From the holdings of the Department of Special Collections , Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ

These documents are either in the public domain, or can only be used for educational and research purposes (Fair use) as per U.S. Copyright law (text below). By accessing this file, all users agree that their use falls in the public domain or within fair use as defined by the copyrightlaw. We do not charge any permission or usage fees for the publication of images of material inour collections, including those provided by Princeton University Library, via our website, catalog, or directly from staff.For more information regarding copyright, credit, and citation please review the information onthe Copyright, Credit and Citation Guidelines page of our website.
https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/policies/copyright-credit-and-citation-guidelines. If you have any questions, including how to order higher-quality images from the collection, contact Special Collections Public Services via our Ask Us! Form. https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/ask-us

---

Doctoral Dissertations, 2011-2026 Sociology

2022

POST-TRUTH POLITICS AND CONTENTIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Maldonado, John Anthony

Princeton, NJ : Princeton University

---

http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp01794081389

U.S. Copyright law: The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, §108, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of fair use that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve a violation of copyright law. https://www.copyright.gov/title17/title17.pdf

POST-TRUTH POLITICS AND CONTENTIOUS KNOWLEDGE

JOHN MALDONADO

A DISSERTATION

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY

OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE BY

THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

ADVISER:
DR. PATRICIA FERNANDEZ-KELLY

SEPTEMBER 2022

© Copyright by John Maldonado, 2022. All rights reserved.

ABSTRACT

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries cited "post-truth" as their word of the year. Defining the adjective as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief," the term gained popularity following the EU referendum in the UK and the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Given the proliferation of mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories, post-truth was seemingly the perfect characterization of the current political moment. In this dissertation, I problematize that concept by suggesting that politics is inherently post-truth. That is, the legitimation of claims as truth is endogenous to the political process. I develop my argument in three empirical chapters. The first takes aim at post-truth as a periodizing concept by investigating competing knowledge claims concerning race and legislative battles throughout the 20th century. I show that contestation concerning the "facts" of race were central to public policy debates. The second chapter draws on fieldwork with COVID-19 skeptics in the "medical freedom" movement. These skeptics are routinely described as being motivated by a distrust of science, but I argue that dismissing such individuals as being "anti-science" is a mischaracterization. COVID-19 skeptics support and even valorize science but believe that the mainstream scientific consensus regarding the pandemic is itself unscientific. The final chapter provides a content analysis of an online community devoted to discussion of heterodox positions concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. While much of the discussion concerning online misinformation focuses heavily on the role played by technology, particularly algorithmic recommendation systems, I instead focus on how epistemic and interaction norms help explain the "stickiness" of misinformation (Tripodi, 2021). The primary contribution of the present work is to challenge the notion that society has fallen

from a formerly epistemically pure past by illustrating how conflict over “truth” and “facts” is not prior, but inherent to politics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present work would have been impossible without the guidance and support of those around me. Dr. Patricia Fernandez-Kelly has been a tireless advocate and source of support since my initial year of graduate school. My debt to her, both intellectually and personally, is substantial. Dr. Miguel Centeno has also been a source of near constant support throughout my time at Princeton, as he consistently affirmed the value of my contributions. Dr. Janet Vertesi provided an intellectual foundation to a then unfamiliar subfield that ended up forming the theoretical basis for the present work. This project would not have happened without the support of my three amazing committee members. I hope to emulate their generosity of spirit moving forward.

My dissertation has also benefited from the contributions of those within the larger academic community. The 2020/2021 cohort of fellows at the Berkman Klein Center for the Study of Internet and Society were an important source of inspiration in the early stages of this project. I've also benefited from intellectual exchange with those at the Center for Technology, Information, and Public Life at the University of North Carolina, particularly the far-right working group.

My fellow graduate students have been an enduring source of support and friendship throughout my time at Princeton. In particular, the friendship of Parijat Chakrabarti, Jean Nava, and Ryan Parsons has been indispensable in my journey. These three were always gracious enough to allow me to share my triumphs and vent my frustrations. Their friendship has been one of the greatest gifts I received as a graduate student.

Finally, I must extend a deep and abiding thank you to my beautiful wife, Belén Unzueta. A bottomless well of love and support, she graciously stood by my side through multiple crises

of confidence. My only hope is that I can return a fraction of the kindness she has extended to me.

CONTENTS

Introduction …….pg. 7

Chapter 1

Co-Production and the Science of Race …… pg. 20

Chapter 2

"Communism is the virus. COVID-19 is how it spreads"
Partisan Epistemology and the Medical Freedom Movement ……pg. 47

Chapter 4

"Welcome to the Other Side"
Digitally-Mediated Interaction Ritual Chains and
the Social Amplification of Misinformation ……...pg. 74

Conclusion ……. pg. 108

INTRODUCTION

Political extremism, mis/disinformation, and conspiracy theories have emerged as topics of concern among media commentators, policymakers, and academics. This intense interest grew out of the 2016 U.S. presidential election when Donald J. Trump managed to upset the heavily favored Hillary Clinton. The 2017 "Unite the Right" rally, the growing prominence of QAnon, widespread skepticism towards the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the storming of the U.S. Capitol in January 2021 served to heighten such interest. In response to those developments, various pundits began to claim that an epistemic rupture had occurred, as we purportedly entered a period of "post-truth" politics, where appeals to emotion and identity increasingly replaced facts and evidence (McIntyre, 2018).

The discussion of post-truth has occurred alongside rising concerns over so-called "online radicalization" into right-wing extremism. The story is a familiar one at this point. The proliferation of social media enables extremists to easily disseminate their ideas at scale, in a process aided by algorithmic recommendation systems. Such systems, to foster engagement, drive users towards contentious and emotionally provocative content and produce homogenous echo chambers where individuals rarely encounter information that challenges their pre-existing beliefs. The "algorithmic amplification" model privileges the role played by technology in community formation and information dissemination.

While there is utility in this argument, it also ignores the long history of white supremacy in the United States. As Jessie Daniels (2018) has argued, understanding "online radicalization" requires attending to both the technology being used, as well as broader historical context from which these phenomena emerge. As she writes, "The rise of the alt-right is both a continuation of

a centuries-old dimension of racism in the U.S. and part of an emerging media ecosystem powered by algorithms (Daniels, 2018, 62)."

Concern over online radicalization has occurred alongside a proliferation of recent scholarship focused on the grievances of white conservatives (Hochschild, 2016; Wuthnow, 2018; Kramer, 2016; Gest, 2016). The findings of this collection of work have proven remarkably robust as such authors consistently report the same general sentiment, namely, feelings of anger and dispossession over the perception that out of touch elites are catering to other groups (specifically individuals from various marginalized communities) to the detriment of white conservatives. As Benkler writes:

> Elites, responsible not only for enacting and legitimating liberalization and globalization on the economic side of governing but also cosmopolitanism and pluralism on the identity side, present a challenge to both parts of the economic nationalism of the new right. As such, elite institutions generally—not only professional media, but also academia, science, the professions, and civil servants and expert agencies—have come to serve as the active oppressive "other" of ethnonationalist politics (2019, Para. 23).

Feelings of dispossession have given rise to a revanchist discourse. I do not use the term revanchism to mean literal irredentist claims, but instead to signify a general sentiment that the country has been "stolen" by usurpers and must be reclaimed.

Distrust of elites has translated into distrust of institutions typically viewed as arbiters of knowledge, such as academia, media, and government agencies. However, I argue that post-truth politics as a periodizing concept fails. Conflict over knowledge claims is endemic to politics and not a novel development. A central insight from science and technology studies is how seemingly self-evident "truths" and "facts" are socially constructed (Knorr-Cetina, 2013). This is

not to suggest an absolute relativism, but instead an insight urging us to recognize that the legitimation of knowledge as such cannot be taken for granted.

In the following work, I ask how do facts and values intersect to shape the legitimation of truth as such? As I show, the rejection of traditional institutions of knowledge production should not be interpreted as a wholesale rejection of facts and truths, the reason being that the rejection of expertise is only the first part of the story. Alongside the repudiation of mainstream knowledge, individuals redirect their trust to alternative systems of knowledge. These alternative knowledge claims are typically described as mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories. But the veracity of those claims is irrelevant to the work at hand. As Saglam (2020) argues,

> [A] careful exploration of the everyday lives of conspiracy narratives is necessary, not because of their epistemological shortcomings, but because tracing their course across socialities reveals how they are implicated in the mundane forging of subjectivities and social groups, how they reconfigure the state and law in unexpected ways and how they engender societal violence through the circulation of 'imminent threats' from others (18).

Thus, rather than drawing on the language of misinformation and conspiracy theories, I instead refer to *contentious knowledge*. That is, alternative knowledge that is at odds with the prevailing expert consensus.

The Argument

Much of the extant work in this area either implicitly or explicitly frames right-wing extremism in terms reminiscent of "brainwashing." In this formulation, individuals are "vulnerable" or "susceptible" to false beliefs, which themselves are understood as akin to an infectious virus (Marwick, 2018). These arguments draw on long discredited views in which the

media acts as a "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle" that induces belief in passive and uncritical audiences (Munger and Phillips,2022). This view continues to be widespread despite being contradicted by empirical evidence dating back to the work of Katz and Lazarsfeld (2017) in the mid-20th century.

McDonald (2018) criticizes the "magic bullet" hypothesis and instead suggests that we recognize the active role that individuals play in the process. As he argues, the adoption of extremist beliefs is not the product of something "done to people," but is instead an active process of meaning-making and identity construction. This is a needed corrective to the brainwashing thesis that undergirds much of the scholarship on right-wing radicalization and post-truth politics, as it moves us beyond the deterministic "push" and "pull" models that typify much of this work.

Building on the insight of McDonald, I draw influence from Marwick's *sociotechnical model of media effects* (2018). In trying to explain why people share "fake news," Marwick underscores that it is not simply a function of algorithmic amplification generating online echo chambers. Nor is the sharing of "fake news" just an extension of pre-existing offline polarization migrating into the digital space. Rather, both are operating at the same time. The social and the technological are interlinked. As she writes, "a sociotechnical theory of media effects must examine actors, preferably taking an ethnographic approach to understanding cultural practice and group identity, and media, as both patterns of messages and sets of technological affordances which constrain or enable certain meanings and actions (Marwick, 2018, 488)."

In this case, the technological affordances of social media have allowed for the proliferation of contentious knowledge at odds with traditional institutions of knowledge production such as legacy media, academia, and government agencies. But contentious

knowledge is not randomly generated. Instead, it draws upon various U.S. cultural idioms such as an aversion to government intervention (framed as "socialism" or "communism") and skepticism towards international organizations ("globalism"). This shared cultural idiom serves as a source of both an affirmation of individual agency and the basis for shared community and understanding.

The present project contributes to discussions in science and technology studies, social movements, and the sociology of knowledge. From skepticism towards COVID-19 and climate change to protests over widespread voter fraud in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and critical race theory, contestation over knowledge claims is central to many of today's most pressing social issues. While often studied through the lens of mis/disinformation, I argue that we instead view alternative knowledge claims as part of a collective refutation providing means by which individuals can engage in what Tan (2021) calls *epistemic resistance*. What makes the cases presented in this work unique is that these knowledge claims are not emerging from marginalized groups in service of social change. Instead, a largely dominant group is forwarding knowledge claims aimed at the preservation of the existing social structure.

Content Outline

In Chapter 1, I focus on the antecedents of the present political moment. As a concept, "post-truth" gained purchase in public discourse following the successful "Vote Leave" campaign in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. As such, post-truth is a periodizing concept, suggesting a fundamental change in the relationship between veracity and politics. That is, post-truth implies a departure from a world premised on widespread agreement over the "facts." I call this assumption into question by focusing on two

periods in U.S. history when the science of racial difference was at the center of public policy debates.

I begin with the Progressive Era. During that period, increased immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe and declining fertility rates among native-born U.S. women gave rise to increasing concerns about "race suicide." Such demographic concerns played a critical role in shaping immigration discourse, ushering in calls for preserving the "historical stock" of the nation. This call was ultimately realized with the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act.

I then turn my attention to the Civil Rights Era and concerns over desegregation and "race-mixing." While some challenged the civil rights movement based on states' rights, others such as Carleton Putnam (1961) viewed the period's contestation explicitly through the lens of race. In doing so, Putnam and his contemporaries framed desegregation as an existential threat to the continued existence of the white race.

While concerns over racial purity and demographics were prominent throughout this period, it was also accompanied by contestation over the science of race. Scientific racism had long bolstered white supremacy, but would begin to be challenged in the early 20th century, as Franz Boas and his students began to dismantle biological understandings of race and plant the seeds for a constructivist view of race that typifies the current scientific consensus.

Both periods saw a pronounced and critical response to the work of anthropologist Franz Boas and his students. As an early critic of biological understandings of race, Boas played a significant role in transforming the science of racial difference. From Madison Grant (1916), Thomas Pearce Bailey (1914), and their fellow eugenicists to Carleton Putnam, Boas was presented as an ideologue who appropriated the mantle of science to subvert society. The fact that Franz Boas was Jewish suffused those criticisms with anti-Semitism. Moreover, the criticism

of Boas and his colleagues increasingly took on a conspiratorial tone. Rather than simply promulgating what his critics saw as inaccurate views regarding race, Boas was increasingly presented as acting to undermine society. In the words of the prominent eugenicist Madison Grant, Boas was involved in an "anti-Nordic conspiracy (quoted in Spiro, 2002, 47)."

Critically, the debates concerning the science of racial difference were not simply disagreements over truth and facts. Instead, the debate touched on deeper questions about how society should be organized. The relationship between race science and public policy is a paradigmatic example of "co-production" (Jasanoff, 2004). As Jasanoff writes,

> Co-production is shorthand for the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it. Knowledge and its material embodiments are at once products of social work and constitutive of forms of social life (2004, 2).

Rather than "truth" and "facts" being prior to politics, the concept of co-production highlights the deep entanglement of knowledge and politics. The concept of post-truth obscures this relationship by suggesting the existence of a realm of objectivity or accuracy distinct from the realm of politics.

In Chapter 2 I draw attention to a major instance illustrating knowledge co-production and appropriation. The COVID-19 pandemic saw the introduction of various measures to contain the spread of the virus, including the closure of non-essential businesses, the imposition of mask mandates, and the introduction of virtual learning in educational institutions. These measures were met with vocal opposition in the form of "medical freedom" protests. Chapter 2 draws on ethnographic work I conducted while attending some of those rallies.

While such public demonstrations are often portrayed as simply a consequence of "anti-science" attitudes, I argue that is a mischaracterization. Rather than framing the conflict over pandemic mitigation efforts as evidence of divisions between anti and pro-science forces, we should instead recognize it as part of a contest over who can legitimately claim the mantle of science. Medical freedom advocates trust and valorize science but draw a clear distinction between science as a procedure for knowledge production and science as an institution represented by government agencies and research universities (Lee et al., 2021, Tripodi, 2021).

The rejection of the mainstream scientific consensus among the COVID-19 skeptics in the medical freedom movement was not a naïve rejection of science. Instead, my informants offered sophisticated arguments concerning how orthodox interpretations of the pandemic were themselves unscientific. In the most general terms, medical freedom advocates argued that political bias and elite greed had intruded into the scientific process. Consequently, the pronouncements of public health agencies such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) were not to be trusted.

The rejection of the scientific consensus regarding COVID-19 is only half of the story though, as those within the medical freedom movement forwarded their own knowledge claims. While often dismissed as conspiracy theories and misinformation, I take these claims as reflective of what Fischer calls "socio-cultural reason." (2019, 139) As Fischer writes, "the socio-cultural reason of the citizen and society generally is experientially geared to social and cultural interactions grounded in particular social and political contexts rather than decontextualized technical calculations (2019, 139)." That is, rather than simply interpreting facts in a transparent fashion, facts are instead interpreted through the lens of identity and values. My informants interpreted the pronouncements of public officials through a socio-cultural lens

that was extremely distrustful of elites and a scientific community that they saw as holding values antithetical to their own. Addressing a pandemic calls for greater government action and increased international coordination, both of which are at odds with conservatism. Consequently, my informants felt a deep obligation to resist complying with public health guidelines.

The broader narrative of the medical freedom movement took the form of the *Republican jeremiad*, As Butter and Reinkowski (2014:19) put it, "a blend of the jeremiad, the narrative mode in which the Puritans expressed their fear of declension and republican concerns about corruption They further argue that this narrative form typifies U.S. conspiracy theories and attribute its persistence to three factors; an individualist epistemology of cause and effect that is averse to structural explanations in favor of individual agency, a persistent fear that the Republic is under siege, and the influence of Puritanism, particularly the Manichean worldview it fosters. The republican jeremiad provided a narrative template for my informants to make sense of the pandemic. Namely, that public health measures were an existential threat to liberty and the U.S. republic.

The broader conflict over the response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the tension between governance and expertise. As Giddens (1990) has argued, a defining feature of modernity is what he calls *disembedding*, where people's lives are increasingly influenced by events and decisions occurring in locations far removed from their daily life. This process leads to increased dependence on *systems of expertise*. The proliferation of technocratic governance has been part and parcel of this process. At the same time, this dependence generates conditions of opacity as no single individual can possibly have insight into all the systems of expertise that govern their life.

Chapter 3 offers a content analysis of online narratives. While rejecting the technological determinism that typifies much of the work concerning misinformation, technology remains deeply enmeshed in these processes. But this is not simply a story of recommendation algorithms confining people into echo chambers. Instead, we must recognize that people self-select into communities, above and beyond whatever technological nudging is occurring (Forberg, 2022). Moreover, a strict focus on algorithmic recommendation obscures how epistemic and interactional norms influence the "stickiness" of misinformation (Tripodi, 2021).

Drawing on digital ethnographic data from r/NoNewNormal, an online community organized around skepticism towards the mainstream scientific consensus concerning COVID-19, I update Randall Collins' (2004) ambitious interaction ritual chains [IRC] framework for the digital age. Developed over the course of more than two decades, Collins provides a model of human action by way of a radical microsociology that builds on the work of Durkheim and Goffman.

Collins is ultimately interested in understanding the source of social solidarity. In offering an explanation, he suggests (borrowing from Goffman) that social life is composed of a series of interaction rituals, and it is through these rituals that individuals construct solidarity, meaning, and identity. As he writes, "rituals are constructed from a combination of ingredients that grow to differing levels of intensity, and result in the ritual outcomes of solidarity, symbolism, and individual emotional energy (Collins, 2004, 47)."

Collins' full elaboration of this theory was offered in the eponymous, *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Given that he takes *the situation* as the unit of analysis, he is primarily interested in face-to-face communication, going so far as to suggest that online exchanges would not generate

enough emotional energy to produce successful interaction rituals. He attributes this to the primarily text-based and often asynchronous nature of online contact.

Interaction Ritual Chains was initially published in 2004, the same year that Facebook launched and one year before the founding of YouTube. In other words, Collins' work appeared just as a major sea change would happen in online communication. No longer was digital life simply text-based, as social media allowed individuals to share audiovisual content quite easily. Considering these changes, I argue that Collins' theory requires further elaboration due to the proliferation of social media.

In this chapter, I draw upon the IRC framework to argue that the singular focus on algorithmic amplification ignores other social dynamics shaping the resonance of heterodox knowledge, namely shared epistemic and interaction norms. The observed community did not function solely as a forum for sharing information. Instead, significant discussion centered around offering emotional support to other users as said users resisted complying with public health measures and faced sanction in their personal and professional lives. In this sense, the community did not differ markedly from online forums devoted to helping people cope with physical/mental illness.

Starbird et al. (2019) argue that disinformation is a type of collaborative work that exploits the participatory culture of the internet. They draw particular attention to emergent forms of conspiracy theorizing that happen in the absence of any top-down directive. As Starbird et al. write:

> Their conspiracy theorizing about crisis events is not controlled by an outside actor or group. Instead, it emerges "organically" through the activities of group members who have come to share an epistemology that views world events as controlled by powerful,

> sinister actors and "mainstream" media as co-conspirators that help to hide that truth. This group does not wait for an external disinformation agent to give them the signal to start theorizing. Instead, each new event becomes interpreted through the same lens, and becomes a catalyst for another round of conspiracy theorizing (2019, 15).

In this sense, communities organized around misinformation draw upon the same participatory culture that has animated other digitally native movements.

This chapter builds on a nascent literature that looks to update the interaction ritual chains framework for the digital age (DiMaggio et al., 2018; Jodén and Strandell, 2021; Maloney, 2013). Much of the extant work begins by asking *if* the types of interaction rituals described by Collins occur online. I argue that existing work has affirmed that such interactions do occur online and that scholars should focus greater attention on explaining precisely *how* they occur. Indeed, as our lives grow ever more mediated, understanding the microsociology of online interaction is more important than ever.

In the final chapter, I conclude that conflicts over knowledge are at the heart of many current public policy debates. As Jasanoff writes:

> Contemporary societies are constituted as knowledge societies […] important aspects of political behaviour and action cluster around the ways in which knowledge is generated, disputed, and used to underwrite collective decisions. It is no longer possible to deal with such staple concepts of democratic theory as citizenship or deliberation or accountability without delving into their interaction with the dynamics of knowledge creation and use (2005, 6).

