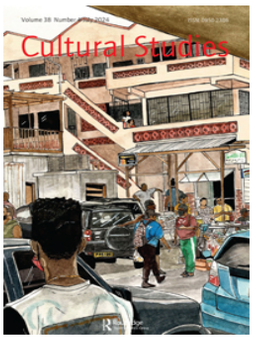

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Repressive suspicion, or: the problem with conspiracy theories

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ABSTRACT

Conspiracy culture cultivates suspicion towards the hidden workings of power. While some modes of suspicion direct critical attention towards the crimes and cruelties of oppressive social relations, other modes misdirect that same attention. When such misdirection serves to reproduce oppressive social relations, entrapping its adherents in the promise of emancipation, this may be understood as 'repressive suspicion'. Empirically, this concept is characterized, herein, via a reception study of the QAnon conspiracy theory, reconstructing how one of the most prominent participants in the insurrection in Washington, D.C., on 6th January 2021 became wrapped up in 'Q' culture – a story that paints a poignant, complex picture of repressive suspicion. This concept is then further developed in historical and theoretical terms, in dialogue with the works of Herbert Marcuse, leading to an analysis of QAnon as a microcosm of the contemporary crisis of hegemony, drawing on Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, and Nancy Fraser. While, in the 1960s, and even in the 1990s, repressive suspicion could be largely ignored by practitioners of political critique, in the current conjuncture this is no longer the case. Thus, as well as constructing a diagnosis, this article also poses a question: If this is what *repressive* suspicion looks like, how must we conceive its opposite?

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It is a truth seldom denied, but often downplayed: The rich and powerful, in their sundry, secretive alliances, often conspire to achieve ends that would be judged, publicly, to be illegitimate, corrupt, or nefarious. From espionage and mass surveillance to medical malpractice and coups d'état, the history of actually existing conspiratorial collusion is long and well-documented. So, however, is the history of frauds that prey upon this reality.[1] This, then, is

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the problem with conspiracy theories: that culture which cultivates suspicion towards the hidden workings of power is both inevitable and justifiable, while, at the same time, this form of popular scrutiny is lamentably prone to what may be called *repressive suspicion*.

While some modes of suspicion direct critical attention towards the crimes and cruelties of oppressive social relations, other modes misdirect that same attention, reducing critique to calumny. When such misdirection serves to reproduce oppressive social relations, entrapping its adherents in the promise of emancipation, this may be understood as repressive suspicion. In this article, I seek to articulate this concept, by both empirical and theoretical means. Empirically, repressive suspicion is characterized via a reception study of the QAnon conspiracy theory. More specifically, this study focuses on the case of Douglas Jensen, one of the most prominent participants in the insurrection in Washington, D.C., on 6th January 2021. Reconstructed in detail, the story of how Jensen was drawn into 'Q' culture paints a poignant, complex picture of the cruel and destructive consequences of repressive suspicion, wrapped up in the web of patriarchy and white supremacy that animates contemporary reactionary politics. This concept is then further developed in historical and theoretical terms, in dialogue with the works of Herbert Marcuse, paying particular attention to the contrast between the structure of feeling of the 1960s and that of the present. The article then concludes with an analysis of the preceding in the context of the 2016–2020 Trump presidency, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing breakdown of neoliberal consensus. In short, through close reading, conceptual articulation, and historical comparison, this article explores the affective-political constitution of the QAnon phenomenon, locating it within the unfolding crisis of hegemony defining the current historical conjuncture.

The traditional psycho-political diagnosis made of conspiracy culture is that it is paranoid. Undoubtedly, the most influential example of this diagnosis is found with Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay on 'the paranoid style' – a pathological form of political agitation characterized by 'heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy' (1964/1996b, p. 3).[2] Such 'pseudo-conservative dissent' could be found throughout history, and Hofstadter himself had been writing about it for more than a decade (e.g. 1954/1996a), drawing on the likes of Leo Löwenthal, Theodor Adorno, and Franz Neumann (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949, Adorno *et al.* 1950/2019, Neumann 1954/1964). However, the 1960s marked a shift in US politics. Mass conspiracy culture may have arrived after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963 (Knight 2000). However, it was the 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater that, for Hofstadter, had given new life to pseudo-conservatism, its 'Southern strategy' and scorn for civic norms losing the election but 'capturing the [Republican] party' (1964/1996c, p. 107, Grossberg 2018, pp. 59–60). At just the same time, and from just this intellectual milieu, Marcuse was developing the ideas that would result

in his concepts of repressive satisfaction, repressive desublimation, and repressive tolerance (1964/2007, 1965/1970). These concepts, too, deployed psycho-political theories to reinterpret their moment. However, whereas Hofstadter had told of paranoid agitation on the march, Marcuse painted a rather different picture. The contemporary situation, as he saw it, was characterized less by suspicion and dissent than by conformism and complacency. This was the age of the suburbs, of progress, of the Establishment – a 'comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom' lulling its 'one-dimensional' subjects to sleep, tolerating the intolerable (1964/2007, pp. 3–9).

Hofstadter, the historian who liked to theorize, painted political characterizations that continue to resound. However, his theoretical affirmations were superficial at best, resulting in a political theory that merely pined for the liberal calm of 'negotiable interests' (1964/1996b, p. 39). By contrast, Marcuse, the theorist who liked to historicize, constructed sophisticated philosophical polemics that remain provocative. However, his historical analyses were, ironically, rather one-dimensional, failing to appreciate the repressive potential of suspicion.

It is easy to pathologise the conspiracy theorist – figure of hatred and irrationality, menace to public order. However, it is also easy to romanticize the conspiracy theorist – figure of outrage and refusal, folk hero of popular dissidence. Both these tendencies may be found, in more nuanced form, within the multidisciplinary academic literature. Hofstadter himself, for instance, while acknowledging that 'there *are* conspiratorial acts in history', confined his narrative to those paranoiacs for whom '[h]istory *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power' (1964/1996b, p. 29). More recently, the legal scholars Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule have argued that conspiracy theorists suffer from (in an unfortunately ableist turn of phrase) 'crippled epistemology'. The pair concede that, 'even in free societies', conspiracy theories may sometimes be true; however, their analysis simply assumes 'a well-motivated government', thus legitimating 'cognitive infiltration' of epistemologically defective communities by the state (2009, pp. 209, 219). As to the contrary tendency, few are more fulsome in their defence of conspiracy theorists than the philosopher Lee Basham, for whom such '[c]itizen researchers' are crucial to the functioning of liberal democracy. A bulwark of 'our self-defense', whose practice is 'critical to social progress', the conspiracy theorist of the Internet age is presented as an agent of emancipation whose words compare to those of Subcomandante Marcos or Karl Marx (2018, p. 54). Affirmation of the freedom-preserving virtues of conspiracy theorizing is generally more equivocal than this. However, the political scientist Joseph Uscinski, for example, likens conspiracy theorists to 'defense attorneys' who, however haphazardly, speak up for the weak against the prosecutorial power of 'the establishment' (2018, p. 238). Such milder characterizations are commonplace (e.g. Hellinger 2018).

Cultural theorists, for their part, have tended to take a more intermediary attitude, interpreting conspiracy-conjecturing suspicion as an inevitable, and even valuable, form of political dissent that is, nevertheless, constrained by the structural conditions of its articulation. For Fredric Jameson, for example, conspiracy theories constitute a kind of energetic but misapprehended social critique – a 'degraded' and 'desperate' attempt to cognitively map the 'the world system as such' (1988, p. 356, 1992, p. 4). Timothy Melley, meanwhile, conceptualizes such theories as a symptom of 'agency panic' – that is, an 'intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy', correlated to an 'all-or-nothing' understanding of agency and structure, which betrays the 'beleaguered' ideals of liberal subjectivity in an age of rapid social and technological change (2000, vii – viii, 10). Peter Knight, similarly, understands conspiratorial thought as 'an attempt to make sense, albeit in a distorted fashion' of genuine social conflicts, enabling 'naming and blaming in an age of unthinkably complex global connections' (2000, pp. 18, 32, see also Barkun 2013, p. 227, Butter 2020). Mark Fenster, somewhat more sympathetically, describes conspiracy thinking as a 'populist theory of power' that ideologically misrepresents power relations, while, nevertheless, constituting a meaningful response to political injustice (2008, pp. 89–90). Thus, rather than pathologising, Fenster aims to 'recuperate' and 'complicate' (2008, p. 287). Jodi Dean, similarly, argues that conspiracy theory 'may well be an appropriate vehicle for political contestation', within certain limits (1998, p. 8). In contrast to the pathologising tendencies of Hofstadter, who reduces politics to a demand for 'compromise, inclusion, debate, security, and constancy' (1998, p. 145), Dean understands conspiracy theories as a mode of critique that operates within 'the governing assumptions of a public sphere' (2000, unpag.). In other words, through hyper-adherence to the legitimating principles of liberal governance, such as transparency and accountability, the conspiracy theorist exposes the contradictions of that order. Indeed, conspiracy theories may even be said to constitute a form of critical theory. However, conspiracy theories and critical theories ultimately share a common flaw: an overestimation of the emancipatory potential of public discourse under conditions of communicative capitalism. 'Criticism abounds' in the hyper-mediated one-dimensional society, but serving up only moralism and entertainment (Dean 2002, p. 110).

