

Experiencing Relative Deprivation as True Crime: Applying Cultural Criminology to the Qanon Superconspiracy Theory

Deirdre Caputo-Levine* and Jacob Harris

Department of Sociology, Social Work and Criminology, Idaho State University, USA

Abstract: This essay builds upon earlier studies of the QAnon superconspiracy theory by applying cultural criminology as a framework to investigate the significance of QAnon and the events that facilitated the rise of the superconspiracy and the associated political movement. QAnon has had multiple impacts that should be of interest to criminologists. In the United States, QAnon was involved with the 2020 election, as adherents believed messages posted by "Q" referred to President Trump as a messiah and Trump tacitly acknowledged the group. In addition, QAnon has international influence, most recently in the "trucker" convoy in Canada and anti-vaccine protests in New Zealand and Germany. This essay utilizes cultural criminology to introduce the framework of relative deprivation theory and emphasize the importance of the gaze from above and below in structuring relative deprivation. In addition, we discuss the role of cultural understandings of victimization in shaping ideology and physical frameworks used by QAnon.

Keywords: QAnon, conspiracy theories, cultural criminology, relative deprivation, precarity.

INTRODUCTION

QAnon is a social and political movement that has coalesced around a "superconspiracy theory" (Butter 2020: 17) which combines the belief that President Trump and members of the military are working together to "take down a Satanic, pedophilic cabal of elites" (Forberg 2021: 2) with elements of older, often anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. The spread of QAnon and the involvement of QAnon-affiliated individuals in the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol has led to fears of radicalization and increasing political polarization (Garry *et al.* 2021). A supporter of the conspiracy theory, Marjorie Taylor Greene, was elected to Congress in 2020, and QAnon adherents have begun to run for local public office (Collins 2021). Although QAnon was initially limited to the United States, it has become a transnational phenomenon. Adherents to the theory have played a role in protests and other forms of political action in Canada (Argentino and Amarasingam 2021), Germany, France, Austria, Spain, and the United Kingdom (Garry *et al.* 2021), and Australia (Badham 2021). QAnon adherents were engaged in the February 2022 Ottawa trucker protests (Ling 2022), and QAnon flags have been carried by participants in supportive demonstrations in Australia and New Zealand (Frost 2022).

In this essay, we utilize the lens of cultural criminology, a theoretical perspective focused on the interplay between culture, crime, and social control within late modern capitalism (Ferrell, Heyward & Young 2008). Cultural criminology is most appropriate

because it incorporates a zemiological framework (Boukli and Kotze 2018) that allows for the investigation of social harm done by QAnon adherents and the study of the cultural etiology of QAnon beliefs. Placing QAnon as a superconspiracy theory and social movement within the broader context of cultural understandings of precarity and victimization suggests a positive pathway forward for counteracting the development of similar movements in the future.

QANON

Before QAnon became a superconspiracy theory, it began as a thread on a rather out-of-the-way area of the Internet, the Politically Incorrect forum of 4chan. 4chan was an image-based bulletin board where anonymous users could post images and text-based messages. Although it began as a left-libertarian space, 4chan became a space known for a troll culture and the alt-right (Colley and Moore 2022). It has also been the source of many common elements of online culture, including Rickrolling, the lolcat memes, and rage comics (Papasavva *et al.* 2020).¹

The history of QAnon is complicated by trolling, which was the key form of interaction among the members of the Alt-Right (Green 2019) who dominated 4chan. Trolling is a set of behaviors understood as a form of play used to provoke reactions (done for lolz) and participation from other trolls (Phillips 2015). Within the 4chan community trolling was understood as an ironic stance. Phillips argues that her informants in

*Address correspondence to this author at the Department of Sociology, Social Work and Criminology, Idaho State University, USA; E-mail: capudeir@isu.edu

¹Rickrolling is a meme that involves tricking someone into clicking onto a video of the song "Never Gonna Give You Up" by Rick Astley. lolcat memes are humorous photos of cat accompanied with misspelled shorthand text. Rage comics are simply drawn pictures that express anger or other emotions.

online communities saw their troll personas as distinct from other aspects of their lives. Green argues that trolling and other behaviors on /pol/ were shaped by "North American norms of masculinity, whiteness, privilege, and heteronormativity" (Green 2019:75). Within 4Chan, a particular form of trolling, LARPing or "live-action role-playing," was popular. Live-action role-playing is a subset of trolling behaviors that involve "pretending to be someone who one is not" (Botha 2021: 91) combined with sensationalist bouts of one-upmanship that feature accusations of stigmatized behavior such as pedophilia intended to trigger disgust. In their analysis of the QAnon community on Voat.co, an online news aggregator, Papasavva *et al.* (2020) have found indications of awareness among participants that QAnon might be a LARP. There are indications that QAnon may be a LARP. Two independent teams of researchers from OrphoAnalytics and École des Chartres used forensic linguistic techniques to identify Paul Furber and Ron Watkins as the first and second Q posters, respectively (Pousaz and Roten 2022).²

