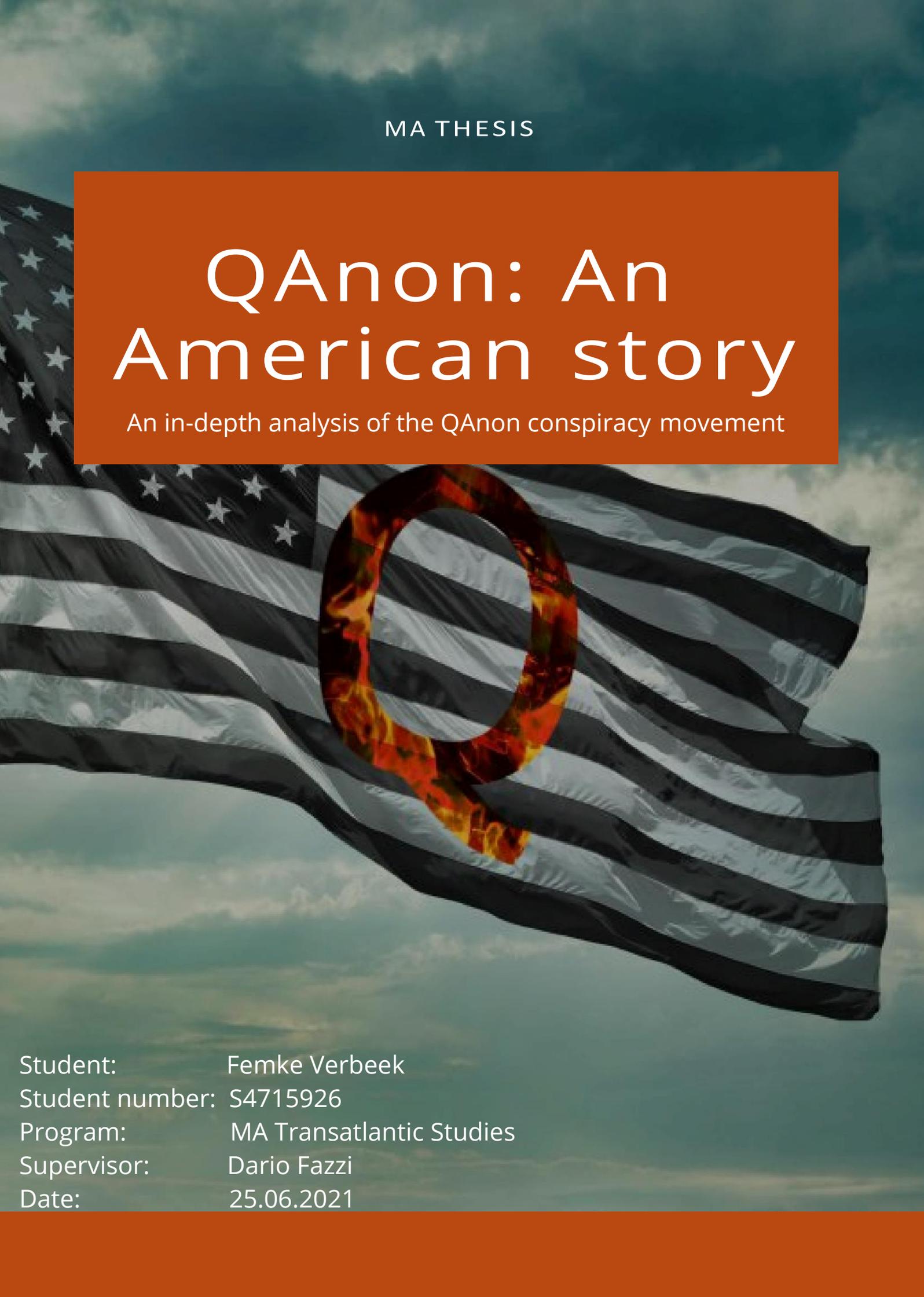


MA THESIS

QAnon: An American story

An in-depth analysis of the QAnon conspiracy movement

The background of the cover is a photograph of the American flag waving against a cloudy sky. A large, stylized letter 'Q' is superimposed over the flag. The 'Q' is filled with a fiery, orange and red pattern, resembling a flame or a fireball, which is a common symbol associated with the QAnon movement.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to provide an in-depth analysis of the QAnon conspiracy movement. This movement preaches the existence of a global cabal consisting of a pedophilic, Satan-worshipping, and child-trafficking elite. This movement came into existence in 2017 as 'Q', the anonymous leader of the movement, posted a mysterious and cryptic post on the notorious 4chan platform. The post suggested the existence of the cabal and it predicted the arrest of prominent individuals who were part of this elite. Although the QAnon narrative started as a far-right fringe conspiracy theory, it has grown out to be a radical and extremist movement consisting of thousands of adherents. QAnon played a dominant role in the Capitol siege in early 2021. Because of these radical and violent developments, QAnon should not be neglected and attention should be paid as to why this conspiracy theory has been able to grow into a mass movement particularly in the US. Overall, this research places the QAnon conspiracy movement in a larger historical, social, political, and cultural context. This allows showing whether the movement truly breaks from the past or whether it fits into a larger historical context. This research acknowledges the radical development of the conspiracy narrative and it aims to explain how it transformed into a movement and why this movement is so American. The findings of this research provide a clear insight as to why this is the case, and why the US, in particular, provides such fruitful soil for conspiracy narratives. Although several reasons will be given, the main reasons are the existence of a prosumer culture, combined with the holy character of the right of Freedom of Speech.

Key words: QAnon, Conspiracy theories, United States, Politics, Extremism, Religion, Superconspiracy, Prosumerism, Social Media, Freedom of Speech.

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INTRODUCTION

What do you do when you think that the world is against you? That the universe is not working in your favor? What if you are confronted with phenomena that do not make sense to you? In other words, how do you deal with uncertainty, anxiety, loneliness, and inequality? Some people decide to go on a world trip in which they try to look for cultures, thoughts, ideas, or theories that would explain who they are and why certain things are the way they are. Others turn to religion. These people long for a safe haven that can provide them hope and certainty. They need a higher power that knows what is going on and who can provide the answers through prayer. And others turn to narratives in which not a benevolent force, such as a God, is central, but rather an evil force that is out for destruction. A narrative in which people conspire to destruct everything others hold dear. They turn to conspiracy theories.

On October 28, 2017, an anonymous user calling himself *Q Clearance* posted a cryptic and mysterious message on the 4chan platform. The post implied the existence of a child-trafficking, Satan-worshipping, pedophilic elite. Q's cryptic posts suggested that Donald Trump was fighting this elite and that at some point in the near future, he would dismantle this elitist society and punish its members for what they had done. That this one post would have momentous consequences was not foreseen by many. Q-drops kept dropping in regularly, and what started as a small and mysterious fringe conspiracy theory grew into a conspiracy movement consisting of hundreds of thousands of dedicated adherents. The QAnon movement played a significant role in the Capitol attack that occurred in January this year. What we have seen over time is that this movement has able to build a bridge between the online and offline world. It created a community in which people felt connected through a shared worldview.

Although QAnon might feel like 'just another' conspiracy theory to those who do not appeal to its narrative, QAnon and its impact on American society should not be underestimated. Mia Bloom, professor of communication at Georgia State University, stated: "[w]e need to worry about Q not because it's about to overthrow the government. We need to worry about Q because the long-term effect is corrosive to democratic values" (Rogers, 2021). QAnon has shown itself to be willing to fight for its beliefs. What is being said and spread online, emulates actions offline. The movement has gained political, religious, and social ground that can be destructive for contemporary American society. Its anti-establishment and anti-authoritative beliefs result in a community of supporters who are willing to step in if needed.

This thesis aims to provide an answer to the question: *How has it been possible for QAnon to emerge as such a significant American conspiracy theory, and how has it been able to develop into a movement that is considered to be a threat to contemporary American society?* Central to this question is the geographical location of the QAnon movement. Although this movement has crossed borders and has some foreign adherents, there is something within American culture and society that thrives this movement to grow and develop. This thesis aims to explore why that is the case, and what the reasons are for its development into a movement. This research is divided into three main chapters, all contributing to answering the main research question. The first chapter looks at the historical context of conspiracy theories in the United States. It is necessary to look at the historical context as one should understand the QAnon movement within a larger historical frame. Conspiracy theories are nothing new, but there is something about QAnon that makes it very American and, in some ways, different from other conspiracy theories. By analyzing the history of American conspiracy theories, continuity and discontinuity might appear when looking at the QAnon movement more specifically in the following chapters. The second chapter deals with the QAnon movement extensively. This chapter explains how the movement works, what its beliefs are, how and why it has emerged, how it has developed, and why it is appealing to some. Moreover, the chapter does already provide some reasons as to why the QAnon movement is so American. The last chapter deals with the preeminent reasons why QAnon is so appealing to many people in the United States. The emergence of a so-called prosumer culture and the highly valued right of freedom of speech are two vital components answering the main research question.

Methodology

For this study, in-depth literature research has been conducted. Influential thinkers within the fields are used to provide information that contributes to this research. Both primary and secondary sources have been used. Hofstadter, Barkun, and Harambam are three of the most significant scholars within the study of conspiracy theories. Richard Hofstadter's book called *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* has played a major role in the research relating to conspiracism in the United States. Michael Barkun's book *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* will return throughout this research as well. Although this book focuses on a specific kind of conspiracy theory, its conceptual framework is highly relevant for everyone researching American conspiracy theories today. Lastly, Jaron

Harambam's book *"The Truth Is Out There": Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability* is relevant for this study as it explains the development of conspiracy theories over time and, like the previous books, it provides a conceptual framework to work with. These books provide the foundation on which this research is built. As QAnon is a contemporary movement, news articles are of high importance as well. Moreover, other relevant scholarly articles and books have also been used.

This research is grounded in both historical and sociological research. As conspiracy narratives have been present in the US for a long time, these narratives are bound and linked to certain sociological factors that play a significant role in understanding the transition from a theory into a movement. An article written by Amarasingam and Argentino shows that QAnon started as a fringe conspiracy theory that has been able to develop into a mass social movement (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). They show that theories can transform into social movements. They argue that: "QAnon is arguably no longer simply a fringe conspiracy theory but an ideology" (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020, pp. 42). Douglas, et. al. (2019) further argue that conspiracy theories have the power to enhance or even initiate radicalization. In other words, conspiracy theories have social consequences (Jolley & Douglas, 2017). Jolley and Douglas showed that belief in conspiracy theories influences how people behave. For example, theories relating to climate change impacted people's behavior towards the global crisis (Jolley & Douglas, 2017). This shows that theories have the power to influence human behavior and maybe even have the ability to create a movement in which like-minded people act the same based on the theory.

