CHAPTER 3

From Pizzagate to the Great Replacement: The Globalization of Conspiracy Theories

Abstract This chapter discusses the circulation of conspiracy theories evolving from concoctions of Internet subcultures to global topics of public conversation and political mobilization. The examples provided are those of the Pizzagate and QAnon conspiracy theories, which embody the anti-establishment ethos, the paranoid disposition and the ironic attitude of far-right on-line communities. The chapter analyzes the spreading of a set of myths, symbols and codes created by the 4chan and 8chan users within a global network of White ethnonationalists. The far-right anti-immigration conspiracy theory 'The Great Replacement' is discussed to explore the interlocking themes of White identity politics, trolling and the 'weaponization' of Internet entertainment.

Keywords Conspiracy theories · Pizzagate · QAnon · Great Replacement · Meme · Ethnonationalism · Alt-right

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the global circulation of conspiracy theories, with a special emphasis on fictional political narratives originating from Internet message boards and discussion forums. Specifically, the focus of the analysis is on conspiracy theories alleging plots by global liberal elites or progressive movements, popular among White supremacists and far-right

G. Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43005-4_3

circles. The chapter attempts to trace a profile of the most popular conspiracy theories currently dominating the discourse among users of fringe spaces of the Internet, especially 4chan, 8chan and Reddit. Such on-line conversations, often cloaked in ironic language, emerge from a subcultural milieu that has been conducive to acts of on-line harassment as well as of violence and terrorism. The 2016 Pizzagate conspiracy theory is presented as the blueprint for fictional political narratives growing out of the contributions of multiple authors in various world regions. The QAnon conspiracy theory, an offshoot of Pizzagate, is also presented as an open-ended collective narrative based on paranoid attitudes toward political institutions and establishments, typical of the current era of Internet-driven populism and radical politics. The chapter also discusses how the conspiracy theories under examination functioned as outlets for the collective elaboration of unaddressed political scandals.

In the second part of the chapter, the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory is discussed as a narrative of victimization of people of White ethnicity, serving as an ideological framework for a growing wave of violent actions by White nationalists worldwide. The on-line communications of White terrorists are brought under examination as they crystallize many aesthetic, cultural and ideological elements common to other on-line subcultures and movements mobilizing around claims of marginalization and dispossession. Memes and other elements of Internet popular culture are discussed as ideologically charged resources of on-line culture wars. Reference to post-truth theory is offered throughout the chapter to place the discussion of on-line conspiracy theories within the broader conceptual framework presented in the book's introduction.

3.2 Pizzagate: The Blueprint for Global On-Line Conspiracy Theories

One of the most absurd and creative of the many fictional political narratives circulating in the 2016 US presidential election cycle—characterized by large amounts of misinformation and disinformation, especially

via social media[1]—was the conspiracy theory[2] that went by the name of 'Pizzagate.' The theory alleged that Comet Ping Pong, a Washington pizzeria, was the operational base of a high-profile ring of pedophiles and Satanists, which included top political figures of the Democratic Party such as the then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and her former campaign manager John Podesta. Even before a self-styled vigilante named Edgar Welch decided to approach this odd story armed with weapons,[3] an investigation by the Washington Police Department had already dismissed Pizzagate as a baseless conspiracy theory, mostly circulating on-line via discussion forums, anonymous imageboards, right-wing alternative news sources and social media accounts (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Articles from The New York Times[4] and Snopes[5] reported that there was no evidence in support of the allegations against Comet Ping Pong. These revelations had, however, not prevented many to continue to believe in the existence of a sordid scandal. On the contrary, the debunking, as it is often the case in context of post-truth concoctions such as conspiracy theories, had the effect of further stoking the suspicions among the Pizzagate proponents. For the entire month of November 2016, after the story had been repeatedly dismissed by mainstream

[1] Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). "Social media and fake news in the 2016 election". *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31:2, 211–236. See also Singer and Booking (2018).

[2] In his work *A culture of conspiracy*, Barkun defines a conspiracy theory as being based on "the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end" (Barkun 2013, 3).

[3] On a Sunday in early December 2016, less than a month after the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, a man named Edgar Welch entered Comet Ping Pong brandishing an AR-15 assault rifle. He then asked all the clients to evacuate the place and started searching the premises looking for a basement connected to secret underground tunnels. The police arrived shortly after Welch had fired a few shots on the floor, with no injuries or casualties. By his own admission, he wanted to 'self-investigate' Comet Ping Pong, to see if the on-line rumors about the so-called *Pizzagate* conspiracy theory were true. He had read a lot about Pizzagate, including accounts from notorious conspiracy-theorist Alex Jones, and had come to Washington with the intention of freeing the children who he thought were kept enslaved in the basement of the pizzeria.

[4] Kang, C. (2016). "Fake news onslaught targets pizzeria as nest of child-trafficking". *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/technology/fact-check-this-pizzeria-is-not-a-child-trafficking-site.html.

[5] Lacapria, K. (2016). "Is Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria home to a child abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton?". *Snopes*. https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/pizzagate-conspiracy/.

media, rumors and speculations around Comet Ping Pong continued to circulate on social media, generating over a million Twitter messages with the hashtag #pizzagate.[6]

According to Craig Silverman of Buzzfeed, one of the first journalists to investigate the association between social media and disinformation, Pizzagate "shows how Trump supporters, members of 4chan and Reddit, and right-wing blogs in the United States and in other countries combined to create and spread viral misinformation during the election season."[7] It also demonstrates how thin are the boundaries between virtual and real repercussions of disinformation, and how "real-world harassment and violence can emerge as a direct result of media manipulation and misinformation online" (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 56). The conspiracy theory is thus a case in point of the multilayered, collaborative and troublesome post-truth dynamics at work during the 2016 US elections, as a plurality of actors motivated by different but overlapping reasons was involved in its creation, circulation and real-life escalation.

The most active sources of allegations behind Pizzagate were the imageboard 4chan and the discussion forum Reddit,[8] popular especially among a variety of Internet subcultures, as well as with people affiliated with the American ethnonationalist far-right, the so-called alt-right.[9] Social media were also instrumental in igniting the conspiracy theory: the first allegation that Hillary Clinton was involved in a pedophile ring was made by a Twitter account associated with White supremacists on October 30, 2016. In a cross-pollination between far-right and anti-Clinton social media users, the tweet referenced a Facebook message by an American woman claiming to have revelations from the New York Police Department about material on the laptop of Anthony Weiner—former US Congressman involved in a 'sexting' scandal with a minor—which suggested that Hillary Clinton was part of a child trafficking ring

[6] BBC. (2016). "The Saga of 'Pizzagate': The fake story that shows how conspiracy theories spread". *BBC News*. http://www.bbc.com/news/blogstrending-38156985.

[7] Silverman, C. (2016). "How the bizarre conspiracy theory behind 'Pizzagate' was spread". *Buzzfeed News*. https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/fever-swamp-election.