In the mythology of QAnon, Q is an individual or small group of individuals with a top-secret "Q clearance." Q is said to have intel that relates to the forthcoming arrest of Hillary Clinton and other elites, who constitute a cabal engaging in pedophilia and Satanic practices (Forberg 2021). The contents of the mythology draw on many conspiracy theories, including well-known anti-Semitic conspiracy theories such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and blood libel (Garry *et al.* 2021; NCRI 2021). Q's posts are cryptic and assume a range of forms such as codes, puzzles, pictures, and memes (Beverley 2020; Bloom & Moskalenko 2021; Garry *et al.* 2021; Rothschild 2021). In addition, community members work together to read and interpret the Qdrops. These elements of gamification (Deterding *et al.* 2011) drive adherents' continued participation because as participants "bake" or decode the Qdrops, they receive rewards in the form of positive feedback from other QAnon followers. This feedback leads to deeper investment and further participation in the theory and the community (Baker 2022).

Situating QAnon among Conspiracy Theories

Although the degree of influence that QAnon adherents have exercised in political discourse has

been startling, QAnon is not a unique event in American history. Conspiracy theories have been an element of American political discourse since the early colonial period and have covered a wide range of issues (Goldberg 2001; Hofstadter 2008; Uscinski and Parent 2014). Entertainment based around conspiratorial narratives, such as the *X-Files*, have been important elements of popular culture (Birchall 2020). Aspects of conspiracy theories have been commodified in ways that allow people to know about the ideas without investing belief in them (Birchall 2021). This enables people to investigate and enjoy elements of theories about UFOs, assassinations, and false flag operations without stigma. The normalization of conspiracy theory narratives in popular culture may have contributed to the ease of spreading the QAnon narratives.

The Internet has played an essential role in the spread of QAnon. Before the advent of the Internet, conspiracy theories were spread by word of mouth, print media, and sometimes, in the case of commodified conspiracy theories, through entertainment media. QAnon built upon the strategies developed within the 9-11 truther and the vaccine-truther communities. Initially, the 9/11 truther communities relied upon sharing DVD copies of films such as *Loose Change* and *Zeitgeist*, message boards, and later, blogs. In 2005, after the development of YouTube, both films transitioned to the site. Anti-vaccination communities similarly used the Internet, setting up message boards, websites, and later, utilizing social media such as YouTube and FaceBook to conduct outreach. The Internet made it possible for members of conspiracy theory movements and conspiracy theory entrepreneurs who earn money through the sales of books and other related items or by monetizing their online content to reach more significant numbers of people within shorter periods. Social media has facilitated this by allowing for cross-platform reach.

Cross-platform reach was key to the spread of QAnon. QAnon began on 4chan but moved into broader awareness when two moderators of the /pol/ board contacted Tracy Diaz, a YouTuber who ran a small channel that had discussed the PizzaGate conspiracy theory (Zadrozny and Collins 2018).³

²Furber is the person who first discovered Q and was one of the early interpreters. Watkins and his father owned 8chan and 8kun, sites where Q began posting in 2018.

³Pizzagate is a conspiracy theory that was a precursor to QAnon. The core belief is that a group of Democratic Party leaders met at Ping Pong Pizza to engage in ritual Satanic abuse of children.

QAnon content migrated from YouTube to Reddit, and Facebook groups, and Diaz became one of the first QAnon entrepreneurs who raised funds on YouTube channels, through Patreon and PayPal, or by publishing books or videos. This facilitated the spread of the narrative as the income-generating activities in other online communities intersected with QAnon (Baker 2022). Qdrops also spread over apps such as Parler, TikTok and Telegram.

QAnon is different from earlier conspiracy theories in that adherents were involved in the "Stop the Steal" rally and the insurrection that occurred on January 6, 2021. Photos and videos obtained by ProPublica from Parler, a social media service used by the far-right and QAnon adherents, showed multiple people who breached the Capitol Building who wore QAnon clothing and/or carried QAnon flags (Groeger *et al.* 2021). Jacob Chansley, the QAnon Shaman, an activist known for attending QAnon events wearing face paint and a horned headdress, reached the Senate chamber. Ashli Babbitt, the woman shot by a Capitol Police officer when she tried to climb through a door leading to the Speaker's Lobby, had a social media presence that regularly retweeted QAnon content (Beckett and Ho 2021). Dona Sue Bissey, one of the 27 defendants linked to QAnon through clothing or social media postings, shared multiple anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, including QAnon.

It is difficult to gauge how much support truly exists for QAnon. The findings on support for QAnon based on public opinion polls are equivocal. Ender *et al.* (2021) and Uscinski and Ender (2021) argue that QAnon is a relatively small movement. Their analyses of polling data between August 2018 and October 2020 found low levels of support for QAnon beliefs (measured as "I believe in QAnon") that remained stable between 2018 and 2020. Ender *et al.* argue that these beliefs are not related to partisan affiliation but rather to a combination of "dark triad" personality traits (psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism), a propensity to share false information, and conspiratorial thought processes (2021). However, they did find support for beliefs related to QAnon, with 35% of their respondents agreeing with the view that "elites, from government and Hollywood, are engaged in a massive child sex trafficking racket" (2021).