While there is broad agreement as to the need for a social-structural appraisal of conspiracy culture, then, not all agree as regards the conclusions of the critique. Whereas Dean, for instance, endorses the dissidence of ufologists who 'question consensus reality', in contrast to the establishment-affirming conformity of those who seek to debunk them (1998, pp. 136, 145), Knight takes the position that while some conspiracy culture may be 'ironic and subversive', some of it is also 'deluded and spiteful', thus concluding that Dean's sympathy for her subjects puts her 'in danger of championing their misery and confusion' for the sake of her own 'political agenda' (2000, p. 22). In a critique

of John Fiske's conceptualization of African American conspiracy theories as 'counterknowledge' (2016, pp. 211–240), Fenster similarly complains of an 'underlying normative confusion' that comes to abstractly valorize 'populist "resistance"' for its own sake (2008, p. 287). Clare Birchall, likewise, notes that Fiske's study risks making such knowledges 'seem more subversive, more distinct, more singular than perhaps is justified'. In general, however, Birchall is wary of evaluative judgement, refusing to 'pontificate' upon conspiracy theories or other 'popular knowledges', reasoning that such judgement precludes self-reflection upon one's 'own knowledge production' (2006, p. 21, xiii, see also Aupers 2012, p. 23). Nevertheless, while not endorsing the romanticizing view that renders conspiracy theories 'a form of latent insurrection', Birchall affirms that, under the right circumstances, they 'go some way to creating a level playing field' between government suspicion of its citizenry and citizenry's suspicion of its government (2006, pp. 66, 62).

These classics of the cultural studies corpus concerning conspiracy theories, taken together, encapsulate the received space of possibilities for a study of this kind. However, for all their insight, it is also notable that they issue, for the most part, from another era – that of *The X-Files*, liberal triumphalism, and the all-pervasive discourse of 'globalisation'. In short, these are works of the 'long 1990s' – an ideological-historical period unsettled by the post-2001 resurgence of US geopolitical imperialism, before gradually unravelling in the years since the Global Financial Crisis.[3] This disjuncture is perhaps best demonstrated, within the literature, by Zack Bratich's *Conspiracy Panics*. Published in 2008,[4] Bratich's text confronts a conjunctural common sense that was already falling apart. As a category of 'disqualification', akin to 'terrorist', the concept of 'conspiracy theory' is said to tell us 'less about the people who believe in them' than it does 'the dominant forms of rationality' that enact a distinctively liberal means of 'monitoring dissent' (2008, pp. 3, 12, 19, 161). By playing into this moral panic, leftists had turned against potential allies, 'turning to watchdogs and turning into gatekeepers', policing 'counterglobalization' and 'turning dissent against dissent' (2008, pp. 163–165). Such anti-conspiracism, then, ultimately harbours an 'emergent *will-to-moderation*' whereby good neoliberal citizens 'manage themselves, monitor others, and ceaselessly struggle against the lures of irrationality' (2008, pp. 165–170).

No doubt, this 'form of extreme othering' (Butter 2021, p. 23, see also Thalmann 2019) remains alive and well amongst those who wish to shield power from accountability. So long as liberal political discourse remains oblivious to the shift in feeling, addicted to the panacea of 'fact-checking', and driven by the will to coax antagonistic political factions into a relation of becalmed, orderly civility, *Conspiracy Panics* retains its relevance. Nevertheless, appearing two years after Twitter was founded, four years after Facebook, the sense of liberatory potential that this book detects in the outpouring of rambunctious mass dissent rings rather hollow. Rather like a

treatise on Cold War geopolitics published in 1988, the world that gave it meaning was already disappearing. In his demand for left intellectuals to embrace their conspiracy-conjecturing brethren, Bratich encapsulates the still-strong sense that the wide-open spaces of online culture may yet wind their roots and branches into a counter-hegemonic movement, free at last from the suffocating bottlenecks of centralized media and consensus reality. What has actually unfolded, however, has been rather different: the glacial dissolution of liberal hegemony, replaced by a multiplicity of creepingly authoritarian chauvinisms, saturated in a fractious mêlée of communicative and cultural possibilities, with pronounced tendencies towards ironism, cynicism, resentment, and the desire for strong, vengeful leadership.

It is to this situation, then, that this article responds, drawing together an emblematic, if eccentric, illustration of the contemporary conjuncture, along with the debates of that decade which still haunts progressive and radical political thought: the 1960s. Rather than pathologising conspiracy theories, romanticizing them, or attempting to take some disinterested middle-way, this article proposes to reorient critical attention towards a political-affective disposition to which conspiracy theories are lamentably prone, but to which they cannot be reduced: repressive suspicion. The point, then, is not to theorize conspiracy culture in general. Rather, it is to sidestep the never-ending debate as to what constitutes rational or 'warranted' conspiracy conjecture (Dentith 2018), and instead to focus on an often recognized but poorly theorized tendency. The problem with the pathologisation of conspiracy theories is twofold: First, it is a simple matter of fact that conspiracies happen and are often highly consequential. Second, such pathologisation amounts to a depoliticizing, quasi-medicalising attempt to regulate dissent through governance. In either respect, the pathologisation of conspiracy theories serves only to bypass the questioning of power. It is at odds with any democratic politics worthy of the name. Nevertheless, this recognition by no means requires any thoroughgoing suspension of judgement. In other words, we should not pathologise, but that does not mean that we cannot criticize. 'Repressive suspicion' constitutes my attempt to thread that needle.

The story pieced together herein is already a matter of history. Even as culpability for 6th January 2021 continues to be litigated, amidst an electoral campaign wrought with promises of retribution, the QAnon phenomenon in some respects persists, in others has dissipated, and to an alarming degree has been assimilated, in more or less refined forms, into the mainstream of the US right. This formation, in turn, is setting the 'cultural war' agenda for reactionary politics, worldwide. The significance of the case of Douglas Jensen is that it offers us a point of perspective upon the sprawlingly intertextual QAnon cultural milieu, which itself provides a telling microcosm of the 'accumulation of contradictions' productive of the collapse in political and cultural authority in the present conjuncture (Hall *et al.* 1978, p. 217).

Before going any further, however, I should make clear that the following includes some unsettling subject matter. The QAnon narrative centres around accusations of child sexual abuse. The story of Jensen, thereafter, also contains brief mentions of child sexual abuse, drug abuse, and suicide. Such matters need to be handled sensitively; however, they cannot be avoided. What is at stake in this study is to understand how the very real harms and cruelties of existing social relations become translated into political possibility via an interpretive apparatus that facilitates the discursive negation of official reality, yielding an unstable, parallel world, which exists only through this negation, and yet which promises a purgative restoration of justice. The devil, then, is very much in the details.

Anons of Q

While the ideas that it repackages are centuries old, the emergence of QAnon is very much a tale of the Internet age. It began with a series of mysterious missives – later styled as 'Q drops' – posted to the online message boards 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun, beginning in October 2017 (Tian 2021). These notorious, anonymous, largely unmoderated online forums are best known for their fomentation of racist and misogynistic trolling culture, and for hosting the 'manifestos' of a number of white supremacist mass murderers. Among the various credulity games that became a staple of these boards was a tradition of posters supposedly disclosing government secrets. For example, a user known as 'FBIAnon' prompted the so-called Pizzagate conspiracy theory, effectively the prequel to QAnon, which held that a child sex trafficking and blood harvesting ring was being operated out of the (non-existent) basement of a Washington, D.C., pizzeria. The poster known initially as 'Q Clearance Patriot' – Q being a level of security clearance – followed in this tradition.[5] However, while the 'chans' had, by 2017, a long history of meming their way into the mainstream, no account before Q had ever so transcended its niche subculture.

While some conspiracy theories are rigourous in their remit, circling around specific events or ideas, QAnon is quite the opposite, being open to almost anything. Nevertheless, throughout its rise, it cohered around a simple, powerful message: The world is run by a cabal of satanic pedophiles, which the (then-)President Donald J. Trump is secretly working to overthrow in a coming 'Storm' of para-judicial summary justice – a quite literal Day of Judgement, to be followed by 'The Great Awakening', a moment of apocalyptic revelation. The cabal, led by the likes of Hillary Clinton and George Soros is, by contrast, evil incarnate. While QAnon lore is protean, the central accusation has usually been (as per Pizzagate) that the cabal tortures, rapes, and murders children en masse so that these elites may gorge upon the infants' adrenalised blood (a contemporary repackaging of centuries-old

antisemitic blood libel). Against this, Trump is (or was) striking back through a panoply of crypto-legal, hyper-inscrutable manoeuvres – the mysterious, marvellous Q in the background, seeding the truth to those ready to hear it: Q's anons.