The realm of truth and the realm of politics overlap with another, as the legitimation of knowledge is itself political. The recognition of this mutually constitutive relationship troubles

the concept of post-truth, as the latter assumes an ideal where reality and facts exist prior to politics. Instead, we must recognize that conflicts over knowledge *are* also political conflicts.

But if knowledge and politics are intimately coupled, are the "crisis of expertise" and declining institutional trust intractable problems? How can we realistically expect expertise to guide public policy if expert authority is simply politics by other means? These are among the most pressing problems in contemporary governance. While addressing this seemingly ineluctable challenge is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I do offer a tentative suggestion concerning public messaging that builds upon the insight of Hilgartner and his colleagues (2021).

As Hilgartner et al. write, "the 'anti-science' label conflates normative dissent about which values matter with epistemic dissent on matters of fact. It corrodes democracy and risks producing dissidents with contempt for experts. Instead of admonishing people to buy the science, we need a more robust politics of persuasion that requires experts to publicly address the competing values and interests at stake in setting policy agendas (2021, 893)." As with the ongoing conflict over climate change, public policy concerning the COVID-19 pandemic presents a conflict between individual liberty and collective well-being. Governance across policy domains often concerns how to balance such competing values.

But as we saw throughout the pandemic, normative questions were largely absent from declarations of public health officials. Indeed, pandemic mitigation measures were instituted in a decidedly anti-democratic fashion. Consequently, the policy conflict fed into pre-existing political polarization, exacerbating it. Rebuilding trust in expertise demands a more transparent discussion of how seemingly technical decisions almost inevitably involve normative considerations. Dismissing such normative considerations as the irrational province of the "anti-

scientific" does not bolster the cultural authority of experts (Jasanoff, 2020). On the contrary, it undermines it.

CHAPTER 1

Co-production and the Science of Racial Difference

The 20th century saw a transformation in the scientific understanding of race. In the early 1900s, biological explanations for racial differences were dominant. The racial orthodoxy would be challenged throughout the century, until a new scientific consensus emerged that rejected the essentialism of earlier race science and instead took a constructivist view that emphasized the role of environment and culture rather than genetics in shaping human difference. This transformation did not occur in a vacuum. Across the 20th century, debates about the nature of race were central to various public policy disputes including national immigration policy and desegregation in the U.S. South.

The science of race came to the fore during periods where demographic and policy changes threatened the existing racial order. As with many disputes ostensibly concerned with matters of fact, the debate involving the science of race was inherently value laden. The preservation of the essentialized and biological view of race was critical to the maintenance of the existing racial hierarchy. In other words, the relationship between scientific racism and the prevailing racial hierarchy is an example of what science and technology scholars refer to as co-production. As Jasanoff writes, "co-production is shorthand for the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it. Knowledge and its material embodiments are at once products of social work and constitutive of forms of social life (2004, 2)." A corollary is that challenges to scientific knowledge are also challenges to societal organization.

In this chapter I focus on two periods in U.S. history where contestation over the science of race played a key role in public policy; the Progressive Era and the Civil Rights Era. Both

periods saw the emergence of an anxiety-ridden discourse around demographic change premised on the prospect of racial replacement and amalgamation. During the former period, increased immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, alongside declining fertility among native-born women (relative to foreign-born women) gave rise to demographic anxiety among the WASP elite. A collection of work emerged during this period warning that demographic changes would have ruinous consequences for U.S. society. In response, proposals to restrict immigration were forwarded, ultimately culminating in the 1924 Immigration Act. Various "scientific" texts were cited in support of that legislation. At the same time, a newly emerging paradigm in anthropology that looked towards environmental and cultural (rather than hereditary) explanations for human difference began to challenge the then dominant conceptualization of race.

A similar contestation over knowledge claims played out during the Civil Rights Era. Here I focus specifically on the writings of Carleton Putnam. A self-identified "Yankee," Putnam was a public critic of the policies of the Warren Court regarding challenging de jure segregation in the U.S. South. But unlike some his contemporaries, he did not express his opposition by appealing to states' rights. Instead, Putnam framed the issue in explicitly racial terms. In his view, desegregation would lead to racial amalgamation and as those who came before him argued, this would surely lead to national ruin. In forwarding his claims, Putnam took issue with the work of Franz Boas and other "equalitarians."

As Gieryn writes, "Representations of science—where it is, and where it is not—have less to do with the cultural realities they supposedly depict, and more to do with the cultural realities they sustain (2022, xii)." That is, the designation of some claims as scientific is a constitutive element of social life and serves to legitimize some forms of social organization and

not others. The changing relationship between science and race provides an illustrative example, as much of the debate during the two periods concerned the validity of conflicting scientific claims. Such debates are endemic to science. As Gieryn argues, *boundary work* is part of the cultural repertoire of scientists (1983). In efforts to extend or preserve authority, scientists rely on various rhetorical techniques to draw a distinction between science and other forms of knowledge. Part of this rhetorical strategy is to construct an image of scientific knowledge completely divorced from normative commitments and bias and to challenge competing claims by suggesting such claims have been tainted by worldly concerns.

"Race Suicide" in the Progressive Era

The Progressive Era in US history saw a consolidation of white existential anxiety as both scientific racism and the nascent field of genetics increasingly informed understandings of human difference and gave rise to the eugenics movement. At the same time, increased immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe was giving rise to growing nativism and xenophobia, particularly among Anglo-Saxons in New England. This was further exacerbated by concerns over the relative fertility of native-born women relative to foreign-born arrivals. It is from this nexus of demographic transition and hereditary understanding of human difference that a broad narrative of racial extinction emerged.

The first form of white existential anxiety to emerge during this period focused largely on differences in fertility between native and foreign-born women and gave rise to the expression "race suicide." The phrase, coined by sociologist Edward A. Ross in 1901, was meant to imply that relatively low fertility rates among the native-born population of the United States was tantamount to collective self-eradication. In an address titled *The Causes of Race Superiority*, Ross commented on the rising standard of living experienced by native-born whites, noting that

"the superior race" had experienced declines in fertility as a result. He then forwarded a hypothetical situation in which "the lesser races" would continue to improve their standard of living without a concomitant reduction in fertility rates. As Ross puts it, "For a case like this I can find no words so apt as "race suicide." There is no bloodshed, no violence, no assault of the race that waxes upon the race that wanes. The higher race quietly and unmurmuringly eliminates itself rather than endure individually the bitter competition it has to ward off from itself by collective action (1901, 88). That address, given at the Fifth Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, was a prelude to a much larger discussion that would emerge in the early decades of the 20th century.

The concept of race suicide would find a prominent advocate in President Theodore Roosevelt. As Roosevelt stated in a 1905 speech before the National Congress of Mothers:

> […] if the average family in which there are children contained but two children the nation as a whole would decrease in population so rapidly that in two or three generations it would very deservedly be on the point of extinction, so that the people who had acted on this base and selfish doctrine would be giving place to others with braver and more robust ideals. Nor would such a result be in any way regrettable; for a race that practiced such doctrine—that is, a race that practiced race suicide—would thereby conclusively show that it was unfit to exist, and that it had better give place to people who had not forgotten the primary laws of their being (The American Presidency Project, n.d.).

While not explicitly acknowledged here, gender and the politics of reproduction were viewed against the backdrop of the increased presence of non-traditional European immigrants. Of particular interest during this period was the question of women in higher education and the potential demographic consequences of their behavior. The Progressive Era saw an increase of

women in colleges and universities but also a forceful backlash against that trend. As Palmieri (2007:246) writes, “Many male educators and doctors viewed the lengthening lines of candidates in the secondary schools [sic] with alarm. They believed the women’s colleges were ‘institutions for the promotion of celibacy,’ producing a disappearing class of intellectual women who were not marrying and hence were committing race suicide.

The changing demographic composition of higher education prompted vigorous debate, both within the political and academic spheres. As Charles Emerick, writing for *Political Science Quarterly*, stated, “The fear of overpopulation, entertained by Malthus, has yielded to the fear of race suicide. Exclusive of immigration, the population of France is little more than holding its own, and the old-time families of Massachusetts appear to be on the road to extinction. Birth rates are falling in England, in far-away Australasia [sic] and in practically every country where the influences of modern civilization are at work (1909, 269).” Emerick goes on to provide reams of statistical evidence before putting forward the argument that demonstrating a causal link between higher education and fertility rates was impossible with the existing data. However, not all scholars would exhibit such a measured view as Emerick’s. For others, the relationship between women in higher education and fertility rates fueled alarmist fears that these developments were detrimental to the “founding stock” of the nation. For example, a 1915 article by Professor Robert Sprague titled *Education and Race Suicide: Women’s Colleges Have Heavy Responsibility for Disappearance of Old American Stock in the United States—Reforms That Are Needed*, was unequivocal in its denunciation of women in higher education. As Dr. Sprague writes, “Home making and child rearing is the greatest job of life and calls for every resource of brain, hand and heart; anything which detracts from their normal development is an evil, because

nothing can substitute for them in importance (1915, 159)." He then concludes his brief article with various pro-natal policy suggestions.

Moreover, the uses of race suicide were myriad. For example, Christine Terhune Herrick, in the *North American Review*, used that idea to make an economic argument. As she argued, declining birthrates were themselves an adaptation to economic challenges. She concluded, "from the depths of an unscientific and child-loving heart I pray that those who condemn race suicide and cry shame upon American small families would set their big brains to work to check or reduce the increased cost of living and make possible again the large families of the earlier days of the Republic (Herrick, 1907, 412)."

This debate would continue throughout the Progressive Era. But as previously indicated, greater female enrollment in higher education was not the sole driver of demographic anxiety. The issue of increased migration from both Southern and Eastern Europe provided the backdrop against which much of this conversation occurred, igniting a powerful nativist backlash.

In a 1921 article published in Good Housekeeping, titled *Whose country is this?*, President Coolidge wrote, "There are racial considerations too grave to be brushed aside for any sentimental reasons. Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides. Quality of mind and body suggests that observance of ethnic law is as great a necessity to a nation as immigration law (1921, 13-14)."[1]

Political mobilization emerged in response to the perceived threat of racial comingling, as efforts were made to institute legislation to staunch the flow of immigration. One of the more significant political organizations to emerge in of that period was the Boston-based Immigration

[1] Similar concerns were voiced by Alexander Graham Bell, who in 1920 released an article citing the fertility of immigrants relative to the native-born population.

Restriction League (IRL). Despite never numbering more than 30 members, the small organization wielded an outsized influence on immigration policy (Lavery, 2016). This influence likely stemmed from the elite status of its members. Founded by three Harvard College graduates, the League was representative of Boston Brahmins. As Lavery notes, "Fundamental to the distrust of cultural or biological heterogeneity was the ostensible erosion of the native New Englanders' political, social and economic dominance – the apparent loss of Anglo-Saxon hegemony (2016, 60)." Thus, rather than merely a racial fear, the anxieties of the League were also a reflection of class anxieties. Two figures associated with the IRL would come to issue the most historically significant warnings about the coming threat faced by the white race.

Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard: Prophets of White Extinction

Two figures emerged during this period that had perhaps the most significant impact on the development of the white racial extinction narrative; Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard. The two men shared much in common. Both hailed from the Northeast United States and were educated in Ivy League institutions. Moreover, both men were avid eugenicists and active in anti-immigration politics. Indeed, Grant at one time served as the vice president of the Immigration Restriction League. Finally, both authored books that presented clear expressions of demographic anxieties that would come to influence the immigration debates of the day.

Grant's major work, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, The Racial Basis of European History* was published in 1916. In this work, Grant provides his position on various political issues of the day, particularly regarding democracy and universal suffrage. He also provides a reading of European history through the lens of his theory of race in which Nordics, Alpines, and Mediterraneans form the three subtypes of the European race.

Throughout *The Passing of the Great Race*, one finds an acute hostility towards majoritarian democracy.[2] As Grant writes, "the tendency in a democracy is towards a standardization of type and a diminution of the influence of genius. A majority must of necessity be inferior to a picked minority, and it always resents specializations in which it cannot share. In the French Revolution the majority, calling itself "the People," deliberately endeavors to destroy the higher type, and something of the same sort was, in a measure, done after the American Revolution by the expulsion of the Loyalists and the confiscation of their lands (1916, 5-6)." This general opposition to basic democratic principles continues as he notes, "there exists today a widespread and fatuous belief in the power of environment, as well as of education and opportunity to alter heredity, which arises from the dogma of the brotherhood of man, derived in turn from the loose thinkers of the French Revolution and their American mimics (Grant, 1916, 16)."

While Grant's work was well received at the time, he was not met without criticism. Anthropologist Franz Boas stands out as perhaps his most notable critic. In a review article titled, *Inventing a Great Race*, Boas excoriated Grant's work as sloppy and factually incorrect. As he writes, "the supposed scientific data on which the author's conclusions are based are dogmatic assumptions which cannot endure criticism (Boas, 1917, 305)." Boas' critique is reflective of his larger intellectual project, which moved away from biological understandings of race. As such, his ideas were directly at odds with those of Grant. The intellectual differences between Grant

[2] Grant would forward a similar argument in 1919, when he published a brief article in the Journal of Heredity responding to another article published the prior year titled "Democracy and the Accepted Facts of Heredity: A Biological View of Government." The initial article, by Alleyne Ireland, is largely a critique of majoritarian democracy and universal suffrage. Arguing that the latter are increasingly viewed by the masses as a laudable end goal, Ireland suggests quite the opposite. As he writes, "The broadest generalization which my observation justifies—the one subject to the fewest exceptions—is that the best governed countries were those in which the mass of the people had the least control over the administration of public affairs. By "best governed" I mean best provided with internal peace, with justice, with honest and competent officials, with protection for life, property, with freedom of individual action; with arrangements for promoting the general welfare." Grant's article was largely him offering praise for Ireland's contribution.

and Boas would eventually play a significant role in the early history of anthropology. They would also set the stage for what would later take on the tone of a full-fledged conspiracy, as Boas' critics sought to portray him as a political ideologue who had "brainwashed" his students through the capture of U.S. anthropology. [3]

The antagonism between Grant and Boas was reflective of larger antagonisms that would gain strength throughout the 20th century. As Jackson writes, "First, they split intellectually on the reality of race and racial differences. Second, they split ideologically, with Grant representing cultural purity and Boas championing a pluralistic egalitarianism. Third, they split professionally, with Grant representing the nineteenth century gentleman naturalist and Boas representing the newer generation of professional scientists with academic credentials and affiliations (2005, 25)." The rivalry between the two men would later play out as the two men played key roles in establishing organizations, both of which claimed to have the correct approach to the study of humanity.

The Passing of the Great Race is Grant's most well-known work, but he wrote extensively on various political and social issues of the day, always through the lens of race, heredity, and biology. In his 1924 article, *The Racial Transformation of America*, he offered his position on the immigration debate of the day. The themes of the brief essay are familiar ones. He looks askance towards the capacity of new immigrants to assimilate, while expressing concerns over immigrant fertility. In particular, he notes the demographic shift that the United States had experienced between its founding and the early 20th century. But his ultimate concern, as is always central to the white extinction narrative, is the question of racial purity. As he writes,

[3] In a letter to naturalist and former president of the American Museum of Natural History, Henry Fairfield Osborne, Grant wrote, "There is no doubt that there is an organized anti-Nordic conspiracy," to which Osborn responded, "There is undoubtedly a conspiracy of the radicals against the whole Nordic and racial theory."

"One thing is certain, that while native Americans have not intermarried to any great extent with the newcomers, nevertheless within the long run such intermixture will take place. Social and legal restrictions of miscegenation will postpone the evil day, but eventually where two races live side by side they will amalgamate (Grant, 1924, 352)." Again and again, the fear of racial admixture is the primary driver of white existential anxieties.

Alongside Grant, Lothrop Stoddard was the most significant prophet of white extinction. His best-known work, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*, is not too dissimilar from Grant's work, which Stoddard cites throughout. In fact, Grant himself wrote the introduction to the first edition of Stoddard's book. There Grant writes, "Democratic ideals among an [sic] homogeneous population of Nordic blood, as in England or America, is one thing, but it is quite another for the white man to share his blood with, or intrust [sic] his ideals to, brown, yellow, black, or red men. This is suicide pure and simple, and the first victim of this amazing folly will be the white man himself (1920, xxxii)."

Stoddard begins *The Rising Tide* by informing the reader of white political dominance across the globe. This basic political observation prompts him to ask a rhetorical question; why write a book about the rising threat to white supremacy when much of the world was under white control? As he writes, "The answer is: the dangerous delusion created by viewing world affairs solely from the angle of politics. The late war has taught many lessons as to the unstable and transitory character of even the most imposing political phenomena, while a better reading of history must bring home the truth that the basic factor in human affairs is not politics, but race (Stoddard, 1920, 4)." As with Gobineau, Grant, and Bailey before him, Stoddard viewed race as the major engine of history.

Three historical events had a significant impact on Stoddard's writing. The first event was the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Stoddard and others viewed the Japanese victory as highly symbolic. As Stoddard writes, "The Russo-Japanese War is one of those landmarks in human history whose significance increases with the lapse of time. That war was momentous, not only for what it did, but even more for what it revealed. The legend of white invincibility was shattered, the veil of prestige that draped white civilization was torn aside, and the white world's manifold ills were laid bare for candid examination (1920, 154)." The fact that a non-white nation was able to best a white nation was a portent of a perilous future.

The second major influence on Stoddard's writing was World War 1, which he viewed as highly detrimental to white solidarity and by extension, to the continued dominance of whites. Despite centuries of warfare internal to Europe, Stoddard maintained that the white race was defined by a fundamental solidarity. As such, he was particularly disheartened by what the first World War would mean for the future of global European dominance.

Finally, and most significantly, the third major historical event to weigh on Stoddard's mind was the 1917 Russian Revolution. Published just three years later, Stoddard warned of the danger presented by "Bolshevism." As he writes,

> Bolshevism is, in fact, as anti-racial as it is anti-social. To the Bolshevik mind, with its furious hatred of constructive ability and its fanatical determination to enforce leveling, proletarian equality, the very existence of superior biological values is a crime. Bolshevism has vowed the proletarianization of the world, beginning with the white peoples. To this end it not only foments social revolution within the white world itself, but it also seeks to enlist the colored races in its grand assault on civilization (1920, 220).

The fear of communism, like the issue of women in higher education discussed above, must be situated against the backdrop of new immigration. As Ludmerer (1972) writes, "most of the truly radical movements in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were populated largely by recent immigrants (64)." Thus, the new arrivals not only represented demographic change but also potentially revolutionary social upheaval.

Taken together, Stoddard viewed these three historical events as a critical reminder for members of the white race to band together and protect themselves against the "rising tide of color." Antisemitism was also involved in the same narrative. Echoing the concept of "judeo-bolshevism" emerging in Europe at the time, Stoddard viewed communism as a largely "Semitic" movement. This distrust of communism and framing it in explicitly racial terms would cast a long shadow on the white supremacist movement. As we will see in the next section, communism would routinely be invoked as a threat to the racial integrity of whites.

While best remembered for *The Rising Tide of Color Against White Supremacy*, this was not Stoddard's only foray into the question of the future of the white race. In 1921, he published an article titled, *The Japanese Question in California*, in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. In this article Stoddard takes the position that Japanese immigration is emblematic of the larger question of "Asiatic" immigration into the United States. As he writes, "Relatively insignificant in numbers, [white people] see themselves menaced by countless hordes of colored men threatening them with the destruction of their living standards, with numerical submersion, with social sterilization, and with ultimate racial extinction (Stoddard, 1921, 42)." This article is largely an extension of the positions forwarded in *The Rising Tide*, as he views the greatest threat to continued white dominance to be the Asian population.

While Grant and Stoddard were two of the most prominent critics of racial amalgamation, they were not alone. Thomas Pearce Bailey's *Race Orthodoxy in the South* (1914) provided a more "genteel" articulation of demographic anxiety. He deplored slavery but believed that people of African descent could not be incorporated into American society through marriage without diluting the superior race's biological endowment. Only through separation would it be possible for white people to retain their purity and for blacks to attain their own legitimate albeit inferior status.

As with his contemporaries, Grant and Stoddard, Bailey was at odds with the work of Franz Boas and the emerging school of social/cultural anthropology. But what distinguishes Bailey is the degree to which he engaged with the Boas' work. He devotes an entire chapter of his 1914 work to a discussion of Boas' *The Mind of Primitive Man*. While lauding Boas' scientific approach to the study of race, he remained deeply skeptical of the prospect of racial equality and even more so of the end of racial antipathy. As he writes:

> Should science show, in spite of the reasonable presumption to the contrary, that the absorption of the negroes within the white population could produce no serious consequences, it may be, nevertheless, that impartial science will come to see the inadvisability of having race-friction continue for a long period of years because of a tenacious race-consciousness based on aesthetic distaste, economic competition, growing "psychological dislike," and perhaps other factors that may be pointed out by an investigation (Bailey, 2014, 228).

