

[QAnon - Politics and Society](#)

Blog Post published by Carmen Celestini on Wednesday, October 14, 2020

In this post for Vistas, Carmen Celestini of the University of Waterloo and the Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism explores the QAnon phenomenon and what it can tell us about politics and society.

Recently Facebook and their subsidiary social media platforms blocked QAnon accounts and other related content. While many of the QAnon believers are not primarily active on these platforms, they are conduits to engaging new adherents. QAnon members interact on other platforms, both mainstream and that are created for right wing “freedom of speech,” in response to social media’s perceived censorship. Adherents also interact within groups on cellphone messaging programs such as Telegram.

QAnon is a bricolage of far-right conspiracy theories that at its centre holds that President Donald Trump is leading a secretive war against an international group of satanic pedophiles. QAnon at its essence brings together religion, far-right politics, conspiracy theories, and radicalization to propel some individuals to acts of violence and criminality. Scholars Amarnath Amarasinam and Marc- André Argentino have written for the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point on the possible security threat that QAnon could create as a “[novel challenge to public security](#).” The FBI has also named QAnon as a possible security threat in their report on the increasing influence that anti-government, identity based, political fringe groups may have via the internet to expose individuals who lean towards extreme behaviour to enact these violent actions.

Fundamentally, QAnon allows for individuals to interpret and create theories about the conspiracy that constitute an alternative history and an alternative reality. From its beginning, QAnon has been linked to politics and the “demonization” of those in power positions in the Democratic Party and liberals as a whole. Beginning with claims about symbology and coded words in John Posesta’s emails, the PizzaGate conspiracy was born. Then on October 28, 2017 the QAnon conspiracy emerged on the pages of 4chan’s politically incorrect page. Q’s first announcement was that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would be arrested on a specific date and time. From there, Tracy Diaz, a YouTube vlogger, used her considerable influence with her significant subscriber base to discuss the “crumbs” left by Q, launching the conspiracy theory from the pages of 4chan.

QAnon is a unique conspiracy theory with politics and nationalism at its core, creating what scholar Michael Barkun describes as improvisational conspiracism. Barkun argues this form of conspiracism is “wildly eclectic.”[1] Improvisational conspiracism can only exist amidst “significant subcultures far outside the mainstream.” As he further explains, “Surfacing in times of crisis and bound up with heterodox religion, occult and esoteric beliefs, radical politics, and fringe science, they [subcultures] have had a long standing sometimes potent influence on American life.”[2] Binding these different ideas together is what Barkun calls “stigmatized knowledge,” which is the belief that secret hidden evil forces are controlling human destinies. This belief is an example of what Barkun has called systemic conspiracies, which are conspiracies that “are believed to have broad goals, usually conceived as securing control over a country, a region or even the entire world. While the goals are sweeping, the conspiratorial machinery is generally simple: a single, evil organization implements a

plan to infiltrate and subvert existing institutions.”[3]

QAnon links together contemporary politics, racist tropes, and religion. They are, they believe, social heroes rising against “The Cabal” whose singular goal is to undermine American democracy to empower themselves through their nefarious agenda. In essence, The Cabal ultimately seeks to destroy American freedom and subjugate the citizens to their will. Mixed within the conspiracy are the moral taboos of pedophilia, Satanism, and human sacrifice. In the end, the adherents believe, the oppressed will be free when “The Storm” comes to arrest and destroy the oppressors.

Traditionally conspiracies have thrived within the realm of those who feel they are marginalized from political power, yet with QAnon the President of the United States is supporting and expressing his own conspiracies from the pulpit of the White House. His vocal battles with the government agencies and institutions such as the FBI support the notion that he is the leader who will defeat the Deep State. With this supposed or interpreted support from the highest of political positions, QAnon has spread to other countries, including the UK and Canada. The conspiracy, much like apocalyptic thought, can provide people with a sense of purpose and control in the face of disenchantment and fear in their present reality. Most importantly, it can provide a conduit to belonging within a community of patriots, fighting for God, country, and family. As Barkun argues regarding apocalyptic thought, believers gain a sense of control or meaning over what is transpiring through the discovery and interpretation of signs and symbols. What is unique with QAnon is that interpretation is completely left up to the reader, as Q drop “crumbs,” or clues, for them the “bake,” or interpret. These crumbs allow the believer to gain enough control to corroborate their belief system with the phenomena they are facing, in a crisis ridden world, and allow for a coming golden era, where this crisis will be alleviated.

Sociologist Robert S. Jansen in his article [“Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism”](#) argues that populism offers sociologists the opportunity to study various issues such as the relationship between state and society, political parties, representation, and the reproduction of social or political cleavages. It could also provide opportunities for research into cultural meanings both in politics and policy making. The bricolage of the QAnon conspiracy also offers scholars an opportunity to research these same ideas. QAnon encompasses religion, politics, conspiracy, and nationalism, but is not confined to one country. Although Q writes as insider in Washington, the causes, the religious connotations, racists tropes, and in some cases the extremism, is easily interpreted across the borders of America.

[1] Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), xi.

[2] *Ibid.*, 2.

[3] Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 6.

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