

The QAnon Coup: hysteria and conspiracy at the end of the world

Via [Punto Rojo](#)

In the halls of Congress, Democrats are attempting (or at least feigning an attempt) to force an investigation into the January 6th riot, in which Trump supporters invaded the US Capitol building. Many on the left correctly view this step as a piece of political theater designed to simultaneously appease their base and generate a rationale for further expansion of the national security state. Despite the ridiculous charade of the capitalist parties, however, there is nothing frivolous about the riot or the horde of fanatical “QAnon” conspiracy theorists that spawned it. The events of January 6 portend the emergence of a new, radicalized Right which the Left must be prepared to combat.

Morbid Symptoms

The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters. – Antonio Gramsci

On January 6th 2021, a right-wing mob overwhelmed federal police and stormed the US Capitol Building. The chaos led to five deaths, including one police officer who had his head bashed in with a fire hydrant and one woman in the mob who was shot by police. The goal of the would-be insurrectionists – to stop the certification of the election results showing Joe Biden as the winner and Donald Trump as the loser – would of course, utterly fail. It was never an existential crisis for the constitutional order in the US, contrary to what some of the more hysterical liberal pundits would have us believe. On the other hand, January 6th marked the first time since 1812 that the seat of US power was physically threatened. It

demonstrated that we are in the midst of a period of instability the likes of which we have not seen since the upheavals of 1968 – only this time, most of the momentum is on the right.

The images from this event were absurd, bordering on fantastical. The protest-insurrection featured everyone from a self-described “shaman” in face paint and vikingsesque headdress, to militia types in full tactical gear prepared with zipties to make “arrests”, to perfectly ordinary-looking retirees filming vertically on their cellphones. The incongruous appearance of the participants was matched by their outlandish views. They were united by a single conspiracy theory – that the vote count had been rigged against Trump. Lurking behind this singular belief were many more complex and preposterous hypotheses. Foremost among these views was the QAnon phenomenon.

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According to adherents to the QAnon movement, a top advisor to Trump (or maybe Trump himself) is using the pseudonym Q to leak information to the public about Trump’s covert battles against a secret cabal of pedophiles who control the world (or did control the world until Trump was elected, or are trying to control the world – the specifics are not particularly clear). This conspiracy theory evolved into an entire universe for its most ardent followers. The “Pizzagate” theory, according to which DC elites rape and/or eat and/or ritually sacrifice children in the basement of the restaurant Comet Pizza, has been folded into the QAnon belief system. Many QAnon supporters believe that allegedly pedophilic celebrities have been arrested and executed or sent to Guantanamo Bay and

replaced with holograms or clones, and that John F. Kennedy, Jr. is secretly alive and supporting Trump as Q.

The sheer ridiculousness of these claims makes them difficult for their opponents to respond to. Some commentators fixate on the specifics of these conspiracy theories: if we could only combat these bad ideas, show them to be false, then we could defuse the dangerous movement that has built up around them. Others simply dismiss them: "The Capitol rioters were a lunatic fringe. Of course what happened is tragic, but it makes no sense to give it much thought at the expense of more important political issues."

Both of these approaches are insufficiently dialectical. Any good Marxist knows that the primary engine of history is the class struggle, not the ideas that bubble up on the ideological superstructure. But even though ideas are never fully autonomous from political economy, they can have discreet effects. More importantly, studying these ideas (however absurd) can reveal how the interplay of class forces is affecting popular consciousness and furnish a more complete strategic perspective for political intervention.

The Conspiracy Behind the Theory

The form that theories of conspiracy usually take in the popular imagination are of social control by a small group of powerful people exerting a secret influence. Inconveniently, this is exactly the way the world works. –[Shuja Haider](#)

The recent HBO docu-series *QAnon: Into the Storm* has come under fire from some critics for its approach to uncovering who the real Q is. The site 538 [says](#), "The documentary falls prey to this kind of puzzle-solving, pattern-seeking mentality that is so prevalent among Q followers." NBC is even more [searing](#): "[The filmmaker] Hoback's own credibility would benefit from fewer scenes lengthily indulging the conspiracists: Their grasping at straws, which forms the basis

of Q's fandom, is uncomfortably recalled by Hoback's own efforts in the film to identify Q... At some point in the six hours, it ceases to be clear where Hoback ends and the conspiracy theorists begin."

