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# Oedipus and the cabal: conspiracy theories and the decline of symbolic efficiency

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Conspiracy theories are a means by which people make sense of vastly complex webs of cause and effect, contingency, and random chance. Impersonal operations of a political economy thus become personified in the figure of sinister puppet masters controlling the world. Overdetermined historical events become narrativized as plots executed with clockwork timing and perfect secrecy. This study proposes a model for the motives and mechanisms by which complex and ambiguous systems are made fodder for paranoid interpretation in the form of a conspiracy theory. By employing an exegetical close-reading methodology and psychoanalytic interpretation, three meta-conspiracies are identified as symptoms of the process described above: antisemitic theories of globalization, the “Deep State” as seen from the political Left, and vulgar UFOlogy. This study will argue that the impenetrable complexity of our globalized, financialized, hypermediated world agitates our experience of the Symbolic order, that is, the realm of language, logic, law, which acts as the scaffolding to the individual’s psychic sense of place in society. Lacan associates entry into the Symbolic order with the reconciliation of the Oedipal conflict and the Symbolic itself with the figure of the Father. However, the complexity and ambiguity of the Symbolic in our contemporary world produce a crisis in this dynamic, which some have described as a “decline in Symbolic efficiency.” This is particularly acute around events, which give rise to conspiracy theories. The will of the Father becomes unknowable, and the order upon which he insists appears dark and chaotic. Conspiracy therefore refers to turning away from this chaotic order and a “dark return” to the pre-symbolic maternal state, via the recession of the Symbolic into the Real, as a chaotic totalized presence (the conspiracy) stretching to occupy every corner of reality.

## KEYWORDS

conspiracy theories, digital media, media ecology, psychoanalysis, Lacan, symbolic order

## 1 Introduction: fascinations and obsessions in contemporary conspiracy culture

We live in an age of conspiracy theory. While conspiracy theorizing is far from unique to our times, conspiracy cultures appear to become more active in times like ours “when novel threats alarm people” (Uscinski, 2014, p. 128; Bezalel, 2022). Digital technology appears to contribute to this dynamic, spreading conspiracies more easily across subcultures, keeping them in circulation, promoting populist attitudes toward scientific and historical expertise, and producing financial incentives for their promoters (Zeng et al., 2022).

Widespread belief in conspiracies bears a profound influence on the health of democracy. Their prevalence reflects the relative health of democracy and can undermine that health too (Moore, 2018). The prevalence of conspiracy theories undermines social cohesion (Uscinski, 2014), affects our families (PERIL and NCRI, 2020), and compromises basic public health at the medical and financial levels (Philippe and Leonard, 2021). Evidence indicates that “[n]either specific conspiracy theory beliefs [n]or general forms of conspiracism” are any more quantitatively prevalent today than in past decades (Butter, 2014; Uscinski et al., 2022, p. 2). Indeed, it may be impossible to judge whether conspiracy culture is more qualitatively influential in today’s society than in past decades and centuries. However, it is enough to recognize that conspiracy theory culture has been and remains a pressing problem that needs understanding, prevention, and amelioration.

Experts have found that conspiracy theories satisfy the need for certainty in an uncertain world (Wood and Douglas, 2018). They offer means to engage with otherwise unapproachable historical mysteries (Susen, 2021). They offer *compensatory control*, that is, a means “to reestablish a sense of order and structure” in situations of precarity and powerlessness (Kay and Eibach, 2013, p. 264). They provide enchantment in a world that has otherwise been rendered sterile by consumer culture, scientism, post-Fordist modes of production, and the quantified digital self of our social graphs (Ricketts, 2011). At their darkest, conspiracy theories offer justification for murderous prejudice, giving license to separate, dominate, and exterminate a hated outgroup (Rousis et al., 2022).

Each of these explanations bears the stamp of empirical proof. They are verified by numerous studies, both quasi-experimental and case studies. They manifest in our everyday encounters with friends and family who have traveled “down the rabbit hole.” However, these explanations seem only to pertain to the surface psychology of individuals, revealing little about the deeper psychic dynamics at play socially. We must seek out the “motives behind the motives,” the underlying conditions which make possible the individualized, psychological dynamics which we seem to understand so well. We must do more to understand these psycho-structural and techno-social conditions, also known as “meta-motives.” Doing so is not just a matter of abstract academic interest. Doing so can offer us a richer understanding of the surface psychology of conspiracy theories, which can only assist in preventing their uptake and bringing our friends, family, and society out of the rabbit hole and into the light of day.

## 2 Key concepts in Lacan

To explore the psycho-structural meta-motives of conspiracy culture in the early twenty-first century, this study will use interpretive frameworks drawn from psychoanalysis. Jacques Lacan and his master exegete Slavoj Žižek offer essential tools for this undertaking. These concepts are not perfectly definable and indeed evolve throughout Lacan’s own works. For the purposes of applying them, however, it is necessary to establish heuristic definitions. The following “readings” of conspiracy culture and its communication technologies will particularly depend on three interrelated concepts, drawn from Lacan and shaped through Žižek: the Symbolic order (and within it Name-of-the-Father and Symbolic Castration), the Big Other, and Žižek’s

theory of the demise of symbolic efficiency in relation to the Symbolic order.

### 2.1 The symbolic order

The Symbolic Order is the structure from which language, law (injunction and prohibition), culture, and expression emerge—it “denotes the domain where symbols are used, or, to put it more strongly, the fact that one can only express oneself symbolically” (Silhol, 2009, p. 2). It is the departure from the domain of the nursery, identification with the mother, and the “petty narcissism” of the child’s first ideal self-conceptions (Lacan, 2006, p. 99). However, the Symbolic is associated with a paternal order of *action* and *power*, and this maternal Imaginary may be associated with a maternal order of *being* and *potentiality*. In the Lacanian thought, the paternal power that embodies the Law is known as the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan, 2006, p. 67).

