

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

**DISSENTING NARRATIVES DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC:**

**Communication Strategies behind the Expressions of Dissensus,
Conspiracy Theories, and Populist Rhetoric**

Author

Nemanja Milošević



Thesis Directors

María Pilar Rodríguez Perez, PhD



Miren Gutiérrez Almazor, PhD



Bilbao, Spain

September, 2023

I. INTRODUCTION.....	4
1. DISSENTING NARRATIVES	4
2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONTRADICTIONS	8
3. PARANOID POLITICS IN THE 21 ST CENTURY	11
3.1. <i>An Explanation</i>	11
3.2. <i>From the Manifesto to the Pastiche</i>	14
3.3. <i>Whose Conspiracy?</i>	17
4. THE MEDIA AND NARRATIVES	20
4.1. <i>The Media and the Entertained Public</i>	20
4.2. <i>The Affective Response and Media</i>	23
4.3. <i>The Divided Public</i>	25
5. THE SUMMARY OF THE INTRODUCTION	28
II. THE NARRATIVIZATION OF THE DECLINE.....	30
1. THE VISION OF PROGRESS	30
1.1. <i>The Political Deadlock</i>	37
1.2. <i>New Forms of Expression</i>	43
2. THE SUMMARY OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	47
III. METHODOLOGY	48
IV. THE MEANINGS OF “THE GREAT RESET”	50
1. INTRODUCTION.....	50
2. “THE GREAT RESET” AND THE DISCONTENT	54
3. METHODOLOGICAL NOTE.....	57
3.1. <i>“The Great Reset” Manifesto</i>	58
3.2. <i>Dissenting Texts</i>	60
3.3. <i>Popular Reception in the Digital Media</i>	64
4. THE VIEWS OF “THE GREAT RESET” AGENDA	66
4.1. <i>Dissatisfactions</i>	67
4.2. <i>Antagonisms</i>	72
4.3. <i>Ideas of Progress</i>	74
4.4. <i>Individual as Authority</i>	85
4.5. <i>Fears</i>	87
4.6. <i>Summary of the Results and Discussion</i>	88
5. REJECTION OF “THE GREAT RESET” BY THE COUNTER-ÉLITES	89
5.1. <i>Dissatisfactions</i>	90
5.2. <i>Antagonisms</i>	104
5.3. <i>Ideas of Progress</i>	109
5.4. <i>Fears</i>	114
5.5. <i>Enjoyment</i>	124
5.6. <i>Summary of the Results and Discussion</i>	127
6. INTERNET USERS AND THE REJECTION OF “THE GREAT RESET”	129
6.1. <i>Dissatisfactions</i>	130
6.2. <i>Antagonisms</i>	137
6.3. <i>Ideas of Progress</i>	144
6.4. <i>Individual as Authority</i>	155
6.5. <i>Fear</i>	156
6.6. <i>Enjoyment</i>	170

6.7.	<i>Summary of the Results and Discussion</i>	174
V.	THE LEGITIMATION STRATEGY BEHIND DAVID ICKE’S PANDEMIC-RELATED CONSPIRACY THEORIES	178
1.	MILLENARIANISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES OF DAVID ICKE	178
2.	LEGITIMACY CLAIMS BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMOLOGIES AND POLITICS	181
3.	METHODOLOGICAL NOTE.....	184
4.	THE PANDEMIC ACCORDING TO DAVID ICKE	186
5.	LEGITIMACY AND POLITICAL CLAIMS.....	190
5.1.	<i>The Critique of Power</i>	190
5.2.	<i>Appeal to Social Critical Theory</i>	199
5.3.	<i>The Delineation of Accepted Authority</i>	214
6.	LEGITIMACY AND THE WAYS OF KNOWING	217
6.1.	<i>Perception and Experience</i>	218
6.2.	<i>The Source as the Evidence</i>	222
7.	SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	225
VI.	CONCLUSIONS	227
1.	THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICS.....	228
2.	THE WAYS OF LEGITIMIZING CLAIMS.....	231
3.	LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH.....	234
VII.	BIBLIOGRAPHY	236

I. Introduction

1. Dissenting Narratives

The belief that the public sphere across Western countries is today in some sort of malaise is one of the most widely accepted notions in the media and the public sphere in general. Whether the concerns are expressed about the general dissensus, overly passionate quarrels, speech based on insults and outrage, or the frequent accusations of false or nonfactual information going in all directions, there appears to be a clear indication that some common ground is lost: some elemental rules that structure society, assure its continued undisturbed existence, and are never brought into question. Relying on the concepts from psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek (1997) uses the concept of “the big Other” to designate the “symbolic order that regulates social life,” which is now slowly being abandoned and relegated to the fantasy of an omnipotent hidden authority that is imagined to have the actual power to control. Furthermore, the sense of urgency and danger that prevails in the language used in daily politics—contained in the belief that democracy, as known until now, will be in danger should a specific political party get to power (e.g., Enyedi et al. 2017)—parallels the feelings of despair in culture. Fatalist sentiment is, for instance, expressed in the widely accepted notion that no betterment of the human condition is possible due to many impending catastrophes and dangers (Furedi 2018, 26). It is a goal of the present dissertation to shed some light on the context behind this development by looking into a specific case: media narratives whose primary objective is to denounce political, social, and economic power uncompromisingly and strongly, while setting out to undermine the legitimacy of the dominant forms of authority. Claims made in those narratives, instead of competing with claims of different kinds, become for part of the public the only legitimate way of assigning meaning to socio-economic reality in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

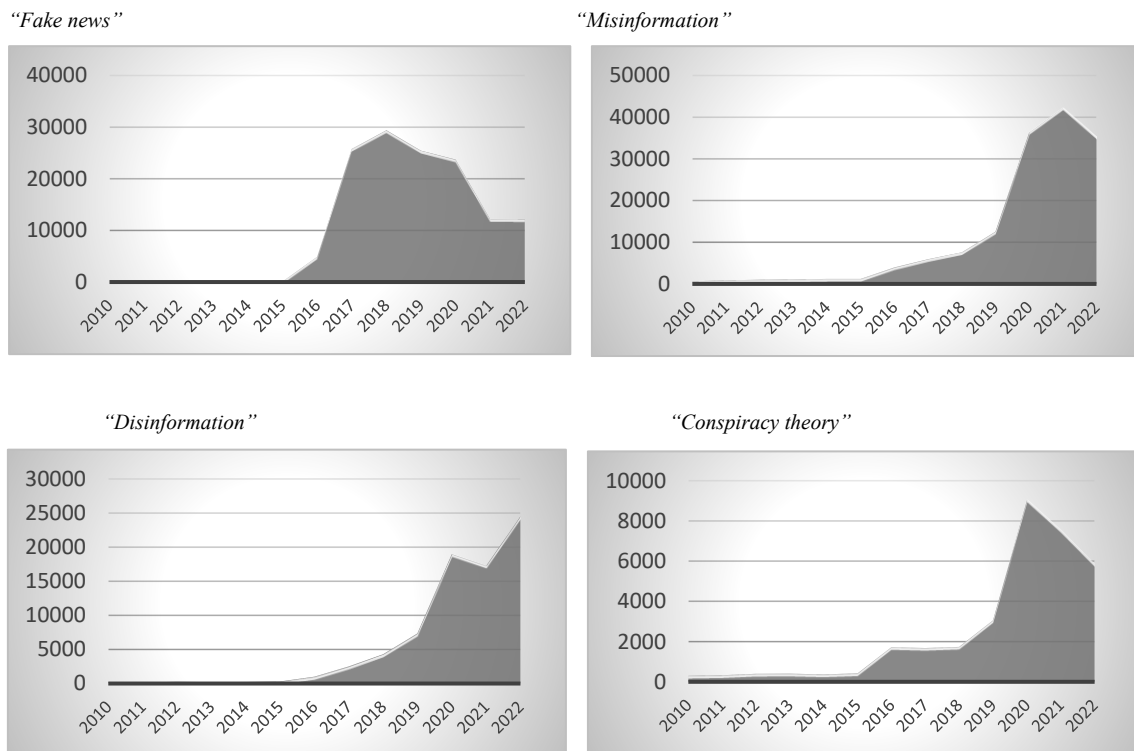
For the purpose of the present study, such forms of expression will be denominated as dissenting narratives, understood here as a highly contested and controversial series of claims with the strong purpose of “going against the grain,” challenging the established center of power, and disturbing the hegemony with what is considered to be the unsaid truth. These narratives exist on the margins of the public sphere: they are often denounced

as dangerous, and strategies are developed to restrict their field of action, but they persevere and adapt quite successfully to new regulations and circumstances.

To be more concrete, we are dealing here with the phenomenon that flows between the confines of the new populist rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and general tendencies in the culture at large. The new form of dissent is particularly significant in light of the increasing popularity of new right-wing populist movements across the West. The immediate period following the Financial Crash of 2008 saw the emergence of the type of a new political movement that combined some ideological elements of the right with highly mediatized and entertaining forms of expression. The new conservatism shaped by the vernacular of the spectacle appears “as a reaction to the dynamics of post-modern culture and neoliberal society,” making appeals to nostalgic sentiments and relying on the pastiche of identities without much regard for consistency (McManus 2020, 16). Those imagined as political opponents are assigned the same pastiche quality; they include as wide a range of actors as “liberal and left-wing elites, globalists, urbanities, ‘cultural Marxists,’ and so on, and affiliated but less powerful groups such as immigrants, minorities, vulnerable populations, and so on” (McManus 2020, 16). This type of politics can be observed in the approach of various new political leaders from almost all parts of Europe and North America and, to some degree, the campaign in the United Kingdom for the abandonment of the European Union (also known as Brexit).

Simultaneously, there has been a growing concern that inaccurate statements are becoming an ever-growing part of the public discourse. The discussion about “fake news,” “misinformation,” “disinformation,” and “conspiracy theories” has taken a stronghold on the part of the public. The appearance of fake news is tied to the rise of online media outlets that spread falsified stories designed to appear as news, where false information is not accidental—as it may happen with traditional news outlets—but the primary means for generating profit (Zimdars 2020, 2). As shown in the figure below, the interest in the beforementioned concepts in the media has grown rapidly around the year 2016, which is the year that saw the unfolding of two key political events: the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in the United States and the successful referendum in the United Kingdom concerning the exit from the European Union.

Figure 1.1 The Frequency of Use of Key Terms in Media



Note. The figures represent the frequency of mention in the online written media (Y-axis) during the twelve years (X-axis). The graphs were elaborated by the author with the data taken from NOW Corpus (News on the Web): <https://www.english-corpora.org/nw/>. Data was retrieved on June 13, 2023.

This ambiguousness in the demarcation of the issue of dissenting narratives—as they exist on the middle ground between media, politics, and culture—is the key notion for the study, as it takes into consideration all the different and numerous elements that make dissenting narrative obtain and preserve a high degree of legitimacy and popularity. Accordingly, the primary question that the dissertation responds to is: what are circumstances within the political and cultural context that allow the dissenting narratives to maintain a sizeable audience and dominate a significant portion of the media ecosystem? Behind such formulation is the notion that the appearance and sudden popularization of said narratives is not something external to the functioning of the system—some aberration that disturbs the norm—, but that it is something inherent to the current order itself what makes dissent and dissensus become such a powerful recourse in public debate.

The premise of the study is that specific developments in politics and culture shape the content of the dissenting narratives. In the realm of politics, the idea of progress based on consistent growth, the wide democratization of consumption, and the promise of the

middle-class lifestyle for all is shown to be unattainable (Lasch 1991), leading to the overall dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the established economic and political arrangements. Moreover, ideas concerning “degrowth” have started to circulate, which desire to advance an economic system that takes into consideration the limited character of the world’s resources and the environmental necessities while still advancing the collective well-being (Cosme, Santos, and O’Neill 2017). At the same time, electoral politics offers no remedy: the existing political movements do not inspire hope or intend to challenge the current order in any profound way and, thus, open up a way for new movements to capitalize on dissatisfactions (Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe 2021, chap. 2). On the other hand, the cultural project of liberalism has reached the limits of its sustainability: the culmination of individual epistemology and the increasing authority of emotions and affect hinder the possibility of the seamless communication and shared semantics in a society (Kaminer 1999, chap. 6). All the mentioned circumstances will be explored in detail in the second chapter.

The study is based on the qualitative analysis of the chosen narratives that are treated as a totalizing social phenomenon, which means that the study explores the claims made in narratives in relation to the specific social and political context. To achieve this objective, the study explores two cases that are deemed illustrative of the time: first, the fervent opposition to the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) agenda for post-pandemic society known as “The Great Reset”; and second, the pandemic-related speeches by David Icke, a popular media personality that engages in the online dissemination of the New Age beliefs and conspiracy theories. The two cases are chosen based on several criteria: (1) they are dependent on the online media eco-system, (2) they belong to the Anglo-Saxon sphere of influence, (3) they express strong opposition to the “establishment” in many different ways and capitalize on the feelings of resentment, (4) they attracted a significant amount of attention, and (5) they are strongly influenced and attached to the context of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

The pandemic that began in 2020 was not just a biological event in its own right, but also a profound accelerator of social and economic malaise, political dissatisfaction, and, most importantly, the loss of legitimacy of the current order (see: Condon 2021). As such, the health crisis has either revealed or accelerated some of the processes that were already taking place. Additionally, the dissent has found new avenues; it can now be more forcefully expressed in the claims about the nature of the pandemic or the response to it, vaccines and medicine, body autonomy and freedom in general, public spending, wealth

inequality, international politics, the debate between populist leaders and those representing the political center, etc. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic became an important context for new forms of political expression and is, therefore, taken into consideration when designing the study.

Next, three major questions will be explored that help to situate dissenting narratives in the social and historical context: first, the general approach to a social phenomenon that informs the dissertation; second, the social significance of paranoia in politics; and third, the development of media and its effect of cognition. These explorations make clear the context behind the issue at hand, how is the emergence of the dissenting narrative treated, what has been a major consideration in scholarship about its constitutive element (i.e., political paranoia), and what is the media environment in which the dissenting narrative proliferate in the 21st century.

2. Understanding the Contradictions

As suggested briefly before, the main presumption behind the premise of the study is the following: the issues dealt with in this dissertation are understood as a direct consequence of the contradictions that are inherent to the system in place. In other words, the claim that many new undesired developments represent a danger to the Western democracy, liberalism, civil virtue, or social cohesion is reversed here into the claim that something internal to the current functioning of the Western democracy, liberalism, civil virtue, and social cohesion is what provoked the undesired developments in the first place. The contradictions that are perceptible in today's society stem from inner inconsistencies rather than accidental and external circumstances. This study defends the position that two interrelated features of the dominant ideology are the cause of the contradiction: first, the slow abandonment of the vision of progress centered around stable growth that, for a long time, did not contemplate the possibility of stagnation or decline; and second, the culture that celebrates the individual autonomy free from external constraints imposed by society. These circumstances in politics and culture will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of the dissertation.

The psychoanalytic political theory is the starting point for the theoretical approach that informs the dissertation. The fundamental presumption of this approach is that what we, the members of society, perceive "reality" as a complex of objective circumstances that follow a specific order; however, our collective experience contains a split that is

fundamental and inherent to it. This split is often denominated as “contradiction” or “antagonism.” Before addressing the nature of the contradiction within social reality, it must be stressed that what we perceive as social and political reality is not some objective order of things with ontological quality; rather,

[the] reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact or (biological, economic...) necessity (and that we tend to perceive as nonideological). It is precisely here that we should be most alert to the functioning of ideology. (Zupančič 2003, 77)

The primary function of social reality, offered by the dominant ideology, is to provide us with “an escape from some traumatic, real kernel” (Žižek 1989, 45). As explained previously, the split inherent to the “reality” itself represents the traumatic kernel that makes the dominant order reveal its inconsistencies and contradiction (Žižek 1989, 137); or, as argued by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) an antagonism that stands as a fundamental social split. The thing that appears in such a way and disrupts the perception of reality as a consistent and coherent image is called the Real. When we are confronted with the Real, the dominant ideology gets heavily undermined.

One such case—that is, the aggressive appearance of the Real in our social reality—was the Financial Crash of 2008. The crisis and the response to it revealed that contrary to the widely held belief, there is no “real economy” that serves to satisfy the actual needs of people and society but only a volatile and inconsistent circulation of financial capital and its speculation (Žižek 2009, 10). As was evident at the time, many Western governments did not provide large sums of money to remedy some real problems that concern regular people, but “to restore confidence in the markets, that is, simply to change people’s beliefs” (Žižek 2009, 80). In such moments of crisis, the contradiction of the dominant order becomes perceptible and causes discomfort.

As a response to this predicament, a fantasy is constructed which intends to reestablish the belief in the consistency of our shared view of the order of things (Stavrakakis 2002, 65). It is common to encounter this kind of fantasy in cases when the Real concerns nature and the way it affects the human world. For instance, climate change—the Real that reveals contradictions of a specific mode of production—today is not so much dealt with in a significant way as incorporated into the functioning of contemporary capitalism. In this case, the fantasy that serves to reestablish the belief in the dominant ideology is “a presupposition that resources are infinite, that the earth itself

is merely a husk which capital can at a certain point slough off like a used skin, and that any problem can be solved by the market” (Fisher 2009, 18). Other than this, fantasies regularly offered today to counter the structural contradictions are the insistence on individual responsibility—e.g., that people caused serious issues by not recycling all plastic bottles, not shopping ethically, not being financially irresponsible, etc.—and the transference of contradictions through imaginings of powerful and sinister actors—e.g., placing the blame for various social problems on specific minority groups (Sharpe 2004, 159–62).

By limiting the analysis of the dissenting narratives to those that appeared during the pandemic, the research can properly examine how such fantasies come to treat contradictions that are most pertinent to the crisis that followed the outbreak. It is not the case, however, that the pandemic provoked by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus set off many systemic problems—an often-repeated assertion—, but that “the pandemic only brought out more clearly what was already there” (Žižek 2020b, 101). Some of the things that have been made apparent are the state of surveillance, large inequalities both in terms of economic prospects and status, the conditions of public services, the deficiencies of public healthcare, the lack of safety net and social security, the outsourced production met with long delays in supply chains, the insufficient housing, the unprepared leadership, and others. The effect on the economic prospect of citizens followed: in the global context, the poorest countries suffered the gravest consequences with the trend of decreasing inequality largely reversed (Sánchez-Páramo et al. 2021); and in the West, many citizens faced hardships in paying rent, assuring employing, and securing food, as shown by the data from the US (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2020). In that context, the pandemic was a unique event that, although primarily a phenomenon of the physical world pertaining to the domain of biology and medicine, had a transversal effect on society.

In short, following the main premises of the psychoanalytic political theory, the dissertation will treat the popularization of dissenting narratives during the pandemic as a response to systemic deficiencies that bring into question the main presuppositions of the dominant ideology. In the rest of the introductory chapter, further context will be given. More specifically, the critical examination of the various ways of thinking about paranoid politics and conspiracy theories will be conducted first; and second, the current state of the media sphere will be examined.

3. Paranoid Politics in the 21st Century

3.1. An Explanation

The fundamental question that should be explored at this stage, bearing in mind the subject of the study, is: what is meant by conspiracy theory? Should there be a set of criteria that in a definite way can serve to label some narrative as conspiratorial explanations? Is there a quality that distinguishes a narrative of that kind from other, more acceptable narratives that assign the power to a group of actors to decide how society should function hidden from the eyes of the public?

Indeed, one definition explains that it is not enough to just describe conspiratorial explanations as claims that some group of potentially maleficent actors plots in secret, but also as a narrative that is “inconsistent with official explanations, [...] whether or not those official explanations are themselves conspiratorial” (Coady 2006, 3). This allows us to understand the authority of someone who defends a conspiracy theory better; for instance, an investigative journalist who may report on corruption scandals revealing dealings in the highest echelons of power.

This also addresses the question of critical theory in the academic context, which also makes bold claims about secret mechanisms of power. One such instance is Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s Racket Theory, which claims that the powerful elite cliques shape to a large extent the function of today’s economy. The theory is interpreted as an explanation that is to some degree akin to the conspiracy theory (Heins 2007, 794), in spite of it coming from a high-status authority. While the criteria of authority and trust that go with it are significant, an approach centered on the inner logic of a conspiratorial explanation might be necessary and helpful for a better understanding of the phenomenon at hand.

For that purpose, the explanation of the conspiracy theory provided by Mark Andrejevic (2013) will be of use. He underlines several important qualities of said narratives: first, “non-falsifiability”; second, “the ‘subjectivization’ of structure”; and third, “a populist tendency to ‘other’ the alleged conspirators” (Andrejevic 2013, 118). What is the key in this approach to the phenomenon of the conspiracy theory is the emphasis on the type of “subjective investment that renders it [...] non-falsifiable” (Andrejevic 2013, 119). This means that the identifying elements of truth and falsity in the theory should not be of primary concern; the inner logic of the explanation is, in any

event, a closed structure that does not contemplate the possibility for the opposing claim to be true, thus “the non-falsifiability” criteria in Adrejevic’s definition. Evidence to the contrary, when presented to debunk a claim of conspiracy, is often incorporated into the explanation itself under the presumption that it is but another manipulation by the powerful. An example of a pathologically jealous husband, given by Slavoj Žižek and borrowed from Jacques Lacan, explains how the direct relationship between pathological paranoia and facts does not stand: “Even if all the facts he [the jealous husband, *author’s note*] quotes in support of his jealousy are true, even if his wife really is sleeping around with other men, this does not change one bit the fact that his jealousy is a pathological, paranoid construction” (Žižek 1989, 48). The following conclusion imposes itself when applying this logic to paranoid politics: the absence or presence of truths, partial truths, or lies, or the combination of all three, does not render the explanation more or less paranoid. For this reason, the new form of political dissent online is not interpreted here using the criteria of falsity; the ideological presuppositions behind what it says and how it makes claims about the world are something of much greater importance.

Consequently, great attention must be given to the question of explanation in conspiracy theory. As the wording itself suggests, the narratives discussed here tend to present an explanation of reality in the form of a “theory.” In this context, “theory” is used in the conspiratorial explanation in the wider sense of the word, as “a guess, speculation, or suggestion,” which is different from how it is used in the scientific and academic context: as “a unifying and self-consistent explanation of fundamental natural processes or phenomena that is totally constructed of corroborated hypotheses” (Schafersman 1997). However, even if conspiracy theory makes bold claims on a more rudimentary level, it is an explanation of social and natural phenomena, nonetheless. For instance, Adrejevic’s definition discussed above, besides the “non-falsifiability” criteria, emphasizes the desire to explain complex systems through a subjective or personified agency and to assign those that conspire the status of the “other” in the fashion of the populist rhetoric. There is, then, a political statement weaved into a conspiratorial explanation.

In his essay about “The Paranoid Style” of United States politics, Richard Hofstadter (1964) points out that the explanation in the relevant context about how things stand politically is quite pedantic—it assigns more coherence to the world than what the actual words exhibit. Additionally, the paranoid explanation comes from the place of powerlessness; groups and individuals who have no bargaining power in a political sense

tend to see the world as sinister and hostile. Put simply, those who engage in this type of politics “see only the consequences of power—and this through distorting lenses—and have no chance to observe its actual machinery” (Hofstadter 1964). This notion contributes to a great extent to how we interpret the dissenting narratives today: how power is being perceived and felt (e.g., utterly unjust, cruel, arbitrary) can define the representation of the forces that structure the economy and society. However, this framework does not suffice; what is missing is the examination of the material (i.e., political and economic) circumstances that may in themselves contribute to the high legitimacy assigned to a conspiratorial explanation at the specific moment in history.

A unique emphasis on the understanding of objective circumstances is offered by Fredric Jameson (1988). For him, thinking in conspiracy theories terms is,

the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content. (Jameson 1988, 356)

In the age of globalized capitalism, when material relations that affect our daily lives are transposed to the distant realm of complex transnational interests, it becomes increasingly common to discuss the socio-economic reality by evoking conspiratorial dealings. Along a similar line of thought, Peter Knight (Knight 2000, 37) explains that “in a world in which the triumph of laissez-faire capitalism has come to be taken for granted, for many people there is no way of framing an analysis of what is happening or registering their dissatisfaction other than in the ‘crackpot’ rhetoric of the conspiracy theorist.” In a broader sense, a group of scholars frames conspiracy theory as a “cultural attempt to grapple with the complexities, anxieties and inequalities induced by large-scale social developments (globalization, mediatization, technocratization, corporatization) and the autonomous workings of opaque systems (e.g. bureaucracies, capitalist systems, mass-communication technologies)” (Harambam 2020, 20).

For the purpose of the present study, claims that there is a group of agents working in secret for some ignoble goals will be understood as an explanation of the social world that takes specific positions and reflects an ensemble of influence: from politics to culture. This framework positions said narratives as something that is integrated into everyday public and interpersonal communication, reflecting the reality that is increasingly “becoming paranoid” (Žižek 2001, 250). Further examination of the type of explanation

that a conspiracy theory provides about social reality will continue by looking into its form and the modes of its distribution.

3.2. From the Manifesto to the Pastiche

The overview of the historical scope of conspiracy theories and their channels of distribution—going far before the advent of the highly mediatized era that concerns the dissertation—allows us to interrogate the above-defended stance. Conspiracy theories have during the long portion of history been the quality of authoritarian political regimes where oppression relied on the beliefs of the paranoid type. The widespread belief in conspiracy theory had a significant function in some historical developments:

Since the late eighteenth-century conspiracy theories played a notable role in shaping public perceptions of history and politics, and all too often as a feature of political ideologies and projects whose role in history has been far from positive. Conspiracism has been the staple ingredient of discriminatory, antidemocratic, and populist politics, a trademark of the rhetoric of oppressive regimes, and [...] a faithful companion to antisemitism. Conspiracy theories remain the refuge of every dictator and authoritarian leader in the world [...]. (Byford 2011, 144)

Norman Cohn's study of the millenarian cults from the Middle Ages shows the development of movements composed of persons who were or perceived themselves as oppressed; they were led by a proclaimed messiah and the strong belief that the world is "dominated by an evil, tyrannous power of boundless destructiveness" (Cohn 1970, 21). Fueled by deprivation, an increased gap between rich and poor, and undermined social bonds and solidarity, this type of movement appeared throughout history in many iterations, often leading to violent acts towards those who were deemed the bearers of corrupt forces. They represented, in a way, an outgrowth of existing social conditions:

The millennial groups grew out of periods of instability, turbulence, and social change, and used these conditions as fuel for their essentially destructive purposes. They had no interest in constructive engaging with reality in any normal sense; they had rather more interest in destroying it. This distinction is one in which the pathological element is not aggression, or revolutionary impulses in themselves, but the use of real grievances to fuel omnipotent, unrealizable, and ultimately nihilistic purposes. (Thurston 2018, 50)

Another important development was a famous document *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* that was fabricated in Russia in 1903 and claimed that Jews, together with

Freemasons, have orchestrated the 1905 Revolution (Bronner 2003, 1). The pamphlet began circulating internationally and helped establish the view of Jews as “the other” or the enemy; additionally, “it was applauded by royalty, it was embraced by counterrevolutionaries, and the Nazis made it required reading. It still serves as a staple for numerous fundamentalist, conservative, neofascist, and antisemitic groups in the United States and throughout the world” (Bronner 2003, 1). Simultaneously, the New World Order conspiracies became prominent, denoting a plan on a global level to undermine the power of federal governments and establish a series of sinister changes (Barkun 2003, 39). Some of the suspected groups include Bavarian Illuminati and Freemasons: two secret societies that are believed to be able to reshape the world to their liking.

However, with the development of modern society centered around consumption, popular culture, and media, the nature of the narrative has changed. The rhetoric of conspiracy theory that was once the lingua franca of extremist groups at the fringes of society is now becoming a dominant mode of representing society and the world in general (Harambam 2020, 8). Now, we are dealing with the “conspiracy culture” (Knight 2000), whose influence largely exceeds the confines of the United States, reflecting the far-reaching influence of its popular culture. One illustrative example is the popular science-fiction TV series *The X Files* (Carter 1993) which follows a couple of the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents in their quest to uncover a series of supernatural conspiracies. The TV show received a devoted following around the world (Gumbel 2008); it ran for nine years following the 1993 premier and was revived in 2016 for another two seasons. The conspiracy literature was also on the rise, the most prominent iteration being *The Da Vinci Code* (D. Brown 2003). The novel had an immediate and significant impact on popular culture and sold at least 80 million copies worldwide (Italie 2009).

Another feature of the new type of conspiratorial claims was their focus on internal enemies; that is, the maleficent actors are not strictly foreign, but are coming from the inside of the system. Such narratives raise concern over the “Invisible Government” (Knight 2000, 28)—the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the US becoming the most common suspect. The Agency is accused in some conspiracy theories in the US of having orchestrated the assassination of John F. Kennedy (Williams 2013) and of having initiated the drug epidemic in the African-American community (Webb 2014). In recent years and particularly following the political ascendancy of Donald Trump, the focus has been

placed on another type of invisible, permanent government, known as the Deep State: “a conspiracy of powerful, unelected bureaucrats secretly pursuing their own agenda” (Horwitz 2021, 52). The actors such as the FBI of the US, and the members of the law-enforcement and national-security bodies are believed to be targeting the political movement of Donald Trump with the goal of weakening his political prospects (Barnes, Goldman, and Savage 2018). Additionally, the Deep State concept was an integral part of the Qanon online movement, closely associated with the former president (Waring 2021, 382). The tendency to express strong suspicion towards the internal corrupt forces of power can be seen in the audio-visual production as well. A number of TV series and films have been made in the United States that represent political and bureaucratic power of their own country as being cynical, dishonest, self-interested, and utterly corrupt, while deceiving the public with a different, more genial face—for instance, the US version of the popular TV series *House of Cards* (Willimon 2013).

In summary, the fear of a secret conspiracy, or simply anxiety of losing agency to some other powerful force, is slowly becoming less a coordinated effort of some mobilized force in politics and more a style of expression that takes an increasingly strong hold over the politics proper and culture in general. The pastiche quality of postmodern populism defined previously (McManus 2020) is applicable here as well. What contemporary society is witnessing is the proliferation of easily made claims that can be remodeled, rearranged, combined freely, placed in the chosen context, and disturbed via any medium with any goal: profit, cultural influence, political or electrical gains, personal pleasure, and so on. These claims can be taken from history, religion, daily politics, New Age beliefs, TV series, films, and news reports that are invented, exaggerated, or misinterpreted. Additionally, they can be combined with actual events, political demands, pieces of news reporting, among others. In summary, the contemporary patterns of communication and consumption make it difficult to delineate the phenomenon as precisely as it was the case before the mediatized society: while once *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* could serve as a manifesto, nowadays, sometimes diverging claims on one topic are exchanged on forums, social media, (often self-published) books, television, and private messaging applications. What remains the same is, however, that we are still dealing with an explanation that provides a dominant ideology with a narrative about the cause of the undesired state of affairs and the power to reshape the symbolic order. The approach that frames the narratives in question in a fluid way—as a pastiche

of free-floating claims that are ubiquities in the public sphere—simultaneously posits the question about the concrete implications of such a position. This will be discussed next.

3.3. Whose Conspiracy?

One important issue in the discussion of conspiracy theories is the stigma attached to them, as the accusation of being a conspiracy theory believer is often used in the debate to discredit the opponent (Husting and Orr 2007). Saying that something is a conspiracy theory implies that claims that are defended do not have legitimacy, that they should not be taken seriously or even considered in any way, and that someone expressing belief in them associates with questionable actors, probably online. It is not only that those that create, distribute, consume, and forward conspiracy theories are seen as gullible (or some variation of the epithet), but that they are often labeled as extremist, dangerous, ill-natured, or anti-democratic. The supposed malign effect of such beliefs can be observed in the claim that forces that produce conspiracy theories are also responsible for “many erroneous judgments, including those that play an important and damaging role in the political arena” (Sunstein 2014, 3). Conspiracy theory is often understood to be a constitutive feature of contemporary extremist movements, similar to many conspiracy theories of the past that proliferated during violent and oppressive regimes. Many events that marked the presidency of Donald Trump, following the 2016 elections, are framed as the consequence of collective paranoia that relied on a series of falsehoods with serious damaging effect on the state of Western democracy (Hellinger 2018). Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) argue that what we are facing now, in the context of new populist rhetoric, is a conspiracy theory without theory; that is, instead of carefully gathered and presented evidence (of whatever epistemic quality it may be) of erstwhile conspiracists, now we hear only brazen statements (e.g., “Rigged!”) that are believed to be sufficient for an argument and that make a democratic debate close to impossible. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is suggested that the belief of paranoid kind could have the negative effect on “public and personal health (e.g., vaccine uptake), democratic citizenship (e.g., political engagement), intergroup relations (e.g., prejudice and discrimination), and may inspire violence and extremism” (Jolley, Marques, and Cookson 2022, 1). This approach establishes a binary whereby the defense of certain values and concepts that are seen as fundamental for a democratic society are counterposed to groups that are “external” to it: these actors range from powerful ill-intentioned actors that

manipulate public opinion for specific gains to more benevolent consumers of said narratives that are pushed towards extremism.

Such a clear-cut binary between the two is not endorsed by all. Moreover, some authors claim that assigning such potency and malignity to conspiracy theories—in addition to the propensity to easily exclude from public debate those associated with it—should be questioned. For instance, Lance deHaven-Smith (2016) rejects the use of “conspiracy theory” accusations to outright condemn all claims about wrongdoings in elite and political circles and explains that this tendency comes from the intent by the CIA to discredit those that question the role the Agency in various suspicious affairs. Similarly, the panic over conspiracy theories is understood as paranoia in its own right; “conspiracy panic” (Bratich 2008) is the political rationality that desires to “govern at distance” with the clearly established line between acceptable and unacceptable modes of dissent. The disciplinary politics that comes with the wide use of the label “conspiracy theories” is closely intertwined with other major issues: “the rise of new technologies; the social function of journalism; U.S. race relations; the parameters of dissent; globalization, biowarfare, and biomedicine; and the shifting position within the Left” (Bratich 2008, 6). The denomination of unacceptable dissent has real consequences; one such case is YouTube’s moderation policy against misinformation and extremism that suppresses independent left-leaning news channels (Marcetic 2022). Finally, “the politics of falsehoods” or the response from the top to the proliferation of fake news and misinformation, contrary to much-needed reinforcement of democratic contestation, uses the appeal to reason and fact to disregard many forms of dissatisfaction: “the fact that people can no longer be trusted easily becomes a justification for removing them from the democratic equation, leaving decision-making in the hands of the few” (Farkas and Schou 2019, 134). Here-presented arguments suggest that an established structure—made of those in power, elites, members of the media class, etc.—reacts in a panicked way that only exacerbates the problem further: they respond to the issue caused by the real or perceived loss of agency of the populace by placing an even stronger grip on that agency. Moreover, a coordinated effort between various entities to regulate speech, as a response to the widespread aversion to conspiracy theories, may only reinforce the perception that there is some hidden form of the Deep State that does not want the truth to come out.

The picture is further complicated when taking into consideration the cases of paranoid politics in the official explanations of events coming from authoritative voices. An example of this tendency is to be found in the claims that the Russian Government or

Russian-led efforts to, through the manipulation of social media, effectively influence Western society in a highly deterministic way—the stance often defended by those who otherwise denounce conspiratorial thinking. A number of major and highly complex political events in the last ten years have been explained using such an argument; to name a few, the 2016 Presidential Elections in the United States (Kessler 2023), the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence from the United Kingdom (Silk 2020), the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum (Gillett 2017), and the 2017 Catalan independence referendum from Spain (Emmott 2017). During the US 2020 Democratic Party presidential primaries, the candidates who were the furthest from the dominant ideological line of the party—namely, Tulsi Gabbard and Bernie Sanders—were often depicted as either being outright Russian assets or being helped by Russia in their electoral efforts (Taibbi 2019b). While it is not the goal of the current text to debate the facts surrounding these accusations, it is noteworthy the degree to which very complex phenomena, in historical, cultural, and social contexts, are externalized onto the external, “othered” enemy by a wide range of public figures and entities.

Addressing the reasons behind the paranoid reactions to the election of Donald Trump to the presidency (the process popularly known as “Russiagate”), Olivier Jutel (2020) explains that a traumatic event for the part of the public has caused a deep crisis in what was seen as a strong post-political consensus. In other words, there was a need to explain why the political center with the data-centric, algorithm-driven, and expertise-based approach—but without the “material and libidinal appeals to justice”—is not able to defeat the opponent (Jutel 2020, 438). The focus on the workings of an external highly powerful agent eases the distress caused by the possibility that what is believed to be a seamlessly functioning democracy can provide such unwanted results as right-wing populism.

And the ultimate approach that will be discussed is that of anthropology. The anthropological point of view focuses on people who believe in conspiracy theories and make decisions in their daily life with the deepest feeling of distrust towards authority. Here, the aim of the scholar is to primarily interpret what people say: “to understand their worldview, their ways of making sense of reality, and their experiences of being in this world” (Harambam 2020, 22). This approach was particularly important in learning about medical conspiracy theories. The anthropological inquiry into vaccine-hesitation, for instance, has shown that motivation can come from various sources of concern: the direct relationship with public healthcare professionals and the system in general, seen as overly

paternalistic and not transparent (Drażkiewicz Grodzicka 2021, 11), the political and socio-cultural consequences of the privatization process (Trifunović 2019, 524), or the conflict of interest (Harambam 2020, 77). In short, beliefs are interpreted having in mind the wider socio-political context and the way it conditions the phenomenological experience of people—who, in turn, narrativize their dissatisfactions, fears, or concerns.

The decision to denominate the object of the analysis as “dissenting narratives” takes into account all the examined positions above. Framing the analyzed texts in such a way presupposes that narratives provide an explanation of reality on many different grounds: they can (1) imagine a fully structured conspiracy, some elements of it, or none at all; (2) include statements from popular culture, politics, or both; (3) reflect the ideological need to designate the common external enemy or express the generalized sense of anxiety without a clearly imagined culprit; (4) express a desire to align to a specific political movement or with some broader concepts, such as the “people” or “populace.” What is the common denominator to all claims is “the splitting”: the expressed desire to go against the grain, contradict, provoke, reject, resist, and similar. In other words, the dissertation will not reject nor endorse any position prior to the analysis; rather, the analysis itself will dictate a conclusion concerning the ways the dissent is communicated. One position resolutely adopted, however, is that the narratives must be interpreted; that is, what is the primary objective of the dissertation is to understand what kind of meaning they assign to reality at the critical moment in history, what their motivation may be, and what do they say about the contemporary society.

4. The Media and Narratives

4.1. The Media and the Entertained Public

Finally, it would be necessary to discuss the nature of the contemporary media sphere, understood here as an ecosystem structured around the network of communication channels. Although the study concerns a broad group of narratives, they all have in common the relation to the internet. Videos, electronic books, online presentations, and social media comments are means by which dissenting narratives proliferate in great numbers, and all those forms will be part of the analysis. Here, the discussion will not concern the content—or what we can call the inner part of narratives, the meaning—but

the outer layer of it, the way it is packaged by the sender and how it reaches and appears to the receiver of the message.

The technology-centered approach, such as the one expressed by Marshall McLuhan in the assertion that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1994, 7), emphasizes the importance of the development of technology that, having acquired an unstoppable impetus of rapid development, has the determining effect on how the message is transmitted in society. The development of the medium exacerbates the process that is already in place: “for the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan 1994, 8). The evolution of the medium—following the transition through oral, hand-written, printed, and finally arriving at technological and digital means of communication—as the sole determining factor leads to what is known as technological determinism: the belief that the “predetermined nature of technological evolution acts as an exogenous force on society and causes it to change. In other words, technology progresses following its own internal logic and society is restructured as a side effect of this” (Héder 2021, 120).

Neil Postman, for instance, already departs from such a deterministic view while still acknowledging the importance of the medium. As he explains, the relationship humans had with concepts such as knowledge, truth, and legitimacy has been closely related to the way a piece of information is conveyed: either orally, in print, or through images in the audio-visual era. He reformulates McLuhan’s statement into “the medium is the metaphor” (Postman 2006, 3) to underline the consequences of the transition from print media (e.g., newspapers and books) to television. Postman explains that contrary to the potential of the message to denote “a specific, concrete statement about the world,” the metaphors work “by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality.” Television brings the metaphor to the forefront, employs it as a primary form of communication, and as a consequence, reshapes the public sphere in the most fundamental way. The advertisement represents the model that structures all expressions: it is a short audio-visual form not necessarily concerned with making factual and truthful assertions of any kind. The advertisement is, rather, “a drama—a mythology, if you will—of handsome people [...] being driven to near ecstasy by their good fortune”; that is, the privilege of consuming the preferred product. It is, due to such indifference towards the world and society, interested in nothing but gratification to the senses. The media that primarily aims to entertain instead of informing turns all claims into marketing spectacles, even news reporting or political debates.

Television is not the successor of print, Postman (2006) explains, but rather a development that builds upon the combination of telegraphy and photography. In that regard, the cognition that television incentivizes is the one that associates truthfulness with brevity, decontextualization, amusement, imagery, pleasure, and the fragmentation of tone¹. The change in the style of politics reflects this: while in the print-based society, the president of a country was primarily known for his or her written word and would not be in all likelihood recognized on the street by the citizens; in the era of audio-visual communication, the president is expected to act as a celebrity versed in the styles of showbusiness. The establishment of such communication codes as the dominant ones fundamentally affects the state of literacy: what convinces the public is, then, not the deep engagement with the nuances of complex ideas that appear in a long logical sequence, but the showman who can offer the appropriate spectacle for the narcissistic indulgence.

Postman's writings on the development of the medium still influence social commentary today; for instance, journalist James Poniewozik (2019) explains the rise of Donald Trump as the showman-politician tracing back the rise of the popular culture's dominance on public life, while Chris Hedges (2010) argues that literacy in its traditional sense and spectacle (i.e., "the empire of illusions") are irreconcilable, resulting in the general public that does not engage with any challenging content in daily-life and is unable to distinguish between truth and illusion. What Postman's approach suggests is that mere technological development is not enough to paint the whole picture. Various other interests and major developments in culture also affect what form the message takes: the rise of the consumer society, the need to inculcate higher tastes for products into the population as a whole, the cult of the individual, the changes in the workplace and leisure, the modifications in education policies, and similar. However, since Postman's writings, the media has evolved and interacted with other events in society at large. One development takes precedence for the context and timeframe that concerns the dissertation: the rise of affective labor, which is to be discussed next.

¹ The most illustrative example of this are the programs that report news on televisions: they are able to provide a piece of information about complex, large-scale, and tragic events in less than minute, which is followed by either some cheerful advertisement or another piece of brief news reporting completely different in tone and sentiment, all the while featuring music, unrelated imagery, and carefully chosen physically attractive newscasters. The pieces of news that are transmitted, mostly completely foreign to the everyday context of the viewers, are meant to provoke a reaction rather than be interiorized, as the key information is usually forgotten quickly after the broadcasting ends. See chapter 7 in Postman (2006).

4.2. The Affective Response and Media

With the growing importance of immaterial labor in the Western economies—that is, the one not concerned with the production of goods and services in the traditional senses—the creation of “the cultural content” has become a commercial activity in its own right. Such labor involves “defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (Lazzarato 2010, 132). As a consequence, affective labor becomes increasingly important in the globalized economy ever more reliant on the trade of sentiments and information (Hardt 1999). Affective labor brings into commercial activities “the production and manipulation of affects and requires (virtual or actual) human contact and proximity” (Hardt 1999, 97–98). In the age of information and rapid technological development, this kind of labor becomes integrated into the main communication practices.

Mark Andrejevic (2013) further develops this argument in relation to the “infoglut.” According to him, when the public is saturated with information, data, and competing claims—as is the case in the highly mediatized society of the digital age—the “gut instinct, affective response, and ‘thin-slicing’ (making a snap decision based on a tiny fraction of the evidence)” begin to serve as an effective strategy to “cut through the clutter” (Andrejevic 2013, 17). Consequently, to make sense of the overflow of information, the careful interpretation of meaning, reference, intent, and context of a specific narrative is substituted by reliance on affect and gut feeling. Affect, in turn, is guided by the assertion that by bypassing the level of symbolic representation (the one that determines signifiers and what, how, and why they come to represent an idea) we can access some organic, authentic truth. The authority of various kinds displays a similar desire: under the supposition to have direct access to the body and the brain, the experts in data-mining, neuro-marketing, sentiment analysis, and body language claim to be able to go beyond the “narrative” or “the social meaning” and find out the unconscious instinct, intent, desire, or belief with the highest possible degree of accuracy (Andrejevic 2013). Furthermore, the transition from syllogistic to the additive type of knowledge signaled by the ascendance of big data leads Byung-Chul Han (2017, 71) to conclude that there is a

desire to do away with the Spirit² from human sciences³ and, thus, mark “the end of theory”:

But when all syllogistic forms fall apart, everything dissolves; nothing has a stay. In a world where everything has become additive, where all narrative tension – any vertical tautness – has gone missing, total acceleration sets in. Today, our perceptive apparatus itself is incapable of arriving at any conclusion: it just clicks its way through the endless, digital net.

What emerges at the time of the undermined belief in the symbolic order are the channels of communication that traffic in affects and media personalities who become versed in the corresponding discursive repertoire. Although the management of impressions became the constitutive feature of politics proper, it provides its most notable iteration in novel forms of conservatism. New conservatism is increasingly becoming reliant on moods, as Lawrence Grossberg (1992) explains, and mood is not something that can be disputed or scrutinized. With that, emotional confession and scandals—which “produce enormous passions but not real political debate” (Grossberg 1992, 277)—become the dominant means of political communication. For instance, the right-wing media personality Glenn Beck, the former presenter on Fox News, structured his public persona, the studio from where he broadcasted, and his act in a way that would produce the desired impression. His performance, delivered as the “pastiche of reason,” combines a great diversity of communication strategies: he is tearful and emotional, skeptical, ironic and sarcastic, the victim of the left, enlightened educator, distressed, one of the people, etc. (Andrejevic 2013, 123–29). In effect, Beck provides a case study of effective media production:

[...] His show and media empire rely upon the exploitation of personal affective moments and expounding an ideal of social transformation. His audience are a loyal army consuming his media ventures, reading lists and end-times commodities, while simultaneously experiencing a form of social collaboration and rebellion. (Jutel 2018b, 15)

The parallel developments in the functioning of power, politics, and media have opened up a space for political leaders who tend to embody enjoyment and offer affective identification, as is the case in the public persona of Donald Trump (Jutel 2018a). The increasing dominance of media spectacle awakens the desire in the public to experience

² *Der Geist* in the German language.

³ *Die Geisteswissenschaft* in the literal translation means is “the science of the spirit.” In essence, it refers to humanities and liberal arts.

politics and the political leader in some kind of an intimate act: to reach the leader in all facets of his or her private and “real” persona (Andrejevic 2016, 4), as a “superhuman” but also “one of the people” (Parotto 2017, 76), and as someone who, by sending a large variety of often-contradictory messages for all taste’s, tells us what and how to desire (J. A. Smith 2020, 41). In short, the dominant form of legitimacy of knowledge today has a far-reaching effect on communication, society, and politics.

In summary, the transformation from typographic to electronic media has replaced exposition—which is “a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response” (Postman 2006, 63)—with a new type of public reason. Impression, amusement, affect, intimacy, and one’s insistence to have direct access to the truth have modified in a profound way the way public debate is conducted, evaluated, and how claims are judged for their accuracy and explanatory potential. The effects are also evident in the online sphere, as new digital media become an increasingly present force in contemporary communication.

4.3. The Divided Public

A significant part of the media sphere determined by affect is the highly incendiary content tailored to incite a strong negative response. The rise of outrage and indignation as the principal feelings that dominate the contemporary public sphere, although it peaked in the digital age, has had its roots in the development of television. As argued by the journalist Matt Taibbi (Taibbi 2019a), the diversification of the television channels according to the demographic—where each group within a society is offered programming tailored to its sensibilities—together with strong incentives offered by advertisement led to the creation of “demographic silos” in media consumption. In the United States, this manifested in the creation of cable news channels that specifically serve to advance political messages of one of the two sides on the bipartisan political spectrum, offering to a specific audience the reporting with the desired angle and the focus specifically limited to the examination of the other side’s corruptness. Hate, explains Taibbi (2019a), becomes part of the regular repertoire: all policies and issues are regarded through the partisan lens (thus foreclosing the possibility of nuance when complex issues are concerned) and the other side tends to be constantly vilified—increasingly with references to Hitler, Nazism, Fascism, and similar.

As the cycles of outrage became a business model for television—where highly trained professionals engage in creating entertaining content based on perpetual and irresolvable conflicts for the wider audience to consume—, the social media corporations developed mechanisms to bring such conflicts to the population at large, that is, to the users of online platforms. After becoming aware that strong emotional response increases “engagement” (i.e., the frequency of revenue-generating interactions between users and creators of content), the digital corporations developed algorithms with the specific objective of bringing to the fore the content that incites outrage (Hathaway 2021; Brady et al. 2021). The feelings and opinions of such intensity are not only reinforced by the effect of the “echo chamber,” whereby the personal standpoint gets strengthened in digital spaces by being reinforced in intense and steady interactions with likeminded users but also by the exposure to the caricature of the Other (Tufekci 2021). What generates the highest form of “engagement” on online platforms is the exposure to the most extreme and uncompromising attitudes or behaviors of the opponent—regardless of how infrequently they may appear in reality—, with whom one can enter into a fervent verbal altercation that draws in a great number of spectators (Tufekci 2017, 271).

This, however, is not an accidental or isolated development, but rather a result of broader socio-economic tendencies. Social media corporations capitalize on the economic extraction of affective labor of individual engagement-generating users—who, on their part, can increase personal pleasure from or monetize the received attention (Rambatan and Johanssen 2021, 37). The economy of outrage exists at the intersection of, on the one side, tendencies in politics and culture, and on the other, the dominant economic model:

In other words, today’s capitalism functions on the valorisation of antagonism. The hatred of the different other is the engine of profit creation for the ruling class. For all their promise of authenticity and innovation, social media and tech companies require a society to keep being divided and in conflict. (Rambatan and Johanssen 2021, 39)

While the issue at hand is primarily the one concerning the online sphere, there is a significant spillover effect on society at large. As explained by Angela Nagle (Nagle 2017), many online “culture wars” that start on the margins of the internet soon grow and start to influence the whole of society and politics. Online platforms such as 4Chan, where right-wing extremist language flourishes through tactics known as “trolling,” which denotes a deliberate provocation using insults, insensitive or outright violent language for no other reason than to upset, found their way to mainstream conservatism through the

successful integration into already-established channels of communication. On the other side, on online platforms such as Tumblr, the young users who embrace the identity politics of the left indulge in acts of performative vulnerability, political self-righteousness coupled with collective callouts (known popularly as “cancel culture”), the comparative weighing of identity-related privileges and grievances, among others. Their influence follows the same route as that of their conservative counterpart; for instance, the question of the actual number of existing biological sexes, genders, and pronouns, once reserved for post-structural theoretical examinations read only by other academics from the field, became an important part of the public debate of many Western countries after being echoed for many years on online platforms.

The penetration of subcultures from the remote corners of the internet into society at large is the result of the outrage they provoked: each side’s “fixation on these relatively niche subcultures,” rather small in scale, has boasted their importance and, as a consequence, shaped “new political sensitivities” (Nagle 2017, 73). This pattern is paralleled in the legacy media, as evident in the reporting of Donald Trump’s presidency in the United States. For instance, there, the “left-leaning” or “mixed” media outlets have reported on Donald Trump’s tweets with a much higher frequency than the media outlets ideologically aligned with the former President (A. Mitchell et al. 2017). While this practice is usually defended with the argument that journalists only wish to fact-check and examine or contextualize the extravagant statements, and as a consequence, must give free coverage to the person they condemn (e.g., Kristof 2016), a much stronger incentive takes precedence: the audience engagement that such a reporting brings.

The purpose of the overview of the medium is to argue that “in the age of diminished expectations” (Lasch 1979) not much can be expected from the public reason, which “requires that the moral or political rules that regulate our common life be, in some sense, justifiable or acceptable to all those persons over whom the rules purport to have authority” (Quong 2022). A society guided by affect cannot at the same time follow principles that are collective in nature—that is, an understanding of social life common to all of society becomes difficult to achieve. The desire by the part of the educated classes to rebuild public reason using facts, data, and evidence is continually undermined by those who present facts, data, and evidence of a different kind. Besides, such causation, the one that is established between correct facts and the “correct” reason, does not suffice⁴; the

⁴ For instance, a large number of 19th-century realist and naturalist novels make forceful claims about the state of economy, social inequalities, politics, and oppression through a fictional narrative. That is, the

crux of the issue lies elsewhere. A force behind here-discussed developments is the grand scale change that defined the last half of the century. The forceful political transformation from the society centered around public good and the commons to the one based on the privatization of all spheres of collective and personal life—finally completed as part of what is now known as the neoliberal economic doctrine (Harvey 2005, 60–61)—has been followed by the appropriate cultural response: the gradual shift from the public reason to various private reasons⁵. The development of the contemporary media ecosystem, the complex neoliberal enterprise in its own right, has adapted to those circumstances and offers numerous channels of communication for all possible sensibilities. The next chapter will trace in more detail the political and cultural circumstances behind these changes; for now, the interdependence between the medium and how knowledge obtains legitimacy in the social and historical context has been established.

5. The Summary of the Introduction

The purpose of the overview of the medium is to tie it to the previous discussion on dissenting narratives and paranoid politics. Their development is correlated and they complement each other; for instance, the “straw man” fallacy in an argument—that is, deliberately misrepresenting the opponent’s argument or position so that it can be refuted or criticized more easily (Walton 2013, 249)—is the constitutive feature of all three discussed themes: the dissenting narratives, paranoid politics, and the contemporary media-sphere. In the current context, making statements while considering all the nuances and details of what someone’s statement tries to convey is hardly a requirement: the new form of literacy favors immediacy and entertainment too much to be concerned with detail, while paranoid politics requires a one-sided and uncompromising representation of the evil Other to rail against.

The pastiche quality of today’s conspiratorial claims is conveniently suited for the dominant channels of communication, where the sense of reality is not conveyed in the sequence of arguments weaved in an extensive coherent narrative consistent in meaning

authors of such novels did not defend their position with facts or evidence; in spite of that, their works are still held in high regard, are understood to have contributed significantly to the creation of knowledge, and their explanation of reality enjoys universal legitimacy.

⁵ This is nowadays often denominated as “regimes of truth” or “truth markets.” However, for the sake of this study, “knowledge” and “reason” are considered to be more appropriate than “truth” to address the whole historical and social context, having in mind all that was discussed in the subchapter.

and tone but using the pieces of information of more ephemeral and disjointed quality. Moreover, the dominance of feeling, charisma, and gratification allows for epistemology to become a personal and intimate process, as the affective reaction to the narrative. The power of this new type of cognition in shaping the public sphere must not be understated. The system of education in its current form, rather than being an antidote, reinforces the new kind of reasoning, as the teaching is increasingly expected to be amusing, address emotions, and foment self-exploration (see: Luri 2020). The modes of expression discussed up until now have been established in the overarching process that has its history and context; while that process is quite hegemonic, it does not escape opposition and critique, as shown in the extensive bibliography used to uncover its mechanisms. These considerations conclude the discussion about the external circumstances that facilitate the distribution of dissenting narratives as they are conceived today. In the next chapter, other factors, the ones that affect the content of the narratives, will be explored in further detail.

II. The Narrativization of the Decline

1. The Vision of Progress

It is very common to interpret dissent and dissensus today as an instinctive reaction by the part of the population that faces the decline in material circumstances. For instance, voting for new right-wing populists is often understood to be a “protest vote” by those who are at risk of poverty or simply experience a downturn in their standard of living. By this logic, should the conditions of these voters improve, these voters will return to the political options closer to the center. While such material circumstances do indeed form part of the rise of new political sensibilities, those economically disadvantaged do not account for enough of the populist’s support to be the determining factor (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 29).

The present study takes this complex picture into consideration. While the recent critical events, such as the Financial Crash of 2008, had an effect on the average standard of living, the industrialized countries in the West are still wealthy and their citizens enjoy a relatively high standard of living in the comparative geographical and historical context. However, there is no doubt that some tangible negative trends are taking place: the growth in productivity does not follow the growth of wages (Brill et al. 2017), and there is a steady increase in wealth inequality and housing prices (Fuller, Johnston, and Regan 2020), and real wages—that is, wages adjusted to inflation—are, in the best case, stagnating (Desilver 2018; Koranyi 2023). The picture gets more complex when the meaning of inflation is broken down: some more important things rise in price above the rate of inflation (e.g., healthcare, education, etc.), some consumer products can even become cheaper (e.g., television sets and technology in general), and inflation affects quite differently parts of the population according to the level of acquired education (see Chapter 3 in Turchin 2023). In other words, the overall feeling of dissatisfaction comes from the looming prospect of a long, inevitable, and gradual decline rather than from a tangible sudden collapse in the standard of living; moreover, not everyone faces the same prospects and the levels of anxiety can vary according to one’s occupational position in society.

This scenario has been decades in the making, as shown by Fritz Bartel (2022). The grand promises of plenty made at the beginning of the Cold War—as both sides in the conflict were doing everything possible to present their economic arrangements as best

suiting for achieving abundance, high standard of living of masses, and the elimination of scarcity—, were predicated on the expectations of high future growth. However, the anticipated rate of growth never came. Starting with the oil crisis of 1973, after which the energy and financial markets tightened their grip on political power, the promises made earlier had to be broken. Two geopolitical blocks were forced to impose financial discipline on their population while trying to cause the least possible popular backlash; here, the Western political system proved to be more successful, as shown in the relatively undisturbed adoption of neoliberal reforms across Western countries. Vowing to put Britain again on the path of high growth, Margaret Thatcher was able to present “the broken promises” as a virtue, using the ideological discourse that appealed to “individual freedom as the highest moral good” and that strongly delegitimized “government intervention in the economy” (Bartel 2022, 77).

Despite all the assurances, the neoliberal reforms failed to bring back the society dreamt in the immediate postwar period, which was, however, not only a broken promise but the abandonment of purpose. In other words, that there might be something other than steady growth in the West was, for a long time, not even contemplated as a plausible option. Already in the 18th century, moralist philosophers argued that old cycles of growth and decay would be overcome by the system of production that guarantees “indefinite expansion,” accompanied by “rising expectations, newly acquired needs and tastes, [and] new standards of personal comfort” (Lasch 1991, 52). The capitalist mode of production was, furthermore, believed to have put the civilization on a new inescapable path, where the rise and fall of economic systems would yield to the uninterrupted rise of the pleasure or surplus economy (Patten 1907, 10). John Maynard Keynes claimed in the 1930s that the development of technology would allow us to, by the end of the 20th century, work fifteen hours per week and enjoy a life of excessive leisure (Keynes 1932, 358–73). In short, the second part of the 20th century in the West was marked by the sense that the society was destined to move towards democratized consumption, universal access to luxury goods, and leisure for all citizens—ideals that, having successfully defied Protestant insistence on fiscal restraint and frugality, introduced enjoyment as the ultimate progressive goal. This vision of progress, claims Christopher Lasch (1991, 78), was the only one that survived the turbulent 20th century, as it successfully suppressed various revolutionary ideologies, religious traditions, and visions of national glory. Its key characteristic was that it was less ambitious: “Liberalism was never utopian unless the democratization of consumption is itself a utopian ideal. It made no difficult demands on

human nature. It presupposed nothing more strenuous in the way of motivation than intelligent self-interest” (Lasch 1991, 78). The growing tendency to associate democracy with “universal abundance” and to see citizens as consumers (Lasch 1991, 68) meant that, should the steady trajectory of the increase in discretionary income⁶ stop, the political systems could see their legitimacy undermined, having no other claims to collective purpose to rely upon.

There are some indications of this direct relationship between overall well-being and political stability. Peter Turchin uses mathematical modeling that seeks patterns among a number of great powers and empires in history to explain the social dynamic of the rise and fall. What he calls “the age of discord” (Turchin 2016), referring to the critical moment in the contemporary US, follows the established three principles identified in various complex societies that experienced cycles of rise and decline. First, there is a general immiseration perceptible in economic, social, and biological terms⁷—a process that is closely related to the oversupply of labor, which, in turn, leads to a significant decrease in its value. Cheaper labor of the working class, while it causes the downturn trajectory for a large part of the population, increases prospects for the elites who are now able to use the low price of labor to improve their lot, which is not only evident in the significant rise in the numbers of billionaires and millionaires, but also in the number of those who go on to pursue higher education. This development gives rise to a problem that is difficult to resolve: the ever-increasing group of elite aspirants encounters the number of elite positions that are either fixed (e.g., the number of positions within a government) or cannot expand sufficiently, which leads to the second principle: the “elite overproduction.” In other words, there is a potential group of “frustrated elites aspirants” who are at risk of exclusion from high-paid professions and downward mobility, which can have various effects: the intra-elite conflicts arise, the counter-elite becomes prominent, the public sphere gets fragmented, national cohesion weakens, and overall discord leads to political disintegration (Turchin 2023). This, in turn, brings us to the last principle, which is that of sociopolitical instability caused by, in order of importance: “(1) elite overproduction leading to intra-elite competition and conflict, (2) popular immiseration, resulting from falling living standards, and (3) the fiscal crisis of

⁶ The income that remains after all taxes and life expenses (e.g., bills, food, transportation, etc.) are covered. This income is crucial for the “pleasure economy.”

⁷ This is to be observed either in the deceleration or reversal of once-positive trends regarding the growth of wages relative to GDP per capita, average stature, or the median age at first marriage (which suggests levels of optimism or pessimism of young adults). See chapter 3 in Turchin (2016).

the state” (Turchin 2016, 17). As explained in the introduction, the study takes into consideration various forms of dissenting narratives: those made by a specific segment of counter-elites and those of regular internet users; that is, the phenomenon is observed in its totality.

The abandonment of the dominant idea of progress and the experience of living in an era of instability are circumstances that can also affect one’s ability to give meaning to social life and conceive of him or herself as part of something larger—as participating in collective efforts towards prosperity and betterment of human condition. Instead of hope and optimism, the public spirit risks slipping into despair, psychic malaise, inertia, anger, withdrawal inwards, and similar. The cultural response to stagnation is, for instance, notable in the current retreat into nostalgia, displayed equally in the recycling of past themes and styles in arts (Fisher 2014) and in the reliance on vague images of not-so-distant past to convey some idea of progress (an obvious example is the Donal Trump’s popular slogan “Make America Great Again” used during the 2016 presidential campaign). The popular article from the magazine *The Atlantic* reminds the readers in a lamenting tone that the life from the 1990s animated TV series *The Simpsons*—in which the father (Homer), “a high-school graduate whose union job at the nuclear-power plant required little technical skill, supported a family of five”—is unattainable for most Americans three decades later (Ryskamp 2020). At the same time, the way ahead does not look promising to many: the belief among young people today that their future prospects in life will be far worse than what their parents experienced is becoming increasingly dominant (O’Connor 2021).

Journalist Ross Douthat (2020) explains this prevailing sense of collective malaise with the claim that the societies of North America and Western Europe, having fallen victim to their own success, are now suffering from overwhelming decadence. Almost all nations in Douthat’s context experience the same political upsurges and cultural developments that point to the overarching diagnosis: “persistent stagnation, chronic disappointment, and a growing conflict between the promise of progress and a reality where everything seems—surprisingly, depressingly—to stay the same” (Douthat 2020, 28). His definition of decadence encompasses various angles—economic, political, cultural, technological, institutional, etc.—that correspond with the topic of the present discussion and, therefore, deserves to be reproduced in its entirety:

Decadence [...] refers to economic stagnation, institutional decay, and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of material prosperity and technological development. It describes a situation in which repetition is more the norm than innovation; in which sclerosis afflicts public institutions and private enterprises alike; in which intellectual life seems to go in circles; in which new developments in science, new exploratory projects, underdeliver compared with what people recently expected. And, crucially, the stagnation and decay are often a direct consequence of previous development. (Douthat 2020, 8–9)

In the last decades, some authors tried to convey the expressions of decline in the form of a fictional narrative. For instance, French novelist Michel Houellebecq dedicated a large part of his opus to the exploration of the “suicide of the West” (Roberts 2017). In *Atomised* (Houellebecq 2001) and *Serotonin* (Houellebecq 2019), the author portrays the contemporary French society made of closed-off and dejected individuals whose nihilism induces them to indulge in the acts of unrelenting hedonism. The character’s obsessive chase for desire and pleasure forecloses any possibility of an authentic human connection—now, the relationships function only as another commercial exchange. French Canadian filmmaker Denys Arcand similarly dedicated a large part of his career to exploring the decline. His famous trilogy of comedies starts with *The Decline of the American Empire* (Arcand 1986) and *The Barbarian Invasions* (Arcand 2004), two films that focus on a group of university professors consumed by the pursuit of the highest form of sexual pleasure. The very first scene of the series of films features history professor Dominique St. Arnaud who appears on a radio show to present her book on the history of the idea of happiness. During the interview, she draws a parallel between modern society, dominated by the search for instant gratification, and Rome during Diocletian, when the idea of conjugal happiness started to prevail for the first time as the empire was in decay. The third and final iteration, *The Fall of the American Empire* (Arcand 2019), follows a young philosophy graduate employed as a delivery man who accidentally gets into possession of bags of cash abandoned during a failed robbery. He joins forces with an elite sex worker and a convicted fraudster to hide the money from the police and, following the advice of a financial expert specialized in tax evasion, launder it by founding a faux charity in Switzerland with the stated purpose of helping disadvantaged children around the world. After successfully accomplishing their goal, the police stop pursuing them, the trio reintegrates into the Canadian society and enjoys financial stability and prestige that comes with wealth.