While nominally open to emerging voices in the science of race, Bailey remained wed to the conviction that racial intermingling would be ruinous for the white race.

The 1924 Immigration Act

The extinction narrative was not simply an intellectual dalliance. It undergirded a broader public policy discussion concerning immigration. This was most evident in the congressional debate concerning the 1924 Immigration Act, which sought to revise the quota system introduced in the 1921 Emergency Quota Act. The 1921 legislation established an immigration quota limit pegged at 3 percent of a sending country's foreign-born population present in the U.S. in the 1910 census. The 1924 Act sought to (and did) reduce the quota limit to 2 percent of a sending country's foreign-born population in the 1890 census. The logic behind this change was to preserve the racial/ethnic makeup of the United States in the face of the growing presence of those "Others" of Europe; Eastern and Southern Europeans (often Catholic or Jewish).

Nordicism, the racial theory supported by individuals such as Grant and Stoddard, was drawn upon as a justification for this legislation. As Representative Albert Johnson, sponsor of the 1924 Immigration Act would state before Congress, "In concluding I want to commend to all those interested in the racial and political aspects of the questions two epoch-making books by Dr. Lothrop Stoddard entitled "The Rising Tide of Color" and "The Revolt Against Civilization," an equally important book by Madison Grant entitled "The Passing of the Great Race," and a most illuminating monograph, just off the Putnam press, by Daniel Chauncey Brewer, entitled "The Peril of the Republic"(67 Cong. Rec. 12065, 1922)" Johnson would go on to cite other works he viewed as indispensable, before remarking, "No one concerned about the future of this Republic with any knowledge of the subtle "boring from within" that has been increasing from foreign sources year by year can afford to ignore the warnings contained in the books I have mentioned. (67 Cong. Rec. 12065, 1922)."

While the theory of Nordicism was deployed to bolster support for immigration restriction, it did not go unchallenged. For example, the Ohio Congressman Charles A. Mooney

was one the most vocal critics of the "Nordic" theory presented by Grant and his contemporaries. As he stated:

> How rapidly a falsehood will spread, particularly if malicious tongues are busily engaged in the godless work. Suddenly, a new word made its way into the English language—"Nordic," "Nordic," "Nordic,"—everywhere you turned. There is not a fifth-rate extension lecturer who does not speak of it with scientific exactness […] But suppose for the sake of argument, there is such as a race as the "Nordic." Has its superiority been established? Has the superiority of any race been established? It is a thing of common knowledge among ethnologists and anthropologists that this talk of racial superiority is largely verbiage (68 Cong. Rec. 5910, 1924).

Here we observe the influence of the newly emerging paradigm of cultural anthropology that embraced cultural relativism and eschewed the hierarchal thinking that typified the Nordic racial theory.

In 1924, New York Senator Copeland had a statement from Rev. Dr. Abram Simon entered into the congressional record. The statement, entitled "Let Us Understand Each Other" had been presented by Simon weeks earlier before the Washington Hebrew Congregation. Simon suggests:

> After you have finished reading the half-baked scientific theories of Madison Grant and Stoddard and Miss Atherton, and are surfeited with the intellectual and racial superiority of this new fictitious race [i.e., Nordic] that never was on or sea, please read a calmly written but scientifically accurate book entitled "The Racial History of Man," by Roland B. Nixon [sic], of Harvard University (68 Cong. Rec. 8009, 1924).

Simon misspoke, as he was actually referring to the work of Dr. Roland B. Dixon, an anthropologist. In his work *The Racial History of Man*, Dixon called into question the existence of a "pure" Nordic race. Ironically, while he was a critic of the Nordic racial theory, Boas and some his contemporaries critiqued Dixon for reproducing methods reliant on various forms of anatomical measurement to forward his argument.

These issues of expertise and who could lay claim to having the science on their side surfaced throughout the debate concerning immigration reform. In raising the issue of expertise, Congressman Celler asked his colleagues:

> Why did not the committee call Ernest Hooten, professor of anthropology, Harvard University; or Franz Boaz [sic], professor of anthropology at Columbia University; or Robert Bennett Bean, of the University of Virginia; or Prof. A.E. Jenks, of the University of Minnesota, who is also chairman of the division of anthropology and psychology of the National Research Council, Washington, D.C.; or Prof. George Grant McCurdy; of Yale? Any one or all of these scientists would have gladly come before the committee. No; the committee only wanted those who believed in "Nordic" superiority; men who deal in buncombe, like Grant and Stoddard (68 Cong. Rec. 5910, 1924).

Celler attributed the same ideological blinders to his opponents as Grant and Stoddard did to Boas.

Democrat Congressman Samuel Dickstein offered further criticism of the proposed bill and the Nordic theory that underpinned it. Dickstein submitted an article from Johan J. Smertenko, a professor of journalism at Grinnell College into the congressional record. Smertenko's article offered a robust assault against the Nordic theory and its promulgators such as Grant and Stoddard. As he writes:

> It is significant that the authors of these publications devoted to self-admiration exhibit similar mental characteristics and qualifications and employ the same technique in setting down their dogmatic dicta. They are sentimentalists blinded by fear, staggering under a prejudice, and wholly lacking in any basis of scientific knowledge. Consciously or not, they base this fantastic farrago of cephalic indices, skull sutures, brain weights, intelligence tests, and cultural stages on the very earliest and most antiquated ethnological postulates and shun the later investigations and the demonstrated conclusions of such anthropologists, physiologists, biologists, and psychologists as Ripley, Boas, Lowie, Dixon, Spencer, Haeckel, Lamarck, Pawlow, Cunningham, Stockard, Guyer, Smith, Griffith, Weigert, and Woodsworth, to mention only a few of the most noted in each field (68 Cong. Rec. 4573, 1924).

As with other critics of Nordicism, Smertenko questioned the scientific validity of Grant and his contemporaries. This was reflective of a broader shift in the science of race that was increasingly rejecting the then dominant biological conceptualization of race in favor of cultural relativism.

In addition to the work of various Nordicist authors, congressional supporters of increased immigration restrictions drew on expert testimony. Doctor Harry H. Laughlin's *Expert Analysis of the Metal and the Dross in America's Modern Melting Pot* deserves particular attention. Dr. Laughlin was then under the employ of the Eugenic Records Office of the Carnegie Institution of Washington and was appointed "expert eugenics agent" of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. In his report, Dr. Laughlin explored the prevalence of "social inadequacy" among immigrant and native-born groups in the United States. In commenting on this work, immigration and nationalization committee chairman Albert Johnson noted, "I have examined Doctor Laughlin's data and charts and find that they are both

biologically and statistically thorough, and apparently sound (Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, 1923, 731)."

While the work of Laughlin was used to provide a scientific justification for immigration restriction, this work, like that of Grant and Stoddard, did not escape criticism. The tenor of this criticism largely focused on the scientific validity of Laughlin's findings. As Congressman Celler remarked:

> Perhaps no pamphlet or writing on immigration has received greater vogue during the last year than the Analysis of America's Modern Melting Pot, by Dr. Harry H. Laughlin. It has been quoted by Members of Congress, officers of the Government, and many magazine writers. Yet this analysis is full of discrepancies and is at great variance with the results of the United States census and our everyday common experience. It would seem that this author, claiming to have presented an analysis of our immigration problem in a scientific and unbiased way, appears now to have been strongly prepossessed with the notion of Nordic superiority, anu has built up his argument on specious logic and solely with the idea to prove the very thing he assumes is true--Nordic superiority. (68 Cong. Rec. 1331, 1924)

In Celler's estimation, Laughlin's "vicious" report was tainted by prejudice and was by extension, unscientific. At a congressional session, he stated: "Just as a drunkard's face is splotched with red stains, so Laughlin's report is splotched and soiled with wholesale inaccuracies and failure to consider factors that destroy the value of his conclusions (68 Cong. Rec. 4177, 1924)." Celler would continue excoriating Laughlin, telling his colleagues, "[Laughlin] is the kind of pseudoscientist who likes to force his conclusions, trusting to luck that no one will check him up." Congressman Celler would later state, "the quota provisions of the

[1924] immigration bill as drafted by the Immigration Committee are in part founded upon this vicious Laughlin report. They are therefore, like a house built upon sand. *Should not an immigration commission be formed to go into this subject scientifically* and in a manner most unlike the investigations conducted by Doctor Laughlin for the Immigration Committee (68 Cong. Rec. 4177, 1924, emphasis in original)."

The critics of Nordicism and the immigration restrictions it called for were ultimately the losers in this legislative controversy. The 1924 Immigration Act passed with a wide margin of support in both the House and the Senate and was eventually signed into law by President Calvin Coolidge. As we have seen, the science of race was a central component in this policy debate. Advocates for restricting immigration underscored the role of heredity in determining human outcomes and exhibited extreme skepticism towards any potential environmental influences. However, this older paradigm was already being challenged by an increasingly professionalized anthropology. Conflict over the science of race would play out again over 3 decades later during the Civil Rights Era. But in contrast to the Progressive Era, the new science of race would emerge victorious.

Carleton Putnam and the "equalitarian cult" during the Civil Rights Era

The Civil Rights era saw the emergence of a new articulation of white imperilment, as racial integration became a central issue in national politics. A surprising defender of the Southern status quo would emerge in the form of Carleton Putnam. Putnam, a member of a prominent New England family, was an ardent segregationist despite being a Northerner. A Princeton University and Columbia Law School graduate, he became a highly successful businessman who served as the CEO of Delta Airlines at one point. Putnam would come to have significant influence over the resistance to desegregation, as he shifted the focus of resistance

away from the issues of states' rights and towards an explicit focus on racial differences and the threat that desegregation would represent to the future of white civilization.

Putnam's initial contribution to the segregationist cause was an open letter to President Eisenhower criticizing the Supreme Court's decisions in both Brown vs. Board of Education and Cooper vs Aaron. While Putnam did not receive a response from Eisenhower, he did find support throughout the South. Putnam's letter would later be published in various Southern newspapers, after the "Putnam Letter Committee" raised $37,000.00 to buy newspaper space (Putnam, 1961). Putnam took particular issue with one statement in Justice Frankfurther's opinion, "Local customs, however hardened by time, are not decreed in heaven. Habits and feelings they engender may be counteracted and moderated. Experience attests that such local habits and feelings will yield, gradually though this be, to law and education (*Cooper v. Aaron*, 1958, 358)." As Putnam (1961) would argue, the "local customs" of Jim Crow had become "hardened" for good reason. In other words, rather than being a brutal system of racialized control, Putnam argued that Jim Crow was instead a reasoned response on the part of the majority to the inferiority of black people. He went on to criticize what he viewed as the "arrogance" of the federal government for trying to impose its views on the South.

Following his letter to President Eisenhower, Putnam would write another open letter to Attorney General William P. Rogers. His primary purpose was to suggest that the academic authorities invoked in the Court's decision were not sufficiently scrutinized. As he writes:

> It is my considered opinion that two generations of Americans have been victimized by a pseudo-scientific hoax in this field, that this hoax is part of an equalitarian propaganda typical of the left-wing overdrift of our times, and that it will not stand an informed judicial test. I do not believe that ever before has science been more warped by a self-

> serving few to the deception and injury of so many. On this subject there may be disagreement. But it is clear to me the Court should have been invited to examine the question (Putnam, 1961, 23).

Putnam stated that he received a voluminous amount of correspondence (both positive and negative) after publishing his letters to President Eisenhower and Attorney General Rogers. He would offer his most well-known work, *Race and Reason*, as a response. Published in 1961, *Race and Reason* offers an elaboration on Putnam's ideas, as well as responses to common criticisms of his open letters. He devotes significant attention to elaborating on the ideas he introduced in his letters to Eisenhower and Rogers, particularly regarding the "equalitarian conspiracy." As Putnam writes:

> I had realized that there had been a broad movement to change man's concept of the nature of man. I had known that there had been pressure to widen the American doctrine of equality of opportunity into a doctrine of social, cultural, economic and genetic equality. By 1954 I had witnessed its invasion of the minds of Supreme Court justices. But I had not even then quite grasped how cleverly it had proceeded—infiltrating first the sciences that surround anthropology, moving next into the more strictly social sciences, enthroning itself at last in the Supreme Court's desegregation order (1961, 17).

As with Grant, Putnam took particular issue with the work of Franz Boas. Writing in response to the suggestion that there is "virtual unanimity among scientists on the biological equality of the Negro (Putnam, 1961, 40)," Putnam suggested that this was merely a result of ideology-driven anthropologists. As he writes:

> There is a strong northern clique of equalitarian social anthropologists under the hypnosis of the Boas school which […] has captured important chairs in leading northern and western universities. This clique, aided by equalitarians in government, the press, entertainment, and other fields, has dominated public opinion in these areas and has made it almost impossible for those who disagree with it to hold jobs (Putnam, 1961, 40).

Putnam's rejection of the mainstream anthropological view of race would pervade all of his work concerning segregation. Inherited from Grant, this distrust of social science would later become a central component of white nationalist discourse.

In addition to this skepticism concerning mainstream academic positions on race, Putnam would forward many positions that would become central to the contemporary white genocide narrative. For example, Putnam is one of the first to explicitly invoke the concept of "genocide" in relation to the status of white people. Writing in response to the suggestion that society is founded on the idea of equal human rights he writes:

> All rights have to be limited by the rights of others. My right to do as I please must be limited by your right not to be assaulted by me. The greatest of all human rights is the right of a race to protect itself against genocide, and its culture against deterioration (Putnam, 1961, 71).

Another idea that would later become a lynchpin of white supremacist ideology found an early proponent in Putnam. This idea suggested that shifting gender norms were part of a concerted effort on the part of communists to undermine white society. As Putnam writes, "The communist technique of undermining the family as a social unit is very much of a part with their pressures for racial integration (1961, 55)." This would later become central to white supremacist

ideology, as gains by both feminists and the LGBT community became part of the white genocide narrative. Much as Putnam before them, modern day white supremacists argue that shifting gender roles and the increased acceptance of the LGBT community are another element of the multi-pronged attack to reduce white birthrates.

Race and Reason was well received throughout the South. In both Louisiana and Virginia, the state board of education would make *Race and Reason* required reading for high school students (Wolters, 2008). Perhaps most indicative of its success was the establishment of "Race and Reason Day" by Mississippi governor Ross Barnett as a statewide holiday. The event, held only once on October 26, 1961, was designed to unite and galvanize the segregationist movement. For the holiday, Governor Barnett encouraged Mississippi residents to read and discuss Putnam's work. Meanwhile, the Governor hosted a dinner, where he invited various elites associated with the segregationist cause to hear an address given by Carleton Putnam himself.

While well received by opponents of desegregation, Putnam's work would generate just as much controversy. A session would be held at the annual conference of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists [AAPA], in which a resolution was passed that condemned the appropriation of science in the name of segregation. As the resolution stated:

> We, the members of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists professionally concerned with differences in man, deplore the misuse of science to advocate racism. We condemn such writings as Race and Reason that urge the denial of basic rights to human beings. We sympathize with those of our fellow teachers who have been forced by misguided officials to teach race concepts that have no scientific

> foundation, and we affirm, as we have in the past, that there is nothing in science that justifies the denial of opportunities or rights to any group by virtue of race (AAPA, 1963, 402).

The AAPA were not alone in their condemnation. Theodosius Dobzhansky, a geneticist, offered a critical review of *Race and Reason* in the Journal of Heredity titled "A bogus 'science' of race prejudice." As Dobzhansky writes, "The adjective "scientific" has nowadays become invested with a kind of sacred mystique. It means different things to different people, but by no stretch of its meaning can Putnam's book be said to be "scientific (1961, 190)." Race prejudice arises from emotion, not from reasoning, although time and again it sought to shore itself up with pseudo-science." Dobzhansky would later go on to offer a critical review of *Race and Reality*, which he titled, "More bogus 'science' of race prejudice."

The negative criticism of Putnam did little to stem the tide of his popularity. In 1962, Putnam delivered an address at the fifth annual Attorney general's conference for district attorneys in New Orleans, Louisiana. This address, titled "The Road to Reversal," was largely a description of Putnam's purported dealings with "equalitarians" and what he regarded as their deceptive tactics and rhetoric. Critically, Putnam did not frame the efforts to undo the gains of the Civil Rights era as simply about reestablishing segregation. Instead, he viewed it as one element in an ongoing battle with the "far-left." As he stated to his audience:

> You are not fighting just for the civilization of the South or just for the protection of your children. This integration issue is the perfect ground for a greater battle. Here is the place not only to fight integration but to fight the ideology that spawned integration, the ideology of the far left, the over drift beyond the pivot point, the leeching that would

> bleed us more and more. This time the sleeping, bemused North must be roused by the South. As I said earlier, these hard-core leftists, striking at you, have betrayed themselves at last. You'll never have a better chance to beat them than you have right here, to save your own society and to save the American way of life for us all (Putnam, 1962, 12).

Two years after the initial publication of *Race and Reason*, Putnam gave a speech at the Washington Putnam Letters Club. In this speech, which was later published in *Mankind Quarterly* (1963) as "These Are the Guilty," Putnam largely takes aim at his critics and those he believes are responsible for producing challenges to the status quo. Continuing with his most familiar themes, Putnam went on to quote from a letter sent to him by former chair of the psychology department at Columbia University, Dr. Henry Garrett. Echoing the thoughts of Grant nearly 50 years prior, Garret writes,

> I knew Franz Boas personally. I was able to observe the influence of Boas as founder of the science of anthropology in America and to evaluate the extent to which Boas' socialistic ideology dominating his thinking and permeated the teaching of his disciples, first at Columbia and later at other universities fed from the Boas cult. I was also able to observe the increasing degree of control exercised by this cult over students and younger professors until fear of loss of jobs or status became common in the field of anthropology unless conformity to the racial equality dogma was maintained (Putnam, 1967, 41).

Garrett himself was a signatory of a laudatory introduction to the 1961 edition of *Race and Reason*. Like Putnam, Garrett too would make criticism of Boas a central piece of his writing. As he wrote in 1961, "By far the most potent assault upon native racial differences from the

scientific side has come from the work of Franz Boas, who may be thought of as the "father" of the equalitarian movement (Garrett, 1961, 481)."

Putnam and his contemporaries argued that the "equalitarian" understanding of race was a product of ideological conviction rather than science. As during the Progressive Era, both sides of this debate did not oppose the scientific justification of policy but instead rejected what they saw as political bias (or outright conspiracy) masquerading as science. But unlike The Progressive Era, the "equalitarian cult" emerged from this row bolstered with scientific legitimacy.

In summary, research on what has been described as the crisis of expertise has drawn particular attention to the intensified coupling of science and governance in recent decades (Eyal, 2019; Jasanoff, 2004). From climate science to public health, the cultural and epistemic authority of science is a resource used to justify public policy decisions. While issues such as climate change denial and more recently, COVID-19 skepticism have drawn greater attention to the role of science in governance, this chapter highlights that this is not an entirely new phenomenon. The scientific racism of years past is now dismissed as pseudoscience, but as we have seen, it very much functioned as regulatory science in much the same way that climate science and epidemiology do today.

As Jasanoff and Simmett (2017: 752) argue, "debates about public facts have always also been debates about social meanings, rooted in realities that are subjectively experienced as all-encompassing and complete, even when they are partial and contingent. Facts that are designed to persuade publics are co-produced along with the forms of politics that people desire and practice." During these two periods, both sides of the scientific controversy forwarded a political

vision, often quite explicitly. The scientific racism of Grant and his contemporaries, alongside the writings of Putnam framed demographic concerns as questions of social organization. The Nordicists viewed demographic change as fundamentally threatening the U.S. system of republican governance. Similarly, Putnam viewed the "equalitarian dogma" as evidence of the "left wing over drift" that threatened U.S. constitutional principles.

The history of scientific racism and contestation over who can lay claim to the mantle of science also problematizes the concept of post-truth. This concept gained purchase in 2016 due to the success of the referendum for the UK to exit the European Union and the election of Donald J. Trump to the U.S. presidency. It was used to signal the view that an epistemic rupture had occurred, with appeals to emotion and identity now trumping facts and reason. But the history of race science underscores that that conflict over what is "true" is not a novel political development but is instead an enduring feature of democratic societies. Mejia et al., follow a similar line of reasoning in providing what they describe as a "racial history" of post-truth. Focusing specifically on the issue of U.S. drug policy, they highlight how falsehoods, gross mischaracterizations, and stereotypes shaped racialized drug policies. As they write, "to suggest that we now live in a post-truth era is to disregard the fact whiteness has always played fast and loose with any semblance of the truth (Meija et al., 2018, 116)."

The concept of post-truth evokes an image of a past where facts were taken as self-evident. But as both the sociology of knowledge and science and technology studies have emphasized, the legitimation of knowledge is a social process. Consequently, scientific facts lend themselves to contestation. Indeed, the scientific enterprise itself concerns competing claims to truth and validity. It is during moments of public debate when this contestation over competing claims is brought to the fore.

