

English II 085LE  
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Karoline Jeane Steckley  
Class Notes



<https://www.niskanencenter.org/the-highbrow-conspiracism-of-the-new-intellectual-right-a-sampling-from-the-trump-years/>

**BY LAURA K. FIELD**  
APRIL 19, 2021

One of the strongest temptations of the Trump era has been to assume that Republican support for Trump was fundamentally limited to fringe groups and the economically disadvantaged — to struggling rural whites and those without much higher education. There is evidence for some of these assumptions, but on the whole such claims mask the extent to which support for Trump also came from **the middle class, the better-educated, and the wealthy**. It seems to me that there is something similar at play in our political discourse with respect to the GOP's descent into conspiracism. There is a strong temptation to attribute phenomena like QAnon and the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol to fringe elements of the GOP: Sure, Donald Trump's irresponsible rhetoric might have contributed to the insurrection, but mostly we're still just talking about disenfranchised outliers. To buy into this sanguine view is to seriously misunderstand the intellectual ecosystem of the American right today — and, in particular, to underestimate the extent to which sophisticated intellectuals have been sustaining Trumpism since 2016. Conspiratorial lies and misinformation were mainstays of Trumpism from the beginning — from Birtherism, to “alternative facts,” to “flood-the-zone-with-sh\*t,” to

QAnon. What was surprising, at least to me, was how swiftly theoretically-minded people swept in to provide more intellectual — but still highly tenuous, and often ultimately conspiratorial and absurd — sustenance to already-tenuous Trumpy views. It began with Michael Anton’s infamous “**Flight 93**” election essay, which appeared, pseudonymously, in September 2016. Once Trump won the election, other theorists turned up to seize the anti-liberal moment: to fill the intellectual void around the new president and soak up some power. And I’m not just speaking about obscure intellects like Anton. I am referring also to folks like Charles Kesler (editor of the Claremont Review of Books and probably the Claremont Institute’s foremost intellectual), Patrick Deneen (a chaired professor at Notre Dame, author of the 2018 bestseller *Why Liberalism Failed*), Adrian Vermeule (a prominent professor at Harvard Law School), and Yoram Hazony (Israeli-American professor and chairman of the Edmund Burke Foundation, and a **key organizer** of the **Nationalist Revival** movement).

My aim in this essay is to shine some light on a few clear examples of conservative political theorists peddling conspiracism in the Trump era.

I’ve written **quite a bit** in **recent years** about **Trumpy intellectualism**, and have come across my fair share of hyped-up conspiratorial claims. In their thoughtful 2019 book, ***A Lot of People Are Saying***, political theorists Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum make a compelling argument for something they call “the new conspiracism.” According to them, the conspiracism we have seen under Trump amounts to something quite new and newly unhinged. They liken it to “conspiracy without the theory” because it so often consists merely of assertion and fabrication: **QAnon** is not out there trying to string together bits of strange and counterintuitive evidence for perplexing phenomena; it is almost pure contrivance and fabulism (you can find a brief overview of their argument, as well as a post-Trump update, over at **The Constitutionalist**). I am not an expert on conspiracism, but in general I find this assessment persuasive. Still, in recent years I have also been struck by how contemporary theorists of the New Right have brought the

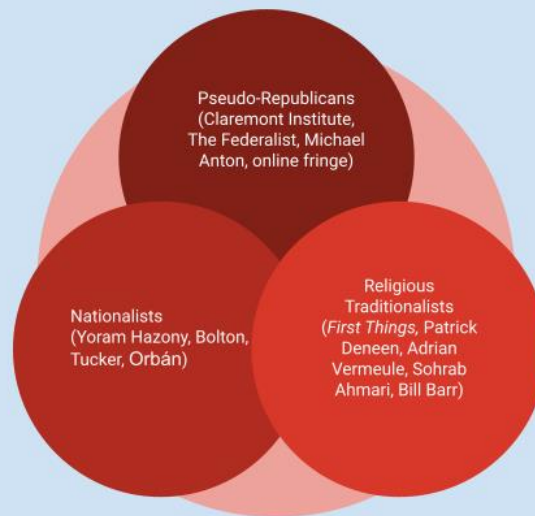
theory back in, as it were. Muirhead and Rosenblum identified a theoretical void in the new conspiracism, which contrasted with what they call classical conspiracism (which involves sleuthing and a scrupulous attention to logic and detail). The conservatives that I have in mind have done a fair bit their part to fill that vacuum. But it's not exactly a case of the new conspiracism meeting up an older, more classic form. Rather, the intellectual side of the new conspiracism betrays its very own pathology — namely, that of hyper-abstraction.

Whereas the new conspiracism that Muirhead and Rosenblum describe involves flagrant fabrication, the intellectual conspiracism of the New Right involves theoretical claims backed up by bad arguments and scant evidence. Under Trump, these two distinct ideational universes worked in syncopation: They were constituted differently — with outlandish claims and made-up “facts” on the one side, and theoretical hyperbole and bad argument on the other — but typically they shared the same targets, played off the same conservative tropes, and had the same disorienting effects.

