

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conspiracy theory, anti-globalism, and the Freedom Convoy: The Great Reset and conspiracist delegitimation

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Abstract

In this article, we analyse how anti-globalist conspiracy theories were mobilised online to delegitimise national authorities and policies designed to curb the Covid-19 pandemic in Canada. These conspiracy theories attacked the political authority underpinning public health measures and targeted purportedly 'liberal' policies and 'globalist' actors. Our case study examines the Freedom Convoy, a series of protests against Covid-19 vaccine mandates that began in Canada but inspired global demonstrations. The Freedom Convoy fostered and relied upon anti-globalist conspiracy theories, including the 'Great Reset' and 'Great Replacement', both of which posit a global conspiracy to erode national sovereignty and impose a 'liberal' international order. We investigate far-right social media commentary from 4chan's Politically Incorrect imageboard /pol/, Infowars, and Rebel News, showing how conspiratorial claims were marshalled in alt-tech spaces. These narratives were used to delegitimise public health measures to combat Covid-19 and the Liberal Trudeau government by linking them to various 'globalist' forces. In exploring three mechanisms of delegitimation – externalisation, personification, and Othering – we argue that far-right movements like the Freedom Convoy, motivated by anti-globalist conspiracism, mobilise the international realm by leveraging the legitimacy gap of international organisations and agendas to undermine the political authority of actors at the national level.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; far right; Freedom Convoy; globalism; Great Reset; populism

Introduction

The Freedom Convoy (FC) began in January 2022 as a series of protests, blockades, and online campaigns opposing Covid-19 vaccine mandates for commercial truckers crossing the Canada–US border. The protests quickly evolved into a broader movement, both within Canada and internationally, against 'globalism' and various issues associated with liberal global governance. These issues ranged from vaccine mandates to intentional depopulation and world government. The FC, which united a loose coalition of far-right groups alongside vaccine sceptics, organised via social media and travelled across Canada to gather in Ottawa and at key border points. The movement mobilised far-right anti-globalist conspiracy theories¹ to articulate its opposition to a range of measures associated with the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the 'Great Reset'.

Using semi-trailer trucks, protestors established an encampment and demanded the repeal of public health measures and the dissolution of the Trudeau government. Sustained by the deafening

¹Robbie M. Sutton, and Karen M. Douglas, 'Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset: Implications for political ideology', *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34 (2020), pp. 118–22. Sutton and Douglas define conspiracy theories as

chorus of honking from 400 to 500 semi-trailer trucks² and supported by approximately \$24 million CAD in online donations – 56 per cent of which came from the United States³ – the protests grew to an estimated 10,000 people in Ottawa’s downtown core,⁴ paralysing city services for over three weeks. The Ottawa protest sparked demonstrations at provincial capitals and blockades at numerous Canada–US border crossings. It obstructed at least 19 ports of entry, resulting in \$3.9 billion CAD in lost trade activity.⁵ At the Coutts Port of Entry, along the Alberta border, police uncovered a cache of guns, ammunition, a pipe bomb, and body armour. Four protestors, some with alleged ties to Diagonol – a far-right accelerationist group – were charged with conspiracy to murder RCMP officers.⁶

Driven by anti-globalist conspiracies and extremist rhetoric, the FC and the Canadian government’s invocation of the Emergencies Act to end the protest garnered significant international attention, leading to smaller but notable copycat demonstrations worldwide.⁷ Countries such as Austria, Bolivia, Israel, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand saw groups rally against what they perceived as the authoritarianism of public health orders, framing the situation as a populist battle for ‘freedom’ against alleged government overreach and a ‘globalist’ agenda. In Wellington and Helsinki, vehicles blocked roads around Parliament, while Paris and Brussels took steps to prohibit anti-vaccine protests inspired by the FC. French police arrested dozens of individuals and intercepted vehicles heading to Brussels.⁸ In the United States, former president Donald Trump criticised Prime Minister Trudeau as a ‘far-left lunatic’ who ‘destroyed Canada with insane COVID mandates.’⁹ Senator Ted Cruz visited the ‘People’s Convoy’ in Washington, DC, to show his support, while Florida Governor Ron DeSantis vowed to investigate GoFundMe after the crowdfunding platform suspended fundraising for the protestors. Pierre Poilievre, leader of the Conservative Party and the official opposition in Canada, enthusiastically supported the FC as a popular campaign against Trudeau and the ‘gatekeeping elite.’¹⁰ In his campaign to become the next prime minister, Poilievre continues to engage with many of the groups that participated in the Convoy and to weaponise conspiracy theories that found a discursive vehicle in the protests, such as the Great Reset.¹¹

‘attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors’ (p. 118). Unlike classic conspiracy theory, what Muirhead and Rosenbaum call ‘new conspiracism’, or conspiracy without the theory, largely forgoes explanation and evidence. Instead, they argue, it relies upon innuendo, assertion, and repetition through social media. While the distinction between conspiracy theory and conspiracism is analytical and arguably overdrawn (see Clarke), anti-globalist conspiracism embodies key characteristics of conspiracism, including the use of assertion, innuendo, and social media to delegitimise political authorities. Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Steve Clarke, ‘Is there a new conspiracism?’, *Social Epistemology*, 37:1 (2023), pp. 127–40.

²Canada truckers protest: Injunction granted to stop horn honking, *BBC News* (8 February 2022).

³David Fraser, ‘Almost \$8 M of “Freedom Convoy” donations still unaccounted for, documents show’, *CBC News* (7 April 2022); Mike McIntire and Michael H. Keller, ‘Canadians are responsible for roughly half of the money raised online for the trucker convoy, leaked data shows’, *New York Times* (14 February 2022).

⁴Paul S. Rouleau, ‘Report of the Public Inquiry into the 2022 Public Order Emergency Volume 1: Overview’, Public Order Emergency Commission (February 2023).

⁵Rouleau, ‘Report of the Public Inquiry’, p. 90; Laura Osman and David Fraser, ‘Winter “Freedom Convoy” blockades cost billions to Canada’s economy, inquiry hears’, *CTV News* (16 November 2022).

⁶Joel Dryden, ‘1 year after disrupting Alberta’s border with the U.S., protesters return to Coutts – where wounds remain’, *CBC News* (28 January 2023).

⁷Alex McKeen, Lex Harvey, and Kieran Leavitt, ‘How Canada’s “Freedom Convoy” is inspiring protests in other countries’, *Toronto Star* (3 February 2022); Emma Graham-Harrison and Tracey Lindeman, ‘Freedom convoys: Legitimate Covid protest or vehicle for darker beliefs?’, *The Guardian* (13 February 2022).

⁸Tim Hume, ‘How Canada’s anti-vax “Freedom Convoy” sparked global copycat protests’, *Vice News* (11 February 2022).

⁹Zi-Ann Lum, ‘Trump calls Trudeau “far left lunatic” as siege continues in Ottawa’, *POLITICO* (2 April 2022).

¹⁰Nia Williams and Anna Mehler Paperny, ‘Insight: In protests and politics, Canada’s “Freedom Convoy” reverberates’, *Reuters* (4 August 2022).

¹¹Klaus Schwab, ‘Now is the time for a “great reset”’, *World Economic Forum* (3 June 2020). In the anti-globalist discourse that animated the FC, the World Economic Forum (WEF) is using the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext for the Great Reset.

Focusing on the conspiracy theories surrounding the FC that circulated online, this article explores the question: how does anti-globalist conspiracism function in the delegitimation of political authority? Contextualising these transnational protests within broader scholarly debates about the global far right and populist internationalism, this article examines how far-right populists and movements have increasingly mobilised conspiracy theories to undermine national governments and ‘elites’ associated with ‘globalist’ institutions and agendas.

Our analysis illustrates that the anti-globalist conspiracism surrounding the FC functioned discursively to delegitimise the political authority of the Canadian government (and public health measures like vaccine mandates) by associating them with international institutions and ‘globalist’ agendas held responsible for the pandemic response.¹² As we show in the following sections, conspiracist delegitimation employs three primary mechanisms: externalisation, personification, and Othering.¹³

First, *externalisation* involves projecting problems of national politics onto the international level and attributing their causes to foreign actors, institutions, and agendas, to the exclusion of internal/domestic processes, policies, and complex, multilevel governance structures. This process redirects concerns about domestic issues onto representative figures of the global elite, delegitimising national actors (such as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau), international institutions (like the WEF), and agendas (such as the Great Reset). Of course, this is not unique to anti-globalism; identifying foreign, international actors as the driving force in history is a fundamental feature of conspiracy theories.¹⁴ External figures such as Klaus Schwab, George Soros, and Bill Gates were prominent in the Convoy discourse, as was the general term ‘globalists’. Externalisation functioned discursively by linking public health measures and post-Covid recovery policies to international organisations such as the WEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations (UN). At the same time, externalisation obscured key factors that shaped the response, such as the division of federal and provincial powers, and the rejection of legitimate democratic processes and actors, which were discredited through their association with the legitimacy deficit of international institutions. Externalisation thus served to delegitimise democratic norms and procedures by mobilising the international and the legitimacy deficit of international institutions and agendas.

Second, *personification* entails reducing various processes and structures to the actions of single individuals or groups – what Popper referred to as ‘psychologism’ in his early critique of conspiracism¹⁵ – a phenomenon also captured by terms such as ‘hyperagency’.¹⁶ Personification assumes that individuals hold near-total control over outcomes and that outcomes are always intended.¹⁷ Consequently, it attributes both unintentional effects and negative outcomes of impersonal and abstract structures to the intentional conspiratorial design of powerful individuals or groups, such as Schwab, Soros, or Gates. Domestically, Trudeau personified the Covid public health measures associated with ‘globalism’, while externally, Klaus Schwab of the WEF was considered responsible

According to its progenitor, Klaus Schwab, the founder of the WEF, this new global social contract, marked by a shift toward stakeholder capitalism, is a process of reforming globalisation. The Covid-19 pandemic, it is argued, presents a window of opportunity to ‘reset’ global capitalism and shape the direction of national economies. However, since the introduction of the idea in 2020, far-right groups have appropriated the Great Reset, grafting it onto the ready-made plot of New World Order conspiracy, centred on an alleged ‘globalist’ agenda of one-world government.

