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Contested Narratives of the Pandemic Crisis: the Far Right, Anti-Vaxxers and Freedom of Speech

Introduction



Source: <https://www.fairobserver.com/coronavirus/miranda-christou-anti-vax-movement-far-right-vaccine-hesitancy-health-news-14251/>

One of the many social and political issues that emerged during the Covid 19 pandemic and the efforts to control it, has been the significance of the so-called 'anti-vaxxers'; people who have disputed the existence of Covid 19, who have rejected public health measures such as wearing masks, social distancing, and opposed the use of vaccines to protect populations against the spread of the virus. This has been in the name of expressing their own choice, their rights to control their own bodies and their own freedom of expression. One of the dilemmas of policy makers as well as public opinion has been whether – and to what extent – spreading what informed scientific opinion considers misinformation against vaccinations and lockdown measures, and mobilising people accordingly, should be censored and suppressed. This goes with the question of whether people who refuse to be vaccinated, for whatever reason, should be banned from public places and certain jobs.

Viewed in this way, the issue of the anti-vaxxers has become one of the main free speech dilemmas of recent years. In this paper we seek to set this phenomenon of opposition to Covid vaccinations and public health-based restrictions in a historical and political context, situating the political forces that we see as coalescing around this issue, and considering the

issue of freedom of speech within that. Therefore, it is important to note at the outset that when we talk about ‘anti-vaxxers’ we are not talking about the ‘vaccine-hesitant’; people who have not yet had the vaccine due to concerns about it, but rather those who have taken a position of overt opposition to this. It is important to note that ‘anti-vaxxers’ constitute a group with diverse motivations – political, religious, aesthetic – though what unites them is a strong belief that the authorities imposing the Covid-related restrictions are doing so based on hidden and ulterior motives.

It is also important to be aware that this is not the first time that movements like this have emerged; indeed there is a long history of movements not dissimilar to the current one, which have formed and developed ever since vaccinations were first introduced in industrialising societies (Link, 2005). Jonathan Berman’s recent book *Anti-Vaxxers* (2021) illustrates the way the need to control outbreaks and pandemics has created tensions in different historical periods between the requirements of public health and concern about freedom of speech and personal liberty over at least the last hundred and fifty years. Berman offers the example of the groups who protested against mandatory smallpox vaccination in 19th century Britain and notes that these were the same people who had previously led opposition to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which coerced unemployed people into labour in workhouses under extremely harsh conditions (Berman, 2021). This points to the way opposition to the imposition of public health measures can have a range of different political motivations, though underlying these is deep distrust of the motives of the state.

Since the 1960s, there have also been new forms of opposition to vaccination campaigns that have developed from homeopathy and other modes of ‘alternative medicine’, where vaccinations are seen to represent an assault on the body’s ‘natural’ resistance to disease. While the evidence base for these claims has been significantly challenged by scientific research (House of Commons, 2010) it is also important to note that the use of medical science cannot be unproblematically associated with ‘progress’; and there is a whole history of the way women’s bodies and the bodies of poor, disabled and racialised minorities have experienced invasive experimental technologies (Yuval-Davis, 1997). In this sense, these movements can be regarded as lightning rods for deeper concerns about governance, public trust and freedom of speech, as well an indication of how people understand the role of the state in addressing issues of health, illness and disease within populations and the regulation of social behaviour based on this.

While it is important to understand this wider history of opposition to vaccination, this discussion is primarily concerned with the politics of the contemporary ‘anti-vaxxer’ movement. While there is clear political diversity among those who have attended anti-vaxxer demonstrations, which draw in people with a wide array of concerns about the insecurity, suffering and distress caused by lockdown measures, there is also significant evidence of the organisational role that far right groups are playing in this movement (Gnauss & McGowan, 2021; Roose, 2021; *Economist*, 2021). Alongside this, the contemporary political space created around opposition to Covid vaccinations and public health restrictions is being utilised by white supremacist and right-wing nationalist groups as a major opportunity to place their conspiratorial vision of society before a wider audience, where a

rhetoric of victimisation masks the deep authoritarianism and profound racism and misogyny. In this way these groups have dominated public and media concern around the management of the pandemic – which has displaced a focus on the disproportionate impact of the negative effects of the pandemic on poor and racialised communities, and on women as a whole. A 2020 UN report notes that the pandemic has created a situation for women in which ‘even limited gains made in the past decades are at risk of being rolled back’. This is manifested in the impact on women’s deteriorating economic situation, negative impacts on women’s health and healthcare, the major increase in the volume of unpaid caring work women have had to undertake through the pandemic, as well as in terms of the increase of violence against women and girls and significantly reduced access to support services to address this. This report notes that ‘the pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic’ (2020:2).

