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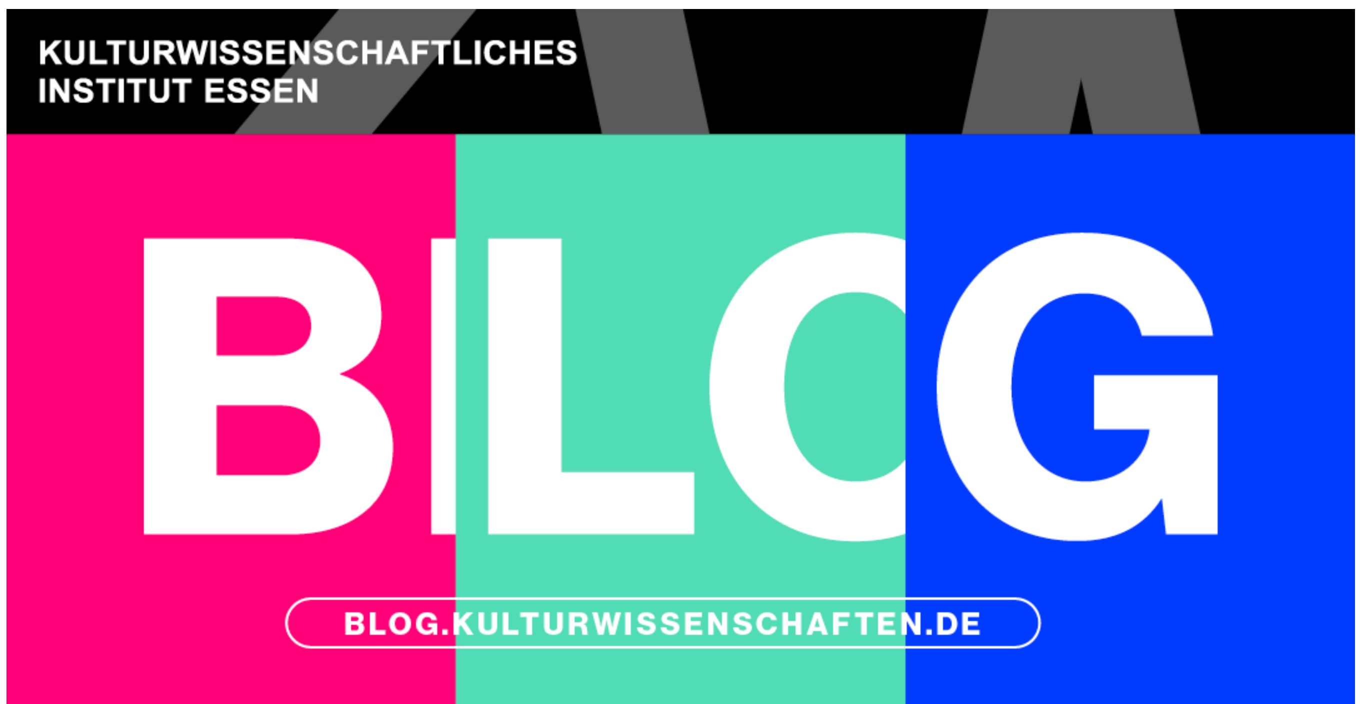
Bojan Baća 12.01.2026



Into the Conspiracist Zeitgeist Why QAnon Is Not Just a Wild Theory but a Symptom of Ideological Crisis Von: Bojan Baća