CHAPTER 2

"Communism is the virus. COVID-19 is how it spreads"

Partisan epistemology and the medical freedom movement

All professions are a conspiracy against the laity

George Bernard Shaw

The COVID-19 pandemic led to changes in public life unseen in recent decades. To mitigate the spread of the virus and reduce the strain on hospitals, mask mandates were introduced, and "non-essential" businesses were forced to close. Then following the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines, vaccination records became a requirement for entering some businesses and public spaces. These measures were widely supported by medical researchers and public health organizations stretching from the local to the global levels. But despite wide-ranging scientific consensus, pandemic mitigation efforts were met with resistance that took the form of protest, largely occurring in two waves. The first, prior to the introduction of the vaccine, largely focused on opposition to so-called "lockdowns." The second wave came after the introduction of the vaccine and was largely organized around resisting inoculation mandates.

Pundits largely framed these protests as another manifestation of "post-truth" politics, where appeals to facts and reason were purportedly waning in significance as claims on identity and emotion came to typify political life. The proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories about the origins and severity of the virus certainly lent credence to such allegations. Surely, only opposition to science could explain why people would reject the assertions of public

health officials. Consequently, the conflict over pandemic mitigation efforts became framed as a battle between those who were pro-science versus those who were anti-science.

While a lack of scientific literacy no doubt played a role in the rejection of the mainstream scientific consensus regarding COVID-19, I argue that the binary between pro versus anti-science is a mischaracterization of COVID-19 skepticism. Instead, the conflict concerns the very meaning and substance of science: what constitutes science? In support of this argument, I draw upon evidence collected during fieldwork at various "medical freedom" rallies. As I will show, COVID-19 skeptics largely believe that they lay true claim to the mantle of science and that the mainstream scientific consensus is far from scientific; it is instead hopelessly corrupted by political biases and elite greed.

I begin by reviewing the literature concerning conservative distrust of science. Recent empirical work has demonstrated a steady decline of trust in scientific among those who align with the political Right (Gauchat, 2012; Kozlowski, 2022). As a potential explanation, I turn my attention towards an emerging body of work concerning partisan epistemologies and the adoption of conspiratorial beliefs. While the rejection of mainstream scientific claims and the adoption of heterodox views is often explained through a "deficit" model (e.g. insufficient data/media literacy, poor education, etc.), a focus on epistemology draws our attention to how information is inevitably filtered through value systems, in what Fischer (2019) refers to as "socio-cultural reason." Following this review of the literature, I proceed to describe my empirical case, the medical freedom movement. I then discuss the implications of my findings, focusing on the role of expertise in contemporary society and the many ways in which 'science' has been used to designate both processes leading to knowledge building and the resulting stock of facts aiding our understanding of the empirical world. As Giddens and other scholars have

noted, modernity has tightened the coupling between expertise and governance. In theory, the reliance on expertise removes policy issues from the realm of the political and transforms them into technical questions. But following the work of Eyal (2019), the hopes of constructing "policy without politics" is largely an unachievable goal because the uneven distributional consequences of even the most scientifically supported policy decision injects politics back into the policy realm. One of the main contributions of my paper is to cast light upon an understated phenomenon: the conscious appropriation of science on the part of medical freedom members to affirm self-identity and oppose state overreach.

Conservatism and Trust in Science

Opposition to COVID-19 mitigation efforts has been situated in what has been described as the "crisis of expertise" and "declining trust in institutions." These have become well-worn phrases in public discourse. Academic literature in this area has focused attention on conservatives. Drawing upon data from the General Social Survey, Gauchat finds that public trust in science declined among conservatives between the mid-1970s and 2010 (2012). Gauchat suggests such distrust stems in part from the proliferation of regulatory science. Most compelling of Gauchat's findings is that the weakening in trust was most marked among conservatives with higher levels of schooling. This calls into question assumptions that the "crisis of science" stems from deficits in education. While unable to test this hypothesis, Gauchat suggests that higher levels of formal education confer a level of political sophistication that allows people to incorporate new (and potentially contradictory) information more effectively into a pre-existing system of belief.

Kozlowski (2022) extends Gauchat's findings by drawing a distinction between moral/social conservatism and political conservatism. As he points out, political labels such as

"liberal" and "conservative" subsume a variety of political tendencies under one blanket categorization. Indeed, these tendencies can be in conflict with one another. For example, anti-obscenity laws may appeal to someone who identifies as a social conservative but run counter to the libertarian ethos of an economic conservative. Consequently, we flatten important distinctions by drawing upon the general label of "conservative."

Drawing on the same GSS data as Gauchat, but looking at the period between 1984 and 2016, Kozlowski (2022) finds very different trends between economic and moral conservatives and their relationship to science. He finds that economic conservatives enjoyed a positive association with confidence in science at the beginning of the period, but this relationship disappears completely by the 2010s. In contrast, moral conservatives already exhibited a negative association with confidence in science at the start of the period under review and remains relatively stable.

The decline in trust in science was driven in part by evangelical Christians finding an ideological home with the Republican Party. This resulted in an increased correlation between holding morally conservative views and identifying with political conservatism. Over the same period, Kozlowski (2022) suggests that the declining trust in science among economic conservatives was the result of the growing association between scientific expertise and the regulatory state. That is, as science became a preferred tool among government officials seeking authoritativeness, appeals to science became identified with state intrusion. These changes worked in concert, leading to the decline initially reported by Gauchat. As Kozlowski writes, "confidence in the scientific community dropped among conservatives between the 1980s and the 2000s because moral conservatism consolidated under the label of political conservatism and

because economic conservatism lost its positive association with confidence in scientists (2022, 1437)."

While efforts to explain declining trust in science among conservatives need to continue, we do have ample empirical evidence that plummeting faith in scientific claims is a fact. But what do people mean when they express distrust in science? Extant work draws largely on GSS data which asks about trust in the "scientific community" rather than science. It could very well be the case that some interpret this to mean scientists themselves, the individual practitioners of science rather than the science as an abstract system of knowledge production. Alternatively, perhaps science is equated with institutions of knowledge production that are coded as liberal by those on the right, such as colleges and universities.

It is worth noting that skepticism towards science does not necessarily mean rejecting its broader cultural authority. The work of Samuel Perry (2022) is instructive. Drawing attention to the increasing invocation of science by anti-pornography campaigns, he asks whether anti-pornography sentiment is undergoing what he calls an "internal secularization," whereby traditional religious concerns are being supplanted by scientific concerns. But he finds this is not the case. He concludes that the apparent secularization of the anti-pornography movement does not reflect a change in attitudes among its members. Instead, the cultural authority of science also functions as a discursive resource. Those who might otherwise be distrustful of science continue to recognize the authority it enjoys within the broader society.

A Partisan Epistemology

An emerging literature concerning partisan epistemologies has highlighted how ways of legitimating knowledge are intimately coupled with one's partisan identity. In her work investigating how Christian conservatives make sense of the news, Tripodi (2018) finds that

many of her interlocutors employed the same close readings techniques that they employed during bible study to make sense of the news. Rather than relying on media reports of what public officials said, they instead went directly to the source. For example, rather than reading a story about a speech given by the president, those individuals would instead watch the speech directly. This would sometimes further erode trust in mainstream media when individuals felt that there was a discrepancy between what they observed and what was reported. In this instance, media literacy techniques were cribbed from and aligned with the Protestant orientation towards scripture.

Tripodi (2018) describes this form of close reading as "scriptural inference (3)." Rather than relying on external messaging, her interlocutors opted to go directly to the source. This very much is keeping in line with the Protestant tradition of direct engagement with "The Word," as opposed to relying on clergy for interpretations. This embodied practice formed the basis for a general epistemic foundation that values unmediated (to the degree possible) access to the information and distrusts "given" truth.

Lee et al. (2021) report similar results in their analysis of data practices among COVID-19 skeptics. Using digital ethnographic methods, Lee and her colleagues show that skeptics generate their own data visualizations to combat the mainstream scientific consensus regarding the pandemic. While policy responses to misinformation often call for greater media/data literacy, the authors' findings problematize that approach. Rather than a deficiency in data literacy, the individuals described in exhibit high levels of criticality towards data. As they write, "anti-maskers often reveal themselves to be more sophisticated in their understanding of how scientific knowledge is socially constructed than their ideological adversaries, who espouse naive realism about the "objective" truth of public health data (Lee et al., 2021, 2)."

This criticality is driven in part by a particular understanding of science as a form of knowledge production. As Lee and her colleagues underscore, COVID-19 skeptics continue to trust science as a *process*. That is, as an abstract procedure to generate empirical knowledge of the world. But they distrust science as an *institution*, instantiated in various public health agencies and research universities. Along with the work of Tripodi, this nascent body of work underscores a distinct epistemology that privileges personal autonomy and initiative in attempting to understand the world.

The partisan epistemology framework also sheds light on the adoption of conspiratorial beliefs, as it shifts scholarly focus away from a myopic focus on the truth value of such claims. As Saglam writes:

> a careful exploration of the everyday lives of conspiracy narratives is necessary, not because of their epistemological shortcomings, but because tracing their course across socialities reveals how they are implicated in the mundane forging of subjectivities and social groups, how they reconfigure the state and law in unexpected ways and how they engender societal violence through the circulation of 'imminent threats' from others (2020, 18).

In other words, rather than focusing solely on the truth value of conspiracy theories and attempting to correct false information, we should also consider the "work" performed by these ideas.

Waters (1997) has introduced the concept of "ethnosociologies" to understand conspiracy theories. Influenced by Garfinkle's ethnomethodology, Waters defines ethnosociologies as the accounts everyday people use to explain social life. As she writes, "Whereas there are few amateur physicists or chemists in our society driving taxicabs, running elevators, and hosting

radio shows, one may notice that there are many, many amateur sociologists. These individuals have ideas about why the divorce rate is high, why kids drop out of school, why the rich are rich and the poor are poor, and, most important here, why Whites have so much and Blacks have so little. The explanations or theories that these everyday people hold to make sense of their social worlds are what I call ethnosociologies (1997, 114)." Similarly, Kou et al. (2017) refer to conspiracy theories as a form of collective sensemaking that is particularly prominent during periods of societal crisis.

It is in this sense that conspiracy theories can be read as text, not to evaluate their veracity but to instead frame them as a demonstration of what Frank Fischer calls "socio-cultural reason." (2019, 139) As Fischer writes:

> The world of social and political affairs is influenced by scientific knowledge, but reason in the social realm follows a different logic or rationality. Whereas scientific reason is a professional orientation that puts it faith in the rational application of empirical methods and evidence, the socio-cultural reason of the citizen and society generally is experientially geared to social and cultural interactions grounded in particular social and political contexts rather than decontextualized technical calculations (2019, 139).

That is, rather than simply interpreting facts in a transparent fashion, facts are instead interpreted through a socio-cultural lens.

Harambam and Aupers (2015) frame conspiracy theories as a way of contesting "epistemic authority." Based on ethnographic work with the Dutch conspiracy milieu, they highlight the various critiques that their interlocutors directed towards science as an institution. Such critiques included the perceived dogmatism of science, the relationship between scientific

knowledge production and vested interests, and the system of credentialization that excludes the knowledge claims of laypeople. As they write:

> More than merely mimicking modern science in order to augment epistemic authority, conspiracy theorists wish to purify it and re-install its free spirit of inquiry. Their critique is targeted at the dogmatic nature of scientific assumptions, the authority of scientific institutions, and, indeed, the epistemic and social boundary work performed by scientists to sustain this authority. Science, we may say, is at once sacralized for its intentions but demonized for its manifestations (Harambam and Aupers, 2015, 477).

This body of work points towards moving away from understanding conspiracy theories simply through the lens of faulty information. Instead, it asks that we consider how knowledge, values, and identity intersect to legitimate some beliefs, while discrediting others. Given the degree to which attitudes toward COVID-19 have become embroiled in the ongoing U.S. culture war, the present pandemic provides an ideal case study for understanding these processes.

The Medical Freedom Movement

The present article uses the contemporary medical freedom movement as a case study to understand the contentious relationship between expertise, governance, and public life. Before discussing my specific case, it is worth noting that various forms of health libertarianism predate the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, resistance to public health measures is not a new development. For example, cholera riots throughout the 1800s saw civil disturbances and the proliferation of conspiracy theories concerning the etiology of the virus (Cohn, 2017). In addition, the United States has a long history of movements organized around opposition to compulsory vaccinations, of which the contemporary anti-vaccination movement is only the

most recent manifestation. Moreover, struggles for "therapeutic choice" also have a long history in the US (Grossman, 2013).

In describing the medical freedom, I am referring specifically to movements organized around opposition to public health measures designed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. This occurred largely in two broad waves, though it is difficult to entirely disentangle them. The first wave began in 2020 shortly after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the spread of COVID-19 constituted a pandemic and so-called "lockdowns" were instituted. In the United States, "lockdowns" were only ever partial and as we shall see, the differential implementation of restrictions (large box stores versus small businesses, for example) played a role in the conflict over policy.

This second wave came after the introduction of the vaccine and the associated public policy changes associated with its introduction. The prospect of compulsory vaccination as a condition of continued employment and having to present an immunization record to enter businesses and public buildings animated much of the opposition.

I attended medical freedom demonstrations throughout the latter half of 2021 and the first quarter of 2022. I located rallies to attend through social media, most notably by joining public Facebook groups and using Facebook's internal search engine. Locations varied but included events throughout Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey, as well as Michigan and Washington D.C.. Audience demographics largely reflected those of the surrounding community, with some exceptions. Most notably, medical freedom rallies hosted at the state capitol in Trenton, New Jersey were overwhelmingly white, despite this demographic only constituting roughly 10 percent of the city's population. This reflects the fact that many of the attendees traveled to Trenton from surrounding counties.

While few of those events were explicitly advertised as partisan, speakers and attendees largely identified as conservative. This was further reflected in the topics discussed. Rather than a strict focus on COVID-19, other current conservative grievances were given attention, such as allegations of widespread fraud in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and concerns over education curriculum (i.e., critical race theory).

Many of these demonstrations were framed around opposition to vaccine mandates rather than against vaccination itself. However, most people I spoke to reported not having been vaccinated nor having any plans to receive the vaccine. Similarly, masks were few and far between (though not entirely absent) even for meetings occurring indoors. Given the widespread skepticism towards COVID-19, this is unsurprising.

While few of the events were explicitly partisan, local and state politicians running on the Republican ticket routinely appeared as speakers. These candidates situated themselves squarely within the "America First" Trumpist wing of the Republican Party and routinely railed against what they described as "establishment Republicans" or "Conservative Inc." for failing to uphold conservative values and ceding ground too readily to the political left.

Communism is the virus. COVID-19 is how it spreads

At a large banquet hall in a hotel outside Baltimore, Maryland, a speaker is giving a lesson in what he describes as "constitutional apologetics." That was an effort to craft a defense of the Republican principles undergirding the United States constitution, which the speaker and many attendees viewed as under direct threat. During a brief intermission, I asked Suzie to write down the name of a book she had previously suggested I read. Suzie, in her early 40s, was attending so she could get more involved in local politics, as the gathering was organized by the Republican women of Baltimore County.

In response to my request, she did not offer a book recommendation. Or even a website. Instead, she handed me a small slip of paper with a series of phrases scrawled on it – "the great reset", "the fourth industrial revolution", and "you will own nothing and you will be happy." Alongside these phrases she added a brief editorial that simply read "this is scary." In asking her to elaborate, she provided a description of a nefarious plot to increase social control and further consolidate wealth in the hands of a global elite. In doing so, she echoed ideas that I heard routinely throughout my fieldwork.

"The Great Reset" is the eponymous title of the 50th annual meeting of the World Economic Forum [WEF]. The theme of this meeting, reflected in the title, concerned reimagining economic and social organization following the COVID-19 pandemic. In detailing what The Great Reset entails, WEF founder and executive chairman Klaus Schwab laid out three central components; ushering in a "stakeholder economy" oriented towards greater equity, ensuring investment aligns with broader goals such as equality and sustainability, and finally, harnessing the developments brought about by the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" such as artificial intelligence to gene editing to further advance these aforementioned goals.

As "The Great Reset" began to surface in public discourse, earlier writings from the WEF soon followed. The phrase "you will own nothing and you will be happy" is one such example. The phrase appeared in a 2016 blog post where the WEF asked various public officials and policy experts to provide predictions for the year 2030. In her entry, Danish MP Ida Auken provided a vision of urban life in the near future where the proliferation of "product as service" apps, such as streaming services and ride share would lead to less personal ownership as urbanites simply "rented" products. The MP went on to suggest that such a lifestyle would be entirely normalized by 2030. But she was also quick to note that these changes would be

accompanied by ever more totalizing forms of surveillance. She underscored that this would become the norm in urban areas, as more rural areas would continue to be "left behind" by processes of economic and social transformation.

While this blog post offered a potential vision of the future, the subjects at rallies had a vastly different interpretation. This was no mere prediction. Instead, my interlocutors argued that this "prediction" was being actively engineered by global elites and that the COVID-19 pandemic was the "manufactured crisis" that would allow changes to be implemented. This is reflected in the title of the popular documentary "Plandemic," whose title is a portmanteau of "plan" and "pandemic." The belief in a constructed crisis gave rise to a sentiment that appeared routinely on signs, "communism is the virus. COVID-19 is how it spreads." In invoking the specter of communism, individuals were largely using a cultural idiom to signal increased government intervention into economic and social life rather than as a change in the ownership of the means of production.

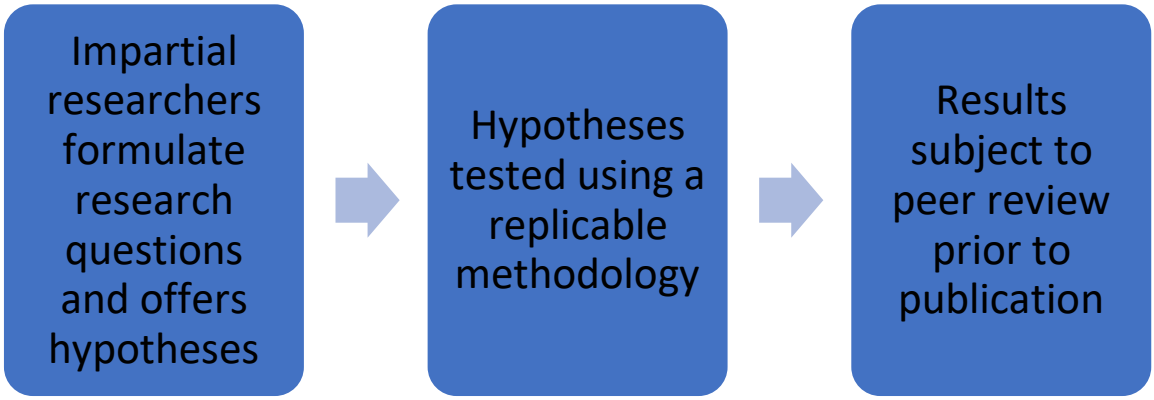
Equating communism and government overreach was by far the dominant narrative concerning the "truth" about the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars of climate change denial will recognize such arguments. As with climate change, effective handling of a pandemic necessitates policy decisions that are largely anathema to conservatism, namely, increased government intervention into economic and social life and the bolstering of international and other supranational organizations. For my subjects, the response to COVID-19 presented a dire threat to the "American way of life" and needed to be vigorously resisted. One manifestation of this resistance concerned challenging the scientific consensus, not by rejecting science wholesale but by arguing that the mainstream scientific consensus was hopelessly marred by political biases, personal ambition, and financial misconduct.

The Hijacking of Science

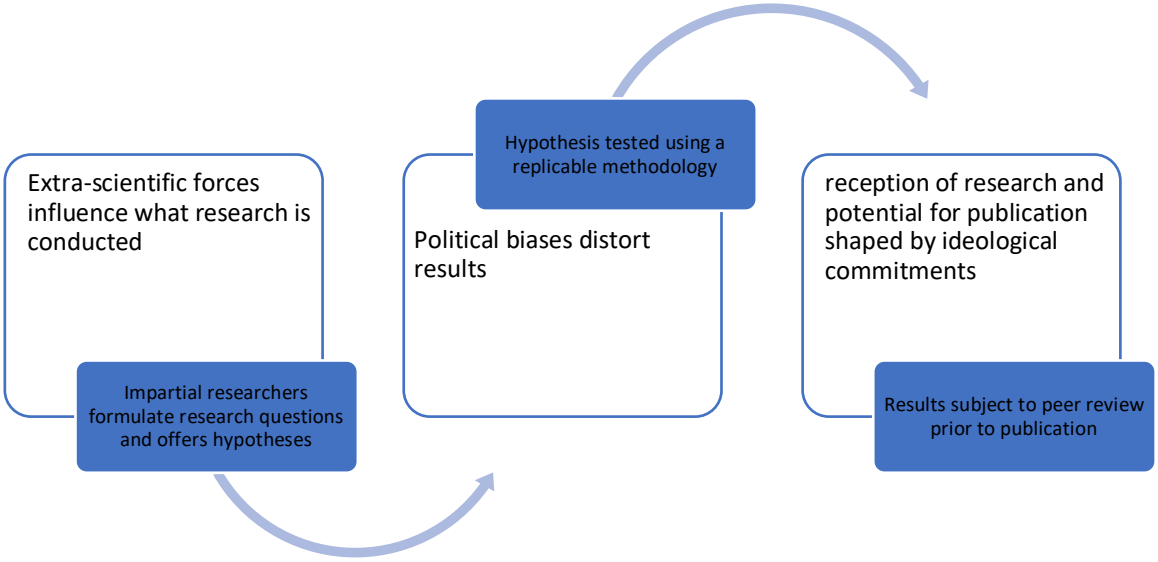
Suspicion about the "real agenda" behind the COVID-19 pandemic formed the basis of opposition to the mainstream scientific consensus and consequently, opposition to various public health measures including social distancing, wearing masks, and receiving the vaccine. While it would be easy to dismiss this as being motivated by a distrust of science, the attendees of these events had a much less straightforward relationship to science. Indeed, while not using specialized language, my subjects were keenly aware of the social factors shaping the production of scientific knowledge.