This discussion focuses on the political and ideological agendas of the far right in this moment, as we feel it is crucial to understand the way the way its narrative – rather than activism around the concerns outlined above – has been the one which has interpolated many people’s difficulties and suffering through the pandemic. In looking at this we have considered the US primarily but also other parts of the western world. Within this piece we also want to consider the relationship between the far right as a secular white supremacist movement and the Christian religious right. The relationship between the ‘Christian right’ in the US and the secular far right is a contingent relationship that has waxed and waned historically. The non-religious far right has generally focused on economic and political issues, particularly opposition to immigration and in the post 9/11 period, opposition to ‘Islam’ as well as to all Muslim people. The Christian religious right by contrast has been primarily concerned with the reproductive familial domain and has focused on issues of gender and sexuality (Goldberg, 2007). In this paper we point to the way these concerns are merging with the development of new forms of ‘alt-right Christianity’.

The central ideological platform of the contemporary far right are ‘white replacement/white extinction’ theories. These ideas have re-animated the far right, which grew significantly under the presidency of Donald Trump in the US and has now gone worldwide, operating in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and much of Europe. In a recent discussion of this political ideology, Chetan Bhatt has noted:

The ‘fear of white extinction’ unites virtually all European and North American far-right tendencies, despite the ideological dissimilarities and conflicts between the alt-right, the alt-lite, the counter-jihad movement, among others. The idea of ‘white extinction’ is associated with several metaphysical themes...[which] are linked in fascist thinking and their logical progression is towards cleansing violence. Each of these themes generates new dimensions of racism in contemporary fascist thinking (2020:2).

So while the extreme right political space contains different conceptions of tactics and strategy, these conceptions of a ‘white replacement’ that articulate a mortal threat to the ‘white race’ from ongoing immigration and state-sponsored multiculturalism act as a unifying

theme. In this article we point to the way this theme has been transferred and transformed into anti-vaccination and Covid-denying conspiracy theories. The dominant characteristic of many Covid anti-vaxxer groups has been hostility to science and scientific advice concerning anti-Covid measures. The political right in its many manifestations especially in the US has always held a deep-rooted suspicion of the state and public health authorities, but what we see with the extreme right is the way anti-Covid conspiracies are articulated through the language of 'white replacement' conspiracies. While the anti-vaxxer movement is politically diverse as we have already noted, our concern lies in the role played by the extreme right within this. It is not only a result of the far right's financial and organisational resources but also its ideological message, where its anti-state thrust and racialised critique of neoliberal capitalism blurs the boundaries between right and left.

In an overall sense we see the present dynamism and growth of right-wing nationalist movements, in both their secular and religious manifestations, as representing bottom-up responses to neoliberalism's systemic multifaceted global political and economic crisis of governability and governmentality (Yuval-Davis, 2012; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy, 2019). This crisis is central to relationships between states and societies as well as to constructions of subjectivity. Peck and Theodore have noted that 'projects of neoliberalisation ...have never been synonymous with a simple diminution, or withdrawal, of the state, but instead have been variously concerned with its capture and reuse, albeit in the context of a generalized assault on social-welfarist or left-arm functions, coupled with an expansion of right-arm roles and capacities in areas like policing and surveillance' (2019:249).

Hence, states cease to see their role in representing the broad interests of the citizenry and instead seek to facilitate multinational corporate interests; precarity, insecurity and inequality in people's everyday lives grows. This is manifested in the increase in low-skilled, low-paid and often part-time insecure employment, particularly in sectors such as retail and hospitality – sectors that have themselves been among those most deeply affected by the pandemic health restrictions. It is in this context that people lose trust in their governments and look elsewhere for reassurance and empowerment, and it is secular and religious nationalist movements led by authoritarian charismatic leaders who are now playing this role. Indeed, the level of political disillusionment is such that this support continues even when these leaders are demonstrably proven to be liars and criminals. Governments respond to these pressures by incorporating securitisation and racialised 'everyday bordering' into government policy and by seeking to adopt the language of nativist nationalism into their political rhetoric in an attempt to demonstrate their legitimacy and effectivity (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy, 2019), which further legitimises the concerns and language of these movements.

