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Of Chakras and Shock Troops:
Insurrectionary Affinities to Alternative Religious Movements

Carl T. Dahlman
Department of Geography, University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC, USA
carl.dahlman@sc.edu

Carolyn Gallaher
School of International Service, American University
Washington, DC, USA
caroleg@american.edu

Why are there apparent affinities between elements of far-right movements and alternative religious movements, namely New Age belief systems? In this brief contribution, we approach January 6th not as a whole case study but as a threshold event that revealed to many the complexity of contemporary far-right movements in the United States and their reach into public culture. We are looking beyond strictly institutionalist theories of authoritarianism to reconsider the role that belief systems have in informing these movements in an effort to explain what they have in common. Although there is a growing body of scholarship looking at these connections (Leidig 2023; Peters 2023), most authors have yet to consider whether and to what degree this combination speaks to geopolitics. We argue here that this integration is too new to have developed a coherent geopolitical view, but we have identified a certain "geopolitical mood" that bears watching, especially in the wake of exogenous shocks like the recent pandemic. This

geopolitical mood—discursive building blocks as it were—may well inform the worldbuilding in which the far-right is peripatetically engaged.

We regard far-right movements as popular expressions of authoritarian politics, which is to say, that these movements welcome more autocratic forms of government and seek to translate movement values into public life and popular culture more broadly (Mudde 2019). We are drawing from our experience in studying far-right and nationalist movements not only in the United States, but also Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia. Methodologically, we are working with texts, often made by participants in these movements, as well as drawing from the insights made by others working with similar material and occasionally as participant observers. The criminal cases prepared by law enforcement and prosecutors in the wake of January 6th also provide extensive background information about the participants' possible motivations.[1] These materials typically exclude personal details such as personal beliefs or non-militia affiliations that would be considered immaterial to the criminal case. Some of these defendants and their defenders have, nonetheless, expressed their broader perspectives on social media or in media interviews.

There is no dataset that captures defendants' views on issues of culture or spirituality nor are we empirically testing a causal model of personal behavior. We are instead trying to stake out the conceptual parameters of a growing phenomenon in these movements, which is the apparent affinity between elements of far-right political movements and alternative religious movements—what are sometimes termed New Age belief systems. Specifically, we observe three *potential* geopolitical building blocks in this admixture—the equation of foreign with elite (irrespective of country of origin), the possession of the domestic by the foreign, and the marriage of bodily purity with territorial ethnic purity.

Yogis in the Capitol

The details of what unfolded at the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021, have been well established, including an extensive documentation of eyewitness testimony and documentary evidence entered into the Congressional Record (Select Committee 2022).[2] As of January 2024, charges have been brought against 1,265 defendants alleging a variety of crimes mainly involving:

assaulting employees, officers, or members of the media; weapons charges; entering a restricted building; destruction of property; impeding official proceedings; and conspiracy counts related to these charges (DoJ 2024).[3] Earlier demographic analyses on the first 716 defendants revealed that the attackers were middle-aged (the median age was 38), majority male (87.3%), overwhelming white (92%), college-educated, and in a quarter of cases, business owners (Denbeaux and Crawley 2023). The same study identified 18.5% as having military or law-enforcement backgrounds, while 22% had criminal histories. Less than 12% of the defendants, however, appeared to have been previously involved in a domestic violent extremist organization such as the Proud Boys or Oath Keepers (Clifford and Lewis 2022). These attackers, while demographically quite homogenous, nonetheless included a wide array of backgrounds and, presumably, different motivations for participating in the January 6th attack.

A few of the January 6th defendants have expressed beliefs that, to us, demonstrate the surprisingly broad appeal of far-right movements that we wish to investigate. The day before he entered the Capitol, certified yoga instructor Noah Bacon wrote on his Instagram account that "the crime of a fraudulent election is complete … 93 people are going to jail for Seditious Conspiracy and High Treason for certifying a fraudulent election … People in for a surprise".[4] He is reported to have followed the claims of Trump's attorney, Sidney Powell, very closely, including her calls to "release the Kraken".[5] A website that presents itself as Bacon's yoga practice describes him as someone "trained in academic mindfulness based practices" developed at retreats and training centers in "our Hemisphere", including a "plant ceremony" with Andean shamans and traditional sweat lodges. His testimonial idealizes a world where many different practices are trails up a shared mountain of spiritual awareness, paths taken by those who seek to "reconnect with their natural empowerment and peaceful state" by "guiding attention and inner energy in simple ways" (High Heart Meditation 2019).