I present a visualization below of how my informants understood science in the figure below. The first image shows science as an idealized process for knowledge production. The vision of science expressed in this figure is essentially the scientific method. Science is understood as a replicable and transparent procedure that is wholly removed from "worldly" concerns. Medical freedom advocates *did not* reject this interpretation of science. Indeed, they valorized and celebrated it. Instead, my informants took issue with science as represented in the second image; science as an embedded institution. The second image more closely aligns with the understanding of science articulated by historians of science and adjacent fields of study. Namely, the realm of science cannot be wholly separated from the society in which it is embedded. Rather than viewing the societal influence on science as the norm, my informants viewed worldly infringements as disqualifying scientific claims as such.

Science as an abstract procedure for generating knowledge



Science as socially embedded institution



Skepticism towards broader influences on scientific claims regarding COVID-19 was reflected by my informants who argued that "science that can't be questioned is propaganda." In

their view, the notion of a scientific consensus was itself unscientific. As Michael, a truck driver living outside of Harrisburg, PA stated, “they say the science is settled and that it can’t be questioned. But science is never settled.” It was widely argued that the scientific consensus regarding COVID-19 was illusory and that dissenting voices were being deliberately marginalized to “protect the narrative.” One example was the experience of an organization called Front Line COVID-19 Critical Care Alliance [FLCCC Alliance].

The FLCCC Alliance was founded by medical professionals whose treatment protocol for COVID-19 was radically opposed to those proposed by major public health organizations. Most notably, it included ivermectin to treat COVID-19 patients, despite little medical research justifying its use. Predictably, controversy followed the Alliance, as many of its member physicians faced professional consequences for their actions. Moreover, some of the founding members had papers retracted from academic journals after further review found flaws in their data and/or analysis.

In gathering reactions to the activity of the FLCCC Alliance, event attendees largely lionized the organization’s members. Particular attention was drawn to the professional consequences faced by the FLCCC Alliance for continuing to treat patients with their heterodox treatment protocol. These professional consequences were largely viewed as simply another manifestation of social control. “They don’t want to let doctors be doctors. These hospital administrators don’t even see patients,” remarked one attendee. In her view, the treatment of these doctors reflected a larger trend of individuals not being able to make decisions at the local level. The marginalization of the FLCCC Alliance from the broader medical community was also taken as evidence of a broader conspiracy to stifle dissent.

Suspicion towards the dominant scientific consensus often centered around the question of *cui bono*. Indeed, this was a common heuristic tool through which news was evaluated by my subjects. This was particularly the case in terms of evaluating the safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine. Mike, a 35-year-old New Jersey native who ran a small business picking up scrap metal for recycling, was an adamant believer that the pandemic was simply a result of collusion between "Big Pharma" and the federal government. "There are many treatments that are readily available and effective. Why aren't they prescribing those? Because they aren't patented like the vaccine." In his view, the emphasis on widespread vaccination as the solution to the pandemic was first and foremost a way for Pfizer and other vaccine manufacturers to line their pockets. To accomplish this, Mike and others argued that the repurposing of cheaper drugs such as ivermectin, hydroxychloroquine, and budesonide was being deliberately suppressed by the "medical establishment."

This suspicion that effective treatments were being deliberately suppressed was widespread, as seen in the example of the FLCCC Alliance. The inverse of this was suspicion towards both the vaccine and standard COVID-19 treatment protocols, particularly ventilation and the antiviral drug Remdesivir. While the efficacy of the latter has been questioned by the WHO, attendees went further in their condemnation of the drug. Beyond arguing that the drug was of questionable efficacy, they instead viewed it as directly harming COVID-19 patients and leading to their death.

Suspicion of the dominant scientific consensus also centered on questions of how data was being collected and interpreted. It was a widespread belief that data related to the pandemic was being deliberately manipulated. This was perhaps most prominent in the distinction people made between dying *from* COVID-19 versus dying *with* COVID-19. Those within the medical

freedom movement widely suspected that doctors and hospital administrators were inflating the number of COVID-19 deaths by labeling anyone who died with a positive COVID-19 test as having died *directly* from the virus. It was argued that "actual deaths" were much lower than what was reported and that deaths from COVID-19 coupled with comorbidities such as immune-deficiencies and obesity should not be included in the official tally of pandemic deaths.

The distinction between dying *from* versus *with* COVID-19 was significant because medical freedom advocates argued that it opened the door for malfeasance. Of particular concern was the fact that the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) provided additional funds to help hospitals treat COVID-19 patients on Medicare. Consequently, COVID-19 skeptics argued that hospital administrators were simply taking advantage of provisions in the CARES Act to pad their budgets by inflating the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19. Here we see how a verifiable fact (provisions in the CARES Act) formed the "rational core" around which critical extrapolations were formed (Starbird et al., 2019, 127).

We should not interpret the rejection of the mainstream scientific consensus regarding the COVID-19 pandemic as a wholesale rejection of science. COVID-19 skeptics largely viewed science as supporting their positions and that pandemic mitigation efforts were not supported by science and instead were motivated by an elite desire for social control and personal enrichment. This was perhaps best captured by an attendee who described contemporary science as a "globalist institution" rather than as an abstract procedure for knowledge generation (that is, understanding science as being synonymous with the scientific method).

Marginalization

Distrust of scientific orthodoxy and the public health measures it supported translated into feelings of marginalization. This became especially prominent as policies such as requiring a

record of having received a COVID-19 vaccine became more widespread. This often led to hyperbolic claims comparing COVID-19 vaccination records to the Nuremberg Laws and Jim Crow segregation. But this also expressed itself in more mundane ways, as people articulated frustration over what they viewed as coercion. Subjects routinely framed this coercion as a choice between being able to live a "normal life" by submitting to unwanted public health measures or being made into a "second-class citizen."

The experience of Liz, a self-described former supporter of Bernie Sanders who was "hiding out in a red state," provides an illustrative example. She was facing economic precarity as someone employed in the music festival circuit, a field utterly decimated by the public policy response to the pandemic. Her skepticism towards the official COVID-19 narrative had caused her to become alienated from her friends who she described as having mislabeled her as a QAnon adherent. This alienation, coupled with her economic precarity prompted her to ask, "why am I considered a risk instead of at risk?" In her view, she was being maligned as a danger to society despite her own very precarious position.

Anger was also expressed towards how these rallies were presented in mainstream media. As a young college student shared with me, "I read those articles and feel like the NYT is insulting me." Her view was that "liberal journalists" were not interested in understanding the medical freedom movement but were more interested in presenting attendees in a bad light to "push the narrative." These unflattering depictions further eroded trust in what my subjects referred to as the "MSM," the mainstream media.

Feelings of marginalization among white conservatives are not limited to their attitudes towards COVID-19 and in fact precede it. A collection of recent scholarship has consistently found that feelings of dispossession and marginalization are widespread among conservatives,

particularly White conservatives (Hochschild, 2016; Wuthnow, 2018; Cramer, 2016; Nadler, 2022). The grievances found by these researchers largely center around animosity towards out-of-touch elites who are thought to favor minorities and viewed as largely indifferent to conservative concerns. This sentiment appeared in spades throughout my fieldwork. But the rhetoric also took on a more antagonistic tone. Rather than indifferent elites, many attendees felt that they were on the receiving end of elite hostility.

Local Control and Personal Responsibility

While organized around combating COVID-19 mitigation efforts, rallies also served as the basis for what organizers and attendees hoped would be a push towards more local and decentralized forms of governance. This manifested itself in two ways. The first might be viewed as a personal or cultural form of local control, while the second was more explicitly political.

Calls to "do your own research" were endemic to the medical freedom movement. As one attendee shared with me, "you basically need to become an expert in everything to know what's really going on." The notion of doing one's own research largely entailed challenging information presented in legacy media, which my subjects referred to as the "MSM" (mainstream media) or "lamestream media." This was most evident in the embrace of the "alt tech" movement. Alt tech refers to a collection of internet platforms positioned as guardians of free speech and largely mirror more popular social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Examples include Gab, Parler, Telegram, BitChute, Odysee, and Rumble. Such platforms emerged in response to the view that conservative voices were being censored on the larger and more well-known platforms.

Given their extremely *laissez faire* approach to content moderation, alt-tech platforms quickly became replete with conspiracy theories and misinformation. But given that they situated

themselves in opposition to “Big Tech,” which was read to be largely liberal in orientation, these platforms were understood by attendees as more reliable sources of information.

One manifestation of “doing your own research” was offering heterodox analyses of official COVID-19 statistics. As Alexander, a middle-aged man from a suburb outside Washington D.C. stated, “I’m an engineer. I trust what the data says. Not what someone tells me the data says.” As previously stated, skepticism towards COVID-19 case counts and mortality rates concerned understanding the social processes involved in creating data, such as determining what constitutes a death from COVID-19 rather than merely testing positive for the virus at the time of death. As another subject asked, “how do they know how bad it is when they can’t test everybody? What about people who got COVID but were never tested and never experienced symptoms?” Here this individual was drawing attention to the social construction of data. This individual was hesitant to take the data at face value, noting that there were clear data limitations. In his view, a “false narrative” was being pushed by manipulating COVID-19 mortality data.

Given their suspicions about what the data concerning COVID-19 being presented meant, attendees largely concluded that the pandemic was overblown. As attendees would often sarcastically quip, “COVID-19 is so dangerous that you need to get tested to know if you have it.” They rejected the interpretations being presented to them and instead cast a highly critical eye towards the data itself. This finding aligns with previous work demonstrating a privileging of direct and unmediated (to the degree possible) access to information rather than trusting interpretations of the data (Lee et al, 2021; Tripodi, 2018).

The desire for personal autonomy and local control also manifested itself in a more overt form; running for local office. “Local action has national impacts” was the banner that attendees operated under. The call for local participation was most pronounced in terms of becoming

involved in school boards. One organization with a particularly prominent voice in the medical freedom movement was Moms For Liberty [MFT], a conservative group focused on the issue of parental rights. While this organization sprang up in response to remote learning and opposition to mask mandates, it eventually morphed into an organization focused on public education more broadly, with a particular focus on curriculum.

Allie, a young mother organizing with MFT in Southeast Pennsylvania, wore a shirt emblazoned with the phrase "Raise Lions Not Sheep." She had two young children in elementary school and first became involved with MFT because of concerns about the negative impact of prolonged remote learning and mask mandates in school. She was particularly concerned that the public health measures in schools were negatively impacting her children's intellectual development. Most concretely, she reported that her son, a second grader, appeared to be backsliding in terms of his grasp of arithmetic.

In addition to the potential concerns related to cognitive development, other mothers drew attention to what they saw as the deleterious emotional and social consequences of masking and remote learning. One outraged mother related a story in which her young daughter began to express anxieties about potentially infecting others with the virus. In her view, the masking policy was emotionally detrimental, as she argued that children were learning to view themselves as a "danger" to others.

Parental rights were a central concern of medical freedom advocates and further reflected widespread institutional distrust. In addition to concerns about the negative impact that pandemic mitigation measures were having on their children, the parents expressed deep concern over the curriculum being taught to their students and what they saw as efforts to undermine parental influence on both their children and the public school system more broadly. As many parents

were quick to remind me, “I don’t coparent with the government.” This phrase was also commonplace on t-shirts and signs.

Advocacy for local control took on a distinctly moral tone. As one speaker commented, “we were asleep while these people set about destroying our country.” Calls to “do your own research” and to become more engaged in local politics took on the tone of admonitions. But this moral tone also allowed for participation in this movement to be a mark of pride. Attendees routinely described themselves as “awake, not woke.” That is, they rejected “woke politics" and instead recognized the COVID-19 pandemic as nothing more than a “scamdemic” meant to enrich global elites and strip people of their rights. Thus, rejecting the scientific consensus concerning the virus provided an opportunity for boundary work as these individuals distinguished themselves from those they viewed as being too eager to comply with public health measures such as wearing masks, social distancing, and receiving the vaccine. As Ian, an accountant living in Chester County, Pennsylvania lamented, “everyone just went along with it. My family. My friends. Everyone was just so complacent.” Ian’s frustration was widely shared. Through resisting compliance with public health measures, my subjects affirmed their sense of identity as free and autonomous citizens resisting a corrupt regime.

Discussion

Giddens (1990) argues that a defining feature of modernity is the *disembedding* of social life. That is, life at the local level is increasingly shaped by events and decisions made at the extra-local level. As Giddens writes, “In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*; that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them (1990, 32, emphasis in original).” Giddens identifies *expert systems* as one of the key mechanisms leading to the process of disembedding.

Another critical feature of modernity identified by Giddens is ever greater reflexivity. While noting that reflexivity is a defining characteristic of human action, he argues that reflexivity becomes "radicalized" by modernity. That is, with the loosening of tradition, new knowledge is constantly brought to bear on social life, reconstituting it in the process. Giddens is quick to note the capacity for disorientation that "radical reflexivity" can produce. As he writes, "We are abroad in a world which is thoroughly constituted through reflexively applied knowledge, but where at the same time we can never be sure that any given element of that knowledge will not be revised (Giddens, 1990, 39)."

Public crises and the response to them bring disembedding and radical reflexivity to the fore. This is particularly the case for disease epidemics. As Kou et al. (2017) write:

> [Epidemics] are often accompanied by tremendous amounts of ambiguity in public knowledge of a disease's nature, origin, transmission pathways, symptoms, risks, and preventative strategies, as well as the geographical reach of a disease. High scientific uncertainty leads to extreme uncertainty at the organizational level, since managing epidemic crises usually requires collaboration among public health agencies operating at different scales (local, regional, national, international) and different locations as well as coordination with individual healthcare providers working directly with patients (3).

Widespread uncertainty and policy coordination challenges have certainly characterized the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also underscored the significant role of expertise in guiding public policy. In the United States, various public health agencies including the CDC, the FDA, and the NIH took on an increasingly *visible* role in terms of public policy. Given the

relative intrusiveness of COVID-19 mitigation efforts, expertise came to bear on daily life in an exceedingly obvious way throughout the pandemic.

The proliferation of systems of expertise stretches into the realm of governance by way of technocracy, generating a challenge for popular participation in the policy process. The growth of various populist movements on both the left and the right can be viewed as a revolt against technocratic governance. As Bickerton and Acceti write, "Whereas technocratic bodies such as independent central banks and inter-governmental regulatory agencies are usually justified as "bulwarks" against the threat of populism, the rise of populism is frequently described as a response to the growing technocratization of public life (2017, 328)." Indeed, it is no accident that these "bulwarks" often become a target of populist ire. Premised on local control and individual-level decision-making, the medical freedom movement should be viewed as reflective of the present populist moment.

The tension between expertise and popular participation emerges because technocracy aspires to create policy without politics (Schmidt, 2019). That is, technocracy represents a form of depoliticization where policy decisions are largely removed from the realm of representative politics. In this sense, it is the opposite of the "antagonistic repoliticization," described by Brubaker as a defining characteristic of populism (2017, 364). The ambition of technocracy to render all political decisions into technical ones is ultimately its fundamental conceit, as nearly all public policy issues are examples of what Rittel and Weber (1973) describe as "wicked problems." As they write, "Planning problems are inherently wicked. As distinguished from problems in the natural sciences, which are definable and separable and may have solutions that are findable, the problems of governmental planning—and especially those of social or policy planning—are ill-defined; and they rely upon elusive political judgement for resolution (Rittel

and Weber, 1973, 160)." Even the most scientifically sound policy decision will inevitably have differential impacts. Consequently, expertise consistently reinserts the political into ostensibly apolitical policy decisions.

In summary, the medical freedom movement underscores a central problem of contemporary governance. Science is increasingly used to justify and legitimate policy decisions. This dovetails with the presumption that governments will act in the best interests of their populace. At the same time, democratic norms demand both government transparency and public participation. But what happens when public participation and the scientific justification of policy decisions conflict with one another?

As Merton writes, "the anti-science movement derives from the conflict between the ethos of science and of other social institutions […] Conflict arises when the social effects of applying knowledge are deemed undesirable, when the scientist's skepticism is directed towards the basic values of other institutions (1938, 336)." While quick to note that there are other sources of opposition to science, I focus my attention on this form of inter-institutional conflict. Collins' observation of conflict emerging between two morally distinct institutional spheres is true, but setting up the dichotomy as one of pro or anti-science misses the mark. At this point, the cultural and epistemic authority of science (in terms of an abstract process of knowledge creation) is widespread. Of course, there are holdouts among specific populations and regarding certain issues (for example, opposition to the science of evolution among Christian fundamentalists). But the general belief in the scientific method to generate reliable and objective knowledge about the world is widely held.

Instead of setting up a binary over the status of science, conflict is instead directed towards what properly constitutes science. That is, the conflict is between trust that science as a

standardized process was adhered to versus suspicion that "worldly" concerns (political bias, greed, careerism, etc.) have tainted the scientific process. Thus, the question is not whether a group opposes or supports some scientific claim. Instead, the question is often whether the claim qualifies as science at all.

My findings contribute to an emerging body of work concerning partisan epistemologies. As an emerging body of work suggests, a lack of media or data literacy does *not* typify the medical freedom movement or adjacent communities (Tripodi, 2018; Lee et al., 2021). Indeed, these individuals display a high degree of media/data literacy, critically analyzing sources and considering how larger social forces shape the information presented to them. These findings problematize often recommended suggestions such as fact-checking to combat misinformation on social media. The attendees of these events recognize that the capacity to label something as truth is a function of power.

Finally, this paper adds to the recent call for greater integration of social movement research with science and technology studies (Hess, 2016). As the cultural and epistemic authority of science is increasingly used to justify public policy decisions, science itself increasingly becomes an object around which social movements mobilize. The politicization of science in the public sphere has already had significant impact on the fight against climate change and plays a direct role in the anti-vaccination movement. As scientific incursions into the lifeworld are unlikely to abate anytime soon, we can only expect science to be at the center of contentious politics.

CHAPTER 3

"Welcome to the Other Side"

Digitally-mediated Interaction Ritual Chains and the Social Amplification of Misinformation

In the previous two chapters, I have attempted to problematize the periodizing concept of post-truth politics by suggesting that contestation over knowledge claims is not a novel development, but is instead endemic to political debates. In this chapter, I turn my attention towards the relationship between social media and contentious knowledge. Much has been written about this relationship, as the democratizing impact of social media on knowledge production has allowed for the proliferation of competing truth claims. Particular attention has been paid to the role that algorithmic recommendation systems play in the dissemination of heterodox information. The general logic of the argument is that algorithmic recommendation "corrals"' users into online echo chambers, where they are only exposed to information that affirms their pre-existing beliefs.

While no doubt important, I recommend a closer focus on interaction and epistemic norms to understand how online communities generate and sustain alternative bodies of knowledge. That is, rather than simply focusing on *algorithmic* reinforcement, we should instead also consider *social* reinforcement. To do this, I extend Randall Collins' (2004) interaction ritual chain [IRC] framework to the digital world. It is through interaction rituals that the alternative knowledge claims described in the previous chapter are produced and legitimated. Such processes are aided through design decisions of various social media platforms, but my argument is not a technologically determinist one. Instead, interaction norms and a distinct partisan

epistemology interact with the design features of social media to produce distinct communities united by a shared institutional distrust and oppositional identity. Drawing on the participatory culture of the Internet, online crowds generate and sustain what Irene Pasquetto (2022) and her colleagues have described as an "infrastructure of disinformation (2)."

In forwarding this argument, I call into question Collins' (2004) argument concerning the necessity of physical co-presence to produce successful interaction rituals. Collins argues that the emotional energy and symbol generation produced during social exchanges requires physical co-presence. I argue that this is another manifestation of digital dualism, where online life is understood as being less "real" than offline interfaces. Instances of so-called "online radicalization" should call this assumption into question. Successful interaction rituals do occur online and scholars should shift their focus into understanding how they function rather than simply asking if they happen.