It is in this context of profound disillusionment with the established political system that these movements present themselves as the coming together of virtuous people taking a stance against the forces of evil, exposing 'corruption' and 'standing up for ordinary people'. Donald Trump's description of far-right conspiracy theory QAnon as consisting of people who 'basically believe in good government' (CNN 3/12/20) epitomises the way these movements often present their extreme right politics not in an explicit language of the white supremacism they clearly believe, but in a language of ethical virtue. In asserting their 'freedom' to speak

out, they are throwing off their passive role as victims of the system and telling people what is ‘really going on’. QAnon for example claims to be exposing ‘the truth’ of how a cabal of powerful Satanic paedophiles within the state, and in the US Democratic Party in particular, are kidnapping, torturing and even cannibalising children on a vast scale (Lawrence & Davis, 2020:8). Their claim to virtue is epitomised in the hashtag #SaveTheChildren, which represents a very different image to the traditional crude racism and xenophobia on the far right. The US media literacy academic Whitney Phillips notes that because this slogan ‘sounds so innocuous, and in fact it sounds like a valiant goal to aspire to, people who otherwise wouldn’t be looking for QAnon-related material could be exposed to those materials’. From there, people are introduced to further and more serious far-right material through the volume of QAnon posts and the way algorithms direct people to more and more related content online (North, 2020).



A “Save the Children” rally outside the Capitol building in St. Paul, Minnesota, on August 22, 2020 Source: <https://www.vox.com/21436671/save-our-children-hashtag-qanon-pizzagate>

The issues of opposition to Covid vaccinations, which involve conspiracy theories about vaccination and public health-based restrictions, builds on these existing forms of far right conspiracy theory. Opposition to vaccination adopts this same language of victimhood that is a central feature of ‘white replacement’ theories, combining anti-statist sentiments alongside support for authoritarian movements and states. Nothing illustrates the fantastical and incoherent nature of the claims these groups make more than the way anti-vaxxers, while waving banners with swastikas, define themselves as the ‘new Jews’ living under the new ‘Covid Nazi’ regimes – endowing themselves with yellow star of David patches where they have written AV (anti-vaxxers) instead of the original Nazi ‘Juden’ (Jew).



Anti-vaccination demonstration in Boston (US), September 2021

Source: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/09/why-mask-and-vaccine-opponents-keep-comparing-themselves-to-holocaust-victims-and-rosa-parks.html>



A hat shop in the US town of Nashville has sold ‘not vaccinated’ patches modelled on the yellow stars Jews were forced to wear during Nazism.

Source: <https://nypost.com/2021/05/28/hat-shop-selling-nazi-like-yellow-stars-as-not-vaccinated-patches/>

The ideological form of conspiracy theory is central to these developments. While conspiracy theories have always existed on both the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ we see the role these are playing in promoting the contemporary arguments and ideas of the far right as crucial. The dissemination of this has been massively facilitated by their promotion by the state in the case of the US under Trump. Alongside this is the huge impact and significance of the online space. The role Trump played in promoting conspiracy theory was unimaginable outside the context of his use of Twitter. It is a mistake to see the constant and relentless nature of these conspiratorial tweets as evidence of his irrationality, as many liberals have done. Rather this points to the effectiveness with which the far right has mastered the use of disinformation as a political campaigning tool, within the online space in particular (Phillips, 2021). Michael Butter has developed this point, arguing that the internet has not only made conspiracy theories more visible and available, but the internet has itself ‘been a catalyst for the fragmentation of the public sphere’; this points to the mutually reinforcing nature of the relationship between the dominance of the internet and the rise of conspiracy theory. Indeed it is the very illegitimacy that these ideas have in the eyes of ‘official politics’ that builds their currency and credibility in the eyes of their supporters (Butter, 2020:7-8). This point has considerable significance for conceptions of free speech that imply the existence of a common public sphere of debate.

Fran Mason has argued:

Every conspiracy theory provides a narrative to legitimate its account of contemporary society, offering a view of how things got to be as they are. Conspiracy theory provides archaeology in narrative form, locating causes and origins of the conspiracy, piecing together events, connecting random occurrences to organize a chronology or sequence of sorts, and providing revelations and denouements by detailing the conspiracy's plans for the future. Narrative provides a form of mapping for conspiracy theory, offering not only an explanatory history but also a map of the future that is to come (Mason, 2002: 43-44).

Mason is pointing here to the 'ideological' nature of these movements to make the point that they cannot simply be seen as irrational, or simply as reactions to the difficulties caused by the pandemic such as personal anxiety or economic insecurity – though these unquestionably facilitate their growth and create an audience for them. These movements are ideologically based forms of political agency and must be understood in this way. We use the term ideology in the Althusserian sense that this represents 'an imagined relationship to one's real conditions of existence' (Althusser, 1971). Ideology 'tells a story' about what is happening at the present time, thereby creating a narrative of good and bad people, and this acts as the basis of the political agency represented by these movements.