[8] Reddit is an on-line aggregator of news, reviews and discussions, popular especially among hackers and software developers.

[9] Alt-right personalities such as Mike Cernovich were actively involved in promoting Pizzagate.

in association with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.[10] Revelations about the emails found on Weiner laptop that were relevant to the Hillary Clinton email controversy—possibly the most prominent theme of the 2016 campaign—started to circulate on 4chan and Reddit, stoking fantastic conjectures among their users. Some of these were picked up by both junk-news web sites and 'clickbait fabricators' (Benkler et al. 2018), often styled to appear as legitimate news sources, which were important drivers of disinformation in 2016.

At the same time, many 4chan and Reddit users were sifting through the thousands of emails that been hacked from the mail servers of John Podesta by means of a phishing scam. The hacking, done by two groups of Russian hackers called Fancy Bear and Cozy Bear,[11] had resulted in a leaking by the counter-information site WikiLeaks of a trove of personal email communication of Podesta. When WikiLeaks started making the email available on-line, users of 4chan, in particular those active in the /pol/ discussion group, a virtual meeting place for Trump supporters, searched through them for any information that could be used to damage Hillary Clinton. Some Reddit users, active on the discussion group r/The Donald, also popular among Trump supporters, suggested that the emails contained coded messages alluding to pedophiliac practices. The term 'pizza,' for example, frequently recurring in the email exchanges of Podesta, was alleged to be used by the pedophile ring to suggest 'underage girls.'[12] This is when the various rumors started to be collected in a common narrative that was labeled Pizzagate. After such narrative involving Comet Ping Pong appeared on 4chan and Reddit, Facebook right-wing partisan pages and professional conspiracy theorists like the British David Icke and the American Alex Jones gave wider amplification to the initial rumors and creative elaborations. While a lot of grassroots input

[10] It should be noted that conspiracy theories on the alleged links between the Clintons and pedophiliac rings have also been popular among right-wing circles for years, especially since revelations were made public in the mid-2000s on the friendship between Bill Clinton and Jeffrey Epstein, a wealthy hedge-fund manager and convicted sex offender.

[11] "One was allegedly associated with the GRU, Russian military intelligence, the other was possibly associated with the FSB (successor to the KGB)" (Benkler et al. 2018, 239).

[12] James Alefantis, the owner of Comet Ping Pong, was involved in the conspiracy theory because his name had appeared in the email exchanges with Podesta, when the two were discussing the possibility of organizing a fundraising at the pizzeria.

went into popularizing Pizzagate, the role of Alex Jones and of other social media conspirations was crucial. Pizzagate thus shows "how online virality—far from a measure of sincere popularity—is a force that can be manipulated and sustained by just a few influential social media accounts" (Singer and Brooking 2018, 404). This observation is also valid for the role of social media influencers amplifying Russian propaganda in the context of the Syrian Civil War, as discussed in the next chapter.

The Pizzagate conspiracy theory took shape as a collective mythology by means of a collaborative storytelling via social media, imageboards, discussion forums and other alternative on-line information outlets, which was amplified by post-truth influencers and entrepreneurs. A fantastic narrative that nonetheless had all the characteristics to excite and mobilize the most radical fringes among Donald Trump supporters and even some people close to the Trump administration (Neiwert 2017). What makes this conspiracy theory particularly interesting is of course its timing, right before the 2016 US presidential elections, as its exposure and resonance were magnified by an electoral cycle characterized by a highly polarized and aggressive public discourse, which has proved fertile ground for the circulation of misinformation and disinformation (Benkler et al. 2018).

Pizzagate had also clear connections with another problematic aspect of the 2016 election cycle, namely the Russian cyberattacks and media manipulation strategies to influence the American democratic process, as discussed in the previous chapter. The hacking of the Podesta emails made possible by the actions of Russian hackers, allegedly under direct supervision of the Kremlin,[13] was in fact the initial spark of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory. Also, means of computational propaganda (Woolley and Howard 2018) linked to Russian manipulation and influence tactics played a role on the amplification of Pizzagate, as "a combination of bots and bot-like accounts were used to make the topic trend, suggest grass-roots activity, and provide enough legitimacy that real people were inspired to join in" (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 38).

[13] Russian hackers, according to preliminary investigation by US authorities, were operating under the direct supervision of Vladimir Putin, even though the Kremlin denied any allegations, admitting only the possibility that some Russian hackers had been overly 'patriotic'. See McIntire, M. (2016). "How a Putin fan overseas pushed pro-Trump propaganda to Americans". *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/17/world/europe/russia-propaganda-elections.html.

The sudden popularization of Pizzagate is an indication of the unique dynamics that were at work during the 2016 American elections. All the actors involved in the 'epistemic crisis' (Benkler et al. 2018) plaguing that election cycle operated jointly: foreign actors, associated with antagonistic governments,[14] engaged in operations of media manipulation in the form of leaking of sensitive information, which resulted in the circulation of disinformation via on-line networked communities of trolls, far-right activists, social media, alternative news outlets, fake news factories and political influencers. Such vast seeding of disinformation, amplified by social media algorithms favoring sensational content, found a receptive ground in the ideological milieu of far-right or populist movements, as in the case of the American ethnonationalist far-right, which welcomed any type of information or narratives that could be used to mobilize their base against establishment politicians, and to challenge the discourse of the so-called mainstream liberal media.[15]

Given the global nature of Pizzagate, which is a case in point for the complexity of the current flows of on-line disinformation, it should not be surprising to find out that the conspiracy theory resonated well beyond the American borders. The so-called junk news and clickbait entrepreneurs active out of Veles,[16] Macedonia, a major producer of disinformation on the 2016 election cycle, feasted on Pizzagate and participated to the further elaboration and circulation on the original allegations about Comet Ping Pong, adding new fictional elements to its core narrative.

Pizzagate was also for a while also a sensitive political topic in Turkey, where in late 2016 a group of supporters of Turkish President Erdogan started to spread the same rumors on Comet Ping Pong that had been circulating in the United States. Social media accounts and trolls affiliated with the Erdogan AK party (Bulut and Yörük 2017) were at the forefront of the disinformation effort, supported by the main national media, which

[14] Calabresi, M., & Rebala, P. (2016). "Here's the evidence Russia hacked the democratic national committee". *Time Magazine*. http://time.com/4600177/election-hack-russia-hillary-clinton-donald-trump.

[15] Confessore, N., & Wakabayashi, D. (2017). "How Russia harvested American rage to reshape U.S. politics". *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/technology/russia-election-facebook-ads-rage.html.

