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Breaking the Matrix: Understanding the ‘Hidden Truths’ of Conspiracy Theories Through Narrative Criminology

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Abstract

This paper attempts a narrative criminological engagement with conspiracy theories through a thematic narrative analysis of 31 conspiracist texts taken from a British conspiracy theorist social movement. The paper identifies three core themes in these texts. First, that society is riven by hidden harms which stem from a corrupt elite. Second, that this fallen world is the result of corruption by a demonically evil outsider. Third, it is only through purging this evil that society can return to its peaceful organic past. The paper finds that whilst many of these conspiracist narratives often include critical attacks on the status quo, these critiques are often limited, and obscure systems that evidently produce inequality and harm. Within the texts systemic problems in society are often revealed to originate from the machinations of hidden occult cabals with purely evil motivations. In this formulation society's problems thus do not come from structural contradictions or systems of power as such, but from specific anthropomorphised evil actors. This narrative framing often pushes these narratives to adopt a form of demonic otherings as the solution to societal ills, where conspiratorial scapegoats are used to explain away systemic problems. The paper concludes by advocating that narrative criminologists must work to further understand the appeal of conspiracist narratives.

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Plain Language Summary

An Analysis of Conspiracy Theory Texts (Books, Films, Pamphlets) Using Narrative Criminology to Understand the Themes and Ideas That Are Present in Them.

Introduction: There is a growing debate amongst scholars as to whether conspiracy theories are pathological, or if they continue meanings for their audience. **Aim:** This paper seeks to help resolve this debate by examining the themes and ideas contained within popular conspiracy theory narratives that are popular in one particular conspiracy theory social movement called the Freedom Movement. It does this to get a better sense of what these stories are trying to say to their intended audiences particularly when it comes to how they understand what is wrong with society and how they think we should try to fix that. **Method:** To meet this aim, I conducted a thematic narrative analysis of thirty one conspiracy theory texts collected through a combination of convenience and purposeful sampling of a British conspiracy community called the freedom movement. **Results:** Through this analysis, I identified three core themes that cut across all of the texts I looked at for the study. First, the texts all point out that society is deeply flawed and corrupt, often highlighting the collapse of institutions and arguing that this misery is part of a deliberate plan by elites to harm society. Sometimes these critiques can even mirror arguments made by critical scholars on the left who highlight the hierarchical nature of control that exists within society. However, the second theme I identified is that these texts then go on to blame these problems on a cabal of evil people who they argue is secretly responsible for all the worlds problems. This divides the world in half between one pure good group, and one pure evil group who is demonised, othered, and scapegoated. Finally, the third theme I identified is that the texts typically advocate that society can only improve when this evil group is purged from the community. I argue that narrative criminologists should study and consider conspiracy theories more.

Keywords

narrative criminology, conspiracy theories, storytelling, conspiracy, critique

Introduction

In 1999 film “The Matrix,” our protagonist Neo discovers that the world he lives in is a lie, a carefully constructed illusion maintained by a computer programme, the eponymous Matrix. This illusion is used by malicious machines to entrap humanity in a waking dream whilst their energy is harvested. It is only by taking the now iconic red pill that Neo can finally wake up from this illusion and understand the real and horrifying truth.

In the decades since the film’s release The Matrix has morphed into a near universal by-word for political and cultural awakening. Indeed, “taking the red pill” or just “being pilld” has become synonymous for realising the conspiratorial machinations

that govern our reality and is used by white supremacist, leftists, and new age seekers alike (Taylor, 2021). The film's enduring popularity seems to speak to a desire for narratives that allow us to step beyond the apparent solidity of a staid everyday life, see the underworld that lies below the surface, and thus, finally break the Matrix.

This interest in narratives of conspiratorial transgression might help us understand the appearance of a number of large conspiratorial social movements that have mobilised across the world in recent years (Bertuzzi, 2021). From the global Q-Anon movement centred around President Donald Trump (McAulay, 2025), the American Stop the Steal movement (Canon & Sherman, 2021) or the Canadian Trucker Convoy (Gillies et al., 2026), social movements are utilising conspiracy theories to mobilise supporters and justify collective action. Conspiracy theories, which here can be defined as “an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good” (Uscinski Joseph, 2018, p. 235), are by no means confined to the western English speaking world. Yet western countries, particularly the United States and its allies, continue to dominate the global conspiratorial space as the primary propagators of conspiratorial materials. What are the causes and impacts of such a return of conspiratorial social movements to public prominence in these countries?

Some theorists have argued that conspiracy theories represent a pathological “paranoid style” (Hofstadter, 1996) of politics which should be resisted at all costs for the sake of the stability of liberal democracy (Pipes, 1997). Yet how quickly should we adopt this view? Instead, is it not worth examining what values and ideas might be contained within conspiratorial narratives and asking why individuals might be drawn to them? In this paper, I want to investigate this prospect, and to do this I wish to utilise the framework of narrative criminology.