Note that necessary concepts and terminology are explained within the chapters. The definition given will apply throughout the entire paper. Every chapter is connected, and every chapter contributes in some way to the overall answer. Vital when answering the research question is that QAnon should be understood as a movement rather than just a conspiracy theory. Its development has made itself significant within its kind and American society. QAnon needs to be contextualized: the emergence of a conspiracy theory is nothing new. However, the movement's unique and extreme development has set it apart from earlier conspiracy theories. Without this contextual framework, this research would be void. Therefore, historical, political, and social context is needed to fathom the phenomenon and understand it within a broader and historical perspective. As already mentioned, the first chapter will deal with the historical context of conspiracy theories in the US, and it will define the key concepts

that return throughout this thesis. The second and third chapters focus more on the political and social context. They aim to contextualize QAnon within American politics, culture, and society.

CHAPTER ONE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The study of conspiracy theories is related to a given historical context, and to historical research methods that layout the groundwork of the study as a whole. This historical context and these research methods help to contextualize certain conspiratorial narratives and are therefore crucial to understanding the rise and fall of such conspiracy theories. According to American historian Richard Hofstadter, history in the context of conspiracy theories is important as “[h]istory is a conspiracy [itself], set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power (...)” (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 29). In other words: history is not only valuable in trying to understand the development and emergence of conspiracy theories, but it is also a contributing factor to the very existence of conspiracy narratives. Essential, before one can analyze this, one has to know what it is exactly that is being analyzed. According to Douglas et al. (2019), it is essential that concepts such as “conspiracy theory” are explained clearly as one might risk delegitimizing individuals when failing to give such an explanation (Douglas, et al., 2019). Moreover, the societal, cultural, and political climate in which conspiracy narratives exist has to be examined as well, as they contribute to creating an understanding of why those narratives could emerge in the climate they did. Not all conspiracy theories gain ground in all nations. In other words, conspiracy theories are inherently connected to national societal, cultural, and political circumstances. For these reasons, this chapter aims to provide a clear understanding of how conspiracy theories have emerged and developed in the United States and to show why they continue to persist in this nation.

1.1 Conspiracy theories: Good v. Evil?

Douglas et. al. (2019), defined conspiracy theories as “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” (Douglas et. al., 2019, p. 4). This definition indicates a rather objectiveness as to the concept is not carrying a fixed connotation. Historian Geoffrey Cubitt highlights that conspiracy theories are used and created to make sense of specific current events (Butter and Knight, 2020). Political scientist Michael Barkun agrees with Cubitt that these theories emerge out of the desire to make sense of the world around them: it is a way to explain evil forces in current events. To be able to explain these forces a sharp division between good and evil is being established (Barkun, 2003).

A conspiracy belief, according to Barkun, uses the distinction between good and evil and is highly convinced that there is a malevolent force trying to achieve a certain goal (Barkun, 2003; Oliver & Wood, 2014). This force is always a great evil in the eyes of the conspiracist, their theory should uncover the evilness stimulating that force and, therefore, denotes a division between good and evil. Ironically, however, according to these thinkers a conspiracy theory is always linked to a morally connotated evil, while when this evil is replaced by a good force, such narratives tend to lean more towards religious beliefs. Douglas and Wood even suggest that there is a correlation between the decline of religion and the increase of conspiracy theories in the West (Dyrendal, et. al., 2019). Conspiracy theories and religions tend to fulfill the same psychological desires: making sense of a random world and finding explanations for phenomena individuals cannot explain (Dyrendal, et. al., 2019; Barkun, 2003). Religious beliefs and conspiracy beliefs work as legitimizers as they provide a sense of control when people feel like they have lost that completely (Dyrendal, et. al., 2019).

When returning to the definition itself, the dichotomy between good and evil appears to be at the core of conspiracy theories. Therefore, this notion should be included in the definition. This paper will, for that reason, use the definition as proposed by Van Prooijen, et. al. (2017). They describe conspiracy theories to be “explanatory beliefs of how multiple actors meet in secret agreement to achieve a hidden goal that is widely considered to be unlawful or malevolent” (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, p. 324). This definition provides a clear explanation of the concept and includes all that is important.

In general, conspiracy narratives are not bound to national or cultural borders; they are a human reaction and are, therefore, a global phenomenon (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). The concept inherently connects to the desire to make sense of the world when a (societal) crisis emerges (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). A concrete example of a conspiracy narrative emerging out of a crisis is what happened after the 9/11 attacks, as theories emerged arguing that the Bush administration was behind the attacks. It is, however, invalid and incorrect to state that all conspiracy narratives emerge out of such an ‘obvious’ crisis. Conspiracy theories that emerged regarding the landing on the moon, for example, might not directly showcase or imply a direct ‘crisis’ – there was not a direct extremely dangerous situation or threat. However, such critical events do enhance the belief that there is a powerful government in place that has the power and ability to deceive its citizens (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Silent crises that live in the minds of people can also be perceived as dangerous situations, even though they do not appear to be so for some at first sight. Crises result in feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, which

ultimately results in experiencing a feeling of lacking control and losing oversight of the future (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Douglas, et. al., 2019). Several psychological studies that focused on the psychological function of conspiracy theories, proved that these theories operate to provide simplified answers to crises (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). These psychological functions are subjective as they exist in the minds of people. Why people believe in conspiracy theories differs from person to person, but overall, they emerge out of the feeling of a crisis and anxiety. According to Hofstadter, conspiracy theories provide a framework and an explanation that makes it easier to understand certain situations and/or events that otherwise were too difficult to grasp. What is remarkable, is that while conspiracy beliefs are a reaction to uncertainty, they do not help reduce this impotent feeling (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Instead, they increase this powerless feeling and stimulate maladaptive behavior (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017).

Lastly, it is important to note the fact that a distinction within conspiracy theories exists as well. In general, there are three kinds of conspiracies that can be identified. The first category is event conspiracy, which are theories based on a specific event. This kind of conspiracy is limited in its scope as it relates to a particular event. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 is an example of such a conspiracy theory. The second category is a systemic conspiracy. This one is much broader in scope than the previous one, as it aims to secure control over a nation, or in some cases, even over the entire world (Barkun, 2003). At the core is an evil organization that tries to take control over the asserted region. It plans to “infiltrate and subvert existing institutions” (Barkun, 2003, p. 6). The last category is a super conspiracy. This type of conspiracy theory connects the first and the second category. An established hierarchy of evilness can be distilled, yet the connections between the layers are inherently present (Barkun, 2003).

1.2 A Long Shadow

Historically, conspiracy theories can be related to national, regional, or local folklores. According to Barkun, the folklore category ‘urban legend’ can be considered to be an ancestor of conspiracy. Urban legends tell the narratives of credible myths that are believed to be true or at least are realistic enough to be believable and include humans rather than gods or other inhuman creatures (Barkun, 2003). These narratives spread among the people through word-of-mouth communication (Barkun, 2003). Folklores were spread more like rumors: one person heard one thing and passed it onto the next person. What sets conspiracy theories apart from

folklores is how they are being communicated (Barkun, 2003). This different type of communication by using new means of transmission helped establish altered versions of the traditional folktales (Barkun, 2003).

For quite a long time, these altered versions did not carry a term. The term ‘conspiracy theory’ entered the terminology no earlier than the 1970s (Butter and Knight, 2020). However, this does not mean that they, as a principle, did not exist before this time. During the Roman era, conspiracy theories were already present, they were not labeled to be a conspiracy theory, however (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Byford, 2011). Given the fact that conspiracy theories stem from nationalist narratives such as folklores, it is important to study the historical evolution within the contours of well-defined national entities and identities. The United States, in this regard, offers a valuable litmus test and an intriguing case study. When looking at the historical background of conspiracy theories in the US, it appears that these theories have been present since the very founding of the nation (DeHaven-Smith, 2013). The founding fathers believed, for example, that there were conspiratorial plans by the British rulers to overthrow the newly found United States (Harambam, 2017; Byford, 2011). So in a sense, the United States as a nation was founded on a conspiracy theory (DeHaven-Smith, 2013). When looking at the federalist papers in more detail, one might notice they are full of conspiratorial accusations (Harambam, 2017). Moreover, because of fear of a power inequality between the branches governing the US, the framers cautiously implemented the principle of checks and balances.

1.2.1 Bavarian Illuminati

Since the French Revolution, the idea of secret societies conspiring evil plots has become the hallmark of conspiracy theories as we know them today (Harambam, 2017). The first concrete conspiracy narrative that supports this idea was the Bavarian Illuminati, founded during the eighteenth century. This conspiracy narrative argues that there was a secret society that was controlling the established world order. The most important pieces of literature endorsing this belief were John Robison’s book: *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, carries on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* written in 1798, and Abbé Barruel’s text: *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* written in 1803 (Barkun, 2003). These texts introduced the existence of the Illuminati. According to Robison and Barruel, this society was an evil and dangerous society that tried to overthrow the political and religious order (Barkun, 2003). They were accused of

plotting the French Revolution and considered to be destabilizing other nations as well (Harambam, 2017; Waterman, 2005; Byford, 2011).

In the US, it was a congregational minister in Charlestown, called Jedidiah Morse, who first introduced the idea of this secret society (Fea, 2020; Waterman, 2005; Stauffer & Murchison, 1918). After having read Robinson's book, he started to spread the idea of the Bavarian Illuminati, which was founded by professor Adam Weishaupt, a German philosopher, and professor in civil and canon law at the University of Ingolstadt (Barkun, p. 2003; Byford, 2011). Morse argued that society was determined to overthrow the political and religious order, not just in Europe but also in the US (Griffin, 1988; Fea, 2020). Yale president Timothy Dwight showed his support for Morse's narrative by holding a speech on the fourth of July, in which he argued for the existence of the Illuminati (Hofstadter, 1964). Morse and Dwight agreed with Robinson's idea that the association was formed "for the express purpose of rooting out all the religious establishments and overturning all the existing governments of Europe" (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 11). This belief created a kind of 'crisis' experience in the US. Among the Federalist members and supporters, the Illuminati had quite an impact, as it stimulated to develop a more leftist religious thought (Stauffer & Murchison, 1918). The jeremiad order, which had played a significant role in the Puritan life, was according to the Federalists, being threatened by this development (Griffin, 1988). For the Federalists, it was essential for people not to convert themselves to more leftish thinking, therefore, spreading the idea of an evil organization that is trying to overthrow the established religious and political order was a means to contain this development. The story of the Bavarian Illuminati shows that conspiracy theories as we know them today are nothing new. Also, it shows how fear endorses the power and popularity of such narratives. Adding to this, early conspiracy narratives were already in line with the modern definition of conspiracy theories: they spread the idea of the existence of an evil organization that is trying to overthrow the established order, which is considered to be malevolent. Significantly, the Illuminati has probably existed, but it lasted no longer than twelve years (Barkun, 2003; Byford, 2011). Today, still, important figures in the music and film industry are considered to be part of this secret society (Harambam, 2017; Byford, 2011). The narrative explains that if these people want to be successful, they have to sell their souls to the devil (Harambam, 2017). One can identify these members due to the use of dark symbols in their work of art, such as videoclips. When not obeying this objective, the members will be eliminated (Harambam, 2017). So, even though the Illuminati no longer existed, it continued to live in the imagination of its enemies (Barkun, 2003). According to those enemies, the society

must have survived as it is “the ultimate act of clandestinity” (Barkun, 2003, p. 47). This conspiracy theory also shows the importance of religion in the US. This conspiracy theory was only able to gain ground as the conspiring group spread anti-Christian and anti-puritan ideas. As already argued before, there is a relation between conspiracy beliefs and religious beliefs. This highly religious climate that has existed in the US since its founding contributes partly as a springboard for conspiracy theories.