I begin by reviewing the literature concerning algorithmic recommendation systems and their relationship with spreading alternative belief systems. I then turn towards the literature concerning sociotechnical systems, suggesting that a myopic focus on the technological obscures our understanding of how communities organized around alternative knowledge function. To address both the social and technological, I next introduce Randall Collins' interaction ritual chains framework to show how such a framework can be fruitfully deployed to understand how the knowledge claims circulating in these communities become understood as legitimate knowledge by their members. I then turn to my empirical case, r/NoNewNormal, an online community organized around skepticism towards the mainstream scientific consensus surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. I conclude by calling for greater attentiveness to the

actual social life of mis/disinformation communities and a greater recognition of how offline and online life is increasingly intertwined (Tripodi, 2021).

Algorithmic Recommendation Systems

On June 8, 2019, technology writer Kevin Roose published a front-page story in the New York Times titled, "The Making of a YouTube Radical." The story is a familiar one. It details the experience of a young man named Caleb Cain who was "radicalized" by content he found on the video sharing platform. A college drop-out, Cain found himself spending increasing time on YouTube, as the platform's recommendation algorithm purportedly led him to ever more extreme content. He describes embracing various conspiratorial beliefs as a result, feeling as if he was being made privy to esoteric and forbidden knowledge that others did not enjoy.

The basic narrative described by Roose has dominated a substantial portion of the discussion surrounding mis/disinformation and political polarization, but scholarship concerning the impact of algorithmic recommendation has provided mixed results. For example, Ribeiro et al. (2020) find evidence of "radicalization pathways" stemming from YouTube's recommendation system, with the platform increasingly suggesting extremist content over time. By following the commenting behavior of users (a rough proxy for engagement), Ribiero and his co-authors find that users commenting on "alt right" videos followed a pattern of progression from mainstream conservatism to far right content. However, Ledwich and Zaitsev (2019) find precisely the opposite. Rather than driving users towards more niche content, Ledwich and Zaitsev provide evidence that the platform's recommendation system generally "pushes" users towards more mainstream content.

This work is hampered by both methodological limitations and questionable theoretical assumptions. Beginning with the former, such work fails to account for a central feature of

YouTube's design, personalization. That is, extant research was conducted without being signed into an account. Consequently, this research does not mirror the experience that someone with a YouTube account would experience. More recent work has attempted to address the impact of personalization by conducting large-scale observational studies where participants are asked to install a web browser extension to observe their "naturalistic" online behavior. This work further calls into question arguments that attribute a profound "radicalizing" effect to recommendation algorithms. As Chen et al. (2021) write, "We do not find clear evidence that YouTube frequently exposes people with neutral or mixed views on issues such as race to alternative or extremist content. Instead, the audience for videos from alternative or extremist channels is dominated by people who already have high levels of racial resentment (36)." Rather than a radicalizing effect, Chen and her colleagues find evidence supporting selection effects. That is, rather than leading users to extremist content, users interested in this content seek it out independently and algorithmic curation amplifies the content. This subtle distinction is an important one. As Forberg (2022) notes in his digital ethnography of QAnon, assigning too much agency to algorithms risks obscuring the fact that people often seek out others like themselves.

In addition to methodological limitations, much of the work concerning "radicalization pathways" relies on assumptions concerning media effects that have been refuted by media scholars for decades. Most notable, the assumption underlying much of this work is what media scholars have referred to as the "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle" model of media effects (Marwick, 2018; Munger and Phillips, 2022). That is, media messages have a direct impact on passive audiences who uncritically accept said content. In this formulation, audiences are implicitly understood as vessels waiting to be injected with content rather than being actively engaged with media.

The model of direct media effects has been subject to empirical refutation for over half a century, as scholars have drawn attention to the role that "opinion leaders" play in both disseminating and interpreting media messages (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 2017; Katz, 1957). Katz (1957, 61) referred to this as the "two-step flow of communication model" because it detailed a process where opinion leaders acted as intermediaries between the mass media and the masses. While early work on media effects vastly understated the amount of "one-step flow," their central insight regarding the role of social interaction in shaping media effects remains salient (Marwick, 2018).

While determining the impact of algorithmic content curation on individual users will remain a challenging statistical problem for the immediate future, we do have evidence of how recommendation algorithms structure social life. YouTube has revealed that roughly 75 percent of the content viewed on the site was algorithmically recommended, as opposed to content that users actively searched for (though this is simply a different form of algorithmic recommendation). Similarly, in their analysis of YouTube, Kaiser and Rauchfleisch (2020) find evidence of "algorithmic homophily," with channel recommendations producing homophilous channel clusters that share similar content, themes, and positions.

At the same time, we should exercise caution lest we overstate the impact of algorithmic recommendation systems. Concerns about "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" often reinforce an implicit technological determinism where a tyrannical algorithm supplants human agency. While algorithmic recommendation is central to the architecture of many social media platforms, it is important to recognize the continued importance of decision-making on the part of users (Forberg, 2021). People like to spend time with those like them and while it is tempting to

privilege the role of algorithmic curation in generating groups of like-minded individuals, we should exercise caution before concluding that the "algorithm decides."

A more productive consideration of the impact of algorithmic recommendation turns our attention away from individual users and towards collectivities. For example, Lim (2017: 422) introduces the concept of *algorithmic enclaves* to refer to "a discursive arena where individuals, afforded by their constant interactions with algorithms, interact with each other and collectivize based on a perceived shared identity online for defending their beliefs and protecting their resources from both real and perceived threats, usually from a common enemy." While she uses the term to describe online Indonesian nationalist communities, the concept can be broadly deployed to reference the online siloing of individuals into communities with like-minded others. Critically, this need not be a technologically deterministic process. Instead, recommendation systems play a critical role in structuring online, but *the algorithm does not "decide."*

Beyond the Algorithm

Skepticism towards the radicalization pathways narrative has prompted scholars to suggest other important "radicalization" dynamics. For example, Munger and Philips (2022) offer a "supply and demand" model based on their analysis of YouTube's affordances. Rather than focusing solely on the platform's recommendation algorithm, they turn their attention towards other design features. Most notably, the ease with which anyone can generate and upload content. As they write, "the structure of YouTube encourages the growth of political ecosystems. Because of the discoverability of YouTube videos, the enhanced monetization opportunities from both YouTube itself and technologies that have developed in parallel, and the efficiency provided by video in creating many hours of content, YouTube has the capacity to support a huge number of distinct media personalities (Munger and Phillips, 2022, 196)." Their

interpretation is broadly in line with YouTube's own promotional material, which frames the platform as means for individuals to "broadcast yourself."

In discussing the demand side of the equation, they problematize an essential assumption of the radicalization literature. As they write, "We believe it is premature to discuss the "radicalizing" potential of far-right media without discussing all the ways in which such an audience could have already existed, albeit without access to media more consistent with their ideological ideal points (Munger and Phillips, 2022, 196)." In other words, rather than extremist media "radicalizing" consumers, these consumers are instead finding content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs.

Of course, it is nearly impossible to determine if this is the case. But it does raise an important consideration. Is migration to more "extreme" content a signal that radicalization has occurred? Or does it signal that someone is searching for content that aligns with the beliefs they already hold? Again, it is difficult to adjudicate between these two explanations and both are likely true simultaneously. Though we might note that recent ethnographic work provides some tentative support for the latter. Recent qualitative work has underscored the widespread feeling of dispossession and loss felt among U.S. conservatives, particularly white conservatives (Hochschild, 2016; Wuthnow, 2018; Kramer, 2016; Gest, 2016). Similarly, recent work has also underscored declining institutional trust in recent decades (Brubaker, 2017; Bennett and Livingstone, 2018). While hardly definitive, this would suggest the existence of an audience for this content, independent of any radicalizing effect from algorithmic recommendation systems.

In addition, rather than focusing specifically on the technical features of platforms, we can also broaden our analytic lens to include social and cultural dynamics. The work of Rebecca Lewis (2020) is also instructive. In her analysis of political "micro-celebrity" on YouTube, she

shows how various social media personalities frame themselves in opposition to mainstream media sources through rhetorical techniques emphasizing authenticity, relatability, and accountability. The concept of micro-celebrity was initially developed by Marwick (2015) to refer to individuals developing a social media following by taking advantage of online participatory culture. Lewis takes this concept and extends it to political social media personalities. A critical insight from Lewis is how these individuals leverage the mechanisms of micro-celebrity in offering a broader critique of "mainstream media," which is understood to be untruthful and biased in favor of liberal/leftist positions. As she writes, "Within this framing, the alternative style of micro-celebrity practices—centered around relatability, authenticity, and accountability—contributes to the substance of their political arguments. Put differently, micro-celebrity practices themselves become a political protest against the mainstream media and the social justice-driven politics the subjects of this analysis believe it represents. Together, the micro-celebrity practices of these influencers thus embody and become aligned with a reactionary political standpoint (Lewis, 2020, 214)." Lewis' work points us towards a greater attentiveness to cultural practices that generate content resonant with their respective audiences

In addition to cultural practices, community dynamics further influence the knowledge production process. Popular narratives surrounding online radicalization often invoke the language of rabbit holes, evoking images of users drawn into an increasingly insular world, as their ideas become more extreme. Note that this is a social process, as the radicalization process takes place in the context of community. Indeed, community is central to the entire process. As Hardin notes,

> In normal politics it is the extremists who depart and the less intense who remain behind. In fringe politics, the moderates exit, leaving the most intense behind. The outmigration

> of the less committed from an exclusionary group leaves the hard core in control. But the exclusionary practices of an extreme group do more than this. *They affect the knowledge of the group's members* (Hardin, 2002, 10, emphasis added).

Vermeule and Sunstein (2008) elaborate on this argument, contending that those who subscribe to conspiracy theories experience a "crippled epistemology," in which they draw information from only a small handful of sources which they consider authoritative.

Consequently, IRs not only affirm group solidarity, but they also reaffirm individual identity. This is in part a consequence of what Kahan has called "identity-protective cognition." Kahan writes, "The basic premise of identity protective cognition is that culture is prior to fact in the apprehension of societal risks. Culture is not just normatively prior, in the sense that values guide individuals' decision-making conditional on their perception of facts. It is cognitively prior, in the sense that people's perception of what the facts are is shaped by their values (2017, 2)." As such, it can be understood as a form of confirmation bias.

Participatory Culture

In moving beyond theoretical models privileging the role of technology, I suggest greater attentiveness to social and cultural dynamics. Particularly germane to the present discussion is the role of participatory culture. Jenkins (2009: xi) provides an early but still relevant definition. As he writes, participatory culture is "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informational mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. ." Discussions of participatory culture accompanied the emergence of what has been described as "Web 2.0," that is, the emergence of more "interactive" websites relying on user-generated content and a move away from the static, primarily text-based internet of Web 1.0.

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the role of participatory culture in the proliferation of mis/disinformation. The work of Kate Starbird and her collaborators (2019), who frame disinformation as collaborative work, is illustrative. In their analysis of "false flag" conspiracy theories following mass shooting events, they describe an emergent and organic form of disinformation that is not "coordinated" in any strict sense of the word. As they write:

> Their conspiracy theorizing about crisis events is not controlled by an outside actor or group. *Instead, it emerges "organically" through the activities of group members who have come to share an epistemology that views world events as controlled by powerful, sinister actors and "mainstream" media as co-conspirators that help to hide that truth.* This group does not wait for an external disinformation agent to give them the signal to start theorizing. Instead, each new event becomes interpreted through the same lens, and becomes a catalyst for another round of conspiracy theorizing. The participants work together to assemble available evidence to support their theories, often adjusting their alternative narrative to accommodate new pieces of information. (Starbird et al., 2019, 15, emphasis added)

While actions of groups and organizations such as Russia's Internet Research Agency have led some scholars to focus on highly-coordinated, top-down information operations, the work of Starbird and her colleagues underscores the myriad forms of dis/misinformation found online. Rather than focusing specifically on the technological affordances that enable the creation and maintenance of these communities, a recognition of the participatory culture that typifies the

contemporary internet underscores the importance of considering the social alongside the technological.

Online echo chambers are not simply the product of tyrannical algorithms siloing users into like-minded communities. Nor are online echo chambers simply a product of offline polarization migrating online. Instead, both processes are imbricated with one another. As Marwick writes, "a *sociotechnical theory of media effects* must examine actors, preferably taking an ethnographic approach to understanding cultural practice and group identity, and media, as both patterns of messages and sets of technological affordances which constrain or enable certain meanings and actions (2018, 488, emphasis in original)." The reader will note that Marwick's methodological and theoretical insight draws attention to the *individuals* consuming media, the *messages* contained in said media, and the *technology* used to share content. Following the work of Marwick, I suggest affording greater attention to the culture of online communities, particularly the interaction and epistemic norms that guide behavior. To that effect, I draw upon Randall Collins' interaction ritual chains framework.

Interaction Ritual Chains

Interaction rituals chains [hereafter, IRCs] are a micro-sociological elaboration and extension of Durkheim and Goffman, offering a theoretical framework that helps us understand how local and immediate face-to-face interactions produce group symbols and boundaries, thus offering the micro-sociological foundation for understanding meso- and macro-level outcomes. This ambitious project begins by acknowledging that all social life is ultimately instantiated in interactions between individuals. Framing these interactions as rituals, Collins argues that our lives are a series, or chain, of interaction rituals.

Before proceeding, we must clarify Collins' use of the word "ritual." In day-to-day life, ritual is used to denote routine behaviors *and* formal practices. Collins' formulation includes both. On one end of the spectrum, consider the ritual of greeting others. When asked how we are doing, we recognize the ritual character of this phrase and know that we are not expected to give an exhaustive or even accurate response to the question. Instead, we typically respond with something like, "I'm doing well. And yourself?" On the other end of the spectrum are activities that most of us would readily describe as rituals, such church services, weddings, and other formal, institutionalized social practices. It is both forms of ritual that constitute our daily lives according to Collins[4]. Across this spectrum, we find both successful and failed IRs.

What does it mean for an IR to be successful? We've all no doubt participated in conversations with a disinterested or distracted person. Similarly, many have attended a musical performance that failed to excite the crowd or otherwise felt flat. In both instances, this disconnect evinces a lack of shared focus and inter-subjectivity. Consider a stimulating conversation. Both participants are engaged, attentive, and operate in tune with the rhythm of the dialogue. There is a general sense of connection and shared understanding of the present situation. It is these qualities that define a successful IR. Similarly, consider a concert in which the crowd is completely captivated by the performer, where individual excitement gives way to collective effervescence.

IRs are not as binary as presented here. Returning to our previous examples, a casual conversation between two individuals is unlikely to produce the same level of emotional energy as individuals might experience when at a concert surrounded by thousands of other fans. To say

[4] This builds on the use of the term "ritual" as used by Goffman, whose work regularly attended to the mundane rituals of everyday life. As Goffman writes, "I use the term 'ritual' because this activity, however informal and secular, represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of [their] acts whole in the immediate presence of an object that has a special value for [them]."

that an IR is successful, is simply to convey that there was some element of shared focus, where people are attuned to those they are interacting with. Collins' uses the word *entrainment* to refer to this shared sense of attention.

Entrainment exists on a continuum. Returning to the example of a highly engaging conversation between two people: they are entrained by one another, with the give and take of conversation occurring smoothly and organically. Both participants are on the same page, so to speak. Similarly, consider individuals participating in a church choir. They are fully immersed in the experience and in tune with their choir mates. These are examples of high entrainment states. But entrainment need not be so totalizing or consuming. A routine interaction with a bank teller provides an illustrative example. The interaction is polite and friendly, owing to the norms of such an exchange, but neither party is likely to be wholly engrossed by the encounter. There is a shared understanding of the situation, but it does not produce the same level of entrainment as observed in the two previous examples. In this sense, Collins views the ritual quality of an interaction as a variable, stretching from quotidian routines to highly formalized rituals.

Necessary elements and outcomes

Collins identifies four elements as being indispensable to successful IRs. These elements are bodily co-presence, in-group boundaries, common attention focus, and common emotional experiences. But as we will see, the necessary elements of a successful IR are also often the products of successful IRs. These products include group solidarity, emotional energy, sacred objects/symbols of group membership, and common standards of morality.

Group solidarity both fosters and builds upon successful IRs. This provides an opportunity to elaborate on the reciprocal relationship between the ingredients and outcomes of successful IRs. In-group boundaries are stronger in the presence of pre-existing group solidarity.

As such, solidarity is a resource that can be deployed in future IRs. However, group solidarity can also be produced in the absence of pre-existing solidarity (Heider and Warner, 2010). Indeed, the construction of group solidarity *through* the ritual itself is an example of a successful IR *par excellence.*

In the context of politics, the IRC framework can help us understand how individuals become emotionally invested in political and social movements. As Collins writes, "it is not the interests that holds us together, but our shared talk about interests: it is these symbol-formulated-interests that carry the Durkheimian solidarity of membership. For that reason, people in a political interest group can become committed to material interests in an emotional and moralistic way (2014, 303)." This insight should be familiar to social movement scholars, who have long noted that group interests must be articulated by movement entrepreneurs in the form of resonant frames (Snow and Benford, 2000).

Emotional energy is another product of successful IRs. As Collins writes, "[EE] is like the psychological concept of "drive," but it has a specifically social orientation. High emotional energy is a feeling of confidence and enthusiasm for social interaction. It is the personal side of having a great deal of Durkheimian ritual solidarity with a group (2004, 108)." But as we've all experienced, the presence or absence of emotional energy, as articulated by Collins, is not the only potential outcome of any given interaction. Consequently, the concept of *emotional energy* is undertheorized in Collins' work. Boyns and Luery (2015) elaborate on Collins' theorizing of emotional energy, drawing attention to valence. Collins is primarily concerned with positive emotional energy from successful interaction rituals. He devotes much less time to negative emotional energy, which Boyns and Luery elaborate on. As they write, "Interaction rituals do not simply produce "ups and downs" of emotional energy; they also frequently result in negative

consequences, creating enduring and potent feelings of disaffiliation and animosity (Boyns and Luery, 2015, 165).” I will return to this point later but will provide some scaffolding for that conversation by underscoring the importance of affective polarization in contemporary U.S. politics (Iyengar et al., 2012). Affective polarization, as the name suggests, refers to the emotional component of political polarization — specifically, the feeling of out-group antipathy experienced by extreme partisans.

Another outcome of successful IRs is what Collins refers to as *sacred objects* or in more secular language, symbols of group membership. In referring to sacred objects, Collins is drawing upon the language of Durkheim. But as with his use of ritual, sacred objects are not strictly a religious phenomenon. The sacred objects created by successful IRs are simply symbols of group membership. Critically, these symbols are not necessarily objects, but can include words, ideas, or gestures. Consequently, both the U.S. flag and the phrase “land of the free” would be construed as symbols of group membership. But ideas themselves can also be sacralized, such as a belief in the importance of limited state power.

It is these symbols that sustain group solidarity and emotional energy between different IRs. Moreover, these objects become cultural resources used in future IRs, as demonstrated through the concept of “inside jokes.” Inside jokes develop from successful IRs. They emerge from personal interactions and continue to hold emotional weight after the initial interaction. They can be repeated in future interactions, but “getting” the joke relies on having built cultural resources from the initial encounter.

Finally, successful IRs generate common standards of morality. This includes, “the sense of rightness of rightness in adhering to the group, respecting its symbols, and defending both against transgressors. Along with this goes the sense of moral evil or impropriety in violating the

group's solidarity and its symbolic representations (Collins, 2004, 49)." Here we can look towards Durkheim's view on punishment, where punishment and the sanction of deviance serves as a reaffirmation of a group's values. As Collins writes:

> In terms of the Durkheimian model of religious ritual, a conversation is a cult in which all believers share a moral solidarity. In fact, it creates the reference point of moral solidarity: those who believe are the good; defense of the belief and hence of the group is righteousness; evil is disbelief in, and even more so attack upon, the cognitive symbols that hold the group together. The cognitive symbols, however banal, particularized, or esoteric the conversational content may be, are important to the group and defended by it because they are the vehicle by means of which the group is able to unify itself (1981).

On the necessity of physical co-presence

The necessity of physical co-presence has been the most routine target of criticism regarding the IRC framework (Maloney, 2013; Ling, 2010; DiMaggio et al., 2018; Jodén and Strandell, 2021). Much of this work shows that successful mediated IRs *do* happen, but with qualifications. For example, Ling (2010) notes that communication via mobile phones bolsters, rather than supplants pre-existing relationships. In this case, he finds that an attenuated form of IRs is occurring through mobile communication, but that such interactions are a supplement rather than a replacement for face-to-face interaction. Others have focused their work solely on online life and find that the same dynamics play out in a variety of online settings including eating disorder forums (Maloney, 2013), workplace messaging systems (DiMaggio et al., 2018), and video game streaming platforms (Jodén and Strandell, 2021).