A case study for the use of conspiratorial narratives within a wider conspiratorial social movement can be found in the Freedom Movement, a British social movement that since the Covid-19 pandemic has been mobilising against state interventions in economic and social life. The movement's mobilisations include protesting low emission zones, speed cameras, and government supported digital identification (Lawrence, 2020; Thompson, 2025). The basis of the Freedom Movement's opposition to these activities is intimately connected to their adherence to dominant strains of anglophone conspiracy theorising, more specifically the idea of New World Order (NWO; Barkun, 2013). This “meta-narrative” (Fine, 2002, p. 237) has been present in a number of other international conspiratorial social movements such as QAnon and the Canadian Trucker Convoy. The Freedom Movement, as a comparatively understudied conspiratorial social movement, is thus an ideal object of study.

The aim of this paper is to provide an understanding of how the conspiratorial texts circulated and consumed within the Freedom Movement construct specific political meanings of social reality for their intended audiences. To do this, the paper will perform a thematic narrative analysis on 31 texts collected as part of a digital netnographic immersion within the Freedom Movement. This analysis examines how the texts construct an understanding of society in which a hidden group of corrupt elites is

blamed for the community's suffering. They then advocate for a return to an idealised past which is to be affected through a redemptive purging of demonised others. This analysis demonstrates the ways in which conspiracist narratives can take on the form of radical or even emancipatory critiques of power, whilst in fact prompting reactionary and violent responses to social change.

What Is a Conspiracy Theory?

To begin it is worth attempting to further define what exactly we mean by conspiracy theories, especially since the definition given by Uscinski Joseph (2018) above is very broad. A good starting point for developing greater clarity on the subject comes from the scholar Bale (2007), who argues we should conceptually separate two different but often confused concepts when we discuss conspiracies. The first are allegations of secret plots by governments and terrorist groups which are grounded in reasonable evidence, what he calls "conspiratorial politics" (Bale, 2007, p. 50). The second are the more elaborate stories of world spanning evil cabals of supernaturally powerful elites which are aimed at destroying the storyteller's community, what he calls "conspiracy theories" (Bale, 2007, p. 51). For Bale, the latter type of narrative is fundamentally different from the former as they are not legitimate attempts to understand wrongdoing by specific groups but are instead stories more akin to religious or mythic narratives used to explain human suffering (Bale, 2007, p. 53). However, is the fact that a conspiracy theory is true or false even relevant to its value as a narrative in the first place? A different approach to conspiracy theories instead might ask what values and ideas are contained within these narratives that makes them attractive as forms of rhetoric. Some scholars, such as Dean (1998) and Fiske (1994), have argued that conspiracy narratives might function as important means for critiquing illegitimate systems of power and privilege by instructing marginalised populations to be distrustful of established political authorities. In this case, the relative truth value of an individual conspiracy theory matters less than the implicit message of the narrative which encourages a critical stance against the status quo. Fiske (1994) went as far as to suggest that even false or potential harmful narratives, such as the idea that HIV was a bioweapon specifically created to kill African Americans and Homosexuals, could be legitimate forms of what he terms "counter-knowledge" (Fiske, 1994, p. 209).

However, this view is contested within the research literature. For example, Fenster (2008) has criticised scholars like Fiske (1994) for uncritically celebrating conspiracy theories. He argues that the fact that they are typically anti-establishment in nature does not guarantee that they are free from other forms of prejudice such as homophobia, misogyny, or antisemitism (Fenster, 2008, pp. 283–284). However, Fenster still does not inherently dismiss conspiracy theories as irrational pathologies, and instead, views them as a type of populist political narrative that engage in a, often deeply flawed, form of sociological or political storytelling (Fenster, 2008, pp. 288–289). Despite their disagreements, scholars on either side of this debate resist the urge to pathologize conspiracy narratives and instead argue that they should be understood as valuable and normatively rich stories that convey important meanings for their

intended audiences. It is into this ongoing debate that I now wish to intercede and introduce the theoretical framework that I believe will better equip scholars to make sense of the appeal of conspiracist narratives, that is narrative criminology.

Narrative Criminology and Conspiracy Theories

I argue that narrative criminology provides a strong theoretical framework for understanding and analysing the function that conspiratorial narrative might have for the authors that create them and the audiences that consume them. Rather than being concerned with the factual accuracy of narratives or of their inherent “truth” value, narrative criminology has long been interested in understanding the social function of narrative as a source of meaning generation (Presser, 2009). Narratives are not true or false representation of the outside world, instead, they function as a way to order and make sense of what might otherwise be disparate unconnected events (Presser & Sandberg, 2015; Sandberg, 2010). Moreover, narrative criminologists have made use of a number of conceptual tools which I believe would also allow scholars to better understand the function that conspiratorial narratives play within the wider conspiratorial social movements that they circulate within.

For example, narrative criminologists have argued that narratives are important for shaping the boundaries of communities and they have adopted the concept of “symbolic boundary work” (Andersen, 2023, p. 1,084) to identify where stories function to define the ethical and social limits of a community. This boundary work is often done by defining an in-group against an imagined, and demonised, out-group which, as Anderson notes (2023), works to solidify boundaries through the collection of narratives which reify the groups own conception of themselves against this imagined enemy force. In a related manner, Lois Presser has argued that narratives can be used to engage in a technique of “othering” (Presser, 2013, p. 20). This typically involves the identification of an out group who becomes the symbolic “other,” who is then reduced and portrayed as if they have only a small number of relevant interests (Presser, 2013, p. 19). Typically, these interests are presented only as antagonistic towards the identified in-group and thus the other is re-constituted as inherently threatening.