### ***Preliminary distinctions and definitions***

I sort the New Right intellectuals into three distinct but overlapping groups — the Nationalists, the Pseudo-Republicans, and the Religious Traditionalists (see the chart below). Each of these groups has its own specific set of concerns and issues, some of which are in serious tension with those of the other groups. Although most of the figures involved stand in strident opposition to the left, and to many things about the U.S. government as it exists today, generally speaking this is a mixed-up group, who might disagree strongly with one another on any given issue. And so, although I do think they often share a conspiratorial outlook, it's important to be clear that, so far as I can tell, these groups are not themselves operating in a coordinated, conspiratorial way.

## Intellectuals on the New Right



I also want to be clear that in the discussion that follows, I am not trying to provide a representative sampling of New Right ideas, nor am I trying to make a comprehensive case about the extent of their conspiracism. Rather, my intention is to provide something like a short catalogue of extreme instances of conspiracism among contemporary intellectuals of the New Right. I do so with an understanding that conspiracism is nothing new in American life, and that many of these examples have emerged against a long history of distrust in government and distrust of elites/higher education on the right (in addition to a long, complex history of racism and nativism). I have also, of necessity, taken my examples of conspiratorial thinking somewhat out of context. In some ways this is unfair, since sometimes a claim comes as the culminating point of a longer argument and analysis. On the other hand, such sampling is inevitable insofar as I'm trying to depict a broad phenomenon and there are some advantages to such an approach. When we divorce conspiratorial claims from their broader discursive context, it gives us a clearer view of them — absent the surrounding justificatory schemas and padding, it's easier to recognize conspiratorial claims for what they are. Furthermore, my hope is that seeing a series of excerpted passages can help to demonstrate how

conspiratorial thinking can sneak up on us: Sometimes ideas that make some sense in the course of a more elaborate set of arguments fall apart — and quickly — when scrutinized independently. But I do want to be clear from the outset that I am deliberately highlighting extreme — and so not necessarily representative — claims.

Finally, a note on the thorny question of how to define conspiracism. I think it's useful to distinguish conspiracies (secretly coordinated unlawful/questionable action) from *conspiracism*. The former describes a concrete category of human action, whereas the latter — conspiracism or conspiracy theory — has to do with the *perception* or *ascription* of conspiratorial action. In other words, when we talk about an actual conspiracy, we are talking about secret behind-the-scenes coordination; but when we talk about conspiracism, we are talking about people's perceptions and imaginings about said coordination, and we are speaking of a distortion of some kind. Individuals can engage in conspiracism without being part of a conspiracy, and vice-versa. As such, I define conspiracism as the *over-ascription* of secret malicious intentionality, coordination, and control to an already-powerful group or institution. A conspiracy exists when people are secretly coordinating to do something bad or uncouth; but those who engage in *conspiracism* generally aren't merely identifying a conspiracy — they are identifying a malicious coordinated action where there isn't any, or they are vastly exaggerating the extent of such intentional coordination and control.

And so, when I say I have identified patterns of conspiratorial thinking among many of the New Right intellectuals, that is what I am referring to. To be sure, conspiracism is an inevitable part of political life, there are plenty of examples of this kind of conspiracism on the left, too, and there is always plenty of subjectivity and potential for reasoning that begs the question in this sort of endeavor. As such, I have tried to hew to a pretty simple “you-know-it-when-you-see-it” standard. My focus here is on the New Right intellectuals because that is where I have been putting my attention lately, and because I do think they have been captured by

conspiracism to an unusual and noteworthy degree in recent years, and because their conspiracism is contributing to a movement that is actively undermining American democracy.

I have followed Muirhead and Rosenblum by organizing my examples of New Right intellectual conspiracism into two main target categories. I discuss their conspiratorial attacks on political institutions, first, and their attacks on educational and cultural institutions, second. As Muirhead and Rosenblum observe, these are the institutions most important to maintaining a free society.

### ***Conspiracism and political institutions***

The *political* conspiracism of the New Right takes various forms. I have identified three basic types of claims. The first sort is the exaggerated attack on the political opposition: Here we see New Right thinkers attacking the legitimacy of the left, with the added suggestion that the left is out to destroy the country. The second is the exaggerated attack on the establishment/existing institutions more generally. The final kind of conspiratorial claim involves exaggerated attacks on the political system itself, including the electoral system. With Trump's "Stop the Steal" campaign so vivid in the collective memory, there is obviously a lot to say about this final, most corrosive type of conspiracism.

My impression is that many of the New Right intellectuals share a fundamentally conspiratorial view of the left — a view that is often deeply cynical and/or detached from reality. Which is to say that most all of these thinkers — from Yoram Hazony to Patrick Deneen to Bill Barr to Michael Anton — are in basic agreement that liberals and leftists are all, intentionally, charting a general course of political revolution and/or general destruction. A good example of such thinking comes from a speech that Barr, then still attorney general, gave to the Federalist Society in **November 2019**. This is not pure conspiracism, insofar as Barr purports that leftists are (always) led astray by excessive idealism rather than by malevolence, but the insinuations of (negative) left fanaticism are not far beneath the surface:

**In any age, the so-called progressives treat politics as their religion. Their holy mission is to use the coercive power of the State to remake man and society in their own image, according to an abstract ideal of perfection. Whatever means they use are therefore justified because, by definition, they are a virtuous people pursuing a deific end. They are willing to use any means necessary to gain momentary advantage in achieving their end, regardless of collateral consequences and the systemic implications. They never ask whether the actions they take could be justified as a general rule of conduct, equally applicable to all sides.**

Barr goes on to opine about how conservatives do not have the same ambitions as so-called progressives, and so they necessarily pursue a more moderate kind of politics, which puts them at a natural disadvantage. The conspiratorial core of the speech is Barr's general, overweening claim that the left sees it as its "holy mission" to use state coercion to achieve their ends — a very clear over-ascription of intentionality and coordination to the political left. Later in the speech he speaks of a "progressive holy war" enabled by a "hyper-partisan media." This is a clear over-ascription of intentionality and coordination insofar as it vastly exaggerates the unity and coordinated efforts of the left (it also understates the extent to which such phenomena also occur on the right).