Such interpretations of contemporary society point to another, and the last to be discussed here, a feature of the West: the rise of the autonomous individual in the era of high liberalism. First, it is important to emphasize that the main claim of contemporary liberalism is not simply that it advances personal emancipation but that its ambitions are a unique case in history. This, however, is not the case, as Patrick J. Deneen (2018) explains. Free choice and individual autonomy, which are believed to be an exclusive domain of contemporary society, have always existed in some form throughout history; the difference is, however, that they are now defined as the absence of obligations towards the community—or, in its most extreme case, as pure self-interest. This is a stark leap from the way that liberty was conceived in societies such as ancient Greece or the ones under the domain of Christianity; that is, as “a reciprocal relationship between the self-government of individuals through the cultivation of virtue (whether ancient or Christian conceptions of virtue, which differed), and the self-government of polities, in which the governing aspiration was the achievement of the common good” (Deneen 2018, 99).

The antagonistic relationship between the self and society at large or the natural world has produced various negative consequences that, even when acknowledged for what they are, are not fundamentally challenged. In the way Deneen defines it, liberalism is not a matter of just one political party or identification, but a dominant way of social life today. On the right, this premise is encompassed in the economic doctrine of classical liberalism, which sustains that the advancement of private enterprise trumps all possible broader considerations. Even when patriotic or humanistic intentions get publicly proclaimed, the economic activity today is primarily that of fundamental anti-communitarianism: it is enough to consider the attempts at tax evasion, the outsourcing of production, the disregard for the natural environment, the extraction of the maximum possible profit on essential goods, and similar. In light of those circumstances, the efforts of governments to successfully reconcile the particular interests of large economic players and the economic matters of social reproduction (closely tied to the price of housing, basic consumer products, medicine, and similar) prove to be increasingly difficult.

On the side of the contemporary left, the progressive liberalism that aims to release humans from obligations imposed by all sorts of authorities (particularly those with a long historical tradition) perceives established frameworks for regulating social life as potentially oppressive and fundamentally arbitrary: family, school, romantic relationship, marriage, parent-children relationship, customs, language, public sphere, science, etc. This is, for example, evident in their attitude towards the children’s education, as both in

school and at home, children are expected to exercise more autonomy and are seen to be more-or-less on an equal cognitive or ethical footing with teachers and parents (see Chapter 7 in Lasch 1979). Other than that, the repressive institutions either establish arbitrary norms to limit one's self-expression—e.g., the puritanical public sphere or linguistic categories and conventions—or harbor the potential to harm individuals, which usually ends in the multiplication of the safeguarding bureaucracies. This current of liberalism tends to reject the notions that fulfilling private life was possible in a pre-liberal society (and, with that, disregard history as a source of wisdom) and that it could be achieved in the future through arrangements other than the ones dominant today.

While both currents tend to see the other as the political enemy, they complement each other—that is, an individual removed from cultural norms, institutions, and associations with others is a necessary condition for the economy based on the uncompromising pursuit of self-interest. It does not surprise, then, that in spite of the continuous political clashes observed in public, “we have seen a steady advance in both economic liberation and personal liberation” (Deneen 2018, 143). Moreover, some of the accomplishments of progressive liberalism have been adopted by the right for their own causes. The obsolescence of decorum and common decency, half a century ago the objective of the youth counter cultures of the left, is now the paradigm of the populist right; leaders such as Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump show that the new right assigns little value to cultural standards, modesty, sexual restraint, chastity, the superior conventions of public expression, etc. The idea that science is only one narrative of many and that it, instead of uncovering them, produces truths for the benefits of the power structure served as a logic of the movements that during the pandemic questioned health authorities.

The two features discussed above—the inability of the social structure to “enforce order upon a collection of autonomous individuals increasing shorn of constitutive social norms” or “provide endless material growth in a world of limits” (Deneen 2018, 41–42)—are the forces that determine the content of dissenting narratives. The contradictions in the dominant idea of progress are reflected in the part of the content that includes political statements. While the dissenting narratives express a myriad of dissatisfactions, they do not manage to conceive of a society guided by principles different from the ones already established; the only thing that remains is the frustration that does not find a vent other than the circular expressions of ire. The second feature is part of the cultural expression; once the subject is abstracted from its broader social context, it expresses itself with the

increased recourse to the self, the sentiment of fear or anxiety, and the appeal to enjoyment. The whole study is structured around those two premises: the analysis of data looks both into political messaging and into how the writings reflect the contemporary modes of collective consciousness. Both will be further explored in the rest of the subchapter.

1.1. The Political Deadlock

In this section, the political landscape will be described briefly and in broad strokes. The emphasis will be on how each fraction refers to progress, how it aims to motivate their base at a time of low expectations, and what are the main ideas that structure their activities. The goal of the following discussion is to contextualize the political significance of dissent and show how it comes to complement the current political deadlock—the deadlock of a political leadership that does not inspire or offer new paths forward, or simply, does not propose any new idea of progress. The following discussion explains the most dominant political forces across the Western sphere; while there are always peculiarities pertaining to each national context, they will not be entertained so as not to sacrifice the brevity of the discussion. For clarity, each fraction will be summarized using two concepts that are considered to be the key that describes them: for the political options around the center, stability and anti-humanism; for the new left, virtue and credentialism; and the new right, distrust and pulling back. Additionally, the table below recapitulates the main ideas for an easy overview.

Table 2.1 The Summary of Political Fractions.

The fraction	Main concepts	Objectives	Base
The center	Stability Anti-humanism	Maintaining the system with the least possible backlash. Progress does not account for collective agency or human potential to reshape the social world.	Broad scope. Uninspired, but somewhat loyal. Electorally invigorated by the prospect of extremes getting to power.
The new left	Virtue Credentialism	Identity is the primary political category. Advance is achieved through better, more virtuous humans. Higher education and professionalization as drivers of a better life.	Urban, middle to upper class, highly educated. Employed in liberal professions. In the risk of fragmentation. Motivated by proper definition of particular grievances.
The new right	Distrust Pulling back	Anti-politics and anti-corruption. The desire to disrupt the current system in some way. Retreat from globalization and return to some past arrangements.	The native working class and losers of globalization. Middle and upper classes from non-liberal professions (e.g., small shop owners). The highest motivation: dissensus and going against the grain.

a. The Politics of the Center

In general, the political options around the center, although they include both the right and left-leaning variations, are characterized by the shared dedication to the post-political consensus in governance and supranational socio-economic arrangements. This kind of politics is characteristic of the immediate conclusion of the Cold War when it was widely understood that the most suitable ideology prevailed and that the main question from then on would be to decide on some technical details of the socio-economic arrangements. Post-politics, in short, is,

a form of government that tries to foreclose political contestation by emphasizing consensus, eradicating ideology and ruling through managerial technocracy. In other words, it is the assertion that all important questions are settled, so all that remains for political discussion are questions of technical implementation. (Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe 2021, 45)

The primary concern of this post-political faction is to maintain the system more-or-less undisturbed and stable in the light of rapid changes that are taking place. With time, the wide popular support for this type of governance waned—some citizens started to feel betrayed by politicians who were increasingly perceived as subservient to the wealthy, and others, simply, withdrew from politics. Peter Mair uses the concept of “ruling the void” (Mair 2013) to refer to the political community where electoral participation is in decline and no enthusiasm is to be found among the voters. When the voters who feel alienated from politics mobilize behind new political options, the post-political center reacts negatively. The strong response to this new kind of democratic contestation, usually under the label of populism, suggests that the elite authority is increasingly concerned with the possibility of their legitimacy being undermined in the light of the new manifestations of the popular will (Furedi 2021, 10). Increasingly, the political center uses the threat that comes from the parties on each side of the spectrum—with warnings of the upcoming fascism and communism—to motivate its base.

Confronted with this situation, the political forces at the center acknowledge the need to rectify some of the grievances of those who feel betrayed and unsatisfied, and they usually try to guarantee some minimum level of social peace. However, the possible remedies must be compatible with large, vested interests, as the aggressive legislation can push out large capital that, in globalized capitalism, is able to search for better conditions elsewhere. Having this in mind, the political options at the center usually define progress in a way that disregards the potential of the human collective agency to reshape the social

world. The external conditions—the economy, the housing markets, precarity, inflation, technological change, etc.—are seen as too big of a force to grapple with in a fundamental way; the most one can do is adapt to the circumstances. The betterment of society will, accordingly, come by working on humans from the outside; that is, the emphasis is put either on technological solutions or the betterment of the body, emotions, mind, brain, and well-being in general. This vision of progress is contended in the appeal to “resilience,” the concept of utmost importance for today’s mainstream political philosophy. Diego Fusaro (2022) explains that the meaning of resilience, according to its Greek etymology, refers to the physical world, where it expresses the capacity of an object or material to sustain strong impact without losing its consistency (i.e., without breaking). Transposing this logic to humans, resilience as the guiding principle depicts the world in which subjects are at the mercy of objects (instead of the opposite being the case) and are capable only of finding a better way to endure strenuous conditions. Whether this vision of progress will provoke wide popular enthusiasm is yet to be seen; however, the appeal to resilience does not only suggest a certain amount of defeatism on the part of the authority but is an extraordinary departure from the promises of universal enjoyment of just half a century ago.

b. The New Left

The main premise of the new movements on the left, or the progressive factions of large left-leaning parties, that started to gain certain momentum in recent years is that cultural hegemony is the actual source of power (e.g., Laclau and Mouffe 1985), which means that within the left, the power is now defined less in terms of material relations (e.g., class) and more in terms of individual cultural attitudes. The main ideas behind such strategies rely on a specific interpretation of the writings of Antonio Gramsci on hegemony (see: Altheide 1984, 477).

According to the political strategy of the new left, the elevation of the standards of individual virtue and its public display are the primary methods of achieving a better society (Liu 2021), and the strategic use of the media plays a key role: the more people adopt the correct attitude and improve on them through time, the more prosperous collective existence will be. The recognition of someone’s difference and oppressed identity—reflected in the fight against prejudiced opinion and active consideration for one’s particular experience—becomes its primary objective (Fraser 1995, 68).

This new movement treats subjectivity with significant skepticism. Influenced by works such as *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950)—a study that claimed to have discovered prejudice as something innate to humans, as a psycho-pathological predisposition that requires “collective psychotherapy” (Lasch 1991, 447)—, the new left developed distrust of human nature. Every person harbors the instincts that can lead them to the worst and most harmful social attitudes and those instincts must be recognized and dominated. The concepts popular today, such as “unconscious biases” and “micro-aggression,” point to the potential of the worst impulses to overpower one’s best intentions and, at any moment, uncover the supremastic personality. The injustices that result from complex historical and social circumstances and come out of specific economic arrangements and interests are, as a result, frequently individualized and framed as something that can be resolved one person at a time; for instance, as moral issues or social disease (Lasch 1991, 452). This premise is sometimes challenged by other voices within the movement, but that, however, does not provide a strong opposition. Those who defend the politics of identity recognition integrate much better into the existing structure—e.g., state institutions, media outlets, private foundations, corporations, etc.—than those who desire to reshape material relations and, therefore, exercise more influence (see: Heartfield 2017).

The identity politics of the left has not managed to draw in the vast swaths of the population and has even been assigned the derogatory term “woke politics” by some. The most extreme, and simultaneously the most visible, elements of the new left impose the superego pressure that is more about the strengthening of their moral authority than about “changing social relations of domination” (Žižek 2023), which makes identity politics unpopular in the eyes of a significant portion of voters. The electoral effort of Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party Primaries in both the 2016 and 2020 elections is a case in point. His first run was marked by an uncompromising social-democratic agenda, while his second attempt included a “fusionist” approach following the critiques waged at him for previously overlooking the matters of identity; his second electoral effort saw an increase in the electoral support in university towns, but also a significant drop in the overall support and within the population at large (Tracey and Nagle 2020).

The fortification of the “Brahmin Left” (a reference to the upper cast in India made of priests and intellectuals) and the increased polarization on sociocultural issues has been paralleled by the transition of the low-income and low-education voters—once the pillars of the social-democratic parties—towards the conservative and anti-immigration

movements across the West, with exception of Portugal and Ireland (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2022, 4). The migration of the working-class base to the new populist right did not only happen as a consequence of the said shift in priorities of the left but was also part of the design. The new left's proclaimed objective in the early years of forming a pluralistic coalition (known also as a "rainbow coalition") announced the abandonment of what was considered an antiquated concept of working class for a more diverse alliance of all the disadvantaged groups with their particular interests (Mouffe 1993, 86). Nowadays, the new left is primarily the preferred option of the highly educated, middle to upper-class voters from the nuclei of large urban areas employed in liberal professions or of those who aspire to join such ranks—also denominated as the professional-managerial class (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 2013). This base can even sometimes contract: the minor inner differences or discord easily lead to conflicts and splitting into several subgroups in the identity-recognition left movements. In short, the idea of the good life of the new left inspires many, but up to a clearly established threshold; it, most importantly, fails to present an appetizing vision of the future society to its erstwhile key constituency.

c. *The New Right*

The new right, denominated often as populist right or far-right, came to occupy the space of the political force opposing in the most vigorous way the established socio-economic arrangements. Primarily the party of the discontent, the populist insurgents voiced distrust towards the established political authority—either through anti-political or anti-corruption claims. The politics of "post-ideological catch-all for popular discontent" can be seen in the promises of the Five Star Movement in Italy to "clean the parliament" (Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe 2021, 79–80) or in Donald Trump's claims that "it is time to drain the swamp in Washington, D.C." (Widmer 2017). In short, the unacceptable level of corruption halts any possibility of betterment of living standards, and politics itself is too contaminated as a field of action to produce any positive change in a society. Furthermore, Eatwell and Goodwin (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018) identify four elements pertinent to the new "national populism" insurgency: the distrust felt by citizens in the light of the growing distance of political leaders and institutions from the governed populace, the dissatisfaction with the decreased importance of national identity and the traditional way of life, the decline in the standard of living caused by neoliberal

globalization, and the weakening of the allegiance towards traditional political parties. The opening left by the withdrawal of the rest of the parties from popular politics is filled up with new leaders—usually a “great personality” with the desire for reestablishing authority (Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe 2021, 152)—who mobilize the masses while giving them acknowledgment such as “the silent majority” (Fandos 2015) or “the forgotten France” (Willsher 2016). In other words, the context behind the appearance of new political movements is quite complex: it includes matters of economic, cultural, and electoral nature. However, one thing seems to be a unifying factor: the educational divide.

More than the income percentile or the type of profession, it is the university degree that separates the constituency of the new right from the rest (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 25). This is hardly surprising: those without a university degree are, at the same time, the ones who are facing the most risk of the downward trajectory in their standard of living (e.g., Turchin 2023, 64). Additionally, the recent decades in the West saw the rise of what has been denominated as “diploma democracy” (Bovens and Wille 2017): the political dominance of educational elites akin to the previous epochs when the reproduction of the political class was founded on birth or property. The know-how and connections exchanged at higher education institutions form the leading elite circles with a specific perspective on how the society should be run—the perspective that is by and large unresponsive to what the popular mood might be. This is, for instance, evident in the popular and elite attitudes towards cosmopolitanism, borders, and globalization (Roussinos 2020).

The new right channels those feelings politically, often through campaigning against matters of globalization. For instance, they can advocate for the renegotiation of the free-trade agreements, modifying, limiting, or halting immigration in its current form, the withdrawal from supranational organizations, the renewed pride in local and national identities, and similar. In general, there is an expressed desire for deceleration that denotes a sense that all the socio-economic changes of the last couple of decades have been precipitated. The new right paints an image of the reality where time can be rolled back to a more secure living or to forms of solidarity often found in the collective imagination of distant decades. All these maximalist promises’ being extraordinarily ambitious and difficult to accomplish leads to a conundrum; when the new right gets to power, they, to a certain degree, inevitably disappoint their very motivated and enthusiastic base since ultimately, they, like all other political formations, have to balance popular demands and

large vested interests⁸. In essence, the vision of progress of the new right finds itself far from actual ambition—unless reminisced stability can be considered ambitious—but has allure for many when considering what else is being proposed; while all three options discussed here appeal to some liberal notion of a good life, the new right wants to save the one popularly associated with the high levels of growth, quality employment, and lower income inequality.

1.2. New Forms of Expression

The ideal of the autonomous individual is another feature that determines the content of the dissenting narratives. Such a link is established, primarily, on the account of the cognition and epistemology that become dominant when bonds in a society become weaker and any framework that constrains one's agency is rejected. As it will be defended next, there are three ways in which liberalism takes form in the public sphere: first, through the appeal to oneself or any other individual as an authority in and of itself; second, having established the primacy of the self, all that is outside of it is seen as a threat—that is, fears and anxiety is developed towards social and political reality; and third, one's point of view is determined by the search for pleasure, amusement, and enjoyment.

a. The Individual Authority

The first instance, the collective withdrawal into the self, is something discussed by numerous authors. For instance, Richard Sennet (Sennett 1977) announced the “fall of the public man”—the one who withdraws from public relationships into intimacy and, consequently, alienation. Christopher Lasch (Lasch 1979), on his part, discussed the “culture of narcissism” that comes from the widely accepted abhorrence of external constraints, primarily the result of the new forms of socialization and child-rearing. The culture centered around self-determination free from limits imposed by objective reality inevitably causes the loosening of social ties, undermines faith in history and the future, and incentivizes the “survival mentality.” The cultural pattern corresponds with the

⁸ This is most notable in immigration policy: in the case of the US, Donald Trump failed to oblige Mexico to pay for the wall at the border or deport all illegal immigrants (BBC News 2020), and in the case of the UK, contrary to what was promised in the campaign for leaving the EU, the immigration to the country reached record high numbers in the year 2022 (Amos and Fouché 2023).

dominant ideology: the economic structure conditions high and unrealistic expectations of others and the society, the constant feeling of being misunderstood, the undermined trust in both strangers and relatives and, in general, indifference to what is going on collectively (Ehrenreich 2016, 171).

Ian Thurston explains the effects of the culture of narcissism on the post-truth society using the concepts from psychoanalysis. The antagonistic relationship towards the constraints imposed by reality inevitably undermines one's ability to come to terms with it, which diminishes one's ability to: go through "the painful recognition that reality does not care to answer to human wishes"; "see other people in a nuanced way as separate from, rather than extensions of, the self"; tolerate "the inevitable presence of conflicting, and something disturbing emotions, thoughts, and wishes"; and "mourn, to gradually and painfully relinquish that which has been lost as an external object" (Thurston 2018, xii). The narcissism of the hypersensitive type common to today's social environment manifests in

an antipathy towards claims of evidence and objective knowledge, a tendency to defensively retreat to the politics of identity and victimhood, and to relate to others not in a realistic way but as alternately idealised and denigrated aspects of the self. Such a mindset is characterised both by fundamentalism – states of emotional certainty and concretised thought – and extreme relativism. (Thurston 2018, xv)

The effects of these developments are visible today in the overwhelming relativism in terms of values (Bloom 1987), the establishment of individual or private epistemologies (van Zoonen 2012), and the establishing of morals and truth as matters of emotions (see Chapter 2 in MacIntyre 1981). The individuation of knowledge—that is, the belief that the epistemological authority can come from the subjective position rather than from the dialectic relationship with external reality and previously established knowledge—gains popularity and starts to influence education. The "reader response approach" often practiced in English language classes in the US school system is one example. According to it, not one interpretation of a novel or a poem can be definite, interpretation is a personal process (the reader is, in a way, the co-creator of the text), and all responses, correct in and of themselves, are the result of one's unique analytical approach (Stotsky, Traffas, and Woodworth 2010, 22). Additionally, the "death of expertise" becomes reinforced by the higher education system where a student is increasingly seen as a consumer—i.e., a customer who is always right; as things stand

now, students “can leave campus without fully accepting that they’ve met anyone more intelligent than they are, either among their peers or their teachers” (Nichols 2019, 77). The public made of individuals with strong convictions regarding their private epistemologies makes dissent today difficult to respond to in a discussion on fair ground, as the understanding of what is going on, in reality, is becoming more fragmented, the assertion can be easily deconstructed or relativized, and no need to refer to objective circumstances is felt by those who engage in it.

b. The Fear

As the individual gets more closed off, the rest of the social world starts to intimidate him or her. The culture of narcissism—embodied in “a loss of selfhood,” rather than “self-assertion”—leads to a state of universal adversity that requires the adoption of everyday survival strategies, evident in the recourse to emotional management and therapy culture that is increasing in magnitude (Lasch 1984, 57). On top of that, we can see today that, in spite of the high degree of development in society as a whole, there is a strong sense that we are living in tumultuous times replete with dangers, the potential of grand-scale disasters, totalitarianism, apocalyptic events, toxins in the air and food, the dangers to children’s wellbeing, and similar.

The proliferation of paranoia in politics, already discussed in the first chapter, is just one example of this development. The integration of conspiracy theories in the culture as a whole (Knight 2000) points to the wide acceptance of the premise that the social and political realm is corrupted by bad intentions, hidden manipulations, and sinister plans. However, something larger is taking place: fear becomes the emotion that starts to dominate the public spirit, signaling “a sense of growing unease about our place in the world” (Furedi 2006, vii). People lose faith in politics as a corrective force and socio-economic conditions appear too unsustainable and, at the same time, immutable. All these developments are a reflection of the pervasive belief that human agency and collective subjectivity have no purpose today and that humans can only be subservient to external conditions. In other words, the “Death of the Subject” (Heartfield 2006) becomes the necessary precondition to the ascendance of the anxious public. The sense that worst predictions will come true, and that some adversity is always lurking has an effect on the way people discuss politics and collective affairs, as distrust and skepticism become the

overwhelming attitude toward political, and economic power, and eventually, toward fellow citizens.

c. The Enjoyment

Finally, the appeal to enjoyment is another factor that determines the content of dissenting narratives. Not only is the potential to entertain and amuse becoming the major factor in assigning legitimacy to knowledge, as argued in the previous chapter, but enjoyment starts to determine how one interacts with the world. In a society structured around consumption, the duty to the authority that prohibits is replaced by the authority that commands us, primarily, to enjoy ourselves: to be happy, consume, seek bodily pleasure, pursue ecstatic states, and similar (McGowan 2004, 34). The new social order structured around the injunction to enjoy as much as possible and experience the sensation directly, however, does not account for the fundamental fact that proper, full direct enjoyment is not possible; it remains as an ideal or a frustrated desire (McGowan 2004, 7). That means that in spite of the orders to enjoy, the contemporary subject cannot but fail in that endeavor, leading to a state that produces fixation on the stolen enjoyment. Such a condition only reinforces paranoia in the outlook toward the world:

[P]aranoia results from constant confrontations with the enjoying other and the belief that this other is enjoying in our stead. We receive an imperative to enjoy, but rather than feeling as if we are actually enjoying ourselves, we impute enjoyment to the other, a enjoyment that is “rightfully” ours. (McGowan 2004, 113)

We can see this sense of “the other enjoying at my expense” in the popular belief that some groups are stealing “our jobs,” that they are abusing welfare systems to the detriment of the population as a whole, that the state is stealing our money through taxes, and similar. Moreover, the proper, complete enjoyment can be relegated to distant geographical areas or historical periods, that from the current vantage point appear as fulfilling and harmonious. The claims about social and political reality in the public sphere, then, can incorporate the images of enjoyment of the other to explain the predicaments faced by the stagnating economy, to give a concrete explanation to an impersonal system, and to provoke an affective response.

2. The Summary of the Theoretical Framework

In short, the dissenting narratives are approached in this study from two points of view. The first takes into account the political circumstances; that is, what projects for a good life are drafted by the major political options and what is their relationship with the society as a whole. Dissenting narratives make claims that find their place on the political spectrum according to what is happening at the moment, they are structured according to the political interests of competing fractions and can align with various positions based on potential audiences. By methodically examining what grievances dissenting narratives underline, whom they identify as a political or ideological enemy, and what vision of progress they propose, the study will build conclusions about the function that said narratives come to fulfill in contemporary political communication patterns and practices.

Other strategies that the dissenting narratives apply are the ones related to the new modes of expression. In spite of what may appear on the surface, the dissenting narratives are the product of the culture of high liberalism, as they express animosity towards the external constraints posed by reality. Even in the implicit nostalgic desire for more communal ways of life, there is a notion that no sacrifice should be made—that is, that there you can have all the benefits of high modernity (e.g., universal consumption and abundance) without the negative consequences: alienation and isolation (McGowan 2004, 5). Dissenting narratives, consequently, reflect the forms of subjectivity that are dominant at the moment, resort to the individual subjective position, express fear over the social and political reality, and appeal to enjoyment. The methodology applied in the analysis of data reflects the position defended here, which will be elaborated on next.

III. Methodology

The study is based on the qualitative analysis of narratives that come in audio-visual and written forms. As explained in the introduction, two main case studies will serve to develop the previously elaborated premises and reach a conclusion concerning the nature of dissenting narratives. All narratives discuss the topic of “The Great Reset” agenda of the World Economic Forum. The first case study does that more explicitly, as it involves the analysis of the agenda itself, the negative reactions to it by the prominent members of the counter-elites, and the negative comments of internet users on YouTube. The second study is centered around the appearances of David Icke, a highly popular author of conspiracy theories from the United Kingdom, in online interviews where he discusses questions concerning the pandemic and related conspiracy theories. Unlike the authors in the first case study, David Icke does not make all the claims on the matters of politics. In other words, he does not defend the legitimacy of his claims by relying solely on argumentative claims (e.g., growing inequality or corruption in politics), but resorts to strategies in the tradition of the New Age, millenarian, and spiritual movements (Robertson 2016). Different points of view of both case studies require some specific stances to be adopted in methodology and they will be revealed in more detail in each corresponding chapter. However, some aspects are common to study as a whole and they will be discussed here.

First, all the texts selected for the analysis respect the unique set of criteria: (1) they are sourced from the online media, (2) they are in English language and primarily reflect the Anglo-Saxon cultural sphere, (3) they express contempt and resentment towards the political and elite “establishment,” (4) they attract a great amount of attention, and (5) they have been created in the context of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The acclaimed authors of highly controversial dissenting texts and conspiracy theories that were selected allow the study to cover the wide ground, as they include authors from the fields of right-wing politics and media, alternative medicine, and the New Age milieu.

The content analysis treats all textual units following clearly established rules: it uses combined coding, which means that other than broadly defined categories imposed on the data, the textual units themselves define codes according to the themes they have in common (Bergman 2010, 391). The broadly defined categories are inspired by the discussion from the second chapter; that is, the study seeks to establish the type of political content that the narrative advances (what grievances are presented, who is

identified as a political antagonist, and what vision of progress is defended) and modes of expressions (the authority of the individual, the fear, and the enjoyment). The analyzed textual units are placed in one of the two broad categories, wherein they will be grouped according to the idea they defend or the theme they develop. That means that coded textual units will be contrasted and compared so that broad themes will be reached, always within one of the two established categories. The table below provides a summary of the main structure of the analysis.

Table 3.1 The Summary of Main Categories in the Analysis

CATEGORY	THE APPROACH TOWARDS DATA (what kind of claims are selected)
Political claims	
Dissatisfactions	The claims concerning the wrongs in a society, politics, and economy. The focus is on the negative attitude towards wider developments and how they are framed.
Antagonisms	The claims concerning the individual, groups, or entities that are discussed in a negative light, as those responsible for the ill of today's society.
Vision of Progress	The claims discuss what would a better society look like and how it is to be achieved. Additionally, what could be a solution to the current problems?
Modes of Expression	
Individual as Authority	The claims are defended with the first or third-person individual experience. Additionally, the claims about large developments are made with references to specific individuals' moral qualities.
Fear	The claims are meant to provoke a negative emotion: fear, anxiety, or worry. It is not only that something is wrong with society or politics, but it is fundamentally sinister and uncanny.
Enjoyment	The claims paint an image of the events and developments in an amusing way. Additionally, they resort to the images of someone else's enjoyment or nostalgic reveries.

An important stance taken by the author of the study is to approach its subject with all its nuances and contradictions. In other words, it is taken as a general position to treat the analyzed narratives without preconceived ideas or value judgments, as they may compromise the unbiased approach that is aimed here.

Each of the following chapters will include a note with more details about the analysis: the data, their source, context, relevance, and how they are approached methodologically to come to conclusions about the main premise of the dissertation. The first case to be discussed is the one that centers specifically around the "The Great Reset" agenda of the World Economic Forum and the second will be the pandemic-related conspiracy theories of David Icke.

IV. The Meanings of “The Great Reset”

1. Introduction

The present study deals with the nature of “The Great Reset” campaign of the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the negative reactions to it. In that regard, the study looks into (1) the official narrative of the WEF that aims to present its agenda to the broader public, (2) the publications of most prominent public figures that are accusing the agenda of being dishonest and hiding some bad intentions, and (3) the reaction of internet users (based on the comments on YouTube). The objective of the following study is to identify the political and ideological elements that stand behind these narratives –the official and that of the reactions to it—, and the type of affective stimulus that form part of said narratives. The main premise is that all narratives combine many different elements, sometimes mutually exclusive and sometimes compatible, which respond to the dominant ideological impasse at the center of 21st century politics. This impasse results from an increasing dissatisfaction with the general state of affairs countered with the post-political climate that does not allow for any significant restructuring of the system or transfer of power. Additionally, it is presupposed that these narratives represent the product of a culture that favors individual perspectives, the sentiments of increased fear and paranoia, and enjoyment.

“The Great Reset” campaign provides an opportunity to examine those premises. The agenda is introduced to the public at a critical moment—the beginning of the pandemic caused by the SARS-Cov-2—and acknowledges the socio-economic context of the initial months of the health crisis. According to the WEF, the crisis exposes “the inconsistencies, inadequacies, and contradictions of multiple systems –from health and financial to energy and education” (World Economic Forum n.d.). What the members of the WEF intend to do is “build a new social contract that honors the dignity of every human being” and “improve the state of the world” by making global stakeholders “cooperate in simultaneously managing the direct consequences of the COVID-19 crisis” (World Economic Forum n.d.). The goal of “bringing together” has become the main feature of the WEF’s annual meeting that takes place in the luxurious village of Davos, Switzerland, since the event became “the premier venue for different types of actors in the global system to discuss the major economic, political and social challenges confronting the world” (Pigman 2007, 1).

The WEF was formed in 1971 (although it existed under the name European Management Forum until 1987), and its inception and significance were understood in the context of broader political shifts. At the time, the economic systems worldwide started to abandon the confines of the nation-state and develop on a global scale, which increased the cross-border circulation of trade and information and created the need for coordinated debates on the issues surrounding the advancements of neoliberalism, promptly fulfilled by the WEF (Pigman 2007, 6–7). In the subsequent decades, the Forum continued broadening its sphere of influence: in 1983, it started organizing meetings of CEOs of the global information technology sector, and by the end of the decade, it began to strengthen its diplomatic influence with the inclusion of China and India in the global market and the resolution of the Cold War (Pigman 2007, 13–16). In the contemporary context, the meetings in Davos have become an annual, for-profit event (Sharma and Soederberg 2020, 835) that are among one the most powerful ones that get to define the agenda in the global context (Schiølin 2020, 544). As argued in the podcast series *The Davos Diaries*, the activities of the WEF are significantly intensified during a major political or economic crisis (Kanchan 2021), as evident in the case of the pandemic caused by the SARS-Cov-2, which the WEF sees as “an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine the world” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 19). Additionally, the Forum started investing in the formation of future political and business leaders through its initiatives like Young Global Leaders—whose alumni include prominent heads of state Emmanuel Macron, Jacinda Ardern, and Alexander De Croo, and other famous figures like Mark Zuckerberg, Wyclef Jean, and Roger Federer—to accelerate “the impact of a diverse community of responsible leaders across borders and sectors to shape a more inclusive and sustainable future” (The Forum of Young Global Leaders n.d.). Their other initiative, Global Shapers Community, is “a network of inspiring young people under the age of 30 working together to address local, regional, and global challenges,” made of “more than 14,000 members” in “456 city-based hubs in 150 countries” (Global Shapers Community n.d.).

Before focusing on the “Great Reset,” the Forum was known for advancing debates on two different themes. One is *multistakeholderism*, a concept that advocates abandoning the imperative of shareholder’s interests in business and proposes a transition to the economy that respects all who have a stake in society at large; that is, *stakeholders*. As explained in the official publication of the WEF, *Stakeholder Capitalism: A Global Economy that Works for Progress, People and Planet*, authored by Klaus Schwab and Peter Vanham (2021, 173), the system they propose does not abandon the main pillars of

capitalism—that is, “individuals and private companies make up the largest share of the economy”—, but wants to reorient it: “all those who have a stake in the economy can influence decision-making, and the metrics optimized for in economic activities bake in broader societal interests.” This effort would include “a system of checks and balances” and consideration for “the health and wealth of societies overall, as well as that of the planet and that of future generations.” This “better kind of capitalism” (Schwab 2019) would make sure that no one is suffering from its effects, by acknowledging the needs of all “customers and clients, employees, managerial staff, and the broader interests of the communities within which the firm is situated, including neighbors in the immediate proximity of the firm, governments, and fellow users of the environment in which the firm operates” (Pigman 2007, 9). The proposal for multistakeholder governance was advanced in light of the diminished power of multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations (the UN). Unable to address governance issues caused by globalization and firmly influence climate change-related national policies of its members, the UN started to prioritize partnerships with businesses in dealing with global issues (particularly, in the context of its Sustainable Development Goals strategy) and, consequently, opened up a way for multistakeholderism to supplant multilateralism (Buxton 2019, 5).

However, as pointed out by Harris Gleckman (2018, 1), the multistakeholder form of governance “gained a degree of public acceptance as a new paradigm for global governance without the international community examining properly its legitimacy or effectiveness as an institution of governance.” The same author additionally argues that the system contains some inherent limitations that do not allow for the achievement of its goal of including everybody and the balance of powers; specifically, it lacks equal representation of gender, geographical areas (Global North versus Global South), ethnic minorities, or, contrary to its pretenses, does not emulate a representative democratic process that would allow the proper representation of the popular will (Gleckman 2018, 5–9). The decision on who and to what extent can be a stakeholder in a particular case – that is, “who is chosen, who is excluded, whose voice is heard, whose isn’t – is ultimately a deeply political choice with ramifications for everyone” (Buxton 2019, 3). On the more structural level, the multistakeholderism opens up a space for further advancement of the influence of private interests on public decision-making since “participating business and civil society are treated as equal actors and can make decisions on standards and develop policies and programs as if they had governmental authority” (Buxton 2019, 3).

The second interest of the Forum in recent years has been the topic of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, introduced by Klaus Schwab (2016) in his book *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* and *Shaping the Future of the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, cowritten with Nicholas Davis (2018). The Fourth Industrial Revolution is the concept that explains the rapid changes in the development of technology, which include:

further breakthroughs in areas ranging from gene sequencing to nanotechnology, from renewables to quantum computing. It is the fusion of these technologies and their interaction across the physical, digital and biological domains that make the fourth industrial revolution fundamentally different from previous revolutions. (Schwab 2016, 8)

Interdependent technologies do not come without consequences. The professed technological disruptions are supposed to alter indefinitely how that businesses are being created and led, negatively affect social inequalities and unemployment numbers, and exacerbate the speed at which innovation happens (Schwab 2016, 9–12). Therefore, one of the WEF’s aims is to address the challenge posed by future technological developments even before they happen. Schwab also anticipates the relationship between the government and the business sector. The role of the governments is described as paramount since “they must let innovation flourish, while minimizing risks” (Schwab 2016, 71); however, without intruding into the regulation and management of the sector (Schwab 2016, 90).

As Alexander Trauth-Goik (2021) pointed out, the discourse surrounding the Fourth Industrial Revolution, regardless of its proclaimed goal, primarily serves to advance the development of neoliberal governmentality. While relying on the core principle of technological determinism—a theory that sees the development of social, cultural, and political forms and institutions primarily as determined by the advancement of technology—, the agenda sets the scenario in which business act separately, and regardless of other social actors, and paints them as the only possible agent of change that will safeguard the wellbeing of the planet and the species (Trauth-Goik 2021, 71). Moreover, the question of the popular will is set aside, as technological transformation is often presented as an inevitable process that is out of our control, and to which we can only adapt and prepare while anticipating it (Trauth-Goik 2021, 62).

To a certain extent, “The Great Reset” agenda builds upon and includes the idea from previous Schwab’s work. The official publications contain specific paragraphs and chapters that explicitly address the topics of stakeholder capitalism and the Fourth

Industrial Revolution. On top of that, some of the main premises from previous campaigns can be identified more generally as the main pillars of “The Great Reset” publications. There is a strong sentiment that the future has already happened, that there is a sense of inevitability in the way the major processes determine our collective existence (for instance, for the leaders of the WEF, the pandemic is a clear example of a catalyst of digital transformation). And at the same time, we can reimagine the world and make it more resilient and sustainable if we try. It is, however, important to emphasize that the focus of “The Great Reset” overcomes the limits of the previous WEF’s endeavors, as it includes a wider range of topics (e.g., the focus on personal wellbeing and mental health).

It is evident that the WEF and its agenda for the future development of the global society present themselves as an appropriate case study for studying dissenting narratives. The transparency of the WEF’s activities and their intentions allows us to contrast the actual plans of ruling elites as they are proclaimed and the narratives that appear on various channels online that reject the mere notion of a global forum as a political actor. The study contributes to all set goals of the dissertation: it provides data for a conclusion concerning the current state of the political discourse, ideas of progress, and the dominant modes of cultural expression. The study, additionally, allows for the exploration of one type of political schism in the contemporary Western public sphere that is highly mediatized and polarized. It is for that reason that the chapter will explore the dissenting narratives that strongly reject the WEF and its plans.

2. “The Great Reset” and the Discontent

As apparent from the previous discussion, the reaction to the activities of the WEF can be twofold. Many public figures and institutions take WEF’s intentions at face value and join their efforts to advance a specific kind of global politics, either sincerely or with a certain dose of cynicism. This tendency is evident primarily among those who, while defeatedly acknowledging that there will be no end to neoliberalism, demand that something be done to alleviate its worst effects, even if by partnering with the WEF. Usually, the speakers at WEF’s annual gatherings include several different profiles, such as political leaders of many a wide range of countries, leaders of supranational organizations (e.g., the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), and representatives from civil society organizations, such as the International Trade Union Confederation, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, and the European Trade Union

Confederation (Chantanayingyong and Parker 2019). Moreover, the young climate activist Greta Thunberg participated as a speaker on two separate occasions and is considered an “agenda contributor” (Thunberg 2021; 2020).

On the other hand, many outright reject the WEF and its mission. For instance, the political scientist Samuel Huntington, who was a speaker at the WEF (Huntington, Küng, and Salamé 2004), coined the term “Davos Man,” referring to the international elites that “have little need for national loyalty, view national boundaries as obstacles, and see national governments as residues from the past whose only useful function is to facilitate the élite's global operations” (these words were attributed to Huntington by Ash 2005). David Sogge (2014), writing for the *Transnational Institute* points out that the model of governance advocated by the WEF aims to primarily absolve large corporations and the private sector in general of any obligation and responsibility, while putting all the risks and guarantees on the governments, or, to be precise, on taxpayers. According to the same author, the supposed Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) are a way to usher in corporate self-rule and undermine independent regulators in international business (Sogge 2014, 4–5). Author Susan George (2015, 143) coined the concept of “the shadow sovereigns” to designate the new form of power in the context of stakeholder capitalism, pointing out that “the huge holes in the democratic fabric” are causing concern regarding the management of “commons for the benefit for all citizens.”

In general, the critique waged against the WEF and new forms of global politics is that it aggravates the already weakened and delegitimized democratic institutions in the West, restricts politics to the circle of well-connected cosmopolitan elites, and primarily serves to advance the private interests under the guise of philanthropy and problem-solving. As Peter Mair (2006) argues, the overall indifference and apathy of ordinary citizens in Western societies concerning politics and their disassociation from collective organizations such as trade unions, communities of worship, and political parties, point toward the ever-greater void at the center of mass participation in public matters. While populations increasingly show indifference toward the decision-making processes, the ideas concerning the meaning of democracy and its renewal become the center of interest at the theoretical, intellectual, and institutional levels. Those two tendencies have a direct correlation:

Making democracy relevant [among professionals and at the institutional level], in other words, comes on to the agenda at the time when it otherwise risks becoming irrelevant. [...] For, far from seeking to encourage greater

participation, or trying to make democracy more meaningful for the ordinary citizen, many of the contributions on institutional reforms or democratic theory seem to concur in favouring options that actually discourage mass engagement. This can be seen in the emphasis on stake-holder involvement rather than electoral participation that is found in both ‘associative democracy’ and ‘participatory governance’, and in the emphasis on the sort of exclusive debate that is to be found in ‘deliberative’ and ‘reflective’ democracy. In neither case is there real scope afforded to conventional modalities of mass democracy. (Mair 2006, 28–29)

After a long effort of elites and professionals to create parallel institutions and environments that can function apart from the “unenlightened” (Lasch 1996, 21) and of the transnational classes to overcome the confines of national and local culture and politics, rejected as “parochial and backward-looking” (Koopmans and Zürn 2019, 19), the divide between those who rule and those who make up societies has become undeniably significant and apparent. As suggested in the above quote by Mair, it is as if the greater emphasis on citizen participation among the ruling circles is directly related to the anti-political and anti-elite sentiments among the masses. This trend can be clearly identified in the case of “The Great Reset” campaign that was launched at the beginning of the pandemic caused by the SARS-Cov-2, in January 2020, which caused a strong, albeit overly negative, public reaction. Although the agenda explicitly advocates for the betterment of conditions of living of populations across the planet through, according to the WEF, a novel and more just form of global governance, it has provoked a wide outrage and mobilized a strong opposition. The exact reasons behind the strong rejection of the WEF will be discussed later in the chapter since delineating the nature of the opposition is one of the objectives of the study.

Although it had been introduced at the beginning of the year, it was only in November 2020 that “The Great Reset” incited a wider interest in the public. In particular, there was a very strong wave of negative reactions to the agenda, many of which were conspiracy theories attributing evil and hidden intentions to the plan (Alba 2020). The article by *BBC News* claims that the conspiracy theory version of the news “started trending globally on Twitter [...], when a video of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a UN meeting, saying the pandemic provided an opportunity for a ‘reset’, went viral” (Goodman and Carmichael 2020). The various interpretations of “The Great Reset” obtained a life of their own, getting significant public attention. According to the general media output, there was a significant increase in reporting about “The Great Reset” starting with November 2020 (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 The Frequency of Mentions of “Great Reset” in Online Written Media

SECTION	20-01	20-02	20-03	20-04	20-05	20-06	20-07	20-08	20-09	20-10	20-11	20-12
FREQ	2	2	9	19	18	77	54	34	37	36	195	225
WORDS (M)	219.1	180.7	238.8	212.3	233.7	240.1	234.6	255.6	220.3	198.1	185.0	189.6
PER MIL	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.09	0.08	0.32	0.23	0.13	0.17	0.18	1.05	1.19

Note. The table shows the frequency of mention of “Great Reset” in written articles available online. The data is for the year 2020. The months are indicated in the first row of the table: the first two digits represent the year and two digits after the dash the month (e.g., 20-01 stands for January 2020). The table is taken from the NOW corpus (News on the Web)—a database of words from web-based newspapers and magazines—on October 10th, 2022, <https://www.english-corpora.org/now/>.

Additionally, “The Great Reset” was used to advance certain goals in party politics. In Canada, the right-wing opposition parties have claimed that “The Great Reset” is a part of the elitist power-grab (Wherry 2020), while in the United States, the agenda was associated by the part of the public with the “Build Back Better,” the public investment plan proposed by the Joe Biden administration (Anti-Defamation League 2020). All these many faces of “The Great Reset” will be the object of further analysis. The interest of the study is to explore the political and cultural meanings that narratives related to “The Great Reset” convey and how these meanings relate to broader tendencies in society.

3. Methodological Note

While there may be many different valid approaches to the question of “The Great Reset” and its importance in the Western public sphere in light of the pandemic, this study focuses primarily on two aspects. In accordance with the general premise of the dissertation, the goal here is to interpret the elements of selected texts that delineate specific political ideas and reflect the cultural expression of Western societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. That is, despite their diverging origins, the study is premised on the notion that all the texts, including the reactions to the “Great Reset,” share the same goal: inscribing new meanings to and revitalizing the existing ideals of

liberalism, which finds itself at the precipice of a profound crisis of legitimation. Therefore, two main elements that are explored will be the presumed reexamination of political reality—which includes the identification of dissatisfactions (i.e., what is rejected and denounced as a problem in our society), antagonists (i.e., who is seen as acting against the collective wellbeing), and the ideas of progress (i.e., what is imagined as the desired way forward). The elements concerning the forms of cultural expressions include the inward outlook, the culture of fear and paranoia, and the imperative of enjoyment. Although these general themes have been already defined, the units of analysis within them are formed and grouped without a predetermined design. For each segment of the analysis, the narrative determined the codes. In other words, the analysis combines mix top-down and bottom-up approach in coding: the main six categories have already been established (dissatisfaction, antagonists, the ideas of progress, individual as authority, fears, and enjoyment), while the subcategories that constitute them are created according to the grouping of similar textual units.

The study examines the ideas present in the original publication of the WEF, the publication of the most prominent dissenting voices, and the comments of YouTube users that express dissatisfaction with “The Great Reset” agenda in the comment section below the WEF’s videos. Each part was subjected to the same coding scheme, with the difference that the first one contained no textual units that could be placed in the theme “enjoyment,” and the second one had no textual units for the theme “individual as authority.”

3.1. “The Great Reset” Manifesto

The analysis of “The Great Reset” agenda is based on the two manifestos published by Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum, and Thierry Malleret, the economist and the agenda contributor at the WEF. The two authors published *COVID-19: The Great Reset* in July 2020, half a year after the beginning of the pandemic and WEF’s first discussions of the “Great Reset.” The book is divided into three parts, each with a specific emphasis and focus, depending on the scope of the issue they deal with. The “Macro Reset” deals with the world in general: economy, society, geopolitics, environment, and technology. The “Micro Reset” talks about the issues concerning the government, businesses, and industries. And finally, the “Individual

Reset” talks about humanness, mental health and wellbeing, and individual priorities in life and society.

In December 2021, the two authors published their second book, *The Great Narrative: For a Better Future*. The book maintains its focus on the pandemic, its consequences, and the future of the economic and political system, but in a different form. The authors decided to slightly change their approach and presented their agenda as a story. As they suggest, we humans are “storytelling creatures,” and we use narratives to “make sense of life,” and narratives, in turn, “have power to inspire us to act” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 9). On top of that, the authors conducted many interviews with influential figures and thinkers worldwide, whose contributions are quoted throughout their book. The theoretical and ideological stances of those included vary greatly: collaborators include Niall Ferguson, Mariana Mazzucato, and Branko Milanovic. While the book maintains some elements of the previous one, it is written in a more approachable way. It speaks less authoritatively when predicting and prescribing future social models. It is not clear whether these changes were introduced to counter the negative reactions from a year before the publication of the second book.

The analysis of two publications has resulted in codes presented in Table 4.2, which were then used to structure the presentation of the results.

Table 4.2 Codes Resulting from the Analysis of “The Great Reset” Publications

1) POLITICAL ELEMENTS
<p>a. Dissatisfactions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Problems are identified in a neutral manner: No interpretation of socio-economic conditions ii. Social issues as “challenges”: various risks, environmental and interconnectivity issues, something to be overcome iii. Disunity: global or local separation of parts, the rich and poor, fragmentation, exclusion iv. Moral failing is the root cause of our problems <p>b. Antagonisms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Those propagating dangerous ideas: anti-science, disinformation campaigns, fake news ii. Intelligent tricksters who seduce people: populists and demagogues iii. Morally corrupt individuals or groups: lacking common decency <p>c. Ideas of Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Redefine social contract: implicit arrangements between the governments and the people ii. The future is not socially determined: it develops according to its own logic iii. The change will come after people become awake: when they realize what the quality of living is iv. The future lies in the hands of experts: the reign of reason and knowledge v. Growth and accumulation: the linear idea of progress

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> vi. The permanent state of emergency will shape society and culture vii. Technological determinism: the advancement of technology will shape our society viii. We can dream and imagine the future: the direction for development are abundant ix. The strengthening of the state and large bureaucracies x. Quality of life is defined as “happiness” or “mental wellbeing” xi. Environmentally friendly solutions to future consumption xii. Private enterprise will be maintained with public investment xiii. Socio-political demands understood as consumer dissatisfaction
<p>2) THE MODES OF EXPRESSION</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Individual as Authority: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Our cognitive workings (e.g., imagination) can affect socio-political reality ii. Survivalism: resilience and personal care in the harsh and heartless world iii. Big questions understood as personal moral dilemmas b. Fears: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Apocalypticism: the grand disaster is coming our way

Note. Elaborated by the author based on the works by Schwab and Malleret (2020, 2022).

3.2. Dissenting Texts

In order to counterpose dissenting views to the official “Great Reset” publications, the analysis will include the texts that provoked a strong public reaction and that express explicit opposition to the WEF and its agenda. There are no clearly established universal criteria for selecting such texts since the publications that negatively target “The Great Reset” agenda have been published at different times, on different platforms, and sold in various forms. However, it was decided that the most important indicator be the authorship and the relative online reception of the publication at the time of publishing.

The first selected publication is *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing the Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*, authored by Joseph Mercola and Ronnie Cummins, published in October 2021. The book emphasizes the topics related to the nature of the SARS-Cov-2 virus, vaccines, government responses, and general population health. The book is advertised on an online retailer website Amazon⁹ as a “*USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly* national bestseller” and has received a great response from the public. By October 13th, 2022, it had accumulated 7,241 ratings from readers with an average evaluation of 4.8 out of five stars. Dr. Joseph Mercola is described in the author’s biography section of the book as a “family physician, bestselling author, and recipient of multiple awards in the field of natural health.” It is additionally pointed out that Mercola is the primary author of the peer-reviewed paper

⁹ Information retrieved from the following webpage on October 13th, 2022: <https://www.amazon.com/Truth-About-COVID-19-Lockdowns-Passports/dp/1645020886>

“Evidence Regarding Vitamin D and Risk of COVID-19 and Its Severity” (Mercola, Grant, and Wagner 2020) in the journal *Nutrients*. He has authored several other publications on the topic of a healthy diet, the health of house pets, and personal care, and has a line of supplements that are sold on his website (Mercola Market n.d.). The co-author, Ronnie Cummins, is described in the author’s biography as the founder and director of the “Organic Consumers Association (OCA), a nonprofit, US-based network of more than two million consumers dedicated to safeguarding organic standards and promoting a healthy, just, and regenerative system of food, farming, and commerce.” Robert F. Kennedy Jr, a nephew of John F. Kennedy, the former US president, wrote the introduction to the book. Kennedy Jr is an environmental lawyer and the founder of Children’s Health Defense, an organization that advocates against vaccines. He grew in prominence as a conspiracy theorist advocating against the vaccination campaign, especially during the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic (Jarry 2021). This publication is, in fact, a collection of essays and every chapter is authored by either Mercola or Cummins. Therefore, the foreword by Kennedy Jr and individual chapters by Mercola or Cummins will be referred to accordingly, as separate units of bibliography.

The second selected work that presents opposition to the WEF is *The Great Reset: Joe Biden and the Rise of Twenty-First-Century Fascism* by Glenn Beck and Justin Haskins, published in January 2022. The book received a laudable public response on the online retail website Amazon, similar to the previously discussed one. The book, which features the images of Joe Biden, Klaus Schwab, and George Soros on the front cover, deals with a wide range of topics, such as the economy, the pandemic, climate change activism, potential future totalitarian regimes, the US party politics, and the monetary politics. The author Glenn Beck is a popular US conservative political commentator, radio and television host, and the author of numerous other books. Glenn presented his highly popular TV programs on CNN and Fox News, before moving in 2011 to his streaming platform GBTV where he conducted weeknight talk shows (Albert 2022). Beck was one of the first media figures to tap into the conservative affect and dissatisfaction in the wake of the novel forms of media spectacle, maneuvering “between fear, anger, sarcasm, intellectualism, and tranquillity, while gesticulating or crying” (Jutel 2018b, 376). In other words, Beck anticipated the turn towards the traffic of intense emotional responses facilitated by new developments in media technology. His co-author, Justin Haskins, is, according to the author’s biography, a director of the Stopping Socialism Center at The

Heartland Institute and a writer of articles published by *Fox News*, *The Hill*, *Newsweek*, and *Washington Examiner*.

And finally, the third publication is titled *The Great Reset: And the War for the World* by Alex Jones, published in August 2022. The book provoked great interest right from the first week of its publishing: it sold 30,000 copies and ranked second among nonfiction books and eleventh overall (Maher 2022). Its advertisement emphasizes positive reviews from highly prominent figures from the US media sphere and right-wing politics, including the podcaster Joe Rogan, the chief strategist in the Trump administration and media executive Steve Bannon, the Fox News TV host Tucker Carlson, dr. Mercola, and Donald Trump. As is the case with the book by Beck and Haskins, this publication contains an exhaustive reference list and uses quotes and data from various sources as a strategy for claiming legitimacy. However, what is unique to Jones's books is the focus on the primary sources; that is, the author dedicates each chapter to some book from the WEF representatives, associated figures, or advocates for global governance intuitions, extracts long quotations, and interprets them, often, but not always, unfavorably. Besides the books by Schwab concerning the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the "Great Reset," Jones also makes references to *Memoirs* by David Rockefeller (2003), *Between Two Ages* by Zbigniew Brzezinski (1970), *Sapiens, Homo Deus*, and *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* by Yuval Noah Harari (2011; 2017; 2018). As a main secondary source, Jones often cites *Technocracy Rising* by Patrick Wood (2015). The book is written in a way that would appeal to the wider audience, evident in the lack of highly provocative and controversial claims. The author included an exhaustive list of references in the end, which shows his effort to present the publication as a disinterested analysis and assign it a higher status.

Jones is one of the most popular conspiracy theory authors and presenters in English-speaking countries. He started his career in public access broadcasting in the 1990s, in Austin, Texas, and by the end of the decade, he founded Infowars, the internet and radio broadcasting network (S. Bond 2022). Jones achieved significant success in digital media and started receiving wider public attention for his provocative claims, including his anti-government and September 11-related conspiracy theories (May 2010, 504). Some of the recent notable examples from his repertoire are the claims that the US Government has "weather weapons," that the government puts chemicals in the water that make frogs homosexual, and that then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton is in charge of the sex trafficking ring that operates in a pizzeria in Washington D.C. (Higgins 2018).

However, the most significant recent claim made by Jones is that the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting was staged using crisis actors. As a consequence, the family members of the victims had to endure abuse online. In the trail following the incident, Jones was ordered to pay \$965 million to the victims’ family members (Evans 2022).

The codes related to the three previously discussed books are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Codes Resulting from the Analysis of the Opposition to “The Great Reset”

1) POLITICAL ELEMENTS
<p>a. Dissatisfactions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The unjust and unequal society ii. Fear and terror are to be denounced iii. Various forms of censorship and limits to personal and collective expression iv. Institutionalized corruption and kleptocracy v. The growth of monopolies and the destruction of small business vi. The political authority and leadership are being doubted vii. Global technocratic agendas for solving problems viii. Surveillance and limits imposed on freedom ix. Breach of privacy x. Liberal politics directed against the working class xi. Negative consequences of the fight against climate change xii. The limits on private ownership and the broadening of government powers xiii. Polarization and the cultural divide xiv. The bureaucratization of all spheres of everyday and private life (esp. government overreach) xv. The rent-based society and the diminishing of private ownership <p>b. Antagonisms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The amalgam of evil actors: insufficiently defined ii. Entities with vested interests and those who defend them iii. Those who are power hungry iv. The corrupted WHO v. Hollywood elites vi. Those understood as leaders of the US or the World (politicians, intellectuals, the wealthy, etc.) <p>c. Ideas of Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Democracy and improved quality of life ii. Resistance: taking matters into our own hands iii. People must unite to build a better future iv. Things should be brought to the local level: closer to people v. The search and longing for the meaning of life
2) THE MODES OF EXPRESSION
<p>a. Fears:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. New technology is being developed that will limit our freedoms and alter our lives ii. There is a network of powerful actors working together iii. There is a secret level of authority

- iv. The fear of the undefined future political order (NWO)
 - v. There is a constant danger of toxins in our food and air
 - vi. Publicly expressed intentions are not genuine
 - vii. Things are not what they look like: reality is manipulated
 - viii. Elites are the enemy of capitalism
 - ix. The fear of the return of fascism or communism
 - x. There is a plot against America
- b. Enjoyment:**
- i. Non-Western countries are taking over the race for development
 - ii. Longing for the lost heaven
 - iii. Jokes and insults
 - iv. The imperative of consumption

Note. Elaborated by the author based on the works of Mercola and Cummins (2021), Beck and Haskins (2022), and Jones (2022).

3.3. Popular Reception in the Digital Media

The understanding of “The Great Reset” agenda by the masses will be explored by looking into the comment section below the YouTube videos posted by the WEF, where they introduce their agenda to the online public. The said media was deemed suitable for the analysis as it represents and allows for the direct communication between the WEF and the internet users; online audio-visual content is slowly becoming the primary and favored channel for obtaining information for more and more people (Stocking et al. 2020), and the open comment section allows the audience to directly respond to the presented content. The two selected videos (Table 4.4) posted by the WEF are chosen for the great interest they provoked: on October 18th, 2022, they had accumulated 195,348 and 1,818,858 views respectively. Moreover, the videos contain long discussions about “The Great Reset” agenda with the aim of introducing the plan to a wider audience. The owner of the channel, the WEF, has kept the comment section open for a very long time; however, the comment section is disabled, and all the comments were not visible on October 18th, 2022. At the time when the comments were retrieved for the analysis, on January 27th, 2021, the videos had 1,039 and 4,254 comments respectively. Most reactions to the videos are negative, as evident in the number of upvotes and downvotes—the system that allows YouTube users to easily and quickly evaluate each video by choosing between a “thumb down” or “thumb up.” On the day when comments were retrieved, the first video accumulated 1,099 upvotes to 4,896 downvotes, while the second one had 4,247 upvotes to 24,793 downvotes.

Table 4.4 YouTube Videos Selected for the Analysis of Comments

Video	Date	Title	URL
#1	03.06.2020.	The Great Reset Launch session	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfVdMWzKwjc
#2	14.07.2020.	COVID-19: The Great Reset	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHRkkeecg7c

The content analysis of the selected comments was performed in the same way as the previously discussed materials; that is, within the broader interpretative categories related to the political and cultural expressions. In addition to the grouping of codes within themes, there will be exploration of the co-occurrences of themes; that is, the analysis will address the number of comments in which two themes appear alongside each other. This will concern only the comments that appear at least in fifty comments, to ensure that conclusions are drawn from the relevant amount of data.

The comments were filtered according to the form—limiting eligibility to the comments in English and to those that contain more than one sentence—and the content. Since the goal of the presented study is to study dissenting views in a specific political and cultural context, certain keywords were used to filter the comments, those being: “power,” “money,” “economy,” “rich,” “wealth,” “poor,” “evil,” “elite,” “global,” “control,” “freedom,” “government,” “politician,” “politics,” “humanity,” “future,” “social,” and “change.” In the end, 1,123 comments were eligible for the analysis. Table 4.5 contains the codes, ordered within broader interpretative categories. Only codes that appear in at least ten separate comments are included, to ensure those wider conclusions are being drawn from an adequate sample. It is important to note that one comment can express many different ideas and, therefore, produce several codes of analysis.

Table 4.5 Codes Resulting from the Analysis of the Opposition to “The Great Reset”

1) POLITICAL ELEMENTS
<p>a. Dissatisfactions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Economic enslavement (i.e., the loss of financial independence) ii. Wealth inequality iii. International politics iv. Liberal and left-wing politics v. Politics and the government vi. Technocracy <p>b. Antagonisms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Big and too-powerful corporations ii. Elites in general iii. WEF and those who try to rule without the democratic mandate iv. Those who created the problems are proposing the solution

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> v. Class politics – 99% vs the 1% vi. Irresponsible elites vii. Morally corrupted elites viii. Psychopathological elites <p>c. Ideas of Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Popular uprising ii. The power of populous iii. Freedom iv. The sense of unity among YouTube users v. Return to the nation-state capitalism vi. The politics of Donald Trump vii. Return to nature
<p>2) THE MODES OF EXPRESSION</p>
<p>a. Individual as Authority:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Individual solutions to political problems <p>b. Fears:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Personal and social control ii. There is a secret conspiracy iii. Publicly expressed intentions are not genuine iv. Evil intentions v. The pandemic is orchestrated vi. The pandemic is a hoax vii. Climate change is a hoax viii. Fear of socialism ix. Fear of totalitarianism x. Fear of fascism xi. Fear of feudalism xii. Elites are the enemy of capitalism xiii. Overpopulation control xiv. Fear of new technology and microchips <p>c. Enjoyment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Religious motives: the fight between evil and good forces ii. Imaginings influenced by popular culture

Note. Elaborated by the author based on the works of Mercola and Cummins (2021), Beck and Haskins (2022), and Jones (2022).

4. The Views of “The Great Reset” Agenda

The analysis of the official ideas of the Davos representatives reveals that the text is largely focused on presenting ideas of progress, as could be expected of the publications that aim to provide a way forward and out of the crisis. The writing style is very concise and intends to convey a clear point. The authors discuss certain topics more than others, they primarily remain at the intersection of the pandemic, socio-economic trends, and topics related to the future potential positive and negative developments.

The following subchapters provide an overview of the results of the analysis of the two publications by Schwab and Malleret (2020; 2022).

4.1. Dissatisfactions

The WEF authors talk about social issues in several different ways. However, despite the primary objective of the text to provide a political analysis of global politics in light of the pandemic, the analysis does not indicate a prolific or strenuous effort by the WEF's authors to critically examine the socio-political reality. As is elaborated in the following subchapters, there are four different discourses present in the endeavor of WEF's representatives to define this critical moment in history.

a. Decontextualized social issues

The most common way of talking about what is wrong with our current society is addressing the concerns in a decontextualized and neutral manner. In other words, the overview of contemporary issues may be accurate and detailed; still, it does not make attempts at examining and theorizing the reasons why society came to the point where it finds itself. That is evident in many instances in the WEF's writings in which the authors simply list issues they think are critical, such as: “global aging, inequalities, a partial retreat from globalization and the supply risks it entails, high levels of indebtedness, geopolitical turmoil” or “social divides, lack of fairness, limited cooperation, failure of global governance” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 14).

Wealth inequality is another illustrative example, discussed as a “significant dimension of today's dynamic of inequality” that “should be more systematically tracked” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 59). Moreover, the inequality and the presumed causes and consequences—“the ineffectiveness of most redistribution policies, a sense of exclusion and marginalization, and a general sentiment of unfairness” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 90)—are seen as the objective circumstances that provoke the breakdown of the social fabric, evident in the generalized loss of trust in our leaders and intuitions. The reversed argument—that the leaders and intuitions are deemed illegitimate because of their intrinsic corruptness and the contribution of the ruling class to the accumulation of wealth in few hands—is not entertained.

The authors, additionally, discuss circumstances behind our material conditions in relation to some objective, crushing grand events that are beyond our collective

political agency. Since the publications are primarily concerned with the issues related to the pandemic, the health crisis is often understood as one such objective force that violently alters our socio-economic reality. Thus, we learn that because of Covid-19, the “employment among black Americans was being decimated” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 86), and the increased hunger and instability will “wreak havoc in the world’s poorest countries” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 129), and the “exacerbated pre-existing conditions of inequality” will get worse (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 82). In other words, the WEF’s explanations of socio-political reality replace ideological and rational political installments that regulate our collective life under a specific logic (e.g., the accumulation of capital) with the impersonal and natural forces that are beyond our direct control and lack any rational intention.

The distinctive political decisions, such as the transition to “the green economy,” are seen similarly—as objective processes that create “winners and losers.”¹⁰ The Gilets Jaunes protests across France that started in 2018 because of, as the WEF authors say, a “small fuel-tax increase” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 67) is an example that demonstrates the possible reaction of the losers of the transition. As a consequence, the predicaments identified in an apolitical manner are then to be addressed in a way that does not include politicization. For instance, the authors claim that many important issues in today’s society can be effectively resolved *only* “if done so in a collaborative fashion” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 108).