This process has taken on additional meaning in the context of political or social movements where, as Ost (2004) has argued, the channelling of anger into grievances against specific identified antagonist groups is the core mode of political mobilisation. This process of collective boundary maintenance in social movement is also, as Polletta et al. (2011) have argued, facilitated through process of narrative sense making. These stories often assume the form of “meta-narratives” (Fine, 2002) which are narratives that are passed around within social movements and can be referred to without repeating the entire story in full (Fine, 2002, p. 237). These meta-narrative shape group understandings even when not explicitly articulated or defined. Furthermore, in the context of social movements, storytelling involves constructing narratives in which moral protagonists, representing the social movement, face off against perfidious antagonists which threaten the community (Polletta et al., 2011). In this sense

narratives can be linked to the wider process of “collective action frames” in which social movements generate a set of beliefs that frame their understanding of relevant social issues, define how the problem is to be address, and legitimise and motivate collection action to resolve them (Benford & Snow, 2000). Narratives can assist these frames through adding emotional and rhetorical appeals to these calls to action and, through emplotment, situate specific frames within a wider temporal story of the social movement’s past and future (Davis, 2002, pp. 24–27). We can thus see the role narrative plays in the development of a social movement’s symbolic identity, and I argue this will be particularly relevant for the study of conspiratorial social movements like the Freedom Movement.

A further important concept utilised in narrative criminology which may be of use in understanding conspiracy theory narratives and their use within social movements is the idea of the counter-narrative (Sandberg & Colvin, 2020). That is, narratives which “challenge or oppose dominant stories” (Sandberg & Colvin, 2020, p. 1588.) As other narrative criminologists have argued (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017) counter-narratives allow for the creation of “narrative resistance” (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017 p. 190) in which marginalised groups develop their own stories to push back against hegemonic narrative templates that otherwise dominant their lives (see also Joosse et al., 2015). This accords with the position taken by scholars such as Dean (1998) and particularly Fiske (1994, p. 209) that conspiracy theories can function as “counter-knowledge” but it is also important to not uncritically celebrate narrative as an inherently progressive force that can resist power. Narrative can equally be used by reactionary forces to reify and support existing systems of oppression (see e.g. Keeton, 2015). Moreover, even narratives which appear on the surface to counter-cultural can in fact simply re-state power relationships in a deceptive way. In this way Plummer’s (2019) concept of “Negotiated Narratives” (Plummer, 2019, p. 60) is instructive. These are narratives that whilst not directly challenging dominant or hegemonic stories provide narratives tools to resist or negotiate the existing order. Crucially, this negotiation never overturns the dominant hegemonic narrative even if these negotiated narratives have a revolutionary gloss to them.

This paper will thus examine what values or meanings can be found in conspiracist narrative by investigating how the narratives promulgated and consumed by a specific conspiratorial social movement help develop that movement’s symbolic boundaries. Conspiracy theories are, I argue, an important area of study for narrative criminologists that, with some exceptions I will discuss below, have largely been missing from the extant literature. This is in spite of the fact that conspiracy theories have been demonstrable engines of social harm. As many scholars have noted conspiracy narratives have played important roles in spreading medical disinformation that has led to preventable deaths due to illness (Pertwee et al., 2022) or convinced large numbers of people to engage in risky financial conduct (Muniesa, 2023). Moreover, conspiracy narratives have been frequently used to justify and excuse violence by both state and non-state actors (Giry & Gürpınar, 2020; Ong, 2020). As narratives that are clearly implicated in social harm, conspiracy theories are thus deserving of a narrative criminological study which this paper intends to contribute. Furthermore, this work builds

on the limited criminological research which has previously examined conspiratorial narrative texts. This includes works such as Sandberg's analysis of the conspiratorial manifesto of the Far-Right terrorist Anders Breivik (Sandberg, 2013). My paper adds to this work by shifting the focus from isolated texts or manifestos, towards a wider understanding of how a range of narratives are used in the context of a social movement. The paper also answers the call by Kindynis (2025) for Criminologists to take conspiracy theory seriously as a site of Criminological research. Whilst Kindynis (2025) examined whether conspiracy theories could be resources to help understand the operation of covert politics by powerful social actors this paper takes a different approach. Instead, it will aim to understand what meanings can be taken from an engagement with conspiracist texts themselves beyond examining their inherent truth value. This research then will highlight the way conspiracist narratives can be used to generate and maintain understandings of the sources of social disorder.

Methods

To investigate this issue, I engaged in a narrative analysis of 31 conspiracy theory texts. Of these 31 texts, 13 were full-length books, 7 were articles or book chapters in edited collections, 8 were feature-length films, 2 were video-on-demand productions available online, and 1 was originally published as a radio broadcast. These texts were collected as part of a wider research project which examined a British conspiracist social movement known as the Freedom Movement.

The Freedom Movement began in direct opposition to UK related health measures during the Covid-19 pandemic (Spring and Wending, 2020), and which has now broadened its scope to oppose a number of government policies such as Ultra-Low Emission Zones, Net-Zero, and Digital I.D. (Lawrence, 2020; Thompson, 2025). The movement is mainly based and organised on a number of interconnected online platforms such as X, Telegram, YouTube, and Instagram. An exact estimate of the movement's size is not possible with my qualitative methodology, however, membership of the various online platforms I examined as part of my netnographic immersion ranged from a few hundred to the tens of thousands.