¹²The division of powers under Canadian federalism means that many of the policies targeted by protestors were implemented by provincial governments, not the federal government (and certainly not international institutions).

¹³We theorise conspiracist delegitimation as a discursive process that operates through three mechanisms. While we distinguish these mechanisms for analytical purposes, they function as ‘ideal types’ that frequently overlap in practice.

¹⁴Lee Basham, ‘Malevolent global conspiracy’, in David Coody (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 93–106; Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Springer, 2011).

¹⁵Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 424.

¹⁶Katharine M. Millar and Julia Costa Lopez, ‘Conspiratorial medievalism: History and hyperagency in the far-right Knights Templar security imaginary’, *Politics* (2021), pp. 1–17, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211010983>.

¹⁷Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 2013); Eric J. Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, ‘Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s) of mass opinion’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 58:4 (2014), pp. 952–66.

for the ‘Great Reset’. The focus on Trudeau, along with his association with Schwab, obscured the mistakes and unintended outcomes that contributed to the pandemic and simplified complex global processes into a narrative of intentional design by individuals. These processes, and the complex governance of public health, border controls, international trade, and supply chains in Canada, were reduced to the intentions of specific elites. By focusing on Trudeau and associating him with Schwab and the WEF’s Great Reset, anti-globalist conspiracism offered a simplistic diagnosis of the pandemic that challenged the legitimacy of the Canadian government and public health measures by discursively linking the prime minister to elitist, illegitimate, and undemocratic forces of ‘globalism’.

Finally, *Othering* draws on racist, civilisational, and gendered discourses to identify those allegedly engaging in or facilitating conspiratorial behaviour intended to alter social norms and practices against the values and interests of the national community. Certain groups are consistently Othered in anti-globalist conspiracism, including Jews,¹⁸ homosexuals, and communists,¹⁹ either explicitly or through the use of coded language like ‘globalists’. As we explore in subsequent sections, the FC online narratives focused their discursive energy on these ‘Others,’ with communists (Trudeau and Castro), women and homosexuals (globohomo), and Jews (George Soros) all featured in the discourse about the FC.

Through an analysis of the anti-globalist conspiracy theories that discursively fuelled the FC, this article makes a twofold contribution to International Relations (IR). First, it adds to the emerging body of research situated at the intersection of IR, the global far right, and conspiracy theories by extending the study of anti-globalist conspiracism beyond the realms of populist foreign policy and far-right ideology to focus on alt-tech spaces, which are becoming increasingly influential in these movements. Second, this article advances the study of populist internationalism by highlighting the role of anti-globalist conspiracism in the FC’s resistance to the perceived forces of globalism, and by analysing the mechanisms of delegitimation directed towards national authorities, who were cast as front organisations for global elites.

Before analysing the process of conspiracist delegitimation in the alt-tech space, the following section reviews the multidisciplinary literature on conspiracy theory. While existing scholarship identifies individual and cultural responses to globalisation, it has not sufficiently addressed the national and international political dynamics at the root of anti-globalist conspiracism. Subsequently, we examine the emerging scholarship on conspiracy theory in IR. We then turn quickly to the literature on the global far right, which has drawn attention to the internationalisation of the far right but has largely neglected anti-globalist conspiracism. Finally, before the empirical analysis, we outline our methodological approach.

Conspiracy theories and International Relations

The visibility of anti-globalist conspiracism has increased in recent years, facilitated by digital platforms that crowdsource conspiracy theories and enable their rapid dissemination in the absence of traditional media gatekeepers.²⁰ The conspiratorial worldview is certainly not unique to the so-called post-truth era,²¹ but technological developments and epistemic uncertainty intensified

¹⁸Lars Rensmann, “Against globalism”: Counter-cosmopolitan discontent and antisemitism in mobilizations of European extreme right parties’, in Lars Rensmann and Julius H. Schoeps (eds), *Politics and Resentment: Antisemitism and Counter-Cosmopolitanism in the European Union* (Brill, 2010), pp. 117–46; Jelena Subotić, ‘Antisemitism in the global populist international’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 458–74.

¹⁹Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*.

²⁰Daniela Mahl, Mike S. Schäfer, and Jing Zeng, ‘Conspiracy theories in online environments: An interdisciplinary literature review and agenda for future research’, *New Media and Society*, 25:7 (2023), pp. 1781–801.

²¹Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (Simon & Schuster, 1999); Joseph Uscinski, Adam Enders, Casey Klofstad, et al., ‘Have beliefs in conspiracy theories increased over time?’, *PLoS One*, 17:7 (2022), p. e0270429.

by globalisation have contributed to the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories within political discourse. Although the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories pre-dates the Covid-19 pandemic,²² the extraordinary public health measures taken to curb the virus appear to have increased conspiratorial speculation about a 'globalist' agenda across the West. This has further undermined faith in institutions such as the media, government, and the scientific establishment, serving as a barrier to public health campaigns.²³

The extant multidisciplinary literature offers a range of explanations for the belief in conspiracy theories. Cognitive explanations focus on the individual level of analysis. They explain the belief in conspiracy theories as a response to various stimuli, including the disruptions associated with globalisation. These approaches are prominent in psychology and political science, where quantitative research has examined the relationship between cognitive biases, psychological motivations, personality traits, and belief in conspiracy theories.²⁴ Some of this work helpfully identifies the affective appeal of conspiracy theories in the face of the failed promises of capitalism and popular sovereignty, and the *schadenfreude* that comes from antagonising liberal elites and violating liberal social norms.²⁵

There is much to be gained by studying why certain individuals are drawn to conspiratorial thinking. However, critics of this approach argue that the political-psychological literature stigmatises conspiratorial thinking as an individual cognitive failure rather than a social process of sense-making that requires interpretive analysis.²⁶ Stigmatising conspiratorial belief as faulty cognitive processes is problematic because conspiracies are actually relatively common and can have significant consequences.²⁷ Pathologising conspiracy belief risks 'depoliticising' conspiratorial beliefs and attempts to 'regulate dissent through governance'.²⁸ We posit that a more holistic account of conspiracy theories must also incorporate the national *and* international political dynamics that give rise to movements animated by conspiracy theories and highlight the political effects of movements that embrace or employ them.

Social and historical explanations for conspiratorial beliefs, which are more common in anthropology, cultural studies, religious studies, and history, identify social, economic, and political conditions that account for the prevalence of conspiracy theories. However, they tend to locate the causes of conspiracy theories at the national level, primarily in terms of political culture. This arguably reflects the dominance of research on the United States, where scholars attribute conspiratorial thinking to aspects of American exceptionalism, such as the paranoid style of

²²Michael Barkun, 'Conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge', *Diogenes*, 62:3–4 (2015), pp. 114–20.

²³Daniel Romer and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, 'Conspiracy theories as barriers to controlling the spread of COVID-19 in the US', *Social Science and Medicine*, 263 (2020), p. 113356.

²⁴Aleksandra Cichocka, Marta Marchlewska, and Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, 'Does self-love or self-hate predict conspiracy beliefs? Narcissism, self-esteem, and the endorsement of conspiracy theories', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 7:2 (2016), pp. 157–66; Agnieszka Golec de Zavala and Christopher M. Federico, 'Collective narcissism and the growth of conspiracy thinking over the course of the 2016 United States presidential election: A longitudinal analysis', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 48:7 (2018), pp. 1011–18; Jan-Willem van Prooijen, 'Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 31:1 (2017), pp. 50–8; Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas, and Clara de Inocencio, 'Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 48:3 (2018), pp. 320–35.

²⁵Thorsten Wojczewski, 'Conspiracy theories, right-wing populism and foreign policy: The case of the Alternative for Germany', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 25:1 (2022), pp. 130–58.

²⁶Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 'Bridging the great divide: Conspiracy theory research for the 21st century', *Diogenes*, 62:3–4 (2015), pp. 17–29.

²⁷Basham, 'Malevolent global conspiracy'; Philip R. Conway, 'Repressive suspicion, or: The problem with conspiracy theories', *Cultural Studies* (2024), pp. 1–32, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2024.2364260>.

²⁸Conway, 'Repressive suspicion', p. 6.

American politics,²⁹ millenarian culture,³⁰ partisanship and polarisation,³¹ and anti-establishment orientations.³² The tendency in this literature to resort to methodological nationalism and culturalist explanations overstates cultural homogeneity and the diverse ways individuals and nations respond to conspiratorial claims. Furthermore, it obscures both the transnational diffusion of anti-globalist conspiracism across populist movements and the centrality of the international/foreign/other in constituting the national/domestic/self.

To be sure, most scholars working on conspiracy theories recognise the centrality of globalisation to contemporary conspiracy theories.³³ The extant literature has provided a range of explanations concerning why globalisation has made the belief in conspiracy theories more widespread: the reduction of state sovereignty;³⁴ production of global winners and losers;³⁵ ‘agency panic’;³⁶ the concentration of power and secrecy;³⁷ increased complexity, uncertainty, and lack of transparency;³⁸ and the introduction of alternative worldviews that undermine belief in a single reality/truth.³⁹ Collectively, these works explain various causal connections between globalisation and conspiracy theories. Yet they do not sufficiently engage with the national and international political dynamics that inform conspiracy theories, and specifically, why some political movements draw on specific conspiracy theories about the international and to what ends.

By contrast, we argue that conspiracy theories are not simply inevitable products of globalisation, but rather political projects of legitimation and delegitimation in a globalised world. While anti-globalist conspiracism isn’t new or exclusive to the far right,⁴⁰ certain political movements are more prone to conspiratorial thinking. We argue that conspiracy theories are essential features of far-right movements that mobilise the international in their delegitimising strategies, rather than merely the result of individual cognitive functions, cultural influences, or social dislocations caused by globalisation.