In Lacan’s theory, the subject’s exit from the maternal domain into the order of the Symbolic is associated with the exit from the imaginary struggle with the Father. Contrary to Freud’s model of castration, which directly signifies harm to the male organ, Lacan’s concept of Symbolic castration is the process by which language is acquired, to “bring forth a subject situated in the symbolic,” and, in turn, structure the psyche and order the subject’s desires. Submission to the Symbolic is submission to the Law. This Law is itself “the inscription into the symbolic...the recognition of symbolic castration, the recognition of one’s imperfection, one’s finitude, one’s lack of unity...In the moment of entry into language, it is erected as pre-existing, as a law that has always been there and that attains validity through language” (Schmitz and Jansen, 2005, p. 78, citing Rendtorff). Thus, symbolic castration is synonymous with the structuring of the psyche linguistically.

However, through the process of castration, “the Imaginary itself is assumed into the Symbolic Order by way of its alienation into language itself” (Jameson, 1977, p. 357). Therefore, this structuring of the psyche must also fragment the psyche, as it requires dissecting the undifferentiated totality of the internal Imagery into the fragmented, externalized, signification of the Symbolic. Through this process of alienation and fragmentation, symbolic castration abolishes the unity of the nursery. From this point forward, the pieces of reality will no longer “fit.” There will forever remain a gap, or a remainder, which cannot be integrated into the matrix of the Symbolic. Lacan identifies this gap with the primal signifier of the phallus and the “little other” or *objet petit a*, which substitutes for the phallus in the fantasy of the subject. This absent object is forever out of sight, behind a receding horizon of desire that we must nevertheless pursue.

However, through the Name-of-the-Father, desire and the ongoing pursuit of the phallus are brought into line with the Law. “Since the subject is not conscious of the essential division at the core of its own being [i.e. the symbolic gap] and because the subject objectifies the other [i.e., the phallic object of desire], it runs into something in the other that is other than a unified subject: a maze of its own making, projected onto the site where the other is supposed to reside. How the subject gets out of this maze is through the Father function” (Tutt, 2014). When this identification is foreclosed, and the subject rejects the Name-of-the-Father, psychosis is the outcome (paranoia being considered a form of psychosis) (Lacan, 2013).

Failures such as this will become relevant later when this article explores social pathologies such as conspiracy culture and the construction of the self via digital media.

## 2.2 The Big Other

The Big Other is a corollary concept to those outlined above. It is the locus of the code, the instance that “ratifies the assumption of the subject into the realm of language or the Symbolic Order” (Jameson, 1977, p. 357). The Big Other “is strictly correlative to the notion of belief, of symbolic trust, of credence, of taking what others say ‘at their word’s value’” (Žižek, 1997, p. 6). It is the figure, sometimes the personification, of “a social contract grounded in the commonality of language (on which is grounded Law), the expression of a ‘higher truth’ that governs the behavior of human beings. It is “an internal power to which we grant external, autonomous status and our own submission” (Strecher, 2002, p. 113).

Its most common manifestations were once found in expressions of language and religion, later in promises of ‘civilization’ (Strecher, 2002, p. 116). Žižek argues that there is a “gap that separates the proper authority of the symbolic Law/Prohibition from mere ‘regulation by rules’: the domain of symbolic rules, if it is actually to count as such, has to be grounded in some tautological authority beyond rules” (Žižek, 2000, p. 320). That authority is the Big Other.

Simply, perhaps crudely, put, the Big Other is an abstract and invisible figure of authority that is consubstantial with the Symbolic Order, which establishes the legitimacy of the Law. It is not God, but it is god-like. It is not the father, but it is paternal in its role as keeper and legitimator of the Law.

Critically, the Big Other functions in relation to the subject’s formation, mediated by language through the Order of the Symbolic. “In Lacan’s work, how one conceptualizes the self has a great deal to do with how the ‘Other’—the often unseen external power constructions—creates a relationship to the symbolic order” (Wolfe, 2010, p. 154). Similar to the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father which produces psychosis, this self-conceptualization vis-a-vis the Big Other can, too, go awry. “If one is consistently judged as unworthy by the representative of the symbolic order (e.g., parent, teacher) then the self is created in a pathologizing way” (Wolfe, 2010, p. 154). Again, failures such as these will become relevant later, when this article explores social pathologies such as conspiracy culture and the construction of the self via digital media.

## 2.3 The demise of symbolic efficiency

The Symbolic Order, through the figure of the Big Other, is (or “ought” to be) a shared structuring and an enjoining/prohibiting force. However, the dislocations of modernity, which reached new heights in the global digital age, have undermined the coherence of the Law. The expansion of markets and rapid information flows of digital media result in the dissolution of traditional life worlds and produce those conditions in which “all that is solid melts into air [and] all that is holy is profaned” (Marx, 2012, p. 77). Along with this comes a recognition of the always “invented” nature of “tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992) that is the ongoing legacy of Enlightenment humanism. In the smooth, permanently negotiable society that is left

over, we experience “a fundamental loss of faith in institutions that anchor and lend weight to some truth claims over others” (Gibson, 2018, p. 3168). The Big Other may never have “existed,” at least in secular ontologies. However, today, the subject must reckon with the dawning realization that “it never existed in the first place” (Žižek, 1997, p. 6). This collapse has been termed the “demise of Symbolic Efficiency” (Žižek, 1997).

