Paranoid Masculinity, Or, Toward A New Identity Politics

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Introduction

White male alt-right identitarianism has become a major factor in contemporary Western society. That this is a phenomenon that thrives with, on, and through conspiracy theories is a fact few would have missed. In this article, I will argue and expand on the way in which this is an identitarian project not only surfing on the force of the many 21st century conspiracy theories that proliferate in the public sphere but emerging also from a deeper and more culturally determined paranoia. The intimate association of paranoia and conspiracy theories in a U.S. political context has been such ever since Richard Hofstadter's seminal articulation of "the paranoid style in American politics" in the 1950s. Recently, it has been suggested that this influential association is unfortunate in that it inscribes broader social, economic, and political processes into psychological and pathological discourses (see Thalmann 2019). While agreeing that the concept of paranoia risks individualizing and pathologizing the broader political deployment and function of conspiracy theories, this article argues that we nonetheless need the former concept to explain the latter, at least when it comes to understanding their configurations in a U.S. context. Honing in on paranoia specifically in the context of the contemporary proliferation of conspiracy theories will enable me to elucidate ways in which these phenomena are linked to a particular conception of the subject and to the challenges to this conception, or perhaps rather, to its instantiations, in recent decades. This also, hopefully, contributes toward explaining the considerable predominance of white men in today's conspiratorial and identitarian movements.

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Suspicious Subjects and Identities

At the heart of 21st century nationalist and alt-right movements, we find a white male subject that needs to be protected from terrorizations and persecutions coming from independent women, from those of other ethnic- or racial backgrounds or sexual orientations, and from immigrants. Frequently, this subject is also hounded by a left-wing "elite" that deviously contributes to the undermining of white masculinity for example by letting immigrants invade and ultimately take over the American population or by giving women power enough to become independent of men, to choose their own partners, and to destroy family values. The "fear of falling" that Barbara Ehrenreich identified in the white middle-class—that sense of fear of losing control over yourself as well as over society—has, as Liam Kennedy has noted, generated a specific anxiety for white men who are now obliged to "confront their diminishing ability to assume normative roles of power and authority and transcend the politics of identity formation" (89). As we have all been made witness to in recent years, the type of defense of white masculinity that consists in locating enemies with secret and malevolent intents has gained considerable force. These developments fit well into definitions of conspiracy theory. Relying on recent understandings provided by Michael Butter and Michael Barkun, Katherina Thalmann defines conspiracy theory as "the view that a group of powerful agents is operating in secret to pursue a malevolent goal, which is, in most cases, the take-over of power over a cultural, religious, ethnic, or political community" (2019, 2). At the same time, and obviously without denying the formation and force of conspiracy theories today, it also seems relevant to ask what kind of subject position sees itself as capable of, or at least wishing to, transcend identity formation in the first place. Typically, it is not the position of those who have never been allowed to forget the race, color, gender, sex, or sexuality of their bodies. Rather, it is a position of he who sees himself as a disembodied, free, autonomous individual who stands above the messiness of embodiment and who is eminently responsible for himself and for making his own decisions.

This is a subject position reaching back to a Lockean understandings of the individual as being in charge of his own destiny and to the "possessive individualism" that C.B. Macpherson develops further, consolidating John Locke's theories with Thomas Hobbes' and which has had considerable influence over societal and political beliefs and systems ever since then. In a U.S. context, the evolution of the autonomous liberal subject is a narrative emerging and materializing as a result of a spatial movement from the conservative and regulating traditions of Europe and the inauguration of a new nation intended to better reflect and accommodate the freedom of the individual. As American exceptionalism, isolationism, and expansionism all show, in different ways, the conception of the

autonomy of the free subject is associated with the nation, and, more specifically, with the United States. Enemies from without have included the old systems and hierarchies of Europe, the alternative ideology of the Soviet in the 20th century, and a range of more or less clearly defined enemies—most commonly Muslims, Mexicans, or, more generally, "terrorists" and "immigrants" in the 21st century. The official narrative, then, is one that commonly depicts external space as threatening primarily because it is riddled with ideological differences, differences that are at odds with or even threaten American conceptions of individual freedom.

