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Deconstructing the Deep State:

QAnon, Metanarrative Conspiracy Theories, and Foucauldian Discourse

Conspiracy theories occupy an intrinsically controversial place in Canadian and American socio-political discourse. While ‘conspiracy theory’ has no inherent truth value, it is an extremely value laden term and heuristically synonymous with ‘incorrect’. Yet despite being broad and value laden, the term is helpful to distinguish conspiracy theories from other forms of non-dominant discourse. In the case of the former, it is not just conclusions, but the appropriate regime of truth itself at stake. Conspiracies (and especially the sprawling and prolific internet-based metanarrative QAnon) tend to center around historic or current issues of the body. As such, conspiratorial discourse can be understood in terms of two cores of Foucault’s thought; biopolitical discourses and genealogical history. Conspiracy theories in general, and QAnon in particular, are approachable as biopolitical regimes of truth in competition with dominant discourses. These regimes have the potential to exert a great deal of power on proponents, and hence have no more potential to limit the power acting upon a proponent than the dominant narrative. Their metanarrative aspect makes these, in a Foucauldian sense, poorly constructed histories. Foucauldian analysis provides a rich framework to understand the workings of the conspiracy theories, and sometimes has the potential to offer critiques of them without directly invoking the opposing dominant regime of truth. To demonstrate this, I begin by reviewing Foucault’s construction of biopower and biopolitics alongside his work examining the functioning of discourses within regimes of truth. I also review some common features of conspiratorial discourses; their tendency to construct metanarratives, justification for otherwise coincidental events, and ability to express an existential fear or counter an emotionally uncomfortable dominate narrative. This is sufficient to formulate conspiracy theories as regimes of truth acting in response to other, more dominant, regimes of truth. Next QAnon is described in detail, with an emphasis on its potential to function alongside compatible conspiratorial, political and religious discourses. Instead of extracting oneself from the influences of biopower, QAnon proponents become immersed in an alternative use of biopower, no less attendant to their beliefs, political alliances, and bodies. It thus runs counter to Foucault’s invocation to care for one’s self, by mitigating the discourse exerting a great deal of power upon one. This holds true for conspiracy theories more generally. I also demonstrate how the essential metanarrative and coincidence dismissing aspects of conspiracy discourses conflict badly with Foucault’s formulation of genealogical history. I finally address some possible objections to my biopolitical approach to conspiracy discourse and conclude by discussing the implications of this analysis more concretely.

Biopower is “a matter of obtaining productive service from individuals in their concrete lives” (Truth and Power 125). An authority, typically a state or ruler, makes use of dialogues and administrative structures to utilize (typically maximize) the population’s productivity. A polar framework emerges with the body as both a machine and an element of the species - the former disciplined and the later regulated (Right of Death 138). In order to maintain and control biopower, biopolitics emerges as a series of regulatory controls and interventions (Right of Death 139), often focused on the health, sexuality, and demography of citizens. “[P]ower had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behavior” (Truth and Power 125), and hence regimes of truth became crucial to the enforcement of power, along with prominent administrative and medical policies (Truth and Power 131). Typically, there is a dominant discourse which “tends to exert a sort of pressure and something like a power of constraint...on other discourses” (ODE 55). It is possible for a dominant discourse to produce a competing discourse, as is the case with repressions/constructions of sexuality (Right of Death 148, Truth and Power 120). More generally, Foucault’s proposal is that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality” (Order of Discourse 52). Such dialogues are not exclusively propagated and mediated by the state; academia and religion often each play a crucial role in the construction of these discourses, acting with a specific framework of logic that validates and circulates them.