We can see a more extreme example of conspiratorial thinking in Michael Anton's infamous "**Flight 93 Election**" essay. Anton's essay arguably made such a splash precisely because it made such an extraordinary argument — not just against Democrats, but also against the so-called Establishment GOP. The basic argument of the piece is that American democracy has become so unrecognizably corrupt that it's worth taking extraordinary risks to try and save it: In particular, Anton felt that the threat posed by Hillary was so grave that it was worth electing Donald Trump. As Rush Limbaugh observed at the time, Anton's essay provided a powerful, blow-it-up style "**shaming**" of the GOP powers-that-be. But the essay is conspiratorial at



its core. According to Anton, the entire establishment (which consists of various coordinated groups — “the Washington Generals,” the “Davoisie,” the “Never Trump movement,” the “Progressive-left,”) is wholly corrupt: Their entire purpose is to hold on to power and oppress everyone else. Here is a clear example of Anton’s conspiracism, as concerned a potential Clinton win:

**A Hillary presidency will be pedal-to-the-metal on the entire Progressive-left agenda, plus items few of us have yet imagined in our darkest moments. Nor is even that the worst. It will be coupled with a level of vindictive persecution against resistance and dissent hitherto seen in the supposedly liberal West only in the most “advanced” Scandinavian countries and the most leftist corners of Germany and England.**

The essay makes a series of arguments about how “the deck is stacked overwhelmingly against us” (the “us” being conservatives). The first involves the idea that “the opinion-making elements — the universities and the media above all — are wholly corrupt and wholly opposed to everything we want, and increasingly even to our existence.” Anton’s second argument is that the so-called “Washington Generals” are too moderate, and too concerned about respecting the political opposition: “Our ‘leaders’ and ‘dissenters’ bend over backward to play by the self-sabotaging rules the Left sets for them. Fearful, beaten dogs have more *thymos*.” Finally, Anton presents a truly ugly argument about the “ceaseless importation of Third World foreigners with no tradition of, taste for, or experience in liberty.” According to Anton’s theory, “the Left, the Democrats, and the bipartisan junta (categories distinct but very much overlapping) think they are on the cusp of a permanent victory that will forever obviate the need to pretend to respect democratic and constitutional niceties.” For Anton, all regular American political practices can be reduced to a vast, coordinated conspiracy against conservatives.



This clearly involves the over-ascription of intentionality, coordination, and power to an already-powerful group or institution. While it's true that the so-called American establishment is powerful, it isn't this powerful, and it isn't this unified or coordinated.

We catch glimpses of similar lines of thought in the work of Patrick Deneen, Notre Dame professor and author of the much-discussed 2018 book *Why Liberalism Failed*. Deneen is more constrained than Anton, to be sure, but occasionally he, too, tips into broad-scale conspiratorial thinking. For example, here's how Deneen describes contemporary electoral systems (from page 2 of *Why Liberalism Failed*):

**Elections, once regarded as well-orchestrated performances meant to convey legitimacy to liberal democracy, are increasingly regarded as evidence of an impregnably rigged and corrupt system. It is evident to all that the political system is broken and the social fabric is fraying.**

Or consider what he says on page 8:

**Our electoral process today appears more to be a Potemkin drama meant to convey the appearance of popular consent for a figure who will exercise incomparable arbitrary powers over domestic policy, international arrangements, and, especially, war-making.**

According to Deneen, elections were never actually something to take seriously — they were always regarded as merely “well-orchestrated performances,” but now they have reached the level of “Potemkin drama.” Today, elections are entirely hollow, and are taken to be “impregnably rigged and corrupt.” Deneen couches his claims in the fuzzy language of perception (“once regarded as,” “increasingly regarded as,” “evident to all,” “today appears to be”), and, as is typical for him, he offers little to no empirical evidence for his claims.

Given these writers' extraordinary levels of political disaffection and distrust (one often wonders about the standards against which they are forming their political judgments, but that is a much longer story), it is perhaps unsurprising that many of them also fell in line behind Donald Trump's "Big Lie" — his false claims of widespread election fraud and the so-called Biden coup, all of which culminated in the January 6 attack on the US Capitol (Bill Barr is an exception here: The attorney general resigned from the Trump administration in time to avoid entanglement in these sorts of claims).