One need not believe in the “contract” secured by the Big Other (for example, conventional morality) nor in the personification of the Big Other (for example, the God Jehovah). “It is enough for us each to see that others around us identify with the ideological cause, and assign especial significance to it” (Sharpe, 2023). Thus, it was sufficient to believe that *others* believed to ensure the efficiency of the Symbolic. In theory, belief might even be “outsourced” to technology, such as the Tibetan prayer wheel, which prays on behalf of the person who spins it (Pfaller, 2012, p. 422). This enables subjects to operate through what Žižek, following Octave Mannoni, compares to a “fetishistic disavowal,” that is, “I know very well...but nonetheless” (Žižek, 2000, p. 323; Mannoni, 2003).

Under conditions of extreme symbolic inefficiency, the Big Other that was once merely non-existent now vanishes altogether. The consequences of such a turn appear to be dire. “[F]aced with the potential demise of symbolic efficiency, the postmodern subject of twenty-first-century capitalism seeks to reconstitute the Other as the only possible means of procuring enjoyment” (Flisfeder, 2022, p. 415). This is perhaps the endpoint the Enlightenment humanism as “the sleep of reason produces monsters” (Goya, 1969). Dean portrays this state of affairs as one of the extreme instabilities as follows:

“[T]he decline in Symbolic efficiency renders signifiers ever more unstable, allowing them to float and drift without being easily quilted into an underlying frame. The underlying frame, then, is also much weaker, fuller of holes, allowing for ever greater uncertainty. With the decline of the Symbolic, the order of the lie, people cannot so easily use words, representations, conventions, and institutions (law) to cover over differences” (Dean, 2005).

This unstable “quilting” resembles nothing so much as the hyperlink structure of the surface web. This dynamic will become relevant later when this article explores the spread of conspiracy theories, their versatility, and the strange ways that belief merges with suspended disbelief in conspiracy culture.

## 2.4 Flexibility and play

It must finally be noted that these definitions may—must—be used flexibly. Lacan’s work is intentionally subject to interpretation. “Lacan, very psychoanalytically, requested the collaboration of his audience and chose therefore to express himself like a poet, leaving his listeners or his readers to painfully construct their own meaning (there is no other!)” (Silhol, 2009, p. 1). However, independent of authorial intent, our license to adapt and apply liberally comes from the very principles outlined above; that is, the psyche is a function of an individual’s relationship with language. In that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (Lacan, 1998), “the unconscious is made up of ‘chains of repressed signifiers’ that relate to one another through their own rules of metaphor and metonymy” (Perman, 2018, p. 15).

Put in plainer (perhaps vulgar) terms, words have a meaning in relation to other words within the full structure of language. This is, by definition, a condition of the Symbolic order and, by analogy, the unconscious. Therefore, while the definitions given above guide the analysis to follow, they should not be mistaken for fixed, much less “orthodox” summaries of these complex and adaptable concepts.

### 3 Informatic collapse and digital deliriums

The collapse of the symbolic order, through the abolishment of traditional authority, might have emancipated the subject from the oppressive influences of the Law and ushered in heretofore unimagined liberty. This was the promise of digital technology (Barbrook and Cameron, 1995). While this has been the case in some limited regards, it is far from the norm. “The absence of such a Master might suggest a new setting of ultimate openness and freedom—no authority tells the subject what to do, what to desire... [but] in fact the result of the Master’s decline is unbearable, suffocating closure” (Dean, 2010, pp. 12–13). Žižek identifies how this dynamic produces an unanswerable “culture of complaint, with its underlying logic of resentment: far from cheerfully assuming the inexistence of the big Other, the subject blames the Other for its failure and/or impotence, as if the Other is guilty for the fact that it does not exist” (Žižek, 2018, p. 8). Identitarian complaints appear alongside and within religious fundamentalism, conspiracy theory, and the further-hybridized “conspirituality” culture, not as atavisms, that is, “regressive... remainders of the past,” but as a kind of the Big Other unmoored from the Symbolic entirely, which Žižek describes as “the most succinct definition of paranoia” (Žižek, 1997): the Big Other in the Real.

The subject decreasingly experiences media as engagement with the Symbolic and increasingly as a flow of affects (Hughes, 2020) that mark the succinct paranoia that is the Big Other transposed to the Real. The very technological-communicative dynamics that have accelerated symbolic inefficiency foster pathologies associated with the collapse of symbolic efficiency: conspiracy and identitarian complaint, which crescendo finally into a kind of digital psychosis.

In recent years, scholars, governments, and NGOs have warned that we are in the midst of an “infodemic” (World Health Organization, 2021). Among the worst symptoms of the infodemic is the proliferation of mis-, dis-, mal-information, and propaganda “in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak” (2021). The infodemic is perhaps no more than a COVID-era metaphor for what Andrejevic termed the “infoglut” (Andrejevic, 2013). The infoglut allows for new propaganda tactics such as zone flooding (Zelenkauskaitė, 2022), due to information “asymmetry” between the powerful and the public, the latter of whom are “promulgating reports that contradict themselves endlessly, pitting “expert” analysts against one another in an indeterminate struggle that does little more than fill air time, or perhaps reinforce preconceptions” (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 154). Andrejevic develops this concept of infoglut alongside the analysis of symbolic inefficiency, pointing to the dynamic by which “the proliferation and accumulation of competing narratives and truth claims ultimately calls all claims to truth into question (McVey, 2013, p. 525).” The Lacanian framework enables us to use Andrejevic’s key ideas while adjusting those that have not been borne out by the subsequent history.