In doing so, we draw on a small but growing body of work on conspiracy theories in IR. IR scholars have contributed to the study of conspiracy theories by further exploring the inter- and transnational aspects of conspiracism.⁴¹ While this literature generally avoids pathologising conspiracy theories, some scholars view conspiracy theory as a product of the liberal international order whereas others explain conspiracy theories as an illiberal challenge to this order.

Scholars like Conway examine how the liberal international order fails to address oppressive structures, arguing that conspiracy theories provide a cathartic release through ‘repressive suspicion’ that legitimises outrage at existing power structures while paradoxically reinforcing

²⁹Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Vintage, 2012).

³⁰Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*.

³¹Josh Pasek, Tobias H. Stark, Jon A. Krosnick, and Trevor Tompson, ‘What motivates a conspiracy theory? Birther beliefs, partisanship, liberal-conservative ideology, and anti-Black attitudes’, *Electoral Studies*, 40 (2015), pp. 482–9.

³³Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York University Press, 2002); Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*; Calance Madalina, ‘Globalization and the conspiracy theory’, *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 23 (2015), pp. 677–81; Jaron Harambam, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability* (Routledge, 2020); Pipes, *Conspiracy*.

³⁴Daniel C. Hellinger, *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in the Age of Trump* (Springer, 2018).

³⁵Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*.

³⁶Timothy Melley, ‘Agency panic and the culture of conspiracy’, in Peter Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York University Press, 2002), pp. 57–81.

³⁷Basham, ‘Malevolent global conspiracy’.

³⁸Madalina, ‘Globalization and the conspiracy theory’.

³⁹Harambam, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture*.

⁴⁰Michael Butter, Katerina Hatzikidi, Constanze Jeitler, Giacomo Loperfido, and Lili Turza (eds), *Populism and Conspiracy Theory: Case Studies and Theoretical Perspectives* (Routledge, 2024).

⁴¹Thorsten Wojczewski, ‘The international cooperation of the populist radical right: Building counter-hegemony in international relations’, *International Relations* (2024), pp. 1–26, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231222888>.

global domination.⁴² Aistrophe argues that certain conspiratorial accounts are deemed rational while others are characterised as pathological, which reflects and reinforces the current order.⁴³ Wojczewski similarly situates conspiracism within the failures of the existing order, viewing conspiracy theories as a coping mechanism that addresses the ontological lack of late modernity, generating psychological satisfaction through ‘agitating against elites and transgressing social norms.’⁴⁴

Other IR scholars have explored how specific conspiracy theories spread transnationally and their broader implications. Millar and Costa-Lopez analyse Knights Templar discourse among the far right, revealing conspiracism’s appeal as a promise of ‘hyperagency’ often manifested through racialised violence.⁴⁵ Similarly, Subotić demonstrates how populist anti-Semitic conspiracy theories not only legitimise anti-Semitic behaviour but also validate Israel as a model of an ethnically pure nation-state.⁴⁶ Building on these works, our article examines anti-globalist conspiracism of the far right as an illiberal challenge to the international order – one gaining significant ideological traction and electoral success in liberal-democratic states.

We also contribute to IR scholarship by drawing attention to alternative spaces and movements that pressure political parties and elites to adopt or adapt to conspiratorial claims. To date, IR scholars have focused primarily on conspiracy claims articulated by political elites and populist parties.⁴⁷ Far less attention has been given to alternative spaces and actors. Following Adler and Drieschova’s call to pay closer attention to social media and ‘to connect seemingly mundane microdevelopments at the national and subnational levels (such as “liking” Facebook posts) to broader macro-level international order changes,’⁴⁸ we analyse the discourse of anti-globalist conspiracism articulated online in support of the FC. By combining IR scholarship on far-right conspiracy theories and populist internationalism with recent literature outside IR on the delegitimising power of conspiracy theory,⁴⁹ we argue that anti-globalist conspiracism represents a unique discourse of delegitimation. This discursive process links international institutions with national actors, drawing on the legitimacy deficit of international institutions⁵⁰ to undermine the political authority of certain national actors and enhance the authority of anti-globalist actors.⁵¹ In sum, our analysis suggests

⁴² Conway, ‘Repressive suspicion’, p. 27. This is a key distinction between the anti-globalisation movement of the early 2000s and the contemporary anti-globalism of the far right that is committed to reinforcing hierarchical relations of dominance globally. The far right generally supports the economic and racial hierarchy contested in the early anti-globalisation movements.

⁴³ Tim Aistrophe, *Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy* (Manchester University Press, 2016); Tim Aistrophe and Roland Bleiker, ‘Conspiracy and foreign policy’, *Security Dialogue*, 49:3 (2018), pp. 165–82.

⁴⁴ Wojczewski, ‘Conspiracy theories, right-wing populism and foreign policy’, p. 153.

⁴⁵ Millar and Costa Lopez, ‘Conspiratorial medievalism’.

⁴⁶ Subotić, ‘Antisemitism in the global populist international’.

⁴⁷ Felipe P. Loureiro, ‘Conspiracy theory and the foreign policy of the far-right: The case of Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil (2019–2021)’, *Contexto Internacional*, 45:2 (2023), pp. 1–20; Feliciano de Sá Guimarães and Irma Dutra de Oliveira e Silva, ‘Far-right populism and foreign policy identity: Jair Bolsonaro’s ultra-conservatism and the new politics of alignment’, *International Affairs*, 97:2 (2021), pp. 345–63; Guilherme Stolle Paixão e Casarões and Déborah Barros Leal Farias, ‘Brazilian foreign policy under Jair Bolsonaro: Far-right populism and the rejection of the liberal international order’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 35:5 (2022), pp. 741–61; Toby Greene, ‘Fitting national interests with populist opportunities: Intervention politics on the European radical right’, *International Relations*, 38:2 (2024), pp. 137–64; Wojczewski, ‘Conspiracy theories, right-wing populism and foreign policy’; Subotić, ‘Antisemitism in the global populist international’.

⁴⁸ Emanuel Adler and Alena Drieschova, ‘The epistemological challenge of truth subversion to the liberal international order’, *International Organization*, 75:2 (2021), pp. 359–86 (p. 381).

⁴⁹ Russel Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, ‘Conspiracism and delegitimation’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 19 (2020), pp. 142–8.

⁵⁰ Michael Zürn, Martin Binder, and Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, ‘International authority and its politicization’, *International Theory*, 4:1 (2012), pp. 69–106; Michael Zürn, *A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy, and Contestation* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵¹ As scholars of international legitimacy argue, the democratic deficit of international institutions, as well as their exclusivity and lack of transparency, are significant barriers to building their legitimacy. The legitimacy gap for international institutions, Zürn et al. (‘International authority and its politicization’, p. 73) argue, arises from their inability to marshal ‘sufficient stocks’

that anti-globalist conspiracism is crucial for understanding discursive strategies of delegitimation at both the national and international levels because it undermines existing processes of legitimation.⁵²

Thus, our paper joins a burgeoning IR literature on populism that has made significant contributions to the study of populist foreign policy and the expanding literature on the global far right,⁵³ populist internationalism,⁵⁴ civilisationalism,⁵⁵ global governance backlash,⁵⁶ and world politics in an era of post-truth and ‘truth-subversion’⁵⁷ but has paid less attention to the role of conspiracist delegitimation and its impact on political authority, especially in its online forms.⁵⁸ Our first contribution to this growing body of literature, then, is to extend the analysis of anti-globalist conspiracism beyond the prevailing research on populist foreign policy and the ideological foundations of the far right to conceptualise and document the process of conspiracist delegitimation, particularly within alt-tech spaces. In our examination of this process, we build on the emerging literature on anti-globalist conspiracism in IR and integrate it with research on the internationalisation of the far right as an intellectual and political project, which we discuss below.⁵⁹

The global far right and International Relations

In recent years, the rise of far-right, reactionary, anti-globalist populist movements has garnered scholarly attention in IR under various terms.⁶⁰ This is partly due to the challenge these forces pose to the liberal international order and partly due to the transnational nature of the

of functional or normative legitimacy as their authority over an expanding area of political life has increased. See Andrew Moravcsik, ‘Is there a “democratic deficit” in world politics? A framework for analysis’, *Government and Opposition*, 39:2 (2004), pp. 336–63; Peter M. Haas, ‘Addressing the global governance deficit’, in Peter M. Haas (ed.), *International Environmental Governance* (Routledge, 2008), pp. 499–513.

⁵²See Daniel F. Wajner, ‘The populist way out: Why contemporary populist leaders seek transnational legitimation’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2020), pp. 416–36; Kilian Spandler and Fredrik Söderbaum, ‘Populist (de)legitimation of international organizations’, *International Affairs*, 99:3 (2023), pp. 1023–41.

⁵³Chenchen Zhang, ‘Race, gender, and Occidentalism in global reactionary discourses’, *Review of International Studies* (2024), pp. 1–23, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000299>; Rodrigo Duque Estrada Campos, ‘The international turn in far-right studies: A critical assessment’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 51:3 (2023), pp. 892–919; Clifford Bob, *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵⁴Fredrick Söderbaum, Kilian Spandler, and Agnese Pacciardi, *Contestations of the Liberal International Order* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Mark Copelovitch and Jon C. W. Pevehouse, ‘International organizations in a new era of populist nationalism’, *The Review of International Organizations*, 14 (2019), pp. 169–86; Wajner, ‘The populist way out’; Jon C. W. Pevehouse, ‘The COVID-19 pandemic, international cooperation, and populism’, *International Organization*, 74:S1 (2020), pp. E191–212.

⁵⁵Gregorio Bettiza, Derek Bolton, and David Lewis, ‘Civilizationism and the ideological contestation of the liberal international order’, *International Studies Review*, 25:2 (2023), p. viad006.