When the U.S. as an idealized space has been threatened from within, this has often been seen as a conspiratorial infiltration of foreign elements, often in collusion with government officials, and frequently with the goal of undoing the free subject and enterprise of the American way. In the 21st century, this can be for example the New World Order international elites or the Zionist Occupation Government or the Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros plotting to destabilize and control the U.S. government, banks, and media, or President Obama nestling his way into the highest offi ce on a fake birth certificate or Muslims infiltrating society and breeding in a long term plan to take over, possibly in collusion with those promoting abortion rights and who thereby assist in gradually reducing the white population. The inaugural suspicion of government in the U.S. has also been perpetuated in theories of the government spraying chemical agents over the population (so called "chem-trails"), elites promoting climate change arguments in order to oppress regular workers, or, in 2020, the conviction that Covid-19 is a hoax purposefully designed for manipulative political ends.

But hauntings of conceptions of the autonomous subject have been around for a long time. In fact, they have been around as long as these conceptions themselves and can be traced all the way back to Locke. In his work, this subject can never rest fully assured in his transcendent position. This subject needs to suspiciously guard itself from its devious and unreliable surroundings and works toward warding off the influence and will of others. In addition, theorists and literary authors alike testify to ways in which such conceptions of free, autonomous subjects become increasingly difficult to uphold during the latter half of the 20th century. Globalization, digitalization, and communication systems, the proliferation of control- and surveillance mechanisms and an intensified neoliberalism all contribute toward putting pressure on conceptions of American liberal individualism during this period. Thus, what haunts the free American subject today is arguably, if perhaps less spectacularly, also a "system" promoted by the U.S. itself. Globalization, digitalization, and communication systems, the proliferation of control- and surveillance mechanisms and the intensifications of neoliberalism put pressure on conceptions of American liberal individualism from within. Such developments have produced progressively all-encompassing but also increasingly ungraspable power mechanisms. Even the most mundane and minute details of our everyday existence are connected with multinational companies, with cybernetic networks, and global geopolitical logics in relation to which we have no means of conceptualizing and situating ourselves. This trend becomes acutely visible in the whole tradition of paranoid fiction reaching from William Burroughs and Philip K. Dick through William Gibson, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster and remains also in a younger generation of writers such as Ben Lerner, Dave Eggers, and Patrick Flanery. This literature gives witness to a sense of increasing and unsettling encroachments on the autonomous individual by more or less identifiable forces reaching from duplicitous aliens, shady organizations, manipulating agencies and controlling- and surveillance technologies, speaking to a paranoia susceptible to historical developments but also to its continuous preoccupation with what is seen to threaten or even undermine an increasingly suspicious white masculinity.

In this light, the senses of intentionality, secrecy, deception, causality, and correlation that inform conspiracy theories must also be aligned, not with individual pathology, but nonetheless with a long-standing conception of the individual subject that thus seems to be purposefully, secretively, and deceptively undermined. From this perspective, we are not dealing only with conspiracy theories but also with a historically, culturally, and politically determined paranoia. A current, basic, pathological definition of paranoia identifies it as "a pattern of pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent." Criteria listed by the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association [APA] 2013) include assumptions of exploitation and deception, secrecy, mistrust taking the shape of minute scrutiny of people's actions, reading hidden—often demeaning or threatening—meaning into comments or events, and long-held grudges for perceived hostility.

Timothy Melley classifies the increasingly paranoid responses to late 20th century social, technological,

and political developments as "agency panic." Agency panic emerges from a disjunction between what is on the one hand an enduring belief in liberal individualism and on the other hand a growing albeit reluctant awareness of our inability to account for the social regulation of subjectivity. The post-war period in particular sees an increasingly "troubled defense of an old but increasingly beleaguered concept of personhood—the idea that the individual is a rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories" (2000, viii). Arguably, then, the clash between a long tradition of beliefs and practices of the liberal individual and more recent threats to this individual produces a paranoia growing strong during the second half of the 20th century and informing discourse and politics in the 21st.