1.2.2 The Protocols of the Elders of Zion

As there had been no evidential sign of the Illuminati since 1786, a shift took place. In the 1800s, people shifted from the Illuminati conspiracy to a new conspiracy that marked Jews as an evil organization (Byford, 2011). Already since the 1770s, it was speculated that the Jews controlled secret societies, such as the Illuminati (Byford, 2011). In 1806, a certain Jean Baptist Simonini wrote a letter to Barruel in which he tried to convince Barruel of the Jewish connection to the societies (Byford, 2011). Although distrust regarding Jews grew in the years following, it was not until a century later that conspiratorial proof was provided. In 1905, the pamphlet *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* by Matvei Golovinski was published (Byford, 2011). The *Protocols* purports transcripts in which Jewish leaders, here referred to as ‘Elders’, lay out a detailed plan to conspire to rule the world (Barkun 2003; Harambam, 2017; Byford, 2011). With the impending Bolshevik Revolution, it gained massive popularity in Russia. The *Protocols* were used to make the Jews the scapegoats of the Revolution.

This idea rapidly spread to Britain and the US as well. Journalists and diplomats started to spread the word in their home countries that Jews were involved in the Revolution (Byford, 2011). In the US specifically, an American diplomat named Edgar Sisson obtained a document that, like the *Protocols*, proved the involvement of Jewish bankers in the Bolshevik Revolution (Byford, 2011). These documents were later published and spread by the American government as another pamphlet (Byford, 2011). Because of this publication, the idea that Jews were conspiring to take over the world became popular in the US as well. This was only the start of a long history of scapegoating the Jews in the US (Byford, 2011). In other words, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* laid the groundwork for antisemitic beliefs and practices that would occur later that century in the entire Western world. Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels used *The Protocols* for their Nazi propaganda in Germany (Bytwerk, 2015). Although they regarded *The Protocols* to be a forgery, they also considered it to be a useful document when spreading the antisemitic ideology (Bytwerk, 2015). Moreover, it was used in Russia as a legitimization to

scapegoat the Jews as an evil and dangerous cultural group which was a threat to Russian beliefs.

1.2.3 Rise of the Elite

Already during the 19th century, there was a rise of a certain elite. Especially during the Gilded Age, when the US experienced economic growth (Maloy, 2012). As a response to the rapid economic growth and industrial changes, a new social and political movement emerged: populism. Represented in the political arena by the People's Party, the movement sought to create an economically more equal society. Populism in the US was "an expression of protest against impoverishment and the power of the corporate elite" (Postel, 2007. p. 5). The movement largely rested on the strength and cooperation of the American farmers who revolted against this rising elitism (Postel, 2007). Populism during the 19th century was more of a left-wing movement that fought against the elite and strove for social and economic equalization (Postel, 2019). Under the People's Party, the American populists tried to revolt against this rising corporate elite. This kind of populism ended with the loss of the presidential election of presidential candidate Bryan in 1896. Nevertheless, this distrust towards the rising elite continued into the 20th century. The New Deal, as imposed by President Roosevelt in 1933, was not favored by all Americans. As already mentioned, the fear of abuse of political power was at the very core of the founding of the US. When President Roosevelt imposed the New Deal plan, many right-wing supporters argued that his plan was a direct threat to the principle of free capitalism (Hofstadter, 1964). They argued that the federal government wanted to control the American economy, which was a threat to the capitalist ideology on which American society was built (Hofstadter, 1964). They even argued that the income tax, which was amended to the Constitution in 1913, was part of this bigger plan (Hofstadter, 1964). On the other side of the political spectrum, another conspiracy theory emerged: The Business Plot. This theory assumed that rich businessmen and bankers were conspiring to overthrow the Roosevelt Administration (Brockell, 2021). These conspiracies together show how sensitive the US has been for distrusting people in powerful positions. With the rise of the consumer culture, that arose during this time as well due to economic growth and the invention of Fordism, the wealthier got wealthier and the poor got poorer. The meritocratic culture, which assumed that everyone could rise to the top, resulted in a highly divided nation in which plutocracy became the norm. This is ironic as this was exactly not what the Founders intended for the US to become. The increasing political power of wealthy and influential people enhanced the underlying distrust that has been existing in the US since its founding. This general feeling of

political distrust makes the US a sensitive nation for conspiracy theories relating to a conspiring elite, whether this is a government or wealthy business owners.

Although the emergence of conspiracy theories highly relies on psychological personal characteristics, the geographical and socio-cultural environment in which those individuals live plays a major role as well. An individual can come up with conspiratorial narratives, however, to gain some kind of legitimacy it needs to gain wider support. Earlier, it was mentioned that conspiracy theories are, in general, a worldwide phenomenon, however, they can only persist and grow under specific socio-cultural and political circumstances. Conspiracy theories tend to be granted more citizenship in democratic nations where freedom of speech is a fundamental right granted to its citizens rather than a nation in which a dictatorial regime governs. This makes sense as freedom of speech and freedom of the press allow for people to freely and uncensored spread their personal beliefs and ideas.

1.2.4 A new enemy

The conspiracies emerging in the early 20th century also denote the start of a slight shift in the kinds of conspiracy theories that emerged. Later, the discourse even moved to the mainstream in which everyone can be, or at least feel like, a conspiracy theorist (Fenster, 2008; Knight, 2000). Due to an increasing sense of distrust, people feel obligated to do their research and to conspire an 'alternative truth' (Harambam, 2017). The most significant change, according to scholars, is that the enemy is no longer an alien 'other', rather, the enemy is hidden within (Harambam, 2017; Olmsted, 2009). We moved to a more *political and institutional focus*, which entails a focus on practices in governing and security within (federal) governments or governmental institutions (Harambam, 2017). It is these institutions, or at least factions within these institutions, that are considered to be the evil organizations that operate behind the evil plots (Olmsted, 2009). Another aspect of modern conspiracies is that plotting no longer specifically happens secretly, rather it happens openly (Melley, 2000). The difference is that people are being manipulated without them even knowing (Melley, 2000). In other words, everyday institutions such as national governments are brainwashing their citizens deliberately to reach their malevolent goals.

One should ask, why such a shift would occur and why now and not earlier in history. The most prominent explanation would be the fact that our world is metaphorically shrinking. This shrinking world translates into societal, cultural and, communicative changes. On a societal level, the creation of the masses has occurred. People gather on a global scale, rather than on a national scale. Community building happens across borders due to cultural and

communicative changes. Via the internet, information is accessible to almost everyone and everywhere. As more information is open for more people, a cultural shift occurs as people can educate themselves more about the world outside of their living environment. These changes are interconnected and result in a more interdependent world in which the creation of masses is a significant result. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly harder to point out a specific alien 'other' that would threaten a certain 'us': the other is among us. As the QAnon movement follows the lines of this modern conspiracy, see chapter three, some examples will be given to show how this kind of conspiracy works differently from the earlier mentioned examples.

The first example to be discussed is the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. This might be one of the most well-known conspiracies in US history. After the assassination, narratives started to spread that did not support the idea of Lee Harvey Oswald being the assassin. Several other possible assassins have been appointed by these conspiracy narratives. Several psychological studies point out that people who believe in conspiracy theories, want to make sense of the world and do not expect that complicated questions or events have simple answers or solutions. According to some, it was the FBI and CIA who killed the president after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1962. No concrete evidence exists to support this theory, yet this narrative is believed to be true as it adds a more complicated dimension to the story. Others preach that it was the Cuban government who orchestrated the assassination of the American President. Although this narrative might seem to make sense to some after the escalation a year earlier, again no evidence was found that could prove this story to be true. People in the United States experienced the assassination as a crisis, as their beloved president was assassinated. This felt like an attack on the entire nation.

The conspiracy theory relating to the moon landing in 1969, is another important example in American conspiratorial history. According to conspiracy thinkers, Neil Armstrong has never set foot on the moon as the entire expedition was part of a Hollywood movie directed by NASA and the American government. The theory, as initiated by Bill Kaysing, a former US Navy officer, who published a book arguing that the moon landing had never happened, gained a lot of support. This support was connected to general governmental distrust that lived among US citizens during the 1970s and the Cold War era in general (Knight, 2019). The Pentagon Papers that came out at the beginning of the 1970s showed that President Johnson had been lying about the Vietnam war and the entire Watergate scandal did not better the situation. Many believed that the moon landing was part of a governmental disinformation campaign (Knight,

2019). This distrust fueled the spread of such anti-government conspiracy theories during the Cold War era and maybe even the following decade as well.

Another famous example concerns the attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC) on September 11, 2001, in New York City. The ‘Truthers’, i.e., the people who believe this narrative, believe that the terrorist attacks on the WTC were plotted by the US government itself (Dentith, 2014). According to the 9/11 Truth movement, the US government had a great interest in the Middle East because of access to oil resources and because they were looking for an excuse to intervene in Afghanistan and Iraq (Jamil & Rousseau, 2011). The theory holds that the US government used the attack to justify the military interventions that occurred after the attacks. As there is no evidence to support this narrative, it could be labeled to be a conspiracy theory. More specifically, a conspiracy theory that is in line with the postmodern paranoia as explained above: people are looking for an enemy amongst themselves rather than establishing an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy in which the ‘them’ refers to an outside group. The government or at least an ‘evil’ fraction within the government is conspiring against the rest of the nation.

The last example to be discussed is the contemporary conspiracy theory relating to Climate Change. This theory shows that conspiracy narratives and the belief in them are not bound to a certain political extreme, ideology, or culturally defined group. People on both the extreme left and right sides of the political spectrum are susceptible to conspiracy beliefs (Douglas, et. al., p.20; Hofstadter, 1964). In this case, people on the right believe in an anti-scientific narrative that claims for climate change to be a hoax (Douglas, et. al., p. 20). That the international community, especially the elites within that community, is spreading incorrect information about global warming for personal and political interest. On the other side of the spectrum, narratives supporting the idea lives that scientists are holding information or, at least, that they are watering it down (Douglas, et. al., p. 20). Again, the evil group or organization lives amongst the people.