For example, in 2013, Andrejevic proposed the possibility that “media tools cultivate “savvy” users whose newfound experience as message producers raise their awareness about the constructed nature of representation, thereby rendering them more skeptical of the messages of others” (Gibson, 2018, p. 3171). However, this theory does not appear to be borne out in subsequent years. Rather, as per Dean, it seems that “the sheer volume of online discourse undermines not just the efficacy of any single claim “but the possibility of knowledge and credibility as such” (2018, p. 3171). In the sphere of infoglutted media, “a plethora of machines operate to produce chains of signifiers, thereby giving rise to symbolic environments of bewildering complexity, bombarding us with messages, prohibitions and incentives” (Zwart, 2022, p. 122). This “rapidly expanding scope of relevant variables—a scope that soon becomes ‘too big to know’—leads to a second dimension of ‘post-comprehension’ knowledge: the emergence of patterns that cannot be modeled and, in this respect, are inexplicable—patterns that simply emerge from the database and can be neither anticipated nor explained once they emerge. This is knowledge that has operational efficacy but no descriptive, explanatory, or even causal purchase” (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 142). This is the very description of the erosion of symbolic efficiency and the Big Other’s disappearance into the Real.

This process is the technological reification of Lacan’s model of psychosis. The Name-of-the-Father is rejected, creating “a hole in the symbolic at pivotal junctures of subjective experience” (Redmond, 2013, p. 2). In “[t]he absence of an anchoring signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, may produce radical disturbances to subjectivity, as there is literally no way of representing specific aspects of subjective experience” (2013, p. 2).

For Lacan, “modern technoscience” represents “a decisive turning point in the history of the symbolic, opens up the intimate circle of everyday phenomenological experience, revealing a dynamic universe of immense proportions and complexity... a universe in which human existence is radically de-centered. This ‘narcissistic offence’ gave rise to a split and marginalized subject.” (Zwart, 2022, p. 120). We might correlate this observation with Kenneth Gergen’s (1991, p. 49) model of the *saturated self*. These technologies, which Gergen terms “technologies of social saturation,” act to “immerse us ever more deeply in the social world and expose us more and more to the opinions, values, and lifestyles of others.” This social saturation in the media environment, Gergen proposed, produces “the onset of a *multiphrenic* condition, in which one begins to experience the vertigo of unlimited multiplicity” (*ibid*). Under techno-social conditions such as these, the desiring subject disperses into the multiple, larval subjectivities of psychosis. Not only has the fetishistic disavowal ceased to function—that is, the subject cannot act “as if” with the confidence that some other subject anchors it in the Symbolic—but now the subject can no longer proceed with any confidence that anyone believes *he, the subject*, exists.

### 4 Cabal: examining antisemitic conspiracy theories of control

The first case study to which this article will apply these concepts is contemporary antisemitic conspiracy theories. Theories of Jewish perversity and human sacrifice date back to the ancient world (Josephus, 1732). The modern era of this conspiracy theory

is perhaps best marked by the emergence of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* forgery in 1903 (Segel, 1995; Hagemeister, 2022). Throughout the twentieth century, these conspiracies took the twin form of paranoia over “Judeo-Bolshevik” communist plots (Hanebrink, 2020) and conspiracies to control the capitalist world’s banking and international finance<sup>1</sup> (ADL, 2017). The legacy of these conspiracies is still evident today. The QAnon conspiracy theory reboots antisemitic blood libels, with claims that “global elites” sacrifice children in bizarre subterranean rituals (Amarasingam and Argentino, 2020). Theories of the COVID-19 vaccine’s sinister origins and purposes (Pickel et al., 2022) echo both the “Doctor’s Plot” conspiracy (Brandenberger, 2005) in a populist register and mid-century claims that Jews are responsible for water fluoridation and its falsely purported pacifying effects (McNeill, 1962). More bizarre conspiracies theorize an extradimensional origin to the Jewish people, suggesting that they are reptilian aliens feeding off the negative energy of humankind (Jerusalem Post, 2023).

While clearly rooted in historical libels, a pattern nevertheless emerges when considering these contemporary versions of age-old antisemitic canards. They are, by and large, antisemitic conspiracies without Jews; that is, the antisemitic content of these conspiracy theories remains masked behind stand-in figures such as faceless “globalists” or individuals, such as George Soros, who can be used metonymously to indicate the full range of the underlying conspiracy discourse without articulating its antisemitic content. With few exceptions, the most vocal purveyors of these conspiracies deny their latent antisemitic content. Indeed, it has been difficult to obtain “smoking gun” evidence that these blinds are intentional. Is this not the very function of the Big Other’s recession into the Real? The structuring conspiracy itself becomes unstable. The masters of our universe are not a cabal of conspirators, but a precession of figures signifying other figures, moving back and forth and cycling around one another while never reaching stable ground. Globalists are George Soros (O’Donnell, 2021), who is a lizard (Lebovic, 2024); lizards are Jews (Broschowitz, 2022), but the British Royal Family and Johnny Paycheck are lizards too (Icke, 1999); there are no reptilians, but the satanic cabal exposed by QAnon effect identical powers through blood sacrifice (Amarasingam and Argentino, 2020), just like Jews (Dundes, 1991), and on, and on, and on.