⁵⁶Zürn et al., ‘International authority and its politicization’; Stefanie Walter, ‘The backlash against globalization’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 24 (2021), pp. 421–42.

⁵⁷Sebastian Schindler, ‘Post-truth politics and neoliberal competition: The social sources of dogmatic cynicism’, *International Theory*, 16:1 (2024), pp. 102–21; Adler and Drieschova, ‘The epistemological challenge’.

⁵⁸But see Uygar Baspehlivan, ‘Theorising the memescape: The spatial politics of internet memes’, *Review of International Studies*, 50:1 (2024), pp. 35–57.

⁵⁹Jean-François Drolet and Michael C. Williams, ‘From critique to reaction: The new right, critical theory and international relations’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 18:1 (2022), pp. 23–45; Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen, ‘Reactionary internationalism: The philosophy of the New Right’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:5 (2019), pp. 748–67; Spandler and Söderbaum, ‘Populist (de) legitimation of international organizations’; Georg Löffmann, ‘Introduction to special issue: The study of populism in International Relations’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 403–15 (p. 404); Donatella Bonansinga, ‘“A threat to us”: The interplay of insecurity and enmity narratives in left-wing populism’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 511–25.

⁶⁰See, for example, Matthew Sparke, ‘Reactionary anti-globalism: The crisis of globalisation’, in Richard Ballard and Clive Barnett (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Social Change* (Routledge, 2023), pp. 19–33; Bob, *The Global Right Wing*; de Orellana and Michelsen, ‘Reactionary Internationalism’; Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C. Williams. ‘Transnational nationalists: Building a global radical right.’ *Political Insight* 14:3 (2023), pp. 28–31.

movements themselves. One of the key contributions of IR scholars is demonstrating that the international is ‘constitutive of far-right politics.’⁶¹ This body of work analyses the emergence of an anti-globalist agenda that seeks to transform the liberal international order, enhance national sovereignty, and insulate ‘birth cultures’⁶² from global norms.⁶³ The IR literature has conceptualised and documented this ideological and intellectual defence of an alternative international order and the historical genealogies, in which far-right groups trace their intellectual roots to fascist ideologues who actively promoted an international system based on illiberal ideas.⁶⁴ Synthesising the European New Right’s fascist ideology and its emphasis on ethnocultural identity with America First nationalism, the anti-globalist worldview of the far right ties ‘the “struggles” of each Western nation to that of all people of (white) European descent.’⁶⁵

Drolet and Williams argue that contrary to depictions of the New Right as populist anti-intellectuals, this political project draws on a robust ‘intellectual and ideological’ foundation of fascist thinkers and critical intellectual traditions to ‘resist and oppose’ the current liberal international order.⁶⁶ The global far right, as Abrahamsen and Williams observe, is not limited to transgressive behaviour on social media.⁶⁷ Rather, it also includes a concerted effort of elite capture, focusing on academic publishing, institutions, and media.

The genealogical analysis of the intellectual and ideological roots of the New Right provides an important corrective to scholarship that only emphasises the anti-intellectual and nativist aspects of the far right. Yet we suggest that the IR literature is insufficiently attentive to the political significance of conspiracism within the far right, the delegitimising function of anti-globalist conspiracism, as well as its racist, civilisational, and gendered dimensions. While there is growing attention to the importance of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in anti-globalist movements in Europe,⁶⁸ we contend that conspiracy theories at the heart of the far right extend well beyond anti-Semitic conspiracies. Conspiratorial thinking is central to fascist ideology and authoritarian rule.⁶⁹ However, an exclusive focus on intellectual genealogies and ideological legacies risks depicting far-right movements as primarily engaged in a mutually recognisable, rational debate over the normative foundations of political authority and international order. For instance, Drolet and Williams observe that New Right intellectuals draw an important distinction between their ‘visions and activities’ and the ‘delusional conspiracy theories of QAnon and like-minded groups.’⁷⁰ The separation of the ideological vision from the conspiratorial is akin to what Bourdieu called the ‘scholastic fallacy,’⁷¹ which assumes laypeople share the same analytical mindset as experts. This fundamentally misrepresents these movements, as well as the broad appeal of these groups, especially on social media and online forums. In the alt-tech space, supporters of far-right populist movements are more likely to engage with the international in conspiratorial, racist, gendered, and

⁶¹ Campos, ‘The international turn in far-right studies,’ p. 896.

⁶² De Orellana and Michelsen, ‘Reactionary internationalism.’

⁶³ Joseph MacKay and Christopher David LaRoche, ‘Why is there no reactionary international theory?’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:2 (2018), pp. 234–44; Drolet and Williams, ‘From Critique to Reaction’; Abrahamsen and Williams, ‘Transnational Nationalists.’

⁶⁴ Jens Steffek, ‘Fascist internationalism’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:1 (2015), pp. 3–22; Kye J. Allen, ‘An anarchical society (of fascist states): Theorising illiberal solidarism’, *Review of International Studies*, 48:3 (2022), pp. 583–603.

⁶⁵ Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Murdoch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (Routledge, 2020), p. 25.

⁶⁶ Drolet and Williams, ‘From critique to reaction’, p. 36.

⁶⁷ Abrahamsen and Williams, ‘Transnational nationalists’, p. 31.

⁶⁸ Rensmann, ‘“Against globalism”’; Subotić, ‘Antisemitism in the global populist international.’

⁶⁹ Julien Giry and Doğan Gürpınar, ‘Functions and uses of conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes’, in Michael Butter and Peter Knight (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (Routledge, 2020); Peter Chambers, ‘Fascist uses of conspiracy theories: Alienation, anxiety, and false concreteness in the critical political theory of Franz Neumann’, *Distinktion, Journal of Social Theory* (2023), pp. 1–27, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2023.2252192>.

⁷⁰ Drolet and Williams, ‘From critique to reaction’, p. 37.

⁷¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. ‘The scholastic point of view.’ *Cultural anthropology* 5, no. 4 (1990): 380–91. p. 384.

civilisational memes and coded language than by marshalling the writings of fascist thinkers and palaeoconservative ideologues.

Although research on the FC has explored its transnational scale and populist dimensions, IR scholarship has largely overlooked how anti-globalist conspiracism – particularly the Great Reset conspiracy theory – served both to mobilise protestors and undermine institutional legitimacy.⁷² Indeed, groups that make up the FC have increasingly embraced a form of ‘new conspiracism’⁷³ that relies on and disseminates a simplistic diagnosis of global capitalism while simultaneously undermining the epistemological foundations for assessing its claims against alternative accounts. New conspiracism, as Muirhead and Rosenblum explain, attacks the epistemological authority of political institutions that ‘create, assess, and ceaselessly update and correct the universe of facts and arguments essential to reasoning about politics and policy (and everything else).’⁷⁴

Conspiracy theories are appealing not because they provide an epistemologically sound explanation for how global politics influences local outcomes and/or harms certain communities, but because they operate as a cultural ‘coping mechanism’ to deal with the insecurities brought about by complex macro-level changes, such as globalisation.⁷⁵ Anti-globalism provides a layman’s explanation of international politics buoyed by the appearance of scientific credibility and a ready-made theory of power, in which international organisations work in secret with transnational elites to co-opt the nation-state and undermine popular sovereignty. The political, epistemic, and affective dimensions of conspiracism, and its simplified assessment of power and knowledge in the liberal international order, help explain its enduring appeal.

It bears repeating that we do not dismiss belief in conspiracies in international politics as delusional or irrational.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, anti-globalist conspiracism offers an impoverished understanding of the complexities of global politics. As IR scholars have shown, it misdirects anger towards the insecurities and inequalities produced by the current global economic system and mobilises people to defend this system.⁷⁷ Indeed, anti-globalist conspiracism relies on a simplistic, Manichean narrative of history, depicted as an ongoing contest between the forces of good and evil. In constructing this account, conspiracism explains outcomes by referencing ‘unseen, intentional, and malevolent forces.’⁷⁸ In this view, non-conspiratorial accounts are seen as part of the conspiracy to obscure the true causes of outcomes from the public. This includes discrediting mainstream sources of knowledge, such as the scientific community, corporations, civil society groups, international organisations, and state institutions. Rather than explicitly rejecting scientific approaches, conspiracism mimics accepted scientific standards, mobilising scientific data and employing existing conventions of research and citation, academic titles and jargon, and academic publishing.⁷⁹

⁷²Jean-Christophe Boucher, Lauren Rutherglen, and So Youn Kim, ‘Transnationalism and populist networks in a digital era: Canada and the Freedom Convoy’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 68:4 (2024), pp. 1–15. By contrast, research outside of IR has highlighted the role of conspiracy theory in the FC. See Tina Askanius, Bàrbara Molas, and Amarnath Amarasingam, ‘Far-right extremist narratives in Canadian and Swedish COVID-19 protests: A comparative case study of the Freedom Movement and Freedom Convoy’, *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2024), pp. 1–21, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2024.2340492>; Zeinab Farokhi, ‘Making freedom great again: Conspiracy theories, affective nostalgia and alignment, and the right-wing base grammars of the #freedomconvoy’, *Global Media Journal – Canadian Edition*, 14:1 (2022), pp. 67–92.

⁷³Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*.

⁷⁴Muirhead and Rosenblum, ‘Conspiracism and delegitimation’, p. 44.

⁷⁵Harambam, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture*, p. 21.

⁷⁶After all, the inner workings of states, transnational corporations, and international organisations are far from transparent and tend to rely upon mechanisms of secrecy and propaganda. In a world in which the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic are hidden and contested, governments deceive the public about the existence of weapons of mass destruction, and political elites have personal relations with high-profile human traffickers, the belief in conspiracy theory is neither surprising nor ‘rationally unacceptable’ (Basham, ‘Malevolent global conspiracy’, p. 95).

⁷⁷Conway, ‘Repressive suspicion’; Sparke, ‘Reactionary anti-globalism.’