1.3 Age of conspiracy?

Another question that has risen amongst scholars relating the change of discourse and the rise of modern communication technology entering the field, is whether we today live in a so-called ‘Age of conspiracy’. This concept indicates that contemporary society is living in an increased conspiracist society. This belief emerged during the 21st century and is shared among some lay individuals and researchers (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). This idea carries a certain ambiguity that makes it rather challenging to decide whether it is true or not. On the one hand,

it might be true because modern society lives in a world in which conspiracy theories are everywhere (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). As people started to question authority, man-made institutions, and the practices of these institutions, conspiracy theories appeared everywhere in everyday life. On the other hand, the concept also denotes that there is a kind of rise of conspiracy belief. Stating that the 21st century is an age of conspiracy indirectly implies that there have been ages that were not 'ages of conspiracy'. Data research by Uscinski and Parent proves this notion to be incorrect (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Their study showed that conspiracy theories have been present for a long time, and instead of increasing over time they proved that the use of conspiracy theories fluctuated (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). As already discussed, what has changed is how the narratives are being communicated. The internet, especially social media platforms, has replaced the oral and handwritten tradition of conspiracy theory spreading. As a result, the scope of conspiracies has changed, those narratives are more globally believed instead of locally or nationally. This does not mean, however, that the 21st century can be or should be marked as the 'age of conspiracy': the scope and the means of communication have changed over the last centuries, yet the theories have always been there throughout history.

Thus, the US can be regarded to be fruitful soil for certain conspiracy theories. In general, conspiracy theories occur out of a great sense of anxiety and fear among a group of people due to the existence of a societal crisis. Conspiracy narratives are created to make sense of the world and to find plausible justifications for the occurrence of random events and phenomena. They pinpoint a single group, organization, or society that conspires an evil plot. Historically, the existence of conspiracy theories has been around since ancient times. In the US, those narratives even helped to shape the nation as to what it is today. Due to the political, societal, and cultural milieu that has been established in the US, conspiracy theories can thrive there. The extreme inequality, which has only been increasing since the beginning of the 20th century, resulted in a wealthy elite governing the nation which was distrusted more and more over the years. This distrust causes anxiety which might invite conspiracy theories to emerge. Modern conspiracies, such as the conspiracy relating to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy or the 9/11 Truth movement, clearly show that the conspirators are no longer an alien group, rather, they are organizations and institutions amongst us, such as national governments or factions within those governments. The claim that there currently is a so-called 'age of conspiracy' is partly incorrect as the phenomenon of conspiracy theories has been present in human societies since ancient times. The modes of communication have changed, yet that does

not make this century specifically an 'age of conspiracy'. All in all, this chapter has laid the groundwork on which the rest of the analysis can be built. In the next chapter, QAnon will extensively be discussed, furthermore, it will deal with how this conspiracy movement fits into the historical development of conspiracy theories in the US in general.

CHAPTER TWO: QANON

The question now arises as to how the QAnon movement fits into this historical narrative. What kind of conspiracy theory is it? On what principles has it been built? What does it exactly entail? According to some scholars and journalists, QAnon is not just a conspiracy: “[t]o look at QAnon is to see not just a conspiracy theory but the birth of a new religion” (LaFrance, 2020). This quote shows the significance of the QAnon narrative: it is more than just a conspiracy theory. The movement can create a group in which paranoia results in a feeling of belonging, something most QAnon adherents probably long for in their day-to-day lives (LaFrance, 2020). Before we can dive deeper into analyzing the QAnon movement, we first must understand what the QAnon conspiracy entails, how has emerged and what beliefs it is spreading. This chapter aims to provide answers to these questions. Moreover, it will already contribute to the analysis of the most influential and significant aspects of this American conspiracy movement.

2.1 The Origin Story

QAnon first emerged in 2017 on an internet platform called 4chan. Although it first appeared relatively recently, its narrative has its roots in other and earlier conspiracies. The most direct and evident successor is the Pizzagate conspiracy theory (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). This narrative assumed that former Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was, together with her campaign manager John Podesta, running a pedophilic organization in the basement of a pizzeria called ‘Comet Ping Pong’ in Washington DC (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). In December 2016, an adherent of the so-called Pizzagate theory, Edgar Welch, went to the pizzeria armed with a rifle. As the narrative suggested that the secret gatherings of the pedophilic cabal were taking place in the basement of the pizzeria, Welch immediately started to look for the door leading to this assumed dark headquarters of the organization. After the assault, Welch, a devoted Christian and father, surrendered himself to the police and was later convicted for four years in prison (LaFrance, 2020). After this debacle, the Pizzagate theory went silent. As the QAnon theory also advocated for this evil elite as well, the main idea of the Pizzagate theory persisted. (LaFrance, 2020). It is important, however, to note here that there is not one conclusive version of the narrative: “QAnon is ill-defined and can be molded to accommodate any new circumstance or evidence” (Uscinski, 2020, p. 3). On this note, QAnon should be regarded to be an umbrella term in which the dominant narrative

suggests that there is an evil global elitist cabal who are trying to establish a new world government (Roose, 2021; Domonoske, 2021; Zuckerman, 2019). Note, that ‘cabal’ is not the only term here to refer to this evil organization. Terms such as ‘elite’, ‘deep state’, and even ‘Illuminati’ are used interchangeably. Especially the latter is remarkable as it shows another link to an earlier conspiracy theory. QAnon adherents are examples of enemies who keep the Illuminati alive, as discussed in chapter one. Q, the anonymous leader of the movement, claimed to be a high-ranking government insider who has access to exclusive information that implied that President Trump was fighting a war against this evil global cabal (Roose, 2021). According to the QAnon conspiracy, there are three main promises: *The Storm*, *Nesara/Gesara*, and *The Great Awakening*.

The first promise, *The Storm*, holds that the war Trump is fighting against the global cabal would ultimately culminate into a period in which he would unmask all cabal members and punish them for their crimes (Roose, 2021). Expected was that this would happen within Donald Trump’s presidential term, however, no assumed actors of the cabal were arrested and/or punished (Domonoske, 2021; LaFrance, 2020). Nevertheless, for QAnon supporters, every downfall and contradiction can be refuted (LaFrance, 2020). Implying that no argument or event can prevail against the ideas and goals of the movement (LaFrance, 2020). Deception, according to supporters, is part of Q’s bigger plan (LaFrance, 2020). Adherents convincingly believe that there is an evil elite out there that will and should be eradicated. So, at some time in the future, this so-called *Storm* will take place. The second promise is NESARA/GESARA. This abbreviation stands for the National/Global Economic Security And Reformation Act (Nesara, n.d.). This act holds all kinds of economic reforms that would ultimately result in an entirely new national and global financial system in which governments will have little to no power. The act would remit all debt and it would increase benefit. In the US, NESARA would even recover the US Constitution in such a way that it would create a more financially equal society (Nesara, n.d.). Adding to this, American judges and lawyers will have to be re-educated about the Constitution (Nesara, n.d.). The origins of the act date back to the presidential election of JFK. QAnon adherents suggest, that President Kennedy would already have wanted to implement this act during his presidency. As the implementation of the legislation would endanger the wealthy and authoritative status of the cabal members, they tried to prevent this from happening, and therefore the President had to be assassinated by the American secret service. Years later, in 2001, President Bush would have wanted to give the act another shot. But just on the day that he had wanted to announce the implementation of this act, two airplanes

flew into the twin towers. Here again, the narrative suggests that the 9/11 attacks were committed and plotted by members of the cabal as they felt threatened by the implementation of the act. In short, this act should result in such major global economic reform that would guarantee financial freedom and equality for all. The last promise called ‘Great Awakening’ is, in essence, the greater goal here. It entails a world where there is no inequality and where people live in harmony side by side. It is the result of the storm and the NESARA/GESARA that should provide for this utopian world.

These three promises form, the dominant narrative and the greater goal of the QAnon conspiracy theory. However, this narrative knows many more sub-narratives. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in 2019, a new movement emerged that argued for the coronavirus was a hoax. Although there are many versions and variations of this conspiracy theory, in essence, it suggests that members of the elite would have created it just for their own sake. Because of the anti-elitist aspect, this conspiracy theory found common ground with the QAnon narrative (LaFrance, 2020). This merging could only have happened because of the distrust in the government and influential individuals. The paranoia of not having control, not knowing everything, and the anxiety of governments getting too much power increased the number of QAnon adherents when the pandemic broke out. Other conspiracies such as the flat-earth theory and the belief that there is a galactic confederation have merged with QAnon theory similarly (Nesara, n.d.). These theories as well, relate to a certain feeling of distrust regarding the government and its ‘mainstream institutions’. According to *The Atlantic* journalist, Adrienne LaFrance, believing in Q “requires rejecting mainstream institutions, ignoring government officials, battling apostates, and depriving the press” (LaFrance, 2020). In other words, these are the ingredients to be a QAnon supporter, and these beliefs trace back too many other conspiracy theories as well. Because the narrative incorporates so many sub-narratives and sub-theories relating to the core narrative, it makes for a powerful and appealing story for anyone who experiences a high level of governmental distrust.

2.2 Superconspiracy and Terrorism

When placing QAnon within the bigger picture of conspiracy theories, according to Barkun’s categories, QAnon could be categorized as a *superconspiracy*. This concept describes conspiracy theories in which there exist conspiratorial constructs that link multiple conspiracies together (Barkun, 2003). Based on just the QAnon narrative, one might get the impression that it is more of a *systemic conspiracy* in which goals are conceived “as securing control over a

country, a region, or even the entire world” (Barkun, 2003, p. 6). At the core is the belief that an organization exists that tries “to infiltrate and subvert existing institutions” (Barkun, 2003, p. 6). This also applies to the QAnon narrative: there is an evil cabal trying to control the world. And, as already mentioned, several other conspiracy theories are, however, intertwined in this narrative. What is also typical for superconspiracies is that it carries the characteristic *parsimony*, which entails that these conspiracy theories reject traditional explanations: they reduce intricate and complex phenomena as reasons for simple causes (Barkun, 2003). This returns in the QAnon conspiracy as well, all counterproof that advocates against their thinking are not considered possible. Along the way in becoming this *superconspiracy*, a conspiracy theory goes through a kind of evolution (Barkun, 2003). QAnon went through such an evolution: the narrative started with Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager running a pedophilic organization, but it has extended to almost every person of wealth and influence, except for Donald Trump, being part of this evil cabal. Every time a new sub-narrative is added to the larger conspiracy, new evil actors emerge.

Another important feature of QAnon is its proximity to terrorist practices. Although the QAnon movement emerged on the internet and mostly prevailed in the online sphere, it has also shown its face in real life on several occasions. For example, people wearing QAnon t-shirts on pro-Trump rallies. There have, however, also been several occasions on which QAnon individuals acted out violently in real life. In 2019, the FBI came out with a memo in which the organization classified QAnon being a “domestic-terror threat” (LaFrance, 2020; Budryk, 2019; Amarasingam, 2020). The memo warned of extremist behavior that could lead to extremist violence. According to the memo, this is particularly the case when individuals “claiming to act as ‘researchers’ or ‘investigators’ single out people, businesses, or groups which they falsely accuse of being involved in the imagined scheme” (LaFrance, 2020). An example is dr. Fauci. Since the beginning of the corona pandemic, Fauci has become an enemy of the QAnon movement as he advocates for regulations against the virus, which is not in line with QAnon's beliefs on the pandemic. As a result, Fauci started to receive death threats on almost a daily basis. For this reason, the Justice Department approved to increase dr. Fauci’s safety measures (LaFrance, 2020).