This lends itself well to understanding a cluster of alternative discourses commonly referred to as conspiracy theories. Among his seven identified features of conspiracy theories, Brotherton identifies the ability for conspiracies to thrive in opposition to a mainstream narrative (qtd. Beene and Greer 1). In their survey of conspiracy theories, Douglas et al summarizes the definition of conspiracy theories with “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (Keeley qtd. Douglas et al. 4). Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka identify three social psychological motives for conspiratorial belief, epistemic, existential, social desires (qtd. Douglas et al. 7); conspiracy beliefs appeal to desires to understand the world and gain certainty, regain control or security, and obtain a positive group/self-image. Conspiratorial belief correlates to uncertainty and provides a pattern within seemingly random events – typically one with social significance (Leman & Cinnirella qtd. Douglas et al.7). They may also be able to emotionally compensate for a perceived existential threat to one’s needs, and the accompanying anxiety and feelings of powerlessness (Douglas et al, Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, Zarefsky, qt. Douglas et al 8). These theories also tend to correlate to feelings of political alienation, economic concerns and social threats (Goertzel, Parsons, Simmons, Shinhoster, & Kilburn, Federico, Williams & Vitriol qt. Douglas et al 8). Socially, conspiracies provide one with a sense of privileged information and uniqueness and may also be linked to “defensive ways of identifying with one’s social group” (Imhoff & Lamberty, qt. Douglas et al, Douglas et al 9).

Evidently, conspiratorial theories are discourses opposing a dominant discourse. They belong within specific patterns of thinking, largely considered fallacies within academic logic (Douglas et al. 7-8) but which are often self-reinforcing. Scientific, historical, or social evidence against conspiracies is only compelling if the evidence is formed within a regime of truth the conspiracy discourse accepts, which is typically not the case. They exist in relation to, and often directly because of a mainstream discourse that does not satisfy the social, epistemic, and existential needs of an individual or group. Just as highly regulated discourses of sexuality in fact reinforce and produce sexualized bodies, dominant narratives have a part in constructing a conspiracy. Douglas et al's work identifies emotionally compelling aspects of conspiratorial thinking; it is understandable that the will to power would align with a conspiracy if some dominant discourse does not satisfy existential, social, epistemic beliefs and/or the will to power. Then conspiracy theories should be understood as alternative discourses operating within, and existing in conflict to, an opposing regime of truth.

Conspiracies often center around the medicalized human body; vaccination, surveillance, and medical testing are frequent themes within conspiratorial discourse. The dominant narratives conspiracies oppose are often biopolitical, stemming from concerns over medical interventions on a population or surveillance of an individual. Foucault's biopower justifies anxiety that governments have incentive to (and do) use the human body as a site of surveillance and influence. Biopower is rarely covert, but it can be in the case of a coexistent biopolitical marginalization or state apathy towards the population. Biopower also explains the appeal of surveillance in conspiratorial discourse; evidence exists that countries including the United States of America and Canada have access to some information collected from residents unknowingly. Surveillance anxiety is reasonable within dominant discourse, although the extension of this anxiety to a fear that vaccines implant microchips is not. Yet, if the dominant scientific discourse is excluded in part or in whole than the barrier to believing vaccines pose a surveillance threat is removed. If reactionary, conspiratorial thinking is also a way to exert biopower -when it is able to propagate to a larger population it can exert political pressure legitimizing its opinions.

While formally only a few years old, QAnon already has a complex relationship to other ideologies and conspiratorial discourses. As such, it is a fascinating example of compatible conspiracy discourses colliding. QAnon is also distinctly demographically tracible; proponents are overwhelmingly socially conservative republican voters (Wong); many identify as evangelical (Wong) and/or are aligned with white supremacist movements (Remski). Each QAnon proponent may or may not accept every compatible narrative - in fact QAnon proponents hold sprawling and sometimes conflicting beliefs. However, QAnon has been adaptable and compatible enough within each of these groups to establish itself, and these groups, inevitably, shape QAnon as a whole. The result is that many superficially distinct discourses are cohered into a metanarrative of beliefs, a "big tent conspiracy" amalgamating within older social and political ideas (McQuade). The obvert anxiety prompting QAnon is child sex trafficking, although the rapid rise of QAnon and its coinciding beliefs suggest that other social anxieties are involved. QAnon proponents hold that a group of powerful, globalist, satanic elites run a child trafficking