Polling conducted by IPSOS in 2020 found higher levels of support for at least some elements of QAnon, potentially indicating the spread of some aspects of the superconspiracy theory. The IPSOS/NPR poll found

only 47% of a nationally representative sample of Americans was able to identify that the following statement, "A group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media," was false. In comparison, 37% were unsure of the veracity of the claims (Newall 2020). Thirty-nine percent agreed that "there is a deep state working to undermine President Trump." However, most respondents disagreed with a statement arguing that the election was stolen and supported a peaceful transition (Newall 2020).

There are few qualitative studies of QAnon adherents. Initial ethnographic work presents a more concerning picture of the development of QAnon. Forberg calls attention to the merging of offline and online spaces that allow adherents to be perpetually immersed in the culture of QAnon (2021). During his virtual ethnography and participation in the social media algorithms that target information to those involved in QAnon, Forberg was able to document the funneling of content that occurs as individuals become increasingly engaged in decoding Qdrops and watching Q-related videos. For example, he describes his experience on TikTok.

"TikTok's infinite scroll of algorithmically-suggested videos, ... perpetually adapted to give users more content that was similar to their previous content, so liking any QAnon video—such as one disguised as a "true crime" narrative—opened the door to more rapid-fire conspiracy content" (2021: 13).

QAnon entrepreneurs and others such as White Nationalists seeking to use QAnon to increase their reach were also able to make sophisticated use of the algorithms. Forberg has documented overlap between QAnon and groups such as the Proud Boys. WayfairGate, accusations of child sex trafficking against the furniture company Wayfair, functioned as a way for QAnon entrepreneurs to conduct outreach to outside communities (2021). Forberg also found that QAnon was not solely an online movement as his participants structured their online and offline lives around QAnon. They participated in QAnon prayer groups and spoke with their church communities, friends, and co-workers. As a result, QAnon became all-encompassing (2021).

Conner and MacMurray conducted a content analysis of 300 hours of QAnon video and audio,

participated in the GreatAwakening messageboard and QAnon-related Telegram channels, and attended live-streamed events conducted by Conner and MacMurray (2021). They found that influencers played a vital role in spreading the conspiracy theory and the associated movement. Some influencers acted as entrepreneurs, using QAnon to recruit followers or generate income. Another group, the "true believers," were invested in the theory and produced content as a way of sharing news of QAnon (2021: 15). For the true believers, the most important and rewarding element of QAnon was the ability to engage in the decoding of Qdrops with others—"doing your own research"—and building a body of knowledge. In this respect, QAnon is not much different from academic pursuits.

QANON AND CULTURAL CRIMINOLOGY

Cultural criminology is a theoretical perspective rooted in symbolic interactionism, labeling theory, and subcultural theory (Ferrell 2017). It is used to investigate how crime is embedded within "social and cultural processes" (Presdee 2001) and addresses the importance of emotions and other elements of "everyday experience" (Ferrell 2013; Young 2011). Our culture, most notably in the form of the structures of late modern capitalism, shapes our experiences of crime and victimization.

QAnon is a complex phenomenon embedded within understandings of crime and victimization. The superconspiracy theory is built upon crime narratives such as pedophilia, attempted election theft and treason, and victimization. Many enemies emerge in the Qdrops and the discourse that has developed as adherents puzzle out the meaning of the Qdrops. These enemies include the mainstream media, Antifa, Democratic politicians, RINOs⁴ and other actors subsumed under cover of a deep state plot engaged in the sexual trafficking of children. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the list of enemies grew to include the FDA, pharmaceutical companies, and Dr. Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. The victims listed in the Qdrops and surrounding discourse included the American body politic, patriots, and the children whom the movement argued had been trafficked by the plot. The movement developed around QAnon has utilized ideological and physical frameworks that have developed in response to broader fears of victimization.

Victimization in Late Modernity

The development of QAnon occurred against the background of late modernity. The late modern era is characterized by globalization, increased differentiation and plurality, rapid social change, and an increased degree of reflexivity (Fornas 1995). The rise of neoliberal economic policy and the accompanying destruction of the welfare state have increased anxiety and concerns about victimization. Discourses of victimization were dominated by racialized images of street crime, with the crime victim representing an "idealized political subject" (Simon 2002: 1042). The crime victim serves as a placeholder for the wider populace and is used to argue for government intervention. Although victimization is understood as a "common and collective experience" (Garland 2001: 11), neoliberal policies led to the experience of responsabilization in which non-state actors, including citizens, are increasingly responsible for security. In other words, we have all become "morally responsible" for managing risk (Hier 2008; 182), even in the face of large-scale risks such as changes in labor markets.