The Capitol siege that occurred on January 6 this year, is another example of the QAnon movement acting out. A large group of pro-Trump supporters gathered in Washington D.C. to storm the Capitol where Congress was counting the electoral votes. Most of the people present were QAnon adherents, the Q Shaman as the most prominent figure. Some supporters were

armed, and at least four people died during this violent ‘coup’. President Trump, who had asked his supporters to march up to Capitol Hill, denied his role in this event. Even some QAnon supporters started to argue on social media that the storming was a ‘false flag’ and that ANTIFA, an extreme-right movement, was responsible and should therefore be held accountable (Gilbert, 2021). Adherents spread this idea so they did not have to take responsibility for the bloody event while still supporting the QAnon movement with good consciousness (Gilbert, 2021).

Besides group violence, there have also been QAnon adherents who acted out violently individually (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). Because of this, experts scare that the conspiracy narrative may radicalize individuals (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). Therefore, how this almost ‘ideology’ was spreading should be traced. Although the movement started on the 4chan platform, QAnon accounts and groups emerged on nearly every social media platform. In July 2020, Twitter announced that it would ban all accounts connected to the QAnon movement. Twitter stated, that they hoped this would help prevent “offline harm” (BBC, 2020; DiResta, 2020). Statements made online proved to indict violence offline. Later Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube followed Twitter by banning all accounts and content related to the QAnon movement. Although these platforms try to prevent physical violence from happening, the question arose whether these measures were in line with the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The First Amendment only protects US citizens from government censorship. Private media companies, like Twitter and Facebook, do have the power to censor. Especially, when certain accounts or posts are not in line with their policy or the message they are trying to get across (Nott, n.d.). Unfortunately for the large social media platforms, their attempts to banning the accounts were not very successful. QAnon still managed to prevail even after many QAnon related accounts were deleted from the platforms. After doing quick research on YouTube, many QAnon related videos still popped up. Adding to this, enthusiastic followers even created websites that explain every detail about the conspiracy and how they plan on taking down this evil cabal (e.g., Gesara.news and TheQAnons.com). Besides, new accounts keep emerging on the social media platforms making it almost impossible to keep up to date with banning every single QAnon related account.

2.3 Insiders

The question of who the QAnon supporters are should be answered to utterly understand the background of the conspiracy movement. Uscinski conducted research related to this question. He raised questions that emerged when closely analyzing the terminology used by journalists (Uscinski, 2021). In general, the QAnon movement is described as a “far-right” movement as it empathizes with former President Trump, and most Q-linked political candidates are tied to the Republican party (Uscinski, 2021). As discussed earlier, conspiracy adherence is not related to an ideological belief: it appears on all sides of the political spectrum. However, adherents of extreme political ideologies are more likely to support conspiratorial thinking (Van Prooijen, et. al., 2015). Extremism is, therefore, more important than partisanship or ideological valence (Uscinski, 2021). After doing more research, Uscinski argued that the correlations between political extremism and QAnon are significant but weak, while the correlation between specific psychological and behavioral patterns is much stronger (Uscinski, 2021). For that reason, QAnon supporters are not perse far-right extremists, rather, they are individuals who are likely to support an extremist ideology, and above all have anti-social psychological, and anti-social behavioral characteristics (Uscinski, 2021). *Foreign Policy* journalist Justin Ling agrees with Uscinski. On the surface, QAnon represents Trump’s America on the political, social, and cultural levels. However, there is more to the story. The connections to earlier conspiracy theories and the ties to anti-Semitism and Nazism show that QAnon is more than just a fringe conspiracy theory that only appeals to or belongs to the Republican party (Ling, 2020). Moreover, when looking at the individuals who are supposedly part of the evil elitist cabal as listed by QAnon, Republican names are included as well. QAnon has become a vehicle for theories that have been considered to be for outsiders: QAnon brings them to the mainstream and thus forefront (Ling, 2020). Uscinski concludes that “QAnon support is considerably more strongly related to conspiracy thinking, (...), dark triad personality (...), and the predisposition to share false information online (...), than (the strength of) political orientations” (Uscinski, 2021, p. 8). Nevertheless, in the book *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening*, a more partisan view is taken on the movement (WWG1WGA, 2019). According to the writers, the end of the Democratic party means the end of Fake News (WWG1WGA, 2019). They describe the phenomenon in which individuals are Enlightened by the QAnon movement and leave the Democratic party (WWG1WGA, 2019). This shows that QAnon support is not perse linked or motivated under just far-right thinkers, however, it does suggest that the political aspects do contribute to the QAnon identity.

It is not just voters that connect to the QAnon movement, some adherents even hold local, state, and federal offices (Bergengruen, 2021). How many officials hold ties to the movement, is unknown and almost impossible to exactly measure as the conspiracy is very broad (Bergengruen, 2021). In the House of Representatives, Marjorie Taylor Greene runs on a QAnon platform (DiResta, 2020). She called QAnon “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take this global cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles out” (Rosenberg, 2020). Moreover, she openly questioned whether a plane flew into the Pentagon on 9/11 and stated that President Obama was secretly Muslim (Edmondson, 2021). She actively uses QAnon's thoughts in her political rhetoric. Connecting her to the movement. For Greene to run on a QAnon platform as the Republican candidate in her district is politically rewarding. In 2016 over 70 percent of her district voted for Trump. His support has only grown here since the emergence of QAnon (Rosenberg, 2020). QAnon has become a means for officials to gain political power. When running a campaign, candidates want to appeal to their voters, and apparently, QAnon has become as strong as a movement that it is rewarding to run on a platform that supports the conspiracy theory. What is dangerous is that misinformation is part of the movement as well. Jared Holt, a disinformation researcher at the Atlantic Council, sees great danger in the long term (Bergengruen, 2021). He argues that officials should base their decisions on a shared set of facts, yet when the officials base their decisions on a conspiracy narrative like QAnon that is also known for its oversharing of fake news, then the understanding between the people and the officials will erode (Bergengruen, 2021). Running on a QAnon platform, therefore, is rewarding in the short term, however, it might bring great danger in the long run.

Trump, who is the protagonist of the entire movement, like Greene, acknowledges that using QAnon rhetoric and empathizing, directly or indirectly, increases the volume of supporters. He has never directly and openly supported QAnon, however, he has never condemned it as well. Nevertheless, QAnon and Trump have become inherently connected. In a way, one might argue that it has almost become a party on its own. It might be questioned whether Greene is more linked to the QAnon movement than to the Republican party. Lines become very blurred and, as it is all playing out on the political stage, it is difficult to determine what has been said behind closed doors and sometimes even to determine what it is exactly that they are trying to achieve. Because of this, Republicans who do not support the movement argue that QAnon is “a pro-Trump movement; QAnon is not of the Republican Party” (Rosenberg, 2020).

What should we make of this conspiracy narrative entering the American political landscape? In their book, *A lot of People are Saying* Rosenblum and Muirhead argue that

QAnon belongs to a new kind of conspiracism which is in essence politically sterile (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). It lacks a coherent story and a clear solution to the problem. This does not mean that it is not dangerous or destructive, yet these narratives are in essence not ideological (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). However, what we did see happen is that conspiracy narratives, while being politically sterile, have been able to gain high political power through the election of adherent officials. This has as a result, that even non-political narratives can gain ground in the political environment. And while these narratives are void in the sense that there is no coherence and factual-based fundament, they can co-govern a nation. This is also what sets QAnon apart from earlier conspiracies. According to Rosenblum and Muirhead, classic conspiracy theories like theories during the founding era had a concrete goal and in many ways were based on realistic distrust. QAnon and Pizzagate seem to have been created out of thin air. And besides the incarceration of various elitist individuals plus the implementation of one particular Act, no clear political aims are at the forefront of the narrative. This becomes more evident when looking at the central goal of the conspiracy narrative: *delegitimation*. Rosenblum and Muirhead define this concept to be “a process of falling off from an earlier judgment that government has rightful authority” (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019, p. 34). Delegitimation goes beyond political mistrust. Political mistrust is a means by which people stay critical and prevent a democratic society from falling apart. This is a healthy characteristic of democratic societies; it keeps people on their toes (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). Delegitimation, on the other hand, drains all existing authority from democratic institutions (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). Of course, mistrust and delegitimation go hand in hand, however, the latter truly undermines the democratic system. In practice, QAnon does this by undermining all political power and, therefore, planting their political actors in the US political arena, resulting in them being able to destruct it from within.

2.4 Holy Conspiracy

As already discussed, the movement thrives on a certain sense of extremism and paranoia, yet religion plays a major role as well (LaFrance, 2020; WWG1WGA, 2019). As mentioned before, religious people are more likely to be susceptible to conspiracy theories as their world is already made up of a good-versus-bad dichotomy (Graves, 2021). During the 2020 elections, pastors started to worry about the increasing belief in particularly the QAnon conspiracy theory as 49 percent of the pastors in the US frequently heard churchgoers mention it (Graves, 2021; Stanton, 2021). The religious group referred to here are the evangelical Christians, which are not a monolith:

“on the whole, they represent a broad spectrum of social and political viewpoints as well as a range of socioeconomic identifiers” (Graves, 2021). Despite the diverse subset of evangelical Christians, the fact is that most white conservative evangelicals voted for Trump in the 2020 election (Graves, 2021). Trump smartly campaigned on religious premises that might appeal to especially these people (Graves, 2021). In the days preceding the Capitol attack this year, various Bible verses were spread via social media supporting the cause (Graves, 2021).