Long confined to the fringes of society, conspiracy theories surged into the public mainstream during the COVID-19 pandemic. The epistemic-*turned*-political crisis created a perfect storm of confusion and suspicion: people were isolated, overwhelmed with contradictory (mis)information about the novel coronavirus, and watching authorities struggle to formulate coherent policy responses. Many, with too much free time on their hands, began exploring alternative worldviews and explanations for "what is going on in the world". As trust in official narratives eroded and the digital public sphere grew increasingly polarized, the ground became fertile for a convergence of populist ideas, pseudoscientific modes of reasoning, and conspiracist narratives.[1] The platformization and gamification of conspiratorial thinking – where conspiracy theories are generated through horizontal, peer-to-peer interactions rather than consumed passively as top-down, ready-made narratives – further accelerated a shift from conspiracist estrangement to conspiracist *engagement* among ordinary people. As conspiracy theories in the digital era become increasingly detached from actual theorizing,[2] they give rise to what I call *conspiracist ideology*: not simply "belief in the primacy of conspiracies in the unfolding of history",[3] but the broader positioning of conspiracy as a structuring principle of the social world.

One vivid example is QAnon, which evolved from an obscure internet subculture rooted in the Pizzagate conspiracy into a headline-grabbing transnational movement. In brief, its adherents believe that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles controls world events and that only their messiah – Donald Trump – can stop it.[4] In late 2017, an anonymous figure known as "Q" began posting cryptic messages – "Q-drops" – on imageboards. Rather than presenting a fully formed theory, Q offered riddles and clues, encouraging followers to "do their own research" and assemble their own ever-evolving narratives.[5] How can we make sense of this epistemic practice? It is easy to dismiss conspiracy theorists as "crazy", "gullible", or "dangerous", but simply condemning conspiracist meaning-making and knowledge-production risks obscuring the reasons these narratives increasingly resonate with so many – not only as explanations of the social world, but as motivations for political action. If we bracket the question of truth for a moment, conspiracy theories also involve categories of meaning and epistemic practices that shape behavior, constituting an epistemic (sub)culture of their own.[6] In this sense, conspiracist ideology crystallizes around shared practices of meaning-making and norms of knowledge-production.

The presence of this ideology is further reinforced by deliberate disinformation campaigns. Recent revelations, for example, suggest that the very institutions calling for greater public trust in authorities actively promoted alien-related conspiracy theories as a means of covering-up advanced weapons programs.[7] In this light, growing cynicism toward public authorities becomes intelligible as political rather than pathological: such scandals not only reveal the fallibility of official institutions but also undermine their credibility, reinforcing perceptions that truth is being systematically manipulated. This uncertainty, therefore, cannot be dismissed as mere paranoia. It is crucial not to reduce it to irrational belief – or, still less, to an enduring "conspiracy mentality" – but to understand it as a reflection of an ideological stance shaped by the erosion of institutional authority. To understand grassroots conspiracist phenomena like QAnon, we need a shift in perspective: one that views conspiracy theorists not simply as deluded individuals, but as participants in a collective effort at epistemic reorientation and political disalienation in an uncertain world through the creation of counterknowledge and the enactment of counterpolitics.[8] While these worldviews may be grounded in falsehoods, they nonetheless constitute practices with tangible political consequences – for instance, contributing to the circumstances that enabled a second Trump term. In other words, we may need to focus less on what conspiracy theories get wrong and more on what they do for people: how they help individuals make sense of the social world and navigate its uncertainties, especially in a context where dominant ideologies increasingly fail to provide satisfactory explanations of "what is going on in the world".

Why We Dismiss Conspiracy Theories: Three Stigmas

Conspiracy theories are often delegitimized through three dominant stigmas: they are framed as *psychopathology*,[9] *pseudoscience*,[10] and/or *parapolitics*.[11] These labels shape public and scholarly debates around conspiracism and frequently prevent us from asking a more fundamental question: *What is it that conspiracism offers people that mainstream ideologies no longer do?*