> Everything has meaning. This is not a game. Learn to play the game. Q *Mar 08, 2018 7:04:40 PM EST*[6]

Anons, for their part, are 'digital soldiers' – boosters and evangelists who 'bake' the esoteric crumbs into sprawling epics, via a kind of homespun hermeneutics. Thus arose both a thriving ecosystem of contending interpretations and a kind of anti-intellectual intelligentsia of QAnon influencers, the most popular of whom built careers upon parsing Q-lore. This entrepreneurial assemblage has, needless to say, had its setbacks. However, neither failed prophecy after failed prophecy, nor waves of deplatforming, nor the loss of a presidential election, nor a failed, shambolic insurrection, nor the prosecution of their great leader have sunk the movement altogether.

Is QAnon a psyop or a prank (McLeod 2014)? A conspiracy or a joke that got out of hand? Ultimately, it doesn't much matter. What matters is the forces this culture has catalyzed, the furies it has misdirected, and the events it has contributed to. QAnon came to exist, for the most part, because there was a need for it to exist. That need can be understood, vividly and dolefully, through the case of Douglas Austin Jensen.

'You guys work for the FBI?'

This story concerns the second most recognizable face in the crowd that stormed the US Capitol Building on 6th January 2021. Not the guy with the horns and furs. That was the so-called 'QAnon Shaman', Jake Angeli (aka Jacob Chansley). Rather, Doug Jensen is that bearded, burly-looking, middle-aged white man, wearing a beanie and a black T-shirt emblazoned with a giant Q, who led a crowd of insurrectionists up a flight of stairs, pursuing the Black police officer Eugene Goodman as he, in a quick-witted retreat, led the crowd away from the Senate chamber. If you've seen any footage from that day, you've likely seen him.

Although travelling to D.C. with a friend, Anthony, Jensen entered the Capitol building on his own, caught up with the crowd. The face-painted Angeli just behind him, Jensen was the tenth person to climb through a smashed window (Morris *et al.* 2022). He initially believed that he was at the White House. By the time that he made it home to Des Moines, Iowa, the next day, Jensen's face was everywhere. Leaving behind his wife's car, which he had used to make the journey, he walked around six miles to the local police station and turned himself in. On 8th January, he was interviewed by two FBI agents, without legal representation. The account that follows is

based upon the transcript of that interview, which was released publicly in April 2022 (FBI 2022).

It is a confession in more ways than one. At first, Jensen seems almost bullish and is keen to share his much-researched opinions on the Storm (p. 7). However, upon realizing that his interrogators have no idea what he's talking about, doubts quickly surface: 'I thought we were going to change the world, I don't know. I don't know what I thought' (p. 15). Though well aware of the trouble he is in, Jensen's self-narration is almost painfully earnest. Indeed, it is difficult not to feel a deep pathos arising from how this self-proclaimed 'digital soldier', in his very own war against the satanic deep state, seems to desire nothing more than the acknowledgement and respect of the federal agents who are, with an air of calm compassion, coaxing him into incriminating himself.

It is difficult to summarize and reconstruct this interview, which was conducted over around three hours, and, transcribed, runs to 146 pages. Meandering and recursive, the flow of conversation is casually guided in the direction of investigatively useful questions: Did he see himself as a leader? (No.) Did he see anyone with weapons? (Yes.) However, the conversation also proceeds at Jensen's own pace, being occasionally punctuated with moments where he suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, divulges a number of past traumas.

Large parts of the conversation rotate around establishing a rapport between interviewers and interviewee.

> –What do you do for a living?
> –Construction.
> –Oh, yeah? You've been at that for a while, have you?
> –It's my 20th year.
> –20 years.
> –21.
> –My goodness. (p. 4)

He seems happy to talk, even if he is, by his own admission, not a happy person. Jensen is that thing we have all heard so much about since 2016: a white, working class, lifelong Democrat who flipped Trumpist. In his own words:

> So I voted both terms for Obama, and during the presidency, I thought he was a great president. The health thing. The health thing didn't benefit me and my family because I had union health insurance. So I got no benefits from it, but I was happy that all those people got insurance, you know? And so I was happy with him. And then I was going to vote for Hillary because I've been a Democrat my whole life. […] And then the WikiLeaks thing happened and I had to start questioning where I was getting my info from. And that's when I realized, you know, holy cow, I can't vote for this woman. And then it became – like I started telling everybody I know about WikiLeaks and

> everything else back then. And then that died off when Trump won. And then I didn't really have anything. I was happy Trump won, you know? And then all of a sudden Q drops started.

Like most Q devotees, Jensen got his drops not from 4chan/8chan but from aggregator sites such as q.pub (p. 7). He also mentions a number of QAnon's most prominent influencers, including JoeM, creator of the video 'Plan To Save The World', which went viral on YouTube, and Juan O. Savin, real name Wayne Willott – now a Republican political campaigner and believed by some to be JFK, Jr. (one of a number of long-dead celebrities supposedly living in hiding, preparing for the Storm). While many of these people were in attendance on 6th January, Jensen did not see them. If he had, he 'would of wanted to get a selfie' (p. 95).

Jensen wasn't really into politics before 'WikiLeaks' – that is, when that website released around 20,000 pages of emails from John Podesta, the chair of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. Soon, he learned of the dealings of the Clinton Foundation in Haiti (a known scandal, involving the misappropriation of aid money). Then there was Jeffrey Epstein and his private island in the US Virgin Islands, nearby which Joe Biden was rumoured to own an island of his own (the official story is that Biden's brother James bought land nearby in 2005). Then there was Hunter Biden's laptop (another scandal with some apparent factual basis, scrambled by right-wing politicking). And so on (p. 7). Pizzagate is mentioned (p. 28). Later, Jensen repeats another plank of the QAnon narrative: that a mass of military tribunals are going on behind closed doors, rooting out the cabal. 'John McCain was executed I think, and he was tied into ISIS somehow' (p. 100). Though the details are hazy, the stakes of QAnon geopolitics are nothing less than existential:

> […] we were supposed to be dead by now, and if Hillary would have won, we were going to be attacked by North Korea or Iran. We were going to go to war, and we would most likely – half of us wouldn't be here right now if Trump wouldn't have won that election is what I got from it. (p. 16)

While clearly caught up in and amplified by a particular historical moment, these beliefs did not come out of nowhere. 'I'm the conspiracy nut at work', he admits (p. 90). Although he deleted his Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Parler accounts after leaving D.C., a YouTube account matching his account name still exists (DAJeeper1 2023), with playlists for a video claiming that the moon landing was a hoax, as well as two videos exposing chemtrails (the belief that the condensation trails that appear behind planes are part of some sort of government scheme, perhaps of weather control or mind control). He also admits, towards the end of the interview, that 'one of the things that I was in to before Q was UFOs, and 12/21/2012 was going to be the end of the years, you know, some of that stuff' (p. 143). He was, in

short, a long-standing aficionado of conspiracy culture. However, this maze of speculation had only snapped into political alignment with the rise of Trump.

Now fully invested in conservative discourse, Jensen espouses its everyday talking points. 'I think the whole Congress is illegitimate because of all this stuff that I hear', he says (p. 119). Voicing popular grievances, he complains that the $2,000 COVID stimulus checks promised by Congress only amounted to $600, and that 'we couldn't come up with $5 billion or whatever for a wall'.

> What was so hard about that? But you what to give all this money away for a study on gender, you know, in another country. I mean there was some crazy stuff.

The news media, too, cannot be trusted, especially when it comes to claims of collusion with foreign powers.

> When the news says Russia, I look the other way, you know. Whatever the news says I don't listen. (p. 51)

Such suspicions are not, of course, absolutely invalid. The fevered liberal discourse, during the Trump administration, about how the President was a Russian asset was, it seems, massively overblown (and was itself, of course, a conspiracy theory). To quote the Mueller report, published in March 2019, while '[t]he Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion', and the subsequent investigation 'identified numerous links between the Russian government and the Trump Campaign', it did not 'establish that members of the Trump Campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities' (Mueller 2019, pp. 1–2). Nevertheless, in Jensen's testimony, such glimpses of judicious doubt fly past in a head-spinning whirl of connections.