For their part, the Claremont Institute was a generative nexus of Stop-the-Steal conspiracism. Prior to the election, they published **several** pieces that not only gamed out worrisome would-be electoral scenarios, but went much further in claiming that the worst scenario — the Biden coup — was already, in fact, being enacted in plain sight. Most of this happened in the pages of *The American Mind*. Michael Anton first gamed out a possible Biden coup in September 2020 (see "**The Coming Coup?**"), and the editorial board was treating the Biden coup as fact within a week ("**Stop the Coup**"). Anton committed to the reality of the thing on November 4 (see "**Game-On for the Coup?**"). Soon thereafter, the president of the Claremont Institute (Ryan P. Williams) and other key leaders at Claremont (Arthur Milikh, Matthew J. Peterson, and James Poulos) rallied behind Anton's vision of resistance to the "coup" and wrote up more detailed plans, complete with overtly militaristic appeals (see "**The Fight is Now**"). **John Eastman** was a **member of** Trump's legal team, and in a bizarre **retrospective discussion of January 6**, Charles Kesler refers to Eastman as principal author of Trump's "theory" that Congress should "pause" the Electoral College count.

The Claremont Institute group spilled a lot of ink trying to argue for a Biden coup: They made a lot of arguments and contributed a lot of hype to "Stop the Steal." The trouble all the way through, though, is that there was never any good evidence for any of it — not of widespread election fraud or interference, and not of state-level uncertainty about state electors (as Eastman's "theory" presumed). There is much more to say about the extraordinary levels of incoherence and conspiracism that the

Claremont Institute leadership became embroiled in during the final months of the Trump presidency. For our purposes here, I'll just say that if readers persevere and click on the links that the authors provide, they will come out empty-handed — much as the president did. There are **plenty** of elaborate theories on offer, but they do not have serious evidentiary grounds (the Claremont group sometimes links to **this article**, by political theorist Claes Ryn, and it is probably the most coherent collection of such theories that I have seen — but, again, it's almost entirely speculative).

In addition to lacking evidence, the Claremont Institute's theory of the Biden coup is fundamentally incoherent. According to the theory, Democrats rigged the election just enough to win the House, but not enough, at least in November, to effectively take the Senate; they rigged the Biden victory, but this had no impact on the GOP Senate wins, and on and on.

But nothing quite matches the **Charles Kesler** gambit: According to Kesler, the question of widespread voter fraud is still pretty much up in the air. Such claims aren't inherently baseless, he claims, since "claims are 'baseless' only until such time as a base of evidence appears for them." Such an outlook only makes sense in conspiratorial context, where we exist in a state of radical skepticism and uncertainty: Nothing is what it seems and we'll never really know *for sure* because the secret operators out there are so all-powerful.

It's tempting to think that it was only the Anton/Claremont Institute types who got caught up in this unhinged electoral madness, but unfortunately that is simply not so. For his part, Patrick Deneen was apparently convinced that the election of Donald Trump represented a "burst of democracy," but that the "elite made sure to roll that back" in 2020 (he has since deleted this tweet, which originally **quote-tweeted** well-known conspiracist and **Claremont Institute fellow** Jack Posobiec). Apparently, for Deneen, the 81 million Americans who voted for Biden form an elite cabal of liberal oligarchs, while the 74 million who voted for Trump are the true democrats. This is, quite obviously, an absurd and incoherent claim. And it's

conspiratorial: It over-ascribes the coordination and power of Democrats, referring to 81 million people as an “elite” who wield nefarious, undemocratic power.



**Patrick Deneen**  
@PatrickDeneen

...

Not infrequently, the view from outside gives you better insight into what is going on inside. The U.S. today is a unique form of liberal oligarchy that was disrupted by a momentary burst of democracy. The elite made sure to roll that back - amusingly, in the name of "democracy."



**President-Elect of Jesusland Poso** ✓ @JackPosobiec · Dec 8

Here is Renmin University professor Di Dongsheng talking about how the US government really works



10:52 AM · Dec 9, 2020 · Twitter for iPad

**60** Retweets **3** Quote Tweets **206** Likes



Finally, there is Adrian Vermeule. Vermeule appears to have gone all-in on conspiratorial claims about the 2020 election (which is somewhat ironic given his authorship of a well-known article, with Cass Sunstein, about **conspiracism**). Vermeule has **earned** some **opprobrium** for his conspiratorial views about the 2020 election, as well as some **support**. While it's possible that Vermeule's tweets during this period were meant sarcastically, as his supporters claim, that is not how they read to me (which isn't to say I think he should face formal sanctions for his terrible judgment in this matter — I honestly have not thought that part through).





**Adrian Vermeule** @Vermeullarmine · 20h



They won't stop; they will have to be stopped.



**Sean Davis** ✓ @seanmdav · Nov 4

Read it for yourself: the Pennsylvania Supreme Court says ALL ballots received after Election Day, even those WITHOUT a postmark, MUST be assumed to have been legally cast. [pacourts.us/assets/opinion...](https://pacourts.us/assets/opinion...)

The Secretary emphasizes that the remedy sought here is not the invalidation of the Election Code's received-by deadline, but rather the grant of equitable relief to extend temporarily the deadline to address "mail-delivery delays during an on-going public health disaster." Secretary's Brief at 18. As no party is seeking the invalidation of the received-by deadline, the Secretary rejects the suggestion of Respondent and the Caucus that the remedy would trigger the nonseverability provision of Act 77, reasoning that the Court would be granting "a temporary short extension to address the exigencies of a natural

<sup>20</sup> She specifically recommends that the Court "order that ballots mailed by voters by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day be counted if they are otherwise valid and received by the county boards of election by November 6, 2020. Ballots received within this period that lack a postmark or other proof of mailing, or for which the postmark or other proof of mailing is illegible, should enjoy a presumption that they were mailed by Election Day." Secretary's Application at 29. We observe that this proposal therefore requires that all votes be cast by Election Day but does not disenfranchise a voter based upon the absence or illegibility of a USPS postmark that is beyond the control of the voter once she places her ballot in the USPS delivery system.