- “They’re Totally Crazy”: This perspective treats conspiracy belief as evidence of cognitive dysfunction. Conspiracists are labeled paranoid or delusional, effectively medicalizing their worldview. While psychological factors may indeed play a role, this framing ignores the broader social, cultural, and political contexts that make conspiracism appealing in the first place. It reduces a complex collective response to uncertainty into a matter of individual pathology – precisely the kind of reductionism that obscures its ideological dimensions.
- “It’s Bad Science”: Another common argument casts conspiracy theories as junk knowledge. Critics emphasize that conspiracists cherry-pick evidence, fabricate elaborate hoaxes, and ignore internal contradictions, rendering their claims almost impossible to falsify. This view portrays conspiracists as naïve or incapable of rational thought. Yet, it overlooks the symbolic repertoires and cultural practices through which people interpret the world, especially when they mimic the language, aesthetics, and procedures of scientific inquiry to construct alternative epistemologies. What is often dismissed as “bad science” may instead reflect competing modes of sense-making when institutional epistemic authority is in crisis.
- “They’re Nothing but a Danger to Society”: Conspiracy theories are frequently depicted as inherent threats to democracy – fueling extremism, scapegoating, and anti-democratic impulses. While conspiracism can certainly have harmful effects, reducing it to a purely destructive force obscures the grievances, anxieties, and unmet needs that draw people into such communities. It also neglects the fact that conspiracist ideology may function as a vehicle for articulating concerns that are otherwise marginalized or dismissed in mainstream political discourse.

Taken together, each of these stigmas contains a kernel of truth, yet all three ultimately oversimplify the phenomenon of conspiracism. By pathologizing or dismissing those who subscribe to conspiracy theories, we risk overlooking why conspiracist ideology becomes so compelling – particularly in moments when established institutions and dominant ideologies fail to provide credible explanations or a sense of meaning. Understanding conspiracism, therefore, requires moving beyond these stigmas toward an analysis that takes seriously its role as a form of sense-making and political engagement.

From Pathology to Politics: A New Lens

Rather than asking “What’s wrong with those who subscribe to conspiracy theories?” we might instead ask: “What role does conspiracist ideology play for them?” An emerging body of scholarship suggests examining conspiracism as a meaningful social phenomenon – one that enables distinct practices of meaning-making and knowledge-production, not unlike certain forms of religious belief.[12] Instead of dismissing conspiracist ideation as mere delusion, we can approach it as a (sub)culture and an ideology in its own right, particularly within the contemporary digital environment. This does not imply accepting conspiracy theories as true; rather, it requires taking seriously the reasons why conspiracists find such narratives compelling and understanding what motivates them to become active *prosumers* of conspiracist content.

As we witnessed during the pandemic, the collective dedication to "researching the truth" can offer a sense of political empowerment – rooted in the search for stability, community, and agency. Studying this process of collaborative interpretation can illuminate the institutional failures and public anxieties that drive people toward alternative epistemologies. Building on this perspective, in my article "QAnon and the Epistemic Communities of the Unreal: A Conceptual Toolkit for a Sociology of Grassroots Conspiracism", published in *Theory, Culture & Society*, I argue for a non-pathologizing conceptual framework for studying *grassroots conspiracism*.13 By this term I refer to a bottom-up, participatory, and collective process through which ordinary people actively contribute to the production, dissemination, and evaluation of conspiracist ideology. Specifically, I offer three conceptual counter-approaches to the prevailing pathologizing framework: first, *cognitive mapping*: understanding conspiratorial thinking as an individual's attempt to navigate an epistemically disorienting world; second, *narrative emplotment*: viewing conspiracy theories as collaborative acts of story-building that provide epistemic-*cum*-political coherence; and third, *performative citizenship*: capturing conspiracism as a form of unconventional political participation aimed at overcoming political alienation.

Cognitive Mapping: Navigating a Confusing Reality

One way to understand conspiracy thinking is through the lens of cognitive mapping, a concept introduced by Fredric Jameson to describe how individuals attempt to orient themselves within the overwhelming complexities of late modernity.14 The pandemic intensified the epistemic uncertainty characteristic of the post-truth condition, as contradictory streams of information made it increasingly difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Yet, the digital era simultaneously offers an endless array of symbolic tools that enable individuals to construct coherent ideological maps – simple, though not necessarily simplistic, visions of an otherwise chaotic reality. Within such maps, for example, a satanic cabal manipulating world events through the so-called deep state appears not as a wild fantasy but as an interpretive framework that renders the world legible. Through the collective effort to transform confusion into clarity, individuals reinforce one another's sense of having uncovered maps that genuinely reflect the underlying structure of the social world.