Another convicted Capitol rioter, Alan Hostetter, had been in the military and then a California police chief before turning to yoga and alternative healing practices. Interviewed in 2019 about his Orange County practice, Hostetter credited yoga in helping overcome chronic pain and crises in his personal life. He has claimed to specialize in "meditation, reiki, yoga nidra (a kind of hypnotic trance induction), and sound healing with crystal bowls, gongs, and his conch

shell", as well as offering whale wisdom workshops (Remski 2021; Voyage LA 2019). In 2020, he founded the American Phoenix Project to oppose public health restrictions related to the pandemic and later used this organization to protest against a "stolen election". Together with several others, Hostetter made various identifying statements linking himself to the Three Percenter movement and photographed himself wearing shotgun bandoliers. His social media posts are full of blistering, conspiracy-laden rhetoric about COVID-19 restrictions and false claims about the 2020 election. He and others were convicted of conspiracy to disrupt an official proceeding and entering a restricted building with a dangerous weapon (Hostetter carried a hatchet), and related charges.[6] He has yet to be sentenced but faces up to 20 years in prison (DoJ 2023).

Jacob Chansley, a.k.a. Jacob Angeli, better known as the "QAnon Shaman", left a threatening note for Mike Pence that read "It's only a matter of time, justice is coming!" while strolling shirtless about the Capitol wielding a spear-tipped flag and wearing a fur hat with bison horns (Armus and Weiner 2021). Yet Chansley's lawyers have portrayed him as "a lover of nature" who is an "active practitioner of yoga" and an adherent of Jesus and Gandhi. He made headlines again when he protested that his detention denied him access to organic food (Mallin 2021). Yet prosecutors pointed to his invective posts on social media which sought to expose widespread political corruption and remove the traitors in government and the "deep state" (Rabinowitz and Polantz 2021). He pled guilty in 2021 to obstructing official proceedings and received a 41-month sentence. Released early in June 2023, Chansley has created a website called the Forbidden Truth Academy that extols political and religious consultations for $500. In a "welcome home" video, Chansley encouraged listeners to engage in "spiritual war" by calling upon a Christ-like love and Buddha, a movement he hopes will "facilitate the ascension of humanity and spread mass enlightenment" (Jenkins 2023). His targets include communists, tyrants, and globalists, whom he insists are "Luciferians". In November 2023, he announced plans to run for Congress as a Libertarian in Arizona's 8th District but later failed to submit the required petition to appear on the ballot.

Conspirituality and Popular Occulture

It would be easy to excuse individuals like Bacon, Hostetter, and Chansley as oddities but their conspiricism is not unique among the accused, and their interest in alternative religious practices has a home within other elements of far-right movements. For example, according to social influencer and marketer Lorie Ladd, whose channels have hundreds of thousands of subscribers, Trump is a "lightworker", causing us to leave behind negative labels like Democrat or Republican and to ascend to a "higher" consciousness that will bring humanity closer to Ladd's paragon of truth: the Guides from the Galactic Federation of Light (Karlis 2021). We have seen that the appeal of Trump's brand of authoritarianism, as well as the strangest claims of the QAnon conspiracy theorists, can be easily cross-branded to feed the epistemic needs of the lost souls in the "wellness set" (Meltzer 2021).[7]

In the United States, alternative religious movements are not typically associated with the ideation or use of violence or with the social biases that characterize far-right movements. Typically, American far-right movements have been more closely identified with Christian nationalist and white Europeanist ethno-cultural ideologies that would appear to exclude what they perceive as "Eastern" and esoteric influences, which are common among New Age practices. As Cas Mudde (2019:41-45) points out, however, far-right politics are not exclusive to Christians and may be found within many religious contexts, including pagan and anti-religious groups. While far-right movements have been highly animated by immigration policy in recent years, there are other more enduring themes on the far-right that are sufficiently aligned with aspects of new religious movements that we can stake out some broad parameters for further exploration (cf. Peters 2023).