Texts were gathered as part of a netnographic process of immersion into the movement's online social sphere. Netnography (Belk & Kozinets, 2016, p. 272; Kozinets, 2015) is a research method which applies traditional ethnographic methods to study social interactions that occur on or are facilitated by digital technologies. In this case, after acquiring ethical approval from my institutions ethic's council, I created two pseudonymous accounts, one on the platform X, and the other on the platform Telegram. Drawing on previous research into the Freedom Movement (Lawrence, 2020; Thompson, 2025), I followed prominent activists who were active on X and joined a number of open access Telegram channels that were advertised to the public.

As part of this immersion, I began to engage in a process of convenience sampling (Waterfield, 2018) to collect a dataset for analysis. I initially only selected texts I would encounter during my netnographic immersion. However, I then supplemented them with a small set additional set of texts (6) gathered via purposeful sampling

(Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025) of historical conspiracist texts from conspiracy theorist associated with the NWO conspiracist meta-narrative.

Once I acquired a text it was subjected to thematic narrative analysis. Through a process of inductive coding (Chandra & Shang, 2019), codes were identified and logged into a code book. These codes were then gathered into larger and larger thematic nodes until only a small number of core themes remained which could be applied to all narratives collected. This analysis ceased when saturation occurred.

Findings

Overall, I identified three core themes which stretched across of all the text's examined within the paper in different forms. These three themes were:

1. Hidden Harms and an Evil Elite.
2. Paradise Lost.
3. Redemption through a cleansing purge.

Taken together these themes construct a conspiracist narrative of past, present, and future which paint the picture of a society riven by social disorder. This disorder originates from a perfidious evil elite which has corrupted and twisted an otherwise pure society into a dystopia for their own demonic and selfish ends. It is only the conspiracist who can see through this deception, rouse the community to purge this cabal from their positions of power and return the world to the state of purity that once reigned in the past. In this way these narratives organise disparate and often chaotic historical and political events into an ordered temporal sequence, what narrative scholars following Aristotle might term emplotment (Ribo, 2019), to generate a new and novel meaning for their audiences. It is through this temporal sequencing, in which the past is corrupted by the present and the future can only be saved by a return to an older order, that the overarching themes of each narrative are given coherence and meaning. Let us now examine these individual themes in more detail.

Hidden Harms and an Evil Elite

All of the texts I examined begin by highlighting a sense of disquiet and paranoia that is rooted in the loss of an imagined past. Indeed, all of the narratives studied for this paper highlighted a sense of temporal disjuncture. The world is out of tilt, things are much worse than they were before, and there is looming sense of dread about the future that ranges from uncertainty to fears of an apocalyptic disaster. This is due to the first of the identified themes; that the omnipresent social disorder in their community is caused by an evil hidden elite. We can see this pattern clearly in the beginning of A. Ralph Epperson's text, "The New World Order" where he notes that:

Something is wrong in America! Today's newspapers are full of stories about the rampant rise in divorce rates; the increasing abuse of children by some parents; increases in the

incidence of rape; pornography being read by an increasing number of people; more crimes against property; demands for world government; urgings for national borders to fall. (Epperson, 1990, p. xii)

The storyteller highlights a persistent theme of unease, disquiet, and even apocalyptic anticipation, all to communicate to the audience that something is deeply wrong with the world. However, after developing an atmosphere of disorder, these texts move on to argue that behind these societal harms there is in fact a coherent ordered plan and a secret group which is controlling and manipulating all of the community's problems. Moreover, each text suggests that the audience can learn to see how this hidden hand operates. Epperson (1990) for example asks his reader, "Why are all of the legacies of the past, the family, national borders, the right to practise any chosen religion, the right to private property, amongst other things, under such an attack?" Before answering his own question with a question; "Is it possible that there are actually people and organisations who really want to change the basic order of things?" (Epperson, 1990, p. xii).

This purported agenda to immiserate, oppress, and even destroy society is tied to another core theme with these works; anti-elitism. Conspiracies originate at the top of the social hierarchy, trickling down from a group of evil criminals who are working silently in secret to bring about ruin to the world's population. As Alex Jones notes in the opening minutes of his conspiracy documentary "Endgame: Blueprint for Global Enslavement.":

In this film you will learn how our world is truly governed. You will see how highly secretive roundtable groups interlock to form a global intelligence network. This group has steered planetary affairs for hundreds of years. Now in the final stages, they prepare for open world government. A goal tyrant throughout history have lusted after. (Jones, 2007)

The consequences of this hidden cabal's agenda are horrifying if allowed to come to fruition. In Cooper's (1991) seminal conspiracy text "Behold a Pale Horse" the author outlines a narrative in which a group of secretive global elites he identifies as the "illuminati" have declared a "quiet war" on the world's population, using "silent weapons." (Cooper, 1991, pp. 36–38; & pp. 167–168). This group wants to drastically reduce the world's population and to turn the survivors into slaves in a global totalitarian world system. In the face of this apocalyptic assault on freedom, Cooper offers his readers a rousing alternative. He asks his audience to stand up to this system of government tyranny by declaring:

The message is this: You must accept that you have been cattle and the ultimate consequence of being cattle—which is slavery—or you must prepare to fight, and if necessary die to preserve your God-given right to Freedom. (Cooper, 1991, p. 65)

In this way, these texts paint a picture of a world governed by hidden obscured harms which are being directed by a secretive cabal to push us closer to a totalitarian system of abject slavery. This critique, in a slightly distorted manner, appears to represent an aesthetic or experiential truth of what is like to live under the rubric of late modern

capitalism. Indeed, many of the critiques at times seem like they verge into structural analysis of the processes that govern modern surveillance capitalism. Alex Jones in his "Police State" documentary series outlines a vision of the American public under siege by the forces of a totalitarian militaristic authoritarianism. These forces work to prevent public opposition to neoconservative economic and imperialist policies and core to his argument is his observation that there is a growing convergence of state and corporate power that use security services such as the FBI and CIA to infiltrate and control opposition movements. (Jones, 2003).