Narrative Emplotment: Collaboratively Weaving a Grand Story

Collecting dots to chart a map is one thing; connecting them into a cohesive story is another. Narrative emplotment refers to the process by which people transform seemingly disparate fragments into compelling narratives. In the realm of conspiracy theories, this collective storytelling enables every hint, rumor, or (mis)interpretation to be absorbed into a larger plot. Historians such as Hayden White have long argued that even professional historical accounts rely on emplotment to turn isolated events into coherent narratives.15 QAnon emerged as a kind of interactive, open-ended narrative in which followers became co-authors – scouring the internet for "evidence" and weaving it into an ever-unfolding epic of good versus evil. Even internal disagreements – such as whether COVID-19 was a hoax or a bioweapon – were not disruptive but instead incorporated into the overarching storyline. Through this process of

emplotment, QAnon evolved into what I call an *epistemic community of the unreal*: a participatory, decentralized collective that collaboratively produces, validates, and circulates counterknowledge.

Performative Citizenship: From Individual Belief to Collective Action

Conspiracy theorists do not merely believe – they frequently act on their beliefs. Drawing on Engin Isin's notion of performative citizenship, we can interpret such actions as forms of political agency that disrupt conventional routines, scripts, and norms of participation.[16] While conspiracism-driven engagement may appear problematic, it is, at its core, an attempt to reimagine and remake the political world on the actors' own terms. Beyond the occasional headline-grabbing protest, many QAnon adherents participate in less visible forms of activism across both online and offline spaces. Through these acts of citizenship, they position themselves as political actors in their own right, forming a counterpublic bound by a shared sense of mission. "Exposing" mainstream science or politics is not experienced as a fringe obsession but as a civic duty – an empowering enactment of dissent and a bold stance against institutions perceived as corrupt, complicit, or incompetent.

Conclusion: The Real Power of the "Unreal"

It is tempting to dismiss conspiracists as merely "crazy" or "dangerous", using such labels as silencing tactics. In my earlier work on (postsocialist) civil society, I argued for a non-normative approach – one that analyzes civic engagement as it is, across the ideological spectrum, rather than as it ought to be according to (depoliticized) liberal parameters.[17] The same principle applies here: understanding must precede judgment. Ignoring the motivations and vulnerabilities that draw people into conspiracism risks underestimating not only its power, persistence, and appeal but also the processes of political subjectification through which individuals overcome their differences by adopting a shared ideological framework in order to become a new collective actor.[18] No matter how outlandish QAnon's claims sound, they exemplify a broader trend of grassroots conspiracism that seeks to address tensions and ruptures in official narratives – gaps that remain unaccounted for by mainstream institutions and dominant ideologies. In a time when institutional authority struggles to sustain public trust, the "unreal" can often feel more politically coherent, more emotionally resonant, and more morally compelling than sanctioned explanations.

As the world entered a period of geopolitical turmoil and the collapse of the (illusory) rules-based international order, public trust in institutional truth-telling further deteriorated, while skepticism, denialism, and cynicism became increasingly widespread. Today's media and political landscape fractures public life into competing "(un)realities", thereby elevating conspiracism as a compelling alternative to dominant ideological frameworks in the digital age. If we hope to meaningfully address the rise of conspiracism as an ideology, we must begin by asking why these narratives flourish in the first place. The "unreal", after all, has very real effects. Condemnation alone will not make these movements disappear. Their appeal lies in the solidarity they provide, the sense of purpose they offer, and the insider knowledge they

promise in a world that often feels chaotic and alienating. Acknowledging this makes it possible to address the underlying structural conditions – social fragmentation, institutional distrust, and a crisis of democratic representation – that sustain conspiracist ideology today.

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