Anti-lockdown demonstrators in London, September 2020

Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-53997203>

This points to a paradox that characterises contemporary conspiracy theories and makes them, at the same time, most vulnerable to critique as well as immune from it. The substantive content of these theories, offered as forms of unequivocal truth, involves claims that are often not just manifestly absurd, but offered without any evidence. However, these ideas at the same time appeal to people as ‘sense-making’; people are drawn to them in the process of trying to understand what is happening in their lives in the context of a highly unstable, uncertain reality. These ideas appeal to them not only cognitively from their situated gazes but, probably even more important, to their situated imaginations and emotions. Ben Rich has captured this sense of their appeal in a moment where:

social, cultural, sexual and political meanings, routines, mythologies and narratives have become increasingly unmoored, decentralised and contested. Many have celebrated these as necessary for the sake of progress and justice. But others have shown far less enthusiasm, with this uncertainty amplifying, rather than allaying, a deep sense of existential unease at the nature of society and politics. Change and disruption to the existing order is seen as deleterious. In such an environment, the demand for compelling, concrete stories that account for this sense of loss and provide a communal panacea to its ill effects has grown intensely. It seems little coincidence that meta-narratives such as ‘Make America Great Again’ and QAnon that not only create a sense of legibility and culpability for the current moment of unpredictability, but also have fostered welcoming communities around these ideas (Rich, 2021).

Where the world is experienced as a frightening and confusing place, where the anchoring reference points of meaning seem to have been wrenched from their moorings, these conspiracy narratives form a powerful rallying call for their supporters and offer new anchors. The far right has created a community of shared meaning and acceptance around this. In this sense, conspiracy theories, despite their irrational substantive contents, are not irrational at all and their growth poses a dilemma for feminists and the left in finding ways to present alternatives to these. In the concluding discussion of this article, we return to the vexed question of how the anti-racist feminist left should respond to these conspiracy theories and the anti-vaxxer movement within the context of our overall support of the right to free speech.

The return of the far right and white replacement theories

While the 'alt-Right' presents itself as a new and radical movement, it is essentially a euphemism for neo-Nazism and accordingly draws on exactly this reactionary, xenophobic and authoritarian form of politics. Indeed one of its most significant achievements is, as Maxime Dafaure notes, to make these tenets appear as novel, provocative and contemporary by translating the traditional politics of far right into the online realm (2020). In his book *The Rise of The Alt-Right* (2018) Thomas Main identifies four main components to the alt-right movement as 'rejection of liberal democracy, white racialism, a rejection of allegiance to America, transferred instead to the white race, and vitriolic rhetoric' or what Main calls 'coarse ethnic humour, prejudicial stereotyping, vituperative criticism, and the flaunting of extremist symbols' (2018:8). The movement emerged in the US around 2010 but has now spread internationally. Alongside its relentless attacks on immigration and multiculturalism are its intense hostility to feminism and it has loose connections to the 'manosphere community', comprising groups as men's rights activists and 'incels' (Dufaure, 2020:1). For the alt-right immigration, multiculturalism and feminism are movements seeking to destroy Western or 'white' civilisation through processes characterised as 'white replacement' or 'white genocide'.

The election of Donald Trump represented an absolutely central development for the growth of the alt-right. As Niko Heikkilä noted: 'The alt-right capitalized on the anti-immigration and anti-establishment campaign themes of Donald Trump to thrust its ideas into the political mainstream. Just as Trump made use of social media, the Alt-Right utilized memes—and like Trump, the movement attracted attention and visibility through provocations and sensationalism' (2017:1). This same attitude epitomised Trump's approach to Covid, where he dismissed the seriousness of the illness, undermined scientific advice, promoted conspiracy theory about the causes of the pandemic, ridiculed mask wearing (note the right wing anti-vaxxer hashtag (#NoToMuzzleMasks) and refused to implement public health measures.

The central ideological plank of this re-energised far right is the 'white replacement' or 'white genocide' theory. These theories are essentially about the steady destruction of the 'white race' and 'white civilisation' through immigration and state sponsored multiculturalism. These ideas have their roots in racist and ultra-nationalist thinkers in the 19th century, going back to the work of the French nationalist author Maurice Barrès (1862-1923). Barrès, a noted

anti-Semite and advocate of race science, wrote a series of novels that warned of the impact from increasing numbers of ‘foreigners’ taking up residence in France.’. He wrote that while ‘France can always be called France, its soul will be dead, emptied, destroyed’ (Schwartzburg, 2019); hence the ‘replacement’ of white French people by immigrants was not only bringing about the changing the nature of the French population, but it involved a ‘spiritual death’ of France.