[16] Subramanian, S. (2017). "The Macedonian Teens who mastered fake news". *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news.

popularized the alleged scandal to the broader Turkish public.[17] The pro-Erdogan Turkish commentators expediently took the Pizzagate scandal as an indication of the moral corruption of Western leaders, above all Hillary Clinton, thus tapping on the similar rhetoric against liberal and globalist leaders used by populist and nationalist politicians such as Donald Trump in United States or Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson in the UK. Writing on the subject on *The Daily Dot*, Turkish journalist and researcher Efrem Sozeri argued that Pizzagate was a case of a truly far-right global conspiracy theory, appealing to both White nationalists in the United States and right-wing Islamist nationalists in Turkey. In a whirlwind of misinformation and disinformation on a global scale, a Twitter account named @pizza_gate, which for a while was one of the main sources of updates on the alleged scandal, turned out to be equally popular among conspiracy theorists in the United States as in Turkey.

The Turkish interest for Pizzagate, and its reverberations on Western media, illustrates very well how post-truth as a global condition currently occurs within complex networks of reiterations, modifications and amplifications of false information extending beyond national borders. Such fictional narratives can become political expedients in contexts that are completely different from those in which they were born. At the same time, the global feedback on the Pizzagate reinforced the belief among American conspiracy theorists and right-wing voters, and the involvement of Turkish media was as unexpected as it was timely for the supporters of Donald Trump.

One of the most significant aspects of the Pizzagate incident was the already mentioned inability of the verification process by official authorities and mainstream media to change the belief of the conspiracy theory proponents. Fact-checking efforts ended up backfiring and stoking even further the suspicions among believers. This fits Harsin's theory that in the post-truth condition, debunking and verification are rarely effective

[17] The Turkish pro-government media became interested in Pizzagate as a form of retaliation against domestic critics and opponents of the president, who were accused of not giving the alleged scandal enough attention after they had promoted a very critical campaign against a foundation linked to Erdogan that had been involved in a documented case of pedophilia. See Sozeri, E. (2016). "How the alt-right's PizzaGate conspiracy hid real scandal in Turkey". *The Daily Dot*. https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/pizzagate-alt-right-turkey-trolls-child-abuse/.

since there is no trusted public venue in which authority can definitively debunk disinformation and thus suture the conflicting segments of the public opinion (Harsin 2015).

3.3 From Epstein to QAnon: The Emancipatory and Playful Side of Conspiracy Theories

There is, however, another aspect about the genesis and circulation of Pizzagate that is worth taking into consideration. Uscinski (2017) offers an original reading of conspiracy theories that isn't necessarily concerned with their epistemic value. Instead, he considers conspiracy theories as being eminently 'notions about power' that serve as resources and tools of dissent by the weak and disenfranchised segments of society to offset against inequality and injustice. Seen through this emancipatory perspective, conspiracy theories offer an outlet of imaginary and imaginative articulation for popular fantasies and aspirations about power, and about challenges to the existing power structure.

In this sense, one could read conspiracy theories as attempts to address the hidden and more opaque aspects of power. Such narrative forms of mobilization against power, while often relying on scarce evidence, on a surplus of fictional elaboration, and only a small kernel of truth, nonetheless play an important role in freeing people's aspirations of political change. As argued by Kalpokas, "menacing narratives that involve (…) plots by malicious others can have a strong 'feel good' factor" and are "efficient in arousing and mobilizing audiences" (Kalpokas 2018, 19). Pizzagate served this function as it presented the elementary narrative structure of the classic conspiracy theory format, based on "archetypal malevolent elites carrying out their dirty deeds behind everybody's back with impunity" (Kalpokas 2018, 19).

Conspiracy theories can thus function as fictions charged with affective and aspirational values, providing the publics with possibility of agency in the construction of emancipatory expressions. Fictional narratives with a paranoid streak such as conspiracy theories operate as forms of cooperation between grassroots aspirational efforts and top-down strategies of public opinion manipulation. While enabled and exploited by foreign agents and also by political influencers such as Alex Jones, Pizzagate also served as an outlet for regular people to express their grievances against the perceived impunity of political and financial elites. This latter function

of the conspiracy theory is best encapsulated by the recent revelations surrounding the arrest and subsequent death of disgraced financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, whose name was associated with the Clintons in the original rumors about the child trafficking ring allegedly operating in Washington.

As already discussed, the debunking of Pizzagate, while ineffective in diffusing the anxieties around the fictitious scandal, it nonetheless widely demonstrated that the allegations on Comet Ping Pong were baseless. Even a radical conspiracy theorist such as Alex Jones retracted his initial support for Pizzagate after the incident at the Washington pizzeria.[18] However, months after the violent exploit of Edgar Welch, some supporters of Pizzagate were still convinced that the theory contained some truth, and "expressed frustration that the mainstream news was not taking their concerns seriously and covered the story only dismissively" (Marwick and Lewis 2017), claiming that it deserved a more thorough investigation. This insistence could be explained by acknowledging that there was, in fact, a small element of truth in Pizzagate that did have an actual reference to real events.

The collective storytelling that gave rise to Pizzagate was initially started by a rumor that in fact addressed an element of the judicial case involving Jeffrey Epstein, specifically the reference to the so-called Lolita Express plane that belonged to the millionaire, which he used to bus his elite circle of friends and underage girls to his private islands in the Caribbean.[19] The Epstein case, dating back to 2005, had for many years lingered in the background of the broader political discourse as an example of how powerful people could use their connections to defy justice. In 2008, Jeffrey Epstein was charged by the Palm Beach Police Department for soliciting prostitution with minors. Since 2005, he had also been under investigation by the FBI on the allegation that he had been running a vast trafficking and cult-like sex enslavement ring involving dozens of

[18] Fahri, P. (2017). "Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones backs off 'Pizzagate' claims". *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/conspiracy-theorist-alex-jones-backs-off-pizzagate-claims/2017/03/24/6f0246fe-10cd-11e7-ab07-07d9f521f6b5_story.html.

[19] Bryan, N. (2015). "Flight logs put Clinton, Dershowitz on Pedophile Billionaire's sex jet". *Gawker*. https://gawker.com/flight-logs-put-clinton-dershowitz-on-pedophile-billio-1681039971.

underage girls across multiple locations. However, Epstein was only sentenced for his lesser crimes, and the FBI investigation on the more serious crimes was blocked when Epstein entered into discussions for a plea deal with then Miami US Attorney Alexander Acosta.[20] The deal signed by Epstein was kept secret, and the sentence he received is considered to be the most lenient ever received by a serious sex offender.[21]

In July 2019, the FBI arrested Epstein with new charges of sex trafficking with minors and conspiracy to engage in sex trafficking minors, and the following month, he was found dead in his cell in a Manhattan correctional facility. The circumstances surrounding Epstein death became immediately fertile ground for further conspiracy theories, which echoed some of the elements of the original Pizzagate narrative, suggesting the existence of a powerful cabal of political and financial elites who feared his possible confessions after his arrest.[22] In the aftermath of his death, Donald Trump retweeted a message by a right-wing personality alleging that the Clintons were involved in the murder of Epstein. In the now global amplification process of conspiracy theories, Russian information channels such as RT and Sputnik dedicated coverage to Epstein's suspicious death in jail. Two rival hashtags, #clintonbodycountand #trumpbodycount, went viral at the time, pushing opposing theories about the involvement with his death in prison of either the Clintons or Trump, who both had been associated with Epstein in the past.[23]

As one commentator observed, "the circumstances of Epstein's life and career are essentially tailor-made to produce conspiracy theories (…)

[20] Ward, V. (2019). "Jeffrey Epstein's sick story played out for years in plain sight". *The Daily Beast*. https://www.thedailybeast.com/jeffrey-epsteins-sick-story-played-out-for-years-in-plain-sight?ref=scroll.