Central here is the question: why this religious group is so relevant for QAnon, and how is this group distinguishing QAnon from other earlier conspiracy theories. First, the QAnon movement, to be successful, needed a dissatisfied and ready-to-fight public. The white evangelical Christians seem to be the perfect fit. A major component is the fact that a great sense of *Christian nationalism* lives amongst this group (Stanton, 2021). Elizabeth Neumann, a former official at the Department of Homeland Security, explains that the belief of this group is less based “on [the] scripture than on conservative culture, some political disagreements are seen as having nigh-apocalyptic stakes and “a strong authoritarian streak” runs through the faith” (Stanton, 2021). Donald Trump and the QAnon movement were well aware of the power of religion in the US. They knew that amongst the evangelical Christians lived a great sense of anxiety, uncertainty, and dissatisfaction. These are excellent ingredients for people to radicalize and turn violent when they have to. When the pandemic broke out, the personal and psychological factors only increased (Stanton, 2021). Amongst this group, a sense of authoritarianism prevails (Stanton, 2021; Williams, 2010). When relevant influential individuals tell them to, for example, vote for Trump, they are likely to do so, even though they would not initially agree (Stanton, 2021). QAnon supports this authoritarian and fundamentalist view, by referring to the scripture - the movement supports its actions and thoughts by quoting the Bible. That way, conservative evangelical Christians appeal to the QAnon movement. Plus, it provides the feeling of fighting for a certain and higher cause, supported by God. An important consequence of this is that it creates groupthink and takes away individual criticality (Stanton, 2021). American Christian nationality is tied to the belief that the US is God’s chosen nation, and that, therefore, the US has a “covenant with God” (Stanton, 2021). The message that QAnon was bringing across relating to Christian nationalism was that the democratic presidential candidates in 2016 and 2020 were putting an end to this covenant (Stanton, 2021). This motivates people to undertake action, or even commit violence as their ‘holy’ nation is at risk (Stanton, 2021). QAnon successfully played in on the authoritarian and fundamental factors as Q cited the scripture numerous times in his so-called Q-drops (LaFrance, 2020). Most

references refer to the fact that God supports the movement and that the QAnon supporters should have faith in the Lord (LaFrance, 2020). The theory is even referred to by some to be part of “God’s plan” (LaFrance, 2020). On April 8th last year, Q quoted the Bible directly: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and the strength of His might. Put on the full armour of God so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (Cotterill, 2020). Ironically, this passage belongs to the *spiritual warfare* passages which are concerned with the Christian belief “that our struggle in life “is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”” (Cotterill, 2020). According to the narrative, the cabal members are Satanists, which makes them enemies of God. Note, this does not mean that all Christians are considered to be an ally or a friend by the movement. Even high religious agents are considered part of the cabal: “Judgement begins in the house of the Lord. That’s why pedophile priests, bishops, and cardinals (and their protectors in the Vatican) are being exposed” (WWG1WGA, 2019, p. 48).

Secondly, QAnon appeals to evangelical Christians because it is in line with the Christian apocalyptic belief. In 1995 the first book of a series called *Left Behind* came out that described the end of time (McAlister, 2003). This series was written by Tim LaHaye, a devoted conservative evangelist, and writer Jerry Jenkins (McAlister, 2003). Although these books were fiction based on interpretations of biblical texts, the novels are more than mere fictional bestsellers, according to McAlister (McAlister, 2003). The underlying goal that can be read between the lines is highly political: the evangelicals should become part of US politics (McAlister, 2003). Central to the books was the belief that the end of time entailed “the rise of the Antichrist, who will persecute Christians and Jews, take over as dictator of a one-world government, lead a global crusade against Israel, and eventually bring the world to Armageddon” (McAlister, 2003, p. 774). Besides the latter part, this idea is in line with the central principle of the QAnon movement. For evangelical Christians, the rise of a global elite and the establishment of new global world order would initiate the end of time. Therefore, they feel strongly for the QAnon cause, and they are willing to do whatever is in their power to stop this from happening. So, in a sense, evangelical Christianity is part of the QAnon identity: “QAnon marries an appetite for the conspiratorial with positive beliefs about a radically different and better future, one that is preordained” (LaFrance, 2020). These individuals are vulnerable to fall for QAnon as the movement triggers exactly what the individuals are missing. The belief that they are fighting for a greater cause, moves them to take fate into their own hands and to act violently. It is not per se a new phenomenon that conspiracy theories appeal to

religious groups, however, for QAnon, this group forms the basis of its own kind of extremist militia. QAnon, therefore, could not have been as extreme as it is without the evangelical Christians. The QAnon narrative has in some way become part of the larger Christian narrative. According to Pastor James Kendall, QAnon and Christianity “run on parallel tracks” (General & Naik, 2021). He explains that similarities can be drawn between the worldview of the two beliefs. As the two are familiar in a worldview, Kendall argues: “It’s easier for Christians who already have that belief system to make a jump over into believing [QAnon]” (General & Naik, 2021).

All in all, QAnon can best be understood not just as a conspiracy theory, but rather as a movement that is built on a conspiracy narrative. Because of its scope, its dedicated adherents, and the ideological and religious touch to it, QAnon’s foundational theoretical elements can be categorized as a *superconspiracy*. This superconspiracy revolves around widespread distrust toward the political elites. This mainstream attitude and a series of unfalsifiable claims have been among the main boosters of QAnon’s popularity. As QAnon is extremely popular, political actors, such as Marjorie Taylor Greene, can use this to their benefit. The dangerous part about this is that future-focused policy will partly be based on disinformation as this is part of the QAnon movement. On the other hand. At the same time, QAnon is also infiltrating the Christian Right. For the theory to work and to break down the wall, in other words, to get the change that they are fighting for, they need adherents who are willing to work for the cause. White evangelical Christians tend to be the perfect fit. QAnon fits them well. In a way, QAnon is becoming both an ideology and a religion. The narrative provides hope for a better future for those who have lost faith in the current governments. To them, Trump will be their savior: he will fight this Satan-worshipping, pedophilic elite. Some QAnon supporters are as dedicated that they want to fight to get rid of the evil elite. The simultaneous mainstream vocation and radicalization of the movement, thus, making it more than just a harmless conspiracy theory believed by a few.

CHAPTER THREE: BREAK DOWN THE WALL

Mass media has fostered the QAnon movement in two ways. First, mass media has made an *objectification of reality* possible (Harambam, 2019). The global availability of worldwide news comes with some suspicion (Harambam, 2019). From a distance and with the current digital technology it is easy to manipulate information without anyone knowing. For QAnon, this, together with the politicization of mass media platforms, started to reject the mainstream outlets (Harambam, 2019). On the other hand, mass media has also allowed for the prosumer culture to emerge. Mass media does not demand a specific time, place, education: it only demands a digital device and a network. Anyone armed with these two tools can enter the online world (Harambam, 2019). From there on, a whole new world opens up for its users. Suspicion raised towards media outlets by conspiracy thinkers is nothing new. The landing on the moon, for example, as discussed in chapter one, was highly based on the ability to manipulate information or evidence without the public knowing. The accessibility of the Internet is, in essence, also nothing new, however, the Internet has come to play a significant role in our everyday lives, and the involvement and content creation of individuals make why QAnon is what it is. There is a real irony to this story as the media are both QAnon's worst enemy and best friend. Without the Internet and (social) media outlets, QAnon would not have been as big as it is today. In 2018, Uscinski et al. argued that the Internet is not per se "as big a boon to conspiracy theories as many think" (Douglas, et al., 2019, p. 15). Although their arguments make sense, as the Internet has not necessarily been responsible for an increase of conspiracies (Douglas et al., 2019), in the case of QAnon it has exceeded to establish a certain community that would probably otherwise not have been created. The Internet no longer solely exists of separate websites with separate one-way comment sections: websites have turned into platforms on which millions of people can connect. And through the use of algorithms, people can easily go down the rabbit hole in which these self-established theories start to make sense. For that reason, the nickname of the Internet changed from *Web 1.0* to *Web 2.0* (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Beer & Burrows, 2007).

So, it is because of the Internet that QAnon has been able to bloom. As established in chapter two, QAnon belongs to new conspiracism. Rosenblum and Muirhead argue that this kind of conspiracism only thrives on the Internet as it provides the opportunity for repetition. Repetition is vital for conspiracy theories like QAnon, as people should know what is going on: a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophilic elites is trying to establish a New World Order. The more people

know about this, the easier it will get to dismantle the people part of this cabal. It is the adherents part of the established QAnon community who should provide for this repetition. The remainder of this research will deal with the concept of *prosumers* and how this truly sets QAnon apart as a particular US conspiracy narrative. It is prosumerism and the rise of opportunities provided by the Internet that has allowed QAnon to become what it is today. This chapter will lay out what prosumerism is, how it connects to the QAnon movement, and why this fosters the American ideology.

3.1 Prosumerism

In 1980, futurist Alvin Toffler wrote a book called *The Third Wave* in which he introduced the concept of “prosumerism”. According to Toffler, a major shift took place in 1970. This shift entailed that people were no longer just consumers, nor were they solely producers – they were both (Toffler, 1980). Initially, Toffler introduced the term to describe the phenomenon in which consumers took on an active role in designing and improving products (Toffler, 1980; Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013; Roberts & Cremin, 2017). Over time, the concept changed into more of a dynamic term which describes that consumers start to produce the products they consume; it is no longer just an active role they have: it has evolved into a full-on productive part in which brands are left out completely (Toffler, 1984; Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013). So prosumerism should be defined, not as “a role, a function of the consumer, but rather a process that expresses itself along a continuum that now has become, in the prosumer capitalism society, a circular process that induces opposing dynamics” (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013, p. 22). Paltrinieri and Esposti continue their description by explaining that prosumerism denotes a person who “in uniting the production and consumption practices, takes possession of the meaning of *content*, as well as someone who lives through the process of alienation that is being gradually displaced from the sphere of work into everyday life” (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013, p. 22). Since the rise of social media, prosumerism has grown exponentially (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Today, being a prosumer exceeds the process of being both a consumer and producer: it entitles a civic role in society (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013). In the case of QAnon, prosumerism takes mostly place in the online world. The information on the conspiracy theory is being produced and consumed by the same people: QAnon adherents.

A vital part of prosumerism in the online sphere is the idea of *social capital*. Prosumerism, as it stems from an economic point of view, relates to capitalism and its ideology. However, when examining prosumerism in the online environment, the social aspect plays a significant

role that cannot be neglected. Social capital refers to the means and opportunities one can enjoy when placing themselves within a specific community or larger society and increase their capital (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013). Connections with other individuals increase the capacity and chances to achieve what one wants to achieve. In other words, a larger social network can make life easier to achieving one's goals (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013). In a way, social capital provides individuals a feeling of inclusion and belonging to a certain group in which they gain support and credibility (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013). When wanting to improve one's social position, one will look for ways to better and increase its social capital - this can occur both off- and online (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013). The desire to enlarge one's social capital can both occur due to a lack of connection to the world and because of the desire to influence others and spread the word. Both of these mechanisms are at work when looking at QAnon. On the one hand, there is the anonymous leader 'Q', who is spreading a certain message and who wants to establish a community in which his ideas and thoughts are shared and maybe even lived upon. On the other hand, many individuals are experiencing a certain feeling of loneliness or alienation from the world they live in. This feeling demands a desire for connection outside their bubble. As these individuals, in many cases, have not been able to find like-minded individuals in the physical world, they turn to online platforms. Here, they find certain information which appeals to them, and which then automatically incorporates them into a distanced, yet due to the Internet, close to the home community.