Based on this body of work, I contend that successful IRs can and do happen in the absence of physical co-presence. That being said, we must still attend to how co-presence operates online. Beaulieu's (2010) discussion of co-presence versus co-location can help us better grapple with this component of interaction rituals. While Beaulieu raises this distinction to develop a methodological argument concerning the nature of fieldwork in highly mediated environments, the distinction she draws also highlights the limits of viewing bodily co-presence as an indispensable element of interaction rituals. As she writes, "Co-presence decentralizes the notion of space without excluding it. It opens up the possibility that co-presence might be established through a variety of modes, physical co-location being one among others (Beaulieu, 2010, 454)."

As Zhao and Elesh (2008) argue, co-location is a *spatial* relationship, while co-presence is a *social* relationship. Consider gatherings in a large, bureaucratic setting such as a DMV or social security office. Individuals are co-located, but the norms of sociality in such venues don't typically lend themselves to robust interactions. While individuals might strike up casual conversations as they wait, it is unlikely that such interactions are producing the type of emotional energy described by Collins. Contrast this with a dyadic exchange between romantic partners via a text messaging app. Co-location is absent. The exchange may even be highly asynchronous. But given the nature of romantic relationships, there is likely co-presence. The two individuals are meaningfully engaged and available to one another (we hope!).

Beyond the notion of co-presence, we can propose other potential mechanisms undergirding online IRCs. For example, DiMaggio et al. (2018) draw on the work Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of speech genres to postulate how the IRC framework might apply to online spaces. Speech genres refer to the "relatively stable types" of language use (both oral and

written) that emerge in any specific sphere (Bakhtin, 1986). A speech genre captures the conventions around language use that dominate any given sphere. DiMaggio et al. (2018) suggest two ways in which the concept of speech genres can help us understand how IRs operate online.

First, speech genres "entail normative expectations and stylized communicative shortcuts that make them distinctive and facilitate their interpretation (Bakhtin, 1986, 85)." As such, speech genres can generate barriers to outsiders, who are unfamiliar with the conventions governing language in any given space. Secondly, speech genres are interactive. That is, it is not merely the speaker or writer who is communicating. The listener or reader is actively engaged in communication. While individuals are often only reading text or watching videos, it is not merely passive consumption. This view aligns with the "active audiences" approach to the study of media effects, which underscores that individuals do not mindlessly consume media (Marwick, 2018). Stated differently, Bhaktin's insight concerning speech genres suggests that individuals enter into a dialogic relationship when engaging the written word, such as online content produced by others.

r/NoNewNormal

Much of the work concerning algorithmic amplification has focused on YouTube. This is unsurprising, given both its size and how central algorithmic recommendation is the platform's user experience. Indeed, the algorithmic sorting of content is a central feature of online life, even in instances where content is simply organized in a chronological fashion. But this form of organization operates differently across different platforms, with content recommendation varying in how central it is to the user experience. In an effort to go "beyond the algorithm," I turn my attention to Reddit, a platform that describes itself as the "front page of the Internet."

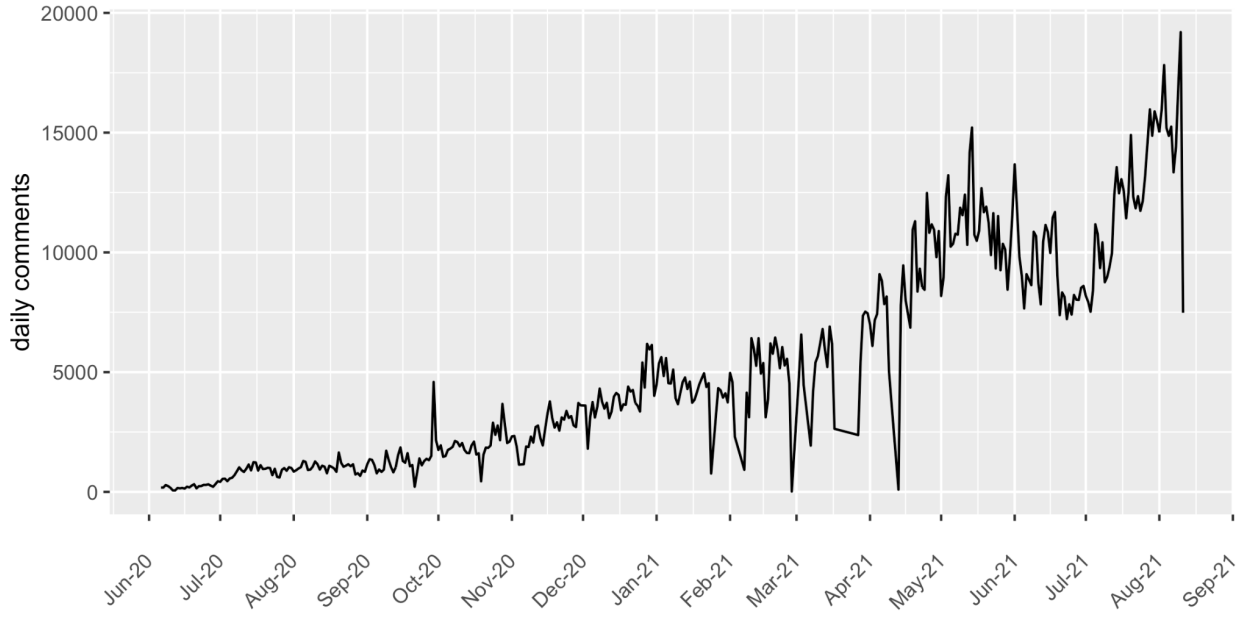
Reddit can best be described as a content aggregator. Users submit content in the form of self-written "posts" or links to external content such as YouTube videos and news links. Other users can then comment on these posts. The platform itself is composed of numerous smaller communities known as "subreddits." The range of these subreddits is incredibly broad and extends from political communities such as r/conservative to hobbies such as r/gardening and r/cooking to cute animal photos such as r/aww and everything in between. When users create an account, they are automatically subscribed to a collection of default subreddits but are free to subscribe or unsubscribe to as many as they would like. Critically, as we will see later, users are able to create their own subreddits.

As with most platforms, the content on Reddit is algorithmically organized. Users do have some control over how information is presented. For example, organizing content by "new" orders content chronologically, with newer posts/comments appearing higher in the queue. The other means of sorting content rely on Reddit's voting system. Users can "upvote" and "downvote" content, influencing how content appears to others. The voting system fits into the platform's broader approach to community management, which leans heavily in favor of communities governing themselves.

If a user organizes content by "top," posts/comments with the greatest net numbers of votes (upvotes minus downvotes) will appear towards the top of the page. That is, organizing by "top" will present content with the greatest level of positive engagement (measured through voting, not comments). This can be contrasted with "hot," which works similar to "top" but also factors in how old a comment/post is. This is an oversimplification of Reddit's algorithmic organizing process, but in short, it is largely a function of how the users themselves respond to content via voting.

In a strict sense, Reddit does algorithmically recommend content, but personalization doesn't function in the way that it does on platforms such as YouTube or Facebook. Users self-select into subreddits of their choice and the algorithmic sorting process works in tandem with the voting system. This is in marked contrast to platforms such as YouTube, which rely much more heavily on personalization when recommending content. This difference in approaches to content recommendation makes Reddit an ideal case for studying how social interaction, rather than algorithmic recommendation, amplifies and reinforces alternative claims of knowledge.

In this chapter, I focus on a large subreddit devoted to COVID-19 skepticism known as r/NoNewNormal. The community was established in June 2020 by the user of a thematically similar subreddit. Growth was rapid, as the community eventually reached over 122,000 subscribers. Growth is further reflected through the level of engagement (captured by the total number of daily comments), as evidenced by the graph below.



The community was eventually banned after the platform began cracking down on COVID-19 misinformation. The stated reason for the ban was that the subreddit's users were

engaged in "brigading," a form of collective action in which users from one community "invade" another community with the goal of disrupting conversation. An update from Reddit administrators stated:

> we found very clear signals indicating that r/NoNewNormal was the source of around 80 brigades in the last 30 days (largely directed at communities with more mainstream views on COVID or location-based communities that have been discussing COVID restrictions). This behavior continued even after a warning was issued from our team to the Mods. r/NoNewNormal is the only subreddit in our list of high signal subs where we have identified this behavior and it is one of the largest sources of community interference we surfaced as part of this work

It is worth noting that this ban also occurred following collective action on the part of Reddit's userbase. In response to rampant health misinformation, various subreddits went "private" as an act of protest. Subreddits can either be marked as private or public. When private, only subscribers to that community can see its content. Given that many of these communities had hundreds of thousands of users, going private had a profound impact on how users experienced the platform.

As a major online hub for COVID-19 misinformation r/NoNewNormal is an ideal case for studying the social life of online misinformation. In the following section, I report results from a content analysis of r/NoNewNormal, using interaction rituals as an interpretive framework. My major finding is that the community did not simply function as a space to share and discuss information about the COVID-19 pandemic. Users, united by a broader distrust of public health agencies and the mainstream scientific consensus concerning the pandemic, offered

support to one another as they faced personal and professional challenges due to failure to comply with public health measures. In this sense, r/NoNewNormal largely functioned as an emotional support hub, a role that online communities play for a whole host of other groups.

Group assembly and shared focus

r/NoNewNormal grew out of a pre-existing community called r/LockdownSkepticism which, as the name suggests, was devoted to the "interdisciplinary examination of lockdowns and other pandemic policies." In a post on r/LockdownSkepticism announcing the formation of the new subreddit, the creator noted: "

> r/LockdownSkepticism has helped me so much throughout the last few months. I want to carry on its tradition but expand the scope to not just the lockdowns but everything else that's going on. I feel like powerful people are trying to re-condition us. I know that sounds like something a conspiracy theorist might say but I'm not sure how else to describe it. I hope I'm wrong but maybe we should plan for the possibility of this actually being the case." In response, the top voted comment stated, "Excellent new sub! Now we have 2 subs to fight against the tyranny and wake people up. We are up against the greatest propaganda machine the world has ever seen and against the people who decide global rules.

Shared focus is also developed through the way the community polices itself, notably through its voting system. While the overwhelming majority of comments were broadly in line with COVID-19 skepticism, minority voices would occasionally chime in. Without fail, these comments would be aggressively "downvoted." A consequence of this is that Reddit's scoring algorithm would lower the visibility of these comments (unless users sorted by "new"). This had

the effect of ensuring that the most visible content was largely in line with the dominant viewpoint of the community. But note that this was not a function of algorithmic reinforcement (at least in the usual sense of the term), but instead was a community-driven process aided by the design features of the platform itself.

Shared mood

A spirit of resistance typified r/NoNewNormal, reflecting a broader institutional distrust. Much of this distrust, as with the offline ethnographic fieldwork described in the previous chapter, was aimed at the scientific community. As one user commented, "Science used to be the open discussion of data from both sides, conferences used to encourage debate. What we have now is propaganda. I respect the scientific method. What we have here in regards to covid is the furthest thing from that." It was widely held that the scientific consensus regarding COVID-19 was a function of power, rather than truth, with dissenting views being deliberately suppressed to prop up what these users say as a politically-motivated consensus. As one user plainly stated it, "A second opinion is how science gets done."

Beyond this distrust of the scientific community, users frequently expressed frustration with their fellow citizens. A major lament was the widespread perception that others were too quick to comply with public health measures. As one user noted:

> I'm losing hope. Every single person around me is caving to the pressure. Why can't they see that we are already living in tyranny? They "are tired of stressing about it." They are afraid of losing their rights so they just do it. That's insane. I'm very sad about this.

This frustration often took a decidedly moral tone, suggesting that those following public health measures had abdicated personal responsibility for one's health decisions in favor of trusting the pronouncements of experts. Compliance was viewed as being at odds with people taking

personal responsibility for one's health. A common sentiment was that public health measures were unnecessary because if the COVID-19 virus was truly severe, individuals would respond accordingly. As one user stated, "It's my opinion that the government should keep its nose out of the whole thing. People have a natural aversion to dying. No need to force families into destitution or print money our great grandchildren will need to pay back […] I'd still default to leaving people to make their own risk assessments no matter the setting." Echoing this sentiment, another user suggested, "If the virus was super deadly you wouldn't have to have govt [sic] mandates. People would stay at home by choice because they would see with their own eyes how deadly it is." The argument that people should have the freedom to perform their own risk calculation aligned with the broader ethos of personal responsibility. As another user commented:

> We already know that no one is going to do anything about these lock downs as long as they keep us ignorant and continue to give NPCs some hope with the vaccine and talking about potential reopening months in the future. All these NPCs think they are doing their part to end all of this by complying, they don't realize that they have been played, that is what the elites want them to do. By tying hope and future prosperity compliance they have created the perfect subjects who will listen to their every decree. This ends when we want it to, they only have power when we comply.

NPC is a reference to a meme that emerged following the 2016 U.S. presidential election. It is an abbreviation for "non-player character," a concept lifted from video games. In a video game, an NPC is a character that a user can interact with, but in an extremely limited way, as they often only have one or two lines of dialogue that are repeated with no variation. In describing people as NPC's, the implication is that the individual described as such lacks original thought and

simply parrots whatever the dominant opinion is on any particular matter. Thus, it aligned well with the general view among r/NoNewNormal users that those who complied with public health measures did so without question, exhibiting little if any critical thinking skills.

Many users also expressed frustration at feeling alienated from family and friends because of their views on the pandemic. The following comment was emblematic of this position:

> I have had so many people I grew up with and family members essentially shun me for making observations and asking questions throughout this whole thing. And then there is the vaccine virtue signaling crowd. It's insanity.

As another user commented, "35-year-old in Brooklyn here and definitely an outsider. My friend keeps being "shocked" that I'm 'one of those people.'" Comments such as these were met with outpourings of support, as individuals were encouraged to continue not complying with public health guidelines. Taken together, the shared mood was one of marginalization. As one user succinctly put it, "Any friends you didn't lose because of Trump/Brexit, you will lose because of coronavirus. And any friends you have left after coronavirus, you will lose because of the riots."

Distrust extended towards the terms used in the media to describe the claims forwarded by communities such as r/NoNewNormal, including "conspiracy theories" and "misinformation." Users were quick to recognize these terms as a function of power. As one user noted, "It's pretty easy to easy to become a 'conspiracy theorist' when the term has been re-defined to mean 'anybody who does not blindly accept the CNN narrative in its entirety.'" Moreover, users viewed their claims as an opportunity to speak truth to power, fulfilling an important democratic function. As one person commented:

> So called 'misinformation' is vital in a democracy. I find it funny that in recent months there has been this strange vulgarization of words such as misinformation, bigotry, and racism to the point where they mean completely different than what they used to mean. Anything that questions the left's narrative is misinformation and thus bigotry. Bigotry can't just be bigotry. Misinformation can't just be misinformation. They're always tied to some other word for some reason. Bigotry = racism. Racism = white supremacy. Misinformation = racism. Anti-masker = racism. Questioning the MSM [mainstream media] = racism. Conservative = fascist white supremacist. Information that counters that which is presented by MSM = misinformation. Misinformation = lies. And on and on.

This reflected a broader sense that dissent was being suppressed through labeling heterodox views as misinformation. Taken together, the dominant mood was a mixture of broader institutional distrust, alongside frustration with those who followed public health guidelines such as wearing masks and receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.

Barriers to outsiders

In contrast to Collins' formulation, barriers to outsiders were relatively low, reflecting a broader larger "mission" of the subreddit; to "wake up" those continuing to comply with public health measures. In response to a post from a user beginning to express doubts about COVID-19 mitigation efforts, another user responded:

> Welcome, and kudos to you for beginning to see through this stuff […] I'm crossing my fingers that more and more people wake up to what is happening before it's too late. […] Think of this like the scene in the Matrix; You just took the red pill. Now it's time to communicate what you've realized to others. Do so gently. The more you push, the more people will dig into their existing mindset. Planting a seed of doubt is POWERFUL. No

> one changes their opinions on the spot, but if you can just put a little crack in the foundation --- the powerful structure of lies and deception will eventually crumble on its own. Welcome to the other side.

The above comment reflects the general spirit of openness the community had towards new users and the subreddit's growth was consistently viewed as positive. But beyond simply welcoming new members, users encouraged one another to continue rejecting public health measures in the hope that others would follow suit. One user commented:

> I think it's important to spread the word, but I think the most proactive thing you can do is to just live your life as normal and reject "new normal" at every turn. I have a variety of reasons for not wearing a mask, but the most important reason is because I don't want to contribute to the normalization of masks. We need to do our part to make sure this is less "new normal" and more "temporary unusual situation that's fading fast." Zero tolerance.

Indeed, individuals were largely welcoming to newer users who came to the community expressing doubts about the scientific consensus concerning the pandemic or the public health response. As one user noted, "I know coming around to the idea that there's more to this than public health concerns is going to be painful especially if you've been on board with the narrative from the start and think you've been a good citizen by wearing your mask and staying apart."

Outcomes of successful IRs

Group solidarity and emotional energy

Group solidarity and a feeling of membership are the most immediate products of successful IRs, digital or otherwise. People largely viewed themselves as belonging to a group of

dedicated truth-seekers and dissidents. However, much of solidarity centered around providing emotional support for one another rather than strictly expressing skepticism towards the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of this emotional support concerned strained relationships due to non-compliance with public health measures such as masking, social distancing, and receiving the vaccine.

One user described facing intense pressure from their family to receive the COVID-19 vaccination. In response, one user provided assurance, “Please listen to your gut feeling. You own your body, not your family.” Encouragement in the face of social sanction was a common occurrence. Solidarity did not only extend to other users, but also the moderators. As one user commented, “The mods here are actually worth their salt. Great work standing up for freedom of information around this topic. You guys rock.”

Other users viewed the community as a refuge, where they were free to express their skepticism without fear of being ostracized. As one user commented:

> This new sub [r/NoNewNormal] and the r/lockdownskepticism one are my only two lifelines keeping me sane at this point. Reddit is the only social media I use. I do wish that I could meet people in my immediate area. I was already super isolated before the lockdown, but now it’s just so much worse because I feel like I can’t express myself here without being attacked or dismissed.

The view that one faced ridicule for being transparent about their thoughts concerning the pandemic was widespread. Many individuals expressed feelings of isolation, stemming from both their own heterodox position about the pandemic and their view that others were too eager to forfeit their rights in the name of public health. As a user commented, “This year has been

super exhausting and I'm thankful for all the lovely souls on here for reminding me I'm not insane. And to anyone feeling alone or depressed feel free to message me any time."

Symbols of group membership

Symbols of group membership appear in both material and immaterial forms, including beliefs and vocabulary. It is these beliefs that are affirmed through IRs. Consequently, rather than simply being a function of individual cognition, beliefs become emotionally freighted. It is in this context that various forms of counter-knowledge are affirmed, and a collective identity of resistance is bolstered.

One symbol of group membership was being banned from social media for violating content policies. Such bans were viewed as an indicator that one had "spoken truth to power." One user commented:

> Every time you get banned from a subreddit you earn a Badge. Go get banned from as many as possible and show us your bling. The people who run this website are obviously criminals to democracy and to freedom of speech. Every time they ban one of us it's like adding another drop of water in the wave. The truth will come out eventually. Do not self-censor. Never self-censor. Get banned and then embarrass them for their pathetic ban.

Another user shared, "I was banned from my local city subreddit because I encouraged a worried Redditor to ignore travel restrictions to go check on his sick mother. Haven't looked back – it's a badge of honor." Sharing that one had been banned from another platform or subreddit served as a marker of belonging.

Common standard of morality

The final outcome of a successful IR is a shared moral standard. On r/NoNewNormal, this took the form of valorizing an oppositional identity. Users were adamant in their opposition to public health measures and offered support to those who were facing social sanction due to non-compliance with public health measures.

By far the largest lament was not simply the public health orders being issued, but the fact that others were complying with what they saw as dangerous government overreach. For example, a user offered the following criticism of another user who described wearing a mask in public simply to avoid sanction:

> You are choosing to roll over instead of doing your duty to your neighbor which is to discriminate and reject what is bad. Those who choose to roll over are the primary cause of the lockdowns, providing incentive and reward to the authorities who mandate the lockdowns. If everyone did his job and discriminated, rejecting what is bad, disapproving of ridiculous overreaching behavior, it would not be beneficial for the authorities to attempt the overreaching and they would have no reason to attempt it. The one who rolls over is the guiltiest party of all.

Rejecting public health guidelines wasn't simply a disagreement over policy. It became a morally freighted decision. Pandemic mitigation efforts were viewed not only as misguided but as an assault on cherished values. Consequently, adherence with public health measures was largely interpreted as forfeiting one's agency to comply with the pronouncements of public health agencies.

Discussion

r/NoNewNormal was created to provide a community to discuss opposition to various public health measures designed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. As a direct consequence,

false or misleading information about both the severity of the virus and the efficacy of mitigation efforts were widespread. But I want to suggest that viewing these communities primarily as a space for information sharing obscures important social dynamics that help explain the "stickiness" of misinformation (Tripodi, 2021). Specifically, a focus on information transfer misses how these communities function as emotional support hubs, a role that online communities play for myriad groups.