The compatibility of New Ageism with far-right political movements has been partly explained by the concept of "conspirituality", a term capturing a web-based movement that hybridizes two forms of holistic beliefs: conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality (Ward and Voas 2011). Ward and Voas' (2011:107-108) observations on conspiracism, the belief that events are never random but are due to hidden forms of political and social control, relate to many of the themes observable in far-right political movements since at least the early 1990s: hidden causes behind events, such as fantasies of a shadow government or New World Order and

the idea that 9/11 was an "inside job"; bio- and geo-conspiracies to control the natural world; and the possibility of parapsychological and alien technologies. These conspiracy beliefs can be found in public statements made by the individuals we profiled above, namely the accusation that the pandemic was an intentional act, that public health measures and vaccines were forms of social control, and that a shadow government was behind it all.

Interestingly, it's the latter conspiratorial belief in parapsychological and alien technologies that aligns with common themes in New Age beliefs, i.e. that ancient wisdom was delivered by aliens or that healing is achieved by practices that "move energy" through the body or by meditative ascension toward "higher", hidden forms of consciousness. These practices are meant to release one's personal ascendence, awakening, or transformation to unite with a "shift" of consciousness in humanity as a whole, overcoming the corrupting or polluting practices that explain human misery (Hammer 2013). In theological terms, this is theodicy, an argument that explains or accounts for evil or suffering in the presence of the divine. This would affirm Ward and Voas' (2011:108) assertion that "conspirituality appears to be a means by which political cynicism is tempered with spiritual optimism". Put another way, "conspiracy theory presents a problem in the form of a worldly evil to be overcome, while 'New Age spirituality' provides the soteriological solution", i.e. evil is overcome by shifting one's consciousness to the "new paradigm" as proclaimed by New Age millennialism (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015:368).

One critique of conspirituality is that it is not new but rather that the current internet-based movement extends a pattern with deep historical antecedents in Western thought. Modern conspiracy theories are at least as old as the French Revolution (Taylor 2014), and antisemitic conspiracism dates to at least the Middle Ages (Voigtländer and Voth 2012). Asperem and Dyrendal (2015) provide a partial genealogy for European esotericism, from which emerged elements of the conspiracist genre present today in far-right movements. These currents have given rise to an increasingly mainstream and eclectic "occulture" comprising diverse beliefs and practices that range from holistic health practices to angelology. Underlying these practices, however, are knowledges alleged to be "hidden, rejected, or oppositional" to mainstream, Enlightenment, or establishmentarian institutions, epistemologies, and values (Partridge 2005). Therein develops an oppositional countercultural logic in which rejected or stigmatized

knowledge claims are more highly valued because they are rejected by dominant social forces, with the idea that such knowledge must, therefore, contain some forbidden element of truth or power that evil forces need to suppress. Herein lies occulture's built-in need for conspiracy thinking, which "will always be at hand to 'explain why all stigmatized knowledge claims have been marginalized'" (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015:372 quoting Barkun 2013:27).

There are other critiques of conspirituality beginning with the insistence that alternative spirituality involves a wide range of both narrow and syncretic practices and beliefs, most of which do not overlap with conspiracy theory, nor would many followers be comfortable with conspiracism. One must certainly beware of the compositional fallacy; just because some people who practice alternative spirituality find common cause with conspricism or the far-right does not mean that all do. It is also well known that the idle casuistry and creative speculation that occupies conspiracy theory and some New Ageism is equally present in the wider public. The question is thus whether the imbrication of conspiracism and New Age millennialism has become a popular mode of political thought, what Hofstadter (1966) might have recognized as the "paranoid style". Our point is that precisely the popularization of these fantasies and this mode of fact-free theorization now inform a seductive politico-cultural ideology that employs theodicean modes of evidence and argumentation to guide answers to questions once provided by political-economic ideologies. In this context, the question is no longer "are you better-off than you were four years ago?" but "who or what hidden force is holding you down?"

Conspirituality as a Geopolitical Mood

Amid such heterodox milieux as these, we cannot yet venture a geopolitics of conspirituality but we can identify the outline of a negative geopolitical disposition in American conspiritualism. We describe this disposition as a "geopolitical mood" comprising elements that are unevenly shared by conspiritualism's constituent movements in the far-right and New Age community, yet are so recurring and frequently observed as to beg closer consideration. The first element of this geopolitical disposition is the redefinition of the categories of foreign and foreigner. Instead of a broad category that covers other countries, allies, and enemies, the term "foreign" now signifies "elites" of any country who are defined in opposition to "the people". In the US context, "the

people" are usually defined as "Americans" connoting not legal citizenship but exclusive ethnic and racial identities. Mirroring far-right populist ideology, the people are imagined as a repository of the good, the honest, and the innocent who are pushed around by economic and political elites who use institutions and resources against the people. In both stylistic and theodicean terms, this parallels a social imaginary in New Age millennialism that divides society between a new "spiritual" humanity born of shifts toward "higher" consciousness and a powerful elite who divide individuals and weaken the people as a means of wielding political and economic power. This element of the geopolitical mood weakens the frame of the nation-state by delegitimating large segments of the polity, experts, and the government itself.