42



375



1.2K



**Adrian Vermeule** @Vermeullarmine · 16h



Lol the election isn't over until Team Joe fixes up your ballot for you



**David Litt** ✓ @davidlitt · 18h

Anyone in Georgia? Team Joe needs people to go door to door helping voters fix their mail in ballots so they count. Sign up! [mobilize.us/georgiademocra...](https://mobilize.us/georgiademocra...)



5



863



2.3K





↻ Adrian Vermeule Retweeted



**The Redacted Man** @theredactedman · Nov 4

...

The election is over and people are playing games.

GA: "A pipe burst!"

PA: "You really expect me to count all these right now?!"

AZ: "Those 1 million votes aren't going to make a difference, Biden won!"

MI: "Can't call it, there's some ballots blowing down 7 mile right now!"

💬 137

↻ 3.8K

❤️ 9.3K



**Adrian Vermeule** @Vermeullar... · 4h ...

Totally normal!



**FiveThirtyEight** ✓ @FiveTh... · 5h

Two more batches of Pennsylvania vote were reported:

-23,277 votes in Philadelphia, all for Biden

-about 5,300 votes in Luzerne Cou...

💬 44

↻ 238

❤️ 1,096





For Muirhead and Rosenblum, conspiratorial attacks on the electoral system are dangerous because they fuel distrust and disaffection from the political system, and

offer no serious or constructive alternative in its place. Skepticism and distrust are perfectly legitimate attitudes towards political power, but at some point radical and baseless skepticism are merely destructive. Conspiratorial claims like those we see with New Right intellectuals are so harmful because they undermine the very possibility of sound judgment, by doing away with the grounds for reasonable adjudication.

As with the more outrageous forms of conspiracism (QAnon is the prime example), these thinkers are playing an explosive game with contemporary politics. The difference is that they are doing it under the cover of impressive credentials, and using their credentials to lend legitimacy to destructive falsehoods. In my view, this makes it worse. They should know better, and so it seems more deceptive, and also quite a bit more damaging.

### ***Conspiracism and cultural authority***

In recent years, the intellectuals of the New Right have also made some extraordinary, conspiratorial attacks on American knowledge-producing institutions. As Muirhead and Rosenblum observe, cultural institutions and authorities are a standard target of conspiratorial attacks, which makes sense given the authority that such institutions exert in modern society (conservatives of all stripes like to speak of “the commanding heights of culture”). Whereas political conspiracism has a destabilizing effect on political institutions, cultural/intellectual conspiracism has a more insidious and general destabilizing effect: It serves to undermine our trust in the very possibility of knowledge and a shared civic life. In what follows, I discuss some of the most extreme examples of this kind of anti-knowledge, anti-institutional conspiracism that I have seen coming from right-wing intellectuals in recent years. I move from more generalized and vague cultural examples — where the targets are vast and inchoate — to more targeted and specific ones. In each case, some nefarious group of elites is out there, plottingly, to get us (“us” being the general public, or in some instances just the Republican public).

One of the clearest examples of such thinking comes from an October 2019 speech given by former Attorney General Barr. This **speech took** place at Notre Dame University, and was concerned with religious liberty in the United States. Throughout the speech, Barr speaks in extremely reductive “culture war” terms about the progressive left. He paints a picture of two radically divergent “moral systems” — the good, traditionalist Christian system, and the new, secularist, progressive one. It’s worth reading the complete screed, as it offers a good encapsulation of the hyperparanoid outlook of many on the conservative right today. In a fear-mongering explanation of why the cultural pendulum is not likely to swing back towards a conservative outlook, here is what Barr has to say about the allegedly secular left:

**First [i.e., the first reason that the pendulum won’t swing back] is the force, fervor, and comprehensiveness of the assault on religion we are experiencing today. This is not decay; it is organized destruction. Secularists, and their allies among the “progressives,” have marshaled all the force of mass communications, popular culture, the entertainment industry, and academia in an unrelenting assault on religion and traditional values.**

Barr’s diatribe could take us far into “cancel-culture” discourse; my intention here is to merely point out that even this short passage contains some incredible exaggerations. It exaggerates the secularism of the left; it exaggerates the coordination and unity of the left; it exaggerates the extent to which the left has “marshaled all the force of mass communications, popular culture, the entertainment industry, and academia.” (*All the forces? Really?*) And it uses the words of warfare (“unrelenting assault” — he goes on to speak of the left’s “inquisitions and excommunications” and “figurative burning at the stake”) to describe contemporary political disagreements and changes in cultural norms. To be sure, some of these disagreements have been vehement and have, it seems to me, involved some genuine injustices — but they are still very far removed from the types of legal

repression and violence that have affected, say, women, and homosexuals, and people of color, throughout history and down to this day. Barr's speech is full of derision and mockery towards moral systems that don't hew closely to his traditional outlook ("What we call 'values' today are really nothing more than mere sentimentality, still drawing on the vapor trails of Christianity"), but he is quite confident that the left is capable of "organized destruction."