[21] Epstein served only 13 months in a county jail with extensive work release and privileged treatment, when he could have faced up to 45 years in a federal prison. See Brown, J., & Albright, A. (2018). "Perversion of justice". *Miami Herald*. https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/article221897990.html.

[22] Epstein's cellmate was removed without replacement, the security guards fell asleep while on watch and the camera in front of his cells was malfunctioning. See Benner, K., & Ivory, D. (2019). "Jeffrey Epstein death: 2 guards slept through checks and falsified records". *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/13/nyregion/jeffrey-epstein-jail-officers.html.

[23] Beggin, R. (2019). "Trump again boosts a baseless conspiracy theory, this one about Jeffrey Epstein". *Vox*. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/8/11/20800787/jeffrey-epstein-donald-trump-conspiracy-theory-clinton-body-count-retweet-killed-death-by-suicide.

because so many of the most important questions about how Epstein gained and retained his power have gone unanswered."[24] Some speculations suggested that Epstein's main business was "collecting footage or other evidence of his powerful friends having sex with underage girls so he could force the men to invest money with him."[25] Other rumors pointed to his involvement with the US government. During his testimony to the Trump transition team, Acosta said that at the time of the plea deal he was told that "Epstein 'belonged to intelligence' and to leave it alone."[26] Both allegations fit of course well with the basic conspiracy theory frame of powerful groups scheming secretly, with the assistance of State apparatuses, to advance illicit agendas. The fact that they have been lingering as unaddressed or even suppressed issues for many years reinforces the collective suspicions about the political establishment that allowed Epstein to defy justice.

Pizzagate thus operated as a form of collective and spontaneous elaboration, based on a kernel of truth, of the largely unaddressed Epstein scandal, which one Epstein victims called a "conspiracy that a lot of powerful people wanted to go away."[27] The core narrative element of Pizzagate—the existence of a child trafficking ring among powerful elites—represented a sort of repressed or hidden truth that was channeled through a storytelling in the form of a conspiracy theory. In this sense, one is tempted to agree with Uscinski bold claim that "conspiracy theories are necessary to the healthy functioning of a society because they help balance against concentrations of power" (Uscisnki 2017, 2). This reading of the phenomenon echoes the interpretation of post-truth communications as 'aspirational emancipatory counternarratives,' which can offer an immediately gratifying, albeit elusive, forms of political action for the 'marginalized and the alienated,' as argued by Kalpokas.

With some many unanswered questions surrounding the life and death of Epstein, it shouldn't surprise that the core of suspicion at the heart of

[24] North, A. (2019). "Why the Jeffrey Epstein case inspires so many conspiracy theories". *Vox*. https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/8/14/20803950/jeffrey-epstein-conspiracy-theories-clinton-trump-acosta.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] 60 Minutes Australia. "Exposing Jeffrey Epstein's international sex trafficking ring". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQOOxOl9l80.

Pizzagate survived even after the fading of the conspiracy theory. Pizzagate in a sense didn't die out, but it simply morphed into a different, even more complex conspiracy theory going by the name of QAnon. QAnon emerged in October 2017, again by means of its circulation via 4chan, sharing the same narrative core as Pizzagate: the existence of a secret global child sex ring run by liberal political and financial elites. Unlike Pizzagate, QAnon posited also the involvement of so-called deep state entities.[28] But just as with Pizzagate, QAnon storytelling hints to the core elements of the Epstein scandal that remain undisclosed and unaddressed, especially the role of well-connected politicians, businessman and celebrities involved in the child trafficking ring. With a further fictional twist on the basic Pizzagate storytelling, QAnon proponents also claim that the Mueller investigation on Trump's alleged collusion with Russia was in fact just a cover-up for what was instead a secret collaboration between the two to bring down the alleged global child sex ring.[29]

The name QAnon is a reference to the highest security clearance available in the Department of Energy in the US government, allowing access to information about nuclear weapons. A 4Chan user called Q Clearance Patriot, or simply Q, claiming to have top security clearance, started to post with relative frequency cryptic messages—'bread crumbs' or QDrops in the parlance of its followers—often written as riddles, aimed at sparking people curiosity on a series of political issues. The posts then became material for speculation and investigation by the broader community of 4chan, who collectively elaborated on Q's posts. The conspiracy theory thus evolved as a collection of various political concoctions, also going under the title of 'The Storm' or 'The Great Awakening,' revolving around a common theme, that is the role of Donald Trump as savior of regular American citizens against the scheming of political elites and State

[28] The 'deep state' is a conspiracy theory suggesting the clandestine existence of a shadow or hidden power system of governmental and non-governmental entities, relying on cronyism and collusion, within the legitimately elected government.

[29] Because of its delirious and convoluted narrative, some have even speculated that QAnon is in fact the product of an elaborate hoax against Trump supporters, inspired by the work of Italian activist collective Luther Blissett. According to this interpretation, QAnon was meant at poking fun at right-wing conspiracy theories and their supporters, but it was taken seriously by imageboards members and it eventually spiraled out of control. See Davis, B. (2018). "Is the QAnon conspiracy the work of artist-activist pranksters? The evidence for (and against) a dangerous hypothesis". *Artnet*. https://news.artnet.com/opinion/q-anon-hoax-1329983.

apparatuses. As a result, QAnons have become closely associated with the broader community of Trump supporters, and QAnon t-shirts and signs frequently appear at Trump events.

Another element of similarity between the Pizzagate and QAnon is their nature of collaborative and playful storytelling emerging out of the subcultural milieu of imageboards. The various plot twists of the QAnon narrative, ranging from the implausible to the ludicrous, often just ended up adding ironic layers to the basic set of beliefs, legitimate as it might be for some proponents of the theory. Irony and provocation are integral to the conversations occurring on imageboards, and fictional elaborations are often exaggerated in order to trigger reactions in the media or among the broader public opinion (Nagle 2017; Phillips 2015). QAnon pushed the collaborative and playful angle even further by making the participation in the conspiracy theory as a kind of role-playing game. As commented by Alyssa Rosenberg in the Washington Post, QAnon added an element of so-called gamification, or the application of game principles, to the standard process of elaboration and circulation of conspiracy theories: "The best way to think of QAnon may be not as a conspiracy theory, but as an unusually absorbing alternate-reality game with extremely low barriers to entry. The 'Q' poster's cryptic missives give believers a task to complete on a semiregular basis. Even more so than conventional video games (…) QAnon is open-ended."[30] The game-like participation in QAnon is one of its most appealing aspects, and it reflects a common trait of on-line conspiracy theory and on-line harassment campaigns, which entice new members with entertaining experience such as scoring points, gaining status within the community or increasing its visibility. This is of course also a reflection of the subcultural milieu of 4chan, infused with reference to videogame culture (Phillips 2015).