This is a more complex, and ultimately difficult-to-articulate, model of a conspiracy theory compared to even those typically based on models of symbolic inefficiency. These models propose that people adopt “conspiracy, positing that behind the seeming chaos and uncertainty of everyday life lies a Really Big Other (or what Žižek calls, following Lacan, the Other of the Other in the Real)—that is, an all-controlling figure or shadowy cabal pulling all the strings in pursuit of nefarious goals, hidden from view” (Gibson, 2018, pp. 3178–3,179, citing Myers, 2003). In simpler models, conspiracy theories may be,

as Jameson claims, the “poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age” (Jameson, 1988, p. 356), and “the growth of ‘conspiracy theories’ as a form of popular ‘cognitive mapping’ seem to counter the retreat of the big Other.” (Žižek, 1997, p. 8). However, this simplification treats conspiracy theories as almost a solution to symbolic inefficiency. In fact, the conspiracies to which people flock in the chaos of the collapse of symbolic efficiency are themselves victims of this very collapse. This is due in no small part to the creative, structuring, and sustaining role of networked digital communication technology in conspiracy discourse.

Techno-socially, this resembles nothing so much as the “argumentum ad hyperlink,” the dynamic by which “[r]eaders seem to take the mere presence of a hyperlink as adequate support for key claims” (Hughes, 2022). Every unsubstantiated claim points to a proof one click away, which, in turn, is revealed as nothing but another unsubstantiated claim pointing to yet another distant (and ultimately unsubstantiated) proof. In this, it closely resembles the mode of obsessive criticism afforded by online affordances such as anonymity, easy repetition, social campaigning, “tweetorial,” and guilt-by-digital-association (i.e., attacking someone based on the identities of their online followers or based on who they follow) (Prasad and Ioannidis, 2022).

These practices are themselves the result of engineering and design affordances endemic to networked digital communication technologies. Digital media enable bad actors to collect and present spurious and fallacious evidence, which may not even be internally consistent. “Each thread of connection is unique, individualized: everyone draws their own map of the network as they navigate it” (Sauter, 2017) In a hypertextual media environment, where any data point is theoretically directly linkable to another (Berners-Lee et al., 2010), it is trivially easy to draw spurious and false associations between any individuals and/or events. Fallacious claims such as these can accrue and gain credibility by virtue of their accrual, not by any logical proof (Hughes, 2020). The volume of data which accrues does so by a process of “default data hoarding inherent in much of the current internet,” which, in turn, “makes it ripe for conspiracy building. All that’s needed is a flood of attention on a body of information to bring conspiratorial linkages to life” (Sauter, 2017).

Thus, under our present techno-social dispensation, we can have not only “racism-without-racists” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) but even antisemitism without Jews. There is even some strange resonance in the absence of the Big Other and the modes of contemporary hatred/paranoia that are directed at the people most associated with the foundational Law of the Mosaic Code. Through the instability effected by our modes of communication—and therefore our modes of thought—it is not merely possible but inevitable to produce conspiracies whose actors, motivations, and activities are forever a step farther from the reader. This analysis should never be taken to suggest that these are unstable, and indeed, incomplete conspiracy theories are less harmful than older antisemitic conspiracy theories. As evidenced by recent years’ spike in antisemitic incidents and violence (Associated Press, 2023), these beliefs are correlated with real-world harm. Perhaps, there is even some direct relation between the symbolically inefficient conspiracy and increased likelihood of violence as the victims of violence are more easily associated with this fuzzy logic.

This question of unseen movers will be explored more in the next section to better understand how they reflect the foreclosure of the

<sup>1</sup> Many other varieties of antisemitic conspiracy persist to this day, including belief in Jewish hypersexuality and the sexual exploitation of gentiles via prostitution and pornography, Jewish worship of Satan, conspiracies that Jews are not genealogically descended from the Classical residents of Judea, and many more. For the purposes of this psychoanalytic reading, however, this article will focus on conspiracy of global control.

Symbolic and indicate instability in the very subject of the conspiracy theorist himself.

## 5 Father in the shadows: the deep state and conspiracy from the left

“Deep State” conspiracies posit that society is politically controlled by an unelected, unaccountable shadow government. While conspiracy theories centered around the idea of a deep state are often associated with the far-right, recent years have seen the emergence of a coherent left-wing conspiracy discourse of the deep state. A variety of left-wing writers and conspiracy theorists have approached this topic (Baker, 2009; Talbot, 2015; Norton, 2017; Scott, 2017; Levine, 2022); however, Aaron Good’s *American Exception* offers a uniquely rich source to explore this thinking from the left. Its mode of conspiracy theorizing differs from the antisemitism of the right, in both scholarly form and in the complexity of its arguments.

While Good makes claims for the reality of conspiracies (the JFK assassination and Watergate are considered the work of the deep state), his deep state is not a “formal organization” (Good, 2022, p. 3), much less a cabal of puppet masters. However, the deep state is not simply a metaphor describing the emergent outcomes of our political economy. Good describes the Deep State as “a nebulous thing...an obscured, dominant, supranational source of antidemocratic power” (Good, 2022, p. 2). It consists of institutions such as finance, the fossil fuel industry, organized crime, and (of course) the CIA. Good criticizes Hardt and Negri’s “hyperstructuralist” theories, describing them as “empire without imperialism” (2022, p. 39). Despite this lack of formal organizing, “U.S. elites” bear “responsibility for intentionally creating and maintaining this system” (Good, 2022, p. 39).

Here, it may be useful to remember Brian Keeley’s point that “there is nothing straight-forwardly analytic that allows us to distinguish between good and bad conspiracy theories” (Keeley, 1999, p. 126). Good references many cases of plausible malfeasance and clandestine schemes (aka conspiracies). However, it is the structure of his complaint that ultimately renders the *American Exception*, a work of conspiracy theory. The deep state is “systemic” (2022, p. 7) composed of human agency, conspiracy, and structural momentums, *and yet*, it is neither human-organizational nor structural. The deep state is both personal and impersonal, a power system with agency and moral culpability, both identifiable but not definable *and* definable but not identifiable.