All of this seems to support the claim of authors like Dean (1998) and Fiske (1994) in demonstrating that irrespective of their representational truth value, conspiracy narrative contains themes that are critical of the existing social system. In this way it might be possible to read these texts as a type of counter-narrative (Sandberg & Colvin, 2020) to established hegemonic stories about society as Fiske (1994) and Dean (1998) would suggest. To return to our starting metaphor, these texts represent the red pill that will allow their audiences to break free of the illusion of the matrix and finally comprehend the horrible nature of the hidden reality beneath it. However, we must be careful not to uncritically celebrate these texts at this point. As we shall see, a further examination of the gathered narratives shows that in most cases whilst they do often critique systems of power, they also work to simultaneously reinforce them.

Paradise Lost

Whilst the texts contain clear themes of anti-elitism and a critique of modern society, these critiques are expressed from a particular viewpoint that markedly differs from the perspective of proponents of conspiracist narratives like Fiske (1994) and Dean (1998). Rather than radical critiques grounded in a structural understanding of power, conspiracist narratives frequently express a nostalgic disposition where they yearn for a past which has been lost and corrupted by the current depravity of modernity. Here the emplotment of each text constructs progress or change as a degraded move away from a past ideal. Thus, the second identified theme in the texts is that each narrative constructs a dichotomy between a corrupted, fallen, and evil present, and an imagined pure, peaceful, and good past which was destroyed by the machinations of the previously identified evil elite. This dichotomy typically involves demonising this constructed elite through a process of othering (Presser, 2013). We can see this theme clearly by returning to Epperson's text. Even a cursory examination of the themes in the work demonstrates that the author is deeply reactionary. He bemoans the closing of churches, the decline of religiosity amongst the young, and the, as he sees it, promotion of homosexuality and destruction of the family forced on the hapless United States (Epperson, 1990, p. 225.)

In this way Epperson constructs an idealised past of white, Christian, heterosexual America. This vision is threatened and corrupted by the outside force of the racialised, communist, queer, and international New World Order. This cabal seeks to destroy this idealised past paradise for perfidious ideological motives. For Epperson, a key part of this plot is the destruction of Christianity, and he has an entire chapter in his book

dedicated to the threat supposedly faced by American Christians (Epperson, 1990, p. 225). William Cooper similarly argues that the New World Order will aim to destroy Christianity and all other world religions (Cooper, 1991, p. 74). This view is also expressed forcefully in Bill Jasper's (2001) "The United Nations Exposed" a book which purports to expose a conspiracy by both communists and big business to enslave the globe in a one world government which will destroy the United States of America and Christianity. He notes:

Only a person totally deaf and blind could fail to notice the incredible occult, New Age, and neo-pagan explosion that has been rapidly transforming the Americas and Western Europe into what the advocates of global change gleefully refer to as "post-Christian civilizations." (Jasper, 2001, p. 236)

Within all of these texts then, there is a recurrent theme in which a previously existing harmonious system is corrupted and defiled by an alternative demonic force. In simple terms, there was a paradise that was lost. For conspiracy texts, this takes the form of symbolic boundary work (Andersen, 2023) where an imagined good community is pitted against the imagined evil of the conspiratorial cabal. What is of note in these cases, is that whilst the texts engage in symbolic boundary making, different texts construct different boundaries in order to create and solidify different imagined communities. For example, in the above texts, taken largely from American authors, this paradise is expressly linked to a prelapsarian vision of the United States. This takes the form of images of the individualised and godly government of the founding fathers. However, this same thematic narrative structure, paradise lost and corrupted by an outside force, is present in the others texts I have analysed, even if the exact content and vision of this idealised past is different.

A more esoteric and cosmic vision of a lost paradise is to be found in the work of British New Age conspiracist David Icke. Icke argues that all the universe once existed in a state of pure cosmic unity and oneness. This perfection was broken when one aspect of the unity rebelled, breaking apart from creation and causing disharmony and discord (Icke, 1994, p. 4). Starting with works published in the late 1990s and early 2000s Icke began to argue that this discordant force was a cabal of alien reptiles. For Icke, these reptilians came to Earth in the ancient past, destroying once highly advanced human civilisations like Atlantis and Lemuria and then enslaving the survivors (Icke, 2002, pp. 34–36). Though outlandish, Icke's narrative fits the same thematic structure of the other texts examined. A glorious harmonious past corrupted and destroyed by a countervailing evil force that seeks to eradicate all that is good.