These themes have been resuscitated by the contemporary French philosopher and novelist Renaud Camus, and indeed the phrase *The Great Replacement* was the title of Camus’ 2011 book. Camus is a cosmopolitan intellectual who epitomises the way the far right has mainstreamed itself by shifting from crude racism to offering a narrative concerned with the destruction of ‘cultural identities’. Bhatt has noted that this concept of ‘white extinction’ is rendered both in ‘biological’ and ‘genetic’ terms, ‘typically as the decline of white populations or their replacement through genetic ‘mixing’, [alongside]...‘white genocide’ also imagined in civilizational terms through which ‘culture’ with ‘biology’ are merged in sophisticated ways’ (Bhatt, 2020:6). This merging of biological and cultural metaphors is at the core of the way Camus describes the dynamic of the ‘replacement’ of the ‘French race’:

Replacement is the very essence of modernity... Objects are being replaced, landscapes are being replaced. Everything is being replaced...I would say that this French race, or, if you’d rather, the French people, in all its dimensions – ethnic, cultural, civilizational – is especially under menace: it is fast losing its own territory, where its own culture and civilization is quickly becoming just one among others (Wildman, 2017).¹

Camus rejects the criticism that his ideas are racist, claiming that he is simply concerned with ‘defending civilisation’ (Bullens, 2021), and illustrates the way the concept of the ‘great replacement’ shifts the focus away from assertions of racial or ethnic hierarchies that were previously at the centre of the far right’s claims, to an argument that situates the ‘white race’ as the victims of both physical and cultural erasure. The importance of this orientation for the far right globally was made clear in the slogans for the ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, where marchers adopted Camus work, chanting ‘You will not replace us – Jews will not replace us’. The exact same ideas were also present in the manifesto of the Christchurch mosque murderer Brenton Harrison Tarrant, also entitled ‘The Great Replacement’. Brenton stated that:

‘population figures show that the population [of black and brown immigrants] does not decrease in line with the sub-replacement fertility levels, but actually maintains and, even in many White nations, rapidly increases. All through immigration. This is

¹ Sarah Wildman’s interview with Camus makes it clear that his philosophy offers in essence a ‘racialised’ account of globalisation and commodification, couched in a language of concern for the integrity – the non-replaceability – of every human being. It is in this way he can be a key figure in offering the central far-right ideas through which to rebuild themselves politically at the same time as disavowing any of the consequences for their growth. In particular he denies any idea that his work is racist, even though he goes on to say how important the idea of ‘race’ actually is: ‘But I think races do exist and that they are infinitely precious, all of them, like everything – sexes, cultures, civilizations, private property, nations – which helps men and women resist general interchangeability and makes each human being unique, irreplaceable’ (Wildman 2017).

ethnic replacement. This is cultural replacement. This is racial replacement’ (in Schwartzburg, 2019).

The current Alt-Right hashtag #WhiteGenocide is an abbreviation of the slogan ‘diversity is a code word for white genocide’ (Niewert, 2018:256).

We have already noted that relationship between the secular right and the Christian Right, traditionally based in Evangelical Protestant churches, is one that has ebbed and flowed historically, often connected through the political trajectories of influential figures like Ronald Reagan and Pat Buchanan. Damon Berry has also pointed to the complexity of this relationship noting that many white nationalists see Christianity as:

too Jewish or as an alien ideology that weakened the racial instincts of Europeans. However, Christianity remained a significant political force for white conservatives in America who were, in some ways, thought of by white nationalists as potential political allies (2021:2).

In a period when the alt-right has been fundamentally driven by a racist nationalism and where Christian fundamentalists mobilising passion has been the LGBT communities they see as ‘living signifiers of decadence and corruption’ (Goldberg, 2007:53-54), this alliance may not have developed. However the theme of ‘white replacement’ has begun to offer new ways in which these different preoccupations could converge. The ‘America First Political Action Conference’ is one group demonstrating this. Its leader Nick Fuentes developed it as an organisation that rejects the overtly Nazi symbolism of much of the far right, seeking rather to pull the right wing of the Republican Party further to the right.

The group’s uses of the ‘white replacement’ theory was clearly expressed in a recent documentary. When asked what the group represented, Fuentes replied: ‘If you change the people in America and you change the place that is America, is it still our home? To me the answer is no’ (BBC 2021). In a speech to the 2021 AFPAC Conference he shouted at his audience:

America is a Christian nation! [Shouts of ‘Christ the King! Christ the King!’]. If America loses its white demographic core and if it loses its faith in Jesus Christ, then it is not America anymore!

Groups such as AFPAC point to the way the far right is starting to re-shape right wing Christian nationalism in its own image. While traditional Christian right figures such as Pat Buchanan and Jerry Falwell sought respectability, groups like ACPAC reject this, speaking to what they see as this new moment of crisis. Commenting on the demonstrations that followed Trump’s electoral defeat (‘#theBigSteal’), Alex Morris similarly observed that ‘If constructing a gallows to hang Mike Pence could be consistent with hoisting a sign that reads “Jesus Saves,” it’s because...in this framing, the Great Replacement subverts the will of God. And the will of God must be defended at any and all costs’ (Morris, 2022).