In a similar way, the authors tend to frame social issues as *challenges* that are to be overcome. This will be discussed next.

b. Challenges and risks

In this case, all the issues that are experienced at the social level are understood as glitches in the perfectly functioning system that can be approached with technical, expert knowledge and resolved efficiently with the proper use of reason. The challenges

¹⁰ The concept of “winners” and “losers” denotes here one’s ability, or lack thereof, to, through the application of higher intellect and prowess, anticipate and benefit from robust social changes (that is, various “transitions”). As if it was a matter of a game in which all players commence on equal footing, the concept establishes a distinct notion of “fairness” in the domain of outcomes. Similar concept is applied to talk about the post-communist transition in Eastern Europe, in which the “winners” were considered to be those who had higher skills and cognitive abilities to thrive in a recently established free market (e.g., see Tucker, Pacek, and Berinsky 2002, 559). Contrary to this, Christophe Guilluy talks about “winners” of globalization (another sweeping transition) as those who are able to use their power and resources to skew the game in their favor (Guilluy 2019, 7).

are ever evolving and increasingly interlocking and can appear in a form of *risk*, another key concept for the WEF representatives. All deviations from some imagined, normal state of affairs are understood as a potential risk, something that can violently disturb our reality and exacerbate the already-existing risks and challenges. Additionally, the risks are “always on the rise” and in the immediate future, “more shocks will disrupt our lives, threaten our societies, endanger our economies and imperil peace” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 107). As the authors explain, the pandemic was one such wake-up call that will make us more alert to future crises.

Two main features of the “challenges and risks” discourse are the premise that almost all segments of collective life harbor potential risks and challenges and that they all are connected, can morph into each other, and intensify. The examples of the omnipresence of risks are evident in how many segments of collective life are talked about in this manner: authors discuss economic, environmental, geopolitical, political, technological, and global risks. They affect different groups in a specific way: the poor will suffer risks worse than the wealthier members of society.

Simultaneously, it is emphasized in the WEF’s publications that risks have their path of development—they are framed as strong forces of nature that are progressively getting worse and for which we are inadequately prepared, particularly in the case of environmental risks or new epidemics. We are suffering the “systemic connectivity,” which means that all the challenges are “concurring simultaneously,” as in the case of the pandemic. The authors warn of the linked risks:

We can all think of economic risks turning into political ones (like a sharp rise in unemployment leading to pockets of social unrest), or of technological risks mutating into societal ones (such as the issue of tracing the pandemic on mobile phones provoking a societal backlash). (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 23)

In another instance, the authors point out that an “‘infectious diseases’ risk is bound to have a direct effect on ‘global governance failure’, ‘social instability’, ‘unemployment’, ‘fiscal crises’ and ‘involuntary migration’” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 24). In short, the WEF presents a grim and pessimistic image of an aggressive wave of undesirable changes that reveal the inner fragility of contemporary Western society. Rather than a precise political project, the authors advocate for global cooperation as the only method that can, at least somewhat, address the challenges in front of us. Any drift

from the course of global cooperation is, therefore, undesired, as discussed in the next section.

c. Global disunity

The Davos representatives denounce all ideological currents that oppose further global cooperation, based on the notion that cooperation puts “our species on its unique and extraordinary trajectory” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 248). For them, it is not only important to include all countries, but also civil society and local actors, and strengthen international organizations (such as the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization). Accordingly, the increasing withdrawal from globalized capitalism is perceived as an undesired tendency, as is the case with “the tensions between the forces of nationalism and openness” concerning capital flows and international trade (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 111). In short, any form of disunity or disintegration of parts from the whole is a potential problem.

The strongest emphasis, however, is placed on the importance of “the global order,” imagined as a system at a supranational level that unites the largest possible pool of countries that cooperate under the rule of a single hegemon for the advancement of the world that is so systematically connected. Therefore, any deviation from that ideal is strongly rejected:

In this messy new world defined by a shift towards multipolarity and intense competition for influence, the conflicts or tensions will no longer be driven by ideology (with the partial and limited exception of radical Islam), but spurred by nationalism and the competition for resources. If no one power can enforce order, our world will suffer from a “global order deficit”. Unless individual nations and international organizations succeed in finding solutions to better collaborate at the global level, we risk entering an “age of entropy” in which retrenchment, fragmentation, anger and parochialism will increasingly define our global landscape, making it less intelligible and more disorderly. (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 104)

In other words, we are living a critical moment in which “nobody is really in charge” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 114) and which threatens to create a “strong dissonance between short-term, domestic imperatives and long-term, global challenges” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 115). This can be observed in the aftermath of the decline of the US hegemony, which resulted in many “medium-sized powers” pursuing their own particular interests (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 75). Defining political agenda within the

borders of the nation-state, and not on any large scale, is deemed dangerous; it can “leave everybody worse off” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 63) and create a situation in which “the world will be even more divided, nationalistic and prone to conflicts” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 248). The pandemic and climate change are two examples that authors provide to justify their call for the strengthening of international institutions, pointing out that greater cooperation is needed for everybody to deal successfully with large-scale challenges.

Namely, the globalized society is understood as an indisputable destiny of humanity, being set as the fastest path towards growth and development. The authors do not conceive of any possible valid political project that deviates from that vision. Moreover, any such divergence is said to possibly lead to fatal consequences for all.

d. Moral failing

Finally, the WEF discusses extensively moral failure as the cause of our predicament. This segment of the WEF’s political writing is in direct relation to their campaign for “stakeholder capitalism,” which should reorient our dominant economic relations and introduce the concepts of humanity and consideration for others in the way our economies function. This goal is to be achieved by providing value not only for owners but also for “communities, customers, employees and suppliers” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 173). In other words, it is suggested that we can resolve the largest issues only if “morality and values are (re)introduced into the practice of economics and the policies” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 140). This is part of the changing *zeitgeist*, evident in the greater importance given to the welfare of all people by the political elites. In that regard, the authors position the main issues concerning moral guidance in the context of economic policy and activity:

From 1973 onwards, the fight for stakeholder responsibility was an uphill battle. During these years, many businesses and financial institutions celebrated the “virtue” of greed (“Greed is good”) and had no moral qualms that, in the 40 years following 1978, CEO compensation at the leading 350 US companies would rise by 940%, compared with a 12% rise for the average worker over the same period (a dramatic disconnect driven by the wrong assumption that paying executives more would yield “the best” performance). For almost 50 years, the common-sense idea that a company is more than just an economic unit seemed incongruous. (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 175)

However, greed as a fundamental principle within the economic policy is just one element of the discussion on values and morality. It is, additionally, suggested that we all need to rethink the fundamentals that guide our individual behavior or introduce mechanisms that would set us on the path towards greater moral standards (for instance, in order to make people assume environmentally responsible behavior, some price on carbon emissions must be established). Such ethics is also expected from political and business leaders if they are to “implement essential value-oriented policies.” And finally, the nation-states are invited to expand their altruism beyond their borders to contribute to global welfare.

Similar to the decontextualized explanations of socio-political occurrences that were discussed previously, in this case, the issues of wealth accumulation, inequality, polluting practices, and exploitation of labor are not portrayed as developments that unfolded in accordance to a specific ideological credo, but due to the uncontrollable lust for money of certain individuals that allowed the corruption of their morals, which “constantly interfere with economics and the conduct of economic policies” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 143). But, if there is indeed a cultural pattern that frames the egotistical personality as the superior preference, which would nudge contemporary subjects to assume specific economic behavior, this phenomenon is not historicized in any meaningful way¹¹.

4.2. Antagonisms

When addressing the main antagonists in today’s world, the WEF’s texts establish two categories presented next. It should be noted here that the issue of political adversaries is not something the authors discuss to a great extent; however, since the concept is implicitly evoked in several different forms it should be discussed briefly in the analysis.

a. Those who spread “dangerous ideas”

The first strong opposition that the Davos representatives express is directed towards those who release undesired or harmful ideas into the media sphere. Their

¹¹ For instance, Oliver James (2008, 120) situates the emergence of the *selfish capitalist* as a dominant personality trait within the development of conditions instituted by the contemporary political economy, including: (1) the focus on a share price, (2) privatization of commons, (3) removal of regulations in financial and labor markets, and (4) the weakening of trade unions.

discourse reflects the wider concerns often expressed in the liberal public sphere in Western countries: “Falsehoods, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracies have always existed, but today they are served and magnified by the dominance and reach of social media and the virality of fake news” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 16-17). The WEF’s narrative points to “influencers,” who are those public actors or groups that opportunistically target already existing groups to establish a strong bond with them, and, in that process, increase social polarization.

For instance, the authors attribute the anti-science movement to such intent, by accusing it of feeding the public sphere information that negatively affects general compliance with the pandemic mitigation measures, which in turn prolongs the health crisis. The WEF sees this obstacle as an important one in dealing with almost any social problem: “the abundance of fake news and its ability to magnify and manipulate polarization hinders our ability to deal successfully with the momentous collective action problems that humanity faces” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 17). The chain of impact follows this kind of logic: anti-science movements empower the climate-change deniers and doubters—who make up, as authors claim, about 30% of the population in the United States, mostly of right-wing political orientation—, who, on their part, “feed polarization and slow (or even prevent) policy” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 69). In the same style, the authors discuss “demagogues,” referring to the political actors that incite “illiberalism, nationalism and populism” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 74).

They suggest, instead, that people connect with others, interact with those who think differently, and avoid tribalization that can limit their perspective and skew their view. The WEF itself has followed this premise, allowing the comment section below their YouTube videos to remain open for discussion despite the amount of negative critique waged at the organization and its “Great Reset” agenda. However, this was the case until recently, when their decision was reversed, and commenting was disabled.

b. Morally corrupt individuals and groups

As discussed in the chapter focused on political dissatisfactions, “The Great Reset” texts denounce moral failing as one of the main causes of our social problems today. Following that notion, those individuals that are the ones with weak characters and inappropriate values are designated as antagonists. Therefore, there is a wide array of actors that are allowing their personal traits to imperil the political project, such as crony

capitalists, corrupt leaders, self-centered and egotistic powerful people, profit-oriented companies, and similar. For instance, the authors (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 223) point out that the behavior of companies and those responsible who used the crises to increase the price of essential products for protection and care is “not only offensive but flies in the face of what is considered morally and socially acceptable.” In other instance, they denounce the relentless pursuit of self-interests that prevents individuals from working towards achieving better inclusivity and fairness.

The circular accumulation of capital at any cost, that is the central premise of the capitalist ethics, is then framed as a decision that each individual can take in the accordance with their own moral stance.

4.3. Ideas of Progress

“The Great Reset” publications were written to present a new political manifesto that radically reimagines the future of capitalism and the world in general. In accordance with that, the following section will be the most prolific one, as the WEF’s authors dedicate most of the pages to the discussion of the existing, upcoming, and potential paths toward a better life. Many of the directions the authors take to present their project form a cohesive broader narrative; however, some of the proposals contradict each other regarding their main premise. This will be discussed next.

a. The change for the better is possible

First and foremost, the WEF expresses ideas that are to incite optimism. Behind this is the presumption that, while it is true that we face a great number of crises, risks, and challenges, we have immense potential to move things for the better. People are right to be upset with the state of things, but instead of anger, they should direct their actions towards constructive endeavors, such as the redefinition of the social contract, which the authors define as “the (often implicit) set of arrangements and expectations that govern the relations between individuals and institutions. Put simply, it is the ‘glue’ that binds us, our societies, together; without it, the social fabric unravels” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 89). As they argue, “our current social contract” is broken, as evident in the amount of strong political dissent that grows larger in Western societies. They suggest that a new social contract be fairer, meaning that we should adapt “the welfare state to today’s world by empowering people” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 90). The key role here is played by

young people, who will “inherit” the world, and thus, must be listened to when drafting the new social contract.

The optimism expressed by the Davos representatives becomes most pronounced when they discuss what we can and should imagine and dream collectively; in short, “the contours of a more equitable and sustainable world.” There is no lack of qualifiers used to emphasize the scope of hopeful options for the future: our imagination is “boundless,” the social, economic, and political solutions are “infinite,” the pathways are “various,” solutions to the global issues “abound,” and similar. These hopeful proposals have great impact, as it is assumed that they will form a larger narrative (as should be the case with “The Great Reset” books), which will lead to concrete action that will profoundly impact reality. Various actors – “entrepreneurs, business executives, investors, policymakers, social activists, academics and all sorts of other thinkers” – are not just dreaming, but are involved in concrete efforts: “developing new ventures, start-ups, economic policies or mammoth projects” that will advance our collective conditions. The common people will also feel this wave of improvements: trade unions will be renewed, worker’s safety will be regulated, domestic production will be reinvigorated, and businesses will be held accountable for the negative social impact. In short, the publications announce many great things, although elsewhere they offer bleak predictions as well. This will be discussed next.

b. Future is bleak

Strikingly divergent from the previously discussed optimistic tone, many parts of the WEF’s publications negatively portray the future as potentially dystopian. This is evident in the discussion of the prospective dangers and the predictions of future states of emergency that are seen as eminent and that will leave an irremovable trace on our collective life. For instance, it is understood by the authors that the large-scale changes that took place following the pandemic will inevitably remain and become a part of our societies (i.e., “the genie of tech surveillance will not be put back into the bottle”; Schwab and Malleret 2020, 172), similar to how the world changed in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The authors argue:

All around the world, new security measures like employing widespread cameras, requiring electronic ID cards, and logging employees or visitors in and out became the norm. At that time, these measures were deemed extreme, but today they are used everywhere and considered “normal”. An increasing

number of analysts, policymakers and security specialists fear the same will now happen with the tech solutions put into place to contain the pandemic. They foresee a dystopian world ahead of us. (Schwab and Malleret 2020: 166)

In that regard, the authors explain that “the pandemic could open an era of active health surveillance made possible by location-detecting smartphones, facial-recognition cameras and other technologies that identify sources of infection and track the spread of a disease in quasi real time” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 168). However, the authors invite us not to be so demoralized about the prospect of technological surveillance becoming a large and inevitable part of our healthcare, as they call for a cautious approach: “it is for those who govern and each of us personally to control and harness the benefits of technology without sacrificing our individual and collective values and freedoms” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 172).

Since the authors present these future developments as inevitable, it is suggested that we should prepare ourselves collectively in the best way possible and try to adapt to these developments by reinventing new modes of governance. Some other developments that will alter our societies in the future are: “automation and innovation, rising inequalities, the growing power of tech and surveillance, the rising rivalry between the United States and China, the partial retreat from globalization, the economic paradigm shift, and an increasingly fractious geopolitical landscape” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 13-14). Therefore, we *have to* build a new world that is “resilient, collaborative, sustainable and equitable.” In other words, the dominant vision of the future in this discourse is that of constant reaction to the adverse circumstances that threaten to expand beyond our control. This notion directly contradicts the one from the previous subchapter—while it is argued there that we have enormous potential to create our future, it is suggested here that society is politically passive in the light of large-scale developments and can only hope to adapt to the situation in the best way possible.

c. The future has already happened

As already discussed, the WEF talks with great confidence about many future developments which are seen as inevitable, outside of human control or any political and social agency. Their statements do not always predict negative outcomes. For instance, the authors argue that “the post-pandemic era will usher in a period of massive wealth redistribution, from the rich to the poor and from capital to labour” and that it is “likely to sound the death knell of neoliberalism” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 78). The authors

suggest that the governments would put an end to share buybacks, low corporate taxes, outsourcing the processes that are key to public healthcare, and similar. In what follows, a very illustrative and extensive example from the analyzed text will be presented that expresses the ideas of such nature. While the example might appear overly lengthy, it is presented in such a way for its usefulness in understanding the scope of the authors' predictions and their convictions:

Health and unemployment insurance will either need to be created from scratch or be strengthened where it already exists. Social safety nets will need to be strengthened as well – in the Anglo-Saxon societies that are the most “market-oriented”; extended unemployment benefits, sick leave and many other social measures will have to be implemented to cushion the effect of the shock and will thereafter become the norm. In many countries, renewed trade union engagement will facilitate this process. Shareholder value will become a secondary consideration, bringing to the fore the primacy of stakeholder capitalism. The financialization of the world that gained so much traction in past years will probably go into reverse. Governments, particularly in the countries most affected by it – the US and the UK – will be forced to reconsider many features of this obsession with finance. (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 93-94)

As can be observed here, the authors make many strongly worded statements that leave very little space for chance. Very striking is the choice of verbs to discuss future developments: “will,” “will have to,” “will probably,” “will need to be,” and “is likely to.” The readers are never provided with a substantial debate on the conditions of those developments and many of the strongly worded statements are made in spite of glaring evidence of the contrary tendencies. Even if what the WEF’s authors predict is to take place, the required revolutionary movements and political projects that would be needed to set in motion such a seismic shift in socio-economic arrangements are never contemplated. For instance, the authors claim that public scrutiny over private companies and businesses will increase, some industries will be nationalized, regulation over workers' rights will improve, and environmental standards will for doing business be tightened. However, they never outline a potential political subject behind this social change, as if it will happen in and of themselves, in spite of its radicality and the evident lack of political will at present.

The same logic is applied to certain future developments that can be considered less desirable. In this case, the authors' linguistic choices vary from more careful to outright prescriptions and predictions like the ones discussed above. For example, many alienating practices related to the introduction of new technology in human relations are

talked about in a measured tone. When the authors discuss the world in which we physically exercise in the privacy of our homes instead of in-person gym classes, communicate with work colleagues on Zoom, and give up on family gatherings and academic activities for WhatsApp groups and online conference calls (which, they explain, are all “safer, cheaper, greener and much more convenient”; Schwab and Malleret 2020, 155), they begin by saying that “we may decide” to make those choices, thus attributing some agency to the contemporary subject. However, this is not the case with some other changes that the WEF predicts. We learn that “the pandemic will fast-forward the adoption of automation in the workplace and the introduction of more robots in our personal and professional lives” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 157), the surveillance at the workplace will increase (“for better or for worse,” as authors say; Schwab and Malleret 2020, 19), and many companies, such as Alibaba, Amazon, Netflix, or Zoom, will become out of the crisis as accidental winners of lockdowns (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 176). Accordingly, “The Great Reset” agenda reiterates previous WEF’s discourse about “violent development paths,” which suggests that you can either adapt to the upcoming changes or be crushed (Schiølin 2020, 550). For instance, the authors talk about the “winners” and “losers” of lockdown-related policies. The losers “will find it very hard to adapt and to survive” if they lag behind and do not board “the high-speed digital train” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 208). The WEF claims that it is futile to oppose it: “Those tempted to revert to the old way of doing things will fail. Those that adapt with agility and imagination will eventually turn the COVID-19 crisis to their advantage” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 210).

For Schwab and Malleret, technology is closely interwoven into the structure of contemporary society and politics. Their vision of progress relies on elaborated sociotechnical imaginaries, understood here as “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (Jasanoff 2015, 4). In WEF’s discourse, the technology has a strong deterministic role, technological changes are something that is “not debatable.” It is disruptive and interwoven into all segments of society; it can have a positive and negative impact; that is, it can improve our health and societal well-being and, at the same time, represent a threat (cybercrime, various risks, intense warfare, etc.). However, the authors of “Great Reset” publications, in several instances, give humanity an active role in the use and development of technology, for instance, by suggesting that

we address the major contemporary challenges by taking advantage of “the stunning speed of today’s scientific and technological progress” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 181). However, the imperative of technological advancement and its deterministic role is a critical element of WEF’s political imaginary.

While the definitive statements concerning the future of society are equally positive and negative (that is, they paint the world of tomorrow as simultaneously more advanced *and* ruthlessly competitive), they all omit the causation and reaction in the socio-political sphere. What is missing is the discussion of power relations, influence, and the effort that is necessary to shape society in a specific way.

d. The appeal to expertise

Another depoliticized discourse of the WEF is the one that centers the knowledge class and experts as the leaders of the world of tomorrow. Since the troubles that exist at the social and economic levels are seen as challenges and risks, the use of knowledge and expertise is introduced as an appropriate tool for achieving collective objectives. Within this discourse, the social structure does not rely on a specific set of preconceived ideas, does not have the guiding spirit of the epoch, or groundless beliefs that serve as the most important guiding principle of ideology, but is perceived as a set of procedures and processes that work seamlessly, if not affected by a malfunction. Consequently, the WEF’s authors do not envision the future determined by a political struggle for alternative visions of society but by the most efficient application of knowledge and science. In other words, society is perceived as a technical system, and political dissatisfactions as system malfunctions that require repair.

The appeal to expertise is most apparent in the discussion on climate-change mitigation measures, which are defined in non-political terms. In that regard, the authors compare the fight against climate change to the policies applied during the pandemic, which means that the mitigation of the consequences of climate change is taken out of its political context into the realm of state of emergency politics. The authors suggest in the text that political leaders and decision-makers “may want to take advantage of the shock inflicted by the pandemic to implement long-lasting and wider environmental changes” and “make ‘good use’ of the pandemic by not letting the crisis go to waste” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 145). Accordingly, experts, researchers, and scientists need to work out the way out of the climate crisis in cooperation with the government, which is the only

body that has “the ability, capacity and legitimacy to pursue” aggressive reforms (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 63). Additionally, research and development will be crucial in achieving other “global public goods,” such as healthcare and education (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 159).

The WEF’s representatives also foresee some limitations that must be rectified to achieve established goals. Those that have the knowledge and expertise are constrained by their narrow view and focus on their specific field, which can “result in a shared disquiet of being both overwhelmed by the complexity of the task and having a limited understanding of its scope” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 18). They related this notion to their theory of interconnectedness of risks and challenges whereby all spheres of collective life (economic, political, environmental, technological, etc.) converge into one. By missing to “connect the indispensable dots between disparate fields,” we lose the ability to conceive the bigger picture of the world we live in. In short, those in charge need to bring together the most suitable representatives of knowledge, expertise, and science from different fields to be able to respond to the numerous crises that await us.

e. Progress as an individual endeavor

The authors of “Great Reset” publications assign great importance to the individual in the face of major political challenges. First, the authors present betterment at the social level as conditioned by our personal understanding of what is quality of life and how much it matters. As they explain, “it is for us to figure out what future we want” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 193). The authors further argue:

Tackling an issue that seems overwhelming begins with practicality – with every one of us acting and focusing on the things within our remit, like being empathetic towards our fellow human beings, reaching out to those in need, making the right decisions on how we engage with others, eat, shop, travel, vote, and more. We need a new awareness of our responsibilities and a willingness to face them. (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 204)

The core belief is that our higher awareness and the change of attitude will make us modify our habits, preferences, and objectives, which will, in a chain of reactions, provoke a major change in large-scale processes that constitute political life. Some of the things that we can rethink and reevaluate are our relationship with nature and why we are alienated from it, our consumption patterns and what we *really* need, the importance of our own physical and mental resilience, our carbon footprint and its impact on

biodiversity, our lifestyle choices (how we sleep, eat, exercise), and similar. Personal decisions of such kind, authors claim, can have a significant effect on society: “What social scientists call ‘behavioral contagion’ (the way in which attitudes, ideas and behavior spread throughout the population) might then work its magic!” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 147) Such is the case with the fight against climate change—if we collectively emulate some of the behavior present during the enforced pandemic lockdowns, “commuting less, working remotely a bit more, bicycling and walking instead of driving” or “vacationing nearer to home,” our aggregate efforts will have great impact (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 142). In that regard, the response to climate change is seen as significantly dependent on behavioral changes and the effect of the changed mindset of all members of society.

As a consequence, collective political subjectivity is absent from the theory of the “Great Reset.” What comes in its place is consumer dissatisfaction; that is, the things in the world will change if, driven by outrage in the face of glaring injustice, citizens *demand* that those in power do something, or if those who have power amend the grievances to impede any indignation that they might anticipate. So, the authors explain that citizens will judge businesses not only through a commercial but through a “social lens” as well and that the markets, activists, and investor activists will punish companies that acted inappropriately during the pandemic. The example of climate activism is given to illustrate the point, as it is suggested that activists can, together with investors in the boardroom, “demand greater enforcement of pollution regulations” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 149). On their part, companies will want to enhance “a brand’s reputation,” and, therefore, “prove that they treat their workers well, by welcoming improved labour practices and paying attention to health and safety as well as well-being in the workplace” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 187). In other words, the motivation for fair and humane treatment of workers is *not* some kind of ethics but pure pragmatism: “Companies will not necessarily adhere to these measures because they are genuinely ‘good’, but rather because the ‘price’ of not doing so will be too high in terms of the wrath of activists, both activist investors and social activists” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 187-188).

In WEF’s texts, political subjectivity is replaced with the imperative of the individual agency, both in terms of personal choices or consumption dissatisfaction (*making demands* not as a citizen or *zoon politikon* but as the disaffected user of goods or services). What is missing from the concept of progress as the amendment of injustice is the ideal of a good and virtuous life with others as the ultimate goal of a political effort.

The agenda rather places the focus on particularity, by strongly advising individual awakening and the careful choice of lifestyle.

f. The role of the state

The strong and big government plays an important role in the thinking of the WEF's representatives. As stated previously, multistakeholder governance does not advocate for the elimination of capitalism, but for its restructuring. Within that logic, the state is imagined as a radical adversary of rampant neoliberalism (even though quite the opposite is the case¹²). The authors go as far as to equate the state with society. For instance, they claim that now, as opposed to the epoch when Margaret Thatcher “captured the zeitgeist” by claiming that “there is no such thing as a society,” the government “has an upper hand” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 92). The authors expect the state to grow much stronger in the coming period because of the crisis provoked by the pandemic, but also, because of the crisis that is to come. In that context, the government should focus strongly on solving problems (responding to risks and challenges). “The Great Reset” agenda takes two directions in developing their claims about the future of state power.

First, the authors profusely discuss the importance of the welfare state. They suggest some policies in terms of welfare-enhancing interventions as a response to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of those at the top, or to adapt the welfare mechanisms to the conditions of contemporary society. Although the WEF's proposals are presented to the public as some radical drift from “politics as usual” (es evident in the choice of the term “reset” in the title of the agenda, suggesting some radical novelty), their proposals are quite familiar bandages to the ills of neoliberalism. So, Schwab and Malleret (2022) explain that “social safety nets, health and employment insurance will be strengthened and, even in the countries that are the most ‘market-oriented’, extended unemployment benefits, sick leave and many other social measures will be considered and sometimes implemented.” These changes serve to strengthen social capital, which is “the lubricant that allows economies to function efficiently.”

¹² Contrary to the established belief, the introduction of neoliberal reforms did not advance dominant economic relations towards the accomplishment of the classical liberal understanding of economy as the autonomous process that functions independently from the society and the state. On the contrary, the growing importance of the welfare state (primarily due to the increasing number of unemployed or underemployed), the “too-big-to-fail” policy, and the greater intrusion of the state into the private matters of citizens (e.g., in the family relations) in the aftermath of the neoliberal reforms are the clear indicators of the growth of the state as a *condition* of neoliberalism itself (see: Konings 2012; Heartfield 2006, chap. 9).

Second, the WEF sees the state as either the facilitator of private enterprise or its regulator. For instance, the authors explain that, for stakeholder capitalism to gain momentum, governments should create “the right incentives” and issue “appropriate norms for responsible behaviour, particularly when they represent the choice expressed by citizens in free elections” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 178). This is particularly emphasized in the context of environmental policies—the governments are expected to lead the transition to a net-zero economy. Additionally, it is advocated in “The Great Reset” campaign for public-private partnerships, which will “affect the way business is conducted” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 94), and for the state to “invest in human and social capital” to improve its economic footprint (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 160). Another way that the government can take a more active role in the private sector is by being an entrepreneur itself: “All around the world, examples abound of governments spurring innovation, creating new markets and playing an active entrepreneurial role” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 163).

Although there is a strong focus on the strength of the state in the narratives, the WEF’s authors do not contemplate the return of the true authority of *the political*, which would suppose the potential of those in power to fundamentally alter the basic principles according to which the society is organized. On the contrary, what is understood as a strong state by the authors is the government that is subordinated to the market, in that the government provides optimal conditions for its functioning or sets it on a specific course.

g. Linear progress

In the end, “The Great Reset” talks about future developments in terms of growth, which is the primary principle behind the concept of linear progress. The central premise of the modern Western concept of progress frames the unlimited abundance for all, the proliferation of desires or needs, the general availability of comfort and luxury goods, and, finally, infinite growth as the primary indicators of the good life (see Smith 1776; Keynes 1932, 358–73). In this paradigm, consumption is seen as a central activity that has the utmost importance. The authors touch upon this as well, and, in their discussion of the changes in behavior that the pandemic will leave, when they explain that “consumers need products and, if they can’t shop, they will inevitably resort to purchasing them online” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 180).

However, the most attention is given to growth, or, to be more precise, to the gross domestic product (GDP). For instance, the WEF hails the upsurge in productivity that resulted from the pandemic as a potential key to the reinforced economic growth and calls for the redefinition of the concept of GDP to reflect the contemporary society, so that it includes “the value created in the digital economy, the value created through unpaid work as well as the value potentially destroyed through certain types of economic activity” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 58). Additionally, Schwab and Malleret advocate for a specific kind of growth in relation to human, societal and environmental well-being.

At the same time, environmental concerns are interpreted as an opportunity to increase growth since, as WEF’s representatives claim, “profitability and sustainability are not antinomic” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 152). In that regard, the authors explain that all the innovation and efforts needed to decarbonize the planet are an opportunity to stimulate demand and create a “new growth strategy” with “millions of jobs” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 66). The right policies for growth also offer a case for inciting hope and counteracting the calls for de-growth (which would “entail catastrophic social and political consequences”; Schwab and Malleret 2022, 150).

The authors place the concept of sustainable growth in the service of maintaining the level of consumption expected for contemporary society. They advocate for the circular economy, which allows consumers to “preserve resources and minimize waste by using a product again when it reaches the end of its useful life, thus creating further value that can, in turn, generate economic benefits by contributing to innovation, job creation and, ultimately, growth” (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 62). They illustrate this by pointing out that more and more companies favor “reparable products with longer lifespans (from phones and cars to fashion),” or “offer free repairs (like Patagonia outdoor wear). At the same time, the new “platforms for trading used products” are expanding and gaining popularity (Schwab and Malleret 2020, 62).

The emphasis on growth and consumption in “The Great Reset” agenda demonstrates the importance of the central premise of progress that revolves around a lifestyle of abundance. The authors do not contemplate any alternatives to the dominant model of economic growth and collective perception of the good life but try to reconcile the desire for everything to remain the same with the environmental concerns that they strongly advocate for.

4.4. Individual as Authority

The WEF's narratives reinforce the vision of the autonomous individual independent from external conditions as the dominant paradigm of contemporary cultural expression. First, the authors develop the idea that our imagination can affect socio-political reality. Schwab and Malleret explain that people should be creative and develop new ways of thinking—everything is possible, “we are in fact only bound by the power of our own imaginations.” This notion is related to the WEF's central thesis in the second publication on the “Great Reset,” where they aim to present their ideas in a way that reflects the power of their imagination in the form of a narrative (hence the title *The Great Narrative*). Their narrative aims to create “stories that are both pertinent and convincing to others” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 122)

The authors argue for the use of imagination in confronting large-scale problems so that the whole process of social change “involves creativity and an openness to new ways of thinking, plus of course large amounts of disciplined analysis and the prospect of a business or policy application” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 124-125). Therefore, those who have such imaginative powers can translate their vision into a narrative that changes behavior and can shape the future. The authors provide the example of central banks, which mobilize “mainstream finance to support the transition towards a sustainable economy” via policies related to “credit operations, collateral policies and asset purchases” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 126). These actions are, according to the authors, “the product of central bankers' imagination” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 126).

In the political thinking of the WEF, the imagination and personal moral dilemmas act as supplements for decisions and choices based on interests or those bound by material conditions. While no absolute correlation can be drawn between the two, the ideas concerning our imagination and its effect on reality (i.e., the socio-political external circumstances) can be interpreted within the larger tendency in the Western public sphere to adhere to the popular psychology, which stresses the effect of positive or negative thinking on one's external conditions. This tendency includes the power of autosuggestion, New Age therapy, positive thinking, and the law of attraction. It is suggested in these theories that we have the power to, by changing our attitude, thoughts, and feelings, influence conditions like psychological illness, wealth, economic prosperity, professional opportunities, or, in general, cause the betterment of life (Pignotti and Thyer 2015, 195).

On the other hand, “The Great Reset” agenda frames many of the issues faced by our society as individual dilemmas. This is clearly pronounced in their discussion of issues related to the pandemic, with the central premise that things in our society depended on the right or wrong choices some individuals can make. The authors emphasize the moral elements of economic decisions related to lockdown and mitigation measures:

Should, for example, fairness or justice be considered when looking at the laws of supply and demand? And what does the response tell us about ourselves? This quintessential moral issue came to the fore during the most acute phase of the pandemic in early 2020 when shortages of some basic necessities (like oil and toilet paper) and critical supplies for dealing with COVID-19 (like masks and ventilators) started to occur. What was the right response? Let the laws of supply and demand work their magic so that prices rise high enough and clear the market? Or, rather, regulate demand or even prices for a little while? (Scwab and Malleret 2020, 222-223)

In this case, individuals with enough power to stir the economy in a specific direction are expected to do so according to some notion of fairness and need. The authors elaborate on “quintessential moral issues” concerning the shortages of basic supplies during the early days of Covid-19; however, it is not clear how was that structural issue to be addressed as a matter of personal ethics and choice. Since the manufacturing processes have been dismantled in many Western countries, taking hold of the “supply and demand” would be an overly ambitious endeavor for any political authority.

Furthermore, in *The Great Narrative*, the authors discuss the importance of personal resilience and mental well-being as related to planetary and social resilience, while in *The Great Reset*, they dedicate one of three thematic parts of the book to the “individual reset” (after elaborating on “macro” and “micro resets”). In the part of the book dedicated to personal questions, they discuss humanness and moral choices, mental health and well-being, and the way individuals should and will reconsider their priorities.

It should be noted, however, that the presented ideas concerning the individual perspective are not ubiquitous in “The Great Reset” agenda. They appear in specific contexts and serve to advance the arguments about specific ills of contemporary global society. In that regard, moral choices, imagination, or well-being are discussed in relation to dissatisfactions (e.g., inequality, injustice) or the way we can resolve the problems—such as environmental challenges that require innovative solutions.

4.5. Fears

The sentiment of fear found in the agenda is related to subchapter 4.3.2, where it is analyzed how the authors of “The Great Reset” predict the bleak socio-political future ahead of us. There, it was explained that Schwab and Malleret express certain fears about the future and strong waves of change that can alter violently how we live. We should brace ourselves for a future full of disasters: technology will grow in power, the weather will become more hostile with episodes of large disasters, privacy will become dispensable, and similar. In this example, the authors explain what negative consequences we can expect in the 21st century without an absolute hegemon (i.e., *one* global superpower):

[...] Power and influence will be redistributed chaotically and, in some cases, grudgingly. In the next few decades, the world will be less secure and less stable than it was in the recent past. It will be marked by a sharp return to great power competition, exhibiting the features of a zero-sum game (“I win – you lose”) and resembling a chessboard on which the rival must be defeated. The chaotic end of multilateralism, the current vacuum of global cooperation and the rise of various forms of nationalism and populist regimes will make it more difficult to find common ground when a crisis erupts. Today, when it could be argued the need is greater than ever, no new global order is in sight – just a chaotic transition to greater uncertainty and volatility. (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 74)

What is distinctive about the parts of the text that incite worry and fear is that they place humans in a quite passive, helpless situation. We are urged to adapt to the changes that are out of our control in order to avoid the worst consequences as if that were more or less all we can do. In the case of climate change, humans are given an active role as those that produced the conditions for the climate change itself. Contemporary society is, nonetheless, seen as unwilling to confront climate change properly and in a very precarious situation, which will change, as authors predict, when “the climate crisis intensifies, putting humanity against the wall and giving decision-makers no choice but to act in a radical manner” (Schwab and Malleret 2022, 59).

The reader of the WEF’s publication can anticipate the series of crises or their sudden and violent amalgam. The survivalist attitude is, therefore, the most convenient one for contemporary subjects to assume.

4.6. Summary of the Results and Discussion

“The Great Reset” agenda functions primarily as a political text, the one that focuses on examining the way out of the perpetual crisis conditioned by, to a large degree, the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. As seen in the analysis (Table 4.6), the most elaborate part of the narrative is the one that suggests some visions of progress (or lack thereof). The authors of the publications do not engage in a deeper political analysis of the ills in contemporary society; although they discuss, to some extent, contemporary issues and those who can be considered political opponents, Schwab and Malleret refrain from making bold statements and decisive value judgments or interpreting the state of affairs with evocations of some political and social theory. In that regard, the authors opt for practical and clear identification of problems as glitches in the system, whose rectification requires efficient application of skills and knowledge.

Table 4.6 The Summary of the Results of “The Great Reset” Analysis

Theme	Premise
1) DISSATISFACTIONS	
Decontextualized explanations	Issues are identified, but no effort is made to interpret their structural causes
Challenges and risks	Social issues are glitches in the system that can be fixed using skills and knowledge
Global disunity	Fragmentation leads to weakness
Moral failings	The lack of moral standards is the leading cause of social problems
2) ANTAGONISMS	
Demagogues	Those who use their discourse to incite antidemocratic sentiment
Morally corrupt individuals	Those making wrong moral choices
3) IDEAS OF PROGRESS	
A better future is possible	A better world is achievable
Future is bleak	We should anticipate perpetual crises and other negative trends in the future
The future has already happened	Some socio-economic and political developments are inevitable and beyond our control
Progress led by experts	Betterment will come when experts abandon their narrow viewpoints and collaborate with other fields
Progress as an individual endeavor	Personal choices and claims of dissatisfaction will cause social change
The state as the key actor	The government should facilitate, limit, or direct the market
Linear progress	Growth and accumulation redesigned
4) INDIVIDUAL AS AUTHORITY	
The importance of the inner world	Our imagination, moral standards, and mental well-being are related to the socioeconomic reality
5) FEARS	
Survivalist attitude	We should prepare for the harshest and most hostile future conditions

The overview of the analysis results invites a simple conclusion: “The Great Reset” agenda is not in any way a radical political manifesto that advocates for the overhaul of the social, political, or economic structure. Most of the prescriptions and predictions delineate slightly modified or escalated forms of the socio-economic process that can already be observed in the first two decades of the 21st century. When the WEF’s authors discuss the importance of personal decisions, the role of the big government in

maintaining the welfare state, the rule of the experts, and environmentally friendly growth, they are not proposing something that is radically opposed to the current ideological currents. In their vision of the future, the most important change would be that of biopolitics; workplace surveillance, digital identification, tracing mechanisms, and similar, are presented as the inevitable consequence of crisis-related emergency politics that, for better or worse, will become the norm.

The narrative is written clearly and in a neutral style for the most part. However, in specific contexts, the text establishes the imperative of the personal perspective and make statements that induce fear for the future survival.

The WEF's agenda primarily expresses the desire to counter the fading legitimacy of the international order centered around globalized capitalism and the principles of Western liberalism. Fragmentation of, isolation, and withdrawal from that order are strongly rejected, and any sense of optimism is linked to cooperation (e.g., as discussed, "The Great Reset" claims that the only solution to the current and future crisis is the collective response) and the respect for individual liberty and flourishing. Ultimately, the authors argue that the remedy to the ills of the late stage of capitalism can be found within the system itself—only if a new kind of ethics (the key concept) could be instructed into those in power. In short, the agenda as a whole is structured on the premise that things must change, so the main developments of late-stage capitalism remain unfettered.

5. Rejection of "The Great Reset" by the Counter-Elites

This subchapter looks into the results of the analysis of three publications that aim to criticize and warn against "The Great Reset" agenda. This segment discusses the way "The Great Reset" is framed in the cultural production of "counter-elites," which is the concept that refers to the class of individuals "whose views and goals differ significantly from those of the ruling body of a country and who, by their abilities, by their wealth, and/or by their heritage, occupy positions of influence in a society" (Sekeris 2017, 152). The analysis follows the same pattern as the previous one, so the discussion will contain the same two parts: the political elements and those related to the affective discourse.

5.1. Dissatisfactions

The analyzed texts discuss to a very large extent what is wrong with today's world, which is particularly noticeable when compared to previously discussed publications by Schwab and Malleret. The ideas from the present analysis are grouped under five distinct subchapters according to the theme and subject.

a. The critique of material conditions

The authors that warn against “The Great Reset” very decisively state that there is something wrong with today's world. They show a clear intention to speak for and to “the common man,” the one who suffers injustices and fears for his or her survival. The authors show clearly that they are the allies of those at the bottom, and not of those at the top. Beck and Haskins (2022), for instance, tell the reader that, “as history has repeatedly shown, sometimes there's just too much power to be seized and too much money to be made to worry about what is in the best interests of Main Street¹³ America.” Consequently, the finger is to be pointed at the ruling class—as Jones (2022) argues: “The Davos group members are the elite 1 percent of the world. If there has been a problem with income inequality, human dignity, or degradation of the environment, it's the fault of that 1 percent.” Jones (2022) additionally voices the grievances of hard-working people by telling us about Ryan Johnson, a trucker with twenty-two years of experience in the United States, who exemplifies what is wrong with the system. We learn that Johnson:

is a union driver paid by the hour; however, most port drivers are independent contractors leased onto a carrier who's paying them by the load. That means whether their load takes two hours, fourteen hours, or three days to complete, they get paid the same rate. On top of that, they have to pay at least 90 percent of their truck operating expenses, and companies usually cover less than 10 percent of the remaining expenses. In short, nonunion drivers are paid extremely low rates for ship and container transport, and they have to cover all their own repairs and fuel and all truck-related expenses. (Jones 2022)

These examples show in what way the authors talk about the dire state of affairs concerning social and economic opportunities. The authors explicitly discuss many contemporary issues in a way that many would be comprehensive to most readers; e.g.,

¹³ “Main Street” is not used only to denote the central street in a North American town where the most vibrant activities and commerce happen. It is also a term with specific cultural meaning; i.e., it is a concept that evokes local economy, small businesses, and other ventures with modest gains that can actually appear on a main street of a small town. The two-word compound should be read as a counter to Wall Street, which is also an actual street more known for its connotative (albeit mostly negative) meaning. (Lake 2019)

“poor education, joblessness, homelessness, and a lack of affordable health care” (Beck and Haskins 2022). The narratives express the need to emphasize the faith of the crumbling middle class and the lack of opportunities for the lower classes. Moreover, Naomi Klein’s (2007) book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* is referenced to argue that “authoritarian demagogues, large corporations, and wealthy plutocrats use mass disruptions to shift wealth upwards, obliterate the middle classes, abolish civil rights, privatize the commons, and expand authoritarian controls” (Kennedy Jr 2021).

Mercola and Cummins (2021), more than other authors, discuss extensively the relation between, on the one side, the pandemic, the mitigation measures, and the lockdowns, and, on the other side, various social grievances. In other words, their critical stance toward the dominant political response to the pandemic is defended with examples of various injustices that ensued. First, the authors argue that the pandemic and the lockdowns had a very grave effect on people’s mental and physical health, “increasing the number of deaths from chronic diseases going untreated as well as engendering a state of chronic stress among hundreds of millions of people.” Second, the political response to the pandemic has been detrimental to “the economy, poverty, hunger, homelessness, and unemployment” and has increased “polarization and conflict in the body politic.” The school closures, lockdowns, and other measures impact certain groups more than others, and most negatively, “low-income groups, minority communities, small businesses, and children.” Moreover, lockdowns can increase food insecurity and reliance on food banks. Finally, the authors point out the grave effect of the pandemic-related mitigation measures on interpersonal violent behavior, which, they claim, is evident in the “dramatic increases in domestic abuse, rape, child sex abuse, and suicides.”

Furthermore, the authors warn against the potential neo-feudal order, in which people will be stripped of their possessions and forced into the modern-day version of serfdom. Claims of that kind are made in relation to the popular article written for the World Economic Forum by Danish politician Ida Auken (2016), titled “Welcome To 2030: I Own Nothing, Have No Privacy And Life Has Never Been Better.” Auken’s utopian vision of the future is for the authors of the analyzed texts a grave warning of the future developments that the ruling class has planned. In the scenario in which you do not own anything, as Jones (2022) claims, “Bill Gates will be your landlord, and he’ll be very happy collecting all that rent.” Similarly, Beck and Haskins (2022) denounce the plan of the ruling class to strip people of their private ownership and push them into dependency.

They draw our attention to the cases in which large entities buy properties or entire blocks just to turn them into rental apartments: “This movement within the Great Reset to limit property ownership and centralize control of property might also explain why Reset-affiliated investment firms are buying up as much property as they can get their hands on.” Finally, the authors ask if this world, where we do not have privacy and own nothing, is what we want to leave to our grandchildren.

The diminished material conditions of lower classes are, then, directly related to the corruption on the part of the ruling class. For instance, there is a strong sentiment in the dissenting narratives that the lockdowns and quarantine served the purpose of advancing specific large-scale interests and destroying small businesses for the benefit of those businesses that are “favored politically” (Beck and Haskins 2022). Kennedy Jr (2021) claims that the pandemic-related policies in the US put “58 million Americans out of work” and bankrupted “over 100,000 small businesses, including 41,000 Black-owned businesses, some of which took three generations of investment to build.” Moreover, while that many small businesses closed, the largest corporations accrued \$1 trillion, according to a source they cite. The final goal of all this is clear to the authors: the transfer of wealth bottom-up (i.e., from poor to rich), the accumulation and centralization of power in the hands of the elites, and the introduction of the stakeholder economy skewed in favor of large corporations which can later be easily controlled. Beck and Haskins (2022) explain: “All this ‘social justice’ stuff that Schwab and other Resetters like to talk about is just a smoke-and-mirror show. In the end, the Great Reset machine could be used to pursue any goals the ruling class deems important.” The authors relate this notion to the transfer of wealth from the public to the private sector, such as the introduction of solar and wind power, which includes large government spending, publicly funded projects, and the power grab by corporations and financial institutions.

Mercola (2021a) applies the same logic to explain the public activities of Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft and a famous philanthropist. He claims that Gates, who is “rich beyond comprehension,” advocates for solutions to global problems that are “consistently focused on building corporate profits.” The author wages a strong critique of this model of philanthropy:

[...] The Gates Foundation is giving money to companies from which it will benefit financially in return for its “donations.” As a result, the more money Gates and his foundation give, the more their wealth grows. Part of this growth in wealth also appears to be due to the tax breaks given for charitable

donations. In short, it's a perfect money-shuffling scheme that allows him to evade taxes while maximizing income generation. (Mercola 2021a)

The publications that are critical of “The Great Reset” discuss social issues in a very affective, clear, and engaged way. The analyzed texts are written in a way that should incite intense resentment and indignation: those at the bottom are abandoned (the elites are too concerned with their own interests to think of anyone else), their grievances are personalized (i.e., told to us through a concrete and identifiable examples), and the described difficulties are something most people have experienced or encountered in their surroundings. Additionally, the narratives provide an analytical framework for understanding the underlying beliefs behind those undesired changes, e.g., the shift towards the rent-based economy in the West is interpreted with references to Ida Auken’s claim that “you’ll own nothing and be happy.” The authors position themselves as defenders and spokespersons of those who suffer injustices and point out structural inequalities. In that regard, there are clear elements of and a strong appeal to the traditional left-wing political discursive repertoire that defends the interests of the lower classes or, in other words, the working class. As a clear example, Jones (2022) explicitly advocates for the power of labor unions against large businesses, corporate-friendly governments, and fascism:

Big business leaders don't like workers who agitate for better working conditions and higher pay. As a first step, Mussolini and Hitler broke the labor unions. Once the workers were disarmed, the leaders were free to attack other countries and do what they wanted with their own dissidents. Whenever you hear the word “public-private,” I want you to translate it into your mind as a promise that the government will not hesitate to attack the people if they protest against the plans of Big Business.

And finally, the predicament of lower classes and citizens, in general, is directly counterposed to institutionalized corruption and the reinforcement of corporate monopolies. The authors of analyzed narratives point directly to the system that favors the accumulation of wealth, advancement of private interests at the expense of overall welfare, and the generalized lack of fairness in how the “winners” and “losers” of various policies, from lockdowns to the ones related to social justice, are structured, and defined. This notion will be discussed in more detail hereinafter.

b. Institutionalized corruption, monopolies, and kleptocracy

The WEF's authors address in their texts the lack of fairness, transparency, and the pursuit of common interests in Western societies. In other words, the authors describe and condemn practices such as backroom deals, special interests, transfer of money from the public to the private sector, and legislation that favors specific businesses. Jones (2022), for instance, warns that the US government is, under the pretense of "green transition," printing trillions of dollars to line the pockets of "cronies" and "everybody 'in the know'." The policies concerning the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investing, —which includes financial support for businesses that are dedicated to advancing sustainability, inclusion, and similar progressive political goals—are specifically targeted. The authors claim that the parts of the political elites can financially reward businesses that advance their favored socio-economic and political projects. Beck and Haskins (2022) ask: "If you were running a business, especially a large multinational corporation, it would be stupid not to do everything in your power to get your hands on some of that 'free' cash, right?" One public authority that is engaged in the advancement of progressive political goals is the U.S. Department of Environmental, Social, and Governance Compliance that was created, as the authors claim,

to develop and maintain an ever-shifting series of standards that determine which American businesses are permitted to trade in the country's largest stock exchanges, as well as who can receive the hundreds of billions of dollars pumped into corporations every year by government officials desperate to keep more companies from heading overseas.

However, the role of the government in the accumulation of capital in the monopoly stage of capitalism is not the only concern of the authors of dissenting texts. Beck and Haskins (2022) explain that many corporations are already in the hands of "the ten investment groups and financial institutions with the most assets under management." The financial assets of the biggest ten investment groups total \$34 trillion, which is more than the entire U.S. GDP in the year 2020 (i.e., \$21 trillion). They can use this power, similar to the power that the government has, to coerce the companies into compliance with the ESG policies. In other words, any centralization of power into the hands of *either* private or public actors is denounced and rejected as corruption.

The use of taxpayer's money and public policy to advance private interests is discussed not only in terms of progressive politics (such as the ESG investing) but also of pandemic-mitigation measures. The Covid-19 pandemic is seen in the analyzed texts

as the set of circumstances that allowed the government, large businesses, and activists to accrue more power and money, and direct society in whichever way they deem suitable. So, the authors argue that the governments used the health emergency to help out those who are already incredibly rich, while small businesses, as was previously discussed, were abandoned ruthlessly. For instance, Jones (2022) argues the following:

You couldn't shop at the mom-and-pop retailers, but you could go to Target, Walmart, and Costco¹⁴ or order online from Amazon and put money in the pocket of Jeff Bezos? Whether you believe it was part of a plan, or just how things happened during the lockdowns, many small retailers went out of business, leading to record profits among the large retailers, just the sort of people who attend the yearly meetings of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. By thinning the ranks of the competitors, the globalists can much more easily pick off the few remaining survivors.

In that context, the financial help that the government sent to citizens during the pandemic (known as the Stimulus Plan in the US) was critiqued as another scheme for the further enrichment of the ruling class. Due to the limitations of commercial activities that were the consequence of the pandemic-mitigation measures, the money given to citizens by the government had to be spent at the few functioning and large-scale businesses. This leads Beck and Haskins (2022) to wonder, “what’s the point of a stimulus plan if there’s almost nothing to stimulate—other than Jeff Bezos’s bank account, of course?”

Mercola and Cummins (2021) talk, in a similar fashion, about the hidden interests of the political class and various businesses in the context of the large drug and medicine manufacturers (often referred to as *Big Pharma*). The industry dedicated to the production of pharmacological products is seen as utterly corrupt, putting profits over the interests of human beings and neglecting safety standards just so it can advance its financial gains. The authors point out that the companies in question rely on a high influx of the taxpayers’ money to do research and develop the medicine but then market the drugs to those same taxpayers at “enormously inflated prices” (Mercola 2021b). Moreover, the two authors accuse the companies of having the power to make the government mandate specific

¹⁴ *Target, Walmart, and Costco* – Large retail chains in the United States.

vaccines in a way that would make their investment pay off in a highly lucrative way, which is additionally stressed by the claim that “intelligence agencies view vaccine safety advocates as a national security threat” (Cummins 2021d). Mercola (2021c) refers to the decision of the US Supreme Court in the case of *Bruesewitz v. Wyeth*, which, they claim, “effectively removed all remaining liability from vaccine manufacturers for harm caused by vaccines.” In short, if the largest corporations and pharmaceutical companies act without any notion of ethics, justice, or common welfare, it is so only because of the political class that paves the way for them to go on advancing their enterprises without consequences.

To summarize, the grave state of political and economic arrangements that dominate in Western societies results from the cynical and unrestrained exchange of favors between various actors: the government, incredibly wealthy elites, activists, corporations, the WEF, and similar. The authors of the analyzed text describe a machine-like structure in which all parts work for the same goal—the accumulation of as much money, power, and influence as possible in the few selected hands. The covert intent behind philanthropy, progressive political projects (e.g., green politics), lockdowns, pandemic-related measures, and similar, lies in the consolidation of monopolies at the expense of the “small neighborhood business.” Pharmaceutical companies are accused of being “in bed” with the political class and of paying no interest to the welfare of common people; on the contrary, they actively undermine the public welfare, as the opioid crisis¹⁵ has shown (Mercola 2021c). While the authors do not reject the pursuit of free enterprise as such, it is noticeable from the analysis that they favor the type of economy that functions “close to the community” and that allows the laypeople the opportunity to thrive. Accordingly, an economy that is based on a limited number of monopoly-seeking corporations is strongly rejected.

c. The state of politics and the government

The authors of dissenting narratives wage a strong critique against the current state of politics and the way governments function. That is, their critique is twofold: on the one

¹⁵ The Opioid Crisis in the US, or Opioid Epidemics, refers to the accusation of corruption waged against Purdue Pharma, owned by the Sackler Family. The company used many different mechanisms of corruption to market the highly addictive drug OxyContin to the as many people as possible. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States, 564,000 of people died from overdose of opioids, including the ones obtained through prescription, in the period 1999-2020. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2022)

side, it concerns the politics as such, as a realm where collective affairs are being debated, contrasted, and where different actors compete for power, and on the other, the government as an institution that gives a specific kind of power to the representatives of popular will.

Regarding the former, it is argued in the analyzed texts against the authority of political leaders and their judgment regardless of their ideological and partisan backgrounds. For instance, Cummins (2021c) claims that “mad science” has been supported financially and carried out by almost every administration in modern US history, including the ones under the following presidents: “Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Bush Sr., Clinton, Bush Jr., and Obama.” Similarly, Beck and Haskins (2022) claim that “pundits and politicians on both the left and the right” are seeking to accumulate more influence and power in their efforts. The critique is sometimes directed towards a specific kind of politics, particularly the one which concerns environmentalism. The same authors accuse the Great Reset advocates of being only interested in power and the “climate alarmist politicians” of being fundamentally dishonest since, if the world was really about to end, “they would not waste one second or dollar worrying about anything else.” Jones (2022) expresses similar doubt about the “green” politics of the European Union, whose members are accused of “flying on private jets to meet in private to discuss how to save us all.” The kind of defiant sentiment expressed by the dissenting authors can be interpreted as part of the wider shift in the Western public sphere against the “dishonest politics” or “crooked and corrupt politicians” that are to be supplanted by some new leaders; particularly, those that come from the outside of the political mainstream, who are more honest and uncorrupted (the sentiment also expressed in the promise of Donald Trump during the first presidential campaign to “drain the swamp” in Washington, D.C.; see Harrington 2016).

Furthermore, all authors discuss in quite a negative fashion the technocratic rule, understood by them primarily as the form of either global or local governance that purposefully bypasses the democratic will to achieve specific goals; e.g., to “monitor, censor, frighten, divide, and control the body politic as never before” (Cummins 2021d). Here, the authors wage critique against the specific way of doing politics. Jones (2022) explains that technocracy “can’t accurately be called communism or democracy. It is best understood as a monopoly on power, held jointly by Big Business and Big Government,” coming to power in American politics in the 1970s. It is further described as an “enlightened dictatorship of scientists, engineers, and managers.” Elsewhere, we learn

that technocracy is just another name for “Agenda 21, the 2030 Agenda, the New Urban Agenda, green economy, the green new deal, [...] the global warming movement in general,” then, “The Great Reset,” “The Fourth Industrial Revolution,” “Build Back Better” agenda, “The Paris Climate Agreement,” “The Gates Foundation,” “The World Economic Forum,” “John Hopkins University,” and the “World Health Organization” (Mercola and Cummins 2021). The analyzed text allows for the conclusion that the technocracy is understood by the authors as governance constitutive of (1) the powerful institutions on a global level that produce ideology (e.g., the World Economic Forum), (2) entities with large financial power capable of pushing forward specific projects (e.g., The Gates Foundation), (3) agendas or agencies that defend specific progressive goals (e.g., Agenda 2030), and (4) those that produce knowledge and are closely related to some of the previously named actors (e.g., John Hopkins University). In other words, what is rejected in this case is the highly complex bureaucratized system of governance that draws its legitimacy from a particular notion of objective reason (i.e., scientific knowledge) and understanding of progress, and, most importantly, functions at the global level.

Regarding the role of the government, the authors express aversion towards the increased power of the governing body over social life and the economy. Jones (2022) argues that any kind of bureaucrat is unfit for ruling; he asks to be pointed to “a single country in the history of the world that can be said to have had ‘competent bureaucrats.’” Beck and Haskins (2022) express the conviction that too much power invested in governments can have dangerous consequences:

In the long run, too much power breeds corruption, tyranny, and, in our modern world, radical corporatism. Conservatives like myself have long recognized the inherent danger of centralizing political, military, and societal power in the hands of government officials. However, we have woefully neglected how many large corporations have used corrupt elements in government to seize unprecedented amounts of influence for themselves too.

This is particularly emphasized in the case of public financial assistance. The money given to the people in some form or the other is, for the authors, a step towards the concentration of power in the hands of the rulers, who would use the loss of autonomy and independence of citizens to impose some kind of illegitimate control. Excessive government spending, central banks’ money-printing, and social programs are all perceived as undesirable.

Furthermore, the authors reject any use of public finances to direct the behavior of any entities and private citizens to achieve a specific “progressive or noble goal.” The excessive printing of money is framed as a potential path to the enforcement of specific social justice objectives or the “responsible corporate behavior” (Beck and Haskins 2022). The authors tie these policies to the “Great Reset,” which is seen as the agenda that provides the framework for large political changes of such nature (i.e., the one directed towards the accomplishment of social justice goals). Consequently, Beck and Haskins (2022) claim that there are no large corporations, including “Big Tech tyrants,” that are not the product of the government.

In terms of the autonomy of private citizens, the authors of analyzed texts warn against attempts of the ruling class to act as a “nanny” for grown-up members of society. As Jones (2022) argues, it is “all about control and compliance”; that is, “whatever your age, the globalists just want to remain your eternal parent, and if you do not obey, they may just lock you in your room.” Beck and Haskins (2022), in that context, discuss excessive fines or “sin taxes,” which, “under the guise of promoting public health, safety, or some other allegedly noble cause,” are used to “raise revenue for the town, city, state, or federal government.” A similar critique is waged against potential mechanisms (e.g., a centralized digital currency) that could allow those in power to, with the excuse of protecting public health, control “the number of Cokes you buy each week,” “the number of burgers you eat,” “the number of alcoholic beverages you consume or cigars you smoke” (Beck and Haskins 2022).

Jones (2022), on his part, underlines the politics related to the environmental concerns that would have effects similar to the ones concerning the health of citizens. For instance, he alleges that “a national ‘per mile fee’ pilot program,” concealed within the excessively long US Senate infrastructure bill, will introduce a tariff for driving a motor vehicle. Jones states clearly that he is strongly opposed to “some universal right for the government to do anything it damned well pleases if it justifies it on the basis of environmentalism.”

The analysis points to two different conclusions about the way the state of contemporary politics and public policy is discussed by the authors of the selected narratives. First, the dominant sentiments towards politics and politicians are that of strong and decisive rejection; the politics of both left and right is filled with corruption, cronyism, and the pursuit of private interest. Dedication to politics is a dishonest endeavor; for instance, concern for the environment is instrumentalized to achieve

lucrative financial gains. In short, the sentiment so strongly expressed in the narratives—also often found in the discourses of contemporary populist movements—is that of anti-politics, understood here as a “politically ambivalent complaint” directed at those participating in the political arena (e.g., such as the popular accusations that “they are all the same” or “they are all corrupt”), which appearing in the form of anti-corruption demands (Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe 2021, 77–78).

The other notion expressed frequently by these authors is the one related to the populism of the kind that is associated with the Tea Party movement. The movement that appeared within the ranks of the Republican Party in the United States in 2009 advocated primarily for the smaller role of the government in private matters, removing government overreach and its influence over economic activities, and other similar demands, in order to advance the pursuit of greater personal freedom (see Good 2010). The results of the analysis reveal the same ideological line; the authors think that the government should not interfere in the economy (e.g., by favoring and supporting financially socially progressive businesses) or private matters of citizens, including the consumption of unhealthy food, the use of motor vehicles, etc.

d. Progressive and green politics as detrimental to the working-class

Following the ideas elaborated in the previous chapters, the authors additionally denounce policies that can be broadly defined as progressive, center-left, or liberal in general (i.e., the one advocating for a reform of the system under a specific notion of humanness or greater necessity, without, however, abandoning the main pillars of capitalism). This kind of politics is set opposite from the interests and benefits of the working and lower classes.

Beck and Haskins (2022) elaborate on this notion in terms of the negative consequences that green politics might have on the well-being of the citizens that are in the most disadvantaged position. “The Reset’s rapid transformation of America’s energy sector” and the Green New Deal, affecting to a large extent the functioning of the gas and oil industry, are responsible, the two authors explain, for the disappearance of “more than ten million jobs,” economic depression in “hundreds of cities and towns,” the rise in prices, and the reduction of economic activity. This is all additionally made worse by the shipment of jobs overseas, as many companies move their production to countries where the energy prices are lower. The same authors delineate clearly who and what is most

affected by this kind of politics: “the economies of Colorado, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Texas,” “America’s heartland,” “lower-income and working-class families,” and “the poor.” Class plays an important role in this discourse; on the one hand, we have the suffering working-class families, the heartland of the nation, and the poor, and, on the other, the image of “relatively wealthy Swedish teens” (the authors refer here to the climate activist from Sweden, Greta Thunberg) for whom it might be easy “to demand that hundreds of thousands of people around the world lose their jobs” without much consideration, even if those masses of people might agree with Thunberg’s goals.

Jones (2022) advances the same argument. He claims that the poor—“whom the globalists claim to care about”—are the ones most affected by the policies concerning green energy since it is exactly those at the bottom of the economic ladder who cannot afford the inflated prices. Therefore, green politics threatens to wipe out “the middle class” and “cause massive deaths globally.” This development is inherent in the logic of policies related to energy: since the demand for energy remains the same (i.e., people still need “air conditioners,” “heaters,” and “to keep our food cold”) while the supply becomes limited (by “phasing out fossil fuels” and “nuclear power”) the prices can only go up.

It should be highlighted that what can be deduced from the structure of both Beck and Haskins’ and Jones’ claims is that the authors do not deny directly and openly the concerns that green activists may have. Moreover, Beck and Haskins (2022) write the following about the popular teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg:

So like I said, I like Greta—sort of. I appreciate that she is at least consistent with her messaging and passionate about an issue she really believes is causing a worldwide crisis. Unlike so many people in government and media who spend their time talking about climate change, Greta is not interested in attaining power for herself; she just wants to positively impact the planet. I do not share many of her beliefs or proposed “solutions,” but I do respect her sincerity.

Jones (2022) introduces a sort of caveat that stresses that, in his opposition to novel energy sources and green activism, he is not objecting to the scientific arguments:

Let me be clear: I’m not breaking down the science of climate change. I’m not talking about carbon emissions. I’m not talking about whether it’s good or bad. I’m not talking about any of that. All we’re doing here is pointing out the policies that are driving this, what will come of it, and how it ties into the Great Reset.

These authors argue that environmentally friendly or green policies are detrimental to the employment, economic stability, and standard of living of the lower and middle classes. The analyzed narratives intend to establish a sentimental and political bond with those at the bottom, whose grievances and interests are clearly and decisively placed in the foreground when discussing the issues in question. It is implied, then, that those who advocate for progressive politics at the global level are not seriously taking into consideration and are largely ignorant of those same grievances and interests.

e. The Undermining of Freedom and Liberty

The narratives that oppose “The Great Reset” assign great importance to the question of freedom and liberty. The value that is seen as essential to the understanding of the US and Western identity is framed in the narratives as something that is in existential danger. There are many different ways of speaking about the issues of freedom and how it is hindered purposely by those who rule over us. This will be discussed next.