This thematic structure has the effect of dividing the cosmos sharply into two distinct and mutually exclusive camps, one which is purely good, and the other which is purely evil. It is this latter force which is held to be responsible for the world's problems by destroying the paradise of the past and immiserating and oppressing the public to this day. This narrative framing presents a dualistic view of society in which all conflict can be bifurcated into two halves, one good and the other evil. It is the conspiratorial cabal which is identified as the prime source of evil which seeks nothing

less than to destroy the remnants of the true harmonious community of the past and plunge the world into darkness and tyranny. Thus, the narrators chosen community, who are often rhetorically referred to as “the people” are locked in a globe-spanning, often centuries long, battle with this evil outside force.

Whilst the identification of antagonists within the conspiracy narratives is typical of social movement texts (Polletta et al., 2011), I contend that these narratives go much further than a mere identification of an enemy. Here, the conspiratorial cabal is not simply presented as mere antagonist, but as a force of pure, unadulterated, even meta-physical, evil. Their motives are to cause pain and destruction, and they pursue their goals with supernatural efficacy and purpose. Thus, within these narratives the conspirators are dehumanised, stripped of any sympathetic characteristics, and presented as objects of hate and disgust. In some cases, this dehumanisation is quite literal. We see this most clearly in Icke’s reptilian thesis where he argues that human beings are not responsible directly for the state of the world, but instead are the victims of mass manipulation by a cabal of bloodthirsty aliens. Icke goes further still and portrays the alien cabal as a uniquely depraved evil that engages in “*Satanic*” rituals where they torture, abuse, sacrifice, then consume children (Icke, 1999, pp. 288–290).

However, this theme of dehumanisation extends to the texts I analysed in which the conspirators were still presented as ordinary flesh and blood humans. In these narratives, the conspirators are still depraved monsters who engage in all types of evil debauchery, including paedophilia, worship of the devil, and even human sacrifice and cannibalism. For example, in Alex Jone’s documentary “*Dark Secrets Inside Bohemian Grove*” he alleges the elite leaders of the New World Order meet in a secluded men’s club in the Redwood forests of Northern California. It is true Bohemian Grove is a secretive networking event for the world’s elites, yet, in Jone’s narrative, this is sensationalised into a huge occult ritual in which men engage in homosexual orgies and worship a giant owl demon called “Moloch.” Jones further alleges the men perform mock human sacrifice by burning effigies of children before a statue of Moloch. He even goes as far as to darkly suggest that the group may actually kidnap and murder real people as part of their rituals (Jones, 2000).

Within these narratives therefore, the conspiracists construct an existentially evil other which becomes a repository for all of society’s ills. In this case, we can see that within these conspiracy texts the, what we might adapting Presser’s (2013) language call, the conspiratorial other, is presented as shorn of any common humanity or unique interests. Their only interest exists in harming and destroying the virtuous community and performing the vilest demonic actions to do so. In this way, by reducing a target and ascribing to them all of society’s immorality, we can also see how narrative othering inter-sect with the creation of symbolic boundaries. Indeed, through the creation of stark differences between victims and offenders, the texts could be said to mobilise Christie’s (1986) concept of the ideal victim, and ideal offender. The conspiratorial cabal becomes the ideal offender, an entirely inhuman entity that only seeks to destroy the idealised victim of the pure and innocent community. In this way, the texts work to symbolically separate these two groups, and in doing so re-affirm the boundaries of their idealised and chosen community from the ideal offenders outside of it.

The conspiratorial other is thus contrasted against the imagined good community of the lost past which is made to appear even more virtuous by its opposition to its demonic enemy. In addition to demonisation, these narratives also engage in a form of scapegoating. As the demonised other is held to be solely and personally responsible for all the problems impacting society. This type of rhetoric explicitly denies alternative explanations which suggest harm arises out of social structures or larger historical, economic, or cultural processes. Instead, within the conspiracist narrative, all harm comes from specific and planned actions willed by a malevolent actor. Many of the texts I analysed, are extremely specific on this point. In “None dare call it conspiracy” the authors deny what they call the “accident” theory of history which argues in favour of structural understandings of world events (Allen & Abraham, 1971, p. 7). Whilst on top of this, this demonic scapegoating is then often used to de-legitimise other oppositional voices, who are presented as dupes unaware of the conspiracy or actively in its service. Icke calls leftist or non-conspiracist critics of power “robot radicals” (Icke, 2002, p. 125) who mindlessly deny the reality of the conspiracy, for example.

Thus, each text seems to attempt to monopolise the criticism of power, labelling alternative critiques of power controlled opposition and instead presenting their demonised conspiratorial scapegoat as the only valid interpretation. It should be noted here that conspiratorial texts do not have the monopoly on critiques on power nor are they the only types of critique that use the identification of antagonists, or even draw on a semi-idealised past in making their arguments. For example, the weaponisation of nostalgia has also been utilised by left leaning critics and parties (see e.g. Jobson & Wickham-Jones, 2010). Where these texts do differ from other types of nostalgic critique, is in the combination of this nostalgia for the past, with the utilisation of the techniques of othering (Presser, 2013). In these narratives, their targets are reduced to a sub-human state with no unique interests and simultaneously scapegoated as personally responsible for all of society’s problem. In this way, these specific narratives are distinctive from other types of political critique. Indeed, it must be noted that many other conspiratorial narratives also lack this distinctive focus on demonic othering and scapegoating, (popular moon landing conspiracy theories for example). This suggests that these texts constitute a more specific type of narrative genre. With this understood, we can now turn to analyse the final identified theme in the narratives.