Users lamented a world where they saw others as being too complacent in complying with public health measures. This discourse took the form of a jeremiad, where such complacency was interpreted as a sign of a broader moral/intellectual decay. Foundational values such as liberty and personal responsibility for one's health were being lost, as people abandoned their rights out of what was viewed as an overly cautious approach to risk. In response, users sought to bolster their communal spirit of resistance by offering support for those flouting public health measures such as masking.

Butter and Reinkowski (2014:19) argue that conspiracy theories in the United States have consistently taken the form of the *Republican jeremiad*, "a blend of the jeremiad, the narrative mode in which the Puritans expressed their fear of declension and republican concerns about corruption." They attribute the persistence of this narrative form to three factors. First, an individualist epistemology of cause and effect that is averse to structural explanations in favor of individual agency. Second, a persistent fear that the Republic is under siege. And finally, the influence of Puritanism, particularly the Manichean worldview it fosters.

This narrative of moral and cultural decay aligns with the broader discourse of dispossession found in recent ethnographic work concerning conservatives (Hochschild; Wuthnow; Cramer). The users of r/NoNewNormal lamented a situation in which basic values

such as liberty and personal responsibility were being sacrificed in the interest of overzealous risk mitigation. It was widely believed that complying with public health measures was aiding a collective descent into greater social and political control. Consequently, opting not to follow public health guidelines was celebrated as a form of resistance against what users saw as a rising authoritarianism.

My findings are largely consonant with the work of Lee et al. (2021) and Tripodi (2021), who have taken a digital ethnographic approach to COVID-19 skepticism on Facebook. In her analysis of ReOpen the States groups on Facebook, Tripodi finds that many of the ideas articulated by these groups resonated with the "deep story" of U.S. conservatism. Moreover, as with the present work, she finds that ReOpen groups routinely suggested the severity of COVID-19 was being exaggerated to expand state power. She continues, "Such logic both emboldened reopen efforts, but also framed those who complied with public health recommendations/requirements as the cultural dupes who had been fooled by the radical left (Tripodi, 2021, n.p.)."

Similarly, in their analysis of the data practices of COVID-19 skeptics, Lee et al. (2021) find the same distinctly moral claim concerning the rejection of expertise in favor of doing one's own research. As they write, "As a subculture, anti-masking amplifies anti-establishment currents pervasive in U.S. political culture. Data literacy, for anti-maskers, exemplifies distinctly American ideals of intellectual self-reliance, which historically takes the form of rejecting experts and other elites. The counter-visualizations that they produce and circulate not only challenge scientific consensus, but they also assert the value of independence in a society that they believe promotes an overall de-skilling and dumbing-down of the population for the sake of more effective social control (Lee et. al, 2021, 14)." Rather than simply being a disagreement

about facts, the counterclaims of COVID-19 skeptics functioned as a moral claim, as users reaffirmed their identity as independently minded critical thinkers.

In addition to shedding light on how institutional distrust is generated and sustained, this project also serves as a supplement to the existing literature concerning algorithmic amplification. While much of the misinformation scholarship concerns itself with the impact of algorithmic recommendations, I argue that a focus on *algorithmic* reinforcement must be coupled with an attentiveness to *social* reinforcement. The former creates an image of siloed sociality, in which users have their worldview entrenched through systems of content recommendation. This highly individualized interpretation fails to capture the fundamentally participatory nature of online communities, where users are not simply consuming content. Instead, they create their own and as we have seen here, interact with one another.

The present work should also encourage scholars to look beyond the impact of algorithmic recommendation systems, as such systems play vastly different roles across different platforms. On reddit, algorithmic recommendation largely occurs within communities, as scoring algorithms organize which posts and comments appear at the top of users' feeds. This is a much more subtle form of algorithmic sorting relative to platforms such as YouTube, where content recommendation is a much more central component of the user experience.

To sum up: the grievances articulated by the users of r/NoNewNormal did not differ substantially from what my subjects shared during the ethnographic observation described in the previous chapter. Moreover, offline and online spheres are imbricated with one another. Rallies are advertised in online communities devoted to COVID-19 skepticism. Similarly, offline events were livestreamed to broaden reach. In critiquing Collins' argument concerning the necessity of physical co-location for successful IRs to occur, I have suggested that we instead recognize that

digital co-presence can function similarly. In doing so, I offer a critique of digital dualism. Moving forward, scholars should recognize that the methodological distinction between traditional ethnography and "digital ethnography" is outdated. In our increasingly mediated reality, scholars must attend to both the offline and the online to paint a robust picture of social life.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Post-truth has been cemented as a watchword for contemporary public discourse. Upon initial review, the concept appears most apt. Consider the emergence of QAnon, the conspiracy-cum-social movement organized around the core belief that several Hollywood celebrities and top-ranking Democratic Party officials are actually part of a Satanic cabal of cannibalistic pedophiles. The fact that such a seemingly fringe phenomenon could gain international prominence would certainly seem to suggest a fundamental change in the relationship between politics and truth.

While post-truth is a tempting moniker for the present political moment, I argue that the concept relies on an unsustainable boundary between the realm of truth and the realm of politics, as the legitimation of the former is a function of the latter. A consequence of this interdependence is that knowledge claims themselves become grounds for contestation. Conflict over knowledge has become more prominent as expertise has come to play an increasingly prominent role in governance and public policy (Eyal, 2019). A consequence of this tightened coupling between expertise and governance is that the former becomes politicized in the process, As Eyal (2019) argues, efforts to scientize politics leads to the politicization of science. This stems from the simple fact that in the world of policy, decisions rarely benefit everyone. That is, while the impact of a policy choice might be a net positive, there are almost certainly those who will find themselves negatively impacted. Eyal (2019) argues that the disparate consequences of policy decisions, even though guided by expertise, lays the foundation for conflicts over the legitimacy of knowledge.

But if truth and politics are locked in an interminable bind with one another, then what is the proper role of expertise in a democratic society? On one hand, the sheer complexity and technological sophistication of contemporary society demands expertise. Epidemics, climate change, and the global financial crises are just some of the recurring challenges where expert judgment is not only valuable but necessary. At the same time, few among us would like to live in a world governed solely by expertise. Indeed, the expectation of robust popular participation is the (aspirational) norm of liberal democracies. How are we to manage this tension between expertise and popular participation if we recognize both as vital to a robust and healthy democratic society?

A useful starting place is to precisely describe the nature of the problem. Collins and Evans' (2002) distinction between the problem of legitimacy versus extension is instructive. The former problem concerns how "experts" legitimize their knowledge as such. Early work in science and technology studies largely concerned itself with this question, particularly within the context of the scientific community. That is, questions of how scientific consensus emerged were central. The chief insight of this body of work is that various extra-scientific influences shape the legitimation of scientific knowledge.

The problem of extension is a related but distinct concern that asks how inclusive technical decision-making should be (Collins and Evans, 2022). The grievances of the informants of the present work reflect the problem of extension. Policy regarding the COVID-19 pandemic was removed from the realm of democratic decision-making. My subjects viewed this as a dangerous expansion of state power that needed to be vigorously resisted. While not expressed in such language, the solution to the problem of extension articulated by my informants was to dispense with the notion of *public* health entirely, as health was viewed as a

personal responsibility that needed to be managed at the individual level rather than being governed by fiat. While there is a certain democratic logic to my informants approach, it ignores the fact that many policy challenges, including grappling with disease outbreaks, are inherently extra-local. Consequently, they demand a response above and beyond those premised solely on individual initiative. But of course the effectiveness of any policy response is contingent upon legitimacy.

The problems of legitimacy and extension are interrelated, as we only extend decision-making powers to those deemed legitimate arbiters of knowledge. But as we have seen in the empirical component of this dissertation, knowledge and politics are deeply intertwined. However, the recognition of the social construction of truth need not devolve into a world of absolute relativism where all claims are of equal value. Instead, this recognition can point towards how we might address the "crisis of expertise."

In providing a tentative solution, I offer one modest suggestion. Namely, addressing the problem of legitimacy requires greater transparency concerning how knowledge, values, and politics intersect with one another. Consider the partisan divide involving support for public health measures designed to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus. At the root of this divide was conflict over the proper role that the state should play in our daily lives. Given the undemocratic means through which pandemic mitigation policies were implemented, it was inevitable that such policies would invite controversy and resistance. Supporters of these measures framed resistance as evidence of anti-scientific attitudes, further exacerbating the conflict. I want to suggest that greater transparency concerning how knowledge might come to conflict with different value systems would bolster democracy and foster increased trust among different stakeholders.

As I have attempted to argue, "post-truth" is inherent to politics, not a development of the post-Brexit and post-Trump world. However, the public discourse surrounding science and expertise continues to assume that the realm of politics and the world of facts are wholly distinct. But I argue that the distinction between truth and politics is illusory and that the distinction itself invites conflict. Given the centrality of expertise to contemporary governance, it is of paramount importance that we recognize the enduring importance of pluralism and other democratic values.

References

American Association of Physical Anthropologists. 1963. "Proceedings of the Thirty-first Annual Meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists." American Journal of Physical Anthropology 21: 399-415.

Bail, C. (2021). *Breaking the social media prism*. Princeton University Press.

Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual review of sociology*, *26*(1), 611-639.

Benkler, Y. (2019). Cautionary Notes on Disinformation and the Origins of Distrust. Retrieved from https://mediawell.ssrc.org/expert-reflections/cautionary-notes-on-disinformation-benkler/ on June 6, 2022.

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European journal of communication*, *33*(2), 122-139.

Bickerton, C. & Accetti, C.I. (2017). Populism and technocracy. In *The Oxford handbook of populism*.

Boyns, D., & Luery, S. (2015). Negative emotional energy: A theory of the "dark-side" of interaction ritual chains. *Social Sciences*, *4*(1), 148-170.

Brubaker, R. (2017). Why populism?. *Theory and society*, *46*(5), 357-385.

Cohn, S.K. (2017). Cholera revolts: a class struggle we may not like. *Social History*. 42(2), 162-180.

Butter, M., & Reinkowski, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Conspiracy theories in the United States and the Middle East: A comparative approach* (Vol. 29). Walter de Gruyter.

Coleman, Gabriella. (2014). *Hacker, hoaxer, whistleblower, spy: The many faces of Anonymous*. Verso books.

Collins, H. M., & Evans, R. (2002). The third wave of science studies: Studies of expertise and experience. *Social studies of science*, *32*(2), 235-296.

Collins, R. (1981). On the microfoundations of macrosociology. *American journal of sociology*, *86*(5), 984-1014.

Collins, R. (2004). Interaction ritual chains. In *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton university press.

Collins, R. (2014). Interaction ritual chains and collective effervescence. In C. Von Scheve & M. Salmela (Eds.), *Collective Emotions*, 299-311.

Coolidge, C. (1921). "Whose Country is This?" *Good Housekeeping,* volume 72 number 2 pages 13-14.

Cooper v. Aaron. 358 U.S. 1. (1958).

Cramer, K. J. (2016). *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press.

DiMaggio, P., Bernier, C., Heckscher, C., & Mimno, D. (2018). Interaction ritual threads: Does IRC theory apply online?. *Ritual, emotion, violence: studies on the micro-sociology of Randall Collins*, 81-124.

Dobzhansky, T. (1961). A bogus "science" of race prejudice. *Journal of Heredity*, *52*(4), 189-190.

Emerick, C. F. (1909). College women and race suicide. *Political Science Quarterly*, *24*(2), 269-283.

Eyal, G. (2019). *The Crisis of Expertise*. John Wiley & Sons.

Fischer, F. (2019). Knowledge politics and post-truth in climate denial: On the social construction of alternative facts. *Critical policy studies*, *13*(2), 133-152.

Forberg, P. L. (2022). From the fringe to the fore: An algorithmic ethnography of the far-right conspiracy theory group QAnon. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *51*(3), 291-317.

Garrett, H. E. (1961). The equalitarian dogma. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, *4*(4), 480-484.

Gauchat, G. (2012). Politicization of science in the public sphere: A study of public trust in the United States, 1974 to 2010. *American Sociological Review*, *77*(2), 167-187.

Gest, J. (2016). *The new minority: White working class politics in an age of immigration and inequality*. Oxford University Press.

Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity.* John Wiley & Sons.

Gieryn, T. F. (1983). Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science: Strains and interests in professional ideologies of scientists. *American sociological review*, 781-795

Gieryn, T. F. (2022). *Cultural boundaries of science: Credibility on the line*. University of Chicago Press.

Grant, M. (1916). *The Passing of the Great Race or The Racial Basis of European History*. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York: New York.

Grant, M. (1924). The racial transformation of America. *The North American Review*, *219*(820), 343-352.

Grossman, L. A. (2013). The origins of American health libertarianism. *Yale J. Health Pol'y L. & Ethics*, *13*, 76.

Harambam, J., & Aupers, S. (2015). Contesting epistemic authority: Conspiracy theories on the boundaries of science. *Public Understanding of Science*. 24(4), 466-480.

Heider, A., & Warner, R. S. (2010). Bodies in sync: Interaction ritual theory applied to sacred harp singing. *Sociology of Religion*, *71*(1), 76-97.

Herrick, C. T. (1907). Concerning Race Suicide. *The North American Review*, *184*(609), 407-412.

Hess, D. J. (2016). *Undone science: Social movements, mobilized publics, and industrial transitions*. MIT Press.

Hilgartner, S., Hurlbut, J. B., & Jasanoff, S. (2021). Was "science" on the ballot?. *Science*, *371*(6532), 893-894.

Hochschild, A.R. (2018). *Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right*. The New Press.

Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology: a social identity perspective on polarization. *Public opinion quarterly*, *76*(3), 405-431.

Jackson Jr, J. P.(2005). *Science for segregation: Race, law, and the case against Brown v. Board of Education*. NYU Press.

Jasanoff, S. (2004). Ordering knowledge, ordering society. In S. Jasanoff (Eds.) *States of knowledge: The co-production of science and social order*, 13-45.

Jasanoff, S. (2005). Designs on nature: Scince and Democracy in Europe and the United States. Princeton University Press.

Jasanoff, S. (2020). Pathologies of Liberty. Public Health Sovereignty and the Political Subject in the Covid-19 Crisis. *Cahiers Droit, Sciences & Technologies*, (11), 125-149.

Jasanoff, S., & Simmet, H. R. (2017). No funeral bells: Public reason in a 'post-truth'age. *Social studies of science*, *47*(5), 751-770.

Jodén, H., & Strandell, J. (2021). Building viewer engagement through interaction rituals on Twitch. tv. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-18.

Jurgenson, N. (2012). When atoms meet bits: Social media, the mobile web and augmented revolution. *Future internet*, *4*(1), 83-91.

Katz, E. (1957). The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on an hypothesis. *Public opinion quarterly*, *21*(1), 61-78.

Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (2017). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Routledge.

Knorr-Cetina, K. D. (2013). *The manufacture of knowledge: An essay on the constructivist and contextual nature of science*. Elsevier.

Kou, Y., Gui, X., Chen, Y., & Pine, K. (2017). Conspiracy talk on social media: collective sensemaking during a public health crisis. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *1*(CSCW), 1-21.

Kozlowski, A. C. (2022). How conservatives lost confidence in science: the role of ideological alignment in political polarization. *Social Forces*, *100*(3), 1415-1443.

Latif, M., Blee, K., DeMichele, M., Simi, P., & Alexander, S. (2020). Why white supremacist women become disillusioned, and why they leave. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *61*(3), 367-388.

Lavery, C. (2016). Situating eugenics: Robert DeCourcy ward and the immigration restriction league of Boston. *Journal of Historical Geography*, *53*, 54-62

Lee, C., Yang, T., Inchoco, G. D., Jones, G. M., & Satyanarayan, A. (2021, May). Viral visualizations: How coronavirus skeptics use orthodox data practices to promote unorthodox science online. In *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 1-18).

Lim, M. (2017). Freedom to hate: social media, algorithmic enclaves, and the rise of tribal nationalism in Indonesia. *Critical Asian Studies*, *49*(3), 411-427.

Ling, R. (2010). *New tech, new ties: How mobile communication is reshaping social cohesion*. MIT press.

McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. MIT Press.

Maloney, P. (2013). Online networks and emotional energy: how pro-anorexic websites use interaction ritual chains to (re) form identity. *Information, Communication & Society*, *16*(1), 105-124.

Marwick, A. E. (2018). Why do people share fake news? A sociotechnical model of media effects. *Georgetown law technology review*, *2*(2), 474-512.

Marwick, A. E. (2021). Morally motivated networked harassment as normative reinforcement. *Social Media+ Society*, *7*(2), 20563051211021378.

Mejia, R., Beckermann, K., & Sullivan, C. (2018). White lies: A racial history of the (post) truth. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *15*(2), 109-126.

Merton, R.K. (1938). Science and the social order. *Philosophy of Science*, 5(3), 321-337.

McDonald, K. (2018). *Radicalization*. John Wiley & Sons.

Munger, K., & Phillips, J. (2022). Right-wing YouTube: a supply and demand perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *27*(1), 186-219.

Nadler, A. (2022). Political Identity and the Therapeutic Work of US Conservative Media. *International Journal of Communication*, *16*, 13.

Palmieri, P. A. (2007). From Republican Motherhood to Race Suicide: Arguments on the Higher Education. *The history of higher education*, *204*.

Pasquetto, I. V., Olivieri, A. F., Tacchetti, L., Riotta, G., & Spada, A. (2022). Disinformation as Infrastructure: Making and maintaining the QAnon conspiracy on Italian digital media. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *6*(CSCW1), 1-31.

Perry, S. L. (2022). Banning Because of Science or In Spite of it? Scientific Authority, Religious Conservatism, and Support for Outlawing Pornography, 1984–2018. *Social Forces*, *100*(3), 1385-1414.

Pinch, T. (2010). The invisible technologies of Goffman's sociology from the merry-go-round to the internet. *Technology and culture*, *51*(2), 409-424.

Putnam, C. (1961). Race and Reason. A Yankee View. Public Affairs Press. Washington, DC.

Putnam, C. 1962. The Road to Reversal. Washington DC: National Putnam Letters Committee.

Putnam, C. (1967). Race and reality. A Search for Solutions. Public Affairs Press. Washington, DC.

Rittel, H. W., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy sciences*, *4*(2), 155-169.

Roose, K. (2019, June 8). The Making of a YouTube Radical. *The New York Times*.

Ross, E. A. (1901). The causes of race superiority. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *18*(1), 67-89.

Saglam, E. (2020). What to do with conspiracy theories?: Insights from contemporary Turkey. *Anthropology Today*, *36*(5), 18-21.

Schmidt, V.A. (2019). Politicization in the EU: between national politics and EU political dynamics. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(7), 1018-1036.

Schwarz, O. (2021). *Sociological Theory for Digital Society: The Codes that Bind Us Together*. John Wiley & Sons.

67th Congress. (1922). *Analysis of America's Modern Melting Pot: Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization*.

68th Congress. (1924). Congressional Record.

Spiro, J.P. (2002). Nordic vs. anti-Nordic: the Galton Society and the American Anthropological Association. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 36(1), 35-48.

Sprague, R. J. (1915). EDUCATION AND RACE SUICIDE: Women's Colleges Have Heavy Responsibility for Disappearance of Old American Stock in the United States—Reforms That Are Needed. *Journal of Heredity*, *6*(4), 158-162.

Starbird, K., Arif, A., & Wilson, T. (2019). Disinformation as collaborative work: Surfacing the participatory nature of strategic information operations. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *3*(CSCW), 1-26.

Stoddard, L. (1920). *The rising tide of color against white world-supremacy*. Scribner.

Stoddard, L. (1921). The Japanese Question in California. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *93*(1), 42-47.

Tan, C. D. (2021). Defending 'snake oil': The preservation of contentious knowledge and practices. *Social Studies of Science*, *51*(4), 538-563.

The American Presidency Project. No date. Remarks Before the Mothers' Congress. Retrieved from https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-before-the-mothers-congress on June 6, 2022.

Tripodi, F. (2018). Searching for alternative facts. Data and Society.

Tripodi, F. B. (2021). ReOpen demands as public health threat: a sociotechnical framework for understanding the stickiness of misinformation. *Computational and Mathematical Organization Theory*, 1-14.

van Haperen, S., Uitermark, J., & van der Zeeuw, A. (2020). Mediated interaction rituals: a geography of everyday life and contention in Black Lives Matter. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *25*(3), 295-313.

Van Prooijen, J. W., & Douglas, K. M. (2017). Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations. *Memory studies*, *10*(3), 323-333.

Waters, A. M. (1997). Conspiracy theories as ethnosociologies: Explanation and intention in African American political culture. *Journal of black studies*, *28*(1), 112-125.

Wuthnow, R. (2019). *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small Town America*. Princeton University Press.

Ylä-Anttila, T. (2018). Populist knowledge:'Post-truth'repertoires of contesting epistemic authorities. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, *5*(4), 356-388.