As with Pizzagate, also QAnon migrated from on-line to real life, thanks to its popularization via an extensive media coverage, support by celebrities and its game-like nature. However, just like with its precursor, the transition to real life didn't occur without violent repercussions. In May 2019, after a series of violent crimes associated with QAnon believers, including the murder of a mafia boss, the FBI identified QAnon as a domestic terrorist threat, making it the first fringe conspiracy theory to be

[30] Rosenberg, A. (2019). "I understand the temptation to dismiss QAnon. Here's why we can't". *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/08/07/qanon-isnt-just-conspiracy-theory-its-highly-effective-game/.

labeled as such. An FBI memo on the subject said that "conspiracy theories very likely will emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace, occasionally driving both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts."[31]

While one can acknowledge, like Uscinski and Kalpokas do, that conspiracy theories can perform a politically and emotionally liberating function for their supporters—as it was revealed by the Epstein case—there remains a fundamentally problematic aspect about the construction of simplistic and paranoid political narratives intent at obfuscating evidence-based investigations and official accounts. As commented by a researcher on QAnon, such a complex and multilayered conspiracy theory can function and spread since society now operates as a 'marketplace of realities,'[32] a notion that echoes Harsin's concept of truth-markets (Harsin 2015) as the founding elements of the post-truth condition. Through fantastical collective storytelling and game-like experiences on various contentious political issues, on-line communities have given people the ability to break down a consensual, evidence-based reality and to transform it by bending it to their desires, aspirations or fears, even the most radical or delirious.

3.4 'Remove Kebab': Ethnonationalism Between Memes and Terrorism

In the Facebook Live feed streamed by Brenton Tarrant, the Australian far-right terrorist and White supremacist who killed 51 people in two separate attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019, one particular song, among others, could be heard playing in the attacker's car moments before he began shooting inside the Al Noor mosque. The song is called 'Remove Kebab,' also known as 'Serbia strong,' an Islamophobic and Serbian nationalist song of the turbo-folk genre. The lyrics celebrate Radovan Karadžić, the Bosnian Serb leader in the 1990s Yugoslav wars who was found guilty of genocide against Bosnian Muslims. Since the mid-2000s, the song has gained Internet popularity among a loose

[31] Budryk, Z. (2019). "FBI memo warns QAnon poses potential terror threat: Report". *The Hill*. https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/fbi/455770-fbi-memo-warns-qanon-poses-a-potential-terror-threat-report.

[32] Rosenberg (2019).

community of videogame players and White nationalists.[33] For White supremacists and ethnonationalists active on 4chan and 8chan, the phrase *Remove Kebab* has become a synonym for their Islamophobic inclinations, the most radical of which is the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from Western countries.[34] In the 74-page long document—a manifesto of some sorts entitled 'The Great Replacement'—that Tarrant circulated via Twitter and on 8chan before the attack, he referred to himself as someone who has been "working part time as a Kebab removalist," an ironic presentation of his own anti-Muslim stance as well as an obvious homage to the Internet memes spawned around the 'Remove Kebab' song.

The title of Tarrant's manifesto, where he laid out the background and the motivations behind his murderous actions, cloaking them in a humorous language full of subcultural references, hints to the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, a recurring theme in the rhetoric of far-right nationalist movements. While circulating among European right-wing circles for over a century, the conspiracy theory was recently re-popularized by French author Renaud Camus, who claims that technocratic elites in France and in Europe are responsible for a plan aimed at replacing Europeans of White ethnicity with immigrants of different ethnicity, particularly from Muslim countries.

In his 2011 work *Le Grand Remplacement*, Camus blames industrialization and capitalism for encouraging mass immigration, unregulated demographic growth among immigrants and low birth rate among White Westerners. These factors are considered to be parts of the engineered substitution of the White European ethnicity and cultural tradition by Muslim immigrants, actively pursued by a loosely defined transnational

[33] Novislav Dajić, the song's accordion player, himself convicted for multiple murders during the war, has become a widespread 4chan meme as "Dat Face Soldier". See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Remove_Kebab.

[34] "A YouTube video for the song (…) shows emaciated Muslim prisoners in Serb-run detention camps during the war. 'Beware Ustashas and Turks' says the song, using wartime, derogatory terms for Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims used by Serb nationalists." See Gec, J. (2019). "Suspected New Zealand gunman fascinated with Ottoman wars, named rifles after legendary Serbs". *The Morning Call*. https://www.mcall.com/news/breaking/mc-nws-new-zealand-shooter-balkans-20190316-story.html.

elite that Camus calls the 'Davos-cracy'[35]—from the Davos summit—consisting of liberal politicians and business executives for whom workers are replaceable elements without any connection to their homeland or cultural heritage. "We are experiencing an invasion on a level never seen before in history. Millions of people pouring across our borders, legally. Invited by the state and corporate entities to replace the White people" write Tarrant in his manifesto.[36]

The Great Replacement theory parallels that of the 'White Genocide,' another trope of contemporary White nationalist and supremacist discourse and propaganda (Neiwert 2017). It refers to the idea that the genetic and cultural heritage of White people in the United States is being jeopardized or even annihilated by means of miscegenation and forced assimilation with non-White immigrants. The conspiracy theory was made popular by American neo-Nazi David Lane in his 1995 *White Genocide Manifesto*, where he placed explicit blame on Jewish elites for allegedly masterminding the plot. While the Great Replacement is at its core an Islamophobic belief, Lane's ideology is anti-Semitic. The parallel themes of the Great Replacement and of White Genocide have both antecedents in right-wing politics during the decolonization era in Europe and in post-Civil War America,[37] and in recent years, they have become central tenets of a global discourse of White supremacists and far-right terrorists responsible for violent acts in multiple countries, as well of the rhetoric of right-wing political parties and populist movements both in Europe[38] and in the United States (Davey and Ebner 2019). Brenton Tarrant made reference to both conspiracy theories in his manifesto, and

[35] Wilson, A. (2019). "Fear-filled apocalypses: The far-right's use of conspiracy theories". *Oxford Research Group*. https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/fear-filled-apocalypses-the-far-rights-use-of-conspiracy-theory.

[36] Tarrant, B. (2019). *The great replacement* (p. 2). http://tarrantmanifesto.com/.