The Internet itself can be regarded to be social capital (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013). It is, in essence, a gate that opened up the opportunity for individuals to communicate their ideas to individuals outside of their communities. What makes the Internet so appealing is that it is very inclusive (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013). It allows for "crowd-sourcing" which means that individuals have the power to shape and reshape narratives (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). When having access to the Internet, many platforms are open to everyone to share their ideas and thoughts with the rest of the world. In a sense, the Internet can give a platform to those who are not successful in gaining a real-life platform through which they advocate their thoughts. The increasing use of the online platform to participate socially and politically has led to new forms of democratic participation (Paltrinieri & Esposti, 2013). Also, the medium allows for freedom of speech: it is clear from government gatekeeping and censoring (Barkun, 20). Prosumerism also influences the level of legitimacy regarding certain information. The more one has heard a certain story, the more likely one is to take the story to be true (Barkun, 2003). QAnon, in a way, motivates its adherents to take on the role of a prosumer. Supporters actively

share, create, and copy information. This way, they contribute to enlarging the digital archive and they affirm the already written stories, allowing for a greater sense of legitimacy.

3.2 DIY-Experts

As the Internet is easily accessible, individuals supporting QAnon enjoy the opportunity to *do their own research*. This idea provides a feeling of being a so-called “cognoscenti” (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019, p. 38). Important here is that it the notion that it provides a *feeling*: it is doubtful whether they truly become cognoscenti as the term is defined as “being particularly well informed about a particular subject” (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019, p. 38). The information QAnon supporters gather is, in most cases, not based on scientific research nor is it written by experts. Rather, it is created by other self-informed adherents. Anyhow, as QAnon is accessible to everyone, no matter your education, these people feel as if they are part of some kind of inner circle. An inner circle that knows what is going on; the Internet told them everything.

The desire to become prosumers is partly born out of the mistrust of mainstream media and institutions. Adherents have lost all faith in these organizations. It is these organizations that uphold the evil system which QAnon is trying to destroy. Therefore, they claim that every individual should do their own research and that no one should let themselves be ‘hypnotized’ by mainstream media outlets (LaFrance, 2020). On social media platforms, *Q researchers*, as they call themselves, have been emerging at a rapid speed (LaFrance, 2020). Blogs, videos, interviews are posted by these *Q researchers* and are created to educate other QAnon adherents. David Hayes, a celebrity within the movement, does not consider himself to be a conspiracy theorist: QAnon is not a conspiracy theory in his opinion. It is rather a movement that fights a real threat (LaFrance, 2020). For Hayes, and many others, being a Q researcher has become a profession as the current online environment provides the opportunity to make money by creating popular content (LaFrance, 2020).

Besides the Internet, some dedicated QAnon adherents have also written entire books about the conspiracy theory. In these books, they aim to explain what the movement is, what evidence that there is, and thus, why it must be true. The most well-known book is *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening* co-written by several QAnon supporters who write under the name of a famous QAnon verse: Where We Go One, We Go All (WWG1WGA, 2019). In this book, all kinds of ‘studies’ are quoted to show that QAnon is not a crazy and irrational theory: it has proven itself to be true (WWG1WGA, 2019). They argue that they have “given fact upon fact,

and detail upon detail: It is a conspiracy no more” (WWG1WGA, 2019, p. 48). Although concrete evidence is still missing, they see no reason not to believe the narrative.

3.3 Ignorance is Bliss

The idea that everyone should do their own research and that the outcome of these researches is legitimized is vital to the movement. The psychological phenomenon called the Dunning-Kruger effect plays a role here. This effect describes how non-experts claim to be experts, unaware of their incompetence and deficient expertise (Dunning, 2011). Dunning claims that knowing how skilled you are compared to other people, helps one deciding when to trust one’s instincts and when not to. However, many people experience “illusory superiority”, which means that one’s perception of their skills is incorrect: one thinks one is more competent than one is. When applying this to conspiracy thinking and the idea of doing your own research, one prioritizes oneself over trained journalists, analysts, and scientists. This does not suggest that one should take any information they receive for granted, however, they should not label themselves to be experts just because they did Google or Facebook research. Experts exist because one’s knowledge is limited: we can simply not know *everything* (Dunning, 2011). By falsely claiming to be an ‘expert’ and thus overestimating your competence, misinformation can be brought into the world. The fact is, everyone is susceptible to over- or underrate their competence. The only way to overcome this is to continue to learn and open oneself up for new information. The problem here is that QAnon supporters are only willing to receive information in line with their thinking. The sub-narrative relating to the flat-earthers is a helpful example of this. People supporting this narrative believe that our earth is flat instead of round. As this should be scientifically demonstrable, flat-earth believers with a scientific background started to search for scientific proof that the earth is indeed flat. However, all their scientific tests concluded the opposite: the earth is round. Nevertheless, these tests are either neglected by flat-earth believers or the validation of the tests is nullified. Because of this tunnel where conspiracy believers find themselves, they will never admit their incompetence and will, therefore, never be able to break loose from the Dunning-Kruger effect.

3.4 Social, Media?

As already mentioned, the QAnon conspiracy narrative emerged on the online platform called 4chan and later on its successor 8chan. These platforms provide the opportunity for users to anonymously post images, and for other users to comment on those images. 4chan is easily accessible as it does not demand its users to register an account. Although the Q drops initially

were only posted on these platforms, QAnon has only been able to set wildfire due to the interconnectedness of online platforms. This interconnectedness exists since most social media users are not bound to one platform; they use several different online platforms simultaneously. When Q posted his first message it was a YouTube video creator together with two moderators of the 4chan platform that created awareness around the cryptic posts (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). They created several videos, an entire Reddit community, and in a sense, an entire business relating to the QAnon conspiracy theory (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). Later it expanded even further, popular social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter also started to become a platform for the QAnon movement. On these platforms, people were able to find like-minded individuals through established groups. Together they brainstormed on what the Q-drops could mean, and shared additional knowledge relating to the QAnon narrative. Not until 2020, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram decided to ban all QAnon related accounts as they are considered to be a violent threat to society (Zadrozny & Collins, 2020).

What becomes evident when looking into QAnon and its media platforms is that it is not particularly cautious on what platforms to use and which ones not to. What is remarkable is that QAnon started on a forum that did not intend to establish communities. All activity on 4chan happens anonymously so that people cannot send each other messages unless one reveals their identity. So essentially, 4chan is a social network that does not have social goals at the core (Dewey, 2014). A core value of the platform is that freedom of speech and freedom of the press can be enjoyed under complete anonymity. This allows people to say whatever they want without the risk of being held accountable for their statements. It truly fosters American values such as freedom of speech, and freedom in general: people do not want to feel like they are constrained in any way (Dewey, 2014). Moreover, this platform diverges from so-called 'mainstream' outlets as it chooses a different goal and structure. Both these ideas are in line with QAnon thinking. Another remarkable thing about 4chan concerning QAnon is that 4chan is highly popular among "young, college-educated men interested in Japanese culture, video games, comics and technology" (Dewey, 2014). This is quite a specific group. What can be concluded from this is that 4chan was just a stepping stone for the QAnon narrative to enter the online discussion arena. As 4chan is almost the only online platform that allows for complete anonymity, it was the only way for Q to drop this mysterious story and to get the conversation going, without having to give away his identity. However, due to cross-media news, QAnon was able to expand and get more grip on US society. Users started to share the Q-drops, and they started to produce, as discussed, their own interpretations of the narrative. Considering

this, it would not be wrong to argue that QAnon could not have expanded in the way it did without the interconnectedness of the online world.

3.5 The Land of the Free

Consequently, the question arises, how a conspiracy narrative, born and raised online, led to a violent attack on the US Capitol building. This was already briefly touched upon in the second chapter. However, it is relevant for this chapter as the attack shows how QAnon is undoubtedly related to the US and American core values. The attack on the US Capitol took place on January 6, 2021, when Congress was in session counting the electoral votes that were in favor of, now President, then former vice-President Joseph Biden. To many, the attack came as a surprise and it might have been the first encounter they had with the QAnon movement. QAnon was not per se the organizer of the attack, however, its signs and symbols were widely presented amongst the people storming the Capitol building. As discussed in chapter two, QAnon has wisely recruited its adherents. In a way, they have been able to establish a kind of underground militia which showed its face, size, and willingness to fight for the first time during the January attack. Douglas Jensen, a QAnon adherent and a rioter at Capitol siege, wore a QAnon t-shirt to the siege, and he positioned himself in front of the mob so that the media would catch his t-shirt and Q would get the credit for the entire attack (Rubin, et al., 2021). Proving that QAnon supporters wanted to be seen, and they wanted Q to get attention. Many others joined him by also displaying QAnon related signs. It is important to note that all QAnon related symbols were in many cases connected to US patriotic symbols such as the American national flag and the American eagle. These symbols represent, in essence, its adherents and its goal at the same time. QAnon adherents are patriots at heart, their country is the most important thing and it should be protected at all times. Their nation grants them freedom, and whenever one assumes or thinks that this freedom is being taken away, one has the right to take it back. The Capitol siege was not so much about fighting the “deep state” it was about saving their nation and stepping up for their messiah, Donald Trump, who will ultimately fight the deep state. Exactly this shows why QAnon is different from other conspiracy narratives. The core value they show to the outside world is not per se the driving force behind the entire movement. It is the *absolute freedom* they want to experience, a core value the US was built on more than 300 years ago. QAnon adherents have just been looking for ways to get and enjoy this freedom. Underneath the surface, the anxiety that they were losing this freedom and experiencing some kind of obstruction, made them look for an outside force. As discussed in chapter one, this is a

characteristic of conspiracy theorists. In the case of QAnon, it is the government, during an increasingly globalized period, that should be the evil force obstructing them. The government, together with the media, are the only ones who would prosper, according to QAnon, to consciously and abruptly invoke in one's right. This core value of freedom and patriotism is what makes QAnon exceptionally popular in the US.

American lawyer and President of Columbia University Lee C. Bollinger described that “[f]reedom of speech has become so much more than just a legal principle. It has become part of a national identity (...)” (Bollinger and Stone, 2019, p. 4). And that is exactly how QAnon adherents interpret it as well. Taking away free speech means taking away a part of their identity - it will limit them from expressing themselves. Although no individual should be construed when it comes to the freedom of speech and expression, it does come with a challenge. Should one's freedom of speech be allowed to harm another's right to be? The answer is simply no. Therefore, the concept of hate speech limits the principle of free speech. Hate speech is defined by the United Nations as: “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor” (O'Sullivan, 2019). Here hate speech directly refers to offense language which how inequality between people, it does not say anything about speech inciting violence or hate crime. In these cases, hate speech is not treated as hate speech, but rather as part of the hate crime (Wermiel, n.d.). Speech inciting violence is therefore difficult to censor by the US Government as it is not per se hate speech. Moreover, the violent actions undertaken by QAnon supporters are in many cases supported by the adherents themselves because they ‘they tried to help the American people’ or because Trump or God told them to do so. The violent actions can, in many cases, not directly be linked to the offensive speech used by the QAnon movement, even though their messages are very likely to be the underlying reason for the violent behavior. Thus, ironically, absolute freedom of speech can never really exist as it is always limited by hate speech, however, because the lines between the two are thin, many cases are not labeled to be hate speech and therefore enjoy absolute freedom until it crosses with another unlawful action such as crime.