Much of what Bill Barr has to say sounds as though it might have been lifted from Patrick Deneen's book, and, in particular, his chapter on so-called "**Liberalocracy**." Deneen's work often pretends to a kind of nonpartisan neutrality, but he singles out liberal elites for blame, in a conspiratorial way, when it comes to the alleged problem of contemporary cultural decay. Deneen is of the mind that social stratification is a major cause of civil disruption and instability, and he cites the work of folks like Robert Putnam and Charles Murray to make his case. According to Deneen, liberalism is a destructive doctrine grounded on individualism, and this tends to tear apart the social fabric. As I have **written elsewhere**, though, he also recognizes that so-called urban liberal elites tend to enjoy a higher quality of life (on the aggregate) than their less privileged compatriots, despite their allegedly corrosive values. Whereas a sensible, non-conspiracist would trace such complex phenomena to a large variety of causes — the predictable outcome of higher education levels, intergenerational wealth, social networks of support, ordinary selfishness, etcetera — Deneen finds "liberalocratic" exploitation and malevolence. For him, everything the "liberalocrats" do — in public life, and certainly in politics — is in bad faith. Here are some of his claims to that effect (with emphasis added):

**Friendships and even romantic relationships are like international alliances — understood to serve personal advantage. ... Elites are studiously silent about the familial basis of their own success. Marital stability is now a form of competitive advantage for the upper tier, an advantage amplified by the insistence that family formation is a matter of individual choice and even an obstacle to autonomy. Having shaped the family in the image of the Hobbesian state of**

nature, its adoption by the strong is now one more tool for advantage over the weak. (134)

The educational system, transformed into a tool of liberalism, is also ultimately the

systemic creation of a new aristocracy of the strong over the weak. Liberalism's denouement is a society of deep, pervasive stratification, a condition that liberals lament even as they contribute in manifold ways to its perpetuation — particularly through its educational institutions. (134)

Rather than encouraging the embrace of relative economic and social equality, as Rawls supposed, this scenario was embraced by those of liberal dispositions precisely because they anticipated being its winners. (135)

This embrace of economic equality [on the part of progressives] was not intended to secure an opposite outcome to classical liberalism: rather, it sought to extend the weakening of social forms and cultural traditions already advanced by classical liberalism, with an end to increasing political consolidation. Under classical liberalism, this end could best be achieved by limiting government's authority over individuals. For progressive liberalism, it was best achieved by empowering the State to equalize the fruits of an increasingly prosperous society while intervening more actively in the realms of church, family, and even human sexuality. (142)

The appeal to economic justice and taming of the market — never realized, of course — was advanced not ultimately in the name of greater equality but to secure the liberation of those living outside the guidelines and structures of cultural norms by disassembling the social structures and cultural practices that supported the flourishing of the greater part of humanity... Progressivism aims above all at the



**liberation of an elite whose ascent requires the disassembling of norms, intermediating institutions, and thick forms of community, a demolition that comes at the expense of these communities' settled forms of life. ... Progressive liberalism was never actually a foe of classical liberalism. Its true enemy was a kind of lived "Burkeanism": the way of life of much of humanity. (143)**

Again, I do not mean to suggest that Deneen has not hit upon any truths in his book about contemporary politics. My point is that his work perpetuates a blatantly conspiratorial view of the forces that operate behind "liberalism": According to Deneen, as with Barr, "liberalocrats" are studiously, intentionally, openly involved in the active disassembly of society. They use all available institutions towards these overtly destructive ends — marriage, higher education, and anything having to do with community or culture.

Patrick Deneen also has a chapter that focuses on liberalism's destruction of higher education (which I discussed [at some length here](#)), but for an even more thoroughly conspiratorial view of the matter, let's turn to Arthur Milikh of the Claremont Institute. Writing for [National Affairs](#) in the winter of 2020, Milikh made something like the Flight 93 argument, but this time with reference to American universities. The article is entitled "Preventing Suicide by Higher Education." According to Milikh, American universities are so corrupt and destructive that they should be allowed to perish (i.e., the federal government should stop offering any support to these institutions). According to Milikh, universities are "working to sink the nation while hiding behind the prestige of science." For him, government support for student loans is equivalent to funding "the corruption of the nation," because identity fanaticism has taken over universities and the Democratic Party. On the basis of one letter composed by students at Williams College, Milikh claims that militant fanatical beliefs are "widely held by faculty and students across the nation's universities," and that "honest intellectual inquiry has become impossible on most



campuses.” He hopes for the collapse of “large parts of the current system,” because:

**Universities that spread poisonous doctrines no longer believe in the purpose of the university. While it is their right to disagree with this purpose, they should not be the beneficiaries of public funds. No society should be expected to subsidize its own corrosion.**

Milikh writes about the problem of free speech and censorship, but in the end he recommends, as a solution, putting an end to publicly-funded higher education. It does not seem to occur to him that whole swaths of the population might disagree with his assessment, such that his proposed solution would actually amount to reactionary anti-liberal censorship. He pretends to speak for the public interest, but he offers very little actual basis for his extraordinary claims, even while he advocates for the destruction of core democratic institutions.

