. It is interesting, for example, to highlight a leitmotiv that is mirrored both in the rhetoric of French and US far-right community: the phenomenon of citizen denunciation,

¹¹³ Daniel Taylor, “WORLD ELITE PRAISE CHINA’S DRACONIAN RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS”, *InfoWars*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.infowars.com/world-elite-praise-chinas-draconian-response-to-coronavirus/> [accessed 12 June 2020].

¹¹⁴ Hebdomadaire RIVAROL, “Tout sur le connardovirus (04.20) avec Jérôme Bourbon”, *YouTube*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wLOE1nOxVo> [accessed 12 June 2020].

¹¹⁵ Rodney Howard-Browne, “03.22.2020 | The River Church Live | Sunday AM | End of Days Part II”, *YouTube*, 22 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSNYGCJZbSU> [accessed 12 June 2020].



that saw citizens report lockdown breaches to authorities. Whistleblower Magazine, an ultra-conservative publication, commented:

Informing on your friends and neighbors used to be something that the socialists on the other side of the Iron Curtain would do. What kind of people, we used to wonder, do things like that? Wonder no more. If you always longed to live in Cuba, North Korea or the USSR, all you have to do is, in effect, dial 1-800-INFORM.¹¹⁶

The publication went on to warn that: “The true tragedy is not that government bureaucrats want people to inform on their neighbors, it’s that so many people are eager to do the informing. Totalitarian systems are a lot easier to defeat than the internalized totalitarian mindset that we have seen in socialist countries around the world.¹¹⁷” It also drew parallels between the current situation and past authoritarian regimes: “In East Germany, the communists built a collective of informants. In the Soviet Union, informing on your neighbors and even your parents proved your loyalty to the state. This behavior has no place here. We’re Americans.¹¹⁸” Very similarly, in France, *Le Salon Beige* headlined “And now, the snitching...¹¹⁹”; the word “snitching” (“délation”) was used historically to designate the practice of reporting Jews to the authorities during the Nazi occupation of France, and therefore carries a strong axiological connotation. Such common tropes shed light on how political imaginaries tend to coalesce on both side of the Atlantic, notwithstanding the unique morphology of far-right activism in each country.

Conclusion

We hereupon conclude this journey to the heart of the symbolic ecosystem that Michael Barkun aptly dubbed “stigmatized knowledge¹²⁰”. As a form of knowledge which is not sanctioned by those institutions society typically relies upon for truth validation, stigmatized knowledge construes its marginality as the result of some nefarious secret agenda. The far right, siloed from the political mainstream by an ideological cordon sanitaire, unsurprisingly traffics heavily in conspiracy theories and paranoid tropes. All of the groups and actors under study exhibited to some extent a conspiracist framing. They are thus able to weave their outsider status and remoteness from power into a circular, self-reinforcing narrative: they are marginal *because*, not *despite*, they are pure, they are right *because*, and not *despite*, they are disavowed by canonical authorities. In line with our initial argument that crises constitute moments of heightened societal negotiation over what is legitimate

¹¹⁶ Daniel Greenfield, “1-800-Inform”, *Whistleblower Magazine*, April 2020, pp. 21–23.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ “Et maintenant la délation...”, *Le Salon Beige*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/et-maintenant-la-delation/> [accessed 13 June 2020].

¹²⁰ Barkun (2013).



knowledge and what is not, we contend that conspiracist counter-epistemologies are an integral—and increasingly important—part of the semiotics of the new culture wars which engulfed the COVID-19 response.

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