Perhaps Good’s work could be described as a conspiracy theory that does not ever fully articulate its theory. Moreover, this is itself symptomatic of a failed symbolic order. The shadows cast by Good’s Deep State are redolent of paternal absence. The Deep State is punitive, withholding, all-powerful, but invisible. The Law is unknown but unassailable. Its enforcement is brutal and all-encompassing, yet the hand of brutality can never be located. In this, the paternal both exists and does not exist. The deep state is both an emergent property of the tripartite state and the handiwork of powerful puppet masters. Furthermore, as even one sympathetic reviewer of Good’s work puts it “the American Empire is an amorphous institution that is not easily bounded by time, space, or concept” while simultaneously “a strong conclusion cannot be reached due to the deep state’s wishes to keep its true intentions a secret” (Patten, 2023, p. 497).

The Name-of-the-Father is structurally linked to castration (Ragland-Sullivan, 1992), and the inability to connect Name-of-the-Father with desire produces psychosis. When “a specific signifier, which concerns both the law and naming, is absent” (Ribolsi et al., 2015, p. 4), the subject no longer “understand[s] themselves and others in terms of rules and standards that one should obey” (2015, p. 4). This signifier that has been instilled during the resolution of the Oedipal conflict becomes foreclosed (Lacan, 2006). The subject’s mode of identification is radically disrupted, as is the chain of metonymic objects, which can be said to plot the subject’s course of action through the Symbolic Order (Lacan, 1998). The self becomes a confused, chaotic flux of back-and-forths, as inconsistent as it is saturated. Meanwhile, the objects of its desiring actions are likewise thrown into upheaval.

Perhaps, too, the depths of the digital archive help to cast these shadows of absent patriarchs. Azuma’s model of database narrativity is instructive here. The vast reservoir of data stored in our servers around the world contain the elements of every story, historiography, school lesson, speech, court record, weather report, MS Paint sketch, etc., that has ever been digitized. This “deep inner layer of the world is represented as the database, and the signs on the surface outer layer are all grasped as an interpretation (combination) of it” (Azuma, 2009, p. 103). These resources gain logic by virtue of their retrieval as part of a larger project. Their inclusion in theories of the deep state becomes its own form of proof. Thus, you can associate a conclusion without making a case, imparting a lesson without telling a story. Instead, fragments of history create “an aggregate of information without a narrative, into which [audiences] could empathize of their own accord and each could read up convenient narratives” (Azuma, 2009, p. 38). Conclusions thus emerge by affect, not by a coherence of evidence.

The system resembles nothing so much as Tausk’s “influencing machine.” Relating to the persecutory delusions of his schizophrenic patients, Tausk describes the influencing machine as “a machine of mystical nature. The patients can give only vague hints of its construction. It consists of boxes, cranks, levers, wheels, buttons, wires, batteries, and the like...[which] serves to persecute the patient and is operated by enemies” (Tausk, 1933, pp. 186–187). The digital characteristic of modularity is the technical foundation for this influencing machine, as “media elements, be they images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are represented as collections of discrete samples (pixels, polygons, voxels, characters, scripts). These elements are assembled into larger scale objects” (Manovich, 2001, p. 30). However, in recursion that is also characteristically digital (Levin, 2014), this is an influencing machine which is created by the object of influence himself.

It is precisely the interchangeability of these digital modules, and the vastness of the reservoir that contains them—and which they comprise—that renders them symbolically inefficient. Azuma’s model of non-narrativity is radically unstable (Azuma, 2009). Unlike Azuma’s *otaku*, there is no anchor in the existing narrative or character. This is the radical demise of symbolic inefficiency. Azuma’s database animals have only realized that “the Big Other never existed in the first place.” However, Good’s deep system of power represents the radical recession of the Big Other into the Real, an undifferentiated, totalizing violence.

Žižek originally addresses this consequence of symbolic inefficiency in his critique of identity politics. However, it might

equally be applied to those elements of today's left whose campist "anti-imperialism" makes common cause with far-right and ethno-supremacist dictatorships (Ross, 2018; Joyce and Sharlet, 2023; Stecuła, 2024). Truly, this is "today's version of the hysterical impossible demand, addressed to the Other, which effectively wants to be rejected, since the subject grounds its existence in its complaint: 'I am insofar as I make the Other responsible and/or guilty for my misery'?... instead of undermining the position of the Other, they still address It: they, translating their demand into legalistic complaint, confirm the Other in its position by their very attack" (Žižek, 1997, p. 8).

Unlike the theorists of antisemitic global conspiracy, whose extralegal violence is well documented—or even "Stop the Steal" conspiracists who turned similar beliefs in the deep state into violent insurrection on January 6, 2020 (Reilly, 2023)—the culture surrounding leftist theories of the deep state is one *exclusively* of complaint. Good's impalpable Deep State is, perhaps, a complaint without a fully identified object, which seeks some ordering force to assure the subject that *someone somewhere* believes in *something*.

## 6 Full circle: Oedipal failure and the UFO flap of 2023

Reports of strange objects in the sky, and indeed a plethora of related phenomena from reports of cryptids to supposed time distortions and other Fortean, are extremely old. As many UFOlogists and academics alike have noted, the very concept of the UFO-as-airship is only one of many meanings attributed to these phenomena. Past explanations have pointed to the divine, the preterhuman, and even the biological-scientific. However, today's UFOs—particularly as interpreted by the popular online media—skew heavily toward pseudo-scientific and military in their explanations. Moreover, similar to the previous two conspiracy theories described in this article, modern vulgar UFOlogy tends toward the unsettled and incoherent. They tend to circulate around theories that blend the transdimensional with the extraterrestrial with the militaristic.