⁷⁸Oliver and Wood, ‘Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s).’

⁷⁹Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (Columbia University Press, 1997); Pipes, *Conspiracy*; Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*.

By mimicking mainstream knowledge production, conspiracism erodes trust in existing political and epistemic authorities by creating a false equivalence (both sides appear equally scientific) and undermining the distinction between qualified experts and the opinions of 'careless loudmouths and demagogues'.⁸⁰

Despite a substantial body of literature on the global far right in North America and Europe, the field of IR has only recently begun to address the discursive process of conspiracist delegitimation, which has gained ideological momentum transnationally in the populist campaigns and policy agendas of Trump, Le Pen, Orban, Poilievre, and Meloni. As illustrated by the case of the FC, within anti-globalist conspiracism, the domestic problems of democratic politics are projected onto nefarious Others, personified through representative figures of the political elite, and externalised onto the global level in the delegitimation of national actors, international institutions, and agendas. Conspiracist delegitimation is a prominent discursive strategy of far-right movements. Yet, to date, existing accounts of the global far right in IR have remained relatively silent on the challenge to political authority that anti-globalist worldviews and movements pose to the liberal international order.

A note on method

In our analysis of far-right social media, we conducted a keyword search for the term 'Freedom Convoy' on 4chan's /pol/ board using the 4chan archive <http://4plebs.org> between 1 January 2022, and 15 March 2022, which returned 4,410 results. We analysed each of these posts, covering the period before, during, and after the FC protests, to identify dominant, subordinate, contradictory, and counter-conspiratorial themes, memes, and narratives. We supplemented this analysis with a discourse analysis of the coverage of the FC by two major far-right media outlets – Rebelnews.com and Infowars.com – between December 2021 and August 2022. In total, we examined 518 entries (articles/videos) posted on Rebel News that mentioned the FC, as well as an additional 46 that covered the WEF meetings in Davos that coincided with the Convoy, and 10 on Infowars.

Using thematically organised discourse analysis and an iterative process of categorising textual data,⁸¹ we identified salient themes and patterns of explicit and implicit meaning in the far-right social media commentary on the FC, public health measures such as vaccine mandates, and the post-Covid recovery. We identified prevalent themes and categories in the material based on the frequency and repetition of particular words and concepts, such as globalism, the WEF, the Great Reset, Justin Trudeau, Klaus Schwab, authoritarianism/totalitarianism, freedom, race, gender, expertise, and science. We coded texts and memes as dominant, supportive, adjacent, contradictory, and counter-conspiracy themes, which allowed us to descriptively map the intertextual space of anti-globalist conspiracism. The far-right social media commentary constitutes a 'text' in the broad, post-structuralist sense, which includes various 'genres'⁸² or modes of communication, such as videos and images.⁸³

Following the descriptive mapping and thematically organised discourse analysis, we analysed discursive patterns to identify dominant themes, representations, concepts, references, coded language, and tropes across alt-tech media. This allowed us to understand the internal logic of anti-globalist conspiracism and to determine which conspiratorial ideas were dominant, such as the belief that pandemic restrictions were part of the Great Reset agenda, and that Justin Trudeau was an acolyte of Klaus Schwab's WEF. Other conspiratorial ideas were coded as subordinate: less frequent claims that supported dominant claims, such as the notion that Trudeau's father is Fidel Castro, or that the vaccine reduced fertility or included microchips to track people's locations. We

⁸⁰David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: How Conspiracy Theory Has Shaped Modern History* (Random House, 2010), p. 335.

⁸¹Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Routledge, 2013).

⁸²Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*.

⁸³Lene Hansen, 'Discourse analysis, post-structuralism, and foreign policy', in Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne (eds), *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 94–109.

also examined conspiracy-adjacent claims: narratives that did not explicitly articulate a conspiracy but adopted terms or phrases indicating some conspiratorial dimension, such as the sarcastic use of ‘trust the science’ or by placing ‘mainstream media’ or ‘experts’ in quotation marks. Additionally, we coded contradictory conspiracy claims, where opposing conspiratorial accounts sought to explain the same outcome, such as the claim that China intentionally created the pandemic versus the claim that the United States/CIA/UN/Bill Gates created the virus. Lastly, we identified counter-conspiracy claims, such as the assertion that the FC itself was itself a ‘psyop’ or psychological operation, a governmental/covert initiative to monitor and control opposition to public health measures. The media sources (Rebel News and Infowars) were used to supplement the textual analysis of 4chan’s /pol/ and help establish which themes were sufficiently dominant in the FC to warrant inclusion in public-facing spaces. These sites included far fewer subordinate, contradictory, or counter-conspiratorial claims and were thus used to help identify dominant conspiratorial claims found in alt-tech spaces.

Three mechanisms of conspiracist delegitimation

	Externalisation	Personification	Othering
Political authority	WEF: Great Reset/Build Back Better, penetrating domestic governments, subverting sovereignty, creating policy, psyop	Trudeau: as puppet, acolyte, terrorist, traitor, tyrant, illegitimate offspring, cuckold, globohomo	Globalists/global elites, NWO, communists, globohomo, Jews, (((they))), scientists
	UN and WHO: producing knowledge, questionable vaccine approval; controlled by China	Schwab: as controlling, remaking societies Gates: profit from vaccine, pre-knowledge of pandemic	Mainstream media; pharmaceutical companies, liberal elites, leftist universities
Dominant	globalist, WEF, UN	Trudeau, Soros, Gates	Globohomo, Jews, communists, sexual minorities, ‘normies’, ‘shills’, ‘glowies’
Subordinate	communists, global pedophile ring, food shortages, false flag	Trudeau/Castro, Gates/microchips, Epstein connection	Russia/United States as source of misinformation/funding
Adjacent	globalist	vague insinuations: globalists	‘trust the science’, ‘experts’, ‘mainstream media’
Contradictory	China, aliens	little personification	China
Counter	psyop	RCMP/police, CSIS, Mossad, CIA	Deep state

Externalisation and the globalist agenda

The FC began as a protest against vaccine mandates and travel restrictions enacted by federal and provincial governments in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, public health measures which enjoyed widespread support among the Canadian population.⁸⁴ In their efforts to delegitimise these interventions, the FC redirected significant energy toward international institutions and agencies. Specifically, it exploited the legitimacy deficit of these institutions to undermine the political authority of the federal government led by Justin Trudeau. In the process of conspiracist delegitimation, the movement transformed into a narrative about transnational populist resistance against external Others, namely globalists, along with their domestic adherents and front organisations. The conspiratorial discourse externalised the issue of political legitimacy onto foreign actors

⁸⁴David T. Zhu, Steven Hawken, Mohamed Serhan, et al., ‘Public attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccine mandates and vaccine certificates in Canada: A time series study’, *Archives of Public Health*, 82:32 (2024), pp. 1–11.

through a story about elite co-optation, by claiming that national leaders were acting on behalf of the WEF and UN to subvert national sovereignty and implement the Great Reset.

In the online spaces where FC supporters gathered, the terms ‘globalism’ and ‘globalists’ featured prominently, representing the external Other against which protestors mobilised. In this conspiratorial worldview, globalism signifies, above all else, homogenisation – the elimination of cultural differences, the destruction of the nation-state and popular sovereignty, and the establishment of a one-world government. Globalism is described as the ideological foundation of globalisation and the institutional framework of the New World Order, which prominent conspiracy theorist Alex Jones has referred to as the ‘global digital panopticon control system.’⁸⁵

In the far-right digital ecosystem, allusions to anti-globalist conspiracies are ‘couched in semiotically indirect, ambiguous, or cryptic forms’ on platforms like 4chan, Infowars, and Rebel News.⁸⁶ Through assertion, affirmation, innuendo, and the rejection of expert authority, anti-globalist conspiracy theories gain validation through sheer repetition across social media, where they seek to redefine key terms of political debate, contest liberal-democratic norms, and delegitimise knowledge-producing institutions.⁸⁷

Despite the localised and national scope of the events, FC supporters frequently referenced the liberal international order using coded language shared by far-right populists, such as ‘globalism’ and ‘globalist’. In a YouTube video titled ‘What is a globalist?’, Lauren Southern, a journalist for Rebel News and alleged Russian-funded social influencer, redefines globalism in opposition to the perceived elites and experts. She argues that elites define globalism in terms of cosmopolitan citizenship, economic and cultural integration, and the pooling of sovereignty within international organisations. In contrast, according to Southern’s polemical definition, globalism is portrayed as a totalitarian project in which:

your vote doesn’t count unless the wise men in Brussels or in Wall Street or in the UN building decide it’s allowed to count. Globalism means any law your government passes is subject to invalidation by unelected hall monitors who would rather police the boundaries of free speech than the borders of actual countries.⁸⁸

Southern’s invocation of ‘free speech’, along with the name of the ‘Freedom Convoy’ itself, discursively constructed the FC as a populist battle for ‘freedom’ against global elites who controlled national leaders and sought to restrict personal liberties. ‘The Freedom Convoy movement sickens the globalist shell’, said one /pol/ poster, ‘because they hate that word, they don’t want you to be free, to be infecting others with the freedom virus.’ The idea to ‘mandate freedom’ instead of mandating vaccines and masks, along with the claim that the FC was ‘pro-freedom, not anti-vax’ became slogans of the protests and the online commentary. Thus, the mobilisation of normative claims about rights and freedoms functioned paradoxically to legitimise the protests, enrol allies, contest the democratic authority of the Trudeau government, and delegitimise public measures that enjoyed relatively widespread support among the Canadian population.

Ironically, claims about the authoritarian forces of globalism elide the anti-democratic nature of the FC itself, which sought to invalidate public health measures legally implemented by democratically elected provincial and federal governments. The conspiratorial delegitimation of political authority in Canada relied on the externalisation of public health measures to foreign others as part of a ‘globalist’ agenda, even though this effort to combat the virus prioritised Canadian citizens over global processes and obligations – for example, through the closure of borders to migrants and asylum seekers. The public health measures implemented in Canada and other developed

⁸⁵Liam Stack, ‘Globalism: A far-right conspiracy theory buoyed by trump’, *New York Times* (14 November 2016).