White replacement and misogyny

For these far-right Christian groups ‘white replacement’ theory is also linked with extreme forms of misogyny. According to Fuentes: ‘Women have been convinced that it is dignified to abandon your children, from your womb, to go and work in some office: how sick is that?’ (BBC, 2021). The connection between this ultraconservative conception of gender and extreme forms of xenophobia lies in the way both are concerned with the biological reproduction of the ‘white’ family, as well as its social reproduction. The patriarchal family is thus the place where the ‘white’ demographic is created, as well as the moral bedrock of society whose upstanding values are seen to be corroded by equality initiatives within the state – women’s rights, LGBT rights, immigration and multiculturalism. Extreme xenophobia and the defence of patriarchal authority in the family show how the secular far right and the Christian right can meet through a concern about the physical reproduction of white children whose prevalence ensures that America can remain ‘home’; this also represents the reproduction of a domestic sphere based on ‘traditional’ gender roles and power relations that emphasise the child-bearing role of women as wives and mothers.

We previously noted the intense hostility to feminism in the alt-right and Nancy Love has noted the language used to articulate this. Feminists are ‘thots’, which means ‘that ho over there’, as opposed to TradHots or TradWives, who embrace traditional sex/gender roles. Love notes that involvement of women in these nationalist movements receives less attention because of their role as auxiliaries to the movement’s male leadership. Despite this subordinate role, women are still active in these groups, typically making arguments such as ‘feminism has failed white women, robbing us of the opportunity to have a male provider, a happy family, and a nice home’ (Love, 2020). It is exactly this sort of language that connects with people’s anxieties about economic insecurity for families and the impact this will have on children (#SaveTheChildren) within this.

Vaccines and white bodies

The far-right theme of a society so corrupt that it must be ‘cleansed’ from its ‘impure’ elements also connects with Covid conspiracy theories. Central to these is the conception of vaccines as a form of poison, directly attacking the white body, mirroring the way state-sponsored immigration and multiculturalism create the conditions for the ‘great replacement’ of white bodies in the racist imaginary. We want to point to the way these themes converge by looking at a thread on the QAnon website entitled ‘*My fiancé got vaccinated and didn’t tell me at all, the commies got to her*’ (November 2021). The initiator of the thread describes the way his fiancé became vaccinated without telling him and against his expressed wishes, and he describes his feeling of betrayal by her. He is correspondingly urged by different respondents to leave the relationship immediately as it would be a profound error for him to have children with a wife who was not a ‘genuine patriot’. These five different responses to the original posting are among the many made:

Respondent 1: *This is a betrayal...You can save yourself a lot of problems now by finding a different woman. One who can be trusted. If you stick with this one, there will be more betrayals later. Guaranteed. Not to mention the sterility/genetics issues.*

Respondent 2: *Yeah, are you really going to stick around and let your children die in her womb, or maybe be born with medical conditions or deformities? Yikes.*

Respondent 3: *And if anyone wants children...yes, that might be a problem. I just heard this morning that the placentas of women who gave full term birth post-vax were all deformed and blackened. I don't have any more details than that. Shocking. And it's also shocking that someone could be so flippant about something so crucial. Now THAT is an irreconcilable difference.*

Respondent 4: *Well it wouldn't be good. Bodily fluids aren't usually a good thing to mix if someone's infected with something. I'm not sure it's been studied or even if they'd tell us if it had. Better to play that one safe than sorry. On a plus note there is not any lack of patriot women out there!*

Respondent 5: *They want us to submit, so there is no point in making the vax super deadly/sterile. No one will submit if the vaccine is obviously bad. So while they may still want to depopulate, they won't start out with a death shot. They want to first train us to accept yearly shots and accept deaths/sterility from adverse effects, like its common place and worth it, for a few years first before increasing the deadliness.*

Source: <https://greatawakening.win/p/13zMwngLch/my-fianc-got-vaccinated-and-didn/>
[Accessed 11/1/22]

Central to the logic of the posts discussed above is the way rejecting the vaccine represents a refusal to accept a poison with the expressed purpose of sapping the strength and purity of the 'white race'. We noted earlier Bhatt's comment that 'white replacement/extinction' theories merged biological and cultural metaphors (Bhatt, 2020:6) – and these anti-vaccination postings do exactly the same thing. Not only is the vaccine an attempt to dilute and ultimately destroy the unique biological essence of the 'white race', but the fact that the writer's fiancé has made her own decision (defied male authority) is similarly a dangerous sign of cultural degeneration. While immigration leads to the destruction of the 'white race' through cultural mixing, the vaccine is seen to be causing the 'mixing' of 'bodily fluids', causing the birth of children who are 'deformed and blackened' – that is physically disabled and ceasing to be 'white'. The racism of these conspiratorial arguments merges with archetypally far right conceptions of the place of women in the properly patriotic white family, which sees itself as standing firm against 'communist' vaccines.