Paranoid Identity Politics

In the 21st century, and escalating wildly during Trump's presidency, it has become spectacularly apparent that the internal threat to the individual white, male subject is identified as emerging not only from external sources or the infiltration of foreign persuasions but also from the social itself. This can be traced back through an historical and deep-seated suspicion of the social that characterizes American conceptions of individualism. This suspicion has intensified as downright hatred or dismissal of the existence of society alongside the triumphs of neoliberalism during the final decades of the 20th century. Indeed, and while suspicion toward society and the social itself seems almost constitutive of U.S. culture, the ordo- and later neoliberal agendas developing after the Second World War and with the Chicago School in the 1980s have consistently undermined, attacked, and delegitimized the social and society. Because if one denies the concept and existence of society, conceptions and attempted enforcements of the social become limitations or even threats to the free individuals imagined as existing beyond it (Brown 2019, 29). As Wendy Brown puts it, "If there is no such thing as society, but only individuals and families oriented by markets and morals, then there is no such thing as social power generating hierarchies, exclusion, and violence, let alone subjectivity at the sites of class, gender, or race" (40). At the same time, of course, it is precisely at these sites that political resistance has been most actively and successfully articulated and instantiated in modern American politics. Significant political activities of the second half of the 20th century, such as the Civil Rights movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the Gay Rights Movement, all worked hard toward social equality and justice. These and other New Social Movements, as Marianne DeKoven reminds us, constitute a major starting point and instantiation of a radical and progressive identity politics informing ensuing decades (2004, 228-9). There are obvious historical motivations behind the race-based identity politics of the Civil Rights and Black Panther movements. The sense in which the question of race is seen as more dominant than other inequalities and discriminations, such as class or gender, must be situated in the U.S.'s long history of slavery and systemic racial oppression.

But there is also another reason why identity politics, rather than a Marxist or class-based political organization that characterized the political activities of other continents during these decades, has become the prominent mode of resistance and political struggle in the U.S. more generally. This is the relatively weak position and influence of working-class movements in the country historically. As Walter Benn Michaels underlines, America seems to prefer thinking in terms of differences between identities to thinking in terms of differences in income and class (2011, 1023). This seems to be true also for the white male identity politics of the 21st century. Despite the fact that economic inflation, globalization, and neoliberalization have played crucial roles in undermining their own position and status, despite the radical rise in income inequalities and impoverishment across the globalized West in the 21st century, and despite the way in which this exponential growth has opened up "an outright social chasm," as Marco Revelli puts it, as millions and millions of people in advanced economies "feel themselves being pushed to the margins or losing their class position" (2019, 198), these white men have not gone primarily for economic critique or class struggle but, precisely, an identity politics as their weapon of choice. It is "not 'Americans' who are angry;" as Michael Kimmel underlines, "it's American men. And it's not all American men—it's white American men" (2017, 6). Today's aggrieved masculinity, then, is largely a white one that feels that it has been violently stripped of its identity, which in turn has given birth to an ever more violent and paranoid white male identity politics. That it is frequently infused with a nostalgia for a prelapserian period, that is, a period before the New Social Movements, is, of course, quite logical in this sense. Make America Great Again.

From the perspective of such nostalgic individualism, the identity politics of the New Social Movements of the 20th century and social justice fighters in the first ones of the 21st must be regarded as an illicit encroachment on the liberty and the choices individuals themselves can and should make. Indeed, any attempts at negotiating or ameliorating inequalities and working toward social justice

become illegitimate—they become, as Brown puts it, either "the baseless whining of 'snowflakes'" (2019, 41) or "tyrannical rules imposed by left-wing mobs" (45). What we see in the U.S. during this period, in other words, is an intensification of a historically and culturally determined suspicion directed not only toward other ideologies and peoples, nor only at surveillance and control mechanism, but also, and perhaps quite centrally, toward the country's own social fabric. In fact, Peter Knight suggests, the New Social Movements from the 1960s onwards reconfigured the formerly so important foreign threat to the American way of life in order to emphasize the threat, rather, of "idealized and ideologized normality" to groups such as black power, radical feminism, and gay lib (2000, 144). And while it is certainly true that there are elements of conspiratorial thinking visible in all these groups themselves, this internalized threat is arguably more prominently seen today as the threat that groups of this kind themselves pose to the liberty of a certain subject position that transcends the social and that is so precious to America. Because does not the struggle toward equality for groups such as women, minorities, and homosexuals associated with these movements look suspiciously like a strengthening of and insistence on the social? This makes it acutely relevant to ask at what point such movements became associated with oversensitive snowflakes or dictatorial left-wingers at best or, at worst, as insistent threats to the paranoid white masculinities that are now mobilizing against them. And when did identity politics—while typically derided or even attacked by precisely by such white masculinities, become a major—while predictably unacknowledged—force in contemporary white alt-right and nationalist movements?