Bollinger and Stone discuss the issue of the rise of the Internet concerning the right of free speech. They acknowledge the fact that the rise of social media is challenging the principle. The American government has still limited power when it comes to censoring, which is both a blessing and a curse in this digital age. Should movements that use “terrorist” or “extremist”

language, such as QAnon, be censored by the American government? Should this become part of hate speech? QAnon anti-Semitic or neo-Nazi expressions are without a doubt part of hate speech already, but what about language inciting violence? Right now, it is private organizations such as Facebook and Twitter that can censor it to a certain extent, but what about self-created websites? This debate is fundamental when it comes to fighting the QAnon movement. At the moment, the movement is thriving on the fact that the US system still relies on a hundred-year-old jurisprudence which explicitly limited the US government's power to censor. The only way for the US government to practice any kind of censorship is through lawmaking (Bollinger & Stone, 2019). In the past couple of years, the US government has increased its censoring power (Bollinger & Stone, 2019). However, for QAnon there is enough opportunity to express itself in an extremist way and escape governmental interference. With QAnon adherents in more legal offices, establishing laws that should further increase government censorship is a real challenge.

This is also what makes the movement extremely dangerous. Mary McCord, a former federal prosecutor and expert in homegrown terror groups, stated that she and other experts are uncertain where the movement is going and what is coming next. In many cases, fringe conspiracy theories, which QAnon was in the beginning as well, are predictable and do not per se grow into a domestic terror group. When looking at the development of QAnon, significant steps and changes have taken place. From a small online fringe conspiracy theory, QAnon has emerged into a movement existing of hundreds of thousands of adherents. It has truly established a community in both the digital and physical world. QAnon shows that there is a bridge between the on- and offline world (Gosse & Hodson, 2021). Without the digital world, QAnon would not have been able to establish such a movement consisting of so many highly dedicated adherents.

Due to the development of the Internet and especially the introduction of social media outlets, people online can become both consumers and producers. As prosumers, they can design and implement their products. In the case of QAnon, the products are posts, videos, blogs, and any other online content-related instruments. Here they can advocate for a story that lacks proof and legitimacy. Nevertheless, due to the repetition possibilities of the Internet, the word could spread rapidly. The freedom they enjoy here is endless. And in essence, this is what they are striving to achieve in real life as well. The deep state story is but the tip of the iceberg. Beneath that, there is a world of anxiety and desire to get back the freedom they once thought they enjoyed. QAnon is a strong group of patriots fighting for their nation. As it is impossible

to gatekeep everything on the Internet, QAnon could prosper. The prosumer culture should be regarded as the foundation on which the rest of the movement could be built. It has also been the perfect vehicle to use when spreading the message and it has been able to fulfill the desire of experiencing a feeling of absolute freedom.

CONCLUSION

So, when returning to the main research question: *How has it been possible for the QAnon movement to emerge as such a significant American conspiracy theory, and how has it been able to develop into a movement that is considered to be a threat to contemporary American society?* How can this question be answered? A challenge when conducting this research was the inability to identify the adherents specifically. The movement highly values anonymity through the use of internet platforms. Therefore, it is almost, if not entirely, impossible to locate and identify the QAnon supporters. Nevertheless, the QAnon movement could still be analyzed and contextualized within American society. Overall, it can be stated that conspiracy theories have been present in American society since the very establishment of the nation. Conspiracy narratives provide an alternative truth to make sense of the world for those who feel anxiety, uncertainty, or experience crisis and chaos in their lives. As a superconspiracy, the QAnon narrative has its roots in many earlier American conspiracy theories, such as the JFK assassination and the 9/11 attacks. Due to several reasons, QAnon has been able to develop itself into a mass movement and had therefore surpassed the concept of being just a conspiracy theory. Its theory has laid the groundwork on which a large group of adherents mobilized themselves and called for direct action. However, this movement is still bound to specific political, societal, and cultural factors. The US proved itself to be the perfect soil for the QAnon movement to grow on. In general, this research showed that five major components are relevant to answer be able to answer the main research question: (1) the existence of a large and significant inequality gap; (2) much religious support; (3) political participation; (4) the holy character of Freedom of Speech; and (5) the existence of a prosumer culture.

(1) The existence of a large and significant inequality gap

The US was built on the principle of meritocracy. This principle made the US appealing to many who truly wanted to make something of their life. However, in reality, it turned out that the ‘American Dream’ was not for everyone. America can sometimes be considered to be the country of the rich: as long as one has money, everything is possible. What has happened over the years is that the inequality gap only increased. Both the poor and the rich had little confidence in the government and on both sides, conspiracy theories emerged. A decade later, this inequality gap still exists, QAnon ties into this narrative as it rejects a kind of elitist group. Overall, the people part of the cabal are wealthy and influential people. The

NESARA/GESARA act is a dream of QAnon adherents, as this act would reset the entire economic system and cancel all debts, indicating that many QAnon adherents are not economically thriving. Moreover, poverty or debt can create a lot of stress and uncertainty. These people are, in many cases, going to look for external factors to answer the question: why them? To be clear, this is not true for everyone. But as argued, research has shown that this is in many cases true. Accusing external factors is psychologically easier than blaming oneself. Therefore, pinpointing an elitist and wealthy group to be the conspirators might appeal to a less wealthy audience who experience a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. As this gap is significantly large in the US, it might contribute to the popularity of the QAnon movement. Moreover, it provides a place for like-minded people: people who have similar negative experiences relating to wealth might find a sense of belonging within the QAnon community.

(2) High religious support in the United States

In general, the US is quite a religious nation and this has been the case since its very founding. Religion and conspiracy narratives, although they are not the same, thrive amongst similar circumstances. Research has shown that religious people tend to be more susceptible to conspiracy narratives. QAnon as a movement has smartly played into this. By creating a worldview parallel to the Christian worldview, and by using religious references, the QAnon movement has been able to gain a lot of support from quite a radical Christian group: the evangelical Christians. This group is partly based upon the belief of Christian nationality. The QAnon conspiracy theory suggests that the US is being led by this evil elitist cabal that threatens American society. As a response, Christian nationalists feel a moral duty to step in here – they need to save their nation.

(3) Political participation

The US political system was established upon a feeling of distrust. The founding fathers wanted to create a system in which every state was sovereign under a federal government. As the US used to be a British colony, the founding fathers rejected a crown to be their emperor. Under an intricate system, they created a nation in which citizen representation was a central focus. Moreover, every citizen needed to have the opportunity to be electable. The QAnon movement made use of this. As it criticizes the government and most of its officials, QAnon adherents themselves started campaigning and running for offices. Republican representative Marjorie Taylor Greene is an example of this. As a representative of the state of Georgia, she represents a group of US Citizens who believe the QAnon narrative to be true. In a way, the movement

has been able to infiltrate American politics. This makes the QAnon movement more than just a narrative. By entering the political arena, QAnon has gained political ground. As a consequence, its ideas and ideals are represented within the government. This makes it possible to make changes, changes that would contribute to realizing QAnon's goals. Political entrance of QAnon adherents did not just happen in high official offices, also on local and state-level QAnon adherents are gaining political ground. Enlarging its power within all levels of government.

(4) The holy character of freedom of speech

The formerly mentioned points are indeed contributors to the unique position in which QAnon is finding itself. However, due to the prosumer culture and the holy character of the freedom of speech clause, QAnon is highly popular in the United States. We now know that people can write, post, vlog whatever they want, and no one can truly stop them. The right to freedom of speech, as guaranteed under the US Constitution, provides US citizens the right to say whatever they want without the government having the power to censor them. This is also what is happening online: people can experience absolute freedom here. For QAnon adherents, this is also a goal that they want to fulfill in the offline world. They feel constrained by the American government, and the QAnon narrative is but a way to break loose from this. They are, metaphorically, trying to 'break down the wall' that is holding them from experiencing this absolute freedom. In the US, the principle of absolute freedom has always been central. Again, this was something incorporated into the government system. Notions such as *the land of the free* enhance this idea. QAnon, while advocating against a certain elite, is also providing a community based on the very founding principles of this nation. It includes rights that cannot easily be taken away by the government.

(5) The existence of a prosumer culture

Prosumerism is the main reason why QAnon has been able to establish itself in the US in the way that it did. The ability to produce and consume information has proven itself to be a powerful tool when it comes to establishing a large social movement. The Internet and the introduction of social media outlets made it possible for its users to become consumers and producers at the same time. For QAnon, this helped to spread its message. The Internet allows for repetition, which in turn allows for a sense of greater legitimacy. Although this feeling is incorrect, people interested in the QAnon movement might get a sense, at some point at least,

that 'something must be true' as they read so much about it. In the US, which is the grand hub for online content and online development, the online world is present in almost everyone's daily life. The phenomenon that everyone can create content and that everyone can consume this content at the same time allows for an uncontrollable situation in which educated experts lose their voice and credibility. The principle of *doing your own research* has been the central focus of many conspiracy theories today when it comes to legitimizing the story. QAnon adherents themselves claim to be experts and researchers, even though they have never learned to do well-constructed research. Sources they use are from DIY-experts who got their information from yet another DIY-expert. This way, disinformation is spread, and untrue stories are falsely verified. And this is what makes QAnon different from other movements: it has the power to produce its own content while consuming it simultaneously. The practice of prosumerism is what made it possible for QAnon to transform into a movement. The information produced and consumed by adherents spread a message that mobilized people in the offline world. Online content created a community that allowed for physical action. And it is this ability that makes QAnon different from earlier conspiracy theories.

So, all in all, the consequences of the QAnon movement should not be underestimated. QAnon has been able to develop into a mass movement that rests on an extremist theory. However, QAnon should not be considered to be a populist movement. As described, populism in the US is not the same as populism in other Western countries. Populism in the US originally represented a more socialist ideology rather than more right-wing conservatism as it does today. QAnon is something bigger than populism: it is a theory that has developed itself into a mass transferal movement. Its narrative is adaptable and nationalistic, which original American populism is not. Therefore, QAnon is extremist in the broadest sense of the word, but not populist. As the movement has gone beyond the Internet and has infiltrated US politics, the influence of the movement should be taken seriously. It is a reason to re-evaluate American principles and maybe even democratic principles in general. The online world has become an extension of our offline world: the two can no longer be separated. The America of a decade ago has changed. Although conspiracy theories are in essence still the same, the development of such theories is predominantly different. The Capitol siege is but one example. Movements like QAnon are unpredictable and sometimes untraceable. The anonymity of the Internet makes it incredibly hard to track them. Although these movements only thrive under specific societal, political, and cultural circumstances, other democratic nations should not turn their heads. QAnon is but an example of how conspiracy theories in this age can develop. Democratic

societies should re-evaluate their values and look at how the online age is threatening them. These nations should face their weaknesses and look at new societal, political, and cultural circumstances and based on that, strengthen the current democratic systems that already exist. With a new US President in place, QAnon might disappear slowly, however, it is only a matter of time before a new and democratically erosive conspiracy theory will emerge.

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