ring, which assaults victims and then cannibalizes them to consume a source of life force (Roose). The cabal in question is an anti-Semitic trope now enacted against prominent Jewish figures, democratic politicians, and 'leftists' (Wong, Beene and Greer 2, MQuade). An anonymous central figure, Q, posts cryptic clues to his intent on internet forums which hint at the time of a coming retributive event where the cabal will be decimated; Donald Trump's presidential run was enacted to gain power and aid Q in his attempt to demolish the "deep state" and bring down the cabal. In analogy to the religion which QAnon has spread successfully within, some proponents see Q as a secular messianic figure to Trump's John the Baptist (LaFrance). QAnon operates in "The Unreal", or a clash of how reality is defined, leading to each side perceiving the other as unreal (McQuade); put in Foucauldian terms 'the unreal' simply describes conflict between incompatible regimes of truth. It's regime of truth has been remarkably successful at propagating in the landscape of social media, and at amalgamating with similar non-mainstream discourses; in particular anti-vaccination, 'pizzagate', and other "deep-state" conspiracies map in neatly to this regime (Wong).

Conspiracies such as QAnon are intelligible within a Foucauldian analysis; this does not mean Foucault's thought lends itself to a validation of conspiratorial thinking. While biopower justifies government distrust, it does not validate metanarrative conspiratorial thinking in its most developed sense. Biopower is a descriptive theory, which is explicitly uninterested in deciding between narratives outside of how much power is exerted upon one's self –however, conspiracies tend to exert a great deal on their proponents. Secondly, conspiracies rely on covert power, which is rare in biopower - typically the mechanisms of power are subtle rather than actually covert. In the case of QAnon, one does not extricate oneself from the mechanism of power in normative political and scientific discourse, but instead immerses oneself within a powerful alternative biopolitic. QAnon's amalgamation of ideologies, encompassing anti-vaccine, white nationalist, Evangelical, and republican power agendas, all exerting pressure on voting choices, medical and public health practices, and beliefs. It has been effective at enacting power outside itself, having now successfully elected a proponent to congress and been the justification for multiple violent crimes (Levin, Wong). The advent of COVID-19 introduced a new aspect to the conspiracy; while some QAnon proponents accept the presence of COVID-19, the regime does not accept the legitimacy of public health officials (LaFrance). Care of one's self, for Foucault, is directly stymied by immersion into an overarching metanarrative that isolates one from many dominant regimes of truth. Then while conspiracies are understandable and explainable within biopower, the framework offers a critique rather than a justification.

Additionally, Genealogy as taken up by Foucault is opposed to the metanarrative framing and dismissal of coincidence within conspiratorial dialogues. Conspiracies have a historic aspect, either seeking to understand past events or construct a narrative leading to the present, and hence are understandable in a genealogical analysis. Justifying seemingly random or coincidental events is a landmark of conspiracies, as is turning discordant acts into a metanarrative. Few have been as successful at weaving together a metanarrative (the history and presence of the elites and the efforts of Q) with legitimate biopolitical and social sway than QAnon, but it is a staple of conspiratorial discourse, nonetheless. In

contrast, Foucault's genealogical history "retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality...must define even those instances when they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealized" (Nietzsche, *Genealogy, History* 76). Hence, the pull towards a metanarrative within conspiracy theories, shown prominently within QAnon, badly contrasts the necessity of coincidence and competing power narratives within genealogy. Genealogical history explicitly rejects any "metahistorical deployment of idea signification and indefinite teleologies and opposes itself to the search for 'origins'" (77). Conspiracy discourses instead seek a resolvable consistent history within an otherwise disjoint event, it is a search for clear causation, rather than an exploration of complexity. Foucault is emphatic that "We must not imagine that there is a great unsaid or a great unthought which runs throughout the world and intertwines with all its forms and all its events, and which we would have to articulate or to think at last" (*Order of Discourse* 67) – and yet this is an identifying feature of conspiracies. Instead, one should approach a discourse and "go towards its external conditions of possibility, towards what gives rise to the aleatory series of these events and fixes its limits" (*Order of Discourse* 67). In a Foucauldian analysis, we ought to understand the power dynamics at work in and interacting within each conspiracy theory, rather than embracing them for opposing a dominant discourse.