There are a few problems with this argument. The most obvious issue is that it functionally denies the existence of actual conspiracies, the reality of which is readily apparent. The respective authors do not say outright, "conspiracies do not exist." But by dismissing out of hand the filmmaker's purported "puzzle-solving, pattern-seeking mentality" or condemning the filmmaker's "indulging the conspiracists" (read: *interviewing the subjects of his film*), their argument condemns a priori any attempt to discover or explain secret plots, how they function, or who is behind them. If this attitude were adopted wholesale, we would not know about the CIA's attempted mind control programs, about the fabricated events in the Gulf of Tonkin which led up to the Vietnam War, the Iran-Contra Affair, the phony testimony that propelled US involvement in the Gulf War.

In fact, even the outlandish claims of the QAnon conspiracy are not so far away from the truth. We know from the emerging details of the Epstein case that celebrities, politicians, and the ultra-wealthy *are* in fact connected to a secret pedophile ring. QAnon just gets the details wrong: the secret lair is on a private island, not in a pizza restaurant, and Donald Trump is good [friends](#) with the chief pedophile, not his arch-nemesis.

What makes the conspiracy-denialist position almost laughable is that, in the specific case of QAnon, we *know* that something covert is going on: Someone or some group is posting as Q, and the public doesn't know who it is. No paranoid assumptions about all-pervasive plots are required in order to investigate who exactly is behind such a scheme. The critics' inevitable rejoinder goes like this: *Yes, there is something to be discovered, but that doesn't really matter. What's at stake is*

the broader social implications; fixating on exposing the culprits is a conspiracists' mentality. This is a more sophisticated proposition, but it ultimately obfuscates the larger question it purportedly means to clarify. It turns out that a close reading of QAnon's inner circle – a rogues' gallery of quasi-legal capitalists, deep-state operatives, and right-wing demagogues – reveals a great deal about the actual dynamics of the resurgent far right.

Any assertion about the true identity of Q will ultimately rely on some speculation, but the case against father-son duo Jim and Ron Watkins, the central suspects of *QAnon: Into the Storm*, is pretty strong. They own and have sole personal control over the only website Q ever posts on, 8Kun (formerly known as 8Chan). Even when 8Kun was taken offline for several weeks, Q never posted anywhere else. Despite claiming to be apolitical, the Watkins cannot help but reveal throughout the film that they share Trump's and Q's right-wing politics – on top of the fact that Jim Watkins founded the conspiracy-peddling right-wing website called "The Goldwater". Jim has a collection of expensive pens and watches; the same items Q features in their posts. Crucially, at the end of the documentary, in the aftermath of the Capitol riot, Ron says that he plans to begin publicly sharing the "research" into various conspiracies which he had previously published anonymously on 8Kun. This revelation comes after denying not only political involvement, but even any participation on the website across multiple interviews which took place over the course of more than a year. Q has not posted again since that last interview.

As fascinating as the main characters of the film are, the figures looming in the background perhaps warrant even closer attention. President Trump himself boosted QAnon accounts on Twitter, refused to denounce the conspiracy theory during multiple interviews, and even appeared to use Q-inspired language as a wink-and-not to his most extreme supporters.

Former Trump advisor Steve Bannon was in touch with the Watkinses during the period in which Q was posting on their forum. His lawyer represented the Watkinses when 8Kun came under fire for hosting extremist content, and he may have even helped fund the lawyer with a sum of \$14,088 (a figure [associated](#) with neo-Nazism). Three star general and Trump advisor Michael Flynn openly endorsed QAnon. Perhaps most significantly, retired US Army Major General Paul Vallely sent representatives to share “information” (unfounded conspiracy theories) with popular QAnon bloggers and Youtubers. Vallely is the author of a [paper](#) titled “From PSYOP to MindWar: The Psychology of Victory”, a handbook for military disinformation campaigns.

Regardless of whether or not any of these people has ever actually posted under the name Q, their demonstrable connection with the phenomenon paints a picture of state actors [collaborating](#) with fascistic elements of the bourgeoisie [operating](#) on the fringes of the law in order to stir the white middle class into a violent frenzy. This is a significant development, which is not captured by platitudes about the dangers of fake news or recourse to the tired generalizations about the American psyche in standby essays like “The Paranoid Style of American Politics.”

Although the vast majority of the ruling class and the capitalist state are horrified by QAnon and even mainstream Trumpism, certain sections have clearly decided to prop up this highly irrational (even anti-rational) ideology associated with some of the shadiest characters imaginable. In QAnon, the bile of petit-bourgeois rage has combined with unlimited media access and official endorsement from the heights of political power to produce the seeds of a new esoteric ideology for American reaction.

From Clown Convention to Concentration Camps

Never believe that anti-Semites are completely unaware of the

absurdity of their replies. They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play. They even like to play with discourse for, by giving ridiculous reasons, they discredit the seriousness of their interlocutors. They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert. If you press them too closely, they will abruptly fall silent, loftily indicating by some phrase that the time for argument is past.