[37] Schwartzburg, R. (2019). "No, there isn't a White Genocide". *Jacobin Magazine*. https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/09/white-genocide-great-replacement-theory.

[38] Another version of the same conspiracy theory, popular in Europe, goes by the name of Kalergi Plan: Ward, J. (2018). "Day of the trope: White nationalist memes thrive on Reddit's r/The_Donald". *Southern Poverty Law Center*. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/19/day-trope-white-nationalist-memes-thrive-reddits-rthedonald.

in the slogans written on his weapons, he referred to both Lane's and Camus' ideas.[39]

While explicitly referencing several concepts from the conspiracy theories above, Tarrant's Manifesto was, however, a more stratified text than a simple espousal of right-wing anxieties about immigration. According to far-right radicalization expert Robert Evans,[40] the sprawling text was written with a series of layered references and intentions, in typical troll style (Nagle 2017), in order to provoke a reaction in the media and to inspire potential copycats by signaling his familiarity to the 4chan and 8chan subcultures. Tarrant manifesto and his communications via social media were thus addressed to two types of intended audience. At one level, they were meant to be read and absorbed by the media, together with other elements of his 'media-friendly' violent actions, such as the Facebook Live streaming, which added to his violent rampage an immersive quality typical of first-person shooter videogames. The first part of the manifesto is structured as a mock interview, presumably to provide media with soundbites to be widely distributed. However, unlike the densely theoretical terrorists' manifesto of the past, in his document Tarrant inserted several jokes, with the goal of stoking controversy and sparking media curiosity, but also of disguising his messages under a layer of irony that would cast doubt on its reliability and the seriousness of his political action.

Tarrant's crafting of this part of the manifesto mirrors the on-line practice of 'shitposting,' typical also of alt-right communications (Marwick and Lewis 2017; Singer and Brooking 2018), which consists of spreading "content, most of it ironic, low-quality trolling, for the purpose of provoking an emotional reaction in less Internet-savvy viewers" and to

[39] While originated in France, the Great Replacement ideological trope has now become global and influences American far-right movements as well. During the 2017 Charlottesville rally *Unite the Right*, which was marked by widespread violence, including the killing of a young woman protesting the rally, people could be heard singing 'You will not replace us' and 'Jews will not replace us', which refer to both Camus' and Lane's ideas. See Chatterton Williams, T. (2017). "The French origins of 'you will not replace us'". *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-french-origins-of-you-will-not-replace-us.

[40] Evans, R. (2019). "Shitposting, inspirational terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre". *Bellingcat*. https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/.

"to derail productive discussion and distract readers."[41] Among the references to the imageboard subculture, Tarrant included the well-known textual meme 'Navy Seal copypasta'[42] in the mock self-interview. Such meme was targeted at imageboards members, but it was also meant to trick journalists, so that they would mistakenly believe the attacker to be a former Navy Seal. In the manifesto, Brenton also credits American right-wing personality Candace Owens with beginning his radicalization. While Owens has championed anti-immigration positions, this statement was certainly meant to troll the media, since it was followed by Tarrant claiming that the videogame Spyro the Dragon 3 taught him ethnonationalism. This could be interpreted as responding to an established practice among *anons*,[43] or members of 4chan and 8chan, to troll or provoke the media for the sake of the *lulz* (Phillips 2015).

At a deeper level, however, the ironic parts of the manifesto were also meant to be received, both as a source of inspiration and as a set of codes signaling subcultural affiliation, by a global network of trolls, alt-right and far-right sympathizers. According to Evans, some of the content of the manifesto acted as bait "to draw the attention of his real intended audience."[44] Ambiguity and irony are a common rhetorical strategy in the discourse of far-right activists, as proudly claimed by alt-right poster boy and provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos (Cosentino 2017). Before leaving the car to enter the mosque and commit multiple murders, Tarrant could be heard saying "Remember lads, subscribe to PewDiePie," which is another reference to a 4chan and 8chan jargon. His ironic yet disruptive strategy is rendered obvious in this particular passage from the manifesto, where he calls on people who share his view to stir conflict by means of ambiguous tactics: "Place posters near public parks calling for sharia law, then in the next week place posters over such posters calling for the expulsion of all immigrants, repeat in every area of public life until the crisis arises." This post-truth approach to subversive political action echoes the manipulative

[41] Ibid.

[42] "Navy Seal Copypasta (…) is a facetious message containing a series of ridiculous claims and grandiose threats that portray the poster as an Internet tough guy stereotype". See https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/navy-seal-copypasta.

[43] The word is an abbreviation of the word anonymous, since the vast majority of the posts are by anonymous users.

[44] Evans (2019).

tactics originally conceptualized by Surkov in Russia and employed by the IRA during the 2016 US elections, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Tarrant thus appears to have crafted the perfect terrorist political manifesto of the post-truth era, skillfully tiptoeing a fine line between a radical fascist ideology and ironic jokes, between real threats and fictional elements, just like a Joker-type figure that entertains his fans and the media while committing hideous crimes. In the aftermath of the attack, the mainstream media channels, as well the main social media platforms, made several efforts not to publicize the attacker's Facebook video nor his manifesto, in order to limit the possibilities of copycats. Tarrant, however, had made sure that his intended audience had received it in advance. On March 15, 2019, just before the events in Christchurch, an anonymous message—most likely submitted by Tarrant himself—was posted to 8chan's /pol/board announcing an attack, which was to be livestreamed on Tarrant's Facebook page, as well as links to several copies of the manifesto uploaded to different web sites.

In the post, Tarrant declared his intention to move from 'shitposting' to 'effort posting,' which in the anon parlance means resorting to actual actions in real life. The post also encouraged other members of the imageboard in spreading Tarrant's message by means of "memes and shitposting," that is in the same semi-serious style of communications used by Tarrant and by the broader imageboard subculture. In the manifesto, Tarrant also encourages to "Create memes, post memes, and spread memes" claiming that "Memes have done more for the ethno-nationalist movement than any manifesto."[45] This statement explains why Tarrant's manifesto was full of memetic references, and reveals its belief that the most effective forms of inspiration and mobilization for on-line activists are memes and other elements of Internet popular culture. The validity of Tarrant belief in memetic warfare (Singer and Brooking 2018) is corroborated by the imageboards' reactions to the Christchurch attack. According to Evans, *anons* generally responded with enthusiasm to the actions and antics of Tarrant, celebrating them on 8chan as the achievement by one of them: "The shooter's frequent use of in-jokes and memes played extremely well with this crowd. (…) The shooter seems to have achieved his goal of providing the anons of 8chan with lulz, and with inspiration" (Evans 2019).

[45] Tarrant, B. (2019). *The great replacement* (p. 57). http://tarrantmanifesto.com/.