Conclusion: free speech, the common good and contesting far right narratives

In this article we have sought to map out the emerging connections between 'white replacement' conspiracy theories and the way these provide a meeting point for both secular and religious right-wing nationalist movements. We then pointed to the way these have travelled into Covid 19 pandemic denial and anti-vaccine conspiracy theory movements in the US and in other parts of the West. We argue that it is crucial to be clear about the way these movements have caused death and damage to people's health and people's lives. This takes place in a context where there is powerful evidence of higher levels of mortality and severe impacts from the pandemic on the lives of women (UN, 2020) and racialised minorities (Pan

et al, 2020). Moreover, these movements have undermined the authority and the legitimacy of science as an evidence-based guide to public policy. They have actively eroded public solidarity and trust in public health measures.

What should then be the response of the anti-racist feminist left to these movements and their conspiratorial messages? The right for the freedom of speech has been constructed as essential to the functioning of any form of democracy. It has been enshrined in the French revolution (Walton, 2009) in the first amendment to the US constitution and the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 2015). Recently, however, discussions about freedom of speech have gained new poignancy due to the growing domination of social media in mass communication and the lack of effective legislation to control it – except for constraints imposed by the non-representative authority of those who own social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter. Many progressives were happy to see Katie Hopkins, Donald Trump and most recently the QAnon-supporting Republican senator Maxine Taylor Green removed from social media platforms. However, this essentially represented an exercise of corporate authority, rather than a defence of the public sphere as such; and as Butter has argued, this has itself been fragmented by the rise of the internet (Butter, 2020:7).

The right of freedom of speech has traditionally been seen by the left as vitally important, inherently linked and enabling the right of dissent. It has also been central to the articulation of any demand for social justice that becomes the basis of struggles for social change. At the same time, this demand for free speech has never been seen as unequivocal. As Amnesty International emphasise in their discussion of freedom of speech, this is not the right to say whatever you like about whatever you like, whenever you like:

Freedom of speech is the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, by any means. More recently, much of the debate on the freedom of speech has been focused on its limitations; on when it stops being legitimate because it constitutes hate speech which can incite against, or ‘cancel’ altogether, racialised and sexual minorities (2020).

In this article, though, we focused our interest on a somewhat different aspect of the limits of free speech – not speech against the rights of particular minorities but on what could be considered ‘the public good’. In the context of the Covid pandemic we see this as essentially manifested in public health provision that has repeatedly demonstrated its effectiveness in protecting populations against disease and illness. While we must acknowledge the abuses of power that have taken place in the name of ‘science’ throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, we would argue that socialised medicine and free and universal health provision represent an absolutely crucial legacy of social democracy. We see these as central to a conception of the common good in the way they seek to require the state, with its hugely important medical resources and expertise, to be as accountable as possible to the health needs of the population.

In her recent book *Freedom: An Unruly History* (2020) Annelien de Djinn notes that movements for popular democracy through the 19th and 20th centuries have been essentially concerned with demanding accountability from the state, and particularly that the state

addresses the real needs of the people at many levels. She counterposes this with the neoliberal conception of the state epitomised in Ronald Reagan's claim that he was seeking to 'get the state off the backs of the people' and Margaret Thatcher's claim that there is 'no such thing as society'. De Dijn positions these statements as representing a backlash to those popular democratic movements by supplanting a neoliberal conception of individualism at the centre of conceptions of citizenship. The right wing anti-vaxxer arguments also repudiate this conception of the 'common good' but rather than a neoliberal conception of entrepreneurial individualism they offer a Manichean conception of a war between the 'races'.

The experience of the pandemic shows how important appropriate medical and epidemiological evidence is in terms of protecting the health of the public. This is also directly related to questions of free speech that are important not only in terms of democratic rights but are crucial because they allow people to keep hold of the truth – complex and multifaceted as it often is. We only need to look at the power of a pandemic and the destruction of life this can wreak to show us why this conception of truth is so clearly related to freedom of speech. Free speech enables us – and others – to hear how particular issues are experienced as well as understood from the differently situated gazes of people in diverse social, political, economic and cultural positions. Following Patricia Hill Collins' (2002; see also Yuval-Davis 2015) dialogical epistemological approach to 'the truth', we argue for a conception of truth approached by encompassing as many differently situated gazes as possible towards an issue; at the same time, we keep holding the shared normative framework of social justice and social care.