QAnon and Precarity

Labor market changes that accompanied globalization led to an increase in the importance of the secondary labor market and the gig economy. These changes triggered a process through which the working class and parts of the middle class began to experience downward mobility (Castel 2017). The destabilization of the Keynesian labor contract led to the development of the precariat, a class-in-the-making" (Standing 2011) which has a tenuous relationship with labor markets, low incomes, and an incoherent class identity (Standing 2018). Although, this has been seen as a condition impacting urban communities of color, there are indications that some white communities, those with higher levels of people without college degrees, are experiencing precarity (Case and Deaton 2020).

Precarity plays two possible roles in shaping the experience of victimization that lead to support for QAnon. First, the lived experience of precarity can lead to feelings of fear and victimization among working-class adherents. Second, the discourse of precarity utilized by the American Right to represent the middle class (represented as "producers") as at the mercy of the state and people of color, white poor, and unionized workers (cast as "parasites") (HoSang and Lowndes 2019) has made it possible for white members of the

⁴Republicans in Name Only.

middle and upper classes to perceive their positions as precarious. Essentially, we can conceive of the experience of precarity from below and above. However, this division is not necessarily as simple as it may first appear. It is possible for an individual to experience precarity from below *and* to identify with right-wing discourses of precarity that demonize their experiences.

Precarity from below

In a series of surveys conducted throughout 2021, pollsters for the Public Religion Research Institute found that QAnon supporters are more likely to have lower levels of educational attainment, with 57% of supporters having a high school diploma or less and 29% having some college education but no degree (PRRI 2022). Almost half (48%) of the QAnon supporters earned \$50,000 or less. Conner and MacMurray (2021) argue that the QAnon is most popular with those who have been hardest hit by the changes in labor structures that were outcomes of neoliberal restructuring. Their secondary analysis of the IPSOS/NPR poll found that when the geographic region was controlled for, QAnon believers largely came from suburban and rural communities (Conner and MacMurray 2021). This has important implications for the spatial concentration of QAnon communities and for the social conditions that shape QAnon, as rural communities have been disproportionately . Based on the findings of the NPR/IPSOS poll (2020), approximately half of white men and rural community members agree with one of the core beliefs of the metaconspiracy theory, the existence of a deep state acting against the interests of President Trump (2020).

Whiteness has become more problematic as a source of identity and relative privilege (HoSang and Lowndes 2019). HoSang and Lowndes draw attention to the role played by race, social class, and gender in the development of the producerist ideology that characterizes right-wing populism (2019). Laziness and parasitism were once associated with people of color and women. However, the position of the white working class has shifted, as reflected by the popularity of narratives that naturalize white poverty and dysfunction.

Middle-aged whites without college degrees have seen their quality of life decline over the past twenty years. Whiteness may have given access to relative privilege, but this has been at least partially rescinded. Conner and MacMurray (2021) argue that the QAnon is

most popular with those who have been hardest hit by the recent restructuring that has taken place in labor markets. These individuals have slipped into the precariat, a class-in-the-making" (Standing 2011) which has a tenuous relationship with labor markets, low incomes, and an incoherent class identity (Standing 2018).

The experience of precaritization can trigger feelings of victimization that can find expression through QAnon. Precarity is accompanied by anxiety due to fears created by a weak social safety net and "risk contagion," which occurs when an adverse outcome in one economic area leads to negative consequences in other areas (Thelen and Wiedemann 2021: 283). The alienation that develops from the experience of being made surplus to requirements may also find expression through a discourse of victimization. The new members of the precariat are also sensitive to negative imagery and condemnation from members of elites and remnants of the middle class. Members of the precariat experience anger when they feel blocked from the opportunities afforded to other social classes.

The realities of precarity accompanied by feelings of exclusion, particularly for a class that had been accustomed to inclusion, can trigger relative deprivation. At the most basic, relative deprivation results from a disjuncture between expectations and realized outcomes. When outcomes do not match expectations, this leads to frustration and anger that in turn trigger participation in harm. In this sense, relative deprivation is derived from the experience of the upward gaze. The upward gaze leads to feelings of anger and humiliation directed at those who are seen as elevated above the viewer. Young argues relative deprivation is constituted by a struggle with the "double stigma of poverty and disrespect" (2007: 47) which can be revealed in acts of resistance or in attempts to transgress against the system.

Precarity from above

Support for QAnon is not solely concentrated among the poor and working class. Thompson and Thomander (2021) found that social class was not a significant predictor of support for QAnon (2021). The Public Religion Research Institute found that slightly more than half (52%) of QAnon supporters had incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000+ (2022). Race shapes the perceptions of precarity that feed feelings of victimization among adherents of QAnon.