According to his own declaration in the manifesto, Tarrant became radicalized as a far-right terrorist two years prior to his attack in Christchurch. During a number of travels to various European countries in 2016 and 2017, in the aftermath of multiple ISIS-inspired attacks to European cities, he became particularly concerned with the threat of Islamic fundamentalism in the West. He also had become fascinated with the Balkan tradition of anti-Muslim sentiment, and with the history of the Balkan wars of resistance against the Ottoman Empire. Many of the weapons used by Tarrant during the attacked had been marked with references to famous historical episodes of such history.[46]

By his own admission in the manifesto, the Christchurch attacker drew also inspiration from Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Breivik[47]—who in 2011 killed 77 people in two separate attacks against government offices and against the Labour Party Youth Association—adding that he had received approval for his actions from people affiliated with Breivik. The 2015 Charleston attack against African-American churchgoers committed by Dylan Roof was also cited as a source of inspiration for Tarrant. More recently, the ideological and communication elements of the Christchurch attack worked as a template for other attacks, including the 2019 El Paso shooting. The El Paso mass killer, Patrick Wood Crusius, had also posted a manifesto on 8chan, in which he echoed many of the same grievances and beliefs expressed by Tarrant, including reference to the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. The most recent sequence of violent actions by White ethnonationalists seems to present a pattern in the functioning of their radical politics, with imageboards and other fringe on-line venues serving as platform of radicalization, ideological support and inspiration that travel across borders, and memes and conspiracy theories serving as a common language and discourse (Davey and Ebner 2019). As conspiracy theories based on White identity politics increasingly circulate on-line, they go beyond being an American or European

[46] One of the rifles also bore the inscription 'Kebab removed'. See Al Jazeera. (2019). "Mosque shooter brandished material glorifying Serb nationalism". *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/zealand-mosque-gunman-inspired-serb-nationalism-190315141305756.html.

[47] "Breivik had shown to be inspired by massacres of Muslims in the Balkans in his 1500-page manifesto published prior to his mass shooting. In his manifesto, Breivik called Karadzic an 'honourable crusader'". Ibid.

political narrative and become a "call to arms to protect what is seen as the white race on a transnational level."[48]

The radicalization of the attacker in El Paso also happened in the 8chan/pol board, and an element of 'gamification' has been observed in the communications around the Christchurch, as well as in the El Paso and Pittsburgh attacks.[49] Among far-right activists and imageboards trolls, a kind of contest aimed at surpassing the body count of previous attacks started to become popular. The game-like quality of on-line conspiracy theory such as QAnon and the Great Replacement, and their violent escalation in real life, seems to be a common thread in the subcultural milieu of imageboards, where ironic layers, playful attitudes and radical political intentions are often intermixed.

Many observers also noted a parallel between the rhetoric of populist leaders such as Donald Trump,[50] who started his presidential campaign in 2016 stoking fears around an alleged invasion of Mexican immigrants with criminal intentions to the United States, and the xenophobic discourse common to the perpetrators of violent attacks in the name of the Great Replacement ideology. Several right-wing politicians and far-right movements have piggybacked on the anti-immigration wave that has swept across the Europe since 2015 and 2016, in the aftermath of the massive exodus of Syrian refugees fleeing from ISIS and Russian aerial bombings. The radical American ethnonationalists who have supported Donald Trump, led by self-styled ideologues such as Richard Spencer, are increasingly aligned with the positions of xenophobic right-wing populism that has surged in many parts of Europe. As radical ideas and beliefs against immigration have gained more traction and media coverage, the defense of European or Western ethno-culture that appears in many of the manifestos of far-right terrorists is becoming a mainstream political theme. The politically ambiguous concept of defending a common cultural heritage is then used as a justification for legitimizing ideas that are at their core dubiously close to racism and hate speech.

[48] Schwartzburg, R. (2019). "The 'white replacement theory' motivates alt-right killers the world over". *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/05/great-replacement-theory-alt-right-killers-el-paso.

[49] Evans (2019).

[50] Berger, J. M. (2018). "Trump is the glue that binds the far right". *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/trump-alt-right-twitter/574219/.

Such surge of ethnonationalist politics across multiple Western countries, as well as in the United States, appears to dovetail with the renewed Russian nationalism infused with religious and messianic references promoted by Putin under the guidance of Volodin. Putin's ambitions for a Russian political and cultural hegemony over Europe, and more broadly over the Western world, is now openly predicated on the defense of Christian heritage and values (Engström 2014). Of course, such strategy also results from Russia's ambitions to regain prominence and to challenge American global dominance. The allegations of connections between the American far-right movements and conservative Russian ideologues and politicians,[51] the already discussed accusations of collusion of the Trump campaign with Russian officials and the evidence of interference of the Russian government in the 2016 elections unearthed by the investigation of the US Department of Justice seem all to fall within a broader strategy by the Russian government to extend its sphere of geopolitical influence by relying on its appeal to a Christian conservative ideology challenging the moral and political relativism of liberal multiculturalism.

Tarrant's critique of the Western liberal democratic order appears to be genuinely rooted in his radical worldview and belief system, which fits with the Russian critique of Western liberal democracy. Identifying the culprit for the current state of social, political and environmental disarray, in his manifesto Tarrant speaks of a "mainstream, 'multicultural,' egalitarian, individualistic insanity" caused by liberal democracy and market capitalism. The suggested solution is to accelerate the crisis by means of "further polarizing Western society," another point that mirrors the Russian interference strategies to undermine the American democratic process discussed in the previous chapter. When arguing for the necessity of "radical, violent change," Tarrant mentions the philosophy of 'accelerationism,' originally proposed by British scholar Nick Land as a political approach to human and social progress based on speeding up economic and technological change and embracing the most destabilizing tendencies of capitalism.[52]

[51] Hawk, B. (2019). "Why far-right nationalists like Steve Bannon have embraced a Russian ideologue". *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/16/why-far-right-nationalists-like-steve-bannon-have-embraced-russian-ideologue/.

[52] Full automation of the production processes and the merging of human and technological dimensions are also advocated as necessary and inevitable for progress. Accelerationism, particularly the strand espoused by Mark Fisher, one of Land's students, has been

A darker, more subversive strand of the original Land idea has found warm reception among far-right movements across the world. This version of accelerationism aims at exacerbating existing social and political conflicts in order to undermine the foundations and the fabric of democracy, with the goal of establishing White ethno-states devoid of immigrants. This type of right-wing accelerationism, also known as 'darkcel,' is the political philosophy echoed by Tarrant in his manifesto, where he argues: "Stability and comfort are the enemies of revolutionary change. Therefore, we must destabilize and discomfort society wherever possible.(…)" through actions such as "voting for political candidates that radically change or challenge entrenched systems, radicalizing public discourse by both supporting, attacking, vilifying, and exaggerating all societal conflicts and attacking or even assassinating weak or less radical leaders/influencers on either side of social conflicts."[53] Tarrant actions should thus be read through the ideological prism of right-wing accelerationism, which advocates violent actions as means to speed up the decline of Western liberal democracy, alongside other transformative events such as the Brexit and the Trump presidency. As observed by Andy Beckett on The Guardian, "The disruptive US election campaign and manic presidency of Donald Trump, and his ultra-capitalist, anti-government policies, have been seen by an increasing number of observers (…) as the first mainstream manifestation of an accelerationist politics."[54]

Even Tarrant's choice of weapons, including the use of the AR15 military-style assault rifle, was done with an accelerationist mind-set. His goal was to further elevate the status of such deadly and contested weapon—used in many recent mass shootings, including by Edgar Welch in his foray at Comet Ping Pong—as a polarizing wedge within the American debate on gun control. IRA trolls also pushed divisive content on the issue of gun rights in the United States with the same intention of Tarrant that is "to create conflict between the two ideologies within the United

embraced by some fringes of the European left as a political approach that could address the flaws of capitalism by reducing working hours through automation and addressing social conflict through the use of technology.