Kennedy Jr (2021) denounces the frequent and unjustifiable use of fear and terror to direct behavior, establish new forms of institutional control, or coerce people, paving the road to “dictatorial power.” These tactics, claim the authors, are inherent to the technocratic order that is dominant in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, the issues of fear and the manufacturing of panic are not only discussed in the context of government policy and communication. The two authors claim that “digital overlords and billionaires” take advantage of “the fear, helplessness, division, and confusion encompassing the world” to make people renounce “basic freedoms and democratic rights and become loyal serfs of a Great Reset and a New World Order.” The behavior of the masses is directed by “spreading disinformation, promoting panic, offering false cures through Big Pharma vaccines and drugs,” “dividing and conquering the general public,” tempering the “PCR lab tests,” and mandating “lockdowns, mask mandates, social distancing, and quarantine regulations.” The state of intense fear induced in such a way, which is even detrimental to human health, should be resisted by educating ourselves and our loved ones, understanding that we have the power, turning off the news and the negative news feeds, or simply changing our attitude.

Furthermore, the authors of analyzed texts dedicate a significant amount of attention to the question of censorship and other forms of limitations to the free expression of ideas and beliefs. The biggest culprits, in this case, are social media companies, also

denominated in analyzed texts as “internet companies,” “Tech/Data and Telecom robber barons,” “Facebook, Google, Amazon, and their subsidiaries” (Mercola and Cummins 2021), and “Big Tech” (Beck and Haskins 2022). They are accused of banning free speech from their platforms, especially of political and religious nature, by labeling it “‘offensive’, ‘misleading’, or ‘misinformation’” (Beck and Haskins 2022). After dismantling the middle class, digital companies are “rapidly transforming America’s once-proud democracy into a censorship and surveillance police state over which they profit at every turn” (Kennedy Jr 2021). They are, furthermore, accused of adding fuel to the existing political polarization by not allowing the dissenting voices to question the dominant narrative concerning the pandemic and policies related to it.

Following the arguments directed against the largest social network and digital companies, the authors of the analyzed texts discuss the climate that exists in the public sphere in which very derogatory language is used to designate ideological opponents. Any form of dissent is labeled in a specific way—such as “climate denialism,” “an obvious attempt to conjure up Holocaust denialism” (Beck and Haskins 2022), or “climate skepticism”—which are then used to disqualify a political adversary and label it as an unworthy participant in the debate. Moreover, as can be observed in the media, there is no incentive for an open debate that includes everyone, no matter their opinion. So, Jones (2022) argues that globalists refuse “to engage in any type of intellectual debate” and instead try to prevent it from happening. Such is the case with Francis Collins, the former director of the US National Institutes of Health, and Anthony Fauci, the Chief Medical Advisor to the President of the United States, who “don’t believe in free and open debate” (Jones 2022). This type of argument revolves primarily around the issues of social justice (presuming that certain positions on specific issues are favored more than the opposing ones) and implies that those in power do not trust the people to make their own informed conclusions after hearing both sides. In short, the authors claim that we live in a time when different opinions are not accepted or valued.

Since the government and the ruling class cannot trust people to form their own opinions and live lives of their own accord, every move and thought of the people is tracked. The authors warn against many forms of surveillance that the “technocratic elite” employs today and which will turn democracies into “police states.” These concerns include personal data (collected through the cooperation of large social media companies with the government), biometric technology, finances in the digital form (which can be controlled much more easily than physical money), and emergency politics (pandemics

and climate change), which serve to establish modes of tracking of movements or carbon emissions. There are also references to some examples of these policies: the Patriot Act of the US government, which gave more surveillance privileges to the authority under the excuse of fighting terrorism, and the decision of the Canadian government to freeze the bank accounts of truckers that protested vaccine mandates for crossing the border with the US (discussed in Mercola and Cummins 2021; Jones 2022). Moreover, the breach of privacy happens when “financial institutions use consumers’ browser history, social media activity, and other previously private user information from tech devices to craft credit scores” in the United States (Beck and Haskins 2022).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the attack on freedom is threefold. First, those in power propagate fear and terror to curb the decisions and lifestyle of citizens. Second, the limits are imposed on free speech and, in general, the open debate in the public sphere, both because of the active collusion between social media companies and the government that together try to influence the discourse and because of the social climate that labels negatively certain kinds of dissent. And third, the breach of privacy and surveillance conducted by the government in cooperation with private entities. Having in mind that the analyzed narratives were written during the coronavirus crisis—which exacerbated the already-existing politics of surveillance and limits on public speech—, the laments for lost freedoms have a strong potential to become engraved in the imaginary of the contemporary reader and provoke a sentiment of indignation.

5.2. Antagonisms

Next, the study will deal with the question of antagonists that the narratives define or refer to more implicitly. The results include three different categories which will be discussed next.

a. The amalgam of evil actors

A common way to designate the adversary in the texts is to simply name them. This is done in a way of long lists that are considered to be enough for the readers to make up a specific image. Implicit in this approach is the idea that the text in and of itself and presented in such a way serves the purpose (i.e., the transmission of a message) and no further explanation is necessary. In other words, the names discussed here are provided by the authors of the texts with very little context. Mercola and Cummins (2021) are, by

far, the authors who write the most extensively in this type of way. All the names will be presented here grouped by their common features.

The first group of designated adversaries consists of actors from the political realm, including those from politics and those who act as part of the government or some other public authority. The list includes: “government technocrats,” “biotechnocrats,” “the US government,” “out-of-control politicians,” and “the Chinese government.” Special emphasis is placed on the part of the government that is related to the army: “the military industrial intelligence apparatus” (and similar variations of the concept) and “the military.”

The narratives further include lists of wealthy individuals or groups of individuals. The authors evoke in their writings the broader categories of people, such as: “billionaire oligarchs,” “[the] Western elite,” “hypercapitalist billionaires,” “high-finance robber barons,” “multinational corporate executives,” “the transnational economic elite,” “the global biomedical/biodefense elite,” “pandemic profiteers,” “medical mal-practitioners,” and “a cabal of global health and economic elites.” In other instances, they signal specific individuals: “Silicon Valley Internet titans such as Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Sergey Brin, Larry Page¹⁶, and Jack Dorsey¹⁷,” “philanthropic giant Bill Gates,” “Big Media behemoths (Michael Bloomberg¹⁸, Rupert Murdoch¹⁹),” and “Eric Schmidt (Google).” The list includes clear and direct allusions to specific people and denominations with implicit or explicit qualifiers that express the condemning tone (robber barons, behemoths, profiteers, and others).

Similarly, the authors list antagonists consisting of larger private entities; the list signals: “uber-powerful Silicon Valley Big Tech corporations,” “Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Oracle²⁰,” “Microsoft,” “MasterCard” (both corporations closely related to the WEF, *author’s note*), and “Walmart²¹.” When not discussing particular “large players,” the narratives denounce agglomerates of the most influential companies or private entities in a specific industry. The examples are: “Big Pharma,” “Big Data,” “Big Technology,”

¹⁶ *Sergey Brin and Larry Page* – The founders of Google.

¹⁷ A co-founder of Twitter.

¹⁸ A former mayor of New York City, a candidate at the US Democratic Party primary elections in 2020, and the founder of the media outlet Bloomberg News. In 2022, he was the 12th wealthiest person in the world (Mille, Dolan, and Peterson-Withorn 2022).

¹⁹ Media *mogul* from Australia. The founder of numerous right-wing media outlets in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The most notable examples include Sky News Australia, Fox News, New York Post, The Wall Street Journal, and The Sun.

²⁰ A technological company from the United States.

²¹ A popular low-cost hypermarket and grocery store from the United States.

“Big Telecom,” “Big Media,” “Big Finance,” “Wall Street,” “the military-industrial biowar complex,” “Big Food,” and “Big Ag²².” The compound of two words, the first of which is “big,” with both initial cases capitalized, is a common way to denote corporate behavior in monopoly capitalism. During the 20th century, the term, then in the simple form of “big business,” was first used in the United States by Teddy Roosevelt in his antitrust campaign. It was altered, in the following decades, to fit other purposes of political communication—taking forms of “Big Banks,” “Big Oil,” and “Big Tobacco” (Oremus 2017). The one that became wildly popular in the decade after 2010, “Big Tech,” was used to designate “the major technology companies such as Apple, Google, Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft, which have inordinate influence” (“Definition of Big Tech” n.d.). Soon, the application of the two-word compound broadened to include a very large number of industries (as can be observed above) that accrue wealth and market power. Will Oremus (2017) writes for *Slate* that the prefix “Big” is not used “out of respect or admiration,” but “loathing and fear—and in preparation for battle.” The highly negative and politically charged connotation of the concept cannot be stressed enough.

Furthermore, the authors include specific organizations in their list of adversaries. These entities are, unlike the one discussed previously, not-for-profit. However, they are powerful, influential, and function on a global scale. Additionally, they are all directly or indirectly (through financing, grants, and donations) related to some of the private for-profit entities mentioned above. These organizations are: “the World Economic Forum,” “the World Health Organization (WHO),” “The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,” “Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance,” “the Rockefeller Foundation,” “the Ford Foundation,” “Bloomberg Philanthropies,” “George Soros’s Open Society Foundations,” and “the World Bank.” The great number of names included are philanthropic institutions that bear the first or last name of a wealthy oligarch that founded it. Others are simply supranational organizations, coincidentally or not, all containing “world” in the title. The authors also mention educational institutions, specifically, the “Johns Hopkins University,” or a particular member of a higher education institution, such as “Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Robert Langer.”

While the discussed list is quite exhaustive and does not provide too much contextual information, it serves to come up with the conclusion according to the relation that exists among these types of persons and entities. In a hierarchical sense and starting

²² Here, “ag” stands for agriculture.

with the one with the most deterministic power, the network includes (1) those involved in the unrestrained accumulation of power and wealth (e.g., the oligarchic class and large monopolies or trusts), (2) the political class that facilitates the economic processes having in mind its own and the interests of big capital (corrupted politicians, military, etc.), (3) the organizations that, although nominally independent, are closely related to the “powerful players,” and (4) those that provide knowledge that is seen as beneficial to the large vested interests. It can be concluded that being part of this network and the mere association with any of the other entities is what compromises named individuals and entities in the eyes of both the authors and the readers.

b. Those who defend vested interests

Furthermore, in quite a different fashion, the narratives express clear denunciations of those who act out of pure interest and, at the same time, in favor of some larger entity. In this case, the individuals and entities are singled out in a way that makes clear their relationship with other antagonists and the nature of their corruptibility. That corrosive influence between the ones with influence and those under their power is primarily exercised through the transfers of money, exchange of favors, or other similar forms. In that regard, the honesty and good intentions of many actors are questioned because of this behavior.

For instance, Bard College, which is the home to the Levy Economics Institute, is a place where leading thinkers advocating for the modern monetary theory work, a school of economic thought that is strongly rejected by Beck and Haskins (2022). Those authors point out that George Soros through his Open Society Foundation donated \$100 million to the College, thus making the connection between the supposedly harmful economic theory and the interests that may stand behind it. This kind of interpretation is applied to information and journalism. For instance, we learn that Bill Gates gives sizeable donations to journalism, which is not “not an unconditional handout with which these companies can do whatever they see fit” (Mercola 2021a). Similarly, the same authors explain that NewsGuard, a digital tool that reviews and rates news articles according to their reliability, is a partner of Microsoft and is funded by Publicis, a communication giant associated with Big Pharma and the WEF. Publicis also owns the Leo Burnett Company, which receives grants from the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation.

And finally, significant attention is given to the question of medicine and pharmaceutical products. Mercola (2021b) accuses the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the US Government of accepting donations worth \$79.6 million from drug companies and commercial manufacturers between 2014 and 2018 alone. Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO) is allegedly financially supported by Bill Gates and certain drug and vaccine manufacturers. These kinds of arguments and claims serve to discredit decisions made by the health authorities in question, which despite their claims of being unbiased in their recommendations, serve larger interests.

The narratives emphasize the importance of public interests as opposed to private ones. When it comes to economic policies, fair and unbiased journalism, or decision about public health, the authors point to the entities and their respective financial dependencies to powerful individuals and organizations to argue for more skepticism towards those same entities. Behind this is the idea that conflict of interest necessarily contaminates any objective pursuit of knowledge or professional decisions.

c. Elites and world leaders

The elites and world leaders are another category of antagonists that the narratives pay a significant amount of attention to. They are represented as hypocritical, morally and ethically corrupt, indecent, malevolent, and narcissistic, all the while pretending to pursue some noble goal.

The texts talk about the “ruling class elites,” “titans,” “bourgeoisie,” “transnational businesspeople,” the ones in “corporate suites,” and similar. These labels are used to designate those who have a significant amount of influence and authority. There is an implicit sense of class belonging since the label does designate not only elite identity, but also economic category associated with certain privileges. These closed circles of the wealthy, on their part, use their power to the detriment of “Main Street America” (Beck and Haskins 2022).

Many others kinds of antagonists fall into the same category. One refers to elites in a sense of intellectual and educational dominance. For instance, Jones (2022) discusses the “ivory tower intellectuals,” bought by the economic elites, who are equally secluded from ordinary people. Yuval Noah Harari, the Israeli thinker, professor, and bestselling author, is accused of being a member of such an elite, of thinking that he knows better than anybody else (Jones 2022). Such arrogance is also attributed to the Hollywood elites,

who also “like to tweet about how much they care about the planet between sips of champagne on a private jet traveling halfway around the world” (Beck and Haskins 2022).

This discursive division between the antagonists (elites in the economic, educational, and cultural sense) and their righteous adversaries (who, as it is inferred, are everybody else, common men and women) is a common manner of waging a critique on the part of the populist political groups in the contemporary Western societies. The texts insist on the irreparable separation between the two groups and politicize the economic and social divide that increases with the advancement of liberal economic policies.

5.3. Ideas of Progress

The authors of books critical to “The Great Reset” agenda do not develop many ideas about how Western societies should move forward in the realm of politics in comparison to the part of the narrative they dedicate to dissatisfactions. Four main themes are identified in the analysis, and they will be discussed next.

a. General improvements to the personal and collective life

First, the narratives express the desire to improve the quality of life and the collective state of affairs. The objectives that are defined are various and will be grouped according to the common premise behind them.

First, there is a strong desire to improve the health of specific people and wider groups. Mercola and Cummins (2021) talk about “natural and integrative health practices,” “regenerative health,” and “food as medicine.” Following this notion, food production and its quality are seen as another aspect that can significantly improve collective well-being. The authors express the necessity for “healthy, organic, and regenerative food, farming, and land use,” “family-farm-based agricultural system,” and “organic and healthy food for all.”

Similarly, the authors express the need for a more just economic and social system that respects everyone and cares for the environment. This “new economic system” should provide “meaningful, socially and environmentally responsible work and a decent standard of living for all who are willing to work.” In terms of the natural habitat, we can read about the need to regenerate “the environment and biodiversity,” “to qualitatively improve public health and planetary health and regenerate the global grassroots,” turn to positive solutions like “renewable energy and a clean environment,” and similar. And

finally, the authors discuss values related to democracy and freedom that we should aim to achieve. Those include: “peace, justice, and participatory democracy,” and “justice, tolerance, freedom, individual choice, privacy, freedom of speech, religion, [and] constitutional rights.”

In spite of many negative developments that the authors denounce, there is something to look forward to. The authors identify several directions that the future society can take, which should mark a significant improvement in collective affairs. Several of the positive developments are directly related to the body and biology: food, natural medicine, improvement and regeneration of the environment and our place in it, and similar. Otherwise, broadly defined values related to the Western understanding of the democratic state will be placed at the forefront of the world to come. Common to all the desired developments is that they are not part of a clear political project that can be placed clearly within the history of ideas or political thought. Instead, the common thread is the idea of a quality and peaceful life, a specific notion of the status quo that should not be disturbed by any excess of malevolence or some external factors.

b. Resistance

Another objective that the narratives establish is resistance to power. Having discussed so many negative developments in today’s politics, the authors suggest that something be done in a way of responding to the undesired occurrences. Resisting power is seen as a way of changing society for the better.

This all starts with a profound awakening, which includes the growing awareness and understanding of the existing conditions and injustices. Cummins (2021a) tells us that we should educate ourselves, to understand that we are not powerless and what tools we have in our hands to confront those at the top. He points out that “the good news is that many are starting to see the writing on the wall.” Jones (2022) expresses a similar idea:

How do we fight back against this darkness? By bringing their plans into the light. Shed light on the lies when you see them. Write a letter to the editor, call up talk radio shows, and use your online abilities to make your voice heard.

Therefore, the first step is to come to the realization of what is to be done and then communicate it to others. Next, since the power is in the hands of the people, the solution is just a matter of will to take initiative, to decide if the future will be the “one of freedom

and prosperity, or bondage and suffering” (Jones 2022). Beck and Haskins (2022) suggest that people refuse “to be a part of elites’ lies” and “remove much of the power that the ruling class has over your life and the lives of your family members.” There is no positive goal inherent in this effort (which would include some idea of desired social relations, fundamentally different from those existing previously), but a negative one, primarily defines as freedom from the influence and rule of those at the top.

In short, the resistance that is the first step towards overcoming adversities is sharing of information, where new media plays an important role. After that, the appropriate action must take place as a determining step toward the desired outcome. It is not clear, however, what exactly that action is; we do not know what the authors envision: a revolution, a new political party, a movement, a complete overhaul of the system, or something different.

c. Joining forces

Furthermore, the authors of analyzed texts discuss the importance of uniting all people for a common purpose. This is a crucial step for achieving a goal such as the previously discussed one—taking on the most powerful in some sort of confrontation.

First, we must overcome all the differences that we think separate us. Cummins (2021b) invite us to stop fighting among ourselves, whether we are “Democrats, independents, and Republicans; liberals and libertarians; radicals and conservatives.” Similarly, Beck and Haskins (2022) claim that we should advance human development and respect for all, “regardless of race, religion, or gender.” We should reach out to those who are on the opposite side of the political spectrum and, through kindness and acceptance, try to bridge our differences “to develop a coalition capable of taking on the grave threats facing all of us.” That is done by talking to others in terms that are easy to understand and relatable.

All these categories that we are being placed in are enacted to “distract us from the greater threats at hand” (Beck and Haskins 2022). Then, together, we must strive “to imagine, and then build, from the ruins of the old, a new world” (Cummins 2021b).

As advocated in the analyzed texts, the differences and divides must be overcome to reach some political objectives and some betterment of collective life. Similar to the previous subchapter, it is not clear through what political project is such a goal to be achieved, as if the simple act of coming together is enough to change the material

conditions of the masses. Implicit in the idea of uniting people to confront the political adversary is that all the divides in society according to various identities and preferences are imposed top-down (from the media, politicians, elites, etc.) in order to keep people from responding to the injustices and illegitimate rule. Massive political mobilization is a clear ideal present in all narratives but without a concretely delineated form.

d. Community

The community is another value celebrated and framed by the authors as a guiding principle for overcoming adversities. This notion favors relations that are not abstract, vague, and lost in large and convoluted bureaucracies or systems but at the level of interpersonal contacts. Such sentiment is implicit in the writings of Cummins (2021d), who argues that “federal and international agencies are captured by technocrats and oligarchs,” so people should “work within [their] community.” In other words, the sense of community is counterposed to large impersonal systems that do not consider the interests of common men and women and exist on a larger, even international, scale.

The sense of community is important also for the economy. The authors emphasize the necessity to abandon large corporations, their products, and marketing strategies and to turn towards small-scale commerce:

Americans used to depend on their neighbors, local businesses, and churches, but now we rely almost entirely on gigantic corporations to fulfill our needs—even though we know that many of them couldn’t care less about our values, desires, or even consumer preferences. And as I’ve shown throughout this book, many large corporations and banks are selling out the American people in order to appease other elites, fill their coffers full of cash, and attain more power for themselves and their corrupt allies in government. (Beck and Haskins 2022)

Two authors, in the following lines, explain that small pleasures and gains afforded by large production, such as quick delivery at the doorstep and cheap consumer goods, are not a reason enough to hand so much power to those who do not have the best interest of people in mind. It is a fundamental principle to support neighbors and compatriots in their commercial activities. A similar idea is propagated by Cummins (2021d), who argues that by “thinking and acting locally—buying local foods and products, and engaging in local politics and local organizing—we start to cut off the lifeblood of individuals and companies that are pushing us in the wrong direction.” The commercial activities that the authors endorse are the ones that happen in the

neighborhood, advertised “mouth to mouth,” or searched for in the immediate proximity when a specific service is necessitated.

The turn towards the local community and economy is not only a strategic decision that can have some political consequences. The notion also corresponds to the growing need for meaning and belonging that emerges as a reaction to the alienated world that we inhabit and that causes so much emotional suffering. As seen in the previously discussed quotation by Beck and Haskins, the ones who command from centers of power and influence cannot understand the “values” and “desires” of the people, which means that we cannot find the meaning in those large and remote entities. Jones (2022) also addresses the importance of meaning and points out that people do not want to inhabit the world of Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel, where everybody is drugged and unaffected by external sensations. Jones says that, on the contrary, all the ups and downs in life are worth experiencing, “that’s what gives life meaning.” That is, the search for meaning appears as a great necessity and becomes a collective demand and ideal. Beck and Haskins (2022) also talk about community as exactly the thing that provides us with meaning and a sense of belonging. So, they encourage readers to seek participation in a “local school board or PTA²³,” “homeschooling association,” “church,” “civic group,” “club,” “farmers’ market,” “or other organization that will help you build local relationships.”

In conclusion, the authors advocate for strengthening the relationship between people in direct proximity, both in the economic and commercial sense, through the reinforcement of the local economy and in the context of belonging, through the active participation in local matters with other people around us. As with the themes discussed previously, the narratives encourage the political and social emancipation of the non-urban and non-cosmopolitan strata of the contemporary United States. It is not just a matter of a style of life (i.e., the one less alienated, more immediate contacts), but also productive self-sufficiency. There is an implicit intention to oppose the ideals of the World Economic Forum and the “Great Reset,” which place at the forefront of their political project cosmopolitanisms, global social and economic relations, and highly complex and impersonal international systems for solving social problems.

²³ PTA – Parent-teacher association.

5.4. Fears

The narratives that denounce “The Great Reset” agenda do not refer to the “inner worlds” to justify their claims against the main antagonists. The emphasis is placed instead on things that we should fear concerning our present and future. There are several discursive tools that the authors of dissenting narratives use to achieve this effect, some of which are common for conspiracy theories. There are five identified strategies and they will be elaborated on next.

a. The malevolent authority

First, the narratives suggest that the current system is run by an authority that is quite powerful and connected in a collusion, and functions in secrecy. It is important to highlight here that the authority in question is not seen as a political antagonist (in a way that is discussed in subchapter 5.2), as the opposition in a vision of political, social, economic, or cultural agenda, but as a powerful, undefeatable, and illusive object.

First, there are clear allusions to the numerous evil actors who are connected in some way and gather to establish a common objective that would advance their interests. In the narratives, we find references such as: “a shadowy international network of thousands of virologists, gene engineers, military scientists, and biotech entrepreneurs,” “a technocratic triad,” and “a powerful network of global elites” (Mercola and Cummins 2021), or “a conference of powerful people” (Beck and Haskins 2022). This network of agents encompasses many of the names discussed in subchapter 5.2.1, which includes media organizations, universities, the WEF itself, foundations funded by powerful billionaires, and similar. The main idea is that there is a deliberate and conscious effort to coordinate their actions to achieve specific *evil* goals. Media helps pharmaceutical companies by removing voices that are critical to the “Big Pharma,” the government makes people seek by enacting “laws to move people into fake and unhealthy meats” (Jones 2022) and bring profits to the same companies, and government officials, activists, and special interests groups help each other get richer.

The activities of such networks are usually hidden, “unbeknownst to the public, a shadowy international network” (Cummins 2021b). To paint a picture of such covert activities, Beck and Haskins (2022) tell an old anecdote about a secret meeting where the US banking system was radically reshaped:

In 1910, U.S. Senator Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island, the chairman of the National Monetary Committee, instructed several of America's highest-profile bankers to covertly meet at night in a train station in New Jersey. Among those who attended were Henry P. Davison, senior partner at JP Morgan and Company; Paul Warburg, founder of the investment firm Kuhn, Loeb, and Co.; Frank A. Vanderlip, vice president of the National City Bank of New York (now called Citibank); and Charles D. Norton, president of Morgan's First National Bank of New York. These wealthy, extremely well-connected men selected by Aldrich, one of the most powerful senators of his day, were told that they must hide their identities, use only first names with each other, and dress as if they were going on a duck-hunting expedition.

The detailed plan contains all crucial elements: a network of malevolent actors (these persons were later joined by important businessmen and policymakers), secrecy, and objectives that will bring clear benefits to those involved. While there is an individual interest involved, the ultimate effect of the actions of the collusion is to cause a profound change in the world.

b. The new oppressive global order

Next, the narratives suggest that there is a grand plan for the establishment of the new, undesired order in the world. As the rule, the new order is significantly worse than the current one, by the judgment of the authors of the texts critical to the "Great Reset." For such a great change to take place, there has to be a plot to end the current system. In this regard, there are two main themes in the narratives: (1) the plot against the United States and its values and (2) the plot against capitalism. There are two ways in which this new system is imagined: (1) the New World Order (NWO) or (2) some form of socialism or fascism.

Beck and Haskins (2022) develop the notion that the United States is subjected to the adverse intentions of more powerful forces. The main idea in this discourse is that the United States is the strong pillar of the free and just world, and its demise would be necessary for establishing the new system. The authors claim explicitly that one of "the biggest impediments to the globalist agenda" has been the rejection of the agenda by the United States. Electing Donald Trump as a president is a clear example of those sentiments, of a country with "a strong independent streak"; in other words, the citizens of the US are strongly and bravely standing against the future world order. So, these authors suggest that the US should withhold money given to the United Nations if its

policies do not benefit the US national security, as the funds given to the International Monetary Fund, which is accused of being the biggest supporter of the “Great Reset.”

Similarly, those who support “The Great Reset” and other international elites are working to end capitalism as we know it. There are various ways in which the authors explain this notion. For instance, Jones (2022) claims that “the globalists are looking to kill classic capitalism and replace it with crony capitalism.” What is understood as “classic capitalism” is a free and objective competition in which the tastes and preferences of the consumers get to determine the financial outcomes. Beck and Haskins (2022) express similar fear; they say that the economy “driven by the wants and needs of the individual consumer” is replaced by the one that is “guided by an agenda crafted by a cabal of international elites.” That agenda, which takes the form of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) goals, although nominally tries to “integrate capitalistic language,” is, in reality, ending “world markets” and removing “profits, supply and demand, the desires of consumers, and other market forces” from the economic equation. While once the consumers (i.e., the citizens) “voted with dollars” by choosing which services and products to favor over the others, now, it is “an elite group of Bond villain wannabes in the ruling class” who decide which enterprises will prosper through stakeholder capitalism. In this scheme, the Government and Central Banks are assigned the primary role and become the arbiters of market success. In short: “The Reset would create a system that is, in nearly every way, a complete rejection of market economics.”

This idea can be very difficult to defend. Those that are accused to plot against the United State and free-market capitalism are exactly the ones that accumulated their wealth and power within the realm of both. Moreover, the plot presupposes that some forces and entities are more hegemonic and better coordinated than those that defend the interests of free-market ideology and the United States. There seems to be a contradiction at the core of the texts that waged a strong critique against the “Great Reset.” However, Beck and Haskins (2022) address this point in a certain way; they explain that they are not accusing the WEF’s agenda of being a threat to capitalism in a way that would reminisce the Cold War struggle, but rather, that the things are quite the contrary:

I want to once again stress the importance of resisting the urge to view the Great Reset as a socialist or even progressive framework. There are socialist and progressive elements to the plan, as I have just pointed out, but we have also already encountered what should be a big red flag: throughout this book, I’ve noted repeatedly that corporations, bankers, and some of the world’s wealthiest people have proudly stood behind the Great Reset. Does anyone

really believe that these Wall Street cutthroats and billionaire entrepreneurs have suddenly become card-carrying members of the Democratic Socialists of America? Of course, they haven't.

Furthermore, the authors seem to have a more sympathetic view of socialist politics than of the agenda "Great Reset" agenda. They explain:

The progressive and socialist elements to the Reset are merely there to win support from some groups on the left while simultaneously expanding the power of elites. The ruling class has not, no matter what they say, had a real come-to-Bernie²⁴ moment—which probably explains why you typically won't find Sanders at Davos cocktail parties.

While the two authors emphasize that the globalist elites *are not* socialist, they do not explain what ideology they are following in their actions. It is understood that they only serve their interests, meaning that they are guided by their personal desires and motives and are willing to sacrifice the whole system for their benefit.

The supplanting system is, then, the New World Order (NWO). Mercola and Cummins (2021) explain that this new system has two defining functions: the economic (it aims to "capture all of the resources of the world," "to centralize profit and power") and the biopolitical one ("technocratic and totalitarian control," "dictate the lives of everyone"). Those in charge of the new order are "same wealthy individuals and their companies and foundations," "Big Pharma, [...] Big Ag, Big Tech, and the technocrats." Beck and Haskins (2022) on their part discuss the new order as a "brave and terrifying new world," with the reference to the title of the novel *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. In a similar fashion, the authors warn against the new economic arrangements accompanying this new order—which will "transform the global economy, eliminate free markets, impose a new, more easily controllable and malleable economic system, and change the way people think about private property and corporations"—and the restrictions on liberties, heading towards a society "with fewer personal freedom." For these two authors, "The Great Reset" agenda is the manifesto for the NWO.

Alternatively, the authors warn against the new possible forms of fascism or communism. Beck and Haskins (2022) claim that the WEF's agenda will usher in "a new, highly sophisticated, technologically advanced, twenty-first-century brand of

²⁴ *Bernie Sanders* – A candidate at the Primary Elections of the US Democratic Party in 2016 and 2020. He represented politics that were more radically to the left of Hillary Clinton (in 2016) and Joe Biden (in 2020), both of whom finally became the candidates at the General Elections over Sanders. Some of the Sanders's key policy-proposals were the publicly funded and universal access to healthcare and higher education.

international fascism, one with a corporatist twist.” What distinguishes the new totalitarianism for these two authors is that the ruling class will use its power to punish undesirable private entities and make people dependent on government institutions and programs. While the new order is oppressive, it is passively tolerated by the masses because it is branded as a form of capitalism, i.e., “inclusive capitalism.”

Jones (2022), on his part, defines fascism as a system based on private-public partnerships since both Italy under Benito Mussolini and Germany under Adolf Hitler, he explains, were following the principles of such economic arrangements. Jones makes further references to the previous fascist regimes, such as: “It’s like we’ve gone back to the days of Mussolini and Hitler” and “The fascists of Italy, the Nazis of Germany, and the communists of the Soviet Union all sought to restrict the rights of people and placed the government as their god.” The ideology that tries to find the justification for terrible acts is, similar to those cases taken from history, again taking hold. Diverging slightly from Jones, Beck and Haskins (2022) try to distinguish the past from present regimes while still calling it “fascism”; they claim that the current oppressive order is “not Marx’s socialism or the fascistic models embraced by Benito Mussolini. It is authoritarianism for our brand-new technology-rich, corrupt era. It is twenty-first century fascism.”

The narratives do not engage in any rigorous examination of totalitarianism and authoritarianism as concepts with real historical significance and implications, but in a quite casual fashion assign the label of fascism or communism to the contemporary policies and tendencies within monopoly capitalism. The tendency to describe as fascism such a wide and inconsistent variety of social phenomena is not new, as evident in George Orwell’s 1946 acclaimed essay *Politics and the English Language*. He asserts there that in everyday political communication, “the word *Fascism* has [...] no meaning except in so far as it signifies ‘something not desirable’” (Orwell 1946, 257–58).

The analyzed narratives imply that there is a radical turn of the course in the way society and politics function, which takes the form of a break from capitalism into something wholly different. While there is a vast number of intents in social theory to define the features of the current socio-political order and processes of transformation (giving it the title such as the imperialist phase of capitalism, monopoly capitalism, neoliberalism, late capitalism, and so forth), none of these suggest that current material relations represent a belligerent perversion of those present in what the authors critical of “The Great Reset” call “classic capitalism.” The analysis of dissenting texts leads to the conclusion that even when the changes in politics and economy are identified correctly in

the analyzed texts and are rightfully denounced, they are not critically examined in a way that would address the academic or non-academic history of ideas. Instead, the easily digestible, insubstantial, and resonant explanations and labels (in the way that the concepts such as “New World Order,” “fascism,” and “communism” can provoke instant mental images and sentiments in the target audience of said texts) are applied to discuss present and past socio-political circumstances.

c. Generalized distrust

The authors of analyzed narratives, in addition, call for skepticism towards the representation. In that regard, there are two main presumptions: first is that what is being said by those who have power is just an invented story (a smoke and mirror show, a decoy) that serves to hide their true intentions, and second, that we perceive as reality is, in fact, manipulated through technology and the application of new knowledge to direct the behavior of masses and their opinions in a specific direction. This tool is useful as it can assure popular acquiescence to the “Great Reset.”

The first of the two narrative techniques follows the formula: first, there is something that the elites and those in power want to hide (some ugly truth, their real intentions, etc.), and second, there is the narrative seen on the surface, told to the public. Sometimes, it is also the actions of the rulers that are deceitful: while it appears that they are doing one thing (which may look even as beneficial to people), they are preparing something sinister in the background. This strategy allows the evil rulers to achieve their goals without using some violent methods (e.g., “outright violence, the confiscation of land, and other, often more overtly authoritarian modes of seizing control”), as is the case with the Modern Monterey Theory, which offers the chance to “seize control without requiring gulag” (Beck and Haskins 2022).

Table 4.7 contains some examples of the deceitful representation and the real intentions that are hidden.

Table 4.7 The Examples of The Deceiving Representations and Hidden Intentions

What Is Perceived (the means)	The Real Intention (the end)
“pandemics and the threat of infectious outbreaks” “the manipulations and fearmongering”	paving “the way for a surveillance state”
“the plan [...] to bring us back into harmony with nature”	“to usher in a tech-driven dystopia”
“sustainability, social justice, food justice, climate-smart agriculture, and poverty reduction”	the elimination of “personal liberty”
“public health, mitigating climate change, and eliminating poverty and unemployment”	elites consolidating “their wealth and power beyond anything the world has ever seen”
“artificial inflation of COVID-19 cases”	“to keep the fear level elevated”
“censoring and manipulation of medical information” preventing “medical professionals from using hydroxychloroquine ²⁵ ”	“social engineering part of this system”
“the pandemic”	“radical limitations on personal freedom and a massive increase in surveillance” “facilitate and hide the transfer of wealth to unelected technocrats”
“COVID-19, climate change, inequality, gender diversity, and now the #MeToo movement”	“a globalist plan to create maximum chaos and fear, the better to implement their authoritarian agenda”
people accepting to be “tracked for COVID-19”	to get people “to agree to track [their] carbon footprint”
“false drumbeat that because of global warming, human life could soon be wiped out”	“radical changes to society and the global economy”
George Soros’s “philanthropic work”	“the elimination of national sovereignty”
using “terminology that sounds appealing to many supporters of free markets—like ‘capitalism,’ ‘investments,’ and ‘stakeholders’”	“something very different from what many of us think of when we hear these ideas”
“‘social justice’ stuff”	“to pursue any goals the ruling class deems important”

Note. Elaborated by the author based on the analysis of the works of Mercola and Cummins (2021), Jones (2022), and Beck and Haskins (2022).

In summary, the suspicion is directed toward pandemic-related information and policies, social justice politics, environmental concerns, and welfare politics. These matters serve to cover up the great power and money-grab, ushering of personal control, despotism, and the manipulation of human emotions.

Similarly, the authors talk about the more sophisticated means of the manipulation of people’s perceptions. They point to the Neuro-Link [*sic*], an invention of the entrepreneur Elon Musk, which will allow the elites, says Jones (2022), to have direct access into a person’s brain and, therefore, control how we work, express ourselves, communicate, and similar. *The Verge*, the US online magazine on technology, reports that Musk’s Neuralink, which is “the secretive company developing brain-machine interfaces,” tries to develop devices that can be inserted in “paralyzed humans, allowing them to control phones or computers” (Lopatto 2019). The skepticism is then motivated by the presumption of the indirect deception that takes place in the realm of semantics and by the prospects of direct, physical access to the human cognitive apparatus.

²⁵ *Hydroxychloroquine* – An anti-malarial medication that received a highly contested and controversial status during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, it was suspected that the medication can have some positive effect on the course of the disease—a belief that was later abandoned by the majority, but not all, in the scientific community (moreover, it was believed that the medication can cause certain harms). However, the matter morphed into a political issue and the support for the drug grew among the anti-establishment groups. The then-president of the US, Donald Trump, endorsed the medication. (Piller 2020)

The assumption of bad intentions and deliberate deception on the part of those in power (in political and economic terms) corresponds with larger political and cultural processes. The loss of legitimacy of the dominant political order encompasses this tendency since the narratives imply that even the promises by the authority to improve the conditions of existence are farcical. With this notion, the number of instances in which honest and fair political debate or conversation can be assumed to be taking place is reduced drastically, as bad intentions are assumed a priori.

d. Menacing technology

There is a number of instances where the analyzed narratives warn the readers of new technologies that are being developed and which are extremely dangerous, would infringe the personal freedoms of people, and cause a great loss of privacy. Similar to the previous subchapter, the main logic is that whatever technology is *presented* to us as harmless or beneficial (e.g., the technology that tracks COVID-19 infections) is not revealing what those in power really want—to effectively monitor and restrict the freedom of the people. This general sentiment is expressed in this quote by Jones (2022):

Remember all those science fiction machines you saw as a kid where the robot went crazy, killing people, and the climax of the film was when the hero discovered it wasn't the robot that was at fault, but the psychologically deranged developer? Yeah, this is one of those kinds of problems.

A similar reference to popular culture is evoked by Mercola (2021a), who says that it is “painfully obvious that we are far along in following the plots of futuristic movies like Terminator and The Matrix.” Several different kinds of technologies are being developed for ignoble purposes. They include technology related to digital currencies and money in general, biometric tracing, and transhumanism.

First of all, the authors of analyzed narratives express a lot of fear towards the suppression of physical money in favor of “digital money,” which is the one that exists on the servers and is displayed in the form of numbers on the screen instead of metal or paper. The main danger behind this transition is that “banks, financial institutions, and governments would be able to track and control nearly every transaction in the world” (Beck and Haskins 2022). Once control over the global economy is achieved, it will be easy to control human behavior. Jones (2022) warns that this process will lead to the “digital gulag,” as the government will be able to freeze accounts and credits if someone

commits “the cardinal sin of too much carbon emissions” or deals with “rogue” private entities. The same author further explains: “this whole digital system will tie into a social credit score system that becomes your own digital prison unless you’re deemed a ‘model citizen’ in the eyes of the State.” The author supports his claims with the example of the 2022 Truckers’ Protest (known also as Freedom Convoy) in Canada, provoked by the requirement to present proof of vaccination at the border between Canada and the United States. At the time, the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, invoked the Emergency Act for the first time in the history of the country, which froze the bank accounts of some of the persons involved in the protests, making the financial means inaccessible for the time being (Austen 2022).

Related to this narrative is the notion that technology for biometric tracing is being developed at a high pace. The ideas concerning digital currencies fall into this category, but do not explain all the related ideas. Biometric tracking will come in the form of the “digital World ID,” which serves as a vaccine “passport,” to trace one’s geographical location, and will form part of the “Central Bank Digital Currency and Social Credit Score system” (Jones 2022). This development comes about with the help of the “Problem, Reaction, Solution” strategy: first, some problem appears (e.g., the pandemic), and people become afraid (that is, a reaction) and want something to be done. The solution comes then in the form of the “global ID system” and the “digital gulag.” Mercola (2021c), on his part, discusses the “CommonPass,” a proof of vaccination that serves to install a “permanent surveillance and social control structure” and is a “cog in this Grate Reset plan.” The infrastructure of this kind also includes “the plans to implant biometric readers into everyone’s bodies.”

The warnings against implanted technology lead to the last theme discussed by the authors, transhumanism. In this case, we are dealing with the possibility of overcoming human biological and mental conditions by advancing technology which can, by being perfected to a high degree, supplant the natural state of being. This type of technology aims to reshape humans, make them subservient to the machine, or simply make people become more like robots. Cummins (2021d) links this tendency to biometric concerns and digital currencies:

Through the use of injections or some other means of getting biosensors into you, your actual physical body will be connected, literally, to the financial system. Transhumanism and technocracy fit hand in glove and can best be

described as a digital slavery system where you are monitored and controlled 24/7.

Mercola (2021a) talks about the international patent WO/2020/060606 by Microsoft titled “Cryptocurrency system using body activity data.”²⁶ The same author claims that if this patent is to be implemented, it “would essentially turn human beings into robots.”

The analyzed narratives suggest that the pandemic opens up a door for the development, implementation, and policies that would normalize the use of invasive technologies, which citizens would otherwise reject. The probability of the forecasts of the authors to come true might be questioned, but the relationship between intensified use of surveillance technology and the perceived social and personal danger has a clear reference to the existing social imaginary. The war on terror in the United States, which was a response to the attacks on September 11 in New York City, is just one instance where the temporary state of exception provoked permanent alterations in the biopolitical policies of the state. The authors of narratives provide warnings that are situated in that social context and, therefore, have the potential to resonate with the audience.

e. Toxins

And finally, the narratives discuss the presence of toxins in our environment. In other words, the authors speak of the dangers the harmful substances that exist in the food, air, drinks, and nature can have on human well-being. It should be noted that this is the theme discussed mostly by Mercola and Cummins (2021). Their publication focuses specifically on health and medicine, and throughout the text, they repeatedly emphasize that our body and immunity are being undermined deliberately and are, therefore, more susceptible to external harms (such as COVID-19).

The harm comes in the form of “chemical agriculture,” “GMO,” and “pharmaceutical drugs and vaccines.” The big companies, such as those denominated Big Food, Big Pharma, or Big Ag, are responsible for the chronic ill health in the population. The narratives potentiate the fear with the claims that the dangers are omnipresent, as medicine and food represent an unavoidable part of everyday life of people.

²⁶ Such a patent is indeed registered under the said number and title, by the Microsoft Technology Licensing, LLC. Information retrieved on 30th January, 2023 from the following web-page: <https://patentscope.wipo.int/search/en/detail.jsf?docId=WO2020060606>.

5.5. Enjoyment

When addressing the parts of the narratives that incite enjoyment, we are referring to claims that aim to provoke *jouissance*, which is some insatiable need in those who consume the narrative that is not to be satisfied. There are two main themes covered in this section.

a. The lost paradise

First, the narratives discuss the danger Western civilization faces from the non-Western parts of the world in the race for development and the improvement in quality of life in general. This theme is based on the assumption that the leadership of other powerful nations is smarter and takes into consideration the benefit of the country when making decisions, unlike the leadership of the country where the authors are from. This sentiment is coupled with the belief that the United States of yesteryears had the glory that is now diminished. That loss is, then, lamented strongly.

First, Beck and Haskins (2022) emphasize that, by refusing to join “The Great Reset” plan and climate accords, China, India, and Russia are able to keep energy costs low and achieve “substantial leverage in trade agreements.” Therefore,

China and India are now the world’s most influential and powerful nations. They use their vast wealth to continue buying large amounts of land and natural resources from developing nations in Asia and Africa, setting the stage for their global dominance over the next one hundred years.

The expressed dissatisfaction with the geopolitical repositioning leads the authors to grieve for the power that the West and the US have lost. The glorious past is referenced through the evocations of Founding Fathers, who would be greatly disappointed with the US of today. Their ideals are betrayed by the “devils” who are trying to devoid people of the rights that are “an inheritance from God, who loves us above all things” (Jones 2022). Beck and Haskins (2022), similarly, explain how the leaders of today are not following the path of their forefathers, “who bled on fields, deserts, beaches, and mountains—both at home and in faraway lands—trying to guarantee the continued existence of this grand experiment in human freedom.” What is, then, taking place is the betrayal of ancestral ideals for the pursuit of personal interests without any consideration for the benefit of the nation.

The past is also seen as more communal. Beck and Haskins (2022) portray the US of the past in very romantic tones:

The America we remember, the America of carefree summers, Saturday night trips to movie theaters, warm family holiday gatherings, and mom-and-pop restaurants, has been replaced with a culture driven by suspicion, rampant fear, and ideological and political tribalism and dominated by massive, multinational corporations.

Jones (2022) tells the story of “The Roseto Mystery,” which refers to the town called Roseto, Pennsylvania, populated mainly by Italian immigrants. The town exhibited in the 1960s a very low rate of heart disease occurrences in comparison to other similar municipalities in its surrounding area, which was suspected to be caused by the very close relationship among Roseto’s inhabitants. Such values—the sense of belonging, a good diet, and positive social relationships—are all replaced by impersonal bureaucracies and the notion of individualistic lifestyles so strongly promoted by “The Great Reset” and its associates.

The betraying insiders and powerful adversaries on the outside are “stealing” the enjoyment of ordinary Americans. The endangered object is the past glory, successes, and the sense of dignity, community, and pride that comes with being an American. The authors, by recurring to this theme, appeal to the sentiment of nostalgia and the desire for closeness to the shared identity that many of the readers may find lacking. Such a narrative intends to overcome the contradiction that it was exactly the goal of the cultural project of liberalism of the postwar United States to promote individualism and competition as the dominant mode of social relationship and decouple economic activity from the sense of patriotism. The core of the issue is displaced and assigned to some “Other” that is interested in seeing the US and the West regress and fragment.

b. Humor

The authors of analyzed texts provide their commentary in an amusing way. That humor is centered around sarcasm and mocking remarks towards those that are seen as political opponents or aligned with the “Great Reset.” Jones (2022) states this clearly: “I use satire and mockery to demonstrate Schwab and his minions do not deserve your respect or deference.” Such an approach in constructing the narrative makes the publication against “The Great Reset” an entertaining read.

Some of the examples in which humor is tied to political commentary can be found in the texts by Beck and Haskins (2022). For instance, when listing those bad guys who endorse “The Great Reset” (among which are the heads of Microsoft and MasterCard), they make the following comment to emphasize their point even further: “I think even the Monopoly guy and Scrooge McDuck threw in their support for the plan, but my research staff is still waiting for confirmation from McDuck’s communications director.” When referring to the lockdown measures in the United States, Beck and Haskins (2022) make a following comments:

The lockdown orders that followed became so draconian, it inspired me to launch the first-ever Chairman Mao Corona Dictator Awards show, complete with Oscars-style Mao’y statuettes for those engaging in the most tyrannical behavior. (And in case you were wondering, no, I’m not joking. I take the Mao’y Awards very seriously.)

Moreover, the authors make direct reference to specific public figures, particularly Jones (2022) and Beck and Haskins (2022). They address in a humorous way: Joe Biden’s use of outdated language—“When most people first hear about modern monetary theory, they usually say something like, ‘That’s a bunch of malarkey.’ Actually, almost no one under the age of one hundred says ‘malarkey’ (sorry, Joe Biden), but you get the idea”; Greta Thunberg’s indignation concerning climate change—“The inherent contradiction [that the authorities that are strongly advocating against climate change do not act accordingly, *author’s comment*] is enough to drive anyone mad—even Swedish teens, apparently”; and the insufficient popularity of Prince Charles, who is strongly involved in “The Great Reset”—“I sometimes wonder if Klaus Schwab gets angry that he just can’t find any good henchmen.”

However, Beck and Haskins (2022) also include humor that is not directed at their perceived opponents. For example, the authors say that “when Hollywood inevitably makes a blockbuster Great Reset film, the role of Glenn Beck will be played by Daniel Craig. Makes perfect sense to me, but not so much to my wife.” Or, in another instance, they write: “I admit that the Great Reset is a little cleverer (is that even a word, Mr. Editor?) than some of the schemes that the ruling class have trotted out before.”

The humorous tone in the texts provides a counterbalance to the narrative elements with a more serious approach, those that express political dissatisfactions or adverse feelings towards perceived opponents. This means that the analyzed texts can be placed

somewhere on a spectrum between political text and the product of popular culture and the entertainment industry.

5.6. Summary of the Results and Discussion

The results show that the analyzed texts combine various methods to both transmit the message of a specific political nature and maintain an engaged audience through affective stimuli. Regarding the former, the dissatisfactions with the current social and political arrangements are communicated in a clear and easily digestible manner, using direct messaging. Specific issues, such as the state of inequality or the high level of corruption, are talked about in a way that would generate general agreement across the ideological spectrum. In other cases, however, the authors promote political causes that are characteristic of right-wing political projects (e.g., the opposition to financial assistance given to citizens). And finally, in a particular instance, the authors even express anti-political sentiments, rejecting the act of doing politics as such for being a dishonest and corruptible endeavor. Merging many inconsistent political positions gives the narrative particular stimulating potential since it formulates a wide variety of messaging that can appeal to different groups, even though it may have limited actual effect on mobilizing them for a common goal.

A similar deficiency is evident in the way the narratives frame opposition and political goals. When it comes to those that are denounced as political opponents, the authors do not go further than to delineate the elite circle that, due to some personal traits (e.g., greed), seeks to improve their lot. They do not develop this notion analytically; for instance, through the discussion of social classes, ownership, material interests, and similar. The narratives indiscriminately place a wide variety of actors in the category of “the elites”: these range from university professors and journalists to billionaire CEOs and Hollywood actors. Furthermore, the political goals communicated in the narratives do not require any radical restructuring of the society; the authors mostly invite for some sort of vaguely defined action (joining forces and resisting) and the maintenance of the projected middle to upper-class lifestyle (the quality of life, consuming locally, peaceful existence, etc.). In short, political messaging is written primarily to be consumed and not acted upon.

Table 4.8 The summary of the Result of the Dissenting Narratives

Theme	Premise
1) DISSATISFACTIONS	
Material conditions	Transfer of wealth bottom-up and the impoverishment of lower classes
Corruption, monopolies, kleptocracy	The exchange of favors in order to accumulate money, and influence.
Politics and the government	Politics is a dishonest endeavor. The government should not interfere.
Progressive and green politics	Detrimental to the middle and lower classes.
The undermining of freedom	Restraints on freedom through fear tactics, censorship, and surveillance.
2) ANTAGONISMS	
The amalgam of evil actors	Lists of names of those considered who work against the public interest.
Those with vested interests	Public figures and entities that are acting dishonestly for their and someone else's benefit.
Elites and world leaders	Secluded and distant from regular people.
3) IDEAS OF PROGRESS	
General improvements	The quality of life; undisturbed state of affairs.
Resistance	Taking action against the undesired order.
Joining forces	Overcoming differences and coming together; joining forces.
Community	Life closer, in social and economic terms, to the local community.
4) FEARS	
The malevolent authority	Hidden, evil intentions to change the world to benefit those in power.
The new oppressive global order	Undermining capitalism and the US to establish the New World Order, new forms of socialism or fascism.
Generalized distrust	What is said in public or perceived through media is just an illusion, which hides something.
Menacing technology	Digital money, biometric tracing, and transhumanism are being introduced contrary to the best interest of people.
Toxins	People consume harmful substances daily.
5) ENJOYMENT	
The lost paradise	The West and the US are losing the race, they lost the past glory.
Humor	Jokes and sarcasm.

Various forms of affective labor went into the creation of analyzed narratives. First, the texts paint the image of a hostile world that we inhabit at the moment, where bad intentions and dangers abound. These narrative elements incite worry concerning future large-scale developments. The texts contain some elements of a conspiracy theory, as they express the following points: (1) the authority with actual power is inherently maleficent, hidden from the eyes of the public, and is immensely powerful; (2) some new, radically different social structure is being developed and violently imposed onto Western societies; and (3) we are being collectively deceived and manipulated. Moreover, the authors warn of technology that would undermine human freedom and toxins that abound in human surroundings.

And finally, the element of enjoyment plays into the narrative in two ways: as the imperative of desire (longing for something that is lost, former glory, communal feelings, and riches stolen by others) or as the mere *jouissance* of consuming the text itself, which makes reading the narrative an entertaining activity.

Taking all this into consideration, the analyzed narratives can be best understood as a pastiche of many different elements taken from daily politics and popular culture. These include the discourse of the new wave of populism, injustice, and wealth inequality claims, the fear of emergency measures becoming permanent, conspiracy theories and

generalized paranoia, and messaging meant to provoke an emotional reaction. In other words, the narratives combine some valid social and political grievances and demands with more audacious claims that defy the principles of serious epistemic evaluation of reality. This strategy may be the key to understanding the status and significant popularity of the publications and their integration into mainstream channels of production and consumption, as they offer different bits for different audiences for instant intake.

The narratives deal more effectively with what is rejected and denounced than with what is desired and imagined as an alternative; they do not present a unifying concept that would bind all the claims concerning socio-political reality into one coherent ideological position but put a strong emphasis on the primacy of some purer and fairer, erstwhile, version of the free market capitalism. Therefore, the analyzed texts are politically impotent (as they are not able to transcend or treat the ideological impasse concretely), but highly effective as a product of popular culture. Their claims are meant to provoke either strong agreement or indignation, depending on the identity of the audience, and form a part of the polarized public debate that already dominates the Western mediasphere concerning a wide range of incendiary questions.

6. Internet Users and the Rejection of “The Great Reset”

In the following section, the analysis concerning the reaction of internet users will be presented and elaborated. The results follow the pattern established in two previous instances; that is, the chapters will provide details on the results of the analysis concerning the political (dissatisfactions, antagonisms, and ideas of progress) and cultural (individual as authority, fears, and enjoyment) expressions found in the comments. As support for the claims made in each subchapter, a selection of YouTube comments will accompany the text in the form of a table. The number of comments in each table is not proportional to the comments used to make respective conclusions; each table with comments is rather the selections deemed by the author as optimal for a reader to get a clear understanding of what is being expressed in the comments. Additionally, for themes that include more than 50 comments, the co-occurrences will be explored, detailing how many times the theme in question appears alongside other themes within the same comments.

The following study allows us to draw comparisons and make contrasts and conclusions relevant to the overall study, to understand the nature of contemporary dissenting narratives. In the end, the contrast and comparison will be made between two

previous analyses—the one of “The Great Reset” agenda itself and the narratives made by popular media personalities—and the one which follows.

The present study is based on the comments from two videos published on YouTube by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in June and July of 2020. The Forum published the videos to present “The Great Reset” plan to the public and the videos have attracted a significant amount of attention. The comments were collected on January 27th, 2021 and 1,123 of them were the subject of the analysis.

6.1. Dissatisfactions

YouTube users that react negatively to “The Great Reset” express many political dissatisfactions that will be elaborated on here. The analysis includes the textual units that express something within contemporary economy and society that is deemed undesirable, harmful for the overall wellbeing, and that should be dealt with somehow. Four different subchapters encompass the themes derived from the analysis. The following table provides more details on the data used for each subchapter; namely, the number of comments that, either in part or entirely, make up the corpus of data and shape the conclusions in the respective subchapter. The noteworthy is the number of comments that denounce globalism. This fact suggests that the global character of the WEF and its specific goals for global governance, including the “Great Reset,” is what provokes the biggest reaction. The rest of the themes encompass between eleven and twenty-eights comments; thus, showing presence, but not with a great effect on overall sentiment among YouTube users that reject the “Great Reset.”

Table 4.9 The Overview of the Comments That Express Political Dissatisfaction

THE SUBCHAPTER AND THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
The diminished economic prospects	
<i>Comments Denouncing Wealth Inequality</i>	20
<i>Comments Rejecting the Loss of Economic Freedom</i>	28
Globalism	
<i>Comments Rejecting Globalism</i>	127
Contemporary Left-Wing and progressive politics	
<i>Comments Rejecting Progressive Political Goals</i>	15
Politics and Technocracy	
<i>Comments Rejecting Politics</i>	12
<i>Comments Speaking Against Technocracy</i>	11
TOTAL	213

a. *The diminished economic prospects*

First of all, the comments express dissatisfaction with the current state of the economy and the downturn in the average standard of living. There are two main ideas expressed in the comments: first, that there is a very wide gap in wealth in current Western society; and second, that the current state of private ownership is being diminished.

Concerning the former, internet users express a high degree of dissatisfaction with the state of wealth inequality in the world. The main elements of their discourse include the vast amount of wealth that the richest individuals have and how their insatiable desire for more will just exacerbate the problem. At the same time, the comments paint a picture of a world that suffers increasing injustice and a downturn in the standard of living and minimum material conditions for a decent living. The lower and middle classes not only have less and less but their modest possessions are being reduced further in the great transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich. The situation is utterly unacceptable; the wealthiest are shamelessly enjoying immense luxury while many have to adjust to privation. Besides addressing the current situation in the global economy, YouTube commenters decisively argue that the WEF plans to, through “The Great Reset” agenda, accelerate this trend even further. The following table contains several examples of YouTube comments that express the ideas discussed previously.

Table 4.10 YouTube Comments Denouncing Wealth Inequality

<p><i>Eight men have as much wealth as half of the world's population (more that 3.5 billion people). The personal wealth of Jeff Bezos, the head of Amazon, is \$165 billion. The top 17 asset management firms control \$41.1 trillion of capital, giving them enormous power all over the world. [...]</i></p>
<p><i>[...] all covid has done has made rich people richer and poor people poorer and to pay for covid, the poorer but working people will pay through nose for the rest of their days. sad, sad , sad times ahead</i></p>
<p><i>Its an evil plan of Gentrification. Shameless²⁷ warned us. [...] They'll line their pockets with the profits of capitalism then create the biggest amount of inequality we'll see in decades by destroying small business and middle/working class. [...]</i></p>
<p><i>Here's the plan: gradually erode and destroy the wealth and influence of the middle and upper middle classes, including all professional persons, by demoralising them and taking their money to fund 'equality' projects everywhere, 'environmental' policies etc.. 'social injustice'. The result will be mass poverty -a massive reduction in wealth for the better off; a tiny rise in wealth for the poorest. But those who form and fund the WEF -the tiny percentage of the world -and their dynasties, will become richer and richer and more powerful as they take ownership of more and more. Misery for all but the very few. No one voted for these insane people but they assume the right to run the world... they should be arrested and locked up... The rich will remain rich and everyone else will have nothing. Sounds like a deal. I think I read that 25,000 people A DAY die from starvation. Guess those people don't have Covid so it's no biggie. Nothing to be gained feeding the poor... [...]</i></p>
<p><i>This is a radical change and not a incremental change. Radical change is associated with great risks. This caters only to the wealthiest who have the resources to invest in this change. A successful radical change generates big business with a lot of wealth to the 1%...</i></p>

²⁷ Most likely refers to the highly successful British TV series *Shameless* (2004-2013), later adapted into an equally successful version in the United States (2011-2021). The series revolves around the daily life of a family and portrays in a very graphic way many elements of urban poverty and social decay.

Klaus Schwab founded WEF 50 years ago to represent the interests of the world's 300 to 400 richest countries, individuals, corporations, and families.

Additionally, the comments discuss the diminished state of private ownership. This theme is connected to the essay by Ida Auken (2016) that is discussed previously, titled “Welcome To 2030: I Own Nothing, Have No Privacy and Life Has Never Been Better.” In it, Auken suggests that many products we know today will become services in the future, so it will slowly become unnecessary “for us to own much.” Contrary to this sentiment, the comments see financial independence and private ownership as central elements of a free and fulfilling life. In other words, “The Great Reset” is understood as a plan that is a crucial step towards absolute control over what regular people own.

The comments suggest that the wealthy are unstoppable and insatiable in their endeavor; they will go on with the accumulation until they strip regular people of everything they have. As the next step, the common people will be pushed into economic enslavement, largely in debt, not owning anything, depending financially on the government or the wealthy, etc.

Table 4.11 YouTube Comments Rejecting the Loss of Economic Freedom

<i>Think about it! These people have an enormous amount of money and we have very little, but they are not even happy with us having very little. They want us to have nothing, they want us to be completely reliant on them. [...]</i>
<i>All the phycopathic billionaires could end world hunger in a instant but choose not to they don't want to help they would rather talk about a great reset where no one owns anything but themselves which won't help humanity just hinder it instead and ultimately will enslave us in the end how unbelievably selfish of them they should be ashamed of themselves.</i>
<i>You will own nothing, and you will be happy"" they want to destroy private property, small businesses, and capitalism and create global communism, the politicians and the elites will live like kings in palaces and mansions and everyone else will be their slaves. A new dark era for humanity is coming.</i>
<i>The great reset means Jeff Bezos has all the money and owns all the shops, you go into bankruptcy and rot on the side of the road. [...]</i>
<i>You enslave the people! Just because you are so greedy and still want more! Billions are not enough for you - the suffering will only stop when YOU stop your GREED! It's probably similar to drug addiction, ONLY ALL people suffer from it - mostly the poor!!! An addict always harms others..." [...]</i>

In short, the comments show anxiety and fear over the current state of economic opportunities and future developments that may aggravate the situation. These sentiments should be interpreted in the context of the socio-economic developments at large: during the pandemic, many reports in the media discussed the increase in the overall wealth of the most affluent individuals coupled with the drop in general standard of living (e.g., Beer 2021; Neate 2020; White 2020). This trend is building upon the tendency that existed far before the pandemic started, which is something that even WEF itself is pointing out (Myers 2021).

The outrage in the comments directly relates to a more general malaise, as structural inequalities tend to bring “diminished levels of physical and mental health,

child well-being, educational achievement, social mobility, trust, and community life” (Eidelson 2011, 4). The drop in the standard of living and the prospect of a life in debt—which can bring negative mental and physical health consequences in its own right (Sweet 2018)—contribute to a political claim with a lot of resonance in today’s public sphere. The outrage is, in this case, directed toward the structure of power relations in contemporary Western society.

b. Globalism

The comments express dissatisfaction with the loss of sovereignty and the growing importance of the global, interconnected society. The main premise behind this sentiment is that the fortification of global governing institutions is undermining the power of sovereign nations to rule of their own accord. Such development is then directly connected with democracy itself, as it makes it difficult for citizens to influence policies, which are seen as hugely decided at the international level. The comments, while abundant, are not very detailed nor exhaustive. The following table exhibits some examples.

Table 4.12 YouTube Comments Rejecting Globalism

<i>Globalism preached by the super-rich elites.</i>
<i>The deep states plan to create a one world government. The 1% elites will thrive. You will be the big loser.</i>
<i>We kicked the English authoritarians' asses in 1776, we can do it again in 2020. No GLOBALIST policies without CONSENT of the people!</i>
<i>They literally list ""global governance"" as one of their aims</i>
<i>Why has no one gone after these assholes. World government right in front of us. Our national governments are powerless. [...]</i>
<i>Welcome to Globalists...no nations...only the globalists and the slaves</i>

The number of comments that negatively address globalism is quite significant: there are 127 of them. Among those comments, some more elaborate ones express several ideas corresponding to the themes developed elsewhere in the study. The table below collects other themes that coincide in a significant number of cases with the strong rejection of globalism; next to the theme is the number of such instances. The numbers of co-occurrences suggest clearly that the internet users that posted a comment on YouTube understand the idea of “global” as an idea of some extreme ideology that they see as unacceptable; namely, socialism (in the largest number of cases), fascism, or totalitarianism in general. Also significant is the relationship drawn between global politics and elites. By relating globalism to socialism, the tendency towards international commercial links is deliberately not framed as a result of economic necessity, such as the

tendency to outsource labor, the expansion of markets, or cross-border financial transactions; rather, it is given some unreal impetus. Consequently, the negative sentiment towards globalism transcends the confines of a strictly political stance and, to some degree, moves into the area of paranoid accusations.

Table 4.13 The Co-occurrence between the Rejection of Globalism and Other Themes in the Analysis

THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
Fear of socialism	13
Anti-elitism	6
Fear of fascism	5
The elites work against capitalism	4
Fear of totalitarianism	4
The desire to return to the nation-state	4

The strong emphasis on the negative sentiments towards globalism reveals the importance that the conflict between “global” and “national” has in the Western public sphere. Such a debate is an integral part of the public sphere today; it is enough to observe the political campaign in the United Kingdom for the abandonment of the EU (also known as the Brexit Campaign) that advocated for the return of sovereign power to legislate and enact policies within the nation-state. The campaign insisted on the image of British society as undermined and highly restricted by participation in the EU (McMahon n.d.). The rise of Euroscepticism—that is, the rejection of or doubts about the European Union integration process—has accelerated to a very large degree and the support for parties that defend some kind of distancing from the Union has doubled in the last two decades across the continent (Henley 2020). In the United States, Donald Trump brought about a new form of populism that demanded that jobs be taken back from abroad and that trade agreements with other countries be abandoned.

The analyzed comments clearly build upon these political claims and frame the desire to transcend the national border for economic activity and in a cultural sense as something beneficial for the one percent of the wealthiest, the elites, and the representatives of various, highly undesirable ideologies.

c. Contemporary Left-Wing and progressive politics

Next, the comments strongly reject left-wing and progressive political developments. The tendency towards right-wing ideals is strongly evident in specific

comments. First, YouTube users defend the role of the small government, which does not take many responsibilities on itself and leaves the society and economy to develop independently. The second question that the comments tackle is the one of the cultural divide. The politics of identity (particularly those concerning minorities) are seen as divisive and detrimental to the structure of society. Conservative social norms, the value of family, and tradition are then seen as desirable, but at the same time, under threat.