> And it's the – you know, so I'm a full believer that somebody's out there trying to give the real information to the public basically, you know, and so I used to believe the news and believe everything it said, you know. I heard it on TV, it's true, you know, and over the last four years I've learned that the corporations, there's only like five different like Disney owns ABC. There's only like five or six different corporations or people that own pretty much all of TV and news and all that, and so we're getting – we're obviously getting one sided news, and it's called coming from China maybe. Maybe China owns Disney. (p. 11)

Grains of truth – that the news media is dominated by a few gigantic corporations and informed by private interests – are strung together with a jumble of suspicious associations. However, by following this thread, attachments to consensus reality become not so much doubted as inverted. The loss of one world necessitates that an equal and opposite world emerge from the shadows – a mirror world (Klein 2023) that can only replace its other to the extent that it continually negates it, while remaining largely unquestioned

itself. Thus, extreme cynicism towards 'official' narratives is offset by almost complete credulity towards the insider-revealed Truth. This, in turn, is underpinned by a remedial attachment to the great leader as a centre of stability, morality, and strength.

> Like I saw the – they're making me out to be this – well, they're making the Trump, you know, they're making the whole rally out to be a – what about Black Lives Matter burning these cities down, and they don't get nothing. We go in, we try to, you know, we can't have a president for four years. He won. Why can't we just have him as the president for four years? (p. 16)

The affective investment in Trump is profound. Not only a figure of hope, the President is a figure of pride. *You* are elevated by *his* radiant glory. Thus, attacks on the leader are experienced as attacks on oneself.

> I started telling people three years ago, four years ago, do you guys notice every day – I couldn't even listen to the radio or TV because being a Trump supporter, I got sick of everything I turned around, they were slamming him saying something bad. It was always negative, you know? (pp. 96–97)

The heady mix of pride, grievance, and superhuman insight proves intoxicating – 'this whole thing got me hooked, you know, the whole thing'. Hence, he has 'done nothing but research for two years straight'.

> I come home, I work – I get up. I work eight hours a day, I come home and just sit on my phone researching daily. […] I was – I don't even watch TV. I don't even – I just sit and stare at my phone. (pp. 16–18)

The pain for which this obsession offers a diversion is real and multifaceted. While telling the agents about his job, Jensen mentions that he 'injured [his] back really bad when [he] was about 25 years old' (he is now in his early forties). He worked through the pain, and still does, but also takes 'muscle relaxers, anti-inflammatories, and then I get two 7.5 hydrocodone [a commonly prescribed opioid] a day'. From here, he segues, almost mid-sentence, into the story of how his brother-in-law committed suicide by shotgun. The police wouldn't clear up, so Jensen gets handed a pair of gloves and is told that he should do it so that his sister doesn't have to. He tries to hire a specialist clean-up company; the quote is $8,000.

> –And then I scraped the ceiling, bleached the walls, tore the carpet up. I retextured the ceiling and redid that whole room just to clean it up.
> –Yeah.
> –And I couldn't sleep very good after that.

He was put on antidepressants. His wife, a nurse, is in charge of his medication (pp. 63–65).

Earlier in the interview, Jensen explains that following Q has 'been like watching a movie of, and I already knew the movie'.

> […] and I watched real life play out. It was like I was getting information from the future almost, you know, and just so – I think what really gripped me from the beginning was the child trafficking and all that with the Hillary Clinton thing. That's what hooked me right off the bat.

He then adds: 'I was molested from when I was 7 until I was 14'. The details are sketchy and clearly recounted under distress; however, it seems that Jensen was not the only survivor. The man he accuses, director of a youth mentoring organization, has a restraining order against him: 'there's still nothing I can do […] it's all hearsay or whatever'. Jensen then mentions Johnny Gosch, a 12-year-old who disappeared in Des Moines in September 1982, about whom rumours have circulated ever since. This the agents have heard of, having watched a documentary (pp. 30–33).

While his mother was institutionalized for mental health issues, Jensen was moved between '20 or more foster homes'. He became addicted to crystal meth, smoking it with the mother of his friend. 'I was a little kid who had been destroyed, and I didn't care, you know?' (pp. 30–32, 76). And so, when Q came along, 'it was like my rise up to fight it in a way I guess' (p. 30). Hence why he travelled to the Capitol that day:

> And I'm kind of big, so I'm intimidating. But really, I'm a nice guy. […] I really am. You know, I'm not racist. I help people, you know? And I think that comes from what happened to me. I've always tried to fix everybody else's problem. (p. 135)

However, that is not the whole story. He also explains, on several occasions: 'I wanted Q to get the attention'. Hence the T-shirt. The plan was to be Q's 'poster boy' (p. 5, passim). '[M]y job as a digital soldier is to be the news. And try to share that stuff that I find on Facebook' (p. 69). Jensen had been following the Q drops 'religiously'. Repeatedly, he compares the experience to watching a movie. 'Everything that's happening now, I know it all because it's all old news to me' (p. 5). This vicarious prescience borders on the supernatural, but it is also tempered with a self-conscious, if inconsistent, rationalism. Unlike many anons, he doesn't claim that JFK, Jr. is alive, 'but I sure would love that to be true, you know' (p. 12). He considers General Michael Flynn to be a more realistic candidate to replace the traitor Mike Pence as Vice President (p. 69). Later, just after pleading for his interviewers to take him seriously – 'I hope you don't think I'm being misled though, you know, because I – that's what disinfo is, you know?' – Jensen mentions that Q may have technology that lets them literally 'see into the future or something'. However, he adds: 'I kind of stayed away from that just because it seems a little weird' (pp. 119–120).

The thing with Q, he says earlier, is that 'Q is so slick' (p. 68). Impervious, brilliant, unbreakable – the shadowy mastermind to Trump's shining celebrity. It is to these figures that Jensen devoted himself.

> I'm on Facebook a lot, trying to post stuff pro-Trump, pro-Q, pushing that, just because I've got 500 people, and if I can just get – I just wanted to get Trump to win (pp. 6–7)

Repeatedly, Jensen makes clear that he takes full responsibility for his actions, and doesn't blame either Q or Trump for any of what happened (e.g. p. 39). Here is where the repressive dimension of this digitally hyper-mediated, para-social relationship reveals itself most clearly. The betrayal of perennially failed prophecy cannot be processed in terms of the affective-ideological formation itself. There is simply no room for the leaders to be fallible:

> Every time Q always says something, it always happens. Every time Q said anything, it always came true. (p. 11)

Because the leader is infallible, and that infallibility has become foundational to his own self as a kind of ego-affirming reflected glory, all blame must, perversely, be directed inwards:

> But it kind of came and went, and then I was wrong again, wrong again. I'm always wrong again (p. 54).

> Was I duped by Antifa? Did I go in with Antifa? Am I an idiot? (p. 131)

The quintessence of an abusive relationship, the blatant contradictions of the abuser are explained in terms of the failings of the abused.

Such tensions run throughout the text. Yet perhaps the most extraordinary contradiction in this account is the paradox that all of this is being recounted to agents of the (deep) state. According to the received narrative, these FBI agents should be one of two things: either they are patsies of the cabal or they are 'white hats' fighting against it. At the very least, they should know about what's going on.

> –You guys work for the FBI?
> –You know, I –
> –What do you do? Look it up on your phone. (p. 8)

> […] if you guys are the FBI, why haven't you guys looked into this stuff? Why haven't you guys made a move, you know? (p. 17)

> –And I'm like you guys got the power, you guys are the cops, do it. You know, like – and it just seems to me like our FBI is corrupt, our CIA is corrupt. And it's like – and I know you guys are FBI, and I'm not saying you guys are corrupt.
> –Right
> –I just – it's hard to trust anything anymore. It really is. (p. 87)

The best the agents can offer is to pass on the info, as if it is some new piece of intelligence.

In the end, Jensen is left afraid for himself and his family. 'I'm kind of scared I'm a target right now by a lot of Antifa or some sheeple, you know?'

(pp. 109–110). This fear was not entirely unfounded. Even by the time that he was driving home from D.C., both Jensen and his wife had received threats and harassment via their Facebook pages. However, the conservative universe of discourse refracts these threats through its own symbolic structure, taking shape in the mysterious, menacing, conveniently faceless figure of 'Antifa'. An imagined enemy covers over the real manipulation. The problem is repressed, but not resolved. Thus, not only does Jensen rage at phantoms, he is completely disarmed in the face of actual dangers. These plumbless depths of suspicion leave him helpless in the face of the most everyday political con-artistry.

Unable, quite understandably, to believe that these calm, apparently considerate people in front of him might be agents of a demonic conspiracy, he not only surrenders himself to their good will – handing himself in, speaking without a lawyer – but, apparently believing that honesty is the best policy, he tells them his life story, divulging its most traumatic and intimate details.