[53] Tarrant (2019, 77).

[54] Beckett, A. (2017). "Accelerationism: How a fringe philosophy predicted the future we live in". *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in.

States on the ownership of firearms in order to further the social, cultural, political and racial divide."[55] Coherently with his admiration for the Balkan wars against the Ottoman, and against the Bosnian Muslim minority during the Yugoslav wars, Tarrant literally refers the "balkanization of the US" as one of the goals that he aims to achieve through his actions.

In his manifesto, Tarrant hints to a familiar aspiration in the rhetoric of contemporary far-right ethnonationalism, particularly in the United States, which is the fragmentation and the dissolution of the country as a unified federal entity. Such grandiose objective would cause two related consequences, desired by ethnonationalists, which are the decline in the global hegemony of the multicultural United States and the creation of a plurality of ethnically pure smaller nations, along the model pursued by Serbian nationalists during the 1900s Yugoslav wars. Such outcome "will not only result in the racial separation of the people within the United States ensuring the future of the white race on the North American continent, but also ensuring the death of the 'melting pot'."[56] The collapse of the American multiculturalism and the invocation of a race war is another recurring theme of the far-right discourse, and it is a direct reference to the *Turner's Diary*, a dystopian novel by White supremacist author William Luther Pierce, a seminal text in the tradition of the American far-right. The ideas of a race war and the collapse of the United States as necessary preconditions for the emergence of a White ethno-state as a post-America are 'apocalyptic fantasies'[57] frequently espoused also by Richard Spencer, the principal ideologue of the American alt-right.

3.5 Conclusions

The wave of far-right politics that that has swept across the United States and Europe in recent years has brought several conspiracy theories from the fringes of on-line subcultures to the center of mainstream political conversations. Conspiracy theories are not anymore marginal, niche discourses relegated to an inferior epistemic status, but have gained legitimacy as alternative explanations for social and political problems. Their

[55] Tarrant (2019, 9).

[56] Ibid., 57.

[57] Wilson, A. (2019). "Fear-filled apocalypses: The far-right's use of conspiracy theories". *Oxford Research Group*. https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/fear-filled-apocalypses-the-far-rights-use-of-conspiracy-theory.

popularity owes also to the expedient endorsement by demagogic politicians such as Donald Trump. After his own election to the US presidency, Trump has continued spreading conspiracy theories, including the allegation that Obama had wiretapped Trump's office inside the Trump Tower, or that three million people had voted illegally in 2016. It would not be far-fetched to argue that Trump has elevated conspiracy theories as founding elements of his political communication strategy. This signals that the conspiratorial ethos, out of which fictional narratives such as Pizzagate and QAnon have emerged, currently permeates political conversations across from the United States to Europe, with important global ramifications.

A worldview based on conspiracy theories or beliefs "implies a universe governed by design" (Barkun 2013), where all-powerful cabals scheme against the welfare of the majority, or against a weak or dispossessed minority. As belief systems, conspiracy theories mirror the same Manichean divisions that undergird the populist rhetoric, pitting a powerful elite against an innocent and subjugated population. Conspiracy theories, as suggested by Uscinski, encapsulate challenges to power by marginal or disposed groups. More broadly, they signal the existence of a power crisis. It is the crisis of political power and of its representative institutions, from the media to cultural-scientific institutions, that allows for marginal, unorthodox political narratives to breach into the public conversation. The crisis of the epistemic paradigms that have underpinned the functioning of the Western modernity package, consisting on the technocratic management of society and on the twin pillars of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism, has caused the collapse of a regime of truth and consequently allowed the rapid growth of regimes of post-truth, relying on conspiracy theories. People who have stopped trusting institutions adopt conspiracy theories as epistemic gateways to decipher and expose the inner logics of political power.

As Western democracies seem increasingly unable to offer effective solutions to world problems that become more urgent and graver—from environmental threats to widening economic inequality, from massive migration flows to terrorism—conspiracy theories allow their believers to have their fears assuaged by a simple explanation that identifies a culpable subject yet avoids questioning the dynamics of power at their core. They offer a simulation of political action and critique that offers gratification, escapism, entertainment and a sense of political identity, without really

demanding profound inquiry and sustained struggle to effectively address political and social problems.

Most of the conspiracy theories surveyed in this chapter share the common theme of a globalist elite of liberal politicians that operates secretively to undermine the standing of Western countries and of people of White ethnicity. Conspiracy theories on this theme could be seen as a kind of popular narrative that disenfranchised White Westerners tell themselves to process their cultural and political crisis and exorcise their fear of an irreversible decline. Conspiracy theories thus offer simple recipes for explaining complex realities and give their proponents the consolation of seeing themselves as elect carriers of secret and repressed knowledge. For proponents of conspiracy theories, the marginal or fringe status of their knowledge reinforces the belief of being representatives of a marginalized worldview that rests in direct opposition with an epistemic and political status quo. In some cases, as we have seen with the Epstein affair, conspiracy theories do act as channels of suppressed truths, while, however, falling short of really engaging with the structural causes of scandals and injustices.

Barkun (2013) has observed that far-right ideologies often present a convergence between apocalyptic beliefs and conspiracy theories. QAnon and Great Replacement supporters share a paranoid streak that borders with the apocalyptic, envisioning a grand plot aimed at the annihilation of the White race or at the exploitation of innocent victims on a global scale. The apocalyptic and paranoid components of the on-line conspiracy theories draw on a vast milieu of sources of inspiration to identify its multiple culprits, from global financiers like George Soros to the LGBTQ community, from immigrants to feminists. Continuously reinventing themselves, as we saw from the evolution of Pizzagate into QAnon, conspiracy theories transform and adapt by relying tactically on disparate elements from political, cultural and quasi-scientific sources. Barkun calls this type of flexible, constantly changing conspiratorial attitude 'improvisational millennialism,' a type of do-it-yourself, game-like apocalyptic belief system that has conquered on-line communities like 4chan and has motivated people like Tarrant to resort to deadly terrorist actions, all while spreading memes and making jokes.

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