Discourses of precarity have been a critical element of right-wing populist discourse since the 1970s, as the right has utilized a "racialized and gendered discursive imaginary" (Apostolidis 2022:126) to generate support for policies and single out communities of color and the poor for blame for adverse outcomes. The poor, including the white poor and people of color, are perceived as problems negatively impacting the middle and upper classes. Precarity can play an essential role in the development of support for QAnon. The status of the precariat can be seen as a lesson for the other social classes to encourage adherence to neoliberal disciplines. Fear of loss of position and marginalization is a potent force that shapes behavior (Bauman 2017). These fears become tied to perceptions of race and ethnicity, shaping narratives of status threat. Status threat culminates in the desire to punish as those seen as inferior are seen as gaining social ground (Young 2007).

Participants in the PRRI survey endorsed expressions of anomie, fear, and anger that included the following statements:

"Things have changed so much that I often feel like a stranger in my own country. Today, America is in danger of losing its culture and identity. The American way of life needs to be protected from foreign influence" (2022).

The anomie is resolved through the identification of an enemy. The construction of the enemy occurs through the process of reification (Aho 1994). In reification, the enemy—Clinton, Soros, the mainstream media—is named and then shamed during public degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel 1956). This occurs during the Qdrops and interpretations of the Qdrops. The mythmaking aspect of Q in which the specifics of the enemy are passed to adherents occurs in the postings of teachers.. Sedimentation occurs as QAnon adherents share their experiences regarding the enemy through messages shared on messageboards and social media. Participation in rituals such as the QAnon protests and meetups reaffirms identity. Being part of QAnon means that, rather than being alone, at the mercy of economic forces in the late modern era, the individual is part of a large group with a shared, easy-to-target enemy.

Precarity, both as experienced from below and above, can account for the edge that exists within QAnon. The experience of precarity can join with moral

outrage in the context of the networked conspiracy theory to increase anger and the potential for violent outcomes. Anger at individuals one blames for loss or potential loss of status, which is reinforced by the other participants within an echo chamber, assumes an aspect of righteousness. This can lead to a self-reinforcing spiral of outrage, which increases vulnerability to solicitations of violent action (Crockett 2017).

QAnon and True Crime

QAnon relies heavily upon true crime, weaving the truth of the Jeffery Epstein case and sensationalized imagery of human trafficking with the fantastic elements of the conspiracy theory. True crime as a form of literature can be traced to Duke's 1910 text, *Celebrated Criminal Cases of America* (Bowder, 2010). The genre is highly stylized, and the typical offenses include serial murder and sexual assault. The offenders are often "psychopaths" or monsters (Murley 2008: 4). Victims are constructed as worthy victims—often white women and children—with whom audiences are intended to identify. QAnon relies heavily upon true crime, weaving the truth of the Jeffery Epstein case and sensationalized imagery of human trafficking with the fantastic elements of the conspiracy theory. QAnon entrepreneurs used the name recognition of the British charity Save the Children as promotion (Roose 2020; Seitz 2020). Claims of hundreds of thousands of children having been abducted and tortured by members of a cabal of satanic pedophiles were a standard part of QAnon discourse (Beverly 2021; Connor and MacMurray 2021). Other elements of QAnon are also expressed in true crime form. *Plandemic*, the anti-vaccine film centering on Judy Mikovits and her claims that the FDA was run by a set of elites profiting off the COVID-19 vaccines, was seized upon by both the anti-vaccine and QAnon communities (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). The video "Murder by 'Vaccine'—The Evidence Mounts!" was viewed thousands of times after anti-vaccine activists posted it on channels linked to QAnon content (Timberg and Dwoskin 2021).

Selzer describes the public fascination with serial killing, reflected in our consumption of films, television, and true crime, and describes how it "merge[s] the natural and national body, where pathological violence is concerned" (Seltzer 1998: 6), making the "wounded body" of the murder victim a "public spectacle" (253). The trauma that the victim experiences is generalized to that of the public. In the case of QAnon, the victim is

the innocent child trafficked by the Satanic cabal members that make up the deep state. In this way, QAnon is drawing from a history of "moral crusades," responses to crime and victimization that "typically rely on horror stories and 'atrocious tales' about victims" (Weitzer 2007: 448). The victim is representative of an innocent public who is subject to "misinformation" and misled by the deep state, thus weakening the nation. The message of QAnon is that by being "faithful," decoding the Qdrops, and participating in movement activities, adherents can take the actions necessary to "save the children" and the nation.

QAnon also builds upon true crime routines and infrastructure in online settings. True crime has moved beyond magazines and bookstores' shelves, including documentaries, television programs, crime blogs, podcasts, and online messageboards such as Websleuths (founded in 1996). The development of true crime as edutainment in the digital era is tied up with conceptions of justice as an object that viewers can achieve through accessing documentaries and podcasts and participating in online fora (Horeck 2019). The combination of interest in true crime and innovations in television writing, such as those found in shows like *Lost*, which relied on intense viewer investment of time spent on fan websites, have contributed to a new set of online practices known as websleuthing and digital vigilantism. Websleuthing is a set of "participatory media" practices within which "the lines between the producer, consumer, and subject are blurred" (Yardley *et al.* 2016: 2). The term is frequently used to refer to investigations that are carried out in online spaces by individuals who are amateurs. However, some podcasts, such as *The Murder Squad*, purport to teach listeners the techniques required for amateur investigation.

