

Conspiracy theories 2020: A new preface

We published 'The rise of conspiracy theories' in *Aufheben* 24 in October 2016. At the time we were aware of an increase in popularity of conspiracy theories as anti-establishment narratives, and felt the urge to analyse their historical development, and their relation to class struggle. We argued that:

Conspiracy theories... express a strong sense of grievance and of estrangement from the state and capital, although in distorted form... Through their appearance of being radical or subversive, they appeal to critical people who seek to attack and expose wrong-doing in the ruling class. But without praxis, they are theories cut off at important points from social reality.

We did not imagine how relevant this article would become just a few months later, with the election of Donald Trump to the US Presidency, and the diffusion in the US of the far right 'Q-Anon' movement supporting Trump against a conspiratorial liberal 'elite'.

The article is even more relevant now, four years on, with the emergence of conspiracy theories around the issue of Covid-19, and with the central role of anti-vaccine and anti-5G campaigners in promoting mass protests and social media misinformation against public health interventions to contain the pandemic.

Viral epidemics have often been associated with conspiracy theories. For example, in the case of Zika,¹ there were conspiracy theories that the disease was a hoax but also conspiracy theories that the virus had been created in labs with some sinister aims. Likewise, in today's conspiracy theories the Covid-19 virus is either a hoax and is a cover for other secret causes of death (e.g., illnesses caused by the 5G mobile band), or was deliberately created to tag the entire population through vaccinations

containing a computer chip. And like many other conspiracy theories, today's Covid conspiracy theories contain clear anti-semitic themes.

²Conspiracy theories often have damaging consequences. To take a recent example, the belief that the combined Measles Mumps Rubella vaccine was part of a conspiracy has been among the reasons for a decline in vaccine uptake³ which in turn has led to rises in childhood measles. In the present case, the more people that believe these theories, the fewer people that observe physical distancing and the other mitigation measures.⁴

As with the 9-11 conspiracy theories that were our focus in 2016, these new conspiracy theories appeal to many people who are hostile to the state, from across the political spectrum. Many of us know people who believe some version of these theories, which now proliferate in everyday conversation, on Facebook and other social media, and almost everywhere outside the places where the official discourses predominate.

As we argued in the case of '9-11 was an inside job', the use of social media alone cannot explain this sudden reach of Covid conspiracy theories. One factor in the present situation is the active promotion of Covid-related conspiracy theories from mainstream, high profile political leaders, including Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil. Nationalists and xenophobes often use pandemics to promote hostility to 'foreigners',⁵ as Trump has done in the case of China.

But more important, ideas around state power and control became connected to our subjective-objective material conditions by the actual Covid crisis. The pandemic is not just a sudden and threatening world crisis. It has resulted in dramatic and far-reaching mitigation measures. If a pandemic

¹ One in five Americans believed in the Zika conspiracy theory. See

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0243-8>

² Rachel E. Greenspan (2020). QAnon builds on centuries of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that put Jewish people at risk. Insider. <https://www.insider.com/qanon-conspiracy-theory-anti-semitism-jewish-racist-believe-save-children-2020-10>

³ Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2014). The effects of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories on vaccination intentions. *PloS one*, 9(2), e89177. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0089177>

⁴ Biddlestone, M., Green, R., & Douglas, K. (2020).

Cultural orientation, powerlessness, belief in conspiracy theories, and intentions to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

British Journal of Social Psychology

<https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bjso.12397>

⁵ Richard J Evans (2020). Why pandemics create conspiracy theories. *New Statesman*.

<https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/coronavirus/2020/04/why-pandemics-create-conspiracy-theories>

Aufheben

occurred in a communist world, we'd still be forced into frequent hand-washing, physical distancing and many of the other measures. But the current public health response to the pandemic around the world - whether in the form of recommendations on hand-washing or laws and coercive threats to 'lockdown' - has taken the form of the intrusion of the state into all aspects of our lives. The Covid 'lockdown' had an immediate and dramatic impact on the lives of everyone, but especially the poorest working class people who struggled financially and were often confined to tiny overcrowded flats with little or no outdoor space.

This brings us back to our article, where we noted that:

...Conspiracy theories gain purchase particularly at times when there is clear shared grievance but also a defeat or retreat, and hence a break between the activities that people might be a part of and the ideas they have to express their understanding of their antagonistic relations.

Messages promoting the anti-lockdown protests, connecting anti-state aspects of conspiracy theories with demands for 'freedom', had a receptive audience among some in an angry working class and disaffected middle class. The pervasiveness of the public health measures and their widespread public acceptance became seen as the attempted -- or even successful -- control of minds and bodies by the hidden forces behind the state.

Yet, crucially, these same people on the anti-lockdown demonstrations are not really anti-state. The enemy is projected away from the actual bourgeois institutions, into an ethereal Olympus populated by nasty billionaire individuals such as George Soros, Bill Gates, or, sometimes, an undefined secret club of 'unelected scientists'. In fact bourgeois institutions, bourgeois relations of property, and the fragmentation of society into individuals seeking to meet only their selfish personal interests, which are consistent with our relations of production, are not threatened by this 'anti-lockdown' campaign. They are instead reinforced: the message here is about protecting bourgeois individual freedom and, in turn, it serves to discourage any spirit of selflessness and solidarity which will eventually be necessary for

creating new relations of production. In short, the campaign and the mobilizations have been a form of collectivity in the name of bourgeois individualism.

In line with this, and crucially again, the 'them' and 'us' in the perceived imposition of government 'control' are not defined in terms of class. In this worldview, Trump can be on my side; and my working class neighbour, a nurse, can be part of the conspiracy. This perspective encourages inaction (as the enemy is so undefined) or worse, division and weakness (as the line between distrust and solidarity cuts across our same class); and it is consistent with the general tendency of conspiracy theories to discourage action, which we analysed in our article.

It is then not a surprise that, on the demonstrations in London and elsewhere, the apparently 'subversive' anti-lockdown message seems to coexist happily with the far right, whether the American Q-Anon or a resurrected 'British Union of Fascists', who certainly have no intention of abolishing the state form, let alone capitalism.

Also, the fact that the conspiracy theories associated with this movement are not just vague, but multiple and contradictory, harmonises with its bourgeois nature: a fragmented grouping, unable to form a collective subject and thus harmless to capital.

In Britain, the ruling class is increasingly showing its inability to juggle Covid and the capitalist economy. Anger and frustration pile up and the far right is currently capitalising on it. So what should we do, and how to respond to this? The conspiracy theorists at the London demos got into scuffles with the cops, which viewed superficially might lead some anti-capitalist elements to side with them. But while conspiracy theories often express in distorted form the critical impulse, as we have argued here and in the main article, they do not represent a determinate negation: conspiracy theory movements do not take us forward. For those looking for the alternative, collective, response to this situation, look no further than the numerous community support groups⁶ that suddenly arose to help people 'self-isolate' and provide support in other ways. Very many of these groups have called

⁶ There are many articles and books about these groups. Here are just a couple:
<https://uk.changeincorporated.com/possibilities/inside-the->

[rise-of-covid-19-mutual-aid](#) and Sitrin, M. & Sembrar, C. (2020). [Pandemic solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis](#) Pluto Press: London

themselves 'mutual aid'.⁷ Through their practice -- autonomous and successfully meeting the needs of neighbours through mutual solidarity -- they testify to the possibilities and promise of collective self-organization without the state and capital.

Aufheben, October 2020

⁷ For an impressively long list of UK groups, see:
<https://freedomnews.org.uk/covid-19-uk-mutual-aid-groups-a-list/>