> –[…] you really have done yourself a favor here, and –
> –Talking to you guys? […] I got a lot of texts –
> –Yeah.
> –from people saying shut your mouth, don't talk. Like I got to – be quiet. But I'm like, look, I'm just going to tell you guys because, you know, I honestly was going with my heart. I was. (pp. 127–128)

Of course, he is attempting to justify himself. We are taking him at his word. However, it is difficult to interpret this divulgence as calculated. Rather, it seems compulsive. A letting go. A bursting of a dam. A kind of impromptu therapy session in a circumstance completely unsuited to therapy.

Sympathy and blame

After a three-day trial in September 2022, Jensen was convicted of five felonies and two misdemeanours. His defence moved to exclude the above interview, arguing that he had not understood its voluntary status. Their request was unsuccessful. Capitol police testified that Jensen had been 'cocky' and 'aggressive', although no one claimed that he had physically harmed anyone. The thing that really decided his fate was that he had been carrying a pocket knife on 6th January – a disclosure that, had he received legal representation from the beginning, might have been better managed. With a history of minor offences behind him, including shoplifting, trespassing, and assault, he was sentenced to 5 years in prison and charged $2,000 in restitution.

It is beyond the scope of this article to consider the justice or injustice of this result, so I will just state the obvious: It is not, in the grand scheme of things, Douglas Jensen that is the problem, nor will the US carceral system, in its prosecution of these crimes, do him or anyone else any good.

Nevertheless, it should not be glossed over that, having become an avatar of white supremacy due to his confrontational pursuit of Eugene Goodman, the fact that Jensen was armed – for 'protection from if there was going to be some kind of showdown', as he put it (pp. 56–57) – may justifiably be interpreted as an act of racist violence in itself. Regardless of what his intentions were, it's what he participated in that counts.

I have presented Jensen's story sympathetically, a choice that I believe its details deserve. However, it is also very clear that the above narrative must not be understood as another of those 'valid grievances' tales, so beloved of liberal media, that imagines morally injured white people, working class or otherwise, to be the central victims of state oppression. Even as they took down his confession, arguably improperly, his interrogators seem to have treated him well – better, certainly, than one might expect had he been Black, leftwing, or undocumented. Moreover, there is no doubt that Jensen did not simply flip for Trump because of the Podesta emails, but that he also bought, hook, line, and sinker, into the broader mythology. Thus, he avows a litany of grievances, familiar to many a tense family dinner: BLM burning down cities, antifa roaming the streets to attack patriots, gender studies profs perverting the youth – and that isn't even getting into the Q-lore. Jensen was not just duped by some strange ideas, he was seduced by a reactionary political project, which has as its principal pillars the reestablishment of patriarchy and white supremacy. Nevertheless, there is no need to be absorbed by either/or moralistic logic here. The point is not to arrive at a moral judgement, but to articulate an idea. To that end, what I am getting at is this: that this whole experience has been, for Jensen, a deeply repressive one, in all senses of that word. Repressive, that is, as in oppressive, unjust, dominating, and repressive as in suppressing a trauma deep down in one's psychological constitution, achieving respite but not resolution, and thus ultimately ensuring that the injury remains.

The results of falling into a conspiratorial cult are tragic:

> My kids hate Trump. They think he's a racist, and I'd be like why is he a racist? I don't know. And, you know, it's like, well, why do you think that? What do you have to show me that he is? They didn't have nothing. And that's what I had to keep explaining to them. And so my family avoids me, they don't like my posts. (p. 97; see also p. 8)

As he fell away from his friends and family, obsessively 'doing his own research', another set of digitally-mediated, dopamine-fortified bonds reached out to him, one lonely 'Like' at a time. But these bonds were superficial – good for one dizzy, apparently euphoric afternoon, but little else. Among the patchwork miscellany that constitutes Q culture is a declaration of movement solidarity: 'Where We Go One We Go All', a slogan lifted from the 1996 movie *White Squall*. This declaration adorns Jensen's Q T-shirt,

along with 'Trust the Plan' and an on-rushing bald eagle. Later, when returned to custody after violating the terms of his parole, Jensen signed his name, followed by 'WWG1WGA' (Morris *et al.* 2022).

Upon the evidence found here, one may conclude that this is all the 'mirror world' of Q can really offer its (not so anonymous) anons: a potpourri of popular culture affording feelings of belonging, purpose, and agency. As is typical of cults, dwelling within the occult reality precludes belonging to anything else. This scission operates through the misdirection of suspicion. Over-concentrated here, under-concentrated there; cynical and credulous at once. It atomizes and isolates, severing family ties and lasting political solidarities alike – the world-replacing negation always growling, underfed. Yet, within this bargain, there is a very real payoff, and it goes beyond the mere conspiracy-entertainment complex: Equal parts amateur sleuth, neighbourhood watch member, and evangelical missionary, Q's 'digital soldiers' are offered an interpretive apparatus by which they may transcend their day-to-day lives, becoming protagonists of an epic mystery, striking back against the cruel actors running roughshod through the world. The remarkable quality of QAnon is how it is able to tie the most grotesque terror to the most grandiose saviour complex, all the while finding a place for the most quotidian contributions to the cause. QAnon imagines a world in which anyone can be a hero.

Yet, despite proclaiming that 'I'm all about a revolution basically' (p. 6), it is clear that Douglas Jensen is not. He is a survivor of abuse and of an abusive society, addicted to a live action roleplaying game that generates political capital, and justifies potentially exterminatory violence, by feeding on the fears, anxieties, and resentments of those it seduces. Lonely, angry, fearful people are easily manipulated, readily moved to participate in the oppression of others, and of themselves. The expropriators of aid money, the media empires suffocating the public sphere, the known sexual abusers in positions of power – when the enemies become BLM, antifa, and demonic child-eaters, all that fades into the background, each real outrage a mere segue into the realm of insatiable, whirlpool nightmare. And that little voice that screams, day and night, 'something is not right!' – that just keeps on screaming. Because you are not a secret agent and you are not a billionaire. And so, in the end, you only have yourself to blame.

The limits of paranoia

By the time that the first Q drop appeared, on 28th October 2017, many a Trump enthusiast had grown disillusioned. Hillary Clinton remained conspicuously unincarcerated, the so-called 'Muslim ban' had largely foundered in the courts, and the Administration itself had filled up with precisely the sorts of insiders and executives that the campaign chant of 'drain the

swamp' had promised to eliminate. Q offered an alternative to this disappointment: Trump is playing the long game, 'Trust the Plan'. Push those doubts deep down inside you. Embrace faith.

Jensen's story is not representative of conspiracy theories in general. It is not even representative of QAnon – keyboard-bound and spectatorial, as its advocates mostly remained. Being disproportionately female and evangelical Christian, the typical Q-follower would likely tell a rather different radicalization story than that recounted above (Bracewell 2020, Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). Nor, for that matter, is the specific political cosmology of QAnon representative of the world-making of reactionary politics, worldwide. It is, after all, a distinctly US-centred phenomenon, although its international uptake, from Germany to Japan, is rather greater than one might think (Anglesey 2022, Jozuka *et al.* 2021). Nevertheless, Jensen's case is exhibitive of a particular mode of suspicion, and of the role that can play within a movement demanding political violence by a small but dedicated minority. That this mode is, in multiple senses of the word, repressive, will, I hope, already be apparent. However, it is also necessary to unfold these multiple senses in more explicitly theoretical terms.

In his essay on the paranoid style, Hofstadter makes clear that he does not employ 'paranoia' in its clinical sense. Nevertheless, he begins by stating the Webster's dictionary definition: 'a chronic mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions of persecution and of one's own greatness' (1964/1996b, pp. 3–4). No explicit discussion of psychoanalysis is had. However, in Hofstadter's footnotes, we find approving references to Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman's 1949 *Prophets of Deceit* and Franz Neumann's 1954 'Anxiety and Politics', while his use of the term 'pseudo-conservative' was taken from Adorno *et al.*'s 1950 *The Authoritarian Personality*, all of which relied upon psychoanalytic theory. In 1896, Freud had described paranoia as a psychosis resulting from 'self-distrust' and 'self-reproach'. Such distressing experiences are 'repressed by erecting the defensive symptom of distrust of other people', a repression that returns in the form of 'delusional ideas' (1896/1962, p. 184). But what is repression? In 1915, Freud clarified that repression is a defence mechanism, arising from 'a sharp cleavage' between the conscious and unconscious, which consists 'in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious' (1915/1957, p. 147). The Freudian concept of paranoia thus differs from the dictionary definition in that it references a much larger theoretical apparatus. However, both agree that paranoia is a narcissistic projection onto the world of what is, in reality, a crisis of the mind.