– Jean-Paul Sartre

Jim and Ron Watkins are worth returning to. Their class position could best be described in Marxist terms as *lumpenbourgeois* – that [section](#) of the bourgeoisie which exists outside or on the fringes of the law, ostracized from the social circles that would normally be associated with their class due to their lack of respectability. Before buying 8Kun (8Chan at the time), Jim made his first big money getting around Japanese censorship laws by producing uncensored porn in the Philippines that Japanese viewers could access. His onscreen persona is that of the joker come to life. Through half of his documentary appearance, he sports an absurd little handlebar moustache. He tells obvious lies into the camera about his politics or his knowledge of Q and then laughs like he's sharing an inside joke. He appears at his congressional hearing with a Q pin and pizza socks, and cracks jokes about how he hasn't brushed his teeth in order to disgust his interrogators. His son Ron mostly puts on a more serious face. He projects mystery: up until 2020, it is almost impossible to find any of his history online. He quotes Sun Tzu and talks about his (frankly less than impressive) martial arts training. But then he shows off his newly purchased sex doll and tries to take the filmmaker to "Soapland," essentially a sensual massage parlor. Both father and son continuously

insist that they are apolitical, that they don't know anything about Q, while making no effort whatsoever to hide their connections to QAnon or their involvement in right wing politics. They each seem to deliberately behave as caricatures of themselves.

These perverse characteristics are not just goofy quirks. They are tools in the fascist arsenal. Unbounded by the dictates of reason or decorum, the purveyors of reactionary conspiracy theories are free to invent or insinuate the most salacious stories imaginable. For their audience, it doesn't matter if the argument makes rational sense, because it corresponds with their perception of a disintegrating social fabric as capitalism grinds down the middle class. More importantly, it justifies their already-established political trajectory towards an explicitly white supremacist, eugenicist, and anti-democratic politics as a means to secure or restore their own class status.

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Historically, the big bourgeoisie have had to rely on such characters and methods as these in order to carry out their dirty work. The most obvious example of this is that of Nazi Germany. Big business overcame their distaste for Hitler's crudeness and embraced Nazism as a cudgel against the working class, communism, and foreign capital alike. From the point of view of capital, Nazi antisemitism was an ideological excess escaping the boundaries of the "real mission" of fascism to destroy the labor movement, and even hampering the war effort. But this ideological excess was in fact essential for

mobilizing the masses of people required by capital in order to accomplish its underlying task. This could not be accomplished by the “respectable” representatives of the bourgeois. Only someone like Hitler, clownish as he was, could harness his own rage with enough authenticity to capture the sentiments of the proletarianizing middle classes and de-classed proletarians who rallied around the Nazi party.

Through the lens of this history, we can see a somewhat familiar, yet still nascent pattern emerging with QAnon. For the Nazis, the “big lie” that mobilized the masses against all the enemies of German capital was the “stab in the back” myth – that Jews, communists, and international finance had betrayed the German cause in World War One and led to their defeat and humiliation on the world stage. In this narrative, Jews are logically necessary as the connective tissue between two groups (communists and finance capital) that would otherwise appear to be natural enemies.

In the United States today, a similar pattern is emerging. A new consensus on the right has emerged around vilifying foreign (especially Chinese) capital, immigrants, and movements for civil rights. QAnon binds all of these threads together by identifying liberal politicians and big business leaders as puppet masters pulling the strings of the Black and brown masses to create social chaos and cover for their nefarious deeds. The claims of massive electoral fraud pave the way for a restriction of the franchise, doing away with the problem of contending with mostly working-class immigrants and Black people at the ballot box.

For the most part, even right-wing outlets still won't touch QAnon explicitly- but its echoes have reached the mainstream. In 2020, the “Save our Children” movement blossomed, as tens of thousands took to the streets against child trafficking, based on the absurd QAnon-boosted claim that 800,000 children a year are disappeared. After the dust settled on January 6th, respected conservative publications have begun calling openly

for [restricting](#) the franchise. Republican politicians and conservative pundits make insinuations about big business conspiring against America when they take a (performative) stance against racist voting laws. “Q” might never return, but American politics is continuing down the path they walked.