Table 4.14 YouTube Comments Rejecting Progressive Political Goals

<i>The only signs of anger I've seen on the streets Klaus are people rejecting big government, not clamoring for the 'security' of your new social contract</i>
<i>The only Social Safety Nets we need are the one's protecting us from nuts like you & your panel members.</i>
<i>This happens when the countries that matter keep voting for the left because political correctness and white guilt.</i>
<i>What does going green have to do with COVID or Racial discrimination. Nothing. I think the concern is societal breakdown, chaos and sanctity for law and order. If current societal infrastructure can reinforce their position and improve in the areas agism, racism and gender inequality, societies can recover. The breakdown of America begins with the dismantling of the nuclear family, inconsistency of the Christian religion and the deconstruction of natural order and social norms. [...]</i>
<i>These people are our leaders. They chill me to the bone. They are divisive, they are 100% for identity politics, they are dictators.</i>

While the comments that express said ideas are not particularly elaborate and often include the rejection of progressive politics as part of the wider and more complex message, they exhibit existing tendencies in contemporary politics. First of all, fiscal conservatism is a well-known and already-established idea within right-wing politics, especially in the United States (Tanner 2012). However, the idea of “divisive identity politics” points to much more current development. The comments evoke some elements of “culture wars,” which is a concept that:

refers to the hot button topics on which there is general societal disagreement and polarization in societal values is seen. The term is commonly used to describe contemporary politics in the US, with issues such as abortion, homosexuality, pornography, multiculturalism, and other cultural conflicts based on values, morality, and lifestyle being described as the major political cleavage. (European Center for Populism Studies n.d.)

While the appearance of “culture wars” has a clear geographical and cultural origin, it took hold across the Western world, which is a stance clearly expressed in an article in *The Atlantic* titled “The World is Trapped in the American Culture War” (Lewis 2020).

The analyzed YouTube comments weave into their disagreement of “The Great Reset” agenda both tendencies: the denunciation of public spending and the struggle over values that is currently at the center of so many debates.

d. Politics and Technocracy

Politics as such and technocracy as the dominant mode of governance represent another theme that is elaborated in the comments in a negative way.

First, the authors of the YouTube comments express dissatisfaction with the state of politics today. They signal negative aspects of politics as an activity and force that shapes public life. Those who engage in politics are seen as dishonest, unreliable, and looking out for their own interest. The mere act of doing politics leads to corruption and this predicament is to be resolved for things to improve on a general level.

Table 4.15 YouTube Comments Rejecting Politics

<i>We need an honest financial system, liquidation of 90% corrupt politicians, give workers honest wages, normal house prices, ban poverty and hunger out of this world, i hope trump is saving the world right now otherwise we are fucked</i>
<i>Instead of all having our opinions I think we all should do what we all have in common and just not vote in politics full stop and strip the world as we know it back a few decades and find our own ways of communicating and trading and respecting human life no matter where your from no matter how rich you are no matter your ethnicity we all need to reset ourselves never mind the economic system</i>
<i>[...] These people are nuts and the elites will get rich like how we're locked down and our leaders go on vacation. COVID is bullshit, H1N1 was deadlier, and we didn't lockdown. Our politicians are trying to destroy our freedoms and hard work!</i>
<i>Drag your elites and politicians out of their homes and butcher them in the streets. [...]</i>

Furthermore, technocracy as the dominant form of governance in the 21st century is also rejected fervently in the comments. Technocracy is not precisely defined in the comments but is conceptualized in a way that would allow the authors of the comments to denounce something they do not like about current collective circumstances. The comments refer to oppression, elites, undemocratic behavior and tendencies, and despotism. The WEF and “The Great Reset” agenda are seen as quintessentially technocratic and are perceived as its main promoters.

Table 4.16 YouTube Comments Speaking Against Technocracy

<i>Welcome to technocracy. These bastards want it ALL. Money, power, control, everything. Unelected fuckers that need bringing down.</i>
<i>Stand up for your freedoms, never submit to these technocratic elites!</i>
<i>I will never give in to technocracy. My freedom, my livelihood, my health, my right to bear arms, my medical freedom, my children's education, my private property - you will never have it.</i>
<i>Global technocrats dilute a citizen's vote.</i>
<i>[...] So where are we heading at? Basically, the middle ages type of societies. Technocratic, modernist mindset is absolutely ridiculous and will lead us to a postmodernist, materialistic, cyberpunk dystopia. You guys think goddamn electric cars will save us, you don't understand the fact that we will consume the amount energy or actually need to consume more to produce the said cars, said batteries, said electricity powering those. You are only shifting the problem somewhere else. [...]</i>

Both the rejection of politics as such and of technocracy, which is not defined in a sufficiently specific way, point to the primacy of indignation over cooperation. The comments express the same attitude observed in the case of popular authors of dissenting

narratives on “The Great Reset”: anti-politics. As discussed in subchapter 5.1.3, anti-politics points to the popular complaint about the state of politics, corruption, the pursuit of self-interests, and similar. The common feature of those complaints is the lack of a positive idea of a political project; they focus almost exclusively on what they are against, and not on what they are for. For more details, see Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe (2021, 77-102). Again, the comments reflect the notion inherent to contemporary populist projects that seek to break with the same old politics and advocate for a much more radical shift from the status quo.

6.2. Antagonisms

The comments develop four different kinds of antagonisms that are seen as formative of today’s society. This segment of the analysis focuses on the comments that discuss individuals and entities that stand in the way of the betterment of society. Internet users point clearly to those that are seen as such adversaries and relate them to the WEF’s agenda. The four subchapters and the corresponding number of comments are presented in the table that follows.

Table 4.17 The Overview of the Comments That Discuss Antagonists

THE SUBCHAPTER AND THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
Corporations	
<i>Comments that Denounce Corporations</i>	10
The disreputable World Economic Forum	
<i>The Lack of WEF’s Democratic Mandate</i>	68
<i>Solution Proposed by the Ones Who Created the Problem</i>	26
<i>The Wealthy Should Redistribute their Money</i>	24
The one percent	
<i>Comments Addressing the 99% and 1% Divide</i>	38
The elites	
<i>Comments That See Elites as Arrogant and Self-Interested</i>	119
TOTAL	321

The numbers in the table suggest that the authors of YouTube comments gave special attention to the question of who is to blame for all the malaise. The topic of the elites and their culpability is a particularly prolific one. The details of ideas attached to the persons and entities that comments denounce will be presented in the following four subchapters.

a. Corporations

First, internet users that react negatively to “The Great Reset” agenda address corporations and their unrestrained power. The corporations are seen as a unified large entity with an insatiable desire for domination. As it is stated in the analyzed textual units, human and natural resources, the whole planet, small businesses, and citizens’ rights and freedoms are all targets of their detrimental actions. They are in a close relationship with the political power, which paves the way for specific corporations to prosper at the expense of other smaller private entities. The following table contains some examples of the denunciation of corporate power.

Table 4.18 YouTube Comments That Denounce Corporations

<i>There you go. The World Government is here to rule over us all. A corporate takeover over the entire planets resources. Human Resources as well as Mineral.</i>
<i>its about total control its about large corporations being the only player in the economy because every thing else is made illegal. not just large corporations the ""right ones"" the ones they do not want or ""like"" will be legislated out of business. It is the great corporate take over of the world.</i>
<i>You have destroyed the small bussiness around the world with the excuse of preserve peoples' health, now you want to pave the way for the large global corporations to control everything! You talk about equality and social justice...</i>
<i>Excellent suggestions for a better society with more rights and freedoms and destroying the power of powerful corporations</i>
<i>Resist the marxist global takeover by corporate fascists...the reset is a plan to enslave the world by big corp and big government dictatorship...</i>

The comments, while addressing the WEF’s agenda and goals, target big capital and large corporations, which are counterposed to the interest of the general public and the functioning of small businesses. The growth of multinational corporations that tend to develop towards monopoly has indeed been on the rise. Its result has been “a perpetuation and heightening of inequalities across national borders, instead of their elimination” and the ability to wield immense power “over nation-states in the periphery” (Suwandi and Foster 2016). The expansionary element of the functioning of large private entities is particularly important for internet users. However, the tendency towards monopoly in today’s capitalism is seen in the comments as some oppressive and irrational will of corporations to oppress the entire planet, rather than a tendency within the political economy at the global level that has been developing for decades and that follows a specific logic (see: Barnet and Müller 1974).

b. The disreputable World Economic Forum

Unsurprisingly, the organization that stands behind “The Great Reset” agenda is seen as an illegitimate political actor in the analyzed textual units. That is, the comments suggest that the WEF wrongfully believes itself to be a competent authority on the matters

it tackles. There are two main ideas behind this theme: first, the WEF does not have a democratic mandate to act in the way it does (i.e., as an authority that introduces major changes in society and economy), and second, the organization and its associates propose solutions to the problems in spite of them being the ones who created the problems in the first place. Following this notion, the authors of the comments invite the WEF and its associate to, if they are really so concerned for the welfare of the planet, give out their money to those who need it. These three aspects will be elaborated on in this subchapter,

In the first case, the internet users express frustrations for not being consulted when the plans such as “The Great Reset” are drafted. They repeatedly point to the lack of popular support for the agenda, as the members of the WEF and its associates have not presented themselves to elections and subjected their plan to popular will. The tone of urgency in the WEF’s proposals, contained mostly in the notion that the global challenges are so overwhelming that there is no alternative and that the big change they envision must take place, is highly contested and denounced. Additionally, the supranational character of the Forum and its agenda suggests that the plan developed at the international level is not tailored to the national context of each country. The comments that express this concern are presented in Table 4.19.

Table 4.19 YouTube Comments That Question the Lack of WEF’s Democratic Mandate

<i>WHO VOTED THIS PEOPLE TO DECIDE FOR OUR LIVES & OUR FUTURE? WHY WE THE PEOPLE SHOULD TRUST THEM?</i>
<i>we have no alternative"" Thus speaks Prince Big Ears, the so called alternative thinker! These incredibly wealthy people already know what is best for us, they've been working on this reset for decades.. Doesn't matter what we think, they've already decided</i>
<i>This is deeply sinister stuff. There are of course things that need to change in the world. But a new world order imposed by unelected elites is not the answer.</i>
<i>Why do these elites think that we want to build their vision for the future?</i>
<i>we dont want the great reset!</i>
<i>who the F choosed you as managers of the world????? [...]</i>

The theme shows significant co-occurrences with other themes in the analysis. The table with the number of co-occurrences is presented below. The two themes that appear with the highest numbers—the fear of being controlled and the anti-elite sentiment—point to the link between paranoia and populist resentment at the crux of the rejection of the WEF. On the hand, the Forum in Davos is equated with the concept of “elites” in general. On the other hand, the fear that the WEF is interested in exercising control over people shows that the element of anxiety plays an important role in the understanding of the WEF’s desire to define global governance.

Table 4.20 The Co-occurrence between the Rejection of the WEF and Other Themes in the Analysis

THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
Society and individuals are being controlled	13
Anti-elitism	10
The powerful are conspiring in secret	6
The pandemic is a hoax	5
Fear of socialism	5

Further, WEF’s plan for the future is rejected on the grounds that it was the Forum’s members and associates themselves, which include some of the most powerful and wealthy individuals in the world, who created the problem. Their culpability originates from their extravagant accumulation of wealth, contribution to pollution, and lavish lifestyle that estranges them from the concerns of regular people. Their actions cause poverty, misery, inequality, and a general drop in the standard of living of the rest of the population. All this, additionally, disqualifies them as valid authorities for resolving major issues. The following table contains some examples of this kind of messaging.

Table 4.21 YouTube Comments Rejecting the Solutions Proposed by the Ones Who Created the Problem

<i>Yeah let's let the rich figure out our how the world should be fixed after they have ruined earth. Can fix the broken with the broken Einstein. Very comical!!!</i>
<i>Yes yeslets have the fukers who created this mess lead the way out? What the fuk do any of these globalist know about real life anyway</i>
<i>World Economic Forum = A collection of self-congratulatory windbags that contribute to global warming with all the hot air coming out of their double-speaking mouths. They live highly off the sweat of others who work. What hypocrites.</i>
<i>Pretty disturbing this...creating global misery, and then coming up with a solution where everyone's the winner. Experience tells me WE won't be the winners in this scenario.</i>
<i>An out of touch parasitic class who's intertwined investments and bought and paid for agents are responsible for national bankruptcies, destruction and pollution of the earth, sees it now fit to dictate a ""great reset"" of humanity. I think we need to reset the parasitic class À la French Revolution-style.</i>

Following this notion, those who reject “The Great Reset” agenda in YouTube comments call for the participants in the Forum to resolve the world’s problems by renouncing their wealth for those who need the most. Wealth should be redistributed directly and massively and is meant to eradicate world hunger and other problems for which the wealthiest are sounding the alarm. It is assumed that this gesture would show that the intentions of the WEF associates are indeed genuine; otherwise, it would be proven that the plans of wealthy elites are just a way for them to increase their standing.

Table 4.22 YouTube Comments Proposing That the Wealthy Redistribute Their Money

<i>How about we reset all these rich peoples bank accounts, so they can stop meddling in other peoples lives.</i>
<i>Are you wealthy people ready to give up your wealth, cause I think that's why we have so many poor people.. The reset starts with you if you want equality for everyone.</i>
<i>How about WE take ALL your money 1% and WE WILL BE HAPPY</i>
<i>[...] how many millions and millions that would end up in every month, abs it's such a small fee from so many people who won't even notice it being missing could feed the desperately poor people out there who's doomed too starvation and suffering from the first day they're born. [...]</i>
<i>How about these people start leading by example. Before you implement this nonsense, donate your wealth for the betterment of humanity and show us what you're own dollars have done. Release the free energy technology and all of the medical advancements to cure peoples ills instead of just treating them.. If any of this is sincere you wouldn't be putting in a meter for profit. I want to see you people live amongst the lowest of classes before you can even pretend to be authorities.</i>

WEF’s intentions and plans are, then, rejected not only on the basis of what they suggest (or for what they are believed to suggest) but also based on the structural position of those who participate and form part of the forum. As discussed in subchapter 2, dissatisfaction with the WEF is a widespread phenomenon among activists, scholars, journalists, and other public figures who directed much vigorous criticism at the Forum over the time of its existence. The criticism underlines the lack of respect for the democratic process and the vested interest that those who participate in the Forum may have when advocating for certain political transformations.

Bearing that in mind, the comments on YouTube join those efforts and express a concern that already from a part of public debate. The comments assign, at least in this case, importance to the rule in accordance with the Western democratic tradition, which leads to the a priori rejection of the proposals of the WEF. Additionally, it is expected of those who intend to rule society to do so in a disinterested way—that is, without getting personally enriched along the way.

c. The one percent

The distinction between the “ninety-nine” and the “one percent” is another common way in which the comments designate various social and economic actors as antagonists. The two labels are used to signal the great separation that exists in income and lifestyle of the extremely wealthy (i.e., those whose income falls into the one percent of the top earners) and those that are outside of that exclusive circle—in other words, the ninety-nine percent of the population. The sentiment present in the comments is that of resentment and anger. The separation between two groups is not taken as a matter of fact: the rich are not just those who legitimately accrued their wealth and deserve to enjoy it but are denounced as maleficent actors whose desire to accumulate more wealth is detrimental to the welfare of the rest. This rhetoric denotes a class conflict, as the interests

of two groups are seen as conflictual so that the existence of one suppresses the existence of the other. Examples of the comments that fall into this category are presented in the below.

Table 4.23 YouTube Comments Addressing the 99% and 1% Divide

<i>The 99% will hunt you down, that will be the great reset... Enjoy your money whilst you can</i>
<i>The day the 99% refuse to use and be used by money all the manipulation ends.</i>
<i>A bunch of rich people in a closed circle talking about including everyone. Maybe the poor people couldn't afford to pay attention to this happening to them right in front of their eyes?</i>
<i>And to the .1% rich who control 99% of wealth, working class is poor</i>
<i>Let's start with the 1% giving up all their wealth and distribute it amongst the 99%, the we'll see how we want to go ahead. Oh???</i>
<i>The Great Reset isn't meant for the 1%???</i> What a surprise!!!!

While such a distinction between the extremely wealthy and everybody else has an obvious mathematical implication—as this kind of rhetoric can be applied to any society in which income is not completely equal among its members—, its generalized use denotes an exorbitantly unequal distribution of wealth common to 21st-century Western capitalism. The origins of the term “ninety-nine percent” can be traced to the 2011 protest Occupy Wallstreet that took place in New York City as a response to the consequences of the 2008 Financial Crash. There are two understandings regarding the invention of the concept within the protest movement: the slogan “We are the 99%” is believed to be originating from a flyer (Weinstein 2011) and is often attributed to the anthropologist David Graeber, one of the most prominent participants of the protest (Sharlet 2011).

By using the concept on YouTube to denounce the politics of the WEF, the authors of the analyzed comments link directly the “one percent” and their interests to “The Great Reset” agenda. Naturally, the rest of the population has nothing to gain and everything to lose from its implementation.

d. The elites

Finally, the adversary that is the most discussed in the comments is the elites. This category, while presented here as separate, is an all-encompassing one as it includes many of the previously discussed denounced groups. In other words, those associated with the WEF, the one percent, and the heads of corporations are all part of the “elites.” In that regard, we are discussing here the elites as a discursive category identified in the analyzed comments and not as some epistemologically delineated social group or strata.

Besides, the comments that discuss the elites appear in a very large number—a total of 119. Many of those coincide with other themes covered in this study. The following table shows the number of co-occurrences between the negative perception of the elites and other themes in the analysis. It is noteworthy that three themes closely related to the idea of an uprising and mobilization coincide with the negative view of elites. On the one hand, the evocation of the one percent—signaling the context of the Occupy Wall Street protests—, and on the other, the calls for popular uprising and the emphasis on the power of the masses suggest that some action needs to be taken against the elites. This points to the populist framing of the concept of “elites” that is centered on the power imbalance.

Parallel to this, the significant number of comments that express fear of social and personal control exerted from the top suggests that there is an additional meaning assigned to the concept of the elites that is closer to the nature of conspiracy theories.

Table 4.24 The Co-occurrence between the Anti-elite Sentiment and Other Themes in the Analysis

THE THEME	Nº OF COMMENTS
Society and individuals are being controlled	24
The divide between 1% and 99%	19
Popular uprising	15
The power of people	15
Wealthy should give out their money	13
WEF has not democratic mandate	10

Concerning the content of the comments, the elites are seen as a group of individuals secluded in the “ivory tower,” distant from the rest and completely ignorant of the reality of the world around them. In spite of their ignorance of the “real world,” they feel that they have the right to dictate how the rest of the people should live, are intellectually arrogant, and freely pass judgment on everybody they consider unworthy or of lower standing. Hiding behind all their public acts (e.g., philanthropy) is just the pursuit of pure interest. The comments that express this notion are presented below.

Table 4.25 YouTube Comments That See Elites as Arrogant and Self-Interested

<i>Why does this have the feel to like the elitists want to control the masses because they are far smarter and know better to control our lives than us simpletons ever could. [...]</i>
<i>Oh...the social elite, the filthy rich and the people in powerful positions. They really think they're so special, so intelligent and really think they can dictate what they wish onto the lower class (in their minds). They really think they are the only people who are capable to change the world to their favour and the way they want our world to progress. These powerful people really do not care what we think about any of this. What a bunch of Egotistical ""B's"". [...]</i>

<i>The only reset we need is to reset all of the elite who believe since they have the most money that they think they know what's best for all of us! They only implement and integrate ""solutions"" that benefit them and only them while the rest of us just die off. [...]</i>
<i>Shove the reset button down your throat corporate slugs. These elitists are drunk on themselves.</i>
<i>Screw you and your new social contract! You political elites make me sick. You just want to tell the common folk what they can't do</i>

The “elites” as the negative Other of a specific political project is a common feature of the contemporary populist rhetoric, whereby the people are given a clear adversary to mobilize against. That is, we are dealing with the narrative that “frames society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” (Mudde 2007, 23). The results of the analysis cover many aspects of the populist key messages in contemporary media as conceptualized by Ernst et al. (2019, 168). The group of authors explains that the anti-elitism encompasses the following claims: (1) “discrediting the elites” (“elites are corrupt”), (2) “blaming the elites” (“elites are harmful”), and (3) “detaching the elites from people” (“elites do not represent the people”).

The results of the study point to the same features, not only in the current subchapter but also in the one that elaborates on the negative view of the WEF, whose members are seen as contributors to the problems they claim to resolve (subchapter 6.2.2). This means that a clear parallel can be drawn between the ideas presented in the comments and those of political leaders of populist movements in the 21st century. The comments express strong negative sentiments towards the elites and frame them as a corrosive element in society that does not represent the people and shows a great level of irresponsibility.

6.3. Ideas of Progress

The YouTube users that comment on “The Great Reset” videos discuss many kinds of projects that they would like to see come into being. They are not only numerous, encompassing five different themes, but follow diverging ideological and political directions. The number of comments corresponding to each of the five following subchapters is presented in Table 4.26.

Table 4.26. The Overview of the Comments That Discuss Ideas of Progress.

THE SUBCHAPTER AND THE THEME	Nº OF COMMENTS
Popular resistance	
<i>Comments that Signal the Power of the Masses</i>	54
<i>Comments that Express Identification with Other Comments</i>	31
<i>Comments That Call for an Uprising</i>	58
Defending freedom	
<i>Comments That Point to the Importance of Freedom</i>	36
Return to the nation-state	
<i>Comments That Call for the Return to the State Politics and Economy</i>	26
Donald Trump	
<i>Comments That Endorse the Politics of Donald Trump</i>	10
Return to nature	
<i>Comments That Endorse the Life in Accordance with Nature</i>	10
TOTAL	225

While there are five different ideas of progress discussed in the comments, one receives a significantly larger amount of attention when compared to the others. The textual unites that point to some form of popular resistance—which includes the comments that accentuate the power of the people, their unity in the YouTube comments section, and their desire for an uprising—represent 63,6% of all the comments that discuss some idea of progress. This tendency in the comments reveals the intensity of dissatisfaction and animosity toward those seen as adversaries; the situation is so dire that a peaceful resolution or cooperation between the two is not often contemplated.

The following subchapters provide more details on all the themes in this category.

a. Popular resistance

First of all, a great amount of attention in the comment section is given to the idea of all people coming together in a confrontation with the ruling elites and those in power. There are two elements to this theme: first, the comments discuss the power of the populace and the potential of the multitude to act in a decisive way, and second, the people, once united and grouped, should confront the WEF and those in power in an uprising.

The comments repeatedly make a point that those who rule lack one key characteristic—they are not many. While they have the means, power, money, media, and similar, the people have the benefit of sheer strength by being able to come together in large numbers. This power, one of the masses, is what really matters. However, people are being put against each other and divided into groups according to their identities by

those in power to prevent people from uniting in a common fight. Examples of such comments are presented in the table below.

Table 4.27 YouTube Comments That Signal the Power of the Masses

<i>These scum bags need to be reset. Their greed for money, control, and power is the reason this world is the way it is. Remember people of the world, there are multi-billions more of us than them.</i>
<i>Why didn't you care about equality 50 years ago when you started this? We don't need you BS great reset. Who do you think you are? The real power is to the people. To All global citizens and we do fully understand what you want. A small group of so called "leaders and stakeholders" who want more power and more control over the world. [...]</i>
<i>You are the 1% of the humanity and we are the rest, we won't have the money but we have the heart, the light and the power to move forward without you! You are evils!!!</i>
<i>[...] They have power simply because we allow it by our ignorance and or indifference. At the moment we are being played off against each other e.g BLM and for as long as we allow this to continue they will retain power. When we aren't fighting/hating each other we are watching trash on TV. We are the population. We are the people and we have the overwhelming advantage that comes with being over 7bn strong. [...]</i>
<i>lol last I heard it was 7.8 billion people on this planet and only a hand full of evildoers so good luck in convincing every single one on earth</i>

Within these comments, there is a significant number of other themes that appear alongside the one that stresses the power of the populace. The three themes that appear most frequently in the co-occurrence table below suggest the strong link between the messages that discuss the political conflict of the populist kind. On the one hand, the high co-occurrence with the calls for popular uprising and the feeling of unity with other users of YouTube point to a desire for grouping with those equally displeased with the current state of affairs. On the other hand, the strong anti-elite sentiment, being the second most common co-occurrence, completes the binary opposition between the people and those that they mobilize against.

Table 4.28 The Co-occurrence between the Power of the People and Other Themes in the Analysis

THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
Popular uprising	21
Anti-elitism	15
The feeling of unity in YouTube comments	12
Society and individuals are being controlled	7
The divide between 1% and 99%	6

Complementing the notion of the powerful masses, the authors of the comments express hope and optimism at seeing other people in the comment section voicing the same or similar thoughts. This fact gives the authors of the comment peace of mind, joy, and a positive outlook on how things stand. This sense of belonging to the group of individuals that think alike additionally reinforces the sense of having the right opinion and might lead to what is known as an “echo chamber,” the reinforcement of one’s

opinion that social media can cause by confronting people only with opinions akin to their own (Cinelli et al. 2021). Additionally, the platform provided by YouTube serves to the authors of the comments as a substitute for a democratic process since the analyzed textual units repeatedly draw the attention of the WEF to the statistics of negative and positive reactions, assuming that it represents the actual will of the people. Table 4.29 contains some instances where such a message is being conveyed.

Table 4.29 YouTube Comments That Express Unity among Authors of Other Comments

<i>Amazing and reassuring that so many comments reflect complete distrust in these globalists.</i>
<i>These comments give me hope. Not all are asleep!</i>
<i>Based on the comments and the disproportionate dislikes to likes I would say that the people you are claiming to help are waking up</i>
<i>Half as many likes as dislikes and this comment section says it all. How long till they shut down comments as well.</i>
<i>You guys are playing a joke right? You can see by the comments left on this and the amount of thumbs down compared to thumbs up, that humanity is not dumb. No thanks. We don't need a ""reset"".</i>

Once people understand their power as a united group, something is to be done with it. The appropriate response against the WEF and “The Great Reset” agenda has to unfold in a specific way. To begin with, it is important to understand that the situation society and economy find themselves in is very serious: the injustice and suffering are too great and people have been tolerating them for too long. Such a dire state of affairs requires a decisive and aggressive response. Therefore, the comments express the need for a massive uprising of people and a revolutionary style of social change. YouTube users imagine an ousting of the powerful, billionaires, and leaders by the masses that are joining forces in a common struggle. Some explicitly call for violence, suggesting that they will hunt down the elites, while others mention the guillotine, thus making a clear reference to the French Revolution. The comments that discuss the potential revolution are presented below.

Table 4.30 YouTube Comments That Call for an Uprising

<i>[...] Please do understand that we will never let you reach your goals of the great reset. There will be a revolution, but not the one you are hoping for! You're all saying "This is the time to make a better world for everybody". Well let's be honest, for most of all it's you who created the current world. [...]</i>
<i>I vote we start building guillotines, and start using them on the central bankers. There was a time when the ""elite"" decided everything for the people, and that ended with the french revolution.</i>
<i>What crisis? Things unfortunately will have to get a lot worse before ppl decide to make large scale changes. It's ironic that the elites are trying to coop the coming real populist uprising with their own agenda for change. I don't think the oligarchs have just become enlightened progressives.</i>
<i>To all you scumbags that are pushing for this I stress to you be very careful what you wish for. Be very careful what you wish for. People are not sheep you can push and push but mark my words you will be pushed back. Only global threat to humanity is the existence of human scumbags like you guys.</i>
<i>When the real reset comes when it all collapses because you people we'll hunt you far and wide dont matter how hungry we are how much protection you have you'll regret this humanity will make sure of it theres no space on this earth for people like you</i>

The analysis of co-occurrences of the “uprising” theme repeats the results similar to those discussed previously, the ones concerning the theme of the power of the populace. There is a strong relationship between the denunciation of elites and the necessity of people to come together in a united struggle. The table below shows the number of co-occurrences.

Table 4.31 The Co-occurrence between the Popular Uprising and Other Themes in the Analysis

THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
The power of people	21
Anti-elitism	15
Society and individuals are being controlled	11
Fear of socialism	6
The divide between 1% and 99%	5
Defending freedom	5

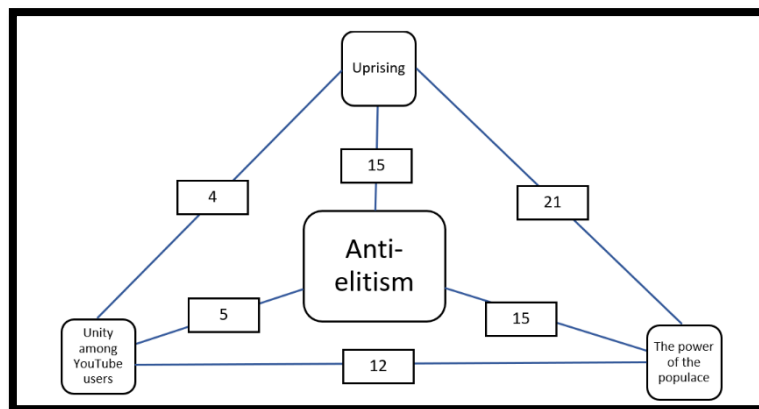
In total, the comments on YouTube see the popular takeover of power as a possible way of achieving what they consider a better society. The group of comments that form part of this theme are going beyond just discussing political antagonisms where the adversary (e.g., the elites, the WEF) that stands in the way of some vision of progress is only identified and delineated discursively but is calling for that antagonism to take a clear form and materialize in a political sense. That externalization of the antagonism is, in some cases, imagined to be violent. The question arises, however, what is the impact of the messages posted on YouTube; are they a catalyzer that has real effects?

The overview of the literature paints a complex picture of the effects that online aggregation of resentment coupled with the desire for mobilization can have. On the one hand, the virtual space is believed to be highly inconsequential. The claim is that the intent to oppose a specific political system on an online platform gets “underpinned entirely by virtual campaigns, online petitions, funny Photoshopped political cartoons, and angry tweets” that only serve as a substitute for the fact that the actual political power is missing (Morozov 2011, 201). Other views are more ambiguous, pointing to the ways that digital communication can sometimes empower and sometimes limit real-world movements (Tufekci 2014, 1–2). It is clear that ideas concerning popular mobilization that appear online can result in actual physical protest movements: notable examples include the Occupy Wall Street Movement (Conover et al. 2013) and the attack on the Capitol of the US on January 6, 2021—the event that stands in close relation to the online conspiracy

theories (Biesecker et al. 2021). However, neither of the two attempts was successful in profoundly disturbing the system.

The analyzed YouTube comments should be, instead, put in the perspective of the whole study in order to make any conclusion about their potency. The pattern of co-occurrences between the comments concerning some form of resistance and the ones that express an anti-elite sentiment (as shown in Figure 4.1) resembles the real-world type of movements that rally against those that are perceived as overly and unjustly powerful. In that regard, the political opposition to “The Great Reset” is best understood as part of the wider rejection of the establishment, the general frustration with the concentration of power and wealth, and the appearance of political leaders and movements that strive on that resentment.

Figure 4.1 The graphic presentation of the number of co-occurrences



Note. The graphic provides an overview of the number of co-occurrences between the themes analyzed in this subchapter and the anti-elitism. The number enclosed along the line connecting two themes shows how many times two themes appear together in the same comment.

One thing, however, might impede to a significant degree a concrete action: the geographical remoteness of the WEF’s meeting venue. On top of that, the lack of concrete institutions that represent WEF’s interests throughout the whole year and within specific Western nations makes it highly unlikely that the sentiments from the comments will have concrete form in the context of “The Great Reset” agenda. The results of the study should rather be interpreted as an enhancing element added to the existing political tendencies in the West: the general loss of legitimacy of the political consensus and the rise of the anti-establishment rhetoric.

b. Defending freedom

In the comments that reject the “Great Reset,” the question of freedom and liberty plays an important role for some. YouTube users point out decisively that freedom must be defended and represents an important ideal that should continue to exist in Western society. Accordingly, it is assumed that the ideal of a free society is threatened by the activities of the WEF and should, therefore, be defended by all means. A couple of examples of such comments are shown in the table that follows.

Table 4.32 YouTube Comments That Point to the Importance of Freedom

<i>Comments disabled on the other ""The great reset"" video from this channel. What a great preview of the kind of behavior to be expected from people advocating for this. The ""shut your mouth, eat your worms and be grateful, peasant"" attitude doesn't cut it for me or any of the freedom loving people, so no great reset of basic human rights for me, thank you.</i>
<i>Keep your European Communism over there and leave those of us across the pond out of it. For over two hundred years rugged individuals have come to America for AMERICA FIRST. We don't need more government to secure our freedom and safety. WE THE PEOPLE ARE FREEDOM. WE THE PEOPLE.</i>
<i>We don't want your reset. We didn't vote for you. We want free markets, property rights/ ownership, and we want to live in a framework were indoctrinated fools cannot vote away our freedoms and responsibilities.</i>
<i>Sooo what are we going to do about it!?</i>
<i>We are so separated and locked in fear... we are all fighting each other instead of fighting for our freedom...</i>

In the analyzed textual units, the US and Western political and cultural project is understood as counterposed to that of the WEF. The Forum in Davos is seen as a project that defends communism and socialism and is fundamentally averse to liberty and freedom. While it is not possible to gather the geographic location of the authors of the comments, it is highly likely that they come from the US or are strongly partial to it. The values such as individualism, freedom, and liberty represent some of the core values of those who identify with the North-American nation (Pew Research Center 2007). Following this notion, the emergency measures concerning the COVID-19 pandemic—perceived by some as an encroachment on people’s ability to exercise their right to autonomous decision—is an important context for understanding why freedom is strongly discussed in the comments and how it interacts with existing political and cultural ideas.

c. Return to the nation-state

As discussed previously, the mere idea of politics at the international scale and the concept of globalism are strictly rejected in the comments. The supranational institutions and globalization are seen as detrimental to local politics and are perceived as an obstacle to a better and fairer society. In accordance with that notion, the comments suggest many ways to revert the tendency by retreating into the confines of a single country.

There are two main notions within this theme. The first one is centered on the nation as an identity. In other words, what matters is the sense of belonging, identity, and the freedom to make decisions concerning the laws and politics of the sovereign and independent nation. Besides the defense of the nation as an ideal, there is an argument that counterposes national politics to global capitalism, which includes the critique of the practice of outsourcing (i.e., moving a business to a different country to take advantage of cheaper workforce and resources), drafting policies in favor of big, international corporations, and the destruction of small local business. What is common to both views is that the prosperity of one (i.e., impersonal, large, global, secluded, bureaucratized endeavors of cosmopolitan types) is in an inverse relationship to the welfare of the nation-state and small-scale society. Some examples of the comments are presented in the table that follows.

Table 4.33 YouTube Comments That Call for the Return to the State Politics and Economy

<i>no one asked me if I wanted a global society! I live in a sovereign nation with it's own government and laws and rights and freedoms. They can take their global garbage society ideas and stick them in their ears</i>
<i>the great reset is a great idea, lets start with resetting all national and personal debts especially in the third world,lets reset the billionaires bank accounts who thought this up, lets reset all the jobs which have been sent over seas to be done by economic slaves to make corperations rich and also the power they weld ovet nations, lets reset the amount spent on the arms trade to fight enemies who only exist to sell more weapons</i>
<i>Nationalism will save this planet. Globalists need to be locked away for eternity and starved to death.</i>
<i>Welcome to Globalists...no nations...only the globalists and the slaves</i>
<i>Remember the 'outsourcing' they have done that crippled our economy.</i>
<i>Be wise with your dollars.</i>

The desire to return to the confines of one’s nation and country evident in the comments posted on YouTube reflects the “struggle over borders” (de Wilde et al. 2019) that is an important part of the political debate in the twenty-first century. The cleavage concerns, on the one side, the professional and highly educate cosmopolitan elites that value mobility and cultural diversity and, on the other side, those that oppose such politics and see it as the cause of an economic and cultural downturn. While elites tend to converge over the positive attitude towards “international trade, immigration, fighting climate change and supranational integration”—largely due to the clear tangible benefits and the cultural capital—, the attitudes of the masses tend to be more complex (Strijbis, Teney, and Helbling 2019, 63–64). The British author David Goodhart (Goodhart 2017) coined the terms “somewheres” and “anywheres” to distinguish between two clashing groups. The author explains that, in a society that was for some time polarized on the question of its membership in the EU, the cleavage consisted of those that value belonging

and small community and those who see the benefits of mobility, cosmopolitanism, and higher education.

Furthermore, the said divide becomes one of the most central issues in the contemporary political and media sphere, as “the cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage” becomes “integrated into left–right semantics” (Strijbis, Teney, and Helbling 2019, 64). In that regard, the return to the nation-state aligns to a certain extent with the right-wing political options, although it has some support on the left when it concerns the opposition to the outsourcing of jobs and the devaluation of cost of labor through immigration²⁸.

Unsurprisingly, those that so strongly reject the “Great Reset,” the agenda concerned with global governance, side politically with the group that imagines the future primarily in terms of returning to the confines of the nation. Consequently, the comments on YouTube should be interpreted as a reflection of the broader tendencies in politics.

d. Donald Trump

For a number of YouTube users that comment on the “Great Reset,” the politics represented by Donald Trump has been a desirable path for Western societies to take. In this case, Donald Trump stands as a signifier for many different political directions. However, on the whole, he is seen as the embodiment of the political opposition to the dissatisfaction and antagonists discussed previously: the one who fights corrupt politics, those who seek too much power, the various hoaxes, globalism, the economic downturn, and similar. Donald Trump is, additionally, seen as someone who fights for the interest of the people and is a strong enemy of the WEF and is, accordingly, able to put an end to “The Great Reset” agenda. Voting for Donald Trump, in sum, means voting against the “Great Reset.”

²⁸ For instance, during the 2016 the US Democratic Primary, Bernie Sanders, the candidate who stood in strong opposition to Hilary Clinton and embraced “socialist” label, famously rejected that proposition of open borders as “a Koch brothers proposal” (Klein 2015). Sanders additionally expressed negative opinion on trade agreements in which the United States takes part, which is a position also defended at the time by a then-candidate to presidency Donald Trump (Davenport 2016). Following a similar line, Elizabeth Warren, another candidate in the 2020 Democrat Primary, published *A Plan for Economic Patriotism* (Warren 2019).

Table 4.34 YouTube Comments That Endorse the Politics of Donald Trump

<p><i>We need an honest financial system, liquidation of 90% corrupt politicians, give workers honest wages, normal house prices, ban poverty and hunger out of this world, i hope trump is saving the world right now otherwise we are fucked</i></p>
<p><i>Nonsense! Power hungry idiots. Climate change is a hoax. Donald Trump is fighting against this idiocy! Fight back!</i></p>
<p><i>Klaus Schwab and his "great reset" is a total Scam which will lead to global socialism and WORSE.</i></p> <p><i>This must be rejected and fought at all costs else we are doomed. They have used a Flu by the name of Covid 19 to scare us into submitting to their diabolical RESET.</i></p> <p><i>It is all BS, pure and simple. They are taking us for simple fools by putting FEAR into us via Covid 19 which is just a Flu. The current lockdowns, the masks are just the beginning.</i></p> <p><i>They have deliberately harmed the economy via the lockdowns.</i></p> <p><i>THEY ARE THE PANDEMIC. We need Donald Trump to save us !!!</i></p>
<p><i>So, a book was written and all kinds of plans that take years were made.....so explain to me how exactly this virus and the epidemic wasn't pre-planned? There is no way these people operate on ""coincidences"". This was an operation from the start with a plan and a purpose for changing the world. And nobody consented or voted for this stuff. And people wonder how Trump got elected? THESE PEOPLE are why Trump got elected. As imperfect and flawed as Trump is, people would rather have someone making visionary changes in the best interests of the voters rather than bow to people who 'insert themselves' as our masters.</i></p>

The table above contains some examples of comments that evoke the figure of Donald Trump. As it can be observed, the former president of the United States is seen as someone who is able to resolve the issues concerning the economy, injustices, low wages, and other questions concerning material conditions of living. The results point to an important feature of political strategy of Donald Trump, which can be described as the “cauldron of resentment” (Kellner 2017, 135). One of the key strategies employed by the former president was to articulate dissatisfactions effectively and give them a narrative form that is more emotionally potent than that of the Democratic Party. This was done even when it meant defending incompatible political demands; for instance, Trump tapped into the strong anti-globalization sentiment very successfully despite having businesses around the world (Kellner 2017, 141). In short, the figure of Donald Trump represents a voice for those who oppose “the power” in whatever shape and form they think it is manifested.

e. Return to nature

Finally, a group of the authors of YouTube comments perceives the betterment of the human condition through the return to nature or living in accordance with its principles. This, primarily, means that the development of industry and consumption brought a malaise that translates into the negative state the current society finds itself in. Technology, pharmaceuticals, electrical devices, and other contemporary inventions should all be rejected for the world to become a better place. Humans should abandon cities, large-scale production, noise, abundance, consumption, and chemically produced food and drinks.

Moreover, those in power, such as the WEF, are seen as responsible for pushing humanity into a lifestyle that is far away from environmentalist principles. The wealthy embrace the progress of industries and contribute to the contamination of their lifestyle. By rejecting the “Great Reset,” humanity rejects the 4th Industrial Revolution and further projects for the development of potentially harmful technology. In short, breaking away from the forces of modernization and a related form of development is seen as a clear path to progress for contemporary society.

Table 4.35 contains some comments that express this kind of sentiment.

Table 4.35 YouTube Comments That Endorse the Life in Accordance with Nature

<p><i>[...] Technology can be used for the benefit of nature and humanity without the need to control peoples' moves and thoughts. The use of natural healing and remedies, education of healthy nutrition and true wellbeing is more effective than any vaccine or pharmaceuticals.</i></p> <p><i>You are not leaders, though you see yourselves as such. Stand down. If your vision isn't heart-driven, it has no place in our Home I am an environmentalist for over 30 yrs personally and professionally. While some of your ideas resonate with me environmentally, the totality of your agenda is riddled with hidden motives.</i></p> <p><i>People never asked for cars, they were happy with their horses</i></p> <p><i>Business men, bankers and politicians approved and advertised cars, planes, steam and oil fueled boats for they could get reacher end enslave people</i></p> <p><i>People never asked for plastics, business men, bankers and politicians encouraged and promoted the use of plastics worldwide, now they blame people</i></p> <p><i>Stop blaming people for your stupid management, bankers, the round table, the masons, DAVOS and the Pope are to be blamed for this mess, STOP this 4th industrial revolution NONSENSE, you, the rich need it, we never asked for any industrial revolution, people would have been much happier with just farming, without your decadent and stinking cities</i></p> <p><i>Sorry, but I don't need security. I don't need electricity or natural gas. I live in the bush. I need freedom. I need less government. We need to get rid of cities and get back to producing for ourselves instead of living comfortably and conveniently.</i></p> <p><i>In order to preserve the planet and the continued existence for humanity we must embrace a lower standard of living. This is fact. We are consuming to much, polluting to much, and mostly we are reproducing at an alarming rate.</i></p> <p><i>I urge world leaders to adopt China's 1 child policy. This century we must reduce humanity's population to less than 500 million through attrition NOT MASS MURDER.</i></p>
--

The ideas expressed in the comments suggest that the rejection of the disenchanting modernity (Aupers and Houtman 2010, 1) is an important element of the current opposition to power. The underlying premise is that what was traditionally understood as progress is now under question. On the one hand, the innovations are not appropriate for humans. This claim is based on the assumption that “the machine [...] made an abrupt entrance into a society which, from the political, institutional, and human points of view, was not made to receive it,” which means that people have to “put up with” the machine and “live in conditions that are less than human” (Ellul 2011, 4). Following the rejection of the modern, nature is situated as the fundamental principle of spirit, which, although the material in the strict sense, is “the source of spirit” and soulful in essence (Moore 1996, 3–4). Life in accordance with those principles would bring a betterment to human life which is missing from contemporary society. In YouTube comments, the appreciation for such a life is related to the opposition to “The Great Reset” and modern tendencies in

general: globalization, alienation, and politics that do not take into consideration the human condition.

6.4. Individual as Authority

The analyzed textual units also include subjective perspectives by individualizing ideology. This means that there is a tendency in the comments to explain undesired behavior and acts in the socio-economic realm through the individual and personalized characteristics of certain individuals. As already mentioned in subchapter 6.2.4, those that accrue money and power—the elites—are doing so because of their personal traits, i.e., they are closed off from regular people and are only interested in improving their own lot in spite of what they claim publicly.

On top of that, two additional features of the powerful clique are underlined: they are morally corrupted and have psychopathological traits. To explain the denounced behavior of the elites, the comments claim that those who belong to that category have numerous negative personality traits that make them behave in a specific way. On the one hand, they are corrupted, greedy, deceitful, hypocritical, power-hungry, irresponsible, and self-centered. In other cases, the elites and wealthy act in the way they do because of some pathological trait: they are narcissists, psychopaths, and sociopaths. There are total of thirty-six comments that express such notion; some illustrative examples are presented in Table 4.36.

Table 4.36 YouTube Comments That Focus on Persona Perspective

<i>What is it about these greedy,psychopathic and very old billionaires at the end of their lives,still wanting to maintain power and decide how we all have to live?</i>
<i>[...] You are evil, hypocritical, dishonest, narcissistic,power-hungry demons.</i>
<i>Only psychopaths put themselves above others.</i>
<i>Money means power and as long as that is not changed, the world will continue to develop for the worse.</i>
<i>NO you evil vile rich parasites, you people are the unessential ones. You must go first and donate ALL your money in the process.</i>
<i>[...] The leaders who dont believe in mankind will be exposed. And much more corruption will become abundantly clear. Policy makers, law makers, biopharma directors, and the children that will watch these interviews and the content of this time frame defined by covid-19, will thank these people for saving the world time and quantifying the process of self-realization, however indirectly and unaware they were when illustrating all this for the world to see.. [...]</i>
<i>Disgusting. Sad. Arrogant social & global engineering. Factually incorrect on almost every ""point"" made. Self-congratulatory fools who dismiss criticism as cynical non-compliance, which eventually will not be tolerated. Power, control & money - what a combination.</i>
<i>"The Great Reset" - indeed...we need to remove all the power hungry, Soul-less, corrupt and psychotic assholes, and return the Planet to the People. Now that's a RESET I agree with.</i>

The analysis points to a clear conclusion: powerful individuals are denounced for something very personal about them. Their behavior, individual characters, and presumed

pathologies are responsible for the accumulation of capital and the pursuit of exorbitant power in the political realm that goes beyond what the majority of internet users find acceptable. This tendency, however, simply leads to the reduction of ideology to individual behavior and to the supposed crisis of morality. As argued by Žižek (2012), the “injunctions to fight the culture of excessive greed and consummation – this disgusting spectacle of cheap moralization is an ideological operation, if there ever was one.” For the same author, the tendency to blame the downfall of personal and collective ethics simply transposes the features inherent to globalized capitalism “into personal sin, into a private psychological propensity.” (Žižek 2012)

In the same fashion, the accumulation of capital as a central premise of the dominant mode of production is not contemplated by the authors of comments as an effective way of understanding the creation of monopolies, high level of corruption, lobbying, and the negligence of the common good, which are characteristic for the contemporary society. What is rather suggested in the comments is that the system would function properly should all the denounced individuals who make elites be replaced by some other, more humane, noble, just, and good-natured types.

6.5. Fear

The comments express anxiety in many ways. On top of that, this is the sentiment that is present in a very large number of comments and there are six subchapters that provide details on this topic. A detailed overview of the number of comments that pertain to each subchapter and the corresponding theme is presented in the table below.

The results suggest that the comments that express some kind of fear do not only cover the highest number of themes but can also be identified in the significantly large number of comments. A total of 448 comments were used in the analysis of fears, which is notably larger than those that address political ideas: 213 comments express dissatisfaction, 321 comments discuss antagonists, and 225 comments propose some idea of progress. This reveals that the authors of the comments, while decidedly wanting to draw attention to the functioning of society that they perceive as unjust, are much more motivated to tell the internet community about their concerns about hidden mechanisms of the global maleficent systems.

Table 4.37 The Overview of the Comments That Express Fear

THE SUBCHAPTER AND THE THEME	Nº OF COMMENTS
Control <i>Comments that Claim that People and Society Are Being Controlled</i>	100
Hidden and evil intentions <i>Comments that Imagine a Hidden Conspiracy by a Group of Actors</i>	60
<i>Comments that Assume Hidden Motives</i>	25
<i>Comments that Assign Evil Intentions to Those in Power</i>	32
The big hoax <i>Comments that Question the Veracity of the Pandemic</i>	19
<i>Comments that Question the Veracity of Climate Change</i>	11
The new undesired social order <i>Comments that Express Fear of Totalitarianism</i>	33
<i>Comments that Express Fear of Socialism</i>	119
<i>Comments that Express Fear of Fascism</i>	33
<i>Comments that Express Fear of Feudalism</i>	10
Overpopulation control <i>Comments that Discuss the Overpopulation Control</i>	16
Technology and microchips <i>Comments that Express Discontent with New Technologies</i>	10
<i>Comments that Discuss Microchips</i>	10
TOTAL	478

Among those comments, the ones that are the most numerous are the textual units that express fear of socialism (119), that claim that people and society are being controlled by the elites (100), and that there is a hidden conspiracy by a group of actors (60). The detailed analysis of the implications of both the content of the comments and their distribution over themes will be discussed further in each subchapter.

a. Control

First, the comments discuss the ways to control populations and individuals that those in power employ for their own benefit. Such messages rely on the premise of the novel and movie “Nineteen eighty-four,” which presents a society controlled by a “Big Brother”—an all-seeing entity that permeates the intimate sphere of its citizens to foster uniformity among them. The comments point to, on the one hand, direct, physical control, and on the other, the control of mind and emotions. The methods for control are, therefore, many; including removing financially independent income, directly enslaving people, terrorizing by fear, manipulating minds using the media and large corporations that dominate the market, or by the means of perpetual crisis. The end goal of such efforts is to have a complete say over the behavior and bodies of populations. The comments that

cover this theme talk about a very wide variety of control; some of them are included in the table below.

Table 4.38 YouTube Comments That Claim That People and Society Are Being Controlled

<i>Why does this have the feel to like the elitists want to control the masses because they are far smarter and know better to control our lives than us simpletons ever could. Expect all innovation to come to a screeching halt. Notice how all conversation is about control control control, with not proposal of keeping that control in check. I guess they are far too intelligent, far too honorable, to ever fall to corruption. [...]</i>
<i>I will never be controlled by you... Never! I would rather prefer to die instead of be enslaved by you for all eternity!</i>
<i>So basically the Davos elites want to deny all of humanity the right to freedom and financial independence. We must all be dependent on the corporations they own. [...]</i>
<i>[...] They placed fear of a virus in our hearts, robbed us and now want to control every aspect of our lives</i>
<i>deception on people and covid only smoke screen ... invisible non-existent enemy to control people ... and so file only a huge scam on people.covid end when people wake up and get up</i>
<i>Unfortunately, a small minority of humans seemingly only exist to control others. We see this everyday in politics from across the political spectrum. They strive to control how the masses live and what they believe. This minority of people is very corrupt and typically hide their true intentions. No altruism exists in the mind of the power hungry, only selfishness and greed</i>
<i>I do not consent to your Great Reset of control. Stop! You're goal is to enslave humanity more than it was. Humanity is free and can think for themselves. WE DECIDE! WE OWN OURSELVES!</i>
<i>Resign your posts and repent! Shut down the World Economic Forum. Globalism is a failure because We The People of Earth reject it and your control attempt. Hop on your space ships and head on out to Galactic Tribunals for each of you!</i>

The number of co-occurrences, as shown in the table below, suggests that the authors of the comments that fear being controlled by those in power express many other fears, including those that form part of conspiracy theories. Besides, the results show a noteworthy co-occurrence with the strong rejection of both the elites and the WEF, which is perceived as disreputable and anti-democratic. Both those actors are, consequently, perceived as either directly involved in the control of individuals and populations or closely associated with it.

Table 4.39 The Co-occurrence between the Fear of Being Controlled and Other Themes in the Analysis

THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
Anti-elitism	24
The powerful are conspiring in secret	15
WEF has no democratic mandate	13
Popular uprising	11
Fear of totalitarianism	8
There are hidden motives behind the public appearance	8

In conclusion, the analyzed comments convey a very strong sense of lament for the lost agency: there is an implicit idea that things in the world happen in a way that is oblivious to what people do, desire, and work for. The relationship between the fear of aggressive control from the top, centered around “a vision of the world in which

individuals are forever manipulated by secret agents, hidden persuaders, and malevolent organizations,” has a cultural function:

to sustain a form of individualism that seems increasingly challenged by postwar economic and social structures. Conspiracy theory, paranoia, and anxiety about human agency, in other words, are all part of the paradox in which a supposedly individualist culture conserves its individualism by continually imagining it to be in imminent peril. (Melley 2000, 6)

The analyzed YouTube comments express the same kind of fear of being controlled aggressively by the powerful. This tendency exposes a specific feeling of powerlessness in the world where political, social, and economic events happen in a way that is contrary to the will of society at large.

b. Hidden and evil intentions

The analyzed textual units, furthermore, describe a reality replete with disingenuous powerful individuals and their hidden plans. This theme has three premises: first, there is a conspiracy between those in power that is not revealed to the public; second, the publicly declared intentions and presented narratives are not genuine; and third, the intentions of the ruling elites are always ill-natured.

The first premise paints a picture of gatherings that foster collaboration between different actors to achieve a specific goal. Those meetings are seen as invalid as they hide from the eyes of the public the workings of the network of evil individuals. Such a portrayal of things evokes the notion of very effective coordination across sectors and parts of the world. It is important to note that the annual meetings in Davos held by the WEF are in themselves a kind of gathering—albeit a public one—, which is a fact that additionally sparks anxiety among YouTube users. Table 4.40 contains some comments that denounce this form of hidden workings.

Table 4.40 YouTube Comments that Imagine a Hidden Conspiracy by a Group of Actors

<i>The Davos crowd. Secret meetings of the wealthy. [...]</i>
<i>[...] The consultation with people (us) will be driven by the global shapers already operating in 400 cities across the planet to ensure the narrative is kept to. This will be Delphi technique at meetings. The consensus already agreed upon before the meeting begins giving you the impression you have a say. You don't and will be singled out as a dissenter and dealt with accordingly. [...]</i>
<i>[...] The global dominators who are the dynasties of some families who rule the world have a diabolical plan for humanity, including population reduction.</i>
<i>Sounds like they had this planned for a long time and were just waiting for something to create a more believable crisis. Finally makes sense why the media and governments were working together to make Covid into such a scare</i>

The number of comments that imagine elites conspiring behind closed doors is sizeable and the theme itself coincides with many others within the same comments. The co-occurrences happen with other themes that express an idea akin to conspiracy theories. These include the view of a pandemic as a hoax, the elites controlling populations, and the existence of hidden motives and evil intentions behind what is being said and done publicly. Notably, the themes that implicitly concern the elites or the WEF are missing from the list of most common co-occurrences.

The table with detailed information is presented below.

Table 4.41 The Co-occurrence between the Accusation of Hidden Conspiracies and Other Themes in the Analysis

THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
The pandemic is a hoax	28
Society and individuals are being controlled	15
Religious motifs	9
There are hidden motives behind the public appearance	8
Evil intentions	7
Fear of microchips	7

Next, the comments explain that intentions that are presented publicly should not be trusted, as they do not correspond to what is actually happening. The emphasis here is on the idea that even the celebrated good deeds and altruism by those who are associated with the WEF are just a decoy from their true, ignoble motivations (for instance, getting wealthier). This is a direct response to humanitarian causes promoted by some of the wealthy public figures connected to the Forum in Davos; moreover, it counters the notion that lockdown and pandemic-related measures are founded on the desire to do good or, in other words, that the number of lives saved by the imposed measures outweighs all the negative effects they can have on livelihoods of a segment of the population. The dominant sentiment, in this case, is that of skepticism and distrust toward what the powerful ones are doing or saying. The following table contains some examples of comments of this kind.

Table 4.42 YouTube Comments That Assume Hidden Motives

*You (WEF) together with your allied actors continue to manipulate humanity using once seemly reputable organizations to push your agenda.
One of them being the IMF (international monetary fund), which has invested in the dirtiest projects around the world, violating indigenous rights, human rights and nature rights. Using the guise of loans to help, instead keeping Southern Hemisphere countries hostage for decades.
From reading other comments here, we are not buying what you are selling. [...]*

<i>The urge to save humanity is almost always a false front for the urge to rule it</i>
<i>[...] This minority of people is very corrupt and typically hide their true intentions. No altruism exists in the mind of the power hungry, only selfishness and greed</i>
<i>[...] Based on what I just outlined and the behavior we are now witnessing from some in power who are acting like total dictators why should we believe that any of you have our best interest in mind and that this is not just another avenue for the most wealthy to gain and have more control over the rest of humanity? [...]</i>

Not only are the intentions of the powerful and wealthy seen in a doubtful light by those who post comments below WEF’s videos, but are, additionally, understood as evil by default. The same people that are proposing “The Great Reset” are accused of being evil, devils, and similar, thus acting out of their perverse desire to harm others. The following table serves to illustrate the point.

Table 4.43 YouTube Comments That Assign Evil Intentions to Those in Power

<i>We are looking on the face of absolute evil here</i>
<i>Now it proves even more why this coronavirus was invented to use it for their evil plans !!! The reset means depopulate the planet !!!</i>
<i>The most evil people on the planet, gathering together, hoping to achieve the subjugation of the entire human race</i>
<i>Genuine evil. We should be incredibly afraid of these fascists and their master plan.</i>

In sum, the comments point to the increasing distrust in the Western public sphere and incite alertness to presumed wrongdoings. It is suggested that we should all be aware that nothing is what it seems and there are evil plans being concocted far from where we can see them, even when good intentions are being publicly proclaimed. This notion points to the crisis of representation that promotes wariness towards the outward appearance of things. The suspicion directed towards what is being said or done publicly, quite common in conspiracy theories, presupposes that some organic and authentic truth hides behind an externality that one can uncover with careful analysis (Andrejevic 2013, 14).

Similar to the previously discussed theme, there is an underlying notion of powerlessness since the comments claim that our collective affairs are not a matter of collective decision-making of all citizens. Decisions are rather taken into the private sphere of specific individuals that actually have the power to rearrange society impervious to the will of the people. The “will” is transposed from humans to complex systems, which are imagined as entities that are reflexive about their purpose and goals (Melley 2000, 13).

The underlying premise of such fears suggests the presence of some elements of conspiracy theories: specifically, those that relate to the generalized distrust and the sense of diminished agency in how collective affairs are decided and structured.

c. *The big hoax*

The following subchapter builds on the two previous ones, however, with a focus on two more specific themes. Here, the accusations against the powerful clique are tied to the pandemic and climate change. In the case of the former, it is stated in the YouTube comments that a certain group of evildoers are responsible for either orchestrating or lying about the pandemic. When it comes to the latter, climate change is seen as a farcical event that serves a dishonest purpose. However, it should be underlined that both views—that the pandemic and climate change are not real events—in the contemporary public sphere tend to be linked and find support in similar demographic groups (Latkin et al. 2022)

In the analyzed comments, the pandemic is framed as a farce on the account that is overly beneficial to the elites. The most powerful individuals in our society can use the excuse of the health crisis to fortify their power, increase their wealth, achieve evil plans, rule without restraint, introduce a new global order, control populations, and achieve many other inappropriate goals. All these developments serve to conclude that the pandemic was not an accidental event as it seemed at the start. Examples of such comments are presented below.

Table 4.44 YouTube Comments That Question the Veracity of the Pandemic

<i>Who elected you???? You are the same people responsible for unleashing COVID 1984 on the world. Eventually the curtain will be lifted and you elite can no longer hide. Obvious the Wuhan Red Death was not working, so now you unleash race riots to tear us apart. Your divide and rule tactics will only last for so long as humanity is awaking to your sinister plans.</i>
<i>Cutting trees down everywhere making way for 5g.and nano chip. To control us. Corona HOAX is the excuse for all of this</i>
<i>Well, well, well... look here, the people who sabotaged the world economic system and planned it for decades. The truth will win from the lie and the world will soon know if the corona virus was released on purpose to introduce this new system. Speaking about timing Mr Klaus.</i>
<i>Now it proves even more why this coronavirus was invented to use it for their evil plans !!! The reset means depopulate the planet !!!</i>
<i>Covit =False Flag Operation Using the equation Problem Reaction Solution For the implementation of NWO ,Not For the Good Of The People ,it's to take the life of the people ,to depopulate the Planet ,vaccinate ,microchip for Total Control of The Masses !</i>

The supposed climate change hoax is seen in a similar light. It is connected with many other notions in the political realm, such as the rejection of supranational and global politics or the praise for Donald Trump. Additionally, it is linked to the themes discussed earlier in this section, e.g., the existence of some hidden and dishonest pretenses in elite circles.

Table 4.45 YouTube Comments That Question the Veracity of Climate Change

<i>Still sticking to their lie about a climate crisis. I guess he didn't get the memo, it was a lie, to justify The UNAgenda one World Power</i>
<i>This is nonsense! These people are power hungry! Fight Back! Based on nonsense of climate change hoax, china virus response hoax.</i>
<i>Climate Change?!!! Really?!! That shit ain't real!! The world is awake to your plandemic cover for this economic reset. It was the plan all along</i>
<i>Nonsense! Power hungry idiots. Climate change is a hoax. Donald Trump is fighting against this idiocy! Fight back!</i>

Previous inquiries into the issues of skepticism towards climate change and the pandemic have discovered some overlap with specific ideological and political stances. Politically, those who are prone to conspiracies and skeptical of climate change tend to be more conservative, older, and male, and express positive views of the entities associated with the Republican Party, as shown by one research in the United States (Sarathchandra and Haltinner 2021, 234). However, the picture is more complicated, as there is an important portion of climate skeptics that are not following conspiracy theories and see themselves as more pro-environmentalist (Sarathchandra and Haltinner 2021, 235). The views that question the veracity of the pandemic can also be linked to some political directions: in Europe, there is some overlap between pandemic skepticism and the support for the far-right; in the United States, that overlap is concerning more mainstream right-wing views (Küppers and Reiser 2022, 492).

In the analyzed comments, the co-occurrence with other themes reveals a complicated picture. The following table provides more details.

Table 4.46 The Co-occurrence between the Popular Resistance and Other Themes in the Analysis

	Climate change is a hoax	Pandemic is a hoax	TOTAL
There is a hidden conspiracy of the elites	2	7	9
Popular uprising	1	4	5
Society and individuals are being controlled	0	4	4
The power of the populace	1	3	4
Anti-elitism	1	2	3
Defending freedom	0	3	3

The co-occurrences, although limited in number, point to many diverse views: from populism at large (anti-elite sentiment, uprising against the powerful), the right-wing of the type common to the US (the emphasis on freedom and liberty), and conspiracy views (elite conspiring in secret, controlling people, and populations). The analysis shows that both the pandemic and climate change serve as nodal points for the beliefs that were

already present in dissenting narratives. In other words, the idea of a hoax does not precede political and cultural ideas discussed elsewhere in this chapter, but rather comes posterior, to complement them. This conclusion is supported by the fact that other than the claims of the falsity of the pandemic and climate change, the comments do not introduce many new ideas; instead, they largely rely on claims such as the dissatisfaction with the elites, the desire to control populations, and others that have been discussed already.

d. The new undesired social order

As mentioned before, the comments suggest that there is some new social order that the elite want to establish violently. This new order is imagined in four ways: totalitarianism, social, fascism, and feudalism. They will be discussed in this subchapter.

First of all, the comments contain numerous allusions to totalitarianism. The comments directly state the intention of the elites to take control of Western society in a way that would include absolute power over people, in the form of a dictatorship. The reasoning behind these comments is that the tone of the WEF associates is that of necessity, not leaving the world a choice in adopting their agenda. The comments are presented in the table that follows.

Table 4.47 YouTube Comments That Express Fear of Totalitarianism

<i>All of a sudden, these famous people are radical environmentalists when it will give them totalitarian power... Of course, they won't have to make any green sacrifices at all... They want to domineer other people into sacrificing everything...</i>
<i>These people are our leaders. They chill me to the bone. They are divisive, they are 100% for identity politics, they are dictators. Do you think these people will listen? Hell no. Do you think they want to negotiate? Hell no.</i>
<i>Did you notice the total absence of facts? It was emotive talk. It's urgent SBC has to be done now?</i>
<i>No thanks. I'd rather participate in democracy and exchange varying ideas from great intellectuals than have a totalitarian regime telling everyone this is for our own good.</i>
<i>My body my choice.</i>
<i>Tyrants dictate (1) new social contract (2) green revolution (3) everything digital (4) stakeholder capitalism (5) stronger globalism to all aid a global reset.</i>

Next, the comments suggest that “The Great Reset” agenda is proposing a socialist takeover of free-market capitalism. This conclusion is based on several presumptions: the communism label is applied to the WEF because they intend to impose a specific way of living on populations, suppress the market economy, are trying to make people more dependent on the state, and are making decisions without the democratic mandate. Some comments merge the dislike for socialism and the tendency of growth of large corporations, by suggesting that the coming version of socialism is the one with a

“corporate flare.” In many instances, socialism is discussed as a system compatible with capitalism that is known in the 21st century. Such comments are presented in the Table 4.48.