Websleuthing has taken place in many online communities - including 4chan, *Reddit Bureau of Investigation*, *UnresolvedMysteries*, and the *Doe Network*. It can also overlap with digital vigilante communities that target individuals identified as having been involved in stigmatized activities such as pedophilia (*Perverved Justice*) and terrorism (Yardley *et al.* 2016). Digital vigilantism frequently consists of the use of "naming and shaming" (Loveluck 2020), doxing (the sharing of an individual's personal information in a public forum), and harassment (Trottier 2017, 2020). In its mildest form, digital vigilantism relies upon informal social control associated with the photos of people "manspreading" or not picking up after their dogs to encourage individuals to follow norms. The most

extreme forms have led to harassment campaigns such as the swatting that accompanied GamerGate, a gender-based harassment campaign that began on 4chan and initially targeted female game designers and critics. GamerGate shares some features with QAnon, including an overlap with the far right-wing communities that were critical elements of QAnon and a tendency toward metaconspiracy theory (Mortensen 2018).

Both websleuthing and digital vigilantism can be classified as informal justice-seeking methods that attempt to intervene when the state is seen as unresponsive and can be seen as indicative of a "crisis of legitimacy" (Trottier 2020: 202). Websleuthing and elements of digital vigilantism are outgrowths of the need to respond to citizen responsabilization. Responsibilization occurs when the state transfers responsibility for crime control to citizens (Garland 2001). In a study of volunteer street patrols, Westall (2020) found that his study participants' willingness to volunteer to help others as an awareness of and response to the withdrawal of the state. The experience of responsabilization intersects with narratives of victimization and desires to protect an imagined community.

Websleuthing and QAnon share a number of characteristics. First, both allow participants to target an enemy—the criminal and the deep state cabalist, respectively, provide a shared positive identity and sense of meaning. The participants can reinterpret their positions as truth-seekers engaged in a heroic group project, taking over the state's responsibility to ensure other citizens' safety. This can be a response to the disabling experience of anger and frustration that accompany relative deprivation. Finally, choosing to participate in QAnon can be read as an attempt to exercise agency within a system in which actors are disenfranchised.

CONCLUSION

Using cultural criminology as a theoretical lens through which to view QAnon allows us to pull apart the multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings that exist with the superconspiracy theory. Gamification and the desire to solve problems with others point to desires for fun and community. The need to help others, which movement entrepreneurs channeled into the Save the Children aspect of QAnon, represents a possible means of intervention. Placing QAnon within the broader social context of victimization allows us to conceptualize the ways in which we can potentially

intervene to decrease its salience and slow its spread. Effective outreach and education as to the reality of human trafficking are needed to fight the sensationalized narratives that surround sex trafficking. The ability to participate in community-level interventions such as evidence-based community activities shown to increase community efficacy and safety may be effective. The impact of social structural issues such as labor conditions shaped by late modern capitalism complicates the response to QAnon. Without a willingness to address the problems of precaritarization and the role of social class, race, and ethnicity in shaping feelings of relative deprivation, it will be challenging to address QAnon in particular and the spread of misinformation more generally.