Another (extremely muddled) example of such conspiratorial thinking regarding modern institutions comes from Yoram Hazony. Writing this past summer for [Quillette.com](https://www.quillette.com) about the relationship between Marxism and liberalism, Hazony describes how Marxists are always lurking behind liberal and leftist causes and organizations:

**Anti-Marxist liberals have labored under numerous disadvantages in the recent struggles to maintain control of liberal organizations. One is that they are often not confident they can use the term “Marxist” in good faith to describe those seeking to overthrow them. This is because their tormentors do not follow the precedent of the Communist Party, the Nazis, and various other political movements that branded themselves using a particular party name and issued an explicit manifesto to define it. Instead, they disorient their opponents by referring to their beliefs with a shifting vocabulary of terms, including “the Left,” “Progressivism,” “Social Justice,” “Anti-**

**Racism,” “Anti-Fascism,” “Black Lives Matter,” “Critical Race Theory,” “Identity Politics,” “Political Correctness,” “Wokeness,” and more. When liberals try to use these terms they often find themselves deplored for not using them correctly, and this itself becomes a weapon in the hands of those who wish to humiliate and ultimately destroy them.**

Hazony’s essay is silly and irresponsible for a lot of reasons — generally speaking, the categories and concepts he uses are so vague that they are far more befuddling than clarifying — but this passage is notable for offering a clear example of outright conspiracism. According to Hazony, the progressive world is full of Marxist “tormentors” who seek to disorient their opponents, and “to humiliate and ultimately destroy them.” They are out there lurking everywhere, behind every progressive cause or concern.

Hazony may have hit upon some little bits of truth here — tensions on the left sometimes erupt according to something like the dynamic he describes — but the full truth is, quite obviously, far more variegated and complicated. There is, quite simply, no unified Marxist cabal on the left that is working through each of the groups that Hazony has identified as fundamentally destructive to liberalism. Each of the groups Hazony brings in here represents its own theoretical bundle of claims and concerns — and, frankly, straight-up Marxism is not a primary feature of any of them (though one could certainly say that many of those groups have been influenced by historical claims about material interests attributable to Marx). Hazony is involved in an over-ascription of secret intentionality, coordination, and control to the Marxists.

To his credit, in the aftermath of January 6 Hazony released a **statement** against the Capitol attack in which he blamed Trump for his attempt to steal the election, but his bizarre, overwrought, exhausted messaging about Marxism is now fast becoming a key line of propaganda **across** the conservative landscape today.

The most vulgar version of this kind of conspiracism that I have seen comes from the president of the Claremont Institute, Ryan P. Williams, and the Institute's chair, Thomas Klingenstein. In a statement they put out this past summer, in which they confidently declared that "**America is Not Racist**," Williams and Klingenstein proclaimed that the real culprits behind the summer's racial unrest and violence were American "universities and media":

**Why is it that so many of our citizens believe that America is racist to its core? Because this lie has been preached by our universities and media like the Gospel for a generation. From there it has traveled throughout society, particularly among the elite. Even most leaders on the Right are unwilling to refute this destructive untruth. In failing to do so, they promote the falsehood, the riots that it has engendered, and ultimately America's destruction. This is to say, the riots are the handiwork of the elite. A country that has been taught it is ignoble will not defend itself against its enemies, domestic or foreign.**

In other words, according to Williams and Klingenstein, the violence and unrest this summer had nothing to do with the killing of George Floyd; nothing to do with police brutality, law enforcement and broader inequities in the criminal justice system; and nothing to do with racism. It was actually all the result of elite lies and malevolence: "the riots are the handiwork of the elite." In their **next statement**, released a few weeks later, Williams and Kligenstein focus more squarely on Black Lives Matter, which they insist is a Marxist, revolutionary, and totalitarian movement (some members of Black Lives Matter do identify as Marxists, but, as was made plain this summer, the movement is much more diffuse; its ideological parameters cannot reasonably be reduced to Marxism, the Claremont Institute's **determined** efforts **notwithstanding**). Both explanations — that the unrest and violence were caused by the elites, and that they were the result of totalitarian/Marxist action — are conspiratorial. They involve obvious distortions about the degree of coordination and power that exists on the left. (For a truly stomach-turning example of conspiratorial, racist scapegoating, have a look at

Christopher Flannery's "[report](#)" from the Million MAGA march in D.C. this past fall. Flannery is a Claremont Institute affiliate and board member; he published his report with the Institute's blog, *The American Mind*).

### ***Radical skepticism and the destruction of reason***

Conspiratorial thinking is hardly the exclusive domain of the contemporary GOP. The left engages in various forms of conspiracism too, and quite regularly. Leftists often speak in conspiratorial terms about corporate power (and its collusion with the Liberal Establishment). Democrats sometimes veered towards conspiracism in the course of the Mueller investigation, and we have seen distrust of political and institutional power flourish [across the political spectrum](#) in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic — from the early rumors about 5G networks and the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine to current distrust in vaccines.

Human beings appear to be quite prone to the notion that there are nefarious forces at work, behind the scenes, that intend to do us harm, and which can explain our suffering. Indeed, the persistent endurance of conspiracism suggests that we are so desperate to understand our suffering that we would rather find evil causes where there aren't any than confront the complex uncertainties introduced by more ordinary vices like greed, happenstance, ignorance, and error.