In some respects, when reading Hofstadter's essay, it is remarkable how little has changed in the world of paranoid politics. From the Bavarian Illuminati and the French Revolution, through the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and exterminationist antisemitism, to the John Birch Society and

McCarthyism, a thread of 'heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy' is easily traced (1964/1996b, p. 3, Grossberg 2018, p. 69). With respect to QAnon, several continuities stand out: The paranoid universe is conceived with an affected sense of the epic – 'the birth and death of whole worlds' forever in the balance. To the epic scale corresponds a temporality of permanent emergency – forever on the brink, time always 'just running out'. From the epic emergency then derives a 'demand for unqualified victories', the inevitable failure of which 'constantly heightens the paranoid's frustration'. Yet, as much as the enemy is evil incarnate, it is also desired and imitated – for instance, as anti-intellectual intellectuals compete to construct their own 'apparatus of scholarship' (1964/1996b, pp. 29–32).

However, no matter how enduring the archetype, the Hofstadterian paranoiac is also something of a caricature. Recall that Hofstadter restricts his analysis to those for whom '[h]istory *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power' (1964/1996b, p. 29). The problem with this is that few devotees of conspiracy culture, even at the extreme end, fit this mould entirely (Hagen 2022, pp. 180–205, Fenster 2008, p. 42). Take Jensen: Day after day, armed with little more than a smartphone and Facebook, he struggled to stitch together not only the shattered pieces of his own life history, along with some seductive, strange, yet oddly familiar stories, but also scattered factoids from a more widely recognizable reality (the media is owned by a few large corporations; liberals were desperate for Trump to have been a Russian asset so that the indignity of his election could be expunged …). Transcendent, demonic forces may have been integral to this story, in its broader circulation, but they were not central to his telling of it. His thought process may have been misdirected and overdetermined – tragically so – but it was not purely dogmatic.

To call Jensen's speculative world-making a 'degraded' and 'desperate' attempt to cognitively map the global social totality is not exactly incorrect, but nor does it capture the entire phenomenon (Jameson 1988, p. 356). Ego-shielding, fantastical, dystopian projection is undoubtedly a mainstay of QAnon, as it is of much conspiracy culture. Recall the Q-drop quoted above: 'Everything has meaning. This is not a game. Learn to play the game'. For the entrepreneurial agitator, paranoia is a resource to be cultivated and harvested, for fame and profit. While this, clearly, is nothing new, the remarkable innovation of QAnon, enabled by the structural conditions of social media, is to have crowdsourced the play of obsessive pattern recognition, unburdening the central charismatic agitator from the weight of imaginative world-negation. Anyone with a smartphone and social media can assemble their own 'apparatus of scholarship', thus seeding the cycle of paranoid hermeneutics. However, to dismiss such practices as crises of the mind is not only callous. No matter how harmful, misdirected, and trapped within 'the governing assumptions of a public sphere' they may be (Dean 2000), we may still

recognize that conspiratorial conjectures can also constitute a cry against oppressive conditions that others are content to tolerate. An 'imaginary relation to real relations' still pertains to real relations, no matter how fanciful its ideological imagination may be (Althusser 1971/2014, p. 259). It is the world, not the mind alone, that is at issue.

Repression and revolt

When, in 1915, Freud defined repression as 'turning something away […] from the conscious', he was clarifying a clinical concept. This was, however, an idea that had already attained grander dimensions. Two years earlier, he wrote that, on a sociological level, the forces of repression 'owe their origin essentially to compliance with the demands of civilization' (1913/1955, p. 188). Underlying both these conceptions is an assumption of the primacy of instinct over rationality – or, better put, drive over reflection. Repression is not present in early childhood, being learned through a child's socialization. It consists, essentially, in the acceptance that not every somatic drive can, or should, be immediately gratified. Likewise, in Freud's stadial philosophy of history, societies pass through the same developmental epochs, with civilisational maturity arising through the advance in repressive forces.

Thus, in its original, technical usage, repression is by no means a pejorative term. It is a necessary human function. Such a conception is, however, rather laden with the baggage of nineteenth-century naturalism. To escape this, Marcuse distinguished between 'basic' and 'surplus' repression (by analogy with Marx's 'surplus value'). Whereas basic repression entailed those restrictions of instinct (sexual or otherwise) necessary for complex collective life, surplus repression signified those 'necessitated by social domination' (1955/1974, p. 36). Thus, while, for Freud, the notion of a 'non-repressive civilization' was a contradiction in terms, Marcuse was able to speculatively demand precisely this – a new kind of society, based upon a 'new relation between instincts and reason' (1955/1974, p. 198).

Through the 1950s and into the 1960s, from his position as a political theorist at Brandeis University, Massachusetts, Marcuse railed against the callous conformism of the Fordist, technocratic, militaristic Cold War order. Buoyed by economic progress, 'non-conformity with the system' had been rendered useless by a malaise of 'repressive satisfaction', leading to 'repressive tolerance' (1964/2007, pp. 3–9, 1965/1970). Going beyond the banal observation that tolerance of intolerance harbours a self-contradiction, Marcuse's point was that toleration of the intolerable was, not hypothetically but actually, the basis of the present order. 'When a magazine prints side by side a negative and a positive report on the FBI', or when 'a newscaster reports the torture and murder of civil rights workers in the same unemotional tone he

uses to describe the stockmarket or the weather', this is repressive tolerance: 'refraining from accusation where accusation is in the facts themselves' (1965/1970, p. 98).

By 'one-dimensional man' Marcuse meant someone who had, in their affluent unfreedom, lost touch with any possibility of transcending actuality, and, hence, lost the capacity for critical thought. This loss was illustrated perhaps most vividly in the domain of culture. Take the novel. In the nineteenth century, such works drew from a lively repertoire of 'disruptive characters': the rebel-poet, the adulteress, the warrior, the outlaw. But, by the mid-twentieth century, these figures had been tamed into the shapes of the beatnik, the neurotic, the hero, the tycoon. No longer conjuring 'images of another way of life', they had become 'rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order' (1964/2007, p. 62). This assimilation of the disruptive to the merely curious, Marcuse called repressive desublimation – another psychoanalytic term. '[E]very kind of cultural achievement', declared Freud in 1905, is enabled by the 'diversion of sexual instinctual forces from sexual aims and their direction to new ones' – a process he called 'sublimation' (1905/1953, p. 178). In other words, the passion of the painter or of the dancer is, in this drive-centred anthropology, a creative redeployment of crude sexual energy towards what, in a highly developed – that is, repressed – society, is considered more morally acceptable, intellectually desirable, or even sacred. *De*sublimation is, then, in Marcuse's words, a process of 'replacing mediated by immediate gratification' – of consuming the thing desired without restriction by some other, 'higher' realm of value (1964/2007, p. 75). By repressive desublimation is thus meant a process by which 'disruptive' ideas, suggesting 'images of another way of life', are profaned and commoditised, becoming objects of 'immediate gratification', bearing no suggestion of anything beyond actuality.

In short, in a world of repressive satisfaction, repressive desublimation, and repressive tolerance, everyone has full bellies, everyone feels affirmed by their favourite TV shows, and no one wants to think about how the wheels keep turning. Within the 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977, pp. 128–135) of a one-dimensional world, one simply does not think. However, as all-consuming as it often appears in Marcuse's prose, this social satiation was far from seamless. Indeed, it was in its cracks and contradictions – in the 'substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colours, the unemployed and the unemployable' – that the system sowed the seeds of its own destruction. This motley assemblage, in Marcuse's estimation, formed 'an elementary force' whose very existence revealed the game as 'rigged' (1964/2007, p. 261). Bearing a 'natural right' to resistance, and even to violence

(1965/1970, p. 117), those excluded from the world of the satisfied thus augured the possibility of 'the Great Refusal – the protest against that which is' (1964/2007, p. 66).

What, then, given this conceptual landscape, is repressive *suspicion*? Following Marcuse's 'surplus' repression, I take this term in its normatively-loaded, denaturalized, sociopolitical sense, with no thoroughgoing commitment to Freudian anthropology. Nevertheless, consistent with the clinical definition, repressive suspicion still consists in keeping something at a distance from the conscious, maintained in excess of the basic needs of collective existence, and in service of domination. In contrast to repressive *tolerance*, however, repressive suspicion operates not through the muting of negative affect – inculcating pragmatism, modesty, positivity, and faith in progress – but, rather, through a purgative, cathartic expression of negativity. This expression comes bedecked in the aesthetics of rebellion and critique. However, being fundamentally misdirected, lacking any meaningful connection with the systemic causes of the phenomena that animate and rationalize its outrage, repressive suspicion, perversely, advances the cause of domination, precisely through its fraudulent promise of emancipation. A fraudulent knockoff of the world it opposes, its promise is a trap.