REFERENCES

- Aho, Jim. 1994. *This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy*. United States of America: University of Washington Press.
- Apostolidis, Paul. "Desperate Responsibility: Precarity and Right-Wing Populism." *Political Theory* 50(1): 114-141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591720985770>
- Badham, Van. 2021. "Qanon: How the Far-Right Cult Took Australians Down a 'Rabbit Hole' of Extremism." in *The Guardian, US Edition*. New York: Guardian US.
- Baker, Stephanie A. 2022. "Alt. Health Influencers: How Wellness Culture and Web Culture Have Been Weaponised to Promote Conspiracy Theories and Far-Right Extremism During the Covid-19 Pandemic." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25(1):3-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211062623>
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2017. *Retrotopia*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Beckett, Lois and Vivian Ho. 2021. "'She Was Deep into It': Ashli Babbitt, Killed in Capitol Riot, Was Devoted Conspiracy Theorist." in *The Guardian, US Edition*. New York: Guardian US.
- Beverly, James A. 2020. *The Qanon Deception: Everything You Need to Know About the World's Most Dangerous Conspiracy Theory*. Concord, NC: EqualTime Books.
- Birchall, Clare. 2020. *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085812>
- Birchall, Clare. 2021. "The Paranoid Style for Sale: Conspiracy Entrepreneurs, Marketplace Bots, and Surveillance Capitalism." *symploke* 29(1-2):97-121.
- Bloom, Mia and Sophia Moskalenko. 2021. *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of Qanon*. Stanford, CA: Redwood Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503630611>
- Botha, Daniel Craig. 2021. "Bridging White Supremacist Discourse: an Ethnography of the Online World of the 'Alt-Right' ". Master of Arts, Criminology, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, Australia. <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.14227073.v1>
- Boukli, Avi and Justin Kotzé. 2018. "Introduction." in *Zemology: Reconnecting Crime and Social Harm*, edited by A. Boukli and J. Kotzé. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76312-5>
- Butter, Michael. 2020. *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Case, Annie and Angus Deaton. 2019. *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691217062>
- Castel, Robert. 2017. "From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers" Transformation of the Social Question." New York: Routledge.
- Colley, Thomas and Martin Moore. 2022. "The Challenges of Studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: 'Come on in the Water's Fine' ". *new media & society* 24(1):5-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820948803>
- Collins, Ben. 2021. "Qanon's New 'Plan'? Run for School Board." in *NBC News*.
- Conner, Christopher and Nicholas MacMurray. 2021. "The Perfect Storm: A Subcultural Analysis of the Qanon Movement ". *Critical Sociology Online* First:1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211055863>
- Crockett, Molly.J. "Moral Outrage in the Digital Age." *Nature Human Behavior* 1(11): 769-771. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0213-3>
- Deterding, Sebastian, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled and Lennart Nacke. 2011. "From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness: Defining "Gamification"." Pp. 9-15 in *Proceedings of the 15th International MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2181037.2181040>
- Enders, Adam, Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, Stefan Wuchty, Michelle Seelig, John Funchion, Manohar Murthi, Kamal Premaratne, and Justin Stoler. Forthcoming. "Who supports QAnon? A case study in political extremism." *Journal of Politics*.
- Ferrell, Jeff. 2013. "Cultural Criminology and the Politics of Meaning." *Critical Criminology* 21(3): 257-271. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-013-9186-3>
- Ferrell, Jeff, Keith Hayward and Jock Young. 2015. *Cultural Criminology: An Invitation*: Sage Publications, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473919969>
- Ferrell, Jeff. 2017. "Cultural Criminology as Method and Theory." in *Qualitative Research in Criminology: Advances in Criminological Theory*, edited by W. R. Palacios. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315127880-16>
- Forberg, Peter L. 2021. "From the Fringe to The Fore: An Algorithmic Ethnography of the Far-Right Conspiracy Theory Group Qanon ". *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography Online* First:1-27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416211040560>
- Fornas, Johan. 1995. *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Frost, Natasha. 2022. "Protests in Canada Inspire Copycat Convoys in Australia and New Zealand." in *The New York Times*. New York: The New York Times Company.
- Garfinkel, Harold. 1956. "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies." *American Journal of Sociology*, 61(5): 420-242. <https://doi.org/10.1086/221800>
- Garland, David. 2001. *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226190174.001.0001>
- Garry, Amanda, Samantha Walther, Rukaya Mohamed and Ayan Mohammed. 2021. "Qanon Conspiracy Theory: Examining Its Evolution and Mechanisms of Radicalization." *Journal for Deradicalization* 26:152-216.
- Goldberg, Robert A. 2001. *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University. <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300090000.001.0001>
- Goldenberg, Alex, Denver Riggelman, Jason Baumgartner, Lea Marchl, Alexander Reid-Ross and Finkelstein. 2021. "The Qanon Conspiracy: Destroying Families, Dividing Communities, Undermining Democracy " Vol. New Brunswick, NJ: Network Contagion Research Institute.
- Green, Alex. 2019. "Cucks, Fags and Useful Idiots: The Othering of Dissenting White Masculinities Online." Pp. 65-89 in *Online Othering: Exploring Digital Violence and Discrimination on the Web*, edited by E. Harmer and K. Lumsden: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12633-9_3
- Groeger, Lena V., Jeff Kao, Shaw, Ai, Moiz Syed and Maya Eliahou. 2017. "What Parler Saw During The Attack on the Capitol." in *ProPublica*. New York: ProPublica, Inc.
- Hier, Sean P. 2008. "Thinking Beyond Moral Panic: Risk, Responsibility, and the Politics of Moralization." *Theoretical Criminology* 12(2):173-90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480608089239>
- Hofstadter, Richard. 2008. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. New York: Vintage Books.