Table 4.48 YouTube Comments That Express Fear of Socialism

<i>The shift from representative government to priming the population to accept the decisions made by unelected boards and commissions within a system of communitarianism where your rights are subsumed into the rights of the community.</i>
<i>A system that combines the worst of communism with the worst of crony capitalism, a marriage made in hell, quite literally</i>
<i>As soon I heard HRH rabbit on about zero CO2 and renewables saving the planet I lost interest. However, some of the concepts are sensible provided they avoid a totalitarian socialist or communist outcome.</i>
<i>Global disgusting corporate communism, plain and simple.</i>
<i>Because 100 million killed in all previous attempts were just the beginning.</i>
<i>People behind this world forum are mostly atheists. they are talking communist Karl Marx idea of eutopia - controlling people, promote worldwide communism by blending it with capitalism. kill small businesses, torn apart families and make themselves as ~god! [...]</i>

Among the comments that fear that “The Great Reset” will introduce socialism into Western society, which was 119 in total, there is not a number of co-occurrences with other themes. As shown in the following table, only the theme of anti-globalism appears in the considerable number of comments alongside the sentiment of fear of socialism; that is, in more than ten instances. The appearance of two themes in the same group of comments points to the contextual displacement of socialism into the realm of globalized capitalism, where the two are equated as part of the same political endeavor. Using the threat of communism in such a way—as a grand omnipresent and incredibly powerful conspiracy—can be traced back to the Cold War. Since then, the evocation of the “communist conspiracy” was often used by the Christian Right or Tea Party in the United States to denounce tendencies in politics and culture that conservative groups deemed undesirable (Berlet 2012). Nowadays, similarly, the accusations of “Cultural Marxism,” waged primarily against identity politics and studies related to it in Western universities, are used by the right to externalize the causes of the “ethical disintegration” (Žižek 2020a, 16).

Fascism is another label very often used to designate the future social order that the authors of YouTube comments find unacceptable. The analyzed comments that mention fascism include the accusations of a violent takeover of power, violence against the population, and complete domination. The German nationality of Klaus Schwab and his accent are referred to often to advance this point. Moreover, there is a number of comments that merge fascism and socialism into one concept; they directly accuse the powerful of trying to implement both systems in a way that would make them compatible. The following comment is an example of one that evokes both communism and fascism:

“Globalist Neo-Communists. Best place for these monsters is 6 feet under. No better than Hitler.” Other examples of comments that fear the threat of fascism in “The Great Reset” agenda are presented in Table 4.50.

Table 4.49 The Co-occurrence between the Fear of Socialism and Other Themes in the Analysis

THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
Anti-globalism	13
Anti-elitism	7
Popular uprising	6
Defending freedom	5
Society and individuals are being controlled	5
Fear of totalitarianism	5
Religious motifs	5
WEF has no democratic mandate	5

Table 4.50 YouTube Comments That Express Fear of Fascism

<i>Here's the nazi's spreading lie after lie after lie.</i>
<i>This reset will kill millions of people all over the world. We the people will lose everything including our homes, our countries and our freedom.</i>
<i>They use this piss poor virus as an excuse to take everything you own.</i>
<i>Just what we need - a German bringing National Socializm to the Fatherland. 4th Reich?</i>
<i>These condescending technocrats really illustrate the banality of evil. They are like a bunch of cartoon Nazis.</i>

And finally, the YouTube comments discuss the potential return of the feudal regime. This is another reference to the claim that, in the future, people will own nothing and be happy, which is attributed to the essay by Danish politician Ida Auken and cited often by the WEF (Auken 2016). The fear expressed in the comments is that people will have no ownership of things in the future and will depend on the will of the wealthiest to get access to goods and services. Such prospects for future material conditions are based on the tendencies in the contemporary economy, in which renting, instead of owning, and subscription to services become ever more important for everyday life (Christophers 2020).

Table 4.51 YouTube Comments That Express Fear of Feudalism

<i>We'll own nothing but you still get to own things? This is basically a return to the feudal system. History shows what happens to totalitarians and tyrants. You best hope that when you destroy the economy of the world, you put all the rope and lamp post manufacturers out of business.</i>
<i>control... control... control"" Beware of this kind of people. They will take away your freedom, even saying ""you will own nothing"" and you should happy about it.</i>
<i>[...] I feel this is all because they want to own all assets themselves and create a feudal system where they rule and everyone lives under them and serves them because the public won't own any real assets or precious metals they will have to lease everything from the government. [...]</i>

The comments seem inclined to conflate or strip of meaning the terms that they use to designate current social relations. It should be noted that the move towards renting in today’s economy is an actual development; however, rather than the return to some pre-capitalist state of ownership, it is a direct result of socioeconomic forces at play in late-capitalism (Morozov 2022). What is more, the wealthy elites associated with the WEF are seen in the comments as the enemy of capitalism and the free market; that is, as representing some fully different ideology than that of liberal economic relations (Table 4.52).

Table 4.52 YouTube Comments That See Elites as Enemies of Capitalism

<i>You will own nothing and you will be happy"" they want to destroy private property, small businesses, and capitalism and create global communism, the politicians and the elites will live like kings in palaces and mansions and everyone else will be their slaves. A new dark era for humanity is coming.</i>
<i>No one voted for you people to control the rest of us. You can take your Globalistic/NWO "Great Reset" and shove off. We know it's a disgusting attack on capitalism, basic freedoms, private property, and the middle class.</i>
<i>How about less government involvement as a solution. And perhaps mention getting rid of the Federal reserve. Oh wait, why not bring back free market capitalism...you know from the bottom up not from the top down. Klaus saying, "Stakeholder Capitalism" makes me feel concerned. The government is way too involved. Haven't they done enough damage? Why call for more control and more government? Makes no sense to me.</i>

In most cases, YouTube users that reject “The Great Reset” assume that the current state of capitalism has features of some past regimes or use the denominations of those past regimes in a way that is loosely delineated, inconsistent, vague, or inaccurate. Like the tendency discussed in subchapter 5.4.2 concerning the use of the word “fascism” in today’s public discourse, the terms “totalitarianism,” “socialism” or “communism,” “fascism,” and “feudalism,” in the context of the current study come to express little more than some tendency in society, economy, and politics that is strongly disliked. Things such as the increasing strengthening of monopolies, the weakening of democratic representation, and the new models of international governance and technocracy are not contextualized within present socio-political circumstances but are discursively displaced into some distant or past regime, as if such a move would allow one to avoid confronting those undesired developments.

e. Overpopulation control

A segment of YouTube users accuses “The Great Reset” agenda of being a plan for controlling the population number on Earth. The main presumption is that the current growth of the population is unsustainable in the long run concerning the economy, food

manufacturing, resource depletion, and similar. Therefore, the wealthy, hidden from the public eye, developed mechanisms to restrict the number of people on the planet.

The removal of the world’s population or restricting procreation is seen as necessary for different objectives of the elites. First, the WEF would have to get rid of all those who oppose their radical plans, those who would require care, who contaminate, or to maintain some level of economic prosperity. The following table contains some examples of the comments which discuss the depopulation theory.

Table 4.53 YouTube Comments That Discus the Overpopulation Control

<p><i>Listen carefully first they say, "net ZERO carbon emissions". Then they say, "NEGATIVE carbon emissions". This is not attainable without a MAJOR world depopulation. Meaning they plan to kill the majority of the world's population. They want to tighten their control on the world. These are some very sick very evil people. Investigate id2020 the beast system spoken of in Revelations. Agenda 21 Agenda 2030 Look into the sterilizations caused by Bill Gates vaccines. Very sick stuff here!</i></p>
<p><i>CovID 19, the Great Reset. Are these scumbags telling us openly that the Scamdemic is there to perform this ""Great"" Reset and bring us all into slavery?! Depopulate the elderly, the poor, the sick...stick with the 500million as per the Georgia Stones and have total control over them! And the idiots in police and army are helping them with this...once they get rid of us, they'll get rid of them too! This is a pure extermination of about 80% of humans on this planet! Pure evil!</i></p>
<p><i>The only way for a global reset to work is a lot of people have to die. The question is have you figured out how many? This is not a rant but a fair and serious question. The objectives can't be met with the current population of the world.</i></p>
<p><i>These people are clearly some of the most evil people on the face of the entire planet. This has depopulation written all over it. Even Michael Moore pointed out the depopulation agenda. The central banks have robbed from the middle class making them poor and made the wealthy even wealthier. The FED, ECB, etc handing out money to the global elites.</i></p>

The ideas concerning the excessive growth of the population can be traced back to the writings of Thomas Robert Malthus, who in the 18th century claimed that the development of supplies and resources does not follow the rapid pace of the increase of the population on Earth, potentially leading to a form of catastrophe (Malthus 1798). Malthus’s writings inspired many schools of thought and movements in history to develop the idea of overpopulation further (see: Dolan 2000).

However, it is only in the highly mediatized society that the fears of violent population control widely and rapidly proliferate as part of the conspiracy theory repertoire. The instances of recent widespread population control fears include the accusations waged against Bill Gates and his vaccine and disease-related activities in several African countries (Joyce 2020) and the circulation of narratives about the outbreak of the Zika virus (S. S. D. Mitchell 2019). More recently, the appearance of the Sars-CoV-2 virus and the subsequent pandemic led some people to think that the virus itself was engineered to reduce the number of people in certain demographics (Jennings et al.

2021, 6) or that the vaccine against the virus is a means to induce infertility (Bíró-Nagy and Szászi 2023, 194).

The analyzed YouTube comments follow that thread of ideas. They express serious fear for the faith of humanity, as they assume that those who have power are ruthless in their intentions and would go as far as to cause death on such a large, global scale or deliberately provoke mass sterilization. The powerful ones are seen as social engineers who have the means to construct the global society in a way they consider the most appropriate and, at the same time, face no obstacles or contemplate ethical considerations in their efforts.

f. Technology and Microchips

And finally, the analyzed textual units discuss the potential technological developments that can have a strong negative effect on the life of humans. The range of themes that are associated with the adverse influence that the “digital revolution” can have on humans is wide and will be elaborated on next.

The fears concerning technology also include some contemplation of the technology that we have at the moment. In this case, we are facing technology that can cause mental distress among the young or be used to trace people under the excuse of a serious threat. Other comments go further and imagine the future forms of technology that are more violent. These include digital tools, artificial intelligence, and other forms of technology that create mind slaves, direct human behavior, monitor thoughts, control directly people’s finances, or reshape the meaning of being human to advance forms of transhumanism. Table 4.54 contains an example of such comments.

Table 4.54 YouTube Comments That Express Discontent with New Technologies

<i>It's already happening! This necessary digital infrastructure for students is already having a negative impact on students. They are developing social disorders in the form of depression & anxiety as a result of no face to face schooling.</i>
<i>The fact that they want to use technology to transform us all into hive minded slaves at a global scale is possibly the most disturbing part about all of this, I have no respect for that type of behaviour at all</i>
<i>Covi pass is the future lady's and gents biometric security systems made with artificial intelligence ! That's us on the grid now !! Covid 19 was a trigger !! Problem , reaction , solution ! We are in world war 3 against us and out freedom</i>
<i>Actually they are right in some ways. Artificial Intelligence will be like God. They need complete control of it Period. These robots can run & fly. They can create bugs that you can't see that spy on you. Hopefully we can figure out a way to peacefully live with technology & still be happy. AI can also be used to steal money so we might need a universal pay out system. Are whole life will change.</i>
<i>[...] These are only the necessary conditions for the real plan, and this plan is perfectly described in only one word that anyone can research: Transhumanism! The rise of cyb-orgs. The transformation of the elite into Nietzsche's superhuman and the transformation of the common people into mindless, slavish labor creatures. THAT is the real intention!</i>

However, the comments give special attention to the question of microchips. Microchip, often used in the manufacturing of technological devices, is “a unit of integrated circuitry that is manufactured at a microscopic scale using a semiconductor material, such as silicon or, to a lesser degree, germanium.” (Sheldon 2022) The exceptionally small size of chips causes concern, according to the YouTube comments, because of the possibility of their undetectable presence in things that get in contact with humans (e.g., vaccines). The reason for the implementation of microchips is similar to the one that concerns technology at large, for the powerful to gain complete control over people and extract many benefits from that endeavor.

Table 4.55 YouTube Comments That Discuss Microchips

<i>Unhinged transhumanist garbage. No I don't want a chip, no I don't want my brain mined, no I do not want a vaccine, no I do not want my entire life controlled by AI.</i>
<i>Cutting trees down everywhere making way for 5g.and nano chip. To control us. Corona HOAX is the excuse for all of this And the keynote address for the Great Reset summit will be held by the CEO of Chipsafer Inc., a company that creates *microchips for cattle*, to monitor and control their behaviour, look for anomalies, and "prevent disease".</i>
<i>Yes, I know the above sounds like a bad joke. Sadly, it's not.</i>

The novel forms of technology caused suspicion in previous epochs in history when they were being introduced (for instance, there has been some concern about new forms of technology causing the increase in joblessness; Spiezia and Vivarelli 2002, 101); here however, the developments in the digital realm are interpreted in the relation to other important political ideas and anxieties. The accelerated development of technology is not seen by those who reject “The Great Reset” on YouTube as an objective process that follows some logic of its own, but as one that is defined, incentivized, and employed by the powerful clique for specific gains and goals. The concerns are placed in the context of the existing broad public debate on the dangers of technological developments (such as that of *Surveillance Capitalism*, see: Zuboff 2019) or integrated into the preoccupations concerning the malevolent, hidden structure of power that is believed to rule the contemporary society. In other words, the ideas presented in the comments oscillate between valid concerns about tendencies in contemporary society and the fears of secret conspiracies.

6.6. Enjoyment

The comments construct a binary opposition between good and evil that goes far beyond usual political antagonism. The dislike for the activities of the WEF members and

associates and wealthy, powerful individuals in general, is transposed to the realm of libidinal imaginaries in which opposite forces clash in a spectacular way. One sort of conflict is a Biblical battle between good and evil, and the other one is the same kind of conflict only within the imagery of popular culture and Hollywood film production. The number of comments that fall into each category is presented in the table below.

Table 4.56 The Overview of the Comments Centered around Enjoyment

THE SUBCHAPTER AND THE THEME	N° OF COMMENTS
Religious motifs <i>Comments that Contain Religious Motifs</i>	79
Hidden and evil intentions <i>Comments that Evoke Themes from Popular Culture</i>	19
TOTAL	98

a. *Religious motifs*

First, the comments discuss the WEF and the opposition to it as a reflection of the conflict between good and evil according to the understanding of the binary by the followers of the Christian faith.

On the one side, the WEF is seen as an embodiment, representative, or in close relation with evil forces. Evil is seen in the form of the devil, Lucifer, Anti-Christ, or Satan. The “Great Reset,” accordingly, is the effectuation of their plans to dominate and bring the Earth to its final days. Jesus Christ is on the opposite side, representing the good. Often, the Rapture is seen as the final event that is getting closer in time, and which will mark the end to the evil intentions of the powerful clique. The following table contains some comments which express these sentiments.

Table 4.57 YouTube Comments That Contain Religious Motifs

<i>Your beast system NWO will be destroyed by our Lord, Jesus Christ. He rose on the third day, He went down to Hades and trampled on the power of the devil. You will not win. Victory belongs to Christ. Repent, or you will be cast down, with your fake god Lucifer.</i>
<i>[...] This is the New World Order, being ruled by the Spirit of the AntiChrist, right up until the actual AntiChrist comes on the World stage. Dear God, do any of you people have ANY IDEA what you are bringing upon not only the world, but, the Judgement you bring upon yourselves? Time is short. Jesus came to tell EVERYONE the good news, that this world is not our real home. Be humble. ASK for forgiveness. LOVE your neighbors as you love yourselves. After Christ comes, you will not get a second chance. God bless you all.</i>
<i>The Bible is true....these satanic 'leaders' are setting the world up for the appearance of the antichrist....trust in the true Christ! The Son of the living God....it's a battle of good vs. evil...</i>
<i>Their father (Devil) made them believe they are Illuminati, and have a blue blood. They are being deceived by their dad and they are deceiving others. I am glad so many people are not falling for it. Let the blinds lead the blinds. Rapture! Jesus is coming!</i>
<i>[...] Do you really want to be completely reliant on a political class that has countless allegations of s@tanism & pedophili@ levelled against them? I have to put @ in the place of a because YouTube uses @lgorythems to automatically delete comments on these topics. Google ""S@tanic ritualistic @abuse"" and see the countless people who have come forward. We are living in a world governed by an elite class of s@tanic ped0philes. Jesus is the only salvation.</i>

The beforementioned type of comments appears in a significant quantity in the analysis. There are other themes that appear alongside the theme of religious motifs; the table of co-occurrences below provides more details on this. The theme that coincides the most with the religious battle of good and evil is the one that imagines a conspiracy of evil forces hidden from the eye of the public. In other words, it is confirmed by the co-occurrences that the conspiring cabal with ignoble pretenses is equated with the evil of Biblical and religious nature.

Table 4.58 The Co-occurrence between Religious Motifs and Other Themes in the Analysis

THE THEME	Nº OF COMMENTS
The powerful are conspiring in secret	15
Society and individuals are being controlled	7
Fear of socialism	5
Anti-elitism	4
Fear of feudalism	4

Bearing in mind the importance that the Christian Faith has had traditionally in the United States, the analyzed comments in question can be situated within the confines of that geographic context where religion continues to influence daily politics in spite of the increasing secularization. The once-imposing political activism of the Christian Right in the United States has been waning and transforming over the decades from the powerful force against issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage to the present weakened opposition to the increasingly permissive and liberal culture in the US (Conger 2019, 18). Among other strategies, this precarious state of religious conservatism made the political group try to reestablish its influence through the support of the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency (Barrett-Fox 2018). Moreover, it is argued that Donald Trump in his public appearance assumed the figure of the Savior akin to the millennialist leaders in the eyes of the more devoted worshipers—the fact which is believed to play an important role in the attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 (B. E. Bond and Neville-Shepard 2023). In short, the intersection of religious imagery, the Christian Right, and the disruptive kind of politics embodied by the new populist movement becomes integrated and intertwined to the degree that makes it also compatible with some claims of conspiratorial nature. This relationship comes on the back of the long history of the New World Order conspiracy theories that relied on millenarian Christianity. Its central theme, “the end-times, when history would reach its climax and

termination, led to scenarios in which a diabolical figure—the Antichrist—would fasten his grip upon the world” (Barkun 2003, 40).

As shown in the results of the analysis, the religious motifs become a useful framework to express dissatisfaction with “The Great Reset” agenda and integrate it into the existing dissenting narratives. Those perceived as opponents, such as the WEF, are not guided by some rational forces (e.g., the increase of capital or pure self-interest) but are motivated by an impetus of profane nature; that of the Lucifer and the Devil. Responding from the position of powerlessness, but nonetheless determined enough to overcome the predicament, is the force of divine righteousness. Framing the conflict between two camps in such a way in the analyzed textual units paints an image of a clash of grand proportions, which is often situated within the central narrative of one of the world’s largest religions and transposed to any context of daily politics.

b. Popular culture

Drawing parallels with religious imagery, the comments discuss the agenda and people behind the WEF in terms borrowed from the lexicon of popular culture. That is, the evil and good forces are discussed in a way that is a clear reference to some pieces of literature or, more often, audio-visual narratives from the US.

First, the comments suggest that “The Great Reset” agenda is similar to a kind of dystopia, which is a genre in fiction that depicts a future society described by the author in a way that the contemporaneous audience would perceive as worse off (Sargent 1994, 9). In the analyzed textual units, there are references, for instance, to the works of literature like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 1949), *Lord of the Flies* (Golding 2001), *The Giver* (Lowry 1993), and the film *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999).

Furthermore, the comments depict Klaus Schwab and other WEF spokespersons as villains from Hollywood movies that revolve around the fight of a virtuous hero against an evil character who is often portrayed in an exaggerated way or humorously. The references are made to the villains from the series of *James Bond* film franchise, Dr. Evil from the *Austin Powers* series, and Dr. Strangelove, from the homonymous movie (Kubrick 1964). A sample of comments that exemplify this tendency is shown below.

Table 4.59 YouTube Comments That Evoke Themes from Popular Culture

<i>Some shit straight out of a movie. But this shits always been in our faces the world is ran by jesuits and masons and the cabal. These people are pure evil.</i>
<i>For such intelligent people the founders of the WEF really need to fire their marketing department. Also who thought it was a good idea that Klaus Shwab become the face of the Great Reset, he looks and sounds like a Bond villain, also seen comparisons to Dr. Strangelove. This is a nightmarish future we will inhabit if there is no resistance. [...]</i>
<i>They must if based Dr Evil off thus world economic forum founder.anyway these are all satanic pan or Janus worshipping P.O.S. [...]</i>
<i>Klaus is like a Bond villain but it's reality . I will control the world...evil laugh...</i>
<i>Yeah you keep reading your BS1984 globalist scripts you left brained wef unconscious half human self serving cowards. It's your eternity you're creating too. [...]</i>
<i>Read Lord of the Flys, Animal Farm and The Giver. Apply them to reality and then help rather than control.</i>
<i>Someone told me that with the "Big Reset" MATRIX creators will continue their games that will be much worse for humanity. The Great Reset is said to result in total surveillance and slavery.</i>

It is clear that the relationship between contemporary dissenting narratives and the products of spectacle cannot be seen as fundamentally disjointed. Popular culture becomes an ever more essential part of the political discourse, as apparent from the paranoid politics of the once highly popular TV series *The X Files* (Carter 1994). The program centered around uncovering supernatural conspiracies and exhibited the type of paranoid politics that “constitute a version of pop postmodernism that deploys suspicion and mistrust to help to map a difficult-to-represent political complexity and heterogeneity” (Kellner 2003, 130). In other words, the reference to products of the entertainment industry becomes an effort to represent in a digestible way some complex issues that occupy human interests today.

In the case of YouTube users who comment on the WEF’s videos, there is a clear tendency to attribute the sense of familiarity to the socio-political reality in a way that vividly demarcates the notions of good and evil. The contemporary dissenting narratives that combine some populist and paranoid messages are, to a certain extent, dependent on the developments of the Western highly mediatized public sphere, which tends to transform the socio-political reality into the spectacle.

6.7. Summary of the Results and Discussion

The analysis of YouTube comments that are critical of “The Great Reset” agenda gives us a glimpse of the popular sentiment concerning the WEF’s plan and its status in the eyes of a specific segment of the population. While the sample size for the qualitative analysis is limited, the results offer space for several clear conclusions.

Table 4.60 The Summary of the Analysis of YouTube Comments.

Theme	Premise
1) DISSATISFACTIONS	
The diminished economic prospects	The diminished consumer power overall and the accumulation of wealth at the top.
Globalism	Globalized economy, supranational institutions, and cosmopolitanism.
Left-Wing and progressive politics	The critique of increased social spending and identity politics.
Politics and technocracy	Doing politics is a dishonest and corrupt endeavor.
2) ANTAGONISMS	
Corporations	Private entities monopolize power and suppress smaller players.
The disreputable WEF	The WEF is hypocritical and claims to be solving the problem that it caused to begin with.
The one percent	The privilege of the one percent is detrimental to the survival of the ninety-nine percent of the population.
The elites	A large group of individuals are signaled as an enemy to mobilize against.
3) IDEAS OF PROGRESS	
Popular resistance	People coming together in a violent uprising against the powerful.
Defending freedom	Fighting against the encroachment on people's freedoms from the top.
Return to the nation-state	The desire for cultural and economic retreat into the confines of one's nation and country.
Politics of Donald Trump	Donald Trump can fight for all the causes listed elsewhere in the chapter.
Return to Nature	Abandoning modern life and living in accordance with nature.
4) INDIVIDUAL AS AUTHORITY	
Individualizing ideology	Large-scale developments resulting from private passions.
5) FEARS	
Control	The body and minds of people are controlled from the top.
Hidden and evil intentions	Whatever the stated intentions are, there is some hidden, malevolent motive behind them.
The big hoax	The pandemic and climate change are lied about, orchestrated, and planned.
The new undesired social order	The return of totalitarianism in general, socialism, fascism, or feudalism.
Overpopulation control	There is a plan among the powerful, through various means, to control the number of people on Earth.
Technology and microchips	The digital revolution opens up a way for the powerful clique to achieve its goals.
6) ENJOYMENT	
Religious motifs	The world is seeing the clash of the demonic forces (the WEF and similar) and good (Jesus Christ).
Popular culture	The evil in the world is represented through imagery borrowed from popular literature or films.

On the side of political ideas—those concerning expressed dissatisfactions, the denunciation of political antagonists, or visions of progress—, the comments defend a wide variety of stances. A significant number of comments, when expressing political ideas, lean towards the populist right. The desire to retreat in the nation-state and the stronger social protections, or the defense of the nation-state and the politics of Donald Trump can all be identified in the current discourse of the right-leaning, populist, or anti-establishment political messages common to 21st-century Western politics. This is, however, not the whole picture. A number of other elements of the analysis express ideas that can appeal across the political spectrum. The frustration over the decaying standard of living, the evocation of “the ninety-nine percent,” the denunciation of wealth inequality in general or some elements of globalization, and advocating for life in accordance with nature are all themes that reveal the complexity of the messages concerning ideological stances as they can be identified as part of some left-leaning movements and ideologies.

The analysis of the political ideas allows us to establish the following binary opposition as the core that structures the political conflict in YouTube comments:

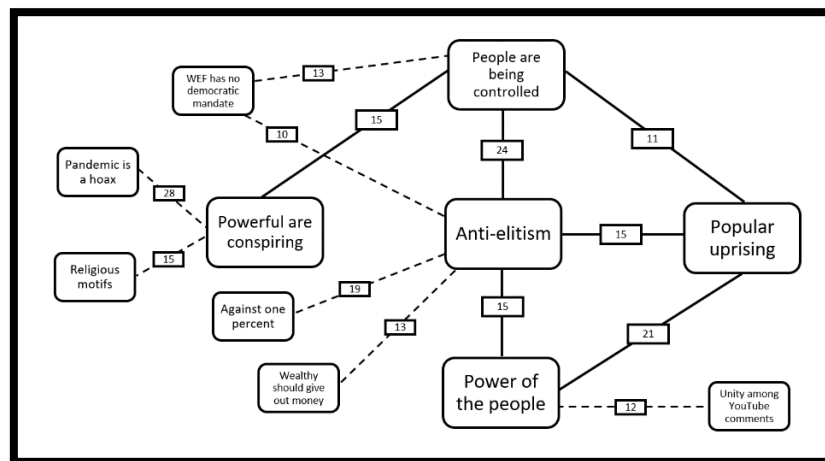
WEF, elites	:	people, other YouTube users
the one percent, wealthy	:	hard-working people, small entrepreneurs
globalists, cosmopolitans	:	patriots, local economy
corruption, seclusion, fragmentation	:	honesty, inclusion, coming together
“woke” politics, the establishment	:	Donald Trump and dissenting leaders

On the other hand, the comments show unity when it comes to elements that respond to specific cultural sensibilities of the liberal society. The results of the analysis point to two main tendencies. The first one is the libidinal investment into the imaginings of evil. Those that are denounced as opponents are presented as guided by private passions or some personal trait intrinsic to them that makes them act in a way that is harmful to society. Otherwise, they are presented as evil in a more picturesque way: as a malevolent force from religious imagery or popular culture.

Additionally, there is a significant presence of fear and paranoia in the comments. In that regard, the comments express elements constitutive of conspiracy theories: there is a hidden authority, and it wants to establish a vaguely defined social order and control people and groups through manipulation. Besides, there is a generalized fear of a plan to depopulate the planet and develop technologies that threaten human existence.

As shown repeatably during the analysis, there are several themes among those analyzed that appear with significant frequency and that establish a pattern of co-occurrences. Figure 4.2 allows us to observe how the analyzed comments create the network that reflects interrelatedness between most discussed themes.

Figure 4.2 The Overview of Co-occurrences



Note. The graphic shows the co-occurrences between themes in the analyses. The number enclosed along the line that connects two themes indicates the number of comments where two themes appear together. Only the values of ten and higher are used for the graphic.

The central theme in the analysis is the negative stance toward elites. These notions of “elites” and “elitism” get employed to describe a range of things, such as cosmopolitanism, the WEF, extreme wealth, left-leaning politics, power in general, and various authorities that interfere in the private life of citizens. According to the number

of co-occurrences, the negative stance towards the elites is strongly related, on the one hand, to the idea of strong political dissent and revolt, and on the other, to the fear of being controlled by some authority and the notion certain individuals are conspiring in secret. This twofold link indicates that the narrative intersects between politics and paranoia, which is a feature that is debilitating at its core. The premise is based on two claims: first, the populace is powerful and will rise against the rulers in massive numbers; and second, the very powerful elites are controlling people and conspiring behind closed doors, making themselves immune from public scrutiny.

These two contradictory stances show that the comments do not imagine contemporary society as a framework through which citizens can, using democratic means, influence public life, policy, and direct political ideas concerning the future. Rather, the comments paint a picture of a world of powerlessness, incapacity, and passivity, where the oppressive forces that decide the destiny of the Earth are so overpowering that the citizen cannot challenge them or even observe them publicly. The desire to resist the power and denounce all the wrongdoings that the authors of comments identify are then coupled with the feelings of hopelessness and grim perspective on power relations evident in the second part of the analysis. In other words, the fears and the spectacular imaginings of evil (e.g., as the Devil or Hollywood villains) come to complement the inexistence of a unifying political project or a vision of a potentially more prosperous society that can be achieved collectively. Such a vision would be necessary to unite all the dissatisfaction and grievances into a clear demand for a new social order. Additionally, a critical understanding of the socio-political elements of collective life, which provides a framework for the understanding of power relations, would need to be formed to precede any collective transformative effort.

V. The Legitimation Strategy behind David Icke's Pandemic-Related Conspiracy Theories

1. Millenarianism and Conspiracy Theories of David Icke

The present chapter examines the elaborate narratives that detail a conspiracy theory related to the health crisis caused by the novel coronavirus. More precisely, it intends to identify the discursive strategies that David Icke, a professional conspiracy theorist whose pandemic-related claims are the object of the analysis, uses to defend the legitimacy of his claims. The objective here is to interpret the narratives through communicative strategies Icke applies to appear plausible, attract large audiences, and communicate broad dissatisfaction with the collective state of affairs. David Icke does not only construct elaborate conspiracy theories of a political kind—such as those that discuss the acts of governments, political bodies, wealth elites, and similar—but includes also references to supernatural, spiritual, and New Age traditions. Consequently, his work relies on references to alternative (i.e., non-official) epistemologies to explain to his audiences why his version of events is more reliable than the official one. In that context, the present study will consider various approaches in the study of epistemologies behind esoteric and conspiratorial claims (Aupers 2012; Aupers and Houtman 2010; Hammer 2004; Harambam 2020; Harambam and Aupers 2018; Robertson 2016; Roszak 1969), while at the same time maintaining the focus on political and ideological elements of conspiratorial explanations.

The strategies of claiming legitimacy have been widely discussed in the case of celebrity conspiracy figures that engage in the construction of *superconspiracies*, which are highly elaborate and totalizing explanations of reality that draw links and connect dots between apparently unrelated occurrences, and create hierarchies between separate conspiracy claims and traditions to expose evil plots (Barkun 2003, 6). One of the most prominent public figures who engage in the construction of such narratives is the British author David Icke. Before becoming one of the most prominent figures in the conspiracy milieu in the early 1990s, Icke had a career in sports as a football player, which was disrupted by a health condition (Icke 1993, 66–67). This turn of events led him to seek other career paths, such as sports journalism at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and political engagement for the British Green Party (Barkun 2003, 103). In the early 1990s, he encountered the book *Mind to Mind* by the British author and spiritual

leader Betty Shine (1989) and went to meet her in person, which for him was a first step toward healing his medical condition and his path toward millenarian spiritualism (Icke 1991, 13). He soon felt the urge to visit Peru and the ancient city of Machu Pichu, where he had an intense spiritual experience that represented the turning point in his life and marked the beginning of his long career in the New Age milieu (Icke 2003, 9–13).

While Icke's first television performance was received with ridicule, his first book, *The Robots' Rebellion: The Story of the Spiritual Renaissance* (1994), launched him into the mainstream of the New Age and conspiracy theory. The book is the first instance in which Icke connects overly powerful and covert secret societies and the ideas of the New Age *sensu stricto*, i.e., the Millenarian vision (Hanegraaff 1996, 98). The Millenarian outlook includes a belief in “a perfect, earthly realm of peace and plenty, without injustice and suffering” achieved through a higher state of awareness (Hanegraaff 1996, 99). Such beliefs can be located within the tradition of the New Age that functions as cultural criticism directed at old dogmas that perceive rationalistic ideologies and religious beliefs as mutually exclusive or opposite (Hanegraaff 1996, 516–17), operating outside of known forms of religious traditions and institutions (Robertson 2016, 41–42).

This merging of conspiracy theories and the Millenarian Tradition present in Icke's teachings was denominated *conspirituality*, which is a concept that describes the claims that (1) a cabal of influential individuals controls society and (2) that humanity is going through a paradigmatic shift of consciousness (Ward and Voas 2011, 104). According to the conspiritual teachings, the grand plot of the evil elites is to keep populations at an extremely low vibrational state through the constant induction of fear, dissatisfaction, and animosity, which would prevent people from moving out of the spiritual prison towards the higher state of consciousness. The beliefs centered around such notions reflect a contemporary form of occultism, which is “a site of cultural experimentation and entrepreneurship as well as of creative consumption, with cultural representations flowing both into and out of popular culture” (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015, 371). The type of stigmatized knowledge “associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism” (Partridge 2004, 68) that slips into the accusations of grand conspiracies is not historically novel. However, it is in the contemporary political context and the light of new technologies and media outlets expressed in novel forms (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015, 371).

Following the great public reception of his initial ideas regarding millenarian conspiracies, Icke subsequently published more than twenty books. The ones that

received considerable attention are the books that detail his theory on the origins of all evil, known as the Reptilian Thesis. As explained in *The Biggest Secret* (Icke 1999) and *Children of the Matrix* (Icke 2002), the secret society made of the most influential individuals are descendants of extraterrestrial reptilians who, through a process of interbreeding acquired human form and “keep humanity in a state of fear and anxiety to feed on these emotions” (Robertson 2013, 35). His vastly popular thesis claiming that the humanoid reptiles today can be found among the Illuminati, The Rothschilds, or the Trilateral Commission was not received warmly by his fellow conspirators, who, according to Icke, cannot abandon the overly materialistic view of reality (Barkun 2003, 106–7). The Reptilian Thesis allows Icke to construct his own theodicy, i.e., the explanation for the existence of evil, which he achieves by displacing the cause of the human predicament from the internal spiritual alienation (as often claimed in the New Age teachings) to the acts of occult powers that conspire to deliberately repress the spiritual awareness of humans (Robertson 2013, 37).

Icke’s style of writing and presenting makes him a more than appropriate subject for the analysis of legitimacy and ideology in his various explanations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Icke is considered to be one of the most “fluent of conspiracist authors, which gives his writings a clarity rarely found in the genre” (Barkun 2003, 167), while his public performances rely on his commending counter-elite charismatic authority (Robertson 2018, 252). Rather than analyzing claims of conspiracy distributed through brief and often incoherent messages, this study explores the elaborate totalizing explanations from an established authority in the field, eloquently presenting their thesis by “connecting the dots” between apparently unrelated large events, utterances, and private histories. That is to be achieved by interpreting Icke’s public appearances on online media outlets in which he is given the space to elaborate his ideas regarding the pandemic. The starting premise of the study is that the attractiveness of the conspiracy theories does not rely on the withdrawal from objective reality into some form of fiction, as often argued (Barkun 2003, 29; Byford 2011, 13), but on their profoundly political and ideological character that reflects wider tendencies in society and culture of late capitalism. The aim is to theorize conspiracy theories not as a phenomenon beyond the social sphere and present historical moment but as an integral part of it or the visible symptom of its internal contradictions.

2. Legitimacy Claims between Alternative Epistemologies and Politics

The current study of audio-visual narratives concerning pandemic-related conspiracy theories focuses on identifying the legitimacy claims evoked by Icke to construct the epistemic defense of his theories. Those strategies can be the ones already discussed in the previous chapter (e.g., by capitalizing on the popular frustration over political corruption, general immiseration, or increased inequalities) and some unique to Icke's field.

Identifying those discursive strategies will be the first step in the analysis and contribute to understanding the allure of paranoid narratives during the systemic crisis. When describing forms of epistemic strategies of millenarian and conspiratorial explanations, David G. Robertson (2016, 46) explains that they

are used to defend and construct the object, and different strategies mobilize different forms of epistemic capital. When an individual cites research or invokes personal experience in an argument to persuade others, they are mobilizing particular epistemic strategies in order to gain epistemic capital within the field. Yet the particular strategies which are acceptable is contingent on the particular field in which the discourse takes place; channeling, for example, may be taken as authoritative in millennial conspiracist discourse but may actually decrease authority in academic discourse. [...] Furthermore, the particular degree to which these various strategies are mobilized will vary significantly according to socio-historical context.

Olav Hamer in *Claiming Knowledge* (2004) proposes the outline of three main epistemic sources for New Age and esoteric teachings at large: (1) the appeal to tradition, mainly through evocations of some native traditions of geographically non-Western and historically distant imaginary utopias; (2) scientism, which is the mere appearance of the scientific method that is often “spiritualized” and “enchanted”; and (3) narratives of experience, including the authority of the direct, first-person access to knowledge or the relationship between various individual third-person accounts. While acknowledging three categories established by Hamer, Robertson adds two additional epistemic sources specific to both the New Age and conspiratorial claims. Those include the synthetic strategy, including the “structural-level analyses through piecing together many smaller pieces of information to reveal the ‘bigger picture’” (Robertson 2016, 51) and channeling—that is, the communication that “takes place telepathically – directly from

mind to mind” (Robertson 2016, 52). However, Jaron Harambam (2020), in his ethnographic study of the conspiratorial milieu, provides an even broader account of legitimation strategies specific to the work of David Icke, which includes: personal experience, tradition, futuristic imaginaries, science, and critical social theory.

For instance, the appeal to experience includes Icke’s dependence on his personal efforts to connect the dots, where he presents himself as an intuitive detective in the elusive reality replete with apparent coincidences, or as an insider with direct knowledge deriving from the early days of his professional career in the deep orders of politics and media (Harambam 2020, 111–12). Furthermore, Icke’s appeal to tradition and futuristic imaginaries reflects the popular rejection of the disenchanting modernity that forecloses the search for meaning and celebrates rationality, efficient bureaucracies, and the definition of objective concepts (Aupers and Houtman 2010, 1). The embrace of non-Western beliefs in the West signals the retraction from a dispassionate world to one that offers new realities and provides meaning to the everyday experience (Partridge 2004, 57–58). As a final epistemic source, Icke draws from scientific and pseudo-scientific sources when they can serve as a support for his claims and constructs a critique of social inequalities by borrowing ideas from critical theory (Harambam 2020, 118–25). As suggested by Robertson (2016, 47), when discussing narratives with such an eclectic claim to legitimacy, it is crucial to make a distinction between epistemic strategies that are widely recognized and valued in the Anglophone world (e.g., science and critical theory), and counter-epistemic sources (channeling, personal experience), that are exclusive to claims of the millenarian and conspiratorial realm and are not taken seriously outside of it. By combining traditions of that many diverse epistemic authorities, Icke becomes a mainstream figure in popular culture and attracts large audiences from many spheres of society, the individuals of different, and often incompatible, identities, occupations, and political affiliations (Harambam 2020, 126).

Following the above-presented scholarship, the analysis of Icke’s pandemic-related conspiracy theories starts by identifying different discursive strategies that serve to defend the legitimacy of expressed claims and assure their popular media appeal. However, the objective of this study is to broaden the analysis by giving a specific focus on why these new forms of counter-epistemic strategies take hold at the specific historical moment and in the delineated socio-political circumstances. The central assumption is that during the systemic crisis that parallels the pandemic, the claims to legitimacy become more reliant on the feelings of political dissatisfaction and the excess of

contradictions caused by the inner limitations of the economic structure. Therefore, besides addressing the “discontent with mainstream societal institutions (i.e., science, politics, religion, media) and their scientific-materialist worldview” (Harambam 2020, 105) in Icke’s public appearances, the study pays close attention to the imaginings of the corrupt establishment, feelings of alienation, the social and political Other, the tyrannical state authority, and similar.

As argued by Fredric Jameson (1988, 349), this contemporary socio-political background that provides the ground for cynicism and distrust is conditioned by the transition from market to globalized monopoly capitalism, leading to “a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience.” The postmodern paranoia is then the result of “a desperate attempt to represent” what Jameson (1988, 356) calls “the total logic of late capital.”

In the critical moment in which the dominant ideology overpromises but underdelivers (e.g. when the belief that the market always produces the best results is countered by the glaring lack of the best results), the contemporary subject reaches for a phantasy in the form of a narrative to restore the primacy of the dominant doctrine. Consequently, the media spectacle appears as a more than suitable means for disseminating and interpreting such frustrations, as it serves as a channel through which social pathologies, anxieties, and hopes are exhibited, and ideological discourses and political positions are circulated (Kellner 2003, 28). Therefore, it is necessary to view Icke’s public performance as a quintessential media spectacle, which is “not a distorted representation of social reality, but the appearance and justification of the actual distortion or perversion of social reality itself” (Russell 2019, 66) which “epitomizes the prevailing model of social life” (Debord 1994, 14).

In short, the claims to legitimacy of the pandemic-related conspiracy theories of David Icke rely equally (1) on the messaging of the socio-political nature and (2) on the modes of expressions that, in this case, are linked to alternative epistemologies common to conspiratorial explanations. In the case of the first, the narratives produced by Icke refer to, on the one hand, the dissatisfactions caused by political corruption and socio-economic circumstances and, on the other, the delineation of trustworthy and untrustworthy authority. In the second case, Icke draws from the authority of individual experience and the knowledge common to New Age and spiritual movements. Unlike the authors from

the previous study, Icke does not make claims of a purely political nature that explicitly advance an agenda of populism or any other political fraction. His claims are, in essence, about the construction of the superconspiracy; for that reason, there will be no separate category that addresses elements of the narratives that reflect fear as an integral element of dissenting narratives since the view of the world as replete with dangers, hidden agendas, and manipulations is present throughout the narrative. In other words, the appeal to political sentiments is secondary in his narratives; it comes to complement his vision of the world rather than represent the starting point for it. The modes of expression that rely on painting the external reality as a dangerous and hostile place is the transversal element of Icke's performances.

3. Methodological Note

The analysis is based on seven video interviews Icke has given since the beginning of the pandemic to prominent online media outlets (Table 5.1). The selected videos were chosen according to the assessment of the popularity and authority of the online platform, bearing in mind the vast presence of authoritative figures in alternative knowledge circles and the audience they attract. Many features inherent to the disputed nature of the analyzed materials impeded the comparative analysis of the impact of the videos: some videos or streaming platforms were being taken down, banned, or have suffered cyber-attacks; some videos exist on several platforms, while others only remain on one. Among the selected sources, LondonReal and Oracle Films represent those that target the widest possible audience, as their content covers topics that exceed conspiracy theories, e.g., cryptocurrencies in the case of LondonReal, or libertarianism, pandemic-related measures, and celebrity interviews (for instance, Eric Clapton and Robert F. Kennedy Jr) in the case of Oracle Films. On the contrary, InfoWars and World Truth Summit (or the platform TCN.Videos that hosts the Summit videos) cover conspiracy theories and related content. The first video interview came out on March 18, 2020, just a few weeks after the first countries in Europe entered the lockdown. The last analyzed video came out on June 27, 2021, finalizing the first part of David Icke's ideas regarding the pandemic. The selected audio-visual content coincides to a certain degree with the central notions from Icke's book *The Answer* (2020a), which contains two chapters dedicated to the pandemic—one detailing the strategies of deception applied to orchestrate and fabricate the pandemic and one about the role of Bill Gates in the whole affair. The analysis follows

the development of Icke’s work up to the publication of the book *Perceptions of a Renegade Mind* (2021a), which came out in September 2021 and is a much more elaborate effort dedicated solely to the pandemic.

Table 5.1 The Analyzed Audio-Visual Content

Platform	Interviewer	Date	Title of the Video	Length in minutes
LondonReal	Brian Rose	18.03.2020.	“The truth behind the coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19 lockdown & the economic crash”	119
LondonReal	Brian Rose	06.04.2020.	“The coronavirus conspiracy: How COVID-19 will seize your rights & destroy our economy”	153
InfoWars	Alex Jones	25.11.2020.	“David Icke exposes The Great Reset with Alex Jones”	74
TCN.Video	Simone Smith	02.02.2021.	“David Icke – The Awakening World Truth Summit”	91
TCN.Video	Simone Smith	06.03.2021.	“David Icke – The Awakening Part 2”	85
Oracle Films	N/A	21.05.2021.	“David Icke Talks To Oracle Films About The Protest Movement”	32
TCN.Video	Simone Smith	27.06.2021.	“David Icke – Full Interview The Awakening 3”	77

The study of pandemic-related conspiracy theories includes the qualitative analysis of approximately ten hours of audio-visual content based on iterative coding, which implies the combination of top-down and bottom-up imposition of codes (Bergman 2010, 391). That means that the study started with the focus common to the dissertation as a whole: political claims (in this case, targeting dissatisfaction concerning socio-economic arrangements) and modes of expression (individual epistemologies). Within those wider categories, the textual units were grouped according to the shared themes. The codes used in the analysis refer to separate claims (102 in total) that Icke makes in an effort to defend the plausibility of his ideas. The claims made by Icke without a clear justification as to why the audience should believe in them have not been considered for the analysis. The selected utterances are the previously discussed strategies of defending legitimacy that the authors in the conspiracy or New Age milieu use on a general basis (e.g., Hammer 2004; Robertson 2016; Harambam 2020).

The coded utterances that form sufficiently clear patterns when contrasted and compared are then used to arrive at coherent interpretations, form broader interpretative categories, and relate them to previously elaborated theory. The interpretative categories defined after contrasting codes serve to structure the presentation of results and the subsequent chapters, which are: for the claims that appeal to political sentiments, (1) the critique of power, (2) appeal to social critical theory, and (3) the delineation of accepted authority; and for the modes of expression, (4) perception and experience, and (5) the source as the evidence.

Table 5.2 The broader interpretive categories and the codes they include

<p>POLITICAL ELEMENTS:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The critique of power: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The rejection of establishment; b. Imaginings of totalitarianism; c. The populist discourse (<i>us versus them</i>); d. Evil villains. 2) Appeal to social critical theory: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The critique of inequality; b. Manipulation; c. The politics of social and personal control. 3) The delineation of accepted authority: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The trustworthy experts; b. The unreliable experts. <p>MODES OF EXPRESSION:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4) Perception and experience: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Inner vs. outer reality; b. Personal anecdotes; c. The primacy of the individual. 5) The source as the evidence: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Predictions; b. Family relations of key actors; c. The evidence of the agenda.
--

4. The Pandemic According to David Icke

This chapter summarizes central ideas in the selected public performances of Icke throughout the pandemic and the overview of each audio-visual recording discussed in this chapter. The summary is provided for readers to be able to follow and contextualize the results of the analysis.

The first video interview (Icke 2020b) was hosted by Brian Rose, a podcaster and mayoral candidate in 2021 for London, on the online media platform London Real and generated 1,479,621 views and more than 1,000 user comments. In that interview, the host positions himself as Icke's challenger, showing some skepticism towards Icke's claims and expressing little consideration for conspiracy theories. At this point in the interview, it is not clear what Icke's position is on the existence of the virus. For instance, he claims that he and his son, like most people, had a mild case even before the virus appeared in China. Therefore, there is no emergency since only immunocompromised should be cared for in hospitals. However, he is open to the possibility that a more potent strain is causing all the deaths, and he does not seem to deny the seriousness of the situation in Italy and Iran.

That all changed in the second interview (Icke 2020c), with about double the views and eight times more comments than the first one. This interview was released in audio on several podcast platforms, such as Spotify, but was subsequently taken down (Shead 2020). This interview has a very clear structure; Icke is allowed to elaborate his ideas almost uninterrupted in an orderly manner for more than two hours and with full assistance from the host, Brian Rose. This time, only nineteen days after the first interview, Icke starts with the claim that “there is no COVID-19—it does not exist,” there is only a perception of it (Icke 2020c, 4:38). He points to the case of China, where people got diagnosed only based on symptoms because the RT-PCR test does not detect COVID-19 but some kinds of genetic material that can cause various illnesses, which are all then reported as a COVID-19 case. In other words, the test amplifies the genetic materials to such an extent that, as Icke claims, any healthy person would test positive. What the RT-PCR detects are exosomes, the substances released in our body when it is in contact with toxins. Stress, fear, and electromagnetic fields are all sources of toxins that can cause the release of exosomes, and when observed under the microscope, the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) appears precisely the same. Therefore, Icke concludes, a natural immune response is framed as COVID-19.

Towards the end of the interview, Icke relates the theory of exosomes to the appearance of 5G technology. According to him, there has been a coinciding pandemic in every instance in history that a new form of technological radiation was introduced. That is what happens with 5G; the waves released by the novel technology poison human cells, which, as a consequence, release exosomes. Contact with the 5G leads to a state of bodily malaise—when “cooking” in the 60 gigahertz radiation from the 5G towers and satellites (installed by Elon Musk around the Earth), the human body loses oxygen. Icke explains that the lockdowns here play a crucial role—while people are kept indoors, the 5G towers are being installed (even in proximity to schools and hospitals) day and night, as it is deemed essential work. The ultimate goal is to create a sub-reality known as a smart grid, to which the human mind will be connected via artificial intelligence and with the help of nanobot microchips inserted in the human body through vaccinations. China has successfully and quickly gone through that process, so the curve is flattening, lockdowns are over, and people are free to move but are heavily controlled.

Figure 5.1 Film Still of the Interview between Brian Rose and David Icke



Note. Source: David Icke (2020c) 2020c. The coronavirus conspiracy: How COVID-19 will seize your rights & destroy our economy. Interview by Brian Rose. London Real.

In the proceeding interviews, Icke remains the defender of his theory presented in the second appearance in London Real but adds new arguments in every video. He is refreshing his conspiratorial repertoire and keeping the audience interested. Other interviews are less structured and more reliant on the interventions of the interviewer; therefore, Icke introduces new elements and details to the theory according to the focus of each host. The third appearance (Icke 2020d) happened on one of the most popular conspiracy media outlets, *InfoWars*, hosted by Alex Jones. Unlike Rose and other hosts, Jones interrupts Icke very often, does not allow him to speak freely for a significant amount of time, but emphasizes that his audience demands to hear from David Icke at least once a month. Jones often points out that Icke predicted many of the things happening now long ago. Icke sounds the least coherent and authoritative in this appearance; for instance, he is encouraged by Jones to comment on the United States elections of 2020, but he does not seem to have an elaborate opinion and just comments on how easy it is to rig electronic voting. Both discuss The Great Reset agenda of the World Economic Forum (WEF) that proposes new directions of development for the post-pandemic society. For them, the WEF's agenda is like a manifesto of conspiracies—the elites are now admitting it all openly. Jones additionally points out that the WEF's book *The Great Reset* (Schwab and Malleret 2020) could have been written by Icke – the only difference is that Icke would have written it as a serious warning, while the WEF talks about it as a good thing and opportunity.

Later, Icke participated in three online conferences hosted by the US-based online platform, Awakening: World Truth Summit. The website suffered a cyber-attack at one

moment during the research, was recovered under the name Expose The Great Reset, and the videos were moved to a different site. After that, however, the website was brought down once again. In the videos, Icke is interviewed by Simon Smith from Awakening, who on every occasion shows great appreciation for Icke and even considers him a very close friend, which is a sentiment echoed by Icke. The first interview (Icke 2021b) reportedly generated one million views in just eight hours, and the host, like those mentioned earlier, explains that Icke attracted much attention from the viewers and that they received a significant amount of questions for him. Smith explains that the reason for this interview is to make people think critically, to stop acquiescing, and to resist oppression. In it, Icke provides details about the secret cult behind the pandemic. For instance, he explains that it is a global network that knows no borders (unlike regular citizens)—it is present in the United Kingdom (“for historical reasons”), Italy (or the Vatican, to be more precise), the United States (in massive numbers), and increasingly in China. Icke emphasizes the role and importance of China in the new developments of the cult, as the whole world starts to follow “the Chinese model of society.”

Figure 5.2 Film Still of the Interview between Simone Smith and David Icke



Note. Source: David Icke (2021b). *The Awakening World Truth Summit with David Icke*. Interview by Simone Smith. TCN.Video. <https://tcn.video/david-icke-the-awakening-world-truth-summit/>.

In the second interview with Smith (Icke 2021c), Icke discusses spiritualism and his personal journey towards enlightenment, while pandemic-related questions play a minor role. Besides his journey, Icke comments briefly on the online censorship he is facing—his videos are being deleted, and he is banned from many platforms. Finally, the topics discussed in the first and second interviews merge in the third encounter between Smith and Icke (2021e). They discuss how to maintain the state of spirituality and higher

awareness in these traumatic circumstances and how to keep our humanity safe from tyrannical authority.

The final interview (Icke 2021d) was made by Oracle Films, an online audio-visual production from the United Kingdom dedicated to free speech, with several anti-lockdown videos. In this instance, the audience does not see nor hear the interviewer since the focus is only on Icke and his opinion on the anti-lockdown protests in London. Before moving to the main topic of the video, Icke elaborates for the first time the Depopulation Theory in the context of the pandemic, which is a type of conspiracy theory that claims that the primary goal of the secret cabal is to control human reproduction and reduce the number of inhabitants. Icke focuses on the sterilization and altering of the human body with synthetic materials, which he claims is evident in the already decreasing sperm count in the West. The pandemic serves as a backdrop to this plan, which is why he praises people on the streets of London who are protesting social distancing measures—they are present in such large numbers that the police cannot do anything. According to Icke, deciding not to acquiesce to oppressive measures is the crucial and necessary step to end the domination of the elite cult.

5. Legitimacy and Political Claims

This subchapter provides details on the analysis of political elements in the pandemic-related claims made by David Icke. The analysis showed that Icke defends his theories concerning the secret network of powerful and all-controlling elites by incorporating the widespread negative sentiments concerning the powerful, the critique of socio-economic injustice that resembles social critical theory, and the delineation of the trustworthy and untrustworthy authority. They will be explained below in detail.

5.1. The Critique of Power

Speaking truth to the perceived omnipotent, ruthless authority as a prevailing political sentiment epitomizes the culture that no longer believes that social life can be reshaped in any significant way. The sentiment of victimhood and powerlessness is thus the most appropriate element of subjectivity for late capitalism; since almost all big decisions about the collective affairs are out of the question for a debate or even some modest changes, the only thing that is left is to make ethical accusations against the

perceived adversary (see Mouffe 2005, 72–76). The claims of victimhood and powerlessness form an integral part of contemporary political communication, not just for the right-wing populist wing but also across the political spectrum. The most notable example is that of the United States, where Donald Trump’s accusations of the deep state plots against him (Horwitz 2021, 476–78) mirror claims made by the opposite party that Hillary Clinton’s electoral loss in 2016 was subject to a Russian interference (Jutel 2017, 6–8). That is, despite all their power, influence, endorsements from the highest echelons of society, substantial campaign funds, and unlimited access to media that effectively shape public opinion, both political leaders repeatedly expressed feelings of powerlessness in front of some perceived powerful, authoritative figure without much pushback from their respective audiences and followers. This specific form of political paranoia and populism that includes constructing the phantasmagoric, powerful Other can be a solid source of legitimacy for a conspiracy theory, as it plays on feelings that already abound in the public sphere in Western nations.

In that context, populist sentiments and conspiracy theories coincide in their fundamental denunciation of specific elite authority, which effectively provides the concrete form for unarticulated political frustrations (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay 2017, 424). However, unlike conspiracy theories, populism functions first and foremost as a political project, and it is meant to mobilize the masses for a specific purpose under the promise of giving back the power to the people, whose authentic voice is thus the populist leader (Torre 2018, 2). In doing so, the populist discourse relies on the designation of the common enemy and the undermined authority of the establishment, which is framed as utterly corrupt and, therefore, illegitimate. Conspiracy theories do something similar; they accuse the power and the establishment of colluding behind closed doors against the general interest of the public (Coady 2006, 3). While both phenomena are grounded on a binary opposition between “us and them,” the two are not to be equated, as populism represents a much broader phenomenon that may or may not integrate conspiratorial accusations to “offer a specific explanation as to why the elites act against the interests of the people” (Bergmann and Butter 2020, 334). In the case of the pandemic, while conspiracy theories function independently from partisan identification, they overlap with general populist attitudes that “decrease trust in political institutions [...] as well as trust in science and research” (Eberl, Huber, and Greussing 2021, 280).

Icke traditionally elaborated his idea regarding the unrestrained power of the elites in his writings concerning the Reptilian Thesis, which explains the origins of evil regarding the most powerful and wealthy individuals in history. Although reptilians were not mentioned even once in the analyzed audio-video content, Icke still addresses the question of power, which appears in different contours in the context of the pandemic. The discursive construction of evil in Icke's speeches will be elaborated in detail in the following lines. The objective here is not to position his utterances as subordinate or superior to a specific populist project but to understand it as a narrative that is in communication with populist sentiments concerning the elites and structures of power in the context of the pandemic and the related socio-economic developments.

a. The Death Cult

Icke denominates the sinister elites as The Cult, which refers to a group of influential individuals, with the most notable representative in the context of the pandemic being Bill Gates and Elon Musk, who are plotting to establish a centralized, global, fascist, communist, Orwellian dictatorship based on technocratic values and principles (Icke 2021d, 15:22). The Death Cult existed through centuries and generations and was dedicated to skewing the knowledge about reality and keeping the general public in the dark (Icke 2021b, 20:08). The origin of the evil nature of The Cult is not as detailed and elaborate as it was in the Reptilian Thesis, which included explicit references to the writings of the Zulu author and traditional healer Credo Mutwa and the controversial historian Zecharia Sitchin (Robertson 2013, 35). When examining Icke's entire argument in his pandemic-related interventions, he appears less fluent than in his previous work since his position oscillates between the following two: (1) The Cult does what it does for the innermost perverted pleasure it finds in afflicting pain to others, and (2) The Cult has a proto-political goal that is clear and identifiable. For example, Icke elaborates in the following quote a highly individualistic and psychological explanation of evil intentions of the elites:

I admit it, I am a COVID denier and I am a human-caused climate change denier. And I'm a denier that anyone but psychopath is running the whole show. I mean, this is one of the things that people need to grasp... And I do understand why it's so hard for them. And that is the scale of evil that's behind this. I define evil as the absence of love and that means the absence of empathy, the absence of compassion and the absence of any caring whatsoever about how you impact on other people. Once you've deleted

empathy and you've deleted compassion—and they are the top two traits of psychopaths, according to the official list of traits—then you've deleted any emotional consequence for the horrors you inflict on other people. Empathy, compassion is the failsafe mechanism of human behavior. They don't have that. (Icke 2021d, 30:07)

Such an explanation is more general and can appeal to many people for whom the Reptilian Thesis might appear as a radical excursion into science fiction. In this case, the evil instinct resides in psychopathological personality traits and the fundamental lack of empathy. That is the case with Elon Musk, whom Icke accuses of putting up tens of thousands of satellites around the Earth to beam 5G rays, which does not only make him a psychopath, as Icke affirms, “That’s not enough, this man is a super-psychopath” (Icke 2020c, 59:53). All the mayhem, suffering, and chaos we see during the pandemic is only possible due to the emotional distance elites establish towards ordinary people—“they are not cold, they are solid ice” (Icke 2020d, 1:03:45). According to this logic, personal enrichment or hoarding of power is not the end goal of oligarchs but just a side-effect of their internal moral and psychological corruption.

Contrary to this, The Cult is accused in other instances of wanting to suspend democracy and transform our current society to the one “that would make George Orwell bloody wince” (Icke 2020b, 36:05), by means of the state of exception and lockdowns (Icke 2020c, 1:34:51). Icke also suspects that the cabal decided to fuse two “hoaxes,” that of climate change and the pandemic, as a pretext to impose “The Great Reset” (Icke 2021d, 28:56) or the “technocratic AI-controlled [artificial intelligence, *author’s note*] tyranny” (Icke 2020b, 38:56). In another instance, The Cult is accused of using the pandemic to enforce mass sterilization to end the current form of procreation (Icke 2020d, 16:55). Unlike the theory of the emotional and psychological origins of evil, these claims explain that The Cult is motivated by a specific shared vision of what the society should look like, which could include principles described as fascistic, communist, tyrannical, or, the most discussed of all, technocratic.

Icke argues that communism and fascism in The Cult's agenda are the same things—both are tyrannies based on the centralization of power in the hands of the few, only differing in how they are rolled out. However, they are both under the umbrella of global technocracy, a society not controlled by elected politicians but by bureaucrats, scientists, experts, engineers, and technocrats (Icke 2020c, 1:56:37; 2020b, 5:51). Following this notion, technocracy is identified as a central element of the World

Government that is slowly being established by The Cult, which would be rolled out via the centralization of power at an international level, as Icke explains:

The world government would dictate to every community on the planet; they want a world army—this is the expansion of NATO [...]—to impose the will of The World Government. They want a World Central Bank—the European Central Bank is a stepping stone to that—which would dictate and control or finance a world currency, which would not be money, cash money, physical money, if you like, but a purely one world, electronic currency, digital currency. I first said this was the plan in 1990 and in a book in 1993. (Icke 2021b, 24:42)

Expanding on this thought even further, Icke claims that “this world government is not meant to be elected. They are appointees, think the European Commission. That's the basic blueprint of it because technocracies do not do democracy” (Icke 2020b, 1:10:27). Moreover, The Cult loves when the legitimacy of politics gets undermined, when politicians appear incompetent and corrupt, “because on one level it is demolishing trust of the public in the democratic process, and what's basically happening [...] with this coronavirus, if you think about it, is that—the democratic process has been suspended” (Icke 2020b, 1:11:17). As a result, The Cult can establish itself as a permanent government behind the apparent authority and is never questioned.

Overall, The Cult is imagined both as a group of individuals with their emotional and psychological pathologies, who together cause great suffering to the public, and as a proto-political entity with clear collective aspirations. The inclination of The Cult to a specific form of authoritarianism includes the conflation of historically distinct socio-political projects, such as communism and fascism. However, Icke shows a certain level of political knowledge, as he addresses correctly the tension between, on the one hand, democratic principles and, on the other, technocracy and the supranational orders that celebrate the post-political governance and advance instrumental rationality at the expense of popular sovereignty (as discussed in Mouffe 2005; Rancière 2004).

b. The Web and the Spider

The Cult is not a single actor that is alone in its endeavor, as it operates through secret and semi-secret societies like the Bilderberg Group, which forms a network that “plays out into the public arena, through governments and government agencies and banking systems and corporations, and Silicon Valley” (Icke 2020d, 20:45). All the agents and members of the secret cabal can be identified in their strategically coordinated

actions, which Icke finds in the censorship that Silicon Valley social networks are doing in the name of the World Health Organization (WHO). Facebook, Google, YouTube, and Twitter do not allow any alternative views on the pandemic to be discussed on their platforms by silencing Icke, among other controversial figures. He points out that Facebook and Google said that they would promote the view of the WHO cost-free while silencing all the dissenting voices, while YouTube promised to use artificial intelligence to delete inappropriate videos (Icke 2020b, 33:24). Therefore, while they appear unrelated to the general public, all the facets of The Cult are working together—“directed by the spider at the center, they are all working to the same end” (Icke 2020d, 26:19). However, the true nature of that “spider” at the center of the web is quite ambiguous.

Icke often implies that there is someone behind the visible authority, hidden levels of power behind the obvious one. For instance, Icke accuses politicians of being only puppets and not the ones with the actual power, which he expresses through a meme he published on his personal website (Figure 5.3). He explains, “You've got the psychopaths in the background who are orchestrating it, and then you've got the clueless”—that is, the political leaders (Icke 2020c, 48:55). He provides the example of the political elites in the United States,

But the permanent government is always there. This is The Cult controlling the government via secret societies, through the financial system, through the intelligence agencies, through the operations of the military, through government administration, and what has become known now as the deep state... And that is always there. George Bush comes—Republican, Obama comes—Democrat, Trump comes—Republican. Come-gone, come-gone, permanent government is always there, same in this country [the United Kingdom, *author's note*], same everywhere. (Icke 2020b, 59:00)

At a different point, Icke suggests that the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, is in the same position—it is not Johnson who is calling the shots, but his advisors and it is evident to the observer that “the shadows are driving the policy” (Icke 2020c, 50:04). One such master from the shadows is Melanie Dawes, the British Office of Communication chief executive. She does not allow any public discussion in the media regarding the 5G and COVID-19, which, according to Icke, is unacceptable censorship for which Dawes will have to be called to account once the crisis is over (Icke 2020c, 1:12:22). Icke even accuses Dawes of having a direct interest in the matter—the fact that she is so engaged in censoring views on 5G reveals that the Office of Communication is

directly involved in the rollout of 5G in the United Kingdom. It is, then, in their interest to censor all the dissenting voices, including Icke's (Icke 2020c, 1:14:50).