The primary difficulty with approaching a Foucauldian understanding of conspiracy theories is the simple hazard of assigning the broad label to such a nuanced and drastically distinct set of discourses. Conspiracy discourses range in devotion, genre, and truth value, and so universal conclusions need to be approached with caution. President Kennedy's assassination, which technically a conspiracy theory, has been consistently believed by over 50% of the US population since 1963 (Chinni). This conspiracy holds much broader validity (and inversely much less power and controversy) than a sprawling, politically connected phenomena such as QAnon. While it is so developed it has been argued that it may be treated as an emerging religious movement (LaFrance), QAnon has its roots in older conspiracies, and its development is informed by conspiratorial dialogues. Despite - in fact because of - the overdevelopment of QAnon relative to other conspiracies, it is a rich example of conspiratorial dialogue. In fact, QAnon's success at amalgamating several conspiracy dialogues suggests that conspiracies do share compatible manners of thinking, and thus we can speak of a conspiratorial regime of truth. Conclusions are necessarily broad, but by focusing on both the dissonance from a dominant narrative and the tendency towards constructing a metanarrative, it is possible to pull together a cohesive analysis of a 'conspiracy theory'. An additional objection to the method presented here is that I approach Foucault's thought as a self-consistent corpus, which is in fact a debated point. However, biopower and the influences of discourse only become more connected (through power) within Foucault's later thought. Speaking later on "The Order of Discourse", he identifies how the paper's discourses relate as functions of power in precisely the ways identified herein (*Truth and Power* 113).

Conspiracies, in a genealogical and biopolitical reading, are a potent regime of truth which must be approached cautiously to avoid excessive manipulation of oneself. Instead of "detach[ing] power from "forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which

it operates“ (Truth and Power 133), conspiracies immerse proponents into comparably demanding regimes of truth. Although they contrast dominant narratives demanding a great deal of power, metanarrative conspiracy theories ultimately demand just as much power in return. Although conspiratorial discourse understood here operates within a regime of truth separate and excluding at least some dominant regimes, it is also manifested by anxieties stemming from one. Biopower is often the appropriate framework to evaluate conspiracies and the dialogues that interact with them. In doing so, one can understand how Foucault’s thought stands in dissonance with conspiratorial thinking, while also providing insight into the structures and mechanisms of power within conspiracies. This is especially helpful in approaching highly successful conspiracies such as QAnon. Instead of extracting oneself from the influences of biopower, QAnon believers have become immersed in another source, equally or more attendant to one’s beliefs, actions, political alliances, and body. QAnon’s political affiliations are aligned with the executive branch of the current US government, and yet proponents still feel a great deal of existential anxiety related to social, religious, or political marginalization. Apart from QAnon as a site of compatible socio-political agendas driven by overlapping social anxieties, it is necessary to grapple with QAnon as belief. Ultimately discourses matter because they are an expression of one’s felt medical, socio-political, and religious realities. The majority of QAnon supporters have a sincere belief that children’s lives are at stake; the academic, medical, and socio-political discourses it opposes are tied to many of its critics’ health, safety, and security. Although many QAnon proponents would not claim to support every correlated discourse, the metanarrative results in racist, anti-Semitic, and misogynistic regimes being propagated. To understand how science misinformation and political polarization spread within QAnon, one must attempt to understand the shared anxieties and political aims which allow it to amass within this wide variety of conspiratorial and alternative discourses. Considering the demographics of QAnon, these anxieties, overtly concerned with the safety of children, may be far more preoccupied with race, government surveillance, political dominance, and religious freedom. Understanding the underlying anxieties and the amassed power at work in QAnon and similar discourses is a necessary framework to engage with it, but not a sufficient one. Communicating across different regimes of truth enters one into the emotionality and vulnerability of discussing not just what to believe, but how to believe. In order to convincingly approach this, we must first understand why our discourses matter –in other words, we must first understand why we believe and think as we do.

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