These movements, furthermore, tend to map the elite as foreign, either in origin or by influence, and often as part of a transnational conspiracy. One's own government is thus presumed to be not a democracy but part of an imposition from outside one's holistic, spiritual, or biopolitical "home". International cooperation is especially suspect to conspiritualists. The United Nations and other multilateral organizations are not simply considered illegitimate, as they are in isolationist camps on the right and left, but are themselves conduits of corruption and economic, cultural, and physical insecurity. Movement leaders often point to footloose corporations, immigration, medical interventions, or surveillant and militarized technology as examples of insecurities wrought by a global elite. There is, again, an important distinction evident in New Age and far-right movements that we have observed, i.e. large parts of the New Age movement embrace and value certain foreign cultures and, specifically, "indigenous knowledges" as reservoirs for hidden or oppressed ancient wisdom. This would seem to inoculate those who seek a "new humanity" from the most virulent forms of far-right xenophobia, one of its primary antagonisms. Intermediate and hybrid strains are notable, however, as in the neo-pagan Europeanist strains of white supremist movements in the United States.

The more dangerous trend, in our opinion, is the deeper naturalism or biologism that imagines the body as a site of defensive purity. When one perceives existential threats to oneself or one's imagined community, then one's norms against violence become more malleable. This perceived "naturalness of being", once part of the back-to-the-land movements, also marks an

important distinction between these movements. New Age practices have long focused on individualistic redemption and personal "healthfulness". Far-right tendencies center the ethno-nation as a defensive biological site. Both target the body as a site of potential social transformation that must be defended. The "QAnon moment" was one where large parts of these movements, and the wider public, converged on wild anti-vaccine and child-abduction conspiracies, spinning fantasies about bodies that were pushed out of the fringe by adherents on social media and into mainstream political imaginaries. Indeed, in 2016, an armed North Carolina man drove to a pizza restaurant in Washington, DC to stop a child sex ring he erroneously believed was in the restaurant's basement. There were, fortunately, no casualties, but the restaurant's owners continue to receive death threats years on, and the sidewalk out front remains a site of periodic QAnon gatherings (Robb 2017).

In summary, the merging of these two movements could portend more and harder-to-predict violence. There are reasons to anticipate further hybridization of these "belief systems" and efforts to concretize them territorially. Yet, there may be limits to which adherents can overcome the differences between them, which we outlined above. It may be that these movements found common cause only in the context of a global pandemic under the encouragement of authoritarian leadership in Western democracies. The question remains, however, whether these movements require exogenous shocks to bring them together, such as a pandemic, or whether they will produce future shocks of their own, such as the attacks of January 6th, to achieve the sort of "awakening" that both movements seek to precipitate.

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[1] The George Washington University Program on Extremism has compiled most of the available public information related to criminal prosecution of the January 6th defendants (see "Capitol Hill Siege Cases" https://extremism.gwu.edu/capitol-hill-siege-cases [last accessed 4 December 2024]).

[2] The unprecedented nature of the attack is reflected in the various terms used to describe it, e.g. breach, assault, siege, attack, insurrection, riot, storming.

[3] As of publication, there are about 1,000 additional persons ready to be charged and an additional 1,000 persons who are under investigation (Parloff 2023).

[4] Prosecutors allege the "93 people" refers to those who voted against Sen. Ted Cruz's objections to the electoral vote from Arizona (see USA v. Noah S. Bacon, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, 29 June 2021).

[5] USA v Noah S. Bacon, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, 14 July 2023.

[6] USA v Hostetter et al., Second Superseding Indictment, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, 10 May 2023.

[7] The "Conspirituality" podcast explores many of the dimensions of these phenomena (see https://www.conspirituality.net/ [last accessed 4 December 2024]).