Figure 5.3 "Ruled by Psychopaths, Run by Idiots" Meme.



Note. The meme was referred to by David Icke in an interview (Icke 2020c). The image was retrieved on November 27, 2021, from the following link: <https://ifunny.co/picture/ruled-by-psychopaths-run-by-idiots-davidicke-com-LiJQeEla7>

The notion that political leaders, considered to be the ones in charge, are actually victims of a greater plot and manipulation suggests that nothing is certain as anyone can be accused of being just a puppet or the hidden master. What is at play is the redoubling or multiplication of the hidden levels of power. One such instance is the role of Bill Gates in conspiracy theories. In many instances, he is painted by Icke as a psychopath who is responsible for many undesired social developments, but on one occasion, even Gates is framed as someone else's puppet, as someone under the control of the bigger external authority. As Icke explains, Gates and those like him, who use the guise of philanthropy to advance the evil agenda, "get phenomenally rich by being *front men* for this whole thing, but there's always a rider" (Jones, 2020, 0:24:01; italics by the author). This hidden authority—"the rider," "the spider," "the permanent government," "the shadows"—always escapes identification and has no clear definition in Icke's discourse and, therefore, becomes a central figure of the phantasy; it is multifaceted, omnipotent, and most notably, elusive. However, it is important not to rush to the conclusion that such an inconsistency in Icke's argument undermines the legitimacy of his claim in the eyes of his followers. Instead, this kind of circular argument in a conspiracy narrative can support the phantasy, as it requires surplus enjoyment in meaning-making or *jouis-sens* (Zupančič 2020, 261). This libidinal investment in the object that embodies the contradiction mirrors the imaginings of immigrants in many Western countries who are accused simultaneously

of being overly diligent (thus stilling natives' jobs) and of being lazy and unemployed, thus abusing social welfare, benefits, healthcare, etc. (Žižek 2008, 68). The imaginings of the true power behind the pandemic have the same function—it represents the libidinal investment that supports the whole ideological structure and obfuscates some fundamental contradiction inherent to the current political expressions of global power relations.

c. The People

Icke's theories include references to the will of the general public, as opposed to that of The Cult. This fulfills the common populist binary opposition that establishes the interests of the elites and that of the people as contradictory and fundamentally conflicting. For instance, in the analyzed materials, Icke uses the familiar concept in populist rhetoric of "one percent" to designate the enemy, which is The Cult (Icke 2020b, 31:52). In that context, he emphasizes how important it is to give voice to the people who are silenced by all the climate, identity politics, or pandemic activists who are unwilling to share the stage (Icke 2020b). Despite being silenced in such a way, the people that Icke defends represent a majority so powerful that they can overwhelm the police during mass protests and gatherings (Icke 2021e, 27:16).

In the context of the pandemic, the mitigation measures imposed by the states are understood as being directed against the interests and the well-being of the people. All the discussion about protecting and caring for the vulnerable is framed as big deceit. As Icke explains, "They couldn't care less about the greater good, can we just understand that? And then we might get some kind of grasp on how this world is run. They don't care about us; they use the excuse of caring about us to justify what they want" (Icke 2020b, 57:24). Icke points out that the real intention behind the social distancing measures is to impose onto ordinary people the state of emotional and psychological alienation that already forms an intrinsic part of the personality of The Cult's members (Icke 2020d, 1:04:24). In other words, the objective is to keep the people at a low vibrational state, such as fear, depression, and anxiety, by banning communal gatherings, going to church, singing, celebrations, and the enjoyment of life in general (Icke 2021e, 47:00). These joyful communal activities can raise human vibration and happiness, while in their absence, people are pushed into depression and the suicide rate increases. Even when it might appear that the elites are making concessions, they are not to be trusted. That is the

danger that Icke sees in naively believing in good intentions of the British government when it decided to ease the restrictions for Christmas in the year 2020 and allow people to celebrate the holidays; instead, this should be understood as the reflection of the elite's fear that people will revolt against the oppression (Icke 2020d, 29:08).

Additionally, The Cult wants to take autonomy away from people and establish a state where they can make all decisions without the democratic mandate, achieved through the destruction of the global economy during lockdowns. According to Icke, the number of infections will go down when people “lose their independent livelihood and income and thus become dependent on the state,” which will condition them to “do what the state says” if they want their “pittance every month” (Icke 2020c, 35:06). That is why Icke strongly opposes the idea of guaranteed income, also known as the universal basic income (UBI)—a political proposal usually made in the context of the automatization of jobs and the Fourth Industrial Revolution according to which all citizens would receive a minimum guaranteed payment from the state, regardless of their economic or employment status. Icke expresses the fear that lockdowns and the guaranteed income proposal will make people more docile, as they will have to become obedient, good citizens to receive a pittance every month, resulting in something similar to the Chinese social credit system (Icke 2021d, 11:50). Icke makes further references to the Chinese form of biopolitics to accentuate his warnings of the potential new form of state control, as he accuses the British Metropolitan Police of installing millions of face recognition cameras across the country. Before the pandemic, the Western countries had to be very careful in rolling out such drastic measures, “but now they've suspended democracy they can do it faster” (Icke 2020c, 1:36:04).

In conclusion, “the people” have an undeniably important role in the elites' plans. The strategy of The Cult relies on keeping the public (1) at a lower vibrational state and absolute (emotional and psychological) alienation and (2) under total control through biopolitical policies and economic dependence. Accordingly, Icke suggests that people break away from such oppression by elevating their awareness, which means opening hearts, minds, and eyes to break down the spiritual prison in which they are enclosed by The Cult (Icke 2020c, 2:16:20). He encourages people to join the protests and disobey the authority after the march finishes, to stop acquiescing, “use the power of no” and “see where the power really is” (Icke 2021d, 21:11).

d. *Legitimacy Between Politics and Belief*

This formulation of the popular will in opposition to the central core of the power structure completes Icke's detailed interpretation of the political conflict (Table 5.3). In it, Icke depends on various types of legitimacy to structure his writings. For instance, the insistence on the antagonisms between elites and regular people, the critique of technocratic rationality, and warnings of new forms of biopolitical and financial means of control are all forming part of the public and political discourse outside of the narrow field of conspiracism and, therefore, have a significant level of legitimacy. In addition to that, Icke also requires from the audience a certain level of belief where his claims lack robust external legitimacy, which includes investment into the fiction and contemporary popular culture: the psychopathological rulers (most likely relying on imaginings of specific Hollywood-film-style villains), past totalitarian regimes (representations of history in popular culture), and the emotional and psychological imprisonment of people (New Age teachings). Finally, the depiction of the structure of power ("the web" and "the spider") has no outside reference and thus represents the intrinsic quality of conspiratorial discourse without robust epistemological support.

Table 5.3 The Summary of Main Concepts in Icke's Critique of Power

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) The Cult. <i>The root of the will to power:</i><ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Psychopathological personality traits;b. Visions of a new, oppressive society achieved in the carefully planned effort:<ol style="list-style-type: none">b1. Historical totalitarian regimes (e.g., communism, fascism);b2. Global technocracy (rule of experts and <i>not</i> of politically elected leaders).2) The Structure of Power. <i>The nature of The Cult's functioning:</i><ol style="list-style-type: none">a. The web (all actions are coordinated, e.g., Silicon Valley and WHO);b. The actors in the web:<ol style="list-style-type: none">b1. Front men, "idiots" (e.g., politicians);b2. True masters, rulers (e.g., advisors, censors, office holders, or some ambiguous undefined authority).3) The People. <i>Victims of The Cult:</i><ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Emotional and psychological imprisonment;b. Biopolitical control and economic dependence.

5.2. Appeal to Social Critical Theory

The following analysis deals with the elements of social critical theory in the discourse of David Icke. An elaborate conspiracy theory can express ideas that resemble

some of the socio-economic theories coming from universities that postulate the network of social actors deliberately colluding to keep the bottom classes unaware of their subordination through intricate ideological or coercive means. For example, some left-wing theorists have in many instances been accused of conspiratorial tendencies by the right-wing commentators in an effort to delegitimize claims that particular interests stand behind great economic developments (Coady 2006, 3–4). Another such instance is critical theories regarding the media sphere and the ideologies of representation. For instance, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, already in the Preface of their acclaimed work *Manufacturing Consent* (1988, xii), preemptively reject any accusation of conspiracy theory that could be waged against their ideas detailing the political economy of mass media, revealing that they expected a hostile reception of their ideas and the subsequent accusations.

Specific theories that intend to deconstruct the economic interests of the ruling elites also get close to assigning malintent to individual personalities and elite cliques, which leads to accusations similar to those waged against Herman and Chomsky. For example, as Edward Granter (2017, 100) points out, the racket theory of Frankfurt School authors like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer details a transition “away from liberal democracy towards direct and privatized rule by powerful cliques” to explain the ruling class as a web of solid connections between “gangs” that make backroom deals and are deceiving the public. Moreover, Volker Heins (2007, 794) goes as far as to suggest that the Racket Theory is in itself akin to a conspiracy theory since its proponents envision an omnipotent group of agents that is secretly controlling social life and “producing truths.” Nevertheless, the idea that coordinated actions of different elite cliques are shaping the economy provides an adequate and necessary account of certain segments of private-public dealings in the current stage of neoliberalism, which cannot be understood as a mere reproduction of ideology. Such is the case of financial deregulation that includes giving and receiving favors on the private-public nexus, campaign funding, personal connections, and the revolving doors between politics and corporate-financial sector (Granter 2017, 103).

In his public performance, David Icke often borrows from the discursive repertoire of critical social theories to defend the legitimacy of his conspiracy claims. Harambam (2020, 122–23) identifies numerous statements in Icke’s discourse that take inspiration from the writings of Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Foucault, including the reference to knowledge as power, class

stratification, and consciousness, or the ideological institutions that serve to reproduce the system of oppression. In the analyzed audio-visual material concerning the pandemic, David Icke explicitly invites the audience to think critically, which for him is the exploration of the hidden interest behind the transparent dealings in the socio-political realm, starting with the presumption that those who benefit the most from specific socio-political developments (e.g., lockdowns) are the ones behind it (Icke 2021b, 1:11:28). The following analysis will be situated within the introduced framework, looking specifically into how Icke establishes latent relation between his writings and the critical social theories, including rhetoric concerning class, media manipulation, and intricate strategies of control in the context of the pandemic.

a. The Conflicting Interest of the Hunger Games Society, or The Critique of Socio-Economic Classes

Icke considers material circumstances that affect social groups differently and establishes his own framework for a class-based society. He names it the Hunger Games Society, using the title of the highly successful dystopian science-fiction novel (Collins 2009) and film (Ross 2012) as a metaphor for an unequal society. He summarizes the stratification in contemporary society in the following way:

Picture a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid, you've got a tiny few enormously wealthy people that actually are connected to this cult. We now have a name for them; we call them the one percent. At the bottom of this pyramid in the Hunger Game Society is basically the rest of humanity that is dependent upon the one percent. And in between the two is a vicious, merciless police-military state, to impose the will of the one percent on the population and to prevent the population from challenging the one percent. (Icke 2020b, 4:39)

As discussed previously, Icke blames unwanted developments on technocracy by claiming that different kinds of experts join the ranks of the oppressive military state to ensure widespread compliance to the unfair divisions. He frames the conflict between the elites and the populace around contradictory economic interests; that is, the way society is structured contributes directly to the wealth accumulation of the few at the expense of many. The antagonistic relationship between classes then forecloses any possibility of philanthropic or genuine intentions from above, as Icke reaffirms, “You wouldn't have something like six people who have as much wealth as the poorest half of the population if they gave a shit about you” (Icke 2020b, 1:34:59). One such instance concerns the

elderly and vulnerable who are at the forefront of the COVID-19 mitigation measures. Icke refuses any assumption that authorities are protecting the elderly. Instead, he explains that the older and vulnerable “get handed a pittance of a pension” despite paying taxes their whole life, which leads them to buy low-quality food that does not provide nutrients, breathe contaminated air, and drink bad water, thus negatively affecting their immune system (Icke 2020b, 21:42). Maintaining the elderly under such precarious conditions responds directly to particular financial interests, above all, those of the Big Pharma and to the whole structure of power in general, as old people “can’t serve the system anymore” (Icke 2020b, 1:35:20). Icke emphasizes the economic interest of pharmaceutical giants in keeping the population unhealthy: “What would a strong immune system in the population in general do? Their profits would absolutely frickin’ plummet because it’s weakened immune systems that are their profit margin” (Icke 2020b, 1:15:01). Therefore, Icke positions himself as the defender and advocate for those at the bottom of the pyramid who are exploited and mistreated in an *irreconcilable relationship* with the top of the pyramid. In his description of the Hunger Games Society, he relies on the material understanding of reality, in which the access and ownership of resources determines one’s position in the wider social structure.

Icke also addresses the question of capital accumulation and the creation of large monopolies characteristic of contemporary society. In that effort, he does not address capitalism or discuss political economy as a historical process and political rationality but rather as a zero-level objective reality. Icke refers to it as the World Economic System imagined as a neutral economic field upon which individuals act. That is apparent in the fact that Icke positions the owners of large monopolies as enemies of the so-called World Economic System instead of its greatest beneficiaries, as he accuses the elites of using the pandemic to disturb the presupposed natural economic order. He explains that the Hunger Games Society

is designed to have no small business, not even medium-sized business, globally, just gigantic corporations that control and produce everything. Amazon is a classic example of what I’m talking about. What this coronavirus hysteria is creating is a situation unfolding by the hour worldwide that is destroying small business, family business, even medium-sized business... some even big businesses too. It’s destroying them. The big legacy of what is happening now will not be to do with health long-term, it’s going to be economic. (Icke 2020b, 19:50)

In this case, he frames large monopolies as deviations from capitalism, rather than its logical outcome, under the assumption that there is a collaborative endeavor of hidden, occult players behind large-scale social events. The state of economic devastation serves to reinforce the stratified society—when people who own or work at bars, restaurants, and similar establishments lose everything due to lockdowns, they will be pushed further toward the bottom of the Hunger Games Society (Icke 2020b, 20:45). Icke identifies the same development in the conflict between the taxi business and Uber, the introduction of autonomous electric cars, and similar techno-capitalist developments, which will only place more power and wealth in the hands of prominent players such as Elon Musk under the guise of the “fake” pandemic and human-caused climate change (Icke 2020c, 1:50:06). For Icke, this is an essential step towards the society of total economic control desired by The Cult.

By including the critique of developments in the material reality, Icke establishes a solid basis for his arguments that can appeal to many people who experience firsthand the object of his critique. That is, people indeed lost their independent income, and many small local businesses closed during the pandemic, while large corporations grew even more, often with assistance from the state (as discussed in Gneiting, Lusiani, and Tamir 2020, 7). However, the pandemic-induced social stratification is understood by Icke as a goal in and of itself, and its critique lacks a clear theoretical and critical basis. In other words, Icke does not see the large-scale economic developments resulting from ideological postulates that effectively structure all facets of the pandemic and non-pandemic reality. Instead, he defends the idea that the “pandemic hoax” serves to accomplish some already-defined goals.

Moreover, as discussed before, the allure of ideology is replaced by the belief in intrinsic evilness or psychopathology of oligarchs and rulers, which implies that genuinely good people with sincere intentions would not profit from other people’s misfortunes and lack of privilege. Such underestimation of ideology is best exemplified in Icke’s theory, Problem-Reaction-Solution, which he used for years to structure his theories. Icke explains it in the following way:

You covertly create a problem. You use the unquestioning, pathetic mainstream media to tell the public the version of the problem you want them to believe, and you're looking at stage two—the reaction for fear. That's the currency of control, outrage, whatever the problem is. And either demand from the public that something must be done or at least an acceptance from the public that things need to change because of the problem. And at that

point, those who created the problem got that reaction openly, and changes in society offer the solutions to the problems they have themselves covertly created... and those changes step by step take us further and further to that Hunger Games Society. (Icke 2020b, 7:25)

The other variation of this theory is No Problem-Reaction-Solution, in which the threat that leads to Hunger Games Society is manufactured—what is needed then is a perception of a problem, such as the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (Icke 2020b, 8:40). While Icke’s theory addresses existing elements of economic and social developments during the pandemic—which makes his theory appear as a well-established critique of material reality –, he shows a significant lack of understanding of a ruling ideology by suggesting that the ruling class *really needed* the pandemic to achieve what it wanted. That is, there is an implicit belief that the current rate of accumulation of capital necessitates a covertly falsified threat to take place as if the oligarchic class had any serious obstacle or opposition in reinforcing its large monopolies or implementing digital surveillance before the pandemic (on the contrary, such tendencies had been discussed extensively before the health crisis; e.g., Piketty 2014; Zuboff 2019). Icke forcefully forecloses any possibility that both can be true—that the pandemic is real and that the ensuing crisis served to advance specific vested interests—without ever explaining entirely *why* that would be the case. This deadlock in his argument makes up the surplus of meaning that reinforces the belief in dominant ideology, as it presupposes some level of innocence and equitableness of the status quo that was disrupted by the “fake” pandemic. What makes Icke’s critique of the class society just a less-apparent reflection of the dominant ideology is precisely this belief in a zero-level objective reality or what is understood during the pandemic as “normalcy” that we will return to when the crisis is over. However, despite the obvious argumentative gaps, logical fallacies, excessive reliance on popular culture, and the inability to establish a clear causal link between various external developments, Icke achieves broad legitimacy, an authoritative presence in the alternative media, and a dedicated, loyal audience by drawing conclusions out of the apparent correlation between the pandemic and the advancement of certain socio-economic developments.

b. Media Manipulation

Icke insistently expresses the attitude of a savvy skeptic concerning almost anything that the media claims during the pandemic, which reflects the increased distrust

of representation inherent to the current technological age. The development in technology allowed the user to consume texts and images and create them, leading to increased awareness of their manufactured nature (Turkle 1995, 18). Moreover, the tendency to deconstruct the meaning behind an apparent representation corresponds to the postmodern attitude toward the truth and knowledge as something unstable, dependent on the power structure behind it, and elusive. Mark Andrejevic (2013, 14) explains that we are dealing here with the question of decreased symbolic efficiency; that is, the generalized distrust in any representation leads to the assumption that behind the surface level of meaning, there is always some actual, unrefined level of knowledge that is beyond symbolization, exemplified by the belief that through the analysis of one's body language or via neuroscience we can access "the truth" behind his or her mere words. This belief forms the central part of Icke's warnings that, as a next step towards the manipulation, The Cult can and will directly access our consciousness. The manipulation of our perception will move from simple control of information in the media to the alteration of people's perception directly via artificial intelligence (Icke 2021b, 27:50). Icke explains that process in the following way:

And if you listen to the crazies in Silicon Valley, they're telling you that in the period around 2030—a year that keeps coming up from all directions—we will have a situation where the human brain will start to be connected to AI [artificial intelligence; *author's note*]. And thus, whoever controls AI will be connecting and driving the perceptions of humanity, and that can be done from a central point through this smart grid, global smart grid. (Icke 2020b, 6:12)

In articulating distrust in the representations of external reality, Icke targets the media's role in shaping emotions and behavior and influencing structural changes in the world we live in, always following the interests of the most influential people. As Icke explains, the key to manipulating perception is the control of the circulation of information through the propagandistic usage of media. He applies that view to the interpretation of the pandemic, which only exemplifies the strategy of manufacturing the truth by constantly and forcefully repeating "the lie" about the existence of the virus. In this context, Icke refers to the propaganda style employed during the Second World War, as he claims, "The Nazis were all about this, you know, keep repeating the lie and eventually everyone will believe it"—following the belief that after hearing the lies in the media so often, people will start repeating them themselves, leading to their wide acceptance and its integration into the public sphere (Icke 2021b, 4:44). Another

argument that Icke presents is that fear plays a role in the beforementioned strategies of media reporting. The fear of death is such a strong and innate human impulse that it can serve to influence the masses and condition their behavior if it is weaponized by the media (Icke 2020b, 48:04).

In that context, the pandemic is framed as a matter of perception since perception shapes human behavior, or, to be precise, the acts of compliance and acquiescence. Icke contextualizes this claim with an example of lockdowns, “if people realize there is no freakin’ virus, and it’s a total scam, then their likelihood of acquiescing in that way is less because their perception is different” (Icke 2020c, 1:16:15). Therefore, the presumption that the pandemic is an orchestrated hoax rests on the argument that the media is powerful and influences citizens’ perception of reality and reversing that influence would be a necessary step in uncovering the manipulation. Moreover, Icke suggests that those ways of deceit can be avoided by carefully examining the language employed to discuss the pandemic in the media since the truth can be revealed in accidental slips. For instance, Icke draws attention to the media language concerning the death of the British comedian Eddie Large, which includes the reports that claimed that Large “died after testing positive” instead of saying that he “died from COVID-19,” suggesting that the death was falsely attributed to the virus that Icke claims it does not even exist (Icke 2020c, 23:45).

Icke uses the widespread censorship of his views as evidence for his claims—he asks why the government is not allowing the discussion of the link between the implementation of 5G and the pandemic if that claim is as outrageously absurd as they say (Icke 2020c, 1:16:42). The censorship leads him to think that there must be a link between two occurrences if that is so forcefully prohibited even as a topic for discussion. He singles out the British Office of Communication, which has direct stakes in the questions of the 5G rollout, according to Icke. When refereeing to the attitude of the Office of Communication regarding the debate on the 5G, Icke claims, “If you can’t win a debate—and they can’t win this one —, then don’t have it... that is the motto of every tyranny in known human history” (Icke 2020c, 1:15:10).

For Icke, the media narrative is always seen as a potential deception that functions according to intricate propagandistic strategies, including constantly repeating the lie and fearmongering, and (3) creating images that would increase fear within the population. However, Icke provides a critique of those tactics by pointing out the power of media images in influencing real life, deciphering the media language, and emphasizing the censorship that is being done. Such an approach provides to the conspiracy theories the

seeming appeal of a critical thinking exercise, under the assumption that the conspirator arrives at a conclusion through the careful analysis of texts and the functioning of the media sphere.

c. Tiptoeing to the State of Total Financial Control

The road to the Hunger Games Society is not apparent and includes many tactics of control that an insightful mind can discern. That is why Icke considers his vocation so necessary; he does that work for the public. He talks about the tactics of social control by the ruling regime denominated as Totalitarian Tiptoe, which refers to the carefully conducted small moves towards the oppressive totalitarian state that would not draw much attention. The transition cannot be evident and sudden, so the governments are conditioned to invent various tactics that would not in any obvious way disturb the flow of everyday affairs (Icke 2020b, 8:44). Icke points to further evidence for such a tendency, the “destination of the journey.” He explains,

I have a phrase which relates to all this, “know the outcome, and you'll see the journey.” If you don't know where this world is being taken by this cult, then everything seems random. Coronavirus—random, climate change—random, economic crash—random. But when you know where we're being taken, you know the outcome—this Hunger Games structure society. Now their apparently random events become clear stepping stones to that. (Icke 2020b, 9:18)

For Icke, coercive social measures are not the goal in and of themselves but always contribute to the further development of the radically stratified society that he denounces. In this regard, he uses the discursive repertoire that resembles that of the authors who discussed the neoliberal biopolitical conditions during previous decades in light of changes to the governmental model. For instance, Icke points to the previous events that fortified the “Orwellian society” we live in, “this virus will eventually flatten out, but what you see every time—Nine-Eleven is a classic—they'll roll back some of it, but not nearly rolled back to where it was before the whole thing moved on closer to The Hunger Games Society” (Icke 2020b, 24:13). Icke's preoccupation echoes some of the debate regarding the permanent state of exception that followed the events of September 11 and the War on Terror, which saw some of the most significant alterations to democratic liberal principles under the presumption of the foreign threat to social order (Agamben 2005, 2–3). For instance, following the lessons learned from the US-led War on Terror,

philosopher Giorgio Agamben expressed some concerns regarding the possibility that the pandemic-caused state of emergency and social distancing will take on a permanent character under the imperative of biosecurity (Agamben 2021, 55–58).

However, while addressing some actually existing developments in global and state governance, David Icke's discourse is filled with libidinal investment into the imaginaries of contemporary popular culture, with the invocations of almost-maleficent omnipotent Master, totalitarian depictions from George Orwell's novel and *The Hunger Games*. There is a fine line drawn by Icke between the images of the subtle, largely intricate tactics of authority and the grandiose display of oppression that epitomizes our society of the spectacle. Here, only those accusations of individual or societal control that resemble social theories will be discussed.

In that light, the most effective appeal in Icke's critique of the mechanics of control is his emphasis on the financial instrumentality behind the new forms of coerciveness. He provides a very passionate critique of today's financial relations by comparing the status of ordinary citizens to that of enslaved people, transposed into the context of the modern liberal state. To be precise, he identifies the limits to the liberal concept of freedom in the financial constraints imposed on subjects:

What is freedom? Freedom is basically the ability to make choices. The more choices you can make, the more freedom you have, and how many people in the world have the ability, not least through financial constraints, to make the choices they'd like to make? Very few. That means they're slaves to the system. The system is not serving humanity; humanity is serving the system. (Icke 2020d, 47:50)

While Icke provides a narrow definition of freedom (bound to the right to choose), he correctly addresses the inability of the economic system to deliver the promised individual emancipation to all subjects within its realm. He focuses on the financial dependence that emanates from replacing direct income more familiar to the earlier stages of capitalism with the form of economic relation conditioned by specific disciplinary dictates, increasingly characteristic of the late stages of neoliberalism and the post-2008 governance. That is achieved through the direct relationship between the structures of power and the suppression of what Icke calls "the independent income" (what is earned in the market), which is replaced by the "dependent income," such as debt and welfare. As Icke argues, this development requires the renunciation of elements of individual autonomy since people's survival will be linked to someone higher financial authority

that makes decisions affecting people's everyday lives (Icke 2021b, 30:50). Accordingly, Icke opposes strongly any idea of the guaranteed income or other forms of social welfare, as they keep people at a certain level of poverty (i.e., the bottom of the Hunger Games Society), take away job opportunities from people to advance the implementation of artificial intelligence, and disincentivize effort and competition (Icke 2020b, 1:22:03).

A similar critique is directed at the coerciveness and the loss of personal autonomy resulting from indebtedness. Icke points out that money is a very effective form of social control, and it is in the interest of power to have people in the position of a borrower for as long as possible through the multiplication of loans and destruction of small businesses (Icke 2020b, 1:23:41). Therefore, the economic part of The Cult's plan is based on luring people into massive debt and economic distress, with the following goal:

They'll come forward and say, we've got to sort this situation out. So, the only way that we can sort out this massive debt [...] is that we will forgive all the debt, but in return, people have to hand over all their possessions, they have to hand over their homes, they have to hand over everything to have their debt cleared. (Icke 2021b, 58:28)

This quote echoes the fear of a neo-feudalist future where people will not own things, a ubiquitous feature of contemporary conspiratorial narratives (see the following video circulated on Facebook as an example, Moss 2021). Such accusations refer to the article that the Danish politician Ida Auken (2016) wrote for the World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting, titled "Welcome to 2030: I Own Nothing, Have No Privacy and Life Has Never Been Better." The article serves many conspiracists as a clear example and written proof of sinister intentions by the elite cabal. Similarly, Icke discusses the argument concerning the relatedness of massive indebtedness and lockdowns (that will only exacerbate the issue of economic instability) in the context of the WEF's writings and the agenda known as The Great Reset, as it allows him to claim that The Cult is admitting its intentions in a written form (Icke 2021b, 59:08).

Icke's insistence on the relationship between "pittance" and "debt" under the umbrella of what he calls "economic dependence" and its role in the fortification of the unequal society echoes writings in critical theory that center on biopolitical financial strategies existing in many modern states. Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) explains that debt does not represent a simple financial transaction but is a social relationship that centers around the asymmetry of power in which discipline and renunciation of autonomy represent crucial elements. Lazzarato argues that:

the debtor is “free,” but his actions, his behavior, are confined to the limits defined by the debt into he has entered. The same is true as much for the individual as for a population or social group. You are free insofar you assume the *way of life* (consumption, work, public spending, taxes, etc.) compatible with reimbursement. [...] The power of debt leaves you free, and it encourages you and pushes you to act in such a way that you are able to honor your debts (even if, like the IMF, it has a tendency to devour “debtors” by imposing economic policies that promote “recession”). (Lazzarato 2012, 31; italics in the original)

When obliged to assume a way of life that would signal to the creditor the guarantee of debt repayment, the debtor renounces his or her freedom to decide and plan the future on his or her own accord. Under the conditions of contemporary neoliberal ideological impositions, welfare takes on a similar disciplinary guise by transforming the concept of “social rights” into “social debts.” That is, the beneficiary of social welfare is under similar obligations, only that he or she is “not expected to reimburse in actual money but rather in conduct, attitudes, ways of behaving, plans, subjective commitments, the time devoted to finding a job, the time used for conforming oneself to the criteria dictated by the market and business, etc.” (Lazzarato 2012, 104). Such a tendency can be observed in Denmark (as discussed in Streeck 2009), a country that is widely recognized for its robust and highly generous welfare system. There, extensive unemployment benefits serve to provide citizens with some level of economic stability at the expense of job security; that is, if the market fires and hires people easily, the state can use the unemployment benefits to condition workers to accept any job that is offered to them, regardless of location, type of work or pay. In that context, the powerful state bureaucracy does not serve to protect some minimal “social rights,” but “to sanction unemployed workers who are unwilling to return to the labor market when told to do so” (Streeck 2009, 10). This, in return, undermines the capacity of an individual to have a clear vision of the future and aspire to some form of stability that includes family life or communal participation.

The strong focus on the importance of financial independence in the context of today’s financial relations echoes the sentiment that Christopher Lasch (1979) described in his critique of the progressive professional middle class of the United States, that due to its inability to address the root causes of capitalist social contradictions (such as the wealth gap or the decreasing purchasing power) advocates for the never-ending expansion of the welfare state. The relation that results from those efforts “has kept social tensions from assuming political form, but it has not removed their source” (Lasch 1979, 224).

This new form of paternalism directed at working classes bars the pleasure of becoming self-reliant—achieved through a satisfactory level of maturity and autonomy—and ultimately “prolongs the experience of dependence [characteristic for early childhood; *author’s note*] into adult life” and “encourages milder forms of narcissism in people who might otherwise come to terms with the inescapable limits on their personal freedom and power” (Lasch 1979, 231). The numerous proposals for guaranteed basic income—usually suggested as a counter-measure to the devaluation of labor, large monopolies, and further automatization of jobs—made by those who consider themselves progressive assume that vast swaths of the working class would receive with open arms the future devoid of serious dedication to craft, work, life-projects and that it would relegate the responsibility for self and others to large state bureaucracies or university-educated middle-class professionals. Therefore, the lure of Icke’s denunciation of indebtedness and the destruction of small business, as well as of robust welfare schemes, during the pandemic should not be readily dismissed as a simple reactionary response from the well-off conservative opponents of social spending but is to be understood as a clear appeal to the increasing popular fear of losing economic and personal autonomy under the narcissistic injunctions of the modern neoliberal state. The eclectic ideological and political stance is further exemplified by Icke’s insistence on the WEF’s proposals regarding the further automatization of work (integral to WEF’s premonition regarding the Fourth Industrial Revolution) and the imaginings of the future devoid of ownership, which would significantly alter the lives not of those that are wealthy, but precisely of those that find themselves politically and economically abandoned and betrayed.

d. The Defeat of the Critical Theory and the Triumph of the Conspiracy Theory

Contrary to what might be assumed from a distance, elaborate conspiracy theories do not narrow down their explanatory intent but expand their discursive repertoire to include claims that resemble various types of critical social theories (Table 5.4). Therefore, the audience dedicated to superconspiracies of this kind does not reject knowledge as such. On the contrary, it consumes forms of knowledge often in its excessive form and is invested in the detailed deconstruction of interests behind socio-economic developments. Through the framework of his conspiracy theory, David Icke shows a significant level of understanding for those common sentiments and responds to the need of people during the systemic crisis to critically interpret what is going on and

why things change the way they do. This conclusion invites further discussion of the extent to which Icke's conspiracy theory triumphs on the inability of progressive thinking classes to connect with the masses through the universalist emancipatory proposals and the potential deficiencies of the modern educational system.

The increasing popularity of superconspiracies appears in the context of the disappearance of critical (and other kinds of) theories from the contemporary curriculum and public life in general. What is more, progressive elements of the middle-class intelligentsia do not only fail to include vast swaths of the population in its politics and emancipatory projects, but very often define their collective objectives against the vague idea of "backward masses" (Lasch 1996), or instead, advocate for rather unpopular paternalistic political projects that see the working class as the object rather than the subject of politics, by redefining social problems in medical, therapeutic or identarian terms (Frawley 2015; Furedi 2005, 72–73). The passivization of citizens and the working class creates optimal conditions for a conspiratorial type of social critique to take a foothold, especially when the significant crisis creates a strong demand for a critical explanation of reality directed against the centers of power.

While Icke's theories abound with accusations of highly elaborate intentions for personal and social control in the style of science fiction narratives (e.g., microchips, radiating 5G towers, human brains connected to artificial intelligence, cartoonish evil masters, and similar), he correctly addresses intricate levels of really-existing coercion that the current form of neoliberalism exercises through various financial strategies, the type of pyramid-like social stratification that is taking hold, or the instrumentalization of fear to direct the behavior of masses. However, as already discussed by Harambam (2020, 125), "in contrast to his appeal to science, where Icke literally quoted natural scientists, the reference to social-scientific knowledge is less explicit," also evident in his critique of inequalities that increased during the pandemic. Icke does not explicitly evoke any of the authors of critical social scholarship and shies away from any association with left-wing political programs and theories, which is also reflected in the terminology he comes up with World Economic Systems instead of nation-state capitalisms, The Hunger Games Society instead of the class society, Totalitarian Tiptoe instead of biopolitics, and similar.

Table 5.4 The Summary of Ideas That Resemble Social Critical Theory in Icke's Conspiracy Theories

<p>1) The critique of class society:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The interests of different classes are incompatible and conflicting (in favor of the classes higher in the hierarchy); b. The economic relations in a pandemic are an aberration of the imagined zero-level state of economic equitableness. <p>2) Media manipulation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Intricate discursive strategies (repeating the lie or fear-mongering); b. Modes of resisting (close reading of reporting, analysis of vested interests behind media institutions, contextualize censorship of dissenting views). <p>3) Biopolitical mode of control:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The elimination of the independent income in favor of the income used for disciplining people (e.g., debt and welfare).
--

The efforts to depoliticize highly political questions is the fundamental element of his conspiracy theory, in which real political frustrations get displaced from their actual socio-economic causes to the secret dealings and highly elaborated plots reliant on spectacular imaginaries. In that effort, any critique of power relations waged by the conspiracy theory is neutralized by the simple form of the critique. The unresolved contradiction appears to be, in this case, the *sine qua non* of the conspiratorial narrative—just after Icke addresses some actually existing political contradictions, he reduces them to intimate sadistic impulses of rulers or the totalitarianism that is imposed for its own sake. Unlike social theories that are interested in exploring the root causes and inner logics of power demonstrated through the analysis of verifiable empirical evidence, Icke requires from his audience a blind belief that the personalities and organizations he denounces are really as pathological as he claims. Accordingly, through indulgence in conspiracy theory-centered media, the audience can satisfy its contradictory desires; on the one hand, it is offered a critique of socio-political reality from a comfortable distance, and on the other, the unrestrained consumption of spectacle and entertainment that are central to the ideological apparatus the same conspiracy theories denounce. The passionate social critique offered by a conspiracy theory only reinforces the cynicism in the contemporary subject as defined by Žižek (1989, 33), that as long as it denounces the system through the indulgence in conspiratorial accusations can go on freely with his or her life without fundamentally sacrificing anything (e.g., the fulfillment of consumerist desires) or organizing politically to change the undesired socio-political conditions.

5.3. The Delineation of Accepted Authority

Additionally, Icke constructs his discursive strategies around expert authorities that appear scientific or within the realm of alternative science. More precisely, he evokes experts, scientists, activists, and doctors who can be either believed or distrusted according to the criteria he establishes. That complicated relationship between conspiracy believers and external expert authority will be elaborated in the continuation.

According to Icke, most medical workers within national healthcare systems are not even aware that they are part of a larger plan designed by the elite cult—they just fulfill their tasks and assignments without ever questioning the motives behind certain decisions or socio-political developments. For example, that is what happened with Deborah Birx, the Coronavirus Response Coordinator of the US government during the Donald Trump administration, and Anthony Fauci, the Chief Medical Advisor to the President of the US. Icke explains that they do not have a clue; they are just victims of “fierce compartmentalization, where people only know what they need to know to make their contribution” (Icke 2020c, 45:16), unaware of the larger agenda. In some cases, they are just following orders blindly “from above,” which is why Icke does not blame nurses and doctors, as they “only need a hierarchy to say ‘this is what you have to do,’ and they do it” (Icke 2020c, 26:50).

Another criterion used to evaluate the trustworthiness of experts is their financial relation to oligarchs, or what Icke calls The Cult. According to that, the director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom, is discredited because of his relationship with Bill Gates, whose foundation is the second-largest donor to the WHO (Icke 2020c, 47:06). Additionally, Icke distrusts Adhanom due to his political activity in Ethiopia as a member of the political party that Icke characterizes as Marxist. Moreover, Icke questions the authority of the entire WHO for being founded by Rockefellers and Rothschilds (Icke 2020b, 29:18). The Imperial College London, the home institution of the famous pro-lockdown epidemiologist Neil Ferguson, is, in a similar fashion, distrusted for being “very closely connected to Freemasons” and for taking “funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation” (Icke 2020c, 42:19). What is implied in such statements is that the economic interests and different types of financial constraints foreclose any possibility of scientific objectivity, especially when the intentions of the authority that sponsors the scientific endeavor are being questioned and doubted.

Accordingly, those being censored by the authorities for leaving official ranks to speak “the truth” are seen as trustworthy sources. Icke mentions several figures speaking from the position of inside informers, who go against the consensus of their profession and rely on first-hand knowledge from the deep orders of the system. One of them is an unnamed frontline healthcare worker from New York, who, in the style of a whistleblower, “stepped out of the line, out of the box” by reporting directly from the intensive care units that the condition people have is not COVID-19 (Icke 2020c, 1:02:37). Icke recalls the doctor’s claims that, by looking at patients’ lungs, he can conclude that they are suffering from the lack of oxygen and not from the virus. In a different instance, Icke tells the story of a “whistleblower” scientist employed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the US, whom he met in 1997. The unnamed scientist invited Icke to his home in Southern California to tell him about the microchips in the vaccines that function like quantum tattoos, similar to the ones promoted by Bill Gates and his GAVI foundation. Icke’s informant, like at least a thousand other scientists employed in the same agency, was patched by his employer, the CIA; that is, his body was altered in such a way to require a plastic socket full of a specific liquid attached to the chest to survive. The CIA provides the patch that effectively holds his life in its hands and can force him into compliance. As Icke recounts the informant’s story in the following way:

Patch has to be replaced every seventy-two hours and if you are not repatched then, you start to die. A very unpleasant death. And he [the unnamed scientist, *author’s note*] said, “I called their bluff on one occasion to see if they were just scamming me and they weren't messing.” That's what happened. So, if he doesn't do and use his expertise to support the CIA in this whole global cult scam and conspiracy, then he's not repatched. And he actually said to me, “I'm holding back knowledge that I have that they want. And I'm letting them know I am because I know from other people this happened to, that once they think they've taken everything they can get from you, they just don't repatch it.” (Icke 2020c, 1:27:33)

Even if Icke indeed met this person, it is noteworthy that he does not even entertain the possibility that his informant was deliberately deceiving him. This unnamed scientist is a reliable source in Icke’s eyes by the mere manifestation of the renegade identity for bravely speaking against the omnipotent Master. Although worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster plot, the informant’s account (or to be precise, the second-hand account, as the alleged occurrences are retold by Icke) is deemed truthful without any presented evidence. The story additionally provides a testimony that reinforces the

imaginings of the ruthless authority that is ready to threaten someone's life to assure acquiescence.

Other trustworthy experts in Icke's pandemic-related conspiracies are those that belong to the contested field of alternative medicine, entirely opposed to the authority of institutional science and medicine. Such a case is that of Thomas S. Cowan, an alternative medicine practitioner from San Francisco, California, who surrendered his medical license after spreading misinformation regarding COVID-19 (Ostrov 2021). To support his doubts concerning the veracity of the pandemic, Icke (2021b, 6:16) quotes Cowan's analysis of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) documents and the book he authored with Sally Fallon Morell titled *The Contagion Myth: Why Viruses (Including "Coronavirus") Are Not the Cause of Disease* (2020). A similar case is that of Dr. Andrew Kaufman, a psychiatrist from New York who now engages in the alternative practices of naturopathy (Jarry 2020). Kaufman serves as a reference to authority for Icke's claims regarding exosomes and their relationship to the symptoms of COVID-19 (Icke 2020c, 4:53). Finally, the anti-radiation activist Arthur Firstenberg is another authority that Icke evokes. In order to support his claim that epidemics have been coinciding with radiation originating in the military bases, Icke quotes Firstenberg's book *The Invisible Rainbow: A History of Electricity and Life* (2020) which documents "the impact on the health of electromagnetic fields technologically generated for a long time" (Icke 2020c, 53:16).

Furthermore, Icke claims legitimacy by decontextualizing or falsifying claims of some historically established names in science and medicine. That is the case of the biochemist Kary Mullis, the inventor of the polymerase chain reaction method, used in the laboratory technique known as RT-PCR to detect the SARS-CoV-2. According to Icke, Mullis claimed that his method should never be used to detect an infectious disease (Icke 2020c, 8:52), which was confirmed never to be said by Mullis (Rahman 2020). Similarly, Icke claims that COVID-19 does not satisfy four postulates that German microbiologist Robert Koch established to determine if a specific microbe is a source of disease (Icke 2020c, 13:04). However, the postulates were formulated in the year 1890, before viruses and asymptomatic spread were known to exist (Wiles 2020). Moreover, the knowledge and authority that Icke is referring to are, in this case, "passive" since the authors are not alive to defend their work actively and participate in a public or scientific debate which would lead to some kind of a consensus in the contemporary scientific and medicinal practices.

In conclusion, rather than altogether rejecting them, the pandemic-related conspiracy theories rely on a specific kind of scientific and medical authority, evident in the delineation of the boundary between trustworthy experts and those considered corrupt by Icke (Table 4). The expert authority is evaluated according to a clear criterion—the nature of its relationship to the evil elite cult and the level of personal awareness. Therefore, Icke engages in the “boundary work” or the mapping out of the acceptable limits of epistemic authority, which includes “the discursive attribution of selected qualities to scientists, scientific methods, and scientific claims to draw a rhetorical boundary between science and some less authoritative residual non-science” (Gieryn 1999, 4–5). For instance, what is considered as “mainstream science” is often rejected in conspiracy theories because of its conformity or “close-mindedness” (Robertson 2018, 251), implicit biases, financial dependence, arrogance or elitism of experts, and the negative public image (Harambam 2020, 191–98). In the analyzed audio-visual material, however, that boundary is not established according to the quality or ethics of the scientific or medical practice but primarily based on the counter-elite position of the expert or institution in question, excluding those with a clear relationship to big capital, those naive to the grand conspiracy or without the courage to confront the corrupt institution.

Table 4. Types of Expert Authority in Pandemic-Related Conspiracy Theories of David Icke

<p>1) Discredited experts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Victims of compartmentalization</i> (blindly following orders without critical thinking) ▪ <i>Those financially dependent on key conspiracy theory antagonists</i> <p>2) Trustworthy experts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Renegades who “go rogue” and expose the system from the inside</i> ▪ <i>Practitioners outside of the institutional science and medicine</i> ▪ <i>Historical figures or deceased experts</i>

6. Legitimacy and the Ways of Knowing

David Icke defends his stances regarding the pandemic by resorting to specific kinds of epistemologies: first, the individual perception and experience; and second, the evidence confirmed by a prediction—something that Icke himself or someone else said in the past that is confirmed by the current events. With these strategies, Icke aims at some semblance of objective verification and epistemic authority regarding his claims,

although what he presents ultimately requires some level of belief from his audiences. The way Icke intends to convince that his or someone else's account is the correct one, contrary to the nature of the official explanation, will be the topic of this subchapter.

6.1. Perception and Experience

The idea of personal experience has a powerful epistemological legitimacy in a contemporary Western society that elevates the subjective life worlds over the shared ones, which is understood as less accommodating to individual sensitivities. In this case, the authority of individual experience used to defend accusations of conspiracy should be understood within a specific socio-cultural development that celebrates “the self” in the wake of the undermined public sphere. The cultural turn inwards and the popular retraction from the traumatic external reality can be traced back to the individual liberation movement of the 1960s, which saw self-determination and the rejection of the oppressive external authority as the ultimate political goal, creating the culture that fosters a specific level of narcissism in the otherwise psychologically healthy adults (Lasch 1979; 1984). In the proceeding decades, both the therapeutic culture, which replaces the search for truth with the imperative of inner pain and healing (Kaminer 1999, 190), and the New Age spiritualism, which rejects the alienating institutions that negate the pursuit of higher stages of awareness (Aupers and Houtman 2010, 28), became constitutive elements of what is denominated by Liesbet van Zoonen (2012, 62) as *I-pistemology*—i.e., the forms of claims-making that rely on personal experience and observations as authoritative positions.

Wendy Kaminer (1999, 5–6) relates the stark turn to non-scientific practices and traditions to the cultural turn that elevates subjectivities understood as fragile and already defined by past intimate traumas from private life, which can be additionally traumatized if the experience is doubted or scrutinized. In that context, the popular therapy and New Age idea of selfhood coincide in their substitution of factual examination of reality with the authority of individual accounts (or feelings) as the arbiter of empirical judgment. Similarly, Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers (2010, 15) explain that novel spiritual traditions in the West reflect the prevailing social values centered around the self since “its participants collectively sacralize the long-standing modern value of individual liberty, and especially the ideal of an authentic self that distances itself from allegedly alienating institutions and traditions.” Various Icke's utterances revolve around the same

axis. The individual perception is elevated above any aggregate of consistent external accounts may propose as the objective narrative. Icke says that we, our parents and all those who influence our perspective on things, have gone through a “sausage machine” in the form of the institutions that provide us with “perceptions to download,” from early childhood and the school system to everything that takes place by the end of life (Icke 2021b, 41:20).

The excessive apotheosis of cogito consequently undermines, almost in a paranoid fashion, the authority of everything external to it, under the assumption that whatever that even slightly challenges our bias is too disquieting to be internalized. In Icke’s speeches, that is transposed to the realm of spirituality and higher awareness, where the enclosure of perception can hinder the process of “connecting of dots.” That is why he claims that we must overcome the state of “myopia” to achieve the “panoramic” view of reality that will allow us to see everything in its true light, in the form of a frequency (Icke 2020b, 1:40:03). The idea that the only thing we can rely upon is our mind in a world where everything is a constant threat reinforces the instinct of savvy skepticism towards almost all facets of reality. The negative attitude towards the external narratives relies on the notion that they “control the perception and therefore dictate behavior,” as in the previously discussed case of fear-mongering in media reports (Icke 2021c, 44:55). Since “everybody has the power to use their mind to dictate their own reality,” we oppose The Cult that is “desperate to control human perception because it knows human perception becomes human experience” if “*we create our own reality*” (Icke 2020b, 01:44:42; italics by the author). Icke invites the audience to take a step further and overcome the five senses to escape “the prison,” “the bubble,” and “the box” they have been put by the elites, and move to a state of sacredness, “eternal consciousness” that overcomes the brief human experience and forms a true power (Icke 2020c, 2:17:32). Therefore, the radical turn inwards is seen as the only strategy people can apply to halt undesired takeover of public affairs by The Death Cult, that effectively “runs the show” and manages perception of reality.

In other instances, Icke evokes the authority of his individual experience to make conclusions about the veracity of the official narratives. For instance, he tells a story about himself and his son, who before Christmas of 2019 had some illness that appears to be similar to COVID-19. Icke’s recollection, “We both went down with this with this illness and, now as I read the symptoms of this coronavirus strain, we had word for word, point by point, every single symptom,” allows him to make broader conclusions, such as that

“this coronavirus strain was going around in Britain than before it had even emerged out of China, or far more likely, we got something else with exactly the same symptoms” (Icke 2020b, 14:15). His personal experience is enough for Icke to distrust official numbers coming out from responsible authorities. Similarly, twice in the same interview (Icke 2020b, 54:43, 1:03:45), he makes claims against vaccines because his children have not been vaccinated and have never suffered childhood illnesses. Again, the first-person accounts are used as a powerful testimony that adds the notion of lived experience to the claims about the critical questions of collective life.

Finally, Icke defends the primacy of the individual above all else, directly and unequivocally. That defense includes many different arguments, one of them being a claim similar to the postmodern relativization of grand narratives under the presumption that there are many individual and equally valid truths. In that context, Icke claims that “they don't want [*sic*] a open conversation and an open debate and exchange of ideas and exchange of evidence, and exchange of views, exchange of information because that will lead to the expansion of people seeing life in many various different ways. They don't want that. They want one narrative” (Icke 2021e, 22:20). Icke further celebrates the liberal idea of personhood that assigns emancipatory potential to the particularity of everyone, which must be safeguarded from any imposition of conformism or universalism. He proclaims:

Stiffen the backbone, grow a pair, say what you believe! Have self-respect in your own uniqueness, and don't let anyone take it away. And if we live in a world of multiple uniqueness where everyone is celebrating their own uniqueness... Their own unique—all part of the same consciousness, yes—but their own unique point of attention. Then that true diversity means tyranny can't reign. (Icke 2020b, 1:56:00)

However, Icke makes sure that his support for particularity should not be conflated with the “woke”²⁹ ideas regarding identity. He expresses clear intention in disassociating with any idea of the politically correct, liberal notion of identity politics, which he attributes to the personalities of The Cult. Instead, Icke praises diversity; he calls for a conversation, peace, and mutual understanding between Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Hindus, because we, humans, are just expressions, manifestations of

²⁹ “Wokeness” refers to the pejorative term used in culture wars in the Anglo-Saxon countries by mostly conservative internet users to denounce identity politics attitudes based on “canceling” (online public shaming) and moralization (The Economist Explains 2021).

something much more profound. After this claim, he goes on to politically distance himself from other political articulations of a similar sentiment:

We should be celebrating real diversity, not the freaking illusion of it, with a woke. We should be celebrating real diversity and celebrating the uniqueness and the spontaneity and the different ways and angles of seeing everything. We should be celebrating that! So, we learn from each other. But when you think: “I am right,” this is the woke mentality, which is orchestrated by the one percent, by the way, that’s why billionaires fund it, like Soros. (Icke 2020c, 2:26:03)

There is a constant tension between the idea that we are all part of one big consciousness and that we have our unique personhood with primacy over any form of conformism. That is evident in his stance on culture wars—The Cult is accused of constantly trying to divide us into groups (according to race, gender, sexuality, religion, and similar) under the injunction of the “woke ideology,” in order to stop us from coming together as one. However, we are all at the end part of the same experience or consciousness, which is just an aggregate of all our unique, personal journeys that The Cult wants to eliminate. In other words, even when addressing human experience as a matter of a broader collective existence, Icke sees that collective not as a historic and culturally, politically, and economically determined entity, but only as an assemblage of separate individuals with their particularities and motivations (with an emphasis on consciousness).

Despite his rejection of identity politics, Icke’s reliance on personal experience and perception (Table 5.5) has evident roots in liberal ideas regarding the individual and society. That is, the allure of Icke’s claims should be interpreted within a wider organization of collective values around the views that the individual is “the sovereign source of public life—political, economic, social, and cultural—and the source of problems in these areas; the proper beneficiary of political, economic, social, and cultural life; and the primordial or grounding element of all of social structure” (Frank, Meyer, and Miyahara 1995, 360). The rationalization of all spheres of life defines a citizen that seeks to maximize his or her personal interests above all else, as primarily an economic subject, and “not fundamentally political, loving, religious, ethical, social, moral, tribal, or something else” (W. Brown 2015, 81). This trend has its expression in the cultural sphere as well, where the turn towards self was erected as a form of political ideal starting with the 1960’s up until today, under the imperative of the liberation of the authentic self against the oppressive authority.

Table 5.5 The Summary of Main Ideas Regarding Experience and Perception and Their Epistemic or Social Legitimacy

<p>1) The primacy of the individual perspective over the collective one: — <i>The external reality is seen as easily manipulable, deceptive, and hostile to our individual sensitivities.</i></p> <p>2) Broad conclusions based on occurrences from private life: — <i>The culture of confession and the erasure of the boundary between the intimate, private sphere and the socio-political one.</i></p> <p>3) The celebration of individuality and uniqueness: — <i>Self-determination as an ideal in the liberal age leads to the view that society is seen primarily as a congregation of individuals.</i></p>
--

Moreover, the rapid development of all kinds of media created the impression that our actions are “being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time” (Lasch 1979, 47), promoted “subjective, autobiographical and confessional modes of expression” across platforms (Dovey 2000, 1), and, through the format of Reality TV programs, elevated subjects’ (i.e., viewers’) arbitrary assessments to the status of the objective judgment (van Zoonen 2012, 57). Personal epistemologies can be additionally identified in many intents to establish authority on crucial conflicting topics (for instance, when making claims concerning military interventions by introducing the argument with “I have a daughter in the military...” or “I am a military spouse...”; see: van Zoonen et al. 2007, 330–34) or in the standpoint theory that claims that more objective knowledge can be produced “from *the lived experiences* of women and others who have been traditionally outside of the institutions” (Ritzer 2007, 4853; italics by the author). David Icke does not only draw legitimacy from the New Age rejection of external authority and institutional knowledge and practices but also from these features of the liberal tradition in which an individual and his or her personal experience play a central socio-cultural, political, and epistemological role.

6.2. The Source as the Evidence

Icke defends his theories by pointing out how obvious the evidence is so that only those unwilling or unable to see it will miss it. However, epistemic legitimacy claims do not depend exclusively on the outside context in many of his utterances of this type. The

argument Icke presents here is sometimes circular or intratextual; i.e., the reason people should believe in his declarations is placed within other declarations he made previously. Within such logic, the only test for this prophetic type of claim is history—if it is confirmed by it, it is to be believed. This strategy of claiming legitimacy for statements regarding the pandemic tends to be more general and vaguer since Icke does not provide a clear and precise reference to where we can find his prediction or its details. In one instance, Icke claims that he forecasted right at the beginning of the pandemic that lockdown would not be a temporary solution but a long-term policy of governments, framing any promise of the return to normalcy as a carrot on a stick in front of a donkey (Icke 2021d, 13:00). Icke supports his claim by pointing to the goal post that moved from flattening the curve to complete vaccination. Similarly, Alex Jones, in the interview, introduces Icke as someone who predicted many things: “he predicted the lockdowns, he predicted the travel passes, he predicted all this because it’s in the Rockefeller Foundation, it’s in their own admissions” (Icke 2020d, 1:16).

In this example, we can see the transition from Icke’s personal prediction to the prediction based on the slippage in the discourse or acts of the evil cult. In other words, Icke transitions to legitimacy based on primary sources and the existing narratives or events that “foresaw” the pandemic and the following mitigation measures. One such source is a document titled “Scenarios for the Future of Technology and International Development” published by the Rockefeller Foundation and Global Business Network (2010), which, as Icke points out, includes a scenario of a flu pandemic and contains a detailed description of how China will react and how the West would follow suit (Icke 2020b, 30:49). Following this example, Icke also singles out the Event 201 organized in October 2019 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Economic Forum, which included the simulation of the pandemic, with the focus on how the circulation of information can be controlled and how to deal with “anti-vaxxers” (Icke 2020b, 31:15). However, none of these are interpreted in detail in the analyzed audio-visual material, as they are discussed rather briefly. One such instance is the case of the beforementioned publication of the WEF regarding The Great Reset, which Icke references to defend his claims but does not go into the details of the text or provide quotes. These sources serve mainly to conclude that the current events are not accidental but have been in preparation far in advance.

As pointed out by other scholars (e.g., Dyrendal 2013, 213), the concept of knowledge in the work of David Icke is grounded on making connections between

important names, histories, and events that might not have an obvious correlation but serve as proof of the veracity of higher plans. Such a connection is made in Icke's exploration of the personal histories of key protagonists in his theories. For instance, Elon Musk is discredited by Icke because his grandfather was the leader of the technocracy movement in Canada (Icke 2020c, 1:57:34). At the same time, Gates and Rockefellers are denounced because of the relationship of two families that Icke accuses of sharing a genealogy (Icke 2020d, 25:25).

Dystopian literature from the twentieth century plays the same role in pandemic-related conspiracy theories. Icke wonders how Aldous Huxley, the author of "Brave New World" (1932), and George Orwell, the author of "Nineteen Eighty-Four" (1949), know what type of social structure we will have and what kind of technology will be used in the present age to maintain people in the state of oppression and surveillance (Icke 2020c, 1:38:27). The foreclosure of contingency and insightful creativity even as a possibility in the external reality serves to defend the notion that there must be a causal link between the source (Table 5.6) and the actual present reality, if that reality even vaguely reflects something from the source, as a fact beyond any discussion. The objective of the strategy is to claim legitimacy not based on a blind belief, but on the form of synthetic knowledge (Robertson 2016, 51), painting the image of the elaborate effort that was made to collect and link the evidence, claims, and information. By grounding his discourse on vague notions of "verifiable evidence," "sources," and "correlation," Icke evokes the notion of the scientific method, often used as a legitimation strategy in esoteric traditions, like clairvoyance, healing, or positive thinking (Hammer 2004, 204–6). Repeated references to the existing sources provide the audience with some level of reassurance that the authority they are listening to do the hard work, dominates the topic, knows well "the matter," and has significant experience in the field. The evoked sources have a varying degree of epistemic status; there are the ones that the audience can verify personally (like online materials or novels that are widely known) and the ones that require some level of belief (prophecies).

Table 5.6 The Classification of Sources Referred to by David Icke

<p>1) Internal source</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ <i>Personal prediction</i> (references to previous utterances) <p>2) External sources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ <i>Primary materials</i> (books, events, documents, videos, etc.)▪ <i>Private histories of key antagonists</i>▪ <i>Dystopian literature</i>

7. Summary of the Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis confirm the starting premise: in the context of the pandemic, David Icke assigns a special emphasis on the question of socio-political nature. He talks extensively and in great detail about power, social injustices, and the loss of experts' independence in the current context. In that regard, the narratives he offers about the pandemic and what is happening as a consequence resemble the claims of authors of dissenting narratives from the previous chapter—those who discuss “The Great Reset” directly and who try to place it in a context of the established political spectrum. Icke, however, does not completely move away from the more fantastic elements of his usual performance; that is, he still integrates some of his previous repertoire, but with moderation. For instance, Icke discusses The Death Cult as the source of evil power without references to the Reptilians.

In the analyzed videos, the popular author of conspiracy theories resorts to some legitimation strategies common to the New Age and spiritual traditions in the West: the appeal to individual experience and prophecy. Here, Icke provides argument why should the general public trust him—that is, he intends to establish some epistemological grounds, while taking into consideration how far the audience will go in accepting such grounds. The claims concerning the individual experiences and predictions are integrated into Icke's view of the pandemic, as he directly confronts the authorities that rely on a tradition with historically established legitimacy with his own strategies.

The results suggest that Icke was motivated by the increasingly apparent loss of legitimacy of the current socio-economic order (Condon 2021) to assemble a set of claims into a narrative that would give meaning to what the audience felt during a large part of the pandemic. This can be further supported by the fact that Icke showed some moderation in his first video appearance—right at the beginning of the health crisis—, which later morphed into a more complete and uncompromising conspiracy theory about the plans

behind the large events. That is, the growing discontent with the mitigation measures and their effect on people’s livelihood was starting to mount after the initial stage of the crisis and revealed a niche that would be prone to consume the content of the more conspiratorial type—that is, the one that would confirm publicly and play back to them their discontent. Additionally, Icke’s narratives are a necessary byproduct of a situation in which both the pandemic and non-pandemic frustrations cannot find a clear political avenue (Babic 2020) and where claims about socio-political reality exercise their utmost influence when expressed in the form of the entertaining spectacle (Postman 2006). In other words, the analyzed dissenting narratives are not an isolated phenomenon that appeared suddenly to disturb the public sphere from the outside; instead, they must be understood within the coordinates of socio-cultural development of recent decades.

Table 5.7 The Summary of The Results

The Section	The Source of Legitimacy
The Critique of Power	The reference to widespread political sentiments (e.g., distrust) and frustrations concerning the socio-economic arrangements. Icke relies additionally on the investment into fantastic imaginary concerning his depictions of evil.
Appeal to Social Critical Theory	The social theories concerning injustices and modes of power-imbalance presented with different labels and adapted to the conspiracy theory discursive repertoire.
The Delineation of Accepted Authority	The authoritative voices during the pandemic are divided into two groups—those who should and should not be trusted—according to their relationship with the power structure and big capital.
Perception and Experience	What one feels, knows, and has experienced is enough proof to come to conclusions about the external world.
The Source as the Evidence	The semblance between what is happening now and what has Icke or anyone else said and done in the past is enough to prove that evil plans have been in preparation for a long time.

VI. Conclusions

The results of the study confirm the premise that was the starting point of the dissertation: the dissenting narratives that during the pandemic expressed distrust towards all kinds of authority encompass two communication strategies. The first one is related to the political deadlock caused by the significant stagnation in the economy that, coupled with the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth in a society, ceased to deliver or even promise high levels of living standards for the majority, progressive improvements in life prospects, and the universal participation in the pleasure economy. This vision of progress, which is the one that defines collective purpose in a highly liberal society, has lost its force, while no other alternative vision has appeared to replace it. In that context, the dissenting narratives express concerns and aspirations that reflect the widespread disenchantment with socio-economic and political arrangements without conceiving a possibility that society can be structured on grounds different from the ones present previously. This notion is confirmed by the analysis that examined specifically the ways the narratives communicate political dissatisfactions, who the antagonists are (i.e., those who stand in the way of the betterment of collective conditions), and what ideas of future progress they propose.

The second communication strategy that dissenting narratives rely on is related to the modes of expression that are adapted to contemporary subjectivity. In a culture that elevates the autonomy of the individual over the matters of common good or collective welfare, the contemporary subjects become abstracted from history and society; that is, the individual does not conceive of him or herself in the broader context and even tends to adopt an adversarial attitude towards it. Consequently, as revealed by the patterns in the analyzed texts, the legitimacy in claims-making increasingly relies on the authority of an individual—both in terms of an individual perception and individual agency—to explain complex events. As individual perspective strengthens, the trust in others and institutions wanes, which becomes evident in the growing expression of fear towards the distant realms of politics and economics. This tendency is not only reflected in the integration of conspiracy theories in the culture at large but also the generalized anxiety (e.g., toxins in food and air). And finally, the appeal to enjoyment integrates into public speech: the entertainment factor starts playing an important role in the legitimacy of claims, and images of the stolen enjoyment incite the feeling that the good life is now relocated to other places and epochs. The analysis of selected narratives identified all

three facets of the new forms of knowledge-legitimation—the authority of the individual, fear, and enjoyment—as crucial for the manners of voicing dissent today. The conclusions were reached after two case studies (Table 6.1) that were considered illustrative of the forms of expression dissent today—that is, by resorting to political paranoia and new forms of populist rhetoric. The first case study focused on “The Great Reset” agenda by the World Economic Forum (WEF), or more specifically, on the narratives that defend it (i.e., the official account) and vehemently reject it (i.e., the dissenting account). The second case centered on the pandemic-related conspiracy theories of David Icke, a popular author in the fields of New Age traditions and alternative knowledge. The following subchapters provide more details on concrete findings and what conclusions can be drawn from them.

Table 6.1 General Conclusions of Case Studies

The Different Meaning of “The Great Reset”	
The Agenda “The Great Reset”	The agenda makes many proposals for the future; however, not many have the potential to inspire wide swaths of people. Ultimately, the goal is to preserve the system as it is, while resolving some of the most apparent deficiencies and negative consequences. The emphasis is placed on the preservation of the legitimacy of globalized capitalism.
Counter-Elites View of “The Great Reset”	The narratives present a pastiche of claims from popular culture and daily politics. They combine some valid claims concerning socio-economic grievances and outright conspiracy theories. Rather than being a solid critique of the system, the narratives function more like a media product to be consumed.
Internet Users’ View of “The Great Reset”	The analyzed texts revolve around the negative feelings toward the elites. The elites are perceived both within the coordinates of broader populism—they are the enemies of the people, and should be opposed for that—and of conspiracy theories—they want to control populations, etc. The social world is perceived as a somber place that is unresponsive to human agency.
The Legitimation Strategies of Conspiracy Theories	
David Icke's Views of the Pandemic	The narratives voice some of the pandemic-related frustrations directed at those with economic and political power and resort to some alternative epistemologies to defend the distrust of authorities. They thrive on the inexistence of political solutions to the grievances that people feel and on the strong legitimacy that entertainment-oriented media offers to alternative knowledge.