Because ironically, the identity politics that shouts the loudest today is asserted in opposition to the very groups associated with identity politics in the mid-decades of the 20th century. The resilience that many of the otherwise diverse alt-right communities and convictions have in common, Nicholas Michelsen and Pablo De Orellana note, emerges from a strong sense of a political agency that is nonetheless under threat. This is an agency, they underline, with as divergent origins as the autonomous neoliberal subject that underpin Hayekian neoliberalism as well as traditions that are vehemently opposed to liberal- and market ideologies (2019, 276). In many instances, such as for founder of Alternativeright.com Richard Spencer, Breitbart's Steven Bannon, and Jared Taylor of the online platform American Renaissance, this is a subject position inspired also by the anti-modernity and radical racism of Italian fascist theorist Giulio Evola (275). Central to the contemporary versions is the desire to protect white male agency—and thus humanity—from the insidious threats of miscegenation, gender ideology, and liberal mind control.

Online networks contribute to actualizing and consolidating these white identitarian communities. Of varying degree of extremism, such networks shape the "manosphere"—a connectivity of a variety of more or less loosely connected sites and messageboards that associate and consolidate an alt-right, anti-feminist, and conspiratorial online culture. Such online sentiments are not reducible to individuals or frustrated trolls but must be recognized as the result of a combination of systemic misogyny and sexism in culture more generally and the technological platforms and subcultures that augment and polarize gender politics (see, for example Ging and Siapera 2018, 522). The manosphere constitutes a key in the consolidation and popularization of male activism in various and diverse forms. And here, the question of class versus identity reemerges with some force. Members of these communities come from socio-economic backgrounds spanning from blue collar workers who feel threatened and replaced by immigrants taking their jobs and women to private school graduates who are "furious," as Laura Bates puts it, "that their 'rightful' place at the top of the political food chain is being challenged" (2020, 17). But what the men from these various socio economic groups do tend to have in common is being white: "it really is white, western men—and in terms of the education: it is very much the developed countries, very much the U.S., Canada, Australia and the UK" and it "links back to the alt-right; it's about white supremacy, and there's very disparaging rhetoric coming out towards black and Asian men as well, which is where you get the suggestion that this is a predominantly white space" (Sugiura qtd. in Bates 2020, 20). The range of different alt-right, and nationalist groups, sites, and movements is considerable and consists of numerous and sometimes clashing factions. But, Casey Ryan Kelly has noted, these groups do have one narrative in common. This is a narrative characterized by a mixture of victimhood, melancholia, radical vanguardism, and apocalyptic thinking (2020, 60-1). At the core of it sits a conviction that not only individuals but white American men as a group have been duped by other narratives, that is, by narratives that are now prevailing in society, primarily those offered by feminists and progressives and that have been allowed to influence and shape society and its relations and institutions (62).

Looking more closely at the form of this white male narrative, it becomes quite clear that paranoia

constitutes a critical ingredient. Kelly identifies four major and chronologically related components to this narrative: the white male has been duped and doped into unthinkingly accepting the simulated reality created by progressive feminist narratives; this false reality makes it impossible for white men to recognize their estrangement from each other and their victimhood; by shocking and raising the consciousness of white men, the manosphere helps them see the bleak but true reality of their existence; together in cyberspace, and eventually irl, white men will be a liberated multitude that will "overthrow the evil autocratic rule of feminism" (2020, 67). This is, as many will note, a narrative transposed from the superbly paranoid film *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist Neo is confronted with the choice between the blue pill, which will return him to a sense of oblivion to the simulated nature of the reality he has hitherto taken as such, and the red pill, which will fully introduce him to the ugly reality which this simulation has concealed. The taking of the red pill constitutes a recurrent trope in many manosphere communities. The manosphere offers its participants to take the red pill, that is, to wake up from "the blissful mind prison of liberalism" to "the unplugged reality of social misandry" (Nagle 2017, 88).