Redemption Through a Cleansing Purge

All the texts I analysed converged on a primary solution to the problem of conspiratorial evil. That society must return to the value of the lost past and renew the spirit of the community in opposition to the cabal which can only be achieved through purging of the malignant taint of demonised evil. In this way the texts each put forward what might be considered a narrative version of a “collective action frame” (Benford & Snow, 2000) to be used by their imagined audiences within a potential social movement.

For American authors this typically involves a call for a return to an imagined past of Godly constitutional government. In the conspiracy pamphlet “Operation Vampire

Killer 2000” the authors argues that the solution to the nations troubles lies in the hands of a group of patriots who: “Know our nation’s founding principles, know what went wrong and how to fix America.” These principles are outlined later in the chapter are embodied in the American constitution, which has served patriots so well because its “bedrock was the Christian Worldview of those who founded this country.” (Police Against New World Order, 1992, p. 66).

Here we see that the author frames the problems facing their community as arising from a deviation from the sacred principles which originally constituted it. Only by returning to these principles, their Christian infused understanding of the constitution, can America and by extension the rest of the world be saved. Alex Jones provides a neat summation of this position in his documentary film “Endgame.” In one scene he stands outside of a meeting of the elite Bilderberg group and, using a bullhorn, declares that: “The answer to 1984 is 1776!” (Jones, 2007). This contrasts George Orwell’s infamous piece of dystopian fiction with the year the American Declaration of Independence was first penned. To defeat the dystopian future, we must return to the glorious past. However, this same call for a return to the values of a lost paradise is seen across all of the texts I examined. The New Age conspiracy theorist David Icke insists we can only defeat the Reptilian slave masters that rule the world by rediscovering our spiritual potential. To do this, we must reconnect to the cosmic oneness of creation that humanity once possessed. Indeed, this theme is so prevalent within Icke’s work, that his 2,012 marathon lecture at Wembley arena in London was titled “Remember who you are.”

Again and again, we observe a recourse to a narrative of redemptive return of recovering a lost sense of harmony and power which was taken from the individual or community by a demonic other. However, the question arises as to how exactly this redemptive return is to be realised? On this point, many of the texts analysed become quite vague. Most end their narratives with a short call to action which does not specify the mechanisms needed for destroying the cabal. Instead, they typically involve a call to spread knowledge about the conspiracy far and wide. Embodied in this call, I argue, is a belief that once people know about the threat we face, then the cabal will finally collapse under its own weight. Indeed, the majority of the other texts I analysed seem very set on not actually advocating for any structural change to address the scale of the problem. For example, Bill Jasper seems to directly forestall the possibility of radical change by noting:

If the people don’t gain the understanding to choose better leaders and hold their politicians accountable to the Constitution, they cannot expect to improve their government through revolution. . .What is needed instead is to use the resources and the freedoms we have to inform our fellow citizens and put the government our Founding Fathers gave us back on track. (Jasper, 2001, p.298)

Again, we see Jasper invoke an imagined past, but here it is to argue against the prospect of radical change. This further emphasises the important role that temporality and emplotment play in these texts as in these conspiratorial narratives, the past is not truly gone, instead it is an ever present possibility that can be actualised here and now

if only the audience takes the initiative. This is true whether this past is the cosmic oneness of David Icke's New Age Conspiracy, or the American exceptionalist understanding of the vision of the founding fathers. This, I argue, fits into the wider thematic structure of the conspiracy narrative and crucially, guides how these texts construct and understand what political actions are necessary to restore social order. If all that is wrong with society is that an evil force has invaded and corrupted an otherwise pure community, then all that is needed to return to that imaged past is the removal and destruction of the conspiratorial cabal. Given this force is typically depicted as ruling through deceit and lies, then exposure of the truth about its existence will be a fatal blow to its power.

For example, the QAnon meta-narrative suggests that President Donald Trump is engaged in waging a secret war against a cabal of satanic demonic paedophilic cannibals (McAulay, 2025). A key part of this narrative is that this war is already in effect won, with many of the key players in the conspiracy arrested or executed. All that remains is for the community to wait for public exposure of the conspiracy through an event known as "*The Storm*," where the remaining conspirators will be publicly executed for their crimes (McAulay, 2025).

As the QAnon author Joe M notes:

Here is the point. The world is currently experiencing a dramatic covert war of biblical proportions, literally the fight for earth, between the forces of good and evil. I can't put it in simpler terms, but I can say it appears the good guys are winning . . . We are all starting to see the pattern now that enough time has passed; that our biggest global concerns are starting to recede, and peace is returning. (Joe, 2019, p. 8)

Thus, QAnon texts represent a more extreme version of a kind of pervasive optimism within the broader conspiracy narratives I have analysed where the future can herald a return to the glorious past. They also embody the demonic othering that I suggested was core to this type of conspiratorial narrative as within the QAnon movement the elites are not merely evil, but satanic child eating monsters who engage in all sorts of depravity (McAulay, 2025). It is this demonisation where they are reduced to subhuman monsters which justifies the violence against them in the storm.