⁸⁶Janet McIntosh, ‘Alt-signaling: Fascistic communication and the power of subterranean style’, *Fieldsights: Hot Spots* (2021), available at: {<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/alt-signaling-fascistic-communication-and-the-power-of-subterranean-style>}.

⁸⁷Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*.

⁸⁸Lauren Southern, ‘What is a globalist?’, *Rebel News Media* (16 September 2016), available at: {<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XumrD3ET3Sg>}.

states prioritised national interests over global outcomes, contributing to global health inequality and poverty.⁸⁹ FC supporters in Canada presented public health measures, such as vaccine mandates, lockdowns, and mask mandates, as part of an elite agenda to transform the global economy and implement authoritarian rule. According to anti-globalist narratives, political elites like Justin Trudeau used the pandemic as a ruse (or in more extreme accounts, manufactured the ‘pandemic’ entirely) to entrench the New World Order. This purported agenda included, among other things, asserting social control through the creation of digital identification systems, central bank digital currencies, social credit scores, and criminalising dissent. In the words of Alex Jones, pandemic restrictions in Canada were a ‘beta test’ for social engineering worldwide.⁹⁰

Our textual corpus of anti-globalist discourse, gathered from Infowars, Rebel News, and 4chan’s /pol/, provides insight into the process of conspiracist delegitimation. For example, during the peak of the FC protests in Ottawa, Alex Jones from Infowars interviewed Ezra Levant of Rebel News, a leading far-right ‘news’ source that supported the FC. They discussed their common enemy, the WEF’s ‘globalist attack’ – the Great Reset.⁹¹

Alex Jones: This is a globalist attack. This is a Great Reset. We’re all being attacked by the same enemy. And any piece of the world that Klaus Schwab and these literal neo- Nazis can take control of is ... I’m one more step closer to a gulag. So I want to explain, solidarity isn’t some pat on the head here, with Australia, or Germany, or the UK, or Canada. We’re all in this together. Can you speak to that?

Ezra Levant: Well, I saw a video just the other day of Klaus Schwab at the World Economic Forum boasting that Justin Trudeau and half his cabinet are acolytes. In fact it’s even worse than that. Alex, you might find this hard to believe, but our former Deputy Minister, our current Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, she’s literally on the board of the World Economic Forum. So, Canada is deeply embedded in that kind of groupthink...

Alex Jones: So this is a great example of what the globalists do when they have full control. And as you know, you mentioned it, Trudeau does videos saying he takes Klaus Schwab’s orders and this is all part of a UN takeover. I mean this is UN governance trying to bankrupt people for a universal income. You want to explain that to international audiences, what this is really about?

Ezra Levant: While I mean Trudeau is a huge fan of the United Nations. He uses the phrase the Great Reset. He uses the phrase Build Back Better. I’m not sure who came up with it first, Trudeau or Joe Biden, or someone else, but it’s sort of weird to hear the same refrain whether it’s in the United Kingdom, Canada or the U.S. I don’t quite get it.

In this conspiratorial depiction of events, the use of vague phrases like ‘Great Reset’ and ‘Build Back Better’ was presented as evidence of a globalist conspiracy and national subservience to an elite-driven, international agenda. This populist mobilisation of international solidarity against the common enemy of global elites was central to the conspiracist delegitimation of the Trudeau government, and by extension, the WEF and its Great Reset agenda. In this respect, anti-globalism offers a ‘transposable logic of enmity’ that resonates transnationally and can be used to support various populist strategies of delegitimation.⁹²

⁸⁹Daniel Gerszon Mahler, Nishant Yonzan, and Christoph Lakner, ‘The impact of COVID-19 on global inequality and poverty’, World Bank Report (2022); Moosa Tatar, Jalal Montazeri Shoorekchali, Mohammad Reza Faraji, and Fernando A. Wilson, ‘International COVID-19 vaccine inequality amid the pandemic: Perpetuating a global crisis?’, *Journal of Global Health*, 11 (2021), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.11.03086>}.

⁹⁰Infowars.com, ‘Canada trucker convoy – Alex Jones + Ezra Levant – InfoWars + Rebel News – Freedom!!!’, *One News Page* (30 January 2022), available at: {<https://www.onenewspage.com/video/20220130/14247400/Canada-Trucker-Convoy-Alex-Jones-Ezra-Levant.htm>}.

⁹¹Infowars.com, ‘Canada trucker convoy’.

⁹²Rita Abrahamsen, Jean-François Drolet, Alexandra Gheciu, et al., ‘Confronting the international political sociology of the new right’, *International Political Sociology*, 14:1 (2020), pp. 94–107.

The anti-globalist account of the FC, articulated by prominent far-right figures from the USA and Canada, represents an international movement of reactionary politics expressed online through alt-tech social media. This anti-globalist conspiratorial worldview features recurring themes with a long-standing history in conspiracy theories about the New World Order, including ideas like population control, white genocide, and mass surveillance. However, these conspiratorial tropes have acquired new meaning and heightened political significance in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccine mandates, passports, lockdowns, and contact tracing.

Personification and externalisation: Trudeau and Schwab

As exemplified in the exchange above, the far-right digital ecosystem in Canada and the United States has personified the 'liberal authoritarianism' of the so-called globalist agenda in the figures of Trudeau and Schwab.⁹³ The narratives and visuals from FC supporters mostly concentrated on Trudeau himself; many protesters carried flags with the slogan 'F*** Trudeau', and numerous vehicles featured bumper stickers or flags with the same message. Online discussions also largely focused their ire on Trudeau, portraying him as an instrument of the WEF. He was variously labelled a puppet of the New World Order, the WEF, Klaus Schwab, George Soros, and Jews – all common elements of anti-globalist conspiracism. By drawing these connections, the public health measures implemented by federal and provincial governments (which are primarily responsible for public health) were attributed to Trudeau and delegitimised as policies imposed by foreign 'globalist' actors. Of course, this narrative ignored the fact that these measures were recommended by public health officials across all 12 provincial and territorial governments.

An extensive literature on populism has documented how populist movements often mobilise support through a 'politics of personality'.⁹⁴ Populist conspiracy theories rely more on personal narratives than on structural analysis, typically personifying structural factors. They focus on individuals who are seen as embodying 'globalist' forces (e.g. Bill Gates, George Soros, Barack Obama, the Rothschilds, Klaus Schwab) or those who oppose globalism (e.g. Donald Trump, Pierre Poilievre, Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni). In Canada and around the world, Prime Minister Trudeau personifies various political stances associated with globalism, such as pro-immigration, trade liberalisation, multiculturalism, feminism, cosmopolitanism, and human rights.

There are also personal aspects that placed Trudeau at the centre of the conspiracy theories. Populist conspiracy theories view national societies as comprised of two groups: elites, who are viewed as corrupt and part of the conspiracy; and the people or the nation, who are either dupes or victims.⁹⁵ Prime Minister Trudeau is easy to associate with 'the elite'. He is the son of former Canadian prime minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau and has well-publicised connections to organisations like the WEF and to global elites, such as Aga Khan IV. Moreover, he has built his political career and persona around progressive social policies opposed by the far right. Trudeau portrays himself as a feminist and an internationalist and introduced Canada's first feminist foreign policy in 2019.⁹⁶

In memes, imageboard discussions, and broadcasts by conspiracy entrepreneurs like Alex Jones and Ezra Levant, Trudeau was depicted as an adherent to the Great Reset agenda and a puppet of Klaus Schwab. For example, one meme shared on /pol/ portrayed Klaus Schwab as Dr Evil from

⁹³ Popular social media figures such as Joe Rogan, Russell Brand, and Jordan Peterson have referred to Justin Trudeau as a dictator, tyrant, authoritarian, etc., because of his allegedly totalitarian approach to controlling the pandemic.

⁹⁴ Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, 'Populism versus democracy', *Political Studies*, 55:2 (2007), pp. 405–24.

⁹⁵ Eirikur Bergmann and Michael Butter, 'Conspiracy theory and populism', in Michael Butter and Peter Knight (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (Routledge, 2020), pp. 330–43; Sutton and Douglas, 'Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset'.

⁹⁶ Rebecca Tiessen and Emma Swan, 'Canada's feminist foreign policy promiss: An ambitious agenda for gender equality, human rights, peace and security', in Norman Hillmer and Philippe Lagassé (eds), *Justin Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 187–205.

Austin Powers, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau cast as his cat, Bigglesworth – a parody of Ernst Stavro Blofeld, the villain from the James Bond films who sought world domination (Figure 1).

For commentators in the alt-tech space, the FC represented an opportunity for the Trudeau government, at the behest of Schwab, to crackdown on dissent and implement the Great Reset. The rant of Infowars commentator Owen Shroyer (who was sentenced to two months in prison for his role in the US Capitol insurrection) on *War Room* provides an exemplary rendition of the anti-globalist narrative:

All the COVID b.s., it's all nonsense. We don't need the Covid lockdowns. We don't need the vaccines, we don't need the masks. We don't need any of it. That's what Trudeau is fighting for? That's what he's putting Canadians under the bus about? 'Cause he wants Covid measures? 'Cause he wants Covid tyranny? No! They are committed to a giant crime called the Great Reset ... It's not about Covid. It's the Great Reset. Trudeau has committed to the Great Reset. Global Government. Population control. He's committed, he's taking orders. He's an agent. He's not the prime minister of Canada. He's the Klaus Schwab World Economic Forum representative, acting as the prime minister of Canada.⁹⁷

As noted earlier, conspiracy theories provide a grossly oversimplified and Manichean view of the global capitalist system, often focused on its repressive aspects.⁹⁸ One such oversimplification involves personifying complex processes and structures, leading to a hyperagential account of political outcomes.⁹⁹ This, in turn, promotes simplistic solutions to address the impacts of highly complex and deeply embedded structures. In the case of the FC, replacing Trudeau (through non-democratic means) and severing ties with the WEF and Schwab were proposed as straightforward solutions.