The aggressive and toxic environment of much of the manosphere is in itself regarded as instrumental to reaching behind this veil. This environment is not just a result but a requirement because it will help men reenact the trauma they have been obliged to keep at bay. At the same time, this aggression and toxicity will scare off skeptics and insufficiently motivated visitors and affirm and reinforce an "in-group's experience" (Kelly 2020, 72). Once behind the veil, in the "desert of the Real," red pillers will discover that the system is rigged against men, that the real motive of feminism is to exploit and dominate men, that men have been programmed to accept equality, that men have been socially conditioned to remain docile, that men have been made to suffer from a false consciousness making them identify with their oppressors (Kelly 2020, 70-4). But the mythic structures of this narrative will also ultimately endow men—as individuals as well as a group—with the agency not just to see through this system but also to overthrow it. Here, then, agency—and I would also like to add a white male identity politics—is facilitated by recurring and "overarching forms and genres" that help uniting and organizing its internal variations (Kelly 2020, 66). In fact, what holds these communities together is "a kind of rhythmic repetition of the same narrative form" (66). Just as in *The Matrix*, there are two "realities:" one that seems real to people who are oblivious of its true, or rather false, nature, and one that only the "initiated" subject is capable of seeing. As in David Neiwert's account of "Alt-America," the second layer has "a powerful resemblance to our own, except that it's a completely different America" (2017, 27). The two realities are not just disjunctive or allegorical but the one is orchestrated to dupe the subjects of the other into compliance. Unlike the fi lm, however, the simulated reality is produced, not by evil aliens using humans as living batteries in an apocalyptic future, but by what most of us would call everyday social reality. This is a reality that has emasculated and undermined the agency and authority of white men. It is reality generated by deceitful liberals and feminists, by deceptive governments, institutions, and media. The unveiling of the devious forces of society as it really is, that is, the activation and mobilization of a second, "truer" layer, helps these white men recognize their true identity as individuals and as a group as well as the identities of their joint enemies. The sense of agency of which men have been robbed is restored. In other words, the connectivity of the manosphere mobilizes a powerful identitarian collectivity around paranoia.

The disjunctive realities thus evoked and rehearsed by paranoid subjects in the manosphere correspond quite neatly with the similar dualities appearing in much paranoid fiction in the aforementioned modern classic tradition— Burroughs, Dick, Pynchon, and so on. But one key difference emerges in a comparative analysis of this literature and the paranoid collectivities of the 21st century. In the literary tradition, the perceptiveness that the reality they walk around in alongside everyone else is not the real one typically cuts the protagonists off from their communities. Commonly, their insights insulate such characters and disable a sense of sociality among them. Even when the other layer is seen as constituting a threat directed toward everybody in a given space, as for example by the body snatchers taking over the bodies of regular American population in Mill Valley, California in Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1954) or by social media that have completely engulfed the lives and agency of a whole generation of Americans in Eggers' *The Circle* (2013), this threat is rarely perceived by many, if any, characters beyond the protagonists themselves. Thus largely prohibiting lateral engagement and dialogue, the individual subject position that is salvaged with the help of the disjunctive realities comes at the expense of a sense of mutuality and community. Agency is secured for the individual but prohibited as a collective effort. The connectivity of the manosphere, on the other hand, brings together previously isolated individuals and communities—bringing "men's rights proponents, misogynists, white supremacists, and far-right extremists" out from "the forgotten silos

and distant outposts that once constrained the scope and intensity" thus enabling "new expressions of white masculinity" (Kelly 2020, 59). The interconnectivity and speed of such online networks—quite different from the medial and communicative conditions of social movements of the past—facilitate cross-pollination and assimilation and repeatedly serve as steps toward increasing radicalization as well as toward the mainstreaming of reactionary views (59-60). It is "an interconnected spectrum of different but related groups" making up "a kind of living, breathing ecosystem in close, symbiotic relationships with other online communities like white supremacists and trolls" (Bates 2020, 5). This sphere, Kelly notes, unites those nodes eager to vent their frustration over women's cruelty and take help of pseudoscientific "laws" to justify inequality with those wanting to actively subjugate women, and with those ready to adopt violent and lethal means to reinstate their power. The outcome is a "larger overarching structure: a network that intones, repeats, and synthesizes different and sometimes contradictory discourse into a cohesive yet neurotic"—and here it seems apt to add paranoid—"project in which everything is connected" (Kelly 2020, 24).