1. The Importance of Politics

The analysis of the claims of a political nature showed that the current socio-economic circumstances play an important role in the construction of the dissenting narratives. The comparative overview of the results of the case studies—as presented in Table 6.2—shows that despite the different points of view of analyzed texts (for instance, the analyzed texts included a narrative of counter elites and internet users, the authors

from the politics-center media and the New Age conspiracy theorists) they all communicate a particular combination of political messages. More precisely, the claims concerning what are the deficiencies of the current socio-economic model, who are the persons and entities responsible for what is happening, and how should collective arrangements look in the future play an important role in the narratives and contribute to a large extent to their wide acclaim for the part of the public.

Table 6.2 The Political Claims of Dissenting Narratives

Dissatisfactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The diminished economic prospects of citizens. — The corruption in politics and the unfairness in the economy (e.g., large monopolies). — The affairs on a global scale. — The encroachment on personal freedoms and the loss of economic independence. — Progressive politics (i.e., the politics of identity).
Antagonists
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The World Economic Forum. — Corporations and the extremely wealthy. — The institutions and individuals who are financially involved with those mentioned above. — Political leaders and public figures are tied to global institutions and the flows of capital.
Visions of Progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Coming together and resisting the unjust system. — Taking back control as a nation. — Assuring some level of a secure and stable life.

The communication of dissatisfactions presents a twofold tendency. The first one includes the type of messages about the injustices that everybody would agree upon, regardless of the political identification; for instance, the narratives emphasize the economic downturn and the decrease in the standard of living of people, the risk of poverty, the rise in political corruption, the unacceptable level of influence companies have on governments, and the accumulation of wealth that goes with the consolidation of large monopolies. These claims are not only widely accepted by the public, but are even echoed by the World Economic Forum (WEF), whose agenda the authors of dissenting text aim to criticize. The WEF's agenda, for instance, points out the problems concerning unemployment or wealth inequality, albeit without addressing explicitly its context (the agenda rather talks about social problems as "challenges"). The second tendency in the claims concerning dissatisfaction is the appeal to right-wing populist sentiments of the last decade. First, the dissenting narratives frame all matters of global importance as negative: the word "global" is used in a pejorative way, the global capital flow is seen as

detrimental to the interests of regular people, cosmopolitanism is framed as a threat to local culture, and similar. Second, matters such as the basic freedom that was perceived as endangered during the pandemic or the negative views of the politics of identity recognition—also underlined by the authors of analyzed texts—clearly suggest the identification with the more right-leaning ideologies in the Anglo-Saxon sphere.

In terms of those who are seen as antagonists, the same criteria apply. Those involved with international matters—supranational organizations, cosmopolitan elites, world leaders, multinational corporations, and similar—are the true enemies of people and so is everyone who associates with them, gets funding from them, etc. The WEF, one of the biggest culprits according to the dissenting narrative, paints an inverted image; the authors from the Forum in Davos see those who disseminate dangerous ideas, such as conspiracy theorists or populist demagoguery, as the biggest obstacle on the trajectory to the better society. In a similar way, the myriad of changes that the WEF proposes—from the negative future forecast that announces the need for adaptation to adverse circumstances to the more optimistic outlook on the expertise- and technology-based solutions—are not entertained by the authors that express dissent and are even outright reject (e.g., this is the case with the possibility of increased surveillance that the WEF sees as an inevitable development). The dissenting narratives, on their part, express a desire for the less ambitious return to some socio-economic stability within the nation-state.

In general, there are a number of claims pertinent to dissenting narratives that are formulated in a way that would appeal to the widest possible audience. Mirroring the tendency of the populist movements, the dissenting narratives present a “catch-all” critique of the current socio-economic system for all possible forms of popular discontent (Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe 2021, 80). This refers to the tendency in the narratives to discuss grievances felt by many social groups without endorsing any clear political positions or expressing a clear attitude towards the center of political and economic power. Additionally, what is framed as a return to stability includes some of the things that everybody can agree upon—e.g., the idea of people coming together in a community, leading a more fulfilling life, etc. At the same time, other claims show the intention of the authors to position themselves within a political landscape, with references to the themes common to right-wing political parties. Such a mixed approach assures that a large part of the audience will not encounter claims that are too alienating, which allows the narratives to capture the wide spectrum—from those with no exclusive partisan

identification to those loyal to the right-wing causes. The only segment of the audience that is excluded is those that align with the perceived antagonists—the identity-oriented left and the technocratic center. In some cases, the eclectic approach can lead to contradiction; for instance, the narratives can at the same time paint the extremely wealthy or large multinational corporations as the pinnacle of evil and vehemently reject the government interference in the economy, without sacrificing any legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In such cases, the elements of the conspiracy theory serve to fill the void: the maleficent wealthy and corporations are not products of free market competition but have acquired their privilege due to secret plots and evil plans, often in collusion with the government itself. In other words, the idea that “the market always delivers the best results” (Sharpe 2004, 160) is salvaged, even in light of the very apparent lack of such good results.

In sum, concerning the claims of political kind, the authors approach the world as it is and intend to intelligently find the position where they can safely inhabit it. Those who belong to the counter-elites elevate their public performance by capitalizing on the deficiencies of the current system, giving voice to the growing right-wing populist insurgencies, and acquiring a semblance of strong defiance to the injustices. The fact that those who produce the most popular dissenting narratives are themselves part of the elite—even if it is the counter-elite they belong to—is not given too much importance or entertained in any way. Overall, the dissenting narratives thrive on the disenchantment caused by the slow disappearance of the middle-class lifestyle in the West; that is, by presenting the narrative that frames the broken promises of liberalism as an elite plot, the narratives allow for the fantasy of the return to stable growth, universal abundance, and the society of enjoyment to exist as a possibility, even if a remote one.

2. The Ways of Legitimizing Claims

The narratives rely on different modes of expression to attract large audiences and ensure that their version of events will get a hearing and be accepted as valid one. The comparative overview of case studies shows that three elements that were part of the design of the dissertation play a crucial role in how the dissent is communicated today. Table 6.3 displays a summary of those elements.

Table 6.3 The Modes of Expression in Dissenting Narratives

The Authority of Individual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — What one has said, done, or experienced serves as a basis for a claim. — The acts of corrupt, evil, or psychopathological individuals are the cause of large-scale problems.
Fear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The world is filled with conspiracies: the evil elites are colluding in secret to establish a new, oppressive order. — Distrust towards what appears on the surface; the reality is manipulated. — People have no agency; someone else is pulling the strings. — New technology and toxins are a threat to human welfare.
Enjoyment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Amusement and entertainment: references to popular culture, spectacular imagery, and humor. — The lost paradise: nostalgia for the good life.

First of all, narratives establish a way of knowing that is closely tied to the individual point of view. For instance, the authors of analyzed text point to someone’s experience or prophecy to argue that something is true; this is the tactic specifically common to David Icke’s arguments, as he operates in the field of conspiracy theories and New Age traditions where such strategies of seeking legitimation have a long history. On the contrary, the discussion of individual characters and traits to explain complex events is a common feature across the studies. In this case, the developments with complex history are explained by referring to someone’s deliberate or unconscious actions. This is common both for the counter-narratives (e.g., the wealthy are just narcissists and think only of themselves) and in the explanations provided by the WEF (e.g., political and economic tendencies are the results of moral issues). This suggests that the new modes of cognition are taking a stronghold in public debate—the transition from debating about the complexity of the world towards debating about the individual nodes within the network.

The next tendency detected in the narratives is the depiction of the world as a sinister and dangerous place; that is, the analyzed texts use fear to incite an affective response. For instance, the elements of conspiracy theories are presented to accompany political sentiments. The wealthy, politicians, and intellectuals, identified as culprits of all things that are going wrong, conspire in secret to bring changes to society that the large segments of the population see as undesirable and detrimental to society. These elements are weaved into a careful and elaborate superconspiracy in the case of David Icke—suggesting a meticulous work of bringing all the pieces together in a convincing account—or exist as separate claims in the works of authors that write in opposition to the WEF. This group of authors resorts freely to distinct claims that make up a conspiracy theory to complement their statements about the injustice that is experienced by their

audience. Besides the claims that suggest a conspiracy, the analysis points to the overwhelming sentiment that the world is a place where human individual or collective agency has no importance, where things develop in a way that is impervious to what people want or do; this is evident in the claims of some hidden authority that pulls the string and effectively runs the society or in the accusations waged at the powerful for manipulating people's behavior and consciousness through the media and government regulations. The undermined human subjectivity—encompassed in the idea that individuals are, in their collective capacity, powerless and irrelevant in front of the grandeur of history and the social world (see: Heartfield 2006)—leads to the public sphere made of individuals prone to withdrawal and hostility. Additionally, it becomes clear that the authors of the texts and the audience view Western society as something far from democracy, as they frame it as a system where citizens expect things to develop in a way that is independent of them.

And finally, the narratives draw from the entertainment industry to defend their claims. This includes references to popular culture (e.g., dystopian novels and films), spectacular imagery (e.g., presenting the elites as devils, Satan, Anti-Christ, blockbuster villains, etc.), or humor (e.g., sarcasm and figurative speech). This technique is additionally followed by the nostalgic sentiment, which depicts distant epochs in romanticist tones. Such tendencies point to the fact that narratives are not only argumentative in the strictly political sense, but function as products of popular culture that induce a certain level of enjoyment when consumed.

Overall, the results of the analysis suggest that new forms of literacy are taking hold. That is, the way people engage with the world through language is changing, with a specific effect on the form and content. In the current context, a claim about reality obtains legitimacy and appears convincing to a segment of the population according to its potential to: first, include an individual as a point through which the world can be inquired into; second, incite intense emotions (fear, in this case), which assures its advantage over other less impassioned modes of expression; and third, communicate through a highly entertaining way and easily digestible examples, often devoid of nuance.

These strategies are crucial for the construction of dissenting narratives today, as they provide a “cognitive mapping” (Jameson 1988) of the world, helping the audience situate complex developments in a familiar context and in a way that does not require an elaborate study. It is clear that what is denominated a conspiracy theory is expansive—it includes sentiments ranging from generalized disbelief to the more brazen accusations

such as those that talk about the manipulation through microchips or the establishment of new oppressive world systems. The political frustration and ire coupled with the distrust of modern institutions can lead to patterns of communication that, in the fixation on hidden control by evil forces, largely undermine the ability of the political systems to function properly. The question that remains to be answered is what is to be done going forward; the answer, however, needs to acknowledge the chronic instability, technological company's increased surveillance of users, and the institutionalization of corruption or revolving-door practices, all of which seem to feed the distrust and the fragmentation of the social cohesion. In order to counter interpretations of the world that make stark excursions into fantasy, the new, disinterested, earnest, and critical interpretation of where the society finds itself and where it is going must be mapped out and put forward. The dissertation contributes to the discussion in its own way; it sheds some light on the nature of the unorthodox explanations of the socio-political reality and how the new ways of acquiring knowledge through media can undermine both the public reason and the existence of a unique and universal set of rules for political and public communication.

3. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

The dissertation focused on specific case studies that included various kinds of narratives, sources, and authors; however, due to the objective constraints, no research has been conducted directly with the individuals who consume the narrative. The findings would have been enriched significantly should the accounts of how people assign meaning to narratives that appear online and how they integrate this information into their everyday lives be included in the analysis. The past scholarship shows that findings based on the anthropological approach towards the phenomenon of conspiracy theory have painted a much more complex picture than what would be otherwise expected (see: Drażkiewicz Grodzicka 2021; Harambam 2020). While the present dissertation includes the analysis of comments of regular internet users, their offline practices and beliefs are not taken into account.

Furthermore, the here-presented research focuses on specific accounts from the Anglo-Saxon sphere. Having in mind the influence that the content in the English language has today and how the information flows and spreads in different media environments, including the narratives from various national environments would

contribute to the expansion of knowledge on the forms dissent acquires in public communication. Such an approach would lead to much broader conclusions about the relationship between the concrete political environment, socio-economic conditions, and the way dissent integrates into the public sphere; that is, some aspects that are not pertinent to the Anglo-Saxon sphere of influence but are of some other national context would bring in new conclusions. Including the anthropological and comparative perspectives leaves space for future research to develop the ideas conceived in this dissertation further.

VII. Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W., Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and Nevitt R. Stanford. 1950. *The Authoritarian Personality*. Studies in Prejudice. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2021. *Where Are We Now?: The Epidemic as Politics*. Translated by Valeria Dani. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Alba, Davey. 2020. “The Baseless ‘Great Reset’ Conspiracy Theory Rises Again.” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2020, sec. World.
<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/11/17/world/covid-19-coronavirus#the-baseless-great-reset-conspiracy-theory-rises-again>.
- Albert, Melissa. 2022. “Glenn Beck.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 6, 2022.
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Glenn-Beck>.
- Altheide, David L. 1984. “Media Hegemony: A Failure of Perspective.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 48 (2): 476–90. <https://doi.org/10.1086/268844>.
- Amos, Owen, and Alexandra Fouché. 2023. “Migration Too High Says Sunak, as Total Hits Record Level.” *BBC News*, May 25, 2023, sec. UK.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/uk-65669832>.
- Andrejevic, Mark. 2013. *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2016. “The Jouissance of Trump.” *Television & New Media* 17 (7): 651–55.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416652694>.
- Anti-Defamation League. 2020. “‘The Great Reset’ Conspiracy Flourishes Amid Continued Pandemic.” *Anti-Defamation League* (blog). December 29, 2020.
<https://www.adl.org/blog/the-great-reset-conspiracy-flourishes-amid-continued-pandemic>.
- Arcand, Denys, dir. 1986. *The Decline of the American Empire*. Comedy, Drama. Corporation Image M & M, Malofilm, National Film Board of Canada (NFB).
- , dir. 2004. *The Barbarian Invasions*. Comedy, Crime, Drama. Pyramide Productions, Cinémaginaire Inc., Astral Films.
- , dir. 2019. *The Fall of the American Empire*. Comedy, Crime, Drama. Cinémaginaire Inc., Téléfilm Canada, Société de Développement des Entreprises Culturelles (SODEC).
- Ash, Timothy Garton. 2005. “Davos Man’s Death Wish.” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2005, sec. World news.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/feb/03/globalisation.comment>.
- Asprem, Egil, and Asbjørn Dyrendal. 2015. “Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New Is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy

- Theory?" *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30 (3): 367–82.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2015.1081339>.
- Auken, Ida. 2016. "Welcome To 2030: I Own Nothing, Have No Privacy And Life Has Never Been Better." *Forbes*, November 10, 2016.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/worldeconomicforum/2016/11/10/shopping-i-cant-really-remember-what-that-is-or-how-differently-well-live-in-2030/>.
- Aupers, Stef. 2012. "'Trust No One': Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture." *European Journal of Communication* 27 (1): 22–34.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323111433566>.
- Aupers, Stef, and Dick Houtman. 2010. "Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital." In *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, edited by Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, 1–30. International Studies in Religion and Society 12. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Austen, Ian. 2022. "Canada Ends Its Freeze on Hundreds of Accounts Tied to Protests." *The New York Times*, February 22, 2022, sec. World.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/22/world/americas/canada-protest-finances.html>.
- Babic, Milan. 2020. "Let's Talk about the Interregnum: Gramsci and the Crisis of the Liberal World Order." *International Affairs* 96 (3): 767–86.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz254>.
- Barkun, Michael. 2003. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Comparative Studies in Religion and Society 15. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Barnes, Julian E., Adam Goldman, and Charlie Savage. 2018. "Blaming the Deep State: Officials Accused of Wrongdoing Adopt Trump's Response." *The New York Times*, December 18, 2018, sec. U.S.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/us/politics/deep-state-trump-classified-information.html>.
- Barnet, Richard J., and Ronald E. Müller. 1974. *Global Reach: The Power of the Multinational Corporations*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Barrett-Fox, Rebecca. 2018. "A King Cyrus President: How Donald Trump's Presidency Reasserts Conservative Christians' Right to Hegemony." *Humanity & Society* 42 (4): 502–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597618802644>.
- Bartel, Fritz. 2022. *The Triumph of Broken Promises: The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- BBC News. 2020. "US Election 2020: Has Trump Delivered on His Promises?" *BBC News*, October 15, 2020, sec. US & Canada. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37982000>.
- Beck, Glenn, and Justin Haskins. 2022. *The Great Reset: Joe Biden and the Rise of 21st Century Fascism*. Brentwood & New York: Forefront Books; Mercury Ink.
- Beer, Tommy. 2021. "Report: American Billionaires Have Added More Than \$1 Trillion In Wealth During Pandemic." *Forbes*, January 26, 2021.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2021/01/26/report-american-billionaires-have-added-more-than-1-trillion-in-wealth-during-pandemic/>.

- Bergman, Manfred Max. 2010. "Hermeneutic Content Analysis: Textual and Audiovisual Analyses within a Mixed Methods Framework." In *SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*, edited by Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie, 379–96. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Bergmann, Eiríkur, and Michael Butter. 2020. "Conspiracy Theory and Populism." In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 330–43. London & New York: Routledge.
- Berlet, Chip. 2012. "Collectivists, Communists, Labor Bosses, and Treason: The Tea Parties as Right-Wing Populist Counter-Subversion Panic." *Critical Sociology* 38 (4): 565–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920511434750>.
- Biesecker, Michael, Michael Kunzelman, Gillian Flaccus, and Jim Mustian. 2021. "Records Show Fervent Trump Fans Fueled US Capitol Takeover." *AP NEWS*, January 11, 2021, sec. AP Investigations. <https://apnews.com/article/us-capitol-trump-supporters-1806ea8dc15a2c04f2a68acd6b55cace>.
- Bíró-Nagy, András, and Áron József Szászi. 2023. "The Roots of COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy: Evidence from Hungary." *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 46 (1): 185–200. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-022-00314-5>.
- Bloom, Allan David. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bond, Bayleigh Elaine, and Ryan Neville-Shepard. 2023. "The Rise of Presidential Eschatology: Conspiracy Theories, Religion, and the January 6th Insurrection." *American Behavioral Scientist* 67 (5): 681–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211046557>.
- Bond, Shannon. 2022. "How Alex Jones Helped Mainstream Conspiracy Theories Become Part of American Life." *NPR*, August 6, 2022, sec. National. <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/06/1115936712/how-alex-jones-helped-mainstream-conspiracy-theories-into-american-life>.
- Bovens, Mark, and Anchrít Wille. 2017. *Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brady, William J., Killian McLoughlin, Tuan N. Doan, and Molly J. Crockett. 2021. "How Social Learning Amplifies Moral Outrage Expression in Online Social Networks." *Science Advances* 7 (33): eabe5641. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abe5641>.
- Bratich, Jack Z. 2008. *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Brill, Michael, Corey Holman, Chris Morris, Ronjoy Raichoudhary, and Noah Yosif. 2017. "Understanding the Labor Productivity and Compensation Gap." *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* 6 (6). <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/77533>.
- Bronner, Stephen Eric. 2003. *A Rumor about the Jews: Antisemitism, Conspiracy, and the Protocols of Zion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Brown, Dan. 2003. *The Da Vinci Code*. New York: Doubleday.
- Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. 1970. *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era*. New York: Viking Press.
- Buxton, Nick. 2019. "Multistakeholderism: A Critical Look." Corporate Power. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute. <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/multistakeholderism-a-critical-look>.
- Byford, Jovan. 2011. *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carter, Chris, dir. 1993. *The X Files*. Crime, Drama, Mystery. Ten Thirteen Productions, 20th Century Fox Television.
- , dir. 1994. *The X Files*. Crimen, Drama, Misterio. Ten Thirteen Productions, 20th Century Fox Television.
- Castanho Silva, Bruno, Federico Vegetti, and Levente Littvay. 2017. "The Elite Is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Swiss Political Science Review* 23 (4): 423–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12270>.
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 2022. "Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic." October 7, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/epidemic.html>.
- Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2020. "Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships." Covid Hardship Watch. CBPP. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and>.
- Chantanayingyong, Fon Mathuros, and Ceri Parker. 2019. "Who's Coming to Davos 2019?" *World Economic Forum* (blog). January 15, 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/everything-you-need-to-know-about-davos-2019/>.
- Christophers, Brett. 2020. *Rentier Capitalism: Who Owns the Economy, and Who Pays for It?* New York: Verso UK.
- Cinelli, Matteo, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, Alessandro Galeazzi, Walter Quattrociocchi, and Michele Starnini. 2021. "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 (9): e2023301118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118>.
- Coady, David. 2006. "An Introduction to the Philosophical Debate about Conspiracy Theories." In *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, edited by David Coady. Hampshire & Burlington: Ashgate.
- Cohn, Norman. 1970. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Suzanne. 2009. *The Hunger Games*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

- Condon, Roderick. 2021. "The Coronavirus Crisis and the Legitimation Crisis of Neoliberalism." *European Societies* 23 (sup1): S805–16.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1839669>.
- Conger, Kimberly H. 2019. "The Christian Right in U.S. Politics." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 1–25.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.810>.
- Conover, Michael D., Emilio Ferrara, Filippo Menczer, and Alessandro Flammini. 2013. "The Digital Evolution of Occupy Wall Street." *PLoS ONE* 8 (5): e64679.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0064679>.
- Cosme, Inês, Rui Santos, and Daniel W. O'Neill. 2017. "Assessing the Degrowth Discourse: A Review and Analysis of Academic Degrowth Policy Proposals." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 149 (April): 321–34.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.02.016>.
- Cowan, Thomas S., and Sally Fallon Morell. 2020. *The Contagion Myth: Why Viruses (Including "Coronavirus") Are Not the Cause of Disease*. New York: Skyhorse.
- Cummins, Ronnie. 2021a. "Exploiting Fear to Lock Down Freedom." In *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*, by Joseph Mercola and Ronnie Cummins. White River Junction: Chalsea Green Publishing.
- . 2021b. "How the Pandemic Plans Unfolded." In *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*, by Joseph Mercola and Ronnie Cummins. White River Junction: Chalsea Green Publishing.
- . 2021c. "Lab Leak or Natural Origin?" In *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*, by Joseph Mercola and Ronnie Cummins. White River Junction: Chalsea Green Publishing.
- . 2021d. "Take Back Control." In *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*, by Joseph Mercola and Ronnie Cummins. White River Junction: Chalsea Green Publishing.
- Davenport, David. 2016. "Trump And Sanders In Agreement? The Strange Politics Of Free Trade." *Forbes*, April 1, 2016.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/daviddavenport/2016/04/01/trump-and-sanders-in-agreement-the-strange-politics-of-free-trade/>.
- Debord, Guy. 1994. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books.
- "Definition of Big Tech." n.d. PCMAG. Accessed December 23, 2022.
<https://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/big-tech>.
- DeHaven-Smith, Lance, ed. 2016. *Conspiracy Theory in America*. Discovering America 6. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Deneen, Patrick J. 2018. *Why Liberalism Failed*. Politics and Culture. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Desilver, Drew. 2018. "For Most U.S. Workers, Real Wages Have Barely Budged in Decades." *Pew Research Center* (blog). August 7, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/08/07/for-most-us-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>.
- Dolan, Brian, ed. 2000. *Malthus, Medicine & Morality: Malthusianism After 1798*. Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Douthat, Ross. 2020. *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success*. New York: Avid Reader Press.
- Dovey, Jon. 2000. *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*. London & Sterling, VA: Pluto Press.
- Drażkiewicz Grodzicka, Elżbieta. 2021. "Taking Vaccine Regret and Hesitancy Seriously. The Role of Truth, Conspiracy Theories, Gender Relations and Trust in the HPV Immunisation Programmes in Ireland." *Journal for Cultural Research* 25 (1): 69–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2021.1886422>.
- Dyrendal, Asbjørn. 2013. "Hidden Knowledge, Hidden Powers: Esotericism and Conspiracy Culture." In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 200–225. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/contemporary-esotericism/hidden-knowledge-hidden-powers-esotericism-and-conspiracy-culture/E0E560A1A553863EB07E996FECB290E8>.
- Eatwell, Roger, and Matthew J. Goodwin. 2018. *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy*. London: Pelican Books.
- Eberl, Jakob-Moritz, Robert A. Huber, and Esther Greussing. 2021. "From Populism to the 'Plandemic': Why Populists Believe in COVID-19 Conspiracies." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 31 (sup1): 272–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924730>.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, and John Ehrenreich. 2013. *Death of a Yuppie-Dream: The Rise and Fall of the Professional-Managerial Class*. New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office.
- Ehrenreich, John. 2016. *Third Wave Capitalism: How Money, Power, and the Pursuit of Self-Interest Have Imperiled the American Dream*. Ithaca & London: ILR Press.
- Eidelson, Roy J. 2011. "Inequality, Shared Outrage, and Social Change." *Peace Review* 23 (1): 4–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2011.548238>.
- Ellul, Jacques. 2011. *The Technological Society*. Translated by John Wilkinson. New York, NY: Vintage books.
- Emmott, Robin. 2017. "Spain Sees Russian Interference in Catalonia Separatist Vote." *Reuters*, November 13, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-spain-politics-catalonia-russia-idUSKBN1DD20Y>.
- Enyedi, Zsolt, Chantal Mouffe, Yannis Stavrakakis, Ruth Wodak, and John Fitzgibbon. 2017. "Five Views: Is Populism Really a Threat to Democracy?" *EUROPP* (blog). July 24, 2017. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/07/24/is-populism-really-a-threat-to-democracy/>.

- Ernst, Nicole, Frank Esser, Sina Blassnig, and Sven Engesser. 2019. "Favorable Opportunity Structures for Populist Communication: Comparing Different Types of Politicians and Issues in Social Media, Television and the Press." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24 (2): 165–88.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218819430>.
- European Center for Populism Studies. n.d. "Culture War." *Dictionary Of Populism* (blog). Accessed April 26, 2023.
<https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/culture-war/>.
- Evans, Gareth. 2022. "Alex Jones Told to Pay \$965m Damages to Sandy Hook Victims' Families." *BBC News*, October 13, 2022, sec. US & Canada.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-63237092>.
- Fandos, Nicholas. 2015. "Donald Trump Defiantly Rallies a New 'Silent Majority' in a Visit to Arizona." *The New York Times*, July 12, 2015, sec. U.S.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/us/politics/donald-trump-defiantly-rallies-a-new-silent-majority-in-a-visit-to-arizona.html>.
- Farkas, Johan, and Jannick Schou. 2019. *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood*. Routledge Studies in Global Information, Politics and Society 19. Abingdon, Oxon & New York, NY: Routledge.
- Firstenberg, Arthur. 2020. *The Invisible Rainbow: A History of Electricity and Life*. London: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.
- . 2014. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Frank, David John, John W. Meyer, and David Miyahara. 1995. "The Individualist Polity and the Prevalence of Professionalized Psychology: A Cross-National Study." *American Sociological Review* 60 (3): 360.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2096419>.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1995. "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'post-Socialist' age." *New Left Review*, From redistribution to recognition?, 1 (212): 68–93.
- Frawley, Ashley. 2015. "Medicalization of Social Problems." In *Handbook of the Philosophy of Medicine*, edited by Thomas Schramme and Steven Edwards, 1–18. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8706-2_74-1.
- Fuller, Gregory W., Alison Johnston, and Aidan Regan. 2020. "Housing Prices and Wealth Inequality in Western Europe." *West European Politics* 43 (2): 297–320.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2018.1561054>.
- Furedi, Frank. 2005. *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right*. London: Continuum.
- . 2006. *Culture of Fear Revisited: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*. London & New York: Continuum.

- . 2018. *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum.
- . 2021. *Democracy under Siege: Don't Let Them Lock It Down!* Winchester, UK & Washington, USA: Zero Books.
- Fusaro, Diego. 2022. *Odio la resilienza: contro la mistica della sopportazione*. Milan: Rizzoli.
- George, Susan. 2015. *Shadow Sovereigns: How Global Corporations Are Seizing Power*. Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Gethin, Amory, Clara Martínez-Toledano, and Thomas Piketty. 2022. “Brahmin Left Versus Merchant Right: Changing Political Cleavages in 21 Western Democracies, 1948–2020*.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 137 (1): 1–48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjab036>.
- Gieryn, Thomas F. 1999. *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gillett, Francesca. 2017. “Probe Launched into Claims of Russian Meddling during Brexit Vote.” *Evening Standard*, November 2, 2017. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/election-watchdog-launches-probe-into-russian-meddling-in-brexit-vote-a3674251.html>.
- Gleckman, Harris. 2018. *Multistakeholder Governance and Democracy: A Global Challenge*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Global Shapers Community. n.d. “Building a Movement.” Global Shapers. Accessed October 3, 2022. <https://www.globalshapers.org/story/>.
- Gneiting, Uwe, Nicholas Lusiani, and Irit Tamir. 2020. “Power, Profits and the Pandemic: From Corporate Extraction for the Few to an Economy That Works for All.” Oxford: Oxfam. <https://doi.org/10.21201/2020.6386>.
- Golding, William. 2001. *Lord of the Flies*. Educational ed. London: Faber and Faber.
- Good, Chris. 2010. “On Social Issues, Tea Partiers Are Not Libertarians.” *The Atlantic*, October 6, 2010. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/10/on-social-issues-tea-partiers-are-not-libertarians/64169/>.
- Goodhart, David. 2017. *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Goodman, Jack, and Flora Carmichael. 2020. “The Coronavirus Pandemic ‘Great Reset’ Theory and a False Vaccine Claim Debunked.” *BBC News*, November 22, 2020, sec. Reality Check. <https://www.bbc.com/news/55017002>.
- Granter, Edward. 2017. “Strictly Business: Critical Theory and the Society of Rackets.” *Competition & Change* 21 (2): 94–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024529417690716>.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. 1992. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. New York & London: Routledge.

- Guilluy, Christophe. 2019. *Twilight of the Elites: Prosperity, the Periphery, and the Future of France*. Translated by Malcolm DeBevoise. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gumbel, Andrew. 2008. "Mystery over Big-Screen Return of 'The X-Files.'" *The Independent*, March 28, 2008, sec. News. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/mystery-over-bigscreen-return-of-the-xfiles-801781.html>.
- Hammer, Olav. 2004. *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*. Numen Book Series 90. Leiden: Brill.
- Han, Byung-Chul. 2017. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Translated by Erik Butler. Futures. London ; New York: Verso.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 1996. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Studies in the History of Religions 72. Leiden & New York: Brill.
- Harambam, Jaron. 2020. *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*. Conspiracy Theories. Abingdon, Oxon and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Harambam, Jaron, and Stef Aupers. 2018. "Rational Enchantments: Conspiracy Theory between Secular Scepticism and Spiritual Salvation." In *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, edited by Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem, 48–69. Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 17. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004382022_004.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. 2011. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. London: Random House.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. 2017. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. London: Vintage.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. 2018. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Hardt, Michael. 1999. "Affective Labor." *Boundary 2* 26 (2): 89–100.
- Harrington, Rebecca. 2016. "Here's What Trump Means When He Says 'drain the Swamp' — Even Though It's Not an Accurate Metaphor." *Business Insider*, November 12, 2016. <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-does-drain-the-swamp-mean-was-dc-built-on-a-swamp-2016-11>.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hathaway, Bill. 2021. "'Likes' and 'Shares' Teach People to Express More Outrage Online." *YaleNews*, August 13, 2021. <https://news.yale.edu/2021/08/13/likes-and-shares-teach-people-express-more-outrage-online>.
- Heartfield, James. 2006. *The "Death of the Subject" Explained*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press.
- . 2017. *The Equal Opportunities Revolution*. London: Repeater.

- Héder, Mihály. 2021. "AI and the Resurrection of Technological Determinism." *Információs Társadalom* 21 (2): 119. <https://doi.org/10.22503/inftars.XXI.2021.2.8>.
- Hedges, Chris. 2010. *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*. New York: Basic Books.
- Heins, Volker. 2007. "Critical Theory and the Traps of Conspiracy Thinking." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33 (7): 787–801. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453707081675>.
- Hellinger, Daniel C. 2018. *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in the Age of Trump*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Henley, Jon. 2020. "Support for Eurosceptic Parties Doubles in Two Decades across EU." *The Guardian*, March 2, 2020, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/02/support-for-eurosceptic-parties-doubles-two-decades-across-eu>.
- Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Higgins, Tucker. 2018. "Alex Jones' 5 Most Disturbing and Ridiculous Conspiracy Theories." *CNBC*, September 14, 2018. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/09/14/alex-jones-5-most-disturbing-ridiculous-conspiracy-theories.html>.
- Hochuli, Alex, George Hoare, and Philip Cunliffe. 2021. *The End of the End of History: Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. Winchester, UK & Washington, USA: Zero Books.
- Hofstadter, Richard. 1964. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964. <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.
- Horwitz, Robert B. 2021. "Trump and the 'Deep State.'" *Policy Studies* 42 (5–6): 473–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.1953460>.
- Houellebecq, Michel. 2001. *Atomised*. Translated by Frank Wynne. London: Vintage Books.
- . 2019. *Serotonin*. Translated by Shaun Whiteside. London: Vintage.
- Huntington, Samuel P., Hans Küng, and Ghassan Salamé, dirs. 2004. *Is a "New World Order" Possible? | When Cultures Conflict*. <https://www.sam-network.org/video/when-cultures-conflict?curation=1012.5>.
- Husting, Ginna, and Martin Orr. 2007. "Dangerous Machinery: 'Conspiracy Theorist' as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion." *Symbolic Interaction* 30 (2): 127–50. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2007.30.2.127>.
- Huxley, Aldous. 1932. *Brave New World*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Icke, David. 1991. *The Truth Vibrations: The Extraordinary Story of the Experience That Changed His Life Forever*. London: Aquarian Press.
- . 1993. *In the Light of Experience: The Autobiography of David Icke*. London: Warner Books.

- . 1994. *The Robots' Rebellion: The Story of the Spiritual Renaissance*. Bath: Gateway.
- . 1999. *The Biggest Secret: The Book That Will Change the World*. Repr. Scottsdale: Bridge of Love.
- . 2002. *Children of the Matrix: How an Interdimensional Race Has Controlled the World for Thousands of Years - and Still Does*. Wildwood, Mo.: Bridge of Love.
- . 2003. *Tales from the Time Loop: The Most Comprehensive Expose of the Global Conspiracy Ever Written and All You Need to Know to Be Truly Free*. Ilford, Essex: Bridge of Love.
- . 2020a. *The Answer*. Derby: Ickonic Publishing.
- . 2020b. The truth behind the coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19 lockdown & the economic crash Interview by Brian Rose. London Real. <https://freedomplatform.tv/the-truth-behind-the-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-19-lockdown-the-economic-crash-david-icke/>.
- . 2020c. The coronavirus conspiracy: How COVID-19 will seize your rights & destroy our economy Interview by Brian Rose. London Real. <https://freedomplatform.tv/the-coronavirus-conspiracy-how-covid-19-will-seize-your-rights-destroy-our-economy-david-icke/>.
- . 2020d. David Icke Exposes The Great Reset Interview by Alex Jones. InfoWars. <https://banned.video/watch?id=5fbe601dc77bbc4fc3cbfcd6>.
- . 2021a. *Perceptions of a Renegade Mind*. Derby: Ickonic Publishing.
- . 2021b. The Awakening World Truth Summit with David Icke Interview by Simone Smith. TCN.Video. <https://tcn.video/david-icke-the-awakening-world-truth-summit/>.
- . 2021c. The Awakening Part 2 with David Icke Interview by Simone Smith. TCN.Video. <https://tcn.video/david-icke-the-awakening-part-2/>.
- . 2021d. David Icke Talks To Oracle Films About The Protest Movement Oracle Films. <https://www.facebook.com/OracleFilmsUK/videos/505147480839056/>.
- . 2021e. The Awakening Part 3 with David Icke Interview by Simone Smith. TCN.Video. <https://tcn.video/david-icke-full-interview-the-awakening-3/>.
- Italie, Hillel. 2009. "New Novel from Dan Brown Due This Fall." *The Mercury News*, June 5, 2009. <https://www.mercurynews.com/2009/06/05/new-novel-from-dan-brown-due-this-fall/>.
- James, Oliver. 2008. *The Selfish Capitalist: Origins of Affluenza*. London: Vermilion.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1988. "Cognitive Mapping." In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 347–60. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.
- Jarry, Jonathan. 2020. "The Psychiatrist Who Calmly Denies Reality." *Office for Science and Society*, September 24, 2020.

- <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/covid-19-pseudoscience/psychiatrist-who-calmly-denies-reality>.
- . 2021. “The Anti-Vaccine Propaganda of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.” *Office for Science and Society*, April 16, 2021. <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/covid-19-health-pseudoscience/anti-vaccine-propaganda-robert-f-kennedy-jr>.
- Jasanoff, Sheila. 2015. “Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity.” In *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, edited by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, 1–33. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jennings, Will, Gerry Stoker, Hannah Bunting, Viktor Orri Valgarðsson, Jennifer Gaskell, Daniel Devine, Lawrence McKay, and Melinda C. Mills. 2021. “Lack of Trust, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Social Media Use Predict COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy.” *Vaccines* 9 (6): 593. <https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines9060593>.
- Jolley, Daniel, Mathew D. Marques, and Darel Cookson. 2022. “Shining a Spotlight on the Dangerous Consequences of Conspiracy Theories.” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47 (October): 101363. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101363>.
- Jones, Alex. 2022. *The Great Reset: And the War for the World*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.
- Joyce, Kathryn. 2020. “The Long, Strange History of Bill Gates Population Control Conspiracy Theories.” *Type Investigations*, May 12, 2020. <https://www.typeinvestigations.org/investigation/2020/05/12/the-long-strange-history-of-bill-gates-population-control-conspiracy-theories/>.
- Jutel, Olivier. 2017. “Paranoia and Delusion: Liberalism’s Descent Into Cold War Fantasies.” *Overland* 228 (October): 3–9.
- . 2018a. “Donald Trump, American Populism and Affective Media.” In *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, edited by Carlos de la Torre, 249–62. London & New York: Routledge.
- . 2018b. “American Populism, Glenn Beck and Affective Media Production.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21 (4): 375–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877916688273>.
- . 2020. “Post-Politics.” In *Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytical Political Theory*, edited by Yannis Stavrakakis, 429–42. New York: Routledge.
- Kaminer, Wendy. 1999. *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Kanchan, Tanvi. n.d. “The Davos Diaries.” Bot Populi. Accessed February 20, 2021. <https://botpopuli.net/the-davos-diaries-episode-1>.
- Kellner, Douglas. 2003. *Media Spectacle*. London & New York: Routledge.
- . 2017. “Brexit Plus, Whitelash, and the Ascendency of Donald J. Trump.” *Cultural Politics* 13 (2): 135–49. <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-4129089>.
- Kennedy Jr, Robert F. 2021. “Foreword.” In *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*, by Joseph

- Mercola and Ronnie Cummins, ix–xiv. White River Junction: Chalsea Green Publishing.
- Kessler, Glenn. 2023. “The Truth about Russia, Trump and the 2016 Election.” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/05/17/truth-about-russia-trump-2016-election/>.
- Keynes, John Maynard. 1932. *Essays in Persuasion*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Klein, Ezra. 2015. “Bernie Sanders.” *Vox*, July 28, 2015. <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/28/9014491/bernie-sanders-vox-conversation>.
- Klein, Naomi. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. London: Allen Lane.
- Knight, Peter. 2000. *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Konings, Martijn. 2012. “Neoliberalism & the State.” *Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research* 23. <https://www.alternateroutes.ca/index.php/ar/article/view/15857>.
- Koopmans, Ruud, and Michael Zürn. 2019. “Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism – How Globalization Is Reshaping Politics in the Twenty-First Century.” In *The Struggle Over Borders: Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism*, edited by Michael Zürn, Oliver Strijbis, Pieter de Wilde, Ruud Koopmans, and Wolfgang Merkel, 1–34. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108652698.001>.
- Koranyi, Balazs. 2023. “Analysis: Wage Catch-up to Prolong Europe’s Inflation Battle.” *Reuters*, March 10, 2023, sec. European Markets. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/wage-catch-up-prolong-europes-inflation-battle-2023-03-10/>.
- Kristof, Nicholas. 2016. “My Shared Shame: The Media Helped Make Trump.” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2016, sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/opinion/sunday/my-shared-shame-the-media-helped-make-trump.html>.
- Kubrick, Stanley, dir. 1964. *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Stanley Kubrick Productions.
- Küppers, Anne, and Marion Reiser. 2022. “Ideological Extremism or Far-Right Attitudes? The Role of Ideology for COVID-19 Scepticism.” *Representation* 58 (4): 481–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2022.2134190>.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Lake, Rebecca. 2019. “Wall Street vs. Main Street.” *Yahoo! Finance*, November 26, 2019. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/wall-street-vs-main-street-175941722.html>.
- Lasch, Christopher. 1979. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Norton.

- . 1984. *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. New York: Norton. <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=62C0DB67-6AF7-45C0-9716-2B79BC671DB1>.
- . 1991. *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- . 1996. *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Latkin, Carl, Lauren Dayton, Catelyn Coyle, Grace Yi, Abigail Winiker, and Danielle German. 2022. “The Association between Climate Change Attitudes and COVID-19 Attitudes: The Link Is More than Political Ideology ☆,☆☆,★.” *The Journal of Climate Change and Health* 5 (February): 100099. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2021.100099>.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. 2010. “Immaterial Labor.” In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, 132–47. Theory out of Bounds 7. Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press.
- . 2012. *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*. Translated by Joshua David Jordan. Semiotext(e) / Intervention 13. Los Angeles: MIT Press.
- Lewis, Helen. 2020. “The World Is Trapped in America’s Culture War.” *The Atlantic*, October 27, 2020, sec. Global. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/10/internet-world-trapped-americas-culture-war/616799/>.
- Liu, Catherine. 2021. *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class*. Vol. 46. Forerunners. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. <https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452966441>.
- Lopatto, Elizabeth. 2019. “Elon Musk Unveils Neuralink’s Plans for Brain-Reading ‘Threads’ and a Robot to Insert Them.” *The Verge*, July 17, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/16/20697123/elon-musk-neuralink-brain-reading-thread-robot>.
- Lowry, Lois. 1993. *The Giver*. New York: Listening Library/Random House.
- Luri, Gregorio. 2020. *La escuela no es un parque de atracciones: una defensa del conocimiento poderoso*. Barcelona: Ariel.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair C. 1981. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth.
- Maher, John. 2022. “This Week’s Bestsellers: September 12, 2022.” *Publishers Weekly*, September 9, 2022. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/90293-this-week-s-bestsellers-september-12-2022.html>.
- Mair, Peter. 2006. “Ruling the Void.” *New Left Review*, no. 42 (December): 25–51.
- . 2013. *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London & New York: Verso.

- Malthus, Thomas Robert. 1798. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. London: J. Johnson.
- Marcetic, Branko. 2022. "YouTube's Censorship Is a Threat to the Left." *Jacobin*, June 17, 2022. <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/youtube-google-big-tech-censorship-misinformation-left-wing-media>.
- May, Albert L. 2010. "Who Tube? How YouTube's News and Politics Space Is Going Mainstream." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15 (4): 499–511. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161210382861>.
- McGowan, Todd. 2004. *The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*. SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture. Albany: State University of New York Press. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10594706>.
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1994. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- McMahon, Paul. n.d. "Sovereignty." *A Guide to Brexit* (blog). Accessed February 28, 2023. <http://brexitlegalguide.co.uk/reason-of-sovereignty/>.
- McManus, Matthew. 2020. *The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism: Neoliberalism, Post-Modern Culture, and Reactionary Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Melley, Timothy. 2000. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Mercola, Joseph. 2021a. "Event 201 and the Great Reset." In *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*, by Joseph Mercola and Ronnie Cummins. White River Junction: Chalsea Green Publishing.
- . 2021b. "Pharmaceutical Failures in the COVID-19 Crisis." In *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*, by Joseph Mercola and Ronnie Cummins. White River Junction: Chalsea Green Publishing.
- . 2021c. "Successful Protocols Suppressed." In *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*, by Joseph Mercola and Ronnie Cummins. White River Junction: Chalsea Green Publishing.
- Mercola, Joseph, and Ronnie Cummins. 2021. *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports, and the New Normal*. White River Junction: Chalsea Green Publishing.
- Mercola, Joseph, William B. Grant, and Carol L. Wagner. 2020. "Evidence Regarding Vitamin D and Risk of COVID-19 and Its Severity." *Nutrients* 12 (11): 3361. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu12113361>.
- Mercola Market. n.d. "Mercola Market - Shop Products Recommended by Dr. Joseph Mercola." Accessed October 13, 2022. <https://www.mercolamarket.com/>.
- Mille, Richard, Kerry A. Dolan, and Chase Peterson-Withorn. 2022. "Forbes Billionaires 2022: The Richest People In The World." *Forbes*, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>.

- Mitchell, Amy, Jeffrey Gottfried, Galen Stocking, Katerina Matsa, and Elizabeth M. Grieco. 2017. "Covering President Trump in a Polarized Media Environment." Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2017/10/02/covering-president-trump-in-a-polarized-media-environment/>.
- Mitchell, Scott S.D. 2019. "Population Control, Deadly Vaccines, and Mutant Mosquitoes: The Construction and Circulation of Zika Virus Conspiracy Theories Online." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 44 (2): 211–37. <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2019v44n2a3329>.
- Moore, Thomas. 1996. *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Morozov, Evgeny. 2011. *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. New York: Public Affairs.
- . 2022. "Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason." *New Left Review*, no. 133/134 (April): 89–126.
- Moss, Mark, dir. 2021. *How We Can Stop Them From Stealing Everything From Us*. <https://www.facebook.com/104567984474216/videos/499123441083062>.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 1993. *The Return of the Political*. Phronesis. London & New York: Verso.
- . 2005. *On the Political*. New York: Routledge.
- Mudde, Cas. 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. 1st ed. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>.
- Muirhead, Russell, and Nancy L. Rosenblum. 2019. *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Myers, Joe. 2021. "These Charts Show the Growing Gap between the World's Richest and Poorest." *World Economic Forum* (blog). December 10, 2021. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/12/global-income-inequality-gap-report-rich-poor/>.
- Nagle, Angela. 2017. *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Neate, Rupert. 2020. "Billionaires' Wealth Rises to \$10.2 Trillion amid Covid Crisis." *The Guardian*, October 7, 2020, sec. News. <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/oct/07/covid-19-crisis-boosts-the-fortunes-of-worlds-billionaires>.
- Nichols, Thomas M. 2019. *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, Sarah. 2021. "'We Are Drowning in Insecurity': Young People and Life after the Pandemic." *Financial Times*, April 25, 2021, sec. The Big Read. <https://www.ft.com/content/77d586cc-4f3f-4701-a104-d09136c93d44>.
- Oremus, Will. 2017. "Big Tobacco. Big Pharma. Big Tech?" *Slate*, November 17, 2017. <https://slate.com/technology/2017/11/how-silicon-valley-became-big-tech.html>.

- Orwell, George. 1946. "Politics and the English Language." *Horizon* 13 (76): 252–65.
- . 1949. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Ostrov, Barbara Feder. 2021. "Conspiracy Theory Doctor Surrenders Medical License." *CalMatters*, February 6, 2021, sec. Health. <http://calmatters.org/health/2021/02/conspiracy-theory-doctor-surrenders-medical-license/>.
- Parotto, Giuliana. 2017. "Populismo e corpo mediale." *Metábasis.it* 12 (24): 71–81. <https://doi.org/10.7413/18281567112>.
- Partridge, Christopher H. 2004. *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*. London & New York: T&T Clark International.
- Patten, Simon N. 1907. *The New Basis of Civilization*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Pew Research Center. 2007. "Chapter 4. Values and American Exceptionalism." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog). October 4, 2007. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2007/10/04/chapter-4-values-and-american-exceptionalism/>.
- Pigman, Geoffrey Allen. 2007. *The World Economic Forum: A Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Global Governance*. Routledge Global Institutions 12. London: Routledge.
- Pignotti, Monika, and Bruce A. Thyer. 2015. "New Age and Related Novel Unsupported Therapies in Mental Health Practice." In *Science and Pseudoscience in Clinical Psychology*, edited by Scott O. Lilienfeld, Steven J. Lynn, and Jeffrey M. Lohr, Second edition, 191–209. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Piller, Charles. 2020. "'This Is Insane!' Many Scientists Lament Trump's Embrace of Risky Malaria Drugs for Coronavirus." *Science*, March 26, 2020. <https://www.science.org/content/article/insane-many-scientists-lament-trump-s-embrace-risky-malaria-drugs-coronavirus>.
- Poniewozik, James. 2019. *Audience of One: Donald Trump, Television, and the Fracturing of America*. New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- Postman, Neil. 2006. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Quong, Jonathan. 2022. "Public Reason." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2022. Stanford, California: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/public-reason/>.
- Rahman, Grace. 2020. "The Inventor of PCR Never Said It Wasn't Designed to Detect Infectious Diseases." *Full Fact*, October 23, 2020. <https://fullfact.org/online/pcr-test-mullis/>.

- Rambatan, Bonni, and Jacob Johanssen. 2021. *Event Horizon: Sexuality, Politics, Online Culture, and the Limits of Capitalism*. Hampshire, UK: Zer0 Books.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ritzer, George, ed. 2007. "Strong Objectivity." In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 4853–54. Oxford, UK, Malden, USA and Carlton, Australia: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1111/b.9781405124331.2007.x>.
- Roberts, David. 2017. "Crowds, Cancer, Clones: The Suicide of Western Civilization in Canetti's Auto Da Fe and Houellebecq's Atomised." *Thesis Eleven* 142 (1): 44–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513617727896>.
- Robertson, David G. 2013. "David Icke's Reptilian Thesis and the Development of New Age Theodicy." *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 4 (1): 27–47. <https://doi.org/10.1558/ijnsr.v4i1.27>.
- . 2016. *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism*. Bloomsbury Advances in Religious Studies. London & New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- . 2018. "The Counter-Elite: Strategies of Authority in Millennial Conspiracism." In *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, edited by Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem, 234–54. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004382022_012.
- Rockefeller, David. 2003. *Memoirs*. New York, London: Random House.
- Ross, Gary, dir. 2012. *The Hunger Games*. Action, Adventure, Sci-Fi. Lionsgate, Color Force.
- Roszak, Theodore. 1969. *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Roussinos, Aris. 2020. "Is Cosmopolitanism Our Destiny?" *UnHerd*, October 13, 2020. <https://unherd.com/2020/10/globalism-wins-because-its-high-status/>.
- Russell, Eric-John. 2019. "From the Commodity to the Spectacle: Debord's Marx." In *Capitalism: Concept, Idea, Image: Aspects of Marx's Capital Today*, edited by Peter Osborne, Éric Alliez, and Eric-John Russell, 58–87. London: CRMEP Books.
- Ryskamp, Dani Alexis. 2020. "The Life in 'The Simpsons' Is No Longer Attainable." *The Atlantic*, December 29, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/12/life-simpsons-no-longer-attainable/617499/>.
- Sánchez-Páramo, Carolina, Ruth Hill, Daniel Gerszon Mahler, Ambar Narayan, and Nishant Yonzan. 2021. "COVID-19 Leaves a Legacy of Rising Poverty and Widening Inequality." *World Bank Blogs* (blog). October 7, 2021. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/covid-19-leaves-legacy-rising-poverty-and-widening-inequality>.

- Sarathchandra, Dilshani, and Kristin Haltinner. 2021. "How Believing Climate Change Is a 'Hoax' Shapes Climate Skepticism in the United States." *Environmental Sociology* 7 (3): 225–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2020.1855884>.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. 1994. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." *Utopian Studies* 5 (1): 1–37.
- Schafersman, Steven D. 1997. "Introduction to Science." *Jan-Philip Gehrcke, PhD* (blog). January 1997. <https://gehrcke.de/2014/06/steven-d-schafersmans-introduction-to-science/>.
- Schiølin, Kasper. 2020. "Revolutionary Dreams: Future Essentialism and the Sociotechnical Imaginary of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in Denmark." *Social Studies of Science* 50 (4): 542–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312719867768>.
- Schwab, Klaus. 2016. *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*. New York: Crown Business.
- . 2019. "Why We Need the 'Davos Manifesto' for a Better Kind of Capitalism." *World Economic Forum*, December 1, 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/why-we-need-the-davos-manifesto-for-better-kind-of-capitalism/>.
- Schwab, Klaus, and Nicholas Davis. 2018. *Shaping the Future of the Fourth Industrial Revolution: A Guide to Building a Better World*. New York: Currency.
- Schwab, Klaus, and Thierry Malleret. 2020. *COVID-19: The Great Reset*. Geneva: Forum Publishing.
- . 2022. *The Great Narrative: For a Better Future*. Cologne/Geneva, Switzerland: Forum Publishing.
- Schwab, Klaus, and Peter Vanham. 2021. *Stakeholder Capitalism: A Global Economy That Works for Progress, People and Planet*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley.
- Sekeris, Petros G. 2017. "Counter-Elite." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior*, edited by Fathali M. Moghaddam, 152–53. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144>.
- Sennett, Richard. 1977. *The Fall of Public Man*. Borzoi Book. New York: Knopf.
- Sharlet, Jeff. 2011. "Inside Occupy Wall Street – Rolling Stone." *Rolling Stone*, November 10, 2011. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/inside-occupy-wall-street-236993/>.
- Sharma, Sarah, and Susanne Soederberg. 2020. "Redesigning the Business of Development: The Case of the World Economic Forum and Global Risk Management." *Review of International Political Economy* 27 (4): 828–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1640125>.
- Sharpe, Matthew. 2004. *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real*. Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate.
- Shead, Sam. 2020. "Spotify Removes Podcast Featuring Interview with Conspiracy Theorist David Icke, While Apple Stalls." *CNBC*, May 6, 2020, sec. Technology. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/06/apple-spotify-david-icke-podcast.html>.

- Sheldon, Robert. 2022. "What Is a Microchip?" *WhatIs.Com* (blog). December 2, 2022. <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/microchip>.
- Shine, Betty. 1989. *Mind to Mind*. New York: Bantam Books. <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781448125159>.
- Silk, John. 2020. "Russia Report Damning of UK Government's 'Lack of Curiosity.'" *Deutsche Welle*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-report-damning-of-uk-governments-lack-of-curiosity/a-54252429>.
- Smith, Adam. 1776. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: W. Strahan; and T. Cadell.
- Smith, J. A. 2020. *Other People's Politics: Populism to Corbynism*. Winchester: Zero Book.
- Sogge, David. 2014. "State of Davos – The Camel's Nose in the Tents of Global Governance." In *State of Power 2014*, edited by Transnational Institute, 16–20. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute. <https://www.tni.org/en/briefing/state-power-2014>.
- Spiezia, Vincenzo, and Marco Vivarelli. 2002. "Innovation and Employment: A Critical Survey." In *Productivity, Inequality, and the Digital Economy*, edited by Nathalie Greenan, Yannick L'Horty, and Jacques Mairesse, 101–25. Cambridge & London: The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5609.003.0009>.
- Stavrakakis, Yannis. 2002. *Lacan and the Political*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Stocking, Galen, Patrick Van Kessel, Michael Barthel, Katerina Eva Matsa, and Maya Khuzam. 2020. "Many Americans Get News on YouTube, Where News Organizations and Independent Producers Thrive Side by Side." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*, September 28, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/09/28/many-americans-get-news-on-youtube-where-news-organizations-and-independent-producers-thrive-side-by-side/>.
- Stotsky, Sandra, Joan Traffas, and James Woodworth Woodworth. 2010. "Literary Study in Grades 9, 10, and 11: A National Survey." *Forum: A Publication of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers* 4 (September). <https://alscw.org/news/forum-number-4/>.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. 2009. "Flexible Employment, Flexible Families, and the Socialization of Reproduction." MPIfG Working Paper 09/13. Cologne: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies. <http://www.ssrn.com/abstract=1852525>.
- Strijbis, Oliver, Céline Teney, and Marc Helbling. 2019. "Why Are Elites More Cosmopolitan than Masses?" In *The Struggle Over Borders: Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism*, edited by Michael Zürn, Oliver Strijbis, Pieter de Wilde, Ruud Koopmans, and Wolfgang Merkel, 37–64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108652698.002>.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2014. *Conspiracy Theories & Other Dangerous Ideas*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Suwandi, Intan, and John Bellamy Foster. 2016. "Multinational Corporations and the Globalization of Monopoly Capital." *Monthly Review*, July 1, 2016. <https://monthlyreview.org/2016/07/01/multinational-corporations-and-the-globalization-of-monopoly-capital-from-the-1960s-to-the-present/>.
- Sweet, Elizabeth. 2018. "'Like You Failed at Life': Debt, Health and Neoliberal Subjectivity." *Social Science & Medicine* 212 (September): 86–93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.07.017>.
- Taibbi, Matt. 2019a. *Hate Inc: Why Today's Media Makes Us Despise One Another*. New York: OR Books.
- . 2019b. "We've Hit a New Low in Campaign Hit Pieces." *Rolling Stone*, May 21, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/taibbi-tulsi-gabbard-bernie-sanders-trump-2020-838156/>.
- Tanner, Michael. 2012. "Fiscal Conservatism." In *The Oxford Companion to American Politics*, edited by David Coates. Vol. 2. New York: Oxford University Press.
- The Economist Explains. 2021. "How Has the Meaning of the Word 'Woke' Evolved?" *The Economist*, July 30, 2021. https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2021/07/30/how-has-the-meaning-of-the-word-woke-evolved?itm_source=parsely-api.
- The Forum of Young Global Leaders. n.d. "Vision & Mission." Young Global Leaders. Accessed October 3, 2022. <https://www.younggloballeaders.org/vision-and-mission/>.
- The Rockefeller Foundation and Global Business Network. 2010. "Scenarios for the Future of Technology and International Development." New York & San Francisco. https://www.academia.edu/43023323/Scenarios_for_the_Future_of_Technology_and_International_Development.
- Thunberg, Greta. 2020. "Greta Thunberg: Our House Is Still on Fire and You're Fuelling the Flames." *World Economic Forum* (blog). January 21, 2020. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/greta-speech-our-house-is-still-on-fire-davos-2020/>.
- . 2021. "Greta Thunberg's Message to World Leaders at #DavosAgenda." *World Economic Forum* (blog). January 25, 2021. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/greta-thunberg-message-to-the-davos-agenda/>.
- Thurston, Ian. 2018. *Everything Is Permitted, Restrictions Still Apply: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Social Dislocation, Narcissism, and Post Truth*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429432101>.
- Torre, Carlos de la. 2018. "Global Populism: Histories, Trajectories, Problems, and Challenges." In *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, edited by Carlos de la Torre, 1–28. London & New York: Routledge.
- Tracey, Michael, and Angela Nagle. 2020. "First as Tragedy, Then as Farce: The Collapse of the Sanders Campaign and the 'Fusionist' Left." *American Affairs* 4 (2). <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2020/05/first-as-tragedy-then-as-farce/>.

- Trauth-Goik, Alexander. 2021. "Repudiating the Fourth Industrial Revolution Discourse: A New Episteme of Technological Progress." *World Futures* 77 (1): 55–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02604027.2020.1788357>.
- Trifunović, Vesna. 2019. "Framing Vaccination in Post-Socialist Serbia: An Anthropological Perspective." *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology* 14 (2): 507–29. <https://doi.org/10.21301/eap.v14i2.5>.
- Tucker, Joshua A., Alexander C. Pacek, and Adam J. Berinsky. 2002. "Transitional Winners and Losers: Attitudes toward EU Membership in Post-Communist Countries." *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (3): 557–71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088399>.
- Tufekci, Zeynep. 2014. "Social Movements and Governments in the Digital Age: Evaluating a Complex Landscape." *Journal of International Affairs* 68 (1): 1–18.
- . 2017. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- . 2021. "The Lure of the Caricature." Insight. *Zeynep* (blog). August 11, 2021. <https://www.theinsight.org/p/the-lure-of-the-caricature>.
- Turchin, Peter. 2016. *Ages of Discord: A Structural-Demographic Analysis of American History*. Chaplin, Connecticut: Beresta Books.
- . 2023. *End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Turkle, Sherry. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Wachowski, Lana, and Lilly Wachowski, dirs. 1999. *The Matrix*. Warner Bros., Village Roadshow Pictures, Groucho Film Partnership.
- Walton, Douglas. 2013. *Methods of Argumentation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139600187>.
- Ward, Charlotte, and David Voas. 2011. "The Emergence of Conspiratoriality." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26 (1): 103–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2011.539846>.
- Waring, Alan. 2021. "Radical-Right Conspiracy Theories and Corporate Collusion." In *The New Authoritarianism*, edited by Alan Waring, 379–414. vol. 3. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag.
- Warren, Team. 2019. "A Plan For Economic Patriotism." *Medium* (blog). June 4, 2019. <https://medium.com/@teamwarren/a-plan-for-economic-patriotism-13b879f4cfc7>.
- Webb, Gary. 2014. *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Weinstein, Adam. 2011. "'We Are the 99 Percent' Creators Revealed." *Mother Jones*, October 7, 2011. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/10/we-are-the-99-percent-creators/>.

- Wherry, Aaron. 2020. "The 'Great Reset' Reads like a Globalist Plot with Some Plot Holes." *CBC*, November 27, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/great-reset-trudeau-poilievre-otoole-pandemic-covid-1.5817973>.
- White, Martha C. 2020. "Wall Street Minted 56 New Billionaires since the Pandemic Began — but Many Families Are Left Behind." *NBC News*, December 30, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/wall-street-s-best-year-ever-why-pandemic-has-been-n1252512>.
- Widmer, Ted. 2017. "Draining the Swamp." *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/draining-the-swamp>.
- Wilde, Pieter de, Ruud Koopmans, Wolfgang Merkel, Oliver Strijbis, and Michael Zürn, eds. 2019. *The Struggle Over Borders: Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108652698>.
- Wiles, Siouxsie. 2020. "Koch's Postulates, Covid, and Misinformation Rabbit Holes." *The Spinoff*, November 15, 2020. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/science/15-11-2020/siouxsie-wiles-kochs-postulates-covid-and-misinformation-rabbit-holes/>.
- Williams, Ashley M. 2013. "Who Shot JFK? Here Are 6 Conspiracy Theories." *USA Today*, 2013. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2013/11/21/john-kennedy-conspiracy-theories-assasination/3661891/>.
- Willimon, Beau, dir. 2013. *House of Cards*. Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/title/70178217>.
- Willsher, Kim. 2016. "Rural France Pledges to Vote for Marine Le Pen as next President." *The Observer*, September 3, 2016, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/03/rural-france-pledges-to-vote-for-le-pen-president>.
- Wood, Patrick M. 2015. *Technocracy Rising: The Trojan Horse of Global Transformation*. Mesa, Arizona: Coherent Publishing.
- World Economic Forum. n.d. "The Great Reset." World Economic Forum. Accessed September 30, 2022. <https://www.weforum.org/great-reset/>.
- Zimdars, Melissa. 2020. "Introduction." In *Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age*, edited by Melissa Zimdars and Kembrew McLeod, 1–12. Information Policy. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 1989. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Phronesis. London & New York: Verso.
- . 1997. "The Big Other Doesn't Exist." *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, no. 5. <http://www.psychomedia.it/jep/number5/zizek.htm>.
- . 2001. *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2008. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London & New York: Verso.
- . 2009. *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London & New York: Verso.

- . 2012. “Occupy Wall Street: What Is to Be Done Next?” *The Guardian*, April 24, 2012, sec. US news.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/apr/24/occupy-wall-street-what-is-to-be-done-next>.
- . 2020a. “Jordan Peterson as a Symptom...of What?” In *Myth and Mayhem: A Leftist Critique of Jordan Peterson*, by Ben Burgis, Conrad Bongard Hamilton, Matthew McManus, and Marion Trejo, 1–18. Winchester, UK ; Washington, USA: Zero Books.
- . 2020b. *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost*. New York & London: OR Books.
- . 2023. “Wokeness Is Here To Stay.” *Compact Magazine*, February 22, 2023.
<https://compactmag.com/article/wokeness-is-here-to-stay>.
- Zoonen, Liesbet van. 2012. “I-Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture.” *European Journal of Communication* 27 (1): 56–67.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323112438808>.
- Zoonen, Liesbet van, Floris Muller, Donya Alinejad, Martijn Dekker, Linda Duits, Pauline van Romondt Vis, and Wendy Wittenberg. 2007. “Dr. Phil Meets the Candidates: How Family Life and Personal Experience Produce Political Discussions.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24 (4): 322–38.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180701560849>.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile books.
- Zupančič, Alenka. 2003. *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*. Cambridge & London: The MIT Press.
- . 2020. “Kratka razprava o teorijah zarote.” *Filozofski vestnik* 41 (3).
<https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.41.3.08>.