Such a diagnosis would likely have been perfectly comprehensible to Marcuse, circa annum 1965. This was, after all, someone who had lived through both Nazism and McCarthyism. The sources that Hofstadter had most relied upon were some of Marcuse's closest colleagues. To one, he had even served as editor (Neumann 1954/1964). Moreover, the revolt of the pseudo-conservative right would soon affect him directly. By the late 1960s, Marcuse had become something of an elder statesman for the student counterculture. Via his former student, Angela Davis, he publicly supported Black radical politics, and his books were widely read beyond the academy (Davis 2005). In his new position at the University of California, San Diego, he attracted the attention of the state's Governor, Ronald Reagan, who campaigned for Marcuse's resignation, in league with the John Birch Society – the far-right conspiracist organization, then near its peak in both membership and notoriety (Mulloy 2014, pp. 2–3, Dallek 2023). After death threats and antisemitic abuse, students organized to protect Marcuse's house, and to accompany him at public events (Marcuse 2014, pp. 208–209). Thus began a far-right fascination that continues to this day, in the form of the 'Cultural Marxism' conspiracy theory (Jay 2010). Nevertheless, even as Marcuse's work took a turn, during the 1970s, towards the study of counterrevolution and reaction (e.g. 1972), never did repressive suspicion come into focus. In an age of 'repressive satisfaction', it could, by and large, be ignored. This is no longer the case.

Conclusion: must we tolerate conspiracy theories?

One reason why conspiracy theories, of the QAnon kind, are so extreme is because they are so shallow. Their habitual logic is that of the 'bad apple': Something is rotten in the world, but the problem is not with the world itself. Something has stolen in from the outside, and, if properly expunged, equilibrium can be restored. Things can be returned to how they should be – which is to say, basically how they are now only better, with justice served and the right people on top (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949, p. 7, Jolley *et al.* 2017). Such theories conjure a mirror world so that the actually existing world may be replaced, at first by imagination and then by force. They call themselves revolutionaries, but follow the logic of the pogrom.

In the universe of discourse within which Douglas Jensen's practice of suspicion was experienced, there are bad cops and there are good cops. Indeed, satanists and saviours. Yet, faced with actually existing law enforcement, the clarity of this opposition proved mystifying. The quasi-camaraderie that Jensen's interrogators were able to establish with their subject was less a privilege than a 'psychological wage' (Du Bois 1935/2017, p. 626). For a moment, an ordinary man was able to feel in touch with the powers of rightness and order – as if, by that proximity, some justice would be done. But the system had no sympathy for him, even if his interrogators did. His suspicion was repressive not only because it was misplaced, but because it supported the real danger.

Jensen's declaration that 'I'm all about a revolution basically' may be pitiful, but it is also telling. Few would characterize our epoch as one of satisfaction. In an age of already-arrived climatic disaster, amidst the sputtering persistence of brutal racial hierarchies, wracked with revelations of cover-up and abuse, lurching from one economic, ecological, and geopolitical crisis to the next, reality beats at the door of our attention like an unwanted visitor. White people stare down their inevitable demographic eclipse, itching at the bonds of social convention that forbid them to 'just come out and say it'. Children of middle-class Euro-American families no longer expect to be better off than their parents. The arrow of time, for these populations, has evaporated. Nevertheless, repressive tolerance is very much still with us. Leading academics still counsel us to 'assume a well-motivated government' to police our dissent (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, p. 219). Meanwhile, mainstream politics remains locked between a crumbling neoliberal status quo and the catharsis of reaction.

This, then, is what I ultimately take from Jensen's story: He needed a relationship to historical transcendence that his society could not provide. The best it could offer was a pseudo-transcendence, a con trick. He grasped that offer with both hands. It is desublimation on a scale that Marcuse foreshadowed but could not foresee. Not only the rebel-poet, the

warrior, the outlaw. In QAnon, revolution itself becomes emptied and profaned. Absorbed into the circuits of instant gratification, political rebellion is shorn of anything beyond its immediate actuality. Agitators become influencers – those you pose with for selfies. Events become content – every wrinkle and stammer an opportunity for clickbait. And insurrection becomes entertainment – deadly serious and farcically frivolous, all at once. The collapse of the domain of fiction into the economy of politics as popular culture.

At the time of writing, ahead of the 2024 US presidential election, it is unclear what will happen next. The objective of the coalition that finds expression through Donald Trump's aggressively grandiose narcissism seems perfectly clear: to achieve perpetual minority rule for white Christian conservatives. With their own media sphere, willing footsoldiers, and a strong hand on the courts, the right are organized, well-resourced, and energized. From the campaign trail chants of 'lock her up!' to the events of 6th January and beyond, Trumpism has succeeded in validating and disinhibiting the violent energies of the declining majority, capturing its chaos within a disestablishmentarian conformism militantly dedicated to reestablishing traditionally dominant hierarchies, all the while cloaking itself in the signifiers of rebellion that its generational base misremembers from its youth. To be sure, the political metabolization of these energies has not been straightforward, any more than it was for the students of '68. Even by the early 1970s, this latter 'cultural revolution' had proved vulnerable to what Marcuse called 'pubertarian rebellion', lacking the 'self-repression' that leads to 'revolutionary discipline'. Thus, a politics of 'clownery and irony' ends up seeking an *esprit de serieux* (Marcuse 1972, pp. 49–51). Dressed in the inexhaustible oddity of US conspiracy culture, the self-organizing pseudo-religion of QAnon has presented precisely this problem. Nevertheless, ambitious, career-oriented operators have found a way to make it work, fuzing raging contradictions through the force of sheer expediency (e.g. Samuels 2023).

It is important to recognize, however, that this movement is reacting, in many respects, from a position of historic weakness. Both the Trump cult of personality in general and the QAnon carnival of bizarrerie in particular correspond to a fracture in the ruling hegemonic bloc that dominated US and world politics for decades. Major divisions may be found running through the US Republican Party, even as it prepares itself for government, as Trumpist true believers fight it out with opportunistic organs of the traditional American right (Adler-Bell 2024). In his prison notebooks, Antonio Gramsci wrote that it is 'a criterion of historico-political research' that 'there does not exist any independent class of intellectuals, but every social group has its own stratum of intellectuals, or tends to form one' (1971, p. 60). Though it may stretch the notion of 'intellectual', perhaps to breaking point, we can nevertheless recognize that QAnon's assemblage of agitator-fantasists

really did form an 'anti-intellectual intelligentsia' of sorts – a more or less spontaneously generated network of content creators, responding to the demand for ideological sense-making created by Trump's unexpected accession to the long-vacant position of history-reversing demagogue, coupled with the repressed disappointment of nothing being fundamentally reversed upon that accession. It was that most American of market conditions: a gold rush. Those hitherto at the fringes of social respect could now become celebrities, practically overnight. Those in want of purpose or agency could now become heroes, at the push of a button. There was money in it, too. Such are the affordances of platform capitalism. However, as powerfully as the Trump cult has stitched together the various contradictory elements of its coalition, including those organs of the traditional right desperate to realize their vision of a caesarist 'unitary executive' (Garcia-Navarro 2024), a historico-political perspective suggests that it has little chance of resolving the crisis. Rather, it remains trapped within that 'interregnum' of which Gramsci also spoke, in which 'a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' (1971, p. 276).

It is crucial, however, not to be consumed by the spectacle, distracted from the interdependency of the parts. It is a familiar cycle: A reactionary says something outrageous, progressives pile on, discourse ensues. Once again, what is true of the Trump cult in general is also true of QAnon in particular: Their aptitude for virality, and their consequent dominance of the attention economy, has depended, in no small part, upon progressive reaction to the reactionary. Typically, this outrage cycle feeds on liberal-progressive moralism – a will to correct, through condemnation. At times, however, it has also been fuelled by liberal-progressive conspiracism – a will to banish, through prosecution. This, indeed, was perhaps Jensen's most relatable insight: 'When the news says Russia, I look the other way'. To be sure, it hardly took a paranoiac to suspect, after the 2016 election, that the Trump clan were up to no good. Nevertheless, day after day, night after night, liberals consoled themselves that this rupture in their national self-image was due, as the apparatus of state would surely show (any day now!), to election interference, sex-tape blackmail, or even to Trump himself being, as was repeated constantly, 'a Russian asset'. In moments of crisis, conspiracies abound.