Today, then, paranoia rather efficiently wields together a group. And conspiracy theories help create a quite powerful sense of joint identity among paranoid subjects. Conspiracy theories abound and have also become increasingly prevalent and reputable in the 21st century. In the context of the concrete democratic political system over which Trump was the President, this became apparent also in his assaults on congressional hearings and debates and the media (the system is "rigged," the rules are "rigged," the election is "rigged," the media are "rigged"). In the context of the general political climate that he has helped feed, the habit of positing the other as enemy and other experiences or perspectives as invalid at best and as evil threats at worst makes reality not one space in which experiences and perspectives are continually negotiated, but a splitting reality—one in which one layer is real and the other one is false, and, quite frequently, malevolent and personally persecutory. Online attention economy dynamics, William Davies notes, further favor emotion and conflict making fear a more productive weapon than trust in engaging crowds (2018, 21). This development produces a generalized fear, a fear upon which authoritarian and nationalist groups thrive while also undermining the trust in society and its institutions. When power seems inaccessible or insufficient—associated with "elites" or with a society incapable or unwilling to protect its members from threats from the outside—violence becomes more attractive. The "reframing of public debate along the lines of 'war'"—encouraged, perhaps, by attention economy more generally but also actively galvanized by far-right sites such as Breitbart—escalate the destructive spiraling of fear and suspicion (22-3).

Against a contemporary reality full of rapist Mexicans, terrorist Muslims, deep state infiltrators, leftist subversives, and baby-killing feminists, then, a white male identity politics is consolidated and gains force by summoning another reality, a reality that needs to be recuperated, a reality beyond the corruption of the social. This other reality, and as has already been intimated, is commonly located in the past. Both during the presidential election in 2016 and when in office, Trump spoke directly to such concerns. As Kelly puts it, the call to "Make America Great Again" ostensibly "hailed a melancholic subject beseeched by an intoxicating fantasy of return to an imagined past before feminism, the Black freedom struggle, and queer activism fundamentally questioned cisgender heterosexual white men's primacy in all aspects of public and private life" (2020, 2). This nostalgia repeatedly points back to 1950s, that is, a pre-New Social Movements era, which is frequently identified and celebrated as that time in history when America was "great." This is a period, in other words, before identity politics. Yet, what is it we see today if not a new identity politics—one grounded not in centuries of racial, gendered, and sexual oppression but one grounded in the paranoid fear of losing a historically authoritative subject position? As this fear is popularized and politicized, it not only yields a sense of individual agency but one also of identitarian commonality and community. Encouraged by radio hosts such as Limbaugh, Savage, and Hannity and other virtual presences and forums, collective and sometimes legitimate complaints are consolidated in what becomes "angry white male clubs" and directed at specified enemies, typically women, immigrants, and gay people. These men, Kimmel notes, recurrently speak of a manhood or identity in general as "something they have to 'preserve,' or 'retrieve,' or 'restore.'" "To them," he notes, "something has truly been lost—and it is their job to restore men to their 'rightful' place" (2017, 18). Or, as the self-ordained "Professor Against Political Correctness" Jordan B. Peterson suggests, we have not talked about living "an honorable life" "in any compelling way in three generations"— "Probably since the beginning of the '60s" (cited in Bowles 2018, n.p). While there is great variety between different groups and individuals, what brings them together is a sense of aggrieved entitlement, that is, the "sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful" (Kimmel 2017, 18).

In this light, the attraction to an authoritarian discourse and practices that reassert the sense of a lost—but ostensibly recuperable—reality and identity makes sense. It also makes sense to be attracted to an authoritarian sounding leader who personifies the strong white male power, truth, and identity that has, supposedly, been appropriated. A powerful white masculinist collectivity and agency is thus constructed precisely by consistently dismissing the reality often called the social as a devious and counterfeit narrative. Or, to put it more directly, 21st century conspiratorial projects continue to fulfi l one of the absolute key functions of paranoia—to ward off threats to the subject and protect a purportedly strong subject position—while building from it an increasingly powerful identity politics.

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