There is an interesting contradiction in the expressions of contemporary UFOlogy. On the one hand, figures such as the dubious Dr. Steven Greer present UFOs as heralds of elevated consciousness, while pointing to shadowy government conspiracies standing in the way of this ascension. On the other hand, former navy SEAL Shawn Ryan, a political reactionary who blends long-form UFOlogy with special operations narratives and Trumpist political rhetoric in a successful YouTube channel. While the two men are not formally allied, Ryan hosted Greer twice on his YouTube channel in 2023. Their exchanges are instructive.

Ryan: Why do you think so many UFOs sightings are happening around nuclear sites?

Greer: They're very concerned that we would actually do something that could threaten the life of biological life on Earth obviously Mutual assured destruction would do that and believe it or not these civilizations are very positively concerned with the human future but they are also secondarily maybe equally concerned about containing the warlike nature of humans from

being exported out into space (Shawn Ryan Show (Director), 2023, 1:44:00–1:45:00).

Later, Greer describes advanced technology not of extraterrestrial origin, in which shadowy forces only *present as extraterrestrial*, for somewhat unclear reasons.

Greer: We have Technologies and Material Science that are far beyond...that people would have said [are] extraterrestrial. [...] That's how [the CIA has] been getting away with doing the alien abduction hoax. The way they have been able to do it is to have technologies and also creatures that like they are gray [aliens] or reptilian or whatever (Shawn Ryan Show, 2023, 2:00:00–2:02:00).

Ryan is a talented and charismatic interviewer, and Greer possesses a confident, earnest affect. Their exchanges are cordial, and both men seem to respect one another. In 5 h of interviews, they never disagree. In both form and content, then, we see the fusion of the aspirational-spiritual and the martial-paranoid. It is *conspirituality* par excellence, "a broad politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age: (1) a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order, and (2) humanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness" (Ward and Voas, 2011).

UFO flaps tend to cluster around moments of social upheaval and existential dread. "Past research on UFO waves has suggested that their fundamental cause could be social factors, such as societal crises (the launch of Sputnik in the fall of 1957), economic distress (the oil shocks of the early 1970s), or general anxiety and frustration (the Vietnam War in the 1960s)" (Cockrell et al., 2022, p. 645). We might present the collapse of symbolic efficiency as an ultimate inflection point of social upheaval and existential dread.

Jung makes the point that "[t]he widespread fantasy about the destruction of the world at the end of the first millennium was metaphysical in origin and needed no UFOs in order to appear rational...But nowadays public opinion would hardly be inclined to resort to the hypothesis of a metaphysical act" (Jung, 1996, p. 18). In the so-called "New Age" of the mid-to-late twentieth century, laboring through the collapse of religious institutions and reordering of social roles, UFOlogy took on the cast of religious messages (Partridge, 2003; Zeller, 2011; Pokorny, 2019). In the present age of scientism and imperialism, in a society which perceives government as opaque, unaccountable, and unresponsive to the popular will, UFOlogy turns toward the militaristic interpretations of the phenomenon (Cooper, 1991; Corso and Birnes, 1997; Committee on Oversight and Accountability, 2023).

Here, it may be important to note that, unlike in the cases of antisemitic globalist conspiracies and the sinister deep state, there is *some* relevant phenomenology to the UFO phenomenon. People do seem honestly to have undergone baffling and unexplainable experiences that bear similar hallmarks to one another and hang together via the symbology of the UFO. There is video evidence, yet to be debunked, of objects in the sky behaving in ways impossible to known aircraft. However, this phenomenology is tertiary. It is the *dream* of the UFO, the affective-narrative complex that has accrued around these phenomena, which points toward deeper

structural-psychic understanding. Jung makes this point, “that even is the UFOs are physically real, the corresponding psychic projections are not actually caused, by only occasioned, by them” (Jung, 1996, p. 107). It is an object example of Lacan’s parable of the jealous husband: “even if all the facts he 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, 2008, p. 49).

In Jung’s foundational exegesis on the UFO phenomenon, the psychoanalyst summarized the themes of the UFO symptom as of *epiphany* through the reconciliation of certain *antitheses*: masculine/feminine, above/below, unity/quaternity, and (perhaps most significantly for this analysis) “an *enigmatic higher world and the ordinary human world*” (Jung, 1996, pp. 100–102). These themes of harmonization represent what Žižek describes as the New Age’s attempt at “re-sexualization of the universe” (Žižek, 1997, p. 2). This represents, on the one hand, a turn toward “an underlying, deeply anchored archetypal identity” of male and female, “which provides a safe haven in the flurry of contemporary confusion of roles and identities” (1997, p. 4). On the other hand, it indicates a desire for “renewal of the harmony between [male] Reason and [female] Life substance at the expense of the prohibitory ‘real father’” (1997, p. 2). In this aspiration toward both deep duality and all-pervasive harmony, Žižek sees a “version of the big Other which persists in the wake of [the big Other’s] alleged disappearance,” that is, both a response and, perhaps, an incomplete solution to the collapse of symbolic efficiency (1997, p. 4).