Thus, despite these texts beginning from what appears to be a position of potential critical subjectivity against power, they often conclude by either arguing against structural change, or coaching their calls for it in favour of a return to an imagined past which can only be realised often through the purging of a conspiratorial other. In this sense, returning to a discussion earlier in the paper, rather than constituting true counter-narratives (Sandberg & Colvin, 2020) we might instead argue that these narratives are what Plummer (2019) calls "Negotiated Narratives" (Plummer, 2019, p. 60). I believe these narratives, with their demonic othering and scapegoating, give audiences tools to manage and even criticise the existing state of things, whilst failing to generate the space necessary for true narrative resistance. In this sense, rather than representing a way to escape the Matrix, conspiracy narratives of this type merely give the seeker a way to manage existence under this same system; not a true red pill, but merely a sedative.

Concluding Discussion

Conspiracy Theories have often been dismissed as irrational or pathological forms of reasoning alien to conventional politics (Pipes, 1997). In contrast, this paper has taken the perspective that conspiracy theories should be understood as value filled narratives that generate political meanings for their intended audiences, and it has attempted to demonstrate this through an analysis of conspiracist texts taken from a particular conspiracist social movement. From this analysis I argue that whilst the narratives found within the Freedom Movement do contain system-critical themes of anti-elitism and even societal critique, these critiques often morph into a nostalgic yearning for a lost past. The loss of this paradise is then blamed on a demonised social other which is anthropomorphised and turned into the perfect scapegoat for structural problems and unwanted social changes in society. This process of demonisation then leads to calls for a redemptive purging of this conspiratorial other to return to an imagined past that has not been degraded and corrupted by modernity.

Thus, rather than acting as tools for challenging mainstream narratives, these conspiracist texts often in fact produce stories which simply re-state dominant social ideas. Concepts such as Christian supremacy, Americanism, racial supremacy and antisemitism, or even the belief in a fundamentally cosmically just universe are simply re-stated but in a deceptively critical format. On this basis, I argue that some conspiracy theories, particularly those which feature demonised othering and narrative scapegoating, may serve to manage or repair values or ideas which are seen to be under threat. They do this, by externalising social disharmony outwards onto an imaged evil outsider. In these narratives, problems occur not because of inherent contradictions within a system, institution, or ideology, but instead because an outside force has invaded the system and corrupted it. The implication that arises from this narrative is that if only this force was removed, all disharmonies would cease, and the system would function as originally intended. In this way, they embody what we might call pseudo-sociological storytelling, in that, they present narratives which suggest or purport to suggest an understanding of the structures of power in society. Yet, through anthropomorphising societal problems and arguing they all arise from the actions of perfidious demonised scapegoats, these narratives undermine a true understanding of how systems of power operate.

However, these findings still challenge the view that conspiracy theories are purely irrational pathologies. The narratives I examined contained an understanding of the world that was both ideological and laden with implicit and explicit normative values. Rather than failures to effectively reason these conspiracy narratives made affectively rich arguments in favour of political mobilisation to preserve their conception of a chosen political community. In this context it is worth noting that the texts I examined parallel and indeed sometimes outright supported many of the political positions of modern reactionary right wing nationalist movements. The texts are often anti-immigration, anti-feminist, anti-environmentalist, anti-queer, and some are outright racist and bigoted against ethnic minorities. It is also worth noting that the majority of the text's studied came from a specific reactionary social movement operating in the

UK (Lawrence, 2020; Thompson, 2025). This in turn might suggest the continued relevance of conspiracy theory texts to the modern far right as a form of political storytelling. This finding is consistent with previous research on the far right (McAulay, 2025) and gives further credence to the notion that conspiratorial narratives are an important rhetorical tool for right-wing political movements. The point, however, is to note that these texts are not irrational, they are narratives which generate political meaning and create communities through shared storytelling. As I argued above this paper builds on previous research, such as Sandberg (2013), by examining how narrative meaning is constructed across multiple conspiratorial texts rather than a singular manifesto or document. Future research might continue this development by moving beyond this paper's focus on textual analysis, to examine how conspiracy narratives might be communally generated by in person or even digitally mediated interactions between members of existing conspiratorial social movements. In addition, the fact that these texts were found on social media platforms where they were shared and disseminated to thousands of people is in and of itself significant. Previous research has highlighted the role that social media may play in disseminating conspiratorial thinking (see e.g. Lacy, 2022), but these studies have typically focused on algorithmic radicalisation and short form content. My findings in contrast highlight how peer to peer recommendation of more classical conspiracy texts may be facilitated by social media technologies.

It is also important at this stage to highlight the potential limitations of this paper. Whilst the texts I analysed generally came from the political right; it should be noted that this type of demonic othering and scapegoating is not the provenance of this political tendency alone. There are numerous examples of left-wing thinkers, movements, and regimes engaging in this very type of conspiratorial demonic othering (see e.g. Greene's (2025), critique of Pro-Stalinist conspiracy theories). Future research might examine whether these narrative techniques appear in the conspiracy narratives of other political tendencies and communities outside of reactionary or right-wing mobilisations like the Freedom Movement. However, in spite of these limitations this investigation has demonstrated the fruitfulness of a narrative criminological engagement with conspiracy theories and may act as a bridge for future research along these lines.

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Ethical Considerations

This paper drew only on textual data taken from publicly available sources and thus did not involve human participants or data that required informed consent. However, the wider project

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