Given how much more psychologically satisfying it is to find a particular other or group to blame — for our hardships or declining influence — conspiratorial thinking will probably always have a role to play in human affairs.

Even so, under Trump, we saw the continued asymmetrical growth of conspiracism on the right, where it has [increasingly](#) made it into the Republican Party's mainstream. The culminating event of the political conspiracism came in the form of Trump's "Stop the Steal" lies and the insurrection of January 6 (as well as the election of folks like Marjorie Taylor Greene and the behavior of folks like Senator [Ron Johnson](#)). In December of 2020, experts warned of a [coalescence around conspiracism](#) on the right, facilitated by social media, and of mass

radicalization. On the cultural plane, just prior to leaving office, Trump passed a series of reforms targeting **institutions** that engage in racial sensitivity training, or which teach Critical Race Theory. It strikes me as unlikely that we've seen the end of **these kinds** of highly-ideological, **right-wing attacks** on **higher-ed**. The New Right intellectuals may speak the language of republicanism and the common interest, but often they wind up defending more authoritarian forms of (minoritarian) government control.

Some of the problems that surfaced under the Trump administration are endemic to life in a constitutional democracy. Some people will always distrust authority, and with good reason — that is an essential part of freedom. There will always be radical intellectuals and contrarian academics, there will always be conspiracies and conspiracy theories, and rationalizations will always be found to give cover to raw power. In a free society there will always be factions, and intellectual silos, and a fragmented, somewhat unaccountable media landscape. But the intellectuals who rose to prominence under Trump aligned themselves with incoherence, unreason, and unaccountability again and again; many of the ideas they peddled were not so far from the rank fabulism of QAnon, and indeed, their respective political and cultural targets often coincided.

One outcome of all this unhinged, sloppy thinking is broadscale disorientation and distrust. As many have observed by this point — from **Masha Gessen**, to **Jason Stanley**, to **Sean Illing**, to Muirhead and Rosenblum — this is the kind of disorientation and distrust that destroys the very possibility of liberal democracy, because it undercuts citizens' rational faculties. As Sean Illing put it recently, in reference to January 6, "we reached this precipice because millions of Americans have had a firehose of falsehoods blasted into their brains for months on end." It's also this kind of disorientation and distrust which eventually — and in some ways, quite understandably — makes people thirst for strongman, authoritarian rule.

Muirhead and Rosenblum do us the additional favor of explaining, in relatively plain language, exactly how conspiratorial thinking generates not only bizarre positive beliefs, but also excessive distrust. They describe, somewhat counterintuitively, how conspiracism destroys skepticism. It's worth quoting them at length on this point:

**Skepticism and knowledge-producing institutions go together, and the conspiracist attack on knowledge is also an attack on skepticism. Knowledge does not demand certainty; it demands doubt. Even when we are persuaded that, all things considered, the available evidence and argument point in a certain direction, even after we have resolved to go in that direction, we should be alive to the possibility that in spite of our best effort to get it right, we got it wrong. Our assurance of being right relies on doubt and an iterative process of questioning. And a plurality of knowledge-producing institutions is skepticism's resource. The wealth of specialized knowledge, of science and social science and ethical perspectives, provides platforms from which we consider when experts are wrong, when science is incomplete, when our best understanding of facts and theories and explanations is limited or flawed, and when reasons match or don't match the values we bring to politics. Conspiracists embrace the self-conception that they are skeptics and critical thinkers. But their own epistemic closure undercuts the capacity for skepticism. When knowledge-based pluralism is closed down, when sources are delegitimized and thrust outside the orbit of consideration, when conspiracist transmitters have lost the capacity for receiving, the framework of questioning and assurance is undone. (pp. 119-120)**

With this, Muirhead and Rosenblum help to articulate some of the most radically destructive implications of widespread conspiracism: It doesn't merely undermine our political institutions — terrible though that is — it also destroys the human

capacity to question things and think them through with any sense of restraint or measure.

These are potentially devastating problems for the American republic. Trump lost the 2020 election, but these issues run much deeper — through the GOP, through the right-wing mediascape, and through the American psyche. And they are, in their very nature, deep social, political, epistemic, and human problems, so there are no easy shortcuts here. My hope is that seeing some of the worst examples of conspiracism among the New Right intellectuals proves useful in two senses: I think it's important to call out such distortions when we can, in order to hold people accountable to truth. I also think it's possible to learn something from these negative examples. Bearing witness to such exaggerated, cynical, evidence-free/baseless, distorted, and fear-mongering claims can result in some refreshingly simple counter-principles.

It's a good reminder always to pause and ask: Is a given claim exaggerated? Is it overly general or made in bad faith? Is it supported by good evidence?

Is a given claim proportionate to what I see play out in my own real-world communities? Does my own day-to-day reality reflect these concerns?

When it comes to conspiratorial thinking, the most important question of all may be: Is it fair to attribute malicious intent to this thing that happened, or was something else going on?

Among other things — like free and fair elections, the rule of law, a free press, good public education — democracy runs on a healthy combination of civic faith, civic skepticism, and common sense. Conspiracism, in contrast, has the allure of the radical and of the forbidden, but it destroys all three of these more tempered habits and virtues. One important way to counter conspiracism — including in its more sophisticated iterations — is to cultivate these other more sober habits, relentlessly.



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