If we are to read contemporary UFO flaps through the lens of symbolic inefficiency, we might observe a similar attempt to reconcile the conflict between operations of *retreat* and *retrieval*. On the one hand, there is a doomed effort to return the Big Other from the formlessness of the Real into the Symbolic order—to place it under the authority of some Big Other so that, at the very least, *someone, somewhere* knows *something* of its meaning. However, this operation is impossible. The hyperlinked structure of the surface web (Schmideg and Spiegel, 2015), and the modular (Manovich, 2001), database/interface relationship of its underlying architecture (Azuma, 2009), fosters modes of organizing information in which any data point is potentially conterminous with any other point (Hughes, 2020). Communication, in both its active form (speaking/composing) and passive form (listening/reading), leapfrogs across text strings and media objects, forming a communicative collage in which consistency is a liability. This vast web continually expands, featuring content commentary on original content and metadata on metadata. The pieces do not fit, and the impossible diversity and abundance of meaning only highlight the reality that *everybody* knows that *nobody* knows what is going on.

The very impossibility of this operation goes hand in hand with an attempt to “close the circle,” to reestablish maternal totality in the Real through the figure of the Archaic Mother. This effort is iconized in the breast-like figure of the UFO, the object of the unachievable drive for total satisfaction (No Subject, 2019). In this operation, the UFO occupies the function of the Maternal Real, “both overwhelmingly, stiflingly present or near and, in her strange, impenetrable alterity, also frustratingly, uncontrollably absent or inaccessible” (Johnston, 2023). This is the UFO as both archon and path to ascension. The aliens want humanity to ascend beyond war,

fear, and scarcity. However, they also hold us back from the ascension, withdrawing the breast of cosmic wholeness until we become an “ascended civilization” Double-binds such as this, in which an ambivalent caregiver pulls closer with one hand while pushing away with the other, are recognized in the psychoanalytic tradition as a root of psychosis (Zuk and Zuk, 1998). The impossibility of the dual operation is idealized iconographically in the reconciliatory symbolism of UFO symptoms described by Jung above. If resolution, or even homeostasis, is impossible, where does that leave the conspiratorial subject?

## 7 The function of conspiracy theory as an expressive form

Thus far, this article has observed how conspiracy seeks to compensate for the insufficiency of the Symbolic to order the subject’s place and the outcomes of this symbolic inefficiency. This insufficiency is the outcome of key features in communication technology and practice. However, in conspiracies, as in dreams, “the structure is always triple; there are always *three* elements at work: the *manifest dream-text*, the *latent dream-content* or thought, and the *unconscious desire* articulated in a dream” (Žižek, 1994, p. 298). In the interpretation of dreams and dream-like symptomology, “the ‘secret to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form...but on the contrary, *the ‘secret’ of this form itself...consists in the answer to the question: why have the latent dream-thoughts assumed such a form, why were they transposed into the form of a dream?*” (Žižek, 1994, p. 296). In other words, we must now ask the question: *Why a conspiracy theory?* Why can the collapse of symbolic efficiency only be encountered through these waking dreams?

Assuming as true what has been proposed earlier in this study—that conspiracy theory (text) represents a dark return to the pre-symbolic maternal in response to the collapse of symbolic efficiency (both latent content)—we should ask *why* this should be transferred symptomatically to the “text” of conspiracy theory? What is the unconscious desire that motivates this encoding?

It may be that the collapse of symbolic efficiency can only be encountered through conspiracy theory because it allows for a permanent suspension of the encounter with its own irresolvability. “The belief in the big Other which exists in the Real is the most succinct definition of paranoia, so that, two features which characterize today’s ideological stance of cynical distance and full reliance on paranoid fantasy are strictly codependent: today’s typical subject, while displaying cynical distrust of any public ideology, indulges without restraint in paranoid fantasies about conspiracies, threats, and excessive forms of enjoyment of the Other” (Žižek, 1997, p. 8). With seemingly no way to resolve this double-bind, the subject can find no stable ground. The perpetual circulation of conspiracy elements itself becomes the operation to pursue homeostasis. This is “the latent content hidden by the manifest text[.]...not drawn toward the unconscious, repressed simply because of its ‘disagreeable’ character for the conscious, but because it achieves a kind of ‘short circuit’ between it and another desire which is already repressed... *which has nothing whatsoever to do with the ‘latent dream thought’*” (Žižek, 1994, p. 297).



## 8 Conclusion

In laying bare the rawer, more undomesticated, motives behind our conscious intentions, it is perhaps the curse of psychoanalysis to cast the mundane in its most pathological light. However, in doing so, it makes familiar what we would prefer to disavow. More than half of people in the English-speaking countries have some conspiratorial beliefs (Navarro, 2023). Like the Oedipal struggle itself (on whose dynamics most people prefer not to dwell), the recession of the Big Other into the Real is a condition with which we all must grapple. We are all subject to the cognitive and affective conditions toward which networked digital communication technology massages us. We are all, to one degree or another, saturated by our many online personae and are made delirious if not psychotic by infoglut. We can no more escape these conditions than we can the post-Enlightenment realization that there never was a Big Other.

As empirical research demonstrates, our age is unlikely to be more conspiratorial in thinking than others; we might come to accept the pathological normalcy represented by conspiracy dynamics such as those discussed here; that is, instead of disavowing them, casting them as the vices of social and political deviants, it may be more accurate and more socially therapeutic to recognize that these are merely another variety of barely domesticated psychic dynamics at play in the subject. Contrary to the much popular thought, conspiracies do not represent a “regression” from a more rational, liberal-minded modes of belief, but rather a *procession* made inevitable by unforeseen interactions between history, the psyche, and the products of our ingenuity. To be sure, there is a moral and normative preference to channel those dynamics toward (for example) vulgar UFOlogy, rather than antisemitic libels. However, if we are to accept the empirical finding that ours is no more conspiratorial an age than others, then we would do well to explore why the dynamics which shape its peculiar forms and functions.

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