Figure 1. Meme of Klaus Schwab as Dr Evil.

⁹⁷Owen Shroyer, 'War Room with Owen Shroyer', Infowars.com (14 February 2022), available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220329072333/https://futurenews.news/watch?id=620ade3af8b550051ca4a255>}.

⁹⁸Conway, 'Repressive suspicion'.

⁹⁹Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*; Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

Externalisation and Othering: Race and sexual politics

In addition to personifying and externalising complex processes, conspiracy theories also use Othering narratives to further delegitimise political authorities. As Sparke has explained, anti-globalists consistently depicted the Covid-19 as a racialised, foreign threat.¹⁰⁰ In the FC, this took the form of racialised, gendered, and civilisational Othering, sometimes explicitly stated and other times captured in coded terms. FC supporters in alt-tech spaces employed the coded term ‘globohomo’ to describe aspects of the alleged globalist conspiracy. The far-right brand of anti-globalist conspiracism that circulates online fosters and relies upon this conspiratorial notion – a portmanteau that combines ‘globalist’, ‘homogenisation’, and ‘homosexuality’. This ‘extremely online’, racist, anti-Semitic and homophobic pejorative, popularised in places such as 4chan’s /pol/, serves as a shorthand for a ‘globalist’ agenda. This includes a range of politico-cultural processes associated with globalism, global governance, and the attendant spread of liberal progressive values (often crudely lumped under the banner of ‘Cultural Marxism’) across the world.

First, the term suggests a process of *political homogenisation* driven by the globalisation of liberal democratic norms, free markets, sustainable development, and human rights. Second, it refers to the erosion of cultural traditions through *cultural homogenisation*, which is portrayed as being orchestrated by a technocratic elite, defined by the promotion of progressive liberal norms. According to the anti-globalist metanarrative, this dynamic has led to the decline of Western civilisation and the demoralisation, feminisation, and emasculation of white, predominantly working-class, cisgender men. The imposition of a liberal-progressive monoculture is believed to undermine heteronormative and patriarchal norms. This narrative ‘compresses’ the biopolitical worldview of the far right,¹⁰¹ repackaging anti-Semitic tropes about Cultural Marxism and the New World Order into a potent form of anti-globalist conspiracism that spreads through memes, imageboard discussions, and alt-tech media. As we examine below, the public health measures implemented by the Trudeau government in response to the pandemic became a key battleground for anti-globalist conspiracists contesting the legitimacy of the broader ‘globalist’ project.

Conspiratorial assertions about the ‘globohomo dictatorship’ of Trudeau, often referred to him as ‘Trudy Castro’. This pejorative moniker both feminised Trudeau and invoked the long-standing conspiratorial intimation that he is Fidel Castro’s son, portraying him as a crypto-communist and part of an authoritarian lineage (Figure 2). This discursive delegitimation of Trudeau focused on conspiracies about his supposed lineage, merging anti-communist rhetoric with heteronormative and racist themes of ‘cuckolding’.

Promoted by right-wing social media personalities such as Candace Owens and Mike Cernovich, the far-right insinuation that Trudeau, like his father before him, is a cuckold or ‘cuck’, emasculated by leftist figures and liberal progressive norms, is common in the alt-tech space (it was even promoted by Donald Trump during the 2024 election campaign). Playing on the racist trope of ‘buckbreaking’, online discussions often portrayed the FC as an act of resistance at both the national and international level against global elites that sought to make an example out of Canada and emasculate and enslave the Canadian population (Figure 3):

The Freedom Convoy is not only fighting freedoms as per the Charter of Rights and Freedoms but the political elite’s cult of Schwabism. Here’s the transcript from the introduction of Trudeau to the WEF by Schwab. The amount invested in Trudeau to Canuck-break Canada into an example for the world is clearly evident.

¹⁰⁰ Sparke, ‘Reactionary anti-globalism’, p. 20.

¹⁰¹ Luis M. Hernandez Aguilar, ‘Memeing a conspiracy theory: On the biopolitical compression of the Great Replacement conspiracy theories’, *Ethnography*, 25:1 (2023), pp. 76–97.



Figure 2. Meme that depicts Justin Trudeau as the son of Fidel Castro.



Figure 3. Post from 4chan's /pol/.

Anonymous users or 'anons' on /pol/ made frequent comparisons between Trudeau's allegedly oppressive response to the pandemic and other authoritarian figures. This conspiratorial idea was



Figure 4. Meme comparing Trudeau to authoritarian leaders.

compressed into memes that functioned discursively to contest the legitimacy of the Liberal government through reference to the legitimacy deficit of international institutions and the elite forces allegedly involved in the undemocratic imposition of ‘globalism’.

Trudeau’s response to the pandemic was regularly denounced as Nazism, communism, and other forms of authoritarian rule (Figures 4 and 5).

Supporters portrayed the FC – and other events labelled as anti-globalist resistance, such as the US Capitol insurrection – as the start of an international uprising against ‘globohomo’ (Figure 6).

Friendly reminder that their ultimate goal is Marxist jewish socialist feminist genderqueer diversity pedo white genocide (ethnocide) corporatiat [*sic*] globalist satanic communism

Western civilization are the commies now this time, and every leader has either been bought out or willingly on their side, mostly the latter

On the brightside I beautifully see that Jan 6 and the Freedom Convoy are the baby steps of the Great Happening where people finally rise up against Globohomo



Figure 5. Meme of Trudeau as Adolf Hitler.



Figure 6. Post from 4chan's /pol.

The post featured a racially charged tweet by right-wing influencer Andy Ngo, which intimated that the police response to the FC in France was hypocritical and disproportionate compared to Black Lives Matter protests (Figure 7).

In a similar vein, another post framed January 6 and the FC as evidence of a coming insurrection against the New World Order, comparable to that of the American revolution – ‘the baby steps of the Great Happening where the people finally rise up against Globohomo Marxist NWO’ (Figure 8).

Illustrating the explicit racialised politics of the FC and anti-globalist conspiracism, the image accompanying the post juxtaposed Trudeau’s allegedly draconian response to the FC to his support for Black Lives Matter, where he famously took a knee in solidarity at a demonstration in Ottawa, much to the chagrin of far-right commentators (Figure 9).

Another poster reiterated the transnational influence of the protests, stating ‘This is beyond Trudeau. The entire globohomo nexus is panicking frantically over this Freedom Convoy.’ The transnational dimensions of the protests were often framed in an accelerationist manner, as a ‘freedom virus’ spreading across borders, analogous to the transmission of the pandemic itself. ‘The movement is going worldwide’, exclaimed one anon, stating ‘Kek! Not only is Justin Trudeau a huge globalist puppet f*****, he EXPORTED globohomo resistance across the world lol ... Is Canada turning from one of the world worst covid tyranny into one of the most based nation?’ (Figure 10).

Using far-right coded language such as ‘kek’ and ‘based’, the commentary regarding the FC reflected and reinforced an anti-Semitic, racist, and homophobic worldview. This worldview expressed opposition to the liberal international order anonymously online through conspiratorial innuendo and implication. In response to accusations of racism from ordinary people or ‘normies’, the far right employs a political aesthetic of irony, sarcasm, and humour to deliver offensive



Figure 7. Close up of image from post from 4chan's /pol/.

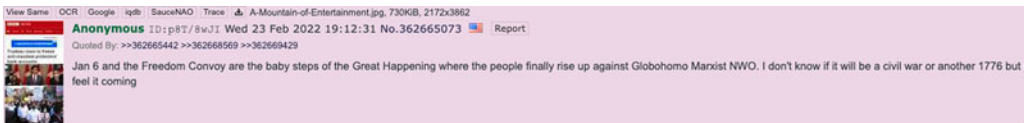


Figure 8. Post from 4chan's /pol/.

content; maintaining plausible deniability, iterative memes and coded messages build on the intertextuality of internet culture, propagating in a viral pattern and connecting supporters across the globe.¹⁰²

The discussion on /pol/ depicted the FC as a battle for ‘freedom’ – an act of populist resistance against the Great Reset. Posters described the FC in Manichean terms as a collective fight against the authoritarian agenda of the ‘globohomo dictatorship in Canada’, associated with various front

¹⁰²Abrahamsen et al., ‘Confronting the international political sociology of the new right’, p. 104.



Figure 9. Close up of image from post from 4chan's /pol/.

organisations, namely, financial institutions, the WEF, and national leaders like Trudeau. In a post featuring a memefied version of Arnold Friberg's painting, 'The Trail Ends at the Sea,' picturing a Canadian Mountie with a wanted poster for Trudeau, one anon exclaimed (Figures 11 and 12):

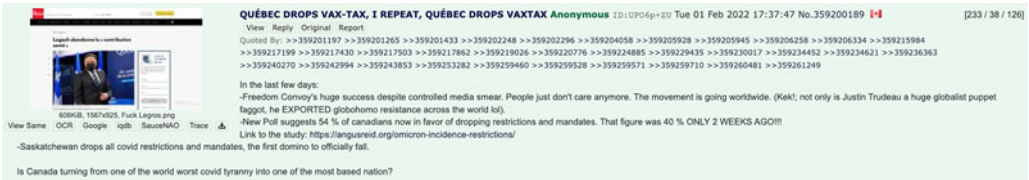


Figure 10. Post from 4chan's /pol/.