For example, to understand the truth about vaccines it is as important to understand the situated gazes of those responsible for public health as it is necessary to understand the fear and suspicion of members of racialised minorities who have undergone bad experiences of certain public health policies in the past. Similarly, it is important to understand the effect of public policies in the pandemic such as lockdown on those who can afford to stay at home and either work or obtain furloughs, as well as on the others who would lose their jobs if they had to practice public health restrictions. The British government's narrative of 'we're all in this together' draws a false picture of a shared experience of the pandemic and ignores the very different experiences of people from different positionings and identifications, particularly the experiences of women and BAME communities who have been disproportionately and negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Freedom of speech is important in this sense because these experiences and the emotions associated with them need to be heard in order to enable any true understanding of what has actually happened during the pandemic. While some conceptions of Marxism (Lukács, 2000) and some conceptions of feminism (Smith, 1990) have argued that the proletariat or women possess a privileged epistemological positionings for understanding the truth, our argument is that understanding the context and engaging with all situated gazes and imaginations is needed to approach truth. The powerful have access to the workings of power and surveillance that the powerless do not; while the powerless see and experience the impact of particular workings of power in ways that the powerful cannot often even imagine. The powerful invariably respond to articulations of their lived realities from the oppressed by denying or ignoring their fears and anxieties as well as those aspects of oppressed lives they

are least comfortable with. At the same time this does not make the cognitions, and experiences of the oppressed more real.

This dialogical epistemological approach to 'the truth', however, should be sharply differentiated from relativist approach to the truth because a relativist approach endows a status of complete truth to each situated gaze. Dialogical epistemology offers a methodology that aims to understand social phenomena and to 'approach the truth' (Hill Collins, 1990) by encompassing as many situated gazes as possible into that understanding. The truth of most realities is complex and multidimensional and only an encompassing perspective of its intersected constructions can really help us understand certain social facts. However, understanding these issues – which require our incorporation of as many differently situated gazes as possible – is distinct from taking a political and/or moral stance towards a particular issue when some anxieties merit solidarity more than others (Yuval-Davis, forthcoming). We also distinguish between recognising the varied epistemologies of different situated gazes that need to be encompassed in a dialogical epistemology in order to be understood, and explicitly spreading misinformation used for particular political purposes – such as those we have detailed in this discussion.

We have shown in this article that conspiracy theories are not simply irrational, but rather represent a 'deliberately enhanced political weapon' (Peters, 2020) that the far right has developed within the fractious and unstable realities people experience as a means of promoting their perniciously racist and misogynist world view. It is an epistemology where any differences of view can never be another facet to explore but constitute a threat – and this is a feature of totalitarianism. This isn't an incidental feature of the structure of argument but reflects the normative ideological approach of those who have been leading these movements. At the same time, they have managed to link their narratives to the real concerns and fears of wide sectors of the population. It is therefore essential for progressives, feminists and anti-racists to understand that the claim of those who promote anti-vaccine conspiracy theories for free speech is a claim to use forms of disinformation that have contributed to increasing levels of death and disease, impacting most significantly female, working class and racialised communities.

The question is difficult and poses a real dilemma to the left. Formal banning is not necessarily going to delegitimise their narrative and it also fuels the sense of victimisation they draw on for support. Moreover, as mentioned above real powers of banning are not often used by (western) states these days – and there is a debate on whether they are even able to do it effectively. As we have noted in our discussion, social media forums more often than not hold the real power of control in these discourses and the spaces where they operate. In this sense what we need are alternative narratives to the conspiracy theorists, and we would argue that central to this is the demand that the state becomes accountable to the citizenry, acting as the guarantor of human rights and the collective good of all its citizens. Such a conception of a democratic state committed to the idea of public good and an egalitarian public health system serve as a counterpoint to corporate power and control, as well as to the narratives of hate, racism and misogyny promoted by the far right. We conclude with the recent work of the British writer Michael Rosen in his account of the way he became infected and recovered in hospital from Covid 19. In this book Rosen recounts a dream he had while in

hospital, which we see as significant for the anti-racist feminist left in the way it offers a collective vision of hope for people as the basis of re-narrating the political crisis we currently face:

I'm disturbed by another dream
 I imagine that just before I got ill
 I came across a statement, a kind of manifesto
 from a German farmer
 It was a reply to the hate coming from
 Neo-Nazis in his neighbourhood...
 His manifesto tells how we can only
 go on if we love each other,
 we have to find many different kinds of love
 he says, love for lovers, love for our children
 love for our colleagues, love even for people we don't know
 If we don't, we will destroy ourselves (Rosen,2021: 58-59).

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