Prophecy Postponed

Society is saved just as often as the circle of its rulers' contracts, as a more exclusive interest is maintained against a wider one. Every demand of the simplest bourgeois financial reform, of the most ordinary liberalism, of the most formal republicanism, of the most shallow democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an “attempt on society” and stigmatized as “socialism.” And finally, the high priests of “religion and order” themselves are driven with kicks from their Pythian tripods, hauled out of their beds in the darkness of night, put in prison vans, thrown into dungeons or sent into exile; their temple is razed to the ground, their mouths are sealed, their pens broken, their law torn to pieces in the name of religion, of property, of the family, of order. Bourgeois fanatics for order are shot down on their balconies by mobs of drunken soldiers, their domestic sanctuaries profaned, their houses bombarded for amusement – in the name of property, of the family, of religion, and of order. – Marx, [18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte](#)

Having investigated the ideology driving the rioters, we should return to the climactic events in question. What is the meaning of January 6th? According to some Democrats, it was a catastrophic event that threatened to overturn our democracy. In spite of this hysterical rhetoric, the party has balked at forming its own investigative committee in Congress without the participation of Republicans – the same party which they allege attempted to destroy the republic just 6 months ago. Many on the left have responded to this ludicrous hypocrisy by dismissing the significance of the riot altogether: “They were just some crazy, riled-up suburban weirdos with no plan –

nothing much to see here.” This depiction of the rioters is probably more correct than that of some Democrats who would like to paint them as hardened terrorists. But the fact that this collection of formless imbeciles was mobilized in a new way bears no small significance.

The Capitol-stormers of January 6th universally endorse the politics of “law and order.” And yet, the day’s events oscillated between bouts of frightening violence and a sort of carnivalesque, but basically harmless suspension of ordinary rules. It would be easy to say something cheap here about the irony-hypocrisy of the whole spectacle. A much more significant observation should be made instead: having arrived at their destination, the so-called insurrectionists *didn’t know what to do*. They paraded around the halls. They put their feet on Nancy Pelosi’s desk. They stole some souvenirs. A few smeared human feces around the building. The most serious tried to find and kidnap congresspeople – but mostly, they took selfies or live streams for their online friends. This phenomenon is partly an extension of the politics of Q. Conspiracy theories, by their very nature, can have a pacifying aspect. If *everything* is happening in the shadows, then mass politics are obsolete. During most of the lifecycle of Q, this was made explicit. Trump was behind the scenes rounding up the pedophiles already. Q’s followers just had to, as one “Q drop” put it, “Grab some popcorn. Enjoy the Show.” A politics based purely around waiting for a prophet-like leader to covertly eliminate the enemy could never have led to a well thought out and effective direct action.

In spite of this partial tendency, QAnon clearly demonstrated a capacity to mobilize people, or else they would not have gotten to the Capitol in the first place. Q was an effective rallying point for all the rage of the white American middle class. With fights over immigration and voting rights still very much ongoing, an even greater climate crisis looming on the horizon, and ever-increasing global competition in the

world market, that simmering rage will only grow to a boil. In the name of “law and order”, the forces that turned up to the Capitol in January will only resort to ever-more violent and extreme methods. Although the police crackdown against them has set them back, their numbers will grow in the long run.

In January, QAnon’s erstwhile prophet, Donald Trump, abandoned them. He gave them their marching orders to the Capitol, saying he would lead them, and then left them to their own devices. After Tweeting his support for a while, even this meagre solidarity vanished as he told the rioters on Twitter “It’s time to go home.” Ultimately, his cowardice and instinct for self-promotion and self-preservation outweighed his commitment to right wing politics. But the whole spectacle was only ever a dry run. In the future, more committed leaders will emerge to take up the same politics under a new name.

Already, the remnants of QAnon are being folded into mainstream conservatism. On April 16th, a platform document [leaked](#) for an ultra-right “America First” congressional caucus, led by open QAnon [supporter](#) Marjorie Taylor Green. The animating ideology of this platform is based on the “Great Replacement” myth: the idea that elites are replacing white people in America with brown immigrants and Black criminals. This myth intersects directly with QAnon conspiracy-mongering about massive electoral fraud replacing (white) votes for Trump with illegitimate votes – where “illegitimate” covers supposedly fabricated votes as well as votes of immigrants and people of color. In spite of the ham-fisted role out of this document, and subsequent backtracking by Taylor Green, it represents a blueprint for a new right-wing consensus in the post-Trump era.

The conspiracy-mongering right is no longer just an online freakshow. It has made its presence felt in the streets, and can no longer be ignored. It is not enough to simply expose the falsity of their claims or subject them to ridicule. Indeed, the notion that “exposing the truth” in itself is

enough to shift the balance of politics is one of the major flaws of conspiratorial thinking. Neither can we rely on the institutions of state power to come to our rescue. Instead, the Left, and anyone supporting democracy, must build the capacity to fight this reactionary threat with real action.