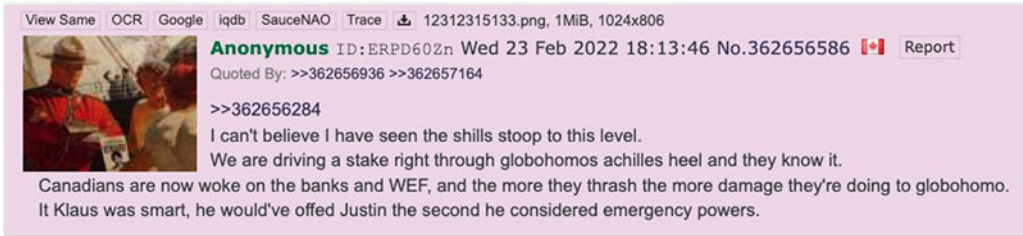


Figure 11. Post from 4chan's /pol/.



Figure 12. Close up of image from post on 4chan's /pol/.

We are driving a stake right through globohomos achilles heel and they know it. Canadians are now woke on the banks and WEF, and the more they thrash the more damage they're doing to globohomo. If Klaus was smart, he would've offered Justin the second he considered emergency powers.

Another anon reproduced this anti-globalist narrative about the pandemic as a story of freedom against tyranny: 'Trump represented a populist revolt against globohomo. globohomo retaliated by engineering a bioweapon and a massive psy op propaganda campaign to implement fear based tyranny' (Figure 13), while another poster stated the 'Freedom will defeat globohomo and the Canadian Trucker Convoy will be the start of it all' (Figure 14).



Figure 13. Post from 4chan's /pol/.



Figure 14. Post from 4chan's /pol/.

The discussion about the FC on /pol/ illustrates this recurring trope in anti-globalist conspiracism, in which allusions to a covert, psychological operation by 'globohomo' appear to obtain validity without evidence, through sheer repetition across social media echo chambers.¹⁰³

Othering and the biopolitics of the Great Replacement

The identification of Trudeau with the common enemy of global elites and experts is closely linked to the racialised, gendered, and civilisational discourses underpinning the far-right critique of globalism. These discourses mobilise biopolitical ideas about population control, demographic replacement, and threats posed by immigration. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, far-right actors superimposed established conspiratorial ideas about vaccines onto existing conspiracy theories about elite-driven population control. Specifically, they sought to mobilise fear and uncertainty about Covid-19 vaccinations by connecting the 'Great Reset' with the 'Great Replacement'. The homonationalist, racist, and anti-Semitic ideas of Great Replacement theory – where popular sovereignty is allegedly being undermined by foreign Others – are rhetorically similar to and often integrated with the Great Reset conspiracy theory. This theory remixes long-standing conspiratorial ideas with anti-vaccination and Covid-19 conspiracy theories.¹⁰⁴

Great Replacement conspiracy theories assert that elites and experts are complicit in the demographic and cultural replacement of white populations. What one anon referred to as 'Western globohomo and its replacement migration' functions as 'discursive bricolages' that mobilises older racist tropes and eugenic concepts within a neo-Malthusian, pseudo-scientific framework concerned with the 'biological and social reproduction of the nation', as Luis Hernandez Aguilar puts it.¹⁰⁵ The discursive adaptability of Great Replacement theories to local contexts and populist campaigns, where they act as an 'empty vessel' for various forms of racial animus, helps explain their transnational appeal.¹⁰⁶

This conspiratorial dynamic was evident during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the far right used replacist ideas to challenge the authority of elites and experts and claim that vaccines not only negatively impact fertility but are part of a globalist plot to sterilise the white population.¹⁰⁷ For Southern, the Great Replacement is a defining feature of globalism itself:

¹⁰³Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*.

¹⁰⁴Michael Christensen and Ashli Au, 'The Great Reset and the cultural boundaries of conspiracy theory', *International Journal of Communication*, 17 (2023), pp. 2348–66 (p. 2353).

¹⁰⁵Hernandez Aguilar, 'Memeing a conspiracy theory'.

¹⁰⁶Amarath Amarasingam, Marc-Andre Argentino, and Graham Macklin, 'The Buffalo attack: The cumulative momentum of far-right terror', *CTC Sentinel*, 15:7 (2022), pp. 1–10 (p. 7).

¹⁰⁷Liram Koblentz-Stenzler and Alexander Pack, 'Infected by hate: Far-right attempts to leverage anti-vaccine sentiment', *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism* (2021), pp. 1–6 (p. 10), available at: <https://www.ict.org.il/images/Infected%20by%20Hate%20-02-03-2021.pdf>.

Globalism means unending war in the Third World. And unchecked immigration from the Third World, all sponsored by unelected governments with as much respect for the people they govern as those in the Third World.¹⁰⁸

Premised on the constitutive Othering of the so-called ‘Third World’ and ‘immigrants’, in the conspiratorial worldview envisioned by Southern, globalists serve as racialised scapegoats intent on ‘replacing’ white populations. Figures like George Soros and Barack Obama, she claims, want to ‘open up’ and ‘destroy’ borders for corporations, which manipulate ‘the false flag of diversity’ to discipline citizens into ‘expendable consumers’.

Patrick King, a leader of the FC, who publicly stated ‘Trudeau, someone is going to make you catch a bullet one day’, described Covid-19 vaccine campaigns as efforts ‘to depopulate the Anglo-Saxon race, because they are the ones with the strongest bloodlines’.¹⁰⁹ In an interview, King reaffirmed this view, stating the vaccine was part of a depopulation effort.¹¹⁰ Action4Canada, another group involved in the FC, filed legal challenges against mask and vaccine mandates, in which they alleged that the Covid pandemic was designed by Bill Gates and the New World Order to inject people with 5G-enabled microchips, in order to track and control the population.¹¹¹ Despite these professed concerns with depopulation, anti-globalists generally endorsed herd-immunity policies that were premised on sacrificing weaker members of society.¹¹²

Claims about population replacement, in which the virus and the vaccine are portrayed as ‘bioweapons’ manufactured by global elites, however incredulous, are a recurring feature of conspiracist delegitimation across the far right. While they may appear irrational and paranoid, these ideas have emerged as a powerful political force. Indeed, they are part of a broader anti-globalist discourse concerning white genocide and civilisational crisis, visible across the political landscape – from Giorgia Meloni’s rhetoric to livestreamed mass shootings like the 2022 Buffalo attack, in which 10 African Americans were murdered in a massacre broadcast on Twitch. The deployment of familiar narratives about racial, gendered, and civilisational crises in anti-globalist movements suggests that conspiratorial beliefs are no longer confined to online trolls, contrarians, and ‘edgelords’ hiding behind the safety of their laptop screens. Instead, these views represent part of a larger movement to delegitimise the liberal international order, uniting various actors in a shared anti-globalist cause.¹¹³

Concluding discussion

This article has illustrated how conspiracist delegitimation mobilises the international to delegitimise the national through externalisation, personification, and Othering. In anti-globalist conspiracism, domestic issues are externalised onto the global stage in the delegitimation of national elites like Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and international institutions and agendas, such as the WEF and its Great Reset. Perhaps surprisingly, despite the racialised, gendered, and civilisational nature of anti-globalism, national governments are the primary targets of delegitimising strategies due to their central role as the perceived bulwarks against globalism. In Canada, as elsewhere, anti-globalist conspiracism calls for reclaiming national sovereignty from globalist forces and national elites compromised by international institutions and agendas.

¹⁰⁸Southern, ‘What is a globalist?’.

¹⁰⁹Jaela Bernstien, ‘Racist conspiracy theory unified white supremacists long before Buffalo, N.Y., shooting’, *CBC News* (20 May 2022).

¹¹⁰Fifth Estate, ‘Convoy organizer Pat King answers questions on racist videos, “catch a bullet” comment’, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96XjD2NkOUc&t=213s>.

¹¹¹Justin Ling, ‘5G and QAnon: How conspiracy theorists steered Canada’s anti-vaccine trucker protest’, *The Guardian* (8 February 2022).

¹¹²Sparke, ‘Reactionary anti-globalism’, p. 20.

¹¹³Bettiza et al., ‘Civilizationism and the ideological contestation of the liberal international order’, pp. 3–4.

The politics of personality that surrounded Trudeau undoubtedly contributed to his central role in the anti-globalist discourse that energised the Freedom Convoy. Yet our analysis suggests that Trudeau was at the centre of the conspiratorial narrative because of the complicated role of the nation-state, and liberal democracies, in anti-globalist conspiracism. As this article has demonstrated, Trudeau symbolises the perceived encroachment of international institutions on national sovereignty, a key grievance motivating anti-globalists across the world.

In the wake of the Freedom Convoy, anti-globalist conspiracism persists in Canadian politics. Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, in his bid to be prime minister, continues to engage with far-right groups and conspiratorial rhetoric, vowing that no cabinet minister in his government would attend the WEF¹¹⁴ and accusing Trudeau's cabinet of being influenced by global elites, stating that 'It's far past time we rejected the globalist Davos elites and bring home the common sense of the common people.'¹¹⁵ In an effort to outflank his far-right opponents, the People's Party of Canada, Poilievre sought to discredit its leader Maxine Bernier by tweeting about his past attendance of the WEF with a video that called him a 'grifter' and a 'liar'.¹¹⁶

Anti-globalist conspiracism is likely to remain a key mobilising force in international politics, even in contexts where the technocratic corridors of global elites seem distant and far removed from sites of local populist resistance. While currently fragmented, as the discourse of delegitimation around the FC suggests, these movements are uniting against a common enemy – global elites – and in the years to come, they will continue to direct their populist resentment towards the real and perceived global governors and figureheads of the liberal international order.

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¹¹⁴Aaron Wherry, 'Suddenly, the World Economic Forum is a ballot box issue in a Manitoba byelection', *CBC News* (17 June 2023).

¹¹⁵The Canadian Press, 'Poilievre's Conservative Party embracing language of mainstream conspiracy theories', *CBC News* (13 August 2023).

¹¹⁶Pierre Poilievre, 'Maxime Bernier lied to cover up his involvement in the World Economic Forum', *Twitter/X.com* (9 June 2023), available at: <https://twitter.com/PierrePoilievre/status/1667297943802507264?lang=en>.