As Stuart Hall *et al*. put it, speaking of Britain in the early 1970s:

> Crises must have their causes; causes cannot be structural, public or rational, since they arise in the best, the most civilised, most peaceful and tolerant society on earth — then they must be secret, subversive, irrational, a plot. (1978, p. 320)

Sometimes, of course, conspiracies happen. While Jensen's appearance at the Capitol may have been an act of interpellative spontaneity – a commitment born from intense identification – others, it is clear, plotted to thwart the

democratic exchange of power most deliberately. Nevertheless, as crooked a con artist as Trump undoubtedly is, the rumour economy that followed his election, and which finally found something solid to hang its hopes on after 6th January, betrays a need for liberal politics to bypass any substantive, structural explanation of his success. Thus, much like Britain in the '70s, the incumbent coalition bases its strategy on an appeal for 'law and order', against the mounting threat of conspiracies and coups d'état. Unlike Britain in the '70s, however, this appeal cannot serve a consolidating function, since it does not draw a line between the dominant hegemonic bloc, on the one hand, and a panoply of subversives – from striking workers to bomb-setting anarchists to dark skinned immigrants to student libertines – on the other. Rather, it draws a line *within* the previously dominant bloc. This is what makes it, structurally speaking, a crisis.

While the '"law-and-order" society', reconstructed by Hall *et al*., put in place the ideological basis for authoritarian neoliberalism in the UK, a formula which was paralleled elsewhere, this was not a permanent coalition. While, today, the right rails against 'wokeness', and from the 1980s did the same for 'political correctness', circa 1972 it was a 'revolt against permissiveness', an attack on 'moral pollution', that provided the justification for a forceful restoration of order (Hall *et al*. 1978, p. 285, passim). However, as the decades wore on, the permissive proved rather more profitable than the puritanical. Between 1996 and 2016, Hillary Clinton went from branding Black criminal gangs 'superpredators' to denouncing Trump supporters as a 'basket of deplorables'. By the time of the protests over the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, major brands were falling over themselves to appropriate images of Black Power. One may, today, see pride flags in the window of any number of high street banks. As superficial, if not cynical, as such gestures may be, such an 'aura of emancipation', as Nancy Fraser argues, has been crucial to the development of progressive neoliberalism, and, accordingly, to the fracturing of the previously dominant hegemonic bloc (2019, p. 14). Metabolizing both the rage resulting from this moral disentitlement and the disenchantment of neoliberal economy after the Global Financial Crisis, the 2016 Trump campaign forged a new electoral coalition, seizing on, among others, the likes of Douglas Jensen. It then proceeded to govern more or less like any other right wing Republican administration, opening the ideological wound in which QAnon found its niche. It was during the COVID-19 pandemic that QAnon then became a mass phenomenon. From early 2020, buoyed by its dystopian moment, its influencer networks exploded (Breland and Rangarajan 2020), melding with the burgeoning anti-vaccine, anti-mask, and anti-lockdown movements. Today, it has become, in however diluted form, a mainstay of transnational conservative discourse (Jozuka *et al*. 2021, Anglesey 2022, Wendling 2023).

While there is little evidence that belief in conspiracy theories is any greater now than in the past (Butter 2020, Uscinski *et al.* 2022), we can nevertheless say that, at this conjuncture, repressive suspicion has become particularly crucial. As an apparatus of ideological capture, it allows, however contradictorily, for simultaneously renouncing and reinforcing hierarchical relations of authority, offering a locus of legitimation for currents of outrage trapped within their own cognitive coordinates. Through an extreme but simplistic negativity, it disinhibits violent refusal of certain prevailing normative bonds. However, being fundamentally misdirecting, its circuits of suspicion can never consistently explain the injuries and dangers to which it constitutes a response, instead turning them away and keeping them at a distance, in a never-ending circle of doubt and credulity. The catharsis of this disinhibition has broad appeal, but seems to seize with a particular intensity on the vulnerable. Holding consensus reality at arm's length, the subject of repressive suspicion comes to rely either on their own preternatural, sovereign insight, or, more commonly, on that of an unpolluted authority figure. The world they come to inhabit is held together only through continuous, abstract negation – an exhausting task, which, for most, will lead only to further vulnerability.

This conceptualization is, of course, tentative and incomplete, being derived from a single case. Nevertheless, it has implications for how we may engage with the problem of conspiracy theories more generally. In a recent conversation piece, Lee Basham, after stating as fact that Jeffrey Epstein 'was mysteriously murdered in his jail cell', and just before denouncing the 'oppressive pieties of "trust"', asks his interlocutor: 'If QAnon adherents just dissented but didn't harass, would that be a problem?' (2022, pp. 47–51). The implication of this question being, as I understand it, that the problem with movements such as QAnon is not that they dissent from official reality – since dissent as such must be commended – but, rather, that they may also, supplementarily, do some things that can be regretted and set to one side. The Jensen case and the analysis that has followed will, I hope, have demonstrated the inadequacy of such a contention. QAnon's faults are more than supplementary. A cry against the status quo though it may be, repressive suspicion ruins lives, and worse (Tian 2021, Watson 2023). To refuse to recognize this amounts not just to romanticism but to apologism – championing any dissidence whatsoever for some vain, undistinguishing sense of revolt.

Two decades ago, it may have made sense to identify 'radical democratic potential' (Bratich 2008, p. 170) in those forms of popular dissent that turn government's paranoid suspicions back on itself (Birchall 2006, p. 62), calling foul on myths of transparency and accountability (Dean 2000, Birchall 2021). Likewise, it may have made sense to paint '[a]nxieties over truth on the Net' as mere knee-jerk attempts 'to pathologize our justifiable paranoia'

(Dean 1998, p. 139), coding a radically transformative medium as 'intrinsically untrustworthy' (Bratich 2008, p. 21). However, today those who 'question consensus reality' (Dean 1998, p. 136) are ten-a-penny – and perhaps they always were. By all means, then, let us discomfort those who refrain from accusation 'where accusation is in the facts themselves' (Marcuse 1965/1970, p. 98). Yet 'the facts themselves' matter. 'Negative thinking', wrote Marcuse in 1969, 'draws whatever force it may have from its empirical basis: the actual human condition in the given society, and the "given" possibilities to transcend this condition, to enlarge the realm of freedom' (1969, p. 87). Thus, it matters whether these theories are being produced within communities organized around mutual liberation, or whether the affectations of liberation are being used to advance the cause of oppression, and it matters whether a mode of suspicion leaves its adherents lonely and afraid, or whether in steels them, in preparedness and solidarity, for addressing the dangers that face them.

QAnon cannot be tolerated. Yet it can, in a certain manner, be taken seriously. As an interpretive apparatus that translates harms, cruelties, and resentments into political possibility by facilitating the discursive negation of official reality, it has proven to have remarkable power. From this, doubtless, lessons can be learned. As the critical race theorist Regina Austin affirms: 'Conspiracies are energizing; the sense of being on a mission entailing risk and defiance moves people to act' (1994, p. 1043). In this, the traditional, structural appraisal of conspiracy culture – that it is a kind of misapprehended social critique – encounters its limit. By bringing the redress of harm and injustice within the realm of imaginable agency, conspiracy theories give people hope. Thus derives their peculiar power, regardless of whether they are empirically 'warranted' (Dentith 2018). For all their dangers, Austin argues, conspiracy theories are 'better than generalized indictments of "the system" – a system which operates on automatic pilot' (1994, p. 1039). As far as 'generalized indictments' go, who could disagree? Energy is preferable to lethargy. Mass convictions of agency may (up to a point, under certain conditions) be self-fulfilling. However, any complex, sustained political movement ultimately depends upon its actual material conditions, and 'the "given" possibilities' for freedom thus available. Structural, 'historico-political' analyses of such possibilities are, consequently, vital, yet these have other obligations than inducing hope. They avail themselves neither to inspiration nor participation. Between the structure-tracing sage and the agency-energising agitator, there is a chasm that critical theory has never sufficed to bridge.

Having typified repressive suspicion with reference to QAnon does not mean that conspiracy theories are inherently repressive, nor that repressive suspicion necessarily involves the conjecture of conspiracies. Rather, with this concept we have named a pattern that, recognized in this case, may

be recognized in others. The objective, then, has not been to pathologise conspiracy theories. Rather, it has been to pose a question: If this is what *repressive* suspicion looks like, how must we conceive its opposite? Suspended between scepticism and paranoia, suspicion is where dissident political subjectivity takes shape (Charles 2021). The fact that it can go so ludicrously wrong takes nothing away from its insistent necessity.

Notes

1. No comprehensive review is possible here, however illustrative examples of both sides of the problem may be found in Olmsted (2011), Kinzer (2019), Washington (2008), Reardon (2011), and many others.
2. First given as a radio lecture in 1959, the definitive version was published in 1964 (McKenzie-McHarg 2022).
3. N.B. Citations of Fiske (2016), Fenster (2008), and Barkun (2013) refer to the second editions of texts first published in 1996, 1999, and 2003, respectively.
4. Most of the chapters were written in the late 1990s.
5. Strictly speaking, Q is a level of security clearance in the US Department of Energy; however, within QAnon, it is understood to be some sort of position within military intelligence.
6. Originally posted on 8chan, still available on other sites (Anon 2018).

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