- Horeck, Tanya. 2019. *Justice on Demand: True Crime in the Digital Streaming Era*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.
- HoSang, Daniel and Joseph Lowndes. 2019. *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-wing Politics of Precarity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvdjrrc>
- Ling, Justin. 2022. "Ottawa Protests: How Did the Rallies against Vaccine Mandates Begin and What's Next?" in *The Guardian, US Edition*. New York: Guardian US. Accessed 2/27/2022.
- Loveluck, Benjamin. 2020. "The Many Shades of Digital Vigilantism. A Typology of Online Self-Justice." *Global Crime* 21(3-4):213-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2019.1614444>
- Mortensen, Torill Elvira. 2016. "Anger, Fear, and Games: The LongEvent of #Gamergate." *Games and Culture* 13(8):787-806. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016640408>
- Murley, Jean. 2008. *The Rise of True Crime: 20th-Century Murder and American Popular Culture*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Newall, Mallory. 2020. "More Than 1 in 3 Americans Believe a 'Deep State' Is Working to Undermine Trump." Ipsos. Accessed 2/27/2022.
- Papasavva, Antonis, Savvas Zannettou, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini and Jeremy Blackburn. 2020. "Raiders of the Lost Kek: 3.5 Years of Augmented 4chan Posts from the Politically Incorrect Board." Pp. 885-94 in *Proceedings of the Fourteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*. Atlanta, GA: The AAAI Press.
- Phillips, Whitney. 2015. *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10288.001.0001>
- Pousaz, Lionel and Claude-Alain Roten. 2022. "A Short Linguistic Meta-Analysis of QAnon Authorship: Confirming Ron Watkins As The Most Likely Author." https://www.orphanalytics.com/en/news/whitepaper202201/OA_QAnon_meta-analysis_2022-02.pdf. Accessed 4/14/2022.
- Presdee, Mike. 2001. *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime, 1st Edition*. New York: Routledge.
- Public Religion Research Institute. 2022. "The Persistence of Qanon in the Post-Trump Era: An Analysis of Who Believes the Conspiracies." Washington, DC: PRRI. Accessed 2/27/2022.
- Roose, Kevin. 2020. "How 'Save the Children' Is Keeping Qanon Alive." in *The New York Times*. New York: The New York Times Company. Accessed 2/27/2022.
- Rothschild, Mike. 2021. *The Storm Is Upon Us: How Qanon Became a Movement, Cult and Conspiracy Theory of Everything*. Brooklyn: Melville House.
- Seitz, Amanda. 2020. "Qanon's 'Save the Children' Morphs into Popular Slogan." in *The Associated Press*. New York: The Associated Press. Accessed 2/27/2022.
- Seltzer, Mark. 1998. *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Simon, Jonathan. 2002. "Governing through Crime Metaphors." *Brooklyn Law Review* 67(4):1035-70.
- Standing, Guy. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781849664554>
- Standing, Guy. 2018. "The Precariat: Today's Transformative Class?". *Development* 61(1):115-21. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-018-0182-5>
- Thelen, Kathleen and Andreas Wiedemann. 2021. "The Anxiety of Precarity: The United States in Comparative Perspective." in *Who Gets What?: The New Politics of Insecurity*, edited by F. M. Rosenbluth and M. Weir. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108879170.012>
- Thompson, Jack and Sierra Davis. 2021. "What Drives Support for Qanon? Evidence from a Survey Experiment." <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/23qaj>
- Timberg, Craig and Elizabeth Dvoskin. 2021. "With Trump Gone, Qanon Groups Focus Fury on Attacking Coronavirus Vaccines." in *The Washington Post*. Washington DC: The Washington Post. Accessed 2/27/2022.
- Trottier, Daniel. 2017. "Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility." *Philosophy & Technology* 30(1):55-72. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-016-0216-4>
- Trottier, Daniel. 2020. "Denunciation and Doxing: Towards a Conceptual Model of Digital Vigilantism." *Global Crime* 21(3-4):212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2019.1591952>
- Uscinski, Joseph E. and Adam M. Enders. 2021. "Unfounded fears about sex trafficking did not begin with QAnon and go far beyond it." *London School of Economics US Centre*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2021/03/09/unfounded-fears-about-sex-trafficking-did-not-begin-with-qanon-and-go-far-beyond-it/>. Accessed 2/27/2022.
- Uscinski, Joseph E. and Joseph M. Parent. 2014. *American Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199351800.001.0001>
- Weitzer, Ronald. 2007. "The Social Construction of Sex Trafficking: Ideology and Institutionalization of a Moral Crusade." *Politics & Society* 35(3):447-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329207304319>
- Westall, Adam. 2021. "Volunteer Street Patrols: Responsibilised and Motivated Volunteering in Community Safety." *Safer Communities* 20(1):31-41. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-05-2020-0019>
- Yardley, Elizabeth, Adam George Thomas Lyles, David Wilson and Emma Kelly. 2016. "What's the Deal With 'Websleuthing'? News Media Representations of Amateur Detectives in Networked Spaces." *Crime Media Culture* 14(1):81-109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016674045>
- Young, Jock. 1999. *The Exclusive Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Young, Jock. 2007. *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Young, Jock. 2011. *The Criminological Imagination*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Zadrozny, Brandy and Ben Collins. 2018. "How Three Conspiracy Theorists Took 'Q' and Sparked Qanon." in *NBC News*.

Received on 05-03-2022

Accepted on 18-04-2022

Published on 20-04-2022

<https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2022.11.07>

© 2022 Caputo-Levine and Harris; Licensee Lifescience Global.

This is an open access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.